
Pro Rege

Volume 48 | Number 1

Article 3

September 2019

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Recommended Citation

Heynen, Elayne Apol (2019) "Grace: A Reflection on the Novels of Marilynne Robinson," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 48: No. 1, 14 - 16.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol48/iss1/3

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Grace: A Reflection on the Novels of Marilynne Robinson



by Elayne Apol Heynen

“She was a religious woman. That is to say that she conceived of life as a road down which one traveled, an easy enough road through a broad country, and that one’s destination was there from the very beginning, a measured distance away, standing in the ordinary light like some plain house where one was shown to a room where everything one had ever lost or put aside was gathered together, waiting.”¹

When I’ve been asked what the novels of Marilynne Robinson are about, I’ve often found myself at a loss for words. Her stories drift along slowly, the plot sometimes difficult to find, buried like flower bulbs in the rich soil of her prose. In each novel, the narrative takes second place to

the simple joy of the words on the page. For this joy in words is what makes her writing so memorable: each sentence is delectable, meant to be read and then re-read, reveled in and embraced before the reader moves on to see what the next sentence might bring. Her novels call the reader to slow down, to notice the beauty of the ordinary, both in the beauty of her writing and the beauty of the lives she writes about. If one could take a common kitchen sponge, saturate the sponge with the words from her novels, and then wring out the sponge, what one would see drip out slowly would unmistakably be grace. The importance of grace in ordinary and everyday occurrences flows through each of her four novels in a seamless, quiet river, much like the river that brings so much life to her fictional town of Gilead. There is a twenty-five-year gap between her 1980 novel *Housekeeping* and her 2005 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *Gilead*, and yet the flow between the two is uninterrupted, continuing into the writing of *Home* and *Lila*.

Marilynne Robinson’s novels call for the reader to experience grace in the “resurrection of the ordinary,” and this grace that Robinson shares in her novels becomes the theological framework that structures and glues together each of her works.² In *Gilead*, she writes, “the idea of grace had been so much on my mind, grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials.”³ Marilynne Robinson’s grace-saturated novels are a beautiful reminder to Christians to recapture joy in the unrelenting mercies of a good Creator God; however, jumping entirely blindly into Robinson’s refreshing

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river of grace, one finds there is a danger of unexpectedly breathing in the water of Christian universalism. One must tread the waters of each novel deeply, tread often, and tread long, but tread carefully.

The idea of God bringing grace to his people through ordinary, everyday occurrences is not new. In the midst of deep grief, the author of Lamentations proclaims, “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.”²⁴ Christians serve a God who is faithful to feed the sparrows and clothe the lilies, and understanding the daily provisions of God as small graces to be embraced is both a protection from worry and a form of praise.

Robinson’s works call the reader to recognize the textures, colors, sounds, and sensations of everyday life as good gifts of God. Her writing captures the way that light falls into a room, the way that water reflects a face, the way birds sing just before sunrise, each with a sense of wonder and a deep understanding of grace. While there are thousands of tiny examples of this, one of my personal favorites can be found in the novel *Gilead*. Robinson, from the perspective of the narrator, writes,

I have been thinking about existence lately. In fact, I have been so full of admiration for existence that I have hardly been able to enjoy it properly. As I was walking up to the church this morning, I passed that row of big oaks by the war memorial—if you remember them—and I thought of another morning, fall a year or two ago, when they were dropping their acorns thick as hail almost. There was all sorts of thrashing in the leaves and there were acorns hitting the pavement so hard they’d fly past my head. All this in the dark, of course. I remember a slice of moon, no more than that. It was a very clear night, or morning, very still, and then there was such energy in the things transpiring among those trees, like a storm, like travail. I stood there a little out of range, and I thought, it is all still new to me. I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees still can astonish me.⁵

The narrator, an elderly preacher, conveys

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a sense of wonder that can only be attributed to Robinson herself. Robinson gives new life to the opening of Psalm 19, in which the psalmist proclaims, “the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech...[;] their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”⁶ One could just as easily substitute the skies of the psalm with the oak trees of *Gilead* and fall upon the same conclusions.

The danger in this grace- and joy-filled writing, however, is in how easily the other characteristics of God are forgotten. While no novel can do justice to the myriad attributes that describe the God of the Bible, and while no novel should be expected to, there is still an imbalance in some of the sentiments Robinson expresses through her novels.

The overemphasis on grace teeters into Christian universalism. This is most obviously shown in the conclusion to her third novel, *Lila*:

In eternity people’s lives could be altogether what they were and had been, not just the worst things they ever did, or the best things either. So she decided that she should believe in it...[I]f any scoundrel could be pulled into heaven just to make his mother happy, it couldn’t be fair to punish scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mothers didn’t even like them, and who would probably have better excuses for the harm they did than the ones who had somebody caring about them. It couldn’t be fair to punish people for trying to get by, people who were good by their own rights... [E]ternity had more of every kind of room in it than this world did... [;]all the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear had to be pitied. No, better, grace had to fall over them.⁷

Here grace is shown as cover for all of the world’s hurts, eternity a place with room for everyone, and being “good by their own rights” grounds for entrance.

In *Housekeeping*, Robinson, in reference to the call to be fishers of men, writes that

Such a net, such a harvesting, would put an end to all anomaly. If it swept the whole floor of heaven,

it must, finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too. From there, we must imagine, would arise a great army of paleolithic and neolithic frequenters of the lake... and strayed children from those and all subsequent eons, down to the earliest present, to the faith-healing lady in the long, white robe who rowed a quarter of a mile out and tried to walk back in again just at sunrise, to the farmer who bet five dollars one spring that the ice was still strong enough for him to gallop his horse across. Add to them the swimmers, the boaters and canoers... [I]t was perhaps only from watching gulls fly like sparks up the face of the clouds... that I imagined such an enterprise might succeed. Or it was from watching gnats sail out of the grass, or from watching some discarded leaf gleaming at the top of the wind. Ascension seemed at such times like a natural law. If one added to it a law of completion—that everything must finally be made comprehensible—then some general rescue of the sort... would be inevitable... What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up eventually?”⁸

Here Robinson’s incredible eye for beauty and grace in nature meshes seamlessly with the narrator’s views on eternity. Once again, Robinson’s brand of grace becomes one in which all those who have died can be gathered up and restored, knit back together, and made whole – regardless of who those people may be.

Later, In *Gilead*, Robinson writes, “doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief, and... the Greek word *sozo*, which is usually translated ‘saved’, can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing. So the conventional translation narrows the meaning of the word in a way that can create false expectations. I thought he should be aware that grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways.”⁹ These words are said by a clergyman to an unbelieving man, and said as a kind of conclusion, where the importance of doctrine is minimized, grace is all-encompassing, and grace extends beyond traditional understandings of salvation.

In the fictional worlds of Robinson’s novels, grace is such a wonderful thing that it cannot be limited by justice or by holiness. This unlimited grace is never explicitly stated as to be universal in the sense that all people’s sins are both propitiated

and expiated through the work of Christ on the cross; and yet, the unlimited nature of this grace also comes dangerously close to trespassing on the traditional Calvinist belief in the limited nature of Christ’s atonement.

Robinson herself is a self-declared Calvinist. Apart from these novels, Robinson has written several works of nonfiction and has appeared in countless news articles, journals, and reviews. She is well-known as a Christian thinker and scholar both inside and outside of the church. There is nothing to guarantee that the sentiments expressed within her novels are her beliefs completely; they are, after all, works of fiction, written from the perspective of fictional characters. Robinson may not conceive of religion as an easy enough road through broad country, as her characters do. Her novels are not grounds to claim Robinson is a universalist. But while fiction is definitionally imaginary, it is also a product of the author’s imagination, and thus still an insight into the thinking of the author. If nothing else, Marilynne Robinson is a grace-filled human being with a deeper understanding of wonder and joy in the ordinary than most Christians today. As this grace-filled perspective sways towards universalism, it is the duty of the readers to be discerning in what they take away from each novel. Jump deeply into the river of grace that flows through every novel: just don’t breathe in.

Endnotes

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (The Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), 9.
2. *Ibid.*, 18.
3. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 197.
4. Lam. 3:22-23, *ESV Study Bible*, English Standard Version (Crossway, 2008).
5. Robinson, *Gilead*, 56.
6. Ps. 19:1-2. *New International Version Holy Bible*. (Zondervan, 1984).
7. Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 259-260.
8. Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 91-92.
9. Robinson, *Gilead*, 239-240.