

Lila Study Guide

Lila by Marilynne Robinson

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Plot Summary

Marilynne Robinson's "Lila" is the story of a young woman who, abandoned at a home for migrant workers, was kidnapped at a young age and cared for by Doll. Though her life is challenging, Lila finds herself in Gilead where she is befriended and married by Reverend John Ames. As the narrative alternates between the past and present, Lila's experiences as a child are shown as influences on her present through her inability to trust her husband, her constant thoughts of leaving him, and the shame she feels about herself and her life.

As a child, Lila lives in a Midwestern migrant workers home where she is neglected until Doll kidnaps her and flees to the cabin of an old woman where they live for a month before falling in with Doane and Marcelle's crew. Their life is rough and includes few joys while food and other necessities are often lacking. When times get hard, Doll considers returning Lila to her original dwelling, but since she is gone for four days, Doane abandons Lila. Doll retrieves her, but Lila cannot trust anyone ever again. At one point, Doll and Lila live in Tammany IA where Lila goes to school. Doll returns to Lila after killing one of her kin, possibly Lila's father, but she is arrested. Doll escapes, but she is presumed dead.

After Doll's death, Lila seeks help at a woman's house in St. Louis, and this establishment is a brothel where Lila accumulates even more shame. Because she is unattractive, Lila's career in the brothel is short-lived, and she gains employment as a hotel housekeeper for a several years before catching a ride to IA with a young religious woman. She finds an abandoned cabin in the woods where she settles in, and Lila begins working on neighboring farms to collect bus money. When she decides to explore the nearby town, Gilead, one day, she ducks into the church to escape the rain and meets Reverend John Ames.

A timid friendship blossoms between Reverend Ames and Lila who are attracted to one another's loneliness. Lila tends his garden as well as the graves of his first wife and child who died in childbirth. Lila thinks about leaving Gilead, but she is repeatedly drawn back to Reverend Ames and suggests he should marry her one day. Reverend Ames baptizes Lila, and a month later, they are married. Their intimacy is timid and fraught with loneliness as they are both haunted by their pasts. Lila learns about religion and begins to develop her faith, and she also begins learning to trust her husband, though she repeatedly denies being able to trust him. Lila still considers fleeing Gilead in a perverse desire to abandon him before he learns her past and asks her to go.

After Lila learns she is pregnant, she worries about how her past will impact her child, even as she is comforted by the qualities he'll inherit from his father. When Lila goes to the abandoned cabin and tries to care for a runaway boy, her husband is terrified, thinking she is unhappy and plans to leave him. Lila's happiness is tempered by her fear of abandonment, loneliness and distrust, yet after her son is born, Lila finds peace in motherhood. Although Lila considers the possibility of leaving Gilead with Robby after the Reverend's death, she decides against subjecting her husband to the new hurt of

willful abandonment. Lila and the Reverend find comfort in their mutual loneliness and find an uneasy peace.



Section 1: pages 3-8

Summary

After being pulled out from under the table and set outside because of her tears, the child sat on the stoop in the dark and was nearly asleep by the time Doll arrived and began pondering where they could go. Gathering her belongings from inside quickly, Doll carried Lila down the road, resting and keeping each other warm to escape the rain, before seeking shelter at an old woman's cabin. At the cabin, Lila was fed, bathed and dressed.

The old woman chided Doll for kidnapping a child when she had enough troubles of her own, but Doll could not leave Lila behind to die. Doll nursed Lila through her fever, and the old woman wrapped them up together in her quilt as Doll forbade the child to die.

Analysis

The novel opens with the introduction of the protagonist sitting on the stoop in the dark, and this image emphasizes the neglect she suffered before Doll takes her away. Ironically, the child hated Doll who was the only one who took care of her and even gave her a doll once. Lila's concern with her doll, especially after leaving it behind, is indicative of her desire to care for someone.

After Doll and Lila fled, they found kinship in the fact that they were the loneliest woman and child in the world, introducing Lila's loneliness especially, and this theme pervades the novel.

At the old woman's house, the bath Lila received introduces the use of water as a metaphor, and this recurs throughout the novel as a means of attempting to wash away one's sins. In her conversations with the old woman, Doll revealed that the child is sick, but the perpetual changes in tense between the past and present foreshadow Lila's survival.

Discussion Question 1

The first pages repeatedly indicates the characters' loneliness. How are Lila and Doll lonely, both apart and together?

Discussion Question 2

The novel begins with Doll kidnapping Lila. Why does she take her, and how does Lila feel about the situation?



Discussion Question 3

Although Doll keeps her feelings very reserved, she repeatedly shows her love for Lila. How does she demonstrate her affection and devotion? How does Lila reciprocate?

Vocabulary

gunnysacks, chafed, decency, burden, embers, chigger



Section 2: pages 9-16

Summary

During the month that Doll and Lila stayed with the old woman, Doll carried Lila outside to help her with the weeding that earned their keep, and the old woman began calling the child Lila. When the old woman's son returned, there was not enough work for Doll so she and Lila moved on, falling in with Doane and Marcelle's crew.

Although the Reverend helps Lila spell Doane's name, he never asks about her past before she wandered into his church to escape the rain.

Mellie, Doane and Marcelle's daughter, knew everything, and she was the one who told Lila she is an orphan; yet, Lila did not have to answer Mellie's curiosity since Doll tended to her needs. There were many things that Doll and Lila did not discuss over the years, but they joined Doane's people working in the field for eight years before the Crash, though things got bad for them two years earlier when their mule died. Though farmers could not afford help after the Crash, Lila strengthened in the good years because theirs was a fine way to live while times were good. In those days, they were a proud people who looked after what they had.

Analysis

During the month that she and Doll stayed with the old woman, Lila avoided leaving for fear of being abandoned, introducing the motif of abandonment in the novel. The precariousness with which the child was finally named demonstrates the lack of attention she had previously experienced.

When they left the old woman's house, they fell in with Doane and Marcelle, foreshadowing that part of their journey in life.

Returning to the present, Lila considers Doane's distaste for churches in comparison with the beauty she found when she wandered into Reverend Ames's church in Gilead during a baby's baptism. This introduces the theme of religion and also shows the first time that Lila met the Reverend; her interest in him foreshadows their courtship and marriage. The child's second birth by baptism is similar to Lila's second birth when Doll rescued her, to her way of thinking.

From her present, Lila thinks of the hardships she endured in the past, but the vague allusions foreshadow the fact that the novel will expand upon these memories at a future point. Lila's difficult memories serve as a foil for the peace of her current situation.



Discussion Question 1

Describe Lila and Doll's life during the month they spend at the old woman's cabin. Compare and contrast it to their life after leaving.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Lila wander into the Reverend's church? How does it make her feel, and why?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Doll and Lila join Doane's people? Describe their lives during this period.

Vocabulary

wandered, baptized, rickety, morsel, chicory, mutual, minstrel



Section 3: pages 16-26

Summary

When Lila first starts tending the Reverend's garden, she starts small, but it grows once she becomes his wife. Sometimes, she dreams of running away into the woods with their son to have him to herself and to teach him that way of life, but it is just a dream because she knows how sad that would make her husband, and she is fond of the beautiful old man. Still, Lila cannot help her strange thoughts, and she constantly waits for him to change his mind and tell her to leave.

After Reverend Ames and his friend, Reverend Boughton, discuss souls one Saturday evening, Lila begins to worry about Doll's soul, and wanting to avoid Heaven if Doll will not be there, Lila slips off to the river early the next morning to wash the baptism off of her in the river. When she returns home, Lila dons her blue dress and waits for her husband to return so she can tell him there appears to be a child coming.

The Reverend is relieved that Lila has not fled, but he promises to see her off safely if she decides to leave because he wants to take care of his wife. Lila believes she will be safe in Gilead and that her husband will be a good father, though she continues to worry about the fact that he does not know the things she has done in her past. He assures her that he simply wants her by his side. Lila realizes that Reverend Ames must be thinking of his first wife and their baby, though she did not consider it before breaking the news.

Analysis

While considering her desire to return to her past life, Lila's acknowledgement that it is only a dream because it would make the Reverend sad proves her devotion to her husband, though she cannot admit to it yet. Lila doubts the existence of God because Doll never mentioned Him, but she knows her husband would forgive her thoughts because that is what the good Lord would do. Lila's attempts to mimic the other wives reveals her desire to be what her husband needs, again revealing her desire to care for someone, and though she is unaccustomed to his brand of gentleness, she finds him beautiful and is attracted to his loneliness since she shares this trait. Lila's fear that her husband will tell her to leave comes from Doll's lesson that everything ends.

Although Lila first enjoys the idea of the Resurrection since she will be reunited with Doll, learning about the Final Judgment causes her to worry for Doll's soul, and she even tries to wash off her baptism so that they can be reunited after death.

Lila tells her husband that she believes she is pregnant, but she confesses that she is not certain for fear he will suspect her of a lie if there is no baby after all. Her realization that he is thinking of his first wife and child foreshadows an explanation of Reverend Ames's past.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Lila dream about running away from the Reverend, and why is this just a dream? What does it indicate about Lila?

Discussion Question 2

How does Lila react to Reverend Ames and Reverend Boughton's conversation about souls? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Lila and the Reverend's reactions to the possibility of her pregnancy. Compare and contrast Lila and the Reverend's reactions to the possibility of her pregnancy.

Vocabulary

practically, amounted, desperate, divine, fledging, displace, reluctance, sternly, particulars



Section 4: pages 26-68

Summary

Lila does not arrive in Gilead intentionally; she is searching for Sioux City when she comes across an abandoned cabin in the woods, but when weeks of loneliness drive her into town, the rain forces her to seek shelter in the church where she first sees Reverend John Ames. She later seeks him out, and though he tells her about his life, her upbringing prevents her from reciprocating.

Lila acquires work in Gilead and decides to stay since she has nowhere else to go, and after learning about John's first wife and child, she begins tending to their graves. Feeling she owes him a kindness, she also begins cultivating his small garden, yet she shies away from being baptized, though she steals a Bible to learn about Christianity and posing questions to the Reverend in her mind makes her feel less lonely. Thinking about her past, she wonders what Reverend Ames would say about the people she knew in her youth.

As it grows too cold to stay in the cabin, Lila thinks about the only real house she lived in with Doll in Tammany IA when she went to school and learned to read. Since she is too embarrassed to reveal her poverty by sharing her thoughts with the Reverend, she focuses on accumulating the money for a bus ticket to leave town. When Lila sees Reverend Ames while walking in town, she does not speak because there is no point pretending she matters to him, and this brings to mind the time that Doll left her for four days and Doane tried to abandon her at a church in a nearby town, though Doll found her later that evening.

After skipping church the next day, Lila tends to the Reverend's garden, but when it starts raining, he arrives home and invites her inside to wait out the rain, though he is sad that she plans to leave town. He loans Lila a sweater which she plans to steal since it smells like him. When Lila questions if he has been snooping around her cabin, Reverend Ames admits he has been around to pray for her, but she slips off when he decides to make coffee. Ames chases Lila down the street to loan her an umbrella and invite her to return to talk anytime. Thinking how she would like to tell Reverend Ames about when Mellie snuck off to get baptized against Doane's orders, Lila decides she will attend church again and sits down to copy Scriptures before bed.

Analysis

Although Lila winds up in Gilead accidentally, her eagerness to go to church on Sunday emphasizes her interest in Reverend Ames since she has no reason to go and is anxious to talk to him. The Reverend's modesty is revealed by his embarrassment in talking to Lila, and her intelligence is revealed, contrary to her claims of ignorance, when she questions life and existence. Lila refrains from telling about her past out of



habit learned from life with Doll when they had to protect their secret that Lila had been kidnapped.

Although Lila thinks about leaving and saves money for a bus ticket, she delays her departure, claiming she has no where to go; her qualifier that she can go anywhere except St. Louis foreshadows the revelation of her life in that city. Interested in the Reverend's sermons, Lila steals a Bible to study, and she begins tending his garden because she feels she owes him a kindness, revealing her inability to accept anything she perceives as charity. This is also shown in her inability to thank Mrs. Graham for giving her clothes.

Although she considers being baptized, Lila delays the event, showing her hesitation to change. In the days after meeting Reverend Ames, Lila's desire to tell or ask him things reveals her intrigue and foreshadows their relationship. Her pride leads her to seek work as she tries to save money for a bus ticket, yet she is still glad to see the Reverend in town. She tries to dissuade herself from pretending he cares about her because Doll taught her she can only rely on herself and men are untrustworthy.

Lila's memory of Doane leaving her in a town during Doll's absence is another example of the motif of abandonment in the novel, and this largely leads to Lila's self-reliance and distrust of others. Lila's desire to teach Reverend Ames a new kind of sadness by telling him to leave her alone indicates that his first wife did not choose to leave him. During their next conversation, Lila admits that she cannot trust the Reverend, and his understanding of her feelings indicates his respect of her past which is reiterated many times throughout the narrative. The theft of the sweater reveals Lila's feelings for the Reverend and foreshadows their relationship, which is also foreshadowed by the Reverend's visits to the cabin and prayers for Lila which show her feelings are reciprocated. Lila spends her free time copying Scriptures, indicating her desire to fit into Reverend Ames's life.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Lila and the Reverend's first real conversation when he invites her in for coffee. What do their different perspectives indicate about them individually and as a couple?

Discussion Question 2

Shame plays a big role in the characterization of Lila and in the novel overall. Examine and explain the instances of Lila's shame in this section.



Discussion Question 3

Lila won't even admit to herself that she likes the Reverend, though many of her thoughts and actions indicate otherwise. How does Lila subconsciously reveal the feelings she denies?

Vocabulary

tansy, pulpit, diphtheria, adequate, tending, weltering, scurry, kindling, beholden, tolerate, abhorred, void, hostile, shabby, scuffling, unravel, eddy, tottering



Section 5: pages 68-77

Summary

In the morning, Lila thinks about how Doll left her those four days to see if things were better at the old place since times were so hard. For lack of other options, they returned to Doane's crew.

When Lila goes to work for a neighbor in town, Mrs. Graham gives her a hooded raincoat at Reverend Ames' request, making her ashamed of the charity as she saves for a bus ticket. Lila continues tending the garden and the graves, and when Reverend Ames hands her a note one day, it reminds her of the note her teacher in Tammany sent Doll about Lila's potential.

Curious about the note, Lila reads John's regrets at being unable to answer her questions about life, though he assures her that he has considered the deeper things with which religion is concerned, such as the meaning of existence. Lila thinks he has no idea, but existence is the only thing she really knows about. She considers loneliness and how she loved Doane and Marcelle for loving one another. The Reverend's note insists he does not want Lila to think he did not take her questions seriously; his faith teaches that God allows man to go through trials, though God is always present to offer comfort. Though this concept is demanding on his faith, Reverend Ames believes it to be true and thanks Lila for asking the question since the attempt to answer may have taught him something.

Analysis

Doll's love for Lila was shown when she left her for four days to see if Lila could return to her original home; Doll is willing to give up her beloved child when times are hard to ensure that Lila is properly cared for, but this action destroys Lila's trust in Doll.

Lila is again ashamed of charity when Mrs. Graham gives her a raincoat, even though this was done at the Reverend's requests since he worries about Lila. When she receives the Reverend's note, she is relieved that he did not give her money because that would have elicited enough anger and shame to convince her to leave Gilead. Her relief shows her desire to stay. This note is compared to the only other note that Lila has received and leads to another anecdote of her past which reveals her inability to lead a normal childhood because of Doll's crimes.

Lila's thoughts of St. Louis again foreshadow her memories of that time period, but she is happier in Gilead. Lila finds the Reverend's inability to answer her questions ironic since existence is the only thing she knows about, though she is also familiar with loneliness, weariness and the desire for more and can tell that he is also familiar with those feelings. Her fond memories of Doane and Marcelle's love reveal Lila's desire for romantic love of her own and foreshadows her romance with Reverend Ames. The



Reverend's belief that he learns something from his attempt to answer Lila's questions foreshadows the reciprocal nature of their relationship.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Doane abandon Lila during Doll's four-day absence? Why is Doll absent, and how does Lila feel about the whole situation?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the only other note Lila ever received before Reverend Ames write to her.

Discussion Question 3

What does the Reverend say in his letter to Lila, and how does she react? Why?

Vocabulary

skillet, grudge, groped, contrary, inevitable, burnished, envy, dignity, presumptuous



Section 6: pages 77-90

Summary

Lila is glad that the Reverend forgets he is talking to an ignorant woman in his letter to her since she would hate him for remembering, but she decides against writing him back for fear she will shame herself, though he never seems to mind when she does. While working, Lila decides that she will ask Reverend Ames to baptize her, and when he joins her on a walk through town, he agrees because he wishes to repay her for tending his family's graves. Lila suggests he should marry her, and he agrees before they separate.

Embarrassed, Lila skips church the next day, planning to leave Gilead, but the Reverend visits her, bringing his mother's necklace. They discuss the possibility of marriage, but Lila decides she does not want to be a preacher's wife; however, she still wants him to baptize her, so he christens her in the river, causing her to cry.

As Lila rests her head on Reverend Ames' shoulder, she admits that she wants to marry him, but she should not since she cannot trust him. Reverend Ames convinces Lila to move to town so they can keep an eye on one another until Reverend Boughton is able to marry them. Worrying that he does not know about her past, Lila confesses to working in a brothel in St. Louis, but Reverend Ames does not care since her baptism makes her new again.

Analysis

These pages heavily further the novel's themes of shame, religion and charity. Lila is relieved that the Reverend's note seems to indicate he has forgotten that he is addressing an ignorant woman because she would hate him for remembering, again showing her pride and shame. She does not respond to his letter for fear of shaming herself again, even though he never seems to mind and shows no sign that she is crazy, though he should be fully aware by now. Lila's interest in the story of Moses ties into her thoughts of abandonment in addition to reinforcing her belief that no one can be trusted since Moses turned on the Egyptian queen who adopted him.

During her next encounter with Reverend Ames, Lila suggests he marry her, and he agrees, foreshadowing their union, though Lila flees in shame and considers leaving Gilead. Although Lila skips church the next day, the Reverend seeks her out to give her his mother's necklace and discuss their possible marriage, showing his desire to have Lila as a wife. Lila's refusal to be a preacher's wife is obviously related to her thoughts of St. Louis, foreshadowing the nature of her residence there. After allowing the Reverend to baptize her, she finds comfort resting her head on his shoulder, and her admission that she wants to marry him still foreshadows their union. The Reverend's insistence that Doll move to town suggests his attempt to stop her from fleeing, though



he accepts that she cannot trust him and asks her not to hate him. Lila's realization that she cannot avoid marrying him without shocking the sweetness out of him foreshadows their marriage and also reveals her concern for his feelings.

Discussion Question 1

Lila has obvious trust issues. Which Biblical story seems to justify her distrust? How is her distrust evidenced?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the Reverend and Lila's courtship. How do they feel about each other and about their own feelings?

Discussion Question 3

Although Lila ultimately agrees to marry the Reverend, she has many reservations. What are they? How do you think the Reverend would react if he knew?

Vocabulary

ignorant, regret, weariness, incarnation, resurrection, basin, haste, remission, sacrament, repentance, christen



Section 7: pages 90-102

Summary

In the month leading up to Lila's wedding to Reverend Ames, she stays in a hotel in town and receives daily visits from her betrothed who treats her with propriety. Finally, they are wed in Reverend Boughton's parlor and have a reception at their home before being left alone in a clean house that was prepared by the church, leaving Lila with nothing to do. Reverend Ames is saddened and embarrassed by Lila's doubts about their union, but he is happy when she admits that Doll would be glad to know of their marriage.

Lila accompanies her husband to Reverend Boughton's house where the gentlemen's talk about sin and the elect causes her to think of Doll's sins and ponder whether God cares about the reason for a crime. When Lila questions Reverend Ames about what happens to the sinful people who are unaware that they are sinning, he admits to having a problem reconciling God's love with hell; he does not think about hell because it does not help him live how he should, and it is presumptive and sinful to judge people.

Analysis

Although Reverend Ames visits Lila daily, the propriety with which he treats her makes her feel lonely. This furthers the theme of loneliness while showing that loneliness can even pervade intimacy. The Reverend insists on waiting a month before they marry because he wants his constituents to know that he is not being foolish. Their wedding is uneventful, but at home, the Reverend's feelings are injured when Lila doubts the "for better or worse" part of their vows.

Lila is still lonely after marrying Reverend Ames, but she feels worse about it now because her husband is sad and embarrassed over not knowing how to talk to her. Lila imagines how happy Doll would be at her success and can almost enjoy her life with that thought, showing how Lila values Doll's opinions. When the conversation about Hell upsets Lila, Reverend Ames can tell she is bothered and tries to comfort her fears for the people she once knew. The fact that he does not know Doll and the others makes her feel lonelier than ever, and she no longer likes the thought of the Resurrection since the Last Judgment makes her worry about Doll's soul.

Discussion Question 1

What do the Reverend and Lila do in the days leading up to their wedding? How do they feel about one another?



Discussion Question 2

Describe Lila and the Reverend's nuptials. How do each feel afterward? What does Lila say to make Reverend Ames sad?

Discussion Question 3

Talk of Judgment Day causes Lila to fear for Doll and others from her past. How does her husband assuage her fears?

Vocabulary

propriety, theology, embroidered, courtesies, regeneration, lingering, adultery



Section 8: pages 102-112

Summary

When Lila suggests that she is the only person Reverend Ames knows who is going to hell, he is saddened by the thought. Disgusted with the idea of resurrection since Doll's sins will preclude her, Lila goes to the river to wash away her baptism the next morning, and her belief that she is carrying a child causes her to recall Mellie and her finding a woman in labor as children.

Realizing that her husband will be happy to have a living child and will let her stay because of it, Lila returns home. Reverend Ames returns home from church to find Lila waiting for him on the porch and is happy at news of a child, but he admits to being upset when he woke to find her missing, so Lila stays closer to home. Realizing how often her husband prays and worries about her giving birth, Lila wants to reassure him that she will be fine, yet she worries about whether her negative thoughts and emotions will harm the child.

Lila attempts to focus on taking care of herself and her unborn babe, but her thoughts constantly wander to the past, thinking of the time that Doll left for four days and returned to find Lila missing. Eventually, Doane began stealing because he could not keep everyone fed, and the group separated after his arrest. Lila ponders why existence is so hard, worrying about her husband turning from her, especially if there is not a child after all.

Analysis

When the Reverend is disturbed by the notion of Lila going to Hell, she suspects that he may love her and thinks of all the other women he could have loved. This indicates Lila's overwhelming sense of shame and inferiority; even now that she is happy, she does not feel that she deserves happiness. Lila goes to the river one morning, leaving the Reverend to wake to an empty house and aggravating his own fears of abandonment.

Lila's belief that she is pregnant is a good thing because she sees it as a way of ensuring that Reverend Ames will allow her to stay. While this faith in his goodness shows more trust than Lila claims to be capable of feeling, it again shows her own sense of insecurity and her fears of being cast aside. The Reverend's reaction to Lila's pregnancy is predictably favorable, but she worries that acting like his wife will make him fear losing her more, obviously echoing her own fears that his eventual abandonment will hurt worse if she allows herself to develop feelings for him.

Although the Reverend fears he won't be able to accept it if something happens to Lila in childbirth, it is against his faith to question God. Lila wants to assure him that everything will be fine since women have babies all the time, but she is also afraid,



especially since she removed the baptism, indicating her growing faith even as she denies it. Reverend Ames reassures her that she cannot remove the baptism.

Despite her happiness, Lila's thoughts frequently return to the suffering of her past, remembering how ugly and mean Doane turned when times got hard. She recalls separating from the group, pondering why existence is so difficult. She worries about Reverend Ames turning from her if there is no child, and though she tries to end those thoughts, they keep returning. This battle shows Lila's inner turmoil as she tries to reconcile the suffering of her past with the peace of her present.

Discussion Question 1

Lila constantly dismisses the idea that the Reverend loves her. Why? How are the novel's themes incorporated into her disbelief?

Discussion Question 2

Lila and the Reverend both worry about her pregnancy but for different reasons. Compare and contrast their concerns. What causes these concerns?

Discussion Question 3

When left alone, what path does Lila's thoughts follow? What does she fear her thoughts will do?

Vocabulary

elegant, roused, relieved, firmament, foreclosure



Section 9: pages 112-121

Summary

Lila and Reverend Ames often discuss the mystery of existence, and he is eager to learn her thoughts. He admits that he finds it easy to believe some things he can never prove, yet he finds it difficult to believe the truth of Lila's presence in his life. Lila does not understand why he does not see her the way everyone else does and considers telling him everything after the baby is born. She recalls a time when Doll tried to convince her to marry a much older man for security, and she considers if she asked the Reverend to marry her because she thought he would refuse and the disappointment would kill her. As they walk, Lila recalls the teacher at the school in Tammany who helped her catch up on her education, and Lila tells her husband that Doll once wanted her to marry an old man since she could not expect more, but she could not do it because she had other ideas as a young girl.

Feeling lonely, Lila worries again about what her dark emotions do to her child. When they return home, Reverend Ames looks pale as he insists Lila should stay until the baby is born, even as he grants permission for her to leave afterwards if she thinks it best. When Lila admits to stealing his sweater and imagining conversations with him before their marriage, he comforts her tears, assuring her that the speech made his previous pain worth it. Lila is relieved that her husband does not shun her after the bit of truth she told him, and she finds comfort laying in his bed, especially when he settles in next to her.

Analysis

Lila's shame rears its ugly head yet again during a conversation with her husband about existence. When he asks her thoughts, she insists that he should be teaching her because she is ignorant, and though he has never thought of her as being ignorant, he thinks it would be interesting to teach her so that he can learn her thoughts. The Reverend's disbelief that he is with Lila though the proof is solid indicates the happiness he experiences by having her as part of his life, yet Lila's shame urges her to ask him why he does not see her the way others do, though she refrains from asking for fear he will start. No matter how much evidence Lila receives of her husband's love and devotion, her fear of abandonment, her past suffering and her overwhelming loneliness will not allow her to embrace her present joy. She wonders if she suggested marriage because his rejection was the worst thing she could imagine; since she did not expect him to agree, she wonders if it would have been the thing to finally kill her.

Lila tells her husband that she still does not trust him, but more importantly, she insists that he cannot trust her because of the things he does not know about her past. She refuses to share these things until after the baby is born, as though their child were a shield to protect her from the worst thing she could imagine: her husband's rejection.



When Lila tells the Reverend about Doll wanting her to marry an old man, his silence on the walk home perpetuates her loneliness, but his comments at home reveal his fear that Lila is not happy with him. She comforts those fears by telling him about stealing his sweater, an act that shows her interest in him. Their solitude in loneliness is constantly revealed as both spouses truly care about one another, but each of them is so insecure and wrapped in their own loneliness and suffering that they fear reaching out.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lila decide to wait to tell the Reverend about her past until after their baby is born?

Discussion Question 2

Describe what happened between Lila and the first man who wanted to marry her. Compare and contrast this to her courtship with Reverend Ames.

Discussion Question 3

How does the Reverend offer Lila comfort even as she frightens and worries him? Why does Lila persist in thinking of leaving Gilead?

Vocabulary

remark, philosophical, progress, tangible, courting, seize, cicadas



Section 10: pages 121-132

Summary

Feeling her child move for the first time in October, Lila promises to stay in Gilead for a while since it is safe and he'll like it here. Lila spends her days cleaning, while the Reverend worries that she is not taking care of herself properly. Lila also spends her time reading the book of Ezekiel because she is intrigued by the idea of such a desolate and reproached people; she hates people who look down on others because of their appearance like many viewed Doll because of the mark on her face.

One evening, Reverend Ames talks about his family and asks about Doll, and although Lila does not mind him remembering who she is for a minute, she does not want to frighten him too much. As they discuss Ezekiel, Lila feels like her husband is laughing at her, but he insists he is just eager to learn what she will tell him that he has never understood and he finds everything she says surprising and interesting. When Lila asks about Doll's knife, he agrees to return it if she understands he will never laugh at her.

Thinking about a parable, Lila asks why God allows children to be treated so badly, and her husband suggests that people have to suffer to recognize grace, though they both wonder about the children no one finds. Reverend Ames notes that he has had enough suffering to recognize that his life with Lila is grace, and Lila ponders what the first Mrs. Ames would think about this poor girl trying to give the Reverend a baby.

Analysis

When Lila first feels her child move, she begins talking to him, telling him her plans. She is unaccustomed to not being alone, and now she is never alone. She tells him about Gilead and his father's family as she tends the graves. Her care of the graves reveal her consideration of the Reverend's past life just as his prayers for her former companions show his respect of her history. The Reverend also begins to see their child as a human being when he begins moving, noting there are "three of us." Lila pretends that she is only at the Reverend's house to clean, her shame factoring in. The emery board that Mrs. Graham gives her causes Lila to think about the girls in St. Louis making her pretty; this foreshadows the nature of her time in St. Louis.

Lila thinks that it is strange to remember what you've forgotten and easier to forget, recalling how Doll used to say that when she questioned the past. Lila's admission that it all comes back to Doll as the Reverend heroically refrains from questioning her, showing that Doll haunts her the way that the life he didn't get with his first family shadows the Reverend. Alluding to a Biblical parable, Lila ponders why God allows children to be mistreated. Her interest in the topic is obviously related to her past, but her mind is eased when her husband confesses that he prays for Doll. Lila's thoughts of the first Mrs. Ames again shows her feelings of shame and inferiority.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Lila find Ezekiel so interesting? Describe her conversation with her husband about her readings.

Discussion Question 2

Lila wants Doll's knife returned to her. How does she question the Reverend about it, and how does he react?

Discussion Question 3

What does the Reverend believe about suffering and grace? Describe his conversation about the topic in this section.

Vocabulary

crocus, offend, reproach, rebukes, astonishment, intrude, restless, parables, infancy, captivity



Section 11: pages 132-154

Summary

Although Lila talks to her child about the future, she constantly reminds herself not to want things. Her thoughts wander back to when Doll arrived at her door bloody after being gone for a month. Lila nursed her, but when the sheriff arrested her in the morning, Lila lied that she did not know her. Because of Doll's age, the sheriff often cuffed her to a rocking chair on the front porch, but Doll denied knowing Lila when she visited, ultimately escaping and disappearing into the woods.

Wanting to talk to her husband, Lila goes to the church and walks home with him enjoyably. Recalling the money at the cabin, Lila decides to use it to buy a gift for her husband.

In the morning, she walks to the cabin and finds a desperate boy who has assumed ownership of the property by virtue of living there. While they eat, the boy mentions trouble at home down south, but Lila discourages him from talking about it. He offers to return her money, but she tells him to keep it. He admits that he ran away because he thinks he killed his father, but he wishes he had never left and hopes they execute him if he did commit patricide. The boy refuses Lila's offer to stay at the Reverend's house or to use her coat as a blanket, so she leaves, feeling sorry for the child who belongs to no one.

Analysis

Although Lila retreats into solitude more as her belly grows, the Reverend does not question her. He returns her knife which acts as an important symbol in the novel. It is the only thing Doll had to give her since her transient lifestyle meant giving away most of the secondhand items she picked up along the way. Her thoughts of Doll lead her to think that Doll's kidnapping her washed away part of her shame at having no one to care for her.

Lila's thoughts regress to Doll showing up with a bloody knife after killing a man related to Doll. Although people said that Doll could not have lasted long after her escape, no one ever found her, and Lila regrets denying Doll. This shame makes her wish she could talk to Reverend Ames, but it also convinces her that he would not understand. Still, she seeks him out, finding peace in their intimacy. Though Lila cannot always talk to her husband about her feelings, his presence often soothes the worst of her fears and doubts, and she even realizes the foolishness of thinking about Doll when the Reverend is with her now.

Lila does eventually talk to her husband about Doll, admitting that she dreams Doll hides from Jesus. Reverend Ames believes that God is gracious and people are happy in the afterlife because the alternative is too hard to accept. Lila's self-chastisement not



to hope and to see how long she can keep the Reverend shows her desire to stay in Gilead, her fear of abandonment, and her suffering which prevents her from trusting her present happiness. Her desire to return to the shack for her money to buy the Reverend a gift also shows her feelings for him as she no longer intends to use that money for a bus ticket, and it also foreshadows her subsequent adventure.

At the cabin, Lila finds a disheveled young boy and attempts to care for him, thinking that Doll never would have let her look that way which intensifies her need to care for this child who has been cared for even less than Lila herself. Lila attempts to comfort the boy and educate him on the ways of his new world after learning his story. Her inability to accept her settled life is shown when she refers to her home as the Reverend's house, yet while she cannot admit that the house belongs to her as Ames's wife, she feels sorry for the child who belongs to no one.

Discussion Question 1

In these pages, readers finally learn about the last time Lila saw Doll. Describe this encounter. How does this impact Lila's thoughts, feelings and actions?

Discussion Question 2

Lila has the same dream repeatedly. What is the dream, what does it signify, and how does Lila feel about it?

Discussion Question 3

How does Lila react to finding the runaway boy at the cabin, and why? What does this indicate about her maternal instinct and desire to care for others?

Vocabulary

rambunctious, harvesting, lovestruck, unmended, drifting, matted



Section 12: pages 154-166

Summary

Halfway home, Lila returns to the cabin and leaves her coat with the boy, and as she walks home in the cold, she thinks of searching for Doll in the cornfield after she disappeared from jail and wishes she had made the boy come home with her. When she stops at the church to get warm, she realizes the Reverend could borrow a car to retrieve the boy, but he is not in his office or at home, so she crawls into bed to get warm, though she stays cold and worries if her baby feels the cold and worries about being born to a woman who cannot offer comfort.

Lila wakes to her husband's relief to find her at home, and he confesses that he heard she was at the cabin and found the boy in her coat when he searched for her. The boy ran, causing Reverend Ames to fear for his wife's safety. Knowing the boy will not come home with her now, Lila convinces Reverend Ames and Reverend Boughton to take her to the cabin where they leave supplies for the boy who still has not returned. On the way home, Lila knows that both men are thinking about how much trouble she causes.

Analysis

Despite the cold, Lila leaves her coat for the boy to use as a blanket, showing her desire to take care of someone. This is reiterated at the end of this section when she convinces the Reverends to take her back to the cabin with provisions, though she does not encounter the runaway again. Thoughts of Doll in the cornfield haunt her thoughts as she returns to town, leading her to wonder what became of Mellie. When Lila cannot find the Reverend in the church, she dismisses her fear that he is hiding from her because it is ridiculous, and when he is not at home either, she assumes that he is comforting someone on their deathbed. Lila's thoughts reveal that she has grown to trust her husband, despite her many claims to the contrary.

The Reverend is relieved to find Lila at home because he feared for her safety and asks her to take care of herself for his sake. Lila is comforted by his concern to some extent, but she also seems to believe his concern is predominantly for their unborn child. While the men help her take provisions to the cabin, she fears they are angry at her for being so much trouble, and that night, she is scared to touch her husband in bed. Her earlier confidence and trust is quickly replaced by shame and the fear of abandonment. Feeling the baby kicking, Lila thinks he is as strong as he should be, indicating how hard life can be.



Discussion Question 1

In this section, both Lila and the Reverend cannot find one another. Compare and contrast their reactions, fears and doubts. What does this reveal about their relationship?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Lila worry about what their child will inherit from her?

Discussion Question 3

Though the Reverend agrees to help the boy, he seems distant and upset. To what does Lila attribute this, and how does she react?

Vocabulary

shelter, gooseflesh, suckling, drafty, abject, urgent, newel, draped



Section 13: pages 166-227

Summary

After learning that there still has been no sign of the boy the next morning, the Reverend observes that there are people who you know from the moment you meet, while others are strangers after a lifetime. He fears Lila was leaving him, but she assures him she is happy and is not planning to leave with his child. When Lila admits that she saw the boy as a child needing care, Reverend Ames is ecstatic because he does know her after all. He offers to move to another house for a fresh start, but Lila enjoys the house and begins cleaning as winter's approach inhibits visitors.

Knowing that her husband worries about her survival in childbirth, Lila admits she is really his wife since the thought of his grief concerns her, causing her to wonder what happens when someone is no longer herself. Lila recalls how her family hunted for her and Doll, yet Doll protected and hid her. After Doll's arrest, Lila recalls how a shop keeper directed her to St. Louis after seeing the blood on her dress. While Doll sat on the porch at the jail, a group of men were furious she had not been executed as they presented their kinsman in a coffin, but the sheriff simply promised to tell them when the trial would be held. In St. Louis, Lila was called Rose since Doll's name was already taken by another girl.

When Reverend Ames comes home for lunch, he encourages Lila to share her thoughts, but she fears how he will view her if he knows the truth. Her husband admits his fear that a man from her past will come and take her away but is grateful when she says that no man would allow her to bring their child since he could not die from grief if he had to worry about his child. Although Lila assures him of her devotion, the Reverend wants it too much to believe he has her. When he offers to let her redecorate the house, she only asks him to promise never to bring a credenza into their home.

After he leaves, Lila's thoughts turn to the misery of her life in St. Louis. Though Mrs. expected the girls to be ladies, they fought constantly and were crowded into two rooms. After locking Lila's knife in her credenza where she stored all of the girls' valuables, Mrs. tells Lila she is not pretty but should try smiling. Lila grew infatuated with one visitor, Mack, who teased her often, though Missy was his favorite and this caused her to lash out at Lila in jealousy. Since Lila did not earn money like the other girls, she began cleaning the house to earn her keep, but when she learned Missy was pregnant, she began plotting to steal the baby.

Unfortunately, Missy's sister took her away before she gave birth so Lila retrieved her knife and left Mrs.'s house, working at a hotel as a housekeeper for several years until she sees Mack and catches a ride with a religious woman towards Des Moines. From there, she found the cabin, and she tells her child she has been in Gilead longer than expected, promising to tell him about the place and his father if they have to leave. Truthfully, she does not believe Reverend Ames will give her a reason to leave.



Analysis

Although the Reverend is obviously very upset about his relationship, he still takes time to learn about the boy before addressing his personal feelings. This gentle nature soothes some of Lila's own feelings and makes for one of the most emotional conversations of the novel. The Reverend's mention of people you seem to know from first meeting them indicates that this is how he felt about Lila, but now he fears otherwise. Lila confesses the reason she went to the cabin, and the reason for the Reverend's tension is revealed as he admits his own fear of abandonment; he believed that Lila was planning to leave him, and his reaction proves Lila's earlier fear that choosing to leave him would teach him a new kind of pain.

Lila's belief that her child will be happy in Gilead reassures her husband's fears, and he realizes that her maternal instinct factored into her actions with the runaway. Despite her concerns about her child inheriting her darkness, Lila is also comforted by the realization that their child will know the Reverend's comfort. Though Reverend Ames never mentions his first wife, Lila knows that he thinks of her and recalled stories of Reverend Boughton blessing her husband's first child cause Lila to wish she could have blessed the runaway who has no one to care for him. Thinking of how the Biblical Job lost his good life, Lila realizes she has seen that happen to people and is surprised to find so many things she already knew in the Bible.

As time passes, Lila feels like a different person as thoughts of leaving Gilead lessen; when her thoughts turn to past suffering, she stops them to avoid frightening her child, but still, she wonders if times will ever be good enough that she gets over her loneliness. As her baby's life grows, Lila feels the fierceness of motherhood take over and can relate to some of Doll's actions to keep her. She comforts her husband's fears that she will leave and take their child away. Still, she does not understand the idea of sharing thoughts, explaining her loneliness within her marriage, but this is because of her shame; she points out that, if she tells him about her past, the Reverend will always know her secrets, and she does not want him looking at her like that.

Lila has a deep-rooted fear of abandonment which, combined with her shame, convince her that her husband will not love her if he knows all of the secrets of her past life which still haunts her so. Ironically, he has never reacted negatively or judgmentally to anything she has revealed. Her shame leads her to thoughts of St. Louis, and this trip down memory lane fulfills several earlier instances of foreshadowing and also explains a portion of Lila's shame.

After Doll was arrested, Lila went to buy a new dress since hers was covered in blood, but the shopkeeper, misreading the situation, directed her to a lady in St. Louis who helps girls with trouble. This lady, known as Mrs., is a madam running a brothel, and she put Lila to work. Though Lila's memories reveal that she was not a favorite and could not afford to pay her rent often, her later observation that she did not think she could get pregnant reveals that she did, in fact, work at the house, just not very successfully. The shame of these acts and her lack of beauty, combined with the shame of the being



abandoned repeatedly and the poverty that drove her to such actions, fuel Lila's self-loathing. Lila's desire to steal Missy's baby shows her determination to care for someone else, as though she wants to return Doll's kindness by bestowing it upon a child that needs it. Eventually, Lila leaves St. Louis and catches a ride with a religious woman heading to Des Moines. From there, she finds the cabin and wanders into Gilead.

In the present, she tells her unborn child that she has been in this town longer than intended, and though she still considers the possibility of leaving, her faith in her husband assures her that he will not give her a reason to go. Lila spends a lot of time in the church at this point and even reads her husband's sermons, and he values her input and questions which seems to dissipate some of her shame.

The Reverend's loyalty to his first wife has changed since meeting Lila, showing that he has decided to live his current life again instead of just waiting for the next life. Convinced that her life is written all over her, she cannot believe her luck in finding the one man who does not see it, though she also knows that he values her for knowing things can happen that no one has the words to tell you. The couple bond over their past sufferings, yet despite their enduring loneliness, they find a sort of peace and intimacy in their marriage though the past still haunts the present.

Discussion Question 1

The day after Lila finds the runaway, what does her husband say about knowing people? How does he react when Lila explains her feelings about the boy?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Lila realize she has changed since settling in Gilead, and how does she feel about it?

Discussion Question 3

In this section, Lila finally recounts her life in St. Louis. Compare and contrast her life in St. Louis to her life in Gilead.

Vocabulary

hymns, ember, unimaginable, grieving, upright, planks, shivering, lapel, disgrace, captivity, codger, grateful, credenza, oblige, rummaging, respectable, feeble-minded, arithmetic, hankering, scrawny, rouge, revival, stupefied, panhandling, coaxed, tailgate, scheming, presentable



Section 14: pages 227-245

Summary

As Lila and Reverend Ames decorate for Christmas, she recalls how rarely the holiday was celebrated in her past. She knows her husband is anxious for next year when their child will be there, but she also knows how hard it will be if something goes wrong. Both are eager for and worried about their child's birth.

There is snow on the ground when their child arrives in March. Stranded inside by the storm, Lila and Reverend Ames play Gin, but when pain overwhelms Lila, he puts her in his bed and crawls in beside her at her request. She worries about being a mother, but he comforts her fears. Waking from a nightmare, Lila thinks the people in town must wonder how she and her husband spend their time, and thinking of how Doll's knife separates her from other people, she considers hiding it. Thoughts of the past turn to happy thoughts of her child, and when her husband awakes, she fondly says "you". His "who else" is answered with "nobody else in the world" (page 245).

Analysis

The approach of Christmas makes Lila remember that Mrs. closed the brothel on the holiday, but Doll and Doane never mentioned it at all. The Reverend's happiness reminds Lila to suppress her own, urging herself to wait instead of hoping. She imagines the difference if there were no child. Lila obviously fears that something will go wrong during her childbirth, though it's uncertain whether she fears dying herself. Either way, she seems to think that the Reverend would be equally distraught, showing that she still does not believe that he values her. Lila and Reverend Ames comfort each other's fears in their quiet way, and the narrator knows "and here were the two of them together in this warm light, the same dread feeding on the same hope, married" (page 231).

As Lila's labor pains begin, the Reverend is very concerned for his wife, and she begins to question the difference between worrying and praying, realizing that worrying about Doll is similar to praying for her. Accordingly, when the Reverend indicates that everything is a prayer, referring to his life with Lila as an answered prayer, Lila insists that nothing ever came of her attempts at prayer, but she never thought to pray for the best things since the worst things just happen on their own. Lila comforts herself after her nightmare with thoughts of her husband's happiness. The exchange between the couple at the end of this section also shows Lila and the Reverend's happiness, though she still is not quite comfortable with the settled nature of her formerly uprooted life.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Christmas in Gilead. Compare and contrast it to Lila's past holidays.



Discussion Question 2

The Reverend comforts Lila on a snowy day when their child is particularly active. What does he tell her about prayer, and how does he react?

Discussion Question 3

While lying in bed with the Reverend, how do Lila's thoughts reveal contentedness?

Vocabulary

pleated, ferociousness, paganism, exuberance, discard, torment, frisky, trifled, dowry, lingering, nudging, fumbled



Section 15: pages 245-249

Summary

Lila goes into labor during the next snowfall, and Reverend Ames tries to hide his happiness, relief and fear, collecting snow in a bowl for the christening. Days of pain and a night of misery yield a scrawny, red baby. Lila worries while her son is being examined by the doctor, and as soon as he is placed in her arms, Reverend Boughton baptizes him, causing the baby to cry out. While Lila nurses her son, Reverend Boughton's son holds and supports him. Watching and thinking what it would be like to have a son, Reverend Ames looks at his newborn son and laughs happily.

Analysis

As Lila goes into labor, the Reverend is happy and worried all at once. The fact that he collects snow in a bowl for a christening shows that he is still haunted by his past; his first child died before they could christen him. Lila is relieved when her pain yields to the birth of her son, but she worries when she does not hear him crying while the doctor examines him. Reverend Boughton also recalls his friend's earlier tragedy and haphazardly douses the child once he is returned to his mother's arms. The child cries out, assuaging Lila's fears. When Boughton's son supports his father, Reverend Ames's joy is evident as he realizes that he now, finally, has a son and will know the happiness he had given up on.

Discussion Question 1

When Lila finally goes into labor, how does Reverend Ames feel, and why?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Reverend Boughton displeased with Robby's baptism?

Discussion Question 3

Throughout her life, how does Lila demonstrate her desire to care for a child? How does she find the culmination of her life's desires in motherhood? How does Reverend Ames feel about the birth of their child?

Vocabulary

craving, christening, cocoon, psalm, wavering



Section 16: pages 249-261

Summary

Lila's new life begins, and holding her son constantly while he is still small enough, she imagines what she will tell him when he is older. She hopes her husband will live to see their son grow into a fine boy, yet she knows that one day they will bury him beside his first family and wander for a while. Although she recognizes life in Gilead as a blessing, she cannot lean on it because she will have to live once this time ends. Talking to her husband, Lila confesses, "I can't love you as much as I love you. I can't feel as happy as I am" (page 255). Her present life is nothing like her past to which she may need to return someday. Reverend Ames regrets this but understands it. Lila now considers herself a Christian because she allowed her husband to baptize her with their son since she cannot bear the thought of being separated from him, even in Heaven.

Although she does not understand eternity, she believes in it because it makes her happy. Lila decides to keep Doll's knife because she cannot abandon her fear and guilt without grace. She must be brave enough to face life's worst possibilities, yet she finds amazement in peace also. Meanwhile, Reverend Ames sings to their son, but Lila knows he worries about going to Heaven without her and decides that someday, she will tell him what she knows.

Analysis

The description of Lila's motherhood beginning her new life reiterates her lifelong desire to care for someone else and indicates her son's birth as the culmination of her life. Her fears of her son inheriting her darkness seem unfounded as she thinks of telling him about his christening and his father's fear of holding him. Although Lila seems happy, she still reminds herself that "old men are hard to keep" (page 251), indicating her expectation of the Reverend's death, though she hopes he will see his son grow up. She knows that she will bury her husband, and then she and Robby will wander, but when her son asks about his place, she'll keep every promise she made; she will tell him about his father taking him fishing before he was old enough to walk, about the Reverend's gentleness when he preaches, and the comfort she finds in his arms.

Even now, she considers stealing her son, effectively hastening the inevitable end of her happiness before it has a chance to take her unawares. The entirety of Lila's character is summarized in the following statement: "I can't love you as much as I love you. I can't feel as happy as I am" (page 255). No matter how happy Lila is, her past prevents her from truly accepting it. She cannot fully move past the fear, suffering and loneliness; however, she still finds a sort of amazement in the peacefulness of her new life, reaching the closest thing to joy that Lila has ever considered for herself.



Discussion Question 1

After Robby is born, Lila thinks of all the things she wants to tell him when he is older. How does she envision their life, and what does she want to tell him?

Discussion Question 2

In the final section, Lila admits that she cannot be as happy as she is or love the Reverend as much as she does. Explain.

Discussion Question 3

How does Lila feel about her life after her son is born? Examine how Robby's birth embodies a major change in Lila's life emotionally.

Vocabulary

miracle, seraphim, intention, circumstance, questionable, flaunting, descended, assaults, stragglers, eternity, scoundrels, vengeance, frail, blunt, whetting



Characters

Lila Dahl

Lila Dahl is the title character and protagonist of "Lila." She is presumably an orphan who was abandoned at a house for migrant workers in the Midwest where she was neglected until Doll kidnapped her. Though her youth is challenging, Lila finds herself in Gilead where she is befriended and married by Reverend John Ames. They connect because both are lonely souls, but filled with shame of her past, Lila settles uneasily into her new life and often considers leaving Gilead. As the narrative alternates between the past and present, Lila's experiences as a child are shown as influences on her present through her inability to trust her husband, her constant thoughts of leaving him, and the shame she feels about herself and her life.

As a child, Lila lives in a Midwestern migrant workers home where she is neglected until Doll kidnaps her and flees to the cabin of an old woman where they live for a month before falling in with Doane and Marcelle's crew. Their life is rough and includes few joys while food and other necessities are often lacking. When times get hard, Doll considers returning Lila to her original dwelling, but since she is gone for four days, Doane abandons Lila. Doll retrieves her, but Lila cannot trust anyone ever again. At one point, Doll and Lila live in Tammany IA where Lila goes to school. Doll returns to Lila after killing one of her kin, possibly Lila's father, but she is arrested. Doll escapes, but she is presumed dead.

After Doll's death, Lila seeks help at a woman's house in St. Louis, and this establishment is a brothel where Lila accumulates even more shame. Because she is unattractive, Lila's career in the brothel is shortlived, and she gains employment as a hotel housekeeper for a several years before catching a ride to IA with a young religious woman. She finds an abandoned cabin in the woods where she settles in, and Lila begins working on neighboring farms to collect bus money. When she decides to explore the nearby town, Gilead, one day, she ducks into the church to escape the rain and meets Reverend John Ames.

A timid friendship blossoms between Reverend Ames and Lila who are attracted to one another's loneliness. Lila tends his garden as well as the graves of his first wife and child who died in childbirth. Lila thinks about leaving Gilead, but she is repeatedly drawn back to Reverend Ames and suggests he should marry her one day. Reverend Ames baptizes Lila, and a month later, they are married. Their intimacy is timid and fraught with loneliness as they are both haunted by their pasts. Lila learns about religion and begins to develop her faith, and she also begins learning to trust her husband, though she repeatedly denies being able to trust him. Lila still considers fleeing Gilead in a perverse desire to abandon him before he learns her past and asks her to go.

After Lila learns she is pregnant, she worries about how her past will impact her child, even as she is comforted by the qualities he'll inherit from his father. When Lila goes to



the abandoned cabin and tries to care for a runaway boy, her husband is terrified, thinking she is unhappy and plans to leave him. Lila's happiness is tempered by her fear of abandonment, loneliness and distrust, yet after her son is born, Lila finds peace in motherhood. Although Lila considers the possibility of leaving Gilead with Robby after the Reverend's death, she decides against subjecting her husband to the new hurt of willful abandonment. Lila and the Reverend find comfort in their mutual loneliness and find an uneasy peace.

Reverend John Ames

Reverend John Ames is Lila's husband. Although Lila is the main character of this novel, Reverend Ames is the protagonist of the series in which "Lila" belongs. He is a quiet, mild-mannered teacher in Gilead, IA who is infatuated with Lila from the moment she wanders into his church. Reverend Ames married young, but his first wife and their child died in childbirth. He lives a lonely life until he meets Lila, and he is uncomfortable talking to her, constantly fearing that she will leave him. Reverend Ames tries to be a good husband and to answer Lila's theological questions.

The Reverend first meets Lila when she ducks into his church to escape the rain during her first venture into Gilead. A timid friendship blossoms between Reverend Ames and Lila who are attracted to one another's loneliness. Reverend Ames is grateful to Lila for his garden as well as the graves of his first wife and child who died in childbirth. Lila thinks about leaving Gilead, but she is repeatedly drawn back to Reverend Ames and suggests he should marry her one day. Reverend Ames baptizes Lila, and a month later, they are married. Their intimacy is timid and fraught with loneliness as they are both haunted by their pasts. He teaches her about religion and encourages her faith, earning her trust slowly, though she repeatedly denies being able to trust him.

When Lila goes to the abandoned cabin and tries to care for a runaway boy, Reverend Ames is terrified, thinking she is unhappy and plans to leave him. He is overjoyed at news of her pregnancy and insists she take care of herself for his sake. The Reverend worries about her throughout her pregnancy, obviously fearing that his past will be repeated, yet he offers her comfort as the suffering of her past haunts her present happiness. The Reverend agrees with Lila's assessment that she cannot be as happy as she is or love him as much as she does. The Reverend is amazed by his infant son and takes Robby fishing before he can even walk.

Doll

Doll is the migrant worker who rescues Lila from the neglectful house of her youth, caring for the child and offering comfort. Doll's past is dark, and she refuses to answer Lila's questions about it. She hides most of her feelings and thoughts from others, but she is more open with Lila, though Doll still remains secretive. Doll leaves Lila for four days when time gets hard to see if things are better at the old place, but she returns and later kills a man, possibly Lila's father, who comes searching for the child. She gives Lila



the knife she used which Lila hides and keeps with it through her time at St. Louis and in Gilead. Doll is arrested, but she is treated gently because of her age and eventually escapes into the cornfields during a snowstorm. Although Doll is presumed dead, she is never found. Lila often thinks of Doll, and her present is heavily influenced by her past experiences and lessons with her adoptive mother. Reverend Ames often prays for Doll, showing his respect for his wife's past.

Doane and Marcelle

Doane and Marcelle lead a crew of migrant workers with whom Doll and Lila fall in after leaving the old woman's cabin. Many of Lila's memories include these two and members of their crew, including their daughter Mellie. When times get hard, Doane tries to abandon Lila at a church during Doll's four-day absence, but Doll retrieves her child. After meeting and marrying Reverend Ames, Lila often worries for the souls of people from her past, and she prays for Doane, Marcelle and the rest.

Mellie

Mellie is Doane and Marcelle's daughter who Lila plays with as a child. Fearless and free-spirited, Mellie constantly seeks new adventures.

Reverend Boughton

As Reverend Ames's best friend, Reverend Boughton spends a lot of time with John and Lila. He officiates at their wedding and baptizes their son, Robby, his godson.

Mrs. Graham

Mrs. Graham is a friendly woman in Gilead who offers Lila work shortly after her arrival in town. She gives Lila clothes, a raincoat, a cookbook and an emery board. Her husband gives Lila away at her wedding to Reverend Ames.

Runaway Boy

Lila finds a runaway boy at the abandoned cabin when she returns for her money. He fled home after fighting with his father who he believes he has killed. Lila comforts and tends to the child, but her absence causes her husband concern, especially when he finds the boy with Lila's coat which she loaned him to use as a blanket. Although Lila convinced Reverends Ames and Boughton to take the boy provisions, they do not see him again, causing Lila's concern for the poor child who has no one to care about him.



Mrs.

Mrs. is the title of the madam at the brothel where Lila resides in St. Louis. She is not particularly pleasant.

Missy

Missy is a prostitute in St. Louis who lives in the same house as Lila. As Mack's favorite, she is jealous when he flirts with Lila. When Lila learns that Missy is pregnant, she plots to steal the child, but Missy's sister retrieves Missy before she gives birth.

Mack

Mack is a "gentleman" who calls at Mrs.'s house in St. Louis. Missy is his favorite, but he teases Lila since she has a crush on him. Lila fantasizes about stealing his and Missy's baby, but when that becomes impossible, she gains employment as a hotel housekeeper until a chance glimpse of Mack sends her fleeing from St. Louis.

Robby

Robby is Lila's son by Reverend Ames with whom she is pregnant through most of the narrative. Lila talks to her son before his birth, telling him about his future life. Robby's birth represents the culmination of life for Lila through motherhood and the opportunity to take care of someone.



Symbols and Symbolism

Graves

Lila spends a lot of time in the graveyard where she tends the graves of the Reverend's family, including his first wife and child who died in childbirth. This symbolizes Lila's respect of her husband's past which is reciprocated by his prayers for Doll and others from Lila's past.

Shawl

At the old woman's cabin, Doll uses a shawl to cover Lila, and this object represents Doll's love and the comfort she offers. Doane burns it in his cruelty, an action that Lila resents.

Necklace

After Lila suggests marriage, the Reverend gives her his mother's necklace, insisting she keep it even if she decides against marriage. This piece of jewelry represents Lila's imminent romance and the Reverend's desire to care for his wife. It also foreshadows the good life she will have in the future with Reverend Ames.

Reverend's Sweater

During one of her first conversations with the Reverend, Lila steals his sweater and uses it as a pillow, gaining comfort from his smell. This desire for a memento demonstrates Lila's interest in Reverend Ames.

Doll's Knife

Doll used her knife to kill a man, possibly Lila's father, but it is all that Doll left Lila, so Lila always keeps it with her. Doll's knife represents Lila's harsh past which includes Lila's need to protect herself.

Credenza

In St. Louis, Mrs. had a credenza where she stored the girls' valuables, including Doll's knife. Lila asks her husband never to bring a credenza into the house because it reminds her of that time and the shame associated with it.



Bowl of Snow

While Lila is in labor, the Reverend collects a bowl of snow for it to melt. He plans to use it to baptize his child. This preparedness indicates his fear that this child will die after birth like his first child.

Reverend Ames's House

Although Lila moves into her husband's house after their wedding, she finds it easier to pretend she is there to clean. This symbolizes her discomfort with an anchored life.

Reverend Ames's Sunday Clothes

Reverend Ames once tells Lila that his Sunday clothes help him control his anger, so when he dons them on the Thursday following Lila's encounter with the runaway boy, it demonstrates his highly emotional state.

Lila's Notebook

Lila transcribes Biblical verses into a notebook, showing her desire to learn and combat her shame of ignorance.

Reverend Ames's Letter to Lila

The letter that Reverend Ames writes to Lila is the second note she has ever received. His attempt to answer her questions about existence demonstrates his desire to talk to her, and the fact that he seems to forget he is talking to an ignorant woman pleases Lila since she would hate him for increasing her shame of her ignorance.



Settings

Gilead

Gilead is the main setting. It is an old-fashioned Midwestern town in Iowa where life is centered around the church. Gilead represents Lila's peace and happiness, despite her inability to fully forget her loneliness.

Abandoned Cabin

The abandoned cabin near Gilead is where Lila lives before her engagement to Reverend Ames. She finds the solitude peaceful and struggles with adjusting to the domesticated life of a married woman.

St. Louis

Lila works in a brothel in St. Louis before coming to Gilead, and the shame of her past life leads to much of the awkwardness between her and her husband.

Tammany, IA

At one time, Lila and Doll lived in a house in Tammany, IA where Lila attended schools. This domestic scene represented the life that Doll wanted for her stolen child, yet her crimes forced them to live an unsettled life filled with distrust and fear.

Old Place

The "old place" is the migrant worker house in the Midwest where Lila remembers sitting on the stoop before Doll kidnapped her. Doll was the only one who had ever cared for Lila, and the fact that she is abandoned and neglected from such a young age reinforces several of the novel's dominant themes.



Themes and Motifs

The Past's Influence on the Present

In "Lila," the past invades the present with the narrator alternating between two time periods constantly and seamlessly. Weaving the past and present into one narrative, the author demonstrates how the past informs the present which is shaped by the past. The story begins in the past with Lila as a lonely child rescued by Doll, and it progresses until they join with Doane's people before jumping to the present. This introduction demonstrates that Lila has known loneliness from a very young, vulnerable age, and this feeling pervades both her past and her present.

The past's influence on the present is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that Lila's brutal past makes it difficult for her to accept love and happiness. Lila's past delivers her to Gilead where she meets and ultimately marries Reverend Ames. From the first time she sees him, Lila is drawn to the Reverend, noting he is an attractive old man, yet she battles her desire because her past has taught her that people are not trustworthy. Although they could not be more different when they first meet, Lila and Reverend Ames are drawn to one another because of their mutual pain. Lila struggles to reconcile the difficulty of her past with the gentleness of her new life with the Reverend, but her husband also finds it challenging to embrace the joy that is their union. Both struggle with the disjuncture of their old and new lives.

Lila's past also torments her in more obvious ways. Her abhorrence of charity is related to how she was treated when she was younger and the disdain that accompanies charity. Because Doll and Lila had to blend in to prevent Doll from being arrested for kidnapping the child, Lila studiously avoids attention, making her uncomfortable when she is the object of it. Lila frequently imagines she can see Doll, and the memories recounted in the book demonstrate that Lila is haunted by her past in general and by Doll more particularly. Doll's lessons, combined with Lila's experiences, make her fearful of confiding too much in her husband.

One key example of this is Lila's fear and hesitation to talk to Reverend Ames about her life in St. Louis because she fears how he will see her; eventually, she shares her dark secret, but the Reverend claims it does not matter because she was made new when he baptized her. Likewise, the Reverend is haunted by the life he did not get to have with his first wife and child; a major component of their marital bond is the respect that they show for one another's pasts with Lila tending the graves of her husband's first family, while he prays for the people with whom she spent her past.

The lessons learned in her past also prevent Lila from being able to trust her husband or anyone else; however, the supposed present is very flexible with Lila reflecting on recent past events as well as they are interwoven in her current present, showing the ways each moment influences the next. These flashbacks provide evidence that the past's influence is relative as Reverend Ames's steady character eventually breaks



down some of Lila's barriers, and while she cannot quite trust everything, her feelings begin to soften.

From the first mention of her pregnancy, Lila considers returning to her past life because she fears loneliness and abandonment and seeks to hasten their end before they arrive unbidden. Likewise, the Reverend's reactions to their news is influenced by his past, fearing that Lila will abandon him as his first wife did. After the birth of Lila's son, she finally discovers peace. While the present cannot eliminate the pain of the past, the past cannot steal the present's joy completely either.

Shame

Shame is Lila's strongest emotion in this narrative. Lila feels shame because of many things, including her poverty, ignorance, life choices and lack of beauty. Because of the heavily filtered third-person point of view that Marilynne Robinson utilizes, the story is primarily seen through Lila's eyes, allowing the reader to recognize how Lila's shame causes her to be an uprooted woman who does not find comfort in a settled life. Her shame begins in her childhood when Lila is ashamed that she has no one to care about her, and throughout her life with Doll, there are many times that she feels ashamed for being poor, unsettled and uneducated. Lila feels ashamed when Mellie identifies her as an orphan, forcing her to accept yet again that no one cared about her. She is embarrassed at the school in Tammany when she cannot answer the teacher's questions, causing her to skip recess to study. Lila also feels immense shame whenever she thinks about the time she spent working at a brothel in St. Louis, even though she was not attractive enough to earn sufficient wages which is another source of shame for her.

Shame follows Lila into Gilead. Although Lila does not mind working, she is ashamed when Mrs. Graham gives her a hooded raincoat and clothes, feeling like she is a charity case. Her past influences this feeling as she recalls the disdain bestowed upon her as a child whenever she was the recipient of charity. She feels shame when accepting things from others unless she earns them, yet she retains a dignity and caring for others, shown as she works a second day for a farmer she feels overpaid her, refuses to accept anything without working for it, and tends to the young boy in the cabin. Lila originally begins tending the Reverend's garden and his family's graves because she feels that she owes him a kindness for the few kind words he spoke to her. In the cabin, Lila is ashamed of her poverty as it grows cold, pondering how she can save for a bus ticket before the Reverend extends more charity in her direction.

Lila avoids Reverend Ames because she believes there is no point in pretending she matters to him, but they still run into each other. Lila is relieved that the Reverend's note to her does not treat her like an ignorant woman because that would have elicited enough shame for her to finally leave Gilead, but she still does not respond to his letter for fear that she will further shame herself; her thought that he never seems to mind indicates that she feels like she shames herself during each encounter with him (and probably others). Still, Reverend Ames is embarrassed when Lila questions him about



sneaking around her cabin at night, blushing as he admits that he comes to pray for her and make sure she's still there. Lila's shame of her ignorance and social status, combined with past lessons to avoid attention, prevent Lila from being baptized in the church. The use of water as a metaphor to wash away sins, or perhaps not, serves to reinforce the theme of shame in "Lila."

Although Lila boldly suggests marriage to Reverend Ames, she immediately flees in shame and later admits to herself that she may have taken the risk with the intent of his rejection being shameful enough to kill her. After their marriage, the Reverend is embarrassed and saddened by Lila's doubts about their marriage, causing more shame for her as she regrets eliciting those emotions in her husband. Lila is embarrassed when Reverend Ames questions her about her beliefs on existence, insisting that he teach her because she is ashamed of her ignorance. Lila demonstrates her shame throughout her marriage in her thoughts of the other women her husband could have married and her preference to pretend she is simply cleaning his house, instead of living with her husband. Over time, the Reverend's continued interest in and praise of Lila leads to a slight diminishing of her shame, though it never seems to go away conclusively.

Loneliness

Loneliness plays a vital role in "Lila," driving the characters' actions and showing itself as a more personal kind of suffering. The novel is the story of a homeless, lonely girl, and the use of a third-person point of view allows the reader to see Lila's life through her eyes. Lila refers to herself as the loneliest girl in the world, and she is embraced by Doll, the loneliest woman in the world. Even before Doll rescues her, Lila is lonely and neglected, yet her loneliness is increased as Doll's crime prevents them from being able to trust anyone and necessitates keeping secrets. Although they spend significant amounts of time together, Lila and Doll are both very secretive and isolated. Lila's questions often go unanswered, and Doll keeps them moving around the country constantly.

Lila refers to the beginning of their time with Doane as the good years, but when things get hard, Doane tries to abandon Lila in front of a church. Lila's loneliness is unbearable since this prevents her from being able to trust even Doll who left her alone to be abandoned in the first place. After leaving Doane's people, Lila and Doll live in a house in Tammany, IA for a while where Lila begins catching up on her education; unfortunately, her nomadic lifestyle has left her behind other students who mock and isolate her. Lila's loneliness increases after Doll's presumed death and then at the brothel in St. Louis.

Throughout her entire life, Lila is different from those surrounding her. She is usually poorer and less educated than those around her, and this causes many insecurities and a tendency to withdraw into herself. When she first arrives near Gilead, she stays in an abandoned cabin until her loneliness drives her into Gilead where she meets Reverend Ames. In Gilead, the narrative turns to the intersection of two people's loneliness as Lila meets Reverend Ames who has also lived a lonely life. Now an old man, he married



young and buried his first wife and their child. Lila and the Reverend continuously seek each other out, searching for an escape from their separate, yet mutual, loneliness. It seems likely that Lila's inability to leave Gilead truly reflects a desire to stay inspired by a decrease in her loneliness when she is near Reverend Ames.

Lila's overwhelming loneliness prevents her from feeling the joy of the present fully. Even after Lila and Reverend Ames marry, Lila is still lonely, but she feels worse about it now since it upsets her husband. They are happily surprised to find each other and stunned that life still holds love for her, but they recognize each other's pain. Unfortunately, the past influences their present, and their intimacy is a mixture of hope and tenderness along with resistance, awkwardness and doubt as they struggle to learn how to communicate with one another. Since loneliness as a motif is linked to the theme of abandonment, it makes sense that the Reverend's fear of Lila leaving is caused by his own loneliness, stemming from his fear of abandonment.

Ultimately, Lila begins feeling less lonely after learning she is pregnant. She recognizes that she is never alone now, though she is accustomed to being alone. From Robby's first movement, Lila begins talking to him, telling him of her past and imagining various versions of their future. She constantly counts the baby as a third person when she and her husband are together, and it appears that the birth of their child may help both of them thwart their lonely existences.

Abandonment and Rescue

This novel begins with a lonely child, abandoned at a home for migrant workers, who Doll rescues from neglect. Lila leaves her doll at the house but fears returning for it lest Doll leave her behind. Years later, Doll leaves Lila for four years, and while she is gone, Doane attempts to leave Lila at a church because times are hard. The many times she is abandoned is also a source of shame for Lila. Although Doll retrieves her, Lila is unable to trust her surrogate mother or anyone else from that point. Lila's interest in the story of Moses ties into her thoughts of abandonment in addition to reinforcing her belief that no one can be trusted since Moses turned on the Egyptian queen who adopted him.

Lila feels guilty for denying she knew Doll after her arrest, feeling that she has abandoned her. Although Doll ultimately abandons Lila only when she goes to jail and is presumed dead after she escapes, Lila maintains loyalty to Doll, washing her baptism away in the river because she feels guilty abandoning her surrogate mother. Lila seeks a similar bond with the runaway boy at the cabin, but he also abandons her when he flees Reverend Ames and Reverend Boughton. Lila is also forced to abandon her kidnapping scheme in St. Louis when Missy's sister takes her away.

The theme of abandonment and rescue is linked closely with the motif of loneliness in "Lila." Lila's loneliness is caused by the many times she has been abandoned, while Reverend Ames is lonely because his first wife died, abandoning him to a life without her. Lila's thoughts of abandoning him cause her shame, but her past experiences lead



to her present fears, though she feels shame each time she is abandoned. When Reverend Ames thinks Lila has left, he promises to see her to the train if she decides to go.

Like Lila, Reverend Ames has experience with being abandoned, though his first wife and child did not choose to abandon him; they died. Lila considers this when she plans to leave Gilead, noting that leaving him for teach him a new type of pain. She does not trust him not to discard her or herself not to abandon him as she is driven by a perverse urge to hasten the end of their relationship before it ends unexpectedly. While Lila suggests marriage to Reverend Ames, she later acknowledges that she expects to be cast aside. Her past prevents Lila from being able to settle into her new, anchored life, but motherhood serves as the culmination of life for Lila, allowing her to thwart her fear of abandonment because she has Robby and will never abandon him.

Religion

Like many novels, “Lila” incorporates the theme of religion, yet Marilynne Robinson writes about faith, theology and Christian ministers without demanding her reader subscribe to any specific religion. Instead, she simply asks reader to think deeply about existence. Lila and Reverend Ames have many conversations about existence and its meaning. When Lila first arrives in Gilead, Reverend Ames is a lonely man who has given up on this world and committed himself to the next, and their first encounter takes place in his church when Lila wanders in to escape the rain. Throughout her childhood with Doll and Doane’s crew, Lila has known nothing of religion; in fact, she was warned against churches because Doane claimed preachers just want money and he also forbid his children to be baptized.

Baptism plays a major role in developing the theme of religion in “Lila” also, with water acting a governing metaphor that will or will not wash away one’s sins. Lila asks the Reverend to baptize her, backing out at the thought of having so many people watch her but agreeing to let him baptize her in the river privately. Later, she tries to wash the baptism away because she fears never seeing Doll again because of the Last Judgment. Reverend Ames promises Lila that she cannot remove the baptism, and she continues studying the Bible and conversing with her husband about what she learns. Lila takes particular interest in passages about abandonment, loneliness and lives being destroyed, noting that she knows about these things.

When she was a child, Doane taught Lila that churches were just after their money, but this idea contrasts sharply with her image of the beauty of the baby’s baptism in the Reverend’s church. Lila recalls Mellie sneaking off to be baptized against Doane’s wishes. At first, Lila doubts the existence of God because Doll never mentioned him, yet she steals a Bible from the Reverend’s church to learn about Christianity. The Reverend prays for Lila from their first encounter, and his prayers continue for the remainder of the book. Lila studies the Bible to learn about her husband’s beliefs, yet she dreams of Doll hiding from Jesus.



The Reverend insists he has considered the deeper things with which religion is associated, such as existence. He believes God allows suffering, though it is demanding on his faith. Still, he believes that God is always available to offer comfort. The Reverend is unworried about Lila's past in St. Louis because her baptism makes her new again. Later, Lila wonders if God cares about the reason for a sin and what happens to sinful people who don't know they are sinning; the Reverend responds that it is wrong and presumptive to assume people are going to Hell. The Reverend fears he will be unable to accept it if Lila and their child die, though it goes against his faith to question God. He responds by christening his newborn son immediately.



Styles

Point of View

Marilynne Robinson's "Lila" is written using a limited third-person point of view. The narrator's perspective is heavily filtered, focusing almost exclusively on Lila's thoughts and emotions, and this allows for a more detailed exploration of the very personal kinds of pain and suffering that Lila experiences. Because Lila's primary emotions are loneliness, shame and a fear of abandonment, the novel's themes center around these feelings. The novel begins with Lila as a lonely, abandoned child and progresses to her adulthood in a highly disjointed chronology that incorporates the past and present simultaneously. Even once Lila is happily married to Reverend Ames, her brutal past makes it difficult for her to accept happiness and love.

As an uprooted woman from childhood, Lila finds little comfort in the settled life of a preacher's wife, primarily because her distrustful nature leads her to fear its end. Constantly considering the possibility of leaving Gilead, Lila is driven by the fear of being abandoned to consider ending her own happiness before it can end unexpectedly. The novel's point of view allows the reader to view the protagonist from within her own mind as she struggles to reconcile the hardships of her past with the gentle Christian worldview of her husband. She does not trust Reverend Ames not to abandon her or herself not to leave him. Lila's predominant emotion is shame, expressing shame of her poverty, lack of beauty, ignorance and life choices at various points in the narrative. The influence of Lila's past on her present is best revealed when she tells her husband, "I can't love you as much as I love you. I can't feel as happy as I am" (page 255); this simple confession embodies Lila's view on life - all good things are temporary, and relying on the good things in life will only make future pains feel more poignant.

Language and Meaning

The language utilized in "Lila" is fraught with emotions and religious innuendo. Lila's feelings of shame and loneliness pervade the text, emphasizing that love does not cure her loneliness because intimacy cannot intrude upon solitude without causing more pain and suffering. The narrator also explores the Reverend's solitude, showing that both characters are haunted by their respective pasts and are stunned to find that life still holds love and hope for them. Shame of her past leads Lila to be very distrustful, and even her happiness with her husband is plagued by fears of its dissolution and a perverse urge to hasten its end.

The intimacy between the couple is a mixture of hope and tenderness, tempered with resistance, awkwardness and doubt. The language used explores a variety of contradictions, including loneliness within intimacy and joy beside sorrow. Although Lila and Reverend Ames are both lonely and frightened of abandonment, they are also very different. Lila is unaccustomed to a settled life, while her husband had given up on this



life in favor of the next. The Reverend's religious speeches offer a sort of spiritual redemption, yet the novel explores religion and Christianity without demanding the reader subscribe to any specific orthodoxy: instead, the reader is simply asked to consider the meaning of existence.

Structure

Marilynne Robinson's novel is not divided into chapters or sections with the only separation being an additional line break between major scenes. It is set primarily in Gilead, IA and other parts of the Midwest in the 1920s and is centered around a group of migrant workers. The novel is not chronological as the past and present are intertwined in such a way that the past informs the present and the present cannot be separated from the past. Lila's past, as a child with Doll and later in a brothel in St. Louis, leads to her present which is spent in Gilead as Reverend's Ames's wife. His past haunts him with thoughts of the life he did not have with his first wife and child.

Reverend Ames and Lila's courtship and marriage shows the intersection of two people's loneliness as they recognize each other's pain. A key component of their bond is their respect for each other's past; Lila tends the graves of the Reverend's first family, while he prays for the souls of those she knew in her past. Both struggle with the disjuncture of the past and present, finding that while the past does not hollow the present, the present cannot negate the pain of the past. Though neither of them can truly embrace their present joy for fear that it will end, both Lila and Reverend Ames find peace and happiness with one another.



Quotes

Doll may have been the loneliest woman in the world, and she was the loneliest child, and there they were, the two of them together, keeping each other warm in the rain.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote describes the early bond between Lila and Doll, and it also highlights Lila's loneliness, allowing it to be compared to Reverend Ames's loneliness.

I keep her by me.

-- Doll (Chapter 24 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote demonstrates Doll's devotion to Lila, as well as her desire to care for her adoptive daughter. This is one of the only examples of tenderness that Doll shows.

Lila, I'm glad to know you aren't planning to leave. But if you ever change your mind, I want you to leave by daylight. I want you to have a train ticket in your hand that will take you right where you want to go, and I want you to take your ring and anything else I have given you. You might want to sell it. That would be all right. It's yours, not mine. It doesn't belong here - I mean it wouldn't - You're my wife. I want to take care of you, even if that means someday seeing you to the train.

-- Reverend Ames (Chapter 30 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the Reverend's love and desire for Lila as he offers to tend to her needs as his wife, even if she decides to leave him.

It is a story, isn't it? I've never really thought of it that way. And I suppose the next time I tell it, it will be a better story. Maybe a little less true. I might not tell it again. I hope I won't. You're right not to talk. It's a sort of higher honesty, I think. Once you start talking, there's no telling what you'll say.

-- Reverend Ames (Chapter 4 paragraph 20)

Importance: Here, Reverend Ames recognizes humanity's tendency toward deceit and praises Lila's silence.

Somebody like me might marry somebody like you just because you got a good house and winter's coming. Just because she's tired of the damn loneliness. Somebody like you got no reason at all to marry somebody like me.

-- Lila (Chapter 6 paragraph 49)

Importance: The attempt to provide an excuse for the Reverend to decide against marrying her demonstrates Lila's loneliness, shame and fear of abandonment.

Thinking about hell doesn't help me live the way I should. I believe this is true for most people. And thinking that other people might go to hell just feels evil to me, like a very



grave sin. So I don't want to encourage anyone else to think that way... You can't see the world the way you ought to if you let yourself do that. Any judgment of the kind is a great presumption. And presumption is a very grave sin.

-- Reverend Ames (Chapter 7 paragraph 53)

Importance: Here, Reverend Ames expresses his disapproval of humans judging others, and this offers Lila hope for the souls of the people from her past.

You know, there are things I believe, things I could never prove, and I believe them all day, every day. It seems to me that my mind would stop dead without them. And here, when I have tangible proof, when I'm walking along this road I've known all my life, every stone and stump where it has always been, I can't quite believe it. That I'm here with you.

-- Reverend Ames (Chapter 9 paragraph 17)

Importance: In this quote, the Reverend reveals his own fears and doubts through his inability to believe his happiness at being with Lila.

I know you have things to tell me, maybe hundreds of things, that I would never have known. Things I would never have understood. Maybe you don't realize how important it is to me - not to be - well, a fool, I suppose. I've struggled with that my whole life. I know it's what I am and what I will be, but when I see some way to understand-

-- Reverend Ames (Chapter 10 paragraph 32)

Importance: Here, the Reverend recognizes the diversity of his and Lila's knowledge and experiences, showing he values her despite the many things in her past that causes her shame.

If the Lord is more gracious than any of us can begin to imagine, and I'm sure He is, then your Doll and a whole lot of people are safe, and warm, and very happy. And probably a little bit surprised. If there is no Lord, then things are just the way they look to us. Which is really much harder to accept. I mean, it doesn't feel right. There has to be more to it all, I believe.

-- Reverend Ames (Chapter 11 paragraph 46)

Importance: This quote reveals the Reverend's faith in God's grace, and his faith gives Lila hopes for the souls of friends from her past.

What happens when somebody isn't herself anymore? I seem to be getting used to things I never even knew about just a few months ago. Not wondering what in the world I'm going to do next, for one thing. Maybe it'll be something the old man liked about me that will be gone sometime, and I won't even know what it was. She found herself thinking she might stay around anyway. She thought she'd always like the feel of him, she'd probably always like to creep into bed inside him. He didn't seem to mind it.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 38)



Importance: Here, Lila's realization that her feelings for her husband are changing who she is as a person foreshadows the peace and amazement she finds in motherhood.

And her life was just written all over her, she knew it without looking, because that's how it was with all the women she used to know. And somehow she found her way to the one man on earth who didn't see it.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 201)

Importance: This demonstrates Lila's shame around people as well as her husband's inability to view her as others do which is a major component of their bond.

Here we are. It's as if we've floated out to sea on an iceberg. The two of us all on our own." (Reverend Ames) "The three of us." (Lila)

-- Lila & Reverend Ames (Chapter 14 paragraph 34 & 36)

Importance: These quotes highlight the bond between Lila and her husband, showing their acceptance of their life together and their mutual happiness over their unborn child.

The best things that happen I'd never have thought to pray for. In a million years. The worst things just come like the weather. You do what you can.

-- Lila (Chapter 14 paragraph 55)

Importance: This quote reveals how Lila's present happiness has exceeded all of her expectations. Still, she cannot fully release her sorrow, even as she begins to hope for the future.

I guess there's something the matter with me, old man. I can't love you as much as I love you. I can't feel as happy as I am.

-- Lila (Chapter 16 paragraph 13)

Importance: Here, Lila revealed how her tainted past inhibits her from accepting her present happiness.

That's how it is. Lila had borne a child into a world where a wind could rise that would take him from her arms as if there were no strength in them at all. Pity us, yes, but we are brave, she thought, and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself in us. That peace could only be amazement, too.

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph 47)

Importance: Here, Lila finds peace and amazement in her life after her son is born, showing how motherhood represents the culmination of everything good in life for which she has dared to hope.