

Kin and Kindness in Gurney Norman's *Kinfolks: The Wilgus Stories*

by Danny L. Miller

While reading an interview with Gurney Norman (conducted by Jerry Williamson) in a 1984 issue of *Appalachian Journal*, I came across a rather daunting and yet also heartening discussion between interviewer and interviewee regarding "English-professor-criticism." At that time Gurney expressed his appreciation for the literary critic. He told Williamson, "If I had energy to invest right now in nourishing anything other than my own work, it would go into pushing the criticism. If I had five hundred extra dollars, I would announce a five-hundred-dollar literary prize for the outstanding critical essay on whoever." Williamson seemed surprised, if not shocked: "You're telling me that a standard English-professor-piece writing is useful to you?" To which Gurney replied, "Yeah, I really am. Maybe the word 'standard'—I don't know—but yeah, yeah, I definitely am [telling you that]." He went on to say how he was "helped in [his] appreciation of the uses of criticism by reading Annalucia Accardo's essay on *Divine Right's Trip*" and to praise her reading of the book as "most excellent." My own book was illuminated for me," he said. "That's what criticism does. It's another intelligence being brought to bear on the same subject and the same material, and by the time the readers and the scholars and the authors are all chewing on the same thing all at the same time, it's like a tribal experience." Williamson was less kind: "Well, I must say your critique of English-professor-criticism sounds like a lucky experience. Maybe I'm harder on English professors as critics than I ought to be, but it seems that rather than making connections a lot of the time, professional literature critics tend to put a wall around what they're saying. Nobody can penetrate their jargon. They don't really seem at all concerned about making this or that piece of writing accessible to the people it was written for" (54-55).

Needless to say, this discussion was frightening for me as I prepared to write just such a piece of "English-professor-criticism" of Gurney's *Kinfolks: The Wilgus Stories*. While I agree with Jerry Williamson that much literary criticism is jargon and incomprehensible, I like to think, like Gurney, that it can be useful and "illuminating." I was likewise daunted because Gurney is a friend of mine, whom I have known and loved and admired for almost thirty years, and it is hard sometimes to write about the works of a friend, even when one's motive, as it should be, is to make a work more accessible to its readers. Reading the conversation noted above put the fear of God in me to write something that would be *illuminating* and *connecting* about *Kinfolks*. If I

were submitting my essay to Gurney's hypothetical contest, I wondered, would it be judged a useful one? But to return to the heartening part of the above discussion, as I prepared this essay I felt that Gurney was on my side as a critic. I did not feel completely intimidated. I teach a course in the short story at Northern Kentucky University, and as a teacher of this genre of fiction I have always stressed the *connections* between reader, writer, and text, the "reader response" approach. I begin each discussion of a story by asking the students to take a few minutes to write down what they would like to discuss about the story—what they found interesting, compelling, mysterious; what questions they have; what elements of the story they would like to focus on. We put these comments on the board, and I use them to direct the class discussion. I have used this same method in my Appalachian literature course, in which I have often taught Gurney's *Kinfolks*, and many of my remarks have been influenced by student reactions to the book.

The title of this collection, *Kinfolks: The Wilgus Stories*, announces its two major subjects and themes: kinship and the relationships between members family—specifically, by the use of the Appalachian term "kinfolks," an Appalachian family; and the focus on one particular person, Wilgus Collier. Unlike many other collections of short stories, these ten stories published together in 1977 are unified by this focus on subject and by a focal character. The stories can surely be read individually and each one analyzed separately, but they can also be read collectively as a kind of novel.

First of all, let's look at the subject of "kin"-ship in the stories. All of the stories of the collection are about family and family relationships. The clannishness of the Appalachian family has often been noted. Appalachian clannishness has been looked upon negatively, especially in terms of the feuds of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as the famous Hatfield-McCoy feud. One person even referred to the Hatfield-McCoy feud in his review of *Kinfolks* (perhaps part of an "Appalachian" stereotyping): "Recalling the Hatfields and McCoys, the funny, astringent family 'troubles' are told with tough tenderness and a good ear for dialogue" (*Booklist*). But usually this devotion and loyalty to family is seen as a positive characteristic of the Appalachian people. As Loyal Jones says, for example, in his book *Appalachian Values*:

Appalachian people are family-centered. Mountain people usually feel an obligation to family members and are more truly themselves when within the family circle. Family loyalty runs deep and wide and may tend to grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins and even in-laws. . . . Families often take in relatives for extended periods, or even raise children of kin when there is death or sickness in the family Blood is thick in Appalachia. Two brothers were talking. One said "You know, I've come to the conclusion that Uncle Luther is an S.O.B. The other said, "Yeah, he is, but he's our'n." (75)

The major interpretation placed on this clannishness is that "family is family" no matter what—"blood is thicker than water." Families protect and defend one another even if the members do not always agree with each other. Large extended families and a code of family loyalty have been depicted in many works of fiction about the Appalachian people, such as the clan in Jesse Stuart's *Taps for Private Tussie*. Likewise, there is the clannishness and "code of the hills," which prompts Brack Baldridge in James Still's *River of Earth* to declare that he cannot turn his freeloading relatives out of his house as long as there is a scrap of food to share with them.

The theme of family is introduced in the first story of *Kinfolks*, "Fat Monroe," which sets the stage and the serious-comic tone for the other stories that follow. In

this story young Wilgus shows his fierce loyalty to and love of his family, specifically his parents, as he defends them against the mock attack on their honor by the cigar-chomping, practical joking Monroe Short. Monroe Short, "Fat Monroe" of the title, picks up the eight-year-old Wilgus as he hitchhikes a ride home from the movies. Fat Monroe is obviously having some fun with the boy as he teases Wilgus about his name, tells him about his several wives, and gives him a soggy cigar butt after offering him a fresh cigar, among other things. The situation gets somewhat more serious (and perhaps uglier—some of my students accuse Monroe of outright child abuse) when Monroe begins to tease Wilgus about his parents:

"You know," said the fat man. "It seems to me like I've heard of Glen Collier. Ain't he that fishing worm salesman from over on Leatherwood?"

Wilgus didn't have anything to say. . . .

"If he don't sell fishing worms, what *does* he do? Talk to me now, Short Wilgus, let's get all this said while we've got the chance."

"Daddy loads coal for the Harlowe brothers when there's work."

"And your mommy? How does he treat your mommy?"

"Daddy's real good to us," said Wilgus.

"Well that ain't the way I heard it," said the fat man, and he clucked his tongue and shook his head knowingly. (6)

Wilgus is confused and angry as he is confronted by the somewhat sinister fat man.

"What do you mean?" Wilgus asked.

"Somebody told me your daddy drunk whiskey, played all his money away on cards, laid out on the weekends and that when he *would* come home. . . .

"That's not so. My daddy's good."

"How often does he beat your mommy up?"

"My Daddy's *good*."

"That ain't the way I heard it," said the fat man. "I heard he beat on you and was too sorry to work and that him and your mommy fit one another all the time, that they just fit and throwed things and rassled all over the floor. And that she went out with boy friends and he went out with girl friends and left you at the house all by yourself without anything to eat and no coal for the stove. Now me, I don't blame you for hating a man like that. If *my* daddy had ever treated me like that . . ." (6-7)

Wilgus is indignant and cries out in defense of his parents:

"None of that's so!" Wilgus cried. "I *like* my mommy and I *like* my daddy, and that's the last thing I'm going to say. And I'm going to tell him on you too if you don't hush."

"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?"

"I don't know," said the fat man. "Are they?" (7)

After Monroe has said these ugly things about Wilgus's parents, Wilgus would like to hit him and is given his chance when Monroe appears to choke and orders Wilgus to hit him on the back. Wilgus begins tentatively to do so and then gains force as he releases all his pent-up anger at what Monroe has said and mercilessly beats him on the back.

When Monroe gets Wilgus to his house, the reader learns that Monroe and Glen, Wilgus's father, are old friends. Monroe laughingly tells Glen that Wilgus is "a pure-

god wildcat" (8) and says, "You've raised you a tough 'un there now Glen, I declare you have" (9). Says Glen, "Aye god, don't I know it . . . You've got to watch out for that Wilgus. He'll beat your ears off if you ain't careful . . . He's my defender, that boy is" (9). Wilgus's love for his parents and his defense of them is thus the main theme of this first story, and an emphasis on love of family is continued throughout the collection.

In the stories that follow, Wilgus lives with his Collier grandparents in an extended Appalachian family setting, including aunts, uncles, and cousins. Wilgus's love for his family is clearly revealed in these stories, as well as family members' occasional difficulty in expressing love for one another. In the story "The Favor," for example, Wilgus loves his grandmother so much that he cannot bring himself to tell her the awful news that her husband, Grandad Collier, is leaving her, the favor Grandad asks of young Wilgus. Instead, Wilgus decides that he will never face Grandma again so he won't have to tell her this news. But he cannot abandon her either, so he decides to build himself a cabin nearby and look out for her. He is saved from having to implement his plan by Grandad's unexpected return—he has decided not to leave after all.

Family is also the theme of "Home for the Weekend," one of the funniest (and yet most serious) stories in the collection. This story, like several of the others, adds a new and realistic dimension to the family relationships among the Colliers. They obviously love each other, but they also love to fight with each other. As one reviewer stated, "Mr. Norman is especially good at writing about the high currents of feeling that perpetually anger and annoy close members of a family" (*New Yorker*). In "Home for the Weekend" everyone fights with everyone else, beginning with what may seem like trivial or insignificant things, such as which are better, Fords or Chevrolets, and escalating to more serious things, such as the consequences of strip mining or the role of John L. Lewis in the UMW. As the family members each remember old debts and call for payback, the tension grows. Grandma Collier starts crying and demands that all the money collected be given to her. She then says she plans to give the money to Wilgus for college. Wilgus's family-centeredness is revealed in his first thoughts about what he will do with the money:

He'd buy watermelons with it. He'd host the entire family at a watermelon feast, outside in the yard. He'd jump in Delmer's Ford and run down to Godsey's store and get four of those big ripe melons just in from Georgia, and they would all gather in the yard and feast on them before they set out for their various destinations later in the day. (74)

"But," Wilgus realizes, "that was a romantic vision, and terribly timed. His relatives had no patience for any watermelon feast this Memorial Day" (74).

At the end of the story, however, the theme of acceptance and love of one's family, no matter what, is reiterated when Wilgus says he is going to use the money to treat his college friends to beers:

He would spend it on beer at the Paddock Club, share his windfall with his writer friends. And as they drank, he would tell them about his family in the hills, describe Memorial Day weekend with the clan. His friends might not believe the stories about his family, but still they would join him in a toast to their benefactors. "To the clan!" Wilgus would say, holding his glass aloft. And his pals would clink their glasses and drink together, and then say, "To the clan!" (74-75)

The reader of this story is perhaps left with the same kind of ironic and paradoxical

attitude toward the Collier family as Wilgus seems to convey: are they a comic-strip feuding family to be made fun of by the more “sophisticated” (and “writerly”) college students, or are they a loving and giving family to be admired and cheered?

The paradoxical nature of the relationships among the Collier clan loving and fighting—is revealed in the aptly named story “The Fight,” in which Wilgus’s aunt Jenny and his Grandma Collier have an actual fistfight, ironically over who can take better care of ailing Grandad. In one of the most humorous scenes of the story Norman writes:

“I’ll be glad to calm down,” said Jenny. “And while I’m at it I’ll just get my daddy and go. Come on, honey,” and Jenny took a step toward. Grandad.

“You come back here!” Grandma yelled, and she grabbed her daughter by the arm and spun her around. As she turned, Jenny screamed and closed her eyes and swung a big haymaker at Grandma. She only hit her on the shoulder but Grandma made a face like she was half-killed. Without a word Grandma lunged past [Wilgus] with both hands open, reaching for Jenny’s hair. Jenny raised her own hands and the women collided heavily, twisted their hands into each other’s hair and began to pull and squeal and stumble in an awkward dance around the room. As I [Wilgus] moved in to try to separate them, Grandma backed into the coal bucket and lost her balance. Letting go of Jenny’s hair to try to catch herself, she stumbled over backwards and fell harshly to the floor, sending a tremor through the entire house. (50-51)

Jenny, of course, is horrified that she might really have hurt Grandma, and to Jenny’s chagrin Grandad comes to Grandma’s defense. Jenny insists on leaving that afternoon, and Wilgus takes her to the bus station. On the way, Jenny confides to Wilgus that she has made a decision:

“I’ve decided to quit worrying about people. I’ve decided to just let people alone from now on, let ’em get along any way they can and start paying attention to my own life for a change. It seems like, all my life, all I’ve done is worry about somebody besides myself, trying to do things for people whether they wanted me to or not. And it’s never occurred to me that some people might resent that.” (53)

Jenny’s recognition gives the reader an insight into the basis for many of the fights among the Colliers, not their hatred of one another but their concern for each other, however it might be misconstrued or misapplied.

This theme of family fighting is continued in the last story of the collection, another humorous-serious one, the epistolary “A Correspondence.” Wilgus is only briefly mentioned in this story as the means whereby Drucilla Cornett Toliver, living in Arizona, has become aware of her brother Luther back in Kentucky after forty or so years. 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 about who will move in with whom, about their religious/moral values, about which is better—the country or the city—and so on. They can’t get along well enough to get together in the first place, let alone live together. But their memories of childhood and family bind them together even over the years and the distance.

In addition to centering on the Collier family and the theme of family relationships, all of the stories in *Kinfolks* are about the character Wilgus. Arranged chronologically, the stories follow Wilgus’s growth and maturation from age eight through his early twenties. Throughout these stories the main role that Wilgus plays with his family is

that of caregiver—defender, consoler, helper. It is a role that I sum up in the title of this essay as “kindness.” It is Wilgus’s kindness that defines him as a character, his unselfish concern for his family, individually and collectively. In many ways Wilgus’s character is simple; in others, it is more complex. It is no wonder that Anji Hurt, one of my students in an Appalachian literature class in which we were discussing *Kinfolks*, predicted that Wilgus would one day need psychotherapy, a prediction which Anji was gratified to see proved true when Gurney read to our class some of his later Wilgus stories in which a middle-aged Wilgus does in fact undergo therapy. Anji’s observation was that Wilgus gives so much and gets so little.

Wilgus is indeed the family caregiver and defender. As we have seen in “Fat Monroe,” even as a child of eight Wilgus defends his parents’ honor as decent people. In “The Favor” his chief desire as a child of ten or so is to protect his grandmother from hurt. Wilgus is likewise sensitive, caring, and protective of his aunt Jenny in “The Fight.” He does not take sides in the fight between his aunt and his grandmother, but rather tries to act as arbitrator between them. After the fight, he drives Jenny to the bus station. Jenny is crying as they leave the house, and Wilgus narrates: “I was keyed up myself, wanting to talk. But I didn’t want to impose a conversation on Jenny till she felt more like talking herself. I’d never seen her that upset before and I felt very protective toward her” (52). Jenny, like many others in the stories, does confide in Wilgus. She reveals to Wilgus her own loneliness since the death of her husband, and Wilgus and the readers understand that this loneliness is what has made her want to have Grandad come live with her in North Carolina, not her notion that Grandma isn’t treating him well enough.

In “The Tail-End of Yesterday,” Wilgus is the caregiver of his Grandad Collier. During most of the story Wilgus stays with his grandfather in the dying man’s hospital room. When Delmer’s turn comes to stay with his dying father, he is so frightened of his father’s death that he can’t do it: “Delmer turned pale and came very close to fainting” (65). But Wilgus stays and comforts his grandfather as the old man raves in his final moments about “Furniture! . . . History! Sweet-cold fire!” (66).

Wilgus is caregiver foremost in two stories, “The Revival” and “Maxine.” A poignant companion piece to the earlier story “Night Ride,” “The Revival” shows a thoroughly defeated Delmer suffering from the effects of a long drunk. Delmer is at his lowest point of physical and emotional defeat. Wilgus comes to his house, gets him to eat, bathes him, and gives him the hope (perhaps false) that his wife Pauline and the children, who have left him, will return on the next day. In addition to providing physical nourishment, Wilgus helps Delmer to feel better about himself. Similarly, Wilgus momentarily helps his cousin Maxine feel better about herself in the story “Maxine.”

One of the saddest features of these two stories for me is that Delmer and Maxine both have such very low self-esteem and poor self-images. If Wilgus is the caregiver, they are certainly in need of care. Even in the earlier story “Night Ride,” Wilgus’s uncle Delmer puts himself down and reveals his low self-image. When Delmer and Wilgus talk on the slag heap, Wilgus asks Delmer about his meeting with Pauline. Delmer says, “Me and her might get married one of these days” (36). “Yeah,” he tells Wilgus, “we didn’t act like it much a while ago though, did we? . . . I’ve tried to tell her I’m a son of a bitch but she won’t listen” (36). Wilgus tells Delmer, “You’re not a son of a bitch” (36), but Delmer says, “Yes I am too” (36). In “The Revival” Pauline has left Delmer because of his drinking, and Delmer still sees himself as a

loser. He admits to Wilgus that he's "bad off" (78) and says, "I guess you know I'm hell-bound, don't you? . . . My soul's blacker'n a piece of coal" (78). When Wilgus tries to get him to eat something to make him feel better, Delmer says, "I don't *deserve* to feel no better" (79) and asserts that Pauline's leaving him is a punishment from God (83). He says that his children are "like little angels to [him]" (83), "But what have they got for a daddy but a damned old devil" (83). Wilgus tries to tell Delmer that he's "not a devil but a good man" (83). Delmer decides to sober up and try to do better as Wilgus goes to the phone to call his aunt Pauline, and try to persuade her to come on home" (86).

Maxine has a similarly low self-image in the story "Maxine." Unable to get her pregnant daughter Cindy to leave her no-account husband Billy Dixon in Detroit, Maxine has returned home full of troubles and hopelessness. Wilgus tries to get her mind off her troubles by telling her about his own plans to go to California. When he kindly suggests that Maxine come with him, Maxine reveals her almost suicidal desperation and loneliness. Wilgus says he wants to see the Grand Canyon, but Maxine says, "Lord, Honey, don't take me to no canyons . . . If I's at a canyon I'd dive head first into the damn thing and be done with it" (103). Maxine feels that her life is passing her by—she'll soon be a grandmother and she's stuck in a holler in the middle of nowhere. She'd like to go on a killing spree:

"I'd shoot Billy Dixon's ass plum off," said Maxine. "And then there's one or two on Bonnet Creek I'd like to kill. Kill me a couple of strip miners. Few sons of bitches over at the courthouse. When it was over I'd shoot myself. Blow my brains out with a big ol' .44." (103-4)

When they get to Maxine's house she tells Wilgus, "This place feels like end of the world to me" (105). He tries to make Maxine think better about things, but when he tells her she's "wonderful," she thinks, "A leftover piece of shit is all I am" (106). To comfort Maxine, who is now drunk on Mogen David wine, Wilgus prepares her for bed and lies down with her, offering her physical comfort as Maxine dreams of making love with him and "riding away with Wilgus, headed west, somewhere" (107).

Gurney himself has spoken about the condition of loneliness and hopelessness among people today. In an interview in *Appalachian Journal*, discussing the nonlinear, fragmented style of much of his work (like *Divine Right's Trip* and "Crazy Quilt"), Gurney comments:

The form reflects the times, I think, and the times seem pretty fragmented. In cultural terms, in North America, it is a time of disintegration, and my characters are usually pretty disintegrated. And to seek integration is the quest. That's the impulse, the longing. For one individual person or for a community or a nation or finally a world to knit itself together again. (52)

He goes on to talk about the suffering of people everywhere:

Boy, I mean people are so lonesome and in such pain. It's just outrageous. 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. (52-53)

Referring to his more recent writings, Gurney says, "To account for what it's like to live and struggle to hold on to your sanity in contemporary Appalachia is a central theme" (53), but this statement could just as easily refer to the earlier *Kinfolks*,

Why do these people, these Appalachian people particularly, like Delmer and Maxine (and even to a degree Wilgus, though here I'm thinking of the later Wilgus, not the Wilgus of *Kinfolks*), feel so badly about themselves? One reason, I think, is the economic condition of Appalachia, the blight imposed on the region, the "War on Poverty" mentality. It is not easy to see your once beautiful mountainous countryside turned into a dumping ground. It is not easy to become dependent on welfare assistance. It is not easy to be told repeatedly that you are poor, and therefore worthless; if you're told this often enough, you may begin to believe it and to feel worthless. Although not overtly "political," in many ways the *Kinfolks* stories show an awareness of the economic and social blight imposed upon the Appalachian region by the coal industry. The sovereignty of coal is alluded to throughout the stories.

In "Night Ride," for example, Wilgus and Delmer visit the slag heap:

Delmer stopped the car in front of a hillside that was on fire. It wasn't really a hillside burning. It was a slagheap big as a hill, steaming all over, and on fire in a hundred different places The great mound of burning slag was the refuse of several decades from one of the biggest industrial mines in Kentucky. (33)

In his hospital room, probably on his deathbed, Grandad Collier wonders, after his son Delmer has left the room, "Whose side was he on?" (65), an allusion to the miners' strikes and the song "Which Side Are You On?" In "Home for the Weekend," the family argues about deep mines versus strip mines, and junior and Delmer argue about whether or not "John L. Lewis had any guts" (69). In "Maxine," as Wilgus drives Maxine home from the bus station, "The road through the Rock Creek Valley was paved but it was so narrow there was barely room for two cars to pass. Every few miles Wilgus had to ease the car half off the road to let a coal truck pass, twenty-ton empties, most of them, the drivers headed home after their last run to the loading ramps at Champion" (101). And Maxine would like to kill the strip miners. So even though these stories are not explicitly about the coal mining industry, the casual references to mining create an impression of the industry's debilitating and destructive effects on the region.

The stories of *Kinfolks* reveal Wilgus's maturation and initiation into adulthood, the continual quest for selfhood and wholeness. As one reviewer stated:

Unlike Norman's first novel, *Divine Right's Trip* . . . , a story of the American counterculture, *Kinfolks* is about growing up in the Kentucky coal country. However, it does resemble Norman's earlier work in its protagonist's gradual progress toward self-discovery. Only nine years old [*sic*] in the first story, Wilgus grows in understanding about himself, the complex personalities of his relatives, and his ties with them, until the concluding story, when, in his early twenties, he leaves Kentucky for Arizona, seeking adventure. However, even there he rents a room from an eastern Kentucky woman, unable to disconnect himself from the web of relationships that tie him to home and family. (*Choice*)

Wilgus's first initiation comes in the first story, "Fat Monroe," when he is confronted by a confusing and somewhat frightening experience and seems to learn something about the nature of adults, even seeing his father in a different light.

In "The Favor," too, he must try to handle a serious problem with maturity and,

in fact, seems to do so. I would like to quote at length from an undergraduate student paper by one of the best students in my Appalachian literature class several years ago, Diane Stehle Dix:

Several passages are key to this story, and it is in these passages that its theme can be discovered. As Wilgus watches his grandfather walk away, he feels, at first, overwhelmed by what he is facing, and his first reaction is to run the other way, as if running away will make it go away. When he later regains his breath, his next feeling is light-headedness and constrictions in his chest as he confronts his task. And finally, as Wilgus's breathing and heart slowly return to normal, the narrator says,

All along his spine, the purest sense of ease that he had ever known was flowing smoothly. . . . Wilgus felt something fresh inside him. Something was trying to occur to him. What was it? He didn't know. It was a feeling, a sense, that somehow this was it: everything he cared about was now at stake. In his hands. Up to him.

The question was whether or not he was up to it.

The glory was that he believed he was . . .

Suddenly his own mind awed him, he felt so powerful and so wise.

. . . [I]f he could be quiet in this rare moment and give this force inside him room to grow, then all he cared about, all the things and people that he knew, would be delivered, safe, and life could then go on and on and on. (15-16)

This tale is one of maturation, and Wilgus, as revealed in these passages, rises to assume the tremendous responsibility which has been handed him; he convinces himself he can manage it. Wilgus the boy becomes Wilgus the young man.

The light tone of "The Favor" brings it to perfection. Gurney Norman's playfulness and sense of humor will not allow Wilgus's initiation tale to be a somber one for long. As soon as Wilgus resolves not to tell Grandma that Grandad has gone (reasoning that as long as she does not know, it has not really happened yet), then decides that he must also disappear (for his Grandma's sake, so she will *never* know), Norman indulges in the boy's celebration of himself. Wilgus rolls and tumbles joyfully in the lake, exhilarated with the responsible decisions he has made and his newfound sense of manhood.

The remainder of the story is quite humorous, and the reader delights in the way this "mature," sensible young man seriously carries out his plans, fully believing in them and their possibility. He decides that rather than running far away he ought to hide nearby so he can secretly "look in on" Grandma from time to time to make sure she is getting along well, as a responsible man should do. He furiously begins to build his house and imagines the way he will live. Of course, this is not funny to Wilgus at all, but an extremely serious matter, and it is the very seriousness with which he carries out his plan which makes it so amusing to the reader. The narrator explains, "Then for awhile he worked on his little rock dam. He'd started it earlier in the summer but hadn't got very far. Now in half an hour he did as much work as he'd done earlier in three or four days" (19). Earlier in the summer, the little dam was a boy's plaything; now, it must be completed because it is a man's resource for survival.

When Grandad Collier suddenly reappears, Wilgus returns to his subordinate status as a young boy, and the story is structured so that it ends by returning everything to its initial state, with one crucial exception. Although Wilgus tells his grandfather he has "just been playing" (20), he has proved to himself that he can think and work like a man. The narrator even calls him "a patient man" (21) at the end, and his maturation process has begun. Wilgus will never again be the same.

Diane's paper is an excellent discussion of Wilgus's maturation in this story, especially her reference to Wilgus's being called "a patient man" at the story's conclusion.

"Night Ride" is the most obvious initiation story, as Wilgus undergoes all the male rites of passage to adulthood—drinking, shooting, sexual discovery, and driving. It is this story, most probably, that some readers of *Kinfolks* find objectionable. In the Williamson interview mentioned earlier, Williamson told Gurney:

I recently participated on a panel whose function it was to choose books, regional books, to pair with classical books for high school reading, a community reading program. One of the books I suggested was *Kinfolks* by Gurney Norman, because I thought there was no book nicer that addressed the whole theme of community, the values of community. So *Kinfolks* was dutifully read by some of the high school librarians and they said, no, we couldn't have this book because it's got some fornicating in it and some riding around in automobiles drinking whiskey in it and some other things that would be objectionable to our communities. And so they wouldn't allow that book. (56)

Gurney commented that the book had been banned in some parts of east Tennessee (56). "Night Ride" is also the story, I believe, that prompted one reviewer to declare: "The kinfolk bring up Wilgus in the good of boy tradition" (*Booklist*). Drinking, driving, and shooting guns may be part of the "good of boy" tradition, but, more importantly, "Night Ride" uses these masculine symbols to show Wilgus's initiation into manhood. As in "The Favor," Wilgus assumes responsibility in "Night Ride." After Uncle Delmer passes out, Wilgus drives them fifty miles back home. Some readers may see this as foolish and dangerous, but others know that Wilgus is mature enough and capable enough to drive the car home.

"Home for the Weekend" marks a further stage in Wilgus's initiation into adulthood—he begins to see his family more clearly (perhaps more objectively) with both their comic and pathetic aspects. Significantly, he has begun the process of separation from his family, both physically and emotionally, by going away to college, and he has begun to see himself as a writer. Wilgus continues this separation by heading for California after graduating from college. Whether this part of his initiation—his separation from his family, from his "roots," we might say—is good or bad, we can't really know, but in mythic terms it marks the beginning of the quest.

The journey/quest motif is important to Gurney. In *Kinfolks* his major, character Wilgus just begins the separation process that had earlier been described in *Divine Right's Trip*. In an *Appalachian Journal* interview with Gurney, Beth Tashery Shannon commented on the "quest-tale" in *Divine Right's Trip* and then said, "At the end of *Kinfolks*, too, Wilgus goes off traveling in an almost quest-like way" (20). Gurney replied:

Ed McClanahan and I have often laughed at the fact that if it wasn't for automobiles and whiskey I wouldn't have anything to write about. So many of the stories in *Kinfolks* are about people in automobiles. I guess it's about wandering, or looking for a home . . . That means home in a literal sense of a place on the ground, but it also means coming to rest inside one's mind, feeling at home with oneself after a long time of feeling split away from home and alienated from oneself. But it's also the ancient quest for higher consciousness and new knowledge. (20)

For Gurney, this quest "for higher consciousness and new knowledge" not only involves the forward movement outward and things looked for but also all of the things left behind. One's past is part of who one is and what one becomes.

Gurney is very aware of the uses and forces of the past; in the interview with Jerry Williamson, he stated: "It's been important to me to deal with the sadness and the sense of loss of the old life. The life of the grandparents" (53). In the story "Night Ride,"

for example, an underlying theme is Wilgus's uneasiness about his grandparents back home and their concern and love for him. As Mack Wiseman sings "The Old Folks at Home" on the radio, Wilgus thinks about his grandparents on the farm, possibly worrying about him and Delmer.

As they rolled along Route 80 toward Hindman, Wilgus looked out the window at the people still working in their gardens in front of their homes along Troublesome Creek. . . . All the people still working after sundown made Wilgus think about his grandparents, who had probably worked through the evening in the garden back at the homeplace. . . . The picture in his mind of his grandmother and grandfather working alone in the last hours of daylight made Wilgus feel a little sad. (27)

As the ride with Delmer continues, Wilgus thinks about "the homeplace again, about how far he was away from it now, away from his grandma and grandad" (29). Additionally, Delmer and Wilgus talk about the Collier family and especially Wilgus's father Glen when they stop at a smoldering slag heap:

For the next hour, or two, or maybe even three, Delmer and Wilgus sat by the slag heap drinking and shooting the pistol at the little pools of fire winking at them in the darkness. And in the intervals between the great explosions of the gun they talked . . . about their family, about the old days among the Colliers on Trace Fork. They talked about their relatives who had died. Delmer asked Wilgus if he ever thought about his father much. (35)

Wilgus says he thinks about him, and Delmer tells Wilgus, "He sure was a good old boy He was the best one of us, that's for sure" (35).

In this same interview, Williamson asked Gurney about the need for storytellers in a society: "What is the good of a story? I'm serious" (59). In reply, Gurney discussed the shamanic role of the storyteller in the community and the shaman's *healing* function:

I was reading in some account about the way in which the shaman would treat mental illness in some of the primitive tribes on the western plains of North America. You have—let's say—someone in the tribe who's having a nervous breakdown, a psychological crisis. Well, then, it's time to call in the story-teller or the shaman, and the healing of the mentally ill person is brought about when the story-teller places the sick person on a bed in the lodge, and the family is summoned, and the community gathers and surrounds the sick person and focuses its energy upon the person who is lost and doesn't know where he is. (59)

In many ways this recalls the role of Wilgus for his uncle Delmer in "The Revival," and Wilgus, in fact, *is* the writer, the storyteller and healer. Gurney went on to discuss the importance of the past in the healing process:

and then the story-teller begins to tell the ancient story from the beginning, which means he tells the creation myth. Someone in the community must always be in the archetypal role of the story-teller . . . and he keeps telling the story until he comes down through time and begins to refer to known ancestors of this person, the great-grandfathers and grandmothers and then the grandparents. (59-60)

The storyteller continues to tell the sick person about his parents and then the sick person's own life,

right on up to the time—"Yes, just here lately you haven't been feeling well, and you flew off in your mind." And the person is talked back from the lost place, psychologically,

through this process, and that is the story-teller in a cultural role at its most archetypal. *That* is the function of story and of story-teller today. 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. (60)

"What has gone before" is what makes us what we are. Wilgus, in the stories in *Kinfolks*, is a young future-artist assimilating the forces of life around him, his family, his community.

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