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Marta Koval

# Home as Emotional Space *in Marilynne Robinson's Diptych about Gilead*

The idea of home has always been open to diverse readings. It is an excellent ground for the discussion of a wide range of ontological and epistemological issues and its transformations are excellent material for cultural and social interpretation of identity, attitudes, and mindset of an individual or a specific community. Home has both personal and collective dimensions and can be interpreted from different, sometimes mutually exclusive perspectives as a shelter or an asylum, and as a prison. The controversy of home as a place to abandon, return to and be imprisoned in is one of the key concepts in *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008) by Marilynne Robinson. The two novels can be read both as parts of a single whole or as individual works of fiction. Although they share the setting and the characters and can be interpreted as a meaningful whole the writer wanted them to be read independently (but not a sequel), each as a freestanding book (Fay)<sup>1</sup>.

The main story focuses on the domestic life of two aging ministers – the Rev. Ames in *Gilead* and the Rev. Boughton in *Home*. Their histories are narrated in a way that brings together the ideas of moral responsibility, transcendentalist admiration of human uniqueness, political urgencies of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and theological concerns. The town of Gilead as a larger home and a locus of domesticity and tradition and respective family homes of the characters become centers of meaning in the novels. The micro world of family home has a particular significance for the writer herself as a reflection of universal concerns and urgencies. As Robinson noted in her interview for *The Paris Review*, “the reality that we experience is part of the whole fabric of reality. To pretend that the universe is somewhere else doing something is really not true. We’re right in the middle of it. Utterly dependent on it, utterly defined by it” (Fay).

Family home performs multiple functions in both novels although in *Gilead* the idea of home is less significant and rather one-dimensional. In this novel, which is a confessional letter of the seventy-six-year-old Ames home transforms from a lonely and gloomy place into the locus of family happiness:

We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I’d walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried-egg sandwich and listen to the radio, when I got one, in the dark as often as not ... I grew up in parsonages. I’ve lived in this one most of my life, and I’ve visited in a good many others, because my father’s friends and most of our relatives also lived in parsonages. And when I thought about it in those days, which wasn’t too often, I thought this was the worst of them all, the draftiest and the dreariest. Well, that was my state of mind at the time. It’s a perfectly good old house, but I was all alone in it then. And that made it seem strange to me. I didn’t feel very much at home in the world, that was a fact. Now I do. (Robinson 2004, 4)

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<sup>1</sup> One of the critics referred to *Gilead* and *Home* as a “dovetailed diptych” (Scott). This definition is no longer precise because with the publication of *Lila* in 2014 it became a triptych/trilogy. However, this essay focuses on Robinson’s first two novels, thus, for the sake of this text, they are referred to as a diptych. In *Lila*, the idea of home does not affect the characters’ development in a meaningful or convincing way, thus including the third novel in the analysis did not seem to bring anything new to Robinson’s vision of home.

For Ames, the idea of house overlaps with the idea of home and after his marriage both undergo a crucial transformation. In the novel, it is presented in a very physical way: Ames's much younger wife Lila and their little son Bobby fill the house with joy, life, warmth, and new smells and sounds. Comfortable and domestic atmosphere of Ames's home encourages sincerity and makes the awareness of the approaching death even sadder.

Thinking about home brings into play the notion of tradition which "being at home" implies. In *The Need for Roots* by Simone Weil that was published in 1949, only a little earlier than the action in Robinson's novels takes place and thus presumably reflective of a global state of mind of the time, the French philosopher explores the notions of obligation, order, obedience, security, responsibility, freedom, security, and uprootedness and their manifestation at different levels (national, regional, and local). Weil views uprootedness as the "most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed" (47). In her mind, it emanates from a departure from tradition ("loss of the past" as she calls it) that may have far-reaching tragic consequences as the history of humanity shows (119). Although Weil analyzes uprootedness from a broad historical, political and social perspective and sees a possibility of "growing roots" in Christian religion, her ideas can be used for individual character interpretations beyond the limits of religious reading. On a microscale, tradition is inevitably linked to the idea of family and home as a metaphorical space where it is created and guarded. In *Gilead*, this perspective is made obvious only once when Ames's elder brother Edward who went to Germany to study philosophy comes home to visit his parents and refuses to say grace at the dinner table because he cannot do it "in good consciousness." The father takes it as a profound and unacceptable disrespect for family traditions which Edward is never forgiven – he leaves his parents' home and never visits it again while his younger brother is not allowed to maintain any contacts with him. The parents blamed Edward's departure from the family nest and his stay in Europe for the emergence of atheistic views. Ames mentions this episode only briefly because in *Gilead* neither the idea of home nor the idea of tradition or family roots are threatened in any significant way. Home here is presented as the locus of unchallenged domesticity, stability, psychological intimacy, and emotional comfort.

In the second part of the diptych the notion of home becomes particularly powerful and multi-dimensional – in fact, it is one of the crucial philosophical concepts of the novel. As the title implies, *Home* creates the cult of the family place and charges it with multiple, often contradictory meanings: a guardian of traditions, an asylum, an emotional prison and the first school. Tadeusz Ślawek in his speculations about the "where" nature of home and oikology points to the arrogance of the idea of home as "my," "my own," and "family" space, that is the kind of space that excludes otherness and opposes the intrusion from the outside. The Boughtons home is very much this kind of place – friendly and forgiving to those who belong there and at the same time detached from the outside world. Nothing changed there over years "except to fade or scar or wear" (Robinson 2008, 52) and it was as if "frozen" in the past.

Home is the central metaphor of the novel. Most of the action evolves around the Boughtons' family house – kitchen, living room, porch, and garden. "Difficult, ordinary life" that the house and its inhabitants live turns to be even more difficult with the return of Jack – Boughton's prodigal son who was away from home for twenty years. The figure of Jack makes the house and home acquire a particularly powerful moral significance and adds a painful ethical

urgency to the story. One of the reviewers of *Home* described it as “book full of doubleness and paradox, at once serene and volcanic, ruthless and forgiving. It is an anguished pastoral, a tableau of decency and compassion that is also an angry and devastating indictment of moral cowardice and unrepentant, unacknowledged sin” (Scott). Jack’s return makes the controversial character of family home even more explicit and highlights its transformation which is very different from the one we observed in *Gilead*. Multiple functions and roles of the family house intertwine although in all of them it is presented as a space where moral dilemmas can be verified or challenged. The image of home – so dear but so obsolete and dysfunctional – acquires the meaning of the idealized past.

Home becomes for its inhabitants an identity framework that “incorporates a crucial set of qualitative distinctions,” which allows an individual to function

with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us ... The sense of what the difference consists in may take different forms. One form of life may be seen as fuller, another way of feeling and acting purer, a mode of feeling or living as deeper, a style of life as more admirable, a given demand as making an absolute claim against other merely relative ones, and so on. (Taylor, 19–20)

Whereas in *Gilead* Ames’s house is mainly presented as a physical space charged with significant though uncontroversial emotions, in *Home* the house is not only an element of the townscape but it is an ethical checkpoint for the older and younger Boughtons. It establishes a moral framework for all God-fearing and decent members of the family except Jack.

For a large and joyful family, their home in Gilead is the stalwart of traditions and stability. It has its rules and conventions that for years remained unchanged and affected the behavior of its inhabitants who kept coming there with their wives, children, and grandchildren. Even the interior of the place reflect the atmosphere of good old days: large pieces of furniture and crowded rooms, styled to reflect standards of respectability and serviceability and “commemorate heroic discipline and foresight” (Robinson 2008, 52). Thus, even elements of the material world become one of those qualitative distinctions of the family collective identity. The house itself is a special character of the novel and its life, history, and charming and at the same time oppressive atmosphere is tuned to significant family events.

The house has “a soul” of its own – an inner identity, which family members feel in different ways depending on their life situation at a given moment. For Glory, it is a deserted and heartbroken place while her father feels it as a living creature, a life-long companion that can suffer and rejoice:

The house embodied for him the general blessedness of his life, which was manifest, really indisputable. And which he never failed to acknowledge, especially when it stood over against particular sorrow. Even more frequently after their mother died he spoke of the house as if it were an old wife, beautiful for every comfort it had offered, every

grace, through all the long years. It was a beauty that would not be apparent to every eye ... It was a good house, her (Glory's – M.K.) father said, meaning that it had a gracious heart however awkward its appearance. (Robinson 2008, 3–4)

For Boughton's now grown-up children the house is an emotional and psychological fortress of genuine domesticity and a museum of the past they admire but would not take with them into their present lives:

There on the immutable terrain of their childhood her brothers and sisters could and did remember those years in great detail, their own memories, but more often the pooled memory they saw no special need to portion out among them. They looked at photographs and went over the old times and laughed, and their father was well pleased. (Robinson 2008, 8)

The house itself and the patriarchal father created a special ethos of the family which everyone was expected to share. Those who failed to do so or whose life did not work out the way it should suffered and tried to hide the truth as Glory did. Or they painfully looked for answers and explanations and also suffered like Jack because the ethos of home did not offer many alternatives.

Glory returned to Gilead after her private life collapsed. Her father needed someone around and she needed an emotional shelter. Gilead seemed an ideal place for it – everything there reminded her of the happy past that was safely locked in time and protected from any changes or intrusions of the present:

She was thoroughly used to Gilead as the subject and scene of nostalgic memory. How all the brothers and sisters except Jack had loved to come home, and how ready they always were to leave again. How dear the old place and the old stories were to them, and how far abroad they had scattered. The past was a very fine thing, in its place. But her returning now, to stay, as her father said, had turned memories portentous. To have it overrun its bounds this way and become present and possibly future, too – they all knew it was a thing to be regretted. (Robinson 2008, 7–8)

For Glory, the idea of home was closely linked to the authority of her father. She returned to Gilead to help him, to heal her emotional wounds, and simply to give herself some time for contemplation. Gilead belonged to the past, so it gave a good chance to stay undisturbed. Earlier, when she lived alone she thought about her family home and diligently repeated the old rituals – it helped her to “remember the household she came from, to induce in herself the unspecific memory of a comfort she had not been really conscious of until she left it behind” (Robinson 2008, 102). In this instance, family home clearly functions as an asylum – a temporary shelter one will soon leave (Sławek).

Family home that gave a sense of comfort and security was also the kind of place she would never create for herself. Rather unexpectedly, Glory reveals her unfulfilled dream: her house would have been very different from “this good

and blessed and fustian and oppressive tabernacle of Boughton probity and kind intent” (Robinson 2008, 102) – it would be spacious, sunlit, and simple. Thus the old home full of traditions is no longer viable and its atmosphere and physical shape become restrictive, if not oppressive. However, Glory will never be able to recognize it openly because the identity framework established in her old home does not allow for it. For Glory, home implies social, economic and religious rituals that ensure a sense of an asylum that is separated from the rest of the world:

How to announce the return of comfort and well-being except by cooking something fragrant. That is what her mother always did. After every calamity of any significance she would fill the atmosphere of the house with the smell of cinnamon rolls or brownies, or with chicken and dumplings, and it would mean, This house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what. It would mean peace if they had fought and amnesty if they had been in trouble. (Robinson 2008, 252)

The old Boughton cherished his vision of home and wanted his family to share it which they, except for Jack, diligently and even willingly did. He knew that his son did not feel at home in their house bustling with life and joy and tried to explain it to himself: “[H]e was always alone, the way he used to be, and I would wonder what kind of life he could have, with no one even to care how he was, what he needed” (Robinson 2008, 169). Jack as a petty thief, a wanton trickster, a mean-spirited transgressor, and a drinker seemed to be an eternal misfit. After a twenty-year absence he returned looking for an asylum like Glory and trying to come to terms with the idea of predestination and his bitter fate. Although Jack rejects the identity framework established by his family and his old home, it is the only identity framework available to him. He refers to it in his attempts to place himself emotionally and psychologically and, on a larger scale, to verify his life: “I came here because everything had fallen to pieces . . . . I was clutching at a straw, coming to Gilead. No doubt about that. I’ve had some experience with them. Straws” (Robinson 2008, 208). Jack returned to Gilead for help and he often uses the phrase “coming home”: “I just wanted to come home. Even if I couldn’t stay. I wanted to see the place. I wanted to see my father. I was – bewildered, I suppose . . . . I was scared to come home. . . . My life is endless pain and difficulty for reasons that are no doubt apparent to anyway I pass on the street but obscure to me” (Robinson 2008, 210–11). Thus we can claim that even for a misfit like him home performed its crucial function: it established an identity frame. Loyalty to tradition and unwillingness to change the established rules creates a paradoxical situation: the house could no longer be home, it turned into a museum and a place of worship for younger family members who came there for holidays, and an asylum but also a psychological prison for both Jack and Glory.

The idea of the asylum implies tension between different realities (the old one to be escaped and the new one to be embraced) and presumes the acceptance of and adjustment to the rules of the new place by someone who decides to stay there (Slawek). Gilead was not a new place for Jack. He knew how things used to be there but he himself became a different person and the reality of his life had little to do with the past or present reality of Gilead. He wanted to know whether he was doomed to be a villain and whether he

would be able to live in Gilead together with his colored civil wife and their son. A decent home of the old kind Presbyterian minister welcomed him back but would not accept his changed life. A manicured reality of happy home did not open to a new experience of racial heterogeneity and tolerance. For Jack, his parents' home in Gilead became an asylum. However, as Sławek claims, the idea of home as the asylum implies a transient nature of the place where one can find a shelter but must accept rules and terms imposed by the host. At that point, home can transform into a prison and in order to avoid it, Jack leaves Gilead again.

Stability and awareness of traditions that were expected to protect from loneliness perversely transformed the place into a citadel of loneliness. Solitude in general is something Robinson admires and cherishes herself. In one of her interviews she speaks of the blessings of solitude which for her serves as an inspiration. At a certain point, the writer called solitude "the cream of existence" (Fay). This is the type of solitude that Ames experienced. Jack and Glory's loneliness is neither creative nor inspiring. It enhances misery and alienation. For the protagonists of the novel, being at home does not mean mental or emotional comfort. On the contrary, it makes the dilemmas they face and the challenges they deal with even more complicated and painful. The difficult experience is something the writer values above all and makes her characters go through:

The ancients are right: the dear old human experience is a singular, difficult, shadowed, brilliant experience that does not resolve into being comfortable in the world. The valley of the shadow is part of that, and you are depriving yourself if you do not experience what humankind has experienced, including doubt and sorrow. We experience pain and difficulty as failure instead of saying, I will pass through this, everyone I have ever admired has passed through this, music has come out of this, literature has some out of it. We should think of our humanity as a privilege. (Fay)

However, contrary to Robinson's declarations, pain and suffering do not make any of the novel's characters undergo catharsis. The pain of being at home only forces them, Jack in particular, to realize their helplessness and loneliness and enhance doubt and sorrow. For us as readers, the emotions of the characters that being at home brings into the foreground are a way to see a contradictory and restrictive nature of home where the moral imperative of the family makes them tell lies and discourages from revealing and sharing their doubts.

The austerity of the Boughtons' family house contrasts with the warmth of the garden around it. At the moment of Jack's arrival it is still shrubby and for all Glory's efforts looks neglected. But even as such it radiates warmth and plays with colors as if nature itself welcomes the heartbroken Glory and Jack offering them moments of emotional comfort:

They had opened the flowers of bleeding hearts to reveal the tiny lady in her bath. Corn on the cob they had all loved, though they hated to shuck it, and they had all loved melons. Jack tended these things with particular care.



When he was restless he would sometimes walk out into the garden and stand there with his hands on his hips, as if it comforted him to see their modest flourishing ... His father watched from the porch day after day and asked him what it was he was planting ... Jack brought him a sprig of bleeding heart, the bud of a pumpkin blossom. "Yes," the old man said, as he did when memory stirred. "Those were good times." (Robinson 2008, 151)

Colors and scents of flowers and their undeniable and unsophisticated beauty imply simplicity and emotional intimacy, which the house fails to ensure.

The multifunctional and controversial character of home in Robinson's novels brings into play issues of tradition, roots, responsibility and freedom of choice. Home transforms from an asylum into a place of hidden emotional struggle. Coming home and abandoning home are the two aspects of the protagonists' life – none easier than the other. Robinson's novels subvert the stereotype of protective domesticity by affirming its restrictive and selective character.

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