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Streams in the Wilderness

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Streams in the Wilderness

Pivotal to *Home* and *Gilead*, the concept of family heritage stands at the heart of both novels; “Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations ... we all live in the ruins of the lives of other generations” (Robinson, *Gilead* 197-198). Without a doubt, family provides the foundation for every child’s identity, giving parents a weighty obligation to protect, provide for, and prepare their children. But what happens when parents fail? Is the child destined to go astray? Is there any hope? Such questions are a driving force behind both *Gilead* and *Home*, as Marilynne Robinson—the American Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist—explores the relationship between parental duty and God’s redemptive power. While Ames and Jack struggle to fulfill their parental calling, it becomes clear that neither, for differing reasons, is able to perfectly meet his son’s needs. Ultimately, Robinson uses *Home* and *Gilead* to reveal that while parents do have an immense responsibility to guide, instruct, and provide for their children; God is sovereign over the well-being of all His children and is capable of redeeming even the most abysmal earthly parenting.

In *Gilead*, Ames often acknowledges his family’s impact on himself, realizing how prior generations laid the foundation for his theology and way of life. Many aspects of John Ames’ identity were inherited; from his name to his occupation to his physical appearance, Ames greatly resembles both his father and grandfather. Ames even declares that, “The holiness of [my grandfather’s] life imputed a holiness to mine” (204). Thus, Ames recognizes that he is indebted

to his family, which compels him to pour out the same blessings that he received from his father onto his son. This pressing duty causes Ames to cry out, “If only I could give you what my father gave me” (114). Tragically, however, despite his fervent yearning to provide for his son, Ames cannot fulfill his parental obligations.

Due to his illness and impending death, Ames is unable to adequately impart the fatherly wisdom, spiritual counsel, and physical provision that he longs to bestow on his son, Robby. Like his grandfather before him, Ames has robbed his son of his inheritance through his well intentioned generosity: “I have almost nothing to leave you and your mother” (4). Ames now has no more time to save money for Robby, which he deeply regrets. However, Ames is primarily concerned, not with finances, but rather his inability to intimately raise his son and teach him, as a father should. While he attempts to convey a life’s worth of wisdom and experience in his letter to his son, Ames knows that it is a poor substitute for the living relationship between father and son. Yet these failures to care for Robby are nothing when compared to Ames’ neglect and mistreatment of his other ‘son,’ Jack.

Although Ames admits, “I was supposed to be a second father to [Jack]” (231), he has completely rejected this duty. Ames loathes that Jack called him “papa,” even though Boughton intended for Ames to be “the father of [Jack’s] soul” (123). Time after time, Jack goes to Ames, seeking comfort, hope, and forgiveness; and each time Ames responds with anger, condemnation, and suspicion. Despite Ames’ best efforts, he cannot forgive Jack or imagine that he can change; in his view, Jack’s irresponsibility and cruelty are forever part of his character, something Jack can “never really reform” (156). Therefore, Ames appears to be, in many respects, an unsatisfactory parent who is incapable of meeting the needs of either his son or his godson. However, rather than despair, Ames surrenders his children to God; by the close of the

novel, Ames is at peace, confident that God will support and guide Robby, and even the wayward Jack.

As Ames struggles with his failures as a parent, different revelations, including the story of Hagar and Ishmael and Jack's final confession, awaken Ames' faith in the perfect providence of God. After pondering the Biblical story of Hagar and Ishmael, Ames realizes that the primary burden of parental responsibility falls not on fathers, but on God Himself, who uses earthly parenting but is not limited by it (129). Ames declares that many children, such as Jack, "seem to be a kind of wilderness unto themselves. But there must be angels there, too, and springs of water. Even that wilderness, the very habitation of jackals, is the Lord" (119). Although Ames originally views Jack as irredeemable, a barren soul who could not be saved, Jack's confession of fatherhood enables Ames to perceive how God transcends earthly parenting, succeeding where both Ames and Boughton have failed. When Ames hears of Jack's deep, selfless love for his family, and of his desire to responsibly provide for his son; Ames finally internalizes that "the grace of God is sufficient to any transgression" (155), and he is able to "see the beauty there is in [Jack]" (232). Ultimately, *Gilead* centers on Ames' inability to perfectly provide for his sons, both physically and spiritually, that is overcome when he surrenders Jack and Robby to the loving care of God, the only perfect Father.

Although *Home*, like *Gilead*, focus on the centrality of family, *Home* deals far more extensively with the pain and divisions that threaten the stability of family relationships. Throughout *Home*, Jack is haunted by his lonely childhood and utter failure to support his first child as he endeavors to redeem himself and establish his new family. In many ways, Jack is similar to Ames, who is largely defined by his family's heritage. Boughton tells Jack, "My life became your life, like lighting one candle from another" (*Home* 116), which reveals how deeply

Jack is indebted to his father. However, though Jack did receive part of his identity from Boughton, including his appearance and pastoral bearing, he has also rejected a significant portion of his family's legacy, namely Christianity. By abandoning his family's faith, Jack isolates himself, and is forced to essentially grow up without a connection to his parents or siblings. Yet while Jack, unlike Ames, has intellectually rejected his father's traditions, faith, and protection; he still craves the emotional foundation that a family heritage provides, both for himself and for his son. However, despite his best intentions though, Jack seems incapable of bestowing such a heritage on his son.

Unlike Ames, who desires reconciliation with Jack and who passionately strives to be an effective father to Robby, Jack has neglected his responsibility to provide for his daughter, while his lifestyle presently inhibits his ability to meet his son's needs. Jack is constantly reminded of his prior failure as a parent, which seems to doom his new attempt at fatherhood from its outset. Boughton indirectly criticizes Jack by saying, "Parents have a responsibility....They bring children into a dangerous world, and they should do what they have to do to keep them safe" (156), which Jack completely neglected to do for his daughter. Yet geographical distance is also prevents Jack from protecting his son from the terrible dangers of racism. As Jack dwells comfortably in the safety of Gilead, African Americans, such as his own wife and child, are being harassed and mistreated by their white neighbors, and even the police. Additionally, Jack's poverty and alcoholism limit his effectiveness at supporting his family and meeting their needs. Therefore, Jack has failed, even more drastically than Ames, to fulfill his parental obligations to his children.

Although Jack feels hopeless about his situation, his sister, Glory, eventually perceives God's faithful providence toward him and his family. Just as Ames recognizes that God is the

ultimate father of his son, Glory also acknowledges that “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” (295). By recognizing God’s responsibility to His children, Glory and Ames are able to accept the inevitable failings of earthly parents, trusting that God will provide what fathers cannot. At the close of *Home*, Glory has a visionary experience where she imagines Jack’s son returning to Gilead, finally coming home. Glory sees that somehow, despite all odds, Jack has managed to give his son an emotional foundation in his family’s heritage, to bind Robert to his family with the ties of familiarity and affection, which were so lacking from Jack’s own childhood. Ultimately, Glory knows that only God can be responsible for such a miraculous homecoming: “he has answered his father’s prayers. The Lord is wonderful”(325).

While *Gilead* and *Home* are exceptionally different in their style, point of view, and tone, both are concerned with the balance between parental responsibility and God’s loving guidance. As Ames and Jack struggle to provide for their families and nurture their children, both find that, apart from the gracious provision of God, they will fail their parental duty. Though this realization drives Jack to despair, Glory and Ames rejoice and place their hope in God. Ultimately, Robinson uses both novels *Home* and *Gilead* to convey the theme that while every father has a massive weight of responsibility for his children; each must eventually “give his child up to the wilderness and trust to the providence of God” (*Gilead*, 129).

Works Cited

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