

THE BAPTISM OF A PRODIGAL SON IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *GILEAD*

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Abstract

As a contemporary American female writer, a devout Christian, Marilynne Robinson gets her religious thoughts fully manifested in her *Gilead*. The novel is actually a home epistle that an aged and ailing father Ames passes to his 7-year-old innocent son, which narrates the three priesthood generations' life changes from the Civil War to 1956 by making use of Ames's first-person narration. However, the outsider John Ames Boughton (Jack) has been subject to diverse academic interest, which proves that he dominates an important textual place. This research makes the priest Ames's baptism for prodigal Jack as an entry point. Ames has baptized Jack and has to reluctantly confer the name "John Ames" to Jack under the request of his bosom friend Boughton. Due to Ames's mixed feelings (jealousy) in addition to Jack's own diverse prodigality, Ames does not want to accept Jack at all. With the focus on the tiny difference between the religious ritual baptism and the true meaning of baptism in the novel, this research aims to put forward that the priest Ames has dilemma in conveying the Bible doctrine "love your neighbors". However, at the end of novel, after seeing the unacceptable prodigal's love and responsibility toward his old father, colored wife and interracial son, Ames starts to introspect his inappropriate attitude toward Jack. Under the guidance of the divine epiphany, Ames is willing to accept Jack and to give Jack the spiritual consolation. By analyzing Ames's inner conflicts between his own "covetise" and the divine epiphany—the developmental process of Ames's acceptance of unacceptable prodigal godson, this paper hopes to argue that the last blessing Ames gives to Jack reveals that Ames's divine epiphany overwhelms his human nature—covetise which enables him to accept even to love the unacceptable people or unpleasant things in life so as to make faith and spiritual pursuit truly become a part of contemporary life.

Keywords: Marilynne Robinson; *Gilead*; ritual baptism; spiritual baptism

Introduction

Marilynne Robinson, one of the most influential contemporary American female novelists, "moralist of the Midwest" called by *The New York Time*, conveys her religious thinking in her *Gilead* trilogy. Her novel *Gilead*, published in 2004, won the

2004 National Book Reviewer Award and Pulitzer Prize in 2005. It's great success proves the novelistic uncommonness. "Gilead", on the one hand, is the title of the novel, and on the other hand is also the locational background of the novel. Robinson talks about the connotations of the title *Gilead*.

The biblical Gilead has a very complex history. It's a town that's criticized for being rich and hard-hearted; it's lamented because it's been destroyed; and it's also used as a symbol of what can be restored, what can be hoped for. I like the name because it has various histories and meanings. (Gritz, 2004)

It can be deduced that not only is *Gilead* glued with Robinson's good religious prospect but also overloads the history of the epitome of America. Except for the biblical meanings that "Gilead" contains, "Gilead" is a small town in Iowa that really exists where Robinson once lived "I grew up quite close to Iowa City, and one of the things that really struck me about Gilead was its peaceful, pastoral atmosphere." (Gritz, 2004) This title not only keeps Robinson's past memories but also stores her religious thinking.

Actually, the novel *Gilead* is a home epistle written by a pastor of the ancient consul, John Ames, to his 7-year-old son on the occasion of his ailing heart problems. Ames records his memories of the development of whole priesthood familial history as well as his religious meditation and emotions of his personal life. However, the outsider Jack has been emphasized many times in the epistle, which proves that Jack dominates a very important textual place. In *Gilead*, Jack has a very close relationship with the protagonist Ames's religious beliefs and practice since Jack has been baptized and then shares the namesake "John Ames" with Ames, which makes him occupy a very prominent position in the previous scholars' discussions.

"Baptism" as an important religious concept, plays a very important role in such a novel *Gilead* with a strong religious significance. In *Gilead*, Robinson not only expresses the meaning of ritual baptism but also delivers the other concept of baptism — spiritual baptism. The problem about how to really realize the transcendence from the ritual baptism to spiritual baptism not only poses a tough task to Marilynne Robinson but also to the readers.

Literature Review

Marilynne Robinson has entered into the horizons of domestic scholars and exotic critics since her first novel *Housekeeping* was launched into publication; though she is not very prolific, her works have drawn much attention from various reviewers, and *Gilead* is one of the most famous novels among them, which is listed as one of the American formal President Obama's most favorite books. As one of the most important figures in the novel, Jack gets a lot of attention from scholars. Most studies about Jack focus on the sin that he commits and what he is seeking for. In "Christian Multiculturalism and Unlearned History in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," Christopher Douglas thinks the guilty of Jack comes from his betrayal of religion, not from mistakes he made in his youth (2011). David Leverenz holds a radical opinion in *Alternative*

Masculinities for a Changing World, he thinks Jack is an unredeemable person whose salvation is just fantasy by analyzing Jack's problem of sins and faithlessness. Except from the analysis of character Jack, most studies focus on Ames's attitudinal changes. Rebecca M. Painter points out that the infant baptism Ames gives to Jack is unusual, not the same as every baptism in which Ames enjoys joy. She puts forward that "Embittered at the loss of his own wife and child, Ames took offense at his friend's generosity, and Jack's baptism was perhaps compromised" (2010: 329). At the same time, Rebecca M. Painter also mentions the scene in which Ames gives blessing to Jack. It seems that Painter realizes the importance of this event, however she does not explore the special significance of this blessing to Jack. In Rebecca M. Painter's another article, she also focuses on Ames. She thinks the essence of Ames's acceptance of Jack is not forgiveness. What pains Jack are not the mistakes Jack made in his youth, but the situation that he and his wife are not accepted by society now. The forgiveness from Ames cannot be of some practical help but the spiritual consolation (2009). Lynne Hinojosa puts forward that the process that Ames forgives and accepts Jack is out of reconciliation rather than love. He further argues that "In moving toward reconciliation, the novel implies, one does not merely tolerate opposing views and doctrines, but one remains open to the people who hold them, honoring them as fellow creatures of God" (2015: 126). It is hard for Ames to share the same idea with Jack because of religious belief and experiences. However, Ames tries to understand Jack not only because of his sympathy for Jack, but also on account of his faith. Ames finally defeats envy and tries to love Jack who holds different opinions with different background. The blessing that Ames gives to Jack when Jack leaves the town is from the bottom of his heart. Since the letter is narrated by Ames, it is easier to find the changes in his heart. Brown Frank Burch focuses on the theme of forgiveness in the novel. He mainly focuses on the limitations of human judgment and the difficulty of forgiveness (2014). Because of the constraint of Ames's judgment, it is very difficult for him to forgive Jack even though Jack has greatly differed from before. Michael Vander Weele details the restoration of Ames and Jack Boughton's relationship. He further outlines the importance of the thematic forgiveness by the analysis of characters' human exchange (2010). Gordon Leah considers the whole process that John Ames gradually forgives and accepts Jack as self-redemption for John Ames (2008). Ames finally knows that his own feelings in the matter are less important than the love that the Lord has for this man whom he has resented for so long. This liberates him from envy and pain while the most important point that he neglects is meaning of the last blessing to Jack.

David Leverenz thinks "*Gilead* shows a dying man reaching to reclaim his spiritual son figure" (2014: 68). Susan Petit points out that it is because of Ames' covetise and prejudice that prevents him from forgiving Jack (2010). Sue Sorensen defines the prodigality in *Gilead* by referring to the biblical story. June Hadden Hobbs mentions the scene that Ames baptizes for Jack, he claims that "Ames's memorialization that begins with a naming ceremony at baptism ends with what he's realized even before he told the story, that "John Ames Boughton is his son" (2014: 248). It seems that Hobbs has noticed a series of Ames's changes in treating Jack.

In retrospection of the researching materials, it is easy to find that the reviewers mainly concentrate on the thematic forgiveness, racism, and the character analysis. Although many scholars probe Ames's forgiveness of Jack, there are few studies paying attention to the analysis of Ames's inner conflict and the meaning of Ames's last blessing. Only Gordon Leah notices the process from ritual baptism to the last blessing and interprets the process as Ames's self-redemption. While the interpretation of Ames's last blessing has been neglected. By interpreting the meaning of the baptism in the novel, this thesis wants to argue that the last blessing Ames gives to Jack reveals that Ames's divinity overwhelms his human nature—covetise which enables him to accept even to love the unacceptable people or unpleasant things in life so as to make faith and spiritual pursuit truly become a part of contemporary life. After the ritual baptism that Ames conducts for Jack's, Ames constantly expresses that he cannot accept such a prodigal son not only because of Jack's prodigality but also due to Ames's human nature—jealousy and covetise. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Ames's human nature gradually approaches the divinity; he shows his readiness to accept Jack and blesses Jack. With the clarification of Ames's baptismal transcendence for Jack as well as Ames's struggle between human nature and divinity, the paper revolves around the following questions: Firstly, what is the significance of the baptism viewed in the post-modern context? Secondly, what factors indicate that Ames's divinity overwhelms his human nature?

Research Method

Documentary Research; Textual Analysis

Discussion

In Gilead, the word "baptism" has been emphasized many times. The scenes of the animals' baptism, children's baptism and the adults' baptism are very fresh in the mind of the protagonist Ames. All the scenes seem to prove the important status of baptism in the novel. To the first narrator Ames who takes the deity, the rite—baptism dominates an overwhelming place in his life career. To the baptized people in the novel, baptism exerts a great influence on their spiritual world. Either John Ames or Jack is closely associated with the baptism. It is acknowledged that baptism is usually grouped into a form of rituality. This thesis holds that baptism not only belongs to a form of the ritual ceremony, but also can be viewed as a sort of spiritual consolation.

Theoretical Foundation of Baptism

In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, baptism is defined as a sort of sacrament rite that "allows a candidate to the Christian Church" (150). St Paul takes it for granted that the baptism stands for the believers' "union with Christ" which makes their sins get cleansed (150). The origin of ritual baptism is cast with the sacredness since it is deeply associated with Christ. Augustine holds that "the Holy Spirit produced in baptism an effect independent of sanctifying grace" (151). St Thomas Aquinas further develops Augustine doctrine claiming that "baptism is not merely a sign of grace, but contains and confers it on those who put no obstacle in its way, and further it is the instrument used by God for the justification of infidels" (151). In *The Essence*

of *Christian*, Feuerbach Ludwig puts forward that “an everlasting life that God has assured us through his son Jesus Christ can only be achieved through baptisms” (128). The 1312 Canons of Council of Vienna have pointed out “Not only the children but also the adult will be granted with the grace and the award of virtue through the baptism”. Martin Luther claims that “The power, effect, benefit, and purpose of baptism is to save. To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ” (2011: 35). Salvation is the only goal of baptism. Through the baptism, not only can the fear of death be suppressed but also the opportunity to gain the eternity can be gained. These theological theories lay a foundation for the religious sacredness and essentiality of baptism.

At the same time, baptism is also spiritual and essential. David Bentley Hart does not think the spiritual baptism as “a symbolic drama” but “a change in one’s social and spiritual identity” (2012: 458). Due to the spiritual development and support, the one has access to win plenty of opportunities so as to be successful which may improve his previous social status. Myles Rearden clarifies that spiritual baptism is “a spirituality of personal faith commitment” (1994: 422). It confirms the fact that the spiritual baptism covers the man’s faith of belonging as well as the individual’s devotion. After going through the spiritual baptism, the one is confirmed the significance of spiritual faith commitment. At the same time, the spiritual baptism is endowed with the holiness. Based on the theoretical foundation, this research aims to interpret the difference between ritual baptism and spiritual baptism in *Gilead* by making a contrast and to probe the significance of true meaning of baptism in the contemporary life.

The Developmental Process of Priest Ames

Prodigal means “a person who spends or has spent, his or her money or substance with wasteful extravagance”. In the “Parable of the Prodigal Son”, it mainly tells about the story that a little son takes his father’s fortune away and squanders the property recklessly, which results in his worse living poverty even than the animals’. The living dilemma urges him to return home. Upon seeing the little son’s return and confession, the father holds a celebration with exhilaration rather than make any accountability. In this paper, the meaning of the prodigal has been specified that refers to Jack, who “vanishes after impregnating a girl of lower socioeconomic standing whom he has no desire to marry” (Pak, 2015: 212). In *Gilead*, the pastor Ames also faces a prodigal — Jack. However, the prodigal is not Ames’s biological son but godson. Whether or not the godfather Ames can overthrow his prejudice toward the prodigal and accept him deserves to be explored.

The Priest Ames's Challenges to the Acceptance of A Prodigal Son

Different from the prodigal son’s father in the parable, Ames does not accept the prodigal as soon as he arrives home. The priest Ames even shows defense toward the prodigal owing to his own “covetise” as well as Jack’s prodigality from the childhood to the adulthood.

As a matter of fact, except from the closest friendship, Ames and old Boughton both serve as the priests of the town's church. Old Boughton is qualified enough to baptize his own child Jack. However old Boughton gives his son Jack to Ames. Under such situation, Ames baptizes Jack and becomes Jack's godfather who tends to be responsibility for Jack's "upbringing and personal development, and to take care of the child should anything happen to the parents". Ames is also asked to confer the name "John Ames Boughton" to Jack unwillingly. Namesake is defined as "a person or thing having the same name as another" Due to the namesake, Ames and Jack share one identity with each other. It means no matter what Jack has done; what grace or shame he brings, Ames is bounded together with him because of the namesake. Even though Ames has been asked to name Jack "John Ames" by his closest friend Boughton, as a matter of fact, Ames has not been cheered by Boughton's generosity. In the eyes of the priest Ames, this endowment is a sort of chains. He claims "There are bonds which oblige me to special tolerance and kindness toward this young man, John Ames Boughton. He is the beloved child of my oldest and dearest friend" (*Gilead*: 177). Jack is the beloved son of Boughton who is the bosom friend of Ames. In view of the factor that Ames keeps a deep and close friendship with Boughton, Ames is forced to treat Jack amicably and kindly. However, the full name "John Ames" has been published in the newspaper because of Jack's scandals — subsequent serious stealing liquor, drinking, and joyriding in the newspaper frequently. These scandals not only disgrace Ames himself but also shame Ames's whole family. Such kind of shame is like a thorn that pricks Ames's heart. However, Ames is forced to continue to accept this shame. The well-respected status of Jack's family provides the privilege for Jack to continue shaming his entire family and disgracing Ames's name. Ames recalls "his family is so well respected...he is allowed to go right on disgracing his family...the Boughtons really love him" (*Gilead* 209). Jack is always the apple of his families' eyes. No matter what the wrong deeds Jack has made, his father or brothers will sweep all the trouble away.

As a priest, Ames can hardly tolerate the ones who bully others and then holds an irresponsible attitude. Ames thinks that Jack's impregnating a poor girl or producing a baby during college time is a matter of "one way or another" (*Gilead* 177). It is very common to have sex with girls or produce the child in the course of college time. However, the prodigal's most serious prodigality lies in that the object he impregnates is dissimilar from the other girls. The girl is very young whose family's condition is extremely "desolate, even squalid" (*Gilead* 178). In other words, the poor girl "enjoys none of the protections a young girl needs" (*Gilead* 178). Jack's family situation forms a sharp contrast with the poor girl's. Actually, Jack is the descendant of well-respected house, while the girl is the daughter of such a humble and obscure family where the yard is filled with garbage and the dirty things. The great disparity in the social status and family situation is not supposed to make the union possible. What's more, Jack has no love toward this poor girl. Under the situation, Jack's behavior contains the meaning of cheating or bullying. Jack does not offer his protection but abandons her after getting the sexual pleasure. Toward Jack's irresponsible attitude, Ames clearly expresses his disappointment in a rhetorical question "How could young Boughton have taken advantage of that girl?" (*Gilead*: 179). Ames denounces such

sort of union and indirectly criticizes Jack's prodigality since "It was something no honorable man would have done" (*Gilead* 156). It means that only the cheeky man can do such kind of things. It is hard for Ames to think of any reasons to vindicate Jack and accept him naturally.

Ames holds that those who abandon their children should be sentenced. Because of Jack's refusal to admit this child, the child does not have the authority to enter into his Christian family reasonably. No matter how others persuade Jack to accept the child, the irresponsible prodigal always shows an indifferent attitude to the misery he has caused in the family and puts everything concerning the child aside. The squalid living environment and careless care finally lead to the baby's death. Ames denounces that "If anyone offend these little ones, it would be better for him if a milestone were put around his neck and he were cast into the sea" (*Gilead* 148). It means that those who abandon their children commit the unforgivable crimes that should be censured. In other words, Jack's prodigality about refusing to take any responsibility for the infant baby and escaping should be punished.

Ames feels very worried after hearing the news that Jack has returned home, since "remembering and forgiving can be contrary things" (*Gilead* 187). All the shame brought by Jack and his prodigality rise in the mind of Ames, which sets huge difficulty for Ames to accept the prodigal.

As a matter of fact, Jack's prodigality poses challenges for Ames to accept him; Ames also has to struggle with his inner covetise on the way to the acceptance of the prodigal Jack. Ames feels overwhelmingly threatened because of Jack's frequent visits. Ames thinks that Jack's frequent visits must have certain purposes. Although the returnee has greatly differed from himself of twenty years ago not only in the appearance but also in a temper. He watches out each action and keeps his decorum, nevertheless all that is disguise in the eyes of the protagonist.

Since Ames's present wife Lila is of similar age with Jack Boughton, Ames thinks that the prodigal Jack is likely to let out the sign of seduction to Lila and afterward to take over the home after his death. That is why Ames keeps warning his son to keep a distance from Jack. Ames writes in the letter "My impulse is strong to warn you against Jack Boughton. Your mother and you...He is not a man of the highest character. Be wary of him" (*Gilead* 143). Ames is cast shadow on by Jack's previous poor moral qualities and the delinquent conduct.

Jack's superiority over the age brings Ames great anxiety. What's more, Jack's youth and appropriateness ruthlessly form a contrast with Ames's aging and ailing body, which triggers the ordinary old man's envy. Especially, under influence of the comparison of age, the young group of three, Jack, Lila and Ames's son seem to be a perfect match, while the old Ames feels much like an outlier, which exactly stirs up the old Ames's jealousy.

The truth is, as I stood there in the pulpit, looking down on the three of you, you looked to me like a handsome young family, and my evil old

heart rose within me, the old covetise I have mentioned elsewhere came over me, and I felt the way I used to feel when the beauty of other lives was a misery and an offense to me. (*Gilead*, 160)

Ames himself defines the covetise “pang of resentment you may feel when even the people you love best have what you want and don't have” (*Gilead*, 152). He can feel the covetise in his mind clear, but he seems to lose the control of suppressing. The beauty of others' lives forms a very obvious comparison with Ames's. In jealousy of Jack's youth, Ames feels much reluctant to accept him.

Ames's Acceptance of an Unacceptable Prodigal Godson

To Ames, accepting the unacceptable prodigal godson is an exceedingly tough task. How does Ames succeed in giving up his loathness resulting from Jack's prodigality and finally accepts Jack? In the part, this thesis mainly focuses on the exploration of Ames's acceptance of Jack. Jack's prodigality makes it impossible for Ames to see any love and sense of responsibility. However finally it is Jack's deep love persistence in his old father, colored wife as well as the interracial child that contributes Ames to change his preconceived ideas. Prodigal Jack returns home after the departure of twenty years. According to the first narration of Ames, Jack has a black wife named Della and produces a colored boy. However, the prodigal's marriage with a colored woman has been viewed as illegal cohabitation by the police that means Jack's interracial marriage with Della is not admitted by the local laws; due to the marriage, he has lost the financial resources since he has been fired; worse, he and his wife have no shelter to reside in, for they have been driven out of rented house by house-owner. The worst thing is that Della's father is impossible to greet the union of his daughter and Jack, for he rejects against “ravening wolf” Jack (*Gilead* 225). Under these circumstances of expatriate dislocation, legal prohibition, no financial support or family's greetings brought by racism, Jack still does not abandon the love toward his wife and the responsibility for his son. After learning how Jack has struggled and how loving and humble he is, Ames comes not just to accept him as a son but to love him.

At the end of the novel, Jack is going to depart from the town again although his father will die soon and he knows his departure will result in his sister Glory's disappointment and his father's sadness. However, he still insists on doing that. Jack's departure wins his godfather's understanding. “I understand why you have to leave, I really do.” (*Gilead*, 274) The intention he chooses to depart from the home is actually out of the love and responsibility toward his wife and son. He hopes to find a shelter where he can live with his coloured wife and child together.

On the path to the bus stop, the priest Ames brings along the book *The Essence of Christianity* in the hope of giving it to the Jack. The reverend's act of giving the book to Jack before the separation is worthy of being carefully analyzed, especially Ames's movement of dog-earing the page, which writes that “How then can I doubt of God? ...To doubt of God is to doubt of myself.” (Robinson, 273) On the one hand, the book itself represents the religious faith itself. It mainly records and explains the kernel of Christianity religion, which has the function of the religious education and instruction.

This farewell gift inherits the reverend's firm faith in religion and indicates the godfather's good expectation as well as prayer to his godson. At the same time, this book implies the godfather's wish to convince his godson of the significance of faith and love that can offer the spiritual support in the mental world. Except from these meanings, the book can also be viewed as recognition to Jack, Ames has recognized Jack as his son since he has meant to pass on the book to his natural son Robby.

Apart from the incident that the book conferring connotes a godfather's love and religious faith to a godson, Ames's movement of granting his godson with the money also implies the parental love. From the part of Ames, Jack's readiness to accept the money will bring Ames consolation and psychological relief in that he knows at least the money is going to provide some aid for Jack. "If you would accept a few dollars of that money of mine, you'd be doing me a kindness." (*Gilead*, 275) John Ames is a pastor whose career is very decent. However, it is because of his generosity and kindness that he gives most of his savings to the people in need, which leads to his poverty in property. Though life is hard to the old reverend, he still gives 40 dollars to the Jack. Money is also the way for Ames to convey his love. It is his financial constraint that further outstands his deep love in Jack.

Jack's identity of Ames's son has been acknowledged by Ames through the John Ames's difference in addressing Jack. At the end of the novel, Ames spares no effort to bless Jack by addressing him "John Ames Boughton" rather than "Jack Boughton", which reveals that Ames has already accepted the prodigal as his own son. He is very willing to endow the son with the name "John Ames", which forms a very clear contrast with his previous antipathy. When Ames admits that he is "a second father" of Jack (*Gilead* 231), he is willing to be called "Papa" as Jack tells Glory "I called him Papa, and this time I think it may even have pleased him a little" (*Home* 308). He is ready to make Jack the son of his own.

The True Meaning of Baptism in *Gilead*

The ritual baptism is in nature a rite with the procedure of the baptismal essentials carried out at the church, the emotions of the priests toward the baptized ones cannot be detected or felt by other congregations, whether they love the baptized ones or not, it's a matter of secret, only the priest himself knows. Jack receives ritual baptism from Ames whose feelings toward Jack are unknown to other congregations. In other words, out of the duty, the pastor is compulsory to baptize the baptized ones regardless of the readiness or the unwillingness. When the baptismal essentials and the sacred place become unavailable, however Ames desires to send out the prayer to Jack in the hope of conveying divine love, the only thing he can do is to baptize Jack spiritually. The greatest difference between the ritual baptism and spiritual baptism lies in that whether or not priest loves the baptized one. The protagonist's obligatory ritual baptism to the benedictory spiritual baptism for his godson not only shows the changes of the baptismal way but also indicates Ames's change in the attitudes toward the prodigal.

Actually the last blessing that Ames gives to his godson can also be interpreted as spiritual baptism. During the break waiting for the bus, the reverend expresses the thought to Jack whom is the one he most wants to bless, "I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers...I said, 'Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father'" (Robinson, 275-76) Ames's movement about sweeping over Jack's forehead can be interpreted as a sort of spiritual baptism that is full of love rather than the coldness or unconcern. It is the movement that not only gives spiritual consolation to Jack but more importantly helps Ames get relieved. Ames sees his own failings and covetise, thus he requires the forgiveness. In other words, Ames also gets inner peace since Jack has given him an opportunity to conduct the blessing to compensate his previous covetise.

Conclusions

In the home epistle, *Gilead*, Ames utters life doctrines, religious faith, biblical stories, family begets, racial conflicts by making use of his first-person narration. Ames reluctantly baptizes Jack in that Ames gives name "John Ames" to Jack who brings much shame to the name. The dynamic process proves that the godson takes over a very important textual place is worth paying academic attention to. Due to the namesake, Ames and Jack become "one" to some extent. In the home epistle, Ames enumerates all sorts of Jack's prodigality, especially Jack's prodigality about refusing to take the responsibility for his own child and to show love to the child's mother. To Jack, Ames cannot succeed in showing the love as the *Bible's* proposal "Love your neighbors". However, at the end of the novel, after seeing Jack's love-light in his old father, colored wife and his interracial son, Ames banishes his previous loathness toward this unacceptable godson. It is the love that stirs Ames to accept the prodigal and to love the unacceptable prodigal. Ames is very ready to give Jack the spiritual consolation, which explains why Ames gives the blessing — spiritual baptism to Jack. Ames's success in realizing the transcendence from ritual baptism to spiritual baptism for Jack reveals that the true religion is not merely formal, verbal, or lingering in the scriptures, but more importantly it offers instructions to people about how to accept even to love the unacceptable people or unpleasant things in life so as to make faith and spiritual pursuit truly become a part of contemporary people's life. That is also Marilynne Robinson wants to convey in the contemporary time, which is of great significance to the development of spiritual civilization.

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