

**Complicating Sex in Southern Society: Bridging Old Southern Values with the
New Southern Belle**

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Abstract

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The Complications of Sex in Southern Society: Bridging Old Southern Values with the Newfound (Dis)Illusionment of the Modern Southern Belle

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This graduate thesis unearths the complications that arose as a reaction to the generational gap between the Old South's illusion of the Southern belle and the modern New Woman who emerged following the Civil War. As a reaction against the prior restrictions placed on women, namely the idealistic façade one was to upkeep concerning family, sexuality, and societal expectations of etiquette, the New Woman survived by fragmenting her identity in order to please a suffocating patriarchal society. By utilizing a chronological sequence of literature – Chopin's *The Awakening*, Welty's *Delta Wedding*, O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* – this thesis explores gender bias, society's manipulation of a female's sense of self, the burden of motherhood, and the anxiety of oppression throughout a succession of women's lives. Here, the thesis argues that Dixie's women have had to submit to the illusion of perfection while simultaneously finding points of escape within the limited space given. Consequently, as the women break through the barriers imposed upon them by patriarchal society and the cult of true womanhood, the South's 20th century woman are in the progress of redefining the domestic space and the roles of womanhood.

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New Southern Belle

The books that I love are not masterful narratives but journals of experiences. They are books that have recorded, and indeed left intact, the emergence of an experience that has been located or noticed for the first time... Hélène Cixous

An over-scrupulous housewife stands alone in the kitchen of her home following a storm. Her husband and son return after waiting out the rain, anxious about her reaction to their absence. As expected, the housewife is preparing supper and is concerned about their well-being. She clasps her husband and son, satisfied that her family has returned home unscathed. She acts as she is to act, says what she is expected to say. The story, of course, is Kate Chopin's "The Storm," and the fastidious housewife is the passionate Calixta. As readers, we know a much different woman than a finicky housewife; we know this same woman as a sexual and assertive being. Prior to this domestic scene in the kitchen, she sits at home, without any thought or fear for their safety. Instead, Calixta unpretentiously sits at her sewing machine, apparently sewing furiously. The sewing machine, a domestic artifact, is juxtaposed by Calixta's ambiguous sensual behavior. As the storm approaches, it becomes evident that Calixta may be doing more than sewing; this innuendo is complemented with several innocuous descriptions of her behavior – her distracted nature, the warmth she feels, and her subsequent seduction of Alcée Laballière, an old boyfriend. Calixta's sensuality is awakened concurrently with the storm's fury, a sensuality that both she and Alcée remember prior to marriage and motherhood: "Do you

remember – in Assumption, Calixta?” he asked in a low voice broken by passion. Oh! she remembered; for in Assumption he had kissed her and kissed and kissed her; until his senses could well nigh fail” (Chopin 928-929). This vacillation between Calixta’s past and present selves indicates that Calixta does not intend to sacrifice her sexuality entirely – she has only learned how to act appropriately for appearances while heeding her inner sensual urges at opportune times. As the storm rages, Calixta takes claim of her “birthright, [which] was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world” (929). And, as the storm passes, so does Calixta and Alcée’s passionate affair. As Calixta’s husband and son return to the home, they find Calixta in the kitchen preparing supper, performing her domestic duties as expected.

Surrounded by domestic artifacts, Calixta momentarily discards her roles of wife and mother in favor of that of the seductress. The home, as the space of domesticity, is briefly discarded as well. During the storm, Calixta’s sexuality is heightened by the absence of her husband and son, and then is further heightened by the arrival of Alcée, whose presence reminds her of stifled passions and freedoms once felt. The domestic space temporarily becomes that of a “love shack” and Calixta the seducer. Calixta dominates Alcée emotionally and “the generous abundance of her passion, without guile or trickery, was like a white flame which penetrated and found response in depths of his own sensuous nature that had never yet been reached” (Chopin 929); she penetrates *him*. Furthermore, Calixta does not feel guilt for her actions, and her husband is unaware of this sexual manipulative power she possesses; Bibinot and Bibi return as they believe

to have left her. She plays into their expectations of her role in their family, expressing her uneasiness during the storm. But, as readers are aware, this is far from the truth. Clearly, Calixta very easily transitions in and out of her expected roles of wife and mother; she shows her ability to react appropriately in her family's presence and inappropriately in their absence. Perhaps this is the most shocking distinction about Chopin's characterization of females; she has the ability to write candidly about women's secret inner worlds and desires, and she emphasizes these secret lives that patriarchal society did not want brought to their attention. As the last section in the text indicates, Chopin also insinuates that Calixta is not the only wife and mother who potentially acts out of impulse and sexual desire. As Alcée's wife, Clarisse, receives his loving (and guilt-ridden) letter after his affair with Calixta, she readily submits to his request to stay away longer in Biloxi. In Biloxi, she and their child were getting along nicely, and "the society was agreeable; many of her old friends and acquaintances were at the bay. And the first free breath since her marriage seemed to restore the pleasant liberty of her maiden days. Devoted as she was to her husband, their intimate conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forego for awhile" (Chopin 931). Interestingly, just as Calixta's husband believes her to be docile, maternal, and chaste, Alcée believes Clarisse to be the same. But, it is just as possible that Calixta and Clarisse are mirrors of the other; Clarisse could easily have affairs with her own lovers and is acting out the dualistic roles of wife and mistress just as consciously as Calixta does.

Though "The Storm" was written in 1898, it was not published until 1969, at the height of the Second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. The short story's themes of idealized womanhood, sexuality, family, and the limitations of woman's space illustrate the progression of Southern women's plight post-Civil War and into the 20th century. The home, and most notably the kitchen, is a place that both liberates women with their mastery of it while also constricting with its limitations of space; it is my purpose to show how the South's cultural heritage and the space deemed as uniquely feminine limits Southern women's individuality and complicates the South's otherwise untarnished perception and idealization of womanhood. Utilizing their *own* perspective, Kate Chopin, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers challenge the Southern dichotomy of pre- and post-Civil War and attempt to reconcile the idealized feminine roles with that of a more progressive era of women. Though the authors at first call for women to be freed from the restrictions of family and womanhood, they problematize this freedom with society's ability to cast the individualized woman as the Other. Though all authors attempt to portray women as owning their minds and their bodies, they cannot escape the restrictions of the South's patriarchal history. Furthermore, the authors each extend one another's argument that it is how one negotiates one's limitations and space that allows women to triumph over the restrictions imposed.

It is necessary to first define the South's idealized woman, which even more clearly shows the pedestal on which women were intended to sit. Though Southern belles were the enviable picture of Southern aristocracy to the outside

world, it was Southern women's simultaneous burden to be the perfect darlings of the Southern patriarchal world. As Anne Firor Scott writes in her book, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930*, the pre-Civil War Southern woman was thus:

This marvelous creation [is] described as a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household. Physically weak, and "formed for the less laborious occupations," she depended upon male protection. To secure this protection she was endowed with the capacity to "create a magic spell" over any man in her vicinity. She was timid and modest, beautiful and graceful, "the most fascinating being in creation...the delight and charm of every circle she moves in." (4)

Interestingly, remnants of this idealized lady are evident in many of Chopin's, Welty's, and even O'Connor's and McCullers's female characters. However, not one of the characters can embody such a perfect image, which is a tension in their domestic realities. Some, such as Chopin's Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, demonstrate womanly elegance while casting off the burdens of motherhood and marriage. Others, such as Welty's Ellen Fairchild, dutifully play the roles bestowed upon them while quietly escaping the home in her thoughts and stolen moments. And, finally, O'Connor's and McCullers's characters are flung into a reality in which they must negotiate their femininity with their masculine tendencies while also reconciling the generational divide of expectations. Most

importantly, O'Connor and McCullers circulate the narrative themes of defining gender, pushing the boundaries of woman's space, and finding peace in accepting one's identity.

Louise Westling compares the Southern belle to the Victorian woman of the 19th century in her book *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* by illustrating the well-kept darling lady as a victory banner for men. The complication with the South and its Southern women arose with the negative views towards the South's association with issues of race. As Westling writes, the Southern lady was used to deflect attention away from the ugly institution of slavery and was glorified for her representation of Southern culture, "but that culture was torn by profound contradictions and forced into a defensive position by wider national pressures. Thus the white female representative of Christian virtues was lauded in public to divert attention from problems of slavery and racism, but the scope of her activities as severely limited" (8). Westling goes on to describe the ideal Southern lady as one who is racially pure, subordinate, docile, and has a sense of duty to the land their men fought so fiercely to preserve (8-9). In contrast to the Southern lady, the Southern gentleman invented and perpetuated the South's myth of chivalry: "They needed the vision of their inviolate women to sustain their elaborate fiction of aristocratic civilization, and when women like [Faulkner's] Caddy began to openly reject the game and live as independent warm-blooded beings who asserted their sexuality – New Women, Southern style – the loss of the myth was insupportable" (Westling 39). The men of the South loved the

Southern belle because it reinforced not only their ego, but also the South's cloak of aristocracy. The South's continual reverence for its supposition of the ideal woman peeks through the fiction of Chopin, Welty, O'Connor, and McCullers, but more often than not, their fiction is a reaction to a contradictory South and the generations that allowed it to be as such.

Women's roles as they progress from the turn of the century fiction of Chopin to the mid-century fiction of Welty, O'Connor, and Chopin illustrate the collective experience of Southern women, as well as the shared understanding of the dissonance between the Old and the New South. Though each text has its own regional flare, each character reflects the suffering the authors find to be inextricably tied to their own cultural and sexual experiences. Each story encircles the mythical Southern family, one headed by an authoritative father and managed by the subordinate mother; consequently, each author slowly tears that familial façade to shreds in their fictions. These texts stray from the imaginative ideal – the woman who dotes on home and family – to the more realistic and dynamic character of Chopin's Calixta. In the earlier works of Chopin and Welty, the women characters are confined to the limitations of the home, but, much like Calixta, they provide themselves with opportunities to escape. In many ways, Chopin's promiscuous Edna Pontellier reflects that of the rebellious woman men feared, while Welty's domesticated, sheltered Ellen reflects the desperation that arises from unrealistic expectations of men. Much like Calixta, Edna repels what she considers the negative, sacrificial elements of womanhood, while Ellen presents herself much like Calixta does in the presence of her husband and son; as

Scott writes, “[p]art of her charm lay in her innocence. The less a woman knew of life...the better she was supposed to be able to deal with it...It was in her nature to be self-denying, and she was given to suffering in silence, a characteristic said to endear her to men” (5). Worldly women like Edna were scorned, while Ellen’s naïveté is revered. In the later works of O’Connor and McCullers, the younger generational characters have escaped the home in many ways, but they represent the generation that suffers the consequences of rejecting (and being ashamed of) their history. This lack of a familial core results in O’Connor’s and McCullers’s characters having difficulty finding and maintaining their identities. Similarly, both authors’ characters lack mothers either due to death or absenteeism. Perhaps both O’Connor and McCullers felt the characters of Edna and Ellen were dead and were unable to realize a mother who encouraged individualism while also representing the South’s and the family’s history. Whatever their individual purpose, both O’Connor and McCullers extend the family outside of the home through characters who search for identities outside of family.

The progression of the familial core – from a unified unit to a chaotic representation of the nuclear family – in these authors’ fictions can be represented by the literal and the metaphoric kitchen. Though problems with one’s identity, maternal discourse, and gendered perceptions are all themes in the women authors’ work discussed here, it is the kitchen that constricts women into its tiny, domesticated space, yet it holds the Southern family together in its space as a location for togetherness. While living rooms and dining rooms are stuffy spaces for visitors and for entertainment, it is the kitchen that all family members are

attracted to as a safe haven, a sanctuary they traditionally associate with the nurturing mother of the household or the servants who raised many of the household children. However, in disjunction with kitchen and maternity irrevocably tied, the 20th century woman expressed the desire to expand her role beyond the home. Laura Sloan Patterson details the chronology of the “domestic novel” and the importance of the emblematic image of the kitchen in her book, *Stirring the Pot: Domesticity and the Kitchen in the Fiction of Southern Women*. Patterson metaphorically and literally showcases the kitchen as the crux of domesticity. As Patterson points out, “the kitchen has been called the heart of the American home, and it is often the first place that comes to mind when we consider the term ‘domesticity...The kitchen may show more about personal and familial identity than any other room in the home’” (1). In particular, the Southern region is considered to be one synonymous with kitchen labor, southern cooking, and the communal aspects of the food culture. As the kitchen became more the central location for the 20th century family (and in literature), the kitchen transformed from a place where “only one’s intimates are allowed to see the mess...” to a place women perhaps experience a “sense of feeling at war” (2). This figurative, embarrassing “mess” in the kitchen contrasts sharply with the superficial perfection of Southern women and the Southern home. By inviting others into the kitchen, the women expose their imperfections; yet, by allowing others in, these women are expressing their very desire to get out of the limited space of the projected illusion. Unfortunately, Southern women have been bred to view the kitchen as reflections of themselves, and they have been conditioned to

retreat to this very space to tidy up once again. This cycle of dysfunctional perfection has become so ingrained in Southern women that the kitchen has become their comfort zone and the space they are most comfortable inhabiting.

Though Patterson sees the kitchen as a strongly negative image of space, the women authors of the 20th century were split as to whether the kitchen played a central “role” in their lives and work. Chopin’s Edna Pontellier is drastically opposed to the notion of the housewife and being attached to home and family. However, this is what makes the kitchen a central character in *The Awakening*; it is as though the kitchen is Edna’s antagonist and the cause of her undomesticated actions. Furthermore, Welty’s characters, in some ways reactions and extensions of Chopin’s characters, utilize the kitchen as a familial center, even though Ellen cannot maintain autonomy there. As a representation of an aristocratic Southern female, Ellen chooses when she enters and exits the kitchen because it is the Negro women who mostly occupied the space. Unlike her Negro servants, Ellen is not completely attached to the kitchen, yet she feels the necessity to occupy the space as a woman. It is in the kitchen where Ellen feels comfortable and the location in which she becomes young Laura’s surrogate mother while teaching Laura how to make a cake. Though Ellen many times feels the necessity to escape the kitchen, she cannot stop the cycle of traditionalism that stems from the Old South’s culture; she draws Laura into the kitchen in order to recreate herself in the young child. Interestingly, O’Connor’s fiction lacks this central location of a kitchen and many of her settings are more focused upon outside the home than within. The inaccessibility of the home as a central core of the family makes

readers all the more aware of the home's presence because of its absence. O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" opens with Julian and his mother leaving the home; without invested interest in their shared Southern history, Julian degrades his mother's pining for her parents' plantation; however, hypocritically, Julian's thoughts reveal his own nostalgia for his grandparents' homestead as well. Most importantly, as a son, Julian's skewed perspective on his mother's worth to him exposes his mother's own traditional views on womanhood. To her, to be a woman and a mother is a sacrificial religious rite that she holds sacred. Her sacrifices for Julian's education and her insistence upon her aristocratic Southern heritage shape her as a stagnant character, one who cannot detach herself from the South's tragic history. In opposition to this, McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* places the kitchen as the central location for camaraderie for Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry. The kitchen is the only consistent setting in McCullers's novel; she utilizes the kitchen as a cultural artifact, a place where many of the dynamic events of the novel are discussed. However, McCullers's use of the kitchen as a setting is often overlooked as cultural material reflective of the characters' lives; its constant presence places the kitchen in the background even though the communal quality of the kitchen is indicative of the characters' social lives. The kitchen is a gathering place that is also a place of contention for these Southern authors, and it is necessary to include its space in the characters' narratives. And, even though "gender stereotypes often die hard" (Patterson 3), the collective memories of the

kitchens of the past make the meaning behind this cultural artifact a large part of the characters' identities.

The kitchen's utility as a social space furthers Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* that women lack individuality and freedom because they do not have a room of their own. The kitchen as a woman's space leaves women little room for escape, which links the kitchen with moments of desperation and suffocation. Men had many opportunities for points of exit while women were necessary as the household manager and male support system; they were the complementary half that stroked egos, organized the household, and managed their children's daily lives. As Woolf so poignantly (and fairly) states in *A Room of One's Own*, the "queen of the home" (17) is required to endure man's losses and cheer for his triumphs, sacrificing her own thoughts and feelings for the betterment of the household:

Life for both sexes – and I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement – is arduous, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are babes in the cradle... Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man as twice its natural size. (34-35).

Though Woolf acknowledges that life is a struggle for both sexes, as Chopin, Welty, O'Connor, and McCullers all integrate into their own plotlines, it is the

emotional support system of the woman that men cannot do without. Woolf theorizes that perhaps this is why patriarchal society reinforces the perception of the inferior woman. The balance of the household, the status quo of the dominating husband and the submissive wife, the heroic chivalry expected from the Southern gentleman – all would be lost if the vision of the Southern belle dissipated. As Westling notes, the loss of the virginal belle “was really the loss of a goddess incarnate, the end of a religion which, despite their trespasses and hypocrisies, these men loved” (39). And perhaps neither sex wished consciously to disrupt this harmony. At the turn of the 20th century, women authors, such as Woolf and the authors discussed here, began questioning this dichotomy, weaving this societal hypocrisy into their work. And, as the New Southern woman emerges, the generational divide widens and familial dysfunction surfaces.

As these four authors indicate, something in the Southern familial myth is askew; the queen of the home is only an outward façade. Every family has its dysfunction, every relationship has its snags and tumbles. It is unrealistic to believe that the antebellum woman was happy. Yes, she had money. Yes, she had community. But, something was always amiss, its *mess*. Chopin shows us this with Calixta and the subsequent authors show us with their own characters. In the South’s cult of domesticity that reasserted “the ideals of perfection and submission” (Scott 7), the real women of these stories emerge, perhaps not altogether triumphantly, but as the new women of the South. Within their own regions, Chopin, Welty, O’Connor and McCullers’s fictions reflect the South’s perpetuation of the “patriarchal family roman,” a myth centered upon the figure of

the father (Westling 16), while also extending the reality to include the very Southern tragedy of decline. However, each author also expresses her optimism in rising above misfortune by emphasizing that ugliness does not necessarily equal despair: Chopin shows a woman's inner strength through rebellion; Welty shows woman's innermost desire for her and her family's happiness; O'Connor shows an elder woman's desperate plight by sacrificing for her children; and McCullers shows the beauty in two young girls' search for their identities. Though cynical of the South's unrealistic emulation of the falsehoods of women's identities, these authors' work celebrates the potential of women.

The methodology applied here is to demonstrate each author's writing as it was generated from the women's disillusionment with the South's insistence in emulating their women in an unrealistic virginal, aristocratic, and unblemished state while simultaneously repressing their individuality and freedom. Many of the conflicts that arise in the early 20th century South's literature are based upon generational and gendered prejudice; additionally, the prejudice and preconceived misconceptions vacillate between generations and are not one-sided. And, further, these conflicts are spawned from patriarchal society's contradictory stance on the view of the Southern lady (the need for their women to be both chaste *and* fertile), as well as the women's yearnings to break free from the stifling roles of mother, daughter, and wife.

Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is an authorial springboard into the 20th century Southern woman. Though Chopin as an unlikely pairing with Welty, O'Connor, and McCullers because of her regional affiliation with New Orleans

and not the deep South, it is necessary for Chopin to begin this study; her progressive feminine ideology is interlaced throughout the latter works. For my purposes here, Chopin is needed because her fiction is the epitome of, in a tribute to her most controversial novel, the awakening of 20th century women. Chopin's infamous Edna Pontellier is at the forefront of controversial female characters, a woman who rejects traditional family values, fidelity, and motherhood. Essentially, Edna acts out other women's subconscious desires to break free of society's given mold and act according to instinct, not according to convention. Welty's novel *Delta Wedding* is an extension of Chopin's emphasis on Edna's budding sexuality as Welty creates a fertile female-driven home at the Fairchild plantation. Welty's depiction of the awakened Southern woman is much more subtle than Chopin's Edna; she shows the simultaneous necessities of appearances and emotional outlets of escape. Though Welty's Ellen plays the required role as the family's matriarch, Welty uses other female characters, such as young Laura, to show the shift from the Old South to the New South. O'Connor further explores the generational shift by exposing the complicated relationship of parent and child. In O'Connor's short story, "Everything That Arises Must Converge," she exaggerates the unsightliness of the elder generations who cling too dearly to the South's aristocratic roots. O'Connor highlights the women's ugly prejudices, egotism, and their inability to move past the Civil War while also paying homage to their traditional nature. And, finally, McCullers extends O'Connor's fiction by casting "freaks" and "queers" as her main characters as she constantly explores those who exist on the fringes of society. McCullers develops characters who

contain a realistic fusion of good and bad human qualities, and her female characters in particular are remarkably transgendered. Like O'Connor, McCullers challenges the notion of the South's ideal woman, choosing instead to explore female characters that are acutely conscious of their lack of femininity. In both *A Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* McCullers sympathizes with her young heroines as they struggle with their developing womanhood and gendered confusion. Both young girls yearn to hold on to their seemingly childish tomboy persona as they progress into adolescence while concurrently embracing and rejecting the woman society wants them to become.

These women authors are sculptors of the South's version of Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, in which they celebrate feminine perspectives, bodies, and differences. As Cixous writes, "[w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (Cixous 2039). Interestingly Chopin ends "The Storm" with dark undertones of the potentiality of Calixta's (and women's) happiness as well as noting the limitations she must bear: "So the storm passed and every one was happy" (931). In many ways, Calixta is answering the call to write herself; she leads a life neither her husband nor child is aware of; however, is this Calixta's only possibility of existence? In the contradictory worlds of outward propriety and hidden impropriety? She creates her own space within the home, but at what cost? Is this happiness? In their own style, Chopin, Welty, O'Connor, and McCullers explore this space

between appearance and reality, and all seem to be left with these very questions. In many ways, the women of their work do simply endure and follow the paths they are given. But, in other ways, each character progresses towards defining a contemporary femininity, examining the feminine self and body, and highlighting their own peculiarities; by exposing the “freak” and “queer” in the Southern woman, these authors infer that there cannot be only one type of Southern woman or one model to live by. Furthermore, these authors show there is more to a woman’s potential than motherhood, wifedom, and unrealistic standards to live by. Thus, the questions I posit here are the following: Is being content the same as being happy? And, if so, is true happiness then necessarily out of reach for these women?

Chapter 1:

The “Indescribable Oppression” of Domestic Space: Edna Pontellier’s

Escape in Chopin’s *The Awakening*

Kate Chopin, born Katherine O’Flaherty, appears to be Virginia Woolf’s quintessential woman with a room of her own. As Marilyn Robinson summarizes in the preface to *The Awakening*, Chopin falls into Woolf’s proposed suggestion for a freed woman; she married into an “established and prominent French Creole family” and, luckily (as I deduce from Chopin’s narrative theme in the novella), was “widowed at thirty-two” (vii). Thus, Chopin found herself with the energy and talent to write. In parallel to this, Chopin’s dynamic and controversial character in *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, also was fortunate (in theory) to marry Léonce Pontellier and was given the life she thought she wished for. Because Edna’s husband is absent throughout most of the novel (although very present in Edna’s mind), she is able to live a certain lifestyle; however, her lifestyle is still very much dictated by her husband. Consequently, Edna’s awakening sexuality cannot be repressed, and she is restless in her marriage. She has wealth and a room of her own, but she feels suffocated by her womanly duties. Thus, she swims into the ocean, away from her burdens and her desperation. As readers, Chopin leaves us with this paradox: though we cannot necessarily fault Edna for her feelings that are not conducive with marriage and motherhood, we also cannot condone her actions. She chooses death over family, but, truly, was it a choice? Or, did Edna see the current of her life sweeping her

away from the person she thinks herself to be? Either way, Chopin must have not seen any other end for women such as Edna.

In a novella that ends with suicide, interestingly it is Edna's sexuality, or the awakening thereof, that disturbed critics at the time of *The Awakening's* publication. As Edna questions her ability to love her husband and children, she is drawn towards other men. As she begins to explore new choices, her former life becomes duller, and she becomes more restless. As Emily Toth writes, Chopin herself separated Edna's life into appearances and reality, an "outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" ("Kate Chopin on Divine Love and Suicide" 115). Toth also notes that, while writing *The Awakening*, Chopin was struggling with her own questions, such as: What is the nature of love? And, what is the significance of suicide? (115). In the novel's trifecta of women, love, and suicide, Edna attempts to evolve from a wife and mother into a human being. However, many critics overlooked Edna as an individual and instead viewed her as "a selfish wife and mother who does not appreciate her good husband, but she also rebels in the worst possible way – by taking a lover or two" (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 209). Though controversial, Edna propels the novel forward; the men are Edna's playthings and are dominated by Edna's decisions and impulses. The Creole society in which Edna lives allows for this inversion of patriarchal dominance; the women are the managers of the households and hold a tight society while the men remain in the business world and out of the home. The men's absence, however, presupposes women's acceptance of their womanly and domestic duties and harmony within the home depends on maintaining this status

quo. Controversially, Edna defies the stereotypical woman and rejects society's insistence that she remains within the limitations of the space inscribed for her.

Chopin's women answer Woolf's call for a different type of character stemming from a different kind of female author. Edna's restlessness is past due for women of the 19th century, and Chopin speaks for them through Edna. As Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (69)

Chopin acknowledges in *The Awakening* that women want to move beyond simply being man's muse, man's looking glass, yet perhaps did not know how to do so in the way society deems socially acceptable. Men love Edna for her charm, her wit, and her sexuality; these feminine qualities are strikingly different than the virginal, submissive woman society expects. As Anne Firor Scott writes, part of the ideal woman's "charm [lies] in her innocence" (4). Edna does not know how to negotiate these two types of womanhood, so she feels as though she must

choose one or the other. Chopin makes Edna's mistakes and missteps transparent for this reason. Edna behaves badly, but she also behaves as many men unapologetically do. She recognizes her sexuality and embraces its mystery and promise. And, it is through Edna's sexuality that she is able to recover the voice she lost; consequently, it is Edna's sexual awakening that drives her away from her home and into the sea.

In a compelling comparison between Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne and Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Ivy Schweitzer illustrates that the plight of women had not changed in a century. The similarities between Hester and Edna are remarkable: each awakens to her own sensuality and sexuality, both seek autonomy, and both are adulteresses (159). Though Hester and Helen are both exploring the conflict between self and society, Hester is saved by her own maternity. Schweitzer suggests that, because Edna refuses to be a part of the existing order, society condemns her for her individuality. She does not make the usual maternal compromises as Hester does and is quintessentially selfish in her insistence to become separated from her roles as woman, wife, and mother: "Although Edna Pontellier's 'conflict between individual autonomy and social conformity' has been viewed from a gender-specific as well as universal perspective, a simple decentering of her motherhood has taken place" (161). Ultimately, Edna initially plays into the fictitious world of love, marriage, and children, but it is these very notions that drive both her upward climb and eventual downfall. Chopin shows the consequences of Edna's actions and laces double meanings into Edna's choices. She chooses to reject her family, but, in the

end, she is alone, without the men she left her family for. Chopin's story is about Edna's search for self and her contemplation of woman's place; it is written for "women who've had it up to here with traditional marriage... Everyone gets to ponder the big questions: who has the right to tell a woman what to do, think, or be?" (Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 34). As Edna's sexuality and passions become more dominant, she begins to live a double life of outward conformity and inner rebelliousness, driven by the "contradictory impulses which impel[] her" (Chopin 17); these impulses contradict the cult of domesticity that necessitate Edna to act according to propriety. As Edna removes herself from the space of the home, the less she wishes to act according to the expectations of marriage and motherhood. Here, Chopin is attempting to reconcile the notion that motherhood and individuality are mutually exclusive.

Chopin's Edna Pontellier has been compared to other promiscuous and marginalized heroines who reject ideal womanhood and maternity. Often, she is compared to Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary, one of the most controversial female characters of the 19th century. As Toth writes, Chopin was acutely aware of the scandalous heroines who preceded her, and hoped her Edna Pontellier was a vision of an emerging woman who controlled her destiny, not a reproduction of the outdated stigma of a marked woman whose life spirals out of her control. As Toth notes, the difference is:

Flaubert regards Emma Bovary as a specimen, a shallow woman with little in her head but romantic dreams. Kate Chopin saw the world differently, through the eyes of a woman. Chopin's Edna has

her painting, and Edna learns and grows and changes through conversations with her friends. Her life is rich with warmth and sensual pleasures, including sexual ones; Flaubert's sexual scenes are brittle and mocking. Flaubert's coldness about his heroine was something Kate Chopin could not emulate, had she wanted to.

(Unveiling Kate Chopin 217)

To Chopin, Edna is not a fallen woman, but a woman who cannot balance her need and wish for individuality with the constraints of mother and womanhood. She would like to embrace the cult of true womanhood, perpetuated by the Creole society; this is evidenced early in the novella by her reactive tears; she is unable to be the wife and mother Mr. Pontellier wants her to be: "She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life...An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (Chopin 8). At this point in the novel, Edna's tears are unexplainable, yet she feels as though she needs to free herself from the burden that weighs on her heart. She wants to love her husband. She wants to love her children. And, she does, but when she needs to sacrifice one or the other, she chooses her individuality over others' needs.

Fortunately, Chopin creates a world in which Edna's awakening sexuality can be embraced. Edna's former life is that of control and social conformity, and Edna rebels against the restrictions imposed upon her gendered station. In the Creole world of New Orleans, Edna is an outsider from conservative Kentucky, a

place she shudders to return to. Edna feels the drastic differences between the society from which she has come and the Creole society Mr. Pontellier has brought her into. Though initially Edna attempts to conform to the society, one that embraces and reinforces the cult of domesticity, Edna soon realizes that, to them, she will always be the Other. Edna “[is] not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles...Their freedom of expression [is] at first incomprehensible to her, though she [has] no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable” (Chopin 12). In the bourgeois life of New Orleans society, the women’s fertility and femininity are revered; thus, Edna’s budding sexuality is predominantly understood and tolerated. The women have autonomy to move freely and associate with whomever they wish while the men move in different circles, unaware of their wives’ daily lives. Consequently, the community allows Edna her whims, excusing her behavior as actions of an outsider. Edna’s successive relationships with Robert Lebrun, and later Alcée Arobin, occur beneath the men’s radar and the women do not understand her uncultivated behavior, which is so different from their own domestic perspectives. As Marilyn Robinson notes, “Edna Pontellier ignores all [society’s] conventions and expectations, yet she bears no social penalty, continuing to enjoy the affection of her friends and the loyalty of her husband” (Preface, *The Awakening* xi). Edna, ideally, has everything she wishes for: very little domestic responsibility, an unsuspecting husband, and the independence to pursue her interest in painting. Yet, as she unveils her true

identity – separate from her roles as wife and mother – she becomes more restless, not less.

Mr. Pontellier expects Edna to behave as other domesticated women, such as Edna's friend Madame Ratignolle, yet he does not remonstrate with Edna about her actions. In one of the early scenes, one of the few in which readers are exposed to Mr. Pontellier's uninterrupted thoughts, Mr. Pontellier thinks of his wife with an exasperated sigh: "He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (Chopin 8). Ironically, Mr. Pontellier is *not* the sole object of Edna's existence. The distance between Edna and her husband is evident, and both show little romantic or emotional connection with the other. Interestingly, Edna too does not feel as though her husband values her conversation, and this perspective spawns her rebellions; she acts out because Mr. Pontellier is largely absent from her and the children's lives, and she maintains appearances only to maintain peace. She feels Mr. Pontellier's disapproval of her inability to be an attentive mother and wife, and, instead of improving upon her domesticity, Edna reacts by dismissing her maternal duties. She is aware her inattentiveness aggravates her husband, an aggravation he attempts to conceal and one she chooses to ignore. Mr. Pontellier takes no responsibility for the children and instead cajoles Edna to deal with the children's daily concerns. It is clear Edna resents this, and it is a constant point of conflict in the couple's relationship:

Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after. Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it. Mrs. Pontellier was quite sure Raoul had no high fever. He had gone to bed perfectly well, she said, and nothing had ailed him all day. Mr. Pontellier was too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken. He assured her the child was consuming at that moment in the next room. He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. (Chopin 7)

It is telling in this scene that the Pontelliers' marriage subsists on the dualistic binaries of clashing egos and passive aggressiveness. Edna challenges Mr. Pontellier's perception of the ideal Southern woman's sense of responsibility, and Mr. Pontellier's ego and sense of worth puts their marriage at a crossroads: if he allows Edna to function as an untraditional housewife, then he feels as though he is not performing his husbandly duty of controlling a rebellious female. Or, if he allows Edna to do as she wishes for the sake of appearance, he then allows Edna to be the head of the household, a role he presupposes to be his. Either way, Edna's actions emasculate him; thus, he simply chooses to ignore her whim and focus on his masculine endeavors, such as going to the men's club and conducting

business. Mr. Pontellier goes on with his daily life, acting out the domestic role of partnership superbly and is “declared [to be] ... the best husband in the world... Mrs. Pontellier [is] forced to admit that she knew of none better” (Chopin 9). However, as a traditionalist, he desperately clings to the outdated, idealized notions of womanhood, which include subordination and humility. Edna has outgrown the domestic role Mr. Pontellier requires of her, and she no longer wishes to perform for her husband and for society.

The illusion of a united home in which mother, father, and children are in sync is what Mr. Pontellier’s feels is his prerogative and right, and it is that very home that repels Edna toward individuality and, ultimately, other men. Within the social and domestic framework given, Edna should obey Mr. Pontellier’s few requests of her because it is he who provides her monetarily with the life she enjoys. However, his requests for propriety only reinforce her limitations and result in her estrangement from a house that is more his trophy than her home. Edna begins to reject Mr. Pontellier’s wishes as she begins to see the possibility of a lifestyle that embraces freedom, not structure. As Scott writes, “[f]or most southern women the domestic circle *was* the world. Girls married young, and might go on having children for thirty years...marriages were as often as not pragmatically or even casually contracted and in any case romance gave way almost at once to practical things” (42). But, Edna *wants* romance, and she *wants* excitement outside of the domestic circle provided. She questions the difference between what her life ought to be and what she wants her life to be; and, she chooses the latter, whatever the consequences of that choice might entail.

Though Southern herself, Edna uses her role as an outsider to reject the culture of domestic space and, thus, rejects the idealized notion of the home. She feels more at home in the open air and in the sea than performing the motherly duties expected of her. Mr. Pontellier notices, but “it was something which he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement” (Chopin 10). Early in life, Edna tried to follow the path set out by the women preceding her; she once was, “as the myth assured her she must, a wife and mother as soon as the opportunity offered...developing in the process of her experience a steely self-control, and the knowledge that the work she did was essential gave meaning to her life” (Scott 44). Edna sees the hypocrisy in these outdated notions, and she gives up control for what she views as her sexual birthright. Edna is outside Mr. Pontellier’s comfort zone, and he retreats from the home instead of attempting to understand her identity crisis. In opposition to Mr. Pontellier’s sudden escape from his troubled home, Edna’s move from the home is more gradual. Constricted by the expectations of her, Edna’s rebellion begins by slowly removing herself from the space of domesticity. She first leaves the space of motherhood by placing her responsibilities upon nursemaids, family, and friends. Then, she begins to remove herself from the domestic sphere altogether. As Edna slowly peels away the layers of maternal and womanly responsibility, she no longer feels the limitations of the “ideal woman” imposed upon her.

Edna’s intimate friend, Adèle Ratignolle, is placed as “the ideal woman” and as a foil to Edna’s rebelliousness of womanhood. Madame Ratignolle mirrors

Edna's beauty and charms, but she is wholeheartedly a mother and a wife. As Deidre Stuffer explains in her essay, "Edna Pontellier's Strip Tease of Essentiality: An Examination of the Metaphorical Role of Clothing in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," Madame Ratignolle is what Chopin terms as the ideal "mother-woman" (Chopin 10). As Chopin describes, Edna is not the type of mother who "flutter[s] about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 10). As Edna sexual progression and individuality culminate, she begins to see the Ratignolles' "domestic harmony" as distasteful and unbearable:

It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, - as pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium.

(76)

Edna realizes that she never wanted a domestic life, and she married Mr. Pontellier for the wrong reasons. In the past, Edna strove to replicate the womanly roles expected of her. But, as she sheds those roles, she realizes the future is uncertain for women like her. For, if not a wife and mother, what are her other possibilities? She could be Madame Ratignolle, but she does not wish that role

upon herself. As she embraces “life’s delirium,” the haunting question of this phase of Edna’s life is that she knows what she does not want to be, but she does not know of any other options.

As she sheds her role of wife and mother, the narrator concurrently strips her of her married name – Mrs. Pontellier to Edna Pontellier to finally Edna – she is “becoming herself and casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin 77). Edna’s three successive relationships – Mr. Pontellier, Robert Lebrun, and Alcée Arobin – are markers for the progression of Edna’s sexual awakening. Her husband, Léonce Pontellier, somewhat ignores Edna as a sexual being and thinks her interests, such as painting and music, are passing fancies. He does not necessarily suffocate her, but she views him as the cause of her domesticated unhappiness. Consequently, he views her as a trophy wife, only concerned with his appearance as a businessman and a member of elite society. Léonce’s words towards Edna in Chapter One resonate throughout the novel, defining the Pontellier’s relationship: “‘You are burnt beyond recognition,’ he added, looking at [Edna] as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (3). William Marion Reedy, editor of the weekly *Mirror* and a friend of Chopin’s, illustrates the intricate contradictions a woman faces upon marriage (and becoming less of an individual): “Women who submit to complete obliteration in matrimony will find, in time, that they will not need to obliterate themselves, for they will be ignored” (qtd. in Toth 117). Edna faces this problem in her own marriage, becoming a mimicker of appearances, much like the parrot in the

opening scene in the novella. Because of Mr. Pontellier's aloof indifference in her thoughts, Edna is attracted to young Robert Lebrun's company. He thoroughly listens to her and supports Edna's whims. He figuratively and literally replaces Mr. Pontellier in Mr. Pontellier's absence. Subsequently, Mr. Pontellier finds himself marginalized in Edna and Robert's presence, yet is not jealous of the two's relationship. Perhaps to nurture his ego, Mr. Pontellier often dismisses himself from the two in order to pursue more masculine ventures, such as going to Klein's hotel to play billiards or out to the porch to smoke a cigar.

The striking difference between Mr. Pontellier and Robert is inflated by Edna's obvious preference for Robert's company. While Mr. Pontellier is stiff and often bored by Edna, Robert had "no shadow of care upon his open countenance" (Chopin 4), and he entertains Edna by adoring and flattering her. Though Edna sheds the identity as *Mrs.* Pontellier, Robert continues to view Edna as Edna *Pontellier*, and he treats her as both an individual and as someone else's wife. Robert and Edna's relationship resembles that of teenage lovers; they enjoy one another's company, but it is far from sexual. No doubt, this is why "no one thought anything of it. Many had predicted that Robert would devote himself to Mrs. Pontellier when he arrived. Since the age of fifteen, which was eleven years before, Robert each summer at Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel" (Chopin 13). Robert's devotion to women perpetuates the Southern chivalric tradition, and Edna is flattered by his attention, such as which she does not receive from her own husband. Subsequently, Edna is confused by Robert's dedication to her, for she is unused to such open affection

from a man she is not married to. Initially, she finds it unacceptable, but contradictorily welcomes it all the same. As time progresses, she begins to yearn for Robert's affection, and perhaps she mistakes this yearning for love. This duality of propriety and impulse is one Edna struggles with, for she knows it is improper for a woman to desire another man's company. Yet, hypocritically, the Creole men fulfill their simple wants and needs – whether it is a drink at the local club, night swims, or gazing at women other than their wives – while women, such as Edna, feel the nothingness that accompanies unexplained longing and unfulfilled wants. Edna initially thrives on the intimacy of her friendships, but as time continues, she finds that it is sexual intimacy she desires and yearns to realize.

Edna's need for man's affection and acceptance grows with her attachment to Robert. She begins to want him, then need him, near her. Simultaneously, she begins to detach herself from her husband, which confuses and hurts Mr. Pontellier. As she shirks her duty to her husband, she begins to “blindly follow[] whatever impulse move[s] her, as if she [has] placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility” (Chopin 43). Interestingly, Edna still has the superficial societal responsibilities of motherhood and marriage, but she justifies her newfound sexuality as something innate and beyond her control. Edna feels as though her sexuality is her birthright, one that she is presupposed as a woman to ignore. Robert stimulates Edna's fresh outlook and, when he abruptly leaves for Mexico, “for the first time [Edna] recognize[s] the symptoms of infatuation...the present alone was significant; was hers, to

torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded” (Chopin 61). She has taken Robert’s love for granted, and she craves it when it is gone. Consequently, she is the reason Robert leaves. He realizes he has driven her from her home with Mr. Pontellier, and Robert hopes his leaving will drive her back again. Instead, Edna’s pangs of regret and obsession are heightened in his absence, and she relieves her ache by speaking about him, even to her husband:

It did not strike her as in the least grotesque that she should be making Robert the object of conversation and leading her husband to speak of him. The sentiment which she entertained for Robert in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel. She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself. (Chopin 63-64)

As Edna mentally begins to break free from her husband’s grip, she learns the discrepancy between thoughts and appearances. Her thoughts are her own, and they free her. Contradictorily, she feels as though she can love Robert, yet still be Mr. Pontellier’s wife.

In this way, Edna attempts to continue to play dual roles. Though she never has a sexual relationship with Robert, she mentally leaves her husband for him. Edna's emotional affair with Robert breaks her from the space of the home and the role of a wife. Yet, she still attempts to maintain the role of wife by performing for her husband and society and maintaining an outward appearance of domestic bliss; she initially entertains Mr. Pontellier by obediently playing the role of his wife and the mother of their children. Though she is blossoming internally, her life continues to be dictated by her husband's routines and habits. The reception day on Tuesdays, the opera, dinner time – these “had been the programme which Mrs. Pontellier [has] religiously followed since her marriage, six years before” (Chopin 67). As Zoila Clark notes in her essay, “The Bird that Came out of the Cage: A Foucauldian Feminist Approach to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*,” “the first step of a dependent housewife towards liberation is to be in possession of her body and mind” (335). Here, Edna has taken possession of her mind; her thoughts are no longer her husband's thoughts, and it is only time before she takes her body from him as well. Edna feels her marriage immobilizes her growth as a woman, and her recognition of this sparks her desire for liberation. As Clark writes, this recognition, which often goes unnoticed, explains the difference between Edna and other married women such as Adèle Ratignolle who “do not see the oppression which controls them. Like a caged bird, she does not see beyond her limits and is always in the same environment. Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, starts to take walks and distance herself from her surroundings...and she achieves an awareness of physical pleasures and bodily

control through swimming” (337). Once Edna establishes control of her own movements, she begins to remove herself and her actions from her husband completely. It is when Edna’s outward rejection of Mr. Pontellier’s requirements of her that leads to the dissolution to their marriage. Edna’s outward rebellion is a direct insult to her husband’s established routines, and Edna shows her break from domestic responsibility. She is no longer Mr. Pontellier’s wife; she is only Edna.

Mrs. Pontellier did not wear her usual Tuesday reception gown; she was in ordinary house dress. Mr. Pontellier, who was observant about such things, noticed it, as he served the soup and handed it to the boy in waiting.

“Tired out, Edna? Whom did you have? Many callers?” he asked...

“There were a good many,” replied Edna... “I found their cards when I got home; I was out.”

“Out!” exclaimed her husband, with something like genuine consternation in his voice as he laid down the vinegar cruet and looked at her through his glasses. “Why, what could have taken you out on Tuesday? What did you have to do?”

“Nothing. I simply felt like going out, and I went out.” (68)

Edna’s rebellion from home and husband perplexes Mr. Pontellier. He feels as though he has fulfilled his duty (at least he feels as though he has), and she should fulfill hers. Subsequently, it is not Edna but appearances he is worried about; he protects his ego and consoles himself by attributing Edna’s behavior to a medical problem. He is ignorant his wife is leaving him (emotionally and physically)

because, to admit this, is to admit she does not love him. He cannot fulfill the sexual passion she yearns for, and she needs more than a doting husband, children, and a house to return to. Instead, she finds sanctuary in the affectionate intimacy of Robert and Alcée Arobin.

Though Edna remembers Robert “like an obsession” (Chopin 48) her inner desires move her forward in her sexual development. Alcée Arobin, an erotic young man who has a passion for the company of older women, fulfills Edna’s desire to have an openly sexual, adult relationship. As Edna’s husband becomes more absent, Edna ultimately sheds the identity of Edna Pontellier and becomes only *Edna*. Though Edna’s emotional relationship with Robert fulfills her need for prominence in a relationship, Alcée fulfills Edna’s desire to be wanted sexually. As Toth suggests, “[Edna] is far more at ease with Robert than with any other man, but even their chattering is mostly little jokes and flirtations: he is the teenage boyfriend she never had, or the rehearsal for the adult sexual relationship with Alcée Arobin (who often prefers not to talk at all)” (Toth *Unveiling Kate Chopin* 214). Edna does not love Alcée as she loves Robert and cannot replace Robert as easily as she replaces her husband. However, in Robert’s absence, Edna’s passions must be fulfilled, and she uses Alcée for companionship and sex. Many times, Edna withdraws herself from Alcée, reversing gender roles in his struggle to obtain her. Though Alcée’s attentions mirror Robert’s, they lack Robert’s innocence. Alcée’s “attitude became one of good-humored subservience and tacit adoration. He was ready at all times to submit to her moods, which were as often kind as they were cold. She grew accustomed to him. They became

intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps” (105). As Alcée persists in his devotion to Edna, she consequently secures her removal from wife and motherhood. She moves out of her home to a much smaller home, though, mentally, she has already broken from the home. Now, she must bodily disengage herself from her former life. Ultimately, the move is the result of Edna’s resolution to “never again...belong to another than herself” (108). Her two lovers, Robert and Alcée, have given her something she never received from Mr. Pontellier – authority over herself. And, she *takes* this authority; they do not bestow it upon her.

As Edna’s relationship with Alcée becomes sexual, surprisingly Edna feels no remorse, only irresponsibility. This blatant disregard for fidelity, marriage, and idealized womanhood empowers and confuses her. She knows what she *should* feel; she knows she is committing a crime of social conventions. Yet, her blatant disregard for monogamy excites her; and, her move into the “pigeon house” (Chopin 74) from her husband’s house completes her transformation as a sexual and independent person. She purchases her house with her own monetary means, designs it herself, and fills it with the company she chooses. Likewise, she keeps her husband’s house within her periphery, reminding herself of a former life she refuses to return to. As Zoila Clark writes, “[f]rom a distance, she sees her dungeon and never goes back to it...The control over her body makes her aware of the relationship of body and space as an indicator of the kind of oppression she [was formerly] experiencing...She seems to run away from her social role of mother and wife as her only functions in life” (338). But, without being tethered

to those functions, Edna loses herself in her impulses, and, eventually, loses all whom she once loved.

Sadly, in a sort of quick finality, Edna realizes that she is, once again, alone and neglected. Once surrounded by friendly warmth, Edna removes herself from all the things that restrict her. Even Robert's love, though welcomed, stifles her yearning for independence. And, when he leaves her *because* he loves her, readers are left with a confounding paradox. In her final moments, Edna resists her husband and children, for "they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (157). By freeing herself from her obligations, is Edna free? Or, is she searching for an understanding that will not ever come? Optimists envision the ending of the novel as a rebirth, that Edna unclothes herself and goes out for a long swim; this swim is indicative of freeing herself from the societal pressures of womanhood. Perhaps she does, but I am more inclined towards a different interpretation of the ending. The mysticism that surrounds Edna's swim – the memories of the barking dog, the cavalry officer, the hum of bees – all circulate a lost battle with patriarchy. Edna finds her identity, but realizes this identity cannot exist in society as she knows it. Chopin chooses to end the novel on this note of ambivalence because, unfortunately, death is Edna's only choice. By clouding the ending with romanticism, Edna's desperation goes unnoticed. And, it is this very desperation that defines her identity. Because Edna does not have the authority to live her life according to her wants, death is not a choice but a necessity. She cannot envision an alternative because it does not exist.

Chapter 2:

From the Kitchen to the Bedroom: The Façade of Sex and Motherhood in

Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*

Eudora Welty casts three representations of females – Ellen, Robbie, and Laura – in her novel *Delta Wedding* in order to illustrate the progression of Southern womanhood and the consequences thereof. Ellen, the traditionalist, mimics the women who came before her; her marriage is a reflection of the authoritative male figure and his “perfect,” submissive wife who manages both the family and the servants. Robbie, the rebel, also married young, but she soon realizes that her romantic expectations of marriage are false images perpetuated by Southern families as well as the South’s tendency to emulate the Southern gentleman as a part of a common heritage. Laura, the youngest narrator, observes the complications of both women’s choices and attempts to pursue a compromise of the two. In many ways, *Delta Wedding* is a continuation of Chopin’s reconciliation of progressive and traditional womanhood in Edna Pontellier and the desperation that so naturally accompanies the women of the era. At the Fairchild’s Shellmound plantation, Welty creates a safe haven for women while also emphasizing the patriarchal society that governs their lives; Clearly, “it [is] the boys and the men that defined that family always [and] [a]ll the girls knew it” (Welty 102). Ellen, Robbie, and Laura must enter into the cult of true womanhood that always-already exists at the Southern homestead while simultaneously searching for a space that is uniquely their own. All of the women narrators realize the limitations of the maternal space of the home and the suffocating

traditionalism that accompanies it; in the end, each woman must sculpt her own destiny or submit to the one given within the hierarchical gendered structure provided at the Shellmound plantation.

In a world in which the men control the women's sexuality and place, the women are expected to play the role of man's supporter and confidante. Pregnancy, consummation of marriage, and traditional values are given to women as burdens they must bear in order to find their place within the community already established at the estate. Ellen and Robbie have married into the family, whereas the death of Laura's mother causes her father to send her to the Fairchilds. The novel is largely structured around Laura's narrative as it begins and ends with her young perspective. As the newest member to join the Fairchild clan, Laura sees the family with uncertainty and with longing. These emotions parallel those of Robbie and Ellen, both of whom never feel as though their given representation of womanhood is their true identity; together, though differently, the women feel the pressure of maintaining the ideal Fairchild image of the feminine and Southern ideal. As Laura Sloan Patterson points out, Welty's *Delta Wedding* not only shows the cultural and protectoral roots of the South, but it also "offer[s] a more spatially, narratologically, and ideologically expansive view of domesticity...the Fairchilds inhabit the entire Delta, equally at home in kitchens or on horseback through the forest. The Fairchilds live together in the most literal sense, allowing their bodies and their narratives to become entangled and even enmeshed" (28). Oddly, this Fairchild ideal is perpetrated by the traditionalist elder women who fancy themselves as images of the antebellum South; their

judgment casts Laura, Ellen, and Robbie as Others within a family that wishes to maintain the hierarchical status quo and traditionalist Southern values.

Nine-year-old Laura McRaven's feelings of marginalization begin before entering the Mississippi Delta and Shellmound. She felt her difference from the Fairchilds, her different name, her different hair color, her dead mother; she even convinces herself that she "could not be in [Dabney's] wedding for the reason that her mother was dead" (Welty 91). Laura is immediately cast as a foil to India Fairchild, a cousin who is near Laura's age and is emulated by Laura because of her Fairchild namesake and her fair complexion. As Laura gazes upon India's seeming purity, she feels her own insecurities in appearance; appearance is what defines the Fairchilds and what separates Laura from them: "India came abruptly around the house, bathed and dressed, busily watering the verbena in the flower bed out of a doll's cream pitcher, one drop to each plant. India too was nine. Her hair was all spun out down her back, and she had a blue ribbon in it; aura touched her own Buster Brown hair, tangled now beyond anyone's help" (Welty 97). As India partakes in the domesticated behavior expected of Southern women – cleanliness, domesticity, purity, and nurturer – Laura plays the role of the traveler who must earn her place within this sacred womb of femininity. As India declares that "[Laura] ha[s] to wash now," Laura is integrated into the Fairchild family by mimicking the Fairchild appearance and identity (Welty 98).

Though Ellen recognizes a younger version of herself in Laura, she must play the role of the family matriarch: "She is an outsider because she has married into the family, but an insider because she is responsible for the physical

conception of the children, a fact reiterated by the announcement of yet another pregnancy...in contrasting light, Ellen might be said to represent the non-domestic or resistant domestic women” (Patterson 30). Because Ellen sympathizes with Laura’s marginalization, she brings Laura into the family fold by recreating Laura as a simulacrum of her own domestic self. Ellen knows no other way to mesh with the Fairchild status quo but to play the roles the family has given her. United as outsiders, Ellen feels Laura’s self-confidence in her appearance, and they both stand apart from the Fairchilds: “All the Fairchilds looked alike...[and] had a fleetness about them, they were tall, solid people with ‘Scotch legs’ – a neatness that was actually a readiness for gaieties and departures, a distraction that was endearing as a lack of burdens. Laura felt their quality, their being, in the degree that they were portentous to her. For Laura found them all portentous – all except Aunt Ellen, who had only married into the family...” (Welty 102-103). Though Ellen plays the role given to her within the confines of Shellmound, she creates points of escape in order to preserve her inner individuality. Through her own observational lens, Laura realizes Ellen’s vacillation between sacrifice and individuality; she is the lone family member who realizes there is more depth and substance to her aunt than maternity: “Even some unused love seemed to Laura to be in Aunt Ellen’s eyes when she gazed, after supper, at her own family. Could she get it? Laura’s heart pounded. But the baby had dreams and soon she would cry out...and Aunt Ellen listening would run straight to her...forgetting everything in this room” (Welty 109). These thoughts from Laura are fleeting, but, as an outsider and observer, Laura’s quiet

observations concerning her aunt makes Ellen more dynamic in the readers' eyes. In the other family members' narcissistic perspectives, Ellen fits the one-dimensional role of wife and mother; they do not consider that she may have other thoughts or experiences other than the domestic role they attribute to her.

Often, Ellen meshes her domestic duties with mental escapism; though she cannot break from the family circle, her thoughts are her own, and her quiet reflections are the most telling of her separation from the Fairchilds' united point of view. In many ways, Ellen's moments of exodus are masked by domesticity, such as when she needs to go outside in order to clear her head or remove herself from the chaos of her family under the ruse of caring for a neighbor. Within the family fold, Ellen's thoughts are often of others' needs, and she has little voice in a family defined by traditionalism and heredity. And still, though Ellen is aware of the sacrifices she makes as wife and mother, she cannot help but place Laura on the same domestic path as her own. She has joined the Fairchilds' cult of domesticity, and she paves the way for Laura to do the same; she does this, for example, by asking Laura to help her with a traditional family recipe, a coconut cake. Perhaps she chooses Laura because Laura is also quiet and reflective and Ellen knows she can be alone with her thoughts. But, also, this could be because Ellen knows no other way for Laura to fit into the Fairchild family and accept the traditionalism that is a natural complement of the family namesake. As Ellen works with the recipe, she lets her mind wander to family issues, namely George and Robbie's broken marriage, mingled with thoughts of Dabney's approaching union:

Ellen was breaking and separating the fourteen eggs. “Yes, I do want coconut,” she murmured. For Ellen’s hope for Dabney, that had to lie in something, some secret nest, lay in George’s happiness. He had married “beneath” him too, in [Aunt] Tempe’s unvarying word. When he got home from the war he married, in the middle of one spring night, little Robbie Reid, Old Man Swanson’s granddaughter, who had grown up in the town of Fairchilds to work in Fairchild’s store. (Welty 112)

Interestingly, Ellen joins the Fairchild prejudice against outsiders even though, hypocritically, she was once an outsider too. And, like the Fairchilds, Ellen views marriage not as gaining a new member to the clan, but sees “the loss of Dabney to Troy Flavin [and] the happiness of George lost to Robbie” (Welty 113). But, by providing the Fairchilds with heirs, something Robbie has yet to do, Ellen joins the established community and must assimilate her identity with the Fairchilds’ namesake.

Though Ellen has taken on the Fairchild name, her quiet reflections of George and Robbie indicate she does not quite agree with the Fairchild views of sex, purity, and propriety. As Anne Firor Scott writes, “all the good women, all the respectable wives, totally suppressed their sexuality... [and] the values of their society certainly encouraged them to do so” (55). Thus, Ellen gave up her sexuality for marriage, and, in many ways, she yearns for the sexual intimacy Robbie and George exude during their courtship years. As a wife, Ellen must accept that she is no longer a sexual, seductive object for her husband, Battle, who

barely notices her throughout the daylight hours. He only comes to her at night, and their sexual intimacy is only a result of Battle's desire for more Fairchild heirs. While she works with the cake, she realizes she may never have had a sexual connection with Battle like George and Robbie's attraction to one another. As a result, Ellen's thoughts drift to a time in which Robbie and George unabashedly loved one another wholeheartedly, prior to their separation. Tied to family duties and contained in the kitchen, Ellen is envious of the couple's early relationship while simultaneously reflecting upon Robbie's ability to love and then leave her husband, even though she does not necessarily condone the choice:

[Ellen] remembered, as if she vigorously worked the memory up out of the mixture, a picnic at the Grove – the old place – an exuberant night in the spring before...Robbie had tantalizingly let herself be chased and had jumped in the river with George in after her...Dalliance, pure play, George was after that night – he was enchanted with his wife, he made it plain then. They were in moonlight. With great splashing he took her dress and petticoat off in the water, flung them out on the will bushes and carried her up screaming in her very teddies, her lost ribbon in his teeth, and the shining water running down her kicking legs and flying off her heels as she screamed and buried her face in his chest, laughing too, proud too. (Welty 113)

Unlike traditionalism's insistence on propriety, Ellen believes this moment reflects a woman's birthright: her sexual being. Ellen's thoughts infer that she did

not deem this moment inappropriate, only magical for the young lovers. As a member of the Fairchild clan, however, Ellen must outwardly project similar Old South views while also maintaining her more progressive views on sexuality and marriage in her thoughts. She reminds herself she is not fully a Fairchild and should not feel obligated to wholly participate in their exclusiveness or traditionalism. However, it is clear Ellen is conditioned to participate in the unanimous nature of the Fairchilds' views on marriage, sex, and propriety, even if she does not wholeheartedly agree.

Though Laura, and eventually Robbie, joins the family at Shellmound, neither mirror the sentiments of the Fairchilds: the Delta plantation is not their sanctuary from the rest of the world. Adversely, the plantation becomes more of a Hell they cannot escape. Though Ellen has assimilated to the Fairchilds' Old South culture, Robbie and Laura do not want to become Ellen; they do not wish their lives to be defined by their family namesake; they do not want to be obligated to sacrifice for the predetermined greater good of the family. Robbie resents the Fairchilds' exclusiveness and traditionalism and is insistent that "I didn't *marry into* them! I married George!" (Welty 230). Robbie feels as though the cult of true womanhood perpetuated by the family is not a means towards the ideal woman; instead, she feels as though domesticity is a curse the family asks her to bear, and it is a burden she refuses. She wishes for an identity separate from the Fairchilds, and she resents the implication that taking on the Fairchild name means losing her former self.

In *Delta Wedding*, Welty problematizes love and its successive byproducts of marriage and children. Ellen's acceptance of her loveless marriage and loss of identity is what Robbie fears; Robbie's desperate love for George illustrates love's capability for making one choose to either suffer in love's wake or to abandon former idealizations of marriage. As an outsider who married into the family, Robbie has access to the Fairchild women's presupposed identities, but she resists the expectations of marriage's entrapment all the same:

In Robbie's eyes all the Fairchild women indeed wore a mask. The mask was a pleading mask, a kind more false than a mask of giving and generosity, for they had already got it all – everything that could be given – all solicitude and manly care. Unless – unless nothing was ever enough – and they knew. Unless pleading must go on forever in life, and was no mask, but real, for longer than all other things, for longer than winning and having. (Welty 236)

Instead of the required love of a husband to his wife, Robbie yearns for the “pure, animal way of love...when she watched, listened, came out, stretched, slept content. Where he lay naked and unconscious she knew the heat of his heavy arm, the drag of his night beard over her” (Welty 237). Instead of loving *some* of her, Robbie wants all of George and all of George's love. As Robbie marches through the scorching heat towards Shellmound to reclaim George, her thoughts are of the Fairchild clan and the suffocation they impose on her beloved George, consequently, herself as well. In order to have George, she must accept the Fairchilds as her family, and they must accept her. Louise Westling calls this

rekindling of Robbie and George's love a refashioning of the charmed life the Fairchilds live. In order for Dabney to be successfully married to Troy, George and Robbie's marriage must first prove successful (88-89). Though Robbie outwardly rejects the family's ideals, she is walking towards George and towards giving their marriage another chance. Despite the family's rejection of Robbie as an outsider, they want the marriage to succeed as all others in the family have hypothetically succeeded. In the end, Robbie chooses love over feminine identity; and, like all Fairchild women, she has nowhere else to go but Shellmound.

In contrast to the Old South's traditionalism that marginalizes the women as outsiders, the women are entrapped within the home due to pregnancy or, at least, the potential of pregnancy. Ellen's successive pregnancies keep her ensnared within a loveless marriage, and Robbie's potential pregnancy to George forces her return to him and the Fairchild family. Both women love their male counterparts but, in loving, the women also have to forsake their individual identities. As Tenley Gwen Bank points out in her essay, "Dark-Purple Faces and Pitiful Whiteness: Maternity and Coming Through in *Delta Wedding*," Welty's novel illustrates the various stages of women's experiences of sexuality:

Six pregnant, recently pregnant, and potentially or rumored-to-be pregnant women populate the story: Ellen Fairchild, the ideal and idolized plantation mother; Robbie Reid, the working-class outsider who has married into the Fairchilds; Mary Denis, a Fairchild cousin who cannot attend the wedding because of her recent childbirth; the unnamed runaway girl whom Ellen

encounters in the woods; the bride of the titular wedding herself, Dabney Fairchild...and Pinchy, one of the Fairchilds' black servants. (59)

In Ellen's case, her successive pregnancies become her identity and leave her feeling "like a mother to the world" (Welty 158). In many ways, because of her sacrifices, Ellen becomes a victim of marriage and her ability to bear children. Shelley, the practical, quiet daughter, realizes the toll the pregnancies (this is Ellen's tenth) have taken on Ellen's body and begs her father to release Ellen from her obligation to bear children:

Shelley had come down the hall barefooted, with her hair down, in her white nightgown. "Oh, Papa," she had said, standing in the door. "How could you keep getting Mama in this predicament?"

"How's that?" Uncle Battle asked drowsily...

"I said how could you keep getting mama in this predicament – again and again?"

"A predicament?"

"Like you do."

"I told you we were going to have another little girl, or boy. It won't be till Christmas," Aunt Ellen said sleepily in the voice she used to India, and Shelley hearing it said, "I'm not India!"

"Mama, we don't *need* any more." Shelley gave a reason:

"We're perfect the way we are. I couldn't love any more of us..."

“What do you mean – a predicament?” said Uncle Battle once more.

“I thought that was what people call it,” Shelley faltered. “I think in Virginia – “

“Maybe they do. And maybe they’re right! But it’s damn well none of your concern tonight, girly,” said Uncle Battle.

(Welty 317-318)

Though Shelley weakly protests what she considers the injustice of her mother’s having to go through yet another health-threatening pregnancy, her father silences her voice. Though it is clear that Ellen’s tenth pregnancy causes concern for her health, as submissive females, Shelley and Ellen are compelled to bow to “the pressure of patriarchal...tradition” (Bank 70) of producing heirs for the Fairchild family. Furthermore, Shelley’s purity, illustrated by her white nightgown, indicates her future as a woman; Battle’s words reflect the “accepted belief...that only men and depraved women were sexual creatures and that pure women were incapable of erotic feeling” (Scott 54). Battle silences Shelley because it is not acceptable for chaste Southern girls to be aware of the parents’ “bedroom lives” and impure thoughts only suggest his daughter’s own budding eroticism. Once again, Battle reinforces the traditionalist notion that only marriage justifies sex, and any intimacy is only for reproductive purposes, not for romance. Romance only leads to ruined women.

It is clear the family disapproves of Robbie’s own eroticism, and they cast her as an outsider who has spoiled the family and damaged George, the family’s

favorite uncle. Hypocritically, the family puts George at no fault for the sexual overtone between himself and his wife, and only until Robbie produces an heir will the family accept her sexuality. Though Robbie only infers the possibility of a pregnancy, Robbie wants George to commit wholly to her, putting her needs above his family's needs. These are the grounds in which she initially leaves him; she cannot be in a marriage with a man who does not fully give himself to her. However, she loves him and returns to him on the pretense that she "want[s] to ask George for something indeed, but not for the moon – not even for a child; she did not want to, but she had to ask him for something – life waited for it...What do you ask for when you love? If it was urgent to seek after something, so much did she love George, that that much the less did she know the right answer" (Welty 235). From Robbie's perspective, love and commitment must come before family and reproduction, which is the inverse of Ellen's marriage to Battle. As Robbie realizes on her walk, the Shellmound plantation is a "constructed shelter" that illustrates the tensions within the home, and as Patterson points out, most notably "the subtle tensions between confinement and protection [which are] erected within many works of domestic fiction" (14). Playing the part as a safe shelter from the outside world and as a domestic prison, Welty's novel is as much a "pastoral hymn of fertility" (Westling 65) as it is a commentary on the burdens of childbearing and the sacrifice of individualized feminine identity.

Ellen's beautiful lost girl in the woods is representative of the progression of womanhood in Ellen, Robbie, and Laura. The young girl is older than Laura, and, unlike Ellen and Robbie, she chooses to leave the home prior to marriage and

children. For readers, much of the young girl's history remains a mystery and, yet, she appears to be running from something; it could be the suffocation of traditionalism, the expectation of marriage, or the stigma an unwanted pregnancy could bear unto her family name. In many ways, the young girl is a young Ellen, torn between the conventionalism of marriage and the yearning for a different path than domesticity. Or, the young girl could be Robbie, in love with a man who does not know how to return her love correctly. Or, the young girl could be Laura, uncertain if she wants to replicate the women and the traditions who proceed her. Interestingly, it is Ellen who encounters the girl and who worries that the lone girl will "bring mistakes on [herself]" by leaving the protection of home (Welty 159). Consequently, after assessing the lone girl's insistence on departing the Delta, Ellen points her to Memphis: "'That way.' Ellen pointed explicitly with her umbrella then drew it back slowly. 'Memphis,' she said. When her voice trembled, the name seemed to recede from something else into its legendary form, the old Delta synonym for pleasure, trouble, and shame" (Welty 160). As the girl walks on, Ellen cannot help but resent the girl's gumption; with each step, the girl is separating herself from family, safety, and home. Ellen is conditioned to believe these are the aspects that must structure a woman's life; individuality, freedom, and choice are only fleeting thoughts and shadows of a former existence.

Envious of the lone girl's freedom, Ellen returns home to resume her role as the Fairchilds' caretaker and manager. Though Ellen feels as though the young girl has escaped a life similar to her own, her own words foreshadow the girl's fate – "I wasn't speaking about good and bad, maybe. I was speaking about men –

men, our lives” (Welty 159). Though the girl wishes to escape the suffocation of a domestic life and a role predetermined by patriarchal society, the road to Memphis does not offer safety. In parallel to Robbie’s entrapment to George through marriage, George admits to finding the girl and sleeping with her. George’s sexual deviance problematizes the family’s façade of love, marriage, and sex:

[George] said at once, “Yes, I met her, as I was coming in.”

Then [Ellen] was speechless. It was a thing she had never learned in her life, to expect that what has come to you, come in dignity to yourself in loneliness, will yet be shared, the secret never intact. She gazed into the evening star, her lips unreasonably pressed together.

“And did she ask the way to the Memphis road?” she asked then.

“Yes, and I took her over to the old Argyle gin and slept with her, Ellen,” said George.

George’s ability to awaken women’s awareness of themselves and their sexuality is consistent throughout the novel: He awakens Ellen’s sexuality by paying close attention to her, unlike her husband and children; he plays upon Robbie’s budding sexuality by teasing and holding her close, forcing her to love and marry him; and, similarly, George seizes the young girl sexually and takes away her newly acquired freedom. Though George never admits his motivation for this intimate encounter, it is possible that his separation from Robbie leads him to need to

reassert his dominance upon women. The image of the lost girl and her stolen sexuality shows the unsaid stories of the idealized South: sex is very much a part of their lives, but propriety represses the women's right to their sexuality. Instead, the romanticized notions of sex are replaced with mechanized reproduction and as a domineering tactic by men to reinforce their masculinity. However, in this moment of George's confession, Ellen "seemed to let go in her whole body, and stood languidly still under her star a moment, then pulled her apron where it still shone white in the dogwood tree and tried to tie it back on" (Welty 167). George's sexuality briefly awakens Ellen but, as the moment passes, she returns to her apron and the domesticity she has become accustomed to. Ellen desires to be sexual, but propriety restricts her. Here, in the deep South, women do not even own their bodies; they must marry in order to justify their sexual lives and, with children, even love and romance disappear.

Therein lies the hypocrisy the women live in the fertile Delta of Dixieland. By falling into the superficiality of perfect marriages, perfect love, and superficial comfort, the women learn to endure the lives given to them. They must succumb to their own fertility, producing heirs and heiresses to the family name, and are given adoration in exchange for maternal sacrifices. This euphoric womb of Shellmound was intentionally constructed by Welty to ensure that the story took place "at a time when there was nothing except the family again that you have to deal with" (Yate 101). Family values, familiar hierarchical structure, and undistracted realism are at the forefront of the story, illustrating a time in which women worked within the space they were given. But, as Robbie so compellingly

cries out, "Don't any other people in the world feel like me? I wish I knew. Don't any people somewhere love other people so much that they want to be – not like – but the same?" (Welty 254). But, as Robbie concludes, Southern family structures like the Fairchilds' cannot simply love *her*; they want to love the idealized her, the woman they want her to become, not the woman she is. As typecasts of womanhood, Ellen, Robbie, and Laura must survive by compromising and redefining their identities. In the end, Welty leaves us with Laura, who departs Shellmound in search of her own identity. Perhaps she too will inevitably return to the fertile Delta. But, perhaps, she leaves us with hope for a change in the dysfunctional cycle of domesticity and will negotiate a different space for the South's New Woman.

Chapter 3:

Flung from House and Home: The Hypocrisy of “If You Know Who You Are,
You Can Go Anywhere” in the Fictions of Flannery O’Connor and Carson

McCullers

Though Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers have different writing styles, they are more similar than they are different: both are Southern women writers from Georgia who resist being pigeon-holed as feminist writers, while also resisting the South’s typecast of the antebellum Southern belle. Both authors used their writing as a rebellion against the cult of true womanhood and as a way to channel their own feelings of marginalization. O’Connor and McCullers’s characters resist the South’s notions of what it is to be a lady, and they emphasize that there can be charm in gracelessness and purity in impropriety. Together, their fiction necessarily bridges the gap from the Old South’s idealized woman to the New South’s women of the mid-20th century. This shift occurs in two stages: first, O’Connor illustrates the generational escape from the Old South’s aristocratic and prejudiced generation of the 19th century and problematizes the familial core and old country values; second, McCullers extends O’Connor’s escape by removing the foundational cores of both family and womanhood. McCullers deemphasizes the home and its center, the kitchen, while emphasizing the shift to an outside communal refuge, such as a cafe or other gathering place. Additionally, McCullers creates characters who are not demonstrative of the Southern woman. Instead, she removes the femininity of her characters and transgenders their identity. By moving away from the stereotypical Southern

family and Southern women, together O'Connor and McCullers emphasize the grotesque and queer of the Southern identity. They see these ugly nuances as more dynamic than the picturesque Southern belle and as more redeemable qualities than perfection. In opposition to a Southern society that emulates the ideal, their characters are both pitiable and remarkable because of their realness.

While Southern literature stereotypically highlights and idealizes the Cavalier-eque Southern gentleman, the chaste Southern beauty, and families united in their Southern heredity, O'Connor and McCullers rebel against the misleading façade. As outsiders themselves, this status of the Other drove both to write against the grain of idealized Southern beauty and propriety. As April Fallon writes, the authors resist the feminine stereotype of perfection, of females who were “icon[s] of purity, virtue, beauty, grace, fragility, and obedience [which] reduces womanhood to a tragic-comic role of empty idol, a pretty puppet, that denies women complexity in their emotional and intellectual lives and denies them power over their own lives” (114). Both O'Connor and McCullers's characters feel the weight of these unrealistic expectations and, many times, are in limbo between traditionalism and progressivism. As Fallon continues, it is clear that, though O'Connor and McCullers themselves were unable to truly reconcile the domestic façade of perfection with reality, “it is clear that both viewed the icon of the Southern Lady as a goliath that needed to be destroyed for truly modern women to gain social acceptance” (114). As a reaction, both writers created characters who wished to make a place for themselves in a society that does not accept them. By attempting to navigate the tensions of their homeland,

these authors in particular illustrate a place whose ugliness is complemented by its beauty; this is a country which cherishes its chivalric image while the next generation resists the same history that pigeonholes Southerners as Confederates and slave owners.

The characters O'Connor and McCullers create represent the complications of the South's identity following the defeat in the Civil War and the aftermath that filtered into the 20th century. The loss humbled the Old South and many traditionalists clung to memories of their antebellum past, whereas the next generation voiced a wish to move forward and create new images of the South. The 20th century generation's breach from the South's united front confused the former generation, who cherished the value of a family name, community, and the traditional roles reinforced by a patriarchal society. The new generation very much separated themselves from the past generation; the new age (especially women) resisted the role of sacrifice while the elder generation clung to the children they felt would be the South's saviors. As Anne Firor Scott writes, in the past, it was the women who had to endure the loss and the upheaval of the lifestyle they once knew, before and after the war, and the men "marched away and left women behind to manage plantations, farms, and businesses, cope with dire shortages of food, clothing, and other necessities, and, on occasion, confront invading armies...Brought up to depend on men for protection and sustenance, they learned when men left that they could fend for themselves and their children" (Sims 239). This experience brought a generational complex; the women in particular entered into the traumatic era of overly burdening themselves with

protecting their children and a post-traumatic era in which they monetarily and emotionally sacrificed everything for their children's success. Essentially, these Southern women saw their own future as dire, but placed great expectations upon their young.

O'Connor's short story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," investigates the Southern woman's complicated sense of loss and shows how intimately and deeply the Old South's women felt towards the loss of the antebellum South, the plantation aristocracy, and the failure of their men to win a war that represented their Southern values and pride. This ingrained personhood is coupled with their expectations for the next generation's success, for the children's success proves that all is not lost. The women are the ones who endured the war alone and are the ones who carry the burden of their children, monetarily and emotionally, because their authority in the males who used to protect them was substantially wounded (Sims 240). This is evident with Julian's mother; for years she has developed defense mechanisms against failure and optimistically deludes herself with images of grandeur and Julian's future success as a college graduate. It is clear that though Julian's mother has made quite a few monetary sacrifices for him, the relationship between the two is strained: Jillian's arrogance and exasperation with his mother is further frustrated by his inability to understand her. His mother lives in the past as she had once known it and bases her decisions upon family connections and past successes; her mantra is: "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere" (O' Connor 487). In opposition to this,

Julian wishes to live and be in any place different from where he had grown up; he resists his mother, but needs her to maintain his identity.

His mother's optimism is coupled with her delusions of her ability to "be gracious to anybody" (O'Connor 487), a hypocrisy O'Connor illuminates time and again in the story. Julian's mother does not know *how* to be truly gracious because her personhood is interlaced with ingrained prejudice; similar to the former slaves, she too is a product of slavery and racism, remnants of the Old South, and indicative of her deep-rooted ideals and values. Julian despises his mother's inability to realize that an inherited family name and family values are meaningless; to Julian, being gracious is not synonymous with altruism: "'They [people unlike them, i.e. the coloreds] don't give a damn for your graciousness,' Julian said savagely. 'Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven't the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are'" (O'Connor 487). Julian's main problem with his mother is his inability to detach from the past. His identity coincides with his mother's own identity; he feels that if he does not resist her completely, he will be associated with her. Even worse, he will become like her. Because his mother is the source of Julian's life and plays the role of the sacrificial martyr, Julian feels obliged to tolerate his mother's antics. His hyper-awareness ironically parallels his mother's own awareness of appearance, even though Julian's slant is that of what he supposes is the "new" social acceptability rather than his mother's old-fashioned perception. O'Connor mirrors his mother's apprehension of wearing her new purple hat, a hat Julian considers "hideous... [but] was less comical than jaunty and pathetic" (O'Connor 485) with Julian's

hyperbolized embarrassment of his mother's pride in her father's plantation, which is reflected in his over-correction of his mother's prejudice. Julian rejects his mother's insistence to "remain what you are" and despises that she groups their present-day family with his great-grandfather's "plantation and two hundred slaves" (O'Connor 487). She sees the number of slaves as wealth whereas Julian only sees his history as slaveholders as shameful. However, as the dialogue between the mother and son retreats into Julian's thoughts, the tension of Julian's insistence on decrying slavery and his connection to his past are much more evident. Upon thinking of his family's former mansion, Julian admits he can "never [speak] of it without contempt or [think] of it without longing" (O'Connor 488). He only wears the mask of the moralistic high ground concerning the mansion because, in the early 20th century, he felt it was expected from his seemingly progressive generation. Similar to the society's expectation of women projecting perfection, Julian too acquiesces to societal expectations of appearance.

The son and mother's conflicting views on appearance – being gracious as opposed to overcompensating for color – emphasize two aspects of the same mindset. The question O'Connor spotlights here is thus: Is acknowledging race so much different than ignoring it? It is clear that Julian and his mother represent an ingrained Southern awareness of appearance that is always-already present in their lives, but it is how they reconcile the dualistic forces of society and identity that separate them. Here, O'Connor is illustrating the hypocrisy of Southern society by emphasizing the stark difference between *seeming* and *being*. Julian, though he often sees himself as taking the moralistic high ground, uses his

mother's aversion to colored people to his advantage; he finds his mother's discomfort amusing because "there was in him an evil urge to break her spirit" (O'Connor 489). Julian knows his mother's disdain for integrating the buses and plays upon her inability to coincide with African-Americans as equals; for her, they represent the South's defeat and the end of a life she cherished. For Julian, they represent a way to separate himself from his mother and, thus, from familial ties: "most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother" (O'Connor 492). Ironically, this is not so. Every action that Julian takes on the bus *is* for his mother. He is always-already aware of her gaze, her values, what she represents. Julian very consciously distances himself from her; but, by doing so, he also very consciously aligns himself with her. He is an actor, and his mother gives him the stage.

Thus, the pivotal scene in O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is the moment Julian and his mother's space becomes inhabited by a Negro mother and son; the most telling about the duo's relationship is that Julian needs his mother to reaffirm his own identity within the newly integrated society of the South. Julian shows his own delusions by imagining his mother in awkward situations with Negroes and pleases himself by using the Negro family as his ploy. While the young boy sat next to his mother (to Julian's disdain because "[h]is mother lumped all children, black and white, into the common category, 'cute,' and she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children"),

the large colored woman sat next to Julian (O'Connor 295). Originally annoyed at this arrangement, Julian then realizes he can use the situation to his advantage when "he [sees] his mother's face change as the woman settled herself next to him and he realized with satisfaction that this was more objectionable to her than it was to him...as if suddenly she had sickened at some awful confrontation. Julian saw that it was because she and the woman had, in a sense, swapped sons" (O'Connor 495). Additionally, with a start, Julian realizes the two mothers are wearing identical hats; Julian "could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson...For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence, but it lasted only a second before principle rescued him. Justice entitled him to laugh" (O'Connor 496). Julian's focus on his mother's lesson blinds him from his own pettiness, his own ugliness towards his mother. Her innate racism, poorly hidden behind her graciousness, cannot be overcome; it is too reinforced by history. Julian refuses to see this and, thus, cannot see his mother as an artifact of the Old South. He wants to change her by showing her a lesson in race when, in fact, it is he who is isolated by not understanding how history shapes him.

Julian's inversion of roles in which he is his mother's teacher culminates as they exit the bus with the Negro mother and son. His mother, well-meaning and naïve, fulfills Julian's intuition that "his mother would open her purse and give the little boy a nickel. The gesture would be as natural to her as breathing" (O'Connor 497). Julian's mother's naiveté embarrasses him as the colored woman

staunchly rejects Julian's mother's offering. Instead of realizing his mother's humiliation, Julian once again unsympathetically tries to teach her a lesson:

"You got exactly what you deserved...Don't think that was just an uppity Negro woman...That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure...it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means...is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." He thought bitterly of the house that had been lost for him. "You aren't who you think you are."
(O'Connor 498-499)

While Julian is caught up in his authoritative role-playing, his mother insists that she must go home. The generations clash as Julian insists on his mother realizing the world outside her sheltered perspective as his mother attempts to re-center herself with the home. While Julian chides his mother for being a child, she falls dead. Julian reverts back to his mother's son, crying "'Mamma, Mamma!'" (O'Connor 500). But it is too late; Julian has wasted his time on chastising his mother rather than understanding her as an important artifact of his history and his identity. His mother's death sweeps over Julian as a "tide of darkness" and marks "his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow" (O'Connor 500), a world Julian was blind to because of his mother's sacrifice and protection. And, with her death, Julian's mother's Southern identity and emotional baggage becomes his own.

Though O'Connor's fiction removes the family from the home, her argument is that, in many ways, the new generation must accept their identity as it is intertwined with the deep-rooted emotions that are byproducts of the Southern heritage. Consequently, the home is a source of despair; it has the ability to at once cement families together while simultaneously estranging them from one another in their dysfunction. McCullers extends O'Connor's argument concerning generational conflict as well as the clash between traditionalism and progressivism by recreating the home apart from family life. Unlike O'Connor's Julian, McCullers's young characters are not necessarily defined by their parents' identities because their parents are largely absent from their lives. Instead, McCullers's characters raise themselves, which disconnects them from the familial history that is so much a part of the South's foundational core. Because of this, family is not as important as one's own perspective, which marks a distinct break from Southern traditionalist thinking. Additionally, McCullers creates young female characters who are either motherless or are victims of absent parents. However, interestingly, McCullers colors her characters with individuality complemented with doubt. Because they are without mothers, the dysfunctional cycle of conditioned domesticity is interrupted, and the girls turn to the outside world for fresh perspectives. And, because the adolescent females are motherless, they embody the possibility of new paths for women.

Though the Civil War produced a "crisis in gender...[and] disrupted the South's system of gender relations" (LeeAnn Whites qtd. in Sims 240), the females were free to "challenge any notion of female limits" (Gleeson-White 11).

Thus, McCullers illustrates a home that is void of women, a home that was rebuilt without the woman as the household manager or reinforcement of notions of Southern womanhood to children. Much of the responsibility, as demonstrated in both McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, fell on the colored caretakers. These caretakers brought with them their own value systems, but the children cannot depend on them as they would their own mothers; the caretakers have their own families to support and nurture. Consequently, the families no longer represent the young ladies' identities; their body and minds are therefore owned by themselves but are also a reflection upon the community that places judgments upon them. This shift towards body awareness, which results in gender confusion, comes at the expense of emphasizing the grotesque and one's inner "freak." As McCullers points out time and again, being considered a freak is a young girl's only option in rebelling against communal standards of womanhood and illustrates a yearning to be something that one is not.

Rachel Adams defines McCullers's particular set of "freak characters" as ones who "suffer an alienation from their bodies that parallels their experiences of estrangement within and isolation from the society of others. Repeatedly, critics of McCullers's work have attributed her characters' suffering to an existential anguish inherent in the human condition" (552). McCullers's characters are constantly connected to the emotional distress of alienation and isolation and bear the destructive repercussions of both. Though there are possible strains of homosexuality in McCullers's work, she works primarily in gender confusion,

gender-bending, masculinizing the female, and feminizing the masculine. In *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie begins as a tomboy in Part 1, but continually sheds and re-imagines her identity in the chapters following. From the very beginning, Frankie expresses a wish to be “somebody else except me” (McCullers 465) which is reinforced by constantly changing her name and her identity in order to become more feminine – Frankie becomes F. Jasmine who later becomes Frances. This lack of grounding and disillusionment with her identity stems from the loss of her mother, who lost her life while giving birth to Frankie. As Fallon writes, this “limited contact with female role models, especially those who embody the Southern feminine ideal” (114) forces Frankie to become independent of the old-fashioned ideals of the South. She keeps the company of John Henry, a male, and Berenice, their black housemaid, who become both her critics and her supporters. In parallel to this, McCullers’s character Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* also begins as a tomboy, unsure whether she fits in with her older, more fashionable sisters, and finds herself more at home with a café owner, Biff Brennan, than girls her own age. For Mick, her home represents the money her family does not have, and she escapes her family’s monetary stress by befriending Mr. Singer, a deaf mute, and Mr. Brennan, who both act as her surrogate parents.

Both girls attempts to come to terms with their sexuality and blossoming womanhood by mimicking propriety – and mimicking it poorly. McCullers casts doubles for Frankie and Mick to show their inability to act as good girls should. Frankie attempts to take on the more feminine identity of her brother’s fiancé out of a longing for another life while Mick’s jealousy of Baby Wilson shows her lack

womanly guidance. Without mothers as examples, the girls are posited against their doubles as the poorer representation of womanhood, even though McCullers silently applauds them for their differences. Frankie's body double, Janice Evans, is rarely seen and even more rarely heard; she lives in Frankie's mind as a hyperbolized ideal which is reinforced by Frankie's delusions of joining her brother and his bride, not only as a member of the wedding party, but as a part of their family. By falsely joining this new family, Frankie feels as though she finds her identity. Because she sees herself separate from the family she is given – she has no mother and an absent father – Frankie's creates a fictional family that is representative of the Southern ideal. By doing this, Frankie thinks she will find “who she [is] and under[stand] where she [is] going. She love[s] her brother and the bride and she [is] a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together” (McCullers *The Member of the Wedding* 501). She first finds an appealing identity as a member of the wedding and transforms that identity into a “perfect” family. Consequently, not only does Frankie want to join her brother and Janice, she wants to *become* Janice. As Frankie morphs into F. Jasmine in Part Two, she continually plays on “the old Frankie” and feels as though this new version of herself is the person she yearns to be, a person suited to be in a wedding. But remnants of the old Frankie remain and are disconnected from the version she pushes to be:

Berenice looked at the orange satin evening dress and shook her head and did not comment. At first she shook her head with short

little turns, but the longer she stared, the longer these shakes became, until at the last shake F. Jasmine heard her neck crack.

“What’s the matter?” F. Jasmine asked.

“I thought you was going to get a pink dress.”

“But when I got in the store I changed my mind. What is wrong with this dress? Don’t you like it Berenice?”

“No,” said Berenice. “It don’t do.” (539)

Berenice realizes that Frankie’s new clothes are indicative of Frankie’s desire to shed her old identity and become something she is not. Frankie cannot become Janice, but she attaches idealistic notions of family and romance to the betrothed couple. Ironically, Frankie’s notions of marriage and family reflect the Old South’s stress on femininity, womanhood, and family. Essentially, Frankie’s delusional reality is very much disconnected from her *actual* identity and familial situation; and, it is evident that the old-fashioned notions of the “perfect” marriage, the “perfect” woman, and the “perfect” family are so interwoven into the fabric of Southern lives that it is difficult for young females to disengage themselves from the unrealistic standards they are expected to achieve.

Similarly, Mick’s double, Baby Wilson, even at age four, is a representation of the ideal traits of a young Southern lady in McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Her mother pampers her, and Baby is given the monetary means to develop her talents at dancing and beauty pageants. Baby appears untouchable, uncorrupted, and chaste; these qualities are vastly disconnected from the rougher neighborhood of Mick’s childhood. Together with

Mick, the neighborhood children emulate and envy Baby's appearance, money, and prominence in their small, sheltered society:

[Mick] was ready to leave when suddenly she stopped and stared. The kids stared too. They all stood still and looked at Baby Wilson coming down the steps of her house across the street.

"Ain't Baby cute!" said Bubber softly.

Maybe it was the sudden hot, sunny day after all those rainy weeks. Maybe it was because their dark winter clothes were ugly to them on an afternoon like this one. Anyway Baby looked like a fairy or something in the picture show. She had on her last year's soiree costume – with a little pink-gauze skirt that stuck out short and stiff, a pink body waist, pink dancing shoes, and even a little pink pocketbook. With her yellow hair she was all pink and white and gold – and so small and clean that it almost hurt to watch her.

(McCullers *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* 140-141)

Dissimilar than Mick in appearance and wealth, Baby floats in front of her as an image of Mick's inner desires – elegant, clean, a young girl who has a mother who praises her as the perfect representation of female. Mick notices this and hates this lack of womanhood in herself. As Gleeson-White writes, Mick's awkward reconciliation with her tomboy nature and her emerging womanhood leave her sexually confused, without a mother for direction: "For Mick Kelly, it is the loss of her virginity, again conjuring up the image of indelibly staining blood, which she understands as a visible marker of her entry to womanhood" (16). Mick

does not understand her entry into womanhood any more than she understands her sexual urges. Gleeson-White continues in suggesting “that the young women’s pubertal bodies are burdensome because of their visibility, and are seemingly inscribed with inner secrets signaling the onset of what much seem like the ‘sentence’ of womanhood. As a result, the young girls are clearly marked as different – different from what they once were, and different from the models of ideal womanhood displayed before them” (16). Mick’s own mother’s absence – she is too busy to notice Mick’s blooming womanhood – is emphasized by Baby’s presence. Unlike Baby’s family, Mick’s confusion stems from Mick’s mother’s inability to guide Mick as antebellum mothers of the Old South. And, like Frankie, Mick yearns for a representation of womanhood to mimic and a communal family environment. Instead, because of her family’s lack of wealth, Mick is cast into womanhood without a motherly guide; and, as she navigates her own sexuality, she feels like a “freak” who does not know how to enact the role of the “perfect” female.

The lack of parenting and familial structure result in both girls maintaining the company of “freaks” (Frankie’s closest friend is Berenice, a black woman with one blue eye, and Mick’s closest friends are the widowed café owner, Brennan, and the deaf mute, Mr. Singer) and participate in gender-bending activities, such as Frankie’s odd crush on her brother’s fiancé and Mick’s sexual confusion over her male neighbor. As Adams points out, McCullers sees her freaks quite differently than she does queers. In her stories, the freaks’ “function depends not upon their correspondence to any fixed identity but upon their

opposition to normative behaviors and social distinctions... Freaks are beings who make those queer tendencies visible on the body's surface" (552). Frankie and Mick are not *taught* to be females; thus they do not know how to identify themselves as such. Though neither young girl would be considered homosexual *per se*, each experiences her own gendered confusion, which stems from their awareness of their changing bodies and their ignorance of sexuality altogether. As representatives of freaks *and* queers, Adams emphasizes that "the queer refers loosely to acts and desires that confound the notion of a normative heterosexuality as well as to the homosexuality that is its abject byproduct" (552). Thus, Frankie and Mick suffer because of their Otherness, and their inability to be assimilated into mainstream society. Yet, their Otherness is a part of their grace and attractiveness; their very presence highlights the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of Southern society. Yes, they could strive to be Janice and Baby, but that would be boring. The dysfunction of being a freak and a queer is what makes Frankie and Mick so dynamic, and their confusion over domesticity and true womanhood resonates as a universal Southern experience.

As readers, we grit our teeth every time we see Frankie and Mick incorrectly react to a social situation or misinterpret domestic circumstances that are outside their realm of understanding. Frankie, in particular, relishes the thought of a wedding in *Member of the Wedding*, but does not know how to position herself within the tradition. Instead, she makes a frivolous purchase of a dress beyond her years and fantasizes about becoming a part of the bride and groom's family. Unknowingly, Frankie becomes a part of the deviant body and

has an unnatural obsession with a bride she barely knows. Frankie simply does not know any better, despite Berenice's advice. Berenice is not Frankie's mother, and Frankie often disregards Berenice's practicality. Instead, Frankie develops an awkward relationship between bodies, things, and abstraction which indicates Frankie's immaturity as well as her "freakishness." Frankie yearns for a "normalization" of herself, but her height, her fantastical notions, and her abrupt masculine behavior prevents her from fitting in to the social order of the community. Furthermore, McCullers humanizes Mick by highlighting her insecurities, her masculinities, and the sexual tension she feels in her changing body. The bridge between tomboyhood and feminine maturity is difficult for the young girls to maneuver because it complicates their easy childhood identity with the much more complicated identity of womanhood. As Gleeson-White notes, neither female views her changing body as a natural progression but as a complete break from her former self, a self with which she was once comfortable:

Mick Kelly's graffiti on the walls of a deserted house captures in essence the emerging eroticization of the youthful female body. In bold red and green chalk letters, she writes "a very bad word – PUSSY." This graffiti reveals that Mick is alert to social constructions and perceptions of women as sex objects, whose sole function is a sexual one. It is no wonder they young girls fearfully consider their changing bodies as freakish, for femaleness frequently loses any capacity for alternative conceptualism beyond (male) obscenity. (Gleeson-White 15)

As time progresses forward and their bodies and identities continually change, Mick “[feels] old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not” (McCullers *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* 237). Both girls’ lack of family only emphasizes their confusion as they are on the cusp of womanhood without adequate role models to show them how to cope as young women. And, as both young girls survive their changing sexuality by taking on the company of strangers, they stretch the boundaries of the home. McCullers balances both girls’ queer and freak tendencies with that of compassion for pitiable thirteen-year-old girls who are still searching for ways to fit into a world that does not seem to include them. Yet, as a tribute to the human spirit, they still seek out acceptance despite their doubts.

Situated in an era that placed large emphases on domesticity and family, the young girls are marginalized because they do not experience either. Instead, the girls create their own families and must reconcile their own morals with that of their inner society and the larger community outside the home. The young girls live within their own individualized perspectives with outside commentary from the sources they choose. Much of their activities and thoughts are not reflective of their families but of the society they keep. Though the young characters do not necessarily choose their communities consciously, their need for advice and acceptance is clear. As a result, the young ladies choose their own paths by choosing their own moral compasses for guidance. Once again, these conscious and subconscious choices disrupt the dysfunctional cycle of tradition and

domesticity, and the female characters show their ability to be individuals in the modern South.

This reconciliation of interior and exterior worlds extends O'Connor's character of Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." While Julian's inner and outer worlds illustrate a struggle between contemporary thoughts and a desire to move away from history, Frankie and Mick's inner and outer worlds reflect young girls who are very much adrift in a world they do not completely understand. In O'Connor's writing, she clearly assimilates the South in what can be deemed a remarkably harsh commentary on Southern ways of thinking and, in particular, Southern women. As Claire Katz writes in "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision," the characters' "inner and outer worlds merge in an imaginatively extended country, and in the fiction... [this] country is dominated by a sense of imminent destruction. From the moment the reader enters... [the South's] backwoods, he is poised on the edge of pervasive violence" (54). McCullers's fiction also represents images of this same violent country, and her dynamic characters too are simultaneously hideous and beautiful. While decay and destruction are a common theme in both authors' fictions, the authors see the beauty in rising above the harsh circumstances given. Both authors' characters realize their lack of control and create their own reality to escape the judgment of community. At the same time, as readers, we must question how different this modern South is from the traditional South. Consequently, while the characters enjoy brief moments of triumph and freedom, they are also simultaneously jarred

back to the reality by submitting to the societal expectations of Southern tradition, of their gender, and of their economic status.

By ending their fiction with tragedy – the death of Julian’s mother, Frankie’s submission to womanhood, the effect of Mr. Singer’s death on Mick – the authors show a world in which every time a character believes him or herself to have won, each is disappointed with loss. The children, the generation following the Civil War, must learn sacrifice in their own way; their world is remarkably changed from that of their parents and grandparents, but life is no less complicated. Some yearn for the simplicity of the past while others simply wish their lives to be different. Because of this, they blame the home, their namesakes, and birthrights they did not ask for. By rejecting the core of their identities, their weaknesses are all the more exacerbated, weaknesses they are forced to acknowledge. In summation, Claire Katz quotes O’Connor in saying, “To know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks” (66). Each character is hyperbolically aware of what he or she lacks, and each neglects to come to terms with the positivity of their individual experiences. Thus, O’Connor and McCullers write for a particular audience – the children that *are* Julian, Frankie, and Mick. These are the offspring of the Old South who also represent the New South’s 20th century dilemma of generations past and present. The stories are universal and reflect the “subsequent struggle to assert the magnitude of the individual against the engulfing enormity of a technological society which fragments social roles, shatters community, and splits off those qualities of warmth, intimacy and mutual dependence which nourish a sense of identity” (Katz 66). The violence of

O'Connor's and McCullers's worlds reflect the violence of the South they both loved yet hated.

The paradox of O'Connor and McCullers's fiction is that there is no satisfactory solution to these characters' problems or resolutions to their weaknesses. These characters must navigate the hostile aftermath of the Civil War, a war that irrevocably changed the way Southerners viewed themselves. The young characters express a wish to reclaim their bodies, their identities, and their homes, but those very items that define them are interlaced with history, societal expectations, and family. They are caught between masculine and feminine cultures, pride and defeat, ugliness and beauty. This hostile environment leaves the characters with a conundrum of society and self: Both authors wish to reverberate their characters' defiance of the past, but also want readers to empathize with their characters' need to be loved as they are. Unfortunately, this same plea is silenced by the louder cultural voice of Southern society. By rejecting their given gendered and cultured identities, the characters wish to progress further than those in the past who were defined by traditionalism and heredity. However, outside the shelter of home and family, their freakishness becomes heightened; their deformities and confusions emerge. Thus, as one generation moves into another, O'Connor and McCullers find that the next generation is only a simulacrum of the generation prior, suffocated by the same prejudices and watched by the same judgmental eye. However, both authors envision a progression that reflects their own lives; an awareness of a Southern identity one cannot escape but also a wish to come to terms with history, society,

and individualism. As McCullers leaves us in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, we must be illuminated by these “glimpse[s] of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who – one word – love” (306). And, it is these characters’ ability to struggle that we must applaud, and it is their ability to love that we must value. At the same time, we must be reminded that we cherish these qualities because there is so little else in the world these characters reside in.

Conclusion:

The Separate Selves of the Southern Belle:

“Why, You Couldn’t Love Me”

Catherine Clinton describes a gentleman’s visit to a Southern plantation in *The Plantation Mistress: Women’s World in the Old South*:

While visiting the home of an antebellum southern planter, one visitor was charmed by the grace and hospitality of the mistress. She was warm, gentle, and refined in her manner. He found her a genial hostess and a model of what he expected “the southern lady” to be. Having gained the permission of his host to stroll around the plantation alone during his visit, the stranger one day spied his host’s wife hard at work. The matron was considerable disarrayed; hoop removed from her skirt, she was bent over a salting barrel, up to her elbows in brine. As he was about to approach her, the gentleman realized the he faced a delicate situation. To fail to greet her might seem rude, but to acknowledge her would put the woman in an awkward position. He had essentially caught his hostess behind the scenes, accidentally violating the rules by wandering backstage. Thus he ambled by without a direct glance. (16)

This image illustrates a region that is “unwilling[] to cope with [the] reality” (Clinton 16) of the authentic and imperfect woman; instead, the antebellum Southern woman and her illusion of perfection is an image the South reinforces

and to destroy this image would destroy a carefully cultivated identity. This stoic unwillingness, represented by the image presented above, defines the characters in the writing of Chopin, Welty, O'Connor, and McCullers. And, the women themselves are a part of the cycle – they are conditioned to believe the dualistic identity and, ultimately, become proponents for it. The woman above does not want to be *seen* in such a state; she is expected to treasure her perfection and carefully refined appearance. The gentleman walked on not just for himself and his own illusions of the southern lady, but for the plantation mistress as well. Thus, the passing on of female representations, the cult of true womanhood, and expectations of domesticity characterized and complicated the antebellum Southern women's distinctness of identity. Mimicry of traditional roles defined the women's reality while individualistic urges were squelched in favor of the greater good of society, family, and their own womanly pride. Each writer created her characters in a different reality and region, but each world given was not one that complemented the women that occupied it. They simply endured and survived within the limited space given.

Consequently, the anxious underpinnings of the expected womanly façade illustrated society's insistence in separating fantasy and reality. Essentially, the women were to separate their superficial appearance from their interior *mess*. Because of this, the women maintained situationally-appropriate selves: their sexual self, their domestic self, their maternal self, and their marital self. Frustrated, the women found it difficult to play each attributed role as superbly as society's fictitious Southern belle. In post-antebellum society, women fragmented

their identities into very specific roles – man’s muse, husband’s supporter, household manager, and nurturing mother. This self-controlled exterior conflicted very much with their subconscious impulses for sexual lives and individuality. And it was these very impossibilities that were Southern women’s truths as well as their burden to pass on to the next generation of women, which perpetuated the cycle of the cult of true womanhood. Chopin, Welty, O’Connor, and McCullers experienced this very distinct form of cyclic dysfunction, and their fictions were a commentary upon an injustice that was always-already present in Southern households and in Southern society. However, as my research and analysis indicates, this search for identity left the authors with more questions than answers. In particular, is it possible for women to mesh the different aspects of their being into an organic identity? Or, is this notion as fantastical as the myth of the Southern belle?

The authors’ synecdoches of womanhood – Edna as the coquette; Ellen as the mother, Robbie as the wife; Laura as the next generation; and Frankie and Mick as the masculine representations of womanhood – illustrate their own confusion over the “correct” demonstration of complete womanhood. As observers of the Southern world they lived in, the authors recreated their own disjointed identities as characters searching for an distinctiveness in a patriarchal society that only promotes one image of woman; marginalized, their characters reflected those women who felt society’s judgments, labeling them as too masculine, too freakish, or too whoreish. And, ironically, as the females continued into the mid-20th century, they relied on past feminine representations as their

only guide; the characters are nostalgic for the former simplistic image of female, wishing that the path of womanhood was less complicated than the one laid out before them. None of the authors here had answers for their characters; but, at the same time, they saw each female character's necessity in building a new regional and national consciousness of woman. They perceived the future possibility of reconciling the celebrated female with the more progressive notions of feminism. In many ways, they set their characters adrift in hopes the doubts will turn to confidence and Otherness into acceptance.

In the post-Civil War South, the identities attributed to 20th century women were very much inherited as a byproduct of the detrimental defeat that changed the South's character. However, as Scott notes in *The Southern Lady*, the largest asset women gained from the Civil War was the recognition of their own ability to survive without a dependence on men: After the "ideal husband went off to war," he returned in defeat, "becom[ing] increasingly bitter through the years. His 'superior strength,' at least in the context of the postwar years, had turned out to be an illusion. [D]efeat and postwar conditions in the South undermined patriarchy" (96). The women no longer depended on men for protection and learned how to fend for themselves and their children during the men's absence. Though Scott makes a valid point on women's capability to endure, surviving is not living. With this newfound freedom, women were overlooked as victims of the war as well; they were stripped of their former identities as antebellum Southerners and were expected to transition into roles that were starkly different than the ones they were accustomed to. Conversely, as the New Woman emerged

in the 20th century, the Southern women found that old habits die hard. They reverted to the old stereotypes because they were unsure how to mesh the several roles to which they were accustomed into something fresh and new. As women progressed, navigated their identities, and found their voices, the New Woman of the South gave way to new representations and more contemporary voices. Though women, on many occasions, still must navigate the limited space given, they will begin to redefine the myth of the South's idyllic woman and, instead of *ideal*, the woman will become *real*.

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