



## Heart

By Gail Godwin  
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### Summary

No other part of the human anatomy has permeated every aspect of life - religion, mythology, literature, art, music - like the heart. Words and expressions involving the heart have worked their way into everyday language without us giving them a second thought. What if we sought to consciously understand how the heart affects the human condition? This is exactly what Gail Godwin sets out to accomplish. Highly acclaimed as a novelist, Godwin demonstrates her love of language and ideas in this broad, sweeping overview of the heart through the ages. From pre-historic cave paintings through the Industrial Revolution, from ritual sacrifices to objects of worship, we come to know and understand the mysteries of the heart. Part One explores *The Heart Through Time*. We meet the key figures in the evolution of both civilization and organized religion, and learn that there has been some notion of the heart since the beginning of time. Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tzu, Jesus of Nazareth, Muhammad - all share "heart-wisdom" in their teachings. We are able to explore subjects as disparate as Greek philosophy, origins of the Valentine, and the first stethoscope - all within the framework of a singular

organ. In Part Two, *Heart Themes in Life and Art*, Godwin adds depth and texture to oft-used expressions like "a broken heart", "absence of heart", "change of heart", "the heart of darkness", and "a heart in love". Whether sharing intimate experiences from her own life, drawing upon the classics like Shakespeare, Goethe's *Faust*, or George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, or engaging the reader by asking thought-provoking questions, Godwin shows her profound insight and passion for one of humankind's most enduring symbols. Part Three, *Hospitality of Heart*, blends intensely personal stories of Godwin's experience of losing her mother with glimpses of the lives of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Paul Klee, allowing us to get to "the heart of things." Amidst a myriad of self-help books about matters of the heart, filled with fluff and promises of transformation, Gail Godwin's *Heart* is an oasis - a serious and thoughtful book, brimming with intelligence, wit and passion - that allows us a refreshingly close look at what makes us most human. **Topics for Discussion**

1. Contemporary society mistrusts "heart-knowledge" as impractical, profitless, or nonexistent [p. 18]. Do you believe this view to be more prevalent in some segments of society more than others? Which ones? Discuss the ways in which variations in age, education, socioeconomic status and gender might affect one's reliance on "heart-knowledge".
2. The kind of heart that Gail Godwin would like to have [p. 42] is "a new heart that will be able to walk accordingly with God and feel shame when it deviates." She struggles to understand what might stand in the way of attaining such a heart. What would it mean to you to have this kind of heart? What gets in your way?
3. Discuss the Shinto belief that man is not inherently evil, but in his pure heart, is divine [p. 69]. What do you believe to be the true nature of man? Of woman? Of humankind?
4. Some 2500 years ago, the Greeks began the process of differentiating the mind from the heart [p. 76] Given the "whole heart" visions of the ancient world before them, what might have motivated the Greeks to develop this new notion?
5. The image of a barn-raising is an example of a "communal heart" [pp. 84-86]. What other examples can you think of? What would it take to encourage more people to participate in activities of this kind?
6. The art of loving, according to Erich Fromm, "can be accomplished through discipline, concentration, patience, and a supreme concern with the mastery of the art" [p. 153]. Discuss the impact of both heart and mind on the art of loving. What obstacles stand in the way?
7. Even 20+ years after the fact, Godwin tries to make sense of her brother's death [pp. 152-155]. How would you attempt to explain why members of the same family, with shared life experiences, can have such different ways of coping? What role does the heart play in consoling someone's grief?
8. The question that Godwin posed to a book group [p. 168] might be a good one for your group to discuss as well. "Has writing ever saved you from despair, and if so, how?"
9. The chapter *Absence of Heart* ends with the line "It is as if heartlessness were a communicable disease" [p. 194]. Discuss some examples to illustrate this point, and some ways that this "disease" could be prevented.
10. Discuss Godwin's use of classical literature and authors like Henry James, George Bernard Shaw and Joseph Conrad to cite examples of heartbreak and heartlessness. As prevalent as matters of the heart are in life and literature, why do you suppose the author chose these particular figures? Can you think of other references that would have served the same purpose?
11. In its own way, Godwin's decision to research and write this book, after a career as an acclaimed novelist, was an opportunity to further explore her own heart. What sections and passages in the book most directly applied to the author?
12. Godwin writes, "When I am fearful or melancholy, or petulant over something, I can take up a volume of Klee's paintings and drawings and . . . immediately enter a better place" [p. 291]. Describe your own "better place." Does the place vary depending on whether it's your heart, body, or mind that needs comforting?
13. How, if at all, has your "heart-consciousness" changed as a result of reading this book? How might you have been affected if, like the author, you had two years to immerse yourself in the topic?
14. A young editor had envisioned "a book about the heart" not a medical book, but the ways we've imagined the heart through time in myth and art and popular culture and what those images tell us about the human condition, then and now. It would be informative, but not scholarly. More of a lush, writerly, intimate book with a narrative arc" [p. 9] In what ways does this book meet the above criteria? How could it have differed? How would you have approached the subject if given the same assignment?

**About the Author:** Gail Godwin was born in Alabama in 1937 and grew up in Asheville, North Carolina. In a speech she made to a group of authors, Godwin recounted powerful forces on her life, including her mother's passion for writing, the themes of her mother's writing, and her involvement in the theater.

Godwin retrieved a play written by her mother while her mother was a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It told the story of a girl who proclaimed herself an atheist but was persuaded to go to church in order to show off an orchid corsage - a young woman trying to strike out on her own gives in to society's wishes and demands. Another play was about two talented roommates, one an artist and the other a writer, who both fear never realizing success. In these plots, Godwin said, "I see the seeds of what has come to occupy me so much" - the struggles of an artist who is not sure she's going to make it. Quoting Carl Jung, Godwin noted her belief that each person's life is the result of "the particular fatal tissue in which one finds oneself imbedded." Yet Godwin has blossomed as a nationally bestselling author of two collections of short fiction and ten highly acclaimed novels, including *A Mother and Two*

*Daughters, A Southern Family, Father Melancholy's Daughter, and Evensong.* Godwin is a three-time National Book Award nominee and has taught at the University of Iowa, Vassar, and Columbia University. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and the 1981 Award in Literature from the National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Her short stories, essays, and articles have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers. She now lives in Woodstock, New York.