

Gail Godwin's A Mother and Two Daughters – A Review

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Gail Godwin's novel *A Mother and Two Daughters* is filled with domestic realism and can also be typed as a social chronicle. This novel considers to what extent individuals can create their own destinies and to what extent destinies are shaped by the people around them.

The plot of *A Mother and Two Daughters* opens with the death of a family member, Leonard Strickland, husband to Nell and father to Gate and her sister Lydia. The opening chapter, in which Leonard's death occurs, is called *The Old Guard*, and in it Godwin, sets up the challenge for her three protagonists. For the three Women it is an end and a beginning.

In the opening pages *Theodora Blount*, the grande dame of the old guard expresses the problems inherent in being a new fashioned woman. She says "Tarn all for tough, independent womanhood, you know me, but there's limit to the traces anybody can kick over I don't care how privileged or intelligent she is... Nobody can live on the edge of possibility forever, especially not women, Lord knows it's nor fair, but a middle aged woman with no base attracts more pity and censure than her male counterpart". (Page 15-16).

Godwin explores the validity of *Theodora's* assessment, and her characters negotiate with themselves and their world to determine exactly which traces they can hold and should kick over. Through their struggles and their eventual growth, Godwin demonstrates that the edge of possibility can be pushed further and further outward without sacrificing the essential elements of the foundation from which her character spring, the image of foundations being largely male dominated.

Gate, Lydia and even Nell do make trouble of various kinds for themselves and other in the months following Leonard's death, but it is not the irresponsible dalliance that Max imagines. All three women are working toward transformations of self, that include recognition of, and respect for their pasts, and their past selves. The success and power of their progress can be measured by the impact that it has on others, both the lovers, friends, children intimately connected to their lives and those further toward the periphery - secondary characters and strangers whose lives they influence.

The setting of *A Mother and Two Daughters*, Mountain City, North Carolina, is very similar to the unnamed southern city to which Jane Clifford returns in *The Odd Woman*, and the phrase "the mother and her two daughters" appears in the earlier novel *The Odd Woman* in a scene in which Jane and her sister Emily sit in a childhood room and talk with their mother. But *A Mother and Two Daughters* is a very different novel than *The Odd Woman*. As its title suggests, Godwin's first novel in which the focus is not primarily on an individual female but has multiple protagonists.

Gate is a typical Godwin woman, and in terms of pages devoted to her and narrator involvement, she is the central figure, but extensive sections are also devoted to both Nell and Lydia, who in earlier works would have been secondary characters instead of protagonists. In addition to examining their relationships with Gate, these sections develop Nell and Lydia separate from those relationships, giving them an autonomy that distinguishes them from important secondary characters, such as Cameron Bolt and Gabriel Weeks. In addition, their independent perspective enhances our understanding of the standard protagonist figure, making her both more sympathetic and more admirable than she can be when her own limited view is the only one available or when the outside perspectives are distorted as it is in the case of Cameron Bolt.

Part 1 of *A Mother and Two Daughters* includes chapters I through 3; in addition to "The Old Guard" there are chapters entitled "The sisters" and "Family Business." This opening section establishes the status quo of the Strickland family in light of Leonard's death. The epigraph to the section, from D.H. Lawrence's *Dies Irae* sets up the strong sense of loss that permeates this portion of the book, but it also indicates the hope that is its ultimate message: "Our Epoch is over, a cycle of evaluation is finished, our activity has lost its meaning, we are ghosts, we are seed" (*A mother and two daughters*, Page 1).

Part 2, the longest, opens with an epigraph from *The I Ching*. "The Chinese character Ku represents a bowl in whose contents worms are breeding. This means decay. It has come about because the gentle indifference of the lower trigram has come together with the rigid inertia of the upper, and the result is stagnation. Since this implies guilt, the conditions embody a demand for removal of the cause. Hence the meaning of hexagram is not simply 'What has been spoiled' (Ibid. p.83). Thus, it is appropriate that this section, chapters 4 through 8, be 'Work on what has been spoiled' be the longest. It presents the three women at work on the spoilage of their lives.

Chapters 9 through 11 make up part 3, in which the three women have been dealing independently with the conflicts in their separate lives are brought together again for the first time since Leonard Stickland's death, Godwin again uses an epigraph from Lawrence, this one from "Be still".

"The only thing to be done, now that the waves of our undoing have begun to strike on us is to contain ourselves. To keep still, and let the wreckage of ourselves go". (Ibid. Page 321).

The resolutions that arise from their confrontation, both the release and the restraint that the situation involves, lead to the affirmation of the epilogue, with its optimistic epigraph from Ralph Waldo Emerson's success. "We are not strong by our power to penetrate, but by our relatedness. The world is enlarged for us, not by new objects but by finding more affinities and potencies in those we have" (Ibid, p.523).

The Epigraphs serve as a code for the novel's structure in that they summarize the progress of the three women from the despair of the opening section, through the struggle to redefine self and context in the second part, into the resolution and acceptance of part 3, culminating in the thematic statement of the epilogue, in which the best parts of the solid foundation built by Leonard Stickland are woven into a vibrant new sense of self, family and society, as designed and executed by his wife and their daughters.

Nell Strickland grows up motherless, and in times of crises in her young life she sometimes longed for an "Ideal Mother" (Ibid. Page 168) someone to provide her with the wisdom to rest secure in her decisions. Nell is a practical woman, however, and knows that the Ideal is not always available. In very different ways, each of her daughters also longs for the Ideal. In Gate that longing is for a social idealism, a world in which justice and freedom are sacredly preserved and accessible to all and in which her own heroic efforts on behalf of these principles are recognized and suitably rewarded. For Lydia the ideal is more personal. She wants an ordered and principled life in which her diligence and preparedness guarantee that disaster will not occur.

By the novel's epilogue, all three women have come to share in and reaffirm a conclusion Nell reached early in her motherless life: "in the absence of the ideal -which was usually not to be found when you most needed it - you had to rely on your instincts and common sense" (Ibid, p.168). Using those tools, ones traditionally granted to females, the healing and transformation of the plot are made possible.

Nell is in many ways an outsider in the old guard of Mountain City. Her entree to that very closed society is her marriage to Leonard. Before that, she was not only an orphan, lacking the bloodline to belong, but also a working woman, a nurse who is defiled by a cruel doctor in an elevator. Thus, she is disqualified by loss of virtue and by having to earn her living. Given automatic access through her marriage, she has the outside observer's power even as she participates in the group and the ironic stance that often comes as a by-product of such power. While the outer evidence of her life makes her more likely Lydia than Care, this sense of herself as an outsider, "observant and occasionally satiric" (Ibid, p.3), indicates that she is also like her elder daughter. Nell is not so much a "Southern Lady" as she is an "unsocialized observer who (has) masqueraded adequately since puberty as a 'Southern Lady'" (Ibid. p.6).

One of the problems facing Nell after Leonard's death involves her latent anger at the scene represented by the old guard. She does not know if she can tolerate the game playing and posturing that permeate that environment without giving into the sarcasm that is her natural mode, without revealing the cynicism that she had hidden so well for all those years under Leonard's moderating influence.

In the wake of Leonard's death. Nell retreats into her house in Mountain city and thinks about her past with him; how he "protected" her "from my harshest judgments of myself as well as of others to accept her (Ibid. Page 154) loss, content to watch the baby crows outside yet the seems her windows and some what impatient when her house is involved by Theodora's book club.

Nell's serenity is disturbed when, in part 3, she and her daughters converge on Leonard's old cottage on the island of Ocracoke. Nell's grief is reawakened, but a friendship is renewed when she discovers that an old school mate has rented the cottage next door. It is at Ocracoke that Nell really says good-bye to Leonard and is thereafter able to resume her own life.

It is also at Ocracoke that the sibling rivalry of Gate and Lydia finally explodes. Gate seeks to trivialize the friends, goals and accomplishments of Lydia, who retaliates by suggesting that Gate has "nothing to show" for her life. After both angry women storm out of the rickety cottage, it burns down, another vanished symbol of a closed epoch in their lives, perhaps part of the "wreckage of ourselves" emphasized by the epigraph for the section (MID Page 321).

Family members and friends are reunited and reconciled in the epilogue, set five years later and the novel ends as it began with a party. This time Gate, not Theodora, presides at the mountain retreat she has

inherited from an eccentric cousin. Theodora is there too, now arguing the pros and cons of racial intermarriage after meeting the lovely bride of Lydia's son Leo.

By the time this reunion arrives, the reader has gotten to know each of the three women separately and knows the tensions and conflicts that are likely to emerge. Lydia is full of the new confidence that her classes, her affair with Stanley, and her friendship with Renee and Calvin have generated. She will not willingly remain in Gate's shadow, especially since she, too, is a single woman now, with the added responsibility of motherhood, and still as organized and efficient as ever. Gate's sloppy life will irritate Lydia more than ever. Nell, having come to enjoy the solitude of her widowhood and the possibility for having her own plot at last, will not want to be drawn into the conflicts facing each of her daughters or the tension between them. Gate, at a real low point with the college dosing, the abortion, and 40 staring her in the face, will see Lydia's progress as having been financed by Max and her friendship with blacks and sudden interest in female consciousness as easy, cocktail-party liberalism. Both daughters will feel that their mother is not being motherly enough.

For Gate, the trip to Ocracoke and the family cottage, where she is planning to live for the summer while sending out resumes in hopes of finding a job, puts her in a situation that closely parallels Violet Clay's Day of Lost Options. Through the joint carelessness of the sisters, a fire in the fireplace spreads sparks across the floor and ignites it. The ensuing blaze destroys the cabin, symbolically ridding them of an important element of their past and eliminating Gate's last faint hope for her future.

While the cottage burns, Gate walks angrily on the beach during heavy winds. This walk exacts a personal price beyond the loss of the cottage, afflicting her with Bell's palsy, which partially paralyzes her face. The disease, coming as a result of her uncontrolled fury at her sister, serves as a reminder of limitations and limited entitlements to fresh starts. Being stripped of all options, left with nothing except her car, Gate must accept her mother's offer of help. She goes back to the house in Mountain City while her mother accompanies the Chapins to their home to nurse Merle. In Mountain City Gate reaches a new sense of tranquility that allows her to transform her future and to set her life on course for the world she has long envisioned. Before she and Nell leave for Ocracoke, Gate tells her mother what that world would be like;

I want to understand.... I want to be free to conduct my own sustained inquiry into this maddening, fascinating, infuriating world I was born into, I don't particularly want to starve or live in ugly places, and I'd like a few friends, and if I can't reach in a college or university,

may be I can find a cluster.... They don't even have to be disciples, just a few engaged minds, so I won't go crazy with loneliness.... I can forgo the luxuries.... through..... I conce thought of them as my simple entitlements.

I think I can forgo the luxuries if I can have the freedom and mobility to investigate things as they are, and may be call a few truths as I see them, without getting arrested or put away in a madhouse. If I can be allowed to do that for a few more years, I think I will have fulfilled my purpose in life. Oh, and I'd like to keep my health, if possible (Ibid. 367-68). He it takes the experience of her trip to Ocracoke to position her so that she can recognize the desired future when it beckons.

Wickie Lee, who turns out to be a distant cousin of Theodora, has married and become conventionally respectable. Finally, the three protagonists have achieved the new self definitions they had been struggling towards. Lydia is an immensely successful television personality Nell is a wife again and after a hiatus of many years, has returned to nursing. Gate is a free lance teacher who relatively markets her courses and continues to go her own way. The sisters are both now secure enough to re-establish their relationship, thus ratifying the epilogue's Emersonian epigraph. which assets that one's relatedness makes one strong.

Depending upon whether one regards attitudes or behaviours as more telling, one could call Nell Strickland an outsider playing as an outsider. She has lived in Mountain city ever since she was fourteen she has gone to the book club meetings presided over by the pretentious Theodora, and she has been for forty years the respected, popular wife of a respected popular mountain city lawyer. Yet even if Nell goes through the motions of conventional propriety, she views those and the class consciousness that dictates them with a somewhat satiric eye.

In so far as Nell's (usually accurate) satiric vision is a defense against rejection and pain, it is offset by her compassion and her vital interest, as a former nurse and as a mother, in helping people to live well and die comfortably. Although, after Leonard's death, retreat from life and from people is a temptation for Nell, the needs of others cause her to become more fully engaged in life than ever. It is Nell who mobilise the women of the book club when Wickie Lee goes into labour during a meeting Nell who eases the last days of her old school friend Merle Chapin, Nell who finds happiness and even passion married to Merele's windower, Marcus.

If out of deference to Leonard. Nell has suppressed her skeptical, defiant side (Gate is the rebel Nell has never allowed herself to be, a twice-divorced, 1960's style libera, who in 1970 found herself briefly in

jail for leading her students from a New York girls school in a demonstration at the Lincoln Tunnel to protest the invasion of Cambodia. It should be noted that, in this story of family relationships and correspondences, Gate's activities result not only from the critical perspective she has inherited from Nell but also from the idealism she has absorbed from Leonard. She cannot see a wrong without wanting to right it and has done the sorts of things Leonard would have liked to do, had he been less prudent, more furious and full of fire. As she approaches forty Gate is alternately gratified and irritated by the knowledge that family members regard her as excitingly, but disturbingly, unpredictable.

While Nell has sacrificed open criticism of social pretensions to the proprieties observed by her society, Gate has sacrificed people to ideals insulating Theodora, alienating Lydia, and aborting the baby of a man with whom she could have been happy. Still, if Gate is hard on others, she is even harder on herself. Her zealous pursuit of the truth, and her impetuosity cause her more pain than anyone else. After her momentous fight with Lydia, Gate's long walk on the windy beach during which she castigates herself for enviously trying to destroy her sister's pride in her own accomplishments results in Bell's palsy, a temporary numbing of the facial muscles. This experience gives Gate a sense of her own limits, and thereafter she cultivates a "detached observer" side of her personality to protect herself and others from her own worst excesses.

On the surface, Lydia is more conventional, the obedient Nell rather than the rebellious one. She has always been the perfect wife and mother pretty feminine, loving and sufficiently well organised to have time to spare for frequent escapist naps. When she decides to leave her husband, Max she manages that perfectly too, doing well in school and at love and feeling no more need for naps. If she is less daring than Gate she is equally self-willed and she dislikes Gate wide ranging diatribes against the conventional traditional society in which she Lydia, hopes to make her mark.

While Gate most wants to see the truth for what it is Lydia most wants to be widely admired and influential. Lydia gets her wish, but because the measures of her success are external, she never feels secure in that success and always feels that something is lacking. Her relationship with her sons is emblematic of her internal conflict, for she most loves not the beautiful, self contained boy, who is like her but the messy, artistic one who is spiritually akin to Gate.

Gate, Lydia and Nell are all painted in broad clear strokes by Godwin, who portrays their suffering with understanding and their self-delusions with a fine, ironic appreciation, occasionally there is less subtlety than there could be, as when Godwin repeatedly uses Gate's

untitled chin as a symbol of her independence and free spirit. Nevertheless if Godwin's symbolism is sometimes obvious, it is also appropriate and its clarity makes the novel accessible to a wide range of readers.

The three protagonists struggle to recreate themselves in a world where the rules are changing. The self-definitions at which they arrive and the adjustments they make represent the survival strategies of three strong-willed individual spirits.

Gate, the romantic truth-seeker, finds that, in order to achieve her own goals, she must learn self-control, she must learn when rage is productive and when it is not. Her spirit compromises but does not give in. Lydia, who buys into society's success story, is just as much her own creation as Gate but is rather less content, her spirit enslaved to some extent by her very success. Nell, who in the past protected the integrity of her individual spirit through critical detachment and self-defensive aloofness, establishes a more vital connection to her society through involvement and love. Perhaps because she has paid her social dues over the years, the little society of Mountain City is now ready to accept her on her own terms.

Certainly all three protagonists recognise both losses and gains in the transitions, they see going on around them. On the surface, the signs of disintegration are all too apparent. Colleges go bankrupt. Old landscapes give way to new shopping malls. Gasoline is scarce. Yet change also means new possibilities. The marriage of Leo Mansfield and Camilla Peeverell-Watson, if not conventionally prudent, has nevertheless become one of those possibilities. So has the brilliant new career of Gate, which in any case, suits her better than the job she previously held at her bankrupt college.

In the midst of all the changes, the family as locus of value is the one thing that gives stability to the lives of Godwin's characters. Despite the rivalry and tension, the fights and reluctant compromises, family members need one another in a world that offers few other constants. Thus neither Gate nor Lydia can truly validate her own success without making peace with the others.

One reason that the family, in Godwin's world, retains its vitality is that it too, is in the process of being redefined. Nell's extended family, at the end of the novel includes not only her new husband and her blood relatives but also Lydia's lover. Stanley Edelman, Mak's child Liza, and possibly even Wickie Lee. If there is one message Godwin has for her readers in *A Mother and Two Daughters* it is that people need to connect themselves with but not submerge themselves in others. The

ideal sort of connectedness the sort the protagonists work to achieve with those they care about means, then not loss of identity but the creation of a life support system in which identity can struggle to know itself and may even flourish.

Like the fiction of Anne Tyler and Margaret Drabble. *A mother and Two daughters* concerns itself with the evolution of the family in modern society and the roles it plays in the lives of modern women like most major women novelists from Jane Austen onward. Godwin considers how her heroines can best find or create places for themselves in a society over which they have negligible control but in which they can achieve some small influence.

It is very appropriate here to quote Josephine Hendin, in *Renovated lives*. "America is in flux as much as American's are. The beauty of the small southern mountain town in which the novel is set, the smug, traditional morality of the town's elite even the mystery of Gate's favourite thoreauvian old uncle, who chooses to live among his apple trees - all contribute to the bright American Colours of the novel" (The New York Times, Page 3). Again she goes on to say.

"A mother and Two daughters is nevertheless a remarkable novel. In this spacious harmonious book - an expansive and imaginative celebration of American life - Gail Godwin retrieves her heroines from impasses. Through characters who are recognizable contemporaries, she takes us back to an Emersonian faith in the human capacity for good, for betterment". (Ibid, page 14)

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