

# Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

A New Historicist and Feminist  
Reading

# Quick Summary

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- ◉ Gilead, Iowa—1956
- ◉ Diary entries to his son
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> generation pastor
  - Grandfather, father relationship
- ◉ Important to note:
  - Male narrator
  - Relationships to son, father, and grandfather are the focus

# “Where the women at?”

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- ◉ 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

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## ◉ Liberalism

- Response to Darwinism

## ◉ Fundamentalism

- Response to liberalism

## ◉ Point of conflict:

- Interpretation of the Bible
  - Literal vs. symbolic

## ◉ *Thesis:*

# Grandfather Ames

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## ◉ 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

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## ◎ 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)

# John Ames' Wife

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- “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)

# John Ames' Wife

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- “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

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- 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...

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- 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

# Take Away...

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- ◎ 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.

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