

ABSTRACT

Remember and Retell: The Transformation of Place and Identity through Memory in

Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*

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This thesis explores the lives of the characters John Ames, Jack Boughton, Glory Boughton, and Lila Ames in the novels *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* in relation to studies on memory, place, identity, and the sacred. In all three of the Gilead-centered novels by Marilynne Robinson, the places of Gilead or the Boughton home are pivotal in inspiring memories that incite transformation in the characters' perceptions of their memories and their identities in the context of the narrative place of Gilead. Rightly understood, the actions of Robinson's characters create a framework for readers on how to process their relation to the places they inhabit by both admitting the faults of the place and giving due gratitude for its successes and potential for growth.

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REMEMBER AND RETELL: THE TRANSFORMATION OF PLACE AND
IDENTITY THROUGH MEMORY IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *GILEAD*, *HOME*,
AND *LILA*

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CHAPTER ONE

Remember and Retell: The Transformation of Place and Identity through Memory in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*

A little over ten years ago, Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead* was published, and the life and thoughts and convictions of John Ames became a source of discussion and interpretation for scholars interested in themes of Calvinism, grace, loneliness, memory, forgiveness, familiarity, prodigality, identity, and the sacredness and beauty of the present moment. Four years after *Gilead* was published, Robinson's next novel set in Gilead, *Home*, presented readers with a deeper and more detailed picture of the enigmatic character Jack Boughton, his sister Glory, and their aging father Robert Boughton. These novels run along a similar timeline and share several poignant scenes, though each has a distinct representation of these scenes. Finally, ten years after *Gilead* and six years after *Home*, Robinson published her third novel in the Gilead setting, *Lila*, which explores the wandering and difficult story of Lila Ames, the young wife of John Ames whose past was only alluded to in the previous novels. Together, the three Gilead novels present intertwined histories of grief, hope, wonder, doubt, and faith in which there is much yet to be discussed and discovered.

Written in the shape of an honest, contemplative, and reflective letter to Ames' young son, *Gilead* meanders through Ames' heritage as the descendent of a father and grandfather with radically different stances on the role of Christians in conflict. He

pauses on memories of his past with his brother Edward, and his first wife Louisa and daughter Angelina who died tragically. His longstanding relationship with Reverend Robert Boughton is tempered by his present bitterness and distrust towards his namesake John Ames Boughton. He contemplates with awe-filled wonder his recent miraculous marriage with Lila that led to the birth of the son to whom he is writing, and he dwells on his present joys he experiences through seeing his son play and learn. Throughout his letter he continually forms and reforms ideas and beliefs about the nature of time, existence, relationship, and God.

In *Home* Robinson provides a story of the intricacies and difficulties of relationships when there have been repeated offenses, distance, and misunderstanding. When Jack left Gilead after refusing to take ownership for the child he fathered, both Glory and Robert Boughton were left to attempt building some semblance of a family for the abandoned mother and child, and when the child died an understandable rift opened between Jack and his family. Twenty years later, both Glory and Jack have returned home to the scene of the crime and the unchanged Boughton house triggers memories of hard and happy times in their past and leads them to wonder about the future. The tone of *Home* is markedly more strained and colored with tones of unrealized reconciliation than *Gilead*, but Jack offers up a yearning hope for the town that brightens the narrative at the conclusion of the novel.

Lila adds to the conversation developed in the previous books about the confusing nature of relationships and trust and belonging. Taken from an unstable home as a child and informally adopted by the homeless migrant woman Doll, Lila's concepts of identity and home do not truly begin establishing themselves until she arrives in Gilead.

However, once there, her memory begins working to retell her story and transform her understanding of home. Throughout all three books, Robinson utilizes memory and the setting of Gilead as a means for inspiring reflection and inciting internal and interpersonal conflict between characters as they seek to understand their identities and how they have been shaped by their pasts, how they can relate to their present, and how they should hope for their futures.

In this thesis, I will consider the works of several scholars who have studied themes of memory, belief, experience, memorialization, prodigality, grace, and homecoming in order to situate my work within the current criticism on Robinson's novels. When *Gilead* was first published, scholars took particular interest in Robinson's use of Calvinist theology, Feuerbachian philosophy, and the nature of experience. Christopher Leise contends that Ames' Calvin is not one consumed with judgment of the non-elect, but one who seeks to find the "little incandescence" of good in everyday life, while acknowledging that there are faults in life as well.¹ Both Haein Park and Laura E. Tanner have focused on the nature of experience for Ames as a man aware of approaching death. While Tanner argues that Ames' focus on the future where his son will be fatherless detracts from his experience of the present moment,² Park contends that through his Calvinist theology, Ames is able to understand his position in terms of "this-

¹ Christopher Leise, "'That Little Incandescence': Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 (2010): 348-367.

² Laura E. Tanner, "'Looking Back from the Grave': Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," *Contemporary Literature* XLVIII, no. 2 (2007): 227-252.

worldly transcendence” that recognizes the divine in daily interactions.³ Sacraments are an important aspect in Ames’ theology and experience, and in her essay June Hadden Hobbs focuses on the ways in which Ames makes secular things such as baseball sacramental through his memorialization of them in his letter to his son.⁴

Predestination, a theological term traditionally linked to Calvinist doctrine, as well as prodigality became favored topics for scholars following the publication of *Home*, which provided deeper discussion of the topic by giving readers more dialogue from Jack Boughton. Justin Evans argues that the significance of Feuerbach as a parting gift for Jack in *Gilead* lies in Feuerbach’s understanding of sacraments and how normal objects can become transcendent through human belief, and therefore represents that Ames does not believe Jack is hopelessly lost.⁵ Rebecca M. Painter, in both an interview with Robinson and an article, discusses how the parable of the prodigal son is illustrated and modified in Robinson’s novels and how grace, forgiveness, and loyalty affect Glory and Jack’s choices throughout the novel.⁶

Another theme of critics is the nature of homecoming for not only Jack and Glory, but Lila as well. Rowan Williams uses the term “native speakers” to describe those like

³ Haein Park, “The Face of the Other: Suffering, Kenosis, and a Hermeneutics of Love in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison and Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 66, no. 2 (March 2014): 103–118.

⁴ June Hadden Hobbs, “Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 241–262.

⁵ Justin Evans, “Subjectivity and the Possibility of Change in the Novels of Marilynne Robinson,” *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 66, no. 2 (March 2014): 131–150.

⁶ Rebecca M. Painter, “Further Thoughts on a Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson,” *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 485–492; Rebecca M. Painter, “Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson’s Fiction,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 321–340.

Ames, who has always lived in Gilead, and Lila, who has adapted to life in the settled small town, to demonstrate how true homecoming, and formation of identity, can only happen when there is a mutual understanding of grace and forgiveness.⁷ Finally, Tanner focuses on Glory's struggle with the entrapment involved in coming home and how she manages to create a space for herself in the restrictive Boughton house.⁸

While the scholars mentioned above have written about certain aspects of transformation in identity, memory, place, or narrative in Robinson's fiction, none have recognized that such transformation for the characters at hand could only have taken place in the specific setting of Gilead. In this thesis, I contend that the characters' transformative memories are dependent on their relation to place, whether the town itself, the Congregationalist church building, the Boughton house, or the Boughton yard and barn. The process for each character of remembering his or her story is transformative because in each case the characters separate themselves, whether metaphorically or physically, from the place, which allows them to view it from a new perspective. Furthermore, their relationships with and to other people in that place influence their searches for identity and reform and reestablish the characters' appreciation for the joys and difficulties that shaped their lives. By retelling their stories through writing, memory, and action the characters transform both their own narrative and the narrative of Gilead. For Ames this distancing and reformation of narrative takes place through writing the letter to his son, in which he articulates the necessity of recognizing and understanding both the good and hard things in life. For Glory and Jack, the distancing took place in the

⁷ Rowan Williams, "Native Speakers: Identity, Grace, and Homecoming," *Christianity and Literature* 61, no. 1 (Autumn 2011): 7–18.

⁸ Laura E. Tanner, "Uncomfortable Furniture: Inhabiting Domestic and Narrative Space in Marilynne Robinson's *Home*," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 7, no. 1 (March 2013): 35–53.

years they spent living away from the Boughton house. Returning to a house laden with memories from these new perspectives, alongside their sibling, prompts them to seek to understand how the narrative of the town and house does or does not fit within their own narratives. Lila, never having had a stable place to call a home, brings a narrative of wandering to Gilead but slowly begins to understand the place as home with John Ames by her side. Through remembering the missteps and trials that brought her to this small town, Lila adds her own narrative to the town and her influence is noted in both *Gilead* and *Home*. In each novel, Gilead offers the characters a place in which they have the opportunity to remember the experiences, relationships, and places that formed their identity to this point in their life, and then decide whether or not the narrative of Gilead can adapt to include their individual stories.

To aid my discussion, I will consider the works of several scholars who have theorized how memory, place, identity, and narrative are interconnected. Janet Donohoe, works philosophically in *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place* to reestablish place as pivotal to the process of remembering for both collective and individual memory.⁹ The grounding of memory in place is important in all three of Robinson's novels, especially in connection with generational and communal memory of the people who inhabit Gilead.

Owain Jones, researcher of landscape, memory, and geographies of childhood and Dr. Joanne Garde-Hansen, researcher in media, memory, and community, collaborated with multiple scholars in *Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies: Geography and Memory: Explorations in Identity, Place, and Becoming* to study how geography, memory,

⁹ Janet Donohoe, *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place*, Toposophia: Sustainability, Dwelling, Design (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

identity, and becoming interact and intersect in the lived experiences of individuals.¹⁰ From their collaboration, I will reference a chapter by social scientist John Horton, and geographer Peter Kraftl, titled “Clearing Out the Cupboard: Memory, Materiality and Transitions,”¹¹ which explores how physically clearing out a cupboard triggers memories of things once stored away. I will compare this study with Ames’ metaphorical clearing of the cupboard through drawing out forgotten memories in his letter to his son, and how this relates to Jack and Glory’s experiences of coming home. In relation to Lila’s experiences with memory, I will also reference “A Domestic Geography of Everyday Terror: Remembering and Forgetting the House I Grew Up In”¹² by communications scholar Belinda Morrissey, which explores memory in relation to childhood trauma. .

Finally, I will use *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* by Philip Sheldrake. Sheldrake’s book is an exploration of how human conceptions of place, identity, and memory intersect with theology. Sheldrake’s book progresses through initial articulation of the ways place is defined by narrative and society and then moves to describe how sacred place in Christian theology comes to be found in people, and finally explores what this means in modern city societies. Sheldrake’s relation of place to the sacred is particularly appropriate in a study of Robinson’s novels because each character

¹⁰ Owain Jones and Joanne Garde-Hansen, *Geography and Memory: Explorations in Identity, Place and Becoming* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), accessed February 5, 2016, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10621883>.

¹¹ John Horton and Peter Kraftl, “Clearing out a Cupboard: Memory, Materiality and Transitions,” in *Geography and Memory: Explorations in Identity, Place and Becoming* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 25–44.

¹² Belinda Morrissey, “A Domestic Geography of Everyday Terror: Remembering and Forgetting the House I Grew Up In,” in *Geography and Memory: Explorations in Identity, Place and Becoming* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 184–198.

in her Gilead-centered novels seriously considers the implications of sacredness and Christianity in their search to remember, retell, and transform their identities and Gilead.

Robinson's characters' earnest efforts to understand themselves, acknowledging their failures and flaws as well as their successes, in a theological context is significant and unique in modern literature. All of the central characters have distinct relationships with the church that significantly shapes their worldview. John Ames is a third-generation pastor in a small town, Glory and Jack are children of a pastor from the same small town, and Lila was told at a young age to be wary of the church and revivals, but ends up finding shelter in churches at pivotal moments of her life. Additionally, there is a realistic uncertainty and questioning in Robinson's characters that leaves readers with the responsibility of considering their own beliefs and how much they agree or disagree with the choices and theologies that are represented in the novels. In the literary criticism on Robinson's novels, ideas of memory, religion, relationships, and identity are appropriately and thoroughly interwoven and dependent upon each other, for Robinson does not adhere to the secular-sacred separation construct in her characters. John Ames' life, in his opinion, is inseparable from his faith and his role as a Congregationalist preacher. Though Leise contends Ames holds an image of "a generous Calvin who emphasizes community service over love of self, a humanistic thinker, rather than the theologian who felt obligated to his own tradition,"¹³ Park refutes this claim and argues instead, "the humanist of Calvin is inextricably linked to his theology."¹⁴ Throughout *Gilead* Ames demonstrates his tendency to both marvel at the beauty of imperfect people

¹³ Leise, 363.

¹⁴ Park, 104.

and struggle with the theological implications of his resentment towards Jack. While there are moments that have humanist or theological bents, Ames' letter demonstrates his understanding that this present world is situated within a broader theological framework. This binding of the secular and sacred is also emphasized by Hobbs in her article in which she notes that Ames forms memories of baseball games, an ashy biscuit, and his grandfather's old clothes such that these things become sacramental and representative of deeper things.¹⁵ I will argue that Ames also sacralizes places through his memories, specifically the town and the church building. By the term "sacralize," I mean the designation of something as worthy of remembrance, reverence, and thoughtful analysis. Ames' sacralization of Gilead and the church building are significant because they are substantiated by his acknowledgment of his and the town's failures as just as important as the wondrous joys he experienced in understanding the narratives of both places.

Gilead is unique among the three novels because it is framed as the composition of one of the characters for the specific audience of his son, while the other novels deal with the characters' thoughts and interactions with others directly. The fact that the means through which readers get to know John Ames is through his written words, in the form of a historical and autobiographical letter, does not detract from the level of intimacy that readers can experience with his ideas. Though some parents may try to hide the grittier aspects of their past and present life, Ames attempts to confront the difficult stuff in his letter. Dorothy L. Sayers describes this kind of transparency of the autobiography genre tellingly:

¹⁵ Hobbs.

Like the creation of imagined character, but in a much higher degree, it is an infallible self-betrayal. The truth about the writer's personality will out, in spite of itself; any illusions which he may entertain about himself become fearfully apparent the moment he begins to handle himself as a created character, subject to the nature of his own art.¹⁶

While Ames does attempt to be self-aware and self-critical in his letter, there are certainly times when readers see more of him than he meant to reveal. Though Ames' account of himself is no less revealing than the thoughts of Glory and Lila in the other books, *Gilead* is distinct because by preserving his thoughts in writing, thoughts that largely concern his past and the pasts of his predecessors, Ames becomes a historian of sorts. His record affects more than himself; it influences future generations, at least the generation of his son. He is aware of his limitations, both in memory and in the time he has remaining on earth, and wants his letter to be reflective of the joys and hardships that most significantly shaped his life. Hobbs argues convincingly that at times Ames moves beyond simply preserving his memories in writing, he sacralizes them, giving them spiritual significance that connects them with not only the spiritual, but also the eternal.¹⁷

It is argued that the process of writing the extensive letter affects Ames in his present time perhaps as significantly, if not more significantly, as it is meant to affect his son in the future. A substantial amount of Ames' letter recounts times of grief and strife in Ames' life and in the relationship between his father and grandfather, but he also includes moments that he recently or presently experiences with his son and wife that

¹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 91.

¹⁷ Hobbs, 258.

mostly carry a tone of joy and wonder. Tanner argues that for Ames, “Imagination’s power to counter future absence here [in a portion of the text where he is describing his son’s current activity] rebounds to overwhelm the present with anticipated loss, rendering grief Ames’s immediate companion.”¹⁸ Park understands Ames’ letter in a much broader and more positive context. She contends, “It is the recognition of life’s impermanence—the approach of death—that sharpens and illumines Ames’s vision of the earth’s loveliness.”¹⁹ Writing down his intense emotions and impressions of the present does not, in Park’s view, detract from his experience of life, for in the writing he contextualizes his experience as being within the whole of God’s creation. Park goes on to write, “This theological vision infuses Ames’s love for Gilead.”²⁰

I agree with Park’s premise that Ames considers his existence in a theological context, and agree with Tanner that grief is a companion of Ames. I contend that for Ames, appreciating and recognizing the presence of both grief and joy in his life leads Ames to pass on to his son what I call a “sober sacralization” of Gilead and the church building. By sober I mean that Ames sets Gilead apart with solemn reflection that recognizes the imperfect nature of Gilead as well as its beautiful aspects, and hopes through this recognition to grow in wisdom and empathy. Horton and Kraftl argue that sifting through old material things, which I liken to Ames sifting through the cupboards of his brain, “remembering and reminiscing.. can thus play a significant, almost ritual, role in the (re)constitution of relationships and the formations such as ‘family’/’home’,

¹⁸ Tanner, 249.

¹⁹ Park, 109.

²⁰ Ibid., 111.

perhaps especially in dealing with changes therein.”²¹ Therefore Ames’ act of remembering and recording his history helps him to resituate himself within the context of Gilead and the church, which Sheldrake notes is significant because “it is stories, whether fictional or biographical, which give shape to place.”²² History, in essence, is a collection of narratives describing how and why events transpired as they did, and it carries the bias of its authors. In his attempt to tell some of his personal history to his son, Ames begins to recognize his biases and the biases of Gilead and tries to provide a framework for understanding how they came to be. By distinguishing these places, and their insufficiencies, Ames awakens a new gratitude in himself for the places while also setting a precedent for his son about how to understand himself as one piece, one present and influential thread in the fabric that makes up a community.

While *Gilead* is “authored” by a character with an anchored faith and an established sense of place, *Home* and *Lila* are more centrally stories of questioning and testing. Jack and Glory Boughton’s childhoods in Gilead happened concurrently with Ames’ “time of loneliness”²³ following the death of his wife and child, and their memories and associations with the town and their house are quite distinct from Ames’. There is a level of fear for both of the Boughton siblings as they return home: a fear that they are returning to a place where all of the unresolved hardships of their pasts remain and therefore must be faced anew. Jack’s previous abandonment of his child and her young mother still provokes deep hurt and resentment from Boughton, Ames, and Glory.

²¹ Horton and Kraftl, 33.

²² Sheldrake, 17.

²³ Robinson, *Gilead*, 44.

Stacked onto this is Jack's history of waywardness as a young boy in Gilead, which the town has never forgotten. In short, Jack and Glory do not view Gilead with the same sense of wonder and beauty that Ames clings to; rather, they come home with trepidation. Despite the painful memories associated with Gilead, both Jack and Glory choose to come home when they have hit their lowest points in life. They have a doubtful hope in returning to a place once familiar, a place that was meant to be a shelter for them when they could not provide for themselves, yet there is still hope. Like Ames' act of remembrance, both Jack and Glory's return home prompts a sort of "clearing of a cupboard," wherein the siblings face anew places from their past that both spark memories and offer them the opportunity to redeem the places through new use. Also like Ames, their identities are interwoven with that of Gilead, and they have to go through the process of reconciling their narrative in relation to that of their family home and the town as a whole.

Much of the criticism on *Home* focuses on the difficulty with which Jack seeks to find refuge in place where even as a child he has never felt fully accepted; however, Painter, Williams, and Evans focus primarily on the theological and interpersonal relational aspects of his homecoming rather than his relation to the physical home and town of Gilead. Prodigality is the term applied to Jack for the resemblance of his story to the parable of the prodigal son that is found in the Christian gospels. In an interview, Robinson once noted a key difference between Jack and the biblical account: "The prodigal can leave his old life behind him. Jack brings his to Gilead—in the form of loss and loneliness and also hope, and a painful precious secret."²⁴ Jack is coming into Gilead

²⁴ Painter, "Further," 488.

laden with troubles about which he is understandably defensive, and these troubles necessarily influence his perceptions and memories of Gilead. Despite being absent from Gilead for twenty years, Jack returns to find the town physically unchanged. He essentially steps back into the world he left at nineteen now carrying the life experience of a weathered and tried thirty-nine-year-old and that disjunction is troubling. Because places carry and cling to certain societal expectations, Jack faces on his return the expectation that two decades later he will still be the scoundrel Boughton child, despite his efforts in his relationship with Della to reform himself. Building on the opinions of the prodigal received in the interview, Painter continues to expound on the way the characters in Robinson's novels diverge from the biblical outline by suggesting "instead of God as the symbolic father who receives his wayward son, she presents two earthly fathers [Ames and Boughton] devoted to serving God but failing to show mercy when it is due."²⁵ Jack had invested some degree of hope in the place of Gilead, in the people whose lives shaped the town before his lifetime, and his reception does little to support his hopes. Yet, Gilead has not been wholly unchanged in the time Jack has been away. Lila's presence in the town as Ames' wife changed the dynamics of the Ames household, and thereby the town. Though she tries to conform to the expectations that come with being a preacher's wife, she is still herself and carries an understanding of the world quite unlike those held by most of Gilead's residents. As Williams states: "She has, though with difficulty and over a significant period of time, learned to pass as a native, yet without losing her critical liberty."²⁶ She is evidence of change in Gilead, however

²⁵ Painter, "Loyalty," 326.

²⁶ Williams, 9.

subtle, and therefore represents hope for Jack. Significantly, though, Jack finds hope in the stability of his childhood home, however distant in the future it may be realized.

Though he did distance himself from his family even as a child, he realizes by returning home that in this place he is loved and cared for, however imperfectly, and he clings to a hope that his wife and son could experience love and care in Gilead as well in the future.

Like Jack, Glory returns to Gilead with hidden wounds. The memories of home she carries, though some are of the same events in their family history, are colored by her own perceptions. Tanner argues that through Glory's narration of events in *Home*, conceptions of family and home as safe places to inhabit for those seeking refuge are drawn into question: "For the Boughtons...holding onto the house of memory comes at the expense of agreeing to inhabit an overly cluttered and purely representational landscape."²⁷ The Boughton home looks just as it did when eight Boughton children and their mother lived there, and Boughton expects his children to fall into the same roles they held during that time. The patriarch of the family, he shows no willingness to change or adapt to changing society, therefore Glory is coming into a stagnant place. Glory takes on, unwillingly at first but with gradual hope and gratitude, the task of preserving her family home in order to provide a sense of stability for her siblings, especially Jack. Belief and trust are difficult for him, but she can provide him with the confidence that this one thing in his life, his home, will remain unaltered physically, but transformed in meaning by her presence as someone willing to embrace Jack, Della, and their son Robert. Tanner concludes by saying that while this decision is constricting for Glory,

²⁷ Tanner, "Uncomfortable," 40.

Robinson has continually argued for the benefits of being alone with oneself.²⁸ However, I contend that the redemptive aspect of Glory's choice to stay is not that she will have time alone to know herself better, but that she is dedicated to remaining there as a sign of good faith that one day Jack and his family will return and find refuge in this place, because she has made it her business to make the house a home. Though the narrative in the Boughton house has largely been held suspended for years, Jack and Glory's return signifies an important shift both for them as individuals and the narrative of Gilead as a town. By confronting and rejecting the lack of forgiveness in the Boughton house, the two Boughton siblings reform their identities in the place and lay the foundations for a Boughton narrative that does not conform to the old one.

Lila's relation to Gilead is altogether different from that of the Boughtons and Ames. Through her memories, it is revealed that most of her life was spent wandering. Her places of safety shifted, and in large part were defined by the person of Doll rather than a physical location. Her narrative is situated around the time of the birth of her son, when she is still in the early stages of understanding the expectations of being married to an old preacher. Permanent loyalty to a place is a foreign concept to her. Because of her lack of possessions and permanence, her identity is something she must create for herself. Sheldrake contends that "stories of displacement show, it is the absence of lineage and memory associated with physical place that is just as critical as separation from the landscape alone,"²⁹ so Lila's effort to remember her own story and create her life narrative is a substantial task. Readers can more fully grasp how noble Lila's aim is when

²⁸ Ibid., 51.

²⁹ Sheldrake, 17.

they consider Morrissey's idea that "trauma that happened so repeatedly it felt normal"³⁰ inhibits memory and causes the victim to distance herself from trust in a place or other people. While like Jack and Glory she is hesitant at first to put her trust in the town of Gilead, she comes to realize that the town and its people, especially Ames, are genuine in their offer of stability and companionship. However, Lila is not bound to the physical place of Gilead; rather, she sees the worth of the place in the memories she prompts Ames to transcribe for their son and her own memories of the place, because for a time it has been a place where she had the time to rest and remember her story.

Through a more thorough exploration of each novel in relation to memory and place, I will demonstrate in the following chapters that Robinson's characters are beneficially transformed, though in different ways, by tying themselves to the place of Gilead, the Boughton house, the Congregationalist church, and the Boughton garden and barn while they endeavor to remember their past in order to understand their identities within their personal narratives and the narratives of the places they inhabit. Chapter Two will expound upon Ames' letter to his son and how the process of remembering and writing his letter causes him to acknowledge and accept some blame for the shortcomings of the place, as well as the importance of remembering the good and beautiful in the simple-looking town in the broader perspective of the eternal. Chapter Three delves deeper into Jack and Glory's attitudes and conceptions on returning to Gilead and their childhood home, and illustrates how memory and retelling of family stories prompts the siblings to reconsider the narratives of their lives and transform their trajectories and the future of the Boughton house. Chapter Four explores the contrasting narrative of Lila as

³⁰ Morrissey, 186.

someone who has never had a place with enough stability to plant roots or even pause long enough to remember all she has gone through until she arrives in Gilead. It also discusses how Lila adapted her narrative to include Gilead while maintaining her identity as someone with the freedom to leave the town and only remain part of its story through memory. Overall, this thesis argues that place is critical in the interactions, memories, retellings, and identities of the characters in Robinson's novels. In Gilead, or the Boughton house, or the church, the characters are prompted to pause and reconsider themselves and the places they inhabit by remembering their narratives with a sort of critical distance that allows them to see the places and themselves in a broader perspective. This new perspective, in turn, enables them to transform and reestablish their identities and the identities of the places they live. Additionally, the methods with which the characters remember and respond to the places they inhabit create a framework for readers on how to become self-aware and socially-aware members of the communities in which they live.

CHAPTER TWO

Sober Sacralization: Reverent and Redemptive Memory of Gilead as a City of Refuge

John Ames, the third man to hold his name, is keenly aware in his seventy-sixth year of life that his son will live most of his life in the absence of his father. Significantly, Ames will not have the opportunity to know and be known by his son through the usual relational means of physical presence and conversation when his son has reached a level of maturity and manhood far beyond that of a seven-year-old. As is evident in his discourse on the Fifth Commandment,¹ Ames esteems the ideal of honoring one's parents, believing it to be a pivotal choice in every person's life and faith. Following this line of reasoning, Ames believes that learning about one's predecessors and the people and events that influenced them helps a person understand himself more completely. Thus, Ames assigns himself to write the "begats"² of the several John Ameses, in which even John Ames Boughton is granted space for parts of his history and posterity, for the purpose of leaving it for his son to read in the future when he has reached an age where he desires to have the "crepuscular quality"³ of his father given its due discourse.

In the process of writing this autobiographical and biographical letter, Ames returns repeatedly to certain places which have become meaningful to him and which he

¹ Robinson, *Gilead* 133–139.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 71.

hopes his son will also find meaningful. As Hobbs notes: “Ames’ act of creation in selecting and memorializing parts of his life is deliberate and purposeful.”⁴ His letter is not an attempt to record a comprehensive and chronological account of his life and his memories; in fact there are years that he does not discuss at all. Ames does not begin his writing in full awareness of what he will say to his son; rather, the letter takes shape in a conversational manner, which is influenced by his current surroundings and the links Ames has made in his memory between different aspects of his life. In their study of memory in relation to physically clearing out cupboards, Horton and Kraftl cite Annette Kuhn’s apt description of the way memory progresses, writing that the “conceptualization of memory as a linear, neat, ‘unearthing’ or ‘accessing’ or ‘retrieval’ of the past” is false, and as Kuhn suggests, memory functions more as “‘radiating web[s] of associations, reflections and interpretations’ through messy, ongoing encounters.”⁵ Ames’ letter is therefore a product of his environment and the connections his thoughts draw between subjects. For instance, he takes some time to reflect on the beauty of the weather, and then notes a snippet of interaction between Lila and his son and himself at the mention that he was writing his begats and then launches into a story from when he was a boy.⁶ He continually draws on his present interactions to reflect on the past and vice versa, and follows rabbit trails of memory where they may lead if he thinks they will serve his general purpose of giving his son a sense of who his father and ancestors were. Though he does explicitly state when he wants his son to read the letter, “[i]f you’re a grown man

⁴ Hobbs, 241–262.

⁵ Horton and Kraftl, 25–44.

⁶ Robinson, *Gilead*, 8–9.

when you read this—it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then,”⁷ he does not set out with a clear definition of content, for after stating his age, the names of his parents and grandparents, and that he has spent the vast majority of his life in Gilead, he asks the question “And what else should I tell you?”⁸ When he asks this question he does not foresee the homecoming of his namesake John Ames “Jack” Boughton, and therefore is unaware of how significant Jack’s story is in relation to his own. I make this point to illustrate that Ames’ points of emphasis, though they are shaped significantly by deliberate choice, are also the product of his context, and their meanings are sometimes adjusted in this light. Horton and Kraftl’s study of literally clearing out cupboards and thus building associations through memory is pertinent here in a metaphorical sense. The cupboard is Ames’ mind and heart, and as he prepares for his death by writing this letter, he is opening doors that he has long kept closed and looking anew at himself and his surroundings.

In this chapter, I argue that Ames goes through a process of “sober sacralization” through the writing of his letter to his son in order to provide a context and means for conversation and instruction concerning the places that he has experienced as significant. As stated in the previous chapter, by the term “sacralization,” I mean the designation of something as worthy of remembrance, reverence, and thoughtful analysis. By the term “sober,” I mean that the sacralization merits a solemnity and gravity, as well as a realistic understanding that things apart from God are fallible, but through understanding faults and failures comes greater wisdom and empathy. Previously, the criticism on *Gilead* has

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 9.

been narrowly focused on Ames's questions about the nature of existence, his thoughts about his ancestors, or his struggle to forgive Jack.

This chapter broadens these narrow focuses by contending that through Ames, Robinson presents a methodology for how a person can thoughtfully and reverently find his or her identity in a community, and how to encourage others to do the same. Though Ames' life does mostly consist of his relationships with his wife, son, and Boughton, he recognizes by the end of the novel that he is responsible for being an agent of forgiveness and change in a town that has forgotten its roots. Change starts at an individual level, and if Ames wants Gilead to be a town his son can be proud of, he must set the precedent for forgiveness and growth so that in the future men such as Jack can come with their families and be accepted and cared for by the community. Sheldrake asserts "Each person effectively reshapes a place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place and also has to come to terms with the many layers of story that already exist in a given location."⁹ Ames is in a perfect position to do this kind of transformative memory work because Gilead is so ingrained in his identity and memories. Significantly, he is aware that because he may not live for much longer the responsibility falls to him to draw on his memory and the narratives of his predecessors to establish a sense of place for his son.

The sacralization of places for Ames is a sober sacralization that recognizes and welcomes grief as playing a necessary role in making life meaningful and accentuating the moments that are joyful. The setting of Ames' life, and the title of the book, the fictional Iowa town of Gilead, is the steady context within which Ames writes and one of

⁹ Sheldrake, 16.

the places he sacralizes in his letter. Ames has spent “seventy-four [of his seventy-six years] here in Gilead,”¹⁰ years which spanned from the end of the nineteenth century, through World War One, the Depression, World War Two, and which are in his current state of life in the midst of the Cold War. In his study on place, memory, and identity, Sheldrake asserts: “The symbols, ritual, attitudes and perspectives about life that constitute ‘culture’ enable human societies to cohere and function. Culture regulates how people assign meaning and allocate value in terms of the key elements of human living.”¹¹ Because Ames has spent his whole life in Gilead, his culture has been mostly restricted to the norms of the town and his own studies of theology. The culture of Gilead is one where most people, except perhaps for those on the outskirts of town, attend church every Sunday simply because that is what they have always done. It is a culture that Ames’ brother and parents left and advised Ames to leave but one where he can say, “here I am, having lived to the end the life he warned me against, and pretty well content with it, too, all in all.”¹² Nothing has really changed in Gilead in recent decades, apart from the arrival of Lila, and Ames is content with that slow, complacent pace. Therefore, if the latter portion of Sheldrake’s statement holds true, he has not only been formed mentally and spiritually by this rural Iowa town, but he has also been a member of the town whose life has influenced its culture. Ames’ identity and the identity of Gilead are interwoven.

Though Gilead is so integrally a part of Ames’ identity, he recognizes that his wife and son do not share the same intimate connection, and perhaps because Ames does

¹⁰ Robinson, *Gilead*, 9.

¹¹ Sheldrake, 3-4.

¹² Robinson, *Gilead*, 24.

not expect them to remain in Gilead after his death, he seeks to describe the town he loves so that his son will in the least understand the context of his father's life, and discern how it formed him into the old preacher, husband, and father he became. He hopes his son will realize and accept the importance of the place:

There have been heroes here, and saints and martyrs, and I want you to know that. Because that is the truth, even if no one remembers it. To look at the place, it's just a cluster of houses strung along a few roads, and a little row of brick buildings with stores in them, and a grain elevator and a water tower with Gilead written on its side, and the post office and the schools and the playing fields and the old train station, which is pretty well gone to weeds now. But what must Galilee have looked like? You can't tell so much from the appearance of a place.¹³

The passage above is written by Ames directly following his account of what he would describe as a failed conversation with Jack Boughton. Jack asked Ames about the "colored regiment" and "colored people"¹⁴ who lived in Iowa and Gilead in the past, but left after their church was burned. Through this conversation, and the recording of it in his letter, Ames recognizes that Gilead falls into the category of bigotry or exclusivity against people of color through their sheer lack of effort to help restore the church and support the displaced community of Christians, which is not something to be proud of, yet he does not want his son to discount the town as a whole for that fault. Ames recognizes that places are given meaning by the people who live and have lived in them,

¹³ Robinson, *Gilead*. 173.

¹⁴ Ibid. 171

they have “the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious,”¹⁵ and there have been saintly people in Gilead as well. Ames ascribes a religious significance to Gilead by referencing saints, martyrs, and Galilee. These terms are important in New Testament Christian theology and tradition, particularly in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Ames, having grown up the son and grandson of Congregationalist preachers and becoming one himself, has an almost inherent knowledge of Christian scripture and tradition. By describing the town and its people in such terms, he brings them into the eternal community of believers. Their story is linked to the broader Christian narrative because of their faith and the hardships they have endured.

Ames chooses to reference Galilee, a significant region in the Gospels, instead of the original Gilead, which is mentioned in Deuteronomy. Galilee was a place of refuge for Jesus in his childhood, for Joseph decided to reside there when he saw that Judea would not be safe for him and his family, and it was the place where Jesus began his ministry, called his disciples, preached, and performed many miracles. What had once been simply another region in Israel became the context for events that would radically influence the world. Ames references Galilee to express his wonder at the fact that extraordinary people can come from places that appear ordinary on the surface. But Ames must be aware that Jesus and his disciples were also harshly rejected in Galilee by many of the people who came to listen to them and by the religious leaders. Therefore by likening Gilead and Galilee, Ames is sacralizing the town with a tone of wonder and respect for the good that has transpired in the town, not by negating the bad things that happened, but by reminding himself and his son that it is important to keep hold of the positive as well.

¹⁵ Sheldrake, 1.

Sheldrake legitimizes Ames' notions when he writes that the addition of new members to a place "effectively reshapes a place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place" while at the same time recognizing "the many layers of story that already exist in a given location."¹⁶ Every thread is important for Ames, even the ones that are snagged or seemingly out of place. Leise succinctly pinpoints this desire of Ames, writing that he "neither ignore[s] the bad nor overlook[s] the good."¹⁷

The original Gilead was one of the regions designated by Moses as a place "which anyone who had killed a person could flee if they had unintentionally killed a neighbor without malice or aforethought,"¹⁸ a city of refuge. Where this reference has potential to be applicable to the Iowan Gilead is in the conflict between Ames' father and grandfather. Their conflict was rooted in Ames' father's belief that the grandfather had been responsible for the death of a man who was chasing after John Brown, and, especially because the grandfather did not show any remorse, this belief bred shame and bitterness in Ames' father about the grandfather. However, there is no definite confirmation of the grandfather's guilt. Ames recounts to his son the distrust between the two men that was always a presence in his life, but never himself condemns his grandfather as a killer. Hobbs argues in her analysis of the memorialization of the possessions of grandfather Ames that "memorialization is a selective process of choosing the memories that serve a purpose and disposing of the rest."¹⁹ Yet Ames does not

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Leise, 364.

¹⁸ Deut. 4:42-43.

¹⁹ Hobbs, 247.

strictly adhere to this process because he does not want his son to be ignorant of the significant events in the past of his ancestors who came to Gilead when Ames “was still a small boy”²⁰; he wants his son to know the pain and strife that occurred in the lives of the men who made the town their home. One of these pains was the burning down of the Negro church that effectively made Gilead a one-race town,²¹ and another was the Spanish influenza that came during the First World War “like a biblical plague.”²² He confesses at one point: “There are so many things you would never think to tell anyone. And I believe they may be the things that mean the most to you, and that even your own child would have to know in order to know you well at all.”²³ His life in Gilead has been full of profound grief and profound joy. So while Gilead was, and perhaps remains, a city of refuge, it is more so in the Galilean sense, a place where miracles of grace occur, where people are fed and marry and live. It is where he met and married his first wife Louisa, and where he lost her and his daughter. It is also where he met his current wife Lila, and where his son was born. Therefore in his selection of memories that characterize and contextualize Gilead, his purpose is to honestly convey his perceptions of the tragedies and beautiful graces that are intertwined in the history of the town. If identities are bound in narrative as Sheldrake suggests,²⁴ there is a responsibility for Ames to tell

²⁰ Robinson, *Gilead*, 76.

²¹ Ibid., 36–37.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Ibid., 102.

²⁴ Sheldrake, 17.

the whole story, not just the pleasant parts. There is no possibility for growth or wisdom if there is no recognition of faults.

As I stated earlier, Ames does not understand his identity as being separable from Gilead and the ideas, beliefs, and practices that are the culture of the town. Near the end of his letter, he discloses that his father once tried to convince him that he need not cling to the “notions that were very old and even very local”²⁵ anymore, that Ames could break free from Gilead and its religious ideologies. This detachment was not and is not conceivable to Ames, as he articulates when writing, “He [Ames’ father] thought he could excuse me from my loyalty... as if it were not loyalty to myself at the very least.”²⁶ Ames sees his attempt to write this letter of explanation of himself to his son as necessarily tied to an explanation of Gilead as a whole. He would not have become the man he is, would not have become the father to his son, if he had not inhabited Gilead. Each experience he had in Gilead, from meeting and marrying Louisa, to losing her and Rebecca, to his lifelong friendship with Boughton, to Lila’s introduction to his life, to his amended understanding and blessing of Jack, has formed him into the man he is, and these interactions would not have occurred had he abandoned Gilead. This loyalty is consistent with Robinson’s own stances on the importance of loyalty to place. Though critical of “undignified, obscurantist, and xenophobic Christianity” sometimes practiced in America, Robinson holds to her stance that “the United States has done many things right,”²⁷ and deserves due respect for its successes. What then does this mean for his son, whom he expects to leave the town after his death? For one thing, it gives his son a fuller

²⁵ Robinson, *Gilead*, 235.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Marilynne Robinson, “Wondrous Love,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 213.

understanding of the significance of the place where he spent his childhood years. For another thing of equal importance, it provides his son with a framework engaging with and participating in the formation of his own identity within the context of whatever towns or places that he calls home.

Perhaps the most formative and consistent place for Ames within Gilead is the church, where some of the most poignant moments in his life transpired. What makes his sacralization of the church, a place normally associated with sacraments, unique is that the church is precious to him not because it is where he preaches every Sunday, but because of the nature of the building itself and the nature of particular pivotal events that transpired there. Furthermore, being in the church alone enables Ames to step back and remember and reconsider his life and Gilead with a necessary and respectful distance of perspective, which I will discuss further later on. “It’s a plain old church and it could use a coat of paint,”²⁸ Ames states before he goes about describing the homeliness of the church and how it truly was a sanctuary, a place of rest and protection for him during the melancholy years after his wife’s death. Earlier he noted that in his vernacular the word “old” “sets a thing apart as something regarded with a modest, habitual affection,” that old things are “very near [to his] heart.”²⁹ The church has been a steady presence in Ames’ life, and while churches are meant to be places of gathering and community, Ames has a love for the building itself. There is a peace that comes from solitude in a simple and quiet place that is a reprieve from the heaviness that comes with human relationships. There is something restorative for Ames in the private moments and

²⁸ Robinson, *Gilead*, 70.

²⁹ Ibid., 28.

memories the church holds for him. After describing the sight of the sunrise in the sanctuary, the sound of the latch, and the creak of the floor of “the building [that] has settled into itself,” Ames remarks: “After a while I did begin to wonder if I liked the church better with no people in it.”³⁰ It is weary work to lead a congregation when one is living in grief, as Ames did for so many years, and to be aware that there was surely gossip when the old man married a woman young enough to be his daughter. Then there is the desire of the trustees to tear down the building and replace it, which feels to Ames like the tearing down of part of himself. The “naked simplicity”³¹ of the building is something Ames relishes dearly. Truly understanding one’s identity in a community requires taking the time and finding a space to be alone with one’s thoughts. Just as understanding the faults and successes of the town and himself are necessary to Ames fully inhabiting his community, solitude and time for rest and reflection are important to keep a person healthy. Experiencing being in the church without the people is a way in which Ames finds rest and calm, but Ames has a deep reverence for his vocation of being a minister as well, and recognizes that the church is important because it serves as a refuge and sanctuary for everyone who enters.

Significantly, the church is where Ames first met Lila. It was a rainy Sunday morning when his son’s “mother walked in” and “she seemed as if she didn’t belong there, and at the same time as if she were the only one of us all who really did belong there.”³² Just after arguing that a central factor in defining a true home as “a place that offers access to

³⁰ Ibid., 70.

³¹ Ibid., 168.

³² Ibid., 20–21.

the sacred,” Sheldrake argues that “[b]elonging’ involves both a connection to specific places and also our existence within networks of stable relationships.”³³ Ames and his congregation had a well-established network of relationships, and were all so familiar that Sunday services were familiar and habitual. They grew up in the church, with a steady trust in its necessity in their lives. Though Lila was unlike Ames and his congregation because she was new and unknown, she came in, and Ames felt a conviction to preach something of significance.³⁴ He did not know at that moment that Lila had no such trust or hope in the church, that she did not immediately feel that sense of belonging. But her presence in the pews reminded him of the sacredness of his position and obligations as a preacher, and since that Sunday morning, Ames has not been able to separate his affection for the church from that moment. On the morning she arrived he “baptized two infants,”³⁵ and for Ames that created a connection in his mind between baptism, Lila, and his lost daughter. These associations match the “radiating web” understanding of memory mentioned earlier,³⁶ where memories are triggered non-linearly by the touch or sight of certain things. When he begins to write about how he and Lila came to be married,³⁷ his thought trails into “that infant Rebecca [his daughter]... the way she looked while I held her, which I seem to remember, because every single time I

³³ Sheldrake, 10.

³⁴ Robinson, *Gilead*, 21.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Horton and Kraftl, 33.

³⁷ Robinson, *Gilead*, 55.

have christened a baby I have thought of her again.”³⁸ The act of christening, of assigning a name to an infant and baptizing him or her into the community of believers, is one of Ames’ treasured responsibilities, but it also reminds him of the daughter he lost. The church was home to these two pivotal events in Ames’ life; therefore, his sacralization of the church goes beyond a simple reverence for the building in which he preaches, to a vastly more intimately sacred place where he experienced both deep pain and love. It is not merely a place where he can find rest in solitude; it is also a place where he can actively bring others into community.

The church is also where Ames holds two of his important conversations with Jack, and it served as a neutral territory. In both conversations³⁹ Jack and Ames discuss, as noted earlier, Gilead as a place where historically people of color could live, and whether or not it could become a home for Jack’s wife Della and their son Robert. The sad answer to Jack’s hopes seems in *Gilead* to be no, that Gilead cannot currently be the city of refuge that it was for the previous John Ames:

I made it as far at the church, and went inside and rested there for a long time. I believe I saw in young Boughton’s face, as we walked along, a sense of irony in having invested hope in this sad old place, and also the cost to him of relinquishing it. And I knew what hope it was. It was just that kind of place was meant to encourage, that a harmless life could be lived here unmolested. “There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for every age. And the streets of the city shall be full of

³⁸ Ibid., 56.

³⁹ Ibid., 167–173, 218–231.

boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.” That is prophecy, a vision of the prophet Zechariah. He says it will be marvelous in the eyes of the people, and so it might well be to people almost anywhere in this sad world. To play catch of an evening, to smell the river, to hear the train pass. These little towns were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter just such peace.⁴⁰

After his first conversation with Jack at the church, quoted earlier, Ames described Gilead as a Galilee, and there was a hopeful expectation in his tone, for he reminded himself that there have been saints in the town. After his second conversation he realizes that the faults of the town, which he did not fully recognize until Jack shared his whole story, make it a place where Jack cannot find permanent shelter, and the severity of the faults of this fact weighs heavily on Ames. As the passage above indicates, the town has not fulfilled the role Jack had hoped it would. Gilead, and the people that fill its churches, has fallen into a state of complacent paralysis, where no one is much concerned with or empathetic towards the idea of reconciliation with the prodigal Jack Boughton, much less his interracial family. Gilead has a subtle sort of hostility to people who cannot conform to its culture, who question things as they have been for years. The subtlety does not make the fault less painful for Jack or Ames. For while Ames makes his own peace with Jack through blessing him as he departs, he knows the bitterness he harbored for years, the lack of faith in Jack’s penitence, cannot be neatly separated out from the work he did as a preacher, and his personal change can only slowly work through his congregation and Gilead as a whole. He offers up these beliefs to his son through writing the long letter, clearing out the cupboards of his soul, and puts himself in a position where his and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 242.

Gilead's "assumed identities are exposed, vulnerable, and up for review."⁴¹ This transparency and willingness to step back from Gilead, in which Ames' whole life is ingratiated, is the first step in working towards reconciliation. To fully understand one's identity and the identity of one's community, a person has to create some distance from which to view themselves and their home. This distance does not detract from his loyalty to Gilead. Rather, it shows a respect for the town similar to a parent's demonstration of respect and care for a child through discipline. Ames wants what is best for the town, so he has to step back a bit from his emotional ties to recognize the objective wrongs that have been done in the hopes that in the future his son will not have to endure the same problems.

Grace is a cornerstone in Ames' theology, and he offers his own grace in his sacralization of Gilead and the church, perhaps because he sees himself as so intertwined with its culture and he knows his own need for grace. At nearly the conclusion of his long letter to his son, Ames again uses New Testament terms to set Gilead apart as a special place, worthy of remembrance and respect: "To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned at this place is, as little regarded."⁴² Ames is not suggesting that the town is perfect or infallible, but that there is a humility in its simplicity that might prevent a stranger from seeing the depth of love and life and grief that has been lived in Gilead. After essentially giving his son permission to leave Gilead if he so chooses, Ames clearly articulates his understanding of Gilead:

⁴¹ Horton and Kraftl, 41.

⁴² Robinson, *Gilead*, 246.

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.⁴³

Ames sees potential in Gilead for hope and change, but he is under no delusions that the changes are imminent, or will even come soon enough to impact the life of his son. Rather, he sees Gilead within the broader context of Christian history, within the eternal. For the places people inhabit on earth can only be a taste, an image, of eternal refuge and sanctuary, and all places derive their significance from their relation to God. Within this context, Ames recognizes, and asks his son to recognize, that in the present time there will be grief and pain, and the people and places one loves may not measure up to hopeful expectations; yet the pain in life helps one feel the presence of grace and joy and hope more fully. Therefore, through Ames' letter, Robinson demonstrates that through the thoughtful remembrance of his past in Gilead, Ames has allowed himself to step back from his intimate love for Gilead and see the town and himself with full recognition that both shameful and beautiful moments have to be accepted as part of his identity. Yet the shameful things, because they have been named, have the potential to be redeemed.

⁴³ Ibid., 247.

CHAPTER THREE

“Ye who are weary, come home”:

Glory and Jack and the Transformation of Hope for Home

Robinson’s second Gilead-based novel, *Home*, illustrates the tension of returning to a familiar place after a long absence full of life and pain. Glory is the primary narrator of the text and her perspective on Jack’s thoughts and intentions is tainted by their past relationship and her current perceptions of his needs and desires. However, there are several points of conflict in the text shared by the siblings. Both Glory and Jack come back to Gilead with secrets and reservations about the purpose of their return. Both encounter the harsh memory of the events surrounding Jack’s illegitimate child’s death. Both seek to understand their father in his physical and mental decline. Both struggle to define and accept their place in Gilead. For all their similarities, the siblings’ progressions of attachment to and detachment from Gilead take different courses. Jack comes to Gilead with a hesitant hope and sincere and purposeful respect. Glory comes to Gilead with chagrin. Throughout the novel their perspectives are altered though not quite reversed. Through their time together in Gilead, reflecting on their pasts and seeking to create an acceptable present and future, Jack’s pining hope for the town transforms Glory’s cynicism and though he leaves the town, Glory is able to make Gilead home again.

Much of the criticism on *Home* notes the Prodigal Son theme of Jack's return to Gilead. Jack, Glory, and Boughton are representations of the younger son, elder son, and father, respectively, though Robinson's characters realistically alter their roles with their distinct flaws and strengths.¹ Evans diverges from the group by focusing on the presence of the Feuerbach book in both *Gilead* and *Home* as an indicator that "everyone can change,"² even someone who feels as delinquent as Jack. Tanner has a fairly negative reading of *Home* with Glory, the narrator as the subject. She reads Glory as "trapped" within "the unworkable fixtures of domestic life" that "unsettles the culturally sanctioned idea of home as an escape,"³ though she concedes Glory is ultimately able to create a small space of her own in Gilead.

In this chapter I will argue that Jack's return and interactions with the Boughton house and Gilead are instrumental in the transformation from bitterness to a level of gratitude in Glory's perceptions of staying in Gilead indefinitely. In her years away from Gilead as a teacher and fiancée Glory experienced the beginning stages of a life she would be happy with, but when she discovered her fiancé was already married and was not going to pay back the money he had borrowed, her life narrative collapsed. When her father's health began declining, Glory was the best choice among the Boughton children

¹ See Simon Baker, "Homeward Bound," *The Observer* (Web, October 5, 2008), accessed April 2, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/05/fiction1>; Rebecca M. Painter, "Further Thoughts on a Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 485–492; Rebecca M. Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction," *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 321–340; James Wood, "The Homecoming: A Prodigal Son Returns in Marilynne Robinson's Third Novel," *The New Yorker* (Web, September 8, 2008), accessed April 2, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/08/the-homecoming>; Rowan Williams, "Native Speakers: Identity, Grace, and Homecoming," *Christianity and Literature* 61, no. 1 (Autumn 2011): 7–18.

² Evans, 143.

³ Tanner, "Uncomfortable," 35.

to return home to care for him and she resented falling into this role by default. In his twenty years away from Gilead, Jack has attempted to reform his identity and had found the most stability in his relationship with Della. But when her family rejects him for his lack of faith, Jack retreats to the one place he feels he might find the guidance to draw him into belief.

Like Glory, stepping back into Gilead and the Boughton house for Jack means confronting his past self in the physically unchanged place. Throughout his time in Gilead, Jack struggles against his distant childhood self, earnestly seeking to find redemption in Gilead, but ultimately realizes that the narrative he has planned for his life and his family does not yet fit into the broader narrative of Gilead. However, through his sincere attempt to make Gilead a home again, Glory has the opportunity to form a deeper relationship with Jack and learn how much he has changed. She remains in the Boughton house as a witness to changing story of the Boughtons and does so with gratitude and hope. Like Ames, both of the returning Boughton children have to distance themselves from Gilead and their home to see it from a new perspective, and like Ames this perspective is not entirely flattering. Gilead and Boughton's apathy about the Civil Rights movement affects Jack personally. However, Jack demonstrates a respect and hope for the town through his return and by naming his son Robert Boughton. Furthermore, his renewed relationship with Glory gives him hope that his family will accept his new narrative, which is exactly what Glory does at the conclusion of the novel.

To begin with the elder son of the prodigal son analogy, and the narrator of the novel, when Glory Boughton first returns to Gilead she does so with resentment and dissatisfaction. "Dear God... dear God in heaven" is her first thought upon reentering her

childhood home, greeted by her aging father.⁴ She then reflects that although to her father “[t]he house embodied... the general blessedness of his life, which was manifest, really indisputable,”⁵ she could not help but wonder “[w]hy should this staunch and upright house seem to her so abandoned? So heartbroken?”⁶ In his reflections on the relation of humans to place, Sheldrake notes that there has been recent attention to the “plurality of meanings given to particular places,”⁷ which recognizes that different people or people groups can have completely divergent associations related to a place. This is certainly true throughout *Home*, which I will discuss further later on. Through self-reflection Glory realizes why she feels these things by recognizing that she is draping her perceptions of herself as abandoned and heartbroken onto the house. It feels abandoned and heartbroken because perception is in “[t]he eye of the beholder,”⁸ and she is experiencing those feelings in the wake of the loss of her fiancé and life dreams.

Throughout the novel, however, Glory sometimes loses this sense of self-reflection and blames the house and her circumstances for her ill thoughts. In his review of the novel, Simon Baker depicts Glory as “a straightforwardly saintly woman,”⁹ but if thoughts can count against a person, Glory is not such a simple character. In fact, her first responses to returning home take on the attitude of a peevish child:

⁴ Robinson, *Home*, 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Sheldrake, 5.

⁸ Robinson, *Home*, 4.

⁹ Baker.

The town seemed different to her, now that she had returned there to live. She was thoroughly used to Gilead as the subject and scene of nostalgic memory. How all her brothers and sisters except Jack had loved to come home, and how ready they always were to leave again. How the dear old place and the old stories were to them... The past was a very fine thing, in its place. But her returning now, to stay, as her father said, had turned memory portentous. To have it overrun its bounds in this way and become the present and possibly future, too—they all knew this was a thing to be regretted.¹⁰

Coming home again was not part of the life narrative Glory had constructed for herself. Glory had every hope that she would not be the Boughton child to fill the role of “elder son” and had done her best to break away from Gilead. She worked as a teacher, which was “an excellent thing”¹¹ in her opinion, and seemed to be progressing along a happy and normal life path for a woman in the 1950s when she also became engaged. However, this fiancé, whom she absolutely refuses to even remember by name rather than title, was the beginning of her life narrative crumbling to pieces. From day one he began spending her money, little by little, stealing the economic freedom she had made for herself from teaching, and then he came and visited the Boughton family in Gilead, but after years finally revealed that he was already a married man.

Being home reminds Glory of the idealized family she may never have and that produces understandable embitterment. “She had dreamed of a home for herself and the babies, and the fiancé, a home very different from this good and blessed and fustian and

¹⁰ Robinson, *Home*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

oppressive tabernacle of Boughton probity and kind intent,”¹² she confesses to herself. Tanner frames this as a recognition of the “performativity”¹³ that defined the Boughton childhood. They were the pastor’s children being respectful and quiet when they needed to be and diligent about keeping up the image that they had it together even when Jack’s actions sent them spinning. Previously, Glory could compartmentalize those childhood troubles, close them nicely in the cupboard labeled “past” and pull out only the pleasanter memories. Now she has to confront all of the things that make up the Boughton house every single day. Horton and Kraftl describe this experience as “a feeling of uncanny distance (mingled with a strange sense of familiarity),”¹⁴ which is apt in Glory’s case: she comes back to a home that looks exactly like it did when all eight children lived there, but she comes back alone.

The first step of a healthy return is giving up ideas of that life with a doting husband and several kids she had planned, but she has a difficult time doing this. The second is deciding how to relate to these things from her family’s past that have been preserved. Her initial response, is a resolution to “not take one stick of furniture from her father’s house”¹⁵ into the daydreams of a family life that she refuses to give up. That possibility of freedom still aches in her mind and she simply will not accept the fact that she is settled in Gilead. Quoting Michel de Certeau, Sheldrake accurately describes this sentiment stating: “Each of us ‘with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place

¹² Ibid., 102.

¹³ Tanner, “Uncomfortable,” 41.

¹⁴ Horton and Kraftl, 39.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Home*, 102.

and object that it is *not that*, one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*.”¹⁶ Glory is aware that the connotation of coming home at this stage of her life is one of failure. She is also wary of reentering the place of Gilead. Like Ames, the threads of her past are in the town, but unlike Ames, she does not want her future identity to be defined by the town and house that simply remind her of the husband and children she does not have. However, as I stated earlier, Glory is not a simple character. She changes, gradually and then exponentially, through her interactions with Jack.

As noted in Chapter One, Robinson stated in an interview that “[t]he prodigal can leave his old life behind him. Jack brings his to Gilead—in the form of loss and loneliness, and also hope, and a painful precious secret.”¹⁷ Jack is stepping back into the place where he is still known as the wayward child among the Boughtons, the scoundrel, and the enigma. In peaceful Gilead he wandered, and stole, and fathered and abandoned a child, and the town has neither forgotten nor forgiven him. In other words, he starts off vastly in the negative of public opinion. Yet Gilead is the place of his childhood, where though distant and wayward, he existed as a member of a collective group, a member of the Boughton family. Upon leaving Gilead, the tenuous ties Jack held to his identity in Gilead snapped and he was left trying to define himself as an individual when he had scant finances and no real sense of direction. For a time, he found a safe place, an identity, in his relationship with Della. Her influence in his life brought stability,¹⁸ but when her family separates them, Jack must seek to reestablish or create anew an identity.

¹⁶ Sheldrake, 3.

¹⁷ Painter, 488.

¹⁸ Robinson, *Home*, 208.

His choosing of Gilead to be that place is understandable with consideration to Robert Mauer's framework for how people choose places to call home:

First, 'home' stands for the fact that we persistently need a location where we can pass through the stages of life and become the person we are potentially. Second, we need a place where we can belong to a community. Third, we need a place that offers a fruitful relationship with the natural elements, with plants and animals and with the rhythms of the seasons. Finally, we need a place that offers access to the sacred (however we understand the term) – perhaps, crucially, relates us to *life itself as sacred*.¹⁹

The first tenet has a tricky application to Jack, due to his twenty-year absence from the town, which included a stint in prison. Yet, in the following pages, I will argue that Gilead is a place that Jack hopes he can "become the person [he is] potentially." The second tenet, finding community, is more difficult for Jack. Because of his actions as a child and teen, the people of the town still have reservations about accepting him back into their community. They show tacit respect for Boughton by dropping off "two pies... a casserole and six eggs," following his arrival, but when Jack surmises "They won't come by, though," Glory affirms "Not unless they're invited." Because of the events surrounding his last departure from Gilead, the fathering and eventual death of Jack's child with a girl from the outskirts of town, Jack, too has his reservations about reentering Gilead society: "I need a little while to get used to this place. To try to."²⁰ The final three words of that statement are critical in understanding the difference between Glory and

¹⁹ Qtd. in Sheldrake, 10.

²⁰ Robinson, *Home*, 47.

Jack's attitudes on returning home: Glory, though she has very few alternatives, wholeheartedly resists claiming Gilead as her home again, while Jack earnestly tries to make the best of a situation fraught with shame, doubt, and miscommunication.

The third tenet, the "fruitful relationship with the natural elements," is visible upon Jack's return to Gilead, but Jack broadens it to include the Boughton house. Despite the slight hiccup upon actually reentering his childhood home, being noticeably hung-over when he had "been all right for a long time,"²¹ Jack quickly tries to settle into his new room at his old house: "Jack had already hung up his clothes and set a half dozen books on the dresser between Abraham Lincoln bookends, having stacked the ten volumes of Kipling they had supported for two generations in the corner of the closet."²² With this simple act, Jack demonstrates an effort to reintegrate himself into the family narrative, as well as transform it. Kipling is perhaps best known for his poem "The White Man's Burden," which is dripping with racist imperialism notions about white supremacy. Though no one in his family is aware of the fact yet, the foremost pain in Jack's life currently is his inability to be with Della, the African American woman he loves who is also the mother of his son. By placing Kipling in the closet, Jack is distancing himself from such attitudes. Donohoe asserts there is a "mutual relationship of change with erasure and with layers of place and layers of memory,"²³ which means that Jack's actions have the efficacy to potentially reshape the place of the Boughton house. The subtle step of replacing the books is his first attempt to rewrite the memory of the place to include the presence of his adult self in this room that once belonged to one of

²¹ Ibid., 31.

²² Ibid., 35–36.

²³ Donohoe, 9.

his other siblings. Furthermore, being in this room provides a healthy barrier between himself and his old habits because he is not occupying the room he lived in when he gained his wayward reputation.

While it is not until the conclusion of the novel that Glory realizes the struggle Jack is facing, she does notice his willfully positive, though hesitant, attitude towards the house and its garden and the barn with the old DeSoto inside. As being in the church incited memories of baptism, Rebecca, and Lila for Ames, the Boughton house has a similar effect on Jack. During the prayer in their ornate dining room, Glory watches Jack “glancing up at the oddnesses [*sic*] of the room, the overbearing drapes and the frippery glass droplets on the light fixture, as if the sound of the old man’s words were awakening him to the place.”²⁴ Just minutes earlier Glory had been looking at the drapes and the whole dining room decor and wishing she could change it all.²⁵ With Glory as narrator, readers cannot quite discern what memories the drapes spark for Jack, but days later Glory notices him “put his hand on the shoulder of their mother’s chair, touch the fringe on a lampshade, as if to confirm for himself that the uncanny persistence of half-forgotten objects, all in their old places, was not some trick of the mind.”²⁶ There is a tenderness in these actions, a longing for home that the members of the Boughton family never realized in Jack. Horton and Kraftl opine that “material things have agency: they actively change the identities and everyday experiences of domesticity over time, albeit in often unremarkable ways.”²⁷ The things that make up the Boughton house are not neutral in

²⁴ Robinson, *Home*, 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ Horton and Kraftl, 37.

meaning, they remind Jack of his childhood and teenage years when he was rooted in Gilead. After years spent in other places, such as prison, or working odd jobs, Jack appreciates coming back to a place that is fully established as a home with its furnishings and details. He is also wary about falling into his old habits of distancing himself from his family. “I don’t really want to keep to myself so much. It’s just a habit,”²⁸ he confides to Glory, demonstrating his sincerity in seeking to re-inhabit his old home, and do so in a markedly different way than he did as a young man.

This effort is more explicit in the copious amount of time Jack spends cleaning up the Boughton’s garden and the DeSoto. Though Glory had been back in Gilead for a longer period of time, she had made little headway on either the garden or the car. Though she had planted several vegetables, she failed to protect the garden from animals like rabbits and groundhogs because “[s]he would have to ask someone to put up some sort of fence, and that would involve talking to someone, which she preferred not to do,”²⁹ so the garden was in stasis. She acted similarly with the car that she “tried to start once”³⁰ and then gave up as a lost cause. Jack, on the other hand, had already begun improving the car, “wip[ing] off the windshield to make the thing look less—humiliated” and asking Glory’s permission to continue working on it.³¹ But first “he spaded between the rows of irises and he was businesslike about it, too. He had rolled up his sleeves.”³²

²⁸ Robinson, *Home*, 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 61.

Here Glory begins to realize the care Jack has for the Boughton house, reflecting: “It had somehow never seemed to her that the place had his attention.”³³ But following that day she recognized that when they worked in the garden together “Jack was very earnest about the work, and very preoccupied, reflective,”³⁴ and then he began showing even more ownership of the work, ignoring Glory’s advice about not trimming the vines on the porch, which Glory found to her surprise made the house “a little less forbidding,” especially with the addition of the petunias he put in a flower pot on the step.³⁵ These changes to the Boughton home, like moving the Kipling books, are further indicators of Jack’s desire to rewrite the narrative of the Boughton home for the future. It is not difficult to surmise that Jack’s efforts to beautify the worn down house, while maintaining its essential look, are done in the hopes that Della will one day visit the house. Should that day come, he wants the house to be both the living example of his past and a sign of his new self that is focused on transforming the house into a hospitable place for Della and Robert.

Not all of Jack’s productive tendencies bear such pleasant fruit, as Jack’s restoration of the DeSoto exemplifies. As James Wood notes, Boughton “is a fierce, stern, vain old man, who wants to forgive his son and cannot,”³⁶ and Jack seeks respite from their strained conversations by spending time in the barn with the old car. When Glory finds him reading in the car he describes it as his “home away from home,”³⁷ but

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 76–77.

³⁵ Ibid., 86.

³⁶ Wood.

³⁷ Robinson, *Home*, 113.

when Jack finally gets the car working again the car loses its association of comfort and reprieve for Jack. The drive with his father and sister is going splendidly until Jack unintentionally begins nearing the rundown shack where the mother of his child lived and the car stalls. Jack then gives the wheel to Glory because he is not satisfied with the work he has done on the car, and he is distracted by the tenderly sore memories he incited in all three of them by bringing them close to the shack. Despite his striving to be better Jack cannot escape the ghosts of his past that haunt Gilead. He feels “metaphysically responsible for the floweriest little grave in all Gilead”³⁸ and worries about exposing that part of himself to Della. The grave of his daughter is physically a part of Gilead, and one he cannot work away with sweat or rewrite with action. Donohoe argues that people can “see the place of monuments as existing in the tension between the presence of the past and the presence of the future, between memory and history.”³⁹ Just as Ames has to come to terms with the complacency of the people of Gilead, which he has ignored for so long, Jack has to open up the metaphorical cupboard where he stored the guilt about his daughter. Like the cupboard Horton and Kraftl open following the death of a relative, Jack experiences “the hopelessness, stress and frustration that comes with knowing that that cupboard is *still* full of stuff” that he has displayed and is displaying an “inability to effectively process and manage stuff at key, life-changing moments of transition.”⁴⁰ As a nineteen-year-old, Jack did not process and work through the situation with the girl he had impregnated. He decided to leave Gilead instead. He only realizes the full

³⁸ Ibid., 278.

³⁹ Donohoe, 102.

⁴⁰ Horton and Kraftl, 40.

ramifications of this action when he returns home and finds that his actions significantly affected his father and sister, and still affect them when they are reminded of the experience by their shared presence in Gilead.

After this set back, one which he cannot alter by force of will, Jack reverts to his harmful tendencies. Some days later, Jack chose the DeSoto as his means of attempting suicide by stuffing “his favorite shirt, the one with the beautiful mending on its sleeve [which was done by Della]” into the exhaust pipe.⁴¹ After the incident, Jack entrusts Glory to clear out the alcohol he has hidden around the house, and allows her to see the home-like space he created for himself in the barn loft. “It seemed almost domestic, and yet there was a potency of loneliness about it like a dark spirit lurking in it, a soul that had improvised this crude tabernacle to stand in the place of other shelter, flesh,”⁴² Glory discerned as she cleaned out the loft. The use of the term tabernacle is interesting here, because it reminds the reader of Glory’s earlier description of the Boughton house as “good and blessed and fustian and oppressive tabernacle.” In both cases the tabernacle brings with it the association of a hallowed place, and also a place that was to be feared and approached with caution. In the Old Testament the tabernacle served as a place to offer sacrifices to God, but it was dangerous to approach without proper preparation. The term seems especially apt, however, because along with “an uncapped pint, three-quarters empty,” Glory finds “a worn little Bible” in the loft.⁴³

⁴¹ Robinson, *Home*, 247.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 285.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 285–286.

Jack's choice to use the barn as an escape indicates that he has in some ways reverted to the habits of his younger self. For before asking Glory to venture into the loft Jack confides that various times when his family thought he had wandered off, "I was usually closer than he [Boughton] thought I was. Where he didn't look for me [in the loft]... I'm just telling you how it was." He laughed. "How it is."⁴⁴ Where Jack had previously worked to change the identity of the Boughton house and even alter his memory of Gilead to make it a more hospitable place to live, the reminder of the death of his daughter coupled with Boughton's inability to be anything but accusatory towards Jack, sends him into a negative spiral and prompts him to distance himself from his house. The beautiful, hopeful part of Jack's identity which he found in his relationship with Della is still there, standing in contrast to this dark and shameful part, and Jack struggles to reconcile this dichotomy. Williams describes this as Jack's awareness that he "do[es] not coincide with [him]self,"⁴⁵ however, this awareness is not paralyzing for Jack, and he pushes on in tenuous hope.

The final tenet of Robert Mager's framework, where home is "a place that offers access to the sacred (however we understand the term) – perhaps, crucially, relates us to *life itself as sacred*," strongly relates to Jack's expectations for and experience with Gilead. His journey in Gilead is no conversion story, no straight progression from unbelief to certainty; rather, it is a searching and grappling in an effort to reconcile his upbringing as the reprobate Boughton with his desire to build a respectable family with Della and his son Robert. Providing a stable home for his family is what is sacred to Jack. Despite his distance from his own family growing up, Jack believes or hopes that peace

⁴⁴ Ibid., 276.

⁴⁵ Williams, 14.

and certainty lies in a stable home. So he grapples with Gilead and slowly brings Glory into his confidence; their relationship stretches and builds on intimate conversations and actions weighted with meaning, although again, Glory does not realize the weight of the meaning till the end of the novel.

Jack's effort to reclaim Gilead as his home rubs off on Glory and encourages her to stop "avoiding ordinary contact with people," for "[i]f Jack [the scoundrel] could face [Gilead], certainly she [the pious] could, too."⁴⁶ She sees him in town watching the news footage of the Montgomery civil rights protests on the televisions at the hardware store. After buying a TV to bring home, they are again watching the news, and Jack realizes his father has little sympathy for the protesters. Glory assumes "[n]one of that will be a problem for you if you stay here," to which Jack laughs, knowingly, "Oh, Glory, it's a problem. Believe me. It's a problem."⁴⁷ Della is the only person in Jack's life with whom he has truly felt at home, and becoming the man he wants to be, in his mind, hinges on his ability to become a good husband and father. In an interview Robinson noted that in the 1950s "Iowa was one of the three states where interracial marriage was legal, so it might have been home to his family,"⁴⁸ but Jack returns to Gilead specifically, the town that constantly reminds him of the terrible end to what may have been the start to a family years ago. This return demonstrates a respect for the Boughton family, and an overall understanding of restored family relationships as part of what is sacred.

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Home*, 95.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

⁴⁸ Painter, "Further," 486.

So Gilead is where Jack seeks to find a home, and rewrite himself into the Boughton narrative as more than the black sheep of the family. When Glory expresses surprise that Jack has childhood memories of the Boughton house like the rest of the siblings do, Jack reminds her that he “lived here, too,” and confides that he has “thought about this place. Sometimes... even talked about it,” and that he is “willing to confess to a certain spiritual hunger.”⁴⁹ Della, partly because of her father’s intervention, has inspired this hunger in Jack. He wants to provide for her, and “if [his] wildest hopes are fulfilled”⁵⁰ have her be accepted in the Boughton family. But Gilead, as Ames discovers in *Gilead*, is not ready to remember its past as a refuge for abolitionists, or even home to members of a black church that burned down when Ames was young, and it refuses to give Jack a place to work. Interestingly, Jack’s hope in Gilead mainly rested on the favor of his godfather, John Ames, rather than his own father, Robert Boughton. He tells Glory he used to consider sneaking into Gilead with Della to “get [Ames’] blessing. Or at least his signature,” but after spending some time back at home he realizes he was “clutching at straw, coming to Gilead.”⁵¹ When Glory asks why he could not confide in his father, Jack responds “Some things are sacred, Glory.”⁵² Growing up as a minister’s son, Jack knows his father has often thought and preached about the sacred, but his meaning is one that Boughton’s mindset simply cannot comprehend: Jack, struggling to reconcile Christian theology with the violent resistance to the civil rights movement, defines the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 103–104.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁵¹ Ibid., 207.

⁵² Ibid., 208.

sacred as the genuine and sacrificial love he shares with Della. So why return to Gilead? Why not get married in some distant Iowa town?

I knew I would need help. I thought the old gent might help me, but I didn't realize—that he was so old. I couldn't find work on my own. So I decided to place my hopes in the kindly Reverend Ames.... And I just wanted to come home. Even if I couldn't stay. I wanted to see the place. I wanted to see my father. I was—bewildered, I suppose... I was scared to come home.⁵³

Jack returned to Gilead in search of community, in the hope that his father and godfather could help him restore himself, help him create the narrative with which he wanted to define his life. He felt a yearning to return to his roots. Quoting Simone Weil, Sheldrake notes, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised [*sic*] need of the human soul,”⁵⁴ and Jack feels that need keenly. Jack's hope in Ames is substantiated through conversation. While Boughton blatantly disagrees with Jack's stances on the Civil Rights protests, Ames offers Jack some hope by agreeing that white Americans have “done pretty badly. Especially by Christian standards,”⁵⁵ because of their violent reactions to non-violent protests. This piece of the conversation is important for Jack because Ames is admitting that there is error and hypocrisy in the practice of Christianity, while still maintaining his faith.

⁵³ Ibid., 210.

⁵⁴ Sheldrake, 9.

⁵⁵ Robinson, *Home*, 217.

But there is still a fear attached to his longing because despite his best efforts, he cannot feel completely accepted in Gilead. Williams defines this struggle in terms of being a “native speaker”⁵⁶ of Gilead:

the native speaker is the one who can inhabit language without anxiety, without constant defensive activity on the borders of the territory, because of a knowledge that all truthful speech and action is activated by what is and always remains unsaid, the hinterland of God’s unimaginable judgment.⁵⁷

Williams argues that Lila is able to become a native speaker because she is given and accepts grace in her relationship with Ames. However, he does not consider the fact that Lila was unknown to Gilead before her arrival, while Jack came back to a town with a grudge and poor reputation decades long. His anxieties about upsetting his father even more than he has are doubled by his awareness of the town’s eyes and gossiping mouths always judging him. Yet, even after multiple conversations confirming his fears that his father would not accept his new wife and child, there is still a tinge of hope for Jack, a resilient longing for a better future for his son. His discussion of the death of King David’s son as a sign of the father’s sin being visited on his son is layered with his own fears about his biracial son, Robert. He states: “You hope he’ll learn more than—bitterness... You hope that people will be kind.”⁵⁸ But the Boughtons and Amesese present in the conversation are unaware that Jack has a mixed-race son. Instead,

⁵⁶ Williams.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁸ Robinson, *Home*, 222.

Boughton interprets himself as David in the analogy, with Jack as the infant fated to death and becomes hysterical.

When Teddy, the token perfect son among the Boughton children, arrives, Jack tries again to syphon some measure of hope from his family. “Have you thought about bringing your kids to Gilead? Would this be a good place for them?” When Teddy responds in the affirmative, qualified by the caveat that their father’s condition would not make this currently desirable, Jack reasserts his spiritual hunger saying, “I do wish to God I were religious, Teddy. That’s the Lord’s truth.”⁵⁹ Jack is a man hoping to find some substance on which to base his faith, but he struggles to understand himself in the context of the Boughton home. He wants to transform it, to recast his role in the home and become a son with a family like the rest of them, but he is restrained by his guilt about his daughter’s death, the town’s continual mistrust of him, and his father’s refusal to rightly consider the Civil Rights movement in relation to Christianity. “When I was a kid I used to wish I lived here. I used to wish I could just walk in the door like the rest of you did,”⁶⁰ he reveals to Glory. His feeling of detachment is as ingrained in him as the biblical knowledge he inherited as a Boughton child. The resentment Ames felt towards Jack since the beginning, caused by the envy he felt towards the Boughton’s abundance of children, may have played a role in this detachment. Because instead of being a godfather Jack could turn to for help, Ames was essentially the confidant for the other Boughton children, learning the bad things Jack had done before giving the boy an opportunity to explain himself. As a man entering his forties Jack surmises that he

⁵⁹ Ibid., 266.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 276.

“create[s] a kind of displacement around [him]self as [he] pass[es] through the world, which can fairly be called trouble.”⁶¹ His whole life he has felt this pain, this inability to settle down and truly *be* in a place, and his return home has not lessened the pain, nor given him substance for his unsettled being. In *Gilead* Ames wrote out the faults of Gilead, and his own faults, and moved towards forgiveness and redemption of the faults in further actions. Jack, because his relationship with Della and Robert is so tied to the identity he wants to create for himself, cannot so easily forgive Gilead or even his past self.

Coming home for Glory meant facing some of the same ghosts as Jack, namely encountering the grave of his deceased child whom she met and loved and facing the people of the town who knew her return meant that her life had not progressed as she had hoped. Her efforts to reestablish herself in Gilead, however half-hearted, only begin after she recognizes Jack’s care and attention to the Boughton house and after he confides in her that he wants so strongly to share a bit of her faith. However, when Boughton tells her that she will inherit the house she recoils, “I mean I positively intended to leave Gilead.” Jack reminds her “It’s a pretty decent house. Free and clear. You could do worse,” but she insists that remaining in Gilead “is a nightmare [she’s] had a hundred times.”⁶² Her father gave her a place to be, a place to inhabit, but Glory sees it as laden with reminders of loss and the absence of the future she hoped for. Yet when Jack indicates that he would be grateful to return someday to see the house unchanged, “she

⁶¹ Ibid., 289.

⁶² Ibid., 298.

had almost promised him she would stay in Gilead and keep the house as it was... Even though he might never see it again.”⁶³

This fairly definitive course for her future prompts her to return to her fantasy of a “modest sunlit house, everything in it spare and functional, airy” with “children playing quietly” inside,⁶⁴ which she sadly accepts will never come to pass. In her time with Jack, her real and living family, she has found community of sorts. It has been strained at times, full of tension but also full of moments of laughter and working side-by-side in the garden. When he is about to depart she is confident enough in their relationship to tell him “Now you know where to come when you need help,” to which he replies “Yes. Ye who are weary come home.”⁶⁵ Then her brother left, without the blessing of his father, but, as we learn in *Gilead*, with the blessing of Ames, and Glory has little hope of actually seeing her brother again.

Glory overcame her distaste for the Boughton house and a life lived in Gilead because her brother, whom she loved, demonstrated his unrequited love for the place to her so honestly. Two days later, Glory’s acceptance of her position takes on a deeper dimension. Della arrives, with Robert, Jack’s son, and the picture of Jack’s character finally clicks in Glory’s understanding. “This place looks just the way he described it. That tree and the barn and the big tall house. He used to tell Robert about climbing that tree,”⁶⁶ Della informs Glory. Then Glory meets the namesake of her father, Robert, “a beautiful son, who would some time turn to Boughton, no doubt, and lose his prettiness to

⁶³ Ibid., 300.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 306.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 316.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 320.

what they call distinction,” a boy who likes baseball and wants to be a preacher⁶⁷ as his maternal and paternal grandfathers are. Glory realizes that the Boughton house had been “sanctified to that child’s mind with [Jack’s] stories, sad stories that had made them laugh,” and now it was “[a]s if all that saving and keeping their father had done was providence indeed, and new love would transform all the old love and make its relics wonderful.”⁶⁸ In a matter of minutes Glory’s viewpoint on remaining in the house shifted from reluctant hope to surprising gratitude. Imagining young Robert’s eventual return to Gilead, Glory affirms “The Lord is wonderful.”⁶⁹

Jack, through his relationship with Della and his return home, has rewritten the Boughton narrative in Gilead and given it the hope of new life. As he transformed, or perhaps restored the history of the line of men named John Ames, his son will transform the history of Robert Boughton. Now there may be two young Roberts, surnames Boughton and Ames, who grow up to be more forgiving men than their predecessors, more willing to accept change and growth, and Glory will wait expectantly to greet them. Through ending the novel this way, Robinson demonstrates that memory has a powerful impact on reforming identity, and that the transformation of place as a result of memory is not instantaneous. Though Glory and Ames have, through the influence of Jack, undergone shifts in perspective about their roles in the Boughton house and Gilead, they are only two threads of the narrative of the town. Their transformations are important, and necessary, but it will take time for Gilead to become a place that welcomes families

⁶⁷ Ibid., 322.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 323.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 325.

like Jack's. The ending also demonstrates that while Jack's attempts at rewriting his story may not have made Gilead into a place he could stay, they were beneficial as a metaphorical sowing of seeds, or laying the groundwork for future generations to reap the harvest.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wandering and Becoming: *Lila* and the Journey into Identity through Memory

Lila, the third installment of the Gilead trilogy, while narratively constructed in a similar fashion to the first two novels, with the narrator running through her thoughts and memories and switching between the past and present, has a central character who has no substantive roots from which to grow. Lila's childhood had none of the comforts that Ames, Jack, and Glory experienced in a stable, Christian home in Iowa. Lila's past significantly affects the way that Robinson frames her story, which is set about seven years before *Gilead* and *Home*, when Lila is newly married and pregnant with young Robert Ames. Her account of her life as a vagrant child during the Great Depression, her experience living in a whorehouse in St. Louis, and her wondering at how she came to be married to old John Ames illuminates much that was unanswered about her character in the previous two novels. However, the recent nature of its publication means that there is yet to be significant criticism published on how the novel interacts with Robinson's themes of the prodigal, home, identity, and Gilead as a city of refuge. In this chapter, I argue that *Lila*, from its form to the minute details of Lila's thoughts and experiences, approaches the themes of the previous books from a new vantage point.

Lila creates points of tension where there were previously accepted assumptions and creates bridges of understanding with Ames, Glory, and Jack's experiences of life, the country, and Gilead. To support my argument I will reference Morrissey's chapter on the

effects of trauma on memory and a person's ability to build trust and relationships, as well as Donohoe's insights on how people relate to others who are unplaced and how monuments affect the present. Overall, *Lila* strengthens the core theme of place, memory, and a deliberate retelling of the hard and beautiful as necessary components to truly making a place home. It is only through coming to Gilead and beginning to build relationship with the people in the town that Lila has the capability to remember her life's narrative in an effort to define who she is and how her story does or does not fit into the narrative of Gilead. She finds through memory and conversation that her place in Gilead marks a change in the trajectory of her story, which is more fully realized by the depictions of her character in *Gilead* and *Home*. However, Lila also discovers and accepts that wandering will always be a part of her identity, so while she does begin to place herself in Gilead with her actions, she retains her freedom to leave and bring the narrative of Gilead with her through her memories and the record she prompts Ames to make of his memories.

The novel begins with the introduction of a nameless child sitting neglected on the porch of a rundown house. Confused, afraid, and dirty, shoved outside while adults fight, the image of the girl is the antithesis of the images that begin the previous two novels: Ames describing his gentle, caring son whom he loves sitting on his lap, and Glory, resistant though she may be, enthusiastically welcomed into her home by her father. Lila has Doll instead. Homeless and dirty Doll who picks her up and sums up their predicament: "Well, we got no place to go. Where we gonna go?"¹ Like Morrissey, Lila's life has been characterized by "everyday trauma; trauma that happened so repeatedly it

¹ Robinson, *Lila*, 4.

felt normal.”² While Ames, Glory, and Jack had their own forms of pain during their childhoods, none of them experienced similar dejection to Lila. The natives of Gilead had a place, a home, where they were loved and held and forgiven; Lila, at this point in the text, did not even have a name to call herself by.

This dichotomy is reflected in the titles of the novels. The words “Gilead” and “Home” have a grounded nature, literally relating to geographic locations that the characters inhabit. True, the connotations that the terms hold are not unanimous, for all of the characters struggle to adequately define them, but the positive and welcoming connotation is a large part of the conversation. Lila has no place to cling to, nor a consistent person to tie herself to; she only has herself. Her name was not inherited from a long line of ancestors, like the multiple John Ames, or the young Robert Boughton that readers met in *Home*. Her first name was put on her by an old lady who took her and Doll in for a while, washed them and fed them, because she “had a sister named Lila. [And if she gave] her a pretty name, maybe she could turn out pretty.”³ That expectation of a pleasing outward appearance clung to her name like a parasite, exposing itself strongly when she began living at a whorehouse in St. Louis and was told, “Just *pretend* you’re pretty.”⁴ So there was Lila. From a terribly young age coached that her worth came from her appearance, she had to live up to the name Lila by being pretty. Doll cared for her, loved her, yes, but she did not have a father like Ames who simply reveled in her mere existence.

² Morrissey, 186.

³ Robinson, *Lila*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

With her last name, Dahl, Lila takes a little more ownership initially. During the year in her childhood where Lila was beginning to have some stability as a student in a school in Tammany, Iowa,⁵ the teacher asked Lila for her last name. Lila had responded with the only other name she wanted to be associated with, Doll, but the teacher misunderstood her: “She wrote Lila Dahl... ‘You’re Norwegian! I should have known by the freckles.’”⁶ When she recounted the story to Doll, Doll rejected it as silly and futile: “Then what’s your last name going to be? ‘Cause it can’t be Dahl, can it?... That don’t matter either.”⁷ “Doll” was a name Doll had given herself and “she never even told *Lila*”⁸ her real name. Lila Dahl, a name pulled from air, a cloud of expectations and masks of the genuine. The intangible nature of her name becomes even more apparent to Lila when she begins comparing her life to Ames’:

Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl, Lila Dahl. She had four letters in each of her names, and he had four letters in each of his. She had a silent *h* in her last name, and he had one in his first. There were graves in Gilead with his name written out on them, and there was no one anywhere alive or dead with her name, since the first one belonged to the sister she never saw of a woman she barely remembered and the second one was just a mistake. Her name had a likeness of a name.⁹

⁵ Ibid., 41, 46, 73, 96.

⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁹ Ibid., 68.

The name John Ames carried the weight of generations, of fathers and sons and strife and stability. Ames was known: known by the town and his family and himself. Lila considered herself nameless; the name Lila did not belong to her, but at the same time it was all she had to call herself by. She did not officially accept her name until the day she was christened by Ames,¹⁰ and even that acceptance came into doubt. More than once she returns in her thoughts to the day she went to the river to wash off her baptism.¹¹ She explains her action by reasoning that by “unbaptizing” herself, she would make herself recognizable to Doll should she ever meet the old woman out on the road.¹² Though she knows deep down that Doll has most likely already died, Lila keeps the image of her return in her mind because she does not want to forget her old life of wandering. There was pain in that life, yes, but also beauty. The second time Lila recalls going down to the river she realizes she is bearing Ames’ child, and that reminds her of a time when she saw Doll help a woman give birth. “Doll could be so gentle. They [Lila and her friend Mellie] couldn’t help watching her,”¹³ Lila remembers and reflects on how Doll cared for the woman she hardly knew. Without a place to call her home, Lila defines herself by her name and the associations it carries with it. Her name both connects her to her old life with Doll, and her new life with Ames, and it is representational of the way Lila seeks to reconcile these two versions of herself throughout the novel.

¹⁰ Ibid., 87.

¹¹ Ibid., 22, 103.

¹² Ibid., 22.

¹³ Ibid., 103.

Reconciling the desire for intimacy and the desire for autonomy, for Lila, is a constant struggle. There has not been a single person or place in her life in which she could permanently find shelter. She cannot build trust like Ames can; she cannot assume the best of people because she assumes they assume the worst of her. Morrissey notes that victims of traumatic upbringings tend to process their memories with a mixture of two ways:

The first, mimetic theory holds that because the trauma is so overwhelming, it never becomes part of the victim's memory system. Instead, the victim enacts the trauma unwittingly, through flashbacks, nightmares and repetitive actions.... The second, anti-mimetic, theory, argues that the victim is essentially aloof from the trauma as it unfolds, and that s/he remains a spectator throughout the trauma, strangely detached from the action.¹⁴

Lila falls more in line with the mimetic theory; however, she also has keen memories of her emotions during traumatic experiences and extensive flashbacks of even the most difficult moments of her life. Perhaps her memory retention comes from the fact there was a period in her life she categorizes as “before times got hard,”¹⁵ when she was content wandering around in the Dust Bowl era, picking fruit in orchards, interacting with Doane and his group, and always, always walking beside Doll. There was also the bittersweet year at school in Tammany, Iowa, where she was known and respected for her work.¹⁶ Brief seasons of happiness interspersed in her traumatic life gave her some joyful

¹⁴ Morrissey, 187.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Lila*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

memories to cling to, but they were tarnished by the dark shadows of her lowest days. One such experience was the poignant break of trust she underwent when Doll left her for a few days “after things started getting bad”¹⁷ and Lila “took a bitter, lonely pride in the fact that she could see them [Doll’s grief, pity, and regret] and not forgive her and not cry”¹⁸ upon her return. Lila was neglected by her biological parents, temporarily abandoned by Doll, and even Doane’s clan “when hard times came... left her behind.”¹⁹ The effects of this traumatic repeated betrayal manifest in Lila’s life as she repeatedly thinks how she just cannot trust Gilead or Ames. Referencing Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, Morrissey uses the term “complex post-traumatic stress disorder”²⁰ to define the effects of this type of trauma experienced in childhood and notes that it often leads to “deep distrust... withdrawal from intimacy and a desperate search for it.”²¹ These people living in rural 1950s Iowa were so foreign, they followed social rules she did not understand, they trusted the church, and yet she cannot make herself leave. Because she does want a place to inhabit, a place in which people know her and care for her, she stays in Gilead and slowly, reservedly begins getting to know the people there.

Her distancing of herself from the people of Gilead can be understood in the context of Sheldrake’s description of place and commitment: “psychology of place speaks of *participation* as a key element in being effectively placed” and furthermore,

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 54.

¹⁹ Ibid., 56.

²⁰ Morrissey, 188.

²¹ Ibid., 189.

“[r]eally *being* somewhere means to be to be committed to a place rather than simply an observer.”²² Commitment requires trust. Lila’s life mantra to this point had been “can’t trust nobody.”²³ The cracks in her foundation of mistrust are well established when her life begins to intersect with that of Reverend John Ames. When she surprised them both by showing up to his house one morning to ask him a question, even as “a stranger,” she could tell “he didn’t want her to leave,”²⁴ and she began to realize she was wanted somewhere. After he finished telling her the tale of the Ames house and those who had called it home she replied, “I liked that story.”²⁵ She liked the idea of being established somewhere, of having a family, people a person could depend on. His story resonated with her desire for intimacy. Sheldrake explains this type of resonance when he contends, “[n]arrative is a critical key to our identity, for we all need a story to live by in order to make sense of the otherwise unrelated events in our life and to find a sense of dignity.”²⁶ Up to this point in her life, Lila had not been in a place where she had the peace and security to even begin formulating such a story for herself.

The first “place” Lila associates with anything like feelings of home during her childhood is Doll’s tattered shawl. The shawl is there at the beginning of her memory, enwrapping Lila and taking her away from her abusive home.²⁷ In fact, Lila sacralizes the

²² Sheldrake, 12.

²³ Robinson, *Lila*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ Sheldrake, 19.

²⁷ Robinson, *Lila*, 4.

shawl when she reasons “she had been born a second time, the night Doll took her up from the stoop and put her shawl around her and carried her off through the rain.”²⁸ She had been baptized into homelessness and wandering, baptized into her name, Lila, and baptized into the longest pseudo-parent-child relationship she would ever know that day. She reiterates Doll’s benevolent presence in her life in her thoughts after hearing Ames tell some of his family story. She does not tell Ames her thoughts though, because Doll always had a rule of secrecy in fear that someone would find out she had stolen Lila. Instead of being a thief, Lila describes Doll as coming to her “like an angel in the wilderness,”²⁹ and she fantasizes about seeing Doll and the street of Gilead and being “wrapped into her shawl,”³⁰ even after she gets married to Ames. With fondness Lila recalls how they kept the shawl “till it was worn soft as cobwebs.”³¹ The shawl was a constant in her gypsy life, a source of comfort, a place of familiarity. Then one day Doane got mad at Doll and held it over a fire “and the flames climbed right up towards his hand. So it was gone.”³² Her home was gone. Any consistency, familiarity, or identity she associated with the shawl was now relegated to her memory; in essence, she became homeless a second time.

When Doll left for a few days, giving no indication of when she would return, and then reappeared to snatch Lila off some church steps, Lila’s relationship with her began

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁹ Ibid., 30.

³⁰ Ibid., 96.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

³² Ibid., 70.

to unravel. A few years later Lila had managed to establish herself with a comfortable job as a clerk in a store, when her life was interrupted by Doll showing up at her doorstep, with bloodied clothes and knife in hand. She had been in a knife fight with people that may have been Lila's relatives, defending her claim on Lila and trying to further solidify herself as "the only ma [Lila] ever had."³³ But when the sheriff came, Lila followed Doll's cue and pretended they did not know each other. In the following days when Lila went to visit her on the jail's porch, Doll "just said, 'I don't know you,'"³⁴ and left Lila to make what she would of her life. Reliving the day in her memory, with Ames' baby inside her, the words ring with shame, "I don't know you." Morrissey describes her own memory of her traumatized childhood "like a finely woven shawl which has large rents torn through it, so there are really more holes than cashmere, but just enough thread to hold it together if one doesn't pull at the garment but treats it with infinite care."³⁵ The shawl has been ash in the wind for decades and Doll is certainly dead, but Lila holds them in memory with infinite care.

As she was cleaning up Doll, Doll bequeathed her knife to Lila, which is the only tangible thing Lila has left of her old life. Because Lila does want to retain her connection to the old life, she is grateful even for the knife: "A knife can't weary with the use that's been made of it. Still. She was sorry there was nothing left of that shawl. It would have been a different thing entirely to tell the old man Doll had left that to her."³⁶ The shawl

³³ Ibid., 135.

³⁴ Ibid., 181.

³⁵ Morrissey, 186.

³⁶ Robinson, *Lila*, 134.

represented the good times of her childhood, the times of which she was not ashamed. The knife represented the pain, the resentment, and the brokenness of Lila's past life. When Ames opens the knife and considers it, Lila warns him, "'It's awful sharp,' thinking probably that the knife was like a snake, that it was in its nature to do you harm,"³⁷ yet she keeps the knife in memory of Doll and her old life. She even imagines the day "when [she] will tell [her son] that that knife is the only thing [she has] to leave [him]."³⁸ In his letter Ames was deliberate about telling his son the difficult things and the pleasing things, and on their return home both Jack and Glory dealt with the tangible places and things that reminded them of their childhood joys and troubles. All that Lila has to look at and touch to spark memories of her past is the knife that was once Doll's: a reminder of a terrible day full of blood, a practical tool, and the one possession she treasured in her time spent in St. Louis.

Morrissey describes the flashbacks that people with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) have as "walking in a darkness so deep you can't even see yourself, then suddenly, a strong light is shone on a scene of such a violence it makes you recoil," and notes that "[s]trangely, . . . these memories or flashbacks never change; they are exactly the same every time. Even telling them is precise; not a word out of place."³⁹ Sitting in the comfort of Ames' house, just at the tail end of a conversation where Ames invites Lila to "move things around a little" to make herself more comfortable,⁴⁰ in my terms to situate her narrative into the narrative of Gilead and alter the identity of the place

³⁷ Ibid., 239.

³⁸ Ibid., 244.

³⁹ Morrissey, 190.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Lila*, 187.

by physically adding her story, Lila feels stable enough to endure these vivid flashbacks. “It’s so different here it makes me remember other places I been. I guess I have to do that. Sort things out a little. Seems like I don’t even know myself, everything’s so different,” she reflects to Ames, noting that since memories of St. Louis have been stirred in her mind she hardly has a choice other than “get[ting] it done with”⁴¹ and remembering the whole story of her time there. She wants to be at peace, to have good memories and emotions so that her child can feel the warmth of them rather than the anxiety and fear that accompany her flashbacks. To move forward, Lila realizes she must remember, and I contend grieve for, her past self. So she let herself remember St. Louis, and “[i]t came over her... the thought of that house in St. Louis. It was just pure misery.”⁴²

Though she spent a significant amount of time in St. Louis, first at the whorehouse then working as a hotel maid, Lila is adamant in her memory that St. Louis was not a home to her. What distinguishes St. Louis from Gilead as a place where Lila can feel at home most significantly is the nature by which the places influenced her sense of identity. As Donohoe contends “[p]laces serve not merely as the settings for our lives, but as participants; as vibrant, living aspects of memory, tradition, history, and meaning,”⁴³ and this is true to Lila’s experience. Gilead, with Ames and the people of his church, is welcoming to Lila. Ames repeatedly invites Lila to tell her own story, giving her the chance to define herself in her own terms. In St. Louis, she was coerced to create

⁴¹ Ibid., 188.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Donohoe, 9.

a mock identity to make herself appealing. When the lady at the whorehouse “asked Lila what she would call herself, since none of them used their own names, she said, ‘Doll, I guess’”⁴⁴ again defaulting to her childhood semblance of home, but since that name is taken she became “Rosie because no one else was Rosie, and the pink dress fit her well enough.”⁴⁵

The madam that ran the house further entrapped Lila in a false identity by coercing Lila to surrender any possessions she held dear and then locked them up in her credenza, “[a]nd Lila watched her lock it away. Well, she’s got me now. And what sense did that make. But she felt that way and it gave her a kind of ease.”⁴⁶ The memory is so potent it bleeds into Lila’s present and she wonders about “anything *else* she could give [the madam]” and thinks for a second, “[m]y locket,” one that Ames had given her. Significantly, Lila rejects the idea of giving the madam her locket. She refuses to give up what Ames has given her that signifies their marriage because “[s]he loved it that much.”⁴⁷ This demonstrates the strength of Lila’s sense of identity with Ames in Gilead. But she is not done reliving her past in her memories, so she lets herself back into the story until she gets to the point where she arrives in Gilead.⁴⁸ The first person she meets

⁴⁴ Robinson, *Lila*, 182.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 190.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 191–192.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 192.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 192–221.

is Mrs. Graham who accepts Lila's offer to do house work and restores Lila to her rightful identity saying, "Lila! What a pretty name!"⁴⁹

Lila endures the horror of her flashbacks because she knows she has to move forward, and she is steadfast in her rejection of St. Louis. Michael Lambeck in "The Past Imperfect: Remembering as Moral Practice" presents the idea that "memory narratives do not merely describe events, but 'are acts of commemoration, of testimony, of confession, of accusation.'"⁵⁰ All of these aspects are true for Lila. She commemorates the good times: playing with the other kids in Doane's clan, her year at the school in Tammany, her job as a clerk, and the sense of home she felt in Doll's shawl. She gives testimony of the new identity she is claiming: rejecting both St. Louis and life in the shack in Gilead, and making the choice to keep Ames' locket, a thing that signifies she is loved. She confesses to herself about several things: her desire for her son to know about her happy wandering days, her fear of Ames' response should he know her full story, the slight pull that her hollow relationship with the man Mack at the whorehouse still has on her thoughts. Finally, she accuses: accuses Doll for leaving her when she was young and Doll for coming to her home with that bloodied knife. But Lila adds another action to Lambeck's list: she forgives. She forgives herself for thinking about those places when she is in a place so clean and different. She forgives Doll for leaving and coming to her door. She forgives because she remembers, along with the bad, the good things Doll did for her.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Morrissey, 196.

Lila's forgiveness of Doll hinges on gratitude: "Ugly old Doll. Who had said to her, Live. Not once, but every time she washed and mended for her, mothered her as if she were a child someone could want. Lila remembered more than she ever let on."⁵¹ The reason it hurt Lila so badly when Doll left her for a time, as discussed previously, is because she truly loves Doll, and is thankful that Doll rescued her and tried to give her a better life than the one she would have had with her biological parents. Walking down the roads in Gilead, with Ames' child inside of her, Lila "just imagined how it would all seem to Doll—a very good life, a comfortable life that she had because Doll had stolen her, and had taken care of her all those years. She lived for Doll to see."⁵² Though she may not yet be familiar with the commandment to honor one's parents, which Ames thinks of so highly, Lila does honor and respect Doll, not only for saving her, but also for "taking the risk [of staying in Tammany so long when she was worried people were coming after her for stealing Lila] so that Lila could learn to read."⁵³ Reading for Lila is one of the means through which she accesses the sacred upon her arrival in Gilead. Throughout the novel, bits and pieces of biblical text appear as Lila reads them and copies them down to continue teaching herself how to write, to educate herself about the things Ames and Boughton were always discussing, and to figure out her own place in relation to the text, which I will discuss more fully further on.⁵⁴

When memories of past pain haunt Jack on his return to Gilead, he is not as resilient as Lila is when she rejects St. Louis as a home. He goes back to stealing and

⁵¹ Robinson, *Lila*, 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36, 42–43, 45, 67–68, 74, 82, 106, 176, 226–227.

drinking and distancing himself from his family. However, Lila understands his relapses in a way no one else in his life can. For while she rejects St. Louis, she remembers the early days of wandering as being times of freedom and independence. One afternoon, when she had been living in Ames' house for some time, she ventured to the shack she stayed in before they became engaged. Just as she had to process her old life now that she was married to Ames, she had to process her new life of being an old minister's wife, and she had to create a distance between herself and her new environment to do so. For Ames, the distancing place was his church when he was the only one sitting in the sanctuary. For Lila, it is the old shack. It is close to nature, to the wild things and the birds, and it gives her a view of cornfields. Sitting in that place Lila dwells on "how familiar that old parched wood smell was, and how strange it seemed to be at peace where she had been so lonesome before, to be more at peace in the old man's house, kind as he was."⁵⁵ The place of the shack has transformed for Lila through her interactions with Ames. She has no intention of returning to live there, but she understands Jack's faults and troubles at a level the others cannot, because like Jack she comes to understand Gilead as a place that will not be her permanent home. However, she is able to live there longer because of the reception she receives from the community, as well as from Ames through the community and himself. Lila has the luxury of coming into Gilead as an unknown, and a person whom Ames is immediately drawn to upon seeing her, as I recounted in discussion of his associations with his church building. Jack reenters the Gilead with an understanding of the bad reputation he still holds in the town, and an awareness of the resentment Ames holds towards him. The people of Lila's past that remember her in her darkest days, her days in St. Louis, do not live in Gilead; the people

⁵⁵ Ibid., 145.

who were present when Jack made the decision to abandon his daughter are his sister, father, and Ames, whom Jack has to encounter daily.

Williams describes the difference between Lila and Jack's experiences in Gilead in terms of the characters' ability, or inability, to become "native speakers" of the language of the town. He argues that Lila, as readers come to know her in *Gilead* and *Home*, has "with some difficulty and over a significant period of time, learned to pass as a native, yet without losing her critical liberty. Her 'unimaginable otherness' has not made a native tongue impossible for her... she has a reconciled irony as opposed to Jack's unreconciled irony."⁵⁶ I agree with Williams' reading of the difference between Jack and Lila presented here. Lila, in her thoughts, claims this liberty near the end of *Lila*: "So you're mine. Gilead has no claim on you, or John Ames either, or the graveyard that has no place for you anyway."⁵⁷ This stark claim in no way detracts from her love for and gratitude towards Ames, and she fully intends to honor him and the town should she leave: "I'll tell you the name of the place... People should know that much about themselves. The name of your father. Could be I won't ever leave. The old man might not give me cause."⁵⁸ These claims indicate that Lila will give her son all the things she most desired throughout her life, for she used to yearn to know just a bit about her life before Doll took her off the porch step. Furthermore, she plans to give her son the opportunity to grow up with a knowledge of Christianity she never had: "She would keep every promise

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 254.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 221.

she had made, the boy would learn ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ and the Hundredth Psalm. He’d pray before he ate... for as long as she had anything to say about it.”⁵⁹

Lila’s adamancy about her son growing up with a knowledge of Christianity is the result of her exploration of scripture through reading, copying the words down, and considering and discussing their significance in her life in her own thought and in her conversations with Ames. The rewriting of scripture, much like Ames’ writing of his story, prompts Lila to consider her place in the broader narrative presented to her through the text. Her exegesis of scripture is matter of fact and literal, not tempered by theological doctrines but instead held in comparison to her own experiences:

And behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they were dead. She’d heard of that happening, plenty of times. A wind could hit a town like Gilead and leave nothing behind but sticks and stumps.... Nobody knew what to say about sorrow like that.... She never expected to find so many things she already knew about written in a book.⁶⁰

Lila’s choice of scriptures to read and copy down, over and over again, baffle Ames to some extent, and prompt him reconsider his own readings of the text in the light of Lila’s experiences. Besides his routine debates with Boughton, Ames had not been significantly challenged in his reading of scriptures until Lila came, and he recognizes that she is presenting him with a new perspective: “You really do have a way of finding the very hardest parts [Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Job]—for somebody starting out. For

⁵⁹ Ibid., 251–252.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 176.

anybody. That's fine. They're Scripture, too."⁶¹ Ames revels in the opportunity to return to scripture and tries to present satisfactory answers to Lila's questions about the passages she reads. He knows she has never had the chance to ask them before and welcomes her wonder and doubt because she is so new to belief, but he also tries to give her hope. Reading from Calvin, he asserts, "each of them, joy and loss, exists in its own right and must be recognized for what it is."⁶² With these terms, Ames seeks to legitimize the suffering of Lila's past as part of her identity as a person living under God's grace. When Jack returns to Gilead, Ames is less eager to engage in his theological questions. He knows that Jack was raised on these concepts as a Boughton child, and initially considers Jack's questions as an attempt to aggravate conversations. But eventually, Ames takes Jack's inquiries seriously, perhaps because he had encountered a similar sincerity of questions from Lila years before.

Williams is also correct in asserting that Jack's inability to adapt to the native language is mostly caused by the fact he and Boughton cannot reconcile with each other.⁶³ However, I suggest that Lila, as well as Glory and Ames' characters, does offer Jack some hope of possible reconciliation through the conversations presented in *Gilead* and *Home*. During one of the dinners the Boughtons share with the Amesese in *Home*, Lila confesses a shared inability to make "small talk, polite conversation" to Jack with a smile, after which "Jack looked at her with a kind of hopefulness."⁶⁴ Following dinner, Jack begins playing piano and they have a shared knowledge of songs that are not strictly

⁶¹ Ibid., 171.

⁶² Ibid., 223.

⁶³ Williams, 9.

⁶⁴ Robinson, *Home* 181.

ones that would be played in church.⁶⁵ Most significantly, when Jack brings up the question of predestination, concerned that he is a hopeless reprobate soul, Lila firmly states: “A person can change. Everything can change.”⁶⁶ To which “Jack said, very gently, ‘Why thank you, Mrs. Ames. That’s all I wanted to know.’”⁶⁷ Of course, the level at which he takes her statement to heart and truly believes it is not revealed to readers, but there is weight in the fact that Lila as a person felt at home enough in the situation to make such a claim for the wayward Boughton she had heard about for years. Glory’s part in offering hope, as discussed in the previous chapter, was to act as a welcoming friend and ally to Della, Robert, and Jack should he return. Finally, Ames tells Jack, “I understand why you have to leave, I really do,”⁶⁸ for as discussed in Chapter One, he has come to recognize the shortcomings of Gilead in regards to accepting and supporting people of color. Then Ames goes a step further and blesses “John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.”⁶⁹ By using Jack’s full name, Ames is, for the first time, demonstrating that he is no longer ashamed or resentful of Jack for carrying his name. By calling Jack a beloved husband and father, Ames is recognizing and legitimizing Jack’s relationship with Della, and demonstrating that he sees Jack as worthy of holding those sacred titles of relationship.

The intersections and encounters of the lives of Ames, Lila, Jack, and Glory in Gilead were transformative both for the individual identities of the characters and the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 189.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 228.

⁶⁸ Robinson, *Gilead*, 240.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 241.

identity of the town as a whole. In every case, the characters had to go through a process of remembering their pasts in an attempt to reconcile it with the narratives they wanted for their present and future. These memories were triggered and made possible by the places the characters came into contact with, whether it was the town itself, the Congregationalist church, the Boughton house and yard, Ames' house, or the shack that Lila stayed in for a time. Gratitude and hope for each character had to be recognized as standing alongside the grief and resentment and shame that accompanied their memories, for truly meaningful transformation could not occur without the difficult and the beautiful. To fully understand these concepts of seeing grief and joy together, and seeing themselves more fully, the characters had to create a level of distance between themselves and the place in which they sought to find their identities. Ames distanced himself by sitting in the church alone, Glory and Jack by leaving the town and returning with new experiences, and Lila by entering as a stranger and visiting the shack after being married. As each character changed, they influenced those around them and played a part in rewriting and transforming the narrative of Gilead into one that was and would someday more fully be accepting of all who wandered into the town.

Significantly, the characters' efforts to reform their narratives and the town's are undergone in an effort to connect or reconcile themselves with the sacred. For Ames it meant actually practicing the forgiveness, blessing, and peace he preached. For Glory it meant loving Jack sacrificially, and welcoming his family as her own. For Jack it meant discerning if he could reconcile Christian doctrine with the violence against the Civil Rights protests, and attempting to transform Gilead into a place that would be welcoming to his family. For Lila it meant forgiving Doll and searching for the connections between

her struggles and joys in relation to life with John Ames and the words in the Bible. From the actions of the characters, readers can learn that it is important to consider ourselves in relation to the places we inhabit and seriously seek to understand how our individual stories affect the grander narratives of the places, and be willing to be forces for hope and gratitude. Our lives can and do affect the lives of our neighbors. We can change the narratives of the places we inhabit, even places with difficult pasts, by first acknowledging the wrongs that occurred and giving due discourse as to why and how they transpired. Next, we must look at our current actions and discern how we fit within the old mold and the new story we are hoping to create. Finally, we can work through honest and transparent conversation and actions towards a reconciliation that recognizes that a community, a Christian community, should function as a body with each unique part fulfilling its role and helping the others do likewise. With this care, a community can transform.

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