**Murdoch and *Gilead*: John Ames as a Model of Murdochian Virtue**

**Abstract**

What’s so *good* about John Ames? The narrator of Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* has been much admired, but it’s far from obvious why. His life is quiet and unassuming, and has for the most part been uneventful in the extreme. In this paper I draw on Iris Murdoch’s moral philosophy to explain the moral arc of the novel, and suggest that the novel in turn can shed light on Murdoch’s key ethical ideas.

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Many readers of Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* have been struck by the goodness of its protagonist, the Reverend John Ames.[[1]](#endnote-1) So much so, that various reviewers have specifically commented upon this: in the *New York Times*, for example, John Wood writes that “Robinson’s pastor is that most difficult narrator from a novelist’s point of view, a truly good and virtuous man”, and Donald Morisson in the *Financial Times* states “Ames is that rarity in fiction, a thoroughly good man”.[[2]](#endnote-2) But why should Ames be such a notably good figure? He’s certainly not conventionally heroic, and the majority of his outward actions are wholly unremarkable. Why, then, has Ames seemed to readers to be so very good? In this paper, I’ll suggest that Murdoch’s ethical framework can make sense of what’s so admirable about Ames. Moreover, I’ll suggest that *Gilead* illuminates some key ethical ideas in Murdoch’s philosophical writing by providing an extended exploration of a deeply ethically engaged life. Finally, given this confluence between their ethical visions, I’ll consider whether the ethical shortcomings Ames displays reflect incipient shortcomings within Murdoch’s ethical framework. I’ll conclude that, on the contrary, they indicate areas in which Ames – an otherwise very good man – fails to live up to Murdoch’s ethical ideals.

At a first glance, it might seem surprising to use Murdoch’s philosophical writing to explore Robinson’s *Gilead*. *Gilead* is suffused in Christian thought and imagery and narrated by a Congregationalist preacher of deep religious conviction. Murdoch, by contrast, inhabits a Godless universe, briskly assuming that serious-minded people no longer believe in God.[[3]](#endnote-3) She is admiring of certain religious traditions or sensibilities, but she picks out Catholicism as the key Christian example of this.[[4]](#endnote-4) Initially, it might appear that the two thus have little in common. But I will suggest that these appearances are misleading: there is significant convergence in the ethical visions presented in these works, and each sheds light on the other.

I begin in §1 by briefly summarising *Gilead* and contrasting the character of Ames with his more obviously impressive grandfather and (to a lesser extent) father. In §2, I go on to outline some core Murdochian ethical concepts and ideas. In §3, I use these Murdochian ideas to make sense of the moral trajectory of *Gilead*, and why Ames might seem morally admirable. Finally, in §4 I address Ames’ moral shortcomings and whether they reflect shortcomings of Murdoch’s ethical framework.

1. Overview of *Gilead*

*Gilead* tells the story of the Reverend John Ames, the Congregationalist pastor of the small town of Gilead, Iowa. An epistolatory novel, it takes the form of letters from the elderly Ames to his son, whom he has lately realised he will not live to see grow up. Ames has had an unadventurous life. He is seventy-six, and seventy-four of his years have been lived in Gilead. He has not travelled much, nor has he played a major role in any local developments. He has seemingly been a diligent pastor, but the death of his young wife in childbirth and the subsequent death of his daughter for many years caused him quiet grief and exacerbated his tendency to retreat into the solitude of his books. Late in life, he has met a much younger, uneducated woman, and made a socially unorthodox marriage. His young son is the offspring of this marriage, and he delights in this unforeseen joy.

Much of the narrative of *Gilead* centres on the return of Ames’ namesake, John Ames Boughton (Jack). Jack is Ames’ dearest friend’s beloved son, who has long been estranged from his father. Ames initially dislikes and resents Jack, fearing that he is concealing malicious intentions. Over the course of the novel, Ames comes to understand and love Jack, and Jack in turn reveals to Ames that he is married to a Black woman with whom he has a son. Legally barred from cohabiting, Jack has been unable to provide for his family or to find a way for them to live together. Ames listens sympathetically, but is unable to do anything to resolve Jack’s difficulties, and Jack leaves Gilead alone, with his problems unresolved.

This quiet and gentle existence is in stark contrast to the lives of his father and grandfather, both of whom were also preachers. His grandfather is presented as an awe-inspiring figure, with an intensity of purpose that both impresses and terrifies the young (and perhaps old) Ames. The abolitionist cause was his grandfather’s life mission, and he fought in the ‘Bleeding Kansas’ confrontations (about whether Kansas would enter the Union as a slave or free state), before fighting in the Union army and losing an eye in the civil war. His selflessness is reiterated in his ordinary behaviour, too: he thinks nothing of giving away all that he has to the poor. His selflessness and fierce commitment to the abolitionist cause, as well as his no-less-violent disappointment at the lack of ensuing justice, present him as an obviously heroic figure, and Ames emphasises this, continually comparing him to Old Testament prophets and saints.

His father, by contrast, is resolutely committed to pacifist ideals. He has as deep an ethical conviction as his father, but in his case it’s a fierce commitment to non-violence (“peace is its own justification”, p. 96). He stands by this conviction despite the severe strain it puts on his relationship with his father, a relationship that ends with bitter disappointment on both sides.

It would be easy to see why Ames’ grandfather or perhaps even his father might be considered strikingly morally good. His grandfather lived according to demanding ethical ideals, and sacrificed much for a noble and morally urgent cause. His actions may have made the world a better place. One might worry, however, that he relished too much the starkness of his vision, and in that light Ames’ father’s calling, peace, might seem to have a nobility of its own.

Ames does not obviously adopt either of these positions. He’s not a courageous man of selfless sacrifice, like his grandfather, and neither is he a defender of peace, like his father. Their single-minded visions have made way in him for a man of endless pondering, able to resist ever committing on a question: “there is a tendency, in my thinking, for the opposed sides of a question to cancel each other out more or less algebraically – this is true, but on the other hand, so is that, so I discover a kind of equivalency of considerations that is interesting in itself but resolves nothing” (p. 159). Ames’ existence has been largely quiet, academic and uneventful. Absent the noble commitment to justice that characterises his grandfather or the love of peace that characterises his father, we might thus wonder why Ames appears to readers to be so strikingly *good*.

1. Outline of Murdochian Ethics

I want to suggest that approaching *Gilead* from within Murdoch’s ethical framework can shed light on why we might think that Ames is strikingly good. I will suggest that the moral trajectory of Gilead is well-understood in Murdochian terms, and that, in turn, the novel can shed light on Murdochian ideas that can otherwise seem obscure.

Murdoch is in many ways an unorthodox ethicist. She was a British philosopher writing from the 1950s to the 1990s, but she rejected the behaviourism and linguistic philosophy of her British contemporaries as well as the existentialism favoured by their Continental counterparts, instead drawing inspiration from Plato. Murdoch’s ethical framework is deep and complex, but I want to draw out three core Murdochian ideas exemplified in *Gilead*. To begin with, take the following passage from Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good*:[[5]](#endnote-5)

Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness. It is a task to come to see the world as it is. (p. 89)

This passage highlights one core concern for Murdoch: the idea that morality is fundamentally a matter of ‘just vision’, or more generally, ‘good quality of consciousness’. Contrary to what she saw as a consensus in contemporary ethics that only actions and choices could be morally significant, she insists that morality is also crucially a matter of clear vision.

Further, Murdoch explains *why* it is a task to attain this clear vision and come to see the world as it is:

By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world. … And if quality of consciousness matters, then anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. (p. 82)

It is difficult to see the world as it really is, Murdoch states, because the greedy, anxious ego is constantly creating falsifying fantasies which distort our vision. The good quality of consciousness, that which enables us to overcome such fantasies, is identified as love, or loving attention: “It is in the capacity to love, that is to see, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists.” (p. 65). Loving attention is a kind of patient, discerning attention to reality that allows us to see it as it really is.

Finally, Murdoch claims that there is an endless perfectibility to the task of seeing the world as it truly is:

M [an agent trying to understand another person] is engaged in an endless task. As soon as we begin to use words such as ‘love’ and ‘justice’ in characterizing M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture of her situation the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection. (p. 23)

Our vision of reality, Murdoch thinks, can become better, truer and more adequate. But such vision is driven by an idea of perfection and will never be *fully* adequate to its object. The proper moral agent will therefore be engaged in a continuous progressive task.

The three Murdochian ideas I will draw on are therefore: first, the insistence that the quality of our consciousness is ethically significant. Second, the idea that the good quality of consciousness involves loving attention, and that this requires overcoming the greedy, falsifying ego and seeing things as they truly are. Third, the claim that there is an endless perfectibility to this task – that it is driven by an ‘idea of perfection’ which human beings can move towards but never wholly attain.

1. Murdochian Ethical Ideals in *Gilead*

First and foremost, given the absence of ‘action’ in *Gilead* and the ordinariness of the action that does occur, it seems clear that if we are to understand Ames as a good man, it must be for the quality of his consciousness rather than his actions. As an epistolary novel, Gilead is well-suited to unveil the character of Ames’ inner life. It is the workings of such consciousness that have struck so many as making Ames thoroughly good: it is the way Ames sees the world that seems so admirable. The idea that the quality of our consciousness matters is necessary to see why Ames is good, though not sufficient.

More deeply, I want to suggest that Ames’ goodness can be understood in the light of Murdoch’s claim that good consciousness involves the exercise of loving attention, which requires overcoming the ego and seeing things as they truly are. The central moral arc of *Gilead* concerns Ames’ relationship with Jack. Ames’ first comment about Jack is terse and dismissive: “I don’t know how one boy could have caused so much disappointment without ever giving anyone any grounds for hope” (p. 82). The petty nastiness of that line is striking in a character who seems ever alert to the joy to be found in others. However, the reader later comes to recognise that in context this assessment of him might even be generous. Jack’s past is littered with cruelties to others, some of them harms suffered by Ames himself: shattering his windows, setting a fire in his mailbox, (temporarily) stealing a photograph of his deceased wife for whom he is in deep mourning, and so on.

Later, Ames reveals that relations with Jack only truly broke down after Jack had a child with an extremely young girl, herself little more than a child, and abandoned the mother and baby. Never, to the best of anyone’s knowledge, did he try to see or help either. The mother and child lived in poverty and squalor, and the child, still unnamed, later died.

All of this, one might think, would give good reason for distrust of Jack, cynicism, and even fear, and Ames expresses all of these. In Ames’ case, his fear is exacerbated by awareness of his growing frailty and inability to provide for or protect the family he will soon leave behind. In this situation, Ames’ unease around Jack is far from condemnable, and his behaviour towards Jack, whilst imperfect, is nonetheless impressive. Ames’ mere politeness to Jack in this context, whilst not enough to make him strikingly good, is a minor moral achievement.

However, Ames is keenly alert to the possibility that his own failings are blinding him to a fuller, fairer understanding of Jack, and that he is being unjust in his assessment of him: “it is hard for me to see good faith in John Ames Boughton, and that’s a terrible problem” 175. Ames is upset by his inability to see what good there is in Jack, and he strives to amend this, starting by acknowledging his sense of sadness at feeling that he cannot keep up with the world any longer:

I really feel as though I’m failing, and not primarily in the medical sense. And I feel as if I am being left out, as though I’m some straggler and people can’t quite remember to stay back for me. (p. 161-2)

This general fear and resentment attaches itself to Jack, whom Ames acknowledges would look less out of place than himself within Ames’ own family, and whose easy familiarity with his family he thus resents. It takes great humility and honesty for Ames to acknowledge these fears, and to recognise that he is unfairly projecting them on to Jack.

A deeper resentment, and one more specific to Jack, nonetheless continues at this point to linger in the background of Ames’ interactions with him. Jack comes from the ‘tumultuous’ Boughton household, a lively place ‘overflowing’ with children. This is in stark contrast to Ames’ own silent household, and he is clearly pained by it. Recalling being told during the baptismal service that Jack would be his namesake, Ames writes:

It took me a while to forgive him for that. … If I had had even an hour to reflect, I believe my feelings would have been quite different. As it was, my heart froze in me and I thought, This is *not* my child – which I truly had never thought of any child before. I don’t know exactly what covetise [covetousness] is, but in my experience it is not so much desiring someone else’s virtue or happiness as rejecting it, taking offense at the beauty of it. (p. 214)

Ames is affronted, filled with painful anger at the thought that Jack has been offered to him in compensation for his own devastating loss. Offered another child on which to bestow parental love, he cannot but reject it, seeking to affirm this significance of his own dead child by rejecting the one offered to him as replacement.

Ames’ pain and resentment are sharpened by Jack’s later behaviour towards his own child. In contrast to Ames’ attempts to honour his brief time with his child, he sees Jack as having ‘squandered’ his fatherhood. Though Ames is clearly not the primary victim of Jack’s actions, it hardens his heart against Jack, and once hardened he cannot but see Jack as unregenerate, someone on whom hope would indeed be wasted. He cannot see any of Jack’s actions in a positive light, and ascribes cynical motives to the most innocuous of his actions. (When Jack tells Ames he looks well, for instance, Ames complains about his ‘prevarication’ p. 105). This certainly does pick up on *something* true of Jack: Jack has indeed caused terrible hurt to others, and is jaded and cynical. However, it does not do justice to the complexities of his character. Murdoch’s ethical framework describes this situation well: Ames’ anxious, self-protective ego is creating a falsifying veil here, distorting his vision of Jack and preventing Ames from understanding him.

Having acknowledged this fuller role that his resentment plays in his vision of Jack, Ames begins to strive to amend this, seeking a truer and kinder understanding of him. In overcoming his own self-protective fantasies, Ames becomes able to discern some good in Jack. Jack comes to speak with him, and Ames notes that it is “good of him” to allow him a moment to collect himself (he’s been napping as he waits) (p. 191). It’s a small thing, but it’s one of the first times in the novel where Ames imputes unmixed good motives to Jack. It therefore indicates an important shift in his perspective: it is true that Jack has done Ames this small kindness, and recognising it overturns Ames’ habitual cynicism about Jack. In particular, it’s noteworthy that Ames is able to recognise Jack’s kindness despite the humbling recognition of his own age and frailty that it entails. Ames is thus starting to overcome the falsifications of his anxious ego through the exercise of virtues such as love, justice and humility.

As Ames strives to move beyond the preoccupations that falsify his vision of Jack, his descriptions of Jack alter. Jack is no longer regarded as an irritating inconvenience, and Ames becomes aware of Jack’s tiredness, fragility, and lack of ease in the world: “he gave me a look, then covered his eyes with his hand. There were elements of grief and frustration in that gesture, and of weariness as well. And I knew what it meant.” (p. 193). At this point, Jack has not yet told Ames about his wife and child, so Ames does not yet understand him, and continues to resent him. Still, this description is notable in that Ames is beginning to attune to Jack’s needs and become aware of his troubled inner life. Far from viewing him as scheming, he notes that he is frustrated, grieved and weary. This more humane description of Jack is also clearly a truer one – Jack *is* frustrated, grieved and weary. In Murdochian terms, overcoming the falsifying distortions of the ego and lovingly attending to Jack has allowed Ames to more truly grasp who Jack really is.

Nonetheless, Ames does not rest content with this minor development. He continues to strive to understand his own shortcomings regarding Jack and to do greater justice to him. After the above-mentioned conversation, he turns to further ponder and pray over his relationship with Jack. He is not content with mediocre moral achievement, and feels that he continues to fail Jack in some important way.

I want to connect this with the third idea I drew from Murdoch, namely the idea that there is an endless perfectibility to the task of loving attention, and that we both can and should act in the light of an ideal of perfection. For Ames, this ideal of ethical perfection is religious:

When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking me in this moment, in this situation? … I am reminded of this precious instruction by my own great failure to live up to it recently … Much more prayer is called for, clearly. (p. 141)

In this passage, Ames presents an ethical framework for his relationships that understands how he should behave not in terms of a bare minimum needed for morally adequate behaviour or even a set of conditions sufficing for good behaviour, but in terms of an ideal. An ideal (unlike a bare minimum) can be fulfilled to different degrees, and it is clear that his actions will never perfectly fulfil all that he understands the Lord as asking of him. Nonetheless, it is important that he acts in the light of this inspiring ideal and that it moves him to continue striving to improve his relations with Jack.

This ideal of perfection makes Ames continually turn back to Jack and attempt to do better by him, leading to his realisation that his failure to fulfil his fatherly role to Jack has poisoned their relations. Jack is not merely indifferent or antagonistic towards him: he is also anxiously seeking a father figure. Jack’s calling him ‘Papa’ is not simply a way to irritate him, as he initially suspects; it is also a plea for Ames’ affection. It is Ames, rather than his own father, whom he seeks out for advice and spiritual guidance, and to whom he reveals the truth about his family. Petit (2010) even suggests that Jack’s childhood misdemeanours should be seen as repeated bids for Ames’ attention – attempts to force Ames to father him.[[6]](#endnote-6) Ames’ realisation that he has failed Jack in this way precipitates an extraordinary moment in which he recognises and accepts Jack as his ‘son’:

John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also. By ‘my son’ I mean another self, a more cherished self. That language isn’t sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do. (p. 215)

This moment marks a deeply significant overcoming of Ames’ rejection of Jack. Not only does he overcome his antipathy to Jack, but here he moves towards loving acceptance of him. For Ames to embrace Jack as his ‘son’ is for him to accept strenuous demands to love him, to strive to understand him and do well by him. It is, in Murdochian language, to be moved by an idea of perfection in his relationship with Jack, an ideal that guides and inspires Ames.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Having accepted Jack as his ‘son’, Ames is told about Jack’s family. It is clear here that Ames stands in Jack’s father’s stead: having come home with the hope of telling his father about his family and seeing whether he could make a life in Gilead, he instead turns to Ames. Ames is unable to offer Jack any practical help, but his description of him is suffused with love:

This morning I saw Jack Boughton walking up toward the bus stop, looking too thin for his clothes, carrying a suitcase that seemed to weigh almost nothing. Looking a good deal past his youth. Looking like someone you wouldn’t much want your daughter to marry. Looking somehow elegant and brave. (p. 273)

This loving attention enables Ames to offer Jack his wholehearted blessing. It’s a beautiful moment, one in which Jack, despite his many troubles, is affirmed, accepted and loved – and in which he is able to accept such love:

And he took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course – ‘The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.’ Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient, for that matter. Then, when he didn’t open his eyes or lift up his head, I said ‘Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.’ Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream. (p. 276)

This blessing marks the final reversal of Ames’ initial resentful baptism of Jack. That earlier occasion should have been a moment of joy, but instead was one of pain and anger. This, many years later, is in many ways a moment of pain: Jack’s hopes in Gilead have been quashed, there is no apparent future for his family, and Ames has been unable to help him. It is nonetheless a moment of healing and restoration in which Jack is seen with all his failings and yet loved as he should have been at the initial baptism, and in which Jack in turn is able to accept the love offered to him.

Despite the fact that Ames now lovingly attends to Jack, he is not blind to his faults. He recognises that Jack looks like ‘someone you wouldn’t much want your daughter to marry’, and notes that it is cruel of Jack to leave Gilead without saying goodbye to his father: “It was truly a dreadful thing he was doing, leaving his father to die without him. It was the kind of thing only his father would forgive him for.” (p. 274). Ames’ loving gaze, then, is not blind to Jack’s shortcomings – he does not view Jack through a falsifying positive lens, but as he truly is. He is well aware that the older Boughton will be heartbroken by Jack’s departure, and that it is ‘dreadful’ for him to leave. He acknowledges Jack’s failings, but continues to strive to do justice to him, realising that Jack’s difficulty in facing the happy families his siblings will bring (they have all been called, as his father is imminently going to die) mirrors the sadness and resentment he himself felt for many years.

Gilead, then, seems to concretise many core ethical ideas in Murdoch’s philosophical work, and by drawing on these we can better understand the moral arc of the novel. Ames’ goodness lies in the way in which he constantly strives to acknowledge and overcome the falsifying distortions of his ego with regard to Jack. He does this even at the cost of painful honesty, led by an ideal of perfect lovingness in his relationship. His patient, humble, loving attention is finally successful, and he moves towards a more adequate grasp of who Jack is and what this requires of him.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Moreover, reading Gilead sheds light on Murdoch’s ethical framework by providing extended concrete illustrations of her core ideas. The extended narrative form seems uniquely well suited for exploring her ethics given her emphasis on gradual progressive changes of vision and their motivations rather than isolated moments of overt action. *Gilead* can thusmake plausible her claim that her ethical framework is in keeping with the ordinary person’s intuitions about how to be good by depicting a moral trajectory well understood in Murdochian terms.

1. Racial Justice, Ames’ Ethical Failures and the Murdochian Ethical Framework

Ames, then, is a morally admirable figure in his overcoming of his fears and anxieties about Jack, and his ultimate loving acceptance of him. How, though, could he rest content with Jack’s unjust situation? For the most part, Ames seems to be curiously blind to the questions of racial justice that thrum beneath the surface of the novel. Having established an affinity between Murdochian ethics and the ethical world of *Gilead*, we might come to worry that Ames’ moral failures here reflect shortcomings of Murdoch’s ethical vision. In particular, we might worry that the loving attention Ames so successfully models with regard to Jack in some way impairs his ability to have a more politically engaged conception of the demands of justice.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Intertwined with Ames’ memories of his own family and his acceptance of Jack are pressing questions of racial justice. Ames’ grandfather has sacrificed much in pursuit of this end, but ultimately been bitterly disappointed. His grandfather’s disappointment is aimed not only at the failure of his mission, but also at his family’s complacency in the face of that injustice. In the racial oppression of the post-war USA he sees the same injustice that he fought to end, and he is enraged by his family’s lack of concern about it.

Ames’ descriptions of his grandfather are oddly strained. On the one hand, he deeply regards him as a ‘saint’: “I am not by any means a saint. My life does not compare with my grandfather’s” (p. 45). Elsewhere, he talks about the ‘holiness’ of his grandfather’s life (p. 232), and of ‘admiring’ him (p. 103). All this is in stark contrast to his descriptions of his own father, who he describes as ‘disappointing’ (p. 8). His grandfather’s life clearly stands as a kind of judgement on his own inaction on racial justice, yet he cannot but admire him. At the same time, this is in tension with his stated loyalties, which lie with his father:

My father was born in Kansas, as I was, because the old man had come there from Maine just to help Free Soilers establish the right to vote, because the constitution was going to be voted on that would decide whether Kansas entered the Union slave or free … things were badly out of hand for a while. All best forgotten, my father used to say. He didn’t like mention of those times, and that did cause some hard feelings between him and his father. I’ve read up on those events considerably, and I’ve decided my father was right. (p. 86)

If Ames truly believed this, his admiration for his grandfather would be badly misplaced. Far from regarding him as saintly, Ames should regard him as a misguided obsessive whose accusations could carry no weight. Yet Ames appears never to have asked what his admiration for his grandfather might imply about his own complacency. He seems to have refused to ask what racial justice requires of him, never even having discussed the issue with his closest friend, despite the racial tensions in Gilead (p. 251).

This is emphasised in Ames’ starkly contrasting descriptions of his own beloved church and the Black church in Gilead, which was burned. To begin with, see the loving description of his own church:

The light in the room was beautiful this morning, as it often is. It’s a plain old church and it could use a coat of paint. But in the dark times I used to walk over before sunrise just to sit there and watch the light come into that room. … In those days, as I have said, I might spend most of a night reading. Then, if I woke up still in my armchair, and if the clock said four or five, I’d think how pleasant it was to walk through the streets in the dark and let myself into the church and watch dawn come into the sanctuary. I loved the sound of the latch lifting. The building has settled into itself so that when you walk down the aisle, you can hear it yielding to the burden of your weight. It’s a pleasanter sound than an echo would be, an obliging, accommodating sound. You have to be there alone to hear it. (p. 80)

Here, Ames is clearly describing a place that is close to his heart. It is the place where he has fulfilled his life’s vocation, a true sanctuary for him in the sad and lonely periods of his life.

This could not be more different from Ames’ refusal to worry about the significance of the fire at the Black church, a fire that precipitated the emigration of the entire community away from Gilead. Every time Ames mentions the fire, he claims that it was small or insignificant:

That and the fire at the Negro church. It wasn’t a big fire – someone heaped brush against the back wall and put a match to it, and someone else saw the smoke a put the flames out with a shovel. (p. 42)

Oh yes, but that was many years ago, when I was a boy. And it was only a small fire. There was very little damage. (p. 195)

[T]hat was a little nuisance fire, and it happened many years ago. (p. 264)

Ames refuses to think about the fire, to consider its significance, or to ask what such events might demand of him. As Lee Spinks (2017) notes, “it is only a “small” fire to those blind to the history of murderous prejudice concealed within it”.[[10]](#endnote-10) These refusals to acknowledge the significance that the church had for its congregation are particularly notable in light of his rapturous appreciation of his own church.

Ames’ insistence that the fire was small and insignificant therefore looks like an active choice, a refusal to recognise how far he has fallen short of the demands of justice. Spinks notes that there is “complex work of repression” occurring within Ames;[[11]](#endnote-11) Ames in some sense knows how far he has fallen short, but he will not confront this. His admiration for his grandfather suggests that he in some sense acknowledges the need for racial justice, but he does not think about the Black community, and refuses to acknowledge the ethical demands he faces.

Ames is thus guilty of a deeply significant moral failing, and we might worry here that this failing is connected to those very things that one admires in him. That is, one might worry that it is *because* his time is spent in lovingly attending to the particulars surrounding him that he fails to take account of the wider historical and political context in which an event like the fire at the church can be ethically important. His loving vision of *other* individuals might therefore be causing his devastating complacency about racial injustices. If this is the case, then it might suggest that Murdochian ethics as a whole is misguided or at least importantly incomplete, since loving attention would not enable us to be morally good. If loving attention distracts us from the urgent demands of justice, perhaps we would do better to eschew it altogether.

However, Ames’ problem is not that he lovingly attends to particulars, but the very limited way in which he does so. As such, it is not *reducing* his loving attention to the world that would morally improve him, but *increasing* it: what Ames requires is not less loving attention, but a more attentive, imaginative form of it. Ames’ problem is his lack of moral imagination, his reluctance to imaginatively overcome social convention and lovingly attend to people unlike himself – but this, Murdoch suggests, can in turn be overcome by loving attention. The problem is not that Ames lovingly attends to his own church, for example, but that it’s *only* his own church that receives such attention. Had Ames lovingly attended to the Black church and its significance for its congregation, he could not possibly have dismissed the fire as a mere nuisance, and it would instead have been seen as a grave attack on someone else’s spiritual home.

In fact, Ames himself does undergo a change of heart throughout the novel. After the first conversation with Jack in which he dismisses the fire, Ames seems to acknowledge not only that he needs to repair his relationship with Jack, but a deeper ethical disquiet:

No sleep this night. My heart is greatly disquieted. … That old weight in the chest, telling me there is something I must dwell on, because I know more than I know and must learn from it myself – that same good weight worries me these days. (p. 204)

This ‘knowing more than he knows’ encapsulates his moral situation at this point. He cannot yet confront the knowledge that he has fallen short. At the same time, he is aware of his failings, and this acknowledgement initiates a kind of reckoning within him of which the reader captures fleeting glimpses as the novel progresses. Having spoken with Jack about his family, he writes the next day:

I woke up this morning thinking this town might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it, and the fault is mine as much as anyone else’s. (p. 266)

The tone in which he speaks about Gilead is usually fondly familiar. This radical change in his attitude towards the place is triggered by his conversation with Jack, and his painful realisation that Gilead would not be a home for Jack’s Black wife and child. Later, reflecting on Jack’s crushed hope, he writes:

And I knew what hope it was. It was just that kind the place was meant to encourage, that a harmless life could be lived here unmolested … These little towns were once bold ramparts meant to shelter just such peace. (p. 276-7)

The town – and he himself, who has identified so closely with it – has grossly failed its mission. Worse, it has failed its mission simply because the inhabitants have ceased to care, have wilfully blinded themselves to the needs of those confronting them, and refused to recognise their own blindness and failures. However, these passages suggest that Ames does come to recognise this injustice, and thus that even here the narrative has a redemptive arc. Far from revealing the shortcomings of Murdoch’s ethics, Ames thus provides an attractive image of the Murdochian ethical life.

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago, 2005) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Wood, *The New York Times (*Nov. 28, 2004) and Donald Morisson, *Financial Times (*Mar 25, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For example: “the old concept of God” (TSG p. 70); “people used to think God existed” (TSG p. 73); “I have … assumed that ‘there is no God’” (TSG p. 74). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Elizabeth Anscombe is perhaps an influence here. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Susan Petit, ”Finding Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Man” in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*”. *Christianity and Literature* 59 (2010), pp. 301-318. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Murdoch connects the idea of perfection with the idea of ‘grace’, suggesting that striving for the Good can enable us to overcome our natural selfishness by a kind of ‘grace’. This has direct parallels here with Ames’ contemplation of God in prayer, which she regards as fulfilling a similar role. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Interestingly, Gilead seems not only to be well-understood within the Murdochian ethical framework, but to require something like Murdochian virtue of its readers. It is slow-paced and meditative, and seemingly requires the kind of patient disciplined attention that Murdoch takes to be characteristic of the moral life. On her view, this would be unsurprising, since she holds that whereas bad art is self-consoling fantasy, good art is truthful, requires loving attention and can encourage us to overcome the anxious ego. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a wider discussion of this potential tension, see Sabina Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lee Spinks, ” “The House of Your Church is Burning”: Race and Responsibility in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*”, *Journal of American Studies* 51 (2017), pp. 141 - 162 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Spinks (2017), p. 157 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)