

A Mother and Two Daughters Short Guide

A Mother and Two Daughters by Gail Godwin

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Characters

All three main characters, a mother and two daughters, are nonconformists — most obviously, daughter Cate, who has some qualities of an "aging" Beatnik/hippie/feminist, unable to remain comfortably at one job or in one environment, let alone one relationship, although at the end she shows some (faint) signs of mellowing and stability. Cate is argumentative, narrow-minded, often infuriatingly alive, tempting the reader to argue with her harsh judgments or stubborn, self-destructive choices. Her sister, Lydia, is a less vivid but perhaps more realistic character. Leaving her eighteen-year marriage, she succeeds in a new life — at college, at a career, and at sex — with a bit more ease than most "real" women would.

The mother, Nell, is by no means a typical representative of the older, more conventional, "unenlightened" generation that populates many other such novels. She has had an unusually strong, stubborn streak from girlhood, and is not a helpless widow when her husband's death opens the novel. She is somewhat tough and acerbic with the community and with her daughters (especially the difficult Cate), refusing to fit into the clubs and gossip of other local widows — so she, like Lydia, finds another life and a man for herself.

Social Concerns

Gail Godwin has been quoted in Contemporary Authors as objecting to the "Fad" for analyzing novels from a sociological or political point of view, and she also has no desire to be classified as a feminist novelist, yet all her works lend themselves superbly to analysis of contemporary "relevant" issues. One of the main characters in *A Mother and Two Daughters*, Lydia, has left her marriage and returned to school. Her doubts and growing confidence are typical emotions experienced by numerous women who change their lifestyles. Lydia, who eventually becomes a successful and independent television personality, is an outstanding "role model." But so is her mother, from an earlier generation, a nurse who also has made a strong identity for herself. The novel embraces about sixty years of women's changing status and choices, with two clear successes and the equivocal case of Cate, the drifting, complaining, unsettled teacher.

As in many of Godwin's books, the women make clearer impressions than the men, who are absent or perfunctorily dealt with, except for one heroic rich man, living in splendor on a hill, who wishes to be a rescuing knight in shining armor, but is kept waiting.

Techniques

Just as the themes in *A Mother and Two Daughters* are more subtle and less "literary" than those of Godwin's previous novels, so are its techniques. In fact, this novel is notable for its absence of self-conscious techniques. It contrasts especially with *The Odd Woman* (the author's largest novel before this) which is filled with allusions, quotations, stories-within-stories, summaries of novels real and imagined, all of which make for fascinating intellectual exercise, but probably limited its popularity. The scholarly reader may miss the rich pattern of parallel fictions presented in *The Odd Woman*, but the newer novel may also strike one as the author's least pretentious work.

Themes

A Mother and Two Daughters differs from Godwin's earlier, and less popular, works in that creativity and artistry are not dominant themes. The average reader can identify with all the main characters, even the intellectual Cate.

The novel does not "announce" its themes as openly as *The Odd Woman* (1974) or *Violet Clay* (1978); hence, it is less self-consciously literary and can be read for enjoyment rather than analysis.

The straightforward title points to the themes of family and of comparison of the women's goals and lives.

The abrasive Cate seems destined to rebel forever against family, commitment, or any sort of confinement. She cannot even get along with her deceptively gentle sister, Lydia. Late in the book, the building tension between the sisters explodes into a (literally) fiery confrontation, but then the book relaxes into a glowing, heartwarming family reconciliation which is entirely convincing and seems to express a faith in togetherness that is new for Godwin.

Literary Precedents

A Mother and Two Daughters marks a turning point in Godwin's work, not only in popularity, but in themes, techniques, and precedents. Such early novels as *The Perfectionists* and *Glass People*, and most of the stories in *Dream Children*, reflected a world-weary anomie. The characters' spiritual malaise recalled the paralysis of James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) stories, the lovelessness of Eliot's "Waste Land" (1922), and the ennui of Camus's *The Stranger* (1942). (One critic, Crain in *The New York Times*, also classified these as part of the more contemporary "Mad Housewife" school of fiction.)

Godwin's next works, *The Odd Woman*, *Violet Clay*, and most of the stories in *Mr. Bedford and the Muses* (1983), were especially concerned with creativity, literature, art, and the problems of creative people trying to bring order to real life. Henry James's *Stories of Artists and Writers* is the most illustrious precedent for these works.

A *Village Voice* reviewer, Carol Sternhell, traced *A Mother and Two Daughters* back to such rich, fully plotted and characterized nineteenth-century novels as George Eliot's. While such leisurely, emotional women's fiction has flourished throughout the last fifty years or more, it has seldom had such resonance and depth as Godwin's. Her novel has the surface of popular fiction, but the richness to transcend its genre, and to last.

One might also note that there has been a sharp increase in popularity and stature for women's fiction since the feminist movement and since the success of Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* in 1977, but Godwin's book, while benefiting from these trends, lacks the anger of feminism in general or French in particular. The angry character, Cate, is frequently depicted as wrong or foolish. *A Mother and Two Daughters* emerges as among the most benign of modern women's books, including Godwin's own.



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