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## Protected values and the meaning of life in Marilynne Robinson's novel

### *Gilead*

Mária Hricková

Mária Hricková works as a lecturer at the Department of English and American Studies, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia. She teaches various literature courses, including Introduction to the Study of Literature, Children's Literature and Romanticism. Her research focuses mainly on the study of literature, particularly on aspects of literary interpretation and interdisciplinary studies in the humanities.

#### Abstract

*The paper examines the protected values in Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize winning novel Gilead (2004). The aim of the study is to show the significance of three major values, namely faith, family and education. It also attempts to suggest how complexly these values interrelate and eventually represent the central tenets of the life worth living.*

#### Introduction

Aaron Milavec in his paper on the early Christian text the *Didache* writes: "Any community that cannot artfully and effectively pass on its cherished way of life as a program for divine wisdom and graced existence cannot long endure. Any way of life that cannot be clearly specified, exhibited, and differentiated from the alternative modes operative within the surrounding culture is doomed to growing insignificance and to gradual assimilation" (2003, p. 15). Although Milavec writes about the community of the early Christians whose life circumstances substantially differ from the modern tensions of a culturally globalized world, his observation on the necessity of a spiritual outlook within the wider cultural context as well as his view that culture as a living and changing phenomenon is vital for the existence of any society are still relevant today.

As a culturally formative text which represents specific values, Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* (2004) deserves, I believe, detailed scrutiny and examination. The text, either studied as a single book, or as a part of the *Gilead* trilogy (*Gilead*, 2004, *Home*, 2008 and *Lila*, 2014) has become, without doubt, one of the most popular (and influential) works published in the United States in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> The book has been praised by professional critics and literary

scholars (see Anderson, 2005; Domestico, 2014; Evans, 2014) and lay readers, including former American President Barack Obama (see Kakutani, 2009),<sup>ii</sup> and its popularity is certainly expressive of a set of values that many readers find affinity with. The present article, therefore, intends to focus on the protected values in the novel, which are faith, family and education. While their significance in Ames's story is quite clearly expressed by the narrator, my examination will provide a closer look at their interrelatedness as well as at the ways in which they conceptualize the central tenets of Ames's philosophy of the life worth living.

### ***Gilead* and the values to live by**

One of *Gilead*'s major concerns is the reality of the transience of life. At the very beginning we learn that its protagonist and narrator, the Reverend John Ames, an elderly Congregational pastor in the small town of Gilead, Iowa, has been diagnosed with angina pectoris and knows that he is dying. The first paragraph of his narrative already suggests that coming to terms with approaching death would be one of the central issues of the story: *"I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. And you put your hand in my hand and you said, You aren't very old, as if that settled it"* (2004, p.3).

Ames's words addressed to his seven-year-old son encapsulate the motivation to write and set a tone which would dominate his later discourses. He uses mild language to tell his son that he is going to die. Knowing the details of the diagnosis, Ames decides to write his child a letter which eventually "becomes a prayer of self-scrutiny, a time capsule of fatherly wisdom, a plainspoken treatise on the difficulty of virtue within the most sincere moral consciousness" (Painter, 2010, p. 325). Meant to express everything that Ames intends to pass down to his son, his "letter" becomes a complex story of the crucial events that shaped Ames's past and shape his present, including the relationship with his beloved wife Lila, best friend Boughton, and his crucial connection with young Jack Boughton.

It is interesting to observe how Ames's narrative subtly changes and develops. The first pages reflect his past more than his present, yet he gradually intuitively feels that what he *really* needs to pass down is an authentic picture of himself, complete with weaknesses, shortcomings and failures. It is difficult to estimate at which point his "*begats*" (2004, p. 9) turn into a "*diary*" (2004, p. 185). Ames's voice in *Gilead* is characterized by stark honesty and strong emotions; he is a pious and disciplined person of immense personal integrity. According to Anthony Domestico, "*Gilead* makes a fundamentally good man seem interesting, and part of what makes Ames so

interesting is his willingness to talk intelligently about matters of faith – in particular, his willingness to talk about the sacraments” (Domestico, 2014, p. 15). D. W. Schmidt thinks that, “[i]n the context of American literary history, Ames’s expression of his father-love may be the most eloquent and sincere statement we have from an American fictional father” (2014, p.123). Ilana Ritov and Jonathan Baron define protected values as “those that people think should not be traded off” (1999, p. 79). They further point out that “[i]f these values are accepted, they trump all other values and dictate the decision” (1999, p. 79). They may well be described as sacred and vitally significant.

In Robinson’s *Gilead*, I identify three major protected values: faith, family and education. It is important to realize that despite the fact that their validity and significance are never questioned or doubted, they are not depicted here as unproblematic. By which I mean that these values are central to the novel’s main conflicts and their relevance is examined in the specific life events which Ames and other characters go through.

### **Faith**

Kay Parris in the foreword to the interview with Marilynne Robinson observes that “[a]n acclaimed novelist bringing serious theology into fiction is not a common phenomenon” (2010). To write fiction about faith, belief and spirituality and refrain from cliché and didacticism is not an easy task. Although the great ambition of art has always been to explore the infinite variety of human experience, to provide this experience with meaning and purpose and even seek “profound conclusions to otherwise unresolved circumstances” of one’s life and existence, the fictional quests seem more difficult and challenging in the secular era of postmodern scepticism described by Robinson as “our modern condition, a state of malaise and anomie” (2011, p. 1). According to her, a great change took place within the last two centuries and “[w]e were told we had disabused ourselves of belief in God, and that the notion that human life had meaning has fallen with the collapse of religious belief” (Robinson, 2011, p. 1). Correspondingly, John Paul II (1999, p. 9) in his *Letter to Artists* writes: “It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself. Such an atmosphere has sometimes led to a separation of the world of art and the world of faith, at least in the sense that many artists have a diminished interest in religious themes”.

In his essay called *Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?* (2012) Paul Elie speaks sceptically about spirituality, faith, and particularly Christianity, as themes of current American literature. He

notes that “if any patch of our culture can be said to be post-Christian, it is literature” and asks the fundamental question: “Where has the novel of belief gone?” (2012) The debate on spirituality in fiction is particularly interesting in the American literary context because, as George M. Marsden points out, “levels of religious practice came to be much higher in the United States than in other modernized nation” (2003, p. 9). For Paul Elie, Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* is an interesting spiritual literary work and Rev. John Ames is “[t]he most emphatically Christian character in contemporary American fiction” (Elie, 2012), “whose belief is believable because it is so plainly the fruit of a personal search” (Elie, 2012). The critic and literary historian D. G. Myers considers Robinson “the most powerful and convincing advocate for religion’s place in the human experience” (Myers, 2012). For Roxana Robinson, on the other hand, “Robinson’s intention seems to be to make human life and meaning intelligible each in terms of the other. For the characters in her fiction, religious faith is a part of meaning, part of leading an examined life. Faith doesn’t eliminate human problems – fear and confusion, pain and loss – but it can alleviate them. And human existence is expanded by the idea of grace, by a sense of trust in God’s presence and gratitude for the mortal loveliness of the world. Grace illuminates these books, and so does a sense of inquiry, of intellectual questing” (Robinson, 2015, p. 30). Anthony Domestico joins the debate on Robinson’s work within the context of contemporary literature claiming that “*Gilead* puts the lie to those critics who say that contemporary fiction doesn’t engage seriously with religion. It shows that Christianity is both a lived practice and a system of belief, a deposit of artistic riches and an endless source of intellectual exploration” (Domestico, 2014, p. 15). Similar approval is expressed by D. W. Schmidt: “the novel’s success beyond its pages, within the literary community and academia, in an age of un- and non-belief, seems nearly miraculous. The letter of an aging protestant pastor, who expounds upon the teachings of church fathers and meditates on the meaning of grace, somehow appeals to the faithful and non-believers alike, even readers who would normally dismiss any text that espouses a sincere faith in any ‘god’” (Schmidt, 2014, p. 119). According to the notable Irish author Colm Tóibín, Robinson “is concerned with how we should live, with the idea of the world as a sort of gift to us, which requires us to notice what we have been offered, and to study it, to appreciate it and to dramatize its textures and contours” (2016). She is “a visionary realist: a writer who senses that the real – the world we experience in our bodies and in our consciousness – is awash with divine meaning and intention” (Domestico, 2014, p. 14).

In *Gilead*, the fullness of religious experience is expressed by seeing the world as the Divine Creation in which everyone and everything forms a part of God's plan and is infused with a miraculous and mysterious nature. Thus, a deep faith in God guides Ames's everyday life. His existence becomes a constant prayer and perpetual dialogue with God. If he fails – and he fails rather often – it is in faith and God that he finds refuge and a stable point upon which his actions and responses to various life situations can be based.

It is interesting to observe how Ames articulates his understanding of the mysteries of life and death and which language he uses to express them. When rational discourse fails, man seeks other expressive means by which the experience of death and afterlife might be verbalized. In this regard, Ames turns to the potency of imagination and to the figurative language of poetry. During a discussion on the nature of hell, for instance, he advises his worshippers: *"If you want to inform yourselves as to the nature of hell, don't hold your hand in a candle flame, just ponder the meanest, most desolate place in your soul"* (2004, p. 208). It is not actual physical suffering which appears as most cruel and harsh punishment for one's sins, but the sincere insight into the soul, a concentrated self-scrutiny of the conscience in which one comes closest to vices, shame and fear.

Ames's description of dying and death is much inspired by poets and their visions. In the following quote, he refers to his favourite Puritan author Isaac Watts (1674-1748):

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

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

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

*No doubt that is true. Our dream of life will end as dreams do end, abruptly and completely, when the sun rises, when the light comes. And we will think. All that fear and all that grief were about nothing. But that cannot be true. I can't believe we will forget our sorrows altogether. That would mean forgetting that we had lived, humanly speaking. Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life."*

(2004, p. 103-104)

The metaphor of “life as a dream” expands into Ames’s deep meditation on the “reality” of death as a transitory stage,<sup>iii</sup> as an ultimate change of which man is not yet conscious in which a Christian believes and should look forward to (see p. 142 and 191).

Concerning other aspects of how the afterlife can be visually imagined, Ames observes in his conversation with Boughton that “*although the Bible has much to say about final judgment, it offers no definitive picture of life after death*” (2004, p. 146). The mere fact of mentioning heaven and hell as places of utmost relevance, however, prompts people to visualize them. The visions, as *Gilead* reminds us, are always personal, imaginative and highly subjective. Ames’s friend Boughton, for example, “*has more ideas about heaven every day*” (p. 147). In Boughton’s mind the idea of heaven is likened to the beauty and goodness of anything on earth multiplied by two. Like Ames, Boughton sees nature (and Nature) as a meaningful revelation. It is a grace to be alive, to be able to love, feel and experience God’s creation via the senses as well as by the intellect. Ames’s idea of heaven is slightly different from Boughton’s in its emphasis on one’s physical condition. He explains: “*I believe the soul in Paradise must enjoy something nearer to a perpetual vigorous adulthood than to any other state we know. [...] I believe Boughton is right to enjoy the imagination of heaven as the best pleasure of this world. [...] I certainly don’t mind the thought of your mother finding me a strong young man*” (2004, p. 166).

I identify faith as one of the crucial protected values in the novel since it determines and conditions everything that Ames does. It provides him with moral principles, offers him consolation and gives him sufficient rationalization and explanation for everything that happens to him. Faith guides his inner world as well as his conduct. It also helps him find satisfying answers to the questions which transcend human reason.

## **Family**

Family life, relationships between generations and especially those between fathers and sons are arguably given a significant role in the text. One of the most important values Ames shares with his son is love and respect for those who are no longer with us. While their physical absence is irreversible and many of their acts may be questioned, their presence is still felt, most intensely through memories and also through objects they once possessed.

It is important to note that relationships within families are as important as they are difficult. Although family life in *Gilead* is based on mutual respect, serious quarrels happen there quite often.



I will illustrate this via the conflict between Ames's father and grandfather and their opposing views on the resistance against slavery and social injustice. His grandfather claims that Jesus himself appeared to him in chains and gave him instructions which he could not oppose: "*And He spoke to me, very clearly. The words went right through me. He said, Free the captive. Preach good news to the poor. Proclaim liberty throughout the land*" (2004, p. 175). Being empowered by Christ's authority, his grandfather argues for fierce military action against slavery, unlike his pacifist son whose favourite verse of Scripture is Isaiah 9:5 and who thinks that violence simply provokes further violence and ceases to be a legitimate force. The argument escalates in angry words pronounced by Ames's father, a bitter farewell to Ames's grandfather who departs soon after.

Their conflict actually raises important philosophical questions. Can any fight against oppression justify the use of violence and killing? Is it possible to advocate and rationalize any violent death even if it takes place within a conflict against injustice? Can one love a father who might have committed murder, and who, at the same time, preaches that young men should be sent to war and thus carries an amount of responsibility for *their* suffering and death?

Although Ames's grandfather and his father both believe in the purposeful life of a Christian, at the same time, the practical ways by which they live their faith are very different. For Ames's grandfather human life has a value measured by one's total and literal commitment to Christ's message, actualized in the specific historical cause of fighting against slavery. He is never concerned with his own pains and even "forgets" to mention his loss of an eye in his letters home (p. 88). Ames further explains: "*All the regret he ever felt was for his unfortunates, with none left over for himself, however he might be injured, until his friends began to die off, as they did one after another in the space of about two years. Then he was terribly lonely, no doubt about it. I think that was a big part of his running off to Kansas. That and the fire and the Negro church*" (2004, p. 36).

Intergenerationality becomes a crucial turning point in Ames's life too. He starts his writing unaware of the radical changes which life has prepared for him in coming days. His mental wellbeing undergoes a distinct crisis with the sudden arrival of Jack Boughton, and even more so when Ames realizes that Jack provokes in him feelings never felt before. It is the fierce and cruel passion of jealousy which begins to occupy Ames's mind. He understands how much Lila means to him and he is afraid he may easily lose her. In his confession, an emphasis is put on her bringing life and light to his former existence described as "a foretaste of death" (p. 205).

Passion is an intense emotion and life without Lila is an unbearable thought for Ames who vividly remembers the feeling when she did not come to church on “*the one terrible Sunday. [...] How dead and sad and airless that morning was, how shabby we all seemed, and the church, too*” (2004, p. 205). The situation worsens as both Jack and Lila do not speak much and Ames simply conjectures on the details of their relationship. Even though there is no valid reason to suspect either of them of betrayal, it is obvious that Lila and Jack are close. The scarcity of words between them only raises Ames’s suspicions. His mind becomes troubled and disunited, he is unable to find equilibrium and restore his inner peace: “*The truth is, as I stood there in the pulpit, looking down on the three of you, you looked to me like a handsome young family, and my evil old heart rose within me, the old covetise I have mentioned elsewhere came over me, and I felt the way I used to feel when the beauty of other lives was a misery and an offence to me. And I felt as if I were looking back from the grave*” (2004, p. 141).

It is telling that Ames describes his feeling as “looking back from the grave”. This suggests his awareness of his physical condition and imminent death, which contrasts strikingly with Jack’s vitality, youth and strength. On the other hand, the scene is also Ames’s painful visualization of a possible future. When he is no longer alive, Jack, Lila and their son may well become a family.

There is little doubt that the essence of Ames’s confusion lies in the conflict between his faith and feelings. It is during this time of formidable worries when he appears most intensely human and fallible and when he pronounces his wish for a peaceful death (p. 179).

In order to resolve his fears and restore his peace, Ames must be willing to “sacrifice” the two most precious elements in his life, Lila and his son. Ames’ realization of this is gradual and, as a matter of fact, his decision to “allow” Lila to find her happiness with Jack is one of his most crucial acts in the story: “*That morning something began that felt to me as if my soul were being teased out of my body, and that’s a fact. I have never told you how all that came about, how we came to be married. And I learned a great deal from the experience, believe me. It enlarged my understanding of hope, just to know that such a transformation can occur. And it has greatly sweetened my imagination of death, odd as that may sound*” (2004, p. 203).

Ames’s conscious decision had a powerful effect on his consequent thought and approach to death. He again attains inner calm of the deepest and most satisfying nature; that which follows a perplexing and almost ruinous mental struggle. At this point, Ames is ready to die, although there is one more distinctive moment at the very end of his narrative which symbolically ends the course of his life. It is the moment when Ames blesses Jack who is leaving Gilead in order



to live with his wife and son. Thus Ames finds much needed equilibrium after and in spite of the sorrow he experiences.

Described as “a quintessentially American story” (Robinson, 2015, p. 27) which encapsulates “the American foundation myth” (Robinson, 2015, p. 27), *Gilead* is firmly rooted in the value of family which extends also to the concept of belonging and home.<sup>iv</sup> The title of the book itself suggests the significance of place for the narrative, alluding to the Biblical Gilead (in Hebrew *the hill of destiny*), probably most famously known in relation to the prophet’s warning addressed to Judah in Jeremiah 8:22: “Is there no balm in Gilead?”.

It is highly revealing that Ames’s last words are also connected to Gilead, the place where all whom he loves live: “*I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love – I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence*” (2004, p. 247).

A sense of belonging, closely associated with family, is often highlighted in the book. Ames admits that before his life with Lila began, he “*didn’t feel very much at home in the world*” (2004, p. 4). Now, he obviously does, and he feels strongly attached to the physicality of life and existence. Home is the place where one may return any time and there are occasions when one *should* return. Ames is bitter when he remarks about Jack Boughton who, “[*W*hen his mother died he didn’t come home” (2004, p. 160).

Relationships within family are sacrosanct for Ames. Marriages, relationships between children and parents as well as between other generations become a main safeguard for the wellbeing of an individual. If these are not reconciled, people suffer. *Gilead* places an emphasis on the fact that it is the responsibility of each member of a family to create relationships that are embedded in sincerity, honesty and love.

## Education

Ames’s love of books and learning permeates the novel.<sup>v</sup> His reading habits and the selection of books he is familiar with are mentioned on several occasions. He often reads through the night, a practice followed by a walk and a visit to church (2004, p. 70). He reads classical Greek and Hebrew and with his best friend Boughton they “*used to go through the texts we were going to preach on, word by word*” (2004, p. 65), practising Biblical exegesis.

Ames has a deep knowledge of the Bible, much of it learnt by heart (2004, p. 67). The practice of memorizing goes back to Ames’s childhood, when, motivated by his father, he was paid a penny for every five verses learnt by heart without mistake. Ames values such kind of oral

knowledge very much, and his young son is also encouraged in this practice: “*You know the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm and Psalm 100. And I heard your mother teaching you the Beatitudes last night*” (2004, p. 67). These eight blessings appear later in the book in the form of an unconventional gift for Ames’ 77th birthday from his little son who “*recited the Beatitudes with hardly a hitch, two times over, absolutely shining with the magnitude of the accomplishment*” (2004, p. 185). Both parents facilitate their son’s memorization of Biblical passages, hereby suggesting the exclusive importance of having such texts in one’s heart.

When addressing his son, Ames is very clear about the values provided by books as a source of education and edification. He hopes that his son has read some of his books (2004, p. 210) and particularly lists the English poets John Donne (2004, p. 77) and George Herbert (2004, p. 111), and frequent references to the Bible expect the son’s adequate command of it (e.g. the Book of Isaiah, 2004, p. 137). Ames understands the capacity of the Biblical verse to enlighten experience and provide a new perspective.

Ames is a living library, well versed in poetry as well as in prose of a great variety. We learn that he owns “*mostly theology, and some old travel books from before the wars*” (2004, p. 77). In a passage where he writes about the tension caused by his father’s uncertainty about Ames’s faith, he provides the names of many controversial and radical thinkers he is familiar with, such as the Welsh social reformer and one of the founders of utopian socialism Robert Owen (1771-1858), the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910), the English novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), the Swedish scientist, philosopher and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and the Russian occultist and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) (Robinson 235).

Ames’s interest in history is mentioned, too. Reading improves knowledge as is the case of his belief “*that the purpose of steeples was to attract lightning. [...] Then I read some history, and I realized after a while that not every church was on the ragged edge of the Great Plains, and not every pulpit had my father in it*” (2004, p. 114). He also discusses his reading on the Civil War to better understand the conflict between his pacifist father and militaristic grandfather (2004, p. 76).

In his understanding, the books one owns and reads are revelatory of a person’s thoughts and character. His life-long passion for learning is obvious from frequent references to purchases of books, although his attitude to them, or better said, to the money spent on them, alters after the radical change in his life. The aforementioned spending becomes Ames’s serious concern as he ponders over the sums which he could use to improve the financial situation of the now

impoverished family (see p. 4). These thoughts, however, do not prove his negative bias towards books and learning. They are, in fact, rather understandable worries of the father who cares about his family's financial security. The regrets over the money spent on literature are supplanted by Ames's appreciation of books as intimate friends and major joy and consolation in the period of sadness and loneliness, described as "[m]y own dark time" (2004, p. 44) and "deep darkness" (2004, p. 55).

Ames constantly returns to books in relation to the past, and his portrayal of himself as an avid reader does not only provide the complex and detailed reader's experience, but it also simultaneously serves as a didactic and educational means for his son (2004, p. 39).

There is good reason to suppose that Ames's intellectual pursuits owe much to the cultural traditions of Protestantism, with its emphasis on books and learning, as well as its highest regard for Scripture, read both in classic and vernacular languages. In this regard, Ames's Congregational affiliation and Robinson's frequent use of the Bible – both as a source of themes, conflicts, motifs and mentions in the book *per se* – are central to *Gilead*. The characters of Cain, Abraham, Isaac and the parable of the Prodigal Son are major fertilizing influences which generate several theological discourses in the novel. The Bible's special meaning relates to Ames's understanding of it as a life-sustaining and spiritually highly relevant (and rewarding) discourse. As a material object it is an important bridge connecting the past with the present: "*Whenever I have held a Bible in my hands, I have remembered the day they buried those ruined Bibles under the tree in the rain, and it is somehow sanctified by that memory. And I think of the old reverend himself preaching in the ruins of his church, with all the windows open so the few that were there could hear 'The Old Rugged Cross' drifting up the hill from the Methodist meeting*" (2004, p. 96). The burial of the sacred books occurred in Ames's childhood when his "*father helped to pull down a church that had burned*" (2004, p. 94) and the details of the event remained deeply engraved in Ames's memory. Here, the Bible conveys a sense of continuity, suggestive of the strong emotional appeal of the experience, a tragedy turned into revelation. In his narrative Ames makes several references to poetry. A special role is attributed to hymns, the singing of which brings tranquillity in difficult situations.<sup>vi</sup> The whole community is united in the singing of "Blessed Jesus" and "The Old Rugged Cross" during the fire and consequent book burial (2004, p. 94) and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" offers peace to the dying Lacey Thrush (2004, p. 57).

Ames names three particular authors of devotional poetry close to his heart. These are John Donne (1573-1631), Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and George Herbert (1593-1633). For example,

John Donne is his recommended reading for Lila when she asks her husband what books should she read (2004, p. 77). Ames is an active reader of poetry who finds the verses existentially relevant. Those which he writes about in his diary function as a discourse of truth and balance his inner worries with hope (see p. 103-104 and 111). Poetry serves Ames as a creative platform upon which the exchange of ideas takes place. These include the celebration of the continuity of human life as well as the power of man to find strength in God's grace and love.

Ames is not only a poetry reader, but he also confesses his partiality to writing verse (2004, p. 45). While he underestimates his poetic skills, his mention of writing offers an insight into his love for the language, sounds and meanings of words, as well as for his thinking in figurative language, vividly evidenced in his imaginative narrative.

Similarly to Bruce Gordon's John Calvin who "*lived simultaneously in the world and before the face of God*" (2011, p. 2), Ames's education and learning establishes the essential interrelatedness of the common and the sacred. Yet, this double nature of existence, which contains the experience of the numinous, is difficult to express in words. There are moments when books and learning fail to provide satisfactory comments and responses, as in the case of Lila's baptism when Ames admits that "*no matter how much I thought and read and prayed, I felt outside the mystery of it*" (2004, p. 21). Learning may provide one with information and knowledge, but the experience may obviously transcend the boundaries of the verbal discourse.

## Conclusion

Ames concludes his narrative with the following words:

*"I'll pray that you grow up a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find a way to be useful.*

*I'll pray, and then I'll sleep"* (2004, p. 247).

The life philosophy he proposes by his narrative is not easy to practise. To be wholly contemplative and wholly active – a life worth living requires nothing less, according to Ames's experience. He speaks with the authority of an elderly man whose life was full of suffering and anguish but also of hope and joy. His authority is that of piety and of an old man's wisdom. The validity of his life philosophy is justified by his conduct and deeds and therefore appears as relevant also to the lived experience of the reader. He simply practises what R. Truss mentions in his article on S. T. Coleridge: "The particular must lead to the general. Love must begin with love of particular persons" (Truss, p. 8).

Ames's philosophy of being a gift for others encompasses the total span of human experience and turns a negation of death into an active principle of life and purpose. The whole narrative can be in fact interpreted as an expression of gratitude for life as the ultimate gift and the novel elucidates how the cultivation of Christian virtues contributes to a sense of a purposeful life. Being connected to the world and to other people in a meaningful way resolves many tensions in life and generates much satisfaction. Ames convincingly proposes that inner strength is always found in relationships. His story, as a result, becomes a training in a way of life that is reflective, ethical and which establishes a space for God in the common discourse of everyday life.

The combination of faith, family and education as three protected values places an emphasis on the significance of everydayness,<sup>vii</sup> on the simple life based on Christian worship, relationships and learning. According to *Gilead*, faith helps to see one's condition in its true perspective; guided by it, a person may fall repeatedly, yet he is also aware of a constant hope and opportunity to improve. Ames's narrative is not the sentimentally sweet recommendation of a devout Christian life. Far from that, Robinson's novel shows the complexities and intricacies of one's existence. It promotes heartfelt piety the strength of which is based on non-judgmental, honest and fair treatment of oneself and of others.

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<sup>i</sup> The first volume won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. *Home* received the 2009 Orange Prize for Fiction and became a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award in Fiction while *Lila*, the third installment, won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

<sup>ii</sup> Concerning his reading of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, Barack Obama in his interview with the author says: "one of my favorite characters in fiction is a pastor in Gilead, Iowa, named John Ames, who is gracious and courtly and a little bit confused about how to reconcile his faith with all the various travails that his family goes through. And I was just—I just fell in love with the character, fell in love with the book" (Obama, 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> The motifs of change and transformation are central to *Gilead* in more than just one way. It is, for instance, an essential part of Ames' explanation of God's presence in the world: "*It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance – for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light. That is what I said in the Pentecost sermon. I have reflected on that sermon, and there is some truth in it. But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?*" (2004, p. 245)

<sup>iv</sup> It is not insignificant to note that Robinson's second book of the *Gilead* trilogy is called *Home* (2008).

<sup>v</sup> There are miscellaneous works such as a healthcare book owned by his mother, "*large and expensive, and it was a good deal more particular than Leviticus*" (2004, p. 17); the gift Ames received a long time ago, of "*one of those books with humorous little sermon anecdotes in it somewhere*" (2004, p. 144); or "*a certain book the preacher had which illustrated the customs of the Orient*" (2004, p. 62).

<sup>vi</sup> Hymns are so firmly rooted in Ames's mind that he sings them without actual realization of the meaning of words. Once, when he is looking after his son, instead of some cheerful tone, he sings to him "Go to Dark

Gethsemane”, a popular Lenten hymn about the last 12 hours of Christ’s life, written by the Scottish-born poet and hymn writer James Montgomery (1771 – 1854).

<sup>vii</sup> According to Marilynne Robinson’s essay “Reformation”, “The most persistent and fruitful tradition of American literature from Emily Dickinson to Wallace Stevens is the meditation on the given, the inexhaustible ordinary” (2015, p. 24).

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Mária Hricková  
Department of English and American Studies  
Constantine the Philosopher University  
Stefanikova 67  
949 74 Nitra, Slovakia  
Email: mhrickova@ukf.sk

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