

Gilead Discussion Questions

These questions reveal plot points. If you haven't finished the book, you might not want to read them.

1. What was your perception of the narrator in the opening paragraphs? In what ways did your understanding of him change throughout the novel? Did John's own perception of his life seem to evolve as well?
2. The vision experienced by John's grandfather is a reminder that the Christ he loves identifies utterly with the oppressed and afflicted, whom he must therefore help to free. He is given his mission, like a biblical prophet. This kind of vision was reported by many abolitionists, and they acted upon it as he did. What guides John in discerning his own mission? The novel concludes at the dawn of the civil rights movement. In what ways does this evolution of race relations mirror the changes John has witnessed in society as a whole?
3. How does John seem to feel about his brother's atheism in retrospect? What accounts for Edward's departure from the church? What enabled John to retain his faith?
4. The rituals of communion and baptism provide many significant images throughout the novel. What varied meanings do John and his parishioners ascribe to them? What makes him courageous enough to see the sacred in every aspect of life?
5. One of the most complex questions for John to address is the notion of salvation—how it is defined, and how (or whether) God determines who receives it. How do the novel's characters convey assorted possibilities about this topic? What answers would you have given to the questions John faces regarding the fate of souls and the nature of pain in the world?
6. Marilynne Robinson included several quotations from Scripture and hymns; John expresses particular admiration for Isaac Watts, an eighteenth-century English minister whose hymns were widely adopted by various Protestant denominations. Do you believe that certain texts are divinely inspired? What is the role of metaphor in communicating about spiritual matters?
7. Discuss the literary devices used in this novel, such as its epistolary format, John's finely honed voice, and the absence of conventional chapter breaks (save for a long pause before Jack's marriage is revealed). How would you characterize **Gilead's** narrative structure?
8. What commentary does John offer about the differences between his two wives? Do you agree with Jack when he calls John's marriage unconventional?
9. John describes numerous denominations in his community, including Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers, and Congregationalists. What can you infer from the presence of such variety? Or does the prevalence of Protestants mean that there is little religious variety in Gilead?
10. What might John think of current religious controversies in America? In what ways are his worries and joys relevant to twenty-first-century life?
11. John grapples mightily with his distrust of Jack. Do you believe John writes honestly about the nature of that distrust? What issues contribute to these struggles with his namesake?
12. In his closing lines, John offers a sort of benediction to his son, praying that he will “grow up a brave man in a brave country” and “find a way to be useful.” Do you predict a future in which his hope came true? What do you imagine John experiences in his final sleep?