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**Subjugation and emancipation in the fiction of Lisa Alther**

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Subjugation and Emancipation in  
the Fiction of Lisa Alther

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Subjugation and Emancipation in  
the Fiction of Lisa Alther

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## Abstract

### Subjugation and Emancipation in the Fiction of Lisa Alther

by Gwendolyn Hale White

Lisa Alther writes of the individual's search for personal identity. Although people tend to seek fulfillment through The Other (person, group, ideology), Alther concludes that definition must ultimately come from within. Only The Self, then, and not The Other, can provide any satisfying and long-lasting answers.

In Kinflicks, Alther concentrates on one woman's search for positive, internal definition. Ginny Babcock attempts to define herself as a flag-swinger, motorcycle moll, student, lesbian, political activist, wife, and mother. She seeks fulfillment in The Other through the externals of: changing clothes/changing identities, sexual encounters, subjugation into relationships, and her preoccupation with death. Ginny is ultimately able to free herself from the stifling identification with The Other, painfully learning that The Other can never function as a replacement for The Self.

Alther's second novel, Original Sins, deals with the searches of five young men and women (Jed, Sally, Raymond, Donny, and Emily) who struggle separately and together to grow, to change, and to find some meaning for their existence. Many times their searches are thwarted by externals (The Other) as some of the characters come closer to internal definition than do others. Alther chronicles their lives through love and sex, marriage and infidelity, passion and ambition, politics and social history, feminism and counter-cultures, racial animosity and protest, and isolation and death.

Finally, in Other Women, Alther focuses on two women (Hannah and Caroline) and their separate struggles--brought together by therapy and moved forward toward positive and self-defining ends. Hannah has already worked through that seemingly lifelong search in a positive and successful way, and after the therapy, Caroline is well on the way to personal fulfillment.

For all of Alther's characters, a positiveness exists in the possibility of choices. Although background, gender, and social status may make the way more difficult, the ultimate choice belongs to the individual--if he or she can manage to find personal identity. Alther leaves us with choices, and her lesson is simple, yet extremely painful: The Self is the ultimate and final answer.



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Lisa Alther, born in Kingsport, Tennessee, on July 23, 1944, and eventually transported to Vermont, produced her first major novel, Kinflicks, in 1976. This massive 500-page novel was followed by Original Sins in 1981 and Other Women in 1984. As of this writing, Alther is working on a fourth novel. Her published short stories include "Encounter," "Termites," and selections from Kinflicks.

In a recent letter, Alther states that she has spent most of her adult life "writing and mothering . . . except for two years in London" (Sept. 11, 1987). Besides the novels and stories, she has written articles for Vermont Freeman, Natural History, Yankee, New Society, New Englander, New Times, New York Times Sunday Magazine, Mankind, New York Times Book Review, and Guardian. With a B.A. in English from Wellesley, she worked as an editorial assistant for Atheneum Publishers and as a free-lance writer for Garden Way Publishers before beginning to work seriously on the novels.

Kinflicks was accepted in the literary world even before its publication. An initial printing of thirty

thousand copies contributed to the extensive prepublication publicity that announced its arrival. The fervor that surrounded the publication of Kinflicks may have stemmed (according to John Leonard) from the fact that Alther was contributing to American contemporary literature a tone of voice "missing in American fiction for years . . . the speech of breezy survivors, of Holden Caulfield, Augie March and . . . Huckleberry Finn" (4). Unlike those predecessors, however, the protagonist of Kinflicks, Virginia Babcock Bliss (Ginny), is female--yet she experiences the same trials in her search for Self that had previously been reserved in fiction for male characters. Maxine Hairston, in "Modern Feminist Fiction: A Course for Returning Women Students," sees the heroine of Kinflicks as an "energetic, self-aware [woman] who [is] actively pursuing both liberty and happiness, but who [does] not retreat to passivity and despair when [her] search falters" (7). As Hairston notes, Ginny comes to understand that she cannot find her identity (sexual or otherwise) through men because "no autonomous person can develop identity through another" (7).

Alther's fiction obviously examines the search for identity and The Self. Although she admits in a letter dated July 8, 1987, that "most writers aren't the best authorities on their own work," she reveals in a letter

of September 11, 1987, the focus that preoccupied her as she wrote her three novels. She states that she was spending a lot of time thinking about "the process of self-definition" and that "you have to go through a period of defining yourself via externals including other people, and having those definitions fail you, prior to arriving at the understanding that the definition has to arrive from within." In Kinflicks, Original Sins, and Other Women, Alther works through those external forces that affect self-definition--arriving at the conclusion that only The Self and not The Other can provide any satisfying and long-lasting answers.

Alther's fiction takes the reader of her novels through one woman's search (Ginny in Kinflicks), through the searches of five young men and women (Original Sins), and through the searches of two women (Other Women); in each novel she arrives at the same hopeful conclusion that she states in the letter of September 11, 1987: "I think it's possible to grow, and change in positive ways, and learn, but I don't think it's easy. In fact, it seems to take a lifetime for most people."

By the time Alther gets to Other Women, she is able to write about a woman (Hannah) who has worked through that seemingly lifelong search in a positive and successful way. In Alther's words, "I wanted to take, basically,

a small room and two characters and see if I could make it interesting, as opposed to the vast canvas and cast of characters in the first two. I was trying for depth rather than breadth, I guess" (Sept. 11, 1987). And in the process, Alther creates the ultimate answer--much more specifically focused than in Kinflicks and in Original Sins. While Hannah represents the woman who has made it, Caroline represents the woman who is still struggling--in much the same way that Ginny and Jed and Raymond and Sally and Emily and Donny struggle. For all of Alther's characters, however, having to make choices is a positive experience because it implies that the characters can have some control over their lives. Although background, gender, and social status may make the way more difficult, the ultimate choice does belong to the individual--if he or she can manage to find personal identity within The Self.

The basic theme that Alther is to use in all three novels takes its shape early in her career in the short story, "Encounter," which portrays a young woman and her desire to define her role in life as more than Wife or Mother. Rachel "wanted to be more than simply Peter's wife and Molly's mother. Today she would discover someone who had been a stranger to her: herself" (114). Rachel,

married to Peter for five years and mother of four-year-old Molly, has had an abortion eight months before. While Rachel wrestles with the consequences of this decision, her story, however, is not really about her abortion nor its consequences for her life. Rachel is searching for some meaning, for an identity of her own. She has already learned that her identity cannot be found in her relationship with her husband--though when she married Peter, she mistakenly believed that her answers could lie in him and in their marriage.

This was the way she'd assumed life would be for Peter and her when they'd married five years ago--that they'd amble through a perpetual spring, an attractive young couple hand-in-hand with their admirable children, forever bathed in sunlight. (114)

It takes little time, however, for Rachel to discover that her happiness cannot be confined and bound within the structure of any relationship.

When Max, the young and attractive gynecologist, propositions Rachel as she sits alone in a crowded restaurant, she realizes, for the first time, that her search has nothing to do with sex or with men. Her search, instead, lies within. "I need some time to myself without being anyone's wife or mother or mistress" (146),



she tells Max. The realization that what she seeks cannot be found in Peter nor in Max nor in Molly nor in any other relationship has motivated Rachel to leave her Vermont home and go on retreat in Montreal for a period of self-reflection. Concerning her marriage, she has already become aware of the first lesson in self-realization: "Their marriage was civilized. They no longer expected to be the whole world to each other. Why had she wasted so much time?" (144). Now that the realization has dawned, however, Rachel is unsure of what to do next, of how to react to the other people in her life, and of how she should focus on a direction for her life.

As Rachel wrestles with whether she should engage in an afternoon of passion with Max, she wrestles, too, with her own feelings:

But knowing that these feelings were normal and would pass didn't alter the dampening effect they were having on this afternoon's proposed bout of passion. And what wouldn't pass was the self-doubt: The knowledge that something that had seemed so right, so necessary, so inevitable in July [the abortion] could seem so questionable now had undermined her confidence in her ability to make healthy decisions. What wouldn't pass was a bit of self-knowledge:

People were really different from each other. Some could move in and out of situations, abortions or affairs, with ease; but she couldn't. An isolated, self-contained afternoon of sex with Max wasn't a real possibility for her, she saw now. She hadn't wanted another child but couldn't cope with abortion. She didn't want marriage but couldn't handle casual trysts. (146)

She realizes, finally, that her search will find no conclusion--only possible and probable complications--if she consents to making love with Max.

Rachel resists the inevitable confrontation with herself and dreads "returning to her room and wrestling with her same old boring hang-ups about marriage and motherhood, life and love, those hang-ups she was supposedly in Montreal to straighten out once and for all" (143). Even though she realizes that postponing the inevitable confrontation is futile, she continues to struggle through a few, fleeting hours with Max. Rachel learns something, however, and while she may not have reached the answers, she at least now knows that she must confront The Self--devoid of any intimacy with other people. She will continue to grow, to change, to struggle, and to confront herself in that everlasting battle to find her own identity.

Subsequent chapters of this study examine Alther's variations on the themes that arise in "Encounter." Ginny, for whom Rachel is the prototype, is the subject of a chapter entitled "Sinflicks." The next chapter, "Original Ends," examines the interrelated characters of Original Sins and their mostly futile attempts at fulfillment. Finally, in "The Other," the search reaches a somewhat positive conclusion. Ginny Babcock's search is discussed through her attempts at definition through the externals of changing clothes/changing identities; sexual encounters, subjugation into the male/female relationship, the female/female relationship, and the mother/daughter relationship; and in her preoccupation with death. The search in Original Sins is discussed via the searches of the five main characters--Jed, Sally, Raymond, Donny, and Emily--as they struggle separately and together to grow, to change, and to find some meaning. Many times their searches are thwarted by the externals (The Other) as some of these characters come closer to internal definition than do others. The discussion of Other Women, finally, focuses mainly on Caroline and Hannah and their separate struggles--brought together by the therapy and toward more positive and self-defining ends.

## Chapter 2

### Sinflicks

Virginia Hull Babcock Bliss (Ginny), the protagonist of Kinflicks, is more than an individual character. She also is more than a symbol for Southern Woman coming of age in the sixties. She represents struggle, defeat, and triumph. Ginny emerges out of the fleeting promises of her relationships as a whole person, no longer suffocated or submerged by attempting to achieve unity with another person. Ginny finds, after twenty-seven years and various, futile struggles with trying to attach herself to her mother, to men, and to other women, that she is Whole in One--no longer suppressed, divided, or fragmented. The Other (which represents the other person or group in her myriad relationships) finally takes its proper position as an addition to The Self instead of as a subtraction which nulls not only the relationship but The Self as well.

Kinflicks is the story of Ginny's search for identity, for wholeness. The "kinflicks" of the title is Ginny's term for the many segments and scenes of her childhood and youth. Mrs. Babcock, Ginny's mother, takes

and collects photographs of family members in an effort to continue ancestral traditional values. An obvious play on the word "skinflicks," "kinflicks" has an overt and unmistakable sexual denotation as well as other more subtle connotations. Ginny's search for identity through her various relationships is graphically presented through the kinflicks of changing clothes/changing identities and of changing sexual orientation/changing relationships. Woven throughout these kinflicks of Ginny's life are the threads of Southern tradition, of family restraints, and of physical and psychological death. "Kinflicks," therefore (besides the obvious "skinflicks"), also means "kinfolks," "sinflicks," "endflicks," and perhaps even "kinfucks."

Structurally, Kinflicks freezes momentarily on each frame of Ginny's life. "Walking the Knife's Edge, or Blue Balls in Bibleland" films Ginny's years as a Southern teen-ager, the typical flag-swinging, traditionalized and peer-pressured young woman of the late fifties and early sixties. The next chapter (or photograph) in Ginny's life, "Harleys, Hcodlums, and Home-Brew," details her first period of rebellion against established norms as she joins Clem Cloyd in his death-defying antics. In "Worthley Material," Ginny is chronicled through her college years. She suffers from "Divided Loyalties" as

she experiences a lesbian relationship and accepts money from her father's munitions factory at the same time that she is protesting establishment corruption. "Wedded Bliss" to Ira Bliss becomes the ultimate irony in the pages of Ginny's photograph album of her life, and the "Mandala Tattoo" is a portrayal of desperation.

In between the chapters (photographs/kinflicks) of Ginny's past, Alther presents seven sections spanning twenty-eight days of Ginny's present predicament. In this four-week period of time, Ginny completes her search for self and emerges whole. The twenty-eight days represent not only the female, monthly, physical cycle but the deeper meanings of birth and death as they are manifest in Alther's exploration of the mother/daughter relationship. Birth and death, love and sex, isolation and submergence of identity, tradition and family--all are investigated and analyzed through Ginny's quest.

Virginia Hull (the virgin, hollow shell seeking to find fulfillment) Babcock Bliss encounters several diverse characters on her journey toward maturity. Although symbolically named to correspond to the scenario being depicted, each character, nevertheless, emerges as an individual. The power lorded over Ginny by her father, The Major (as opposed to minor), is the most important force in her life until she meets Joe Bob Sparks. "Joe

Bob" is a typical Southern, double first name, and Joe Bob creates sparks of desire in Ginny even though they are never fanned into flames. Clem Cloyd is the flashy, motorcycle-riding representation of deformity--both physical and psychological. Ginny is soon "cloyed" with Clem, and Miss Head, of Worthley College, takes over Ginny's education. Eddie Holzer (with her masculine first name and feminine-orifice last name) replaces the cerebral image of Miss Head. When Ginny marries Ira Bliss, the union is anything but euphoric. Hawk, the Vietnam war deserter, preys on Ginny's psyche as he introduces her to mystical sex practices. Finally, Ginny is able to confront the woman who has no name of her own. She is referred to only as Mrs. Babcock (identified by her husband) or as Ginny's mother (the only other identity she ever experiences).

Ginny is in turn a flag-swinger, motorcycle moll, college student, lesbian, political activist, wife, and mother. She passes through these various experiences by attempting to identify with The Other. The outer trappings of physical appearance play an important, visible part in what occurs beneath the surface as Ginny struggles to conform to the expectations of others. The same analogy can be applied to Ginny's sexual experiences as those various experiences mirror her longing to find

fulfillment. Enlaced throughout the multiple episodes, the theme of death permeates Ginny's very existence. Finally, Ginny confronts and gains an understanding of the mother/daughter relationship.

In a review of Kinflicks, John Leonard states that Ginny "tries on selves as though they were training bras" (4). Similarly, Germaine Greer writes that the "developments in Miss Babcock are signalled by changes of clothes and hairstyle" (1046). Both of these statements are true as far as they go, but both reviewers stop short of the real point.

It is painfully evident that Ginny slips in and out of identities as quickly and as easily as one can change a blouse. It is also obvious that each stage or crisis or passage in Ginny's life is easily identified by the clothes she chooses during each segment of her progression toward self-realization. The point, however, is not that Ginny's wardrobe reflects her particular life stage but that she actually does not choose her hairstyle nor her clothes any more than she chooses each particular identity which she confronts, tries to assimilate, and eventually discards. Only in the shedding of each imposed identity does Ginny make the real choices and show signs of self-realization and individuality and independence from social pressures; from family ties, roots, and duties; from



dependence on relationships; and from the constraints placed on her by her Southern heritage. Although growth occurs with each association, it is not evident as such until the final assimilation and enlightenment at the end of the novel when Ginny faces the ultimate confrontation with her mother.

The reader is as aware as Ms. Alther (although Ginny is not) that the traditional "preppy uniforms" of the late fifties and early sixties were not ones of choice, but were, in fact, dictated by tradition, by one's peers, by one's mother, by where one lived, and by one's social class. The "plumed helmet . . . short shorts and go-go boots" (28, 29) that Ginny dons as a member of the high school Flag Corps is a prescribed uniform worn by every member of the group. What she wears on and off the field is just as prescribed as the intricate maneuvers she performs as a flag twirler.

When Joe Bob Sparks picks Ginny up for school, she has changed her clothes from her flag uniform to her school "uniform": "cordovan loafers with leather tassels and a madras shirtwaist with a Peter Pan collar" (33). Although Alther doesn't continue the description, Ginny is also probably wearing a gold circle pin attached to the Peter Pan collar and white socks stuffed into her loafers. Joe Bob, too, is attired in the same manner as every other

middle-class, white Southern male of the time in his "tan chinos and a plaid Gant shirt and penny loafers" (33). He sports a crew cut and, like Ginny, is probably wearing white socks. There is no allowance for individuality, for separate expression, nor for any deviation from the accepted norm. These students are identified as clean-cut, normal, All-Southern teen-agers and, as Ginny observes, they "looked clean and pressed and identical to every other member of the Hullsport High student body" (33). This is the "in" group, the young people who are expected to grow and mature in certain, predetermined ways. Many of the girls are expected to marry soon after high school. If they do attend college, the expectation is more for an MRS. degree than it is for a B.S. degree. As Ginny perceives when she begins her first menstrual period, "bleeding like a stuck pig every month [is] the price exacted for being allowed to scrub some man's toilet bowl every week" (32). Even the physical and biological make-up of the female appears to contribute to the Southern woman's destiny--at least during the time that Ginny is beginning to mature into young womanhood.

No one tells Ginny (least of all her mother who is locked into the dutiful-wife syndrome) that she can, indeed, make her own choices, beginning with the clothes she wears. Instead, she moves (not necessarily

progresses) in and out of identities that are prescribed by other people, by her heritage, and by being female. As a child playing rough-house football with the boys, Ginny erroneously believes that she can grow up to be an Oakland Raider, but that is before, as she says, she learns the "bitter lesson that women [lead] their lives through men" (31). Ginny's best insight seems to exist in the innocence of childhood when all things appear possible. When her body changes into adolescence, however, she becomes locked into a path determined by the women who came before her (specifically her mother), by the men in her life, by social convention, and by her Southernness. The "bitter lesson" that Ginny learns is a lesson of the way things are, however, and not one of the way things have to be. Ginny must try on a multitude of clothes and a multitude of identities before she "unlearns" that bitter lesson and finds, instead, that when she goes to "where she has no idea" (518), she at least goes as Ginny and not as Wife, Mother, Daughter, Southern Girl, Political Activist, Beauty Queen, Lesbian, Moll, Feminist, and on and on. Before she finds Ginny, however, the passages in and out of trial internal identities are perfectly mirrored by an obvious intentional parallel to external appearances. Just as the particular identity dictates what Ginny must wear, so

does the identity dictate what Ginny must think and how she must act.

When the flag-twirling Ginny of the London Fog raincoat and Villager blouses starts dating the blue-jeaned, black-jacketed, and Harley-riding hoodlum, Clem Cloyd, she not only changes her clothes, but she changes her act. She donates her wraparound skirts and madras shirtwaists to a "Teen Team for Jesus rummage sale as [her] parting gesture" (137) to traditional respectability. Clem Cloyd belongs to the group (no less prescribed and traditional than the middle-class one of Joe Bob Sparks) of high-school hoods who wear "unspeakable tight studded blue jeans with pegged legs, and black ankle boots and dark T-shirts and windbreakers" (133). When Ginny becomes his Moll, she must, according to the dictates of this particular group, change her clothes, her attitudes, her actions and reactions, her method of speaking, her associations, and her expectations. She discards her flag and her twirling uniform "under the prodding of Clem's scorn" (130) just as quickly as she renews an old "friendship" with Maxine.

When Clem forces Ginny to try some moonshine, he also forces her to "like it," and Ginny dutifully complies. "'Delicious!'" she gasps, "desperately eager to please him for reasons that were unclear to [her] at

the time" (122). The reasons are excruciatingly clear: she must conform to the dictates of the group and to the desires of The Other. She can no more express her distaste for the moonshine than she can continue to wear her Weejuns and Villagers. Ginny begins to imitate Maxine's mode of dress and describes the change in character-revealing terms:

a long-sleeved cardigan sweater buttoned up the back, with a bra that had pointed cups like party hats; a small gold cross on a fine gold chain, lodged between my breasts; a too-tight straight skirt that hugged my ass so closely as to make me look as though I were sitting down when I was standing; black ballet slippers, which I shuffled as I walked. (137)

Ginny doesn't even make her own decision to begin dating Clem. Instead, Clem becomes her lover because of her relationship with Joe Bob. Her parents and Joe Bob's football coach are beginning to suspect sexual liaisons, and Joe Bob decides that she should be seen with other boys to throw the adults off track. When Clem arrives for their first date, probably bedecked in his usual windbreaker with the "island of Korea embroidered in garish yellows and greens on one breast, and an Oriental

dragon all across the back" (115), Ginny cannot even decide where they should go on their date. Any decisions and choices are always left to Parent, Boyfriend, or Group. Ginny is not only unable to make a decision, she is totally shocked when Clem asks her where she wants to go: "I was speechless. I was accustomed to being taken places by my dates, not to deciding where myself. 'I don't care,' I said meekly. 'You decide'" (116).

"You decide" is the motto that guides Ginny throughout her varied trek through myriad relationships. Her mother decides, Joe Bob decides, Clem decides. Later, Miss Head decides, Eddie Holzer decides, and Ira Bliss decides. Ginny does not make her first real decision until she, like Huckleberry Finn, strikes out "for the territory" after Mrs. Babcock's death. It doesn't matter that she doesn't know where she is going. What matters is that she is going and that she can finally go without being encumbered by the decisions and choices of others. In the meantime, she must still encounter Miss Head, Eddie, and Ira, and work through her relationship with her mother.

Before Ginny leaves Hullsport for Worthley College, she vainly attempts to merge two identities, but the two identities do not belong to Ginny alone. While she is dating Clem, she dons a yellow organdy evening dress in

order to relinquish her crown as reigning Persimmon Plains Burley Tobacco Festival Queen to the next recipient. She has an encounter with a "good ole woman" farmer's wife, who is "dressed in faded bib overalls and flannel shirt. Her hair was dull and frizzy, especially in contrast to the glossy bouffanted manes of the new queen" (144) and Ginny. After the festival, Ginny gathers her billowing yellow skirts and roars off behind Clem on his Harley. The material from the long dress floats loose during the ride, blinding Clem, and causing Ginny to fall from the motorcycle. Her attempt at assimilating her Southern Belle image with her Moll image is doomed to failure.

When Ginny arrives at Worthley College, the decisions about what to wear, what to think, and how to act are taken over by Miss Head of the stereotypical severe bun and horn-rimmed glasses. Miss Head wears a "beige nylon blouse . . . high-necked and firmly secured at the throat by a rose-tinted cameo brooch . . . [and] on the jacket of her burnt orange tweed suit . . . hung a small round watch" (174). To Ginny, who has assumed her "Clem" identity in an attempt to shock Miss Head into refusing her acceptance into Worthley, Miss Head looks like the "plastic model of the human cerebrum that sat in the Hullsport High biology lab" (174). Ginny wears to the

interview not only her defiant Clem identity but the clothes which are so integral a part of it:

a black, too-tight straight skirt; a black cardigan buttoned up the back with a Do-It Pruitt pointed bra underneath; Clem's red dragon wind-breaker . . . black ballet slippers; and Clem's huge clanking identification bracelet. (173)

Even before the interview concludes, however, Ginny begins to lose the "Clem" identity and begins to take on the one offered by Miss Head. Ginny realizes that the world of Miss Head is but one more identity she will try and that "Clem Cloyd seemed very far away from Kant and Hegel" (177-78). In a flash of insight (though uttered in an act of defiance), Ginny responds to Miss Head's question of what is most meaningful to her self-concept with a question herself: "Which self-concept? I've had several" (176). And, indeed, Ginny is to take on several more self-concepts in various guises and disguises before she can emerge into her own.

By the end of her first semester at Worthley, Ginny is firmly entrenched in philosophy, hooked on tea, and steeped in the identity deemed appropriate by Miss Head. Ginny lets her hair grow (both literally and figuratively) and buys "a dozen wool suits and some high-necked nylon



blouses, an antique cameo brooch [replacing the gold circle pin and Clem's ID bracelet of the past] and some low-heeled simple shoes" (190). As she delves further into Descartes, Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Schopenhauer, she becomes intellectually attired in exploring ideas while she is now physically dressed in a tweed skirt and the cameo brooch.

Miss Head is well aware that she is imposing not only her philosophical biases but her personal biases on Ginny, and Ginny is an easy mark. It is an extremely easy task to dress Ginny in the college tweed of history and ethics and philosophy and literature. She tells Ginny that she displays "a remarkable ability . . . to adapt to [her] surroundings--a sort of protective coloration" (192). The problem with this sort of adaptability, however, is that Ginny becomes the human chameleon, taking on the trappings and attitudes of those around her while never developing her own sense of direction.

At Worthley, too, Ginny meets Eddie Holzer who initiates Ginny not only into a lesbian affair but into the feminist movement. Eddie introduces Ginny to political activism, to the protest movement, and to the demonstration circuit. Again, as did the girls at Hullsport High, the young women in this group are dressed alike--both physically and philosophically.

Ginny, as she begins her stint into the "isms" of the sixties, realizes that, once again, she must replace her clothes and her ideologies to conform to the group with which she finds herself associated: "They all looked identical to Eddie in their wheat jeans and turtlenecks and sandals, with long straight hair or braids. I felt instantly intimidated in my Helena Head tweed suit and bun" (229). As Ginny and Eddie prepare to leave Worthley, Eddie symbolically pulls the hairpins from Ginny's tight bun, divides her long hair into three thick strands, and manipulates the hair into a single braid. Although preaching individualism and separateness from established norms, the group of feminists simply exchanges the ideologies of one group for the ideologies of another group. They now bow to the dictates of the newly formed group, and Ginny soon falls in line with them.

Ginny and Eddie become lovers, leave Worthley for an apartment in Cambridge, and begin attending all the "peace marches, rent strikes, [and] work slowdowns" (273) that they can find in an attempt to protest establishment corruption. Although the trappings are again different from anything Ginny has encountered before, she realizes that "basically I hadn't changed" (273). Indeed, Ginny is still conforming by appearing not to conform.

When Ginny and Eddie move to a communal farm in Vermont, her wheat pants are replaced by "army fatigues . . . lumberjack shirt . . . olive air force parka . . . [a] Sisterhood is Powerful T-shirt [and] combat boots" (383). Here Ginny becomes, for a brief period, firmly entrenched in the feminist movement, leaving behind "The Family and The City . . . [and] American capitalist-imperialistic economy altogether" (288). The Free Farm women, called the Soybean People by the community of Stark Bog, or less kindly referred to as "Communists, lesbians . . . atheists, [and] food stamp recipients" (301), are easily identifiable as they begin their mission of winning over the people to "The Revolution" (301). The women are dressed identically in "plaid wool lumberjack shirts and khaki army fatigue pants and green rubber boots" (301). Basically, the experiment at The Free Farm is a fiasco from the beginning. Ginny is as out of step and out of place with this group as she has been in attempting to completely identify with earlier groups: the flag twirlers, the "Clem" group, and the Worthley group. There are elements of Ginny's emerging identity that she contributes to each group, just as there are elements of each group that help to contribute to Ginny's yet-to-be-formed concept of self. Every experience, however painful or seemingly unimportant, helps to form that part of Ginny

which will eventually allow her to strike out on her own with the seeds of fully developed identity growing and maturing.

When Ginny marries Ira Bliss, she trades her lumber-jack shirts and combat boots for "polyester pantsuits and jersey tops" (384). Her braid is replaced by long hair "pulled back and tied with a scarf" (384). This is the "working" uniform of the middle-class wife who must join the "surprise shower scene" and the "Tupperware party set" and the "Women's Auxiliary of the Stark's Bog Volunteer Fire Department" (384). Another required uniform of Ginny's newly acquired identity is a "crinolined skirt and puffy scoop-necked blouse" that she must wear to the weekly square dances of the Wheelers 'n' Reelers.

Ginny is now peeling potatoes, cleaning up the hall after the Volunteer Fire Department meetings, participating in fashion shows, and making monumental decisions about whether to cook roast or liver for dinner. The Wife image merges into the Earth Mother image with the birth of Wendy, but Ginny soon finds that even a child cannot take the place of one's own identity. There is something missing that friends, husband, parents, child (in short, other people) cannot provide for Ginny.

When Ginny boards a plane bound for Hullsport to attend her dying mother, she is totally alone. Ira has

thrown her out of the house at gunpoint, and Ginny returns to the beginning to work through the relationship that has plagued her from childhood. She is dressed for the return home, both literally and figuratively, in fragments from her thus-far-thwarted journey toward self-realization and discovery--in a hodgepodge ensemble that reflects her myriad and separate identities. She sports "a patchwork peasant dress and combat boots and a frizzy Anglo-Afro hairdo, with a knapsack on her back and a Peruvian llama wool poncho over the pack so that she looked like a hunched crone" (17).

As Ginny arrives at the Hullsport airport, alone and on her own and facing the most important and monumental crisis yet, the kinflicks of her life pass in review, neatly summarizing the stages through which Ginny has passed to reach this culmination. The kinflicks of her arrivals and departures freeze momentarily to picture each Ginny who has passed in and out of her various guises:

a black cardigan buttoned up the back and a too-tight straight skirt and Clem Cloyd's red silk Korean windbreaker when she left home for college in Boston; a smart tweed suit and horn-rim Ben Franklin glasses and a severe bun after a year at Worthley; wheat jeans and a black turtleneck and Goliath sandals after

she became Eddie Holzer's lover and dropped out of Worthley; a red Stark's Bog Volunteer Fire Department Women's Auxiliary blazer after her marriage to Ira Bliss. (16)

Ginny is ready at last to confront not only the ghosts of her past but the demons of the present. She must now confront her own mortality in the body of her dying mother. When Ginny grows into her own identity and leaves the cabin for the final time, an important first can be observed. We don't know what Ginny is wearing. Finally, it doesn't matter how she dresses because there is no need for guises or disguises or conformity. We see Ginny at last and not her clothes.

In this picturesque novel, alternating between the bedside vigil and flashbacks of Ginny's own kinflicks, Ginny, while changing her clothes to correspond with her shared identities, is at the same time experimenting with sexual roles. Ginny's search for sexual identity is entangled and immersed in her search for personal identity, in her fate of being born female in the South, and in her various relationships where sex (in its many forms and guises) becomes an almost inevitable outgrowth of each alliance. As she moves from one person to another, from one group to another, from one ideology to another, she not only takes on the identity of The

Other but becomes engulfed in fulfilling the demands of those around her. Ginny's needs are at best secondary and at worst nonexistent. Ginny's heterosexual relationships with Joe Bob Sparks, with Clem Cloyd, with Ira Bliss, and with Hawk (although placing different external demands on Ginny's "feminine mystique") are similar in their internal suffocation of Ginny's hidden desire for individuality and autonomy.

The men in Ginny's life (beginning with her father, the Major) are self-oriented, ego-centered, commanding, and tyrannically powerful. Eddie Holzer, Ginny's one venture into homosexuality, is just as overbearing and demanding as the men in Ginny's life. According to Frederick Waage, Eddie, "with male role as well as name in their relationship, destroys herself in seeking total control and possession" (203) of Ginny. Even Miss Head, the main asexual relationship that Ginny experiences, wields her power with such intensity that the relationship begins to exhibit sexual undertones. Power and sex are undoubtedly intertwined, and Ginny succumbs in each relationship to the will and to the desires of the other person.

Ginny's initiation into the one role that will follow her throughout the entire book begins, predictably, with the Major and Mrs. Babcock. Ginny's mother

spends her life nurturing her husband and Ginny, performing her wifely and motherly and womanly duties. She bequeaths these ideas to Ginny by projecting the traditional Southern role of women who must be totally dedicated to the family while sacrificing their own identities. Mrs. Babcock realizes on her deathbed that "by always doing everything for them, usually in advance of their requesting it," she has "undermined their drive and self-confidence" (261-62). The Major, the literal and symbolic head of the family, is Ginny's original initiation into guilt and submission.

When Ginny begins dating Joe Bob Sparks, she is entering the relationship with certain attitudes and behaviors already firmly established by her parents, by her peers, and by her Southern heritage. Alice Adams, in "Endjokes," calls Joe Bob Sparks, "of the idiot smile, a nonverbal communicator if there ever was one" (94). Joe Bob typifies and symbolizes the emerging adolescent male image so prevalent in the South in the fifties. Joe Bob's physical and athletic prowess is rivaled only by his sexual ineptness and selfish domination. Joe Bob is no more aware of his already-established role in the male-female relationship than is Ginny; without thinking, both follow the patterns set by their parents with the male dominating and the female submitting. Problems



begin to emerge in this kind of relationship only when the female tries to exert her individuality by breaking out of submission. Ginny never even tries.

Soon after Ginny and Joe Bob begin dating, they start performing "those mating rituals called the boogaloo and the chicken scratch" (30) at the football victory dance. They circle "each other slowly with carefully calculated flailings of arms and legs, with coyly disguised thrusts of hips and profferings of breasts" (30). Joe Bob, and by extension all other males of his social class and region and age, pursues and conquers women in much the same way that he exhibits his interest and ability in athletic endeavors. Young men like Joe Bob apply the terminology of sports to descriptions of their relationships with women. They "get to first base" or they "score a home run" or they "play the field." Paul Gray, writing a review of Kinflicks in 1976, refers to Alther's picaresque novel as presenting a female view of life as contrasted to the previous monopoly of male-oriented depictions. Gray, however, descends into that characteristic, male-oriented language as he continues: "The organs are different; the scoring is the same" (80).

At the victory dance, Joe Bob wears his wrist and ankle weights and wraps his "musclcd arms around [Ginny] as though enfolding a football for a line drive, his

wrist weights clanking together" (31) behind Ginny's back. According to the rules and traditions already established, Joe Bob and Ginny know just how far their sexual relationship is allowed to proceed based on the status of their social and personal relationship. As long as they are just dating, they can proceed slowly (along established guidelines) through their sexual experimentation so that by the time football and basketball seasons are over and baseball season arrives, "everything above the waist [is] fair ball" (45). Joe Bob seems to know instinctively when to push the developing relationship to the next inning of the ballgame. When he asks Ginny to wear his ring, they are both well aware that "Hullsport High tradition required that each new material commitment between a couple signal a new array of carnal privileges" (46). Ginny and Joe Bob are obviously inexperienced and inept, and Ginny describes their gropings in poignant and touching, yet agonized and satirical detail:

Then in one of the lightning-quick plays he was so renowned for on the athletic fields, one of his fingers skirted the elastic and buried itself in me like Jack Horner's thumb in a Christmas pudding. We both sat immobile, startled by the success of his venture and uncertain of the next way station in our

journey together toward the Golgotha of sexual intercourse. We looked at each other, perplexed. . . . We sat motionless for a couple of minutes, uncertain of how to disentangle ourselves and proceed. (46-47)

As Ginny and Joe Bob begin the expected and traditional ritual known as the mating game, Ginny must, according to convention, begin to dismantle the bonds that connect her to her father. When she arrives home late one night with her make-up smeared, her hair disarranged, and her jacket hastily buttoned incorrectly, the Major attempts to assert his territorial rights as ruling male in her life. As Ginny looks back on the argument, she realizes that "the Major and I were enacting the ancient sexual drama in which a daughter makes the break with her father, her true love since infancy, by taking a man her own age" (49). The Major uses all of the age-old arguments to keep his daughter (his love) shackled to his newly questioned authority. He tells her she is not like other Southerners and must go to college in the North; he tries to scare her with tales of psychopaths in lovers' lanes; he tries to frighten her with projections of how unhappy she will be if she marries a shoe salesman. Ginny, however, is undaunted and transfers her allegiance from the Major to Joe Bob. Ginny and Joe

Bob spend the remainder of their relationship trying to hide from the prying eyes of the Major and Joe Bob's coach. They manage trysts in the high school dark room and liaisons in the trunk of Doyle's Dodge Dart. As Lore Dickstein points out, "Sparks takes Ginny through all the stages of devirgination, but never manages to 'do it'" (90).

It is with Clem Cloyd, the "crippled hood-about-town" (64), that Ginny finally loses her virginity. They have known each other as children and begin their adolescent mating rite by playing "Five Minutes in Heaven" in the Major's basement bomb-shelter. In this same bomb-shelter, Clem further widens the gap between Ginny and her father. He takes over from Joe Bob as Ginny transfers fealty from one man to another. The Major makes a valiant effort at restoring the precarious bonds that hold Ginny to him by wielding his power in Hullsport. Joe Bob, too, thinks that his discovering the potency of the female clitoris will enable him to keep Ginny under his masculine domination. They are both wrong, and Ginny turns to Clem Cloyd.

Clem, who gets his supply of colored condoms and French Ticklers from his brother Floyd, is as inept as Joe Bob in performing the sexual act. Both boys are intent only on satisfying their own physical desires while Ginny is busy concentrating on emotional concerns.

Ginny erroneously believes that her physical cooperation in the act of sex is but one of the ways she must satisfy a man. She must like what he likes, do what he asks, and open her legs to receive Clem's condom-covered "small salami, lime-green and glowing fluorescently" (129).

The Major, in the final, conscious act of his diminishing power over Ginny, forces her to attend Worthley College and thus removes her (or so he believes) from the source of her corruption: The South, hoodlums like Clem, and unambitious boys like Joe Bob. Indeed, the Major's ploy almost works--at least for a while. At Worthley and during the consequent association with Miss Head, Ginny enters the asexual period of her quest for identity. She transforms attention from her pubic area to her brain--aided and nourished in the attempt by her philosophy professor. Miss Head explains to Ginny that

the human organism has only so much energy at its disposal. If you divert a great deal of it into any one channel, you can expect the others to collapse or atrophy. If you squander your vital energies on your emotional life . . . plan to be physically and mentally bankrupt.

(186)

The relationship between Ginny and Miss Head becomes just as intense as Ginny's previous encounters with her

father, with Joe Bob, and with Clem. Just as physical expression (no matter how forbidden) exists in the father/daughter kinship, so do sexual ripples exist in the authoritative/subordinate affiliation between professor and student. Ginny submits herself to Miss Head with all the energy and verve of a love affair. Ginny begins to dress like her, she begins to talk and act like her, and she begins to mirror and mimic the philosophical and psychological ideologies of Miss Head as if they were her own. Ginny begins to spout Cartesian philosophy in perfect parody of Miss Head, and Ginny observes that she is "progressing well as [Miss Head's] mouthpiece. . . . I was gaining Worthley, but was I losing Hullsport in the bargain?" (198). Ginny is, indeed, losing Hullsport, but she is still no closer to escaping the limitations placed on her by others.

Although Ginny's tenure at Worthley is asexual (until her encounter with Eddie), her relationship with Miss Head illustrates but one more "bitter lesson": no other person can provide the answers for her--not the Major and his tyrannical tirades nor her mother locked into traditional female roles, not Joe Bob and his unambitious destiny, not Clem Cloyd and his fanatical and fatalistic approach to life, and not Miss Head and her cerebral substitutes for living. Ginny still is unaware that the answers

must come from within, a conscious blending of her own resources to provide fulfillment. Other people may be the chocolate icing, but Ginny must bake her own cake. In a rare flash of insight, Ginny realizes that her destiny does not necessarily have to lie "in some man's unmade bed" (209).

And so, for Ginny, the search continues. This time, with Eddie Holzer, Ginny believes that she learns of passion, "incredibly passionate sex, culminating in a breathtaking series of multiple orgasms" (274). Perhaps the sex act itself is passionate and perhaps the relationship fosters a kind of passion between two people, but Ginny also experiences the agonizing torture that appears when passion turns into possession and obsession. According to Eddie, "plunging into involvements with other people, and risking rejection and ridicule in a good cause is better than self-embalment" (226). Eddie, however, is destructive--both masochistically and sadistically.

With Eddie as her lover and her spiritual guru, Ginny plunges herself into political activism and the feminist movement with all the same fervor that characterized her absorption of Descartes and Hegel. Because of Eddie, and not because of any internal revelation, Ginny embraces the demonstration and activist movements. Once again, Ginny's lover makes the decisions and tells Ginny what to believe,

what to wear, how to act, and what to think. "You can't allow your roots to become ruts" (280), Eddie tells Ginny after an abortive attempt to picket the Major's munitions factory. It is a true statement, but misguided. Although Eddie is correct in helping Ginny to view the faults passed to her both genetically and environmentally, she doesn't seem to see or to care that the direction she chooses for herself and continues to push Ginny toward is just as destructive.

Ginny observes that Eddie is able to take comfort in the fact that they are "boycotting one aspect of the corrupt death-dealing male power structure that [is] perpetrating all the misery in the world by seeking [their] sexual fulfillment elsewhere" (281). But Eddie, and by extension Ginny, misses the point. The war for feminine independence is not against men. According to Betty Friedan, men are "fellow victims, suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique . . . and locked in lonely isolation [and] alienation, no matter how many sexual acrobatics they put their bodies through" (371-72). The characterizations of Joe Bob, Clem, Ira, and Hawk reflect the veracity of Friedan's statement.

The fact that Eddie is female in no way alleviates the problem for Ginny who attaches herself to relationships and attempts to become part of another person. She



is still taking orders and internalizing the thoughts of others instead of thinking for herself. The other person for Ginny somehow represents Order, Truth, Knowledge, and Security. Ginny may be beginning to realize her total dependence on The Other, but so far she is unable to do anything about it. Ginny is, however, able to intellectualize part of her problem when she thinks to herself:

I wasn't at all sure . . . why I was in Vermont. I reviewed my motives and concluded that I was mostly here because Eddie wanted to be, for reasons of her own, and I wanted to be with Eddie. Once again, I was shamelessly allowing my self to be defined by another person. (292)

Eddie becomes so mono-maniacal in her obsessions that she turns her hatred of men and of society inward. Her obsession with Ginny destroys their relationship and eventually destroys Eddie herself. Ginny's three-year involvement with Eddie is a painful segment in her search to find herself.

After Eddie's grotesque and violent decapitation, Ginny marries the tame and restrained Ira Bliss and settles into suburban wifehood. All aspects of her life are now completely ordered, including the fact that Ira marks on a calendar in red pencil the days they are to

have sex, yet Ginny is unable to enjoy their love-making. Ginny's sexual activities in the past have "taken place under threat of imminent discovery by punitive authority figures [and she is] conditioned to associate sex with terror. Now that intercourse is allowed--applauded, required even--[she is] incapable of response" (377). Sex with Ira never improves from their first attempt. Ginny observes that their "next 172 attempts at intercourse" (379) are just as dismal as the first attempt.

Ginny convinces herself that she is finally happy although her "married lot [is now] harsh and tediously predictable" (381). Once again, as with her previous relationships, Ginny submerges her own identity to that of the other person. The one thing that Ginny cannot manage in order to please Ira is an orgasm:

I didn't see how I could explain that I was burnt-out emotionally, that I wanted only peace and quiet and an orderly life from him. After all, he was a modern male, believed in equal orgasm for equal effort. How could I persuade him just to use me and not fret about it? (382)

Ginny is deluding herself as well as trying to delude Ira, and when Wendy is born, Ginny simply transfers her identity to her child. Somehow Ginny believes that the

birthing and nourishing process will make her whole, but even this so-called mystical experience of physical and emotional attachment can never reveal the answers Ginny so desperately seeks. Buried in housework, in child care, and in volunteer work, Ginny's identity is once again submerged. Physical bonds do exist between mother and daughter, and it is difficult for Ginny to separate what is expected and required from what is felt and experienced:

All these bodies that she wasn't permitted to lust after. First her mother's and the Major's, her brothers'. Then Wendy's. But there was no denying that the bond between Wendy and herself was intensely physical.

. . . Both Wendy and her mother she thought of largely in association with certain sounds, smells, caresses. And yet her interest in them both was expected to be platonic. (96)

It is finally beginning to dawn on Ginny that she cannot find her niche in society, in a family, or in the human scheme until she confronts herself--individually and separately from The Other. She does realize that there is something more, but she continues to struggle within the confines of relationships--a futile struggle. When she finally begins to come to terms with the void

she is experiencing in her present predicament, she thinks, perhaps, that the answer may be provided by the world at large and by society in general:

It's not enough! It's not enough, I kept wailing. So what if you do have descendants? That still doesn't prevent your suffocating on factory emissions, doesn't prevent your being sizzled in a nuclear holocaust, doesn't prevent your dying an agonized death. . . . The world needed me, and I was trapped here in the woods rinsing bibs and mashing bananas! (406)

Through Ginny's relationships, all of which are either literally sexual or so intense that they exhibit sexual overtones, she seeks a fulfillment that can never be realized. Before Ira throws Ginny out of his house and she returns to Hullsport, she experiences yet another sexual encounter. Hawk, a Vietnam deserter who stumbles on Ginny at her home, tries to initiate Ginny into the sacrament of Maithuna, or ritual coition. As a last-ditch effort, Ginny is willing to try anything for the possibility of finding her answers. She tells Hawk: "I'm beginning to suspect that the problem isn't the place or my partners--but me. I apparently haven't been able to achieve a balance between my need for stability and order and my need for variety and excitement" (443).

Even though Ginny now apparently realizes that her fulfillment does not exist in her partners (The Other), she slips back into what she has known before and tries again with a different partner and a different ideology. Past experiences, although not providing answers, are at least familiar, and it seems easier to repeat the past instead of breaking new ground. Hawk tells her:

I want us to use carnal desire, Ginny, as a vehicle for achieving spiritual illumination, as a means of effecting reintegration of our opposing polarities. The generative forces that fetter our souls to samsara can instead be used to fuel our escape into the ineffable bliss of divine union. (454)

And Ginny believes him.

Ginny and Hawk embark on four weeks of "training" which will supposedly lead to one final act of total union. They practice breathing exercises, take LSD, and meditate in anticipation of the cleansing union with no need for orgasm or ejaculation. After a month of preparatory anticipation, however, Hawk and Ginny fall asleep during the actual ritual, and Ira finds them.

Ginny's search for identity through her relationships remains at a stalemate. She is no closer to fulfillment with Ira or with Hawk than she was with Joe Bob

or with Eddie. She still needs to divorce The Other from The Self and learn the lesson provided by Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique:

The need for self-fulfillment--autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization--is as important as the sexual need with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Woman's sexual problems are, in this sense, by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfill her potentialities as a human being. (314)

Again, as with all of Ginny's other sexual encounters, the fusion of the physical act of intercourse and the emotional act of love never occurs. Until Ginny finds her own place as separate and individual, she remains unable to enjoy the enhancements of self that can be found in relationships. It is simply not possible to appreciate the enrichment provided by finesse and subtlety until the basic technique is mastered. In music, one cannot learn arpeggios until one learns the chords. In baseball, one cannot learn to hit a home run until one learns to hold the bat. And Ginny cannot learn from relationships until she learns from herself.

As Ginny takes on the various identities provided to her by other people (outwardly visible and obvious by her

change of clothing and hairstyles and inwardly discernible by the outcomes of her sexual entanglements), she is haunted throughout her twenty-seven years by the intrusion of Death into her psyche, into her relationships, and into her philosophical view of the world. From the first sentence of Kinflicks, "My family has always been into death" (1), Alther immediately projects to the reader an accurate awareness of the book's purpose, themes, and tone. The comic/serious tone that pervades the entire book and the themes of relationships, tradition, death, and identity are instantaneously portrayed in one statement.

The first chapter, "The Art of Dying Well," is not only the literal and philosophical introduction to the novel, it is in itself a commentary on family life and tradition and identity in the Southern city of Hullsport, Tennessee. With Death as an almost physical presence during Ginny's childhood, it becomes a means of integrating all of Ginny's struggles within the wasteland of her relationships. Death, while carrying all of the themes of life itself, projects a barren, infertile, and impotent essence into Ginny's environment and into her epistemological outlook. As Pat Caplan states in a review of Kinflicks:

The suggestion prevails throughout the story that death isn't merely the end of life but

its purpose. Only in the glaring imminence of death, perhaps, can truth emerge, like an image on film taking shape from its negative.

(6)

Death, then, is the overall picture comprised of individual and various components and implications. Death is the photograph album, and each photographic "kinflick" is a segment of life. The story of Ginny becomes the story of death: physical and biological death, including suicide, natural death, flirtations with and defiance of death, and euthanasia and the death-with-dignity issue; the death of self and identity and the possible consequent birth of self-actualization; the death of an era and its inherent tradition, heritage, and ideology; the death of relationships and naive idealism; and emotional death. In the phraseology of religion, Ginny can gain life only through death. Indeed, she encounters death at every turn and in many forms before she is able to arrive at a purposeful beginning.

The subject of death permeates Ginny's childhood existence as her mother spends her days writing and rewriting her own epitaph and making rubbings from tombstones of family ancestors. Ginny believes that her mother regards



Death as some kind of demon lover. The challenge, as she saw it, was to be ready for the assignation, so that you weren't distracted during consummation by unresolved earthly matters. The trick was in being both willing to die and able to at the same time. Dying properly was like achieving simultaneous orgasm. (3)

Ginny believes, too, that Mrs. Babcock must be living her life as simply foreplay for the "ultimate fuck with Death" (3).

Ginny's mother preserves not only yellowing photographs of their ancestors but stories of their deaths--not of their lives. They die from blood-poisoning and suicide and drug addiction and accident, but nothing of the lives they lived survives in the legacy Mrs. Babcock leaves for her own child. She continually reminds Ginny not only of her own inevitable death but of Ginny's as well: "Don't worry, I will [die]. And so will you" (4).

One of the many epitaphs Mrs. Babcock writes for her own tombstone is a mini-commentary on her absorption with death:

The way that is weary, dark and cold  
May lead to shelter within the fold.

Grieve not for me when I am gone.

The body's dark night: the soul's dawn.

(4-5)

In these few miserable lines can be found an almost fatalistic acceptance of the pain to be suffered in life, of the duties to be performed for others, and of the ultimate peace that evidently can be obtained only through death.

The Major, Ginny's father, with his doom-predicting "Cassandra complex," is also obsessed with death. Unlike Mrs. Babcock, who seems to court death, the Major views death as he views other potential tragedies. If one is aware, one can forestall the inevitable. Unlike the kindly gentleman, Dickinsonian view of death or the demon-lover view of Mrs. Babcock, death for the Major

was not the inevitable companion of one's later years, the kindly warden who freed each soul from its earthly prison. Death to him was a sneak and a cheat who was ever vigilant to ambush the unwary, of whom the Major was determined not to be one. (3)

Ironically, it is the Major who succumbs first.

Although Ginny seems to be surrounded by death, she does not actually experience the agony associated with it until her teen-age years when death appears in the demise of intimacy, with her father and with her first adolescent

love, Joe Bob Sparks. Although Ginny feels the pangs of loss associated with her deteriorating relationship with Joe Bob, she is not fully attuned to the actual implications of death inherent in the dissolution. What she does realize is that letting go is part of the difficult process to be endured:

It hurt. I cried unexpectedly over trivial things. My stomach churned when I saw [Joe Bob and Doreen] together. I didn't want Joe Bob anymore, but I sure as hell didn't want anyone else to have him. The only solution appeared to be homicide. (131)

Homicide, of course, isn't a choice at all; it is but a passing thought born of adolescent despair.

With Clem Cloyd, Ginny experiences the first brush with her own mortality. Clem, like Mrs. Babcock, seems to flirt with death, but Ginny's mother does so in her familiar passive role while Clem actively defies death at the same time that he dares death to take him. After the tractor accident that leaves Clem's leg mutilated and crippled, he tells Ginny that "Dyin is no big deal. To tell you the truth, I was kinda disappointed to come to and find myself still alive" (135). Because of his near-fatal accident, Clem now believes that he holds the key to life and death in his own hands, that he is

invulnerable. Because Death missed him once, Clem laughs in Death's face:

I tell you what, woe-man. I done paid my dues. Ain't nothin nobody can do to ole Clem no more. They can't touch me. I'm running the show now. I decide who gets hurt and how. I been dead, and I done come back alive, woe-man. So don't mess around with ole Clem. (135)

Ginny, involved with Clem and his death-defying antics, is treading water way over her head. She would probably have drowned in Clem's destruction without the Major's intervention. Although her trip through Worthley eventually sends Ginny along another destructive path, it does remove her from Clem, who very nearly succeeds in persuading Ginny to follow his fatalistic defiance. As with all of Ginny's relationships, she becomes caught up in the convictions of her present partner without thought of her own physical or emotional well-being. With Ginny behind Clem on the Harley, he races the machine to high speeds, screaming, "Go ahead! Kill us, you bastard! I dare you to!" (135). Although Ginny realizes she is perched on the brink of disaster, she is powerless to confront her own motives, and therefore she allows Clem (The Other) to control her fate:

Gradually Clem's hysteria spread itself to me, and I was barely able to prevent myself from joining in screaming and jeering at the gods. I was far too caught up in the thrill of the fatal high speed . . . to worry about the likelihood of being smeared all across the highway. . . . Or to question the mental make-up of the boy to whom I was entrusting my precious and precarious life. (135)

Ginny is too naive, too inexperienced, too entrenched in traditional Southern female roles, and too unsure of her own initiative to trust even her instincts. It is easier and more familiar to allow someone else to lead: "My instinct for self-preservation told me not to see [Clem] again. My instinct for self-preservation, however, wasn't in the ascendancy" (137). In fact, Ginny's instinct for self-preservation doesn't surface totally until after her mother's death, after Ginny's pathetic and abortive suicide attempts, and after her realization that total dependence on relationships for fulfillment is a living death of the self.

Ginny's near-fatal motorcycle accident with Clem is not her last encounter with his destructive and virulent personality. When Ginny returns to Hullsport, she finds Clem married to Maxine in seemingly benign and ordinary

respectability. Ginny soon finds, however, that Clem is still defying death--courting death--but this time he does so in the guise of religious belief. Clem has installed himself as the self-proclaimed minister of a religious cult called the "Holy Temple of Jesus." Alther patterns the church after the actual Holiness Church of God in Jesus Name in Carson Springs, Tennessee, led by Rev. Liston Pack. In "They Shall Take up Serpents," Ms. Alther interviews Pack and members of his congregation about snake-handling, speaking in tongues, laying on of hands, and drinking strychnine as part of the religious service. Pack states in the interview that "we are instruments in the hands of God. . . . Neither can we tempt Christ. Christ cannot be tempted" (35). Instead, Clem (like his prototype, Pack) tempts the devil and death, and Ginny realizes that Clem has not changed after all. He is "still dealing in Death, still trying to subdue it to his command" (374).

Ginny is still vulnerable to the whims and projections of other people, not yet strong enough in her autonomy to withstand completely the pressure exerted by outside expectations. Similar to the time Ginny joined Clem in courting Death on his Harley, Ginny now finds herself hypnotized with the emotional outpourings of Clem's congregation as the members clap, shout, sing,

dance, speak in tongues, collapse in heaps on the floor, and caress the slithering bodies of copperheads. She recognizes the familiar temptation to merge, once again, into the belief structures of *The Other*, but at last, because of the recognition, Ginny is able to resist.

She recognized in herself all the symptoms of Incipient Conversion Syndrome: She was severely demoralized in her personal life; all the various traditional ties and beliefs had failed her, were failing her. She knew that if she didn't watch out, she'd be fashioning copperhead necklaces with the best of them. (374)

Before this new-found, yet still slippery strength becomes a part of Ginny's identity, she encounters death in other forms. It is as though she must come in contact with fragments and pieces (like individual photographs) before she can begin to comprehend the total scheme of life and death, physical and emotional well-being, and autonomy and self-realization. In the biology lab at Worthley, Ginny watches a cell, scraped from her own cheek, gradually go through the physical process of dying. Similar to an earlier remark by Clem, Ginny now comments that "I had seen Death, and it was no big deal.

Only the unfamiliar had the power to stir neurotic emotions." Or so she reasons (205). In another lab experiment, Ginny observes the exchange of protozoan genetic material. This observation, according to Doris Nelson, "suggests the possibility of change rather than identical replacement" (343). Whereas before, Ginny takes on the exact identities offered to her by genetics (her mother and the Major) and by her environment (merging with The Group or The Other), Ginny can now see concrete evidence of the unlimited possibilities for exchanging ideas, for giving and taking bits of Truth, and for using this information to enhance rather than to stifle her own identity. In short, it is as if parts of Ginny must die (caused by pain and suffering, the death of relationships and family ties, and inherited traditions) in order for her to give birth to herself.

At Worthley, Ginny also comes face-to-face with attempted suicide--not her own, which comes later, but with that of a dorm-mate. When Ginny stumbles onto the half-unconscious body, she stands contemplating moral issues instead of taking charge of the situation:

A person attempting suicide . . . didn't really want to die, but was rather adopting this desperate tactic as the only remaining means of exerting an impact on an unresponsive



environment. . . . Thwarted, the person would  
 . . . go on to live a long and productive life.  
 . . . On the other hand, a person's life  
 belonged to her alone, and she had the right  
 to end it if she so chose. (234)

Because Ginny is still unable to view the larger picture, to know much of anything about her own values and possibilities and intentions, she can only stand deliberating over the drug-dazed girl and allow someone else (Eddie, in this case) to take charge. She realizes later that the event (as are all specific episodes in any life) "was not a self-contained incident; it's reverberations would affect us all" (236).

Ginny relinquishes all ties to Worthley, and the lessons she is learning in the process, when she breaks the bonds that hold her to Miss Head. In a rage of unprovoked anger, she shouts at Miss Head: "Don't you see where you're heading? You're so goddam detached that you're morally paralyzed! You're so busy with your fucking ideas that you never have time for people! This is a living death!" (241-42). Ginny falls into the trap of low self-esteem which even Ginny herself realizes is taking place and which Alther takes up at great length in her third novel, Other Women. Ginny thinks to herself (even though the belief is totally erroneous) that "it

was necessary to my development that I reject [Miss Head] by manipulating her into rejecting me" (242). And once again, a relationship has died.

When Ginny begins her journey into protest via her lesbian relationship with Eddie, the women spend part of their time in open protest against hunting, fishing, trapping, and the killing of animals. Eddie refers to these male-dominated sports as "macho shit--stalking and killing and terrorizing . . . about as low as you can go, evolutionarily" (309). Eddie, however, in her deranged mania against anything involving men, lashes out in her anger by protesting the senseless killing of the animals with dangerous methods of her own. When Ginny points out to Eddie (after a pit has been dug to trap the men) that they "just want to scare them, not kill them," Eddie responds with, "Who doesn't?" (312). Her solution to death and corruption is death.

Eddie turns her anger on Ginny, screaming at her and injuring her head by throwing dishes at her when Ginny hints that she may be dissatisfied with their relationship. In the final, horrible irony, Eddie then turns her hatred inward and manages her own decapitation on one of the very wires she has strung to destroy the men on their snowmobiles. To Ginny, "it looked as though she had in mind a kamikaze mission, in which she would

mow down as many of the congregated snow machines and drivers as possible, in the process of killing herself" (344). Along with Eddie, a part of Ginny dies, and she begins marriage with Ira without ever confronting the real loss she feels with the death of her lover. Ginny plunges in again without allowing herself to grow, to learn from the experiences with which she is confronted, and to learn from the death of one relationship before she faces another.

Only after Ginny returns to Hullsport to attend her dying mother does she attempt to come to terms with her own coming of age. According to Alice Adams, Ginny and Mrs. Babcock must both "come to terms with each other and with death, and that is what really goes on in this novel" (98). It is only after the actual biological death of Mrs. Babcock that Ginny has any hope of finding her own identity. Even though the death occurs at the end of the novel, we are acutely aware that Ginny is finally able to arrive at a new beginning to find her own way, unencumbered by family roots or duties or rules or obligations. For the first time, she is totally alone without parents or relationships and associated ideologies, and analogous to R. W. B. Lewis' American Adam, Ginny now emerges as a new Southern Eve--a figure with new potential, ready to start fresh. Traditional Southern heritage is stripped

away along with Ginny's inherent dependence on The Other as she begins her foray into the wilderness--alone.

In Ginny's search for autonomy, she scatters her energies in futile attempts to become part of another person. She never emerges from her relationships unscathed, and she takes with her pieces of the life puzzle that never quite seem to fit together. After Joe Bob, Clem, Miss Head, Eddie, Ira, and Hawk, Ginny now confronts the most elusive and internalized, yet the most important and revealing of all human relationships: the mother/daughter interaction. In My Mother/My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity, Nancy Friday summarizes the symbiotic partnership that exists between mother and daughter from the womb and through various states of development:

The fetus is in physical symbiosis with the mother; literally, it cannot live without her. The mother . . . is in psychological symbiosis with the unborn baby. . . . The next stage of development is separation [and] the long march toward individuality and self-reliance has begun. . . . Incomplete, unsatisfying, or interrupted symbiosis stamps a woman for life [and] . . . becomes a problem of juggling security v. satisfaction. (57, 58, 59, 62)

The stage is set, to a certain degree, before Ginny is born. The progress she can make is determined by how her mother handles the symbiosis, by how Ginny is able to come to terms with it, and by how both mother and daughter are able to come to view each other. Joan Lord Hall expands on Friday's symbiotic notion as it specifically relates to Ginny: "This paradox, of finding autonomy actually within a symbiotic organism, is one that may heal the frantic dichotomies of [Ginny's] earlier lifestyles" (346).

Without obvious intention and most of the time without even realizing what she is doing, Mrs. Babcock passes on to Ginny her own roles of mother and wife and dutiful "host" to the parasitic cravings of others. Mrs. Babcock approaches psychological enlightenment only when physical death is imminent. It is too late for Mrs. Babcock, but fortunately Ginny can be spared the lifelong submersion and suffocation that have characterized her mother's existence. Mrs. Babcock realizes too late (at least too late to make any difference in her own life, but perhaps not for Ginny) that submersion of identity is the same as annihilation. Instead, she has lived her life by traditional precepts:

If anything had been drummed into her in  
her years of motherhood, it was that you

mustn't squelch the young. It might stunt their precious development. Never mind about your own development. That was no longer important once you were a parent; you had been superseded as an evolving being. (155)

This afflictive and destructive philosophy unfortunately typifies the South, society in general, and women in particular during Mrs. Babcock's youth and maturity. She unknowingly and without malice bestows the same tormenting burdens on Ginny.

In science, according to Brock, Smith, and Madigan in Biology of Microorganisms, the various symbiotic relationships may be parasitic--one organism benefits and the other is harmed, commensalistic--one benefits and the other is not affected, neutralistic--the two organisms have no effect on each other, or mutualistic--both organisms benefit by the relationship (452). Unfortunately, a mutualistic relationship between Ginny and her mother doesn't occur until almost immediately before Mrs. Babcock's death. Symbiosis, by definition, precludes a relationship that is harmful or destructive to both organisms. Humans are evidently the only organisms with this potential for mutual devastation. Perhaps the term miasmatic should be added to the psychological

lexicon (if not the scientific) to include reciprocal destruction--whether consciously and purposely intended or inherently and unknowingly transmitted. For example, Ginny realizes as she coaxes Wendy to eat her vegetables that "parents [spend] years urging their children to eat, and that those children, grown, [spend] the rest of their lives trying to stop eating" (157). It is not just food that mature adults must stop ingesting--it is the inherited value systems and judgments and philosophical frameworks inflicted by parents onto their vulnerable and receptive children.

Paul Levine, in his essay "Recent Women's Fiction and the Theme of Personality," recognizes the overwhelming power and influence that mothers have over daughters and, conversely, the power that daughters wield over their mothers. One answer, says Levine, in becoming one's own self is "being weaned away from [one's] mother's influence. Both mother and daughter must learn to let go of their assigned social roles and establish a new relationship" (338). While Ginny and Mrs. Babcock arrive at this conclusion too late to help Mrs. Babcock, Ginny is able finally to learn from the relationship in a way that will allow her to grow into an autonomous individual. She vainly seeks fulfillment from other people, but her liberation must come from within. The real tragedy in

the book is that Mrs. Babcock must lose her life for Ginny to find hers. It is true that Ginny has to lose her own emotional life in order for her to regain it, but Mrs. Babcock's death is the end for her. Anne Larsen states that "here is Mrs. Babcock literally near death, and Ginny symbolically so" (42). Symbols, however, can be reversed, and after Ginny's thwarted suicide attempts, she is no longer facing either physical death or emotional death.

Mrs. Babcock is suffering from idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura, a blood clotting disorder that surfaces only two months after the Major's death from a heart attack. Ginny's first glimpse of her mother in the hospital bed is one of disbelief: "Her powerful mother vulnerable after all? The idea was so new that she simply didn't know how to deal with it. . . . This sleeping woman wasn't her mother" (73). Mrs. Babcock certainly doesn't look like Ginny's mother with her lined face, bruised body, and thinning, greying hair. Yet, somewhere in the pathetic, wasting body is a tiny glimmer of recently acquired defiance against what Mrs. Babcock has been taught and has lived throughout her life. She does what she is told--dictated by society, cultural norms, her husband. Even in her deteriorating state of near-death, she fears that she will be forced to participate in a



craft class if the nurse knows she is awake, and she simply feigns sleep to obtain her wish instead of stating her desire to be left alone.

When Ginny arrives at the hospital, Mrs. Babcock's mother-role surfaces, and she wants to blurt out to Ginny a condemnation of her hair style and a method of how she can correct the frizziness. Mrs. Babcock realizes that her instinctive mothering has surfaced, and she is able, for once, to hold her tongue. The indictments she pours out on Ginny throughout her childhood, youth, and subsequent maturity are not, however, malicious and premeditated schemes. Once the symbiotic pattern has been established, it is difficult, if not nearly impossible to view one's offspring as an intelligent, separate, and mature individual. As Mrs. Babcock approaches death, however, she reviews her role of motherhood and realizes that she can give Ginny one final gift--the gift of self-realization.

As Mrs. Babcock views the kinflicks of her motherhood, she realizes that she did make some attempts at preserving her own identity--however miniscule and ineffective they turned out to be. She begins to read encyclopedias from cover to cover in an effort to have some life of her own beyond that of wife and mother: "to have something to do with herself; to round out her

liberal arts education, which had been abruptly terminated by marriage and by the relentless arrival of babies. But mostly, she'd been looking for some pegs to hang her philosophical hat on" (90). Even though she knows at the time that the relationships that exist in the husband/wife and mother/child roles are not fulfilling, she is never able to emerge as a person identified separately from those roles. The desire exists strongly, but traditional patterns are too powerful.

Since Mrs. Babcock's only identity exists in her husband and in her children, she believes, as she reviews the accomplishments of her children, that she has failed in her life's work. She has no career apart from her home, no tangible evidence of her existence separate from the lives of her children:

When she really faced up to it, Mrs. Babcock couldn't place herself in the vanguard of her profession of parenthood. She had been committed to endowing the world with three decent, imaginative, hardworking citizens. But she had to say now that she'd failed. There was nothing much wrong with her offspring, but they clearly weren't the superior beings she'd envisioned. It wasn't easy to admit that perhaps your life had been wasted. (92)

Tragically, Mrs. Babcock feels that there is no other yardstick by which to measure her own life except through the accomplishments of her children. Ginny, too, nearly drowns in the same philosophy.

At one point in Mrs. Babcock's hospital stay, she uncharacteristically snatches a thermometer out of her mouth and sends it crashing to the floor. So unusual is this behavior that even Mrs. Babcock at first convinces herself that it is an accident. "So well-trained was she in the notion that one didn't even feel hostile emotions, much less give expression to them, for a moment she genuinely believed that it had been an accident, that her hand had simply slipped" (152). A woman in Mrs. Babcock's position is simply not allowed (by pre-existing dictates) to exhibit or even possess feelings of her own. Her emotions must be squelched in favor of what is perceived best for The Other. It is precisely this notion that Mrs. Babcock unconsciously instills in Ginny. Consequently, Ginny fears that her own identity can manifest itself only in the same terms that characterize Mrs. Babcock-- that of always doing one's duty. "Mrs. Babcock knew she was a martyr. The children's needs in those confused and unhappy war years had swamped her own needs, had become her own needs" (168).

As Ginny confronts the physical body of her dying mother, she must also confront the psychological and emotional make-up of her mother. At the same time (and this is the most painful), Ginny must confront her own motives and instincts which are embedded in those of her mother. She still needs to think of her mother as "strong and healthy and invulnerable--a shield between Ginny and mortality" (150). Although facing her own mortality is an important issue, much more than the physical act of dying is being confronted. Ginny finally begins to realize that her own actions and beliefs (no matter how she has expressed them outwardly) are simply a part of the paradigm established, for the most part, by her mother. "Ginny knew that almost everything she had done to date had been either in emulation of, or in reaction against, this powerful nonpal of a woman, or her equally influential husband" (150).

According to Gail Sheehy, in Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life, it is in the twenties (Ginny is twenty-seven when she returns to Hullsport) that the various possibilities must be sorted through and a life-projection established. Sheehy states that

the tasks of this period are as enormous as they are exhilarating: To shape a dream, that vision on one's own possibilities in the

world that will generate energy, aliveness, and hope. To prepare for a life-work. To find a mentor if possible. And to form the capacity for intimacy without losing in the process whatever constancy of self we have thus far assembled. (100)

Although the impression one gets from Ginny's many abortive attempts at identification is that she is not growing and maturing and reaching her potential for individualism until after her mother's death, according to the above proposal by Gail Sheehy, Ginny is, indeed, pursuing life with healthy and positive goals. She is searching for her place in the human scheme, and at the end of the novel, as she approaches her thirties, she is at least aware and open to future possibilities.

Ginny, unlike her mother, can actually pursue her own dreams and goals devoid of the sense of duty that permeates the very existence of her mother. By the time Mrs. Babcock is freed of The Other, she is lying in a hospital bed with no time left to pursue what she wants and could do if she hadn't felt so pressured by what she considers her duty. She vents her rage on Ginny as she realizes what has happened to her:

You've done nothing with your life but pursue your selfish personal pleasures. Me--I've

always done my duty. I waited on you and your father and your brothers hand and foot for years. For the first time in my life, I had no one to account to but myself. I was going to travel, go back to college, teach. And now this. Why me? (167)

This oppressive catastrophe is true for far too many women as they postpone personal ambitions until the car is paid for, until the children are grown, or until the years of retirement. Ginny can break the pattern; indeed, Ginny does break the pattern of servitude so that she is able to journey toward her thirties without being encumbered by The Other. Ginny is freed from those imposed responsibilities, unlike her mother who is "falling apart in a hospital bed after years of satisfying other people's needs, without ever having had a chance to figure out what she might need" (169).

Ginny, who has been unable to find fulfillment in any of her relationships (including those with her mother, her husband, or her child), attempts to adopt and nourish some orphaned baby birds in another futile try at mothering and at struggling to find a purpose for her existence. Even though the books on birds warn against it, Ginny does her best to feed the birds, to teach them to fly, and to mother them. One by one, they die anyway, until the last

one, finally grasping the idea of flight, crashes around in its new-found freedom and kills itself trying to fly out of a closed window. According to Ronald Blythe, "The bird sees how to fly, at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Like Mrs. Babcock" (254).

As Mrs. Babcock slowly slips away from life, she and Ginny spend their time together watching a soap opera (ironically titled "Hidden Heartbeats") and discussing the lives of the characters. The rest of their tense conversations are mainly superficial chats about mundane matters or surface, verbal slaps at each other. Even when they do come close to the real issues, death and relationships and identity, they barely skirt the truth. It is easier to return their attention to a television program and the "moral dilemmas of modern America" (369).

The revelations about self, finally matured and understood by Mrs. Babcock and newly planted and waiting for nourishment in Ginny, are barely discussed by the two women. Instead, each one remembers the past, sifts through her own version of each one's kinflicks, and assimilates the knowledge alone. Mrs. Babcock, now needing life's blood from Ginny, sees herself become the child in the relationship:

A subtle shift in the balance of power  
between Ginny and herself had occurred,

and she didn't like it at all. The pattern had always been Mrs. Babcock's bleeding herself dry . . . for the children. Nothing had ever been too much for them to demand of her. . . . Ceasing to serve, she had collapsed, mentally and physically. (261)

Somehow Mrs. Babcock would like to help Ginny to break out of the established pattern, but she is unsure of how to accomplish the task. When Ginny asks her mother whether she should return to Ira and Wendy, she fully expects Mrs. Babcock to begin issuing orders about returning to them to fulfill her duty. It is, in fact, a struggle for Mrs. Babcock not to give this particular advice. Instead, for the first time, she tells Ginny that she simply doesn't know what she should do. Lying in bed, with little to do but think, Mrs. Babcock realizes that "parents expected too much of children; it was unfair to use them, as she now recognized she herself had been used, to fulfill parental ambitions or philosophies" (430). Ginny is understandably shocked at her mother's acquiescence in allowing Ginny to make her own decisions and wonders if it could be finally possible that the "generational spell [may] actually [have] been broken" (431).

As Ginny ponders the new "non-advice" from her mother, she grows angry, believing that Mrs. Babcock owes



her "some explanations! About life and death, about love and marriage and motherhood!" (506). Finally, in the last hour of her life, Mrs. Babcock is able, with one sentence, to free Ginny of the past, of the bonds that unite her to The Other. Mrs. Babcock's final words to Ginny, the final mother/daughter irony, are "Look after yourself [emphasis added], Ginny dear" (508). It is only now, with the death of Mrs. Babcock, that Ginny is free to continue her search, as Mary Anne Ferguson says, "purged of her own fear of becoming like her mother . . . free to become an autonomous adult" ("Female" 66).

Ginny reacts to her mother's death with thoughts of death herself, or as she thinks, "the only way to outwit Death was to kill herself" (514). Every attempt, however, is an abortive one, descending, as Ginny realizes, into the "burlesque." Marilyn J. Smith sees Ginny's suicide attempts as methods "to essentially cut off the old ways and start life afresh" (29).

Through Ginny's search for a self-fulfilling identity, the communication gap between generations, the rites of passage, the political and social mores of an era, and the evolving place of women in a man's world are reviewed and analyzed. Mrs. Babcock finally helps Ginny to open a door which will allow her to find her own way, unencumbered by family roots or duties or rules or obligations.

The final irony, the ultimate tragedy, is that Mrs. Babcock has to die in order to release the vast potential and the many possibilities which exist in her daughter. If Ginny has learned enough, and we can assume that she has, she will be able to allow her own daughter's growth as separate and apart from hers, fostering not only the individual development of each but the enhancement that can occur within the relationship when both members are fulfilled. As Ginny learns from the pain of her own self-defeating relationships, The Self must be complete and whole before it can interact successfully with The Other. The Other can never function as a replacement of Self, and Ginny learns the lesson painfully well.

Chapter 3  
Original Ends

Original Sins, expanding on the themes first presented in Kin flicks, is a Bildungsroman of five inter-related, yet separate and isolated characters who are searching for meaning and identity within their various relationships during the complacent fifties and the turbulent sixties and seventies. Alther treats the rites of passage simultaneously with satiric humor and with anguished pathos against the backdrop of the New South of Newland, Tennessee, and the Activist North of New York. "The Five," as the group of characters is known as children, confront growth and maturity individually and collectively through their relationships with each other and with other people. Alther chronicles their lives and relationships through love and sex, marriage and infidelity, passion and ambition, politics and social history, feminism and counter-cultures, racial animosity and protest, and isolation and death.

Jed and Raymond Tatro are brothers who represent the working middle class of the Southern fifties and sixties. Sally and Emily Prince are sisters who represent, at least initially, the Old Southern aristocracy. Donny, who is

black, is the fifth member of the group and represents racial segregation and eventually black activism.

Original Sins, with these five representative characters, presents a microcosm of life and the individual search for identity within relationships. Paul Gray, in "Beating the Sophomore Jinx," states that "no theory or ideology can account for the cussed complexities of daily life. As Emily, Raymond, and the rest stumble from one ism to another, their author both mocks their blindness and applauds their determination to keep searching" (71).

All five characters are born and spend their childhood and youth in Newland, Tennessee. Although they are born into three separate families, three social classes, and two races, the five characters share a distant ancestral kinship and heritage. Jed, Raymond, Emily, Sally, and Donny also share some similar experiences (particularly during their youth) before they travel different and isolated routes in their search for identity. Sally and Jed remain in Newland while Emily, Raymond, and Donny travel North in an attempt to break regional and social ties. No matter where the characters go, however, the message is clear. Each individual must cast off social restraints and the "original sins" of heritage, region, class, and race if he or she is to find fulfillment within The Self.

Original Sins begins in "The Castle Tree" where The Five play and talk and dream as children. They erroneously believe that they are special and invulnerable and that they are destined for greatness. The book also ends in "The Castle Tree" with the children of The Five now playing among those same branches. The dreams and schemes have basically gone awry for The Five, but they look for hope in those extensions of themselves--their children. "Gon be different for them" (563), Donny announces to the others. Yes and no, Alther tells us throughout the rest of the book. Some things can and will, indeed, be different for their children, and yet the "original sins" of their parents will be manifest in the children's continuing search for individual fulfillment which can be marred by social, regional, environmental, ancestral, and political concerns. According to Brian Martin, "the sins of the fathers are visited upon the heads of their children and the five protagonists show this" (19). Alther, herself, has a slightly different view of original sin and makes the following statement in an interview with Andrew Feinberg:

My belief is that original sin is loaded onto you by social conditioning. People are assigned roles because of their external characteristics and then are forced to play them out for the rest of their lives unless

they are lucky enough to figure out what is going on and get out. (59)

Alther obviously doesn't mean by "get out" that simply moving from one section of the country to another will provide an answer. She is speaking of getting out from under The Other and allowing The Self to emerge.

Society, according to the message in Original Sins is no better in one part of the country than another--it is just different. That the manner in which individual pursuits are conducted and internalized can make a difference in one's life rings loud and clear throughout Original Sins. Obviously, much is wrong with society in all sections of America, but ultimately the answer lies within the individual--apart from The Other--whether The Other be society in general or another individual within a specific relationship. The human organism can choose to submerge and be subjugated into The Other or find emancipation in The Self. It is tough and painful, Alther says, to divorce The Other and pursue wholeness within The Self. Some people make it and some never do and some continue the search and the process throughout their entire lives. At the end of Original Sins, some characters are still subjugated and some appear to be on the way to emancipation.

Mr. Marsh, the minister of the Methodist church attended by the Tatro family sums up in a sermon what

seems to be expected of middle-class Southern individuals in submerging their own needs and wants into those of religion, society, family, and other people in general. He speaks specifically of duty:

Now, what are our duties, friends? . . . In general our duties pertain to what we owe other people--what we owe our ancestors, what we owe our parents, what we owe our children, our spouses, our bosses, our town, our state, our nation. And most especially they pertain to what we owe our God. . . . (106)

This sermon of duty is preached not only from pulpits but by parents, by teachers and coaches, and by partners in relationships. The specific message, however, can be completely contradictory and, therefore, totally confusing and impossible to carry out.

As Sally Prince experiences the divergent interpretations of what seems to be expected of her, she realizes the impossibility of performing her duty to The Other when the demands are in total opposition. "She knew what Jed wanted. She knew what her daddy wanted. She knew what the Lord wanted. What she herself wanted was to do what they wanted. But they all wanted different things" (70). Unfortunately, Sally is never able to divorce the contradictory messages she receives from The Other and,

consequently, spends her life trying to mold herself into someone else's concept of what she should be, how she should act, and what she should think.

Each of the main characters in Original Sins, in turn, experiences contradictory and illusory attempts at internalizing the demands from The Other. As long as this defeating process continues, the individual can never become whole within The Self, since scattered pieces are forever subjugated to the demands of The Other. While the specific demands placed on The Five are somewhat different, depending on their predetermined roles in society, the result, nevertheless, is the same for all five. Until each one finds fulfillment and emancipation within The Self, the demands of The Other will wreak nothing but destruction and pain and hollowness and futility. By the end of Original Sins, Emily comes closer than any of the others to internal fulfillment, but the way is clear for Sally and Raymond and Donny to follow the same path if they have learned enough. The process will continue until they do learn enough, or like Jed, until they die.

Jed Tatro, one of the two characters who remains in the South, is portrayed early in the book as the "all-Southern" (if not all-American) boy. According to Florence King in her essay "Sex and the Good Ole Boy,"



"a Good Ole Boy is not simply a man who makes a to-do out of his masculinity. He makes such an incessant fetish out of it that he becomes gamy, or pitiful, or both" (53). This is the perfect description of Jed who conveys his macho prowess in his relationships with women (particularly Sally) in much the same manner as he displays prowess on the athletic field.

John Reed, in Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy, adds this definition of the Good Ole Boy as someone who is "independent" and doesn't cry much. He probably is "sloppy," "loud," "rough," and "comfortable about being aggressive." He may well have "difficulty expressing tender feelings" and be "calm in a minor crisis."

(75)

Reed is quoting from a "catalogue of stereotypical sex differences compiled by a team of social psychologists in Massachusetts" (75), and the descriptions fit Jed Tatro perfectly. The list for Jed must also include that he is thoughtless, sexist, rude, crude, racist, self-centered, and hypocritical. He epitomizes the macho male image that places women in the paradoxical double standard. He wants a Betty Crocker in his kitchen, a Madonna image for his children and for appearance, a maid for his house and his personal needs, a slave to his every whim and fantasy

(even when he, himself, is not sure what he wants), and a whore in his bedroom. He doesn't want too much of a whore, however, or she might begin to see him "helpless on his back and whimpering" (316). A woman's place, to Jed, is wherever he wants her at the moment with "enough sense to let the men do the talking on topics she [doesn't] know anything about" (317).

Jed, himself, is so unsure of his position within relationships that he conveys contradictory messages to Sally, who in her prescribed role of attempting to perform whatever is expected of her from The Other, becomes totally frustrated and confused in trying to determine just what Jed thinks he wants. On one occasion, after a particularly trying day at work where Jed is threatened and dominated by another male (his boss), he forces his sexual advances on Sally in order to reassert his fragile masculinity:

He turned her over roughly, rolled on top of her, pinned open her legs with his knees, and drove himself into her time after time. To his horror, she began moaning and raising her hips to meet his. Betty Boobs used to do this. He froze in mid-thrust, and his erection wilted.

"What's wrong, honey?" she gasped.

"Nothing," he growled, rolling off and turning his back.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Where did you learn that?"

"What?"

"The way you was moving."

"I don't know. I made it up."

"Well, don't do it no more."

She said nothing.

"It ain't ladylike."

"I . . . OK, Jed honey." (340)

Sally is simply responding to what she believes that Jed wants. Jed has told Sally earlier that "making love with her was like screwing a corpse" (350), and Sally is trying to project into the relationship the excitement that she believes Jed is seeking from her. What Sally has not learned is that she is fighting a losing battle, a futile struggle in her effort to totally please someone else. Jed represents, within himself, a paradox. Florence King elaborates on this contradiction in Southern Ladies and Gentlemen as she expands on the definition of the Good Ole Boy who demands a woman

so voluptuous that it requires no effort,  
talent, or knowhow to satisfy her, a woman  
so perpetually ready to pop that she will

have an orgasm if he merely looks at her crooked. At the same time, she must be sweet, demure, passive, submissive, self-sacrificing, with a yen to be dominated.

(92)

Obviously, what Jed seeks in The Other does not exist. No other person (even one who is totally dedicated to satisfying his every wish and thought) can substitute for his own, inner fulfillment. For Jed, the perfect representation of the stereotypical "Good Ole Boy," Florence King's description is an apt and appropriate one: "He sets himself up for inevitable disappointment, which is exactly what he wants, because then he can flee from the female entirely" (92)

Jed, therefore, believes that he has perfectly good reason to blame Sally for any problems that surface in the marriage. Jed believes that he has more important relationships and issues to face and to resolve than the one with Sally. He is a man, and men are supposed to have everything under control--work, relationships, financial obligations--at least according to the established traditions of Southern manhood under which Jed is operating.

Jed is the same kind of husband and father and manager as he was teen-ager and athlete and student. He

is still trying to live his adult life by the precepts and philosophical "mumbo-jumbo" of his high school football "mentor," Coach Clancy: "A woman gets hooked on love like a junkie on dope. But don't let them pass their habit on to you men" (312). Jed spends his entire married life in trying to live up to this "profound" philosophical statement. Sally probably is "hooked on love" because of pre-existing standards of how she is supposed to behave and think of the male/female relationship. Jed, however, is not supposed to have those same feelings, and therein lies a major part of the conflict. The more Sally tries to please him, the more he backs away from the relationship. Pronouncements of love make him uncomfortable since they go against the very precepts of toughness and independence associated with the Southern male "Good Ole Boy." For example, Jed likes sex best in the mornings when he is rushed to get to work so that he can obtain his physical release without the protestations of love he feels are demanded by Sally:

At night and on the week-ends you had to go into all that do-you-really-love-me junk that sometimes made jerking off seem preferable. He didn't understand why Sally couldn't just take it for granted that he really really loved her. Why did they have to go over

it time after time? It was like the Lord's Prayer at church--after a while it stopped meaning anything. (311)

All his life a man like Jed is told to be domineering, to be strong, to keep himself in a superior position to the female. If emotional conflicts begin to seep into the man's life, he must further assert his male domination in order to keep the balance that has been prescribed by society and by his heritage. In so doing, however, he fights against the very possibility of finding his individual identity as he submerges into what is expected of him as a man. Another of Coach Clancy's directives instructs the boys on his team to channel their anger constructively. The advice sounds acceptable and positive until Coach Clancy elaborates further: "Go out on that ball field and bust some heads. Or take your girl into the woods and fuck the cunt out of her" (315).

While Sally's personal identity becomes entrenched in Jed's, his, in turn, is submerged in what he perceives as his only acceptable role. He is the man impossible to please because he has not grown up enough to know himself what he really wants. It is unlikely, even without his early demise, that Jed would ever find an individual fulfillment apart from The Other which, in Jed's case, is the conception of his male role as perceived from other men.

Unfortunately, for Jed, he doesn't live long enough for any possibility of individual identity to emerge. One suspects, however, that Jed is so immersed in his role-playing facade that he would be doomed to failure even if he were to live. Carol Rumens, in "Staying Cool," states that Jed "remains totally irredeemable; only a car-wreck can cure him, terminally, of his pathological machismo" (730).

Jed erroneously believes that just because he is a man, he is supposed to be in control of all situations, know how to handle them effectively, and never feel confused about his position. "Sometimes he wished he was a girl and didn't have to be the one to make everything happen. If you was a man, you wasn't supposed to get confused. You was supposed to know all the time what you wanted and how to get it" (44). And this is a part of Jed's problem in sluffing off The Other and taking control, not of situations but of himself.

A tiny amount of pity might even be conjured up for Jed when one realizes that he is just as much a victim of his place in the scheme of subjugation into The Other as are the women in Original Sins. Even though it is with barely restrained glee that the author allows Jed to die in the proverbial "uncompromising position" of a car crash with Betty "Boobs" Osborne in front of the Lazy

Daze Motel where they have their final tryst, one senses, nevertheless, the ultimate irony and unnecessary tragedy that occurs. If Jed had found an identity apart from his perception of what it was supposed to have been, he would, most likely, have never become involved with Betty, and the fatal collision might have been avoided. But Jed remains, according to Kirkus Review (1981) the "jock/pig/stud, totally sold on the good ol' boy credo" (224).

Unlike Ginny Babcock in Kinflicks, whose Other is centered mainly on one other person within specific relationships, Jed Tatro's Other involves the expectations of Southern society in general and includes specifically his high school football coach and his jock friends. Jed's actions and thoughts are dictated not by Sally but by people outside of his relationship with her. He incessantly quotes Coach Clancy's worn-out adages about how to be more of a man. Jed is never able to see Sally as a person, as an individual apart from his own needs and wants. According to Jed, women are never to have thoughts of their own apart from what would be pleasing to a man, and he plays out his marriage role within one of Coach Clancy's exclamations: "Women! . . . They was good for two things, and one was to get your meals on the table" (315).



In Jed's relationship with his son, he tries to convey to the child the same propositions he has learned himself--that men are strong, that they are tough, that they never allow any tender feelings to surface, and that they are the bosses in both work and personal relationships. He says to his son, "Hey Joey! Don't cry, son. Boys don't cry. Be Daddy's little man" (323). Real men, according to Jed and Coach Clancy, are not allowed outward expressions of emotions. Sons must be trained, too, that certain things are for boys and certain things are for girls. When Joe tries to enjoy the pleasurable sensations of playing with a jonquil, Jed squelches his son's natural, inquisitive urge to find beauty in what Jed can consider only as feminine: "Flowers are for girls. Let's you and me play ball. . . . Daddy and Joe, we the men!" (323). Jed's relationship with his children never expresses mutual love and compassion. In his role of father, Jed is his son's first mentor as he teaches him the toughness which must surround a man's world. Jed might find the enhancement of Self within the relationship with his children except that Jed has no identity of his own to enhance. Jed's identity is totally submerged in the outer world of male expectations.

Jed's relationship with Sally, too, never matures and grows. He keeps Sally in a submissive position

and then rebels and recoils from her when she is left with no identity of her own apart from trying to cater to his needs. If Jed could allow Sally true individual independence and growth, then their relationship would be built on two separate people--enhancing the potential of each person instead of squelching and destroying their individual spirits. Jed even feels no jealousy about a possible affair that Sally might have apart from what it would do to his male image: "The mere idea of Sally lying in some other man's arms and revealing that Jed had hemorrhoids and sometimes missed the bowl when he pissed could make him frantic" (310).

Jed seems to want Sally to wait quietly and unobtrusively in the wings, efficiently preparing meals, expertly caring for his children, waiting on him and taking care of his personal needs--content and happy with the fact that he pays the bills and provides a house and food for the table. When Sally asks for assurances of his love or opinions about household matters, Jed is angry. To him, Sally should be a personal robot, programmed by him and damned happy for the opportunity to please him. She should never demand attention from him but should anticipate his own need for attention:

She was so goddam stuck on herself, always demanding his attention. As though he didn't have more important things to think about.

. . . Why did she need reassurance all the time? It was irritating having to convince her at every meal that Betty Crocker herself couldn't of did better. Why couldn't she just put it on the table and shut up? (342, 344).

Jed's immaturity and willingness to listen to others keep him from developing an individual identity. According to Mark Shechner, Jed "becomes after marriage [Sally's] keeper, tormentor, and betrayer" (35). Jed's obsession with his masculinity may be the very reason that he exhibits some latent homosexuality. Jed quickly dismisses conscious sexual feelings that emerge in a scuffle with his best friend, Hank: "He instantly erased from his mind the sudden awareness that Hank and he had had erections during the backyard clinch" (325). But those feelings of closeness with other males are something that Jed actually yearns for and misses from his high school days:

Jed threw his shoulder against Hank and knocked him off-balance, then threw a block that brought him down. They lay giggling in the leaves. The arms around you in the huddle, the slaps

on the rear, the horseplay in the showers, the frenzied embraces after touchdowns, the blocks and tackles. He missed them. (338)

Not only in Jed's domination of women does he experience the need to prove his toughness. Besides the condescending manner in which he treats the women at the mill and the belligerent way he speaks to Sally, Jed and Hank must show each other just how tough they really are. On a fishing trip, they remove all their clothes down to their jockstraps and place ice cubes under their arms and in their jockstraps to reveal their strength and masculinity. Actually, however, they reveal nothing more than an obsession with trying to prove to each other and to the outside world that they are not soft nor tender nor in possession of feeling--traits they erroneously believe to be purely feminine features.

Jed's lack of a developing individual identity directly causes the problems that occur within his relationships and indirectly causes his death. Since he is unable to internalize any precepts except those fostered on him by society and by the prevailing male image, he goes to his grave as the "good ole boy" macho stud--never realizing that the forces which could have improved his existence are to be found within The Self.

Sally Prince, Jed's high school sweetheart and pre-mature wife, is not in a much better position than is Jed. Sally is the "all-Southern" girl who seems to correspond perfectly to Jed's "all-Southern" male image. This pre-conceived image of the Southern young woman of the fifties and sixties requires that Sally be perfectly coiffed and manicured, powdered and perfumed to entice and tease the macho male animal. She quickly learns how to boost a man's ego while subduing her own. She represses her own intellect in order to avoid bruising the sensitive nature of the man in her life. She is caretaker, Mother Earth, nurturer. Her identity is completely submerged under the "all-Southern" boy's fragile ego. She is the host for his parasitic lechery. The fifties and sixties of Original Sins are years when nice girls don't but nice boys seek and receive all that they can. According to Gail Godwin in "The Southern Belle," "the Southern girl learns that if she 'practices' grace, purity, charm, she will be more popular; more sought after by the 'right' man. She will make a better marriage" (51).

Sally, by the time she enters high school, is totally immersed in the role of Southern Belle. She is a cheerleader, a member of the Ingenues, a member of the Devouts, and she chairs committees for school dances. She takes home economics, participates in cheerleading camps, and

enters beauty contests. She already knows that "women were supposed to do whatever they could to please men" (40). The problem with this dictum, however, first surfaces when Sally wrestles with the dichotomy of trying to please Jed and of knowing what her father expects. Sally grows up waiting on her father and catering to his whims. When Jed enters the picture and begins requesting sexual favors, Sally is confused that the two most important people in her life (both men) could expect and want such opposite things from her:

Here was Jed asking her for something that would please him very much. How could she deny it to him? But how could she grant it either, knowing how her daddy would feel about it? And she certainly didn't want to get into the business of deceiving her daddy.

(40)

Jed ultimately wins this particular battle, however, since the original man in her life (her father) must be replaced with another man to please. She learns her lessons well and begins practicing on Jed as she transfers her allegiance to him.

In a fight with Jed over the sexual issue where he proposes the typical "if you love me, you'll want me" argument, Sally is unable to come to terms with the

opposing desires of The Other. "They all wanted different things" (70). It never occurs to Sally that she is capable of making a decision based on what she, as an individual, may want, regardless of what anybody else may choose for her. Her identity is already so enveloped in attempting to live her life through The Other that the Self, for Sally, does not exist.

Gail Godwin states that "a girl growing up in the South becomes aware of certain ideals of womanhood at an early age. . . . They have to do with grace, elegance, modesty (and purity), tact, hospitality, and duty (to others, not yourself)" (51). Sally and the other Ingenue members work all year having bake sales, car washes, and raffles in order to arrive at the one final day of the Plantation Ball. "She loved being able to provide everyone with such a lovely dance. Things would get so humdrum without special occasions to work for and look forward to" (126). Sally performs her duty admirably as she prepares to utilize her learned skills on her future husband.

In her home economics class at school, Sally learns the correct way to set a table in order to please a husband. Mrs. Courtwright lectures to the girls on the additional touches that can make a table setting special:

Now I know most yall is been setting tables your en-tire life. But, girls, I tell you, hit's different when you're adoin it for your husband in a happy home of your very own. You want to provide all the touches that let him know how ex-try special he is to you. (149)

The girls learn that fresh flowers and candles are appropriate and special additions to an otherwise bland table setting. From all sides and in every situation, Sally learns that she, as the woman, must provide for The Other. She doesn't learn from her parents, from her peers, and from her education that in providing totally for other people, she loses a sense of her own worth as she subjugates herself to the desires of others.

Even at the cheerleading camp, the young women are barraged with advice on how to please the male athletes who will later become their husbands. The gym teacher intones that "being a good cheerleader requires exactly the identical qualities as being a good wife does. You have to know your man" (163). Later, when her sister Emily visits her home, Sally is stagnating in a suburban dumping ground. She tries, however vainly, to realize her potential as the "perfect" wife and mother. She tells Emily that the simmering onion on the stove is to permeate the house with good smells so that Jed will think she is



"taking as good care of him as his mama" (215). Jed, however, probably hasn't even noticed.

Sally finds, as she spends her days doing what she believes will please Jed, that he does not appreciate her efforts. He either ignores her efforts and complains when his desires are not anticipated, or he undermines what she does by stating that he wants the opposite. When she joins a bowling league in order to have something for herself, Jed asks her not to return. She inadvertently mentions to the wife of one of the workers under Jed's supervision that Jed doesn't like liver, and Jed responds with, "A wife should be absolutely loyal to her husband" (349). In fact, Jed doesn't want Sally to have friends at all, stating that "a husband and wife don't need no outside friends. They should be each other's best friends" (349).

Since Jed obviously wants Sally at home, she spends her lonely days reading articles in women's magazines with such titles as "How to Keep That Man Coming Back for More" (351). That article offers the following advice:

. . . and once you've rinsed that grey right out of your hair, don't neglect that grey matter inside your head. Check books out of your local library. . . . Read the newspaper every day. . . . Inject your new knowledge

into conversations in a modest, low-key way.

No one likes a girl who knows it all! (351)

When Sally tries to talk to Jed about his work, however, his response is: "Sally, I got to think about that shit all day long. I just want to relax when I get home" (351). The real problem is that Sally will never be able to please Jed no matter what she does. Jed doesn't know what he wants; it just seems always to be the opposite of what Sally happens to do. Conversely, Sally's problem lies in searching for her identity in Jed's instead of realizing her own potential. The more Sally tries to anticipate what she believes Jed wants, the more he seems to resent it.

As Sally makes check marks in the margin of the article, "How to Keep That Man Coming Back for More," she buries herself further and further into *The Other*. The article says:

. . . every man finds mystery alluring in a woman. . . . Shut him out of the bathroom when you're putting on your face. . . . Don't run around the house in rollers when he's there. . . . Let him suspect he doesn't know everything there is to know about you. (363)

Sally is trapped by trivialities: whether to wear Eat Me Orange nail polish or another color and whether to buy

matching placemats and napkins to coordinate with the kitchen curtains. According to Mary Cantwell in a review of Original Sins, Sally is "lobotomized by marriage, [turning] baby-tending, housewifery and standing by her man into substitutes for thought" (9).

Sally realizes that she is nothing and has nothing outside of her marriage, but she is unable to determine what she is doing wrong. When she fixes Jed bologna sandwiches, he tells her he is tired of them; and when she tries to give him warm cherry pie, he tells her he likes it better cold. Her determination to anticipate Jed's wants just gets her deeper and deeper into resignation. The more she does, the worse the situation gets until she is even afraid to ask him to place his dirty clothes in the hamper instead of letting them drop to the floor wherever he happens to remove them. When she finally does ask him, she worries that she has done the wrong thing--that he might find another woman who would pick up after him without complaining. Instead, she whines to Jed: "Don't ever leave me, honey. Your love is all I got" (364). She becomes pathetic and vulnerable and emotionally abused by Jed.

Margaret Ripley Wolfe, in her article "The Southern Lady: Long Suffering Counterpart of the Good Ole Boy," quotes from Anne Firor Scott in her definition of a

Southern lady: "a submissive wife whose reason for being [is] to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household" (18). Wolfe continues the description of the Southern lady, and the description becomes an apt one for Sally:

Physically weak, [the Southern lady depends] on male protection which she [secures] through her capacity to create some sort of magical spell over the opposite sex. In spite of this mystical power, part of her charm [lies] in her innocence. A creature dominated by emotions rather than logic, she [is] discerning about human relations, sympathetic, and compassionate, given to suffering in silence, a natural teacher, and a wise counsellor for her family. Strangely enough, this paragon of virtue, blessed with almost supernatural powers over men, still needs their direction. (18)

Sally trades personal identity for what she mistakenly believes is emotional security. Actually, Jed wreaks havoc on Sally's emotional well-being, and she allows him to feed her insecurity.

Much of Sally's problem revolves around what she has been taught, and therefore, the road out of the trap and

into personal fulfillment is a difficult one. Gail Godwin states that

the young woman in the South is instructed overtly and specifically in the skills of entertaining, of running a good home; and she is taught covertly, largely through feminine innuendos, how to "handle" a man . . . in order to get maximum benefits, but "without threatening his masculinity." (52)

As Sally begins to feel that she is somehow failing in her duty to Jed to be the perfect wife, she further descends into self-recrimination. Her self-esteem hits bottom as evidenced by the following humiliating and pitiful exchange between Sally and Jed:

"Honey, would you mind putting your dirty clothes in the bathroom hamper?"

He looked at her.

"It'd be a big help."

He picked up the shirt between two fingers, gazing at her. He marched into the bathroom and dropped it in the hamper, still gazing at her.

"Thank you so much darling. I feel just terrible asking you."

"Mama always did it at home. Said it was the least she could do when her men worked so hard all day long."

"Never mind. Don't do it anymore," she pleaded.

"No, I'll manage."

"Please don't, Jed. I like doing it."

"You want my clothes in the hamper, Sally, you'll get my clothes in the hamper."

"But I don't, Jed. I want them on the floor.

I don't know what got into me, sweetie." (367)

In one scene (and one has to laugh even through the horrible irony), Sally thinks she is doing what Jed asks of her by surprising him as he works on his back under their car. She unzips his pants and begins to fondle him. The man under the car, however, is not Jed, and Sally is mortified. As the relationship between Jed and Sally progresses from bad to worse, Sally wonders: "What could she do to win his love again? Who was this other woman she was competing with anyway?" (373). Although Jed does begin to see Betty Osborne eventually, she is not "the other woman" with whom Sally is competing. Sally is competing with herself.

Gradually, Sally begins to realize that she cannot fulfill her own potential as "Cheerleader, Miss Newland,

Homecoming Queen, Virgin, Wife, Mother, Daughter, Whore" (375). She knows that these labels can never substitute for her own individuality. "What about plain old Sally? Everybody was always telling her how to be. The feeling that was alarmingly close to anger was churning in her guts" (375). Sally finally attempts a separation of sorts in order to locate some identity of her own. "She [is] a wife and mother, a homemaker. The real challenge [is] to take this reality and do something with it" (533). Sally awakens part-way, but she is still identifying herself as "wife," "mother," and "homemaker." And so, in a burst of misguided idealism, Sally begins to turn her "trash" into "treasures"--apple-core dolls and beer-can hats. She eventually manages to publish a book and become the hostess of a T.V. show. However, Sally is not finding Sally; she is merely transmuting Wife to Writer, and Mother to T.V. Host.

When Sally confronts Jed with her desire for something other than being his wife, for something she can call her own, he responds, "Shit, your underwear pants is all your own. You got plenty that's all your own" (535). In her attempts, however, she is just managing to fill time. She really comes no closer to finding her own identity. Jed resents these attempts even more than he resents her unintentional suffocation of him. At least,

for Jed, before her fleeting fame, she was at home and out of trouble. Once, during her tenure as T.V. host, Jed leaves a copy of Modern Wife, open and marked for her to find and read. She reads the underlined portions of "100 Ways to Lose Your Man" with gnawing feelings of guilt:

Let your house turn into a wasteland. . . .  
Give him the cold shoulder in bed. . . .  
Serve TV dinners when he comes home from  
work. . . . Put your own interests ahead  
of him. . . . Leave him to babysit the kids  
while you go out. . . . If you earn more  
money than he does, flaunt it. (546)

When Jed is killed, Sally is still dreaming idle dreams and believing that it is "possible to prevail over [her] circumstances" (504). She does have the right idea, but she has no idea of how actually to go about identifying and understanding her own worth. Her last scheme is thwarted by Jed's death. She enters the Mrs. Tennessee contest by nominating herself, but she realizes after Jed's death that there is "no such thing as a widowed Mrs. Tennessee" (557). Once again, Sally is identified through her husband and not by her own efforts, achievements, and possibilities.



Jed's mother, at the funeral berates Sally and accuses her of indirectly causing Jed's death: "If you'd been giving my son what he needed, he wouldn't of been roaming the highways in the middle of the night!" (528). In the eyes of Southern society, it is, indeed, Sally's fault for not anticipating and fulfilling Jed's needs. Sally responds to Mrs. Tatro with "I gave him my life. What more could I give him?" (528). And, finally, the real truth is unveiled to Sally. She needs to give herself life.

The blame for the deteriorating relationship lies with both Sally and Jed--with Sally for not finding her potential as a separate individual and with Jed for his immature prejudices and expectations. Both Jed and Sally are conditioned by their environment and by their heritage, and neither seems to have the fortitude to rise above or at least to move away from that conditioning. Sally comes close with her "treasures from trash"; and with Jed's death, Sally may, at last, find her own identity. If she has learned enough, she will. If she has not learned enough, she will probably repeat the pattern in another marriage similar to the one with Jed.

The potential is finally uncovered for Sally, but the question remains open as to whether she will capitalize on the opportunity. After Jed's funeral, she immediately

embarks on another scheme. She will offer a newspaper reporter a chance to do a story called "Portrait of a Bereaved Widow" (557). Unfortunately, at least for the present, Sally is substituting Widow for Wife. If she is able to work through this final identity thrust on her by Jed, then she can emerge as Sally--similarly to Ginny Babcock in Kinflicks. For both women, a death holds the key that can unlock the potential individual identity for each woman. For Ginny, the path is clear--if not the direction. For Sally, the path remains somewhat ambiguous. The choice, however, is hers.

Raymond, Emily, and Donny, who leave the safe, yet stagnating cocoon of the South, fare little better than Jed and Sally in their search for meaning. One problem may lie in the fact that, according to John Alfred Avant, "everyone's conditioning is inadequate and being Southern is a particular handicap: the original sin. They try to attain a state of redemption, and since they've started out flawed, it's hard, in most cases hopeless" (506). The Southern "handicap," while it may be an important one, is no more of a handicap than different kinds of conditioning elsewhere. The heritage and environmental conditioning of Raymond's cohorts in FORWARD make them no less prepared nor able to cope with individual identity and relationships.

While the concerns and views bombarding Raymond's friends may be somewhat at odds with the messages he receives in the South, Justin and Maria and the others in the group are all in the same position as Jed and Sally and Raymond and Donny and Emily. Each one must conduct his own research, taking on and discarding ideologies and philosophies until a final realization of Self blossoms unencumbered by The Other. Most people, as Alther accurately observes, never achieve the goal. Some, obviously, come closer than others. The message that Alther conveys so strongly is this: Instead of spending our entire lives hopelessly searching for fulfillment in some group or person or epistemology, we can, instead, with this knowledge find some meaning which is totally divorced from any Other.

Raymond Tatro travels full circle from his roots in Tatro Cove--from his middle-class teen-age years in Hullsport to his embrace of Marxism and the Civil Rights Movement, and finally to his return to Tatro Cove. As a teen-ager, Raymond is a misfit, the "nerd" of the fifties and sixties. "He had already accepted that he would never be 'one of the boys,' with a case of Bud in his trunk and a pack of Trojan Enz in his glove compartment. He was beginning to take pride in it" (49). Unlike Jed, Raymond is never one of the "good ole boys"

of the South. He searches, instead, for his identity in various other ways.

Raymond looks for fulfillment first in his camera-- partly as an expression of his beliefs and partly as an extension of Self. Photography also offers an alienation for Raymond who does not feel comfortable in Jed's world of football and beer and girls. "He was aware he was using his camera as an excuse not to join in. Because he couldn't. He got drunk on one beer. He always lost at poker. He choked when he tried to smoke" (52). From his early teen-age years, Raymond also has difficulty in forming a sexual identity. Like Ginny Babcock in Kin-flicks, he seems to try out a variety of sexual roles at the same time he is experimenting with ideologies.

In high school, Raymond realizes that he should (according to established norms) be experimenting with the male/female sexual relationship. Instead, however, he has been involved with Wayne, and the subsequent relationship with him seems to preclude an involvement with Emily other than on a superficial level. He desperately tries to understand his own feelings which seem to be at odds with what he knows the other boys are feeling and experiencing:

Raymond knew what was expected of him: He should wrap Emily in his arms, cover her face

with wet kisses, rummage around with his hands until she called him off. . . . But he wasn't interested. Emily was like a sister. Maybe it was the incest taboo? The ritual of ownership. He just couldn't see it. All the maneuvering, knowing that in the end you'd still have to jerk yourself off when you got home. . . . Wayne had maybe ruined him for this game. That had been so straightforward. Each had needs the other could fulfill--for talk, tenderness, and ejaculation, in approximately that order. The idea of backseat struggles with some confused girl left him cold. (54)

Raymond and Emily, consequently, never consummate their relationship.

Raymond does finally have an affair (of sorts) with Maria, whom he meets in the FORWARD group. He is so unsure of himself at first that he is even afraid to speak to her. The fear of rejection reigns supreme in Raymond's mind as he considers the best approach:

"Uh . . . hey, baby, how bout you and me . . . ."

"Maria, it's come to my attention that, uh . . . ."

"Maria, I was just wondering if you'd like to . . . ."

The strong silent approach: Alone in the loft, he'd turn to her, put his hand on her thigh . . . .

He'd shave his head. . . . (256)

Raymond finds out quickly, however, that Maria is not interested in love--only sex and lust for the moment, and she begins seeing another man while she still has sex with Raymond. Raymond cannot comprehend the rationale behind her actions. His Southern upbringing is too much a part of his self-image to even begin to comprehend an image of the female in other than the traditional double standard:

More than one man at a time? He'd never heard of such a thing. For a man, maybe. But not for women. Not for decent women. . . . Sex for fun? Sex to quell lust? It was revolting. . . . Who did Maria think she was anyhow? He was the man, he had the cock, he decided what went on and when. . . . Orgasms for women! . . . She should spread her legs and be grateful for what she got! (274)

Raymond, like Jed, has internalized the concept of male/female relationships as they relate to background and heritage.

As Raymond searches for his sexual identity, he, at the same time, is reaching to find a place in society via his relationship with The Group--in this case, the members of FORWARD--"Friends of Rural Workers Against Racial Discrimination" (206). For a short time, Raymond believes he has found his niche--in trying to create what his cohorts call "working to alter the status quo in the South . . . to solidify evolving societal patterns" (252). Raymond, however, never fits in with this group either--this time because he is Southern.

Raymond finds out, surprising even himself, that when he goes with Justin and Maria to try to get the Randalls to register to vote, he has more in common with the Southern black family than he does with his new Northern acquaintances. He is beaten up by some "good ole boys":

Those boys had beaten him shitless thinking he was a Yankee. But he was actually one of them--a redneck, cracker, peckerwood, clay eater, poor white, white trash, hillbilly, ridge-runner, rebel, stumpjumper. (279)

Raymond realizes, then, that he has not found his fulfillment within the FORWARD group, and his next plans involve an effort to become totally self-sufficient by learning to live from the land.

Raymond has learned his "isms" firsthand, at last concentrating on his own hands--learning to till ground, weave cloth, knit, and can vegetables. Raymond, however, still does not find what he is searching for in his self-imposed isolation. Part of the irony of his "return to the land" is that he spends several hundred dollars on warm clothing so that he can spend less on heat and several hundred more on fishing and hunting gear so that he will spend less on food. He plants corn, learns to make cheese and butter, shears sheep, tries to learn to play the banjo, dries fruit, gathers honey--all in a futile effort to find liberation and emancipation in isolation. Once again, however, Raymond has subjugated identity to a "cause" instead of realizing his own worth.

However, Raymond is not content to live out his "ideal" in total isolation. He feels compelled to impose what he believes are the "answers" on his cousins, but they are more interested in watching The Beverly Hillbillies (a not-so-subtle irony) on TV, in eating Kentucky Fried Chicken, and in possessing "the finest bathroom in these parts" (459). Progress and change, according to the cousins, are inevitable, profitable, and preferable. According to Mary Anne Ferguson in "Lisa Alther: The Irony of Return," Raymond's "failure to influence his cousin and to convince the community



it must fight the strip-miners who are tearing up the environment leave him without romantic illusions" (115).

Raymond finds a release for his sexual tension in Thelma, a waitress who is married to a quadriplegic. Although Raymond enters the relationship knowing that it exists for lustful pleasure, he soon tires of sex alone. He longs to talk to Thelma, to share feelings. He views Thelma as a robot who constantly agrees with him just to get her orgasm:

If only Thelma would argue with him, put him down sometimes, challenge him. As long as he fucked her, everything was fine with her. But Maria had cared about his political analysis, spoke his language. Thelma didn't have a clue about what he was talking about. . . . "Thelma, there's more to life than slinging hash and having orgasms."

"Yeah, they's Saturday night TV and emptying your husband's bags." (449)

Raymond finds no more fulfillment in his sexual encounters with Thelma than he has found in the FORWARD group or in his return to the land. He still seeks his identity in some Other.

Raymond believes, like Sally, that he has learned the ultimate lesson: "Everybody [betrays] you in the end and

[has] been deceiving you all along. You [can't] count on nobody but yourself" (441). The assumption is correct. Raymond, however, does not internalize the real and deeper meaning of the revelation. He must certainly count on only himself for identity and fulfillment and meaning. He is still, however, in his imposed isolation with the return to the land, seeking his fulfillment from an ideology instead of from The Self. He is ultimately rejected by everyone he encounters: his father, Emily, his labor-organizing "friends," Thelma, and finally by his cousins--the very source of his long-sought-after and original sustenance. Raymond, like Ginny in Kinflicks, tries on several identities in search of the one that is his. He is the pseudo-intellectual; the Marxist and union organizer; the rugged individualist; and finally, at Jed's funeral, the compassionate brother.

At the end of Original Sins, Raymond has obviously not learned enough. He is still floundering around in his search. He has learned that the answers must lie within, but he remains no closer to applying that learned precept. He knows, too, that the path is difficult, painful, and at most times impossible. He learns, too, that "the whole point [is] to accept your lack of control and go with the flow, as Tatro Cove [has] always done" (484). Alther

leaves Raymond with possibilities--if not with specific direction.

Donny Tatro, the one black character of *The Five*, is, according to Carol Rumens, "being reared on the fatalistic philosophy of his Grandmaw" (730). Donny epitomizes the Southern black of the fifties and sixties who only slowly begins to realize the discrimination with which he lives. Ruby, Donny's grandmother and the Princes' maid, tries to give Donny what little advice she can about how to live in a white-dominated world. For Donny, destiny seems to be affected not only by his economic level and by his Southern heritage but by the color of his skin. Although he spends his youth in "The Castle Tree" with Jed and Sally and Emily and Raymond, dreaming idle dreams, the reality of his situation hits Donny hard.

The first dawning of how Donny is different occurs when *The Five* go to a movie theatre, and Donny is relegated to the balcony. The banishment doesn't really bother Donny (until he thinks about it later), who has listened many times to his grandmother's words:

Donny, you growing up to be a fine proud colored man. You do like the white folks says and you be all right. They treat you just fine. . . . You got to learn to be a clever nigger. You clever enough, you gets what you wants. . . . (37)

Donny, however, like the other four main characters in Original Sins, has more trouble finding a personal identity and dealing with his relationships with other people than he does in coming to terms with his race. While the color of his skin may be a particular handicap for him, it is no more of a handicap than is his Southernness or his maleness or his poverty. The other characters share some of Donny's problems in their own searches for meaning, but each one carries individual burdens. This is the key to their fulfillment--that each one must find his/her own way regardless of race or economic status or regional concerns or background. Donny moves from one extreme to another until, finally, as the book closes, he seems to be settling into a middle-ground position. Still unsure of his individual place, he now possesses a strength of will and determination which has previously been lacking.

As a teen-ager, Donny is a star basketball player for the black high school. At the same time, during a dance at the white high school, his white friends are dancing while he, in a white coat, is pouring their punch. As he pours, grinning, he thinks about his grandmother's advice: "Good manners is the best life insurance a colored person can have" (128). This advice directly contradicts that of Kathryn, Donny's mother, who has fled to New York after a nasty scene with her white boss. Although Kathryn wants

the best for her son, her admonitions to break out of the typical "black mold" are no better for Donny than the words he constantly hears from Ruby. In Hullsport, Donny has a "grave self-confidence from knowing his surroundings, from being known as Ruby's grandson, from making good grades and having lots of friends and being a basketball star" (95). In other words, Donny takes his identity from his position in society.

When Donny becomes trapped in a marriage with Rochelle, he loses his former "star" image and becomes a "nobody" in a demeaning and dead-end janitorial job. The relationship with Rochelle suffers from poverty, from too many children too soon, from the closeness of cramped living quarters, and from outside expectations--those of the Southern society in which he lives, those of Rochelle, those of Kathryn, and those of the men he knows who are out of work and lounging on street corners. These contradictory expectations gnaw at Donny:

Prince wanted him to be grateful for the chance to mop his floors, so he was grateful while he mopped the floors. Rochelle wanted him to buy her a ranch house, so he felt bad cause he couldn't. His mother wanted him to Make Something of Himself, so he worked until he was so tired at night that he couldn't

hardly hold his head up to watch the TV. His grandmaw wanted him to love the Lord, so he loved the Lord, not knowing nothing about the cat. (494)

Obviously, Donny (like Sally) can never please all of the other people who exert pressure on him to fulfill certain expectations. The tragedy comes in even trying. There are times when Donny does know what he wants for himself, but the forces from outside seem to be too strong for him to make any progress.

As the demands and pressures from The Other become more and more contradictory, Donny simply becomes more confused and unhappy. His own goals become lost in the shuffle of daily life, and he gradually loses what little identity he has been able to nurture within himself. Besides other people's expecting different things of Donny, each one of those other people seems to expect too many and too varied things of him. Rochelle, trapped in her own problems, looks to Donny for her fulfillment which he obviously cannot give her since he is unable to fulfill himself. "What did she want--a stud, or a husband and father? Looked like she wanted everything" (291). Rochelle also wants Donny to be her material provider, her mentor, her psychologist. Both people in this relationship are submerged in expectations and are

being stifled in their individual search for identity. They work against each other instead of toward common as well as individual goals. Donny sees the problem but is powerless to make any progress:

He saw things different from her. He didn't think much beyond this evening. Tomorrow he'd do pretty much what he'd done today, last month, last year. Next year he'd still be doing it. Whereas she seemed to see him rising into jobs that paid more. She hadn't been able to turn herself into no librarian. How did she expect him to turn himself into someone who could buy her a ranch house? (293)

Donny is stagnating, while Rochelle is trapped in idle dreams with little chance of fulfillment. They are working at cross purposes--both looking to The Other for answers instead of working first toward a fulfillment within The Self.

Donny realizes his inadequacies, but he is so entrenched in trying to do what others expect of him that he is having difficulty getting past his mundane daily existence. He knows that Rochelle depends on him, but since he can't even depend on himself, he realizes that he cannot provide her with the answers that need to be coming from within her own psyche. Donny, like most of

the other characters in Original Sins, never seems to grow up. He does realize, however belatedly, his own limitations. The realization, though, just makes him angry instead of contributing to his growth. When Rochelle tells him that she needs him, he responds angrily, "Shit, woman, I can't head up nothing. I couldn't organize a fuck in a whorehouse" (303). It is no wonder that Donny's fiery relationship with Rochelle erupts into physical abuse.

After the fight, Donny leaves Pine Woods for New York, becoming just as trapped by his so-called radical "friends" as he was by his marriage. According to Mark Shechner, Donny is "eventually transformed from a shuffling, backwoods lout into a militant black nationalist but toward his wife he remains a brute" (35). Ironically, however, Donny finds no more understanding nor fulfillment from his new "friends" than he was able to find in Pine Woods from his family, from his friends there, from his wife and children. He dons different outward trappings (as does Ginny in Kinflicks) with an Afro and leather jacket, and he tries to assimilate the prevailing image of male supremacy, but Donny is no happier with his Cadillac-driving friends than he was in Pine Woods. Instead of the fatalistic philosophy of Ruby and the dependence of Rochelle, Donny now listens to Leon:



Love ain't got nothing to do with nothing,  
farmer. It don't put clothes on your back.  
It don't put you behind the wheel of no El  
Dorado car. It don't even keep a woman in  
your bed. Cause they want that stuff too.  
Love is cheap, farmer. Fur coats ain't.

(500)

Donny is still not working on his own identity. He continues to listen to The Other. The voices and the speeches are different, but the result is the same.

As some realization begins to dawn slowly in Donny's mind, he comes close to awareness but still misses the point: "Naw. Naw, he couldn't see it. Blaming your problems on someone else. If you worked hard and lived right, you'd get your reward" (515). The reward, however, must come from within--though Donny does finally see that his problems are not caused by The Other. He cannot control the actions of others, but he can learn to control his own reactions and responses.

Donny finally sends for Rochelle and the children, determined to help his children find what has been eluding him. So far, however, Donny is in no position to do that. He thinks, for example, that by having his son thrown to the floor by a white man, the boy will learn the ways of the real world. According to Donny, "his children would

face the realities of life for black people in this country, rather than scrambling around in some dumb tree with a bunch of spooks thinking you was something special" (525). This is, however, exactly what Donny wants for his children--for each one to be special. Donny has not found his inner strength yet, but he is closer than he has been by the end of the book. The choices are still there for Donny, he is still in the process of working them through, and he shows some hope for finding his direction at last.

Near the novel's conclusion, Donny says to Raymond and Emily and Sally as their children play among the branches of "The Castle Tree," "Gon be different for them" (563). Maybe, and maybe not--but it can be different for Donny if he chooses for things to be different. He now realizes that the path does not have to be dictated by The Other, and as he begins to assimilate the painfully acquired knowledge, his own direction should become clearer. Perhaps he can help his children and perhaps he cannot; but they, like the other characters, will have to work through the process alone--eventually coming to their own conclusions and finding their own directions.

Emily Prince is the one character of *The Five* who shows the most possibility for eventual self-fulfillment. She, like the others, however, mercilessly pursues a myriad of philosophical identities. From being the misfit

in high school who, nevertheless, desperately wants to fit into the group, she moves to New York and the empty ideologies of The Group, then to a marriage similar to the one in which Sally is trapped, and finally to a lesbian affair. Like the other main characters in Original Sins, Emily attempts to define herself in relation to The Other --whether The Other be family member, group, or husband. Her clothes, like Ginny Babcock's, portray her outward association with The Other, while at the same time her inner turmoil cries with various and contradictory voices. Eileen Kennedy sums up Emily's final "victory": "Of the five, the greatest insight, perhaps, is achieved by Emily, who sadly and with finality realizes that a woman has to take the responsibility--even if she doesn't want to--of forming her own personality" (123).

From early adolescence, Emily knows, through conditioning, that there exist certain expectations and obligations in male/female relationships. "From watching her mother and Sally, she knew the way to enthrall a male was to ask him questions about himself, and then listen with feigned fascination to his lengthy answers" (34). Emily, however, from the beginning has trouble with this prescribed role. Even though she frantically wants to be a part of the "in" group (the Devouts, the Ingenues, the popular set), she is never quite willing to wear the

"correct" clothes nor act in the prescribed manner for popularity. Her relationship with Raymond shows signs of a blossoming male/female friendship. The problem, however, is that friendships between males and females are difficult to maintain because of underlying sexual overtones. The rules are different, and Emily and Raymond remain in a kind of limbo, never able to work out the relationship.

In high school, Emily seems "stuck with [her] own grim determination to fit in and inability to do so" (121). She thinks she wants what Sally has, and not until much later does Emily realize that Sally's way is no better--just somewhat different. Emily does, finally, receive a bid to the Ingenues, meets Earl at camp, and takes on the trappings of "popular." She finds, however, that she is still required to live up to the expectations of others. In the "preppy" scheme of things, she becomes lavaliered and then pinned to Earl. The course, if she chooses this route, is set. Earl tells Emily that the plans are made:

I had it all mapped out. We'll have next year together at State. Then I'll go to work at Dad's plant. When you're a junior, I'll give you your diamond. Then when you graduate, we'll get married" (212).

Emily realizes, though, that she cannot continue in this "mapped out" direction. Instead, she chooses a college in New York and joins Raymond and the FORWARD group. Before she departs, Earl tries desperately to convince her that she is making a mistake, but Emily knows somehow that the path with Earl is not for her. As Earl's tongue "gently prodded open her reluctant mouth, she realized that it was exactly how you put a bit into a horse's mouth--just prior to quietly slipping the leather straps over its ears. Bridle. Bridal" (214). She realizes the implications, but somehow, later, with Justin, she is unable to avoid the same mistake.

When Emily gives the graduation speech as "Most Studious," she admonishes her classmates to accept change and to make choices, but she is not sure, even herself, if she can follow her own advice:

Most of the boys would soon be working in the factories and stores and warehouses. Most of the girls would marry them and keep their houses and raise their children. Some would go to State. A few would leave the region. "The choice is ours." Who among them was choosing? Certainly not herself. If she could have chosen, she'd have stayed here with the scenes of her

childhood and the graves of her forebears.

It sure didn't feel like choice. (218)

As she makes her "choice" to attend college in New York, she again allows other people to influence her actions and even her thoughts. She makes a few feeble attempts at autonomy of action, but, for the most part, her conduct is still colored by what others believe is right for Emily. "They had taken her political education in hand. . . . Emily was attending each benefit, rally, concert, and coffee house they suggested" (225).

As Emily settles into the new group, she has some second thoughts about her choices. She misses Earl and wonders if she has, indeed, made a wise decision for herself. "If she wasn't incarcerated in Freedom City right now, she'd be at a football game with Earl, wearing a Chi O blazer and plaid pleated skirt, instead of wheat jeans. . . . Why had this seemed so unappealing a few months earlier?" (2298). By the time Emily decides to return to Earl, it is too late. The choice, once again, has been made for her. Earl is engaged to someone else. Emily feels that if she cannot be identified by the college "preppy" group, then she has no choice but to remain where she is. Instead of "The KT Fall Formal, the UT game, the Hot Nuts concert" (232), she is listening to Joan Baez and watching films of the "Freedom

Riders." She is singing the same song--just simply a different verse. In Emily's words, "she couldn't turn back, but she didn't want to move forward. Apparently she had to stay put" (240).

When Emily marries Justin (the leader of the FORWARD group), she doesn't realize that she is trapping herself into a situation that is ironically similar to Sally's. Fighting desperately to avoid what she sees in Sally's marriage, Emily, nevertheless, falls into the same snare. "She too spent all her time doing only what other people wanted, never consulting herself to find out what she might want" (409). Early in the marriage, Emily begins to assimilate her role as Wife: "Either you played the Great Ear, or you accepted the label of Festering Hole. One way or another, men were determined to fill your orifices" (381). She falls prey to the unfortunate belief that her husband must be kept content. Much like a child, he must be mothered--listened to, catered to, sympathized with, and cleaned up after: "After he came, she lay still as his semen oozed out of her, seething with resentment that once again a man had succeeded in transferring his mess to a place where she would have to clean it up" (389). Emily is able to add a few corollaries to her original hypothesis about the "Great Ear":

The Great Ear wasn't supposed to appeal for sympathy herself. (384)

The Great Ear was not supposed to talk, particularly in a less than loving tone. (385)

[There is] that awful need of the Great Ear to fulfill the needs of other people. (391)

A Real Woman waited with Patience and Loyalty. This was her role. (407)

The Great Ear [wanted] to do only what everyone else wanted. (418)

Emily has not learned yet that she must find her own fulfillment of needs. She can no more fulfill the needs of Justin than The Other can fulfill hers. She makes a valiant try, but the outcome is inevitable. She must first find her own direction before she is able to find any pleasure or enhancement within any relationship.

Along with The Great Ear, Emily feels she must also live up to the category of A Real Mother:

A Real Mother should be: forever at home, eternally available, unquenchably interested. A Real Mother will: bake cookies, stew vats of hot chocolate, make Christmas tree ornaments, play Monopoly on demand. This was the model Emily was stuck with. . . . And she suffered about her inability to conform. (391)



Emily doesn't believe that she is a "good" mother any more than she feels that she is a "good" wife. She can't be either, in fact, until she is able to come to terms with her own sense of The Self. She is, at this point, working toward that goal, but where she seeks advice and counsel and help from The Other, she must, instead, seek from within. First, she must find out what she wants to do and where she wants to go with her own life. Then and only then will she be able to find some satisfaction in her relationship with Justin and with her son, Matt. Alas, however, it is not to be.

Emily correctly assumes that her relationship with Justin is unsalvageable. Instead of focusing on personal aims and goals, however, she falls into the same suffocating trap--this time with Maria. She erroneously believes that Maria offers escape from male chauvinistic destruction: "If you want sympathy, you aren't going to get it from a man. All I've ever had from them are long self-absorbed monologues, followed by short premature ejaculations" (387), Emily tells Maria. She looks to Maria, however, for the same kind of fulfillment that she has sought in Justin. In her marriage to Justin, Emily believes that she must spend her entire energy and time in giving him what he needs: "If she didn't give Justin what he needed, he'd get it elsewhere.

She'd be reduced to a lifetime of lonely masturbation" (384). In trying to make the needs of Justin her own needs, she becomes frustrated and angry and blames him as well as the entire male gender for her own internal inadequacies and inhibitions.

Emily sees men as having certain advantages not afforded to women. She even envies that predetermined dominance:

It occurred to her that she was in fact handicapped: She had no penis. Freud was wrong, though. It wasn't a penis she wanted, but rather the prerogatives that mysteriously accrued to those who had them.

(412)

Emily finds that the same problem exists in her relationship with her boss that exists in her marriage. She sees herself as coffee-maker, as sympathetic listener, as "gopher" to the demands of a male. She is supposed to bolster the ego of the man while totally submerging her own needs. Consequently, because Emily has not forged her own way within the workplace, she loses her job when Harold moves to another company.

In her marriage, as well as with her boss, Emily realizes the need to discover some autonomy, but she also

realizes that the deck is stacked against her because of preconceived notions of male domination:

The institution of marriage was a penal institution. Set up and maintained by men, to domesticate the passion she now knew existed in women. The ominous feeling she'd had first making love with Earl, that he was trying to tame her like one of his mares--that's exactly what had been going on. Those passions unleashed. What would they do to the orderly male world of getting and spending and hoarding and defending? . . . They filled their factories with machines. They filled their homes with machines. They preferred it if their wives were merely appliances: Plug them in, and they dispensed sympathy and meals and clean socks. Plug into them and they got your rocks off. (417)

Although Emily now recognizes that she cannot provide life and sustenance for The Other any more than The Other can provide the same for her, she is still powerless to make any internal alterations in the scheme of things.

When Emily transfers her allegiance from Raymond to Earl to Justin to Maria, she expects each person to provide her with emotional fulfillment. Maria, although

somewhat gruffly, tries to warn Emily that she cannot take responsibility for Emily's happiness:

If you mean what I think you mean by 'in love,' then I don't want any part of it.

This manic-depressive trip where you give me the power to make you jubilant or miserable?

Honestly, Emily, it's an illness to be recovered from, not a state to be cultivated. (424)

An illness, it is not; but a state of mind to be reviewed, it definitely is. As Emily's relationship with Maria demonstrates, Emily does not seek her existence just from men but from any Other who will take the responsibility.

Because Emily knows only that she needs Maria (The Other) desperately, she wants some hold that will make the dependence inescapable:

So that Emily could begin to tire of having responsibility for her, and eventually start feeling contempt for her inability to care for herself. So that Emily's love could transmute into resentment, then hatred. So that Emily could finally free herself of this awful need to have Maria need her. (433)

Emily is learning, however, and her direction seems much more focused than at any time previously. When she no longer defines herself as Junior Servicette, Wife, Mother,

Lesbian, or Freedom Fighter and begins to view herself as Emily, then the process will be complete. She is well on the way by the time she attends Jed's funeral and offers her support (but not any kind of fulfillment) to Sally. With a kind of wise irony, Emily responds to Donny's "Gon be different for them." "Damn right" (563), she answers, knowing that while they may try their best to teach and support and help their children, they ultimately will be on their own to attend to the process of the search for identity.

Emily has learned, and she will obviously continue to learn. She will not stagnate, though there may be regressions. The forward steps, however, will continue to shape Emily's sense of herself and allow her to find what she seeks--not from The Other but from The Self.

## Chapter 4

### The Other

In one respect, Other Women continues the themes in Kinflicks and Original Sins: all three novels deal with the individual's search for meaning and identity and how that search is often closely related to one's relationships. In a definite and positive departure from the first two novels, however, Other Women portrays at least one female character (Hannah) and one male character (Arthur) who have successfully come to terms with the search for identity and are comfortable in their respective roles. A third character (Caroline) is well on the way to personal fulfillment by the time the book closes.

Glimpses into the lives of Hannah (the therapist) and Caroline (the nurse) reveal myriad possibilities for positive as well as negative associations with The Other. As Hannah leads Caroline (sometimes willingly and sometimes not) through therapy, the relationship of Hannah and Caroline and their relationships with other people are portrayed with increasing clarity. Hannah, according to Nancy Evans, learns the ultimate lesson: "Everyone has problems, even shrinks. The trick: To learn the

shrug of acceptance, to realize you can't control all the bad things that happen" (26).

Caroline Kelley, a divorced woman with two sons, is experiencing depression as the book opens. She makes her first appointment with Hannah Burke because, at the time, therapy seems to be the only alternative to suicide. Even though Caroline enters psychotherapy with extreme trepidation, she is willing to try one more avenue in her search for Self. Caroline realizes that she has tried all of the standard bromides: marriage and motherhood, apple pie and monogamy, bigamy and polygamy; consumerism, communism, feminism, and God; sex, work, alcohol, drugs, and true love. Each enchanted for a time, but ultimately failed to stave off the despair. The only bromide she hadn't tried was psychotherapy.

(18)

All of her life, Caroline has felt displaced, never totally involved in what she considers to be the mainstream of life. She, like Ginny and Emily and Sally before her, attempts to identify herself through The Other--whether (in Caroline's case) The Other be parent, man, child, or woman.

Up to the point where Caroline begins her therapy, she believes that she has learned one true lesson about

relationships and that is that The Other is consciously or subconsciously out to sabotage whatever Caroline thinks she wants. She reduces her philosophy to one oft-repeated sentence: "I know what you want and you can't have it." The trick then, Caroline thinks, must be never to allow The Other to know exactly what she does want. If she expresses her true feelings to someone else, she believes that The Other will automatically and instinctively withdraw from her. Bonnie Zimmerman, in "Out and About," states that Caroline "hides her true self behind a facade of weakness, self-sacrifice, and despair" and that this suggests "that in refusing to be whole and true to one's self, one revels in victimization and powerlessness" (14). Caroline is certainly a victim--of her childhood and upbringing, of her gender, and of society in general. Most of all, however, Caroline is a victim of her own misguided beliefs and internal struggles.

Partly because of Caroline's early home life, she is unable to accept a man into her present life without giving up her own sense of Self. Her past psychological history illustrates that for Caroline a man is intrusive--both literally and figuratively. For Caroline, wanting and needing are intertwined, and as she begins to work through therapy with Hannah, she begins to realize that the two are separate entities--that some things cannot



be changed simply because she may want to change them. When she learns to accept herself as she is, then and only then, can The Other accept her as she is--as Hannah is able to do without any value judgments. As Adrian Oktenberg states, "Nothing we know or feel is easy; but then ease is not the point" (20). As Caroline works through her inner self with Hannah, she painfully begins to accept herself and realize that, for her, a lesbian relationship may be the only kind that will give her any hope of becoming whole within a relationship.

Caroline's childhood is fraught with subjugating her own needs to those of The Other. Both of her parents are totally involved with charities and philanthropic endeavors to the detriment of their own family. Thus, early in life Caroline learns to sit quietly and unobtrusively, so that she can stay out of trouble and people will love her. She "learns" that the more she gives, the more she will be loved. It takes Hannah to help her unlearn this misguided lesson. "Rejection and abandonment were Caroline's inner ambience, probably shaped in those first months when Daddy went to war and Mommy went berserk with abandonment and terror" (108). As Hannah tells Caroline later, "You didn't pick your parents . . . but you've picked everybody since" (110). When Caroline can learn to stop choosing people who will ultimately

reject her, then her search for Self will become meaningful.

When Caroline returns to her parents' home for Christmas, she falls back immediately into the trap of trying to please someone else--as she did for her parents when she was young, as she does for Jackson in her marriage, and as she does for Diana in her lesbian relationship. Caroline realizes at her parents' home that the more she entangles her senses "with another person, the more rapidly a bond [turns] into bondage" (115). And in bondage is where Caroline has been all her life. The Christmas scenario is ludicrous but typical and similar to Caroline's childhood. She shops with her father for damaged cartons of perfume for his secretaries, and her boys receive March of Dimes cards to fill and their own discarded boots as presents from Caroline's parents. Caroline and her sons leave the Christmas table hungry because there are too many "street people" invited for the amount of food prepared. The individual family members are subjugated to the "good" of society. Hannah tells Caroline later, "You're entitled to feel pissed off, you know. . . . Lousy gifts, not enough food, a houseful of loonies" (137). From every front, Caroline is bombarded with the message: Do more, give more, and someone will love you, but never let the person know

what you really want. Caroline's philosophy is that you don't show what you want, because then you deprive others of the satisfaction of denying it to you. You had no business wanting anything anyway if you had food on the table and a roof over your head, when half the world lacked even that. (26)

From her early learned "lessons," Caroline functions well only when she feels that someone else actually needs her. She and Diana have problems in their relationship because each tries to outdo the other in mothering and caring.

Their relationship wasn't working, they finally concluded, because each had an equivalent need to be needed. In relationships with men, each had been exploited to her heart's content. But with each other life was a constant struggle to outnurture. The cabin filled up with their greeting cards. Banks of flowers were always dying on the tables. Each put on ten pounds from the candies and pastries the other brought home. . . . During lovemaking each would wait for the other to climax first, until both lost interest altogether. They fought over who got

the most burnt toast, or the lukewarm second shower. (29)

Caroline doesn't realize that she is exploiting herself and smothering The Other in the process. This intense "need" to do for The Other is hidden in her own needs and can never be voiced or shown since that would give The Other the inevitable excuse to withdraw affection.

After what Caroline sees as a failed affair with Diana, she attempts an affair with a man again, this time with Brian. With men, the rules are already established, and Caroline is desperate to find her niche in the scheme of things. She goes about trying to fall in love with Brian with the same logic that one would use to pursue an advanced degree or learn to play the piano. If she follows the prescribed rules, then she will be happy--or so she reasons:

If she played her cards right, Brian would stick around, shovel the steps, change the faucet washers, prepare the tax returns. Life would be easier with a man. The roles were defined: Brian would bring home the bacon, and she'd make the BLTs. (148)

For Caroline, however, a man cannot bring her happiness. She must realize that her happiness depends, not on The Other, but on herself. Caroline cannot simply choose to

fall in love with Brian and "live happily ever after." As Hannah tells her at one point in the therapy, "Conscious choices aren't always in agreement with unconscious ones. That's why we're trying to bring the unconscious ones out for an airing" (184).

When her relationships don't work out, Caroline immediately begins to blame herself, to look for the faults in herself that may have caused the separation and loneliness. The answer does lie within but not necessarily in a list of faults and inadequacies.

Why had her lovers always withdrawn? She hadn't given them what they needed so they looked elsewhere? But she'd always tried so hard. What was it they wanted? Diana said she was a taker. Jackson said she was too intense. David Michael said she was a boring bourgeois housewife. (223)

Caroline allows herself to be defined by someone else's terms rather than by what she chooses. Those things that cannot be changed must be accepted, but for other areas there are choices that Caroline can make without regard to what has been established for her by someone else. She realizes that the way she always tries to keep her lovers around is to "buy [her] lovers presents, water their plants, walk their dogs, put coins in parking meters

for their cars" (230). The need to be needed is paramount in Caroline's definition of her role in a relationship.

The one time that Caroline is able to enjoy a sexual encounter with someone she has just met and with whom there is no prospect of a continuing relationship, Caroline is rewarded with the revelation that the sex act itself does not necessarily mean emotional and lifelong commitment.

She'd never known you could go to bed with people without assuming their debts, writing them into your will, adopting their children, folding their laundry, rubbing ointment into their hemorrhoids. She'd had no idea irresponsibility could feel so good. (228)

The valuable lesson here is not so much one of irresponsibility as it is that Caroline does not have to give more of herself than the other person even wants in order to feel mutual pleasure and satisfaction. When she is able to know exactly what constitutes her own fulfillment, then she can enjoy what The Other has also found in his or her own fulfillment. Caroline does learn this lesson. Whereas she has lived by the precept, "You feel you have to do nice things to keep them around" (239), she finds that the premise just simply does not hold. "Maybe so," Caroline continues, "but it hadn't worked. She'd knocked

herself out doing nice things, and where were all the recipients today?" (239). In learning the lesson, Caroline first begins to confront choices--choices born of first deciding what she really wants as opposed to what someone else might want.

Through Caroline's sessions with Hannah, she is able to work through her background, her childhood, her self-destructive patterns, and her relationships to come to a final understanding in her search for Self. The ultimate, painfully acquired lesson is this: "The strength you've insisted on assigning to others is actually within yourself" (371).

Hannah Burke, in Other Women, exemplifies much more than the vehicle for Caroline's therapy. She epitomizes the female character who has experienced tragedy and heartbreak and depression and has, nevertheless, emerged whole and fulfilled. While she may suffer occasional bouts of self-doubt and longing, she is able, however, to view the whole picture and realize that there are simply some things which cannot be altered in life. Acceptance of those unalterable circumstances is the key to Hannah's stability and is the very philosophy that she desperately tries to convey to her clients through psychotherapy. It is ultimately a simple, yet painful process of unlearning previously learned responses. According to Francis King, in "Hannah and Caroline,"

Hannah's view of neurosis . . . is that it originates in The Pattern: that is, the bad emotional and behavioural habits which we pick up in childhood and which then cause us endless damage and distress until we manage to unlearn them. (24).

Hannah, from outward appearances, seems to have suffered no deep, emotional tragedies. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hannah has just learned to manage the cards that life has dealt her with acceptance and understanding. The pain that Hannah shelters is born of a lifetime of struggle:

Four years old and your mother dies of typhoid. Abandoned by your father at five. Nineteen, and your husband is killed in battle. Two children dead in their beds from carbon monoxide. No more surprises in her life if she could help it, which she knew she couldn't.  
(19)

By simply accepting that surprises are an inevitable part of life over which Hannah has no control, she crosses the line from fatalistic depression to controlling her own responses to outside forces. Hannah knows that while she may not be able to control what other people do and what circumstances may befall her, she can control her reaction to those inevitable actions.



One of the stabilizing forces in Hannah's life is her husband, Arthur. He is probably the only male in Alther's fiction to have come to his own acceptance as a man and as an individual; and he can, therefore, accept Hannah as she is. While Hannah and Arthur suffer both individual and collective tragedies, they are able to support each other--a feat that can be accomplished only after a final acceptance of Self without dependence on The Other for identity.

When Mona and Nigel died, it was Arthur's steadiness that got [Hannah] through--and that was when she began to regard staying power as a virtue, and one Arthur had developed slowly and painfully in his private struggle to come to terms with having left behind one family in order to form a second with her. (41)

After Hannah and Arthur learn individually, they are then able to transfer that knowledge into a positive support and collective learning.

Some of Hannah's own search for meaning revolves around her participation in psychotherapy--as the client instead of the therapist. Before she can become a licensed psychologist, Hannah has to undergo therapy with Maggie, who successfully leads Hannah to the process that

each individual must undertake. While the therapist can help to show the way, the individual must finally walk the path alone. "Maggie used to maintain that doing therapy was simply a question of raising the child concealed within each client, and then disillusioning the client about the extent of your own powers" (47). The trick, then, is to allow the individual his own power without assigning a stifling and suffocating power to another person. Allowing The Other the power to control one's life thwarts and stagnates one's search for individual identity. When the power to control responses comes from within, then the search quickens, and eventually The Self is emancipated. Hannah believes that, in therapy, "clients didn't hand over any power at all. All they did was to use the therapist as a stand-in for the strong part of themselves, until they were ready to face their own strength" (51). Her clients often do, however, hand over power to The Other in their lives, and Hannah is usually successful in helping them to uncover their own strength and power.

In her own life, Hannah has already experienced much of what her clients are presently experiencing. Dealing with loss, with relationships and love and sex, with depression and longing and nostalgia, with repressed anxieties, and with change are no easier for Hannah than

for her clients except that she has come to terms with them. She realizes that in someone young and inexperienced in life, the process is slow and painful, and she muses about the training that is required for one to learn about dealing with one's relationships. She thinks about

how much training a young person would require . . . about what one could reasonably expect from another person, training about the space and freedoms you had to allow so as not to kill off the qualities that drew you to someone in the first place. She'd been through all this with Arthur--the frantic demands for proofs and declarations of devotion--in the course of learning to let love alone, to wax and to wane, to heave and shift and settle and heave again, without endless dreary dissection. Learning to come as close as possible for two people lodged in separate bodies, but then to accept the necessities of that separateness and move away, sadly perhaps but without rancor, knowing you were merely setting the stage for reenacting the pleasure of breaking down the separateness once again. (79)

Hannah has learned, and she directs her knowledge and expertise to others in an attempt to help them break down

barriers and free themselves from The Other--not toward freedom from relationships but toward freedom within relationships.

In her sessions with her clients, Hannah tries to direct each person toward his or her own inner strength. She realizes that the power is somewhat different for men than it is for women:

She often prodded the men to allow themselves a wider emotional range, whereas the women usually needed to discover the part of themselves that didn't change along with the hormones each month. Until they found this inner pole star, they clung to relationships, or to anything else that seemed to promise external stability. (93)

Hannah forces this awareness of clinging to relationships, however subtly, to the surface, and thereby enables her clients to begin to come to terms with themselves. For Caroline, specifically, the recognition of her role within her present and previous relationships reveals an awareness that she has thus far been unable to perceive about herself. She wants to change the world, but with Hannah's help, realizes that she can accept herself only within that larger world.

Part of Hannah's acceptance of life as it is simply comes from having lived a certain number of years and having allowed the wisdom to enter her consciousness. "The gift from middle age was the ability to enjoy the moment without expecting it to last. . . . Life was a painful experience. All pleasure faded, and everyone had to die" (94). With this knowledge, Hannah can make the most of the moment (with occasional lapses), enjoy the particular experience, and be ready for the inevitable change.

Hannah feels the same emotions that cripple her clients, but she has learned to channel them into acceptable directions. "Loss and abandonment, guilt and terror. The same primal atmosphere her clients inhabited. Probably that was why she was such a good therapist" (133). And Hannah is such a good therapist in part because she has suffered so much herself. Understanding the emotions felt by her clients, Hannah's empathy makes them feel safe in simply being themselves. She feels the same pangs of guilt that every parent feels about child-rearing, but Hannah accepts her limitations.

There wasn't any such thing as an adequate parent anyway. It was an impossible job. If their parents had been present, clients felt suffocated. If absent, clients felt deserted. How could one flawed mortal

protect another from all the ghastly things this world dished out? She hadn't been able to protect Mona and Nigel. Even if you could protect your children, you'd probably be doing them a disservice. (134)

Hannah recognizes that along with accepting the inevitable from outside The Self, one must also accept that part of The Self which cannot be changed. While some attitudes and reactions can be realized, others are simply a part of one's being.

She concluded that you never got rid of your tired old patterns. You simply began to recognize them as they cropped up. Some you valued. . . . The more obnoxious pattern . . . you learned to ignore most of the time. (164)

Hannah has not lost herself by submerging into Arthur. Without Arthur, she would still cope. Obviously, she enjoys their relationship, and the thoughts of not having it are painful, but her whole existence does not depend on the relationship. "To have been through life with someone, to know all his flaws and failings and he yours, to have done every awful thing two people can do to each other, yet still to be together-- it was a pleasure unsurpassed in Hannah's experience"

(200). Hannah can afford to feel the pleasure since her sense of Self is enhanced by Arthur rather than created by him. Her sense of Self (while evolving gradually) is a positive and profound revelation. Hannah can confront whatever surfaces from The Other, what may surface from the outside world, and what may bubble up from within herself. She realizes that confronting The Self is difficult but well worth the effort:

Humans were problem-solving creatures, and where no problems existed, they created some so they'd have something to solve with their much-vaunted brains. Because if they didn't, they were forced to confront the echoing stillness beneath all the hubbub, which was terrifying because it was unfamiliar. It seemed like emptiness at first. Only gradually did you realize it was everything. (251)

Hannah realizes that sometimes even an involvement with another person is not worth the pain and suffering of eventual separation. In her relationships with her clients, she must balance her personal emotions against the fight the other person is waging to find his or her own fulfillment. She realizes that "her office was a speeded-up version of the world: people flowed through, and she had to resist entanglements with them or suffer

the agony when they moved on, as they usually had to" (312). In her professional relationships at least, Hannah can involve herself only so far and only for the moment. She can gain wisdom and understanding from the particular experiences but must be able and willing to let go and move on when the time comes--as her clients must also learn to do.

When someone else replaces one's own sense of Self, then the loss of that person can trigger a total loss of Self. While Hannah loves deeply and unselfishly, she, nevertheless, keeps a part of herself untouched and unopen to pain. The death of her children was nearly her undoing, but the lesson she learns is unwavering and everlasting.

She now tried to make sure that nothing and no one was ever that important to her again. Call it self-preservation. If you attached your heartstrings to people and objects, you were dooming yourself to heartbreak, because they all eventually vanished. (363)

Hannah plans for the future but does not necessarily expect her plans to be fulfilled. She has learned that her happiness and her personal identity depend not on some Other but on The Self. Hannah is Whole in One.



As the personal/professional relationship grows and matures between Hannah and Caroline, they begin interacting positively and begin to learn to accept. The relationship between these two women typifies the way all healthy relationships can be handled--whether they be between parent and child, man and woman, or woman and woman. Adrian Oktenberg observes that the experiences of Hannah and Caroline produce a "reverberative relationship" where the two "examine everything they know about themselves, each other, and the world" (20).

Before the therapy even begins, Hannah attempts to place the eventual relationship into some perspective. Sometimes she refuses to take on new clients, but in Caroline's case, she has agreed.

She never knew why she said yes or no to someone. . . . If you cut your losses before taking them on, you could skew your success rate and feel more capable. But this time she said yes. If the woman had bothered to track her down, probably there was a reason. . . . (18)

Even at the first meeting, Hannah's mind is churning, seeking to discover how to help Caroline find her own strength. She accurately observes--even though there is no way she can know for sure--that Caroline is probably

"one of those women who asked to be stepped on, and then complained that there were boot prints on her back" (19). Hannah is right on target and then proceeds to divorce herself from what she will begin to hear about Caroline's past and present.

Hannah has discovered through experience that she must "flip the switch that . . . allowed her to listen without relating what was said to herself" (22). What even Hannah does not realize at this point is that as she works with Caroline and helps her to focus on a positive self-image, Hannah herself, in the process, will confront her own past again and emerge even fuller and stronger than she has ever been. The potential for growth never stops, as Hannah discovers again and again in her sessions with Caroline. Even though Hannah already knows that it isn't "necessary to live with Caroline's current level of misery" (25), she discovers that no matter how far one has come, the potential for further growth is ever present.

Caroline and Hannah face a long and tedious process together, and Caroline fights the inner feeling even from the beginning. "This therapy stuff was a big waste of time. . . . She was a nurse, she could diagnose her own malaise: she inhabited an insane asylum called earth. Do something about that, and she'd be fine" (27). The problem, however, as Hannah begins to help Caroline

discover for herself, is not in changing the world but in changing Caroline's response to it. She must somehow (with Hannah's help) learn to recognize her own role and place without projecting that position to the world and then receiving what she perceives as negative feedback. In Caroline's own thoughts, she seeks her role as defined by The Other instead of as defined by The Self: "It was a strain to be cooperative in enterprises to which she couldn't see the point, like therapy and celibacy. But her role in life was to help others feel better" (32). Nowhere does Caroline (at least at the beginning) see that her role must first revolve around making herself feel better.

As the therapy begins, Caroline is understandably afraid of what she might have to confront. She practices the age-old art of self-defense by not allowing Hannah access to those buried and repressed feelings. "Caroline was right to be scared. Some of the things she'd have to face about herself would be painful. . . . The stronger the defenses, the more devastating the wounds underneath" (44). Caroline not only crosses her arms and her legs in an outward attempt to conceal her Self from Hannah, but she also tries to second-guess Hannah. She believes that if she produces what Hannah wants, then Hannah will like her. The process is, thus, just beginning.

Hannah knows her "stuff," and when she gives Caroline an assignment to write down descriptive adjectives about herself, Hannah knows immediately that Caroline probably does it only to please her. She somehow must convey to Caroline that this assignment, along with a multitude of "directions" from The Other, can really be done only because it may help Caroline and not because it is something wanted or demanded by The Other.

If Caroline had done the list to please her, she wanted to convey that Caroline's compliance or noncompliance was a matter of indifference to her. . . . Therapy was theater. You tried to restage scenarios from the client's past so the outcomes were different. (61)

If Caroline thinks that a particular behavior is expected, then she will comply because of past experiences. Hannah must help her to break the patterns.

Since Caroline's learned but misguided and erroneous philosophy has been "I know what you want and you can't have it," Hannah must deliberately and calculatingly (at least at first) keep those pressures away from Caroline. Caroline desperately tries not to let Hannah know what she wants, because in this philosophy, once she lets Hannah know what she wants, it will be taken away: "It was a

firm rule with her not to let people know what she wanted from them. If you pretended you didn't care, sometimes what you wanted came to you unasked" (62). And Caroline has no intention of laying herself open to this woman whom she doesn't even care about.

Hannah knows these things about Caroline before Caroline knows them about herself, just as Hannah is able to accept Caroline for what she is before Caroline can learn to accept herself. Because Hannah can see what Caroline will only begin to see much further along in the therapy, Hannah must temper her own impatience as she begins to pull from Caroline those facets of her personality that are repressed or colored by The Other. Hannah reminds herself "not to go too fast. If the pain was too great, Caroline would shut down. You had to balance their developing trust in you with the unveiling of their ancient sorrows" (63).

Because of certain responses Caroline has learned from her childhood, it is difficult (if not impossible at first) for Caroline to accept any facet of herself as good. Hannah realizes this and knows that, like Caroline, most of her clients are "affectionate, capable people, with an overlay of crap from things other people had laid on them when they were too little to protest" (64). Hannah realizes, too, that there seem to be only two

types of behavior in the world: "One said 'come here,' and the other said 'go away'" (64). Caroline exhibits both behaviors at certain times, and sometimes she seems to exhibit both at the same time. To change not only her behavior but her inner responses to The Other, Caroline must "accept Hannah as an authority figure so she could rehear things she'd misheard as a baby--such as the notion that she'd caused World War II" (65).

Slowly, Caroline begins to realize that what she does or doesn't do may or may not have an effect on The Other. For the first time in her life, Caroline now at least questions her lifelong philosophy:

Was it even true she felt she had to do what others wanted for them to like her? . . . Whenever she failed to be long-suffering, people withdrew. But Diana had withdrawn too, and Caroline had always tried to do everything Diana wanted. (73)

With Hannah, Caroline at last begins to question motives, actions, reactions, and responses that before she had never dared to question. With the questioning, comes the first glimmer of hope that her questions may, indeed, have different answers than those she would have expected had she been able to pose them before.

Hannah begins to show Caroline that she can control and channel her responses to events in any way that she chooses. She tells Caroline that even in therapy, "I hold an image of a healthy happy coping client in my mind, and that's what I worked toward. If I held the idea of a depressed dependent client in my mind, then that's what I'd work toward" (82). When Caroline looks out at the world, she sees desperation, but Hannah tells her that she can see positiveness instead. It involves simply a matter of choice:

"It's your privilege to stay depressed if you want to."

"Want to?"

"It's your choice."

"Choice? If you really look at this world, you can't help being depressed."

"That all depends on what you see when you look. What do you see?"

"Injustice, brutality, war, hunger."

"True. But it's also a place of incredible beauty and intricacy. Inhabited by some people capable of great generosity and decency." (83)

For the first time, Caroline confronts a choice--the choice between seeing plusses as opposed to minuses, and it startles her.

Also, for the first time, Caroline can voice to Hannah her intense fear of rejection. Always before when Caroline has given of herself, she has ended up in pain over some loss from The Other. She feels this same threat with Hannah but is able to give verbal expression to it for the first time.

"What are you so afraid of?" asked Hannah.

"That I'll open myself up to you and get clobbered."

Caroline put on a brave show of tending everyone else. Doing for others what she wished someone would do for her.

"Well, I can't promise that won't happen . . . because someone who's determined to get clobbered will see a clobbering even when the other person intends nothing of the kind." (86)

It is, instead, Caroline's perception that is sometimes askew instead of what is actually taking place. Opening up to The Other most certainly involves a risk, but it doesn't have to be the same risk that Caroline has always expected.

Caroline is on the way to learning that The Other cannot (and should not be expected to) fulfill her own, inner needs. As she learns from Hannah, she will begin



to find those resources of her own strength and power that she insistently assigns to The Other instead of bringing to the surface in herself. Up to this point, Hannah accurately observes that Caroline is stuck at a point where fulfillment must be sought from The Other: "Caroline's reality was a vacuum of fear, insecurity, and longing for affection and protection--which she'd attempted to fill with a parade of people, objects, and projects" (88). In the seeking, however, often comes rejection, since The Other cannot fill her own void.

Hannah knows, both with her heart and with her head, that the come-here/go-away syndrome is paramount for most people. If The Other comes close enough to touch the soul, then the pain later caused by inevitable separation is almost too much to bear. And yet, people need the closeness and intimacy of other humans. The answer for Hannah, and for her clients eventually, lies in choices and a finding of Self that includes power and strength and inner fulfillment. Much of the pain that is felt can be ignored, since it is caused from within instead of by The Other. Hannah's clients

talked about the complications of their lives as though divinely ordained. They were unimpressed when she suggested they'd

devised many of the complications themselves, and could therefore simply drop them. . . . They needed you not to reject them, but they were so accustomed to rejection that they did everything they could to trigger it. (90-92)

As Hannah's words and observed behavior begin to sink into Caroline's mind and heart, Caroline starts to view the outside world somewhat differently. She realizes that she does have choices, that she can decide how to view the same thing in either a positive or a negative way: "Hannah said whether you were depressed depended on what you saw when you looked around. You could see that dead elm as a potential accident, as a supply of firewood, as a natural sculpture" (95). The potential, then, exists everywhere either for a healthy and positive view or for a diseased and negative one. Caroline is beginning to work toward the positive view--one where she can accept herself as she is without recriminations and blame. At this point, however, the feelings are strange to Caroline, and she is unsure that she can continue the therapy. Hannah knows the pattern: "They got scared when they started feeling good, just because it was so unfamiliar. Like chronic prisoners facing release from their cells" (105).

Caroline seeks to work through this new-found confidence by trying to avoid possible confrontations that might cause her pain. Hannah immediately sets her straight, however, by saying, "You can't feel good on a sustained basis by avoiding things that cause you pain. You have to come to terms with them. And you will" (109). But the process is just beginning. Even after the therapy terminates, the process will continue for the rest of Caroline's life. Finally, Hannah is able to tell Caroline what she has been unable and unwilling to hear up to this point: "'Awful things happen. You can't control that. But you can control how you respond.'" With a lot of practice and effort, she added silently" (139).

When Caroline feels silly and ridiculous about the rejection and pain she feels, Hannah responds with, "Your pain is as real as anyone else's, however trivial the triggers seem. Don't belittle it, or it'll continue to kick you in the teeth" (157). And Caroline realizes that "according to Hannah, she used [her] painful memories to feel lousy in the present" (172). Caroline is working, diligently and doggedly toward a positive goal. She begins to recognize her repetitive patterns of behavior as a source of her problems instead of attempting to place the blame on the world, on society, or on The Other.

The ultimate soul-searching comes for Caroline when Hannah probes too deeply into Caroline's psyche and soul and produces a self-confrontation. Caroline resorts to her tired, old pattern of doing things for other people in order to produce affection for herself. She bakes a loaf of rye bread for Hannah and expects praise and loving thanks. Instead, Hannah reacts with nonchalance and bafflement, and Caroline sees the reaction as rejection. Hannah, however, socks Caroline with the truth: "You feel foolish because I didn't react the way you wanted. You want to control my reactions so you can feel okay about yourself. Wouldn't it be easier just to eliminate me and feel okay without relation to what I do or don't do?" (176). Caroline is appalled and reacts strongly to the implication that she is unable to feel good about herself without the acceptance of The Other. The truth does hit hard, and Caroline lashes out in anger as she realizes that Hannah is exactly right. Hannah continues, "You feel you have to figure out what people want and do it, for them to like you" (179). Yes, the light is finally beginning to dawn for Caroline that the two poles are not necessarily congruent.

The problem with trying to second guess The Other is brought into focus more sharply than Caroline could have previously imagined. Hannah is now able, after several

painful and lengthy sessions, to confront Caroline with basic facts about herself and others, and Caroline is finally ready to absorb what Hannah is teaching her about herself. Hannah tells Caroline:

We're all operating from scripts written for us when we were infants. Most of the time we have no idea what other people are really like. You, me, Jackson. We have to treat each other with kindness because we're all laboring under similar disabilities. (207)

In other words, the best we can hope for is to control ourselves, our reactions to what happens, and to learn to allow The Other to confront and control his or her own responses.

Late in her therapy with Hannah, Caroline realizes that she has become dependent on Hannah. While Caroline now knows that "how other people see her was their problem, a projection of their own hopes and fears" (223), she realizes that the knowledge has come from Hannah and that she has transferred her new-found stability to dependence on Hannah. While the insight creates a problem for a while, Caroline herself slowly begins to realize that she can manage without Hannah. "She wished she could put her in a freezer, thawing her only as necessary. Then she realized she could, and did, summon

Hannah's image in her head whenever she liked" (228). And finally, when Caroline has learned enough, she will no longer even need to do that. She will summon her own inner resources instead. She will be able to live by the advice that Hannah gives her: "You can judge whether an experience is worth the effort by what it teaches you" (231).

There is nothing wrong with Caroline, really. She just believes that there is because of her dependence on what she perceives as The Other's reaction to her. Hannah has seen this all along, and now is able to tell Caroline:

For most of your life you've damped down all these facets of your personality in an attempt to be acceptable. They've been emerging lately, and . . . they're absolutely fine. You are fine, exactly as you are--sometimes sad and hurt and wanting to be taken care of, sometimes funny and charming, sometimes sexy, sometimes aggressive, sometimes angry. They're all you, and they're all fine. Just because they weren't fine to important people early in your life doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you.

(232)

Caroline is finally beginning to believe Hannah, and the process is accelerating. Now, when Caroline feels the

need to ask Hannah, she can many times seek and find the answers herself. "Choices, Caroline," she hears reverberating in her ears, but she still knows that "to choose, you first had to know what you wanted" (245). And finding out just what she wants is Caroline's next lesson.

Hannah is able to steer Caroline toward a revelation about her relationships with other people that makes Caroline finally and totally ready to begin to confront herself. She offers a long soliloquy to Caroline in summary of Caroline's past experiences with The Other:

"You keep talking about how these terrible people failed you. . . . Your pink blanket was destroyed, and Marsha was run over by a truck. But it sounds to me as though you left the others. They did things you chose to regard as rejections and betrayals, but you were ready to go. You took on new strength, and they couldn't cope because they wanted someone they could dominate. They failed you. But in their terms, you failed them. You didn't remain submissive and adoring. . . . This pile of corpses you talk about. . . . You could instead see as a compost pile. Ask yourself what

you learned from each person that allowed you to develop into the fantastic woman you are today. Your parents gave you their sensitivity to human suffering. Arlene helped you become good at your work. Jackson gave you babies and belongings. David Michael taught you about politics. . . ." The whole point, it seemed to her, was to figure out that none of these was enough to give life meaning.

(255)

While each person and each experience can teach and can provide a fleeting enjoyment, Hannah is helping Caroline to realize that none of these is permanent. The only permanence is within Caroline and how she reacts to what goes on around her. When she comes to this final realization, then she will have achieved what Hannah has been able to accomplish within her own life. The fleeting promises of The Other can be replaced with the immutability and stability of The Self.

In the last sessions of therapy, Hannah gives to Caroline a final, parting thought to reflect upon, to learn from, to absorb, and to grow toward: "All you can do is try to maintain your own peace of mind, with the hope that it can soothe away the savagery" (275). And as Caroline herself has finally learned: "There were



some situations to which there were simply no solutions" (287). Caroline is finally beginning to accept control for herself without the suffocation of expectations from The Other, even though she may not yet realize it. Hannah reminds Caroline after she rejects Brian that "you've just made a choice . . . you're shaping your live, and not just letting it happen" (299). Caroline is still having some difficulty here, and once again Hannah comes to her psychic rescue. "Don't you see that if you decide to go, of your own accord, it'll break your pattern of waiting around to feel rejected?" (319). Caroline can feel good on her own about her own decisions and choices without depending on The Other to make those choices for her and, consequently, in the process, force Caroline to feel a certain way because of what someone else does to her. She can, instead, feel the way she wants to feel regardless of what someone else may try to impose on her.

As Caroline prepares to terminate her therapy and continue on her own, she reflects on some of Hannah's strong and powerful messages: "That's what I'm here for--to be left," and "The miracle is all around you" (329). She also remembers the advice about change: "That's the risk you take if you change: that the people you've been involved with won't like the new you. But other people who do will come along" (331).

And most importantly, Caroline can now like herself as she is, accept herself as she is, and grow into her full potential as a whole being within The Self. She is, at last, ready to accept an almost unbelievable principle: "I know what you want and you can have it" (355).

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

In all of Lisa Alther's fiction, a sense of alienation is paramount. In her work, however, alienation generally has positive results because characters develop a sense of their own worth as individuals. As Alther's characters experience loss and heartbreak and disappointment and failure, they begin to realize that a strong sense of self-worth makes the battle worth fighting. Struggling through various stages of growth or stagnation, they move to the essential realization that self-definition is positive and rewarding while definition by The Other is negative and defeating.

Lisa Alther continues the themes of earlier twentieth-century contemporary fiction while, at the same time, she breathes new life into those historically male-dominated themes. Ihab Hassan, in Contemporary American Literature: 1945-1972, chronicles the themes of contemporary literature as "the stresses of culture, the pressures of the Self, the tensions of the imagination" (12). Alther examines these themes from the woman's point of view and concludes that as long as

we seek fulfillment from The Other, a vital piece of life's puzzle will forever be missing.

In "Termites," Alther's latest short story (1986), she appears (on the surface) to depart from her past themes and to concentrate, instead, on a diseased and decaying mind. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals the same themes, previously found in the novels but here treated in a slightly different manner. In this story, while literal termites eat through the wood of the family home, figurative termites of alienation gnaw at the narrator. Although the narrator seems to believe that her mother is the one suffering from an aging mind, in reality, the narrator's sense of alienation is destroying any hope for a better future. She is an alcoholic who views her affliction as merely "a little something to refresh myself after a hard day" (270). The "hard day," however, consists of brewing coffee, eating divinity candy, ordering plastic flowers, doing a little typing, and leaving early from the doctor's office where she is employed.

The mother in "Termites," while obviously the stronger of the two characters, is powerless to stop her daughter's decay. While she may have originally contributed to the stagnation by calling her daughter home before the father died, the daughter was already

in a decline. The narrator blames her mother for all of her problems: the fact that her one beau was not considered from a good enough family, the fact that she was asked to leave Knoxville to return to Beulah, and the fact that the narrator believes that she must take care of her mother. Again, as with all of Alther's fiction, a character identifies with The Other--blaming The Other instead of finding self-fulfillment. The narrator rationalizes about her alcoholism, again blaming her mother for the presence of the champagne in the cellar as well as for her failed romance: "Mother's been saving this here champagne for long as I can remember. Used to say all the time how it was for my wedding. Well, that's all her fault and not mine anyhow" (269).

Because the narrator views her problem as solely connected to her mother, the only answer she can conceive of is to place her mother in a nursing home for geriatric patients:

I have to ask myself if some of them termites haven't started in on her brain. Because when you start pitching fits for no reason at all, that pretty well shows you're getting screwy. So that's why I'm being forced to consider putting her in the county home. Though I just hate the idea, you understand. (271)

The irony, of course, is that the "termites" are eating at her own existence and not that of her mother. She will be in no better position with her mother out of the way. In reality, she will probably get worse. In this case, Alther presents a character who shows little or no hope for growth. She is trapped within her own existence and blinded by placing blame on The Other.

Alther's fiction, then, mirrors reality within her framework of self-definition. Some of her characters are left with little hope of ever finding fulfillment, some are in the process, and some are extremely close to ultimate and positive answers. The narrator of "Termites" is the farthest away from self-definition while Hannah, in Other Women, has evolved the most. Alther's other characters (Ginny, Caroline, Emily, Sally, Jed, Donny, and Raymond) are presented in various stages of developing self-worth and positive growth.

The narrator of "Termites" represents defeat and, perhaps, even regression. Jed Tatro, who dies before much growth is possible, represents stagnation. Donny and Raymond, who both begin to seek definition, still remain far from the ultimate goal. Sally Prince can be considered the center of the continuum, the one who begins to exhibit positive possibilities. Although Emily and Caroline and Ginny are headed in totally diverse and

individual directions, they, however, offer the probability and likelihood of hope and positive self-definition. Finally, Hannah is the one main character who has arrived, even before the novel opens, and who continues to grow every day that she lives.

Lisa Alther, in her fiction, continues to offer us possibilities for learning, for growing, and for coping with the ways individuals must deal with The Self. Her lesson for us is simple, yet extremely painful and difficult to learn: The Self is the ultimate and final answer. As Hannah says to Caroline in Other Women, life is "like learning to surf. The waves keep rolling in, each different from the last, and you have to ride them, instead of getting pounded to bits" (376).

Women who read Alther's fiction can expect to experience a painful confrontation with The Self. Southern women, in particular, will find a mirror which may be extremely difficult to look into. A depth of truth lies just beneath the surface of this fiction--a truth that women have felt, have sometimes voiced, but have rarely confronted directly. Since most novels that present a quest for self-definition have been written by and for men, women who have read that fiction could expect to gain little more than intellectual insight. Alther, however, forces women to look at themselves as whole

beings rather than as fragmented pieces or as parts of some Other. While the confrontation may be painful, it is necessary if women are to find any stability and positive direction as fully functioning and independent beings. Men reading Alther's fiction can expect to gain not only intellectual insights into women but emotional insights into The Self--both for themselves and for the women in their lives.

Although Alther's main characters are mostly female and her setting is mostly in the South, she does not write just for women nor just for the South. And although she chronicles an era, she encompasses more than a single era. Alther writes not only of the way things have been and of the way they are, she writes of the happy consequences of learning to cope with the excess baggage of outside expectations and of how to understand and accept The Self. Unfortunately, the process takes a long time for most people. But as Alther illustrates through her fiction, her message not only reaches and touches us but helps us to lessen the length of the process as well as its pain.

While Alther has obviously worked through the process of self-actualization in the writing of her fiction itself, we, as readers, can learn to accept change and to grow inwardly. We can make our own choices, unencumbered by what choices others make. In the process, we find not



only that we like ourselves better but that we are able to enrich our lives in those inevitable interactions with other people.

Although as Hannah says, "Nobody ever said life was supposed to be easy" (376), it can, nevertheless, be enriching and rewarding and challenging and acceptable and occasionally fun. If it is painful, it can also feel good; if it is stifling, it can also open new doors; if it is difficult, it can also be enlightening. And even if what we can expect is that other people will ultimately fail us in the end, we don't have to fail ourselves. The past is behind us, the present is for living, and the future will be what we make it.

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