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THE STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEME
OF VIOLENCE IN SHIRLEY ANN GRAU'S
THE KEEPERS OF THE HOUSE

by

Dorothy Louise Tate

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Dorothy Louise Tate

Approved by:

Charles W. Carter

Chairman of Thesis Advisory Committee

M. John Lipky

Member of Thesis Advisory Committee

John E. Gering

Member of Thesis Advisory Committee

Gratis Williams

Director of Graduate Study

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	THE HERITAGE OF THE PAST: THE VIOLENCE OF BIRTH	8
III.	THE VIOLENCE OF THE LIFE FLOW	19
IV.	COMPLETION OF THE CYCLE: THE VIOLENCE OF DEATH	34
V.	CONCLUSIONS	39
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	42

DOROTHY LOUISE TATE. The Structural Implications of the Theme of Violence in Shirley Ann Grau's The Keepers of the House. (Under the direction of CHARLES WESLEY CARTER.)

The major portion of this study of Grau's novel, The Keepers of the House, consists of a textual analysis of the theme of violence. Offering a close reading of the primary material, the present study demonstrates that Grau uses violence throughout the novel as a cohesive element which organically relates the events of the family's history she is narrating. The history of the Howland family is a history of violent people reacting violently within a violent world.

Overwhelming textual evidence of the theme of violence in the novel has led me to conclude that Grau uses such a theme structurally to develop and to relate the three-part divisions of the narrative to the violence of birth, the violence of the life flow, and the violence of death respectively. It is by means of the theme of violence that Grau develops her plot and cyclically completes the movement of the narrative from past to present time.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The theme of violence is the primary focus of Shirley Ann Grau's The Keepers of the House, a novel depicting the history of the Howland dynasty through the narrative of Abigail Howland Tolliver, the last of the Howland family line. The theme of violence is the cohesive element in this history of a violent people, for The Keepers of the House brings together the history of violence of the past and the present crisis of Abigail. In keeping with the thematic concern of a family history, the theme of violence corresponds to the basic three-part narrative structure Grau has given the plot. In telling the history of her family, Abigail begins the story by setting the scene of the novel and by telling the violence of the family's past. This section of the novel parallels the theme of the violence of nature and the violence of birth or beginning. After describing the violent scene of the action, Abigail relates her personal life, the violence of the present. This part of the novel comprises the central section of the plot and can be seen as the violence of the life flow. Violence encountered by Abigail and her family in this division of the story can be described as both

physical and psychological; various types of violence cause and are products of murder, loss of innocence, love and sex, confronting death and grief, and revenge. The third structural division of the novel, which climactically ends the family history, is comparable to the violence of the cessation of a violent life.

Grau's view of the history of the Howlands is cyclical; the novel follows the archetypal cycle of birth and death. Grau's thematic use of violence is also cyclical, for it is through the theme of violence that the plot makes a complete movement from past to present. Violence is the mode of action in the present time, and it instigates reveries of the past. Violence begins and ends the story and fills the middle with episodes telling of the violent life flow of a violent people. Both overt and mental violence describe and motivate the actions of Grau's characters; hence it determines and motivates plot. There is a close interrelationship between these two kinds of violence which bears examination. External and internal violence both must come from some kind of action, be it in present time or in a causal effect from the past. Grau's novel deals quite specifically with the entanglements of different time elements; it is in a sense a history of the violence of the Howland family, as Abigail herself informs us:

I am caught and tangled around by their doings. It is as if their lives left a weaving of invisible threads in the air of this house, of this town, of this county. And I stumbled and fell into them.¹

The memory and the results of violence from the past direct actions in the present. Abigail's decision to defend her home and family, to become a "keeper of the house," is already made for her by her ancestors who have lived by the code of violence and revenge. She knows what she must do, and her deeds are violent ones.

Unfortunately, critical studies of the theme of violence in The Keepers of the House have been limited to analyses of contemporary problems of racial prejudice, bigotry, and miscegenation in the South. One study has, however, given some enlightening comments upon the specific purpose of violence in Grau's novel. Louise Y. Gossett points out that violence in Grau's fiction is used to emphasize tone, elucidate theme, and delineate character.² Gossett further purports that Grau's attitude toward her material governs the special use the novelist makes of violence:

Working largely without a dominant theme or an explicit philosophical view, she approaches violence as another

¹Shirley Ann Grau, The Keepers of the House (New York, 1969), p. 6.

²Louise Y. Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, North Carolina, 1965), p. ix.

element typically present in the lives she records. She is not tempted like Erskine Caldwell to exploit her primitives for the sake of social or economic theories. Miss Grau stays outside as an observer and only rarely permits a character to become introspective and subtly analytical. The basis of her observation is a profound respect for the integrity of any manner or condition of human life.³

Violence, nevertheless, is part of the lives of the characters whether they react by railing out against injustice or by quietly submitting to harsh action. Because the theme of violence is so crucial to the novel, it would seem that its significance goes beyond mere character motivation or atmospheric description. The recurring theme of violence is larger than what Gossett's criticism considers. Her observations upon the matter of violence in The Keepers of the House have not touched upon the possibility of finding in this common theme a single, central core around which the structure of the fiction is assembled.

Violence of various physical and psychological sorts is found throughout the novel. Violence is omnipresent in humanity and nature in Grau's novel. Violence assumes many forms; an act, a word, or a gesture cannot be ignored as a possible hint of ultimate violence. Violent forces are either external or internal; they may be violence of passion, of confusion, or of psychological tension directed

³Gossett, p. 193.

inwardly or outwardly that results in extreme actions such as suicide, murder, mutilation, and rape. Violence in the novel results from man's innate, selfish desire to seek revenge, to promote the survival of the family at all costs. It is this inhumanity of man to his fellowman that is the cause of the tragedy of the Howland family.

William M. Frohock's discussion of the tragedy of violence in the contemporary novel of violence elucidates the significance of the theme of violence to structural techniques.⁴ He maintains that the pattern of the violent novel is tragic. The hero finds himself in a predicament that can be escaped only by inflicting harm upon another human being. In this infliction of harm, Frohock contends, the hero also finds the way to his own destruction, but he accepts the way of violence as a way of life. The hero of the tragic, violent novel may be defeated but not frustrated. Frohock describes certain special characteristics of the novel of violence whose presence is determined by the tragic pattern within the novel. When necessity demands it, the hero must be capable of a violent act. The protagonist figures in a plot organized to reveal the nature of his predicament and to allow this plight to force him to some

⁴Wilbur M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America, 1920-1950 (Dallas, Texas, 1950), pp. 8-9.

conclusive action. Finally, the action will lead him to a foreseen catastrophe. Usually, Frohock states, the psychological makeup of the hero is not the subject of the work but is a part of the data of the story. Thus violence is not used stylistically to develop character, but, instead, is used to develop the structure of the novel itself.

The theme of violence in The Keepers of the House is a structural device which encircles the history of the Howlands and binds together the progression of plot in an interrelationship between the various types of violence. The author's view is a cyclical one; violence begins and ends the story and fills the middle with episodes telling of the violent life flow of a violent people. Close analysis of the text clearly indicates that every aspect of existence for the characters in the novel is changed and emphasized by some kind of violence. Violence is the mainstream of life for the characters; violence describes the natural setting and determines the action within the plot. The piling up of events indicates that violence is the expected way of life for these people. Events which form the characters' lives are violent. Their birth into the world is the violent beginning of a life ending in a final violence. The novel begins with violence in the present time and moves backward to violence of other times and places to

show direct influences. The progression of the novel moves to a mounting and tragic climax which ends the novel and the history of the Howland family where it began. The Keepers of the House moves in a circular pattern in rhythm to the music of violence.

CHAPTER II

THE HERITAGE OF THE PAST: THE VIOLENCE OF BIRTH

The opening section of Grau's novel of family history and violence is structurally dependent upon the violence of nature, birth, and beginnings. In setting a scene which remains the same throughout The Keepers of the House, the author relies on the theme of violence to tighten the plot structure of the narrative sequence. The history of the Howland family told by Abigail Howland Tolliver begins with the first of the Howlands, old William Howland who came to the Howland lands many years ago back in the early 1800's. The beginning of the novel is the story of the birth of the Howland family into a violent world. The scene of violence is thus set for the rest of the novel; descriptive passages of natural surroundings throughout the novel, but especially in the first section, depict the violence of man's outer world.

The setting of The Keepers of the House appears at first glance to be peaceful, but it is soon evident that it has been the scene of violent action. Abigail's first description of the scene of her ancestral home is tranquil in tone: "November evenings are so quiet, so final. This

one now. It is mistfree; you see for miles in all directions Everything is crisp and clear. There is only the quiet steadily fading light."¹ Soon, however, the setting is changed in mood and is made to reflect the first light of violence. What was once the quiet scene of a chilly autumn evening is turned into the violent setting of a recent battle with only a few words of description from Abigail: "Even in this dim light you can see that the turf has been broken and torn" (Keepers, p. 4). The theme of violence done to the land is spoken of again by Abigail when, later in the novel, she surveys the damage done to her domain by modern-day outlaws: "This one piece of ground now, fought over, blood spilled, outlaws and Civil War raiders, and before all of them, the Indians. . . ." (Keepers, p. 286). The land itself has inherited the whirlwind of violence; blood stains cannot be washed from the land or from the minds of the Howlands. The first Howland that anyone remembers, William Marshall Howland, had to scrape his living out of the rich soil of the farming land he had claimed against all the violent forces surrounding him. His death, too, was a violent one, and became one of the many violences the Howlands have always chosen to remember:

¹Shirley Ann Grau, The Keepers of the House (New York, 1969), p. 3. All subsequent references to this work will be given following the quotation within the text.

That William Howland was murdered by five raiding Indians one April while he was clearing his fields. They took his rifle and his powder horn. . . . In little more than a day nine men set out. . . . They trailed the Indians to the Black Warrior River, and they killed them--all but one--on the banks there. They took that single survivor back, along with the half-dried scalp. They called the Howland family out to watch while they hanged the Indian to a white oak in front of the house. (Keepers, pp. 11-12)

The setting in this episode of death and violence very subtly adds to the violent atmosphere; the "Black Warrior River" indicates that the river's name may have come from the dark and bloody past of the region. The hanging tree, a white oak, conjures up an image of murder and violence. The violence of setting is inherent in the kind of primitive world the Howlands inhabit.

Even though Abigail's world is far removed in time from the ancestors and the tales about them which she remembers, the setting Grau has constructed for her is the same elemental and violent one known by those Howlands of so long ago. Abigail was brought up on her grandfather's farm; so she is well acquainted with the ways of nature and its violence. Sounds of violence in nature are hints of the violence in the hidden thoughts of Abigail. As she sits on her front porch surveying the scenery around her, her thoughts about her personal disaster are echoed in the violence of nature: "I hear the brief scream of a rabbit; the owl has found supper" (Keepers, p. 5). Violence of

nature is used here to hint upon the darker violence of man, his murdering and revengeful tendencies, which will be explained as the plot develops.

Into this violent setting prepared by the author comes the figure of William Howland, Abigail's grandfather. He, too, has inherited the violence of the past and has led a violence-filled life; William accepts violence as a way of living in his world. The power and the incipient danger in nature is constantly made evident in the narration of his headstrong journey through Honey Island Swamp to find an illegal whiskey still. Animals in the swamp are disturbed by the presence of man in their domain, and the description of them makes plain that they are violent creatures. As William poles his skiff through the uncharted waters, he is cautious and somewhat afraid. Once, a "dark shape tumbled athwart his bow and slithered into the water"; yet he is capable of protecting himself against the possible harm of the snake (Keepers, p. 62). He is reminded of his experiences with snakes when he was a boy:

He disliked snakes, though as a boy he had hunted them, to grab them by the tail and snap them whip-fashion so their brains spattered out neatly. (Keepers, p. 63)

William is aware of the violence of nature; he had learned early to react to its violence and danger by committing an act of violence.

The violence of nature in the setting is handled in a matter-of-fact manner by the narrator. To the person knowledgeable of the ways of the wild, there is nothing strange about the rough forces in action in nature. The setting of William's swamp trip is full of the sights and sounds of untamed nature. Watching a panther fish for food, William keeps his distance and watches in awe:

You didn't see too many of those real panthers any more. There had been bounties on them time and again, and people had just about killed them out. You never heard their night shrieks any more--except in the swamp. (Keepers, p. 66)

Here again can be seen the violent reaction of man to the potential fury in nature. Yet William makes no attempts to destroy the wild animal, perhaps because of his love for its unspoiled beauty, perhaps because of his fear of it; for, as he said, "panthers had been known to attack men, especially if they had a litter nearby" (Keepers, p. 66). By giving William a knowledge of and a love for creatures of the wild, the author begins character development of William in her descriptive passages of setting. William and his environment are so closely related that he becomes almost an elemental character; his ability to commit acts of violence, then, is an ability gained from years of learning violence from his natural surroundings.

Description of nature in the story of William serves to illustrate the primitive atmosphere of the world he

inhabits, a world where force and cunning rule. The creatures of the swamp attack William because he has invaded their private habitat:

He poled through miles of moss-hung cypress stands where gators splashed away from his bow and moccasins swam alongside with their bright intelligent stare. He jabbed at these with the pole. Now and then he hit one, but the pole was heavy. . . . As the sun dropped, a cloud of biting gnats rose from the grasses . . . until the sky was dark with them. William felt his whole body begin to tingle. Not just his hands and face and neck. . . but his whole body burned as the tiny insects slipped inside his clothing. (Keepers, p. 69)

This primitive swamp world is not only one in which man faces possible annihilation but also one which threatens its members with extinction. William observes this violent life and death struggle in the changes which occur in the swamp after nightfall:

With the rising moon, cats began to prowl in the distance. He heard a couple of panthers yeowl, and a couple of screeches that he recognized as bobcats. As the water birds settled for the night gators began to prey on them, and he heard the loud snapping of their huge jaws. (Keepers, p. 70)

The violent pattern of hunting and being hunted is not restricted to the animal world. Occasionally man stumbles upon the violence lurking on the outskirts of his civilization. William is forced to react with ruthlessness when he accidentally comes upon a rattlesnake in the brush:

He kicked aside a dry palmetto and uncovered a rattler. He felt the shape slip from under his foot; he heard the quick annoyed shake of rattles; but in

the dark he saw nothing until the snake struck. . . . He killed it with a few quick blows and kicked the twitching shape aside. (Keepers, p. 71)

Nature has struck out at the intruder but is destroyed by a mightier force.

After establishing nature's violence and man's violent reactions to it, the author continues this theme of violence in relating the beginning of a human relationship which is to bring about the final violence of the novel. Grau does so by describing the violence of natural surroundings. When William Howland first meets Margaret Carmichael, the Negro woman whom he is later to marry, he has no idea that this encounter with her will ultimately and drastically change his life and bring disaster and ruin to the Howland home. The author subtly hints of this unknown violence by describing the violent setting of the meeting. As William watches Margaret washing her clothes in a creek, his reactions are silent and contemplative, yet the "only sounds were the birds' screeching and fussing and feather-tearing fights, the running stream, the rustling shivering leaves" (Keepers, p. 76).

Like William, Margaret's personality and her position in the chain of violent events of the plot are revealed through description of violence in setting. She recognizes the violence in nature and realizes that her life is influenced by the ruthlessness of her environment. The history

of her past is one of violent action; Margaret's mother was deserted by the white man who had fathered her child. He was a surveyor for the new road going through the county, and he followed it to places beyond when his work was completed, promising to send for Margaret's mother. Margaret is indeed violated before her life began, and the violent pattern continues throughout her life. Margaret describes the dissociated world into which she was born:

Everything about that highway was bad luck. It came through Wade County the same summer weevils first really destroyed the cotton, the time people went hungry with their whole year's work eaten out. Some thought that cutting and grading for the road brought the weevils out of the earth where they had been sleeping. Some said that the damage wasn't weevils at all--that some old, forgotten law had been broken and this was punishment. (Keepers, p. 83)

The violence of man's breaking "some old, forgotten law" of nature is a presage to the breaking of the basic laws of love and honesty in the human world by Margaret's father. Nature reacts with vengeance to violations done it, but Margaret is unable to avenge herself for the wrongs done her by her father. She is born into a violent world and soon learns to submit, although she does retain her pride. When she was a child, Margaret and her family were forced by the spring flood to submit to the violent climate and change their living habits. The river is one of the violent elements in the natural setting which Margaret inhabits:

She saw the river, which had been rising steadily all the last month, top its low bluffs and inch across the land. Finally, she saw the thick heavy clouds boil over the horizon and the heavy hail-spotted rains begin. These hard falls--tempests, old people called them--sent the creeks boiling white along their courses, ripping up trees and rolling rocks, tumbling along the drowned bodies of animals under a thick lightning-streaked sky. (Keepers, p. 109)

Violent storms of the weather reflect the storms in Margaret's tempestuous life. Like the animals swept along by the river floods, Margaret becomes caught in a flood of violence.

Abigail inherits from her grandfather and Margaret a violent world and a heritage of violent action. Both of them have instilled in her a feeling for the inherent violence of a life which was isolated and unprotected. Abigail's early recollections of life on her grandfather's farm are incidents of violence:

I remember the enormous rattler some men found. . . thick around as my arm, head smashed by an ax. . . . All the dogs slunk off howling. . . . A chicken hawk caught by a shotgun blast, spun to the ground. . . . My pet coon torn by the dogs into bits of bloodied fur. . . . (Keepers, pp. 150-151)

Abigail perhaps learned on the farm to accept violence as a way of life; her grandfather taught her how to recognize some kinds of natural catastrophes in the primitive farm world:

When, now and then, an animal died, he [her grandfather] and Oliver checked to see what happened. Sometimes it was a fall. A few of the pastures had sharp rocky drops down a slope: cattle lost their balance and

tumbled over, and they starved. . . . You could tell too when they died of snake bite: just that the leg was swollen. . . . (Keepers, p. 151)

Abigail learned, too, how to cope with violence as William did, with a recompensable act of violence. Her grandfather owned a bull which was a menace to him. The young girl Abigail watched him combat possible harm with a fervor that could only be called violent action:

But he really hated his bull. . . . He was injured when a bolt of lightning struck a pine under which he was sheltering during a storm, and he had to be destroyed. My grandfather looked almost pleased, in spite of the money that was going to be lost. (Keepers, p. 151)

Abigail Howland saw violence all around her. Life was not easy for the farm people nor for the other inhabitants of the harsh world. Even birth as Abigail observes it is a thing of violence. Abigail observes this fact of cataclysmic introduction into life by watching the farm animals in the labor of giving birth to their young: ". . . And over and over again, animals straining in birth. Cows in the pasture lots, an occasional mare in the shelter of the barn. Cats under the porch, backs arched and straining" (Keepers, p. 151). Description of the violence of actual, physical birth is similar to the violence describing the beginning of life in the structure of the plot for each of the main characters of the novel. They are conceived of violence by people of violence, and are violently thrust into the world.

The structural pattern of The Keepers is arranged so that each of the three major characters, William, Margaret, and Abigail, come into contact with nature and are aware of the violence in their environment. Each of the characters is introduced into the plot through description of the natural violence which sets the stage for violent action by hinting of unforeseen destruction. Abigail, the granddaughter of a man who has pushed his way through the harshness of life, inherits from her grandfather feelings of compassion, fear, and respect for the elements and animals of the wild. She also inherits, as it is later revealed, the family's characteristic capabilities of committing violence. By placing her characters in a setting which she has established through description as a violent one, Grau has used the theme of violence to set up a structural pattern. This pattern is one which introduces and defines the history of the Howland family. The author has used description of violence in the setting and in man to introduce her characters and to tell of the Howlands' past and their inheritance of violence. The first part of Grau's three-fold narrative structure places the actors in a vibrant, volatile world in preparation for the action to come. Violence of descriptive setting begins the cycle of the violent history of the Howlands and directs its movement to the violence of the life flow.

CHAPTER III

THE VIOLENCE OF THE LIFE FLOW

The next structural division of The Keepers of the House concerns the violent life flow of the Howland family. This middle section is the piling up of events which places the heroine of Grau's novel in a predicament from which there is no other escape except through violence. The exposition of plot relates the present history of the major characters, Margaret, William, John, and Robert. The actions of these characters bring the progression of plot to the point where Abigail is thoroughly entangled in the web of violence.

The violence in the life flow of the novel is evidenced in the relationships among various characters, specifically among Abigail and members of the Howland family. Some of the violent action at the time it occurs has no noticeable impact; but in relation to the final violence in the novel, much of the action in the second part of the structure leads Abigail to destruction and pushes her to defend the family without regard for her own welfare. Abigail has never thought of Margaret as being a purveyor of violence; yet, because she is involved in the history of the

family, Margaret is involved in violence over which she has no control. Abigail is aware of the position Margaret has in the family, but she does not know that because of Margaret's being taken into the Howland household, her own life will be totally and drastically changed:

That was the way it began. That was the way he found Margaret, washing clothes by a creek that didn't have a name. She lived with him all the rest of his life, the next thirty years.

Living with him, she lived with us all, all the Howlands, and her life got mixed up with ours. Her face was black and ours were white, but we were together anyhow. Her life and his. And ours.¹

The "it" Abigail speaks of has deeper implications than the simple man-woman relationship between Margaret and William. The "it" which Abigail says began a long series of interrelationships is miscegenation, the instigation of the violence which destroys the family in the end. Abigail knows that her grandfather's union with Margaret is not an ordinary one, but it is accepted by the family and the community. That William has a Negro mistress is no cause for real concern; and that he has children by the woman does not threaten his position. Only when the embittered son of William and Margaret reveals that William had legally made Margaret his wife did prejudice, hate, and outrage incite the community to acts of violence. The family and

¹Shirley Ann Grau, The Keepers of the House (New York, 1969), p. 78. All subsequent references to this work will be given following the quotation within the text.

Abigail are brought to destruction as a result of an act done without knowledge of the violent repercussions to which it later leads. Margaret and William never know the violence their love brings upon the family. Abigail, however, knows full well what havoc is made by the revealing of truth when she first receives news of the secret marriage from John's political rivals:

I put the clipping and the photostat back in their crisp, clean brown envelope and slipped them under the phone, thinking what I had always known: that my grandfather had been a good man. That he had found a woman to fill the last decades of his life and that he had married her. A good man. And when I thought of what would happen now, I felt sick.
(The Keepers, pp. 259-260)

An immediate cause of the final violence in the novel is, ironically, an action of love and respect.

Margaret is a creature of the shadows. Because of her color and her lack of a real position in the family, she must remain in the background. Margaret's role is one of suffering and endurance. The relationship with William is revealed as one in which she accepts her inferior position, and William is infuriated by her passivity: "She seemed small and fragile again, and for the first time in his life he wanted to hit a woman. It was the bend of the neck that did it. It was so exposed and patient" (The Keepers, p. 135). Although she is a strong person, Margaret is denied her real identity. She is the strength

William depends upon, but she could never take her proper place in the family as his wife. She is denied the right to be the mother of her own children. As soon as they are old enough to go to boarding school in the North, the three children of William and Margaret are sent away from the smothering and hate-filled atmosphere of the South, where they are "niggers." Yet in trying to do what she thinks is best for her children, Margaret refuses them a real family life. She sends them away to lives devoid of a past with which they can identify. The son Robert, who comes back home to tell the truth of his existence, has no past and no history. Abigail knows that he is acting out of hate for being deprived of his proper heritage, and she confronts him with this fact when he comes to visit her:

'But you didn't come back to help the Negroes around here. Or hurt them either. . . . You're doing it for more personal reasons, you're paying off an old grudge. Your mother or your father?' (The Keepers, p. 266)

In his search for identity and his craving for revenge, Robert commits an act of violence which destroys the family and upsets his own world.

Both Margaret and William die without knowing how their lives inevitably change the family. William's death is an unexpected tragedy, but he is spared a death of violence. His death is abruptly mentioned by Abigail, and

her reaction to his passing is restrained: "And my grandfather died. It was in January, a couple of days after the big snow" (The Keepers, p. 212). The family thinks that William had gone out in the pastures to take care of the panic-stricken animals in the snow, but he had instead driven a truck "down into the cotton bottoms, the old land" which "the first William Howland had claimed for himself" (The Keepers, p. 214). He had gone to die where his ancestors had first made their mark upon the rich bottomland. William had foreseen what was going to happen to him and had prepared himself:

He'd driven off the track. . . and turned off his engine and set his brake. He was still sitting there, hands on wheel. Forehead touching the knuckles of his hands. As if he were waiting for something. As if he had stopped and was waiting for something. (The Keepers, p. 215)

William had gone back to the land of his beginning to complete the birth-death cycle. He was unafraid to meet death, but his dying greatly disturbs the family. Abigail's husband, John, is the most visibly upset and grief-stricken; he simply had not expected the old man's death:

The plain bare statement the trooper brought didn't hurt me much. I'd had all night to prepare for it. But it rocked John. His face drained white and then turned a kind of light green. He hadn't shaved and the heavy beard. . . made his face look bruised. 'Jesus God!' he said. 'I've been thinking all night he must be hurt or sick, a heart

attack or something like that because of his age.' He began to bite his nails nervously. . . . (The Keepers, p. 215)

Abigail somehow had expected that her grandfather had met with fatality, and she had prepared herself for it. Margaret takes this catastrophe in her stride, just as she had every other calamity, even though she, of all people, is the closest to William. Perhaps she, too, had known of the closeness of death and is not overwhelmed by its violence: "Her smooth round black face of a middle-aged Negro woman who looked older than her years, and wasn't particularly concerned by whatever was happening around her" (The Keepers, p. 216). But Margaret is deeply affected by William's death and her body reacts involuntarily to the jolt her life has been dealt: "Her feet were a little heavy as she walked away, and she shuffled a bit, as if the hold the earth had on her had gotten stronger, all of a sudden" (The Keepers, p. 216). Margaret had been close to William when he was alive, and now his death demands that she soon join her husband.

As Abigail listens to Margaret in the kitchen preparing breakfast after the family had heard the news of William's death, she realizes at last how deep Margaret's grief is. Her low-voiced song of mourning tells of the brutality and cruelty of death:

I'd never heard that song before. I listened to the words and shivered. It was death creeping up and killing.

'Stretch my jaw, jerk my legs, break my bones until I'm dead. . . .'

Margaret sang it as a kind of chant, monotonous and wailing. 'Death spare me for another year.' She wasn't talking about herself. She was mourning Will Howland, that he hadn't had just another year. Just one more year. (The Keepers, p. 217)

Margaret's lamentations that William was not given "just one more year" of life may have come from some instinctual knowledge she had about her own life, that she, too, had not much time to live. Margaret knew before she met William that her life was to be entangled with his. She had remained extremely close to William all their days together. Even the description of the circumstances of her death is close to the details of William's death:

Margaret died. Four years after my grandfather, on the very day when he had collapsed over the wheel of his truck and died in the woods. The anniversary of that day was bleak and cold and wintry, with everyone huddled inside by their fires. Margaret had not gone out all day. . . . In the late afternoon, just after the watery winter sun slipped behind the southwest ridge, she put aside her tatting and got up from her rocker. 'Somebody calling outside,' she said. And she went, without a coat or a shawl, though the ground was already frozen and cracked under her heavy steps. (The Keepers, p. 233)

Margaret is found lying dead in the old baptistry by the creek where she and William had first met so many years before. Her lonely life ended because she chose not to live without William; and with the death instinct of a woods creature, Margaret went back to the place where her

life with William had begun. Abigail again is not shocked by death, and she is not at all surprised at the way Margaret left the world:

This was the order re-establishing itself. This was the way I'd known all along it would be, without realizing it. It wasn't something you cried over. You didn't even grieve in the ordinary sense of the term. You just curled up where you were, curled up in pain and fear, and you stayed shriveled and shivering. (The Keepers, p. 235)

The order Abigail speaks of is the ordering of the life flow through violence. Violence was a way of living for Margaret and William; the history of the family is one of violence and revenge. Although Margaret and William left the world in a non-violent manner, their lives were full of violence. Only death brought peace to them. Both had re-established order and meaning, even though the mechanism for realizing order is death. They had lived full and satisfying lives and were content to ease themselves in death. The violence made by their life together does not touch them in their graves, yet Abigail reaps the whirlwind of the violence they had caused. The heritage they leave to Abigail is violence. Not the good, but the evil possibilities of their life flow lives on after them.

Besides her grandfather and Margaret, there are other people in Abigail's family who are part of the life flow of violence. Her husband, John Tolliver, is revealed to be instrumental in the destruction of Abigail and the

family. For a long time Abigail is blind to the disaster which her relationship with him is certain to bring. From the first time she met him, Abigail ignores reason and listens only to her heart. There is violence implicit in their relationship from the beginning. The man she saw was "a stocky young man who had the shortest crew cut His black hair was like a bruise on his skull" (The Keepers, p. 192). Shortly before Abigail meets John, traumatic incidents in her life cause her to lose her sense of wonder and faith in life. Abigail learns that life is not as simple and good as she had dreamed in her childhood. In becoming a woman, Abigail loses her child-like faith and love. Abigail begins to realize how easy it is for life to be harsh and painful:

That glitter and hush-breath quality just slipped away. . . . And my love too. There isn't even a scene--not for me, nothing so definite--just the seepage, the worms of time. Like those wedding dresses my cousins and I found so long ago in the old storage trunks. They looked all right. But when you picked them up, they fell of their own weight. . . . That's the way it happened with me, during the years. Things I thought surrounded me have pulled back. Sometimes I wonder if I'm not like an island the tide has left, leaving only some sea wrack on the beaches, useless things. (The Keepers, p. 182)

Abigail begins to see herself as a victim of the violence of time. Her description of herself as "some sea wrack on the beaches" points out her amorphous position; she floats with the tide of violence. Her gaining insight

into the nature of an imperfect world, her loss of innocence, paves the way for her meeting John. Just before her encounter with him and her losing her heart, Abigail is involved in an incident which definitely pinpoints the slipping away of "that glitter and hush-breath quality." At a lake party given by some of her fraternity and sorority friends at college, she is thrown into the water and nearly dies: "I held my breath and went down. . . . I remember only a couple of coughs and then I passed out" (The Keepers, p. 183). Fortunately, someone notices that Abigail cannot swim and pulls her out of the water, half-drowned. It is curious how the incident of Abigail's near-encounter with death is juxtaposed with her loss of sexual innocence. The young man who had rescued her decides to take Abigail for a drive to console her, and the act of consolation is channeled into the act of sex. Abigail finds that it is easy to pass from innocence: "And I found that it wasn't so hard to lose your virginity, nor painful either. I hadn't been told about that, I hadn't been taught about that, but then I hadn't even been taught to swim" (The Keepers, p. 187).

Abigail, then, has already lost her innocence and her sense of wonder at life when she meets John Tolliver. Perhaps because she is so afraid of not having anything substantial to believe in, of having lost meaning in living,

Abigail eagerly accepts John Tolliver and his devotion and need for her. John offers her the kind of stability and love which she has never known and which she desperately needs. Although she completely trusts John, Abigail does know about the violence in the past of his family. John is one of the Tollivers of Somerset County, "Tolliver Nation," who control the north of the state with their strong political machine. Abigail's recollections of what she knows about that area indicate the violence in John's past:

Somerset was the northernmost county with the darkest, bloodiest past in the state. The breeding plantations had been up there. . . . They bred slaves and sold them, like stock. . . . Those breed stations were always discontented and seething. Slave uprisings often began there. . . . There'd been a big one in the forties, one that left a wide trail of burned houses and bodies hanging on trees. Travelers in the old days used to shiver and keep their guns ready when they passed along that section of the North Trace. . . it was robbers' country. During the Reconstruction they'd gone in for family feuds and for twenty years they killed each other. When it was over, just about the only families left bore the name Tolliver. (The Keepers, pp. 194-195)

John later proves himself to be the son of his fathers; his lust for power is so strong that all his actions center around his political ambitions. John decides that he must become a prominent politician, and he can allow nothing in his way. John gains political influence by marrying the granddaughter of the wealthiest man in the state, by making himself an advocate of the conservative, racist branch of

state politics, and by joining the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizens Council for the express purpose of gaining votes to pave the way to the governor's mansion. Abigail can never understand why John has affiliated himself with such rabidly violent and unjust organizations, since she knows that he is an intelligent man and really does not believe what he publicly speaks out for. But Abigail realizes too late for her own happiness that her husband has used her in his quest for power. Her grandfather warns her about the violence that can come from marrying for love: "'You got to be careful,' he said heavily, 'your mama married for love and it ran out on her and she was left with nothing to hold her heart together'" (The Keepers, pp. 180-181). Abigail, too, is left without a love to hold her heart and soul together when she finds out why John had married her. When she asks him what she can do to help him with the primary election for governor, John's answer tells her that she had been chosen as the perfect pawn: "'Honey, you're perfect for the job, and that's why I married you!" (The Keepers, p. 250). Abigail learns the violence of giving love and being used unrelentlessly because of her love.

The web of violence begins to close around Abigail as her husband's influence grows. A few days before the election that John is so certain will place him in the

office of governor, certain rumors are circulated about a dark spot on John's record. John's opponents then reveal that William Howland and Margaret Carmichael had been legally married. The arrangement of master and Negro mistress had been accepted by the townspeople; by a marriage between the two they are outraged and incited to violence. John's career is ruined, and he refuses to protect Abigail against the angry community. The Howland house has become a symbol of his destruction; the Howland family has brought about the destruction of his career. In his frenzy and hurt, John blurts out his hostility towards the house and the family: "I wish it'd been burned to the ground before I ever saw it" (The Keepers, p. 273). Because John has met with violence which he believes came about because of the Howlands, he leaves Abigail alone to defend herself and her name.

The mob who come to destroy Abigail's home forces her to react to its violence with the fury and hate of the Howlands before her. The mob out in the yard frighten her, but the family tradition of revenge and self-preservation spurs her to action:

' . . . when the bandits killed that Howland girl in the kitchen--right over there. . . --her family hunted them into the swamp and found them and killed them. They say her mother went there to watch.' The men dragged the bandits out of the swamp and hanged them, living and dead, from the tallest trees to swing until the animals and the birds cleaned their bones.

They say that Mrs. Howland stood under those white oak trees, looking up, and laughing. . . . It hadn't been glee at vengeance, I thought, the way the stories had it. She'd been having hysterics at the blood that was wasted. And she'd been seeing her daughter's death agonies repeated over and over in the agonies of her murderers. . . .

I stood thinking about that old tragedy, its violence and its pain, all of it. And all of a sudden I knew what I should do. (The Keepers, p. 279)

Although Abigail realizes that what she must do is violent and will not end the blood-letting and the hate all around her, she decides that she must not let the family down. She must fight back, even if she is destroyed. With the help of the faithful Negro caretaker, Abigail sets fire to the cars the mob had left parked in the pasture. After her deed of vengeance, she goes back to the house and prepares to meet anyone who might try to do more damage than burning barns and shooting animals. Abigail realizes that her actions as well as those of the fanatic townspeople are foolish and useless:

One for one. Like it was before. You kill my child in the kitchen and I murder you in the swamp. . . . I was lightheaded, and exhausted, I began to giggle. . . . They were shooting steers and cats. The Howland they wanted was dead. His Negro wife was dead. Their children disappeared. And so they were wrecking the only thing that was left of him, of them. First the barn and then the house. . . . (The Keepers, p. 285)

But Abigail is able to save the house. All the violence directed against the Howlands has not destroyed the one symbol she has so desperately fought to preserve. She

fighters out of hate for those who have turned against her and out of love for the house and the land. The ghost of her grandfather comes to Abigail and approves of what she has done, not because it is good, but because she had done what she had to do. Abigail sees that she has carried on the trust and pride of the family:

I stood on that cold wintry grass and saw what I had done. I saw that it wasn't bravery or hate. It was, like my grandfather said, necessity. And that's pretty poor comfort but at times it's all you've got. (The Keepers, p. 290)

The Howlands who have made their own violent rules for life are finally defended by a woman who acts instinctually and fiercely. The flow of life for the family has been one of violence in death, love, treachery, grief, and revenge. Abigail is carried along by this flood of violence toward her own destruction. The action in the second portion of the novel places Abigail in a moving cycle which can end only in a personal violence and ruin. The progression of plot has prepared the way for the final action of the novel: the violent ending of a violent family. The violence of the present in this section of the novel is so greatly influenced by violence in the past that it must repeat itself. The revenge of Abigail comes about because she is forced by the past into action. And because she knows that the Howlands of long ago were destroyed in seeking vengeance, she realizes that her life, too, must soon draw to a close.

CHAPTER IV

COMPLETION OF THE CYCLE: THE VIOLENCE OF DEATH

The concluding section of The Keepers of the House is structurally dependent upon the violence of death, the ending of life for violent people. This part of the novel ends the history of the Howland family through violence and revenge. Abigail finds herself left with the bitter ashes of defeat; her family is gone and so is her hope for a happy life. Abigail looks over the scene of her fury and sees that there is nothing satisfying in her violence:

The excitement and the fear left me when I saw that people had expended whatever energy and violence they had within them. Leaving only a bitter taste, a nasty taste in the sight of things as they really were. . . . Aimless anger had burned a barn, had killed cats and steers and a couple of hounds. And all my courage had only fired a parking lot and pumped a load of bird shot into the side of the car.¹

At last Abigail knows that she can gain no real revenge on the people who have wronged her. In seeking vengeance, she commits violence to herself. She has no choice but to follow the tradition of her family in their eye-for-an-eye justice.

¹Shirley Ann Grau, The Keepers of the House (New York, 1969), p. 293. All subsequent references to this work will be given following the quotation within the text.

Violence in the last part of the novel centers around the ancestral house of the Howlands. Abigail has protected the house as though it were a living being. Now the house is all she has left of the family, and she speaks of it as the last of her hope and consolation: "I would no longer run such an elaborate house. In the meantime I did not let them repair anything. They only swept up the broken glass. The fences stayed down, the panes stayed missing. Howlands kept such things to remember by" (The Keepers, p. 296). Abigail knows that the destruction brought upon the family has stifled the organic growth of the house. Each generation of the Howlands had added new wings and rooms onto the house until it had spread out like a living creature. Now Abigail decides that the house must remain as it is; it will no longer be full of life and growing. She keeps the reminders of death and violence around her, just as the Howlands have always kept the charred staircase to remind them of another violence of the past. Abigail closes up the house and she closes up her life. She begins divorce proceedings and demands that all the Howland property be returned to her. Abigail pulls the walls of the house around her like a protective garment.

Abigail's final acts of violence completely close her life, and the life of the community. She plans her strategy of revenge to touch everyone who had been involved

in the destruction of the Howlands. At a tea party given by one of the prominent ladies of the town, she announces the final stage of her battle against the community:

'You listen now, and you tell your husbands. You bring them a message from me. The Howlands were the first ones here, back when it was Indian country, and you set out your dogs at night, and barred your doors against them, and went about daytimes with a rifle. It's still Howland country. I'm taking it back.'
(The Keepers, pp. 304-305)

Abigail proceeds to tell them that she is going to destroy the economy of the county by closing up all the Howland interest in it. There will be no stock industry, no dairy market, no hotel, no lumber business when she finishes her plan of revenge. She does this knowing full well that she will hurt herself in turn, but the drive for vengeance is too great: "'Howlands have crazy blood, I used to hear It'll cost me to do this, but I will. I figure to have enough money to live'" (The Keepers, p. 306). Abigail feels that this revenge is not for herself but for her grandfather: "'You watch. This town's going to shrivel and shrink back to its real size. . . . It wasn't Will Howland you burned, it was your own house'" (The Keepers, p. 306). As she leaves the scene of the party, the ghost of her grandfather walks behind her, and she tells him that she did what she had to do for him: "'That was for you. . . . You won't like what I'm going to do now, but this is for me'" (The Keepers, p. 307).

Abigail's last personal revenge is to make a phone call to remind Robert Howland that she is waiting for a chance to destroy his life. She lets him know that she has the power to return violence, but she does not let him know when and how she will do so: "'Oh, Robert. . . that won't do any good. I'll be calling again. Over and over again'" (The Keepers, p. 309). Like the Howland woman who had watched the robbers being hanged in the swamp, Abigail laughs at the violence her pride and sense of duty demands from her. She laughs not because her acts have in any way made things right, but because the whole cycle of violence is returning to its beginning point. In her acts of violence she has destroyed herself: "I know that I shall hurt as much as I have been hurt. I shall destroy as much as I have lost" (The Keepers, p. 4). Abigail does what she must do because the Howlands have always lived in violence: "It's a way to live, you know. It's a way to keep your heart ticking under the sheltering arches of your ribs. And that's enough for now" (The Keepers, pp. 4-5). Even if Abigail does what she does to keep herself alive, her life is nothing more than the mechanical motions of staying alive. The final destruction of Abigail is not one of a victorious woman. The scene is similar to a funeral, the death rites of Abigail: "I was conscious that people came and bent over and looked at me, shook their heads and went

away again. On tiptoe as a funeral. I no longer cared. I had my own sob-wracked echoing world, and I was locked into it" (The Keepers, p. 309).

Abigail remains closed up in the coffin she has prepared for herself. She has achieved the final violence of vengeance in self-destruction. All her attempts at righting wrongs and getting revenge are to no avail. She realizes at last that there can be no peace in violence; violence can bring nothing but more violence. The cycle of the violence of the Howland family is completed with Abigail. She ends her life by cutting off the world, and the final, tragic scene is that of Abigail lying helpless on the floor: "I went on crying until I slipped off the chair. And cried on the floor, huddled fetus-like against the cold unyielding boards" (The Keepers, p. 309). Abigail is not frustrated in her efforts to avenge the family, yet she suffers defeat. The picture of desolation from violence is complete; all the Howlands are dead, except for Abigail. But Abigail has set herself apart from the living world and fancies herself to be like the land she has fought to keep: "I have the illusion that I am sitting here, dead, That I am like the granite outcroppings, the bones of the earth, fleshless and eternal" (The Keepers, p. 4).

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

The narrative structure of The Keepers of the House is based upon Grau's cyclical view of the history of violence in the Howland family. The structure is so devised that violence is the means by which the life cycle of the family, begun violently in the historical past, completes its movement with the personal violence of Abigail. The theme of violence depicts the violence of birth, life, and death for the Howland family. Each generation is motivated by violence, and, in turn, passes on the heritage of violence to succeeding generations.

The theme of violence is used in the novel as a structural device for relating the history of a violent family; Grau does, however, make a statement about the nature of violence and its influence upon mankind. Used structurally, violence motivates character within a narrative of action composed of violent patterns. Abigail Howland Tolliver is defeated; she is brought to destruction because she acts out of necessity and duty to the family. Abigail must commit violence to satisfy the vengeance which her ancestors demand. In doing so, Abigail is destroyed, but she is not frustrated in her attempts to avenge the Howland name.

The heroine finds herself in a predicament which can be escaped only by inflicting harm upon other human beings. Her house, her land, and her family are threatened by outside forces of violence. Grau, therefore, allows her characters to accept violence as a way of life. The novel, however, does not end in despair.

Because Abigail succeeds in the violence which she is compelled by the past to inflict, she can be seen as a tragic figure. In the tragedy of Abigail's life, violence acts as the deterministic force of fate. Theoretically, of course, Abigail has the choice either to seek revenge or to accept the injustices which have been dealt her. But because of the past and its tradition of violence which influence her so strongly, Abigail cannot escape the burden of violence. Although there is triumph in her defeat, the tragedy of Abigail is that she can never achieve happiness because of the tradition she must uphold. Indeed, the ultimate violence in the novel is the destruction Abigail brings upon herself through the violence she perpetuates.

Grau's attitude toward violence indicates that violence can be nothing more than an end in itself. Violent actions necessitate a violent life, and violence engenders more violence. Grau makes no attempt to speculate upon

the reasons or justification for the existence of violence in the world. She merely accepts violence as an integral and influential part of life in the fictional domain of the Howland family.

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