PRESENCE OF MIND:
THE WRITINGS OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

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ABSTRACT

Marilynne Robinson is arguably one of America’s best contemporary authors. Winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Gilead* and of the 2009 Orange Prize for Fiction for her novel *Home*, Robinson is often recognized for her graceful diction and the interfusion of theology into her fiction. Many scholars focus on recurring themes in her writing, such as grace, nature, compassion, family, or expressions of femininity. But the questions remain to be asked: Can we understand Robinson’s works without a theological framework? Is there any connection between the content and the form of her novels? How do the ideas expressed in her nonfiction find expression in her novels?

Researching such questions in Robinson’s writing is possible because her thoughtful and provocative body of work is contained in three novels and four nonfiction books. Careful reading of her entire corpus does indeed reveal there is one common thread woven through all her works. Interviews with Robinson and analyses of her works support this conclusion. This common thread extending across all Robinson’s writing is her belief in the existence of and a high valuation of the mind.

This thesis explains the importance Robinson puts on the mind. Her perspective of the mind is revealed in her nonfiction, primarily in two ways. First, Robinson
critiques those who would deny the mind’s existence by explaining human experience as a result of conditioning or instinct. Second, Robinson expects that the mind be accounted for in many areas of life including the arts, the sciences, the academy and education, theology, ecology, altruism, philosophy, and political discourse. Robinson’s humanism and theology are derived from her view of the mind.

Robinson’s valuation placed on the mind having been made evident, this thesis proceeds to demonstrate, both through its text and through substantive comments at the beginning of footnotes, how Robinson’s perspective influences her fiction. Her choice of narrators for her novels; her aim as an author to create characters with their own voices; her foregrounding of characters’ perceptions; and her portrayal of memory, mystery, and mercy are all aspects of a mindful human life. Ultimately, Robinson’s fiction highlights the role our minds play in understanding and living within reality.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT ...................................................................................................................................................ii

ABSTRACT ...................................................................................................................................................iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................................................................................................v

CHAPTER ONE: ROBINSON’S PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD .................................................................1

A RESPECT FOR SCIENCE ..............................................................................................................................3

CRITIQUING PARASCIENCE .............................................................................................................................6

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF MIND ...................................................................................................................13

REGARDING THE SOUL .....................................................................................................................................16

TURNING TO THEOLOGY ....................................................................................................................................18

CONCLUSION: ROBINSON’S HUMANISM .......................................................................................................26

CHAPTER TWO: POINT OF VIEW IN ROBINSON’S FICTION .................................................................29

ROBINSON’S POINT OF VIEW ..........................................................................................................................31

FIRST PERSON IN HOUSEKEEPING AND GILEAD .......................................................................................34

THIRD PERSON PROXIMAL NARRATION IN HOME ..................................................................................36

CAPTURING CONSCIOUSNESS .........................................................................................................................38

GIVING A CHARACTER HIS VOICE ....................................................................................................................46

PROJECTING OUT OF THE SOLITARY SELF IN HOUSEKEEPING ...............................................................52

PERCEPTION IN GILEAD ....................................................................................................................................55

CONCLUSION .....................................................................................................................................................56

CHAPTER THREE: FUNCTIONS OF MIND: MEMORY, MYSTERY, AND MERCY ........................................58

MEMORY ..........................................................................................................................................................59

Memory: Haunted Housekeeping .......................................................................................................................61

Memory: Gilead’s Legacies ................................................................................................................................66

MYSTERY ........................................................................................................................................................70

Mystery: Mystifying Sylvie in Housekeeping ....................................................................................................70

Mystery: Jack Boughton, Man of Sorrow ........................................................................................................72

MERCY HONORS THE SOUL ............................................................................................................................74

Mercy Lived Out ................................................................................................................................................77

Mercy’s Source: Imagination ............................................................................................................................80

CONCLUSION .....................................................................................................................................................82

CONCLUSION .....................................................................................................................................................84

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................................................88
CHAPTER ONE

ROBINSON’S PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD

It seemed almost domestic, and yet there was a potency of loneliness about it like a dark spirit lurking in it, a soul that had impoverished this crude tabernacle to stand in the place of other shelter, flesh.

~ Marilynne Robinson, *Home*

I first encountered Marilynne Robinson’s writing through reading her novel *Home*, and I was moved to tears by her interweaving of simply beautiful prose and powerful theological themes. Robinson’s writing has also moved many critics, earning her the Pulitzer Prize in 2005 for the novel *Gilead*, the Orange Prize for Fiction for *Home*, and the publication of many articles about her works. The Winter 2010 issue of *Christianity & Literature* was given entirely to analyses of her fiction. In a letter from the guest editor of the issue, R. Scott LaMascus comments that Robinson’s “stories and characters not only delight and instruct but also deeply move us on matters of Christian faith.”

Indeed, many commentators on Robinson tend to highlight the influence of her theology on her writing or to focus on her significance as a woman of faith in American letters. For example, Andrew Brower Latz speaks of the role that the doctrine of Creation plays in the novels *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*: “An understanding of this

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1 I like Mark O’Connell’s description: “There is nothing fraudulent about her eloquence, nothing remotely shifty or meretricious about the beauty of her sentences. Her voice is at once sad and ecstatic, conversationally fluent and formally precise. And it doesn’t feel like a performance or a feint.” “The First Church of Marilynne Robinson,” *The New Yorker* (May 30, 2012), http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/05/marilynne-robinson.html (accessed August 6, 2012).

doctrinal and narrative background provides insight into both novels and their main characters, John Ames and Ruth respectively, and show Robinson’s as an important theological voice qua novelist.” And James Wood comments in The New Yorker that “behind all of Robinson’s work lies an abiding interest in the question of heavenly restoration.” But while Robinson’s theology is certainly an important aspect of her writing, a closer examination of her works, particularly of her nonfiction, reveals that the driving force behind her view of the world is not her study of God but her study of humanity, particularly the mysterious inner workings of our experience.

Centrally important to understanding human experience, for Robinson, is consideration of the capacity for self-awareness, that complicated yet compelling ability to reflect, analyze and respond to the world. This capacity is found somewhere outside the self, an ability to look at one’s own reactions, thoughts and emotions. Robinson recognizes “there is that mysterious thing the cognitive scientists call self-awareness, the human ability to consider and appraise one’s own thoughts.” And she explores the implications of this self-awareness by contrasting her perspective with that of many early modern and contemporary scientists and thinkers.

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5 As I will address later in this chapter, Robinson would likely refer to these aggregate abilities as “mind.”

In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate that it is her recognition of this aspect of human experience that influences her perception of the world, including her theological preferences. Such a demonstration requires an explanation of her approach to science (which studies the human organism) and of her critique of what she calls “parascience.” These explanations will be drawn from Robinson’s nonfiction works, particularly *The Death of Adam* and *Absence of Mind*. In these collections of essays, Robinson suggests that current approaches to explaining the mind are inadequate because they assume an unwarranted confidence in the power of modern science and rely heavily on Darwinian explanations of origins and development. After explaining Robinson’s views on science and parascience, I will explore what she does consider an appropriate approach to the mind, which for her is closely connected to the soul. It is the high esteem she gives to these entities (mind and soul), that influences her theology, which finds its expression in the tradition of Protestant Christianity’s John Calvin. Ultimately, it is her humanism, resulting from her view of the mind, that holds sway over all the areas of thought (science, history, theology, ecology) addressed in her writing.

**A Respect for Science**

Since at least the middle of the eighteenth century, science as a discipline has held an elevated status. “Science”\(^7\) has become that measure against which all claims to reality and truth must be measured. Contemporary attempts to understand human

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\(^7\) I say “science” here in quotation marks because Robinson questions the legitimacy of using the term for some areas of thought generally included in the field today.
existence, uniqueness, and capacity for self-awareness or conscious thought must generally be given scientific explanation to receive credibility.8

In her 2010 collection of essays Absence of Mind, Robinson criticizes the tendency of contemporary thinkers to operate under the assumption that following Darwin and his contemporaries’ “discoveries” in the nineteenth century, we have entered a new era of thought that provides a complete explanation for human behavior and that controls the areas still open to scientific exploration.9 She laments the “first premise of modern and contemporary thought, the notion that we as a culture have crossed one or another threshold of knowledge or realization that gives the thought that follows it a special claim to the status of truth.”10 Such an attitude is the epitome of elitism and arrogance.11 This superior claim to human knowledge not only shows hubris but also denies the history of scholarship.12

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8 “The modern fable is that science exposed religion as a delusion and more or less supplanted it.” Marilynne Robinson, The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought (New York: Picador, 1998), 71.

9 “Darwinism might have evolved long enough on its own to have become another species of thought than the one in which it had its origins, though nature provides no analogy for change of that kind. . . . We find them[primitive economics and Darwinism’s new prominence] separately and together encouraging faith in the value of self-interest and raw competition.” Ibid., 29.

10 Marilynne Robinson, Absence of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1. She goes on to say, “A model that shapes contemporary writing across any number of fields is the crossing of the threshold. It asserts that the world of thought, recently or in an identifiable moment in the near past, has undergone epochal change.” Ibid., 3.

11 “In denominating any moment in history, whether real or imagined, as the threshold moment, a writer or school is asserting a prerogative, the right to characterize the past and establish the terms in which discourse will be conducted from this point forward. . . . In culture as in nature there is no leaving the past behind, but to have done so, to have stepped over a threshold that separates old error from new insight, is the given from which these schools of thought proceed, as posture and as method.” Ibid., 20.

12 “The degree to which debunking is pursued as if it were an urgent crusade, at whatever cost to the wealth of insight into human nature that might come from attending to the record humankind has left, and without regard for the probative standards scholarship as well as science should answer to, may well be the most remarkable feature of the modern period in intellectual history.” Ibid., 29.
Robinson has no quibble with scientific study nor with the application of science to other areas of study and to life. Far from it. In fact, Robinson holds the scientific endeavor and the phenomena it studies in very high regard.\textsuperscript{13} She explains, “I love science. I think that the new cosmologies and so on are among the most beautiful things that people have conceived. They, I think, don’t need to be interpreted as religious or antireligious, they are beautiful in their own right.”\textsuperscript{14} The enormity of the universe and the complexity within it fascinate her:

Why should there be, or have been only one great singularity, one great surge of cosmos? Our universe is sufficient to prepare our imaginations for plenitude on an even grander scale. . . . Everything we take to be essential could be the accident of a peculiar history, a warp or an asymmetry in this one emergence that eventuated as time, or as gravity. . . . We now know that only a small fraction of the universe is in any sense visible, that the adjective “dark” is now applied to most of it, meaning that the presence of unanticipated forms of matter and energy can be discerned or inferred though not “explained.” . . . no one expected to find that the expansion of the universe is accelerating, and that the rate of its acceleration is accelerating.\textsuperscript{15}

Within science, however, the field of Darwinism has taken on an almost religious status that Robinson is not sure it deserves: “Faith is called faith for a reason. Darwinism is

\textsuperscript{13} \textquoteright{}I read as much as I can of contemporary cosmology because reality itself is profoundly mysterious. Quantum theory and classical physics, for instance, are both lovely within their own limits and yet at present they cannot be reconciled with each other. If different systems don’t merge in a comprehensible way, that’s a flaw in our comprehension and not a flaw in one system or the other. . . . The science that I prefer tends toward cosmology, theories of quantum reality, things that are finer-textured than classical physics in terms of their powers of description. Science is amazing.” Marilynne Robinson, “Marilynne Robinson, The Art of Fiction no. 198,” interview with Sarah Fay, The Paris Review 186 (Fall 2008), http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5863/the-art-of-fiction-no-198-marilynne-robinson (accessed December 11, 2010).


\textsuperscript{15} Robinson, Absence of Mind, 121-4.
another faith – a loyalty to a vision of the nature of things despite its inaccessibility to
demonstration.”

Robinson admires the pursuit of knowledge through scientific inquiry. But this
pursuit has its place within human beings’ larger pursuit of knowledge. Scientific
inquiry arises out of human curiosity and imagination, out of pursuing answers to
compelling questions, and in response to mystery. Any endeavor attempting to call itself
“science” should apply the scientific method of observation followed by hypothesis,
theory, and the possibility of testing for validation.

Critiquing Parascience

What Robinson critiques are the status, authority, and putative objectivity of
what she calls “parascience.” Her term “parascience” encompasses those areas that
invoke theories based on massive extrapolation of data, are not subject to testing or
validation, and derive from value systems not in the least bit “scientific.” She explains
it thus: “What I wish to question are not the methods of science, but the methods of a

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16 Ibid., 39.
17 Ibid., 125.
18 “The defenders of ‘science’ have imputed objectivity and rigor to an account of reality whose
origins and consequences are indisputably economic, social, and political.” Ibid., 40.
19 “Some allusions to the science of the moment [are] used as the foundation for extrapolations and
conclusions that fall far outside the broadest definitions of science.” Ibid., 43.
20 “...a reader in this [parascientific] literature has no more chance of testing the validity of their
observations than she has of splitting a photon. We have been told to disallow the intense and emotional
subjective considerations a human altruist is likely to ponder, and to do so in deference to a mathematical
formula [Hamilton’s r x b <c] that can never be made subject to any test in a human population. It is
consistent with the genre of parascience, however, that this formula is applied with great confidence to
the nature of our species.” Ibid., 63.
kind of argument that claims the authority of science or highly specialized knowledge, that assumes a protective coloration that allows it to pass for science yet does not practice the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished.”

The application of a Darwinian explanation of origins to human behavior in all circumstances, especially to the creating of “laws” that are assumed to underlie human motivation, psychology, and society is a problem because such laws are not subject to validation and do not account for significant portions of human behavior.

Robinson includes in these parascientific fields anthropology, sociology, and political theory that make their “case by proceeding, using the science of its moment, from a genesis of human nature in primordial life to a set of general conclusions about what our nature is and must be, together with the ethical, political, economic and/or philosophic implications to be drawn from these conclusions.” Parascientific writers would include Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and the contemporary writers influenced by their ideas such as Dennett, Pinker, Gould, and Dawkins. According to Robinson, the areas of study articulated by such figures are not necessarily entirely consistent with

21 Ibid., 2.
22 Ibid., 32-33.
23 Robinson, The Death of Adam, 63, 67. She similarly comments in an interview with Sarah Fay in The Paris Review: “When people try to debunk religion, it seems to me they are referring to an eighteenth-century notion of what science is. I’m talking about Richard Dawkins here, who has a status that I can’t quite understand. He acts as if the physical world that is manifest to us describes reality exhaustively. . . . The whole excitement of science is that it’s always pushing toward the discovery of something that it cannot account for or did not anticipate. The New Atheist types, like Dawkins, act as if science had revealed the world as a closed system. That simply is not what contemporary science is about. A lot of scientists are atheists, but they don’t talk about reality in the same way that Dawkins does.”
each other, but what they share is a status equal to that of science and a powerful influence on many modes of contemporary thought:

The schools of thought that support the modernist consensus are profoundly incompatible with one another, so incompatible that they cannot collectively be taken to support one grand conclusion. That they are understood to have done so might reasonably be taken to suggest that this irresistible conclusion came before, perhaps inspired, the arguments that have been and still are made to support it. I propose that the core assumption that remains unchallenged and unquestioned through all the variations within the diverse traditions of ‘modern’ thought is that the experience and testimony of the individual mind is to be explained away, excluded from consideration when any rational account is made of the nature of human being and of being altogether. In its place we have the grand projects of generalization, solemn efforts to tell our species what we are and what we are not. . .The great new truth into which modernity has delivered us is generally assumed to be that the given world is the creature of accident, that it has climbed Mount Improbable incrementally and over time through a logic of development, refinement, and elaboration internal to itself and sufficient to account exhaustively for all the complexity and variety of which reality and experience are composed.24

In a number of essays including, but not limited to, “Darwinism,” “On Human Nature,” “The Strange History of Altruism,” “Thinking Again,” “Freedom of Thought,” and “Austerity as Ideology,”25 Robinson alludes to the pervasive influence of Darwinian ideas in the assertions of modern writers. “Darwinism is still offered routinely as a source of objective scientific insight on questions like the nature of human motivation and the possibility of altruism. As I have said, the views of contemporary adherents on these matters are darker than Darwin’s own.”26 Again, much of her complaint is the objectivity such writers claim for themselves when, in fact, only some of what

24 Robinson, Absence of Mind, 21-23; emphasis added.


26 Robinson, The Death of Adam, 48.
constitutes their systems of thought comes from observations while much also comes from value systems about human life.

These writers rely on their own myths. “Ironically, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud have all benefited from a myth of origins. Even now, the idea that they astonished a world of settled belief with brave new insight, and that they dispelled the gloom of an unvalued present life by turning their piercing gaze resolutely to Truth and Nature, makes giants of them.” Robinson recognizes the influence these writers hold for all subsequent thinkers and does not entirely discount the possibility that some value may be gleaned from them, but she does not believe they merit the weight they often hold.

The theories of parascientific thinkers often become reductionist and apply a paradigm in line with the philosophical school of positivism, which suggests that observation of human behavior can be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as data examined by physicists, botanists, or biologists and that such observation can deduce “laws” regarding human behavior, including motivations and emotions. Robinson points out that positivist thinking is nothing new, having originated in the nineteenth century, and that August Comte had already (mistakenly) asserted that “the laws of [physical sciences]. . .can therefore be presumed to govern [the social sciences].” But she raises the question “whether the social sciences are in fact sciences, or are methodical and testable enough to identify in themselves the workings of the kinds of

27 Ibid., 59.

28 Robinson, Absence of Mind, 123.
apparently universal constants it is customary to call ‘laws’.” Simply put, Robinson has “felt for a long time that our idea of what a human being is has grown oppressively small and dull.”

Robinson’s critique of Darwinian, parascientific, reductionist explanations is that they are insufficient to account for the complexity of human inward experience and exceptionalism. The mere existence of the Earth within the universe, not to mention the complexity and mystery of the strange organisms inhabiting it called human beings, deserves more nuanced consideration. She includes some beautiful descriptions of our existence in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*: “Here we are, a gaudy efflorescence of consciousness, staggeringly improbable in light of everything we know about the reality that contains us.” But parascience tries to provide overly-simplified explanations for this staggeringly improbable and conscious existence and to force fit it into its framework for understanding the world.

Robinson explains, “We have put together among ourselves a rigidly simple account of life in the world, which we honor with the name Reality, we now assure one another, must be faced and accepted, even or especially at the cost of those very things which societies we admire are believed by us to value. . .”

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29 Ibid., 123.


31 “We live on a little island of the articulable, which we tend to mistake for reality itself. We can and do make small and tedious lives as we sail through the cosmos on our uncannily lovely little planet, and this is surely remarkable.” Ibid., 21.

32 Ibid., 109.

33 Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 76.
experience consists of more than the merely “real”; it is rich with a history of varied
cultures full of arts, philosophies, and theologies, of the mythologies, metaphysics, and
mysticism of generations of surprisingly placed human beings. Any accounts of “history
and civilization are an authoritative record the mind has left, is leaving, and will leave,
and objectivity deserving the name would take this record as a starting point. . . .”  

We exist as inward, conscious creatures. The complexity of human experience is
not reducible to a biological explanation where human animals seek only genetic
perpetuation. Allowing for an evolutionary account for the origin and development of
life on planet Earth, Robinson still commends the exceptionalism of human beings who
are aware of themselves. Professor Robinson does not hold that knowledge comes only
from study and assumed familiarity with the idea of influential thinkers; it also comes
from observation and appreciation of the beauty of the people, of the social customs, of
the physical settings in and around which we find ourselves. Each person’s experience
is valuable and not to be discounted merely because it may not be a result of intense
education. The knowledge that comes from observation and experience suggests that
humans do have a conscious existence. The mere notice of human conscious existence
for millennia and as experienced in the 20th century is reason for marvel to Robinson.
And it is a factor which deserves inclusion in any accounting of human life.

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34 Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 133.

35 “Modern theories of human nature, which are essentially Darwinist and neo-Darwinist, pare us
down to our instincts for asserting relative advantage in order to survive and propagate.” Robinson, *When
I Was A Child I Read Books*, 156.
Like scientists, Robinson also works from observation of experience, but she wants to include more of what seems obvious to her. She is willing to trust herself and her observations and relies on common sense as well as extensive reading to assert that any understanding of ourselves and how we exist within the world needs to account for how humans experience it.\textsuperscript{36} A part of this “experiencing” is inward processing by mental and emotional faculties, consciously and unconsciously. Philosophical analogies and scenarios aside, human behavior rarely seems explainable through a simple genetic predisposition to act for the survival oneself/relatives/offspring or to operate off a pleasure (pain avoidant) principal. The parascientific writers frustrate Robinson by minimizing (or trying to totally invalidate) human history and experience,\textsuperscript{37} by demonstrating in their theories that “the mind as felt experience had been excluded from important fields of modern thought.”\textsuperscript{38} She notes that “whoever controls the definition of mind controls the definition of humankind itself, and culture, and history. There is something uniquely human in the fact that we can pose questions to ourselves about ourselves, and questions that actually matter, that actually change reality.”\textsuperscript{39} So she focuses on the essential point of human experience that is encompassed in the “mind.”

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{36} “. . .everything I took from studying and reading anthropology, psychology, economics, cultural history, and so on did not square at all with my sense of things, and that the tendency of much of it was to posit or assume a human simplicity within a simple reality and to marginalize the sense of the sacred, the beautiful, everything in any way lofty.” Robinson, \textit{Absence of Mind}, 5.

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{37} “The subject that interests me is in fact the persistence, through the very long period we still call ‘modern’ and into the present, of something like a polemic against the mind - not mind as a misnomer, not as the construct of an untenable dualism, but mind in more or less the fullest sense of the word.” Ibid., 74.

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 13.

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 32.
Towards a Definition of Mind

Robinson is fond of pointing out that the human brain is the most complex object known to mankind.\(^{40}\) This complexity should be the starting point for any attempts at grasping or explaining human life. “Humankind never ceases to express itself in new terms, and the data at hand are inevitably flawed and partial. But the complexity of the object, the human brain, and all associated phenomena are at the center of the question, inextricable from it.”\(^{41}\) This is, perhaps, her primary claim for human exceptionalism and for her belief that each person is a fascinating study and a being worthy of respect: “[b]y my lights, this makes the human mind and the human person the most interesting entity known to exist in the universe.”\(^{42}\)

This is not to say that for Robinson the mind and the brain are one and the same — but that the physicality and complexity of the human brain is her starting point. It is the mere fact of the brain’s complexity that accounts for her refusal to accept reductionist explanations for its activity and to seek for an account of our inner workings, our self-awareness. If the brain itself is complex, could not the concept of a nonphysical mind also be something to reckon with? Might it be more than electronic impulses and firing synapses?

\(^{40}\) Marilynne Robinson, “The Resurrection of the Ordinary,” interview with Paul Elie, Georgetown University, April 6, 2009, http://explore.georgetown.edu/news/?ID=42413 (accessed December 18, 2010). Robinson also mentions this in Absence of Mind, “Might not the human brain, that most complex object known to exist in the universe, have undergone a qualitative change as well? . . .it might at least encourage an imagination of humankind large enough to acknowledge some small fragment of the mystery we are” (135), and in When I Was A Child I Read Books, “…having read any number of times that the human brain is the most complex object known to exist in the universe. . . .” (8).

\(^{41}\) Robinson, Absence of Mind, 133.

\(^{42}\) Robinson, When I Was A Child I Read Books, 144.
We are indeed physical beings, and that physicality must also be accounted for, including the physicality of the brain. But the physiological data to be gleaned from studies of the brain are not equivalent to the function of what has traditionally been called the “mind.” Indeed, the challenges in articulating a definition of the mind are part of what suggests its existence: “the elusiveness of the mind is a consequence of its centrality, which is both its potency and its limitation.”\(^{43}\) This elusiveness does not mean it is reducible merely to physical brain study or that the mind does not exist. Simply that is difficult to classify:

To say it is the brain is insufficient, over-general, implying nothing about nuance and individuation. Much better to call it the mind. If the brain at the level of complex and nuanced interaction with itself does indeed become mind, then the reductionist approach insisted upon by writers on the subject is not capable of yielding evidence of mind’s existence, let alone an account of its functioning.\(^{44}\)

The mind is important to Robinson. To be clear, she is not necessarily endorsing a Cartesian dualism of separate entities called “body” and “mind,” but rather trying to explain the presence of the mind as one aspect of the whole person who cannot be easily broken into categories. Every day, human bodies encounter information, consider it, and use it to make decisions or take actions. The information may take the form of direct sensory input like sights, sounds, or smells, but often it also comes as intuitions, impressions, or unconscious interpretations of a subtle expression on a face, a tone of a voice, or the scent of a topiary. Although we like to believe we are intentional and rational beings, we generally take part in these processes without any conscious


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 120.
attention. The place for this processing, which significantly impacts not only emotional and psychological but physiological well-being, might fairly be referred to as the mind.

Robinson wholly accepts the presence of a nonphysical yet real aspect of being human, which is integrated with the physical and can know – that is acknowledge as meaningful and consistent with experience and observation – and she would call this aspect the mind. Attempting definition, she proposes, “Let us say the mind is what the brain does. This is a definition that makes the mind, whatever else, a participant in the whole history and experience of the body.”

The ability to identify and to analyze our own thoughts, reactions, feelings, even our experiences, is much of what is important for Robinson in accounting for ourselves. Somehow we are able to step outside ourselves and look in at our own inner workings, to examine and analyze ourselves. Robinson describes it this way: “By ‘self-awareness’ I do not mean merely consciousness of one’s identity, or of the complex flow of thought, perception, memory, and desire, important as these are. I mean primarily the self that stands apart from itself, that questions, reconsiders, appraises.” This ability is immensely special. It is an ingredient in the composition of each human life, something for which we should account. This essential component of each human life is mysterious and beautiful, carrying worth. “Each of us lives intensely within herself or

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45 Ibid., 113. Here Robinson is tweaking a definition provided by Steven Pinker in How the Mind Works (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 324-7, 456-9. She later comments that “those who claim to dismiss the mind/body dichotomy actually perpetuate it when they exclude the mind’s self-awareness from among the data of human nature.” Robinson, Absence of Mind, 118.

46 Ibid., 118.
himself, continuously assimilating past and present experience to a narrative and vision that are unique in every case. . . .” 47

That something of which the mind is aware, as it thinks, imagines, and reflects, is another mysterious entity called by some the “self.” Robinson prefers the term “soul.” For Robinson, the concepts of mind and soul are interconnected and sometimes even indistinguishable. She comments that after reading about more neurons in the brain than the galaxy that the “mind is not identical with the brain but is more mysterious still, it seems to me this astonishing nexus of the self, so uniquely elegant and capable, merits a name that would indicate a difference in kind from the ontological run of things, and for my purposes ‘soul’ would do nicely.” 48

Regarding the Soul

Soul is not necessarily a term commonly used today. Patrick Miller in “Whatever Happened to the Soul?” notes the dearth of references to the soul even in contemporary theological literature. He comments that often “the soul. . .is a pointer to a dimension of depth in human existence that other terms convey with less directness or clarity. That defining the soul is not easy to do does not necessarily mean the term fails to denote and connote to its hearers.” 49 He intimates that perhaps the word soul has lost its popularity because of spiritual connotations and that “self” has replaced it as a term

47 Ibid., 132.

48 Robinson, When I Was A Child I Read Books, 8.

to capture the indefinable essence of an individual. He goes on to distinguish between
the “self” and the “soul”:

. . .the shift from soul to self, which seems to be the primary substitute word to
talk about some of the same substance, is not simply a linguistic change. . . .The
soul is a way of speaking anthropologically not simply about an outmoded
personal dualism but of that dimension of human existence that is addressed by
God and understands self and person as features of a God-human relationship.
To speak about the soul is to speak about something that is part of us — in a non-
defined and non-empirical fashion — that has to do with God, with the moral and
religious dimensions of our being, in a way that no other anthropological term
quite brings off. Clearly, the self, which seems to be a more holistic and accurate
term, does not carry the connotations of the term soul. Its psychological roots
make it a rich term or notion for thinking about personhood, but it is able to stay
firmly within a notion of the human that takes no account of either morality or
transcendence. It is surely no accident that we speak about a “soul brother [or
sister]” but not a “self brother.” A “soul brother” is one who connects with me in
the things that matter most in my being and activity. 50

Robinson agrees that we are self-aware, that part of us recognizes person and considers
and appraises thoughts, and that “soul” is likely the best term to refer to this:

I suspect this self-awareness is what people used to call the soul. Modern
discourse is not really comfortable with the word ‘soul,’ and in my opinion the
loss of the word has been disabling. . . .So the soul, the masterpiece of creation, is
more or less reduced to a token signifying cosmic acceptance or rejection,
having little or nothing to do with that miraculous thing, the felt experience of
life, except insofar as life offers distractions or temptations. 51

Angela Trilby, an author referenced by Patrick Miller because of her book Soul,
seems to echo Robinson’s interpretation of the contemporary interplay between science
and soulishness. According to Miller, Trilby “articulates a contemporary perspective
when she notes that many believe that science has ‘made the notion of the soul

50 Ibid., 508-9.
51 Robinson, When I Was A Child I Read Books, 8.
redundant.””52 Miller goes on to observe, however, that Trilby “judges this dismissal of
the notion of the soul as a mistake. She sees in science a new book of nature emerging
that speaks ‘very directly to people’s sense of God and of themselves.’”53

Robinson would likely agree with Trilby and Miller that the new revelations of
science do not eliminate the existence of, nor need for recognizing, the soul; rather they
augment it. She proposes we reincorporate this word and concept into our vocabulary
and into our perception of ourselves. “If we are to consider the heavens, how much
more are we to consider the magnificent energies of consciousness that make whomever
we pass on the street a far grander marvel than our galaxy? At this point of dynamic
convergence, call it self or call it soul, questions of right and wrong are weighed, love is
felt, guilt and loss are suffered.”54

Soulishness is intimately connected to the individual. And Robinson wants to
remember the persisting “beauty and strangeness of the individual soul, that is, of the
world as perceived in the course of a human life, of the mind as it exists in time.”55

**Turning to Theology**

Given her understanding of the soul, it may be unsurprising that Robinson’s
theology seems driven, at least in part, from her observation of and value for human
experience, particularly self-awareness and consciousness:

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52 Miller, “Whatever Happened to the Soul,” 509.
Faith always sounds like an act of will. Frankly, I don’t know what faith in God means. For me, the experience is much more a sense of God. Nothing could be more miraculous than the fact that we have a consciousness that makes the world intelligible to us and are moved by what is beautiful.\footnote{Robinson, interview in The Paris Review.}

She finds the Christian tradition, particularly the theological writings of John Calvin, to provide the most compelling account for understanding human life, that each soul is individual, exceptional, and worthy of honor. “You assume that anyone you encounter is precious to God.”\footnote{Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, “Second Life; Marilynne Robinson,” PBS, September 17, 2009, http://video.pbs.org/video/1324370057/ (accessed July 25, 2012).} Each individual life has value and beauty, and it is in accounting for this that Robinson finds Calvin’s theology helpful: “As much as [Calvin] explores a theology he explores also a state of consciousness, the experience of a radical individuality, which he takes to be, granting a fallen world, the definitive state of all human consciousness, and therefore the appropriate basis for knowledge of man and of God.”\footnote{Marilynne Robinson, preface to John Calvin: Steward of God’s Covenant, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), xii.} Humanity is created, somehow, in the image of God, who is himself lovely and unique, the source of goodness and beauty. Robinson highlights the elements of Calvin’s theology that outline this idea:

[Calvin’s] humanism is expressed precisely in his understanding of the teaching of Genesis, that humankind is made in the image of God, the likeness being “that glory of God which peculiarly shines forth in human nature, where the mind, the will, and all the senses, represent the Divine order.” . . he places this incandescent divinity − it is the glory of God that ‘shines forth’ from human nature − at the very center of individual experience and presence. And this sacredness is an attribute not of saints only, nor of Christians only, but is inherent and also manifest in all human beings as such.\footnote{Ibid., xv.}
A theology based on men and women created in the image of God and thus containing beauty and goodness does not, according to Robinson and her interpretation of Calvin, have to exclude what is also observable about human nature and behavior around us and throughout history: namely that both individuals and societies have a capacity for very bad behavior and enormous destruction to themselves, their communities, and the natural environment. Indeed, people can be very sinful, and Calvin is well known for his doctrine of total depravity, which accounts for people’s sin as inherent to their nature. Robinson explains how this doctrine arises both out of Calvin’s context and out of the value he places on human life:

...the hyperbolic extremes of Calvin’s exaltation of human nature on the one hand, and his sense of its utter fallenness on the other, might have presented a paradox his earlier readers would not have seen as a contradiction. Indeed, a theology that did not address the problem of evil as radically present in human life could hardly be taken as serious enough to deserve attention. ...Calvin’s famous doctrine of “total depravity” is remarkable in this context because, notoriously, it makes meaningless, in cosmic terms, moral distinctions of better and worse.

In fact, by Robinson’s interpretation, the doctrine of total depravity honors the mystery and value of human life because it puts all people on the same level. It has a regard for every soul. “The Calvinist model...the belief that we are all sinners gives us excellent

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60 “The specifics of the historical situation tend to be forgotten, and this presumed melancholy ascribed to the baleful influence of Calvin’s temperament and his theology. The polemic against Calvin over the centuries has been virulent, and very effective. He himself has been associated with repression and persecution so insistently that to read his theology as based in exploration of the consciousness of the persecuted may surprise some readers.” Ibid., xiii.

61 Ibid., xvii.
grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness, and is kindlier than any expectation that we might be saints, even while it affirms the standards all of us fail to attain.”

But we must perceive ourselves, others, and the Divine. And perception is (at least in part) a function of the mind. For Robinson, perceiving truly also involves imagination and beginning from a place of humility, but these are essential for understanding God. “The self-abnegation that is always the condition of a true perception of the self or of God can only be understood as the rigorous imagination of a higher self.” It is the importance placed on the role of human perception, both of what an individual sees around her as well as within her, that also connects Robinson and Calvin. According to Robinson, “The crucial role of perception in Calvin, who bases so much of his definition of the divine in humanity on the brilliance of the human capacity for perception, is evident in the consistency with which he associates the ‘election’ with the radical understanding of the presence of God, and of his nature as manifest in Christ.”

Perception plays a key role in communing or connecting with God. It is with that mysterious entity, call it mind or soul, that we perceive beauty and encounter the mystery of the Divine. Perception is part of how we commune with God. Both the capacity to perceive and the existence of things to perceive are a result of God’s grace. Calvin explains the connection between human perception of and experience in the

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62 Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 156.

63 Ibid., 183.

64 Robinson, preface to *John Calvin: Steward of God’s Covenant*, xxv.
natural world. “The locus of human mystery is perception of this world. . . . I [Robinson] like Calvin’s metaphor – nature is a shining garment in which God is revealed and concealed.”65 This may account for Robinson’s explanation in an oft-quoted passage from her essay “Psalm 8”:

> So I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among us. The eternal as an idea is much less preposterous than time, and this very fact should seize our attention. In certain contexts the improbable is called the miraculous.66
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> It is into this miraculous scene that God reveals himself out of love and mercy. “God himself chooses to engage human consciousness thus intimately, that to do so is his being toward us, and that to feel the presence and the meaning of his attention is our being toward him.”67 Not only does he engage human consciousness, but he engages with human physicality. The physical, human organic beings and the natural world they inhabit are essential to human experience and Robinson’s theology. Much of Christian thought has been considered dualistic or accused of minimizing or even despising the physical human body, and Calvinism has been included in this criticism. But Robinson sees another perspective, on which she elaborates in her essays on Margeurite de Navarre, the sister of the French King Francis I and early patron of Calvin:

> Theology of the period of Cauvin68 employs a characteristic language which discredits it in the eyes of modern readers, including extreme disparagements of

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68 In these essays, she purposefully refers to Calvin by the French spelling of his name, Cauvin.
the physical body, and more generally of humankind under the aspect of sin or fallenness. The first thing that must be borne in mind is that those who wrote in such terms, whether Cauvin or Luther or John of the Cross, did it in the service of an extraordinarily exalted vision of the human soul. It is a form of hyperbole — purity is corruption, pleasure is illusion, wisdom is folly, virtue is depravity, by comparison with the holiness that can be imagined, not as the nature of God only, but as the nature of humankind also, whom . . . God has made “a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and worship”.

It is into the human experience, the inwardness and perception, the physicality, and the natural environment, that God reveals himself through creation and incarnation.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, perhaps the most powerful example of this is the doctrine of the Incarnation, that is of the divine taking on physical humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. That any Divine being would subject him/herself to the physicality and limitations of human life seems both impossible and improbable. But it is also miraculous and the most powerful expression of love:

If we have entertained the questions we moderns must pose to ourselves about the plausibility of incarnation, if we have sometimes paused to consider the other ancient stories of miraculous birth, this is no great matter. But if we let these things distract us, we have lost the main point of the narrative, which is that God is of a kind to love the world extravagantly, wondrously, and the world is of a kind to be worth, which is not to say worthy of, this painted and rapturous love. . . . Christ’s humanity is meant to speak to our humanity.

The doctrine of the Incarnation not only demonstrates Divine love, but it also gives deep meaning and significance to human life and all its extent components, from the most ordinary to the most sublime. Robinson comments on the ordinary life of this man Jesus of Nazareth:

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69 Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 182.

Then if, after his ordeal, Jesus had gathered around him just the composure of an ordinary man, so that he could be mistaken for someone going about his work, that would seem like miracle and grandeur, that would be an astonishing beauty. It seems to me that the narrative in its most dazzling vision of holiness, commends to us beauty of an altogether higher order than spectacle, that being mere commonplace, ineffable humanity.\footnote{Robinson, \textit{The Death of Adam}, 239-40.}

That humanity can be both commonplace and ineffable is what inspires Robinson and accounts for her humanism. Her interpretations come not only from the New Testament story of the Incarnation but also from the Mosaic laws in the Old Testament scriptures that lay out an expectation of appropriate treatment of each life.\footnote{“The first obligation of religion is to maintain the sense of the value of human beings. If you had to summarize the Old Testament, the summary would be: stop doing this to yourselves. But it is not in our nature to stop harming ourselves. We don’t behave consistently with our own dignity or with the dignity of other people. The Bible reiterates this endlessly.” Robinson, interview in \textit{The Paris Review}.}

In \textit{When I Was A Child I Read Books}, she points out that, “The laws of Moses establish a highly coherent system for minimizing and alleviating poverty, a brilliant economics based in a religious ethic marked by nothing more strongly than by an anxious solicitude for the well-being of the needy and the vulnerable.”\footnote{Robinson, \textit{When I Was A Child I Read Books}, 102-3.} Similarly in \textit{The Death of Adam}, she claims, “My own sense of the text [Hebrew Scriptures], based on more than cursory reading, is that the sin most insistently called abhorrent to God is the failure of generosity, the neglect of widow and orphan, the oppression of strangers and the poor, the defrauding of the laborer.”\footnote{Robinson, \textit{The Death of Adam}, 102.}

Robinson’s interpretation of Calvin is unconventional, a distinct and perhaps unexpected reading of the Protestant Reformer and theologian. Indeed, Robinson has

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Robinson, \textit{The Death of Adam}, 239-40.}
\footnote{“The first obligation of religion is to maintain the sense of the value of human beings. If you had to summarize the Old Testament, the summary would be: stop doing this to yourselves. But it is not in our nature to stop harming ourselves. We don’t behave consistently with our own dignity or with the dignity of other people. The Bible reiterates this endlessly.” Robinson, interview in \textit{The Paris Review}.}
\footnote{Robinson, \textit{When I Was A Child I Read Books}, 102-3.}
\footnote{Robinson, \textit{The Death of Adam}, 102.}
\end{footnotesize}
been called revisionist in her writings on a number of topics, including her theology. She attributes to Calvin a more positive vision than that with which he is generally credited. Yet she would expect (as she would for Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and so forth) any thoughtful reference to Calvin and his theology to come from a reading of the works he himself wrote, rather than from a reliance on traditional (and perhaps limited or simplistic) interpretations.

Still, not all theologians would credit Robinson with an entirely orthodox Christianity or an appropriate interpretation of Calvin. Todd Shy also notes how Robinson’s humanism influences her own theology and interpretation of Calvin in the following excerpt from “Religion and Marilynne Robinson”:

What Robinson admires in Calvin, first of all, is the grandeur of his vision of what God intends for humanity. It is the ‘elegance’ and ‘gallantry’ of his moral vision, not its orthodox precision that she extols. . . . The expansive view of divine majesty is certainly Calvin’s, and the elegance of the prose makes Calvin a writer’s writer, but where Robinson steers her theology I doubt Calvin would be willing to follow. . . . Calvin was indeed a humanist by education, but Robinson humanizes Calvinism in a way that is ironically modern. . . . The theology is radically rewritten by Robinson. . . . It’s not that. . . . Robinson’s own theology isn’t tenable but that what is central to her is a product of religious crises spawned by industrialization, urbanization, scientific advance, modern textual studies, political reform and other non-theological developments. . . . Calvin wanted to say what he could about God; Robinson writes about life infused with glimpses of awe.75

In sum, Robinson’s theology – strongly influenced by her understanding of Calvin’s writings – aligns with how she perceives human existence, namely that the mysterious presence of a mindful soul housed within a physiological organism, showing

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both beauty and a capacity for evil, should be treated with respect, sensitivity, and compassion.

Conclusion: Robinson’s Humanism

“We have to think that people are sacred, human beings have to be considered sacred. That’s the beginning.”

Truly, for Robinson, this is the starting place for her understanding of human experience, of science, of history and culture, of religion, and of the natural world. It is the source from which her fiction works flow. Her criticisms are aimed at ideologies and theories that are inhumane in their impact because her “loyalty really is to human loveliness and the deep experience of self that every self deserves and the deep acknowledgement that everyone owes to everyone else.”

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77 “In fact there is no moment in which, no perspective from which, science as science can regard human life and say that there is a beautiful, terrible mystery in it all, a great pathos. Art, music, and religion all tell us that... It is true because it takes account of the universal variable, human nature, which shapes everything it touches, science as surely and profoundly as anything else.” Robinson, When I Was A Child I Read Books, 15.

78 “Each of us lives intensely within herself or himself, continuously assimilating past and present experience to a narrative and vision that are unique in every case yet profoundly communicable, whence the arts. And we all live in a great reef of collective experience, past and present, that we receive and preserve and modify.” Robinson, Absence of Mind, 132.

79 “Only the grandest religious thought has even attempted to create a wholly integrated model of reality, typically employing the language of myth or epic to assert human meaning in the context of a dauntingly nonhuman universe. We moderns have abandoned the effort, and for us that seems to serve as an equivalent to solving the problem.” Robinson, preface to John Calvin: Steward of God’s Covenant, xvi.

80 “I don’t believe in exploiting or treating with disrespect even an imagined person.” Robinson, interview in The Paris Review.

81 Robinson, “The Resurrection of the Ordinary.”
For example, Robinson gives the first half of her book *Mother Country* to critiquing the British history of philanthropy and care for the poor, implying that a much higher value of every human life exists than was given by the British first through the Poor Laws and, today, by the Welfare State. She goes on to lament the continued lack of respect for both human life and the environment (or future human lives) shown by the British establishment in operating and accounting for the modern nuclear waste plant Sellafield in northwest England because “[e]very environmental problem is a human problem.”82

While she appreciates the grandeur of nature, Robinson also recognizes the incredible impact the human species can have on it, and it concerns her. We have a tremendous power for heedless action and destruction. “I think we must...accept the fact that the consequences of human presence in the world are universal and ineluctable, and invest our care and hope in civilization, since to do otherwise risks repeating the terrible pattern of enmity against ourselves, which is truly the epitome and paradigm of all the living world’s most grievous sorrows.”83

Marilynne Robinson’s humanism comes through on almost every page she writes, impressing on the reader the importance of the “soulishness” of every human being. The existence and influence of the mind is central to human experience. She suggests we consider an approach to study and to living that recognizes and honors human inwardness and accounts for human sinfulness. Only in this way will we truly


83 Ibid., 254.
understand our place in the world, find purpose, develop meaningful relationships, and care for our environment. In her understanding of the world, the following is essential:

[we must again] acknowledge the fact, manifest in culture and history, that we are both terrible and very wonderful. . . .an open definition like this one would protect us from the error of assuming that we know our limits, for good or for harm. . . .There is much that is miraculous in a human being, whether that word “miraculous” is used strictly or loosely. And to acknowledge this fact would enhance the joy of individual experience and enhance as well the respect with which we regard other people, those statistically almost-impossible fellow travelers on our profoundly unlikely planet. 84

84 Robinson, When I Was A Child I Read Books, 159.
CHAPTER TWO

POINT OF VIEW IN ROBINSON’S FICTION

The mind, whatever else it is, is a constant of everyone’s experience, and, in more and other ways than we know, the creator of the reality that we live within, that we live by and for and despite, and that, often enough, we die from. Nothing is more essential to us.¹

~Marilynne Robinson, Absence of Mind

In Chapter One, I tried to demonstrate that Robinson’s view of the world stems from a belief in the conscious, self-aware, mindfulness of every individual. Robinson always seeks to demonstrate the value of cultivating the mind: “What an extraordinary privilege it is that we are in constant conversation with this most complex object in the universe. . . .its potentialities are unexhausted, you know, untested, really, but they certainly are there for anyone to explore.”² Engaging the mind of oneself, of another, or even of a fictional character should not be casually taken for granted.

For Robinson, the mind is so integral to human experience that, at times, it is challenging to determine the distinctions she would make between the mind and the soul. Closely associated with the mind is the soulfulness of each human life, which contains mystery and merits dignity and compassion. Both mind and soul are important to Robinson. Recognizing that mind and soul are closely related, for purposes of clarity here,³ let us say that mind is that cognitive capacity, somehow connected to the

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¹ Marilynne Robinson, Absence of Mind, 1.

² Robinson, “The Resurrection of the Ordinary.”

³ In her essay “Family,” Robinson asserts that “the attempt to impose definition on indeterminacy and degree and exception is about the straightest road to mischief I know of, very deeply worn, very well traveled to this day.” The Death of Adam, 87. I would say that both mind and soul are terms
operation of the brain, that allows for information processing, for coming to terms with that information, for analysis and reflection (both conscious and subconscious), for holding knowledge. *Soul* is a term that more richly approximates the center of felt experience for each unique person and that can be self-aware.\(^4\) Subsequently, every interaction with another soul has value, and a mind opened to another is a privilege.

This is a privilege Marilynne Robinson gives to the readers of her novels, *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004), and *Home* (2008).\(^5\) In each of her novels the reader does not simply see or hear a story unfolding but is given the opportunity to engage with the minds of Ruth Stone, John Ames, and Glory Boughton. Although Robinson’s characters are not, of course, “real” in the sense they ever had a physical existence on Earth, they come alive on the page and grant to each reader an encounter with a beautiful soul. Her characters embody that exceptional mystery that accompanies each human presence. Given that she approaches fiction as an exploration of

encompassing indeterminacy, and any definition will likely be incomplete. I am not trying to be mischievous, merely recognizing that definition helps a reader and thus hoping to bring some clarity to the use of both terms, especially for the arguments laid out here.

\(^4\) As I will discuss later, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio would likely place self-awareness in the mind. But Robinson seems to associate it more with the soul. Again, her distinctions are hard to draw, but I believe she *would* make them: “There is that mysterious thing the cognitive scientists call self-awareness, the human ability to consider and appraise one’s own thoughts. I suspect this self-awareness is what people used to call the soul. Modern discourse is not really comfortable with the word ‘soul,’ and in my opinion the loss of the word has been disabling. . .So the soul, the masterpiece of creation, is more or less reduced to a token signifying cosmic acceptance or rejection, having little or nothing to do with that miraculous thing, the felt experience of life, except insofar as life offers distractions or temptations.” Robinson, *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, 8.

\(^5\) Robinson also published a short story “Connie Bronson” in *The Paris Review* in 1986. She has admitted, however, that “Connie Bronson” anticipated her novel *Housekeeping* and that she rarely thinks of it: “‘Connie Bronson’ has for me now the interest and charm of anyone’s juvenilia—that is, almost none at all.” Robinson, interview in *The Paris Review*. 
personhood through another character, surely this mysterious presence is something Robinson achieves because she intends to.⁶

Robinson’s readers have the opportunity to get to know (not merely know about) her characters because her approach to writing fiction also includes allowing characters to speak for themselves. This approach grants dignity to them and flows from Robinson’s high estimation of the mind and her reverence for each soul, even fictional ones. The chance to know Ruth, Sylvie, Lucille, Reverend Ames, Lila, Jack, Glory, and Reverend Boughton is realized through the narrative techniques founded on Robinson’s view of the mind.

**Robinson’s Point of View**

Narratives are considered to be told from one of three general points of view, though each has its own subtleties and variations. A narrator might be outside her story, either knowing everything in the form of an omniscient, third-person narrator or knowing the events and characters in a more limited way in the form of a third-person speaker. In the third option, the narrator may be a character within the story, recounting events from a first person perspective. Each narrative technique has its own advantages and limitations. But at the center of any point of view is perception. An author’s choice always influences how characters, and importantly how we as readers, perceive the

⁶ “There is a great difference, in fiction and in life, between knowing someone and knowing about someone. . .When he [author] knows his character he is writing to explore, to feel reality on a set of nerves somehow not quite his own. . .there is no word for the experience of seeing.” Robinson, *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, 6-7.
people, places and events in a work of fiction. And perception is an integral part of how the mind works.

Robinson’s narrative points of view are then, as for her they must be, character driven, born of her belief in the mind’s significance. Although perhaps not always with outright intention at the time of writing, Robinson selected points of view that capture the complex workings of the mind. Reflecting on her writing, she supposes that her attempt was “to simulate the integrative work of a mind perceiving and reflecting, drawing upon culture, memory, conscience, belief or assumption, experience and response and then reshaping them both as narrative, holding one thought against another for the effect of affinity or contrast, evaluating and rationalizing, feeling compassion, taking offense.”

Since Robinson’s endeavor is simulating the integrative work of the mind, it should come as no surprise that she refrains from employing any form of directly omniscient narration. The high value Robinson places on the “mystery and distinctiveness” of human presence coupled with the “abilities and limitations” humans bring to the act of perceiving also preclude an omniscient narrator. Although this type speaker can certainly describe the thoughts and emotions of any character he chooses, his point of view generally revolves around the larger story itself and its cast of characters rather than focusing on the inner processes of any particular individual.

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7 Ibid., 7.
8 Ibid., 6-7.
9 See page 39 for the longer quoted excerpt from Robinson, When I Was A Child I Read Books, 57.
Robinson is not so focused on the story that she selects her narrator in consideration of the plot.\textsuperscript{10} She highlights the individuals themselves, spotlighting human experience. Although her novels do have a story, the overwhelming impression of each is that of having encountered another person.

Instead of omniscience, the best point of view for simulating “the integrative work of the mind” is first-person because it aims to put the reader inside the mind of a character in the narrative. It brings to the forefront the processes of our minds and captures a sort of vicarious experience of a character’s thoughts and feelings instead of merely describing them. Limited third-person point of view, especially variations of what is called free-indirect style,\textsuperscript{11} can also come close to achieving similar results if the voice of any outside narrator is largely absent and the entry into a character’s mind is centered on one person. The use of first-person point of view in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* and of fairly limited third person in *Home* are born of and maintain the centrality of mind and soul that Robinson so highly values. I hope now to demonstrate this by briefly analyzing the narrative techniques used in each of the novels, followed by explaining how these techniques convey the experience of the mind through

\textsuperscript{10} “I feel strongly that action is generated out of character. And I don’t give anything a higher priority than character. The one consistent thing among my novels is that there’s a character who stays in my mind. It’s a character with complexity that I want to know better.” Robinson, interview in *The Paris Review*.

foregrounding consciousness, conveying voice, projecting thought from the solitary self, and highlighting perception.

**First Person in *Housekeeping and Gilead***

*Housekeeping* can be described as a coming-of-age tale. Its narrator is the reminiscent Ruth Stone who opens the novel simply, drawing the focus centrally on her personhood: “My name is Ruth.”

The adolescent Ruth struggles to come to terms with the deaths of her grandparents and mother, and with the implications those deaths have on her own existence. Her story is replete with metaphors and analogies — tools the mind can use to make sense of and create meaning in the world — and with wonderful imagery. Every description, even of the most domestic tasks and seemingly insignificant occurrences, suggests a mind highly active and alert, fascinated with the details of the world and equally comfortable with its imaginings as with the physically real. Notice the sensitivity and insight expressed in the following excerpt:

> Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy. So shoes are worn and hassocks are sat upon and finally everything is left where it was and the spirit passes on, just as the wind in the orchard picks up the leaves from the ground as if there were no other pleasure in the world but brown leaves, as if it would deck, clothe, flesh itself in flourishes of dusty brown apple leaves, and then drops them all in a heap at the side of the house and goes on. So Fingerbone, or such relics of it as showed above the mirroring [flood] waters, seemed fragments of the quotidian held up to our wondering attention, offered somehow as proof of their own significance.

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13 The narrator of *Housekeeping* seems to be a young woman, but is actually a middle-aged adult who has had time to process the events of her adolescence and construct a narrative around them.

Such a passage could be conveyed through an omniscient narrator, but the first-person account removes the authority such a narrator would hold and turns it into a much more reflective, personally identifiable musing. Only through the first-person can the reader join in Ruth’s wonder at the fragility of life and the beauty of the quotidian.

Ruth’s attention is drawn as much to the physical (dried flowers pressed into a book by her grandfather) as it is to the metaphysical (specters of Western settlers or the ghosts of the Biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah). As the novel progresses, she becomes increasingly aware of and able to accept her own mind, her own physical transience in the world, and the effect her perception has in setting her apart from many in her community, including even her sister Lucille. It is within Ruth’s mind that Robinson takes the reader on a sensitive exploration of the process of perceiving and reflecting on memories and culture, of holding one thought against another, of feeling compassion. Only within Ruth’s own first-person narrative can the reader experience himself, on every page, the vibrant life of the mind.

Robinson’s second novel, *Gilead* has a much different first-person narrator, the elderly Reverend John Ames, who is writing a series of letters to his much younger (seven year old) son. The format of his narration allows Ames to speak of the present or the recent past with sincerity, but not always with knowledge of the outcome of present events (unlike *Housekeeping*). Each of his letters detailing a day’s events captures the mind’s endeavor to assimilate and organize the information it takes in. Such a narrative format allows Ames to do that which so many of us do, justifiably reassess himself later in the novel and change his mind, most notably about Jack Boughton. The impression of
Gilead’s point of view is one of reading over Ames’s shoulder as he writes. The effect of the first person technique employed is that it simultaneously allows the reader to access John Ames’s thoughts while giving that strange, mind-like experience of being “outside” in a sense, able to examine and analyze those same thoughts.

**Third Person Proximal Narration in Home**

Breaking from the point of view employed in her first two novels, Robinson makes the narrator of *Home* an outside third person who is not entirely limited to knowing the thoughts of one character. Here and there the speaker does allude to having knowledge of what is taking place in others’ minds. But though the novel is technically in third-person, the overwhelming impression created by *Home’s* narration is that Glory Boughton is telling the story. Analysis of the novel’s opening passage can help illustrate this:

> “Home to stay, Glory! Yes!” her father said, and her heart sank. He attempted a twinkle of joy at this thought, but his eyes were damp with commiseration. “To stay for a while this time!” he amended, and took her bag from her, first shifting his cane to his weaker hand. Dear God, she thought, dear God in heaven. So began and ended all of her prayers these days, which were really cries of amazement.15

Clearly the bolded pronouns, “her” and “she” are third person, as are “he” and “his.” Neither Glory nor Reverend Boughton is actually narrating here. But the italicized phrase “her heart sank” at the end of the second sentence puts us immediately in sympathy with Glory’s emotions (also an aspect of the mind). The underlined phrases “attempted a twinkle of joy at this thought” and “with commiseration” may seem to be

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in free indirect thought,\textsuperscript{16} but they still give the impression of being Glory’s own interpretation of her father’s empathy rather than the absolute knowledge of an outside authority. Immediately following this allusion to her father’s mind, the narration returns to Glory’s thoughts in italics: “Dear God, she thought, dear God in heaven.” This is not entirely direct thought (it does not use the quotation marks around \textit{she thought}), but again provides direct access to Glory’s mind.

Although the narration is in third person, and although it is interspersed with references to the thoughts and feelings of Glory’s father Reverend Boughton, her brother Jack, or their neighbor and friend John Ames, still the reader hears and sees only those conversations and actions in which Glory takes part, that are recounted to or through her, or that she imagines taking place. This is perhaps most notable for conversations that Glory overhears and are subsequently incomplete because of missing dialogue when she is absent. Glory’s constant presence throughout the novel adds to the effect that the story is from her point of view. Her centrality is not a usurpation of the reader’s attention but a key to how the reader perceives both her brother and her father.\textsuperscript{17} I would refer to Glory as a “proximal narrator”: although she may not, in reality, be the actual storyteller, she is close enough to the narrator that it \textit{seems} like she is recounting the narrative.

\textsuperscript{16} I am relying on the definitions of “direct thought,” “thought report,” and “free indirect thought” provided by Alan Palmer in \textit{Fictional Minds} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 54.

\textsuperscript{17} Jennifer Holberg, for example, claims that “Glory is central to this narrative, her story as important as her father’s and her brother’s.” Jennifer Holberg, “‘The Courage to See It’: Toward an Understanding of Glory,” \textit{Christianity & Literature}, Volume 52, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 289, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA001776116&site=ehost-live (accessed September 15, 2012).
This proximal narration is essential to expressing the experience of mind in *Home* because it gives access to others’ thoughts while giving Glory the function of acting as a sort of intercessor between Jack and her father. Indeed, throughout the novel, both Jack and his father rely on Glory for help on multiple levels, not the least of which is Glory’s facilitating their own communication with one another, interpreting and mediating for them. *Home*, although technically in third person, is far from including any omniscience and reflects many of the same expressions of mind as would a first person narrative. But because it is in third person, we perceive both Jack and Glory, and the slight distance created between the reader and the proximal narrator moves us to sympathy for both characters.

**Capturing Consciousness**

Consciousness is a commonly noted aspect of the mind, one best captured through a first person (or proximal) point of view. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio provides an explanation of the concept of consciousness that helps illuminate how this process connects the mind to the body. Damasio proposes that the brain creates an image, a “dynamic representation” of the body that can then be perceived by the mind.\(^{18}\) This accounts for self-awareness and consciousness:

\(^{18}\) I realize it is a bit of a risk to quote any neuroscientist in relation to Robinson’s understanding of the mind given her view of some biologically-reduced explanations as addressed in the section about parascience in Chapter One. Robinson references Damasio only twice in *Absence of Mind*, both times in relation to studies of Phineas Gage. She directs more of her criticism toward other neuroscientific writers. Robinson wants to allow for the complexity and the existence of the mind. However, Damasio conditions his book *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, by saying that he does “not claim to have solved the problem of consciousness, and at the current stage in the history of cognitive science and neuroscience, [he regards] the thought of solving the consciousness problem with some skepticism” (12). Indeed, he goes on to in a way that Robinson would likely appreciate: “solving the mystery of consciousness is not the same as solving all the mysteries of the mind.
The fact that the body of a given organism can be fully represented in the brain of that organism opens important possibilities. The first relates to consciousness, specifically with the part of the process called the self. Elsewhere we have argued\(^\text{19}\) that the construction of the self would simply not be possible if the brain did not have available a dynamic representation of its body. Consciousness is about the relation between a given organism and the objects perceived in its mind.\(^\text{20}\)

Thus the conscious experience of the mind is reliant on perception (including the perception of the body representation). Various people can see, smell, hear the same sensory data with very different results. Robinson recognizes this aspect of the mind as well in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*: “There is a case to be made for the idea that we human beings create the universe in the fact of perceiving it, since it exists as we know it only because we bring particular abilities and limitations to the problem of knowing anything.”\(^\text{21}\) For Robinson, our knowledge is contingent on how we take in our world.

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Consciousness is an indispensable ingredient in the creative human mind, but it is not all of human mind, and, as I see it, it is not the summit of mental complexity, either. . . .Understanding consciousness says little or nothing about the origins of the universe, the meaning of life, or the likely destiny of both. After solving the mystery of consciousness and making a dent on a few related mysteries of mind, assuming science achieves either, there is enough mystery left to last many a scientific lifetime, enough awe at nature to keep us modest for the foreseeable future. After considering how consciousness may be produced within the three pounds of flesh we call brain, we may revere life and respect human beings more, rather than less.” Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 28.

Certainly revering life and respecting human beings more is consistent with Robinson’s view of the world, so I believe that employed with care, Damasio’s ideas can help provide some illumination on Robinson’s presentation of consciousness and mind.

\(^\text{19}\) That is, in Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*.


First person point of view is, then, a natural choice for Robinson as she tries to capture the experience of the mind’s aspect called consciousness. As Damasio notes, “consciousness is an entirely private, first-person phenomena which occurs as part of the private, first-person process we call mind.”\(^\text{22}\) In a novel, first person brings into close alignment the original perceiver and the reader; we only know the story as the narrator perceives it. Such a point of view highlights the inner and the private processes of the mind. The narrators of *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* bring different abilities and limitations to their perceptions of the stories they tell, but both serve an important function in capturing the experience of consciousness.

One of the abilities Ruth Stone brings to the narration of *Housekeeping* is a particularly heightened form of mental awareness. She is acutely aware of her presence and strangeness, as she herself describes: “And I was left alone, in the gentle afternoon, indifferent to my clothes and comfortable in my skin, unimproved and without the prospect of improvement. . . . each particular tree, and its season, and its shadow, were utterly known to me, likewise the small desolations of forgotten lilies and irises, likewise the silence of the railroad tracks in the sunlight.”\(^\text{23}\) Here Ruth not only describes her environment with depth of detail and perception that are “utterly known to me,” but she also describes her awareness of herself with phrases such as “indifferent to my clothes,” and “comfortable in my skin.”

\(^{22}\) *The Feeling of What Happens*, 12.

In another passage, Ruth’s awareness of herself is an observation separate from but still cognizant of her body: “. . .there was no way for me to tell Sylvie that the tea had tipped out of my hands and wet my lap. I knew that my decay, now obvious and accelerating, should somehow be concealed for decency’s sake, but Sylvie would not look up from her magazine. I began to hope for oblivion, and then I rolled out of my chair. In addition to the first-person pronouns, the use of phrases like “wet,” “knew my decay,” and “hope for oblivion,” in Ruth’s narration capture her virtual disembodied experience, the interplay of her organism and her perception. In using “should” and “would not,” Ruth adds her own interpretation to her description, helping us relate to her feelings in the moment. This mindful experience can only be achieved with such impact through a first person narration.

The narrator of Gilead, John Ames, has a similar experience of the awareness of the mind and body’s interplay when he finds himself in the awkward position of feigning sleep while his wife Lila talks with Jack Boughton: “There in the dark and the quiet I felt I could forget all the tedious particular and just feel the presence of his mortal and immortal being.” Laura Tanner rightly notes that with regard to Ames throughout the novel, “The intensity of his perception reflects the workings of a consciousness that infiltrates the dynamics of his every sensory experience, yielding torment as well as compensation.”

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24 Ibid., 119, emphasis added.


26 Laura Tanner, “‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead,” Contemporary Literature 48, no. 2 (Summer, 2007), 243,
Perception is not, however, always noticeably recognized by the mind in the same way it is in these former examples from Ruth and Ames. In both cases, the narrator was also aware of his/her thoughts, registering the interplay of mind and body, and able to put it into words. This is what Alan Palmer refers to as “inner speech,” that is, “the highly verbalized flow of self-conscious thought.” In his project to expand narrative theory titled Fictional Minds, however, Palmer expresses the belief that a study of fictional minds should not be limited to this inner speech because it “does not do justice to the complexity of the types of evidence for the workings of fictional minds that are available in narrative discourse.”

It is certainly easier to identify the expression of mindfulness through examples of characters analyzing or commenting on their own thoughts, but perception often goes unnoticed by the mind as our brains constantly, but without conscious awareness, adjust to the random experience of sensory images.

Palmer would include this random form of perception within an appropriate study of the consciousness of fictional minds. Housekeeping is just that - a series of impressions and images with which Ruth is absorbed and by which she struggles not to

http://www.jstor.org/stable/27563748 (accessed August 2, 2012). She ascribes Ames’ heightened perception to his impending death. As I am trying to argue, however, Ames’ heightened awareness is a result of Robinson’s value on the mind, not merely an effect of Ames’ age and awareness of his mortality. Clearly the much younger Ruth Stone also expresses a very heightened awareness, which is similar to if not even stronger than that of Ames.

Palmer, Fictional Minds, 53. Perhaps another example would be Ames’ reflection, “Clearly I must somehow contrive to think graciously about him [Jack], also, since he makes such a point of seeing right through me. I believe I have made some progress on that front through prayer, though there is clearly much more progress to be made.” Robinson, Gilead, 123.

Palmer, Fictional Minds, 5.

Damasio explains this in The Feeling of What Happens, 21.
be overwhelmed. In a sense, Ruth acknowledges this herself near the end of

*Housekeeping*: “I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses while that I have merely imagined.” The entirety of the novel is an amazing expression of the mind’s experience, so it is challenging to capture in a single passage. Palmer acknowledges this challenge of delineating expressions of consciousness in fiction apart from inner speech: “It is difficult in a number of cases to separate out presentations of consciousness from descriptions of action.” It’s the entirety of first-person description of others, of nature, of the ordinary throughout *Housekeeping* that captures the experience of the conscious.

The same is true for the first-person narration of Reverend John Ames in *Gilead*. Perception plays a part in even the most ordinary occurrences. Much has been said of Robinson’sbeautifully capturing the quotidian and Robinson herself admits to being fascinated with the ordinary:

> Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me. One Calvinist notion deeply implanted in me is that there are two sides to your encounter with the world. You don’t simply perceive something that is statically present, but in fact there is a visionary quality to all experience. It means something because it is addressed to you. . . .You can draw from perception the same way a mystic would draw from a vision.

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32 Among the many notations are Robinson’s interview at Georgetown University titled “The Resurrection of the Ordinary,” and Jennifer Holberg pointing out Robinson’s attention to the quotidian in her essay “‘The Courage to See It’: Toward an Understanding of Glory.”

33 Robinson, interview in *The Paris Review*. 

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Our perception has this “visionary quality,” so descriptions of the ordinary are, indeed, a reflection of characters’ minds, an essential component to their own processes of perception. Thus, Ames’s mind is conveyed as he looks out the window of his study: “I saw a bubble float past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst. So I looked down at the yard and there you were, you and your mother.”34 He attends to the beauty of the transient and connects this to his own transience in the life of his wife and son.

The impact of perception is not always directly recognized by our minds, so Palmer argues that a study of minds in fiction should also include the “report of such states of mind as emotions, sensations, dispositions, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motives, and reasons for action.”35 Ames’s narrative does accomplish this expression of mindfulness. In a scene that occurs in both Gilead and Home, Jack asks Ames for advice on a theological topic that turns into one of the more heated (at least, heated for Robinson’s characters) conversations in both novels:

I was sitting there listening to old Boughton ramble along (he uses the expression himself) about a trip he and his wife made once to Minneapolis, when Jack broke in and said to me, “So, Reverend, I would like to hear your views on the doctrine of predestination.” Now, that is probably my least favorite

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34 Robinson, Gilead, 9. Laura Tanner accounts for Ames’ attention to details in his physical world, to treating them as sacramental is a result of his awareness of his impending death. “Insofar as the knowledge of his impending mortality shapes the ‘window of mind’ through which Ames perceives, he ‘attends’ to the images he processes with an unusual self consciousness linked – at least in part – to his anticipation of embodied absence.” “Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilyne Robinson’s Gilead,” 236.

Again, I would argue that although this may account for his attention to detail as a fictional character in a story, ultimately such attention derives from Robinson’s own fascination with the ordinary as sacramental; each of her narrators pays attention to such detail, even those who are not confronting the inevitability of death.

topic of conversation in the entire world. I have spent a great part of my life hearing that doctrine talked up and down, and no one’s understanding ever advanced one iota. I’ve seen grown men, God-fearing men, come to blows over that doctrine. The first thought that came to my mind was, Of course he would bring up predestination!

So I said, “That’s a complicated issue.”

Taking into account some of the other areas Palmer believes should be included in a study of fictional minds, a cursory examination of Ames’s narration reveals that he expresses emotion (complaisance – “ramble along,” followed by exasperation – “Of course he would bring up predestination”), a disposition to listen rather than force his opinion on others, a belief that Jack’s purpose is to annoy him, an attitude of disliking talk about predestination or any topic that tends to be divisive, and a motive of trying to avoid giving an answer that could be awkward or painful. The mind expressed in Home’s version is different:

Boughton said, “Yes, that’s very interesting.” Then fell back on his experience of Minneapolis, his closest equivalent to foreign travel. “Mother and I went up to the Twin Cities from time to time, and we saw Lutheran churches everywhere. Just everywhere. A few German Reformed, but the Lutherans outnumber them twenty to one, I believe. That’s an estimate. Minneapolis is a very large city. There may be Presbyterians in areas we didn’t visit.”

Jack said, rather abruptly, “Reverend Ames, I’d like to know your views on the doctrine of predestination. I mean, you mentioned the accident of birth.”

Ames said, “That’s a difficult question. It’s a complicated issue. I’ve struggled with it myself.”

Here the emotion conveyed is more that of impatience with Boughton’s rambling, the sensation that Jack’s question asked “rather abruptly” is, albeit rude, weighing heavily

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36 Robinson, Gilead, 150.

on his mind, the intention to portray Ames’s response in a sympathetic fashion by including his disclaimer that he’s struggled with it himself.  

Although Ames’s version of the conversation does include some inner-speech (he indirectly responds to the possible criticism of his use of the word “ramble,” and he admits to his first thought in response to Jack’s question), much more than what is self-consciously expressed reveals the characters’ minds. Robinson does capture the full range of conscious experience. It is also captured through her narrator’s accounts of the ordinary conversations and the details that compose daily interactions and observations. As Ames reflects in one entry, “When things are taking their ordinary course, it is hard to remember what matters. There are so many things you would never think to tell anyone. And I believe they may be the things that mean most to you. . . .”

**Giving a Character His Voice**

While expressions of the mind should include more than just the words into which we can put our thoughts, our speech does come *from* our minds. The voice through which we express ourselves is another function of mind. Robinson remarks on this in *Conversations with Contemporary American Writers*: “I became interested in the enormous amount of information that we really do have stored away that, in the normal course of your life, you have no access to. However, when you find that you have a

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38 The differences in the accounts of the answer Ames gives, when both have been read, also convey the experience of mind that memories are not always entirely accurate and we do not recall events exactly as they occurred.

sufficient language for experience in your mind, you can say something about it.”

First person point of view foregrounds consciousness, but it also presents the mind of a character through his/her voice.

An author’s use of first person allows him to avoid the limitations presented by an omniscient narrator like separation from the characters and a greater reliance on his own (rather than on any character’s) voice. Friedman explains, “Although an omniscient author may have a predilection for scene and consequently may allow his people to speak and act for themselves, his predominant tendency is to describe and explain them to the reader in his own voice.” Marilynne Robinson wants to avoid using her own voice, preferring to have her characters speak for themselves. She briefly explains her philosophy in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*: “For me, at least, writing consists very largely of exploring intuition. A character is really the sense of a character, embodied, attired, and given voice as he or she seems to require.”

Crediting characters with their own voice, even seeking to *find* the voices of her characters as an author, virtually precludes any possibility of Robinson employing an 

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40 “It’s only when language is pushed very hard in the direction of being adequate to experience that you get something.” Marilynne Robinson, “Marilynne Robinson,” interview with Sanford Pinsker in *Conversations with Contemporary American Writers* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), 125.

41 Norman Friedman, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1975), 148. Previously he had explained, “If artistic ‘truth’ is a matter of compelling rendition, of creating the illusion of reality, then an author speaking in his own person about the lives and fortunes of others is placing an extra obstacle between his illusion and the reader by virtue of his very presence. In order to remove this obstacle, the author may choose to limit the functions of his own personal voice in one way or another” (37). This is precisely what Robinson attempts to accomplish in her fiction. As I address later in this section, she does not entirely succeed with *Gilead*.

42 As already noted, even in *Home* the narrative voice is closely associated with Glory Boughton.

omniscient narrator. Ruth’s first-person narrative voice is sensitive, almost perpetually curious, tending to observe the details of existence with wonder rather than with strong emotion. Home’s proximal narrator, Glory Boughton is very different. As a single, middle-aged, former English teacher, she is adept with language and has an earnest, practical, somewhat melancholy voice. Robinson’s underlying assumption that characters can require a certain voice comes out of the value she places on the beauty of individuality, and it accounts for the narrative techniques she employs. She aims to honor the minds of her characters. Yet Robinson is not entirely successful in her endeavor to give characters their own voice.

Those who have read Robinson’s corpus find in the elderly Reverend John Ames of Gilead a very familiar speaker: soft-spoken, intellectual, conversational, and fascinated with the ordinary wonders of the world. Compare, for example, the following passages. In Gilead, Ames reflects:

The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does. Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on this point. It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence.44

While Robinson herself, in her interview with Sarah Fay in The Paris Review, shares:

[Jonathan Edwards] uses the metaphor of the reflected light of the moon, which we see as continuous light. Yet it is not intrinsic; it is continuously renewed as light. . . .The reality we inhabit and treat like an old shoe is amazingly arbitrary. I’m not terribly persuaded by the word supernatural. I don’t like the idea of the world as an encapsulated reality with intrusions made upon it selectively. The reality that we experience is part of the whole fabric of reality. To pretend that

44 Robinson, Gilead, 119.
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.\textsuperscript{45}

In the same interview, Robinson also acknowledges that while she was in college, she “became interested in the way that American writers used metaphoric language, starting with Emerson. . . .”\textsuperscript{46}

Ames’s appreciation of the astronomical, his connection of it to human existence, and his speculation on metaphors are all more than just an author allowing the ideas she has encountered to influence her writing. They are virtually exact expressions of those same ideas, in syntax and language similar to that which Robinson herself uses. Consider again, Robinson’s and Ames’s mutual admiration of the atheist philosopher Feuerbach.

Ames: “Feuerbach is a famous atheist, but he is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world.”\textsuperscript{47}

Robinson: “If I were not myself a religious person, but wished to make an account of religion, I believe I would tend toward the Feuerbachian view that religion is a human projection of humanity’s conceptions of beauty, goodness, power, and other valued things. . . .”\textsuperscript{48}

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\textsuperscript{45} Robinson interview in \textit{The Paris Review}.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 186.

\textsuperscript{47} Ames frequently refers to having read Feuerbach after being introduced to him by his brother. Robinson, \textit{Gilead}, 24.

\textsuperscript{48} Robinson, \textit{Absence of Mind}, 127.
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It is not merely that Ames’s view is similar to that of Robinson’s, but that they phrase their admiration in similar terms, employing conditions before praise in sentences composed in a series of clauses of parallel length.49

Examples of Ames’s likeness to Robinson abound. Compare his frequent references to Protestant hymns throughout *Gilead* to Robinson’s observation in *When I Was A Child I Read Books* that old hymns move her deeply.50 Or take Ames’s mirroring of Robinson’s view of Biblical injunctions to care for the poor and oppressed, which is addressed in Chapter One and in a number of her essays51: “I have always worried that when I say the insulted or the downtrodden are within the providence of God, it will be taken by some people to mean that it is not a grave thing, an evil thing, to insult or oppress. The whole teaching of the Bible is explicitly contrary to that idea.”52

Indeed, Robinson admits that John Ames precipitated all kinds of things she had pursued out of her own curiosity.53 Among their shared influences and interests are a high value placed on history and tradition, awe in the presence of creation, loneliness, Congregationalist theology, and extensive libraries. Although Ames, because of his age

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49 Granted, Ames relies on joining independent clauses while Robinson’s own sentence is more complex.

50 “I have reached the point in my life when I can see what has mattered. . . . But some of them I could never have anticipated. The importance to me of elderly and old American hymns is certainly one example. They can move me so deeply that I have difficulty even speaking about them.” Robinson, *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, 125.


53 Robinson, “The Resurrection of the Ordinary.”
and situation, is more prone to be aware of death and have it in his mind than is his author, his awareness of it also mirrors her own view.

Expression of mindfulness in fiction is not a simple project. The influence of an author’s mind, her ideas and values, will likely be present to some extent in the minds and lives of the characters she creates. Robinson’s own experiences of solitude and of growing up in the American Northwest are evident in Housekeeping. Her appreciation of hymns, literature, creation, and theology are conveyed in Home. Yet in Gilead, the similarities of mind between author and character parallel each other throughout. It is not merely the ideas but also the voices − syntax and vocabulary − of the narrator and the author that converge, it is their minds. At times, Ames seems like Robinson’s fictional mouthpiece.

Through Ames’s narration, Robinson successfully centers on and captures the experience of the mind. Singularity of character voice, however, is not entirely achieved. In Gilead the engagement of the reader with another mind is, in some ways,

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54 This is the premise of Laura Tanner’s essay “‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilyne Robinson’s Gilead.”

55 “When I do think about death, the idea that life will be going on without me makes me melancholy. There’s so much to miss: history and architecture! But it won’t miss me.” Robinson, interview in The Paris Review. Compare with Ames’ comments: “It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything. . . I want your dear perishable self to live long and to love this poor perishable world, which I somehow cannot imagine not missing bitterly.” Robinson, Gilead, 3, 53.

56 In How Fiction Works, James Wood explains that third-person, free indirect style can highlight a problem in narration: “[d]o the words these characters use seem like they might use, or do they sound more like the author’s?” Oddly, in Robinson’s case, her novel in first-person − Gilead − sounds much more like the author than the third-person Home. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 26. Some of this is because Home contains much more dialogue between characters and because it is generally less abstract (philosophically or theologically) than Gilead. Take for example, another musing on the significance of human life in the world from Glory as she considers what it means to come home: “How oddly holiness situated itself among the things of the world, how endlessly creation wrenched and strained under the burden of its own significance.” James Wood, How Fiction Works, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 102.
more complicated than in *Housekeeping* or *Home* because he is experiencing the
author’s intent to give voice to her character while frequently blending it with her own.

**Projecting out of the Solitary Self in *Housekeeping***

Experience is always subjective. Consider again Robinson’s case that we create
the universe as we perceive it, which is always subject to our abilities and limitations. Recognition of one’s own mind, the autonomy and privacy of it, can be both
empowering and isolating. In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson notes that with regard to the
mind, the words ‘solitude’ and ‘individual’ are crucial, “the unvarying condition of the
mind, no matter the web of culture and language by which it is enabled, sustained, and
limited.” The “self” is the “solitary, perceiving, and interpreting locus of anything that
can be called experience.” This solitary experience of mind is not, for Robinson,
necessarily a negative concept. But it does have the effect of hiding others’ souls from
us and leading us, in our curiosity and desire for connection, to guess at what they may
think or feel.

Neither Ruth Stone, John Ames, nor the proximal Glory Boughton can resist that
same urge to guess at, or even more brashly to assume, what is inside another’s mind.
Damasio accounts for this tendency toward conjecture. He explains that the idea of self-
awareness / personhood comes from the brain’s creation of a conceptual representation

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of the physical body within the brain. Because we can be aware of our own conceptual representations of ourselves, we assume the same is true of others:

These body representations have another major implication: after allowing us to represent our own actions and emotional states, actual or simulated, they allow us to simulate the equivalent states of others. And because we have established a prior connection between our own body states and their significance, we can subsequently attribute the same significance to the states of others that we come to simulate. The body in mind helps us construct our selves and then allows us to understand others, which is nothing short of astounding.\(^5^9\)

In reality, we can only hypothesize about the workings of another mind. But Robinson captures our tendency not only to believe that others’ minds work in ways similar to our own but also to describe them authoritatively. Operating out of this assumption is an expression of mind.

Ruth does just this in *Housekeeping*. Though the novel is written in first person, we are given descriptions of the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of Ruth’s grandfather, grandmother, aunt and sister as she presumes to speak for them. She guesses at and, at times, asserts she knows what is in others’ minds, including their motivations and responses to situations. At the beginning of the novel, she describes her grandmother’s reaction to her daughters after her husband’s death: “Never since then had she been so aware of the smell of their hair, their softness, breathiness, abruptness. It filled her with a strange elation.”\(^6^0\) Because Ruth is the narrator and her description is told with such sensitivity, the reader takes her at her word when, in actuality, she has no

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\(^{59}\) Damasio and Damasio, “Minding the Body,” 22.

\(^{60}\) Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 11.
way of knowing what her grandmother was aware or what brought her elation before Ruth was even born.

For those with whom Ruth interacts daily – namely her sister Lucille and her Aunt Sylvie – her narration suggests greater reliability and a strong bond resulting from shared (and rather extraordinary) experiences. As Ruth and Lucille grow into adolescence, Ruth observes, “I found, as Lucille changed, advantage in conforming my attitudes to hers. She was of the common persuasion. Time that had not come yet – an anomaly in itself – had the fiercest reality for her. . . .Lucille saw in everything its potential for invidious change.” Whether Lucille’s reality was made of an awareness of the future or whether something’s potential for change was at the forefront of her mind would really only be for her to say. But her decisions and actions suggest to her close companion Ruth that these are the case.

We are indeed limited by our own “lonely” experience of mind, but we can, and continually do, attempt to overcome this by connecting with others’ minds. Ruth illustrates this mindful tendency in *Housekeeping*. The effect of her presumptuous first-person narration is an increased centrality on the importance of the mind. We cannot know for certain whether Ruth’s claims are accurate, but they create an overall impression. The reader not only experiences the actual working of the mind as Ruth narrates but is also reminded frequently of the significant role the mind plays in each human life.

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61 Ibid., 93.


**Perception in *Gilead***

*Housekeeping, Gilead, and Home* incarnate the mindfulness of characters within the novels and engage the reader’s own mind in response. The first-person narration of *Gilead* differs greatly from that of *Housekeeping* in terms of what it allows the reader to know, and to assume the narrator knows, as the novel progresses. In telling her story retrospectively, Ruth already knows (on some level) everything she describes. And the reader experiences through Ruth the intense mystery and strange beauty of the workings of her consciousness. But the experience is different for the reader of *Gilead* or *Home*. While the reader can access the mind of Ames and Glory, her engagement of both is more filtered. She perceives and knows without entirely taking on the *persona* of either character.

The contemporaneous events in *Gilead* and *Home* also provide a different, mindful response from the reader of both works, who comes to the second novel having already been exposed to many of the events and thoughts of one of the narrators. This highlights the power of perception and understanding in the mind of the reader. For example, *Gilead* is not simply about what Ames perceives or hopes to pass on to his son, but what *we perceive* of Ames (that perhaps he does not perceive himself) and how we respond. Ames is jealous of Jack for much of *Gilead*, worrying that this reprobate will take his place as Lila’s husband and Robby’s father after his death. He struggles with unresolved issues of fatherhood, which are interconnected to his relationship with Jack.
The reader who has perchance read *Home* before *Gilead*\(^{62}\) knows for herself that Ames has nothing about which to be jealous. But *any* perceptive reader may question whether such jealousy is indeed warranted. It is Ames’s own objectivity and self-reflection as a first person narrator that allows us to entertain that question. Even for Ames, understanding changes his perception of Jack when Jack explains his past and his relationship with his common-law wife Della. After learning this, Ames can note: “. . . standing there, I wished there were grounds for my old dread. That amazed me. I felt as if I’d have bequeathed him wife and child if I could to supply the loss of his own.”\(^{63}\) At the end of the novel, Ames’s perception and the reader’s merge, both coming to believe that Jack *is* a good man.\(^{64}\)

**Conclusion**

Robinson considers our minds central to our experience of the universe, and she observes that we often use our minds to order that world:

We have as a function of our minds the idea of order and we have as the function of our natures the capacity to create an order that is always highly personal, highly culturally specific, specific to our period and our sense of reality. We’re like people acting in a dream, in a sense; we have an enormously strong sense of what coheres, of what is logical, but seen from an easily imaginable “outside,” these things are perfectly arbitrary. . . Art is interest in the

\(^{62}\) Although *Home* came after *Gilead*, this is a possibility and was actually my experience. I recall noting, as I read *Gilead*, what seemed like unnecessary hostility and jealousy on Ames’ part toward Jack because of the sympathy for Jack I had from reading *Home*. This was my perception based on what I already had encountered and what I *knew* from the other novel.

\(^{63}\) Robinson, *Gilead*, 233.

\(^{64}\) At the end of *Home*, Jack tells Glory that he told Ames “almost everything, and when I was done, he said ‘You are a good man.’ Imagine that.” Glory affirms Ames’ (and the reader’s judgment), “Well, I could have told you you are a good man. I’ve said it in so many words, surely.” Robinson, *Home*, 308.
function of creating order because it feels it has discovered an order that inheres in the world. . . .

In her own artistic craft, Robinson arranges culture, memory, belief, experience and response into a narrative, employing first-person to create order in a way that simulates the experience of a mind. Consciousness, voice, loneliness, perception – aspects of mindfulness noted by Robinson in her own nonfiction – find expression in her fiction, not merely by being talked about by her characters but through the narrative techniques she employs. She captures the unique qualities contained in the interplay of body and mind that are important aspects of each individual existence, of each soul, engaging our own minds and thereby effectively conveying the mind’s importance.

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CHAPTER THREE

FUNCTIONS OF MIND: MEMORY, MYSTERY, AND MERCY

Presence is a great mystery, and presence in absence...a great reality for all of us in the course of ordinary life...community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly.  
~Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was A Child I Read Books*

In her 2008 interview with Marilynne Robinson in *The Paris Review*, Sarah Fay comments, “Her novels could also be described as celebrations of the human—the characters that inhabit them are indelible creations.” And indeed, the humanist values arising from Robinson’s view of the mind stated more explicitly in her nonfiction are expressed implicitly on page after page of her fiction. In a discussion with Paul Elie at Georgetown University, Robinson acknowledges that the power of fiction comes from its capacity to incarnate, more than nonfiction can, meaning and significance for a reader. Robinson does have a profound sense of her characters, which impacts how she represents their existence.

Chapter Two addressed how the significance of mindfulness was expressed through each novel’s point of view. As we have seen, perception is an important aspect of this expression of mind. Robinson’s fiction does not, however, just simulate the mind’s experience but also helps us perceive the value of the mind and allows that perception to influence our own perception of the world and of others.

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2 Fay, interview in *The Paris Review*.

3 Robinson, “The Resurrection of the Ordinary.”
While point of view matters for how we perceive a story, it is even more important for how we see others in our own lives. Sympathy generated from perception is also incorporated into Robinson’s fiction. Jennifer Holberg, in her article “‘The Courage to See It’: Toward an Understanding of Glory,” sees in Robinson’s writing an involvement in the “fulsome cultivation of narrative sympathy, in helping the reader develop the ability to see the world through others’ eyes. . .Robinson [seems to believe] that a profounder sense of neighbor comes concomitant with novelistic allegiance to representing the full spectrum of human existence.”4 In this chapter, I would like to explore how Robinson cultivates this narrative sympathy in *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Home* by incarnating the meaning and significance of three important functions of the mind: memory, mystery, and mercy.

**Memory**

Memories are a very real part of perception. They can sometimes be a more powerful force for understanding the world than an actual occurrence because they stay in the mind. Robinson recognizes this important function memory provides for the mind, and she acknowledges the influence it has on her own thinking and writing in an interview with Sanford Pinsker: “I think there is a legitimacy to the operations of the mind and that, in significant ways, there is a greater reality in what we remember than in what we experience. . . .it is the inventory of meaning. . . .an equally legitimate

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aspect of experience along with, say, reaching out and touching something.”

We remember as we find meaning in events; those that have the greatest impact on us, for better or worse, staying most vividly in our minds. An exploration of our memories can reveal what has importance for us.

We may experience an event or interact with a person once, but our minds continue to recreate, analyze, and reflect on that experience. The memory is more significant to the mind than the event or interaction itself. Much of how we operate is reliant on images, impressions, or previously taken courses of action that are recalled to our minds again and again. More than twenty years after her interview with Pinsker, Robinson similarly noted to Regan Good her interest in “the persistence of things that perish. The fact that they reconstitute themselves, that they yield things in the mind, in the consciousness, and that the being of anything of significance cannot be said to have an end. . . .there’s a sort of supersaturated quality to experience, that it doesn’t happen once and then cease.”

The significance of memory as a reflection of what has meaning is especially evident in Housekeeping while the desire to process and play a part in the formation of memories is a central component of Gilead.

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5 Robinson, in Conversations with Contemporary American Writers, 120.

Memory: Haunted Housekeeping

Robinson’s first novel, *Housekeeping*, is loaded with memories. Although most of what could be termed the “action” of *Housekeeping* takes place during a year or two of Ruth’s adolescence, the reader finally learns that the perspective must be one of looking back and reflecting from a distance greater than first expected — Ruth’s middle- or late-adulthood — because she is writing later in life. In this way, its voice is reminiscent of Harper Lee’s Scout in *To Kill A Mockingbird* in that it takes on the layers of narration, perspective, and vocabulary of a much more mature narrator reconstructing the events of youth. Like Scout, Ruth has had time to sort through and order important events to present to her audience. Robinson, however, also recognizes in the composition of *Housekeeping* itself the powerful influence of memory on the mind.

The narrator Ruth recalls how she and her sister Lucille did not know their father; were left by their mother on their grandmother’s doorstep before she drove off a cliff to her death; were then raised by their quietly domestic grandmother until she was replaced, briefly after her death, by two spinster great-aunts; and finally were cared for by their eccentric aunt Sylvie Fisher. The specters of these family members are ever present with Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie. Death is always a concept with which the mind struggles to come to terms; strange, inexplicable and sudden deaths all the more. Ruth features the power of memory by beginning her account with a commentary on the collective effect of her grandfather’s tragic death in a train accident on his wife and

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Ruth imagines her sister Lucille as a woman with daughters, suggesting that she too has reached middle-aged womanhood.
daughters. How Edmund Foster’s family chooses to interact with each other moving forward is a result of their father’s death and its impact on their souls:

The event had troubled the very medium of their lives. Time and air and sunlight bore wave and wave of shock, until all the shock was spent, and time and space and light grew still again and nothing seemed to tremble, and nothing seemed to lean. The disaster had fallen out of sight, like the train itself, and if the calm that followed it was not greater than the calm that came before it, it had seemed so.⁸

They cannot forget, so they must each come to terms with the memories of their father’s sudden disappearance from their lives.

Sylvie’s response is transience. Her father’s death impressed on her adolescent mind the transient nature of her physical existence. As an adult, Aunt Sylvie rides the rails and lives vagrantly until she returns to Fingerbone to care for her nieces, where she forgets notes to Ruth’s and Lucille’s school, buys beautiful but impractical items, and keeps house haphazardly. Occasionally, she even loses touch with people around her as her mind wanders. She “inhabit[s] a millennial present.”⁹ The past and the present so absorb Sylvie that she has little room in her mind for the future. She chooses to embrace transience and take in each moment, each person as fully in the present as she can:

“[Sylvie] did not wish to remember me [Ruth]. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion – a familiar shape, a familiar face, a familiar silence. . . .But if she lost me, I


⁹ Ibid., 94.
would become extraordinary by my vanishing.”

Memories profoundly affect Sylvie’s choices, her attentiveness to her environment, and her relationships with her nieces.

Ruth and her sister Lucille are also forced to deal with memories of a similarly significant moment when their own mother dies in a way that mirrors her father’s, Edmund Foster’s, death: entrapment in a moving vehicle (this time a borrowed car) falling into the Fingerbone Lake. Ruth recalls all the details of the last drive with her mother to her grandmother’s house immediately preceding her mother’s accident. Her memory transforms the drive into a moment of wonder instead of grief, something she much later recognizes changed her indelibly: “It seemed to me that in all this there was the hush and solemnity of incipient transfiguration. Perhaps memory is the seat not only of prophecy but of miracle as well.”

As with Sylvie, the death of her parent has a powerful impact on Ruth’s perception of her world and her choices in interacting with it.

Like their aunts and grandmother, Ruth and Lucille must also choose how they will remember. In Ruth’s case, one example is the different forms the reality of her mother’s personality and motivations take on her and Lucille:

Lucille’s mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow...who was killed in an accident. My mother presided over a life so strictly simple and circumscribed that it could not have made any significant demands on her attention. She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone – she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned.

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10 Ibid., 195.
11 Ibid., 196.
12 Ibid., 110.
Minds can work in powerful ways in response to memories, so perception is key. While not always entirely accurate in terms of what may, in actual fact, have occurred (consider the example of Ames’s and Jack’s conversation about predestination from Chapter Two), memories become our reality of past events. We can always perceive things differently and are more than able to persuade ourselves of things that are not necessarily true.

The truth of Helen Foster Stone’s personality is not one that can be empirically verified. In Housekeeping the reader is prone to sympathize with the narrator’s interpretation over Lucille’s as Ruth remembers her mother because her explanation seemingly best accounts for everything she shares about her mother. But here, again, perception is central to interpretation. Ruth is limited in her memories, and they tend to solidify over time. She only perceives what she has experienced with Lucille and what she is told or intuits. Thus Robinson captures the mind’s ability to influence our interpretation of our perceptions and to exercise control of how, and what, we remember.

Memories haunt the characters in Housekeeping. Ruth recognizes that part of their potency is that memories stay as impressions in the mind, but their vividness, especially with regards to people, fades over time. As much as memory affects our perception, we prefer the physical presence of those for whom we care the most. Ruth would have preferred that from her mother. As she struggles to remember her childhood interactions with her mother, she reflects, “But of course she was looking into a face I do not remember – no more like mine [in the present as Ruth writes] than Sylvie’s is
like hers. . . . Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it.”

Because of Sylvie’s role in their lives and the glaring absence of Helen, it is natural for Ruth to associate Sylvie with her mother. But she wants to remember her mother, and so she and Lucille ask Sylvie about their mother.

Sylvie, however, cannot provide a solid answer. Instead, she can only fall back on a series of impressions: “‘It’s hard to describe someone you know so well. She was very quiet. She played the piano. She collected stamps.’ Sylvie seemed to be reflecting. ‘I’ve never known anyone so fond of cats. She was always bringing them home.’”

Ruth considers this answer, while unfulfilling, to be indicative of the nature of memories, and she recognizes she would have the same challenge if asked to describe her own sister.

*Housekeeping* demonstrates the integral role memory plays in perception as Ruth not only chooses her memories but also recognizes their omnipresence. Consider, for example, the image Ruth describes of the bed and dresser that Edmund had painted with fanciful designs. As years passed, “each of these designs had been thought better of and painted out, but over years the white paint had absorbed them, floated them up

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13 Ibid., 52-3.

14 Ibid., 51.

15 “If someone had asked me about Lucille, I would remember her with her mass of soft, fine, tangly hair concealing ears that cupped a bit and grew painfully cold if she did not cover them. I would remember that her front teeth, the permanent ones, came in, first one and much later the other, immense and raggedly serrated, and that she was fastidious about washing her hands. I would remember that when irked she bit her lip, when shy she scratched her knee, that smelled dully clean. . . .” Ibid., 53.
just beneath the surface.”16 This is the power of memories; they linger beneath the surface of our cultivated mind, never forgotten and always just a little present.

Because of the tragedy in their lives, the characters in *Housekeeping* carry memories of loved ones with them. Though not physically present, they potently linger on in the minds of their family members:

> Every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming, habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long.17

Memories carry meaning with them. Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille live with the absence of their loved ones and the constant presence of these family members’ images, words, and gestures in their minds. The power of these memories is strong and significantly impacts the choices and relationships of each woman in *Housekeeping*.

**Memory: Gilead’s Legacies**

Memory is also a central motif in *Gilead*, even, in a sense, driving its narrative. *Gilead* is comprised of a series of letters composed by the elderly Reverend John Ames to his only son, seven-year old Robert. According to his own account, the purpose of these letters is Ames’s desire to speak to his son, to “leave you a reasonably candid testament to my better self.”18 Laura Tanner credits his writing of these letters to his impending death: “Ames. . .comes increasingly to experience a world he cannot fully

16 Ibid., 90.
17 Ibid., 194.
inhabit. The novel takes the form of a journal. . .that becomes both a narrative of
Ames’s inevitable movement toward absence and a collection of images and memories
that would resist such progress.”

Ames wants to linger on in the world. Creating memories is a way for Ames to capture such lingering, to maintain his
presence in his son’s life. June Hadden Hobbs similarly comments that “[Ames] can
come to grips with being gone, but not with forgetting or being forgotten. And so he
engages in an act of creation that echoes the mythic narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, in
which God creates the worlds with words.” Tanner and Hobbs attribute Ames’s
writing — both to recall and to leave a legacy — to his age and mortality. While these
may account for some of Ames’s motivation in writing, memory (and motivation) are
both found within the mind.

The experience of our senses in a moment, what Tanner calls the “textured
particular,” can solidify that moment in our mind. A song may trigger a memory of an
event or a smell may remind us of another place. In turn, when we remember a moment,
our mind recalls to our senses the sounds, sights, and smells from that moment. Small
moments and sensory experiences are both important to the act of remembering. This is
especially evident in Gilead. Tanner focuses on one particular memory Ames has of

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19 Tanner, “‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in
Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead,” 227; emphasis added.

20 June Hadden Hobbs, “Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne
Robinson’s Gilead,” Christianity & Literature 52, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 243,

21 Tanner, “‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in
Marilynne Robinson’s Gilead,” 230.
being fed bread by his own father after the burning of a local church. She explains that this highlights how details connecting sensory experience and emotional response can aid the mind in retaining the specificity and impressions of a moment:

What emerges from Ames’s repeated representation of memory is not merely an essence which represents the distillation of experience but an emotional truth which emerges in and through the textured specificity of embodied experience: Ames’s recollection of joy and sadness is immersed in the feel of rain, the sight of steam rising against the blackened church, the sound of women’s voices, and, most importantly, the touch of his father’s body on his own preserved in the transfer of a biscuit blackened by his father’s “scorched hand.” As Ames the narrator circles round and round his childhood memory, the emotional impact of the experience he recalls remains inextricable from his sensory apprehension of the moment. The image’s intelligibility can be traced not only to Ames’s ability to “comprehend” its symbolic meaning but to a different sort of comprehensiveness – the narrative’s gathering up of multiple strands of intercorporeal experience, its testimony to memory’s stubborn situatedness in the realm of the textured particular.  

*Gilead*’s compilation of memories draws Ames to consider again his relationship with his father (a pastor) and the stories told of his grandfather’s involvement in the abolitionist movement and the John Brown raids. Ames wants to be remembered by his young son, for his son to *know* his father, so he opens to Robby (and to us) his mind. Hobbs believes that as he delves into memory, Ames uses typologies to assist him in making sense of his memories and organizing them for Robby: “Ames uses both biblical and secular typologies to organize his memories into meaningful patterns. . .He does not lose the vivid details of his life, but, in fact, uses those details to

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22 Tanner, “‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead,*” 230.

23 “Typology is a tool for giving significance to memorialized human events by describing them in terms of sacred symbols. It is also a way to show that the most significant events of the past recur, that the day of miracles – or at least of transcendent moments – is not past.” Hadden Hobbs, “Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead,*” 245.
fulfill the potential of typological patterns and memorialize his life.”

As in *Housekeeping*, those who have gone before are not entirely absent from the narrator’s mind. “The novel is full of buried narratives resurrected – perhaps reluctantly – in Ames’s memory.”

As the novel progresses, Ames is forced to confront his memories of Jack Boughton and his fears that Jack’s presence in the life of Lila (his wife) and Robby after his death might replace their memories of him. But Hobbs refers to Ames’s “resurrecting” the stories of Jack Boughton, as “the reader witness[ing] a transformation of memory.” Through the process of grappling with his memories of Jack and of Jack’s reappearance in his world, Ames comes to terms with his discomfort at being asked to baptize and bless Jack as a child and is granted the opportunity to again bless – this time with sincerity – Jack as an adult. Rather than finding in Jack a replacement, Ames gains, in a way, another son (the surrogate role suggested by Jack’s Christian name John Ames Boughton), and another mind to remember him kindly.

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24 Hadden Hobbs gets the inspiration for studying typologies in Ames’ memorializing from Laura Tanner (229-33). Hobbs believes that “typology...is absolutely crucial to Ames’ act of memorialization, the conscious construction of memory for a social purpose. Ibid., 258.

25 Ibid., 247. He falls into “the long-established custom of fitting spiritual experience into a typological framework provides a way to merge his [Ames’] natural memories with the artificial...collective memory of his church [as a larger whole]. His individual memory is not lost in the collective memory; rather, the collective memory is fulfilled in the individual.” Ibid., 251.

26 Ibid., 248.

27 In a sense, Jack, who because of his own wife’s skin color, is intimately concerned with the Civil Rights movement, is the inheritor of Ames family legacy of involvement in abolition.
Mystery

As noted in the section on “Projecting Out of the Solitary Self” in Chapter Two, each of us can only truly know what occurs within our own minds. The mind of any other is to be honored, but at best is ultimately still a little known, mysterious entity. Others may try to give us entry into the mysteriousness of their minds. Sometimes such endeavors dispel the mystery; other times they compound it. The mystery of the mind and soul have been the subject of contemplation for centuries, but in Absence of Mind, Robinson observes that many disciplines now have “tended to forget the beauty and strangeness of the individual soul, that is, of the world as perceived in the course of a human life, of the mind as it exists in time. But the beauty and strangeness persist just the same.” Mystery is an inescapable part of human experience.

Robinson recognizes this mystery inherent in any other soul: “The characters that interest me are the ones that seem to pose questions in my own thinking. The minute that you start thinking about someone in the whole circumstance of his life to the extent that you can, he becomes mysterious, immediately.” She takes on the portrayal of this strange mysteriousness in Housekeeping’s Sylvie Fisher and Home’s Jack Boughton.

Mystery: Mystifying Sylvie in Housekeeping

Sylvie Fisher arrives in Fingerbone to care for the girls at the request of her own aunts after the death of her mother. But she is not a traditional domestic woman. This

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28 Robinson, Absence of Mind, 35.
29 Robinson, interview in The Paris Review.
confuses Ruth (for a while) but increasingly frustrates Lucille. Sylvie dresses not merely unfashionably but impractically, not outfitted for the weather. She collects tin cans and newspapers and prefers to leave the lights off in the house, allowing the natural darkness or light in through the windows. At one point, she walks to the edge of the train bridge over Fingerbone Lake, an action observed by and alarming to her nieces: “We were very upset, all the same, for reasons too numerous to mention. Clearly our aunt was not a stable person.” Sylvie is not at all explicable in standard terms; she is mysterious.

Robinson explains, however, that as far from normal as Sylvie seems in *Housekeeping*, mystery is an element of everyone’s experience. Others will be strange to us. This is not to say that strangeness is to be a goal, but rather that the awareness and choices of another’s mind, whether that be accepting and running with its own perceptions or adapting to the expectations of community, will always be a part of experience:

> Out of an absolute cloud of experience that we all store, that we all *are*, we understand how to present ourselves to one another recognizably. The result is socialization – how we learn to choose things out of the range of possible behaviors that are recognizable to other people as reassuring. . . .I think this is a healthy and sociable thing – I don’t see it darkly at all. . . .it’s the difference, I think between looking at someone with an intact surface and looking at the same consciousness with that surface lifted away.  

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30 “Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship’s cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude.” Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 99.

31 Ibid., 82.

Sylvie herself embodies this honor due to others, recognizing and respecting the personhood of both Lucille and Ruth, as different as they are. A wonderful aspect of her character is the sensitivity she shows to them. Ruth admits at one point, “I feared and suspected that Sylvie and I were of a kind, and waited for her to claim me, but she would not.”\(^{33}\) Sylvie will not make a claim on the personhood of Ruth. And she accepts Lucille’s choice to adapt her own behaviors in socially recognizable ways. Lucille presents an intact surface; Ruth presents more of an unvarnished consciousness. Through the narration we identify with Ruth, but Robinson would not have us judge Lucille’s healthy and sociable decision.

Ruth’s first-person narration in *Housekeeping* focalizes the importance of the mysterious nature of others. Having access to Sylvie’s mind would steal much of what makes her eccentric. She must be present as she is written, foiled against Lucille and Ruth. She is the essential “other” who incarnates the mystery that is at the center of every mind but our own.

**Mystery: Jack Boughton, Man of Sorrow**

In a similar way, Jack Boughton incarnates mystery in *Home*. Thus, the thoughts and emotions to which the reader primarily has access in *Home* must be another’s. Robinson had previously, brilliantly achieved the feat of captivating readers by telling the story from the perspective of an elderly pastor in *Gilead*, thereby excluding Reverend Boughton as a good option for narrator and leaving his children Glory and

Jack as primary contenders for the role. Both Glory and her prodigal brother could be considered the protagonist of the novel. Both struggle with returning to their father’s home. Both garner the sympathy of the reader. But only Glory works as a proximal narrator.

When asked if Robinson ever considered narrating *Home* from Jack’s point of view, she explained, “Jack is thinking all the time—thinking too much—but I would lose Jack if I tried to get too close to him as a narrator. He’s alienated in a complicated way. Other people don’t find him comprehensible and he doesn’t find them comprehensible.” Mystery is an essential component of Jack. And his mystery comes forth best through the third-person narration. Not only would a story from his point of view lose some of its mystery, it is entirely possible it would also lose some of the sympathy for Jack engendered through Glory’s proximal narration.

As Robinson points out, a recognition of beauty or mystery requires a small measure of distance from the object or person. “You have to have a certain detachment in order to see beauty for yourself rather than something that has been put in quotation marks to be understood as ‘beauty.’” Robinson achieves this distance in *Home* through third-person narration; in *Gilead* through a narrator struggling with his feelings toward Jack.

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34 Who is to say we cannot have two protagonists?

35 Thanks to Jennifer Holberg for bringing to my attention this comment from Robinson’s interview with Sarah Fay in *The Paris Review*.

36 Robinson, interview in *The Paris Review*. 
Ames, too, with some detachment, evokes sympathy for Jack. “When I pray about all this, it is a sense of the sadness in him that keeps coming to my mind.”

Ames’s struggle to understand Jack leads him to reflect on the mystery that we all have for each other:

In every important way we are such secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. . . . We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have also fallen heir to the same customs, trade in the same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us.

Jack recognizes this same idea in his own way, admitting how he feels set apart from the world in Home, which makes him feel rather worthless. What he perhaps fails to realize is that he is not alone in this feeling. “I really am nothing. . . . Nothing with a body. I create a kind of displacement around myself as I pass through the world, which can fairly be called trouble. This is a mystery, I believe.”

Glory goes on to respond, “Don’t you think everybody feels that way sometimes, though?” Mystery is a characteristic of the mind, which through its placement and complexity, sets each of us apart. How we respond to this mystery is another function of our minds.

Mercy Honors the Soul

The strange mysteriousness of the mind present in each soul is essential, but often undervalued. We often disregard, criticize, or judge those who are different from

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37 Robinson, Gilead, 213.
38 Ibid., 197.
us, particularly those who seem weak or strange, like Sylvie or Jack. Within the Christian tradition, others are not merely weak but prone to sin. For Robinson, however, the mystery of the mind and the strangeness of the soul, even within a tradition that credits humankind with a fallen nature, merits a response that honors another through gentle treatment. Even God is mysterious to us, as Ames tries to explain in response to Jack’s question about predestination: “There are certain attributes our faith assigns to God: omniscience, omnipotence, justice, and grace. We human beings have such slight acquaintance with power and knowledge, so little conception of justice, and so slight a capacity for grace, that the workings of these great attributes together is a mystery we cannot hope to penetrate.”

As we think of others, we should consider their mystery and the image of God in them, rather than their sin. Robinson highlights Calvin’s instruction from *Institutes of Christian Religion* “that we remember not to consider men’s evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them.” The Christian tradition following Calvin both accounts for and demands the kindest response to the mind of others.

Robinson believes that recognizing the mystery in others should merit a reverent response. Her interpretation of personal holiness includes not so much a view of personal sanctity but an openness to each individual as set apart. We should take into

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40 Robinson, *Gilead*, 150.

account man’s sinfulness (the human situation) while still recognizing his unique existence and accounting for our own weaknesses. Robinson explains this in her article “Onward, Christian Liberals”:

What I might call personal holiness is, in fact, openness to the perception of the holy in existence itself and, above all, in one another. In other words, it is not my belief that personal holiness - sanctity, as the theologians call it - inheres in anyone in isolation or as a static quality. Acting with due reverence for the human situation, including the fact of one’s own life, if that were possible, would be saintly. Instead we all struggle constantly with our insufficiency. Every person has weaknesses and flaws. Accepting this about oneself is important to the project of extending mercy to others. Robinson reflects that “. . . wisdom, which is almost always another name for humility, lies in accepting one’s own inevitable share in human fallibility.”

This is a wise acceptance that Reverend Ames must come to in *Gilead*. In writing of Reverend Ames’s struggle to think kindly of Jack Boughton, Michael Vander Weele asserts that “if recognition of blessing and openness to transformation are prerequisites for human exchange, so too is recognition of shared flaw.” Ames comes to realize that what he shares with Jack is a love for a wife and child so powerful that

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the potential loss of it is debilitating. Only after recognizing his own flaws and weaknesses is Ames truly able to bless Jack.  

**Mercy Lived Out**

Mystery and faults come with the experience of humanity. In *The Paris Review* piece, Robinson comments, “To think that only faultless people are worthwhile seems like an incredible exclusion of almost everything of deep value in the human saga. Sometimes I can’t believe the narrowness that has been attributed to God in terms of what he would approve and disapprove.” In *Home*, she puts this theory to the test in her creation of Jack Boughton, creating a flawed man of whom many would likely disapprove, but writing of him with realism and sympathy. As he leaves his father’s home at the end of the novel, Glory watches Jack walk away with a poignant, evocative reflection:

> He was too thin and his clothes were weary, weary. There was nothing of youth about him, only the transient vigor of a man acting on a decision he refused to reconsider or regret. No, there might have been some remnant of the old aplomb. Who would bother to be kind to him? A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their face. Ah, Jack.

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45 “How could he [Jack] be there in the midst of it all with that sad and splendid treasure in his heart? — I also have a wife and child. . . . I told him it was an honor to bless him [Jack]. 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, *Gilead*, 237, 242.

46 Robinson, interview in *The Paris Review*.

47 She admits this in her interview with Paul Elie at Georgetown University, hypothesizing that if people love Jack Boughton then God does. Robinson, “The Resurrection of the Ordinary.”

Who would be kind to him indeed? Robinson’s language calls to mind for comparison with this weak alcoholic none other than the suffering savior and Lord of Christianity. Consider Jesus Christ’s parabolic commendation to his disciples: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Glory does much for her weak and wounded brother Jack, illustrating what should, for Robinson, always be the merciful response to mystery, suffering, and sin.

Robinson is well-known for centering her novels on the quotidian: housekeeping in Fingerbone; baseball and books in Gilead; cooking, gardening, and day-to-day family conversations in the Boughton home. Her focus is purposeful because it is within these daily occurrences that mercy is lived out. She comments that the “ordinary is of its nature incandescent, like the little acts that people carry out for others’ comfort – they are beautiful and sacramental.” Glory’s little, ordinary acts incarnate that sacred response to her brother.

Glory, like Ames and Reverend Boughton, struggles to forgive Jack Boughton. Yet all of them find success on some level, Glory perhaps most of all. She has always loved Jack, different from his family though he was. His behavior was not always explicable, but she yearned for the affection, attention, and presence of her big brother all the same. Her response to his strangeness is to forgive. “He was himself. . . .How resigned to Jack’s inaccessible strangeness she must be to forgive him something so

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49 Matthew 25:40 (NIV). Robinson highlights other passages from the same parable in Matthew 25 in her essay “Onward, Christian Liberals: Faith is Not About Piety or Personal Salvation, But About Helping Those in Need” (43).

50 Robinson, “The Resurrection of the Ordinary.”
grave, forgive him entirely and almost immediately. They all did that, and he had understood why they did, and he laughed, and it had frightened him. She thought, I will not forgive him for an hour or two.”

The reader immediately identifies with the struggle to forgive while cheering Glory on in her easy forgiveness. It is through the course of Glory’s and Jack’s day-to-day conversations and mundane interactions that she and Jack reconstruct their relationship into one of mutual appreciation and understanding.

Glory comes to understand enough to forgive Jack for leaving Gilead as well as for leaving her alone again. Jack understands the pain it will cause Glory. Late in the novel, Glory reflects to her brother how she perceives him: “Remember when you talked to me about your soul, about saving it? . . . And I said I liked it the way it is. . . I’ve thought about what I should have said to you then, and I haven’t changed my mind at all. That’s why it embarrassed me, because it would have been so presumptuous of me – I’m not even sure what it means.”

Glory accepts Jack as he is and shows mercy in that acceptance. For Robinson, this is the best response.

Robertson reminds readers of both her fiction and nonfiction that the Bible enjoins us to “honor” one another.

51 Robinson, Home, 249.

52 I would argue that for them both, their relationship is forged through the intention not to fall to old familiar patterns of communication and behavior.

53 Robinson, Home, 287.

54 Robertson is referring here to I Peter 2:17, which she alludes to more than once in her writing. In When I Was A Child I Read Books, she notes, “In the First Epistle of Peter we are told to honor everyone, and I have never been in a situation where I felt this instruction was inappropriate” (30). And in Gilead,
herself regarded Sylvie with sympathy, but no mercy, and no tolerance." Ames finds his heart can embrace the honoring of Jack after following his mind’s intention to do it for most of the novel, and Glory does so by caring for Jack and ultimately letting him go. In each case, Robinson incarnates her belief that the appropriate, the only response to human mystery and weakness is a merciful one.

**Mercy’s Source: Imagination**

In her essay “Family,” which preceded *Home* by ten years, Robinson proposes the following: “Imagine that someone failed and disgraced came back to his family, and they grieved with him, and took his sadness upon themselves, and sat down together to ponder the deep mysteries of human life. This is more human and beautiful, I propose, even if it yields no dulling of pain, no patching of injuries.” Robinson herself exercises her imagination in just that way in *Home*, beautifully incarnating the sharing together of sadness, the mutual pondering mystery, the forgiving of deep hurts, and the accepting of another’s strange soul.

Robinson sees the importance of imagination in her fiction: “I think fiction may be, whatever else, an exercise in the capacity for imaginative love, or sympathy, or identification.” And indeed, an important function of fiction is how it helps us develop the mindful approach we need for relating to others in our own spheres of existence.

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Reverend Ames points out that “The apostle says, ‘Outdo one another in showing honor,’ and also ‘Honor everyone’” (135).


56 Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 90.

Not only can we imaginatively come to care for Robinson’s characters, but we also see them exercise imagination with regards to each other. Ames assumes that his son will understand a situation that he describes when he says, “you can imagine, reading it in those circumstances gave it a great interest for me.” Ruth honors Lucille at the end of *Housekeeping* through imagining how she must remember her sister and aunt: “No one watching this woman smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger, or slip cellophane packets of oyster crackers into her handbag for the sea gulls, could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie.” Glory’s sacrifice to maintain her family home is, in part, to allow Jack to keep it in his mind, to imagine it as he always knew it, to imagine his own son visiting there.

It is just that ability of the mind to conjure up the unknown or the hypothetically possible, based on experience but not on actual occurrence, that plays such a key role in honoring others. Imagination itself is essential to dealing kindly with others. We can show mercy only to the extent that we are able to imagine others’ minds. The lack of imagination shown in holding to rigid categories and ideologies is damaging not only to individual relationships but also to communities and the human race:

When definitions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ begin to contract, there seems to be no limit to how narrow these definitions can become. As they shrink and narrow, they are increasingly inflamed, more dangerous and inhumane. They present themselves as movements toward truer and purer community, but, as I have said, they are the destruction of community. . . .I am convinced that the broadest

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58 Robinson, *Gilead*, 24, emphasis added.

possible exercise of imagination is the thing most conducive to human health, individual and global.\textsuperscript{60}

Fiction like \textit{Housekeeping}, \textit{Gilead}, and \textit{Home} helps us develop this imagination so we might apply it in our own lives.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Robinson believes “in the holiness of the human person and of humanity as a phenomenon,”\textsuperscript{61} which proceeds from her view of the mind. Each human life is a short-lived existence, at the center of which are memory and mystery. In her works, Robinson captures how our experiences compound, forging and re-forging connections in our minds in the form of memories. These memories reflect what has importance to us. Sometimes these memories come from painful circumstances, leading us to behave in ways others cannot understand. Sometimes our memories are a series of attempts to makes sense of others who are weak and strange. We may wish that our mindful remembrances did not hold such influence, but this is human experience.

Yet even in our fragility and confusion, we must recognize others’ humanity and react with kindness. In knowing that life is fraught with challenge and imperfection, we act believing that the state of existence should be different and seeking to bring restoration. Glory captures the essential sentiment: “In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human and vulnerable to kindnesses because there is the sense that things should be otherwise, and then the thought of what

\textsuperscript{60} Robinson, \textit{When I Was A Child I Read Books}, 26.

\textsuperscript{61} Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals: Faith is Not About Piety or Personal Salvation, But About Helping Those in Need,” 43.
is wanting and what alleviation would be, and how the soul could be put at ease, restored.\textsuperscript{62}

The best response to human weakness and mystery is compassion. The mind, that center of human perception, plays here a significant role as it makes the choice to judge or love, to criticize a flaw or to show mercy. Robinson advocates a “posture of grace, generosity, liberality” that she draws from John Calvin: “We ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves. When we turn aside from such contemplation, it is no wonder we become entangled in many errors.”\textsuperscript{63} It is contemplation, a function of mind, that can keep us from or send us into error. Robinson demonstrates the value she places on the mind by incarnating the meaning of memory, mystery, and mercy in her novels. And by so doing, she beautifully implies how a mindful life may be best lived.

\textsuperscript{62} Robinson, \textit{Home}, 282.

\textsuperscript{63} Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals: Faith is Not About Piety or Personal Salvation, But About Helping Those in Need,” 51.
CONCLUSION

We are that mysterious presence, the Observer, who can never wholly stand apart from the object of inquiry. . . . Some nostalgia has been devoted to the loss by us moderns of the conception of the universe that put humankind at its physical center, or at least did not overwhelm us so utterly with its power and scale. But the universe of the mathematicians, however important its departures may, over time, prove to be from an objectively existing universe, is unspeakably beautiful. . . . The universe that they manage to capture, however tentatively, out of the totality of phenomena is magnificent for the aura of implication that surrounds it, the tantalizing not-yet-knowable and the haunting never-to-be known.1

~Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was A Child I Read Books*

We are caught between approaches to understanding ourselves, our world, and our place within it. At times, modern science reduces explanations for human self-awareness, emotion, creativity, behavior, and spirituality to animal instincts or biological interactions. Yet scientific inquiry also reveals astounding phenomena and complexity, from the performance of the universe to the minute workings of the human brain. While the sciences are held in highest regard, often acting as the standard against which all claims must be measured, they do not necessarily need to be held in opposition to human endeavors to find meaning and create value in life.

Robinson writes at the center of these tensions, observing in *When I Was A Child I Read Books*:

[We have this] notion that science and religion are struggling for possession of a single piece of turf, and science holds the high ground and gets to choose the weapons. In fact there is no moment in which, no perspective from which, science as science can regard human life and say that there is a beautiful, terrible mystery in it all, a great pathos. Art, music, and religion all tell us that. . . . It is

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true because it takes account of the universal variable, human nature, which shapes everything it touches, science as surely and profoundly as anything else.\(^2\)

Robinson highly values science, but the sensitive expression of that universal variable, human nature, conveyed in her novels is what draws readers to her.

She herself tries to resist the secular / sacred dichotomy.\(^3\) She draws on her own interests and experiences and interweaves her theology into her novels. Yet although her theology holds a significant place in both her fiction and nonfiction, it is not the foundation of her worldview. Instead, the force underpinning her approach to science, to theology, to education, to history, or to writing is her view of the mind.

Robinson reveals her high valuation of the mind in *The Death of Adam*, *Absence of Mind*, and *When I Was A Child I Read Books*. She suggests that the mind, although challenging to define or place specifically in the human biological organism, exists because we can observe its impact on human experience. We *are* self-aware, and we *do* have the capacity for a myriad of occurrences that take place in the mind: observation, analysis, reflection, emotion, memory, existential crisis, and empathy. Her writing reveals an incredible generosity toward humanity, despite her antagonism toward certain parascientific writers or proponents of ideologies.

Because the mind holds a place of such import for Robinson, it finds expression in her fiction in a number of ways. She employs first person narration for *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, thereby putting the reader *into* the mind of Ruth and Ames respectively.

\(^2\) Ibid., 15.

\(^3\) Robinson made reference to her belief that that lines we try to draw between the sacred and secular are not nearly as obvious or as neat as we would often like them to be during her talk at the 2012 National Book Festival.
And although *Home* has a different narrator, the reader associates with the mindful experiences of Glory Boughton. Robinson captures the experience of the mind not only through her selection of narrators but also through foregrounding *how* they perceive the people and events around them, how they create meaning from these, and how those perceptions and meanings stay with us in our memories. And she demonstrates her value of the mind by intending to give her characters a voice, to “speak for themselves.”

Robinson’s mind-full fiction highlights the role our minds play in understanding and living within the reality that “we inhabit, we are part of...for which explanation is much too poor and small.” She writes of housekeeping, of aging, of ordinary items and occurrences, creating beauty from the quotidian and reviving a new appreciation for each detail of life. And she imbues her novels with her humanism, creating mysterious, weak characters for whom we come to care. Her novels help remind us of the fragility of humanity and of the important role imagination plays in our own minds for empathy and for showing mercy.

Although Robinson herself admits to not knowing why we need fiction, her novels demonstrate the powerful role fiction can play in developing our minds, in revealing our world in a different way so we have a new perception of reality, and perhaps most importantly, in enriching our imaginations. We can include Robinson in her own list of writers for whom “creeds fall away and consciousness has the character of revelation. [Who] identify sacred mystery with every individual experience, every

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5 Ibid., 7.
life, giving the word its largest sense. . .arriv[ing] at democracy as an ideal, and. . .accept[ing] the difficult obligation to honor others and oneself with something approaching due reverence.”

Any encounter with Robinson’s writing enlivens the mind and reminds us why education (forming minds) has an importance beyond economics, why science and religion can complement rather than oppose each other, why reality is miraculous, and why mercy is the best response to weakness. Education, science, religion, reality, and mercy all have value because they are a part of our experience and demonstrate an honor of that unique, unlikely creature: a human being.

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6 She includes in her list writers such as Whitman, Emerson, Melville, Dickinson, William James, and Wallace Stevens. Ibid., xiv.
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