Father Melancholy's Daughter Short Guide

Father Melancholy's Daughter by Gail Godwin

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Contents

Characters

Father Melancholy's Daughter is very much a novel of character. Reviewers have noted that one meets an entire congregation in these pages.

While most minor characters are partially stereotypes, they are also distinct individuals. Mrs. Major, the parish's "She who must be obeyed," exerts her power through ploys like her obligatory Easter egg hunt. The developer's son, known in high school as the Blimp, slims down and becomes a credible crusading journalist. Many other characters walk through the narrative, all made vivid by their behavior and their impact on the Gowers' lives.

The four central characters — Margaret Gower, Reverend Walter and Ruth Gower, and Ruth's friend Madelyn — are all interesting, sympathetic, and flawed. Of them all, Ruth is both the most mysterious and the least developed. This is natural, as for most of the story she is present only through the memories of the other three people.

The reader gets to know each of these very well. Margaret collects absent-mother stories in childhood, featuring characters such as Cinderella, Snow White, Jane Eyre, Becky Sharp.

She followed the royal wedding avidly because Lady Diana Spencer's mother left her when she was six. As she grows up, Margaret has to bear not only the social burden of being a clergyman's daughter but the psychic one of seeing him through long stretches of dejection. Despite all this, she remains a pleasant young woman who faces the world with quiet cheer. Her biggest flaws are her tendencies to always serve others rather than herself and to accept social lies at face value.

Margaret is a complex and believable character, with one exception. In high school and college, she is totally unaware of her peer culture. It is plausible that her reserve and serious purpose might keep her from having much of a social life, but it defies belief for a bright young woman to go through college with only an elderly landlady and her best friend's smarmily infatuated kid brother for company. This lapse probably stems from the author's distance from an adolescent setting, rather than from Margaret's weirdness.

In an era when fictional priests usually have hidden sexual vices or deep doubts about their faith, it is nice to meet one who has neither. Father Walter Gower is an exemplary priest and pastor — sure of his faith, always believing the best about human motives and prospects, well versed in theology and church tradition. With his wife gone he comes to lean heavily on Margaret's support as a confidante and hostess. Critics have made much of this emotional neediness, but it is not such an uncommon pattern in single parent households, and their parent-child relationship appears mostly appropriate and benign. Walter, too, is handicapped by having no one else to whom he can turn with his own troubles.

And these are exceptional. Although he has no doubts about the essence of his faith, there are frequent times when a mental Black Curtain descends on him. During such times, nothing brings hope or pleasure or meaning; he goes through the motions of life without savoring any of it. It does not quite reach the point of clinical depression.

Walter is still able to function during these episodes. But they are a trial both to him and to those around him, even more so because he feels that, behind the Black Curtain, he is supposed to be looking for something which he never finds. Because we see him through Margaret's eyes, we cannot go very far into the darker thoughts that haunt him. When his depression fades, he is once more a congenial and optimistic man, full of plans for the future.

Margaret disliked Madelyn Farley the moment she arrived at the Gower household, carrying a strange granolatype energy food. When Ruth leaves with her — as fate would have it, to never come back — Madelyn becomes Margaret's unseen enemy for the rest of her childhood. It is not until after Walter's death that Margaret finally meets her again.

This results in the most dramatic reversal of the book. While in some ways Madelyn is just as Margaret remembered her — loud and tactless, lacking the grace of Southern women — she no longer appears an ogre. Margaret discovers her to be a vulnerable human being, devoted to her friends and her art, and even bearing love and guilt toward her dead friend's daughter. She ends up touring with Margaret as a surrogate mother, at a time when the younger woman needs it most.

Madelyn's day at the Gower household had been fateful for her too.

Among other things, it provoked an obsession with religious questions and images which led to her stunning plays. Sadly, Madelyn's newfound kindness cannot answer the question haunting Margaret since childhood: Would her mother have come home if she had lived?

Social Concerns

This novel is the story of the girlhood and coming-of-age of Margaret Gower, the daughter of an Episcopal priest in a small Virginia town. In many ways it seems like a tale from a bygone age, with its gentle and dutiful protagonist and her kind, learned father who nevertheless leaches enormous doses of moral support from her.

The town of Romulus, Virginia, too, seems to slumber in an earlier time. It still boasts formidable church ladies, their prideful gardens, and a speakeasy in the black district where mildly daring white teen-agers go to hear the blues.

But not even Romulus is immune to new currents stirring American life in the last third of our century. Father Gower's particular crosses are the 1979 revision of the Prayer Book, and the developer who seeks to destroy a cor ner that holds the church's historic stone crucifix. He copes by ignoring the first and mounting a city-wide protest against the developer's plans.

The biggest incursion, however, is the tragedy of his wife's leaving him and six-year-old Margaret to live with another woman. He can only cope by convincing himself (and half-convincing Margaret) that Ruth's true intentions were otherwise.

Abandonment by a parent is every child's fear. In earlier generations, the percentage of children raised without both parents may have been as large as now, but the causes tended to be involuntary: death, severe illness, or dire poverty. Only in recent decades have many children grown up apart from their mothers because of judges' decisions or the mother wanting to "get on with her own life." A mother leaving in order to join a female friend or lover was formerly unheard-of.

A parent's absence can either make or break a child. In Margaret's case, because she still has one loving, competent parent and grows up in a supportive community, she does fairly well. The main consequence is that she becomes sober and responsible too young. Also, she never ceases to search for clues to her mother's motives and proof of her mother's love.

Closely related to these events is a subtly feminist motif about women's identity and life course. Ruth Gower apparently fled Romulus and Walter because she found nothing for herself in the role of rector's wife. Perhaps this was merely because she married too young, without the chance to try out her fledgling artistic talent, or to know who she was. Walter Gower certainly believed this, and it helped him to forgive what another husband might have found unforgivable. Perhaps she simply married the wrong man for her, admirable though he might be in parishioners' eyes. Perhaps — although her friend Madelyn and her daughter Margaret both take pains to deny it — Ruth was primarily drawn to other women. Because Ruth dies in a car wreck only months after she leaves her husband and daughter, neither they nor the reader will ever know.

Losing her mother remains a central riddle in Margaret's life. After a few false starts it appears she will blend her needs for selfhood and service to others better than her mother did.

Whether she will also find an intimate relationship that meshes with these needs is left to the future.

Another socially related topic plays a part in the story. The religiondrenched drama that brings fame to Madelyn reminds one of controversial works such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical Jesus Christ Superstar, and Nikos Kazantzakis's The Last Temptation of Christ. The church's situation in a secular age is addressed in some other ways as well. Father Gower worries about declining church membership.

His response is simply to bemoan it and to be the best priest he can be.

Other responses are suggested by Adrian Bonner's pastoral counseling, Madelyn's quest through outrageous art, and Margaret's own mix of nurturance and scholarly piety. For the nonreligious reader, these may merely be interesting character tags. For Christians holding onto their faith, Walter's (and the Book of Common Prayer's) call to present "our selves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice" may well say something more profound. For both groups, the lore about the Christian year, the garb of priests, and the like is a colorful and unusual touch.

Techniques

The story is narrated by Margaret Gower from a first-person point of view. The chronology is basically direct, but with so many flashbacks and memory asides that time sometimes seem to loop around. The effect is not confusing; rather it is like looking into a scrapbook while visiting with the narrator. The most unusual device is a long epilogue, made up of letters which Margaret writes after her father dies and she leaves Romulus.

Themes

A woman's journey to identity is the primary theme of Father Melancholy's Daughter. Margaret must ask not only "Who am I?" but at the same time, "What do I owe to others?" before she can answer "What do I owe to myself?"

Margaret's way may be harder than most, because her own mother, who struggled with the same questions, is unavailable to her.

There is a related theme of how one's art or work connects with one's real life. Even without any feminist message the book shows these as harder for a woman to integrate than for a man. Walter's personal life and calling are all of one piece. Ruth had to leave home and family to even begin seeking her own work. Madelyn ultimately makes of her art not only a success but a larger statement, but she does it without much of a personal support system.

The author may not intend this reading; in fact most of Romulus's longtime inhabitants dwell in an earlier psychological framework where such questions do not arise. But the conflict is there, tying together two of Godwin's recurring motifs: a woman's identity and the puzzles of creativity.

Finally, there is a subtle theme of the timeless hidden within the passing years. The rhythms of the church year are cyclic and timeless; the town of Romulus rouses itself only partially and reluctantly to admit the concerns of the late twentieth century. Margaret becomes fascinated by the life of Hilda of Whitby, an early British abbess. In the Epilogue this theme is made more explicit. Margaret visits the island where the parish's namesake saint, Cuthbert, lived in 683, and imagines a circle linking him to present day events, and these to him.

Key Questions

This novel touches on many psychological and religious ideas in the course of the story. It also has much to say about relationships within the family and community. Its chronology is both linear and circular, with plot events interwoven with the timeless rhythms of the Christian year and of the centuries. The nature of time, the meaning of the liturgical year and its feasts, and the extent to which children repeat the patterns of their parents, are all topics suggested by its structure.

Unlike the protagonists of many coming-of-age novels, Margare t chooses a profession and identity without going through serious rebellion.

Groups might want to discuss how often this happens, and compare it to other novels, such as Susan Isaacs' Close Relations (1982), whose protagonists likewise choose courses that reflect their upbringing.

1. Almost one half of the entire book is taken up, or at least framed, in the events of Passion Week of 1988. Besides the fact that Walter Gower's heart attack occurs near the end of this week, does the author have another reason for writing the book this way?

2. Margaret thinks herself in love with Adrian Bonner, with whom she has only talked a few times, and who shows no signs that he is particularly aware of her. Is she as unaware of trying to replay her mother's romance with her father as she seems? Or is there something else at work here?

3. Why can she not fall in love with Ben MacGruder, whom she has known since childhood, and who pursues her unflaggingly?

4. Does Hilda of Whitby's story have unusual meaning for Margaret, apart from scholarly interest? For Madelyn?

5. Do you think Margaret's close and mutually protective relationship with her father was unhealthy? Why or why not?

6. Walter Gower bemoans the fact that his church, like many others, has lost members and importance in people's lives in recent decades. Do Margaret's and Madelyn's career choices have anything to do with the issue?

7. Do you believe Madelyn's statement that she and Ruth were not lovers?

8. If Walter Gower had found a colleague like Adrian earlier, someone in the same town who shared at least his professional interests, would he have depended so much on Margaret for company?

9. Is the fact that Walter never remarries just due to bad timing in popping the question to Katherine? How would Margaret have reacted to a stepmother joining the family when she was fifteen?

10. Walter Gower railed against the idea of women priests. Would he have accepted Margaret's decision to go to the seminary, if he had known?

11. Margaret Farley's stage productions are outrageous in conventional religious terms. Some might call them blasphemous. Yet religious questions have haunted her ever since the day she visited the Gower household. What is she trying to accomplish in her drama?

Literary Precedents

To a large extent Godwin establishes her own approach and message in this book. Its contrasts with other works of similar subject matter are more illuminating than the similarities.

Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield (1766) is a melodramatic tale of an idealistic vicar and fond father. Goldsmith's plotting is more intricate and coincidental, and his Dr. Primrose is more simplistic than Father Gower.

Samuel Butler's The Way of All Flesh (1903) is a classic novel of growing up in a rectory. Its protagonist clashes with the verities of his upbringing in a way completely alien to Margaret Gower.

Many fairy and folk tales have motherless girls as the heroine. The dynamic of such stories as "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty" is quite different from Margaret's story, much as she may have consoled herself with these tales in childhood. She has no evil stepmother to contend with, but no handsome prince comes to protect or rescues her, either. Margaret has to do this for herself. In symbolic terms, this shows identity replacing sexuality as the prime developmental task for a young woman.

Susan Howatch's "Starbridge" novels are contemporary books which share some of the same features. Like Father Melancholy's Daughter, they examine questions of faith and identity in a setting of Anglican church life. Scandalous Risks (1991), with its young woman protagonist, and Absolute Truths (1994), about a bishop who loses his wife and suffers a crisis of faith, have the closest plot parallels.

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