

Apr 1st, 2:30 PM - 2:45 PM

Patriarchy and The Protestants: A New Historical and Feminist Reading of Marilynne Robinson's Gilead

Jesse D. Lawhead
Cedarville University, jdlawhead@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research_scholarship_symposium

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Lawhead, Jesse D., "Patriarchy and The Protestants: A New Historical and Feminist Reading of Marilynne Robinson's Gilead" (2015). *The Research and Scholarship Symposium*. 8.

http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/research_scholarship_symposium/2015/podium_presentations/8

This Podium Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Research and Scholarship Symposium by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

Jesse Lawhead

Dr. Wilfong

LIT 2090

December 11 2014

Patriarchy and The Protestants: A New Historical and Feminist Reading of Marilynne

Robinson's *Gilead*

In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson establishes a correlation between the presence of Protestantism and constricting gender roles women experience in the United States. Living in 1956 Gilead, Iowa, seventy-six-year-old Pastor John Ames begins writing to his seven-year-old son in a series of journal entries after he is diagnosed with a terminal case of angina pectoris. In these journal entries to his son, Ames records the histories of his reverend father, reverend grandfather, his own life, and present observations as the beauty of life continues to captivate him. Ultimately he hopes to “to tell [his son] things [he] might never have thought to tell [him]” had he been able to father his son longer.

Notably, all of the previously mentioned relationships are between two males. John Ames, the narrator, examines his male ancestry as he writes to his male heir. The women of *Gilead* are wives or caretakers, and seem solely mentioned because of the males they are associated with. In the novel, Ames mentions his former wife, who dies in childbirth early in their marriage; his current wife, whose name is not given; Glory, the single daughter of a nearby family who takes care of her father and household; his mother; grandmother; and the wife of a man named Jack Boughton. Robinson marginalizes women in the text, making them of peripheral importance to the narrative, but of great importance to providing a window into the early 20th century's treatment of women.

Marilynne Robinson understands what Ernest Hemingway worded as, “anything you can omit that [one] knows [one will] still have in the writing and its quality will show” (Paris Review). In her previous novel, *Housekeeping*, Robinson illustrates a feminist revision of patriarchal standards in society. She is aware of women’s overlooked condition as the oppressed class and the presence of oppressive patriarchal tradition. Therefore one can safely assume Robinson is aware of the absence of women in Gilead. Yet why, with her painful awareness of an oppressive condition that so desperately needs public attention, would she deliberately exclude women and their condition from the focus of the novel? It allows her to usher in a rather subversive criticism of the gender roles present in the early 19th century without involving women in the elocution of the criticism, thereby giving her criticism of the gender roles the value of male authority that holds so much weight in patriarchal society.

In the analysis of gender role definition between the 1880s and the 1950s, a feminist approach to the text is insufficient. A feminist reading does not take into account the historical and cultural context of a text, making “literary criticism, in these terms, a limited creature that needs the help of anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and more” (179). A new historical approach in congruence with a feminist approach to *Gilead* provides the broad treatment of cultural context and other interdisciplinary factors that influence the definition of gender roles.

Late 19th and early 20th century saw a drastic cultural disparity between the western and eastern United States societies. The east began to industrialize in the period known as Reconstruction, following the Civil War. Women, typically the keepers of the household, make their way into the male-dominated work force by way of factory jobs and

begin to seek equality with men through the law; a vision that comes to fruition in 1920 with the 19th amendment declaring universal suffrage. However, this progressive feminine movement was exclusive to the east. The west remained largely rural and agricultural, which disallowed women from seeking any sort of role outside of the household. Therefore, the lack of opportunity present in the west contributed to women's confinement to traditional gender roles.

The largest factor in the creation of such cultural disparity between the east and the west, however, were the effects of the Enlightenment on Protestantism. Darwinian evolutionary theory called into question the Creationism of the Bible, and in turn, the literal interpretation of the Bible. The unification of the naturalistic worldview of Darwin's scientific discoveries and Protestantism became known as Liberalism. Liberalists held a loose interpretation of the Bible the miracles within, interpreting God's creation of the world in six days to be symbolic of the billions of years in which it took for Creation to develop. In response to this progressive Protestantism, Fundamentalism proclaimed the name of Convention. Fundamentalists held to the traditional way of interpreting the Bible literally, and therefore rejected Darwin's evolutionary theory.

The tension that arises between Fundamentalism and Liberalism over literality and the interpretation of scripture will be the focus of this essay. Fundamentalists "tended to emphasize assent to unrevisable doctrinal propositions as the essential and timeless core of Christianity" (567) in response to the Liberalist interpretation of the Bible.

Fundamentalists interpret the Bible as literalists and take Biblical writings as dictations of factual historical events, whereas the Liberalists see the scriptures as metaphorical or literal. Liberalists also see taking a definitive stance on the literality of the Bible as

inconsequential to the message it reveals. Therefore, a literalist interpretation sees scripture as factual and historical, in addition to instructive, but the Liberalist is only interested in the instruction the Bible provides rather than its literality.

The tension between these warring branches of Protestantism in the early 20th century allow for an examination of the resultant gender roles under both Fundamentalism and Liberalism in *Gilead*. Liberalists saw their change as a progression, a betterment of previous thought, whereas the Fundamentalists saw it as a demonic deviation from the Truth. Liberalists embraced change while the Fundamentalists clung to convention. In relation to the feminist movement occurring at the same time in American history, the women gain equality under the law and begin to defy conventional gender roles in Liberalist-rich urban areas, while the Fundamentalist-rich western United States still saw women confined to the household and marginalized in society. Fundamentalist Protestantism cultivates constrictive gender roles for women, while Liberalism allows women freedom to act in equality with men and blur the line between male and female gender roles, but only to an extent, due to the nature of patriarchy in the West.

John Ames' grandfather represents Fundamentalist Protestantism. John Ames' grandfather "lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments" (31), demonstrating his prescription to the fundamentalist approach to Scripture. He even has visions with "the Lord, standing there beside [him], [having] one hundred times the reality for [him] that [John] [has] standing here now" (85), which speaks to his belief in the supernatural interactions God has with his people, stemming from a literal interpretation of Biblical miracles.

When grandfather Ames stayed with his son and daughter-in-law, he never turned down someone in need. He “would actually give away the blankets off his bed...and [John’s] mother was at a good deal of trouble to replace them” (32). He operated based on the Scripture, “to him who asks, give” (33), which made it “hard to contradict” (33). Not only does he use his patriarchal authority as means to act autonomously and oppressively, but also uses his stark, literal interpretations of Scripture, making it difficult for Ames’ mother to oppose his authority. Instead, to gain some power, she quietly subverts his authority by “[taking] to washing her money and then pushing it into the lard or burying it in the sugar” (33) to undermine grandfather Ames. Therefore, the oppression Ames’ mother experiences at the hands of grandfather Ames does not solely stem from his patriarchal authority, but also his Fundamentalist approach to the Bible, which reinforces his authority with the divine authority of God’s Word.

Mary Wollstonecraft, feminist theorist, recognizes women as powerless and having to resort to manipulation in order to gain any power. As a response to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand’s assertion that women should be excluded from public education, she argued women needed education. Society expected women to be “[susceptible] of heart, [delicate] of sentiment, and [refined] of taste” (106), which “are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness” (106). Men, such as Maurice de Talleyrand, saw no reason for women’s education because of the domestic lifestyle they led. Wollstonecraft, ahead of her time, argued education was paramount to “obtain a character as a human being” (106) and would lead to equality between men and women. However, until women cease to put on the “epithets of weakness” deemed appropriate by society, they must continue to protect their interests through manipulation.

The relationship between Ames' mother and grandfather continues to reveal the oppression women face under Fundamentalists. As the grandfather "watched her with that terrible eye" (33), mother Ames just crossed her arms and stared right back, unwilling to give any more money to the generous Fundamentalist. Grandfather walks away, and mother declares victory, "I stared him down!" (33). While subtle, the grandfather attempts to coerce the mother into giving up more of the money. The fact that this exchange does not appear to be coercive at first glance only reinforces the case for patriarchy's deep roots in Western society. Also, mother Ames "seemed more amazed than anything" (33) when she realizes she did not collapse under the grandfather's will. Such surprise because one human being did not relent to the coercion of another speaks directly to the condition of women under Fundamentalist men. Men and society do not see women as equal, but inferior.

The oppression of women under grandfather Ames does not always appear to be directly related to his religious subscription. However, Fundamentalism inherently encourages patriarchy and inherent female inferiority, which translates into the way women are treated under grandfather Ames. In the same way, Liberalism allows for more fluidity in regard to gender roles based on their loose interpretation of the Bible. John Ames being the representative of Liberal Protestantism, encourages, whether consciously or unconsciously, an expanded female role and less of a conviction for patriarchy. Therefore, the manner in which men treat women and their role in society is indicative of religious conviction, whether it is Fundamentalism or Liberalism. Therefore, the connections between the branch of Protestantism and gender roles is often convoluted, but connected nonetheless.

John Ames represents the Liberalist Protestant ideology. The value he places on the natural significance of things and the teachings of atheists as well as theists indicates his subscription to the Liberal Protestant camp. Liberalists sought to unify the naturalism Darwin's evolutionary theory encouraged with the teachings of the Bible, which John Ames clearly does. When relating his baptism of cats as a boy to his son, Ames deems the teaching of the famous atheist philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach appropriate to the occasion. Feuerbach elaborates on the "profound natural significance of water" (24), as water is "significant in itself, as water" (23); a fact he uses to consecrate the baptismal ceremony despite his unbelief in the existence of a God to make the ceremony holy. In this way, Ames reveals his belief in the natural significance of things. Similarly, when John Ames speaks of prayer, he speaks of the intimacy therein (19). Not in his belief of a God who grants prayer requests, but in the holiness of the act of prayer itself. Prayer provides intimacy. Ames discusses the natural significance of each of these consecrated facets of Protestantism and the holiness they themselves hold, which indicates his subscription to Liberalist Naturalism.

John Ames' wife has an expanded gender role under his Liberalism. The British feminists and their Marxist approach to tracing female oppression in patriarchy, point to "power structures, which are male dominated" (108). Power structures include government, the workforce, industry, the church, and the family. Therefore, when Ames' wife begins to step outside of "her kitchen" () and into a greater role in the household, she blurs the line between male and female gender roles and accesses more freedom and mobility for herself. Typically in the early 20th century household, the father was in charge of bringing the children in up in the teaching of the Bible, due to their education and

women's lack thereof. Ames' wife, "unschooled in Scripture, and in just about everything else" (67) still took to "teaching [their son] the Beatitudes last night" (67). A rarity in *Gilead*, a woman exercises authority in the household, even with material that requires education.

This simple act of authority his wife exercises in the household carries her down a path to an expanded gender role. She then expresses interest in education. She no longer feels content with her lack of competence when it comes to scripture and tells Ames "she wants to read those old sermons that are up in the attic, and [he] believes she will do that" (69). With her beginning to teach scripture to her son, she develops a need for education. By doing so, she escapes the opinion of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand in that women have no need for education, and begins "to obtain a character as a human being" (106) rather than an inferior, as Wollstonecraft articulates. As she pursues "a character as a human being" she begins to escape the inferiority associated with the female gender role; a progressive circumstance that Ames' Liberality cultivates.

Ames Liberalism makes way for a greater female gender role. He fully accepts the subjectivity that he brings to his religion and his God, with grace and humility. He outlines "Calvin's God was a Frenchman, just as mine is a Middle Westerner of New England extraction" (124). He understands his inability to comprehend God and constantly records his fascination with a world he will never understand. With a humble spirit he understands "[his] only role is to be gracious" (123). Ames' Liberalism allows him to acknowledge the subjectivity of his interpretation of God and the Bible, whereas Fundamentalism enforces a strict, objective, and literal interpretation of scripture, which leaves little room for acknowledgement of the influence one brings to his view of religion. Ames understands his

role to be a gracious one, while the Fundamentalist sees his role as the patriarch of the family, given him by the divinely inspired word of God. The taking on of such a role ostensibly ordained by God, places the woman in a submissive role that she cannot contradict based on its divine authority. But Ames understands his role to simply be gracious. He allows for his wife to assume a greater role and encourage her desire for education and participation within the power structures of family and religion because of his lenient stance toward biblically dictated gender roles.

Michel Foucault, French philosopher, understands the value of discourse in modern society. He expresses such importance as, "if we control the discourse, we control power." Foucault defines discourse as "a group of statements or utterances about a specific theme or topic." Due to their confinement to the household, women have no voice and little education to equip them for such participation in discourse. Foucault's assertion agrees with the British feminists and their belief in "male dominated power structures" (108). Men control the discourse due to their domination of government, the work force, and family, giving them an arena to participate in the discourse and value to their voice as individuals. Women historically do not have representation in the government or the work force, due to their conventional confinement to the household. This confinement robs women of the opportunity to participate in the discourse and gain power, which leads to the male-favored society, or a patriarchy, that exists. John Ames' Liberalism, however, allows his wife to step outside women's long held silence.

With the exercise of authority and hunger for education, Ames' wife steps into a place no other woman of *Gilead* goes: theological discourse. Jack Boughton comes to John Ames asking about predestination and free-will, a common Protestant issue regarding

God's sovereignty. The men held the discourse, until "[Ames' wife] spoke up, which surprised us all" (152). The surprise Ames felt is indicative of the novelty of a woman speaking up and entering into the discourse long held by men. Her entrance into discourse affords her a certain power that remains unique to her character, as Glory, Boughton's daughter, is present but not participatory in the discussion. Therefore, Liberalism allows Ames' wife to step into a greater gender role beyond household confinement and servitude, by allowing for the exercise of authority in the household, the pursuit of education, and finally the entrance into male-dominated discourse.

A stipulation arises in regard to the freedom Liberalism affords women. While his wife does blur the line between gender roles, Liberalism does not transcend the oppression of patriarchy, but simply grants a limited room of freedom within patriarchy. Patriarchy, as mentioned before, runs deep enough in the West that its presence is not often felt. The subtle remnants of patriarchy that Liberalism cannot transcend go unnoticed, even by the narrator. Ames feels his death is imminent and that he must consider the preparation to be made when he dies. But ultimately, "it shames [him] to think that [he] will leave [his son] and [wife] so naked to the world" (31). In the absence of a man, a woman is vulnerable and naked to the world. This statement encapsulates the lack of opportunity and means to provide for themselves that women have in society, even under Liberalism. The work force is male-dominated and therefore difficult for women to infiltrate, however, Ames' statement hints at something deeper than just a lack of economic opportunity. Leaving her "naked to the world" implies that he is the clothing and the protection from the world and women need a man to provide protection. Therein lies the patriarchal belief in women's

inherent inferiority to men that continues to oppress women regardless of the branch of Protestantism.

John Ames' wife never receives a name. He refers to her only as "your mother," in his addresses to his son. Appearing to be a harmless reference, however, it speaks to women's association with men; a pattern throughout the novel. All women are associated with a male, either a wife, sister, or mother. The fact that a female character does not stand alone and independent from men in a single case clearly indicates women's limited interactions with people only through the male figure. In each instance, leaving his wife "naked to the world" and only referring to women through another man, points to the prevailing sentiment of patriarchy that exists even within Liberalist Protestantism.

In conclusion, Fundamentalist Protestants cultivate an oppressive environment with constrictive gender roles for women, while Liberalism affords women freedom to the extent to which patriarchal bounds will allow. Each branch of Protestantism's interpretation of the Bible greatly influences the effect each has on gender roles; the Fundamentalist's literalist approach and the Liberalist's encouragement of the subjectivity each individual brings to the text. Patriarchy, however, guarantees an imbalance of power and the marginalization of females despite Liberalism's inherent encouragement of expanded gender roles. Therefore, while Liberalism affords some freedom for the women in Western society, the ultimate aim to achieve female equality is the eradication of patriarchy. John Ames' wife's successful entrance into male-dominated discourse paves the way for feminine to gain representation in societal discourse. By doing so, women will share leadership of the power structures long held by men, and gain the power that eludes the women of *Gilead* and society. Awareness, however, is the first step to the eradication of

the patriarchal oppression of women, and Robinson's illustration of feminine oppression is her attempt to make the public aware of patriarchy's deep and destructive roots in society.

Works Cited

DeBerg, Betty A. *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*.

Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990. Print.

Dobie, Ann B. "Feminist Criticism." *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*.

South Melbourne, Vic.: Heinle & Heinle, 2002. 104-26. Print.

Hemingway, Ernest. "Ernest Hemingway, The Art of Fiction No.21." Interview by George

Plimpton. *Paris Review* May 1954: n. pag. Web.

Machen, J. Gresham, and Presbyterian. "Christianity and Liberalism." Introduction. *Christianity*

and Liberalism. New York: Macmillan, 1923. 1-16. Print.

Olson, Roger E. *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*.

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999. Print

Robinson, Marilynne. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004. Print.

Shmoop Editorial Team. "The Order of Discourse." *Shmoop.com*. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 10 Dec. 2014.