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SOUTHERN FAMILIES AND THEIR DAUGHTERS:
THE SELF AND THE SYSTEM IN SELECTED TEXTS BY
GRAU, GILCHRIST, WELTY, SPENCER, AND DOUGLAS

A Dissertation
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in
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Abstract

In this interdisciplinary study, I apply the materials of family systems theory to the study of five twentieth-century literary texts, each written by a Southern white woman. Arranged in the order they will appear in this study, the five texts are The Keepers of the House (1964) by Shirley Ann Grau; Net of Jewels (1992) by Ellen Gilchrist; The Golden Apples (1949) by Eudora Welty; The Voice at the Back Door (1956) by Elizabeth Spencer; and Can't Quit You, Baby (1988) by Ellen Douglas.

In the analysis of these books—all examples of domestic and social realism—I analyze and measure the effects of the family system on the individuation process of each female protagonist, particularly (as the texts are arranged) the increasing degrees of differentiation that the female protagonist achieves as she conforms to or resists the family and cultural forms she faces. A second purpose is to explore and evaluate the potential of family systems theory as a reliable tool for the analysis of imaginative fiction in general and these texts by these Southern women writers in particular.

The results indicate that both the specific family structure and the communication processes of each of the five families supported and fostered the traditional Southern roles of Southern belle and lady. Each of the protagonists also found these roles restrictive, yet how each one reacted to these roles was a
measure of her family's particular destructive qualities and her unique temperament. From family to family, the central problem varied. Abigail Howland faced neglect and abandonment; Rhoda Manning endured a patriarchal, controlling father; Virgie Rainey experienced the diminished presence of a mother who loved an outsider; Marcia Mae grew up amid secrets and forbidden speech topics; and Cornelia also faced lies and family secrets.

Each protagonist, facing various difficulties, employed strategies that were designed to distinguish and differentiate her from the family. They met with varying degrees of success, in their efforts to overcome family difficulties and to integrate the desire for individuality with the demands of family and community.
Chapter 1
Family Systems, the Self, and the Southern Women's Novel

One popular and useful enterprise in literary scholarship of the last several decades has been to apply the discoveries, concepts, and theories in different fields to the analysis of literary texts. The approach has netted some insightful and creative ideas. In this interdisciplinary study, I apply the materials of family systems theory to the study of five twentieth-century literary texts, each written by a Southern white woman. In the analysis of these books—all examples of domestic and social realism—I will analyze and measure the effects of the family system on the individuation process of each female protagonist, particularly (as the novels are arranged) the increasing degrees of differentiation that the female protagonist achieves as she conforms to or resists the family and cultural forms she faces. A second purpose is to explore and evaluate the potential of family systems theory as a reliable tool for the analysis of imaginative fiction in general and these texts by these Southern women writers in particular.

To stabilize the social and family conditions for this analysis, I have selected texts whose protagonists are contemporary white middle- and upper-class women from the Central Deep South. The authors themselves generally emerge from that socioeconomic level as well, and they were also born within thirty years of each other. The primary criterion for the selection of each text is
that the individual female protagonist develop within the protection, confines, and expectations of her white middle or upper-middle class family.

Arranged in the order they will appear in this study, the five literary texts are The Keepers of the House (1964) by Shirley Ann Grau; Net of Jewels (1992) by Ellen Gilchrist; The Golden Apples (1949) by Eudora Welty; The Voice at the Back Door (1956) by Elizabeth Spencer; and Can't Quit You, Baby (1988) by Ellen Douglas. This arrangement presents the female protagonists by increasing degrees of differentiation and selfhood they have achieved, or conversely, by decreasing degrees of fusion to their individual families and a resulting alienation from self. That is, the organizational pattern presents each protagonist by degrees of differentiation and fusion as she emerges from a middle or upper-middle class white Southern fictional family.

The primary reason that these particular books have been selected is that these protagonists face different family structures, ranging from strong patriarchal fathers or matriarchal mothers, to absent fathers or mothers, and to surrogate fathers or mothers. Within these different family systems, however, there are recurring or abiding similarities, particularly those of the cultural roles of belle and lady that are such intimate aspects of Southern female education. As different as the family structures are, the Southern white middle and upper class families still impart these family and cultural expectations to their daughters.
Hence, the generally difficult process of growing up that one would face in any family system is complicated for this particular group of women characters by entrenched, inflexible social roles uniformly transmitted by these structurally different Southern family systems.

This family process involves at times a high degree of resistance from the young daughters, and conflict results. At times, resistance and rebellion help to define or differentiate the daughter's identity, and at times the family system is so strong that such differentiation is rendered impossible. From one fictional family to the next, the system and the individual daughter work out an intimate dynamic with the identity and health of the daughter hanging in the balance.

The conflict between the individual and the powerful family or community is reflected in the social history of the region, for the historical South has demonstrated an attachment to family and particular roles for women. "More than other Americans," argues Anne Firor Scott, "Southerners put their faith in the family as the central institution of society, faith that was slow to change" (The Southern Lady 213). The fundamental responsibility of the family was to serve to instill the expectations of the culture. That is, the growth and development of women are influenced by specific expectations established by tradition, custom, and community values. For young Southern upper- and middle-class women, these expectations have been traditionally quite high,
extremely complicated, and sometimes contradictory, and they have emerged most clearly within the context of the family. Scholars have identified several reasons (and argue about others) for this special set of expectations for Southern women.

Katheryn Lee Seidel in The Southern Belle in the American Novel explains, “During the first half of the nineteenth century, both in England and in the United States, the home was elevated to the status of a sacred refuge from the corrupt world” (94), but she notes that in the South the home became more like “a temple of civilization’s most cherished values and virtues” (4-5). In an earlier study, W. R. Taylor argues in Cavalier and Yankee that the Southern woman had been “given the home on the understanding that her benevolence was to stop at the bounds of the family” (148). That is, Taylor points out that “Southern women in a certain sense were being bought off, offered half the loaf in the hope they would not demand more” (167).

Nevertheless, the Old South’s new desire to raise the status of the Southern woman, regardless of its reasons, led to sweeping changes in the South’s ideology. For instance, the “cult of chivalry” was born, according to Taylor (148). That is, the noble Southern gentleman-cavalier was to “kneel down before the [new] altar of feminity and familial benevolence” (148). A new “planter’s social code” came into being which was designed both to elevate the
position of the Southern woman and her realm "without robbing the Southern
gentleman of his manhood" (148). Building upon the observations of Taylor
and many other scholars of Southern culture, Seidel enumerates some of the
causative conditions which led to the South's tendency to exalt the values of
cavalier, lady, home, and family. For one reason, Southerners believed that their
civilization was superior to that of the North. Since the upper-class landowners
thought that they were directly descended from the English aristocracy, they felt
that they and their families should live their lives in such a way as to serve as
ideal examples of how life should be lived. During the nineteenth century, a new
social and personal model gained acceptance as beliefs about democracy and the
natural aristocrat, such as the theory of Thomas Jefferson, became increasingly
popular, and many of the old aristocratic notions gave way. Southerners who
prized the old norms grew more uneasy, their feelings of insecurity perhaps
leading them to grasp for a stable symbol of order in order to allay their anxiety.
The home provided the perfect icon. Unfortunately, the combination of idealism
and desperate determination to find stability contributed to inflexibility and
rigidity in the roles for men and women of the South.²

In the middle and upper classes, many Southern families were to raise and
develop a certain kind of adult woman, one who was to be more than a mere
living and breathing flesh and blood person; she was a symbol of all the South
held dear. W.J. Cash, in *The Mind of the South*, stated that the white Southern woman became to Southerners more of a symbol than a real flesh and blood person (86). According to him, the white upper class woman “was the South’s Palladium, this Southern woman—the shield-bearing Athena gleaming whitely in the clouds, the standard for its rallying, the mystical symbol of its nationality in face of the foe. She was the lily-pure maid of Asolat and the hunting goddess of the Boeotian hill. And—she was the pitiful Mother of God” (86). Furthermore, Anne Firor Scott has observed in *The Southern Lady* that the cultural roles for the women remained the same well into the twentieth-century (213). More recent scholars concur, as Anne Goodwyn Jones observes in *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, “Southern womanhood has been the crown of Dixie at least since the early nineteenth century” (8). Yet another scholar underscores the same ideas by arguing that the woman of the home was selected to be the figurehead of the home, and as an unchanging demigod, she was elevated almost to religious stature (Seidel 5).³

That the upper class white woman was expected to conform to this image of virtuous womanhood was further elaborated by Virginia Kent Anderson Leslie in “A Myth of the Southern Lady.” Leslie notes that because “elite white men sat at the apex of power” in the South (20), they made the rules which the Southern women were to abide by (20). Leslie also notes that since the actual percentage
of people who were upper class in the Old South was small, only a "few individuals could [ever] actually become Southern ladies" (20). Nevertheless, the white men of the South worked furiously to set forth their version of the ideal woman. Thomas R. Dew writes, for instance, in an 1832 essay, "Professor Dew on Slavery," that the upper class Southern lady was "the cheering and animating centre of the family circle . . . [and that] her virtues . . . throw a charm and delight around our homes and firesides, and calm and tranquillize the harsher tempers and more restless propensities of the male" (339). As Southern ladies, the women were also to "bring forth and nurture the rising generation" and teach these children to be moral (336-37). Since her "physical weakness incapacitated her for combat," she could, "fall an easy prey to [a man's] oppression" (336). In 1835, Dew amplified and delineated the qualities of the ideal woman in four separate issues of Southern Literary Messenger. In these articles, he pointed out that the weaker woman must know how to attract the stronger male by acquiring "grace, modesty, and loveliness" (495). She also needs to "delight and fascinate" the man by having great physical beauty combined with a meek demeanor (495). Her meekness required that she never "give utterance to her passions and emotions like a man" or else she would become manlike and thus repulsive and unable to convince a suitor to marry her (498).
In an 1837 article, William Harper suggested a similar line of thinking when he argued that women were “unfit” for certain kinds of “privileges,” which he lists as civil, political, and educational privileges (554). Dew’s notions also found support from George Fitzhugh seventeen years later in his 1852 book *Sociology for the South*: “so long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness” (214-15). Once the belle marries, however, Fitzhugh believed that she will become like “all women [who] literally sell their liberties when they marry, and very few repent of the bargain” (272). Thus, according to Fitzhugh’s arguments in *Cannibals All! Or Slaves Without Masters*, the married Southern woman, or Southern lady as she came to be called, became her husband’s “property and his slave” (235). As such, she was to be obedient and dutiful and place her husband’s needs and those of her children above all else, including her own needs and desires. Since the Southern woman thus had to fulfill a set social role, conformity in women was encouraged, a fact which might seem ironic in a region where “intense individualism” was itself worshipped, as Cash noted, more than at any other time “since the Italian Renaissance” (31).

Many Southern males wanted the Southern woman to conform to these much-discussed, much-written about roles, even though they and the family were
actually instilling in the minds of the young Southern women very contradictory notions of what it meant to be a woman. Kathryn Lee Seidel, echoing Anne Scott’s earlier observations, points out Southern women found great difficulty in conforming at least in part because the two roles expected of them were inherently contradictory. That is, the young unmarried upper class Southern woman, the belle, was to be “nervous, fickle, and capricious” (Fitzhugh 214); yet the married Southern woman—the lady—was to be faithful, dutiful, and helpful (34). One is not surprised to find, then, degrees of confusion, rebellion, resistance, and leavetaking as predictable responses to such contradictory cultural expectations.

This rich and complex conflict between the individual woman and the cultural expectations she faced has been explored both in the primary fiction of women writers and more recently by literary critics. In her 1981 seminal study, *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, Anne Goodwyn Jones studied seven women writers who had been “raised to be southern ladies, physically pure, fragile, and beautiful, socially dignified, cultural and gracious within the family sacrificial and submissive, yet, if the occasion required, intelligent and brave” (xi). Yet Jones notes that these “ladies” were unhappy with this role, and in fact it was “the tension between the demands of this cultural image and their own human needs” that sparked and encouraged their creativity (xi). Seidel has likewise maintained
that the Southern writers after World War I began to use the figure of the
Southern belle "not to praise the South but to criticize" the South for requiring its
women to live by such standards. Other significant works which were published
in 1985 included two that studied Southern women writers who also criticized the
role of the Southern lady. Carol Manning in *With Ears Opening Like Morning
Glories: Eudora Welty and the Love of Storytelling* and Louise Westling in
*Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*, Carson
McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor demonstrated that Welty, McCullers, and
O'Connor were Southern women writers whose works portrayed many of the
difficulties the women of the South faced.

While the tension between the individual female protagonist and her
sociocultural roles has been mined to some extent, the existing scholarship on the
development of female protagonists in literary texts by Southern women writers
has rarely made use of the family systems theory that I draw upon in this study.
Rather, the critical commentary that employs a psychological methodology
focuses on the intrapsychic factors of identity that are measured in terms of
instincts, drives, and impulses of the individual. Even when the family itself has
been the subject of critical scrutiny, the psychoanalytical system has been the one
that most critics have employed.⁵
Frequently, scholars have analyzed the social roles for male and female characters, as well as the role that the social mores and customs play in the development of each character’s identity, but they have generally traced the characters’ development in terms of the role itself, outside of the family system. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, for example, in “Southern Ladies and the Southern Literary Renaissance” examines how two Southern women writers, Eudora Welty and Katherine Ann Porter, portrayed the Southern lady in some of their works. Additionally, a few studies have examined how the Southern woman comes to know that she should conform to these narrowly-defined cultural roles. Joan Schulz notes in “Orphaning as Resistance” that in no other region is “one’s identity determined [so much] by who one’s family is” (89). She states that in the South even the community is “an embodiment of values having their roots and significance in kinship structures” (90). Schulz argues that in the South the family is the key social institution which affects identity. Her study examines female protagonists who reject their parents and choose to leave the family unit and become orphans. Louise Westling, also studying the Southern family in “Fathers and Daughters in Welty and O’Connor,” is concerned to discover how female characters’ relationships with their fathers affect their identity. A similar kind of work on mother-daughter relationships in Eudora Welty’s fiction has also been completed.
Those studies that seek to interpret characters' identity as developing within the family provide a more accurate account of the actual developmental process. While the studies of Schulz and Westling do focus on various aspects of the family dynamic, they do not employ a systematic analysis of the effects on individualization of the complete family system. Family systems theory is, however, a particularly useful framework for studying male and female protagonists. However, in this study female Southern protagonists, for whom identity results more directly from their family rather than from their broader social experience, will be the focus. This particular study provides broader parameters for analyses of literary portrayals of family dynamics than do those by Schulz and Westling, which focus upon a single relationship of the character within her family. In fact, family systems theory provides a model of the family that includes not only the important family relationships but also many other kinds of topics as well, including power issues, communication, and the handling of cultural information.

If one considers the rigid socio-cultural expectations for women, it is not surprising in the least to see the power that the Southern family wielded in inculcating these values in the lives of its Southern daughters. In the relationships of the family, between mother and daughter, father and daughter, between siblings, as well as other relationships in the extended family and even
the community, these models for women are presented and instilled. The family instills the values within the immediate family circle and sends the child into the churches and the schools where corroboration and support are to be found.9

Human identity and its outward manifestations in behavior can "be understood as embedded in a concentric series of systems: the structure of the mind, the nuclear family, the extended family, the community, the nation, and so on. A full description of human problems takes into account actors, behavior, and context" (Nichols, Self 8). If we look inward, we may find "personal rigidities which will not yield readily to interactional influences,"(8) and looking outward, we "may discover economic and social forces" as well. The family provides the vortex of forces where mind and community interact, and for this reason it offers unique and complex insights into the formation of identity. The movement from intrapsychic to interpersonal psychologies is also accompanied by a corresponding shift from the study of the content of the mind to the process of human interaction. Consequently, this kind of investigation attaches great significance to the action (called by Nichols the praxis) of the individual within the context of relationship to others. The analysis of a character's identity must include a myriad of responses to and transactions with others in her family.

To refer to the processes of the family as a family "system" does not involve a jejeune attempt to make literary analysis more scientific, and thereby
simply more impressive. Rather, this term derives from a psychological theory and method that offers insights into literary as well as clinical subjects.\textsuperscript{10}

Family systems theory developed in the late forties and early fifties in several different U.S. cities in response to several distinct kinds of social problems. After the end of World War II, the clinical needs of thousands of returning servicemen necessitated a more practical approach to therapeutic insights than that afforded by the slower psychoanalytic approach. Recalcitrant and persistent difficulties in two other psychological settings, the treatment of schizophrenia and juvenile delinquency, led to exploration of other methods of treatment by Murray Bowen, Gregory Bateson, Nathan Ackerman, to mention the more prominent theorists and clinicians.

By the 1960s, theorists and practitioners who had studied these dysfunctions in terms of “interactional contexts” (Jones xix) were writing about new insights into individual disorder (Ackerman, 1958 and 1966; Bateson, 1978; Bell, 1967; Bowen, 1966; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Framo, 1965, Satir, 1964, and others). These theorists and practitioners based much of their work on the tenets of psychoanalysis, but soon new concepts led to a new set of therapies which were used to predict and control dysfunctional behavior, in particular schizophrenia. These insights, joined with systems theory, became the basis of the family paradigm. Today, there are various offshoots or refinements of this
approach used by different practitioners and theorists (cf. Bowen, Bateson, Minuchin, Ackerman, and others). Their theories and insights rest on the hypothesis that the family is a system. Becvar offers a general definition of a system as being an “invention which is used to describe regularities or redundant patterns we observe between people and other phenomena.” He maintains, “It is useful and simplifies our understanding of the world to conceptualize a given pattern of relationships as a system” (5). Raphael Becvar presents the definition of “system” above, and points to the difference between the open and closed system. Every family system, whatever its basic qualities, must develop the means to deal with information that comes to its doors. In a closed system, very little outside information gains access without being very strictly censored, but information moves relatively easily into the open family system. It is also useful to think of these terms as operating on a continuum rather than discretely. That is, a family is more open or less open, not simply open or closed.

Elsa Jones in Family Systems Therapy: Developments in the Milan-Systemic Therapies describes the idea of a system in a more detailed way, when she says:

Based on the work of Von Bertalanffy family therapists adopted the idea of a family as an open system. A system can then be described
as a group of elements in interaction with one another over time, such that their recursive patterns of interaction form a stable context for individual and mutual functioning; to the degree that the system is open, interaction with elements outside itself will exert mutual influence. (2)

Jones also offers several characteristics of the open system (4-5). She includes these as being the following: wholeness, family members interrelate and depend on each other; feedback, the system will respond to input from its members or the environment in a way that ensures its survival; and equifinality, any consequence or effect of family processes may result from very different causes. To the extent that a system resists or denies these principles it becomes a closed system. In this way of thinking, a closed system is cut off and unresponsive not only to the aspects of the outside environment or community but also to its own members.

Practitioners and theorists first identified a fundamental principle that seems to be at work in systems of every sort, and this was the principle of balance. That is, a system had to find a way to remain in balance or it would break down. The principle of continuity did not account for the various changes that systems gradually undergo, so two complementary ideas, continuity and change, were developed to describe the phenomena at work in the family system. Psychologists have given the term homeostasis to those qualities of the family that tend to reflect redundant, stable patterns of behavior. Family systems theorists first used homeostasis to refer to the principle of continuity, but
practitioners more recently have applied two new terms that more reliably indicate realities that were found. Morphostasis refers to the stability of form and behavior, whereas morphogenesis involves the change in the system.

A fundamental "law" of family systems is that each individual family member seeks differentiation of the self within the context of the family (Hall 18). That is, as Nichols argues, "each of us is both embedded [within the family] and separate" (7). A central paradox for each individual in the family is that [s]he seeks differentiation and connection to the family at the same time. That is, two opposing forces within the individual--one that demands separation and the other conformity--create interesting tensions both in the individual and in the family where this tension is expressed. The study of any family system reveals the way in which its members seek to be different and have other family members notice the difference while depending on the membership in the family for that difference to have any meaning. This paradox is useful in explaining one of the sources of the ambivalence that a literary protagonist feels toward the family.

Another useful concept of psychologist Murray Bowen, who attempts to account for the personal and social senses of self, is that individuals possess both a solid and a pseudo-self. By solid self, Bowen means the non-negotiable sense of identity, the bedrock core of what the individual takes to be the essence of
identity, and by pseudo-self he refers to those aspects of identity which are new or unformed or peripheral. These two concepts can be useful in describing the process of individuation of the female protagonists in the five literary works.

To the extent that the individual person does not develop the solid self and perhaps a healthy pseudo-self, there may be a fusion of the individual with another family member or members. It may be enlightening to study those efforts of protagonists who have not formed a solid sense of identity that can ward off the effects of fusion. Psychologists have identified the various defenses against the painful loss or lack of identity and the resulting fusion to the family. There are six separate defenses of this sort: emotional cutoff, withdrawal, submission, standoff, compromise, and insulation.

Families also create and express their unique dynamics in the elaborate ways they process information. Information processing includes verbal and nonverbal communication. Psychologists particularly study why miscommunication occurs. One example of miscommunication, the double-bind, occurs when a verbal message is not the same as the nonverbal message.

Another way to examine the processes of the family system entails the resolution of power issues in the family structure. In most families, the power descends from the top down, or from the parents to the children. In this sense, power is arranged vertically, and normally, one of the parents is more powerful.
than the other. When a conflict occurs between the more powerful parent and one of the children, the child often seeks to pair up with the weaker of the two parents to form a more powerful union. This kind of dynamic is called triangulation. C. Margaret Hall in her analysis of the Bowen approach to family systems explains the Bowen definition of triangulation as being an aggregate of the thinking of several earlier psychologists:

Following the tradition of Georg Simmel’s ‘triadic’ conceptualization of human behavior (Wolff 1950) and extending some of Theodore Caplow’s findings (1968), Bowen has defined the smallest relationship unit in a family as a triangle, or a three-person system. The most uncomfortable participant in a dyad, or two-person system, predictably draws a third person into the twosome when sufficient stress occurs in the two-person relationship. (23)

A second concept related to the power issues in the family is collusion. Collusion entails the family’s participation in distortions of various sorts in order to remain a unit. Specific lies may become acceptable, certain topics will become unacceptable for conversation, and secrets will be harbored by family members.

Boundaries, another major component of the family system, define what behavior and information are acceptable in the family. By circumscribing and limiting behavior, boundaries define the roles of the family members within the family. Two problems associated with boundaries involve a role reversal in
which the child becomes the parent or caretaker to one of the actual parents or the child becomes the lover of one of parents. Also related to the idea of family boundaries is the means whereby the family filters the outside information to its own members. This *emotional process in society* demonstrates the ways that the social roles and models gain entrance into the family's boundaries. Also, very important to a culture that emphasizes the extended family, specific *multigenerational transmission processes* are present.

In clinical settings, psychologists have expressed a great deal of enthusiasm at the prospects this new approach affords. Psychologist Raphael Becvar in *Systems Theory and Family Therapy* argues that systems theory involves nothing less than a "paradigm shift" (5). He points out the essential difference in this psychological method and earlier ones: "Instead of studying objects and people discretely, we now have a means of studying them *in relationship* [italics added]. Along with other systems we have invented, e.g., the solar system, society, culture, neighborhoods, bureaucracy, we have also found it quite useful to construe the family as a system" (5-6).12 Psychologist Michael Nichols points out that "family therapy has revolutionized our thinking and established itself as a dominant force in mental health" (Self 7). What is so new in this approach is the emphasis on interpersonal forces that influence
intrapsychic processes. These interpersonal factors are never so powerful as in
the primary system, the family.

For a literary analysis what is so attractive and compelling about family
systems is its framework of ideas within which we may examine the developing,
fictional protagonist in a relational context. Rather than employing an analysis
limited to the intrapsychic processes of the individual's mind, the critic may
broaden the analysis to include both intrapsychic and interrelational aspects of
development of identity.¹³

Where a study of the effect of interpersonal forces on identity formation
departs from the traditional sociological approach is in the overlap of
intrapsychic responses and realities with the broader sociocultural factors like
roles and community expectations. Family systems theory joins two
terminologies and interrelates the personal and social systems. In a literary study,
this overlap and integration are useful because the identity of any fictional
protagonist is a fluid composite of internal as well as external forces. Hamlet's
central problem may trace to an Oedipal conflict, but even if this premise is
correct, this conflict is stimulated (and perhaps provoked) by the actions of his
mother, his stepfather, and his father's ghost. In fact, the intensity of any conflict
is affected by the actions of family members, and the outcome of any internal
dilemma is also influenced by specific external factors. A very important further
consideration is that in the novel the family of the protagonist frequently plays an essential part in the formation of identity. Family systems theory allows a free range of exploration of the forces that create, intensify, and resolve a protagonist's conflict, and ultimately, forge the very identity.

While family systems theory was developed to improve the understanding of and conditions within dysfunctional families, the family systems theory is also an appropriate tool to apply to an analysis of these five literary texts by Southern women writers, who are drawing upon their experience and knowledge of white middle class society. Furthermore, many families in Southern fiction exhibit strong elements of the violent, the grotesque, the gothic, and the decadent--similar qualities of families upon which this psychological methodology was developed. But most importantly, the use of the systematic, formal ideas of family theory clarify and elucidate the reading of these texts. By using family theory, the ordering of the ideas about these many families will allow us to draw some conclusions about what similarities the families share and what differences they reflect.

Thus, in a study of the family system as embodied in literary works, we will examine information processing, family boundaries, power issues, and the ways in which expectations, values, and conflict strategies work to define the system of rules in the family. We will also analyze (for the purposes of this study
that examines the growth of female protagonists) how each female protagonist seeks differentiation from the other members of the family through triangulation, emotional cutoff, leavetaking, or absence. In these strategies, the protagonist experiences a degree of painful anxiety without much true differentiation.

Many of the ideas of family systems theory shed light on the significances of family interactions in fictional works. A key advantage to using this approach is that family systems theory presents the means to study a character in relation to other characters, rather than discretely and in isolation; in so doing, the study moves away from a reliance on the inferential study of each character's developing human psyche or mind and toward the specific, observable human behavior that influences the character. So that the insights of the intrapsychic perspective are not lost in the analysis of the interactional system, pragmatic psychologists seek to balance the systems approach with the intrapsychic approach. Psychologist Michael P. Nichols points out, in The Self in the System: Expanding the Limits of Family Therapy (1987), that “however much their behavior is coordinated, family members remain separate individuals” (ix). As individuals, each one retains “private hopes and ambitions, motives and expectations, quirks and foibles, and potential for creative growth” (ix). Nichols admits that no one “who works with families, stands up to announce that intrapsychic personality dynamics are more important than interactional family
dynamics" (xiii). From the outset, he argues for inclusion of the best of intrapsychic and interactional family concepts. Nichols confesses that he criticizes “systemic thinkers for ignoring the self and psychoanalytic family therapists for underutilizing the power of the family” (xi). This study will avoid such neglect of the power of the family by making family systems theory the conceptual framework through which the details of these women’s lives through the conceptual grid of family systems theory.

There is some potential criticism of a study of this sort. One possible objection might be that family systems theory is designed for actual, not fictional, families. Although therapists use the terms and concepts of systems theory to alleviate suffering in actual families, the materials are applicable and even appropriate to the study of fictional families, particularly those families in novels in which domestic realism is a fundamental quality. The lexicon of terms and concepts is particularly appropriate to this study of Southern fictional families because in these novels, the family holds a privileged position. Also, this kind of study is not entirely new to literary scholarship. Some scholars have applied family systems theory to the realistic domestic drama, and at least one study of this sort involves the work of a Southern woman novelist.14

A second potential criticism does not target the appropriateness of using family systems theory, but questions, even more fundamentally, the concept of a
discernible, autonomous self. This criticism must be answered at some length. A great deal of the philosophical inquiry of the twentieth-century has called into question the entire notion of individual identity. Recently, critics such as Wylie Sypher and Ihab Hassan have questioned the existence of a unitary self and, by doing so, have undermined the foundations of the traditional idea of self that the protagonists (and their authors) are working to discover, uncover, and create. These critics argue that the earlier humanistic conception of a coherent self is erroneous, and that the views of Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, as well as succeeding generations of humanists were profoundly mistaken. They regard as a fundamental error the notion that the individual was "the bearer of a consciousness," and that this consciousness was the "intending and knowing manipulator of the objects[s]" of reality (Smith xxvii), thought to be capable of acquiring and using knowledge about the external world, and in doing so to be essentially autonomous.

The ideas of many other thinkers have worked against this fundamental belief of the humanists. Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, the scientific and industrial revolutions, and two devastating twentieth-century world wars have also contributed to the loss of faith in the traditional humanist ideas of a sovereign self and a knowable reality. The additional contribution, at the turn of the twentieth century, of Ferdinand Saussure’s idea that the self, or the "subject,"
was constructed through language and discourse with others further helped to erode the idea of an autonomous individual self. Saussure and the succeeding structuralists emphasized the social nature of the acquisition of language and language's influence on the development of the "subject" or self. Jacques Lacan also questioned the idea of a supreme self. In fact, one of the tenets of his psychoanalytical theory was that a child has no knowledge of self as separate until he reaches the mirror stage of growth. Then he sees, literally, that he is separate from the external world. However, he does not gain full subjectivity until he learns language, for language is the symbolic tool which allows him to distinguish between himself and other subject positions.

Other twentieth century theorists have also shown deep pessimism about the autonomy of the self. Louis Althusser, for instance, believed that the subject or self was formed as a result of learning the language and ideology of a society; hence, the subject was a product of the interaction and interrelationship between the individual and society (171). Ihab Hassan sees the subject as "an empty 'place' where many selves come to mingle and depart" (845). Feminists, too, have expressed doubt about the primacy of an individual self, particularly the French feminists Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Some feminists maintain that even believing in a unified, female self is an indirect way of embracing the patriarchal system. That is, to define female authenticity "as originating in some
way from within the self" is to adopt male critics' views (Grimshaw 92). Jean
Grimshaw asserts that to see female growth "in terms of a recovery or discovery
of that untainted core of being" is to use a male model (97). Hence, for critics
like Grimshaw another model must be developed.

All of these uncertainties and debates involving the self may follow from
close reasoning and systematic thought, but the issue has not been decided, and
the debate is not over. Social science, for example, has proposed models of self
that emphasize the metaphors of processes, stages, or layers of self. These
scientists agree that the self is not a single, unitary entity; rather, their definitions
depend on the self's evolution. The self described by Descartes and his
descendant philosophers has thus not so much been discarded as modified by
insights generated in developmental psychology, biology, and the sister sciences.
In a literary analysis, much of the commentary about self involves an attempt to
describe the evolving, not the static, self.

According to many theorists, we must ultimately confess our ignorance,
for all models, including the evolving/layered/developing self model of social
science and psychology, may provide only a "map of the reality we assume exists
but cannot know" (Becvar 27). It is axiomatic then from the perspective of
extreme skepticism that whatever conception of self the philosopher, linguist, or
scientist employs that the conception itself plays as much a role in what is
"discovered" as what is actually real. As Seidel notes of the efforts of those in the various disciplines, "No matter what modes of perception or what sorts of world interpretation" the theorist applies, what is found is a function of the tool or model itself (52).

For other reasons, feminist critics often find it necessary to defend the notion of the self. At times, they argue that throughout history women have had so few rights and privileges in society that it has become necessary "to defend the very idea of a female subject" (Gardiner 115). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese sees a "determination to understand female literary culture as an articulation of female being" (196). In this light, identity is no longer seen as stable. In fact, feminist critics frequently view female protagonists "as people in the process of creating or discovering their wholeness" (Comillon xi). Jean Grimshaw, for instance, says that identity is the "problem of negotiating contradictory or conflicting conceptions" of self (102). Susan Fraiman defines the "'integrated' self as the clashing, patchwork product of numerous social determinations, [with] the 'I' [being] basically unstable and discontinuous" (12). She also declares that selfhood is differentiated in terms of "class, country, race, and time as well as gender" (12). Furthermore, Fraiman believes that growing up is a result of "persistent relatedness" to one's culture and others (144). Since she sees self as having "less" to do with "the apprenticeship of a central figure," she
"recommends a shift away [from the study of] character altogether" (140).

Critics should instead turn their "attention to those discourses of development [which are] at war in a given text" (140). Only through the study of these discourses can the individual’s development be charted.

Fraiman adds that Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* was often overlooked and omitted from critics’ discussions of the bildungsroman precisely because these critics failed to see that even though Lily Briscoe was "never permitted to dominate the narrative, which continued to shift away from her even as she approached her climactic vision," she was nevertheless, a "putative bildungshelf" (137-38). Fraiman points out that Lily was only not denied the dominant discourse in the novel but that she was also "quite literally displaced from the center of the text by the specter of 'Time Passing'" (138). However, the reason for Lily’s lack of prominence in the novel and her lack of dominant discourse was to show that "Lily and her vision are always inextricable from social relationships" (138). Fraiman declares that Woolf’s and other women writers’ dramatization of female development in so many "contradictory ways" indicates that "the 'feminine' [is] a site of ideological confusion, struggle, and possibility, thereby opening up still more space for debate around this term" (31).

Annis Pratt has argued that female protagonists frequently experience "a sense that they are outcasts in the land, that they have neither a homeland of their..."
own, nor an ethnic place within society" (6). Pratt concludes that as a consequence female characters often feel "radically alienated" (6). Barbara A. White adds that "Southern writers especially must portray their heroines as very limited because they must bear the weight of specifically Southern ideals of womanhood" (163). Suzanne W. Jones observes that the South's customs and values as well as its ideals of womanhood are both deeply entrenched and distinctive. Among the regional concerns specific to the South which she says affect the development and maturation of the individual are "a love of storytelling, a preoccupation with family and with manners, the support and suffocation occasioned by a close-knit community, a concern with race relations, social classes, and gender roles, and a passion for place that is tied up with the past and with rural life" (xv).17

Despite all of these obstacles, however, the Southern female protagonists rarely relinquish their efforts to participate in the fashioning of their identity without a struggle.18 The young southern woman very often resists her family and culture as she attempts to define herself. If this conflict is heated and intense, the protagonist or the family will sever ties. Hence, rebellion and leavetaking are often unplanned consequences of the power struggle in the identity formation of young Southern women.
The tensions I will examine follow naturally from the very different purposes of the family and the individual protagonist. The family serves to instill, inculcate, and develop values and models that the family and the culture consider essential, and the protagonist faces the task of assimilating the ideas and values while retaining a sense of individuality. In nearly all cases, she resists assimilating these cultural elements, at least to a degree, and at times, the resisting requires distancing and leavetaking. An examination of the family’s and the individual protagonist’s resources and responses will provide many insights into the process of assimilation of cultural values, the degrees of leavetaking of the individual female protagonists, and, ultimately, a deeper understanding of the Southern literature that portrays the difficulty which females, particularly those of the white middle class, experience in developing, uncovering, discovering, and creating an identity in the twentieth-century South.

Typical of much of the writing focusing on the development of female protagonists, from many great nineteenth novels such as Kate Chopin’s The Awakening and many others, the woman who struggles to form her own identity and live her own life has been a central character in modern fiction. The protagonists in this study experience a similar struggle, and in so doing demonstrate the continuity that exists in writing about women. The external constraints imposed by family systems, the internal responses of the individual
who struggles for differentiation, the ensuing struggle between the family and the self—these are the forces which the family system theory measures.

The specific family structure of each of the five families in the five literary works supports and fosters traditional roles of Southern belle and lady. Each of the protagonists also find these roles restrictive, yet how each one reacts to these roles is a measure of her family’s particular destructive qualities and her unique temperament. From family to family, the central problem varies. Abigail Howland faces neglect and abandonment; Rhoda Manning endures a patriarchal, controlling father; Virgie Rainey experiences the diminished presence of a mother who loved an outsider; Marcia Mae Hunt grows up amid secrets and forbidden speech topics; and Cornelia O’Kelly also faces lies and family secrets.

Each protagonist, facing various difficulties, employs strategies that are designed to distinguish and differentiate her from the family. They meet with varying degrees of success, as we shall see.

End Notes

1. Literary criticism boasts a high number of excellent interdisciplinary studies. Freudian psychoanalysis (and its descendants), Jungian depth psychology, and Marxist philosophy of history, have all been applied to literary analyses. More recently, Levi-Strauss applied linguistic theory to myth, Lacan applied linguistic theory to psyche, and Genet applied linguistic theory to narrative.

This present approach employs family systems theory which was developed in America following World War II. The high numbers of returning veterans who needed counseling encouraged an approach which would have faster, more immediate results than the conventional psychoanalytical method.
Also, individual psychologists found that conventional methods of counseling did not help rebellious, disturbed adolescents or patients exhibiting schizophrenic symptoms. A new relational method which responded to these realities proved to be a great help. Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist, in Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind provided the theoretical supports of the psychological system that has various components in mathematics, cybernetics, and systems theory.

2. In systems theory, this kind of rigidity refers to a “closed system.” In other frameworks, different terms and explanations have been offered. Some have argued that the image and role of women are male expressions of ambivalent feelings about the inability to control the environment (Gilbert and Gubar, Sexchanges 34). Others have looked to the extended community for the source of these roles. Virginia Barnhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Theda Perdue in Southern Women: Histories and Identities say that “in the South, women’s identities have always been fashioned by the communities to which they have belonged” (1). Shirley Abbott explains in Womenfolks that all Southern women “grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies” (1).

3. Cash, Taylor, Scott, and, more recently, Seidel and others have made this point. Taylor in his 1961 work points out that “it was the responsibility” of the Southern woman to act as the “intellectual and ethical tutors “of the men and to provide them “with necessary moral restraints” (147). Taylor also points out that since the Southern woman thus had become the moral, religious figure, then the Southern man was free to be less moral and religious.

4. Scholarship dealing with Southern women writers was slow to develop. In general, the Southern woman writer was excluded from serious study. Even in the seminal 1953 work Southern Renascence edited by Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs, only two scholars analyzed the work of two Southern women writers: John Edward Hardy discussed Ellen Glasgow’s literary contributions, and Vivienne Koch examined Caroline Gordon’s work. Although scholarship in the field of Southern literature in general began to proliferate, studies of women writers lagged far behind. Carol S. Manning in The Female Tradition in Southern Literature (19 ) agrees: “... it was not until the 1980s--with works by such scholars as Anne Goodwyn Jones, Louise Westling, Kathryn Lee Seidel, Helen Taylor, and Minrose Gwin, and with special issues on Southern women writers by The Southern Quarterly--that feminist murmurs about Southern literature began to be heard”(2).
5. Psychologist and scholar Mark Karpel describes the evolution of psychological schools: “Psychoanalysis, which ‘begat’ family therapy, was itself ‘begat’ by 19th-century medicine. Thus, it inherited and passed along a strong focus on the individual (as opposed to any larger social system), a therapeutic model based on “diseases” (with symptoms, syndromes, diagnoses, and prognoses), and an emphasis on cure rather than prevention. Psychoanalytic theory, by limiting itself to the experience of an individual, essentially denied the relevance of the family itself as anything other than the locus and source of the trauma” (6). Karpel is representative of many post-World War II family therapists who emphasize relational aspects of identity and maladjustment rather than pathological inquiries. He points out that the very method of psychoanalysis precluded the recognition of influences on identity and behavior of other family members.

More recently, Marina Shampaine points out that “most modern critical theories of the family start with a Freudian model and either elaborate on or challenge his ideas” (3). In the unpublished dissertation of Pamela Monaco on the role of the family in modern American drama, the point is frequently made that modern literature relied on psychoanalytic ideas and assumptions quite heavily up to the end of World War II (9-10). The psychoanalytic theory allowed writers to explore the strengths of “domestic realism” (10). She goes on to argue, however, that the widespread and almost exclusive use of psychoanalytical notions has “contributes to a belief in a linear causality that is reductive in nature” (11). Family systems theory, on the other hand, suggest a “multiplicity of causality and ambiguous uncertainty of life” (11).

6. One reason for the abundance of scholarship on social roles for women and men in fiction can be found in the startling rigidity of the roles for men and women in the family of the historical white South. In his analysis of the relation of Southern culture to the literary products of selected Southern authors, Paul Binding notes that “the narrow gender roles of ‘machismo’ for men and ‘loveliness and grace’ for women” have dominated the culture since at least the nineteenth century (211). During the 1800s, the “elite white men [who] sat at the apex of power in the antebellum South” played the key part in creating these roles, and such wealthy Southerners as Thomas Dew, William Harper, and George Fitzhugh offered definitions of the expectations and the roles which white upper and middle class women were expected to fulfill (Leslie 20).

7. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw noted that both Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter saw the role of Southern lady as constricting and limiting; however, they also saw beyond the limitations of the role. In so doing, she argues that while
Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter did write about how constraining the role of lady was, these two authors also saw such a myth as the one of the Southern lady as "an idealized vision of human possibility" (87).

8. Rebecca Mark in *The Dragon’s Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty’s The Golden Apples* analyzed mother-daughter relationships in Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples*. Specifically, she studied the mother-daughter relationships of Virgie and Miss Eckhart, of Miss Eckhart and her own mother, of Cassie Morrison and Mrs. Morrison, and of Cassie and Miss Eckhart (29).

9. *Albion’s Seed* by David Hackett Fischer traces the roots of the South’s valuing of hearth and home to a much older Anglo-cultural tradition.

10. There are three explanations for the development of the family systems theory. They are cited above. Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist, looked to information theory, communications theory, cybernetics, among other systems for the theoretical framework for family systems theory. According to Mark Poster in *Critical Theory of the Family*, Bateson found support in those "postwar epistemologies that stressed the priority of the relationship over the individual" (111).

11. Bowen uses eight fundamental concepts in his system. C. Margaret Hall sets these eights concepts out in abbreviated form in *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses*: differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, emotional cut-off, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and emotional process in society. Given the complex portrayal of family in these novel, I have found that most of these concepts are appropriate to the study of this literary form. In other genres, only a few of the principles are applicable.

12. Michael P. Nichols writes, “Family therapists discovered that the actions of one person can often be understood more fully in terms of interactions between that person and others” (Self 28), and hence he implies that the psychological penchant for the intrapsychic cause(s) of behavior are incomplete and even inadequate. Nichols goes on to declare as a principle of the most recent efforts of family therapy, “Dyadic and triadic models of behavior are better than monadic ones” (28).

13. Nichols explains a more inclusive approach to human behavior: “Human behavior can be understood as embedded in a concentric series of systems: the structure of the mind, the nuclear family, the extended family, the community,
the nation, and so on. A full description of human problems takes into account actors, behavior, and context” (Self 8).


15. In a recent dissertation that has since been published, Lihong Xie presents a list of traits describing the linear development of previous bildungsroman heroes. She cites protagonists’ relocations from country to city, the long road from alienation to integration, their initiation into the sexual world and the world of friendships, and finally their development of a permanent relationship with a mate and a well-defined philosophy of life (The Evolving Self: Gail Godwin’s Novels as Contemporary Bildungsroman 20-25). Today we do not tend to think of identity in such a facile, linear way.

16. The traditional bildungsroman as the genre that dealt with the development of the central protagonist has a long and complex history. My first inclination when seeking a methodology for this study was to determine what relation these female protagonists had to the qualities and characteristics of the traditional bildungsroman.

17. Lucinda MacKethan in Daughters of Time adds several other difficulties to achieving selfhood that Southern women face. For Southern women the challenge is to fulfill the “myth of Demeter and Persephone” (66), the ideal mother and daughter. However, actual women are born into a culture that “was founded upon a patriarchal system that made all women daughters, defined as perpetual dependents, servants of the progenitor-creator, the father, the husband, or the master” (66). MacKethan argues that for these women character “means taking possession of self, a first act of creation” (69).

18. This struggle with patriarchal values generally postpones the development of the self of women until later in life. Abel, Hirsch, and Langland argue that most female bildungsromans, for example, “show women developing later in life, after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient” (7). They also point out that female heroines do not “sever ties as easily as males” (8), but they submit that this tendency is “not inferior to the masculine” (10).
Chapter 2
Shirley Ann Grau's The Keepers of the House: A Family Legacy of Abandonment, Neglect, and Duty

“When the bandits killed that Howland girl in the kitchen... her family hunted them into the swamp and found them and killed them. They say her mother went there to watch” (279).

The critical reception of Shirley Ann Grau’s The Keepers of the House (1964) for the most part has been positive. Paul Schleuter regards the book her "most ambitious to date," and he adds that the special qualities of this book are "its overwhelming sense of place" and the mythic dimensions of its "sheer scale" (Shirley Ann Grau 52, 67). Other critics have found positive qualities in the novel; both Lillian Smith and Mary Ellen Chase have lauded the moral integrity of the novel. Perhaps the most incisive insight into the workings of the novel is offered by Paul Schleuter elsewhere, when he observes, "For most of her career Grau has emphasized sin and evil, especially the forms of evil and individual ways of handling evil" (Fifty Southern Writers After 1900 226). More germane to this analysis is Schlueter's assertion that most of her books, "notably The Keepers of the House, are really more about such basic questions as the nature of evil than they are about race" (226). The source of this evil forms the subject of this chapter.

While a great deal of critical attention has focused on Grau’s storytelling ability, her knowledge of place, and her depiction of the workings of evil, I will
examine her depiction in this novel of the processes whereby the evil within the fictional Howland dynasty affects the lives of family members for several generations. I argue that The Keepers of the House illustrates the destructiveness of fundamental family dyadic and triadic relationships, an evil preserved intergenerationally in the form of roles, rules, secrets, and loyalties.

What has been maintained in fiction has been demonstrated in therapy, namely that what complicate the individual’s complex movement toward differentiation are family dynamics and social roles. Bowenian psychologist C. Margaret Hall in The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses (1991) explains, “Repeated projection processes create an extended powerful emotional force, which eventually raises or lowers levels of differentiation in members of succeeding generations. Genealogical data and observations of families over several generations provide evidence of a variety of repeated patterns of dependent behavior” (24). Applying the concepts of family theory to literature in a recent dissertation on the Baltimore novels of Anne Tyler, Marina Shampaine points out, “Families engage in behavior patterns which are handed down from generation to generation within the family context” (7). Certainly, Shirley Ann Grau’s basic concern in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is, as Schleuter observes, the study of evil, but the most potent evil in this case involves a family system which enables the deleterious actions of early generations to influence
and shape the identities and influence the actions of the children many years and generations afterwards.

To study the multigenerational evil of the Howland dynasty, a destructiveness that begins with the family system of William and Margaret Howland, one should first examine their backgrounds, their marriage and early lives, and then the later marriages of their descendants, particularly Abigail Howland Mason Tolliver. In fact, there are several families to examine: William and his first wife Lorena Howland, William and his second wife Margaret Howland, Abigail and Gregory Mason, Abigail and John Tolliver, as well as the children of Margaret and William’s marriage--Nina, Crissy, and Robert. In these families, women give birth to and raise the children, and leave other matters to their husbands. Howland wives are taught to support their husbands unquestioningly, to remain outside the important decisions of business, finances, and politics; in short, the men control the larger world.

The novel’s protagonist, Abigail Howland Mason Tolliver, accepts the role assigned to her by the family. In this role, she fulfills the requirements of the role in her own family by marrying well and raising the children. However, during the later years of her marriage and particularly after her husband John Tolliver begins to have affairs, Abigail finds that the role of Southern lady has broken down. Nevertheless, she clings to the role out of necessity because she
does not know what else to do. This solution satisfies Abigail and enables her to keep her marriage together, until the revelation of a family secret kept since the secret marriage of William and Margaret two generations before threatens the identity she has chosen for herself. It is then that she realizes she must seek out a new identity, one similar to that of William Howland and the strong patriarchal men of the family. However, in the end, when she is overwhelmed by her own unflinching desire for revenge, she finds that neither the Southern lady nor the strong patriarchal values can give her the strength, independence, or differentiation from her family she requires. Abigail learns to imitate proper behavior, but her world calls for more than protocol. Her inability to recognize and adapt to the necessities of an imperfect world contribute to her regression to a near infantile state of mind at the book’s conclusion.

The book’s title itself reflects an emphasis on family, on multigenerational transmission of values, and on the darker meanings implied by the verses from Ecclesiastes 12:3-5. These verses predict that "in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble," man also dies or "goeth to his long home." By the novel's end, Abigail Howland, the last keeper of the house, has suffered this fate, at least psychologically. Although she becomes the last keeper (that is, the last keeper that the reader sees, though a third Abigail is likely to continue the family tradition of the old Howland house) and successfully defends the family home
against the racist mob, she wants absolute vengeance. Like her female ancestor who watches the murder of the bandits, Abigail sees to it that she obtains her revenge. At the very end of the novel, however, Abigail cries alone "huddled fetus-like against the cold, unyielding boards" on the floor (309), suggesting her revenge does not mark a triumph as some critics have argued, notably Schleuter in his chapter on the novel (Shirley Ann Grau, 65). This image of Abigail huddled on the floor strongly suggests that wrapped within her determination to exact revenge was an overwhelming rage and impotence. Somewhere along the way, this keeper of the house has lost or misplaced an essential part of herself. Rather than extricate herself from the inherited dynamics, or even arrive at an uneasy ambivalence with regard to her family, she “trembles” as her identity "goeth to its long home." Hence, the Biblical prophecy, in Abigail’s case, comes true, yet the irony is that the other “keepers” in the Howland family play the key role in bringing about her failure.

The perpetuated evil, passed down generationally, includes elements that are repeated in the generations of Howland families. The most important of these are neglect and abandonment by parents and the families’ insistence on their women playing the limited roles of Southern belle and lady. These evils are not detectable at first sight, for the surfaces and exteriors of the Howland family are very impressive. One of the wealthy, respected families in Madison City, the
Howlands have earned their status as community leaders. One of the townspeople remarks, “There is always a William Howland” (13), and each one has been immensely successful. Many of the businesses and buildings in the town are owned by the Howlands, and other community enterprises depend at least in part on the Howland businesses. However, these social and economic trappings only reinforce the superficial beauty of the magnificent facade of the family mansion, for there is another dimension to the Howland family.

Inside the family system, neglect, abandonment, and ultimately powerful secrets become multigenerational Howland habits. In her study of the Baltimore upper-middle class families in Anne Tyler, Marina Shampaine finds that “certain patterns of behavior become so habitual . . . that they are often repeated, both consciously and unconsciously, in new social constellations” (180). Later, Abigail Howland underscores the fusion that connects the generations of Howlands when she says, “I am caught and tangled by [generations’] doings” (6).²

Abigail’s entrapment then can be traced back to her grandfather, William Howland, a father who devotes all of his time and energy to building the family fortune, particularly after the death of his first wife, Lorena Adams. Consequently their child, the first Abigail, left alone in the mansion library to find an identity in the pages of the sentimental novels that line her father’s
bookshelves, slowly evolves into a weak version of the Southern lady. Abandoned through the early death of her mother and her father’s devotion to business, she grows up without the consistent presence of either parent. Family systems theory maintains that differentiation is the goal of every family member, but it has been pointed out by more than one theorist that “differentiation cannot occur in a vacuum” (Hall 59). Rather, “Differentiation describes a posture of meaningful emotional contact with one’s family emotional system” (59). The minuscule level of differentiation of the first Abigail, who grows up with a “feeling controlled world” (53), will in turn influence the degree of differentiation of the Abigail of the next generation, thus continuing the cycle.

Additional difficulties burden the descendants as well. Even if the Howland children and grandchildren could have shouldered the painful burdens of abandonment and neglect without great effort, an even more difficult problem, the shame of a central family secret, is created for the family system when the forty-eight year old William Howland turns to the eighteen-year-old mulatto woman Margaret Carmichael for love and companionship. When she surreptitiously becomes his second wife, a fiction enters the already-conflicted family. Both Abigails notice that the housekeeper Margaret goes into the bedroom of William Howland, and they suspect that she is more than the housekeeper. Mother Abigail is such a lady that she refuses to inquire about the
behavior, and her own daughter Abigail accepts it during her childhood. Apparently this behavior is not so secretive; however, William Howland never discloses that he actually marries Margaret. Years later, this omission will threaten the well-being of the Howland descendants. Hence, a prohibited topic for speech can gradually acquire a great destructive force. Psychologist Joan Laird points to the relationship between silence and secrecy: “Silence and secrecy are about, among other things, the relationship between knowledge and power” (244). Maintaining the silence and secrecy, Howland retains his power at the expense of his descendants’ security—a dangerous tradeoff.

Indeed, the family members are fused as one undifferentiated entity, held together in emotional immaturity by their darkest secrets. Abigail herself describes these connections as invisible threads: “They are dead, all of them. . . [But] it is as if their lives left a weaving of invisible threads in the air of this house, of this town of this county” (6). In a more hopeful mood she will refer to the connections as “a ring of stories, like a halo almost” (14), yet the metaphors of threads and captivity occur more often in the story. Hence, for three generations of Abigails (for there is yet another Abigail born to John Tolliver and Abigail) the family maintains an impressive facade of stability and status, but one which cannot entirely cover the interiors of lives damaged by abandonment, neglect, and family secrets.
The responses of each of the Howland children to the circumstances illustrate how incomplete their family has been. Abigail, for example, becomes the flawless, perfectionistic Southern lady, and later the grim, passionate woman almost mechanically taking her revenge on the community. For Robert, who is the oldest child of Margaret and William, the most sensible response is to leave, to get as far away as he can to a new life on the Pacific coast, but emotionally he never leaves. In fact, he retains a great deal of the same desire for revenge. These outcomes, fueled by anger, rage, and the desire for revenge would have been difficult to predict, judging from the impressive start of William Howland, the grandfather.

The evil that becomes a part of this family system has an innocuous beginning. The early manhood of William Howland seemed to foretell good things—an inheritance, an excellent education, a solid career in law or in the family businesses. His predictable future takes shape when he meets Lorena Hale Adams in Atlanta while he is there to study law. Since William soon decides that he hates the law profession and wants to return home as soon as possible to become a rancher, he courts Lorena quickly, marrying her only four weeks after their first meeting. He had been attracted to her because she was "the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen" and because she was gentle (20). William thought that "there was such a light to her, . . . I used to think she'd glow in the
night" (26). They marry, and might have raised a wonderful family had she not
died in childbirth with their second child, a son who also died soon after his birth.

The significance of this event is felt across several generations of
Howlands, because William does not date or remarry for over twenty years.
Instead, he devotes himself to business, neglecting everyone and everything
except his work. Thus, William Howland in his grief for his wife and his love of
his work begins the pattern of neglect and abandonment in the family. The most
immediate impact is felt by his surviving child Abigail, who grows up
motherless, surrounded by the servants, without even a surrogate mother figure in
her life. Occasionally her Aunt Annie Howland Campbell, William's sister, visits
to teach her about decorum and tea parties, but she does not come often enough,
and Abigail never grows emotionally close enough to her for Annie to be a
dominant figure in her life. This Abigail Howland, the first of two Abigails, does
indeed absorb the expected behaviors of the Southern lady, but she never
develops the internal strengths of one who has experienced the presence, support,
and devotion of parents. In “The Keepers of the House: Scarlett O'Hara and
Abigail Howland,” Elzbieta Oleksy agrees, “Abigail’s mother is weak, withering,
and unimportant except perhaps as a model of traditional Southern feminine
behavior” (173). Yet young Abigail identifies with her at least partially, for her
mother is the only adult who teaches her to be human, and Abigail retains an
inner life in suspended animation, the emotional maturity of an abandoned child, even while she imitates the proper behavior of her mother. She learns control and propriety, but not how to express or experience her powerful emotions. In short, she learns the outward forms of power, but misses the balanced disciplining of desire and control that distinguishes the person who knows how to create and maintain power.

In this family, neglect and abandonment occur frequently. They become the norm; even the people who marry into the Howland family have experienced abandonment and abandon their children in their turn. For example, twenty years later Howland's second wife Margaret Carmichael Howland, for her own reasons, abandons her three children by this marriage when each child reaches the age of eleven. Of course, Margaret's behavior does not develop in a vacuum, for her childhood also reflects a multigenerational pattern of abandonment. Her own Freejack mother and white father leave her in her childhood. In fact, when she loves and marries William Howland, Margaret is reenacting two patterns from her childhood: having an interracial relationship like her mother, and repeating the abandonment she had experienced when, without the usual regrets and indecisions, she sends her children by Howland to boarding school.

Yet, here too the familiar pattern of abandonment is established earlier. Young Margaret's own problems with abandonment are intensified by the
additional problem of the race of her father, so it is not surprising that her father-daughter relationship was a poor one. In fact, Margaret's only relationship with her father was an imaginary one, for she had never met him. He had been a white man, a road surveyor who directed the crews who were building a new road through New Church, the community in which Margaret lived. He had stayed only two weeks before he moved on after having promised "a young Negro girl that he would send back for her" (84). However, Margaret suspected that "he never thought of it again. Most likely he didn't even remember" (84). Although Margaret knew little about her father, she had known nothing at all until she was eleven because "before then she had not dared ask about her father. She was afraid to ask. She saw how the other people deferred to her, how they pretended she wasn't there" (82). Thus, Margaret had never been accepted by her own family members in New Church, and it had taken her years to discover that the cause was related both to her father's race and to his absence.

Abandonment generally intensifies a child's confusion as to her identity, as Margaret's own reaction illustrates. After her great-grandmother very bluntly and matter-of-factly told her about her lineage, Margaret looked at her own light "black skin . . . pinched it between her fingers, rubbed it. . . . Her father's blood, where would it be? It had to be somewhere, because it had gone into her. It would be inside maybe. Inside she would be white and blond-haired like him"
Hence, Margaret feels divided because of her mixed parentage. After she learns she is half-white, she realizes that "before, she had always thought of her body as solid, one piece. Now she knew it was otherwise. She was black outside, but inside there was her father's blood" (85).

The uncertainty, confusion, and ambivalence tend to affect the child's other relationships as well. In her relationship with her mother, Margaret feels confused, particularly because she is treated with more direct indifference and neglect. She realizes that her mother Sara has almost no interest in her. Later, Margaret declares that "the way her mother stayed in her mind [was as]... a stark figure, lonely and slight. An outcast by her own desire. Sheltered by her family because she had no place to go, but part of nothing. Living in the house, .. but not being there" (82). Margaret's mother waits nine years for her lover to come back. "A whole long youth of waiting. Who would have thought a small slight body would have so much determination in it?" Margaret muses (82). Despite her mother's will power, Margaret basically has little respect for her. Certainly Margaret thought her mother had been too passive; she states, "My mother ought to have taken another man and forgot the whole thing" (87). She remembers that her Cousin Francine had remarried after only one year of waiting when her husband of ten years had walked out on her. Margaret decides that her
"mother was a fool" (86). Margaret also knew that her mother's own mother, after she had learned that Sara was pregnant, had fussed and screamed at her, and called her a fool, but the words had washed right over her head. Like the words of the men who would have married her, . . . good men from the New Church community. She was small and pretty, and they would have married her together with the baby girl she had borne. (84)

Just as her white father had done, Margaret’s mother also abandons her. Margaret's mother had trusted her lover and waited for him until Margaret was eight years old. Then, "when she tired of that, she left. Alone" (84). The family believed that she had traveled south to Mobile to search for her one and only lost love. All that Margaret had left of her was a "fancy apron" (119). This apron symbolizes the passive, submissive role Sara Carmichael had played all of her life and that she wanted to continue to play. That is, her only life goal was to be with, cook for, care for, and love blindly and faithfully the white road surveyor.

After Sara leaves her young daughter, the young girl is raised by her grandfather. She lives "in Abner Carmichael's house, to be raised with all the other children,. . . [where] there were always plenty of children" (82, 87). She even looks like all the other children for "no trace of white blood showed. No trace at all" (82), despite all of her mother's early efforts. When Margaret had been three or four her mother [began] smearing her face with buttermilk, dampening her hair and sitting her in the blazing sun to
bleach, sending her to the voodoo woman for a charm to bring out her white blood, to bring it to the surface. (82)

The denial of various realities involving origin, race, and identity contributes to Margaret’s later callousness towards her own children.

Consequently, the multigenerational pattern is repeated in this secret branch of the Howland family as well.

Staying and leaving are the same to Margaret in her original family, because the spiritual deadness and sterility there are treated as matter-of-fact realities. When, for example, she tells her grandfather, "I am leaving," he only nods and says, "Nothing for you to do here. You got to be moving on" (120). Margaret knows that if she "had been little, she [would have wanted to] hug and kiss him, but that time was past" (120). As she leaves, the grandfather calls out "absently, 'It's hot and I'm miseried,'" but Margaret ignores him because she does not feel a part of his life or the world of New Church anymore, if indeed she ever did.

In such families, communication and intimacy are largely nonexistent. Her great-grandmother had sincerely tried to make her feel accepted. It had been she who had told Margaret about her father. However, the great grandmother's telling her in half a dozen sentences, "that was all" (83), indicates that she was simply not demonstrative. Nevertheless, after her great-grandmother had died,
Margaret sees her ghost "clearly, just as she had used to sit on the porch" (97), and this ghost says, "Come to the house, child of my daughter's daughter, flesh of my flesh. Be with my blood" (98). Although the great-grandmother persistently asks, Margaret flatly tells her "Quit bothering me. You've got your grave to lie in" (102). Then Margaret snaps, "Only half my blood is yours. I'm using my other half now" (103).  

Margaret’s attraction to William represents an attempt to end the ambivalence she feels about her own family, basically wishing to cut herself off from the pain of abandonment and neglect. Ironically, she is entering a relationship which will ensure the continuation of patterns of neglect and abandonment, or worse. A week after she agrees to work for William Howland, she walks into his bedroom late at night, beginning a relationship that will intensify the suffering of the Howland family.  

For William Howland, the relationship was not so much about surface attraction either. When he first meets her at the old baptistry well, he "saw at once she was not pretty. The face was too dark, and too long" (76). He also notices that "she didn't act at all like a white woman. As for her having a white father, he didn't believe it. . . but lots of gals said so" (117). However, William also wondered "how anybody that tall [could] look so delicate just because she
was sitting down? Then he saw that she wasn't sitting, she had folded herself into the earth" (117).

In fact throughout the novel, William's devotion to and love for her is evident. His granddaughter Abigail observes that he never wants to be away from the ranch for long because he "misses Margaret" (192). Abigail also realizes why he loves her so much. All of the other Howland women had been weak, had been "clinging female arms" (222). Margaret, on the other hand, was one "who was tall as he was who could work like a man in the fields. Who bore him a son. Who'd asked him for nothing. Margaret, who reminded him of the free-roving Alberta of the old tales, . . . was strong and black" (223). Thus, this Alberta figure continues to appeal to William throughout their thirty years together.8 He admires not only her strength but also her intuition, and her psychic abilities, for Margaret says "she often saw things in the woods. Faces and figures. Sometimes they talked to her" (115). She also "knows things ahead of time" (118).

Both William and Margaret come to the relationship with a complicated family history of their own.9 There are elements in the personal pasts and family histories of each of them which cause each to be attracted to and fall in love with the other. However, he was not ready to make such love public, and Margaret carries scars of other sorts that will also be passed down to her children, who will
come to resent their second-class citizenship. The complex family dynamic is replete with potentially explosive forces—William’s devotion to his work, the death of his first wife Lorena, the family background of Margaret, their relationship and secret marriage. Unfortunately, children who are raised in circumstances in which neglect, abandonment, and secrets are fundamental and recurring aspects of the situation tend to learn and repeat many defenses that amount to false roles. The descendants of William and Lorena as well as the children of William and Margaret respond to the similar conditions by assuming a variety of stances toward the world. Their defense mechanisms represent failed attempts to separate, find their identity, and support the family balance at the same time.

William and Lorena’s first child Abigail, for example, initially feels that completely getting away is the best strategy; cutting off connections seems the safest alternative for her. After her wedding to her British-born college English professor, Gregory Edward Mason, Abigail moves far away. William never goes to visit her, and she rarely comes to see him. Her attempts at physical and emotional cutoff do not work at making her independent, however. In fact, her poor relationship with her father influences her behavior in her marriage. She and the British professor were often "stiff" to each other, and then angry, and afterwards Abigail's eyes would be "red for days on end" (141-42). After nine
years of this, they separated for good, and Abigail returned "South to the home of her father" (142). She refused to open her husband's letters, and she made sure their only daughter never saw him or received a letter from him again. After her divorce, Abigail wandered around the rooms of the mansion of her father and eventually "lingered around the bed until she died" (222).

Many psychologists have noted the central importance of the mother in the growth process of the daughter. The process of individuation which Carl Jung described, for example, includes the relationship with the mother, whose presence supplies the young woman with an awareness of her difference. Jung stated that individuation began in adulthood when the young adult became aware of the "persona," or the role in society to which he or she was expected to conform (173). The absence of a mother to use as a model either to imitate or rebel against consequently delays a daughter's experience of individuation.

The abandonment of Abigail by Lorena's death, then, partially explains why William's daughter Abigail grows up to be a very passive, uncertain, withdrawn woman. She worries about her looks, for she infers that women, especially those in the South during the early part of the twentieth century, are valued for their physical beauty. In this regard, she was "a tall thin girl with long blond-white hair" (31). In high school, "though most of the girls at her age had at least one serious caller, she had none" (31). Everyone, including her father,
thought she was "not interested, [for] she was too shy to enjoy parties, and she did not dance at all" (31-32).

The distance between the father and his daughter is illustrated by his reaction to her intense concerns. When she tells her father, "Not being pretty . . . it worries a girl," he is shocked (41). He had not even been aware that "behind that blond smooth face, those gentle eyes . . . [she] had thoughts or feelings of her own. She had always seemed so content" (41). He is even more surprised when she confides that she had thought that she was too unattractive ever to be married. He protests, "I wasn't worried about your finding a husband when you're not twenty" (41). This lack of emotional connection between her father and Abigail had long existed. William knew that sometimes when Abigail talked, "he did not listen" (35). At an odd moment, he had imagined himself a "foreigner" to his own daughter (41).

The deleterious effects of neglect and abandonment are also passed along to the next Abigail, the daughter of Professor Gregory Edward Mason and Abigail Howland Mason. Because of the childhood abandonment by her parents (the English professor and her mother), Abigail adopts perfectionist roles as her best defense. Just as her mother had earlier behaved, she pays close attention to externals of social behavior, appearance, and ladylike behavior. For young Abigail Howland, the appearance of propriety becomes the substance of
happiness and fulfillment itself, and without reflection or conscious thought she constructs a brittle exterior that proves too delicate for her circumstances.

In a pattern familiar to the Howlands, Abigail's professor father is also absent from her life, and long after she is a wife and mother, she chooses to "forget" her father, and she decides, "Now, today, I don't even know where he is. I don't have any address. I don't even know what country. He is gone as completely as if he never existed" (142). Instead, she concentrates on becoming the true Southern lady, eventually shutting down her inner life, feelings, and thoughts that do not contribute to the maintenance of her social identity as a lady.

Abigail's family system produces this behavior. Abigail remembers that her mother rarely took part in any household matters, preferring instead to read the romantic poetry of Shelley, Keats, or Browning. As for Margaret, about her (young Abigail's own mother), "Abigail never said a word. She always pretended to believe that Margaret's children had just come" (144). However, Mrs. Abigail Mason basically "liked her father's second wife" (149). Her daughter Abigail was not sure why, but she thought that perhaps it was because Margaret had everything my own mother Abigail hadn't: size and strength and physical endurance. Maybe my mother was so sure of her own position that she couldn't be challenged by her own father's Negro mistress. Maybe too, maybe as simple as this: my mother was a lady and a lady is unfailingly polite and gentle to everyone. (149)
When the internal supports are absent, the child may focus on the externals of role playing and imitation of models. In short, the outward manifestation of identity becomes confused with identity itself. In this way, young Abigail learns what it means to "be a lady."

Although Abigail was eight years old when her mother left her British-born father, she "wondered if those years had ever happened at all" (141). She vaguely remembers her father quoting the poet Rupert Brooke as he went around the house and the "smooth green college town . . ., her father walking off to teach his class in the mornings, leaving a thin line of pipe smoke behind" (141). However, by the time she was eighteen, she "had long since forgotten" what he looked like, and her "mother angrily had not kept any pictures" (178). She also had never received any letters from him, but after she had unexpectedly gone into the living room one day to see her mother tossing letters, "unopened," into the fireplace while saying "That's what I think of them," Abigail suspected that her mother had burned them all. Young Abigail was right; her mother was determined to make certain her daughter had absolutely no relationship with her father at all. Fully two years after her mother's death, her father comes to see her. However, her "grandfather had found out his plans somehow," and Abigail is "hurriedly spirited away" with Aunt Annie and four of Ann's grandchildren to a six-week driving tour of the Grand Canyon and the West (178). Apparently her
grandfather was as adamant as his own daughter had been to cut off any contact
between the professor father and the daughter.

   Even many years after she is a married adult who has children of her own,
Abigail realizes that she has no urge to track down her father. She says that she
simply does not feel she was ever a part of her English professor-father's life.
Before her marriage, "people had always called me the Howland girl, and it was
hard to remember sometimes my real name was Mason" (142).

   Despite Abigail’s unusually distant, remarkably strained relationship with
her own father, on one level she cannot deny her desire for a father figure. Like
all daughters, she needs one, and so she turns to the man whose mansion she
lived in. She states, "I feel that my grandfather was my father" (142). Perhaps
another reason she was so close to her grandfather was that she was so isolated.
Because she lived out of town on the ranch, she "didn't see too much of those
children, and summers [she] hardly saw anybody who didn't live on the place.
[She] didn't go to Sunday School . . . and [she] never went to church unless it was
for a wedding or a christening or a funeral" (153). In this respect, she is quite
typical of many bildungsroman heroines, especially Southern ones, who are more
apt to feel isolated and alone.

   Also, as is conventional for these Southern heroines, Abigail is largely
protected and sheltered but, from another view, excluded from the outside, "real"
world. For instance, Abigail remembers that her grandfather "never talked about himself or his business with [her]" (190). Abigail even says, "I was used to that manner of his, and I didn't mind it all--after all, there are lots of southern men who treat their ladies that way" (190). Abigail, in fact, knows so little about her grandfather's business that it is not until many years after his death that she discovers the extent of her grandfather's holdings, property that made him one of the richest men in the state. Instead of confiding in her as one would an heir and eventual business partner, William Howland simply referred to Abigail as "Lady," his nickname for her. When he did speak of her, William talked of her future as a wife and mother. For instance, when she tells him how much she loves the ranch and says, "I'd like to live here all the rest of my life," he replies, "It'll depend where your man'll live" (180). When she says then, "I haven't got a beau," he snaps, "You will, you will!" (180). A few years later after she has started dating and tells him she has a beau, he calmly answers, "I been expecting that" (197).

Hence, this Abigail is taught to be ladylike and to get married as well. Although her grandfather was "grooming" her for marriage, Abigail did not realize it at the time. She also, at the time, did not understand that, by not ever telling her about any of the family business deals or ever confiding his feelings to her, he was implicitly teaching her to be a properly submissive Southern wife.
As Oleksy states, Abigail is being prepared “to conform to the stereotype of the Southern lady, with its notions of inherent scatterbrainedness, nonintellectuality, and dependence” (177). That is, her beloved grandfather, by not teaching her about financial matters or any other male domains, actually implied that Abigail should not try to be “smart enough” to run the Howland estate.

Abigail was also prepared in other ways to become a proper Southern lady. For instance, she was told by one of her lady cousins to make sure she always wore "new or almost new or very fancy underwear" because "if you . . . were taken to the hospital and they saw that your panties were all torn and ragged and your slip was penned at the shoulder by a safety pin, you'd be so ashamed you'd have to die" (166). Abigail, for the most part, conforms to their standards, but occasionally she would enjoy unladylike behavior. She, for instance, was "never bothered [by] hog-sticking time [although] lots of the girls at school said they couldn't bear to watch" (159), and she also preferred the "outside" and outdoors to the "inside of the house" (163). Nevertheless, despite a few aberrations such as these, Abigail basically grew up as a "little lady." Her own grandfather, however, who had encouraged her behavior once told her, "You're a child, and like your mother you have very little sense" (192). Thus, William, to an extent, did not deeply respect his ladylike daughter and granddaughter, though he had been the one to praise their ladylike actions.
Abandonment and neglect continue to affect Abigail in adult life, as for example in her marriage to John Tolliver, when she reenacts a pattern similar to one she had experienced in her childhood. All of the strong men in her life expect her to perform the duties accorded to a lady of her rank, but they do not want her to be involved in any important aspects of their life. Just as William Howland had had other concerns that obviated proper attention to Abigail, her husband John Tolliver also possesses ulterior motives in the relationship with Abigail.

The fundamental interest of John Tolliver was to make his name respectable by associating himself with the Howlands. He needed this respectability for any election bid he might undertake, for John Tolliver came from Somerset County, which was "the northernmost county with the darkest, bloodiest past in the State" (194). There, slaves had been "bred and sold, like stock. There was money in it, but not much else," for people "didn't think too much of the slave . . . breeder. They bought from them," but they did not like or admire them (194). John, who has political aspirations, wants to change his family's slavetrader image, and he believes marrying Abigail Howland Mason, whose grandfather is one of the most respected men in the state, will improve his image and help him gain enough respect from voters to get elected. Consequently, he courts her "politely but firmly," and after only a month of
dating, in a "matter-of-fact tone," asks her to marry him (197). In fact, he tells her that she will be "perfect for the job" of being his wife (250).

Abigail is not surprised at the question, or his practical, even unromantic attitude toward her. She had told her roommate previously that she did not need her diaphragm anymore because, "I am not sleeping with John. . . . I am going to marry him" (197). Hence, once she meets John, she turns into a traditional Southern "good girl who never sleeps with her intended until the wedding night." All traces of the more modern, free-spirited college woman who had enjoyed sleeping with Tom, a casual acquaintance, disappears. Moreover, the reason she gave for loving John also sounded like one that would be given by a proper Southern lady. Abigail looks up to John for being a strong man who "ordered and directed events himself" (197). In addition, he "told [her] what to do . . . , and [she] liked it immensely" (197). Later, John would describe her effectiveness as the hostess wife of a politician as one who "oozed good will and female charm" (219).

Abigail's early training proved quite helpful in the construction of a utilitarian marriage. After the wedding ceremony, Abigail continues to metamorphose into the perfect, traditional upper class Southern lady of the house. John, in fact, expects her to decorate their home, to give and attend "cocktail parties, showers, dances, old-fashioned week-long house parties on the Gulf
coast" (200), and to be "sweet and kind to everyone" (250). In this setting, she learns "to decorate" (222), do volunteer work, even monogram napkins. In short, she becomes the gracious wife of the Southern businessman who also has political aspirations.

Abigail also learns to overlook things lurking beneath the surface of their relationship, for in her devotion to surfaces, appearances, and behavior, Abigail skates above any undesirable realities. She "almost never saw John" for extended periods because he works so hard on his career, and this phenomenon also is part of the normal life of the ideal wife. So, too, are Abigail's dislike of John's neglect, her having "nothing to do all day" because she has no career, and her beginning to suspect him of infidelity. The first time she suspects him of cheating, she follows him one evening and upon seeing he was innocent, Abigail says, "Because I felt so awful, . . . I decided to let myself get pregnant" (202). Thus, Abigail gets pregnant out of guilt and loneliness, and John, although he believes the pregnancy was accidental, tells Abigail that at least "the child will keep you company" (202).

A pattern of keeping secrets and prohibiting speech about his sexual infidelities develops between husband and wife. During her pregnancy, he sends her back to her grandfather's house while he takes a job in Washington, D.C. There he is unfaithful, though he denies it. Abigail reacts equally traditionally by
pretending to believe him and also gradually learning to be indifferent to his sexual misconduct. Once when she suspects that he is having an affair, she even continues to work "on the napkins she had been monogramming" (224). She also becomes more traditional in that she settles into the cycle of pregnancy and birth. Ultimately, she gives birth to four children, three girls and a boy, and by the time the last baby is born, she knows that she has "breasts that were too small and hips that were too large--a matronly figure" (257).

However, Abigail's attitude toward pregnancy is not that of the traditional good wife and mother, though it is typical of the bildungsroman heroines that Barbara White examined. Like these women, Abigail is disgusted by some parts of the pregnancy. During the last trimester, for example, she feels "foolish and dull and heavy" (204). At the birth of her first child, when the "green-flecked ammonia-smelling water [floods] down her legs," she thinks, "How nasty it smells. How horrid it looks. I kept staring at it, wrinkling lips" (204).

Also just as White found in her study, Abigail pays the same heavy price that other pre-1972 bildungsroman protagonists pay for becoming passive, "perfect wives." Abigail completely loses her self-esteem. For instance, when she cannot get to the hospital in time to deliver her first child and Margaret has to help her have it at home, she thinks silently, "How silly. I can't do anything right" (205). Abigail gradually begins to believe, "I didn't know anything" (241),
and "Then, I never thought of anything" (213). She thinks that John must be there all the time "to tell [her] what to do," or else she will not be able to act correctly (270). She notes, "I always did what John wanted" (302). Partially she did so because she was afraid to get "into an argument with him because [she] always lost" (208). Thus, she herself prohibits some types of speech between them because she is afraid of looking stupid when she talks to him. She also realized that "it had been such a long time since anyone had listened to [her]" (267). John usually gives her a set of directives, and she follows them. As she matures, she connects the multigenerational treatment when she realizes, "My grandfather had treated me the same way; but back then I was a child" (241). She has become the lady that her grandfather, her deceased mother, her Aunt Annie, and her husband John want her to be, yet she is miserable and has no respect for herself.

Despite this marital unhappiness, her loss of self-esteem, and John's infidelity, she stays with him. After fourteen years of marriage, she considers him to be "still the most attractive man [she'd] ever known" (232). She especially remembers one special night of love-making with John. John had come home happy over the pre-election predictions and had said, "Woman, let's go to bed" (232). Although Abigail says that she will remember and cherish that night always, this experience illustrates that John dominated every aspect of their
marriage, including the sexual one. Abigail accepts this arrangement and seems unaffected by the tumultuous times of the late 1960s when many other young women were beginning to question the role of the submissive wife. Despite these protests by others in the United States during this era, Abigail continues to live within the parameters of her assigned and accepted roles with her husband in the same small Southern town in which she had been raised.

Just as abandonment and neglect affect the lives of both Abigails, the children of Margaret and William Howland testify to the power of the family conflicts as their lives demonstrate significant damage from the same causes. Despite the positive qualities of Margaret's psychic abilities and her earth mother characteristics, Margaret's treatment of her children involves a reenactment of the painful qualities of her own childhood. Not surprisingly she wants her son Robert to attend school, not only to gain knowledge for its own sake, but also to leave Madison City forever, get a college degree, and marry a white person. These facts suggest that she is involved in his life, that she is determined to free him from the familiar pattern of abandonment. However, when he is eleven, Robert is sent to a boarding school in the North. Although William writes Robert once a week and once a year goes to see him, "Margaret didn't write... It was as if she were dead or a million miles away... Margaret never went at all" (173).
Much the same pattern follows with her second child Nina. When Nina is eleven, she is sent to a "very expensive girls' school in Vermont" (173). Although she writes even more often than Robert, "Margaret didn't write," and she never visited (173). Moreover, Margaret did not even keep the addresses of her children (236). Perhaps as a result of this practice, Nina has a very poor relationship with her mother. Unlike Robert, who graduates from Pittsburgh's Carnegie University with a degree in engineering and then marries a white Seattle doctor's daughter, Nina rebels. To upset her mother, she marries a black man, and Margaret is so angry that she tells people "Nina is dead" (227). When Nina and her new husband return to the South to see Margaret, Margaret refuses to see them (228). Obviously Margaret is so unhappy about Nina's violating her ethics and values that she withdraws her love from the child. Her love for her three children is thus very conditional, and the granddaughter Abigail realizes that none of the children were "that important to Margaret, who had known from the moment they were born that she would send them away" (237).

With the baby Crissy, however, Margaret seemed to have a special bond. "Margaret was a lot more affectionate with her. . . . Whenever she passed, she'd scoop her up and give her a hug--something [she had not done] with either Robert or Nina" (173). Perhaps this is because "Crissy was the nicest of the lot. . . . She was even-tempered and happy and almost never sick. She was also the brightest,
a lot brighter than Robert, although everybody encouraged him more" (173-74).
Still, "when Crissy was eleven, she went away, like the others," and she and
Margaret never saw each other again (174). As an adult, Crissy lives in Paris,
"the haven of American Negroes" (242), and so Crissy, "the gentlest and nicest of
Margaret's children" (242), seems to be the most successful of them. Robert
cannot accept being part African-American and runs toward the white world,
whereas Nina cannot accept her lineage, runs defiantly toward the African-
American world. Crissy, however, is able to admit she is part African-American,
and so she chooses to live in the European city in which, during the early 1960s,
African-Americans could enjoy greater freedom and respect than they could in
the United States.

The children of Margaret not only have difficulty adjusting to their own
mixed racial heritage, but also they must accept that their father William's white
offspring—his adult daughter and his granddaughter—come to live with them. In
fact, there are many years when the lives of these two sets of children overlap.
When the second Abigail is still a young girl, Margaret's children are growing up
as well in the same household. During these years, an uneasy alliance exists in
the household among the children of the two marriages. They do not like each
other; in fact, they treat the problem of parentage by not speaking of it. During
times of perfect frankness, Abigail can confess, "When I am being honest with
myself, . . . I know that I wish [Robert] were not [alive]” (6). The reality of their shared father but different mothers is overlooked or ignored, generally becoming a suppressed topic so much that it takes on the dynamics of a family secret.

Despite Crissy's positive attitude, Abigail realizes that all of Margaret's children have unresolved conflicts probably because of the extent to which Margaret wanted them all to forget about being part African-American and to "pass for white," marry whites, and live in the white world. Abigail knows that "Margaret would haunt her own children" (290). She wonders whether or not Margaret will haunt her, for she had always felt that "black Margaret was my own mother" (143). Abigail had always admired Margaret's strength; her own mother Abigail had had little strength--physical or emotional--and, indeed, she had died of tuberculosis in a Santa Fe hospital when Abigail herself was eleven. Abigail grows up relying on William's sister, Ann Howland Campbell, or Aunt Annie, as she called her. Ann teaches her about clothes, parties, and the rules of social etiquette. Margaret, however, was the one Abigail turned to during times of stress or crisis. Margaret, for instance, singlehandedly delivers Abigail's first child when Abigail found herself unable to get to the hospital, and after Margaret's death, Abigail honors her memory by naming her fourth and last child Margaret. However, the degree of intimacy that they share is questionable at times. For instance, when her grandfather William dies,
Abigail takes over and forgets all about the grieving Margaret who had been William's second wife for more than thirty years (215). Ultimately Abigail comes to believe that despite all the motherly functions that Margaret had performed for her over the years and despite her own feelings for Margaret, Margaret would never be "one of [her] ghosts" (290). Several years after Margaret's death, Abigail had finally gained enough distance and self-knowledge to realize that the relationship had not been reciprocal. That is, Abigail in her youth had reached out to, thought of, and wanted Margaret to be her mother. Margaret, however, had liked and taken care of Abigail, but the bitter and distant Margaret had never once considered herself to be Abigail's mother. Abigail concludes, "She would haunt her own children, but never me. She was not part of me" (290).

During these years when the surviving descendant of the first marriage and the growing children of his second marriage grow up together, the powerful secret of the marriage of William and Margaret comes into the family dynamic. Psychologist Evan Imber-Black relates, "Intergenerational family loyalties are often shaped by secrets. Such loyalties may appear as otherwise unexplainable behavior" (9). Unfortunately, when the carefully kept family secrets emerge, particularly those powerful secrets which have been maintained across the generations, the family's equilibrium or homeostasis is affected and extreme
behavior may result. In this family, the loyalties take on the form of deep and abiding bitterness for one family member and scalding rage in another. As the secrets are taken out of the family closet, different members of the Howland family begin to fight each other, and their name and wealth go up in a conflagration of holdings, envy, hate, and revenge.

Hence, the destructive power of the secrets creates the special distinction of this family. By the time that the third generation of Howands has arrived, the secrets have created varying degrees of emotional cut-off, hidden alliances, and other enervating behavior. In short, the evil that the secret creates has spread like a virus in a culture.

In most families the parents provide the system which the children embrace and within which each child must be fostered. When a family secret becomes a force in the family system, the family's existence can change in many ways. Evan Imber-Black describes the impact of secrets on the family in this way: "Secrets are systemic phenomena. They are relational, shaping dyads, triangles, hidden alliances, splits, cut-offs, defining boundaries of who is 'in' and who is 'out,' and calibrating closeness and distance in relationships" (9). Add to this the fact that their most profound secret is intergenerational, passed on from William and Margaret to the child of a first marriage as well as to their own, and it is then easily understood how the dislodging of this secret from its protected
perch brings out rage in Abigail who has lived a model existence for her grandfather. She has faithfully, loyally adhered to his values and his notions of proper womanhood. When his own propriety is questioned, something deep within her own neglected psyche is triggered. Hence, one shaping dynamic of the Howland family is the fact that “intergenerational family loyalties are often shaped by secrets” (9).

When her half-uncle Robert comes to her door surrounded by photographers who take their picture together, the catalyst begins its action. Robert had told the newspaper reporters the whole story of Abigail's grandfather's marriage to a woman of mixed descent, knowing that it would ruin John Tolliver's chances of becoming governor in such a prejudiced Southern state in the 1960s. Robert's plan to get revenge on Abigail, who had been the legitimate, legal white heir to Robert's father's estate, worked. John deserts Abigail and realizes he will not be elected governor, and the citizens of the state even try to burn out Abigail and her four children. Only Oliver Brandon, her grandfather's African-American manager of the ranch, stays to help her, and he is very old. At the thought of facing the angry mob with only the aged Oliver and her children beside her, Abigail begins to "shiver with rage and fury" (275). She says, "All my life I had been trained to depend on men, now when I needed them they were gone" (275).
Yet at the moment of crisis, she recalls the many members of the family, many of whom have long been dead. In a very real sense, the multigenerational processes and woven interconnections are still present. When Abigail later tells the townspeople of her plans to ruin the town's financial well-being, she imagines that she sees her grandfather's ghost, and she whispers, "That was for you" (307).

As Susan Kissel notes, “Abigail’s response to all that has happened and all she has learned is merely to realign herself with the most significant male presence in her life, with her grandfather, William Howland (or, rather with the ever-present ghost of her grandfather)” (45).

Even prior to this incident, after she had fended off the violent mob, she had again in her imagination recalled various family members, including the first William Howland who had begun the Southern dynasty. This magnificent moment signifies the abiding presence of the Howland family in Abigail’s mind and imagination. She even speaks to them, saying, "You didn't think I could do it" (289). Abigail also remembers the story of the Howland woman who had demanded that her other family members track down the bandits who had murdered her daughter and kill them (279). It is this woman--strong, defiant, and vengeful--whom Abigail envisions and wants to be like. These memories reflect the powerful continuities of the past and of family in Abigail’s mind, and for a
brief, shining moment, her spirit flares upward as she sheds the limitations placed on her by training, family, and culture.

However, her moments of glory and independence are shortlived, for Abigail's weakness begins to become apparent in her swing toward rage and revenge. Her obsessive desire to be the perfect Southern lady is replaced with its opposite; she becomes an avenging fury, bent on the complete destruction of those who had harmed her. Part of this fury must trace to her own abandonment issues, and part to her lack of knowledge and experience in the world. She does not possess a sound and tested character; rather, her life testifies to the powerful effects of neglect and abandonment on the lives of children. She simply does not know when she has made her point.

Hence, Abigail decides on a patently unladylike course of behavior. She prepares to take revenge on all those who had hurt her, and begins by hiring a Catholic, Edward Delatte, to be her attorney. Abigail knows the Protestant county dislikes Catholics and that her choice will be unpopular. Edward arranged her divorce from John, making sure that John got none of the extensive Howland property as part of the settlement. Abigail also gets back at John by throwing out into the street an ugly yellow oak desk that had belonged to John and the Tolliver family for generations.
She also avenges herself against the town by closing down all of the businesses in Madison City that her grandfather had owned, for she knows that most of the town is in some way dependent on Howland businesses for their income. For instance, she sells all of her livestock because she knows that without her animals coming in, the slaughter yard and packing plant will have to shut down and lay off employees (305). She also closes the dairy, the ice-cream plant, and the hotel. Abigail wants Madison City to "shrink and go back to what it was thirty years ago" (305). She wants the townspeople to see that when the angry mob tried to burn her house down, they were actually destroying their own houses as well, for she and all the people who live in Madison City are actually an interconnected community (306). She is so angry at the community members that she adds, "Maybe my son will build it back. I won't" (305).

Abigail's revenge against Robert is also carefully planned. She had learned that Robert had not told the white doctor's daughter whom he had married that he was part African-American. She suspects that his white wife will leave him if she is told, and so Abigail calls Robert in Seattle and threatens to tell his wife. Robert is terrified and hangs up on her, but she vows, "I'll be calling again. Over and over and over again" (309). Earlier, she had gotten back at Nina, whom she had never liked, by telling her that Margaret's falling into the old baptistry well had not been accidental; she had committed suicide. In reality, Abigail was
not sure whether the fall had been deliberate or accidental, but the facts were unimportant to her. Since she knew Nina secretly regretted disappointing her mother by marrying a Negro, she knew Nina would feel guilty about her mother's death all of her life. Although Abigail enjoyed taunting the self-centered Nina, her main reason for hurting her was to be loyal to Margaret, whom she had considered for a long time to be her mother, for when Margaret had learned that Nina had married a Negro man, she had said that she no longer had a daughter.

Although Abigail had imitated the Howland mother who, after her family had hunted the bandits who killed her daughter "into the swamp and found them," had gone "there to watch" her vengeance being carried out, these assertive, violent actions that Abigail chose to take ultimately did not ensure her or her family's identity or security. Critic Susan Kissel believes that at the end of the novel Abigail remains "in a state of paralysis and arrested development" (68), and the reason for Abigail's state is rooted in her family's past. Indeed, a multigenerational transmission process had been at work, ensuring a similar kind of attitude and resultant unhappiness in succeeding generations. As the novel ends, Abigail is both laughing and crying as she thinks about her phone call to Robert. Finally she begins to cry so hard she falls off her chair and cries "on the floor, huddled fetus-like against the cold, unyielding boards" (309). When the novel had opened, Abigail had said, "I have the illusion that I am sitting here,
dead. That I am like the granite outcroppings, the bones of the earth, fleshless and eternal" (4). As she waters her geraniums, she promises herself, "I shall hurt [others] as much as I have been hurt. I shall destroy as much as I have lost" (4). Then she adds, "It's a way to live, you know. It's a way to keep your heart ticking ... " (4-5). Thus, Abigail herself admits that she feels "dead" and that even her vengeance does not make her feel alive but instead is only a way to keep herself somewhat interested in living. At the end, she has regressed to the point of longing for her long-absent mother and step-grandmother Margaret, and it is clear that Abigail has many stages of development left before she will have built for herself an identity which will bring her happiness and fulfillment.

The Howland family system produces combinations of contradictory elements of character, and Abigail’s response to conflict illustrates them clearly. The exacting demands of perfect social behavior overlie a powerful passionate, even primitive, internal life. For Abigail, the neglect and abandonment in her early years contribute to the creation of this mindset as she adopts perfectionistic ideas and rules which never tutor and inform her own heart and inner nature. Like a half-trained circus lioness, Abigail prowls the ring until the pressures of performance and all those eyes watching her bring about a strong reaction that her training cannot control. Abigail’s story in The Keepers of the House enacts the destructiveness of the Howland family system, an evil preserved
intergenerationally in the form of perfectionistic roles and rules, in secrets, and in fierce loyalties. Had Abigail not been excluded early on from every important function except for childrearing and hostessing, then at least she might have gained enough experience interacting so as to control her emotional side.

End Notes

1. Critic Linda Wagner-Martin locates the evil primarily within the culture where Abigail grows. Consequently, Martin does not analyze the destructiveness within the Howland family system. Rather, she believes that, insofar as her family, "Abigail is well launched. She acted when she needed to act, of her own volition. Her family spirit was of no material help, except in helping her nurture her own spirit. As a Howland, Abigail will go on doing what she knows is right, despite the petty prejudice of the community" (154).

2. The child will imitate the one who models behavior for her. In a great deal of the research on families, ranging from the severely dysfunctioning through the successfully functioning family, researchers have discovered the tendency of children to imitate or to reproduce behavior that is modeled for them.

   According to Shampaine, "Family systems theorists examine the secrets, myths, rules, roles, and loyalties and explore how they are initiated, maintained, and perpetuated. Family secrets proliferate around topics charged with intense feelings of fear or shame" (13). Abigail's words reflect these two facts: repetition of learned behavior and the underlying feeling of being caught, of feeling shame.

3. The recurrence of a particular problem can often be traced as a part of a "multigenerational transmission process," which does exhibit a cause and effect relationship between the the earlier instance of the problem and the later one (s). See Shampaine, 15-16.

4. C. Margaret Hall, speaking of the power of this multigenerational transmission process says that there is a "strong tendency to repeat impairing patterns of emotional behavior in successive generations" (18).

5. The Freejacks were a small group of people who had isolated themselves in a region called New Church. They had descended from a small group of slaves

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who had served under Andrew Jackson. Once the war was over, Jackson wanted
to reward them by giving them their freedom, but the liberating general’s
handwriting was so illegible only two words could be made out of the scrawl:
“free” and “Jack...” So they came to be called Freejacks. In succeeding
generations, some intermarried with white people and with the neighboring
Choctaws and “took on many of the Indian ways and customs” (10). Margaret
notes that the Freejacks, believing in their own superiority, were so proud that
they eventually looked down upon both the Choctaws and the African-
Americans.

6. According to Barbara A. White, the female protagonists of the early
bildungsromans also did not admire their mothers because they believed that their
mothers were passive and weak (156).

7. With few exceptions, Margaret, like so many of the heroines of the early
bildungsromans, has very ambivalent feelings toward her family members.

8. As a matter of fact, ever afterwards throughout The Keepers of the House,
Margaret is referred to as an archetypal "earth mother." While still at the
baptistry waters, she reminds William of old Alberta, a "great tall black woman
who lived up in the hills with her man Stanley Albert Thompson and drank likker
all day" (75). She "had nothing to do all day, ... [so] mostly she and Stanley
wandered around in the high peaks of the Smokies" (75). The people down the
mountains would occasionally "hear their laugh ... or find the place where those
two had lain down to sleep, pine needles stirred and flattened by the violence of
their loving" (75). People also said that "when they were restless and bored, they
would toss rocks ... and Alberta slung stones like a man" (75). He is so
intrigued by her that he offers her a job as his housekeeper. After she has been
there a week, William still thinks she has "a primitive walk, effortless,
unassuming, unconscious, old as the earth under her feet" (129).

9. The eighteen-year-old Margaret initially is ambivalent toward sex and
womanhood. Early on, she dislikes sex and her own womanhood. After
watching her cousin Hilda make love to the preacher’s son in the barn, Margaret
"cursed herself and men, and hated her body for what it would do to her" (106).

That is, she sees that, like Hilda, she will be attracted to and make love to
men, and ultimately she will be married and begin the cycle of pregnancies and
births. Having been born a woman ensures this fate; however, young Margaret
wishes to escape it. Margaret is thus first confused and naive about her sexuality.
Margaret also is uncertain about her appearance and her physical attractiveness to
men. She fears that she is too large and dark-skinned to attract any man, including William Howland. As time passes, however, her attitude changes, and she seeks to develop a loving and sexually satisfying relationship with William Howland.
“I was cathected by a narcissist. That’s how shrinks put it and it means, my daddy is a vain and beautiful man who thinks of his children as extensions of his personality. . . . You have to know to understand this story, which is about my setting forth to break the bonds he tied me with. It took a very long time and almost destroyed a lot of innocent people along the way. In the end I got free, so it sort of has a happy ending. That’s what this country is about, isn’t it? Getting free. Freeing people from their pasts. Creating our own crazy dazzling lives” (3).

In two passages of Net of Jewels (1992), at the beginning and at the end, the narrator, Rhoda Manning, asserts that she has achieved freedom from her past. Of course, these assertions could be read Ironically, but even if the claims were meant to be taken literally, the question would remain an open one because other realities that elude the understanding of the storytelling author suggest very strongly that Rhoda is largely the product of the image, the presence, and the values of her father, Dudley Manning, a Southern patriarch. As Margaret Jones Bolsterli states in “Ellen Gilchrist’s Characters and the Southern Woman’s Experience: Rhoda Manning’s Double Bind and Anna Hand’s Creativity,” Ellen Gilchrist, in her depiction of Rhoda, goes “deeper into personality, to shine a light into the dark corners of women’s souls to expose the preoccupations that get in the way of their achieving wholeness and coherence” (7). In fact, Rhoda’s own “crazy, dazzling” life is as much a result of rigid, patriarchal forces within her family as it is of her own efforts to achieve freedom. Her self-fashioning, to
borrow a Greenblattian phrase,² is less spectacular, dramatic, or dazzling than she claims, being defined by the creative efforts she takes during the peaceful interludes and the sudden, violent events and crises of her life that elicit her father’s intervention.³ The pattern of Rhoda’s life appears to be a single cycle of rebellion and attempted escape repeated several times in a variety of circumstances. As Dorie LaRue observes in “Progress and Prescription: Ellen Gilchrist’s Southern Belles,” Rhoda’s “hot-headedness may carry the story but rarely wins her more than little battles, skirmishes, the last word” (70). LaRue, in fact, maintains that “Rhoda’s behavior and personality seem to mirror the image of woman as described by George Fitzhugh, an articulate spokesman for slavery and the subordinate role of women in the Old South” (71). From the time she first appears at eighteen until the end of the novel when she is fifty-five, Rhoda reenacts the same scene, which always ends with the arrival of her father as a deus ex machina, the strongest (and most enervating) person she has known.

Rhoda’s plight is made more poignant at the loss or frustration of so much potential for independence and even fulfillment. At Vanderbilt, her first and favorite university, she competes as a swimmer, earning several medals, particularly a gold in the final conference meet during her freshman year. Even more important in her eyes is the first place award she receives for an essay an English professor had entered in the freshman writing contest. She is equally adept at spinning out tales and dramas and writing articles for the newspaper she
edits. Unfortunately, Rhoda receives no recognition from her family for these intellectual and physical achievements. In fact, only very much later in her life does she find success in a career as a professional writer.\(^4\)

The primary reason for her failure is the family system from which she emerges. That is, the actions and decisions of Rhoda connect in many ways to the drama being written and performed by the Mannings, a drama that reflects the forces, tensions, and dynamics of multigenerational patriarchy, one kind of closed family system.\(^5\) Bowenian psychologist C. Margaret Hall points out, “Repeated projection processes through several generations in a family create an extended powerful emotional force, which eventually raises or lowers levels of differentiation in members of succeeding generations” (24). When one ascendant family establishes a pattern of values and accompanying behavior that is adopted by succeeding generations of this family, then the emotional force of the pattern accumulates a greater power on the lives of the descendants. The family acquires a history, a tradition, a reason for continuing the behavior. The Manning family provides a clear example of this multigenerational transmission process.

The current generation of Mannings is headed by her father Dudley Manning, second only to Rhoda in importance in the novel. His essential belief is that in order for the Manning family to achieve and maintain homeostasis, and thereby preserve a sense of order and its identity, the children must submit or, at the very least, compromise whenever conflict is imminent. Indeed, his views are
emphatic, pronounced, and very clear. However, Rhoda’s weakness is not merely in inverse proportion to her father’s strength. Sometimes the weakness of sons can be traced to just such a primary cause as this; however, with Rhoda, the issue of women’s roles also figures in centrally. Rhoda fundamentally identifies with the power of the male world, yet finds herself relegated to the world of the weaker sex. Hence, a host of issues exist in the soupy mix of the family’s values and in the individual roles that each member plays.

Certainly both of the Manning parents would say that they want their children to be strong and independent, but the children are expected to achieve strength and independence by playing out the roles assigned to them by the parents. The children will conform to the parents’ goals for them or else face physical punishment and continuous criticism. When the children rebel, the family’s methods for handling the difficulty illustrate the family system rules. Verbal conflicts, the nonverbal messages, the forbidden topics, the criticisms, the absence of emotional supports, all play a role in the communication and identity issues in the family. Because many of Rhoda’s actions, including those at home and after she leaves the nest, are frequently rebellious, they reveal the power issues in the family. Her family allows her freedom to act, but each time she finds herself in trouble, her father steps in to solve the problem without asking Rhoda to explain or claim responsibility. Rhoda’s determination is to create distance and differences from her family; these conscious, deliberate actions
constitute a kind of *praxis*, the first steps toward selfhood. Unfortunately, Rhoda may leave Dunleith, but she never transcends the familial forces that have created her personal demons.

The multigenerational transmission of values is not only a familial process; it is frequently culturally based. That is, the generations of the Manning family did not invent the patriarchal, survivalistic pattern which it espouses, even unconsciously at times. The Deep South was settled primarily by Scot-Irish, Celtic, and British people, many of whom had emerged from violent, patriarchal cultures whose values they had retained after their arrival in the American South. In these cultures, there are overarching privileges for the parents, privileges which include authority, control, and power. Predictably, children are expected to obey, to be loyal, to love hearth and home, to revere the family and regional histories, and the female children face even more restricted roles. They must find and attract a man who is acceptable to the parents, marry him and thereby add to the family’s prestige and wealth, and raise the children that this union produces.

Notwithstanding her battles with this ethic, Rhoda’s temperament demonstrates some of that old Celtic fire when she confesses that she believes that “the furies [she] went into” during which “no one dared mess with” her were caused by her “lack of pigment and red hair,” and she states that she herself is “a throwback to that Celtic violence” (74). Certainly, Dudley Manning himself exhibits many of these behaviors and values. When Rhoda’s mother advises her
to be “a lady and let people love you,” Dudley corrects his wife and tells Rhoda instead to “let people respect you; you don’t need a bunch of love” (74). A brief review of the inherited set of cultural and family values that Dudley and Ariane Manning use to establish their family system will provide the context of the family structure within which Rhoda herself grew.

Dudley Manning, the epitome of the wealthy white Southern patriarch, is descended from the well-to-do Mannings of Dunleith. Dudley’s brother Carl has become a famous, wealthy doctor, “the one who worked with DeBakey on heart transplants” (289-90). Dudley himself went into business after achieving football hero status in college. Growing up, Rhoda admires her father’s athletic good looks and his flair for dressing in fine tailormade clothes. After his college football career, he founds a construction business, runs several mines, and eventually becomes a millionaire.

Growing up in Aberdeen, Alabama, Dudley applied some of the same principles he learned in his own youth to raise Rhoda and her three brothers. His fundamental principles are that one must earn the respect of others and children must obey their parents. Consequently, he disciplines Rhoda and her brothers by “beating” them because, as Rhoda says, “that was his code and his culture that had been beat into him in Aberdeen and he had beat it into my brothers” (74). Thus, Rhoda believes that her father learned to use severe corporeal punishment as a form of discipline from his own Southern parents and Southern culture.
In addition to acquiring wealth, Dudley also acquires a family along the way, and his wife Ariane is both beautiful and docile. Like many patriarchs, he has little respect for the parental abilities of his attractive wife, and consequently he becomes the disciplinarian in the family. His discipline includes the corporeal punishment, mentioned above, but his fundamental value beyond the tough love is control. In essence, he believes that he has the right to run their lives. In fact, he rigidly controls all of his children, and Rhoda especially dislikes his practice. Though she loves her father dearly, Rhoda confesses that her father is an unloving man.

Complicating matters are the immense privileges he extends to his children. For example, after she marries, Dudley has a house built and decorated for her, and he hires a nanny for each of her two sons. Yet the generosity results in enervation, at least for Rhoda. Dudley retains power so long as he is needed to step in to straighten out a difficulty that Rhoda or one of the other children has encountered or created. By finding herself in “messes,” Rhoda makes her rebellion and disapproval plain, while empowering her father to reenact his own role in the family. Unwittingly hence, Rhoda reinforces the family system of dependence on the father who is the central, all-powerful decision maker. Unfortunately for Rhoda, the process includes painful ambivalence as she is repeatedly resentful of his control and dependent on his financial and other resources.
Another key trait in the makeup of this Southern patriarch is his love of home and family, reflected in his determination to return to the little town of Dunleith, Alabama, where he could be near “Rhoda’s grandmother [his mother]” (8). As he tells Rhoda, “I hated having to raise you kids in the North, but I had to do it until I could make my stake” (68). In order to build his business and increase his wealth, he “worked a twenty-hour day all his life” (68). Then, once he has achieved his goal of earning one million dollars a year (74), he returns to Alabama where “the real people” live (69). In Dunleith, he “had come home to the South to live among [his] people” (57). Rhoda herself is not surprised to hear her strong-willed, blunt, outspoken father talk about returning to the Deep South to reunite with the “folks that are our kind of people” (69). She sees that “tears would come into his eyes at the thought of Aberdeen stew, . . . [a meal which] only the descendants of Highland Scots could have invented” (55). Her father loves this ancestral meal, the recipe for which had been in his family for generations and which had been brought over from Scotland by the first Manning who had settled Alabama, so much that Rhoda notices that while it was cooking, he looked “at my mother with disarmed, tender eyes.” Dudley Manning even loves the great amount of preparation time to make “Aberdeen stew right” (55). It took three days to cook the tomato, okra, corn, and chicken stew, “which had the exact consistency of oatmeal” (55).
Rhoda’s own attachment to place will find expression in her repeated returns to home during college, her marriage and divorce, and even later. Unlike her father’s attachment to home, however, Rhoda’s relationship to place is based more on need than on love of traditions and family. She frequently returns as a prodigal daughter, rather than a triumphant son.

Another of Dudley’s convictions that affects the lives of his children is his belief that other races are inferior. Dudley holds very definite racist beliefs, though he employs large numbers of African-Americans in low-paying positions in his company. Dudley makes no secret that he hates and fears the “mongrelization of the races” (233). Consequently, he begins to spend a fair portion of his fortune building private schools so that his grandchildren need not “go to school” with African-Americans (234). The fact that two African-American nannies raise his grandsons does not bother him, however. Nor does Dudley see the contradiction to his racist beliefs in his friendship with Mayberry, one of his other four maids. He and Mayberry are so similar that he affectionately refers to them as being like “what and what” (336). Both are “highly suspicious, profoundly cynical, and almost never slept” (336). His affection and respect for Mayberry, however, do not lead him to see that he has no reason to fear and hate African-Americans in general. Thus, he continues to donate and pour more and more of his money into building private schools in order to keep the races separate. This contradictory racism highlights the way the
Manning family system works: once inside the domain, the boundaries of the system, new rules take effect. Mayberry ceases to be an inferior African-American in the eyes of the patriarch; rather, she becomes an admirable person.

Dudley's attitude toward African-Americans, as well as his attitudes toward learning and towards women's roles, perhaps reflect similar values of many typical upper class white Southern males of the 1960s, men who would also express indifference or perhaps polite disgust to the idea of homosexuality. Accordingly, Manning's attitude toward homosexuals and bisexuals like Charles William is also typical. Charles William himself, a man who has faced ridicule and rejection from some quarters, declares, "Upper-class Southern men didn't mind gays back then. We weren't any threat to them" (358). From time to time, Dudley would ask Rhoda not to spend so much time with "that sissy britches Waters boy" (337), but—as Charles William knows—he did not fear homosexuals the way he did African-Americans.

These central values of Dudley Manning demonstrate the multigenerational transmission process, they define his character, and they ultimately demonstrate the dynamic role he plays in the Manning family. As important as he is, however, Dudley does not represent the entire family system. In fact, the central dynamic in the family system is the relationship between the husband and wife. That is, the primary emotional force that the children respond to is their sense of the parents' relationship. It is true that Rhoda says of the
powerful effect of her father, "Our entire lives were supposed to be lights to shine upon his stage" (3), but just as essential to Rhoda's turbulent efforts at differentiation is the part Ariane Manning contributes. By energetically supporting Dudley's values and carrying out his expectations, by providing herself as an example of the sacrificing and loving wife, and by sending out signals of her pain to her children, she creates a double bind in Rhoda that as much as any other force compels her to love and reject her mother and the role that Ariane is trying to impart. Michael Nichols explains the result of such double binds as being a "failure to develop a sense of cohesive sense of self" (Family Therapy 195). Even more important to an insight into the reason behind Rhoda's desperate if "dazzling" efforts to be an individual is the idea that individuals who lack this sense of self generally retain "an intensely emotional attachment to the family" (195). Well into Rhoda's mature years the drama between love and hate, acceptance and rejection of her family, is being played out.

The complement to the patriarch is the Southern lady, and in this role, Ariane does an excellent job of personifying the traits of the Southern lady--proper, sexless, and self-sacrificing. Dudley and Ariane thus agree that the roles of Southern aristocratic husband and wife, father and mother, are quite distinct and fixed, but they share the notion that whatever the particular gender role, the family is to be ordered according to very strict roles and rules.
Rhoda describes her mother as having descended from “bloodless, proper, scared people from the Delta” (171) who possessed very definite ideas about how women should behave. This is not to say that Ariane sees herself as self-sacrificing. Rather, by playing her part, Ariane feels that the family will be happier and more orderly. The *collusion* that Ariane encouraged in Rhoda’s development entails the proper way in which a woman finds a husband and the way a wife keeps the family together.\(^{10}\)

Both of these rules require a great deal of sacrifice on the wife’s part. Ariane herself, for example, knows of Dudley’s affair with a woman in Louisville, but she suffers in silence. Her code prohibits any discussion of the tawdry and unseemly, and above all, it prohibits discussion of any topic that might threaten family unity. In this way, she sacrifices her own needs, even her own sense of reality, to the desire for continuity or homeostasis. Her nervous breakdown is one unsurprising result of her heroic effort. The energy that is suppressed by her desire to maintain a calm, beautiful surface to the family’s life goes underground and causes even greater damage had the problem been confronted, for the effect of the secret impacts the children as well.

Also damaging to Rhoda, Ariane generally refuses to recognize or discuss those excellent qualities, values, and achievements of her daughter that do not relate to the behavior she wishes to produce. For this reason, Ariane does not praise or even acknowledge Rhoda’s intellectual achievements, particularly the
content of anything Rhoda has written, though discussion of these feats is precisely what Rhoda needs to be able to develop a strong sense of individuality. Also, Ariane rarely speaks of Rhoda's friends because they are not a part of the plan for Rhoda. The verbal conflicts that the mother and daughter duo have surround the lengthy set of rules that Ariane has devised, rules which complement the values and actions of Dudley Manning.

Ariane holds many beliefs about what constitutes the proper way to obtain a husband, and she expects Rhoda to follow all of these "rules." First of all, Ariane tells her daughter, "Don't chase men, Rhoda" (166). She also expects Rhoda always to "be careful of your reputation. Try to act like a lady. Let people love you" (73-74). Rhoda herself admits that her mother had so thoroughly "programmed me to breed with her kind of man" that "it certainly never occurred to me that I could find a boyfriend who was smart" (80). According to her mother, Rhoda's boyfriend/husband "had to be six feet tall and a good dancer. Nothing else would do" (80). Rhoda, however, says, "I kept having a hard time finding anyone who fit the bill. The tall boys couldn't dance and I wasn't supposed to take the short ones seriously. None of them could think as fast as I could or read or write as well" (80). As a result, Rhoda remains dateless, wandering "around being in love with mythical Bob Rosen and an occasional professor and drunken fraternity boys when they were drunk enough to be self-assured" (80).
Ariane thus trains Rhoda to look for the kind of man who could repeat the pattern established by Dudley and former Manning men, and Rhoda is to accomplish this by following the set of rules Ariane herself had adopted in her own life. As expected, Rhoda becomes a cheerleader (90), and she is, at all times, to be "one of the really pretty girls . . . with beautiful clothes and faces" (76). Certainly Rhoda's mother makes sure Rhoda had all the right, expensive clothes to wear. As Rhoda notes,

> When we costumed ourselves in 1955 we looked good at any cost. If it meant sweating all over the armpits of silk blouses and the silken linings of Daviedow suits that was the price we had to pay. We did worse things than wear wool suits in hot [Alabama] weather. We wore Merry Widow corsets, girdles that reached from our ribcages to our thighs, thick silk hose, three-inch heels, hats and gloves in every weather. (108)

The price that is paid for this beauty is at times great. Ariane's domain extends to the surfaces of her children's bodies. To ensure that Rhoda retains her powerful feminine attraction for correspondingly powerful men, Ariane obsessively monitors Rhoda's weight, for it is yet another of Ariane's "rules" that women of all ages should not ever allow themselves to become overweight. In this sense, Ariane expects Rhoda to retain a girlish, sexy figure in order to attract a man, though she does not encourage Rhoda to flirt to accentuate her attractions. When Rhoda gains over twenty pounds during her freshman year at Vanderbilt, Ariane insists that she that she "go see Doctor Freer" and get diet pills (23). Rhoda not only submits to her mother's rule, she enjoys it. In fact, Rhoda herself
wants to be thin and sexy so much that she misuses them by taking too many at once and by skipping meals frequently. Rhoda’s mother, however, is never worried about Rhoda’s drug abuse nor is she ever sorry that Rhoda has a prescription for drugs. Rhoda’s motivation is more complex. She submits to the rule in order to win popularity, but also to win her mother’s approval, which is very slow in coming.

Indeed, at times, the family rules (with the accompanying tension between the child’s desire to win approval and the parents’ desire to control) result in some absurd situations. Rhoda recalls that once after taking her pills, “I . . . ran around the house twenty times while my father stood on the porch and roared with laughter” (50-51). Rhoda’s father takes great pleasure at the sight of the lengths to which the young Southern ladies will go to reach their goals. Ironically, here both the strong and the weak parent agree on what is the proper behavior of their daughter; moreover, they both agree on the extremes to which it is appropriate to go to ensure that their daughter become the physically attractive Southern belle that she should be at nineteen.

Yet another expectation which her mother has for her is that Rhoda should remain a virgin until the day of her marriage. Rhoda remembers that her mother had for “years bathed me four times a day and shuddered at the slightest hint of my sexuality and covered me up with clothes and underpants and stockings and brassieres and girdles” (193). Other than her recommendation to Rhoda that she
remain a virgin until her marriage, however, Rhoda’s mother gives her very little information about sex. Although talking about sex was generally a prohibited topic in the 1950s, Rhoda’s mother takes the prohibition to an extreme. In fact, Rhoda is so afraid to ask her mother about sex that she does not get any information about birth control until the day before her elopement, and then it is from a book that she has bought (186). The twenty-year-old Rhoda also assumes that doctors in 1956 would not prescribe diaphragms to women unless they are married, an assumption which was false. Rhoda also admits that, even after she has been married ten weeks, that she is “still laboring under the misapprehension that [she] couldn’t get pregnant unless [she] wanted to” (198).

Thus, both the mother and the father in this family set up inflexible guidelines for their daughter. Both parents enact distinct and complementary roles in order to prepare their children to repeat the pattern they themselves have adopted in order to survive and perhaps flourish. Unfortunately for their daughter’s sense of individuality and differentiation, both parents are oblivious, even indifferent at times, to their daughter’s reactions to these expectations so long as her behavior does not interrupt the gatherings on their front porch at their brown Victorian mansion in Dunleith. For all of the strengths which they encourage in Rhoda, they paradoxically abandon any efforts to see to it that she grows independent of them. Because she never quite separates from the “net of jewels” that is her family, her degree of fusion, or lack of differentiation, remains...
quite high throughout the parts of her life that the reader sees. That is, Rhoda never experiences for herself the degree of strength and independence that she recognizes and admires in her father. Brought up to admire certain “jewels” of character but never own them, Rhoda carries a perpetual emptiness and hunger that are never reconciled. This is the most unfortunate result of the Manning family system.

Children who grow up in controlling families do not see themselves as victims. Rather, they make various attempts to individualize and differentiate their existence to the degree that circumstances and individual temperament allow. As an adolescent, and later as an adult, Rhoda feels that she is facing insurmountable barriers to her freedom from her family system, but she takes every opportunity to find and invent herself. One way she tries from the very beginning to extricate herself from her parents’ code and values is to adopt contrary values.

On the most fundamental level, she differs from her parents in that she does not share their attachment to the South or the family ancestors. Her Scottish forbearers are
cold laughing people, with beautiful faces and unshakable wills. They are powerful and hot-tempered. They never forget a slight, never forgive a wrongdoing. They seldom get sick. They get what they want because they believe they are supposed to have it. They believe in God as long as he is on their side. If he wavers, they fire the preacher. (20)
Once the nineteen-year-old Rhoda arrives in Dunleith, she does not feel “at home” as her parents do. Her Southern-born-and-bred grandmother, in fact, thinks that she is “a scatterbrain” (13). Other north Alabama relatives affectionately use the word “mess” to describe Rhoda (183). Rhoda feels uncomfortable in the land of her parents and ancestors, and far from sharing Ariane’s and Dudley’s love of place, extended family, and home, Rhoda privately detests them. Outwardly, however, she submits and, through her submission, keeps the peace in the family—at least on the surface.

Even more broadly, the role which Southern women in the late 1950s were expected to play frustrates Rhoda and makes her feel stifled, limited, and trapped. As Rhoda remarks,

Back then girls were supposed to look like children. Not everywhere, of course, but certainly in the culture of the Deep South. Perhaps this was because southern men were so mother-ridden they had to believe they were kissing little girls to get excited. A woman as large as their mothers might suck them back into the womb, control them body and soul, make them keep on hating themselves forever. Fortunately for the human race the system was imperfect. There were very few mothers who could control their sons’ minds after the testosterone kicked in and very few women who could make their bodies smaller and keep them that way, so breeding kept getting done and the species rolled on to better days. (80-81)

Rhoda also quickly learns that the “sleepy little Alabama town” of Dunleith expected the women to follow a certain rigid daily routine and have a lifestyle based on certain very prescribed rules. Reflecting her resistance to the
encased attitudes and roles of the region, Rhoda offers a critical description

Dunleith as a place

where the ladies spent the mornings getting dressed and the afternoons playing bridge. Whose intellectual food was the Dunleith Daily and the Birmingham News and the main selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Who thought New York City was where you went to spend the day at Elizabeth Arden and the evenings seeing Broadway musicals or carefully selected plays without any dirty language. Where everybody went to church and sent money to Africa to save the heathen but took it for granted that the black people in Dunleith couldn’t read. (48)

With respect to the more serious subjects, such as marriage, the substance of Rhoda’s thoughts is even more unfortunate. To her, marriage means she will be doomed to a life of vacuuming, dishwashing, and housecleaning, and she is so “disgusted” by pregnancy that she is determined not to “have a baby for all the tea in China” (79). Rhoda believes that the only reasons that women are needed in the Deep South are to “empty the ashtrays and put out flowers and bring music and poetry and beauty to the place” (88). Indeed, she has seen her own mother accomplish these tasks. Ariane had been a classics major at Ole Miss and knew all “about the muses and the Greek gods” (88). Her mother also spent a great deal of time redecorating and “bringing beauty” to the old Victorian mansion that Rhoda’s father had bought. Indeed, Rhoda states that her parents have a “good” Southern marriage; her “daddy made money and [her] momma spent it” (183). She simply cannot envision such a life for herself, for Rhoda aspires to a position of control, power, and authority that only men could enjoy.
Rhoda identifies with the power, vitality, and creativity of her father, believing her mother to be a person who has trouble "bossing" anyone around, especially her (27). She thinks that her mother is basically powerless and ineffectual, and as a result Rhoda’s attitude toward her mother leads to instances of verbal conflict and even physical confrontation and violence. Nineteen-year-old Rhoda tells her mother at one point, “Shut up, Mother... Please mind your own goddamn business” (29). Once she also physically pushes her mother out of the bedroom. Rhoda is aware, however, that her mother wishes the relationship could be better. As Rhoda says, “Every day [Ariane] woke up thinking she could understand me and ‘stop fighting with me.’ Every day I broke her heart” (27). Rhoda realizes that her mother “worshiped [her] despite [her] faults” (53).

Charles William tells Rhoda, “[Your mother] adores you. She was praising you to the skies. She told me about your newspaper column” (57). However, these facts do not motivate Rhoda to respect her mother. She regards her blonde-haired mother as one who is capable only of setting a lovely dining table complete with “crocheted placemats and heavy Strasbourg silver” (24), of fetching “whiskey sours and scotch mists and gin and tonics” for her father and his friends (30), and of wearing nylon hose and high heels in “one-hundred degree” heat without appearing to sweat (52).

Reinforcing Barbara A. White’s discovery that many female heroines of bildungsromans experienced poor relationships with their mothers, Rhoda
similarly possesses very little rapport with her mother. As is typical of most of the bildungsroman protagonists studied by White, Rhoda believes that her mother is an insignificant, weak person. Frequently women who identify with the freer, more powerful male tend to denigrate the position and power of the female in the system. Accordingly, Rhoda views her father as being so handsome, "so perfect, so powerful and impossible and brave" (17). Yet her relationship with him is equally poor because she both needs and resents him. Nevertheless, because Rhoda believes he is the stronger of the two, Rhoda respects and emulates him more. As Rhoda observes, "I was proud . . . [to have] a man as handsome as my father, in his gorgeous handmade clothes from Harold's in Lexington . . . . He had played left field for the Nashville Volunteers in the old Southern League and . . . he had been famous" (16). Rhoda also believes that there was between her father and her a "secret smile" that meant "Don't pay any attention to her (Ariane). She's too weak and silly to be involved in the real work of the world making money, being headstrong and passionate, winning" (192). Hence, Rhoda both hates and loves her powerful father while she feels contempt and pity for her powerless mother.

What complicates Rhoda's and her father's relationship is that the very qualities of power and control that inhibit her own growth are the ones that she relies on and even admires when she sees them in operation. This fact magnifies her ambivalence and creates a double bind for Rhoda. For one thing, Rhoda
admires his strength, noting that “criticism rolled off him like water of a duck’s back” (9). However, his immunity to criticism also causes her to fly into rages against him, rages which are usually followed by feelings of helplessness and impotence. For instance, when Rhoda phones her father to tell him how angry she is with him for moving back to the Deep South, he hangs up on her. Although Rhoda knew that “he always hung up if you tried to yell at him” (9), his not listening to her sometimes makes her feel as if she is “going crazy” (9). In actuality, Dudley’s refusal to listen to and care about Rhoda’s differences of opinion constitutes another example of prohibited speech. Dudley simply forbids any open communication to take place. After all, Rhoda is welcome to agree with and support his views, but if she protests, Dudley refuses to hear his daughter’s ideas. Communication is at best one-sided and at worst nearly nonexistent.

The obstacles constructed by her family are impressive: her mother’s expectations that she become a Southern lady, her father’s assertiveness, love of the past, both parents’ attachment to place, and their respect for tradition. All of these qualities exert pressures on Rhoda to behave in specific ways; nonetheless, despite these difficulties set up by her family’s structure, Rhoda makes intense efforts in three areas to find her own individuality.

According to Bowen, differentiation is the ultimate goal of each individual; it is the cornerstone of individual effort (349). This differentiation
represents "varying degrees of emotional strength of self" (23), according to Bowenian psychologist C. Margaret Hall. Accordingly, Rhoda demarcates specific differences between her family and her identity and between her training and her personal preferences. These efforts are not entirely unconscious, instinctive, and blind as intrapsychic therapies often suggest. Rather, Rhoda's efforts constitute praxis, consciously selected behaviors that establish her own separateness from her family.

To create one difference, she works hard in school because she is seeking in books the freedom that she cannot find in her family life. She also seeks out friends, Charles William for example, who are the antithesis of what Dudley and Ariane had been inculcating in the young Rhoda. Thirdly, she develops relationships with people who act as substitute mothers, replacing the model Ariane had provided with alternative ones. A brief analysis of these three areas of initiative—school, friends, and mentors—will show in what ways Rhoda attempted to create her own independence by resisting strong requirements of the Manning family system.

Rhoda has to make a special effort to excel in school, for it is unimportant to her family and to many of her peers at the University of Alabama. Certainly Rhoda's Chi Omega sorority sisters do not seem interested in "intellectual stimulation," for when Rhoda arrives they tell her that their chapter is on academic probation (77). Rhoda's creative efforts result in a prize-winning play,
"The Muses Come to Tuscaloosa." Although the play takes first place, she is called in to see the dean because of her "profane" language. Imitating the rough language she has heard from her father, Rhoda has one of the characters in her skit calls the muses "hussies" and says she’ll "drink all the goddamn whiskey" she likes (91). Rhoda’s play reflects her own reversal of the gender roles—civilizing men and freewheeling, frank women. Thus, her efforts to use school to break free of her family’s system and to differentiate herself represent a synthesis of various qualities she acquires from her earlier training, and not surprisingly problems arrive when she mixes the roles assigned to her.

Despite this early success, her attempts to differentiate herself by triangulation with activities associated with school ultimately ends in disappointment because the school employs prohibited speech and censorship to squelch her creativity and individuality. Eventually she is so disheartened with the sorority and the "mindless" classes at the University of Alabama that she stops attending sorority meetings and nearly stops attending classes.

In a second area, Rhoda seeks friendships with people who offer alternatives to the lifestyle expected of her by her family. Probably more than any other of the protagonists of this study, Rhoda prizes these friendships which provide distinctly different models from the actions of her parents. This triangulation thus allows her to increase her perceived power and to diminish the influence of her father and mother.
In one friend in particular Rhoda finds a soulmate who helps her to develop independence in several ways. Charles William Waters himself emerges from a similar family system, and he has found resistance and nonconformity to be useful strategies. Charles William, the nephew of Dunleith’s Doctor Freer and the son of one of the wealthy town founders, loves the avant-garde. For instance, every summer he travels to Taliesin West to study modern architecture, and he has remodeled his own house, turning it into a grotto, complete with sconces on the walls which provide lighting (201). He studies everything he can find on Frank Lloyd Wright, and he majors in modern architecture at Georgia Tech. He also loves to read in general, and he smuggles in copies of such “forbidden” novels as D. H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterly’s Lover and James Joyce’s Ulysses.

To Rhoda, Charles William is a savior, at least in part because he is the antithesis of what she has been prepared to like. She says of him, “He was my first true running buddy, my first imaginative peer. All my life I had wanted a friend who knew what I was talking about” (31). Rhoda confesses, “Charles William and I had loved each other from the moment that we met” (203). For Rhoda, Charles William is “a friend of the mind,” as she eventually describes him. After all, he shares her love of books, jazz, Ravel, and Tchaikovsky. He even renames her Dee for “Dirty old Rhoda, for what you did to Lizzie” (25). It seems that Lizzie had been the teenager who “was furious because she had to
leave” the Victorian mansion when her parents sold it to Dudley Manning, Sr. (25). He also believes that “Rhoda is too closed for her. She needs an open sound” (27). To Rhoda/Dee, however, her new name means more than that; it symbolizes a finding of her true self. Charles William helps her unlock “the best [her] mind could offer” (79). He is someone “who wanted the best [she] had to give” (79).

Charles William’s upbringing also had been remarkably similar to Rhoda’s. His father, too, had been a strong-willed patriarch. As Rhoda gets to know Charles William, she discovers that he disagreed with many other common Southern practices—just as she did. For instance, he abhors the values and practices of the Ku Klux Klan, and he deplores the illiteracy that was then widespread in the South of the 1950s. In many ways, Charles William chose to handle the South’s love of tradition by defying it in his lifestyle, his possessions, and his friendships. In this relationship then, Charles William presents Rhoda with a set of new and unconventional choices—new literature, modern architecture, and a rejection of several practices of the Old South, to mention a few. When Rhoda ventures out with Charles William, the powerful presence of her father recedes, but these differences, she discovers, do not represent a decisive break with her family’s emotional system.

Another character whose actions depart from the Manning family patterns is May Garth Sheffield, the nineteen-year-old daughter of a wealthy Alabama
judge. Initially in this relationship, Rhoda reveals her adoption of Ariane's values, when she does not seek out May Garth because she "was at least six feet tall," a quality Rhoda says "back then . . . was the social equivalent of having terminal cancer" (80). One of the rules that is most difficult for Rhoda to test is the imperative that she recognize beauty and avoid ugliness.

Like Charles William's father, May Garth Sheffield's father is also atypical of other wealthy Southern males. Although he and his family own almost all of the banks in Alabama, six cotton gins and thousands of acres of cotton land, most of the other wealthy Alabama families think Judge Carl Sheffield's support of the Supreme Court's decision in the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education ruling has made him "a traitor to the South" (84). For some time, this admonition presents Rhoda with a second reason to avoid May Garth. When May Garth invites the sorority to her room for a poker party, no one--not even Rhoda--attends (87).

Ultimately, however, Rhoda "began to see May Garth in a different light, as a Valkkyrie or Joan of Arc, a female warrior" (82), coming to admire May Garth for a poster in her dorm room which proclaimed "in huge red letters on a yellow field . . ., NO MAN IS FREE UNTIL ALL MEN ARE FREE" (87). Most of all, Rhoda respects her for daring to be an atheist in the 1950s in the South. When May Garth asserts, "I don't believe a word of that crap [taught in church]," Rhoda begins to see her as a courageous young woman. As in her
friendship with Charles William, Rhoda finds new freedom in alternatives outside her family system, and once again, the relationship provides Rhoda with opportunities to develop her own lifestyle. The fact that the relationship does not develop Rhoda's own artistic ability demonstrates how even the strongest relationships in her life do not have much ultimate effect on her lifestyle. One measure of the abiding power of Rhoda's family is her inability to make lasting changes in her life despite her attraction to such individuals as Charles Williams Waters and May Garth Sheffield.

Rhoda's attempts at differentiation extend beyond her efforts to forge a new identity through her education and through her friendships. She also seeks out alternatives in her relationships with substitute parents, meeting her first adopted mother figure, Patricia Morgan, the summer that she is nineteen. Rhoda had seen her at the Dunleith swimming pool and had wanted to talk to her because she was "different" (45). Hence, even then, Rhoda is looking for alternatives to the forms she has been exposed to. Eventually, Patricia becomes a role model and mentor to Rhoda, providing an example of a different life that a woman could live. She is the wife of Doctor Max Morgan, a scientist who works for the new Chemistrand company, a large, Yankee-owned corporation that had moved to Dunleith.

In 1955 in Alabama, Southerners liked the money that these Northern firms brought into their communities, yet they disliked and resented the arrival of
the "Yankee" employees that the firms usually brought with them. Northern companies were so aware of this resentment that they often conducted "seminars for their northern employees and their wives to prepare them for moving to the South and [they] warned them against stepping on the toes of the natives" (47). Of course, it is precisely this quality of being Northern and thus different from Rhoda's Southern family and community that first attracts Rhoda to her.

Rhoda also likes the other traits of Patricia Morgan which are different from those expected of her by her family. For instance, Patricia wears brown Spalding saddle oxfords, not high heels like Rhoda's mother and the other Southern women. She also, unlike Southern women "whose intellectual food was the Dunleith Daily and the Birmingham News and the main selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club" (48), reads the New York Times and such classic literary works as Durrell's Justine and Mountolive. Patricia also wears leg braces and uses crutches because she has had polio. She also refuses to let Rhoda or anyone else help her or pity her, and Rhoda admires her for being an independent woman who does not want to lean on a man, as she has seen her mother do. Rhoda is also surprised by Patricia Morgan's "plan to feed breakfast to children in the public schools" (46), a plan that would have been considered radical for the South of the 1950s.

What reveals that this mentor relationship is connected to issues within Rhoda's family is Patricia Morgan's own sensitive advice, for Patricia senses the
fundamental problem is Rhoda’s attachment to her family. Patricia then counsels Rhoda to “. . . know who you are, Rhoda; get autonomy. Try not to judge the world” (49) and “it isn’t good to hate your mother, Rhoda. It’s like hating part of yourself. Our parents create us” (57). Rhoda feels that she had never before “talked to anyone who entered into what [she] was saying such intensity” (50). Rhoda loves having such a confidant and feels that she and the Morgans are “a family” (61). She even tries to follow Patricia’s motherly advice because she believes Patricia is as wise as a “Chinese mandarin” (45).

Creating an alternative family relationship between substitute mother and adopted daughter is one way to lessen the tension in the original family. Essentially Rhoda senses here that feeling contradictory feelings about her parents is acceptable, but even more important, that in working toward one’s independence both love and hate of her parents may be essential. Unfortunately, this first and most potent freeing relationship ends prematurely and in tragedy. The bond between them might have provided a great support in Rhoda’s quest for freedom if she had not had the car accident that ended Clay Morgan’s life. Although the Morgans do not blame Rhoda for the car accident, she blames herself, and after she returns to college at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, she never contacts Patricia Morgan again. In fact, Rhoda’s father enters, as he regularly does after every catastrophe, supposedly to help Rhoda. However, he takes the opportunity to justify sending her to the University of
Alabama, a move he intends before the accident occurs. Hence, as in every climactic moment and catastrophe, Dudley enters to assert order and his own will in Rhoda's life, and Rhoda generally accepts his wishes.

Rhoda's second substitute mother makes a more lasting impression on her. Unlike her relationship with Patricia Morgan, Derry Waters does not suddenly leave her life. Perhaps part of the reason that their relationship is a sustained one is that Rhoda is looking for an alternative to the life planned for her by her parents. By the time that she meets Derry, Rhoda is twenty-two, has already left college because she found it intellectually unsatisfying, has married but has found marriage and motherhood to be unfulfilling, and has separated from her husband. Thus, she is ready to listen some "motherly advice."  

From the moment Rhoda meets Derry, she senses in her "some kind of power [she] had never seen in a woman before" (244). Rhoda states, "I wouldn't have wanted to cross her or make her mad" (244). Rhoda "had never in [her] life been in a place so charged, so energized" as in Derry's ultramodern house (247). Within moments after Rhoda's arrival, such people as Hodding Carter, Thurgood Marshall, Roy Reed, Stokely Carmichael, Constance Baker Motley, and Anthony Lewis are calling to speak to Derry Waters about their work with her on various projects (246-47).

Rhoda's attraction to Derry Waters is strong because Derry provides an opportunity for yet another alternative existence, one full of personal.
achievement, hard work, involvement in important matters. In essence she demonstrates a life that Rhoda has seen men enjoy. For Rhoda, Derry's existence represents an exciting set of possibilities. Accordingly, Rhoda is overwhelmed not only by Derry but by all the ways Derry's life reflects this difference, as in Derry's house, for example. Rhoda endorses it as "the most modern house in Montgomery" (237), and one walks through a Japanese garden to enter it (244).¹²

Rhoda also is amazed at how Derry and her husband treat each other. Charles did not try to control Derry the way that Malcolm and Rhoda's father had tried to control Rhoda or the way that Rhoda's father controls her mother. Instead, Derry "prefaced her statements . . . with 'Charles does, Charles thinks,','" and Charles prefaces his "with 'Derry thinks, Derry wants'" (249). The characters of Charles and Derry are thus created by Gilchrist to provide Rhoda with an example of what a marriage based on mutual respect and freedom is. Excited by all of these differences, Rhoda decides, in fact, that she wants "to live and die" right there in Derry's house (249). "I'll move in," she tells Derry (258).

Despite the initial attraction and admiration Rhoda feels for Derry, Derry's presence creates very few permanent effects in Rhoda's life. Rhoda is, for example, less inclined to love and admire Derry's advice about work than she is her house. Derry tells her, "Work is the main thing, Rhoda. . . . It's how you define yourself, how you create your meaning" (254). Rhoda, however, can think of no work she would like to do, being much more interested in the attractive
young lawyer Jim Philips to whom Derry introduces her. Rhoda worries that she is not thin enough or beautiful enough to attract him. Although Rhoda does not realize it, she is more of the traditional Southern belle who worries about being sexy enough to attract men. Her mother Ariane would have been proud of her behavior at this point.

Because Rhoda retains the rule of her original family against female self-sufficiency, this potentially constructive relationship ends like many of the other positive relationships in Rhoda’s life—they gradually die. After Rhoda returns home, she misses Derry and calls her often. Derry continues to give her motherly advice: “Read Jung; read Margaret Mead. And don’t drink so much, Rhoda” (296). Although Rhoda promises to follow her advice, she does not, and eventually Rhoda notices that Derry “started being short with [her] when [she] called her. Derry wants Rhoda to change her life; she wants her to stop being miserable by getting out of the family situation and its concomitant ways of thinking which make her drink and be miserable all the time; she wants her to move toward creating a meaningful identity based upon finding a worthwhile occupation. Rhoda, however, does not have enough courage or confidence to reject her parents totally or even to leave the Manning home.

These relationships show how despite Rhoda’s need to separate from her family and the presence of such attractive opportunities presented by her friends and substitute parents, Rhoda never seriously threatens the fusion that defines her
family. Ultimately, Rhoda remains a traditional Southern young woman because she cannot sever the ties with her father, her mother, and the powerful influence that they hold over her. Consequently, the potential differences these relationships with Charles William, May Garth, Patricia Morgan, Derry Waters may create are limited by Rhoda’s refusal to apply and to heed what they have to offer her. In the tight spot, the crunch, and the difficulty, Rhoda’s bonds and triangulation with them disappear. She dismisses their ideas and behaviors, only to submit to the training her family has provided.

Rhoda also tries to achieve differentiation first in her heavy use of alcohol and later with sexual activity. Her reliance on these substances and activities provides two more examples of how she triangulates with people and substances in attempts to lower the stress she feels as a result of her failure to break free of her family and establish her own identity. Unlike the more uplifting opportunities presented to her by Charles William, May Garth, Patricia Morgan, and Derry Waters, Rhoda’s drinking and sexual activity are more self destructive. She admits that she has not been to a “party since [she] was fifteen at which [she] didn’t get drunk or at least very tipsy” (303).

Her sexual activity outside of marriage to Malcolm also demonstrates Rhoda’s rather desperate attempts at differentiation. In Robert Haverty, a wealthy married man who has inherited the Alexandria newspaper from his father, Rhoda finds a short-lived affair (303). She does not love him or even like
him much, but, by 1960, Rhoda feels “powerful and cynical and old” (312). She feels that all there is to life is “getting all the men to be in love with you” (312).

She feels so confident in her disappointment that she never explores the causes of her own behavior. In fact, Rhoda is merely repeating the pattern established by her adulterous father so many years before. In this case, however, she replays the misbehavior without any love or even desire; rather, she nonchalantly confirms both the supreme unimportance of sex to her and her need to break any rule, expectation, or norm she contacts. In this regard, too, she never leaves her father’s shadow.

Through these various instances of triangulation during her adolescence and early adulthood—school, friendship, surrogacy, and her self-destructive behaviors—Rhoda seeks to establish her freedom, her difference, her identity. Perhaps the reason her efforts are so assiduous and intense traces to the set of rules that she is working against. She survives her adolescent misadventures, though they do not end in a greater sense of independence and individuation, moving on to create a new family in her marriage to Malcolm.

If living longer and more intensely could bring greater maturity, then Rhoda’s life might have taken a turn for the better. However, the selfsame issues that she has not resolved eventually come to the forefront again. Once Rhoda marries, for example, she quietly doubts her husband’s infidelity, just as her mother endured Dudley’s affair with his “tacky red-haired bookkeeper” (74).
One of the predictable ironies Rhoda’s life is Rhoda is first attracted to Malcolm precisely because he reminds her of her patriarchal father. He also has been found to be an acceptable husband by Rhoda’s father because Malcolm descended from upper class stock. His forefathers had founded and settled Martinsville, Georgia. Once Dudley Manning discovers that Malcolm’s ancestors had “built their empire in the south of England” before coming to Georgia to found Martinsville, he is satisfied with the lineage of his new son-in-law (196). The fact that Malcolm’s father “in true aristocratic fashion had lost the plantation in the Depression” does not bother Dudley precisely because quite often the progeny of the empire builders are not as strong as the first generation patriarch had been (175). What is important to Dudley as a father is that his daughter marry a man who comes from an upper class family and who is familiar with and devoted to its upper class norms and customs.

The saddest and strangest fact is that Rhoda has tried so many ways to separate herself, to differentiate herself, but as she enters marriage to begin her own family, her actions demonstrate the tenacious persistence of the multigenerational transmission process once again. In her marriage to Malcolm, so many elements of her parents’ lives find another expression. For one thing, Rhoda’s parents are the ones to determine the fitness of the future mate based on his possession of desirable qualities. Indeed, Malcolm is in many ways a carbon copy of Dudley Manning. Malcolm has not been happy with his father’s
position. He hopes to restore the family wealth, power, and prestige and thus regain the lifestyle of his forefathers. He dreams of living like the monied Southern upper class of the 1950s and 1960s. He even hopes that someday, after earning his engineering degree and working his way up the career ladder, he can rebuild the old family plantation and mansion, Martinsrest. Hence, the same set of values arise—career, family, attachment to place and home—all wonderful qualities except for the fact that the selection is not entirely an individual process. Rather, the family tends to inculcate the values, sometimes unconsciously.

Similarly, Malcolm repeats the transmission process by reenacting several beliefs common to his patriarchal father and father-in-law. For instance, he believes that Rhoda should do the cooking and the housework. Rhoda herself resists this idea, but acquiesces in unconscious ways to her training. Once she marries Malcolm, for example, she rarely does the things that have given her such gratification before, never swimming, for example. An even more telltale sign that she is reproducing behavior from her family training, Rhoda begins to become increasingly dependent on her husband’s strong presence, taking great solace in having him around, certainly not reflective of the independence that she thought she deserved or the personal strength that she has admired in other women. In fact, Rhoda is afraid of being alone; she is relieved to have a husband because “[she] wouldn’t be alone anymore” (193).
To a great extent, her dependence on Malcolm is caused by her poor relationship with her parents, thereby ensuring the tendency to repeat and fail. Because she both loves and resents her powerful father's ability to control her, she wants to rebel against his wishes and yet be near him. She also blames her mother, for, although Rhoda believes her mother is basically inept and weak, she realizes that because Ariane will not stand up for Rhoda, Ariane is helping Dudley Manning run her life. She thinks that, together, "they had taken [her] life away from [her]" (193). However, she believes that "they could not steal her "husband and marriage" (192-93). She sees her husband as "mine. This belonged to me. I had found him and I had taken him and he was mine" (193). In this observation, she is as blind to the truth as she is in other relationships.

In other matters, she continues to think that she is creating a difference only to reveal still another weakness and similarity to the family pattern. Rhoda's first baby is delivered by caesarian section. The operation causes Rhoda so much pain that she determines, "That's the only baby I'm ever going to have. If I get pregnant, I'll have an abortion" (222). Rhoda further declares, "I just can't stand the idea of swelling up and dying. Why should I die? I'm only twenty-one years old, for God's sake" (223). She is certain that she never wants to give birth again, declaring brutally, "If I get pregnant again I'll stick a coke bottle up by body and kill it. I'll read that book again. What was it? An American Tragedy. All the ways to do it are in there but I didn't read it closely

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enough” (221). She tells Malcolm, “You ought to have seen the blood. Sheets full of my blood were on the floor. My blood was everywhere” (229). Despite these devout avowals, Rhoda goes have a second pregnancy soon afterward, thus acquiescing to her husband’s desire to have more children.

Since Rhoda gets pregnant again only six weeks after giving birth to her first child, it is good that she has come to like certain aspects of motherhood. Rhoda, in fact, notices that, despite all of the threats she had made about getting an abortion, “strangely enough I was good-natured about the second pregnancy” (228). However, one principal reason she is so “peaceful” about it is that “because of it Daddy sent us enough money to get a nurse for Little Malcolm so my life was easy” (228). Rhoda had learned quickly that she detested the day-to-day details of caring for a baby. She notes, “He had come unbidden into the world and he was welcome to it but somebody else would have to keep him amused and fed. Babies bored me to death” (57).

Even her resistance to such a conventional practice as child-rearing necessitates her father’s presence and financial aid. Following a particularly violent argument with Malcolm, Rhoda decides to return to her home. Once she is home again, her father hires two maids, one to care for each child. He also started divorce procedures for her. Moreover, his attorneys were instructed to name him and Ariane as the adoptive parents of the two boys if anything happened to Rhoda (264). He also wanted Rhoda to allow him to change the
children's last name to Manning because, as he explained, "They act more like fine little Manning boys" (234). Rhoda refused to permit this, but she did allow him to build her a large, roomy, and expensive apartment behind her parents' house for her and her sons to live in (234-35, 262).¹⁴

In this family, communication descends from above. Opinions, feelings, thoughts, and unsolicited contributions of the children are unwelcome. Never does Rhoda's father leave any doubt as to who is in control of the family and who makes the important decisions. In the first scene, when Rhoda complains to her father that he has not consulted her about moving the family from Franklin, Kentucky, to Dunleith, Alabama, he tells his only daughter, "I'm not going to ask any little half-baked girls if they like what I do with my life" (8). He does not take any criticism kindly. When she chastises her father for not asking whether or not she won her events in the Vanderbilt Women's Swimming Team's last competition, he cuts her off by simply saying, "Of course you won... Now settle down" (8).

A second example of his indifference to the children's ideas or desires occurs when Rhoda reaches college and goes to college at Vanderbilt. Although Rhoda had not seemed to love Vanderbilt while she was attending it, once she was at the University of Alabama, she did miss it, perhaps in part because of the writing award she had won at the end of the spring semester. She had won first place in the freshman writing contest essay about the Fugitive poets, and she was
to enter the Honors program for English students (19). Rhoda wonders, "[If] I had been allowed to stay at Vanderbilt I would have found other friends my own age who were deeply truly interested in literature and art . . . , but Daddy had closed that door" (124).

Rhoda thus had found the academic program and atmosphere at Vanderbilt more intellectually stimulating, and perhaps it had been for this reason that her father had begun to hate Vanderbilt, denouncing it as "a goddamn liberal place" (16). Once Rhoda was enrolled at the University of Alabama, Dudley Manning said, "I thank God every day [that] I got you away from those liberals in Nashville" (124). Of course, Dudley was not convinced that a college education was necessary for anyone to have, especially a woman. In fact, Dudley believed, "A college education is the worst thing a man can have. I'm about to live mine down at last" (16).

Throughout most of Net of Jewels Rhoda is an "old-fashioned girl" because she is concerned primarily about love, and to a lesser extent, marriage and children. Nevertheless, Rhoda admits that it was impossible for me to get interested in a good-natured boy who loved me. I had been cathected by a narcissist. The only men who could interest me had to be completely unavailable or even slightly mean. I could love my English teacher or my lab instructor or someone with terminal cancer, but not just someone who wanted to love and have fun with me. (90)
In fact, if a man is “kind and loving” to Rhoda, Rhoda says it “embarrassed [her] to death” (94). Rhoda knows that part of the reason her love life was so troubled was that all of her life she had wanted her father to adore her because, she says, “I adored him. Why couldn’t he adore me?” (320) However, she never feels that he does adore or love her, despite the fact that he constantly showers her with extravagant gifts and gives her large amounts of money. She sees her Scottish father as someone who is “dark and tall and cold. He never smiled. He wanted me to act like a lady. He wanted me to be beautiful and thin. Sophisticated and aloof, quiet and soft and perfect” (101). As a result, she is attracted to “cold,” “aloof” men. However, because she does not believe that her father adores or loves her, she feels that she “had to work to make them like [her]” (116).

Rhoda’s relationship with her father made normal relationships with worthwhile men more difficult, yet her father cannot shoulder all of the responsibility. In fact, Rhoda’s relationship with her mother also caused her to become involved with men who were defined more by her mother’s preferences than by Rhoda’s unique temperament. For instance, because Ariane Manning thought it was important to marry a man who was “six feet tall and a good dancer” but not necessarily smart, Rhoda says, “It certainly never occurred to me that I could find a boyfriend who was smart [because] my mother had programmed me to breed with her kind of man” (80). Since Rhoda is very intelligent, she finds herself spending a lot of time “pretending” to be stupid “to
make stupid people feel at ease” (79) because many men in the 1950s did not find intelligent women attractive.

Thus, Rhoda’s life is determined more by the powerful men (and a corresponding silence and acceptance on the part of her mother) than by her own initiative or by the alternative role models she finds. Even in Rhoda’s affairs, she paradoxically shows that she agrees with the idea that women are primarily their surfaces. She confesses that her basic philosophy is that “all there was” was “getting all the men to be in love with you” (312). Rhoda thus believes in her own mother’s values: that physically beautiful women were always able to attract and date any man they wanted, and the man should be glad simply to go out with the beautiful woman. Perhaps without knowing it, Rhoda had begun to believe that having men be attracted to her should be her first priority and that using her looks and sexuality to interest them was permissible.

At the end of Net of Jewels Rhoda is “fifty-five years old,” and she and Charles William say that they “escaped” the restrictive Southern families in which they had been raised (357-58). Rhoda finally has become a writer and Charles William an architect, though his career is cut short when he is diagnosed with terminal heart disease. Rhoda’s religious belief that the world is a net of jewels comforts her during the time of his illness and death. Rhoda believes that each part of life adds brilliance and sparkle to the beauty of the whole, and, since death is a part of life, it too sparkles and adds to the whole in some way. Hence,
immediately after Charles William’s death is described at the end of the novel, the novel itself ends with an observation made by Vincent Van Gogh in 1888:

The deep blue sky was flecked with clouds of deeper blue than the fundamental blue of intense cobalt, and others of a clearer blue.... In the blue depth the stars were sparkling, greenish, yellow, white, rose, brighter, flashing more like jewels...opals you might call them, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires. (359)

This quotation is appropriate because it implies that Van Gogh, like Rhoda and Charles William, saw the world as a “net of jewels” or a web “in which each jewel contained the reflection of all others” (56). Thus, since different people from different centuries saw the world in the same way, continuity or eternity was created. This interconnectedness of all things in the web or net was, according to Rhoda, the only immortality.

Unfortunately, this interconnectedness entailed great difficulties for Rhoda, who wished to extricate herself. Rhoda tries through triangulation in her education, in her selection of friends, in her adoption of substitute parents, in her marriage and her affairs, even in alcohol, to invent an identity of which she could be proud. She wanted to be like Patricia Morgan and Derry Waters, to find in herself the integrity and strength that she desperately needed to assuage her savage loneliness. Of course, at the end of the novel she tells us that she indeed achieved this independence, but I am inclined to think that she might be enmeshed in the net of jewels much more completely than she thinks. Dorie LaRue also doubts Rhoda’s achievement of autonomy, saying that Gilchrist
merely "tacked a coda onto the end" (73). LaRue further asserts, "If Rhoda is satisfied she is a success . . . the reader has a right to know how this came about. After all, we left her (a few paragraphs before) in the comfortable hands of her father" (73). The ending does not obscure the reality that Rhoda's family system, particularly her father's patriarchal values, determines her life decisions and identity.

Yet Gilchrist shows us the limitation of seeking only cultural causes for the woman's failure to win autonomy. What Joanne S. Frye has said is only partly true--most female characters lack "autonomy because an autonomous woman is an apparent contradiction in cultural terms" (5). The failure must be shared by culture, family, and individual who work together to maintain the ties that bind. Rhoda reveals her own psychological insight into the connection between self and family in her comment that she traces the wellspring of her own behavior to the fact that she was "cathected by a narcissist" (3). Judging from her own behavior, we may agree with her. One major difference, however, involves the sharp suffering that her own imitation of her father brought into her life. It is this suffering which reveals the relational process at work--a young woman struggling and failing to differentiate herself from the rules of her family system, for throughout Net of Jewels Rhoda remains entangled in the harmful and limiting caretaking net of her Southern patriarchal family. Critic Tonya Stremlau Johnson is a little more optimistic when she concurs:
Though Gilchrist does not offer much hope Rhoda will ever free herself from the influence of social constructs, neither does she unduly punish Rhoda for her failure. . . . Gilchrist may also be suggesting that Rhoda should be given credit for at times trying to free herself from the constraints of the society in which she was raised . . . . Rhoda, always herself, continues to be the rebel who maintains a facade. (95)

Hence, Rhoda does not go to the extreme of Abigail Howland, who isolates herself completely and lies huddled on the floor. Abigail becomes overwhelmed by her desire to take a systematic revenge on those who have threatened her existence, and while the roots of her rage are intimately connected to her family history, Abigail never sees this fact. When that novel closes, she remains locked inside the Howland family prison. Rhoda’s identity, on the other hand, while just as frustrated in terms of sustained growth, does at times move outward away from the adopted images belle and lady at least briefly, before returning to the comforting arms of the illusion which she has unconsciously accepted. Rhoda’s departure from the Manning family, while never certain, complete, or triumphant, is nevertheless marked by repeated attempts toward differentiation and freedom. In her friendships, her adopted parental figures, and in her behavior there are clear examples of the means this protagonist takes to see herself clear of her original family.

End Notes

1. Wayne C. Booth’s Rhetoric of Irony presents a celebrated analysis of the modes of irony in the narrative voice. He identifies stable irony as that in which implied assertions that the author/persona makes can serve to subvert the surface
meaning of the text (5-6). I think this essentially describes how we to read Rhoda’s assertions of freedom and self-sufficiency at the end of the book. Furthermore, several of Rhoda’s traits tend to suggest that the character who narrates this story lacks the insight to properly evaluate her own life. Her words cannot be taken at face value, adding even more force to effect of her family on her life.

2. Critic Stephen Greenblatt’s critical premise in Renaissance Self Fashioning that imperialist countries demarcated their own claimed territory by acts of violence is similar to Rhoda’s own life in the sense that in many cases she circumscribes her own identity with successive, impulsive, violent acts. There is very little serene, gradual development in Rhoda’s life, as she finds herself unable to identify with the friends and parental figures who provide her with alternative behaviors. Even more important, I think, are Greenblatt’s ten rules for “self-fashioning,”(9) all of which I will not list here. In them I see something dynamic in Rhoda’s quest as she demarcates her territory, submits to an absolute power (Dudley Manning’s ideas of family and gender), and begins to fashion her identity in opposition to the threatening Other of anonymity.

3. Much of the critical response is in agreement at least in terms of Rhoda’s failure to break the binds of her past. Critic Tonya Stremlau Johnson, for example, points out that “Rhoda Manning . . . likes to see herself in the role of rebel . . . yet she never seems to be able to break the strong ties of family and society which bind her to the past” (87).

   Certainly reviews of the book support the idea that Rhoda does lack development and change. Eils Lotozo writing for the NYTBR observes, “If only ‘Net of Jewels’ delivered what it promises, we might have had a good novel instead of one that resembles its heroine: something with a lot of dazzle but little depth” (18). Barbette Timperlake takes a more sympathetic approach, focusing instead on “Gilchrist’s skillful portrait of this insecure, yet enigmatic and fascinating woman” whose life makes plain “what it is to repeat destructive patterns because of a basic need to be loved” (151).

4. Annis Pratt in Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction maintains that for women finding one’s self later in life is not uncommon. She describes the novels of rebirth and transformation that feature middle-aged or older heroines who have lived through many social roles and rejected them After the children and the husband’s career, many women then find time for their own development.

   What is atypical of Rhoda’s evolution is she usually places her own desires first during time of relative security, only turning to her parents in times
of distress. At no time, however, does she put husband and children first. So for her to find a writing career later in life suggests yet another reason of the difficulty in liberating herself, not from work, children, and marriage, but rather from the ties that bind her.

5. Michael P. Nichols traces the history of the family therapy methodology in *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*. He asserts that one of the first psychologists to turn to family systems therapy was Don Jackson at the institute in Palo Alto, California. Don Jackson believed that “families operate by rules, and rules about rules” (Nichols 44). Jackson “concluded that family dysfunction (as well as varying degrees of failure to find individuality such as Rhoda’s failure in *Net of Jewels*) was due to a lack of rules for change” (44).

6. Several excellent studies of multigenerational patriarchy have been completed. Dysfunctionality has already been demonstrated to involve more than one generation. Not only do psychosocial problems tend to be repeated in successive generations, but also in “healthy” families, the patterns of behavior, family rules, and the like tend to be repeated in succeeding generations. C. Margaret Hall explains, “Repeated projection processes through several generations in a family create an extended powerful emotional force” (Hall 24).

7. According to Becky L. Glass in “Women and Violence: The Intersection of Two Components of Southern Ideology,” a chapter in *Southern Women*, the South’s attitude toward violence is paradoxical. She points out that in studies comparing the regions of the United States on the basis of various instances of violent experience the South shows no significantly higher rate of violence. However, she does admit that, as has been pointed out by other researchers, the South’s attitude toward violence may be “schizophrenic,” for the South actually does possess some of the highest homicide rates while simultaneously showing “little regional differences in attitudes toward violence” (192). Also, Sara Munson Deats in *The Aching Hearth* analyzes violence in the home. She points out that the statistics illustrate the truth of the idea that parental behavior is learned by the children thereby ensuring multigenerational behavior of the same sort. Deats points out what the statistics show, “The primary models of behavior for children to imitate during the first five years of their lives are their parents or parent surrogates. An action performed by the parent not only gives the child a template to copy, it also provides the child with an example of the moral standards by which that family is governed. If a parent strikes a weaker member of the family, the child usually assumes that, at least within the family, social morality allows the strong to hit the weak. The stronger parent may hit the
weaker mate, and both may hit the children. These beatings help develop the the child’s concept of a correct pattern to learn and imitate. When the child grows to adulthood, gets married, and has children, the child may be convinced that within the family units beatings are a natural and sometimes admirable method of managing the household” (5).

8. Racial attitudes in the South’s upper class is substantially paradoxical. Not only do wealthy whites employ numbers of African-American, but in many cases, these workers are definitely preferred. Even more significant, whites form exceptionally close, sharing friendships with African-Americans, just as Dudley does with Mayberry, while simultaneously holding the convictions that the race is sadly inferior. One explanation is offered by Patricia Morgan in “‘My Ol’ Black Mammy’ in American Historiography” in Dillman’s Southern Women. Morgan notes that upper class antebellum whites created the negative image they wanted for African-Americans regardless of the truth of the image in order to “prop up the patriarchy” (41). Dudley’s own interest in maintaining the distance between the races for socioeconomic reasons seems to support this idea.

9. Characters in the novel express little or no hostility for alternative sexual orientations.

10. From Southern Women, Dillman presents the social code of the New Southern Woman (19-20). The values Dillman cites reflect the core values of Ariane Manning. They are the following:
   a. One should never forget status.
   b. There are “Natural” distinctions between men and women
   c. Chastity is to be protected at all costs.
   d. One should be loyal to tradition.
   e. A woman can never be too rich or too thin.
   f. A woman needs confirmation of appearance from other people.

11. Rhoda also knows, however, that her own mother and father would not approve of the Yankee, Derry Maitland Waters. Derry had been a reporter in Washington, D.C., when Charles William’s cousin had met her. Years after their marriage, Charles Waters, a well-to-do brain surgeon, longed to return to his native Montgomery, Alabama. Derry had accompanied her Southern-born husband back to his hometown, but she had insisted that he not interfere with her desire to begin helping Alabama’s disenfranchised and disadvantaged African-Americans. Her cause was such an unpopular one in 1958 in Alabama that some, probably Ku Klux Klan members, had burned a cross in her yard.
Refusing to be daunted, Derry had "simply brought the cross inside and built a pond around it. An architect from Sweden designed it for her," and Derry put goldfish in the pond.

12. Gilchrist uses differences in architectural and artistic taste to establish differences between key characters. In Charles William's house and here also with Derry Water's home, resistance to the South's antebellum architecture reinforces the difference between old and new South. Primarily attracted to the house for its differences from the traditional Victorian and antebellum mansions inhabited by her parents and their friends, Rhoda is intrigued by this modern building. Once inside the copper-roofed structure, one walked through another garden, an indoor one of azaleas and Japanese magnolias, before one reached the pond where the "charred cross with flowers growing around it" was (244). The walls were glass, skylights were set in vaulting ceilings, and the floors were polished stone covered with Indian rugs (244). On one wall was a painting Andrew Wyeth had given Derry "for keeping his cat" (247). Of course, since Rhoda by this time wanted to rebel against the traditional mansions which her parents and relatives lived in, Rhoda loves the house partially because it does defy tradition.

13. The role expected is highly defined--wife and mother--but so devoid of the information necessary to its adequate performance. Her parents wanted her effectively and admirably married, but cannot demonstrate the means or any method except through their own marriage, a system which Rhoda resists. That is, she knew little about sex and even less about giving birth. Her "mother's face contorted into a terrorized mask "every time she tried to talk to Rhoda about sex (199), and since her father was a Southern man of the 1950s, he was not expected to and never did talk to Rhoda about sex. In fact, Rhoda noted that he only once in her life had mentioned her body as if it were that of a sexually mature woman's body (325).

14. Rhoda's return to her original home soon prompts the familiar demand by her father that she should make progress toward self-sufficiency. Consequently, she enrolls in business school, and Rhoda "dutifully" went--for a week or two. Then one morning when she finds herself against a blackboard spelling simple words in competition, "she misspelled some simple word, picked up [her] pocketbook, and walked home in a rage" because she "couldn't even win a spelling bee at a goddamn business school" (235). To Rhoda, "It was clear my mind was gone, my life was over" (235). It is at this time that she reflects, "Daddy had the money power but she (Ariane) had the maid power. She had the
power to make me take care of the children. He had the power to make me rich or poor. What [power] did I have?” (270-71). Thus, Rhoda’s journey takes her back to the family that she has struggled to leave, and after a marriage and two children, she is asking the same question that she asked as a young teenager.
Chapter 4
Eudora Welty’s The Golden Apples:
From Family of Necessity to Family of Choice

“She drank vanilla out of the bottle, she told them, and it didn’t burn her a bit. She did that because she knew they called her mother Miss Ice Cream Rainey, for selling at speakings” (39).

Much of the critical commentary on Eudora Welty’s 1949 work, The Golden Apples, has focused on particular characters who appear in the stories. One feature of these stories that makes such character analyses so appropriate for this study is the way that Welty depicts identity through paired characters, either opposites or soul counterparts who, though they are emotionally, spiritually, even biologically connected, nevertheless illustrate alternative means of being human. That is, she uses characters to provide distinct contrasts and differences in such ways as to invite studies of them. Also, the critics who have explored the mythic dimensions of the book generally employ a character analysis as well. Studies that seek parallels between a transcendant Welty character like King MacLain or Virgie Rainey and a mythic counterpart also tend to emphasize the analysis of a particular character. However, there are other ways to view the realities portrayed in the book.

The fundamental processes in The Golden Apples are relational; no character moves in an intrapsychic vacuum. A prominent family theory psychologist, Michael Nichols, has proclaimed that “family therapists
discovered that the actions of one person can often be understood more fully in terms of interactions between that person and others. [For example], a child’s fearfulness may not spring from anything inside the child as much as it does from the child’s relationship with an anxious or punitive mother” (Nichols, *The Self in the System* 28). Following this notion, critics have examined the idea of community as a means of connecting the relational aspects of many characters’ stories. Certainly, one dyadic bond these townspeople share is their connection to the community of Morgana. They all emerge from the fictional town of Morgana, Mississippi, as it existed in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

In fact, one can see the relational realities in Morgana society from several perspectives, by observing one focal character, Virgie Rainey, as she moves through successive systems of the *biological family*, the *community family*, and her *family of choice*. In the innermost circle of relationships, the original family of Virgie Rainey provides the issues and connections that prompt her to later desires to recognize her own surrogate, adopted family of likehearted souls. Hence, on this fundamental level, Virgie’s evolution moves from the nucleus of that original family dynamic to a wider world of connections that she shares with the people who play father, mother, and fellow children to her.
In this second system, the relational connections may be discovered in the ways the community members themselves contribute to the formation and reinforcement of Virgie’s public identity. Of course, in a collective sense, the community members may express their own needs in their various narratives of Virgie’s life, with Virgie playing the roles of heroine or scapegoat as the case may be. Yet more important for Virgie herself is the way that various community members play family roles in the close knit Morgana community. In this respect, Virgie finds a mother and a sister, and a father and brother to a lesser extent. In the third and last circle, Virgie recognizes the significance of several important people in her life, and moves toward a new life with her family of choice internalized and intact.

Before these three relational systems may be examined, however, several potential critical problems must be addressed. The thesis that in each novel the protagonist’s family provides the context for the most significant interactions in the individual’s development, which has been the fundamental idea of this study, appears to be undermined by several aspects of The Golden Apples. One problem with this idea may be the question of which character is the central protagonist. Because of the presence of many Morgana community members in this book, one might say with some justification that The Golden Apples entails the evolution of not one but many individuals, for Welty actually depicts the
development (or lack of it) of numerous Morgana residents. A second problem follows from the great importance accorded to the community of Morgana. In fact, many critics concur in their appraisal of the book's valuation of community over any particular family. Chester Eisinger suggests that “instead of the family as the central social structure, it is the community” (17). Eisinger testifies to the important presence of this fictional community when he says, “Indeed, Morgana is so palpable a presence here that it clearly has the same weight as a major character” (17). Even Rebecca Mark in The Dragon’s Blood, her recent feminist study of The Golden Apples, offers the idea that Virgie’s journey toward selfhood “only occurs in relation to the community [that is, to a group extended beyond the family], in her connection to all of the other characters who inhabit her textual universe” (233).

Certainly, the community demonstrates its prominent part in the creation of the story, as various community members relate several of the stories themselves. Magnifying the community’s role, these townspeople actually contribute to the creation of the life stories of the other characters. That is, news of Virgie’s life reaches us at least partly through the eyes, ears, words, and memories of other community members. Welty cannot tell Virgie's or Cassie’s life stories without telling of the lives of numerous others in the community, some of whom are not biologically related to Virgie and some of whom Virgie
does not interact with or even seem to know. Welty thus portrays identity as the interplay of the lives of Morgana community members.

Hence, to explain Virgie’s entire development simply in terms of the dynamics of her immediate family (though this explanation will provide a starting point) is to reduce the complex realities of the fictional world of this particular text. One response to the question whether the community relationships overshadow family relationships is to point out that the interactions of individuals in Morgana actually work very much like a traditional family system, so much so in fact that I argue that the Morgana community depicted in The Golden Apples can be considered an extended family system, at least for Virgie Rainey who moves about in the lives and imagination of the extended community. One way the Morgana society imitates the system of a family is that it sets up models against which the younger generation test themselves. The community also illustrates the tendency that families exhibit, namely to create heroes and scapegoats out of these models. In a third way, this community, like a family, tends to influence the identity of its members by community folklore, stories, rumor, and innuendo about them. Fourth, among the many functions of the family, one of the most essential is the establishment of the boundary between the public and private spheres. In rural, close knit Morgana, the proximity between each individual family and the outside community makes
this division into public and private less emphatic and pronounced. Indeed, the integrated and overlapping nature of the lives of Morgana’s upper class citizens enables them to function in many ways like a family.

The relational realities in *The Golden Apples* that contribute to the unfolding, evolving identity of Virgie Rainey comprise the more traditional ways in which Virgie’s immediate family influences her development, the more subtle yet still indelible connections and influences from members of the Morgana community family, and ultimately the people who coalesce into a new family of choice for Virgie Rainey by the book’s end. Hence, we will examine Virgie’s development in terms of her movement and growth through the three intimately related “family” systems—the biological, communal, and the chosen.

Virgie’s biological family is essential to an understanding of her identity because it provides the original dynamic situation that prompts her initial efforts to differentiate herself. The Rainey family provides a clear example of the kind of family that gives the children impetus to seek outside the home for other relationships. Virgie’s father is essentially an unremarkable, emotionally barren, unfulfilling partner for Katie Rainey. Katie is more complex, a paradoxical blend of the dutiful, conscientious, controlled Southern lady with all that her nickname “Katie Blazes” suggests. Katie attempts to develop Virgie’s obedience to the roles and behavior expected of her as a young Southern belle.
and lady to be. Even more importantly, Katie's preoccupation with King MacLain, supposedly a private matter, takes on the force of a family secret with its energy driving Virgie outward to a search for the person who possesses such a compelling personality.

The Rainey family's unique dynamic involves several key ingredients—the ineffectual father, the anxiety of the mother over her secret obsession/preoccupation, the innate contradiction of mother's wifely duties with private personal preferences, the resulting prohibited speech, all lead to the daughter's separation and triangulation outside the home with other people who offer alternative roles, behaviors, values, and identity.

Virgie's family system is remarkably different from those of many other female protagonists of other bildungsromans written in the 1940s. Many of the principal female protagonists of the novels written primarily by non-Southern women writers have strong fathers who are dominant patriarchs. The problem for young women in these families is how to differentiate oneself in the presence of someone who is so overpowering or controlling that few personal decisions are possible.

Nothing could be less the case for the children of Lafayette "Fate" Rainey. The always soporific, predictable Fate is rarely mentioned in The Golden Apples, and he interacts or communicates with Virgie even more rarely.
The only father-daughter outings Fate shares with Virgie consist of his attendance of Virgie's yearly piano recitals during her youth. In fact, Virgie and he have a very distant father/daughter relationship. All Welty tells the reader is that Fate attends Miss Eckhart's piano recitals and that he burns the books written in German that Miss Eckhart gives Virgie during World War I.

Fate's behavior in the Rainey family creates a problem of a different sort from his patriarchal brethren. His lack of involvement and weak presence do not provide a better alternative to the controlling, inflexible father. While she is not angry or antagonistic to her father, his general absence signals the presence of an emotional vacuum in the family which will influence Virgie's actions.

It is in the mother-daughter relationship that Welty creates a special bond. Katie's wants to be a Southern lady, but her contradictory impulses and actions suggest she is more complicated. She also wants her daughter to be a model child, but she learns early on that controlling Virgie is impossible. Although Katie and Virgie possess these fundamental differences, their relationship reflects ties that go very deep. Despite their personal differences, a sense of duty influences their actions. Ties are not severed easily. When, for example, Virgie in her early twenties becomes old enough to leave Morgana, she does not do so. Instead, she secures a menial job clerking at a local lumber company, a job which she keeps for more than twenty years. During all of this
time, she faithfully comes home before dark to milk her mother's favorite Jerseys. Even her own mother cannot believe Virgie is so conscientious about her milking duties, for she says, "It's a wonder, though, . . . a blessed wonder to see the child mind" (207). Katie is not accustomed to having much control over her headstrong and willful daughter.

Katie demonstrates the substance of matriarchal power daily as a good, hardworking, industrious housewife. In this regard, Virgie's mother is stronger than her father. Fate's "sickly" tendencies bring about the necessity for Katie to contribute more and more of the family income. It is she who sells so much ice cream after the church services and other events that she gains the nickname "Ice Cream Rainey" (39). She also sits along the roadside in the swivel chair King MacLain bought her to sell her crochet needlework, boiled peanuts, plums, muscadines, peaches, blackberries, and dewberries (224). Whether or not Katie resents Fate for his lack of financial success is unclear, but she does refer to him once as her "good for nothing husband" (224). In her lack of complaints, and in many other ways, Katie exhibits the qualities of a good, middle-class Southern lady, if only she had not also been, according to King MacLain, a young woman full of adventure, daring, and strength. MacLain tells how young Katie Mayhew, after being dared to do so, set fire to the fuzzy outer layer of her cotton stockings. None of the other schoolgirls would do so except Katie, who comes
to be called "Katie Blazes" (217). Certainly Virgie herself adopts and reflects this side of her mother's personality, particularly those traits of which MacLain approves.

Of all the negative forces in the Rainey family system, the most influential is the mother's need for or preoccupation with another man. Her love/obsession with King MacLain illustrates the dynamic of their household and explains partly why Virgie is mindful of King MacLain in her own life. Of course, several critics have pointed out that judging from Kate Rainey's preoccupation with MacLain, it is possible that Virgie is not just spiritual, but biological, daughter to King. Additionally, in the terms of family theory, King's importance to and kinship with Virgie may be connected to her mother's fascination with him and the resulting imbalance in the family. Since in the family system all relationships depend on each other, it may also be true that Katie's obsession with King is related to an apparent lack of interest in her own husband Fate.

Certainly from the first moment, Katie is intent on telling the reader about King MacLain, a wandering tea and spice salesman who had been trained to practice law but had never wanted to. As the novel develops, King MacLain may become a spiritual father to Virgie, but this connection is not apparent to Katie, who maintains this "handsome devil" (16) prefers to travel around the
countryside doing only "what was best for him" (4). Yet Katie's passion for MacLain has much to do with Virgie's own identity.

Regardless of the true nature of her relationship with King, Katie's preoccupation with MacLain lends him stature, even a mystical power. John Allen associates him with a "natural life force of nature" (26). He is the absent powerful figure who figures in much of the conversation she hears in the home. Unsurprisingly, she seeks to discover what advantages his way of life may present to her, particularly because her own family seems so impotent in the face of life's conditions. Michael Kreyling hears "a call to growth, a summons to fulfillment" in the "related stories in the person and spirit of King MacLain and the sharers of his vitality" (Order 79). In this respect, too, Virgie responds to that call. Thus, in this way Virgie's own mother in the family nucleus creates tensions and forces that impact her daughter's life for many years.

Another of the fundamental realities of her original family that influences her behavior is the financial difficulty experienced by her parents and Virgie. Virgie feels she has to be invulnerable, to show no weaknesses around others, when the family's income falls so low they can no longer afford to pay for Virgie's piano lessons. Miss Eckhart first gives her free lessons but later asks her to gather her pecans. Virgie makes sure she tells everyone that Miss Eckhart "never gave her one lesson. Yet she always had nuts in her pocket" (53). Virgie
is too humiliated to admit to her school-friends that her family cannot afford to pay for her lessons, a fact that provides an interesting contradiction to those critics who see her as a transcendant creation.

Virgie knows, however, that the other children talk about her family's being poor. For instance, Virgie "knew they called her mother Miss Ice Cream Rainey for selling cones at speakings" (39). Therefore, to defy the children and salvage her pride, Virgie drinks vanilla extract "straight out of the bottle and told [her friends] that it didn't burn a bit" (39). In this case, Virgie responds to the name-calling and condescension by both rebelling and denying; she is not entirely invulnerable, complete, and independent.

Thus, Virgie responds to the difficulties of her unique family situation by rejecting orthodox roles for the Southern belle and lady, by ignoring and rejecting her parent's claim to authority over her, by seeking outside the home for alternative means to self-realization. In her actions, Virgie becomes a young woman who negates the claims on her by her family. In fact, she circumscribes a tight line around her private self and generally refuses to be guided by by the denizens of Morgana. The reasons for her rejection of the family's desire for her to be a proper Southern lady is her rebellion against the dynamics of her family situation—an ineffectual father combined with a dutiful mother who seems to yearn for another man. These two factors alone can account for much
of Virgie's rejection of her family's models and her spiritual search for the very man who is the center of the community's curiosity and desire. Add to these forces the family's financial difficulties and the stage is set for Virgie to move out into the larger community to play the rebel, a role which the community can use to create for her the reputation of heroine and scapegoat to meet its own needs. 10

Every time Virgie moves outside the Rainey boundaries or transcends the strict confines of her original family, she enters a second complex system, the Morgana community. Yet she carries the problems, rejections, issues with her when she goes. Her summary rejection of the family's roles (with the qualification of doing her duty to her mother) is repeated within the larger community, which as I have argued repeats the social imperatives that the family has tried to instill. In fact, Morgana itself acts like a family in that Virgie finds herself facing parental figures with demands, imperfections, expected roles, and the like. Also from the community emerge several sibling figures who compete in various ways with Virgie for approval and affection. Finally, in the community of Morgana, Virgie's reputation becomes her public identity as she becomes something of a legend, notorious for her differences from community standards.
Like most families who have an authority or leader, Morgana, viewed as a community family system, is dominated by King MacLain and the legends about him. Just as we have seen in other texts that many members of a biological family are affected by the absence of the father, so in The Golden Apples many of the community bemoan King's absence and yearn for his presence in a variety of ways—by conformity to or rebellion against his lifestyle, his example, and his values. Katie Rainey, for example, is anxiously obsessed by the details of his life. In some ways, her story in "Shower of Gold" reveals the pain and longing of a lonely wife. Furthermore, Katie's daughter Virgie possesses many similarities to King MacLain, as has been pointed out many times in previous criticism. In fact, in some ways Virgie's actions repeat the pattern of the rebellious daughter who struggles to define herself in opposition to and finally in transcendance of the father figure.

Yet Virgie, Katie, and King are not the only members of the community family headed by King MacLain, for even such a Southern lady as Cassie Morrison is influenced, if only indirectly, by the spiritual father King MacLain through her own response to and competition with Virgie. Cassie's actions illustrate the attempts at self-definition by conformity to the general community's rules and customs. That is, Cassie becomes the dutiful, bright Southern lady in all that she seeks to do. Despite her unquestioning adherence
to her family and social roles, her attempts lead to loneliness and spinsterhood, suggesting a rejection of the historical Southern code for womanhood.

Whereas many of the Southern women writers in this study trace and depict the development of a central female figure within the widening concentric spheres of psyche, family, and community, Virgie appears more frequently in the outermost sphere, the community. To say that Virgie does not behave like the traditional heroine has been noticed, analyzed, and explained by many prominent critics. For one thing, Virgie’s identity appears to be more finished, more complete, apparently independent of the influences of family and community, at least on first examination. Her vulnerabilities out of sight, she breaks appointments, runs late for music lessons, peels figs with her teeth, and, as a teenager, maintains many sexual relationships with different men. In a few words, she is an authentic, irreverent, strong-willed, and independent young woman who possesses extraordinary abilities.

One reason the vulnerabilities are not apparent is that the reader learns of Virgie primarily through the voice of a narrator whose language and knowledge are more nearly those of a towns-person than of an omniscient author. In fact, it is rare for the reader to be given access to Virgie’s mind; rather, she remains somewhat distant and elusive, beyond the ken of mortals. All of these qualities say much of the community family’s (very much like the nuclear family’s) need
for its own heroes, scapegoats, and myths, a deep need for and preoccupation with those people who step outside the circumscribed rules, roles, and duties. Hence, the community family takes the details of Virgie’s life and structures a paradoxical identity for her that satisfies its need for heroes and scapegoats, two roles that Virgie alternately plays. That is to say, news of Virgie’s affairs, her rebellions, her lack of rules and discipline, her refusal to develop her talents travels so rapidly and with such selective detail generally because she is so confident that she can do anything she puts her mind to but also because the community family has then created its own identity for her out of selected details of her life.

Despite the community’s need to create versions of Virgie’s identity to suit itself, there are particular community members who nurture or support Virgie’s quest for differentiation and independence. One of the most essential is Miss Eckhart, Virgie’s piano teacher. Miss Eckhart is a mothering person who would like to see Virgie develop her considerable talent, but as Rebecca Mark has argued, Miss Eckhart is far more than just her piano teacher; she is Virgie’s "artistic foremother" (257). As an artist and mother figure, Eckhart provides Virgie with a new set of behaviors that Virgie needs at the moment. Both women are nonconformists, both have rejected the Southern roles of belle and lady, both are outsiders in the Morgana community, and both have artistic talent.
Miss Eckhart does not act like or dress like any of the other Southern ladies of Morgana. A German, she is ever a foreigner: "Even after 1918 people said Miss Eckhart . . . still wanted the Kaiser to win" (55). In addition, she "belonged to some distant church with a previously unheard-of name, the Lutheran" (44), and she ate strange, exotic dishes like "pigs' brains" and drank wine with her meals. Even if she ate cabbage, she cooked it "by no way it was ever cooked in Morgana" (55). These differences, combined with her "Yankeeness" (41), for she had come down from the North, make her the object of gossip. Her clothes are talked about, too, for she wears out-of-style outfits since her appearance did not "interest her in the least" (6). In fact, she looks so unlike a proper Southern lady that one Morgana citizen who sees her, Fatty Bowles, even asks, "She's a she, ain't she?" (76).

Much like her spiritual daughter, Miss Eckhart herself is censured by those who do not approve of nonconformity. Disapproval of Miss Eckhart occurs when she reacts emotionally at Mr. Hal Sissum's funeral. Mr. Sissum had been the town's shoe salesman and the cello player at the picture show. Miss Eckhart had always liked him, but as the citizens said, she had no idea "how to do about Mr. Sissum" (44). That is, Miss Eckhart did not know how to flirt like a Southern belle or how to win over a man by silently conveying her goodness to her suitor as a more reserved Southern lady would. As a result, they
had not dated. Nevertheless, at the funeral she "broke out of the circle, pressed to the front, . . . and would have gone headlong into the red clay hole [of the grave] . . . [or] thrown herself upon the coffin if they'd let her" (47). These actions plus "the way she cried in the cemetery" led quite a few "ladies to stop their little girls" from taking any more piano lessons because Miss Eckhart's "display" caused them to assume wrongly that the unmarried Miss Eckhart had acted "improperly" with Mr. Sissum (48-49).

More important than these similarities and alternative behaviors is Eckhart's attraction to Virgie's musical talent. Here, Eckhart acts more like an adult whose own frustrated life can be vicariously lived through a talented younger person than a mother who provides roles and models for a child. That is, this community member seeks out Virgie as a surrogate artistic self, one who has the potential to satisfy Eckhart's own need for expressing artistic talent. This relationship is both a mentor relationship and a maternal one, although the mentoring role is the dominant one.

In this capacity, because Miss Eckhart knows that Virgie Rainey is the best pianist in Morgana, she does not want Virgie to grow up, get married, and so become a "good lady" as she knew the others who took piano lessons would. Rather, Eckhart wanted Virgie to leave Morgana and "develop her gift" (53).
Welty notes that Virgie never says she loved Miss Eckhart or followed her instructions to practice (57). Virgie is, in fact, unresponsive to Miss Eckhart's gestures, and she frequently shows disrespect for Miss Eckhart. For instance, once when Virgie makes clover chains and hangs them all over her, Miss Eckhart does not protest, although the entire gathering of people notices and she herself is "filled with terror, perhaps with pain, too" (46). She had, as Welty notes, allowed Virgie to "turn her from a teacher into something lesser" (41). Even when Virgie shows "bad manners" (41) by refusing to use Miss Eckhart's beloved metronome during practice by simply stating she "would not play a note with that thing in her face," Miss Eckhart acquiesces (40). Virgie also often comes "an hour late, . . . and sometimes she missed her lesson altogether" (36). Almost always, as she dismounts from her bicycle, she would "run the front wheel bang into the lattice" of the porch (36). At other times she would enter the room "peeling a ripe fig with her teeth" (36). Moreover, in the summer, Virgie brings Miss Eckhart a gift, a magnolia flower. However, this magnolia blossom is always stolen, and as Virgie's girlfriend Cassie Morrison points out, it is an inappropriate gift because "magnolias smelled too sweet and heavy for right after breakfast in a closed-up room" (36). The other piano students, in fact, have much to disapprove of in Virgie, for she was, like King MacLain, "full of the airs of wildness; she swayed and gave way to joys and
tempers, her own and other people's with equal freedom" (38). This disrespect has been attributed to her renouncement of all forms of weakness, to any degree of dependence or vulnerability, and to her ambivalence toward any mother figure.\textsuperscript{13}

Another plausible explanation stems not from Virgie's strength and independence but from her confusion over her identity. She must reject the forms and practices of her own family system, and to wholeheartedly affirm the practices of one who is quite different would seem a predictable next step. That she does not do so suggests her own indecision and her inability to show vulnerability and risk intimacy. The cruelty of some of Virgie's actions here support such a link to her family system. As authorities lead Miss Eckhart away to be taken to the insane asylum in Jackson, Mississippi, they pass Virgie on the sidewalk. Even Cassie believes "Virgie will stop for Miss Eckhart" (79) and help her; however, Virgie only glances at her and leaves her to her fate. She offers no assistance. This kind of distance may not simply be the sign of the self-absorbed, focused Perseus-figure; it can be alternately viewed as the mark of one who resists vulnerability and kindness when the opportunity presents itself because of deep-seated insecurity.

If Miss Eckhart is a mother to Virgie, then Cassie Morrison, a fellow piano student and dutiful Southern lady-to-be, is a competitive sibling rival.
Cassie Morrison's personality and actions provide a clear picture of the good Southern lady or a failed Virgie. Acting like a competitive sibling sister, Cassie’s actions provide the antithesis to Virgie’s choices. Much like children who try opposite or at least alternative ways to win attention, love, and identity, Cassie plays the role of a competing sister in the community family.

One of Virgie’s fellow piano students, Cassie greatly admires Virgie's ability to think for herself. In fact, Welty presents the character of Virgie in part by contrasting Virgie with the more rule-abiding young Cassie Morrison. Cassie even believes that the reason Miss Eckhart had scheduled her (who was "so poor in music") before Virgie (who was "so good") for all of those years must have been because they were "such opposites in [this and] other things!" (33). When the adolescent Virgie quits taking lessons and starts "playing the piano in the picture show," Cassie says of her that with "customary swiftness and lightness [that] she had managed to skip an interval, some world-in-between where Cassie and Missie and Parnell were all dyeing scarves" (52).

Cassie realizes that she is very different from Virgie. She knows she has better manners (48), and unlike Virgie, who rarely seeks out either her biological or "spiritual" mother, Cassie panics when her mother is not around. As a girl, whenever Cassie inadvertently becomes separated from her mother at parties or lectures, she gets upset (47). Similarly, her mother's habit of being late for the
piano recitals instills in her a permanent "dread that her mother might not come at all" (63). Cassie's desire to have her mother close by indicates neither that she is like her nor that she is her mother's favorite child (her younger brother Loch is the favorite). Cassie would like to be like Mrs. Morrison, who is playful and emotional, but "she could not see herself do an unknown thing [for] she was not Loch, she was not Virgie Rainey; she was not her mother" (68). She, for instance, remembers that on one trip of the boys and girls to Moon Lake, "she herself had let nobody touch even her hand" (84). Cassie, however, knows not only that she is different from Virgie but also that her life of conformity is not as fruitful or rich. At times, Cassie, who knows that she is expected to dye a scarf to wear to an event, looks at the scarf as "part enemy" (8). She even pictures Virgie breaking the rules by "waving the scarf, brazenly, in the air of the street" (82). She, however, simply continues dutifully to dye the scarf. What fate lies in store for a "good girl" such as Cassie? By the novel's end, Cassie has replaced Miss Eckhart as the town's piano teacher, her emotional mother has committed suicide, and she has become a confirmed spinster. Although she always follows the rules all her life, Cassie clearly does not fare as well as the often disobedient, sometimes rude, and more sexually free Virgie.

As a foil, Welty uses Cassie's character to complement and more clearly define Virgie's character; it is Cassie who decides to honor her mother's memory
by spending every penny she had ever saved on an elaborate tombstone for her
mother after her mother committed suicide (230), for example. She also plants
narcissus bulbs in such a way they spell out her mother's name, Catherine, in the
spring when they bloomed (239).

Those who honor the community family’s roles are often rewarded by the
community. That is, despite the seeming sterility of Cassie's life, at least she
does win the Presbyterian Church's music scholarship to go to college to study
music education (56); none of the other Morgana girls go to college. Virgie, for
all of her talent, does not develop her musical ability. The community, like an
approving parent, controls the financial rewards for those who act within the
prescribed roles. Hence, as a competing sibling in this family of Morgana,
Cassie does find an identity for herself, and in so doing, she provides another
contrast to Virgie’s life.

A third community member who plays the role of a family member is
King MacLain, the Zeus-like man for whom Virgie’s mother has an intense
curiosity. Critic Michael Kreyling hears “a call to growth, a summons to
fulfillment” in the “related stories in the person and spirit of King MacLain and
the sharers of his vitality” (Order 79). Virgie does indeed hear and respond to
such a call, and, for her, King MacLain ultimately becomes a father figure, one
by whom she measures and identifies herself. Yet King’s presence influences
Virgie’s development even early within her own family system. As a community member, King has his own considerable reputation within the community family, holding a place of distinction in the hearts of many. His wild reputation and escapades provide sources of community gossip, so Katie’s interest in him could plausibly affect Virgie. This man is not some distant stranger for whom her mother had a passing fancy. Rather, he is the object of great curiosity, rumor, and attention. His notoriety must have been very compelling for a young rebel such as Virgie who could not find such a person to identify with in her own family. He was powerful, but outside her family and in opposition to the role played by her father Fate. Hence, her silence about King MacLain is not surprising, for she likely feels a high degree of ambivalence for the man with qualities she wants but whose presence threatens the family from which she emerges.

While their paths do not cross very often, Virgie is aware of connections they share predominately because the family dynamics of Virgie propel her toward King MacLain, his values, his lifestyle. Rather than seeing Virgie as a completely self-sustained, independent, even mythic, individual, we can find in the dynamics of her family the roots of the particular patterns that render her choices and actions more human and understandable. Her affinity for King’s life may trace to a rejection of her father’s soporific personality and her
mother's lessons about the Southern lady, as well as her mother's preoccupation with King MacLain.

Many details in the text reveal similarities between MacLain and Virgie, as Virgie's personality and actions reflect more connections to King MacLain, her spiritual father, than to Fate Rainey. A fundamental similarity they share is their openness toward sexuality. As critic Louise Westling has noted, Virgie's name is not meant to suggest she is a virgin in the physical sense. Rather, the name Virgie "refers to her self-reliance" (98). Westling observes that Virgie is virginal only in that she does not "allow males to control her life" (98). Westling reads Welty's works as suggesting that both men and women should have the freedom to choose sexual partners, and that erotic force expresses life force. Seen in this light, the behavior of characters such as King and Virgie does not illustrate the immorality that the townspeople see in the behavior.

John Allen points out that Welty is "skeptical of conventional morals" in general (30). Allen asserts that Welty's main preoccupation or purpose is the study of evil, and Allen concludes that Welty does not associate evil with sex but rather with any form of imprisonment. Hence, King, who is always trying to test the limits and not be imprisoned or fettered at all, is, in many ways, a positive figure. In fact, Allen says that in King, Welty created a classic "demigod" figure, who, because he is superior, can have "derision in regard to
manmade law" (31). J.L. Demmin and Daniel Curley basically concur with Allen, but they call King a representation of Zeus and "a natural force" (130).

According to Allen, Welty depicts this Zeus or demigod figure as inciting the newly-married Mattie Will Sojourner Nesbitt to break four different types of laws or codes in order to have a sexual encounter with him one afternoon in Morgan's Woods. Since Mattie's husband Junior is there in the woods with her, she must slip away from him to meet King. In doing so, she breaks the law of matrimony. Blackstone, a hired helper who is also on the hunt is, as Junior's employee, legally bound to be there because his employer has ordered him to come along. Mattie must also slip by him. Allen states that Wilbur, the hunting dog named after Wilbur Morrison, the owner of the local newspaper, symbolizes the law of public opinion which Mattie also defies in order to be with King. Finally, Mrs. Lizzie Stark's unique no trespassing sign, "Posted. No hunting. No pigs with or without rings. This means you" (93), represents the "law" or power of miserliness and hate (31). Young Mattie breaks all of these codes in order to have a brief sexual encounter with King, yet neither she nor her seducer feels guilty or ashamed.

King's spiritual--and perhaps biological--daughter Virgie also is unashamed of having brief sexual relationships. For instance, when she is sixteen, she and a sailor, Kewpie Moffitt, begin meeting at the empty and
deserted home of King and Snowdie MacLain. In fact, it had been Virgie who had "let the sailor pick her up and carry her there one day, with her fingers lifting to brush the leaves. It was she that had showed the sailor the house to begin with, she that started him coming" (21). Virgie is able to keep these trysts secret until one day when the house is set on fire. As they are both fleeing from the burning building, they run into several ladies who are returning from a Rook party. The embarrassed sailor "ran from the wall of ladies, . . . carrying his blouse and naked from the waist up" (78). On the other hand, the half-dressed Virgie, when the ladies call out, "Look at that! I see you, Virgie Rainey," simply goes down the steps "clicking her heels out to the sidewalk--always Virgie clicked her heels as if nothing had happened in her past or behind her, as if she were free, whatever else she might be" (79). Virgie even "faced the ladies as she turned toward town," and, as a result, the ladies "hushed" (79).

Not only does the sixteen-year-old Virgie, like King, not feel guilty about her sexual relationships. Her attitude toward sex does not change as she ages, for even at the end of The Golden Apples, when she is "past forty" (205), she is not at all bothered when the townspeople gossip about "that fellow Mabry's taking out his gun and leaving Virgie a bag o' quail every other day" (206). Virgie is indifferent to the community's knowledge of her intimacy with Bucky Moffitt and Simon Sojourner, among others (242).
In this respect, she differs greatly from heroines of the typical bildungsromans written between 1920 and 1972 which Barbara A. White studied. According to White, these heroines were usually afraid of sex, recoiled from it, or else endured it. Also, they were concerned with either maintaining the Southern lady's reputation for being a "nice girl" or else developing a poor reputation by being a "bad girl" who rebelled against the rules. Virgie Rainey fits neither of these categories. Although she does express her sexuality freely and she never marries, even after she is "past forty" (205), Virgie's motivation for doing so is not to be a "bad girl." Rather, Virgie reveals herself to be "skeptical of conventional morals" (30) as John Allen notes. In fact, Welty gives her female character traditionally male qualities, some of them vying with the tremendous life force of King MacLain himself. In this respect, Welty's 1940s heroine Virgie Rainey is not a female victim who is trapped into conforming to the "good girl" or the "bad girl" role. Hence, unlike the other women writers of the 1940s studied by White, Welty created a heroine who was sexually active, unashamed, and unconcerned with public opinion.

Even the less central members of the Morgana community family contribute to the delineation of Virgie's character. In fact, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw argues that Welty clearly delineates the character of Virgie not only by setting her against her opposite Cassie but also by creating a second set of
parallel characters ("Southern Ladies" 81). That is, the characters that Welty places in the story "Moon Lake," Easter and Nina, are very similar to Virgie and Cassie, respectively. These parallel characters even share similar goals, for the orphan Easter wants to go "out in the world" (136) and become "a singer" (118), much as Virgie's departure from Morgana for the larger world answers the call to develop herself and talents. Nina says that she "dreams that her self might get away . . . [to a] faraway place" (115). However, by the story's end, the more traditional Nina Carmichael suspects that she will never fulfill her dreams and probably will end up an "old maid" in Morgana (138).

Nina and Easter's relationship parallels Virgie and Cassie's in other ways as well. For instance, Nina looks up to and wants to be like Easter much as Cassie admires Virgie. Nina even says, "The orphan! . . . The other way to live" (123). She wishes she could change into and become Easter. Nina says she longs to be an orphan because "nobody's watching them" (112). She adds, "Even [if] watched, [they and] Easter remained not answerable to a soul on earth. Nobody cared!" (112). Nina's feeling that she, a "good girl," was being watched is a common one, if one judges by White's findings. Her study revealed that the majority of heroines of the bildungsromans she examined did feel "observed" or "spied upon." Welty's true "heroines," however, are Virgie and her "spiritual" twin Easter, and they are indifferent to being spied upon.
In fact, it is this tough-minded independence that Easter and Virgie share which has led critics to associate the two so closely. Some critics have even said that the two may be more than spiritual sisters or parallel characters, speculating that Easter and Virgie may both be King MacLain’s biological daughters and thus half-sisters. At the very least, Michael Kreyling asserts, at the close of *The Golden Apples* both Easter and Virgie are moving toward spiritual growth.

Nina and Cassie, in contrast, ultimately remain entrenched in their “good girl” roles; Nina eventually marries Junior Nesbitt and by the book’s end is pregnant, while Cassie chooses to settle into the role of the town’s “old maid” music teacher, instructing new generations of little Morgana girls how to play the piano. Thus, Nina and Easter’s life choices do parallel those of Cassie and Virgie, respectively.

Yet another set of parallel characters includes King MacLain’s twin sons, Ran and Eugene. If Virgie is King’s illegitimate daughter, then they are her half-brothers. Regardless of genetic linkage, Virgie in “The Wanderers” declares that she feels “an alliance” with Ran (227). She also visits Eugene’s grave before she leaves town, an action which indicates an emotional connection. At the gravesite, however, Virgie decides that Eugene never learns how to live and love. Whether or not his twin Ran did so is a subject has been debated by various critics, among whom are Julia Demmin and Daniel Curley.
According to Demmin and Curley, in the story "The Whole World Knows" Ran MacLain has reached a crisis point in his life. Had he handled the crisis well, he would have been a fitting heir to his father's one legacy, the purpose to live life to the fullest. However, Ran fails the test. Demmin and Curley state that when Ran, a young man of twenty-three, helps to save Easter from drowning, he is at that point young and untainted and so still has a chance of maturing into a passionate and wise man. However, they maintain that by the end of the story Ran has made the wrong choices and has lost all hope of ever being truly admirable. Ran's major dilemma is what to do about his wife Jinny Love Stark's infidelity. Even his mother Snowdie says, "It's different when the man cheats on the wife" (157). That is, in a patriarchal society it is more humiliating for the man to be cuckolded by the woman than for a wife to have an adulterous husband. If a husband's wife is unfaithful, then the husband is considered not manly enough and so is more scorned. Certainly Ran feels humiliated enough by Jinny's affair to have a brief fling with Maideen Sumrall. However, Maideen is a kind, devoted, sweet girl who feels so ashamed of her one night with Ran that she commits suicide. Ran, nevertheless, seems to feel little remorse or guilt about Maideen's death. By the end of the novel he has grown fat, has become mayor, and has reconciled with Jinny Love. To judge him by the course his life takes is to agree with Demmin and Curley's
conclusion that Ran has little in common with his father King and inherits little or nothing of his life-giving spirit (137).

Virgie, however, does feel close to Ran, and by the end of The Golden Apples, thinks that out of all the other people in Morgana, she is more “connected” to him than anyone else except King. In fact, at Virgie’s mother’s funeral, Virgie suddenly feels “without warning, that two passionate people stood in this roomful, with their indifferent backs to each other” (225). That is, at that moment she becomes aware of her alliance with Ran MacLain. Later on at the funeral, Virgie felt yet “another moment of alliance” with Ran (227), and this time Virgie calls this “indelible thing” she feels for Ran a type of “kinship” (227). Thus, Virgie does believe that she and Ran are connected, that in all of Morgana Ran and she are the only passionate, freedom-loving people left, now that King MacLain is in his sixties and is growing old and somewhat feeble. Perhaps Demmin and Curley are right that Ran has not matured into a fully admirable human being, but such a distinction would not and does not matter to Virgie, who responds rather to the passionate nature she finds in Ran. As for Maideen Sumrall whose suicide may to a degree be blamed upon Ran, Virgie blames Maideen for killing herself, noting, “I hate Maideen... Hate her grave” even (231). Hence, she shares an “alliance” with him, a connection so strong that she tells her servant that she is “in a way like Ran MacLain” (237). 

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His twin brother Eugene, or little Scooter as he had been called as a child, never wants to be like his father in any way. As soon as Eugene reaches adulthood, he moves far away from Morgana, Mississippi, to San Francisco. There, he becomes a watch repairman, marries a "foreign lady," Emma, and fathers one daughter Fanny, whom he and Emma both adore (161). The unexpected death of this beloved daughter, however, causes Eugene and Emma to grow apart. One morning at breakfast Eugene without any warning reaches over and slaps his wife. She responds only by sitting and blinking at him, and so Eugene leaves the emotionally lifeless house that his home has become. He soon sees a Spanish musician whom he and Emma had watched perform earlier, and he follows him. The Spaniard has a successful career and, most important, he still has both emotion and discipline, and so he can communicate with others both through his music and art and in his own native tongue. Since Eugene and the Spaniard speak different languages, they cannot converse, and this lack of communication is symbolic of his inability to communicate with his wife, himself, his father King, and everyone else. However, just as Eugene could not escape from his father, even by moving thousands of miles away from Mississippi, he cannot escape from himself.

Thus, Eugene MacLain does not develop into a complete, self-actualized human being. Virgie, too, agrees that Eugene fails to live well. After her
mother’s funeral, as she stood over Eugene’s grave in the MacLain Cemetery, she remembered his “light, tubercular body” and how Eugene “was never reconciled to his father . . . was sarcastic to the old man— all he loved was Miss Snowdie and flowers” (241). Virgie recalled he had always been full of “averted, anticipating questions,” and she wondered if he had ever learned “that people don’t have to be answered just because they want to know” (241). Virgie realized that Eugene had wasted his life by searching for answers which did not exist instead of simply accepting and living his life. Ran’s twin brother is thus nothing like her or Ran, and she feels no “alliance” with Eugene. Nonetheless, her stop at his grave does show a tie to the MacLains, all of them, even Eugene.

After the original family has faded in influence, after the community forces have been rejected, integrated, or transcended, in the end, Virgie’s actions show she has subtly adopted her own family of choice. Virgie’s fundamental disagreement with familial and community role models results in alienation from both family and community, yet in some ways she is not alone as the final scenes of the book make clear. Welty underscores Virgie’s affinity for King MacLain and Miss Eckhart through Virgie’s behavior in the last scenes. As things turn out, Virgie’s family of choice turns out to be composed of King, Katie, Eckhart, and Ran.
Virgie leaves Morgana to go out to explore both the outer world and new facets of her character. In her quest, she carries the indelible imprint of her family and her community family, but she holds in her mind those for whom she has a special affinity. Ultimately, following her own inclinations rather than conforming to the community family's wishes becomes Virgie's abiding principle. Hence, by the end of *The Golden Apples*, this bildungsroman begins to resemble more the "novel of awakening" described by Susan J. Rosowski or the "novel of rebirth and transformation" described by Annis Pratt. According to Rosowski, the heroine of a novel of awakening does not see self-fulfillment as the outward movement toward integration into society. Rather, the movement is inward because the objective is self-knowledge (313). In the novel of rebirth and transformation the older heroine defines selfhood as "the integration of her self with herself and not with society" (195). Pratt maintains that this heroine therefore seeks "cosmic integration," not a thriving career or romance. Thus, although her actions may appear foolish, when Virgie quits her job, leaves her suitors behind, and departs Morgana, she is actually on the path to self-fulfillment.

Virgie's self integration can be seen, for example, in the fact that she does not mourn the lack of a musical career she had never sought. When she had played the piano, she did so in order to satisfy her own desires, not to please
other people or gain the praise of other people. Primarily, Virgie played the piano for the same reason she did almost everything else, to express her emotions. She did not necessarily have to have a piano in order to do this. For instance, Virgie sees milking the cows as a way to communicate her feelings to them. She thinks that when her fingers milked a cow, she was helping the cow and its "calling body to respond [to her] flesh for flesh, anguish for anguish" (235). One night she even dreams "a new piano she had touched had turned, after the one pristine moment, into a calling cow" (235). Virgie thus makes no distinction between the two.

Virgie's leaving immediately after the funeral and her not feeling close to any of the Mayhew family or the Rainey family who have come to attend the service provide even more evidence that Virgie would have liked to have left Morgana long before she was in her forties. Also, Virgie decides to sell all of her mother's possessions, and expresses unconcern that the household employees have stolen some objects from the house. The only other person throughout The Golden Apples who is indifferent to material possessions and who left Morgana to wander the larger world is King MacLain. As Welty closes the last chapter, King and Virgie are forging a closer, stronger bond with one another and parallels between the two are becoming clear.
Although Miss Snowdie brings the sixty-something King to the "laying out," he does not behave as the other polite guests do. Instead of viewing the body and acting grief-stricken, he asks for a cup of hot coffee and then takes a nap (217). When he comes back on the day of the funeral, he remains in the kitchen instead of going to listen to the preacher. There, he "sucks a little marrow bone" of ham, and then he made a hideous face at Virgie Rainey like a silent yell. It was a yell at everything--including death, not leaving it out--and he did not mind taking his present animosity out on Virgie; indeed, he chose her. Then he cracked the little bone in his teeth. (227)

While King senses that a connection exists between him and Virgie, in her own quick response, Virgie reveals her relationship to two of her selected family. She felt "refreshed all of a sudden at that tiny but sharp sound" (227), and then she wonders whether she felt it with "Ran or King himself" (227). The meaning of this moment has been debated by critics, but one clear possibility is that Virgie senses the presence of those who form her own family of choice. Here in this moment she finds a father and a brother.16 Her concluding comment, in fact, demonstrates their family relationship: "perhaps that confusion among all of them was the great wound in Ran's heart" (227). That is, Virgie knows that Ran's identity has been uncertain all of his life because he himself has not been sure how much he is like or wants to be like his father.
Virgie, like the mocking King, believes that kinship has nothing to do with "friendship" (227). Rather, one can be "kin" to someone without liking the person or even having much interaction with him or her, provided the two are similar in spirit and temperament.

Certainly her relationship with King fits this description, for Virgie is very much like King, much more like King than "there-ain't-a-surprise-in-him Fate" (6), and it is possible that King himself with his hideous face is acknowledging a more fit offspring than Ran could ever hope to be. Like King, Virgie's sense of self has been steeled to reject any sentimentality or agonized soul searching. Demmin and Curley, in fact, say that Virgie's identity is so firm that she knows that she has a private self which no one else has access to (143), not even her father King.¹⁷

Louise Westling agrees that Virgie resembles King more than she resembles anyone else in The Golden Apples. Westling maintains that both King and Virgie are like the hummingbird who "came back every year" who was also "incredibly thirsty, greedy for every drop" (59). That is, they, like the hummingbird, are by nature both wanderers and both determined to "drink every drop of life" (59).

Rebecca Mark likewise observes Virgie's self actualizing actions in the final story. She sees Virgie's sewing of this plaid dress as a symbol of her
"designing a new text, a new costume, for herself" (20). Since Virgie makes the
dress just before she leaves Morgana, Mark sees evidence that Virgie’s “old self
is dying” in her decision and states that Virgie is about to “weave together” a
new fabric for her life (20). Indeed, the plaid dress represents not only a new
identity, but also an extended family that Virgie carries with her into her
wanderings. She weaves out of the old fabric another piece of cloth, the same
material but a new dress, or in family terms, a new family from all the former
family relationships.

In a similar fashion, just after her mother’s death in another symbolic
action, Virgie bathes in the river. Westling argues Virgie’s naked river bath
represents a ritual which symbolizes the cleansing away of one life and rebirth
into another. It is also possible that the cleansing away relates to her original
family, coming so soon as it does after her mother’s death. In a sense then,
Virgie washes away the last vestiges of the family duty and responsibility that
alone kept her rooted in Morgana all the preceding years, the power of the
original family having lingered for many years after its primary dissolution.

Virgie also receives a gift of a cereus from an unknown woman who tells
her, "Keep it [and enjoy it tonight because] tomorrow it'll look like a wrung
chicken's neck" (235). That the flower is destined and meant to be beautiful for
one brief period only to be destroyed during the next stage of its life cycle is a

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progression Virgie realizes. She understands, in fact, that "all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying . . . unrecognizable one from the other sometimes, making moments double upon themselves" (234). Her ability to recognize, understand, and accept the relationship between life and death is a fundamental aspect of her maturity at the end of the book. Her departure from Morgana during a rainstorm is yet another symbol of death and rebirth that illustrates Virgie's awareness of the dualities, the contradictions in life. But out of opposites Virgie is determined to create a larger entirety, a larger unity. Her symbolic acts serve as indicators of her intentions.

The three symbolic acts—sewing the dress, bathing in the river, and receiving the flower—prepare the reader for the most profound moments of the book, her visit to the graves of King MacLain's forebears and Miss Eckhart. While musing about Miss Eckhart, she realizes that she "had not, after all, hated her--had come nearer to loving her" (243). She also thinks about Miss Eckhart's painting of Perseus with the head of Medusa. Virgie believes that "cutting off the Medusa's head was the heroic act that made visible a horror in life, that was at once the horror in love, . . . the separateness" (243). Danielle Pitavy-Souques states that Perseus had been unable to accept the separateness of love (144). Instead, Perseus was so desperate to possess the Medusa that he killed her in order to have her, and by doing so, violated the very nature of love. Virgie,
however, is able to "absorb the hero and the victim," to "take Miss Eckhart's hate and then her love" and make all one (243). At the end of the novel, she sits under a tree with an old Negro woman who is a thief, understanding that she and the old woman are both "alone and together" as they sit there "listening to the world beating in their ears. They heard through falling rain the running of the horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon's crusty slither, and the glimmer and trumpet of the swan" (244).

Virgie's profound vision includes aspects of family that have not received comment. Her philosophical dualism implies she is both part of and not part of the families of origin and community that have struggled with and against her. She is leaving behind both a mother and a mother figure, a father and father figure, and has found relationships where none existed before.

Rebecca Mark argues that since Virgie has begun to forgive everyone, "even the community that has treated her so badly," she is in the process of becoming a full human being. Mark asserts that Welty in this book has created a "poetics based on community and confluence," and in such a world "everything is part of the vision" (252). Mark explains that in such a system, "the self is relational," and this means "forgiving everyone" (252). She points out that Virgie finds a "self of the whole world" (257).
In explaining the causes of Virgie's actions, we should look as much to the dualities inherent in relational connections to family and community as to the inner aspects of self. Ruth Weston points out that because the family in Welty's stories often acts to limit the individual, it is often seen as a wilderness (112). Virgie's early entanglement in the thicket of family and community magnifies her eventual triumph precisely because she had so much to clear away in order to find her way. It is in the relational realities that we find powerful determining dualities in Virgie's relationships—a weak father and the resulting search for a strong father, a mother who teaches the Southern lady model but is nicknamed "Katie Blazes," and a surrogate mother whose teachings preach of artistic control while she descends into madness. Hence, Virgie's own powerful vision at the end of the book is in part developed from the challenges the family systems present to her as she grows.

Looking backward to the first two protagonists—Abigail Howland and Rhoda Manning—we find a significant change. Although she remains with her mother to the end of her mother's life, Virgie is not as enmeshed or fused in her family system as the first two protagonists. Rather, she has begun her odyssey toward selfhood and fulfillment. Unlike Abigail, whom we left "huddled fetus-like," or Rhoda, last seen on her father's private airplane, Virgie incorporates the family and community models and begins to create an identity of her own.
End Notes

1. See Prenshaw, "Woman's World, Man's Place," 58-62; MacKethan, Ch.2; Peter Schmidt, pp. 58-79 and pp. 170-79; etc.

2. This idea of paired characters has been noted by Prenshaw in regard to the myth of the Southern lady. Prenshaw includes "among the more subtle evidences of the repudiated myth of the lady" the "frequent appearance of paired characters, a fictional device that allows for the contradictions within the role—that is, the willful coquette or the efficient manager of worldly affairs and the submissive, obedient innocent—to be realistically resolved" ("Southern Ladies and the Southern Literary Renaissance" 81).

3. Peter Schmidt points out, for example, "King and the book's other wanderers are associated with natural cycles, sexuality, disguise and metamorphosis, wandering, and occasionally madness, whereas the representatives of proper Morgana society—usually women—are linked with social restrictions, possessiveness, a repression of sexuality, and a provincial belief that Morgana is the center of the universe" (60).

   Schmidt also tells us that "As Thomas McHaney has shown, Perseus emerges as the most important quester figure in The Golden Apples; he was fathered when Zeus appeared to Danae in a "shower of gold" (63).

4. Michael Nichols argues, "We are inherently social; we are embedded in a matrix of relationships and groups" (29). Hence, our identity cannot be explained as if we developed without the essential presence and influence of those in the primary groups of family and community.

5. The central tenet of family theory is voiced by psychologist Michael P. Nichols who argues, "Family therapists believe that the dominant forces in personality development are located externally in current interactions in the family system" (Family Therapy 80).

6. By doing so, this book supports the notion that so many observers and citizens of the South have made. Prominent critic Louis D. Rubin certainly speaks for a rather large group when he says, "Perhaps nowhere is the influence of the community more prevalent than in the South" (Mockingbird 33).

7. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw maintains that, in fact, the greatest source of power in Welty's fiction is matriarchal power ("Woman's World, Man's Place," 60).
8. Critics have pointed out similarities between King and Virgie; see Louise Westling, p. 99, for example; among the most recent critics who argue that King is Virgie's biological father is Ruth Weston (114).

9. Katie’s relationship with MacLain, though only partially revealed, is plausible. Katie’s remark about the trysting tree where King and Snowdie met to make love in the woods to which Katie “could have streaked like an arrow to the very oak tree, one there to itself and all spready: a real shady place by day, is all I know” (4-5), indicates that she might have met King there secretly. Katie also regrets perhaps a little too deeply the fact that she missed seeing the retreating form of the startled King during his attempted Halloween visit. She says that maybe if she had thought to glance down the open hallway she could have seen him, but she declares, “I was a fool and didn’t look” (13). She also romantically pictures King out in the faraway, scenic state of California, “out where it’s gold and all that. Everybody to their own visioning” (10). Her repeated references to him as a “scoundrel” (9) and a “handsome devil” also suggest their relationship may not have been that innocent.

These possibilities also enable the reader to understand why Snowdie and Katie’s own friendship eventually cooled. Katie states that the reason that Snowdie did not want Katie to come over to her house or to bring her butter traced to that October day when King fled before Snowdie could talk to him. Hence, the suggestions, while delicate, are indelible.

10. See, for example, Pitavy-Souques on myth (146), Mark on “feminist intertextuality” (4). Still, the book’s richness is not exhausted by the insights presented heretofore. Certainly another of Welty’s fundamental subjects is the family, and the way she uses the idea of significant familial connections in this book will reveal other layers in this book.

11. Demmin and Curley argue, for example, that “at the end, Virgie is . . . casting herself in the heroic role of Perseus” (144).

12. One example will illustrate how this relationship was predominantly one-sided, with Eckhart offering most of the effort. Virgie was so talented that every time Virgie finished playing a solo, Miss Eckhart would say "Virgie Rainey danke schoen." She said this so often that the other school children teased Virgie by calling her "Virgie Rainey Danke Schoen" at school. Once after Miss Eckhart had said this to Virgie, Miss Eckhart's aged mother rolled into the room in her wheelchair and began shouting "Virgie Rainey danke schoen" at the top of her lungs (54). Miss Eckhart walked over to her mother and slapped her once; hence,
even her own mother's jealousy did not cause Miss Eckhart to stop caring for Virgie. Miss Eckhart thus shows her devotion to her star pupil.

13. Peter Schmidt, for example, argues that Virgie ignores all social conventions when it suits her, even rebelling against the conventions that "dictate that a secretary ought not to be also a farmgirl and that proper ladies have nothing to do with either" (175). Hence, this view of Virgie as somehow impervious to family and community influences emerges frequently in the pages of the critics.

14. Prenshaw's article (see endnote 1, above) on the Southern lady exposes another use of the paired characters, namely the "subtle" criticism of traits of the Southern lady. This idea serves my analysis as well in two ways: 1) in the repudiation or qualification of the role of Southern lady and belle, and 2) in the manner of the created difference, the two young ladies Cassie and Virgie act in ways similar to those of sisters, though they are unrelated.

15. Louise Westling asserts that the main force in this novel is the power of nature (99), and King MacLain is the primary natural force in the book. Only Virgie develops a power commensurate with MacLain.

16. According to Rebecca Mark in The Dragon's Blood, King "picks Virgie out" because he realizes that "she is his death; she is the fertility consort who will replace him. She is his equal" (252).

17. One fundamental difference between King and Virgie is demonstrated by Virgie's rejection of the possibility of marrying any of her suitors because to do so would mean that she is not "all to herself" but instead is reaching "backward to mere protection" (242). Welty says that King, on the other hand, "had butted like a goat against the wall [of others' private selves that] he wouldn't agree to himself or recognize" (233). Thus, King will not respect the private self of others; he always wants to be admitted into the inner realm. Demmin and Curley maintain that because he pursues this goal all of his life, he never sufficiently develops his own self (139). Thus, despite his extensive traveling and life of breaking the rules and testing the limits, King is in some fundamental sense a failed man. Virgie, on the contrary, accepts, develops, and protects her private self, and so she becomes a self-actualized human being.

18. Of course, in another sense, she is not only leaving but is being ostracized as well, a fact that corresponds to Virgie's vision of the essential dualities of good and evil, of love and hate, and of all else in life. Louise Westling argues that
Virgie does not become a fully developed human being because by the end of the novel Virgie is "an exile" (103). Westling points out that Virgie's community of Morgana does not really accept her. For instance, on the day of her mother's death Virgie wants to go into her own kitchen and help with the cooking, but the women of Morgana "prevent her" from being with them (212). Westling states that this rejection of Virgie shows that the women do not consider her to be one of them. On the same day Miss Perdita Mayo tells Virgie, "Your mama was too fine for you, Virgie, too fine. That was always the trouble between you" (213). In this statement Miss Mayo is complimenting Katie while blaming Virgie for their ambivalent relationship. The women also suspect that Virgie will spend her inheritance on "something 'sides the house," and they disapprove of her doing so (214). Similarly, they do not comprehend Virgie's refusal to see the prepared body, and they simply "pull and lift her to her feet" and push her in to see the body of her mother (213). Virgie does cry, but weeps not for her dead mother but "because they could not understand" her (214).

Patricia Meyers Spacks maintains that in Welty's world "the community is all, and to live alone is to live in horror" (157); her view accords with that of Westling, for Virgie is all alone. She has no living biological or spiritual family members, Katie, Fate, King, Miss Eckhart, and her brother Victor having died by this point in the book.
Elizabeth Spencer’s *The Voice at the Back Door*: 
Breaking the Silence of Prohibited Speech

“We couldn’t stay in the South and be free. 
In the South it’s nothing but family, family” (194).

In her 1956 novel *The Voice at the Back Door*, Elizabeth Spencer’s primary focus is the experience of a man “caught in a web of racial tensions and conflicting values in a small Southern town,” according to critic Peggy W. Prenshaw, (“Mermaids” 147). Elsewhere Prenshaw points out the source of the problem in this Southern town: “In *The Voice at the Back Door* Spencer shows that Ida, Ada, Brevard, and all the other inhabitants of Lacey are victims of a tradition harmful to soul and body. The split between public and private selves, between professing and feeling, leaves one spiritually homeless” (Spencer 54).

The marked separation of public and private spheres and the hard line drawn between feeling and saying suggest that specific topics and values are prohibited in Lacey, and these prohibited ideas, words, and feelings remain relegated to voices at the back door.

While a female character does not become Spencer’s central focus until her later novels, the experience of one central female character, Marcia Mae Hunt, is similar to that of the male characters in that she is also caught up in the tensions and conflicts of this small town. Also like the male characters, she
learns a great deal about life’s complexities, ambiguities, and difficulties. There are significant differences, however. For one, unlike Duncan Harper, the novel’s chief protagonist, her initial solution to the problems she faces is to leave town and her “liberal-thinking, but powerless mother, a domineering father [and the memory of] a homosexual brother whose death was virtually a suicide” (Prenshaw, Spencer 58). Another difference in her experience is that, for Marcia Mae Hunt, the family more than the community provides the context for the tensions that she experiences, although to separate the two spheres of existence is somewhat arbitrary, especially in such a small town where all of the social institutions exist in complex proximity. Terry Roberts, in Self and Community in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer (1994), describes this proximity: “[In Winfield County] even the slightest gesture causes public repercussions. . . . The characters all come to recognize the subtle and pervasive power of community” (1).

Notwithstanding the pervasive power of the community in Spencer’s novels, particularly in The Voice at the Back Door, the family structure also exhibits an unmistakable, persistent and powerful presence as well. Roberts himself observes that Marcia Mae more than any other character knows that family is one of the “weapons” of the Lacey, Mississippi, community (43). In fact, the complexities that Marcia Mae discovers can be located not so much in
the community as in the silenced points of view in or near the Hunt family system. The Hunt family not only prohibits topics but also contains secrets. Because “families with secrets come to operate as a single ego” (Imber-Black 21), Marcia Mae finds independence and selfhood difficult to develop and achieve. She achieves some success by resisting integration with her family system, but for years she remains unaware of the unresolved issues and deeper connections that draw her back to Lacey and her family. After her return, Marcia Mae gradually comes to hear and understand the several distinct voices at the back door, all of which present her with further contradictions to the life planned for her by her father and mother. As she gains new insights into her family and community, she uncovers points of view (those voices heard at the back door). This metaphor of voices at the back door is a fitting one for the Hunt family dynamics, dynamics which include volatile family secrets, prohibited speech both about the secrets and other topics, inflexible and limiting roles for male and female behavior, and multigenerational transmission of the problems that are created by the family system of the Hunts.

Given these realities, Marcia Mae’s return to Lacey and her family may be surprising until we recognize that Marcia Mae (unlike Welty’s female protagonist who leaves her family and community) feels compelled to return because she has not resolved issues that remain to be faced. Indeed, in Marcia Mae’s life “it is
nothing but family," a family that prohibits speech, contains toxic secrets, and requires the strict roles of behavior. For Marcia Mae, however, leaving the South provides no better answer than staying at home. Until she comes to understand what binds her to her family and community she can never make a break from the South, her family, or her culture. Her initial failure to do so is precisely the reason for her return.

The Hunt family system imitates a familiar Southern patriarchal pattern of values with its accompanying rigid gender roles, suppressed speech topics, and family secrets. In systems as static and inflexible as these, children tend to adopt distinct roles in the family because a high degree of fusion makes differentiation impossible (Bowen 351). In the Hunt family, each child demonstrates consistent, predictable, apparently distinct behaviors, while remaining deeply connected to the family system. In fact, Marcia Mae, Cissy, and Everett become defined by their roles in such a way as to render change impossible. That is, Marcia Mae, Cissy, and Everett play their parts as they are limited and defined by the family system.

Not surprisingly, Cissy, the younger sister, personifies all that a young stereotypical Southern lady should be. An ideal child, Cissy's primary goals are to be dutiful to her parents and happily successful in the community. Predictably however, not all of the Hunt children conform to the expectations of the system.²
Rather, the Hunts face the dilemma of two problem children—a homosexual son
and a rebellious daughter. Illustrating the powerful interconnectedness of the
family system is the fact that Marcia Mae’s own development toward
independence and selfhood depends greatly on the identity and the fate of her
homosexual brother Everett. These two reflect adaptations to the family
expectations the Hunt parents hold for them. Everett is the male who does not
demonstrate traditional male behavior, just as Marcia Mae is the young woman
whose behavior reflects her resistance to roles assigned to young Southern ladies.
The closeness shared by the family’s two reprobates is revealed when Marcia
Mae leaves Lacey after the death of Everett. Ultimately, as later changes reveal,
the secret of Everett’s homosexuality and the tragedy of his death become the
catalyst for change for Marcia Mae, providing impetus for the beginnings of her
search for selfhood.\(^3\)

The most essential forces in Marcia Mae’s life exist in the Hunt family, a
system which challenges her ingenuity. In her efforts to achieve a sense of self,
the resisting and questioning daughter contrives several strategies for freeing
herself from the strictures of this family system, all of them unsuccessful until her
return to Lacey.\(^4\) These attempts at self-definition include triangulation with Red
O’Donell by means of an early marriage to him that removes her from her family;
emotional cutoff by staying away, although her return suggests she never really
succeeds in becoming emotionally distinct; her return with vague intentions, confused, but returning to family nevertheless; the affair with her former fiancé, an attempt to reconnect with the past; and, once she returns, her various attempts to break communication patterns of the past by speaking with her father—despite her mother’s model of retaining prohibited speech patterns. In order to understand her family, she also has a last conversation with Duncan about her homosexual brother during which she realizes the extent of difference that separate her and Duncan. Their essential difference lies at the crux of the importance of family and community. From the outside, Marcia Mae sees the control and power that these institutions exert over the individual’s life whereas Duncan does not separate himself from the roles that family and community have him play. Marcia Mae, who believes that “everything is family, family, family,” ultimately decides she must leave to start her life over without the connections and influences of her family community, but this time she leaves with more resolve because the issues have been ultimately decided.

Marcia Mae’s first attempt to find her freedom involves her marriage to Red O’Donnell. In Lacey, ten years earlier, Marcia Mae Hunt O’Donnell, the elder daughter of “the best family in the town” of Lacey, Mississippi, bewilders everyone in Lacey when she suddenly abandons her family, her childhood sweetheart Duncan Harper, and the entire town of Lacey to “run off” with a
Marine from California. Every citizen agrees she "left the best man in the state of Mississippi" (182). Her parents and the rest of the community believe that her husband Red O'Donnell is a low-class Irishman "who must have been a lumberjack because "he was from the West" and "wore a plaid shirt" (35). Nevertheless, she marries him, becomes his widow when he jumps on a grenade to save his battalion during World War II, and then spends ten years working at "good jobs . . . only so long as they interested her," becoming "twice engaged" only to break off both engagements (185). This triangulation with O’Donnell involves the formation of a relationship with a third person to decrease tension and conflict in a relationship with another person.7 In Marcia Mae’s case, the conflict she is trying to escape involves family issues, particularly the tragic death of her brother.

Triangulation with Red O’Donnell, though more striking and unusual, is only one of her efforts to be rid of the inner turmoil she feels. A second technique, emotional cutoff, involves her staying away for ten years. What she does not know is that she has never left Lacey, Mississippi, emotionally. Despite her marriage to an outsider and living out of state for ten years, she is still fused to her family, her former fiancé, and the town of Lacey itself.8

Standing that day of her return in the town square, Marcia Mae finds herself wondering why she has "come back home," and looks at herself in her
antique sterling silver dresser mirror to find out the answer (41). Yet all she sees are “a woman’s eyes” which “told nothing, not even to herself... [she] felt like crying” (41). Family psychologists like Ackerman point out that when strategies of emotional cutoff and insulation do not work, people (in Marcia Mae’s situation) often instinctively try other strategies to get free of enmeshment and fusion with the family.⁹

As Marcia Mae discovers, the problem traces back to the years during which she was trying to make the transition to adulthood, years when the family rules and social roles receive their most intense scrutiny. The kind of roles that were expected of her were of the traditional Southern belle-to-lady sort, and her mother Nan Standsbury Hunt is the primary teacher. Mrs. Hunt is so “admirably controlled and considerate to the limits of her subtlety [that] she never mentions her daughter’s shortcomings... to her face; in fact, she believes that Marcia Mae did not know what she thought of her” (40). Thus, her mother prohibits any honest speech between them. What she thinks about her daughter, she never actually says to her. One cause of the silence may be traced to Mrs. Hunt’s love of the qualities of the Southern lady. Certainly the lineage of Nan Standsbury Hunt indicates she is a Southern aristocrat. Her father, old Judge Standsbury, had been one of Lacey’s wealthiest and most respected citizens, and her mother, still goes to Memphis to buy the “most beautiful, expensive hats” in town (43).
Marcia Mae does indeed think of her mother as a Southern lady. From belle to lady, Nan Standsbury had devoted herself to being a proper Southern woman. In her youth, Nan had been just enough of a flirt and coquette to attract the appropriate husband-to-be, and after marriage she had given up the coyness to devote herself to having children and decorating her home and gardens. Marcia Mae senses somehow that “long ago she (her mother) . . . had been a Southern belle,” and Marcia Mae wisely guesses “that meant that exactly to the extent of her own attractiveness she was her mother’s enemy” (40). Hence, Marcia Mae knows that because Southern belles value both beauty and using their beauty to attract wealthy men to them, her mother as a former Southern belle would have to be jealous of her own daughter’s beauty and attractiveness to wealthy men. Indeed, this is precisely the situation between Marcia Mae and her mother. Marcia Mae with her full thick blonde hair and ankles “that shot down as straight and trim as a blade” is considered a “stunning woman” (178). Nan, on the other hand, is regarded a “mature woman” (43). The rivalry and competition between mother and daughter are by no means rancorous or hostile, however, because no one talks about them.

The prohibited speech patterns the family possesses and the rivalry between women that the cultural roles require both foretell the difficulty that Nan Hunt will have communicating her feelings openly to her daughter. The roles
are so entrenched in Nan Hunt that, as a matter of fact, she secretly believes she has “failed Marcia Mae by not finding some way to impart a knowledge she herself obviously had possessed in quantity, as witness the darling dazzling time she had had as a girl” (40). The great knowledge to which Mrs. Hunt is referring concerns her own “knowledge of men” (40). She thinks “that her daughter had had an unhappy time of it” because she has been unable to tell Marcia Mae about men and marriage. Secretly Mrs. Hunt feels guilty about Marcia Mae’s sudden elopement with Red O’Donnell and her jilting Duncan Harper; however, her patterns of prohibited speech prevent her from ever conveying her beliefs to her first-born daughter.

Under such a set of inflexible rules, it is not surprising that in this family “it became accepted that nobody could do anything with Marcia Mae” (117). In fact, Marcia Mae grows up with almost none of the traits of a Southern belle or lady. Rather she is “a messy little girl, fidgety, full of reactions to everything, sometimes three or four at once” (38). Additionally, all of her pastimes as a little girl are those which would have been much more appropriate for a “little boy.” That is, “she climbs trees, had to have a pony, and went fishing with Negroes” (38). Once, too, “greedy, she had climbed to the top of the scuppernong arbor and taken grapes right out of the sun, until, reaching too far, she had tipped over and fell through, flat on her stomach” (38). Another time little Marcia Mae,
“always into things,” runs through the woods barefoot—despite her mother’s admonition against going shoeless—and gets a large thorn in her foot (37). Such activities are so far away from being those of a Southern lady that Nan sternly rejects her young daughter’s ways, yet Nan’s own rule against discussing such unladylike, unseemly behavior helps to cause this situation and the resulting distant relationship between her and her daughter.

Marcia Mae’s response to her family system is counter-conformity, the tendency to resist the expectations. Hence, she grows up “game,... curious, and not ashamed of curiosity . . . and in her curiosity, ageless: little girl, woman, old woman, with . . . bright interested undemanding eyes that missed nothing” (62). In fact, her life provides a pattern of qualities opposite those expected of her at home. She is uncalculating and spontaneous; she does not use her beauty for advancement; and she refuses to limit herself to plans of housecare, childrearing, and gardening.

Thus, the mother futilely attempts to establish the boundaries for her daughter’s behavior and the rules by which her life should be governed, rules which Nan herself lived by. Significantly, as an unmarried Southern belle, Nan had evaluated and judged Jason Hunt in exactly the same way she evaluates Duncan Harper. True to her Southern belle pattern, in her own youth Nan Standsbury selected “a man who would amount to something, to say nothing of
how wisely she had weighed her assets when she had made her choice” (40).

That is, Nan “had judged to the dot how much her Standsbury family name
would mean to Jason, and how much beauty and charm would have to be added”
(40). Nan gets her man, and after their marriage, Jason validates her judgment by
getting involved in a plethora of different businesses and earning a large amount
of money to add to the already substantial Standsbury wealth. Cissy, too, just as
her mother before her, wants her beau Kerney Woolbright to be “important,”
because “then [she will have] to be important too” (222).

Thus Nan as a young woman had conformed to the roles of Southern belle
and lady, yet despite playing by the rules and passing them on to her daughters,
happiness had not followed. For example, soon after her marriage Nan learns
that Jason and the other “men never told her anything” (45), so she finds herself
excluded from Jason’s discussions of business and politics. Rather, Jason
expects his wife to be interested only in the lawn. So the lawn and gardens
become Nan’s realm, the province and territory which she may control. She does
not have to work herself; rather, a Negro boy named George is assigned to Nan’s
direction by Jason. Nan is distressed by his laziness, however, and gradually Nan
comes to think the lawn took a “terrible amount of labor,” and she complains
about it so much that “nobody heard her anymore” (179). As a matter of fact,
Jason “had a way of forgetting” that both Nan and her own mother, old
Mrs. Tennie Standsbury who has come to live with them after the death of old Judge Standsbury, listen to the men’s conversations, or if they listen, that they “had opinions of [their] own” (44). Jason’s patriarchal treatment of Nan, as well as her own growing, nagging suspicion that “she had married beneath her,” cause Nan to develop “fierce headaches” and migraines later in life (48). In actuality, the lack of independence and differentiation involved in being a devoted Southern lady are likelier the root causes of Nan’s health problems.

Nevertheless, the resilience and consistency of the family system are demonstrated when the second daughter is born. The second time, the family has more success. Two girls face the same rules—the first resists them, and the second adopts them almost without question. The model child, Marjorie Angeline “Cissy” Hunt, pleases her mother and father in many ways. Jason Hunt compares his two daughters when he comments, “Cissy had played the family role where Marcia Mae had not deigned” (212). That is, Cissy absorbs the teachings of her upper-class family, and thus becomes a Southern belle while Marcia Mae, despite her superior gifts and talents, steadily fails to please the family. For instance, the blonde-haired Marcia Mae has great beauty, a quality which is extremely important to a Southern belle, while “Cissy, if she lived to be a hundred, would never have an inch of flesh that would hold a candle to Marcia Mae” (178). Yet Cissy, despite her “ankles [being] too round and thighs
shapeless where the little-girl fat had not cleared away,” constantly works on her looks; she keeps “her hair as glossy as a blooded chestnut’s coat,” and she paints her fingernails, activities appropriate for a young Southern belle. She also keeps Kerney Woolbright “guessing as every Southern family advises” (212), as her father Jason Hunt notes with joy. That is, Cissy listens to her mother’s advice not to have pre-marital sex because if one engages in it, then the man “wouldn’t want it anymore” (178). Little Cissy also, like a proper Southern belle, knows how to flirt. In particular, she knows that all she “was supposed to do [is] talk baby talk” to Kerney (222). She also understands that she is to prattle on about unimportant subjects while occasionally slipping “her hand through his arm” and giving him an occasional kiss, and although “she could go on like [that] for hours, without even thinking about it,” privately Cissy “thought it was disgusting” (49). Yet Cissy herself rarely verbalizes her true opinions, although she, too, feels displeasure with some of the rules for being a Southern belle. For example, when Kerney once tells her, “Little girls shouldn’t bother their pretty heads with nasty old politics” (285), and again, when he explains his political speeches to her before he delivers them so that she can “look intelligent” at the appropriate moments (285), Cissy complains, “You’re treating me the way Daddy treats Mother. He never tells her anything” (222). Cissy knows that a multigenerational pattern is being created, but she does not have enough power to
insist that Kerney change, and Cissy herself does not rebel enough to stop being
the Southern belle that Mrs. Tennie, Nan, and Jason have molded. Because of
her general acceptance of the rules and the prohibited speech, Cissy helps to
perpetuate and keep alive the behavior patterns of the Southern belle.

The family rules have affected Cissy’s social life as well, influencing her
decisions and actions. When Cissy tells Marcia Mae why she does not respect
Tinker Taylor Harper, Marcie Mae herself is astonished at how much like
“Grandmother” her sister Cissy is (177). Cissy believes that Tinker “ought to be
ashamed” of how she acts when Jimmy Tallant is shot (177). Tinker, who is
married to Duncan Harper, “cried right in front of everybody and had sat all
night in the hospital” with Jimmy, who is married to Belle Grantham (177).
Cissy likens such “carrying on over another woman’s husband” to being “like
crying out loud at a funeral, or saying you’re constipated,” activities disapproved
of by old Mrs. Standsbury and Nan (177). Marcia Mae does not know it, but her
sister Cissy also knows about and disapproves of Marcia Mae’s torrid, secret
affair with Duncan Harper. She bases her objection to it not on Duncan’s
adultery nor on Marcia Mae’s immorality. Rather, as a calculating, ever practical
Southern belle, Cissy merely thinks Marcia Mae is “crazy” to have the affair
because “there was no future in it” (147).
The preceding analysis points to distinguishing and recurring features of the Hunt family—the intransigent persistence of the rules by which the Hunt family lives and the complementarity of the two daughters in the Hunt family. That is, each of the lives of the two daughters reflects some reaction to the family rules set down by Jason and Nan Hunt. As each one moves out into the social world of Lacey, there are opportunities to rebel or conform to the teachings of the family system. As we have seen, Cissy’s life takes on a predictable pattern of conformity, though she privately experiences some disappointment and regret with the results of her decisions. Marcia Mae, on the other hand, determines her identity by resisting the roles assigned her.¹¹

The application of the Hunt family’s rules upon Marcia Mae is not without some success, however. She is sufficiently formed by them to win the approval of Duncan Harper’s mother, who approves of the match. She cannot wait for her only child to grow up and marry into the wealthy, important Hunt family, and the feelings are laudable from one viewpoint, for Mrs. Harper has been a longtime Lacey resident. She knows Nan Hunt has been Nan Standsbury, daughter of old Judge Standsbury. Thus, their wealth and position have been handed down generationally to Marcia Mae’s mother. Duncan’s mother regards that kind of status and prestige as worthy to be looked up to. Although she refuses to admit it, “she loved being in with the Standsbury family,” and despite the other
problems with their family systems, both Duncan and Marcia Mae know the advantages of this kind of alliance. The rest of the town of Lacey also respects Marcia Mae’s lineage, just as Duncan’s mother does. So, Duncan and Marcia Mae, along with Duncan’s friend Jimmy Tallant and his girlfriend Louise Taylor, go everywhere together and do everything and are generally considered to be “the main ones. Things [among the young people in Lacey] did not happen” without these four.

At many other times, Marcia Mae’s desire to break the patterns established in the family emerges. In her choice of friends, this reaction emerges early. One of the group of four friends mentioned above, Louise (Tinker) Taylor, is an unlikely companion for Marcia Mae from the perspective of Marcia Mae’s parents and the larger community. Yet Marcia Mae is enough of a rebel to give her a degree of acceptance although Tinker is considered a “nobody” because she is the daughter of old Gains Taylor and Emmie Taylor (72). Gains was “filthy poor,” and Louise’s mother leaves him during this time. Later, Gains remarries and strikes it rich in the oil fields. However, his newfound wealth does not mean that his daughter’s status in Lacey improves. Rather, the upper class of Lacey continues to see Louise as one of the “poor girls,” in part because Gains does not have a close relationship with his daughter and thus sends no money to his child or his ex-wife. Also, finally obtaining money does not mean that Gains has
acquired "taste." In fact, it is well-known by the upper class people of Lacey that Gains and his second wife lived in south Mississippi in the most expensive pigsty in the world. They had a swimming pool and several long cars and a station wagon with the name of the estate written on the door. They gave drinking parties and so did all their friends. When they were all together, they told dirty stories, and when they separated the men talked oil production and cursed the Fair Deal and the income tax, while the women gossiped. (66)

Thus, the Taylors represent the essence of what Lacey's wealthiest citizens refer to as the "nouveau riche."

Little Louise and her mother, on the other hand, are hardly considered to have any better taste. Certainly they do not have the taste that Marcia Mae—who came from multigenerational family of Southern ladies—has acquired. One day Louise wears to school a navy wool suit with big pearl buttons the size of moons, and the children at school, especially Marcia Mae Hunt, laugh at her "costume" (207). A proper little Southern lady would never have worn such an outfit, and Marcia Mae as the daughter of "the best family in town" leads the laughter. Louise runs away in humiliation. Years later when Louise and Marcia Mae are both thirty years old, Marcia Mae cannot help getting a "satisfying" feeling at the sight of Louise dressed in "too carefully matched navy and white, even to navy and white pumps" (289). Louise can never become, given her background, a Southern lady, and people like Marcia Mae Hunt, who have been raised to
become one but who also fail in some ways, still fault her for being from a different class. Even at thirty Marcia Mae cannot reject all of her Southern belle upbringing.

Unlike Marcia Mae, there are other people in Lacey who do not hold Louise’s background against her. For instance, Kerney Woolbright, a twenty-five-year-old lawyer who has secured a political position as a United States representative and who plans to run for the Senate, regards Tinker as being natural, spontaneous, unpretentious, and sincere. Although everyone in the county knows he dates Cissy Hunt, Marcia’s younger sister, and will probably ask Cissy to marry him eventually, even Cissy knows Kerney likes Louise Taylor better than he likes Cissy herself. As Kerney flatly tells Cissy once, Louise “felt uncomfortable in stockings and heels . . . she’s the original woman. All the rest of you are playing paper dolls” (147).12

The vortex of forces that form the Hunt family system thus comprise the rules and expectations established by the parents, the responses of the various Hunt children to the system, and all of the reverberations of these dynamics in the Lacey community. All of these forces contribute to Marcia Mae’s alienation. For many years, she stays away, thinking that time will heal her confusion, questions, and hurt. When she returns, she is answering a deeper pull than she knows. Only her strength helps her to face her past, both her family and the one
she had abandoned. In her attempts to face her past and answer all the questions, she begins to move beyond the limits established by her family and her initial responses. Hers is not a startlingly rapid growth, for only "little by little, only as much each time they met as her pride would allow," does Marcia Mae become aware of the reason she is seeing Duncan Harper and then begin to realize why she has returned to Lacey after her ten-year absence. The emotional cutoff strategy that she has used has not worked, so "slowly, she brought herself to admit that this was why she had come home, to tell him everything" (181).

Marcia Mae has been keeping many secrets, from her family, from Duncan, and from herself, and her denial and avoidance have brought her misery. Finally she confesses to Duncan that "behind the high proud look she had whenever Red O'Donnell was mentioned, lived the memory of a marriage that had not been a raging success" (181). For all those years she has also been keeping it a secret that she has not loved Red O'Donnell and that the brief marriage had been troubled; publicly she has lied to Duncan and everyone else about why she jilts Duncan. In reality, Red had been bored by and hated the routine of marriage, had gone to parties, drank too much, already had an ex-wife to whom he owed alimony, and probably had affairs. The Marine Corps ships him overseas, however, only a few months after their marriage, and soon afterwards he dies heroically in World War II. Emotionally, Marcia Mae still
cannot stop lying about her husband, and she continues to practice avoidance and emotional cutoff. For ten years she is haunted by thoughts of Duncan Harper and Lacey, Mississippi, until one day she finds herself back in the town square. She has not planned to have an affair with her ex-fiancé Duncan either, and when he asks her one afternoon “Why did you leave me?” it is only then that she suddenly realizes “that impossible as it seemed, she would have to try to answer him” (189).

When Marcia Mae begins to discuss matters with Duncan, she makes understanding possible, for it is with Duncan Harper that the woman she has become in resistance to her family system gets affirmed and examined. With Duncan Harper, both in her youth and years later as an adult, her identity is tested. When they begin to explore the ramifications of his sudden question, they begin to explore the sources of Marcia Mae’s anxiety. It is not a smooth process, however, as her first response is to accuse Duncan of prohibiting speech about her older brother Everett’s death. Marcia Mae declares, “It’s better Everett died. Nobody would come out and say so... You wouldn’t say so either” (190). Even then, after ten years, Duncan “winced” and replied, “If everybody does know things like that, what’s the good of saying them? It seems kinder not to” (190). Marcia Mae, on the other hand, cannot become a self-aware, independent person without being open. Marcia Mae also tells Duncan, “I saw with my own eyes
how glad Daddy was when Everett died. Mother felt it, and all the love she’d had for Everett, the weak one, her only son, turned into hate for Jason. She was left living with the man who’d killed him” (190).

Although Duncan disagrees with her statement about her father’s killing her brother, Marcia Mae insists that the truth remains that both of her parents have killed Everett. Her persistence suggests that the pattern of prohibited speech which surrounds the event finally must change. She explains that the problems with Everett began when Jason Hunt, following a traditional Southern male pattern, forced Everett to go deer hunting with him. Everett had accidentally killed a deer and Jason, “keeping a death grip on Everett to keep him from running away,” had “bathed Everett’s face in the blood” of the deer as a part of the ancient hunter’s ritual. At the time, Jason does not foresee that Everett would vomit, bringing on the laughter of friends. He feels humiliated by his son’s weakness, and as a Southern patriarch, he cannot stand to be belittled in front of his wealthy companions. The hunting accident makes Everett so sick that he must stay in bed for a couple of weeks. One day while he is recuperating in bed, Everett makes little Cissy a Turkish doll, complete with a fez. Marcia Mae remembers that when Jason reached out to look at the doll his son had made, her mother Nan had said in an icy voice, “Don’t you touch it” (192). Marcia Mae recalls, “I felt sorry for all of them, but I didn’t understand” (192). The teenage
Marcia Mae at this point in her life is too enmeshed with and fused to her family to understand the significance of the incident. Yet she can never erase the image impressed upon her nineteen-year-old mind, and she feels she can never discuss it with anyone. The family rules of the Hunts prohibit any type of openness about such an incident. Only years later does Marcia Mae understand how much her mother blamed her father and had grown to hate Jason Hunt—although the couple never seem on the surface to show rancor toward one another.

Another example of the result of prohibited speech and secrets is Marcia Mae’s ignorance of her brother’s homosexuality. She recounts to Duncan, “Everett used to ride around in the car with [you and me] at night. I thought he [just] enjoyed that. We’d make him quote us poetry” (192). Years later as an adult Marcia Mae realizes that Everett had just not wanted “to leave us alone because he didn’t want us to make love. He was in love with you, Duncan. Now don’t deny you knew it” (192). Marcia Mae, in fact, has rightly guessed that Everett had gone to Duncan’s house and declared his love to Duncan, only to be rebuffed by Duncan, of course, one night in June. This rejection causes Everett to again take to bed, so sick with worry and grief that he weakens, until he ultimately dies. Duncan confirms, “I never told that to a soul, Marcia Mae, not even you” (193). Duncan is still rather proud of keeping Everett’s homosexuality a secret; he still does not understand that keeping all the secrets and all of the

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topics about which speech is prohibited has caused Marcia Mae to run away from her problems for ten years and, despite her emotional cutoff and withdrawal, to render her incapable of differentiating herself from Duncan Harper and Lacey, Mississippi. She is still as much tied to them both as she had been as a twenty-year-old.

Then as a young woman the only solution Marcia Mae knows is to try to withdraw; immediately after Everett’s death she begins to try to convince Duncan to escape with her. She sits on the lawn of her parents’ mansion one hot day, noticing how lovely the lawn and house are, and thinks, “With all this horror in people, how can things look so beautiful?” (193-94). Then she “saw them both, both together, the beauty and the horror, like one gorgeous rotten fruit. That was when I knew we’d have to leave” (194). Duncan remembers that a nearly tearful Marcia Mae rushed in and said she is “sick of everybody agreeing to cover up the plain truth by being nice to one another,” but he thinks she is “just upset over Everett” (193, 195). He also thinks she is crazy because she wants Duncan to sell the grocery store he inherits and take one of the faraway coaching jobs he is offered (194).

Marcia Mae tells Duncan that she has waited “all summer” for Duncan to listen to her. “I wanted, passionately, for you to understand. If I could have showed you once why we had to get away, that they were turning our love into a
complicated family thing, that they had killed Everett, and oh, you kept going to talk business with Daddy and . . . you didn’t, couldn’t, wouldn’t understand!” (197). Marcia Mae also points out that “Daddy kept right on calling you in to talk business” while Duncan “had let them put the wedding off three months” (196).

Even at twenty Marcia Mae senses that the Hunt family prohibits honest communication not only within the family but also exerts pressure to control Duncan as well. This insight leads, however, to insignificant results. Back then Duncan, in fact, maintains they “couldn’t hurt the family,” that they “ought to help” the Hunt family (196). Marcia Mae’s response is to get away from the perceived source of the problems. The crucial break between Duncan and Marcia Mae arrives one summer day when her mother Nan demands “for the fourth time” that Marcia Mae go pick up the mail because she enjoys reading the sympathy cards about Everett’s death, yet it is not proper for her to go out in public. When her father tells her to do as her mother says, she grabs Duncan’s hand and demands they elope immediately. Instead, in irritation Duncan replies, “I’m pretty damn sick of your carrying on this way . . . You might as well realize that I’m not going one step anywhere, and you aren’t either” (199).

After Duncan refuses to elope with her, Marcia Mae still “didn’t have any idea” that she would leave Duncan when later that day she boards a bus to Stark,
Mississippi, and accidentally meets the Marine Red O’Donnell. “He might have been a creature from Mars. He had no consciousness of families, small towns, roots, ties, or any sort of custom,” Marcia Mae recalls about her husband. She realizes that since he was a Yankee, he will never understand what has caused her to leave her fiancé, her family, and Lacey, Mississippi, and, in fact, it is his very lack of familiarity with her situation which attracts her to him in the first place. She thinks of Red O’Donnell, “At least he’s free . . . I wish I were free like that . . . I love him” (199). Not long after their wedding, Marcia Mae discovers that he is an irresponsible spendthrift whom she also suspects of committing adultery; however, no one back in Lacey, Mississippi, ever knows the truth because Marcia Mae hides it all by being secretive and by lying—habits which she has learned growing up within her own family, and, to a certain extent, with Duncan.

Years later, even having the secret affair with Duncan comes to distress Marcia Mae.13 In Lacey she hates the lies, secrets, and prohibited speech patterns of her family and the other citizens of the town. As she says to Duncan of their trysts, “I cannot bear this sneaking and hiding and deceiving” (202). As she explains,

I don’t actually feel guilty myself. I feel that other people are trying make me say I’m wrong whether I think so or not. I’ve always hated that about Lacey. They all know how right they are. Anybody who disagrees is wrong. Why shouldn’t I see you? . . . If
Marcia Mae believes that any form of difference or individuality will not be tolerated, and so again, as she has years earlier, asks Duncan to run away with her. “I never thought we could be happy staying here,” she still insists (187). “We couldn’t stay in the South and be free. In the South, it’s nothing but family, family,” she emphasizes (194).

It is this moment that reveals the power of the family systems in this region, for this level of society. The Hunt family creates bonds that tie up the individuality of its members who learn to compromise for the security of belonging to family and community, or else they face the difficult task of extricating themselves from the connections. This moment is Marcia Mae’s moment of success and independence; for this insight, she has returned to Lacey, Mississippi.

Duncan Harper, however, “did not believe that the Hunts were worse than anybody else, or that you escaped from anything when you left Lacey and the South” (202). He does not agree with Marcia Mae that there is “evil . . . in her family and in the whole South” (202). In fact, after Marcia Mae has told him why she jilted him ten years before, he realizes that above all, “Duncan Harper was a citizen of Lacey. It was his strongest and final quality” (205). For the first
time, Duncan is able to admit to himself, "I always hated football... I never wanted to play" (303). He has played only to help the high school football coach to win games and then, after becoming a sensation, only because it makes his town of Lacey proud to have such a star in their midst. Moreover, he also sees that he has not really wanted to be the acting sheriff of Lacey; he has accepted that position only because he believes he can help Lacey become a part of the New South. Duncan’s deepest desire is “to be a groceryman like [his] Daddy” (303). However, he sees that his beloved hometown clings to old, out-dated Southern practices like racism and bootlegging. Duncan agrees to be the acting sheriff and to run for sheriff in the upcoming August election only because he sincerely wants to serve his hometown. Once he becomes the sheriff, he tries to shut down his old friend Jimmy Tallant, the biggest bootlegger in town. Of course, the 1950s version of Lacey, Mississippi, violently dislikes his equal treatment of the African-Americans.

Duncan becomes so unpopular that Marcia Mae is worried his life is in danger. Yet Duncan refuses to run away with Marcia Mae, and he even decides to break off their affair. He returns to his wife Tinker, their two children, and his duties as sheriff. However, during this time someone shoots Jimmy Tallant, and the townspeople assume it was an African-American named Beckwith Dozer. Although Jimmy Tallant swears Dozer is innocent, the townspeople believe that
Duncan is just “too liberal” to arrest an African-American. In spite of Duncan’s love of Lacey, Lacey hates Duncan so much that Duncan’s own friend Kerney Woolbright, who is running for U.S. Senator, is afraid of being seen with Duncan. Therefore, during one of his speeches, Kerney announces, “I . . . hereby publicly disassociate my candidacy from the candidacy of Duncan Harper . . . . [He] will not receive my vote” (301).

After his statement, Marcia Mae refuses to let Kerney ride home with Cissy and her in the Hunts’ car because he has “just stabbed his best friend in the back publicly” (307). Cissy, on the other hand, responds as a true Southern belle should: “Not let him ride home because of something he said in a speech? That’s the silliest thing I ever heard of” (307).

At this point, Marcia Mae again has to choose, between her values or her sister’s, and she decides to “fling the door shut almost on his finger” (307). She rejects her Southern belle sister’s shallow beliefs and returns home to find no one else there upset about Kerney’s betrayal either. Her father, in fact, thinks of Kerney as a son, and he admires Kerney’s ability to do what he had to do to get elected. Although he originally had liked Duncan years before when Marcia Mae had been engaged to him, he gradually comes to believe that Duncan will not be a suitable son-in-law. After his marriage to Tinker and career as a groceryman, Jason Hunt says of Duncan, “He’s never amounted to much” (45). Eventually
Jason realizes which fatal flaw Duncan possesses; “He had no more sense of
greed than a child had lust,” and a strong Southern patriarch like Jason Hunt
believes greed is “proof of manly thinking” (212). To Jason it appears that
Duncan, with his selfless beliefs in eradicating prejudice and his selfless love of
Lacey, acts like he thinks he is “Jesus Christ” (53). Consequently, Jason Hunt
grows to dislike Duncan more as the years go by. Jason also never understands
how Duncan Harper allows such a wealthy, beautiful young woman as his own
daughter Marcia Mae to slip through his fingers into those of a low-class Marine
like Red O’Donnell. Jason himself originates, like Duncan, from a family of
modest means. Indeed, as a child Jason Hunt had been even poorer than Duncan
Harper had been as a boy; at times he had been too poor to have shoes. Yet
unlike Duncan, he is fanatical about marrying a wealthy Standsbury, and he
courts and wins Nan Standsbury (204). After his marriage, he sets about owning
or controlling as many businesses in Winfield County as he can, although he still
regrets that he has no time to go to college earn a law degree (217-18). Having
the values of a patriarch thus helps Jason Hunt increase the Standsbury wealth he
has married into. Another belief held by patriarchs like Jason is that men should
know how to make alliances and build power bases; Duncan disappoints him
here, too, by refusing to drop by for advice; instead, he rarely visits, makes his
own decisions and acts independently.
When Marcia Mae recounts to her father how Kerney has betrayed Duncan, Jason immediately blames Duncan for getting himself into the situation and faults Duncan for his unwillingness to forge alliances with other powerful men. Marcia Mae retorts, “You mean if Duncan had come to you for orders. If he had taken lessons in how to be a hypocrite” (319). Marcia Mae thus begins to criticize her father openly. She is adamant about ending the prohibited speech patterns which have prevented the two from communicating at all. Jason, in fact, remembers that Marcia Mae still continued to “shove the ping pong table against the wall and play that way alone by the hour” (312). In his more honest moments, Jason admits to himself, “It was strange how his family, all within the same walls, had had a tendency to withdraw” (211).

Despite Marcia Mae’s honesty with Jason, Jason fails to understand her criticisms and in fact fails to change his patriarchal behavior. When Marcia Mae insists on going to warn Duncan that the citizens of Lacey feel murderous towards him because of his lack of prejudice toward African-Americans and because of Duncan’s seeming “protection” of Beckwith Dozer, her father forbids her to go. Marcia Mae, however, rebels. She does what she believes is right, and in the process, she becomes more of an individual.

Once she arrives at the town square, she discovers that Jason Hunt has followed her. She also for the first time in her life understands why all of those
years while she was growing up that her father had admonished her, “Don’t go
too far from town. . . Don’t go down on the tennis court by yourself, not in the
afternoon . . Be careful. . . Be sure there’s a man along” (322). Lacey,
Mississippi, can be a violent, dangerous place, and she finally understands that
her father, despite his distance from and lack of communication with her, has
been trying to protect her from physical harm. For the first time, she understands
that in his own aloof way he has felt he is showing his love for her simply by
protecting her from violence during all those years she was growing up.
Nevertheless, when Jason sends word by a local countryman that she should
come home with him immediately, Marcia Mae refuses. Yet, “even on this one
word, her voice shook,” and she has to say “no” over again (322). That is,
Marcia Mae understands that on one level her father loves her and cares about
her, but she cannot agree with him on almost any single issue, including that of
letting Duncan Harper blindly walk into the agitated crowd. Her new
understanding causes her to realize, “She would soon be going away. She would
take off the house and the town and the people there, like taking off clothes, one
things at a time, before dressing new from the skin out—a new place to live, a
new job, and somewhere, a new man” (318).

Marcia Mae thus rejects Duncan as much as he rejects her. She has
admitted to herself that, “If I had stuck by Duncan, . . . I would be a Lacey
housewife, putting muffins in a hot stove this minute” (312). Finally, she has realized that Duncan is “bucolic,” “so damn family-group,” that he wants only “little curly-haired cherubs, his little homegrown wife,” and to be “tied down” to Lacey (287). It does not bother Duncan that “in a small town, in a society whose supreme interest is people, the past exists physically” (289). Indeed, Duncan wants to be tied to his family, his past family, and his society, and he wants to change those aspects about them which he dislikes. Marcia Mae, on the other hand, does not believe that a family or society so fused can change. She wants simply to leave and wants Duncan to leave Lacey and “start from nothing but” themselves, “clean,” but he has refused (194). He has even laughed at the thirty-year-old Marcia Mae for saying, “I wish . . . that I was anybody’s secretary in some big city . . . . Then I would be happy” (122). He does not understand then, anymore than he had ten years before, that Marcia Mae is simply trying to escape—and to get him to escape—being enmeshed and entrapped in Lacey. She never likes being controlled by the townspeople anymore than she likes being controlled by her father and mother; she recalls how the ladies in Lacey called her mother to tell her when she impulsively took the bus to Stark and attended the Marine Corps dance alone and met some strange soldier (199). “Marcia Mae reflected . . . practically everybody in Lacey felt constrained around her for one reason or another” (289). They never discover what to make of the strong-willed
blonde older Hunt girl, and Marcia Mae resolves that, as soon as she helps
Duncan this one last time, she will leave him, her family, and Lacey forever.
Only then, she thinks, can she gain her freedom; only then can she be an
individual.

Once Marcia Mae is among the crowd members, however, she senses they
plan to kill Duncan, and so she speeds to warn him. As Duncan sees her driving
wildly toward him, he immediately understands her purpose and feels
"extraordinary pride in her . . . nerve" (338). At that moment his tire blows out,
and he is killed. Later it is discovered that his tire had probably been slit.

Kemey Woolbright also discovers, immediately after his public
denunciation of Duncan, that Duncan had been right not to arrest the African-
American Beckwith Dozer for Jimmy Tallant's attempted murder. Kemey opens
a telegram addressed to Duncan which arrives just after his betrayal. The
message indicates that a fellow bootlegger has shot Jimmy; Duncan Harper thus
has been correct to believe in the African-American’s innocence (309). Kemey
wants no one to know that he has read the telegram; Cissy, however, has seen
him do it. He tries to make her promise to keep it a secret, yet everyone knows
Cissy "told everything she knew to everybody she knew" and cannot keep a
secret--although she denies she has divulged confidences (221). Moreover, Cissy
immediately tells Kerney she will have to ask her father for permission to keep
the telegram a secret (309). Like a good dependent daughter she asks the patriarch who controls her. Kerney, however, insists that she keep the secret, and he practically forces her to make love with him. Cissy's reaction to her first sexual experience is that of the stereotypical Southern belle that Spencer has shown her to be: she is not upset that "her pretty cotton eyelet underthings" have been torn and "dragged away," for "this was why they were so pretty" (310). Southern belles know that they keep themselves beautiful and well-dressed in order to attract "a man who would amount to something, and it appeared that Kerney would be elected Senator" (40). Cissy also "discovered she had been absolutely right in thinking how boring most things were" (310). Faithful to the idea that women were angelic rather than sensual creatures, Cissy never enjoys sex.

Also like a well-trained belle, Cissy announces to her family on the same afternoon that she loses her virginity to Kerney that they are getting married (313). Kerney has calculated that premarital sex would cause Cissy to want to marry him as soon as possible and end the flirting. Assuming that a Southern belle like Cissy will not want to have or let anyone else know she was having premarital sex, he is able to control her without her knowing it.

What he does not know is that Cissy, despite her promise to keep the telegram a secret, will tell her family about it. Kerney incorrectly assumes that
after having sex and becoming engaged to him, Cissy will be more loyal to him. However, Cissy is a multigenerational Southern belle, and as such her loyalty to her patriarchal father and her family of origin is intense. Cissy has told everyone in her family except the aged Mrs. Tennie Standsbury, and Marcia Mae—who is about to leave Lacey—cannot resist telling Kerney. All of her life she has tried to escape the fusion that existed in the Hunt family, and she can see that Kerney has now allowed himself to become totally trapped and enmeshed. She thinks that Kerney is too bright to become so entangled, but she tells him

I take it back. I was mistaken. But don't worry. I won't make a scene. Why should I tell what everybody already knows except Gran, and she doesn't care? They know, but you are one of them now, and they will protect you. They will organize themselves for evasions and excuses, they will indulge in endless beautiful subtleties, they will get the door of heaven open for you if they have to unscrew the golden hinges, for your sake and their own. You're safe. Nothing can touch you. Don't worry about anybody, least of all me. (366-67)

Marcia Mae thus knows that Kerney will be fused with the Hunt family forever. Since she is still angry with him for having publicly denounced and betrayed Duncan, she gets a measure of satisfaction from the realization that he has forfeited his individuality and is now trapped by and indebted to her family. He has given up independence and autonomy to be a part of the wealthy family he so admired. In fact, he has loved the elder Mrs. Nan Standsbury Hunt, almost more than Cissy—simply because she is one of the old aristocratic Standsbury
family (43). Yet after Marcia Mae's chilling prophecy, Kerney drives over to sit outside Tinker Harper's house. He now has everything he has ever wanted—he is engaged to Cissy Hunt, and he has been elected U.S. Senator. Yet, as he sits alone in the darkness, he realizes he loves the new widow Tinker Harper, yet he will never be able now to tell her or try to have a relationship with her. He will have to give up the woman he really loves, the natural, spontaneous Tinker Harper for the calculating, affected southern belle, Cissy Hunt. He folds his arms across the steering wheel, "crying aloud with great innocent sobs, like a little boy" as the novel ends (367).

Thus, in terms of their perception of her, Marcia Mae's relationships with her family do not change substantially. Jason, Nan, Cissy, and Mrs. Tennie either do not understand or else do not approve of her decisions or values. Her ex-fiancé Duncan Harper also had disagreed with her beliefs. Yet by verbalizing them to herself and in some cases, to others, Marcia Mae is able to break the rules concerning prohibited speech, family secrets, and lies. She thus achieves individuation and is able to overcome the fusion she had lived with all those years. Even during the ten years she lives in California when she tried the technique of emotional cutoff, Marcia Mae had not been free. Only by facing and explaining her problems has she been able to become an individual.
The novel’s end implies that the multigenerational dysfunctional family pattern is continuing. Her nineteen-year-old sister Cissy is fused to the family’s expectations for her to such a degree that she is unaware of her entrapment. She thinks she is perfectly happy being a Southern belle who is maturing into a proper Southern lady like her mother and grandmother before her. Her fiancé, the new Senator, has given up any chance of true happiness with the woman he loves, Tinker Harper, in order to marry into the Hunt/Standsbury family. Thus, the familiar pattern of connection and compromise continues in her case.

For Marcia Mae, other suggestions are clear. At one point in the novel, there is a distinct indication that the Hunt’s elder daughter has indeed escaped a sorrowful fate. This potential tragedy of her fate is suggested to her one day during a walk in the woods after she returns to Lacey. In the woods, Marcia Mae sees a mongrel hound “the color of the Mississippi River.” This dog, its “hide nothing but a coat of paint over his skeleton” (200), symbolically illustrates the essence of Marcia Mae’s experience with her family. The dog, left behind by his African-American owners when they had deserted Mississippi in order to go to Detroit to try to earn a better living by working in the new defense plants, loyally and blindly refuses to abandon the empty house, despite the fact that the smell of food had been absent from it for a long time and he himself is starving to death. Similar qualities can be found in Marcia Mae’s own situation—connection to
home, blind loyalty, and neglect. Marcia Mae receives little nourishment from growing up in Lacey, yet she is so haunted by it and enmeshed with her family and former fiancé that she cannot leave it emotionally, despite having distanced herself by two thousand miles and ten years. Because of her courage and determination to end the unhealthy family patterns which had been filled with lies, secrets, and prohibited speech, the thirty-year-old Marcia Mae is finally able to sever unconscious ties to Lacey, Mississippi, and her family. While in general Marcia Mae's experience is "emblematic of the range of possibility for reconciling heart's desire and social reality" (Prenshaw 58), her facing and freeing herself from her family indicates that she earns the opportunity to discover a fuller life. The "enormous spiritual baggage" (Winchell 580) has been explored and given up in her return to Lacey, after her first ten-year absence. Now, beginning for her second departure, she will truly be able to leave home without being "haunted and shaped by what he or she has left behind" (581).

Both Virgie Rainey and Marcia Mae leave their respective communities, and both synthesize a vision of wholeness as they leave to begin a new life. Additionally for Marcia Mae, because she has confronted the members of her family (rather than waiting passively for her mother to die as Virgie does), she has elected to exorcise her family demons before moving on. It is this greater
openness that marks her departure as being more complete and more indicative of fuller differentiation than Virgie's.

End Notes

1. Critic Mark Royden Winchell demonstrates the great difficulty that Marcia Mae experiences when she decides to leave home. He argues, “to leave home in a traditional southern community is to turn one’s back on a patriarchal culture... [and] once the physical break has been made, enormous spiritual baggage remains.” (580-81).

2. Critic Betina Entzminger argues that rebellion and nonconformity for women in Spencer’s fiction is “a rebellion against the control of others” (74). In Entzminger’s view, this control for women amounts to, for one thing, the expectation of emotion of certain kinds. “Emotion is one thing that is expected of women, and it can often imprison them in a sense of vulnerability and dependence” (74).

3. In his chapter “Gay and Lesbian Affiliations” from Secrets in Families and Family Therapy, Gary Sanders writes, “It is in the neo-Christian tradition, as manifest mostly within North America, and particularly the southern parts of North America, where same-sex love has been viewed with the most vehement hate and the most vicious actions. Therefore, not only do people in such cultures experience an invitation to keep their orientations secret, but they are, in fact, invited to erase the secret from their own minds” (222). I will add that the southern value for family loyalty makes keeping such family secrets more likely and consequently more damaging. In the South, the mechanism for maintaining the secrecy is already in place.

4. While her family structure is similar to many of the patriarchal systems in previous books, one factor that distinguishes this protagonist is her desire to return to her original family and community to face the dilemmas of her youth. By doing so, Marcia Mae makes growth possible.

5. What happens to Marcia Mae involves her attempts to find selfhood through what Bowen calls “counter-conformity” (351). In a family where differentiation is not allowed, children either conform in outward behavior or assume pseudo-independence through counter-conformity. Thus, while Marcia Mae’s rebellious behavior demonstrates her strength to resist, she does not achieve independence.
so long as her behavior reflects the opposite of what is expected of her. She
repeats this fundamental pattern throughout the novel.

6. Prenshaw points out, "There is no opportunity in Lacey or Winfield County
for Marcia Mae to free herself sufficiently from family to make a separate life for
herself, and so she impulsively marries a Yankee..." (Spencer 59). Prenshaw
also argues that even later Marcia Mae exhibits a "nearly absolute failure to
imagine any other way of life" (59). What I am adding is that her struggle to
confront the issues within her family and her freeing herself from these family
forces allow her to become free to begin such an imaginative journey.

7. Triangulation involves some third person's presence which is used to diminish
the anxiety or stress that exists between two people in the family. By marrying
O'Donnell Marcia Mae avoids the original conflict she faces with her parents
who expect her to marry an appropriate young Lacey man. Triangulation is one
of the most common behaviors that family members employ to find freedom
without confronting the issue at hand.

8. When the thirty-year-old Marcia Mae returns to Lacey after a ten-year
absence, she walks through the town square in her "expensive well-buffed leather
loafers" and her "beige cashmere sweater," while she wonders why she has come
back. "In Lacey someone was always watching her, and Marcia Mae had never
liked being spied upon. Moreover, "nobody in Lacey would ever call her by her
married name; she was still Marcia Mae Hunt" (39). In fact, the compelling
reason for her return will become apparent to her after she returns and follows her
impulses to understand her family and her former life in Lacey.

9. Even in healthy families, Ackerman argues, "A family is a household in which
the behavior of any one person is at all times a function of behavior of all other
members" (16). Enmeshment then is a more extreme form of the way a system
generally works. In healthier families, the individual can belong to and be
distinct from the family, a balance which does not occur when the family
members become enmeshed.

10. Not always the rebel who disappointed her mother's expectations, Marcia
Mae did manage to make her mother proud of her a few times during her youth.
While she had attended the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Marcia Mae had,
"for two straight years (the only time in the history of the university) marched as
Homecoming Queen between the chancellor of the university and the captain of
the team, and received from the Governor of the state an enormous bouquet of
white chrysanthemums with satin ribbons eight inches wide" (320). Indeed, both
of her parents had been happy to see "the three-hundred-piece band arranged on the field to spell 'UM' playing 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart' [to their daughter while] a crowd of 30,000 stood solemnly and the men removed their hats just as if it had been the Star-Spangled Banner' or news of the President's death or the outbreak of war" (320).

Another positive behavior in her parents' eyes was her choice of Duncan Harper as her beau. Young Duncan had seemed to be a very suitable beau for Marcia Mae. First of all, "he was blond, too" and together, they were "a fine-looking couple, fair, beautifully built, alert as a brace of hunting dogs" (38-39). After Duncan became a high school and then college football star, with news of his "football feats travelling over clicking wires to every newspaper in the world," Jason Hunt liked Duncan so well that he began to explain how some of the Hunt family businesses worked and planned to allow Duncan to run some of them someday.

11. Her resistance to her family's expectations does not preclude any successes. As mentioned above, there were times when her behavior pleased her mother. Also, during her first forays into the social world of Lacey, Marcia Mae initially had been happy, for it was generally accepted in the small town of Lacey that she and Duncan Harper were "It" (39).

12. Jimmy Tallant, too, liked the "natural" Louise Taylor. He thought of her as "a small dark warm woman of unextraordinary beauty" who instinctively understood the "nature" of things (20). She was able to give "softness and comfort" to almost everyone, and she could decorate a house equally well because she understood that houses, like people, had different characters, too (20). Jimmy had never loved anyone else, and he had been the one to give her the nickname "Tinker" because one day at school she had been "counting off some buttons on her dress . . . [and after] she said Tinker Taylor," Jimmy had responded, "Who's Tinker Taylor? You are" (107). Despite his love for her and their having dated for five years, Tinker had refused ever to sleep with him. Even Marcia Mae herself who had proven to be a failed Southern belle by rejecting her mother Nan's "virtuous advice that if you gave a man what he wanted, he wouldn't want it anymore," thought Tinker had been wrong "to parade it like a bowl of cream before a cat" (178). Yet both Jimmy and Tinker knew that the reason Tinker had never had sex with Jimmy had been because she had been in love with Duncan Harper ever since the day Marcia Mae and her friends had made fun of her navy dress and Duncan Harper had gotten her to stop crying by saying to her, "I think your dress is real pretty, Louise" (208). Thus, Tinker's not having premarital sex with Jimmy meant she was in her own way loyal to Duncan, not that she was
teasing Jimmy. Tinker’s devotion to Duncan from the time she had been a child was yet another reason to prohibit her speech and never verbalize that Marcia Mae was not exceptionally close to Tinker.

13. On the other hand, Tinker sensed Marcia Mae was having an affair with her husband, but—unlike Cissy—she did not fault Marcia Mae for impractically choosing to have a relationship with a man who was not free to marry her. Rather, Tinker knew that because Marcia Mae was neither a Southern belle nor a Southern lady, her goal was not simply marriage. Instead, Tinker believed that Marcia Mae was more “manlike” and masculine; she remembered that in high school when Marcia Mae played tennis, she wore “a white boy’s shirt,” “could hit the ball as hard as a boy,” and would “throw everything behind the racquet, leave the ground, [grit] her teeth “like a boy” (150). She also believed Marcia Mae didn’t “want a husband, she just wants a man” (152). That is, Marcia Mae was having an affair with Duncan in order to have a sexual relationship. Thus, according to Tinker’s definitions of masculinity and feminity, Tinker thought of Marcia Mae as much more masculine than feminine. As she bluntly said to Jimmy Tallant one day, “You think she wanted to cook and keep a house? You think she’d love a child if she had one?” (152)
Chapter 6
Ellen Douglas' Can't Quit You, Baby:
Uncovering the Tangle of Family Secrets

"It's always true . . . that a tangle of water moccasins lies in wait (Under the surface of the water) for the skier. Always, always true." (131)

Characterized as "unconventional" for her selection of aging and elderly women as protagonists and her focus on the subject of relationships between white and black women (Carol S.Manning, Contemporary Fiction 91), Ellen Douglas does break certain conventional patterns common to many writers. She did not begin to write seriously, for example, until her thirty-fourth year, not publishing her first novel until she turned forty. Yet, she writes about topics common to Southern writers. Manning explains, "Ellen Douglas writes about families and individuals molded by the values and conditions common in the South of the early and mid-twentieth century" (93).

Critics Panthea Reid Broughton and Susan Millar Williams agree that Ellen Douglas "pulls together brilliantly the strengths of her previous work" (64) in Can't Quit You, Baby (1988). They write, "Here again are women both enclosed by and alienated from families, women with cross-racial friendships" (64). The idea that social conditions "mold" families and individuals is indeed a common one for Southern writers, as is the logical extension that families in turn mold their constituent members. These connections are reflected in the works of
the Douglas canon, and there is continuity of subject matter as well. For example, the title of her first novel *A Family’s Affairs* (1962), may also apply to the book that is the subject of this chapter. For Cornelia Wright O’Kelly, the protagonist of *Can’t Quit You, Baby*, the process of making oneself truly independent and free are indeed her two families’ affairs. Certainly an unconventional aspect of this novel is that it presents a successful protagonist who deceives herself for forty-five years, reevaluates her life in the face of personal tragedy, and ultimately discovers that by shedding the false layers of self she can trust herself again. Even more interesting, Douglas fashions a surrogate mother-figure for Cornelia in her poor, African-American maid Tweet.

The self-deception which only Tweet can unravel begins in Cornelia’s original family, from which Cornelia inherits the guiding principle that one must always appear perfect. In fact, both of these characters face racial, familial, and cultural systems which limit them. Critic Jan Shoemaker explains, “The main characters... are, because of constraints and expectations in their cultures, limited in choices and ability to tell their stories by their race, their gender, and their communities” (84).

Yet very early in the novel Douglas presents a clear image of the problem with Cornelia’s adopted outlook that all things must appear perfect, describing this female protagonist as a woman who always appears to have everything
“already sorted out, as if she dances over a polished floor [or is] skiing on a
summer day over the steely bright surface of a calm lake under a blue sky piled
high with cumulus” (39). As the nearly-doomed water skier in this novel,
Cornelia is unaware of the dangerous “tangle of water moccasins” that lie in wait
for the skier. According to Cornelia, life will be fine, “she won’t lose her
footing, she’s sure of it. She won’t find herself sinking into the dark water
among slimy cypress knees and alligators and alligator gars” (39).

As the novel Can’t Quit You, Baby opens, the forty-five-year-old Cornelia
O’Kelly appears to be a “self-controlled,” confident woman who believes she
possesses a perfect life: “My darling, we’re so lucky, she says to her husband
again and again from year to year” (12). Indeed, Cornelia feels “she was born
under a lucky star, as if a fairy godmother bestowed on her the gift of beauty,
brains, and good luck” (12). Other than “loving her husband too much [for] it
was unseemly still to be ‘in love’ after [being married over twenty-five] years,”
Cornelia sees “no flaw in her kingdom” and is looking forward to the future (12,
129).

The water mocassins of which Cornelia is unaware involve the operating
rules of her original and married families, and only when her children force
Cornelia to confront painful truths and only much later in New York, after she
has cut herself off from her children after the death of her husband John, does she
begin to confront the ugly realities beneath the bright surfaces of her life. Her ultimate willingness to see each reality is one of the fundamental strengths which distinguish Cornelia from many of the other protagonists in this study. Her additional determination to return to her life and her friendships with an intense desire for renewed involvement also demonstrates Cornelia's exceptional strength.

Such a strong finish is not suggested by the constricted beginnings of Cornelia's life, for her original family does not inculcate the desires to confront and to act on the perceived truth. Rather, the Wright family operates a set of sophisticated but dangerous systemic rules. The family is based on a dominant-submissive parental relationship, a firm suppression of negative feelings, and a vein of secrecy and underlying resentment. Cornelia finds herself a pawn in the family chess game being played by a weak, normally absent father and an overbearing mother. In this scheme, she exists as one facet of her mother's strategy to always, always present a perfect face to the world.

As Rebecca Hood-Adams notes, "Even Cornelia's mother's name--Mrs. Wright--rings symbolic of a society determined to live and die by propriety," of a society where "doing things right" was not only a duty but also a nearly sacred obligation (3F). Accordingly, Mrs. Wright is a member of the Junior League and the Episcopal Church, both of which befit the image of the upper class.
Southerner and perhaps the modern Southern lady (81, 86). As such, she fitfully surrounds herself with fiddleback Empire chairs, Sheraton tables, Sevres urns and other antiques in the large “old two-story Victorian house with its octagonal tower clad in fish-scale shingles” (79, 72). Mrs. Wright also enjoys overseeing the work of her servants, and she also loves fine cuisine—probably too much, for she is overweight. In fact, fifteen years after Cornelia’s marriage, Mrs. Wright dies while “happily mumbling, ‘How delicious!’ over the stuffed artichoke leaf” she chokes on (73).

Despite the tragicomic conclusion of her own life, Mrs. Wright unfortunately introduces her daughter to several potential tragedies, principally because she considers her daughter a simple extension of herself. She rigidly controls Cordelia’s relationships with friends and boyfriends, repeatedly stymies and stunts Cordelia’s natural curiosity, and essentially prohibits any kind of behavior that might cause others to question the family’s status and gentility. Cornelia, however, is taught to accept without question her mother’s requirements and dictates, and generally Cornelia conforms to these expectations. As for her father, Cornelia remembers him as a “gentle, uncombative man who [had] abdicated his power to his wife early in their marriage” (78).

Thus, her original family does not look too promising for producing self-sufficient, mature individuals. The rigid rules and roles, the overcontrol of the
mother, the all-too-typical absent or weak father—the signs suggest Cornelia will have difficulties in becoming independent, balanced, and healthy in her future, although Cornelia herself thinks she rebels against the inflexibility of her mother. In her marriage, for instance, Cornelia attempts to break her mother’s control.

When the time comes to raise her own children, Cornelia repeats much of the same training with her children Andrew and Sarah that her own mother had employed with her. In fact, the similarities that the O’Kelly and Wright families share demonstrate the stubborn persistence of the multigenerational process at work.

The dynamics of her married family also reflect qualities remarkably similar to her original family. Her husband John is “careful of what he says around her and what he chooses to tell her” (130). Her two children, twenty-four year-old Andrew and twenty-two year-old Sarah, are also cautious about what they reveal to her. Thus, underneath the perfect, happy surface of the O’Kelly family patterns of prohibited speech abound. Secrets, lies, and omissions also exist in the O’Kelly system, although Cornelia is unaware of all of these forms of collusion.

The route toward individuation that Cornelia takes, though circuitous, is nevertheless unmistakeable— from the control maintained by her mother, to her rebellion by the marriage to John, to the repetition of the pattern established by
her mother when she raises her own children and relates to her own husband, and finally to the isolation of the trip to New York where she is presented with the evidence from her own memory and imagination—Cornelia's steps toward freedom are generally taken when she discovers a painful reality. In her case, the mocassins of her existence begin their attack on many fronts.

In the series of revelations, there is painful discovery for Cornelia as well as an opportunity to break with the forms of the two family systems which have bound her. “Everything began to crumble” when Andrew comes home to tell Cornelia that he planned to marry the woman with whom he had been living for two years. “Cornelia had not known she even existed” (131). Why had he kept it a secret for such a length of time? Andrew knows his mother has raised both of her children to have “straight teeth and straight backs, and straight A’s” (11), and he realizes his fiancé has none of these. Not only is twenty-nine year-old Willie Belle Gorton five years older than he, she has had two illegitimate children by different fathers. She has never attended college; Andrew possesses a degree in marine engineering and designs towboats for a shipbuilding firm in Baton Rouge. The only jobs she has ever had were minimum-wage positions, requiring unskilled labor. Moreover, she curses, smokes, drinks, uses marijuana, and has not seen her own parents in years.
What is so enlightening here is the way that the O’Kelly family’s commitment to superficial conformity and shallow happiness brings about a rebellion similar to the kind that occurred in the Wright family a generation before. The overcontrol exerted by the parents of these two families fosters rebellion on the part of the children, and the offspring, first Cornelia and later Andrew, simply do the opposite of what is required. They are never truly free, and because they never act independently, they are likely to continue the pattern established by their parents, generally sealing the unrecognized agreement to ensure a multigenerational transmission process.

Andrew, to his credit, does attempt to break the secrecy after two years of his secret engagement to Willie Belle, by telling Cornelia, “I can’t go on... concealing... dancing this marriage with you” (134). But then, like her own mother, ever-polite Cornelia merely says, “Bring them all out for breakfast, and I’ll make pancakes for the crowd” (136-37). Andrew even encourages his mother to “get mad for a change. I deserve it” (137). But Cornelia replies, “I’m not angry, my dear. What would be the point...?” (137). However, when she reminds him to tell his father and he explains that John has known for the entire two years, Cornelia is extremely angry--although she does not let John, Andrew, or Sarah know it.
Psychologist Joan Laird argues, “Silence and secrecy are about, among other things, the relationship between knowledge and power” (244), an old idea that she traces to Foucault. Laird continues, “But there are also remarkably intimate relationships between knowledge and gender and between power and gender” (244). In other words, this family like Cornelia’s original family centers overwhelming power in the parents by maintaining secrecy about any nonconforming behavior, and the parents’ notion of rigid gender roles only exacerbate the problem. For the Wrights and the O’Kellys, gender roles are a function of or are controlled by the more important value of status. Young ladies such as Cornelia are raised to marry specific kinds of young men, and nearly the same, though less so perhaps, is true for the male children.

Whenever a violation of the family system rule with regard to the gender roles occurs, a potential loss of parental control is occasioned. Hence, denial and secrecy result. By breaking the silence, Andrew threatens to make known the unwritten, unspoken rules of conduct which Cornelia, who fancies herself very different from her own controlling mother, has enforced.

Despite the self-doubt that the violation causes, Cornelia nevertheless is forced to recognize one of the family secrets, a lie of omission, and this recognition is the beginning of the process that eventually helps her to grow. In fact, she never mentions their keeping this secret for two years, but silently she
wonders, "What else in their lives is hidden from me? And why? What else do they not say, or say only in whispers?" (143). It is then that Cornelia remembers that all of her life she had seen the three of them "at the supper table, . . . seen their lips move, their heads nod, hands signal. They had been excluding, deceiving, betraying her, had constructed their life together as if her presence were a hole in its center" (143). She convinces herself that deceiving her had been easy for them because of her potential deafness. In addition, Cornelia was too polite ever to ask anyone to repeat what had been said; she took "pride in her ability to keep everyone comfortable—whether or not she had heard and understood" (14).

While psychologists Jo-Ann Krestan and Claudia Bepko maintain that "Secrecy ultimately demands a withdrawal of emotional 'presence' from the relational context" (142), the opposite proposition may be more true in this case. In such a family in which secrecy and silence have played such a key role in keeping the family together, it is the revelation of the secret that brings about the withdrawal. True perhaps, but in her withdrawal, Cornelia's chances for confronting the truth are enhanced.

Predictably enough, after her son Andrew tells her that John has known about Willie Belle Gorton for two years, Cornelia does enter a period of withdrawal. Of course, she does not tell her family she has withdrawn; rather,
instead of getting up early with John, she would “shake her head, mutter... [and] pull the covers closer around her” (148). She also does not go to the bookstore that they own and operate as often as she had in the past. Although their nighttime routine remains the same, when John comes to bed, he finds her “lying still untouchable” (148). In fact, she explains, “I must need a little time to myself... I don’t know why I don’t feel like sex these days” (148). Even on nights when John comes home “so late the sun was rising” and Cornelia is sure he had “found a woman to comfort him,” she never says a word (147).

What truths are revealed in the cornerstone relationship between the two adults when silence and withdrawal are met with indifference and a corresponding withdrawal? Of course, Cornelia is aware that her polite silence and apathy are extreme, beginning to feel “sometimes that she has become two people, that under the skin of her cool, still-slender and smiling self, inside the efficient lady with the almost invisible hearing aid, the competent partner... a monster may live” (147). Yet Cornelia runs away from this side of her self; she “shook it off” as if it were a “dream” (147).

The existence of other secrets would not be improbable in such families, and in fact, they had all kept at least one other secret. During her sophomore year at college her daughter Sarah had drifted “into a marijuana fog from which she didn’t surface for months” (128). However, even after she had quit her habit,
neither she nor the others dared to tell Cornelia. Instead, Sarah had chosen to lie, and Andrew and their father corroborate the lie. Sarah "invented a plausible love affair and a broken heart to explain why all the A's dropped that year to D's and I's" (129). Sarah had known "from the first" that she would never be able to tell "her mother the truth, . . . but the marijuana fog is not the first thing Sarah concealed from her mother. She has in fact (and this true of Andrew, too), never told Cornelia much about her life--never" (129).

Of the three family members, Sarah does, in fact, confide in her least. Although Cornelia believes her relationship with her daughter is good, throughout the novel they seldom interact, and when they do, it is done formally, politely, and falsely. As Sharon Sloan Fiffer notes, Cornelia is "unaware of the problems faced by [either of] her college-age children" (8: 14). Reviewer Murray Simmons concurs and points out the reason for her lack of awareness about her children's lives is that Cornelia "would rather watch them than hear them" (17D). There are such repetitions of the earlier parent-child relationship of Mrs. Wright and Cornelia: her own mother was certain she had a good relationship with her daughter; both daughters seem so independent and strong that they apparently do not need a mother much.

However, at twenty-two, Sarah is actually directionless. She has no career plans, and she is not involved in a long-term relationship. After she receives her
bachelor's degree she moves "to Baton Rouge—at LSU, where she begins work toward a graduate degree in English literature which she has no intention of using" (144). She said she had enrolled because she "just enjoyed school," but in reality she has no other ideas about what to do with her life. She likes to "read and read," and from time to time she "takes a new lover" (144). However, she never discusses the latter with her mother, for she knows her mother, a virgin until she married at nineteen, would disapprove. So she keeps her sex life a secret from Cornelia. Thus, Sarah discusses very little with Cornelia, and although Cornelia loves her chestnut-haired daughter, the two cannot communicate and are not close in that regard. Perhaps if they were, Sarah would not be so directionless and have such uncertain, vague career goals.

In addition to her withdrawal, Cornelia exhibits another sign of internal turmoil, "a ferocious passion [taking] possession of her. No matter that her body [was] like a frozen board, a corpse buried for thousands of years in the permafrost, still she [felt] burning outward from her heart a lava of hatefulness. Somehow she will punish them all" (149). Thus, her withdrawal becomes a form of revenge against her family members from keeping secrets from her. Rage is an inward manifestation of the sense of betrayal and disloyalty, but I think it intensifies in proportion to the degree of self-sacrifice that the individual who feels it has given. In other words, by maintaining the superficial happiness,
remaining an unquestioning, self-sacrificing person all of her life, Cornelia has set herself up for the feeling of disequilibrium and rage. All that is needed is one serious obstacle or violation of her delicate balance and she can be thrown into complete confusion and self-doubt.

The rage works itself to the surface, and unfortunately for John, with deadly results. On a business trip to Atlanta, John meets her at the airport—late and drunk. He is so drunk he cannot take care of the bags and the tickets. Although she acts as if she is not upset with him, Cornelia hears “somebody say, ‘Bastard. Fucking bastard’” (152). She is sure that she could not have uttered these words because she “never used such words even to herself” (152). Even after boarding the plane, Cornelia makes certain she “laughed lightly, with the laugh assigning this behavior to its unimportant place” in their lives (153). Completely unaware of herself, Cornelia blurts out, “Who were you drinking with?” (153).

When John’s answer to her question is merely to “stick out his tongue at her,” Cornelia is so “astonished” she whispers in John’s ear, “You fucking bastard . . . You bastard. I know. I know. All these years. You . . . You . . . To have secrets with them . . . To conspire with them against me. How could you do it?” (153). She pauses breathless, and then, out of control, continues, “Am I so ugly, so awkward, so stupid? . . . I HATE you” (153). Immediately after this
incidence of verbal conflict, John slumps over. He experiences a serious stroke and shortly lies dead in the aisle of the DC-3.¹

The only way out of difficulty may be to go directly through it, but Cornelia’s entire history works against that. Critic John Fister supports this notion when he points out, “Cornelia has led a sheltered, pampered life... John assumes to know what’s best for Cornelia, and... he protects her from the harsh realities of life” (104). Ultimately his protection creates an unhealthy insulation, predictably bringing about withdrawal and rage on her part when she is confronted with these realities. After John’s death, Cornelia refuses to think about confronting him or accusing him of keeping secrets with the children throughout their long marriage. Her mechanism for coping with unpleasant realities is to isolate herself and engage in several forms of bizarre (at least for her) behavior. For instance, she starts to drink too much. Indeed, the degree of emotional cutoff is extreme as she simply stops going to the family bookstore. Her actions also impact the family; Sarah, taking her mother’s place at the bookstore, quits her graduate program at LSU to keep the family business from going bankrupt.

Cornelia’s dark days in New York are brought about primarily by the actions of her family members. Rejecting her family, she isolates herself even further by leaving the state. That is, she wants to cut herself off emotionally by

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moving to New York City alone, fortunately remembering that her friend Evelyn had years ago rented an apartment there which Cornelia could have the use of during the winter. Under the principle that one good lie deserves another, what Cornelia actually has opted to do turns out to be exactly what her family has already done.²

Although she has shown the determination to leave her controlling family, she unfortunately proves unprepared for this independence. In New York, she continues to isolate herself from the moment of her arrival, sitting “rigidly and fearfully” in a taxi, unsure about even to how to get the taxi driver not to run up the toll on her unnecessarily (184). She is also terrified of going out into the unfamiliar streets for food and groceries, realizing that for the first time she is alone. Turning to the “valium waiting in the medicine cabinet,” she eventually begins to consider suicide, and she isolates herself by turning down her hearing aid and continuing to drink too much. Her life as a Southern lady had not prepared her to be self-sufficient, at least initially.

Her terror is so great that, much to her surprise, she begins to see the faces and hear the voices of her dead mother and husband John as well as her father and Tweet. For Cornelia, these “visions” which at first seem to be such an unhealthy phenomenon are actually healing. Cornelia is “one of those people who draw back, almost as if it might be a sin, from examining the causes and
consequences of their acts" (65). That is, Cornelia always had refused to look at any of the reasons for her behavior or anyone else's. To have examined causes would have meant studying her own feelings and life, and to Cornelia, "it was almost unthinkable to speak to anyone, even herself, of her feelings, her childhood, her children's intimate life with her husband, even her children's lives" (66). She always had regarded such utterances as "trashy, dishonorable (an old-fashioned word still very much a part of her vocabulary) . . . [and] scarcely formulable" (66). Thus, during all of Cornelia's forty-five years, she had lived the life of a proper Southern lady and had been in a state of withdrawal.

Now, however, in the vicarious development of a surrogate mother-daughter relationship, made even more unconventional by the fact that this mother is black and poor and the daughter is white and rich, Cornelia begins a long odyssey toward health. Through the remembered and imagined moments with her maid Julia "Tweet" Carrier, Cornelia demonstrates an inner resilience and willingness to become flexible. Most of these memories involve uncovering the experiences in her original family that had shamed and limited her profoundly. Most of the significant confrontations with her past belong to the category of uncovering her hatred of her mother, but this recognition takes a long time. At first, she recollects less significant moments in her family life. At one point, for example, she thinks she sees her father darting around the street corners.
of New York City just in front of her. She, of course, knows that in reality her
now-aged widower-father is "down in Mobile enjoying himself" (209). Cornelia
remembers that as she was growing up she had "looked once or twice to him for
support, but he had dropped his eyes and retired behind his newspaper . . . , [and]
Cornelia [learned to] look no more" (78). Cornelia recalls that he often brought
her gifts back from his business trips, but she also remembers that he had been
often away from home and that even when he was home, he "seldom" went to
any of her school activities (74).

The power and control of the most significant and damaging family
member go unquestioned for much longer. Suppressed from consciousness the
longest, the memory of her deceased mother emerges one day when Cornelia sees
a portly woman on a New York street. Immediately she hears Tweet's voice,
"that fat lady feature your mama, don't she? . . . I hate her, but she ain't my
mama. You hadn't got around to beginnning to hate her yet" (199).

Before very long, she remembers an incident from her childhood during
which she had been afraid of the dark. She had rushed downstairs to ask her
mother for permission to leave a light on, but her mother had said, "We don't
waste electricity. Go back upstairs. And come back down slowly like a lady.
Night-lights are for cowards" (189-90). Even as Cornelia remembers the
conversation, she tries to suppress the memory, but—for the first time in her life—
she allows feelings to surface. Once she replays the scene, Cornelia blurts out, "Oh, God... I hate her. If she were alive, I would kill her" (190).

Verbalizing and confessing her hatred for her mother represents a positive step for Cornelia. Cornelia also recalls how her mother had rigidly controlled her dating habits, acting to "conceal Cornelia's beauty from her... [and] her sexuality" (73) by purchasing her "a hideous bile green taffeta... with awkward three-quarter-length sleeves, an ill-fitting, long-waisted bodice that hid the tender curves of her young body, and a wide taffeta sash with a huge bow at the back" (73).

The fifteen-year-old Cornelia does not know her mother is controlling her, for Mrs. Wright had "brought Cornelia's dress at the best shop in the city" and for a very "high price" (74). Yet that evening Cornelia looked so bad in the dress that her embarrassed date "feigned a bellyache and took her home" after the first few dances (73). The other young men at the party thought Cornelia so unattractive that "no one asked Cornelia out for a year, two years" afterwards (74). Yet Cornelia never knows why she is so unpopular, for her mother tells her, "You look lovely, my dear" on her way out of the door (73). Thus, Mrs. Wright achieves her desire: by buying "an outfit that Lewis Carroll might have dreamed up to keep Alice a little girl forever" she herself keeps her daughter tied to her.
Mrs. Wright’s very objective in crucial areas of Cornelia’s development is to keep the level of fusion and dependency in the family quite high. Critic Jan Shoemaker goes so far as to argue that “Cornelia’s mother plays the wicked witch who is jealous of her own daughter’s sexuality” (91). So, by making Cornelia too “reserved” either to flirt or flatter, Cornelia remains tied to Mrs. Wright and unable to leave her to marry a young man of her choice (75). In the process, Mrs. Wright makes Cornelia into the very “essence of sheltered Southern womanhood” (Uhry 13).

Mrs. Wright’s control of Cornelia’s sexuality is illustrated in another recovered memory, one about Lewis Robinson, the only boy she had ever liked during her entire adolescence. He was the son of a wealthy family from New Orleans who had moved to Mississippi, and being quiet and shy, he is not upset that Cornelia does not know how to flirt (71-72). Although she likes him, after Mrs. Wright visits his mother, “the friendship had cooled and then, in a year or so, he was gone” (73). Not until one lonely night in New York does Cornelia realize that she “had loved him,” and that somehow her mother broke them up (217-18). It is then that Cornelia realizes she can hate her deceased mother. Also while she is in New York, Cornelia remembers her courtship with John, and for the first time, she is able to admit she used John to “outwit” her controlling mother (218).
In a third recovered memory of this type, Cornelia recalls that Mrs. Wright was so concerned lest the nineteen-year-old Cornelia meet the "wrong type" of soldier from the nearby airbase that she "required Cornelia to limit her engagements to soldiers who brought letters of introduction from relatives or acquaintance in other cities" (70-71). Mrs. Wright as a Southern lady possessed four fears which she had ranked in descending "order of their catastrophic significance" (70). She was first of all generally apprehensive that Cornelia would bear a child out of wedlock; two, die of scarlet fever or a burst appendix; three, marry a poor and unsuitable man; and four, marry a rich but unsuitable man" (70).

Accordingly, she devised rules which would prevent any of these four disasters from occurring (or so she thought). One night at a USO dance, Cornelia meets John O’Kelly, a "New Orleans shanty boat Irish Channel Catholic poor boy" of whom she knows her mother would disapprove. Therefore, she dates him secretly for two weeks until her mother finds out accidentally (78). Cornelia institutes what becomes the family tradition of keeping secrets, a tradition that Andrew and her own daughter Sarah eventually have recently emulated. Just as Cornelia is furious when Andrew and Sarah and John keep secrets from her, Cornelia’s mother was enraged that Cornelia dared keep John a secret. Mrs.
Wright refuses to “be heard shouting... like a fishwife” at Cornelia, but she calls the general whom she knows, convincing him to transfer John overseas (86). Her plan does not work, however, for when John tells Cornelia he has only two weeks left, they decided to get married. Predictably, Mrs. Wright forbade Cornelia’s wedding to a man with “no background, no education, no prospects” who would “probably end up being an airline pilot after the war” (82). When Cornelia had insisted she would marry John, Mrs. Wright started locking her daughter’s bedroom door at night. Thus, Cornelia had literally become a Southern princess locked in the third floor turret bedroom of their old Victorian mansion.

Even at nineteen Cornelia had quietly rebelled; she simply had called John to rescue her. He had used the ginkgo tree by her window to help her down, and they had eloped (92). The ginkgo tree’s leaves of gold had showered down on them as they ran off; this ginkgo tree was a favorite tree of the Old South. Its golden leaves caused it to be called “the money tree,” and Southern ladies often gilded its fallen leaves and used them in decorations. Thus, it is appropriate that Mrs. Wright—as a lady of the twentieth century who still loved and imitated the ways of the Old South—would have one in her garden, and it is both appropriate and symbolic that Cornelia would climb out of the tower (also an architectural element loved by traditional Southerners because it hearkened back to the time of
both the British and Southern lords and ladies) and down the gingko tree, thereby leaving behind her aristocratic, hierarchical Southern-lady mother to begin a new life with a commoner whom she had chosen to be her husband.

Yet by secretly slipping out and avoiding any open conflict with her mother and father, Cornelia had begun a new family tradition that would be passed on to her children. Moreover, her own decisive but quietly rebellious act of secretly eloping did not even change her relationship with her own mother. Rather, after Cornelia had married John, Mrs. Wright still came to visit, and the two did not discuss the incident. Instead, every time that "Mother visited," they "passed their time together playing cards" (66). Double solitaire was their favorite, and "during the card games they talk, it's true, but they exchange recipes instead of confidences, they speak of events rather than meanings, they speculate on the motives of politicians and pastors, never of parents and spouses" (66). Thus, prohibited speech patterns and secrets between mother and daughter continued and characterized their relationship.

Cornelia regretfully recalls that only once did Mrs. Wright come close to communicating openly with her daughter. On that day, she had put down her cards and said, "Once I took the two of you (Cornelia and her younger brother) and went home to Mama. Tacky. Disgraceful. But I did" (66). Cornelia’s reaction to such a "genuine revelation" is far from normal. Instead of
interrupting and asking "the question that would spring instantly to anyone else's lips--why?--she . . . does not even ask herself" (69). By the time that Cornelia is an adult, she knows that anything of a personal nature is a topic about which speech will be prohibited, so it never occurs to her to question her mother, not to ask about a problem that could have caused her mother to leave her father.

Likewise, Cornelia remembers that she never commented about what had happened between her own mother and her mother's mother. It seems that her mother's mother--Cornelia's grandmother, had informed her distressed daughter:

My dear, don't think for a moment you can come home to me. I've raised my children. If you leave him, you'll have to make a life for yourself and your children however you can . . . . Look at me, my dear. How could I help you [anyway]? I'm sixty-four years old . . . But that's not the point. The point is: You married him. You chose a life with him of your own free will. Now, if you want to change your life, it's your business, not mine. (67-68)

Mrs. Wright's reaction to this abandonment by her own mother was perhaps strange. She told Cornelia:

So I went back to your father. What else could I do? He never knew I'd left him . . . I thank my mother for it. She was absolutely right . . . Yes, I thank her. God knows how our lives--your lives, too--would have gone, if she'd opened her house to us, backed me . . . . I'd have been standing behind the counter at Rosenstein's on these [her plump, small feet], working for Jews, selling piece goods to people like me. Instead, I did well by you children--by us all. (68)
Cornelia, instead of being amazed at the gratitude of her mother after her harsh rejection by her own mother, at first said nothing. She herself had always found her father to be a distant man but one who had been controlled by his wife. Instead of trying to find out more about the intimate relationship between her dominating mother and her emotionally absent father, Cornelia hears “someone else speak, someone for whom she has no responsibility, say, “‘Maybe you shouldn’t have had children’” (68). Once she had realized that she indeed had uttered these words, she feels both “fear and exhilaration,” for she believes her mother will be furious at her for saying such an “impolite thing” (68). However, when Mrs. Wright just shrugs, the two merely continue to play solitaire in silence, and the incident is forgotten until years after Mrs. Wright’s own death.

Although Cornelia may not have regarded her own inability to react to her mother’s story as significant, it was. Probably unbeknownst to her, Mrs. Wright had revealed that multigenerational family process was at work. That is, Mrs. Wright had not been able to confide in her indifferent mother and tell her why she had left her husband and wanted to end her marriage.

Thus, Cornelia is slowly redeeming her past from oblivion and self-deception, forcing these recollections from the bottom of her memory. In these efforts, she is supported by the hovering and sometimes challenging presence of Tweet. These memories are the punishing snakes of her memory, but she finds
that she is able to withstand the pain with Tweet. Even during her first stressful, nearly panic-filled weeks in New York, Cornelia is cognizant of how ironic it is that she keeps imagining Tweet with her, for Cornelia has always considered Tweet to be so different from her that she once wanted to fire her so that she would never “have to look at her face again” (201). In actuality, however, the two women are not so different, and gradually during Cornelia’s stay in New York she comes to learn how much these two share though from such different levels of Southern society.

Significantly, both women had endured lives filled with secrets, lies, neglect, and abandonment. In her discussion of the novel, Linda Tate argues that because Cornelia and Tweet “are both oppressed by the still dominant southern white patriarchy, they must implicitly look to each other for support” (56). Charles Fister describes the families of the two women as “totalitarian states of consciousness” (101). Despite the similarity of their life experiences, their responses to these experiences could not have been more different. Cornelia, raised to be a Southern lady, believed—as all proper Southern ladies should—that she was to be perfect and that her life was to be perfect as well. Since a life of perfection should not by its very definition include secrets, lies, deception, neglect, and abandonment, Cornelia had not handled the flaws and imperfections she had discovered in herself and in her family members very well. Tweet, on
the other hand, had been able to handle the imperfections in her family life and family members more effectively.

Facing both abandonment and neglect from her father, Tweet's family life was far from ideal. Jan Shoemaker argues that "Tweet's whole life is a series of threats to her selfhood by patriarchs" (92). Not surprisingly, her father had left before she was born. An older man in his thirties when he seduced the fourteen-year-old Rosa, Julian abandoned his young, pregnant lover before she gives birth to Tweet. Shortly after her birth, Tweet is abandoned by Rosa, when Rosa gives up her infant child to Julian's elderly father, a man who was so old he received a Civil War veteran's check every month. Thus, before the end of her first year of life, Tweet has been abandoned by her mother and father.

Her grandfather, however, did serve as a father figure for Tweet, and the child eventually comes to love him dearly. Nevertheless, their mutual affection did not mean that their relationship was perfect. Rather, the grandfather kept at least two secrets from Tweet. One involved his relationship with his own son Julian. Regardless of how many times the young Tweet asked her grandfather why Julian and he never wrote each other and never would speak to each other, the old man remained silent. He simply refused to talk about Julian at all, and Tweet gradually learned that all speech about Julian was prohibited. Why Julian and his father did not relate to each other very well was to remain a permanent
secret. The second secret between grandfather and granddaughter involved the elderly man’s life savings. The grandfather had managed to save a large portion of his Civil War pension checks, and he hid the money out in the swamp, but as much as he loved Tweet, he would not tell her where he had hidden the money.

Tweet, however, is able to accept the imperfections in her relationship with her grandfather and by doing so, she still loves him. When she is fifteen years old, her father Julian, now in his fifties, returns and brings his wife Claree with him. His return brings more secrets and lies into Tweet’s life, and Tweet becomes embroiled in a violent family relationship. However, Tweet is never certain that her father has come back intending to engage in such deception and to be so violent. She tells Cornelia years later, “People don’t say: We’re bad, we’re going to do evil” (25). Rather, Tweet believes that people “accidentally” started doing evil because the world was as full of evil as good and the line between the two was often blurry and uncertain (29). Cornelia emphatically disagrees with Tweet’s philosophy, insisting that “right is right and wrong is wrong” (25). Tweet, however, knows that Cornelia’s view is simplistic and that such clear divisions do not exist. Cornelia’s belief is simply the product of her rigid upbringing as a perfect Southern lady. Since Tweet accepts the fact that people wander in and out of the worlds of good and evil, she is able to see the horrible things people do without becoming paralyzed.
She can accept even such horror as that committed by her father and Claree who set fire to the cabin one night with grandfather and Tweet inside. The father knows that with both of them dead, he will inherit the money. The physical strain he feels running out of the cabin causes the elderly grandfather to die of a heart attack; Tweet, however, lives to inherit through her grandfather’s will. Tweet understands that her father will pursue her for the money she inherits, and can accept the fact that he has given in to the evil within him. However, she is not destroyed by this knowledge of her father’s betrayal and callous selfishness perhaps because she is able to express her dislike of his behavior. Tweet openly accuses her father and defies him to try to trick her out of her inheritance again.

Cornelia has never allowed herself the luxury of openly disappoving of her weak father. She remembers that during her arguments with her mother, her father never defended her. Rather, he would “drop his eyes and retreat behind his newspaper when she looked to him for support” (78). During this time in New York, however, Cornelia imagines she sees her father on the subway platform, along the crowded streets, and in the department stores. In a fantasy, the imagined Tweet informs her, “You [think you] see him sitting there across the aisle. That ain’t daddy. You daddy’s in Mobile enjoying himself. Ain’t that a disgrace?” (209). Gradually Cornelia begins to realize that her father is never
there to protect her; he has emotionally abandoned her all of her life, she finally comes to realize.

In her vicarious relationship with the imagined Tweet Cornelia discovers the inclination to dislike her father for choosing to take the easy way out, for “abdicating his power to his wife early in his marriage” and, in effect absenting himself from the family. Even as a child, Cornelia had secretly blamed her father for neglecting and abandoning her, but—as a young Southern lady—she had denied her negative feelings and emotions. As a forty-five-year-old in New York encouraged by her imaginary talks with her maid, Cornelia is able to admit her negative feelings for her father.

Because Tweet is not confined by the role of lady, she can admit whatever she feels. In her marriage to Nig, for instance, she confronts him when there is a problem. When he steals her money and runs away with the church organist, she demands her money back. When he refuses, she shoots him in the arm, and amazingly, the confrontation brings them back together. Thinking of this confrontation, Tweet is reminded of several lines from a song: “Can’t Quit You, Baby, but I sure do hate. . . your treacherous low-down ways” (210).

That is, Tweet is able to accept the good and the bad, the tender moments and the secrets and the deceptive times in her marriage, and as a result, their relationship lasts. Cornelia herself, quite differently, delayed any confrontation
with her husband John when he kept Andrew’s living with Willie Belle for two years a secret. Cornelia secretly had resented him, had stopped going on flights in his airplane with him, and had refused to have sex with him, but she was “too nice” to tell John how much she hated his keeping secrets from her. In New York, however, she remembers Tweet’s story of Nig and Puddin’s secret affair, and she imaginatively allows herself to confront and dislike John for keeping secrets from her. Such imaginative visits from Tweet help to heal Cornelia, for she is learning to accept the imperfections and the evil in other human beings, at first her father and then her husband.

Ultimately Cornelia finds a fitting metaphor for the original family system from which she is emerging. In New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Cornelia finds Magritte’s L’Assassin Menace, a painting depicting a dead woman on a chaise longue, her killer standing over her while in the wings watching there are two men who intend to kill the killer. Cornelia’s fascination with this painting leads to an insight into the workings of her family. She observes later, “the figures--one dead, one about to die, two about to be killers, three witnesses--all” have become entangled; the good and the bad are all entangled “beyond extricating” (215). Such qualities as the sacrifice of the woman, the disorderly merging of the good and the bad, the voyeurism of the avengers, the air of danger and secrecy, all offer concrete aspects of her family life.
Comelia's first steps toward freedom are not all premiddled or planned. Rather, she explores the alternatives that she had once never recognized, having an affair with a man she simply meets on the street, for example. He is a hospital orderly who is taking night classes in order to obtain a degree in history education. Certainly Comelia would never have had such a brief sexual relationship with a stranger if she had not learned to act on and explore all of her feelings, the bad as well as the good.

The energy that she discovers in life stems first from her recognition of the rules that dominated her former life--prohibited speech, prohibited actions, rigid gender roles, and family secrets. As was not the case with many of the previous protagonists in this study, for Comelia an intellectual recognition is accompanied by a fundamental shift in understanding and behavior which results in changed relationships. Jan Shoemaker describes Comelia's emergence in terms of antitheses. "The antitheses of silence/speaking and deafness/hearing augment the pattern of antitheses that permeate the book" (89). That is, once she returns home, the differences in Comelia are immediately apparent to those who have known her, as Comelia begins to explore life with fresh curiosity, intensity, and independence. One of the particularly good feelings she explores is her love for Tweet. In fact, in Tweet she finds the mother who can name her feelings, teach her how to accept herself, how to behave around others, and how to face
adversity. Linda Tate argues that Tweet is Cornelia’s sister, but I find that in nearly every way, Tweet acts as a spiritual mother to Cornelia. No one is more amazed at her affection for Tweet than Cornelia herself, for throughout their twenty-odd year relationship Cornelia always thinks of herself as separate and superior to Tweet. Now, however, she confesses to Tweet, “You’ve been with me—I mean in New York. I’ve been in New York and you were—there . . .” (237).

Of course, Tweet does not respond to Cornelia’s powerful (and to Tweet) sentimental feelings. One reason is Tweet feels she must confess to the theft of an expensive barrette she had pilfered years before. Cornelia declares, “I would have given it to you. . . . Why did you steal my gold barrette?” (254). Tweet’s response strikes at the heart at what understanding she has to offer Cornelia, for she mocks Cornelia by reminding her, “I’m evil. Right is right, yeah. Uh huh, And wrong is wrong. People don’t do bad by accident” (254).

In Cornelia’s family, the moral alternatives of right and wrong are just as clearly divided as in the lines by Tweet during this moment. However, in the definition of Southern lady presented by her mother, Cornelia has never been allowed to name the evil she feels in herself and others. When she discovers that Tweet’s presence teaches her how to accomplish such a liberation, she feels a deep gratitude for Tweet. The real Tweet, not the imaginative one, reminds Cornelia that she has only just begun to see unnamed realities: “I hate you . . .
You ain’t got sense enough to know I hated you . . . And I steal that gold barrette to remind me of it. . . . Talking all that shit about me being with you in New York. You ain’t never seen me, heard me in your entire life” (254-55). Perhaps the sign of Comelia’s growing differentiation is she can now begin to be as honest and open as Tweet has always been.

In fact, the new Cornelia not only does not dislike the expression of negative feelings; rather, she freely expresses them. She can even include her spiritual mentor Tweet, as when she says “Damn you then... I hate you, too” (254). The two women then start fighting and wrestling on the floor. Tweet tries to force the barrette into Cornelia’s hand; Cornelia tries to make Tweet keep it. The battling continues for a few moments with both women cursing each other, but before long laughter breaks out. Cornelia ends the fight by asking, “What can we do now?” (256) Tweet answers by singing “Can’t quit you, baby . . . I love you, baby, but I . . . sure do hate your treacherous low down ways” (256). Thus, by the novel’s end, the two women have become equals and friends. Cornelia, then, does become an individuated, self-actualized character. By following Tweet’s example Cornelia is able to confront the family ties, memories, and roles, thereby divorcing herself from the limitations of her family. She emotionally has worked through her resentment toward her deceased mother and husband as well as her aging father. She also has accepted her son Andrew’s new
wife Willie Belle and Willie Belle's two children. Only by facing her problems—
as Tweet had always done—does Cornelia manage to stop trying to live the role of
the perfect Southern lady, the graceful water skier who skims "over the bright
surface of a calm lake under a blue sky" (39).

Cornelia now understands the reasons that Tweet kept welling up in her
mind's eye in New York, and it is strongly suggested that she will experience life
more fully in her future. Significantly, however, such differentiation does not
occur until Cornelia--imaginatively at least and with the support of her friend
Tweet--has confronted her family and broke free of the family system that had
entrapped her. In so doing, "Tweet and Cornelia have formed a new kind of
relationship between southern black and white women, based . . . . on an essential
consciousness of the patriarchally imposed barriers that divide them" (Tate 59).
As John Grigsby notes, Cornelia has "returned to the South, to Tweet . . . with a
new sense of who she is and of what life means for her" (47).

Thus despite her family system that comes replete with neglect and
abandonment, secrets, and stiff with rigidity and control, Cornelia frees herself
because she explores and faces these forces. To her credit, Cornelia is able to
break free to become an independent woman able to better determine the terms of
her own life. Unlike the first two protagonists--Abigail and Rhoda--Cornelia
does not remain connected to the original family. More similar to Virgie and
Marcia Mae, she faces the problems that her family and community present.

Additionally, however, she does not feel compelled to leave the community to begin life anew. Rather, she incorporates and integrates the past into the present. What she discovers and uncovers she applies to the relationships that she has in her life, making her the most courageous and differentiated female protagonist of this study.

End Notes

1. Breaking an entrenched family pattern can result in traumatic, even fatal, responses of family members as we see here. John’s death, despite its comic effect, is nevertheless realistic. Changing a pattern of behavior that others in the family have come to rely on and act on, can have devastating consequences for other family members. I think that this response underscores the significance that we attach to the behavior of others in our family. The interpersonal dynamics are generally more powerful than the the intrapsychic ones.

   For Cornelia, whose past behavior prohibits open communication of her anger to family members, particularly John, such behavior indicates and foreshadows future change both for her as well as for him and the others.

2. Although Cornelia is surprised at herself for stooping to telling lies to her children, such a family system as Cornelia’s fosters the development of lying. That is, when just prohibiting speech about forbidden topics and keeping secrets about subjects which are off-limits are not enough to avoid conflict and maintain homeostasis, lies will be employed. In such situations, telling falsehoods on subjects about which family members would have disagreed is—like secrets and prohibited speech patterns—simply a way of avoiding conflict which might lead to a disruption of the family patterns. When Cornelia lied to Andrew and Sarah, she did so because she knew one of their family patterns was that she had never been alone. “Since she was nineteen years old and flew from her tower bedroom to John’s loving arms, she had never done anything alone” (183). Linda Tate argues that Cornelia’s apparent rebellion did not create a significant, life-altering difference: “Yet Cornelia’s early elopement from the tower—despite its symbolic resonance—does not ultimately signal a real and profound move off the pedestal. If anything, John simply becomes a substitute for her mother”(55).
Chapter 7
The Self in the Family System

One of the central tasks of the study has been to analyze the ways in which each family system affects the developing identity of the protagonist, a pursuit balanced by the study of each daughter’s personal reaction to her specific circumstances. Indeed, in each of these literary families a significant element of the family system deeply influences the identity of the female protagonist. Furthermore, in each family we have discovered how identity is a combination of these family conditions and the individual’s response. For Abigail, the problem was neglect, secrets, and the transmission of the family secret to her generation. For Rhoda, the essential conditions that affected her identity were her father’s patriarchal values, her mother’s submissiveness, and Rhoda’s own divided attitude toward her assigned role in the family. Virgie herself faced neglect, and rebellion was her response. Marcia Mae responded to family secrets and prohibited speech by emotionally cutting herself off from the family. Cornelia became the dutiful daughter in response to the secrets in her family and her strong mother.

Ackerman argues that “a family is a household in which the behavior of any one person is at all times a function of the behavior of all other members” (16). Both the family as a collection of individuals functioning as a single entity
and the interplay between the individual and that group have been the foci of this study. For each female protagonist, these several factors—the family structure, the communication content and processes in the family, and the power issues of attention and control—provide a complex context for the interplay of the individual with the family system. Each protagonist employs various strategies of detachment, rebellion, or cutoff as each young (and sometimes not so young) protagonist seeks differentiation and independence. Yet the interworking of these family situations with the responses of the protagonists does not quickly lead to growth and individuation. Rather, the differentiation and independence of the protagonist is often postponed, sometimes even delayed until the protagonist is beyond her fortieth birthday.

Many times scholars look either to cultural or individual sources and causes. On this point, Ackerman suggests a synthesis: "When we move on to family, we do not leave individual psychology behind; rather, the ideas of family include the idea of the individual" (18-19). That is, by measuring the extremes of the spectrum, scholars have sought two very different kinds of cause. The family is the meeting ground of these two forces, the culture and the individual, and in fact, family theory possesses the methodology that seeks to explain its dynamics and its rules. Family systems theory presents ideas that reveal the central importance of the family to the development of the individual.
In using this framework to analyze fictional works, one finds that studying the family as a system holds up reasonably well under close scrutiny. In these five novels, we have seen how an action by a family member, most often one of the parents, brings about actions and reactions from the female protagonists. Another way in which the family acts as a system is in the determining power that the relationship between the parents possesses. In this study of fictional families, I have argued for the central importance of the relationship between the two parents as predetermining the outcome of family growth and change. In their actions, values, and even their inaction, we can also trace the growth and halted development of the fictional protagonists. Indeed, the forces that systems psychologists of the family have pointed out are well represented in the novel. The intrapsychic method alone does not offer these insights into individual development. In fact, the overwhelming influence of the Freudian model of individual psyche that has been used in literary studies has oversimplified the study of individual development.

We have examined the development and emergence of five female protagonists created by different contemporary Southern women writers. Each of these fictional lives develop within a unique family system, and in every case, I have found that the individual family system influences the protagonist's development in these white middle- and upper-class families in powerful ways.
The various means that the families use to communicate with family members—acceptable speech topics, repressed topics, and secrets, to mention a few—determine what information is readily available to the family members and influence how the protagonists think and act. Furthermore, both the specific family structure and the communication processes of the family support and tend to foster the cultural roles of belle and lady expected of these Southern daughters. While the family structures from which these fictional women emerge are indeed quite different—ranging from two-parent and single parent families to more unconventional arrangements—the behavior that is regularly expected of the protagonists is in fact fairly consistent and generally inflexible.

While each family harbors significant problems which create the potential for pain and freedom, the reaction of the individual protagonist to the teachings and values of her particular family system seems largely a function of the attention and control the family affords the protagonist. When the family offers too little or too much of either attention or control, the protagonist develops a more rigid sense of self, becoming a rebel or a staunch conformist. In these circumstances, the protagonist’s sense of self becomes either too strictly bound or too unstable.

We have seen these forces at work in each novel. In the Howland family of The Keepers of the House, neglect and abandonment (too little attention or
control) result in Abigail’s adoption of very rigid sense of self, an identity which proves too brittle under the pressures of her existence. In the Manning family of Net of Jewels, Rhoda receives a great deal of attention from Dudley and Ariane. These two parents also exercise an emphatic control over the life of their daughter, and as a result, Rhoda never develops independence (despite what she says in the coda). Rather, Rhoda experiences a cycle of rebellions and spats, each ending with the “divine” intervention of her father. These first two books portray the two extremes of the absence of control and exertion of too much control, and the damaged lives of the two protagonists, Abigail and Rhoda, demonstrate the power of these family systems.

In the Rainey family of The Golden Apples, an absent, weak father and a mother who combines strict behavior standards with a preoccupation for a stronger man, foster a deep rebellion in Virgie Rainey. Paradoxically, she seems to be one of the stronger characters, one who is impervious to her family’s influences. However, Virgie’s strengths are largely oppositional ones. She resists and by doing so redefines herself in opposition to others. At the end, she appears to be self-sufficient, even all-encompassing, when she recognizes her connection to all the lives that have touched and influenced her own. Yet we see her leaving her community in the end. Her departure demonstrates that Virgie’s life is not integrated with others in her community.
In the Hunt family of The Voice at the Back Door, Marcia Mae receives more attention, respect, and freedom than the protagonists in the first three books, yet she too lives in a family with its share of secrets, suppressed speech topics, and rigid control of gender roles. The tragic (and ignored) death of her brother and other nagging voices at the back door of her family’s system cause Marcia Mae to want to find a life elsewhere, but until she returns to face the hidden truths of her family, she is never really free to begin again anywhere else. As this novel ends, Marcia Mae has freed herself from the past and is moving forward toward a more independent future.

In the Wright family of Can’t Quit You, Baby, Cornelia reminds us of the perfectionistic behavior of Abigail Howland. The painful failure of Abigail to develop a strong sense of self is not repeated here, however, although for a good while the pattern looks the same. Initially Cornelia exhibits the familiar perfectionistic behavior, a naive and rigid sense of self, a tendency to ignore and deny the existence of ugly realities, and she certainly undergoes painful times (as did Abigail) when her world begins to fall apart. When the secrets begin to emerge, however, she calls on deeper reserves of strength and imagination than Abigail possessed. Ultimately, Cornelia does embrace a stronger identity by rejecting the forms of her original family and adopting new values as she integrates the remaining elements of her past and present lives.
According to Bowen’s theory of the family, it is “more difficult to be a self in a family than to appear to be a self in comparatively transient social groups, which make fewer and less persistent emotional demands” (Hall 36). This assertion is given embodiment in the female protagonists of these middle and upper class Southern families. The universal problems human beings face in moving toward self-sufficiency and independence are compounded by systems that reinforce denial of feelings and other realities, demand impossible standards of behavior, and strictly limit freedom of behavior. The female protagonists who are able to resist (like Virgie Rainey) or transform (like Marcia Mae Hunt and Cornelia Wright) these demands placed upon them, and who in doing so develop an integrated sense of self, exemplify those women Sarah Abbott describes as being “strong women, with an ancient pedigree, who adhered to a code of honor” (4), yet even the deepest chord of self in this code is not entirely distinct from the part that the family plays in the unfolding drama of the one and the many.
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