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Stereotypes of Southern Women in Contemporary Films

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Image and Reality: The New Southern Belles Onscreen and Off

For southerners and nonsoutherners alike, the image of the Southern belle has pervaded film since Scarlett O'Hara first graced the silver screen as the quintessential Southern belle. But since that time, Southern belles both onscreen and off have proven that they are much more complex than the early images suggest. In the twenty-first century, it is clear that the Southern belle is making advances, although she still maintains much of her identity that has been prescribed from the paternalistic culture in which she lives. An examination of the Southern belles in *Steel Magnolias*, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *A Time to Kill*, and *Miss Firecracker* reveals that Hollywood, along with Southern culture, is grappling with the changing role of the Southern belle. Contemporary films are now presenting a range of Southern belle-like characters, including the stereotypical belle and the independent, strong-minded career woman. All these dramatic and sometimes comical belle characters represent essentially the spectrum of Southern belles, proving that she can be either genteel or overbearing, or even be both at the same time. In short, the belles of contemporary film reveal that the Southern belle is the "oxymoronic ideal of the women made of steel and yet marked in fragility" (Leslie 32). This paper will briefly examine the historical contradictions between the mythical Southern belle versus the real historical Southern belle, and focus on contemporary films that include a wide variety of Southern belle characters who, in turn, reflect both the mythical ideal and the changing reality of the new Southern belle. Furthermore, it will explore the extent to which the new Southern belle still espouses the values that the mythical ideal represents.

I. The Mythical Southern Belle

Since the 1800's, the myth of the selfless, church-going Southern belle has been a part of Southern culture. This belle is one who is obedient, genteel, pure, and quiet, among other qualities. Historians like Jacqueline Boles and Maxine Atkinson have created a detailed list of specific characteristics that the *ideal* Southern belle possesses, as taken from a survey of historical documents: "simple, good, passive, delicate, innocent, submissive, mannerly, economical, humble, sacrificing, sympathetic, kind, generous, pious, non-intellectual, hospitable, rich, and calm" (Boles 67). Furthermore, she possesses "fine (and refined) sensibilities" but she still requires "control, protection, and guidance from men" (Boles 67). This mythical Southern belle, a passive beauty, has been placed on a pedestal by Southern culture and is adored for her beauty and graciousness. Therefore, she has always stood as a distant, unattainable vision of beauty that many Southern women have tried to emulate over the years. In order to understand why the mythical belle has endured as a model for emulation, it is first necessary to understand several characteristics of the Southern culture that have contributed to her creation and continuation.

While it is obvious that the mythical belle exists in Southern culture, the reasons for her existence are not nearly so defined. One can immediately infer the numerous differences between Southernness and mainstream culture have contributed to the creation of the mythical belle. Two of those regional differences are an "extremely deep regard to kinship networks" as well as an "extreme religiosity compared with other regions" (Dillman 15). Thus, the South's ideal belle embodies the values of family and religion.

In short, she is portrayed as if her existence revolves around raising children and seeking the approval of her husband. Historian Anne Firor Scott, author of the definitive text *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, provides a generalized definition of the responsibilities of the mythical Southern belle: “Her life was one of devotion to God, husband, and children, whose training was her major responsibility” (Scott 10).

The agrarian based economy of the South is another reason for the creation and continued life of the mythical Southern belle. By the late nineteenth century, the South was characterized as aristocratic and agrarian, while the North was seen as democratic and commercial (Prenshaw 76). While modernization and urbanization in the North led to a more autonomous women’s culture, the South remained limited in the development of an autonomous women’s culture. The lack of women’s autonomy due to the agrarian economy is another difference contributing to the creation of a more obedient and passive ideal woman. She became enveloped with the system of agrarian slavery and was often used as an image of purity for the plantation system.

“More than just a fragile flower,” the Southern belle came to represent “her culture’s idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial, and social perfection” (qtd. in Prenshaw 74). The mythical belle has long stood as a vision of what is pure and good about the agrarian system and the South in general. In short, she has been the symbol of “the values by which Southerners have defined the region’s character through the Civil War and Reconstruction, New South, and modernism” (qtd. in Prenshaw 74). As Dr. Peggy Prenshaw states, “The role of the lady was viewed not merely as genteel refinement but as integral to the aristocratic social structure” (76). Therefore, she is not only a product

of the paternalistic Southern culture but also a vehicle through which the system of Southern aristocracy and paternalism remains alive.

The result of the aforementioned distinct Southern cultural characteristics has been to create a very different “ideal” belle than that of other regions. With its rigidly stereotypic view of the role of women, it is no surprise that the mythical ideal, “the image of all that is treasured by dominant culture,” is synonymous with “the virtues of passive beauty and quietude” (Hawks 92). For “the distinctiveness of the South may lie not in its empirical differences [alone] but in its unique belief system” (Middleton-Keirn 105). This “unique belief system has caused the “romantic exaltation” (Prenshaw 73) of the mythical Southern belle, who, in turn, has stood as the “crown of Dixie at least since the early nineteenth century” (qtd. in Prenshaw 73).

II. The Historical Reality of the Southern Belle

“The antebellum southern white woman of the upper class would have been the happiest and most nearly perfect specimen of womanhood ever seen on this earth” if she lived as comfortably as the ideal belle did (Prenshaw 73). As attractive and comforting as the simplistic picture may be, the mythical belle’s simple, idle life is a great contrast to that of the actual Southern belle. In the 1800’s when many Americans were “adopting the belief that women were made of fabric not suited for the more mundane tasks of life, the vast majority of [Southern families] were still living on farms where women worked” (Boles 68).

The image of selfless, passive perfection that is the mythical belle has never correlated to the true lives of any Southern women, nor did it to the few women who existed merely as ornamental objects for their husbands. While society, novels, and films

may have created the myth of the ideal Southern belle, it is quite clear that the myth has *always* been at odds with the reality. As Anne Scott states, “The paradox of progressive women began to disappear. . .[as] I came to understand that Southern women . . . had been the subjects—perhaps the victims—of an image of woman which was at odds with the reality of their lives” (Scott x). Anne Firor Scott was one of the first historians to discuss the differences between the mythical Southern belle and the historical reality of the Southern belle. In her novel *The Southern Lady*, Scott also reveals that the real Southern belle is a much more complex and paradoxical character than most would have first assumed. Scott and other Southern women historians have stated that while the real belle holds the image of the ideal in high esteem, the belle is paradoxical in her strong-willed determination and her genteel quietude. Scott accurately recognizes that although a ““woman’s place”” was not in the political arena . . . “there she was, active and effective” (Scott 11). Thus, it is clear that the belle maintains numerous contradictions, from her desire to be admired to her desire to argue for equal rights.

Regardless of those factual differences between the ideal and real belles, the God-fearing, homemaking mythical Southern belle, a product of the paternalistic and traditionalistic Southern culture, has been held as a model for Southern women since the late 1800’s. Furthermore, many critics would argue that even today many Southern belles view the mythical ideal as the embodiment of perfection and they therefore continue to emulate her. “Southern belles made valiant efforts not only to live up to the mythical belle” (Scott 8) but also to do everything even better than she did. They sought diligently to live up to the prescriptions, “to attain the perfection and the submissiveness demanded of them by God and man” (Scott 8). One housewife of the early nineteenth

century wrote in her memoirs that all women “owe it to their husbands, children, and friends to represent as nearly as possible the ideal which they hold so dear” (qtd. in Scott 9). “In countless ways the Southern white woman was encouraged to shape, repress, modify, and monitor her behavior to create her own perfectness” (Prenshaw 74). Southern belles have sought to attain the perfect devotion to family and church that is defined by the mythical belle, only to find that they fall short each time, never quite measuring up.

After realizing that the belle is at once both myth-idolizing and power-seeking, one is left to wonder exactly who the Southern belle really is. Above all, she is mutable and adaptable. So although the real-life belle has striven to be the passive, dependent ideal belle, one of her most admirable characteristics is her ability to survive and even thrive in the paternalistic culture in which she lived. While survival seems unremarkable, it has been in a society that “made survival a trick bit of business, especially for women” (qtd. in Brabant 54). She was and is a survivor, and ultimately, she has proven herself marvelously adaptable.

However, the Southern belle over the years has shown that “survival was not enough,” for the belle “was taught not only to survive, but to do so with dignity” (Brabant 56). Critic Sarah Brabant accurately describes the combination of survival and gentility that is the historical Southern belle:

Beneath the icing of the traditional Southern culture lay a body of norms, values, and beliefs organized in such a way that the Southern female of my era was prepared not only to live within the confines of traditional Southern society, but

also to survive change, even rapid catastrophic change. I was taught to make cup custard; I was taught to avoid tackiness at all cost. (53)

As seen in Brabant's statement, women were socialized to be courageous and yet genteel in the face of adversity.

The mutability, when accompanied by the gentility, of the Southern belle is what has allowed her to survive and even flourish in the Southern culture. She can maintain many roles at once, as she can be conniving and controlling and in the next breath demure and passive. It is the subtle manipulation of power that has allowed the Southern belle to survive--with dignity intact-- for over one hundred years. Southern belles have actually used their sphere of power within the home to their advantage, although quietly and subtly. The women that were "so firmly put in their place, the home, often showed unusual power within that restricted domain. She raised the children; she set the standards for behavior" (Scott 19). The Southern belle, although not the white-gloved mythical ideal, has learned to maintain and increase her sphere of power over the years, and she uses her femininity to her advantage when she needs to do so. For while the Southern belle held and may still hold the homemaking wife as the ideal, she is powerful within her home and often uses her femininity as a means of being powerful. She uses her theatrical emotions to subtly manipulate her husband and her children. As the sphere of power of the Southern belle has spilled into the workplace, the Southern woman has once again proven her ability to use her power to her fullest.

III. The Southern Belle Variants in Contemporary Films

Born of the mythos of the Southern belle, a stereotype of the passive, dependent Southern belle emerged very popular in film and other media early in the twentieth

century. As George Brown Tindall states, “‘The mass media . . . has had so much more influence in shaping popular myths about the South than all the products of scholarship and high culture’” (qtd. in Dillman 23). One of those popular myths about the South is the stereotypical Southern belle. Until recently, most images of Southern belles have depicted shallow, obedient, and dependent women, thereby perpetuating the existence of the mythical Southern belle. However, since the 1980’s that stereotype has been changing as films now more than ever before are showing a wide spectrum of Southern belles and new variants of her. Contemporary film, it appears, is now more accurately reflecting the real Southern belles onscreen. Although there may be only one ideal mythical belle and a resultant stereotypical Southern belle of film, there is a wide spectrum of real-life belles and they are beginning to appear onscreen. Hollywood is branching out, following the lead of Southern belles who are demanding more freedoms and more independence.

The films discussed below—*Steel Magnolias*, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *A Time to Kill*, and *Miss Firecracker*—provide a glimpse of the array of characters that represent an even wider array of real belles. The above films will explore the characters who represent, in varying degrees, the stereotypical Southern belle. The evolving film image of the belle as seen through these films reflects the continuity and change that marks the real belle and that makes her such a paradoxical and enigmatic figure.

A. *Steel Magnolias*

The Hollywood blockbuster *Steel Magnolias* reinforces some characteristics of the stereotypical Southern belle while also showing that she can be strong-willed and

independent. Hospitable, religious, concerned with appearances, and obsessed with family, the women in *Steel Magnolias* seem to be archetypal Southern women at the beginning of the film. The first time we meet them they are in the beauty parlor preparing for Shelby's (Julia Roberts) wedding. Shelby's biggest concern appears to be her nail polish color: "Mother, this nail polish color is all wrong. My colors are Blush and Bashful. Pink is my signature color" (*Steel Magnolias*). The concern for appearances that pervades the film reflects the comfortable place of the women on their pedestals—they like to be looked at. As Anne Loveland states in *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, "They accepted the image of sacred womanhood prescribed by their menfolk" (187). These women are proud of the power their "sacred womanhood" has given them.

Truvy, played by Dolly Parton, explains the effort that goes into being revered by those around you: "Look at me. It takes some effort to look like this. There is no such thing as natural beauty" (*Steel Magnolias*). The women spend countless hours in the hair salon getting their hair teased and their nails done, which is proof enough of their desire to be placed on pedestals. Appearances are very important to the women, even though they are uncharacteristically strong-willed and brave. While they enjoy being admired, they have also learned to "take advantage of subtle loopholes in the social fabric and use them to expand their spheres of personal freedom" which is "no small feat in a world committed, however futilely, to maintaining the status quo" (McKern 8). They make the most of existing within the Southern patriarchy and achieving "success and satisfaction in a system where most values and standards have been set by males" (McKern 25). While

the traditional belle is an object of beauty, these magnolias are women of substance, of steel.

Also in accordance with the stereotypical Southern woman is the sheltered place of the *Steel Magnolias* women within the Southern aristocracy. Clairee is perhaps the best example of the Southern aristocratic woman. She emerges from her Cadillac with white gloves on, having just returned from a baseball field dedication for her deceased husband. She seems content in her role as a genteel Southern woman who continues to glorify her husband's good name. Clairee reflects the sentiment that a belle's life should be "one long act of devotion,--devotion to God, devotion to her husband, devotion to her children . . . to humanity" (qtd. in Hawks 90). She supports the local arts with her money and enjoys being a part of the church and close-knit community. Clairee's world does revolve around her children and her home, and she is not shy in admitting that "business never interested me. Laurel took care of that stuff" (*Steel Magnolias*).

At Shelby's much anticipated wedding, all the women approve of Shelby's groom because "he comes from a good ol' Southern family with good ol' Southern values" (*Steel Magnolias*). Exactly what those Southern values are remains unanswered, but one is led to believe that "Southern values" can be equated with money and the ability to let his wife live comfortably on his arm, raising the children and being president of the PTA. These Southern belles like the fact that they are expected to raise the children and that their husbands will raise the money and adore them.

But even though these women are comfortable in their place in the home and even the Southern aristocracy, they are clearly powerful women in their own right. They do not live "in a fantasy world of flower gardens and gracious homes and shut their minds

and hearts against anything ugly, unpleasant, or evil” (Loveland 186). They face tragedy with grace and wit when they deal with Shelby’s death. It is the *women* of the film who are the stronger sex, as M’Lynn states, “I find it amusing. Men are supposed to be made out of steel” (*Steel Magnolias*).

The women of *Steel Magnolias* reflect some of the paradoxical characteristics of the Southern belle. They are strong and independent, and yet also comfortable in their roles within the household and being admired by their husbands. M’Lynn is the best example of the Southern woman who is both powerful and yet still traditionally Southern belle-like. She is determined to keep her family together after the death of her daughter, but she is also consistent in her maintenance of appearances. She proclaims that she will triumph over tragedy but in the same breath she asks “Does anybody have a mirror?” (*Steel Magnolias*). She knows that appearances are important, but she has the independence and determination that do not fit any historian’s definition of the stereotypical Southern belle. Even the most stereotypically Southern woman, Clairee, reveals that she is a steel magnolia and not a wilting flower. With the politeness and gentility that is ingrained in her womanhood, she states “It was a beautiful service. The flowers were the most beautiful I had ever seen. M’Lynn, you know what they say—that which does not kill us will only make us stronger” (*Steel Magnolias*). It is the women who are there for M’Lynn; it is the women who have, individually and collectively, the strength of steel. Through laughter and tears, they are resilient in the face of adversity, and they face their problems head on without avoidance. By the end of the film, it is quite evident that underneath all the teased hair and glossy nails, there are five very brave women.

The tenacity and strength of these women emerges in their soft-spoken Southern words, and they prove that they are much more than passive objects of domesticity. Although they are content to remain on their pedestals, they are not the fragile women that they appear to be from a distance. Thus these women are dually images of the traditional Southern belle *and* the independent woman. They do not ask their spouses' permission for anything they do; they are positively not submissive. It is the women who hold together their families, friends, and community. The women of *Steel Magnolias* reshape the stereotypical mold of the Southern belle to include strength and determination proving that they are "marvelously adaptable" survivors above all else. They reflect the Southern woman that can be passive and powerful, strong-willed and obedient. These women have unshakable gentility and courage, and it is the latter that separates them from the stereotypical Southern belle—they are women of substance.

B. *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*

Another film produced in 1989 that reflects the evolving Southern belle is *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. In the film Andie McDowell plays Cynthia Melaney, a submissive Southern wife who develops her autonomy with the help of Graham, an impotent man who likes to film women talking about sex. When Graham first meets Cynthia and asks her how she likes being married, her only response is that "I like it just fine. You know the cliché about the security of it, and we just bought this house, and John was just made a junior partner in his firm" (*Sex, Lies, and Videotape*). Each of her statements, from her house to John's career, have nothing to do with her life but instead her life as it revolves around her husband. She does not enjoy any activities for herself, including sex, as she calls it "overrated and not that big of a deal" (*Sex, Lies, and Videotape*).

Cynthia can be typified as a submissive Southern wife whose sole existence revolves around her husband and maintaining an orderly household. McDowell's belle character could be the onscreen character of the Southern belle who said "I do what [my husband] tells me to do. I like the arrangement. It's the only way I know how to live" (Hart 281). She possesses one of the defining traits of the belle, and that is passivity, which she shows by agreeing with her husband and remaining patiently attentive to his wants and desires. When her therapist asks her why she is angry at her husband for inviting a house guest without her permission, she replies with a monotone statement of obedience: "I guess I'm angry because I can't justify being angry—it's his house, he pays the mortgage" (*Sex, Lies, and Videotape*).

Unlike the women of *Steel Magnolias*, Cynthia is not at all headstrong or independent but the exact opposite—she is dependent and acquiescent. Cynthia, like the mythical ideal, is characterized by extreme femininity—any mention of sex or masturbation makes her blush. But Cynthia evolves throughout the movie into an independent, self-confident woman who is soon able to discuss sex and everything else, too. She realizes that her life should not revolve only around her husband, and she discovers that she is more concerned about making herself happy.

This film is perhaps the strongest example of a very traditional Southern belle who frees herself from her expected role and stops emulating the ideal. By breaking that mold, she comes into her own and finds happiness and freedom. An independent Southern belle emerges from a stereotypical belle who had previously never lived her life for herself. She ultimately refuses to be the standard trophy wife for her uncaring husband. Cynthia first stands her ground against her husband's wishes when she

demands—not asks—to know whether or not he is having an affair. Cynthia's ultimate act of independence and defiance is making a video for Graham in which she admits that her sex life is unfulfilling. Sitting demurely with a large silver cross around her neck, she talks openly about her fantasies and desires, and snubs her husband and the image of the Southern belle in the process. Finally, she is able to take a stand against her cheating husband, telling him exactly how she feels, regardless of the consequences: "My life is shit. I want out of this marriage" (*Sex, Lies, and Videotape*). She no longer feels dependent on him emotionally or financially.

Thus, Cynthia reflects yet another variant on the Southern belle. With the Southern cultural Renaissance that began in the 1980's, numerous critiques of the status of Southern women have appeared in the media, and this is one example of such a critique. McDowell's character reveals the repressiveness and solitude of being a quiet, submissive wife in the South. But in the end, she proves that she can function perfectly on her own, as she gets a divorce, gets a job of her own, and creates goals of her own. She represents the changing desires and wants of the modern Southern woman. For a time she is content in being the model Southern belle, but ultimately she finds that model boring and unfulfilling. Numerous real-life Southern belles seem to be agreeing with her decision, as upper class white Southern women have entered the workplace and the political arena in record numbers over the last fifty years. Many of those women have chosen to work not because they need to, but because they want to, leading one to assert that some of the modern Southern belle want more responsibility than exists within spheres of the home and the church.

C. *Crimes of the Heart*

Another example of a newly autonomous belle who becomes autonomous is Babe in *Crimes of the Heart*, a film based on the play by Beth Henley. Babe, played by Sissy Spacek, is yet another variant of the belle who stands outside the traditional stereotype of the Southern woman. Babe shatters the mold of the stereotypical belle in several ways. First, she shoots her husband. That alone is enough to move her far from the traditional image of the Southern belle. Beyond that, she has an affair with a seventeen-year-old black male. Babe, above all else, proves herself to be unconventional in thought and in action.

Babe is initially the epitome of a trophy wife for her politician husband until his mental and physical abuse send her over the edge and she shoots him. Babe defies her husband and furthermore, cares little whether or not he even survives: “after I shot him I put the gun down on the piano bench and went to the kitchen and made a pitcher of lemonade . . . Yes . . . I was dying of thirst my mouth was just dry as a bone” (*Crimes of the Heart*). She admits that “yes, I’m guilty as charged. But jail is going to be a relief for me. I can learn to play my saxophone, and I won’t have to deal with Zachary anymore” (*Crimes of the Heart*). Babe, who until then appears as a genteel Southern woman, undergoes a transformation much like Cynthia in that she, too, learns to love her independence. While Cynthia’s escape was divorce, Babe sees jail as her way to escape a monotonous life. Babe and Cynthia are excellent examples of characters who evolve from the stereotypical belles to autonomous women throughout the film. Babe refuses to try to emulate the mythical belle, and she comes to disbelieve in any of the values that the myth represents.

Babe, more than any other character discussed here, refuses to be a part of the entire Southern culture. She is content to exist outside of the Southern patriarchy and its prescribed roles for the upper class, white woman. She cares not what anyone thinks of her, and she is one of the most outrageous versions of the Southern belle presented onscreen. While the women of *Steel Magnolias* are both independent and a part of the Southern aristocracy, Babe chooses to reject not only the ideal Southern belle but also the entire system of the Southern aristocracy. When she decides to scoff at the rigid rules of race that correspond to the Southern class system, she refuses the entire system along with the expected stereotypical characteristics of the Southern belle. She proves that she does not care be a part of the Southern class system nor does she care about being “tacky.”

D. *A Time to Kill*

The fourth film, *A Time to Kill*, contains, at first glance, the most unstereotypical belle. In this film directed by Joel Schumacher and based on the novel by John Grisham, Sandra Bullock plays Ellen Roarke, a young law student from Ole Miss. Ellen appears to reject not only the idea that she is to be genteel and feminine, but also that she should heed the ideas of the Southern patriarchy itself. The first time we meet her, Ellen screeches her small convertible to a halt and hops out of the car, with her bra clearly visible through her tight white tank top. “Care for a beer?” she says, as she offers to split a six pack with Jake Briganse, a young lawyer played by Matthew McConaughey (*A Time to Kill*). In the film Ellen and Jake defend Carl Lee Haley, a black man charged with killing a Southern white racist who raped his ten-year-old daughter. Bullock can be seen as the anti-belle, that is, a Southern woman who goes against all characteristics of

Southern gentility and the Southern patriarchy itself. She is headstrong, independent, sexually aggressive, and indifferent to the opinions of all the men who fall at her feet. She expresses no desire to raise a family and maintain a household, and instead she is very focused on her career.

But while she claims to be independent, she still relies on her rich, aristocratic background. It is interesting that Ellen's character comes from a background of wealthy Southerners. A law student at the University of Mississippi, she admits that "Ole Miss is a family tradition. Mom was a sweet little sorority girl there 'til Dad married her" (*A Time to Kill*). Jake immediately responds by stating that he "married a sweet little sorority girl from Ole Miss [him]self." Ellen spars back admitting the Southern belle trophy wife tradition, stating that "they have an excellent selection there" (*A Time to Kill*). Ellen seems to shun that passivity and quietude of Southern belles as she speaks her mind and deliberately flaunts her sexuality in sheer black tops and short skirts.

Ellen mirrors the description that Sharon McKern in *Redneck Mothers, Good Ol' Girls, and Other Southern Belles* provides of the Southern belle variation whose mother "is most probably a traditional Southern belle deeply ingrained in the femininity of being a Southern woman. Her actions typically say 'see how bad I am but just remember I've got breeding'" (McKern 25). Ellen is a member of the upper class, and she is able to enjoy working *pro bono* because her "daddy's filthy rich" (*A Time to Kill*) and yet she desires more than anything to dissociate herself from her privileged background. She is tenacious in her desire to become involved with the controversial murder trial, and she definitely cares nothing about whether or not she seems "tacky" as she smokes on the street and gulps her beer out of a can.

Even though Ellen appears to be a poster-girl for the anti-belle character and the new, independent woman of the South, the vestiges of her Southern belle breeding surface when she is caught in a bind. Even this seemingly anti-belle character uses her feminine charms when she is forced to out of necessity. Ellen's crucial role in the trial of Carl Lee Haley is to find a way to discredit the prosecution's psychiatrist. When she visits the Whitefield mental institution to dig up discrediting files on the doctor, she works her Southern belle charms on the attending nurse, "Ah really must speak with hem," as she bats her eyelashes and purses her lips (*A Time to Kill*). Thus, even in the most anti-belle character, the remnants of the Southern belle appear as she tries to accomplish her goals. She recognizes the power in using her Southern accent and gentility as she plays them up to successfully achieve her mission. She realizes that she can use her helplessness and ineptitude to her advantage, and she smartly does just that.

Ellen is a film character who reflects the Southern belle's tendency to sometimes use her gentility as a means of power. Ellen, like Southern belles, is often paradoxical in her traits and her ability to manipulate others through her beauty and passivity. While she wants to be independent, she still uses her femininity when she wants to because she realizes the power in being a passive beauty. Like Ellen, the real-life Southern belle plays both hands by being both independent and passively feminine when she wants to be.

E. *Miss Firecracker*

Miss Firecracker, more than any other film discussed here, shuns the image of the stereotypical belle and her ideals of beauty and passivity by satirically poking fun at Southern belles and by finding fault with its exaltation of the Southern belle. It

emphasizes that the Southern belle's greatest asset is that "her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve this weakness" (Leslie 44). *Miss Firecracker*, first released in 1989, presents a comic satire of the patriarchal Southern culture which breeds women to be obsessively concerned about being pretty, passive objects, or in other words, being stereotypical Southern belles. This comedy is a great commentary on the class structure of the South, showing the hilarious effects of one woman who tries to change her status in a rigid class structure.

Holly Hunter plays Carnelle Scott, a "white trash" resident of Yazoo City who desperately wants to stand in the spotlight as Miss Firecracker. With her bright red hair and tight jeans, Carnelle struggles with the fact that the blood of a Southern belle is not in her genes. Carnelle, a fish factory worker, desires nothing more than to be a Southern belle/ beauty queen, and does everything in her power to appear graceful and classy although she ultimately fails. While Carnelle has the grit to accomplish her goal, she lacks the poise, and "good Southern genes" to become a true belle.

Miss Firecracker occupies most of its time making fun of the Southern culture that emphasizes beauty and passivity in women, recognizing that the Southern patriarchy is still very much alive. The stereotypical belle is epitomized in Elaine Rutledge, played by Mary Steenburgen. Rutledge, who herself was once a Miss Firecracker, is totally dependent on her uncaring, wealthy husband because he "can give her all those nice face creams" (*Miss Firecracker*) and afford to send her roses daily. Elaine, it seems, cannot divorce herself from her desire to be admired. Elaine tries to explain in quiet, generous words that "it takes an enormous amount of time and skill" (*Miss Firecracker*) to become Miss Firecracker, trying to gently persuade Carnelle not to get her hopes up as a

contestant. Carnelle desires to become the Southern belle that Elaine epitomizes, and she fantasizes about wearing Elaine's pageant-winning red dress, as if she believes that by wearing the dress alone with long white gloves, she, too, will become a Southern belle: "I have to have it Elaine. It's exactly perfect" (*Miss Firecracker*).

Before the much anticipated pageant even begins, Elaine gives a speech on "My Life as a Beauty," in which she describes the excitement of her sash-wearing year and the trips to Baton Rouge, Jackson, Atlanta, and New Orleans. Elaine is presented as superficial fake, and she repeatedly looks at her face in everything from car mirrors to vanity mirrors, and the film greatly emphasizes her concern with her looks. Furthermore, her devotion to church is also emphasized, as the minister says, "We have a pew waiting for you. Right this way" (*Miss Firecracker*).

The Miss Firecracker pageant itself is another comic scene that emphasizes the Southern belle's stereotypical obsession with beauty and corresponding lack of intelligence. The women who audition to make the final five are herded like cattle into their places in a circus-like scene, and there are women in costumes ranging from the statue of liberty to Scarlett O'Hara. They are instructed that Miss Firecracker "must have that special firecracker spark. Then and only then will victory be hers" (*Miss Firecracker*). But a more pertinent question that none of the women in Yazoo City ask is "what exactly is the victory a celebration for?" as the pageant merely reinforces the importance of being genteel and pretty. The women desire nothing more than to stand on a makeshift stage and wave to all the young girls who, one assumes, dream of one day becoming a Miss Firecracker themselves.

The only person, it seems, who recognizes the comical nature of the entire pageant is Delmont, the insane brother of Elaine and cousin of Carnelle. He is the only person who remarks at the ridiculousness of the pageant, saying “why it’s nothing but a garish display of painted up pigs—that’s all there is to it” (*Miss Firecracker*). Delmont is portrayed as a strange, misfit character who was just released from a mental institution. In *Miss Firecracker*, it is quite ironic that the only sane one is Delmont, whom everyone else believes is insane.

The Miss Firecracker pageant seems to be a hollow display of useless talents, as contestants juggle several hula hoops and tap dance to the *Star Spangled Banner*. And while these talents are presented as ever-important as the crowd oohs and aaaahhhhs, the most stirring talent act is a rendition of the closing scene of *Gone with the Wind* as the winning contestant belts out the quintessential belle’s lines saying “I’ll nevah, evah go hungry again” (*Miss Firecracker*). Carnelle, who attempts to attain that winning O’Hara like Southern display of feminine gentility, instead receives shouts of “give that dog a bone” as food is thrown at her (*Miss Firecracker*).

For Carnelle, her dashed dreams of becoming a Southern belle are surrendered after she finishes in fifth place and is forced to carry the American flag behind the winning firecracker’s float. Only then is Carnelle able to admit to herself that the ideal of Southern belle perfection is unattainable for her: “I tried so hard to fit in, I just don’t know what you can reasonably hope for in life” (*Miss Firecracker*). As she admits to herself that she will remain beneath the class of the Southern belle, she remarks that “there’s always eternal grace,” hoping that maybe she can achieve some form of Southern belle greatness after death (*Miss Firecracker*). While she knows in her heart that she will

never become Miss Firecracker, the film closes with a nine-year-old Carnelle waving up at a passing Miss Firecracker with a wide grin of admiration. So even though she knows a crowning with the coveted title is unrealistic, she still holds up the title of Miss Firecracker in idealization.

This film more than any other reflects the continuity of the image of the mythical Southern belle, and it also reflects that the rigid class structure is still very much a part of Southern society. Unlike *Steel Magnolias*, this film finds fault with the characteristics that the ideal Southern belle espouses, and it makes fun of her desire to be admired and remain dependent. The belle of *Miss Firecracker* is “parodied and inverted so that she represents many of the worst qualities of the South” (Prenshaw 79). But even though the film reflects negatively on the image of the mythical belle, it still reflects the idea that women hold the belle in high esteem as Carnelle does.

IV. Conclusion

With all these varying images of the Southern belle in contemporary film, it becomes evident that the Southern belle of the twenty-first century is not one type but many types. There are numerous variations of the Southern belle both onscreen and off, and the five aforementioned belles are merely five out of hundreds if not thousands. As the Southern belle continues to change, Hollywood will be forced to change also to keep up with her. The following pages will explore the changes and continuity in the lives of real-life Southern belles and examine the degree to which onscreen belles are accurately reflecting the new Southern belle.

In the political arena, it is evident that women have strengthened their involvement as voters and as participants. The percentage of women voters has risen has

risen from 41% in 1956 to 48% in the 1980 presidential election (Black 187). According to political scientists Erle and Merle Black, there has been an “increase [in] voting by southern women, especially those without a college education, and a simultaneous decline in reported voting by southern white males. . . As [upper class, white Southern women] left home, they voted more frequently” (189). The number of Southern women politicians is also on the rise, a trend that many political scientists expect to continue. Elizabeth Dole is an excellent example of a belle politician who can be both genteel and powerful much like the women of *Steel Magnolias*. She differs from them only in that her devotion extends beyond her family and community into the field of national politics.

Besides politics, Southern belles are becoming better educated in increasing numbers. Since the 1950's, upper class white Southern women have moved out of the kitchen and into the classroom and have become increasingly better educated. Surprisingly, in 1980 the percentage of white college-educated Southern women who voted stood at 66%, which was actually two percentage points higher than the same demographic in the non-South (Black 190). Thus, the film images of Southern belles as accomplished, self-reliant women are comparable to their higher education levels. Ellen Roarke, the fair weather Southern belle and fiery Ole Miss law student in *A Time to Kill*, is a prime example of a progressively more educated Southern woman.

While Southern belles are increasing their spheres of influence, one might ask whether or not real-life Southern belles still hold the mythical belle in high regard. Even today, as Southern belles are gaining ground, there is much evidence pointing to the continued emulation of the selfless, passive mythical ideal. In a study done by sociologist Middleton-Keirn, 93% of the women felt that the women's appropriate role

was as a housewife, and again 93% labeled themselves as feminine, compared with 69% of non-Southern women (Middleton-Keirn 103). So it appears that most Southern women have not abandoned the traditional values that the mythical ideal represents. Like Truvvy, M'Lynn, and Ouizer of *Steel Magnolias*, they still value the importance of family and the virtue of femininity that characterize the stereotypical Southern belle.

Sociologists point to numerous amounts of evidence that state that the ideal belle is thriving in the New South. One such study was done by sociologists Jacqueline Boles and Maxine Atkinson. Their study explored the extent to which the mythical belle is still a salient role model for selected samples of women from the South and the Pacific Northwest. Contemporary Southern women agreed with the traditional characteristics that define the mythical Southern belle, proving that although the roles and lives of Southern women have changed, many still hold up the mythical Southern belle as an ideal, or at least they still adhere to the values that she represents. Over 75% of the respondents felt that a Southern woman should be simple, submissive, mannerly, humble, kind, economical, generous, hospitable, and calm (Boles 74). Additionally, the majority of Southern women identified passivity as an ideal quality. So although Southern women are moving from the kitchen to the workplace, assuming management positions, and gaining ground in the political arena, many of them still “express a nostalgia for that paragon of female virtue and rectitude” that is embodied in the Southern belle (Boles 63).

From the voting statistics to the reverence of passivity and femininity, it is quite apparent that Southern women are searching for a balance between their changing roles in society and the traditional idealized image that they still apparently subscribe to. For some women like Cynthia in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, that balance is found by

completely abandoning the role of wife and starting anew. And for others, like the women of *Steel Magnolias*, it means maintaining appearances and a household while also being strong-minded and independent. *A Time to Kill*'s Ellen Roarke provides another example of that balance, because she is an independent career woman who still relies on the traditional virtues of passivity and femininity when she needs to. Other women, like Babe of *Crimes of the Heart*, use extreme measures to rid themselves of their prescribed roles to find freedom.

The real-life Southern belles, like those of film, have each chosen a different balance, as evidenced by the comments of several Southern belles. In 1985, one Southern belle echoed that sentiment by stating that “a woman should have her own job as long as she’s still a good wife and mother” (Middleton-Keirn 91). And another concurred by stating that “I like helping my husband . . . but I think there should be some room for the woman to try to do something for herself” (Middleton-Keirn 91). Southern belles are deciding to be not only mothers and wives but also career women. In their search for a balance between the ideals of mythical belle and their own ideals, Southern belles are beginning to come to grips with the “realities and contradictions of combining family responsibilities with the demands of a full-time double-duty work schedule” (Middleton-Keirn 105). Now more than ever before, they are seeking to define themselves through their own identities—identities which include careers and activities outside the home. For many Southern belles, “the concept that a woman can have needs as a person, that she can seek to define for herself her own identity” is a new and sometimes startling concept (Middleton-Keirn 105).

As contemporary Southern belles are achieving statuses of power and reaching new heights, many still believe that they are inadequate because they are neglecting their traditional roles as homemakers and mothers. In Middleton-Keirn's study, there was not one characteristic of a Southern belle that more than 70% of women felt they had achieved (106). Thus, while the majority of Southern women still believe in the characteristics of a Southern belle, they also believe that they are falling short. The contemporary Southern belle is "torn between her desire to emulate the true Southern lady and her feelings of personal inadequacy for being unable to do so" (Boles 77). The Southern belle, while she continues to survive and adapt, will not be free from self-criticism until she surrenders the ideal and until the Southern patriarchy itself values women for characteristics other than their passivity or submissiveness. The Southern belle will not completely evolve until the mental construct as created by the Southern patriarchy, which remains solid in its gender role ideology, changes its values. Many Southerners still believe that the question of a woman's place and her demeanor are "not matters for examination, discussion, or change—they simply [are]" (Middleton-Keirn 98). So while she is changing and growing, that change will be tempered by the continued existence of the mythical ideal and the Southern culture.

In the final analysis, it seems that there is not one right answer to the question of who exactly the Southern belle is or even who she wants to be. Instead, there is a spectrum of variations of Southern belles who prove that if anything, they are enigmatic figures. Ultimately, the Southern belle proves herself to be a paradoxical, fluid figure as she tries to hold on to the past and charges ahead into the future; she is constantly changing. Southern belles are searching for a balance between becoming independent

and powerful, while still maintaining a feminine gentility. Some women, such as the women of the film *Steel Magnolias*, reflect the tendency of Southern belles to be not only both, but to be both in the same instance. From Babe in *Crimes of the Heart* to Truvvy in *Steel Magnolias*, the women of film show that for each woman there is a different balance between being emulating the passive ideal and being an autonomous woman. Critic Sharon McKern accurately describes the various film images of the Southern belle: “No symbol is completely ‘false,’ nor none entirely ‘true.’ There are numerous Dixies from which to choose . . . All coalesce into an ever-expanding mystique about a complex and contradictory region which persists, at least symbolically, as a separate sub-nation” (262).

Although the Southern belles of film now represent more types of Southern belles in accordance with the changing roles of the Southern women, it is clear that the traditional stereotypical image of the Southern belle in film is far from dead. But even though some Southern belles may still be concerned about whether to choose “blush” or “bashful” nail polish, they are depicted as more independent and powerful in their own right. Anne Firor Scott says it best when describing the history and the future of the real-life and silver screen Southern belles: “‘People have a disconcerting ability not to fit into the historian’s categories. The reality, when it finally emerges, is no less interesting and far more helpful in understanding ourselves, than all the myths and fiction ever were’” (Hawks 110).

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