

The Portrayal of Women in the Novels of Gail Godwin

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American women writers are always concerned with the life of women. The feminist writers of America challenged the male chauvinistic principles by fighting for the rights of women in the society. Gail Godwin, a charming, strong willed woman novelist from Alabama, can be said to lead other writers in this direction. Gail Godwin is a gifted popular writer whose work has been praised for its convincing development of characters. With story lines closely paralleling her own life experiences, she writes about issues pertaining to woman—male-female roles, marriage, family, personal freedom, self-concept, and self-actualization. She has based many of her characters on her own family members and tragic incidents in their lives that affected her. Thus Godwin narratives can be perceived as analysis of her life. While not all of her novels are in the south, her Southern upbringing pervades each work through settings, events, cultural references, or characters struggling with Southern traditions and stereotypes.

Women in most societies may find it more difficult than men to rebel from the demands of tradition, since they are expected to transmit received truisms as unquestioned truths. They have fewer chances to test socially-accepted rules, fewer chances to gain varied experiences which help a searcher to tell from tradition. During the 1970s what Godwin wrote about the American south shows her concern with the customs and taboos which make the traditional roles of women even more inflexible.

Southerners who believe in the heritage of the old south try harder to turn women into exemplars and transmitters of its old virtues. When those are shallowly defined, and Godwin sees how often they are mere forms, the most admired mothers perpetuate falseness. Dutiful daughter replicate their mothers, and questing daughters flee for their lives. Even after their flights, they are hampered in their searching for honesty and autonomy because of lingering fear of all that is disruptive. Raised voices, the threat of a scene, whatever her mother would call ugly or strident, will often send them into trembling retreat. Away from home, they do have the courage of quite liberated convictions about sexuality. Their shudders over scenes make particularly interesting the process depicted by Godwin as essential to growth.

Gail Godwin was born in Birmingham, Alabama on the 18th June 1937, for Kathleen Krahenbuhl Godwin and Mose Godwin. It was not a happy marriage and they divorced. Gail Godwin raised in a man less small family by her mother and grand mother until she was adolescent.

They were dissimilar role models. Her grandmother Edna Rogers Krahenbuhl the widow of a Southern railways employee was a traditional Southern woman who ran the household and set aside her interests for others her mother Kathleen Godwin, was a reporter for a local paper, a junior college teacher, and weekend romance writer. She imbued Godwin with a love of storytelling. In 1944, Gail Godwin enrolled in the second grade at St. Genevieve's-of-the-pines. Established in 1908 by French nuns, whose order is called Religious of Christian education, St. Genevieve's provided Asheville's brighter and more affluent young ladies with superb education. Early on, Gail Godwin began to distinguish herself as one of the top three students in her class of twenty to twenty-two. She excelled at languages, mathematics, and literature.

When Godwin was eleven years old her mother married Frank Cole, with whom she never developed a close relationship. Godwin finally met her charismatic father, Mose Godwin, whom he had left the family shortly after her birth, at her high school graduation. She lived with him briefly while attending Pearce Junior college in Raleigh, North Carolina. Later he committed suicide. Godwin's uncle and half-brother also committed suicide. After graduating from the University of North Carolina, in 1959 Godwin took a job as reporter with the Miami Herald.

She was fired a year later because she persisted in infusing her stories with human-interest details rather than just presenting the facts. During the same year she was married for three months to newspaper photographer Douglas Kennedy. This union would be fodder for Godwin's first novel *Gull Key*. This novel however was never published because she sent the only manuscript copy to a publisher whom later tracks down.

In 1962 she went to London, where she worked for the U.S travel service at American embassy, travelled and took writing classes. In 1965 she met her second husband, British psychiatrist Ian Marshall, in one of her classes. Her first published novel, *The Perfectionists* is based on her second, also very brief, marriage. Upon her return to the United States, Godwin studied writing and pursued her postgraduate degrees at the University of Iowa, earning her M.A. degree in 1968 and her Ph.D. degree in English in 1971. Her thesis was the novel *The Perfectionists*. Beside the novels, Godwin has written short stories and essays and has been the librettist of musical works by her companion, Robert Starer. In 1972 Gail Godwin began to share her life and her home with Robert Starer, to whom she dedicated *The Odd Woman* and *Violet Clay*.

A large man with a deep laugh, Starer is a pianist, classical composer, and formal Julliard professor. Nearly 1984, Godwin completed

her sixth novel, *The Finishing School*, published in February 1985. The advance for her seventh novel, *A Southern Family* published in September of 1987.

Gail Godwin has become a significant voice in Southern and contemporary American literature. Her travels in England, Denmark, Spain and the United States; her teaching posts at Vassar, Columbia, and Iowa; her knowledge of music, art and literature--all have added polish and depth to her work. But as she returns to her man-less little family in her novels, her memorable characters are women. Many can trace their lineage to the extended family of Asheville, North Carolina, the most remarkable being Kathleen Krahenbuhl Godwin Cole. Of the many gifts she bestowed on her daughter, the most important was an unconditional belief in her adored child.

Gail Godwin has also become a significant voice in Southern literature. She has inherited from William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe a love of the land. *A Southern Family* and much of *The Odd Woman* are set in her native North Carolina, while the heroines of her other four novels grew up in Charleston, Fredericksburg, the mountains of North Carolina, and an unspecified Southern locale.

Aesthetically, Godwin has employed and mastered several established strains in literature, among them realism, fantasy, allegory, folklore, and myth, using personal experience as the basis for excursions into highly imaginative material. All the seven Godwin's novels, from *The Perfectionists* in 1970 to *Father Melancholy's Daughter* in 1991, centre upon young women struggling to attain their independence, establish their identity, and successfully pursuing their work despite the restraints of male-dominated culture and with or without the companionship or support of men. Many aspects of Godwin's work connect with the historical conditions of Southern culture and literature, and render it worthy of inclusion in the canons. In her most important novels, Godwin treats from one or another angle several elements that over time have characterized Southern civilization, especially the persistently thorny issues of family, race, and social class. Her methods of dealing with these issues reflect her knowledge of Anglo-American literary traditions, to which she gives a recognizably Southern slant, and they reflect her awareness of both renaissance and post modern cultural attitudes toward class and race as conveyed in Southern literature.

Throughout her long fiction, she explores the central concerns of her protagonists within the context of carefully wrought, finely nuanced depictions of Southern society that make plain the continuing struggles in the region involving family, class, and race. Godwin filters

transformed aspects of personal experience into increasingly complex novels that depict the struggles of ambitious, talented women in late twentieth-century America, sometimes contrasting their problems with those faced by women of earlier generations. In these novels she examines several related concerns, notably those of young needing the companionship of both women and men, and the relationship among independence, love, marriage, creativity, and freedom. These concerns frequently intersect with predictably problematic results.

Godwin novels tell a single story that of woman's difficulty but ultimately successful quest for self-definition and a satisfying career with or without the support of other people, especially men. In Godwin's fictional world, the family is as close, as respectful of ancestors especially grandmothers, problems arise between step parents and children, whose uneasy unions lack the strength of Southern blood ties: the young professor is belittled and bedevilled by her materialistic stepfather in *The Odd Woman*. Godwin's marriages are generally troubled, the contemporary Godwin heroines get a divorce although Gail Godwin values her Southern and European ancestry, and she is very much a Southern writer of the new generation. Legally and socially the white Southern family has been dominated by men in antebellum times, of course, wives, slaves, and livestock bore the same relationship to the male master as property. But Godwin's families consist of strong women and few men—more a result of her early life than of any feminist vision.

During slightly more than twenty years of an active career, Gail Goodwin has established herself as one of the most gifted, prolific, and popular late twentieth-century Southern novelists. Gail Godwin is significant figure in Southern and American literature. *Violet Clay* and *The Finishing School* are her best novels. *The Odd Woman*, *Finishing school* and *A Southern family* attracted favourable reviewers and a large popular audience. Godwin frequently is categorized as feminist writer. However, although her protagonist are women making decisions about their identities, her themes are broader, her characterizations more complex, and her prose more elegant than those in the conventional feminist novel. *The Odd Woman*, generally considered her most successful novel, concerns the relationship of life and literature, the past and present.

The Odd Woman (1974) is the simplest narrative novel. Story lines closely paralleling her own life experience, she has based many of her characters on her own family members and tragic incidents in their lives that have affected her. The title and central issue of Gail Godwin story are based upon George Gissing's 1893 novel. In *The Odd Woman* Edna

Rogers Krahenbuhl becomes Edith Dewar Barnstroff, and both Kitty Clifford sparks, who teaches medieval history at the local college and attends Mass daily in *The Odd Woman*, and Lilly Quick in *A Southern Family* are clearly based on Godwin's mother Kathleen, Frank Cole becomes Ray sparks. Both men are contractors. Godwin's novel, however, exaggerates the real-life tension between daughter and stepfather.

The Odd woman demonstrated a significant advance in her development. In the novel unmarried literature professor, Jane Clifford, engaged in a love affair with a married man, Gabriel Weeks mulls over freedom, identity and self-fulfilment by examining the lives of real and literary women. Following the death of her grandmother, she analysis the roles of her mother, grandmother, colleague friend.

Her mother is a romantic, accommodating wife. Her grandmother is a traditional Southern lady; her friend is militant feminist, her colleagues' successful married career woman and reflects on how she twines literary fantasies into her life, especially in her relationship with Gabriel. This novel is twice as long as Godwin's previous ones because of her inclusions of more flashback, fantasy and actual incidents and of the characterization of several women.

The Finishing School (1985) is Gail Godwin's fifth novel. It is the simplest narrative novel, portraying the story of a young girl who falls under the spell of an older woman. A fateful summer in the life of Justin Stokes a displaced and lonely 14-year-old girl, and her friendship with the intense and eccentric Ursula De Vane, a woman three times of her age. Ursula lives with her brother, Julian De vane, a troubled and brilliant classical pianist. 'The finishing school, Gail Godwin charts the exhilaration, the enchantment, the transformation, then the inevitable disillusionment and loss inherent in such a friendship and such self discovery'. [1] Gail Godwin's heroines have given importance for friendship. Even though they have broken their friendship Justin had taken Ursula's ideas in her life. Ursula wanted Justin to become an actress. Ursula moulded her Justin to become an actress and encouraged her artistic talents. Finally Justin became a successful actress.

Godwin's heroines worked hard to get a good position in the society. Justin is famous stage actress. She acted important roles in famous plays. She was playing the role of Lady Macbeth in the Shakespeare drama *Macbeth*. The mother sacrifices their life for the sake of her children. Justin's grandmother is an ideal Southern lady. She led a correct path to her grand daughter.

Godwin's female characters are very proud of their family background and history. Ursula is very proud that she belongs to an old Huguenots family. She wanted to write a book about her ancestors. She has collected lot of materials about her family and ancestors. It was her life ambition. Godwin's women characters loved their siblings. Ursula loved her brother and sacrificed her life for her brother. She wants her brother to become a successful pianist. Justin, at forty, remains single after her two failure marriages. She has the courage to live alone without the support of a man.

In Godwin's novels the relationship between mother and daughter is not very good. The daughter likes to be away from her mother because the mother's second marriage made the daughter to away from her mother. The daughter feels that her mother's affection towards her is transferred to her second family. They feel that their mother's talents were locked inside the family. They are not having a free relationship with their step fathers. So the heroines were separated from their mother. 'The widowed mothers found fulfilment and satisfaction; daughters achieved love, good work, success' [2]

A Southern Family (1987) is her auto-biographical novel. The 540 pages contain all members of her man less family. In *A Southern Family*, the Coles become the Quick family. Godwin's mother has evolved from Lily Campion, reporter and believer of art, into Lily Quick visitor to nursing homes and believer in god. Gail Godwin herself becomes Clare Campion who lives with Felix Rohr, moulded on composer Robert Starer. It is based on the death of her half brother. In the novel, Clare Quick is visiting her family in North Carolina when her brother, a divorced father kills his girlfriend and himself. The book delves into the reaction of the survivors and the family history and relationships that might shed light on such an unpredictable event.

The structural design of Godwin's novel is unique and the novelist's imagination and experience have gone into making of the novel, and the emotional texture of the book appears to be real. Her thought and writing were one and almost like breathing. 'A Southern family is a rich, complex book, easy to summarize, difficult to distill. Ms. Godwin's perseverance and her love of story have the last say. Whatever their success or failure, her books all give evidence of a supple intelligence working on the page. In this one she's in full bloom and at her mindful best'. [3] When the marital relationships ending futility, when they lose their meaning women seek refuge in remarriage. In a Southern family snow get separated from Theo and joins with the man who is working in the Aurora carpet mills. Some women accept fate and continue their meaningless life while some fight against fate.

Godwin heroines are involved in art. Clare is a successful writer. The woman characters have problems with their step-father. The mother has changed her life style because of her husband. She took care of her family and children. In Godwin's novels the Southern values are given much importance. They portray their Southern values and culture.

Godwin portrays the aspects of American society, particularly that of South. All her heroines were born in South; they were brought up in the Southern culture. Godwin herself was very proud that she has born in the South, so she specifically mentioned the beauty of the land in all her novels. She mentioned the practices that followed by the people who lived in the Southern part of America. The women characters in this novel were defined well by Godwin. They are given importance more than the male characters. The male characters played the secondary role

End notes

Frances Taliaferro. "Dream Daughter' Grows Up," The New York Times Book Review, 27 Jan. 1985.

Kim Lacy Rogers,. "A Mother's Story in a Daughters Life: Gail Godwin's 'A Southern Family'," Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in contemporary American Literature. Ed. Mickey Pearlman, Greenwood Press, 1989.

Beverly Lowry. "Back Home in Carolina." The New York Times Book Review 11 Oct. 1987.

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Godwin, Gail. A Southern Family. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987.

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