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Grace in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and Georges Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest*

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ABSTRACT. Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2007), a meditative letter written by an aging minister, probes the need for forgiveness and grace. George Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1936) pictures the suffering and sacrifice of an unnamed young priest in his attempt to open his parishioner's heart to the love of God. Both novelists explore themes such as forgiveness, love, peace, faith, and grace. This paper first discusses the prevalent Christian themes in these novels, and the ways each novelist presents the saving and life-giving power of God's grace in healing and restoring human soul, and then compares their treatment of these issues. The Protestant Robinson's sensibility regarding these religious themes seems very similar to that of the Catholic Bernanos. Indeed, the American writer seems to be considerably influenced by her French predecessor.

There was a book many people read at that time, The Diary of a Country Priest. It was by a French writer, Bernanos. I felt a lot of sympathy for the fellow, [...] I remember reading the book all night by the radio till every station went off, and still reading when the daylight came [1].

Marilynne Robinson, a contemporary American writer, has published only four novels in a span of more than thirty years and her career is incandescent with Christian sensibility, spiritual wonder, moral wisdom, and understanding of God. Written in the form of a letter with "the qualities of a sermon, a meditation, a diary, and a journal" [2], Robinson's *Gilead* (2007) chronicles the life of an aging Congregationalist minister, John Ames, who is dying of angina pectoris. After a long life of ministry in a family to which preaching has been a second nature, he spends his last days writing a long letter to his son, intending to show him the ways to live a good life. There had been, in Ames's life, much loneliness, and much sorrow, over watching other men with a family of their own and longing for one of his own. Late in life he has been 'graced' with a family of his own, whom he loves and does not want to lose out to death. Moreover, Ames struggles over an older and deeper conflict within his conscience. Though a Congregationalist minister, he can hardly bring himself to forgive his prodigal godson, "for disgracing his name and the family of his friend, Robert Boughton, a Presbyterian minister" [3]. Later, the novel starts to record Ames' reaction to Jack's return after twenty years. Regarding his late marriage as an unexpected joy, Ames wants to save his wife and son from the potential harm of Jack Boughton, one "whose childhood was spent escaping from school"[3], and lifting small items of special importance to Ames such as his Greek Old Testament, Ames' reading glasses, and a little photograph. Other harmful things were done, but Ames' virtue prevented him from blaming Jack even in privacy of his thought. Stealing was not the only transgression, though. Earlier in his letter, Ames discloses a "pure meanness"—as it seems to him—of Jack's behavior. Still in college, Jack gets involved with a too young girl of a very desolate family, and the involvement produces a child, but young Boughton never made any provision for

the child and his mother and left them. After three years the baby dies of infection. All these brings great dishonor to Boughtons and Ames' name. Nevertheless, as a priest and someone highly aware of the value of humanity, God's gift of grace and difficulty of exchanging this gift, and of the beauty of forgiveness, Ames raises exceeding expectations of his mercy and virtue. *Gilead* seems to represent a thought that is of great importance to Robinson, that is, "the us-versus-them mentality is a terrible corruption of the whole culture," "the idea that you draw a line and say, the righteous people are on this side and the bad people are on the other side -- this is not graciousness" [4]. Initially, however, Ames warns his family against Jack, and it takes a long time for him to come to terms with his self and his namesake, whom old Boughton bestowed on him, to lighten the darkness of his friend's loneliness.

Ames' failing in filial relations is not just because of his distrust of Jack's behavior. As Ames records in his letter — that gradually turns into a diary of a preacher's struggling over his moral failures -- it is "covetise" that plagues his mind. How young Jack is, and how "damn old" Ames is, and how much Ames desires that his son had seen him in his youth and strength. He writes to his son that Jack is just about "your mother's age", expressing his anxiety about his oldness, and that Jack and Lila, Ames's wife, are the same age, and they together with Ames's son look a nice family. On the day Ames is preaching on the stories of "Hagar and Ishmael" and "Abraham and Isaac", suddenly Jack comes to the service, sitting next to Ames' family. Tellingly, during the whole service, Ames is preoccupied with the image of those three sitting there—instead of his sermon:

Then young Boughton came to the service. That was nothing I would have expected. You saw him and waved and patted the pew next to you, and he came down the aisle and sat with you. Your mother looked at him to say good morning, and then she did not look at him again. Not once. [1]

Once just before suppertime Young Boughton "came strolling by," as Ames records, and then they begin talking politics and baseball until Ames is "obliged" to invite Jack in for the supper. Ames feels that his wife and son suppose Jack to be a very wonderful man, and this feeling leads him to a very prejudiced description of young Boughton:

You and your mother still regard him as a fairly wonderful surprise, this John Ames Boughton with his quiet voice and his preacherly manner, which, by the way, he has done nothing to earn, or to deserve. To the best of my knowledge, at any rate. He had it even as a child, and I always found that disturbing. Maybe it's something he isn't conscious of, growing up the way he did. But it seems to me sometimes that there's an element of parody in it. [1]

Ames's jealousy does not even exclude Jack's way of saying grace: "Your mother asked him if he would like to say grace, and he did, with an elegant simplicity that seemed almost wasted on macaroni and cheese" [1].

Gilead's striking variation on the prodigal son parable is distinctly underlined when Jack asks Ames on the doctrine of predestination [3]. Both Ames and Boughton fail to give a satisfactory response to Jack's serious and pivotal inquiry. Eventually, Lila, who appears there, just for the earthly purpose of asking Ames and her son for supper, asserts all Jack wanted to know: "A person can change. Everybody can change" [1].

Perhaps there is "some special providence in [Jack's] turning up just when [Ames has] so many other things to deal with" [1]. Robinson maintains that we should regard every being that we encounter as someone sent by God, someone whom we shall honor [5]. This biblical teaching is what later Ames comes up with, when he ponders on one of his sermons on welcoming a stranger

because you might be welcoming “an angel unawares” [1]. Young Boughton acts as ‘God’s special providence’ for Ames, to let him evaluate his faith and mirror up his treatment of and love for his fellow beings, to measure him up in terms of God’s grace and unfailing love for His creation. He learns from his father’s teachings that someone’s transgressions are God’s benevolence in disguise, they act as a parable and deepen our understanding, so one should not take offence at “the thoughtlessness of any individual, when it is seen to be in the service of the mindfulness of the Lord” [1]. Thus Robinson dramatizes how Ames by means of praying, pondering on biblical teachings, and following Christian ethics – that involves conforming to Christ’s humility, hope, and love – comes to forgive and even to love his godson. Gradually he decides that there is much more for him to ponder on in the case of Jack: “better that I should offend or reject my own son – which God forbid – but you are the Lord’s child also, as am I, as we all are. I must be gracious. My only role is to be gracious” [1]. Upon finding the sermon on the parable of Prodigal Son, Ames decides to give it more thought, and then tries to explain the point for his son, indeed more for himself: “My point here is that the great kindness and providence of the Lord has given most of us someone to honor – the child his parent, the parent his child” [1]. Hence, he tries to participate in God’s ‘grace,’ and comes to a better understanding of his role as an instrument of God’s benevolence, and as someone who is participating in a “fatherhood that is ultimately His” [1]. Moreover, later on he reminds his son that “the grace of God is sufficient to any transgression,” and that “to judge is wrong, the origin and essence of much error and cruelty” [1].

John Calvin, the 16th century theologian – Robinson’s and Ames’ man – believes that, we are not only saved by Christ but by our faith in Him which is not our own but bestowed upon us by the grace of God; for faith in Christ leads to imitation of Christ. This imitation is realized in the pattern of honoring others, serving others, and praying for them so that the weaker ones, like Jack, can be honored and loved [6]. This theology together with the idea of ‘the image of God,’ debated over throughout the history of Christianity, become reasons for Ames to love his Prodigal Son, and to come to the understanding that because God has created man in His image, to love His creation is to love Him. Ames reflects on a passage by Calvin that says: “the image of the Lord in anyone is much more than reason enough to love him, and that the Lord stands waiting to take our enemies’ sins upon Himself” [1].

Reverend Ames not only tries for the restoration of his soul, and building up Jack in his love, he also tries, though late, to open Jack’s heart to the splendorous love of God. In the years of his absence, Jack Ames Boughton has had a long but forbidden marriage with an African American woman. Hopeful to settle for his nearly-broken family, he has returned to Gilead, hopeful to ask his father’s help, but the old Boughton is in bad health. Therefore, Jack seeks for Ames’ help and his influence in Gilead, though Ames answers that he might not live long enough to make use of his influence. Later he blesses Jack with a bigger hope. Seeing Jack on his way to leave Gilead, Ames calls to him and gives him Ludwig Feurbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*. He has marked a passage for him, which reads: “only that which is apart from my own being is capable of being doubted by me. How then can I doubt of God, who is my being? To doubt of God is to doubt of myself” [1]. This passage implies Calvin’s idea that to know God one should first come to knowledge of oneself. This seems quite fitting and proper to Jack’s search for God and might set him off on a journey of self-discovery. Eventually, Ames is blessed with his lifelong, yet perhaps belated, wish to Christian and to baptize his son, his “second self” as he comes to call him. As Ames remembers, after the act of baptism is performed, Jack looked as if “he were waking out of a dream” [1], with an amazement that Ames imagines to be of the realization of the reason we live: “this is why we have lived this life!” [1]. That is, to love and to be loved, to forgive and to be forgiven.

Written in 1936, *The Diary of a Country Priest* has been held in high regards particularly by Roman Catholics. The young priest’s diary revolves around both the inner life of his mind and the daily life of his parish, where he arrives at with high hopes for his ministry. However as the realities of the parish surface, his hopes are deferred. He sees the parish suffering from a sense of ennui

resulting from parishioner's indifference to spirituality, honesty, and honoring and loving each other. For him this state is 'Christianity in decay': "I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay" [7]. Soon he becomes the subject of villagers' gossip, and the object of their scorn and suspicion. The local merchants trick him into buying things for which he has no need, for instance the grocer offers him a few bottles of elderberry wine, which the priest assumes to be a gift, while later he will be charged for them. Even the parish children, whom he teaches and is affectionate toward, scorn him with their childish tricks, leading him to lament the situation: "children are children -- but, oh, why should these little girls be so full of enmity?" However, as Ames in *Gilead* says, "hope deferred is still hope" [1]. The priest feels so much for his parishioners who do not pity him that even later when he receives an unsigned note that reads: "a well-wisher advice you to apply for a change of parish. And the sooner the better. What at last you open your eyes to what everyone else can see so plain, you'll sweat blood! Sorry for you but we say again: 'Get out!'" [7], he thinks of no enmity at hand and will no more record anything about the note. He simply forgets any enmity, scorn, and ridicule. To him, "True grace is to forget" [7]. His parish "has become his Garden of Gethsemane, and his isolation mirrors Christ's own" [8]. His difficulties are exacerbated due to his declining health, but his involvement in the private affairs of the most prestigious family in the village, nurtures his confidence in his clerical life. The priest approaches Mme la Comtesse, the mother of the family, about the problems her daughter has spoken to the priest about, and he then learns about the infant son of the countess who died at the age of 18 months. She has been left in sorrow ever since the death of the infant, and her husband and her daughter have become very close and ignore Mme la Comtesse. She is filled with an anger which has turned into hatred towards God. However, after having a conversation with the priest she finds herself turning back to God after years of disbelief and resentment. The priest accuses the countess of lack of love, saying that God will break her heart that has grown stiff with hatred. The young priest appears as the angel of charity which is an important virtue in Roman Catholic moral theology: "the love of God and neighbor mandated by Jesus in his sum of law and evoked by God's love" [9].

Because charity is gift of God's Grace, the young priest feels that God is using him as instrument of His grace toward the mother. Later in a letter to the priest, the countess confesses how he acted as an angle of grace and transformation in her life: "I have lived in the most terrible solitude, alone with the desperate memory of a child. And it seems to me that another child has brought me to life again. I hope you won't be annoyed with me for regarding you as a child. Because you are!" [7]. She feels the priest sees through her soul, and seems to relate this ability to his innocence and weakness, features attributed to children. According to Daniel Brother, for Bernanos "the clairvoyance of priests derives exclusively from the gift they have of loving souls" [10]. Love or Grace of God is the warp and woof of priest's vision, weaving an image of Christ in him. Aware of God's grace in creating men after His likeness, he honors and loves others as epitomes of God's love, sent to him, inviting him for participation in Christ's fatherhood and servanthood. Later Reflecting on their conversation and the letter from the countess, the priest provides a beautiful description of how God's Grace enabled him to give what he does not have, and to empty himself for the others' sake: "oh, miracle -- thus to be able to give what we ourselves do not possess, sweet miracle of our empty hands!" He then prays: "Lord, I am stripped of all things, as you alone can strip us bare, whose fearful care nothing escapes, nor your terrible love!" [7]. His mercy and love for his fellow beings are God's Grace and he sees himself devoid of everything, for his faith is not his own either.

Nevertheless, the question raised is: "Considering God's omnipresent Grace and love, why is it that the young priest undergoes so much suffering?" This argument might lead to the idea that according to Ryken is the key contribution of the novel to our understanding of the notion of ministry: Grace is not overflowed to Christian ministry, one should peruse Grace in one's own suffering. "The minister or parish priest is not ultimately a repository of grace but only a conduit of

grace” [8]. This idea has its roots in the Catholic theology that makes a distinction between ‘prevenient grace’ and ‘saving grace.’ While the former is God’s sovereign will over the world, the latter is mediated through the church and sacraments, and priests act as a channel for pouring God’s grace upon people. Thus, the priest in Bernanos’ novel, feels duty-bound to his people. “Suffering for the sake of others. Suffering for the sake of others. Suffering for the sake of others,” This is the bedtime reminder of servanthood, whispered by the young priest [11]. The lines speak for themselves; suffering is the means he needs for succeeding in curing souls wallowing in the hell of self-hatred and hatred of others, for “it is hard to imagine how there could be any depth of sympathy and love in a person who had never known suffering at first hand”[9]. Back in the beginning of the novel, when the priest expresses that the “good and evil are probably evenly distributed,” one can draw the inference that for Bernanos not only “Grace is everywhere,” suffering is ubiquitous too [8]. In other words, in the life of the priest, these two forces happily corporate.

Reflections of both Robinson and Bernanos on the power of grace, the need for love, forgiveness and mercy, and the value of humanity -- rooted in the mystery of love -- take the form of a meditative diary. The form acts like a spiritual autobiography, a mode whose roots go back to Augustine’s *Confessions*. This narrative form provides a model of self-discovery, and religious practice, and also serves as a didactic form [12]. Furthermore, for Ames and the priest, writing feels like praying, and they feel that they are with someone:

For me writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn’t writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone. [1].

And

I hoped this diary might help me to concentrate my thoughts. Which will go wandering on the few occasions when I have some chance to think a little. I had thought it might become a kind of communion between God and me, an extension of prayer a way of easing the difficulties of prayer. [7]

Furthermore, as Malcolm Scott notes, the first person narration of *The Diary* has a special significance: “in catholic novels written in the traditional third person form, the responsibility for conveying the novelist’s religious perceptions is devolved to the narrator; thus presumptions of God’s role in the affairs of human beings are written into the fabric of the entire text, and for readers unable to accept them, the novel as a whole risks rejection” [13].

To both Ames and the priest writing (of letters, diaries, sermons) become a prayer, a narrative of self-scrutiny and self-discovery, a piece of moral wisdom and a sermon on the difficulty of virtue, and striking versions of loyalty, prodigality, fair-mindedness, justice, and charity in contemporary moral conscience. In the world of these novels graciousness confronts evil, and “there is not only a communion of saints, there is also a communion of sinners” [7]. Like the young priest of Bernanos’ novel, Reverend John Ames is an example of someone serious about being human and fully aware of mysteries of God’s grace, someone whose piety and largeness of spirit pose an antidote to Robinson’s perception that “something has passed out of the culture, changing it invisibly and absolutely [...]. There are too few uses for words like humor, pleasure and charm; courage, dignity, and graciousness; learnedness, fair-mindedness, openhandedness; loyalty, respect, and good faith” [3]. The real question is: will people shelter one another, humanize one another, and open each other’s hearts to God’s love?

Both Ames and the priest feel their imminent death, due to their bad health. John Ames starts his letter telling his son that he “might be gone sometime”[1], to be with the Good Lord and then remembers people, even those who were on the edge of the other world, asking him what death is like, and that he used to say “it was like going home.” Back then he was living all alone in an old house and perhaps that is why he thought of the other world as a Home. But later, graced with a

wife and a family of his own, he feels more at home in the world and at odds with his forthcoming death. However, Ames anxiety and fear is mostly rooted in the prospect of leaving his family with nothing, no provision, no money, and no protection:

And now they say my heart is failing. [...] I do regret that I have almost nothing to leave you and your mother. A few old books no one else would want. I never made any money to speak of, and I never paid any attention to the money I had. It was the furthest thing from my mind that I'd be leaving a wife and child, believe me. I'd have been a better father if I'd known. I'd have set something by for you. [1]

Nevertheless, confiding in God's grace and providence Ames once again comes to peace with death.

While Ames in the beginning of the novel is aware of his late in life death, the priest of Ambricourt is late in knowing about his early death. The priest's experience regarding his approaching death is similar to that of Ames. However, their feelings about the issue are different. Near the end of the novel the priest visits a doctor who talks with him about hope, death and happy resignation to it. The priest believes that "one should die little by little," and get used to the idea. In fact leaving this world does not matter to him, because his death matters to no one:

'One should die little by little, I stammered. 'Get used to the idea.'
'You don't say! Is that what *you* do?'
'At least I have tried. But I'm not comparing myself to others who have their work, their Families. The life of a priest like myself matters to no one.' [7]

He had entered there with his mind prepared, ready for anything about his illness, but as soon as he hears the word 'cancer', he realize how much he likes this life, and that happiness and joy are a greater thing than he thought. Facing their imminent deaths, John Ames and the country priest come to the question of existence. The priest, utterly alone, sees his death as "wiping out" perhaps his existence. Similarly, Ames writes: "I have been thinking about existence lately". Later he desires his son to know that sooner or later everyone wonders what he has done in life, and that if he ever wonders about this, he should know that he was "God's grace"[1] to him. Later, Ames records that he loves his son mainly for his existence: "Your existence is a delight to us. I hope you never have to Long for a child as I did, but oh, what a splendid thing it has been that you came finally, and what a blessing to enjoy you now for almost seven years." [1]

Ames perceives existence as God's grace, and for him it is godlike to love someone's being as God loves our being. God by his grace has sent someone for us, to love, to honor, and to let us participate in His love. This mentality partly induced by his dealings with death, helps Ames to finally honor and to love Jack Boughton's existence as a gift from God too. Ames is also deeply involved in the simple joy and beauty of life. He sees holiness in everyday world. He enjoys the company of his radio, listening to baseball games, eating fried-egg sandwiches, and even cold baked beans, and finds Presbyterian quality in his salad. He records the childhood joy he felt in the act of baptism he performed on some cats. He regards the atheist Ludwig Feuerbach marvelous in his ideas about the joyful aspects of religion. Ames' worldliness or what Micheal Vander Weele calls "ministerial interpretation" [14] of the world around him, is what makes him different from the country priest. *The Ddiary of a Country Priest*, as Sorensen puts it, "is one long cry of pain" [11]. The priest's crying near the end of the novel in the doctor's office is not as strange and unfamiliar to the readers as it is to himself. One has the impression that the country priest is crying throughout the entire novel, over the ennui, doubt, hatred, and injustice in his parish, and after knowing about his illness, he stops, wondering at and about the moments of joy and beauty in the life that is gone with the wind of ignorance:

I was alone, utterly alone, facing my death -- and that death was a wiping out, and nothing more. With fearful speed the visible world seemed to slip away from me in a maze of pictures; they were not sad, but rather so full of light and dazzling beauty. How is this? Can I have loved it all so much? Mornings, evenings, roads.
[7]

As one who believes “grace is everywhere,” [7] the young priest is not expected to forget that God desires us to experience fulfillment and joy. Whereas Ames feels unexpected joy in God’s blessing of marital life to him in his old age, Bernanos focuses on “the struggle of a priest with the discipline of celibacy” [15]. The priest refuses to care for his health, and lives on a diet of Eucharistic food, and longs for entering into Christ’s pain and suffering. Like Ames, the country priest tries to hold up to the image of God, and endeavors for self-transcendence and worthiness for relationship with God, but his concentration on the spiritual aspects of humanity, neglects the external body. And this stems not merely from the doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism.

“Stop doing this to yourselves”, this, Robinson believes, would be the summary of the Old Testament. As such, John Ames seems to be more of a this world person, universal, and imaginable, and perhaps that is why this Robinson’s has transformed someone’s spirituality, reshaped someone else’s Atheism, and put some ministers in mind of what to do with their sermons. As Wroe observes, “This is a book that talks about religion to non-religious people in powerful ways” [16]. In contrast, as the young priest’s beliefs and intentions are not kindly greeted by the villagers, Bernanos’s characterization of the priest and his theological ruminations and convictions are not well received by the non-Catholic readers of *The Diary*. For the non-Catholic, Whitehouse believes, reading Bernanos’s novels “requires at least an effort of imagination and perhaps a suspension of disbelief, since in them the consequences of a movement towards or away from what he can see as the postulated entity that Bernanos called God assume major significance” [17].

Grace -- the thread running through the two novels connecting together not just the different parts of each novel but the two novels together -- is the divine forgiveness of sins and God’s love and mercy, that empowers people with faith, love, and hope, in meeting the demands of new life. Regardless of different strands of this doctrine, in the novels discussed here, the reality of God’s grace shapes characters and their relations, and defines morally right decisions in their affairs. Bernanos and Robinson write under the dictation of love and grace, as if they have no conception of world, humanity, and God without love. They believe that although man is flawed and the image of God is distorted in him, his heart still senses and responds to God’s desire for love. Bernanos calls God “voracious,” because he has total desire for souls, and that is a total charity, stronger than that of Satan [10]. For him losing the vision of God’s world of grace is going down into the world of ennui [17]. Whitehouse maintains that the essential insight expressed by *The Diary* is that “when a human being sees himself clearly, he needs more than human strength if he is not to succumb to anguish and despair” [17], and this divine strength is the power of grace. This implies the innate inability of human beings in facing difficult demands of human exchange with God and others.

Robinson also addresses our failure to transcend our lesser natures and to perceive moments of grace. In fact both Bernanos’s and Robinson’s novelistic endeavors depict the enigma and inevitable failure of human relations and understanding of their selves, if not interpreted in the light of God’s grace. Stepping out of the state of grace, to Robinson and Bernanos, is stepping out of humanity. Expressing her loyalty to loveliness of humanity and the world in an interview, Robinson suggests: “A lot of the things that I criticize, I think, are in their impact inhumane. My loyalty really is to human loveliness and the deep experience of self that every self deserves, you know, and the deep acknowledgment that everyone owes to everyone else” [18].

In their novels, the two novelists do not seek holiness, goodness, loveliness, and saintliness beyond the world of humans. As Whitehouse notes, the true saints Bernanos describes are not

superhuman, “they are the most natural, the most alive, and the most human of his creation. They have their life and a luminous quality which somehow adds meaning t and completeness to everything they do, even to their apparent failure” [17]. John Ames believes there must be a “prevenient courage” to acknowledge “the prevenient grace” [1] that theologians talk about and therefore to make ourselves, as old Ames says, useful. Ames echoing Robinson says, “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like a transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see” [1]. This is the gist of the entire preaching he was about throughout his letter: the need for a willingness and a courage to see the little incandescence and joys of God’s grace in everyday life. Likewise, the Priest of Ambricourt, though late, answers the world’s call of holiness and joy with his final words: “Grace is everywhere” [7].

Bringing their Christian sensibilities to the fictional world of their characters, Bernanos and Robinson shed light on the saving and empowering power of God’s grace in defining human relations and the understanding of the value of humanity and the loveliness of the world. Despite varieties in Christian theology and their views on the doctrine of grace, the fictional worlds of *Gilead* and *The Diary of a Country Priest*, reflect the Christian métier of their creators, the gift of seeing souls, the gift of living souls, and the gift of forgiving souls in the characters, even in those who are left at night like Jack and Mme la Comtesse.

CONCLUSION

Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (2007), a meditative letter written by an aging minister, probes the need for forgiveness and grace. George Bernanos’s *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1936) pictures the suffering and sacrifice of an unnamed young priest in his attempt to open his parishioner’s heart to the love of God. Both novelists explore themes such as forgiveness, love, peace, faith, and grace. This paper first discusses the prevalent Christian themes in these novels, and the ways each novelist presents the saving and life-giving power of God’s grace in healing and restoring human soul, and then compares their treatment of these issues. The Protestant Robinson’s sensibility regarding these religious themes seems very similar to that of the Catholic Bernanos. Indeed, the American writer seems to be considerably influenced by her French predecessor

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