

BOOK STUDY RESOURCE

GILEAD by Marilynne Robinson

Book Study Commentary and Questions by Emilie White, parishioner at All Souls Cathedral and Professor of English at Warren Wilson College

GILEAD is by Marilynne Robinson, and tells the story of a Presbyterian preacher who has led all of his long life in Gilead, Iowa, in the last two decades of the 19th century and the first five of the 20th. Marilynne Robinson also wrote the novel *HOUSEKEEPING* (1981), which a recent poll conducted by the New York Times named as one of the best novels of the last twenty-five years. She also wrote *MOTHER COUNTRY*, a book of non-fiction, and also a collection of theological and scholarly essays entitled *THE DEATH OF ADAM*.

You'll discover as you read *GILEAD* that it treats several fairly huge themes, and that these themes intersect and inform each other in what may feel to you like a myriad of ways. What follows therefore are a set of questions to help you prize apart the book's various elements so that you can consider them separately.

You may want to wait to read these questions until you're done with the book, so that none of the story is given away.

1. Fathers and sons

Looked at one way, the book can be considered as an extensive (and rather fraught) meditation on the relationship of fathers to their sons. There are several father-son relationships in the book, both literal and figurative. There is the first and most obvious one, the epistolary relationship of John Ames, the narrator, to his young son (to whom he is writing the long letter which is the novel); there is the religiously embattled relationship of Ames's father to HIS father, both of whom, like Ames, were preachers; there is Jack Boughton, who has functioned as a prodigal son for both his biological father and for John Ames; and then there are Ames's theological ruminations on two father-son relationships in the Bible, that of Abram and Ishmael, and Abraham and Isaac.

That's a lot of fathers and sons for one book. And, of course, the reason they're all in there is because Ames wants to talk about them. It's Ames's mind that drives the story forward, which is to say that fathers and sons are much on his mind. The problems entailed in being a good father are preoccupying John Ames to an unusual degree.

For the sake of the upcoming discussion, let's propose the following: That John Ames, during the course of this novel, learns how to be a good father, though not so much to his seven year old son as to the forty-some year old Jack Boughton. Do you agree with this proposal? Why, or why not?

A sub-question to the above one: What is it about Jack Boughton's character that challenges John's so? Or, stated another way: How is Jack a foil for John? Or, stated yet another way: How is Jack Boughton John Ames's "prodigal son"?

2. The dispute between John Ames's father and grandfather over the meaning of Jesus' teachings

What would Jesus do?

Probably all of us have asked that question at some point in our lives, as we've wrestled with a moral dilemma the solution for which isn't immediately apparent. Sometimes, of course, the solution *is* apparent, but carrying it out will involve pain or difficulty, or, more lastingly, leading one's life in a manner less "practical" than those around us--and so, perhaps, leaving them behind. With that word "practical," I am referring to John Ames's grandfather, who, to quote the novel, "was never really a practical man again after that day," meaning, after the day he commits a violent act so as to protect the warring abolitionist, John Brown, and his men. It is "after that day" that the grandfather preaches while wearing a pistol in his belt and a bloodied shirt, this to demonstrate his belief that only war will "free the captive." For the grandfather, when Jesus extends his hand to us and puts it on our shoulder and leaves it there, it is as much in anger for what we have not done as in love and forgiveness for what we have.

His son (who is John Ames's father) hotly disagrees. In a searing argument, he tells his father, "I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt. And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has NOTHING to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing." (GILEAD, pp. 84-85)

I suspect we will want to talk in Book Group about the difference between the Jesus worshipped by John Ames's father and the Jesus worshipped by his grandfather. Do you consider that difference the result of the two men's different ages in the years leading up to the Civil War? After all, childhood would have exempted Ames's father from having to act (he was only ten at the time John Brown and his men hid out in his father's church.) Only as an older man, perhaps, looking back, could he have afforded the pacifism that his father, embroiled in that time and struggle, could not.

But maybe that's not right. (I genuinely don't know the answer myself.) Maybe the difference lies in the two men's characters. It will also be interesting to talk in Book Group about the character of the grandfather, about the ways his "impracticality" allows him to live every moment of his life with Jesus at his side. (In his mind, anyway, he lives that way--but with Jesus at your side, what other mind should count?) Note that Robinson has made the grandfather the most see-able and memorable character in the novel. Why do you think she has done so? Perhaps there is a figure like that in your own life, someone who emblemizes for you a kind of courage that's way further out there than your own. Perhaps you ultimately deemed that courage "impractical," or even dangerous, but its example continues to beckon. It does seem like we need our zealots, our radicals, our crusaders, precisely so we won't have to pay the price for living the crusade ourselves. Maybe that was true for the fathers and sons of the Ames family--again, I have no settled opinions about this. But it will be interesting to take up these questions when we meet.

3. John Ames's character

Do you think John Ames a believable character? Recently I spoke to a friend who does not think him believable, who says that he is "too good to be true." But another friend says that the threats posed by the young Jack Boughton draw out the "worst" in John Ames, thereby making a "human being out of him" (and therefore, presumably, believable.)

How do you weigh in? Here are some sub-questions to get you going.

At times it seems that the bewilderment and bitterness John Ames suffers over the figure of Jack Boughton threatens to corrupt his good character. But by the end of the novel, it's pretty clear that John Ames is going to be okay; despite some fierce temptation, he

hasn't succumbed to hatred or "covetise" or other meannesses of spirit. Why? Do you think it was the fortitude of his character that overcame those threats, or do you think John Ames was, in a sense, saved? Or maybe it's *because* of Ames's practice as a Christian (which we could think of as the source of his fortitude) that he was saved. I mean to muddle your thoughts here productively.

4. "Sometimes I almost forget my purpose in writing this..."

Like most long letters, especially those written on the eve of death, John Ames's to his son tends to digress from its stated purpose. Its fits and starts, its habit of looping around to its conclusions through long stories of luminously vivid detail, shows a man discovering, again and again, that he loves "this life." It also shows a man freshly challenged by the density of life, through feelings of covetise and paranoia stirred up by his encounters with Jack Boughton.

Occasionally Ames will see that he has lost his thread. At one point he says, "Sometimes I almost forget my purpose in writing this, which is to tell you the things I would have told you had you grown up with me, things I believe it becomes me as a father to teach you." (p. 133)

What do you think are John Ames's other purposes in writing to his son? What, for you, are the purposes that drive his writing that he is *not* aware of? In a sense, we can think of the letter as Ames's effort to control the way he is perceived--both as the man he was, and as the man he will become in memory. Do you think he succeeds at that effort of control? What is Ames trying to create with this letter; what is he trying to preserve; and what is he trying to prevent?

Another rather provocative way to ask this question: Perhaps this novel, in its very structure, poses an equivalence between the loss of control entailed in Love, and the loss of control entailed in Death.

Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

5. The Horse in the tunnel

What do you think about the horse in the tunnel, his body half visible above the earth? (This is a totally innocent question, by the way.) It's such an odd, uncanny-feeling, powerful image, sort of like, to quote Robinson, an image from an "extravagant" dream. Why do you think it's in the book?

BOOK STUDY RESOURCE

HOUSEKEEPING by Marilynne Robinson

Book Study Commentary and Questions by Emilie White, parishioner at All Souls Cathedral and Professor of English at Warren Wilson College

I know that the first time I read *Housekeeping*, I found myself exasperated for not knowing what to make of all those long ruminations about water and the surface of water. The following questions and proposals, therefore, are designed to help you make sense of those descriptions—though, obviously, if you wish to have a un-directed reading experience, just ignore this document for the time being and open it again once you're done with the book.

Also, please know that this document will not give the story away.

So, my major questions to you I'm going to state right here, so you don't have to swim through this nine-page document find them. And I'm going to ask them again, later in this document, though in different ways. (Also, just so you know, I'll ask a few more questions as I'm finishing up.)

1. Why does Ruth spend so much time describing water and the surface between water and air? What is it that she wants, deeply wants, that doing so will satisfy?
2. And, what does she ultimately achieve with those descriptions? Let's propose that what she achieves is a kind of vision, or ontology, or metaphysics. What are the contents of that metaphysics? How does the world work, let's say, in the Gospel according to Ruth?

Those are tough questions (I think.) Yet I'd like to pursue them because they may be the only way to get us closer to the heart of the novel. If we don't treat those descriptions as *motivated*—if we don't treat them as an activity that comes from need—then they'll just seem like excess padding in a story that's “really” about two sisters and their eccentric aunt. They're not. **I would like to propose those descriptions—those wet, mossy, exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) descriptions--as Ruth's most important and defining *action* in the book, and I would like to propose that action as a transfiguring one.**

What I'll do now, then, is provide some background information to help you think about these questions and to make them less difficult. This “background information” comes mostly from an interview with Robinson conducted by a writer for the literary journal, *TIN HOUSE*, on the eve of the publication of *GILEAD* (which we just read.) It will include, first, some remarks of Robinson's about her pursuits as a scholar of 19th century American literature (in which she earned a Ph.D. before setting out to write *HOUSEKEEPING*); second, her thoughts about the 19th century “extended metaphor,” which is what she claims she ended up writing when she wrote *HOUSEKEEPING*; and, third, her very provocative (and elusive) ideas about what an extended metaphor can do in terms of envisioning, or re-envisioning, the world. Throughout, then, I'll be excerpting this interview, while also trying

to draw connections between the things Robinson says and the novel itself. And when I pose a question, or introduce an idea that's new, I'll highlight it in bold, so that you can orient yourself as you're reading.

My hope is that we can deepen our encounter with the book and the book's philosophy by getting on terms with it the way that Robinson was on terms with it as she composed it. It's just one approach, and who knows if it will work...I *certainly* don't know if it will work. Its main advantage is that we get to think both of Robinson and of Ruth as **visionaries**, and to ask what their vision "sees." Writes Robinson in an article in the current issue of HARPER'S Magazine:

"It is vision that floods the soul with the sense of holiness, vision of this world."

So, as some of you may know, before setting out to write HOUSEKEEPING, Robinson earned a Ph.D. in 19th century American literature, in particular that of Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson. Robinson grew fascinated with these writers' use of the extended metaphor. Although I realize you were all thinking about the extended metaphor just moments ago, who knows, maybe the phone has just rung, a grandchild has just been born, your car was just broadsided—and, alas, life has prevailed over the extended metaphor once again. Let me therefore offer the definition I'm finding most frequently in the books on my shelf and on the web, which is: **a metaphor that dominates or organizes a whole passage of prose, or a whole poem--or even a whole book.** A few prominent examples of extended metaphors from the 19th century in America could include: the sea in MOBY DICK, also the color white in that novel, and "circles" in Emerson's essays (which he writes about in his essay entitled, not surprisingly, "Circles.") As for Emily Dickinson, a great many of her poems are structured around extended metaphors, such as, foreexample, the well known, "I felt a funeral in my brain." It starts right off with a metaphor, a "funeral," the implications of which Dickinson explores through to the poem's final stanza. (Those of you who are interested in seeing the poem in its entirety will find it at the end of this document.) The reason I list these examples here is because, A) maybe you've encountered one of them yourself, and B), more importantly, this was the kind of literature Robinson was studying as she conceived her own extended metaphor(s) in HOUSEKEEPING. Says Robinson in the TIN HOUSE interview I mentioned above:

*I was an American literature major in college and I became very interested in the nineteenth century's use of extended metaphors. I felt as if that needed to be explored and that people had stopped using metaphor in that incredibly ambitious way for no particular reason. **I felt that metaphor was no longer being used as a way of envisioning the world.** [Emphasis here is mine.] When I was working on my graduate dissertation people told me if you did critical work you couldn't do creative work. So I would write what to me were extended metaphors—I would write them and then put them away—and when I read them again I realized that they cohered and that they were the basis of a fiction.*

The extended metaphor as a way of envisioning the world—let's keep that idea in mind as we take a look at the contents of Ruth's vision.

The first incidence of Ruth's vision comes, I would argue, as soon as the book begins, right there on the third page of the Picador edition, which is the one, I believe, most of us are working with.

“Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. [...] The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips. Our house was at the edge of town on a little hill, so we rarely had more than a black pool in our cellar, with a few skeletal insects skidding around on it. A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands.” (p. 5, HOUSEKEEPING, Picador Edition)

That image, namely, the world reflected in water, “as slight as an image in an eye,” Ruth will return to again and again in the two hundred pages that follow it. Again and again she'll speak of reflections—and she'll speak of images that are like reflections, as well. She'll speak of images surfacing from under some kind of coating or patina, like paint; she'll speak of windows; she'll speak of ice, in particular the frozen surface of Fingerbone Lake; she'll speak of steam and the shapes we can draw in it; and at many points in the novel you'll see objects half under water and half above, such as tree branches. In each case, you have a membrane separating one world or realm from another, and in some of those cases, that membrane has a picture on it (or, to be fair, *in* it.) It is from looking and looking obsessively at this membrane—or membranes—that Ruth develops a wholly developed vision of, well, existence. (“Existence” is a vague word in this context, but I'm sticking with it because it doesn't give anything in the book away.) She develops an **ontology**, to use Robinson's word, by likening water and the various physical forms it can assume to other aspects of life. Eventually, these watery images will become a kind of lens or prism through which she will see the world. Here is another excerpt from that interview with Robinson in TIN HOUSE:

Interviewer: You've called the nineteenth century use of metaphors “real ontology” and have said that “they don't just signify, they mean.” Can you explain?

*Robinson: Wallace Stevens provides a good example. He was twelve or thirteen when Melville died and seven when Emily Dickinson died, so he was much closer culturally to them than to us. I use his poem “Of Modern Poetry” to describe how metaphors work in MOBY DICK. It seems to me as if characteristically and pervasively the chapter structures in MOBY DICK are “poems of the act of the mind” which reach for a metaphor, encounter the limits of the metaphor, destroy the metaphor, and so forth [...] MOBY DICK makes no argument beyond the display of the fact that **the mind can't set out what it sets to know...***

INTERVIEWER: Say more about Stevens and how he works.

*ROBINSON: Stevens himself has a way of **staying faithful to objects and at the same time freeing them from context so they become transcendent versions of themselves, you know? It's as if the strategy of metaphor is to invest a given thing more fully with itself.***

I know it seems like we're sinking into a morass of literary terms here, but I promise you we're not. If we stay true to Ruth and remember that SHE'S the one telling this story, and telling it, moreover, out of the need to tell it—just as, perhaps, we need to tell our own stories, to transfigure our own worlds—we won't sink into that morass. **Let us therefore take Robinson at her word and treat Ruth as WANTING to talk about objects in a way that “stays faithful to them” while “freeing them from context so they become transcendent versions of themselves.” Why would Ruth want to do that? What kind of world will she create if she looks at objects that way—if she indeed transfigures them that way? Try and answer this question with reference to the text.**

Here are a couple of sub-questions to this one:

Does this way of viewing Ruth and her story resonate with you? How do you view Ruth's descriptions of the surface of water and other membranes like it?

One thing you might do before we meet on Tuesday is to skim through the book a second time and watch for the way Robinson builds those descriptions of water to include more and more of the story's elements as the book proceeds. A kind of synthesis is taking place that will become Ruth's vision. **Again, what is it about Ruth's life that would make her want to re-envision it? And what does that new life end up providing her with that the old couldn't?**

The second thing you might watch for is the way Ruth's tone changes as the book proceeds. Tone, in literature, is commonly defined as the speaker's or narrator's attitude towards the things he or she is saying. **By the end of the book, Ruth's tone sounds (to me) different than it did at the beginning. Do you feel her tone has changed as well?** If you do, why do you think it's changed? Remember, events change us, for sure, but telling stories can change us too. Stories themselves are like bridges spanning deep water—crossing them (telling them) can send us into the wilderness, or can bring us home. And in some lives, as we know, “wilderness” and “home” are one and the same.

(continued next page)

In this last bit of our study material, you will find **A)** a few more questions about the book, much more briefly stated than the last ones **B)** two Dickinson poems, so you can see short examples of the kind of literature that may have influenced the way Robinson wrote *HOUSEKEEPING*, and **C)** the definitions of “ontology” and “metaphysics” from the Oxford English Dictionary.

A. Last Questions:

1. What, for you, is the climactic moment in this story? (The reason I ask this question is that I have one picked out, and I'm interested to hear what yours is.)
2. What are the other images Ruth obsesses over? How do these cooperate (or not) with the images of water and transparency and reflection?
3. Totally innocent question: What do you make of the long scene near the end of the novel that involves “the children in the woods?” (I'm being coy here so as not to give anything away.) This scene begins around p. 148 and ends around 153. Every time I read *HOUSEKEEPING* I find myself confused as to what is “really” going on in this scene. What do you think?
4. Re-read the last paragraph of the book. It runs on a string of negatives—and ends up saying something very curious indeed. What do you think it's saying?

What is being seen (or not seen?) What is going on (or not going on?) I find the passage confusing. What do you make of it?

5. Do you think this book has a “practical application”? Its landscape, both physical and psychological, is so remote, its characters so eccentric, its language so lyrical, that it may be hard to draw connections between Ruth’s life and your own. Or, maybe you totally disagree. I think what I’m asking is how we can learn from this book.
6. The following association flew into my mind in the middle of the night a few nights ago. It’s what I call a “sleep thought,” and so may not make sense in the light of day (especially to anyone but me.) But let’s have a look at it anyway. It’s a connection I see, and some of you may recognize as well, between a famous remark by the early 19th cent. English poet, John Keats, and the wisdom that Ruth comes to at the end of HOUSEKEEPING. The remark is as follows: “The poetical character. . . is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—. . . What shocks the virtuous Philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet. . . A poet has no identity. . . When I am in a room with People, I am in a very little time annihilated.” (letter of John Keats to Woodhouse, October 27, 1818.)

Do you see Ruth in these remarks? How?

B) Poems by Emily Dickinson:

Two poems by Emily Dickinson are transcribed below. Like I say, these are here so you can see short, comprehensible examples of the kind of literature Robinson was likely to have been studying as she composed HOUSEKEEPING. The first poem, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” begins right off with a metaphor, without introducing it as such, and then pursues that metaphor—a funeral--until the end of the poem. Here it is:

#280

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb-

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then-

The second poem by Emily Dickinson, “A Bird Came Down the Walk,” works differently than “I felt a Funeral. . .”. It starts with intense attention to a real thing in the world—in this case, a bird—and, by watching that thing very closely, opens on to a kind of transfiguration. I would like to explain what I mean here when we meet, but I thought it best to give you the poem now. (I see this poem as containing a Robinson-like, Ruth-like vision.)

#328

A Bird came down the Walk-
He did not know I saw-
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass-
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass-

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around-
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought-
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home-

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam-
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

C. Definitions of “ontology” and “metaphysics” from the Oxford English Dictionary

metaphysics: the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including such concepts as being, substance, essence, time, space, cause, and identity; theoretical philosophy as the ultimate science of being and knowing.

Ontology: *Philos.* The science or study of being; that part of metaphysics which relates to the nature or essence of being or existence.

Ontologism n. (*Theol.*) a form of mysticism based on a belief in an immediate cognition of God, **ontological argument:** for the objective existence of God from the idea or essence of God.

I put these here for those of you who may have become interested in what meant when she said that the 19th century's use of the extended metaphor amounted to a "real" ontology. (Because how would you know it was real?) (Hold it up to a mirror?) (Are there inspection stations?) It's an odd remark—and again, if our discussion leads us that way, I'd like to take it up when we meet.

I hope these remarks are useful to you in some way or another. HOUSEKEEPING is an unusually ambitious novel, especially for the time in which it was published—and does seem to belong more to the 19th century than to the 20th. But let's not be intimidated by its richness and its remarkable intelligence

BOOK STUDY RESOURCE

MAURICE by E. M. Forster and ***A FATHER'S STORY*** by ANDRE DUBUS
Book Study Commentary and Questions by Emilie White, parishioner at All Souls Cathedral and Professor of English at Warren Wilson College

What follows are, first, some questions and proposals about *Maurice*, and, second, some questions and proposals about *A Father's Story*.

Part I: Questions and Proposals about E. M. Forster's Maurice

1. The romantic or fairy-tale-like strain in Maurice.

I wonder if others of you recognized a highly romanticized, even fairy-tale like quality to certain scenes and episodes in the novel. I'm thinking of how both love affairs—Maurice's with Clive's, and Maurice's with Alec—begin with someone climbing up into a bedroom window in the nighttime (reminding one perhaps of children's tales involving locked princesses in towers), or of the seeming mystical powers of the evening primrose, or of the incantatory way Maurice initiates his affair with Alec—by going to the window and calling "Come!"

If you do recognize this romantic element, do you feel it belongs in this novel? Why do you think Forster has included it?

2. Maurice as a critique of conventional middle-class society.

"After all, is not a real Hell better than a manufactured Heaven?"
(215)

This remark falls on page 215 of the Norton Edition (the edition on sale at Accent on Books), and seems to speak to a proposal running throughout the novel, namely, that in coming into his true sexuality and self, Maurice comes also into a kind of radical understanding of the emotional falsity of many of the conventions by which "normal" or "sanctioned" people live. In this way, the novel seems to offer a critique of the middle class, especially in England, which, in Dr. Lasker Jones's words, has always been "disinclined to accept human nature." (p. 211) (Indeed, in response to this remark, we learn that, "Maurice understood. He was an Englishman himself, and only his troubles had kept him awake." (p. 211))

I wonder if others of you saw the novel as mounting, or offering, such a critique, and if, like me, you saw the critique of Christianity as part of this larger critique of the English middle class. It does seem that the novel sets up a kind of opposition between, on the one hand, the "greenwood," a kind of Arcadia where freedom and genuine camaraderie and affection are possible, and, on the other hand, the office of Messrs Hill and Hall, the University, the Church (or, more precisely, Reverend Borenius's church)—in other words, the institutions of the middle-middle class, where the "existence of earth and sky are forgotten" and where "real joy" has never been known.

The passage I am referring to here, in bits and pieces, reads as follows. (It comes late in the novel, after Maurice has tried just about everything possible to “cure” himself, and is coming to realize that his situation is inalterable and, very simply, who he is.)

“Before his failure with Lasker Jones he had looked forward to work as a privilege of which he was almost unworthy. It was to have rehabilitated him, so that he could hold up his head at home. But now it too crumbled, and again he wanted to laugh, and wondered why he had been taken in so long. The clientele of Messrs Hill and Hall was drawn from the middle-middle classes, whose highest desire seemed shelter—continuous shelter—not a lair in the darkness to be reached against fear, but shelter everywhere and always, until the existence of earth and sky is forgotten, shelter from poverty and disease and violence and impoliteness; and consequently from joy; God slipped this retribution in.” (p. 218)

I wonder how others of you responded to this theme in the novel. Do you find the critique restricted to England in the first half of the twentieth century, or do you think it relevant to American culture as well? Did you identify with Maurice’s coming-to-consciousness, never mind your sexual orientation? Does this critique, for you, have a universal application? (Who knows, maybe the “freedom” Maurice ultimately attains is not unlike the freedom offered by the worship of Jesus Christ.)

??????

3. A reconsideration of the proposal above.

But then again, maybe I am wrong in describing Maurice as attaining a “radical” freedom (as is proposed in the question above.) Maybe what the novel is saying instead is that that kind of freedom is ultimately impossible because too lonely. It’s important, isn’t it, that Maurice remains committed to being a “man of his class.”

What do you think?

4. Forster’s “theology”

I wonder if you were struck with the oddness of the sudden appearance of Maurice’s father’s ghost. The ghost appears on the bottom of page 151, as Maurice sits in his office working. Here is the passage:

“As he sat in his office working, he could not see the vast curve of his life, still less the ghost of his father sitting opposite. Mr. Hall senior had neither fought nor thought; there had never been any occasion; he had supported society and moved without a crisis from illicit to licit love. Now, looking across at his son, he is touched with envy, the only pain that survives in the world of shades. For he sees the flesh educating the spirit, as his has never been educated, and developing the sluggish heart and the slack mind against their will.” (p. 151)

As we discussed in our last meeting about *A Passage to India*, there seems to be in Forster’s novels a mystical dimension that transcends his materialism, and even his stated agnosticism. It’s almost as though Forster wants to have it both ways: he wants to respect

every single point of view as possessing its own sovereignty, whether the bearer of that point of view believes in God or not; but, seemingly dissatisfied with the limitations of that philosophy, at the same time we see him almost swooping down to offer a god-like knowledge—an omniscient consciousness who sees the “ghosts” his characters don’t. In this way, he gets to include in his novels a force larger than any one character—larger, and more loving. And smarter, too, for it does seem that in Forster there is an elusive meaning that is as much in control of what happens to people as the people themselves, as though Forster were signaling the limits of our mental equipment in the governance, even in the perception, of our lives.

What do you think? Do you see this trend in Forster, or do you think I’m being overly optimistic?

5. The importance Forster attributes to “friendship”

Friendship, or the importance of having a Friend, is obviously an important theme of *Maurice*. Do you see any parallels between Forster’s interest in friendship as it is expressed in *A Passage to India* and that interest as it is expressed in *Maurice*?

Part II: QUESTIONS ABOUT ANDRE DUBUS’S “A FATHER’S STORY”

1. Why does Luke repeatedly distinguish between his public and private lives?

At various points in the story, Luke takes pains to distinguish between the life of his that people “see” and the prayerful, private one they don’t. We might even say that what gets Luke talking in the first place is his desire to make an account of himself that turns on this distinction.

Who do you think he’s making this account *to*? To God? Can the story be thought of as Luke’s prayer? Why or why not? And, following from this question, why do you think it’s so important for Luke to distinguish between his public life and his spiritual one?

2. A question concerning Luke’s remarks about knowing, as a child, that life would “try” him.

At the end of the second paragraph of the story—this would be at the top of p. 456—Luke makes a remark about his childhood that I find useful in trying to understand why he’s now leading the isolated life that he is. He says, “even as a child I knew that life would try me, and I must be strong to endure, though in those early days I expected to be tortured and killed for my faith, like the saints I learned about in school.”

As I say, this remark revealed much to me about Luke’s character and, in particular, about why he’s leading the isolated life that he is. Do you also find the remark revelatory? Why or why not? What does it say to you?

3. Why animals? Why, in particular, horses?

Why do you think Dubus has elected to surround Luke with animals? And why do you think the animals he’s surrounded him with are horses?

4. Some reflections on the beauty of the language of the story:

There is much that is beautiful in this story. There is the beauty of Luke's home—the birds, the rabbits, the horses, the opera; but none of these details would possess the radiance they do were it not for the chief beauty in the story, which is, for me, the rolling cadences of Luke's speech. Even the sentences describing painful or frightening realities seem to have issued from a speaker deeply at one with the act of telling his story—meaning, not at odds with that story, not ashamed of it, not hiding or shirking from the truth of himself in any way. Look, for example, at the following two sentences. They come at the climax of the story—when Luke first confronts the wounded (or dead) boy's body.

“Then I said, ‘Oh God,’ and felt Him in the wind and the sky moving past the stars and moon and the fields around me, but only watching me as He might have watched Cain or Job, I did not know which, and I said it again, and wanted to sink to the earth and weep till I slept there in the weeds. I climbed, scrambling up the side of the ditch, pulling at clutched grass, gained the top on hands and knees, and went to him like that, panting, moving through the grass as high and higher than my face, crawling under that sky, making sounds too, like some animal, there being no words to let him know I was here with him now.” (bottom p. 469 to top of p. 470)

There are probably hundreds of ways to communicate the information contained in those two sentences. Think about how someone from your life might have communicated it—your neighbor, your sibling, your friend, etc. Think about how another author might have written the information. How would Flannery O'Connor have written it? The minimalist, Raymond Carver? Ernest Hemingway? All I'm inviting you to do here is to consider why Dubus elected to have Luke communicate it in *this* way: in long, ecstatic sounding sentences of immense auditory interest. Luke seems not just at peace with his story, but excited to tell it, much the way a musician may be excited to play an especially challenging piece.

We all know how thrilling it is to listen to someone whose every utterance sounds like an act of praise. I would like to propose Luke as such a speaker; and, following from this, I would like to invite you to consider why, for “A Father's Story” to work—to be the emotionally convincing story that it is--Luke *must* be this kind of speaker.

5. The description of the boy

Look again (if you can bear it) at the description of the dead (or wounded) boy in the grass. (This description begins about two thirds of the way down page 469 and continues all the way to page 471.) Note Luke's delicacy of observation of the boy's personal effects and body. I think of the intense physicality of Luke's “tough fingertips on that smooth underside of flesh and small bones” of the boy's wrist. Or, Luke's likening the sound (maybe) of the boy's heart to “when you pump a well and after a few strokes you hear air and water moving in the pipe.”

Occasionally in great writing you'll run across some fact of the physical world so vividly portrayed that it seems to possess a kind of purity that cannot be accounted for in words. By this is meant it cannot be reduced to, translated into, made to symbolize, what

have you, anything other than what it is. It's like when you encounter some object in nature that is so perfectly, redolently, miraculously *itself* that you feel in the presence of a kind of godliness. It's true, what I'm saying here IS pretty loosey-goosey; but in any event, I'd like to propose the description of the boy's body in "A Father's Story" as bearing that kind of power. We might call it the power of mystery. Story writers talk about "mystery" as the greatest achievement in fiction writing, and I would like to propose the boy's body as functioning as point of infinite mystery.

What do you think about this proposal? Does it resonate for you? How do YOU experience the description of the boy? Does this proposal lead you to other proposals, or observations, you'd like to share with the group?

6. An incendiary question about Luke's isolation and loneliness:

I'm not sure I believe the following proposal myself. The hope is merely that it will incite discussion.

It's possible, upon closing this story, to interpret Luke Ripley's isolation as the outcome of unfortunate circumstance.

In this interpretation, the supreme reality in the story would be the law of God, and Luke would be the passive and faithful bearer of (and practitioner of) that law. This seems like a perfectly reasonable way to interpret this story.

But there is another interpretation that says that Luke, though isolated, has achieved with his isolation exactly what he most wants.

And if *that* were true, what has Luke achieved?