PORTRAIT OF A SOUTHERN WOMAN IN THE WORKS OF VICKI COVINGTON

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: PORTRAIT OF THE SOUTH

The South has the reputation of having a unique culture. As a result, Southern life is often chosen as the topic for plays, literature, art, music, and criticism. Southerners are most often noted for their relationship with land, family, and religion. According to Robert L. Hall and Carol B. Stack, in the South, "enormous value is placed on land and landownership, kin loyalty and cooperation, and on church membership" (3). These traits are the ones that dominate the themes of film, literature, and myth about the South. Not only in fiction, though, is the Southern culture still being studied. Sociological studies have been done recently to determine what it is about the South that still seems to give it a distinctly different look from the rest of the United States. According to Cleanth Brooks, statistics conclude:

> In areas capable of quantification, the South is much closer to national norms than it once was, but in less tangible features, such as attitudes toward family, religion, place, and history, the South differs from other parts of the country by a margin that seems to be actually increasing. (4)

In other words, as Vicki Covington put it, "I can still remember when Burger King came to Meridian [Mississippi]. It began to look like just any other town, but the people were still Southern" (Troy State, 7 April 1995). Brooks reiterates this idea:

> The fact that an airport in the South is essentially like every other airport in this country...does not really tell very much of importance.... And the predictable uniformity of chain motels across America can be a

> convenience to travelers without signaling a shift toward regional uniformity. (3)

Regardless of the standard look of a Southern town, then, beneath the surface, the people, the Southern way of life, the Southern experience, still keep the South unique. In particular, the Southern woman is unique. She exemplifies the characteristics most often portrayed about the Southerner, through her sense of closeness to the land, her close family ties, and especially her religion, which for the most part, is a strong sense of spirituality.

This first characteristic of Southerners that sets them apart is a preoccupation with the land. According to Brooks, the Southerner comes from "a culture that loves to talk, to tell stories, to remember its roots in the past and to cherish its identity with regard to a family or to a larger community, or to the total region which it regards as a homeland" (5). Indeed, Southerners have always cherished their heritage and especially their homeland. Women, particularly, in the South, have a special bond with the land in that they love to cultivate it and to grow, prepare, and serve the food that comes from their nurturing of the land. Women, by nature, are nurturers, so perhaps this bond they have with the land comes from the fact that the earth, Mother (not Father) Nature, is a nurturer also. Scholars have suggested that perhaps this close bond between land and women stems from the Southern woman's role in the Civil War. While the men were away fighting, the women were left to take care of the family, including doing the jobs, like farming, which were usually left to the men. According to Vicki Covington:

> Southern women are those who, since the days of the Civil War, have been able to do all necessary to survive, from hunting, growing, and preparing food to burying sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers killed in the war to

> making clothes and keeping house for the family. (Personal Interview, 24 April 1994)

This kinship of women to their land and their homesteads, then, is a traditional image and one that is often used throughout literature and drama. One popular example, of course, is Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind.* Scarlett, though first portrayed as a stereotypical, fragile Southern belle interested only in men and parties, turns out to be a very determined, strong Southern lady as well, who gains great strength from her land, her homeplace, Tara.

Along with home, though, comes a natural connection to family. Scarlett's strength comes also from her strong sense of family loyalty. This theme of strength found through family ties has been used often in drama in the portrayal of Southern women, in plays such as Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias.* The depiction of Southern women as having very strong family ties is a traditional one. Southerners, as a whole, have always placed great importance on family name and history and claim as kin much more distant relatives than people in other areas of the country even bother to trace. According to Brooks, "One way in which to describe such a culture is to say that it functions very much as a kinship society in which people attempt to maintain a connection with even their more remote cousins" (5). This sense of family serves a larger purpose, however. The devotion that Southerners feel to even these distant relatives comes from gratitude to the family for giving them a sense of belonging, a sense of who they are, and as a result, Southerners take care of their own. Again, according to Brooks, the South is presented in literature, particularly, as "a culture in which interpersonal relationships are close and important. The family still exists as a

normative and stabilizing force" (10). The women in Southern families often seem to be the source of this stabilizing force. Because of their strong nature, they are the ones who survive the tragedies, the family crises, and the family embarrassments and who, despite all of these things, struggle to keep the family together. Family is essential to the makeup of a Southerner, and women are the foundation of the Southern family.

Very close to the hearts of Southern families are their religious traditions. These traditions are perhaps the most criticized yet intriguing aspect of Southern culture. According to Richard M. Weaver, the Southerner has "a point of view and a set of values which the remainder of the nation is highly curious about" (23). Weaver writes about some aspects of Southern philosophy about which the rest of the nation is highly curious:

> The typical Southerner is an authentically religious being if one means by religion not a neat set of moralities but a deep and even frightening intuition of man's radical dependence in this world. That awareness is something which has to be achieved immediately rather than mediately, and I suggest that the Southerner's practice of viewing the world in this way is the postulate of all his thinking, and that it causes him to demur at the analysis of life, or love, or war, or any other large subject. (15)

To the distant observer, then, life centered on religion is the defining characteristic of the South. According to Weaver, "The South remains the stronghold of religious and perhaps also of ethical fundamentalism....the South is often described as differing from the rest of the nation through a disproportionate amount of piety" (19). The South does seem to be more religiously fundamental than other areas of the country. According to Brooks, "Evidence sets the South apart from the nation in the extent and uniformity of its religious convictions, which are deeply held and basically orthodox" (10). So, while Southerners do live, according to Neil O'Connell, in "the Vatican of the Bible Belt and

religious fundamentalism" (116), the myths about this subject are probably the most exaggerated. Elizabeth Hardwick recognizes "the burden of fixed ideas" (18) about the South. Fixed ideas can be a burden, particularly where religion is concerned. Especially in films, such as "Mississippi Burning," Southerners often are portrayed as "detestably ignorant, stubborn, violent, and staunchly fundamentalist" (Campbell 81). Wade Donahoe recognizes, however, "We must defend our culture, and that means a defense of tradition, particularly our religious tradition" (61). This defense of religious tradition comes primarily from Southern writers writing about their own experiences.

Vicki Covington is a writer who defends the South and all of its traditions, whether regarding land, family, or religion, both in her editorial writing and in her fiction. In an interview, Covington revealed that she does want to change the minds of some who have "fixed ideas" about Southern women in particular (Personal Interview, 24 April 1994). In her own life and in her own beliefs as revealed through her editorials, Covington holds to some of the traditional views of the Southern woman in regard to her relationships with land, family, and religion, but in all three areas, she believes the Southern woman is much more complex than tradition allows. Vicki Covington's characterization of the Southern female includes both the traditional, the Southern belle and the "steel magnolia," and some non-traditional attributes such as religious tolerance, humanity, and a deep sense of spirituality. Consequently, Covington's model of the Southern woman is not altogether the typical one. Covington recognizes, as McDonogh and Wong state, a "broad religious consciousness at the heart of the southern experience" (45). The female characters of Covington's novels embody this broad religious

consciousness, a large sense of spirituality and humanity, combined with the traditional attachment to land, family, and religion. In the first three novels, *Gathering Home*, *Bird of Paradise*, and *Night Ride Home*, several female characters incorporate all of the traditional and non-traditional characteristics that Covington believes make up the Southern woman, but in her fourth novel, *The Last Hotel for Women*, all of these characteristics culminate into one character that is Covington's portrait of a Southern woman.

CHAPTER II

PLACE, FAMILY, AND RELIGION IN THE LIFE, EARLY WORKS, AND EDITORIALS OF VICKI COVINGTON

Vicki Covington, a native Southerner born October 22, 1952, in Birmingham, Alabama, had a fairly typical childhood but describes her childhood self as "a little strange" (Troy State, 7 April 1995) because she liked to watch people and write about them in the diary that her mother had given her. Not until she was twenty-five years old and living in Ohio, though, did she realize that she was a writer. According to Kathy Kemp, Covington, feeling lonely and removed in Ohio, continued her childhood habit of keeping a journal. When she noticed her new tendency to write in the third person, she showed her husband, Dennis, a creative-writing instructor at the College of Wooster, and he said, "Welcome to the house of fiction" (6). Covington then began doing the writing assignments that her husband was assigning his students. He critiqued her stories along with his students' and encouraged her to continue writing. She did and began submitting her short stories to magazines for publication, but to no avail.

In the meantime, the Covingtons moved back to Birmingham, and finally, in 1986, Vicki Covington's short story "Magnolia" was published in a "serious" literary publication, *The New Yorker*. "Magnolia," a story about her grandmother, according to Covington, was different from all the other stories she had been writing. "When I finally quit writing about marriages gone bad, people smoking and getting drunk, everything changed" (Troy State, 7 April 1995). Covington's subject matter made all the difference:

she began writing about a place she knew and the people she knew—the South and her family. According to Covington, "find a subject to write about that you care about, one that bothers you, interests you, intrigues you, and every time, it will be your family" (Troy State, 7 April 1995). Covington often writes about her family, and her family is from the South, the place that Covington knows and has written successfully about in many editorials and in four novels. When asked if she would ever consider writing about some other regional area, Covington immediately replied, "Never" (Personal Interview, 24 April 1994). Covington's loyalty to the South emerges both in her editorials and in her fiction.

Covington's editorials disclose her personal beliefs about and confidence in the strength and complexity of Southern women. In Covington's article "Southern Women Haven't Missed the Boat; They're Steering It," she best reveals these beliefs. The article begins with Covington's description of a Northern friend sitting at her supper table and posing the question, "Why do you think it is that the Women's Movement didn't take in the South?" Covington's immediate thoughts were disbelief:

> He was posing this question, mind you, to a Southern woman who had spent the morning securing a grant for a drug program to help HIV-infected addicted women offenders get treatment, who had then sent a final draft of a second novel to her editor in New York, had bathed and washed the hair of two small children, and had set a fairly adequate meal [chicken, 7-layer salad, mashed potatoes, and chocolate pie] on the table for the man who was asking the question. I can't recall my response. Probably, I passed him the butter and said, "I don't know, hon, what do you think?" That's how Southerners respond to insidious questions. But I silently vowed, on the spot, that I'd answer that question someday. (2C)

Covington, not only in this article but also in many others, is constantly answering that question.

Covington's answer to the question, her explanation of the comprehensive nature of the Southern woman, includes three chief characteristics. The first of these characteristics involves the idea that Covington, like many Southerners, feels a loyalty to her heritage and to her birthplace:

> It was only after I started writing fiction that I came to understand how place shapes who we are. Eudora Welty reminds us that God first created Eden—a place—before he made the characters to inhabit it. So place is, in a sense, the most important element of creation, of fiction, and certainly of our identity. ("Birmingham Family..." 2C)

For the Southerner, particularly the Southern woman, then, this idea of place being linked with identity is seemingly inborn. Not just place, though—homeplace. In one *Birmingham News* article, Covington boldly states, "In the end, nothing matters but the homeplace..." ("Can't Get Nixon..." 3C). The inhabitants of the homeplace are merely the reflections of the place that shapes them. Covington often discusses place so emphatically that it comes to life, as if there is no distinction between the people and the place; they are one. For example, in her article, "Hueytown Nurtures Its Racers and Mourns Them Too," she discusses Hueytown, Alabama's claim to fame of being the town that produces race car drivers, and she asks, "So if you were born in Hueytown are you really more likely to become a race car driver? Is there something in the dirt? I hear this question posed often. It's the old 'does the place shape the man or does the man shape the place' kind of inquiry" ("Hueytown Nurtures..." 3C). The answer, of course, to the question, according to Covington, is that there is no real difference between the place and the person. She emphasizes this idea by personifying Hueytown, explaining how it can lose so many race car drivers to accidents but still keep producing them:

> We keep asking, how much can Hueytown take? It can and will take whatever is asked of it. It's that kind of place. It is, in many ways, the blueprint of a Southerner. It's got a tough veneer, but underneath lies a sweet spirit. ("Hueytown Nurtures..." 3C)

For the Southern woman, though, this identification with a place delves even deeper, to the land itself, the dirt. In one article, Covington describes frantically scrounging through an old toolshed behind her grandmother's house, the old homeplace. It had been, sadly, put up for sale after the death of Covington's grandmother. She was looking for old recipes, keepsakes to hold on to. "I felt like a deranged archaeologist. My hands were dirty. That's always a good sign. I've heard that the reason women like to dig in the dirt is that they're digging for bones. They're digging for their ancestors" ("Special Recipes..." 3C). Taken somewhat literally, place and people, then, are one for another reason, too. People are buried in the earth; it is the circle of life that causes the Southern woman to hold on to, to cherish, the land and the homeplace. Covington's statement continues, "In the end, nothing matters but the homeplace, the **burial** and forgiveness" ("Can't Get Nixon..." 3C).

Covington's life has been steeped in these "earthy" women—her mother, grandmother, and aunts—who have all shared a kinship with the land. "As far back as I can remember, the women in my life have always been in the garden" (Covington, Personal Interview, 24 April 1994). Covington, too, admits that she feels the same bond with the land, for there, in the garden, she feels closest to God and to the spiritual side of herself and hopes to pass this bond on to her two daughters as it was passed on to her (Personal Interview, 24 April 1994). This feeling of closeness to God through the earth is most discernible in a garden because the miracle of life, of growth, occurs there. Another

reason, then, that Southern women feel a kinship with the land becomes apparent. Southern women have always had a strong bond with the fruits of their labor in the garden. Here, the strength in the complexity of the Southern woman begins to be seen. These women are not only the ones working in the garden, hoeing and plowing, but they are also the very feminine cooks in the decorative aprons, serving iced tea and vegetable trays, the result of their labor in the garden. The various sides of the Southern woman's attachment to the land are connected, however. According to Covington, "It's a Southern thing, this marriage of dying and feeding. All those day-of-the-funeral casseroles, Decoration Day where we clean the graves then have dinner on the grounds, the way we remember friends by their recipes" ("Special Recipes..." 3C). Dying, burial, and funerals all represent the land, and food goes hand in hand with them, with the land. As a result, the Southern woman is a woman who prepares, cooks, and serves food. While, at first glance, this side of the Southern woman, the one in the frilly apron, seems much more feminine and fragile, it is really not much different from the side that works the hoe. Cooking and feeding are just additional levels in the relationship with the land.

This strand in the makeup of the Southern woman is often considered by some in other parts of the country as a weakness rather than a strength. Covington, too, in her article "The Southern Art of Feeding," admits that she struggled with her love of feeding people, of serving them, especially the men in her life. "Isn't this blatantly unenlightened? Isn't a woman meant for more lofty endeavors than feeding?" (276). Covington came to terms with her desire, however, after becoming a mother, realizing that the need to feed is first, instinctual for women and, second, an essential characteristic

of a woman who feels a bond with the land:

> I believe there's a kind of sensuality associated with the generosity of Southern feeding. We grow our vegetables. Our hands knead the earth. We've heard so many family stories of the men coming in hungry from the fields that we still respond accordingly, and that's all right by me. ("Southern Art..." 276)

The Southern woman clings to food and feeding for other reasons, also. "We feed to nurture, to heal, to create, to enrich our friendships, to gather family, to admit our inability to do anything else to comfort (as evidenced by day-of-the-funeral food we prepare and deliver)" ("Southern Art..." 276). The woman's use of food as "the mainstay of Southern healing" ("Why Grits and Goo Goo Clusters..." 3C) adds even more to her complexity: her connection to land is directly proportional to her connection to people. In a *Birmingham News* article, Covington writes about someone from Italy inquiring about our peculiar Thanksgiving holiday by asking, "'And so after this meal? Do you dance?' No. The meal is the dance. Thanksgiving is a family dance" ("Thanksgiving..." 3C). Food and eating are largely associated with family gatherings and family attachment, which connect directly to the second major trait that Covington attributes to the composition of a Southern woman.

This loyalty and attachment to family reach beyond the realm of ties to immediate family to include the larger aspects of family and the community that rears a child. According to Covington:

> Whenever someone new to the city [Birmingham] asks me, "Why do you live here?" my first response is, "Because my family's here." This is, of course, a multifaceted Southern reply. Hidden under the surface of family love is a clannishness that mocks the outsider asking the question. ("Birmingham Family..." 2C)

"Clannishness" describes Southerners precisely because a clan is indicative of more than just immediate family, and the unique aspect of a Southerner's definition of "family" is that it always includes cousins, aunts, and uncles. One reason for this devotion to even distant cousins is that the South is filled with small towns, so small that often much of a town, or at least many of the communities in the town, are made up of members of the same family. All of these cousins have no choice but to attend the same schools, churches, and social activities. As a result, Southerners grow up feeling just as close to some of their fifth cousins as they do their first cousins. So, Southerners do not necessarily have more relatives than anyone else; they just grow up being associated with them and, therefore, develop a closeness to and friendship with them. According to Covington:

> Southern writer Dorothy Allison says somebody cornered her once at a bookstore and demanded, "Why is it all you Southerners have so many cousins?"
>
> "Well," she replied. "We just keep track of ours. And what I don't understand is how come you don't." ("Cousin's Descent..." 3C)

Southerners' closeness to these distant relatives reveals the extent of the loyalty that they feel towards their family. Women, especially, will go almost any distance to help or protect a relative. In her *Birmingham News* article, "Cousin's Descent into Darkness Will Be Part of Family Lore," Vicki Covington describes an incident in which her cousin, Jan, had a brain aneurysm and was scheduled for surgery in Mobile, Alabama. "My uncle called after surgery to say the procedure had gone well but there was a problem: Jan wasn't waking up. I, along with the other cousins, Beth and Julie, didn't ask what that meant. We just got in the car and headed for Mobile" (3C). Southern

women are not only willing to drive the distance, but, more often than not, they go the distance in many ways to help out relatives, even distant ones, during a crisis. Often, they offer the only comfort they know how to give—food.

Finally, though, when they know that no more food or house cleaning or any other errands can be done to help the ones in need, they turn to another much cherished resource:

> Back in the waiting room that day at the hospital, we told family stories because these tales are the way we comfort each other. It is the way we act out the drama of who we are. Family stories are the way we get through funerals and divorces and surgeries and weddings. ("Cousin's Descent..." 3C)

The women in Southern families are the immovable rocks during a family crisis, gaining their strength from memories of family. Southerners, then, especially the women, treasure the history of their families and the sometimes bizarre stories about some of their relatives that give them an image of where they came from. According to Covington, this sense of history and ancestry is about more than just names. She recalls her excitement at a recent family reunion upon discovering Cousin Lester, who could tell her minute details of her great-grandfather's personality, how he was somewhat of a barber and that he would often stop people on the road and give them "a five-minute bevel" if he thought they needed it. She also discovered that he gardened, made ax handles, and whittled his thumbnail like wood:

> We want pieces of the past, clues, details. We are all trying to make something appear. And when somebody remembers something, something as insignificant as the five-minute bevel or the whittled thumbnail, the entire past is recreated. Those long dead are suddenly alive, walking with you, on a hot summer day, through an open field in Ohatchee, Ala. ("There's No Telling..." 3C)

Knowing these kinds of details is what gives Southerners such a feeling of closeness to and love for even distant relatives. Southern women draw strength from this bond of kinship. Covington recalls what happened after she and the other cousins arrived at the hospital in Mobile and discovered that Jan had indeed awakened from her surgery:

> She pulled us down, one by one, with her strong left arm and kissed us with a left-sided kiss. Language wasn't there, but family love was intact, and I felt anew the power of it. We were blood-kin. We had oftentimes in the past turned to one another and said, "Blood sure runs thick, doesn't it?" That's a Southern way of saying "I love you." ("Cousin's Descent..." 3C)

So, while some might find annoying the insignificant details of the lives of third cousins, Southerners, through this knowledge, grow to love and appreciate their relatives more. This characteristic is, to Vicki Covington, one of the greatest assets of the Southern woman. According to Covington, the Southern woman's ability to allow these stories about the unique characteristics of relatives to be a special affection rather than an irritant is what makes her distinctive, and this distinction is called "grace" (Personal Interview, 24 April 1994). Characteristics such as this kind of "grace" reveal more of the spiritual side of Southern women.

This spiritual side is the most extensive and the most complex, probably because it is the characteristic that is most unlike the traditional view of Southern women as very conservative, fundamentalist, churchgoers. While Southern women are, to an extent, the traditional, faithful churchgoers, Covington views their religious nature as much more complicated than that. In fact, to Covington, the organized part of religion is the least important and the least revealing of the Southern woman's genuine spiritual nature, which is more concerned with human suffering and compassion than with religious

issues. For this reason, she is often found in the "moderate" category instead of the typically thought "staunchly fundamentalist" category. Because of this combination of participating in organized religious activities while still holding moderate-to-liberal ideas, the Southern woman is often caught in awkward positions. For instance, Vicki Covington often speaks of participating in organized religious activities at Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham, where she attends. Being an ordained deacon there, she is also involved in the organized administration of this church. Some of her beliefs and attitudes of a religious and moral nature, however, are far from what the general public would expect from a Southern Baptist. The very fact that she, a woman, is a deacon in a Southern Baptist church is the first hint that Covington is not what many might expect from a Southern woman. The road to her position in the Baptist church began, according to Covington, as a child in Birmingham. She grew up Southern Baptist but left the church when she was twenty. After about ten years of drinking and blaming the church for the injustices in her world, Covington returned to the church (Personal Interview, 24 April 1994). This "prodigal" experience perhaps gives Covington this individual perspective of the nature of religion, viewing it in two different respects: the ceremonial, organized face of religion and the spiritual, more genuine face of religion.

Although Vicki Covington gives more attention to the spiritual nature of religion, her participation in organized religion cannot be overlooked. She is very involved in the activities at Southside Baptist, and this participation is seemingly a welcomed friend after her absence from religion for a number of years. The places this friend takes her, though, reveal her genuine beliefs on religion and spirituality. Through this avenue of organized

church activities, Covington, along with her family, participates in many aspects of ministry. In three different *Birmingham News* articles, "If We Keep Acting, We Will Become Who We Say We Are," "Take Family on a Mission to Help the Suffering: It'll Hook You," and "Need More Policemen—And to Honor the Ones We Have," Covington speaks of mission trips to rebuild homes, minister to neighborhood children, and give support to AIDS victims. These types of ministries are the aspects of organized religion that Covington holds dear. She is very aware, however, of the constant stereotype of religion, particularly in the South. As a member of an AIDS Care Team organized through Southside Baptist Church, Covington remembers a picnic given for men with HIV. "I remember picking up the guys at the home where they live and thinking, 'They're hating every minute of this. They'd rather be anywhere on earth than at a hamburger-and-baked-beans cookout with a bunch of misguided Baptist do-gooders'" ("If We Keep Acting..." 3C). Covington is uncomfortable with the vehicle of organized church functions that must often be used to reach a place of ministry. The old "hypocrite" stereotype always lingers in these places, but Covington does not give up hope that an important destination can be reached by this vehicle. According to Covington:

> There have been times in this AIDS ministry—and last Wednesday was one of those times—when I've felt like an actor, when I've felt like we were all acting out a script. It's as if the HIV residents are only playing the "sick" role and that the members of the care team are only playing the "ministers" because we are all suffering. For the truth of the matter is that both Christianity and HIV have been subjected to misunderstanding. We need one another, for that reason if for no other. And if we keep acting, we will—as St. Genesius did—become who we say we are. ("If We Keep Acting..." 3C)

Covington's thoughts reveal her sensitivity to the appearance of organized religious activities to others, but while she feels uncomfortable with the means, she is most comfortable with the end it brings.

The end reached, a compassion for many types of people, is the other face of religion that Covington views as essential to the character of a Southern woman. This aspect of the Southern woman's character deviates from the typical image, seeing through the outward portrayal of a person to the soul in need of compassion, which is often buried under a mound of moral and emotional controversy. Covington's Southern woman will go right past all of that and get straight to the "heart" of the person. Dale Chambliss, Vicki Covington's friend and pastor, describes this ability when he characterizes Covington as a "fighter for human rights" (Telephone Interview, 16 July 1993). This "fighting" spirit is often displayed in her attitudes toward controversial groups and ideas. For instance, Covington's attitude about homosexuals, particularly homosexuals in the church, is quite different from what others might expect from a Southern Baptist. In an article about this issue, Covington writes about the Southern Baptist Convention's move to stop a North Carolina church from sanctioning gay "marriages" or partnerships. She praises the pastor at the church, Pullen Memorial, for standing up to this criticism, but more than that, she sees the gay community with a kind of compassion that is uniquely insightful:

> The irony in all this, of course, is that there is probably no group in America today any more spiritual than the gay community. They are dealing daily with death—and its serendipity of love, friendship, and wisdom. For more than a decade, they have struggled—with courage and dignity—to cope with an epidemic unlike anything this country has ever experienced. There are a lot of lessons that the heterosexual community,

> the Alabama Legislature, and the fundamentalist movement can learn here if they'll listen—lessons about facing reality, building community, and overcoming fear. ("Alabamians Just Don't Know..." 2C)

Covington's attitude about this controversial subject, particularly controversial in the South, is surprising, but it reveals the side of the Southern woman that, in Covington's view, defines her.

Another example can be seen in Covington's outlook on abortion, another tremendously controversial subject with religious groups. According to Covington, "Abortion resulting from careless sex, as a method of birth control, is different—for me—than abortion resulting from incest or rape or to save a mother's life" ("Taking Abortion Out..." 3C). Although Covington's belief is primarily conservative, she resists strongly being put in this category:

> What we've got to do is understand that if we oppose abortion we're not giving in to demagogues. It is not a surrender to authority. This has been my biggest problem. I am so offended by certain elements of the religious right that the idea of sitting in the same pew on an issue as intimate as abortion makes my skin crawl. My gut tells me—I have no facts—that there are some who use abortion as an emotional appendage to an agenda of control and power. ("Taking Abortion Out..." 3C)

Covington displays a common view when analyzed in context of her idea of the Southern woman. According to Covington, "The unborn deserve compassion, but so do the women whose hearts have been torn apart because they're having or have had abortions—for whatever reason" ("Taking Abortion Out..." 3C). In regard to women who have had abortions, Covington does not just have compassion; but also, she sees the need to act on it:

> Women need Christians nearby when they come out of an abortion clinic, as much as they do when they're entering it. You can't always stop people

> from completing the cycle of a mistake. Plastic embryos and bloody posters can't do the job if the die is already cast, as it is in most cases. What women need, then, is a set of arms to fall into after the act is done. You can't have your arms free to embrace broken women if your hands are loaded down with anti-abortion literature. A Bible, a hand, a message of healing: these are the things that can be handed to women as they leave a clinic. ("Caring Arms and Words..." 3C)

Believing abortion is wrong but still being willing to embrace the one who has had the abortion epitomize the spirituality of Covington's Southern woman.

This spirituality can also be seen in issues of a social nature. Genuine concern for humanity, regardless of the issue, is another example of the non-traditional aspect of the religious nature of Covington's Southern woman. Covington often writes about the controversial history of Birmingham in the Civil Rights Movement. Covington possesses compassion for African-Americans and a distinct outlook of forgiveness for Birmingham's officials during that time. In her *Birmingham News* article, "Old-time Preaching in a Multicultural Church," she writes about Bull Connor, Commissioner of Public Safety in Birmingham during the Civil Rights Movement, who was a staunch segregationist, famous for some of the violent steps taken to stop the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham. Covington, though, attempts to see his importance in history, thereby allowing people to forgive him:

> We will never be completely healed in Birmingham until we understand and forgive Connor. We haven't, yet. But he is part of the story of who we are. If we forgive him, we forgive ourselves. Every story has a villain. The story can't exist without it. He is important. He makes it work. In many ways, he is the sacrificial lamb. ("Old-time Preaching..." 3C)

Again, the ability to feel tenderness on both sides of a controversial issue is evidence of the genuine nature of spirituality that Covington's Southern woman possesses.

To those people not reared in the South, the typical image of a Southerner is not one of a culture who readily embraces people of all races and nationalities. But for Vicki Covington's Southern woman, compassion for all types of people is innate. In many of Covington's newspaper articles, such as "Take Family on Mission to Help the Suffering: It'll Hook You," she speaks of refugees, starving people in other countries, and a mission trip she and her family took to a Hispanic neighborhood in Homestead, Florida. People of other ethnic groups often have a more spiritual, but stoic, quality that attracts the Southern woman to them. At a conference in Birmingham, Covington learned the reason why people of other races than her own intrigue Southern women:

> I learned at this conference that indigenous spiritual movements have been springing up in Africa. No missionaries. Just the Holy Spirit crossing the land. I asked Bill O'Brien why, here in Birmingham, I felt the Holy Spirit in African-American churches and not in white churches. "Because our white worship isn't an outgrowth of pain," he told me. ("Old-time Preaching..." 3C)

Covington's Southern woman is one who has the ability to see the pain of others, particularly the struggles that other races and nationalities often face, and the desire to help them bear it. In Covington's words, the Southern woman possesses "radical not convenient compassion" ("Apology Did Not Heal..." 3C). Displaying this radical compassion for those who would typically be alienated, particularly from religious or social groups, is the essence of the religious nature of Covington's Southern woman.

One other defining characteristic of the spiritual side of Covington's Southern woman is a belief in things mystical, particularly spirits and angels. In many of her articles, Covington refers to angels or mystical types of events. For example, in one *Birmingham News* article, Covington remembers an experience her own mother had not

long after a brother's death: "After my mother's brother died, he came to her in a brief moment. 'I was at the sink,' she told me, 'washing dishes.' I can almost see her hands, still in the suds—no dishwasher sloshing in the background, her kitchen quiet enough for angels" ("Reliable Pencils and..." 3C). These types of experiences are common for Vicki Covington's Southern woman. In an essay, "The House Within," Covington explains that her characters' attraction to cemeteries is linked to angels:

> It's hard for me to keep my characters out of cemeteries, and I've stopped trying. I let them go frequently to lie in their beds of memory because there's really no stopping them. Who wouldn't want to be in a place where angels hover? (20)

Vicki Covington's characters are open to ideas such as "angels hovering" and other mystical aspects of religion, further signifying her non-traditional religious nature.

Covington's Southern woman can be seen participating in many traditional religious activities. She goes to church on Sunday, participates in many of the organized activities and mission trips of the church, and may even be an active participant in the administration of a congregation, but these activities are only vehicles needed to reach the place that Covington's Southern woman inevitably wants to go. She goes beyond the ethnic background, sexual orientation, physical affliction, and past history of people and sees straight through to their pain. This insight into the pain of others and her natural desire to heal their pain define the most complex part of Covington's Southern woman—her religious nature.

Vicki Covington's view of the Southern woman, as expressed in her own life and in her editorial writings, differs from the image that "outsiders" might have of a Southern woman. This image differs because Covington's Southern woman is an intricately woven

creature consisting of both the traditional and non-traditional characteristics of a Southerner. According to Amy Weldon, "Covington believes that creative vision and spirituality intersect easily in Southern life, because of the close relationships between Southerners and their land, their religion, and their history" ("Exploring the South's Torment" 3). These three topics are fundamental to the definition of Vicki Covington's Southern woman, and in everything Covington writes, whether newspaper articles about her own life or her novels about the lives of Southern characters, these three qualities emerge as the primary colors in her portrait of a Southern woman.

CHAPTER III

THE WOMEN OF *GATHERING HOME*

In *Gathering Home*, Vicki Covington's first novel, she intended to tell the Southern story of love, home, and spirituality: "I wanted to show the South is a good place. I wanted to show that those of us who chose to stay were blessed and healed, and those of us who felt compelled to leave can come back now" (Kennedy, "She Found Her Way...." 6F). Certainly, Covington accomplishes her goal in *Gathering Home*. This novel, set in Birmingham, Alabama, tells the story of several people dealing with internal conflict. The main character, eighteen-year-old Whitney Gaines, is the common thread linking all of the other characters. Cal and Mary Ellen Gaines adopted Whitney as an infant, and because her father, Cal, has decided to run for U.S. Congress, the subject of her adoption becomes a topic of public interest. This renewed interest by others also arouses a curiosity in Whitney to find out about her birth parents. Although Whitney's birth mother, Diana Zorn, never acknowledges Whitney's correspondence, she is able to locate and correspond with her birth father, Sam Kirby, and his mother, Eva Kirby. In this way, two sets of characters are linked together. Whitney, then, actually has two lives unfolding at once. First, she is the daughter of a minister, helping her father with his campaign for Congress and falling in love, for the first time, with her father's campaign manager, Nathan (Nat) Hollins. Second, she is the biological daughter of a gay man who gave her up for adoption and is now living in New York with his partner, Aaron. Not only is Whitney discovering about life, love, and family, but also, so are the people with

whom she comes in contact. In particular, her birth father, Sam, discovers that he cannot deny his Southern roots but must come to terms with his childhood as the son of a minister. Whitney's contact with him and her experience as the daughter of a minister also lead him to an acceptance of his past, his family, and his religious heritage. Obviously, Covington's beliefs about Southerners and their inescapable bond with land, family, and religion, including both religious heritage and spirituality, permeate this novel through the female characters of Whitney, Eva, and Mary Ellen. The attachment to land and the homeplace is revealed primarily through Eva. Whitney serves as the main symbol of the importance of family, and finally, the varying aspects of religion are displayed in all three of the women. The end result is the portrait of Covington's Southern woman revealed through the combination of three female characters in *Gathering Home*.

Eva Kirby, Whitney's newfound biological grandmother, displays an attachment to land by being, first, the keeper of a homeplace. She provides a home for her son, Sam, to come back to. Although Sam has tried for years to get away from his Southern roots, his mother's home still provides a place of stability for him. When something emotionally disturbing happens, he goes "home." For instance, soon after Whitney first contacts Sam, he and Aaron go home to Pineapple, Alabama, to stay with Eva for a few days. This discovery of the child, the family, he had forgotten marks the beginning of Sam's journey back to his roots, back to the homeplace he thought he could live without. For the first time he begins considering returning home to the South. He tells Aaron:

> "I'll get Hazel's Sunday paper and we'll check out real estate. Maybe there's a few acres nearby. We'll plan to close on our land by summer, O.K.?" Aaron gave him a look. Sam knew that nothing would make Aaron happier than for him, Sam, to be serious about that. For a moment,

> he almost was—or wished he could be. (68)

Although Sam is trying to resist the realization, his mother and their homeplace provide a comfort to him in a time of emotional upheaval, the contact with his child, and he is drawn back to his roots in order to help Whitney search for hers. The attachment to his homeplace, the place his mother has never left but kept intact for him, is inevitably too strong to resist. After finally meeting Whitney face-to-face, he takes her home to meet his mother and notices the varying stages of the autumn leaves still clinging to the trees as they near his childhood home in Pineapple:

> Back in Birmingham, all the hardwoods were almost bare from pending winter. Farther along, he understood now, they'd begun to show an earlier time in fall. The cold had not quite reached them, and their leaves were still red and gold. And he knew that eventually they would become green, as he traveled south, backward in seasonal time, toward home. (240)

In the end, Sam succumbs to the unavoidable calling of home in the South.

Eva also represents the attachment of Southern women to their land in other ways. For instance, Eva often goes to her garden to think or just for enjoyment. Vicki Covington often shows her female characters wearing earth-tone colors to symbolize this quality. In Eva's case, she is often wearing her earth-tone attire while she digs deep into the ground, symbolizing her own deep-seeded roots in her Southern heritage:

> She had on her favorite sweatshirt. It was a bit too warm, but it was brown—the color of dirt—and she liked to wear it on gardening days. First, she got her hand-size shovel and went deep for the spring onion roots, tossing the pesky things into a trash bag for discard. Next, she rearranged the bricks that had gotten all askew during winter, so that the garden border began to assume a kind of symmetry she liked. (61)

Eva is often disturbed by her son's disdain for his Southern background, and she realizes that the primary cause of his disdain is his inherited "gloomy" personality. When she

ponders about Sam's life, his spiritual well-being, she does it in the garden:

> Whether or not his [Sam's] or anyone else's dark side could be changed into light was, to Eva, the basic spiritual question. She wanted to believe the answer was yes, and she did believe it most days. Like today. Eva and Hazel knelt close to the garden as they spaded up spring weeds. They had the necessary knee calluses of country women that permitted this kind of work to be done wearing shorts. Neither wore gardening gloves and neither was afflicted with arthritic hands. Their strong fingers worked like machine parts, prying the weeds up. (69)

For Eva, then, the garden uplifts and provides an outlet for intimacy between two Southern women.

Most often, though, the garden is a place of comfort for Covington's Southern woman, and Eva is no exception. For example, when Eva learns that her best friend and next-door neighbor, Hazel, has cancer and that it is spreading, her first impulse is to seek refuge in her garden:

> Hazel had called that morning, and her bill of health wasn't a clean one. The melanoma had spread to the lymph system, and there was a spot on her lung. Eva had absorbed the information. It was one of those *bad moments*, she knew, and she needed the exhilarating to blend itself with the excruciating. Instead, she was feeling a very simple, but paralyzing, sadness. She got up and went to her garden. (131)

Covington's Southern women are strong, stoic women who are used to bad news and dealing with tragedy, and one of the main places they find this strength is deep in the earth where the roots grow, reminding them of their well-grounded, rock-solid nature. In times of real tragedy—death—again, the land is involved. Burials are events, healing events, for Covington's Southern woman. When Hazel succumbs to the cancer, Covington reveals the tragic event by beginning a new chapter in the novel with a poignant scene:

> Eva knelt by Sam, Sr.'s, grave, pulling up weeds and nutgrass. She hadn't been here since Memorial Day when she placed the traditional fruit jar—filled with roses, hydrangea, or whatever was in bloom—beside his grave. She gazed over to the pasture adjacent the graveyard by the church where she observed dinner-on-the-grounds every year after tidying up his grave. Always, there were other widows doing the same thing, so it wasn't a sad occasion—just another domestic duty, a kind of after-the-fact spring cleaning. But today, it was another story. There were no other widows. Everybody had already left Hazel's graveside service. (186-187)

Eva is again comforting herself during a difficult time by putting her hands in the earth, and this activity is the way Covington chooses to introduce the fact that Hazel has died. For Covington's Southern woman, the land is the first place she goes for comfort, and it is the last place she goes—in burial.

Another ritual common among Southerners, representative again of their attachment to land is the "day-of-the-funeral" food, as Covington so often calls it. When Hazel finds out that she is very sick, friends bring her food, and she and Eva joke about this Southern ritual:

> "We don't need to go anywhere for lunch. Come look." Eva followed her to the kitchen. A big tray full of cold-cuts was there on the counter. "I'm not even dead yet, and they're already bringing the food in." (163)

For Covington's Southern woman, the preparing, the cooking, the feeding, the entire event of a meal is a comfort, especially on the day of a funeral, but at other times as well. In *Gathering Home*, Eva particularly exemplifies this characteristic. When Sam first tells Eva that he has had contact with his daughter, Whitney, Eva's first thoughts are of food:

> "She wants to meet all of us eventually. She lives in Birmingham, you know."
>
> "What do you want to have, Sam, when she comes? Chicken, fried chicken? Sweet potatoes? Beans? A pecan pie? A lemon-icebox pie?"

"Calm down, now. She's not coming any time soon. Food's not important, anyway."

"Well, it is, too." (54)

Covington's Southern woman always thinks of food first because it is a comfort for the preparer but also a way of showing love and care to the guest. Sharing a meal with someone is often indicative of a bond much closer than the physical sitting down together to eat. On one occasion when Sam is home for a while, Eva enjoys their eating together. "Eva watched Sam eat. She liked to watch Sam eat. That, too, was comforting" (92). Obviously, the relationship between mother and child is based on feeding from the beginning of the child's life, and for the mother, mealtime always remains a special, bonding event.

To emphasize this relationship, Covington's Southern women are often seen in the kitchen together, preparing meals for others, displaying this bond with food and ultimately with the land, that they all share. While Eva is the primary symbol of the attachment to land in *Gathering Home*, Covington shows the other women in the book cooking together, too, a reminder that regardless of how different the circumstances, all of her Southern women share this attribute. Toward the end of the book, Covington paints the typical picture of her Southern women in the kitchen when Whitney, Mary Ellen, and Francy, the church secretary, work together:

> Francy set the table. She knew exactly where to locate the silverware, salt and pepper shakers, butter dish, and juice glasses. She and Mary Ellen worked in rhythm, dodging one another in a kind of domestic dance—one that Whitney had observed in church women over the years as they traveled in and out of each other's kitchens, preparing food and serving it to their children, neighbors, strangers, and aliens. The dance had an element of grace most all of the time, with the possible exception of soup-line duty....Here, this morning, though, it was the old familiar family

> waltz, and Whitney joined alongside Francy and her mother, reaching in the cabinets for plates, buttering the toast, pouring the juice. (218)

This domestic dance, one that is instinctual for all of Covington's Southern women, results directly from their bond with the land—the homeplace, the garden, and ultimately, the food.

The second characteristic of Covington's Southern woman, family loyalty, is revealed primarily through Whitney. Although family issues are at the heart of the Kirby family, Eva and Sam, Whitney's relationship to them as well as Cal and Mary Ellen keeps the theme of the importance of family prevalent throughout the novel. Whitney's journey to come to terms with her roots represents an important quality in Covington's Southern woman. Without a solid attachment or understanding of her roots, Whitney feels lost. Whitney's desire to find out about her biological parents is the first step in her discovery that she has an inescapable need to know her ancestry. When Whitney first finds out information about her biological mother, she realizes the effect that family ancestry has on her:

> The report said that Diana was born to an "intact family," that her father was an attorney, her mother a housewife, that she had five siblings. She was a student at the University and hoped to complete her education after the adoption process was completed. She was studying theater—Whitney felt something inside when she read that. She felt, for a moment, like she might cry. (46)

Whitney, also being a theater major, is saddened by this knowledge, but it brings her closer to the realization that family history is something that everyone inevitably studies. Eva, a more mature Southern woman already knows that this knowledge is something

that Whitney will need. After Eva receives her first letter from Whitney, she immediately plans to provide Whitney with the information she will want:

> Then she dialed the library in Selma. "Archives, please." When the clerk answered, Eva told him she wanted to know how to begin tracing her ancestry. "It's something I'm doing for my granddaughter," she said, knowing that the clerk could have cared less. (210)

Eva's actions here, her willingness to go to great lengths to help the granddaughter she has never even met, also exemplify the devotion that Covington's Southern women have to family members.

Whitney, too, possesses this willingness to help out a family member. The first letter she writes to Eva is in response to a request from Aaron. He writes to Whitney to tell her that Eva's friend, Hazel, has died and tells Whitney that it would help Eva if she would write to her. Whitney, although still young and not as aware of the importance of family, rises to the occasion. She is willing to do a small thing to help out the grandmother she has never met.

Along with Whitney's discovery of her biological family, she also gains a new appreciation for her adoptive parents, Cal and Mary Ellen. Whitney's journey to find her ancestry has led her back to where she has always been and what she has always known but now with a heightened sense of understanding of family love, loyalty, and heritage. In a conversation with Cal, Whitney reveals this understanding:

> "I went to my room, then I went to yours and Mom's room. That's when I saw the picture."
> Cal looked at her.
> "I was thinking maybe it was taken the year you got me."
> "I can't recall," Cal said.

> "That was something," Whitney said. "You getting me."
> Cal smiled. "Yeah, that was something."
> "I mean, it was something that you would do that for me."
> Cal looked at her searchingly. "Well, we wanted you." (226)

Although it first appears that Whitney's representation of family attachment is different because she is adopted, she exemplifies Covington's Southern woman in this respect because she discovers two families connecting her to each of their roots, and she displays a rare love and understanding for each one. For her newly discovered, biological family, she is willing to get to know them and become part of their lives, while creating in Sam a desire to renew his bond with family history. For the only family she has known up until this point, her feelings of family loyalty and devotion are deepened. Whitney expresses these feelings to Nat when he asks her, religiously, if she is saved. She replies, "I was saved the day Mom and Dad got me" (229). This appreciation for her family stirs in Whitney a loyalty, a bond with them, that shows one aspect of her maturation as a Southern woman.

Finally, the third characteristic of Covington's Southern woman, her religious nature, can be seen in several characters, mainly Eva and Hazel, Mary Ellen, and Whitney. All four of these characters possess a duality in their religious nature. On the outside, they all go to church and participate in the organized activities of the church, but the genuine spiritual nature of their religion is found underneath the blanket of "church."

Eva and Hazel demonstrate this duality in that they go to church and various church-sponsored activities, but going to church is not what is spiritual about them. Eva is often seen going through the ritual of church but with other things on her mind:

> Inside, they took the back pew. The acolyte, a small boy, lit the candles.

> The service was beginning. Holiday poinsettias lined the altar, each given in memory of the dead by the living. Eva knew the one she'd chosen for Sam, Sr. It was a bit spindly but very red. It wasn't like the others. She didn't listen to the sermon. Instead, she began to plan what she'd do someday for her grandchild, Whitney. (58)

Eva is attending the traditional Christmas church service and bringing her poinsettia just as she is supposed to, but she is not really listening to the sermon, and even in her ritual, she is different. She brings a flower to offer as a memorial that she says is not like the rest of the flowers, symbolic of her difference from the rest of the churchgoers. The more genuine side of Eva's religious nature, the spiritual side, is revealed in her ability to see a side of people, a side where pain might lie, that others would overlook. For example, when Sam calls Eva to tell her that he has a daughter, her reaction is not the expected one:

> That's why, when Sam first called with news that he'd discovered he had a daughter from his relationship with Diana, back in college, Eva's heart went first to Aaron, fearful that he'd feel left out or strangely jealous. (51-52)

Hazel, too, shows a compassion for people that epitomizes her religious nature. When Hazel realizes that she is going to die, she first tells Eva that she is going to will her house and all of her things to the church, but right before she dies she decides to give her things to specific people, people she knows who need it:

> As it turned out, Hazel had sort of adopted her [Becky, the girl who would take over her beauty shop] and had given her more than a list of customers. Three days before Hazel died, she'd called her attorney, Judson Carmichael, and had him come to the hospital where Hazel instructed him that her house was to go to Becky, though the furniture was to go to the nursing home. (209)

Finally, both Eva and Hazel also share the basic characteristic of a Covington

Southern woman in that they are rock solid in their earthy nature. This attribute is another outward sign of her spiritual nature. Eva expresses this best when she describes her feelings on the way to the hospital with Hazel, who is going for tests to find out if her melanoma has spread to her internal organs:

> Eva's hair blew away from her face. It felt good. They were in the very heart of summer—a miserable place to be—yet she was all right. Knowing you're in the eye of the storm, that it won't get any worse—this, Eva knew, provided her with iron strength. She'd felt this, most acutely, twice in her life—during the height of each labor pain birthing Sam, and at the moment she discovered Sam, Sr., wired up to his bed. She knew she had a natural capacity to endure, a kind of emotional endorphin overflow, she supposed, recalling the flood of strength she'd experienced at horrible moments. (130)

Then, in the hospital, both Eva and Hazel share their common peculiarity:

> "Are you worried?" she asked Hazel.
>
> Hazel, still sitting on the edge of the bed, stared out the window. "What's there to worry about?"
>
> Eva smiled, didn't pursue it any further. She knew what Hazel meant. If the news was bad, it was just one more thing in life to pass through. She understood with clarity that she and Hazel shared a philosophy of life—even though she couldn't define it. They were troopers, comrades in a war against something she couldn't name. (131)

This strength they share is a common strand in the makeup of Covington's Southern woman, the mortar that holds all of her characteristics in place.

Mary Ellen, to an even greater extent, demonstrates the two sides of the religious nature of Covington's Southern woman. First and foremost, she is the "preacher's wife," and she knows how to act the part. Whitney describes Mary Ellen's portrayal during a typical church service:

> At the close of the service, three Hispanic families came forward during the invitational hymn. Mary Ellen, signing the lyrics to "I Surrender All," was almost crying, it appeared. Yet Whitney knew her mother wore this

> look most all the time—like her face was breaking. It was a big part of her beauty. (36)

Nat also refers to Mary Ellen's rehearsed countenance, once commenting, "She smiled her wife-of-a-pastor-running-for-Congress smile..." (170), and again when he describes "her gorgeous face restricted by its necessary role,....*wife of depressed minister*" (151). In this role, she is involved in many of the organized activities of their church, groups such as "Mothers for Nuclear Disarmament" (37), interpreting in American Sign Language for the deaf community of their church, and participating in church-sponsored conferences. All of these groups are the kind typically associated with churches, but again, the spiritual side of Mary Ellen is not defined by these traditional activities. Rather, her sincere desire to serve others regardless of their outward appearance, economic status, or background reveals her interpretation of "religion." Mary Ellen's involvement with the refugees reflects her true religious nature. Vicki Covington often uses foreigners, dark-skinned people, such as the Guatemalans and Hispanic refugees in *Gathering Home*, to symbolize spirituality: first, because their history is usually one of pain and struggle; second, their dark skin symbolizes earthiness, which, to Covington, is synonymous with spirituality; and lastly, their spirit of servitude also reflects their spirituality. Whitney observes these characteristics:

> It was one thing she'd noticed about these people—they were always wanting to give you something—even when they had hardly anything at all. Maybe that's why Cal and Mary Ellen liked them so much, Whitney thought. They were real stewards. (75)

Consequently, Mary Ellen's involvement with the refugees reflects her own servitude and, as a result, her spirituality. For instance, at one of the conferences on church

"issues" that the Gaines family attends, Mary Ellen asks Cal, "Who cares about school prayer, abortion, and evolution when the world is starving and our Hispanic neighbors are being murdered?" (10). Mary Ellen's nature is to be more concerned with people who lack a basic human need, food, than to be all absorbed in political issues surrounding religion. This ability to see the suffering of others and the desire to help them are accurate displays of Mary Ellen's "religion."

Another outward sign of Mary Ellen's spirituality is her stamina as a person. Regardless of the circumstances, she never gives up hope or support of Cal in his campaign or any other aspect of their lives. For instance, during Cal's campaign, when some of the refugees are deported, Cal goes into a depression, but Mary Ellen is there to keep things going. Even someone who has not known her for very long, like Nat, recognizes this calming, steady nature. After talking to Mary Ellen on the phone about Cal's depression, his feelings about her are revealed. "Nat hung up, feeling like Mary Ellen was the only solid person in the campaign, including himself" (149). On one other occasion Nat also notes Mary Ellen's strength:

> Mary Ellen was another story. Not that she was unprincipled or shrewd or in any way lacked loftiness in her ideals or actions. It was just that she was, in some way, more earthly, rooted in reality. (104)

In this passage, Nat sums up the religious nature of Covington's Southern woman—a religious woman with principles and ideals combined with a religion of basic, unassuming humanity.

Finally, Mary Ellen's spiritual nature is confirmed when Whitney refers to her as "wearing a white dress, looking like an incredible angel" (222). In her fiction, Covington

often uses the mention of angels or the comparison of a woman to an angel to further denote a character's religious duality, with "angels" representing the spiritual side.

Whitney displays this duality more subtly than Mary Ellen or Eva. At first, Whitney seems to show only the side of her that participates in religion because that is what she is supposed to do. She, almost hypocritically, acts the part of a minister's daughter without being involved at all in the ministry:

> Afterward, she put on a boring dress—white with oval buttons. "Sweet" is what some people might have said about this dress. But Whitney was going to dinner with her parents. And, being Cal's daughter, she had learned to play the part. If there was one thing she could do well, it was play the part. (12)

Whitney often exhibits this detached way of thinking, the idea of acting out religion. Many times, Whitney refers to her "Sunday smile" (16) that she has learned to give people. Whitney even practices this smile and knows its distinctive characteristics:

> Mita and Carlos looked at her timidly. Whitney gave them a variation of the Sunday smile. In the Sunday smile, you let your face open so that the light flows. You want people to have the sensation of heavenly sunshine—teeth and all. For Mita and Carlos, she did most of it, but parted her lips only slightly, thereby creating a shy look of warmth. She didn't want to overwhelm them. She sensed their fear. (74-75)

In this passage, Whitney is meeting some new refugees for the first time, and while her description of a rehearsed smile sounds hypocritical, Whitney is actually developing the ability to read people, to sense their needs. She realizes that these two, being in a foreign country, are afraid, and she wants to calm them in any way she can, even if that way happens to be through a smile she has "learned" in her role as minister's daughter. Whitney, then, is a young woman on the verge of developing into everything she has been trained to be. She has grown up surrounded by the atmosphere of organized religion, but

her mother's influence of possessing a spirituality much deeper than the surface spirituality of "church" comes out in her as she grows up during the course of her father's campaign. For instance, to begin with, Whitney refers to the fact that the year before, a Guatemalan girl had lived with them and shared her bedroom. She does not speak of this experience with fondness. When Whitney is first confronted with the idea of Cal running for Congress, she replies:

> "Whatever," or something like that. It was just one more thing to get used to. Life with Cal was that way. A minister's home was a place where you rolled with the punches. You did distasteful things, made distasteful adjustments, and accustomed yourself to foreign ideas and people—like having a Guatemalan girl move into your bedroom or knowing that you might be moving to Washington next fall. (24)

As Whitney matures, however, her attitude about the Guatemalan girl changes, marking a change in Whitney, also. When some of the other refugees of Cal's church are deported, Whitney realizes that the Guatemalan girl, Maria, who has shared her bedroom, has also been deported, and for the first time, she looks around her room and regrets not having taken more of an interest in her:

> It was hard to believe Maria had slept here—night after night—and Whitney didn't even ask her one single question. I was only fifteen that year, she argued with this new part of herself—this godawful conscience. Still, it was bad. Maria was back in Guatemala or El Salvador or whichever one it was, and, from what she gathered, it wasn't cool at all to leave and then come back. They, whoever the bad guys were, let you know it, too. She was beginning to feel real bad. Time to think of something else. What? Maria's daybed kept drawing her attention. She considered writing to her. But, what was there to say? Sorry I didn't ask you any questions. Sorry you're there instead of here in my bedroom. (155-156).

This change in Whitney's attitude toward Maria is further evidence that Whitney possesses the spiritual nature of Covington's ideal Southern woman.

Covington also uses two other symbols to represent the presence of Whitney's developing spiritual nature. First, she uses the color of Whitney's clothing to show that she is maturing. Whitney realizes this about herself:

> She got up and went over to the full-length mirror attached to her closet door. She was wearing khakis, not unlike those Nat had on. Her shirt was white and unadorned, worn loose, like a kind of medical uniform. It was as if, in recent months, she had swapped attire with her parents. They'd given up the safari look and wore bright colors. She had laid off the turquoise-jams-look and was into more subdued things. Her fascination with her body had waned, and she didn't want to attract attention via her wardrobe. Instead, she was working on her smile. She wanted to branch out from the Sunday smile and its variations. (86)

Whitney's change from bright-colored clothes to earth tones represents her change from adolescent to adult as well as her becoming more aware of her earthy, spiritual side as a young Southern woman.

Second, Covington uses the mention of angels to signal spirituality. In *Gathering Home*, Covington simply introduces with Whitney being drawn into a conversation with a stranger about angels. When Whitney and her parents are in New Orleans for the church conference, Whitney encounters a woman out by the pool who speaks to her of angels:

> "Do you believe in them?" the woman asked.
> "Yeah, I guess so."
> "Have you ever seen one?"
> "No," Whitney said.
> "Well, I have. And let me tell you, they are *big*." (9-10)

This dialogue, although seemingly short and insignificant, sets the tone for the religious nature of the women in the book. The mention of angels to Whitney, specifically, at the very beginning indicates that Whitney's journey to find her roots will result in a religious journey as well, in which Whitney finds that her roots dig deep into Southern soil and that

her ancestry, both biological and adoptive, is one of strong, spiritual Southern women.

In *Gathering Home*, Vicki Covington uses the characters of Eva, along with her friend Hazel at times, Mary Ellen, and Whitney to represent various aspects of the Southern woman. Eva and Hazel most often represent the Southern woman's attachment to land, food, and the homeplace, while Whitney, who is the link tying all of the characters together, is the main symbol of the Southern woman's loyalty to family. All three of the women portray the dual nature of the religious side of Covington's Southern woman but at varying stages of development: Eva, as the older, more seasoned Southern woman; Mary Ellen, as the middle-aged Southern woman; and Whitney, as the young, coming-of-age Southern woman. Together, these women exemplify Covington's portrait of a Southern woman and the process of becoming one.

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMEN OF *BIRD OF PARADISE*

Vicki Covington's second novel, *Bird of Paradise*, is a beautiful story of Southern women, their traditions, their family, and their religion. The story is told from the point of view of the main character, Honey Shugart, a 72-year-old woman whose stoic life is sent spinning into a whirlwind of emotion when her sister, Dinah Bluet, dies and leaves to Honey three-quarters of her estate, which includes some money and the old homeplace. The other quarter of the estate Dinah leaves to her stepdaughter, Neva Joy Cantrell. Almost immediately Neva Joy prods Honey to have their property rezoned as commercial property and to sell it for a large profit. Honey, always claiming to be the stoic with no sentimental ties, concedes. However, when a buyer appears, Honey begins to have second thoughts, realizing she has some emotional ties to her old homestead. In the mean time, her life is changing in another emotional way. After being the widow of an alcoholic for many years, Honey begins dating Judson Carmichael, a lawyer she meets at the meeting of the Zoning Board. Although skeptical about religion in general, Judson leads Honey to the spiritual realm she needs in order to come to terms with her feelings about her homestead, her past, and her recently inherited fortune.

Vicki Covington's ability to capture the thoughts and emotions of a woman in her seventies in such a realistic fashion is remarkable. In an interview with Kathy Kemp, Covington explains that writing in Honey's "voice" came to her involuntarily:

> When you write, you sit down in darkness, and you never know what is

> going to happen. But Honey turned the light on and started talking to me. Every day, she never let me down. People have asked me, "How can you get into the head of a 72-year-old woman?" And it's just the opposite—she got into my head. I don't know who she is or where she came from. It was like I was the medium, and she was speaking through me. ("I Didn't Know...6)

Indeed, *Bird of Paradise* flows with grace and uncontrived craftsmanship, confirming Covington's role as a medium for Honey's "voice." Through Honey's voice, Covington is able to reveal her ideology about Southern women. In fact, Honey and the other major female characters in the novel capture the essence of Southern women in Covington's singular way. The attachment to land, the loyalty to family, and the twofold view of religion are portrayed primarily through the character of Honey Shugart, but these characteristics would not be fully developed in her without the support of two other female characters in the novel, Dinah Bluet and Honey's best friend, Carmen Dabbs.

Dinah's death at the beginning of the novel is the catalyst that causes Honey to realize the depth of her attachment to the homestead and her family memories. As a result, Dinah, or the memory of Dinah, is the primary representative of the Southern woman's bond to land. For this reason, the novel opens with Dinah's going to a cemetery to put flowers on her husband's and father's graves and dying there herself:

> Calling forth the grace she inherited from Mama, she [Dinah] placed Winston's fifty-dollar arrangement on his grave with dignity. She didn't cry. We strode on over to Papa's. She knelt to place her spray of daisies, and, just as I was bending over to place, beside hers, my spray of carnations, Dinah shot me a glance I'd like to forget someday. It was the face of a startled, bewildered woman. Death had seized her, and she hadn't yet recognized her captor. All she knew was that she'd been grabbed up. (16)

Dinah's death, of course, brings with it some of the most fundamental Southern symbols

of land—burial and food, day-of-the-funeral food. Honey is forced to go to the home where she grew up, Dinah's home, in order to receive the food that the neighbors will be bringing. Instantly, Honey's ability to deny her sentimentality and bond with her homestead begins diminishing. For example, when some of her friends begin to arrive at the house, Honey has the uncontrollable desire to show them around:

> I led C. I. all through the house. I don't know why I did this, exactly. It was an odd gesture. It was like something a real-estate agent might do. But then, when we got to Mama's and Papa's old bedroom, I knew why I was doing it. I wanted somebody to understand, to fathom with me, the vastness of my sorrow. (21)

As long as Dinah had been alive and had stayed at the homeplace, Honey could then ignore her attachment to the place and her family memories. For many years, Dinah had taken on this part of Honey's character for her, but inevitably, when she dies, Honey is faced with the fact that her homestead is an undeniable part of her. Although Honey first begins to feel sorrow at the sight of her parents' old room in the homeplace, she still is not aware of the degree to which the place is a part of her. Consequently, when Neva Joy suggests that they have the property rezoned as commercial property and sell it for a substantial profit, Honey agrees. Immediately, though, she begins having second thoughts:

> What kind of a woman sells her papa's old homestead, built, mind you, by Papa's hands? He was, as I said, a carpenter by trade, though he farmed and mined as well. What kind of civil woman sells her inheritance? Knowingly sells her entire past to a junkmart or fast-food restaurant or parking lot? But then, what kind of a pragmatist, deliberately gives away $200,000? (46)

Still not completely willing to give in to her "inborn" Southern desire to hold on to ties to a homeplace, Honey goes through with the rezoning. Feeling as if "I'd just rezoned my

entire past" (52), Honey's emotional struggle to come to terms with this part of herself is just beginning. When a buyer for the property quickly surfaces, Honey becomes more and more aware of her attachment. Referring to Neva Joy and herself as "co-heirs, sharing the legacy of a homestead" (140), Honey knows that she does not want to sell her family's property. Although it takes her some time to admit this fact publicly, Honey's thoughts are constantly remorseful over selling the homestead:

> Still, the problem with the old homestead sat heavy on me, and I couldn't bear the image of its absence amidst a collection of buses parked on Papa's land. No matter how pleasing the thought of a "forced issue," that is, an integrated neighborhood, I didn't want to see the place torn down. (144)

Finally, when Honey talks face-to-face with the prospective buyer, Michael Antoine, she voices her sentimentality, and her emotions almost overcome her. "'I just am having a hard time, though, letting go of my family....' I felt the armor rising in my throat that would prevent my voice from cracking. 'Do you understand'" (153)? After voicing her feelings, Honey starts down the road to acceptance. In final submission to her character, Honey reveals her decision to her close group of friends:

> "I wanted to get you all together," I said, "to let you know what I have decided to do about the offer." I felt my voice begin to crack, and I feared I might once again cry. "I hope you will understand my reasons for wanting to preserve the dignity of my homestead. I intend to turn down Michael Antoine's offer. I will not make a counter-offer. I do not intend to sell—not now, perhaps not ever, but certainly not now." (191)

Through the event of Dinah's death, Honey is finally able to display the first aspect of the bond with land—the homeplace—that is characteristic of Covington's Southern woman.

Second, with Dinah's death, the Southern woman's fondness for and comfort in preparing food is revealed immediately when neighbors begin bringing the "day-of-the-

funeral food." Neva Joy explains to one neighbor who calls to inquire about the recipe for a lemon icebox pie she wants to bring over, "There's nothing worse than a flat meringue on the day of a funeral" (25). While worrying over such matters may seem trivial and inappropriate during a time of death, for Covington's Southern woman, food preparation is a way of dealing with a difficult situation. Honey explains Neva Joy's urge to prepare food at Dinah's house:

> Neva Joy had busied herself with making a fruit salad. She'd brought the ingredients—pineapple, mandarin oranges, raisins, and maraschino cherries. I don't know why she felt obligated to bring food, since she's a family member herself, though I do understand how the preparing of food is terribly soothing and gives one the feeling of being on top of a given situation. (23)

Likewise, Honey displays this attribute entirely, using the preparation of food for comfort, particularly when she is troubled with the feeling of insecurity or the dilemma of a difficult decision. For instance, on Wednesday night at church, when Honey dreads facing the people who will want to talk on and on about the offer she has received on her property, she literally uses food as a shield when entering the building:

> Carmen, sensing, I'm sure, my armor rising (she knows me like the back of her hand), gave the casserole back to me as if it were a weapon I needed, which it was—being food I'd prepared and was ready to dispense to hungry friends. No matter how up in arms they were, they'd still eat my casserole. (100)

Not only the food itself and the preparation of it, but also the idea of others eating her food comfort Honey. Honey recalls even her work as a waitress as a comforting experience because it involved the serving of food to others. "After Scotty died, I worked as a waitress, and I truly liked this occupation because, as I mentioned earlier, serving up food is a good feeling, akin, I'd say, to nursing a baby" (39). In particular, though,

serving food to the important men in her life is pleasurable and comforting to Honey. First, she takes comfort in her son's eating. "Jackie got up and walked alongside the buffet, selecting seconds. I like to see Jackie eat. It's comforting. He was a scrawny boy, and even though he grew to be a substantial man, I still am heartened when he eats" (33). Likewise, Honey also takes pleasure in watching Judson and her friends eat:

> Judson ate his sandwich in a way that pleased me—like he was real hungry and believed eating to be pleasurable. Sometimes I invite C.I. and Dewey over just to see their big, steelworker hands at work buttering bread, carving a steak, indelicately using a napkin, unashamedly heaping second and third helpings of mashed potatoes onto their plates. (90)

As much as Honey gains great pleasure from watching the men in her life eat, she feels just as much pain when they do not. This desire to feed, to nurture, is inborn, and she cannot bear the thought of not feeding her loved ones any more than a mother can bear the thought of a starving newborn baby. Honey expresses this feeling that she knows well from her years spent married to Scotty, an alcoholic:

> I say he [Scotty] never ate. I can recollect one winter he decided he'd not drink. It lasted one week, best I recall. He wanted milkshakes. Lord, did I make the milkshakes. I beat up an egg, used heavy cream, cocoa, and globs of ice cream. I'd take the concoction to Scotty's bedside and bear the sensual pain of a lactating mother whose sick baby has finally decided to accept the breast—you know, that feeling when the milk finally lets down from its neglected, overextended source. (90)

Honey knows the pleasure, comfort, and pain involved in preparing food, serving it, and having the recipients either accept or reject it. As with all of Covington's Southern women, much of Honey's life has been spent preoccupied by food, with every event in her life defined by it, because working with food—its preparation, the act of serving it, and watching others enjoy it—provides a spiritual comfort directly proportional to its

origin—the land.

In *Bird of Paradise*, Honey is also the primary character representing the Southern woman's loyalty to family and reliance upon memories of family. The entire plot of the novel involves Honey's reluctance to give up the home and the place where she grew up. While the homeplace itself represents one aspect of Honey's attachment to the land, her reluctance to give it up is directly associated with her memories—memories of family. Honey has a special closeness to her family stemming from her innate desire to hold dear her family heritage. Honey expresses this pride in her family heritage when she describes with admiration the place where her ancestors are buried. "Judson took my elbow, and we proceeded down the hill, past the collection of buried family and friends, names I knew like the back of my hand, a bed of memory and grace" (83). After this walk in the cemetery, Honey begins to realize just how much she is influenced by her family. Honey acknowledges this fact when Christmas Day arrives, and she is at the old homeplace, and for the first time in years, she is sentimental about the day rather than bothered by it:

> I, on the other hand, was feeling remarkably at ease. It was odd, seeing as how, ever since Dinah's death, I'd been absolutely spooked of the place, reluctant to even grace the door. For some reason—and I'd been conscious of it as I prepared the salad, using Dinah's old green bowl—I'd realized that I was carrying on a holiday tradition, that I was Mama, Dinah, and me all rolled up into one, and I had an inkling of what it had been like, in my youth, to be charmed rather than annoyed by Christmas. (86)

Honey's realization that she is carrying on a "family" tradition, that she is affected by her family's influence, causes a change of heart. For most of her adult life, Honey has tried to ignore her bond with her family and their memories because they are tainted with the scars of living with an alcoholic husband for many years, but finally Honey recognizes

that all of her memories, including those of Scotty, make her the strong Southern woman that she is and that all she lacks as a Southern woman is embracing those memories:

> I was born right below Nectar Hill. If I strained hard enough, could I see—from here—myself, in the distant past, redirecting a colony of ants or chasing butterflies or riding that mule-drawn wagon that Papa's brother drove on his way to repair company houses when they all worked the mines? Or the day Papa coerced his buddy to swap shifts so he could plant some fruit trees in our yard? Dinah and me on our knees watching Papa dig big holes in the earth, Papa's face when he heard the explosion, knowing that his buddy would be charred black when found, Papa's guilt, my gratitude over his spared life, the fruit trees of mercy, the miner's wife left widowed, Papa poisoning the trees in order to absolve himself. Scotty leaping from a car—the first one I ever saw—wearing a bright cap, so dapper, wanting to teach me to drive, me behind the wheel, moving on along the chert surface, feeling what it was like to steer, down Mineral Springs Road, over the railroad tracks, in the shadow of Nectar Hill, the oak canopy overhead, branches breaking the sun into patterns and making the road ahead light, then dark, then light. The wheels of Alabama buses that took Rosa Parks to town, me to Alanon meetings, Carmen to work, Dr. King to jail. The one-pump gas station that carried me through the Depression and caused me to first shed my petticoats. Mama's rose garden. Papa's leg lost in the mines. Papa's wheelchair, Wallace's wheelchair, Lurleen's election, Lurleen's death, Kennedy's death, Robin's birth. The steel plant, flat meringues, squash casseroles, nursing, waitressing, polishing the silver armor, burying husbands, baking cakes, tending to wills, singing God's praise, making love with the windows open. (205-206)

Finally, Honey embraces her past, her family, and herself.

Lastly, the Southern woman's bond with religion dominates the characters of *Bird of Paradise*, particularly Carmen Dabbs and Honey. Together, they represent the total religious makeup of Covington's Southern woman. As with Covington's other leading female characters, the main characters in *Bird of Paradise* have a two-fold involvement in religion: the traditional and the non-traditional. This duality is seen clearly when Honey prays:

> Without further ado, I closed my eyes and thanked God for farmers. Then I thanked him for the pecan trees out front—a living testimony to the fact that life goes on. Then I thanked him for the angel-clouds that were blowing northeasterly, up to Fort Payne, I reckoned, on their special mission.
>
> I said "Amen," unfolded my napkin, and passed Judson the salad. (89)

Although prayer is one of the most fundamental of Christian activities, the content of Honey's prayer is far from traditional.

Honey and Carmen both participate in other traditional church activities, and they belong to the most common denomination in their area. Honey describes the area in which they live: "Neighborhoods are marked by and anchored with Baptist churches, a few Methodist, maybe a Presbyterian, but you know what I'm saying" (48). Along with attending this church, they are involved in the typical types of church-related activities. According to Honey, she and Carmen have these activities planned out on a daily basis:

> Here is my week: Sunday is church. Monday is bingo at the Family Life Suite. Tuesday is nursing-home visits. Wednesday is senior citizens' choir practice, study club, and covered-dish prayer meeting (Wednesday is a big day for Baptists, nigh near busier than Sunday). Thursday is Meals-on-Wheels delivery, Friday is quilting, and Saturday is open. (60)

While Honey and Carmen are very busy with these kinds of activities, church involvement is never representative of their spirituality. In contrast, Honey's description of some of these church-sponsored activities is far from that of a group of spiritually-minded people meeting together: "The [Fellowship] Hall was in its general uproarious state. There's nothing quite like a room full of sober, hungry Baptists who're half crazed with caffeine and gossip" (100). Obviously, Honey attends these functions, but for her, they are more of a social outlet than a spiritual refueling station. Recognizing her lack of

traditional Christian beliefs, Honey acknowledges her religious duality. "On occasions, Papa has come to me in dreams with special messages about Jesus—still trying, I suppose, to make my spiritual side more in keeping with traditional Christian belief" (194). Honey's non-traditional spiritual nature is seen first in her small actions, from disliking traditional funeral passages and Christmas, to refusing to sing a Christmas carol for her solo at church on Christmas morning to accepting, but not acknowledging, her minister son's live-in girlfriend. However, Honey's non-typical "religious" beliefs delve far deeper than these surface idiosyncrasies. As with Covington's other female characters, Honey displays an unexpected view of particular people and situations. For instance, in a discussion with Judson about a fellow church member, Kelsey Borden, Honey reveals a very tolerant attitude toward his strong support of the National Rifle Association: "If Kelsey wants to carry a gun to prayer meetings, I still love him, because he's part of the family" (166). Honey's words express her natural ability to look at a situation in a different light. Instead of being piously appalled at a "Christian" man's desire to carry a gun, even to church, Honey accepts this characteristic because she prefers to think of him as family, in a spiritual sense.

Honey also exhibits unanticipated empathy when she recalls her travels to Birmingham during the Civil Rights Movement: "I rode in the back of the bus, in deliberate disobedience, to Alanon meetings in Birmingham in 1957. I'm afraid that's all I can rightfully claim, but my heart was there, every step of the way" (129). Not only was Honey aware of the injustices of the 1950s, but she is also aware of the continuing need to force racial issues even now. When a "black" company makes the first offer on her

property, Honey knows it will cause a great stir in her all-white neighborhood, and this fact alone causes Honey to want to consider the offer. She reveals to Judson, "I am amused by this busing-tour company. I would like to see the neighborhood integrated. I would like to see the issue forced" (130). Honey sees that the arrival of the busing-tour company would be beneficial socially as well as economically, and her ability to see the social benefit reveals her deeper compassion for the struggles of African-Americans, particularly in the Birmingham area. This compassion, along with Honey's ability to overlook some situations—Christmas, a live-in girlfriend, and the National Rifle Association—that would normally cause great controversy in religion, is the first major characteristic revealing her non-traditional religious nature.

The second hint that Honey's religious nature has a non-traditional duality is evidenced first in her definition of prayer. At a particular church gathering, the preacher calls for a moment of prayer for those listed in need, and although Honey's first thought is of Sara Catherine Lawler, her next door neighbor and Dewey's wife who is suffering from agoraphobia, her silent prayer is not the usual kind:

> I didn't pray. I focused instead on the floral arrangement on the serving table, tonight's centerpiece, the only true testimony in the whole room that God was alive and well. There were roses, a daisy spray, and a spectacular bird of paradise. Where did that come from? I wondered. Didn't they grow in some other country? I let Sara Catherine come to my mind, and I visualized her tiny fingers splayed like five birds taking flight as she released the bread crust. Then I let my eyes travel upward to the stucco ceiling of Fellowship Hall, taking my mental picture of her up with me, beyond the bird of paradise, in the direction of heaven. This is how you lift someone up in prayer. You don't have to say a word. (104)

In addition to her unconventional way of "lifting someone up in prayer," Honey demonstrates in this passage her belief that nature is much more of a testimonial to the

existence of God than anything occurring in church. Honey attempts to reveal her doctrine of God in nature to Judson Carmichael, her romantic interest, when he takes her to his land in north Alabama. Judson constantly questions Honey about the existence of God and the relevance of her involvement in church activities, so when Honey tries to bring up religion while they are in the woods, Judson tells her, "No church in the woods" (184), indicating that Honey's religion has no place in his woods. Ironically, Judson then begins to worshipfully show Honey all of the beautiful wonders of his virgin woods, reinforcing Honey's beliefs:

> A host of tiny blue butterflies swept past us. Judson stopped and, not letting go of my hand, pulled me down to a kneeling position with him. "Trillium," he said. A bold maroon bloom cast itself up from the three whorled leaves. We stayed there a bit as if in prayer, then got up and proceeded. (185)

After this "prayerful" tribute to the beauty of nature, Honey reveals to Judson the belief that gives her bond with the land a spiritual meaning as well. She tells him, "God and nature are one and the same" (185). According to Veronica Pike Kennedy, this scene epitomizes Honey's non-traditional religious nature. She states, "He [Judson] takes her to the mountains, to the 'Free State of Winston,' where she gets as close to her faith as she ever did in church" ("Average People..." 5F). Honey's "faith," then, involves her church activities, but the root of her religiosity is a spiritual nature that includes both a compassion for people, particularly those facing controversy or pain, and an association of God within nature.

Finally, Honey describes her religious experience as "mystical" (76), which is the principal characteristic of Honey's non-traditional religious nature. When describing

herself, Honey states, "...I feel the need to reiterate that I am Honey, the pragmatist, when it comes to people, but in all aspects of nature I'm a radical mystic. It isn't a choice I make. It's a gift" (85-86). For Honey, this gift is all about angels, which she believes are spirits that, "both on earth and in heaven, have missions" (68). These missions are for various reasons, and Honey often feels that angels are nearby when she is having some particular problem. For example, when she decides to talk with the man who has made an offer on her property, she feels the angels:

> I felt all the angels hovering near me, and I wasn't sure why they were flying in. To protect, warn, encourage, comfort? That's the thing about angels—they don't talk out loud. After Gabriel flew in to tell Mary she was pregnant with God's son, there just wasn't any way an angel could ever speak aloud again. I mean, what more was there for angels to say? (144)

Honey believes that angels are with her at many times for different reasons, but particularly for comfort. When Honey decides to go with Judson to his land in north Alabama, she tells her son Jackie, "'My life is changing....Angels are nearby'" (180). The most comforting angels, however, are those people close to Honey who recently have died:

> Generally, when somebody dies, her angel-form hovers nearby for a spell. Driving in your car alone, you scream in grief at the innocent blue sky and immediately your voice is absorbed rather than cynically echoing back, and you're comforted. This absorption that you sense is the angel hearing your plea, which is usually, "Dinah, where *are* you?" or "I love you, Mama," or "*Speak to me*, Scotty." Or, maybe—this happened to Carmen after she lost her brother—you're standing there washing dishes, crying perhaps, and suddenly a halo lights your hands and a sweet glow dances all over your body. This is a creative kind of angel (Carmen's brother was a writer) coming to you when you're engaged in a simple, domestic task—so as not to scare you. (194)

According to Honey, angel-forms, halos' sweet glows, and "creative" angels are all a part of, a "creative faith" (130), including the belief that those loved ones she has lost have become angels themselves. She explains this theory to Judson on one occasion when they are talking about her father:

> "Papa's in his grave," he said.
> I looked at Judson's face. Oh, the absence of imagination, of a creative faith. "Papa is *not* in a grave," I corrected.
> Judson smiled and raised his eyebrows in mock disbelief. "He's not?"
> "No. He's in China."
> Judson's merried eyes narrowed a bit so as to survey my words. "China," he repeated.
> I knew I was about to carry things too far, but something about Judson's concrete mind made me want to. "Papa, in his early manhood, wanted to be a missionary to China. I believe God probably has stationed him there in his angelhood." (130)

Honey's belief in the many types of and missions of angels prevails as the defining symbol of her religious duality. The angels represent the spiritual, mystical side of her religious personality, but the use of angels in Honey's complexity of character does not end with the belief in invisible, heavenly beings. Honey, too, believes in angels on earth. She believes that Carmen is one: "Anyway, Carmen held my fingers. Believe me, Carmen is an angel on earth, and the sight of her makes you believe in heaven" (20). On another occasion, when Judson asks Honey if she has ever seen an angel, she replies, "'Carmen is one'" (131). On yet another occasion, Honey mentions this idea to Neva Joy:

> "Carmen's having me over."
> "That's sweet. Carmen is a jewel, isn't she?"
> "An angel," I said.
> Neva Joy nodded.
> "A real one," I added. (43)

Although Neva Joy takes Honey's statement lightly, a real angel is exactly what Carmen is to Honey. Because the spiritual aspect of Honey's character has always been hindered somewhat by her inability to cry and to feel deep emotion as the result of her life with Scotty, Carmen, through these years, has been there to listen and comfort Honey. For instance, when Honey feels like talking about Dinah, Carmen actively participates in Honey's grief:

> I felt then, as I was telling Carmen this, as close to crying as is humanly possible and still not be crying. And when I saw that Carmen *was* crying, I felt even more like crying because I wasn't able to cry, and I understood most succinctly how important Carmen's crying was to me and had been over the years. Since we were always together, she could cry at appropriate moments and relieve me of the necessity. And isn't that what most friends do for one another, anyway? Fill up the holes? Complete the picture? (56)

Carmen has been there to perform the tasks that Honey could not and to be her personal "guardian" angel until the time would come that Honey would achieve her full spiritual potential. Honey again describes Carmen's unique ability to comfort:

> Carmen is one of those women who's got an aura of calm. I believe in auras. I can't see them, but I know they exist. Get near Carmen, and you can feel the warm sensation. When artists invented halos they had a good idea. I'd say they were right on track with interpreting God's mystery, and don't be fooled into believing that those Nativity-scene characters and other assorted angels were the only ones who've ever had halos. Carmen wears one, only it hovers near her entire body rather than just her head. Its color is gold. The message isn't intended for the eyes but rather for the hands. (27)

Carmen demonstrates, in seemingly small ways, the "tactile" ability to encourage and comfort Honey, to gently support her during the crucial periods of her life. After Honey speaks to Michael Antoine, the prospective buyer for her property, Carmen knows that Honey is at a crossroads, that she is near the point of making a decision about keeping or

selling her homeplace, so she offers comfort and encouragement with simple gestures: "She leaned over and gave me an angel kiss on the forehead, then adjusted my collar in motherly fashion" (158). Carmen, for many years, has been the angel taking care of Honey until Honey recognizes her own angelic, compassionate spirit. Finally, after Honey's trip with Judson to his "virgin woods" of north Alabama in which she renews her creative faith by communing with God in nature, she returns home confident in her acceptance of her attachment to her homeplace and its memories and consequently, her decision *not* to sell it. Almost simultaneously with Honey's decision and her emergence into her full "angel" potential, Dewey Lawler's wife, Sara Catherine, emerges from her house and her agoraphobia, acknowledging Honey:

> "Sara!" I called, unable to contain myself.
>
> She glanced up. In her apron, she looked solid as a farm-woman. She raised a hand tentatively like you do when greeting a semi-stranger.
>
> "Honey," she called back.
>
> "Good to see you!" I hollered.
>
> She held her palms up, shook her head, then let her hands fall to her apron pockets, as if to say, Don't ask me where I've been or why.
>
> I blew her a kiss, meaning, Don't worry, I've been there myself. (196)

Sara Catherine's literal emergence from her home symbolizes Honey's emergence from her state of repression of her complete spiritual, religious self.

The final evidence that Honey realizes her maturity as a Southern woman comes when she decides to let the black busing-tour company come to her neighborhood to force a discriminatory issue. When Wash, Dinah's African-American yardman, tells Honey that his daughter Twila and baby are moving down South and need a place to stay, Honey immediately thinks of Dinah's house, the old homeplace:

> "We don't rightly have the space. Twila's looking for a place to rent." Wash stopped clipping, and I stopped sipping, and we looked at each other. I glanced around to catch a glimpse of whatever angel was hovering nearby, then I realized the angel was myself. "Tell her to call me," I said.
>
> "Were you planning to rent the place?"
>
> "Not until just this second." (200)

At just that second, Honey realizes that she has become the kind of angel she has always known Carmen to be, thus completing the portrait of herself as a Southern woman.

In *Bird of Paradise*, Honey is the strong Southern woman who has survived life with an alcoholic husband, his inevitable death, her son's liberal lifestyle, the deaths of her parents, and finally, the death of her only sister. Her sister's stepdaughter calls her "the Rock of Gibraltar...earthy" (142). Indeed, she has the strength of the typical Southern woman and possesses all of her characteristics. However, she does not recognize her attachment to land and family until the death of Dinah, and she does not truly become the complete Southern woman, religiously, without the support of Carmen. Therefore, Honey Shugart, with the benefit of Dinah Bluet and Carmen Dabbs, ultimately exemplifies Covington's unique Southern woman.

CHAPTER V

THE WOMEN OF *NIGHT RIDE HOME*

The tone of *Night Ride Home*, Vicki Covington's third novel, differs from that of the first two primarily because of the setting. Although, as with *Gathering Home* and *Bird of Paradise*, it takes place in Alabama, near and in Birmingham, the time is the early 1940s, just before the beginning of World War II, in a small mining community. The story centers on the lives of Ben Ray and Tess Hayes, whose son, Keller, is soon to be married to Laura, the daughter of Scotty and Grace Sandifer. While the Hayeses are the typical mining family, with Ben Ray working in the mines, the Sandifers own the local gas station that Grace and Laura operate because Scotty is an alcoholic whose main focus is to hate Keller Hayes for marrying his daughter. Besides Keller's strife with Scotty Sandifer, he struggles with another conflict with Bolivia Ivey, "the newest of the camp whores, a smallish girl with Indian-looking braids and wobbly legs, now pregnant" (25). Keller instinctually knows that the baby Bolivia is carrying belongs to him; however, Keller is able to shirk his responsibility in the matter because Charles Avery, the junkman, takes care of Bolivia and wants to marry her and rear the child. Keller hopes desperately that no one will ever find out that he is the father of the child. These conflicts build to the center of the novel, in which there is a cave-in in the coal mines, and Ben Ray and others are trapped inside. This crisis causes the entire community to pull together in an effort to free the men and support the fearful, waiting family members. Surprisingly, Scotty Sandifer leads some of the efforts and takes a benevolent role in assisting Tess

Hayes throughout the crisis. As a result, he does not have time to drink during these events and emerges from the ordeal with a commitment to overcome his alcoholism. Immediately after the crisis in the mines is resolved with Ben Ray's life being spared, another more private tragedy occurs. Bolivia goes into labor and has problems with the delivery of her child. Consequently, the baby dies during the birth. Again, the entire community, both black and white, is brought together, this time in church, for the funeral of Bolivia's child, with no one else except Keller's parents ever knowing who fathered the child. Finally, the novel closes with Keller being drafted by the Army and riding on a train headed for the frightening unknown world of war.

The women of *Night Ride Home* differ from the modern women in Covington's first two novels because of the different lifestyle surrounding work in the coal mines in this earlier time; however, the women themselves are still the same—they are still Southern women. Tess Hayes and Grace Sandifer, combined with the presence and character of Bolivia Ivey, constitute the embodiment of Covington's Southern woman.

According to Vicki Covington, Bolivia is a "mystical, spiritual, Mary Magdalene-type character" (Troy State, 7 April 1995). In this role, Bolivia acts as a "shadow" character for Tess. While Tess is a refined, well-respected woman, Bolivia represents the true nature of Tess. She is the raw, uninhibited picture of Tess, and with Bolivia's mother having died, Tess becomes the obvious mother figure to Bolivia. Both of these women, then, share many of the same characteristics—the characteristics of Covington's Southern woman. Tess typifies the Southern woman in her relationship with food. Like all of Covington's Southern women, Tess gains much comfort and pleasure in preparing

food and feeding the men in her life. When she and Keller are discussing his future married life, Tess wants to show him motherly love. "And so she again felt she ought to offer him something tangible, like food. 'Sure you're not hungry?'" (51) In another instance, Tess worries over how much food she packed for Ben Ray's lunch when she realizes he is trapped in the mine cave-in and could be there for a long period of time until the rescue teams arrive:

> "I made him ham sandwiches," she said. "I wish I'd made peanut butter. It'd keep better."
> Keller looked at her. "Mom, please."
> "But you know how ham is. You have to eat it soon if it's not on ice."
> "Mom."
> "You know it's true. He'll get sick. And I put in all those pickles. Who needs pickles? I should have packed something special. It's Christmas Eve," she said, and he was afraid she was going to get crazy.
> "Mom," he said gently. "Dad loves ham. Ham *is* special," he made himself say.
> "I did put in some biscuits and honey."
> "Great."
> "And lots of fruit," she said.
> "Good," he said. (156)

Obviously, Tess is not really concerned about the food, but fretting over it is her way of releasing, or perhaps avoiding, her real concern for Ben Ray's life. In addition, since she cannot be with Ben Ray during this ordeal, the food she has prepared for him is the only comfort she can give in this dismal situation. Tess also comforts herself with food—by preparing it:

> Minutes later as she walked back from the outhouse, she understood that God was answering prayers she'd never even said. She needed something to do, and now she knew what it was. She went inside and lit the stove. Then she got the flour, sugar, and butter from the icebox and mixed it all up with some eggs to make a cake, a perfect white cake with thick frosting. She made biscuits and stuffed them with the last of the ham

> given to her by the preacher at the Bethlehem Methodist church, where they'd slain a pig right on the grounds, right beside the pastureland that led to the graveyard. (166)

Tess finds cooking more comforting than even prayer as she waits for news of Ben Ray's rescue. After Tess prepares this food, she takes it to the coal mining office to share with the family members still there waiting. When she arrives, many of the other women are also bringing "casseroles and cornbread and pies" (176). Of this activity, Keller observes, "Women had food to pass the time, to keep their hands busy during bad times" (198). Typifying Covington's Southern woman, Tess uses food—the product of the land—to pass the time and to comfort her during a stressful situation.

Representing Tess' more "earthy" nature, Bolivia also possesses the desire to prepare food and serve it to the men in her life. When she and Charles have company, Bolivia immediately begins to prepare the table:

> Charles asked Scotty to sit at the table with him. When he did, Bolivia heaved herself from the chair, dropped the pink yarn, and began making tea. She circled the men the way women do when they're at a table, and placed spoons and lemons and sugar beside their hands. (147)

Tess is unable to hover around a table at which her son and husband are seated because they are both temporarily away from her as a result of the cave-in. Bolivia's actions, though, represent Tess' natural desire to do so.

Bolivia also displays an attachment to the land—burial and cemeteries—that Tess consciously tries to avoid during the hours that Ben Ray's fate is still unknown. For a short time, Bolivia bears for Tess this aspect of the Southern woman's bond to the land. While Tess escapes the fate of burying her husband, Bolivia accepts this fate in the death of her newborn child. Before the child is born, though, Bolivia talks of graves and burial.

Stricken with the pains of labor and squatting "to be near the earth" (215), Bolivia is talking irrationally, but the subject of her thoughts is clear: "Sequatchie. It's where my mother is buried, and my grandmother, too. I'm going to find their graves. I'm going to talk to them about this matter" (217-218). During childbirth, an exclusively feminine experience, Bolivia's innermost thoughts—thoughts about the earth, burial, and graves—are revealed. Unfortunately, these thoughts prove to be intuitive, for Bolivia loses her child and must go to the cemetery to bury her. Although Bolivia is the primary representative of this aspect of the attachment to the land, through her, Tess regains this relationship with the land. When Bolivia's baby is born, Tess immediately realizes that the child belongs to Keller and is her grandchild. Therefore, the death of this child has a greater significance for Tess, giving her an inescapable bond with the land through burial.

Bolivia's child also links the characters together to emphasize the importance of the family relationship in *Night Ride Home*. From the very beginning of Bolivia's pregnancy, Tess takes on a nurturing role towards her. Tess is a mother figure for Bolivia, whose natural mother is dead. Tess' willingness to overlook Bolivia's "occupation" and see a young, pregnant girl who is all alone in the world is typical of Covington's Southern woman, who will go to great lengths to help a family member in need, even a very distant relative. Similarly, Tess accepts Bolivia as "family" and is willing to go the distance to help her just as if she were a blood relative. Ironically, Bolivia's unborn child is Tess' blood relative, her grandchild. Tess even has a prophetic dream about this fact but does not realize what it means at the time:

> "The other night, I dreamed you cut your finger," she said to Bolivia, remembering. "I turned on the faucet and milk streamed out. My

> finger started bleeding, too. Our blood got all mixed up in the sink. Ugh"—she shuddered, glancing over at Charles—"that's awful, isn't it?" (97)

Even though Tess does not understand the dream, that the child is Keller's, she is willing to help Bolivia because she is pregnant and without any "blood" relatives to rely upon. This determination to help someone, particularly a family member, or in Bolivia's case, an "adopted" family member, illustrates Tess' strong family-oriented character. Primarily, Tess exhibits this strong character as she works to help Bolivia through the birth of her child. This bond formed between Tess and Bolivia depicts the genuine nature of loyalty and attachment of Covington's Southern woman to her family.

Grace Sandifer also shares in the portrayal of the Southern woman's loyalty to family in the support of her husband, Scotty. Although Scotty is an alcoholic, Grace tolerates his addiction and his behavior and always believes in him in his attempts to quit drinking:

> Grace reached to pet the kitten, and it buried its head in Scotty's chest. They stood under the tree beside the dog's pen near Grace's clothesline, which hung from one tulip poplar to another. The rest of the yard was nothing more than a plot of dirt where they battled and made up under the rules they'd established: he got drunk, they had a fight, she kicked him out, he rose sober in the morning, he got sick and scared, she nursed his body with mustard poultices and fed him milkshakes of cream and chipped ice, they played Rook, then made love, and at night he got drunk. (150)

Although Grace's "routine" is typical behavior for a person who lives with an alcoholic, this relationship is comparable to that of the Southern woman and her family. Grace's constant forgiveness in her relationship with Scotty as a backdrop for the other events taking place is a constant reminder of the Southern woman's attachment and loyalty to family.

Thirdly, the combination of these three female characters—Bolivia, Tess, and Grace—exemplifies the religious constitution of Covington's Southern woman. Although Bolivia does not singularly constitute the portrait of a Southern woman, ironically, she is the primary representative of her traditional religious nature. Through Tess, Bolivia is introduced to several religious ceremonies, such as foot washings and worship services:

> "Have you ever heard of foot washing?" she asked him [Scotty].
> "Well," he said. "If I'm not mistaken, some beautiful woman was in love with Jesus and washed his feet, and all the men raised holy hell about it."
> Bolivia felt goosebumps running all over her flesh.
> "I believe she was a whore," Scotty said. He shook his head. "That might not be right, though. Why're you asking, baby?"
> "Tess asked me to come to a foot washing at her church on Sunday," she said, wondering if Tess knew this part about the whore. (46)

When Bolivia attends this ceremony with Tess, the experience fascinates her:

> Tess rubbed her heels as if polishing stones, on and on, until Bolivia herself came to believe that her worn feet were worth something....
> Bolivia knelt, and, taking Tess's feet into her hands, touched the skin of another woman for the first time since her mother died. (58)

These activities pique Bolivia's interest in "traditional" religion, and she tells Charles, "'I want a Bible'" (84).

In contrast, these activities are not meaningful, religiously, to Tess. They are Tess's means of earning a living. Keller describes his mother's profession:

> They drove past the white Baptist church where Tess sometimes sang when she wasn't working the Holiness, where they liked snakes and spoke in tongues. The people in the new, staid sanctuaries were richer, but the money often flowed more freely from the poor, who lost their minds over her voice and gave their last coins. She felt, she said, less guilty in the rich churches. (23)

On another occasion, Keller again reveals Tess's feelings about church and traditional religious involvement:

> Tess's unpredictability was no secret, but he'd always chalked it up to her having to deal with so many preachers. Church itself was enough to make anybody crazy, and Keller knew his mother's brand of spirituality was, at best, unwieldy. She had no use for ritual or legalistic fervor. (62)

While Tess does attend these traditional church services and introduces them to Bolivia, she only attends for the purpose of making money. Tess places no significant religious value on the conventional church services, but she does place importance on some traditional religious practices such as prayer. Tess displays her belief that prayer affects even the mundane aspects of life:

> He [Keller] and Ben Ray were borrowing suits from the preacher and his son, who had extra ones. The fits were remarkably identical. God's hand, Tess was certain, was working together with her prayers. He might be tending to the war in Europe, but his partner—the Holy Ghost—was busy tailoring here in Sweetgum Flat. (52)

While Tess does not possess many "traditional" religious traits, she attends traditional worship services and practices prayer, but for the most part, her participation in religious ceremonies does not reveal Tess' true spiritual nature.

The non-traditional aspects of Tess' religious beliefs show more of her genuine nature, her position as one of Covington's Southern women; in *Night Ride Home*, Tess alone represents this side of Covington's Southern woman. Other than Tess' obvious use of religious ceremony for personal gain, she also demonstrates another habit of "using" her talents to gain material possessions:

> Tess handed him [Keller] an ashtray that said GOD GRANT ME THE COURAGE. Beside the words were praying hands that reminded him of the miners' wives.

> "Where did you get this?" he asked.
>
> She shrugged. "I picked it up somewhere," she said and looked at her nails. He smiled, knowing she'd taken it from somewhere. She wasn't a thief; she just had a habit of walking out of situations with something in her hand. (154)

Obviously, Tess' means of earning a living and acquiring trinkets is not what would be expected of a highly religious Southern woman; however, Tess' brand of religiosity involves a much deeper, more compassionate, spiritual nature, and to Tess, using worship services to make money and stealing a few little things here and there are insignificant to her spiritual self. This deeper, more spiritual temperament is first evidenced in Tess' enduring compassion for others. Tess' compassion is often the kind that leads her to perform difficult tasks, tasks that reveal her stalwart nature, the natural fortitude characteristic of Covington's Southern woman, who is at her best when she is seeing to the needs of others, and Tess often rises to such occasions. For example, when the news arrives that Jake Hatfield has died in the mine cave-in, Keller dreads having to be the one to deliver the news to Jake's wife, but his mother, true to her strong but compassionate nature, graciously relieves him of the task:

> "Hatfield's dead."
>
> Tess's hand flew to her mouth, and she turned abruptly and went silently into the office. That's when he knew he wasn't going to have to tell Reba Hatfield, that his mother was going to do it for him, another tender mercy in the endless tender mercies of his parents. (206)

The chief example of Tess' compassionate nature, however, is manifested in her tenderness towards Bolivia. Although Bolivia is known as the town whore, Tess does not hesitate in treating her with compassion, beginning with hospitality. Keller first notices his mother's hospitality towards Bolivia: "Keller spun from the yard, causing dust to fly.

But in the rearview mirror, he saw his mother talking to her, accepting the basket of eggs, and he knew she was asking her in for dinner" (25).

Tess' kindness delves far deeper than hospitality, however. Tess takes a special interest in Bolivia. First, Bolivia has a different ethnic background than Tess, and this fact immediately piques her interest. Like Covington's other Southern women, Tess desires to help those of a different race than her own, showing no prejudices toward them. Tess often sings in "Negro" churches as well as the "white" churches. So Bolivia's ethnicity, which she describes as "Melungeon," possibly indicating that she is "part Portuguese" (77), ignites Tess' already natural desire to know, understand, and befriend Bolivia. Keller recognizes his mother's attraction to Bolivia and questions her about it:

> "You want to be friends with her or something?" he pressed.
> "Yes, I guess I do. Is that odd?"
> "She's a whore," he said.
> "She's also a person. She's going to be a mother, Keller." (52)

Second, Tess sees this other side of Bolivia—not the whore, but rather the woman, an expectant mother, in need of understanding and acceptance. Tess also acts on her feelings for Bolivia. She recognizes the scared, young girl in Bolivia and promises to be there for her when she labors with her child:

> "Don't worry," Tess said. "I'm going to birth your baby."
> Bolivia didn't say anything. Would Tess deliver the baby if she knew the truth?
> *Mercy*. (114)

Tess' compassion for Bolivia is unconditional and resembles that of a mother for her child, which is exactly what Tess has become—a mother figure to Bolivia. Tess' actions reveal the side of her that is deeply spiritual, the side that cares for others, a merciful side.

Tess has the ability to show compassion, particularly for those unaccustomed to receiving it.

Other evidence of the non-traditional religious nature of Covington's Southern woman can be found in all three female characters: Bolivia, Tess, and Grace, revealing their more spiritual, three-dimensional religious nature. For instance, Grace has a great reverence for nature—the universe, the stars and planets: "Storms excited her, according to Laura. Grace was known to read too many astronomy books and had a peculiar kind of religion where she didn't take medicine or attend worship. Her overinvolvement with the universe was striking" (35). Grace's "overinvolvement" attests to her belief of finding God in nature rather than in church and hints at the more mystical side of religion for Covington's Southern woman.

The primary symbol Covington uses to represent this mystical aspect of religion, however, is the reference to angels. Covington uses both Bolivia and Tess, the angels of *Night Ride Home*, to display this view of the Southern woman's mystical religiosity. Tess acts as Bolivia's guardian angel. Bolivia recognizes Tess' angel-like characteristics soon after Tess befriends her, telling Scotty Sandifer, "'She's like an angel'" (46). When Scotty takes Tess to Birmingham to sing in one of the big churches there, he, too, experiences her angelic aura. Peeking in the church building from outside, Scotty sees Tess singing at the front of the church:

> Cautiously, he walked over to the steps leading to the sanctuary and tried to see inside. And that's when he saw her, standing under a painted Mary, wearing a snow-white dress that looked for the world like a night-gown, or was it one of those robes preachers wore? He hadn't been to church in over twenty years. Bright-colored stained-glass windows glowed beside burning candles. Tess stood in the light. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

(141)

To Scotty's amazement, Tess looks like an angel surrounded by halos, and for a moment, he thinks that she might be a literal angel, as he later admits to her. Scotty then finds himself thinking of Tess in a different light—he understands Bolivia's fixation on Tess. In further confirmation of Tess' role as an angel-figure, she gives Bolivia a brass angel as a gift:

> "I brought you a little something," she said, reaching into her pocketbook. Inside the purple lining, the brass angel was wrapped in one of Ben Ray's handkerchiefs. She gave it to Bolivia.
>
> Bolivia ran her thumb over the angel's wings and didn't say anything.
>
> "I like it," she said finally, as she reached for Charles's cigaret, took a long draw, then exhaled smoke in a delicate stream. "I like it very much," she said, cupping it in her hand. (96)

This scene foreshadows the way Tess will give herself, as an angel, to Bolivia when Bolivia needs her, and in the same way that Bolivia now owns the brass angel, she will become more like Tess in her ability to be an angel of comfort and healing for the entire community. Tess acts as Bolivia's mother-figure and guardian angel when Bolivia is in stressful labor with the child. Bolivia, who is becoming delirious with the pain, sees Tess helping her, but believes that she is seeing angels and her deceased mother, who "heard her prayers" (215). Particularly, when Tess must lean over and tell Bolivia that the baby is dead, Bolivia feels the presence of angels:

> "Is the baby dead?" Bolivia asked Tess.
>
> Tess leaned over, touched her hair.
>
> "Yes," she whispered. Angels' reflections stood in the green irises of Tess's eyes. Cherubim are guardians of fixed stars, Bolivia thought. Where had she heard that? *Where were you when the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy?* (228)

In this moment, Tess' eyes reveal her angelic relationship with Bolivia, but as she continues to care for Bolivia after the traumatic delivery and grieve for who she now knows to be her dead grandchild, she becomes less of an angel-figure and more of a mother-figure to Bolivia:

> Bolivia turned to the wall. Tess took her hand. "I'm seeing angels," she said to Tess, but she couldn't look at her.
>
> "When you pray for somebody, an angel sits on the shoulder of that person," Tess said. "I'm praying for you."
>
> Bolivia kept her face to the wall. *Mother?*
>
> "I'm right here," Tess said. (229)

Bolivia also serves as an angel-figure in *Night Ride Home*. Her angel-like nature is unsophisticated at first, but it evolves as her friendship with Tess evolves. Initially, Bolivia acts as a "guardian angel" for one person—Keller. Keller first sees something in Bolivia that causes him to believe "she was a witch or an angel or something" (125). And when she has a "prophetic dream" (215) that Ben Ray will be found alive in the mines, Keller realizes exactly what she is to him: "He believed, in those moments of flying toward his car, that Bolivia was responsible for his father's survival, that she was a good witch who would be his guardian angel" (128). Bolivia also protects Keller; physically, she restrains Scotty at Keller and Laura's wedding to prevent Scotty from harming Keller. Emotionally, she protects Keller by concealing his identity as her child's father, allowing him to come to terms with his fatherhood gradually. Consequently, in many ways, Bolivia is Keller's "protector."

Next, Bolivia acts as a peacemaker, an angel, to a family. She works to ease the tension among the Sandifers, particularly between Scotty and his daughter Laura. Bolivia knows of one occasion in Laura's childhood in which Scotty, drunk, makes her go with

him to throw a litter of kittens into the lake to dispose of them although they are all alive and healthy. This incident is just the beginning of Laura's bitter resentment toward her father. After Scotty quits drinking, Bolivia insists that he take one of her cats home to Laura for a Christmas present, and although this gift to Laura does not solve their problems immediately, it ignites the healing process:

> "This is for you," he said to her and handed her the cat.
>
> Laura held it in much the same way as Bolivia had, in one hand, as if studying a piece of fruit, checking for bruises. She then let it fall to her lap and cradled it there. "Thank you," she said but didn't look up at him. He knew that it would be a long time before she ever looked at him again, but this evening he had given her an invitation. (152)

Bolivia makes this invitation possible, causing a family to begin to recover from the heartaches and emotional scars of alcoholism.

Not only does Bolivia serve as a guardian angel to Keller and the Sandifers, but she is also the angel who brings an entire community together. When her child is born dead, the community grieves with her, "not a whore but a mother who'd lost her child" (230). Bolivia gains sympathy from everyone in the town regardless of race or religion or social status, and, representative of the ideal organized religion, the whole community gathers together in church:

> Charles held the tray for Bolivia to get bread. Keller held it, in turn, for Charles. Laura held it for Keller. Scotty held it for Laura, Grace for Scotty, Reba Hatfield for Grace, a colored woman for Reba.
>
> Keller watched the tray pass over to the other side of the chapel. The pews held black and white miners suddenly together in the same church for the first time. He knew that they'd never shared Communion with each other, and might never again. He knew, too, that Bolivia—herself both colored and white—was the reason they were here, able to do this. (242-243)

Bolivia, Tess, and Grace, together, embody all of the characteristics of land,

family, and religion that define Covington's Southern woman. This union is evidenced at Keller and Laura's wedding when the three woman join together to control Scotty. Tess brings Bolivia to the wedding to keep Scotty from causing a scene, an awkward situation for Grace, Scotty's wife, but the meeting of the three women on the porch Lila Green's house, where the wedding takes place, confirms that these three women, together, make up Covington's ideal Southern woman. After they meet all together on the porch for the first time, Keller and Ben Ray are discussing the incident:

> "Didn't you see how all three of them—Bolivia, your mother, and Grace—stared at one another like gypsies?"
>
> Ben Ray lit another cigaret.
>
> "I mean, when women're trying to have a wedding or a funeral or a baby born, they'll do whatever it takes to carry it off." (67)

Covington's Southern woman, represented in *Night Ride Home* by Bolivia, Tess, and Grace, is the steel magnolia, gaining strength from her attachment to her land, her family, and every aspect of her religion.

CHAPTER VI

THE WOMAN OF *THE LAST HOTEL FOR WOMEN*

Vicki Covington's fourth and most recent novel, *The Last Hotel for Women*, is set in Birmingham in 1961, a turbulent time in Birmingham's history. Civil rights issues permeated the lives of every citizen. Covington was a thirteen-year-old growing up in Birmingham in 1961, so she well remembers the chaos of the 1960s, which is the backdrop for *Last Hotel*. This novel centers on a family—Pete, Dinah, Benny, and Gracie Fraley—whose lives are on the brink of change, much like the city in which they live, while they wait for their new house to be built. In the meantime, they are living in their grandmother's old brothel-turned-hotel downtown. Covington bases this thread of the story on a real woman in Birmingham's history, a madam named Lou Wooster. In one of her *Birmingham News* articles, Covington writes about this historic madam, her desire to stay in Birmingham—the place where she found "freedom"—and her contribution to the city when she turns her brothel into an infirmary during an outbreak of cholera: "There was in those days [1873], a madam named Lou Wooster. Raised in a wealthy Mobile family, she'd come to Birmingham in order to make her way. Stories of her colorful, maverick life are testimonials to who we are" ("City's Fighting Spirit..." 2C). True to this pattern, the characters of *Last Hotel* are mavericks in the midst of the civil rights movement.

The novel opens on Mother's Day in 1961, the day the Freedom Riders' bus arrives in Birmingham. Benny and Gracie sneak out of the hotel to the bus station where

they witness the terrible riot and beatings. They do not return home unnoticed, however, because they bring with them one of the Freedom Riders, a young girl named Angel, sent by the authorities to stay at Dinah's hotel until she recovers from the incident. Conflict immediately arises when Eugene "Bull" Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety and Dinah's lifelong acquaintance, finds out that the girl is at the hotel. Connor frequents the hotel because he has known Dinah since she was a child growing up there. Dinah's mother, Candy Gentry, ran the hotel, but at that time, it was a brothel, a whorehouse, and Bull Connor frequented it then, too, claiming to have been in love with Dinah's mother, so his presence seems very natural to them. To her family, Dinah is the story and Connor, the storyteller. When Connor begins to try to prevent their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, however, a schism between the Fraleys and him begins to form. Benny falls in love with Angel, the Freedom Rider, who is part Mexican and part German but looks as if she is possibly black, and Pete is becoming friends with one of the black men, Nathan Stamps, who works for him at the foundry. Connor tries insistently to prevent the inevitable integration, not only in public places, but private ones as well. He shows up at a baseball game at the foundry where Pete works and causes a scene when the white and black teams decide to practice together. Connor is losing control of the racial situation in Birmingham, and he cannot bear the thought of losing control of the Fraleys, also. Dinah puts up with all of Connor's devices and allows him to continue coming to the hotel because he is the only one who really knows all about her past, and his presence gives her a sense of origin, memories of her mother. Finally, though, Connor is driven to hurt Dinah by claiming that she, too, participated in her mother's "business." At this point,

Dinah punches Connor in the face, and she will not let him enter the hotel again. With his city and his favorite family out of his control, he is left alone and pitiful while the Fraleys bond together to survive whatever lies ahead of them.

The novel's focus is Dinah—her past, her family, and her spirituality. In this respect, Covington's ideal Southern woman, in her entirety, is found in the character of Dinah Fraley. First, Dinah is undeniably attached to her homeplace. Even though her homeplace is a former brothel, it is still her homeplace, and she is drawn to it: "Dinah can't sleep. She hasn't the heart to tell Pete she loves living at the hotel, that it's what she always wanted. No matter how sordid your past, it's still yours. It's all you've got. Your mama's always your mama" (71). Dinah's love for the hotel is obvious. One of the boarders, a reporter that Connor has nicknamed "Sugarfoot," notices this trait in Southerners, particularly Dinah, when he observes, "some force keeps them nailed to the home place" (147).

Second, Dinah displays an attachment to the land through food and her desire to feed. Throughout the novel, Dinah feeds the multitudes, constantly cooking in the café of the hotel for the boarders, her family, and Bull Connor. The café, Dinah's "favorite part" (88) of the hotel, gives her the perfect opportunity to fulfill her innate desire to feed. During one of their gatherings in the café with Connor, Dinah's desire is revealed:

> Dinah gets leftovers from the icebox. "Anybody hungry?" she asks. It's Monday. Wash day meal—kraut and weiners, mashed potatoes, corn bread. An old habit from the country, one that Southern women can't resist. Dinah loves to cook for people. (68)

Like her homeplace, cooking and feeding are activities that Dinah cannot abandon. These tasks are important ones; they are second nature to her. Connor observes

her seriousness about feeding and serving the customers, but he only sees her intensity as a necessity for a businesswoman:

> "Here you go, hon," Dinah says, throwing a mess of dill pickles beside the cheeseburger. "Just let us know if you need anything else, hon." She smiles, but it's her businesswoman smile. She hardly knows who he is. She is at work. Connor thinks that there's nothing on the face of the earth any more alluring and powerful than a woman running a business. (86)

Although Dinah literally runs the café as a money-making business, she also views her participation in cooking and serving food to others as an important business—the business of comforting and caring. As Covington's portrait of the Southern woman, Dinah relishes opportunities to cook for people. For example, when Dinah is thrust into the bond of friendship and rebellion by breaking the law with Lydia Stamps, Nathan Stamps' wife, she compares their united act of breaking the law to simply preparing food:

> "Breaking the law," she says to no one in particular. "Breaking it." She watches Pete's hands grip the steering wheel. "I mean, when you think of breaking something, do you think of holding a stick and jerking it in two with your knee? Is breaking the law a mean and deliberate thing?"
> "No, baby," Lydia says softly. "It's like snapping beans."
> Dinah looks at her.
> "It's so easy," she says.
> Dinah pictures herself with Lydia Stamps snapping beans in the hotel café. (238)

The simple act of "snapping beans" together is as much a close bond between Southern women as that of breaking the law together.

The bond Dinah feels toward her past, her homeplace, the land and the products of it is a natural one for Covington's Southern woman, and along with this bond comes the intrinsic attachment to family. Dinah's entire relationship with Bull Connor stems from his knowledge of her family history. Dinah's desire to keep her family history near her is

the only reason she has allowed Connor to continue to participate in their lives:

> She [Gracie] can't grasp it all yet—that the hotel was once a whorehouse—but it holds a certain charm. Gracie knows that her mother has known Mr. Connor all her life, that he'd been a regular at the hotel during the 1930s—before Dinah's mother was killed and Dinah moved up to the chicken farm to live with the preacher. She knows her mother can't kick Connor out of their lives. He talks to her about the old days, her mother, how men hungry for a girl sat smoking into newspapers. (27-28)

Connor realizes how deep her devotion to the knowledge of her family delves: "Dinah's eyes are hungry for it, hungry for every sorry detail of her family tree. She is at his mercy. 'Oh, Sugarfoot,' he says without taking his eyes from Dinah, 'how they [Southerners] love to dig in the dirt for the ancestral bones'" (253). Connor tries to use Dinah's desire "to dig" into her family history when she refuses to let him enter the hotel after he reveals that she participated in her mother's "business." Standing outside the window, Connor begs Dinah to let him in the hotel, constantly referring to Dinah's mother: "'Mama,' he whispers, 'let's talk about Mama,' and he watches her hands slow to a methodical rhythm....'Mama,' he says to the glass" (294). Connor's pleas do not gain him reentry into the Fraleys' lives, however. Dinah must repair the damage he has caused. She pulls her family together to recover from the weighty effects of Bull Connor, racism, and family secrets. As a Southern woman, she will always be loyal to her family, and in Connor's case, she must choose her immediate family over her sordid history with him. After the explosive episode with Connor, Sugarfoot hears the Fraleys, just the four of them, in one of the rooms of the hotel, talking, laughing, working things out:

> He can hear them overhead, the family. Maybe they're celebrating, he thinks. They've killed the beast.
>
> He gets in bed, under the sheets, and he can hear them long into the night. Their voices ebb and flow. They grow quiet, so quiet he can hear

> the walls creak, then they're at it again. He can't distinguish who's who; they're all in it together. It makes him want to move somewhere else, to get married and have kids who will come to you in the night; who will ride in the car and see it all and hear it all and not run away; who will, in time, want to ask you the very things you want to give answers to; who will watch you come across the bar to deliver the blow or catch the ball or save the day; who will bear all things and believe all things and hope all things and endure all things—for you, for themselves, for the sake of the place, the past, the family. (283-284)

Dinah protects her family, shields it from Connor's pollution, and protects their strong family bond.

Characteristic of Covington's Southern woman, Dinah's attachment to family includes extended family, also. With Dinah, however, this closeness is with the hotel boarders and the Stampses. They become the Fraleys extended family, and Dinah graciously treats them as such. Sugarfoot first notices their relationship when Dinah allows him to go behind the counter and pour his own tea. He realizes that he is no longer "an ordinary guest" (146). Sugarfoot and Angel have become family and begin acting as such. Sugarfoot, Angel, and the Stampses join together with the Fraleys in not backing down to Connor when he explodes into his rage at the café. Angel declares them all to be "family," and Connor mocks her declaration:

> "Oh," Connor says and holds his hands up. "Oh, a family. Angel Freedom Rider thinks this is a family. Who's the family, Angel-rider? Is it the mother, the father, the sister, the brother? Or are *you* part of it, too? Maybe you're the kissing cousin? And Sugarfoot, here, is he part of the *family?* What's he? The mother's boyfriend? And these Negroes, are they part of the *family?* Oh, not the maids or the butlers or the yardmen, but the in-laws. So we have this family, in this café, with this mean old grandfather," he says, and cups his mouth to speak sideways to Gracie, "That's me, sugar. That's Eugene Connor." (250)

Ironically, Connor's words actually ring true. Dinah treats the boarders almost as her

"adopted" children, and she has taken on the task of becoming involved in the integration movement with Lydia, an act of loyalty often shown only to a family member. Through her acceptance of and loyalty to this "extended family," her strong bond with her immediate family, and her attachment to her family history, Dinah exemplifies the Southern woman's tie to family.

Dinah also embodies every aspect of the religious nature of Covington's ideal Southern woman. While holding on to some of the traditional aspects of organized religion, she demonstrates many non-traditional, more spiritual aspects as well. For example, after Dinah's mother died, Dinah went to live with the man believed to be her father, who was a preacher, so for much of her childhood, she was reared to attend church, pray, and read the Bible. As an adult, Dinah continues to follow some of these typical religious practices such as reading from the Bible on Sundays. Even in Dinah's "traditional" upbringing, though, some aspects of her religion are the types of things that most organized religions consider non-traditional. For instance, her father's church was a snake-handling church, and Dinah herself "took up serpents," and often "felt the Holy Spirit." She and her father had another unconventional practice:

> *Dinah begins to hum a song, but her father mistakes it for the rumblings of the baptism of the Spirit. He starts to pray. "Oh mother, keep us safe."*
> *It's something they don't tell anyone—that they pray first to Dinah's dead mother. The Spirit always comes.* (12)

As Dinah gets older, her religious practices stray farther from organized religion. She says she "can't go to church anymore" (214), and when she visits her father to help him with his poultry houses, he questions her about her reasons:

> "Why don't you go to church anymore, baby?" he says, his hand

still on her. She is kneeling, painting the walls, her back to him.

"Because preachers aren't a mystery," she tells him.

"And do we need a mystery, sugar?"

"Well you do, don't you?" she snaps. "Isn't Jesus a mystery? Wasn't Mother one?" (219)

Dinah, a complex Southern woman, requires "mystery," or depth, in her spiritual life because her religious temperament is innately two-fold. Beyond her traditional religious nature lies her non-traditional, spiritual side, which includes all of the characteristics of Covington's complete Southern woman. First, Dinah shows a genuine compassion for people regardless of their background or race. She does not judge the person based on a stereotype, and when portions of the stereotype are true, Dinah appreciates other aspects of the person's character. For instance, of Bull Connor, Dinah tells her father, "There's a part of me that loves him" (217). Although she is aware of his detestable perspective in the Civil Rights Movement, she still tolerates him, sees him as a lonely, needy individual. In this way, she sees a side of Connor that others do not take the time to recognize. At the same time, though, Dinah displays her compassion for the other participants in the Movement. She takes in Angel, whose real name is Maria Juarez and whose ethnicity is described as a "Mexican-German mix" (66), Sugarfoot, the Northern reporter, and eventually, Nathan and Lydia Stamps, the "Negroes," taking their side, not because it is the controversial side of an issue but because it involves seeing the person and his pain underneath the color of his skin. Seeing through to this pain is what Covington's Southern woman will inevitably do, what Dinah inevitably does.

Dinah also exemplifies the spiritual side of Covington's Southern woman through the "mystic" qualities of her personality. According to Angel, Dinah is "a mystic" (156).

She has an aura about her—beginning with her reputation for "taking up serpents"—and a mysteriousness that causes people to notice her spiritual qualities. For instance, when Lydia Stamps tells Dinah that they are trying to have a baby, Nathan recognizes the mystic quality of Dinah's personality:

> "It'll happen," Dinah says, and Nathan watches her eyes. They're cat's eyes. They're green and piercing, and he wonders if she has certain powers, like maybe she can predict the future. She's turned back to face them. She looks at Lydia and then at him in the way whites generally won't look at you unless they're mad at you for a job poorly done. "It'll happen," she affirms and keeps on penetrating Lydia with her eyes, as if she's capable of impregnating her with the power of a gaze. "God's in this," she says, and Nathan wonders if she's talking about a baby or about what they're doing. (234)

Dinah's ability to assure the Stampses that they will have another baby, that their participation in the Civil Rights Movement has God's hand in it, shows Dinah's angelic attributes; however, Dinah surpasses Covington's other "angel" characters—she is more than just an angel. The primary evidence of this fact is that one of Dinah's boarders, someone she comforts and takes care of is named "Angel"—Dinah has the ability to protect an "angel," and Angel herself testifies to Dinah's superior spirituality:

> "See, I was thinking of the rumors, the rattlesnakes, the whorehouse, the way Dinah supposedly ran away with a preacher who claimed to be her father to some mountain up in north Alabama. She's a mystery, isn't she? She's not the mother of prostitutes as in Revelation, but the daughter of one. The woman is the great city. Maybe that's Birmingham," she concludes and smiles brightly. (170)

Dinah is the portrait of Vicki Covington's complete Southern woman, displaying all of the qualities that become her, even down to her ability to answer, as Covington labels them, "insidious questions" with the typical Southern woman's reply. For instance, when Connor proudly shows Dinah the headlines written about him, blaming his inaction

that led to violence toward the Freedom Riders on the Freedom Riders themselves, Dinah simply replies, "That's nice, hon" (64). Along with the smallest of traits, Dinah also manifests Covington's major characteristics of Southern women, including an attachment to the land—both the homeplace and food—as well as a loyalty to her past, her family and extended "family." Religiously, Dinah epitomizes the complexity of the Southern woman, cherishing many of the traditions of organized religion but more importantly, showing compassion for others. Covington's choice of the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham as the setting for *The Last Hotel for Women* allows Dinah's superior compassion to be evidenced. Covington also reveals Dinah to be her ideal, giving Dinah a "foreign" background, describing her as a "Slavic-style Southern woman" (23), with a mystical aura about her, symbolizing a deep, genuine spirituality. In addition, Dinah possesses the strong, unyielding constitution essential to the Southern woman. Her ability to stand up to Connor demonstrates this strength, not as a genteel Southern belle, but as a principled woman who believes deeply in the fair treatment of all people. In every possible way, then, Dinah completes Covington's portrait of the Southern woman.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: PORTRAIT OF COVINGTON'S SOUTHERN WOMAN

In a South that appears to be looking more and more like the rest of the country but continues to be viewed with some traditional stereotypes, the Southern woman retains her unique identity, and Vicki Covington is a leading voice for the Southern woman, whose voice echoes in all of Covington's writings, whether fiction or non-fiction, that she is a complex woman comprised of various defining attributes, including an intimate attachment to land, family, and religion, often in very non-traditional ways. In an article in *Southern Living*, Covington writes about this voice:

> What is the unmistakable voice of a Southern woman? Beyond the obvious—that it can, at one moment, be sweet, stoic, and ironic, there is also the miracle of recall; the unconscious way it weaves, sculpts, paints, and makes of itself a song; the natural way it can ask a neighbor on her deathbed, "Don't forget to give me that recipe for angel biscuits before you die." (84)

In her *Birmingham News* article, "Southern Women Haven't Missed the Boat; They're Steering It," Covington vows to answer the Northerner's question about why the Women's Movement did not take in the South (2C). In each of Covington's four novels, the "unmistakable voice" of the Southern woman appears, answering that question.

In her first three novels, the attributes of the Southern woman are found in several of the main female characters. In particular, though, her religious nature progresses in maturity and intensity, reaching a point in the fourth novel in which all of the characteristics Covington uses to define the Southern woman are found in one character,

rather than several. This progression perhaps represents a development in Covington herself. In the book *Salvation on Sand Mountain* by her husband, Dennis Covington, Vicki attends a snake-handling church service with him and discloses that she would like to receive a blessing during the service from Aunt Daisy, one of the women she has noticed: "'All I want...is for Aunt Daisy to lay hands on me'" (223). Inevitably, Vicki Covington receives this "blessing" from Aunt Daisy, the laying on of hands from one Southern woman to another, perhaps symbolic of another blessing Covington has received—the ability to be a voice for the Southern woman.

Covington also received this blessing in another way. In her *Birmingham News* article, Covington explains another "laying on of hands" she has received when she describes going to the beauty shop to have her nails done and getting stuck together by nail glue with the manicurist, Betty. When Betty asks if she is hurting her, Covington replies:

> No Betty, you're not hurting me. I've felt your hands all my life. They are the hands of my grandmother, my mother, myself—hands that rock the cradle, feed the men, tend the soil, write the books, polish the nails, heal the sick, bury the dead.
>
> Are Betty and I less liberated, less enlightened because we are bound, in that moment, with nail glue rather than feminist ideology?
>
> I think not. Because the power lies in the fact that we are bound. If we appear, in our moment of bonding, to have missed the boat, then so be it. Perhaps the power of Southern women transcends politics, intellect, and anger. ("Southern Women Haven't..." 2C)

Covington writes about the characteristics and power of the Southern woman so well because she is one. According to Covington, writers always write from experience: all writers' characters are, to some extent, people they know (Troy State, 7 April 1995), and Vicki Covington's Southern women are her mother, her grandmother, her aunts, and

all of the other Southern women who have influenced her and shaped her into the woman she is and writes about.

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