Blessing is an underlying theme in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, and it ultimately comes to be a resolution of sorts to the conflict between characters in the novel. Reverend John Ames seeks to understand the meaning of blessing, or what a blessing does. He understands that blessing is a mutual experience, in that a blessing blesses both the blesser and the blessed. According to John Ames’ grandfather, “being blessed meant being bloodied,” but Ames acknowledges that that is not a scripturally-based claim (Robinson 36). Ames fears a different scripturally-lacking aspect of blessing: whether a blessing without intentionality could account for a state of perdition, particularly when Ames considers the state of Jack Boughton’s life (188). Ames determines that a blessing is a sort of recognition of the sacred mystery of another creature. Ultimately, though, Ames knows that a blessing has an ineffable and incomprehensible nature in it, a nature that cannot be fully understood or defined because the one from whom the blessing comes is also unable to be understood or defined.

From the very beginning of *Gilead*, John Ames is preoccupied with blessing. In explaining his fatal heart condition to his son, Robbie, and therefore the reader, Ames says that “for a dying man I feel pretty good, and that is a blessing” (Robinson 6). His heart condition and seemingly imminent death are of course the reason for his writing of this long letter to his son—his “begats,” as he calls them (9). While Ames considers many things to be blessings, perhaps taking after his grandfather, there is a different sort of blessing that Ames struggles to define, or contain, throughout the novel. The first

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1 Alternate title: “What exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it”: The Acknowledgement of Blessing in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*
glances of this other sort of blessing appear in Ames’ recollection of the baptism of his wife, Lila, which he performed. Ames considers baptism to be primarily a blessing, and he recalls that after baptizing Lila that he “felt like asking her, ‘What have I done? What does it mean?’” (21).

This question of meaning and causality has been with Ames since childhood. After baptizing a litter of “dusty little barn cats” with his lifelong friend Robert Boughton, John Ames asks his father, “what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it?” (22). He wonders “what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them” (23). Ames recalls that a few of the cats were “made into fairly respectable house cats. The others lived out their feral lives, indistinguishable from their kind, whether pagan or Christian no one could ever tell” (22). While Ames’ father does not give Ames a straight answer about the nature of blessing, he says that “the Sacraments must always be treated and regarded with the greatest respect” (22). Ames learns that the blessing of baptism is a sacrament that must not be trifled with, and this understanding later influences Ames’ musings about his blessing of John Ames “Jack” Boughton—his godson and namesake.

In an interview with BBC Radio 4’s Bookclub, Robinson notes that “blessing is an arch”—the person doing the blessing is also blessed. Robinson elaborates that “the [second] blessing Ames gives Jack is an act of recognition that blesses Ames, too. He is profoundly moved that he has had the occasion to do it, that Jack accepted it, wanted it. I really do believe that all blessing is mutual” (Painter 490). John Ames mentions this mutual nature of blessing as well (Robinson 189). However, this aspect of blessing is lacking in Ames’ first blessing of Jack when Jack was a child. Ames worries that “the
child felt how coldly I went about his christening, how far my thoughts were from blessing him… I didn’t feel that sacredness under my hand that I always do feel, that sense that the infant is blessing me” (188-189). Mark Scott interprets this reflection as Ames worrying “that his bitter state of mind withheld the blessing from Jack that perhaps inadvertently contributed to his state of perdition” (158). This fear is enhanced by the questions that Jack poses to Ames regarding predestination. Jack asks Ames: “Do you think some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition?” and Ames largely avoids the question (Robinson 150). Ames recognizes that his worries are unfounded (Robinson 189), but the belief that a lack of blessing could lead to perdition suggests that blessing holds the potential of influence or action.

Ames’ fixation on blessing has been passed down to him from his ancestors—Ames’ grandfather is portrayed as being as preoccupied with blessing as Ames. Ames recalls his grandfather’s constant refrain of there being “great blessing” in everything (Robinson 35-36). Further, Ames’ grandfather frequently repeats the opening lines of the priestly blessing from the book of Numbers: “The Lord bless you and keep you” (Numbers 6:24; Robinson 33, 85, 176). Ames also recalls that his grandfather “told me once that being blessed meant being bloodied, and that is true etymologically, in English—but not in Greek or Hebrew. So whatever understanding might be based on that derivation has no scriptural authority behind it” (36). Ames is correct about this. The Greek and Hebrew words for “bless” mean “to speak well of, to praise” and “to worship, to praise,” respectively (Online Etymology Dictionary). In English, the word “bless” comes from earlier words that meant “hallow with blood” and “consecrate” (Online Etymology Dictionary).
John Ames, however, seems to interpret “bless” by its Greek and Hebrew meanings. Praising, worshipping, and speaking well of someone all include a sense of acknowledgement. In reflecting on his baptism of the cats, Ames says that “there is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is power in that” (Robinson 23). Blessing is a form of acknowledgement, scripturally and in Ames’ own experience. When Ames blesses Jack near the end of the novel, “Ames and Jack acknowledge something mysterious and sacred about the other” (Wriglesworth 38).

The power of blessing that Ames mentions relates to the Old Testament understanding of blessing. In this sense, blessings “were more than good wishes; in some sense they were efficacious in bringing about what the [bless]er conferred” (Dictionary of Biblical Imagery). It is important to note that the person who is blessing is not instrumental in this “bringing about.” Rather, the action of the blessing is brought about, exists, or will exist by the power and grace of God. Human will is not enough. A prominent example of this in the Old Testament text is Isaac’s blessing of Jacob:

May God give you heaven’s dew
   and earth’s richness—
   an abundance of grain and new wine.
May nations serve you
   and peoples bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
   and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed
   and those who bless you be blessed (New International Version, Gen. 27:28-29).
There is power in this blessing—the subsequent account shows this blessing to come true. It does not, however, come about by Isaac’s power. Isaac blesses Jacob through God’s power, not through his own.

Similarly, John Ames blesses Jack through God’s power: “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father” (Robinson 241). Through this blessing, Ames acknowledges Jack’s roles as a son, brother, husband, and father, all of which were uncertain in Jack’s mind. But Ames’ own acknowledgement is not what makes the blessing true. Jack exists as a son, brother, husband, and father by the power of God, even though Jack may feel that he does not live up to these titles.

The words of Ames’ blessing over Jack prove this even further. When Jack agrees to be blessed by Ames, Ames recites the priestly blessing from Numbers, but he leaves out the first of the three verses. Instead, he begins “The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” (241). Ames then circles back to the beginning of the benediction and says “Lord, bless Jack Boughton” (23). However, there is one crucial aspect of this benediction that Ames leaves out: “keep”. The first verse of the blessing reads “The Lord bless you and keep you” (Num. 6:24). The constant refrain of this verse by Ames’ grandfather ensures that these lines are not forgotten. It is clear that Ames has purposely neglected to include “keep” in Jack’s blessing. “Keep,” in this context, is often understood as “protect,” as in the New Living Translation of this verse. However, Ames seems to understand it as “remain” or “retain” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) in this particular use of the blessing. Ames understands the power of a blessing. He cannot ask the Lord to keep Jack in Gilead. Ames has come to understand that Gilead “might
as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it” (Robinson 233), that it “may no longer be as hospitable as it once would have been to a biracial couple” (Vander Weele 230). Because Jack is a husband (though not legally) to a woman of colour and a father to a biracial son, and because Ames cannot guarantee that Jack’s family would be welcomed in Gilead, Jack cannot stay. Ames understands the power of a blessing, so he does not include the aspect of keeping in his blessing of Jack.

Lila’s blessing of Jack further confirms that the efficacy of a blessing is not determined by the person who bestows the blessing. Little is explained about Lila, John Ames’ second and much younger wife, in Gilead. But it is clear that she is not a pastor, though Ames recalls that when baptizing two infants on the day that he first encountered Lila he “felt like saying quite sincerely, ‘If you know a better way to do this, I’d appreciate your telling me’” (Robinson 21). Nor does Lila come from a line of preachers, like Ames does. However, she blesses Jack and Jack is genuinely affected by this blessing. Ames somewhat accidentally hears a conversation between Jack and Lila, in which Lila says “Well, Jack, bless your heart” (200). It is unclear how much Lila knows about Jack’s situation, though she likely knows very little, as she tells Jack that “everybody speaks about you kindly, you know” (199). Yet even though Jack knows that Lila is unaware of his past, Jack is genuinely touched by her blessing: “Why, I thank you for that, Lila” (200). Jack leaves the Ames’ house immediately following this exchange, unable to continue the conversation under the weight of such a blessing.

Along with acknowledging the power of a blessing, John Ames understands that a blessing is a form of recognition, as does Robinson (Painter 490). In his blessing of
Jack, Ames recognizes Jack as a son, brother, husband, and father, but also as a “mysterious and sacred” (Wriglesworth 38) creature who is “irreducibly unique” (34). Ames knows that this is a vital part of blessing. The power of a blessing that passes through Ames is the sensation “of really knowing a creature,…really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time” (Robinson 23). Annette Aronowicz posits that Ames understands blessing as coming into contact with “a medium that far exceeds us…[that] is both the world outside us and the world inside us…through an intensification of experience” (48). The creatures that Ames blesses, including Lila and Jack, are “images of God” (“Conversation in Iowa”), as is Ames. The medium that “exceeds us,” that is “both the world outside us and the world inside us,” that creates the mystery of each individual creature, is God. The nature of God is mysterious and irreducible, and therefore so are those creatures made in God’s image. In speaking about her creation of characters, Robinson notes that even characters “are not reducible in the way that …would be implied if you could actually put them together from the outside” (Interview by Harriet Gilbert). The mystery of each individual creature lends to the power and acknowledgement of blessing.

Blessing, though, carries its own mystery. There is an ineffability about blessing that Ames frequently acknowledges. He wonders “what, from a cosmic viewpoint” had happened to the baptized cats (Robinson 23). His father, also a minister, is unable to explain the effects of a blessing. Ames asks what a blessing means after baptizing Lila, and remarks that “that was a question that came to me often, not because I felt less than certain I had done something that did mean something, but because no matter how much I thought and read and prayed, I felt the outside mystery of it” (21). In
remembering the rainy day on which his father helped to tear down a burned church and the blessing that it was to him, Ames writes that “I can’t tell you what that day in the rain has meant to me. I can’t tell myself what it has meant to me” (96).

Robinson has frequently commented on the ineffability of blessing. She notes that although people “accept the idea that something real is transacted in a blessing...the way that we conceptualize the world doesn’t allow us to explain things like that” (Interview by James Naughtie). Robinson further says: “I’m very interested in blessing as a phenomenon because I don't understand it particularly. It seems to me that I can see the reality of it...but at the same time our cultures have not prepared us to be articulate about what actually passes, if it can even be spoken of” (Reflections on the Ordinary). A blessing blesses the blesser, it is “efficacious in bringing about it,” it acknowledges the mysterious scaredness of another creature. But there is an aspect of blessing which is entirely ineffable and incomprehensible. The same is true of those creatures who carry out the blessings.

The tragedy and beauty of Gilead both stem from the “mutual incomprehension” (Robinson 7) beheld in a blessing. The beauty is that of truly acknowledging another person, of recognizing them as a “mysterious and sacred” (Wriglesworth 38) being. The tragedy is the misunderstandings that are unavoidable in the face of mutual incomprehension. Knowing someone does not guarantee comprehension. Even after he has blessed Jack, Ames lacks any ability to comprehend Jack. Jack thanks Ames for his blessing, and Ames reflects that “his tone made me think that to him it might have seemed I had named everything I thought he no longer was, when that was absolutely the furthest thing from my meaning” (Robinson 241). Whether or not Jack intended irony
in his remark “You’re all saints” (242) remains a mystery, unknowable to the finite mind of John Ames and Robinson’s readers. Yet, beauty seems to edge out tragedy, at least in John Ames’ view. Ames quotes the book of Revelations: “‘He will wipe the tears from all faces.’ It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required” (246). The beauty of blessing and mutual incomprehension in *Gilead* cannot exist without the tragedy of the incomprehension. But that does not make the blessing any less beautiful.
Works Cited


Wriglesworth, Chad. “‘The Thing I Would Like, Actually, Is to Bless You”: Acknowledging the Soul in Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead.’ CRUX 52, no. 3-4, Fall 2016, 28-40.