Sentimentality and Grace: Marilynne Robinson and Nineteenth-Century Prodigal Son Narratives

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Abstract


Initially inspired by Sir Walter Scott, American writers have written historical novels that allow them to comment on the present by way of examining the past. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008), each set in the 1950s, continue the tradition started by James Fenimore Cooper and Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and further developed by writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Sedgwick and Stowe in particular concern themselves with matters significant to Robinson, especially the heritage of Calvinism in American life. In *A New-England Tale* (1822), Sedgwick grapples with America's Calvinist heritage and concludes that milder forms of Christianity like Quakerism or Methodism are more compatible with American values than her forbears' faith. Calvinist doctrines like predestination and total depravity prove substantial stumbling blocks to her characters, and they must abandon these harsh traditions in order to be both American and religious. Stowe, too, confronts predestination in *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), a novel that depicts the pain and anxiety caused by the impossibility of knowing whether a deceased loved one was part of the elect or damned for eternity.1

1 Though Sedgwick's *A New-England Tale* and Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* are the two nineteenth century texts that this essay studies in depth, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1869) is another example of a text by a woman that takes Calvinism to task. Like *The Minister's Wooing*, Phelps demonstrates that living with uncertainty regarding a deceased...
In Robinson's novels, the questions that preoccupy Calvinism's heirs have not changed. Jack Boughton asks John Ames if “some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition,” and at the end of *Home*, Glory and old Boughton plummet into a harrowing state of mourning when Jack leaves (*Gilead* 150). Their reaction stems from their inconsolable feeling of uncertainty; they do not know if they will see him again, they have doubts about his physical and mental well-being, and at least according to Boughton, he demonstrates no discernible signs that he has been summoned by God's irresistible grace. Glory and Boughton's grief is just as poignant as that of the characters in Stowe's novel who mourn for James Marvyn, a young man who was thought dead prior to demonstrating the signs of conversion.

Yet Robinson stays within the Calvinist fold, both in her fiction and otherwise, which is not true of her predecessors. The ways that these three writers portray the story of the prodigal son—Robinson's Jack Boughton, Stowe's Aaron Burr and James Marvyn, and Sedgwick's David Wilson—demonstrate fundamental differences in what they believe about human nature, justice, and God's grace. Influenced by eighteenth century ideologies regarding the moral sense of human beings, Sedgwick and Stowe use the prodigal son narrative to show that Calvinism is incompatible with Enlightenment-inflected theories of moral sentiments and humane reason. They show that the human uncertainty of divine election, a human being's inability to participate in his own salvation, and the irrelevance of one's feelings to moral conduct—all staples of traditional Calvinism as well as early Puritanism in America—lead to moral irresponsibility, depression, and mental or spiritual paralysis. Through the sentimental tradition that they helped to forge in Victorian America, Sedgwick and Stowe debunk Calvinism and demonstrate its harm to the human psyche as well as its detrimental effects on nation-building. Robinson, in contrast, re-envisions the prodigal son narrative without Sedgwick's and Stowe's sentimentality. In her portrayal of the parable, the sentimental novel's narrative logic and philosophical perspective are the unworthy rival of a full, humanistic Calvinism that is animated by the mystery of divine grace.

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2 Sedgwick joined the Unitarian church in 1821. Stowe's change in religious affiliation is more complicated because her husband was often employed by colleges from the Calvinist tradition, either Presbyterian or Congregational (Kimball 112). She started attending an Episcopal church in 1864.