

## Marilynne Robinson

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# MARILYNNE ROBINSON

*Rachel Sykes*

Marilynne Robinson has long been considered America’s most un-contemporary living novelist. Known for her fiction’s complex combination of rhetoric, religiosity, and American history, the author has fans as diverse as former US president Barack Obama, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and controversial American novelist Brett Easton Ellis.<sup>1</sup> Despite ~~her~~ mainstream success, however, critical appreciation of Robinson largely centres on her reputation as a historical novelist, the Christianity of her central characters further marking her as an outlier in the landscape of twenty-first-century literary fiction. ~~For example, w~~When her debut novel *Housekeeping* was published in 1980, the author’s slow and richly metaphorical prose, which is deeply indebted to nineteenth-century American authors like Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Henry David Thoreau (Robinson 2012: xiv), was described as a ‘transfiguration’ of ‘the ordinary human condition’ (Brovard 1981) in a rave review for *The New York Times*. As Joan Acosella (2005) later wrote: ‘[R]eviewers loved it and, seemingly, were also grateful to it, for while *Housekeeping* had all of modernism’s painful knowledge, it showed none of the renunciations of clarity and unity that the modernists – not to speak of the postmodern types, who were already around – felt that such knowledge required.’

This chapter outlines Robinson’s opposition to the ‘postmodern types’ of her literary generation while also critiquing the willingness of critics and reviewers to assign the style and concerns of her writing to the past. Robinson’s second novel, *Gilead* (2004), was published twenty-four years after *Housekeeping* when the author was sixty-one-years-old. Although the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2005, it, too, was celebrated for its ‘old fashioned’ (Wood 2004; Hadley 2005: 19) qualities. *Gilead*, according to novelist Ali Smith (2008), *Gilead* ‘reads like something written in a gone time’ and in everything from the novel’s setting in 1956, its secluded location in the small fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, and the Christian (specifically Congregationalist) beliefs of its seventy-six-year-old narrator, the Reverend John Ames, *Gilead* was widely perceived as a book that felt ‘out of time’ (Wood 2004) for the twenty-first-century moment in which it was ~~both~~ written and published. When two partner novels, *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), followed in quick succession, revisiting the same characters, the same location, and set in the same year as *Gilead*, Robinson’s ‘old fashioned’ reputation seemed assured.

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This chapter argues for the importance of reading Robinson as a twenty-first-century author who is no less engaged in the 'politics' of the contemporary United States for her tendency to evoke historical and fictional worlds that are 'remote enough' ~~as she claims~~, to avoid 'the intractability of the language of contemporary experience' (Robinson 1983). Understanding Robinson solely as a historical novelist, and as a ~~religious~~ outlier in contemporary fiction, not only radically diminishes the interpretive possibilities of her work but also neglects her record as ~~a~~ outspoken public intellectual, her authorship of six volumes of political and theological non-fiction, and, before her retirement, nearly thirty-years teaching ~~contemporary~~ writing as a professor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Through consideration, first, of Robinson's representation of rural communities in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest regions of the United States and, second, her commitment to Christian theology, I argue, third, that what I describe elsewhere as Robinson's 'quiet' (Lykes 2011: 108), uneventful, or even 'antiental' (Savage 2013: 5) aesthetic presents a way of understanding the twenty-first century through its philosophical and political continuities with the past ~~that and~~ diminishes claims of ~~our present moment's~~ exceptionalism. ~~In this way~~, Robinson's understanding of history is neither nostalgic nor 'old fashioned' but rather privileges historical and theological inquiry as a way of understanding longer histories of inequality that might speak, as Robinson (2018) herself argues, to '[w]hat is at stake now in this rather inchoate cluster of anxieties that animates so many of us' (23).

### Region: *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Mother Country* (1989)

Two ideas dominate critical readings of Robinson and arguably account for the author's 'old fashioned' reputation. The first is her fierce love and intellectual appreciation of the mid- and north-western United States. All of Robinson's novels are set in small and pointedly isolated towns during the mid-1950s: *Housekeeping* takes place in the fictional town of Fingerbone, Idaho on the edge of a vast and mysterious lake while *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila* are all set in the small fictional town of Gilead, Iowa where life 'on the prairie' provides its characters with 'nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to delay' (Robinson 2004: 246). Robinson's interest in mid- and north-western experiences of rurality is, in the first instance, ~~autobiographical~~. Born Marilynne Summers on 26 November 1943, she entered a family of fourth-generation Idahoans and self-describes as 'an American of the kind whose family sought out wilderness generation after generation' (Robinson 1998: 246). During her early childhood, the Summers family moved with her father's work in the timber industry, living in a succession of small towns in northern Idaho and western Washington, one of which, Sandpoint, became the model for Fingerbone in *Housekeeping*.

Robinson insists on her intensely intellectual relationship with what might commonly be perceived as the 'flyover' states of America. In a 2012 essay, 'When I Was a Child,' she writes that 'the hardest work in the world is to persuade easterners that growing up in the West is not intellectually crippling' (68). *Housekeeping*, she continues, demonstrates 'the intellectual culture of my childhood': Robinson's narrator, Ruthie, reads from the same Latin textbook that she and her brother used in high school and draws from Robinson's favourite works of literature as a child, the

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collected poems of Emily Dickinson and the Bible (Mason 2014: 24). Robinson (2014) refers ~~similarly specifically~~ to Iowa, the setting of all three Gilead novels, as her second 'adopted state' (35); the only region after Idaho that she 'learned' to love since moving to join the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1991. Robinson's phrasing here ('learned') is not a slight to Iowa but rather confirms that she sees the production of fiction as deeply connected, if not reliant, on a cerebral relationship with her surroundings. Her connection with both Idaho and Iowa is not, therefore, part of a conservative drive to commemorate a forgotten American heartland but ~~a-symbolic~~ of Robinson's broader attempt to ~~add privilege and~~ nuance to the portrayal of rural areas ~~that-in~~ contemporary American culture, ~~which-repeatedly-regularly empties rural life~~ of both historical event and intellectual presence.

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A surprising and often neglected example of Robinson's ~~active and political~~ engagement with the environment is her first and highly controversial work of non-fiction, *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989), which she began researching as a visiting professor at the University of Kent, UK in the late 1980s. With uncharacteristic directness, Robinson accuses the British government of contaminating the Irish Sea with waste from the Sellafield nuclear power plant, ~~and-controversially~~ ~~names~~ the environmental activist group Greenpeace as complicit. ~~Discovering-Arguing~~ that Britain is 'the most abused landscape in the industrial world' (Robinson 1989: 19), Robinson claims to write *Mother Country* 'in a state of mind and spirit I could not have imagined before Sellafield presented itself to me' (3) and which she has not replicated since. Greenpeace successfully sued Robinson for libel, banning the book from publication in Great Britain; but its importance to Robinson's later work ~~remains-is~~ clear. In *Mother Country*, the author's uncharacteristically 'political' stance at once distances the writer from contemporary environmental movements and reframes their shared interest in conservation as an extension of ~~both-both~~ her Congregationalist beliefs and the wider intellectual project of her writing:

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I'm profoundly critical of the environmental movement. Not because I have any problem with the idea that the environment needs to be rescued, but in the sense that I think that they have been stunningly ineffective and in many cases a major part of the problem. [. . .] I am who I am, and I write about landscape and the human investment in landscape and vice versa, I mean the investment of soul, because I want to make people love where they are. I think that the best defense, the best sort of on-the-ground defense for any landscape is to have people love it, and any landscape deserves that.

(Robinson 1989: 114–117)

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Rejecting current trends in environmental activism, Robinson writes about conservation as a philosophical and moral imperative that falls outside and certainly predates any current ~~-political-~~ movement. Importantly, ~~her-Mother Country's wider~~ evisceration of the British political system, particularly the Welfare State, also reaffirms her belief in American democracy, highlighting a need, she writes, 'to rediscover the complexity of our own political history' (Robinson 1989: 104) ~~so as to~~ avoid the mistakes of the British.

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*Mother Country* therefore contextualises the representations of American rurality found in Robinson's fiction. *Housekeeping*, for example, tells the story of two sisters, Ruthie and Lucille Stone, who are orphaned and raised by a succession of female relatives in Fingerbone, a remote, misty, and mountainous settlement bordering a vast lake. It is an environment that exists, as the narrator Ruthie suggests, at several 'puzzling margins' (Robinson 1980: 4); a town that is so intertwined with the lake and mountains beyond it that residents speak about Fingerbone as if it 'belonged' to the water. The sisters' eventual caretaker, their eccentric Aunt Sylvie, gives up a life riding freight trains across the country for a settled and pseudo-domestic existence where she gradually and quite literally dismantles the family home. The novel reaches its climax with Sylvie and Ruthie putting 'an end to housekeeping' (Robinson 1980: 209), setting fire to a broom and leaving the house in flames as they readopt Sylvie's transient lifestyle and enter the ghostly world of the wanderer.

The novel's evocation of liminal spaces, patriarchal erasure, and domestic destruction has led to many several feminist readings. Aviva Weintraub (1986) describes *Housekeeping* as an 'essentially female novel' and Lake Fingerbone as an 'essentially female image' (69). Similarly, Joan Kirkby (1986) reads the novel as a clear rejection of 'the patriarchal values that have dominated American culture and a return to values and modes of being that have been associated in myth and imagery with the province of the female' (92). These interpretations have been complicated by subsequent critics (Burke 1991; McDermott 2004; Engebretson 2017) and inevitably ultimately challenged by Robinson herself, who insists not only on the text's essential ambiguity but also on her dislike of both critical theory and what she sees as the conceptual dead-end of 'identity politics' (Robinson 2017).

For the purpose of this chapter, debates about whether *Housekeeping* should can be read as a 'feminist' text reaffirms Robinson's wider resistance to the language of contemporary politics. Although deeply indebted to the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s, who provided Robinson's generation, as she writes in 'Imagination and Community' (2013), with '[a]most suddenly an expanding field of possibility' (29), the author doesn't discuss 'feminism' and doesn't refer to herself as a 'feminist' in interview or in print. As Alex Engebretson (2017) suggests, '[p]erhaps it is Robinson's humanism, its skepticism toward gender-based descriptions of identity, that causes her to avoid using the word "feminism"' but, either way, critics have largely abandoned early attempts to read Robinson's work through the lens of feminism or, indeed, through through many other strands of contemporary theory. The Gilead novels, for example, which I discuss below, focus just as prevalently on the prescription and constriction of gender roles within the rural American home yet the only reference to feminism in Shannon Mariotti and Joseph Lane Jnr.'s ambitious volume, *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson* (2016), comes in a digressive footnote. Overall, the editors suggest, '[i]t might seem somewhat vulgar [...] to call what Robinson offers a "political theory," because her writings rarely advocate for any conventional politics in a direct fashion and her unique constellation of beliefs, values, and advocacies don't fit into our usual categories of Republican or Democrat, red or blue, conservative or liberal.' In this way, Robinson has been framed not only as a novelist who doesn't 'fit' with expectations of contemporary authorship but also as a writer who can only be read through the lens of her older influences.

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**Religion: the Gilead novels (2004–2012)**

A second strand of Robinson criticism has therefore overtaken early eco-feminist readings of her work, further marking the author as ‘unique’ (Mariotti and Lane Jr 2016) and ‘out of time’ (Wood 2004) within the landscape of contemporary American fiction. This strand attends to the author’s representation of religion: Robinson is not only a Christian but also a serving Congregationalist minister who, ~~increasingly~~ since the millennium, has used her fiction and non-fiction to examine the complexities of religious belief, particularly notions of grace, repentance, and predestination (Liese 2009; Angerford 2010; Thurston 2011; Douglas 2011).

Although best known for what is currently a trilogy of Gilead novels, Robinson’s six volumes of essays, including *The Death of Adam* (1998), *The Givenness of Things* (2015), and *What Are We Doing Here?* (2018), demonstrate a clear and sometimes confrontational style that recalls the manifesto-like tone of *Mother Country* but ~~remains~~ ~~remains~~ largely absent from her fiction. Her essays on John Calvin, for example, the sixteenth-century French theologian popularly associated with a rule-bound, puritanical, and largely unforgiving mode of Christianity, redraw the thinker as a misunderstood humanist who is ‘more or less entirely unread’ by contemporary Americans but who has proven ‘of the great historical consequence, especially for our culture’ (Robinson 1998: 12). Again, Robinson’s privileging of ‘unread’ or ‘old-fashioned’ ~~lesser known~~ works of literature, philosophy, and theology provides the author with a way of understanding the present that roots current issues in centuries of debate and allows Robinson to ~~reject exceptionalism by~~ ~~stressing~~ our ~~own~~ lack of originality; that no intellectual or moral problem is ever truly new.

This philosophy extends to her fiction. The trilogy of novels for which Robinson is best known, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, focus on two Christian families, the Ames and the Boughtons. Narrative episodes overlap around 1956 but through family anecdote and inherited memory, the trilogy details events dating back to the 1850s. *Gilead* is an epistolary novel written from the perspective of Congregationalist minister John Ames and addressed to his seven-year-old son, Robby, in the months after he is diagnosed with heart failure (in the novel: *angina pectoris*). *Home* ~~then~~ retells the events of *Gilead*. *Gilead* ~~from~~ the household of Ames’ oldest friend and confidante, the Presbyterian minister Robert Boughton, whose daughter Glory returns ‘home’ at the age of thirty-eight to care for her elderly father. *Home*’s third-person narrative is often focalised through Glory’s perspective but her younger brother, John ‘Jack’ Ames Boughton, is the black sheep and would-be ‘prodigal son’ (Robinson 2004: 84) whose search for redemption structures both *Gilead* and *Home*. A third novel, *Lila*, provides the history of Ames’ much younger second wife who is a marginal and peaceful figure in the preceding novels and the only central character to have been born outside of Gilead. Through a closely focalised third-person perspective, Robinson ~~then~~ revisits themes of drifting, transience, and gender identity last fully explored in *Housekeeping*. ~~However~~ ~~Yet~~, while the end of Robinson’s debut sees the Stones destroy their family home, *Lila* depicts the opposite transition as the second Mrs. Ames comes to terms with her vagrant and sometimes criminal past, converts to Christianity, and struggles to make Gilead her physical and spiritual home.

What Mariotti and Lane Jr (2016) refer to as the ‘unfashionable’ and ‘alien’ qualities ~~that of~~ Robinson’s ~~prose style seems to have for~~ contemporary readers

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comes results, at least in part, at least in part, from from the range of philosophies her characters can reference. Reverend Ames and Reverend Boughton, for example, for instance, discuss many of the Christian thinkers considered in Robinson's non-fiction. From the works of John Calvin to those of Karl Barth, the Swiss Reformed theologian, and Ludwig Feuerbach, the German philosopher, Ames discusses the theology that Robinson (1998) claims is 'more or less entirely unread' (12) in her essays. Notably, however, and although their work is unpopular, the theology that Ames and Boughton quote is often far from more radical than conservative. On the surface, Ames seems to follow a traditional conception of God as a transcendent Creator who judges sinners and offers eternal salvation to a worthy few. However, as Andrew Place (2016) argues, in the concepts he introduces throughout *Gilead*, Ames in fact 'embraces progressive and even atheistic ideas regarding the divine' (2) and, in claiming to keep many 'old boxes of sermons' (Robinson 2004: 43) in his attic, the Reverend further conceives of writing as a kind of communion with God: 'as that which facilitates and renders perceptible man's proximity to divinity' (Place 2016: 2). Although on first reading, that is, Ames seems so old fashioned that, to return to Ali Smith's (2005) review, 'when [his] child draws Messerschmitts and Spitfires, it is actually shocking,' on closer inspection the reverend entertains a wide range of philosophies that are markedly open-minded for a seventy-six-year-old who has served a small rural congregation in Iowa since the 1890s. As Amy Hungerford (2010) also notes, 'John Ames is a character fully imagined to be living in Charles Taylor's secular age: he emerges in *Gilead* as a believer profoundly aware of the possibility – even the plausibility – of unbelief' (114). Ames is, in other words, mindful of the potential secularity of his son, to whom *Gilead* is addressed, as well as and his wife, Lila, who is completely 'unschooled in Scripture' (Robinson 2004: 67), just as Robinson anticipates the likely secularity of her twenty-first-century reader.

The reverend's concept of writing as a form of communion also further reflects the larger project of Robinson's fiction. Both, for example, evoke a 'capacious' (Hungerford 2010: 121) form of Christianity based in Congregationalist and therefore Calvinistic principles of individual autonomy for congregation and congregant. Although the *Gilead* novels may read as 'old fashioned' or even 'out of time' to some readers, Robinson's commitment to largely forgotten or marginalised theologies, philosophies, and, as I discuss below, regional histories may be 'unfashionable' (Domestico 2014: 12) but they are also clearly relevant to America's present.

In the final words of *Gilead*, Ames tells his son: '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' (Robinson 2004: 247). Turning attention away, finally, from his 'weary' hometown and considering the idea that his family might leave Iowa, Ames ends *Gilead* with a plea that his son might have the bravery to reckon with the forgotten and often brutal threads of American's history that he spent his life ignoring. What better words for an American reader facing feelings of futility in the wake of the Iraq War; what better words to leave for a child in the age of Trump?

### History in the present

In the final part of this chapter, I want to consider the relationship between the rural setting of Robinson's fiction and her characters' engagement with history. Robinson's

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novels take place in what ~~some might broadly be considered~~ historically insignificant locations. In *Housekeeping*, residents of Fingerbone describe the town and the state of Idaho as 'chastened [...] by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere' (Robinson 1980: 62). Similarly, the Reverend Ames, a fierce defender of the small town that he has devoted his life to, contemplates with increasing frequency what the loss of local history might mean for his community. 'The President, General Grant,' he writes towards the end of *Gilead*, 'once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism. But what is left here in Iowa?' (Robinson 2004: 175). The historical 'insignificance' of Idaho and Iowa serves two purposes. First, as detailed above, from *Housekeeping* and the Gilead novels to *Mother Country* and *What Are We Doing Here?*, Robinson reclaims ~~rural landscapes-states~~ and ~~historical instances-events~~ that are both local to her and that have in some way been forgotten, misread, or undervalued. Second, and although she is rarely read this way, the author considers what is historically forgotten or neglected as deeply indicative of ongoing inequalities in the contemporary United States.

A key way in which the past of the Gilead novels relates to the twenty-first-century moment in which they are written is their ambiguous and almost atemporal settings. At the beginning of *Gilead*, Ames states that he was born in 1880 and has lived seventy-six years in the town from which the reader can work out, if they want to, that he is writing in 1956. By writing a letter for his son to read when he becomes an adult, Ames' narrative is further divorced from its present moment because, as Ali Smith (2005) argues, the epistle is 'a conscious narration to the future from someone whose time was different and is over.' Ames ~~even~~-lovingly imagines Robby as an old man: 'Why do I love the thought of you old? That first twinge of arthritis in your knee is a thing I imagine with all the tenderness I felt when you showed me your loose tooth' (Robinson 2004: 210). And if Robby turns seven in 1956-7, he would ~~be-be fifty-five or fifty-six-and old enough to be in possession of his letter years old~~ in 2004, the year *Gilead* ~~was published-published; old enough to be in possession of his letter. It is in this way that Robinson writes an abstract notion of temporality that gestures towards contemporaneity but remains rooted in the past. As I have written elsewhere,~~ 'The Gilead novels pointedly occupy 'an ambiguous present in which the political and cultural "now" is vague scenery to the emotional landscape of the characters' (Evans 2017: 115). Put simply, very few dates or historic events are stated or referenced in *Gilead* and its partner texts and although we might deduce that the novels take place in the 1950s, Robinson ~~effectively~~-writes three historical novels that are curiously and pointedly non-topical, ~~or~~ abstract enough to take place any time between the 1880s when Ames was born and 2004 when the novel was published.

What Lee Spinks (2017) calls Ames' radical ambivalence towards the political climate of the 1950s is also important to any argument about the text's contemporaneity (141). In *Gilead*, we learn that Ames' grandfather, John Ames I, was a radical preacher who fought to end slavery both prior to and during the American Civil War of 1861-65. Robinson modelled Ames I on the Reverend John Todd, a leading abolitionist and 'conductor' on the Underground Railroad who co-founded the town of Tabor, Iowa in the 1830s to serve as a fall-back for abolitionists fighting pro-slavery factions in Kansas (Robinson 2004: 180). According to Robinson, the town of Gilead is the fictional 'offspring' of Tabor and through the memories and stories of three generations of the Ames family, the Gilead novels contrast Iowa's radical past

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with the generalised political disengagement now associated, however simplistically, with the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Both Ames' father and grandfather served in the Union Army during the Civil War but disagreed about the necessity of continued activism during the period of Reconstruction that followed. Ames then represents the ethical outcome of their conflict; he is reluctant to narrate or engage with the political climate of either his progenitors or ~~the his present moment~~ 1950s. 'All best forgotten,' he writes, as 'my father used to say' (Robinson 2004: 76).

A major theme of both *Gilead* and *Home* is ~~therefore~~ the difficulty of inheritance; as the act of passing on knowledge, bequeathing memories, and achieving ethical consensus proves difficult even between three generations of Iowan preachers. *Gilead*, of course, is also an epistle: a letter and a record of Ames' 'begats' (Robinson 2004: 9); a familial and local history that the reverend will leave for his son to read as an adult. Yet the potential failure of ~~patriarchal-patrilineal~~ relationships to achieve moral and political consensus haunts all three novels. The confession of 'Jack' Boughton, for example, the wayward son of Ames' oldest friend, is the closest to a narrative climax in either *Gilead* or *Home*. In both novels, Jack returns to Iowa after twenty years of self-imposed exile, causing Ames, Jack's father, the Reverend Boughton, and his sister, Glory, ceaseless anxiety and worry. A major turning point ~~then comes~~ occurs when Jack 'confesses' to Ames that he wants to return to Iowa with his African American partner, Della, and their young son, Robert. In Missouri, where the family have been living, Jack's lack of income, Della's distrustful father, and the state's anti-miscegenation laws, ~~which; which-enforced~~ racial segregation, and which Iowa, the 'shining star of radicalism' (Robinson 2004: 175), rejected in 1851, conspire to keep the couple apart. Jack therefore returns to Iowa to find work and a home for his young family.

The religious arguments against slavery debated by Ames' father and grandfather foreground and, in some way, anticipate the crisis of purpose that afflicts Ames from this point in *Gilead* through the rest of the novels. Presenting long since marginalised debates about the use of violence in social action and the necessity of activism in religious life, the memories of Ames' father and grandfather serve to condemn the reverend's political apathy and ignorance of the Civil Rights Movement (1954–68) in the narrative present. Jack's revelation provokes a strong reaction in Ames who finally despairs at Iowa's forgotten radicalism. He notes that the black communities his grandfather welcomed to Gilead in the 1850s all left in the 1880s when a mysterious fire destroyed their church. Gilead, Ames writes, was set up as 'part of an old urgency that is now forgotten' (Robinson 2004: 254) and, in realising this, the reverend cannot tell Jack that his interracial relationship would be welcome ~~in Gilead~~.

This confrontation is a crucial moment in the Gilead novels; one that is revisited in *Home* and informs the events of *Lila*. Still, because of academic fascination with Robinson's religiosity, it has only recently gained critical attention. As Lee Spinks (2017) writes:

Variouly entranced by Ames's unwavering commitment to self-knowledge and right perception in the face of his own impending death and his rapturous celebration of the transcendent beauty of a natural world which incarnates the miracle of divine creation, much of Robinson's audience has elected to read his letter either as a type

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of sublime secular ethics or a materialized spiritual vision rather than a fraught meditation upon the burden of a historical inheritance.

(147)

Any doubt of *Gilead*'s commitment to debating the individual's moral and political responsibilities in the present would be further dismissed by a reading of *Home*. The second Gilead novel both contextualises its predecessor and provides evidence of Ames' political beliefs beyond the briefest allusions made in *Gilead*. In *Home*, for instance, Glory describes what Ames calls 'conversations' (Robinson 2004: 212) between Ames and Boughton as 'incomprehensible . . . shouting matches' (Robinson 2004: 222). Boughton's own account of their fights further complicates the persona that Ames writes for himself in *Gilead*. '[Ames] pretends to be mulling it over,' he says, 'but I know he will vote Republican again. Because his grandfather was a Republican! [. . .] Whose grandfather was not a Republican?' (Robinson 2008: 43). In *Home*, Boughton presents himself as a moderate outsider, suggesting that his family, who arrived in Iowa in 1870, could not understand the 'fanaticism' (Robinson 2008: 213) of abolitionists like Ames' grandfather. Whether or not Boughton is right about the vehemence of Ames' convictions, and his surprisingly thoughtless support of the Republican party, *Home* periodises *Gilead* and connects both novels with the political events of the 1950s that critical categorisation of the trilogy as either 'sublime secular ethics or a materialized spiritual vision' (Brinks 2017: 147) would exclude.

*Home* moreover, *Home* also amplifies the political events excluded from Ames' letter. Although the dates are, again, never stated, it is clear that Jack follows news of the 1956 civil rights demonstrations over segregation in Montgomery when he argues with his father about the 'provocation' (Robinson 2004: 214) of non-violent protest on TV. The events of *Home* also seem notably bleaker after *Gilead*. Whatever else it might achieve, the primary function of Ames's epistle is to communicate; to memorialise the reverend's affection for his young wife and son so that '[w]e as readers become, in effect, Ames's son, encountering his words a half century after he writes them' (Chodhi 2016: 356). *Home*, by comparison, returns to the point where *Gilead* began and, from Jack's return onward, details the Boughtons' repeated failure to connect with each other. If the reader knows *Gilead*, they read *Home* with the knowledge of Jack's secret and therefore anticipate the repetition of his 'confession' scene in *Home*. When, in that second novel, Jack's confession doesn't materialise, Robinson's elision seems significant, evading a sense of resolution and catharsis for the reader but also confirming that repetitions of the same historical instance are partial, unrecoverable, and highly subjective in the present.

This, to conclude, is how Robinson's fiction best engages with the unexceptionalism of her contemporary moment: through an unmoored and almost atemporal rendering of history that gestures forward as much as it looks back. However, yet Robinson's commitment to taking the long-view of American politics and pointedly, in particular, distancing herself from contemporary activism movements may well be changing. In an essay to mark the one-year anniversary of President Donald Trump's election in November 2016, Robinson (2017) pivots from a discussion of the 'older, deeper problems' of American society, characteristic of much of her writing thus far to date, to and launches a direct attack on the 'sort of higher twaddle' or 'so-called "theory"'

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taught in universities, blaming ~~said this~~ ‘twaddle’ for the decline of public rhetoric and ultimately for the election of Trump. Her latest essay collection, *What Are We Doing Here?*, similarly opens with a dismissal of ~~both~~ the ‘contemporary Left and Right’ (Robinson 2018: xiii) for the ‘maelstrom of utter fatuousness’ that they, ~~too,~~ introduce to public rhetoric. Robinson, who turns seventy-five in 2018, concludes the preface with the following: ‘I say this all because I am too old to mince words’ (Robinson 2018: xiv).

### Notes

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**Comment [AuQ11]:** Please indicate where the in-text citation for [[Obama, B., and Robinson, M., 2015. 'President Obama & Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation in Iowa: Part One.' *The New York Review of Books* [online]. 5 November. [www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/)]] should appear in the text.

**Comment [RS12]:** Done.

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- Obama names Robinson as one of his favourite novelists ~~and~~ famously ~~flew~~ to Iowa in the final year of his presidency to interview the author for the *New York Review of Books* (2015). Williams frequently reviews Robinson's work and Ellis (2006) suggests ~~see~~ in an interview that, although he found *Gilead* 'boring,' it's a text that he has 'to pick it up again because it's so beautifully written, the prose gives me the chills when I read it.'
  - Following William Cronon's famous critique of how wilderness protections have promoted conceptions of exotic locales for massive environmental destruction, Robinson's concept of 'wilderness' is not stable; the essay, 'Wilderness' (1998), from which this quote is taken, criticises a colonial structuring of 'civilisation' that constructs wilderness as an absent space over which humanity can exert their 'onerous dominion' (245) in the belief that it is a ~~place~~-location 'where actions would not have consequences' (247).
  - This temporal ambiguity is also true of *Housekeeping*, which the reader might suppose is set in the mid-1950s due to several ~~references to~~ issues of *Good Housekeeping* and a 1954 bestseller, *Not a Stranger* by Morton Thompson. ~~The date however, but which~~ is never stated.
  - As Simon Hall (2016) notes, contrary to popular opinion, 1956 was ~~actually~~ a year 'on the cusp of dramatic change' which 'saw ordinary people, all across the globe, speak out, fill the streets and city squares, risk arrest, take up arms and lose their lives in an attempt to win greater freedoms and build a more just world' (xiv). Not only was Dwight D. Eisenhower re-elected in a landslide but, as Hall argues, a series of 'rapid' changes and events including the Suez crisis, US involvement in the Middle East, and clashes over race in the South, undercut the 'small-town conservative values' (iv) that historians associate with the period.

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