

## Analysis of the Biblical Archetype in *Gilead*

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### Abstract

The use of a large number of religious elements is a major feature of Marilynne Robinson's works. Each of her works involves related religious themes and concepts, which shows her thinking about the essence of religious belief. This paper takes her second novel, *Gilead*, as an example. The novel *Gilead* tells the story of three generations of a pastor's family in a unique epistolary way, and explores the relationship between the individual and the family, race and faith. This paper mainly explores the similarities between the protagonist John Ames and the biblical character Abraham, so as to demonstrate the changing process of John Ames' faith in God. At the same time, combined with the current religious dilemma facing the United States raised by Robinson, this paper analyzes the realistic significance of depicting this Abraham style character.

### Keywords

*Gilead*, Archetype, Faith.

### 1. Introduction

Marilynne Robinson is one of the most distinguished women writers in America. Her first novel *Housekeeping* published in 1980 caused a great sensation and has been known as the classic of contemporary American Literature. However, It wasn't until 2004 that her second novel *Gilead* came out, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2005. Marilynne Robinson has always believed in the religion she grew up in, and she once said that the *bible* was her most treasured book in the world. Obviously, *Gilead* is also a religious philosophical novel which recounts the changes of a pastor's family in the small town named Gilead from the civil war to 1995. This novel demonstrates the author's value orientation of Christian faith, and uses images and parables from the *Bible* to depict characters and express their inner world.

*Gilead* was a letter to his seven-year-old son by an elderly reverend who thought his days were numbered. He hoped that through this special letter, his young son could learn about his father's life. The main character John Ames, as well as the narrator, recorded the changes of the reverend family in the small town of Gilead over several generations since the American Civil War, containing his experiences in childhood, memories of his grandfather, the marriage, the situation of preaching in the church and the complete change of his "godson" Jack. All these segments have led many scholars to analyze and interpret this novel from different perspectives such as prodigality, father-son relationships, forgiveness, grace, aging and death. In this novel, some figures from the chapter "*Genesis*" of the *Bible* can be found easily, such as Abraham, Issac, Ishmael and Hagar. This paper intends to collect the similar details between Abraham and John Ames and argue that to some extent, Abraham is the biblical archetype of John Ames. The image "Abraham" mentioned in *Gilead* is the portrait of John Ames himself. And the following questions will be answered: Firstly, what connections can be built between the two figures? Secondly, what is the author's intention by shaping such an Abraham style figure?

### 2. Rise and Fall of Faith

(1) The Vision and the Call

In Gilead, the name “Abraham” appears seven times. I intend to classify these appearances into several aspects, which conceal the similar changing process of Ames’s faith and Abraham’s.

“Abraham” is mentioned in the memory of Ames’s childhood for the first time.

Once, when my father was gathering sticks for firewood into my arms, he said we were like **Abraham** and Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah. I'd thought as much myself. (*Gilead* 11)

In fact, there are many flashbacks and episodes in this novel. Ames’s grandfather had mentioned that the vision “Lord were bound in chains”, “those irons had rankled right down to His bones” (*Gilead* 49) was like God’s call to urge him to do some useful work for Abolition Movement in Kansas, which made him leave his hometown and become an army chaplain. However, he returned from Gilead alone in a low spirit by the tough experience in fighting as well as people’s aversion to the black slaves. Several years later, hearing the death of his grandfather, Ames and his father set out for Kansas. The journey was rather difficult. Despite the hardship in the way, even there were several times when he truly believed they might just “wander off and die”(*Gilead* 11), his father was determined to find the grave to convey his deeply sorry.

Ames witnessed the reconciliation between his father and his grandfather before the grave, where he saw another vision “ a full moon rising just as the sun was going down”. (*Gilead* 14) Ames believed it was the oracle from God just as he thought “ it is waste and ingratitude not to honor such things as visions, whether you yourself happen to have seen them or not”. (*Gilead* 97) From then, he was determined to devote himself to the cause of the priest and work for God.

It is the first also special place to mention “Abraham”, for from Ames’s father’s words, he was “Abraham” while his son was “Issac”. However, Ames should also be “Abraham”. In the *Bible*, Abraham changed his status from an ordinary man to a servant of God just because of the call from God (*Genesis* 12). Then he followed God’s words, from whom a new nation was born. In other words, the vision Ames’s saw is equivalent to the call that Abraham received, which both represent the beginning of their religious life.

## (2) Desire for Descendants

The second appearance of “Abraham” in *Gilead* is from Lila’s words. Ames had always talked about Boughton’s family life, such as “Boughton lost his wife five years ago, and he married before I did. His oldest boy has snow-white hair. His grandchildren are mostly married.” (*Gilead* 54) As a contrast, family life with his wife and son took up quite limited time for Ames. Once he said he had shepherded a good many people through their lives and baptized babies by the hundred. In such life, he seemed to feel “as though a great part of life was closed to me”(*Gilead* 54) . At that time, his wife Lila said he was like **Abraham**.

Lila became Ames’s wife in his old age. She was much younger than Ames. They had a seven-year-old son, who was the receiver of this whole letter. Knowing that there would be few days to come, and that he could not accompany with his beloved wife, nor could he see his young son grow up with his own eyes, Ames wrote this long family letter, hoping that when his son grew up, he could understand his father’s life through the words. But before Ames got married with Lila, he did feel lonely even resentment, especially when compared with his best friend Boughton.

Ames had got married when he was young, but that wife died of dystocia and his daughter also died immediately. During his long years as a clergyman, Ames often thought that he would live alone all his life, though he did not seem content with that. Here one of the “men” who could watch their wives grow old is Boughton. Ames envied his friend Boughton who had a large family and eight children being noisy every day. It seemed to him to be “blindingly beautiful” (*Gilead* 65). He mentioned his suffering a good deal at the spectacle of all the marriages, all the households overflowing with children, just because he wanted his own. (*Gilead* 134) “ I used to dread walking into his house, because it made mine seem so empty. And Boughton could tell

that, he knew it." (*Gilead* 65) Boughton named his fifth kid (Jack) "John Ames Boughton", and he asked Ames to baptize the child and become his godfather. He hoped that this child with the same name as Ames could pacify Ames's lonely life. However, Ames regarded his action as to set off his family's lively laughter with his own loneliness. It was a mockery of his life with no wife or son. Therefore, Ames did not like and was not close to the Godson of the same name. At the moment he wrote the letter, Ames acknowledged that such emotion was due to the sin of covetise, that was the pang of resentment you might feel when even the people you loved best had what you wanted and did not have. From the point of view of loving your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18) As a priest, theoretically speaking, what he should rely on and pursue most is the relationship with God, and what he should care most about is the work for God. Yet Ames was still eager to have a family with many children like Boughton, let alone "the pang of resentment". This is also a reflection of his inner frustration. The sacred profession as God's servant cannot fully satisfy his emotional needs.

The same affection was also expressed from Abraham in the *Bible*. In *Genesis*, the word of the Lord came to Abram to ease his anxiety, said "Do not be afraid, your very great reward." And Abraham's answer was " You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." (*Genesis* 15:1-3 NIV) Actually, he directly pointed out that he had no son. It means even if God blessed him more, eventually his family property would not be inherited, and all the material reward would belong to an outsider. In the eyes of Hebrews at that time, the succession of descendants, especially the eldest son, was extremely important. It can also be perceived from the dialogue between Abraham and God that he was eager to have his own children. After that, Abraham's wife Sarai found herself barren, so she suggested Abraham that her Egyptian slave Hager could replace her to give him a child. Abraham accepted. Finally a child was born named Ishmael. In fact, God had promised Abraham countless offspring, yet he did not have enough faith in this case and manipulated in their own way. The child Ishmael to a greater extent was from human's wishes, not the chosen by God. And Historically, the nation formed by the descendants of Ishmael became the long-term enemies of the Israelites. Likewise, on the matter of having descendants, Abraham shows his feebleness in faith.

### 3. Great Faith Rooted in the Rock

#### (1) Faith in "Sacrifice"

The next appearances of "Abraham" in *Gilead* are in Ames's sermon. In his remarks, he stated the similarity between the stories of Hagar and Ishmael sent off into the wilderness and Abraham going off with Isaac to sacrifice him.

My point was that **Abraham** is in effect called upon to sacrifice both his sons, and that the Lord in both instances sends angels to intervene at the critical moment to save the child. (*Gilead* 129) Before talking about the sacrifice, it should be clear that for Ames, he had two sons. One was Jack (John Ames Boughton), and the other was the receiver of the letter, Ames's seven-year-old son. Jack was actually the son of Boughton. Boughton had several children. When he thought that there would be no more children, the son Jack was born and became Boughton's favorite. Boughton named the son after Ames, and let Jack be the godson of Ames to compensate for his childlessness. It's the first son of Ames.

Abraham's first son was Ishmael, who was born from an Egyptian slave Hager. Abraham's wife Sarai found herself barren, so she gave Abraham a son via her slave.

Ames's real son was born nearly in Ames's seventies. And Abraham's second son was Issac, who was born when he was 100 years old, and was the descendant God had promised. They both treated the son as God's grace and "something more than a miracle" (*Gilead* 52). Expectations for children in their prime could not be realized, so it was more precious to get the unexpected son in their twilight years.

One of the most famous stories in the *Bible* is probably the incident of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. It is the very way that God tests Abraham's faith. Abraham did not grudge his hard-won son, besides he believed that even if his son Isaac was dead, God has the power to revive him.

And In this letter, from Ames's remarks, the act that Abraham set the child Ishmael and his mother off still showed his faith in God. It was an action "trusting to the providence of God" (*Gilead* 129). And in Genesis, Abraham did feel distressed greatly about Sarah's requirement. And then God's words came, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman... I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring." (*Genesis* 21:11-13 NIV) Indeed, it was because of his faith in God that he would take care of the mother and son even in the wilderness, and believing that God would then bless the child's descendants, Abraham was relieved to expel him from his place. This was to give his son Ishmael to God wholly, just as he believed that God would look after Isaac in any way when he swung his knife on Mount Moriah to kill him. Only faith, no scruples.

To this extent, Ames also made two "sacrifices" of his sons. Jack had been transformed in his more than 20 years of wandering. He married a black girl and had his own son. The reason why he returned to his hometown was to find a stable place for his family of three. Actually, when Ames mentioned "Abraham's sacrifice" in the sermon, he still thought of Jack as the one who could only make trouble, mistakes and be irresponsible to his family. It was not until Ames knows Jack's remarkable changes in the past years, did he realize that the Jack he was facing was a completely new Jack who took the responsibility of his own family and he forgave Jack. Before Jack left Gilead again, they had understood each other already. And Ames had such statement "John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also." and he "did bless him to the limit of my powers" (*Gilead* 241) when Jack was going to leave. He prayed and blessed that God would look on Jack's future life. In fact, he gave Jack, his son to God completely, just as Abraham did to Ishmael for he knew even though people's tolerance and understanding for him and his family was quite limited, God would never abandon them.

Meanwhile, Ames knew that he might not have much time to watch his beloved child grow up. He also worried that his child might be hurt and in danger after his death. Therefore, many times in the letter, he mentioned that he prayed for his son, for parents could secure "so little for their children, so little safety" (*Gilead* 129). The only safe and hopeful choice was to give the son to the Almighty God, who lives forever. So that is another sacrifice.

Obviously, both Abraham and Ames experience more about God through their sacrifices, which also announce their beliefs.

#### Faith Passed down from Generation to Generation

The last appearances of "Abraham" in *Gilead* are also from Ames's sermon, which is about the inheritance of faith. He indicated that from Abraham's age, persistence in faith had never been facile. Abraham suffered being "sent into the wilderness, told to leave his father's house also" (*Gilead* 129), and that should be the narrative of all generations.

Christ is Himself the pastor of His people and a faithful presence among them through all generations... I put the question why the Lord would ask gentle **Abraham** to do two things that were so cruel on their face—sending a child and his mother into the wilderness, and taking a child to be bound on an altar as if for sacrifice. (*Gilead* 129)

The time Ames gave such sermon was during the war. Many parents' sons had died owing to the war. Sadness permeated the town. This was the moment when people were experiencing a crisis of faith in God. They couldn't understand why God allowed so much violence, murder, and why their children should be the victims in the war. If it was the "sacrifice", now the "altar" would be for violence, for murder.

Moreover, in this novel, some figures do reflect the decline of faith in the town of Gilead. Ames's brother Edwards Ames became an atheist when he returned from abroad and in order to show his attitude of breaking away from the religious tradition of the family, he even removed one letter "s" from his name and changed it from Edwards to Edward. Another is Ames's father who used to be a famous priest. When Edward came back, he was extremely disappointed by Edward's change, and did not allow Ames to read or discuss anything about Feuerbach. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, he left Gilead to live with Edward. When he returned, he told Ames that he could not preach anymore and suggested Ames leaving this town to experience the wonderful outside world (*Gilead* 234), which means Ames's father had totally abandoned his belief.

In the *Bible*, God called Abraham to go from his country, his people and his father's household to the land he would show Abraham and make him into a great nation. Actually, it was until his offspring who could enter the promised land Canaan. It took hundreds of years from the promise to Abraham to the final fulfillment of the promise to his descendants. In this process, generations of people have experienced oppression, hunger and thirst, and death. Finally, only those who persisted in believing in God's word finally entered the promised land and got what God had prepared. Faith is a process, driven by generation after generation.

Ames did have doubted God, for he could not understand the intentions behind the cruel events, not to mention gave a reasonable and comforting explanation to the grieved parents as a priest. But when he understood that many phenomena seemed cruel and painful, just like letting Abraham do the two unacceptable sacrifices, God had his own good pleasure and blessing behind them. Abraham passed the test of faith, so he was worthy of God's promise. As Job in the *Bible* said "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." (*Job* 23:10 NIV) It is in the face of challenges and shocks, even suffering, that the faith is even more valuable. Thus Ames insisted to stay at Gilead, though in his father's words this town was "Old, unhappy far-off things and battles long ago" (*Gilead* 235). He refused to leave this town, where he saw the hope to rebuild the faith altar and resume the inheritance of faith.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper points out that in *Gilead*, the protagonist priest John Ames is shaped based on the archetype "Abraham" in the *Bible*. It can be proved in several aspects, such as they both begin their religious life by something unusual, suffer the pain of no descendant and offer up two "sacrifices". Actually, Marilynne Robinson uses such similar shots to depict an Abraham style priest, whose changing process of faith reflects the decline of faith in the town of Gilead: Someone quits with doubts gradually; someone abandons it suddenly. The figure of John Ames also responds to Robinson's own proposal that the United States is facing a religious dilemma. Robinson points out in her essays that what the United States is facing today is that people interpret people's emotional desire by pseudoscience such as the principle of mechanical motion. (*The Death of Adam*, 262) She criticizes Darwinism for opposing religion and science completely, regarding religious belief as the stumbling block of civilization development and social progress, which leads to the collapse of belief moral system in modern society. And she also mentions that though polls show that most Americans still believe in God, the essence of this belief has been disappearing gradually from the traditional American culture.

Priest Ames, unlike the image of the villain in general literature, has the characteristics of piety and authenticity. Robinson takes advantage of the fragments in this priest's daily life to guide people to think about the relationship with God. Through his experiences and insights, Robinson responds to the relationship between people's daily life and belief, helping people to understand and restore the relationship between man and God. The development of science and technology does make people ask more questions about the authenticity of God and belief,

but there is a region in people's heart that only God fills, where people find comfort and ease. Live by faith.

John Ames, who has experienced the training of his faith, is a rare positive religious figure presented by Robinson for American literature, and a typical character created by the writer to fight against the contemporary nihilistic life. Through this priest, Robinson touches the darkness in human nature, and also discusses the resurrection of ordinary life. There exists a kind of spiritual connection between human's incompleteness and God's integrity, which emphasizes human's subjectivity and God's eternity.

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