Marilynne Robinson’s Merging of Medicine and Literature: Therapeutic Journaling as Balm in *Gilead*

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Abstract

In *Gilead*, writing proves to be a therapeutic process that brings its protagonist peace and a sense of well-being. John Ames is an avid writer and elderly preacher who is crafting a letter to his son in the form of an intimate journal. A close examination of Ames’s journal reveals the protagonist’s own emerging awareness that he is being changed by his writing. This essay considers how Ames's journal writing closely resembles the kinds of writing therapy adopted by medical practitioners. Robinson shows how her protagonist heals himself, in effect, through his private literary exertions, unburdening himself of his past and any further need to write. So eased, he can prepare himself for the world to come.

In the novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson's protagonist and narrator is an elderly preacher who confides that he has spent most of his life writing. Faced with his imminent death, Reverend John Ames is composing an intimate journal for his young son, and the contents of this journal, written over several months, comprise the text of the novel. What begins as a compiling of family history soon takes on aspects of the confessional as unresolved problems from the preacher’s past start to surface in his life. Ames’s journaling becomes the perfect vehicle for his own revelatory enlightenment since it allows contemplation of himself through his writing. The changes in Ames's writing as well as his growing cognition regarding his own past behaviors reveal a man in turmoil, writing of a war within himself and hoping to win self-forgiveness before his imminent death.

Writing proves to be a therapeutic and spiritually edifying process that brings Ames peace and a sense of wellbeing. I argue that a close examination of Ames's journal reveals his emerging awareness that his writing and thinking processes are changing. Initially, these alterations move from issues in the distant past to an intense focus on the present, and increasingly to the arrival of his adversary, Jack Boughton. In a telling moment early in the text, Ames deliberates on the unforeseen rhetorical transformations occurring in this text: “I don't write the way I do for the pulpit.... I do try to write the way I think.
But of course that changes as soon as I put it into words” (Gilead 28–9). These alterations reflect Ames's struggle to understand his own failings as well as his successful path to achieving forgiveness. In short, this paper will consider how Ames's journaling, much like the writing therapy adopted by the medical sciences, allows the preacher to move from a state of angst over his past wrongs and unfulfilled relationships to a place of contentment with himself and life. Furthermore, the act of writing permits Ames to leave behind a memoir for his son while letting go of his past and his need to write in preparation for the next world.

Alice Brand in Therapy in Writing identifies the early connections between writing and medicine crafted by the ancient Greeks. From the worship of Apollo—the Greek god of literature and the healing arts—to Aristotle’s use of the medical term katharsis in Poetics, in which he claims that viewing a tragedy provides the subject with a release of negative emotions much like the purgation of the human body of harmful fluids, the Greeks have found the written arts to be of medical importance to humans (7). Most significantly, this ancient concept of using language as a means for attaining emotional release and comfort is directly tied to today’s use of writing as a remedy for deeply seated emotional issues. Certainly the use of writing for individual catharsis and spiritual awakening can be noted in Augustine’s Confessions (397–398 AD), referenced by Ames, in which Augustine uses writing as a means of acknowledging his sins, professing his faith, affirming his self-revelations, and praising God. The art of confessing or the act of contrition, whether on paper or in church, became a practice for relieving the tortured soul, as the Christian subject sought absolution of sins and emotional healing.

The use of literature and writing for medical and therapeutic purposes has been practiced in America since the eighteenth century. Following the moral treatment trend developed in Europe, such physicians as Dr. Benjamin Rush and Dr. John Minson Galt 11 prescribed the reading of newspapers and fiction for their patients in mental institutions.1 Clinicians prescribed

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1 Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of America’s Founding Fathers and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, worked at Pennsylvania Hospital and introduced literature as an ancillary treatment for his patients suffering from mental disturbances. See Weimerkirch, “Benjamin Rush” 511. Rush advised reading novels and the poetry of William Cowper as a cure for melancholia. Dr. John Minson Galt 11 was superintendent of the Eastern Lunatic Asylum in Williamsburg, VA. Galt encouraged his patients to write and publish their own poems and articles (Weimerkirch 523). Reading materials provided for patients in nineteenth century American asylums included the Bible, fiction, and a variety of periodicals, newspapers, and other non-fiction texts. According to John Minson Galt 11, “[t]he staple of American asylum libraries consisted of history, biography, travels, reviews, and writers such as Sir Walter Scott,