Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*

A New Historicist and Feminist Reading
Quick Summary

- Gilead, Iowa—1956
- Diary entries to his son
  - 3rd generation pastor
  - Grandfather, father relationship

Important to note:
- Male narrator
- Relationships to son, father, and grandfather are the focus
Robinson is sensitive to patriarchy

However:

- Historically accurate
- Gives valuable male authority to her text

Illustrates interesting array of historical circumstances that lead to women's oppression

- Aka: Protestantism
Liberalism and Fundamentalism

- Liberalism
  - Response to Darwinism
- Fundamentalism
  - Response to liberalism
- Point of conflict:
  - Interpretation of the Bible
    - Literal vs. symbolic
- Thesis:
Grandfather Ames

- Fundamentalist
  - “lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments” (31)
  - “the Lord, standing there beside [him], [having] one hundred times the reality for [him] that [John] [has] standing here now” (85)
John Ames

- Liberalist
  - Seeks to unify Darwinian naturalism with Protestantism
    - ""profound natural significance of water"" (24), as water is ""significant in itself, as water"" (23)
    - Prayers inherent intimacy (19)
“unschooled in Scripture, and in just about everything else” (67) still took to “teaching [their son] the Beatitudes last night” (67).

- For the first time, a woman in Gilead exercises authority over a male
- Fathers teach the Bible (especially with a pastor as father)
“she wants to read those old sermons that are up in the attic, and [he] believes she will do that” (69).

- Charles Maurice de Talleyrand
  - No need for education due to domestic role
- Mary Wollstonecraft
  - “character as a human being”
John Ames’ Wife

- She enters into theological discourse
- Michel Foucault
  - “if we control the discourse, we control power”
- Enters the theological discourse...
  - “she spoke up, which surprised us all” (152).

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.
To conclude...

- 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
By entering into societal discourse:
• Women will share leadership of the power structures long held by me
• Shape an egalitarian society

However, awareness is first step.


