

# Gail Godwin's contributions to literature

by Rob Neufeld

Gail Godwin is the author of 14 novels; two collections of stories; two works of non-fiction; and two books of edited, narrative journals. Born in Birmingham, Ala., and raised in Asheville, N.C., she made Woodstock, N.Y. her home in 1976, sharing her life with the late composer, Robert Starer, with whom she collaborated on several musical compositions as the librettist. Among Godwin's honors are: a Guggenheim Fellowship, 1975-1976; Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1981; National Book Award finalist honors (for *The Odd Woman*; *Violet Clay*; and *A Mother and Two Daughters*); the literature award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; five best-seller placements, including a number one position for *A Mother and Two Daughters*; and numerous inclusions in studies of American and modern fiction. Her career has involved explorations of many forms and themes. The following essay relates the significance of her achievements.

## Early feminist

In the 1970s, Gail Godwin emerged, with her first novels, as a leading voice in a shifting society, carrying the traditions of Jane Austen and George Eliot into the era of women's liberation, psychoanalysis, sexual freedom, and existentialism. *The Perfectionists* (1970) placed a mismatched woman on a sun-drenched island with a multitude of strong characters pulling at her. *Glass People* (1972) trapped a woman with little sense of her identity in a marriage to a master egoist. *The Odd Woman* (1974) became a benchmark in the literature of intelligent women.

Godwin had grown up in a three-woman household—composed of her grandmother, mother, and herself; attended a deep-thinking private school run by a progressive order of nuns; read voraciously; looked to Thomas Wolfe, whose presence pervaded their common hometown, Asheville, North Carolina; and was sensitive to her family's lowered class standing. In other words, she had a lot in common with the intelligent, restricted heroines of 19<sup>th</sup> century British classics.

Reviewing *The Odd Woman*, a National Book Award finalist, the *Chicago Sun-Times* stated that it was “one of the most realistic, intelligent and skillful character studies of a contemporary woman to date.”<sup>1</sup> Women-in-fiction scholar Rachel Brownstein noted the novel's landmark status. “In the mid-seventies,” she observed, “real and fictional literary women like Jane Clifford [the novel's protagonist] were fascinating to themselves and others as never before—or perhaps

---

<sup>1</sup> *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1974. (citation to be provided)

since.”<sup>2</sup> Brownstein also noted that, in 1985, Godwin, despite her celebration by feminists, had “brought down upon herself [their] wrath” by voicing disapproval of feminist categorization in her *New York Times* review of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*.<sup>3</sup>

### **Self as artist**

With her fourth novel, *Violet Clay*, also a National Book Award Finalist, Godwin took a new turn, not getting rooted to the thing that was bringing her fame. *Violet Clay* sets aside the problem of women’s roles to reveal a universal story about the traps into which one falls when tempted, tricked, or coerced into playing pre-scripted parts by society. Joanne Frye, writing in *Contemporary Literature*, recognized how, with this novel, Godwin committed herself to a “complex exploration of the significance of narrative design in the full claiming of selfhood.”<sup>4</sup>

To achieve an exploration of selfhood, Godwin incorporates the metaphor of personality-as-artist into her characters’ lives. This distinctive construction has enabled her to survey cultural influences within a fluid, sympathetic voice rather than within the meta-fiction of post-modern literature.

One shining example of the artist-as-archetypal-personality is Madelyn Farley, the theater art director in *Father Melancholy’s Daughter*. When she had been a girl, confined to her room with illness, Madelyn had made a doll into whose magician’s hand she’d placed a “Hot Wand.” Madelyn waved the doll’s wand, and then transformed her bedroom into a fantasy environment. It presaged her career. Having achieved success in her field, she applied it to her life. She visited her old friend, Ruth, wife of a minister and mother of the heroine, Margaret; and whisked Ruth away in a declaration of independence. She also appropriated Margaret father’s career, gaining notoriety as the creator of a play about a woman priest. Margaret, in the meantime, struggled with fulfilling roles that had been laid out, unconsciously, by her parents.

The most extensive exploration of the theme plays out in Godwin’s 2009 novel, *Unfinished Desires*, in which girls at a private school; their teachers (nuns); and their parents and guardians put to the test their artistic-religious powers in what turns out to be a deadly game of personal politics.

### **Concept of personality**

Godwin’s artist metaphor has additional power. She uses it, at times, to illustrate a Jungian view of personality—that it’s not a single being, but a cast of characters directed by an individual.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rachel M. Brownstein, “The Odd Woman and Literary Feminism,” in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*, ed. by Mickey Pearlman, University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Joanne S. Frye, “Narrating the Self: The Autonomous Heroine in Gail Godwin’s *Violet Clay*,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. by Jeffrey W. Hunter, Vol. 125, Detroit: Gale Group, 2000.

Jane Clifford wonders if “the concept of the ‘self’ had been a myth which had died with the nineteenth century. Had there ever been,” she asks, “such a thing as a basic personality?”<sup>5</sup> Later on, she meets the man whom her family had miscast as the eternal villain, and tells him, “I’ve lately become interested in drama, the way drama relates to the way we live our lives, the parts we act... What I am interested in is: do we create the roles, or do they create us?”<sup>6</sup> Godwin, in her journals, applies the concept to herself, separating out a troubling aspect of her personality, inventing a character out of that archetype, and then having a heart-to-heart conversation with it.

### **Autobiographical sources**

The exercise, cited above, typifies one of Godwin’s fictional processes, which is to take a conflict or mystery from her own life and cast it as something larger than and different from herself. In a 1976 conversation with the author John Hawkes, Godwin cited as an example of such a work, Rainer Maria Rilke’s novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Rilke, an Austrian, created an aspiring writer character based on his young self, and made him Danish. “When he finished the book, it was a completely imagined character, but the experiences in that book,” she noted, are ones “he had taken from his own letters.”<sup>7</sup>

This life-inspired approach falls within, but is different than the literary movements termed life-writing and autobiographical fiction.

Life-writing is a term that has been used to refer to many things.

First, there’s its avant-garde application to the crossing of literary boundaries. Max Saunders in his 2010 book, *Self-Impression*, applies it to modern experiments in mating autobiography and fiction, with James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* given as a notable example.<sup>8</sup> Godwin engages in this kind of writing mainly in her Christina stories, most prominently with *Evenings at Five*.<sup>9</sup> Then, there is the kind of novel, also called life-writing, that has arisen from the oral history cultures of indigenous writers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Gail Godwin, *The Odd Woman*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1974, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 349.

<sup>7</sup> “The Place of Autobiography in Fiction,” John Hawkes and Gail Godwin, in *The Lost Saranac Interviews: Forgotten Conversations with Famous Writers*, edited by Joe David Bellamy and Connie Bellamy, Writers Digest Books, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* by Max Saunders, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> *Evenings at Five* by Gail Godwin, Ballantine Books, 2003.

The distinction of indigenous people's life-writing from autobiography is significant. The tellers fuse their individual stories with that of their cultures; and the work often involves collaboration with sensitive editors.<sup>10</sup>

The use of autobiography as a medium for collective history has also excited critics of established authors. Reviewing Annie Ernaux's *Écrire la Vie* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Michael Sheringham proclaims that she has captured "the intertwining rhythms of collective and individual experience" and "exemplified the advent of a new style of 'life-writing.'"<sup>11</sup> Godwin's journals represent this approach.

Autobiographical fiction hinges on whether writers maintain control over point of view, or yield to their fictional protagonists. Godwin's autobiography-derived fiction yields to her protagonists as well as to thematic and dramatic design. Her main intent is to explore the mysteries of personality and existence; her strategy is to use material that offers the most realistic complexity and depth, namely, her personal experience. Her fiction then develops along chosen themes, through honest characterizations, and out of the fruits of research.

### **Method of empathy**

Godwin relates her interest in character empathy to Ortega y Gasset's concept of transmigration into others' souls.<sup>12</sup> "Ortega says that a person is a barbarian to the degree that he *can't take others into account*," newly graduated Emma Gant tells her friend, Alex de Costa, in *Queen of the Underworld*. "That's because he lacks the capacity to go out of himself and imagine life from someone else's point of view. Ortega says the capacity for 'transmigration into another soul' is the highest form of civilized sport."<sup>13</sup>

The "sport" becomes deadly serious in *Violet Clay*<sup>14</sup> when the heroine tries to imagine the state of mind of her uncle, who had shot and killed himself in the cabin in which she is staying. Empathy cuts across classes of people; and its exploration aids writers in their spiritual development.

---

<sup>10</sup> Margaret McDonnell, "Protocols, political correctness and discomfort zones: Indigenous life writing and non-Indigenous editing." *Hecate* 30.1 (2004): 83+, *Literature Resource Center*. Web, Dec. 19, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Sheringham, "We write, she writes," *Times Literary Supplement*, Oct. 5, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, tr. into English by anonymous translator, W.W. Norton, 1932.

<sup>13</sup> *Queen of the Underworld* by Gail Godwin, Random House, 2006, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Violet Clay* by Gail Godwin, Knopf, 1978.

Godwin's 2013 novel, *Flora*, is a symphony of empathy. The 10-year old heroine, Helen Anstruther, undergoes a life-shaking transformation—from being a snob toward her simple-hearted guardian, Flora, to being an idolizer.<sup>15</sup> The passage changes narrator, author, and reader.

### **Organic plot structure**

Development of character, in Godwin's fiction, goes along with development of design. Her notebooks reveal how ideas branch into a web of associations. Her characters also follow paths—through flashbacks, dialogues, and allusions—that create a snowflake rather than a lightning effect.

For example, in *Flora*, Helen walks away from a conversation with Flora after Flora had stunned Helen by characterizing the girl's childhood as strange. Descending her driveway, the condition of which bespeaks ruin, Helen passes the mailbox and thinks of the kinds of letters that had filled it over the years. Two pages later, Godwin resumes the story of Helen's walk, but not before Helen has reason to think of her mother's, father's, and grandmother's imprints on her personality.<sup>16</sup> The swirl of realities makes Helen dizzy.

Godwin's story architecture is a variation on Henry James' house-building analogy. "Henry James," Godwin noted in her Feb. 17, 1964 journal entry, talks about "the finer vibrations" of a living character's being.<sup>17</sup> "But what loving patience it takes to record, probe, circumvent—build not only in layers but in spokes." Godwin extends "vibrations" into a musical metaphor for story architecture. "What you might do," Hugo Henry, a writer in Godwin's 1994 novel, *The Good Husband*, tells a student, "is find connections within the information you've already given us and then set about making them resonate. Create a little string quartet of meanings."<sup>18</sup>

### **A kind of Gothic**

Godwin's plots feature protagonists who put their quests to the test, seeking consciousness and competence in deceptive settings. Her modern form of Gothic is psychological, developmental, and ethical rather than supernatural and violent. Her early attraction to authors such as Emily Brontë, Daphne du Maurier, and Isak Dinesen indicate influences. In Godwin's novels, the Gothic threat is to the development of self; the sublime goal is higher consciousness; and the horror comes in many forms, some of them traps pathologically set by the self itself.

Godwin's Gothic interests are presented front-stage in *Violet Clay*, in which the heroine is an artist who paints Gothic novel book covers and thinks in terms of Gothic fiction. Violet's

---

<sup>15</sup> Gail Godwin, *Flora*, Bloomsbury, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 79-81.

<sup>17</sup> Henry James, "Preface," *The Wings of the Dove*, New York edition, 1909.

<sup>18</sup> Gail Godwin, *The Good Husband*, Ballantine, 1994, p. 144.

nemeses are family legacies, which haunt her; and a career that holds her back. *The Finishing School*, Godwin's 1984 novel, creates a Gothic atmosphere through the story of a young woman and her troubled, mesmerizing mentor. Desire, dread, and hidden truth color every scene as they would in a Gothic romance. The mentor figure assumes a big role in Godwin's adventures, taking the place of the deceptive lover.

### **Visionary response to existentialism**

Sometimes, the nemesis in Godwin's world is something as pervasive and undefined as everydayness, a word that Godwin had picked up reading Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*.<sup>19</sup> Though her characters live in societies that strive for normalcy, her heroes are unhappy with the ordinariness that comes with it, and they relish turmoil. This contrasts with the fiction of Anne Tyler, with whom Godwin is sometimes compared; for, in Tyler's novels, ordinary life is put forward as the balm.

From early in Godwin's career, she has identified the desired state of being as a kind of mystical achievement. She has variously called it the perfect moment, the timeless moment, and the illumined moment. In *Dream Children*, her fourth book, a collection of stories, she cast her visionary ideas in speculative fiction. A vicar, in the story, "An Intermediate Stop" (originally titled, "The Illumined Moment"), stumbles upon a vision of divine truth. "Days went by before he could bring himself to record it," she recounts. "Even as he wrote, he felt the memory of it, the way the pure thing had been, slipping away. Nevertheless, he felt he must preserve what he could."<sup>20</sup> Tragedy resides in the idealism. Why is it so hard to achieve a state of being in which self can be one with otherness; and the present be open to the past?

### **Religious practice**

To achieve the enlightened state—the heartfulness and mindfulness explored in Godwin's non-fiction work, *Heart*—Godwin has characters engage in rituals, which can range from cleaning a kitchen to traveling outside one's body. Mother Malloy, the young nun at the private girls' school in *Unfinished Desires*, kneels at her bed before sleep, asks for God's light, and imagines a hawk circling a chosen location.

"This precept of taking a God's-eye view came naturally to her. As a child, Kate Malloy had gone on frequent night journeys after lights-out in the foster home," Godwin relates. Malloy, as

---

<sup>19</sup> "I am sinking into everydayness. Then I see the vision, only for a minute," 26-year-old Gail wrote in her journal on Sept. 4, 1963, while employed in a travel service office in London. She'd read *The Moviegoer* five months before. "The synthetic 'second life' we have created does not really matter," she continued. "I see this pattern more clearly, I will be able to write about it." See *The Making of a Writer, Vol. 2: Journals, 1963-1969*, Random House, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Gail Godwin, *Dream Children*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 152.

a young postulant, had told her spiritual director that her excursions “don’t feel at all mystical, Father. It’s more of a visual shift in perspective.”<sup>21</sup>

In her story, “Dream Children,” a woman who has suffered the still-birth of a child awakens in the middle of the night and enters a state of reverie, a “weightless though conscious state,” in which she is “able to send her thoughts anywhere, as if her mind contained the entire world.” She hears a noise, and sends herself to a room, where she encounters a boy, cold and scared, shaking a jar of seashells. “Dream and reality are...reciprocal sources of consciousness,” she tells her husband, having been inspired by Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>22</sup>

In *Evensong*, Godwin’s 1999 novel, Margaret Bonner, a pastor, recalls her time providing counsel to young girls at a foster home, and visiting their bedsides for night prayers. “I’ve never prayed in my life,” a girl named Josie challenges her; and Margaret provides a natural, un-doctrinal introduction to the value of such a ritual, as well as to a reading of *Psalms*, which Josie hears as whiny. “People go through some pretty awful stages as they fumble toward what they’re meant to be,” Margaret responds. “As you put it, cruel and whiny. It takes a long while to complete the transformation from ‘eye-for-an-eye’ sandbox whiner into a loving person—a lot of us never make it.”<sup>23</sup> Godwin read the night prayer episode to President and Laura Bush; Mr. and Mrs. James Billington, Librarian of Congress and his wife; and other guests and honored authors at the first National Book Festival in 2001. The response to her humanized religiosity was powerful, as it brings together both religious and secular people.

### **Renewed religiousness**

*Father Melancholy’s Daughter* was the key work in the development of Godwin as a religious voice in literature. Subsequently, three of her eight books have had strong religious themes (*Evensong*; *Heart*; *Unfinished Desires*). Also, she and her life partner for nearly 30 years, the late composer Robert Starer, collaborated on an impressive body of sacred music, for which she was the librettist.

In *Father Melancholy’s Daughter*, Adrian Bonner, a young priest, befriends both Rev. Walter Gower (“Father Melancholy”) and his daughter, Margaret. On his first visit to the Gower household, he brings two books: a volume of Gnostic writings; and James Hillman’s *Insearch: Psychology and Religion*.<sup>24</sup> Typically, Godwin’s characters read a lot; and their reading adds a layer to her fiction, a sub-text. Adrian’s reading opens a modern, psychological, and animist understanding of Christianity and related faiths. Very few writers are exploring this territory in contemporary literary fiction.

---

<sup>21</sup> Gail Godwin, *Unfinished Desires*, Random House, 2009, pp. 71-2.

<sup>22</sup> Gail Godwin, *Dream Children*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, pp. 10-12, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Gail Godwin, *Evensong*, Ballantine Books, 1999, pp. 74-6.

<sup>24</sup> Gail Godwin, *Father Melancholy’s Daughter*, William Morrow & Co., 1991, p. 197.

Godwin comes to her singular treatment of religiosity through childhood inheritance. Her mother, Kathleen Cole, had often consulted St. Teresa of Avila's testimony of faith, *The Interior Castle*. This source book emerges at times in Godwin's fiction; and it has captured the attention of Godwin scholars.

In Godwin's short story, "Some Side Effects of Time Travel," Gretchen, a doctoral student, recalls meeting Jorge Luis Borges, who said "the reason his stories were so short" was because he was blind and he "liked to carry all of them around in his head." He endeavored to live in "a world outside of time." Gretchen's mother tells her that to achieve wisdom, one need only "get outside of time." When Gretchen's stepfather is asleep, her mother "reads St. Teresa's *Interior Castle* in the original. 'God lives outside of time,' she wrote to Gretchen at graduate school."<sup>25</sup>

Night time is a sacred time, as with Jane Clifford in *The Odd Woman*, who after a messy exchange with her lover, recalls the choice her mother, Kitty, had made to "stay home at nights where you belonged, building your own interior castle."<sup>26</sup>

### **Queens of the underworld**

"In her characterization of Kitty," Lihong Xie writes in her study, *The Evolving Self in the Novels of Gail Godwin*, Godwin emphasizes the chasm culture insists upon and perpetuates between a woman's femaleness and her autonomy. Kitty struggled to claim both, only to write herself into one of the 'premature endings' of the female plots that culture and literature prescribe for fictional heroines."<sup>27</sup>

Godwin's novels about women finding expansive realms in their minds lead to mythologies about women who explore the underworld. Though men explore subconscious and mystical depths as well—most notably Carl Jung in one of the key works in Godwin's library, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*—the feminist connection carries with it a separate body of literature.

In *Heart*, Godwin writes about her discovery of the Sumerian myth of Inanna. "Not only did Inanna descend to the Great Below of her own volition," she relates, "but she came back with more of herself than ever... She came back fully conscious of her powers and how she wanted to use them, and also with the compassion and larger-heartedness that suffering brings."<sup>28</sup>

### **Author's education**

---

<sup>25</sup> Gail Godwin, *Dream Children*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, pp. 36-7.

<sup>26</sup> Gail Godwin, *The Odd Woman*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1974, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Lihong Xie, *The Evolving Self of Gail Godwin*, LSU Press, 1995, p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Gail Godwin, *Heart: A Natural History of the Heart-Filled Life*, Perennial trade paper ed., 2001, pp. 206-7.

*Heart* makes it clear that Godwin, in her writing, invests in a humanist religion with connections to her childhood education and lifetime reading. From the second through ninth grades, Godwin attended St. Genevieve of the Pines, a private school for girls run and taught by a French order of nuns whose mission it was to have young women achieve their highest potential.<sup>29</sup> On the bus home, as well as at other times, the rule had been silence, encouraging meditation. Handwriting lessons involved copying lines from the Catholic Catechism: “Who is God? Why did he create us?” Studying literature required looks into oneself more than into scholarly criticism.

This kind of practice, Godwin said in a 2010 interview, “builds habits of discipline. It’s religious, but it applies to anything in life you want to do. You need time to think, time to be quiet, time to let your inspiration have a chance to speak; and then you need the discipline to learn how to organize things, and train your mind.”<sup>30</sup>

No discussion of Godwin’s education can exclude the role her mother, Kathleen, had played in mentoring Gail’s development as an imaginative writer. Godwin writes about it 2015 book, *Publishing: A Writer’s Memoir*. “My mother and I told each other stories as soon as I could form a sentence,” Godwin recalls. “We made up stories together, in which I was allowed to do awful things under the alias of someone called Theophilus, the Awfullest Bear in the World. We took turns ‘reading’ stories out of a tiny address book with blank pages. We also drew pictures and acted scenes based on real people.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Faith in aesthetics**

Father Gale Webbe, the priest at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Asheville, which Godwin had attended with her mother, had a long-term influence on her. “Not only did I find church something to look forward to,” Godwin reflected about her first experience at age ten, “but I had met a man I admired who would actually talk to me seriously.”<sup>32</sup> In 1964, in London, she found his book, *Night and Nothing*, in a bookstore, and began a correspondence with him. “More and more I understand what Father Webbe means when he says we are living in eternity.”<sup>33</sup> Three weeks later, she included a quote from his book in her journal: “The spiritual man is increasingly becoming aware that his essential satisfactions proceed...[from] whether or not his life is constructed on the lines of a sound story. It must have a pattern...a too rare overtone only produced when, as it were, the fingers of free will move across the strings of destiny.”<sup>34</sup> At age

---

<sup>29</sup> Godwin left the school when her stepfather moved out of state for a job, and the family went with him.

<sup>30</sup> Gail Godwin, quoted in “Visiting Our Past” by Rob Neufeld, *Asheville Citizen-Times*, Jan. 11, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Gail Godwin, *Publishing: A Writer’s Memoir*, Bloomsbury 2015, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Gail Godwin, “Farewell to a Mentor,” *The Living Church*, May 14, 2000, digital archives, [www.episcopalarchives.org](http://www.episcopalarchives.org), Jan. 8, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Gail Godwin, *The Making of a Writer, Vol. 2: Journals, 1963-1969*, Random House, 2011, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

89, shortly before he died, Webbe delivered a talk about his friendship with Godwin when she was presenting a keynote address at the Kanuga Conference in Henderson County, N.C. “The creative process,” he noted, “is an obscure prayer process, in which God within us moves us to make an offering to God above us.”<sup>35</sup>

In *A Southern Family*, Clare, the novelist, writes a letter to her younger brother Theo a half year after his suicide, in which she relates their mother’s mystical faith in creativity. “The Lily of my childhood,” she explains, “believed in Art the way the Lily you grew up knowing counted on God...I was taught by her to believe that special patterns of words, or the resolutions of chords, or inspired slashes of colored pigment on a flat surface could make all the difference between feeling you were an ordinary person, lonely, disappointed, and trapped, and knowing you possessed a passkey to a kingdom with powers and privileges unlike any other.”<sup>36</sup>

The equation of religious and aesthetic thinking is a distinctive achievement of Godwin’s life work. She presents the idea in stories about people experiencing existential anguish. Suicide becomes a major theme, additionally so because of two suicides in her family, that of her father and of her brother, Tommy, on whose despair *A Southern Family* is based.

“I was thinking how nice it would be to be a character in one of your novels,” Theo, the fictional brother, once told Clare. Clare stopped herself from reacting with: “What have you done to make you a main character in *anybody’s* book?” He accused her of confecting happy endings for her protagonists and asked, “Why don’t you write a book about something that can *never* be wrapped up? What if you came across something like that in life?”<sup>37</sup>

### **Social novels**

To understand her brother Tommy’s fate, Godwin created a 500-page fictional setting in which she challenges her main article of faith. *A Southern Family* does more as well. It creates a Southern landscape in which characters get entangled in a high-stakes game of avoid-the-traps. “You’d have to be from around here to understand all our little stratification systems,” Theo’s and Clare’s brother Rafe tells a psychoanalyst.<sup>38</sup>

Psychoanalysts do not appear that much in Godwin’s fiction, but dreams do. Characters bring their subconscious lives into conscious memory. *A Southern Family* and her other Asheville-based saga, *A Mother and Two Daughters*, are full of dreams, as are her journals. Godwin’s art is derived, in part from her propensity to dream; and then to write them down.

---

<sup>35</sup> Gail Godwin, “Farewell to a Mentor,” *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Gail Godwin, *A Southern Family*, William Morrow, 1987, p. 392.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 274,

In a social novel such as *Unfinished Desires*, imagination, dreams, and hauntings rise to an equal status with action. Previously, those aspects were allowed free reign primarily in her short stories.

### **Chief dreamer**

Yvonne Zipp, reviewing *The Making of a Writer, Vol. 2* in *The Christian Science Monitor*, called the book “unbelievably generous” and of “immense value,” and yet took issue with the inclusion of dreams, comparing it to people’s tedious habit of dream-telling.<sup>39</sup> Godwin’s dreams, however are part of her genius; they’re integrated into her life and work. In recognizing her distinct contributions, one must see her as a chief dreamer.

In an interview with Paul Mandelbaum, Godwin told how the fiction editor at *Esquire* had persuaded her to remove a dream sequence from her story, “A Sorrowful Woman,” published in the magazine in 1971.<sup>40</sup> “Now, thirty years later,” Godwin revealed, “my website receives a steady traffic in e-mails from baffled students—and teachers—who want to know why this woman killed herself. If the dreams had been left in, you would know why.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Theater of the subconscious**

“Last night I dreamed of Ursula DeVane,” Godwin’s fifth novel, *The Finishing School*, begins. Justin Stokes, the 14-year-old narrator, says of her 40-year-old mentor, “She, along with a few others, has claimed a permanent place in the theater of my unconscious, where each figure—based wholly or in part of some real person—has its function.”<sup>42</sup>

Godwin’s way of representing the subconscious on the same field with practical reality is to create scenes in which characters test out interactions in the replay studios of their imaginations. Through multiple views of predicaments, one comes to distinguish dominant themes. All characters engage in an introspective process, manifesting the supernatural in ways that differ from the ghost Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*; the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez; and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s allegories.

“There is a finite stage in the theater of the unconscious,” Godwin said in an interview about *The Finishing School*. “There is a finite number of actors—not fifty, but only five or ten. The story crystallizes into figures of necessity... Then, there are certain sets that you return to again and

---

<sup>39</sup> “The Making of a Writer, Vol. 2,” review by Yvonne Zipp, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 5, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> “A Sorrowful Woman” was first published in *Esquire* in Aug. 1971. Godwin included it in her volume of stories, *Dream Children* (Knopf, 1976). It has been anthologized many times, including in *Great Esquire Fiction: The Finest Stories from the First Fifty Years* (Penguin, 1983).

<sup>41</sup> Gail Godwin, interview with Paul Mandelbaum, *12 Short Stories and Their Making: An Anthology with Interviews*, Paul Mandelbaum, Persea Books, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Gail Godwin, “The Finishing School,” Viking, 1984, p. 1, 4.

again in your imaginative theater, like recurrent dreams. I have Asheville sets. One is St. Mary's (Episcopal Church). One is St. Genevieve's. They don't represent themselves. They represent points of growth. They stand for attitudes and challenges. You can learn so much from dreams."<sup>43</sup>

### **Fainting**

Sometimes, in Godwin's fiction, subconscious and symbolic worlds overwhelm characters. Cate, a protagonist in *A Mother and Two Daughters*, senses a void in her life. "As she slowly climbed the stairs, the ghosts of her arrogant young dreams clustered around her like frightened children seeking protection from the lengthening shadows." The melancholy environment is "made up of all the ingredients of her own history—those she could control and those she could not. She had been fleeing from such a moment as this, when that history would have had enough time to assume a shape."<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, instead of dreading truth, Cate achieves peace, lying awake in bed, contemplating life's design.

At times, the power of the subconscious world is so strong, characters faint—as Helen does in *Flora*, and as Mother Malloy does approaching dark mystery in *Unfinished Desires*.

The emotional well-being of Godwin's characters often depend on their places and times. Along with being trapped by roles they're expected to play, they are haunted by history and affected by societal ruin. Though Godwin is not considered a political writer, she is very much a social writer.

### **Chronicling societal decline**

*A Southern Family* is a story about people caught up in ruin. In Godwin's story, "Mr. Bedford," Carrie Ames, a 27-year-old aspiring writer in London, gets caught up in the web of her landlords, the Eastons, whose aristocratic world, Mrs. Easton said, was "going, going, gone."<sup>45</sup> In the end, Carrie flees their ship. Before returning to America, she visits their present lodgings, and as she approaches, looks in through the windows. She spots Mr. Easton, "doing knee-bends in his striped flannel pajamas... He was facing the front door, no doubt seeing his reflection in its glass panes, when, suddenly (I must have stepped forward, or his vision shifted), he looked perfectly horrified, as if he'd seen a ghost, and turned and bolted down the hall and away into the shadows."<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> "A Conversation with Gail Godwin," Gail Godwin, *The Finishing School*, Ballantine Books Reader's Circle Edition, 2004, p. 327.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Godwin, *A Mother and Two Daughters*, Viking, 1982, pp. 479-480.

<sup>45</sup> Gail Godwin, "Mr. Bedford," in *Mr. Bedford and the Muses*, William Heinemann, 1984, p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 103.

The dramatic moment echoes the D.H. Lawrence quote that Godwin uses as an epigraph to Part I of *A Mother and Two Daughters*: “Our epoch is over, a cycle of evolution is finished, our activity has lost its meaning, we are ghosts.” The idea, Cate explains deep into the novel, is that we must “‘give up the ghost’ and let the old world die with us,” and re-begin with what’s true and indestructible in us.<sup>47</sup> Godwin had absorbed the lost-generation and existentialist thinking that had preceded her to offer a view that aligns more with Søren Kierkegaard, as she’d noted in her journal on Sept. 24, 1963: “Our lives become meaningful to the degree that we bind together tomorrow, today and yesterday in an active whole.”<sup>48</sup> That message of hope and faith is a hallmark of Godwin’s writing, and she consciously balances hope and despair in her fiction, particularly with her endings.

“All was silent, safe and still,” *The Odd Woman* concludes as Jane settles down for the night, recovering from fright at a suspected intrusion. “From the little concrete house behind came the barely audible tinkle of a soul at the piano, trying to organize the loneliness and the weather and the long night into something of abiding shape and beauty.”<sup>49</sup>

Social ills express themselves, in Godwin’s family novels, through closely-followed characters who interact and think a lot, as in the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot. In this vein, Godwin gave satire and exposition elbow room in *A Mother and Two Daughters* and *A Southern Family*, both of which became best-sellers.

### **Best-sellerdom and the market**

With *A Mother and Two Daughters* had begun Godwin’s reign as a best-selling author and Book-of-the-Month-Club choice. “This happy event,” Paul Gray wrote in *Time*, “entitled her long-time admirers to mixed emotions. While it is pleasurable to see a favored writer receive the success she deserves, it is irksome to realize that membership in a small club of discriminating readers has suddenly been thrown open to the multitudes. If so many people, the reasoning follows, liked Godwin’s loose, loving chronicle of three plucky females, then maybe we should find it disappointing. And whom will she write for next time, all of them or us?”<sup>50</sup>

Godwin defied expectations with her subsequent novel, *The Finishing School*, before returning to a saga with the tragedy-struck household of *A Southern Family*.<sup>51</sup> Her eighth novel, *Father*

---

<sup>47</sup> Gail Godwin, *A Mother and Two Daughters*, Viking, 1982, p. 413.

<sup>48</sup> Gail Godwin, *The Making of a Writer, Vol. 2: Journals, 1963-1969*, Random House, 2011, p. 33 (Sept. 24, 1963 entry).

<sup>49</sup> *The Odd Woman*, *op cit*, p. 423.

<sup>50</sup> “Deliberate Speed, Stunning Effect,” a review of *The Finishing School*, by Paul Gray, *Time*, Feb. 11, 1985.

<sup>51</sup> *A Southern Family* was on the *N.Y. Times* bestseller list for eight straight weeks, beginning on Oct. 18, 1987. Like *A Mother and Two Daughters*, it was then published as a mass market paperback with a painterly woman’s novel book cover.

*Melancholy's Daughter*, became another bestseller. Then she produced *The Good Husband*, a novel with an unconventional structure and four protagonists—two male, two female—each of whom shows a damaged side in their passage toward truth and redemption.

“*The Good Husband*, published in 1994, remains my favorite failure,” Godwin writes in *Publishing*—not an artistic failure, but a publishing one, selling only 30,000 copies. “Devotees of *Father Melancholy's Daughter* had been hoping for another character like Margaret,” Godwin relates. “They had wanted to *be* Margaret. I received letters from women who said they were seeking ordination because of Margaret’s story. Whereas there was not one among the four protagonists in *The Good Husband* that a reader would gladly ‘identify with.’”

*Publishing: A Writer's Memoir*, published in 2015, chronicles Godwin’s journey in a reflective and story-loving way. Her immediate launch into critical success (with *The Perfectionists*), once she’d matriculated through Iowa Writers’ Workshop, fills Chapter 3, after we learn of her mother’s influence on her childhood and the hunger that drove Godwin on her decade of struggle after Chapel Hill. Then, there’s the rest of the story: lionization, best-sellerdom, and publishing decline. The vantage point of the memoir is of a writer who has achieved freedom, mastery, and a sure place in the literary world looking back at a historic phenomenon: the takeover of publishing houses by profit-oriented corporations. The tone and style is that of a war-zone letter-writer, frankly telling about key moments, eulogizing casualties, and reflecting on the state of the world. As she did in *Heart*, Godwin makes her work of history personal, and includes humor, intent on winning hearts with stories in order to let ideas be received. She quotes a friend who’d quoted Pablo Casals: “The first twenty years you learn. The second twenty years you practice. The third twenty years you perform. And the fourth twenty years you play.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Rendezvous with the Beast**

Can fiction that uses the story-telling mode of Jane Austen convey important stories for early 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences? Sara Maitland, a magical realist and feminist fiction writer, reviewed Godwin’s *The Good Husband* for *the New York Times Book Review* and declared, “Like Magda [the dying visionary professor in the book] and Ms. Godwin, I believe in the symbolic and want fiction to explore it. But it is extremely difficult to do this sort of writing within the structures of the conventional social realist novel.”<sup>53</sup>

*The Good Husband* is a social novel in that it moves from scene to scene without fantasy and with a natural progression. It is also a philosophical novel. Art and literature are in the spotlight as much as in *The Odd Woman*. Existential, real-life topics get communicated through stories, as in *Heart*.

---

<sup>52</sup> *Publishing*, *op cit*, p. 155.

<sup>53</sup> Sara Maitland, “The Wife Every Woman Wants,” review of *The Good Husband*, *The New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 4, 1994.

Maitland also questioned Godwin's level of irony, though Magda's world view—involving the marriage of heaven and hell—is thoughtfully ironic; and Hugo Henry, the lower class boy who becomes rich folks' favorite story-maker, is always on the edge. And, of course, the book's title is ironic.

Suspense in Godwin's work relates to how the beastly aspects of existence fill the stage. In *A Southern Family*, nihilism has its day. In *The Good Husband*, we have a cabinet of horrors: cancer, child and sibling deaths, a dying marriage, mental breakdown, and writer's block. There is a Gothic element to this fiction, as in the church carvings (misericords) that the title character makes his quiet obsession. One time, Magda was rushing him way from his favorite carving—a dragon—before he had enough light for a photo. Miraculously, a sunbeam shined through a window on his subject. “Well, good for the light,” Magda commented, “if it stroked your little beastie out of its shadows, eh?”<sup>54</sup>

### **Different kind of ghost stories**

The reality of hauntings as mental experiences is a lifelong subject of Godwin. Alice Hugo, the writer's editor and wife in *The Good Husband* is haunted by traumas, and sometimes retreats into a ghost world.

“There are so many ways to be haunted,” Godwin said in a 2010 interview, talking about *Unfinished Desires*. “A parent can want something really badly, and not get it, and then the child thinks, ‘I have to do that,’ without even making the connection...Mother Ravenel is haunted by her mother and by the unfinished business with Antonia. Cornelia is haunted by the loss of her twin sister and her own hatred and resentment of Ravenel. And poor Madelyn is haunted because her mother keeps saying, ‘you're so much like your aunt, Antonia.’ Henry Vick—he has one drink a day as a kind of inoculation against the alcoholism of his mother, his grandfather, the whole bunch. Mother Malloy is haunted by her state of orphanhood. And Chloe really is haunted. She really is. She's sleeping in a room with a ghost and wants to stay in that room.”<sup>55</sup>

The phrase, “unfinished desires” does not only relate to wishes; it is also code for ghosts, that is, the unfinished desires passed by the dead to the still-living.

*Evenings at Five*, Godwin's 2003 novella, begins with Christina, the protagonist, experiencing her house in the presence of her recently deceased, long-time partner, Rudy. “Now that Rudy was dead,” Godwin writes, “Christina listened to him more closely than ever...At the ghostly cocktail hours, she hung on his every echo.”<sup>56</sup> In an interview about the book, she added that a “leftover life that refuses to die can inhabit the person and use the living person as an

---

<sup>54</sup> Gail Godwin, *The Good Husband*, Ballantine, 1994, p. 403.

<sup>55</sup> Gail Godwin, interview with Rob Neufeld, Jan. 11, 2010, *The Read on WNC*, [www.thereadonwnc.ning.com](http://www.thereadonwnc.ning.com).

<sup>56</sup> *Evenings at Five* by Gail Godwin, Ballantine Books, Reader's Circle edition, 2004, pp. 16-17.

instrument.”<sup>57</sup> In her introduction, she noted that she’d started the book as a tale invented from her life. Then, while writing it, memories and feelings jumped out at her. “But what I didn’t know until I got deeper into *Evenings at Five*,” she said, “was that I was writing a ghost story.” She added five Christina stories to the novella in the paperback edition (including “Mother and Daughter Ghosts, A Memoir”) and realized, “all the Christina stories collected here could qualify as ghost stories.”<sup>58</sup>

As Godwin’s work has continued, the theme of ghosts has evolved as an encompassing view. Godwin’s 2013 novel, *Flora*, minimizes the role of the most literal ghost—Helen’s grandmother, Nonie—to a couple of scenes in which Nonie’s voice speaks to Helen. The book shifts attention to a new powerful haunting, that of the title character on the narrator, Helen, who, writing years after her loss of Flora, reflects, “I thought I knew all there was to know about her, but she has since become one of my profoundest teachers...These pages are for her. They are my attempt to stand among the crowd and say aloud for all to hear. ‘Flora Waring, you are not forgotten.’”<sup>59</sup>

### **Distinctive voice**

Speaking to Rudy’s empty chair in *Evenings at Five*, Christina recalls their last conversation at his hospital bed, and then reflects on her voice, in which, she says, “I sometimes hear things. It’s a wiser version of my own voice, and it was saying like a mantra: ‘Absent in his presence, present in his absence.’ And then I had this further idea. That somewhere in the gulf between those opposites, ‘absence and presence’ or ‘presence in absence,’ might lie the secret of eternal life.”<sup>60</sup>

Godwin’s distinctive voice is one of her contributions to literature. In her fiction-writing, she strives to live in more than one world at once—past and present; dreams and waking reality; self and other—and her voice takes on the sound of someone in an intermediate realm: caring, regretful, ironic, intimate and plain-spoken, and conscious of being outside of time, like a ghost.

--Rob Neufeld, July 2015

---

<sup>57</sup> “A Conversation with Gail Godwin” in *Evenings at Five* by Gail Godwin, Ballantine Books, Reader’s Circle edition, 2004, p. 277.

<sup>58</sup> “Introduction,” *Evenings at Five* by Gail Godwin, Ballantine Books, Reader’s Circle edition, 2004, p. xvii.

<sup>59</sup> *Flora*, *op cit*, p. 273.

<sup>60</sup> *Evenings at Five* by Gail Godwin, Ballantine Books, Reader’s Circle edition, 2004, pp. 20-21.