

“In That Water You Could Rinse Things Clean”

Blood, Shame, and Baptism in Marilynne Robinson’s Lila

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Introduction

Depicting baptism as central in the narrative arc of a novel is quite unusual in contemporary literature. In Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Lila*, baptism is set boldly against the stark stuff of life. Violence, shame, and orphanhood challenge the meaning of the sacrament for a traumatized woman.¹ Lila, the protagonist, seeks in baptism a relief of her shame, as well as the assurance of being loved. As Lila later learns about the doctrine of predestination, she loses the fragile peace she gained in her baptism. Lila is, however, able to find a way out of the theological impasse in which she finds herself: she creatively constructs her own theology of baptism and salvation, a theology that holds love at its core. Robinson depicts the sacrament in *Lila* in a way that underscores both the theological and psychological aspects of becoming baptized.

Sacramental imagination has been a recurrent feature in Robinson’s fiction, starting with her first novel *Housekeeping*.² In the novels preceding *Lila* – *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* and *Home* – there are passages depicting sacramental imagery and, in the case of *Gilead*, scenes where baptism and the Eucharist actually take place.³ The depiction of sacraments in Robinson’s

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Lila*, New York 2014.

2. Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*, London 2005.

3. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, London 2004. *Gilead* is an epistolary novel whose protagonist is Pastor John Ames. Lila depicts the events that take place prior to *Gilead*, telling

fiction varies from novel to novel. Whereas in *Housekeeping* sacramental theology lies, for the most part, between the lines, requiring attentiveness of the reader to notice it, in Robinson's *Gilead* quartet it is more explicit. In *Gilead* the depictions of baptism highlight the otherworldly numinousness of the sacrament with glistening water and babies with soft brows. Meditations on baptism in *Gilead* introduce a theological content for baptism that enhances its aesthetic qualities.⁴ In *Lila* the dogmatic content of baptism is problematized in a way that differs from the manner in which baptism is depicted in Robinson's previous novels.⁵ The focus in *Lila* lies explicitly in baptism and the theology it imbues, not in the imagery pointing to it (as in *Housekeeping*) or in Pastor Ames's meditations on the significance of water and his memories of baptizing (*Gilead*).

Sacramental theology in Robinson's fiction has been explored in previous research. Matthew Potts observes that in *Housekeeping* Robinson not only writes prose that is permeated by imagery pointing to baptism. In intertwining love and loss with baptismal imagery in this novel Robinson, according

the story of Pastor Ames's wife, Lila. The other novels of the *Gilead* quartet are Marilynne Robinson, *Home*, London 2009 and, most recently, Marilynne Robinson, *Jack*, New York 2020. In *Gilead*, sacraments are depicted in several scenes: Pastor Ames and his siblings (following the footsteps of their father, a pastor in the Congregationalist church) baptize a litter of kittens (p. 26) and Ames's father gives his son a piece of ashen biscuit in a burnt-down church – a scene resembling the Eucharist in Pastor Ames' memory (pp. 108–109). There are also several scenes that point to baptism in *Gilead*: for example, an often quoted passage with a couple walking down a street after the rain. The young man takes a hold of a branch in a tree, pouring water on himself and the woman. Robinson adds a theological reflection: "It is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing" (pp. 31–32). And in an especially poignant scene, Pastor Ames observes his son playing with a water sprinkler with another little boy. Ames reminisces watching Baptists baptizing people in the river, pointing out that it looked like "a birth and a resurrection" (p. 72). Also in the fourth novel of the *Gilead* quartet, *Jack*, we find water imagery pointing to baptism, such as in this scene: "The West Nishnabotna was the river that circled Eden. He [Jack] thought sometime he might get off the bus a stop early and walk to it, and kneel and wash his face in it, and then he would feel ready to go home" (p. 256). It is as if Jack Boughton, Pastor Boughton's prodigal son and John Ames's godson, has to perform this ritual-like cleansing before he can face his father after being absent for twenty years. But unlike Lila's protagonist, Jack, who has been baptized as a child, does not bring up baptism as something that could help him in any way in overcoming his constantly nagging despair about the doctrine of election.

4. In *Gilead* the focus is often on the aesthetic dimension of water in baptizing: "The water just heightens the touch of the pastor's hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection." Robinson, *Gilead*, 72.

5. Andrew C. Stout: "A Little Willingness to See": Sacramental Vision in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*", *Religion and the Arts* 18 (2014), 571–590, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685292-01804005>. Stout suggests that "the nature of created elements, water in particular, take on a more explicitly sacramental significance in *Gilead* in contrast to the more elusive quality of *Housekeeping*" (p. 584). In *Lila* we find yet another angle from which Robinson approaches sacramental theology, one incorporating the protagonist's psychological trauma.

to Potts, proposes “a novel sacramental theology”.⁶ Andrew Stout suggests that in depicting sacraments in her fiction Robinson assimilates several influences: John Calvin (1509–1564) the Reformer, the New England Puritans, and also the American transcendentalist writers, as well as her own participation in the sacraments and doctrinal reflection.⁷

The interest in sacramental theology in Robinson’s fiction can be seen as an example of a larger phenomenon in literary studies. Sarah Beckwith observes a “resurgence of interest in something called ‘the sacramental text’” and charts several dimensions of this in different kinds of texts – from medieval plays to contemporary literature.⁸ One of these dimensions Beckwith mentions provides a particularly suitable motivation for exploring the sacraments in Robinson’s novels. Beckwith speaks of a sacramental text as offering up the opportunity of “redemption through reading” – an idea implying that literature can have a transformative effect on the reader.⁹ Beckwith understands the very idea of a sacramental text as residing in “its resistance to the doxic mode of critique that is still the default model of reading in literary studies”.¹⁰ Thus, she places sacramental reading against

6. Matthew Potts, “‘The World Will Be Made Whole’: Love, Loss, and the Sacramental Imagination in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*”, *Christianity and Literature* 66 (2017), 482–499, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0148333117708263>. In his persuasive theological analysis of *Housekeeping*, Potts reminds us that it is generations of both Roman Catholic and Protestant thinkers who insist that the sacraments uniquely realize God’s work in the material world. He argues that Robinson’s fiction reflects this very idea and shares with it the conviction that sacramental signs effect and occasion “God’s ontologically foundational and self-effacing love” (p. 484). However, according to Potts, in her fiction Robinson not only reinforces Reformed sacramental theology, she also develops constructive theology. Whereas much discussion in the history of sacramental theology has been about the Eucharist, Robinson not only chooses to write about baptism but she also, to use Potts’s expression, “read[s] and render[s] baptism as a sign of utter loss and estrangement, thus excavating and articulating deeper sacramental and theological issues [such as longing, loss, and love]” that are also inherent in the sacraments (p. 496). Furthermore, Stout, “A Little Willingness”, 572, suggests that Robinson has in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* developed a vision of the world that is both sacramental and distinctly Protestant.

7. Stout, “A Little Willingness”, 588.

8. Sarah Beckwith, “The Sacramental Text Reconsidered”, *Christianity and Literature* 66 (2017), 534–540, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0148333117708265>.

9. For an example of Robinson’s thoughts on the transformative effect of literature, see “A Conversation between Marilynne Robinson and Rowan Williams”, in Timothy Larsen & Keith L. Johnson (eds.), *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson*, Downers Grove, IL 2019, 183. Robinson argues here that in the strict etymological sense much literature is subversive: “It [literature] wants very much for you to think about something in a way that you would not otherwise.”

10. Beckwith, “The Sacramental Text”, 535–537. Besides being sympathetic to the idea of the sacramental text as offering up to us “some sense of the hopeful conversions literature offers”, Beckwith also suggests other motivations for the interest in texts which can be read as “sacramental”. She observes, first, that the sacrament can be seen as a historical trajectory of the so-called secularization thesis, and second, that the concept of the sacrament points to questions of presence and representation, of sign and thing, of symbol and reality. Lastly,

“the hermeneutics of suspicion”. It is “a process of finding and discovering grace, and sometimes in the most unexpected of places”.¹¹ I will show in this article that the sacrament of baptism in *Lila* elicits precisely these possibilities for unexpected encounters with grace – not only for the protagonist of the novel, but also for the reader.¹²

Andrew Latz observes that “Robinson’s novels are a form of sophisticated and subtle theological reflection, even a model for doing theology, precisely *qua* novels”. In *Lila* Robinson “does theology” by problematizing the meaning of baptism for its recipient. Latz concludes that theological ideas are tested in Robinson’s novels when she imagines how they affect human life, “and this is an extremely important contribution given theology’s tendency to slip away from the concrete and towards the abstract”.¹³ I suggest that this is precisely the case in *Lila*: baptism is *lived out* by the protagonist. There is nothing abstract in Lila’s relentless attempt to become clean and acceptable by getting baptized, and her disappointment when her baptism does not make herself feel thoroughly cleansed. In the novel Robinson invites her reader to pay close attention to subtle clues that gradually come together, forming a multi-faceted picture of both theological, psychological, and even aesthetic aspects of baptism. Thus, *Lila* testifies to Robinson’s goal in her writing: she poses herself fundamental existential questions and tests her thinking.¹⁴

Beckwith suggests that the history of the sacraments is a story about language, and the conditions under which it can be efficacious.

11. Beckwith, “The Sacramental Text”, 537. For the critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion in literary studies, see Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Oxford 2008, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444302790>.

12. Curiously enough, these unexpected encounters are not always welcomed by readers. In discussing what he calls Lila’s conversion and “a transforming recognition” of the protagonist on the last pages of *Lila*, Rowan Williams suggests that some Christians have experienced difficulty with the ending of the novel. It is “a conversion to a God who’s actually a good deal more risk-taking than they would like their God to be, and a God who is far too like Lila for comfort in some people’s eyes”. Rowan Williams & Greg Garrett, *Rowan Williams in Conversation with Greg Garrett*, London 2020, 53.

13. Andrew Brower Latz, “Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson”, *Literature and Theology* 25 (2011), 294, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/fr017>. In his article on the doctrine of creation in Robinson’s fiction, Latz suggests that Robinson is “an important theological voice *qua* novelist”. Doctrine is depicted in Robinson’s novels in a manner that puts “some flesh on the formal bones”, to use Latz’s expression. Latz understands this way of entwining doctrine with a lived experience as “almost certain[ly]” intentional on Robinson’s part (p. 283–284).

14. Robinson describes her process of writing: “I believe that faith in God is a liberation of thought, because *thought is an ongoing instruction in things that pertain to God. To test this belief is my fictional practice, the basis for the style and substance of my two novels and the motive behind my nonfiction.*” Marilynne Robinson, “Credo”, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Spring 2008, 26–27. My italics. In an interview Robinson explains: “I am exploring and inquiring in my novels, putting questions to myself that are real for me.” Rebecca M. Painter, “Further Thoughts on a Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An

Robinson explores a theology of baptism in her fiction within the Calvinist tradition. Reformed Christianity maintains that baptism and Eucharist represent the promises of God, mediated through objects in the everyday world, such as water or bread and wine.¹⁵ Lila reflects on this formulation. Robinson is fond of water as a subject of literary imagination.¹⁶ In *Lila* water in many forms, such as rain, snow, and ice, comprises a steady undertow. It is my aim to deepen the understanding of Marilynne Robinson's sacramental theology by exploring the theological meaning of baptism in *Lila*. I will focus on both imagery pointing to baptism and actual baptisms. I agree with previous research that in her fiction Robinson emerges as a theologian, but I also aim to show that in *Lila* Robinson contributes further to our understanding that fiction offers an important venue for discussing and developing theological ideas.¹⁷ Hence, my analysis does more than merely contribute to existing research on sacramental theology in Robinson's fiction.

As far as the depiction of baptism in *Lila* is concerned, my motivation for exploring it is twofold. I am interested in sacramental theology pertaining to baptism in *Lila*, but also how the protagonist grapples with her baptism psychologically. Thus, I will explore how the protagonist of *Lila* understands baptism. How does she creatively strive to weave the different meanings of the sacrament into a theology of her own that allows her to imagine herself a future? I tackle my questions from two perspectives that I consider side by side, as they permeate each other. The first aspect pertains to the psychological underpinnings of the hopes and fears the protagonist experiences when she tries to grapple with the meaning of baptism in her life. The second is a theological perspective, pointing to the theological content of the sacrament of baptism in the novel.

Interview with Marilynne Robinson", *Christianity and Literature* 58 (2009), 488, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014833310905800312>.

15. Alister McGrath, *On Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Hoboken, NJ 2017, 51.

16. O'Connell points out that "for Robinson, water is more than just a metaphor for God. It is itself a divine presence, a form of immanence that creates and sustains life, and sometimes destroys it, and remains mysterious no matter how familiar it might seem to us". Mark O'Connell, "The First Church of Marilynne Robinson", *The New Yorker*, 30 May 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-first-church-of-marilynne-robinson>, accessed 2021-04-17.

17. I should also point out that in her six books of nonfiction Robinson writes extensively about her theological ideas. In previous research, Robinson's essays have been read side by side with her novels in an attempt to analyze her theology as a whole. For a recent study of this kind, see Andrew Cuning, *Marilynne Robinson: Theologian of the Ordinary*, London 2020.

"I Was Bad at Whoring" – Lila's Life

The protagonist of *Lila*, Lila Dahl, later Lila Ames, is in the present time of the novel a middle-aged woman in the Midwestern town of Gilead in the 1950s. The reader learns that Lila's parents abandoned her when she was a young child. She then lived with an obscure and abusive group of people until she was rescued by a drifter called Doll. This drifter became Lila's surrogate mother. With a group of migrant workers the two roamed the Midwest of the 1920s, eking out a meager living through the years of the Wall Street Crash and the Dust Bowl.¹⁸ When work became scarce, Lila, already grown-up, was hired as a clerk. She had only been fortunate enough to go to school for a few months.

There would have been enough cause for Lila's chronic shame, a central theme in *Lila*, in being rejected by her parents. But then a violent murder takes place, sealing Lila's fate. From early on in the novel Robinson has introduced a knife that Doll meticulously sharpens, and there is a premonition that this knife will not be used just for paring apples. Later Doll stabs a man to death, allegedly protecting Lila from a possibly dangerous meeting with her relatives. After running away from the murder scene, Doll seeks help from Lila:

That night or morning when she was trying to clean away all the blood, and Doll, who probably wasn't in her right mind, saying, "He wasn't your pa. I'm pretty sure. Maybe a cousin or something. An uncle, maybe." And here was his blood all over Lila's hands and her clothes, some in her hair. She had brushed a strand away from her eyes, and it fell back, wet and heavy. So much blood she knew he was dead, whoever he was.¹⁹

Doll is now a murderer and the thug she killed could have been Lila's father. Lila has the blood of this man all over her, compelling her to buy another garment from a secondhand store. Adding to Lila's shame, this new red dress is decorated with cheerful ruffles and pockets in the shape of hearts.²⁰ Afraid of being connected to Doll's crime, Lila leaves the town, while Doll herself has already run away. Lila is forced to work in a whorehouse, but "I was bad at whoring",²¹ she later observes.

18. For an exploration of the plight of migrant workers in America in the 1920s, see Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, London 2017.

19. Robinson, *Lila*, 172–173.

20. Robinson, *Lila*, 181.

21. Robinson, *Lila*, 217.

After leaving the brothel, Lila works as a cleaner. In a final attempt to change the course of her life, she leaves her job and arrives in Gilead. Escaping the rain, she steps into Reverend Ames's church and witnesses the old pastor baptizing two infants, preaching the Calvinist theology on baptism. Lila begins to long for the purity the sacrament promises to give to its recipient. She also yearns for the touch of the handsome pastor: "There was no reason to let an old man dip his hand in water and touch it to your forehead, as if he loved you the way people do who would touch your face and your hair."²²

Witnessing the baptisms awakens in Lila a wild hope of being loved. When Ames preaches about baptism, he also mentions marriage. From now on, baptism and love belong together for Lila.²³ She begins to entertain an idea of her shame being washed away in baptism, and perhaps the pastor could love her. Lila, completely uneducated theologically as she is, now dedicates much of her energy to understanding the meaning of baptism – especially after she eventually does marry Pastor Ames and begins to discuss theology with him on a daily basis.

"A Few Waterskeeters Won't Do Any Harm" – Lila's Baptism

In her fiction, Robinson places her sacramental imagery and theological meditation firmly within the domestic sphere of everyday life.²⁴ The scene where Lila does her laundry contains all the central ideas of baptism that Robinson introduces in *Lila*: shame, dirt, baptism as a form of washing or purification, and the difficulty of living within one's new identity:

She [Lila] liked to do her wash. The smell of the soap was a little sharp, like the smell of the river. In that water you could rinse things clean. It might be a little brown after a good rain, soil from the fields, but the silt washed away or settled out. Her shirts and her dress looked to her like creatures that never wanted to be born, the way they wilted into themselves, sinking under the water as if they only wanted to be left there, maybe to find some deeper, darker pool. And when she lifted them out, held them up by their shoulders, they looked like pure

22. Robinson, *Lila*, 76.

23. Robinson, *Lila*, 222. Lila later (p. 222) reminisces on this day: "He [Ames] was going on about baptism. A birth and a death and a marriage, he said."

24. See Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work"*, New York 1998. In this book (whose title points to household chores as "women's work", albeit in quotation marks) Norris suggests that our daily tasks "have a considerable spiritual import, and their significance for Christian theology, the way they come together in the fabric of faith, is not often appreciated". Christianity is "inescapably down-to-earth and incarnational" (pp. 76–78).

weariness and regret. Like her own flayed skin. But when she hung them they began to seem like things that could live.²⁵

The stains Lila struggles to remove represent her shame. She is delighted to see how water and soap eventually renew her clothes. In lifting up her dresses and checking if they are clean, she sees that her clothes are “creatures” who never wanted to exist; they seem to want to sink to the bottom of the river. When Lila observes the “pure weariness and regret” of her dresses, the fabric speaks of “her own flayed skin”. Could there be an effective washing, a cleansing for her too? After *Lila* has rinsed her dresses, sunlight and summer wind breathe their warmth into them on the clothesline. Perhaps they could live. And she, too; as the river water cleans the laundry, the baptismal water could transform her as well. Theologically speaking, this transformation is complete,²⁶ although inherent in this scene is the idea that baptism is not a quick fix for Lila’s emotional and psychological problems.

Lila wonders if baptism could help her to overcome her anxiety: “She began to think about getting herself baptized. She thought there might be something about that water on her forehead that would cool her mind. She had to get through her life one way or another.”²⁷

Lila asks Pastor Ames to baptize her, and he gladly obliges. Fetching water, Ames notices some insects in the baptismal water. “A few waterskeeters won’t do any harm”, he contends gracefully. The river water is good enough for the sacrament, because God’s word will sanctify it. The waterskeeters, known as “Jesus bugs” for their ability to glide on the surface of water, offer yet another example of how Robinson entwines the mundane and the sacred together. Accompanied by a choir of buzzing bees, Ames preaches: The sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Dying in Christ we raise in Him, rejoicing in the sweetness of our hope.²⁸ With these words, Ames declares he has washed Lila “in the waters of regeneration” and she is now “a newborn babe”. The biblical picture of an abandoned child, picked up into someone’s arms and washed clean, looms in the background. In her baptism, Lila is effectively washed and adopted into God’s family, as Calvin teaches. However, even this tranquil moment is

25. Robinson, *Lila*, 78.

26. John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, Grand Rapids, MI 2001, 513. Calvin maintains: “When once administered, it [baptism] seems to have passed, it is not abolished by subsequent sins. For the purity of Christ was therein offered to us, always is in force, and is not destroyed by any stain: it wipes and washes away all our defilements.”

27. Robinson, *Lila*, 34.

28. Robinson, *Lila*, 86–88.

marred by a memory of blood. After the baptism, Lila and Ames pick brambles in a handkerchief, and “fragrance and purple bled through the cloth”.²⁹

"Then Washed I Thee with Water" – The Theology of Baptism

What one receives in baptism becomes a burning question for Lila. The natural source for an answer is Calvinist theology, because the Ameses are members of a Congregational church. For Calvin, baptism is first and foremost “the initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church”, “a sign and evidence of our purification” of our sins.³⁰ According to Calvin, “the only purification which baptism promises is by means of sprinkling of the blood of Christ, who is figured by water from the resemblance to cleansing and washing”.³¹ The Reformer emphasizes the role of faith in receiving the sacrament.³² As to the manner of baptism, Calvin eloquently warns against “all theatrical pomp, which dazzles the eyes of the simple, and dulls their minds”.³³ Brian Albert Gerrish succinctly summarizes Calvin’s theology: “The way in which Calvin describes the gospel: it is, quite simply, the good news of adoption.”³⁴

Lila reads the Bible that she has stolen from Ames’s church. Especially one verse in the Book of Ezekiel gives her a theological interpretation of her shame: “On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths” (Ez. 16:4, New International Version).³⁵

Lila has been rejected by her parents and she can relate to the imagery of blood. The verse from Ezekiel sets the ominous, almost archaic tone for Lila’s quest for purity and love:

29. Robinson, *Lila*, 88–90.

30. Calvin, *Institutes*, 513. “[Baptism is] a kind of sealed instrument by which he [God] assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed.”

31. Calvin, *Institutes*, 513.

32. Calvin, *Institutes*, 522: “That promise was offered to us in baptism, let us therefore embrace it in faith. In regard to us, indeed, it was long buried on account of unbelief; now, therefore, let us with faith receive it.”

33. Calvin, *Institutes*, 524.

34. Brian Albert Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*, Edinburgh 1993, 89.

35. See Craig A. Evans & Jeremiah J. Johnston, “Intertestamental Background of the Christian Sacraments”, in Hans Boersma & Matthew Levering (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, Oxford 2015, 38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199659067.013.37>. Evans and Johnston point out that the laws of washing and cleansing in the Old Testament were often employed as metaphors: “The Psalmist petitions God that he might be washed and cleansed from sin (Ps 51:2, 7). Similarly, an angry Isaiah enjoins Israel to wash themselves and make themselves clean (Isa 1:16).” Evans and Johnston mention precisely the same verses from Ezekiel which have such a strong impact on Lila.

She was still thinking about Ezekiel, as much as anything. The man takes up the baby that's been thrown out in the field. Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. The blood is just the shame of having no one who takes any care of you.³⁶

The verse from Ezekiel serves as an illustration of Calvin's theology on baptism, and especially the notion of adoption.³⁷ God is full of grace towards a suffering human being who is adopted into his family and his kingdom. Pastor Ames has washed all blood away in baptism. In loving Lila he has given her a concrete expression for the theological idea of adoption. For Lila, baptism and a loving touch belong together. "But if she ever had prayed in all the years of her old life, it might have been for just that, that gentleness", she later reminisces.³⁸ Again, the theological and psychological aspect of baptism are entwined. Thus, after Lila has confessed to Ames that she used to work as a prostitute, he still wants to marry her. This points to one of the central tropes in the Old Testament, depicting God's steadfast love to Israel, who repeatedly sins. Later Ames attempts, rather unsuccessfully, to convince Lila that the child in Ezekiel represents Israel,³⁹ but Lila refuses this alternative interpretation: for her, the prophet speaks about her.⁴⁰

Lila, however, still questions whether she can construct her new identity: "I am baptized, I am married, I am Lila Dahl, and Lila Ames." In declaring the constituents of her identity, she points to being both baptized and married. But soon after her baptism Lila complains: "I don't know what else I should want. Except for the shame to be gone, and it ain't."⁴¹ Now she also runs into a theological stumbling block: the doctrine of predestination. She is a Christian now, but she fears that Doll and the rest of her long-lost loved

36. Robinson, *Lila*, 135.

37. See also Stout, "A Little Willingness", 588. Stout argues that Robinson introduces "the corrective lens of Scripture" in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* into an understanding of the sacraments. In *Lila* the protagonist's diligent reading of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, guides and enriches her understanding of the meaning of baptism.

38. Robinson, *Lila*, 253.

39. Robinson, *Lila*, 128–129.

40. See also June Hadden Hobbs, "Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*", *Christianity and Literature* 59 (2010), 241–262, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014833311005900207>. Hadden Hobbs suggests that Robinson uses biblical and secular typology in *Gilead*, implementing this literary tool in analyzing for example scenes pointing to baptism in the novel. This method could also be useful in an analysis of *Lila*. Before even considering getting baptized, Lila reads the Book of Ezekiel and finds a scene of an abandoned baby in need of washing. This passage affects Lila's interpretation of events in her life, giving ordinary, everyday moments such as washing a child, giving her clean clothes, and combing her hair, a theological or even sacralized meaning.

41. Robinson, *Lila*, 94.

ones will not be saved. Lila does not wish to commit herself to a religion that separates her from them. She returns to the river and washes herself three times to rid herself of her baptism. The river is back to its ordinary self, it teems with vicious creatures, reminding Lila of her past: “The river smelled like any river, fishy and mossy and shadowy, and the smell seemed stronger in the dark, with the chink and plosh of all the small life. The river was like the old life, just itself. Nothing more to it.”⁴²

It is as if Lila’s baptized soul sinks to the bottom of the river. But she is satisfied. Now Doll will recognize her if they ever meet again, for “she still felt a little more like who she was”.⁴³ In her baptism an ontological change has occurred, a change she hopes she has undone by unbaptizing herself. Before her debaptism Lila removes her wedding ring, but she nevertheless returns to the parsonage, puts on a new dress, and tells her husband that she is expecting a child. Lila stays, but is tormented by thoughts of leaving Ames. She still does not know who she is.⁴⁴

"To Just Purely Hate My Life" – Lila's Shame

After arriving in Gilead, Lila interprets her past life through the lens of Calvinist theology and the Bible. It is obvious she knows she is a sinner – even though Robinson portrays Lila as a good person: “She had never taken a dime that wasn’t hers or hurt a living soul, to speak of.”⁴⁵ Lila defends herself, as well as “the heathens” with whom she used to “tramp around” by pointing out that they are just “as good as anybody” and that they “don’t deserve no hellfire”.⁴⁶ Psychologically speaking, Lila suffers from chronic shame: “How else did I know to come here to just purely hate my life, hate everything about it, my damn body, my damn face, the damn misery in my heart because I got nothing to care about.”⁴⁷ This corporeal shame calls for a healing that touches her body, not just her mind.

Stephen Pattison explores chronic shame within Christian theology. He observes that “shame pertains to a metaphorical world in which persons are excluded, found to be ‘dirty’ or polluted, and stand in need of cleansing and acceptance in order to be reintegrated into society”.⁴⁸ Pattison suggests it

42. Robinson, *Lila*, 21–22.

43. Robinson, *Lila*, 22. “She thought, It [the river] has washed the baptism off me. So that’s done with. That must be what I wanted. Now, if I ever found Doll out there lost and wondering, at least she would recognize me.”

44. Robinson, *Lila*, 17. Lila had hoped that getting baptized might help her to overcome what she calls her “strange thoughts”, but with no success.

45. Robinson, *Lila*, 254.

46. Robinson, *Lila*, 225.

47. Robinson, *Lila*, 197–198.

48. Stephen Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, Cambridge 2000, 88,

can be easier to handle guilt than feelings of shame. Confession and atonement are formal mechanisms for dealing with guilt. No such remedies exist to heal shame.⁴⁹ Lila hopes that baptism will wash away her shame, but Pattison would not give her much hope. He contends: “Rituals do not invariably reduce or alleviate shame”,⁵⁰ and certainly, at his point in the novel Lila’s shame is not yet healed. To resolve her theological and psychological dilemmas Lila will need to return to the church where she first fixed her hopes in being baptized.

"The Reverend Couldn't Bear to Be Without Her" – Back to the Altar

After Lila gives birth to Pastor Ames’s baby, the frail Pastor Boughton – Ames’s best friend – tries to baptize the child. Holding the bowl in his trembling hands, Boughton spills water on the floor, only some of it falling on the baby’s head, leading the men to debate whether the child’s baptism is valid. Out of kindness to his friend, Ames agrees to baptize his son again in the church.

After baptizing the newborn child, Ames touches Lila’s forehead three times with the water. This can be interpreted to mean that both Lila and the newborn child have received baptism twice. This scene is puzzling. Ames most certainly knows of Calvin’s teaching that once baptized, one does not need to be baptized again.⁵¹ Why does Ames sprinkle water on Lila, too? Is he trying to assure himself that Lila will not leave him? Does Ames intend to undo “the unbaptism”, even though he has told Lila baptism cannot be washed away?⁵² Does this second baptism imply primarily a blessing?⁵³ All answers are possible, as some readers have concluded.⁵⁴ However, I propose the key to understanding Ames’s intention is the very words he utters while

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612411>.

49. Pattison, *Shame*, 43.

50. Pattison, *Shame*, 160.

51. Calvin, *Institutes*, 514: “We ought to consider that at whatever time we are baptized, we are washed and purified once for the whole of life.”

52. Robinson, *Lila*, 237.

53. Rebecca M. Painter, “Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson’s Fiction”, *Christianity and Literature* 59 (2010), 331, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014833311005900216>. According to Painter, Pastor Ames also performs a second baptism in *Gilead* in blessing Jack Boughton, whom he has already baptized. Painter argues: “Rev. Ames has, in effect, re-baptized his namesake as he sets out in abject sorrow and hopeless bravery for a life without those he cherishes.”

54. Amy Frykholm et al., “Lila in Community”, *The Christian Century*, 5 January 2015, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2015-01/lilanbspin-community>, accessed 2021-04-17. In the article Rachel Marie Stone suggests: “There is the practical matter of not wanting Lila to run away. Then there is his gratitude that Lila did not die in childbirth like his first wife. And maybe ‘keeping’ Lila with ‘us’ has something to do with Ames’s conception of salvation. – But it also has to be about belonging to life and to existence.”

touching Lila's forehead: "But I wanted you to know that we couldn't bear – we have to keep you with us. Please God." For Lila, these words become a token of Ames's love. She later returns twice to these words, as if in awe: "The Reverend couldn't bear to be without her." Lila wonders: "In that eternity of his, where everybody will be happy, how could he feel the lack of her, the loss of her? She had to think about that."⁵⁵ It is clear that Lila interprets Ames's words as referring to a life after death.⁵⁶

Consequently, these words are instrumental in healing Lila's shame. They speak of Ames's love loud and clear, bringing together the theological notion of adoption and marriage. But I also have to ask if Ames the theologian is at odds with Calvin's theology on baptism. According to Calvin, baptism is not necessary for salvation.⁵⁷ Lila has faith. That would be enough.⁵⁸ The answer lies, again, in Calvin's theology of adoption. I suggest that both Ames and Lila need this concrete rite in front of the congregation, showing that Lila is adopted into God's family, just as she has been taken into Ames's family in marriage. The biblical imagery of God and his unrelenting love for the unfaithful Israel is implied in front of the God-fearing people of Gilead when Ames affirms his love for his "unseemly" wife.⁵⁹ Marilynne Robinson has described the sacraments as "an utterance above language, the kindest

55. Robinson, *Lila*, 257–260.

56. Ames is of course right in implying that baptism, death, and resurrection belong together. "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:3–5, NIV). In an interview Robinson makes the biblical connection of death and baptism explicit, intertwining also blessing and mortality: "One of the things that's very striking about baptism as an idea, in terms of the language in which it is dealt with biblically, is that it's a baptism into death. The meaning of it being that in a certain sense you take on mortality by identification. So that the idea of blessing and the acknowledgement of the fact of mortality are very implicit together." Jill Owens, "The Epistolary Marilynne Robinson", *Powells*, 19 January 2008, <https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/the-epistolary-marilynne-robinson>, accessed 2021-04-17.

57. Calvin, *Institutes*, 525: "How much evil has been caused by the dogma, ill expounded, that baptism is necessary to salvation, few perceive, and therefore think caution the less necessary. For when the opinion prevails that all are lost who happen not to be dipped in water, our condition becomes worse than that of God's ancient people, as if his grace were more restrained than under the Law."

58. As concrete signs of Lila's faith, she is often depicted as praying, she goes to church every Sunday and is adamant about raising her son a Christian.

59. In *Gilead* Ames also suggests that in baptism a person's sacredness is acknowledged. Robinson, *Gilead*, 104. He adheres to Calvin's teaching: "For Paul connects together the word of life and baptism of water, as if he had said, by the gospel the message of our ablution and sanctification is announced; by baptism this message is sealed." Calvin, *Institutes*, 513.

deed ever done, the purest gesture of love ever made”.⁶⁰ Reflecting this idea, Lila experiences baptism as an act of love.⁶¹

When Lila holds her baby after the baptisms, she remembers Mellie, Doane, Doll, and other people from her past. She still fears for their eternal fate: “It couldn’t be fair to punish scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mothers didn’t even like them, and who would probably have better excuses for the harm they did than the ones who had somebody caring about them.” A mystical experience ensues. Lila imagines being in heaven and asks: “Can a soul in bliss feel a weight lift off his heart? She couldn’t help imagining – Oh, here you are! Your dear weariness and ugliness as beautiful as light!”⁶² Lila imagines seeing Doll again, transformed.⁶³ She wonders: “If Ames thinks he can bring me to heaven with him, will I be able to bring Doll to eternity, and maybe even the rest of the migrant workers? Will she carry to heaven that teenager who killed his father?”⁶⁴ And “wicked old Mack”, the man she used to love in the whorehouse?⁶⁵ Lila answers her questions by imagining Mack “wondering what the catch was, what the joke was, somehow knowing that she had brought him there. And his child. She couldn’t bear to be without them”, Lila thinks. In this meditation it is

60. Anthony Domestico, “Blessings in Disguise: The Unfashionable Genius of Marilynne Robinson”, *Commonweal* 141:18 (2014), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blessings-disguise>, accessed 2021-04-17.

61. We are reminded here of Potts’s analysis of *Housekeeping*, where he argues that what is “real” about the sacraments is the love that stirs them; a love that is also necessarily accompanied by loss and absence. Potts, “The World Will Be Made Whole”, 493. I have already referred to Potts’s argument stating that Robinson proposes a novel sacramental theology in *Housekeeping*. I suggest that the altar scene makes a strong case for a similar argument about *Lila*. Here love and loss are also entwined with the sacrament, and in a more explicit way than in *Housekeeping*.

62. Robinson, *Lila*, 258–259.

63. A recurring theme in Robinson’s essays is the injustice towards the poor. Their suffering calls for a final redemption by God’s grace. This idea is reflected in Doll’s heavenly transformation. See Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, New York 2015, 238. Robinson asks how the dead, “motley and cantankerous” as they have been, can live again. She answers: “Imagine that we find ourselves restored, and our friends, and our enemies, and those so blighted and neglected that all their beauty had been only God’s to enjoy. Souls. A heaven of souls.”

64. Robinson, *Lila*, 259.

65. Rowan Williams suggests “a theologically complex agenda” in *Lila* that he refers to as “implicatedness”: we are “tangled and embedded in relations we have not chosen”. He asks: If Lila is redeemed, will those who made Lila to be who she is, be redeemed “in her, with her, through her”? Williams cites a saying of his Russian Orthodox friend that matches the idea of heavenly restoration in *Lila*: “We all go to heaven in each other’s pockets.” Rowan Williams, “Beyond Goodness: Gilead and the Discovery of the Connections of Grace”, in Timothy Larsen & Keith L. Johnson (eds.), *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson*, Downers Grove, IL 2019, 158–159, 162. See also Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology*, Grand Rapids, MI 2017, 99. Plantinga Pauw maintains that Lila expresses solidarity with those “who are strangers to the covenants of promise”.

implied that Lila's shame has finally been alleviated: "It was eternity that let her think like that without a bit of shame."⁶⁶ Lila has managed to bring this ragtag bunch of misfits to heaven. There is no more shame in being associated with these poor stragglers. Theologically, Lila's revelation of heaven reflects Karl Barth's (1886–1968) theology of salvation, enhanced with the idea of human love. This universalist notion that all will be saved is based on Barth's theology of election, reinterpreting the Calvinist doctrine of predestination.⁶⁷ Robinson ends *Lila* on the same note as all her previous novels: the idea of restoration.⁶⁸

Consequently, it is Lila's imagery of heavenly restoration that ties together the theological and psychological meanings of baptism in *Lila*.⁶⁹ Although her shame has probably not gone completely, Lila can now live with it: Ames has declared his love for her in front of his congregation. Does she need more proof? In this theological resolution Robinson rewrites Calvinist theology. Heavenly adoption is offered to any scoundrel who has done his best to survive in life.⁷⁰ It is as simple as this: "She [Lila] couldn't bear to be without them."⁷¹ In *Lila* love determines who finds the final restoration in heaven. The ties between those who love each other cannot be severed.

66. Robinson, *Lila*, 260.

67. Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology", in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, Cambridge 2000, 93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOLO521584760.006>. According to McCormack, "the revolution which Barth effected in the Reformed understanding of predestination was to replace Calvin's version of double predestination with a universal election". The influence of Barth's theology on Robinson's novels has been established in previous research. For a convincing example of this, see Alison Jack, "Barth's Reading of the Parable of The Prodigal Son in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*: Exploring Christlikeness and Homecoming in the Novel", *Literature and Theology* 32 (2018), 100–116, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frx018>. Robinson herself maintains that "the great modern Calvinist was Karl Barth". "Marilynne Robinson: Prevenient Courage", *Faith and Leadership*, 24 October 2011, <https://faithandleadership.com/marilynne-robinson-prevenient-courage>, accessed 2021-04-17.

68. James Wood, *The Fun Stuff and Other Essays*, New York 2012, 169. Wood suggests that "behind all of Robinson's works is an abiding interest in the question of heavenly restoration".

69. As to the theological concept of restoration, Alister McGrath, *On Christian Theology*, 246, explains that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ "changed things" for the created order, above all humanity, which have fallen into disorder. "The doctrine of salvation deals with the restoration of the created order, and above all humanity, to its proper relationship to God." I suggest that also in her emphasis on grace Robinson follows Karl Barth. On Barth and the doctrine of predestination, McGrath argues: "Despite all appearances to the contrary, humanity cannot be condemned. In the end, *grace will triumph, even over unbelief*" (p. 349, my italics).

70. Calvin, *Institutes*, 273, maintains that Scripture "sets forth the resurrection as intended, along with celestial glory, for the children of God only". In *Lila* Robinson opens the door of heaven, to use Calvin's word, to the "ungodly", too – but with the exception of the mean-spirited "Mrs" of the whorehouse, who Lila does not mention in her vision of heaven.

71. Robinson, *Lila*, 260.

In her important essay “Grace”, where Robinson explores grace in William Shakespeare’s (1564–1616) plays, she contends: “The great acts of grace at the end of many of his plays are the restoration of lost loved ones. Human love in the purest forms we can know it, wife and husband, parent and child, has the aura and the immutability of the sacred.”⁷² To be sure, Robinson offers a Shakespearean ending in *Lila*, incorporating the idea of restoration, grace, and human love into the theology of baptism: Ames and Lila love each other, and this second baptism affirms and acknowledges this love – and, if we borrow from the sacramental theology found in *Gilead*, they also mutually bless each other at the altar.⁷³

Robinson has written that she observes “a law of completion” in her writing.⁷⁴ In *Housekeeping* this law, “that everything must finally be made comprehensible”, is made visible in the powerful imagery of ascension.⁷⁵ Theologically, baptism gives us what it promises, but our lives will always be marred by incomprehension, disappointment, and doubt. But there is a hope for restoration, a restoration where we will finally comprehend everything.⁷⁶ In these passages Robinson explicitly builds upon Calvin’s theology, where God is at the centre, not the individual Christian. In her essays Robinson often directs harsh critique towards her fellow Christians who “feel they have crossed a line into assured salvation”.⁷⁷ In *Lila* Robinson gives literary expression to a theology where God is *extra nos*, and the sacrament cannot be earned by our “free choice” or “decision for Christ”.⁷⁸

72. Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 48–49. Robinson – who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* – connects longing for an eternal life with one’s loved ones, expressed by Shakespeare’s characters, with “the unquestionable power of human love”. Robinson suggests: “Shakespeare, my theologian, never asserts but often proposes that we participate in grace, in the largest sense of the word, as we experience love, in the largest sense of that word.” In loving and forgiving, even after their deaths, Shakespeare’s characters are “at last fully themselves, purely the souls God gave them”. *Lila*’s ending ties together restoration, eternal life, love, and God’s unfathomable grace.

73. Latz, “Creation in the Fiction of Marilynne Robinson”, 284, observes a literary or novelistic theology in *Gilead*. What is at play in the altar scene in *Lila* is precisely this novelistic theology, offering new interpretations for Calvinist theology.

74. Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, New York 2018, 106–107.

75. Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 92.

76. Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 92: “There will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.” This image could be from *Lila*, Lila dreaming of once again sleeping beside Doll. This is also a literary image of adoption – effective in our mundane life and beyond, pointing also to the feminine attributes given to God in the Bible.

77. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 304.

78. Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, Collegeville, MN 2009, 464. Johnson argues that “a clear baptismal spirituality places the theological emphasis where it should be: on God, the great author and initiator of salvation”.

Finally, I suggest that Robinson purposefully lets Lila blossom as a theologian. Throughout the novel Lila challenges Ames's theology.⁷⁹ She actively interprets her life experiences in the light of both the Bible and Calvinist theology. She courageously engages herself in the process of creating her own theology, being given the final word in the last sentence of the novel: "Someday she would tell him [Ames] what she knew."⁸⁰ What did Lila know? Ames is still unsure whether he has succeeded in bringing Lila to heaven. But Lila has already had a mystical vision of heaven after her second baptism. She *knows* that in a final restoration all those who love each other will be together. It is this comfort she will one day offer her husband.

"Can a Person Be Rinsed Clean?" – Conclusion

In her fiction Marilynne Robinson does not simply transfer Calvinist theology into prose. Lila is not content with preordained ideas of Calvinist theology. When predestination bothers her, she tries to escape the throes of the doctrine by washing away her baptism. On the last pages of the novel Lila is granted a revelation of heaven, offering her a theological solution with which she can live. Robinson knits shame, baptism, adoption, marriage, and restoration together creatively in a way that is effective both as literary imagination and as theology.

I have explored *Lila* for theological and psychological aspects of baptism. I paraphrase the quote "In that water you could rinse things clean" from the laundry scene and ask: Can a person be rinsed clean of sin and shame in baptism? The answer Robinson proposes in *Lila* is affirmative. Theologically, what baptism objectively gives a person is absolute and unwavering, as expressed in, for example, Calvin's *Institutes*. But as Lila shows, human emotions and theological scruples can make it difficult to believe that, in Lila's words, one "could live". Our mistakes and sins haunt us. Baptism even brings up fear, as in Lila's case: will her baptism separate her from those she has loved? Is it possible, according to *Lila*, for baptized Christians to bask in God's good sunlight – just like Lila's dresses do on laundry day – and enjoy divine grace, regardless of the theological and psychological obstacles life throws in their way?

Robinson's answer is yes. Lila will surely still be tormented by her past. But instead of perfect peace of mind Robinson offers Lila *grace*, grace that

79. In an interview Robinson speaks of Lila as a theologian: "I consider Lila to be, in her way, as much a theologian as John Ames [Lila's husband] is. She's just a *natural theologian*, as they would say." "A Conversation With Marilynne Robinson", *The Nation*, 7 January 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/conversation-marilynne-robinson/>, accessed 2021-04-17. My italics.

80. Robinson, *Lila*, 261.

has to fall over “all the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear”.⁸¹ Grace bestows Lila with a hope that is theologically outrageous: she will be able to bring her unchristian loved ones into heaven. Those poor “scoundrels” will finally receive justice. In my reading of *Lila* Robinson can be understood as suggesting that the ultimate goal of being baptized into God’s family is to become a vessel of grace, to be someone like Lila, who extends her hand to all those she used to love, and mysteriously leads them to heaven. ▲

SUMMARY

The aim of this article is to explore the depiction of baptism in Marilynne Robinson's *Lila*. In a way that is unique for contemporary fiction, the protagonist, Lila, seeks in baptism a relief of her chronic feelings of shame and a confirmation that she is loved. However, after her baptism the Calvinist doctrine of election drives Lila to emotional and theological despair. I suggest that the Calvinist notion of adoption in baptism is a unifying thread in Lila's theological and psychological dilemma, emphasized by her reading of the Book of Ezekiel. From a theological point of view, in baptism one changes ontologically for once and for all. But Lila's story shows that grappling with this transformation can be an emotionally painful process. Robinson depicts her protagonist as a theologian in her own right. This is significant in a novel in which the theological authority lies with male pastors and theologians, regardless of whether they are present in theological books or in religious communities in the 1950s Midwest. Lila understands in a mystical experience of heaven that she will be able to bring her non-Christian loved ones with her into heaven. This unusual rewriting of sacramental theology signifies how Lila constructs her own theology; a rewriting that connects baptism with Barth's universalism and his idea of restoring all humanity. Thus, I argue in this article that in *Lila* Robinson incorporates a recurring idea of sacramental theology into her fiction, a final restoration in which grace mends the relationships severed in and by life.

81. Robinson, *Lila*, 260.