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# Lopsided, Scarred, and Squint-Eyed: Ugly Women in the Work of Southern Women Writers

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LOPSIDED, SCARRED, AND SQUINT-EYED: UGLY WOMEN IN THE  
WORK OF SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
1    THEORIZING UGLINESS.....	7
2    THE MEDUSA STARES BACK: UGLY WOMEN IN THE WORK OF EUDORA WELTY.....	48
3    THE UGLY PLOT.....	79
4    CHOOSING TO BE UGLY.....	128
CONCLUSION.....	156
WORKS CITED.....	160
VITA.....	168

## **ABSTRACT**

The ubiquity of ugly female characters in the work of southern women calls into question what W. J. Cash termed “gyneolatry,” the worship of the beautiful white woman upon which so much of southern ideology has been based. If the South functions as an internal other for the nation, then examining this fiction’s multiplicity of ugly women illuminates the ways in which women defy not only the norms of southern gender but also those of the larger American culture, in which the southern woman often acts as a representation of the South in general. By considering ugliness as a category separate from others with which it has heretofore been conflated, my project illuminates the ways in which characters who fail to live up to the rigid expectations of their gender reveal the productive potential of such failure. Though Flannery O’Connor wrote that southern literature is rife with freaks because only southerners were able to recognize the freakish, I maintain that writers such as O’Connor created so many ugly women as their own way of “being ugly.” These authors utilize the “ugly plot” instead of the expected courtship or marriage plots to imagine alternative futures for southern women who fall out of the marriage market. As American culture often relies upon regionalism in order to bolster national identity, viewing the southern novel through the lens of the ugly plot reveals that texts written by southern women not only speak back to southern ideologies, but call into question national paradigms of femininity.

## INTRODUCTION

We often forget that the first line of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* is, "Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful" (1). While the iconic beauty of actress Vivien Leigh is at odds with this description, the characterization of the less-than-beautiful southern woman is surprisingly common in the work of twentieth and twenty-first century women writers. In fact, in contrast to popular ideas of beautiful southern belles, the fiction of these southern women writers contains a preponderance of women described specifically as ugly: differing from the norm enough in a negative way to catch the attention while simultaneously repulsing the viewer. In *Lopsided, Scarred, and Squint-Eyed: Ugly Women in the Work of Southern Women Writers*, I argue that the ubiquity of ugly female characters in this fiction calls into question what southern scholar W. J. Cash termed "gyneolatry," the worship of the beautiful white woman upon which so much of southern ideology has been based (86). The purity and protection of middle and upper class white women have been evoked when defending not only retrogressive gender roles in the region, but also its history of Jim Crow laws, lynching, and other race-based violence and practices of exclusion. I demonstrate how southern women—particularly those writing after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment—have consistently used the figure of the ugly woman as an act of rebellion against this ideology which insisted upon limited roles for women. If the South, as many scholars observe, functions as an internal other for the nation, then examining the multiplicity of ugly women in this fiction illuminates the ways in which women defy not only the expectations of Southern gyneolatry but also those of the larger American culture, in which the southern woman often acts as a representation of the South in general.

Ugliness as a category is important because, unlike more extreme categories such as the grotesque, ugliness is quite everyday; it differs just enough from normal to catch the eye. We stare at ugliness because it represents some sort of disorder or violation of expectation. We try to make sense of what we are seeing: what is that? What makes that different? Scholarship which has addressed the figure of the ugly woman has conflated ugliness with other categories, such as the grotesque and the freakish. However, by differentiating the more quotidian characterization of “ugly” from more extreme descriptors, my project argues that ugliness has a specific function in the work of southern women writers: ugliness marks those who for various reasons are not suitable for the expected roles of marriage and motherhood. In addition to the acknowledged narrative structures of the courtship and marriage plots, I propose that, in the work of these authors, there also exists a third element, which I call the *ugly plot*. By taking them outside of the marriage market, the ugly plot offers women ways of living that are alternative to marriage, acknowledging women who “don’t count,” whose class status, race, ethnicity, or rebellion against the status quo threaten the stability of the dominant, white southern culture. I argue that the ugly plot not only reveals the limits of the structures underlying the seemingly requisite roles of wife and mother, but also provides a space for imagining alternative household configurations and ways of living.

Not only does the ugly plot demonstrate that there are a variety of ways of living alternative to the dominant marriage market, but it also highlights the fact that there are a variety of marriage markets. While a traditional courtship plot such as John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* primarily acknowledges the dominant, white, upper class marriage market, works as disparate as Katherine Anne Porter’s *The Old Order* and Alice

Walker's *The Color Purple* which deploy the ugly plot acknowledge that there are multiple marriage markets, interlocking and yet distinct from each other. Depending upon factors such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, these markets rely upon each other in order to mutually reinforce these boundaries. For example, as I discuss in Chapter Three, in *The Old Order* the juxtaposition of the wedding of the young, white, upper class belle with that of her young, black slave illuminates the ways in which these marriage economies are simultaneously exclusive and interdependent.

Generally speaking, the beauty standards in the twentieth-century South which permeate these texts are based on whiteness. Blaine Roberts claims that, "What it meant to be beautiful in the Jim Crow and civil rights South was determined largely by the presence of a racial other" (7), and it is such standards of white beauty which are generally upheld by these texts. As I discuss in Chapter Three, in texts such as *The Color Purple* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, markers of blackness (kinky hair or darker skin, for example) are often invoked as characteristic of ugliness. However, whiteness does not assure that a woman is evaluated as a beauty; many other factors mediate such a judgment. And in fact, an ugly plot containing a female character described as ugly—especially one who has consciously chosen to be ugly—often highlights the role that privilege plays in the ugly plot. As I discuss in Chapter Four, a woman must have access to material resources outside of marriage in order to choose to opt out of any of the marriage markets.

My first chapter, "Theorizing Ugliness," constructs a theoretical framework for my analysis of the use of ugliness in these works by southern women writers. First, I consider the specifically southern dimension of ugliness. As "being ugly" is a phrase with

a regionally specific definition (meaning misbehaving or being rude), I argue that the ubiquity of ugly women in these works functions as a refusal of the pedestal. Beginning with a primarily Foucauldian understanding of the body as a product of its specific history, I explain the ways in which ugliness not only allows female characters to defy specifically southern norms of femininity, but allows them a spectrum of relationships to the marriage economy, including invisibility, shock, and productive modes of failure. Finally, I consider how ugliness differs from the visual categories with which it is often conflated. Unlike ugliness, descriptors such as the grotesque, abject, or freakish imply forms of monstrousness and deviance which place them well outside the bounds of the normal. I discuss the ways in which these categories inform my understanding of ugliness as well as the importance of ugliness separately from these categories as well as less extreme ones, such as the homely or the plain.

Chapter Two, “The Medusa Stares Back,” examines the deployment of ugliness in the short fiction of Eudora Welty. Utilizing archival research from the Welty collection at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, I consider the recurrence of Medusa imagery in Welty’s work as a new paradigm for understanding the interactive dimension of ugliness, arguing that this imagery thematizes the intersubjective nature of ugliness. Unlike more traditional readings of Medusa in Welty’s work, I focus on the Medusa figure herself rather than on the effect of Medusa on her victims and Perseus’s ultimate victory over her. Though Medusa herself is monstrous, Welty uses Medusa imagery less to portray monstrous femininity than to construct an interactive model of ugliness and its effects on both the viewer and the viewed. The Medusan paradigm of intersubjective



ugliness highlights the centrality of fascination—that ugliness has a dimension of power to it—in this process.

In fact, the frequent appearance of these characters in the work of southern women writers affects the very nature of southern narrative form. In Chapter Three, “The Ugly Plot,” I argue that these characters form the basis of what I propose as the ugly plot in the work of southern women writers. Complicating the courtship plot/wedding plot dichotomy observed by Elizabeth Freeman, I propose that there also exists this third element. Though southern literature is replete with teleological courtship plots such as John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* and multitudinous marriage plots such as Carson McCullers’ *Member of the Wedding* or even William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, I demonstrate how authors such as Margaret Mitchell, Marjorie Kinan Rawlings, Katherine Anne Porter, and Alice Walker deploy this ugly plot narrative structure. Dramatizing ugliness as representing a productive mode of failure, the ugly plot highlights women whose identities represent what many queer theorists characterize as illegible, and as such, challenge the stability of the dominant, white southern culture that the South’s gyneolatrous traditions attempt to uphold.

In Chapter 4, “Choosing To Be Ugly,” I focus on one particular category of the ugly plot, one in which women make the conscious choice to be ugly in order to opt out of the expectations of marriage, motherhood, and passive femininity. Starting with the southern expression “Don’t be ugly,” I argue that the frequent appearance of female characters in the work of southern women is itself a form of “being ugly” on the part of the authors. By drawing upon the counterplot of ugliness as a choice, southern women imagine alternatives to marriage and motherhood, undoing the male homosocial triangle

and the homosocial underpinnings of southern society. The authors in this chapter are those who engage in this politics of dissent through various kinds of conscious choices about female appearance. In the works of authors such as Flannery O'Connor, Zora Neale Hurston, Lee Smith, and Helen Ellis, characters choose to appear ugly, actively seeking out an ugly appearance through their clothing, grooming, posture, facial expressions, and even the way they walk.

More than simply engaging in a politics of dissent, I believe that these recurring figures highlight the narrow vision of gyneolatry which for so long has been considered as fundamental to (at least twentieth-century) southern ideology. By considering ugliness as a category separate from these others with which it has heretofore been conflated, *Lopsided, Scarred, and Squint-Eyed: Ugly Women in the Work of Southern Women Writers* illuminates the ways in which these characters who fail to live up to the rigid expectations of their gender show how such failure has productive potential. Though Flannery O'Connor claimed that southern literature is rife with freaks because only southerners were still able to recognize the freakish, I maintain that writers such as O'Connor created so many ugly women as their own way of "being ugly." These authors call upon the ugly plot in order to imagine alternative futures for southern women who fall out of the marriage market.

## CHAPTER 1 THEORIZING UGLINESS

One of the most important aspects of the turn to the “new southern studies” at the beginning of the twenty-first century was a renewed emphasis on the significance of gender to our understanding of Southern literature. In the preface to their special issue of *American Literature* on *Violence, the Body, and “The South,”* Houston A. Baker and Dana D. Nelson proposed a “new Southern studies” represented in part by works such as Patricia Yaeger’s *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* and Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson’s collection *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*. In particular, new southern studies brought attention to the significance of the grotesque female body in southern literature: Yaeger importantly focused on “the prevalence in southern women’s writing of flesh that has been ruptured or riven by violence, of fractured, excessive bodies telling us something that diverse southern cultures don’t want us to say.” She wished to “examine the importance of irregular models of the body within an extremely regulated society and to focus on figures of damaged, incomplete, or extravagant characters described under the rubrics peculiarly suited to southern histories in which the body is simultaneously fractioned and overwhelmed” (xiii). New Southern Studies worked to complicate the understanding of the grotesque as merely as “decadent southern form,” as many had previously considered it (xiii).

Yaeger is certainly not alone in her focus on the significance of such “fractured, excessive” bodies. Sarah Gleeson-White, for example, identifies what she describes as a “peculiarly southern form of ugliness” in the work of Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O’Connor,” arguing that “these freakish women that so loudly dominate

these stories engage in a politics of dissent” (46). However, though ugliness has been a part of these discussions, when ugliness has been considered, it has been conflated with other categories, such as the grotesque and the abject. In this dissertation, I argue that ugliness should be considered as a discrete, separate category, because of its very ordinariness.

Admittedly, these are slippery categories: at what point does the plain slide into the homely? Where exactly do we draw the line between the ugly and the grotesque? Throughout this project, I try to remain cognizant of how these characterizations overlap and often inform each other. However, the significance of my commentary lies in its *emphasis* on the ugly rather than the grotesque or other categories. While plenty has been written about the ramifications of Joy-Hulga’s prosthetic leg in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” from the perspective of disability studies, or even the sort of “freak studies” represented by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, I am much more interested in the fact that she changes her name to Hulga because of its ugly sound, insists upon frowning and wearing ugly clothes, and walks in such a way as to emphasize her limp and make an “ugly-sounding” entrance each morning (267).

In these works, ugliness functions as a marker of defiance against social standards and expectations. Similar to the abject and the grotesque, it calls attention to the boundaries of normativity in society, in a sense reinforcing and reifying these boundaries. However, unlike the abject and grotesque, which are more excessive, hyperbolic, and—at least in the case of the grotesque—contain possibilities for connection to the sublime and the explosion of boundaries, the ugly does not so much explode or reinforce boundaries as it does threaten, irritate, and call them into question. Particularly under the rubric of

the twentieth- and twenty-first century beauty-industrial complex, which approaches the discipline of the proper body as a duty to be enforced, the figure of the ugly woman functions as a figure of rebellion or moral failure.

More importantly, ugliness, as it fails to conform to social norms, forces a more direct interaction between viewer and viewed than does the more conventional body. Ugliness refuses to be dismissed: by forcing an interaction, the ugly woman denies the possibility of mere objectification, as one judged as beautiful might. Rather, as the ugly body requires explanation, a narration to bridge the gap between expectation and reality, the ugly woman resists the object position and instead insists upon her own position as subject. Opening up the possibility of sexuality which is not object-choice based, this process not only has the potential to threaten the viewer who is forced to engage in ways which call attention to her own vulnerability, but also offers potential empowerment for the woman being viewed, as she resists passive objectification. Even if her ugliness is more a form of passive dissent than active rebellion, it nevertheless provokes a reaction in the viewer. Ultimately, the figure of the ugly woman functions as an important site of potential resistance for women against the nearly irresistible interpellation into the beauty industrial complex, strict southern gender roles, and their hegemonic value strictures.

### **The Interactive Nature of Ugliness**

Ugliness, like beauty, is an aesthetic judgment which results from an interaction between a viewer and one who is viewed. In *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson focuses on this interactivity, specifically at the interactive aspects of staring. She asks why we stare, what happens when we stare, and how staring affects both the

starer as well as the one stared at. First, she breaks down what happens when we stare, noting that at its core, “Staring is an ocular response to what we don’t expect to see” (3). More importantly, she observes that “We stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what’s going on and demands the story . . . . This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making” (3). It is the narrative and “meaning-making” aspects of staring which are most significant in the judgment of ugliness. Ugly women grab our attention in ways that more conventional-looking women do not—they deviate from the norm enough to be noticeable. They require an explanation for why they look the way they do, what has scarred them or pushed them outside of the normal.

Similarly, in *On Beauty and Being Just*, philosopher Elaine Scarry sees beauty as emerging from the interaction between the perceiver and the one perceived as beautiful. To Scarry, it is in this interaction that the power of beauty is felt, as both parties provide a sense of life for each other. Beauty makes the heart beat faster, makes the perceiver feel alive. Describing a Pygmalion-like paradigm, Scarry claims that the attention of the gaze bestows life upon the beautiful. To Scarry, what marks someone as what Garland-Thomson would characterize as “stareable” is that they deviate from the expected norm or average (in both positive and negative ways—beauty and ugliness share the quality of deviating significantly enough from the norm to be notable). In fact, she emphasizes the fact that, “Beauty always takes place in the particular, and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down” (18). She also explains that typically, individual concepts of the beautiful arise from what she paradoxically explains as a “composite of particulars” (19). In other words, beauty results from a comparison to our own individual

accretion of the particular details and traits of the people we have encountered, while keeping intact a sense of individuality, rather than the kind of blurring together which an average might imply. And by extension, ugliness is that which is outside of the “standard deviation” of conventional appearance.

This seems to speak to Nancy Etcoff’s claim in *Survival of the Prettiest* that our ideas of beauty are an average of what we have seen before: “The mechanism that stores and averages faces is innate and universal, but the composite it forms is dependent on the faces it sees. This means that in a multicultural world people’s internal averages might begin to reflect the universal face” (146). In this model, the aesthetic judgment of beauty reflects an individual viewer’s singular history, reflecting an average of those seen before—but more than simply an average, there is still a focus on particulars.<sup>1</sup> In Scarry’s specification, it is the particular which is just as important as the composite. There must be something extra on which the viewer is “caught” in order to facilitate the kind of interaction required for a judgment of beautiful to occur.

However, being “caught” in this way does not only happen with the beautiful. Garland-Thomson explains that, in any visual encounter, the brain must sift through a riot of sensory input, a process she refers to as “orientation”: “Orientation is the attempt to impose a frame of reference on the chaos of a visual field by integrating what is unknown into what is already known . . . . [requiring] scrutiny to impose a logical narrative on what at first glance seems to be random visual stimuli” (20). Data which does not align easily with expected schemata or does not neatly fit into a logical narrative (because it deviates

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<sup>1</sup> My use of “average” here is not quite correct—in mathematical terms, beauty would be not so much a mean value, which is based on a sum total, but rather a median value, which keeps the individual values of the components intact in its consideration.

from the norm) causes the need for additional data to be gathered, through further gazing or staring. Whether someone is missing a limb, is scarred, or has an excessively large nose, we stop and stare, trying to figure out why she is so different from us.

As I am interested in the interactive nature of what happens when we encounter ugliness, I will briefly discuss different conceptions of how this interaction is enacted. While Scarry uses “gazing” and “staring” interchangeably, Garland-Thomson not only distinguishes between the two terms, but she also differentiates between different kinds of staring. Gazing, according to Garland-Thomson, is “an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim” (9). In her discussion of different kinds of staring, she differentiates between “the blank stare, the baroque stare, the separated stare, the engaged stare, the stimulus-driven stare, the goal-driven stare, and the dominating stare” (9). All of these different modes, however, whether gazing or staring, has at its heart “the matter of appearance, of the ways we see each other and the ways we are seen” (9).

Despite the issues of power at play in staring, Garland-Thomson is most interested in what she describes as staring’s “generative potential” (9). This “generative potential” is one which results from an extended encounter:

If an encounter can be sustained, staring asks questions. And those questions open up stories. To stare is to ask, ‘Why are you different from me?’ and ‘What happened to you?’ To observe the stare is to ask “Why are you different from me?” and “What is his interest?” To undergo the stare is to ask “What is attracting her?” or “What is wrong with me?” Each of these implicit questions is the nub of a narrative about who we are, how we fit into the human community, or how we understand each other. As such, scenes of staring can generate new stories. (95)

Garland-Thomson not only describes the possibilities for meaning-making during such encounters, but she importantly highlights the ways in which these possibilities exist for both the starrer and the stared-at; it affects them both. Garland-Thomson characterizes



what happens during staring as an interactive moment of possibility: “Staring,” she explains, “makes things happen between people” (33).

Among the myriad paradigms of staring Garland-Thomson explores are two opposing ones which are relevant. First, there is what she calls a “Foucauldian” mode of staring, which builds upon Foucault’s Panopticon theory of discipline.<sup>2</sup> The Foucauldian paradigm is one in which the threat of the stare is internalized: “By institutionalizing the dominating stare, the idea of the Panopticon tames Medusa, stripping away her petrifying stare and replacing it with the banal surveillance camera we’ve all come to accept . . . . Surveillance differs, however, from interpersonal face-to-face staring in that it is controlling, static, and exercised by the few on the many” (43). In other words, this is the kind of staring which implies expectations; this kind of staring expresses judgment based on society’s standards.

An alternative to the Foucauldian mode is what Garland-Thompson refers to as Sartre’s “parable of interpersonal shaming through domination staring,” in which “[b]eing caught staring is as dangerous as being stared at.” Acknowledging the interactive nature of these staring configurations, Garland-Thomson explains that “This scene asserts the perversity of staring and the anxiety of being a staree.” The Sartrean configuration complicates the Foucauldian binary configuration (in which the stare is unidirectional, going from the starrer to the one being stared at) by making the starrer also at risk of being caught staring—in other words, being in the double bind of being stared

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault used the analogy of a panopticon-styled jail—round, with a darkened-glass guard tower in the middle—in which inmates had to assume that all of their activities were seen by the guards, whether or not this was actually the case at any given moment. Such assumed surveillance leads to constant self-surveillance and behavior modification among the inmates. It was Foucault’s contention that a similar mechanism of self-surveillance occurs in society as well. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

at while staring, which Garland-Thomson characterizes as “simultaneous domination and subjection” (43).

### **A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness**

This intersubjective paradigm of staring at an ugly person is complicated further when we take the regional meaning of the word “ugly” into account, as it adds an important behavioral dimension to this schema. Ugliness has a unique meaning when used in the American South: “being ugly” is a southern phrase meaning behaving rudely. That ugliness has such a regionally specific dimension which is tied to behavior highlights the function of ugliness in the work of southern women writers: ugliness marks those who for various reasons are not suitable for the expected roles of marriage and motherhood. Ugliness often marks women who “don’t count,” whose class status, race, ethnicity, rebellion against the status quo, or other undesirable characteristics threaten the stability of the dominant, white southern culture that the South’s gynelatrous traditions attempt to uphold. As the warning “don’t be ugly” implies, southern ugliness is code for that which upsets the status quo, whether visually or through inappropriate behavior.

Ugliness as a descriptor, then, marks women as inappropriate and disruptive in ways that other negative descriptors do not. Unlike more dramatic signifiers—such as the freakish, monstrous, abject, and grotesque—ugliness is remarkable in its very ordinariness. Women who are described in these excessive terms can, on the one hand, pose an overt threat to the status quo. On the other hand, the very excess of their appearance can also render them less or other than human, thus negating any threat they

might pose. We should look at female characters who are characterized as ugly separate from characters who are described in other negative valences because ugliness has a specific southern meaning. Even adjectives such as plain and homely, which one might be tempted to consider as synonymous with ugly, actually signify quite the opposite. While ugliness marks women who are unfit for marriage, plainness and homeliness are in fact markers of fitness for traditionally feminine roles. A truly beautiful woman is not ideal marriage material: first, in the long tradition of cuckoldry anxiety, her beauty stands as a constant threat to her marriage; and second, beauty is distracting—it would interfere with the running of a household. Instead, to be successful within the southern marriage economy, a woman’s appearance should reflect her submissive nature, through her plain—or even more appropriately, *homely*—appearance.

### **Ugliness as a Refusal of the Disciplining Pedestal**

A woman’s appearance is not only a symbolic representation of her identity, but is also a physical manifestation of her experiences. Low socioeconomic status, for example, has material effects on the body, demonstrating what Foucault means in his discussion of the body in *Discipline and Punish* as “caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions” (11). He describes the economic dimension of the body’s subjection in this field where “power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (25). According to Foucault,

This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use . . . . This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without

involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order. (26)

Such subjection arises from material forces, and such subjection has visible effects on the bodies under its jurisdiction.

The ugliness which marks the female characters in my study distinguishes them from other female characters who, in contrast, do fulfill the expected roles of wife and mother. Following Tolstoy, in these works beautiful women are often alike; ugly women are often ugly in their own way.<sup>3</sup> What we understand as “ugliness” is often history rendered visible: stretch marks, scars, wrinkles, and posture are all potentially revelatory of woman’s life. Life leaves marks on their bodies which can be read as an archive. Much of what is read on the body as ugliness is often the result of the material conditions of lifetimes of hardship and suffering. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), for example, Zora Neale Hurston describes people on the muck as being “ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor” (131).

The material conditions of poverty, privation, and demanding physical labor have very real effects on the body—and in turn, on a woman’s appearance. Even in *Gone with the Wind* (1936), Scarlett’s hands reveal the reality of her post-war life at Tara, when Rhett gasps at seeing “not Scarlett O’Hara’s soft, white, dimpled, helpless” hand, but rather one “rough from work, brown with sunburn, splotched with freckles. The nails were broken and irregular, there were heavy calluses on the cushions of the palm, a half-

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, recent studies seems to support this, as they suggest that less attractive faces are more distinctive and memorable than faces considered to be attractive or even beautiful (Wiese, Altmann, and Schweinberger 31).

healed blister on the thumb. The red scar which boiling fat had left last month was ugly and glaring” (397). Scarlett’s changed life of labor can be read in her “ugly” hands.<sup>4</sup>

Susan Bordo takes Foucault’s explication of power and material forces and connects it to the expectations of feminine appearance in the United States. After explaining that, “Following Foucault, we must first abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another; we must instead think of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain” (“The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity” 92). Bordo claims that through these practices, “we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, insufficiency, of never being good enough. At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death” (“The Body and Reproduction of Femininity” 91). Within this Foucauldian framework, ugliness is a dynamic, emergent property, creating the dynamic body as an archive over time—as we see in Scarlett’s hands, for example.

Such a Foucauldian understanding of the nature of ugliness highlights the importance of its intersubjective nature, which Erving Goffman emphasizes in his discussion of the connection between ugliness and stigma. According to Goffman, ugliness “has its initial and prime effect during social situations, threatening the pleasure we might otherwise take in the company of its possessor . . . . we may discriminate against him here simply because of the feelings we have about looking at him. Ugliness, then, is a stigma that is focused in social situations” (50). In her discussion of what she

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<sup>4</sup> Although, she maintains enough of her earlier class privilege and the privilege currently accorded her family name that she can hide her hands with gloves and still pass as someone who does not know manual labor, as her subsequent marriage to Frank Kennedy demonstrates.

refers to as “the female grotesque,”<sup>5</sup> Mary Russo similarly calls attention to “the careful calibration of anatomical differences and body types which characterize disciplines of bodily production in consumer society; in terms, that is, of the continuing market segmentation which requires different models for different markets and accordingly sorts and measures one female body or body part from and against another” (23). As much of what is characterized as attractive involves discipline and policing of boundaries, ugliness is a practice of freedom. The power of ugliness lies in its ability to interrupt the power flow within these “networks of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain.” The potential for resistance which ugliness possesses arises from its ability to threaten the pleasure that arises from such networks.<sup>6</sup>

### **Shock and Failure as Effects of Ugliness**

Ugliness has an additional political function in these works, as it allows authors to respond to various kinds of backlash reactions to political success achieved by women, like what Bordo describes in her observation of 1980s cultural backlash to second wave feminism. According to Bordo, “the contemporary preoccupation with appearance, which still affects women far more powerfully than men . . . may function as a backlash phenomenon, reasserting existing gender configurations against any attempts to shift or

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<sup>5</sup> As I have already noted in my discussion of scholars such as Sarah Gleeson-White, Russo’s use of the word “grotesque” similarly conflates variety of negative descriptors including ugliness. Nevertheless, her observations about the place of the female body within consumer society are quite relevant to my analysis.

<sup>6</sup> As I discuss below, I have set the parameters for my project beginning with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, a moment in history in which we see new networks of power emerging for women. The backlash which arose from such new avenues of power may explain to some extent the preponderance of ugly female characters who emerge in the writing of women after 1920, especially in the more conservative cultures of the American South, as these characters provide a site of resistance to such backlash.

transform power relations” (“Reproduction of Femininity” 91-2). As the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919 is arguably one of the greatest American feminist achievements of the twentieth century, I have limited the scope of my study to works published after this date. Not only are women full legal subjects in this period, but in the wake of the kinds of backlashes that Bordo describes, the authors in my study create ugly female characters in order to refuse and speak back to these heightened expectations. As many in the South have advocated for the re-emergence of traditional gender configurations to silence unruly women, women writing in the American South have continued to create unruly women who speak and act out, refusing the roles which are expected of them through their very unruliness.

The intersubjective nature of appearance allows ugliness to function as an active rebellion as it often evokes a visceral reaction in its viewers. Many not only express disgust but also claim to experience real harm at the sight of ugliness, as hyperbolic exclamations such as “I’m blind!” and “Oh, my eyes!” in response to, say, a fat woman in a bikini, demonstrate. In fact, throughout the twentieth century, many laws known as “ugly laws”—“ordinances [which] bar ‘unsightly’ citizens from public places because they are in fact too sightly”—have been enacted in order to protect people from such perceived harm (Garland-Thomson 73). By attempting to prevent encounters with bodies which deviate too far from the norm, what these laws actually try to provide is protection from a confrontation with the realization of bodily vulnerability. Such confrontation is at the heart of the deployment of ugliness by southern women in their work. Rather than rely on the grotesque, or the gargantuan, or other excessive registers, the ugly allows writers to express this mode of affect in response to the incoherence of the (southern)

world and the difficulty many women have in fitting into it—or their lack of interest in fitting in.

Key to this reaction is the element of shock which ugliness offers. We see such shock at ugly women registered in many of these stories, whether the unnamed narrator of Welty's "A Memory," who feels a "peak of horror" at seeing ugly, fat women in bathing suits (97) or Richard Burlage in Lee Smith's *Oral History*, who is "stunned" at seeing how "hugely, grossly fat" Justine Poole has grown since he last saw her (219). Laurent Berlant and Lee Edelman consider the affective quality of such shock in *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Considering the ways that "delegitimated being[s]" can "surviv[e] dominations of power" (7), they emphasize the importance of shock as a strategy of resistance. Ugliness has the potential to provide this kind of effective shock proposed by Berlant and Edelman: "Even in its everyday form . . . the shock we encounter retains the *potential* to undo our faith in our ongoingness, our sense of our consistency as subjects (however inconsistently conceived), and to obtrude with an incoherence we cannot master by finding it comic or resolve through the judgment of shame" (8, emphasis in original). Berlant and Edelman's focus on what they call "sex without optimism" builds upon Edelman's earlier work on "queer negativity" and his rejection of "reproductive futurism." In all of this work, Edelman generally expresses a suspicion of progressive narratives and instead focuses on what happens in places of failure or refusal. However, instead of characterizing these moments as particularly transgressive or subversive, they instead "attend to the possibility of 'making peace with' or 'being in the room with' . . . the 'mess' of affective intensities by engaging that mess in its ordinariness instead of as



inherently traumatic” (64). Similarly, ugliness allows authors to engage with problems in southern culture at the level of the ordinary, rather than in more hyperbolic registers.

The concept of queer negativity (as theorized by both Edelman as well as Judith Halberstam) provides a generative framework from which to consider ugliness. According to Edelman, the value of queer negativity “resides in its challenges to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* 6). My own feminist analysis of ugliness parallels that of Halberstam’s description of queer negativity, in which it represents a form of “feminist politics that issues not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or becoming women but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy” (124). Even as a moderate refusal, I wish to engage with ugliness in its ordinariness, rather than in more extreme, grotesque iterations, especially in its capacity for “undoing,” a concept discussed by both Edelman and Halberstam.

Edelman’s discussion with Berlant in *Sex, or the Unbearable* is particularly appropriate for my consideration of ugliness, and not only because ugliness has been a marker of sexuality in Western literature at least as far back as the Wife of Bath’s gapped teeth.<sup>7</sup> Ugliness, like sexuality, reveals a “mess of affective intensities” connected to the corporeal and calls attention to that which is not easily controlled. In her unruliness, the ugly woman is often she who cannot be contained. Ugliness often describes women who are excessive: fat, hairy, or even loud. In this way, the inclusion of ugly women within a narrative calls attention to the real complexities of life. In fairy tales, the ugly stepsister

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Bauer’s discussion of ugliness as a marker of sexuality in the work of American women writers.

must be disposed of; she cannot be rewarded in the end. Ugly women embody the excesses outside of happily ever after.

Focusing on female characters who fall outside of such “happily ever after”-structured courtship and marriage plots has allowed many southern women writers, as I will discuss in chapter 3, to imagine alternatives to the marriage market, what I characterize as the ugly plot. Though some works—such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), which ends with the ugly woman Celie having found her way to artistic expression within a household of her extended family—imagine such alternatives as happy endings, not all of the endings in these works are necessarily what I would characterize as utopian. However, Berlant and Edelman’s discussion of the meaning of the utopian with regard to negativity and failure does echo my understanding of these imagined alternatives. For Berlant, a primary characteristic of the utopian—and why she characterizes her own perspective as utopian—is that it contains the possibility for transformation through a willingness to tolerate difference. Describing Berlant’s “utopian perspective,” Edelman explains it as

this belief that the conditions supporting abjection, aggression, and domination by norms are susceptible to transformation in such a way that won’t dramatize their negativity by defensively *disavowing* that negativity but might enable us, instead, to accept it as part of our openness to the world. Difference, conceived as “benign variation,” might thus give rise to a vitalizing experience of engagement and curiosity rather than encouraging a fearful retreat to normativity’s fortified bunkers. (64)

Admittedly, I am loath to characterize the ugly female characters in my study as utopian, even in Berlant’s usage: ugliness in these works functions as more than simply “benign variation.”

However, I do think that there may be some sort of utopian impulse at work in the humorous aspects of ugly female characters. Ugly characters in works such as Helen

Ellis's *Eating the Cheshire Cat* or Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" evoke a complex affective response in readers, including sympathy, shock, and amusement. The combination of amusement and sympathy allows the reader to reach a state of openness like that described by Berlant and Edelman. The affective potential in these characters permits readers to reevaluate the myths of southern female beauty and consider not only different understandings of the role of women in the South but also the very role of the South itself within the nation. It's important to note, however, that the ugly women in these texts remain ugly—these are not ugly duckling stories which end with swan-like transformations. Instead, they encourage us to imagine a world in which there is a place for ugly women.

Certainly, many southern women have made explicit the connections between southern beauty ideals and with submissive femininity. In "No Place for You, My Love," for example, Eudora Welty provides a description of "the Southern Look," which she describes as a "Southern mask—of life-is-a-dream irony" (562). Even historian Anne Firor Scott discusses the concept of the southern lady in aesthetic terms, reporting that, "In 1925 a North Carolina woman thought the image of the lady died when the suffrage amendment was passed," and quotes the woman as claiming, "The pedestal has crashed . . . it is broken thank God beyond repair." Scott claims, however, that "It lived on, not as a complete prescription for woman's life but as a *style* which as often as not was a façade to ward off criticism of unladylike independence or to please men. It gave *an illusory uniformity to the southern female personality*" (225, emphasis added). Here, Scott draws a straight line between the expectations of southern female beauty and what she identifies as an *illusion* of compliance to conservative gender norms. Many southern women have

used the aesthetic style of “southern ladyhood”—markers which admittedly change over time, from Scarlett’s protected, pale skin to the Ya-Ya Sisterhood’s iodine-enhanced suntans—in order to *give the appearance* of adherence to gender norms, whether they are actually in favor of these norms or not.

Elizabeth Grosz and Sandra Bartky both address the significance of these material markers of femininity in their analyses of gender roles and expectations of appearance. Importantly, Grosz disagrees with what she characterizes as Bartky’s contention that women’s use of markers of femininity such as makeup and clothing to “signal women’s acceptance of and absorption into prevailing patriarchal paradigms.” Rather, Grosz points out that,

The practices of femininity can readily function in certain contexts that are difficult to ascertain in advance, as modes of guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes, although the line between compliance and subversion is always a fine one, difficult to draw with any certainty. All of us, men as much as women, are caught up in modes of self-production and self-observation. (144)

In fact, in “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” Bartky argues that Foucauldian ideas of discipline inform ideas of enforced and internalized norms of femininity (95). While I agree that there is certainly an internalized surveillance mechanism at work in women’s conformity to gender norms, I disagree that it is a “panoptical man,” as Bartky maintains, which women have internalized. Rather, I maintain that women are much more aware of *other women* as gender police.

Regardless of the gender of the enforcers, however, the role of a disciplinary system in these judgments of beauty and ugliness is key. Grosz explicates the role of the Foucauldian body-as-archive within a particular place and time, highlighting the significance of ugliness in its southern inflection: “The body is not outside of history, for it is produced through and in history. Relations of force, of power, produce the body

through the use of distinct techniques . . . and harness the energies and potential for subversion that power itself has constructed” (148). Similarly, Judith Butler explains that, “being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it. To be not quite masculine or not quite feminine is still to be understood exclusively in terms of one’s relationship to the ‘quite masculine’ and the ‘quite feminine’” (*Undoing Gender* 41). In other words, even as ugly female characters fail to achieve marriage and motherhood, their exclusion from these roles simultaneously points to their centrality to mainstream, primarily white southern culture as represented in these works while it acknowledges and imagines alternatives to these prescribed and proscribed roles.

That the system which governs aesthetic ideals is so culturally and historically specific and changeable reflects that it is in no way an innate or organic system, but rather a construct which must be policed and reinforced. As Grosz points out,

Makeup, stilettos, bras, hair sprays, clothing, [and] underclothing mark women’s bodies . . . in ways in which hair styles, professional training, personal grooming, gait, posture, body building, and sports may mark men’s. There is nothing natural or ahistorical about these modes of corporeal inscription. Through them, bodies are made amenable to the prevailing exigencies of power. (142)

In this way, Grosz examines the ways in which “the body can be understood as the site of the intermingling of mind and culture . . . [and] the symptom and mode of expression and communication of a hidden interior or depth” (116). In this model, the body is considered two-dimensional. Rather than having a mind/body, inside/outside, dualistic understanding of the self, here the body is a two-dimensional surface for inscription, understood

as a social object, as a text to be marked, traced, written upon by various regimes of institutional, (discursive and nondiscursive) power, as a series of linkages (or possibly activities) which form superficial or provisional connections with other objects and processes, and as a receptive surface on which the body’s boundaries and various parts or zones are constituted, always in conjunction and through linkages with other surfaces and planes. (116)

Importantly, Grosz discusses this surface in terms of its moëbial properties and potentialities: rather than designating a boundary between inside and outside, this inscriptive surface is both. This perspective rejects the concept of a totalized subject:

The body is thus not an organic totality which is capable of the wholesale expression of subjectivity, a welling up of the subject's emotions, attitudes, beliefs, or experiences, but is itself an assemblage of organs, processes, pleasures, passions, activities, behaviors linked by fine lines and unpredictable networks to other elements, segments, and assemblages. (120)

Here, the body is less an individuated actor within a system than a changeable gestalt constantly emerging from the larger system.

### **Ugliness, Self-Fashioning, and Invisibility**

Many of the works by southern women dramatize the many ways in “the body can be understood as the site of the intermingling of mind and culture.” Florence King’s *Confessions of a Failed Southern Woman*, for example, characterizes a “true exemplar of southern womanhood” as a “malleable girl . . . someone delicate and fragile in both body and spirit” (7). Although the malleability which King describes is one of fragility, I believe that this property is equally present in the ugly women in these texts, women whose appearances are affected by their experiences. Such malleability is central in Grosz’s discussion of the moëbial body, in which she says that

it is crucial to note that these different procedures of corporeal inscription do not simply adorn or add to a body that is basically given through biology; they help constitute the very biological organization of the subject—the subject’s height, weight, coloring, even eye color, are constituted as such by a constitutive interweaving of genetic and environmental factors. (142)

Or, more succinctly, “There is no ‘natural’ norm; there are only cultural forms of body, which do or do not conform to social norms” (143). In other words, in Grosz’s system,

there are no inherent, essentialist entities such as beauty or ugliness. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler elaborates on this connection between constructed norms and power: “To the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problems of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not” (2). Beauty norms, then, reinforce ideological systems of subjectivity—in other words, who does or does not “count” in a particular society.

Despite such compelling arguments for the social construction of aesthetic judgment, there are those who argue for a more essentialist understanding of beauty and ugliness. Symmetry, for example, is often cited by those who approach physical attractiveness from the perspective of evolutionary advantage. Nancy Etcoff claims that “there is a core reality to beauty that exists buried within the cultural constructs and the myths” (233). Her work posits an “argument for beauty as a biological adaptation,” as she claims that “beauty is a universal part of human experience, and . . . it provokes pleasure, rivets attention, and impels actions that help ensure the survival of our genes” (24). Tracing her project back to classical thinkers who similarly tried to quantify beauty, Etcoff examines various elements which seem to underlie all human concepts of beauty.

I am intrigued by the idea of symmetry as central to judgments of attractiveness, especially in its relationship to more abstract ideals. Elaine Scarry’s discussion of beauty, for example, considers it in terms of the notion of “fairness”: both in terms of meaning beautiful, but also in terms of its implication of justice. She quotes John Rawls, who defined fairness as “a symmetry of everyone’s relation to each other” (93). According to Scarry, beauty acts as a concrete example or representation or reminder of much more

abstract laws and principles of justice in the world (102). Further, it inspires and calls out for justice. The vision of beauty requires the existence of truth and order in the world.

If beauty inspires justice, then ugliness may illuminate prejudice or mark what is outlawed. Generally, physical appearance is closely tied to ideas of morality and moral character, as Debra Gimlin discovers in her sociological study of the ways in which women participate in shaping their bodies in an attempt to meet cultural norms. Acknowledging that many of the physical norms they aspire to are unachievable for most women, she claims that “Women’s bodies are, therefore, by definition, violations of cultural imperatives” (5). Focusing on four locations where women take active roles in their physical appearance—a beauty salon, an aerobics class, a plastic surgeon’s office, and a political and social organization for fat women—Gimlin claims that these women, rather than simply being “dupes” of cultural power (as she understands Foucault’s descriptions of power to indicate), are in fact consciously repositioning themselves with respect to (as well as resisting) these hegemonic cultural forces (7). In Gimlin’s sociological approach, she focuses on the significance of social structures such as “group forces, commercial interests, professional considerations, and the structures of communities” (9) in the “body work” these women engage in and undergo.

Ultimately, Gimlin says that she “learned that arenas of body work provide women with the ‘socially approved vocabularies’ that explain their failure to accomplish ideal beauty and thus serve to neutralize the flawed identity that an imperfect body implies in Western society” (15). However, I maintain that when southern women enact such failures—particularly through ugly fictional characters—it is much less a neutralization of a flawed identity than it is an act of defiance. In Blain Roberts’ 2014



*Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women : Race and Beauty in the Twentieth-Century South,*

she observes the changing meanings of such beauty practices in the twentieth century to southern womanhood:

Many of the beauty practices that second-wave feminists would later condemn as tools of female subordination were perceived as dangerous instruments of female liberation to conservative southerners living in the interwar years. Makeup and beauty contests, for example, represented a threat to southern male power. While their meaning later changed, we should not lose sight of how they were initially received and interpreted. Even if they failed to upend southern sexual relations, these products and rituals created possibilities for a femininity that was deliberately crafted by women themselves. (9-10)

I argue that rejecting such practices enacts a similar self-construction against these norms. As Bartky explains, in failing to live up to society's expectations, "the female body is revealed as a task, an object in need of a transformation. *There are no ugly women, just lazy ones*" ("Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" 135, emphasis added). Such judgment is central to my inquiry. If ugliness is a choice—if it reveals a rejection of the disciplinary regimes of femininity, a failure in moral responsibilities—then the ubiquity of ugly female characters in the work of southern women writers illuminates a wellspring of dissent which has heretofore been undertheorized.

Gimlin emphasizes the fact that "Meanings of the stigmatized body are clearly difficult to displace because self and body, at least in mainstream American culture, are too closely linked" (131). This link between the self and body is strongly reinforced by the role of sexuality in subjecthood. According to Grosz, in her discussion of embodied experience,

It is only the sensory, perceiving subject, the corporeal subject, who is capable of initiating (sexual) desire, responding to and proliferating desire. The libido is not an effect of instincts, biological impulses, or the bodily reaction to external stimuli. It emanates from the structure of sensibility, a function and effect of

intentionality, of the integrated union of affectivity, motility, and perception. Sexuality is not a reflex arc but an “intentional arc” that moves and is moved by the body as an acting perceiver. (109)

In fact, many have read the characteristic of ugliness in women as a marker of sexuality. In contrast to beauty, which may be connected to purity and other ethereal qualities, ugliness is a reminder of corporeality. In her analysis of ugliness in late nineteenth and twentieth century American literature, Dale Bauer specifically links ugliness to sexuality through a Freudian reading of Medusa, in which “Medusa represents knowledge of sexual difference” (61). As I explore in the next chapter, the Medusa myth ultimately calls attention to gendered dimensions of ugliness, as the sexuality and rebellion represented by the ugly woman gain strength from a dynamic of gender difference. When the ugly woman faces a man, he is not only forced to stop, but is petrified (in both physical as well as emotional meanings of the word) by the threat she represents. The extent of the threat she represents is so great that it requires a mythic register in order to be fully represented.

Such a denial of prevailing norms which is read as a marker of sexuality may more generally be also read as a marker of agency, of disobedience in a system which requires women be passive. In Bauer’s analysis of ugliness as a marker of uncontrolled sexuality, ugliness is deployed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to signal a shift away from sentimental literature, which “deliberately obscured physical intimacy since it could not contain or account for sexuality.” For Bauer, this literature demonstrates “how culture sentimentalized sexuality by displacing sex onto unsentimental—i.e., ugly—bodies” (58). Female purity required that sexuality be located elsewhere from romantic plots.

Bauer describes this displacement as being both a historically-specific move as well as a primarily class-based one:

While the rising commercial culture was obsessed with advertising and selling beauty culture to middle-class women as an *alternative* to sex-expression, the Social Gospellers imagined that they discovered in working-class women perhaps *the* source of cultural degeneration. Those who did engage in sex are depicted, curiously enough, as “ugly girls.” The cultural logic that links ugliness and sexuality goes like this: if sexuality can be found to originate in ugliness, then patriarchal control can flourish when it is exerted over beauty. (62)

Once again, ugliness and sexuality are implicated together within the strictures of the beauty-industrial complex. More importantly, however, are the ways in which ugliness marks a class-based stigma, as women of a lower socioeconomic status have less access—neither time nor money—to the disciplinary regimens which conventional beauty requires. What Gimlin identifies in ugliness as a judgment of laziness—“there are no ugly women, just lazy ones”—similarly reveals judgment against women who lack the leisure and other resources (in addition to those who lack the desire) necessary to achieve an acceptable physical appearance. Bauer’s identification of “patriarchal control” as the source of conventional beauty standards reinforces the Foucauldian framework from which my own analysis emerges.

However, these effects are not simply confined to the ugly woman herself. In Garland-Thomson’s configuration, staring has disciplinary effects on all of those involved in the interaction. Scarry denies the validity of claims that the gaze has a destructive potential against that upon which it gazes, despite the fact that being the object of a stare (for whatever reason—whether because of great beauty or ugliness) is often seen as objectifying the person being seen—and such objectification is understood by many as having a dehumanizing effect on the person being stared at. However, Scarry says, “It is odd that contemporary accounts of ‘staring’ or ‘gazing’ place exclusive

emphasis on the risks suffered by the person being looked at, for the vulnerability of the perceiver seems equal to, or greater than, the vulnerability of the person being perceived” (73). Rather than acknowledging the ways in which the person being stared at loses her humanity, Scarry instead privileges the vulnerability of the person caught staring (as described in Garland-Thompson’s Sartrean mode). What Scarry does not take into account, however, is the fact that, typically, when “the gaze” is being discussed, the perceiver is typically in a position of more power—a less vulnerable position—than the person being seen. And in this schema, the person being seen is being framed solely in terms of (usually) her beauty, which takes away her own personhood. The gazer has the ability to frame that which is deemed beautiful, and the frame/pedestal functions to restrict the agency of the person being gazed at.

Garland-Thomson quantifies the claim that Scarry makes, that beauty gives life to the beholder and the beheld, by pointing out how such encounters can have physiological effects, making the heart beat faster:

The staring encounter arouses us as well. Our heart rate increases when we are stared at; being subjected to a stare even registers on a cortical EEG. So viscerally potent is the staring encounter that we can even feel stares directed at us. In fact, humans from infancy can detect unseen stares. We not only believe that we can tell when we are being stared at, but repeated experiments dating as early as the late nineteenth century suggest that in fact we do. (17)

So, contrary to Scarry’s claim that staring and gazing do no harm to the object of the stare, according to Garland-Thompson, they do have a palpable quality to them. Further, Scarry’s claims are framed in terms of staring at beauty: what happens when the object of the stare is striking for other reasons? What is the effect of the stare on the ugly?

In “Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee,” Dorothy Allison characterizes staring as a weapon of defiance. In this story, Shirley Boatwright finds her daughter Mattie’s

stare unbearable: “She hated the way they cringed away from her. After all, she never hit them. A pinch was enough, if you knew how it should be done. But more than their shameful fear of her, she hated the way Mattie would stare back at her and refuse to drop her eyes” (*Trash* 23). What emerges as most significant in these configurations is the importance of the interactivity of these encounters. It is not simply a one-way vector, however, but a more dialectic process at work, one which leaves all parties involved changed and takes place within what Jessica Benjamin calls “intersubjective space.” Building on the work of Jürgen Habermas, Benjamin’s concept of “intersubjective space” is that which “refers to that zone of experience or theory in which the other is not merely the object of the ego’s need/drive or cognition/perception but has a separate and equivalent center of self” (30). The success of such intersubjective space between two people, however, requires that each party recognizes the subjectivity of the other person. This does not always occur; as Benjamin acknowledges, “recognition is a capacity of individual development that is only unevenly realized” (30). Despite this unevenness, however, it is the very possibility of intersubjective space which explains the ways in which bodies are interactively influenced and marked by the meanings given to them by others.

Butler expands on Benjamin’s discussion of recognition, focusing her discussion on the important role that communication plays in the process of recognition. According to Butler, recognition “takes place through communication . . . in which subjects are transformed by virtue of the communicative practice in which they are engaged” (*Bodies That Matter* 132). This explains what Scarry refers to as “being caught,” what happens when we see something unexpected and find ourselves staring. The delay in “being

caught” is caused by the transformation which takes place during the time it takes to explain to one’s self the encountered deviation. Staring is related to recognition because during the process of recognition, the Other is seen as “structured psychically in ways that are shared” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 131). When we stare at the ugly, we stare because the Other is *not* recognizable. We do not see a shared psychic structure, so we stare, trying to figure out the structure we do see, trying to give it structure, to explain, to narratize.

In this way, ugliness constitutes a confrontation, a demand for recognition. Ugliness issues a challenge which insists on being recognized; it insists upon an acknowledgment of a shared psychic structure which the viewer might not wish to acknowledge. If the viewer admits that she is similar to the ugly woman she encounters, then that admission forces her to acknowledge the possibility of her own vulnerability: she, too, might become scarred, fat, wrinkled, disfigured, any of the qualities which might be characterized as ugly. We recoil from ugliness because we don’t wish to acknowledge these possibilities.

In what she calls a theory of “corporeal feminism,” Grosz similarly traces how one’s body image is itself an emergent phenomenon of life experience and—important to my current discussion—social interaction. She proposes an intriguing schema, one originally formulated by psychologist and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder, in which “social and interpersonal attachments and investments, as well as libidinal energy, form a major part of one’s self-image and conception of the body.” What I am interested in here is Grosz’s claim that, “For Schilder, every touch is already oriented in a visual register, for it evokes a mental (that is to say visual) image of the spot touched.” She goes on to

explain that in Schilder's model, the optical and the tactile, which are separated in other phenomenological models, are integrated, reflecting our ability to "see an object with our ability to touch it. The body image is synesthetic, just as every sensation, visual or tactile, is in fact synesthetically organized and represented" (67). Grosz's characterization here echoes the idea of the significance of intersubjective space, in that there seems to be a feedback loop that occurs, reinforcing (or even reifying) the judgments made or stories invented to explain the gaps which occur when we encounter the unexpected.

Ultimately, I agree with Grosz's conclusion that "What psychoanalytic theory makes clear is that the body is literally written on, inscribed, by desire and signification, at the anatomical, physiological, and neurological levels" (60)—and, more importantly, "the body which presumes and helps to explain is an open-ended, pliable set of significations, capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of reinscribing the forms of sexed identity and psychological subjectivity at work today" (60-1). Such a synesthetic organization leads Grosz to conclude that "The body image . . . is formed out of the various modes of contact the subject has with its environment through its actions in the world" (67). While Grosz's use of "body image" here is referring to a primarily physical, tactile understanding of the body, it is possible to extend her meaning to the psychological, emotional sense of the phrase as it is used when discussing more psycho-corporeal phenomena such as eating disorders. Again and again, the idea of the body as a dialectically constructed entity emerges, refuting any notions of the body's essentialist or fixed nature.

In Doris Betts's "The Ugliest Pilgrim," for example, Violet Karl's scarred ugliness—which she considers to be a form of infirmity which she hopes to have healed

by a preacher—is primarily the result of a horrific accident in which her face was slashed by an ax head which slipped from its handle. Though Violet is impatient to have her affliction healed, she realizes that even her scarred, ugly appearance is mutable without divine intervention. If she were not anxious to be pretty while she is young, she realizes that “If I could wait to be eighty, even my face might grind down and look softer” (14). Violet demonstrates an implicit understanding of the dialectically constructed, Foucauldian body, subject to myriad external forces—as much as her face was altered by a momentary trauma, so, too, will it be changed by future experiences, even if they are less traumatic.

Grosz characterizes such a dialectically-constructed body—one which interacts with, responds to, as well as affects those around it—as conforming to a phenomenological view of the body, and references the work of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in her analysis of this malleable, mutating body. She explains that he begins with the “negative claim that the body is not an object. It is the condition and context through which I am able to have a relation to objects” (86). In other words, the body shapes and is shaped by experience. From the perspective of phenomenology, she discusses the central place that vision has occupied, a sense which has been considered superior to the other senses since the Greek philosophers. Again relying on Merleau-Ponty, she makes a number of important observations about the role of sight in knowledge, such as that:

Merleau-Ponty describes vision in terms of an activity undertaken by a subject in relation to a distinct and separate object. To this bare presumption—shared equally by empiricists and idealists—Merleau-Ponty adds two other factors: the claim that subjects are always and necessarily embodied, incarnate, corporeal beings and the claim that vision is always composed not of a given sense datum but of a set of relations between figure and ground, horizon and object. (96-7)



What I find significant here is the idea that vision always involves a relationship between at least one embodied subject—and in the case of a judgment of ugliness, this judgment takes place between two embodied beings. Here is where Benjamin’s concept of intersubjectivity is key. Even if the person making the judgment of ugliness perceives their relationship as being one between a subject and object, this is a mistaken understanding: every interaction of this sort takes place within a realm of intersubjective space, whether the intersubjectivity is acknowledged or not. Even if the fat woman on the beach feels the judgment in the stare of Welty’s narrator in “A Memory,” the narrator is equally affected by the vision of such unruliness. In this way, the vision of the ugly woman constitutes a potential site for productive resistance in its confrontational nature.

Conversely, southern women who adhere to the conservative norms of physical attractiveness are engaging in more than the act of constructing an appealing persona. As Virginia Kent Anderson Leslie explains in “A Myth of the Southern Lady,” “the cultural expectations that ‘Southern ladies’ ought to be weak, dependent, illogical, and pure served the purposes of ideology—that it was to keep the ruling gender/class/race ruling; specifically, that this definition-myth was self-consciously used to justify the domination of both Southern ladies and slaves by elite white men” (19). That many southern women have chosen to create ugly characters, then, reveals a political dimension to what at first appears to be an aesthetic choice. Characters who fail to meet the standards of southern beauty are signaling their rejection of both this ideology as well as their role within it through their aesthetic style.

Aesthetic style in the South, however, is not simply a split—or even a spectrum--between beauty and ugliness. Throughout this dissertation, my challenge is to clarify

what sets each of these fictional characters apart as specifically ugly, and the particular purposes being served by these ugly appearances. Again, I refer to the framework of queer and sexuality studies for my understanding, particularly Edelman's description of his project with Berlant, which he describes in part as a

political desire, to think the enabling conditions of an anti-anesthetic space that would not reproduce the pacifications of aesthetic ideology or the sublimations that recuperate the sublime's distinctive undoings. Instead it would permit the encounter with negativity to initiate transformations whose end is only the endless opening onto the necessity of new ones. (18)

So, too, does ugliness permit a similar opening onto new transformations, as it highlights female characters for whom, to a certain extent, the categories of traditional southern gender roles fail. Ugliness is that which does not fall within the expected norms of appearance; but unlike beauty, ugliness is deviation with a negative register. In this way, it defies containment, challenges intelligibility, and endangers the very boundaries which contain and control societal systems.

Here, my figuration of ugliness is informed by what French feminist theorist Julia Kristeva has characterized as the "abject": "the jettisoned object, [which] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses . . . . It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). To Kristeva, the abject concurrently defines and challenges borders. We recoil from ugliness, but cannot simply ignore or disregard it. In Butler's analysis, abjection "presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated" (*Bodies That Matter* 243 n. 2). For both Kristeva and Butler, the abject's existence outside of a system constitutes a threat to this system, while at the same time is necessary for the upholding of said system. The abject provides delineation of boundaries.

### **The Ugly Body, Defiance, and the Marriage Market**

While ugly female characters are not fully abject, their position in southern society is certainly related to the abject. Ugliness marks them as unsuitable for the roles of wife and mother, roles central to the marriage economy-based society which not only provides the basic structure of southern society, but is also responsible for its continuation through reproduction. However, as I discuss at more length in Chapter 3, unmarried women in the South have played important roles in their communities, albeit with varying degrees of acceptability. As schoolteachers, for example, unmarried women have been able to live outside of the marriage economy while simultaneously contributing to its continued production, by educating future generations of southern citizens.

The ways in which these roles that ugly women play allow them to simultaneously rebel against while at the same time support this system highlight the ways in which many Marxist feminist theorists see capitalism as implicated in systems of abjection. For example, in “Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation,” Bartky looks at the ways in which the role of women in capitalist society entails an additional layer of alienation to that which Marx describes as occurring generally in capitalism. She points out that, in what she refers to as the “modern beauty-industrial complex,” the norms of femininity and sexual objectification mean that women become their own alienated Other on which they pass judgment. According to Bartky, the beauty-industrial complex under capitalism is reinforced in ways that regular capitalist alienation of labor is not: “Women of all classes buy large numbers of books and magazines which teach them how to be

better, that is more ‘feminine’ women. There is no comparable body of popular literature which teaches workers to be better workers” (131). In addition, in *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism*, Laurie Penny sets out the “parameters for the trade in female flesh as sexual and social capital, and demonstrate[s] . . . how women are alienated from their sexual bodies and required to purchase the fundamentals of their own gender” (2). Penny’s materialist Marxist reading is quite enlightening, as she demonstrates that, ultimately, such market alienation results in the separation between the marketable erotic and the repulsive corporeality of actual sexuality. Penny argues that it is disgust and fear of female flesh which lie beneath much of twentieth century misogyny, which is “fear of female power, the sublimated power of women over birth and death and dirt and sex” (32). That which defies and lies outside of beauty standards—*that which is ugly*—is connected not only to abjection, but to an uncontainable, uncontrollable (and anti-capitalist) sexuality.

Contemporary feminist critics continue to connect appearance directly to the market aspects of marriage. Virginie Despentes, for example, illuminates the connection between abjection and market economics in the opening to her manifesto-like *King Kong Theory* with, “I am writing *as* an ugly one *for* the ugly ones: the old hags, the dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuckables, the neurotics, the psychos, for all those girls who don’t get a look in the universal market of the consumable chick” (7, emphasis in original). Abjection in such terms resonates with Sarah Gleeson-White’s consideration of female ugliness in the work of southern women writers, especially as she sees these images “engag[ing] in a politics of dissent” as they “challenge idealized and, needless to say, oppressive visions of white southern womanhood” (46). Such visions were supposed

to be embodied through physical manifestations of the “cult of true womanhood” described by Barbara Welter in her germinal feminist essay of that same name, in which she identifies the foundations of this archetypal femininity as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152). Any physical characteristics which detract from this image—such as scars (which violate purity) or a generally slovenly appearance (which violates all of the True Womanhood characteristics)—are physical markers of failure to conform to these norms. Women described as “ugly” are in direct violation of systems which uphold and rely upon such enforced feminine ideals and therefore pose a threat to the supposed integrated nature of these systems.

As these theories of abjection demonstrate how ugliness simultaneously reifies the very borders it threatens, so do theories of the grotesque similarly inform my understanding of ugliness. However, where theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s grotesque bodies were characterized by “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness” (303), the ugly body does not have these hyperbolic qualities. Where the grotesque explodes boundaries, the ugly irritates and seeps through them. While the grotesque is characterized by the “exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions” (321), the ugly remains within the realm of the inappropriate—not enough to destroy boundaries, though enough to threaten them.

The ugly body is best described by what historically has succeeded the grotesque body in modernity, what Bakhtin calls the “body of the new canon.” With the development of this new body under the disciplining surveillance of modernity, carnivalesque possibilities inherent in the grotesque body are no longer possible:

In the modern image of the individual body, sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the

private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole. In this new connotation they can no longer carry on their former philosophical functions. (321)

While the grotesque entails a connection to the communal and the sublime, ugliness, then, is only an echo in this new, individuated body of the formerly sublime grotesque. Instead of engaging in grotesque interactions of a carnivalesque nature (and the revelatory possibilities such interactions contain), we instead are only able to stare. I contend that part of what makes us stop and look at an ugly figure is this echo of the grotesque (and the potential for the sublime) it contains. We still feel (and perhaps miss) the echo of the grotesque in our new individuated bodies. That some characters, such as O'Connor's Joy-Hulga, combine elements of both the ugly (her ugly name, ugly clothes, and sneering face) with the grotesque (as an amputee) only complicates the strength of their force as characters.

### **Parameters and Purpose of This Study**

In their discussion of the grotesque, Stallybrass and White observe that “what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central (like long hair in the 1960s)” (5, emphasis in original). I believe that the ubiquity of ugly female characters in the work of southern women writers functions similarly: while Scarlett O'Hara or the Ya-Ya Sisterhood have yet to be fully replaced in the southern (and national) imaginations by Joy-Hulga or Celie, the constant presence of these latter characters who are overtly described as ugly announces their symbolically central role. Physical appearance often defines character, as Welty discusses in a *Paris Review* interview:

In those early stories I'm sure I needed the device of what you call the “grotesque.” That is, I hoped to differentiate characters by their physical qualities

as a way of showing what they were like inside—it seemed to me then the most direct way to do it. This is an afterthought, though. I don't suppose I did it as consciously as all that, and I didn't know it was the easiest way. But it is easier to show somebody as lonely if you make him deaf and dumb than if you go feeling your way into his mind. ("Eudora Welty, *The Art of Fiction* No. 47" n.p.)

Certainly, the strategy of characterization through physical description is not new.

However, that Welty refers this strategy as a utilization of the *grotesque* is illuminating, as it reveals that the important characters in her work are the ones with ugly outer appearances. In fact, while she discusses characters such as Lily Daw as an example of her deployment of this device, I would firmly categorize Lily's appearance as ugly, and certainly not extreme enough to be described as grotesque. Although Welty used the word "grotesque" to describe Lily, her explanation is important in demonstrating that her usage does not signal Lily's affiliation with the theoretical meanings of the grotesque of Bakhtin or Stallybrass and White. Rather, Welty's explanation emphasizes both the significance of her characters' physical appearances as well as (perhaps unintentionally) how often these appearances are ugly ones.

That Welty in particular created so many ugly female characters highlights another of the parameters of my study: that I am limiting my analysis to the work of southern women, rather than including characters written by men. Certainly, there are plenty of ugly female characters created by southern men, such as Ellie May in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, or the goat woman in Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*. However, I maintain that women writers are held to different standards themselves in terms of their appearance, which gives them a unique perspective from which to write. Welty exemplifies this phenomenon, as the opening of Ann Waldron's unauthorized biography of her amply demonstrates. The first chapter begins,

By all rights, Eudora Welty should have been miserable every minute of the day when she was growing up. “The thing you have to understand about Eudora is that she was not a belle,” a man a few years younger than Eudora who grew up in Jackson. “She was not pretty, and that is very important.” He talked about this a little more. “Oh, she had friends who were boys—not boyfriends—but one of them, Frank Lyell, was such a sissy that even his own brother made fun of him.” “It wasn’t that Eudora was plain,” said a woman who had grown up in Jackson and now lives in Boston. “She was ugly to the point of being grotesque. In the South, that was tantamount to being an old maid. You could either teach school, be a librarian, or teach music, if you were far out.” (9-10)

Later on in the biography, Waldron claims that Welty’s being named one of *People Magazine*’s “Ten Great Faces” was significant because, “The girl who was remembered for being so ugly had reached a pinnacle where her looks and style clearly eclipsed those of the Jackson belles who had been invited to dances in the Delta” (335). It’s important to note that Welty asked her friends not to participate in the project, so the people Waldron interviewed for her research were not particularly close to her.

Nevertheless, these Jackson residents are not the only ones to comment on Welty’s appearance. For example, recalling her interview with Welty that was published in the interview in the *Harvard Advocate* in 1973, Alice Walker said, “I liked Eudora’s calm, clear, gray-eyed gaze . . . . She was very present, very there. Of course I felt again the security all around her, as with Flannery, as with Bill [Faulkner]; in a large, handsome house her father had built and left to her, a society in which she was prized. Still. She had a deformity of the upper back/spine. And this is probably what saved her” (White 221). And even Welty’s authorized biographer, Suzanne Marrs, reported that Welty’s friend Katherine Anne Porter once told Welty, “You will never know what it means to be a beautiful woman” (566).

I admit to being perplexed as to why Welty’s appearance is so frequently commented on, and so often in such hyperbolic terms, such as “ugly to the point of being



grotesque.” According to Marrs, Welty’s “comments about beauty were always matter-of-fact, and she had long been dismissive of the American obsession with cosmetic enhancements” (566). However, it does demonstrate the different standards to which women and men are held: male authors are simply not written about in this way. By confining my analysis to the work of southern women, I can keep my focus on works written by people who share a sense of heightened awareness aesthetic standards.

In this way, I intend to demonstrate how the ubiquity of ugly female characters in the work of southern women writers has provided an undercurrent of resistance to what has often been understood as a generally rigid system of gendered expectations. Within this model, in which the body functions as an archive, we are able to reconsider progressive narratives of not only southern but also American history, especially in a nation which many like to characterize as post-racial and classless. Though the popular image of the southern woman is the beautiful Vivian Leigh as Scarlett O’Hara, the fact that southern women writers populated their work with so many ugly female characters suggests that they were not only refusing the expectations and responsibilities of the gyneolatrous pedestal, but also calling into question the existence of a South homogenously committed to racist, sexist, and classist hierarchies. Such a reconsideration of the role of the South through the ubiquity of unattractive female bodies has important implications for our understanding of the role played by the South within the life of the nation. As Baker and Nelson explain in their introductory essay to their special issue of *American Literature*, “We decided to focus on *the body* because our speculation was that the visual, bounded body of the Other was bedrock for the construction of both regionalism and racism in the United States” (232, emphasis in original). That this visual

body has been so often cast as ugly—particularly given the southern meaning of the word, meaning unruly or rude—reveals a discomfort with and pushback against this role.<sup>8</sup>

Jennifer Rae Greeson is among many scholars who have observed that the South functions as an “internal other for the nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole” (1). Observing that the United States “has been defined against many antitheses, from wholly external entities like ‘the Old World’ to places and peoples not included in the body politic at its origin but assimilated later: ‘the West,’ ‘the woman,’ ‘the Indian,’ and so on,” Greeson argues that the South

provides a different sort of juxtaposition . . . . As an internal other from the start of U.S. existence, it lies simultaneously inside and outside the national imaginary constructed in U.S. literature. Our South thus serves in that literature as an unparalleled site of connection between ‘the United States’ and what lies outside it—a connection to the larger world, to Western history, to a guilty colonial past and a desired and feared imperial future. (3)

Considering the bodies of ugly women in the work of southern women writers as archives of various modes of tragedy makes us reconsider both national and regional narratives of progress which posit trajectories of steady movement toward equality and democracy. Reading the history marked on the bodies of ugly female characters results in a clearer understanding of the disruptions and fissures which exist within these apparently seamless narratives. By countering the stereotype of the beautiful, white southern belle, southern women writers call into question the validity of the assumptions that have been made based on the South’s role as the nation’s “internal other.” As the South has so often relied upon the stereotype of the beautiful white woman in need of protection to justify an

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<sup>8</sup> Certainly, this use of ugliness is a regionally and historically specific one, and I am aware that ugliness has had different meanings in different times and locations (as, for example, Dale Bauer’s work on ugliness in American literature near the turn of the century demonstrates).

ideology of racism and violence, the microtraumas of life as a southern woman recorded on the bodies of these characters challenge the very foundation of southern ideology. And in terms of national identity, replacing the iconic representation of the South as a beautiful woman with that of an ugly woman complicates what is generally considered to be a much more binary, dialectic relationship between the nation's center and its margin.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MEDUSA STARES BACK: UGLY WOMEN IN THE WORK OF EUDORA WELTY

This chapter is a case study in analyzing ugliness, using the ugly women who appear in the short fiction of Eudora Welty as my focus. In her consideration of ugly women in the work of Welty and other southern women writers, Sara Gleeson-White says that Welty's first collection of stories, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941), is the one in which Welty is most "preoccupied with female ugliness" (49). Certainly, ugly women appear in her later work: her 1970 novel *Losing Battles*, for example, is particularly noteworthy for women such as the tall, bony spinster Miss Beulah Renfro. I realize that by focusing on Welty's early work, I risk perpetuating the error of "see[ing] only one facet of Welty's art" (7), an error which Michael Kreyling decries in much of Welty scholarship. However, as Welty's later work veers away from the grotesque, it also becomes less preoccupied with overtly ugly images of women.

In this chapter, I will examine some of the ways in which Welty probes the possible meanings of ugliness in a number of her short stories, ending with "A Memory," the story that best thematizes what I characterize as the *Medusan mode of ugliness*: one which forces a prolonged interaction between the ugly woman and her viewer through its power to freeze, to catch, and to captivate. I propose that the Medusa imagery in Welty's earlier work offers a new paradigm for understanding ugliness. We stare at ugliness because it represents some sort of disorder or violation of expectation. Like victims of Medusa, we are caught in a stare in an attempt to make sense of what we are seeing. In Rosemary Garland-Thomson's explanation, we "attempt to impose a frame of reference on the chaos of a visual field by integrating what is unknown into what is already known"

(21). People—whether the characters in the stories, or the readers of the stories—draw on their own previous experiences with human appearance in an attempt to comprehend appearances which don't fit with their expectations. Ugly people defy these expectations to varying extents and require extra attention in order to reconcile their appearance with our thwarted expectations.

In Welty's short stories, she deploys a particular kind of female ugliness, an ugliness which grabs the reader's attention in a way different from other kinds of disagreeable visages. Unlike the overtly grotesque and abject women which populate southern literature (about which quite a bit has been written),<sup>9</sup> the women in Welty's work are not so much grotesque as they are ugly, lacking the physical beauty so often connected to traditional ideals of southern womanhood. The variety of ugly women throughout Welty's work catches not only the attention of her other characters, but that of her readers, too, as we cannot help but be fascinated by women such as the "common" women on the beach or Mrs. Fletcher in the beauty parlor chair.

Welty was not alone in writing such fascinating characters in the early part of the twentieth century. In her discussion of images of ugly women appearing in American literature from this period, Dale Bauer attributes the ugliness in this fiction to a shift away from the sentimental in literature. Signaling even more than a move away from the sentimental, the ugly women in Welty's short fiction challenge idealized white southern womanhood, as their appearance becomes an embodied history of sexuality and violence. Patricia Yaeger describes *Curtain of Green* as a "book set in the Great Depression that

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ellen Glasgow, "Heroes and Monsters" and Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," or more recently, *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* (eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson) and Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*.

dramatizes the defamiliarization of the American Dream as it is mapped onto depressed southern bodies” (“Beyond the Hummingbird” 310). These “depressed southern bodies” are my focus in this chapter, as I examine the emergence and meaning of the ugly women who populate these stories. Unlike beauty, which is both an inspirational virtue and unattainable ideal,<sup>10</sup> ugliness not only functions as a marker of immorality but also reveals (and at times rebels against) the borders of societal norms. Ugliness, like beauty, is an aesthetic judgment which results from an interaction between a viewer and one who is viewed. In both cases, the interaction is often prolonged into staring, such as that observed by Garland-Thomson: “We stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what’s going on and demands the story . . . . This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making” (3). It is the narrative and “meaning-making” aspects of staring that are most significant in my consideration of ugliness in Welty’s stories. Similarly, philosopher Elaine Scarry claims that what marks someone as “stareable” is that they deviate from the expected norm or average in both positive and negative ways—beauty and ugliness share the quality of deviating significantly enough from the norm to be notable. There must be something extra on which the viewer is “caught” in order to facilitate the kind of interaction required for a judgment of beauty or ugliness to occur.<sup>11</sup>

This moment of “being caught” is connected to the theme of petrification which is such a fundamental aspect of Welty’s work, a theme which often reveals itself through

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<sup>10</sup> Welty herself observed that beauty (along with sensitivity) is one of “two qualities that cannot be imitated in this life” (*On Writing* 27). Though she does occasionally create pretty or attractive characters, the absence of physical beauty in Welty’s work does imply the impossibility of fully achieving beauty.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, and Elaine Scarry ed., *Literature and the Body: Essays on Population and Persons*.

her use of Medusa imagery. Like many scholars, Lauren Berlant points to gender as a key element in Welty's use of the Medusa myth, explaining that the "Perseus-Medusa myth contains a paradigm of sexual difference; for Welty, the violence it embodies is inevitably inscribed in desire" (59). Berlant's observation foregrounds the corporeal qualities of beauty and ugliness that the Medusa myth evokes. The gendered nature of this exchange emphasizes the gendered dimension of my own argument, that it is the ugly *women* in Welty's work who represent a rebellion against southern gender expectations.

The preponderance of Medusa imagery in Welty's work thematizes the intersubjective nature of ugliness. Ugliness is that which differs enough from the norm that it catches the viewer's attention and forces us to stare—and in staring, we are forced into an interaction with the object of our attention. In Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's analysis, this relationship is significant as an interactive moment of possibility: "Staring," she explains, "makes things happen between people" (33). We stare in order to make sense of what we are seeing: what is that? What makes that different? The uglier the person, the longer and more against our will we stare, trying to understand the ugly face (or ugly body, or even ugly clothes) within the context of our expectations and aesthetic values. The interaction which results from this staring imposes a kind of relationship onto the participants, often against their will. This is one reason why it's generally considered impolite to stare, because it does impose an unasked-for relationship between strangers: it is in part the involuntary nature of this relationship which makes it intolerable.

Certainly, much attention has already been given to Welty's use of Medusa imagery. Early critics saw the incorporation of Medusa (as well as other mythological) elements into Welty's work as a way of infusing everyday life in Mississippi with a sense

of the mythic.<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Phillips, Jr., sums up much of this early scholarship on Medusa imagery in Welty's work by observing three primary categories of ways in which Welty incorporated the mythic within her work: first, she uses mythological allusions to subtly "enhance realistic characters and settings" (58); second, "the narrator defines character and setting almost entirely in terms of myth and fantasy so that the reader's understanding develops from the narrator's arrangement of allegory and symbol"; and finally, "some characters consciously experience the rich, imaginative dimension of myth and fantasy" (59). Phillips observes that these different modes pose different demands on the reader, ranging from basic interpretation of the allusions present to reconciling both the characters' as well as the narrator's understanding of the presence of the mythic.<sup>13</sup>

I am following in the tradition of scholars such as Danielle Pitavy-Souques, who observes that for Welty, "Myth here is technique, imposed on the world of action, shaping our perception and reaction to it" (259). I see the Medusa story as an organizing principle in much of Welty's work, whether the imagery is overtly referenced or not. However, my interest in Welty's evocation of Medusa differs in two specific ways from these traditional views. First, my focus is less on Perseus—or the effect of Medusa on her victims and Perseus's victory over her—than on the Medusa figure herself. Phillips, for example, observes that in "The Wanderers," when Virgie Rainey remembers the picture of Perseus holding the head of Medusa that Miss Eckhart used to own, "Virgie identified with Perseus in that she too faced the terrible risk of becoming as lifeless and stone-like as the statue of the angel Cassie had bought to mark Mrs. Morrison's grave. One glimpse

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., William M. Jones, "Eudora Welty's Use of Myth in 'Death of a Traveling Salesman' and 'Name and Symbol in the Prose of Eudora Welty.'"

<sup>13</sup> Phillips points to "Shower of Gold" as an example of such a challenge of reconciliation, and certainly other stories such as "Asphodel" and "The Worn Path" exemplify this kind of reading.



of the head of the Medusa would turn the unfortunate beholder to stone. Virgie saves herself from that fate” (66). However, though Virgie may have once fully identified with Perseus in this picture, at the point of her reflection, she realizes that “she must believe in the Medusa equally with Perseus” (*The Golden Apples* 554). In other words, after the trauma of her mother’s death, Virgie realizes that being struck lifeless is not her only option. In realizing her own mortality, Virgie is also reminded of her vitality as well.

Second, I am equally interested in the intersubjective nature of the Medusa/Perseus paradigm. While I concur with Phillips’s reading, I also see that Welty emphasizes the Perseus/Medusa story as an interactive narrative: it does not only exist as a static picture on the wall, but is also part of a larger unfolding story. In “The Wanderers,” the narrator observes that when considering the picture of Perseus and Medusa, Virgie “saw the stroke of the sword in three moments, not one” (554-555). Further, for Virgie, “Every time Perseus struck off the Medusa’s head, there was the beat of time, and the melody. Endless the Medusa, and Perseus endless” (*The Golden Apples* 555). Virgie experiences the Medusa/Perseus encounter as a series of events, more than simply Perseus’ reaction. As a series of events, this encounter emphasizes the interactive nature of the Medusan process of fascination: both parties are affected by their encounter.

To a certain extent, Pitavy-Souques acknowledges the interactivity at the heart of this paradigm, observing that “the centre [*sic*] of this trinity is fascination—Medusa’s deadly gaze, or rather fascination defeated, overcome by another gaze—Perseus’ in the mirror . . . . At the level of human relations, it refers to that spell, that *abus de pouvoir* by which we tend to objectify the other, to make him lose his identity and become a thing, an object” (263). However, her subsequent focus is on Perseus’s fascination and

petrification, rather than on the dynamics of this paradigm as a whole. The fact that there is such an *abus de pouvoir* present in this structure demonstrates a real potential for feminine dissent and rebellion—even if the rebellion manifests less as working against the system than as actively opting out. To that end, I propose a change in focus to Medusa herself, and the interactions between the characters in these mythic allusions, rather than on Perseus and the petrified outcomes which have so long been the center of attention.

Central to the Medusan theme of petrification is the idea of the viewer “being caught” and the intersubjective dimension to this encounter. Sianne Ngai’s work on what she characterizes as “ugly feelings” elucidates this interactive nature of ugliness. Ngai describes the kinds of “ugly feelings” which she investigates as being “explicitly *amoral* and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release” (6). Unlike beauty, which is supposed to inspire virtue, or the grotesque, which has similar abilities to provoke dramatic change, ugliness is analogous to these less dramatic, “noncathartic” emotions. Ngai’s distinctions speak to how I distinguish “ugliness” from other, more highly theorized kinds of negative appearances. Ugliness is a similarly minor affect; I maintain that the interaction evoked by ugliness is more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities than passions. However, such ambiguities offer many tantalizing possibilities for rebellion and dissent.

“Petrified Man” contains the most overt retelling of the Medusa myth in the *Curtain of Green* collection, focusing on women in a beauty parlor, with their grotesque, dripping hair (echoing Medusa’s head of snakes) and a petrified man (which might refer to the effects—physical, physiological, and emotional—of Medusa on those who looked

upon her). Berlant's explication of the story echoes Gleeson-White's contention that ugly women in Welty's fiction work against expectations of passive white southern womanhood:

"Petrified Man" is designed strategically to expose the grotesque, the inelegant level of women's desire: not to assert that monstrosity and violence are essentially feminine, but to refuse the nostalgic and sentimental construction of female superiority by creating a scene of embarrassment, to insist that monstrosity is female as well as male. (60)

Alternately, Berlant's explication of Medusa imagery also supports Bauer's reading, which sees ugliness as connected to female sexuality. Berlant explains the Freudian reading of Medusa, in which "Medusa represents knowledge of sexual difference" (61). Ultimately, the Medusa myth calls attention to gendered dimensions of ugliness, as the sexuality and rebellion represented by the ugly woman gain strength from a dynamic of gender difference. Though women's strength is by no means limited to her looks, in this paradigm a woman's strength resides not in her beauty but in her ugliness, by her failure or refusal to fulfill societal expectations of appropriate appearance. When the ugly woman faces a man, he is not only stopped by her appearance when it fails to meet his expectations of female beauty, but is petrified by the threat she represents. The extent of this threat is so great that it requires a mythic register in order to be fully represented.

Such a mythic register is evoked in a different way in the story "Clytie." We first see Clytie out in the rain with her bonnet drooping "like an old bonnet on a horse." The description of Clytie is one of an ugly woman: "The old maid did not look around, but clenched her hands and drew them up under her armpits, and sticking out her elbows like hen wings, and ran out of the street, her poor hat creaking and beating about her ears" (100). Not only is she characterized as an "old maid"—a state at odds with the expectations of woman as wife and mother—but in this description she is compared to

two different barnyard animals: a horse and a hen. Further, her posture draws attention to her armpits—loci not usually connected to feminine beauty—and makes her appear unfeminine.

The story draws its strength at least in part from the irony produced by the tension created by the mythical names given to such ugly characters. Clytie is an ugly, bitter old maid, nothing like the mythic water nymph who pined after Apollo so desperately that she was transformed into a sunflower. Nor is she like Clytemnestra: sister of Helen, murderous wife of Agamemnon, and another potential namesake. As an allusion to Clytemnestra, it is possible to read the name “Clytie” as both a reference to the inferior sister of the world’s most beautiful woman as well as to her potential power. Nor does the character Clytie’s sister Octavia, an angry bedridden invalid, resemble Mark Antony’s virtuous wife. The irony in the meanings implied by such possible allusions is complicated, though, by Clytie’s trust in the meaning of the external, as such trust leads her to expect that such external signs as names should be indicative of the person’s character. According to Clytie, “The most profound, the most moving sight in the whole world must be a face. Was it possible to comprehend the eyes and the mouths of other people, which concealed she knew not what, and secretly asked for still another unknown thing?” (101). Welty’s use of the word “comprehend” in the free indirect discourse here signals Clytie’s belief that a person’s internal character should be able to be read in her outward appearance, though her actual experiences with other people demonstrate that appearances are generally deceiving.

Nevertheless, as the mythical Clytie in her sunflower form kept her face constantly turned toward the face of the Apollo in his guise as the sun, so Welty’s Clytie

is equally attached to outward forms. If appearances are to be trusted, then Clytie's physical hideousness confirms Gleeson-White's assertion of feminine ugliness as a challenge to traditional southern womanhood. Further, the short story "Clytie" clarifies the potential power of ugliness, that it has a mythic mode. Generally, scholars have focused more on Clytie's behavior in this story—her uncontrollable swearing, for example—than on her appearance. When they write about ugly women in Welty's work, their focus is more generally on appearances which can be categorized under the more dramatic rubric of the grotesque.<sup>14</sup> However, I would not characterize Clytie's appearance as differing from the norm enough to qualify as grotesque; in this story, Clytie is ugly.

Focusing on Clytie's appearance rather than her behavior (as so many others do) demonstrates the power of ugliness, though a power that is less in the "sinister mode" discussed by Gleeson-White (51) than it is a refusal of her community's expectations of womanhood. Clytie's refusal is exemplified by the novel's opening scene, in which the ladies of the town watch her stand in the middle of the road, seemingly oblivious to the rainstorm in which she is being drenched:

Now, under the force of the rain, while the ladies watched, the hat slowly began to sag down on each side until it looked even more absurd and done for, like an old bonnet on a horse. And indeed it was with the patience almost of a beast that Miss Clytie stood there in the rain and stuck her long empty arms out a little from her sides, as if she were waiting for something to come along the road and drive her to shelter. (100)

Watching the rain further spoil Clytie's already ugly appearance, someone finally calls out and tells Clytie to seek shelter. She goes home, where her bedraggled, rain-soaked appearance provokes her sister to declare her "Common—common!" (101). From the

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<sup>14</sup> See Marie Lienard-Yeterian "Opening Up/Mapping Out a New Space in the Southern Imagination" 38.

story's beginning, it is Clytie's appearance which leaves a wake of disturbance among those whom she encounters.

Welty's story "Petrified Man" dramatizes the violence inherent in the enforcement of these norms and the challenge to them posed by ugliness. Gleeson-White sees violence and issues of beauty as "intriguingly entangled in 'The Petrified Man,'" a story which she says "constructs feminine beauty not as something natural or innate, but as wholly manufactured . . . . The women who are associated with southern beauty are, in a nutshell, silly" (50). The story takes place in a southern beauty parlor where the beautician Leota tells her customer Mrs. Fletcher about her adventures with the exciting Mrs. Pike while she does Mrs. Fletcher's hair. Indeed, the silliness of the pursuit of artificial beauty is exaggerated to the point of absurdity, as exemplified in the anecdote Leota relates about Mrs. Montjoy, who stopped by the shop to have a permanent wave put in her hair while she was in labor so that she would look pretty for the birth of her new baby.

Here, beauty not only is completely artificial but also has a definite forbidden, sexual undercurrent. What Berlant refers to as an "illicit quality of pleasure" (63) in the story is typified in this description of the beauty parlor, in which women are "Hidden in this den of curling fluid and henna packs, separated by a lavender swing-door from the other customers, who were being gratified in other booths" (22). This description of customers being "gratified in booths" evokes scenes of peep shows and prostitution. The beauty process is not a pretty one: hair frequently drips, for example, requiring cotton to "sop it up" (45). Here, the process of changing ugliness to beauty is an overtly sexual one. This is a sexuality of consumption, hunger, and need. It takes place between women

in “booths.” Functioning as a semi-public, semi-private space, these booths provide visual privacy for their female customers while allowing verbal communication between them. Even with the assistance of the services the beauty shop provides, the women in the story are ugly, in contrast to typical standards of southern beauty. Mrs. Fletcher, for example, is described as having “her hair-line eyebrows diving down toward her nose, and her wrinkled, beady-lashed eyelids battling with concentration” (23). It is important to note that the beauty shop services seem to only magnify her ugliness, as her “hair-line eyebrows” are unnatural and must be the result of a salon service.

In addition to the artificiality of the beauty salon, there is a submerged violence in this story which many critics have identified as a constant theme in Welty’s work.<sup>15</sup> Gleeson-White points to “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” as a similar example of “the violence so typical of the collection underneath the comic tenor of the story” (*Curtain of Green* 50). In this story, Lily’s father beat her and tried to cut off her head after the death of her mother, a violent history which is marked permanently on Lily’s body in the scar on her neck. After her father attacks her, Lily is taken from him by the ladies of the town who find her a safer home. These concerned ladies subsequently decide to send Lily to the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble-Minded of Mississippi, as Lily “isn’t bright” (5), and, further, she is in their judgment inappropriately sexual. The story opens with the ladies searching for Lily, who has gone missing after the performance of a travelling show. Even after hearing Lily’s claim to have become engaged to the show’s xylophone player, the ladies assume that the xylophone player “was after Lily’s body alone and he wouldn’t ever in this world make the poor little thing happy” (10). Further, they discuss

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<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Gleeson-White as well as Yaeger, “Beyond the Hummingbird.”

the fact that Lily frequently wears only a petticoat for a dress (8), and Mrs. Watts offers to give her a “pink crêpe de Chine brassiere with adjustable shoulder straps,” noting that she “needs it” (11). This judgment that Lily’s breasts “need” to be contained combined with the ladies’ assumptions about Lily’s promiscuity demonstrate that, once again, the figure of the ugly woman represents a sexuality which is difficult to control.

Though not a femme fatale, Lily’s physical and mental scars do make her morally dangerous, as they mark her as possessing an uncontrollable sexuality. Lily’s threatening sexuality connects her to Betina Entzminger’s dark belle, who was “the opposite of the ideal southern lady, the mature woman the belle was intended to become” (2). That Entzminger’s belle has somehow “gone bad,” or not fulfilled expectations of southern womanhood, shows that she is no longer the young belle, virtuous and eligible for marriage; instead, she “uses her sexuality as a tool” (2). Lily, too, is considered ineligible for marriage, despite what turns out to be a legitimate proposal from the carnival’s xylophone player. Her mental status, threatening sexuality, and history of violence make her ineligible for the marriage market (at least in the opinion of the ladies), which is reserved for those who would properly reproduce and perpetuate the correct kind of society.

Though Entzminger focuses on Welty’s novels rather than her short stories, she includes Welty in her larger characterization of contemporary southern women writers who “use the bad belle figure to critique the southern social system, particularly as it relates to the role of women” (123). In Welty’s novels, Entzminger sees Welty “us[ing] the bad belle as a hyperbolic version of society’s traditional view of powerful women” (129). In her early short stories, Welty’s ugly women represent a more nuanced critique



of this system. Lily's sexuality and existence (albeit an enforced one)<sup>16</sup> outside of the marriage economy demonstrate that a possible alternative to idealized southern womanhood exists. It is, in fact, Lily's Daw's complete lack of autonomy which, while it keeps her from maintaining any personal agency (as ultimately, she is sent to Ellisville Institute for the Feeble-Minded of Mississippi), instead reveals the vulnerability of the town's traditional system represented by the ladies. Lily's abuse at the hands of her father highlights the dangers of trusting in paternalistic honor.

Lily's is a sexualized ugliness, like that described by Bauer, who sees ugliness as a marker of uncontrolled sexuality in fiction written by women at this time. In Bauer's consideration, fiction from this time period demonstrates "how culture sentimentalized sexuality by displacing sex onto unsentimental—i.e., ugly—bodies" (58). Female purity required that sexuality be located outside of romantic plots. Because Lily does not look like a romantic heroine, the ladies cannot imagine her as an agent within a romantic plot—and therefore, they can only assume that any attraction a man would have for her would be solely a sexual one. Lily's disfigurement, a marker of her violent and deprived history, is a visible reminder of her difference from the kind of middle class southern femininity represented by the ladies of the town.

Many of the women in Welty's stories have bodies physically marked by class difference, histories of violence, grief, and other aberrant experiences. As in the case of Lily Daw's scar, Gleeson-White notes "the contorted and fragmented bodies that fill these writers' stories at the same time own up to a tragic history in which they have

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<sup>16</sup> To be fair, marriage to a traveling musician may not exemplify the path of marriage and motherhood which would satisfy the ladies of the town. However, the fact that Lily has received a bona fide proposal of marriage does imply that Lily may have more potential for the marriage market than the ladies have been willing to admit.

partaken” (46). These bodies reflect what Yaeger refers to as the “body as testimony” (*Dirt and Desire* 218), or the palimpsestic medium provided by the female body in literature. Yaeger’s use of the word “testimony” emphasizes how visual appearance functions as a speech act, a performative expression which not only tells a story but also insists upon a response. In “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” for example, the scar on Lily’s neck can be seen “if you knew it was there” (*Dirt and Desire* 9). The ability to see Lily’s disfigurement implies a knowledge of the violence done to her and, consequently, a responsibility to at least attempt to assuage the wrongdoing.

Though I agree with Gleeson-White that the *Curtain of Green* does seem to be “preoccupied with ugliness,” Welty certainly returned to the theme throughout her work. In “Moon Lake,” physical appearances convey socioeconomic status. Appearance separates all of the orphan girls from the more affluent Morgana girls: at the lake, the orphans stand “swayback with knees locked, the shoulders of their wash dresses ironed flat and stuck in peaks” (413), while the Morgana girls “walked out of their kimonos and dropped them like the petals of one big scattered flower” (414). Here, ugliness functions as a physical marker of their marginalized class status as impoverished orphans. The orphan girl named Easter in “Moon Lake,” for example, has “cropped and wiry” hair with a dark band at her hairline which was “pure dirt” (*The Golden Apples* 417). Her appearance is so dirty and disheveled that she is described as having “repulsed” her campmates (445). However, Easter’s ugliness also marks her as “dangerous” (418) and “dominant among the orphans” (417), a girl whose life of deprivation has toughened her, though not turned her “provenly bad” like some of the other orphans. Unlike someone like her friend Geneva, who is known to steal, Easter only hurts those who deserve it,

such as the Bible teacher Mr. Nesbitt, whose “collection hand” she bites after he stares at her developing breasts (418). Easter’s ugliness marks her as one who refuses the accepted female position of objectification, especially as she already occupies the dehumanizing, marginalized position of an orphan. Easter may be marginalized, but within her marginalization she is a leader.

The unnamed narrator of “Why I Live at the P.O.” (who is only referred to as “Sister”) is another example of abjected ugliness, who like Easter is cheerfully defiant despite her rejected status. Stella-Rondo’s insulting description of Sister’s body as “one-sided” (*Curtain of Green* 57) is a particularly sexual one, referring to Sister’s breasts. In this way, Sister’s ugliness detracts from her femininity and her womanhood, and Stella-Rondo’s accusation leads directly to her losing her love interest Mr. Whitaker (with him her chance at normative heterosexual couplehood). Sister’s ugliness is a form of abjection, as it drives her from her family home to live at the P.O. where she is postmistress and, presumably, allows the family to continue without the kind of threat which Sister’s plain-spokenness and independence represent.

Sister exemplifies the kind of ugliness in southern fiction described by feminist scholar Mab Segrest. In a slightly different vein from Gleeson-White, Segrest sees the ugly women who appear in this fiction as not posing a challenge to the expectations of southern white womanhood, but instead providing a necessary pressure valve for a system which otherwise would implode from its own pressures. Segrest writes,

The town freak (or eccentric, the *eccentric* being in one’s own family, the *freak* in someone else’s) is often sacrosanct, protected because her/his insanity is recognized as necessary to preserve collective sanity . . . . These community

demands for normalcy are particularly strong around matters of female sexuality—hence the prevalence of the female grotesque in these fictions. (25)<sup>17</sup>

To Segrest, ugly women such as Sister provide a necessary outlet for the strictly policed gender norms of the community, allowing others in the community to vicariously experience rebellion without risking their own status.

While Segrest’s characterization falls more under the rubric of abjection, Yaeger’s discussion of ugly women in *A Curtain of Green* relies more upon theories of the grotesque. Unlike Segrest, who focuses on such women’s real-life counterparts in southern communities, Yaeger is more interested in the larger canon of which works such as Welty’s short fiction are a part. Yaeger writes that “southern women writers who appropriate the grotesque are at work constructing a female tradition that refuses the genteel obsession with writing (or inhabiting) the beautiful body in exchange for something more politically active and vehement: for the angry sex- and class-conscious writing of the southern gargantuan” (“Beyond the Hummingbird” 312). Like Gleeson-White, Yaeger sees the image of the ugly woman as enabling southern women writers to perform a politics of dissent. While Segrest considers the role that ugly southern women play within their communities, Yaeger instead focuses on the role of the southern woman writer within the culture of the South.

In the larger tradition of southern literature, Yaeger identifies the “racially pure and diminutive female body in need of protection” as a southern myth, a myth critical to

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<sup>17</sup> Although Segrest uses the descriptor “grotesque” in her claim here, I maintain that her conflation of the grotesque with the eccentric qualifies her characterization to be considered under the rubric of ugliness in addition to the grotesque. Though the difference between the grotesque and the eccentric is a matter of perspective to Segrest, I see the inherent difference in degree of abnormality between the two descriptions as implying that at least some of the examples that Segrest is willing to consider—those which at least some people would consider to fall nearer the “eccentric” end of a continuum—would also fall within the realm of the ugly.

maintaining racial hegemony. Yaeger claims that, “this fragile white body helps to motivate (1) southern modes of population control reproducing black and white populations as separate, (2) the regulated segregation of these racial bodies in space, and (3) the need for deeply interiorized categories of racism that will do the work of segregation” (“Beyond the Hummingbird” 312). Yaeger’s sees Welty’s writing as refusing this requisite discipline, specifically through its portrayal of images of ugly women and grotesque bodies. Through these images, southern women writers are able to defy the forms of control which undergird the racism and racially motivated violence which has pervaded southern history and culture.

The story “A Curtain of Green” addresses race more directly than many of Welty’s other works do, especially the other stories in this collection. This is not to say that Welty does not address race in her work—certainly, even within the *Curtain of Green* collection, race plays a significant role in stories such as “Powerhouse,” “A Worn Path,” and even “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden.”<sup>18</sup> In “A Curtain of Green,” however, the appearance of the grieving white widow both highlights the intersection of the fixed categories of class and race within southern society while revealing the omnipresent threat of violence which undergirds these divisions.

The widowed Mrs. Larkin’s attempts at mutiny within the community of “Curtain of Green” underscores the ultimate futility of any attempts at resistance or deviation from the norm. Hers is the “racially pure and diminutive female body” which Yeager describes as motivating southern racial violence. However, Welty goes further than this, showing that the seemingly fragile, white, female body in fact possesses the capability for violence

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<sup>18</sup> And certainly, her story “Where is the Voice Coming From?” directly addresses race-based violence in the South.

itself. As she approaches Jamey, “the colored boy who worked in the neighborhood by the day” (132), Mrs. Larkin stops in a moment of premeditation: “When she was directly behind him she stood quite still for a moment, in the queer sheathed manner she had before beginning her gardening in the morning. Then she raised the hoe above her head; the clumsy sleeves both fell back, exposing the thin, unsunburned whiteness of her arms, the shocking fact of their youth” (134). Contrary to the narrator’s claims, however, it is not the youth represented by these white arms which is shocking. Rather, it is the violence—and in this community, sanctioned violence—that such whiteness represents which should actually be considered shocking.

What is also surprising is that it is not this scene which is viewed by Mrs. Larkin’s neighbors and gossiped about, but the more banal details about Mrs. Larkin’s appearance. Threatened violence against a young black boy is not notable; failure to meet standards of feminine beauty are. The neighbors observe that Mrs. Larkin has put beauty completely behind her in her widowhood. The neighbor woman who watches her describes her appearance as slovenly: “Every morning she might be observed walking slowly, almost timidly, out of the white house, wearing a pair of the untidy overalls, often with her hair streaming and tangled where she had neglected to comb it” (130). The lack of tidiness in her clothes and hair shows her unwillingness to submit to her neighbors’ expectations of a proper woman’s appearance. Grief has caused her to shirk the duties expected of her by her conservative southern neighborhood, including the duty of allowing her neighbors to comfort and care for her through tragedy. Even her preoccupation with gardening, a potentially appropriate pastime for a woman of her

status, is not executed appropriately. It isolates her, as she fails to share what she grows with her community.

She further fails to take the community's feelings into account in her gardening methodology. Her neighbor complains, "And if she thought of *beauty* at all (they regarded her stained overalls, now almost of a color with the leaves), she certainly did not strive for it in her garden. It was impossible to enjoy looking at such a place" (131). In the value system of the neighborhood, flowers are not beautiful by themselves: they require cultivation and a proper context in order to qualify as beautiful. Growing wildly without order disqualifies them from being considered beautiful, as does the widow's failure to use them to show the proper regard for her neighbors. The widow's rejection of beauty parallels her rejection of her community through her rebellion against its aesthetics, values, and expectations.

While many of the descriptors of ugliness were present in early drafts of these stories, both the intensity of the ugliness as well as the intersubjective nature of it are properties which emerged over the course of Welty's revisions to the manuscripts. Certainly, many of the descriptions of ugliness are present in the original drafts of these stories, The description of the mother in "Why I Live at the P.O.," for example, is that of a two-hundred-pound woman with little feet (MS 10), as it is in the final version, and Lily Daw's hair is described as "milky yellow" (a description which I find curiously ugly) in the original as well (MS 9). The women in these stories are anchored in the tradition of ugly women in southern literature which I see as prevalent.

Thus, Welty plans the inclusion of ugliness in her work from the beginning stages of her writing, although the Medusan petrification theme is one which emerges over the

course of her revisions. Surprisingly, many of the markers which signify the kind of intersubjective space which I see as key in Welty's stories—between characters as well as between the reader and text—are absent from Welty's early drafts of these stories. I maintain that a great deal of what makes Welty's characters so memorable is this very dimension of intersubjectivity in her stories, so it is fascinating to see how this characteristic emerges through seemingly small, sentence-level details such as word choice over the course of her revision. For example, in "Why I Live at the P.O.," it is not until a later draft that Mr. Whitaker's "Pose Yourself" business appears: earlier, he is simply Sister's boyfriend and Stella-Rondo's husband (MS 1). The addition of the "Pose Yourself" business underscores the theme of scopophilic vision that the Medusan themes imply. In "Clytie," the detail "while the ladies watched" was added to the description of Clytie's hat getting wet (MS 2), similarly highlighting that Clytie's ugliness is one that is seen by others. I even read the idea of intersubjective space in the edit Welty made in "The Key," when she revised the description of Ellie. In the first version, Ellie is described as having "that too explicit representation of agony" (MS 2). The final version reads "that too explicit evidence of agony." Even this minor word change evinces a growing preoccupation with witnessing and interactive vision, as "evidence" implies a kind of intersubjectivity not present in "representation."

Similarly, many of Welty's early drafts contained ellipses which were not present in the final version.<sup>19</sup> As Welty complained in a letter to her close friend John Robinson, she was often dismayed with the changes made to the punctuation in her manuscripts ("Letter to John F. Robinson, n.d. "Friday" [27 June 1941]"), and I suspect

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<sup>19</sup> "Asphodel" is particularly noteworthy in this respect.



that she intended her final stories to have ellipses. While I am not aware of scholarship that has specifically addressed this detail in Welty's work, there is scholarship which discusses the presence of ellipses in the work of Edith Wharton which I believe is applicable to Welty's punctuation.<sup>20</sup> In Wharton's work, many see her frequent use of ellipses as places in which the reader is expected to fill in the narrative themselves, and I see Welty's use of ellipses in her earlier drafts as performing a similar function—once again, foregrounding a more interactive role for the reader.

I now turn to "A Memory," the story which best exemplifies not only the interactive nature of readership and viewership but the broader Medusan themes I have discussed so far, especially those of rebellion and sexuality, as the gross sexuality she represents undercuts the idealization of the narrator's romantic crush. In this story, the unnamed adolescent girl who narrates the story has her daydreams about her school crush interrupted by an encounter with a group of vulgar people on the beach. Gleeson-White says that, for the narrator, "the group she encounters by the lake . . . will not fit into her narrow vision. The woman overflows the bounds of acceptable identity to challenge restrictive images of petite and gracious womanhood, written into a history of terror and (self-) denial" (50). It is not only the ugly body that offends the narrator, but also the evocation of foreignness in the description of the ugly group: "They were brown and roughened, but not foreigners; when I was a child such people were called 'common'" ("A Memory" 94). Such a vague evocation of foreignness implies both a literal foreignness, in that their dark complexions link them to geographical Otherness, as well as a socioeconomic foreignness (as the narrator's characterization of them as "common"

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Jean Frantz Blackall, "Edith Wharton's Art of Ellipsis."

implies). Both of these othering statuses represent a threat to the traditionally southern ways of life, typified by the traditionally beautiful, upper class southern white woman.

Sexuality is present in this scene—but it is an earthy, uncontainable, base sexuality completely located on the body. Such corporeal sexuality is in stark contrast to the idealized, romantic fantasies that remain in the narrator’s imagination. Her description of the woman on the beach is one of fear, alienation, and disgust:

She was unnaturally white and fatly aware, in a bathing suit which had no relation to the shape of her body. Fat hung on her upper arms like an arrested earthslide on a hill. With the first motion she might make, I was afraid that she would slide down upon herself into a terrifying heap. Her breasts hung heavy and widening like pears into her bathing suit. Her legs lay prone one on the other like shadowed bulwarks, uneven and deserted, upon which, from the man’s hand, the sand piled higher like the teasing threat of oblivion. (95)

In this description, the woman’s inability to appropriately fill the highly charged gender marker of a bathing suit undercuts her own femininity even as it foregrounds the monstrosity of her body, which is described in terms of violent nature imagery. This threatens not only her own identity (“I was afraid that she would slide down upon herself into a terrifying heap”) but also of civilization itself, as her legs described as deserted bulwarks evoke a post-apocalyptic landscape.

Such threats also evoke French feminist Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, as it is “not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). The abject defies containment, challenges intelligibility, and endangers the very boundaries which contain and control societal systems. It is in this way that my understanding of ugliness is informed by Kristeva, who characterizes the abject as, “the jettisoned object, [which] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses . . . . It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject

does not cease challenging its master” (2). To Kristeva, the abject concurrently defines and challenges borders. Similarly, Judith Butler says that abjection “presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated” (*Bodies That Matter* 243 n. 2). As with the abject, we recoil from ugliness, too, but cannot simply ignore or disregard it. The abject’s existence outside of a system constitutes a threat to this system, while it simultaneously upholds it, by providing a delineation of boundaries.

Unlike abjection, ugliness resides within the system (however marginally). That ugly women so frequently appear within these stories demonstrates their failure to qualify as truly abject.<sup>21</sup> Considering what ugliness shares with abjection, however, highlights what the abject shares with the ugly in Sarah Gleeson-White’s consideration of ugly women, especially as she sees these images “engag[ing] in a politics of dissent” as they “challenge idealized and, needless to say, oppressive visions of white southern womanhood” (46). Women described as “ugly” are in direct violation of a system which simultaneously upholds and relies upon such enforced feminine ideals. In this way, ugly women pose a threat to the supposed integrated nature of these systems.

Such a threat is quite apparent in the narrator’s response to the fat woman in “A Memory.” To Kristeva, the abject delimits the “border of my condition of a human being . . . the place where I am not and which permits me to be” (3). In “A Memory,” the disgust the narrator feels in response to the fat woman’s appearance along with the overt, vulgar sexuality of the people in the group reflects such a challenge to what she thinks of as her ordered life. The narrator’s prolonged visual attention—staring, which is

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<sup>21</sup> These ugly women are unlike characters such as Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Judith and Clytie Sutpen in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, who occupy more literally abject positions with respect to their environments.

emphasized by her framing hands—reveals her attempt to impose what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls a “regulating visual dynamic” (41), or “visual acts . . . [which] help to create, enforce, and register our social positions (42). As the narrator literally makes a frame around the group with her hands, she tries to construct a border between herself and these people, attempting to re-establish the borders between what she understands as normative and deviant behavior, borders which have been challenged by the sight of this group.

Though the ugly woman on the beach is often discussed as an example of the grotesque female body in southern literature,<sup>22</sup> I would like to challenge this characterization. While the grotesque is apparent throughout the tradition of southern women’s writing, I contend that the heading of “The Southern Grotesque” has been applied too liberally to characters who do not qualify as such. “Grotesque” as a descriptor should be reserved for characters and bodies which truly are the “open, protruding, extended, secreting body” (Russo 62) or monstrous freak (Russo 75), such as the amputee Joy-Hulga in O’Connor’s “Good Country People” or Dorothy Allison’s monstrous Shannon Pearl. Even the fat woman’s bulwark-like legs and fat which hangs like “an arrested earthslide” in “A Memory” appears human when compared to Shannon Pearl who, “Looking back at me from between her mother’s legs . . . was wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction” (*Bastard Out of Carolina* 155). Shannon Pearl is a terrifying creature who evokes fears of a vagina-dentata-esque incarnation of the monstrous feminine.

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<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Yaeger, “Beyond the Hummingbird,” 293.

In contrast to such truly sublime evocations of the grotesque, the characterization of the woman in “A Memory” as “common” suggests that she is recognizable and human. However, by characterizing women such as this one under the rubric of the grotesque, critics attribute the Bakhtinian understanding of the grotesque as having the “carnavalesque” potential to tear and shred organized society to the anonymous woman’s unruly body.<sup>23</sup> While I agree that the fat woman’s appearance does have the potential to endanger the societal norms it violates, I disagree with the characterization of the woman as grotesque. Welty’s reliance upon Medusa imagery and the theme of petrification, in fact, reinforces the fact that ugliness is different from the grotesque.

In “A Memory,” the group on the beach is provocative enough to elicit the unnamed girl’s stare, a behavior which she surely has been taught is impolite. To begin with, the interactive characteristic of staring means that the girl is interacting with this “common” group, itself a rebellious behavior on the part of the girl. Notable among the different paradigms of staring identified by Garland-Thomson in her discussion of the interactive nature of staring is what she calls the Sartrean mode of staring, what I explain in Chapter 1 is based on Sartre’s “parable of interpersonal shaming through domination staring” (43). In this mode, to be stared at is to be recognized as failing to meet the expectations of the viewer; to be stared at in this way is to be a victim, and to realize that one is the recipient of such a stare is to concede defeat. Acknowledging the interactive nature of the staring configuration, Garland-Thomson explains that such a scene “asserts the perversity of staring and the anxiety of being a staree” (43). Certainly, being caught staring is itself a failure to meet certain standards of civility.

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<sup>23</sup> See Bakhtin, especially Chapter Five, “The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources” (303-367).

Such a double bind is demonstrated throughout “A Memory,” as the narrator’s position as a viewer is emphasized from the beginning of the story, when she describes how taking painting lessons has taught her to make “small frames with my fingers, to look at everything” (*Curtain of Green* 92). At one point, however, her position as viewer is threatened in the Sartrean mode by the man in the group whose careless gaze includes the narrator. Being seen—being caught—while looking causes the narrator to be “stunned” (96); in this story, she is the victim of Medusa. By the end of the story, she is so horrified by the grotesque sexuality on display—“victimized by the sight”—that she tries to end the interaction by closing her eyes repeatedly (97).

Among the various modes of staring which Garland-Thomson explicates in addition to the Sartrean one, she also examines the role that curiosity plays in staring:

To those who condemn it, the curiosity launched by the impulse to stare at inexplicable sights is a grab for unauthorized knowledge, a presumptuous overreaching . . . . A poke in the eye of the gods, curiosity puts us in charge of the story, trouncing obedience and risking sound punishment. Eve, Prometheus, Icarus, Oedipus, and Frankenstein warn us the hubris of curiosity, of wanting to know more than is good for you. (63)

The sense of hubris which Garland-Thomson argues is inherent in staring may explain why it is considered impolite to stare: in this way, staring becomes a way of claiming that which is not yours, or exhibiting an unearned agency.<sup>24</sup> In Welty’s work, particularly in “A Memory,” not only is the one who does the looking as important as the one being looked at, but the interaction which results from this encounter is also crucial. The girl’s looking at the group on the beach through her own fingers, framing the scene and calling attention to the ugly woman, enacts the Sartrean mode by forcing us as readers to see her

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<sup>24</sup> This understanding of staring also explains why the man on the beach seems unaware of the impropriety of his staring, while the girl is embarrassed: their reactions to being caught staring reflects their own class status, through their varying levels of awareness of the rules of propriety. (Of course, the man’s gender is also a factor in the complicated vectors of privilege at play in this scene, as I address below.)

staring (as well as calling attention to our own role as onlookers). Here, the staring relationship is a highly sexualized one, as the girl's framing of both the overtly corporeal scene on the beach as well as her own idealization of her school crush give her a sense of sexual agency, even if only in her imagination (which, especially in the context of a short story, is itself a form of action).

Additionally, Yaeger draws attention to the uniqueness of the narrator of "A Memory": "Unlike most of the characters in *Curtain of Green* . . . the heroine of 'A Memory' seems out of place, for she is solidly middle class and hopelessly lyrical . . . suggesting that this story's narrator may be Welty herself."<sup>25</sup> As a photographer, Welty certainly saw value in what many others registered as a lack of beauty. I agree with Yaeger, who explicitly points to the transformation of the narrator from one who is "at first repelled but finally feels eroticized by the grotesque world around her" ("Beyond the Hummingbird" 311), drawing attention to the significantly gendered nature of these dynamics. Further, as Garland-Thomson explains, "Whereas the male stare is a potentially hostile instrument to be mastered, the female stare compromises a woman's virtue, which is the ultimate threat to her position as a lady" (69). By openly staring at the group on the beach, the narrator further subverts the expectations of her own ladylike status, as her willingness to witness overt sexuality compromises her own moral standing. In other words, by being the instigator of a Sartrean stare, the young woman on the beach becomes both Medusa and her victim: both the perpetrator of the destructive gaze as well as its petrified victim. The intersubjective space in which this interaction takes place,

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<sup>25</sup> Welty's biographer confirms that many of the details in the story—the unrequited schoolgirl crush, the habit of physically framing scenes with her hands, and even the leisure time spent at the beach—are details from Welty's own life (Marrs "Eudora Welty: Panel Discussion and Gallery Walk-Through").

however, allows for a potentially productive petrification. In this beach scene, the young woman will presumably emerge from the intersubjective space of this stare a changed person, with a changed vision of the world.

I was surprised to discover that the theme in “A Memory” of intersubjectivity aroused by ugliness did not develop until a later draft, as I consider this story to demonstrate this dynamic more overtly than her other stories. In the published version, the narrator of the story frequently holds her fingers up in a frame shape through which she views the world. These frames emphasize the extent to which she, as a viewer, is responsible for constructing her vision of the world, and calls attention to the reader’s similar role in constructing her own understanding of the story. Significantly, this hand gesture is absent from early drafts.

And in fact, when it does appear, it is first described as a “shield,” and only later as a “device,” a distinction which I find quite revealing (MS 2). As the gesture is one that the narrator learned in an art class, I read the original “shield” characterization as one in which artistic creation functions as a protection from the ugliness of life, as she holds it up between herself and the debased people on the beach. However, Welty’s work is not about hiding from the baser aspects of life, and this is why this earlier characterization of the gesture as a “shield” changes to “device” in the final version. A more neutral descriptor, “device” implies a facilitation of something, a tool, as the narrator’s hand gesture ultimately functions not as a shield but as an attempt at connecting with reality. As the end of the story leaves the narrator with her romantic visions of her imaginary love story shattered, what these revisions emphasize to me is the ways in which artistic



vision functions as a connection to, rather than a shield against, the harsher aspects of reality in Welty's writing.

Elaine Scarry claims that "Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people" (3). If this is true, what is the purpose, then, of bringing ugliness into art—why have ugly women in literature at all? Despite the troubling meanings implied by ugliness, its power to captivate remains.

In Welty's work, the images of ugly women offer openings in the narratives, the kind of "open-ended . . . capacity to create meaning" described by Garland-Thomson (39). Especially when Welty's stories are read together, the frequent appearance of the ugly women throughout the stories cannot be ignored. While some readers might be content to dismiss them as a gesture toward the Southern Gothic or a reliance on stereotypes for comic relief, I maintain that their appearance is more complicated than this.

Exemplified by the unresolved endings of "A Memory" and "Why I Live at the P.O.," Welty utilizes the dynamics of ugliness and staring in order to leave open a generative space. In her discussion of Welty's writing process, Marrs observes that Welty realized that "in the pages of stories . . . writer and reader met, jointly bringing their imaginations to bear upon a narrative" (*Eudora Welty: A Biography* 36). By making us look at ugliness repeatedly, Welty puts the reader into an uncomfortable position. Within the frames of her stories, she includes elements of the abject and grotesque which threaten the very borders she constructs. However, the dynamic which emerges from the images of ugly women as well as the staring they provoke offers the reader new and productive opportunities for considering female characters previously caught in a

tradition of southern literature which offered limited models of femininity. Despite popular images of southern women as beautiful belles, stories such as Welty's reveal that these images are not the only model of southern womanhood. Though many dismiss these characters as humorous stereotypes of inferior southerners, I maintain that their ubiquitous presence throughout Welty's work means that they are too important to simply be dismissed as comic relief. As we can see in the girl's response to the group in "A Memory," these characters' appearance signify more than comedy: the ugliness read on their faces and bodies function as markers of dissent, sexuality, and histories of violence and neglect. These stories interrupt our expectations of southern angels of the house, and thus make us stop and reconsider our expectations of southern women. As ugliness requires the one staring to imagine a story to explain what is being seen, so Welty's ugly women require us to imagine our own new narrative possibilities.

### CHAPTER 3 THE UGLY PLOT

In her 2002 *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture*, Elizabeth Freeman differentiates what she sees as the conservative courtship plot (one in which the main plotline ends in an engagement or a wedding) from the much more complex and potentially radical marriage plot (one which contains an actual marriage or wedding within the text, but does not end with it). She observes that, in the courtship plot, “various alternatives to marriage are systematically deployed and then rejected or overcome, and the wedding finale signals, at best, acquiescence to a social order only slightly modified by bourgeois feminine values. But . . . when a wedding took over a plot, narrative and social chaos ensued” (xiv). While courtship plots contain a return to order by the end of the story, wedding plots can provide critiques of the status quo. In a marriage plot, “the wedding actually served to demystify marriage, illuminating and critiquing the power of marriage law to maintain structures that do not seem immediately connected to it, such as the nation-state, racial taxonomies, and so on” (Freeman xiv). Unlike the courtship plot, which is teleological, building to one particular ending, the wedding plot is multitudinous, containing many possibilities.

Similarly, Joseph Allen Boone examines the tradition of what he refers to as the “love-plot”<sup>26</sup> within the Anglo-American literary tradition. According to Boone, the generic “love-plot” consists of “complex interchanges whereby ideological structures of

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<sup>26</sup> While they are discussing similar themes, authors such as Freeman and Boone do not always use terminology in the same way. For my purposes, “love-plot” is any plot which is structured around the development of romantic love between two characters. A “courtship plot” is one in which this “love-plot” ends in an engagement, and possibly a wedding, although we see little if any of the couple’s married life. A “marriage plot,” following Freeman, is one in which a wedding takes place in the beginning or middle of a text, but does not serve as the climax of the novel’s plot.

belief—of which the ideal of romantic wedlock is a prime example—are translated into narrative structures that at once encode and perpetuate those beliefs” (2). Similar to Freeman’s discussion of the courtship plot, Boone claims that the tradition of the love-plot has “served a powerful conservative function promoting exaggerated expectations of everlasting bliss that have enforced the subconscious acquiescence of many readers . . . to a limiting position within the social and marital order” (2). Both Boone and Freeman see these plots with their pre-determined endings as confining women to narrow, traditional roles and reinforcing retrogressive traditions.

However, as Freeman identifies the marriage plot as one which offers alternatives to these confining roles, so does Boone identify a counter-tradition within the love-plot, one which pushes back against the ideological underpinnings of the conservative narrative structure. Boone argues that love-plots often contain contradictions which require careful deciphering by the reader, a process which creates a “simultaneous counter-narrative: the persistent ‘undoing’ of the dominant tradition by the contradiction concealed within the specific forms that its representations of ‘life’ and ‘love’ have assumed” (2). For example, although a novel such as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* conforms to a standard courtship plot structure in which a series of obstacles are eventually overcome to unite Elizabeth and Darcy by the novel’s end, there are enough “devious inflection[s] and glancing blows[s] at sexual roles and marital institutions” throughout the novel to provide a counter-narrative of critique which coexists with the primary narrative’s “affirm[ation of] a progressive vision of marriage as a viable social good” (91). What Boone identifies as these “small but subversive attack[s] upon the evolving hegemony of the marriage tradition in Anglo-American fiction” (2) are similarly

present throughout much of the fiction written by southern women through their deployment of the ugly plot.

Similar to these counterplots, I propose the *ugly plot* as counterplot to the more familiar courtship and marriage plots. As a vehicle for social rebellion in many works by southern women writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ugliness marks those who for various reasons are not suitable for the expected roles of wife and mother. In the ugly plot, a woman described as ugly lives outside of normative marriage and motherhood. As an alternative to a love plot, the ugly plot imagines other possible relationships for women, often those with other women similarly excluded from marriage. In some versions of the ugly plot involve characters such as Welty's Lily Daw or Porter's Cousin Eva whose appearance reflects their inability to fully inhabit their expected role as a southern woman. However, there are other variations of the ugly plot in which women actively choose to adopt an ugly appearance in order to opt out of these expectations. Rooted in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" and her character Joy/Hulga who consciously frowns, slumps, and stomps around in order to appear unattractive, this variety of the ugly plot highlights the important role that privilege places in choosing ugliness, as only women who have the resources to meet their material needs outside of marriage can make the conscious decision to opt out of it.

Ugly plots have the potential for much more variety than courtship plots, whose outcomes are rather fixed as happy endings. Ironically, these plots involving women unsuitable for marriage are more closely related to Freeman's formulation of the marriage plot, which demystifies marriage by showing the variety of possibilities—both good and bad—which exist after vows are exchanged. Unlike these love plots, however, the ugly

plot enables a rebellious existence outside of normative southern gender roles and marriage economies. By taking them outside of the marriage market, the ugly plot offers women ways of living that are alternative to marriage, although not necessarily utopian. The ugly plot acknowledges women who “don’t count,” whose class status, race, ethnicity, rebellion against the status quo, or other undesirable characteristics threaten the stability of the dominant, white southern culture that the South’s conservative traditions attempt to uphold.

Ugly female characters who fail to achieve marriage and motherhood are another way in which authors illustrate the “slippages in the logic governing marriage and marriage fiction,” as Boone argues that the contradictions throughout love-plots highlight. Exemplifying the type of counterplot which “tap[s] the [novel] genre’s original radical impulse to subvert what (and while) it conserves” (2-3), the ugly plot as a narrative structure imagines alternatives to expectations of marriage and romance. Southern women writers write ugly plots in order to revive the radical potential for critique and dissent and in the once subversive genre of the novel.

Though Boone’s primary interest is in the effect of the revival of such subversiveness on the novel’s form, I am more interested in the implications for a feminist critique of traditional southern gender roles as well as the potential for queering the love-plot. Because ugliness has a specifically southern dimension, the deployment of the ugly plot is a strategy to rebel against these regional ideological strictures. By creating ugly characters, southern women writers themselves are able to “be ugly,” to not only push back against these expectations of femininity, but also imagine ways of living

alternative to established roles. By taking them outside of the marriage market, the ugly plot offers women ways of living that are alternative to marriage.

This is not to say, however, that these alternatives are always utopian (or even positive) in nature: while some texts, such as *Gone With the Wind* and *The Color Purple*, do leave readers with a sense of hope for the characters' futures, others, such as "Lily Daw and the Ladies" have a much more ambiguous ending. Still, ugliness provides these female characters access to a sort of freedom, at least in the terms discussed by Foucault in "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom." Observing that "power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free," Foucault insists upon a broad definition of freedom: "Even when the power relation is completely out of balance, when it can be truly claimed that one side has 'total power' over the other, a power can be exercised over the other only insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself, of leaping out the window or of killing the other person" (441). Though the ugly plot does not promise utopian futures, it does demonstrate a spectrum of positions relative to the marriage market, as opposed to more traditional love-plots which trace a more linear progression from single to married.

Further, the constellation of alternatives to marriage which these texts demonstrate is not a static system. Women's appearances change over time, and these changes are reflective of their positions relative to marriage and motherhood. Certainly, when an ugly woman tries to interact with the marriage market, the interaction affects both the woman and the market. It is what is left out of the Cinderella story, the fairy tale which Rudman and Heppen have appropriated for their characterization of "the glass slipper effect," in which "the idealized association of men with chivalry and heroism

might be linked to a hobbling of women's personal power aspirations" (1359). This paradigm of marriage as limiting women's identity and options for ways of living is reflected in retrogressive models of marriage in the South.

However, the ugly plot demonstrates that interpellation into the roles of wife and mother is not the only option which women have. The ugly plot illuminates a fictional space similar to that described by Kathryn Bond Stockton as the realm of the queer child in fiction. Just as "the gay child lights up the problem of History[, l]ying outside of historians' focus—not 'in' it yet" (8-9), so does the ugly woman highlight problems of southern gender roles and show alternatives which exist outside of the focus of love-plots. In her discussion of the gay child, Stockton posits a concept of "sideways growth" as "something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive." Denied a place in progressive narratives of growing up as well as heterosexual couplehood and reproduction, the gay child instead "grows to the side of cultural ideals" (13). The ugly plot imagines similar ways of living "sideways" to the cultural ideals of the American South.

Ugly women have appearances which mark them as failing to live up to these ideals. What Stockton refers to as "living sideways" is similar to what many queer theorists have characterized as "illegibility." Although Judith Butler emphasizes the importance of having identities which are legible in the political system, Judith Halberstam questions the usefulness of legibility in such systems. Halberstam claims that, "Illegibility may in fact be one way of escaping the political manipulation to which all



. . . . fields and disciplines are subject” (88),<sup>27</sup> and I think that illegibility in the marriage market may similarly be a way of escaping the “political manipulation” to which southern women are subject by virtue of their gender. To clarify, being *legible* in the marriage market is different from being *eligible* for the market: *legibility* is primarily a matter of possessing a visage which is recognizable as a member of the system. A married woman, for example, or a widow would be legible to the system, having an identity and role which was acknowledged, approved of, and understood—despite being ineligible for marriage.

However, a woman who qualifies as ugly—because of physical characteristics which mark her as belonging to a lower class, for example, such as Mrs. Slattery in *Gone With the Wind*, who was a “snarly-haired woman, sickly and washed-out of appearance (67)—is not only ineligible for the marriage market (which women such as Scarlett aspire to), but has an appearance which is illegible to the market. There is no place for Mrs. Slattery in the dominant white, hegemonic marriage market populated by families such as the O’Haras and the Tarletons. Her daughter Emmie is later seen by Scarlett as being a “dirty tow-headed slut,” an “overdressed, nasty piece of poor white trash” (747); Emmie’s appearance signifies her class status which renders her illegible (though not invisible) to the marriage market. Certainly, Scarlett would never consider Emmie to inhabit the same system as she does, because of Emmie’s class status and known sexual promiscuity.

Ironically, Emmie Slattery does, in fact, marry Jonas Wilkerson, the former Tara overseer who was fired after he was revealed to be the father of Emmie’s child. After

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<sup>27</sup> Though Halberstam is writing about legibility in academia, I believe that such questioning of the usefulness of legibility is transferable to larger applications outside of the academy, including marriage.

they are married, however, Scarlett's characterization of Jonas as a "Scallawag" demonstrates that she continues to see them as inhabiting a very different status stratum from herself, despite the Wilkerson's possession of much more money than the O'Hara's have. The only legibility which Emmie possesses is that of a threat to Scarlet's system: first through her family's typhoid germs, which ultimately are responsible for the death of Scarlet's mother, and then through Jonas's "Scallawag" wealth and his attempt to buy Tara when Scarlett cannot pay the property taxes on the plantation.

Emmie Slattery demonstrates the variety of positions relative to marriage which the ugly plot demonstrates are available to women outside of the linear progression from belle to married lady, a progression which novels such as *Gone with the Wind* overtly imply is the only suitable one. At first glance, the continued popularity of *Gone with the Wind* appears to sustain beliefs in traditional femininity and feminine gender roles represented by the belle ideal. Although the concept "southern belle" is firmly rooted in the nineteenth century,<sup>28</sup> as an ideal it refuses to die, as demonstrated by contemporary magazines such as *Southern Living* and *Garden and Gun*.<sup>29</sup> Within the hegemonic, white southern culture, women have not traditionally had many accepted roles besides those of wife and mother. However, I maintain that *Gone With the Wind* remains popular at least in part in the ways in which it attempts to subvert these ideals through the deployment of ugly counterplots.

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, though the southern belle was a common character in nineteenth century fiction, Jones and Donaldson convincingly argue that the image of the southern belle was popularized during the Jim Crow era as a reason for the region's race-based violence and lynching epidemic. See "Haunted Bodies: Rethinking the Body through Gender."

<sup>29</sup> See "southern belle" and Glock, "Southern Women."

White southern womanhood—or in its ideal form, ladyhood—has quite rigid requirements. Taking a sociological approach, scholars John Lynxwiler and Michele Wilson have identified a “specific cultural image” of southern womanhood, with nineteenth century roots whose tenets were still observed at the time of their study in the 1980s:

Southern womanhood is essentially white and relatively well to do . . . . Southern by ‘the Grace of God,’ she is a lady in her innocence, including the absence of knowledge of vulgar topics and language. Her timidity, never marred by assertiveness or anger, is complemented by her submissiveness to her parents, husband, spiritual counselor, and God. All of these protect her from the harsh realities of money, the world of work, and rapists. She, of course, matches or rewards this protectiveness with self-denial and a compassionate concern for others. (113)

Lynxwiler and Wilson’s observations are echoed by Mab Segrest’s memoir of growing up female in the South, especially in her explanation of the centrality of manners (and the denial which they facilitate) to southern ladyhood: “Manners, lies and truth were all intertwined in the world I grew up in. Manners were, in fact, elaborate rituals for getting at or avoiding the truth” (63). In both of these examples, white southern ladies facilitate the preservation of the white hegemonic system through the preservation of their own appropriate façade.

Scarlett O’Hara exemplifies the struggle to preserve this façade throughout *Gone with the Wind*. The novel provides several fascinating examples of ugly plots contained within larger, seemingly more conventional narratives of courtship and marriage. The incorporation of these ugly plots within the often romantic sweep of the larger narrative draws attention to the very unromantic nature of marriage—at least the type of marriage held up as an aspiration for women such as Scarlett—which is to perpetuate a very specific kind of southern society: one which is white, affluent, and supports retrogressive

values. The ugly plot calls attention to women who are typically illegible in this system—and while illegibility is not necessarily synonymous with invisibility, the illegible is often ignored. By calling attention to women who would typically be illegible in this system, the ugly plots in *Gone with the Wind* not only demystify marriage but also call attention to the many possible ways of “living sideways” which marriage often overshadows.

From the novel’s beginning, romantic aspirations for marriage are called into question. Gerald O’Hara dismisses his daughter Scarlett’s romantic aspirations for Ashley Wilkes and instead encourages her toward a more practical union: “If you had any sense you’d have married Stuart or Brent Tarleton long ago. Think it over, daughter. Marry one of the twins and then the plantations will run together and Jim Tarleton and I will build you a fine house, right where they join, in that big pine grove” (23). In fact, despite a description of their gentlemanly traits of “raising good cotton, riding well, shooting straight, dancing lightly, squiring the ladies with elegance and carrying one’s liquor like a gentleman,” it is ultimately their wealth which distinguishes them from others: “Their family had more money, more horses, more slaves than anyone else in the County, but the boys had less grammar than most of their poor Cracker neighbors” (2). And the purpose of marriage in this society is to preserve this wealth among those who will preserve this society of affluent whites who live by retrogressive, southern values.

The visibility of the character Belle Watling further demystifies any romantic notions about marriage. Belle’s appearance evokes the Medusa-like qualities of the ugly woman discussed in Chapter Two, as her appearance is striking, but catches the attention because it is too bright and inappropriate. When Scarlett first encounters Belle, her “eye was caught by a figure on the sidewalk in a brightly colored dress—too bright for street

wear,” and observing her red hair, “it was the first time she had ever seen any woman who she knew for certain had ‘done something to her hair’ and she watched her, fascinated” (101). Belle’s appearance poses a threat, in that it has the potential to catch and fascinate. After Uncle Peter refers to her as Belle Watling—without a “Miss” or “Mrs.”—and refuses to specify anything more than she’s one of the “passel of no-count folks” in Atlanta, Scarlett realizes that Belle must be a “bad woman” (102). According to the narrator, “Bad women and all they involved were mysterious and revolting matters to her. She knew that men patronized these women for purposes which no lady should mention—or if she did mention them, in whispers and by indirection and euphemisms” (171). In this way, the existence of Belle in the novel functions not only to demystify marriage but also to acknowledge an alternative to marriage, as Belle is the proprietor of a brothel.

Unlike the film version, in which Ona Munson’s brightly made up Belle Watling shares screen time with Vivian Leigh, Olivia de Havilland, and Clark Gable, in Mitchell’s novel these scenes with Belle are more often recounted by those involved, rather than directly narrated. For example, the memorable film scene in which Belle gives Melanie money for the hospital is only recounted by Melanie to Scarlett in the novel in retrospect. Importantly, Belle is rarely fully seen in the novel: upon Scarlett’s return to Atlanta, for example, Scarlett sees her carriage, in which “a woman’s head appeared for a moment at the window—a too bright red head beneath a fine fur hat . . . . It was Belle Watling and Scarlett had a glimpse of nostrils distended with dislike before she disappeared again” (382). The only scene in which we see Belle directly interacting with another takes place inside her dim carriage, when she is apologizing to Melanie for having to imply that

Ashley was an unfaithful husband. This dimly-lit scene consists primarily of dialogue, however: even when interacting with Melanie, Belle remains invisible as a person; her too-bright hair is only able to catch attention—otherwise, she lacks any real personhood, other than being a non-grammatical voice who resents the old ways even as she reveres the Confederate ideals. And in fact Belle is quite aware of the importance of being unrecognizable, as she is concerned about someone recognizing her carriage while Melanie is in it. In order for her business to be successful, she must remain unrecognizable while interacting with people of “proper” society.<sup>30</sup>

At the time that Mitchell was writing *Gone with the Wind*, marriage laws were being passed which exemplified the kinds of attempts at political manipulation described by Halberstam through their new requirements such as tests for venereal diseases and restrictions on marriage between relatives. These new laws signaled the importance of marriage in the reproduction of a physically healthy and, I would argue, morally appropriate population.<sup>31</sup> Admittedly, one could argue that ugly bodies are not so much illegible as they are undesirable. Nevertheless, I maintain that there is still a distinction to be made between the two characterizations. Women may have appearances which register in a negative valence—Melanie Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*, for example, whose “serious heart-shaped face that was *plain* almost to homeliness” (14)—and still be *legible* in the marriage economy. In fact, Melanie’s “heart-shaped” plainness reveals her

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<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Mitchell 569.

<sup>31</sup> See Freeman 23. Though she ties these laws only to the reproduction of a physically healthy population, I maintain that the moral undertone to these rules—specifically those regarding sexually transmitted diseases and marriage between relatives—function not only to police the physical health of the population, but also to regulate the moral character of the population as well.

to be the ideal woman for marriage: romantic yet compliant. She loves Ashley and will not be a difficult wife.

Melanie's non-threatening visage signifies her as good marriage material; similarly, the connection between being unattractive and being unmarried was a common one in the South as well. However, spinsterhood was not a dead end for these women, as historically, unmarried women in the South at times did have more opportunities than their married sisters. In her historical account of nineteenth century unmarried women in the urban South, Christine Jacobson Carter reports several accounts of ugly women whose single status marked them as having "failed in the usual trajectory to mature womanhood" (19), such as Harriot Pinckney, the wealthy, unmarried daughter of a Revolutionary War hero who was described as being "plain to distinction"<sup>32</sup> and "filled with all the beauty that nature had left out of her countenance" (16). Carter claims that, in the nineteenth century, southern single women in cities shared what Lee Chambers-Schiller has identified as a "Cult of Single Blessedness" with their northern sisters, an ideology which "held that remaining single and useful to others was better than marrying the wrong man for the wrong reason and that women achieved their highest purpose and happiness in service to others" (5). According to Carter, "What made *southern* single blessedness distinctive, however, and the experiences of elite southern spinsters unique, was that their places within families and their understandings of themselves as daughters, sisters, and aunts still shaped their identities" (6).

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<sup>32</sup> While I have worked to differentiate ugliness from plainness in my work, that Pinckney was not only plain but "plain to distinction" qualifies her, in my reading, as exceeding the boundaries of plainness and entering the realm of the ugly.

While single women in the nineteenth century may have depended on their “original families” to “[ensure] them their social places and identities” (Carter 7), what we see in twentieth century fiction written by women is single women whose unmarried status not only allows them to reimagine and reinvent alternatives to the household organized a heterosexual couple and children, but also reveals the limitations of marriage, especially as southern households began to move from larger, extended family schemas to smaller families centered around one heterosexual couple and their children.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the Civil War, many single southern women “found that the legacy of antebellum single blessedness and benevolent activity was not enough to sustain them in the new economic, social, and political landscape.” According to Jacobson, “Many assessed their lives and changed circumstances and began to wish for independence from family burdens—and from being a burden on their families” (153). And in fact, she claims that once the war began, the antebellum “relative permissiveness, or blind-eye attitude, about spinsterhood was shattered”; unmarried women were put “under the microscope of public discourse,” with plenty of “debates on the roles of single women, and hand-wringing over their lots” (153).

My understanding of such hand-wringing over the failure to marry is informed by scholars such as Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam, who write about the concept of failure in terms of queer theory. Specifically, the ugly plot challenges the imperative of “reproductive futurism,” a concept which Edelman explains “impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of

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<sup>33</sup> Orville Burton observes that, while families in the South were slower to change from larger households (which conformed to stricter gender roles), they did eventually respond to changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization, including smaller, more consumer-driven households as well as more women working outside of the home. *See* Burton 460-461.



heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (2). Instead, Edelman and Halberstam both embrace a model of queer negativity, what Halberstam describes as “a project within which one remains committed to not only scrambling dominant logics of desire but also to contesting homogenous models of gay identity within which a queer victim stands up to his or her oppressors and emerges a hero” (149). Edelman sees the value of queer negativity “in its challenges to values as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (7).

In the same way that queer negativity is a refusal of futurism, there is a similar refusal deployed by southern women writers in their continued creation of ugly women who are barred from sanctioned, reproductive sexuality through marriage. Ugliness functions in a similar mode as queerness, in the way that “queerness exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and engaging those fantasies through the figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them” (Edelman 7-8). The ugly plot similarly reveals the limits of the structures underlying the seemingly requisite roles of wife and mother by imagining alternative household configurations and ways of living, by presenting ugly women who have found ways to “live sideways” to these roles.

However, Halberstam is critical of Edelman’s “negative critique [which] strands queerness between two equally unbearable options (futuraity and positivity in opposition to nihilism and negation).” Halberstam asks, “Can we produce generative models of failure that do not posit two equally bleak alternatives?” (120). The ugly plot is exactly

such a “generative model of failure,” as it imagines a variety of alternatives to the teleological straits of courtship, marriage, and motherhood. Importantly, such a generative failure signifies a “a feminist politics that issues not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or a becoming women but from a refusal to be or become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western politics” (Halberstam 124).<sup>34</sup> The creation of unmarriageable, ugly women in these works demonstrates just such a possible refusal to Woman as she has been even more narrowly defined within the culture of the American South.

This is not to say, however, that such endings represent some sort of feminist utopia. Certainly, Welty’s “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” should be considered under the rubric of an ugly plot, for while it is discovered that Lily did, in fact, receive a marriage proposal from a traveling xylophone player—complicating the plans of the town’s ladies who have arranged to send her to the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble Minded of Mississippi—the story’s end leaves Lily’s fate unclear. Lily, once excited about her engagement to the xylophone player, claims that she wants to go to Ellisville instead. The story’s end emphasizes its ambiguity: “The band went on playing. Some of the people thought Lily was on the train, and some swore she wasn’t. Everybody cheered, though, and a straw hat was thrown into the telephone wires” (15). Even this state of ambiguity is an alternative to a settled state of marriage, one which I argue fits under this rubric of queer failure. In this way, the ugly plot posits a way of reading women who have typically been considered illegible to the dominant system, not only highlighting

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<sup>34</sup> Though the southern marriage economy is not completely synonymous with “Western politics,” I maintain that the ways in which white southern womanhood was defined in terms of marriage and motherhood is similar enough that the analogy between the two systems—Western politics and southern marriage—is appropriate.

their ineligibility for the system and its rewards but also pointing to alternative ways of living for women in the South. While these alternative models may not fully subvert the institutions of southern marriage and family, they do certainly challenge the hegemony of this model and demonstrate that alternatives are possible.

I would like to clarify that the failure demonstrated by the ugly plot is different from the kind written about by many southern male writers. Ellen Douglas observes that when William Faulkner (like so many others) writes about women, women are not only likened to the South in general (as W. J. Cash observed), but to the failed South in particular: “the projection of human purity onto women is doomed always to failure, doomed to produce, inevitably, disappointment and hatred” (87). Faulkner’s mode of feminine failure is one of symbolic representation: women such as Miss Rosa in *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, who exude a “rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity” while resembling a “crucified child” (4). In contrast, the “failure” of women such as Cousin Eva or Scarlett O’Hara<sup>35</sup> to succeed at marriage is not symbolic of larger Southern tragedies, but is instead a rejection of this symbology, a rejection of the pedestal.

Failure as a mode of possibility is particularly apt in the marriage economy, specifically because of its relationship to the free market economy. Judith Halberstam explains that failure “goes hand in hand with capitalism. A market economy must have winners and losers” (88). Importantly, Halberstam observes that, “as a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and

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<sup>35</sup> I address both of these characters later in this chapter.

its indeterminate qualities” (88). The ugly plot is one possible answer to Irigaray’s challenge to imagine what would happen to the social order “if women left behind their condition as commodities . . . and took part in elaborating and carrying out exchanges? Not by reproducing, by copying the ‘phallogocratic’ models that have the force of law today, but by socializing in a different way the relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire” (191). Female characters in the ugly plot do just this, as they find alternatives to the reproductive nuclear family household,<sup>36</sup> alternatives which allow them to experience their identity more fully than in other, more traditional situations. Failure in these plots possesses generative potential.

Such failure is related to that exhibited by spinster characters in the traditional courtship plot. Considering Jane Austen’s spinster figures with other women in her work, D.A. Miller observes that, “Amid the happy wives and pathetic old maids, there is no successfully unmarried woman; and despite the multitude of girls who seek to acquire ‘accomplishments,’ not one shows an artistic achievement or even an artistic ambition that surpasses mediocrity” (28). Unlike the courtship plot, however, the ugly plot highlights *successfully unmarried* women as not only a possibility, but as a real alternative to the limits of often unsuccessful marriage. Southern women writers deploy ugly characters to imagine such alternatives. I recognize their creation of these ugly characters as an act of rebellion amid narrow expectations of successful womanhood: namely, marriage and motherhood. While failure may seem a particularly negative mode within which to cast such imagining, my use of the concept is similar to that of

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<sup>36</sup> The concept of the “nuclear family” first emerged in anthropological usage in the 1920s, understood to be the basic family unit of a mother, father, and their dependent children (*OED Online*).

Halberstam, who explains that “Negativity might well constitute an antipolitics, but it should not register as apolitical” (108).

The aunt figure in particular highlights the existence of an alternate system of production which is *nonprocreative* but nevertheless *productive*. The existence of ugly women outside of the marriage economy demonstrates that there is a space outside of marriage and motherhood. These women do other things: teach school, provide for nieces, and otherwise interact with the public sphere. However, spinsters and schoolteachers were not the only participants in non-dominant (though significant) economies. Unmarried aunts are a frequent occurrence in this literature, as they represent productive members of society who are outside of the dominant system. Southern women writers often recognize the significance of outsiders in their employment of the ugly plot, as the ugly plot enables those who fail to meet the standards of marriage eligibility—whether because they are racially or economically marginal or perceived to be deformed—to find a place outside of the strict gender ideology of the American South. One of the more acceptable roles adopted by unmarried women has been that of the spinster aunt, a role which allows women to adopt a somewhat maternal role without the requirements of actual marriage and motherhood. Despite the fact that the spinster role is an acceptable one within southern society, I wish to emphasize its place within a separate realm which is productive and yet non-procreative. When a spinster aunt’s unmarriageable state is called attention to by her ugliness, the ugly plot highlights the alternatives to the procreative roles of wife and mother she must seek out, demonstrating the kind of “productive failure” discussed above. In fact, Charlotte M. Wright traces ugliness in twentieth-century American literature primarily to the nineteenth century

spinster figure. Wright sees any exclusion from the realm of the beautiful as marking the character as unattractive, and, by extension, undesirable (13-14).

And certainly, aunts have traditionally played an important role in the southern family. There is an entry on the “Maiden Aunt” in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, which explains that, while unmarried women often lived on the fringes of society because of their questionable status, within the home of a married sibling, “she was often a cherished and fond member of the family circle” (Clinton 483). In fact, the *Encyclopedia* identifies “aunt adoption” as a recognized southern phenomenon, in which unmarried women would single out a niece for particular attention, through emotional and even financial support. Nevertheless, while the maiden aunt may have been “often a cherished and fond member of the family circle,” ultimately they were still considered “social outcasts, denied the status a woman could achieve only through her role as matriarch.” Their essentially outsider status is reflected in Catherine Clinton’s observation in the *Encyclopdia* entry that, “Few parents, even those of enormous wealth, would bequeath money to an unmarried daughter” (483). In the conservative southern society, wealth was used to perpetuate and reproduce the dominant society, not to facilitate and fund alternative ways of living, such as that represented by the spinster aunt.

These dominant white economic and social structures were built upon and dependent upon the oppression of African Americans, through the chattel slavery system and the racist precedents it established. Though the novels I am examining were written in the twentieth century, after both women and people of color were legally enfranchised, the dominant white marriage model is firmly rooted in antebellum institutional structures, and the economic (and other) inequalities of slavery continue to echo long after

Reconstruction. These structures were guarded by practices which best guaranteed their reproduction, such as the appropriate marriage practices of white men and women which promised to perpetuate the dominant white culture.

This reproduction was reinforced through a marriage market firmly grounded in the homosocial exchange of women. While many scholars have written about the centrality of marriage—especially the role of women as “the supreme gift” (in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss)<sup>37</sup> between groups in society—I am most influenced in my thinking here by Luce Irigaray’s analysis of marriage’s importance to a market economy. Irigaray writes: “Mothers are essential to its [the social order’s] (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are (reproductive) of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general). Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it” (185). The preoccupation of so many southern women writers with the ugly plot, a plot which calls attention to and interrupts the idea of mandatory marriage, reflects these writers’ recognition of the growing regulatory nature of marriage in the twentieth century. Marriage ensures the reproduction of not only a physically healthy population, but one which preserves southern values of traditional gender roles and a family-centered community.

Many southern women writers have written stories about these excluded women and shown how, in the absence of marriage, they compose alternative households which imagine alternative ways of living. When Patricia Yaeger observes that, “The marriage plot looks pretty tragic viewed under the politics of patriarchy” (“Genre”), she identifies

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<sup>37</sup> See Lévi-Strauss 65.

what these authors seem to be implicitly reacting against: the real limitations imposed upon women in marriages in the South. Even after gaining full legal citizenship through the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, white women were still expected to fulfill the expectations of southern ladyhood.<sup>38</sup>

Such ladyhood represents the aspirational ideal of southern womanhood, an ideal which often reveals what Anne Goodwyn Jones characterizes as a “complex and sometimes contradictory set of values.” Using the image of “Dixie’s Diadem” to represent this unattainable ideal, Jones observes that the southern lady “is not a human being; it is a marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still . . . . Efforts to join person and personification, to make self into symbol, must fail because the idea of southern womanhood specifically denies the self” (*Tomorrow is Another Day* 4). Aspiring to southern ladyhood requires that women embody many cultural tensions and contradictions of the South, especially those involving the intersection of race and sexuality. Diane Roberts is among many scholars who identify the centrality of the white ladyhood to the white supremacy of southern ideology: “In the collapse of slavery, the white South reinvented its racial binaries and reimagined the psychosexual world of blacks and whites, elevated white ladyhood even higher into a bodiless realm, while black men and black women, cast out from the ‘moral order’ of slavery, sank deeper into depravity” (156). Despite its ultimate unattainability, southern ladyhood provided a rigid model of idealized white womanhood to which all southern women were expected to emulate.

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<sup>38</sup> See Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930*.



The ugly plot shows what happens to those women who do not embody the retrogressive southern values represented by the figure of the eligible young lady. Women who are eligible for the marriage market are middle and upper class white women of childbearing age. Their purpose is to marry, maintain the household, inspire their husbands, bear children, instruct children, and support their part of the structure of society. Though it was a product of their study from the 1980s, the code of the southern belle which sociologists Lynxwiler and Wilson identified is largely applicable to the primary components of ideal southern ladyhood throughout the twentieth century:

Never Forget Your Status Lest Others Forget Theirs  
Honor the “Natural” Distinctions Between Men and Women  
Don’t Be a Slut  
Remain Loyal to the Southern Tradition  
You Can Never Be Too Rich or Too Thin<sup>39</sup>  
Pretty Is as Pretty Does.<sup>40</sup> (117-119)

All of these tenets function to reinforce and reproduce the status quo of a retrogressive, white supremacist, sexist southern society, one in which people recognize their prescribed roles and submit to them.

In fiction, women who are best fit for these duties are marked as physically appealing. Ellen O’Hara’s physical appearance in *Gone with the Wind* typifies an ideal wife. Though attractive—“her neck, rising from the black taffeta sheath of her basque, was creamy-skinned, rounded and slender, and it seemed always tilted slightly backward

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<sup>39</sup> This tenet reflects the cultural norms of the 1980s more than any of the others in its encouragement of excess. Given that excessiveness is usually considered at odds with traditional southern femininity, this certainly is a problematic inclusion on this list which otherwise seems applicable to the rest of the century. However, that it is encouraging women to maintain a thin appearance in the midst of wealth certainly harkens back even to Scarlett and her famous seventeen-inch waist.

<sup>40</sup> This last admonition importantly emphasizes the moral and behavioral dimensions of physical appearance in the same way that the warning “Don’t be ugly!” does with respect to inappropriate and rebellious behavior. See Chapter 4.

by the weight of her luxuriant hair in its net at the back of her head”—her appearance further reflects her temperament: “She would have been a strikingly beautiful woman had there been any glow in her eyes, any responsive warmth in her smile” (27). Had she been a striking beauty, she would not have been as ideal as a wife—her striking appearance would have been distracting to those around her, rather than nurturing. However, that Scarlett “had never seen her mother stirred from her austere placidity, nor her personal appointments anything but perfect, no matter what the hour of day or night” (27) demonstrates how Ellen’s appearance marks her as the epitome of the selfless southern wife and mother.<sup>41</sup>

In fact, contrary to more common understandings of beauty, which typically see it as a culturally constructed concept, bound to time and place, scholars such as Nancy Etcoff claim that “there is a core reality to beauty that exists buried within the cultural constructs and the myths” (233). Etcoff says that her work posits an “argument for beauty as a biological adaptation . . . . beauty is a universal part of human experience, and . . . it provokes pleasure, rivets attention, and impels actions that help ensure the survival of our genes” (24). Tracing her project back to classical thinkers who similarly tried to quantify beauty, Etcoff examines various elements which seem to underlie all human concepts of beauty, such as symmetry, highlighted gender-specific physiological differences (such as female breasts and male square jaws), and certain markers of youth and nobility, such as large, round eyes. Etcoff claims that many markers interpreted as beautiful are in fact markers of reproductive fitness and fertility, as well as youth and vulnerability. That such

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<sup>41</sup> Certainly, it is possible to read this description of the unsmiling Ellen as lacking any warmth, even for her children. However, I believe that the emphasis on manners in southern ladyhood—as Mab Segrest explains, “Feelings were what manners hid” (64)—explains what otherwise might seem like a shocking lack of affection within the family circle. Once again, appropriate femininity eschews any excess—whether excess flesh or excess emotion.

characteristics evoke feelings of protection not only point to stereotypical gender roles in this reading, but also underscore procreation as the basis of attractiveness, and subsequently the heterosexual, procreative couple as the organizing structure of this society. A properly feminine woman who willingly takes on the responsibilities of the roles of wife and mother is what this society wishes to reproduce, and thus the woman who *embodies* these characteristics is desired.

Katherine Anne Porter's *The Old Order* contains many examples of women whose physical appearance—whether beauty or ugliness—is an embodiment of their personality traits and values. For example, in his analysis of the collection, Jay Watson compares symptoms of romance exhibited by Porter's female characters with symptoms of illness: "Subordination, exhaustion, economic and emotional dependence, passivity, silence, the retreat from public to private sphere—this is the same fate that awaits the heroine of southern romance when her story inevitably arrives at marriage and motherhood" (258). In Watson's reading, he focuses on Miranda's Aunt Amy, whom he describes as "run[ning] head-on into the romance plot and the traditional society it helped to legitimate and sustain. Here also the marketplace in flesh . . . reappears in more specific terms as a marriage market, scene of an Irigarayan traffic in women" (238). Amy is the beauty of the short story collection, the only one who meets the family's high standards of beauty, the "points of beauty by which one was judged severely":

First, a beauty must be tall; whatever the color the eyes, the hair must be dark, the darker the better; the skin must be pale and smooth. Lightness and swiftness of movement were important points. A beauty must be a good dancer, superb on horseback, with a serene manner, an amiable gaiety tempered with dignity at all hours. Beautiful teeth and hands, of course, and over and above this, some mysterious crown of enchantment that attracted and held the heart. It was all very exciting and discouraging. (102)

Though Amy's beauty wins her marriage, her illness reveals such beauty as ultimately being less than desirable. In fact, the "mysterious crown of enchantment" in its evocation of the angelic (and the requirements of "lightness and swiftness of movement") marks this mode of the beautiful woman as being less than corporeal. As an invalid, Aunt Amy typifies the kind of "difficult embodiment" which Watson identifies as permeating Porter's work. By focusing on images of sickly women, Watson concludes that "Porter's illness stories are feminist fables in which love can only end 'unhealthily ever after'" (261).

I agree with Watson's identification of Aunt Amy as an exemplar of Porter's sickly women who reveal the limitations of marriage. However, I am less interested in Aunt Amy's success at marriage than I am in Cousin Eva's failure: Eva, whose ugliness marks her as illegible to and ineligible for the marriage market. Miranda's father Harry claims that Eva's entire life was determined—and doomed—by her weak chin, which he blames for both her failure to marry and her strident political activity as a suffragist: "For even then it was pretty plain that Eva was an old maid, born. Harry said, 'Oh, Eva—Eva has no chin, that's her trouble'" (111). Though Miranda's father, Harry, claims that there is a direct causal relationship between this particular physical flaw and her failure at marriage, an earlier description in the text gives a much more complex picture of Eva, both in her ugliness as well as the relationship that her appearance bears to her life's trajectory:

Eva, shy and chinless, straining her upper lip over two enormous teeth, would sit in corners watching her mother. She looked hungry, her eyes were strained and tired. She wore her mother's old clothes, made over, and taught Latin in a Female Seminary. She believed in votes for women, and had traveled about, making speeches . . . . Eva was a blot, no doubt about it, but the little girls felt she belonged to their everyday world of dull lessons to be learned, stiff shoes to be

limbered up, scratchy flannels to be endured in cold weather, measles and disappointed expectations. (104)

Even basic physical attractiveness is out of Eva's reach, as it takes an effort to simply close her mouth. Her eyes and mouth—two of the most expressive parts of the face—are described by variations of the word “strain.” Eva exemplifies the ugly plot, in which a physical trait reflects her personality and the fact that she is ill-suited for marriage and motherhood.

Race is, of course, the most pronounced physical marker which disqualifies women from the dominant marriage market. The requirement that a beautiful woman's skin must be “pale and smooth” highlights the exclusion of any nonwhite women from the dominant marriage economy as well. Although it would be possible for a nonwhite person to have pale, smooth skin, given the rigid gender expectations not only of the society Porter creates in this collection but also within the family itself, I read this proscription of “pale and smooth” as code for “white.” In *The Old Order*, the exclusion of nonwhite women from the dominant marriage economy is demonstrated through the character of Old Nannie, a family slave (and later servant) whose sole identity within the household is determined by her race and role as a slave. Nannie was purchased by Sophia Jane's father when she was a baby and Sophia Jane was five years old. As a child, Sophia Jane does not see Nannie as a fellow human being; after Nannie is bought, Sophia Jane claims her as a pet “monkey” and sees her as a plaything, equivalent to her new pony.

However, the close juxtaposition of Sophia Jane's wedding with that of Nannie's in the text is remarkable enough that I believe it merits attention here. In fact, this juxtaposition highlights the fact that women not only occupy a variety of positions relative to the marriage market, but there are, in fact, multiple marriage markets which

are foundational to southern society. Just as Emmie Slattery's marriage to Jonas Wilkerson lie outside of the realm of possibilities of marriage which Scarlett O'Hara would consider appropriate, so, too, does Nannie's marriage to another slave lie outside of Sophia Jane's marriage market. Nevertheless, both Emmie Slattery's marriage as well as Nannie's marriage have demonstrable effects on the narrower system of white, affluent marriage, especially in economic terms. The Wilkerson union gives an appearance of legitimacy (through marriage) to Jonas's non-inherited wealth—itsself a threat to the previous system of marriage which cemented systems of consolidated power through inherited wealth. And Nannie's marriage to Uncle Jimbilly is purely arranged by their owners, presumably motivated by their owners' desire to produce more slaves through the offspring of their forced union, rather than by any desire on the part of those being married.

In fact, Nannie's wedding, taking place a few days after Sophia Jane's, seems almost an addendum to Sophia Jane's ceremony. The proximity of these events in the text highlights the transactional nature of Sophia Jane's marriage while it emphasizes the contrast in legible personhood between Sophia Jane and Nannie. In fact, that the attractive, white, upper class Sophia Jane marries is so expected it is almost un-noteworthy in the narrative. The description itself is, however, noteworthy enough that it bears recounting in full:

Nannie had slept in a bed and had been playmate and work-fellow with her mistress; they fought on almost equal terms, Sophia Jane defending Nannie fiercely against any discipline but her own. When they were both seventeen years old, Miss Sophia Jane was married off in a very gay wedding. The house was jammed to the roof and everybody present was at least fourth cousin to everybody else. There were forty carriages and more than two hundred horses to look after for two days. When the last wheel had disappeared down the lane (a number of the guests lingered on for two weeks), the larders and bins were half empty and

the place looked as if a troop of cavalry had been over it. A few days later Nannie was married off to a boy she had known ever since she came to the family, and they were given as a wedding present to Miss Sophia Jane. (19)

First, the intimacy between Nannie and Sophia Jane is emphasized in this passage as the description appears at the beginning of the paragraph, I read it as particularly significant. The middle of the paragraph is dedicated to Sophia Jane's wedding, describing it in detail as a lavish event. Significantly, though, the groom is never mentioned. In the last sentence, Nannie is married.

It is important to note that the same wording is used to describe both marriages: "Miss Sophia Jane was married off..."; "Nannie was married off...." This passive construction emphasizes that both women lack agency with regard to their marriages while it obscures the identities of those who do have power over these events. The description of Nannie's marriage (significantly, not "Miss Nannie"), however, is followed by the additional clause, "and they were given as a wedding present to Miss Sophia Jane." Though Sophia Jane and Nannie are both seventeen years old and married off to men whose individual identities are less important than their spousal roles, Nannie's inferior status is emphasized by the fact that she can constitute a "wedding present" for Sophia Jane.

In a subsequent passage, the description that we do get of Sophia Jane's husband emphasizes that their marriage has family interest, rather than romantic attraction (or even real fondness) at its center. Observing in her husband a "lack of aim, failure to act in a crisis, a philosophic detachment from practical affairs, a tendency to set projects on foot and then leave them to perish or to be finished by someone else; and a profound conviction that everyone around him should be happy to wait upon him hand and foot"

(21), Sophia Jane's contempt for her husband emphasizes that marriage and motherhood are roles she has been thrust into, rather than relationships and responsibilities she has actively sought.

As an attractive woman, Sophia Jane is expected to fulfill these roles, which she does. What I am interested in, however, is the ways in which Nannie's character is used to demonstrate what exists outside of Sophia Jane's marriage economy. Once again, ugliness marks those who occupy a position outside of marriage, positions which highlight the unromantic, economic basis of this system. Though Nannie is married off to the slave known as Uncle Jimbilly when she is seventeen, their marriage is even less sentimental than Sophia Jane's:

That marriage of convenience, in which they had been mated with truly royal policy, with an eye to the blood and family stability, had dissolved itself between them when the reasons for its being had likewise dissolved . . . . They took no notice whatever of each other's existence, they seemed to forget they had children together (each spoke of 'my children'), they had stored up no common memories that either wished to keep. (45, ellipses in original)

Nannie bears thirteen children, of which only three survive. Though both Nannie and Jimbilly stay on with the white household after Emancipation, the family's younger generation of white children do not even realize that they had been married. Once the children which Nannie was responsible for nursing are raised, and she becomes "Old Nannie," she moves out of the house and lives alone in an abandoned cabin where she "aim[s] to pass my las' days waitin on no man" (46). Old Nannie spends her evenings sitting by herself in the night air; she spends her days sitting with Sophia Jane sewing and talking about the past.

Following Michael Bibler's analysis of the collection, I agree that the complicated, dynamic relationship between the women demonstrates what he terms a



“southern kitchen romance,” what in Porter’s hands constitutes “an attempt to create out of the mythologized past a model of more equitable relations between southern whites and blacks that does not replicate the injustices of the past” (168). Further, Nannie’s marriage to Jimbilly represents another demystification of marriage, as we are encouraged to compare their marriage’s arranged, pragmatic characteristics to that of Sophia Jane. A close reading of these two weddings and marriages reveals the economic, political, and eugenic qualities of marriage that white southern culture works hard to obscure.

As an example of a southern kitchen romance, Nannie and Sophia Jane demonstrate a far from utopian vision of an alternative household arrangement. Often, ugly plots highlight the importance of such relationships, especially in cases of unsuccessful marriage. For example, in Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s short story “Gal Young’Un,” an unlikely bond grows between Mattie and the Elly the “gal young’un” of the story’s title, whom Mattie’s husband Trax brings home to live with them as his acknowledged lover. Mattie’s appearance seems ground down by time, as she grows to resemble her house, “tall and bare and lonely, weathered gray, like its unpainted cypress” (148). Often compared to her weathered house, much of Mattie’s ugliness is age-related, such as when she “smoothed back her gray hair from her worn face and presented her middle-aged bulk in a clean apron” (163).

In fact, much of Mattie’s ugliness is made poignant through her attempts at making herself attractive, such as smoothing her hair here and wearing a clean apron. Of course, the starkest contrast occurs when Trax (whom everyone, including Mattie, is aware only married her for her money) brings home Elly, expecting Mattie to wait on and

care for them. Trax's mistreatment of Mattie has a material effect on her, as she finally realizes that she "had not been whole. She had charred herself against the man's youth and beauty. Her hate was healthful. It waked her from a drugged sleep, and she stirred faculties hurt and long unused" (171). Once again, though her appearance is affected by her treatment and her environment, it is not static. She goes from being "a gray bulk" (167) when Trax brings home Elly, to being terrifying in her anger, as Trax sees her "stragglng gray hair down the length of her frame. Her apron was smudged and torn. Her hands were black and raw. He came back to her implacable cold eyes" when she destroys his prized car (179). By the story's end, once she discovers the strength within her to send Trax away, she becomes "strong and whole. She was fixed, deep-rooted as the pine trees. They leaned a little, bent by an ancient storm. Nothing more could move them" (181). She does not become beautiful, but her ugliness changes, reflecting her changing responses to the difficulties she faces.

Despite being Trax's momentarily favored one, even with her youth, Elly, too, often looks ugly. Picked up by the disreputable Trax after being abandoned by a father who "romped on me reg'lar" (173), Elly's appearance similarly reflects her rough treatment. Elly "was painted crudely, as with a haphazard conception of how it should be done. Stiff blond curls were bunched under a tilted hat. A flimsy silk dress hung loosely on an immature frame. Cheap silk stockings bagged on thin legs. She rocked, rather than walked, on incredibly spiked heels" (167). The clothes that Trax buys her fit neither her body nor her age, and the mismatch detracts from her appearance. She literally cannot fit into the role he expects of her.

Although it may seem a jarring transition from Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings to Alice Walker, I believe that they both exemplify the kind of unexpected bond between women within the ugly plot—a bond which often emerges in reaction against the man for whom they are supposed to be rivals. Just as Mattie realizes that when Trax married her, “she had been thrown in on the deal, like an old mare traded in with a farm” (166), so is Celie’s marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in Walker’s 1982 novel *The Color Purple* one of convenience, as he is clear from the beginning of their relationship that he marries her because his household needs a woman to provide childcare and housework. After realizing that Celie is his only option, it still takes him four months to reach a state desperate enough to marry her. Even then, he does not hide that his real desire is for the singer Shug Avery (as well as Celie’s sister Nettie). And in fact, when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ negotiates with Celie’s stepfather Alphonso over his marriage to her, the commodity-based nature of the exchange is emphasized by the addition of a cow to sweeten the deal. Alphonso encourages Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to see Celie’s ugliness as positive attribute, signifying her hardiness and industriousness. Alphonso explains, “She ugly . . . . But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean.” (8). A victim not only of poverty but also her stepfather’s rape (which causes her to bear two children who are taken from her), Celie’s ugliness also reflects her difficult life, which has required that she become hardy and industrious in order to survive.

Shug is another compellingly ugly character in the novel. Though many find her beautiful, hers is another appearance which fluctuates to reflect her current state. Photographs always depict Shug as beautiful: when Celie first sees Shug’s photograph, she remarks that Shug was “The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than

my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar” (6). When they first meet in person, however, Shug is sick, and close up, she is ugly: “Close up I see all this yellow powder caked up on her face. Red rouge. She look like she ain’t long for the world but dressed well for the next. But I know better” (45). Though Shug bewitches many, this bewitchment seems to be primarily a function of her personality<sup>42</sup> and, more importantly, her musical talent.

Despite the fact that the novel takes place within an almost exclusively African American community, it is notable that the descriptors of ugliness such as nappy hair and dark skin are particularly raced markers. When Shug and Celie first meet, Shug is almost monstrous in her illness. Celie says, “Under all that powder her face black as Harpo. She got a long pointed nose and big fleshy mouth. Lips look like black plum. Eyes big, glossy. Feverish. And mean. Like, sick as she is, if a snake cross her path, she kill it” (46). Further, like Rawlings’ Elly in her oversized, overly mature silk clothes, both Celie and Shug appear ugliest when they are forced into roles or environment into which they do not fit, especially roles informed by the South’s retrogressive gender roles.

My usage of variations of the word “fit” with respect to marriage is intentional, as physical descriptions of both Shug and Celie often characterize them as physically different from women who are “fit” for marriage. For example, when planning her house, Shug wishes that she could live in a round house, explaining, “I just feel funny living in a square. If I was square, then I could take it better” (209). Shug’s desire for a round house reflects Shug’s inability to fit into a traditionally domestic space. Similarly, Celie’s body

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<sup>42</sup> In this respect, in fact, she seems to resemble Scarlett O’Hara, whose lack of beauty was compensated for by her charm.

is physically different enough from a normative, female body that Shug observes that traditionally feminine clothing does not fit her right. Importantly, when Shug tells Celie, “You don’t have a dress do nothing for you. You not made like no dress pattern, neither,” and suggests that Celie make herself some pants (146), Shug unknowingly sets Celie on the path which will lead to her self-discovery through her artistic awakening. By the novel’s end, Celie is designing her own patterns, both for her clothing as well as her living arrangements.

*The Color Purple* dramatizes such self-discoveries through a variety of sensual awakenings, not only artistic but erotic as well. In Celie’s self-description above, though some of the descriptive words have a negative valence, her unromanticized self-blazon is ultimately not self-shaming: Celie’s hair is “short and kinky because I don’t straighten it anymore. Once Shug say she love it no need to” (70). Shug teaches Celie to appreciate her body in its current state—whatever form it takes—and Celie’s self-acceptance reflects what Daniel Ross observes is “one of the primary projects of modern feminism” exemplified in the novel, which is “to restore women’s bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them” (70).

Not only does Walker restore Celie’s body, but, according to Linda Abbandonato, through Celie she “replots the heroine’s text” (1106). Comparing *The Color Purple* to Nancy Miller’s concept of “the heroine’s text,” which describes a tradition of endangered heroines rooted in eighteenth century feminocentric novels, Abbandonato says that “by exposing and opposing a powerful ideological constraint, institutionalized or ‘compulsory’ heterosexuality, the novel appropriates the woman’s narrative for herself, in effect reinscribing ‘herstory’” (1106). Abbandonato says that the novel answers the

question, “how can a woman define herself differently, disengage herself from the cultural scripts of sexuality and gender that produce her as feminine subject” (1107). She explains that the novel dramatizes the process of women “authoriz[ing] themselves as women, to disengage their feminine identity from the ideological metanarratives that inscribe it” (1110). As Celie’s self-blazon illustrates, while ugliness is often the result of a difficult life, functioning as an archive of tragedy, women such as Celie or Mattie can claim this ugliness by claiming their “herstory” as written on their faces and bodies.

*The Color Purple* represents one of the more utopian deployments of the ugly plot, as Celie, characterized as ugly from the novel’s beginning, finds a satisfying life of artistic expression outside of the expectations of marriage. Once again, though such a comparison to *The Color Purple* may seem malapropos, I suggest that *Gone with the Wind* presents a similarly optimistic vision of the ugly plot, as it ends with Scarlett, abandoned by her husband, returning to her childhood home and her extended family there. Certainly, I concur with Tara McPherson’s evaluation that “though the novel does reveal a desire for union, this latency in no way mitigates the novel’s racism” (59), and I am not suggesting that Mitchell’s novel achieves even gestures toward equality between the races that Porter’s aspires to. Nevertheless, the novel deploys a variety of ugly plots which further demonstrate that the assumed linear progression from unmarried belle to happily married lady is not the only option, even for women born into affluent, white circles.

Admittedly, it may seem disingenuous to consider Scarlett O’Hara under the rubric of an “ugly plot,” as the actress Vivien Leigh who portrayed her in the 1939 film adaptation of the novel has become an icon of beautiful southern womanhood, despite the

novel's opening claim to the contrary. While this amnesia is in part because the vision of Vivien Leigh is permanently emblazoned on our collective consciousness, it is also because, like the Tarleton twins, we as readers are also caught by Scarlett's charm—or if not charm, at least her wit and her candor. Importantly, what keeps her “arresting face” from being beautiful is the clash of her mother's delicate, aristocratic features and her father's heavier Irish ones (a clash which plays itself out not only in Scarlett's features and personality, but in the novel's racial, gendered, and class-conscious thematic conflicts as well). While plenty has been written about Scarlett as a proto- or anti-feminist (or even what Bettina Entzminger has referred to as the “belle gone bad”), what has been less examined is Scarlett's actual physical appearance as Margaret Mitchell wrote her. Throughout the novel, Scarlett's arresting—but not beautiful—appearance functions as a marker of race and class, revealing the significance of beauty in policing the borders of the marriage economy.

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, philosopher Elaine Scarry explains that, typically, individual concepts of the “beautiful” arise from what she paradoxically explains as a “composite of particulars” (19). In other words, beauty results from a comparison to our own individual accretion of the particular details and traits of the people we have encountered, while keeping intact a sense of individuality. This explains why beauty norms can vary from culture to culture, but that there are always those whose appearance is different enough to catch attention.

The details in Mitchell's description of her demonstrate that often the physical markers which keep a woman from qualifying as beautiful are markers of race, ethnicity, or class. Importantly, it is the clash of cultures in her face—the “too sharply blended . . .

delicate features of her mother, a Coast aristocrat of French descent, and the heavy ones of her florid Irish father” (1)—which keeps her from qualifying as beautiful. In Mitchell’s description, it is Scarlett’s character—as Rhett so famously declared, the fact that she was “no lady”—which comes through in her appearance and keeps her from meeting the standards of her contemporary society’s definition of beauty. Mitchell is quite clear about this: “But for all of the modesty of her spreading skirts, the demureness of hair netted smoothly into a chignon and the quietness of small white hands folded in her lap, her true self was poorly concealed. The green eyes in the carefully sweet face were turbulent, willful, lusty with life, distinctly at variance with her decorous demeanor” (1). Once again, her appearance reveals a clash of class and cultures, as “Her manners had been imposed upon her by her mother’s gentle admonitions and the sterner discipline of her mammy; [however,] her eyes were her own” (1). As her green eyes are to a certain extent an expression of her Irishness, this description reveals that no amount of aristocratic tutoring can disguise her Irish soul.

In her discussion of the appearance of Irishness in the novel, Geraldine Higgins importantly observes that, “When Mitchell wants to signal Scarlett’s failure to live up to the ladylike example of her mother, descended from French Catholic aristocrats, she indicates that her features are becoming more and more like her father’s” (36). According to Higgins, “Irishness in *Gone with the Wind* is shorthand for commonness and a certain vulgar aptitude for social climbing” (37). As many have observed, throughout most of American history, the Irish have often been seen as not deserving of the same privileges as those who were considered to be more authentically white than the Irish, who were perceived as an ethnic “other.” And while Higgins is ultimately dubious regarding the



question of whether there is any “equivalence between the Irish and African Americans in the ethnic hierarchies of *Gone with the Wind*” (40), she does observe that Mitchell “undercuts racial essentialism with her Irish heroine as a survivor” (42). Higgins is willing to go as far as concluding that, “Irishness does inflect the racial binaries of blackness and whiteness in Mitchell’s text, even if we cannot go so far as to say that it mediates between them. Tara and the O’Haras are significant ethnic markers in *Gone with the Wind*, penetrating the traditional invisibility of ethnic differences in the white South and troubling the homogeneity of its racial categories” (46). Eliza Russi Lowen McGraw, too, considers that “Scarlett’s Irishness holds the possibility of positioning her alongside the Southern ‘other’—African Americans” (127). In fact, McGraw goes so far as to posit Scarlett following in the tradition of the tragic mulatta character (127-129).

However, unlike the traditional tragic mulatta character, it is Scarlett’s mixed heritage which ultimately saves her. In fact, McGraw sees the central argument of the novel as being that “survivors of the New South must have blood other than that of the defeated Anglicized planters idealized by plantation legend. Within the economy of the text, Scarlett’s Irishness accounts for her transgressive nature, and ensures she will thrive in post-bellum Atlanta” (124). It is Scarlett’s stubborn practicality and her inability to fully conform to expectations of gender which allow her to survive. From stealing her sister’s fiancé to killing a Yankee, Scarlett takes the steps she sees as necessary to feed her family, keep her home, and survive both the war as well as Reconstruction. However, it is also these rebellious characteristics which keep her from achieving full ladyhood and, with it, conventional beauty and successful marriage.

As I noted earlier, Mitchell locates Scarlett's rebellion in her eyes, eyes which are "pale green without a touch of hazel, starred with bristly black lashes and slightly tilted at the ends" (1). While some might read these pale green eyes as pretty, to me the description of "bristly black lashes" undercuts their beauty. They are, however, powerful. Entzminger observes that, "Like her antebellum analogue's, Scarlett's eyes, though green instead of black, are used as hypnotic focal points of her feminine powers," and she points out that Scarlett relies on the power of her eyes when winning over the Tarleton twins, Charles Hamilton, and Frank Kennedy (107). In *The Southern Belle in the American Novel*, Kathryn Lee Seidel points out that,

Of all the belles I have studied, she is the only one with green eyes. By assigning Scarlett this eye color, Mitchell both acknowledges and overturns this small detail of the belle stereotype. It is a technique Mitchell uses masterfully throughout the novel; with it, she compliments her audience's knowledge of and affection of the stereotype, but uses it for her own purposes. (53-54)

Further, green eyes not only emphasize Scarlett's Irish heritage, but evoke the unladylike quality of jealousy, a quality which Scarlett often displays.

I am intrigued by Seidel's observation that Mitchell "captures the essentials of the belle's attractiveness" in her characterization of Scarlett's lack of beauty, noting that "the belle has not always been a great beauty, but rather seems to be considered one because of her charm" (53). However, I disagree with her explanation that, "The imperfect beauty of the belle reflects authors' acknowledgment of female readers who certainly are not all beauties and can better identify with a heroine who is more like themselves. Such a description reassures the reader that being alluring, finding a husband, and establishing a happy life are possible even for those who are not born beautiful" (53). And it is true that even *Swallow Barn's* Bel Tracy, to a certain extent the *ur-belle*, is described as having

“quick impulses, that give her the charm of agreeable expression, although her features are irregular, and would not stand a critical examination. Her skin is not altogether clear; her mouth is large, and her eyes of a dark gray hue” (78). However, I don’t dare characterize any aspect of Scarlett as “agreeable.” While Mitchell to some extent may be following a tradition of imperfect belles (as Seidel claims she does with eye color, for example), I see Scarlett’s appearance as marking her as unfit for the roles of lady, wife, and mother, which her status as the daughter of a plantation owner insist she should easily adopt.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses Scarlett to discuss such interpellation. Sedgwick observes that,

in the life of Scarlett O’Hara, it is expressly clear that to be born female is to be defined entirely in relation to the role of ‘lady,’ a role that does take its shape and meaning from a sexuality of which she is not the subject but the object. For Scarlett, to survive as a woman does mean learning to see sexuality, male power domination, and her traditional gender role as all meaning the same dangerous thing. To absent herself silently from each of them alike, and learn to manipulate them from behind this screen as objects or pure signifiers, as men do, is the numbing but effective lesson of her life. (8)

According to Sedgwick, the obviousness of Scarlett’s mercenary motives is what draws (especially female) readers to the novel, as it has “thematized for successive generations of American women the constraints of the ‘feminine’ role, the obstacles to and the ravenous urgency of female ambition, the importance of the economic motive, the compulsiveness and destructiveness of romantic love, and . . . the centrality and the total alienation of female sexuality” (8). Therefore, I believe that it is not so much Scarlett’s failure to achieve acceptable standards of beauty which makes us root for her; rather, it is the ways in which her struggles reveal how difficult and unappealing the expectations of

traditional gender roles are that make us cheer when Scarlett defies these expectations. Her appearance is a corporeal manifestation of her defiance.

Over the course of the novel, however, other revelations of physical ugliness also signify her unladylike behavior and the ways in which appropriate behavior is tied to class. In the scene where Scarlett visits Rhett in jail, for example, Scarlett almost fools Rhett into believing that she has survived the end of the war unscathed at Tara, and that her visit to him is motivated only by her fondness for him (and not from the great financial need which is her actual motivation). As I touched on briefly in Chapter 1, her deception succeeds until he sees her hands, which are “rough from work, brown with sunburn, splotched with freckles. The nails were broken and irregular, there were heavy calluses on the cushions of the palm, a half-healed blister on the thumb. The red scar which boiling fat had left last month was ugly and glaring” (397). Scarlett’s scars reveal that she has been engaged in physical work, behavior unacceptable for a lady of her previous socioeconomic status. For once, all of Scarlett’s charm cannot disguise how poverty has marked her body.

In this scene, Scarlett’s body betrays her, and she is unable to charm Rhett into giving her the money she needs to pay the taxes on Tara to save her home. However, not everyone is as astute at reading Scarlett as Rhett is, and she is able to charm the financially flush Frank Kennedy into marrying her and saving Tara. After the privations of the war and the beginnings of Reconstruction, Scarlett clings to her upper socioeconomic status and the privileges it accords, though she is much more successful at the financial aspects of her privilege than the social responsibilities it entails. I am quite interested in the fact that, though she claims to have had plenty of experience in receiving

proposals of marriage as a belle, and she does marry three times over the course of the novel and bear three children, by the novel's end she is alone, abandoned by Rhett, the only husband she genuinely loved. I read her ultimate solitary status as proof of her failure at marriage, as the end of the novel finds her abandoned by her husband—not a successful ending for a nineteenth century heroine (even one written in the twentieth century).

Scarlett's failure at marriage demonstrates my contention that ugliness marks those who are considered ineligible for the marriage economy: her inability to consistently behave in a properly feminine manner emphasizes that Scarlett does not fulfill the expectations of a married southern woman, and as such is excluded from any permanent status in the dominant white marriage economy. As Entzinger observes, "Scarlett is successful with these men only when she follows the rules of conduct against which she protests" (110). Although many would consider her multiple marriages as proof of her success at marriage—Charles Hamilton and Frank Kennedy in particular, as they both seem to qualify as appropriate husbands within Scarlett's social circle and socioeconomic class—I maintain that the death of both of these men in fact symbolizes their ultimate failure to act as an appropriate husband to Scarlett, one who is able to fully inhabit the role of head of the household. It is important to remember that, prior to their engagement to Scarlett, both Charles and Frank had "understandings" with other women. Scarlett's "success" at snaring them as husbands was at the expense of other women of her community—certainly not exhibiting the "pretty is as pretty does" exhortation of southern ladyhood. Scarlett's unladylike, rebellious nature are marked by her arresting appearance along with her Irish heritage, characteristics which disqualify her from being

the kind of submissive, ladylike woman required by the role of the dutiful wife in this society.

I argue that Tara at the end of *Gone with the Wind* offers a vision of the kind of alternative to the traditional, heterocentric household made possible by the ugly plot. Though she was married three times, the fact that the novel's end finds Scarlett O'Hara abandoned by her husband qualifies her as yet another woman who moves back and forth between being unsuccessfully married and successfully unmarried. Though Scarlett herself would never consciously admit to the possibility of being "successfully unmarried," she does have an epiphanic realization regarding what she has been taught about gender roles:

A startling thought this, that a woman could handle business matters as well as or better than a man, a revolutionary thought to Scarlett who had been reared in the tradition that men were omniscient and women none too bright. Of course, she had discovered that this was not altogether true but the pleasant fiction still stuck in her mind. (862)

Her realization leads her to consider the "lean months at Tara" during which "she had done a man's work and done it well." At this point, she even questions the necessity of marriage:

Why, why, her mind stuttered, I believe women could manage everything in the world without men's help—except having babies, and God knows, no woman in her right mind would have babies if she could help it. With the idea that she was as capable as a man came a sudden rush of pride and violent longing to prove it, to make money for herself as men made money. (863)

Despite Scarlett's repeated attempts at marriage for a variety of motives, every time she is at Tara—the novel's beginning, after the fall of Atlanta, and her implied return at the novel's end—she is in a different state of singlehood. From her identity as an unmarried belle, to a hard-working widow, to a grieving wife, life for Scarlett at Tara is successful

(albeit in varying modes of success, from life as a flattered belle, to the hard work of saving her family and family home, to the assumed recovery and recuperation at the novel's end) at least in part because she is unencumbered by either a spouse or motherhood (as Tara's extended kinship system provides caretaking for her children). Scarlett's story serves as an example of the ugly plot deployed to not only reveal the limitations of marriage but also imagine an alternative household arrangement. In fact, the novel's end represents a more fully realized alternative than the nostalgic reminiscences of Porter's Nannie and Sophia Jane.

If beauty marks those who are deemed eligible for marriage, then what does it mean that the quintessential southern belle fails to meet ideals of southern beauty? Entzminger explains that, "The parallels between Mitchell's life and that of her heroine indicate that she saw similarities between her role as a southern lady during World War I and the Great Depression and that of a southern lady during the Civil War and Reconstruction" (105). As Anne Goodwyn Jones observes, "Margaret Mitchell was simultaneously an unreconstructed southerner—a believer in the traditional values of the southern lady—and a new kind of rebel. And out of the tension produced by the conflict of different definitions of southern women, her life—and her novel—grew" (314). Mitchell, infamous for her own occasional acts of rebellion against genteel femininity, creates a character that highlights the rebellion at the heart of southern womanhood. As Entzminger observes, Mitchell "sees that the bad belle's worst qualities—her deceitfulness, shrewdness, manipulateness, and superficiality—are the very traits that enable her to survive in the fallen South . . . Paradoxically, the good lady's best qualities—trust, self-sacrifice, and loyalty—are the ones that make her unfit for the

modern world” (106). Similarly, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that the novel “grappled . . . with the dilemmas of female identity in the modern world . . . . Scarlett engaged a special identification from her readers by simultaneously mobilizing and obscuring the tensions of female being and passion that plagued Mitchell and her contemporaries” (392). Fox-Genovese also observes that at the core of the novel “lies a psychological exploration of the place of women within the ruling class and of the tensions between their subjective desires and their assigned objective role” (394). Ultimately, Scarlett’s striking lack of beauty functions as a marker of defiance against societal standards and expectations.

At the center of these expectations is the requirement that only women who possess appropriately feminine characteristics be allowed access to the marriage market and the potential for reproduction it possesses. In *The Old Order*, that Eva to some extent inherits her ugliness from her mother (both in her physical appearance and its connection to her behavior) demonstrates the very dangers posed by ugly women reproducing. Her mother Molly is described as “an unnatural other to her ugly daughter Eva” (103). Molly, “far past her youth” with her obviously dyed hair, “shamelessly” flirts with old beaux and makes no attempt to hide her hunt for husband number three, despite societal expectations that mothers should be more sedate. Molly should be emulating the matrons described in *Gone with the Wind* whose appearance is so subdued that it barely registers: they are “the older women seated in the drawing room, sedate in dark silks as they sat fanning themselves and talking of babies and sicknesses and who had married whom and why” (65). No longer commodities on the marriage market, safely ensconced in their positions in society, these appropriately embodied married women have appearances



which are not attention-catching. They also demonstrate the fact that, though the connection of youth and beauty shows that beauty is fleeting, ugliness is not necessarily eminent once beauty fades. Other categories—the plain, the homely, even the faded—exist to describe women who do not qualify as beautiful, and such a lack of beauty does not necessarily exclude women from the dominant marriage economy. It is only women who are marked as ugly who are excluded. Certainly, this ugliness can emerge, as in the case of Molly's behavior. She was once appropriately married and not characterized as ugly. However, as an older woman who attempts to re-enter the courtship market, her attempts to change her appearance and appear younger obliterate her attractive features and render her ugly.

Molly's inappropriate behavior makes her appear ugly, and this ugliness marks her as an "unnatural other" and alienates her from her daughter.<sup>43</sup> While Molly flirts, the young Eva hides in corners. Rejecting her mother's unseemly flirtation, the adult Eva nevertheless performs a different kind of ugliness, though an ugliness which is also linked to both her character as well as her behavior. Her secondhand clothes are described in the same sentence as her teaching Latin. She is described as being a "blot" in the same sentence that she is thought of by her students as yet another daily trial to be endured, along with scratchy flannels and measles. Watson, too, observes a direct link between Eva's character and her appearance, noting that, "Porter also hints at Eva's limited reliability as narrator, suggesting that the corruption she [Eva] attributes to Amy may be a projection of her unattractive looks and her belief in women's rights" (250).

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<sup>43</sup> In fact, it may be possible to read Eva's congenital ugliness as a punishment for her mother's unladylike behavior.

However, I believe that Porter ultimately favors Eva over Amy, because it is Eva who survives (unlike the beautiful Amy, who dies a tragic and mysterious death on her honeymoon in New Orleans) and with whom the collection ends. Porter does not privilege marriage in these stories, despite the important role it plays in the lives of women. Watson observes that, “Nowhere in Porter’s life or fiction, for that matter, do we find a marriage that is mutually fulfilling or empowering for both partners. It is always a zero-sum game, someone consumed, someone winning, someone losing, someone bleeding” (260). Ugliness here is connected to industriousness, studiousness, and intellect. Though society might not consider these characteristics attractive ones for a woman, by ending the collection with Eva, Porter reveals a certain sympathy for the ugly aunt.

In fact, the ugly plot’s structuring theme of a connection between appearance and character is maintained throughout *The Old Order*. Miranda’s father Harry often espouses these connections, not only in his appraisal of Cousin Eva, but in his parenting as well.

Though described as a

pleasant, everyday sort of father, who held his daughters on his knee if they were prettily dressed and well behaved, [he] pushed them away if they had not freshly combed hair and nicely scrubbed fingernails. “Go away, you’re disgusting,” he would say, in a matter-of-fact voice. He noticed if their stocking seams were crooked. He caused them to brush their teeth with a revolting mixture of prepared chalk, powdered charcoal, and salt. (112)

Harry also passes judgment on Miranda, lamenting that she “was going to be a little thing all her life, she would never be tall; and this meant, of course, that she would never be a beauty like Aunt Amy, or Cousin Isabel. Her hope of being a beauty died hard, until the

notion of being a jockey<sup>44</sup> came suddenly and filled all her thoughts” (130). Significantly, once the hope of beauty is gone for Miranda, it seems to clear the way for other possibilities. The life of the beautiful belle is fixed, determined, and tragic; in these stories, it seems to be the ugly women who have the potential for more interesting lives.

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<sup>44</sup> Though equestrian riding was an acceptable pastime for women and there are references to female jockeys in the South as early as the 1850s, most of these references were in regard to women who were trick riders in circuses. So, Miranda’s plan her to become a jockey here is analogous to running away to join the circus. *See, e.g.*, “The Circus,” an 1894 article in the *Charlotte Observer* which mentions female jockey races.

## CHAPTER 4 CHOOSING TO BE UGLY

The *American Heritage Dictionary* observes that the use of the word ugly to mean “rude” is “*Chiefly Southern US*” (“ugly”). This definition highlights that “ugly” carries a regionally specific, ideological meaning. In addition to the characters whose ugly physical appearances are beyond their control, there are also female characters who consciously choose to be ugly in both physical and behavioral senses of the word. Stories in which women actively take steps to make themselves look ugly constitute a particularly important **variation** on the ugly plot. As the ugly plot illuminates how ugliness marks those who for various reasons are not eligible for or legible to the marriage market, so there exists a **variation** of the ugly plot, one in which women choose to make themselves ugly in order to rebel, express dissent, or refuse the roles of wife and mother and their rigid gender expectations.

In Chapter 3, I discussed Molly in *The Old Order*, whose attempts to make herself appear pretty and eligible for marriage—her heavy make-up and her inappropriate flirting at parties—instead give her an ugly appearance. As a mother of an advancing age, southern society dictates that she should not be competing with other belles for marriage and should instead adopt a quieter appearance, one which makes her less obtrusive. Despite Molly’s intention to make herself more attractive, the end result of her primping is that she appears ugly. However, in the work of southern women, there are also many female characters who do the exact opposite: they purposefully set out to make themselves appear ugly in order to opt out of the marriage economy, rebelling against the expectations of femininity by which they feel strangled.

Refusing the trappings of feminine beauty is an overt act of defiance: it takes courage to resist cultural norms and expectations of femininity. Feminist critic Laurie Penny emphasizes how embedded these norms are in capitalist-fueled conspicuous consumption, observing that, “Women’s work-relationship to their bodies mirrors our work-relationship to our homes: we labour [*sic*] at great personal cost to gild our cages, our increasing resentment tempered by fear of the social consequences of refusal” (48). To be clear, the characters I’m interested in here go further than improperly gilding, more than simply failing to live up to the often impossible standards of beauty expected of them. Rather, they actively seek out an ugly appearance through their clothing, their grooming, their posture, facial expressions, even the way they walk. Instead of fading into the background, their ugliness in fact draws attention to them.

American culture in general (not only the South) shuns the idea of a woman making such a spectacle of herself. Reflecting upon such admonitions from her childhood which still echo, Mary Russo observes that,

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure . . . . For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap . . . were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. (53)

In the examples which Russo gives, it is more than simply making a spectacle of one’s self which is appalling; an extremely beautiful woman is certainly spectacular. Rather, it is ways in which their bodies exceed boundaries and reveal that which should remain hidden which makes these women spectacularly ugly. As Penny explains, “Fear of female flesh and fat is fear of female power, the sublimated power of women over birth and death and dirt and sex” (32). Tracing these ideas back as far back as Augustine, Susan

Bordo claims that “the body is the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control*. It overtakes, it overwhelms, it erupts and disrupts” (145, emphasis in original). This is why so many beauty products—from Lycra undergarments to hair spray—are about containing the body: that which cannot be contained is dangerous.

Contrary to the “inadvertency” which Russo attributes to women who appear in public in such disarray, the female characters I am interested in are well aware of how their excessive appearance is being read. For example, Janie’s first appearance in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates how her community understands that refusing traditionally feminine trappings is an act of defiance. Upon returning to the community of Eatonville after running away with her beloved Tea Cake, the community focuses on her appearance to express its censure: “‘What she doin comin back here in dem overalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on?—Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in? . . . What dat ole forty year ole ‘woman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak some young gal?’” (3). Talking to her friend Pheoby about the community’s gossip, Janie acknowledges that her overalls were Tea Cake’s idea, to make it easier for her to work in the field with him (7): in this way, they signify the egalitarian nature of her relationship with Tea Cake. Janie’s overalls are a convenient shorthand for the unconventionality of her relationship with Tea Cake, a relationship whose failure to conform to the community’s values is a part of its strength.

Janie has never been interested in the security of traditional marriage, despite her grandmother’s desire to “marry [Janie] off decent like” (13). Nanny sees marriage as the safest route for her granddaughter, explaining to Janie that, “Ah don’t want yo’ feathers always crumpled by folks throwin’ up things in yo’ face. And Ah can’t die easy thinkin’

maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you" (20). However, Janie's brief life as the wife of Logan Killicks, despite the material comforts afforded by his "often-mentioned sixty acres" (21) leaves her indifferent, despite Janie's claim that she "wants to want him sometimes" (23). Her apathy to Logan renders her vulnerable to the exciting offer of Joe Starks to take her away from her life of drudgery with Logan to the enticing opportunities of Eatonville.

Though she settles down to something of a more conventional life as Joe's wife in Eatonville, even there she is seen as an ugly woman. In Eatonville, her ugliness marks her as not fully capable of living up to Eatonville's expectations of her as the wife of a successful businessman and mayor. For example, after Janie rebuffs Amos Hicks's attempts at conversation, he connects this failure on her part (a proper southern lady would know how to flatter a man with appropriate conversation) to her appearance: "'at 'oman ain't so awfully pretty no how when yuh take the second look at her. Ah had to sorta pass by de house on de way back and seen her good. 'Tain't nothin' to her 'ceptin' dat long hair'" (38). Although Amos's dismissal of Janie's appearance is to a certain extent an attempt to save face after Janie fails to properly acknowledge his presence, it is notable that he points to her hair as her one exceptional quality. Throughout the novel, Janie's hair is consistently pointed out as her one beauty—later in the novel when Janie and Tea Cake are working on the muck, for example, Mrs. Turner pursues friendship with Janie based on Janie's light skin and her "luxurious hair" (140). Janie's husband Joe finds her hair so beautiful that he requires her to keep it hidden under a kerchief. Even Tea Cake is smitten with Janie's hair, admitting to Janie that, "Ah ain't been sleepin' so good for mor'n uh week cause Ah been wishin' so bad tuh git mah hands in yo' hair"

(103). Janie has the potential to be an attractive woman, as her hair demonstrates, just as her grandmother's upbringing has given her the potential to be a proper wife and mother. However, Janie's physical beauty fails to live up to the promise of her hair, just as her desires for sensuality and freedom keep her from being a submissive wife.

Despite the promise of escape originally offered by Joe Starks and life in Eatonville, Joe's vision of marriage is one in which his wife's identity is fully defined by his. As he explains to Janie, "Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" (46). Especially after Joe becomes mayor, he expects Janie to adopt the role of the mayor's wife, one which is primarily one of having the proper appearance. At the grand opening of Joe's store, for example, he "told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang" (41). However, Janie withers in Joe's shadow. When Joe rejects their guests' request to have Janie speak to them, Joe explains that, "She's uh woman and her place is in the home." At this response, Janie experiences Joe's lack of concern for feelings as though "he took the bloom off of things" (43). This description is noteworthy for its imagery, as it connects to Janie's loss of desire for Joe, when "The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again" (71). Acknowledging the fundamental connection in Janie between nature and sensuality, she's described as no longer being "petal-open anymore with him" (71).



With Joe, Janie experiences the same sort of restricted identity and dull sense of life which she had with Logan—and as with Logan, so, too, does Janie defy Joe’s expectations. This is dramatized in the repercussions of the unintentionally lackluster dinner which Janie produces one evening for Joe—not through any conscious rebellion on her part, but simply “one of those dinners that chasten all women sometimes. They plan and they fix and they do, and then some kitchen-dwelling fiend slips a scorched, soggy, tasteless mess into their pots and pans.” Offended by her failure as some sort of personal injury, Joe “slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store.” Though their marriage was already deteriorating, it is at this point that “something fell off the shelf inside her.” After Joe slaps her, she realizes that “she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (72).

Prior to this scene, Janie’s self-conception has been one rooted in sensuality and desire. When she is most fully self-expressive in the novel (in childhood and once she is with Tea Cake), Janie’s selfhood is connected to nature, especially trees, beginning with the famous scene of Janie lying beneath the blooming pear tree, watching the “thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from the root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight” (11). Janie’s capacity for sensual delight is repressed by those such as her grandmother and Joe who expect her to be a smaller voice than her husband.

It is not until she experiences her temporarily egalitarian romantic relationship with Tea Cake that her original perspective is restored. Admittedly, it is with reservations that I characterize Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake as “egalitarian,” which is why I

qualify this period as of their relationship as temporary. I agree with Susan Edwards Meisenhelder that their relationship moves from one which is originally reciprocal to one which becomes increasingly similar to Janie's marriage to Joe Starks, as well as Meisenhelder's contention that readings of the novel should acknowledge both the "vigorous equality of their relationship and the threats to it the changes in Tea Cake constitute" (81). Reading the novel through the lens of the ugly plot highlights Meisenhelder's claim that the novel "allow[s] a story of female resistance to 'pass' as romance" (90). The novel's frame shows Janie as a woman alone, having undergone a transformation through her relationships, but ultimately forging a life alone and signaling this choice through her chosen appearance.

When she returns to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death and tells Pheoby her story, she is described as seeing "her life like a great tree in leaf with all the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" (8). In between, however, Joe's attempts to force her into submissive femininity transform her lived experience from the multitudinous, nature-based desire of her youth to a less complex one: "mostly she lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods—come and gone with the sun. She got nothing from Jo[e] except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn't value" (76). In other words, Janie becomes alienated from her own body and develops a much more binary sense of herself—inside/outside, shadow/light, hot/cold—rather than the fuller, lush capacity for experience that the pear tree exemplifies Janie as possessing.

Critics continue to debate whether Janie's reclaiming of her own sensual desire and individual subjectivity over the course of the novel qualify the novel to be

characterized as a feminist text. Jennifer Jordan provides a succinct summary of these feminist debates surrounding the text:

The novel is seen as a vehicle of feminist protest through its condemnation of the restrictiveness of bourgeois marriage and through its exploration of intraracial sexism and male violence. It is seen as a quest through which the heroine, Janie Killicks Starks Woods, achieves a sense of identity as a self-fulfilled woman and, through her own self-realization, becomes a leader of women and of her community. Although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provides a most effective examination of the stultification of feminine talent and energy within traditional middle-class life, it ultimately belittles the suffering of the majority of black women whose working-class existences are dominated by hard labor and financial instability. Furthermore, Janie's struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements and, despite her sincere relationship with her friend Pheoby, fails to achieve a communal identification with the black women around her or with the black community as a whole. (108).

I am sympathetic to a feminist reading of the text (at least in terms of self-identity), as I read Janie's transformations as illustrative of Elizabeth Grosz's proposal that a feminist understanding of the body requires seeing the body as a complicated, changing construction. Beginning with Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of difference, Grosz suggests that their

notion of the body as a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations, may be of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object and interior/exterior opposition. (164)

Certainly, Janie's appearance over the course of the novel reflects not only a recovery of her dynamic, non-static, non-binary self, but also highlights the significance of the dynamic nature of her appearance.

Janie's realization of the split between her inside and outside marks a turning point in her behavior with Joe, one which is signified by a change in her appearance. Previously, she didn't recognize a difference between her inside and outside: her outer

appearance reflected her inner sensibilities, as in her refusal to wear a head kerchief. She had previously complained about the head kerchief which Joe insisted she wear because he realized that her hair was attractive to other men. However, once Joe severed any trust remaining between the two of them when he physically attacks her, she is no longer interested in communicating with him. Janie is then content to look on the outside in a manner consistent with his expectations of an appropriately passive, feminine wife—which includes wearing the head kerchief. This image stands in stark contrast to Janie’s actual feelings, as she at this point begins “saving up feelings for some man she had never seen” (72). Janie’s compliant outer appearance is a form of deception against her husband.

Once Janie is aware of this divide within herself, she is able to consciously control her outer appearance in order to control how people read her. Her appropriate, *not* ugly appearance signals her acquiescence to her position as Joe Stark’s wife and her suspension of rebellion against the expectations of her.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, Hurston twice describes Janie as “starching and ironing her face” in order to emphasize this control. In one scene, Janie “starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see” (87). Hurston uses the same phrase—“Janie starched and ironed her face”—a page later to describe her preparation for Starks’ funeral (88). Hurston’s use of the language of the domestic sphere to describe Janie’s control over her appearance is significant, in that

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<sup>45</sup> However, it is important to note that this acquiescence is only temporary. As she will later use her choice of overalls to signal her rebellion against Eatonville’s gender norms, so at the end of her relationship with Joe does she use her appearance to relay the message she wishes to get across: specifically, that she is no longer interested in fighting. The fluctuating nature of Janie’s appearance throughout the novel highlights the fact that ugliness is not a static quality: appearance can change over time in response to a variety of factors.

it implies that this power over what one's outward appearance reveals is a specifically feminine one.

Janie no longer uses this power for deception once she is with Tea Cake. With him, she can integrate her inside and outside, returning to the open, sensual, desire-based identity of her youth. Janie's appearance reflects their egalitarian relationship, particularly through the similar clothes they wear. Sometimes she would wonder, "What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes?"<sup>46</sup> In Lake Okechobee, she is comfortable interacting with other men as an equal: "she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (134). Rejecting the strictures of Eatonville femininity, Janie chooses to wear masculine work clothes, an action which signals her position as Tea Cake's equal, both in the field and in the household. The changing significance of her masculine apparel—from being marker of her equal status to men on the muck to a statement of her outsider status in Eatonville—highlights the role of the community in the understanding of ugliness: both in the construction of standards against which female ugliness is determined as well as providing women like Janie a system against which to rebel. That even on the muck, Janie is aware of how her clothing would signify differently in Eatonville highlights the contingent quality of ugliness: what qualifies as ugly in one context is considered functional in another. And even at the novel's end, Janie has not capitulated to the community's expectations of her appearance: she continues to wear her overalls and to keep her outer appearance to her own liking, despite Eatonville's expectations.

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<sup>46</sup> As their later disapproval demonstrates, this was not an idle question. Janie is aware that she is breaking rules as she breaks them.

Although Janie's behavior in romantic relationships has generally gone against her community's expectations of appropriate gender roles, her appearance has not prevented her from having romantic relationships with men (regardless of the community's disapproval). In other texts, female characters take on ugly appearances to signal their resignation from the marriage market. What some understand as giving up on the possibility of marriage and traditional southern womanhood can also be read as active rebellion against and refusal of these expectations. From Hurston's time until today, Janie's strategy of using a consciously chosen ugly outer appearance to acknowledge being outside of (or at times even opposed to) marriage and motherhood continues to be utilized by female characters who wish to opt out of the expectations of their gender. Lee Smith, an author whose work Peter Guralnick describes as "Zora Neale Hurston transported to the mountains of Appalachia" in the way that they share "a fine and unbuttoned declaration of individuality" (141), has created a number of female characters for whom ugliness clearly signals their distance from traditional femininity. In Smith's work, ugliness is a property over which women work hard to exert control—and though some actively fight it in an attempt to keep themselves eligible for the marriage market, others actively choose it, in order to signal their own rejection of marriage and motherhood.

The characters in Smith's early works, such as *Family Linen*, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, and *Black Mountain Breakdown*, are constantly on guard against any encroaching ugliness. Certainly, part of this fear of keeping ugliness at bay has to do with the physical changes brought about by aging, as *Family Linen*'s Myrtle experiences when she discovers that

gravity set in. Myrtle realizes that gravity has always been around, but she never noticed it until she was thirty-nine. Then right along her chinline, at either side of her mouth, something started to droop. Her breasts changed shape, hung lower. And her buttocks—which is probably what bothered her most, since Don is a self-professed ‘ass man’—really started to sag. (42)

While this description to a certain extent describes the “body as palimpsest,” it also describes what ugliness represents to women such as Myrtle who fear it: the loss of attractiveness, especially frightening when it seems to pose a threat to her marriage. If successful femininity is defined as being physically attractive enough to entice a man to propose marriage, reproduce, and provide for his wife and family, then a woman who loses her looks also risks losing her husband, marriage, and the security which rests upon this foundation.

However, ugliness in Smith’s work is not simply the result of the processes of age and gravity. The work that Smith’s characters put into keeping up their physical appearance also functions as a bulwark against laziness, slovenliness, and a general sense of capitulation to the many forces which threaten the stability of this lifestyle of marriage and motherhood. Scholars such as Grosz emphasize the role that these beauty rituals play in constructing recognizable identities: “They make the flesh into a particular type of body—pagan, primitive, medieval, capitalist, Italian, American, Australian” (142)—and, I would add, southern and feminine. To those who engage in the struggle to tame their bodies with beauty implements daily (whether hairspray or lycra), then, the act of “letting one’s self go” seems a moral failing. Sybil, for example, in *Family Linen*, observes that her sister Lacy would be pretty “if she kept herself up” (27). Similarly, their sister Candy, though a beautician, has “let herself go” and “neglect[s] her own looks.” For Smith’s women, “letting yourself go” is a signal that a woman lacks the correct disposition and discipline for the compromises of marriage and motherhood. Certainly, “letting oneself

go” has connotations of the kind of failure of self-discipline discussed by Russo. However, the subjunctive mood evoked by the word “letting” emphasizes the importance of permission. Significantly, letting yourself go is an action; it represents a trajectory of motion instead of a condition of stasis. In contrast to ugliness as signifying an inadvertent failure of discipline, women who let themselves go are *actively allowing* themselves the freedom to “go.”<sup>47</sup> The ugliness which results from refusing the discipline of beauty regimens signifies that the woman in question has given herself permission to experience freedoms and possibilities not available to those who choose a more traditional route.

Such characters represent the kind of challenge to compulsory heterosexuality that Adrienne Rich described in her essay of the same name. As Rich observes, “Women in every culture and throughout history *have* undertaken the task of independent, nonheterosexual, woman-connected existence, to the extent made possible by their context” (32, emphasis in original), so, too, are women who let themselves go similarly staking their claim outside of the marriage market. In this way, women who let themselves go are attempting to detach themselves from the economy of looking which gleans its power from men’s desire. In *Family Linen*, for example, Myrtle explains the overt connection between the discipline of keeping up one’s appearance and marital success: “But if you want a successful marriage, you’ve got to *work* for it. You can’t afford to get fat, for instance, or let yourself go” (37-38). For women such as Myrtle, ugliness hangs as a constant threat to marriage, a threat requiring constant vigilance. If a

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<sup>47</sup> The persistently apocryphal stories of second wave feminist bra-burning (based on the “Freedom Trash Can” at the 1968 Miss America Pageant protest) emphasize how threatening the rejection of such symbols of feminine beauty regimens are perceived.



woman succumbs to ugliness, she is in fact responsible for her marriage's demise.

Choosing to be ugly is choosing a kind of failure; it is siding with chaos and dissent.

It is important to remember, though, that failure in the context of the southern marriage economy is not necessarily a bad thing. As I have already discussed, the failure required by such systems can be a place for imaginative production and creative alternatives to normative households and lifestyles. As a subcategory of the ugly plot, the *chosen ugliness plot* also functions as a generative model of failure. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, Janie demonstrates how "success" in marriage requires a constant performance in order to continually constitute herself as a wife in her life before meeting Tea Cake. The world of marriage and motherhood is a realm of constant production and reproduction. Once women achieve wifedom, they are expected to reproduce themselves, literally through bearing children as well as socially through their proper training and upbringing. Mothers have a duty to produce offspring who will adopt appropriate roles in southern society, ensuring the society's preservation for another generation.

Neither Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* nor Grace in Smith's *Saving Grace* embrace this duty, although Grace expresses more ambivalence about her inability to do so than Janie does. As the daughter of a preacher as well as a preacher's wife and mother of his children, Grace goes to greater lengths than Janie does in an effort to conform to the retrogressive gender norms of her religious communities in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. Even more so than Janie, Grace radically changes her physical appearance after leaving her life as a wife and mother with Travis Word for a life of sin with the musician/housepainter Randy Newhouse. In rejecting the markers of

her old life as a conservative preacher's wife, Grace's new choices underscore her ambivalence about her new life as a cocktail waitress, living in sin with Randy:

The fact is, I was not real good at modern life. I didn't even look good anymore after five years with Randy Newhouse. I had circles under my eyes and a double chin. I had gained thirty pounds. I had cut my hair and gotten a permanent so it would be easier to take care of, and it *was* easier, but I don't think Randy liked me as much after that. He liked me back when I looked country, when I looked like a preacher's wife. This is what turned him on. Now that I was thirty-eight years old and had cellulite on my thighs and looked like everybody else in Knoxville, he was losing interest. (239)

To a certain extent, Grace's changed appearance reflects the changes she has undergone in her life, especially in the weight she gains, her cellulite, and the circles under her eyes. However, she makes other choices—cutting her hair and leading the kind of lifestyle which leads to weight gain and dark circles under the eyes—which make her less attractive to Randy. Ambivalent about both possible lives (that represented by Travis Word, the conservative preacher, and Randy Newhouse, the permissive and promiscuous swinging seventies musician) Grace makes changes to her appearance which result in alienating her from both realms.

Tara Powell categorizes Lee Smith as one of the “current, commercially popular group of authors” writing in the ‘just folks’ and ‘hardscrabble South’ style.” Including Smith in her analysis of the role of the intellectual in southern fiction, Powell characterizes Smith's works as “featur[ing] the academic stamp of educators and educated people whose intellectual lives and rational decisions are spiritually and socially unsatisfying—people who, in the tradition of O'Connor's intellectual heathen, find themselves looking outside intellectualism, seeking enlightenment elsewhere for alienated, often dysfunctional lives” (105).

Though Powell does not look at any of Smith's work individually, her characterization of Smith's work as "just folks intellectuals" is notable with regard to Smith's 2002 novel *The Last Girls*. Among the reunited group of college roommates in the novel, intellectualism is understood to be incompatible with marriage, as Harriet realizes when considering why she never married: "Harriet always thought she'd get her Ph.D. and publish papers in learned journals while writing brilliant novels on the side" (8). In Harriet's world, intellectualism would not only be a distraction from the duties that marriage and motherhood requires, but the dissatisfaction with the limited activities of these roles might lead to rebellion against these strictures.

As Powell notes, Smith is following in the tradition of Flannery O'Connor's characters, whom Powell characterizes as O'Connor's "intellectual heathens." In O'Connor's work, women who choose to make themselves ugly often do so in pursuit of the life of the intellect. Characters such as Joy-Hulga in "Good Country People" and Mary Grace in "Revelation" look, dress, and carry themselves in such a way as to reject southern femininity and the expectations associated with their gender. Even in O'Connor's very early work, the connections between failure at romance and the life of the mind were apparent. In his biography of O'Connor, Brad Gooch recounts an unsuccessful date to a college dance that O'Connor went on—she claimed to be such a bad dancer that she had a "tin leg." Gooch suggests that this experience "may have contributed to her April 1943 cartoon on the opening of a college gym for dances, portraying a 'wallflower' of a girl in a long striped skirt, with glasses, sitting alone, watching other couples dance. The caption, later echoed in Lee Smith's work: 'Oh, well, I can always be a Ph.D.'" (Gooch 100).

I see a direct link between the identity of the beautiful and that of the intellectual, a link made clear by Powell's definition of the term *intellectual*. After explaining a number of different ways of understanding the term, Powell notes, "I have found it more useful . . . to proceed with my paternal grandfather's definition: anyone who has, in the broadest possible sense, been up to the *dubious project of beautifying his or her mind*" (19, emphasis added). Certainly, the ideal southern woman needs a certain amount of education in order to handle the responsibilities of running a household. However, as with a woman's physical appearance, excess is unacceptable. Joy-Hulga's Ph.D. in philosophy exemplifies such excess. While her mother "thought it was nice for girls to go to school" (*A Good Man Is Hard to Find* 267-8), her daughter's degree baffles her. According to Mrs. Hopewell, "You could not say, 'My daughter is a philosopher.' That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans" (268). Joy-Hulga's doctorate is analogous to Molly's unflattering makeup in *The Old Order*: in both cases, a woman's attempt to supplement their natural assets (whether physical or intellectual) exceeds the boundaries of the appropriate and marks them as ineligible for marriage.

The difference between Molly and Joy-Hulga, of course, is that Molly's failure is unintended, while Joy-Hulga's is quite intentional. Further, Joy-Hulga's rebellion is, like many of O'Connor's characters who choose ugliness, directed at her mother. In the work of many southern women, mothers bear the brunt of their daughters' rebellion as they attempt to fulfill their maternal roles by turning out reproductions of themselves: young women eligible for the marriage market, poised to take their place in perpetuating the dominant, white society. Certainly, the stakes are high for mothers of daughters: their own success as a woman depends on their daughter's success in the marriage market.

Referencing Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Susan Bordo identifies the body as “not only a *text* of culture . . . [but also] a *practical*, direct locus of social control. Banally, through table manners and toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines, rules, and practices, culture is ‘made body’” (165, emphasis in original). Though Bordo’s focus is on the construction of the “made body,” she also calls attention to the mother’s central role in this construction, as all of the subjects she names, such as table manners and toilet habits, along with other banal and trivial practices, fall under the rubric of domestic and maternal responsibilities. Bordo’s insight elucidates why producing marriageable daughters is so crucial for women: as a “*practical*, direct locus of social control,” the bodies of their daughters provide white mothers of a certain social class with one of the few sanctioned avenues of power available to them within the strictly gendered realms of southern society.

Mothers in these texts, then, see their daughters not only as their responsibility to transform into the next generation of properly feminine marriage material, but also as one of their few opportunities to escape the submissiveness which is expected of them in most other realms. Daughters in these texts who choose to be ugly do so often in large part to reject being the objects of their mothers’ creation, insisting on their own subjecthood and self-fashioning.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, there are many accounts (including those by O’Connor herself) of O’Connor’s contentious relationship with her own mother, which include

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<sup>48</sup> In her article “Southern Women” on the website for the southern lifestyle magazine *Garden and Gun*, Allison Glock ties the importance of a southern woman’s appearance to her maternal qualities: “Southern women do not capitalize on their looks to snag men, though that often results. The reason we Southern women take care of ourselves is because, simply, Southern women are caretakers.” This connection between an attractive appearance and caretaking responsibilities means that when women choose to be ugly in part as a way against rebelling against their mothers, their ugliness is not only a rejection of traditional gender roles, but is also itself a refusal to adopt a maternal role towards themselves, a stand against assuming a caretaker role, even for themselves.

stories of her mother's disdain for her daughter's intellectualness and frustration with her failure to meet the expectations of southern ladyhood. In a letter to a friend, O'Connor admits to sharing a disposition with Joy-Hulga (Letter to A., 5 August 1955, 954). She even gave her character an unattractive sweatshirt, a source of real-life contention between O'Connor and her mother: "The only embossed [sweatshirt] I ever had had a fierce-looking bulldog on it with the word GEORGIA over him. I wore it all the time, it being my policy at that point in life to create an unfavorable impression. My urge for such has to be repressed as my mother does not approve of making a spectacle of oneself when over thirty" (Letter to A., 5 August 1955, 946).

In her analysis of "Good Country People," Powell observes that, "Important to the success of this story is that O'Connor manages to critique the young woman's intellectual hubris while at the same time loving her strangeness and her courage" (33). In my consideration, it is the coexistence of these three elements—Joy-Hulga's intellectualness, her strangeness, as well as her courage—which makes her the compelling character that she is. She exemplifies how the choice to be ugly can be an attempt to choose the intellectual life over the domestic one. Certainly, the connection between intellectualism and ugliness is not without precedent. In American literature in general, one genealogy of the ugly woman is that of the fairy tale character of the wise, helpful crone.<sup>49</sup> While O'Connor's ugly women could not be described as helpful, I do see them as following a tradition of the ugly woman as educated or wise, the type that W. J. Cash identified as the "Yankee schoolma'am":

Generally horsefaced, bespectacled, and spare of frame, she was, of course, no proper intellectual but at best a comic character, at worst a dangerous fool,

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<sup>49</sup> See., e.g., Wright.

playing with explosive forces which she did not understand . . . [The South] saw her, indeed, as a living epitome of the Yankee mind, identified her essentially with Northern universities, read in the evils springing abundantly from her meddlesome stupidity categorical proof that Northern ‘theory’ was *in toto* altogether mad. (137)

An alliance with educated “Yankee schoolma’ams” certainly sets southern women who choose to be ugly at odds with their prettier sisters whose marriage and motherhood work to preserve southern culture.

By emulating these ugly northern women, O’Connor’s ugly characters choose ugliness as a rebellion against the expectations which have been placed on them because of their identity as southern women. Ugliness is a deliberate choice for Joy-Hulga and Mary Grace—both academics who reject the limitations southern ladyhood—which they flaunt in the face of their mothers’ embarrassment. Even Joy-Hulga’s accomplishment of earning a Ph.D. is unacceptable, as her mother would have preferred that she had made an effort to meet boys at school, not spend all of her time studying (267-8). Similarly, Mary Grace’s mother explains that “‘Mary Grace goes to Wellesley College . . . . In Massachusetts,’ she said with a grimace. ‘And in the summer she just keeps right on studying. Just reads all the time, a real bookworm.’” Her mother disapproves of her constant study, and thinks “she ought to get out and have fun” (*Everything that Rises Must Converge* 643). As a Wellesley student, Mary Grace exemplifies the kind of unacceptable northern influence which Cash describes. Intellectual accomplishments are simply a barrier to the more important accomplishments of attracting men, marrying, and settling into the expected roles of wife and mother.

For both Joy-Hulga and Mary Grace, ugliness not only reflects their conscious rejection of gender norms, but it is also a physical manifestation of the anger they feel at such restrictions. In “Good Country People,” the “hulking” Joy-Hulga’s “constant

outrage had obliterated every expression from her face.” She “would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it” (264-265). Here, her ugly appearance is the result of an *act of will*. Her mother’s exasperation with her results from realizing that Joy-Hulga’s ugliness is a chosen one. Mrs. Hopewell, looking at Joy-Hulga, “would think that if she would only keep herself up a little, she wouldn’t be so bad looking. There was nothing wrong with her face that a pleasant expression wouldn’t help” (267). By changing her name to the ugliest name she can think of and consciously choosing to be ugly through her clothes, facial expressions, and even the way that she walks, Joy-Hulga disqualifies herself from the kind of marriage-based southern ladyhood expected of her.

In “Revelation,” O’Connor repeats the themes of “Good Country People,” as the stylish lady in the waiting room at the doctor’s office assures Mrs. Turpin that “I don’t think it makes a bit of difference what size you are. You just can’t beat a good disposition” (*Everything that Rises Must Converge* 634). She’s accompanied by a “fat girl of eighteen or nineteen, scowling into a thick blue book which Mrs. Turpin saw was entitled *Human Development* . . . . She appeared annoyed that anyone should speak while she tried to read. The poor girls’ face was blue with acne” (635). This mother and daughter could be Mrs. Hopewell and Joy-Hulga, twenty years earlier. Both Mary Grace and Joy-Hulga consciously struggle against the strictures of southern ladyhood, expectations that their behavior be fitting of women named “Joy” and “Grace.” However, O’Connor certainly does not privilege such rebellion, as neither Joy-Hulga nor Mary Grace come to happy endings. Joy-Hulga’s hubris in feeling herself superior to the “good country” Bible salesman leaves her stranded in a hayloft minus her prosthetic leg, while



Mary Grace, after being overwhelmed by her anger at proper southern ladies, ends up tranquilized and institutionalized.

By the twenty-first century, these mother-daughter battles take a disturbingly darker turn. Helen Ellis's 2000 novel *Eating the Cheshire Cat* shows the lengths to which southern mothers are willing to go in order to make their daughters literally fit the mold. The novel opens on the night before Sarina Summers' sixteenth birthday, with the young woman in the emergency room suffering from alcohol poisoning and smashed fingers. Despite the stories that Sarina and her mother tell about adolescent indulgence and drunken clumsiness with car doors, the reader soon learns that Sarina's condition is all her mother's doing: after feeding her spiked punch and shots of whiskey,

Sarina saw her arms outstretched, her wrists duct-taped to a cinder block. Except for her pinkies, her fingers were curled into fists and taped. Her pinkies laid out and taped. The cinder block taped to the table. Her mother standing before it all.

“Oh,” cried Sarina. She was too drunk to speak.

“Be a good girl,” Mrs. Summers said as she picked up the ax. She lifted it, blade backwards, over her shoulder. “Keep your eyes closed.”

Sarina did as she was told. (21).

As Sarina's broken fingers will require re-setting after her mother's terrifying attack, the end result will conveniently be that Sarina's crooked pinky fingers—the top joints of her fingers bent in, looking as though “those pinkies were trying to do a U-turn,” according to her father—will be straightened. When Mrs. Summers had previously tried to have Sarina's imperfect fingers fixed, her pediatrician had refused and claimed, “There's no doctor who'll do it. What your daughter's got is a recessive trait. Like widow's peaks and attached earlobes” (20). Mrs. Summers's violent attack on her daughter is revealed to be a twisted sweet sixteen present.

Opening with this harrowing account of Sarina's mother's attack, the novel subsequently follows Sarina's friendship with Nicole, whose mother is even more intent than Mrs. Summers is on her daughter's physical and social perfection, along with the experiences of Bitty Jack, the daughter of the summer camp caretakers whose life frequently intersects with those of Sarina and Nicole. One thing this novel emphasizes is that women who make the choice to be ugly do so from a position of privilege. Bitty Jack's ugly physical appearance is linked to her lower socioeconomic status; she would certainly not choose it, if she could. When faced with the physically attractive (crooked pinkies aside) bunkmate, Bitty Jack feels her own deficiencies in comparison: "She wondered if she would ever outgrow what her mama called her awkward stage. Could she ever afford new glasses? Could she dress better? Wear makeup so it looked right? Would her acne ever clear? Would her hair lose the oil, gain body, gain bounce?" (26)

Unlike Bitty Jack, those for whom ugliness is a choice occupy a position of privilege; they can choose ugliness as a form of rebellion, usually against insistent (or in this novel, draconian) mothers who are adamant about ensuring that their daughters will fit properly into the marriage economy. A woman must occupy a place of privilege within society in order to have the choice to opt out of their expected position. For Nicole, making herself ugly is an attempt to connect to her friend Sarina. Nicole's obsession with Sarina is both a way of rebelling against her mother (who does not approve of the friendship) as well as an expression of lesbian desire, which is strictly forbidden in this community:

With Sarina, Nicole made an effort to play down her beauty. She didn't powder her nose. A zit was like a door prize that she'd never try to hide. Who cared what her date thought? Not Nicole—one single bit. Her unfinished face put Sarina at ease. When Sarina was at ease, she was more attentive to Nicole. She

accompanied her to the rest room, to get popcorn, refill their drinks. Anytime Nicole could steal Sarina from her date [*sic*]. (66)

Here, Nicole's actions to make herself less attractive to her date have several goals. First, by "putting Sarina at ease," Nicole hopes both that Sarina will feel comfortable enough to spend more time with her as well as relay the message that Sarina should not see her as competition for the attention of young men. She also is signaling her lack of interest in courtship to her date: in this way, Nicole is overtly communicating her intention to opt out of the marriage market through her lack of interest in interacting with potential mates through dating. Finally, by focusing her attention on wooing Sarina away from her date, Nicole is not only encouraging Sarina to join her in opting out of the marriage market, but also rebelling against the heteronormativity of the market. Further, Nicole's self-sabotage is also an act of defiance against the imperatives of both of their mothers, that they behave in ways which will best position them to claim a high-status marriage.

In contrast to Sarina's and Nicole's mothers, whose insistence on their daughters' beauty and conventional behavior provokes rebellion, Bitty Jack's mother sees beauty even in the people who perform in the freak show with her daughter. Upon witnessing "Little Miss Horse and Pony," she whispers, "She has such a pretty face" (89). Though she does not consciously make herself ugly like Nicole does, Bitty Jack's appearance is, to a certain extent, also mutable, especially once she learns how context-dependent value judgments about appearances are. When she gets a job in a freak show hosing off Johnny Iguana, the "Freak Boss" assures her that "You'll get along fine with him. I can tell. You wouldn't be here unless you was an ugly duckling once yourself," to which Bitty Jack replies, "I'm no swan" (81). At the freak show, however, the Freak Boss tells Bitty, "You're not chicken shit . . . around here, you'll be the belle of the ball . . . . What you

got? Glasses? Skin that'll clear up sooner or later. Freckles. You're skinny, but you're nothing to turn your nose up at" (81).

The Freak Boss has a clear understanding of the benefits of ugliness. Regaling Bitty Jack with the story of the 300 pound woman who fell into the Pick a Duck pool, who "was flailing around like a pig in shit . . . . Poor ducks were stuck in every crevice of her body," he goes on to say that "Someone got the whole ugly incident on camera. Won ten grand on that goddamned embarrassing video show." Despite the immediate embarrassment it caused the fat woman, the Freak Boss ultimately wonders whether she staged the entire incident with the prize money in mind (92-3). He understands that the failure implied by ugliness is not necessarily a dead end: context is key.

At the fair, for example, the ugliness which held Bitty Jack back at camp now allows her access (and training) that lead to her social success. Not only does she attract the performer Johnny Iguana as a boyfriend, but she also is able to enact some revenge over Sarina, whom she holds responsible for a great deal of her own unhappiness. Working the games, she not only learns how they are fixed, but she also runs the games herself, which ultimately enables her not only to win the big pig prize, but to prevent Sarina's boyfriend Stewart from winning the same prize, a failure which upsets Sarina. When we first see Stewart and Sarina at the fair, we are tempted to believe them that the games are fixed, although Sarina's response to the Pick a Duck game—"The ugly bitch behind the counter kept giving Stewart small prizes" (54)—seems excessive in response to a carnival game. When we later learn that the "ugly bitch" is, in fact, Bitty Jack (and that she is, in fact, cheating Stewart out of the prizes he has legitimately won), it illuminates the unique power which ugliness grants Bitty Jack.

Bitty Jack's account of Stewart's quest for the big pig includes her own candid self-appraisal: "Bitty knew she was no swan. Her beauty wasn't storybookish: no dragon returns to find Bitty's face morphed into a pot of gold. She still had to wear glasses. The shower was a war zone against combination skin. But she wasn't the same girl she was at thirteen. Bitty knew she had bettered" (95). Though it is ultimately a trifling power, Bitty does momentarily exercise power over Sarina and Stewart. Sarina has her heart set on Stewart winning her a plush pig at the game—or, failing that, a purple snake. Regardless of what Stewart picks in the carnival game Bitty Jack runs, however, Bitty Jack uses her position to only award him the small prize—the plush snake—and never in Sarina's preferred purple. As Stewart's frustration mounts with each additional consolation prize snake, "[w]ithin minutes, Sarina stood like Medusa's maid of honor. A wilted bouquet of bold-colored snakes drooped from her grasp" (96). It is significant that Sarina in this description is Medusa's maid of honor, and not Medusa herself. Here, Bitty does not grant Sarina the full power of Medusa. Instead, Bitty Jack retains her power, and it is Bitty's silent stare which drives Sarina mad, making enough of a commotion that Sarina is asked to leave the fair (96-97). By retaining the full power of Medusa herself, Bitty Jack demonstrates the power available to ugly women.

This power, however, does not come without a cost. While *Eating the Cheshire Cat* ultimately emphasizes that ugliness in the South is synonymous with rebellion and dissent, it emphasizes that such rebellion is not equally available to all who would seek it through choosing to be ugly. Women such as Joy-Hulga in "Good Country People" and Nicole in *Eating the Cheshire Cat* are able to adopt an unattractive appearance because they are assured of a certain amount of security: they both have homes with mothers who

are willing to provide them with food and shelter despite their daughters' open contempt for their preferred ambitions which would see their daughters married and procreating, ensuring the reproduction of the system which they, as mothers, have embraced. They can choose not to marry, as they still have access to food, shelter, and—at least in the case of Nicole—opportunities to interact with society through her mother's connections. Despite Nicole's repeated, outrageous public appearances, from attacking her mother at the Tri Delt alumnae card party to her apparent murder/suicide during the Alabama homecoming game, Nicole's inherited wealth and societal status mean that she always has some material security, even when she has run away from home and been kicked out of her sorority.

Characters such as Bitty Jack in *Eating the Cheshire Cat* or Mrs. Freeman's daughters in "Good Country People" act as a foil for characters such as Joy-Hulga and Nicole, as their lack of privilege prevents them from being able to make such choices. Bitty Jack's ugliness, for example, is to some extent a reflection of her class status, as her acne and lifeless hair are examples of physical characteristics which greater wealth might allow her to alleviate through access to the services of a dermatologist or a beauty salon. Nicole, in contrast, is given cosmetics and attractive clothes, and thus has the opportunity to decide whether to use them or not. Glynesse and Carramae Freeman, similarly, as the daughters of the lower class Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People," are presented as pursuing marriage and motherhood at early ages without any possible alternatives possible for them. Ugliness as a choice in these texts points to the material requirements of being able to imagine alternatives to expectations of gender.

When women consciously alter their appearance to make themselves unattractive—whether through their choice of masculine clothing, their failure to wear cosmetics, or their carriage and facial expressions—they not only signal their own rejection of the expectations of their gender but also continue on a path of “being ugly” in the southern sense of the term of being rude and making a spectacle of themselves. These stories of women who choose ugliness highlight the ways in which the imperative for southern women to fit into such narrow parameters of beauty results in a desire and drive to “be ugly”—both in appearance and in behavior. In all of these texts, the rigid requirements of femininity, marriage, and motherhood are openly rejected and rebelled against by women who make themselves ugly through their clothes, carriage, and behavior. Emphasizing the link between the southern idea of ugliness as unacceptable behavior and the more general idea of ugliness as an unacceptable appearance, these women embody the rebellion at the heart of “being ugly.”

## CONCLUSION

I'm writing this in the wake of twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger's shooting spree near the University of California Santa Barbara, during which he killed six people before committing suicide. This tragedy has stirred a national conversation regarding male privilege and the dehumanization of women, the result of objectification based on appearance. After the discovery of Rodger's misogynistic rants on *YouTube* as well as in a 137-page "manifesto" in which he blames women's rejection of him for his homicidal rage, the *Twitter* hashtag #YesAllWomen emerged as a way for women to bear witness to their own everyday experiences of misogyny and gender-based harassment. In response to the #NotAllMen hashtag, deployed by men who felt they were being unfairly implicated or included in accusations of culturally-entrenched misogyny and sexism, the #YesAllWomen *Twitter* campaign was a strategy deployed by (primarily American) women in order to speak back to the misogynist culture, as a way to refuse suffering in silence.<sup>50</sup>

Many twenty-first century women have found the co-opting of such media to be a useful strategy for a variety of modes of feminist activism, running the gamut from facetious *Amazon.com* product reviews of sexist products to Pussy Riot's criminalized anti-Putin *YouTube* videos and performance art.<sup>51</sup> Though these acts of rebellion manifest in a variety of registers (whose stakes are often not equivalent), they all illustrate ways in which women have found ways to use media to convey their dissent against sexism. In this way, throughout the twentieth century, southern women writers utilized the media of

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<sup>50</sup> See Weiss.

<sup>51</sup> See Judkis, Pussy Riot, and Tayler.



the written word and fiction in order to strike out against the limits imposed on them because of their gender. In a world where women's value is so often based on their appearance, choosing to be ugly is a significant activity. The important strategies of "being ugly" deployed by the authors in my study demonstrate a significant category of methods of resistance, refusal, and rebellion which southern women have discovered to employ against such gendered systems of privilege. Whether re-focusing the emphasis in the Medusa/Perseus paradigm to the Medusa herself, as in Welty's work, utilizing the narrative form of the ugly plot (in contrast to the more traditional marriage and courtship plots), or writing stories in which female characters choose to be ugly (both in their physical appearance as well as in their behavior), southern women writers have created a spectrum of ugly women who defy expectations of beautiful, demure women. In doing so, they point to possible ways of living outside of the nuclear family, to alternatives to of traditional femininity and feminine gender roles.

Such strategies have a wider significance as well. For example, as American culture often relies upon regionalism in order to bolster national identity, viewing the southern novel through the lens of the ugly plot reveals that texts written by southern women not only speak back to gyneolatrous southern ideologies, but call into question more general, national paradigms of femininity. Given the specifically southern nature of the idea of "being ugly" as rude or rebellious behavior, the ubiquity of these characters represents a real undercurrent of resistance throughout twentieth and twentieth century fiction written by southern women, regardless of whether this resistance represents conscious, active rebellion or a more subtle, passive stance. As the protection of white women has been used as the reason for so much race-based violence (as well as for

maintaining retrogressive gender roles) in the American South, I believe that the deployment of these characters represents a refusal of this scapegoat role. And while many of these characters, such as Joy-Hulga, are consciously acting to resist these roles, even those characters who are not actively engaged in rebellion represent a refusal on the part of their authors to sanction not only the expectations of gender in the South but also the validity of the tradition of giving the safety and purity of southern women as the reason for its violence.

In fact, looking at a wider swath of twentieth- and twenty-first-century southern culture reveals that this strategy holds true. From the comedian Minnie Pearl to the variety of women in Ross Campbell's contemporary *Wet Moon* graphic novel series, ugly women are everywhere in southern culture, defying our stereotypes of the beautiful southern belle. Despite (or at times even because of) their frequent depiction for comic effect, there is a common element of dissent to their frequent appearance. And within the larger context of American literature, the appearance of male American authors will never be subject to the same scrutiny that female American authors endure: critical studies of both Eudora Welty and Edith Wharton (to only name two) have claimed that their works were profoundly affected by their authors' ugliness. That so many southern women writers have laid claim to ugliness in their writing demonstrates not only an awareness of the onus of physical appearance felt by women, but more importantly a way out of this responsibility through literally being ugly.

As recent works such as Jon Smith's *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies*, Jason Arthur's *Violet America: Regional Cosmopolitanism in U.S. Fiction since the Great Depression*, and William Hardwig's

*Upon Provincialism: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies*

demonstrate, the relationship between Southern Studies and American Studies continues to evolve, as changes in each field raise new questions in the other. I believe this trend echoes Rodrigo Lazo's discussion in the March 2014 issue of *American Studies*, in which he asks whether "a local framework does not have to emphasize national belonging." Though his review essay considers an even larger field of "Hemispheric American Studies," the questions he raises about the changing significance of place is relevant to southern studies. Like Lazo, I, too, am interested in what happens "a local context is deployed in order to establish connections on a more global scale" (173). In other words, as Lazo considers how individual, regional literature from the Americas can inform and expand our understanding of the larger region, so, too, do I believe that focusing on the figure of the ugly woman throughout the work of southern women writers complicates our understanding not only the role of women in the larger American culture, but also on the relationship between the South and nation.

Has the South, like Scarlett O'Hara, tried to charm its way out of its ugly history? Or might characters such as Joy-Hulga and Minnie Pearl be ways of the South speaking back to a larger American culture which has simultaneously cast it as both the nation's feminine other as well as its racist underside? Reconsidering the relationship between the South and the nation in terms of the regional meaning of "being ugly" reveals previously ignored undercurrents of subversion in southern society performed by its women writers as well as opens up new possibilities of understanding its relationship to the nation.

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