

Calvinism in Literary Art

The Novels of Douglas Wilson and Marilynne Robinson

Douglas Wilson and Marilynne Robinson have similar views on Calvinism's role in shaping the Puritan vision of America's founders, but their views on Calvinism's role in modern America are very different. Wilson founded New Saint Andrews College in 1994, a classical Christian college in Moscow, Idaho, and is known for his writing on classical Christian education, Reformed theology, and cultural commentary. He has earned his place as a commando in the culture wars who refuses to compromise the fundamentals of Protestant belief. Robinson taught creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop between 1991 and 2016. She has earned her place in high culture, making the compromises required by the literary elite. Both have been interviewed by John Anderson on his podcast, Wilson for his role in the culture wars, Robinson for her analysis of the Book of Genesis. Their novels are a compelling contrast in different Classical and Romantic approaches to Calvinism in literary art.

Douglas Wilson

Like Jane Austen, Wilson writes novels to the formula Aristotle prescribed for Tragedy in *Poetics*: a fatal flaw (or sin) leading to a downfall (*hamartia*), a sudden reversal of fortune or change in circumstance (*peripeteia*), the moment of critical discovery (*anagnorisis*), the cleansing or purging of strong or repressed emotions (*catharsis*). Gustav Freytag charted this formula as a pyramid or arc in *The Technique of Drama*: exposition, complication (rising action), climax (turning point), unravelling (falling action), *denouement* (Tragedy's catharsis became Classicism's *denouement* in the Neoclassical period). Initially it was a dramatic formula for theatre; Austen was unique among her literary peers in adapting it to the novel.

Wilson is not in the same literary class as Austen—of course—and no one knows what inspired him to adopt Aristotle's formula. As he

moves his plots forward, he makes little room for interiority (psychological complexity). Instead, he begins each novel by exposing a moral disorder—a *hamartia*—and he restores as much order as possible at the *denouement*. He knows complete moral order is impossible; human nature makes it frail and contingent; the devil is always on the prowl, like a hungry lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

In his first novel, *Evangellyfish* (2011)—awarded *Christianity Today's* prize for best fiction—the disorder is the hypocrisy, corruption, and sexual immorality in a megachurch, because the great evil of the present age is Christians behaving like pagans while pretending to be Christians. In his second novel, *Flags Out Front* (2017), the disorder is the threats to orthodox Christian belief in a modern America where believing loyalty to Christ has become anathema to the nation's new organising principles of multiculturalism, identity politics, sexual freedom, and expressive individualism. In the third, *Ecochondriacs* (2020), it is the dark side of climate-change politics feeding the evils in American politics more generally. In the fourth, *Ride, Sally, Ride* (2020), it is the sociopolitical tensions dividing the United States—pushing it towards a new civil war—as progressive states confer human status upon android sex dolls while the progressive parts of the Church consider receiving them into the Body of Christ because “they need Jesus”.

Apart from these, Wilson has written a historical romance, *The Man in the Dark* (2019), and a series of adventure novels for boys—*Blackthorn Winter*, *Susan Creek*, *Two Williams*, and *Barbary Jihad*—which follow the seafaring adventures of the Monroe family from the eighteenth century to modern times. He is an economical writer. His adult novels are short, concise, hilarious, display rare acuity of vision, and there are no unnecessary words.

Modern readers tend to react to Calvinist authors with reflexive mental images of the Salem Witch Trials, which damaged the Puritan cause, or Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*, whose stern belief

in predestination harmed the inmates of Lowood School. In the propaganda narratives of liberal Western enlightenment, Calvinists are unenlightened, reasons why religion should be banned from the public square. Wilson is a conservative whose classical understanding of Calvinism complements his biblical beliefs. That alone is sufficient to place him beyond the pale of progressive sensibility.

Wilson describes how he arrived at his Calvinism in *Easy Chairs, Hard Words* (1991), a short and elegant book which should be widely read. His attitude to narrative is influenced by *What I Learned in Narnia* (2010) as well as other authors in *Writers to Read* (2015) which in addition to C.S. Lewis includes Marilynne Robinson, R.F. Capon, G.K. Chesterton, T.S. Eliot, H.L. Mencken, J.R.R. Tolkien, and P.G. Wodehouse. A loyal son of the Reformation, with encyclopaedic knowledge, he is what was once widely known as a Renaissance man.

Wilson's Calvinism displays the classical Christian way of intuiting humanity's goal, purpose—its teleology, its *eudaimonia*—which slowly disappeared on the journey from romanticism to modernism and its posts. His protagonists have *telos* in the same way Austen's protagonists have *telos*. His plots focus on the complementarity of men and women, settling protagonists in godly marriages, healing marriages that need healing. He supports traditional biblical roles for men and women within marriage, including male headship. This does not make him puritanical in the conventional sense of the term. His female protagonists are strong, have agency, are part of each novel's moral disorder—its *hamartia*—as well as part of its moral reordering at the *denouement*, according to God's plan.

In *Evangelicallyfish* the dramatic tension is between the moral disorder of Camel Creek, a megachurch pastored by Chad Lester, and the moral order of Grace Reformed, an orthodox Presbyterian parish pastored by John Mitchell. Lester's lack of a moral compass—his promiscuity—is gradually exposed, but promiscuity involves both sexes and the female protagonists initiate it for many reasons. At the novel's climax (the turning point from the rising to the falling action) Lester's estranged wife admits his promiscuity is a response to his competitive relationship with his father, but that does not explain her unfaithfulness. There is intense media scrutiny, in this rich and comic plot, because the scandal of Camel Creek feeds a news cycle pursuing its own

agenda. At the *denouement*, Lester's false reality collapses. He asks and receives John's forgiveness and mentorship. His wife returns some of her divorce settlement and begins worshipping at Grace Reformed with her new husband, Brian.

In *Flags Out Front* the exposition begins with a drunken sophomore driving past Choctaw Valley Bible College at dawn. He notices three flags at the entrance and makes a statement by switching them around: "The Christian flag was now flying high above the others, the state flag was where the Christian flag had been, and the American flag was where the state flag had been." The rising action describes the complication of Tom Collins, college president, deciding the Christian flag remains above the others. This draws him into the news cycle, into state and national politics, as a loyalist fighting for Christ's headship in the culture wars. At the *denouement*, a corrupt state governor arrives at the college with a SWAT team to rescue the American flag, but

Collins's supporters have arranged a flash mob, back at the governor's mansion, to raise the Christian flag over the American flag.

In *Ecochondriacs* (2020), the exposition begins with an atheist from a nominally Christian family, Helen, fleeing assassins hired by her manager, Steven, who inadvertently sent her an email revealing the dark side of climate change politics. She meets Cody, a Christian with strong evangelical beliefs. As they continue their flight, they develop sexual feelings for each other, but Cody's beliefs keep these in check. They meet and are assisted by Larry and Jill, a strong evangelical man

and woman. Their situation is dire because the dark side of climate change has been weaponised for political gain. Del, an adulterous candidate for US president, has a conversion experience after his wife, Gina, tells him she is divorcing him. By the *denouement*, Helen renews her baptismal vows while Gina is baptised and remains with her husband. Wilson demonstrates his skill with action scenes, as he establishes godly marriages and heals those in need of healing.

In *Ride, Sally, Ride* (2020), the exposition has two parts. First, there is semi-retired defence attorney, Jon, who converted to Christianity after his wife left him for another woman, and his daughter Stephanie, who is not converted yet but is thinking about it. Second, there are Steven and Sally, who have moved from Arkansas to Denver into a nice neighbourhood opposite a Christian family: Benson,

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Roberta, and their son Ace. Sally is not human; she is an android sex doll. Benson sees his new neighbours as an opportunity to evangelise, because “they need Jesus”. Ace sees them as evil because sex dolls cannot be brought to Jesus. The novel’s rising action begins as Benson and Roberta go to Bible study and Steven asks Ace to check on his wife while he goes out. Ace takes the opportunity to dispose of Sally in a compactor at the recycling centre. Has Ace committed a crime or a heroic deed? If the former, what kind of crime? If the latter, what kind of heroic deed? If the answers were obvious until recently, everything is upside down in the world of twenty-first-century identity politics.

Marilynne Robinson

After an interview with James Wood in 2005, Marilynne Robinson was asked a loaded question: “What do you think of Flannery O’Connor?” She admitted to not liking the way O’Connor “creates terribly defective characters and then destroys them”. She realises O’Connor intends to express the presence of grace, in some way, but she believes this is fudging and her definition of grace is different.

Grace is an attribute Scripture assigns to God. From the Hebrew *khen* and Greek *charis*, Grace is God’s transformation of life as distinct from his gift of life. Like oxygen, grace is freely given and has no denomination, but believing in oxygen, why life depends on it, is easier than believing in grace. O’Connor—shaped by the regnant creative writing mode taught during her time at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop—was trying to express grace in the specificity of Catholic theology. But grace has no specificity, literary, cultural, or theological. Grace is Grace.

The Iowa Writers’ Workshop is where Robinson taught creative writing between 1991 and 2016, during a later phase, using different models. She avoids O’Connor’s influences while keeping her theology broadly orthodox. One of her teachers, the post-modern author John Hawkes, believes the novel’s enemies are plot, character, setting, and theme. When such familiar ways of thinking about fiction are abandoned, all that remains is a “totality of vision or structure”. Writing fiction in this unfamiliar landscape is more challenging than writing fiction to a generic formula like the classical one Austen adapted from Aristotle, charted by Freytag, which Wilson makes his own.

Robinson sets her tetralogy—*Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014) and *Jack* (2020)—near the end of the Jim Crow era. She wanted to convey a cultural memory of the Civil War, because chattel slavery is an indelible stain on America’s psyche. The Ames family are a family of multi-generational Congregationalist clergy. John Ames’s grandfather was an abolitionist with a militant understanding of abolition as a Gospel imperative. His father was a pacifist. The memory of the tension between them haunts John’s clerical persona. Presbyterian Robert Boughton is not similarly haunted, being less invested in the indelible stain because his family emigrated from Scotland after the Civil War.

The architecture of the tetralogy is seen in the leitmotifs Robinson weaves seamlessly into its fabric. Congregationalist Ames and Presbyterian Boughton are clergymen in Gilead, Iowa. They remain lifelong friends, bound by a theology they vigorously debate, but any disagreements they have, over whether God finds us or we find God, what salvation means, what damnation looks like—the Calvinist focus on God’s sovereignty, the Arminian focus on free will—never threaten their bond of faith.

The Arminian focus revolves around Lila, a rescued (or stolen) infant who fears attachment, gradually overcomes her desire to remain independent, and is saved by being baptised and becoming Ames’s wife in his old age. The Calvinist focus revolves around Jack Boughton, a much-loved son who remains an exiled soul unable to accept his father’s gracious, unconditional love offered despite his son’s total

depravity. Within this theological structure, the tetralogy expresses Robinson’s panoramic vision of God’s glory.

It is remarkable that Robinson could realise her Calvinism as a powerful work of literary art. A deacon in her Church, she preaches High Christology, Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-existing Logos of John’s Gospel. In her much-quoted interview with the *Church Times* in 2012, Robinson said: “I think, if people actually read Calvin, rather than read Max Weber, he would be rebranded. He is a very respectable thinker.”

She is indebted to Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) whom she discovered during university. His book, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, alerted her to a “more plausible ontology than anything compatible with the ugly determinisms on offer then and now in courses on philoso-

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phy and psychology". She finds problematic the Weberian biases of modern historical and cultural assumptions through which "The void Puritanism has merged with the void Calvinism, swallowing Edwards along the way, to constitute a vast ignorance of early American history, a negative energy that obviates any awareness of contemporary British and European history, with which early New England history is so deeply intertwined". As she reminds her readers, "Ideas about the nature of a good society were developed and applied in New England ... the Puritans were intent on a reformist experiment, as much political as religious."

Jack leaves home to avoid accountability. He has no direction or prospects in life, becomes an alcoholic, serves time in jail, falls in love with a black woman, has a son, and is still an alcoholic bum with no prospects. He finally realises he should go home to see his geriatric father, who always left the door open for him and regularly sent him money to live on. Jack senses there is a reckoning to be reckoned with but never grasps what his role in the reckoning is or should be. In Genesis 3, Adam's sin, which sets humanity's story in motion, is meaningless without free will, construed as Adam's agency. The mystery of Jack's inability to accept responsibility for his agency mirrors the mystery of Adam's inability to accept responsibility for his. Both men look for excuses, Adam gestures towards Eve, Jack towards Tragedy.

This is fudging, in Robinson's terms, because Christianity is anti-tragic and has no tragic vision. Ultimately, the only atonement Jack achieves, before leaving home, for the final time, is a tender attentiveness towards his dying father. This is good, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough in anyone's terms, including his own.

Jack has been baptised and confirmed. He knows Scripture and has a working knowledge of dogmatic theology, but does not *believe*. His problem as an exiled soul is the way he has chosen to exercise his free will throughout his life and refused to accept responsibility for his moral agency, as sinner and alcoholic. Robinson weaves an exquisite artistic frustration around his refusal. O'Connor would have treated Jack differently.

Perhaps, as Jack's father says, when attempting to reconcile the mystery of predestination with the mystery of salvation, "the conclusions are never as interesting as the questions". Jack must remain an exiled soul so Robinson can keep writing literary novels—as a theological commentator and a celebrated artist—shrouded in the mists of high culture. If Jack were saved, in any physical or metaphysical sense, Robinson would be lost.

Readers who see Jack as a tragic figure misunder-

stand Robinson's theological point. He is an exiled soul. He wants to bypass repentance to get to grace, but this is not possible. Even the literary high art of liberal Calvinism—performed in the mutual fandom between Robinson and the Obama White House—can only stretch so far. If Robinson does not believe Jack is evil, she cannot construe him as good.

When Robinson was asked her reasons for finding Calvin's theology profound, her reply was:

One of them certainly was the importance of human consciousness. He's also a humanist; he's terrifically admiring of what the human mind does. He says we have completely fallen away from the glory of God, and look what we are, and then he describes this glorious creature. The implication is that if we were to be in our unfallen condition we would be spectacular. He allows for the reality of great evil. He was living in the 16th century, which was a brutal period. He was ready to grant the dark side of reality, and completely lyrical about what is splendid about it, including the stars and including human consciousness, human presence, most profoundly.

The muddle of ideas here includes Calvin's humanism, what the human mind can do, how spectacular it would be if humanity could return to a prelapsarian state, the great reality of evil, and what is lyrical, splendid, and profound about the dark side of reality including the stars, human consciousness, and human presence. So, her Calvinism blends Puritanism with a *felix culpa* romanticism, with echoes of the romantic image of inspired artist and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Jack's problem—his exiled soul, his unrepented sin—is never solved because Robinson's art needs it to remain unsolved.

Once Robinson's link with romanticism is noticed, Wilson's link with classicism becomes obvious and their differences are easier to discuss. The poignant art she creates around Jack's sin and suffering is an artefact of the literary style she adapted from her teacher and made her own. She belongs to a cultural elite which finds Wilson distasteful, so it turns him into a cartoon, labels him Far Right, and treats him as a threat to its liberal values. She knows the US began as a colony of Puritans but has gradually evolved into what it is today, for better and for worse. This US is quite different from the world of her 1950s Gilead.

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