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## **Sex and the Southern Girl: Eudora Welty's Critical Legacy**

LEGENDS ABOUT THE SOUTH REMAIN AS POWERFUL as the place itself. Whether or not a genteel Southern aristocracy has ever existed continues to be an issue for scholarly debate, yet the legend of such an antebellum South and of the South as a backward-looking region longing to rise up from the ashes of Sherman's pyrotechnics as an openly genteel, white supremacist nation looms powerfully in the minds of many readers and critics. These received images of the Old South, hanging around like a bad penny, present formidable obstacles for Southern writers who take the South as their subject. The new legend of the "sunbelt South" may have begun to chip away at these hegemonic myths, but for much of the twentieth century, Southern writers were allowed two topics: the myth of the Old South—"ladies'" stories detailing faded aristocracy, laced with extremely good manners—or the direct opposite of Southern gentility, manly stories about abject poverty and perverse depravation (see: William Faulkner). A writer working explicitly with neither topic, Eudora Welty finds her work more often than not caught awkwardly between these diametric subjects in critical discussions of her short fiction. In addition to its awkward relationship to historical myth, Welty also finds her work captive to a series of personal myths generated by her reticence about her private life, about a third of which she lived alone in her parents' house in Jackson, Mississippi. These personal myths, along with generic historical myths about the South, position Welty's work in peculiar zones: a zone of misapprehension because her stories do not conform to conventional historical subjects; and a zone of under-reading, because of misconstrued ideas about the narrowness and prudishness of Welty's personal vision.

In this essay, I consider several of Welty's stories apart from the standard historical and personal myths that have governed their reading. I find in these stories a writer offering up explicit discussions of sexuality, the kinds of sexual conversations that occur among women in the exclusive space of the beauty parlor, in "Petrified Man," the legacy of boys educated in sexuality by women in "At the Landing" and "June Recital," and a hopeful

prophecy of how sexuality may be discussed and envisioned in "The Wanderers." Throughout these stories, Welty both records and interrogates cultural configurations of gender and sexuality.

Critics almost universally agree upon the technical brilliance of Welty's stories—they show her sharp ear for dialogue and gift for recognizing and capturing a dramatic scene, her profound uses of intertextuality. Yet, as the Georgia writer Alice Walker explains in a recent interview, the East Coast critical establishment is notorious for forcing writers into preconceived categories. Acknowledging the power of critics to build or destroy a literary reputation, Walker talks about the freedom she found in her work after moving from the East Coast:

The east-coast critics are really afraid of the spirit. . . . I don't feel I've had a decent critic ever on the East Coast. There's also that feeling that they have the right to suggest what you should be doing. That's absurd. . . . People always want to keep you in a little box or they need to label you and fix you in time and location.<sup>1</sup>

Consistent with Walker's experience, many of Welty's critics in the popular press as well as in scholarly venues keep her in the "little box" of genteel antebellum Southern lady writer. Yet by neither interrogating nor allowing the subject of what women hear and observe into the canonical subjects that a Southern writer may address, critics can diminish Welty's literary achievement and can as well diminish what we can know about the South. In addition to the restricting power of Southern myth, the power of personal myth also can corrupt a clear reading of Welty's work. Though she has been vilified in some circles for doing so, Eudora Welty lived in her parents' house on Pinehurst Street in Jackson, Mississippi, for most of her life. She lived primarily on her own; when asked about marriage in the *New York Times* a few years ago, she answered that the subject "never came up,"<sup>2</sup> an ingenious way to fend off the *Times's* implication: her solitary life in her parents' house suggests that she is a spinster incapable of finding a husband or living on her own away from home. Welty did spend a brief year due

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<sup>1</sup>Duncan Campbell, "A Long Walk to Freedom," *Observer* (London), 25 (February 2001), 3.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Dawidoff, "Only the Typewriter Is Silent," *New York Times*, August 10, 1995, p. C1.

north of the Mason Dixon, studying business advertising at Columbia University, in Manhattan, which one critic has called her “true spiritual home,”<sup>3</sup> as if she somehow couldn’t bring herself to move to New York even though she wished to. In the *de facto* chronicle of that “spiritual home,” the *New Yorker*, Claudia Roth Pierpont argues recently that Welty has “entered the national pantheon as a kind of favorite literary aunt—a living exemplar of the best that a quaint and disappearing Southern society still has to offer.”<sup>4</sup>

Besides her “lifestyle” being the object of scrutiny, Welty has also been taken to task by some for the way she has written about her home and her region: because readers see nothing blatantly anti-racist or feminist in her work, she is spanked for not attacking the evils of the slave-stained South. To further complicate reading Welty’s work, as Jay Tolson summarizes, she is viewed “on the one hand, cuddly and dear, virtually a state monument . . . on the other hand, too difficult, too obscure, too literary.”<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, a person who has spent most of her life in the same house in the same town with the same people cannot know anything about the wider world (and Welty’s home in a Southern city shrinks the

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<sup>3</sup>Jay Tolson makes this slip in what is otherwise a sensitive and well-argued essay about why reading Welty confounds some in the “lit biz” (“The Necessary Optimist,” *Wilson Quarterly* [Winter 1999], 10 April 2001 <<http://wwics.si.edu/OUTREACH/WQ/WQSELECT/WELTY.htm>>).

<sup>4</sup>“A Perfect Lady,” *New Yorker*, October 5, 1998, p. 94. Pierpont uses hearsay evidence—Welty’s confession to Katherine Anne Porter about her virginity, and Porter’s response—in order to read Welty’s *oeuvre* as one briefly open and daring in terms of depictions of the hot-button issues of sexuality and race. Pierpont reads Welty with the sensitivity of Walker’s typical East Coast critic.

<sup>5</sup>P. 2. Tolson offers this observation in the service of his larger argument that Welty’s literary reputation is in danger: “Last year [1999] was in many ways the best and worst of years for Eudora Welty. No only did more than the usual number of tributes come her way, all richly deserved for a career of astonishing literary achievement; more pointedly, proof of her achievement . . . was brought together . . . in the *Library of America* series, an honor tantamount to canonization. . . . But the year also had its lows. . . . Almost inexplicably, none of Welty’s works appeared on a curiously assembled (but widely discussed) list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century drawn up last summer by the board of the *Modern Library*. . . . [T]he slight seemed to hint at troubles ahead as far as Welty’s literary reputation is concerned” (pp. 1-2).

scope of her knowledge even further); and on the other hand, certainly one writing in such an hermetically sealed environment cannot but write hermetically, and thus inscrutably. Yet Eudora Welty has written clearly and sharply about her region, and assumptions about that region projected onto Welty and her work prevent some readers from reconciling a pre-conceived idea of Welty's work with what Welty writes. This complex reading problem threatens Welty's literary survival, even though her work arguably is the most sophisticated and penetrating of any writer of her generation.<sup>6</sup>

In her earliest stories, Welty's sophistication is both masked and embellished by her droll timing and un-sexed sexual language. Welty seems to copy down exactly what she has heard, a complex deception that places trust in the reader to penetrate and unpack the multi-layered innuendo that comprises public conversation among Welty's women. "I'm not one-sided, I'm the same," Sister announces at the outset of "Why I Live at the P.O.," a reference not to her personality but to the common belief that women have one breast larger than the other. While Sister's double talk is typical of the stories in *A Curtain of Green*, Welty's "Petrified Man" embodies the most outrageous example in the volume of Welty's ability to deploy her sly narrative tactics. "Petrified Man" takes place in a beauty parlor in a Mississippi town, specifically in the chair of the head beautician, Leota, who gossips with her customer, Mrs. Fletcher, intermittently throughout the

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<sup>6</sup>Critics such as Patricia Yaeger and Danièle Pitavy-Souques have brilliantly placed Welty's work in the context of post-structuralist critical theory (see Patricia Yaeger, "'Because a Fire Was in My Head': Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination," in *Welty: A Life in Literature* ed. Albert J. Devlin [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987], pp. 139-167; and "The Case of the Dangling Signifier: Phallic Imagery in Eudora Welty's 'Moon Lake,'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 [Winter 1982], 431-452; and Danièle Pitavy-Souques, "Of Suffering and Joy: Aspects of Storytelling in Welty's Short Fiction" in *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*, ed. Dawn Trouard [Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989], pp. 142-150), but for many scholarly readers, such contextualization places Welty firmly into the "obscure" and "literary" category. The post-structuralist critique of binary categorical thinking could help erase the cuddly/difficult bifurcation, but many influential critical voices in Southern literary studies remain untrusting of critical theory. Other critics such as Rebecca Mark have located Welty's work convincingly within gender studies, finding that Welty's work in many ways transforms the traditional boundaries between genders into locations of exchange (see *The Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's "The Golden Apples"* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994]). Welty has attempted to inoculate her work against readings focused upon gender with her firm claims that she is not a feminist, and thus many readers shy away from gender issues in reading Welty.

story. Customers return weekly for a “shampoo and set,” so the conversation in the story stretches over several appointments. Leota and her husband have taken in boarders, Mr. and Mrs. Pike. Mrs. Pike is in the employ of Fay’s Milliners, and her three-year-old son Billy Pike lurks underfoot at the beauty shop during the entire story. Through “eavesdropping” on the gossip, we learn a great deal about what is going on, not just in the shop, or in the town, but, I would argue, in a much larger arena of the culture of Southern women.

“Petri-fied Man” depicts an exclusive Southern matriarchy; the only male present during the gossip sessions is the boy Billy Pike. The stereotypical South is a matriarchy, generally thought to be so because all Southern men were either killed or maimed during “the War Between the States.” While it is true that Southern men did “grow back” after this rather abrupt and rude pruning by the Union army, their sensibilities were forever changed by the fact of the war and by the legacy of boy children being reared in female-dominated homes. Or at least this is a theory that has had currency among those who study the South.<sup>7</sup> Billy Pike’s presence in this exclusive female space draws upon this stereotype—“only three years old and already just nuts about the beauty-parlor business”<sup>8</sup>—but we learn whether or not his place in the story is stereotypical only at the end of the story. In the final scene Billy makes himself a nuisance, rooting around in Leota’s purse to get the stale peanuts rolling around among the hairnets, hairpins, and other paraphernalia. Since the seventeenth century, “purse” has been a slang term for a woman’s uterus, and peanuts, of course, are seeds. An over-determined reading of the story would read this incident too strictly; this is one of many complex sexual references in the story, part serious representation, part subversive joke. This visual pun maintains the broadness of jazz songs of the period, such as “My Handyman Ain’t Handy No More,” in which the handyman just loves to clean his lover’s front lawn:

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<sup>7</sup>I can only add to this debate that my father’s favorite author is Jane Austen, because reading Austen reminds him of sitting in the kitchen listening to his aunts and mother gossip while his unemployed father was off doing something “in town.”

<sup>8</sup>Eudora Welty, *The Collected Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 19.

Sometimes he's up long before the dawn  
Busy trimmin' the rough edges off my front lawn  
Yeah that man is such a handy man

Why you know he never has a single word to say  
No not while he's working hard  
And I wished that you could see the way  
He handles my front yard!<sup>9</sup>

When Leota discovers Billy's meddling in her purse, Mrs. Fletcher immediately yanks him onto her lap, where Leota "paddl[es] him heartily with the brush" while his "angry but belittling screams" cause "ladies [to begin] to gather round to watch the paddling" (p. 28). Billy seems to experience humiliating domination within the matriarchal domain; he can live in this space but not on his terms: he cannot invade it.

Yet Billy strikes back, "kick[ing] both Leota and Mrs. Fletcher as hard as he [can]," escaping their clutches and "stomp[s] through the group of wild-haired ladies and [goes] out the door" (p. 28). His is literally the last word: "If you're so smart, why ain't you rich?" he asks Leota. This question, coming "out of the mouth of babes," represents a powerful challenge to Leota and her maternal authority. She has no answer to his question; Mrs. Pike has identified the Petrified Man as the serial rapist sought by the police, and earned a five-hundred-dollar reward for doing so. She found the evidence of the man's identity in a magazine of Leota's which Leota had placed in the room rented to the Pikes. Billy, with the last word, exposes Leota somewhat threateningly—she knows that he has heard and understood the jealous slurs she has uttered about his mother. While he received a literate sexual education in this most female of places, Billy nevertheless confounds the stereotype, for he certainly doesn't show signs of timidity or effeminacy, in spite of his public beating with the hairbrush, one of the instruments responsible for a woman's beauty in the shop.

The story also embraces a stereotype that extends beyond the South. Matriarchy clasps hands with gossip in "Petrified Man"; in fact the gossip

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<sup>9</sup>Lyrics attributed to Bessie Smith ("My Handyman Ain't Handy No More," 12 April 2001 <<http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/blhbumes.htm#My312>>); first recorded in 1928 by Ethel Waters.

dialogue between Leota and Mrs. Fletcher dominates the story. This dialogic language may seem at first reading to be guileless and flat, and could cause one to wonder what, if anything, is remarkable about the story or, indeed, about the author. Welty discusses obliquely in an interview the language that she uses in such a story as "Petrified Man," and why that language is important. When Hermione Lee quizzes Welty about the kinds of stories that she writes, Welty offers this incisive anecdote:

I know when I was in William Faulkner's house a couple of times, I heard him and his cronies telling stories, and they were all men. But those would be the stories they would tell at hunting camp or out sailing. Or stories about crazy people in Oxford, Mississippi. Men know more stories, at least they did in those days, because they get out and live in the world more, and their stories are more adventurous and full of action.<sup>10</sup>

Perceiving that Welty might have the other side of the coin in mind as she links Southern male writers with "liv[ing] in the world more," the interviewer interjects at this point, "But it's women who make up the fabric of gossip, who know what's going on?" Welty agrees, "That's true—the gossip, the domestic kind. . . . I think women tell their kind of story to women and men tell theirs to men" (Lee, p. 121). Welty's depiction in this Faulkner anecdote of the "male" story and her placement of herself as a teller of women's stories illustrate both the understatement and the deflection of the self that characterize Welty's approach to Southern myth.

Welty always delivers a sanguine and wry truth when she discusses her work, though more often than not readers unfamiliar with the layers of Southern comportment insist upon a certain misprision about that wryness. A "naive" reading of her comments upholds the received critical view of Welty: Southern men in general just live larger lives and tell real stories; Southern women are restricted to the house, the beauty parlor, and the neighbor's yard, and can tell only stories that are mythical, and therefore trivial. Yet reading this anecdote with the knowledge that Welty understands that a certain kind of self-presentation can brilliantly project her good manners as well as maintain her privacy without hiding her critical acumen, is to see it as the harshest criticism: Faulkner and his drunk buddies make

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<sup>10</sup>"Interview with Hermione Lee," in Carol Ann Johnston, *Endora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1997), p. 121.

up or embellish stories about the abnormal (mythical) Mississippi, while Welty writes down what people talk about in normal (real) conversation in Jackson. This interpretation keeps fidelity with the multiple layers of Southern speech, and when we see Welty gouge Faulkner in this manner, we wonder how critics can refer to her as "a kind of favorite literary aunt." (Her other famous comment about Faulkner also maintains a lovely decorum while packing ironic heat: writing in proximity to Faulkner is like writing in the shadow of a mountain.)<sup>11</sup> In order to test the validity of a reading based upon Welty's belief in Southern manners as civility without lobotomy, let's assume that Welty writes as a Southerner, in a pithy and multi-layered code that may be lost on listeners unfamiliar with the language, and that the dialogue in "Petrified Man" is in a language pitched to a Southern audience, not an unreasonable premise, since the characters and the location are Southern.<sup>12</sup> Here, too, is where we may deepen the Southern grasp of its own legend, while also allowing Welty's unforgiving genius for seeing and listening to inform our reading of her stories so that we may penetrate their quiet style. Welty's Southern ladies play both with and against type; most are not aristocratic, but even the most impoverished among them attempt to carry themselves in a manner that reflects Southern aristocracy, while remaining true to their individual wit and desire.

The initial layer below the surface of beauty shop gossip in Welty's story is a language of punning intimation. The most obvious of these puns

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<sup>11</sup>Flannery O'Connor refers to the situation as being like "a mule and wagon stalled on the same tracks the Dixie Limited is roaring down" (*Mystery and Manners*. [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979], p. 45), an even more damning comment than Welty's.

<sup>12</sup>The dense code that comprises Southern middle-class language has its origin in the language of slaves, who spoke in code continually to mask their actions and feelings from their owners and overseers. The language of spirituals most readily illustrates the practice: "Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home" uses apocalyptic language of Protestantism to plea for freedom from slavery. As Benjamin Schwarz explains, "Without doubt the fundamental element of the temperament and culture of the South is that blacks and whites have lived there together for so long. Of all [W. J.] Cash's insights [in his *The Mind of the South*] into the Southern ethos, none was so penetrating—or, unfortunately, so underdeveloped—as his argument, scandalous for the time it was written, that blacks had a profound influence on whites in the South. . . . Nearly every distinctive aspect of Southern life . . . developed from the interchange of the two races" ("The Idea of the South," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1997, p. 122).



places the absent presence of the story, "Mrs. Pike," under immediate suspicion. "Pike" alludes to the fish with the phallic snout lined with teeth. To drive the reference home, Leota assures Mrs. Fletcher that "Mrs. Pike ain't goin' to bite" her (p. 20), though throughout the story, the suggestion about just who Mrs. Pike might bite is strong. She represents patriarchy *in extremis*—Mrs. Pike, the man-eater. And then we have the Petrified Man himself, a "member" of a travelling freak show that Leota and Mrs. Pike visit. The triple punning Welty executes with his name will take considerable unpacking, extending until the surprising ending of the story: "they got this man, this petrified man, that ever'thing ever since he was nine years old, when it goes through his digestion, see, somehow Mrs. Pike says it goes to his joints and has been turning to stone" (p. 21). Other delights in the show set up the punning reference inherent in the "Petrified Man" tag. These include full-term unseparated twins in a jar. Leota and Mrs. Fletcher determine that such deformity is a result of incest and feel the need to assure each other that their husbands "aren't one speck of kin" to either of them, so no need for them to worry about birth defects. Along with the babies in a jar, the show features a group of pygmies, members of one of the characteristically short tribes of Africa. Leota's description of the pygmies, perhaps the richest veiled sexual language in the story, deserves to be quoted entirely:

"They've got these pygmies down there, too, an' Mrs. Pike was just wild about 'em. You know, the teeniniest men in the universe? Well, honey, they can just rest back on their little bohunkus an' roll around an' you can't hardly tell if they're sittin' or standin'. . . . Just suppose it was your husband!"

"Well, Mr. Fletcher is five foot nine and one half," said Mrs. Fletcher quickly.

"Fred's five foot ten," said Leota, "but I tell him he's still a shrimp, account of I'm so tall. . . . Well, these pygmies are a kind of a dark brown. . . . Not bad lookin' for what they are, you know." (p. 21)

This brief dialogue contains several layers and references several controversial issues—not the least being "Is Welty a racist? If not, how come she is making fun of pygmies?" While this is an important issue, I would argue that the pygmies represent a coded sexual language, not a racist one. Images of pygmies circulating in the 1920s and 30s showed them wearing penis sheaths and little else. So when Leota talks about "teeniniest," "bohunkus," "just s'pose it was your husband!," "shrimp," and so forth, the question she raises about pygmies does not concern blackness, or even

height, but rather the more interesting and taboo sexual subject of penis size. When we place this discussion cheek by jowl against the petrified man nuances, the question “What is so interesting (sexual) about a petrified man?” becomes less mystifying. Obviously, the issue is: does he have a petrified penis—a permanent erection? Should this reading seem a bit beyond the pale, consider the phenomenon of Serena de la Hay’s sculpture *Willow Man* on the M5 motorway in Bridgwater, Somerset, a giant nude man woven out of steel and willow branches. According to a report on BBC radio, the majority of those stopping in town to ask about the sculpture are women, and the majority of those are asking if there are postcards of willow man’s “bohunkus.”

Beyond this punning sexual entendre, the story also presents the beauty parlor as a sexual space, one where women find multiple satisfaction. We expect the beauty shop experience to please, since it is a safe zone in which women may unabashedly pamper themselves. Leota’s beauty shop extends the space beyond pampering, however; Leota’s beauty shop experience is metaphorically a sexual experience. In the opening paragraphs of “Petrified Man,” as Mrs. Fletcher abruptly asks, “Who’s Mrs. Pike?” our narrator tells us that “other customers . . . were being *gratified* in other booths” (CS, p. 17; emphasis mine). When Leota finishes her work on Mrs. Fletcher, she sends her off to one of the booths to be “gratified” as well—and her charge—with a wink and a nod—suggests a particular kind of gratification: “Now go git under the dryer. You can turn yourself on, can’t you?” (that is, you can push your own button, can’t you?). The conversation previous to this evocative question provides wonderful sexual context leading to this double reading of Leota’s question. Mrs. Fletcher and Leota have been discussing how they met their husbands. We learn that Mrs. Pike has met Mr. Pike (where else?) on a train. Then Leota tells Mrs. Fletcher, (who has “with dignity” announced that she met her husband in a “rental library”): “Honey, me an’ Fred, we met in a rumble seat eight months ago and we was practically on what you might call the way to the altar inside of a half an hour.” With such a set-up, Leota’s query “You can turn yourself on, can’t you?” assumes a brilliant autoerotic shimmer (p. 23).

Returning to the beginning of this scene, after we’ve learned that Mrs. Pike is “cute” and has a “sharp eye out” (no pun intended?), the conversation circles around what seems to be a scalp disease: “Hair fallin’,”

Leota observes, and Mrs. Fletcher seems to be concerned: "Any dandruff in it? . . . I couldn't of caught a thing like that from Mr. Fletcher, could I?" No dandruff and no "over-cooking" during her last perm, but Mrs. Fletcher has definitely "caught" something from Mr. Fletcher. Leota finally comes out with it; she has heard that Mrs. Fletcher is "P-R-E-G." Mrs. Fletcher is quite determined to hide her condition, for reasons not yet clear, but Leota persists: "How far gone are you?" (p. 18). The discussion of the pregnancy takes a surprising turn at this point, surprising if you believe that motherhood is a woman's highest calling and that marriages are happy havens of love (in other words, if you believe that Eudora Welty is a nice, genteel, Southern writer, as she is described by many of her critics). The bratty three-year-old Billy Pike pops off from under the sink, and Mrs. Fletcher, "unmollified," responds, "Well! I don't like children that much. . . . Well! I'm almost tempted not to have this one." With this remark she makes clear why she has wanted the pregnancy to be secret—so that she might not have to deliver the child at all.

Leota takes the news in stride. Indicating her belief that women are not in control of their bodies, Leota has intoned that pregnancy "just ain't our fault, the way I look at it" (p. 18). She continues, "Mr. Fletcher would beat you on the head if you didn't have it now . . . after going this far" (p. 19). "Going far" and "far gone" are the euphemisms Leota has settled on to refer to sexual intercourse—probably related to that Americanism "going all the way" that everyone hears whispered in high-school hallways on Monday morning. With her response to Leota's commanding version of Mr. Fletcher, we see that Mrs. Fletcher does not share Leota's capitulation to men. She knows what to do when she doesn't want to "go all the way": "Mr. Fletcher can't do a thing with me. . . . If he so much as raises his voice against me, he knows good and well I'll have one of my sick headaches, and then I'm just not fit to live with" (p. 19). Within Welty's carefully constructed sexual framework, the comment takes on the added denotation of the stock phrase "Not tonight, honey, I have a headache."

The subject of control arises again in the story within a context that seems to epitomize the stereotypical Southern woman's complete obsession with her appearance. Mrs. Montjoy, a member of the "Trojan Garden Club" (we can't help but wonder what's hidden inside this particular Trojan), has

come into the shop much further along in her pregnancy than Mrs. Fletcher. Leota narrates:

Child, we was all plumb scared to death. There she was! Come for her shampoo an' set. Why, Mrs. Fletcher, in an hour an' twenty minutes she was layin' up there in the Babtist Hospital with a seb'm-pound son. It was that close a shave. I declare, if I hadn't been so tired I would of drank up a bottle of gin that night. (p. 24)

Mrs. Fletcher's response to this last-minute coiffeur seems to reverse her attitude towards control of her own husband: "Her husband ought to could make her behave. . . . He ought to put his foot down." Likewise, Leota seems to switch sides as well: "Ha . . . A lot he could do. Maybe some women is soft" (p. 25). Mrs. Fletcher, however, immediately clarifies her position regarding how wives should handle husbands, and in doing so, offers an excellent template for reading the Southern lady in Welty's stories in general:

Oh, you mistake me, I don't mean for her to get soft—far from it! Women have to stand up for themselves, or there's just no telling. But now you take me—I ask Mr. Fletcher's advice now and then, and he appreciates it, especially on something important, like is it time for a permanent—not that I've told him about the baby. He says, "Why dear, go ahead!" Just ask their advice. (p. 25)

Mrs. Fletcher develops for Leota a rubric for controlling while seeming to be controlled: let your husband advise you on appearance ("something important"), and you can take control of truly important issues. Leota doesn't quite get the subtle gradations of the pattern, but she seems too put out with her husband to give any strategy a try: "Huh! If I ever ast Fred's advice we'd be floatin' down the Yazoo River on a houseboat or somethin' by this time. . . . I'm sick of Fred" (p. 25).

Though Welty's dialogue initially may seem like inane small talk, the jumbled minutia one sees through the microscope of small-town living, with it Welty exposes the double, and sometimes triple, energy of women's conversation. Southern matriarchy has taken at least two twists in the story: Billy Pike defies his effeminate surroundings with a stereotypical male question about the relationship between money and brains. Further, though the Southern lady, Mrs. Fletcher, believes that she, not her husband, has

control of her body; she will decide whether or not to keep her baby, and she decides whether or not to engage sexually with Mr. Fletcher.

The ending of the story reveals a deepening of the subject of power relationships between men and women. Once we become attuned to the sexual *entendre* of the beauty shop conversations, we first laugh, but as we follow the story that accompanies the banter, we become aware of the serious issues behind the humor. The ending of the story turns on the subject of sexual power and violence. The Petrified Man is identified by Mrs. Pike as the multiple rapist pictured in the "most wanted" criminal section of *Startling G-Man*. The aftershock of the ending sends us back into Welty's playful, punning language to re-examine its subtext. The myth of Welty's sheltered innocence is easily punctured when we look at the bald subjects of the story: a woman who is pregnant but unsure if she wants the child; Mrs. Fletcher's strategies for gaining control in marriage; a rapist on the run; and the serious unanswered questions of what happened to Mrs. Pike when she was living in Mr. Petrie's (the rapist's) house for six weeks in New Orleans. Mrs. Pike's noticeable absence in the beauty shop (even though Leota announces that she is a beautician), along with her teeth that can bite, takes on an added significance within such a serious context. The rapist's victim, since the tale of Philomel, typically is silenced by the crime. While Mrs. Pike understandably stays clear of the world of female sexuality created in the beauty shop, her protracted (and possibly violent) encounter with the Petrified Man neither cowers nor silences her. Mr. Pike tries to persuade her not to turn Mr. Petrie over to the police, but Mrs. Pike prevails and collects her five-hundred-dollar reward. Leota narrates: "Mr. Pike didn't want to do anything about it . . . said he kinda liked that ole bird. . . . But Mrs. Pike simply tole him he could just go to hell" (p. 27).

The playful yet somber subject of the story gives us unusual insight into Southern culture in the early twentieth century. You can, of course, draw your own conclusions, but I would suggest the following: from Welty we learn how Southern women discuss the central but taboo topics of female sexuality and of female powerlessness in the face of aggressive male sexuality. We learn how boys learn about female sexuality without sacrificing masculinity. The story seriously damages the myth of Welty as the naive Southern belle, and the sheltered Southern spinster completely ignorant of male sexual diversions, and completely disinterested in sex herself.

While I've used "Petrified Man" to represent Welty's earliest work, the legacy of the story is profound and deep in her later work. "At the Landing," from her second collection of stories, *The Wide Net* (1943), depicts a vulnerable young girl who strikes out into the world at the death of her parenting grandfather. She is first "violated" by Billy Floyd, a local fisherman, and when she tries to find him, is gang-raped by his buddies:

But after a certain length of time, the men that had been throwing knives at the tree by the last light put her inside a grounded houseboat. . . . One by one the men came in to her. . . . When she called out, she did not call any name; it was a cry with a rising sound, as if she said "Go Back," or asked a question, and then at the last protested. (CS, pp. 257-258)

The narration here takes on quite a different tone from that of the more popular and well-known stories in *A Curtain of Green* (if we base popularity upon appearances in anthologies), but readers seem to have as much difficulty with the layers beneath Welty's metaphorical writing as they do with those beneath her humorous writing. Few critics have written about the story as a rape, and in an essay on Welty's photographs, literary critic Louise H. Westling describes Welty as a photographer whose world is "largely sheltered from poverty and violence," and a writer whose fiction "rarely betrays any knowledge of the violent enforcement of white male authority."<sup>13</sup> The subject of "At the Landing" and in many of Welty's stories is "the violent enforcement of white male authority," a subject she addresses in her early career with humor, in her middle career with chilling metaphor, and in her later career with a dazzling combination of these techniques. "Circe," from *The Bride of the Innisfallen* (1955), depicts the story of Odysseus and his men from Circe's point of view, humorously softening Homer's monstrous woman. Men become what they truly are when they drink her potion, and in Circe's house, one must pick up one's own things: "In the end it takes phenomenal neatness of housekeeping to put it through the heads of men that they are swine" (p. 531). Odysseus has been brought up well—he cleans up after himself—so he remains a man in the company of swine.

Likewise the legacy of boys' sexual education carries through Welty's work. The final scene of "At the Landing" shows sons throwing knives at tree trunks as their fathers rape the young girl, and as their

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<sup>13</sup>The Loving Observer of *One Time, One Place*, in Devlin, pp. 168-187.

mothers and grandmothers sit idly by, around a fire. While these boys follow the violent pattern set by their fathers, Loch Morrison, the boy at the core of Welty's interlinked stories *The Golden Apples*, lives almost exclusively among women; we witness his relationships with his sister Cassie and his mother, but his father rarely appears. In "Moon Lake," he is the lone male in a summer camp for girls, where he is every bit the quintessential boy, using the lake when the girls are indoors, "div[ing] high off the crosspiece nailed up in the big oak. . . . He [goes] through the air rocking and jerking like an engine" (CS, p. 342). As a Boy Scout, he saves a drowning girl's life:

The Boy Scout reached in and gouged out her mouth with his hand, an unbelievable act. She did not alter. He lifted up, screwed his toes, and with a groan of his own fell upon her and drove up and down upon her, into her, gouging the heels of his hands into her ribs again and again. (CS, p. 366)

A mother of one of the girls happens onto this scene, and believes that she is witnessing something other than "lifesaving": "But what's he doing to *her*? Stop that. . . . Boy Scout? Why, he ought to be—he ought to be—" (CS, pp. 366-367). Welty plays out the protracted scene in delicious visual language that blurs the lines between life-saving and life-giving. Whether or not Loch himself plays upon this visual pun is not clear; we do know that he knows a bit about sexual intercourse. During his long and unspecified illness<sup>14</sup> in "June Recital," he is confined to his bedroom, with little more to amuse him than his father's telescope. He uses it to spy on the vacant house next door.

Loch trained the telescope to the back and caught the sailor and the girl in the moment they jumped the ditch. They always came the back way, swinging hands and running low under the leaves. . . . Loch squinted; he was waiting for the day when the sailor took the figs. And see what the girl would hurry him into. . . . It was she that had showed the sailor the house to begin with, she that started him coming. They were rusty old fig trees but the figs were the little sweet blue. When they cracked open, their pink and golden flesh would show, their inside flowers, and golden bubbles of juice would hang, to touch your tongue to first. (CS, pp. 277-278)

The glorious sexual image of the figs epitomizes Welty's expression and conception of sexuality throughout *The Golden Apples*. Expressively, the passage is very frank in its description of both male and female sexuality, while it avoids either the crude language of "blue balls" (giving us instead

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<sup>14</sup>He is being treated for malaria.

the vivid image, “the figs were the little sweet blue”) or the Latinate medical terminology of “vagina” (offering, “when they [crack] open, their pink and golden flesh,” which exquisitely evokes female sexuality, the hanging juice something “to touch your tongue to first”). Welty recognizes that no language exists between slang and medical terminology to describe sexual equipment; her solution here to create such a language by using a vivid description of figs is innovative and brilliant. Further, the figs show us metonymically her conception of sexuality: both male and female exist in the identical locus, the figs. “The girl” here is Virgie Rainey, star pupil of piano teacher Miss Eckhart. Virgie emerges at the end of the interlocking stories, along with Loch, as an escapee of Morgana and its fixed sexual and gender roles. In the final story, “The Wanderers,” Virgie prepares to leave Morgana, having buried her mother and all attachments to Morgana’s vision as well. The final scene shows us a Virgie who has understood the level of her passion and the compulsion of male-defined society to squelch women’s passionate thrusts. She meditates on a picture above Miss Eckhart’s dictionary, of Perseus and the Medusa:

Cutting off the Medusa’s head was the heroic act, perhaps, that made visible a horror in life, that was at once the horror in love, Virgie thought—the separateness. She might have seen heroism prophetically when she was young and afraid of Miss Eckhart. She might be able to see it now prophetically, but she was never a prophet. Because Virgie saw things in their time, like hearing them—and perhaps because she must believe in the Medusa equally with Perseus—she saw the stroke of the sword in three moments, not one. In the three was the damnation—no, only the secret, unhurting because not caring in itself—beyond the beauty and the sword’s stroke and the terror lay their existence in time—far out and endless, a constellation which the heart could read over many a night. (*CS*, p. 460)

Because Virgie has broken Perseus’s destruction of Medusa into three parts, she will be able to isolate the central part, the essence of Medusa as a living, penetrating, passionate woman, a vision apart from her destruction and from the heroism that Perseus earns throughout history for that destruction. Thus by dissecting the myth, Virgie is in the unique position potentially to revise it, moving the focus onto the beauty and necessity of a woman’s passion, rather than upon its threat to and annihilation by male-dominated society. She moves beyond Miss Eckhart in this regard, the Miss Eckhart who possessed her own passion but was destroyed by it, because she could not understand the myth that bound her to male-defined expressions of passion.



Loch sees the beginnings of Virgie's seizing possession of her passion as he watches her seduction of the sailor—"it was she that started him coming"—and because the scene is related through Loch's eyes, Welty signals that Loch is on his way to comprehending a woman's initiation of sexual passion. If the fig-enhanced description of sailor and girl sneaking into a vacant house remains too metaphorical to suggest Loch's awakening sexuality, then Welty gives us, through Loch's telescope, a more explicit sexual scene to mull over:

He moved his eye upstairs, up an inch on the telescope. There on a mattress delightfully bare—where he would love, himself, to lie, on a slant and naked, to let the little cottony tufts annoy him and to feel the mattress like billows bouncing beneath, and to eat pickles lying on his back—the sailor and the piano player lay and ate pickles out of an open sack between them. . . . Sometimes they held pickles stuck in their mouths like cigars, and turned to look at each other. Sometimes they lay just alike, their legs in an M and their hands joined between them, exactly like the paper dolls his sister used to cut out of folded newspaper. . . . And then, like the paper dolls sprung back together, they folded close—the real people. Like a big grasshopper lighting, all their legs and arms drew in to one small body, deadlike, with protective coloring. . . . He clasped the cool telescope to his side, and with his fingernail close its little eye.

"Poor old Telescope," he said. (*CS*, pp. 281-282)

While explicit, because we see the scene through Loch's lens, the scene is boyish and delightful—the lovers remind him of the paper dolls he cut out with his sister Cassie, pulling apart and springing together. He relates intercourse to his everyday experience of watching insects "do it." Further, we see Loch here fantasizing a vision of sensuality that fits a feminine stereotype; he longs to feel the tufts of the mattress against his bare skin. Loch's delicate sense of his own body comes to the fore in "Moon Lake" as well; Nina and Jinny Love peer into his tent as he undresses after manfully saving Easter from drowning, and he "[stands] there studying and touching his case of sunburn in a Kress mirror like theirs" (*CS*, p. 373). Here Loch is caught in the feminine gaze of Nina and Jinny Love, and we might be tempted to believe in the power of that gaze to effeminize Loch's sense of his body as he looks in a mirror "like theirs." But Welty offers up an answer to that suspicion in the passage above from "June Recital," where both Loch's gaze and his meditation upon his own body are just as gentle and tender. Loch's paean to his fading sexual innocence as he temporarily closes his eye on the subject shows Welty at the height of her power, the language describing his voyeurism rich with metaphor at once humorous and

empathetic: the power of the male gaze tempered with the sensitivity of the female, a boy understanding sexuality in terms of the paper dolls he has made with his sister.

Welty's extraordinary powers of observation allow her both to render and to revise sexual and gender stereotypes. Depicting Southern society as it exists in the beauty parlor, the fishing party, the piano recital, and summer camp, Welty gives us a complex, nuanced society that in notable instances both understands and undermines easy stereotypes and assumptions. Southern society as Welty depicts it is as complex as society at large, yet like keen observers of Southern society before her, such as Kate Chopin, Welty cannot break the jam that has fixed female passion into an immovable and self-destructive force. Welty reveals in *One Writer's Beginnings* that she sees in herself more of Miss Eckhart than any of her other characters; yet unlike Miss Eckhart, Welty's passion does not send her to a mental institution.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Welty delivers a series of stories that if read seriously and with care can offer inventive solutions to issues of insidious stereotyping that demean all—male and female, Northerner and Southerner—alike.

The legend of the Old South begets the subjects of faded aristocracy and gentility, as well as the nasty flip sides of those coins. These subjects in turn serve to reinforce the legend that gives them life. Because she has seen and listened so well and with such constancy, Eudora Welty has a unique vantage point from which to report Southern life, "to know what's going on," and that is what her stories can tell us. The Polish poet Anna Swir has said that artists are the "antennae of society." If we agree that an artist's service to a society is to take in the incomprehensible waves surging through a culture and transmit them "loud and clear" to anyone who can and will receive them, then we must also believe that to lose a writer is to lose a translation of a culture. The conundrum with reading Welty, then, is profound and perhaps irreversible: received ideas about "the South" and about Southern women in the first half of the twentieth century prevent us

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<sup>15</sup> "What I have put into [Miss Eckhart] is my passion for my own life work, my own art. Exposing yourself to risk is a truth Miss Eckhart and I had in common. What animates and possesses me is what drives Miss Eckhart, the love of her art and the love of giving it, the desire to give it until there is no more left" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 101).

from learning about the South and about Southern women in the first half of the twentieth century. We must ask the literary establishment to reread Welty's *oeuvre* with greater care and lesser bigotry. Hers is a precious music.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Thank you to Jacqueline Fear-Segal, Eric Homberger, and Adam Fairclough for inviting me to give lectures to students and faculty in English and American Studies at the University of East Anglia. The opportunity to write those lectures germinated my thoughts on Welty and sexuality, and sharp questions from my colleagues in EAS developed those thoughts significantly. Elizabeth Frost as always was a sensitive reader and listener; thanks to her and her colleagues and students at Fordham University for their keen attention to these ideas.

