

## ANALYSIS

*The Velvet Horn* (1957)



Andrew Lytle

(1902-1995)

## INTRODUCTION

“Lytle attended Vanderbilt University and was a member of George Pierce Baker’s ‘47 workshop’ at Harvard. He worked as an actor in New York for a time, then returned to Tennessee and contributed to the Agrarian symposium *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). He taught at several universities, was managing editor of the *Sewanee Review* (1942-43); and became its editor in 1961. Most of his writing is set in the South and is largely concerned with the impact of the prevailing Northern way of life on the old Southern traditions of strong family ties, matriarchy, and agrarianism. *The Long Night* (1936) and *The Velvet Horn* (1957) are historical novels, the former taking place during the Civil War and the latter shortly after. *A Name for Evil* (1947, reprinted in *A Novel, a Novella and Four Stories*, 1958) is a modern ghost story dealing with the spirit of a dead man and his eerie effect on his living heirs.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 666

“Of those Vanderbilt Agrarians whose literary accomplishment can be termed major, Lytle was the most consistently Agrarian in sympathy and literary practice. He was also the only one who repeatedly put his agrarianism to the test and thus understandably the only one whose agrarianism matured into something more practical than a reactionary program and more substantial than a nostalgic retrospective. For more than a decade after *I’ll Take My Stand*, he spent most of his time managing his father’s cotton farm in north central Alabama.... It was Christianity...that mattered to Andrew Lytle—Christianity with the eternal verities of faith, hope, and charity at its core—and in his view it was the last of these virtues that must sustain both the institution of family through all its natural vicissitudes and a southern agrarian society that was...a confederation of such families. Where charity prevails, man’s dominion over the land and its creatures needs no apology; man takes his place within, not above, the universal scheme of things, and Lytle’s dream of agrarianism is thereby realized.

## TEXT

*The Velvet Horn* presents...Pete Legrand, who, like the Yankee and his Spanish predecessor, thought of land primarily as something to be manipulated for profit. Legrand, however, stands at the periphery of an action that brings into simultaneous focus a wide range of characters, themes, and conflicting points of view, all essential to the comprehensive picture of the South that Lytle would have us see.

Two years after *The Velvet Horn* appeared, he published a remarkable essay, 'The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process,' in which he told what he had set out to do in the novel and described in some detail the process by which forces beyond his control had taken over and made it something more than he intended. 'I thought I wanted to do a piece of fiction on a society that was long dead,' Lytle wrote in his first paragraph. Instead he ended up writing a fictional projection of the universal process by which societies—and, indeed, all forms of life, corporate and individual—undergo perpetual change, renew themselves by season, and ultimately pass away. The society that he had symbolized in the closely knit family of *The Velvet Horn* is the same one he had evoked so brilliantly in 'The Hind Tit' and would write of again with moving nostalgia in *Wake for the Living*. It is also the society that he and his fellow Agrarians had once dreamed of recovering from the tattered remnants of a vanished South.

Ostensibly, of course, *The Velvet Horn*, which Lytle values above everything else he wrote, is the story of a young man, Lucius Cree, and his coming of age. The key to that understanding which is usually the final achievement of the protagonist of such a novel rests undisclosed with his mother and two others in the story. One of these is the adulterous Legrand, whom Lucius thinks is his real father, and the other an eccentric uncle and mentor, who in the final moments takes a bullet intended for Lucius and so dies without telling. What Lucius does not know—and, Lytle would have us believe, never needs to know—is that he is actually the child of a union between his mother and her favorite brother, an incestuous relationship that symbolizes for Lytle the incest of spirit inevitable in the 'complex interrelationships of blood and kin' which at once constituted the culture of the South and threatened its continuation.

Thus when Lucius, unwilling to perpetuate what he mistakenly thinks is a continuing pattern of adultery in the family, decides to marry the sturdy poor white whom he has seduced and give their offspring a legitimate name, he avoids the penalty of death that Lytle sees as the unavoidable consequence of incest of whatever degree (it symbolizes mankind's forbidden attempt to return to Eden) and participates instead in an act that makes possible the reconstitution and continuation of the family. One may wish that Lytle had seen fit to develop this theme in a full interpretation of southern society as he understood it, but the novel is sufficient to make his point.

In any case, *The Velvet Horn* marks the maturation both of Lytle's art as a writer of fiction and of the agrarianism that in its various stages affected almost everything he did. It liberated him to write *A Wake for the Living* (1975), which begins, 'Now that I have come to live in the sense of eternity, I can tell my girls who they are.' That sense of eternity had for him two sources, which in the end are the same. The first consists of those subliminal impulses—symbolized by mythmakers from time immemorial and formulated in various ways by the depth psychologists he happened to be reading at the time—that keep us consistently human throughout the cultural flux in which our race moves and has its being. The second and most important is the Christian religion, which Lytle professed openly without apology throughout his career."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 131, 134-36

Michael Hollister (2015)