V. C. ANDREWS: A Critical Companion

E. D. Huntley

GREENWOOD PRESS

V. C. ANDREWS

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Kathleen Gregory Klein, Series Editor

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To David
and to the memory of Paul T. Nolan

ADVISORY BOARD

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Series Foreword

The authors who appear in the series Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers are all best-selling writers. They do not have only one successful novel, but a string of them. Fans, critics, and specialist readers eagerly anticipate their next book. For some, high cash advances and breakthrough sales figures are automatic; movie deals often follow. Some writers become household names, recognized by almost everyone.

But novels are read one by one. Each reader chooses to start and, more importantly, to finish a book because of what she or he finds there. The real test of a novel is in the satisfaction its readers experience. This series acknowledges the extraordinary involvement of readers and writers in creating a best-seller.

The authors included in this series were chosen by an Advisory Board composed of high school English teachers and high school and public librarians. They ranked a list of best-selling writers according to their popularity among different groups of readers. Writers in the top-ranked group who had not received book-length, academic literary analysis (or none in at least the past ten years) were chosen for the series. Because of this selection method, Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers meets a need that is not addressed elsewhere.

The volumes in the series are written by scholars with particular expertise in analyzing popular fiction. These specialists add an academic

focus on their best-selling writers to the popular success that these writers already enjoy.

The series is designed to appeal to a wide range of readers. The general reading public will find explanations for the appeal of these well-known writers. Fans will find biographical and fictional questions answered. Students will find literary analysis, discussions of fictional genres, carefully organized introductions to new ways of reading the novels and bibliographies for additional research. Students will also be able to apply what they have learned from this book to their readings of future novels by these best-selling writers.

Each volume begins with a biographical chapter drawing on published information, autobiographies or memoirs, prior interviews, and, in some cases, interviews given especially for this series. A chapter on literary history and genres describes how the author's work fits into a larger literary context. The following chapters analyze the writer's most important, most popular, and most recent novels in detail. Each chapter focuses on a single novel. This approach, suggested by the Advisory Board as the most useful to student research, allows for an in-depth analysis of the writer's fiction. Close and careful readings with numerous examples show readers exactly how the novels work. These chapters are organized around three central elements: plot development (how the story line moves forward), character development (what the reader knows about the important figures), and theme (the significant ideas of the novel). Chapters may also include sections on generic conventions (how the novel is similar to or different from others in its same category of science fiction, fantasy, thriller, etc.), narrative point of view (who tells the story and how), symbols and literary language, and historical or social context. Each chapter ends with an ''alternative reading'' of the novel. The volume concludes with a primary and secondary bibliography, including reviews.

The Alternative Readings are a unique feature of this series. By demonstrating a particular way of reading each novel, they provide a clear example of how a specific perspective can reveal important aspects of the book. In each alternative reading section, one contemporary literary theory—such as feminist criticism, Marxism, new historicism, deconstruction, or Jungian psychological critique—is defined in brief, easily comprehensible language. That definition is then applied to the novel to highlight specific features that might go unnoticed or be understood differently in a more general reading of the novel. Each volume defines two or three specific theories, making them part of the reader's under-

standing of how diverse meanings may be constructed from a single novel.

Taken collectively, the volumes in the Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers series provide a wide-ranging investigation of the complexities of current best-selling fiction. By treating these novels seriously as both literary works and publishing successes, the series demonstrates the potential of popular literature in contemporary culture.

Kathleen Gregory Klein
Southern Connecticut State University

Acknowledgments

The first person who deserves to be named and thanked is Kathleen Gregory Klein, who invited me to contribute to the new series she was editing and who suggested that V. C. Andrews's fiction might be an intriguing subject on which to write. Because of my keen interest in women and Gothic fiction, I accepted the invitation. The result is this book. Writing it has been a rewarding and informative experience that has given me a new understanding of the relationship between young adult readers and Gothic fiction.

Thanks go also to Melissa Barth, a good friend who is always a source of encouragement and support and possibly the only feminist of my acquaintance who did not give me a strange look when I told her what the book was about. T. J. Arant listened and reacted as I thought out loud about the critical lenses through which I was reading Andrews's work; Mark Vogel talked to me about adolescents and their reading habits; Lori Scurlock unearthed reviews of the Andrews novels and found me a copy of a V. C. Andrews trivia book; Cori Lazarus contributed ideas that came from her love of Andrews's work; and Patti Randall cheered me with her constant enthusiasm for the project.

Finally, I owe a colossal debt of gratitude to David, whose love and reassurance, friendship and warmth, great cooking and gifts of chrysanthemums made life joyful and easy while I was working long hours on this book. Although he will never read a V. C. Andrews novel, this book is for him.

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The Life of V. C. Andrews

Virginia Cleo Andrews was born on June 6, 1924, in Portsmouth, Virginia. She was the third of three children and the only daughter of William Henry Andrews, a career navy man who retired from the military to become a tool-and-die maker, and Lillian Lilnora Parker Andrews, a telephone operator. Andrews spent her childhood years in and around Portsmouth, and although her family lived briefly in Rochester, New York, they returned to Portsmouth while she was still in high school.

A personal statement reveals that books became important to V. C. Andrews quite early in her life:

> I was brought up in a working-class environment, with a father who loved to read. . . . When I was seven he took me to the public library and signed me up for my first library card. He went home with two books. I went home with nine. Books opened doors I hadn't even realized were there . . . took me . . . out of myself . . . into the past . . . into the future; put me on the moon . . . in palaces, in jungles, everywhere. When finally I did reach London and Paris—I'd been there before. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 19–20)

Andrews remembered her childhood as happy and generally uneventful. Neither the misadventures of the Dollanganger children nor

the terrors endured by Audrina Adare, all characters in her books, are retellings of her own family life. ''I didn't have a terrible childhood,'' she points out in a published interview, adding that her parents were never guilty of any form of abuse. ''I didn't even go hungry. And I had a lot of pretty clothes'' (Winter 165).

Ultimately, for Andrews, excitement and adventure had to come from her imagination and from books. ''The most terrible things about my childhood probably were those that I created in my mind'' (Winter, *Faces of Fear* 165). She attempted to create excitement in her ordinary life by inventing fantastic plots for the games she played with her friends, and her natural creativity was fueled by the books she read. She especially enjoyed *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights,* as well as classic Russian novels, and her favorite authors included Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Thomas Hardy. She also showed a marked preference for fairy tales, science fiction and fantasy, and boys' adventure stories. Apparently noticing young Virginia's fascination with mystery and horror, an uncle presented her with a first edition of *Dracula.* The book appealed to her desire for the extraordinary and ignited her imagination, frightening her sufficiently to make her conceal the book in a closet and to purchase a crucifix as protection from vampires.

Another manifestation of Virginia Andrews's imaginative talent was her early accomplishments in art. Having amazed her teachers with her natural ability to draw objects in perspective, Andrews was permitted to take art classes at a local junior college when she was seven years old. In later years, she recalled drawing in all of the books she read, even library books, believing as children do that other readers liked the illustrations as much as she did. Her artistic activity extended to attempts to color the wallpaper in her bedroom.

While a teenager, Andrews fell down the stairs at her school, incurring severe back injuries in the accident. Although suffering from the pain caused by bone spurs that formed on her spine, she was unable to convince physicians that she had a problem: ''They said, 'You walk too gracefully . . . you look too good,' '' she remembers. ''Looking too good is a terrible way to go into a doctor's office. They don't take you seriously'' (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 4:20). Arthritis set in, and surgery to align her spine correctly was only partially successful, leaving her a ''little leery of doctors because they made mistakes with me'' (Rubin, ''Mistress''). Although arthritis ultimately forced her to spend most of her life on crutches or in wheelchairs—a condition shared by some of the fictional characters she created—Andrews was quick to assure others

that she was not paralyzed and that she retained the ability to walk, albeit with difficulty.

Andrews believed that she was gifted with ESP and that her gift enabled her as a child to prepare for life as an invalid:

> I had psychic moments which showed me . . . that eventually I was going to end up using crutches. I was very angry at the time. These visions occurred often, like fate preparing me so that I'd be able to cope. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 20)

Also a believer in reincarnation, Andrews sometimes described herself as an old soul—someone who had experienced previous lives. She told Douglas Winter, author of an excellent interview with Andrews, that as a child, she often found herself expecting to see horses and carriages instead of automobiles, low buildings instead of skyscrapers (Winter, *Faces of Fear* 167).

In later years, she was philosophical about her disability and the fact that it kept her physically dependent on her family, especially her mother. Having adjusted to a less-than-mobile existence, Andrews settled down to finding happiness in the life she was able to make for herself. She scoffed at those who pitied her:

> It's not that I'm a hostage. That would mean that someone is deliberately holding me a prisoner. I can go out. I don't feel like a hostage. In fact, sometimes I rather like it. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 20)

To one interviewer, Andrews compared her adolescent plans for her future with the reality of the life she eventually had as an adult:

> I never wanted to be an ordinary housewife. . . . I had no intention of getting married till after thirty, but life kinda threw me a little curve. . . . I think if I had failed at writing, maybe I would be bitter now. I always wanted to be somebody exceptional, somebody different, who did something on her own. (Rubin, ''Blooms'')

Dates for many of V. C. Andrews's activities are approximate or unrecorded. Winter suggests that the explanation for Andrews's reticence on her history lies in an adolescent experience when she discovered that

some younger friends were disappointed on learning that she was nineteen years old instead of sixteen. From that point on, she refused to divulge her age or to assign specific dates to events in her life (Winter, *Faces of Fear* 164–65).

Andrews excelled as a student, winning a scholarship for writing a parody of Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* when she was fifteen and finally earning her high school diploma from Woodrow Wilson High School in Portsmouth. She continued her education by working with tutors to complete a four-year correspondence art course while living at home with her parents and while undergoing a series of surgical attempts to correct the bone problems in her hip and back. When William Andrews died in the late 1960s, Virginia and her mother left Portsmouth for Manchester, Missouri, where Virginia's brother lived; later, mother and daughter relocated to be close to another brother in Apache Junction, Arizona. There V. C. Andrews augmented the family income through her career as a commercial artist, portrait painter, and fashion illustrator. She was unusually successful, selling every piece she painted, but she found the work neither energizing nor fulfilling and sought creative release by writing, which she did in secret. The first manuscript she completed was so autobiographical that she decided to destroy it, preferring to keep her life private. Eventually she decided to dedicate all of her energy to writing, completing her first novel, a hybrid science-fiction-fantasy piece called *The Gods of the Green Mountain,* in 1972. The book was never published.

Success as a writer eluded Andrews for several years, but she continued undeterred, often producing up to forty pages in one evening, sometimes typing in bed, other times writing while standing up in a body brace. During those years, she published only a short piece of sensational fiction, ''I Slept with My Uncle on My Wedding Night,'' in a pulp confession magazine, but her voluminous output eventually totaled nine books and twenty short stories—all unpublished—in seven years. Each time a book was rejected by a publisher, she put the manuscript aside and started a new one.

Andrews's determination and persistence finally paid off when she submitted a 290,000-word novel, which she called *The Obsessed,* to a publishing company whose editors told her that although the manuscript had promise, it was far too long. She was asked to reduce her text to a less unwieldy length and to ''get more gutsy''—advice that Andrews eagerly followed, drafting the new outline in a single night and adding ''unspeakable things my mother didn't want me to write about, which

was exactly what I wanted to do in the first place'' (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 4:22). The result was a ninety-eight-page revision that she retitled *Flowers in the Attic,* a saga of child abuse and incestuous love that introduced readers to Cathy and Chris Dollanganger and their twin siblings, Carrie and Cory. Andrews was paid a $7,500 advance for the novel, which reached the best-seller lists only two weeks after its publication in paperback by Simon and Schuster's Pocket Books imprint in 1979. She dedicated the novel to her mother, who ''hasn't read the books. She never reads any. She thinks they're all lies anyway'' (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 22). Mrs. Andrews maintains that she has not read any of her daughter's books.

Petals on the Wind, a sequel to *Flowers in the Attic,* was published the next year, bringing Andrews a $35,000 advance. The second book was an immediate success, remaining on the *New York Times* best-seller list for a phenomenal nineteen weeks during which *Flowers* returned briefly to the list, a beneficiary of its sequel's popularity. Andrews's first two novels together sold over 7 million copies in two years, and predictably, the author's asking price increased. *If There Be Thorns,* continuing the chronicles of Cathy and Chris Dollanganger, appeared in 1981, initially bringing Andrews a $75,000 advance; like its predecessors, it gained almost immediate success, rising to the number two position on many best-seller lists within two weeks of publication.

Almost as though she had exhausted her supply of stories about the Dollanganger family, in 1982 V. C. Andrews published *My Sweet Audrina,* her only nonseries book and the first to be published by Poseidon Press. Again she met with commercial and popular success, as *Audrina* topped the sales figures of its predecessors. At least one critic has speculated that *Audrina* may have been the result of a reworking of one of Andrews's many earlier unpublished manuscripts.

Two years went by before another Andrews novel appeared. *Seeds of Yesterday,* published in 1984, returned to the Dollanganger story in order to bring closure to the family saga with the deaths of Cathy and Chris, the last of the ill-fated Dollanganger quartet. Again, readers were captivated, and not surprisingly, *Seeds* became, according to the *New York Times,* the best-selling fiction paperback of 1984. The next year, Andrews embarked on a new series chronicling the fortunes and disasters of the members of the Casteel family from the West Virginia mountains.

Heaven, published in 1985, followed in 1986 by *Dark Angel,* takes Heaven Leigh Casteel from the Appalachian mountains to a Boston mansion. Andrews's readers were evidently as fascinated by the Casteels as

they had been with the Dollangangers; *Angel* shot to the number one position on best-seller lists three days after publication. Andrews was named the Number One Best Selling Author, outselling even the prolific Stephen King, after the American Booksellers' Association conducted a survey of popular horror and occult paperbacks on best-seller lists.

With the unprecedented success of *Flowers in the Attic,* V. C. Andrews became a public figure, and she consented to be interviewed by a reporter for *People* magazine. Capitalizing on the notoriety of the novel and on the author's physical disability, the magazine's reporter produced an article that portrayed Andrews as an eccentric recluse. She reacted by refusing most subsequent requests for publicity and interviews, thus inadvertently fueling the rumors that she disliked company. The truth was that Andrews enjoyed people and delighted in the hundreds of letters she received from admiring readers. She traveled to promote her novels, indulged her taste for gourmet lunches and dinners at trendy restaurants, and clearly enjoyed her celebrity status.

When she was named Professional Woman of the Year by the city of Norfolk, Virginia, in 1984, V. C. Andrews was thrilled. By that time she had five novels in print, and each one had sold millions of copies in several countries. About her fame, she quipped, ''I like the attention I get . . . the money . . . the things I can buy'' (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 26). Her new wealth had enabled her to build for herself and her mother a spacious home on a wooded lot overlooking Lynnhaven Bay in Virginia Beach, and she hired a nurse to accompany her when she traveled. For Andrews, success brought the recognition and fame, comfort, and luxury that so many of her fictional characters seek in vain all their lives.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1986, V. C. Andrews died in Virginia Beach on December 19 of that year and was buried in Olive Branch Cemetery in Portsmouth, where she had spent her childhood. She was sixty-two years old and had well over 24 million books in print, including translations into Dutch, German, Hebrew, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Swedish, and Turkish. At her death, her estate was valued at around $8 million. A film adaptation of *Flowers in the Attic,* with Andrews in a cameo scene as a window-washing maid, was released in 1987. Near the end of her life, in the screen version of her first book, V. C. Andrews realized her childhood ambition to become an actress.

Two books were published after Andrews's death: *Garden of Shadows* (1987), which returns to the Dollanganger story to provide what is chron-

ologically the first volume in the series, and *Fallen Hearts* (1988), another book in the Casteel family saga. An afterword from the publishers is appended to printings of Andrews's novels after the writer's death:

> V. C. Andrews was such an extraordinarily gifted storyteller that she had completed working on a number of novels prior to her passing and all of these will be published in the near future by Pocket Books in paperback and by Poseidon Press in hardcover. (*Dark Angel* 244)

Five years before her death, V. C. Andrews had told the *Washington Post* that she had already created synopses for sixty-three new books in addition to those already in print.

Several sources have pointed out that the decision to publish as ''V. C. Andrews'' was made without the author's consent. When Andrews was shown the galleys for *Flowers in the Attic,* she noted that she was listed as ''Virginia Andrews.'' Later, when she received a copy of the book's cover, she was surprised to see that Virginia Andrews had become ''V. C. Andrews.'' A telephone call to the publishers produced the explanation that the printers had made a mistake, but that so many copies of the cover had been printed that any change would be prohibitively expensive. Sometime afterward, Andrews was told the truth: her publishers had made the decision to use her initials in an attempt to conceal the fact that the author of *Flowers* was a woman. She accepted the explanation. ''Without the initials, I think it's very likely that I would be discriminated against as a woman in a man's field'' (Winter, *Faces of Fear* 175). Ironically, had Andrews's publishers decided at the beginning to market *Flowers in the Attic* as a Gothic novel instead of as horror fiction, the author's identity as a woman might have been a major selling point.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although a phenomenally popular success, V. C. Andrews's work has not garnered the critical acceptance enjoyed by the work of other novelists with whom Andrews has been compared. In fact, reviews of her books have tended to be predominantly negative even when the reviewer acknowledges—as many of them do—that Andrews is a skilled

storyteller and that some elements of her work are deserving of praise. That readers have purchased millions of copies of Andrews's novels seems to suggest that something in those books fulfills a need that has not been addressed by any other popular writer of Gothic fiction.

The appearance of *Flowers in the Attic* prompted Carolyn Banks of the *Washington Post Book World* to complain of an ''unbelievable'' plot and ''indigestible'' dialogue, labeling *Flowers* ''the worst book I have ever read,'' and to wonder why ''the principle of selection does not seem to have entered the author's head, nor her editors'' (Banks 14). Three years later, *My Sweet Audrina* elicited Eden Ross Lipson's complaint in the *New York Times Book Review* that ''the writing is execrable'' and the plot difficult to follow, except that ''most of the brief sexual passages involve third parties watching in fascination, which gives things a little spin, I suppose. Nothing else makes any sense'' (Lipson 13). The *London Times*'s Kristiana Gregory commented that ''it's hard to figure out why everyone acts so creepy'' (Gregory 10).

The pejorative commentary notwithstanding, some reviewers agree with readers that Andrews is particularly adept at connecting with her audience, talented at creating the varieties of suspense and impending danger that engross her readers. About *Petals on the Wind,* Bea Maxwell of the *Los Angeles Times* points out that ''although certain situations tax credibility, this pop novel of suspense and romance successfully ensnares. Andrews lulls the reader, then shocks and awakens'' (Maxwell 15). A year later in the same periodical, Dale Pollock, after admitting that *If There Be Thorns* has some weak spots—in particular the ending—and that ''Andrews' forte may not be understatement,'' praises Andrews's ability to create two narrative points of view—those of two very different adolescent boys who ''emerge as credible (if pitiable) characters. . . . Andrews excels at re-creating the confusion and frustration of being old enough to grasp the pieces of a family mystery, but too young to assemble the puzzle.'' Pollock suggests that one explanation for the popularity of Andrews's novels is that readers take a macabre pleasure in reading about the travails of others, that people in general enjoy the safety of experiencing fear through fiction. First remarking that ''Virginia Andrews' writing is embarrassingly crude and naive, especially in her first books, though she has improved greatly in the course of writing four,'' the *London Times*'s book critic, Patricia Miller, adds, ''there is strength in her books—the bizarre plots, matched with the pathos of the entrapped, which she herself clearly feels'' (Miller 6).

ANDREWS AND THE CRITICS

Asked for her reaction to reviewers' focus on the more grotesque elements of her fiction, V. C. Andrews said:

> Why have an imagination if you don't go that way? . . . I don't like everything to be explained by scientists who say there are no little green men from Mars. (Rubin, ''Blooms'')

About her gloomy atmospherics, she reasoned that surface attractiveness often effectively conceals ugliness and darkness at the heart of things.

Countering the dozens of accusations that her fiction seems obsessed with incest, Andrews retorted:

> I don't think those people creating the stew over incest have read the books. They think I'm going to have brothers and sisters . . . looking at each other with lust. That's not it at all. It was just a natural event in the story . . . referred to specifically in only one paragraph that was not that explicit. (Ruehlmann)

ANDREWS AS A WRITER

Despite her reluctance to talk to reporters, which resulted in only a few in-depth interviews during her years of fame, V. C. Andrews had a great deal to say about her life as a professional writer, her writing habits and strategies, and her constant search for material that she could rework into fiction.

Andrews cited a variety of sources for the ideas that eventually became her novels. A few of the incidents were autobiographical, ''though, no, I won't tell you which bits and pieces'' (Goldstein 321). Her coyness notwithstanding, it is possible to extrapolate from a remark she made to Stephen Rubin the germ of the idea for *My Sweet Audrina:*

> I was happy until I became an adolescent. Then life comes at you too fast. I was very pretty, and some fathers of my little girl friends made advances. . . . I did a lot of running away. (Rubin, ''Blooms'')

Andrews revealed that a particularly effective composing strategy for her was to think about an incident from her own life and ask, ''What if I hadn't run as fast as I had? What if I had been caught?'' (Andrews, ''Profit''). Other fruitful sources of material were the lives of her friends as well as family stories told by elderly relatives. She drew from her dreams—''the most powerful imaginative force I have going for me''—as well as from her memories:

> There is the magic of memories . . . they do not have to be inhibited by the strict truth. A writer can, and a writer *must,* embroider and embellish what might be a simple tale without all the imaginative trappings. . . . Dialogue in reality can be so mundane as to be absolutely boring. (Andrews, ''Profit'')

Another major source of ideas for V. C. Andrews was fiction—both popular and literary. Always a voracious reader, she remembered that when she was a child, the book that ''got me really turned on to fiction'' was *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar,* one of the three books that the Andrews family kept in their home. Andrews never explained why her family owned so few books, an odd situation given her love of reading, which was nurtured early by her father. In her teens, she discovered the novels of Charles Dickens, and because the books became her favorites, she went through a period of trying to duplicate Dickens's style. Although no concrete evidence exists, there are suggestions in Andrews's novels that she might well have read the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Daphne du Maurier, Stephen King, and other writers in the Gothic tradition—in particular, the American Gothic. (See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the Gothic novel.)

Andrews was uncomfortable when the label of ''horror fiction'' was applied to her work. Although she agreed that one of her strengths was her ability to evoke fear in readers, she felt that her novels escaped the ''horror'' classification by their avoidance of the supernatural. She maintained that she did not enjoy reading true horror novels because of her dislike for the graphic portrayal of violence and its aftermath.

Available information suggests that V. C. Andrews's writing habits make nearly as interesting copy as her books do. She told more than one interviewer that she liked to write at night before going to sleep, frequently producing between thirty and forty pages at a stretch. ''Sometimes she'll be up at midnight or one in the morning,'' her mother revealed, ''and I just have to say 'Enough' '' (Goldstein). Her physical disability meant that she was forced to type either while sitting up in

bed or while standing rigidly encased in a body brace. Occasionally she would mount a mirror behind her typewriter so that she could watch herself as she composed in order to ''project better.'' That she drew in some way from her own life and identity in order to create her characters is evident in her blonde heroines who resemble herself.

As a child, V. C. Andrews wanted to become an actress because she believed that a career on the stage and screen would give her the opportunity to inhabit a variety of roles. The arthritis resulting from her accident put an end to her dreams of an acting career, but she continued throughout life to think in terms of the theater and later the screen. Her novels abound in theatrical motifs, and several of her characters become stage performers. Images of the stage colored Andrews's discussions of her writing habits. She said that while she was creating the characters in a novel, ''I assumed their bodies and their minds. . . . In a way, when I write, I am on stage, speaking the lines, directing, producing'' (*Contemporary Authors*). Noting that she spoke aloud as she crafted her characters' dialogue, she admitted that ''I do both sides'' (Goldstein 321), although ''when you construct a good strong character, often he or she will take off and lead the way, surprising you'' (Andrews, ''Profit'').

Andrews generally had difficulty with the first fifty pages of a novel in progress, although she eventually identified with her characters to an amazing degree: ''I suffer when my characters suffer. I lose weight when they do.'' She claimed that while she was writing *Flowers in the Attic,* the Dollanganger children's ordeal caused her to lose almost twenty pounds. ''I weighed one hundred and ten pounds when I began . . . when I finished, I weighed ninety-four'' (Winter, *Faces of Fear* 172). She admitted that so strong was her connection with her characters that their troubles became her own; when one of them died, she grieved as though she had lost a friend.

Shortly before her death, Andrews told an interviewer on the set of the film version of *Flowers in the Attic* that although she preferred to write at night when things were quiet, she had taken to writing in the afternoon, ''because I don't feel as super-duper as I used to'' (Goldstein 321). But write, she did, and continued to do so regularly up to her death.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF V. C. ANDREWS

Douglas Winter describes V. C. Andrews's novels as a ''mingling of adult fairy tale and psychological terror'' and contends that the novels are labeled ''horror fiction'' only because they appear initially to belong

to no other recognizable category. Writing of Andrews's ability to integrate the dark passions that spawn greed, cruelty, and incest with the fragile, glittering images of fairy tale splendor, Winter praises the Andrews canon as ''the most individualistic tales of terror of this generation'' (Winter, ''Writers'' 471).

Andrews was particularly adept at creating absorbing adolescent characters caught uncomfortably between childhood and adulthood. These characters embody common teenage frustrations and confusions—about identity, sexuality, peer acceptance, relationships with parents and other adults. In Cathy Dollanganger, Heaven Casteel, and Audrina Adare, teenage girls on the brink of womanhood see themselves and the significant concerns that they share with these fictional characters. Andrews pointed out that she wrote about everyday fears rather than supernatural terrors:

> The face of fear I display in my novels is not the pale specter from the sunken grave, nor . . . the thing that goes bump in the night. Mine are the deep-seated fears established when we are children . . . the fear of being helpless . . . of being trapped . . . of being out of control. (Winter, *Faces* 173)

A young friend described *Flowers in the Attic* to me as a ''safe scare'' because it allowed her to experience vicariously the terrors of confinement, the futility of a child's engaging in combat with an adult, the horrifying realization that sometimes one's best efforts are not good enough. Andrews's youthful protagonists have experiences that closely mirror the fears of young readers; thus, the novels provide readers with a kind of catharsis—a way to expend feelings of fear without actually being in danger.

Andrews is less successful with adult characters who tend toward two-dimensionality and are relegated to one of three structurally prescribed roles. The first role—the miraculous source of help and comfort—is played by only one or two, among them the charitable and rather dull Paul Sheffield of the Dollanganger series. Characters in the second role—the antagonist—are far more numerous. Two types of antagonists are responsible for generating conflict and terror: the weak adults, which include Corrine Foxworth (Dollanganger series), Damian Adare (*Audrina*), and Luke Casteel (Casteel series); and the powerful manipulators, which include Olivia Foxworth and John Amos (Dollanganger), and Tony Tatterton (Casteel). In the third role are the supporting characters

who function as components of a novel's setting, as foils to the antagonists or even as sources of comic relief. Among the most distinctive of these supporting characters are Henrietta Beech and Madama Marisha (Dollanganger), Aunt Ellsbeth (*Audrina*), and Jillian Tatterton (Casteel). Because they are so highly individualistic, the supporting characters are V. C. Andrews's best adult creations, although they are not all necessarily the most memorable.

V. C. Andrews never earned literary recognition, but there is no doubt that her books are among the most significant publishing phenomena of the late twentieth century. So popular has her work been that all of her novels are still in print, and her name on a paperback cover guarantees that the novel will sell extremely well. The power of her name is evident in the fact that since her death in 1986, the V. C. Andrews novels have been written by another author—Andrew Niederman—who has made a career of writing in the Andrews style and under the Andrews name.

ANOTHER V. C. ANDREWS?

Surely one of the more interesting phenomena in book publishing and marketing is the fact that Andrew Niederman has written, partly or entirely, eleven ''V. C. Andrews'' novels to Andrews's eight. Because at the outset Niederman scrupulously crafted his Andrews novels along the lines of Virginia Andrews's books, his earliest efforts—employing characters and settings created by Andrews—seem to be virtually indistinguishable from the novels written by the original author. Beginning with the Cutler series, however, Niederman has begun to revise and extend the genre that Andrews created, and both the Cutler novels and the Landry series that followed bear fictional hallmarks distinctive to the work of ''the other V. C. Andrews.''

This book will examine in detail only the work of Virginia Andrews—the novels that represent her unique adaptation of the female Gothic genre. With the publication of *Flowers in the Attic,* Andrews launched a new kind of Gothic fiction, a subgenre that is darker and more psychologically realistic than the traditional Gothic, which shares with horror fiction the unbearable tension of fear even while avoiding the gory elements and occult intrusions of that genre. Because this study is the first full-length treatment of V. C. Andrews, it makes sense to focus primarily on the body of work produced by the author of that phenomenon. Chap-

ter 8 will discuss the V. C. Andrews novels by Andrew Niederman, whose work ultimately will require its own extended analysis.

THE POPULARITY OF THE ANDREWS NOVELS

Several attempts have been made to understand the appeal of the Andrews novels to readers, especially teenagers and young adults. Most of the reviewers and critics who have wondered in print who reads these books have gone on to ask why any reader would spend time with novels that they claim are implausible, wordy, and unwieldy. Suggestions vary. Roger Sutton, a Chicago children's librarian, offers his idea:

> Explicit sex is not the appeal of *Flowers in the Attic;* it is the mystery, secrecy, and frustrated passion surrounding sex, particularly the emerging sexuality of the adolescent. . . . The secret, forbidden quality of Christopher's and Cathy's love in *Flowers* . . . may not be wholesome, but genuine passions are here. (54)

Focusing on the readers themselves, best-selling juvenile horror fiction author Christopher Pike has another suggestion:

> They want to be scared or they would not pick up the book and read it. The kids have fair warning and know it's all good fun. (Gray 54)

Cosette Kies believes that young readers are drawn to books like those written by V. C. Andrews because of the ''persistent and universal appeal of a good scary story'' (169).

Even among reviewers who find much to criticize in Andrews's overblown prose and incredible plots, there is agreement that Andrews is a good storyteller, that her novels somehow speak to what is significant in the lives of her readers. Commenting on her readers, V. C. Andrews once said, ''Their letters tell me they don't feel like they're reading, they feel like they're living, experiencing. Then when they finish the book, they start it over to live it again'' (Goldstein 36). Andrews's gift is a facility to reproduce the fear and uncertainty with which a child or an adolescent views the world of adulthood and maturity and senses the implicit terrors inherent in that world. Through Andrews's novels,

youthful readers can exorcise their fear of losing control, being helpless, and being betrayed—without leaving the safety of home. Immersed in the stories of fictional adolescents who must suffer the pains of living in that limbo between childhood and adulthood, readers can return to their real lives after a few hours, in most cases secure in the knowledge that the terrors they have just experienced exist for them only between the covers of a novel.

Whatever the reasons for the ongoing popularity of the Andrews books, one fact about Andrews and her work remains abundantly clear: V. C. Andrews was a talented storyteller. Her family sagas hold the reader's attention through the sheer inventiveness of her storytelling and through her ability to reproduce in fiction the powerful and unnameable emotions universal to young people who stand, frightened and uncertain, on the verge of adulthood.

2

V. C. Andrews and the Gothic Novel

V. C. Andrews's novels follow in the tradition of the Gothic novel. First appearing as a distinct fictional genre in the eighteenth century, the Gothic novel is a suspenseful tale of psychological terror played out in a setting heavy with the threat of danger and pervasive malevolence. Typically the novel focuses on a young woman who is ill equipped to mount a sustained defense against the unnameable peril that threatens her. Standard sources describe classic Gothic fiction as a genre in which horror, violence, and supernatural effects combine with medieval elements, generally in a setting reminiscent of Gothic architecture—a castle or a crumbling cloister. As the Gothic novel's popularity increased among writers in a number of European countries, especially Germany, and later in America, the genre evolved, taking on new characteristics and modifying others. Because the New World lacks medieval castles and ruined monasteries, American authors focused instead on crumbling old houses that were relics of decaying old societies, such as the New England gentry and the southern aristocracy.

V. C. Andrews's novels are Gothics of a particularly twentieth-century type, focusing on young women who are forced to endure domestic abuse and violence and suffer isolation and deprivation, finally to triumph over adversity and achieve happy domesticity—for a short while. Author Donald Westlake has been quoted as remarking, ''A Gothic is a story about a girl who gets a house'' (Pronzini 199).

HISTORY OF THE GENRE

Literary historians generally agree that the first true Gothic novel was Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which chronicles the persecution of the heroine, Isabella, by Prince Manfred and his son Conrad before the two men are finally killed and Isabella is united with Theodore, her true love. Because Walpole set his story in a mouldering medieval castle—encrusted with flying buttresses, crowned with towers, full of dark stairways and underground crypts and hidden doors—the genre that he popularized came to be described as Gothic in homage to the architectural style of the castle. With its complicated and impossibly suspenseful plot, Walpole's tale strains credibility with outlandish situations, improbable events, and supernatural interventions, yet at its first publication, it clearly provided readers with pleasures until then largely unknown in English fiction. *Otranto* went through three sold-out private printings before a commercial edition appeared in 1782. Meanwhile, two other Gothic novels were published: Clara Reeve's *The Champion of Virtue, A Gothic Tale* (1777), later published as *The Old English Baron,* and Sophia Lee's *The Chapter of Accidents* (1780).

Within half a century following the publications of Walpole's novel, other women writers—Mary Anne Radcliffe, Eliza Parsons, Agnes Maria Bennett, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jane Austen—had embraced the Gothic genre, extended and redefined its boundaries, and created and refined a number of now-familiar narrative devices. Old friends by now to readers of the Gothic, these devices include the following: the motherless young woman of good family whose point of view shapes the narrative; the constant threat of sexual violation and physical violence; the lurking menace of shameful family secrets and unnatural relationships; the emphasis on setting and suspense instead of character delineation; and the explained supernatural. This last, a device much used by Ann Radcliffe, removes all trace of the genuinely occult from the Gothic novel, forcing the novelist to provide more or less plausible explanations for the seemingly inexplicable terrors that beset the novel's heroine.

Ann Radcliffe particularly is credited with the invention of a ''fictional language and a set of conventions within which 'respectable' feminine sexuality might find expression'' (Wolff 207). As we shall see, that language and those conventions formed the basis for the development of the female Gothic, the genre to which V. C. Andrews's fiction, with its

focus on the emerging sexuality of adolescent girls, most properly belongs.

Within a few years of its initial appearance, the Gothic novel had evolved into two distinct varieties. The first, the masculine Gothic, exemplified by William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1795), and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), is the tale of an outsider whose exile from home engenders feelings of revenge and the need to force his isolation on a female counterpart. By contrast, the female Gothic, as written by Ann Radcliffe and Sophia Lee, exposes the dangers inherent in home and family, where patriarchal figures menace the heroine under the guise of protecting her. Clarifying the differences between the two forms, Michael Sadleir describes the ''Radcliffians'' as ''persons . . . [whose] sensitiveness to the beauty of the terrific depends less on the actual quality of terror than on the shuddersome but agreeable contrast between the dangers of abroad and the cosy security of home'' (14). By contrast, says Sadleir, the warmly welcoming Radcliffe interior would be invaded by a ''Lewisite'' striding in, ''haggard, and with water streaming from his lank hair, shrieking perhaps . . . as a demon of the storm; then, when he had struck the company to silent fear . . . would vanish again into the howling darkness'' (14). By now, most commentary on the Gothic novel accepts and builds on Sadleir's divisions as representative of the ways in which the genre developed in the years immediately after Walpole and Reeve.

The first fully developed female Gothic may well have been Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a long, complicated novel about a heroine whose encounters with evil force her finally to develop common sense and independence, two qualities initially alien to her. Radcliffe refined Walpole's techniques and contributed to the genre the convention of entrapping readers by raising and sustaining for hundreds of pages the possibility of violence and unnatural occurrences. Later novels in the tradition are Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), Daphne du Maurier's Gothic novels set in Cornwall, England, and the works of contemporary novelists like Victoria Holt and Joan Aiken. Not all Gothics by women are in the literary tradition of Radcliffe's work. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1794) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), with their focus on male protagonists as marginal wanderers, have more in common with the Lewis than the Radcliffe version.

Less than half a century after the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* and only twenty-four years after Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* pro-

vided readers with vicarious terror, Jane Austen mocked the entire Gothic genre with her novel *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1797 and 1798 but not published until 1818. *Northanger* comically imitates its predecessors by creating sharp contrasts between the fanciful Gothic world of the imagination and the no-nonsense real world. In creating an emphatically ordinary heroine in Catherine Morland who seeks excitement by reading Gothic romances, Jane Austen ridicules the impossibly accomplished and clever young women who are central to Radcliffe's stories. Radcliffe's heroines flee through the dense forests of southern France and over rugged mountain passes in the Pyrenees, while Austen's Catherine must make do with the quiet, civilized resort city of Bath.

THE MODERN GOTHIC NOVEL

In the twentieth century, the Gothic novel has undergone several changes, influenced not only by the serious novels of Radcliffe and the Brontë sisters but also by Austen as well as by the Gothic-inspired melodramas that were popular in European and American theaters at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, the American Gothic form can claim ancestry in the nineteenth-century novels of Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne and the short fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, and in the twentieth century in the works of William Faulkner and other southern writers. The Gothic novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have also influenced the development of detective fiction, science fiction, fantasy, horror fiction, romantic suspense, the Regency novel, and historical romance. Although many of these genres are identifiable by their clearly defined conventions and sometimes formulaic writing, they all retain significant evidence of kinship with the early Gothic novel's creation of suspense through the use of Gothic plot devices, character types, and settings. The true twentieth-century descendants of Radcliffe and the Brontës are Daphne du Maurier and, later, Barbara Michaels, Virginia Coffman, Jane Aiken Hodge, Victoria Holt, and Phyllis Whitney, among others; and it is with these authors, rather than with Stephen King and his fellows, that Andrews can be compared most fruitfully.

Although she is very much a Gothic writer, V. C. Andrews is generally described—partly accurately and somewhat erroneously—as a writer of horror fiction, creating in the literary genre popularized by Stephen King, Peter Straub, and Dean Koontz. Bookstores shelve the Andrews novels

in sections reserved for horror fiction, and Andrews's readers have learned to search for their favorite books on those shelves, where, separated from the novels of Victoria Holt and Mary Stewart, Andrews's *Flowers in the Attic* shares space with King's *The Stand* and Straub's *Ghost Story.* Reviewers and interviewers have contributed to the ''horror'' label, although Andrews herself always resisted that designation for her work.

That the Andrews novels have some traits in common with horror fiction is indisputable. The horror genre is, after all, a descendant of early Gothic novels. But what finally separates the Dollanganger story from Clive Barker's and Stephen King's novels is that the latter can also be identified as occult fiction while the former cannot. True, Andrews's tales have been described as terrifying, but the terror that they evoke owes nothing to the supernatural and everything to human activity. Like Ann Radcliffe before her, V. C. Andrews portrays only the explained supernatural, only the realistically possible.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MODERN GOTHIC NOVEL

Kate Ferguson Ellis comments that ''the [modern version of the] Gothic novel can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out'' and that the genre is ''concerned with violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women'' (3). Here, Ferguson has identified the popular Gothic novel's essential elements: a house, a heroine, and domestic violence. But the modern Gothic novel has other easily identifiable traits and traditionally defined conventions.

The modern Gothic novel has at its center a young woman who is forced to confront unfamiliar situations far beyond her understanding and control. Dominating the setting is a large, remote dwelling—mostly uninhabited, decaying, and hidden by dense forests or impassable mountains—in which many of the events that make up the plot take place.

The plot is frequently tinged with suggestions of supernatural or unnatural influence, although in the true Gothic novel, the supernatural events are explained away, inevitably unmasked as the creations of a protagonist's overactive imagination or the productions of malevolent, and very human, characters. In the Andrews books, the uncanny is explained, as it is in Ann Radcliffe's novels. Frightening noises are attributed to perfectly natural causes, and any apparently genuine occult interference is found only in the nightmares that plague some characters.

The author's skillful deployment of the appropriate Gothic elements creates a menacing atmosphere that allows readers to experience vicariously the travails of the heroine. In a Gothic novel, tone—the sum of plot and setting and language—is everything. The language of the Gothic novel tends to be formal and solemn rather than familiar. There are frequent references to nightmares and visions, secrecy and concealment, darkness and mystery, pain and death. Overall, the tone of Gothic fiction creates a sense of antiquity and decay and hopelessness.

PLOT DEVICES

The plot devices associated with Gothic fiction have their origins as far back as the landscape poetry of the sixteenth century, although they became fictional staples through the works of Walpole and Radcliffe and their imitators. Admirers of the genre expect from the Gothic certain staples of narrative development: amnesia, overheard conversations, forbidden rooms, unacknowledged offspring, lost jewelry or other treasure. The natural world can heal or destroy, domestic settings conceal sources of evil, and when the events of the plot become too complicated, an improbably contrived solution is quite appropriate. Gothic plots are often built on patterns of flight and pursuit, imprisonment and freedom. Suspense is created through the withholding of crucial information until the last possible moment, and sometimes it is resolved through the sudden appearance of hitherto absent characters. The confinement or entrapment of a protagonist provides the Gothic author with a ready source of intricate structural maneuvers revolving around the prisoner's attempts to escape.

Gothic plots frequently focus on family secrets and mysteries about heredity, on estranged or lost heirs to large fortunes, and on dark prophecies about the future of a family of ancient lineage. Often intertwined with these convoluted plot strands is the threat of incest—past, present, or future—calling into question relationships or kinships between protagonists and antagonists. Suicides and unexplained deaths follow the revelations of long-concealed scandals; accidents inevitably come on the heels of threats of disclosure.

Sex and violence are often linked in these novels; conflict is flavored with mingled passion and cruelty, and sexual tension underlies even the most benign of social exchanges and conversations. In fact, the Gothic

novel sometimes appears to be obsessed with abnormal psychological states and with portraying human beings in extremis.

Strangely enough, along with its emphasis on characters' inner lives, the Gothic novel also exhibits a preoccupation with exterior elements like costume and architecture, often lovingly detailing the particulars of a house or the intricacies and ornamentation of the heroine's dress. Functioning as the external manifestations of internal verities, clothing and physical surroundings provide clues to the emotional and psychological concerns that structure the characters' lives.

THE GOTHIC SETTING

The classic Gothic setting is typically exemplified by a paperback cover illustration of a huge, sinister house with one lighted tower window. In the background is a threatening night sky with roiling black clouds nearly obscuring a moon; in the foreground is a shadowy overgrown garden; and in the extreme foreground is a frightened, fleeing woman, caped and gowned in period garb or dressed in twentieth-century clothing. Whatever her costume, she wears on her face a look of undisguised fear. Dark colors predominate, and occasionally an inset provides a tantalizing glimpse of other characters in the forbidden interior of the house.

At the center of the Gothic novel is a building—often a castle or palatial residence, sometimes a large, rambling farmhouse or turreted Victorian structure. Sequestered by its location in dense forest, atop a craggy cliff, or behind high stone walls, the mansion is mysterious and crowded with terrifying possibilities. Devoted readers of the genre have come to expect certain architectural features: winding stairways, subterranean tunnels, trapdoors and sliding wall panels, isolated rooms with locked doors, labyrinthine corridors, innumerable wings and annexes, cavelike vaults, and hidden chapels. Antique furniture and heavy draperies add to the pall of terror that shrouds the house; outside, huge trees and rampant foliage threaten to overwhelm and engulf both house and inhabitants.

Within the house or castle is an enclosed prison-like space—a single room, a suite, a wing—that functions as the specific site of terror. Gothic novels tend to imply connections between danger or evil and rooms designated as off-limits to the heroine. The consequences to her of ignoring the warnings against exploration are almost too horrible to contemplate with composure, despite the reader's knowledge that inevitably

the heroine will succumb to her overwhelming curiosity and will liberate all of the terrors contained in the forbidden space. True to form, Andrews's Cathy Dollanganger eventually creeps out of her attic prison to explore the forbidden vastness of Foxworth Hall, and Heaven Casteel is drawn inexorably to enter a locked cottage that she has been told to avoid. These brief exploratory journeys have far-reaching consequences for Cathy and Heaven, whose lives change as a result of the knowledge they gain from their furtive explorations.

Like its eighteenth-century ancestor, the modern Gothic novel situates its highly specific house in a vaguely familiar yet undefinable location and time. Actual place names are invoked for a touch of realism, but the reader soon discovers that geographic and temporal exactness is impossible to determine. Attempts to establish specific dates for the Dollanganger story only prove that the final chapter happens in the 1990s, clearly in the future for a novel written in the 1980s. Because the Gothic novel is ritualized, almost formulaic, its setting—both realistically evoked and oddly beyond space and time—must provide a narrow route between realism and fantasy. It is the danger posed by that literary journey that intrigues and enthralls readers, because such danger is safe, confined as it is between the pages of a novel. Readers can shiver in delicious terror as they follow the perilous journey of the Gothic heroine, but those same readers always remain comfortably aware that the terror is imaginary.

What may be the supreme irony is that the Gothic house's intended cultural function as a refuge is at odds with the unmistakable threat of danger within its walls. The Gothic house, like most other dwelling places, is designed to offer shelter and safety to its inhabitants, yet typically, that same house harbors dangerous secrets that put the heroine at risk. Confined to a space or a location generally associated with kinship, affection, and warmth, the heroine discovers that her hideaway is also the source of the evil she must escape. Her home is the site of her vulnerability. In a familial circle where she might expect to reclaim her lineage and thus her true identity, the Gothic heroine instead comes face to face with domestic danger, which is all the more terrifying because it is unexpected.

In V. C. Andrews's Casteel series, Heaven Casteel believes that she is providing herself with a stable, ordinary home life by thoughtfully selecting the married couple who will purchase her for five hundred dollars from her destitute father. They take her home with them to their Atlanta house, but immediately after her arrival, Heaven realizes with

horror that the Dennisons do not want a child. Kitty Dennison needs someone to scrub the kitchen and bathroom, and Cal Dennison hopes for a bedmate who can console him when his wife is out of sorts. For Cathy Dollanganger, a heroine who looks forward to meeting her grandparents, the first encounter with Foxworth Hall is shocking. She and her siblings are smuggled into a massive, dark mansion and introduced to their monstrous grandmother, a woman who is convinced that the children are ''devils' spawn.'' Finally, Audrina Adare, who does not, in the course of *My Sweet Audrina,* leave Whitefern where she thinks that she is secure and relatively contented, finally comes to realize that her comfortable home is in truth a psychological prison from which she might never escape.

Gothic settings are always ambiguous: at once realistic and fantastic, beautiful and terrifying, welcoming and claustrophobic. They are, as well, simultaneously ordinary and marvelous. Functioning as both safe havens and prisons, these settings draw the fictional protagonist and the readers of this fiction into the Gothic universe where rescue from one danger may be a prelude to entrapment in another terrifying situation.

In Gothic fiction, setting performs a number of important basic functions: it provides a stage on which the plot is dramatized; it reveals social, economic, and cultural information; it outlines character; and it reflects the psychological and emotional landscape of the novel. These functions, universal to most fiction, are discussed at length in the context of *Flowers in the Attic,* which is analyzed fully in Chapter 3. Other less universal functions are more definitively identified with Gothic fiction. The setting may evoke historical periods and distant geographic locations, thus widening the distance between readers and fictional text, and enabling readers to experience fear and take risks without actually entering a nightmare universe. Conversely, when the setting is familiar, even mundane and ordinary, it forces readers to consider the possibility that the everyday world might harbor the uncanny and the terrifying.

SOME MEANINGS OF GOTHIC SPACE

Readers of the Gothic expect that the architectural structure occupying the center of the novel is more than just a physical setting in which events occur. In fact, in a sense the setting is a character in its own right, insofar as it influences and shapes the novel's characters and events.

The Gothic setting represents mental and emotional states, collective

guilt and individual shame, unspoken realities and unvoiced concerns. Mansions that house disintegrating families tend themselves to be dilapidated. Houses that conceal pain and death also hide creeping rot and structural damage. Some Gothic settings have been carefully designed by their inhabitants as reminders of traumatic events in their pasts. Indeed, two of Cathy Dollanganger's homes after she reaches adulthood have attic rooms inexplicably (to her children) furnished with twin beds and decorated with paper flowers—clearly Cathy's attempts to replicate the painful but familiar world of her childhood.

Gothic settings enclose a world where dream and nightmare combine to create a painful and terrifying existence for the unfortunates trapped there by circumstance. No sooner does Heaven Casteel decide that Farthinggale is the fairy castle of her dreams than she discovers that the beautiful house conceals secrets that threaten to undermine her happiness and emotional well-being. She finds her father at Farthinggale and then symbolically loses him again on her discovery that like so many other men she has met, he is sexually attracted to her.

Inner spaces—attics, rooms, closets—illustrate the attitudes toward female sexuality that prevail in the world of Gothic fiction. Even in novels written by women, sex and violence are linked, and female sexuality is viewed by many characters as a threat to domestic stability, possibly as a problem to be eradicated or at least contained. In the Dollanganger saga, the swan bed belonging to Corinne, Malcolm's mother, and later, Corrine, Malcolm's daughter, amply illustrates the connections between violence and a woman's sexual identity. With its clear parallels to the Greek myth of Leda and the Swan (discussed in detail in Chapter 5), the swan bed is the site of the first Corinne's infidelity as well as Malcolm Foxworth's assaults on both his wife and his stepmother. To Malcolm, the bed belonging to his unfaithful mother symbolizes the treachery and weakness of women, and on that bed he attempts to force women to pay the price that he wants to exact from his mother.

Ultimately the Gothic space represents the power held by the man who holds title to the house and land that comprise the Gothic universe. Farthinggale is Tony Tatterton's kingdom, as Foxworth Hall is Malcolm Foxworth's empire. Even when absent, Tatterton and Foxworth exert control over the daily routines of the individuals who inhabit their houses, either as family members and guests or as servants. These men stamp their characters on their settings, reshaping the physical and social worlds to their own needs and desires, and creating an emotional landscape in which they reign unchallenged.

GOTHIC CHARACTER TYPES

Gothic writer Virginia Coffman has said that the classic ingredients of the Gothic romance are ''a Wicked Uncle, an Endangered Niece, a Cruel Housekeeper, and an ancient house that was falling apart (243).'' Bill Pronzini, writing about the pulp Gothics of the 1950s and 1960s, identifies the central Gothic character as an ''imperiled woman'' (199) who is menaced by ''wicked barons, monks, nuns, outlaws, and bogus lovers'' (200).

The conventional Gothic heroine is young—often in her late teens—and more than a little naive about the world. She is considerably more inquisitive than most other young women of her age and station, and her curiosity impels her to investigate where she should not, to open doors that she has been told to leave alone, and to attempt to engineer her escape from the trying circumstances in which she finds herself. She is also beautiful, and her developing sexuality exerts a powerful attraction on the men around her even while it engenders rabid jealousy in other women. Almost at odds with the heroine's combination of headstrong impetuousness and obvious sexuality is the fact that she is a virgin who is determined to stay untouched until she is married.

In the classic Gothic novel, as in the fairy tale, the hero (for want of a better title) is frequently overshadowed by the antagonist, an older and more sophisticated, wealthier, and certainly more powerful man. Beside the antagonist, the hero can look colorless and ineffectual, even lacking in sex appeal. Quite often, despite the hero's early appearance in the novel, he is a relatively minor character, and his role is not significant until the heroine, who has endured flight and pursuit, imprisonment and escape, abuse and violation, is finally in need of rescue. Like Prince Charming in the fairy tale, the Gothic hero provides stability and companionship for the heroine at the end of the novel. There are notable exceptions, however. Some examples of the best Gothic fiction—*Jane Eyre* (a favorite of V. C. Andrews) and *Rebecca,* among others—appear to combine antagonist and hero in one man, thus giving the heroine an opportunity to affect a proud self-contained man so profoundly that he softens and becomes worthy of the heroine and the love she offers him.

Two types of antagonists, or adversaries of the central characters, inhabit Gothic spaces: the predator, a man who, because he is a guardian or surrogate father, should be protective of the heroine but who in fact poses the gravest dangers to her; and the other woman, a beautiful, pas-

sionate older woman who identifies the heroine as the competition for male attention and adoration. Often the predator violates religious and cultural taboos by forcibly attempting to instigate a sexual relationship between himself and the heroine. Successful or not, his actions bring down upon the heroine the undisguised hatred of the other woman, who wishes to keep for herself the attentions of a powerful man. Occasionally the other woman is a longtime housekeeper, an elderly woman whose power over the antagonist is emotional rather than sexual. This personification of the other woman dislikes change, and she views the heroine as an agent of upheaval or the potential destroyer of the way things used to be. Yet another variation identifies the other woman as the heroine's own sister, a woman who is competing fiercely and underhandedly for the attentions of the hero.

Contributing comic relief as well as complications to the Gothic plot are the supporting characters, most of them conventional types who also appear in other formulaic genres: faithful retainers, pompous butlers, frightened servants, innocent children, country folk who speak rural dialects, snobbish wealthy acquaintances, and malevolent elderly relatives. Occasionally the heroine has a confidante, an older woman who has achieved everything that the heroine hopes for: a decent husband, lovely children, a beautiful house, and a great deal of money. More frequently, however, the heroine is alone and can trust no one.

V. C. ANDREWS AND THE FEMALE GOTHIC

V. C. Andrews worked both within and without the Radcliffe tradition, leading reviewers and critics to attach to her novels a number of different labels: ''Gothic tales,'' ''horror fiction,'' and ''romantic suspense'' are the most common. Her work, however, is closest to the fictional genre defined by many literary critics as female Gothic, best described by Juliann Fleenor, who defines it as loosely structured around a heroine's quest, which is often set in a ruined castle or enclosed room ''to symbolize both the culture and the heroine.'' Fleenor clarifies her definition by citing the following hallmarks of the female Gothic: first, it provokes ambivalent feelings toward female sexuality and the female role; second, it reflects a patriarchal culture that suggests that women are flawed because they are female; and finally, it portrays women as literally and symbolically motherless even as they are controlled and shaped by fathers or father figures (15).

According to Fleenor, the female Gothic also exhibits other distinctive characteristics. First, it relates particularly to the unique condition of being a woman. Second, it deals specifically with female anxieties. Third, it views conflict from a female perspective. And fourth, it puts female interpretations and variations on the themes of pursuit and escape, loneliness, sexuality, and domestic happiness. Except for *If There Be Thorns,* which is principally narrated by two young boys, the Andrews novels have women as their storytellers, and even *Thorns* begins and ends with a Prologue and Epilogue by Cathy Dollanganger (Marquet Sheffield by that point in the saga).

The heroine at the center of a Gothic novel is nearly always beautiful, desirable, and potentially fertile. She is also either unaware of her uniqueness as a woman or profoundly uncomfortable with the female role. Cathy, Heaven and Audrina all display the female Gothic heroine's characteristic ambivalence about being a woman, about possessing a traitorous body that is capable of betraying them into uncomfortable situations. Sybil Vincent points out that the Gothic heroine ''recognizes that there is that within her that can destroy her, and the person as a whole recognizes that conflicts within are threatening her overall wellbeing'' (155). Andrews's heroines, all survivors of abuse or sexual violence, nevertheless find that they must deal with an uncontrollable physical attraction to men who are otherwise threatening.

Evidence of sexual desire is not the only way in which a woman's body can embarrass her. Cathy's dance audition is spoiled when she begins to bleed, and the red stains visibly discolor her light-colored tights. Heaven suffers from acute diarrhea after drinking laxative-spiked punch at a dance sponsored by her boarding school, and her undignified rush to the restrooms (which turn out to be locked) is furtively observed by the giggling girls who are responsible for tainting the punch. Audrina's body betrays her in a tremendously intimate and embarrassing way. On her wedding night, she discovers that she feels only fear and revulsion at the touch of the man she has loved for years, and their first intimacies are painful and humiliating for her.

Another signature characteristic of the heroine of the female Gothic is her vulnerability to doubts about her value as a woman. One way or another, she is frequently reminded that because she is a woman, the troubles she must endure and the trials she must undergo are inescapable. Pain and suffering are a woman's lot in the Gothic universe, and the Gothic heroine personifies the persecuted woman at the heart of this genre. More disturbing, the experiences of the women around the her-

oine tend to reinforce her dawning realization that as a woman she is inherently flawed and consequently responsible for her own unhappiness. She is surrounded by cultural paradigms that exemplify for her what it means to be female. When Alicia Foxworth first appears in *Garden of Shadows,* she is a lively, talkative, pretty, young woman, but a few months in Foxworth Hall are sufficient to inculcate in her the idea that she, and she alone, is to blame for her stepson's desire for her. Continually stalked by Malcolm, frightened by his advances, and reminded by him that her beauty is the catalyst for his behavior, Alicia withers, and her laughter ceases. Malcolm is not the only instigator of violence against women at Foxworth Hall. His angry wife, Olivia, unable to retaliate for his cruelty to her and neglect of their sons, becomes Alicia's implacable enemy. It is Olivia who imprisons Alicia in an unused wing of the hall, Olivia who chops off Alicia's abundant chestnut hair so that Malcolm will no longer be ensnared by its beauty, Olivia who finally refuses to call a physician when Alicia goes into labor before she bears the daughter who was conceived when Malcolm raped her. Through Alicia, Andrews illustrates a characteristic Gothic commonplace: a young, passive, naive woman is no match for evil and is, in fact, by her timidity an unwitting collaborator in her own destruction.

V. C. ANDREWS'S ALTERATIONS OF THE GOTHIC TRADITION

Although her work follows the forms and conventions of the traditional Gothic novel as well as the female Gothic, V. C. Andrews departs in a number of significant ways from the two genres to which she is most closely allied. In particular, she makes considerable alterations in her handling of setting, characterization, and plot resolution.

A classic Gothic setting—the isolated, haunted, ancestral house—appears in both of Andrews's multivolume family sagas, as well as in *My Sweet Audrina,* but only in the latter is a house the single dominant setting. Of the Dollanganger novels, three are set at Foxworth Hall (although *Seeds of Yesterday* is set in a brand-new replica of the old manor house, which was destroyed by fire). The other two involve a gracious South Carolina mansion, a rural cottage in the Blue Ridge Mountains, a New York apartment, a California redwood ranch house—settings that are rather ordinary in their geographic locations and lend an aura of normality to the events in Cathy's turbulent life. Similarly, the Casteel

novels have several settings, beginning with a shack in rural Appalachia, moving on to a bland suburban subdivision house in Atlanta, and finally ending at Farthinggale Manor where, the last volume makes clear, the whole complicated story began years earlier. Andrews has expanded the idea of the Gothic setting to include a variety of locales not generally identified with the genre, but she has maintained in these settings the Gothic's essential requirements: bleakness, isolation, mystery, and an atmosphere of impending violence and danger.

The typical Andrews heroine, like her predecessors, is young, beautiful, spirited, intelligent and artistically talented, and poised on the brink of mature womanhood. She is also eventually revealed to be of good family, and thus entitled to claim social position and wealth and, presumably, to contract a marriage to a suitably impressive man of equally excellent background. There are, however, significant differences between an Andrews heroine and the young woman at the center of a classic Gothic. While the classic heroine is a naive virgin who remains that way until she is claimed by the hero as his bride, the Andrews heroine comes to her marriage with quite a bit of sexual experience, much of it acquired with several partners while she was fairly young. These sexual encounters are depicted as the innocent gropings of adolescents or an older man's seduction of a young girl who is more than willing. But the result is the same in all instances: as a bride, the Andrews heroine is no coy, blushing maiden.

The third area in which Andrews has effected major changes is in plot development and resolution. As Michelle Masse has pointed out in her essay on the Gothic, there are two possible traditional plots. In the first, an unprotected young woman endures repeated persecutions during her sojourn in an isolated house. The source of her trials is the evil master of the house, and after she suffers a great deal of pain and anguish, she is released from the house by the poor but honest young hero who overcomes the villain. Beginning like the first plot, the second version reveals that the seemingly evil master of the Gothic house is more sinned against than sinning, and when his innate nobility of character is finally revealed, the heroine marries him (679).

Andrews departs from both of these plots in dramatic fashion. Although in her novels the master of the house is the source of the heroine's fears and is largely responsible for her emotional and physical travail, his status as head of the family precludes his ever marrying her. Nevertheless, his dominance is absolute and long-lasting. Just how far-reaching his control is becomes clear when the heroine marries, and her

new husband falls under the spell of the master of the house. Instead of rescuing the heroine and taking her away from the site of her terror, the man she loves surrenders his personal independence and himself becomes a kind of prisoner of the house and its master. Marrying Logan partly because she loves him and partly because the union will give her an excuse for staying away from the Tattertons and their circle, Heaven is horrified when, on their wedding trip to Farthinggale, Logan accepts Tony Tatterton's offer of a career at Tatterton Toys.

Finally, Andrews reverses the traditional Gothic's skeletal plot. In the classic formula, the heroine survives a series of trying circumstances and finally finds love and security in the arms of the hero. Implied in this ending is a happily-ever-after future for the happy couple. Such a finale is uncharacteristic of the Andrews novels, which tend, on the whole, to conclude with loss and reminders of mortality. Cathy Dollanganger and Heaven Casteel—each a central figure and narrator in the series about her life—are dead at the end of the final volumes of their stories. The lone exception is *My Sweet Audrina,* which reunites Audrina with Arden at the end. But even that conclusion does not suggest ''happily ever after.'' Audrina and Arden have salvaged their marriage for the time being, but their fairy-tale castle is Audrina's childhood home; they must share it not only with her father and her emotionally handicapped younger sister but also with her nightmare memories of a tortured childhood.

3

Flowers in the Attic (1979)

Published by Pocket Books in 1979, V. C. Andrews's *Flowers in the Attic* was an overnight best-seller, its popularity fueled by enthusiastic word-of-mouth endorsements and by the $100,000 promotion budget allocated by the publisher in an unusual gamble on an unknown author who had no previous publication history other than a short story in a pulp magazine. Despite strong positive reader response to the book, reviews of *Flowers* tended to range from dismissive one-sentence announcements to outright disparaging commentary. Today, however, literary scholars have become interested in exploring the reasons for the book's amazing popularity, particularly with female readers. Evidence suggests that one reason might be the book's focus on some common adolescent concerns—burgeoning teenage sexuality, frustrated passion, unarticulated feelings of desire, the mystery of sex—that adolescent girls may feel unable to discuss with adults, by whom they often (rightly or wrongly) feel ignored or misunderstood.

Flowers in the Attic is the first and best volume in the saga of the Dollanganger siblings—Christopher, Jr., Cathy, and the twins, Carrie and Cory—who are the children of Corrine and Christopher Dollanganger of Gladstone, Pennsylvania. Narrated by Cathy, the story begins with the ingredients of a fairy tale: a perfect family whose blond, blue-eyed beauty prompts acquaintances and friends to call them ''Dresden Dolls'' in reference to both their Germanic handsomeness and the first syllable,

''Doll,'' of their uncommon surname; a carefree existence; and delightful surroundings. Early in the narrative, the fairy tale abruptly becomes a nightmare when the children's father is killed in an automobile accident on his birthday. Explaining to her children that their true surname is Foxworth and not Dollanganger, the emotionally and financially bereft Corrine moves her family from Pennsylvania to Foxworth Hall, her parents' home in Virginia.

On their arrival at the dark southern mansion, the fatherless family is met and separated; the four children are installed in a remote upstairs suite, while Corrine is taken away to the main portion of the house. Because she hopes for reinstatement as her father's heir, a role that will be denied her if she is ever proven to have borne Christopher's children, Corrine is coerced by her mother into concealing the existence of her offspring, who are trapped in their suite for what they believe will be only a few days. The days lengthen into over three years, and finally Chris and Cathy mature and discover each other sexually. The twins suffer from ill health. All four children are semistarved and then poisoned presumably by their grandmother. Meanwhile, Corrine gradually forgets her promises of liberation to her imprisoned children. She attends parties, travels to Europe, flirts with eligible men, and spends her father's money. One twin dies from repeated ingestion of poison, and the other three children escape the house to begin new lives elsewhere.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE

The plot of *Flowers in the Attic* has been described as ''a ferocious fairy tale'' (Kies 16). The novel draws its patterns from traditional fairy tales about the sufferings of unfortunate children who are partially orphaned or abandoned—Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel—and later cruelly misused by their new guardians. Chris and Cathy and the twins lose their father to an accident and their mother to Foxworth society. Virtual orphans, they are held captive and abused physically and psychologically, sacrificed to their mother's greed and their grandmother's rage at their existence. In keeping with the happily-ever-after ending of Disneyised fairy tales, some of the Dollanganger children are headed for the sunshine at the end of the novel, but their dead brother Cory remains in the world of Grimm's fairy tales, in the dark and twisted universe also shared by horror fiction. Good children always win in the fairy tales; in horror fiction, angelic children often suffer and even die.

Andrews reverses the traditional plot device of the forbidden room behind a locked door by locating her protagonists within that room. Unlike fairy tale characters who are given access to entire castles or mansions with the stipulation that they avoid a mysterious room, Cathy and her sister and brothers are forbidden to leave the room, denied the freedom of the rest of Foxworth Hall. Born to parents who are half-siblings, the children are the symbolic evil of such a union and must be hidden away from the rest of the world. For Corrine, they represent truths that must never be told if she is to create a life of wealth and social position. Not for her the disaster of Pandora, that mythical maiden who yielded to the temptation to open a forbidden chest, thereby releasing death and pain into the world. Corrine is too crafty to send out into the world the evidence that will bar her from a substantial inheritance. Her father must never discover that her marriage to Christopher produced children.

Another plot device through which Andrews creates suspense is the interlocking and all-encompassing nature of the conflicts that involve the Dollanganger children. Within their prison, the children disagree and quarrel among themselves; these clashes are intensified by the demons of isolation, boredom, frustration, deprivation, starvation, and—in the case of Cathy and Chris—desire. In the larger arena of Foxworth Hall, Corrine and her mother have been at war since Corrine's insistence on a sinful marriage to her half-brother. The women are antagonists, enemies locked in a relationship echoed by the escalating battle between Corrine and her daughter Cathy. While Corrine reverts to the powerless position as daughter of the house, Cathy usurps Corrine's maternal power by taking on the role of mother to the twins. Winners must be declared in the conflicts, and the balance of power constantly shifts from protagonist to antagonist and back again.

Already a substitute mother to the twins, Cathy is horrified to discover her growing physical resemblance to Corrine, whom she has come to despise. Worse still for Cathy because it echoes the irregularities in their parents' marriage is the developing physical attraction between her and Chris. Thus *Flowers in the Attic* also chronicles the war that rages within Cathy: her fight to maintain her individuality and distinctive self under circumstances that pull her inexorably toward a reenactment of her mother's life. Cathy must struggle not to become Corrine's doppelganger—a ghostly duplicate of a living person. Her struggles are complicated by her obvious admiration of her mother's beauty and by her instinctive delight mingled with distress at her growing resemblance to Corrine.

SETTING

The word *setting*—the background against which the action in a narrative happens—generally refers to both location and time, that is, the world of a fictional narrative as well as the era or season or day of the events in that narrative. Setting, an important component of most fiction, assumes a dominating presence in the Gothic novel and horror fiction. The major characters must do battle not only with themselves and their antagonists but also with the physical and psychical environment.

In the Gothic novel, setting performs a number of significant functions. First, and most simple, it provides a stage on which a novel's characters act out their own personal dramas. Foxworth Hall is the scene of the domestic tragedy that costs Cory his life and puts an end to childhood for his siblings. The hall is home to the senior Foxworths and an uncomfortably familiar space to Corrine, who hopes that it will once again provide her with a means of escape from its gloomy confines.

Second, setting reveals basic information—social status, economic circumstances, tastes, way of life—about the characters. Foxworth Hall's size and luxury underscore the family's wealth, power, and social position in the community. Heavy, expensive furnishings suggest traditional tastes as well as a certain repressiveness of temperament; dark colors underscore the absence of laughter and love within the family circle.

Third, setting defines a character by creating boundaries and opportunities, challenges and situations that force that character into decisive action or passive acceptance of circumstances. Uprooted from a safe, middle-class home in which she has a ''pink and white room with peppermint walls,'' Cathy and her siblings are forced to trudge in the night from an abandoned depot to the ''grandest of the sleeping mountain homes.'' At Foxworth, the exhausted children are herded up a narrow back stairway to the room that will become their universe as well as the setting for Andrews's exploration of the American-Dream-turned-Nightmare. Shaped by a life of outward conformity and inward rebellion, compelled by the dream of someday escaping from her prison, Cathy is defined by the upstairs room and, more significant, by the attic, which represents the tainted Foxworth heritage.

Finally, and most important in a Gothic novel, setting functions as a mirror that reflects a psychological and emotional landscape. Pervaded with the chill of longstanding domestic tensions, Foxworth Hall is a shrine to decades of family pain and revenge. The hall's dark passages

and rooms serve as an architectural representation of Foxworth secrets; in particular, the upstairs room and attic conceal the evidence of Corrine's motherhood from everyone but her own mother, a woman warped by decades of forcing her weakened husband into psychological penance for his infidelity.

Cathy's first tired glance on arrival suggests only a large, dim bedroom with heavy tapestry curtains over the two windows. Daylight the next morning adds details: massive dark furniture, an oriental rug, gold satin bedding, and three paintings of demons pursuing naked people through the red caverns of hell. The pink and white innocence of Gladstone has been replaced with the infernal red and gold of Foxworth. This hell is to be the children's prison: the door to the rest of the house is locked, and although the connecting hallway to the attic is open, there appears to be no passage from there to the outside world.

A reality unconnected with anything beyond its walls, the attic of the title is tomblike, enormous, dirty, and poorly lit by a few deep dormer windows. Abandoned sheet-draped relics—the sad remains of several lifetimes, furniture, clothing, household items—are covered with dust and permeated with the odor of decay, prompting Cathy to see ''these things as weird, eerie . . . whispering, whispering'' (66–67). Nineteenth-century costumes, portraits of the long dead, and a deserted schoolroom reinforce the attic's similarity to the interiors of the Gothic castles in Walpole's novels, and although the children are more than a little intrigued, their fascination is tinged with terror, with fear of the unknown lurking in the dark reaches of the attic.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

At the center of *Flowers in the Attic* are the four Dollanganger children whose life under virtual house arrest is the focus of the novel. Chris, the eldest son, and Cathy, the narrator, are approaching puberty when their lives change so drastically. The twins, Carrie and Cory, are still young enough to be strongly affected by their environment. At the fringes of the children's existence are the adults—their mother, Corrine; the grandparents; various servants; Corrine's suitors—who in varying degrees exert a strong influence on the children's daily lives.

Despite the highly unusual events and extreme emotional situations in the novel, the Dollanganger children are somewhat flat characters. The adults who order their lives are even more two-dimensional, resembling

cardboard cutouts positioned against a Gothic backdrop. V. C. Andrews has been criticized for creating overly simple and stereotypical characters and for depicting clichéd fairy tale figures. The comments are accurate, but the criticism is valid only if the obvious is ignored: *Flowers in the Attic* is Gothic fiction, a modern retelling of the traditional fairy tale—a genre in which character development has traditionally been somewhat less important than setting and tone and suspense-producing action. Thus, the characters display certain familiar and stereotypical characteristics that are designed to provoke specific reactions from readers who are familiar with similar characters in similar narratives.

Cathy is the young, virginal heroine who is central to the plot; it is through her eyes that readers see the horrible events at Foxworth Hall. Characters like Cathy exist at the heart of romance and Gothic novels. In these genres, the young woman whose life forms the narrative must undergo a ritual testing of her resilience and strength before she is rewarded with her freedom from the forces that oppress her throughout the novel. A common feature of the test is the confrontation with the other woman, who seeks to deprive the heroine of comfort and fulfillment, beauty, and even life.

In the role of other woman is Corrine: glamorous, irresponsible, overtly sexual, and experienced in the ways of the world. Like many other fictional other women, Corrine is wealthy and self-indulgent, adept at manipulating people and events to her advantage. Generally the other woman competes with the heroine for the love and attentions of the hero; the standard scenario allows the other woman to come very close to winning the competition. Like Snow White, Cathy must escape destruction at the hands of a jealous maternal figure who wishes to keep the hero's attention and admiration to herself.

Flowers in the Attic is unusual in that its cast of characters includes two hero figures who share the same name: Corrine's dead husband, Christopher, and Christopher, Jr., who is maturing into an uncannily exact image of his father. Cathy jealously guards her memories of her father and resents Corrine's marriage to a man whom she sees as a replacement for Christopher the elder. Although Cathy voices her reservations about Corrine's honesty to her brother, Chris refuses to believe his beautiful mother is capable of treachery—and the struggle for sole possession of his love becomes a source of tension between Cathy and Corrine. Like fairy tale heroes, Chris is not a particularly interesting character except as the prize in the war between his sister and his mother; he is often a

blurred background figure, a good boy who serves as a contrast to the rebellious and suspicious Cathy.

The modern Gothic formula includes young children (Carrie and Cory) to whom the heroine must become a surrogate mother. From the fairy tale, Gothic novels also borrow the dangerous crone (the grandmother), the powerful but absent king (Malcolm Foxworth), the attractive suitor (Bart Winslow), and the faithful retainers (John the butler, who almost certainly knows that the ''empty'' room is inhabited not by mice but by human beings).

When the Dollangangers leave Gladstone (the traditional fairy tale) and move to Virginia (the dark nightmare), complications in family relationships become evident. More or less abandoned by their mother, Cathy and her siblings discover that they are the offspring of an incestuous marriage—they are told that Corrine was half-niece to Christopher senior although the two are really half siblings—and that in their grandparents' eyes they are monstrous despite their beauty. The relationship between Corrine and her mother is fraught with tension and distrust, foreshadowing the future rift between Corrine and her daughter, Cathy. Later, as though in fulfillment of prophecy from the Bible, which the grandmother quotes frequently, Cathy and Chris, who have become surrogate parents to themselves and the twins, engage in another parental activity—sexual intercourse—thus demonstrating that the sins of parents do sometimes become the sins of their children, that—as the grandmother fears—evil is somehow genetically transmitted and perpetuated.

NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW

Events are narrated by Cathy, whose manner of telling her story colors readers' interpretation of the characters' actions. Although given to daydreaming and fantasizing, Cathy is not unobservant. She recounts her experiences and those of her siblings, faithfully recording her interpretations of chance remarks and seemingly insignificant actions; she entertains readers with her childishly envious admiration of luxuries she is allowed only to glimpse and horrifies with her candid descriptions of the indignities and abuse the children suffer over three years.

Cathy's unnaturally innocent tone and sometimes girlish vocabulary (her favorite exclamations are ''good golly day!'' and ''golly lolly!'') contrast oddly with her growing—and very adult—suspicions about the

truth of the plight that she shares with her siblings. The inconsistency is chilling because it draws attention to the unnaturally proper and most unchildlike behavior that the children must maintain in the presence of their chief jailer, the grandmother. Her monstrosity and cruelty are enlarged by the transparently youthful accents and rhythms of Cathy's narrative.

Yet another contrast is created by Cathy's use of clichés and circumlocution to verbalize her barely repressed sensuality. When Cathy describes the feelings engendered by her proximity to Chris, hearts ''throb,'' bodies are ''pressed together,'' lips and fingers ''tingle,'' groans and moans are ''smothered,'' and eyes ''lock'' in passionate gazes. Like the average young woman who records her life in a diary, Cathy lacks the capacity for subtle and original utterance, but her narrative is riveting nevertheless because of her emphasis on the visual, tactile, auditory, and gustatory experiences she and her siblings are permitted in their prison. Her narrative style both distances and draws in readers to create a world in which horror can be confronted and named dispassionately but not completely dispelled.

As narrator of *Flowers in the Attic,* Cathy occupies an intriguing position in the novel. She is the storyteller who constructs and reconstructs events, exaggerating or understating or editing according to the demands of her purposes. But she is also the subject of the narrative. V. C. Andrews provides readers with ample opportunity not only to view events and actions through Cathy's eyes but also to watch other characters react to those same events and actions. As well, readers are often in a position to observe Cathy as she ''performs'' or poses before mirrors, and—before another observer—sometimes knowingly, other times unwittingly—generally either Chris or the grandmother. Thus readers identify with both Cathy and someone else, and that someone else might be either sympathetic or antagonistic toward Cathy. The effect is a somewhat fractured, multiply focused point of view, perhaps best investigated through Andrews's use of the voyeur or hidden spectator as a motif.

Flowers in the Attic abounds in images of people watching other people perform personal rituals and private actions unconscious of the gazing voyeur, while readers are manipulated by the images into the position of spectator. When Chris and Cathy escape from their room one night, they see their grandfather for the first time as they crouch under furniture to watch the Christmas festivities. From their hiding place, they hear the gossip about Corrine and Bart Winslow, and later that night, Chris, hiding in another concealed corner, watches Bart give Corrine several

passionate kisses that ''made me feel sick'' (211). During one midnight prowl through the house, Cathy encounters a sleeping Bart on whom she gazes while she weaves erotic fantasies in her mind.

Several times in their room, the children look up from their books or toys to discover their silent gray grandmother watching them from the doorway. It becomes clear that she is spying on them, waiting for any infraction of the strict rules she has given them. When the grandmother's vigilance is rewarded with a glimpse of Cathy posing nude in front of both a mirror and Chris, readers, who have been entrapped by the first-person narrative into identifying with Cathy, suddenly find themselves in an uncomfortable position. Cathy is the voyeur or the watcher as she admires her naked image in the glass; and as a spectator, she is identified with the male position, personified in Chris who is watching her and in the grandmother who represents the unseen but powerful grandfather of Foxworth Hall. But Cathy is also the subject of her grandmother's surveillance and the object of Chris's prurient interest; thus, she inhabits the female position in that she is the spectacle under scrutiny. Clearly then, in the character of Cathy, the lines between audience and performer are blurred.

Because Cathy is central to *Flowers in the Attic,* her narrative raises a number of questions about the validity of her recollections, the veracity of her account, and the objectivity of her descriptions. As storyteller she is the observer from whose perspective readers are introduced to the horrors of Foxworth Hall; as a character she is the observed, the victim of the atrocities portrayed in the tale. Author and text are united in one female body, which is rendered unimportant in the world of Foxworth Hall but which Cathy seeks to empower by making that body central to her narrative. Cathy's story contains the lurking threat of incoherence. Can a powerless voice be truly honest? More to the point, does a powerless individual have a voice? And if she does, how trustworthy is that voice?

Cathy the character is aware of constantly being observed—by her grandmother, her mother, her brother—and objectified by the observers. To the grandmother, Cathy is the living result of evildoing; to Corrine, she is a reminder of lost youth; and to Chris, she is a nubile and desirable woman. Each observer is blinded to the true Cathy by her uncanny resemblance to her mother, who is implicated in all of the children's misfortunes. Cathy herself is fractured by her own desire for her mother's beauty and her revulsion at the idea that she might be anything like Corrine. In consequence, Cathy repeatedly seeks to reassure readers (and

herself) that she will eradicate in herself any resemblance to her mother and enter adulthood as a unique individual, Catherine Dollanganger.

LITERARY DEVICES

In fiction, symbols are often used as a literary shorthand that compresses multiple meanings into a single object, icon, person, event, or pattern. A symbol is at once itself as well as a representation of something else: it can be the concrete signifying an abstraction, an image evoking a reality, an object standing in for a subject. Symbols and allusions are the major literary devices Andrews employed to write the Dollanganger story.

Recurring throughout the novel are symbol groups and clusters that involve food, gifts and jewelry, and clothing. Of these four groups, the food symbols are the most pervasive and possibly the most revealing of character and motivation. Additionally, food structures the narrative, shaping a plot that moves from meal to meal, food image to food reference, celebration to denial.

Apart from being necessary to life, food has enormous cultural and emotional significance; anthropological and sociological studies have pointed out that food has biological, social, ideological, and economic functions. Food satisfies human needs: for survival, security, connection with others, self-esteem, and definitive identity. Thus, it often symbolizes human values and relationships.

In *Flowers in the Attic,* food initially symbolizes life and love, comfort and celebration, the normal routine of daily existence. More significant, food later represents power—the power of choice, the power of a social hierarchy, and ultimately the power of life and death. Andrews portrays food ironically as well. Instead of security, food to the children indicates imprisonment; rather than enhancing health, food makes the twins very ill. Far from being a reward, food becomes punishment.

During their long incarceration, food takes on considerable meaning for Chris, Cathy, Carrie, and Cory. Because they supposedly do not exist, they must be fed without the household staff's ever discovering the presence of four people in the locked upstairs rooms. The grandmother's solution is a picnic basket packed with provisions for an entire day and brought up very early, before the servants begin working. Initially, the food is ''comfort food'': bacon-and-egg or cereal-and-milk breakfasts; sandwiches and soup for lunch; fried chicken dinners; fruit; and, once,

vanilla ice cream and chocolate cake smuggled in by Corrine to her children, although the grandmother disapproves of sweets. The homey food implies that life under house arrest is not so extraordinary, salvation is still possible, and the children are safe and loved, at least by their mother.

At first, Corrine regularly visits the children at mealtimes and eats with them, joking that she will gain weight from having to dine downstairs to avoid suspicion and then eating again in the attic. Later, as her other life begins to consume her, she visits less frequently, always babbling excuses for her absences. Thanksgiving dinner, although carried on a silver tray, is hours late and consists of cold turkey, lumpy potatoes, and wilted salad. Food has negative connotations for Cathy, who complains that none of it is ''hot enough, or seasoned right—I think she [grandmother] does it deliberately, just so we'll never have anything to enjoy, even food'' (273).

After the grandmother's discovery of the unclothed Cathy glorying in her own mirror image, Cathy is forced to make a choice: she can submit to a drastic haircut, or all four children will be deprived of food for a week. Food—or its absence—becomes an expression of power and oppression. The older children believe that the grandmother is bluffing, but she refrains from delivering the picnic basket to them for a week during which they subsist on a little milk, a few oranges, some crackers, and a pound of cheese that they have hidden. Days pass; Chris cuts his arm and forces the weakening Carrie and Cory to drink his blood. On the verge of dining on raw dead mice, the children are spared the gustatory horror by the arrival—as if no break in the routine had happened—of the picnic basket overflowing with food.

Early in the starvation period, Cathy experiences her most vivid and detailed nightmare, a distorted version of the tale of Hansel and Gretel. Like them, Chris and Cathy are running through dark woods, but instead of seeking refuge, they are searching for the twins, who are mysteriously missing. An Oreo-cookie-roofed gingerbread cottage appears at the end of a Christmas-candy path, surrounded by ice-cream-cone shrubbery and a peppermint-stick fence. Cathy hesitates because the house, constructed of the sugary dainties they have been forbidden to eat, clearly represents temptation and sin. Chris, however, senses that the twins are in the cottage, and he and Cathy enter. Inside, they are mocked by sofas and chairs constructed from more forbidden food—hot rolls and bread dripping with butter—and in the kitchen, the two children are suddenly confronted by a witch, who is a caricature of the grandmother. To the horror

of Cathy and Chris, the witch is holding up the twins by their blond hair preparatory to thrusting them into a waiting oven. Cathy's screams evoke hysterical laughter from the witch, who undergoes frightful transformations: from grandmother to caterpillar to butterfly to their mother, Corrine, whose long, golden hair snakes around the children to strangle them. Cathy awakens. The dream confrontation will prove prophetic; Corrine does attempt to kill her children by slowly poisoning them. Cathy suppresses the nightmare's implications for months until it is far too late for Cory, who dies before the children can escape from Foxworth Hall.

Food, that sustainer of life, becomes the agent of death for Cory. The picnic basket that rescues the children from the starvation of their enforced fast contains four powdered-sugar doughnuts; predictably, the children grow accustomed to the once-forbidden treat when it eventually becomes a daily dessert. Ultimately, Cory becomes violently ill, with symptoms that Chris, who has been reading medical texts, believes are clear evidence of food poisoning. Corrine is forced to rush Cory to a hospital. She returns without him, saying only that he has died of pneumonia. Later, the older children discover that the doughnuts have been laced with small quantities of arsenic and that Cory's already weakened constitution has succumbed to the systematic low-level poisoning. Cory is buried secretly; the surviving children are not allowed to participate in the funeral.

Gifts, which in fairy tales are suspicious objects, form another symbol cluster in *Flowers in the Attic.* In the stories of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, gifts are the precursors of misfortune and near-death, presented to the heroine by malevolent older women. Even at their most innocuous—like Cinderella's coach—gifts are rarely what they appear to be. Chris, Cathy, Carrie, and Cory are inundated with gifts by their mother, and as their life grows more dangerous, the offerings grow more expensive and unnecessary.

Initially, Corrine brings her children practical everyday gifts: books so that they can continue to learn, and games and toys with which to pass the rest of the time. Occasionally she brings forbidden sweets. When the children clean up the attic and garland it with colorful paper flowers, Corrine brings them live flowering plants and art supplies; later she brings clothes to augment their sparse wardrobes. There is a strong element of role playing in Corrine's actions. At first, she enacts the role of the devoted and nurturing mother whose concern for her children's

physical and intellectual well-being is paramount. As the children's imprisonment lengthens, Corrine's gifts grow more extravagant: ballet costumes, a television, an instant camera, leather-bound books. She tries to deny her guilt by acting as a fairy godmother, feeling, no doubt, that the costly presents make up for the children's lack of freedom. With the gifts, she justifies their strange existence, pointing out to them that despite their confinement, they are properly fed, housed, and clothed.

Ultimately, gifts represent the gravest danger to the young prisoners. That danger and its association with Corrine's mother are foreshadowed in two incidents: the grandmother's gift to the children of a pot of chrysanthemums and her outright rejection of the tapestry they have painstakingly created as a Christmas gift for her. Although it is Corrine who systematically poisons her children with arsenic, the grandmother is the messenger who delivers the deadly dose to the attic each day. Her gift of flowers that represent autumn—that season when blossoms die—and her refusal of their offering seem to suggest that she does not expect them to live much longer, that she might even look forward to the end of her association with them.

The third major symbol group is clothing, which both reveals and disguises character. The terrifyingly rigid grandmother dresses only in gray, a color echoed by her monochromatic coloring of gray hair and eyes. But despite the severity of her high-necked dresses, the grandmother betrays her well-disguised vanity in the expensive taffeta fabrics that she favors and in the diamond brooch and rings that she wears. Like her clothing, her religion is gray and unyielding, focused on sin and punishment and completely devoid of grace and love; and like her severe clothing, her religion masks her vanity of spirit.

Like many typical adolescent girls, Cathy is fascinated with her mother's wardrobe, and throughout the narrative, she catalogs Corrine's outfits: a black chiffon negligee, red, white, and blue sailing shorts, and faded blue jeans at first; later, expensive designer suits, dresses, and matching shoes in every color and jewelry that to Cathy looks like diamonds. As Corrine alters herself from loving wife to beautiful widow to doting mother and finally into childless heiress, her clothes reflect her changing roles and values. The transformation is complete when she floats into her children's room on the night of the grand ball gowned in green velvet and chiffon, decked in diamonds and emeralds, shrouded in musky perfume. Her costume aligns her with the green-gowned temptress who lures Sir Gawain of the Round Table into sin. Like that

Arthurian siren, who is disguised to conceal her identity as Morgan le Fay's agent, Corrine is masquerading, costumed to hide her murderous schemes, performing in a drama that will determine her future.

For the children, clothing is past, present, and future. They have arrived in Virginia with only two suitcases containing all that is left of their Pennsylvania life: their identities, the roles that will be frozen in time by their incarceration. In the attic, they find ancient clothing belonging to forebears about whom they know nothing. Searching for amusement at one point, Chris and Cathy don the antique clothing, thus fusing their presence with their ancestors' absence, their living selves with the family ghosts. The future intrudes subtly but negatively. Because Cathy wants to be a dancer one day, Corrine gives her a Swan Lake ensemble, a costume that, through its associations with the tragic story of the ballet, ultimately symbolizes the death of Cathy's childhood dreams. More significant, Corrine's gifts of childish clothing to her children reflect either her refusal to notice that they are maturing or—disturbingly—her assumption that they will never reach adulthood.

Another literary device V. C. Andrews uses in this book is the allusion, a signpost pointing the way out of the world of the novel and into another world. Allusions are words, phrases, and names that refer to historical, literary, cultural, or religious events, characters, or objects. Many of the allusions in *Flowers in the Attic* direct readers to traditional fairy tales. While the family still lives in Gladstone, Cathy remarks that her mother, perfumed and gowned in readiness for her husband's arrival, looks like a fairy tale princess. As well, the children's blond perfection identifies them as characters in a traditional story.

At Foxworth Hall, the darker side of the fairy tale—the murky world of the Grimm Brothers and Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*—immediately intrudes, beginning with the appearance of the cronelike grandmother who rapidly takes on the characteristics of the traditional wicked stepmother. The children's imprisonment echoes the plight of Rapunzel of the long, golden hair (like their own), of Briar Rose hidden away in a remote castle surrounded by impenetrable forest; and even more obvious, Cathy's gingerbread nightmare underscores the parallels between *Flowers in the Attic* and the story of Hansel and Gretel.

That Cathy is prone to lapses into fantasy is evident in her frequent use of the phrase *fairy tale* to lend shape to an event, as well as in the fact that her dreams are punctuated with fragments of the horrors at the heart of fairy tales. She describes herself as the ''kind of child who'd always looked for fairies dancing on the grass,'' a girl who rebels against

having ''all of the magic taken out of the world by scientific explanation'' (80). Young Cathy's favorite reading includes the tales of Camelot, and she daydreams about the sunlit magnificence of the imaginary Arthurian world; the adult Cathy who narrates the story ruefully admits, ''I didn't know at that time that I had come to live in what was virtually a strong and dark castle, ruled over by a witch and an ogre'' (80).

Like Hansel's and Gretel's parents, Corrine attempts to unburden herself of her offspring. Like theirs, ironically, her motivation is poverty—initially. Untrained in any useful skill and unable to support her family, she concocts the scheme of ingratiating herself into her dying father's will. At first she seems genuinely to care about her children's future, and she endures a beating from her mother in exchange for food and shelter for the children. Greed, however, soon destroys Corrine's charitable maternal impulses, and when the existence of the four children proves to be dangerous to her financial future, she cold-bloodedly schemes to remove them from her life. In fairy tales, the children triumph; in *Flowers in the Attic,* the triumph is only partial and darkly tinged with tragedy.

The Christmas festivities that mark the beginning of Chris's disillusionment with their mother finds the generally suspicious Cathy able temporarily to put aside her fear that danger lies ahead and to enjoy the rare privilege of observing life as a fairy tale. Allowed to watch the festivities through a screen in the back of a massive table in which she and Chris are concealed, Cathy is dazzled by the crystal and gilt decor, the iridescent jewelry worn by exquisitely gowned women who are escorted by handsome men, the ballroom where she can imagine Cinderella dancing with her Prince Charming. But the magical night is destroyed when Cathy and Chris overhear a conversation strongly hinting that although she has earlier claimed that she never will remarry, their fairy princess mother might wed her handsome prince. And since fairy tales always end before the happy couple produce offspring, the four blond children will be unwanted baggage from a past life, possessions to be discarded so that Corrine can live happily ever after with her prince and her wealth.

MAJOR THEMES AND ISSUES

Since its publication, *Flowers in the Attic* has gained increasing notoriety for its treatment of adolescent sexuality, incestuous behavior, and child abuse. The novel contains many examples of the stuff of censor-

ship—domestic chaos, unsanctioned sex, voyeurism, sadism, a dysfunctional family—as well as innumerable illustrations of the seven deadly sins, chiefly greed, pride, anger, lust, and envy, although gluttony and sloth make occasional appearances. And like the fairy tale to which it has been compared, *Flowers in the Attic* explores the friction between mother and daughter through its portrayal of the dissension between Cathy and Corrine and between Corrine and her own mother.

As Cosette Kies has pointed out, the incest in *Flowers in the Attic* is not that of child abuse but rather of forbidden lust. Chris and Cathy and the twins are the products of what is described as an incestuous marriage between half-niece and half-uncle, a relationship expressly identified in the Code of Virginia as illegal (although Pennsylvania law is not specific about half-blood relationships). By the terms of biblical law, however, the marriage is evil, and it is biblical law with which the Foxworths uphold their rejection of Corrine when she marries Christopher Sr. (Kies 33). The truth—that Corrine and Christopher are half-siblings—leaves their sin in no doubt.

Andrews does not seem particularly interested in exploring the biological consequences of blood-kin unions, although the grandmother does allude to potential genetic abnormalities when she grudgingly admits her surprise that the four children are unusually beautiful. More disquieting to the grandmother is the possibility that the children might repeat their parents' sin. Fearing that biblical prophecy might be fulfilled under her roof, she imposes a strict code of behavior on the children, instilling in Chris, Cathy, and the twins a sense of guilt in her attempt to forestall any repetition of their parents' sacrilege.

Another issue graphically addressed is the subordination of women in a patriarchal culture. Strong-minded as they appear to be, the Foxworth women are defined by the men in their lives. Scenes in which the women seem to speak and act authoritatively tend to be displays of anger and latent sadism, and the women impose their feeble power only on the even less powerful, younger women and children.

Corrine is the product of a repressive home life, the creation of an overbearing father whose restrictions she temporarily eludes by marrying and moving to another state. Never given the chance to develop an independent identity, she is helpless after her husband's death and returns home to the role of prodigal daughter. Ultimately Corrine escapes the daughter's role once again when she remarries—this time a man of whom her parents approve—but this marriage will be controlled by her father's will, which stipulates that Corrine inherits only if she has no

children. By her father's express desire, she must remain daughter and wife—in his world, both powerless positions.

While Foxworth is ill and incapacitated, his power is wielded capably by his wife, the stern grandmother who devoutly practices her husband's religion, based on the code of the Old Testament patriarchs. Little about the Foxworth marriage is revealed, but the grandmother clearly is—like her daughter—the creation of Malcolm Foxworth, and as his representative, she attempts to ensure the compliant behavior of Corrine and her children, always holding up as incentive the Foxworth fortune. Corrine is adequately imprisoned by her own greed; the unpredictable children must be locked up and kept under control.

A third important issue that *Flowers in the Attic* confronts is imprisonment: physical and emotional, psychological and intellectual. Four children are literal prisoners in a locked room; but the novel portrays various other incarcerations. Both Cathy and Chris are psychologically shackled—she to her need for revenge, he to his desire for her. The twins do not escape; Carrie's happy spirit is encased in a body that does not grow, and Cory prematurely enters the prison of death. Corrine remains in thrall to her greed and her fear of independence; Bart Winslow is helplessly captivated by Corrine's beauty and money. In the older generation, the grandmother is oppressed by both her religion and her powerful husband; even Malcolm Foxworth belatedly discovers that his money cannot deliver him from the prison of a diseased body.

GENERIC CONVENTIONS

Flowers in the Attic has been variously classified in different but related fictional genres. Cosette Kies includes a brief discussion of the book in her *Young Adult Horror Fiction* (1992); the catalog for *Mysteries by Mail* features V. C. Andrews titles under the heading of ''Romantic Suspense''; my local secondhand paperback bookseller shelves *Flowers in the Attic* with Gothic fiction. Yet another and more specific possibility, which contains elements of these three categories, is female Gothic, which describes the perils endured by a young heroine as she undertakes a quest—emotional, psychological, spiritual, or physical—to unite her desires and needs with her destiny, and finally to discover happiness. Central to the genre is an uneasiness about female sexuality, underscored by the symbolic absence of mother figures and the dominance of paternal power, often wielded by women.

Lacking the public drama of the quests undertaken by the Knights of the Round Table, the quests in *Flowers in the Attic* are nevertheless genuine campaigns in search of seemingly unreachable goals. Corrine schemes to inherit her father's fortune; her children plot their escape from the attic. These two separate quests highlight the parallels between this book and the female Gothic. Once at Foxworth Hall, Corrine relinquishes the role of mother to pursue money, and Cathy and Chris become surrogate parents to the twins. Corrine's own mother, Olivia, has no maternal characteristics; she is not a nurturing, supportive woman but rather Malcolm Foxworth's proxy—the unwomanly female who imposes the will of the father on the household. Almost daily confronted with flawed examples of female adulthood, Cathy exists in a state of confusion about the significance of the physiological changes in her body and about the growing attraction she feels for Chris, who is, after all, acting with her as coparent (thus ''husband'') in nurturing Carrie and Cory. And presiding over the psychological and emotional chaos from his sickroom is Malcolm Foxworth whose wealth, power, and status define his family and circumscribe their lives.

ALTERNATIVE READING: FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism is not a single theoretical stance; rather, it is an attitude and a focus that are manifested through several different methodologies by feminist critics whose goals might differ in a number of ways. What most feminist critics do have in common is best summed up by Arlyn Diamond and Lee Edwards:

> Feminist critics, obviously, are distinguished by . . . their particular concern with society's beliefs about the nature and function of women in the world, with the transformation of these beliefs into literary plots, with the ways in which artistic and critical strategies adjust and control attitudes toward women. (Diamond and Edwards x)

In other words, feminist criticism focuses on the ways in which literary texts reflect or subvert traditional gender roles. And as Sven Birkerts

points out, the feminist critic generally reads literature through a very specific lens: ''the lens of a long history of unequal distribution of power among men and women'' (Birkerts 1580).

Although rooted in early social and political activism that focused on the rights of women, feminist criticism was developed by women scholars who came of age in the mid-twentieth century women's movement struggles. Early feminist criticism focused on revealing and analyzing the misogyny inherent in many literary works, pointing out that women's experiences have been stereotyped, misrepresented, or completely excluded from literary explorations of the universal human condition. The next phase of feminist criticism involved recovering from neglect the works of women writers whose literary and historical importance had been almost erased by cultural values that privileged the accomplishments of male writers and artists. In the two or three decades since that beginning, feminist criticism has created its methodologies by drawing from a variety of disciplines—among them, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and history. Feminist criticism has also appropriated strategies from a number of theoretical stances: Marxism contributes the examination of class struggle and materialism as underlying patterns in culture and society; deconstruction provides an analysis of contradictions and indeterminacies within a text or structure; semiotics reveals the rules and conventions governing the construction of meaning in culture; psychoanalytical criticism focuses on symbols and language that reveal the workings of the unconscious mind; and the field of cultural studies seeks to understand the impact of lived and performed experience on identity and human relationships.

Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson cite two types of feminist critics: the ''textual archaeologist,'' whose investigation into literary attitudes reveals both a female absence and a dominant male presence, and the critic, who searches ''for a new consciousness within the text'' and ''for the imaginative world that often lies unseen, at least in much literature'' (Donovan 62–64). Yet another overview of the field implies three separate but related scholarly activities: the resurrection of women's texts from the obscurity imposed by the patriarchally defined canon, the rereading of texts by males to understand their role in the creation of the attitudes that have condemned women to powerlessness, and the study of the ways in which women have developed socially, spiritually, psychologically, linguistically, and politically in a patriarchal society.

Flowers in the Attic as Female Gothic

A feminist study of *Flowers in the Attic* would begin by noting that the novel is written by a woman, the narrator-heroine is female, the dominant characters are three generations of women in the same family, and the majority of readers, not only of this book but also of other books by V. C. Andrews, are female. In fact, all of these points have led a number of feminist readers to condemn V. C. Andrews's books for their perpetuation of certain negative female stereotypes, for their portrayal of women as victims. Such condemnations are generally based on superficial readings of the novel or on word-of-mouth accounts of the novel's content. A far more interesting and fruitful feminist reading might explore the ways in which the novel both represents and transcends the female Gothic.

Genre theorists and feminist critics have long noted the unique relationship between women and the Gothic. That relationship includes the dominance of women authors and women readers in the creation and perpetuation of the genre, the Gothic's preoccupation with women's issues, and the Gothic representation of woman as both narrator and protagonist, object and subject, observer and the observed.

V. C. Andrews's novel is structured around two competing female quests: Corrine's pursuit of her father's love and his wealth and Cathy's search for selfhood and freedom. Inevitably those quests intersect and collide, producing a conflict central to the female Gothic: the battle between a woman and a maternal figure who embodies what the woman might become if she relinquishes her control over her body and mind.

The maternal figure is an object of both envy and fear. When she daydreams about the future, Cathy imagines herself as a happy wife and mother in a beautiful home—the image of Corrine in Gladstone. Forced to become surrogate mother to Carrie and Cory in the Foxworth attic, Cathy begins to view her mother in a different way as she realizes that Corrine is weak, greedy, and dependent on men for support and approval and that she is capable of putting herself first before her children. For her part, Corrine only plays at motherhood, bringing toys and clothes to her children, voicing concern for their plight, and promising freedom. Forced by the prematurely adult Cathy to recognize that Carrie's and Cory's pallor indicates ill health and malnourishment, Corrine reverts to childish behavior, losing her temper or whimpering pitifully,

thus emphasizing her abandonment of her maternal role to her own mother and daughter.

Although Corrine never explicitly indicates her feelings, she clearly views Cathy as competition and tries to keep her from growing up. During the three years or so in the attic, Cathy matures physically into a younger version of her mother. Corrine continues to blind herself to the changes in her daughter, until Chris finally reminds his mother that Cathy's impending womanhood requires a long-overdue woman-to-woman conversation between mother and daughter. Having fulfilled that obligation, Corrine ignores its significance, continues to treat Cathy as a child, and a year later gives Cathy ''silly, sweet little-girl garments that screamed out she didn't see'' (301). By this point, Cathy needs a brassiere, not a childish party dress, and she pilfers the necessary garment from her mother's closet. This act symbolically suggests that Cathy is donning the adult sexuality that previously has been Corrine's exclusive domain.

Women and Patriarchal Power

Women's issues and concerns are traditionally the focus of the Gothic novel, which locates female sexuality (and its attendant components: virginity or promiscuity, marriage, fertility and childbirth) at the center of its fictional universe. Much of the tension in the Gothic is created by the threat posed to an established order by a woman's sexuality. Many readers have noted that Gothic settings tend to represent femaleness—enclosed rooms, caverns, caves, womblike spaces—and that these female preserves are, in the course of the novel, penetrated either physically or symbolically by representatives of patriarchal power who seek to diffuse the strength inherent in female fertility.

Malcolm Foxworth, Corrine's father, is the embodiment of the power that holds Foxworth Hall's closed society intact and in thrall. Despite the grand spaciousness of the mansion, the world of *Flowers in the Attic* is tiny: a locked room and the adjoining attic. This mysterious concealed space serves a number of important and intersecting functions. The hidden world preserves the past in the ancestral debris interred in its secret places; it is a symbolic womb into which Corrine thrusts her four children, attempting to reverse history and un-birth them so that she can inherit her father's wealth. It represents Cathy's discovery of her wom-

an's body; while incarcerated, she begins to menstruate, and later she loses her virginity when she succumbs to the lust she has felt for her brother for weeks. It is the tomb in which Chris, Cathy, Carrie, and Cory bury their childhoods. Although Foxworth never enters the locked room and never even sees his grandchildren, his power is frighteningly tangible, penetrating the lives of four children of whose existence he remains unaware. Their lives are shaped by their grandfather, whose word is law in the feudal atmosphere of Foxworth Hall.

Always defined by the men around her, Corrine appears to have no real knowledge of herself. Her adolescence was devoid of normal teenage activities because her father feared they would put her in too much contact with the opposite sex; in her isolation, she fell in love with and married her father's much younger half-brother—also her half-brother though at the time she is unaware of the sibling relationship—who came to live at Foxworth Hall. From being the sheltered daughter of an overly protective father, she becomes the pampered wife of a doting husband—and in essence, she never completely matures into a responsible adult, preferring to rely on a feigned girlish helplessness, a ploy guaranteed to provide her with male protectors.

Corrine has never been anything more than a ''pretty useless ornament who always believed she'd have a man to take care of her'' (32). In a rare display of insight, she realizes that her father views her as a possession: ''I was part of his collection of *objets d'art* . . . and he meant to keep me for himself, not to enjoy, but to keep others from enjoying what was his.'' But the insight is wasted. Telling her children about her financial predicament, she ruefully admits, ''I was strong only when I had your father . . . and now I don't have him'' (101). Sadly, for both herself and her children, Corrine has no interest in developing strength—in fact, she seems terrified at the prospect of having to take charge of her life—but she inadvertently drives Cathy to marshal the resolution and inner force necessary to her survival. Cathy vows never to allow herself to ''become so dependent on a man I couldn't make my way in the world'' (107).

Bedridden and dying, Malcolm Foxworth strongly influences the lives of all who inhabit Foxworth Hall. This powerful father is early described as so ill and feeble that ''he always stays on the first floor'' of his mansion, with ''nurses to take care of him night and day'' (33), but so burdened is Cathy by her grandfather's authority that when she first sees him, she imagines that the weak old man in his wheelchair ''gazed upward, directly at our hiding place [and] for one terrifying moment it

seemed he knew we were there'' (196). Foxworth dominates the Dollangangers even after his death. Because the children are repeatedly promised their freedom when their grandfather is gone, Chris is distraught when one night after Cory's death, he discovers that Corrine and Bart have left the hall permanently and that Malcolm Foxworth—that embodiment of patriarchal power—has been dead for nearly a year during which the children have been needlessly confined. Overheard servant gossip reveals Corrine's motivation: if she is ever proven to have produced offspring—living evidence of her sexuality and fertility—she forfeits her inheritance. In choosing wealth over her children, Corrine succumbs to the power of the patriarchal structure that prescribes her behavior and limits her control over her own body.

Cathy in the Mirror

Mirrors figure prominently in Cathy's construction of her identity through her stories. Cut off from interaction with other young people, Cathy relies on her mirror image to mark her transformation from child to adult. And although they satisfy her vanity, reinforce her identity, and prove her individuality, mirrors also entrap Cathy by reflecting back to her the image of her mother. Ultimately for Cathy, mirrors represent both the pain and the pleasure of the adult world.

The upstairs prison has three mirrors: a large one over a dresser, a smaller one inside the folding top of a table, and the mirror on the medicine cabinet. Gazing into these mirrors, Cathy alternately wonders whether she will ever possess a fraction of her mother's golden beauty and fears that she is too much like Corrine. Struggling to continue to love her mother in the face of growing evidence of Corrine's treachery, Cathy is torn between the desire to acquire her mother's charm and the revulsion she feels for her mother's weakness. Staring at herself in the mirror, Cathy is simultaneously pleased to resemble Corrine and disheartened at the similarity.

Cathy's narcissistic inspection of her newly adult body reflected in the dresser mirror triggers the most severe confrontation between the children and their puritanical grandmother. When the grandmother finds Cathy reveling in the sight of her feminine curves before the mirror as Chris gazes on both the real and the reflected Cathy, the punishment is swift and horrific: Cathy's hair is embedded in tar, and the children suffer starvation. Despite this experience, Cathy does not lose her near-

infatuation with her reflected self; on the contrary, she needs mirrors to reassure herself that her ruined hair has not diminished her beauty.

When Chris ingeniously contrives to unlock the bedroom door, he and Cathy acquire a little stealthy freedom to wander about Foxworth when its legitimate occupants are elsewhere. The first time that Cathy accompanies Chris to Corrine's room, she is immediately enthralled by a three-way mirror in the dressing room. Draping herself in Corrine's clothes and jewelry, caking her face in makeup, and shrouding her body in perfume, Cathy struts before the mirror, demanding compliments from Chris although ''the mirrors already told me I looked sensational'' (337). Chris is disgusted, and a closer inspection of her reflection convinces Cathy that ''this wasn't the way my mother looked in the same dress—what had I done wrong?'' (337). It becomes clear to the reader, if not to Cathy, that because Chris idealizes his mother, Cathy desperately needs his approval of her appearance even while she both resists and revels in her own resemblance to Corrine.

The unspoken rivalry between mother and daughter reaches a crucial point when Cathy ventures into Corrine's suite without Chris. Discovering her new stepfather dozing in a chair, Cathy, after watching him for a few minutes, kisses him while he sleeps on. With that act, Cathy seizes her mother's place and takes the first significant step toward becoming Corrine. Mirror images of each other, mother and daughter now share more than their appearance: they have kissed the same man, and much as Cathy might deny the fact, she, like her mother, will thereafter be defined by the men around her.

4

The Dollanganger Chronicles

The next three installments in V. C. Andrews's Dollanganger saga became available to readers over a period of four years. *Petals on the Wind* was published in 1980, the year after *Flowers in the Attic; If There Be Thorns* followed *Petals* in 1981. Publication of *My Sweet Audrina* interrupted the series, and not until 1984 was *Seeds of Yesterday* released to complete the Gothic epic. Like the first novel in the series, the three that followed were immensely popular successes, resulting in sales of millions of copies, and appearing almost immediately on best-seller lists, where the books remained ensconced for weeks at a time.

FROM *PETALS ON THE WIND* TO *SEEDS OF YESTERDAY*

Petals on the Wind takes Chris, Cathy, and Carrie Dollanganger from the Virginia mountains to a small South Carolina town where they become the legal wards of Paul Sheffield, a physician. Chris eventually earns a medical degree, Cathy becomes a professional dancer, and Carrie finishes high school and then refuses to attend college.

Cathy is the center of a more than usually convoluted melodramatic plot. Initially engaged to the much older Paul Sheffield, she instead mar-

ries Julian Marquet. The marriage fails; Julian commits suicide; and Cathy bears Julian's son, Jory. An affair with Bart Winslow, her mother's second husband, gives Cathy a second son, Bart, Jr. Foxworth Hallburns, and Bart, Sr., dies in the inferno; Corrine is committed to a mental institution. Cathy marries Paul Sheffield shortly before he dies, and when she is widowed, she and Chris begin a life together as husband and wife.

In *If There Be Thorns,* the Foxworth clan has relocated to Marin County, California. Cathy and Chris, who now call themselves ''Sheffield,'' raise ''their'' sons, Jory and Bart, and an adopted daughter, Cindy. Corrine leaves the Virginia hospital and purchases an old mansion next to the Sheffield house. Young Bart befriends her and falls under the spell of John Amos, her companion and supposed husband, who turns Bart into a sadistic moralizer.

Set fifteen years after Corrine's death, *Seeds of Yesterday* finds Cathy and Chris—now in their fifties—back in Virginia, living in the newly rebuilt Foxworth Hall. Sibling rivalry keeps their children estranged from each other, and the source of much of the conflict is Bart. Several peculiar disasters at the hall prompt Chris to purchase a house in which he and Cathy can grow old peacefully, away from family tensions, but their dream of a happy retirement together never materializes.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE

Unlike *Flowers in the Attic,* which borrows its structure from the traditional fairy tale, the next three Dollanganger books have more in common with that fairy tale of the postmodern world, the modern television soap opera—both daytime and prime time. Complaints from critics that the novels' plots are confusing and difficult to follow are not wholly unfounded. (I have found that adult readers find that those inordinately complicated plots require some slogging through; adolescent readers, however, appear to find the tangled plots no barrier to their enjoyment of the books.)

Freed from the Foxworth Hall attic and at large in the world, Cathy becomes the embodiment of destructive force, sometimes unwittingly, other times with planned deliberation. Throughout her life, she never seems to realize (or chooses to ignore) that the havoc she purposefully wreaks on one person generally injures—physically, emotionally, psychologically—herself as well as those whom she does love or wishes to protect. Her seemingly uncontrollable vengefulness triggers reactions

from others, and those reactions incite Cathy to still more attempts to even the score. Cathy is the domino that causes all of the others to fall, until the entire line lies in a heap.

Petals on the Wind, If There Be Thorns, and *Seeds of Yesterday* all reflect in their plots the chaos that is personified in Cathy (Foxworth) Dollanganger Marquet Sheffield. Indeed, the plots rely quite heavily on the deus ex machina, a plot device that allows the author to provide, at opportune moments, appropriate or necessary elements: a ready home and surrogate father for three frightened young travelers; the suicide or sudden death of potentially inconvenient characters; transcontinental coincidences; the resurrection of supposedly dead relatives; instant religious conversions; and a neatly significant finale to the epic nightmare. Like soap operas, the Dollanganger story features failed marriages, rampant sexuality, familial discord, physical and psychological abuse, and adultery, and like soap opera characters, Cathy and her family seem to live in a world entirely divorced from social issues, national politics, international conflict, and cultural and artistic changes and developments. Dancer she might be, but never once in her narrative does she allude to real dance companies or dancers of the late twentieth century.

These Dollanganger novels share with *Flowers in the Attic* an important plot device, doubling and twinning, that highlights parallels and relationships among and between them, creating a nightmare world in which anything of significance invariably has an echo in another time and place. Through the web that they create, these doublings serve as structural links joining the novels.

Character doubles form the first type of twinning, a device that is underscored by the twins Carrie and Cory and by the children's surname of Dollanganger, which reverberates with echoes of the word *doppelganger,* an uncannily exact double of a person who is still alive. Chris and Cathy are doubles of their parents, Christopher (the first) and Corrine, who were half-siblings. Furthermore, Corrine is the second Foxworth who bears her name; the first Corinne apparently abandoned her son, thus setting the stage for the second Corrine's repudiation of her children. Carrie and Cory, the original twins in *Flowers in the Attic,* are duplicated two generations later in Deirdre and Darren, Cathy's twin grandchildren, who, like the first twins, are charmingly blond and trustingly naive.

The second type of doubling consists of parallel plot elements. Foxworth Hall is destroyed by a fire that kills the children's grandmother and Corrine's second husband; some years later, Corrine, who is respon-

sible for the Foxworth fire, dies in another fire that razes her California mansion. Both Cathy and her son Jory become professional dancers; both are injured seriously enough to force them to give up dancing. In the last volume of the series, a new Foxworth Hall, built to be the exact duplicate of the original, is the scene of the final chapters in the Dollanganger story, and Cathy ends her life in the replica of the attic where her troubles began.

A third type of doubling becomes evident in problematic relationships that pair one generation with an earlier one. Losing her father when she was young has driven Cathy to form attachments to men who are considerably older than she, men who are father figures in one way or another; she has an affair with her stepfather, before going on to marry her surrogate father. Even more disturbing is the way in which Cathy's son Bart connects with an earlier generation. When he reads Malcolm Foxworth's diary, Bart so internalizes his great-grandfather's ideas and philosophies that he slides into a psychological breakdown as he becomes Malcolm's doppelganger. Like the long-gone Malcolm, Bart musters his considerable energy in a holy war against his mother, who epitomizes sin in his eyes.

Finally, the fourth and most significant form of doubling in the Dollanganger novels is the pervasive echoing of plot elements that allude definitively to *Flowers in the Attic.* The first Christopher dies in a traffic accident in the opening pages of *Flowers;* his son Chris is killed in another traffic accident just before the conclusion of *Seeds of Yesterday.* Cory's death in *Flowers in the Attic* is the inspiration for Carrie's suicide in *Petals on the Wind;* Carrie consumes arsenic-laced doughnuts so that she can die in the way as her twin. In the same way that Carrie and Cory are forced to identify themselves as ''devil's spawn'' in *Flowers in the Attic,* Deirdre and Darren must similarly label themselves in *Seeds of Yesterday.* The most dramatic parallel links two scenes. In the earlier scene from *Flowers in the Attic,* the grandmother ruins young Cathy's golden hair by pouring tar on the precious locks while Cathy sleeps. That scene is replicated years later in *Petals on the Wind,* which shows the adult Cathy dancing frenetically one night around her comatose grandmother before dripping candle wax on the old woman's thinning gray hair.

SETTING

Andrews creates distinctive settings to provide appropriate stages for the major acts and scenes in the drama acted out by Cathy and Chris,

yet these different locations share some significant similarities. They are all isolated, if not geographically, then by virtue of enclosure within a garden or woodland. Each setting physically appears to be a safe haven, in which the emotionally weary siblings can at last enjoy an uneventful existence together. Inevitably, each tranquil location is invaded or penetrated by a malevolent influence or chaotic presence, and Cathy and Chris must relocate in yet another attempt to achieve a contented peace.

Cathy's first impression of Clairmont, South Carolina, is of ''quiet, wide streets with trees that arched gracefully overhead'' and of imposing houses, ''large, aristocratic, with verandas and towering cupolas'' (*Petals* 8). Sheffield's gracious, sprawling Victorian house, nestled in four acres of gardens on a low hill, becomes a refuge to the three children who finally ''allowed faith, hope and trust to come and dance like sugarplums in our heads'' (*Petals* 41). The lovely fairy tale disintegrates under the assault of the harsher realities of life. Cathy becomes the object of desire for three men—Paul Sheffield, Julian Marquet, and her own brother Chris—whose attentions flatter her even as they cause anxiety and confusion. At boarding school, Carrie is tormented by her peers, who steal her dolls, lure her onto a rooftop, and then abandon her in an attic. More unnerving is Clairmont's proximity to Greenglenna, Bart Winslow's home town and the location of one of Corrine's and Bart's many homes. Because the Winslows are considered newsworthy, local papers faithfully record their comings and goings, thus allowing Cathy to keep track of her mother's activities and to brood on the anger aroused in her by Corrine's name and photograph.

Another apparent haven, Cathy's Virginia cottage in the woods near Foxworth Hall, has a flower garden and a view of quiet misty mountains. A soft green interior with white trim evokes tranquility; a fireplace contributes cozy warmth and a homey glow. But it is in this pastoral green bower that Bart Winslow rapes Cathy and thus begins the affair that produces Bart, Jr., the avenging dark angel of the next two installments of the saga. Bart's violation of Cathy in some ways parallels the legend of Leda and the Swan (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). Forcibly invaded by Bart, her stepfather, Cathy gives birth to a child who will ultimately bring the Foxworth clan to the brink of destruction.

When Cathy and Chris flee to California as the Sheffields, they build a redwood house in a valley, at the end of a long, winding, narrow road ''with more twists and turns than a puzzle maze'' (*Thorns* 4). Although on the surface their life seems relatively uneventful and they tell the boys a carefully edited version of the story of their parentage, the twisting road to their home mirrors Cathy's punishing need for revenge. All is

calm until the past intrudes in the form of Corrine, who takes possession of a nearby deserted mansion. Bart's fascination with the gloomy house and its black-veiled mistress leads him to make the acquaintance of his grandmother, and thus begins the transformation of Bart into the scourge of the Foxworth clan.

An odd feature of the Marin County house is the huge attic in which Cathy frequently feels compelled to dance alone, although she tries to hide her activity from Chris. That attic conceals her secret: a corner adorned with pictures of flowers and furnished with two twin beds and a large picnic hamper. For Cathy, the attic is a place where she can try to exorcise the demons of her childhood. She has no recollection of arranging the beds and purchasing the hamper, but she never questions the existence of the strange little exhibit. Cathy seems at least vaguely aware of her need to recreate the attic prison in which she lost her innocence. Sadly, her frenzied dancing never results in catharsis, never allows her to purge her psyche of revenge and hatred.

Foxworth Hall, rebuilt, is eerily similar to the old building destroyed in the fire that killed Bart Winslow. Even the attic rooms have been duplicated. The marble staircases and fireplace that survived the blaze have been incorporated into the new fabric of the house. Fittingly, since the travails of the Foxworth clan began in the old hall, those misfortunes are destined to end in the new hall; and as Malcolm Foxworth's cruel influence permeated the original building, so Foxworth's reincarnation as Bart Winslow Sheffield contaminates the reconstructed Foxworth Hall.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Surviving from *Flowers in the Attic* are three Dollanganger children (although Carrie dies in *Petals on the Wind*), Corrine and Bart Winslow, and the grandmother. Added to the cast are some new major characters, as well as a gallery of fascinating supporting actors.

After *Flowers in the Attic,* none of Andrews's characters in the Foxworth story is satisfactorily developed, although a few crucial ones are more than flat stereotypes. As might be expected given the melodramatic nature of the saga, most of the characters can be arranged on a scale that descends from good to bad. Good characters occupy one end of that scale; evil characters inhabit the other; both sets are predictable and unchanging and incapable of arousing much genuine reader interest. The background characters (middle of the scale) are more intriguing, even

quirky; in some ways they are more alive than are the good characters. And the three narrators who tell their stories manage to escape some of the clichés that define characters in the Gothic novel.

Carrie (until she disappears from the narrative), Chris (who is present almost to the end), and Paul Sheffield (who graces only *Petals on the Wind*) are good characters, innocent victims of Cathy's unthinking rampage through life. All three are frequently described as good looking, almost angelic, and nice. Carrie and Chris have a tendency to whine politely and cling to the past; both are dresden dolls, lovely figurines who grace the decor of each scene in which they appear. Chris is characterized chiefly by his obsession with Cathy and his willingness to do anything to keep her in his life. His principal emotion is jealousy, although other characters describe him as a caring and selfless physician. Somewhat more memorable is Carrie, who although beautiful, exhibits a physical imperfection—she is tiny and has a disproportionately large head—that might be attributed to her parents' blood relationship. Carrie is an irritating child, and her temper tantrums punctuate her otherwise conventional beauty. In reaction to anything she dislikes, she howls in rage, ''feet wide apart, head thrown back, with tears of frustration'' (*Petals* 35). Carrie refuses to mature. At sixteen, she still sulks; at twenty, she sobs and then slams her bedroom door because she disapproves of Cathy's plan to return to Virginia. Paul Sheffield is an even thinner good character—all altruism and high-minded selflessness, nearly pure innocent victim. In love with Cathy, he patiently waits for her as she hurtles through one marriage and an affair; meanwhile he pays for Chris's education and provides Carrie with a home.

In the villains' roles are John Amos and Joel, cartoonish agents of evil operating behind masks of strict piety. Despite their different backgrounds, they have similar motivations and modi operandi. Both men want Foxworth Hall, although Joel at least is a genuine Foxworth with real kinship claims to the place, while John Amos is merely Olivia Foxworth's cousin. Both are overtly spiritual, concealing their depravity behind constant public prayer and preaching. Both disguise their greed and lust by trumpeting the words of an angry deity who demands penitence and self-abasement from sinful human beings. And both are guilty of psychological child abuse.

Some of the supporting characters are much more interesting; although based on cultural and social stereotypes, they are distinctive enough to attract attention to themselves whenever they enter a scene. Henrietta Beech escapes Aunt Jemima comparisons because she is mute

and so clearly is considered a member of Paul Sheffield's family rather than a faithful old retainer. Madame Marisha, almost a caricature of an Eastern European ballet teacher complete with accent and mangled syntax, is one of the few characters who understands and sees Cathy as she is, and she sympathizes with Cathy's inability to rout the ghosts of a nightmare childhood. Madame Marisha's love for her husband, Georges, and her son, Julian, is genuine and fierce; she is nearly destroyed by their deaths. Her affection for her grandson, Jory, and for Cathy—her only remaining family—is no less powerful.

Because they function as narrators, Cathy, Jory, and Bart are more fully realized as individuals with interior lives and distinctive personality traits and linguistic patterns. Their private thoughts—for the most part unedited by self, uninterpreted by others—are available to the reader. Their doubts, fears, hopes, dreams, prejudices, and needs are essential to their texts and provide motivations for many of their actions.

Cathy's voice dominates *Petals on the Wind* and *Seeds of Yesterday.* Like *Flowers in the Attic,* the two later books are Cathy's stories. The Cathy of the attic is a young and generally uncomprehending victim; the older Cathy is obsessed with revenge and driven by hatred. Events are colored by Cathy's opinions; people are described only in relation to her fears or ambitions or needs. What Cathy omits from her stories is provided by Jory and Bart, whose voices alternately reveal more about the family in *If There Be Thorns.* Together, Jory's and Bart's perspectives and emphases provide a much fuller—albeit fractured into a dark-patterned mosaic—picture of Cathy's and Chris's lives as adults, as survivors of the attic years, as psychically maimed individuals who are attempting to get on with the business of living as normally as they can.

Cathy as narrator of *Petals on the Wind* and *Seeds of Yesterday* is no longer the young, hopeful storyteller of *Flowers in the Attic.* She is older, distanced in time and geography from the Virginia horrors of her childhood, and hardened by experience. Well traveled, much married, and the mother of two sons and an adopted daughter, Cathy has learned to conceal her continuing obsession with the attic years, although she is less successful at disguising her fantasies of revenge against Corrine. All that remains of the young Cathy is her impulsiveness and dislike for protracted decision making. Cathy tells her story with the ring of authenticity and candor, but her tendency toward snap judgments and her habit of making instant decisions suggest that her reminiscences might not be

completely accurate; they might even be fleeting impressions and partial recollections that have become permanent memories in her mind. Moreover, Cathy is aware that she is writing to release all of the skeletons that lurk in the Foxworth closets so that she can lay her past to rest. She writes to tell the truth as she sees it, but she also writes to hurt and destroy.

Andrews has done a better than average job of individualizing the two young boys who narrate *If There Be Thorns.* Jory is the good boy—bright, handsome, artistic, and inclined to notice the beauty of his isolated home, the grace of his mother's dancing, the bond between Cathy and Chris, which seems ''more intense, more tumultuous, more passionate'' than the love he sees in his friends' homes. Jory is empathetic: he is aware of secrets held by his mother and stepfather; he is conscious of Bart's inner turmoil; he notices the turbulent undercurrents running beneath the surface calm in the redwood house. His portions of the narrative focus on the tensions in his family, on his concerns about Bart, whose behavior grows more erratic and dangerous every day, on the peculiarly strained atmosphere that has settled heavily on everyone. In *Seeds of Yesterday,* narrated by Cathy, Jory is the adult version of the sympathetic child in the earlier book.

Bart is the bad boy whose narration lurches unevenly through *If There Be Thorns* in sections colored by his broken sentences, ungrammatical syntax, and unfinished words. Bart is a troubled soul, emotionally starved and psychologically undeveloped, who takes refuge in his imagination, play-acting scenarios in which he is a valiant warrior or courageous hunter. He seems to have at least two personas—the needy little boy who cuddles close in his grandmother's lap, and the sadistic tormentor of living things that happen to be smaller or weaker than he is—and both identities speak in his narrative. Those two personas demonstrate the split in his world: he both adores and hates his mother; he loathes and is fascinated by John Amos; he wants his St. Bernard puppy to be both dog and pony. Not surprisingly, Bart is supremely self-centered; his view of events and opinions of people are focused on the relation of those events and people to his own needs and desires. And while Jory matures into a likable man, Bart denies existence to the needy little boy in himself. In that boy's place, Bart nurtures his angry persona, the self-righteously wrathful descendant of Malcolm Foxworth, and he struggles to purge all Foxworth descendants of ''sin'' by destroying the family.

LITERARY DEVICES

Much of the implied meaning of the Dollanganger novels is revealed through motifs, or recurrent images, objects, words, or actions that create unity through their appearance in a text. Two dominant motifs in the novels that follow *Flowers in the Attic* are dolls and dreams, which together indicate the undercurrents and disguised emotions that motivate the novels' characters.

The doll motif first makes its appearance early in *Flowers in the Attic* with Cathy's remark that when they lived in Pennsylvania as an intact family, the beautiful blond Dollangangers were affectionately referred to by their friends as the ''Dresden Dolls.'' During the long incarceration, Carrie plays with tiny dolls in an elaborate dollhouse, and when the children escape from the attic, Cathy takes the dolls to give to Carrie later on.

Cathy keeps alive the family connection with dolls. When her dancing career begins, she shortens her name to Catherine Doll, believing that Dollanganger is too lengthy and too strange a name for a ballerina. Eventually because her New York dance teacher describes ''Doll'' as ''silly,'' Cathy becomes Catherine Dahl, but she retains the connection with dolls in other ways. She begins an occasional one-way correspondence with their mother, sending Corrine news of her children's accomplishments, and signing the letters with ''Not yours any more, / The doctor doll, / The ballerina doll, / The praying-to-grow-taller doll, / And the dead doll'' (*Petals* 132).

Carrie is frequently described as possessing a ''piquant dollface,'' as ''a doll with an exquisite face.'' The parallel between her and dolls is heightened by her diminutive size and her dependence on the tiny dolls that Cathy has smuggled out of the Virginia attic. Those dolls precipitate the harassment and psychological torture that Carrie endures at her boarding school, and when she refuses to return to that school, she spends more and more time with those dolls. Years later, in the wake of Carrie's tragic death, her fiancé, Alex, mourns her loss, saying, ''To me she was a dainty doll,'' and Cathy sadly thinks, ''Out of the four Dresden dolls, only two were left'' (*Petals* 333).

The doll motif heightens the sense that Cathy and her siblings seem to live their lives at the behest of forces beyond their control and understanding. Seemingly manipulated by forces beyond their control, the Dollangangers resemble Carrie's dolls, taken from place to place, occa-

sionally lost or misplaced, but always somehow retrieved, though much the worse for wear.

Dreams form the second dominant motif in the Dollanganger story, appearing principally in *Flowers in the Attic* and *If There Be Thorns.* In both novels, dreams parallel the deepest concerns of Cathy and Bart, Jr., accurately depicting their fears but also revealing the frightening effects of a world gone awry on their fragile inner lives. Feelings of helplessness concealed during waking hours become the subject of nightmares, and images of repressed desires and needs interrupt sleep.

Cathy and her son Bart are the principal dreamers; they are also the most introspective and troubled members of the Sheffield family. Mother and son struggle with identity, with frequent attempts to define themselves, generally through seemingly uncontrollably peculiar behavior. Cathy's dreams generally focus on failures and successes, on sexuality and maternity, while Bart's feature disturbingly violent incidents in which he dominates as the avenging destroyer of an evil universe.

Through her dreams, Cathy is able to confront the thoughts that she cannot speak aloud to her family. With the stigma of her parents' relationship as siblings always in her mind, she cannot verbalize the confusion in her relationships with men: her emotional ties to her brother; her sexual experiments with her surrogate father, Paul; or her infatuation with her stepfather, Bart. And because she has cast herself in the role of the strong, ambitious sister, she finds it difficult to admit that she is not always as confident as she pretends to be. Almost fanatically obsessed with her desire to be a dancer, the young Cathy dreams that she fails her ballet audition, thus setting in motion a lifetime of mistakes that culminates in a withered old Cathy begging in the streets of an anonymous large city.

As Cathy matures into adulthood, Bart Winslow appears more and more frequently in her dreams as a hero figure who dances with her and makes love to her. Julian, Cathy's partner in a disastrous marriage, is frozen atop a silver music box, where he spins around and around, accusing Cathy of infidelity with his eyes but unable to take action. Occasionally the dream Julian is transformed into Paul, who eventually does marry Cathy, and Paul becomes Chris with whom Cathy will live out the rest of her life. Cathy's dream dances with Bart Winslow represent her erotic fantasies about Bart, fantasies that have their origins in her earlier encounter with her dozing stepfather. Significantly, Cathy dances in her dreams only with Bart, who is married to her mother, while the men who do become Cathy's husbands figure only as onlookers in

the dreams. Bart is the unavailable, the forbidden, and thus the most desirable.

Mother figures haunt Cathy, who dreams of herself as an ancient crone begging for alms from her mother, who is still young, beautiful, and wealthy, a mother who does not recognize the daughter whom she has earlier disavowed. The dreams involving Corrine are evidence of memories that Cathy firmly represses during her waking hours. Because of Corrine, Cathy has aged too prematurely, has had to forget her pride and beg for food and help, even as she watched her mother grow more youthful and lovely.

In another dream, Cathy sits in a dilapidated rocking chair, holding in her lap a ''ghostly small brother who called me Momma'' (*Petals* 88). Clearly, that small brother is Cory, dead by his mother's hand. Equally clearly, the little ghost represents the death of Cathy's innocence and vulnerability, the end of her childhood, the loss of her youthful idealism. The Cathy who dreams is vengeful and cynical, professing to desire love but willing to substitute lust. Her dreams reveal her remoteness from what she once was and what she once aspired to become.

Cathy's dreams reflect the several realities of her life. She has been abandoned by a mother whose greed drives her to kill one child and to attempt to do away with the others. Cathy and her brothers and sister suffer from starvation at the hands of their mother, whose energies are focused on remaining youthful and desirable even as she robs her children of their youth and beauty. Because of Corrine's renunciation of her maternal role, Cathy is forced to become a surrogate mother to Carrie and Cory, although she is powerless to prevent Cory's death.

Another meaning may also be deduced from Cathy's frequent dreams about Corrine. Acutely aware that she is her mother's physical double, Cathy is thrilled at the prospect of maturing into Corrine's blonde loveliness. At the same time, she fears that the resemblance might go deeper. Cathy is terrified that she harbors the potential to become, like Corrine, a destructive, narcissistic, cruel monster; in fact, Cathy's narratives are shaped by her private fears, manifested in her constant reiteration to herself that she is not like her mother. The image of Cathy in the rocking chair with the dead Cory in her lap suggests Cathy's feelings that she has failed somehow to provide Carrie and Cory with the maternal protection that they need.

Like Cathy's dreams, Bart's are reflections of the young boy's insecurity and uncertainty about his identity. Many readers would classify Bart's nocturnal visions as nightmares rather than dreams. These night-

mares, which occur frequently, awaken Bart and precipitate frightened weeping at first, although as he grows older he becomes inured to the terror that mars his childhood. Bart describes one dream:

> Fell into ugliness. Dead bones everywhere. Blood gushing out in great rivers, taken pieces of human beings down into the oceans of fire. Dead. I was dead. Funeral flowers on the altar. People sent me flowers . . . telling me they were glad to see me dead. Hear the sea of fire play devil music, making me hate music and dancing. (*Thorns* 149)

The dream is a reflection of the chaotic emotions that Bart hides from his family. A typical little boy, Bart is clumsy and bumbling and feels like a misfit in a family of achievers. His dream that combines ugliness and images of death suggests his insecurity, his feelings that he is powerless to change his ineptitude, and his fear that he is an unacceptable child.

Not all of Bart's dreams focus on his anxieties. Feeling like an outsider during his waking hours, Bart compensates by sometimes dreaming of being so tall that his head bumps the sky and so large that his feet sloshing in the ocean create tidal waves. In these dreams, Bart has the power to dominate and control, to unleash his anger and jealousy without incurring reproof or punishment from his parents.

When he falls under John Amos's spell, Bart begins to have nightmares about ''winding jungle paths that were taking me straight into hell'' (*Thorns* 217) or about being a weeping little boy hurled into a trash can by a cruel old man. These new dreams suggest the influence of a religion that both fascinates and repels. John Amos worships a vengeful God, and Bart's discovery of a destructive and vindictive deity awakens in the boy the possibility of a new source of power along with the fear that the divine patriarch will repudiate him in the way that he believes he has been rejected by his father.

Bart's dreams reflect his suppressed anxieties about his place in his family and his barely concealed hopes that his friendship with John Amos will reveal to him a way to gain the power to control others. Bart resents his adopted sister, Cindy, because she is dainty and lovable, while he is scabby-kneed and crabby, and because he believes that Cathy loves the angelic little girl more than she loves her impish son. Learning the true story of his origins from John Amos, Bart dreams of whores who represent to him the mother whom he silently adores and whose

undivided attention he craves, even while he condemns her for her adultery with his father and for living in sin with her brother.

Another literary device V. C. Andrews employs to emphasize her novels' relationship to other similar fiction is her use of allusions, or references to other novels or other works of art or literature. *If There Be Thorns* contains the most significant of these allusions. Both the topiary garden behind the old mansion and the final scene of Bart's reading a blank book evoke images from Stephen King's *The Shining,* published while Andrews was working on *Thorns.* Corrine's black veil, worn to cover a face made hideous by sin, has its literary predecessor in a similar face covering worn by a clergyman in Nathaniel Hawthorne's story, ''The Minister's Black Veil.'' The King novel and the Hawthorne tale both focus on mental instability and obsession, psychological states that figure prominently in the V. C. Andrews books.

MAJOR THEMES AND ISSUES

V. C. Andrews is adept at depicting the emotional and psychological conflicts that wreak havoc on the adolescent psyche. As she continues the story of Cathy and Chris through the three novels following *Flowers in the Attic,* she addresses many of the same themes and concerns introduced in the first book. Among the most dominant of those issues are the need for acceptance by peers and superiors, the construction of identity, and parent-child relationships. Through her portrayals of Cathy and Chris, then Carrie, and later Jory and Bart, and finally Cindy, Andrews addresses the seemingly trivial doubts as well as the larger questions that trouble young people on the threshold of adulthood.

Of central importance in the Dollanganger novels is an individual's need to belong, to be an important part of a group. While they live in the attic, the Dollanganger siblings need to focus only on obeying the rules imposed on them by their grandmother, who makes it clear that they are separate from her. Their shared misfortune binds the children together; they need no one else's approval. Once away from the attic and out in the larger world, they begin to worry about acceptance by their peers, as well as measuring up to the expectations of adults whom they love and trust. Cathy, Chris, and Carrie work hard to earn the approval of Paul Sheffield and Henrietta Beech, who have given them a home; later, Cathy desperately tries to win praise from Madame Marisha, who can give her an entree into the dance world. Meanwhile, Carrie is so

tormented and ostracized at her boarding school that she returns home and later refuses to attend college because that would mean another separation from her family. Years later, Cathy's son Bart will nearly destroy the family and himself in his own campaign for their acceptance and unconditional love.

Another important issue on which the Dollanganger novels focus is the nature of identity—of major concern to both adolescents and adults. Through her use of names as markers for the events of Cathy's life, Andrews makes it abundantly clear that identity is in many ways an artificial role. Born a Dollanganger, Cathy discovers after her father's death that her surname is a falsehood, and assumed name her parents adopted when they fled from home. She is instead, she discovers, a Foxworth, although her right to that name is contested by her grandmother. When Cathy and her siblings become Paul Sheffield's wards, they alter their name to Sheffield. By this point, they have used three surnames, none completely theirs. Chris retains the Sheffield name. Meanwhile Cathy takes ''Catherine Doll'' as a stage name, and then changes to ''Catherine Dahl'' when she is told that ''Doll'' is silly; not long afterward, she acquires ''Marquet'' through her marriage to Julian, and when he dies, she marries Paul, thus legally becoming Cathy Sheffield. With each name change, Cathy alters somewhat, taking on a persona she feels is appropriate to the name she currently bears. Cathy Dollanganger is hopeful and naive; Catherine Dahl is an international ballet star; Catherine Marquet is angry and singleminded. As Cathy Sheffield, she is relatively calm and settled, almost as though Paul Sheffield's dying legacy to her has been the peace of his South Carolina home. But although she is Mrs. Sheffield for the rest of her life, Cathy never relinquishes her Dollanganger identity; and she ends her life as she began it—as Cathy Dollanganger, sister of Chris, Carrie, and Cory.

A third theme that dominates the series is the relationship between parents and children. The tenuous parent-child bond provides much of the tension and conflict at the heart of the novels, and at the center of most of these tensions is Cathy. Devastated by the death of her father, Cathy tries to replace him by forming liaisons with men who can be both father figures and lovers. Her affair with Bart Winslow and her marriage to Paul Sheffield involve her with much older men who are actually more than just father figures: Bart is her stepfather, Paul her legal guardian. Her marriage to Julian Marquet who is very nearly her age is a failure. In the end, the man with whom she finally does spend her life and raise a family is Chris, who is the doppelganger of her father in both

name and appearance. Meanwhile, the age-old mother-daughter conflict fuels the ongoing war between Cathy and Corrine, a war that ends only with the blaze that destroys Corrine's mansion. Perhaps because she hates her mother, Cathy is more than a little unsuccessful with her own children, particularly with Bart, whose emotional instability turns into righteous scorn for a mother whose love he also craves. If Cathy is Corrine's greatest failure as a mother, Bart is Cathy's, and reconciliation between mother and son will not come until just before Cathy's death.

ALTERNATIVE READING: THE ARCHETYPAL APPROACH

Archetypal criticism is based on the idea that literature and art encourage in readers and viewers a sense of participating in universal experiences. These experiences are evident in certain images and patterns that appear to be so inextricably embedded in the unconscious mind that they evoke recognition and response from people of varying backgrounds and cultures. An archetypal critic focuses on the relationships and parallels between patterns in literature and those in ritual and myth, and thereby comes to some conclusions about the universal motifs embedded in the literary work.

With its roots deeply buried in both psychology and anthropology, archetypal criticism owes much of its language and methodology to the work of eminent scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—in particular, anthropologist Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941) and psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961).

Frazer examined primitive rituals and magical practices in which he detected recurring patterns across tremendously diverse and geographically isolated cultures and groups. These patterns—of both behavior and belief—displayed remarkable similarities to internal structures in myth and folk narratives. Frazer eventually published the results of his work in *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), an immense study of comparative religion and mythology that influenced a great deal of subsequent work in literary theory and psychoanalysis.

Carl Gustav Jung, known as the father of analytical psychology, proposed the idea of a universal repository of symbolical forms and patterns called *archetypes.* He called this common source of theme and image the *collective unconscious*—"universal images that have existed since the remotest times," images that are not the result of personal experience but

are inborn (Jung 287–88). David Fontana defines the collective unconscious as a ''genetic myth-producing level of the mind common to all men and women, and serving as the well-spring of psychological life'' (30).

Frazer's and Jung's work was integrated firmly into literary analysis by archetypal literary critics, among them Northrop Frye, Maude Bodkin, and Bettina Knapp. Although the specific critical approaches developed by these theorists differ in many ways, all agree on a few essential points: certain images, patterns, character types, and details—called archetypes—that occur in literature and art are sufficiently universal to evoke profound emotions; and these archetypes are symbolic of the collective unconscious of the human race and are thus keys to the understanding of dreams, fantasies, mythologies, narratives, and rituals.

In Western cultures, fairy tales are perhaps the most familiar sources of archetypal images and patterns. Even in their most sanitized versions—the Disney animated films—fairy tales strike a responsive chord in the majority of audiences who instinctively recoil from the wicked stepmother and cheer for Prince Charming as he rides to the rescue of the endangered heroine. Certainly some of that reaction can be traced to the audience's familiarity with the tales, but close readings of hundreds of fairy tales in dozens of versions have revealed that fairy tale plots and characters have uncanny similarities to the narrative patterns and personages celebrated in the rituals and myths that Frazer recorded.

V. C. Andrews makes the archetypal approach an obvious one for a literary analysis of the Dollanganger saga. A Jungian critic would immediately note the frequent allusions to fairy tales in the Dollanganger books. The frequent occurrences of these allusions in *Flowers in the Attic* has already been discussed; here, the emphasis is on Andrews's use of fairy tale archetypes to illuminate the universality of Cathy's story.

When Paul Sheffield takes the Dollanganger children into his life and his ''gingerbread white house,'' they begin to allow themselves to think that they are helping the happily-ever-after phase of their lives. ''Fairy tales could come true,'' thinks Cathy who has already acquired from Henrietta Beech the sobriquet of ''Fairy Child'' (*Petals* 41). Cathy is pleased that ''the wicked queen was out of our lives, and Snow White would reign one day,'' but she is also well aware that ''every fairy tale had a dragon to slay, a witch to overcome or some obstacle to make things difficult.'' She fears that she knows who that witch is, and, she says, ''that was the saddest part of being me'' (41).

Cathy's statement is ambiguous, and two possible meanings immedi-

ately become obvious. First, the witch, like the wicked queen, could be Corrine, that most unmaternal mother whose greed for wealth and position has blinded her to her obligations to her children. Second, because of her growing resemblance to her mother, Cathy herself could be ''the witch'' and could harbor within her psyche the potential to destroy not only herself but also Carrie and Chris. In either case, her knowledge of the witch's identity is problematic for Cathy, whose mission it is to make certain that she and her siblings lead normal, happy lives. She is unhappily aware that the Dollanganger children are still in peril and that the danger they continue to face is lodged within their family.

Cathy's references to witches and wicked queens create parallels between Andrews's fiction and the stories of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella. Many fairy tales revolve around maternal evil, around a female figure who has become a modern archetype: the wicked stepmother, a woman who is the negative opposite of the nurturing, caring, archetypal Great Mother.

Like Hansel and Gretel, Chris and Cathy and the twins are forced by circumstance to leave a comfortable home. Their journey culminates in an attractive mansion where they expect to live in fabulous splendor. Instead, they face captivity and persecution at the hands of a grandmother who bears a marked resemblance to the old hag who greets Hansel and Gretel. Cathy's dream of finding the twins imprisoned in a gingerbread and candy house strengthens the parallels between Andrews's novel and the Grimm tales.

In another parallel, Cathy realizes that her growing resemblance to Corrine has created competition between them, a rivalry that echoes the contest between Snow White and the Wicked Queen who is so obsessed with being the fairest woman in the kingdom that she sends Snow White out into the forest to starve to death. Corrine plays her role in the fairy tale by actively working to destroy Cathy and the other children, who are the living evidence that she is growing older year by year.

Corrine is distinctly identified with the maternal evil in fairy tales. In the tales, the terrible mother, who represents tyranny, jealousy, abuse, and destruction, generally labors at first to earn the trust of her victims by feigning maternal concern and nurturing behavior. Only after the victims drop their guard does this monstrous woman embark on her scheme to destroy her victims. Like the old woman in the forest who plies Hansel and Gretel with pancakes and apples, milk and sugar, before attempting to bake them in her oven, Corrine initially showers her imprisoned children with lavish gifts and edible treats to win their trust

before she feeds them first of many doses of arsenic concealed in sugary doughnuts—the Foxworth answer to the poisoned apple intended for Snow White.

In the Dollanganger novels, Cathy follows the archetypal journey of the fairy tale heroine who is exiled from home through the actions of a jealous, scheming mother or stepmother, goes into a treacherous forest, and ultimately finds peace in a second home. This pattern, discussed at length by historian Maria Tatar, is repeated several times in the story of Cathy's life, and in each repetition, an individual symbolizing maternal evil dies. Not until the destruction of the final representative of that evil—who is ultimately revealed as the supposedly dead Joel Foxworth and thus an extension of Malcolm Foxworth—is the cycle broken. In the final volume, Cathy finally joins Cory, Carrie, and Chris when she dies in the attic that she has decorated with paper flowers, an orange snail, and a purple worm—replicas of the cut-paper ornaments that graced the attic of her childhood.

5

Garden of Shadows (1987)

Garden of Shadows appeared in 1987, eight years after the phenomenal success of *Flowers in the Attic* and only a few months after V. C. Andrews's death in 1986. Although chronologically the earliest book in the Foxworth family epic, *Garden of Shadows* produces a far more interesting and disturbing impact if read at the end of the series as a kind of afterthought. It allows Olivia Foxworth, the cruel grandmother introduced in *Flowers in the Attic,* to tell her story. In her narrative, Olivia attempts to justify the events of her long life, especially her treatment of her four grandchildren, and to discover some meaning and purpose in her long and unhappy existence at Foxworth Hall.

At the beginning of the novel, Olivia Winfield is in her mid-twenties and destined for spinsterhood. When handsome Malcolm Foxworth proposes to her, she begins to permit herself to believe that she might look forward to life as a happy wife and mother in a charming home of her own. Olivia and Malcolm are married within the month. The newlyweds travel immediately after the wedding from Olivia's native Connecticut to Malcolm's ancestral acres in Virginia, where Olivia's happy dream dissolves into a nightmare.

Olivia chronicles the disillusionment that she experiences when she finds out that Malcolm has married her because she is a trained bookkeeper and is healthy; he has decided that he needs an accountant who can also bear him the sons he wants. When he consummates their mar-

riage by raping her in his mother's bed, Olivia is introduced to Malcolm's dark side: he both hates and lusts after the mother who left him when he was five years old, and he identifies every woman he meets with his mother. Although Olivia bears two sons, Mal and Joel, she never succeeds in winning her husband's affection. Life at Foxworth Hall becomes nearly unbearable for Olivia when Malcolm's father, Garland, returns from his honeymoon with a young wife, Alicia, who reminds Malcolm of his lost mother. Alicia soon bears Garland a son, whom they name Christopher.

After Garland dies, leaving his wife and son at Foxworth Hall, Malcolm rapes his father's widow (again in his mother's bed). Forced by Olivia to hide in the Foxworth attic, Alicia bears him the daughter he has always wanted. To protect the family name, Olivia pretends that the child is her own and banishes Alicia and her son from the hall. Malcolm names the new infant after his mother.

Malcolm is delighted with his daughter, Corrine, and his doting affection turns her into a manipulative, charming, willful young beauty. Meanwhile, Alicia dies, and Christopher—now a young man—arrives at Foxworth, which is legally his home. Although Christopher and Corrine become inseparable friends, Olivia is so enthralled by their beauty that she fails to recognize the signs of passion between them until she discovers them making love on (once again) Malcolm's mother's bed. Infuriated at what he interprets as Corrine's repudiation of himself and incapable of telling the pair that they are half-siblings, Malcolm disowns Christopher and Corrine and orders them to leave Foxworth Hall. Almost immediately following his angry outburst, Malcolm suffers a severe stroke, and without his dominating control, the hall becomes a gloomy mausoleum. The novel ends when Corrine, years later a mother and a widow, begs Olivia and Malcolm for reconciliation; she and her four children arrive at Foxworth, where the children are taken to the attic prison once occupied by their real grandmother, Alicia.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE

In addition to the Gothic conventions—locked doors, forbidden rooms, hints at supernatural phenomena—that lend shape to *Garden of Shadows,* V. C. Andrews creates tension and suspense by relying heavily on two narrative strategies: the description of voyeuristic activity, involving a character's listening to or watching others who are unaware of the scru-

tiny, and significant entrances to produce major discoveries. These strategies, which create a heightened sense of unease, are common in the theater, and it is tempting to speculate that Andrews's early interest in the stage may have influenced the way in which she crafted her plots, all of which employ these dramatic devices to some degree.

Voyeurism in *Garden of Shadows* is both a motif and a plot device. At a theatrical performance, the audience is put in the position of the unseen observer who is privy to even the most intimate moments experienced by the characters whose lives are enacted on stage. In Andrews's novel, the reader not only watches the events of Olivia's life unfold but also frequently observes Olivia as she spies on or listens to others. Olivia's voyeurism allows the novel to encompass events and conversations that might otherwise be impossible to include in a first-person narrative.

Olivia often finds herself in the uncomfortable position of being able to listen to conversations and sounds not intended for her ears. At her first Foxworth party, she overhears the guests wondering why handsome, wealthy Malcolm Foxworth has selected as his bride a tall, plain woman from that Yankee state of Connecticut, a woman who reminds them of a stone statue—obviously a woman who would never fit in with the pretty, feminine southern belles of Virginia. More disturbing remarks come her way. Having installed Garland and Alicia in a bedroom next to hers, Olivia hears through a thin wall that they pity her, especially for her immense size. Another time, Olivia catches a conversation among the servants who clearly adore the smiling Alicia and dislike Olivia, whom they fault for constantly scowling. These overheard remarks slowly harden Olivia's resolve to control the lives of everyone at Foxworth Hall.

Unflattering comments about her are not the most devastating discoveries that Olivia confronts through her listening. Intrigued because the servants marvel that Alicia and Garland ''are always at it,'' Olivia follows the couple upstairs one afternoon and puts her ear against the thin wall between her room and theirs. The sounds of their lovemaking apparently prove irresistibly fascinating, and she begins to listen frequently because the activity gives her far more excitement than she can get from the romantic novels she occasionally reads. Ultimately, this habit of surreptitious listening alerts Olivia to Malcolm's visits to Alicia's room after Garland's death, and Olivia is forced to acknowledge a truth that she has suspected all along: Malcolm—overbearing, self-centered, emotionally unbalanced, and incapable of fidelity—can never be the husband and father of Olivia's perfect fantasy family. Olivia will never experience the domestic happiness that she craves.

Listening is not the only activity through which Olivia gains, at least vicariously, the thrills that are lacking in her own life. Garland and Alicia are so much in love that they kiss and caress each other even in the presence of others. When the birth of a son tempts Garland to stay at home more often, Olivia is initially disturbed because her father-in-law's presence forces her to notice the happy family trio of Alicia, Garland, and baby Christopher and to realize that her own family circle is unsatisfactory by comparison. Very soon Olivia becomes aware that watching Garland's and Alicia's private activity is even more titillating than listening to them. She follows them to the lake one afternoon and watches as they make love on the shore, and after she discovers that a hidden peephole in Malcolm's trophy room affords a view of the swan bed, she watches Garland and Alicia indulge their passion in the Swan Room. The results are predictable. Olivia becomes angry with Malcolm, on whom she blames her unhappy life. She feels cheated of the marital bliss so evident in Garland's and Alicia's relationship and so lacking in her own. ''How much of what should be every woman's was not mine and would never be mine'' (135).

The existence of the spyhole is evidence that Olivia is not the only one at Foxworth Hall who observes others stealthily. Clearly Malcolm does too, and his voyeurism so intensifies his desire for Alicia that he propositions her—unsuccessfully—while Garland is still alive and rapes her almost immediately after his father's death. Another voyeur whose spying is crucial to the later development of the plot is John Amos, Olivia's pious cousin who comes to live with the Foxworths after Olivia's father dies. John Amos's obsession with Corrine inflames his already warped curiosity, and when newly adult Christopher arrives at Foxworth Hall, John Amos begins to spy secretly, as well as blatantly, on the two young people who have become friends, making it his duty to follow Corrine and Christopher around the house and the grounds. It is John Amos who first suggests to Olivia that the relationship between the young people might be more than the normal sibling companionship, and his constant reports to Olivia coupled with sly remarks about hidden evil in the house set the stage for the explosive climax of the novel. When Corrine and Christopher are discovered making love in the swan bed, Malcolm disowns his adored daughter and collapses—the victim of a stroke, brought on, no doubt, by the shattering news he has just received.

Another and equally unsettling narrative strategy in *Garden of Shadows* is the classic theatrical entrance and discovery. Olivia's first real entrance before an ''audience'' sets in motion the series of events that will take

her to Foxworth Hall, and thereafter, each significant entrance by a character signals an impending discovery of some magnitude. Olivia is always involved in these scene changes but is not always the actor who enters. At times, it is she who must endure the intrusions on her privacy and the subsequent discoveries of her secrets. When she walks into her father's drawing room and meets Malcolm Foxworth for the first time, Olivia senses that her life is about to change. As though the novel were a play, Olivia's entrance signals the opening act. Significantly, as Olivia dresses before that fateful encounter with Malcolm, she reminds herself that she is once again ''rehearsing'' for what she believes will be another ''failure'' (10). The truth of her observation will not be evident to her for years.

Another major act in the drama of Olivia's life begins with the arrival of Garland and Alicia Foxworth from their European journey. Not until they make their entrance onto the Foxworth stage are Malcolm and Olivia made aware that Alicia, who is extremely young and very pregnant, looks remarkably like Malcolm's mother—and Garland's first wife—Corinne. Beautiful Alicia inflames Malcolm's lust and Olivia's intense curiosity, and thus begins a disturbing period of Foxworth Hall's history, one that will end only when Alicia and her son leave to set the stage for the final act, which will begin with the entrance of that son as a young man. In fact, *Garden of Shadows* ends with the events that begin another drama: the reappearance of Corinne, this time with her four children, on the stage of Foxworth Hall.

SETTING

Always conscious of his power and status, Malcolm Foxworth refers to Foxworth Hall as the ''seat of my empire'' (44) when he introduces Olivia to its sprawling wings and innumerable bedrooms, curving staircases and dark balconies, mosaic floors and crystal chandeliers. Olivia dutifully admires the grand furnishings around her but is strangely compelled to focus on the family portraits in which both men and women ''looked austere, cold haughty. . . . Their faces were pinched, tight, their eyes saddened by some trouble'' (43). The illusion of moldering baronial magnificence is emphasized by a suit of armor positioned prominently at the entrance to the wing where Olivia is to stay.

Foxworth Hall *is* Malcolm Foxworth. Like his home, which conceals ancestral decay in its serpentine passageways, Malcolm's mind hides sa-

distic tendencies in its twisted gray coils. Even as Foxworth Hall glitters with a hard brilliance and a veneer of gaiety during a party, Malcolm is all delightful charm and suave politeness in public. When the guests depart, the hall is once again draped with shadows, and Malcolm becomes the angry man who wants to make every woman do penance for his mother's desertion. He keeps that mother's bedroom—the Swan Room—intact as a shrine to her charming, cheerful, unmaternal Corinne, whose beauty hid the ''heart of a harlot'' (60).

The Swan Room at the heart of Foxworth Hall is dominated by a platform on which, altar-like, stands a massive swan-shaped ivory bed. Still in the room's closets are the first Corinne's clothes and jewels, on the dressing table are her silver brushes and mirrors, and over the entire room hovers the presence of that glamorous, pampered woman for whom none of this luxury was enough. On his mother's swan bed, Malcolm sexually assaults his own bride and later his stepmother, whom he forces to garb herself in Corinne's gowns and to perform the role of his mother. On that same bed, Alicia's children, Christopher and Corrine—Malcolm's half-brother and daughter—consummate their love, thus innocently contributing to the family history of unnatural couplings in that bed. Within the confines of the Swan Room lurk the Foxworth family secrets, concealed events so terrible that knowledge of them forever changes those who have been so painfully enlightened.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

In *Garden of Shadows,* Andrews portrays a domestic power hierarchy that places each character in relation to the man who wields the most influence: Malcolm Foxworth, whose word is law at Foxworth Hall. Second to Malcolm but possessed of a good deal less authority is his wife, Olivia; and below Olivia are ranked Garland Foxworth, Malcolm's father, and Garland's second wife, Alicia. Children do not matter. Not until the second Corrine is born does any child gain a measure of influence—and then, because Corrine is Malcolm's favorite, she wields some of his power until that dreadful day when he banishes her, forever altering her life and his.

Malcolm casts a long shadow over the inhabitants of Foxworth Hall. Having anointed himself patriarch of the Foxworth clan that he plans to sire, he sees himself as the eventual father of strong, competent sons in his own image, and he scorns the weakness that he associates with his

father. At the core of Malcolm's need for control is his memory that he was helpless to prevent his mother's departure when he was a toddler. His mother's desertion has made Malcolm power mad, distrustful of women, scornful of men who do not dominate their wives, and impatient with his unaggressive sons. Although he cannot admit to it, the truth is probably that he suffers from feelings of immense insecurity, which drive him to assert himself by dominating others.

Every other character in *Garden of Shadows* is defined through Malcolm's relationship with that individual. Olivia becomes more and more bitter and judgmental as Malcolm's neglect of her grows more pronounced. She loses the capacity for kindness of any sort. Blaming Alicia for being so pretty that Malcolm lusts after her, Olivia allows her normally concealed sadistic tendencies to develop into outright cruelty. Alicia, who is youthfully bubbly and delightful when she first arrives at the hall, visibly withers under Malcolm's campaign of rudeness following her rejection of his advances; and Garland ages rapidly with Alicia's growing unhappiness. Even Mal and Joel, Malcolm's sons, are victims of their father's prejudices. When Malcolm is told that the boys have musical talent, he immediately condemns them as effeminate and thus useless to him, and he turns away from them. Only when Corrine is born is Malcolm finally able to love another human being—and his smothering love for the child turns her into a willful creature who will ultimately break Malcolm's heart by deserting him, as his mother did.

Garden of Shadows is narrated by Olivia, apparently close to the end of her long, unhappy existence. Quoted in the Prologue is an addendum to her will, announcing that she has been forced by circumstances to write her autobiography because others have distorted the tale and she wishes to set the record straight. She is presumably referring to her granddaughter Cathy's memoirs. Olivia's attempt to justify her behavior is a failure; she succeeds only in revealing the innate cruelty and weakness that she disguises behind her formally rigid composure. In fact, hints of Olivia's latent inflexibility become evident very early in the book—in her dictatorial commands to a seamstress about the alterations to Olivia's mother's wedding dress.

Believing that she is displaying commendable strength, Olivia conceals her disappointment in her unhappy marriage and adopts a stiff reserve that earns her the Foxworth staff's guarded dislike. Although she claims that she is torn between a twinge of pity for the widowed Alicia and overwhelming envy of her youth and beauty (not to mention the adoration of the household help), Olivia also admits that she succumbs to

her lower instincts when she allows herself to dislike the younger woman. When Alicia becomes pregnant after Malcolm rapes her, Olivia, unable to attack her husband, punishes Alicia instead—thus behaving like a bully who torments only those who are clearly weaker.

Olivia records not only her actions but also the feelings that accompany those actions. While she seems to believe that she is writing her story exactly the way it happened, readers inevitably begin to wonder just how much Olivia's desire to absolve herself of guilt has influenced the telling of the tale. Moreover, there are questions about the degree to which Olivia's religious beliefs have led her unconsciously to reinterpret the events of her life. At some point in the story, she embraces the rigid, fundamentalist religious teachings espoused by her cousin John Amos, and thereafter she treats everything and everyone she believes she has cause to dislike as the evidence or embodiment of sin and evil. Readers might feel some sympathy for Olivia Winfield during the early years in Connecticut, but Olivia Foxworth, the chatelaine of a Virginia mansion, emerges as a mean-spirited, narrow soul who seems to delight in the sufferings of others.

LITERARY DEVICES

The dominant symbol in *Garden of Shadows* is the swan bed that belonged to the first Corinne. Nestled amid luxurious furnishings in pink, rose, mauve, and purple, the bed appears to float in the center of the room, reflected in the mirrors around it. Swans are common enough in literature—from William Butler Yeats's wild swans at Coole to the swan boats that carry both Lohengrin and King Arthur to their destinies—but the swan story with the strongest resonances for Olivia's narrative is the legend of Leda and the Swan.

In that legend, Leda, the wife of Tyndareus, the Spartan king, is raped by the lusty god king Zeus, who approaches her disguised as a swan. Alicia, like Leda, is another man's wife when Malcolm—the modern-day Zeus ruling from his mountaintop—violates her and forces her to bear his child. And like Leda, Alicia becomes the mother of chaos. Leda's offspring from the encounter with Zeus included Clytemnestra and Helen of Troy, and from those two women came the Trojan War and the tragedies in the house of Atreus. Alicia's children, Christopher and Corrine, fall in love with each other, and when Malcolm's curse drives them from Foxworth Hall, they leave behind a ruined family. Their daughter,

Cathy Dollanganger, will ignite emotional and psychological firestorms among the Foxworth descendants in future years.

Olivia's childhood dollhouse is another important image in *Garden of Shadows,* representing the peaceful domestic life that Olivia and her children and grandchildren long for and are denied. The dollhouse, exquisitely furnished and inhabited by a daintily perfect porcelain doll family and their servants, is locked in a glass case, out of reach of the clumsy child whom Olivia seems to have been. That same child had often fantasized about the perfect life that she thought she saw in the glass-enclosed dollhouse universe. As an adult, Olivia automatically sees her marriage to Malcolm Foxworth as her chance finally to live the dollhouse dream as a fulfilled and happy wife and mother. Instead, she realizes almost immediately that she will never know the domestic contentment and happy perfection that she has ascribed to the porcelain figures and that she will forever be only an envious—even jealous—observer of the love and marital companionship enjoyed by other married couples.

MAJOR THEMES AND ISSUES

Although not the most grotesque of V. C. Andrews's novels, *Garden of Shadows* is in many ways the most disturbingly and unremittingly violent. In her characterization of Malcolm Foxworth, Andrews attempts to explore the various ways in which a man can manifest a pathological hatred of and violence against women.

While information about the first Corinne Foxworth is sketchy at best (she was beautiful, she loved parties, she was spoiled), Andrews suggests that Corinne's departure from Foxworth Hall when Malcolm was five years old has left him psychologically scarred for life. But while the novel more than adequately illustrates the adult Malcolm's antisocial behavior and perversions, little is revealed about the relationship between the child Malcolm and his mother. A number of questions remain unanswered, and there are crucial gaps in the family history. Little is said about Corinne's behavior as a mother, for instance, nor is there any suggestion about the kind of familial interaction that existed between Corinne and Garland and their only son. What is clear is that the adult Malcolm is a cold and cruel man, incapable of loving anyone, unwilling to form human connections, and always ready to blame women for any flaws or disturbances in his carefully controlled and ordered life.

Finding Olivia in the forbidden Swan Room on her first day at Fox-

worth Hall, Malcolm reveals his deeply rooted hatred of women through his description of the mother whose bitter memory he enshrines in that room. Spitting out the name ''Corinne'' as punctuation between passages of invective, Malcolm fulminates against his mother, whom he describes as an unprincipled, self-centered coquette who wearied of life at Foxworth Hall, abandoned husband and child, and ran off with her lover. Despite his assertions that Olivia in no way resembles Corinne, whom he both loves and hates, Malcolm repeatedly assaults Olivia, and then leaves her with one final muttered ''Corinne.''

Not until Malcolm's father returns from a European journey of several years is Olivia provided with another version of Malcolm's childhood. From Garland Foxworth, she learns that Corinne had found Malcolm impossible to discipline as a child because his youthful intelligence always rose to the challenge of discovering loopholes in her restrictions and ways to avoid punishment. Furthermore, Olivia tells Malcolm, ''You knew she didn't have the patience or tolerance for endless discussions. [Garland] thinks she ran away from you'' (139). Naturally Malcolm disagrees, insisting that if Garland had been a dominant presence as a husband, Corinne would never have been able to leave. The conversation reveals not only the possible distortions in Malcolm's memories of his mother but also Malcolm's obsessive need to be in control of everything: his very existence, his family, his money, his house. Malcolm clearly has never come to terms with the fact that Corinne, now out of his reach, will remain the one person whom he could neither influence nor manipulate to his own ends.

Malcolm's festering anger with his mother drives him to persecute his stepmother. Resembling Corinne in her lighthearted youth, Alicia has further inflamed Malcolm by occupying the Swan Room with Garland, thus fusing her tangible beauty with Corinne's now untouchable loveliness. When Malcolm enters the Swan Room one night bent on raping Alicia, her screams bring Garland, and the battle between father and son leaves Garland dead by his son's hand. Predictably, when Olivia asks Malcolm for details, he blames Alicia. ''In his twisted mind she was responsible because she resisted him and called for Garland. . . . The woman was always responsible, never the man'' (162).

With Garland's death, Malcolm's campaign against Alicia escalates. Threatening to hurt her son, Christopher, he forces himself on her in the swan bed, duplicating his earlier assault on Olivia. And as he did previously with Olivia, he fathers a child by Alicia, calling her ''Corinne'' as he does so. Symbolically, Malcolm Foxworth has twice begotten chil-

dren on the despised and loved Corinne. Alicia's and Malcolm's daughter, named Corrine after her grandmother, will set in motion the process not only of her father's destruction but also the obliteration of the Foxworth name.

Also explored in *Garden of Shadows,* although in far less depth than might be desirable, is the beauty myth. Andrews describes Olivia Winfield Foxworth as six feet tall, broad shouldered, bosomy, and auburn haired. Olivia thinks that her gray eyes are ''too long and catlike,'' and she longs for the delicate porcelain prettiness of the tiny doll wife in her dollhouse. It cannot escape the reader that Olivia more than likely resembles the female superathletes of the 1990s and that she has the potential to be strikingly beautiful, but by Victorian standards, she is much too tall for a woman, and her hair and eyes are the wrong colors. Worse yet, she is a college graduate who keenly admires the activities of the suffragists and enjoys discussing politics and current events.

Olivia's father reinforces his daughter's negative opinion of herself with his clumsy attempts to ensure her future. Believing that a practical education might make her more attractive to prospective suitors, he sends his unfeminine daughter to business school, and after she earns her degree, he cheerfully creates an office for her in his masculine study, thereby making her feel more like a son than a daughter. Because Olivia has taken refuge in books and so presumably has no social graces, her father feels that he must warn her to avoid the subject of women's suffrage when he invites eligible young men to their home.

It would perhaps be too much to call the young Olivia a budding feminist, but that is precisely what she occasionally appears to be before she is transformed by her experiences at Foxworth Hall into a vindictive, angry woman. Early in her story she mentions how much she wants to be like her mother, whom she remembers as an active, busy woman, involved in community and church, and always giving the impression that regardless of the responsibilities required by a project, ''she was competent and in charge'' (7). On the train after her wedding, she has to restrain herself before she blurts out a comment when her husband gets into an argument about socialism with some other (male) passengers. Clearly the young Olivia is a woman far ahead of her time, possessed of a beauty and strength unappreciated by family and acquaintances, and thus doomed to that peculiar punishment for the strong woman in literature: the charge that she is grotesque. The Olivia at the end of the novel is not the intelligent young woman yearning for a family in the first pages. Olivia at the end is unlikable, a steely instrument of

divine wrath, tempered by the fires of her husband's perversions, and twisted by the teachings of a vengeful God. In the final pages of the novel, Olivia is a monster.

GENERIC CONVENTIONS

In writing *Garden of Shadows,* Andrews drew—whether consciously or not—on the established characteristics of Gothic fiction, although she substantially revised some important traits to make them more appropriate to the story she had to tell. Among her most obvious borrowings from the Gothic tradition are the novel's remote setting and the heroine's isolation.

At the center of the novel is historic Foxworth Hall, a classic Gothic structure situated high on a Blue Ridge hillside, looming over the other homes ''like a proud king surveying his minions'' (40). Significantly, Olivia's first description of the hall as ''the castle of which I would be queen'' (40) immediately identifies it with the ruined castles in the works of Walpole and Radcliffe in the eighteenth century and Victoria Holt in the twentieth.

Within Foxworth Hall lurk the horrors of two enclosed spaces: the Swan Room, in which Malcolm will assault both his wife and his stepmother as available substitutes for the mother he despises and adores; and the huge attics in which, according to family legend, some cousins were cloistered during the early years of the mansion. When the Dollanganger children come to Foxworth Hall in *Flowers in the Attic,* Olivia incarcerates them in those same attics.

In the classic Gothic novel, the heroine is isolated, not only physically but also socially and emotionally. In leaving Connecticut to live with her husband in his Virginia home, Olivia is separated from her father and from her only other relative, a fanatically religious cousin named John Amos. She exchanges her comfortable if dull life for the stressful atmosphere of an unfamiliar house. Introduced to Malcolm's friends and business associates at a party, given ostensibly to celebrate her arrival as the new Mrs. Foxworth, Olivia notices that each time she joins a group of women guests, they immediately change the subject of conversation and look at her ''as though I were an intruder'' (80). Among the vivacious and fashionable women at the party, Olivia is a misfit in an outdated blue dress and severe hair style. Because she is intelligent and strong willed, Olivia initially weathers her social failures, learning instead to

enjoy the privacy of her isolation at Foxworth Hall. What finally undermines her confidence is her realization that she will never be able to expect from Malcolm any sympathy for, or understanding of, her loneliness. In a terrible moment of sudden comprehension, Olivia understands that Malcolm is incapable of loving her and that her position in his life is almost that of an employee who has been ''hired to perform a role, fulfill a specific set of functions, just [like] a house servant'' (86). Isolation will be an irremediable fact of her life.

In her portrayal of Olivia Winfield Foxworth, V. C. Andrews departs radically from the conventions of the classic Gothic novel. Twenty-four years old at the beginning of *Garden of Shadows,* Olivia, who, like Jane Eyre already is older than most other Gothic heroines, is neither dainty nor naive. On the contrary, she is six feet tall, auburn haired, full-bosomed, large, and well versed in political and financial theory. Olivia's existence as Gothic heroine is short. As soon as fragile, nineteen-year-old Alicia appears at Foxworth Hall, she becomes the true Gothic heroine: an innocent despite her status as Garland's very pregnant wife, and a completely feminine woman. Olivia is transformed into the other woman, no longer the victim but the perpetrator of abuse and the instigator of punishment.

Another striking difference between *Garden of Shadows* and most other Gothic fiction is the unhappy ending that Andrews created for the story of her two heroines. Typically the Gothic heroine is rewarded for her courage and endurance with love, marriage, a beautiful house, and a happily-ever-after life. At the end of *Garden of Shadows,* Alicia is dead—after having been widowed twice—and although her marriages have been happy ones, readers sense that life has not quite been a fairy tale for her. For Olivia, the ending of the novel is even more unsatisfactory. True, she is the mistress of Foxworth Hall and Malcolm Foxworth will no longer be unfaithful to her. But she runs the hall through intimidation, and Malcolm is a bedridden old man. Through *Garden of Shadows,* Andrews provides a glimpse at the reality of ''happily ever after'': the fairy tale castle is a prison, and the only alternative to being trapped for life or destroyed is to give up the castle. Unwilling to be defeated by the castle and its king, Olivia decides to learn to accept her imprisonment and to turn her fate to her own advantage by becoming the ''master of my own prison house'' (191). At the end of the novel, Olivia wields the power at Foxworth Hall, but the cost to her has been the loss of her humanity.

ALTERNATIVE READING: PSYCHOANALYTICAL

Psychoanalytical Criticism

The psychoanalytical approach to analyzing literary texts emphasizes the ''values of symbols and language that, often unconsciously, explain meanings of unconscious intention'' (Holman and Harmon 402). Sometimes referred to as Freudian criticism, this approach has its origins in the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who described human psychology as a function of the three divisions within the mind: the id, the ego, and the superego. According to Freud, two of these divisions are mainly unconscious: the id, which is the location of instinctual and impulsive drives, generally for pleasure and aggression; and the superego, the conscience or internal mechanism for making judgments based on learned cultural and institutional values. Ego, or the conscious mind, must reconcile its own awareness of social realities with the demands of the id and the censorship of the superego. In a mentally and emotionally balanced individual, the ego is able, through the use of defenses, to acknowledge the requirements of the superego by controlling the id's demands for instant gratification. Among the defenses that the ego can call upon are repression, projection, and sublimation.

Freud theorized that all children, female and male, pass through the oedipal stage of psychological development, a period during which the child, dependent on the mother for gratification and pleasure, desires the destruction of the father, who is perceived as a competitor for the mother's attention. The child generally outgrows the oedipal stage eventually, replacing it with another and equally strong desire: to eliminate the parent of the child's own sex from the sexual and emotional relationship between the child's parents, and then to take on the displaced parent's role in the life of the parent of the opposite sex. In a male child, that second stage is an intensification of the first, and in Malcolm Foxworth, the two stages are merged into an obsession that dominates his life and ruins the Foxworth family for generations.

The relationship between Freud's theories and literature was obvious from the beginning, and although the field of psychoanalytical criticism very early took many different directions, each direction was significantly influenced by Freud's ideas. Freud himself did some work in literary theory, contributing to that field at least two significant essays: ''The Relation of a Poet to Daydreaming'' (1908) and ''The Uncanny'' (1919).

A psychoanalytical critic with a Freudian orientation would focus on Malcolm Foxworth as a fascinating example of a man trapped in an expanded oedipal stage. Early in *Garden of Shadows,* it becomes obvious that not only has Malcolm never grown beyond his infantile need for his mother, Corinne, but he has also remained in thrall to his instinctual drives for aggressive behavior and immediate sexual gratification. As Olivia narrates the story of her marriage to him, the evidence of his sexual fixation on his mother becomes as overwhelming and impossible to ignore as his need to dominate through violence.

The first piece of evidence is Corinne's Swan Room, which Malcolm keeps as a shrine to his beautiful and beloved mother who was the center of his world until she left his father when Malcolm was not quite five years old. When Malcolm rapes his wife in that room, he calls her ''Corinne'' in a Freudian slip, an unconsciously revealing remark that signals his repressed desire for his mother. As long as he is in public, Malcolm manages to keep repressed his sexual desire for his lost mother and to transfer the responsibility for her departure to his father. Nevertheless, a sign that Malcolm's defense mechanisms are not strong is the fact that more and more hints of his unsatisfied need to possess Corinne or a suitable replacement become evident. Not only does he repeatedly proposition his stepmother, Alicia—the woman who has taken Corinne's place in Garland's bed—but when he finally possesses Alicia and fathers a child by her, he names that child Corrine as a living reminder to himself of an unfaithful mother who broke her promise to him that she would ''stay and love me until I was a man'' (243). When Corrine is a teenager, Malcolm extracts from her a promise that she will never leave Foxworth Hall, in return for his pledge that she will inherit his entire estate on his death. Unaware of what such a promise will require from her, Corrine agrees, thus setting the stage for the second great betrayal of Malcolm Foxworth's life.

For years, Malcolm has repressed his anger at his mother's desertion of him and has projected on his father, Garland, the five-year-old boy's failure to keep Corinne at Foxworth. Sometimes implying that he meant more to his mother than Garland did, Malcolm claims that his relationship with Corinne was ideal:

> She would complain [about her husband] to me. She respected my intelligence. . . . Never spoke down to me the way mothers often speak down to their children. . . . If he didn't show up when he was supposed to, she would go off by herself. It was his fault. (102)

Malcolm blames his father for Corinne's departure, claiming that the older man was a failure as a husband. When Olivia suggests that there might have been other reasons for Corinne's behavior, Malcolm retorts that his mother would never have had an opportunity for an extramarital affair if Garland had asserted his dominance as the ''firm strong husband'' who should control every marriage (139).

As an adult, Malcolm is determined to be as unlike his father as possible. While men like Garland are attracted to ''flimsy, narcissistic, flighty women [who] . . . have no loyalty to any man,'' (62), what Malcolm wants in his own marriage is a capable woman who can present him with children. He has no intention of doting on his wife as Garland did Corinne; in fact, when Olivia timidly attempts to discover whether Malcolm feels any affection for her, he roars, ''I don't want to hear about bells ringing and the world turning rose-colored. My mother's letters are filled with such silly references'' (86). Clearly any love he might have given a woman has already been bestowed on Corinne, that unworthy female whom he is unable to forget.

Garland's recollections of Corinne's relationship with the young Malcolm differ substantially from what Malcolm has told Olivia. Garland remembers a tireless little boy who constantly pestered his mother and refused to leave her alone:

> I would come home and find her in an absolute dither . . . rushing through the house and Malcolm trailing after her. . . . She was in flight from him. He exhausted her. (110)

In fact, as Garland tells Olivia, Corinne more than likely left Foxworth Hall because she needed to get away from her demanding five-year-old son who was impossible to discipline.

In many ways, Malcolm behaves not like a deserted child but like a rejected lover who refuses to believe that any woman would prefer someone else to him. In his memory, Corinne is not a maternal figure. She is, rather, the object of sexual desire. He tells Olivia that his mother betrayed him when she left him ''only with the memory of her touch . . . her kiss . . . the sweet scent of her body. . . . Left me forever in this room to see her, to feel her'' (62). Those are not the words of an abandoned little boy, no matter how intelligent that little boy might have been. Malcolm's words are those of a man who speaks of a sexually desirable woman. Eventually, when Olivia discovers the peephole that gives a

view of the swan bed, she wonders if the young Malcolm might not have used the hole to watch his mother undress and make love to his father.

When Alicia insists on occupying the Swan Room, Malcolm transfers his maternal obsession to her. She is, after all, his stepmother, and she does bear an uncanny resemblance to Corinne. He watches her through the peephole in the trophy room, and he secretly follows her to the lake intent on a naked swim with her. When she spurns his advances, he embarks on a campaign of rudeness that soon affects the entire household. Finally, driven by his lust, he attempts to force himself on Alicia one night, and her screams bring Garland running to her rescue. In the fight that ensues, Malcolm kills Garland. Having removed his father from the competitive arena, Malcolm possesses his father's wife, thereby setting in motion a series of events that, while they do not exactly correspond to the story of Oedipus and his family, are no less disastrous for Malcolm's descendants and the future of the Foxworth family. Years later, Malcolm is abandoned by his second Corrine, who, like the first one, breaks her promise to stay forever at Foxworth Hall with Malcolm, and leaves with another man—his own half-brother, Christopher.

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My Sweet Audrina
(1982)

My Sweet Audrina, published in 1982, is the story of Audrina Adare from her traumatic childhood through a nightmare adolescence and finally to the maturity that allows her to come to terms with herself and her family. Like the first three Dollanganger novels that preceded it, *My Sweet Audrina* proved to be extremely popular with Andrews's readers and rather less than enthralling to reviewers.

V. C. Andrews introduces Audrina as an unnaturally sheltered child of seven who seems to have lost all memory of her first six years. She lives in a remote Tidewater Virginia house with her parents, Damian and Lucietta Adare, who are both beautiful and vain. Family mythology suggests that the Adares once had another child, also named Audrina, who died under mysterious circumstances in the nearby forest sixteen years earlier. Devastated by that earlier tragedy, the Adares have named their second daughter Audrina and have embarked on a scheme to transform her into the ''First and Best Audrina'' by isolating her from other children. Telling Audrina that she is an ''empty vessel,'' Damian urges her to fill the void within herself with her dead sister's personality and character. Supposedly to help her with the process, he regularly forces her to remain in the dark in the first Audrina's bedroom and to sit in a rocking chair that was once a favorite of that earlier child.

Living with the Adares are Audrina's bad-tempered aunt, Ellsbeth, and Ellsbeth's illegitimate daughter, Vera, whose jealousy of Audrina is

the source of tension and disaster in the household. Behavior among the other family members verges on the illogical and insane: the older women of the family regularly hold ritual tea parties to which they invite long-dead Aunt Mercy-Marie for whom they take turns speaking; Damian keeps photographs of the first Audrina throughout the house and not a single photograph of the present Audrina. No one seems able to keep track of the correct time, and most of the family members exhibit frequent memory lapses.

Gradually Audrina is permitted some contact with the world outside her home, and eventually she goes to school instead of learning her lessons at home. Tragedy strikes the Whitefern family, and Audrina loses her mother, and then her aunt, and finally her stepmother, leaving her with only an emotionally remote father, a geographically distant cousin, and a beloved but mentally and emotionally challenged little sister, Sylvia. Audrina marries, but instead of living happily ever after with her husband, Arden, she discovers that her troubles have multiplied. Because she and Arden decide to live at Whitefern, she faces a life as caregiver to her sister and her father.

The focus of *My Sweet Audrina* is on the uncovering of the past, on the revelation of secrets. Until she solves the mystery of her childhood and confronts her personal history, Audrina cannot know happiness. Locked away in her psyche is the memory of her ninth birthday, the day she was gang-raped in the nearby woods, the day she came home traumatized and in shock to horrified parents, who immediately sought to erase all traces of Audrina's tragedy. She must somehow discover how it is possible for her to be both the source of the darkness at the heart of Whitefern and the agent of the family's salvation from their own private hell.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE

V. C. Andrews returned to a fairy tale plot with *My Sweet Audrina,* drawing from traditional stories the plot devices and motifs that shape her novel. Like Briar Rose, Audrina is a prisoner in a fantastic house, incarcerated there by supposedly loving parents who seek to nullify a disaster: a finger pricked by a spindle in the fairy tale, the violent death of an older sister in Audrina's case. As is typical in traditional fairy tales, the plot of *My Sweet Audrina* develops through the gradual revelation of secrets and the discovery of broken taboos.

A fairly typical fairy tale plot has four major narrative sections. First comes the identification of the helpless heroine—frequently a girl or young woman—around whose misfortunes the tale is structured. Second, and the lengthiest of the sections, is the account of the conflicts between the heroine and all of the characters who wish to destroy her. This section generally ends with her victory over her enemies, thus preparing the way for the third section, which provides a graphic account of the punishments that must be endured by the heroine's persecutors. With evil vanquished forever, the tale concludes with the fourth and very brief section: the heroine's marriage and a kind of elevation to a happily-ever-after existence.

True to the fairy tale tradition, *My Sweet Audrina* immediately introduces the powerless heroine, a young girl who has been rendered ineffectual and dependent by a severe memory loss that has robbed her of all knowledge of herself. Like Rapunzel, Audrina is a prisoner in her home, able to view the larger world only from the top of a tower and forbidden all contact with any males except her father. Another circumstance earns Audrina a place in the company of several fairy tale heroines: she is forced to endure daily the taunts and cruel jokes of a cousin who is later revealed to be her half-sister.

Thus Audrina undertakes one form of the classic fairy tale heroine's journey from victimhood to revenge, and like her mythical counterpart, she is not responsible for the eerily appropriate tragedy that destroys Vera. The fairy tale's insistence on a kind of symmetrical justice is fulfilled when Vera, who may have pushed her mother down a flight of stairs to her death and may have attempted to kill Audrina in a similar way, stumbles and hurtles down a spiral staircase, suffering the death she intended for others. Nor does Damian escape justice, but because his flaws have had less catastrophic consequences he does not die. Having, however, all but ruined Audrina's childhood with his repeated description of her as empty, he is condemned to a lifetime of caring for a younger daughter whose mental and emotional problems have left her with a vacant mind.

Also evident in the novel is a signature V. C. Andrews plot device: doubling. Through doubling, Andrews creates a web of interrelated characters, events, and locations, and she highlights the close parallels between dream and nightmare, fairy tale and horror story.

The most important doubles are the two Audrinas. The ''First and Best Audrina'' is such a presence at Whitefern that her namesake must live forever in her shadow, much as Max de Winter's second wife loses her

selfhood when she is forced to live with the vibrant ghost of the first Mrs. de Winter in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca.* Audrina is never allowed to forget her predecessor. The only photographs displayed on Damian's desk are of his first daughter; her toys and clothes are enshrined in her room, and the second Audrina is expected to transform herself ''with [the first Audrina's] memories and capture her special powers since she was dead and didn't need them anymore'' (6). The existence of both living and dead Audrinas creates suspense in the plot, as the living child tries to discover the story of her dead sister in the hope that the first Audrina might be exorcised from a house over which her tragedy has cast a pall of gloom.

Another significant doubling is the relationship between Audrina and Vera, the daughters of the Whitefern sisters, Lucietta and Ellsbeth. Damian Adare acknowledges only two daughters—the two Audrinas—but in fact, Vera is his daughter, giving him two living children, begotten on two sisters. Damian's relationships with Ellsbeth and Lucietta are echoed years later by Arden, who becomes involved with both Vera and Audrina. Both Damian and Arden father children by the elder sister (although Vera loses Arden's child) before marrying the younger sister. Both men are forced by circumstances to welcome the unwanted sisters into their homes.

SETTING

My Sweet Audrina is a dark novel with scenes that remain gloomy even when the sun is shining, but the book is also a story of love and hope, and the setting underscores the duality at the heart of the novel.

Audrina's home, Whitefern, like Foxworth Hall and Farthinggale, is set several miles by automobile from its nearest neighbors. An ornately embellished, many-roomed Victorian house, Whitefern is a huge three-story pile on a hill with a rear lawn that slopes to the River Lyle. Gothic features proliferate: stained glass windows, dark crooked blinds, a weathered copper roof crowned with a large cupola, balconies, verandahs. Inside the house is a Victorian jumble of furnishings and decorative details: art deco and Tiffany; sconces and chandeliers with dangling crystal prisms; lace curtains; fireplaces of marble or wood; paintings of half-naked women disporting in biblical scenes; elaborately carved ceilings; antique furniture, each piece ''in competition, trying to outdo the others'' (11). The effect of this detail is claustrophobic and engulfing.

Surrounded by woods on three sides, the lake on the fourth, Whitefern exists in splendid isolation. ''No casual callers ever came to our doors,'' recalls Audrina. ''Signs were posted everywhere: 'No Solicitors Allowed,' and 'Beware of the Dog,' and 'Keep Off, This is Private Property. Trespassers will be Prosecuted' '' (15–16). For Audrina the house is both a safe haven and the source of danger. Whitefern keeps her sequestered from a world that her father describes as dangerous and cruel, but Whitefern also harbors the malicious Vera and, more frightening, the secrets of the first Audrina.

The nightmare forest that Audrina is cautioned to avoid surrounds Whitefern, symbolically holding the house in a menacing embrace. Audrina is both fascinated by and terrified of the dark trees and mysterious paths that cross beneath those trees; she simultaneously wants to explore the woods as a normal child would and is afraid to do so. In the woods lurk evil and pain, and Audrina is forbidden to walk the dark paths through the trees. So inescapable is the terror of the woods that Audrina in her nightmares imagines being attacked by nameless and faceless ruffians as she walks beneath the trees on her way home from school.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND POINT OF VIEW

None of the characters in *My Sweet Audrina* is fully developed. They are, rather, the instantly recognizable inhabitants of fairy tales and Gothic fiction. As literary stereotypes, they fulfill certain functions, one of the most important of which is to serve as a kind of narrative shorthand, allowing the author to create tension, suspense, even minor catharsis, without lengthy introductions to each individual character.

The extended Adare family of Whitefern includes some of V. C. Andrews's most grotesque individuals, people who resemble William Faulkner's fictional eccentrics in their psychological and physical deformities, who are distinctive because each one is misshapen or deficient in some way. These human oddities give *My Sweet Audrina* the distinct aura of the southern Gothic, a subgenre distinguished by its focus on the decaying aristocracy of the American South, on the eccentric behavior and strange rituals of its characters.

Much of the prevailing tension in *My Sweet Audrina* is the result of Andrews's careful deployment of three groups of characters. Each group exists as itself and as a foil for the other groups; each group is identifiable through its own unique deformity or flaw.

Paired in the first group are the antagonists: Damian Adare, Audrina's father, and Vera, Audrina's illegitimate cousin. Both are self-centered and narcissistic and inclined to react violently when they do not get the attention they crave. Furthermore, both are physically flawed in small, almost unnoticeable ways: Damian's toenails are thick and horny, and Vera's left leg is nearly an inch shorter than her right. Damian's wife calls him a dandy and a fop. His obsession with his appearance manifests itself in decidedly grotesque ways: vigorous flossing of his teeth, quarterly visits to the dentist, daily examinations of the amount of hair in his hairbrush, concern about the growth of his toenails. Vera's self-love is realized in her constant attempts to find excuses to disrobe either partially or fully, preferably in the presence of men. For Vera, the attention of any male is a reinforcement of her opinion that she is an attractive woman and, thus, a valuable person. Both Damian and Vera find Audrina's presence a trial: Damian because Audrina cannot give him the unthinking adoration and trust he enjoyed from his first Audrina, and Vera because she does not have, and never will, the complete family and status that Audrina has.

Audrina finds her father more than a little sinister in his obsession with her dead older sister. According to him, his first Audrina was perfect—beautiful, good, never wrong—and his ambition is to remake his second daughter into the image and personality of the first. Vera aggravates the tension between father and daughter by constantly voicing her opinion that the second Audrina will never be able to come close to duplicating her older sister's beauty and promise. ''Second and Worst Audrina'' is Vera's frequent refrain as she taunts her cousin. Eventually it becomes clear that Vera herself would like to become the replacement for the First and Best Audrina

The second group of characters, marked by their psychological or physical inability to take significant action, is the chorus: Lucietta, Audrina's mother; Ellsbeth, Vera's mother; and Billie, Arden's mother. Maternally fulfilled and emotionally starved, all three women at some point enter into sexual relationships with Damian Adare. More ominous, all three die after having first taken on the task of making sure that Damian's life and household run smoothly. These women serve the same function as does the chorus in Greek tragedy, commenting ironically or accurately on events, assessing other characters, and providing the narcissists with a ready audience. Significantly, even as the traditional chorus functioned as indicators of time and place, Lucietta and Ellsbeth are

chiefly responsible for keeping Audrina's sense of time and season off-balance and out of kilter.

In the third group are the passive protagonists, Audrina Adare and Arden Lowe. Like the characters who are central to traditional fairy tales, Audrina and Arden are more acted upon than acting. Instead of taking the initiative, they are manipulated negatively by the antagonists, neutrally and sometimes positively by the chorus. Audrina is the princess, incarcerated in her palace, awaiting the arrival of the prince who will bring her back to life; Arden is the prince who must find his way into the palace, banish the spell that enslaves Audrina, and free her forever from the malevolent influence that has imprisoned her. Or Audrina is the king's daughter, Arden the hero who must perform impossible tasks in order to win her as his bride.

NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW

My Sweet Audrina is narrated by its title character, another V. C. Andrews heroine who is forced to grow up too rapidly. In a number of ways, Audrina is an appealing and sympathetic character, with none of Cathy Dollanganger's singleminded need for revenge, and Audrina's innocence and naiveté render more terrible the dreadful calamities and misadventures that plague her existence.

Andrews's use of the first-person point of view, with a narrator who is central to the novel, allows the reader to experience some of the doubt and frustration that plague Audrina as she attempts to tell her story, make sense of the improbabilities of her life, and learn the lines of a play for which she alone has no script. Although first-person narrators tend to produce tales of questionable accuracy, Audrina's story is more problematic than most other personal narratives.

The first problem stems from an inherent characteristic of first-person narrators: they see things from only one point of view—their own. Unlike the omniscient narrator who can read minds and be in more than one place at one time, Audrina can tell her story only by recounting what she sees, hears, feels, touches, tastes, and understands. If she misses a crucial piece of information or fails to hear an important comment, the reader never finds out about either. What Audrina chooses to ignore—perhaps because she finds it unimportant or irrelevant—is omitted from her narrative. What she does not know is never told.

A second concern about first-person stories is the very human tendency to edit speech, tailor utterance to a specific audience, and delete words, phrases, and sentences that might give pain or are too painful to speak. This editing impulse produces incomplete narratives with important omissions and gaps. Although Audrina does describe her thoughts and feelings in what appears to be a candid manner, the nature of her childhood suggests that what she does not say is probably more significant than what she does say. She has grown up in a household that values secrecy and silence, and she has been trained well.

More disturbing than the first two concerns—and certainly unique to Audrina—is the evidence that the entire Adare household seems to be engaged in a conspiracy to shield Audrina from something by denying her a normal life. Having lost her memory of her first six years, she can only reiterate what she has been told by others about her early childhood, and she has no way of determining whether those stories are true. She has never even seen photographs of herself as an infant or a toddler, and she struggles with the feeling that in some way those early years never existed. Worse, Audrina is finally convinced that her family is attempting to manipulate time by pretending that her sense of time is flawed, or by stoutly maintaining that she has not experienced something that she is convinced she remembers from the recent past. ''You are a special kind of girl with talents so extraordinary that you don't realize the passing of time,'' her father explains (34). Because of such intrusions into her attempts to script her identity, Audrina as narrator is less than completely trustworthy.

LITERARY DEVICES

Symbols, archetypal patterns, and motifs are the principal literary devices that give *My Sweet Audrina* its distinctive style. Seldom do these devices function alone; generally the symbols and archetypes are linked in some way to create the dominant motifs and themes of the novel.

''Once upon a time,'' that phrase with which so many fairy tales begin, has resonances for Audrina. Recounted by the adult Audrina, the story is about the ''once upon a time'' of her younger self—a period during which she loses all notion of natural sequence and progression. The archetypal pattern of the passage of time—manifested in the procession of seasons, the parade of months, and the march of days—unnaturally structures Audrina's life. Because the adult Adares, with the connivance

of Ellsbeth and the enforced cooperation of Vera, have manipulated the evidence of passing time at Whitefern, Audrina does not experience the natural order of things. The family's conspiracy to erase Audrina's sense of time means that Tuesdays come twice a week, two years flash by in days, no one has birthdays, spring arrives before even the buds have formed—and the confused Audrina is told either that her sense of time is special or that she has slept longer that she thinks she has. Symbolizing time at Whitefern are dozens of clocks, none of which gives the correct time:

> The grandfather clocks in the halls chimed out different hours; the cuckoos in their wooden Swiss clocks popped in and out of small ornate doors, each contradicting all of the others; the fancy French clock in my parents' bedroom had stopped long ago at midnight or noon, and a Chinese clock ran backwards. (5)

The contradictory clocks parallel the confusion in Audrina's mind. At times, she almost believes that she remembers scraps of information about her early years, snippets of memory that tease her at the edges of her imagination. She also has nightmares in which she thinks that she is her dead sister, reliving the violent assault on that earlier Audrina in the forest. Sometimes she remembers things that her family says she could not possibly have known; other remarks she makes cause her father to retreat into disapproving silence.

The motif of time is one of the keys to *My Sweet Audrina.* All of the inhabitants of Whitefern, with the exception of Audrina, are engaged in a conspiracy to erase time if possible. No calendars hang in the house; no newspapers arrive; only old magazines molder in the attic. The Adares' desire to live in the past—or to turn back time—is evident in the antique furniture that crowds the rooms, which are lit with gaslamps, candles, and fireplaces. In a nod to the twentieth century, Whitefern has electricity in kitchen and bathrooms, Damian Adare drives an automobile to his stockbroking office, and Ellsbeth insists on owning a television, although Audrina is never allowed access to it.

Another deliberate manipulation of time is evident in the Whitefern inhabitants' refusal to reveal their ages, although they mention Audrina's age repeatedly. Audrina knows that Vera is three years her senior, but because Vera ''could be any age she wanted to be—ten, twelve, fifteen, and even twenty,'' Audrina is never really quite sure that she herself is

seven years old. Her confusion is compounded when she is suddenly told that two years have elapsed and she is approaching her ninth birthday. Audrina's panic is caused, in part, by her having begun a daily journal in which she writes the names of the days as they occur. The discrepancy between what she knows and what she is told leads her to begin doubting her sanity.

Ultimately Audrina begins to accept that her family has attempted to rewrite her history by revising her time, to understand that she may not be precisely the person they claim her to be or the age that they say she is. With that realization, she begins to realize that before she can be whole again, she must uncover the secrets that others seek to hide from her. Her ultimate happiness depends on her success in discovering the history that her family has attempted to erase in their misguided attempts to restore equilibrium to Whitefern, to return to life as it was before Audrina's rape.

Physical deformity is another important motif—one that seems to parallel the psychological flaws that threaten to destroy the Adares as well as Ellsbeth and Vera. The most obviously deformed characters are Billie Lowe (Arden's mother), who has lost both legs to diabetic complications, and Sylvia, whose difficult birth has left her disabled. Vera limps as the result of several childhood accidents; Damian worries about his ugly thickened toenails.

GENERIC CONVENTIONS

Although V. C. Andrews's books are all Gothic novels with settings in the southern United States, only *My Sweet Audrina* clearly belongs to the southern Gothic subgenre, a form of modern American writing epitomized for many readers by the novels of William Faulkner and Shirley Ann Grau, the short stories of Flannery O'Connor, and the plays of Tennessee Williams and Beth Henley. Although writing about different kinds of people in a variety of settings and situations and historical periods, these authors share a distinctive fictional universe that has its origins in the mythical antebellum South.

The universe of the southern Gothic features a dark, ominous landscape over which hovers the constant threat of emotional and physical violence. In many respects, this landscape is the familiar, almost mythic, Old Dixie of stately homes, a gracious, slow-paced way of life, traditionally prescribed rituals and modes of behavior, and mint juleps, iced tea,

and beaten biscuits. In the mythical South, existence is carefully choreographed, people accept and are happy with their social positions, and no one ever acknowledges any unpleasantness or any desire to change things. But the southern Gothic reveals the rot at the heart of the society, the decay in the great aristocratic families who close ranks to conceal the madness and the driving ambition for position among the underprivileged. Most of all, the southern Gothic chronicles the slow, irreversible emergence of the moral confusion and repressed violence that exist just beneath the calm surface of the gracious life.

The southern Gothic has been defined as a genre in which ''corruption and hypocrisy . . . underlie the codes of behavior which govern Southern life,'' the falsehoods that structure existence are made visible, and ''the language of the text, the descriptions, gestures, looks, all combine to deny the facade of bourgeois respectability'' (Docherty 5). Double standards, based on differences in gender, race, and social class, are the norm in the southern Gothic universe. Female sexuality is portrayed as a threat; a sexual woman must be avoided, even fled from, or confronted and destroyed. Thus the genre's frequent depiction of violence against women is directly linked to their identities as sexual beings.

A comparison between literary southern Gothic fiction and Andrews's *My Sweet Audrina* might be useful. Although she was not by any means the artistic peer of Faulkner or McCullers and others (and she never pretended to be a literary giant), V. C. Andrews drew from the same cultural traditions and mythologies, represented the same character types, and chronicled many of the same attitudes and situations. Like Carson McCullers, Andrews focused on children on the verge of maturity and on young people who discover that growing up means accepting isolation. Audrina Adare, forever changed by the rape that robs her of her childhood, finds herself stranded in an emotional and psychological limbo. She is neither child nor adult; she has no knowledge of her past and no apparent hope of a future; she is part of a family but has no friends, either at home or elsewhere. Audrina is surrounded by grotesque physical and moral freaks similar to those who exist in Flannery O'Connor's fiction—in a world in which the only certainties are lust, weakness, defeat, and death. In the Adare household at various times are Audrina's mother and aunt who regularly have tea party conversations with a dead relative, an oversexed cousin whose left leg is shorter than the right, later a mentally retarded younger sister, and still later, a legless stepmother. Dominating the menage is Damian, a glossy Gothic paterfamilias who is obsessed with his hair, teeth, and toenails.

Life at Whitefern is governed by rituals and codes of behavior reminiscent of the traditional South. Like a good Southerner (although he is Yankee-born) Damian Adare is preoccupied with the Civil War, and he spends much of his leisure time reading about and discussing the great Southern heroes, particularly General Robert E. Lee. His wife, Lucietta, and her sister, Ellsbeth, are the last remnants of a once prominent Tidewater Virginia family; and the Adare family lives in the sisters' childhood home, surrounded by elegant old furniture and ancestral portraits. At the Tuesday tea parties, Audrina and her cousin Vera are frequently admonished to act like ladies, to mind their manners, to behave properly. But beneath the veneer of Southern gentility and graciousness, life at Whitefern is marred by violence, hypocrisy, and spiritual emptiness. The lovely old home is rotting slowly, its furnishings deteriorating and the grounds slowly succumbing to the encroaching woods. Lucietta's and Ellsbeth's honeyed cliches and studiedly polite phrases cannot conceal the hostility between the sisters; and the Adares' protestations of love to Audrina do not mask their emotional and psychological abuse of their daughter. *My Sweet Audrina* details one Southern family's inexorable descent into moral anarchy and dynastic failure.

MAJOR THEMES AND ISSUES

Like other Andrews novels, *My Sweet Audrina* focuses primarily on the linked themes of isolation and adolescent confusion. The first theme is realized primarily through the novel's setting and characters, the second through plot and character development.

Whitefern, Audrina's home, is set apart from its neighbors, not only because of its geographic separation but also because it harbors an anachronistic way of life. Contemporary life is held at bay. Ellsbeth's small television set and Damian's automobile are modern instrusions into a world of tea parties, stilted conversation, antiques, candlelight, and veneration of the past. Guests are seldom invited to the house, and the family's only regular public appearance is at the village church, where they worship, physically among others though psychologically separate and aloof. Through its isolation, Whitefern remains proudly marginal to the realities of everyday life in the real world.

Audrina suffers from physical and emotional isolation at Whitefern. Denied the opportunity to attend school with other children, forbidden contact with people outside the family, she also feels marginal to the

other Whitefern inhabitants, who appear to have closed ranks against her in a protective conspiracy to expunge all trace of her earlier years. Damian's evident obsession with the perfection of her dead older sister further isolates Audrina, who despairs of ever measuring up to the impossibly high standards set by the First and Best Audrina. ''Not wanted, not worthy, not pretty, and not special enough'' (20) are the words that echo constantly through Audrina's mind.

Contributing to the isolation felt by both Audrina and Vera is the adults' avoidance of their responsibilities as effective parents and role models. The adults at Whitefern live in the past, but it is a version of the past that they have chosen to recall selectively. For Damian Adare, everything was better when he was younger; even the dogs were more dignified in those early years. Lucietta and Ellsbeth cling to the past through observance of outdated traditions like their regular tea parties with the deceased Aunt Mercy-Marie. What each adult has excised from the past is a portion that involves one of the two young girls who also live at Whitefern. Vera's presence is painful to everyone; she reminds Ellsbeth of an affair gone wrong, Damian of responsibility shirked, and Lucietta of betrayal by a sister and a spouse. For her parents, Audrina is a pale replica of the first wonderful Audrina who worshipped her father and represented the family's highest hopes. Thus, although Audrina and Vera are fed and housed and generally provided for, they are begrudged real affection and parental approbation. Each girl is alone even within the family circle; neither girl is able to connect with anyone else in the Whitefern family.

Andrews explores the pain and uncertainty of the teenage years through Audrina and her cousin Vera. Like other young women poised on the dividing line between childhood and maturity, Audrina and Vera are wracked with confusion about the directions in which their lives seem to be heading. Additionally, they are both disturbed and excited by the physical changes they are experiencing. In fact, Audrina and her cousin seem to be trapped between pairs of possibilities and desires: they long to become adults yet yearn for the safety of childhood; they chafe at restrictions even as they seem to fear freedom. The contradictions are more evident in Vera, who is consumed with the need to be Damian's little girl though she aggressively flaunts her blooming woman's body at every available male she meets. As if to underscore the confusions felt by Audrina and Vera, their true ages are a mystery—Audrina because she has no idea how old she is and Vera because she cannot make up her mind about the age with which she feels most comfortable.

Another source of uncertainty for Audrina is her growing conviction that adults are not worthy of her trust. Inconsequential incidents and offhand remarks suggest that they are engaged in a scheme to deceive her, although the nature and reasons for the deception are unclear to her. As evidence of their treachery mounts, Audrina begins to resent the ways in which her life is shaped by her parents, particularly her father:

> All I had was quicksand. I wanted parents who were honest, consistent from day to day, not so changeable I couldn't depend on their love to last for longer than a few minutes. (32)

When she discovers her father beating her mother, Audrina's distrust of him turns into scorn for a man who is guilty of ''screaming abuse, criticizing, stealing self-confidence and instilling self-loathing and a deep sense of shame for just being female'' (125). Audrina realizes that from that point on, she has no one but herself on whom to rely. Her mother and her aunt, bewitched by Damian Adare, are powerless to help her; Vera is her enemy; and Whitefern is a prison.

ALTERNATIVE READING: ARCHETYPAL

Like the Dollanganger novels, *My Sweet Audrina* lends itself particularly well to an archetypal reading. As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, the archetypal approach focuses on the universal images and patterns in literature that evoke responses from readers of different backgrounds and cultures. Because fairy tales contain within themselves many of those universal symbols called archetypes, an archetypal critic might find it especially intriguing to understand *Audrina* through an analysis of the novel's fairy tale elements. This archetypal analysis would reveal in *My Sweet Audrina*—and by extension in the female Gothic—the existence of those mythologized patterns and motifs that allow individuals to confront with composure the dark side of human existence and finally to exorcise fear of the dark side through the catharsis gained from reading fictional accounts of its manifestations.

Critic Cosette Kies's description of the classic Andrews story as a ''ferocious fairy tale'' (16) is particularly applicable to *My Sweet Audrina.* Throughout the novel, Andrews makes very clear the parallels between her story and the traditional narrative form; those connections lie pri-

marily in the dark and violent atmosphere, the brutality and abuse at the intersection of the Gothic novel and the fairy tale. In these two fictional forms, few people are trustworthy, the home is the source of the greatest danger to a young person, and the happily-ever-after ending is inconclusive.

Fairy tales, especially those collected by the Brothers Grimm, have provided a number of the archetypal images and patterns to which readers respond with recognition. Because the Disney film versions have filtered out much of the original violence in the tales, what remain in the popular consciousness are romance and fantasy. But the darkness at the heart of the fairy tale cannot be totally obliterated: the Evil Queen tries to destroy Snow White; the witch nearly consumes Hansel and Gretel; a wicked stepmother and her daughters attempt to isolate Cinderella from the world. And the Adares endeavor to protect Audrina from the hazards of a world beyond Whitefern, when, unknown to them, the source of the greatest danger is Vera, a member of the household. More recently than Disney, dramatist Stephen Sondheim created the immensely popular musical *Into the Woods,* which capitalizes on audiences' shared and largely unverbalized knowledge of the darkness in fairy tales. While Sondheim's retelling does not entirely restore the menacing evil of the older version, it is at least closer to the original stories in which murder, infanticide, mutilation, and incest play such dominant roles. In any case, there exists a jarring contrast between the happily-ever-after that concludes the fairy tale and the pain, suffering, and loss that precede that finale.

The archetypal cast of characters in the fairy tale is the family, which may be portrayed as whole or partial, happy or dysfunctional, nuclear or combined, small or large. A king and his queen, and their daughters or sons, make up the most common family group, but variations on that combination abound. Quite often, the heroine's true mother is dead, leaving her either unmothered or stepmothered, and ignored by a father who is preoccupied with affairs of state or with his new wife. In a number of tales, not only is the mother dead but the father becomes the source of menace and danger to the heroine.

Fairy tale protagonists tend to be drawn from the younger members of the family. Frequently the heroine is the youngest daughter or the only daughter, and she is always beautiful, though completely unaware of her startling good looks. Cinderella is the youngest child in her family as Audrina is in hers; both the fairy tale heroine and the Andrews character are pretty and docile, and both are persecuted by older family

members. Nearly always, the fairy tale antagonist is also a family member, invariably an adult or a much older sibling of the same sex as the hero or heroine. In the tales that feature a villain who is not a family member, events generally reveal that the villain is acting at the behest of someone who is related to the hero or heroine.

Within the fairy tale's family circle, violence and unnatural behavior frequently take the form of child abuse, both emotional and physical. Hansel and Gretel are exiled from home by their own parents; Snow White is abandoned in the woods to die; and Little Two Eyes is bullied and tormented by her sisters. Fathers lust after daughters, mothers kill their children, and ugly older sisters reduce younger siblings to slaves.

Conflict between women is common in fairy tales. In stories about two or more sisters, one girl is generally portrayed as kind and unassuming and her sister(s) as heartless and vain. Audrina, young and beautiful and good, is constantly victimized by the older Vera, who is jealous and greedy. The relationship between the two girls echoes the one between their mothers, also sisters, whose daily bickering is the result of festering envy and distrust.

Certain fairy tale settings provoke feelings of terror and unease in protagonists and, by extension, in readers who are sufficiently familiar with the structural and narrative conventions of the tales. Quaint dwellings in the forest attract and then imprison the unwary, and the forest itself is the home of pervasive evil that takes many forms, both human and animal. Fairy tale castles glitter from afar and then prove on closer inspection to contain twisting passages and deep dungeons from which the heroine cannot escape. Whitefern is a classic fairy tale setting transferred to twentieth-century Virginia. In that beautifully ornate house with its luxurious furnishings, Audrina is a virtual prisoner, forbidden to explore the woods around the house, and kept away from the local school and other children. It soon becomes clear, however, that the danger to Audrina, the menace that threatens her peace of mind, is within Whitefern itself.

The family at Whitefern is as fully dysfunctional as any family in the traditional fairy tales, and Audrina is subjected to many of the torments—emotional and physical—that are common to fairy tale heroines. She is simultaneously deprived of effective mothering and overwhelmed with attention from her father. Although Lucietta Adare graces the first third of the novel, she is a distant mother at best, and her death in childbirth not only renders Audrina motherless but also transforms her

prematurely into a surrogate mother for the flawed daughter whom Lucietta has left behind. Two women—Ellsbeth and later Billie Lowe—stand in as mother figures for Audrina, but as both women are more interested in Damian's attentions than in Audrina, she grows up without any significant maternal influence.

Like all other fairy tale heroines, Audrina must live with very little affection and a great deal of pain before Prince Charming comes along to make her happy. Predictably, her father is against any relationship between Audrina and Arden, just as fairy tale fathers throw barriers in the way of young men who come to woo their lovely daughters. But eventually Audrina and Arden are married, and since the wedding in a fairy tale is generally little more than an afterthought, so their wedding is anticlimactic—a ceremony conducted by a justice of the peace. At this point, the fairy tale would conclude with the brief statement that heroine and Prince Charming lived happily ever after; but Andrews is not finished with Audrina's story.

For anyone who has wondered what ''happily ever after'' is like, Andrews has an answer. The final third of *My Sweet Audrina* reveals the life that follows the wedding of the charmed protagonists. Although Audrina and Arden have been friends since they were children, there are significant facts about him that she does not know when they are married. Like the fairy tale heroine who knows little or nothing about her prince except for the fact that he wants to marry her, Audrina is acquainted only with the side of Arden that he is comfortable with showing her. After the wedding comes her discovery that marriage is more than chaste kisses and always being together—and her first night with Arden is a painful disaster.

Audrina learns that Arden is not only all too human but is also a man who requires sex, preferably from the woman he loves, but—as their wedding night discussion makes clear—from other women if necessary. Thus she is in some ways prepared when Vera returns to Whitefern and embarks on a passionate affair with Arden. The painful wedding night has another unexpected result. Struggling as Arden takes her, Audrina has a sudden sensation that the gaps in her memory are filling with vivid recollections of earlier and even more devastating struggles. As images of her earlier life return to her conscious memory, Audrina slowly initiates the process of deciphering the bits and pieces that will simultaneously restore the childhood she has lost and reveal Arden's secret: the fact that he watched in petrified horror as the gang of boys raped her,

the shame he feels at not having come to her rescue. Not until both she and Arden confront their shared history do they have any chance at a happy marriage.

When Andrews finally ends her modern fairy tale, the finale is inconclusive. The heroine and her prince are poised on the brink of their ''happily ever after,'' they no longer have any secrets to divide them, and the conniving other woman is dead. ''Arden and I would begin again in Whitefern,'' says Audrina (403), but ''the stale wedding cake house'' that is Whitefern is no fairy tale castle, and Audrina and Arden must live in the real world.

7

The Casteel Story

Before her death, V. C. Andrews launched another series of novels, designed to follow the trials and tribulations of the Casteel clan of West Virginia, and more particularly Heaven Leigh Casteel, whose life and loves take her from West Virginia to Georgia to Massachusetts. Structurally, the series resembles the Dollanganger saga, with four books chronologically recounting the story of the heroine and her life, and a fifth book returning to an earlier time, just before the heroine's birth. The first three Casteel novels were written by Andrews, the last two by a ''carefully selected writer'' who worked with the Andrews estate ''to expand upon her genius by creating new novels'' (*Secrets of the Morning,* i). Chapter 8 provides a fuller discussion of the work of that ''carefully selected writer.''

Heaven, the first novel in the series, written in 1985, introduces the title character, who lives with her parents and siblings in a ramshackle cabin in the Appalachian mountains of West Virginia. The Prologue describes how ten-year-old Heaven Leigh Casteel learns that the woman whom she has always called ''Mother'' is her stepmother and that her birth mother was a runaway Boston girl whose death when Heaven was born turned Luke Casteel into an emotionally remote father who ignores his oldest child. *Heaven* establishes the identities of a number of important characters: the Casteel family with whom Heaven spends her childhood,

thinking that they are her family; Logan Stonewall, whom Heaven will later marry; and Cal and Kitty Dennison, who buy Heaven and take her to Georgia with them. Life with the Dennisons exposes Heaven to psychological and physical abuse, and when Kitty succumbs to cancer, Heaven returns with them to the mountains so that Kitty can die at home in Winnerrow. When Heaven is later given the opportunity to visit her mother's family, she eagerly sets out for Massachusetts.

In *Dark Angel,* written in 1986, Heaven is ensconced at Farthinggale Manor, home of her mother's parents, Jillian and Tony Tatterton. Surrounded by opulence, provided luxuries far beyond her needs, Heaven discovers that wealth does not guarantee happiness. Her grandmother is pleasant but distant, her grandfather intrusive, and her schoolmates at exclusive Winterhaven treat her like the outsider that she is. She finds acceptance from Troy, her grandfather's much younger brother; and Heaven and Troy fall in love. In a typical Andrews plot twist, Heaven learns that Tony Tatterton, her grandmother's second husband, is her real father, and that Troy is her uncle, making her marriage to him impossible. Several tragedies later, Heaven decides to marry Logan, her childhood sweetheart.

A West Virginia school teacher when *Fallen Hearts,* written in 1988, opens, Heaven marries Logan Stonewall, and the newlyweds travel to Farthinggale. Jillian Tatterton is mentally unbalanced and believes that Heaven is Leigh, Jillian's daughter and Heaven's mother. Much to Heaven's dismay, Tony offers Logan a job, and the younger man accepts eagerly, dooming Heaven to live once more at Farthinggale. Again, Heaven's West Virginia family erupts in a series of catastrophes, most of which affect Heaven, although by now she knows that she has no real kinship with the Casteels. The novel ends with the birth of Heaven's daughter, Annie, named after old Annie Brandywine Casteel, who first revealed to Heaven the secret of her birth.

The last two books in the Casteel series are said to have been written from V. C. Andrews's notes and outlines by a ghostwriter who has explained that he studied Andrews's prose style in order to replicate it as accurately as possible. *Gates of Paradise* (1989) recounts the story of the orphaned Annie—Heaven's daughter—as she struggles through the pains of growing up at Farthinggale Manor, to which her grandfather, Tony Tatterton, has taken her. In *Web of Dreams* (1990), the series doubles back on itself to fill in the story of Leigh Van Voreen, Heaven's mother.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

As in all her other novels, some of V. C. Andrews's most effective plot devices in the Casteel series are those common to both the Gothic and horror genres. Among these narrative conventions are midnight journeys, forbidden places and locked rooms that the major characters somehow cannot ignore, secret paths and passageways, hiding places for cherished possessions, hints at dark secrets in people's lives, accidents, coincidental meetings, and the rambling utterances of frightened servants and senile old people.

Gothic and horror fiction frequently rely for suspense on the concealment of essential information until disclosure is absolutely imperative. Suggesting that certain questions of heredity are all important to Heaven, Andrews successfully withholds the answers to those questions until the plot presents opportunities for appropriately dramatic revelations. Heaven shares with many Gothic heroines the need to discover the identity of her father and to create an affectionate relationship with him. She has had a number of substitute fathers, none of them satisfactory and all of them flawed in some way, and she appears to feel that her doubts about herself will vanish if she can only reconstruct the true story of her life. Years later, her daughter, Annie, is confronted with the same questions about her own paternity, as well as a much more pressing need to know the truth. Not for Annie the simple desire to know who she really is; she has fallen in love with her half-brother and he with her, and only proof that they do not share the same father will solve their dilemma.

A second narrative strategy that Andrews uses to great effect is the disappearance and reappearance of several characters whose absence leads to sadness and even grief but whose presence generally creates conflict and tension. Since each disappearance is inconclusive, suspense builds up as the reader wonders when, if ever, a particular character might reenter the scene or whether perhaps that character might be dead. Luke Casteel's absences bring his family to the brink of starvation and finally drive his wife to abandon the cabin in the woods and their children. After he sells Heaven, Luke reappears periodically in her life, and because she hates him for what he has done, each reunion brings new tension to her story. Also reappearing at intervals is Fanny, who is Heaven's sister and rival for Logan even after Heaven and Logan are married. Fanny's sexual and marital escapades are a constant source of worry and irritation to Heaven, who continues throughout her life to

maintain ties with her Casteel siblings. The most dramatic disappearance and return involves Troy Tatterton, who dies in one novel and returns in the next book of the series with a believable explanation for his absence.

Another narrative device that structures the Casteel story is the comparison between two completely different but parallel settings and ways of life. Heaven has two real homes: the West Virginia mountain cabin in which she spends her childhood, and Farthinggale, childhood home of her mother and thus Heaven's true ancestral place. Throughout the series, Heaven travels back and forth between Appalachian poverty in West Virginia and East Coast affluence in Massachusetts, thus affording readers ample opportunity to recognize the disparities between the lives of Heaven's two families and their worlds. Moreover, because Heaven does not belong completely in either world, she is able, as the narrator, to dramatize her status as an outsider who can be a more or less objective storyteller.

Finally, Andrews employs the suggestion of incest (or quasi-incest) as a strategy for injecting tension and suspense into the plots of the Casteel novels. Heaven's affair with Cal Dennison, her Atlanta ''father,'' detonates an already explosive situation in the Candlewick house by positioning Heaven as Kitty Dennison's competitor; Fanny's seduction by her foster father, the Reverend Wayland Wise, results in a child whose existence contributes to the ill feelings that Fanny nurses against Heaven, whom she resents for her effortless popularity. The incident with the most far-reaching consequences is Tony Tatterton's rape of his stepdaughter, Leigh. Heaven, the central figure in the series and the child of that union, herself bears a child whose father is her uncle, Troy Tatterton. And for that child, Annie Stonewall, the inescapable family history of incestuous relationships proves both curse and blessing when it first separates her from her beloved Luke and then, almost at the end of the series, allows them to marry.

SETTING

Heaven's life is dominated by the two places that she identifies as home. Both places are more than mere physical settings; they represent the irreconcilable desires and emotional geographies of Heaven's identity. Although other settings are important during specific periods of her life, Heaven is most directly affected by her two homes, each of which exerts a powerful pull on her when she is at the other.

The Casteel home is a ''shedlike cabin that clung precariously to the steep mountainside'' in the West Virginia mountains known colloquially as ''the Willies'' (*Heaven* 2). Inside the cabin are arrayed the family's few possessions: one bed, some rough chairs, a cast-iron stove. Outside is a decrepit porch with steps down to a dirt yard. In this remote dwelling, five Casteel children live with their frazzled mother, their aging grandparents, and occasionally their father, whose disappearances are far more frequent than his sojourns at home. Heaven and her brothers and sisters go into town only to attend school and church services.

Winnerrow, the closest town in the valley, is almost a foreign country to the Casteels, whose poverty distances them from the other students in the small local school to which they trudge every weekday. Condemned by circumstances to sit in classrooms with Winnerrow children who wear clothes that fit and live in houses with indoor plumbing, Heaven becomes acutely conscious of her family's destitution and her status as ''hill scum, hill filth, and scum bags'' (18), and she vows to study hard enough to be able someday to leave the Willies and attend college.

Farthinggale Manor outside Boston is vastly superior to anything Heaven has ever known. Built of gray stone, crowned with turrets and a red roof, the manor resembles a castle to the awestruck young girl from the mountains. Entering through arched doorways, Heaven notes that the interior walls are ornamented with murals depicting scenes from fairy tales, the house is furnished with antiques and hung with silk fabrics, and the impressive library overflows with leather-bound books. Unlike the crowded mountain cabin that is home to nine Casteels, Farthinggale Manor's extravagant vastness houses only Tony and Jillian Tatterton and, later, Heaven. The servants occupy another wing, away from the family's living space.

The Casteel cabin and the Tatterton mansion leave indelible imprints on Heaven and shape her into the woman she becomes. Early deprivation and discomfort instill in her the desire and the ability to depend on herself, and they provide her with the inner strength that sustains her whenever she is faced with unfamiliar or threatening situations. Her impoverished childhood serves as the motivation for her ambition not only to leave the mountains but also to attend an Ivy League college if at all possible. At Farthinggale, Heaven learns about the world beyond Appalachia, developing poise and acquiring the sophisticated veneer that will enable her to maneuver in the society to which her birth entitles her. As an adult, Heaven cannot forget the backwoods shack or the lux-

urious mansion, the village school or the select boarding academy for wealthy girls. All of her life, she is pulled in two directions: toward the mountains, toward the city.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND POINT OF VIEW

Cultural and literary stereotypes appear to have been the inspirations behind V. C. Andrews's creation of the individuals whose lives are portrayed in the Casteel novels. Like the characters in other Andrews books, Heaven and her family and acquaintances are grouped through their resemblance to familiar character types from popular culture, folklore, and literary works. And once again, Andrews depicts female characters who are far more interesting—even within the restrictions of recognizable types—than the male characters with whom they interact. While it is certainly true that men wield enormous power in an Andrews novel, they are curiously flat, sometimes interchangeable characters who personify the patriarchal system that controls women's lives in Andrews's fictional world.

V. C. Andrews has positioned Heaven among three distinct groups of women who embody and personify the values of the economic and cultural worlds that they inhabit. Heaven herself moves—not always effortlessly—among the three groups and their worlds. Logan Stonewall, once he marries Heaven, manages to maneuver himself slightly beyond the influence of his mother's Winnerrow circle but not entirely into Tatterton society. All three groups of characters are clearly defined by their surroundings and their settings, and they display the stereotypical traits assigned by American popular culture to the inhabitants of certain regions of the United States.

Heaven's mountain family, the Casteels, are classic mountain folk: natives of the Appalachia of coal mines and moonshine, haunted ''hollers,'' and steep trails. They are mythologized hillbillies whose mumbled diction and ungrammatical syntax, shapeless and colorless clothing, and diet of fried food, biscuits, and lard gravy are staples of folklore and country music.

In the Casteel books as in American popular culture, two types of mountain men exist. The first type, like Tom and his grandfather Casteel, is proud, independent, and hard working; the second, represented by Luke, is degenerate, ignorant, and illiterate. Their women—brawny and plain, or oversexed and giddy—are similarly stereotyped. Poor, long-

suffering, strapping Sarah, who cooks, cleans, and cares for her brood of children, resembles Snuffy Smith's wife, the amazonian Loweezy of that comic strip community known as Possum Holler. Like that comic mountain housewife, Sara must live with her ne'er-do-well husband's inclination toward petty theft as well as his frequent absences from home. Fanny is instantly recognizable as a gullible, wanton coquette who would be at home in an Erskine Caldwell novel.

Difficult living conditions and backbreaking work cause women in Appalachia to age prematurely, and Sarah and her mother-in-law, Annie, are no exceptions; both women appear at least twenty years older than their actual ages. Time has been particularly unkind to Granny Annie; she has lost most of her teeth and suffers from a variety of ailments, of which arthritis is the least debilitating.

The mountain bourgeoisie are represented by the more prominent female citizens of Winnerrow: Mrs. Wise, Mrs. Stonewall, Reva and Maisie Setterton, and Kitty Dennison, who has fled Winnerrow to live in an Atlanta suburb. Winnerrow society publicly embraces the virtues of hard work, family values, and pretentious respectability, but beneath the surface of its comfortable, well-regulated lives, religious bigotry and intolerance thrive. With little formal education and almost no knowledge of the world, Winnerrow women are narrow-minded and inclined to be judgmental. Mrs. Wise, the wife of a local minister, ''didn't smile, didn't speak, only looked sour and unhappy'' (*Heaven* 186), and when she sees Heaven after church one Sunday, she orders the girl to ''tell your father not to come to this church, an we would all greatly appreciate if *no* Casteel ever came to services again'' (203). A poor example of a minister's wife, Mrs. Wise is typical of the women of Winnerrow. In fact, as Heaven says to Kitty who grew up in Winnerrow, ''you're not one whit better than any scumbag hill-crud girl'' (328). In later years, when Heaven returns from Boston for visits, the Winnerrow folk, still rigidly encased in their prejudices, refuse to accept her as a native of the town. To them, she will never be anything other than one of those despised Casteels.

In dramatic contrast to the Casteels are the Tattertons and their circle of acquaintances: pampered eastern social butterflies straight out of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby.* Tony and Jillian Tatterton are moneyed and privileged, accustomed to expensive clothes and international travel. Financial security and a life of ease keep them looking youthful. Her hair a ''sleek cap of shining gold, pulled back from her face to show a sculptured profile'' (*Dark Angel* 5), elegantly dressed Jillian at sixty

inspires Heaven to a mental comparison of this grandmother with fifty-year-old Granny Annie Casteel whom Heaven remembers as having ''thin white hair . . . stooped shoulders with her dowager's hump, her arthritic fingers . . . [and] pitifully few garments'' (*Heaven* 9).

Although wealthy, much traveled, and cosmopolitan, Jillian and Tony Tatterton and their friends are not so different from Winnerrow society. Tony Tatterton especially preaches the virtues of hard work and respectability, and like the Winnerrow ladies, he is inclined to be narrow-minded and judgmental. Intensely proud of his business empire and of his personal wealth and social standing, Tatterton seeks to cut Heaven off from the influence of her Casteel family and Winnerrow friends, all of whom he believes to be the slothful, drunken, uncouth hillbillies of popular stereotype. Nothing Heaven says in their defense is effective; Tatterton forbids her any communication with people from her past.

Heaven, Dark Angel, and *Fallen Hearts* are all narrated by Heaven Casteel, although Andrews never makes clear just when Heaven tells each installment of her story. The Prologue to *Heaven* seems to suggest that the narrator is looking back on her early years, and since the novel takes Heaven to her seventeenth year, a reader might assume that the narrator is the seventeen-year-old girl who fearfully and eagerly looks forward to her initial meeting with her maternal grandparents and says goodbye to the Willies. Neither *Dark Angel* nor *Fallen Hearts* offers any clues about the age of the narrator.

As a narrator, Heaven Casteel herself is neither as interesting as the amnesia-fogged Audrina Adare nor as engaging as remorsefully vengeful Cathy Dollanganger. In fact, Heaven, only a pallid copy of Cathy, is a curiously ordinary young woman who happens to have lived an eventful life. What does provide the Casteel novels with life is Heaven's ability to re-create in words the significant events in her life and to represent vividly the personalities and characters of the people with whom she comes in contact. In fact, Heaven is more compelling when she narrates the stories of others, blander and less effective when she focuses on her own feelings. Thus readers learn little of any genuine substance about Heaven but a great deal about her physical, cultural, and social environments, as well as the people with whom she has to associate.

LITERARY DEVICES

To a greater degree than she does in other books, Andrews uses the device of opposition in the Casteel novels to illuminate the contradictions

and conflicts that define Heaven's life. Those discordant elements are signaled in several chapter titles: ''The Way It Used to Be,'' ''Squalor and Splendor,'' and ''A New Home'' in *Heaven;* ''Holidays, Lonely Days,'' ''January in July,'' and ''Winners and Losers'' in *Dark Angel;* ''Old and New Lives'' and ''Life and Death'' in *Fallen Hearts.* Moreover, one book title, *Dark Angel,* itself a kind of contradiction, aptly identifies the book in which Heaven's emotional tensions are the most significant because she must constantly maneuver between two homes, two lovers, two families, two lives.

From the first pages of *Heaven,* the title character is different from everyone around her. Unlike her rowdy boy-crazy sister, Fanny, Heaven is a studious, quietly proud girl who does her share of housework and helps her stepmother care for the younger children. When Sarah abandons the Casteel brood, Heaven takes on all of the household responsibilities while Fanny sulks. During the Candlewick years, Heaven functions as the ladylike foil to Kitty Dennison, whose attempts to attain social status are failures because of her blatant lack of taste and good breeding. At Farthinggale and Winterhaven, Heaven again stands out, this time because of her Appalachian country manner, which, despite her natural grace and sweetness, puts her at a disadvantage among people whose proud bearing and snobbishness are considered de rigeur in sophisticated Boston.

Andrews also sets up contrasts between the men in Heaven's life. Luke Casteel, the father who has raised Heaven, is an irresponsible hillbilly playboy and so poor that he eventually sells Heaven in order to make a little money. On the other hand, Tony Tatterton, Heaven's wealthy biological father, while charming when he needs to be, commandeers the running of his daughter's life, exerting an ominous degree of control that suggests his ownership of Heaven. To both Luke and Tony, Heaven is a possession; but to one, she is a source of income, and to the other, she is an ornamental object whose beauty must be enhanced, displayed, and preserved.

The two great loves of Heaven's life are also presented as opposites. When young Heaven first becomes aware of handsome Logan Stonewall at the Winnerrow school, he is oddly overdressed—as befits his elevated status as the new pharmacist's son—in gray flannel slacks, white shirt, necktie, green sweater, and ''regular Sunday hard shoes, polished to a shine'' (*Heaven* 43). His clothing reveals that he is well aware of the power of appearance in the creation of public opinion and initial impressions, and he is probably prone to making judgments based on appearances. Troy Tatterton, handsome in a more dashing way, is quirky,

very private, and possessed of an artist's sensitivity. And far from going out of his way to befriend Heaven as Logan has done, Troy immediately attempts to keep her out of his cottage and out of his life. Each man offers Heaven something she needs; Logan gives her the stability and occasional dullness of everyday familiarity, while Troy offers whimsy and a magical passion that will finally give Heaven her only child.

Another literary device that is characteristic of V. C. Andrews's work is the use of allusions that serve to open up her novels in ways that would not be possible with unadorned narrative. The Dollanganger story draws upon Andrews's strong interest in the world of classical ballet, and in the Casteel novels—especially in *Heaven*—images from dance literature and performance again shape and inform the text.

The vernacular name of the mountain range of Heaven's childhood—the Willies—has both linguistic and artistic resonances. The first and most obvious allusion suggests a popular phrase and its variants: ''It gave me the willies.'' Referring to the shivery tremors associated with revulsion and disgust, fear and terror, the phrase is often used to explain a physical reaction to something both inexplicable and unpleasant. A second reference implicates the Wilis who haunt the dark forest in the romantic ballet *Giselle.* Ruled by the imperious Queen Myrtha, the Wilis are the ghosts of young women who died, betrayed, before their wedding days. In revenge, they appear to the men who are guilty of infidelity and treachery and punish them by forcing them to dance until they drop dead of exhaustion. Although betrayed by her lover, Albrecht, Giselle, who has become a Wili, protects him from the vengeance of her ghostly sisters and gives him his life although she will not be alive to share it with him. Like Giselle, Heaven is betrayed by the man she loves, Logan Stonewall, and like the ballet heroine, Heaven forgives Logan everything and does everything in her power to make it possible for him to continue his pleasant life, unpunished.

A set of literary allusions comes from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind,* that romantic classic about life in the Old South. Speaking like a hillbilly Scarlett O'Hara and in phrases borrowed from that fictional heroine, Fanny announces, ''There's gonna come a day when I'm neva gonna be hongry or cold agin . . . ya wait an' see'' (*Heaven* 140). Years later, Annie Stonewall, coming down the stairs in an elegant gown, is compared by her father to Mitchell's heroine. Neither Annie nor her aunt resembles Scarlett O'Hara in the least, but the mention of her name serves to define both women by contrasting them with the image of that classic southern belle. Fanny, despite her eventual wealth and palatial

home, will never be a southern lady; Annie, on the other hand, is to the manor born.

A third group of allusions ties Andrews's work directly to the classic Gothic novel, particularly the works of the Brontë sisters. When Marianne Deale allows Heaven and Tom to take books home from the Winnerrow school, Heaven reads and rereads not only Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* but also a biography of the Brontës. The allusion is unmistakable. Heaven's life contains Gothic elements similar to those to be found in the stories of Jane Eyre and Cathy Earnshaw, and like those fictional heroines, Heaven must endure pain and humiliation, rise above deprivation, and come to terms with abuse before she is allowed to find peace and contentment.

MAJOR THEMES AND ISSUES

V. C. Andrews's fiction enjoys great popularity with young readers because the books address so many of the themes that these readers find compellingly personal and relevant to their own lives. Adolescents often complain that they feel marginal, peripheral, out of place, and misunderstood by other teenagers and by adults. As she does in her earlier novels, Andrews focuses in the Casteel series on adolescent frustrations, parent-child conflict, sibling rivalry, and a young girl's confusion as she blindly attempts to find her way across the problematic terrain that separates girlhood from womanhood.

Throughout a series in which she is the central character, even after her death, Heaven remains marginal to every group she encounters. Growing up in the old cabin in the Willies, Heaven is raised by a stepmother who has her own large brood of children. Heaven's life deteriorates further when the Dennisons take her home; Kitty Dennison views Heaven as a kind of indentured servant, and Cal Dennison casts a lustful eye on the girl. Finally reunited with her birth mother's family, the Tattertons, Heaven discovers yet again that she is expected to remain peripheral and undemanding—and although in this situation, she is provided with every possible material advantage, she clearly does not quite belong in the Tatterton mansion or social group. Even when she is an adult whose family money is paying to revitalize the West Virginia town of her childhood, Heaven learns to her sorrow that her wealth and position are inadequate to overcome the taint of her Casteel connections.

Nothing she does will ever suffice to induce the Winnerrow women to accept her as one of them.

Another important theme in the Casteel novels is Heaven's—and later, Annie's—search for a father. Although the narrative abounds in fathers and father figures—among them Luke Casteel, Cal Dennison, the Reverend Wayland Wise, Tony Tatterton and his brother Troy, Logan Stonewall, and Cleave VanVoreen—each man is not only an ineffectual father but also an unfaithful husband. Throughout her life, Heaven encounters virtually no completely admirable men who can serve as paternal role models for herself, her sister Fanny, or her daughter Annie. Luke Casteel is an absentee father and womanizer, a man who never seems able to find the sort of occupation that will let him support his large family. His most flagrantly irresponsible attempt to provide for himself leads him to sell his children: Fanny to Reverend Wise who rapes her and fathers a child by her while she lives with him and his wife; and Heaven to Cal Dennison who instigates a sexual relationship with his purchased daughter. Leigh VanVoreen is raped by her stepfather, Tony Tatterton, and the child of that union, Heaven, eventually bears a child fathered by Troy, her uncle. Meanwhile, Heaven's husband, Logan, fathers a child by his wife's sister, Fanny. The unfortunate result of these irregularities of behavior on the young women who are thus victimized is emotional hunger, most noticeable in Heaven, who spends much of her life searching for a man's love (whether paternal or sexual is never really clear to her) and never being quite sure that she has found it. Troy's daughter, Annie, finally breaks the cycle by marrying a genuinely decent young man, although his lineage is tainted by a father who was married to someone other than his mother.

Connected with the search for a father is the theme of the family as safe haven and informal support group, and as the center of desirable existence. As long as she has her brothers and sisters, her stepmother, and her grandparents, Heaven remains undaunted by the dire poverty of her existence in the Willies. When the family is broken up and the children are sold, Heaven makes it her mission to stay in touch with the others, including ungracious and jealous Fanny, and to find a way to reunite them. As her quest takes her from home to home, Heaven hopes on each arrival that she has finally found a perfect family, a Norman Rockwell family with a happy circle of loved ones bound to each other by genuine affection. Each time she is disappointed; each new home she finds poses significant threats to her emotional and physical safety, and

she learns at great cost to herself that the family circle can be far more dangerous than any group of strangers.

GENERIC CONVENTIONS

Overtones of the Gothic are immediately apparent in the description of setting in *Heaven*'s Prologue:

> The wind didn't just blow in the Willies, it howled and shrieked. . . . Living on the mountainsides was enough to give anyone the willies—especially when the wolves howled like the wind and the bobcats screeched and the wild things of the forest roamed at will. (2)

The name of the mountain range conjures up images of darkness and feelings of terror, underscoring the tension created by Heaven's description of the midnight walk with her black-shawled grandmother to the graveyard, ''stark and eerie in the light of the pale bluish winter moon'' (5). There beside a granite headstone, Heaven learns for the first time that her real mother was a fourteen-year-old Boston runaway who died in childbirth.

As she grows older, Heaven discovers that her childhood fears of terror in the woods are mere trifles compared with the immensely real horrors that lurk in the home. The perils that threaten her are domestic ones; the ogres who have designs upon her are father figures like Cal Dennison.

Like countless other Gothic heroines, Heaven is motherless. Leigh, her birth mother, died when Heaven was born. The stepmother who raises her, despite her basic kindness to Heaven, seems unable to offer the girl any genuine affection, and the child must look to her grandmother for what little maternal love she experiences. Kitty Dennison, who insists that Heaven call her ''Mother,'' is more of a slavemaster than a nurturing parent. In fact, Kitty wants Heaven for one reason only: Heaven is the daughter of the woman whom Kitty blames for the abortion that Kitty had to undergo when Luke married Heaven's mother; and Kitty derives a peculiar pleasure from forcing Heaven into servitude. When she finally arrives at her mother's home in Boston, Heaven realizes that the grandmother she has long hoped to meet has no intention of playing a ma-

ternal role in Heaven's life. Although lacking any sort of a mother, Heaven has far too many fathers, all of whom complicate her life unnecessarily. For her, as for the classic Gothic heroine, a father figure is a dangerous male, prone to forget that the beautiful young woman in his charge needs protection rather than sexual exploitation.

ALTERNATIVE READING: FEMINIST

Feminist Criticism

As has already been pointed out in Chapter 3, feminist criticism finds its expression through a number of approaches to literature and culture. Common to all of them is their implicit critique of a patriarchal society, a culture that takes its direction from the needs and desires of the male who, by virtue of his sex, is viewed as superior to the female. A feminist analysis of the Casteel saga might identify certain important issues of gender identity as they are reflected in the novels and might then attempt to show how those issues are addressed or resolved in the texts.

The first issue worth considering is Andrews's portrayal of women as essentially powerless in a patriarchal world. Although each book is structured around a central female character, the woman at center stage is inevitably the object of someone else's attentions and manipulations rather than the subject of her own plans. Much as she might talk about her dreams, desires, and ambitions, her life is dominated by assumptions and conventions of a society created for and controlled by men.

Heaven never instigates any of the experiences that seriously affect her life and its direction. Her existence is defined by others' needs and structured by others' requirements. She dutifully helps Sarah keep the family together during Luke's disappearances, and when Sarah runs away, fourteen-year-old Heaven becomes a surrogate mother to her siblings. Although she believes that she controls her destiny, she is wrong. Major events in her life are triggered by the actions of other people, most of whom have no genuine interest in Heaven's welfare. Her own father sells her for a few hundred dollars, supposedly to provide her with a home that can supply her with the advantages he has failed to give her. In truth, Luke simply does not want the responsibility of caring for five motherless children; furthermore he needs the money. Luke's action places Heaven under the control of the Dennisons from Atlanta, and through them, her standard of living goes up considerably. But she pays

a terrible price for that luxury. Little more than a servant to Kitty Dennison, who abuses her physically and psychologically, Heaven is seduced by Cal Dennison. Thus in many ways, the Atlanta experience forces Heaven into adulthood long before she is ready for that role. Once at Farthinggale, Heaven falls under the control of her real father, Tony Tatterton, whose wealth and power allow him to choreograph Heaven's experiences in ways that Luke Casteel never could. Even as a wife and mother, Heaven is aware of Tony's manipulation of her life. Ultimately it becomes clear that Tony has shaped Heaven's life from before her birth when his rape of Leigh VanVoreen forced her to flee to West Virginia, where Heaven was born. After Heaven's death, her daughter, Annie, becomes Tony's ward, and the cycle of control begins again.

A second issue that provides material for interesting analysis is the strong impression given by the Casteel novels that society offers women almost no possibilities for fulfillment without men. Most of the female characters are wives, mothers, and daughters whose identities are extensions of their relationships to husbands, sons, and fathers. Sarah needs Luke, although he mistreats her and stays away for weeks. Heaven notices that when Luke is away, ''Sarah allowed her hair to go dirty and her meals were worse than usual,'' but when he pays one of his infrequent visits to the shabby cabin, she ''came alive, to hurry and bathe, to put on the best she had'' (*Heaven* 16). Heaven learns well her early lessons in keeping a man happy. Years later, when she finds out that Logan is responsible for her sister Fanny's pregnancy, Heaven rationalizes her forgiveness of Logan's behavior by telling herself, ''My hunger to be loved and to put aside all the hardship and misery I had experienced was greater than I had realized'' (*Fallen Hearts* 212).

For a woman like Kitty Dennison, a husband ten years younger is a necessity—a man ''to show off as her prize 'catch'—a college man—'her man' '' (*Heaven* 300). Kitty's self-esteem is a function of her attractiveness to men, and the fact that Cal has married her validates her in her own eyes. Jillian Tatterton, twenty years her husband's senior, makes a career of looking youthful in order to keep her husband's love and attention, and when she can no longer hold age at bay, she quietly goes insane. Even beautiful Fanny looks to men as the only source of happiness; she admits to Heaven that her bold flirtations and sexual advances to men were inspired by her need for love: ''I was jist tryin' ta get one ta love me . . . I thought that was how I could get one ta do it'' (*Fallen Hearts* 393). Sadly, Fanny never realizes that love can come from within a family circle, and she continues to view men as the only sources of love.

A third concern that merits commentary from the feminist perspective is the objectification of women in the Casteel novels. Andrews makes it abundantly clear that in her fictional universe, women are not individuals—indeed are mere objects in both Winnerrow and Boston society. The objectification of women is most compellingly exemplified in Luke Casteel's sale of his daughters, Heaven and Fanny. Although it is not his intention to engage in white slavery, the effect of his action is precisely that. In offering his daughters to the highest bidders, Luke is selling the girls' bodies to men who will take advantage of them. For Luke at the moment of sale, Heaven and Fanny are not daughters but items in his personal inventory for which he can ask a fairly substantial price.

If Luke sees his daughters as possessions he can sell for large sums of money, he does not accord his wife the same value. Women in the Willies and in Winnerrow are brood mares and domestic servants; Luke marries Sarah because he ''needed a wife t'fill his empty bed,'' a woman who could satisfy his ''cravins . . . physical cravins'' (*Heaven* 8). Sarah works hard to make her poor cabin a comfortable home that might keep Luke from leaving so frequently, but she is unsuccessful. He has exactly what he wants: a cabin to which he can come home and a woman waiting for him. Glimpses throughout the novels at other wives in Winnerrow suggest that although the townswomen may be better situated financially, they are no better off in their marriages than Sarah is in hers. They too exist to provide necessary services for their men, and almost to a woman, they are unhappy, sour faced, and mean.

Farther afield, in sophisticated Boston society, matters are little better. Jillian Tatterton is an object of a different kind: a beautiful woman who can ornament any of her husband's public appearances by her presence on his arm. Jillian sleeps well into each morning before rising to spend several hours ''behind closed doors performing her 'secret beauty rituals' '' (*Dark Angel* 71). Focused only on her appearance and her pleasure, Jillian is a living mannequin, completely dependent on Tony, who describes himself (though not to Jillian) as the ''keeper of a woman obsessed by her desire to stay young'' (*Dark Angel* 255). Not surprisingly, one of the toys that has cemented Tony Tatterton's reputation as ''King of the Toymakers'' is the Tatterton Toy Portrait Doll—a painstakingly sculpted, elaborately dressed doll that is the exact image of any girl whose parents are wealthy enough to commission such an expensive toy. The word *portrait* in the toy's name refers to the fact that the young girl must sit for the artist who creates the doll. In those portrait dolls is embodied a widely held cultural attitude: that women are lovely collec-

tibles to be admired, played with, and kept as toys. As in the Dollanganger series, dolls in the Casteel novels are reminders that those who most resemble dolls lack free choice and are easily manipulated, not only by other people but also by forces that seem beyond understanding or control.

8

The Other V. C. Andrews: Andrew Niederman

Virginia Cleo Andrews died on December 19, 1986, a victim of breast cancer. At her death, she had over 30 million copies of seven novels in print and one more novel shortly to be released. She had also—according to her publisher, Simon and Schuster—''completed working on a number of novels prior to her passing,'' and these novels were to be published shortly after her death. Specifically identified among the books ready for posthumous publication were *Garden of Shadows,* scheduled for release in October 1987, and ''a sequel to *Heaven* and *Dark Angel* to be published in the fall of 1988.''

Garden of Shadows and *Fallen Hearts* (the Casteel sequel) were published according to schedule, but the V. C. Andrews output did not end with the release of the two books. In quick succession, *Gates of Paradise* (1989) and *Web of Dreams* (1990) appeared, to complete the fictional biography of Heaven Leigh Casteel with the stories of her mother, Leigh Van Voreen, and daughter, Annie Stonewall. Almost immediately thereafter, *Dawn* (1990) appeared, launching a new series that chronicles the trials of Dawn Cutler and her family through four more volumes: *Secrets of the Morning* (1991), *Twilight's Child* (1992), *Midnight Whispers* (1992), and *Darkest Hour* (1993). In 1994, the publication of *Ruby* initiated a new saga involving the Landry clan of southern Louisiana. The second book in the Landry series, *Pearl in the Mist,* was released in 1994, the third, *All That Glitters,* in 1995.

Since Andrews refused to grant many interviews during her lifetime, her fame was limited to name recognition, and so a ghostwriter was brought into the Andrews project after her death relatively easily. The Andrews family, speaking through the Virginia C. Andrews Trust, and Andrews's publishers, had already addressed the issue of authorship with the publication of *Dawn* in 1990. That novel included, opposite the copyright page, a letter from ''The Andrews Family'' describing Andrews's last months as a time of heightened activity during which she put considerably more hours into writing than usual, hoping to complete as many stories as she could before her death. It is unclear whether the stories referred to are plot synopses or drafts of novels. The letter continues:

> With the final books in the Casteel series we have been working closely with a carefully selected writer to . . . complete Virginia's stories and to expand upon them by creating additional novels inspired by her . . . storytelling genius. (*Dawn,* page facing the title page)

That carefully worded letter was a quasi-official admission that an unnamed author had been given the task of ghostwriting further Andrews novels, thus keeping alive the V. C. Andrews name.

Bringing in a ghostwriter to continue a popular fiction series is nothing new. The Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys mysteries have had more than one author, with every subsequent writer using the name of the original author. A variation on the idea of a ghostwriter is the continuation of a popular series by other authors who write under their own names. The kind of series that lends itself to multiple (named) authorship generally features the activities of a fictional character of mythic proportions, a character so distinctive that reader loyalty is to the character rather than to the original author. Nero Wolfe, Philip Marlowe, James Bond, and Sherlock Holmes were brought to life by, respectively, Rex Stout, Raymond Chandler, Ian Fleming, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but those fictional heroes have continued to baffle and entertain readers with new exploits through the inventiveness of clearly identified authors Robert Goldsborough, Robert Parker, John Gardner, and a number of latter-day Conan Doyles. Both varieties of authorial continuations are possible in large part because many readers of serial fiction become intrigued with specific fictional characters or genres and are not often inclined toward sophisticated linguistic and textual analyses that would uncover the sty-

listic traits of a new writer. These readers prefer the unconditional enjoyment of a suspenseful tale with intriguing fictional characters and an engaging plotline.

THE NIEDERMAN STORY

The writer referred to in the Andrews Family's letter is Andrew Niederman, a novelist whose background has prepared him uniquely to become V. C. Andrews's ghostwriter and successor. A high school teacher for over twenty years in upstate New York, Niederman through his career has had close contact with adolescents, who form the majority of Andrews's readership. Furthermore, he is a successful author in his own right, having published horror fiction under his own name. Even more to the point, Niederman shared both an agent, Anita Diamant, and an editor, Ann Patty, with V. C. Andrews. This connection proved important to the perpetuation—under the name of V. C. Andrews—of the distinctive Gothic series concept popularized by that author.

Shortly after V. C. Andrews died, her publisher and her agent began to investigate the possibility that another writer who could closely approximate Andrews's prose style might make possible the continued publication of V. C. Andrews novels. A longtime familiarity with Andrews's prose style and methods of plot and character development inspired Ann Patty, the editor responsible for discovering Andrews and nurturing her talent, to make the first attempt to write an Andrews novel. Patty, however, was unable to produce a manuscript that Simon and Schuster was interested in publishing as a V. C. Andrews novel. For a time, the project seemed destined to fail for want of a suitable ghostwriter. At that point, Anita Diamant suggested her client Andrew Niederman, a published author who had written marketable horror fiction, one of the genres with which Andrews's work has been either compared or classified.

Following a series of discussions with Simon and Schuster representatives during which Niederman elaborated on his writing experience and described possibilities for new V. C. Andrews novels, he produced a writing sample, which he later compared to an audition for the role of V. C. Andrews. Evidently all parties concerned found the audition successful, and Niederman was offered a $250,000 advance for his first novel as V. C. Andrews. That novel may be *Garden of Shadows,* although there remain a number of unanswered questions about how much of that work

is Andrews's and how much Niederman's. Confusing statements have emerged from three sources: the publisher's statement that Andrews had completed *Garden of Shadows* before her death (''A Note to Readers'' included in printings of Andrews's novels after her death), the Andrews Family letter identifying the final Casteel novels as the beginning of their work with another writer, and Niederman's own statement, ''In the beginning, I saw no unfinished manuscripts and I saw no other writing but the published writing'' (Streitfeld, ''Novelist's'' A10, Col. 3). These statements contradict published records identifying *Dawn* as Niederman's ''fifth ghost-written book'' (Streitfeld, ''Novelist's,'' A10, Col. 2). On the other hand, Cosette Kies, who has written what is to date the only critical assessment of Andrews's oeuvre and is well aware of Andrew Niederman's contributions, treats *Garden* as a genuine Virginia Andrews novel. Neither the publisher nor the Andrews estate has commented further in a public venue on the issue, although Niederman is now identified at writing workshops as the current author of the V. C. Andrews books.

Meanwhile, novels by ''V. C. Andrews'' continue to sell by the millions of copies in both the United States and internationally. *Dawn,* the first novel said to be entirely created by Niederman, reached the 3 million sales mark within months of its release, and all indications are that the Cutler series, of which *Dawn* is the initial volume, has done extremely well, generating high hopes for the Landry novels that follow.

Newspaper interviews with Andrew Niederman indicate that he takes his work with the V. C. Andrews novels very seriously. Using a computer in his attempts to capture the Andrews style, he has analyzed plot development, characterization, word choice, and sentence structure, and he appears to have so perfected the Andrews technique that many readers seem unaware that they are no longer reading books written by their favorite author. In a deposition given by Niederman in the case of *Estate of Virginia C. Andrews* v. *United States of America,* filed in the U.S. District Court in Norfolk, Virginia, Niederman said:

> I had to research every single book that V. C. Andrews had written, and . . . go through and study their syntax, vocabulary, phraseology, the concepts. . . . I had to become someone else in the writing process. . . . I have extracted . . . phraseology and vocabulary just to maintain what I call the V. C. Andrews feel. (Streitfeld, ''Novelist's,'' A2)

His careful analysis paid off in *Garden of Shadows* and the final Casteel novels, which bear many of Andrews's characteristic turns of phrase and re-create recognizable Andrews character types. That these novels are almost indistinguishable in places from those written by Andrews herself is quite likely due to the fact that she was responsible for the creation of the individual characters who live through *Garden, Gates of Paradise,* and *Web of Dreams.* While Niederman can be credited with having contributed to the plots of those three novels, he was at the time restricted to writing about characters whom Andrews had already described at length in other books. At that point in the project, he had little opportunity for original character development.

''Don't make this sound weird,'' Niederman told David Streitfeld of the *Washington Post,* ''but sometimes I do feel possessed.'' Niederman maintains that his connection with Andrews is a literary one, although he has confessed that at times he thinks that he feels her presence as he writes the novels published under her name.

ANDREWS AND NIEDERMAN: A COMPARISON

Similarities

With *Flowers in the Attic,* V. C. Andrews initiated the convention of assigning thematically or symbolically significant titles to her series novels. The titles of the Dollanganger books draw attention to the idea of blighted flowers, or growing plants struggling for life in inhospitable soil. After *Flowers* came *Petals on the Wind, If There Be Thorns, Seeds of Yesterday,* and *Garden of Shadows,* all of which suggest that fertility and barrenness, and hope and despair coexist, even in a fantasy. Similar discordant pairings identify the novels in the Casteel saga, but in this case, the allusions point to heaven and hell—almost certainly in ironic homage to Heaven Casteel, whose life sends her back and forth between salvation and damnation.

Andrew Niederman also clearly had Dawn Cutler's name in mind when he gave each volume in the Cutler saga a title with echoes of temporality: *Secrets of the Morning, Twilight's Child, Midnight Whispers,* and *Darkest Hour.* Common to these titles is the suggestion—more obvious in some than in others—of impending change for better or for worse. The words *dawn, twilight,* and *midnight* identify transition periods during which the quality of light changes as one time of day is trans-

formed into another. And whether intentionally or not, the title *Darkest Hour,* with its reference to the traditional phrase, ''the darkest hour is just before dawn,'' becomes the herald for the first title, *Dawn.* The new Landry series, introduced with *Ruby,* continues with *Pearl in the Mist* and *All That Glitters.* These allusions to precious stones and jewels link Niederman with V. C. Andrews, whose own books are ornamented with frequent references to jewelry.

Given the circumstances that led to Niederman's assumption of the Andrews name and acceptance of the responsibility for producing further books, it is to be expected that on the surface, the Niederman novels are very similar to those written by Virginia Andrews. Niederman points out that his ability to mimic Andrews's style is the result of his intensive study of the texts of the published Andrews novels, and his novels bear many of the distinctive hallmarks not only of the Dollanganger and Casteel sagas but also the Gothic novels that inspired Andrews.

Like the original Andrews tales, Niederman's novels conform for the most part to the traditional Gothic conventions: predictable characters, family secrets, a complicated plot that begins with the heroine's separation from the familiar, suggestions of romance allied with strong intimations of horror, violence against women, and historic buildings that double as psychological torture chambers. Niederman has also adopted the structure devised by Andrews for her family epics, particularly the Casteel novels. In that series, Heaven completes her story in the first three books before her daughter, Annie, picks up the narrative in the fourth. The fifth volume returns to the years before Heaven is born to allow her mother, Leigh, to describe her version of events. To a certain extent, this structure also shapes the Dollanganger series, although in those novels, the original narrator's children are male, and the member of the older generation who insists on publicizing her life story is a grandmother rather than a mother. Niederman's Cutler series begins with the multivolume memoirs of Dawn Cutler, moves on to the story of Dawn's daughter Christie, and finishes by returning to the past so that Dawn's grandmother, Lilian, can have her say.

Niederman's Dawn Cutler and Ruby Landry are reincarnations of the typical V. C. Andrews heroine. As young girls they are unaware of their true parentage, and although they eventually are reunited with their families, neither girl finds genuine acceptance from her newly discovered kin. Like Andrews's young female protagonists, Dawn and Ruby in Niederman's novels are emotionally and physically abused by selfish mothers, jealous half-sisters, and either domineering or powerless fa-

thers; and these young women initially attempt to find affection, first by becoming substitute mothers for much younger siblings and later by innocently embarking on sexual relationships with inappropriate or much older men.

Also shared by Niederman's novels with those of Andrews are certain distinctive narrative strategies: the use of doubling or twinning (Dawn is befriended by a pair of twins at her New York school; Ruby has a twin sister), the disappearance and appearance of important characters at crisis points in the plot, patterns of confinement and escape, the heroine's exile (generally to a restrictive boarding school) and subsequent return to familiar surroundings, and the establishment of tremendous social and economic contrasts between the heroine's early home and the home to which she belongs by birth and heritage. Furthermore, Niederman continues in his Andrews work the fictional treatment of the issues and concerns that Andrews addressed in her novels. Dawn and Ruby confront endless variations on the perils that beset young females on the verge of womanhood; they must fend off incestuous advances, curb their own growing sexual desires, become accustomed to the changes in their bodies, and discover avenues to fulfillment without compromising themselves.

Differences

Superficial similarities between their novels notwithstanding, Andrews and Niederman are individually distinct writers. Despite his care to be as accurate as possible in his reproduction of Andrews's syntax and word choice, Niederman cannot erase his identity as a writer who belongs to another generation and cultural background, and his work bears the hallmarks of his own time and place, as well as his gender. Unlike Andrews, for example, Niederman generally overlooks explicit domestic details (not for him Kitty Dennison's laundry list explaining to Heaven how to separate clothes by color) and generally avoids extensive descriptions of the wardrobes of female characters. But the most significant differences between Niederman's work and that of Andrews are evident in the fictional worlds that the two authors describe, as well as in the specific characters who inhabit those worlds.

Chapter titles provide clues to the distinctions between V. C. Andrews and Andrew Niederman as writers. Andrews titles are impressionistic, sometimes whimsical phrases: ''The Secret of the Wind Chimes,'' ''Tues-

day Teatime,'' ''Again on a Rainy Day,'' and ''In the Cupola.'' In contrast, Niederman's titles are informative and matter of fact: ''The Letter,'' ''A Visit with Jimmy,'' and ''Ugly Realities.'' Andrews's titles suggest an imaginary world, Niederman's a real one.

The Virginia Andrews Gothic world is at once featureless and fantastic, mythic and realistic, and possessed of the kind of specificity with which the Grimm brothers describe the gingerbread house that lures Hansel and Gretel to near disaster. Reviewers and readers alike have described the Andrews fictional milieu as timeless, as an indefinable era that both is and is not the twentieth century. Indeed, Andrews's frequent invocation of the phrase ''fairy tale'' contributes to the hazy temporality of her settings by suggesting that events are transpiring ''once upon a time.'' Any attempt to assign specific decades to Cathy Dollanganger's story results in the discovery that *Seeds of Yesterday* probably happens in the indefinable near future, although the specific details of plot and setting suggest the recent past.

Contributing to the suggestion of timelessness in Andrews's novels is the absence of recognizable detail in the novels' settings. Cathy lives in New York for a few years, travels to Spain, and builds a house in California, but these places are never fully developed as anything other than geographic locations with familiar names. In the Casteel novels, Atlanta is represented only by the imaginary suburb of Candlewick, and Boston's familiar historic landmarks are virtually ignored in favor of evocative descriptions of two classic Gothic settings: Farthinggale Manor and the Winterhaven School. Towns in which considerable action happens are Andrews inventions; Gladstone, Greenglenna, Winnerrow, and Clairmont (names that hint at tranquil picture-perfect fairy story villages) exist only in the pages of the Dollanganger and Casteel novels.

By contrast, Andrew Niederman's fictional world is detailed, realistic, and recognizable. Unlike Andrews for whom New York, Barcelona, and Marin County simply are recognizable names that connote certain culturally exotic settings, Niederman sets his novels in real places, providing enough local color so that readers are immediately transported to New York City, or southern Louisiana's New Orleans and bayou country, or the Mississippi River city of Baton Rouge.

In *Secrets of the Morning,* Dawn Cutler navigates her way through a recognizable New York that includes Brooklyn and Queens, the East Side and the West Side, two rivers, delis, intimate cafés and trendy restaurants, taxicabs, snarled traffic, brownstone houses, pocket parks, the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Natural History, and the lobby

of the Plaza Hotel. This is a Big Apple teeming with people of a variety of ethnic backgrounds and professions, a city that is home to both fashion models and teenaged street people. Through Dawn Cutler's experiences, Niederman allows readers to experience the sensory overload that assails the first-time visitor to New York. Almost from her first day in the city, Dawn finds herself unable to take in all of the sights, sounds, and smells of the metropolis, and for months she remains awed and overwhelmed by the city. Furthermore, once Dawn begins studying at the Bernhardt School (probably a fictional Juilliard), Niederman seasons the narrative with allusions to the world of music and theater: the Metropolitan Opera, a production of *Romeo and Juliet,* Stanislavsky, a poster advertising Chekhov's *The Seagull.*

More effective as a symbolic setting is the Louisiana that Niederman evokes in the new series that begins with Ruby Landry's narrative. The Landry novels take readers to New Orleans and the lazy rhythms of the Garden District with its balconied homes and camellia bushes beneath spreading oaks. Through Ruby's letters, readers inhale the ''scent of the green bamboo, gardenias, and camellias'' and hear the sound of a streetcar ''rattling along St. Charles Avenue'' as ''somewhere in another house someone is playing a trumpet'' (*Pearl in the Mist* 5). Ruby describes a New Orleans of sidewalk cafés and tourists festooned with cameras, a city in which traffic stops for traditional funerals led by ''black men in black suits [who] played brass instruments and swayed to their music'' (29). But this is also the New Orleans of voodoo and *gris-gris,* and one of the maids in Ruby's father's house practices the ancient rituals involving chants, herbs, candles, old bones, and magical powders and potions. Farther afield, in the south Louisiana swampland where Ruby spent her childhood, is Cajun country where rivers are the ''color of dark tea,'' and the trees that hang over the water are draped in Spanish moss. Instead of creating an imaginary place as Andrews might have done, Niederman identifies the real town of Houma as Ruby's home. Like its true-to-life counterpart, the fictional Houma is surrounded by palmetto growth and cypress swamps that are home to alligators and other wildlife. Summer brings hot, sticky nights to Niederman's Louisiana, and hurricanes threaten destruction to coastal towns like Houma. In fact, it is during one such violent storm that Ruby gives birth to her daughter, Pearl, whose name conjures up references to another illegitimate child named Pearl in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter.*

While Andrews created settings that exist only outside the boundaries of recognizable time, Niederman's books are definitively located in the

late twentieth century. Niederman's fictional world is criss-crossed with interstate highways down which tractor trailer rigs barrel on their journeys between large cities. In this world, teenagers smoke marijuana and injure themselves in automobile accidents, runaways contact friends from convenience store telephone booths, and young men are shipped off to boot camp. The contemporaneity of Niederman's fiction is most evident in the author's frank treatment of socially controversial topics and inflammatory issues like drugs, abortion, lesbianism, and racism—issues coyly hinted at but only rarely spelled out in the Andrews books. Strangely enough, however, Niederman displays his own squeamishness in his (so far) exclusion from his books of that distinctive hallmark of a Virginia Andrews book: a Swiftian obsession with bodily functions and excretions and a prurient fascination with deformity and grotesquerie.

Another significant area of difference between the Andrews and Niederman novels is character development and configuration. Niederman has incorporated into his work the standard characters of the V. C. Andrews novels: a young heroine; several siblings, at least one of whom is a jealous sister; an ineffective mother or a stepmother; a powerful grandmother; a grandfather whose word is law even from a sickbed or the grave; an absent or weak father. Like an Andrews heroine, Niederman's possesses tremendous artistic talent coupled with the ambition to develop that talent into a career. But surface similarities aside, Niederman's cast of characters differs in significant ways from their predecessors. A few examples should make the point. The Niederman heroine is far more likely than is her Andrews counterpart to have a close female friend. Andrews's Cathy, Heaven, and Audrina are isolated; neither woman has a confidante or mentor of her own sex or a close female friend. As a matter of fact, these three young women's experiences might suggest that women are incapable of genuine friendships with other women. Dawn and Ruby fare better in Niederman's fictional world, especially when they leave home to attend school in another city. Boarding schools in the Andrews novels are places where the heroine is ostracized and persecuted by her peers. But Dawn forges a close friendship with Trisha in *Secrets* and enjoys the companionship of a number of other young women her age. The same is true of Ruby, who in *Pearl in the Mist* is sent away from New Orleans to a school in Baton Rouge, where, like Dawn, she acquires at least one close friend as well as a host of other cordial acquaintanceships. In Niederman's fictional world, young women are still at risk, are still vulnerable to the Machiavellian plots engineered by their enemies—both female and male—but they are not

completely isolated from others like themselves; they at least have the consolation of friendly relationships with other women.

Yet another contrast between the Andrews and Niederman novels is the greater degree of worldliness and cosmopolitanism displayed by characters in Niederman's books. For many an Andrews character, the mark of sophisticated cuisine is a dinner like the one that pseudo-sybarite Bart Winslow orders: ''Beef Wellington . . . tossed salad . . . chocolate mousse'' (*Petals* 369–70). Fried chicken is a delicacy to Andrews's characters, and in one instance, Heaven Casteel practically swoons at the lavish luxury of the sandwiches, deviled eggs, crackers, and cheese offered to her by Troy Tatterton at their first meeting. Regardless of where the action is set, the Andrews menu varies almost not at all. In Andrews's world-out-of-time, the geography of cuisine is not important; what matters is the suggestion of exclusivity and excess. The opposite appears true in Niederman's work. In his fictional Louisiana, for example, the characters dine on gumbo and crawfish etouffée, the latter made with a ''roux glazed with butter and sprinkled with chopped green onions'' (4). Pralines are a favorite sweet, and a popular lunch features the po' boy sandwich with ''crab-boil, sauteed shrimp, and salami, fried oysters, sliced tomatoes, and onions'' (114). For Niederman, the description of regional cuisine is a strategy not only for character development but also for the creation of an accurate and evocative setting.

Niederman has, according to his own statement, made a sustained effort to learn how to write like Virginia Andrews, and he has succeeded so well that there now are nineteen novels by ''V. C. Andrews,'' eleven of them published after Andrews died in 1986. At least eight of the posthumously published books are entirely Andrew Niederman's work; three more may have been based on outlines or notes or even drafts left by Andrews on her death. Andrews created a new subgenre of the Gothic; Niederman is, novel by novel, pushing the boundaries of that subgenre, all the while retaining the essential outlines and characteristics of the Andrews Gothic. The most crucial change to date is Niederman's move away from the timeless fairy tale world of Andrews's fiction to a more realistic evocation of the world familiar to readers of the Andrews books. But the suggestion of evil in the world remains, and the V. C. Andrews books continue to inspire the kind of uncertainty and fear in which young readers of Gothic fiction delight.

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