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Résumé de l'article

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NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

The Narrative Shaping of Meaning in Gail Godwin's *A Southern Family*: Why Fiction?

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In her novel *A Southern Family* (1987), Gail Godwin fictionalized a real-life incident concerning a suicide-murder in her family. Interweaving narrative theory and literary analysis, this paper asks "why fiction?" for the telling of this story. In the context of narrative's capacity to "make present" our experiences (Schiff, 2012, p.36), the paper explores some of the ways in which Godwin makes this fictional work an effective narrative tool for shaping meaning, and it suggests that the novel's narrativity transforms this traumatic background story into both a work of art and a form of "story repair" (Howard, 1991, p. 149).

On October 2, 1983, novelist Gail Godwin received shocking news. Her half-brother Tommy had shot and killed his girlfriend and then himself. A New Yorker for the past 30 years, Godwin was visiting her mother in North Carolina when the two dead bodies were discovered in an automobile, so she was with the family in their initial crisis. The incident haunted Godwin, and she wrote about it in fictionalized form in her novel *A Southern Family* (1987), published just four years after Tommy's death. Godwin openly acknowledges the novel's correlations to her life, calling *A Southern Family* one of her two "most autobiographical books" (as cited in Donlon, 1994, p. 11). Years later, in her nonfiction work *Heart* (2001), she speaks in the first person about the events surrounding her half-brother's death. The account is only twelve pages, but it makes apparent to a reader of both works how closely the novel adheres to key details of the real-life event. Despite its many correspondences to real life, in *A Southern Family* Godwin uses what she calls a "fictional truth," in which her allegiance is to her "material" and her "vision" rather than to the external facts (as cited in Donlon, p. 17). This paper asks "why fiction?" for the telling of this story. To answer this question, it explores some of the ways in which Godwin makes fiction an effective narrative tool for shaping meaning and, to borrow Jerome

Bruner's (1986) memorable words, how she "creates possible worlds through the transformation of the ordinary and the conventionally 'given'" (p. 49), by using the suppleness of fiction to create a work that is both narrative art and narrative therapy.

According to Gerben Westerhof and Ernst Bohlmeijer (2012), in narrative therapy, the goal is to find a better way to reframe and/or replace the "problem-saturated story" with "an alternative, more satisfying, or preferred story" (pp. 118-119), and this process is what happens in *A Southern Family*. In telling about her half-brother's murder-suicide in novelistic form, Godwin is drawn instinctively to what Brian Schiff (2012) identifies as narrative's most interesting and essential characteristic: "the meanings that we are able to express and articulate through narrating" (p. 35). Schiff speaks, as well, of narrative's ability to "make present" our experiences (p. 36) through communicating "the feel and texture of our lives" (p. 37) and through bringing into a confluence of time and space the unwieldy details of a story to make it alive in the now —personally, socially, and culturally. George S. Howard (1991) uses the term "story repair" to highlight the narrative nature of therapy: "Life—The Stories We Live By; Psychopathology—Stories Gone Mad; Psychotherapy—Exercises in Story Repair" (p. 194); he emphasizes the important role of culture in shaping "some of the stories we live by" (p. 190). Jill Freedman and Gene Combs (1996) aspire "to think more like novelists and less like technocrats" (p. 33) in doing narrative therapy. Their description of the process of narrative therapy emphasizes the parallel between fiction-writing and narrative therapy: "Particular strands of narrative are selected and thickened by weaving back and forth between story development and meaning-making. That is, as someone begins to develop an alternative story . . . a tapestry of story developments and their meaning is woven" (p. 140).

Freedman and Combs articulate what many novelists, readers, and theorists know intuitively, regarding fiction: "that truth can be found in descriptions of events that never occurred" (p. 99). In fiction's ability to weave together what is factual and what is possible, in its ability to interweave details and patterns, it taps into the affective realm. Thus, in the case of the unclear sequence of events regarding the trauma of her half-brother's desperate emotions and violence to self and other, Godwin may have needed to go to a fictional mode to create a narrative of what happened, especially one which provides access to feelings about the event and reframes the life of Theo (the fictional counterpart of her half-brother Tommy) to suggest some redemptive meaning for it. As Judith

Herman (1992) explains, traumatic memories are stored in a nonverbal part of the brain in the form of images and bodily sensations, not in language. In constructing this work from shadowy details and incomplete knowledge, Godwin, herself shocked by the event, in effect performs as a novelist the roles of both therapist and patient so as to gain perspective and to reconstruct with affect the story of what happened from incomplete memories and from language that is often "partially dissociated" in early narrative attempts. As Herman explains: "Out of the fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation, patient and therapist slowly reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context," but the narrative itself, "without the accompanying emotions," is "without therapeutic effect" (p. 177). Indeed, using fiction to tell the truth in and about a traumatic situation, in actuality, may make the story more, not less, accurate regarding its deepest emotional truths.

What Bruner (1998) says of the journalist can also be applied to the novelist writing autobiographical fiction: "It is his or her function not simply to cherish the facts that do not yet make sense in anybody's story but also to generate candidate narratives that both handle those aberrant facts and generate new ones" (p. 6). For Godwin, as for Bruner (1998), "[facts] live in context; what holds most human contexts together is a narrative" (p. 6). In Arthur Frank's (2002) words, stories "do not present a self formed before the story is told" but rather become the means by which the person "become[s] for the first time that which [she or] he is" (p. 15). It is as if, in reframing the life of Tommy through Theo, Godwin allows Tommy to become what he would have become if he had more time to let him emerge through story into what he is. And, indeed, writing the novel seems to have helped Godwin to work through her complex response of sorrow, horror, and guilt, for in March of 2009, when I interviewed her about parallels between her life and fiction, she pointed me to *A Southern Family* (personal interview, March 18, 2009). Clearly, she regards the novel as spiritually rich and personally and artistically revealing.

To explore the way that Godwin's novel is both a form of narrative therapy and art, we will turn our attention to some specific ways Godwin shapes narrative meaning and accomplishes story repair in three primary story threads: in Theo/Tommy's life and death, in Clare Campion/Gail Godwin's writing, and in Southern culture. In seeing why and how the choice of using fiction fosters story repair in these three primary threads, we will look through the lenses of five artistic components that enhance the shaping of meaning in the novel: naming,

polyphony, parallelism, metanarrative reflection, and generative metaphor. These artistic components help weave a powerful and artistically complex novel in which the "problem-saturated story" [is reframed] with "an alternative, more satisfying, or preferred story" (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, pp. 118-119).

Naming

The naming of characters is an essential aspect of fiction-writing, and often authors find this action very significant to their artistic purposes. Godwin's penchant for attaching importance to the naming of her characters is made salient in *Heart* (2001): "I wrote about this [Tommy's death] in *A Southern Family*. Tommy became Theo, a name that would have suited him well. Rebel became Rafe. I chose the name Clare for myself because I hoped for more clarity" (p. 148). Though many other names in the novel have important associations, we will focus here on the name *Theo*, for, although Theo dies early in the novel, he is the absence around which the novel takes its shape. Indeed, Theo becomes, in some odd way, a Christ-figure, despite his seemingly meaningless self-destruction and the apparent misfiring of his life. *Theodore* means "God's gift" (Room, 2002) but the name Theo, used throughout the novel, is itself a root form of *Theos*, meaning God. In its Germanic roots, *Theobald* means a "bold, brave" person (Hanks & Hardcastle, 2006). As the novel winds itself outward, Theo's disdain of class and race elitism and his desire to help and rescue others emerge. Though his suicide can be seen as cowardly, through the memories of others, his unconventional resistance to the claustrophobic snobbery and rules of southern stratified life lend him a brave and bold persona. In his acceptance of all people, he can be seen as a friend of God, and his mysterious appearances in his brother Rafe's drunken stupor and in Sister Patrick's dream make us feel that he not only is not dead in spirit, but is loved by God.

Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon's (1994) interview with Godwin provides an important clue to the personal significance of Theo's name for the author, who shares her childhood memory of a series of "made up stories" her mother told her, around "a particular character named Theophelus, 'The Awfullest Bear in the World,' and he was always in some trouble." The adult Godwin sees this character created by her mother as a "combination of what [her mother] was like as a bad little girl and what I was like as a bad little girl. Or what we would have *liked* to be like" (p. 12). Godwin shows this same identification with the character

whose actions express the shadow side of herself in her description of her first short story, written when Godwin was eight years old, about a man named Ollie, whom she, as a reflective adult, feels certain "came out of Theophelus doing things – expressing our rage, misbehaving" (p. 13). This combination of acting out and being lovable can be seen in the character Theo, whom Clare, the writer figure in the novel, comes to see as a part of herself that she could have but did not become. The association for Godwin, whether conscious or unconscious, between Theophelus and Theo is made clear by their proximity in Godwin's thoughts. Not long after telling her story about Theophelus, Godwin turns to the topic of Theo and his awareness of "the whole codes business: the sub-stories and the sub-texts and the using courtesy as a lubricant, as well as a weapon. My character Theo, in *A Southern Family,* has a conversation with a European man about this topic: southern codes and courtesy as *weapon*" (p. 15). Because the name *Theophelus*, a variant spelling of *Theophilus,* means "friend of God," as well as "lover of God or beloved by God" (Hanks & Hardcastle), and Theophilus is the person addressed by Luke in two books of the New Testament, Godwin's personal associations with Theo's name exude both aspects of her vision of him in the novel: misguided and admirable, secular and spiritual.

Ron Emerick (2001) calls Godwin's "selection of a name for the mysterious Theo . . . crucial" (p. 138). Rhetorically asking why Godwin has named "what [he] would argue, is the novel's main character so obviously," he answers: "Godwin clearly wants us to make the connection between Theo and divinity, and she confirms the connection in numerous references to Christ and the New Testament throughout the novel" (p.138). Admitting that Theo, chiefly because of his suicide and his murder of his girlfriend, might be seen as "an unlikely candidate for sainthood," Emerick shows that "despite some evidence to the contrary, Godwin continuously reinforces the connections between Theo and Christ," including his carpentry work for his father and his laughingly delivered description as a savior by Clare: "Theo was always trying to save people. . . . He would drive around at night when he was a teenager, with this first-aid kit he had, hoping to find an accident" (as cited by Emerick, p. 138). Emerick cites the compellingly suggestive interaction between the dead Theo and the drunken Rafe, his brother. Rafe cries out, "Theo, you've got to help me. Jesus! My head is going around like those strobe lights and I'm so sick I could die!" Theo tells Rafe that even though it's too late for himself, he can "get [Rafe] home," saying "Let me tell you the secrets of the universe. You won't remember any of it in the

morning, but you'll know I at least got you home" (p. 506). For Emerick, this sequence is a dream, but Godwin leaves it ambiguous whether the alcohol-soaked Rafe actually drives home safely in a severely impaired state or whether he simply falls asleep drunk and dreams. Clearly, in either interpretation, Theo is a Christ figure for Rafe. And in Sister Patrick's dream sequence, in the last chapter, a man rises from the dead, and she just knows this refers to Theo. When she tells Lily about the dream, which relates Theo to Christ via the image of rising from the dead, Sister Patrick enhances Lily's faith and gives her hope. In fact, Theo, in his absence, is the central character of the novel.

Polyphony

Being able to choose innuendo-rich names is one advantage for Godwin in choosing fiction over autobiographical account to tell this story, both artistically and personally. As we have seen in exploring Theo's name, the choice of his name helps Godwin to find an artistic resonance in the story even as she accomplishes part of her own needed story repair by finding a better way to view her half-brother Tommy's life and death. Being able to write from many points of view is another. Godwin skillfully weaves multiple viewpoints and voices into the novel, helping her to artistically enrich the novel's layers of meaning and to suggest an emerging cultural story repair. The term "polyphony" is being used broadly here, to encompass variegation of voice, socio-linguistic register, and complexity of dialogic interaction caused not only by the varied voices and societal-cultural backgrounds of the characters who interact but by the doubled voice caused by the author's indirect voice behind the characters' words. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's general observation about the novelist, in "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-1935/1981), is very applicable to Godwin's use of multiple viewpoints in *A Southern Family*:

> The prose writer as a novelist does not strip away the intentions of others from the heteroglot language of his works, he does not violate those socio-ideological cultural horizons (big and little worlds) that open up behind heteroglot languages—rather, he welcomes them into his work. The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions. (pp. 299-300)

Because of the inextricable relationship of culture with fiction, and with construction of self, Bruner (1991) compares autobiography with the novel, in that both "[involve] not only the construction of self, but also a construction of one's culture" (p. 77). He emphasizes the need to bring out the significance of a life "in the constructing, in the text, or the text making" (p. 69), as "self-making (or 'life-making') depends heavily upon the symbolic system in which it is conducted—its opportunities and constraints" (p. 77). Alan Palmer's use of the term "intermental," which he links to "social minds," surely fits *A Southern Family*, with his emphasis, as described by Jens Brockmeier (2011), on narrative as a means of "giv[ing] shape to phenomena such as social discourses, collective thinking, and forms of consciousness that are constituted by more than one thinking, talking, and feeling individual" (p. 260).

In seeking to create meaning, in the novel and in her life, regarding Theo/Tommy's untimely death and unsettled life, Godwin brings into the novel the shifting culture of the South, almost as a character. Theo's early refusals to adhere to race and class boundaries make his voice distinct from what would be expected in his immediate cultural environment, but he seems unable to do more than "shock the bourgeoisie" (p. 286), rather than using his insights to create a meaningful life narrative for himself. Theo's protests, including wearing an inappropriate suit to his job at an accounting firm, his marriage to the mountain girl Snow, his earlier close personal friendship with the African American construction worker LeRoy, with whom he was "pretty much inseparable till LeRoy went off to prison for armed robbery" (p. 283), are a sign of the breaking down of old social barriers, as is Lily's shocking marriage to Ralph Quick, Clare's stepfather, who came from the lower classes and is part Native American. The death of the Old South is reflected in these socially resistant actions. But, like the meaning of Theo's life that ultimately is constructed in the novel, the resilience of the South is the story of its rising from the ashes of its outdated mores, as seen more steadily in the slower changes in the old guard, like the evolving friendship of Clare's mother Lily with Thalia, an African American masseuse, and the willingness of Julia's father to exchange gardening tips with and socially befriend the wife of the African American doctor who lives on his block.

Thus, society and culture are important parts of the novel's polyphony. Throughout the novel, small changes like these indicate the presence of ongoing story repair in the narrative of class and race

relations in the South. As Bruner (2008) points out, not only must a culture provide "a shared sense of the ordinary" for its members, but it "must also provide its members with means for understanding and tolerating *deviations* from shared ordinariness . . . . One of its principal means for doing so is through *narrative*" (p. 35). One such narrative is *A Southern Family*, an interweaving of personal and the cultural threads that both shows the charm of the old South and the need for acceptance of deviation from it.

Lihong Xie (1995) explores the diverse voices that help shape this narrative, focusing on the variety of social and ethnic backgrounds and noting that no one voice predominates, not even the voice of Clare, the novelist/stand-in for Godwin. Xie asserts that, in this novel "Godwin realizes fully the artistic possibilities of what Bakhtin calls a 'hybrid' novel" (p. 168), succinctly summarizing Godwin's stylistic shaping of a complex topic via a carefully crafted multi-viewpoint approach:

> Nearly every chapter of the novel is "assigned" to a single character (on occasion deliberately to two characters) presented as the center of consciousness in that chapter, providing his or her unique version of the family story from his or her particular perspective, in his or her particular language. The entire novel, then, becomes a cacophony of vastly different voices, languages, and consciousnesses, vying in turn for recognition and significance. Three of these chapters have stylistic distinctions that set them apart from the others: Snow Mullins' first-person narrative assertion of her mountain identity and accent; Rafe Quick's painful confession to the school psychiatrist, and Clare Campion's anguished communion with her dead brother Theo in the form of a letter . . . . Within each individual chapter, internal dialogue, narrated stories, and remembered utterances are fused together to enlarge further the sense of multiplicity and diversity. (p. 168)

This polyphony helps shape the meaning of the novel, what Godwin (2011) might call "the intangible space beneath [description, experience, metaphor, symbol]" (p. 300: journal entry, April 27, 1969). It is important to the novel that various characters reflect on their lack of understanding of others and on their perception of others' misunderstandings of them. This level of reflection helps create a sense that the old attitudes of the South will perforce die, but the South itself,

unlike Theo, will not die. Clare, as aunt to Theo's son Jason and as a writer, tries to understand the viewpoint of Snow, Theo's former wife, and she comes to appreciate the intelligence and authenticity of voice in Snow, who quit school after ninth grade. She visits Snow where she now lives and invites Snow to visit her in the beachfront vacation cabin she and her partner rent. Snow does not come to the cabin. And Clare recognizes that, without Snow's help, she cannot fully understand Snow's way of life. This recognition of one's own limited mindset is an important insight in approaching other cultures.

Xie (1995) calls this heteroglossic, multi-perspectived world of *A Southern Family* a "decentered world" (p. 169); however, this is not the entire truth. The characters are encircling, or centered around, the absence that is Theo. That paradoxically present absence is the shaping principle of the novel, for this circling structure relates not just to recreating the recursion that occurs with trauma (Herman, 1992), with memories of Theo coming up again and again in different characters, but to the larger spiritual implications of the novel. Just as the characters experience God as a physical absence ephemerally present in their thoughts, memories, and longings, even so they continue to experience Theo more consciously in his absence than they did when he was physically present. As communion is celebrated in the church as a "remembrance" of Christ, so the remembrance of Theo helps the characters to experience a communion in grief that surpasses any communion they had before Theo's death.

Though her insights about the novel's polyphony are very helpful, Xie's use of the word *cacophony* misrepresents the deftly artistic shaping of meaning in the novel suggested through the compelling image of the symphony. Clare's partner Felix reflects on Brahms's genius, which, according to Schumann, "transformed the piano into an orchestra of mourning and rejoicing voices" (Godwin, 1987, p. 306). In *A Southern Family*, this is what Godwin aspires to and achieves: a symphony of different voices emerging from one instrument: the metaphorical pen of Godwin. The mourning and celebration come together in the novel to express, as Brahms did, "an exalted spirit of the times" (p. 306). Focused on Theo and questions of life's meaning, *A Southern Family* is a wonderful orchestration of voices around the themes of forgiveness, growth, hope, and resurrected possibility.

Parallelism

In writing, as in music, parallel patterns help create the interpretive, as well as the aesthetic, component of meaning-making. In her letter to Theo, written to him after his death, Clare reflects on their mother Lily:

> The Lily of my childhood believed in Art the way the Lily you grew up knowing counted on God. It was her resource and her respite, her trusted magic and her trump card. . . . As far back as I can remember I was taught by her to believe that special patterns of words, or the resolutions of chords, or inspired slashes of colored pigment on a flat surface could make all the difference between feeling you were an ordinary person, lonely, disappointed, and trapped, and knowing you possessed a passkey to a kingdom with powers and privileges unlike any other. (p. 391)

Narrative meaning is shaped, too, by the way characters and ideas are paired; in particular, Clare's friend Julia and Clare herself seem to be paralleled, in their complementary lives and work, with Julia coming back home to care for her aging father instead of pursuing her writing career as a historian and Clare escaping her background, moving north, and becoming a successful novelist. Both have found ways to live full lives and to not be dominated by the culture in which they grew up. Julia and Clare's dialogues and inner thoughts help shape the novel's philosophical dimension. Theo and his brother Rafe, close in age, seem paralleled in a complementary way, too—with Rafe destroying himself with drink but still aspiring to social acceptance and Theo breaking the social rules and then destroying himself physically. Theo's death seems to shake Rafe up and cause him to deal with his own life, as it were, to live for the two of them.

Some of the parallels serve to link people of various classes or conflicting views. Theo's father Ralph and Theo's ex-spouse Snow are paralleled by the cluttered junk outside their homes. Clare's mother Lily and Felix's daughter Lizzie share a parallel desire for the spiritual life, though, as Jennifer McMullen (2004) points out, Lily tries to achieve her spirituality by denying her body and Lizzie does so by integrating her sensuality into her spirituality (pp. 98-99). An interesting parallel may be seen between Clare's friend Julia, a historian who gave up being an

author to teach history at a local university in order to care for her ailing parents, and W. J. Cash, the fictional author referred to in the novel, who wrote what Julia calls a brilliant book called *The Mind of the South*, and who seemed to be able to be "one of the few Southerners able to live at home and see it, historically and objectively for what it was, and still love it" (p. 344). The implication is that Julia is another such. But an unexpected irony comes in his hanging himself five months after the publication of his masterpiece. Cash's life, like Theo's, calls into question the meaning of insight about one's culture if such insight remains disconnected from creating for oneself a self-actualizing life narrative. In Cash's self-destruction, a parallel is suggested between W. J. Cash and Theo, who also sees many of the flaws in the South but cannot manage to bring his perceptions into an empowering life narrative of his own. In addition to character pairings, we have the ongoing ideological pairings of fiction and fact, then and now, Black and White, North and South, presence and absence, spirituality and sensuality, autobiography and fiction. Such parallel pairings proliferate and make the novel ethnologically and ideationally rich.

Psychologically rich, some of these pairings suggest Jungian shadow selves. Clare's explanation to Felix about her relationship with Theo demonstrates this: "Yet he exasperates me, maybe because I see too much of myself in him, the kind of person I might have turned into" (p. 309). Through this shadow-side parallel, Godwin explores the mystery of why one person flourishes and another does not, of why one person experiences what Gene Cohen (2005) would call the "Inner Push" and another does not seem to experience the sap-like rising up of life energy that brings forth "flowering and seasonal growth" (pp. 32-33). Indeed, Godwin sees a parallel between herself and all her characters. She told me, "My characters enlarge me because they're all parts of me. They're unfinished parts of me and may be largely unconscious parts of me. So it's definitely an interaction" (personal interview, March 18, 2009). Telling her half-brother's story through fiction allows her to gain new perspectives on it, for the very process of creating and learning about the characters is healing for her. As an artist and human being, she recognizes increasingly that, even with her primary allegiance shifting increasingly to the work itself rather than to working out her own issues, still "you can explore yourself by writing about very different people, and you can also take parts of yourself and put them into other people. I mean, however much we are fabricating, we never get out of our own brain" (as cited in Donlon, pp. 19-20).

Fascinated by Jungian theory, Godwin spent eleven years in mostly long-distance, by telephone, Jungian analysis. Thus, the internal awareness in Godwin of parallels among lives and of shadow selves enhances her ability to shape a novel in which expanding empathy is possible for her characters, the author herself, and her readers. Her artistic use of parallelism in this fictional work helps Godwin achieve the type of density Jens Brockmeier (2011) attributes to nonfictional autobiographical narratives: "a thick fabric of interrelated and interrelating social coordinates. . . . In this universe, the Cartesian geography of the mind is overwritten by a map of the socialized narrative mind" (p. 263), but using fiction allows her to go beyond focusing the work on her own life story repair.

Metanarrative Reflection

Just as Godwin seeks to grow through fictional reflection on psychological and cultural levels, so she seeks through her fiction to gain a better understanding of her own writing and of narrative itself. In *A Southern Family*, because one of her protagonists (Clare) is a novelist and another (Julia) is a historian, metanarrative reflections fit smoothly into the weave of the novel's plot, thematic content, and overarching thrust to story repair. Such reflections integrate questions of meaning with questions of aesthetics and allow author, characters, and readers to enter a more highly conscious realm regarding the very novel they are engaged with. Such metanarrative reflections encourage readers of and characters within *A Southern Family* to contemplate the relationship of narrative to meaning-making and to the role of narrative in story repair.

In the following conversation with Felix, Clare reveals the role of narrative imagination in her own self-actualization, through her having come up with a way to escape being the battleground for Lily and Ralph's differences:

> "They'd have kept their marriage together by draining my spirit and filling up the empty carcass with the poisons they'd brewed between them. But I ran for my life to my father's people . . . it was like I was creating the plot of my own life when I wrote that letter to my uncle . . . and then I left Theo [to take my place]. He was only two when I left." (p. 309)

This passage illustrates more than just the guilt Clare feels. It is one of the novel's many metanarrative reflections: in this case, that the ability to create a plot for one's life gives one power to change things, to perform "story repair."

One of the stories to be repaired is that of Clare's novel writing. As Clare is, in many ways, a stand-in character for Godwin, we can see that *A Southern Family* is also a form of story repair of Godwin's own writing. As Jane Hill (1992) notes, "Godwin has been, in many ways, her own best critic" (p.12). In "Becoming a Writer," Godwin shares this concern about her work: "I think the most serious danger to my writing is my predilection for shapeliness. How I love 'that nice circular Greek shape' . . . or a nice, neat conclusion with all the edges tucked under" (as cited in Hill, p. 13). She places this self-perceived weakness in her work into the mouth of Theo, in *A Southern Family.*

In the novel, a criticism Theo gives of Clare's work, shortly before his death, haunts her to the point that, when she returns to New York after his funeral, Clare discards a manuscript she has been working on for a year. Theo had commented:

> "How nice it would be to be a [main] character in one of your novels . . . because you take care of them so nicely. You let them suffer a little, just enough to improve their characters, but you always rescue them from the abyss at the last minute and reward them with love or money or the perfect job—or sometimes all three." (p. 49)

Theo defines the world of Clare's novels as one "where everything gets wrapped up at the end" and challenges her, "Why don't you write a book about something that can *never* be wrapped up? What if you came across something like that in life? Would you want to write about it?" (p. 50).

Clearly, this conversation raises not only aesthetic questions, but teleological questions, too—about God in relation to His creation, as compared to Clare's treatment of her main characters. Indeed, the central preoccupation of the novel, the death of Theo, never gets "wrapped up"—neither the questions about his internal motives nor the exact details of how it happened. This metanarrative conversation provides clues to the reader about the type of story he or she is reading: one that cannot be "wrapped up." It raises questions about the relationship between life and fiction. Despite the novel's claim that Clare, as a writer, changes life to make it art, the novel claims, as well, to resemble life in its lack of neat

answers. As Thomas Leitch (1986) says, "the fundamental requirement of all stories is that they be tellable" (p. 33). Through the artistic shaping of meaning, Godwin makes this untellable story tellable. Fiction provides a broader canvas than autobiography would have afforded for the interweaving of story threads, as fact-based autobiography (however artistically composed) would have compelled her to focus more on her own story's repair and less on that of Theo and of the Southern culture. Through fiction, Godwin is able to make the story larger, to generate more meaning from it, and, thus, to make it more "tellable."

Part of what allows her to do this is her awareness of the power of the "'silent narratives' that you hear in your life" (as cited in Donlon, p. 12). In her personal life, one of those silent narratives was that her mother "didn't become a writer because she had made choices that would have made it too difficult. She married, she had children, she had to work." Godwin speculates that her internalization of this story "may be a reason that I didn't stay married in my several attempts and that I didn't have children or ever really want to." Godwin thinks this silent narrative contributed to her own ambition and single-mindedness (Donlon, p. 12). As an author, she calls on her ability to hear the silent narrative of Theo's life, to bring it into a form, as he was unable to do so for himself. In *A Southern Family*, Clare, like Godwin, escapes an environment that would have stifled her talent and her dreams. She, like Godwin, experiences guilt at not attending enough to her step-brother and not caringly nurturing his escape from the destructive silent narratives of the family home.

In her letter to Theo, written as a "form of therapy" (p. 372) at Julia's suggestion, Clare describes her aspirations as a writer who wanted a lifestyle that

> "would be conducive to the kind of fiction I was trying to write: deep-breathing, reflective, and with that patience for detail I admired in those medieval stone carvers who would lavish their skills on the lowliest gargoyle simply because . . . that was their job for the day, and every day's work was done for the glory of God." (pp. 380-381)

Not only does the passage link narrative with healing, and artistry with spirituality, but it provides a metanarrative reflection on fiction. It creates a standard from within itself for the novel to achieve "deep-breathing, reflective fiction."

At the same time, the suggestion in the novel that writing can be therapeutic goes beyond the inner bounds of the novel. It ties the autobiographical underpinnings of the novel to the metanarrative discussion of what purposes writing can serve. In this context, the entire novel, the dedication of which reads simply "for Tommy," might be considered a long and certainly unconventional letter to Tommy, Godwin's deceased brother, written in the form of a multi-voiced novel.

The incident of Tommy's death created an uncomfortable vacuum for the surviving family members, who craved a cogent narrative of what exactly happened and why it happened. "Afterward, we would go over and over [the event]," taking the police report "out of the files, again and again . . . , as though the family believed that if we stayed faithfully on the case some magical number of times the *real* truth would suddenly float up from beneath the official text. The real truth being something everybody could bear," writes Godwin (2001, p. 149), speaking autobiographically in *Heart*. In life and in fiction, no definite explanations are attainable for the motives and facts of Tommy/Theo's death. Indeed, Godwin's choice of fiction to tell the story exemplifies her respect for the relationship between fictional narrative and the ability to shift perspectives on stories in her own and others' lives. When asked by Lihong Xie if she would be interested in writing an autobiography, Godwin responded: "I don't think I could possibly tell the truth. You know, because once you tell a story, you tell a story, then the next time you tell it, you want to tell it a little differently" (as cited in Xie, 1993, p. 180).

Drawing on Polkinghorne and others, Deborah Schiffrin (1996) highlights that narrative structure can help us to come to "an understanding of the self as a whole; our actions and experiences gain meaning through their relationship to one another, as well as their relationship to general themes or plots" (pp. 168-169). Theo's death evokes a key enigma of the novel, and of life: what makes one human being survive and thrive and another give up? What makes one person able to create a narrative identity and another not? Why could Clare create a plot for her life, and why could Felix, despite his difficult childhood, be a happy and optimistic person with a goal, purpose, and meaningful career, while Theo loses hope and vision for his life? How sad that Theo could criticize the over-facile narrative structuring in Clare's novels but could not see his way to creating a plot for his life.

Generative Metaphors

An important affective component of story repair in the novel is Godwin's use of generative metaphors. The concept of generative metaphor being used here leans upon Donald Schon's *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) and refers to any type of metaphor that helps us to generate "new perceptions, explanations, and inventions" (p. 185). We will look at two such metaphors near the end of the novel. Associated with dreams, these metaphors are lent the heightened interpretive valence of dream language. To give the novel the perspective of a hopeful restorying, without erasing or minimizing the fact of the suicide scenario for Tommy/Theo, Godwin uses spiritually nuanced generative metaphors.

Near the end of the novel, we are told about supernatural experiences in the beachfront summer cottage that Felix and Clare rent. In a certain breezy bedroom, Clare's partner Felix has a "quasi-mystical experience," telling Clare, "It was a little like sharing the feelings of God. For the first time I had the idea that if God exists, He isn't just a blind brute force but something that enjoys making new things to love, even if some of them don't turn out well, or get destroyed in the process'" (p. 406). Clare, sleeping in that breezy room the next night, has a special dream in which, on a spaceship, she meets and loves a woman who turns out to be a timeless essence of herself (pp. 406-407). Later, when Clare's editor sleeps in this room, he has a life-transforming vision, too. In its Greek etymology, pneuma "is connected with breathe or blow, and has a basic meaning of 'air in motion'" (Hornblower & Spawforth, 2003). Carl Gustav Jung (1976), whose writings Godwin has studied and been influenced by, points out that the pneuma, in the miracle at Pentecost, has "the double meaning of wind and spirit" (p. 64). This connection for Godwin is surely intentional. Certainly, in *A Southern Family*, the phenomenon of a sea-breezed room that inspires deeply meaningful dreams suggests a force at work beyond the ordinary, a force that can blow in new perspectives and catalyze story repair. This windy spiritual metaphor for human connectedness to spirit contrasts to the piled-up junk in the living spaces of Theo's father Ralph and of Theo's ex-wife Snow; the junk sullying the beauty of the living spaces around them is a metaphor for cramped-in, thwarted life stories in need of repair. Thus, the metaphor of a cleansing and inspiring wind blowing away mental blocks signals a kind of story repair, though in a metaphysical dimension.

M. Carolyn Clark and Marsha Rossiter (2008) recognize the "sometimes contradictory" ways we narrativize our identities: "In one

context we can see ourselves as the hero of the story, while in another we are someone whose agency is limited" (p. 62). Through her novelistic artistry, Godwin has succeeded in creating such complexity within and for her characters, especially Theo. In particular, through generative metaphors, she lends his story, to use Erik Erikson's (1980) developmental term, an element of life generativity that metaphorically extends his life into the a legacy for those that follow. Though Theo himself does not generate and offer his own legacy to the next generation in the self-achieved manner described by Dan P. McAdams (1990, p. 185), Theo nevertheless leaves a lasting legacy. Godwin's artistic use of generative metaphor in *A Southern Family* suggests this legacy derives from something beyond what we see or touch.

In the last chapter of the novel, Sister Patrick relates a dream she had on the eve of the anniversary of Theo's death, and she tells it to Theo's mother Lily. The dream's components are a metaphor for Theo's spirit living on, even if human hearing cannot quite catch the words from beyond this world:

> I dreamed of Theo. As soon as I woke up, I knew it had been Theo. . . . and as we walked up the hill together he was explaining something to me very forcefully and energetically. . .. He was trying to explain himself, probably what had happened with the horse, with Shadow, why she had struck him down. But I couldn't hear without my hearing aids in. (pp. 534-5)

Lily responds with faith that this was a message from Theo to say "it's all right":

> The details of how he was . . . struck down, exactly what *happened* that day, well, they aren't important: they're already over, we don't need to know because it won't change anything. That's why you didn't need your hearing aids. But in the realm that matters, the realm where the indestructible personality lives on, the realm mere history can't touch, Theo lives. He lives.. . . Oh, I consider it a gift, your dream, Sister Patrick. I really do. (p. 536)

Surprisingly, the novel ends not with the activities of the protagonists, but with Sister Patrick (Theo's former teacher) and the other nuns interceding in prayer for the world: "May the Lord bless us, protect

us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life." "Amen" (p. 540). The ending, like the naming and character development of Theo, is unapologetically spiritual. In two entries, on January 2 and January 4, 1969, Godwin (2011) wrote in her journal: "Imagination—art, religion—triumphs over reality" (p. 262). "And I know that this religious, mystical, spiritual thing is very much a part of my 'calling.' I feel near to that" (p. 264). For Godwin, the answer to life's enigmas is in metaphors of deeper mystery.

As Frank Kermode (1967) so aptly observes: "Men, like poets, rush 'into the middest,' in *medias res,* when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus,* and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends such as give meaning to lives and to poems" (p.7). Godwin provides one such "fictive concord," one instantiation of how our stories may seem to fail us but how, too, they may then be revivified, strengthening our identities both as individuals and as parts of human community. Because of Godwin's transparency about the connection between her life and her fiction, and because of the novel's being set in the South, *A Southern Family* presents a fascinating opportunity to explore how a traumatic narrative, in the hands of a skillful writer, can be transformed so as to shape a possible world of meaning out of confusion and pain. In the novel, this shaping pertains to the individual lives of the novel's characters, to the shifting culture of the American South, in which the novel is set, and to the life and writing of the author herself, in her attempt to find meaning in and through her writing regarding a sordid life event. We see, in the case of *A Southern Family*, an instantiation of Jerome Bruner's (2008) idea that the very "function" of art may be "to rescue the ordinary from its banality, to bring what was taken for granted back under closer scrutiny" (p. 37). "Our stories," as Robert Fulford (1999) reminds us, "are central to our identity, and if they fail us, we may fall apart" (p. 13). In *A Southern Family*, the central stories of family, community, and faith threaten to fall apart. But using a multi-faceted perspective attainable in art, the novel becomes a form of story repair. This repair is not a trivial task, nor is it a merely personal undertaking, for Godwin's narrative is a part of a larger social and cultural network. In her fictional reframing of a failed real-life story, Godwin makes the story present for us on various levels and offers us a model for recasting our own stories in a context tinged with hope.

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