A Southern Family Short Guide

A Southern Family by Gail Godwin

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Characters

In 1987, while working on A Southern Family, Godwin wrote "All my protagonists . . . disguised by gender or species, occupation or social class or hardly disguised at all—are parts of myself." This novel, apparently written in response to a shattering event in Godwin's own family, has at least eight protagonists—and, if we believe Godwin's statement, each one is a part of its author. The central figure, Theo Quick, dies before page eighty of this six-hundred page book, after he has spoken for himself in only scattered bits of dialogue. The remaining seven major characters—Theo's half sister, Clare; his estranged wife, Snow; his brother, Rafe; his mother and father, Lily and Ralph; Clare's boyfriend, Felix; and her best friend, Julia—spend the rest of the book searching for keys to Theo, and, in doing so, they learn a great deal about themselves and reveal even more to the reader.

At the same time, they all examine class and, of course, the Southern family.

Theo was a gentle and confused young man who alternated between charming and repelling those he should have loved and those who should have loved him. At twenty-eight, he had yet to find a satisfying direction for his life (not all that unusual in the Quick family), and his only passion was his son Jason. During the last twenty-four hours before he takes his own life in a dramatic murder/suicide, he speaks with each of the other protagonists, and in each case, what he said would be interpreted as an unanswered plea for help. The one exception is Felix who, although he had not spoken with him for months, had his own reasons for feeling that he had let Theo down.

In the remainder of the book, each of the survivors tries to figure out what motivated this peaceable and romantic, if antisocial, young man to commit his final violent act, made more violent by the fact that it was witnessed by a child. Julia, a college professor, who sacrificed a promising career to return to her home town and a second-rate university to care for her ailing parents, seems to be the most stable of the lot, but her exploration of her own contribution to Theo's suffering reveals a profound defensiveness about the uncomplicated life she has chosen.

Ralph has made a tenuous leap from his working-class background into the prosperous middle class, but his efforts to endow his sons with its benefits have been unproductive at best, destructive at worst. Not unlike the lawns of his nottoo-distant cousins in Appalachia, Ralph's house is surrounded by the more luxuri ous detritus of his economically successful life. Neither of his sons was comfortable in the prestigious prep school he attended, and each contrived not to graduate. Ralph is left to pick up the pieces and to seek consolation from the elderly survivor of an "old family" with whom he finds an unlikely camaraderie. His wife Lily detests him, not for having an affair with a German doctor, but for insisting on telling her about it. Ignoring the fact that she is the daughter of a railroad man and fancying herself a relic of the genteel South, she has revealed to no one but herself that Theo was her favorite— especially not to Theo who might have lived had he known or to Rafe who assumes that she, like everyone else, favors him. She prepares herself for old age by visiting selected elderly residents of

nursing homes while she contemplates life without Theo—the only family member she thinks would have seen her through her own decline.

Rafe, the slightly younger brother, has been mistakenly labeled by his family as the "golden son" who does everything right. Never mind that he managed to break a cardinal rule of the prep school and get expelled days before he was to graduate as valedictorian. Never mind that he drinks too much, a tradition in the best Southern families. Never mind that while Theo's "leave" from his position at an accounting firm to save himself from being fired is viewed as a personal failure, Rafe's "leave" from law school before he flunked out is viewed as a smart move. Never mind that at twentysix Rafe is just as mystified about his future as Theo was about his. Rafe has a powerful chest, a good suntan, no redneck wife, and charm that does not disappear at awkward moments. He is the family pride, and no one sees his failings.

Rafe, however, is consumed by both the sudden realization that he loved his brother and by guilt that he is alive while his brother is dead.

Snow, the uneducated wife from the Appalachian foothills, appears to be the most vital character because she alone speaks directly to the reader in her own voice. The others speak through a thirdperson narrator or to another character.

Rafe, for example, reveals himself to a psychiatrist; Clare reveals herself in letters to the dead Theo. Snow fancies herself the only one who really knew Theo. Since she fled the Quick influence and their snobbery, she has had a telephone relationship with Theo that involved much more give and take than any of his interactions with his family. At Theo's death, Snow's main concerns are that he be buried as he would have wanted rather than as a statement of Quick social pretensions and that she regain custody of their child.

Snow's monologue suggests that she is a better parent for Jason than any of the Quicks would be. But then seeing her trailer home and extended family through Julia's and Clare's eyes, calls for a reassessment of that view. When Clare assesses her own ambivalence about Theo's death by seeking out Snow in her mountainous home, she is dismayed by the lack of quaintness and good yeoman stock around her. Try as she might to admire the remnants of Elizabethan speech in Snow's expressions, she is distracted by the poverty and ugliness of the surroundings and Snow's apparent lack of ambition. Just as the Quick family seems to be moving nowhere in their pretensions to upper-class status, Snow's family seems complacent in its gloomy surroundings, waiting for something good to happen.

Clare, the writer, emerges as the interpreter of Theo's death and of the Southern family itself, but not until she has revealed that she shares the family's chief shortcoming: reinventing family folklore to present the image of themselves they want the world to see. She alone of the Quicks—and she is actually a Campion, daughter of her mother's first marriage—has been successful and uses that success to advantage. Even she, however, cannot accept success and personal happiness without guilt.

Social Concerns

While Gail Godwin would rather not be known as a writer on social issues, she admits to a fascination with class, especially in the South. A Southern Family is not only about class in the South; it is an indictment of a class-stratified society that imposes devastating effects on those who are trapped in it. At a time when Americans are becoming ever more aware of this class difference and the increasing difficulties of upward mobility, A Southern Family offers an especially topical exploration of this social imbalance and its victims. Set in the South where few have ever denied the existence of class and many have reveled in it, this book reveals as much about the America of the future as it does about the South of the past. All of the characters muse on the effects of social class on themselves and those around them. Even Clare, the only successful and satisfied member of the family, wonders how different her life would have been if she had the security of an "old family."

Godwin gives us a South of many classes: remnants of the supposed aristocracy of old families (some in genteel poverty); the cultured and affluent New South; the affluent New South unable to assimilate culture; the "rednecks" resisting the New South; the smug but stagnant intelligentsia; and the pretenders. Not one Southern character is secure and confident with her place in contemporary society.

In addition to class and its effects, Godwin explores family dynamics.

Through her detailed study of the financial Quick family and less extensive ventures into the dynamics of three others, Godwin questions the definition of family, the conflicting obligations to family and self, and, perhaps, whether any family can ever be a positive force—at least in today's South. Godwin also explores the relationship of Southerners to the South itself. Can a Southerner, she asks, leave the South behind and can a Southerner survive if she does not? This is not a novel that leaves readers yearning for the South's endearing qualities.

As in much of her writing, Godwin examines the obligations of an artist to her public and to her family. Where is an artist justified in modifying the truth for effect and audience satisfaction? For example, every member of the Quick family (and maybe every Southerner) adjusts memory so that when a story is told it will have the maximum desired effect on the listener—whether it be to make the story more amusing or to present the teller in an acceptable light. To Clare, as a disaffected Southerner and member of the Quick family, the habit of altering memory is a negative characteristic of her people and yet, without fully realizing it, she indulges in it herself. In her role as a writer, on the other hand, Clare assumes twisting the "truth" to be part of her craft.

Techniques

A Southern Family is presumably the novel that Clare writes to tell her story. In her final conversation with Theo, he confronts her with her habit of tying everything up at the ends of her books and with rewarding the protagonists. He challenges her to write about an event that cannot be explained. And then he presents her with such an event. The whole book is an exploration of the event from every major character's point of view and reveals Clare's resolve to deal with that which cannot be neatly wrapped up.

The novel is a shifting tapestry of points of view in which readers are provided enough material about each character to attempt their own explanation of the unexplainable. As the novel opens with Julia's view of the family the evening before the tragic event, the reader finds that she associates with the Quicks only as an avenue to continued friendship with Clare. Several "chapters" follow in which one learns from each character's point of view the reactions of each to the tragedy and, more importantly, how each views him or herself, the Quick family, the institution of the family, and finally the South. Transparent bits of self-deceit on each character's part provide one with that delicious smug feeling that one "understands" better than the narrator.

Despite the lack of action in the book—the only real "event" is Theo's death—Godwin builds suspense through various characters' remarks about family history which are gradually expanded. If we still fail to understand the Quick family, we certainly know almost everything there is to know about it.

In A Southern Family, Godwin reveals herself as a truly Southern writer. After trying several times to displace her fiction from her Southern background, she chooses in this book to examine her own geographic and family background. While the novel is hardly traditional autobiographical fiction, Godwin draws upon events and people from her own life while disguising them less than she has in other works. She uses the Southern landscape, its society, and most of all its social classes to reveal a particular dysfunctional Southern family and Southern families in general. Like William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and others, she permits her characters to speak in paragraphs so that her pages of dialogue would look like pages of exposition in other fiction.

Key Questions

A Southern Family is a novel of talking—through long passages characters reveal themselves and the plot through their accounts of themselves and of events. For some discussion group members, this will be the basis for their difficulty understanding the novel: The chestbeating lamentations of guilt, remorse, regret, and self-righteousness may seem like the whining of simpletons. A discussion of why an author would choose a format of characters recounting their versions of events could break through the resistance group members might have to a plot that is almost entirely psychological. The most common reason an author has for such a narrative is a desire to explore how different people may view reality in different ways—it is a reach for a universal question for human beings: How do we know what we know? A Southern Family implies that there are levels of meanings created by how an individual person acquires knowledge.

Firsthand observations involve some disagreement among observers, but then the observers, often consciously reshape events to suit their own purposes, which means that learning about an event from someone telling about it can be very misleading. This problem is solved in part by Godwin by presenting several different accounts, allowing for comparisons of each and a chance for finding out the truth.

As a regional novel, A Southern Family invites discussion of its portrait of daily life and the culture of its characters. Its title implies that it may be generalizing about Southern family life. Does it do so?

Is it accurate? What points does it make about the strengths and weaknesses of Southern families? The characters in the novel are divided by their various individual misunderstandings of events but are also divided by class. Is the class structure in the novel revealing about Southern culture? A good discussion may eventually move beyond these issues to ones focusing on American culture in general.

Do the social concerns of the characters apply to life in America beyond the South?

1. The South is composed of many states and millions of people. Is it possible for an author to generalize about the South's culture through a novel about a family? Does Godwin manage to do so in A Southern Family?

2. Does A Southern Family successfully use its account of one family to comment on Southern families in general?

3. In a discussion of Southern regional literature, William Faulkner almost always comes to mind. He, too, deals with families and class distinctions, as well as with the misunderstandings and cruelties associated with each. One of his most difficult works, The Sound and the Fury (1929), takes the issues of individual perceptions and social confusions to greater extremes than does A Southern Family, and may make for a revealing comparison. For instance, are the observations made by characters in A Southern Family as clouded by cultural bias as Faulkner implies in his novel?

4. Is Theo Quick a tragic figure or a selfish jerk? Is there any way that his last actions can be justified?

5. Characters in the novel seem to think they each should have said something to Theo that would have prevented his murder-suicide. What does Godwin imply with this response? That we all feel guilty when someone close to us dies? Or is there a deeper meaning, perhaps that no one but Theo himself was actually responsible?

6. What would be the best outcome for Theo's child?

7. How responsible is society for the lives and feelings of the characters? Are their actions and reactions shaped by forces greater than themselves? Is any personally responsible for his or her own behavior?

8. If the characters are aspects of the author, do they form a composite image of Godwin?

9. What is the truth in A Southern Family? Is any of the characters a reliable source of information?

10. Why would Godwin have her characters make false statements that we readers would easily spot?

11. Is A Southern Family judgmental, analyzing and rendering verdicts on the people and society it portrays?

12. How important is gender in determining the status of the novel's characters? What are the expectations of society based on a character's gender? Does social class alter such expectations?

13. Does gender play a role in how characters view, form opinions about, and describe events?

14. What purpose do the contradictions in accounts serve?

15. Which characters grow during the novel? What do they learn about themselves? Who grows the most? Will any of them alter their behavior because of what he or she has learned?

16. What techniques does Godwin use to hold the attention of readers?

Literary Precedents

While A Southern Family is certainly not feminist in the political sense and reveals neither anger not mystification about female roles in society, it is feminist. That is, characters are explored largely through their gender roles. In that sense, Godwin falls into a tradition that began with Jane Austin and continues in the writing of women to the present.

Godwin's concern with class and its effect on individual development puts A Southern Family squarely in the contemporary milieu. While a sense of place is also consistent with contemporary concerns, this novel reflects the original concern of such early to midcentury novelists as Willa Cather, William Faulkner, Ellen Glasgow, and Eudora Welty. And in A Southern Family, the introspection of Godwin's characters puts her squarely in a Southern literary tradition where characters (and authors speaking through them) examine and reexamine their society and their places in it.

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