

**“Light within light”:
The Possibilities of Grace in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*.**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines two contemporary works of fiction, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008), exploring how the characters of each novel contend with conceptions of grace, forgiveness, and agency, all hinging around the character of Jack Boughton. This is of particular interest to me because it is not the movement of Jack Boughton that must be contended or examined, but rather the grace others must display to forgive, tolerate and ultimately accept him as part of their own flock. By using metaphor as an alternative epistemology in the first part and the theories of consciousness propagated by the German Idealist thinkers G.W.F. Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach in the second, this thesis displays how characters in each novel surmount prejudice and preconception and allow Jack Boughton to move from caricature to a full and robust humanity.

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*The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just
as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning.
Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something.
So much does.*
—Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

*Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will
not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for
seeing.*
—Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

John Ames' Light of Tolerance: Extending Grace in *Gilead*

In an interview in 2006, Marilynne Robinson claims that, to her, metaphor is not an allegorical clarification of meaning, but rather it is “a way of thinking” (Gardner 48). Situating metaphor apart from any reductive correlation of signifiers, it becomes equitable with other methods of interpretation such as perception and conception. Metaphor becomes a method of perception, a creation of reality for the spectator. She clarifies, stating that metaphor as a perception is “a language through which things are communicated to us” (48). And like things understood intellectually and scientifically, metaphor as perception “exist[s] side by side without contradiction” (48). This allows a reading of her work through both the metaphors the reader experiences as well as those which the characters see through. As O'Connor states, these metaphors, which have become belief, are not what is seen or an excuse for seeing all else, but are merely the light by which everything else is perceived.

Robinson's novels, the epistolary *Gilead* (2004), as well as the narrative parallel novel *Home* (2008) have been read primarily as religious texts and, therefore, the

metaphors have been placed within a pre-articulated schema of traditional Christian symbolism—the sun equating with Christ and so forth. However, with the consideration that none of her metaphors are reducible to simple allegorical meaning, the novel’s narrative movement takes upon an entirely different shape, bursting any definitive meaning her images have been given from within the traditional framework of the Christian symbolic. Rather, metaphor-as-a-narrative-shape invites a reading of her novels as a particular method of perception, a reading of the characters within the novel as interpreting their own equally valid particular realities, an allowance not usually afforded. A symbolic reading therefore denied, this capacity of metaphor enters her text to reform how metaphor, and therefore perception, is framed and altered, ultimately allowing for metaphor to become an alternative epistemology for her characters. The characters’ individual realities and expectations of the other create the possibility for what I call a “space of grace,” allowing the characters to be seen and treated as equals, outside of a hierarchical dialectic. Taking a cue from Marilynne Robinson’s book of essays, *The Death of Adam*, and interviews where she stresses the importance of primary sources, this thesis focuses mainly on her two novels and the two works of philosophy: Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*.¹

Within *Gilead*, Reverend John Ames is writing a letter to his son to teach him all the things he would have liked to had he the chance. From the initial framing as an

¹ This is no great loss, for while I discuss the common conception of Robinson’s work as detailed by the many reviews, there is only one scholarly article published about *Gilead*, and none regarding *Home*. This does not, however, indicate that her work does not merit extensive commentary—*Gilead* won the Pulitzer Prize, and her first work of fiction, *Housekeeping*, has elicited many articles over two decades and is included in *The 100 Greatest Novels of All Time*, as compiled by *The Observer*. Rather, the paucity of criticism is only a result of both the novels being published so recently.

epistolary text, Robinson has set up a particular perspective by which the reader (the intended son, or us) can understand both Ames and his world circa the 1950s and the changes that are just beginning to take place, extending Ames' perceptual shift to a social conception of otherness as the struggle for civil rights begins. His method of perception belies both his character and his apprehensions, how he perceives the world around him and, most intriguingly, how he perceives interpersonal interaction. He displays reverence for every character, though his relationship with his namesake and godson, John Ames Boughton, known as Jack, is strained and becomes the central conflict of the novel. Through the space of grace, I show how Ames is able to revalue previously established difference and be able to forgive Jack's past, though he never understands Jack well enough to be able to afford him a robust form of agency, the ability to act differently in the future than he has in the past.

Home tells the story of the Boughton household during Jack's visit and shows similar difficulties Jack has relating to others as an equal. Jack, in both novels, is judged as the miscreant boy he is remembered to be, the same young adult who abandoned his young bastard child when he left Gilead twenty years previous, without consideration for the man he has recently become and has the possibility to be. The central struggle for the characters in both novels revolves around how they perceive Jack and how they can interact and communicate with him. This becomes problematic because each character, namely John Ames and Jack's sister Glory, must replace a prejudicial view of Jack with a different perspective of acceptance and equality—a perspective which does not revolve around the automatic placement of Jack as consistent with a certain behavior, but allows for the grace to change his previous character as well as an empathy toward Jack's

experience, which Ames approaches, but only Glory can fully realize. However, engaging the metaphorical possibilities of reshifting perception, the equal valuation of Jack and the possibility of a robust agency can only be done outside of the traditional, hierarchical master-slave dialectic, and within a space of grace. This space is configured as a forgiveness and tolerance in *Gilead*, but is fully realized as a robust agency within *Home*.

Most of the sparse commentary and reviews of Robinson's later novels structure them as meditations, mysterious, spiritual and inspiring, but still ignore the central question of how consciousness informs perception (both in the sacred and mundane) as well as the grace John Ames and Glory participate within and extend to Jack when their method of perception shifts. In order to elucidate the latter concepts, I apply theories of consciousness originated and discussed in nineteenth-century German Idealism. However, this is not the imposition it initially seems; in *Gilead*, John Ames discusses in length the controversy and merits of a religious person to read Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. He discusses the thinker so much that his wife considers naming the cat Feuerbach. The importance of Feuerbach's thought must be contextualized and only becomes relevant as a post-Hegelian critique of the conceptions both of consciousness and Christianity. In order to understand how exactly a Feuerbachian conception of communication works, this thesis establishes how the Hegelian dialect postulates that consciousness interprets phenomena by projecting the ego into an object and then retracts it with a new object of knowledge and how this creates, and even dictates, how the master-slave dialectic informs and constricts communication between people precisely because of the power differential. However, Feuerbach reverses the

direction of the dialectic regarding the divine, meaning that instead of perceiving an object and then projecting the ego from oneself in order to comprehend the object as an object of knowledge, he postulates that one projects an image of deity from oneself and then perceives it. Thus, he allows for the attribution and perception of the divine within others, thereby refuting the master-slave dialectic and allows for communication to be possible between equals, or the fully realized space of grace.

By initially establishing the different possible directions of consciousness as detailed by Hegel and Feuerbach, I display how Jack is the victim of the former limiting perception, and only through great effort and a shifting of characters' perceptions within a spectrum of possible meaning, is Jack allowed a freedom—or a difference without intrinsic value. This perspective is at the forefront of *Gilead* because it is a first person narration; so as readers, we are privy to John Ames' thoughts and considerations. We see how his space of grace is different from Glory's and how he restructures difference through metaphor and thus is able to forgive and accept Jack. While he does not make the final offer of grace that Glory does, it is important to note that it is not a defect within his grace, or his offering of it, but merely within an old man's hesitancy to remit his experiences of the past. However, his offering of a space of grace is exactly sufficient to circumstance and is a necessary predecessor to Glory's final offer and Jack's hopeful rehabilitation.

An examination of Ames' struggles, memories, and shifts in perspective requires an investigation of his consciousness as a separate language with a separate aesthetic and separate valuation of difference. But an investigation will only uncover the interworkings of Ames' personal civilization if understood upon his own terms. Thus my

query will hinge upon a particular foundational event in Ames' life, where he visits his grandfather's grave, a memory he refers to often and fondly. The primacy of this memory becomes a metaphor for how Ames understands phenomena around him, how he distinguishes difference and how perspectives and ideas can shift with the consideration of new phenomena. What then follows is a reshifting of language-to-phenomena or sign-to-signified. This is only a reaffirming of metaphor, as Robinson self-admittedly writes within an "Emersonian view that language is metaphorical in its origins and its fundamental character" (Johnson 183). This view posits language as an arbitrary relation to that which it describes, and that one can only grasp the signified from the sign by an abstract relation between the two concepts. She clarifies how an extended metaphor, one being beyond the syntax lost within accepted familiarity, functions, saying, "Extended metaphors have syntax at a larger scale, and they exploit the fact that the mind moves through the likeness in things" (183). Thus, as a foundational metaphor, or way in which John Ames' mind will move through interpretation and cause other phenomena to be structured because of their likeness and value, this thesis will explore a particularly poignant scene of John Ames' life, which occurs early in his childhood, his memory and the novel.

Once the movement of acceptance and creation of grace is established, the actuality is easily shown through Jack's and Glory's interaction in *Home*. Previous to exemplifying how this space of grace is created, the characters must be placed upon a plane where meaning can be shifted, which is the level of metaphor. A metaphorical understanding of the text explicates the possibility for phenomena to surpass known categories and allows John Ames, Jack, and Glory Boughton to enter a space of grace; by

following their model and armed with the comprehension that meaning is not fixed, we, as a whole, can reshape our understanding, perspective and thusly allow for the characters in our life to be encountered with a grace which embraces before it judges.

When focusing on *Gilead*, the majority of reviewers and the few critics who have dealt with the text all agree that, first of all, the book is expounding religion as much as it is an act of narration, but also that the central conflict of the novel revolves around John Ames, the narrator of *Gilead*, and his struggle to accept his godson and namesake, Jack Boughton. However, another central concern of the sparse commentary is one precisely of perception. Laura Tanner, who has also published work on Robinson's earlier novel, *Housekeeping*, sees a particular representation of perception in the nostalgia brought out by Ames' anticipation of the loss which accompanies death. She focuses on Ames' lyrical retelling of his collected past and "how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception" (Tanner 228). She continues to explain that the central conflict of the novel is that "Ames's experience of dying traps him in the collapsing space of perception and representation" (228). This is to say that perception does change, but is only brought about by the fact that Ames knows he is dying—a fact which cannot be contested since the novel is an extended letter from an aged father lamenting he will not be able to raise his a seven-year-old son and wishes to tell the young boy, who is named after Robert Boughton as Jack was named after Ames, his "begats" (Robinson, *Gilead* 9). While this is a persuasive and intriguing reading, and therefore a particular way of seeing the world, it presupposes a static consciousness of John Ames which is altered by the trauma of anticipating loss and not by the external phenomena itself. While this justly highlights the "sensory details of lived experience"

(Tanner 228) and centralizes the creation of reality around the observer, a point which will aid my argument, it does not allow for a robust involvement with the world where a shift in understanding or a reconsideration of outward phenomena is caused by the lived experience qua experience, but merely is a materialist consideration of the great inevitable.

Reinforcing the same idea of the individual being the source of reality, Betty Mensch, in the only other lengthy treatment of *Gilead*, claims Robinson is suggesting that, “Howsoever ephemeral and transitory they are . . . images in the mind are all we have in relation to the world” (Mensch 222). She then aligns this with the theology of Jonathan Edwards, and thus places *Gilead* firmly within a particular Calvinist worldview and history. While her reading is incisive, she does not highlight the movement within the novel itself, choosing rather to focus on how *Gilead* informs a new reading of a specific history and reinscribes this history upon a post-modern world—though it should be mentioned that her work is a lengthy review comparing *Gilead* to George Marsden’s recent biography of Jonathan Edwards. Mensch adroitly compares the two works to show how they communicate to one another and to what she calls a post-modern consciousness; the review focuses more on how the books speak outwardly to the reader and the history and historian. This ignores the struggles, conceits, and victories of the characters, and thus denies their humanity, albeit fictional. In fact, Mensch concludes her essay with a single sentence paragraph stating, “Gilead, of course, is fictional” (241). Again, John Ames is depicted as a static character who underscores the shifting contours of Edwards’ legacy rather than as a flexible consciousness capable of change and further understanding. She hardly glances toward the conflict between John Ames and Jack, and

does not indicate that the novel contains any conflict beyond the historical and theological expressions of Ames and his heritage.

My research enters the conversation highlighting John Ames's journey, consciousness, struggle and awakening—or what I will call an instance of grace. The very format of the novel seems to beg for a consideration of Ames' experience as it is first person. And we, as readers, can only access what Ames chooses to relate to his son; though, he admittedly strays from his initial intention and occasionally writes in what can be seen as an attempt to understand phenomena rather than transfer memory and history to his son. The epistolary form is apposite for Ames' expression and for an investigation of his consciousness precisely because every detail is related through his understanding without any interference from an omniscient narrator. To illustrate how this applies to her historical reading, Mensch says, "The novel-as-letter form allows Robinson to hint at historical shifts and contours of this much-studied legacy [Edwards and early American Protestantism] without attempting any single definition of its content" (224). Each perspective is particular to a specific observer as a source of reality that exists among differing conclusions without contradiction.

If a fictional individual's representation can illuminate history without confining it, then it more so exemplifies how the very journey and struggle of history is one which takes place within Ames himself. In fact, Ames ponders a metaphor for the phenomenon of individual difference, saying:

I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built upon the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations .

. . . We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have also fallen heir to the same customs, trade in the same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us. (*Gilead* 197)

Here Ames establishes the fact that each separate individual will have a separate and incommunicable reality, and that it is custom which helps us surmount these inviolable differences. Custom becomes a metaphor for how communication is possible. By showing how each human is metaphorically a separate civilization, Ames is also stating that every personal value of difference, such as the distance between good and bad, right and wrong or dirt and cleanliness, is upheld solely by the individual, and therefore can only be revalued within an individual framework—a framework which is metaphorical in nature and uses the extension and metaphor of grace to surmount these “utterly vast spaces.” Thus, if we see each individual as a creation of similar coincidences and yet possessing an entirely unique yet valid point of view, it is no stretch of the imagination to see each “civilization” as the source of a particular reality correspondent to that unique viewpoint. It is, then, even less of a stretch to see how the struggles of John Ames shape and inform his reality and further, how the understanding of his struggle and awakening unto grace can act as a metaphor for our individual involvement with our internal civilizations.

When he is still young, John Ames witnesses a simultaneous sunset and moonrise while on a journey to Kansas. Ames and his father had gone to find and keep the grave of Ames’ grandfather, a pastor who moved from Maine with the express purpose of

freeing those in bondage, which he understood to mean slaves.² Ames and his father have spent all day cleaning off the meager, prairie graveyard and have knelt in prayer to bless and sanctify the final resting place. John Ames looks up and sees what he thinks is the sun going down in the East. Then, in an attempt to make his perception align with the science he knew, Ames renegotiates the situation to realize that it was “a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it” (*Gilead* 14). To Ames both the sun and the moon are visible, but more so, each of them seem to be simultaneously producing light. He does not state that the sun sheds light and the moon, which is by itself dark, can only reflect light. To his perception they both become luminary sources. And more than both producing light, each body suspends the light within the air, within the very space he is in. He states that both the moon and the sun were “so bright you couldn’t get a clear look at them” (14). So his perception of the encompassing light comes both from illumination and blindness. However, not being contradictory, this particular blindness becomes a method of seeing. Ames thought this spectacle was such a sight he interrupted his father’s prayer to tell him to look at the “moon” (14). He then goes on to state that they were “exactly between” the sun and moon (15).

This passage evinces a number of readings. The literal understanding places Ames in time and space and to allow the possibility for his, and therefore the reader’s, perception of the event. Beyond the literal is an allegorical reading which would imply a specific eschatological understanding of the prayer, the sun reflecting off the moon, and

² Because John Ames shares a name with his father and his grandfather, I will refer to the narrator as John Ames and to the other two men in relation to him as Ames’ father and Ames’ grandfather to preclude any confusion.

of Ames' state of mind, but this is precisely the reading that the text refuses. If each symbol were placed within the traditional Christian symbolic order, it would make no sense for Ames to interrupt his father's prayer to look at the moon rather than the sun. This particular reading would also dislodge when Ames mistakes the moon for the sun, showing that the true light of Christ can be mistaken; unless this is refuted to show how mistaken Ames was, his glorifying in both sources' light and the light strung between them would border on apostasy. However, when read as a metaphor, which is not reductive but can be a way of thinking for Ames and a way of thinking for the reader, this image becomes a rubric by which the entire novel can be read and different values placed accordingly. With the grace of multiple possible readings, this scene has a poignant primacy, and this formation guides and shapes a reading of the novel, illuminating aspects and understandings which previously would have been obscured. Specifically, the explication/exploration of this metaphor establishes a spectrum of delineated difference by which the characters and the text identify self from other, right from wrong, and black from white.

This scene is formative for the reader's understanding of who John Ames is and how he thinks, partially because it is the earliest memory Ames recalls. The repetition of this scene directs both Ames' son's and the reader's attention to how important it is; but the main indicator of its importance is that this moment serves as both a formative metaphor and a representational metaphor for the orbital shift John Ames must take in the novel to resolve his inner conflict with Jack. The initial formation of how a consciousness can and must be restructured as shown by this passage allows for Ames' later understandings and serves as a structure which underlies the arbitrary correlation of

sign to signified, or of value to specific difference. Robinson situates Ames “exactly between” the sun and the moon on a desolate prairie of Kansas (15). But the moon shines so bright he mistakes it for the sun. This is his initial and traditional understanding of phenomena. However, realizing that the sun was setting in the east becomes the event which requires a shifting of his understanding. Rather than abandoning what he believes he knows, or has been told by science, he reshapes his perception to see and interpret the outer phenomena differently. So here Ames’ mind is exploiting the likeness of things to create an entire picture—picture which places him in the center of things, or, metaphorically, as the center of his reality and therefore its author. The metaphor also is an example of what it will explain and is simultaneously foundational for how Ames’ understanding of phenomena will be shown to work.

Ames is in the literal and metaphorical position to reconsider his perceptions and reevaluate difference. Standing between the sun and the moon places two bodies of light across from one another diametrically. Metaphorically, light is representative of knowledge. However, not to be confining, these poles come to represent the different expressions knowledge can elucidate. Thus, they stand in for two opposing poles with a spectrum of possible variants between them. This is further complicated by the idea that the moon does not naturally produce light. If we are allowing light to be representative for knowledge or awakening, then this model shows that there is only one source and therefore only one interpretation. But with Ames as the source of his own reality, this uni-directional form of knowledge is refuted for an individual understanding of phenomena. In keeping with a historical accuracy for her characters, Robinson allows for what Mensch calls a particular Edwardsean conversion narrative of experience. She

describes the concept, saying, “‘tradition,’ understood as ‘objective’ legacy in history, often dissolves into discontinuity, yet becomes central to ‘subjective’ experience; experiential subjectivity provides the most direct evidence of objective continuity” (Mensch 238). To Ames as the experiential subject, both the moon and the sun are sources of light as he initially mistakes the moon for the sun. And furthermore, he is suspended between the poles, in an interplay of light. Both poles and any point in between can be the light which Ames sees; and as knowledge, each possible source of light, which in this metaphor have become infinite—or at least immeasurable—represents a different way of understanding the same phenomena, and, in turn, only reinforces an objective continuity of phenomena. Thus by denying a traditional one-to-one correlation between sign and signifier, and by situating the observer as the source of reality, each individual understanding and each different perspective becomes a potentially and equally valid object of knowledge—with the extents and consequences of that knowledge the greatest degree of affect, richness and impact within the individual’s consciousness.

The specific realization the young Ames has here impacts him and is formative for reading the rest of the novel precisely because of its poignancy. Ames’ grandfather, who had been a preacher and chaplain in the Union army, had been living with Ames and Ames’ parents until he disappeared to Kansas. He had come from Maine to settle Iowa and Kansas as free states, which situates him deeply in the early American Protestant movement, as stipulated by Mensch. While in Maine he received a vision that led him to fight for abolition. In his words, the Lord said, “Free the captive. Preach good news to the poor. Proclaim liberty throughout the land” (*Gilead* 175). As remarked in the letter where Ames learns of this vision, each of these statements is scripture (Isaiah 51:14,

Luke 4:18, and Leviticus 25:10, respectively)³. However, Ames' grandfather does not understand these scriptures in the context of the Bible—Leviticus 25 continues regarding the proper buying and selling of those in bondage saying, “both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you” (Leviticus 25:44). Rather, in an example of how metaphor can be used as a method of thought, Ames' grandfather chooses not to understand this chapter literally, but understands the vision to be a metaphor signaling the unrighteousness of slavery. In another account of the vision, this time through Ames' perspective, we are told that the Lord stood before Ames' grandfather in shackles that “had rankled right down to His bones” (*Gilead* 49). Reading this literally, the vision burns in him like a fire while he moves west and becomes a preacher in a town that became part of The Underground Railroad. He even goes to fight in the Civil War and loses an eye at battle. Abhorring the violence displayed as unrighteous behavior, Ames' father leaves home to stay with the Quakers.

From that point on, Ames' father and grandfather could never agree on many points of doctrine or method, be they small or large, and never had a reconciliation before the old man leaves for the last time. This aids the metaphor of the sunset scene because Ames' father has gone to find his father as an attempt at finally making peace. This also hearkens back to the image of each individual as a separate civilization built upon the ruins of the past generations, for Ames and his father are standing within a small graveyard that is closer to the definition of ruin than most any other image Robinson

³ The King James Version of the Bible was used in all cases within this paper. While *Gilead* does mention the use of a Greek New Testament, no specific version of the Bible was mentioned, but given the time in which these events happened it is supposed that Ames' grandfather would have been most familiar with the King James Version.

provides. Thus, underneath the literal presence of Ames and his father being in Kansas, there is the reason for them being there, replete with a determination to resolve a difference of ideology founded upon difference of race. These differences can be represented as the difference between the sun and moon, the one light bearing, the other, reflecting that light, but different both in ideology as represented by orbit and purpose—a purpose which is based upon the difference between light and dark. And as Ames describes, he and his father were “exactly between them” (15). The literal positioning of Ames and his father within the metaphor shows both that they are involved in the flux between the darkness and light; and also that the difference between darkness and light, or black and white, is easily mistaken and exists not on a binary function but on a spectrum with taut skeins between them.

As a method for regarding, this metaphor elucidates the perception of difference as well as the demarcation of ontological difference. Here, as Ames is between both the sun and the moon; he is metaphorically and perceptually able to see difference on a spectrum which encompasses and revolves around him. Using a metaphor not as a correlative for another signifier but as an interiorized manner of conception highlights the perceiver’s reality as the center of meaning creation. Robinson describes this specific function, saying, “perception is meaningful in the sense of being integrative, it is not a report on reality but it is the primary locus of reality itself” (Gardner 48). Thus, the perception of difference as a continuum becomes interpretative, relative and individualized. While the fact that difference is perceived is not arguable here, the specific placement and meaning of each particular difference is not fixed. This lack of fixity allows for traditional understandings of difference between concepts, objects or

paces to collapse and be re-evaluated, as will happen with Ames' conception of Jack. Ames might have realized this possibility for he even states, "you never know the actual nature of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed and certain nature," a concept he states "only enhances the value of it [experience which isn't fully understood]" (*Gilead* 95). The ability to shift the placement of difference within one's personal spectrum as experience is perceived and remembered is precisely what John Ames struggles to accomplish throughout the course of the novel.

Throughout the novel, Robinson employs the repetition of many different images, but few as often as fire. The novel depicts fire as a helpful source for keeping warm, during the act of blessing, and as a source of light; but it is also a destructive one, destroying sermons, letters and churches. When a bolt of lightning strikes the steeple and burns a church where Ames' grandfather had occasionally preached, Ames and his father go to help clean up the rubble. Ames is still young and recalls watching the men and women sing and walk in the rain as they gathered and buried the hymnals and piled the old wood to burn once it dried. It is this scene which makes him later remark that there might not be a "fixed and certain nature" of experience. But in the recollection of the moment, he speaks of the whiteness of the church and how now it is nothing but a pile of splinters and ash. The church as a painted white structure being reduced to burnt remnants of black ash initially signals an incompatible bifurcation between the two categories. In fact, the young John Ames notices that the white men who are moving the burnt lumber became "entirely black" a distinction he follows up with the value "filthy" (95). This correlation appears at the beginning of the novel as well when Ames sees two dirty mechanics and, at first sight, labels them as "rascally" and "laughing that wicked

way they have”(5). For lunch Ames’ father brings him a biscuit to eat; since his father has been working on the burnt church he, as well as the biscuit, are covered in ash. Ames must have been taken aback by this “filthy” ash polluting his otherwise white biscuit, for his father tells him, ““Never mind . . . there’s nothing cleaner than ash”” (95). Ames eats the biscuit, believing the ash did not contaminate it, although he mentions it changed the taste. He later refers to this meal as the only communion he received from his father, though he maintains that it is an individual conviction, saying, “I remember it as communion, and I believe that is what it was” (96). This highlights again the primacy of the individual viewer and the immediate validity and impact of believed perception. His reception of communion from his father has the same impact on him regardless of his father’s intentions. Thus, he validates his own perception as the most immediate, and therefore the most robust.

Working through our established metaphor as a method of thinking, this simple action revises the meaning of particular difference while still maintaining the perception of difference. The significance of filth or impurity of blackness and ash is effectively troubled, not meaning precisely what it did previously. There is, in fact, nothing cleaner than ash. Ames’ father does not say that there is nothing cleaner than the church. First of all, a statement like that would not be remarkable, as it would be assumed; but also, there is not the equivocation of cleanliness Ames’ father establishes. By stating that there is “nothing cleaner than ash,” he places ash, previously seen as filth, at a marker cleaner, and therefore purer, than the church it once was. Ames can tell the difference in taste between the ash and the biscuit, which still belies a difference in character, but the specific delineation of blackness as impure has begun to shift within Ames’ racial

continuum. The biscuit covered in ash becomes a new metaphor for the possible harmony of cleanliness, sustenance, and godliness—as it is perceived as a communion.

If we extend these markers of difference from inanimate object to humans, the categories of black ash and white biscuit as well as the concept of relative cleanliness and the consequent overlap become precisely racialized. As an act of communion the reevaluation of racial categories and their respective values is, in effect, propitiated by an act of grace given from father to son. The movement from racialized object to racialized humanity follows in this situation because of the basic conceptions tied up with words and their respective meanings upon the pre-established spectrum, but also because it was the African-American church in Gilead that had been set aflame, though Ames cannot remember the specific details, nor did he know the pastor. This extends the perception of difference in the biscuit's whiteness and ash's blackness directly to those people who have been affected by the tragedy. This exemplifies difference and also how difference can be reconfigured. And not only does the initial metaphor of the sun and moon inform how this can be understood, it is signaled by the specific signifiers of heredity, religious grace equalizing difference, and may cause Ames to later remark, when thinking back upon his grandfather's grave, "it was the most natural thing in the world that my grandfather's grave would look like a place where someone had tried to smother a fire" (50). Here fire as revelation, but also as a simultaneous, though not contradictory, cleanser and destroyer, is invoked.

These same symbols are maintained when John Ames must make a more conclusive and intimate acceptance of racial difference and once again renegotiate the spectrum on which they are viewed. Toward the end of his life, Ames attempts

reconciliation with his prodigal godson, Jack Boughton. When Ames was younger he lost his young daughter and his wife. Soon after this, the elder Boughton had Ames' christen Jack as John Ames Boughton, almost extending reparation for Ames' loss; and Boughton has even called Ames "the father of [Jack's] soul" (123). Ames has become responsible, in part, for Jack, and he feels and responds to this pressure. Thus not only is the reconciliation with Jack important for the viewpoint it sheds upon Ames, it also completes a cycle of father's struggling with their sons and how that rectification has to be attempted in order to find peace. This echoes back to the guiding metaphor for this particular reading where Ames and his father have gone to find Ames' grandfather's grave and hopefully, make peace with the old man or at least with his memory. So, in order to satisfy the narrative tension introduced at the beginning of the novel, reconciliation between Ames and Jack must occur, and can only truly come about through re-evaluating the difference or otherness that Jack represents.

When Jack returns home, he has to return to a town which has not forgotten who he has been and is even referred to by Ames as that "heathen that he is, or was" (120). And yet he has a certain deferential manner which belies his upbringing and his parentage, both physical and spiritual. As Ames describes it:

[T]his John Ames Boughton with his quiet voice and his preacherly manner, which, by the way, he has done nothing to earn, or to deserve. To the best of my knowledge, at any rate. He had it even as a child, and I always found that disturbing . . . it seems to me sometimes that there's an element of parody in it. I wonder if he acts that way everywhere, or if he does it only around me, and around his father. (120)

Though Ames is making a distinction between himself and Jack's father, he also equates the two categories allowing for a singular performance of Jack's to extend between the two as though there were a specific virtue which evinced the preacherly parody from Jack. Aside from the comparison of Ames as Jack's father, what is noticeable here is how Jack is othered from respectable society. He may act like a preacher, but the men who are supposed to love him the most on the Earth agree that he has done nothing to neither earn nor deserve such distinctions. Jack recoils from the townspeople as much as they recoil from him; as Ames explains, Jack "seems always to suspect that people are in some sort of league against him. And no doubt that's true, often enough" (211). In fact, though the words were not spoken within the novel, the reviews of *Gilead* overwhelmingly characterize Jack as a "black sheep" (Simpson)⁴. Not only does this show his removal from a respectable teetotaling Iowa town, but also it frames his difference as distinctly racial.

As a racialized other, Jack is more easily categorized and ostracized. Placed within a racialized category which is removed from the self-identification of the town, Jack cannot be considered as part of the town, the church or the family—either the Boughton's or Ames'—without a significant shift in understanding and perspective from the viewer, which in this case is John Ames. But by converging the two categories of religiously Other and racial Other, the removal from one remains impossible without the removal from the other. Therefore, in order for Jack to be accepted back into a society of

⁴ This term designates a perceived difference and a racial difference. Sheep being usually white, the black sheep is noted for being the one which does not fit in with the others. But by using the metaphor of a sheep, this term also signals an adherence to a righteous or properly Christian understanding. Thus, Jack is now not only recognized as an other within the crowd, but it also signals an apostasy from the values of religious Gilead.

inclusion and not of difference, he must also be accepted back into respectable white society.

This is something which Reverend Ames states he cannot do; he writes, “remembering and forgiving can be contrary things. No doubt they usually are. It is not for me to forgive Jack Boughton . . . I don’t forgive him. I wouldn’t know where to begin” (165). Thus, Jack’s value is tied up in his ostracization from the religious society of Gilead by virtue of his past. After many attempts at mutually participating in a respectful and honest conversation with one another where differences can be forgotten and past grievances laid to rest, Ames and Jack meet in the office of Ames’ church. When Jack walks in, Ames is carrying dusty boxes and excuses himself to go wash the dirt off of him. But then to sit down, Jack moves “boxes onto the floor, and then his hands were grimy and the front of his jacket” (218). Once again there is the establishment of dirt versus cleanliness as a specific indicator of value. But, once again, Robinson shifts these values. But before this, Jack must reveal exactly how removed he is from the society that has been excluding him.

As the conversation begins Ames is trying to love and accept Jack in a grace he defines as “a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to the essentials” (197). This would seem to remove the distancing categories that have been placed upon Jack; but if we continue to work within the idea that the individual is the locus of their own reality, this ecstatic fire will only show what the individual can see, which means that an objective essence is still covered by preexisting prejudices, regardless of how diaphanous they may seem. Before as two men begin discussing, Jack is filthy and therefore othered.

Then Jack tells Ames what he could not tell his biological father, that he has a wife and child. He shows Ames a picture of them and to Ames' surprise, which he tries to hide, he sees that "the wife is a colored woman" (217). Ames asks if Jack is afraid that telling his father would kill him, to which Jack replies, "It came near enough killing *her* father. *And her mother*" (219, emphasis Robinson's). This then shows that though Jack is racially othered from the white society, he is also othered from African-American society. This puts Jack in a peculiar position of not belonging anywhere—in any of his supposed families. Jack notes the novelty and extremity of the situation by explaining, "As you know, I have considerable experience antagonizing people, but this is on another level entirely" (219). Ames understands that this is part of Jack's identity and in order to love Jack, he must accept this unlawful miscegenation.⁵ Thus, he is forced to renegotiate the valuation of racial categories within his spectrum, though this time the shift is more definite and poignant because it revolves around humanity and Ames' being able to accept this former miscreant as part of the same larger identifiers as himself. Being older and not having the direct word from his father, it takes Ames longer to accept Jack and shift his understanding. And though it does not happen at the scene of this revelation, the reconsideration might very well be because of Ames' realization how abandoned and alone Jack is in this world, and thus becomes the prevenient grace which allows one to accept an act of grace (246).

⁵ There were never any anti-miscegenation laws in Iowa, but Jack and Della were living in Missouri first and then Tennessee, where her family is from. Both these states had anti-miscegenation laws at the time of the novel, circa 1950s. But the unlawful nature of their union still stands within the eyes of religious Iowan society as well because, as a result of the anti-miscegenation laws Jack and Della are only married by what he terms "in the eyes of God . . . who does not enforce anti-miscegenation laws" (*Gilead* 220).

The last Ames sees of Jack is when he finds Jack packed up and ready to leave town to return to St. Louis to his wife and child. In his ruminations on prevenient grace, of which we saw an example, Ames describes a particular phenomenon, saying:

There are two occasions when the sacred beauty of Creation becomes dazzling apparent, and they occur together. One is when we feel our mortal insufficiency to the world, and the other is when we feel the world's mortal insufficiency to us. (245)

Thus, perceiving how Jack has been displaced and thus is suffering from the world's insufficiency to understand him and his situation, Ames, as a preacher and father asks to bless Jack and call upon an other worldly understanding of Jack and his individual struggle, regardless of sufficiency. Jack accepts and as Ames lays his hand upon Jack's head, he is both the recipient and benefactor of the grace required to understand difference as now separate from value. After stating that it was an honor to bless Jack, he explains that he would "have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment" (242). The actual blessing does not take up much time or attention in the novel, Ames details that he quoted from numbers and asked the lord to bless Jack, but beyond that, the instance could appear rather inconsequential. However, the change it instilled within Ames is undeniable; as proof of his values reshifting, a necessary link in order to accept Jack, Ames' last words to Jack are, "We all love you, you know" (242). And the tone of his reflection upon Jack shifts toward one of understanding and sympathy. In fact, when Ames goes to see old Boughton, who is asleep, he sits by the bed and tells his sleeping friend, "I blessed that boy of yours for you . . . I love him as much as you meant me to. So certain of your prayers are finally

answered, old fellow. And mine too, mine too” (244). To say to Boughton that Ames’ loves Jack as Boughton meant him to, the very same man Boughton called the father of Jack’s soul, evinces a reuniting of father to son—a reconciliation that stretches across any difference between the two and which forgives him as “an only child,” which is what Ames states is necessary for forgiveness to carry any currency within the human heart (245).

Finally, through a moment of grace as fire, Ames has reconciled his racial spectrum to include the difference Jack represents without a specific value. Ames can conceptualize a racial difference so slight that the valuation of either may be mistaken for the other. And, as he stands in the center of the two glowing poles of difference, each reflecting off the other, he realizes that he would have lived his whole life for this one moment—that he would go through all the learning and struggle to experience the singular space of grace with Jack. What is not elucidated here, nor need it be, is whether that moment meant being able to reconcile with Jack, being able to finally stand in as the father he was meant to be, whether he could pass his wisdom to a worthy son transcendent of himself, or if that moment was the awakening of a racial equality where one may be mistaken for the other as sources of light. Ames becomes the center of the established metaphor in a transcendent manner—for not only does he achieve this moment of equalization and a reshifting of variant categories, since reality revolves around the perceiver he becomes a metaphor, or manner of thinking for us, exemplifying how we can also renegotiate our spectra of difference, shifting values toward equality and consequently, like the young John Ames, bask in the brilliant light.

The Full Grace of Glory: Allowing Jack Agency in *Home*

Though Ames is able to reshift his categories to allow a greater equality among difference, his new spectral reconsiderations do not account for Jack's indefinable human nature. This is to say, that in order for any value to be placed upon Jack, or even to be initially defined as different, he must be categorized. While not completely denying Jack's agency and ability to change, Ames' consistent viewpoint as to Jack's character does not reaffirm the latter's ability to change and recreate himself either. The space of grace Ames undergoes in *Gilead* allows him to forgive Jack, but not to allow Jack to change his future behavior, thus showing that his forgiveness resembles tolerance more than a remission of transgression. Resituating the difference Jack evokes either literally or symbolically will allow that difference to be seen anew, but it will still retain the assumed qualities of difference, dirt, blackness, or sin, as it were. While this remits Jack's offenses, he is still not granted the agency to become different, only to sin again and then again strive for a remission unto cleanliness.

Being valued without being able to change mimics the concern Jack mentions in a conversation between him, his father, Ames and Ames' wife, Lila. In a moment highlighted in both *Gilead* and *Home*, the group discusses the possibilities of change and how "the mystery of predestination could be reconciled with the mystery of salvation" (*Gilead* 152). Neither Boughton nor Ames is able to answer Jack's inquiry, Ames eventually claiming that, "to conclude is not the nature of the enterprise" (152). Lila,

however, in one of her few instances of dialogue, states, “A person can change. Everything can change” (153). Lila’s life is left a mystery both within the text, and to the other characters in the novels. At this conclusion of Lila’s, Ames rubs his eyes from what can be assumed were tears, “suddenly moved by some glimpse he had never before of the days of her youth or her loneliness” (*Home* 228). Assumed here is that Lila has led a life very different her current social position as the preacher’s wife. Her difficult past is obliquely alluded to, and Jack recognizes in her a soul sympathetic to the life he has led, which, we are told, has been filled with thievery, drunkenness, penury and even prison. But the precise details of her experience are not given. This highlights the fact that change is possible, precisely because Lila knows how much she, herself, has effectively changed.

This scene deserves the focus given here not only because it is repeated in each novel, but because there are slight differences in the different retellings which emphasize the possibility of individual change and the accompanying conception of self and other which must be reconfigured to allow Jack’s eventual change to happen and to be acknowledged. In the account given in *Gilead*, which is told from Ames’ point of view, recollected and written for his young son, Robby, it states that Lila responded to Jack’s inquiry, “Still never looking at him” (153). However, in *Home*, written in third person and following Glory’s experiences for the most part, it states that before Lila speaks, she “looked up at him [Jack]” (227). This difference could be accounted for by a lapse in Ames’ memory, or by something he did not notice, or care to recognize, as he does seem to be threatened by Jack possibly stepping into his familial place after his aging heart fails. Regarding Ames’ need to reshift his values upon a categorical spectrum (which had

not happened at the time of the conversation at hand), it becomes evident that it is Ames' insistence on categorizing shading his perception or his memory. But in Lila looking at Jack before she speaks, she signals to him, and thus to the reader, that change is possible for him—not just an acceptance of who he is, but an actual change so that he may become something other than what he has always been seen to be.

What Lila invokes here is a robust form of the space of grace—an allowance for a person to redefine their own essence because of their non-determinate nature. If it is possible, as Lila claims, that someone can change, then the concept of predestination is refuted. This is not only within a celestial consideration: if a person can robustly change who they are, which can only be defined, or perceived by others, by their actions and their possible actions, then the change requires that others grant a different possible action for the person in question. Ames does not quite allow this, answering Jack's inquiry by stating, “generally, a person's behavior is consistent with his nature, which is to say that his behavior is consistent is what I mean when I speak of his nature” (*Home* 225, *Gilead* 151). Where Ames and Lila differ here is the same point from which Jack derives his anxiety.

Jack wishes to be seen differently than he has before, he wants to become respectable, in some sense. He has returned to Gilead after a twenty-year absence and does not want to be known as the boy he was. He no longer identifies as that child or wants to be held to his younger self's miscreancy. Lila did not know the younger Jack and has not been informed on the person that he was, though it was Ames' intention to tell her and Robby of his questionable nature—which Ames assumes will be consistent with his previous behavior. Thus it may be easier for Lila to grant Jack a grace in which

he is able to redefine himself either because she does not hold him to his past self, or else she can recognize not only the possibilities, but also the desire for change. This allows for her to allow Jack his space of grace, whereas for Ames and perhaps even Jack's own father, a reshifting of values is necessary to accept Jack even as he is. Nevertheless, tolerance is not the same as allowance, for tolerance still retains the marks of past actions, now divorced from the judgments of those actions. To allow Jack a grace is to allow him a robust freedom to become different and to actually, as Lila says, change. In this way, his ability to change resembles the same movement as a true conversion.

The space of grace is an acceptance not only of what actions a certain person, in this case, Jack, has performed, but is a remission of who that person has been in favor of who that person can possibly become. This is actualized only in a reversal of typical conception and perception of who a person is within an empirical fashion; meaning that all sensory data received from a person is not the sum of that person's potential, though it is the sum of their past. To ascribe a difference, or a potential change, within a person is to recognize the ability for that person to commit, in the future, other actions and reactions than they have in the past. It is to grant a freedom of action and new state of being to that person—it is to grant a grace for that person to step into and redefine themselves. The word grace here is used very specifically: not only it is the ecstatic fire that brings things to their essentials, it is also a mark of divinity within that person, allowing a transcendence of their earthly categorizations.

The conceptualization of Jack here is precisely what G.W.F. Hegel delineates in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the recognition of the familiar. Here, the recognition is what is being compromised in favor of a pre-cognized version of phenomena. For Jack

is not being re-cognized in the idea that his phenomenal being is configured as it stands before Glory or Reverend Boughton, rather it is the re-emergence of a previous cognition of who Jack was and applied to not only his present self, but to any future self he could possibly display.

Hegel states that within phenomenology, or the consciousness apprehending outside objects through experience, that the result, or the consciousness' conclusory apprehension of objects is not solely "the result of the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about" (Hegel 2). The conception of Jack comprises not only the actual phenomenal apprehension of his body, voice and actions, but also the process one goes through in order to apprehend who he is. The very process of recognizing Jack or perceiving him, is fraught with the understanding of who he has been and any previous conceptions of him. This is contingent upon how Hegelian Idealism apprehends objects and why Jack's recognition cannot be escaped without an alterior process, regardless of how different he might appear. In metaphorical language, Hegel explains first of all the cause of perception, saying, "The 'beautiful', the 'holy', the 'eternal', 'religion', and 'love' are the bait required to arouse the desire to bite; not the Notion" (5). Here we are shown that it is not a logical understanding of the world which creates or shapes perception, rather it is the passions, then logic will enter as the justification or categorization of the "wealth of substance" (5). Thus, any conception of Jack is derived from an emotional impetus using logic to justify any and all claims, regardless how spurious or injurious they may be. This is especially important once Jack has been rendered as an object of the familiar.

Hegel discusses this process further stating that the actuality of a perception of any object, animate or not, here referred to as a “simple whole” consists of the accretion of “its moments and which will now develop and take shape afresh, this time in their new element, in their newly acquired meaning” (7). This means that objects are apprehended as a single object, though the actual experience with that particular object is acquired over many different moments in which the object might appear in different respects. All these individual moments accumulate to create one simple object, hence the “simple whole.” This assumes a historicism of the object being perceived which would seem to obviate any differing conception of an object which is identified as the same being as it has previously been. In fact, Hegel states this in even stronger terms, saying,

the whole is veiled in its simplicity . . . the wealth of previous existence is still present to consciousness in memory. Consciousness misses in the newly emerging shape its former range and specificity of content, and even more the articulation of form whereby distinctions are securely defined, and stand arrayed in their fixed relations. (7)

Hegel is thus precluding any extension of grace to Jack with this statement, saying that he necessarily must be conceived of in his securely defined distinctions. The previous conceptions of Jack are created by the definition of his past, and are the defining characteristics of his present and will be of any possible future. Though I intentionally use the word possible future here to delineate the difference between Jack’s agency and a future determined, perhaps by the predestination Jack fears, it is tongue-in-cheek because any differing possible future Jack may display will not be seen by those around him as an

alteration of his character unless they extend a space of grace to him and allow a future different from his past.

As has been shown above, Jack is very much in need of this space of grace, as he has come home and hopes, though is not fully convinced, that he is a different Jack than the one who left Gilead twenty years previous. In one of the first mentions of him in *Home*, a recollection of when all the Boughton children were young and at home, Robinson writes that the other children, all except Jack, were good and wanted “to be seen to be good” because Jack “was so conspicuously not good as to cast a shadow over their household” (6). Thus, he was categorized as the “black sheep,” the preacher’s miscreant son; and when all the children have crushed a neighbor’s crop and are found in the wrong and need to apologize, Jack joins them, “as if penance must always include him” (11). The offended party behaves poorly at the children’s apology and in remonstrance labels and categorizes Jack in front of his siblings and, thusly, for the reader, saying to Jack, “I know who you are. The boy thief, the boy drunkard! While your father tells the people how to live! He deserves you!” (12). Though the Trotskys are not accepted as part of distinguished, religious, Gilead society (they are squatters and atheists), they are still informed as to the social conception of Jack’s nature—his nature, taken as a cue from Ames, to merely mean his consistent behavior.

When Reverend Boughton is retold these events, he exemplifies acceptance, which to be fair, is a type of grace, but does nothing to change the conception of Jack. Jack tells him, “She was really mean. She even said you deserved me.” To which Boughton replies, “Well now, that was kind of her. I will be sure to thank her. I hope I do deserve you, Jack” (13). And though he seems grateful to have Jack as his son, the

omniscient narration states that, Reverend Boughton's "eyes stung" displaying a pain at the realization of who Jack had become not only for their family, but for society as well. Boughton is the epitome of forgiveness within this novel and seems to be able to forgive Jack any trespass, though he does not allow for a true change in Jack's character. When Reverend Boughton anticipates Jack's return, though anxious about its reality, not wanting his hopes to be dashed, he allows for his own mistakes, so he will be able to excuse Jack and his possible behavior. Robinson writes through Glory's perspective, "If he [Reverend Boughton] was disappointed and Jack did not come home, he could tell himself that the fault was his own, taking the bitterness of it all on himself and sparing his miscreant son" (27). Here Boughton excuses Jack's behavior having established a consistency within it, or what Hegel calls the familiar. But it does not grant the grace for Jack to be good, which Boughton defines as having a "gracious heart however awkward its appearance" (4).

In fact, Reverend Boughton never truly allows Jack the space of grace requisite for him to change his behavior. Toward the end of Jack's visit, Reverend Boughton attempts to speak plainly, a quality difficult for the Boughtons that is frequently blamed on their being Scottish. After a questionable night where Jack's actions were not accounted for though his appearance belies a long night of drink, Boughton tells his penitent son,

So many times over the years, I've tried not to love you so much. I never got anywhere with it, but I tried. I'd say, He doesn't care a thing about us . . . Still, I thought you would come home for your mother's funeral . . . That was foolish of me. Your mother always said, You imagine some

happiness is going to come out of all this, all this waiting and hoping, but it never will. (272-273)

Boughton's intention and his inability to truly allow Jack to change evinced here is, at the same time, a reflexive missive regarding his own foolishness and an attempt to unsuccessfully distance himself from Jack. He desires the distance so that he can escape feeling as much grief for Jack and his life of disreputable behavior. Though he truly wishes and hopes Jack will change, he does not allow Jack the possibility to display change. His already affirmed conceptions of Jack will override any attempt possible to deny what is conceived to be an unerring consistency.

This is further exemplified upon Jack's arrival when Glory wonders if she would have been able to recognize his physical being. However, she has no doubt she can predict his actions and his behavior, thinking that Jack is watching her, "as if suddenly reminded of an irritant or an obstacle. Watching her with the kind of directness that forgets to conceal itself" (30). Here, not able to understand Jack she applies the familiar or what she has previously conceptualized and remembered Jack to be like, though the passage shows that Jack is being direct without attempting to conceal himself. This evinces his ardency to display who he is and have this new, changed person be accepted—if he truly has changed, which even he doubts at times.

Reverend Boughton exemplifies the impossible emendation of Jack towards the end of the novel. Aging and unable to care for himself any longer, finally his physical ineptitude is matched by a mental lapse in which he cannot recognize Jack and mistakes Glory for his deceased wife. Jack is attempting to talk to him, to give him the comfort he knows has been denied him by years of Jack's shameful behavior and lack of religious

faith. Jack is tentative and shy about making his declaration and his senile father does not make it easier, talking to Jack as though he was a stranger and about Jack as though he was not there. Glory gently admonishes her father telling him to be kinder to Jack, to which Reverend Boughton replies,

‘Kinder to him! I thanked God for him every day of his life, no matter how much grief, how much sorrow—and at the end of it all there is only more grief, more sorrow, and his life will go on that way, no help for it now. You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it, you feel as though you would die for it, but it isn’t yours to keep or to protect. And if the child becomes a man who has no respect for himself, it’s just destroyed till you can hardly remember what it was—’ He said, ‘It’s like watching a child die in your arms.’ He looked at Jack. ‘Which I have done.’ (*Home* 295)

At the end of his very painful monologue, Reverend Boughton refers to Jack’s largest source of shame and disgrace, namely the child he fathered out of wedlock and then abandoned, which because of the indigence of its upbringing died of an infected cut. Despite reinforcing the past Jack wishes to escape, his father’s honesty denies any possible change for Jack. He denies even a possible repentance—an extreme consideration for a man of the cloth. This shows that his hope for Jack has disappeared. To him, Jack is condemned to being the silent, brooding malfasant he was as a misunderstood child and rebellious young man, despite the fact that Jack is now over forty and is desperately trying to establish a respectable place in the world for himself and his new family.

Faced with this definition of himself from his patriarch and a man whose opinion still holds respect in the town of Gilead, Jack says, “I don’t have anything to lose,” and drops his hands, “like a man abandoning all his defenses” (295). Jack steps into the role his father has delineated for him, once again abandoning himself to the familiar and truncating any possible future for one consistent with his past. Forsaking hope of changing, he resolves himself to the fixity previous conception has dictated. He is seen as completely determined, which Hegel states is necessary for anything exoteric, meaning outside of consciousness, to be “comprehensible, and capable of being learned and appropriated by all” (Hegel 7). This claims that only those objects of knowledge which do not change can have an appropriation by all, or by social conception. This opens several distinctions: the first being that if something is not determined it will continually escape being an object of knowledge, and that the ability to become indeterminate does not happen within a social context but within individual consciousness.

When the spirit, or the self-reflexive consciousness, apprehends an object, it does so in a dialectical relationship known as sublation. This refers to the dialectic of consciousness. Because consciousness is always and only directed upon an object, it is constantly moving outside of the self. This means that the consciousness looks outward, alienating itself in apprehending an object and, in effect, enters that object. The object in question is now the only content for consciousness. Once the object has been satisfactorily examined, the consciousness “returns to itself from this alienation, and is only revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also” (21). This is the self-reflexive movement and what allows for the development of spirit. Equipped with specific objects of knowledge, the

consciousness is free to apprehend other objects and continue collecting them as objects of knowledge. This process repeats itself essentially in dialogue with outer surroundings and accretes each object of knowledge recollected in-itself and moves on in formative stages. The objects of knowledge developed through much investigation and conscious involvement are now but things one can memorize without the robust involvement of the dialectical process, such as the Boughton children understanding the content and significance of the Edinburgh books without having read them personally.

When the consciousness apprehends the object and returns it to spirit, it matches its qualities to the conclusions previously established. If the object being apprehended has the same qualities as a previous object, or if they are identified as being the same object or person, the uncomprehended object or person loses the immediacy of consciousness returning to itself and thus the new object “has thus merely passed over into figurative representation. At the same time it is thus something familiar, something which the existent Spirit is finished and done with, so that it is no longer active or really interested in it” (18). The familiar is that which is accepted without a robust phenomenal investigation. In this way the conclusions derived from the familiar in no way differ from the conclusions retained from the previous encounter with the same object. Or as Hegel states, “the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood” (18). This serves as a sentence for Jack, condemning him, in his return home, into becoming the familiarity of the scoundrel he was once conceived as, regardless of any correspondent truth.

Therefore, even if Jack’s past is to be re-evaluated, or revalued as Ames was able to do, it cannot be escaped. Jack is not looking for justification, but struggling for

redemption. What is important here in the way that objects are perceived is that the direction of the consciousness alienates itself in an outward movement into the object and then returns to its being-for-self with the object apprehended. While this accounts for the preconception of what an object will be, it does not allow for the difference that object could possibly provide and can only be applicable if and only if the object is determinate.

The problem with how Jack is conceptualized, therefore, is that his past is being transposed onto his present and his future and he is being regarded as a determinate object of knowledge. And just as objects of knowledge ardently acquired are sublated into the familiar, they are also established as memorizable facts for the social conception. Thus Jack, being part of society, as much as he feels alienated, is aware of the social conception of himself. When a local store was robbed, the townspeople and even Glory and Reverend Boughton seem to suspect Jack. Jack speaks to Glory about his father's conception saying, "He's a saint, and I believe he's afraid to die because of me. To leave me behind, still unregenerate—I know that's what he has on his mind. I can tell by the way he looks at me" (*Home* 143). Later he says to Glory, "I'm a scoundrel, Glory. Let's leave it at that" (166). Glory reflects upon this phenomenon, thinking, "Poor Jack. People watched him, and he knew it. It was partly distrust. But more than that, the man was at once indecipherable and transparent. Of course they watched him" (181). Readily apparent in these examples is Jack's knowledge of how he is conceived of, and thus he must, in some way, reconnoiter the conceptions other's have of him with how he sees himself and how he wants to be seen. As a perfect example of his struggle to represent himself, he tells Glory in a straightforward honest moment, that Della, Jack's wife, does not have many illusions about him, "but the few she does have might just be crucial"

(165). Here Jack wishes to retain someone's good opinion of himself and, therefore, must struggle against conception of him society holds as determinate of his nature.

Where this becomes even more complex and damning is beyond the strictures of society determining Jack as a character incapable of change where the social sublation becomes an object of knowledge Jack himself believes. When Jack goes to the Ames' for dinner and is nervous about how he will be conceived and if what he does will unintentionally give offense, Glory remarks that, "his reservations were the fruit of his experience, and his experience was the fruit of his being Jack, always Jack, despite these sporadic and intense attempts at escape, at being otherwise . . . no one could know as well as he did that for him caution was always necessary" (205). Jack must be cautious because he, first, understands the conception others have of him and second, believes their conception to be as valid a truth for himself as for others. He is stepping into the definition others have placed upon him.

This is precisely what Hegel describes in his discussion of lordship and bondage. When two consciousnesses meet there is a different consideration than when only apprehending an object. The difference arises from the realization that the other being is also a being-for-itself with a consciousness and an ego which can perceive the self. Hegel explains this, writing, the self "is aware that it at once is, and is not, another consciousness, and equally that this other is *for itself* only when it supersedes itself as a being for itself, and is for itself only in the being-for-itself of the other. Each for the other is the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself" (Hegel 112). This is to say that the self requires the other to affirm its own identity. The consciousness recognizes that the other can perceive them, and thus in the

perception of the other reaffirms one's own existence. Complications arise here because now any self-conception is contingent upon the conception of the other. They are sure of themselves but not of the other, so the self's conception is always hesitant and never entirely reaffirmed. Meaning that Jack may have a good idea of how he is being perceived, but can never be sure that his actions are reaffirming the negative conception of himself or defying them.

Hegel makes this exchange even more fraught by stating that the two perceiving each other "do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously, but leave each other free only indifferently, like things" (114). This introduces not only a determinate nature for the other, but also a power struggle to keep the other determinate. The master-slave dialectic hinges upon one being attempting to limit the other's possibilities and affirmation of an other's self. Thus it is the other which defines the self—meaning the self becomes what others conceive them to be, regardless of how misconceived the other might be, and usually is. Jack provides an example of this process saying, "Reverend Miles, Della's father and my biographer, told me I was nothing but trouble. I felt the truth of that. I am nothing. . . Nothing, with a body. I create a kind of displacement around myself as I pass through the world, which can fairly be called trouble" (*Home* 288-289). Here Jack willfully allows someone who he knows dislikes him and has forbidden him to interact with his wife and the mother of his only living child to define who he is. He defines Della's father as his biographer which shows how robustly the definition of himself is contingent upon how he is perceived and how others, through dialectic, describe him. He has clothed himself in this definition because it is what society expects of him. And though he sardonically refers to Della's father as

his biographer, Jack still allows this man to create the Jack of the present and limit Jack's possible future.

At this point, Jack is unable to believe in his own ability to rehabilitate, even though he states that is his intention. He constantly reaffirms everyone's worst thoughts about him telling Glory, "Be warned. I should wear a leper bell. I suppose I do" (171). Here he admits his own nature and accepts being ostracized, conceding society sufficient and just reason. And in this Jack concedes his own agency for the determination his past has established. He is affording himself no grace and even tells his father that, "somehow I have never felt that grace was intended for me, particularly" (271). Paralyzed by what he has been seen to be, Jack no longer hopes, stating at his nadir, "I think hope is the worst thing in the world. I really do. It makes a fool of you while it lasts. And then when it's gone, it's like there's nothing left of you at all. Except"—he shrugged and laughed—"except what you can't be rid of" (275). Because he cannot escape the conceptions of himself others place upon him, Jack has become destitute, slowly accepting the idea that he has become truly irredeemable. And though his forbears wish for him to change, and Ames even states that nature is not definitive and experience cannot be fully trusted, writing, "you never know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed and certain nature" (*Gilead* 95) both he and Reverend Boughton can only offer forgiveness for Jack's past, not absolution—not the new chance unfettered by past malfeasance which Jack so desperately needs. But it is Glory, Jack's unassuming baby sister who, in dealing with her own loneliness, can accept and forgive Jack. And most importantly, it is Glory who within a space of grace offers Jack a chance to redefine himself on his own terms.

Glory, who is defined as taking “everything to heart” (*Home* 14), remembers Jack but was never close to him, he being older than her by quite a few years and distant from the entire family. And though Glory knows all too well the stories of Jack’s past, she still approaches him as a new object of knowledge. Robinson writes, that Jack “began to remind her more of her brother as she looked at him. It was hard for her to look away” (34). Glory enacts the self-same movement discussed previously, understanding Jack as a simple whole, as the brother who was never around, the brother who left a child and ran off, the brother who failed to come home for their mother’s funeral. And in the beginning, though she remains continually kind, she does not yet allow Jack any possible alteration, expecting him to live up to his own expectations. But Jack does not hold her to the expectations she might assume, if she assumed any in particular; he re-evaluates her present self as the whole; he would occasionally look at her, “as if she were someone who figured in an intention of his and about whom he realized he knew nothing to be relied upon, or nothing that mattered, someone he must consider again carefully” (85). Her realization of this, which Jack seems to extend to most he encounters, perhaps Ames excepted, allows for her to begin creating a space of grace for Jack. She begins to forgive him his past, an act Reverend Boughton says is requisite for any understanding to occur (45). Though Reverend Boughton does not take his grace beyond forgiveness, Glory will allow Jack to regain his autonomous self and to truly change.

Her allowance for change will occur within an acceptance of Jack as he is, free from a judgment which implies a continuance of behavior. She allows him the ability to change, and must necessarily do so outside of the Hegelian dialectic. This does not allow for an object of knowledge which is not determinate, for the consciousness leaves the self

with intention and returns with familiarity, or in other words, when encountering a familiar object, the consciousness apprehends what it intends to apprehend. But if this movement were to be reversed, the object of inquiry is the one informing the thought and thereby informing the being-for-itself which can then apprehend, or perceive the object as an object which can impart knowledge but is not determined by the familiar intentionality of consciousness. In a herald to using metaphor as an alternative epistemology, a focus which allows an increase of grace seems appropriate to detail the movement Ludwig Feuerbach discusses in *The Essence of Christianity*. This movement is signaled by the texts precisely because Ames is so enamored with the thoughts of Feuerbach as a method for approaching his vocation, directly concerned with forgiveness and God's grace, that Lila teases him about possibly naming the cat Feuerbach (*Gilead* 143).

Written in direct discourse with Hegelian thought, Feuerbach proposes a different method of apprehending objects which are not determinate, namely divinity, or that which retains divine qualities. In fact, he will be so brazen as to attribute the qualities of the divine to any human who believes God has human characteristics. He writes, "He who makes God act humanly, declares human activity to be divine" (Feuerbach 31). This is because the movement he proposes is a reversal of the Hegelian consciousness. In his highlighting of the human subject, he establishes a "real and existential, not just projected and extended, duality between subject and object" (xiii). Or in his words in the preface to the second edition of his book Feuerbach writes, "I do not generate the object from the thought, but the thought from the object; and I hold that alone to be an object which has an existence beyond one's own brain" (xviii). The initial thought of consciousness is caused because there is an object outside of one's own consciousness. Thus, the

consciousness is able to apprehend objects, not solely because it is an outward extending force, but because there are other objects outside of it, or the being-for-self, which are available for the consciousness to interact with and to perceive. Then as the consciousness thinks (here the term thought means both conception and perception) about the object it has just apprehended—or more precisely encountered—the consciousness simultaneously learns about the object as an object of knowledge and about the self as a being-for-self. Then the being-for-self can then interact with the object as a realized object of knowledge. In this way the apprehension of objects is less about the devouring acquisition of knowledge, and more about the discovery of self. It is then, as Feuerbach writes, “Man thinks—that is, he converses with himself” (4). He clarifies explaining that, “in the objects which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself: consciousness of the objective is the self consciousness of man” (7). While this does differ in form from the Hegelian mode of apprehension, the results are still quite similar, apprehending objects as objects of knowledge which then enrich the self and can apprehend/encounter other objects.

The real difference between these two methods of consciousness is the encounter of an object which exceeds its own limitations, or in other words, is not determinate, is not fixed. With this reversal of the Hegelian consciousness, the master-slave dialectic is also affected. When two beings encounter each other the struggle to affirm one’s own essential nature by negating the other’s essentiality has been replaced by recognition of the limitlessness and therefore indeterminate nature of the other precisely because they too are a separate consciousness. However, this is not a default method for interacting with others. Feuerbach establishes that this is the conception of the divine and that

because there is no perceptual object which the consciousness can encounter regarding the divine, then it is the default or the only possible method to conceive of deity. However, the encounter of the other does provide a perceptual object and thus the quality of limitlessness is extended when the divine is recognized within the other. But this is not a necessary or common method of encountering the other. As shown, the entire town of Gilead, including Jack's father and godfather, structure him as a determined object and ignore any possible change because to them he remains the familiar. The concession of an infinite and indeterminate consciousness is extended rarely and only with the acknowledgement of divine attributes within the recipient. But when the infinite is extended to another's consciousness, a space of grace is created where two people may interact and communicate outside of the strictures of Hegel's bellicose dialectic. Jack signals the necessity for grace to escape the enforced determinism in the discussion regarding predestination in saying, "Presumably there are those to whom grace is not extended, even when their place in life might seem suited to—making Christians of them . . . One way or the other, it seems like fate" (*Home* 220). Thus, he shows that it does take grace to enable a change, or at the least the absence of grace is the same as predestination.

The comment which sparks Jack's response is his father defining grace in one manner; there are a couple different variations within the novel, though none of them contradictory. But Reverend Boughton offers the definition into the discussion saying, "Grace . . . The grace of God can find out any soul, anywhere. And you're confusing something here. Religion is human behavior. Grace is the love of God. Two very different things" (220). Besides dividing the ideas of proper religious behavior and

God's capacity for grace, which is later described as "perfect sufficiency," this definition attributes the capacity for grace to the actions of God (221). However, within Feuerbach's understanding, God only possesses qualities that the conceptualizing human retains. This makes grace a characteristic of the human, and if Reverend Boughton's definition proves true, then grace is a divine extension of human love. But Reverend Boughton has more to say on the subject. Before the main conflict enters, he defines grace as a possibility only after forgiveness is extended. He says, "If you forgive . . . you may still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace" (45). Thus, grace is defined as the ability to understand another's soul. Though within this logic, forgiveness must precede understanding, which has been covered previously, but here grace also precedes understanding. In this sense, the love of God is defined as a willingness to understand. Therefore, understanding another person takes place within the space of grace; and by simple extension, understanding someone through grace allows them the chance for robust and actual change.

Jack earnestly wishes for the ability to change his behavior, repent for that which he has done and begin anew. When the Amesese join the Boughtons for dinner one night Jack offers to say grace, which is one of the most profound definitions of grace and displays not only his desire, but his assessment of his capacity for change. He prays,

Dear Father, . . . You are patient and gracious far beyond our deserving. . . You let us hope for your forgiveness when we can find no way to forgive ourselves. You bless our lives even when we have shown ourselves to be utterly ungrateful and unworthy. May we be strengthened and renewed, to

make us less unworthy of blessing, through these your gifts of sustenance,
of friendship and family. . . In Jesus' name we pray, amen. (183)

Not only does he admit that he cannot forgive himself, and therefore obviates any true understanding he might have of himself, but he sets up the formula that one can be made less unworthy through not only food and friends, but family. Reverend Boughton highlights this and emphasizes that, "It is in family that we most often feel the grace of God" (183). Thus, we have been shown the actual need for grace, the method of grace, the possibility of grace, as well as the understanding which can arise from the space of grace. The only piece missing is the medium.

Glory is now the keeper of the home. She will inherit it and keep it. Thus it would seem only apposite that she also becomes the medium for grace, the one to allow Jack the real possibility to change. She begins the novel quite nervous around Jack, always deferring to what she thinks he might want. But as they become more familiar with each other, familiar in a sense where they can further understand and not the familiar which can obviate understanding, she begins to understand and accept Jack. When Jack's presence is still novel, he asks her if she is going to try to save his soul. Catching her off guard she quickly responds, "I think I like your soul the way it is" (105). This marks the beginning of her accepting Jack for who he has been, who he is and whoever he may become. She keeps offering small kindnesses to help Jack, similar kindnesses attributed to Mrs. Boughton as small comforts also defined as a grace (3). Thus it is through these small acts she enters the posture of grace where she can understand fully Jack's indeterminate self.

One night Jack tries Glory's patience and simultaneously allows her the space to offer Jack a grace wherein he can change who he is. Glory finds Jack shirtless, shoeless, hiding in the barn still drunk, dirty, hurt and having failed to kill himself with the exhaust of the car he had been repairing. She cleans him up, mends his clothes, shaves him—a kindness so intimate it can only truly be done with a good deal of love—and helps him to bed. But she does so without judging him—only caring for him. She has already forgiven him and now weeps at her understanding of him and her inability to truly understand. But she is trying; she offers him a space of grace and hopes she will be able to help him redefine himself. Afterward, when Jack has recovered, he comes downstairs to the kitchen where Glory is. Robinson writes, "He looked at her, as if he knew he did not seem the same to her, as if he had made some terrible confession and had been forgiven and felt both shame and relief" (270). He now knows that she has offered him the space of grace and can be defined by that. Which is to say that he is now free to create his own definition of himself, as Glory accepts and forgives him without determining his nature.

Glory is able to accept Jack and allow him a different future by her robust acceptance and her offering of grace. Shortly before Jack leaves, Glory reminds him of the conversation they had earlier where she said she liked his soul the way it is. She brings this up again to Jack to remind him of the now actualized truth of the statement and adds, "Well, your soul seems fine to me" (288). And with that Jack is at once forgiven and absolved of judgment. His soul is fine. And because one person has offered him the space where he can change and define himself, he can enter that space, accept the grace and become whosoever he will. When Jack walks away, leaving home and never

expecting to return, Glory watches him musing, “There was nothing of youth about him, only the transient vigor of a man acting on a decision he refused to reconsider or regret” (318). He walks away from home, from Glory, from all that is familiar, but now is reborn; thanks to Glory’s grace he enters the world outside of Gilead with some “remnant of the old aplomb” (318) but with a new capacity, aware that he can be forgiven, can be trusted and, most importantly can be loved.

Through the offering of grace by both Ames and Glory, Jack is forgiven of his past and allowed to create a future for himself which is not contingent upon that same past. He has gone home to Gilead and while not converting to a religion, has, to an extent, been saved, or at least redeemed by a space of grace. His value has been resituated and he has come to a reconciliation with his father, the same way that Ames’s father had to visit his father one last time. Now his difference is not his condemnation. He can escape the master-slave dialectic and fulfill his future as he seems fit, freed from the fixity of predestination. This is what he has returned home to do, and by all extents and purposes, has been successful. And by his example, through the grace of Ames and Glory, Robinson shows how it is possible to revalue difference, to learn to forgive, and to perceive the divine in those we, as readers, and as individuals who are our own civilizations, encounter. Through the quiet grace of her fiction, Robinson exemplifies a forgiving and accepting viewpoint not limited to Christianity, the clergy, or even the outwardly religious. Rather she shows how it is possible for Jack Boughton, and by extension for us, to robustly change who we are and be forgiven for what we have done, granting we are able to extend and offer that space of grace. Now we, like Jack, can return home, can go out again and can feel free to create ourselves, mold our future and

offer grace for others to do the same, escaping definitions placed upon us and allowing others to walk away, undefined, free.

Glory has refused to define Jack, allowing him the freedom to go into the world without the burden of a specific trajectory or definition. He can now choose, untroubled by the specter of his past, no longer defined by the miscreant boy he once was. He is now free to be the man he wills. And though she might say more later, reflecting on the beauty they shared together as they encountered one another's souls, in one final recollection, as the other children descend upon the household to watch their father trade the pleasures of this world for those of the next, Glory offers the only adequate definition of her beloved, enigmatic brother: saying only, "Jack was Jack" (318).

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