The Sacred Journey: A Catholic Sacramental Reading of the Protestant Theology in Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead

Stacy Sathaseevan*

* Laurentian University, 935 Ramsey Lake Rd, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, P3E 2C6

Received: April 30, 2019; Accepted: December 22, 2019; Published: December 31, 2019

Abstract

In this paper, I undertake a reading of the Catholic sacraments within Marilynne Robinson’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel Gilead, analyzing symbolic representations of the seven sacraments. Whereas we would expect to find only two sacraments, given its Protestant setting, I explore and demonstrate the presence of a broader sacramental framework through an analysis of various textual vignettes for each of the seven sacraments. I argue that Reverend John Ames and Jack Boughton illustrate the reception and rejection of the grace of the sacraments, respectively. Both characters are surrounded by the beauty of the sacred (manifested in community, family, love, and the small pleasures of the world), but whereas Ames embraces it, Jack eludes it, almost literally running away from grace at the end of the novel. The reasons why Jack refuses grace remain a mystery (Is he unwilling or unable to receive it? Does he reject it freely or is he predestined to reject it?) but create the fundamental theological problematic that drives not only Gilead but also the other novels in the trilogy.

Keywords: Catholic, Gilead, Marilynne Robinson, Sacramental Theology

Introduction

The sacrament of baptism is a theme that is continuously woven into the various fictional works of Marilynne Robinson. She uses the ubiquitous nature and commonality of water to depict the blessing that is baptism, a symbol that caught my attention early on in the study of her literature. As I was delving deeper into her symbolisms and personifications of this element, it became evident to me that she also uses a variety of other “natural” or “common” life experiences to explain and bring to light other Christian sacraments. In Gilead (Robinson, 2004), a novel so intensely infused with Protestant theology, one cannot help but see how events such as Ames’ marriage to Lila, Ames’ calling to be ordained, and most prominently, Ames’ reconciliation with the life he is leaving behind could also resonate with Catholic sacramental theology. The seven sacraments recognized by the Catholic Church come to life in all of her
novels, but most conspicuously in this first novel of the Gilead saga.

According to Karl Rahner (1908-1984), the Catholic church has seven recognized sacraments:

[...] man’s initiation into the Church (baptism); the express mission to the world from the Holy Ghost (confirmation); the reconciliation of the baptized and repentant sinner with the Church and God by words of absolution (penance); the central solemnity of the Lord’s Supper and the anamnetic presence of his redemptive sacrifice in the liturgical sacrifice, the celebration of the Church’s unity in love in anticipation of the eternal banquet (in the Eucharist); the prayers and unction with which the Church comes to man’s aid when his mortality presses upon him in serious illness (anointing of the sick); the transmission of office and the charism of office (in holy orders); and the sanctification of wedded love by drawing it into the mystery of Christ’s forgiving love that unites the Church to him (matrimony) (Rahner, 1965, p.416-417).

Augustine (354-430), a well known Catholic theologian, has defined a sacrament as a “sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice” (Jankiewicz, 2004, p.365). He has also identified them as a means of salvation, therefore, placing them in a soteriological framework (Jankiewicz, 2004, p.366).

Marilynne Robinson herself will admit that she has been influenced by the Protestant theologian John Calvin (1509-1564), as one notices quite obviously throughout her work, and especially in Gilead (Robinson, 2004). Therefore, even when recognizing Catholic sacramental theology throughout the novel, it is nevertheless important to understand Calvin’s view of the sacraments as well as his influence on Robinson’s interaction with them. Interestingly enough, even though “he rejected the notion of the seven sacraments and narrowed their number to two: baptism and the Eucharist,” (Jankiewicz, 2004, p.378), Calvin wrote that his definition of a sacrament “differeth nothing in sense from that definition of Augustine, which teacheth that a sacrament is a visible sign of a holy thing” (p.612). He also believed that “the sacraments strengthened or augmented the faith of a participant” (Jankiewicz, 2004, p.378).

Although one can draw similarities between Calvin’s Protestant vision and Augustine’s Catholic one, it is not possible to infer that they are the same. A self-declared Calvinist, Robinson is undoubtedly Protestant in her personal beliefs, and throughout various moments in her writings, her shared ideologies with the French theologian are revealed. In her essay titled “Marguerite de Navarre” in her book The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought (Robinson, 1998), she writes that “[h]e argues passionately that humankind is itself a sufficient revelation of the divine presence…” (p.183). This Calvinistic sentiment also feels overwhelmingly Robinsonistic as she often uses examples of this in her novels - notably in Gilead, in the way Ames finds wonder in his son. Timothy George (2019) notes that “Calvin presents a creation penetrated by sacred meaning, the internal evidence for which is planted in every soul” (p.56). Finding the sacred in ordinary things is another way in which Robinson is influenced by Calvin and also the avenue, which is used to highlight the sacraments throughout the novel.

Reverend John Ames is a man facing the end of his earthly life and coming to terms with all of the things he has experienced in his lifetime, as well as the things he hasn’t yet. As
Ames recounts his life story through his begats, we are able to see that in the various, naturally occurring situations in his life, the sacraments have played an important role in fulfilling his time here on earth. As suggested by Hamner (2016), “Robinson is able to evoke the glory of God not so much through arguments about doctrine as via rich demonstration, through moments of uncalculated encounters [...] for attentive readers, it offers a refreshingly sacramental vision of holiness in the ordinary” (p.72).

Jack Boughton, for all intents and purposes, is the antithesis to Ames’ character. Like every other detail in the story, we learn about Jack’s struggles through Ames’ storytelling. He is a man who has never felt at home in Gilead. He cannot find his place within his family, within his community, and certainly not within his religious upbringing. Unlike Ames, who can see the sacred and the beauty in most things, Jack lacks the ability to understand and embrace the sacred that surrounds him, which perpetuates his inability to experience the sacred that can be found in the sacraments.

The sacraments are “eminently helpful because they have the power to effect spiritual change that would not otherwise occur” (Jankiewicz, 2004, p.369). Although Jack is periodically introduced to the sacraments, such as when he was baptized by his godfather John Ames, one could argue that he never really fully experiences the strengthening of faith that Calvin says a sacrament should provide and is, therefore, unable to benefit from the spiritual changes that he greatly needs in his life. This is in direct juxtaposition with the experiences of Ames, whose “fictional account provides insight into the ways [he] moves from his state of turmoil to a peaceful reconciliation with his imminent fate” (Moy, 2014, p.174-175). Ames was a faithful believer in God and His grace, and so his life became the living embodiment of the sacraments, which ultimately strengthened his faith and allowed him to leave this life and peacefully go on to the next.

In considering a variety of scenes in Gilead (Robinson, 2004), the bestowal and/or deprivation of the seven sacraments to the characters of John Ames and Jack Boughton are depicted in such a way that one is able to better understand the fates of each of them. Whereas we are led to believe that Ames leaves the story on his way to eternal peace, the reader can also assume that Jack’s inability to find peace makes him leave Gilead to continue a life of loss, suffering and solitude.

Baptism

Robinson seems at ease in the frequency of which she uses the imagery of water to describe the sacredness of baptism, likely because the latter is a recognized Protestant sacrament, of which she is very familiar. For instance, one of the more obvious scenes in Gilead (Robinson, 2004) is when Ames describes the young couple on a stroll, enjoying each other’s company. The young man splashes the girl while running and laughing. Ames cannot help but notice the beauty in that memory and also how, in moments such as these, it is “easy to believe that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash” (Robinson, 2004, p.27-28). John Trotti (2006) also writes about how water is used in the novel as something sacred and blessed. He describes the journey that Ames and his father take to Kansas and how water was scarce and highly valued, leading John Ames never to take that blessing for granted again (p.105).

Throughout the novel, we repeatedly hear how much Ames loves to baptize people and how amazing he finds the sacrament. He believes, “there is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It does not
enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time” (Robinson, 2004, p.23). The sacrament of baptism allows him to connect with people in a way that would not be possible were it not for this blessing. Ames is able to experience these moments in his life, such as when he baptizes Lila (Robinson, 2014, p.87-88) and also when his son is baptized (Robinson, 2004, p.248).

Jack, on the other hand, was not offered the same baptismal experience that Ames describes as being sacred and bonding. Although he was indeed baptized by Ames, his godfather, we are told on many different occasions in the novel that since he was taken by surprise with the naming of the child, the Reverend was admittedly distracted and, therefore, always felt like he may not have administered the sacrament properly. To support this, Ames states, “I have thought from time to time that the child felt how coldly I went about his christening, how far my thoughts were from blessing him” (Robinson, 2004, p.188). In Alister E. McGrath’s book, Christian Theology: An Introduction (2011), James Robinson Graves identifies that one of the three characteristics of baptism is a proper administrator. This also contributes to the idea that although Jack was baptized, he was still denied the very thing that makes the act meaningful and sacred. Ames spends many moments in the novel contemplating whether or not his state of mind at the moment withheld the blessing he was meant to give to Jack, which may have inadvertently contributed to his feeling of perdition (Scott, 2014).

Penance

Beyond baptism, reconciliation is the most prominent sacrament in this book. Ames is writing his notes to carefully explain his failings to his son. He apologizes for his covetise, his jealousy, and most importantly, his impending absence. He states, “[t]hat is the main thing I want to tell you, that I regret very deeply the hard times I know you and your mother must have gone through, with no real help from me at all, except my prayers, and I pray all the time” (Robinson, 2004, p.4). It is his way of asking his son for forgiveness for not being a perfect man, nor for fulfilling his expected role as his father.

The humanity of Ames’ character is most prominent in his struggle with this sacrament, in particular when it comes to his inability to forgive Jack. “He has made abysmal decisions for much of his life: abandoning a child to squalor, failing to acknowledge the death of his mother, and living a life of habitual life and irresponsibility” (Wrigglesworth, 2016, p.34). Ames admits that he cannot forgive Jack, not because he sinned, but because he is dishonorable. He believed, “...[t]hose who are dishonorable never really repent, and never really reform” (Robinson, 2004, p.156-157). Closer to the end of the novel, we are privy to a conversation between Jack and Ames where the young Boughton confesses his transgressions to his godfather, allowing him to slowly see how Jack, more than anyone, could use the sacrament to relieve his burden; “he is someone who must be forgiven a great deal on the grounds of that strange suffering” (Robinson, 2004, p.213-214). It is at this moment that Ames is able to begin his reconciliation with his godson.

Although Ames has decided to forgive Jack and to bestow upon him the blessing that he feels he needs, the sacrament is, once again, not thoroughly received. In order for the sacrament to be effective, the recipient must first acknowledge the need for it, and then, accept that one’s sins have been absolved. When Ames blesses him, he says:
“Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father”. Jack replies, “Thank you, Reverend,” but 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, the exact opposite of my meaning (Robinson, 2004, p.241-242).

Wrigglesworth notes that “[i]t is another ambiguous reconciliation. Ames has blessed and forgiven Jack, and yet Jack shows no evidence of change. He remains a desperate man without any faith, taking flight from those who love him most” (Engebretson, 2017, p.40). Since he is unable to accept the sincerity and depth of Ames’ forgiveness, he cannot fully receive the sacrament of reconciliation.

**Eucharist**

Often, we see the representation of food as a way to bring people together, to form a community, or to connect with others. In the article titled “You Can Eat the Roots of Things”: The Sacramental and Sacrificial Significance of Food in Marilynne Robinson’s Novels,” Rachel Marie Stone (2016) comments on this, and also on how “[m]eals in Marilyne Robinson’s novels are nearly always sacramental” (p.43). Communion allows us to connect with like-minded people and to also connect on a deeper level with God Himself. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we are taught that the Eucharist happens when we “all gather together” and that the Eucharistic assembly is when “Christians come together in one place” (Catholic Church, p.1348). It is to serve as a reminder that God will always provide us with what we need, both physically, and spiritually because we are a part of His community.

In *Gilead* (Robinson, 2004), we are made aware of a few different times when Ames was able to participate in the sacrament of communion. The most vivid recollection he provides us with is when he and his father are at the burned down Baptist church, and his father offers him an ashly biscuit. Ames states, “It is not surprising that I remember that day as if my father had given me communion, taking that bread from his side and breaking it for me with his ashly hands” (Robinson, 2004, p.15). Ames also writes about how even his wife Lila recognized the beauty of the sacrament, and he wanted to make sure that he was able to experience that with his son.

[Y]our mother brought you up the aisle to me and said, “You ought to give him some of that.” You’re too young, of course, but she was completely right. Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. Your solemn and beautiful child face lifted up to receive these mysteries at my hands. They are the most wonderful mystery, body and blood (Robinson, 2004, p.69-70).

Ames was able to give and receive the literal sacrament, but he was also given the opportunity to experience the sacrament figuratively, by recognizing that he was part of a community that would remind him, throughout his life, that he was being provided for. When he lost his wife and child, for example, he had “the beauty of a community that rallied around him, the beauty of a friendship that sustained him, [...] and the beauty of a family later on” (Scott, 2016, p.15).

Throughout the novel, we never hear of Jack taking part in the sacrament of the Eucharist, although one can assume that due to his father being a Reverend, he might have been introduced to it in his younger years. What is more glaringly obvious is Jack’s struggle with this sacrament due to his lack of community. If we are to believe that the
sacrament is represented by a community coming together in one place, then we must also take note of the constant reminders that Robinson gives us of Jack’s feelings of solitude. Warranted or not, Jack has never felt like he rightfully belonged. In the second novel of the Gilead trilogy, *Home* (Robinson, 2009), we learn that Jack lived in the barn, separate from his parents and siblings. Unlike Ames, who often felt his community surround him in times of need, Jack does not even feel like he can include his wife and child as members of his community. Moreover, if the “Eucharist is [...] an invitation to look backwards recalling all that God has done,” (McGrath, 2011, p.412), this would perpetuate the thought that Jack cannot fully partake in the sacrament of the Eucharist, because he does not truly believe that God has played a roll in his life.

**Confirmation**

The sacrament of confirmation is defined as the moment the Holy Ghost is “bestowed on the baptized person, in what Scripture calls an “anointing” or a “sealing,” as a special gift...” (Rahner, 1965, p.97). In his role as Reverend, Ames is once again given the opportunity to experience this sacrament through his connection with others. After their baby is born, Ames blesses Lila. “[W]hen the Reverend had baptized their infant at the church that day and put him into her arms, he touched the water to her head, too, three times” (Robinson, 2014, p.257). She believed that she has washed her baptism off in the river, which she did because she feared that the sacrament would change who she was, and by connecting her to God, it would alienate her from the only family she knew, namely Doll. He explains to her that washing away your baptism is not possible, and ultimately seals her baptism by blessing her once more.

It is through the sacrament of confirmation that Ames is able to connect with Jack when he is allowed to experience a form of his confirmation by blessing him as he gets ready to leave town.

[H]e took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course - “The Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly or more sufficient, for that matter. Then, when he didn’t open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.” Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream” (Robinson, 2004, p.241).

Ames is finally able to accept being Jack’s godfather, confirming his role in his life. “John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also. By “my son” I mean another self, a more cherished self” (Robinson, 2004, p.189). This second chance given to Ames to bless Jack is one that allows him to not only attempt to reenact a part of his story that he feels needs to be mended, but also to bestow onto Jack the confirmation that he is indeed part of a family; Ames’ family. This moment in the novel is a gift from the Holy Spirit and, therefore, a confirmation of God’s grace not only on Jack but on Ames as well.
Matrimony

In their *Theological Dictionary* (1965), Rahner and Vorgrimler write that “every valid marriage between two baptized persons is a sacrament” (p.273) and that marriage is “the legitimate union of man and wife for permanent physical and spiritual companionship” (p.273). Once again, the dichotomy between Ames’ experiences with marriage and Jack’s inability to experience the true sacrament of marriage are quite evident, even to the most inattentive reader.

Ames is married earlier in his life, and it is clearly something that had a profound impact on him. In his late sixties, he is unexpectedly able to experience the phenomenon of married love once again with Lila. Throughout the novel, we are often reminded of how precious and sacred it is to be connected to someone in that way. Although he is clearly a character with strong Protestant affiliations, Ames himself cannot help but reflect on the fact that marriage is also a sacrament in its own right.

It might seem to be comparing something great and holy with a minor and ordinary thing, that is, love of God with mortal love. But I just don’t see them as separate things at all. If we can be divinely fed with a morsel and divinely blessed with a touch, then the terrible pleasure we find in a particular face can certainly instruct us in the nature of the very grandest love. I devoutly believe this to be true (Robinson, 2004, p.204).

In *Lila* (2014), Ames describes the words “family,” “wife,” and “marriage” as prayers (Robinson, p.237). When he describes to his son the first time he met his second wife, we recognize that she was the answer to his prayers.

I’m grateful for all those dark years, even though in retrospect they seem like a long, bitter prayer that was answered finally. Your mother walked into church in the middle of the prayer - to get out of the weather, I thought at the time, because it was pouring. And she watched me with eyes so serious I was embarrassed to be preaching to her. As Boughton would say, I felt the poverty in my remarks (Robinson, 2004, p.19-20).

Despite his prayers, Ames never thought he would be able to partake in the sacrament of marriage again so late in his life. The beauty of this sacrament and his gratitude for it almost highlights the fact that once again, Jack has not been granted the blessing of experiencing a holy sacrament.

The young Boughton finds love with a black woman named Della. In the particular point of history in the American midwest that this novel was set in, interracial marriages were condemned. “We are married in the eyes of God, as they say. Who does not provide a certificate, but who also does not enforce anti-miscegenation laws” (Robinson, 2004, p.219-220). Although Iowa did not have those particular laws, Jack still felt like he was unable to marry her. When Ames asks him if he will marry Della, Jack shook his head. “Her father doesn’t want her to marry me” (Robinson, 2004, p.220). His feelings of unworthiness towards Della and his son are apparent and ultimately are what disallows him from experiencing the sacrament of marriage.

**Holy Orders**

Ames describes his career path, his *vocation*, to his son on a few separate occasions. It is something that he feels would have called him, despite whether or not his father and grandfather had made the same
choices. He questions many of his life’s decisions but seems to be clear on his decision to take up his holy orders. “My vocation was the same as my father’s. I assume that if I’d had another father entirely the Lord would still have called me” (Robinson, 2004, p.220). Ames unswervingly believes that being a reverend was what he was meant to do, and often comments on the benefits and meaningfulness he finds in his vocation. “One great benefit of a religious vocation is that it helps you concentrate. It gives you a good basic sense of what is being asked of you and also what you might well ignore. If I have any wisdom to offer, this is a fair part of it” (Robinson, 2004, p.7). We see this again in his reflections of his blessing to Jack as he leaves town. “I told him it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact, I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment” (Robinson, 2004, p.242).

Just like Reverend John Ames, Jack has ministerial blood running through his veins. He is the son of a minister, the godson of a reverend, and the father of a boy that wants to be a preacher (Robinson, 2004). He is himself often mistaken to have taken up the holy orders, even by Della. “As I said, when she first knew me, she took me for a man of the cloth. Many people make that mistake” (Robinson, 2004, p.242). As a character that is so obviously plagued by his own personal demons, it is certainly interesting that Robinson would also give him characteristics that could be mistaken for ministerial qualities. One can also assume that although Jack does not see himself as being a man worthy of the cloth, he does wish that he could have followed a similar path as Ames’. He says to him, “It’s an enviable thing, to be able to receive your identity from your father” (Robinson, 2004, p.168-169). Perhaps Jack himself realizes the tragedy that lies, once more, in his refusal and inability to experience a sacrament.

### Anointing of the Sick

Having stated earlier that penance is one of the most obviously identifiable sacraments in _Gilead_, one could also argue that the sacrament of the anointing of the sick plays an equally prominent role. This final sacrament is described as “[t]he Sacramental action of the Church in and for the sick which shows the Church victorious in eschatological hope over approaching death and its darkness” (Rahner, 1965, p.23). Since the reader is told from the beginning of the novel that the protagonist is ‘approaching death’, this final sacrament is expected. Furthermore, “[t]he church also calls this anointing the completion of the sacrament of penance” (Rahner, 1965, p.244), which ties the two sacraments and their prominence in the story together quite cohesively.

Providing eschatological hope over impending death allows the person who is dying to leave this world in peace. We know that one of Ames’ deepest wishes is to be able to bless Jack properly. Achieving this goal towards the end of the novel provides Ames, and the reader, with a sense of fulfillment. The weight on Ames’ shoulders is now gone and will, therefore, allow him to die with a clearer conscience. Jack’s blessing also provides Boughton (who is dying as well) the peace of mind that he longed for - in knowing that Ames loves Jack as his own son, just as Boughton had hoped. “I blessed that boy of yours for you. I still feel the weight of his brow on my hand. I said, I love him as much as you meant me to. So certain of your prayers are finally answered, old fellow. And mine too, mine too. We had to wait a long time, didn’t we?” (Robinson, 2004, p.244) In blessing Jack, he has “unburden[ed] himself of his past and any further need to write. So eased, he can prepare himself for the world to come.” (Moy, 2014, p.171). Ames’ blessing of Jack does indeed complete the sacrament of penance that allows him to leave this world with a lighter
conscience, and the knowledge that he has fulfilled Boughton’s hope for him to love Jack as his own son.

Rahner (1965) also describes this final sacrament as “The Church herself confidently standing by him and declaring her solidarity with him as his agony approaches” (p.24). There is an element of solidarity in Ames, who realizes that he and Jack are more connected through their losses in life than he realized. Additionally, Jack’s agony approaches as he realizes that there is not a chance for him to have a normal life with his family in Gilead. Although Jack is not dying in the traditional sense of the word, his inability to create a life with his wife and child marks a form of death for his family (Russell-Jones, 2016). Ames tries to comfort Jack, but “[t]he conversation ends with a confirmed loss of faith in the church” (Wriglesworth, 2016, p.35) and “a ‘kind of sad wonder’ in Jack’s voice and body, [...] tied to a realization that Jack will never see Gilead or his father again” (Wriglesworth, 2016, p.35).

Conclusion

Marilynne Robinson has the ability to bring doctrine to life in the most ordinary of situations. What Ames describes in his begats are almost always common, everyday scenarios that most people can relate to. And, as we read in Gilead (Robinson, 2004), “[i]t was Coleridge who said Christianity is a life, not a doctrine, words to that effect” (Robinson, 2004, p.179). Therefore, while Robinson likely never intended to portray the seven sacraments in her novel, and her characters and theology all lean more towards Protestantism, the complexity, the beauty, and connectedness within the life experiences of the characters allowed all of the seven recognized Catholic sacraments to be illustrated.

In the case of Reverend John Ames, the last words he writes are: “I’ll pray, and then I’ll sleep” (Robinson, 2004, p.247). He is able to accept the eternal rest that is imminent, one could presume, because he has been blessed with the experiences and favours that the sacraments have granted him. Having worked through the situations that life has presented him, he is able to leave his family behind, trusting in God’s grace. “The dread of leaving his son has been replaced by a pleasant wonder at the beauty in the world and the goodness of grace. With his troubles behind him, Ames now writes of revelations that are made visible if only one is willing and ready to see them” (Moy, 2014, p.186).

As for Jack Boughton, who continues to struggle with seeing the sacramental beauty life has to offer him, the reader leaves him in a state that is less optimistic than his godfather’s. Not being able to experience fully the sacredness in the ordinary that we see through the sacraments, Jack seems destined to continue stumbling through life feeling alone and disheartened. “Longing and love go together...the sacraments must “speak most clearly of loss’,...they should reinforce a sense of common need or dependence, and a contingency and vulnerability we share as finite agents” (Potts, 2017, p.493). If one is able to take this excerpt literally, then the idea that sacramental theology fits so perfectly in Gilead is palpable, confirming this as an essay about the loss of love, life, family, and future.

Acknowledgements: The author has no acknowledgements to declare.

Author Contributions: Stacy Sathaseevan wrote the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author has no conflicts to declare.
Funding: There is no funding to declare for this work.

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