

Danny Miller

Writing Award

Keith Wilson (Northern Kentucky University) won the Danny Miller Writing Award in the Undergraduate Critical Writing Category

Folk Traditions as a Conduit for Healing in Gurney Norman's *Kinfolks* by Keith Wilson

The latest edition of Gurney Norman's *Divine Right's Trip* holds a subtitle notably absent from the original: "A Novel of the Counterculture." The subtitle of this newer edition belies the intent of the novel, however, an intent which the 1972 edition's subtitle, "A Folk Tale," hinted at. Moreover, while *Divine Right's Trip*, focuses on the centrality of folk tradition and family to the well-being of the individual, the family is shown as a sort of cultural anchor in Norman's other work, *Kinfolks: The Wilgus Stories*. *Kinfolks* explores the role of family in culture, and the ties it has to the folk tradition as a means of physical, spiritual, and societal healing.

It is important to understand what exactly constitutes folk tradition in order to understand how it communicates the values of its culture. Folk tradition is defined as follows:

The common beliefs, practices, customs and other cultural elements of an ethnic or social group that are rooted in the past, but are persisting into the present due to means such as arts and crafts, songs and music, dance, foods, drama, storytelling and certain forms of oral communication. ("folk tradition")

Folk tradition is therefore culturally specific to the region and peoples it originates from. Norman, operating from the perspective of a culture that is predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Appalachian, drives his protagonists toward a folk tradition much apart from certain other cultures, but the function of those folk traditions remains the same: to tie individuals back to their culture and family in order for healing to begin. Appalachians often value traditional music (folk music), family ties (kinship), and storytelling. They often embrace the idea of the importance of the homeplace, share a deep respect for the land, and worship through a protestant Christian religion, though often outside of the realm of traditional church ("Appalachian Culture").

The collection of short stories entitled *Kinfolks* follows the central character Wilgus Collier in his journey from a young boy to a young man among his large and very close Appalachian family. Family holds a much greater role in the direct actions of the stories of *Kinfolks*; in one sense, *Kinfolks* might be considered a pre-trip *Divine Right's Trip*. That is, it recalls the life of David Ray before he ventured westward for truth. Near the end of the collection, Wilgus even mentions that he plans on traveling west with some of his writer college friends.

With the closeness and importance of family comes a more direct look at Appalachian culture than in the earlier *Divine Right's Trip*, and an in-depth focus on the more verbal elements of Appalachian folk traditions, especially via dialect.

But what separates *Kinfolks* from *Divine Right's Trip* is that D.R.'s story begins outside of the Appalachian experience and ends with his healing. This healing is facilitated by folk traditions, that is, folk traditions are a vehicle toward his culture and the healing of some damage that D.R. has accumulated during his trip. *Kinfolks*, then, is much more about that culture itself, what folk traditions are leading back to in *Divine Right's Trip*, and a look at the very source of individual and societal healing. To study *Kinfolks* is to see the family which is the base of healing.

The first story of the collection, "Fat Monroe," is the story of a very young Wilgus and the conversation he has with a man named Monroe, who teases him relentlessly. The majority of Monroe's comments are derogatory toward Wilgus' family, and Wilgus, unable to understand why the man would lie about the goodness of his father or the state of his family, avidly defends them. At one point, Monroe questions Wilgus's attachment to his family.

"But *why*, Wilgus? *Why* do you like them? That's the point?"

"Because I just do," said Wilgus. "They're my mommy and daddy ain't they?" (7)

As the introduction to the stories to come, the exchange displays some of the patterns of speech that are distinct to the community that Wilgus has grown up in. But more than that, they show a commitment to family that extends without question. Wilgus cannot think of a logical argument for why he likes his family, because his love for them extends beyond a causal list of positive qualities that should make him like them. They are kin, and that connection exists above all other relationships and experiences. It is this kind of core belief that is the foundation of what allows folk traditions to be learned, which necessarily link back to the values of its cultures. The final result is healing in nature. At this point in *Kinfolks*, there is no healing happening, but we begin to see what precisely is communicated.

Monroe pulls into Wilgus's family's driveway; he is in fact an old friend of his father's. At this point, Wilgus is beating at Monroe with his fists, angered to tears by his lies. "'He's a pure-god wildcat, this 'un is,' the fat man said as he clambered out of the truck to shake Glen's hand. 'You've raised you a tough 'un there, now Glen, I declare you have'" (9). Wilgus has shown his strength: he never for a second stopped defending his family, not in the foreign environment of this strange man's truck, even despite the size of the man. It is a strength rooted in his loyalty to his family.

In "The Favor," we see an older Wilgus serving as a source of stability for his grandfather who is contemplating leaving his wife. Granddad asks Wilgus to give Grandma some money, and to explain to her that he has left. He says "If you'll take that to your Grandma, it'll be a big help to me" (14). As young as Wilgus is, he displays a considerable amount of forethought and decides that he will live on his own in the field, staying close enough to take care of his grandmother if she needs it, but far enough away that she will never know that his grandfather has left. In Wilgus's mind, as long as she doesn't know that he has left, it hasn't happened yet, and despite the childish logic, we see the strength of kinship (hereafter referred to interchangeably as family and kinship) in Appalachian culture. This is a cyclical relationship: just as family teaches culture, culture shapes and informs family.

Wilgus is a stabilizing factor in his family as well as an example of a role of family: to protect family members, sometimes even from themselves. Wilgus's decision

to refrain from helping his grandfather to end his marriage might have contributed to saving that marriage and keeping the family whole. It also saved his grandmother from unnecessary grief, since his grandfather would soon enough realize the error of his ways. Granddaddy sums it up nicely when he says “You’ve played hard. And you’ve done me a real good favor” (21). The favor which Wilgus has given him is fortunately not the one he asked for. This kind of protection is essential in creating a sanctuary from the kind of problems that might hinder healing, and to form the foundation that real strength is built upon.

The story “Night Ride” explores in detail the relationship between Wilgus and his Uncle Delmer. It shows cultural traits that the two of them share, as family members and as Appalachians. This varies from the songs on the radio (Bluegrass singer Mac Wiseman’s “I Wonder How the Old Folks Are at Home”), to drinking beer and shooting Delmer’s .38. The two are participating in a male bonding that Wilgus would have had with his father, if he were living, and which his father had participated in himself as a young man. These are things that would be absent or very much different if Wilgus had grown up in, say, California, and are strengthening Wilgus as a man. This is a part of his culture, a culture which all of Appalachia does not share in the exact same ways, but which will give Wilgus something to anchor himself to when he is an adult and needs help.

While telling stories (a staple of Appalachian folk tradition), Delmer points out a slate pile that has been burning since he and Wilgus’s father were young men. “The war come. But the slate we dug went on that very pile yonder. It was on fire then and there it is, still yet burning. That’s something to think about” (34). This is symbolic of Wilgus’s father specifically and of family and Wilgus’s culture in general, burning on long after the things that created them are gone. This enduring quality which transcends all barriers is what makes the positive effects of family and culture possible even after having been far removed from them for extended periods of time, an example of which we see in *Divine Right’s Trip*.

“The Fight” might seem to show family in a much less glorified manner, but like “The Favor” it shows that a family is sometimes there precisely to save one another. Although Grandma and Jenny have been fighting since as long as anyone can remember (as a “running theme” as Wilgus says), the titular fight differs from their usual in its gravity. This is because the fight is about how to save Granddad. Jenny wishes to move him to South Carolina where the air is cleaner. When Wilgus is finally able to speak with Granddad on the matter, Granddad expresses his lack of interest in moving with Jenny. “Granddad shook his head. ‘Now what would be the difference if I did?’ I nodded, knowing what he meant. ‘They’re pretty much alike, aren’t they?’” (48). The true medicinal purposes of moving with Jenny are not discussed, in part because the physical ailments of Granddad can’t be stopped. But Jenny is lying to herself; she doesn’t want Granddad in South Carolina so much as she wants him away from Grandma, who is so much like herself that they clash at every moment.

But remember that Granddad had a chance at leaving Grandma years before (in “The Favor”), and has stuck through with that commitment. His response would seem to indicate that either way he will be around another woman who will be fussing over him and getting on his nerves. The irony of this all is that Granddad loves both the women—just as they love each other. The lesson here is that the dynamics of any family are complicated as the members that comprise that family. But Granddad, a man who has had his chance to leave once before, expresses the ultimate power of love through his indifference in the technicalities of things. As a man who is perhaps

dying, he has not lost the will to care as much as accepted, that either fork in the road leads to the same life he is outwardly, critical toward but inwardly comforted by. There is healing happening here, behind the scenes, and it is perhaps the hidden nature of this healing that makes it possible for people to be blind to the benefits of their own culture, as D.R. appears to be at the onset of his trip.

Granddad's condition worsens in the "The Tail-End of Yesterday," and we see that the spiritual healing of family cannot save a man whose time has come. But the importance of that familial connection and the folk tradition that ties back to those bonds remains. Grandma says when she hears how poorly Granddad is doing, "Why I bet Pap won't touch their old food. I bet he's said no to their soup and crackers. I bet he's laying down there dreaming about my good cornbread" (61). Of course the family doesn't truly believe that Granddad would be physically better in their care. They brought him out to the hospital themselves, after all, and they make no real attempt at pulling him out. But they all, Grandma especially, recognize that there is a certain thing missing from Granddad's healing. The hospital is unable to truly heal Granddad and Grandma suspects this is because of the foreignness of the surroundings—Granddad doesn't want to be apart from everything he knows. The family wishes to nurse Granddad, and Wilgus tries his best; Grandma herself states "You've got your work cut out for you. Nursing that old man is work" (62).

The family is conflicted by the very same debate that D.R. confronted in his trip: how to reconcile the healing nature of family with the coldness of the rest of the world and all of the separate benefits that world brings. Granddad will be kept alive as long as modern medicine can keep him, but only a family member, Wilgus, can calm his soul and guide the old man into "dreaming of history and sweet-cold fire" (66), fire being used here as in "Night Ride" to represent the enduring quality of family.

Perhaps the most explicit example of the healing nature of family, "The Revival" finds Wilgus trying to save his Uncle Delmer from a misery he has thrust himself into. Delmar's eventual revival, like D. R.'s, will involve religion, but at first religion cannot help him. "Delmer's eyes filled up with tears as he said 'I'm afraid Jesus ain't going to let me in'" (78). In this case religion, in and of itself, has stifled Delmer's ability to heal by being so overbearing that he feels hopeless. What results is the perfect example of family as a source of healing. Wilgus helps Delmer physically by feeding him, taking care of him when he becomes sick, and shaving him, but most significantly, Wilgus gives his uncle hope by convincing him (falsely, at first) of the restoration of his family. Throughout this ordeal, Delmer expresses his feelings in a spiritual manner, exclaiming "If a man don't do right, he can't get no peace" (84), "Amen" (85), and "I've been hearing the call" (85). There is perhaps no more powerful a way to express one's feelings of remorse and gratefulness than Delmer's religious exclamations. A family member (Wilgus) has brought him salvation, and that salvation is itself family.

It is possible to mistake Norman's work as overly idealistic, that he as an author who is writing with rose-colored ink, so to speak. But Norman does not write only about the positive aspects of family. Instead, he writes about the transcendence of the family and its link to healing over the negative qualities that will always exist between human beings. For example, in the final story of the collection, entitled "A Correspondence," a brother and sister, Appalachian natives, cannot stay in one another's good graces for more than a couple of letters.

The letters between Drucilla and Luther are paradigmatic of the family relationships between the Colliers. At first Drucilla and Luther are overjoyed to be reunited after so

many years, but after only a few letters between them they begin to fight . . . But their memories of childhood and family bind them together even over the years and distance. (Miller 147)

As individuals, the two cannot get along, but they share the same memories of family, of how it used to be when everyone was together. This may not be enough to keep their conversation civil, but the two obviously grasp at those memories as protection from the loneliness of their current situations.

One story from *Kinfolks*, “The Wounded Man,” deserves special attention because of its focus on folk traditions. The folk tradition of story-telling is the most powerful of the traditions in Norman’s works, and it is experienced and preserved by a family that understands its importance in this story. “Evelyn has heard her mother tell the story many times over the years, but she’s no less interested than the youngsters” (87). The stranger who stumbles into Grandma and Granddad’s lives is typical of a person who has lost his or her way. Although he has not landed in the care of his own family, it is family which ultimately saves him. The man is enigmatic in order to strengthen this symbolic position he holds, and Grandma even mentions that the man was visiting a woman. This means that the man was far removed from his family, journeying outside of himself and through this separation the man experiences a physical wound. What saves the man ends up being both the fledgling family and a folk remedy that has actual medicinal credibility; ashes from the fireplace. Besides this folk remedy, the tradition of story-telling itself, and the modes of speech that Grandma employs while telling the story, the tale is replete in culturally specific items. Grandma’s cooking soup outside in her big iron kettle, the mention of Granddad’s former days as a miner and logger, and the close ties to a Christianity not tied strongly to the church so much as it is respected and observed in the day to day are all clear. Ultimately, it is folk tradition, and family, that physically saves a man who has lost himself.

Kinfolks serves two purposes. The first is a direct look at the culture itself: the traditional music (Mac Wiseman’s Bluegrass), kinship (expressed strongly throughout), storytelling (as in the story Delmer tells of Wilgus’s father), love of the homeplace and respect for the land (Wilgus’s work on the land by Grandma’s homeplace in the time between his Granddad leaving and returning to his family), and worship through religion (Delmer’s revival). While these cultural traits are in many ways specific to the Appalachian experience, they are similar to other cultures as well. But looking at them in general, they show that cultural traits constitute the “building blocks” of character and are the key to understanding, and thus healing, a person.

The traditions and culture that created a person are the very things required to heal that person from a residual tendency that works at separating us from ourselves, whether that separation is due almost entirely to our own flaws as with Delmer or when that separation is due at least in part to the outside world as in *Divine Right’s Trip*. This separation from ourselves is often the result of our society, where individuals get lost from their families and cultures in alarming numbers. Norman notes,

Here and there, I gather, there are happy homes and normal life going on, but boy, the untold millions of people living in “single family” households—that means one poor bastard all alone smoking cigarettes and watching TV at midnight is what that means. It’s an epidemic. I think about that a whole lot because that’s a symptom of the loss of community. The collapse of culture. It’s the collapse of all the old binding ties. It’s an epidemic in Appalachia as much as it is in Chicago or anywhere else. (Williamson 52-53)

People separating themselves from each other, being separated from their families, or being separated from any other circumstance leads to a fracturing of us as individuals, not just as a society. This fracturing is not as apparent in *Kinfolks* as it is in *Divine Right's Trip*. Instead, we are constantly shown what it is like to be whole, and shown that even this whole is not without struggle and conflict.

It is not always possible to physically return to the places and events that give us strength, whether because those places are destroyed as in Emmett's farm in *Divine Right's Trip*, or because those people have passed away like Wilgus's father in *Kinfolks*. But with the help of folk traditions we are able to be sent back, for a time, to those places exactly as they were when they created us, and experience a healing unmatched by any other method, as we can see in *Divine Right's Trip*. As Norman explains in an interview in the *Appalachian Journal*, "The story-teller opens the old channels of memory so that he has a renewing function to remind, or re-mind, to renew the mind of the listener or the audience, to make sure that the audience remains in continuity, in continuous feeling association, with what has gone before" (Williamson 60). The storyteller is one of the functions of the folk tradition, who opens our "old channels of memory" and connects our experiences. The result of this can only be healing in nature, especially given the necessary fragmentation we experience in society.

Kinfolks explores the idea that folk tradition is a conduit to one's culture and family, the essential building blocks of a person. In Wilgus, we can see this formation, and at times, we can even see it in the act of healing. When Delmer loses all hope, it is family, even above religion (or perhaps as a motivating factor toward religion) which saves him from alcoholism. The man that falls into Granddad and Grandma's care is physically saved by folk tradition. These are both cases which a hospital or therapist could have treated. Ultimately though, it is family and culture that heal us from the things no amount of sterile technology can. The true epidemics in our society are best treated with love and kindness, and these are found in greatest abundance in these modes, as expressed in *Kinfolk*. Folk tradition is an expression, and therefore a conduit, to modes of healing, and ones that work just as well in a car ride with your uncle at night as from the classic folk tradition of storytelling expressed in a book.

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