

# A fulfilled spiritual life with unmovable faith portrayed by character john ames ...

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## **The Life of John Ames**

Thus far in Marilynne Robinson's epistolary novel *Gilead*, John Ames appears to be liberal in his spiritual life. As a reverend and a pious man, John always maintains strong beliefs in Christianity, but also opens his vision to writings of prevalent atheists. In his letter, John mentions that his brother Edward "had been very important to [him]," even when his father was not fond of Edward's atheistic beliefs (Robinson 24). Edward gives John one of Ludwig Feuerbach's books, *The Essence of Christianity*, that John reads with great interest. Although John does take time to read Feuerbach and analyze the subjects of his arguments, his faith remains unshaken as he acknowledges that Feuerbach's has some errors in his beliefs. John admires Feuerbach's attitude towards joy in his writing, but does so from an objective point of view, opening his mind to different perspectives. The family quarrel between his father and his grandfather also prove John's flexibility in his spiritual life. After the conflict between father's and grandfather's spirituality incites hostility between the two, John admits that he has "decided [his] father was right" (76). Father has been critical of grandfather's apparent vision of Christ who inspired him to fight for the cause of abolitionism, and John seems to share the belief of his father in the potential absurdity of visions. In one of his unspoken sermons, however, John demonstrates that he has a strong belief in God's signs. During the time of the Great War, John wrote a sermon that he decided to burn right after about the message behind the spread of Spanish Influenza in the United States. In his sermon, John describes the plague as a sign of Lord's judgement that "the desire for war would bring the consequences of war" (42). He believes the Influenza to be a sign that

everyone “ refused to see and take its meaning” (43). John’s strong belief in signs from God, but his refusal to agree with his grandfather’s visions of Christ, show that John has multiple perspectives depending on the circumstances. John is open-minded with his spirituality and willing to look at things from a neutral point of view, while still remaining a pious reverend.

So far in the story, John seems to care a lot about his family, but also feels guilty for leaving them so soon. Throughout the story, John continuously recounts many memorable moments he has with his son and wife Lila such as the time when his family plays in the garden. John spends time reflecting on that afternoon, wondering why his beautiful wife would marry a guy like him, and realizing that his son has been “ God’s grace to [him], a miracle” (52). After that afternoon, his love for his wife and son deepens, and he feels even more guilty leaving them. Early in his letter, John admits that he regrets the hard times his son and wife go through, “ with no real help from [him] at all” (4). He knows that he is dying of a heart condition and it shames him that he will leave his family “ so naked to the world” (31). The fact that the entire narrative is a letter John is writing to his son shows that he wants his son to have more memories of him. John is a father that cares deeply for his family, but feels guilty for leaving his family behind because of his approaching death.

Up to this point in the book, John appears to be a hard-working and devout pastor, but he thinks that he “ get[s] much more respect than [he] deserves” (39). John believes that he developed the reputation of a perfect pastor, when in reality, he is somewhat over respected. In his letter, John mentions

that he has written two hundred twenty-five books worth of sermons, which “ puts [him] up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity” (19). His long nights writing sermons in the study causes people to admire his work-ethic, but John himself claims that if the study light was burning long into the night “ it only meant [he] had fallen asleep” (39). To people around him, John appears to be the ideal pastor, but even he knows that that is not the reality. John also knew that he “ developed a great reputation for wisdom by ordering more books than [he] ever had time to read.” John, however, realizes that people overrate the type of pastor he is, as he is “ by no means a saint.” Even though John is a hard-working and respectable pastor, he himself explains that what people think of him as a pastor is different from the truth.