Gilead Study Guide

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

This is a story of fathers and sons. John Ames, the narrator, tells a story of three generations of fathers named John Ames, addressing it to the single direct descendent, the unnamed son readers may assume is the fourth John Ames. The story of the Ames family includes the story of the narrator's best friend, Robert Boughton, and his son who was named after the narrator, John Ames Boughton. In order to reduce confusion, these characters are referred to here in terms of their relationship to the narrator, that is, the narrator's grandfather, the narrator's father, and the narrator's son, to whom the narrator addresses himself in this text. As in the novel, Reverend Boughton's son is referred to by his nickname, Jack.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1944

Source material providing biographical information on Marilynne Robinson is scant and all too often conflicting in its facts, focusing on her publications and the host of awards she has won, rather than on biographical details. Robinson was born in Sandpoint, Idaho, probably in 1944 (though 1943 and 1947 are also reported), where she grew up and there attended Coeur d'Alene High School, from which she graduated in 1962. She graduated in 1966 with a B.A. in history and religion from Pembroke College in Warren, Rhode Island, an institution which became affiliated with Brown University in 1971. In 1977, Robinson received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington.

Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, was published in 1980. The work, which is dedicated to Robinson's husband and □four wonderful boys,□ was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and won the PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel. In the 1980s, Robinson wrote essays for such publications as *Paris Review*, *New York Book Times Review of Books*, and *Harper's*. She also began teaching and was a writer-in-residence at various colleges and universities, including the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College, and the University of Kent.

As of 2006, Robinson has published two works of nonfiction. The first was the controversial *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989), a thoroughly researched exposé of the Sellafield Nuclear Processing Plant, exploring the nuclear energy industry, its environmental impact, and its opponents, specifically Greenpeace, an organization that successfully sued the British publisher of this book for libel and got the book banned in England. Nonetheless, *Mother Country* was a National Book Award finalist in the United States.

Sometime after that publication, Robinson and her husband divorced, and she eventually joined the faculty of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she remained through the 1990s and into the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 1998, she published *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, a collection of prose pieces that mostly had appeared originally as articles or speeches. This collection, in part, traces the legacy of what Robinson calls the idea of □continuous cull,□ as it appears in Thomas Malthus, emerges in Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest, and recurs in the economic theory of Karl Marx and the racist ideologies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Adolf Hitler. As with her two previous books, this collection displays Robinson's erudite, theoretical mind and exceptionally fine prose style. Like *Mother Country*, *The Death of Adam* challenges beliefs that define modern Western culture with arguments enlightened by deep learning and wide reading.

In 2004, Robinson published her second novel, the 2005 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction, *Gilead*, which immediately garnered universal acclaim. As of 2006, Robinson was on the faculty of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa.

Plot Summary

The Present Year: 1956

The immediate present spans the late spring, summer, and fall of 1956 in the fictional plains village of Gilead, Iowa. Through these months, the narrator, Reverend John Ames, who turns seventy-seven in early fall, keeps a journal in which he writes a series of letters to his son, who is not yet seven. The narrator hopes that as a grownup, the son will read this book and come to know the man his father was. The narrator is dying of heart disease, and while he is able, he wants to commit this personal history to paper as a legacy for his son.

Writing about himself causes the narrator to examine his private feelings, his religious beliefs, the role sermon writing has played in his life as a minister, his study of the Bible and various philosophical and psychological questions he has been unable to resolve. As the narrator records the events of 1956 and summarizes a family history that covers 120 years, he digresses frequently into topics connected to his ministry, to his congregation, and his lifelong friendship with Robert Boughton. These parts interrupt the plot line but effectively reveal the narrator's mind and his personal challenges, his grief and regrets. Through the journal, the narrator hopes to present himself to his son with a candor quite different from his day-to-day reserve.

The narrator begins writing by reporting a conversation the previous night between him and his son in which the narrator broached the subject of his illness and possible death. The son refused to believe the narrator may die. The narrator assures the son that □there are many ways to live a good life□; this journal relates one of them, a minister's life in service to others.

The son struggles with his school work, needs prodding to get to bed at night, and tolerates the concentrated attention of both his mother and the narrator in morning preparation for school. During this spring, the narrator feels pretty good, though on some nights he has difficulty sleeping and goes to his upstairs study to write or read or doze in his chair. Some nights he leaves the parsonage and walks through the neighborhood to his church; he sits in the sanctuary awaiting the dawn. On some afternoons, he walks to the home of his friend, Reverend Boughton, the father of eight children and now a widower, who is cared for by his daughter Glory. Their good news is the expected arrival of Reverend Boughton's son, John Ames Boughton, whom everyone calls Jack.

The narrator's son plays with the family cat, spends an afternoon blowing bubbles with his mother, and draws airplanes while lying in a square of sunlight in the narrator's study. The son also plays with his Lutheran friend Tobias Schmidt. On pleasant evenings, the narrator, his wife Lila, and the son sit on the front porch. On Sunday afternoons, the wife and son study their lessons, the wife reads her western novel, and Reverend Ames falls asleep over his books.

Slight hints appear that through the summer the narrator's health declines. He reports having trouble breathing, lifting his son, and going upstairs. Jack Boughton arrives in town, much to his father's delight, but he is an irritation to the narrator. Jack visits the Ames family at the parsonage, and once he attends service at the narrator's church. During the summer months, Jack plays catch with the narrator's son. Jack also helps Lila move some of the narrator's belongings from his upstairs study to the ground floor parlor, in the process handling the journal, which the narrator takes as an affront to his privacy. On hot days, the son and Tobias play in the sprinkler; once they attempt to camp out in Tobias's backyard, but noises frighten them, and they end up coming to the parsonage for some late-night sandwiches and a safer sleep indoors. As the narrator's health declines, members of the congregation send in casseroles and donate a television so Reverend Ames can watch his baseball games.

The narrator confesses in his journal to being troubled by Jack Boughton's presence. At forty-three years of age, Jack is only a couple years older than the narrator's wife, and he is physically able to play catch with the narrator's son. Jack may seem benign and well-intentioned, but he arouses jealousy and fear in the narrator, which the narrator tries to hide. These feelings are triggered, in part, by what the narrator knows about Jack's past and what he envisions about his future in Gilead. The narrator wonders if Jack may take his place as Lila's husband once the narrator has died. After all, Jack seems to be a more appropriate partner for the narrator's wife and a more age-appropriate father for the narrator's son. Reverend Ames is angry about being old and dying when he loves his wife and son so much and wants to remain with them.

In a short time, the narrator discovers Jack has his own problems, and he has returned to Gilead hoping to find resolution and forgiveness. Jack feels he can talk to the narrator but not to his own father. Speaking privately to the narrator, Jack reveals that he has a black common-law wife and a son by her. Anti-miscegenation laws in Missouri prevented their marrying when they became committed to each other, and her family has as of this summer effectively separated them. Troubled and not knowing where to turn, Jack leaves Gilead. But just as he departs, he accepts the narrator's blessing. This act of benediction seems reflexively to resolve the internal conflict which has tormented the narrator and somehow brings him to a point of peace where he can leave off writing.

Years in Gilead: 1882 to 1956

Born in Kansas in 1880 and having moved to Gilead when he was two years old, the narrator has really known only this one town as his home. He was virtually an only child in a family of five children. Edward, the first son, studied abroad and settled into a teaching career at the state college (later University of Kansas) in Lawrence. There he married and had six children. After Edward, who was born in 1870, the narrator's father and mother had three children, two daughters and a son, all of whom died of diphtheria. Then John was born and reared practically alone.

John recalls fondly his early years in Gilead, walking on stilts with his friend Robert Boughton, whom he called Bobby; trying to be friends with a little girl, Louise, who

would allow nothing to interrupt her rope skipping and who then stopped long enough to marry the narrator during his last year in seminary. Louise died giving birth to their premature daughter, Angeline, who died shortly after birth. The now ailing narrator refers several times to this primary double loss. After all these years and now happily married with a son, the narrator continues to grieve for his first wife, and thinks repeatedly of the moments he held their daughter, of how she opened her eyes right before dying, to look at him. He envisions that after dying himself he will meet Louise and their baby in heaven.

The narrator was a widower at age twenty-five. A new minister, he tended his congregation, sat by the dying, gave his sermons, and alone in the parsonage ate his fried egg sandwiches and listened to baseball games broadcast over the radio. He continued his friendship with Robert Boughton, who married happily and had eight children, all of whom grew into adulthood. The narrator thinks about the luck Boughton has had, living in a lively household full of children, being able to see his children mature and marry, being able to see his wife age along with him. The narrator loves Boughton, admired him so much when he was a young man, now so appreciates his theological and Biblical insights, and yet he is bitterly jealous of him. The narrator admits failing in the commandment against covetise.

However, twenty or so years into Boughton's life as a family man, difficult times came to this family which the narrator envies. The son called Jack got involved with a very young woman and impregnated her. A daughter was born. Jack went away to college, leaving his parents to cope with the realization that their granddaughter was living in abject poverty. They tried in vain to help her, but the child died at age three and the child's mother ran off to Chicago. Looking back on that scenario, the narrator concludes that Jack squander[ed] his fatherhood as if it were nothing. This sequence of events haunts John Ames in his final year: Jack denied his paternity while John Ames had his paternity stolen from him by death. Now, as he faces his own failing health and Jack's return, Reverend Ames envisions a replay of the earlier events; he imagines that when he dies, Jack may get too close to Lila and their son and then do them harm. The working out of this problem constitutes the main action recorded in the journal during the year in which it is written, 1956.

Before Gilead: 1830 to 1882

Of the previous generations of family members, the narrator writes most about his eccentric, radical grandfather. This first John Ames at age sixteen in Maine had a vision in which Jesus appeared to him cuffed in chains that cut his wrists to the bone. The vision urged the boy to liberate the captive, directions that prompted him to leave Maine in the 1830s and head for Kansas. There in the 1850s conflict between Free Soilers and abolitionists, on the one side, and proslavery forces, on the other, was waged. The grandfather participated in that conflict. He also knew John Brown, an historical figure who led the attack on Harpers Ferry and, thus, in part, precipitated the Civil War. When the Civil War began, the grandfather wanted to fight in the Union Army, though his age disqualified him. Still, he went as a clergyman and was injured at the Battle of Wilson's

Creek in Missouri on August 10, 1861, during which Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon was killed. In the battle, Grandfather Ames lost an eye. After the war, he married, had a family, and later moved with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson, the narrator, to Iowa, where Grandfather Ames became one of the founders of the town of Gilead.

As he aged, Grandfather Ames became eccentric and even more radical in his beliefs. He took a militant stand for liberty and supported the World War I enlistment of local boys. Taking charity to an extreme, he would steal laundry from the wash, including his own bedding, and coins from the pantry lard can, all to give to vagrants and ne'er-do-wells who happened by asking for a hand-out. He impoverished his son and daughter-in-law and took belongings from other members of their congregation. All these were charitable acts to his mind. He also had repeated visions in which Jesus spoke to him.

The narrator's father was a pacifist, completely set against the militancy of the grandfather. When the grandfather advocated war, the father temporarily left the church and went among the Quakers to worship. Shortly after this defection, the grandfather left Gilead for Kansas, never to return. Years later, when the narrator was twelve, the father received a package containing the grandfather's belongings and set out with the narrator to find the grandfather's grave. In 1892, this journey was dangerous, given the drought and scarcity of food, and the narrator recounts several stories associated with it. The most important of these pertains to how he and his father tended the grandfather's long-neglected grave before heading home to Gilead.

The narrator's father sees his own defection from the grandfather's brand of religion differently when he must deal with his son, Edward. The narrator's brother, Edward, returns briefly to Gilead after college study abroad, and the father learns that Edward is now an atheist. The narrator is in awe of his older brother, is persuaded to read the atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach as he has, and to socialize with Edward despite his extraordinary refusal to say grace over the family meal. The church (the denomination of the church the Ames family attends and in which the male members serve as ministers is not specified) paid for Edward's education, and on the first of each year, Edward habitually sent back a check to the congregation by way of thanks. The narrator sees the good in Edward, and yet he struggles with ambivalence, loyalty to his parents and love for his brother. Edward lived out his life a few hundred miles away in Lawrence where he had a wife and six children. The narrator's parents in time leave Gilead, too.

In his sixty-seventh year, the narrator falls in love with a young woman who begins attending his church. Her past is a mystery and she is completely without family. She immediately captures the narrator's attention when she enters the church for the first time on a rainy Pentecost Sunday. Later, she takes lessons in the faith from Reverend Ames, and he baptizes her. She helps around the parsonage and then surprisingly proposes marriage to him. This emotional upheaval and sudden devotion transforms the narrator's lonely existence. They marry and have a son. As he writes the journal, the narrator repeatedly tells the story of Lila's arriving at the church and of her proposing marriage. In him, Lila found the settled life she had never known; in her, the narrator found the magnetic, romantic chemistry he had never before experienced.

Section 1 (pages 1-8)

Section 1 (pages 1-8) Summary

This gentle, evocative novel narrates a dying man's encounters with his past including his memories of his strong-willed father, eccentric grandfather and loving, inarticulate wife, as well as his reactions to the unexpected arrival of a long-estranged godson whose presence both invades and challenges the relative peace of the present. Written in first-person journal-like letters from a man to his unnamed infant son, the novel explores the complex nature of father/son relationships, the human capacity for both forgiveness and redemption, and the sometimes contradictory relationship between religion and faith.

The book begins with John Ames writing letters to his seven-year-old son to be read after his (John's) death. He refers to several key aspects of his life—that he's dying of a heart condition, that his son came to him and his wife late in life, and that his son is very much like his wife, both physically and in terms of their temperaments. He reveals that he became a minister like his father and grandfather simply because it was the only life he knew, or felt he could know, and has lived almost his entire life (except for the time he went away to seminary) in Gilead, Iowa.

In these first letters, John refers to fleeting incidents that he recalls in great detail, hinting that his memories are so strong because he's so close to death. These incidents include a memory of seeing his son, his mother and pet cat playing with soap bubbles on the lawn, helping his son get dressed for school, and discovering his son trying to put back together a broken crayon. Non-family incidents include an encounter with a couple of lively young men whom he sees laughing but stop laughing as soon as John spots them. He talks about seeing this experience as beautiful, without really knowing why he would consider it so, and then contemplates the strange nature of being a minister (see "Quotes", p. 6). John also refers to how little fathers and sons can know each other (see "Quotes", p. 5) and, in the final letter of this section, traces his lineage back three generations through his father and grandfather, both of whom were also named John Ames.

Section 1 (pages 1-8) Analysis

The first point to be made here is that all divisions made in this analysis are arbitrary, based on interpretations of the content of the writing. As discussed in the "Style" section, the book contains no chapters or headings and very few demarcations within the text. The only occurrences of on-the-page division are in occasional interjections of long dashes or underscoring, which are relatively few and far between. One effect of this narrative choice is emotive, in that it creates the very clear sense that the narrator, John Ames, is writing as thoughts and memories and feelings occur to him; in other

words, the narrative is essentially a stream of consciousness and brings the reader deeply into his very subjective but nonetheless transformative experience.

The second effect of this narrative choice is, as previously discussed, that divisions within this analysis have been made based on perceived units of either action or possible thematic meaning. From that perspective, then, this first section can be considered largely expositional, or setting up the thematic and narrative foundations of what is to follow. John's failing health, his devotion to his wife and son, his sudden experiences of beauty and joy, and the nature of ministry (i.e. religion) all play important roles in developing the novel's key themes and lines of action. Perhaps most important, however, are his references to his father and grandfather. His recollections and analysis of them as individuals and as father and son, as well as of his own relationships with them, define the central thematic and narrative journey of the book, which is John's movement from being old and somewhat embittered towards transcendence, forgiveness, and redemption.

Section 2 (pages 9-37)

Section 2 (pages 9-37) Summary

John tells how he and his father undertook a month-long journey from Iowa to Kansas to find the grave of his (John's) grandfather. He describes at length the hardships they experienced (including evading an angry farmer from whose garden they were stealing) and the blessings they encountered (such as the generosity of a poor farm woman and the beauty of a simultaneous sunset and moonrise). He also describes how they found the grave in an untended field where there were several other graves, tidied all the graves and planted wildflowers, and then journeyed back to Iowa where they were met with angry concern by John's mother, for they'd been away more than a month.

John then recalls his first marriage, which ended when his wife Louisa gave premature birth to a girl they would have called Rebecca, and they both died. He also refers to a friend and colleague named Boughton, a wise old minister with arthritically misshapen hands, later commenting on how unhappy he (Boughton) is because of his failing faculties and his loneliness for his son Jack. John also describes at length how he came to meet his son's mother, commenting that his wife is near what Rebecca's age would have been if she were alive. He also comments, with astonishment and quiet pride, on the number of sermons he's written, saying he always did his best to give them meaning. He then recalls a childhood incident in which he baptized a family of stray cats and describes in detail the spiritual transcendence of not just that baptism, but baptism in general, referring in particular to the cleansing power and flowing joy of pure, clear water. This is referred to again later in this section when he recalls seeing a pair of young lovers playing under the still-dripping trees after a fresh rain.

At one point John recalls another important member of his family, his older brother Edward, who was treated by his mother and father as a very special child destined to be a great preacher, but who came back from an extended period of study in Europe a confirmed atheist. This belief, or lack thereof, led to an intense family argument and resulted in years of estrangement between Edward and his father. Edward did, however, give young John an important critique of Christianity to read, a book John kept hidden out of fear that his parents would find it, realize it was from Edward, and punish him.

Finally, comments on the solitariness of his son, the renewed innocence of his wife, and the impoverished conditions in which they live lead John to an extended reminiscence of his grandfather. He had lost the use of one eye and was in the habit, which was very irritating to John's mother, of giving away anything and everything, whether the family could spare it or not. He also didn't get along very well with John's father, in spite of their trying to make peace with each other (see "Quotes", p. 34). The section concludes with a reference to the reasons why he ran off to Kansas—his loneliness and a fire at the Negro church.

Section 2 (pages 9-37) Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this section, which focuses mostly on John's family history but occasionally relates that history to John's present life. This narrative approach is taken throughout what is essentially the first half of the book, as John's recollections influence his perceptions of the present, while his increasing awareness and transformations in the present color his experiences of the past. Meanwhile, an important component of this approach is the way in which John's recollections flow seamlessly, but sometimes without apparent connection, one into the other. As previously discussed, this is a stream-of-consciousness type of narrative, in which thoughts, ideas and feelings are conveyed to the reader as they occur to the narrator. There are evocations here of old age, in that the minds of the elderly often function in this free flowing, associative fashion. There is also the sense of poetry and beauty emerging from chaos, from random juxtapositions of perception and experience. These emergences, in turn, become triggers for and/or components of John's spiritual and emotional transformation, from a lonely bitter old man to a graceful, grateful enlightenment.

Another noteworthy element here is the way several of the novel's key themes are developed. First, and perhaps most important, is the parent/child theme, developed to a degree in three secondary situations: John's recollections of his daughter and of the tension between his father and brother; his commentary about Boughton and Jack; and his growing, self-surprising and deeply emotional reflections on his love for his son. The theme is developed most importantly, however, in John's detailed and lengthy recollections of his father and grandfather. The ways in which these three generations of Ames men interact, define and deny each other are the narrative and thematic cornerstone of the book; their relationships trigger key events, while at the same time recollections and examinations of these relationships trigger emotional and spiritual transformation. Other themes developed in this section include sudden manifestations of joy (such as the sunset encounter in the cemetery) and their transformative power, and the tension between religion and faith (dramatized in the story of Edward). Meanwhile, important symbols developed and defined in this section include water and baptism, which are linked throughout the novel with other manifestations of sudden joy and feeling, as well as sermons, which appear throughout the novel as modes for John Ames to express his inner truth in the only way he knows how—up to now, that is. It's important to note that this novel, which itself is the ultimate expression of his inner truth, is not a sermon but is, so it would seem, the only form of non-sermon writing and self examination he's ever done.

Several elements of foreshadowing are apparent in this section. The description of the estrangement between Edward and John's father foreshadows explanations of the years of estrangement between Boughton and Jack, which is also foreshadowed in the passing mention of Jack's extended absence. Meanwhile, the reference to the fire in the Negro church is both a foreshadowing of and a reference to feelings of racism that John implies are very much part of the culture and society of the time (early- to mid-20th Century). These feelings and the consequential actions are developed more vividly later

in the novel when conversation and confrontation revolve around the subject of Jack's Negro wife and half-Negro child.

Because Christianity and interpretations of the Bible play such an important role in the book's actions and themes, it's possible to see references to the Bible in many of its incidents. One such possibility exists in the reference to John and his father having been in Kansas for more than a month. As John describes it, Kansas is a kind of wilderness of unexplored physical, emotional and spiritual territory. In the Bible, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness confronting both Satan and his own nature as the Son of God. Is the "more than a month" in Kansas intended to be a parallel experience to that of Jesus? In both circumstances, those who were in the wilderness came back with a deeper understanding of their relationships with their father - John's father came back with a deeper understanding of his father, John came back with a deeper understanding of his, and Jesus came back with a deeper understanding of His relationship with His (heavenly) Father.

Section 3 (pages 37-57)

Section 3 (pages 37-57) Summary

This section begins with a brief reference to John's son becoming friends with a neighbor boy named Tobias, how John misses his son when he's spending the night at Tobias' home, and how much joy John feels when his son comes home unexpectedly. This leads him to recollections of his childhood friendship with Boughton, who has become an arthritically bent shadow of his former athletic self. These comments lead to John considering his own tall-for-his-age childhood, his physical presence combining with the fact that he read so much to give everyone the impression he was more mature and wiser than everyone else, an impression that lasted throughout his life. Self-deprecatingly, he comments that he never read as much as everyone thought he did, but that he did take a degree of pride in his sermons, one in particular that suggested the Spanish Flu epidemic that killed thousands of people just after World War I was a consequence of humanity's foolish determination to perpetuate war.

Recollection of the loneliness of holding this belief leads John to reflect on how most of his life was spent alone, with only the distractions of reading and baseball to preserve his sanity. He remembers one game in particular that he attended with his grandfather when he was a child, a reminiscence that leads him to remember how good he felt walking away from his grandfather's graveyard in Kansas and how he felt blessed by seeing the gentle moon and the blazing sun. He also recalls his father commenting that everyone who saw what happened was also blessed, but that he in particular (his father, that is) was also moved to tears by what happened. Finally, recollections of the fiery sunset leads John to a reminiscence of a story he was told by his grandfather regarding how he received a vision of Jesus in chains. John comments that the flaming power of this vision was perhaps one reason why his grandfather always seemed old, dusty, ashy and restless, adding that "it was the most natural thing in the world that my grandfather's grave would look like a place where someone had tried to smother a fire."

John also recalls, with a joyful peace or peaceful joy, a moment when his son and his mother came home with flowers, and also a moment when his son and the family cat took turns sitting in his lap (see "Quotes", p. 52). As he reflects on why writing these letters is important to him (see "Quotes", p. 53), he realizes how few photographs he has of Louisa, ponders the intensity and seriousness of his brief courtship with his current wife, and pontificates how there is so much joy to be found in life (see "Quotes", p. 57). He concludes this series of thoughts by reflecting on the peaceful, thoughtful death of an elderly parishioner.

Section 3 (pages 37-57) Analysis

Stylistically and emotively, the narrative continues to flow in a stream-of-consciousness fashion, with thoughts, memories and reactions all bouncing off one another, triggering

other thoughts and memories and reactions in a way that is sometimes incoherent but always engaging and evocative. Within this seemingly random rush of memory and feeling, however, there are some key points: the passion of John's grandfather for his faith, John's own pride in his intellect, the way both that intellect and that pride were limited expressions of his soul, and how those limits were a key component of the loneliness he felt most of his life. These somewhat dark-sided aspects of his experience vividly, and quite tellingly, contrast with his experiences of quiet, surprising joy arising from his relationship with his son and his wife. An interesting consideration is that throughout this section, John's wife and son are unnamed. They remain so for most of the novel; in fact, John's son is never named, while his wife's name is heard only from the mouth of Jack Boughton late in the action. There are several possible reasons for this, but perhaps the most interesting is the idea that in John's mind and writing they are the embodiment of pure joy - they are utterly spiritual, to the point that giving them a name is something that, in his mind, might reduce them to something merely earthly.

The novel's key theme relating to the relationships between fathers and sons is dramatized throughout this section, mostly through John's continuing reminiscences of his father and grandfather. It is also manifested in the reference to Tobias, whose father turns up later in the action and who turns out to be a different kind of father altogether. Their relationship, while glimpsed very briefly, is nonetheless an illumination of the novel's thematic focus on fathers' feelings about their sons and sons' feelings about their fathers.

Section 4 (pages 58-71)

Section 4 (pages 58-71) Summary

This section begins with John passing on a story told to him by his grandfather about the citizens of a town whose clumsy, and increasingly foolish, attempts to build an underground tunnel between the stables and the store merely ended up with a sunken pathway through the town, formed as the tunnel collapsed. As the story goes, the entire town ended up being moved so the people who lived there could avoid the embarrassment of being asked how the pathway got there, and with the pathway turning into a small creek, beside which visitors would, and could, picnic happily.

This leads into a brief commentary on how, at the time of writing, John's son and Tobias are running through the lawn sprinkler, which provokes John to comment on how much beauty, transcendence and joy can be triggered by the presence of water. These comments in turn trigger a happy memory of Edward, who in the middle of playing catch with John on a hot summer day poured a glass of water over his head. John concludes his recollection of Edward with a remembrance of being admonished to not let anyone know that he was reading the critique of Christianity (last referred to in Section 1), which leads John to comment again that his reputation for wisdom was somewhat exaggerated, even if his reputation for commitment was not. He contrasts himself and his work with Boughton, who had a large busy family but was equally determined and committed to be a good preacher.

Recollections of Boughton's family lead John to recall the face of his dead infant daughter (see "Quotes", p. 66), and also to comment on how he's teaching his son Bible verses in exactly the same way as he (John) was taught by his father. This leads him to consider how, by contrast, uneducated his wife is. At this point there is a brief detour into a discussion of a visit from Tobias' father, who is concerned about the boys' behavior and who goes away reassured but dubious. After he's gone, John comments on how his wife plans to read at least some of his sermons, stored in the attic by the hundreds, on how they were the major work of his life and on how he feels they always fell short of what he really wanted to say. He offers the example of a recent service at which he preached about the nature of Christ's body, both sacred and human, and confesses that he (John) has been thinking a lot about the body lately because he's dying, and how he's been thinking in very different terms.

He then describes how his wife brought his son to the front of the church to take communion, and how he (John) knew his son was too young but gave it to him anyway (see "Quotes", p. 70). This makes him reflect on how he found great peace and contentment in the physical building of the church, even during times of war. After expressing his hope that his son will one day grow up to experience those feelings himself, he (John) confesses that he knows the church is soon to be torn down, and that the people behind the destruction are, out of politeness, waiting for him to die before they go ahead.

This section concludes with commentary from John on how he used to spend his lonely, wakeful nights wandering through the town praying for those whose lights were still on - those who, like him, were still awake and still troubled. He makes a passing reference to trouble in Boughton's family, and then expresses the hope that his son, in reading these letters, will come to understand him better (see "Quotes", p. 71).

Section 4 (pages 58-71) Analysis

The first important element of this section is the story of the tunnel, which can be seen as a metaphor for the way joy can be found in the most unlikely circumstances and result from the strangest series of events. This is a manifestation of one of the novel's core themes, the power of unexpected joy, and contains at its conclusion another variation of the novel's primary symbol embodying this theme - the water that fills the trench, becomes a river, and brings joy to the people sitting beside it. This image, water as a source of happiness, is repeated in the reference to John's son and Tobias running playfully through the sprinkler, an incident which in turn leads to the appearance of Tobias' father. This appearance, as previously discussed, is a variation on the theme of fathers and sons that permeates the novel. This section provides an excellent example of how the novel's themes, symbols and narrative resonances intertwine, in the same way as John's memories do, to give meaning. In other words style reinforces substance, and vice versa.

John's actions in giving his son Communion, and teaching him Bible verses in the way he himself was taught, function on two levels. On one level these moments dramatize the way he's doing what his father and grandfather have done, building and defining their relationship on a church-based, religious-based, foundation. On another level, however, these actions trigger the realization in John that what he is in fact doing, or at least intending to do, is passing on grace and love. As part of this realization, he also comes to understand that the kind of grace and love passed on by his father and grandfather were, in short, not enough and that the love he truly wants to pass to his son is of a deeper, more joyful, liberated nature. This, as John is coming to discover, is the kind of love they both receive from the woman who gave them birth - physical birth, in the case of John's son, and emotional birth in the case of John himself.

The church, both in terms of its actual physical structure and its governance of John's mind and soul, is a representation of restriction and control. It symbolizes the limited terms in which he, his father and grandfather lived - physically, emotionally and spiritually. The implication that its physical destruction is tied to the end of John's physical life can, in this context, be seen as a symbolic suggestion that once he dies he will be fully free. This idea is supported by the way that several key events in the novel that lead to his sense of spiritual and emotional freedom originate inside the church but are aborted, only to come to full fruition outside the church. The most notable example of this is the peace he comes to with Jack Boughton at the book's climax (Section 15).

Section 5 (pages 72-85)

Section 5 (pages 72-85) Summary

This section begins with a reference to the impending visit of Boughton's son Jack, whose actual name is John and who was, according to John's narration, named after him. John talks at length about how Jack is Boughton's favorite child, how he's been such a disappointment, and how he's got a story to tell about Jack but will save it for later after he's had a chance to reflect upon it. He then returns to the subject of his ancestry, recalling how his father was born in Kansas but moved to Iowa when he was small and how his mother always kept the Sabbath sacred—that is, she never worked. This leads him to comment on how his wife was glad to learn that "work" didn't mean studying, and consequently read and studied a great deal on Sundays.

After this brief diversion John returns to memories of his childhood, in particular the memory of a farmer killed by a bowie knife, a crime that was never solved but which haunted the lives of farm families for years afterwards. The most important aspect of this story to John is the fact that after the murder the knife was apparently thrown into the river. This is important because John once saw his father throw a gun into the river, a gun he discovered when he unwrapped a bundle left behind by Grandfather Ames when he went to Kansas. John describes how his father goes through great lengths to dismantle and get rid of the gun and how his mother goes through equally great lengths to clean, and then bury, the two bloodstained shirts that were in the bundle with the gun and several of grandfather's sermons.

John confesses that he never knew what his grandfather had supposedly done, but reasons that in the upheavals before the Civil War his grandfather had participated in violence and confrontation. This reasoning comes at least in part from an argument he recalls between his father and grandfather, who in times of anger and resentment each called the other "Reverend." The argument, essentially, was about whether war was a good and holy thing (which John's grandfather believed) or whether it opposed the teachings of Christ (which John's father believed). John reveals that it was shortly after that argument that his grandfather left for Kansas, where he died, and that he spent several years torn between who he should love and who he should blame (see "Quotes", p. 85). He concludes by wondering whether for his father, his anger towards his father was the one thing about his life that he really had to repent of.

Section 5 (pages 72-85) Analysis

The essential purpose of this section is to dramatize the novel's central theme relating to parent/child relationships, specifically those between father and son. This takes place in two ways. The first is through the references to Boughton and his son Jack, the ongoing tension of which foreshadows tension to come when Jack Boughton returns to Gilead, and also mirrors the tension between the three generations of Ames men. In the

same way that tension continues to trouble the relationship between the Boughtons, it troubled the relationships between the Ames men in the past and continues to do so in the present, as John clearly has trouble reconciling the actions and attitudes of his father and grandfather with his own present belief systems. The point must be made, however, that John is clearly making the effort to understand and to forgive in a way that neither his father nor his grandfather could do. In other words, this section is also dramatizing one of the book's secondary themes, relating to the need for and power of forgiveness, redemption and transcendence.

The shirts and the gun are some of the novel's most potent symbols, embodying the capacity for violence—physical, emotional and spiritual—in all the Ames men and, perhaps by extension, the Christian religion. John's father's dismantling of the gun and his mother's extreme efforts of cleansing the shirts are both symbolic attempts to eliminate violence from the family's collective psyche, but with one significant difference. John's father essentially attempts to *hide* the "violence," a perspective that suggests it will never truly be eliminated. John's mother, on the other hand, does her best to cleanse the "violence" away before giving in, realizing it can't be cleansed, and like her husband attempting to simply hide it. It's possible to see that their efforts, admirable but futile, finally bear fruit in John Ames, the narrator. Over the course of the novel, through his celebration of joy and love as well as his coming to terms with the past, he finally is able to cleanse himself of the family capacity for emotional and spiritual violence. He forgives his father, grandfather, and would-be son (Jack Boughton) for their humanity, thereby transcending his personal and ancestral (some would say vocational) capacity for spiritual and emotional violence - judgmental nature, condemnation, and rejection.

Section 6 (pages 86-104)

Section 6 (pages 86-104) Summary

This section begins with a brief reference to the arrival of Jack Boughton, who is described by John as having had his name in the papers several times, and not for good reasons. He recounts how the Boughtons were always embarrassed on John's behalf whenever this happened, given that it was always Jack's full name that was printed - John Ames Boughton (John Ames, of course, being John's name).

John then describes how his father, when they were on the quest for grandfather's grave in Kansas (Section 2), told stories of his childhood, in particular how Grandfather came back from fighting in the Civil War and spoke proudly of it, much to the tearful grief of the women who'd lost sons and husbands in the fighting. John's father also talks about how grandfather made himself constantly busy and useful in the community, leaving him, his sisters and his mother (gravely ill with what John believes to have been cancer) to fend for themselves. John comments that he believes his grandfather to have had too narrow a vision of what God's grace and God's joy can be, adding that he (John) has come to the conclusion that it's possible to experience both in every moment of everyday life.

The narrative is interrupted by a brief commentary on a visit from Jack Boughton, whom John introduces to his family by his full name. When they hear it, both John's wife and son are surprised, leading Jack to make a joke and John to feel guilty that he hasn't told his family about him before. John also feels angry that Jack has discovered him so physically infirm, and that seeing him seemed to trigger the realization in his wife and son that he (John) was old. He comments that he wishes his son could have seen him when he was young.

John then describes at length an incident from his childhood. A church was struck by lightning and the community gathered to salvage what they could; however, because it was raining the workers all got filthy from the wet ash. John describes how his father, covered in sodden ash, offered him a biscuit as a snack, and then comments that over the years he's come to realize that that moment had another meaning. He describes it as a moment of communion, that his father was offering bread to him in commemoration of Christ's life and death in the same way that he offered it to the congregation at church. He describes the encounter as a vision, likens it to the vision of the women of the church planting flowers on the site of the fire and continuing to have prayer meetings there. He also describes his grandfather's "visions," which he says came upon him unexpectedly and resulted in his being unusually agreeable, almost saintly, for days afterward.

He describes how he and his whole family felt humiliated by the way grandfather left, and then recalls a tapestry embroidered with the comment "The Lord Our God is a Purifying Fire" that hung in his grandfather's church. He describes the tapestry as a

bone of contention between his father and grandfather, and wonders how much the women who made it had to sacrifice to create it. Finally, he recalls his father's comments about his grandfather's preaching (see "Quotes", p. 101).

The section concludes with John's description of coming home from church to find Jack playing catch with his son and both of them laughing. This leads John into recalling three things - the joy of seeing Louisa jumping rope; the pleasure of playing catch with Jack's father; and the mingled joy and bitterness of sharing the ashy, communion-bread/biscuit with his father the day his grandfather's church, burned down. He makes the connection between the memory and his giving his son some of the communion bread (Section 3 - see "Quotes", p. 70). He wonders whether such moments have any meaning at all, but comes to another belief (see "Quotes", p. 104) - that life is only given meaning by memory. The section concludes with John's grieving comment that his son will grow up without truly knowing him.

Section 6 (pages 86-104) Analysis

The beginning of this section marks the beginning of the book's unofficial second half, the point at which the focus of John's attention (and therefore of the narrative as a whole) shifts from the past into the present. Up to this point his writings have concentrated mostly on his recollections of his father and grandfather. From here on in, his focus shifts to his increasingly troubled reactions to the presence of Jack Boughton. On a metaphoric level, Jack's presence and John's subsequent concern represent the way the past can trouble the present. On another level, both sets of circumstances are essential catalysts for John's process of change. If Jack hadn't returned, and as a result John hadn't been forced to confronting both his past and his feelings about his past, he never would have come to the kind of peace he comes to by the end of his book and his life - the kind of peace that the novel thematically presents as being necessary, healthy, and godly.

On any level, however, this section dramatizes the way past and present intertwine, an important aspect of the novel's narrative perspective that appears throughout. In this section, the intertwining manifests as Jack's return and the negative emotions inspired by that return echo and reinforce the negative emotions John experienced when his Grandfather returned from the Civil War. Both Jack and Grandfather bring pain with them when they come back, seem oblivious to the effect they have on others, and leave without apology, regret, repentance, or even much awareness that they've caused pain at all. The irony here is that while John seems aware that this is what Grandfather did, he seems un-aware that Jack is doing the same thing. This is because John is too caught in his own tumbled emotions of resentment, anger, guilt (at not loving and forgiving his godson), and hope (that Jack has somehow learned to be a better human being). The process of working through these emotions and re-defining his response to them is the focus of the second half of the novel from this point on.

The images of communion in this section and throughout the novel have multiple levels of meaning. The ritual of communion is a sacrament in the Christian church, a re-

enactment of the so-called "Last Supper," the final meal Christ shared with his disciples before his Crucifixion. At that meal, Christ spoke of the bread and wine he was sharing as symbols of his body and blood, and suggested that by consuming them his disciples were remembering him and his teachings, and making them part of their lives. Because he professed to be, and was believed to be, the Son of God, the implication is that by partaking of communion those who received it were, in fact, partaking of God - or, at the very least, drawing closer to him. In other words, in Christian tradition the ritual is an act of "communion," or connection, with God and Christ. All of this means that on another level of meaning, John's perception of the gift of food from his father as a kind of communion suggests that he experienced that moment as a connection with God, an experience that in turn also functions on more than one level.

Firstly, this moment functions in the same way as his learning Bible verses from his father in the same way as he (father) learned them from Grandfather - the Ames men are connecting to God in the same way, through ritual and religion. On a second level, however, a level more thematically connected to the book as a whole, John receiving "communion" from his father, connection with his father, represents love and connection between father and son beyond that of ritual and religion. As his writing here indicates, he has come to understand and/or believe that in this moment they shared a spiritual union not as believers and not as ministers, but as human beings. It's the type of connection that he longed to deepen with his father, that he longs to develop with his genetic son (hence his writing these letters), and that he's frustrated at not having with his godson, Jack Boughton. Is it possible, on this level of meaning, to see the thematic suggestion that it is the way communion ought to be viewed by those who participate in the ritual, as a connection with a spiritual truth beyond that of religion? It could be argued that this was Christ's intent, given that many of his teachings opposed traditional religious systems - he did, after all, argue with the conservative religious leaders of his time. In any case, the point is that in recollecting this encounter John, because of his emerging and deepening spirituality, is able to see it for its true meaning, and as his relationship with Jack Boughton also deepens, he (John) is able to apply that meaning in new, transcendent, redemptive (for both of them) ways.

There are two important elements of foreshadowing in this section: the reference to Jack's playful relationship with John's son, which foreshadows the deepening of that relationship and the simultaneous deepening of John's resentment, and the passing reference to Jack's bad behavior, which foreshadows the revelation of the worst example of that behavior (Section 9).

Section 7 (pages 105-115)

Section 7 (pages 105-115) Summary

This section begins with John telling a lengthy story that he says was told to him by his father during the long, lonely, hungry days while they were searching for Grandfather in Kansas. The story goes that one night late in the Civil War John's father (who at this point is still a boy) discovers Confederate rebels taking refuge in Grandfather's church. He lets them go and is struggling to conceal the evidence of their presence, since Grandfather could be jailed by the United States Army for aiding the rebels, when he encounters a Union soldier. The soldier indicates that he knows about Grandfather's involvement, and that he is in trouble. As the story goes, the soldier goes off in search of the rebels but never comes back, and no more Union soldiers come looking for the rebels or Grandfather. That night, however, Grandfather comes back with the bloody shirts (Section 5) and having fired his gun (also Section 5). The story concludes with John's father describing how Grandfather wore one of those shirts to preach in and wore the gun in his belt whenever he climbed into the pulpit after that encounter. John concludes the story by saying the day after he heard it, he and his father encountered the generous farm woman (Section 2).

John then refers to having a meeting with the church trustees, who are planning a new church to replace the old one and who, John feels, are courteously waiting for him to die so he doesn't have to suffer through seeing his beloved church destroyed. He describes himself as feeling quite healthy that day, and then describes his joy at seeing his son playing on a swing made for him by another of the Boughton boys, Don, the good son. He quickly returns to the subject of the church, however, expressing the wish that the trustees would take better care of it in its old age and expressing the belief that in spite of all the difficulties the church is going through, this building in particular but the entire institution in general, there is something profoundly spiritual in its existence.

At the conclusion of this section John describes how, while listening to the radio, the urge to waltz came to him. He recalls the joy of physical movement, particularly in terms of playing catch with Edward (his brother), and reflects on how, in the same way as his youth is still alive in him, his entire life must still be alive in the memory of God.

Section 7 (pages 105-115) Analysis

The essential value of this section, particularly the story that opens it, is to provide a thematically relevant contrast between two different approaches to spirituality and to living what's perceived to be God's truth. In the story about Grandfather, the narrative vividly portrays a confrontational, aggressive style of belief. In the passing mention of the encounter with the generous farm woman, however, this portrait of violence is juxtaposed with a portrayal of what could be described as simple Christian charity and compassion.

John's contemplation of his church develops the thematically relevant premise discussed earlier, that the inevitable destruction of the physical church parallels and symbolizes the inevitable destruction of John's physical body and also the (perhaps less inevitable) destruction of his old ways of thinking, believing, and judging. Meanwhile, the reference to the waltz at the end of this section is another manifestation of the novel's thematic focus on joy - its suddenness, as well as its presence in little things and little moments.

Section 8 (pages 116-131)

Section 8 (pages 116-131) Summary

A visit to Boughton, who seems happily preoccupied with listening to and watching his son and daughter (Jack and Glory) working in the garden, leads John to recall his years of happy friendship with him, Boughton's uneasy relationship with his own minister father, and also his (John's) years of bachelorhood. The latter causes him to read a book his wife loves, *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, about a young woman who marries a much older man. He also considers writing a sermon inspired by the Biblical story of Hagar and Ishmael, the moral of which is that a man's responsibility is to protect his wife as well as his children. Meanwhile, as his wife and son become more and more engaged with Jack, John recalls a time when Boughton came calling while they sat in the dark and prayed about Jack. There are more hints of the dark secret in Jack's past as John debates what to tell his wife. He wonders whether warning her about Jack is the right, moral and Christian thing to do or whether he should just let events take their course, trusting (as told to by his father) that every relationship is an opportunity to learn and to practice God's grace.

As Jack spends more and more time with John and his family, and as manifestations of John's aging and infirmity become more and more apparent, both to him and to those around him, John prepares and gives his sermon on Hagar and Ishmael. The verse upon which his sermon is based also contains references to Abraham (Ishamel's father). Partly due to this fact, John departs from his prepared text to speak about the relationships between fathers and sons, between ministers and the church, and between God and his "children." His diversion is also partly due to Jack Boughton coming to church, sitting with John's wife and son, and grinning his way through the sermon - grinning in the way, John says, that he always does when faced with words. John describes Jack as always taking words as a challenge, almost as though he were being physically threatened. John describes his wife as looking nervous throughout the sermon, and starts to wonder whether Jack has told her an abridged version of whatever it was that happened in the past that has made Jack such a black sheep.

Section 8 (pages 116-131) Analysis

This section and the section that follows comprise what might be described as a story within the story; that is, a narrative focusing on Jack's present relationship with his namesake, John Ames, and climaxing with a narrative of Jack's past indiscretions. This section continues to define the novel's shift in narrative perspective, from John's memories to present events and circumstances. It's interesting to note how this shift in focus also includes increased commentary about John's deepening infirmity, which may or may not be triggered by anxiety associated not only with Jack's presence but also with the way John's wife and son are becoming increasingly attracted to him. In other words, John's emotional and spiritual difficulties seem to be manifesting in increasing

physical difficulties, an example of the book's drawing of a connection between the spiritual and physical lives of the characters.

The reference to the Hagar/Ishmael sermon is another manifestation of the idea that John's inner life is played out in his sermons. What's interesting to note here is that as he delivers the sermon, the current state of his inner life is in fact playing out before his very eyes - Jack's apparent insolence and his wife's nervousness. This is what causes him to divert from the written course of the sermon. John is being forced to play a more active role in the circumstances of his life; he can't impose isolation on himself any more, he can't sublimate his feelings in his sermons or his faith, and he can't let the past be what it always was. It's time for confrontation, which he begins to realize here, begins to act upon, and acts upon even more decisively in the following sections.

There is an interesting irony at work in this section. While much of the novel seems focused on the troublesome aspects of father/son relationships, particularly those involving the three generations of Ames men, the comment of John's father about each human relationship providing a chance to experience God's grace, is, in fact, as bald a statement of theme as there is in this book. He's absolutely right, at least in *Gilead's* thematic context—through John's relationships with Jack, his wife and his son, he does indeed come to a deeper understanding of both God's grace and the necessity, in the name of spiritual well being, to act on it.

Section 9 (pages 132-160)

Section 9 (pages 132-160) Summary

In the days following the delivery of his sermon, John writes an extensive contemplation of the Ten Commandments, specifically the Fifth Commandment, which orders children to honor their fathers and mothers. He looks at this commandment from several angles, suggesting that parents have an equal responsibility to honor their children. He also writes about finishing *...the Lonesome Pine*, and finding comfort in its depiction of the young woman's constant love for her aging husband. As a result of all these contemplations he resolves that the right thing to do is tell his wife about Jack's history. In the writings that follow, however, there are no indications that he does. These writings are mostly used to contemplation age, the difference between the intellectual concept of belief and the actual spiritual nourishment it offers, and recollections of his wife early in their relationship (her uneducated way of speaking, her awkward relationship with his congregation).

The writings in the middle of this section recount in dialogue-rich detail almost unique to the book a conversation between John and Jack on the subject of predestination, or fate. As Boughton, Glory and John's wife listen, John and Jack discuss whether human beings can escape what God seems to have planned for them, whether human beings are innately sinful and therefore all condemned to hell, and whether fundamental human nature is changeable. At one point, and to everyone's complete surprise, John's wife speaks up and asks about the evangelical concept of being saved and whether it affects the argument of whether it's possible to avoid hell. Boughton comments that hers is a good question; Jack hints that her question is at the core of his, and John seems angry. Jack, sensing this, attempts to leave the conversation, but John's wife insists that he stay, saying she believes it's possible for people to change. The conversation concludes, and John and his wife go home. On their way, John feels rebuked by his wife, contends that he said nothing that he couldn't and/or wouldn't have said to Edward, realizes he's being defensive, and also realizes that not reacting defensively is just about the hardest non-Commandment commandment there is.

This section concludes with a recounting of just what it is in Jack's past that makes John so uncomfortable around him. He prefaces his story with comments about the deep personal and spiritual connection he still feels with Jack in spite of everything he's done, and about the teachings of the church indicating that it's wrong to say bad things of another. He nevertheless goes on to tell the story about how Jack became sexually involved with a low-class, uneducated girl, got her pregnant, abandoned both her and the baby, and left his much loved convertible at home so his family could visit his daughter. He tells how Jack's family did their best to provide for the child, but its mother and grandparents wouldn't accept them. He also describes how Glory planned to kidnap the child in order to give it a better life, how she was talked out of it, how the child died when it was three, and how the mother disappeared (see "Quotes", p. 159). He concludes with the observation that he still doesn't know why Jack has come home after

twenty years of absence, saying, "he doesn't have the look of a man who has made good use of himself."

Section 9 (pages 132-160) Analysis

The first part of this section explores, in intellectual and/or Biblical terms typical of John's traditional way of thinking, several of the novel's key thematic points such as the relationships between parents and children (the examination of the Commandments), the possibilities of unexpected joy (the recollections of his wife), and the conflict between the intellectual and actual spiritual relevance of religion. By contrast, the second part of this section explores these same questions in dramatic, relationship-and-character based ways that are, for the most part, unique to the novel.

As discussed in the "Language and Meaning" section, dialogue is used as a narrative technique in *Gilead* quite rarely, specifically at key points of conflict and more often than not when that conflict involves Jack Boughton. The dialogue here is the first such example of these parameters of usage, and within that context is all the more effective because of its hitherto unique nature. In other words, up to this point John's conflict has been internal. In this scene it becomes external - he comes face to face with the embodiment of his spiritual past - his prejudices, his judgments, and his limited opinions. It's important to note, however, that he does so in the presence of the one person who, from the beginning of their relationship, has challenged those exact same characteristics - his wife. She, as portrayed in John's admittedly sketchy description, seems to have similar traits to Jack - a troubling past, an initial reluctance to communicate honestly, a buried resentment. But, unlike Jack, she has both transcended her experience and caused John to begin to transcend his. In this section in particular, her challenge to his mental/spiritual/emotional status quo is, in effect, the challenge her existence has brought to his, a challenge she now extends to her husband, in a dramatic embodiment of the novel's thematic point about the necessity of forgiveness and the possibility of redemption. When she speaks of the possibility of people to change, she is speaking of herself and, as John comes to learn, of him.

The final part of this section is notable for several reasons. Firstly, it offers a no-holds-barred description of what, exactly, Jack's big "sin" in the past was. There are many parallels and/or contrasts between this particular story and other stories in the book. For example, the evident disregard Jack shows for his "wife" and their child is vividly contrasted with the deepening love John shows for *his* wife and *their* child. Conversely, the fact that Jack "loses" this wife and child parallels the fact that John lost his first wife and child, while the fact that John has learned to accept and love a second wife and child foreshadows that Jack is at least beginning to do the same with *his* second wife and child. In the larger scheme of things, the neglectful relationship between Jack and his daughter is an aspect of the novel's thematic and narrative focuses on relationships between parents and children in general. Putting all that aside, the section is also notable for the way in which it's written. Specifically, John's resentment, anger and frustration are kept barely in check, his vitriol is barely restrained, and his disgust is palpable. This all gives the very clear impression that in spite of everything said to him

by his wife and in spite of the forgiveness he's managed to experience in terms of his father and grandfather, he's still got a way to go before he manages to "forgive" his son.

Section 10 (pages 160-173)

Section 10 (pages 160-173) Summary

This section begins with John referring to his wife reading his sermons, kept in a box in the attic, and placing one on the topic of forgiveness by his side of the bed. This leads him into a recollection of her attending his services and listening to his sermons (see "Quotes", p. 162), which in turn leads to a memory of a visit he and Glory paid to Jack's child and its mother. He recalls in particular how the two splashed each other with water flowing through a small creek, how the splashing led to laughing and joyful playing, and how Glory, on their way home, commented that she understood nothing about life. After recalling this incident, John returns to his contemplation of forgiveness, and questions whether he has anything to forgive Jack for.

"That one man should lose his child and the next man should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing - well, that does not mean that the second man has transgressed against the first," he writes. He goes on to say, however, that he doesn't forgive Jack. He wouldn't, he says, "know where to begin."

The next day, as John sits on his porch and watches, Jack arrives to play baseball with John's son and his friend Tobias, greeting John's' wife as he does so. Before the game begins, however, Jack tells John he wants to speak with him, and they make an appointment for the following day. That night, John sleeps poorly, waking up early the following morning and putting particular care into making himself tidy, saying he owes it to his son's "lovely mother" to create a good impression. He meets Jack at the church, and their conversation is again recounted in dialogue-rich detail, which begins with references from Jack about John's father having preached in the church and saying "It's an enviable thing, to be able to receive your identity from your father."

Their conversation, awkward at first, honest for a moment, and then poisoned by lies from both men, refers to the influence fathers have over their sons for good or for ill, and to the history of "colored" people in the area (including the "colored" church and the colored regiment that fought in the Civil War). Their conversation, which by this point is almost an argument, concludes with discussion of an atheistic writer who John says he admires in spite of the fact that he is completely wrong about the fundamentally empty nature of faith. At that point Jack excuses himself, mumbles a request for forgiveness, and leaves.

Section 10 (pages 160-173) Analysis

Several thematic and narrative motifs explored in earlier sections are developed further here. First of all, the incident with the sermon dramatizes again how John's intellectual and emotional life was defined and displayed through his sermons, and how his wife continues to play a key role in his ongoing spiritual and emotional evolution. Secondly,

the recollection of the visit to Jack's "wife" and daughter is a manifestation of the parent / child theme - specifically, that joy is possible between parent and child no matter what the circumstances, a lesson John would seem to still need to learn in relation to his feelings about his father and about Jack, his son. This manifestation of joy, in turn, is linked to water as so many other such manifestations are throughout the book. Meanwhile, the question of forgiveness resurfaces and collides directly with John's still-controlling resentment. What's evident here is the thematically relevant premise that lingering resentment in fact poisons the possibility for forgiveness, redemption and transcendence.

The conversation at the church repeats two motifs. The first is the way lengthy exchanges of dialogue are used to highlight the presence of thematically important conflicts. In this case, that conflict is defined by Jack's envious statement about identity - a statement which can be seen as a direct statement of a key aspect of the novel's core theme, in that Jack seems to have gained no sense of identity from either his birth father (Boughton) or his godfather (John).

The second motif repeated here is the fact that the conversation takes place within the walls of the church, and provokes resentment and is unproductive. The church, as it does throughout the novel, represents rigidity and narrowness, which in turn leads to lack of spiritual connection. This is a profound irony, of course, since in the novel as well as in life "church" is held up to be the place where profound spiritual connection is more possible than anywhere else. This point is particularly important to keep in mind later when Jack and John finally achieve connection, but *outside* the church walls (Section 15).

The final narrative motif repeated in this section is the reference to "colored" people, echoing the earlier references to the burning of the Negro church and foreshadowing the revelation that Jack has a Negro wife and half-Negro child. In defining Jack's personal conflict in these terms (having a loving interracial relationship at a time when such relationships were illegal and repugnant on both sides) the novel is perhaps making the secondary thematic suggestion that the biggest resentment and/or anger that society, represented by John and others who react negatively to Jack's truth, must get over is racism.

Section 11 (pages 173-185)

Section 11 (pages 173-185) Summary

This section begins with John reflecting on how the present can't be judged by the past. This recollection leads to his recounting how Grandfather was invited to speak at a town picnic, how the entire family was nervous about what he might say, and how his sermon described in detail the vision that called him to God's service. John describes how Grandfather proclaimed that his vision is still valid; Iowa still needs to be touched by the flaming power of God, even though the people seemed to have turned away from Him. John also describes the general flippancy of those who heard the sermon, including that of John's grandfather, who comments that he doesn't think it did much good.

John then considers the sermon in the abstract context of how people react in general to passionate expressions of belief, recalling conversations with his father after reading the books Edward sent from Germany and realizing that everything his father said to him was in fact his (his father's) attempts to reason with Edward. He goes on to talk about how questioning faith within the context of "real life" is pointless since everything about faith, its existence as well as its purpose, is intended to *transcend* real life. Meanwhile, his sleep is uneasy, as is his mind; he overhears Jack and his wife talking on the porch, and then receives the note of apology Jack brought with the sense that his wife knows everything that's gone on. John sends a note of apology to Jack in return and entrusts it to his wife to deliver it - the whole time wondering what's going on between them.

The rest of this section is filled with John's rambling but detailed recollections of Jack as a youth, including his mischievousness, which John says bordered on meanness, the loneliness he glimpsed occasionally at the core of the mischievousness, and the charm with which he managed to get away with everything he did. He also recalls how through it all Jack continued to call him "Papa," a kind of honoring of the fact that he had been given John's name. At the conclusion of his reminiscences, John realizes that bringing all these memories to the surface is upsetting him and resolves to put them out of his head, turning to prayer instead.

Section 11 (pages 173-185) Analysis

This brief section both analyzes and dramatizes the novel's central conflict between past and present. Analysis appears in John's recollection of Grandfather's sermon, John's detailed consideration of why nobody thought it went well, and the conclusions he comes to as a result of his deliberations. Aside from the insight he comes to about the real source of his father's anger about the German books, the key conclusion here is the one John comes to with regard to the relationship between faith and life. This is significant because his writing, in its analytical, intellectual, sermon-like perspective, is a direct contrast to John's experience; if his faith-based considerations were truly an aid to

transcending life, he wouldn't be nearly as troubled as he is *by* his life. In other words, this section dramatizes again how John's mind is on a separate experiential path from his soul, as both embodied and nourished by John's wife. At the end of the section, in fact, when he resolves to turn to prayer (as opposed to open-hearted conversation and confrontation with Jack, the source of his troubles), it's clearer than ever that John has some significant catching up to do to reach his wife's capacity for redemption, forgiveness and genuine spiritual transcendence.

Section 12 (pages 185-201)

Section 12 (pages 185-201) Summary

This section begins with John narrating the events of his seventy-seventh birthday. He eats his favorite breakfast of pancakes and sausages (with birthday candles stuck in the pancakes), has a picnic with his wife, his son, Tobias and Glory, and finds joy in seeing his family wearing the clothes he loves to see them in. His happiness is clouded by constant thoughts of Jack Boughton—the way John's son seems disappointed when Jack doesn't come on the picnic, the way his John's wife falls silent when Jack's name is brought up, and the way Jack hasn't responded to the note John sent. John takes a second note of apology over to the Boughtons and hands it to Jack personally. Jack reads it gratefully, and says he'd like to talk with John again. John agrees, and goes home. When he gets there, he recalls the circumstances of Jack being given his name - Boughton had originally decided to call Jack by another name, but when it came to the actual moment of baptism (which was being performed by John), Boughton announced that Jack's name was to be John Ames. In other words, the name was a surprise. John wonders whether Jack ever felt, even subconsciously, the resentment that sprang from that surprise, and confesses that he (John) never warmed to Jack at all. The following day, though, he considers that isn't really true, convincing himself that to love Jack in spite of his transgressions is truly the Christian thing to do. He adds, however, that if Jack ever hurts his son, Christian forgiveness would likely be impossible.

John then narrates a quiet evening spent with his wife and son on their front porch, but they are interrupted by a visit from Jack. They all make small talk for a while, and then as John's wife takes his son to bed, John and Jack tentatively continue their discussion about theology begun in the church. Soon, however, they reach another of their conversational impasses, sitting in silence as John's wife brings cider. The silence leads John's mind and memory to wander. He recalls rare moments of peace between his father and grandfather and the simultaneous isolations and connections that spring up between people (see "Quotes", p. 197). He then describes a conversation place between his wife and Jack, which John assumes takes place because they think he's dozed off. During the conversation, John's wife speaks kindly and compassionately to Jack, and when he almost playfully suggests she's lying to him, says she hasn't lied in years. They talk about life in St. Louis, where Jack now lives and where John's wife says she once tried to find work but had no success. They talk about how miserable it is to be poor and then John's wife offers Jack her blessing. He thanks her, calling her by her name, Lila. This is the first time in the entire book that her name is mentioned. Jack leaves and Lila takes John to bed.

John describes how he spent the night writing down the conversation and considering his feelings about what he heard, commenting that Jack sounded relaxed, surprised that John hadn't warned Lila about him, grateful that John seems to have come to some peace regarding Jack's presence, and regretful that he's never been to St. Louis. He also comments that as Jack and Lila talked about her having come to a settled life and

him still wondering what that is like, John realizes that he's in a similar situation—all his life he's wanted to feel settled, but only now has come to understand how that feels.

Section 12 (pages 185-201) Analysis

On one level, this section can be seen as containing some surprising developments in the development of the character of John Ames. His resentful surprise at having his name given to John (Jack) Boughton adds a layer of self-centeredness and selfishness to his character that is perhaps less surprising when the self-confessed depth of his resentment is factored in. In other words, the selfishness of the naming incident becomes more understandable when the ongoing resentment of how that name has, at least in John's mind, been continually besmirched. There is also the sense here that John resents the unexpected responsibility he believes Boughton has dumped on him—the responsibility, traditionally ascribed to godparents, for helping to forge the character of the godchild. It's almost as though John does not want personal and genuine responsibility for the life, mind and soul of another human being. It seems that he is willing to take institutionalized—but limited and impersonal—responsibility as part of his job as a minister, but unwilling to take any kind of personal responsibility for and to those with whom he shares his life.

This latter point is particularly interesting to consider in the context of the second surprising development in his character revealed in this section: the fact that he apparently knows so little about his wife's past. It's significant here that these revelations emerge through dialogue, which throughout the novel is a hint that what's being discussed (and inferred) is particularly important. It's a circumstance that, in this case, implies that John carries with him an essential, core self-centeredness. In other words, he seems to not think about his wife except in terms of what she can do, and is doing, for him.

It's also significant that this is the first point that the name of John's wife is mentioned. The reader gets to know more about her at the same time as her husband does. Again, there's a sense of selfishness here, that up to this point John has neither wanted nor needed to convey anything about her to the reader other than what she is to him. Who she is to and for herself is, essentially, irrelevant. An additional significance is that these revelations emerge as the result of relationship with a character that has been so far portrayed as quite unsympathetic. Here again can be seen the truth of the novel's theme as well as the statement attributed by John's father earlier in the book (Section 8), that every human being, even Jack, can be a source of enlightenment, new knowledge and God's grace. One other significance is the fact that John learns about his wife while he is, to all who see him, asleep. This represents the way that even though he is spiritually asleep, certain truths are getting through, with the result that he is slowly becoming more spiritually awake. Meanwhile, the fact that Lila, who at this point clearly more spiritually enlightened than her minister husband, offers the troubled Jack her blessing foreshadows the way John, as he becomes more enlightened, offers Jack his blessing (Section 15).

Section 13 (pages 202-215)

Section 13 (pages 202-215) Summary

This section contains a lengthy, sensitively written account of how John and Lila came to be a couple. He describes how he became aware of her when she first came into his church, listened with grave attentiveness to his sermon, and left without saying anything more than "Thank you." He also describes how, at age 67, he felt romantic attraction for the first time, how that attraction was different from his feelings for Louisa (with whom he had grown up and with whom marriage was taken as inevitable), and how that passion conflicted, in his mind at least, with his pastoral responsibilities (see "Quotes," p. 204). He describes how he courted her by inviting her to Bible study and easing the obviously painful impact of some of the more painful comments of the other participants. He describes her response, which was to comfort him, describes his wonder at her tenderness and sensitivity, and then describes her response when he suggests he doesn't know how he can repay her; she tells him he should marry her. He realizes at the conclusion of these contemplations that if there is something approaching love between her and Jack Boughton, he should treat it as a kind of blessing, since any love is a blessing. He concludes with the hope that his son will write a similar journey of his life when he gets old, and contemplates his son's "old man" difficulties with the same sort of joy as he contemplates his son's "little boy" playfulness. He seems to suggest that it's all joy in the fact that his son exists and will continue to exist after he's gone.

The section concludes with a narrative of a day Glory took Lila and John's son to the movies, leaving Boughton with John. Boughton, who has difficulty moving and speaking, confides in John that all is not well with Jack, that nobody knows why he came home and that there's something wrong. At that moment Jack appears, aware that something has passed between his father and John and uncertain as to what it might be. Boughton drowses as John and Boughton have a tense, short conversation about nothing in particular, a conversation that leaves John very angry. He describes how Glory came back and took Boughton home, how John's son went off to see Tobias (who's not allowed to go to movies), how Jack stayed a while longer and said nothing, and how he eventually left, wandering the entire evening without returning home for dinner. He describes how Glory and Lila found Jack in a bar, and how Jack said he'd be home later.

Section 13 (pages 202-215) Analysis

The first part of this section contains touching and important developments in the character of John Ames as he realizes the depths of feeling, understanding and truth that his wife has brought into his life. The quote on p. 204, in fact, can be seen as a summary of several of the novel's themes including the tension between religious teaching/rules and a truly spiritual life, that joy in whatever form is a manifestation of true spirit, and that living from a place of love and compassion can trigger redemption.

This section is a key point of transition for John as the contemplations and considerations he enters into here trigger the personal and spiritual transformations in the following final sections.

The second part of this section—aside from developing the theme of parent/child relationships through the tension between Boughton and Jack, the tension between John and Jack, and the briefly glimpsed tension between Tobias and his father—serves as an important emotional and narrative springboard for the climactic revelations and confrontations in the following section. Written in a more suspenseful narrative style than the rest of the book, one may get the sense that the plot is kicking into a more energetic, driven gear, a substantially different sensibility from the more leisurely, character and reflection oriented pace of the book to this point.

Section 14 (pages 217-233)

Section 14 (pages 217-233) Summary

This section, which begins after a substantial on-the-page gap in the action, begins with the stark statements that Jack Boughton has a wife and child, and that they are both colored. After making these statements, John describes at length the encounter that he had with Jack during which this information came out.

John is at the church cleaning out old boxes of files. He's dirty and dusty, but welcomes Jack when he unexpectedly shows up. Jack shows him a picture of his wife and son and then begins a long narrative of his family's history. He describes himself and his wife (Della) as being married in the eyes of God but without the benefit of either a church marriage or a marriage license, and tells how they met by chance and developed a "respectable" (non-sexual) friendship, based at least in part on Della's belief that Jack was a preacher. He describes how, after a while, he disabused her of that notion, but she continued to be his friend in spite of his evident unreliability and liking of alcohol. Jack describes how her family made several attempts to separate them, which they both went along with until they realized how unhappy they were without each other.

They secretly became sexually intimate and lived together given that at the time there were laws against inter-racial co-habitation. When Della got pregnant she went back home to Tennessee while Jack struggled to become more respectable, hold down a job, pay debts, etc. Jack describes how he went down to see her just after the baby was born, how Della's father heard he was descended from John Ames of Kansas (John's grandfather), and how Jack let him believe it was true. Jack then describes how he and Della got together again back in St. Louis and how they've tried to make a life for themselves but have faced a series of racism-defined obstacles.

Finally, Jack describes his reasons for coming home. He says he wants his father (Boughton) to meet his son, but is afraid that the shock would kill him. He indicates that he's telling John this because Jack views him as a surrogate father, and if John can welcome the truth that might be enough. He also asks John whether it might be possible for Jack, Della and their son to make their home in Gilead. John expresses his doubts, and Jack, while giving in to despair, says he'd pretty much given up hope anyway. He asks John to keep what he's been told to himself, and John agrees. As he writes all this to his son, John says it may seem like he's breaking that promise, but confesses that it's the only way he can think of to let his son know that there was, after all, some beauty in Jack.

John then describes the events of the Sunday following the visit from Jack. John read from an old sermon Lila had brought down from the attic, felt deep embarrassment at speaking about what he used to think and feel with his son, Lila and Jack sitting near

the front of the church. In other words, John is speaking old words while being confronted by new thoughts and beliefs.

Section 14 (pages 217-233) Analysis

This section marks a kind of prelude to the novel's climax as John Ames and the reader are confronted with important truths about Jack Boughton, one of which comes as somewhat surprising. It's no surprise that he's become involved with a woman and gotten her pregnant; after all, he's done it before. It is something of a surprise that the woman in question is colored, but given the novel's references to racism and to the fact that Jack has always been a rule breaker and renegade, it's perhaps less of a surprise than it might be in other contexts. The real surprise, the thematically relevant one, arises from the sense that Jack is finally revealing some strength of character - courage, integrity, vulnerability, and responsibility. John, in hearing this story and reacting to it, is evidently transformed, realizing he's been judgmental and negative, making unwarranted assumptions and having unfounded, potentially destructive attitudes. In other words, this section (and the section that follows) demonstrates again that John's father was right (Section 8) - it's possible to witness God's grace, experience it for oneself and learn from it, through encounters with anyone.

There are two interesting details here. First, John's encounter with Jack begins as John is throwing out old files, an action symbolic of his throwing out old ideas about love, faith, forgiveness and relationship. The second detail emerges in Jack's story about Della, and his comment that her father believed him to be descended from John's grandfather. On one level, this can be seen as an ironic commentary on John's view that Jack is, at least to some degree, his son.

On another level it's interesting to consider how Jack might actually BE a descendent of Grandfather Ames in terms of spirit and attitude if not in terms of genes. Jack, like Grandfather, is independent to the point of being rebellious, self-righteous, and somewhat insensitive. It might not be going too far to suggest that like Grandfather, who was blind in one eye, Jack has only sees half of the world. He sees only his desires and has no awareness of how acting on and/or achieving those desires would affect others. In this he is perhaps similar to John; John, after all, has only limited vision of his wife, his friends and indeed of his life. In this context it's possible to see Jack as having arrived at a beginning point of redemption and spiritual rebirth before John. In other words, Jack's story of commitment to Della and their child can be seen as a foreshadowing of the commitment to forgiveness, transcendence and redemption that John reaches in the following section, the second half of the novel's climax.

Section 15 (pages 233-247)

Section 15 (pages 233-247) Summary

This concluding section begins with a narration of John's increasingly hostile feelings towards Gilead (see "Quotes", p. 234), and of how he came to still be there. His father and mother moved to the west coast to be with Edward, promised to move back, but never did. John describes how he felt abandoned by his father, a sense that increased when he received a letter from him speaking negatively about his decision to stay. Meanwhile, he describes how Jack is preparing to leave; he's received a letter from Della, and is planning to join her in Tennessee. Glory worries about the effect that Jack's departure will have on Boughton, leading John to a contemplation of how love, unreasonable and passionate, affects people. He describes his belief that Boughton, no matter how wonderful his other children are, will drop everything to help Jack, since Jack is his deeply beloved, in the same way that if John had a wife and several children, he would drop everything to be with Lila and his son. After reaching this conclusion John resolves to stop writing, saying he's said enough and remarking that he's grateful for having been brought back to the present by such detailed examination of the past.

John then describes an encounter he has with Jack on the day of his departure. They meet on the street and after a bit of small talk Jack reveals that Glory and the rest of the family are deeply upset with him. John tells him he understands, and that he'll try to help Glory understand. After Jack thanks him, and after John persuades him to accept some money, John confesses that what he really wants to do is give Jack a blessing. Jack accepts, and John puts his hand on Jack's forehead, invoking God's blessing on him (there is an echo here of baptism, in which the minister's hand is placed on the head of the child to be baptized and a blessing is asked). Jack accepts the blessing "as if he were waking out of a dream," and John says he would have "gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment." He tells Jack they all love him; Jack describes them all as saints and then leaves. John spends the rest of the day in the church, contemplating.

In the last part of this section, John describes how Lila seems to be striving to make his meals and his days special. He also tells how he visits Boughton in an effort to offer him some comfort at Jack's absence, finds him nearly comatose, and recalls times when they were best friends as young boys and used to escape the very same room in which he's now dying to go out and live—going fishing, playing outside in the sunrise, etc. John also describes his futile attempts to comfort Glory, his decision to have Lila burn any/all of his old sermons she doesn't care to keep, and his contemplation about when the beauty of Creation becomes apparent when the individual feels insufficient to the world, and the world feels insufficient to the individual. At that point, he speaks rapturously about the beauty of the prairie, of his ultimate love of the town, and describes his burial in its soil as "a last wild gesture of love." He prays that his son will grow up to be brave, strong and useful, saying that after he's done praying he'll sleep.

Section 15 (pages 233-247) Analysis

The action of this section contains the novel's climax, the moment at which elements of plot, relationship, character and theme all come together in a transcendent illumination of meaning. There are actually three stages to this climax. First, John realizes the transformative and irresistible power of love. This is the cumulative result of his reflections on his relationships with his wife and son, his contemplations of Boughton's unconditional love for his son, and his conversation with Jack in the previous section, in which he learned that even the apparently unredeemable can be transformed by love.

The second stage of the climax comes in John's blessing of Jack, an action inspired by what John has realized and which, it's important to note, is portrayed as a life-based blessing rather than a church-based one. It takes place outside church walls, away from religion-defined rules of behavior and judgment and the way love manifests, out on the street where life is literally going by. Here can be seen a repudiation of John's earlier point about faith transcending real life (Section 11). As John blesses Jack, presumably in full view of townspeople who would condemn them both (Jack for being disrespectful, John for apparently condoning his behavior), it becomes clear that the novel's point is that faith and are only fully transcendent if they're part of real life. This is the realization hinted at by John in his comment about the relationship between life in seminary -the blessing on the street, he seems to be saying is the truth that years of study and religious practice have simultaneously been trying to get at and struggling to avoid.

One last point to consider in relation to the blessing—when he does it here, John is blessing Jack and meaning it. When he did it in the past, at the point at which he baptized Jack while resenting his being given his name, there is the sense that he was doing it under protest and with resentment. Now, he offers his blessing freely and with genuine love and compassion. It seems, in fact, that this is the more truly Godly blessing.

The third stage of the novel's climax is perhaps less obvious than the other two, but in terms of John's development as a character is no less important. This is the comment, made almost in passing, that he's asked Lila to burn his sermons. As has been discussed, John's sermons represent the intellectual, theoretical, self-protecting aspects of his life and faith. By burning them, or at least most of them, John suggests that that part of his life, that way of living his life, is over, that he is now fully and willingly embracing faith of the heart, as opposed to faith of the church and of the mind.

The novel's final lines are enigmatic, evocative and quite powerful. There is the sense here that when John refers to sleep he is in fact referring to the eternal sleep of death. He's accomplished what he intended to accomplish, which is to pass on the story of his life and ancestors to his son. It hasn't taken the form he thought it would; rather than revealing simply the story of his past he's conveyed the story of his spiritual transformation, which would seem to be a far more valuable thing for his son to learn rather than the dates, places and confrontations of three generations of Ames men. The question must be asked, however, would the story of transformation be as relevant, to

both the reader of the novel and the reader of the letters (i.e. John's son) if the other stories had not been told? Another question: In John's final reference to prayer, is it not possible that he's been praying all along? If praying is defined as opening a line of communication with God, revealing one's heart in the hopes of receiving guidance or enlightenment, isn't that exactly what John has done? In being enlightened, at least to a point, is he now more able, at the end of his life, to truly live in death? Finally, isn't that what Christian teaching is all about? Isn't that what it means to settle in the Gilead of one's soul?

Characters

Angeline Ames

Daughter of narrator John Ames and his first wife, Louisa, baby Angeline, named by Robert Boughton and baptized by him, died shortly after her birth. The narrator, who refers to her as Rebecca, the name he would have given her, had a moment in which to hold the baby. She opened her eyes and looked at him shortly before she died. Her loss, along with her mother's death in childbirth, is a grief that hounds the narrator, one to which he returns in his letter to his son.

Edward Ames

Ten years older than the narrator and his brother, Edward Ames left Gilead as a young man to study philosophy in Germany where his own beliefs were shaped by the work of Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1804-1872), a materialist who challenged orthodox religion, for example attacking the Christian belief in immortality. Feuerbach believed that the idea of God is a projection of the inner nature of man. When Edward returned to the United States, he married a young woman from Indianapolis, and the couple had six children. He taught at the state college (later University of Kansas) in Lawrence until his death. For Edward, leaving Gilead was □like waking from a trance□; he lived out his years only a few hundred miles away, rarely visiting his parents or brother John in Gilead.

Reverend John Ames

Reverend John Ames, the narrator, son and grandson of Protestant ministers with the same name, turns seventy-seven in the early fall of 1956. Throughout most of 1956, he writes a journal addressed to his son. The narrator was born in 1880 in Kansas, the son of John and Martha Turner Ames, and grandson of John and Margaret Todd Ames. He has lived all but two years in Gilead, Iowa. Ames has been a widower most of his adult life, having married his childhood sweetheart, Louise, who died giving birth to their only child, Angeline, when Ames was twenty-five. The baby died shortly after birth. For the next forty-two years, the narrator lived a solitary, contemplative life as a small town minister.

When he was sixty-seven, John Ames married Lila, who shortly thereafter bore him a son. Because of his age and failing health, the narrator has no hope of seeing his son, now nearly seven years old, grow into manhood. To account for himself, Reverend Ames writes of his □own dark time,□ during which he got by on □books and baseball and fried-egg sandwiches.□ He looks at the present moments with wife and son and neighbors; his memories of his birth family and grandparents; and his future both on earth and in heaven, all through the lens of his approaching death. A person habitually aware of the world's beauty, he now sees his life with a sharp tenderness, knowing he is

soon to leave it. This novel purports to be the journal John writes in his final year in the hope that his son will read it when he is an adult.

Lila Ames

Second wife of Reverend John Ames and mother of his son, Lila is forty-one in 1956 as her husband writes his journal letter to their son. John says of his wife, he □never knew anyone . . . with a smaller acquaintance with religion.□ Lila appeared in Ames's church in May 1947 on Pentecost Sunday, when the narrator was sixty-seven and she was thirty-two. She had a difficult past, arriving in the small Iowa town with a face full of □settled, habitual sadness.□ She has no family. She admires the book knowledge of John Ames, who eventually baptizes her. She helps out around the parsonage, and when Reverend Ames admits not knowing how to thank her, she suggests marriage to him. She loves her husband and is devoted to their son, and she wants to improve her book learning so she can assist in the education of their son. Lila loves the western novel, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, a romantic story of a May-December marriage. She is mindful of her role as the minister's wife and tries to speak correctly and act appropriately.

Louisa Ames

Louisa Ames, childhood playmate and then teenage sweetheart and first wife of Reverend John Ames, dies in childbirth. John Ames continues to grieve for her, remembering her as a child skipping rope, her braids flopping on her shoulder, and anticipating with pleasure seeing her and baby Angeline in heaven after he dies.

Margaret Todd Ames

Margaret Ames, the narrator's paternal grandmother, does not get much attention in the novel. She is eclipsed by her husband, the narrator's eccentric grandfather. But the narrator does provide one story. After the narrator's father walked out on the grandfather's sermon, Margaret Ames, who was suffering from cancer, had her daughter carry her to the church to attend the service. In this dramatic way, she communicated her loyalty to her husband, in the face of the disrespect shown him by their son.

Martha Turner Ames

Martha Ames, the narrator's mother, is strong enough to stand between her husband and her father-in-law when they begin to fight. She is committed to the family, hard-working and prudent, and saves what she can by hiding some coins in the pantry and some in a handkerchief under her blouse. She chaffs at the grandfather's so-called charity, an □endless pillaging□ of the family's goods, for the sake of giving to beggars and vagrants, yet she respects the old man for his tenacity and religious vigor.

When a storm blows through, soiling the day's wash on the line and destroying the hen house and her chickens, Martha Ames has the resilience to make a joke of the disaster: she closes one eye and uses the one-eyed grandfather's favorite line, "I know there is a blessing in this somewhere." Remembering the scene years later, John Ames remarks about his mother, "She always did like to make me laugh." Martha Ames drank whiskey to dull her rheumatism and slept poorly at night. Then during the day she would doze by the kitchen fire. The narrator remarks: "She'd wake up if the cat sneezed . . . then she'd sleep through the immolation of an entire Sunday dinner two feet away from her."

John Ames Boughton

Called Jack, John Ames Boughton is named after his father's best friend, Reverend John Ames, who was widowed and childless at the time Jack was born. Now forty-three, Jack returns to Gilead in the summer of 1956. He is the most beloved of Boughton's sons, but he is also described as "the lost sheep, the lost coin." He misbehaved as a teenager, pulled pranks, and was a nuisance. Then as a young man, he brought shame on his family when he fathered a child out of wedlock and left town, leaving the young mother and baby in poverty. Away from Gilead and unknown to his family, he establishes a long-term loving relationship with "a colored woman" and has a son by her. He would marry her, but anti-miscegenation laws prevent it. Now back in Gilead Jack seeks connection with John Ames, "father of his soul," across their troubled past relationship, and hopes briefly that Gilead may provide a place in which he and his common-law wife and son can live.

Robert Boughton

Robert Boughton, "a staunch Presbyterian" minister and the narrator's best friend, whom the narrator called Bobby when they were children, is now bent double with arthritis and in frail health. Robert was best man at the marriage of John and Louisa Ames; he named and baptized their daughter, Angeline, shortly before the baby died; and he married John and Lila Ames forty-two years later. Living near one another, Boughton and the narrator visit regularly, discussing theology and scripture.

Boughton and his wife had eight children, four of each sex, and their house was lively and crowded, quite a contrast to John's parsonage during the decades in which he was alone. Thinking John would never have a son of his own, Boughton named one of his sons, John Ames, as a tribute to their lifelong friendship. Boughton grew old with his wife, who died in 1951. Once a lively, handsome man, Boughton is in 1956 in even poorer health than the narrator. He is cared for by his daughter, Glory, at home now after her own marriage has failed. The narrator loves his friend but has over the years also been jealous of him. Widowed for decades, John saw Boughton's family life as "blindingly beautiful."

Father

The pacifist father of the narrator and husband of Martha Todd Ames, John Ames was born in Kansas and moved to Iowa in 1882. Reverend John Ames and his wife Martha had five children: Edward, the oldest; then two daughters and a son who died of diphtheria; and then, ten years younger than Edward, their last child, John, named after his father and grandfather before him, the narrator of this novel. The youngest child, John, did not know the three middle children who died. The narrator's father, a Protestant minister, recoiled from the violence of the Civil War, became a pacifist and preached the doctrine of love. He was angry with his own father, the narrator's grandfather, for being a militant abolitionist and in the pre-Civil War violence in Kansas for being willing to kill if need be to assure Kansas would be a free state. When the United States entered World War I in 1917 and American men enlisted, the narrator's father became ill and nearly died. The narrator describes his father as Abel, covering up □the guilt of his father,□ the narrator's grandfather.

Glory

Glory, daughter of Robert Boughton, has returned home to care for her father in his final illness after her own marriage has failed. She maintains the family home and garden, cooking for her father and extending herself to her brother Jack when he visits and to their neighbors. Glory is devoted to her father and to the family and criticizes Jack for leaving just as their siblings and spouses circle around their father on his deathbed.

Grandfather

The militant grandfather of the narrator and husband of Margaret Todd Ames, John Ames was born in Maine and went west in the 1830s. As a youth of sixteen, he had a vision in which Jesus, bound in chains, laid his hands on him, and thereafter John felt called to be a militant abolitionist. As a young man he participated in the Free Soilers violence in Kansas led by John Brown. Later, too old to enlist as a soldier, he served with the Union forces as a clergyman, and lost an eye at the Battle of Wilson's Creek in Missouri (1861). After the Civil War ended and now living in Gilead, Iowa, and serving the community as a minister, the grandfather preached the righteousness of war to a congregation of women whose men and sons were away at war or already casualties of it. This act enraged his son, the narrator's father, who walked out of the church and went to worship with the pacifist Quakers. Shortly thereafter, the grandfather left Gilead for Kansas where he was an itinerant preacher until his death. When the narrator was twelve he accompanied his father on a life-threatening journey into drought-afflicted Kansas. They found the grandfather's neglected grave, attended to it, and prayed over it.

Jack

See John Ames Boughton

Tobias Schmidt

The narrator's son's best friend, Tobias Schmidt, lives across the street and is a Lutheran. The two boys play together throughout the summer of 1956. Tobias has a strict father who prohibits his son from watching television at the Ames's parsonage and talks to Reverend Ames about the bad language the boys use. This conversation becomes a joke between the narrator and Robert Boughton. The boys take to spelling the alphabet in such a way that they speak the letter □L□ with □worldliness and scorn,□ making it sound like a swear word. Tobias's father thinks Reverend Ames must be a lax Unitarian because he is amused by the boys' conduct. Later Boughton pretends to agree with Mr. Schmidt, saying, □I have ong fet that etter ought to be excuded from the aphabet.□

Son

John Ames's six-year-old son is not named in the novel. The narrator addresses his son directly in the journal as □you.□ The old men in town call the boy □Deacon,□ which suggests a natural seriousness and may also convey others' belief that he will grow up to be a minister just like his great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were. But the son also resembles his mother. In fact, the narrator says that the son's face has a look of □half sadness and half fury□ in it, very much like his mother's. The son plays with his friend Tobias, draws pictures of airplanes while lying on the floor in his father's study, and enjoys the family cat, Soapy. In one scene the son and his mother blow soap bubbles. When Jack Boughton comes to visit, he plays catch with the boy. There are tender moments too between the son and his father, John Ames; in fact, the novel begins with one. However, as the months progress, the father's illness prevents his engaging in a lively way with his son.

Objects/Places

Gilead, Iowa

The book is set in this small farming community. In the Bible, "Gilead" became the home of one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. In short, it became the dwelling place of a people who were, to all intents and purposes, lost. The use of the name here has three layers of meaning. It illustrates the importance of the Bible and Christian religion to the people who live there and, on a more metaphorical level, it illustrates the way in which John Ames, after years of being emotionally and spiritually lost, by the end of the novel has "come home" to an emotionally and spiritually fulfilling life. The contrast here, the name's third layer of meaning, is to Jack Boughton, whose literal attempts to come home result only in his having to leave again without having found the kind of spiritual and emotional sanctuary he seeks and which John Ames, by contrast, has found.

Kansas

John's grandfather leaves his life, ministry and family in Iowa to move to Kansas, where he believes his teachings will be better received. He does experience some success there, but ultimately ends up unfulfilled, dying in a land far from his home. In that sense, Kansas can be seen as symbolizing all places that aren't, essentially, home, and particularly, places in the Bible where Jews who didn't find their way to the new homelands in Gilead and other communities found themselves exiled, even imprisoned or enslaved. Grandfather, in that sense, can be seen as being imprisoned by his own limited belief systems and attitudes.

The Cemetery in Kansas

This is the cemetery where John's grandfather, who died in spiritual and emotional exile from his home (Gilead), is buried. It is also the site of a key encounter between John and his father (Section 2).

Water

Throughout the novel, water in various forms (baptism, rain, rivers, lakes, sprinkler water, tears) represents joy in its suddenness, in its capacity for purification (i.e. redemption and forgiveness), and for its purity and natural beauty.

Grandfather's Eyes

John's grandfather lost an eye while fighting in the American Civil War. The remaining eye, as described by John, was watchful, sly and judgmental. It seems that the first eye,

the missing one, represents the way that John's grandfather seemed to be missing a degree of compassion, love and even sanity. The eye that remained was constantly seeking and searching for wrongdoing, guidance from God, opportunity, and money.

Grandfather's Gun

This is a souvenir from an encounter between Grandfather and an opposing soldier late in the days of the Civil War. It represents Grandfather's capacity for violence, emotional and spiritual as well as physical. The fact that John's father is determined to destroy it represents his determination to not espouse violence in the same way. The fact that he dismantles it and throws it into the river symbolizes his determination to both wash away the "sin" of violence and live according to more joyful, life affirming rules, water serving throughout the book as a symbol of joy and emotional freedom.

Grandfather's Shirts

These items are also souvenirs from the war, representing emotional, spiritual, and physical violence. The fact that the shirts belong to those whom Grandfather has wounded represents the way his attitudes have spiritually wounded others, while the fact that John's mother struggles so hard to clean them represents the family's determination to "cleanse" themselves of his influence. The fact that the shirts are buried represents the way that John's father was determined to "bury" that side of Grandfather, while the fact that they are deeply washed by John's mother represents the determination of all Grandfather's family to "wash" themselves clean of his judgmental influence.

Sermons

Sermons appear throughout the novel, given by all three generations of Ames preachers, Grandfather, Father, and John. For all three men, sermons are ways of expressing views and beliefs that they can't necessarily live by. Grandfather's sermons espouse the kind of spiritual violence that he, in spite of his best efforts, couldn't fully embody. John's Father's sermons were about bringing the Word of God in the Bible to life, which he never fully managed to do. John's sermons are his means of communicating his innermost thoughts, feelings and beliefs, always in terms of Biblical language and teachings but expressed in such a way that attempted to awaken similar spiritual and emotional perspectives in those listening. The fact that John keeps his sermons, and that his wife repeatedly brings his old sermons for him to consider represents the way that his old ways of thinking, feeling, believing and living are being challenged by the newness of his life - his wife, his son, and the reappearance of Jack Boughton.

The Church

The church embodies John's ways of thinking, believing and feeling. There are indications throughout the book of John's awareness that the church will die with him and that after he passes, the church will be destroyed to make way for a new building. The symbolism here is of John's old ways also being destroyed, that those he leaves behind will live and think and feel and believe in a new way. It's interesting to note here that John's initial, difficult, unproductive encounters with Jack Boughton take place in the church, while the final moment of transcendence and redemption and love takes place outside the church.

Baseball

Throughout the novel, baseball serves as a welcome distraction for John from the cares of his life and work. The irony here is that it also becomes a source of deep concern. Jack plays catch with John's son in the way John can't, brings joy into his life in the way John can't, and fuels concern about how he (John's son) will be influenced by others in ways John can't control once he is dead. In other words, baseball is no longer a source of joy, but rather a source of fear.

Themes

Father and Son Relationships

The most important theme in *Gilead* pertains to the difficulty in making connection across the generations, particularly between fathers and sons. In some places in the novel, this difficulty is explored in terms of the parable of the Prodigal Son. Indeed, in several cases in the novel, the son's decision to leave (leave the family home town, leave the faith) is understood by the father as a □defection,□ (the military term suggests both cowardice and disloyalty). The father and son feel rejection, and anger simmers between the two.

The grandfather left Maine to fight for abolition in Kansas, to join the Union Army in the Civil War; as he aged and perhaps even more so after he was wounded in battle (losing his eye, losing his depth perception), he became all the more radical and eccentric. He gave sermons with a gun in his belt, urging people to fight for what is right, and continued doing so, even when he was mostly addressing widows and mothers whose husbands and sons had died in the war. This stance enraged his son, the narrator's father, also a minister in the same Protestant sect, causing him to walk out on the grandfather's sermon and worship with the Quakers. This defection by the father angered the grandfather so much he decided to leave Gilead and return to Kansas, where he remained until his death. The irony is that the breach between generations is a snag that holds the two connected, even against their will; the father received the grandfather's personal belongings, buried and unburied them, and finally took the narrator, then only twelve years old, in search of the grandfather's grave. They found the grave, cleaned it, and prayed over it, but what a struggle it was to get to that place and what a struggle it was to return from it.

The father □grieved . . . bitterly that the last words he said to his father were very angry words and there could never be any reconciliation between them in this life,□ and yet that breach recurred between the father and his firstborn son, Edward, the narrator's brother. Edward left Gilead to study in Germany, came home an atheist, and refused to say grace in his father's parsonage. He could quote the Bible still, but he preferred the works of the atheist Feuerbach to his own father's sermons. Scholarly Edward lived out his life in Lawrence, Kansas, at the state college (later University of Kansas), just a few hundred miles away, believing that in leaving Gilead and in leaving the narrows of his father's Protestantism, he awoke as if from a □trance.□

Robert Boughton's son, John Ames Boughton, called Jack, defected in more than one sense. In his early twenties, he left Gilead, abandoning a young woman whom he had impregnated and their child who, in neglect and poverty, died at age three. The narrator, now twenty some years later, accuses Jack of having □squander[ed] his fatherhood□ and further suspects Jack of perhaps intending to move into a relationship with Lila, once the narrator has died. In fact, when Jack returns in the summer of 1956, ostensibly to see his dying father and privately in hopes that Gilead will provide haven, the narrator

scorns him. The narrator sees Jack in terms of his earlier abandonment, even in terms of his childhood misdemeanors. This attitude contrasts with old Boughton who rejoices in his son's return, the one □whom he has favored as one does a wound□ and seems to rally in his presence. Repeatedly the narrator considers □warning□ his wife and son about Jack, a person who seems so friendly and yet may hide evil intentions. Like Edward in this one respect, Jack has also abandoned the faith of his father. While Edward has succeeded professionally and had a good marriage which produced six children, Jack has been a loner and a ne'er-do-well; a professional liar by his own admission, he has charmed his way through life without finding a calling or purpose. In a sense, though Jack returns to Gilead for a visit, he remains lost. The seed for healing, however, lies in the secret Jack carries home and confides in the narrator, the man whom he calls □Papa.□

The parable of the Prodigal Son is about the breach between a father and the son who leaves him and about the father's great joy in this son's return. It equally pertains, however, to the relationship between the father and the other son, the one who remains at home, steadfast and working, while his sibling is off spending his inheritance. This devoted son is the one with whom the narrator identifies. Though he believes himself to have been a disappointment to his father, the narrator recognizes that he fulfilled the role of □the good son . . . the one who never left his father's house.□ The narrator's intention in the journal is to make connection with his own son, despite that most final of defections, death. He writes his sermons imagining his baby daughter, walking into church some Sunday, all grown up. He writes this journal to communicate, as if from the grave, that his son has □been God's grace to [him], a miracle.□

The departure of the son may be as natural as the decision by another son to remain behind in the father's house, but as in □the Parable of the Lost Sheep,□ the father focuses on the lost one. In this novel, an increasing focus is on Boughton's son Jack who returns for the summer. While the narrator is writing to his own son, creating this time capsule the boy may read when he is an adult, the narrator is approached by his godson and namesake, John Ames Boughton, who repeatedly attempts to engage the narrator in conversation. When the narrator realizes Jack's predicament, that Jack has lost his common-law wife and child, he sees Jack differently, sees his □beauty□ and blesses him. With a fine symmetry, he blesses his friend's son as Jack leaves Gilead for the last time, just as Boughton blessed Reverend Ames's premature baby daughter before she died.

Forgiveness

This novel presents a minister who struggles to learn the lessons he preaches, a man who seeks scriptural insights to help him live a moral life. The humanity of John Ames is fully conveyed in so many ways, and not least of these is his admission of his own failings. Of these perhaps the one that hounds him most is his covetousness, that he envies his beloved friend Robert Boughton. Reverend Ames also struggles with anger, the family trait which characterized the father's feelings about the grandfather and the grandfather's feelings about almost everything.

John Ames envies Reverend Boughton for his long marriage and for having so many children, all of whom Boughton saw grow up. Boughton had the opportunity to grow old with his wife, and John Ames envies him that. Reverend Ames found the lively Boughton household □blindingly beautiful,□ a beauty that over the decades while he was widowed seemed to eclipse the fact the Ames had once had a wife, too, and a daughter. Also, the beauty in Boughton's family life seemed to negate what Reverend Ames found beautiful in his own solitude. Regarding his preference for visiting with Boughton, just the two of them, in the narrator's own kitchen, John Ames explains: □I don't think it was resentment I felt then. It was some sort of loyalty to my own life.□ In facing his grief over the untimely death in childbirth of his first wife and the neonatal death of their daughter, Reverend Ames still appreciates the beauty in those forty-two years of solitude before he met Lila, his second wife. Imagining their son as an adult reading this journal, Reverend Ames states: □I hope you will understand that when I speak of the long night that preceded these days of my happiness, I do not remember grief and loneliness so much as I do peace and comfort□grief, but never without comfort; loneliness, but never without peace. Almost never.□ While insisting on the positive aspects of his solitary life, the narrator also admits how he feels about seeing Boughton with his grown son, Jack: □It has been one of the great irritations of my life, seeing the two of them together.□ The point in all of this for Reverend Ames is that while he savors the good in his own life, he struggles with the grief in it, the loss of his first wife and their daughter and also the recognition that he will not live to see his own little boy grow up. So, yes, there is comfort and peace, and great joy in the son's presence but also a gnawing grief, which expresses itself as irritation, anger, envy, covetousness.

Reverend Ames sees Jack in a new way once he knows Jack has also lost a wife and child. Realizing they share a common grief, Reverend Ames stops judging Jack by wrongs he committed, both in childhood and adulthood, and stops seeing Jack as a sneaky culprit and potential threat. Face to face with Jack's loss, Reverend Ames softens. He offers money, but more, he offers benediction. In blessing Jack, Reverend Ames soothes his own irritation, appeases his own covetousness.

Details about the characters' ages may be a subtle hint at the theme of forgiveness. One of these details is that in early fall, John Ames turns seventy-seven. His son is not quite seven. Jack Boughton is forty-three (four and three add up to seven). These specific ages, taken together, may echo the law of forgiveness taught by Jesus in Matthew 18:22: □I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.□ Reverend Ames seems satisfied after he blesses Jack. He has forgiven Jack and seen □the beauty□ in him. It is as if in identifying with Jack, John Ames is able to find the balm he seeks in Gilead.

Parents and Children

There are several important parent/child relationships in the novel, mostly between fathers and sons. The action of the novel defines these relationships in several ways. The first is by dramatizing the way the older generation attempts to lead, guide and

instruct the younger. Examples of this are the way each generation of John Ames (Grandfather, Father, Son) act and speak in a way they hope will guide and inspire their sons. In the case of the narrator, the youngest John Ames, this applies not only to the way he writes letters in the hopes of awakening his genetic son to knowledge and wisdom. This attitude also applies to his relationship with his godson, Jack Boughton, whom he clearly expects to behave according to a certain set of standards and who disappoints him by not adhering to them. This, in turn, is a manifestation of the way the novel also dramatizes how the younger generations challenge and in some ways break free of the influences of the older. Father Ames struggles to break free of the attitudinal restrictions placed upon him by Grandfather Ames, John Ames has the same struggle with the restrictions placed on him by Father Ames, Jack Boughton also struggles with the attitudes of both his genetic and spiritual fathers.

It's important to note here how the narrator's son remains un-named. One wonders if he also has been called John Ames. Will he, like his father and grandfather and great-grandfather, be a minister? Will he grow up the way they did, caught between the opposing demands of being a good son, a good man, and a good minister? Or was he given another name—and if he was, does that mean he will finally break the Ames pattern of intolerance and judgmental-ism?

Meanwhile, relationships between fathers and daughters are also of import in *Gilead* - the way Glory Boughton has essentially become her father's handmaid, the way Jack's illegitimate daughter is completely ignored by her father, Jack's girlfriend Della is subjected to the will of hers, and the way John Ames' daughter Rebecca died as she was being born. The core issue here is identity; in the eyes of their fathers, it's important that their identities be passed on to their sons, while the daughters essentially have no identities of their own at all.

Joy

Sudden, deeply experienced manifestations of joy appear throughout the novel. Most often, this joy is experienced through human connection; between John and Father Ames at Grandfather Ames' cemetery, between John and his wife, between John and his son, between John and Boughton, between Jack Boughton and Della. The key point about so many of these moments is that they appear unexpectedly in the characters lives. The day-to-day struggle of life and relationship tends to absorb them, wearing them down emotionally; but then suddenly an experience of pure transcendent happiness jolts them into realizing that that happiness lingers just beneath the surface of their routines, and that connection with joy in almost any circumstance is possible.

These sudden emergences of feeling are often illuminated by the use of water as a symbol - the flow of baptismal water, the rush of river water, the playful spattering of sprinkler water, the happy dampness of tears. An added layer of meaning can be found in the traditional connection in Christian-based faith systems, between water and the Holy Spirit. This connection is made most clearly in the sacrament of baptism, in which sins are symbolically washed away by the Holy Spirit as represented by water - either

the water in which the person being baptized is immersed, or with which the person's forehead is bathed. At the same time, because the Holy Spirit is, in Christian theology, also the source of joy, wisdom, freedom and truth, the implication is that the act of baptism is also a bringing in of those feelings, not only a redemption, but an awakening.

Religion vs. Faith

Because the action of this book and the lives of its characters are so thoroughly anchored in experiences of the Christian church, it's possible to interpret the flowing of joy into the lives of the characters as a flowing of the Holy Spirit. But because so many of the charcharacters are struggling to be free of the restrictions placed upon feeling and behavior by the Christian church, it's also possible to interpret the sudden flowings of joy into their lives as being transcendent of Christianity, and as being connected to the joy of simply being a human being. Herein, therefore, is a manifestation of another of the book's central themes, that joy springs not from religion, but from life, which means that faith in that joy, which translates into faith in life, is far more transcendent and life affirming than faith in religion. In other words, restrictions on belief and action and feeling placed on and/or by characters like Grandfather Ames, Father Ames, John Ames, and Boughton lead to them eventually becoming narrow, lonely, and unfulfilled.

It's sudden experiences of unexpected joy, experiences that exist outside of religion, that broaden their lives and their spiritual perspectives. These experiences include Grandfather Ames' pleasure in being a mischievous petty thief, Father Ames' experience of transcendence in the cemetery, John's experiences of gratitude and wonder at the presence of his wife and son in his life, and Boughton's joy in the existence of his (admittedly ne'er do well) son. The book, therefore, seems to develop the theme that faith in life is a greater, freer source of joy than faith in religion.

Forgiveness and Redemption

In the context of the book's thematic comparisons between sources of joy and between religion and faith, the need for forgiveness and redemption is yet another important thematic value. In most of the primary relationships in the book, letting go of past transgressions and tensions, whether inspired by Christian responsibilities or by human need, is a source of freedom and joy. This is true not only of the various father/son relationships, which are either enriched by letting go of the past (John Ames/Jack Boughton, John and Father Ames, John and Grandfather Ames) or poisoned by not letting go of the past (Grandfather Ames and Father Ames, John Ames and Jack Boughton in the early stages of their renewed relationships). Indeed, the transcendent power of forgiveness and redemption is also dramatized in the relationship between John Ames and his wife, whose hinted-at life of "sin" and "suffering" is transformed by the redeeming power of her self-less love for her husband and son and their uncomplicated, grateful love for her.

An interesting question is this: Has Jack Boughton been redeemed by his love for Della and their son? He feels very differently about them than he does about the first woman and child he became involved with. Are these feelings going to lead to further transformation? Is he going to feel the same new sense of wholeness, wonder, joy and responsibility that John Ames feels when the love of his wife and son comes into his life?

Style

The Novel as Journal or Letter

As it is used in literary criticism, the word, genre, according to *A Handbook to Literature* designates □the distinct types or categories into which literary works are grouped according to FORM or technique or, sometimes, subject matter.□ But the distinctions between genres may not always be absolute, since a given work can draw from various types or categories of writing to achieve the desired effect. *Gilead* is a work of fiction, a novel, yet it clearly has features of other kinds or types of writing. The novel reads as though it is a collection of private letters or one long private letter to one person, written piecemeal over time, a text intended for only one reader, the writer's son. This feature makes the work sound like a private document, one never intended to be published and read by a wide audience. The sense readers have that they are reading someone else's private letter increases the impression of intimacy in the text; the device brings readers closer to the narrator's most inner self. The strategy deepens and narrows point of view. Using the letter device makes the work akin to a subcategory of the novel genre called the epistolary novel, which is a novel comprised of letters instead of chapters.

Moreover, since the text presents itself as one that was written over the course of several months, with brief entries added on an almost-daily basis, it also appears to be a journal or diary. It is worth noting that the novel as a genre tends to present itself not as fiction but as a historical account, a history (Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), a collection of letters (Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*), a journal (Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*), an autobiography (Margaret George's *The Autobiography of Henry VIII*). Clearly, even if a work of literature falls in one category, as Robinson's is definitely a novel, it can blend characteristics from various types or categories. What does an author stand to gain in giving a work these features? In this case, Robinson gains depth of insight into the single point of view; she can scroll back into American history for her themes within the family history this narrator wants to record, and yet she is not obliged to write a conventional conclusion. She can also omit how and when the narrator dies and how the narrator's son receives the journal left for him as his legacy.

Setting: The Balm in Gilead

The balm, or soothing element (literally the honey-like resin from certain trees thought to have medicinal properties) in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, lies in part in its historically having served as □a place John Brown and Jim Lane could fall back on when they needed to heal and rest.□ Iowa, □the shining star of radicalism,□ the state without anti-miscegenation laws, lay just beyond Kansas. It served as a safety zone for abolitionists and Free Soilers who fought to make sure that Kansas was admitted to the Union as a free state. Before the Civil War, Gilead and other towns like it served as havens for runaway slaves. Many houses in town have □hidden cellars or cabinets where people could be put out of sight for a day or two.□ These houses testify to a time

when Gilead was a stop on the Underground Railroad, with townspeople hiding escaped slaves who were headed north. The militant grandfather was one of the town's founders, a man who counted it a blessing to have known John Brown personally and to have lost an eye supporting the Union effort in the Civil War. This historical role of Gilead in accepting and aiding blacks waned in subsequent generations. The black church closed and its congregation moved to Chicago after someone started a fire next to the building, and when Jack returns in hopes that Gilead might provide a haven for him and his common-law wife and biracial child, he realizes there is no racial diversity in the town.

Plot

A plot summary describes the action of the novel, generally using divisions of chapters or sections. This novel, however, is not divided into chapters. It reads like a journal. Entries are separated by space breaks: some spaces are blank, and some are marked with a horizontal line. Toward the end of the novel, one space break is so large it suggests the conclusion of the body of the book and the beginning of a final section, something like an epilogue. Given these characteristics of the text, the plot contains both immediate events that transpire as the narrator writes during the summer of 1956 and reaches into the past of the narrator and further back into the lives of his father and grandfather. Dominant memories of the narrator are related, such as the trip he made at age twelve with his father in 1892 when they went to Kansas in search of the grandfather's grave. An important earlier trip is one the narrator made with the grandfather to Des Moines to see a baseball game in which Bud Fowler, the first African American to play professional baseball, participated. The narrator tells childhood stories about the ongoing disagreement between his father and grandfather, about how his mother stared down the old man who wanted to give her household savings to beggars, and about how the narrator's grandmother suffered from cancer and yet directed her daughter to carry her to church to show her support for her husband. Going further back, the narrator reports the grandfather's visions of Jesus and his adamant, militant stance against slavery.

The discursive prose slides from event to reflection to theological question to immediate scene, following the movement of the narrator's thought and focus. Behind this natural, shifting movement across subjects occur tiny hints strategically placed to reveal indirectly what lies beyond the narrator's focus. For example, while the narrator is away from the parsonage, Jack Boughton, at Lila's request, moves furniture and personal articles from the minister's upstairs study to the main floor parlor; the narrator returns to discover that his journal has been placed where he never keeps it. Also, the congregation's awareness of the narrator's failing health is conveyed indirectly by the casseroles that show up in the parsonage kitchen and by the women in the church beginning to cry immediately when, in his sermon, Ames alludes to how an old minister may worry about the congregation he must soon leave.

The entries in the journal are not dated, but hints are given of time passing. In the present, the narrator refers to the previous night or this morning; he plans a sermon,

thinking about the Bible stories he wants to mention, then later he mentions having given the sermon. Also, clues appear regarding his physical decline. He reports feeling all right then not being able to lift his son as he used to do and not finding the steps as easy as they were once. He complains about not sleeping and having trouble breathing while lying down. In one scene, Jack Boughton helps the narrator out of his porch seat, and the narrator is humiliated by the fact that he needs the assistance. In these ways, indirectly, his failing health is conveyed. In all, the handling of plot in this novel works to reveal the mind of John Ames, the way he associates ideas, the way he holds onto regret. In this way, the plot serves to reveal his character.

Allusion

An allusion is an indirect reference to a literary or historical figure or event; its effectiveness depends on the shared knowledge of the author and the reader. The more well-read the reader, the more likely it is that allusions will be recognized and the meaning of the work thereby enriched. Allusions can occur in tiny details or take up considerable text. In telling the story of their trip to Kansas in search of the grandfather's grave, the narrator reports that his father had said they □were like Abraham and Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah.□ In this reference, Robinson makes use of the Old Testament story and also draws upon historical fact, for in 1892, a severe drought in Kansas made food extremely scarce. The narrator's father proved his love for the grandfather by going to this extreme trouble to locate and care for his grave, yet in proving that love, he put himself and his own son, the narrator, at risk. The father was at risk of starvation or being shot for gleaning from gardens, and the narrator admits if his father had died on this trip, the narrator himself would have been stranded in Kansas, just a boy of twelve. This allusion is amplified later in the novel when the narrator dwells on stories about Abraham and his two sons and gives a sermon on that subject.

Other allusions serve to anchor the setting historically; for example, the narrator refers to Woodrow Wilson in his discussion of World War I (1914-1918), and he also states that he will vote for Eisenhower and then in the fall alludes to the election. Dwight Eisenhower was re-elected to the presidency in the fall of 1956. One literary allusion suggests Lila's unwavering devotion to her husband. Lila loves reading *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, a novel by John Fox published first in 1908, which was made into a film in 1936. Fox's novel tells the story of a May-December romance and marriage in which the wife remains faithful to her much older husband. While the narrator entertains ideas about Jack Boughton's intentions regarding Lila and she is friendly and open to Jack, her love for Fox's novel is a hint that she is in truth devoted to her husband.

Point of View

The novel is written from the first-person point of view in the voice of John Ames, a dying seventy-seven-year-old minister, recent father, baseball fanatic, and troubled godfather. In the first half of the novel, he contemplates his love-slight, turbulent past from the point of view of a love-filled, peaceful present. As the result of these

contemplations, he discovers that he's able, and willing, to look into his present with a new point of view about his past. In other words, for the first time he's examining the relationship between past and present, and living through changes of attitude and experience that result from that examination. It's important to note that his point of observation of both past and present is relatively objective—curious and interested, courageous and prepared to ask hard questions, light on bias and preconception. When his examinations lead him to long held beliefs, he forces himself to confront what he believed he understood and seek a deeper truth; indeed, throughout the novel he makes clear and concerted attempts to see his life, the people with whom he was involved and whom he loves, as clearly and as honestly as possible.

He intends to come to a new understanding of himself so he can pass on as complete an understanding as possible to his son—the idea being that he (his son) can see his father from a point of view that he (his father) didn't come to about his own father until it was too late to improve their relationship. In short, John Ames is writing from the perspective of a father who wants his son to truly know him, to know why he is who he is and why he did what he did, in order that he (his son) can make "informed decisions about who he is, and what he wants to do with his life."

Setting

The novel is set in Gilead, a small town in Iowa, a Midwestern state in the USA. The book provides very little detail about the town or the state. There is the sense that the town is small, rural, and conservative in perspective, while the state is relatively large, sparsely populated, and has a degree of harshness to its climate and topography.

The book gives the impression that life in Gilead is difficult, full of hard physical work and sustained by a strict Christian belief system. As discussed in the "Objects/Places" section, the name "Gilead" has a Biblical connotation, being the country in which one of the ancient Twelve Tribes of Israel settled after being banished from their homeland and drifting in the wilderness for many years. Both Gileads are places of settlement for wanderers and pioneers, places of at least temporary security. The Jews of the Bible settled there only until they could return to their traditional, promised homeland, while the Ames family settled there in the belief that they belonged, that their belief systems and teachings were the right fit for the right community at the right time.

Both Gileads seem to have been viewed as the appropriate setting for a righteous struggle—the harshness of the environment toughened the body and the soul for the spiritual struggle ahead, the sustaining of faith through the difficulties of earthly life. The irony is that through the course of the novel the most recent John Ames discovers that he has, in fact, been living in a spiritual Gilead, a way of thinking and feeling and believing as harsh and demanding and unforgiving as the land in which he's settled.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is that of both contemplation and discovery. John Ames, through the narrative device of writing letters about himself to his son, considers his past, makes new discoveries about that past and therefore about himself. The intellect of the narrator, both natural and trained, is apparent in his words and images. Also apparent is his awakening and deepening experience of feeling, which is expressed in occasional (and sometimes surprising) poeticism. In other words, language is used very effectively in this novel to detail the emotional and spiritual journey of a mindful man discovering his soul.

All that being said, there is one element worthy of particular note, that being a relative lack of dialogue. The novel consists almost entirely of narration, John Ames' letters to his son. Most of the time, dialogue is described, not narrated. Its content is summed up, not recounted. The only exceptions occur when John recounts confrontations between himself and Jack Boughton, (Sections 9 and 10), between John's father and grandfather (Section 5), and between Jack and Lila, John's wife (Section 12). Upon consideration, it becomes clear that these confrontations contain important turning points in John's spiritual development; when he becomes more fully aware of the spiritual and emotional relationship between his father and grandfather, and perhaps most importantly, when he becomes deeply aware of the emotional and spiritual necessity of transcending his anger and resentment towards Jack, his stepson. In other words, dialogue is used selectively to dramatize moments of key impact on John as his heart, mind and soul open to new realities, new ways of thinking and feeling and believing and being.

Structure

The first point to note here is that there is no formal, on-the-page structure; the divisions of the above summary are purely arbitrary, since there are no chapter headings, section headings, or subtitles. Each of John's "letters" is separated from the others by what might be called double or triple spacing. The only demarcations are long dashes placed at points at which the author seems to consider something important has been said. This structure gives the sense that John is writing as ideas occur to him, that what he (and the reader) are experiencing is stream of consciousness. This sense is reinforced by the somewhat rambling content of each entry—thoughts trigger other thoughts, tangents trigger tangents, and eventually he gets back to the point he started to make at the beginning of the section.

Interestingly enough, it's often the tangents that provide the most insight to John himself, and therefore to the reader. That being said, the book is clearly divided into two parts, with the split occurring almost exactly at the halfway point when Jack Boughton arrives in Gilead. The first focuses on John's past, his relationships with his father and grandfather. The second focuses on John's present, his relationships with his wife, son, and godson (Jack). As a result of this structural element, there is the sense that John needs to understand his past before he can fully come to grips with his present.

There is the sense that he needs to transcend his old beliefs about his father and grandfather before he can transcend his current beliefs about Jack Boughton, his fears and resentments, and live what remains of his life in peace. Finally, between Sections 13 and 14 there is, on the page, a significant division. Whereas other sections are divided by only the space of a line or two, these sections—which, it must be remembered, are arbitrary and created only for the sake of this analysis—are separated only by a page and a half of space. This on-the-page structure creates the sense that everything that has gone before has been preparation for what is about to happen - having honestly confronted his past John is about to honestly confront his present. Then, having grown from his new knowledge about the past he's able to grow into his present, and move forward with his life (death?) a transformed, more enlightened, more loving human being. In other words, he has left his spiritual Gilead for what Jews in the Old Testament (where Gilead is first referenced) for the so-called Promised Land. In John's case this is less a physical fatherland than it is a spiritual, emotional, love-real home.

Historical Context

Nineteenth-Century Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa

Gilead spans 126 years of American history, from 1830 to late 1956. Major historical events, most of which occur in Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa, create a backdrop for the first two generations in the Ames family. The grandfather heads west in 1830 and participates in the 1850s violence in Kansas over the slavery question. A strict abolitionist and totally opposed to the spread of slavery to the territories or to having any state join the Union as a slave state, the militant grandfather knew John Brown (1800-1859) and was willing to engage in gunfights and may have even killed one or more men, all in the name of freedom.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, people had opposing opinions about whether territories in the West should be allowed to enter the Union as slave or free states. Southerners wanted new states to permit slavery; northerners in general wanted slavery contained in the South. Some antislavery advocates opposed the practice on economic grounds; they feared that if new areas permitted slavery, plantation-style farming would occupy large tracts of land, eliminating the possibility of ordinary people having small farms. Other abolitionists were more thoroughgoing in their opposition and were prepared to fight against slavery wherever it was promoted. These included individuals who called themselves Free Soilers, who were willing to settle in new territories and fight if necessary to prevent slavery from occurring in the new area. The conflict was brought to a head by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which divided the Kansas territory into northern and southern parts and allowed a local referendum to decide if slavery was to be legal in either section. Violent outbreaks, some of which were led by abolitionist John Brown, were so bloody that they came to be collectively referred to as Bleeding Kansas, and many saw what happened in Kansas as a preview of the Civil War.

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, the grandfather wanted to enlist; refused because of his age, he served with the Union forces as a clergyman. He was seriously wounded and lost one eye at the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri, which was fought on August 10, 1861. Brigadier General Nathaniel Lyon died in this battle; he was the first Union general to be killed in the Civil War. The grandfather felt his own injuries, including the loss of an eye, were inconsequential compared to the loss of Lyon.

In 1892, the narrator, then age twelve, and his father, left Gilead, Iowa, and returned to Kansas, in search of the grandfather's grave. A terrible drought gripped the southwestern third of the state, a drought that engulfed half of the state in 1893. The parched farmland gave rise to dust storms like those that recurred in the late nineteenth century and in the 1930s, the latter exacerbating the economic depression of that period.

In the last half of the nineteenth century, Iowa was known as □the shining star of radicalism.□ Glory talks about □towns like ours,□ which were □a conspiracy,□ because □Lots of people were only there to be antislavery by any means that came to hand,□ including building houses that had □hidden cellars or cabinets.□ Runaway slaves, if they got across into Iowa, might well find refuge in these small towns en route to Canada. Moreover, unlike Kansas, Iowa never had anti-miscegenation laws, which explains why Jack hopes briefly to find a place for himself, his common-law wife, and their biracial son to live in the town of Gilead.

Spanish Influenza

The novel mentions a 1916 outbreak of influenza. In fact, in December of 1915 and throughout 1916, there was a major respiratory disease epidemic in the United States. This disease was often referred to as Spanish influenza because its origins were traced to Spanish-speaking Central America. By the spring of 1918, just as World War I was slowly drawing to a close, the pandemic influenza began, a disease so deadly it took about fifty million lives worldwide, more than died in total in the war. The one sermon Reverend Ames recalls never giving pertained to the sudden outbreak of deadly influenza in 1916 at Fort Riley. He stated: □They drafted all the boys at the college, and influenza swept through there so bad the place had to be closed down and the building filled with cots.□ In his sermon, Ames stated that the boys' □deaths were a sign and a warning to the rest of us that the desire for war would bring the consequences of war, because there is no ocean big enough to protect us from the Lord's judgment when we decide to hammer our plowshares into swords.□ His pacifist father would have been pleased with that sermon, but Reverend Ames decided not to give the sermon, knowing the few women attending church were apprehensive enough without it.

Critical Overview

Gilead was widely and wonderfully well received. Stacy Carson Hubbard in her review entitled, □The Balm in Gilead,□ writes that the story of John Ames □unfolds in a ruminative style, full of pithy vernacularism and homiletic wisdom.□ Hubbard stresses that □Ames's tale is not so much a celebration of goodness as it is a celebration of complexity and ambiguity.□ The novel, she writes, is □a meditation on the meaning of fatherhood, both literal and figurative. . . . Every father here is as much a mystery to his child as God is to humanity, and every son is in need of that 'boundless compassion' which Karl Barth□our narrator's favorite theologian□identifies with the radical otherness of God.□ Hubbard concludes that Robinson's novel is □remarkable and redemptive,□ a work that □invites us, with a kind of understated ecstasy, to contemplate the mysteries of being in the world.□

Thomas Meaney, in his review entitled □In God's Creation,□ praises the □masterly control□ of *Gilead*'s narrative. He also points out that John Ames is a sympathetic character, □a wise old Iowa minister,□ so unlike many ministers evoked in novels who □come outfitted in the vestments of their own unraveling.□ Meaney explores Robinson's handling of the concept of predestination, and he concludes that her □Heaven . . . may afford an extraordinary amnesty for sinners. But *Gilead* also argues that, in this world, moral responsibility lies squarely on the individual's shoulders.□ Gerald T. Cobb, writing for the journal *America*, concludes that □Robinson deftly combines the elegiac and the eulogistic into a compelling sense that this minister of a small town has a privileged view of life's horizons and depths.□

Among so many positive assessments perhaps the last word should belong to Scott A. Kaukonen who evaluated the novel for *The Missouri Review*. Comparing Robinson's *Gilead* to other contemporary writing, Kaukonen writes: □In a culture where bombast passes for insight and where theological nuance suffers amid sound bites and power politics, *Gilead* refreshes like water from a deep, cold spring. . . . It reminds us that grace and mercy can be more than planks in a political platform.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Monahan has a Ph.D. in English and operates an editing service, The Inkwell Works. In this essay, Monahan examines the healing role journal writing plays in the life of John Ames, the narrator of Marilynne Robinson's Gilead*.*

In *Gilead* (2004), the central action, it might be argued, is the habitual daily writing Reverend John Ames does during what he anticipates will be his final year. Robinson's protagonist is a man writing a journal, a □letter□ to the □grown man□ his son will be. At the outset his purpose in writing this journal is clear: John Ames is dying of heart disease, and he wants to leave a message for his little boy to read when he grows up. The novel is that message, a year-long journal or extended letter. On the surface, this task is transparent: Ames, who has written fifty sermons a year for forty-five years, sets out to do some different writing now. He intends to create a personal account of himself, write something intimate. Someday his son, who stands to inherit precious little, will at least have this book, written by his dad in the last year of his life, quite an inheritance in its own right. What Reverend Ames does not realize, however, is that unlike a sermon that gets tied up neatly in thirty pages or so, ongoing daily writing can lead away from the initial subject into unexpected terrain, and it can affect the writer in ways he does not anticipate. Writing the journal, Reverend Ames fulfills his original intention, but he also accomplishes other work: he learns more deeply about what makes him heartsick, his grief, his anger, and envy; he even engages at one point in a dialogue with himself, part of a valiant effort to sort through his feelings and find the balm his heart requires. Equally important, he extends himself to his namesake, his best friend's son, repairing that longstanding troubled relationship. These unexpected developments in his journal writing may be facilitated by Reverend Ames's resolve to make the journal □an experiment with candor.□ The novel traces, then, how the writing process itself transforms the writer's thinking and over time may bring healing to chronic, hidden wounds. *Gilead* provides an opportunity to observe how journal writing draws the writer toward the meaning he implicitly seeks and how that meaning affects his actions. In short, journal writing is shown to be a catalyst for personal transformation and action.

Insomniac John Ames has lived his life awake in more than the literal sense. A poet, a philosopher, and man without pretense who searches for the truth and admits harboring unanswered questions, Ames writes deliberately. In the early pages of the journal, he notes his attention to words. He loves the word □susurrus□ (full of whispering sounds) and describes himself as having □a certain crepuscular quality□ (resembling twilight). He is self-conscious as he writes, trying to do a good job. He comments on □the care it costs [him] not to use certain words more than [he] ought to.□ He talks about the word □just,□ as an ordinary intensifier. He remarks on using the word □'old'□ too often but explains that, for him, it □has less to do with age . . . than it does with familiarity. . . . with a modest, habitual affection.□ He calls his lifelong friend, □'old Boughton'□; he refers to Gilead as □'this shabby old town,'□ meaning in both instances □very near□ his heart. In frequent passages, his word choice reveals his aesthetic eye for detail. He describes soap bubbles, for example, that □ripen toward that dragonfly blue . . . before they burst.□ He describes his son standing on the swing, with the □planted stance of a

sailor on a billowy sea□; the son swings so high □the ropes bow like cobwebs, laggardly, indolent.□ He wants to save experience by anchoring it in text. He regrets Boughton's remarkable sermons were never written down: □So that is all gone.□ About his own sermons saved in boxes, they may □seem foolish or dull,□ but he wrote them with □the deepest hope and conviction. Sifting [his] thoughts and choosing [his] words. Trying to say what was true.□ Reverend Ames sets out to write the journal with the same deliberate care he used to compose his sermons. However, as he continues writing in his journal, his self-consciousness recedes somewhat; he becomes more engaged with his own ideas and feelings, sorting these out, wondering about them.

Reverend Ames ponders scripture; the stories in both Testaments having to do with fathers and sons and with parents and children recur in his thinking. These stories resonate with his circumstances, and he finds comfort in the way some stories conclude. He reports in his journal how □the story of Hagar and Ishmael□ came to him while he was praying. As he worries about how his wife and child will manage without him (once he is dead, they will have to leave the parsonage and find somewhere else to live), he refers to this Biblical story and takes heart: □That is how life goes□we send our children into the wilderness. . . . Even that wilderness, the very habitation of jackals, is the Lord's. I need to bear this in mind.□ He imagines that without him his wife and child will be thrust into a wilderness of vulnerability. He specifies what in the parsonage belongs to him, things they should take with them, and he cautions his son to accept any help parishioners offer since during his service to the church he has generously helped its members. He repeatedly regrets having so little to leave his wife and son by way of an inheritance.

Full of love and concern for his wife and boy, he nonetheless admits a mean-spirited irritation with John Ames Boughton (called Jack by everyone), the son of his lifelong best friend, Robert Boughton. The emotion stems, perhaps, from an initial event intended as a kindness. Eight years after Reverend Ames's first wife died along with their premature baby daughter, Reverend Boughton had yet another child, a son. Reverend Ames baptized this baby, and when he asked what it was to be called, he was shocked to learn it would bear his own name. In that baptismal moment, Reverend Ames rejected the baby, feeling that this child somehow denied his own little daughter's existence. Remembering this moment late in the journal, Ames writes: □my heart froze in me and I thought, This is *not* my child.□ In the same passage, he explains envy as it applies to himself: □covetise is . . . in my experience . . . not so much desiring someone else's virtue or happiness as rejecting it, taking offense at the beauty of it.□ As he writes now about it, he sees a sermon topic in this line of thinking, and he also ponders whether the baby John Ames Boughton □felt how coldly I went about his christening, how far my thoughts were from blessing him.□ Jack grew up during the years in which Ames remained widowed and childless, and Reverend Ames confesses that seeing Jack with his father was □one of the great irritations□ of his life.

Reverend Ames continues to think of what happened to the Biblical Abraham's sons; as he writes in his journal, he makes plans for a sermon on the subject. He focuses on the idea of wilderness and what can soothe it: □My point was that Abraham is in effect called upon to sacrifice both his sons, and that the Lord in both instances sends angels

to intervene at the critical moment to save the child.□ He concludes, taking Abraham's fate for his own, that the father must □trust to the providence of God.□ Even more, he realizes that each person is destined for the wilderness, that Abraham □himself had been sent into the wilderness . . . this was the narrative of all generations.□ As he writes, applying these stories to his own situation, Ames begins to realize that he is called upon to have faith regarding his wife and son (Hagar and Ishmael) and himself (Abraham). Normally in his sermons Reverend Ames would not refer to personal matters, but in writing later in his journal about how he delivered this sermon, he reports digressing to mention how an old pastor may worry about what might become of his congregation after his death; the pastor is called upon to believe that God is in charge. The Old Testament stories are paradigms: no matter what manner the abandonment, Reverend Ames comes to understand in his journal writing, his faith is called upon to recognize that God is in charge in the wilderness. As he soon realizes, the wilderness has both a physiological and a psychological dimension.

As he broods about what he calls his □sin of covetise,□ Reverend Ames chaffs at the smiling presence of Jack Boughton. He resents Jack's having helped move Reverend Ames's study to the main floor parlor and is offended by Jack's placing the journal in a drawer where Reverend Ames never puts it. He knows he is unreasonable, but with candor he writes out his feelings. Gnawing him is the suspicion that Jack will get close to Lila and their son after Ames dies and may do them harm. This thought torments Ames. These present feelings are triggered by his age-old envy of Boughton, who had four sons, all of whom he saw grow up; Boughton loved Jack the most, the one who since childhood irritated Reverend Ames. Ames defines covetise as □that pang of resentment you may feel when even the people you love best have what you want and don't have.□ In order to steer clear of breaking the □Commandment, Thou shall not covet,□ Ames has avoided the Boughton household, despite his love of Reverend Boughton. In 1956, when Jack comes home, he wants to talk privately with Reverend Ames on a matter he cannot discuss with his father; Jack repeatedly approaches, and Reverend Ames recoils, irritated and guarded, tempted repeatedly to warn his wife and son about Jack's potential to harm them, in all feeling increased physical and emotional agitation.

As Ames struggles with this issue, he juxtaposes in the journal different types of writing. In one instance, Ames uses his journal to sort out his feelings about Jack, especially in the face of Jack's request for consultation. Ames engages in a dialogue with himself. He imagines a scene in which he, Ames, calling himself Moriturus, comes to Reverend Ames for consultation, and the dialogue he writes out surprises him:

Question: What is it you fear most, Moriturus?

Answer: I, Moriturus, fear leaving my wife and child unknowingly in the sway of a man of extremely questionable character.

Question: What makes you think his contact with them or his influence upon them will be considerable enough to be damaging to them?

Now, that really is an excellent question, and one I would not have thought to put to myself. The answer would be, he has come by the house a few times, he has come to church once. Not an impressive reply.

This dialogue shows Ames that he does not have evidence to prove Jack's alleged culpability. Ames realizes that his fear is directly connected to the envy he feels when he sees Jack sitting in the pew with Lila and their son: □I stood there in the pulpit, looking down on the three of you, you looked to me like a handsome young family, and my evil old heart rose within me . . . I felt as if I were looking back from the grave.□ This turmoil is not about Jack but about Reverend Ames, and the journal writing allows Ames to realize it. It makes perfect sense: □The fact is,□ he concludes, □I don't want to be old. And I certainly don't want to be dead.□ Even Jesus □wept in the Garden,□ knowing he was to die; Reverend Ames can feel some compassion for himself; he knows himself to be □failing.□ Sleep becomes □elusive□ and □grueling,□ and prayer has not quieted him. Then, in the darkness of his suffering, quite surprisingly, Ames undergoes a jolting change of heart.

He reflects again in his journal upon the baptism of Jack Boughton, considering how Reverend Boughton had given John Ames this baby □to compensate for [his] own childlessness.□ Reverend Ames realizes that his rejecting the baby, in a way, seems like Jack's rejection of his own baby daughter born out of wedlock. He prays now □for the wisdom to do well by John Ames Boughton□ yet acknowledges that his □sullen old reptilian self would have handed him over to the Philistines.□ His conflict heightens: he reports being unable to sleep: □My heart is greatly disquieted. It is a strange thing to feel illness and grief in the same organ.□ An □old weight in the chest□ informs him that he knows more than he knows, and he □must learn it□ from himself. He goes back over what he knows about Jack, about his pranks in childhood, particularly how the boy stole a photograph Ames had of his first wife, Louise, and then how the child smiled innocently at him afterward, seeming to mock him while calling him □Papa.□ Now he thinks the child Jack was □'lonely,' though 'weary' and 'angry'□ also describe him. Curiously, he depicts the young Jack in terms that apply to himself now as he writes. Remembering how the child galled him, Ames reports, just writing about it □is not doing me any good at all.□ He says elsewhere in the journal that transformations can be □abrupt□ (as the change in him when he first saw Lila in church on □that blessed, rainy Pentecost□). Suddenly, Ames feels connected to Jack: □John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also. . . . That language isn't sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do.□ Concern for writing style is less important than this realization: □it is a rejection of the reality of grace to hold our enemy at fault.□

In these journal passages, as he seeks both psychological and theological clarification of his feelings about Jack, Ames is fully self-referential. He is no longer writing to his little boy; now he is sorting through his own feelings, outlining his own blind spots. He rereads his journal. He is troubled. In the moment, he concludes, □Oh, I am a limited man, and old, and [Jack] will still be his inexplicable mortal self when I am dust.□ Because Ames is freighted with these feelings, it is not surprising that the first two private conversations between him and Jack fail. Ames is antagonized by Jack's

pleasantries; he reports in his journal, □I am angry as I write this. My heart is up to something that is alarming the rest of my body.□

Shortly after this entry, a blank page appears in the journal, not unlike the kind that signals the end of a chapter. When the text begins again, it is on the facing (recto) side of the next page, with a large first letter, matching the format used on the novel's first page. This new section of the journal appears almost to be an epilogue. It begins with the secret Jack confides in Reverend Ames: Jack has a wife and child, □a colored woman, and a light-skinned colored boy.□ Here all the time Reverend Ames has been mucking around in his own grief, examining his private wounds, interpreting Jack and everything else in terms of his own problems, Jack has been preoccupied with a quite different, but equally weighty problem. Jack cannot speak to his own father about his cross-racial relationship or about his biracial son. He returned to Gilead to see his ailing father, to be sure, but he cherished the hope that Gilead, a place that once harbored runaway slaves, would be a haven beyond anti-miscegenation laws, one in which he could live with his family. While he is in Gilead, however, Jack learns that his common-law wife and their son have been removed from him permanently by her family. He tells Reverend Ames about all of this. Reverend Ames quotes Jack at length, admitting that in doing so he violates □pastoral discretion.□ He excuses himself to his son: □I just don't know another way to let you see the beauty there is in him.□ How interesting that here Ames uses that word □just,□ which in the early pages he says conveys □something ordinary in kind but exceptional in degree.□ Facing Jack's pain in losing his family, seeing no □grounds for [his] own dread,□ Reverend Ames admits, □I felt as if I'd have bequeathed him wife and child if I could to supply the loss of his own.□ This is transformation, indeed.

In the journal's closing pages, Reverend Ames expresses his gratitude □for the splendor□ of the world, which he found also in Lila and in their son's □sweetly ordinary face.□ He knows that □old Boughton,□ if he could, would rise out of his □decrepitude□ and follow Jack into the world to bless him, that son □he has favored as one does a wound.□ Reverend Ames longs to witness such □extravagant□ blessing as Boughton would bestow in Jack, this □prodigal son□ who leaves Gilead while Boughton lies on his deathbed. In the consummate scene, Reverend Ames enacts what Boughton cannot physically accomplish: Ames blesses Jack. Jack thinks he is leaving Gilead forever, and Reverend Ames understands. They wait at the bus stop; Reverend Ames has □to sit down on the bench beside him on account of [his] heart.□ Reverend Ames places his hand on Jack's forehead and pronounces □the benediction from Numbers . . . 'The Lord make his face to shine upon thee.'□ All the roles a man may play coalesce in the blessing Reverend Ames adds: □Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.□

In this moment of benediction, face to face with Jack, as in the journal consultation he faces himself, Reverend Ames evokes what elsewhere he calls □incandescence.□ In seeing the beauty in John Ames Boughton, John Ames sees the beauty in himself. He resolves to □put an end to all this writing.□ The first snow arrives. Ames concludes his journal with the best of his faith: □the Lord loves each of us as an only child.□ Then addressing his son again, he assesses the legacy: □What have I to leave you but the

ruins of old courage, and the lore of old gallantry and hope? Well, as I have said, it is all an ember now, and the good Lord will surely someday breathe it into flame again.□ The journal which began as a letter to this son, grown into manhood after the father's death, has become a journey into the writer's self. Uncovering the □bewilderments□ of that □new territory,□ that wilderness of soul, became the process by which this journal writer made himself known, first to himself, next to his son. Late in his journal writing, Reverend Ames realizes that he set out to do one thing and the writing took him in an unanticipated direction:

I have been looking through these pages, and I realize that for some time I have mainly been worrying to myself, when my intention from the beginning was to speak to you. I meant to leave you a reasonably candid testament to my better self, and it seems to me now that what you must see here is just an old man struggling with the difficulty of understanding what it is he's struggling with.

Journal writing invited this disclosure. This text promises to touch Reverend Ames's beloved son because it depicts with candor the writer's struggle and its resolution.

Source: Melodie Monahan, Critical Essay on *Gilead*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Quotes

"That's the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people ... tell you the most remarkable things. There's a lot under the surface of life ...malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn't really expect to find it, either." p.6

"A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension." p.7

"For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn't writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone. I feel I am with you now, whatever that can mean, considering that you're only a little fellow now and when you're a man you might find these letters of no interest. Or they might never reach you, for any of a number of reasons." p.19

"'What have I done? What does it mean?' That was a question that came to me often, not because I felt less than certain I had dome something that did mean something, but because no matter how much I thought and read and prayed, I felt outside the mystery of it." p.21

"[My grandfather's] eccentricities were thwarted passion, that he was full of anger, at us not least, and that the tremors of his old age were in some part the tremors of pent grief. And I believe my father on his side was angry, too, at the accusations he knew he could see in his father's unreposefulness ... in a spirit of Christian forgiveness very becoming to men of the cloth, and to father and son, they had buried their differences. It must be said, however, that they buried them not very deeply, and perhaps more as one would bank a fire than smother it." p.34

"...You have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle. You may not remember me very well at all, and it may seem to you to be no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town you will no doubt leave behind. If only I had the words to tell you." p.52

"While you read this, I am imperishable, somehow more alive than I have ever been, in the strength of my youth, with dear ones beside me. You read the dreams of an anxious, fuddled old man, and I live in a light better than any dream of mine ..." p.53

"...I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us." p.57

"Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest in the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any." p.66

"Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. Your solemn and beautiful child face lifted up to receive these mysteries at my hands. They are the most wonderful mystery, body and blood. It was an experience I might have missed. Now I only fear I will not have time enough to fully enjoy the thought of it." p. 70

"As you read this, I hope you will understand that when I speak of the long night that preceded these days of my happiness, I do not remember grief and loneliness so much as I do peace and comfort - grief, but never without comfort; loneliness, but never without peace. Almost never." p. 71

"This morning the world by moonlight seemed to be an immemorial acquaintance I had always meant to befriend. If there was ever a chance, it has passed. Strange to say, I feel a little that way about myself." p. 74

"I had so much respect for my father. I felt certain that he should hide the guilt of his father, and that I should also hide the guilt of mine. I loved him with the strangest, most miserable passion when he stood there preaching about how the Lord hates falsehood and how in the end all our works will be exposed in the naked light of truth." p. 85

"[grandfather] had preached his people into the war, saying while there was slavery there was no peace, but only a war of the armed and powerful against the captive and defenseless. He would say peace will come only when that war ends, so the God of peace calls upon us to end it. He said all this with that gun in his belt. And everyone there always shouted amen, even the littlest children." p. 101

"Our dream of life will end as dreams do end, abruptly and completely, when the sun rises, when the light comes. And we will think, all that fear and all that grief were about nothing. But that cannot be true. I can't believe we will forget our sorrows altogether. That would mean forgetting that we had lived ..." p. 104

"I always imagine divine mercy giving us back to ourselves and letting us laugh at what we became, laugh at the preposterous disguises of crouch and squint and limp and lour we all do put on. I enjoy the hope that when we meet I will not be estranged from you by all the oddnesses life has carved into me." p. 118

"Transgression. That is legalism. There is never just one transgression. There is a wound in the flesh of human life that scars when it heals and often enough seems never to heal at all. Avoid transgression. How's that for advice." p. 122

"The fact is, though, that Glory's scheme would probably have ended with her and some of the rest of us in jail, the baby back with its mother, and young Boughton under a tree somewhere, reading ... his convertible at last restored to him." p. 159

"I wish I could leave you certain of the images in my mind, because they are so beautiful that I hate to think they will be extinguished when I am. Well, but again ... memory is not strictly mortal in its nature, either. It is a strange thing, after all, to be able to return to a moment, when it can hardly be said to have any reality at all even in its passing. A

moment is such a slight thing, I mean, that its abiding is a most gracious reprieve." p. 162

"I have thought about that very often - how the times change, and the same words that carry a good many people into the howling wilderness in one generation are irksome or meaningless in the next." p. 176

"It is one of the best traits of good people that they love where they pity. And this is truer of women than of men. So they get themselves drawn into situations that are harmful to them. I have seen this happen many, many times. I have always had trouble finding a way to caution against it. Since it is, in a word, Christlike." p. 187

"In every important way we are such secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us ... every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable ... we take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have also fallen heir to the same customs ... the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us." p.197

"...There I was trying to write a sermon, when all I really wanted to do was try to remember a young woman's face ... if we can be divinely fed with a morsel [communion] and divinely blessed with a touch [baptism], then the terrible pleasure we find in a particular face can certainly instruct us in the nature of the very grandest love." p. 204

"...There must have been a hundred little towns like [Gilead], set up in the heat of an old urgency that is all forgotten now, and their littleness and their shabbiness, which was the measure of the courage and passion that went into the making of them, now just look awkward and provincial and ridiculous ..." p. 234

"It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance - for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light." p.245

Topics for Further Study

Write a letter to a relative of yours or to your child or a child you envision having one day. For a week write in the letter every day both about memories you have, about what is happening in the immediate moment as you write, and about what you imagine the future holds for yourself and for the person to whom you are writing. You may decide to keep the letter for a child or for a child not yet born. Or you may decide to mail the letter to the relative to whom it is addressed.

Get the full names of your parents, your grandparents, and your great-grandparents. For all of these ancestors, see if you can determine the year and place of their births, and if they are deceased, the year and place of their deaths. Now interview family members, asking for stories the family has passed down about these ancestors. When you have the genealogical information and a couple stories, write an essay about what you have learned. If you wish, you may include in the essay some of the stories.

Get a blank map of the United States and draw on it the migration route of Grandfather Ames from his birthplace to Gilead. Since Gilead is a fictional town you can choose its location in Iowa, based on what you learn about the narrator's journey into Kansas by horse and on foot and how long that takes. Draw a route the narrator and his father may have taken on their trip into Kansas. Last, locate St. Louis, Missouri, and Lawrence, Kansas, on the map, writing a few words next to each, telling what happens according to the novel in these cities. How does making a map clarify the plot of this novel?

Define miscegenation and do some research on this topic in order to better understand the problem Jack Boughton has and what his options are in the 1950s. Then write an essay explaining the term and the legal issues associated with it. Explain any relevant laws of the 1950s or earlier which might affect Jack's situation. Conclude your essay by explaining what you think might have happened to Jack, his wife, and child.

Look through old letters, journals, or albums your family has. Select some document or photograph of a time the predates your earliest memories and write a story based on the document or photograph.

What Do I Read Next?

Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping* (1980), which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, is a work of remarkable metaphoric richness, full of American literary allusion. The novel is set in a small western town situated on the edge of a lake and tells the story of three generations of women, coping in various ways with the task of going on despite traumatic losses.

Robinson's *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998) is □contrarian in method and spirit,□ as she states in her □Introduction.□ Of the included essays, □McGuffey and the Abolitionists□ and □Puritans and Prigs□ cover topics that surface in *Gilead*.

Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989) follows the lives of seven women living in Brewster Place, a ghetto housing project in a northern U.S. city. The poignancy of these women's lives and their hopes and challenges clearly depict the difficulty that poor African American women face living in poverty and coping with racial and sexual prejudice.

Ursula Hegi's *Sacred Time* (2003) tells the story from three different points of view of an extended Italian family living in the Bronx in the 1950s. The accidental death of one of the children traumatizes parents, aunts and uncles, and cousins, and becomes the shaping event in the lives of that child's generation.

Against the backdrop of the American Civil War, *The Glory Cloak* (2004), by Patricia O'Brien, tells the story of an orphan girl who travels to Concord, Massachusetts, in 1858 to live with her cousin, Louisa May Alcott. Susan Gray goes with the Alcott family to Washington, D.C., to volunteer in helping Union casualties.

Norman Maclean's collection *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (1976), containing two novellas and one short story, tells the story of a young man and his family, set in rural western Montana.

March (2004), by Geraldine Brooks, is a novel which draws from personal journals and letters of Louisa May Alcott's father. Brooks based the main character on the father in *Little Women*. In this novel, a father leaves his family to fight in the Civil War and in the process discovers what he believes.

Letters from an Age of Reason (2001), by Nora Hague, tells a Civil War story of an interracial and cross-class relationship between the rich white daughter of a New York family and the black house servant in a family of French American slave holders.

Further Study

DeCaro, Louis A., *Fire in the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown*, New York University Press, 2005.

To understand the militant abolitionism of Grandfather Ames, readers may enjoy this biography of the great abolitionist John Brown. This study places Brown in his nineteenth-century social and religious context and explains his brand of Puritanism. DeCaro portrays John Brown as a Protestant saint, a man ahead of his time, seeking to fulfill divine providence by acting on his radical faith.

Frost, Karolyn Smardz, *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: The True Story of Two Runaway Slaves Whose Flight to Freedom Changed History*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006.

This book tells the true story of slave couple Lucie and Thornton Blackburn and their 1831 escape from Louisville, Kentucky, to Canada. Efforts were made to have them extradited to the United States, but the Blackburns made it to Toronto where they began the city's first taxi business. Canada's lieutenant governor came to their assistance, and their case set a precedent for those of subsequent fugitive slaves.

Gosse, Edmund, *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments*, Nonsuch Publishing, 2006.

First published in 1907, Edmund Gosse's autobiography is about growing up in the strict Victorian household of his parents who belonged to the Protestant sect called Plymouth Brethren. As a little boy, Gosse was taught the imagination is evil, and instead of reading children's stories, he was expected to read stories about missionaries. As he developed into adulthood, he became interested in the outside world and questioned his father's rigid beliefs. This autobiography is an important portrait of an exceptional Victorian family.

Lubin, Alex, *Romance and Rights: The Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945-1954*, University Press of Mississippi, 2006.

This book studies how interracial sexual relationships were treated in U.S. culture in the ten years following World War II, in the decade leading up to the civil rights movement. Lubin explains that the federal government wanted interracial relationships to be treated as private matters so that the contradictions between a post-war atmosphere of cultural freedom and the realities of Jim Crow policies and anti-miscegenation laws would go unnoticed. Lubin's primary sources include African American literature, NAACP documents, and segregationist protest letters, among other writings.

Stellingwerff, Johan, *Iowa Letters: Dutch Immigrants on the American Frontier*, William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

These nineteenth-century immigrant letters, first published in Dutch, were written by religious dissenters from the Netherlands Reform Church and cover the period from 1840 to 1870. The letters consist of the correspondence between the settlers in Iowa and their family members back home.

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Meaney, Thomas, □In God's Creation,□ in *Commentary*, Vol. 119, No. 6, June 2005, pp. 81-84.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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