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# "Of one kind or another": rape in the fiction of Eudora Welty

Nicole M. Donald

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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"OF ONE KIND OR ANOTHER": RAPE IN THE FICTION  
OF EUDORA WELTY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of English

By  
Nicole M. Donald  
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## Abstract

"*Of One Kind or Another*": *Rape in the Fiction of Eudora Welty* explores the ways in which Eudora Welty's repeated inclusion of rape in her fiction reveals and questions southern society and women's roles in it. Despite the vague, even confusing language with which she describes the incidents of rape, Welty offers a rich, forceful commentary upon the culture and women's roles in it. The ambiguity with which she describes rape reveals ambivalence toward the society that Welty may be said at once to protect and to expose. An examination of Welty's use of rape in her fiction reveals a troubling ambivalence, but, in the context of Welty's fiction, the persistent image of rape does allow Welty to voice a critique of southern culture.

Chapter One demonstrates Welty's ambivalence towards both the South and violence in it. Chapter Two analyzes the rape imagery in one story from each collection of short fiction, and delves into the conventions of female decorum that these stories expose. Chapter Three explores Welty's commentary on race in southern society that is evidenced in contrasting rape scenes in *The Robber Bridegroom*.

Welty's repeated use of rape imagery invites further exploration of its significance in Welty's fiction. What

this repetition reveals, in fact, is Welty's assessment of gender and racial roles in the south. In both her short fiction and in her novella, Welty uses rape to reveal cultural norms and expectations of women in southern society.

Chapter 1:  
"A 'Distorted' Picture of Dixie":  
Rape and Ambivalence in Eudora Welty's Fiction

On November 4, 1958, Eudora Welty stated in her hometown newspaper, the Jackson, Mississippi, *Clarion Ledger*, that "southern authors who emphasize violence tend to give the world a 'distorted' picture of Dixie" (*Clarion Ledger* 1958). With this comment, Welty betrays a consciousness of herself as a southern author and of her responsibility to give the world an accurate picture of "Dixie." Welty appears almost protective of the South of which she writes; in fact, she further denies an emphasis on a violent South in her own writing. Welty explains that she avoids describing violence in her fiction because she does not understand it well enough to write about it: "I don't know much about it. I write what I know about" (*Clarion Ledger* 1958).

Twenty years later in an interview with Reynolds Price in 1978, however, Welty contradicted her earlier perspective:

There's plenty of violence in life, and I would be the last to deny it--but it comes from within human beings. *That's* its source, and you can write about the source with any set of tools you



wish. The novel has got to reflect life--life is violent and it has to show violence. . . .

(*Conversations* 233)

Here, unlike in the earlier disclaimer, Welty acknowledges her awareness of aggression. But the contrast between these two extreme statements is revealing, indicating Welty's ambivalence towards violence. In fact, she expresses her ambivalence about the view that the South is a violent place not only in her interviews, but also in her fiction.

Perhaps Welty's boldest depiction of rape is in a manuscript that she left unfinished. In a reflection on their friendship shortly after Welty's death, Price recalled a story idea in which rape figured prominently:

In those latter years, Eudora frequently told me she was working on a story about the effects on a community of single women, mostly schoolteachers, when one of them is raped. She said it was "threatening to become a novel," and I said, "Let it." But she never showed me any pages; if any of this manuscript survives, we can hope it will prove publishable. (Price, "One Writer's," 2)

Obviously, this theme was one to which Welty returned, repeatedly, and one can only speculate about Welty's failure to finish this story that was "threatening to become a novel." While the plot may have been clear to Welty, she may still have been ambivalent about presenting such a clear portrayal of violence against women; Welty may have been conflicted about finishing such a story. Indeed, many of her stories reveal conflicting and often confusing depictions of aggression in the South. Welty at once denies and details violence in her work.

When abuse does occur in her fiction, Welty does not describe it in great detail; nevertheless, it does occur frequently. What is more, often the assaultive behavior depicted by Welty is the most heinous type of crime--rape. In fact, sexual violation--the act of rape or the appearance of a rapist--occurs in a number of Welty's works. In "Petrified Man," Mr. Petrie's crime is raping numerous women; in "At the Landing," Jenny is raped not once, but multiple times; in "June Recital," Miss Eckhart is raped and then shamed for being the victim; in "The Burning," not only is Miss Myra raped, but the black servant Delilah is also offered to the Union soldiers by her mistress; and in Welty's longer work, *The Robber*

*Bridegroom*, both the young, virginal white girl and the Indian maiden are raped.

In spite of the repeated appearance of rape in her work, Welty does not give detailed descriptions of the rape scenes. In fact, the reader is often left wondering whether a rape has taken place. Often the scenes involving rape or discussions about rape depend upon the most oblique language in Welty's work. Her seeming equivocation--to include sexual violence against women but to do so sketchily--perhaps betrays her ambivalence towards what this violence suggests about the South. And yet, even in their vagueness, Welty's depictions of rape are potent. Ultimately, in narrating rape minimally in her work, Welty simultaneously remains ambivalent about the violence in the culture of which she writes and says volumes about the role of women and their value within southern society.

The role of violence within the writing of Welty has been investigated by few, and even fewer have delved into the purpose that rape scenes play within her work. This critical oversight is surprising, not only because of the contemporary interest in uncovering a Welty less genteel than she was earlier thought to be, but also because Welty herself invites an analysis of her work in light of its emphasis on rape.

In a letter to the writer Jean Stafford in 1976, Welty acknowledges her awareness of rape as a contemporary issue, including her knowledge of Susan Brownmiller's groundbreaking work, and she explains that her own work deals with the subject:

I enjoyed the Guest Word in the NYTBR called "Fearful Symmetry" by Lionel Tiger, author of "The Imperial Animal" with Robin Fox, in which he names you—author of "The Mountain Lion" and "Elephi, the Cat with the High IQ," as the only clear-headed reviewer of S. Brownmiller's book. I missed that review, and didn't read the book (on purpose besides every other reason, as I'm trying to write a story with rape in it of one kind or another.)<sup>1</sup>

In this letter to Stafford, Welty recognizes that there are many different definitions of rape, but her recognition seems almost flippant. Welty's confession that she is writing "a story with a rape in it of one kind of another" seems, at first, to be careless and even thoughtless. And yet, in the context of her work, Welty's comment may be read instead as an attitude almost of resignation to the reality of rape. Furthermore, the assaults in Welty's work

do not assume significance because of how the assault is accomplished; rather rapes are important because of what they reveal about the perpetrator, the victim, and ultimately the culture that produced both. While the intricate details of how female characters are raped may be missing from Welty's work, Welty's depictions of women's responses to violation are not. In her fiction, Welty seems considerably more concerned with the victim's response to rape and with the response of other women to the victim than with the male perpetrators of these assaults or with the actual assaults themselves. In subtle, carefully nuanced scenes, Welty reveals, with language that at once denies and exposes aggression toward women in the South, rape after rape of women white and black, rich and poor. With more careful caricatures of women's responses to rape, Welty exposes not only the obvious reality that "life is violent," but also the more complex truth that women sometimes replicate the values by which they have been devalued.

The issue of sex and women in the South is complicated, and many works of southern literature deal with the complex way in which women have been cast into feminine roles, which both negate and require sexual

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<sup>1</sup> University of Colorado Special Collections Division.

identities. It is ironic, given that sex itself has long been a taboo subject in the genteel South, that many works of southern literature by women, from Chopin's *The Awakening*, to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, to Walker's *The Color Purple*, to Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* treat women's sexuality as a central issue. As Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones explain, women's sexuality has been one of the issues in southern literature that "rings with a peculiar resonance" (Donaldson 1). Indeed, because of the time-honored traditions of female sexual propriety in the South, gendered sexual behavior has been thoroughly coded and betrays a strict ordering in society in which women are, to say the least, to be objects rather than subjects.

Luce Irigaray, in her challenge of both Freudian and Lacanian readings of female sexuality, highlights the disenfranchised role for women in Western society. She interprets the history of psychoanalysis as a male-oriented tradition in which women are assigned passive rather than active roles. Like Simone de Beauvoir before her, Irigaray argues that being denied sexual subjecthood and being defined as sexual object have reduced women's role and ultimately women's power in society. In southern culture, then, where masculinity was one of a number of "lost

causes" that had to be recovered, women's disenfranchisement was essential to the return of the chivalric traditions of the old South. In fact, Kate Millett, in her work *Sexual Politics*, a work that along with de Beauvoir's and Irigaray's has increased awareness of women's sexual roles and paved the way for contemporary analyses of rape, exposes the devaluation of women as anything but sexual objects in southern society:

Traditionally rape has been viewed as an offense one male commits upon another—a matter of abusing "his woman." Vendetta, such as occurs in the American South, is carried out for masculine satisfaction, the exhilarations of race hatred, and the interests of property and vanity (honor).

(44)

Obviously, rape reflects other, important gender and racial hierarchies in the South.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in "'The Mind That Burns In Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," has also explored the role of rape in southern society. In fact, Hall describes the "Southern Rape Complex" as a pattern in southern society that heightens racial and gender hierarchies by emphasizing the violence of black male perpetrators and the dependence of white female victims

upon white male saviors (332). Hall's main interest is in the disempowerment of women that results in a rape culture. That sexual violation is so often linked to male domination of southern women heightens the importance of rape in Welty's fiction. And yet the critical oversight of rape in Welty's work persists and is, in fact, consistent with the overall scarcity of theoretical inquiry or textual analysis of rape in general.

Although few critics have considered the way in which rape is emblematic of gender and racial ideology in Welty's fiction, several critics have examined the role of sex and sexual violation in a broader sense in Welty's fiction. Patricia Yaeger, for example, in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* insists that women's bodies are important in southern women's literature because they often have meanings beyond their own bodily substance: "the bodies in southern women's fiction can be intensely political; they are often concerned with 'larger cultural, racial and political themes" (121). Although Yaeger acknowledges the importance of women's bodies, she does not explore the repeated rape imagery in Welty's work in light of her thesis on the importance of women's bodies.



Rebecca Mark in *The Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's 'The Golden Apples'*, looks at the role of sex and sexual violation within *The Golden Apples*. Mark argues that Welty creates a space in which usual, traditional roles of male and female are diminished:

By focusing on the connection and disjunction of the female, we might overlook the ways in which all categories, including masculinity and femininity, are being decentered and, more importantly, how the center itself becomes in the fictional world of Welty's narratives intertextual universe in which old notions of disjunction or 'women's world' no longer apply. In fact to assume that there is one female identity and one female world is to greatly diminish the continually evolving and expanding signification that is the radical gift of Welty feminism. (13)

Mark demonstrates that in Welty's fiction there is not one set definition for femininity or masculinity. Mark argues that Welty's refusal to accept one role for men and women demonstrates to the reader Welty's idea that neither of the sexes can be forced into set roles. From Mark's

perspective, then, sexual violation does not highlight women's roles. But clearly Welty's female victims and male perpetrators do conform to stereotypically gendered roles. In fact, I would argue that Welty highlights stereotypically gendered roles and reveals female characters who have so identified with the strictly ordered roles in southern society that they, in turn, limit other women by helping to enforce such gender conventions.

Still other critics have examined the significance of aggression in Welty's work. Both Louise Gossett and Louise Westling have explored the role of violence, but neither Gossett nor Westling has commented upon the connection between Welty's ambivalent portrayal of rape in her fiction and her ambivalent attitude towards the south itself.

Louise Gossett, in her book *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* (1965), explores the role of violent acts within the writing of Welty. Gossett argues that Welty uses violence within her writing to aid the characters' search for their identity:

In most instances in Miss Welty's fiction, violence does not destroy the central character, but corrects his view of himself. The fact that his consciousness is separate from all other consciousness is not altered by his new perception, but the

separation no longer cripples him. Having recognized his condition, he may be enabled to communicate with others. Although his bridges between island consciousness are unsubstantial and need continuous rebuilding, he can now live without despair. If the character suffers from the antecedent condition of being himself one of the unaware, he may be awakened by violence. Once alert, he can turn his unawareness into awareness in the kind of conversion which Henry James celebrated as making the person on whom nothing is lost. (102-103)

Gossett argues that the acts of violence serve as an awakening for the character being violated. The abuse of the characters brings them out of their isolation from society, enabling them to communicate with others.

Gossett, like Mark, does not distinguish between male and female victims of violence. In fact, Gossett's reading of Welty's fiction ignores the prevalence of rape and the resulting commentary on southern gender roles.

Likewise, Louise Westling, in her work *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, explores the issue of violence in Welty's fiction, but Westling does differentiate between male and female victims. In fact, Westling actually focuses on the more specific act of rape, but Westling

almost dismisses the significance of rape in Welty's fiction in her generalization:

In most of these instances, rape appears to be a natural, if sometimes inconvenient, sexual encounter from which women, like slightly annoyed hens, pick themselves up, shake their feathers, and go on about their business. The roosters strut away to further conquests. (100)

Westling argues that Welty's female characters consider rape as an inconvenience, and the males operate as if it is normal behavior. Indeed, the assaults in Welty's fiction do occur so frequently that they seem almost to be expected, but "natural" goes too far in minimizing the importance of this pattern of sexual aggression. In fact, Westling's assessment that rape seems almost natural in Welty's work reflects a common understanding of rape as a part of what Susan Brownmiller calls the "educative process of becoming a female" (*In Our Time* 203).

Nevertheless, Welty's victims do pick themselves up, although the business that they "go about" varies according to the impact the rape has had on them. Several of the victims attempt to have the men who have raped them marry them, or at least declare a commitment, as in Jenny in "At The Landing" and Rosamond in *The Robber Bridegroom*. But,

because of her outcast status in society, Miss Eckhart in "June Recital" does not move into the acceptable role of wife, but instead becomes a social pariah. And other women, such as Delilah in "The Burning," must deal with being sacrificed as the spoils of war. Indeed, the perpetrators in Welty's works do "strut away to further conquests," portraying a total disregard for women, but this behavior is not a trait embodied by men alone. The business that the women pursue in "Petrified Man" is turning in the rapist for a cash reward, with almost negligent regard for his victims.

Regardless of the victim's response to being raped, Welty's repeated inclusion of rape incidences in her fiction reveals it as a significant vehicle for indirect social commentary on southern society and women's roles. Her attention to details concerning other women's responses to victims creates a complex view of women in southern society. In each incident of rape in Welty fiction, Welty portrays southern culture and offers clear commentary on women's roles in it, despite the vague, even confusing language with which she describes the actual rapes. The ambiguity with which Welty describes rape should not be neglected, for it reveals ambivalence towards the society that Welty may be said at once to protect and to expose.

An examination of Welty's use of rape in her fiction reveals what is perhaps a troubling ambivalence to the contemporary reader, but in the context of Welty's fiction, the persistent image of rape does allow Welty to voice a critique of Southern culture. In their collection of Welty criticism, *Does the Writer Crusade?*, Suzanne Marrs and Harriet Pollack inquire into the political aspects of Welty's work, battling the perception that Welty's fiction, indeed Welty herself, is apolitical. An exploration into the repeated use of rape as an image in her fiction reveals Welty's subtle indictment of southern society, both for its gender and its racial ideologies.

In order to demonstrate the breadth of Welty's use of rape imagery in her fiction, in Chapter Two I analyze it in one story from each of Welty's four collections of short fiction, and I explore the conventions of female decorum that these stories expose. Welty's short story "Petrified Man," from her collection *A Curtain of Green*, demonstrates not only that men see women as commodities to be used for their personal satisfaction, but also that women may emulate such commodification of women. The reader is shown that even women assign a dollar value to women when Mrs. Pike turns the rapist in for the reward, and when Leota, another character in the story, states, " I guess those

women didn't have the faintest notion at the time they'd be worth a hundred an'twenty-five bucks apiece. . ." (Welty 27).

In "At the Landing," from Welty's collection *The Wide Net*, the reader is shown a young girl who is brutalized by the young man she loves and then is gang raped by a group of fishermen. The nameless women in the fishing village are aware of what is happening to Jenny, and they do nothing. In fact, when one woman walks into the room on the boat where Jenny has been raped she asks, "'Is she asleep? Is she in a spell? Or is she dead?'" The woman never acknowledges the fact that Jenny has been violated. Indeed, she seems to be almost unaware that what has happened to Jenny is a violation at all.

The character Miss Eckhart in "June Recital," from Welty's collection *The Golden Apples*, is raped by a "crazed Negro." The short story explores the issue of the outsider, and what happens when a "foreigner" ignores expected roles for the Southern woman. The story demonstrates that women will ostracize other women for not adhering to "time-honored roles." Additionally the story places women in the role of oppressor—a characteristic generally attributed to men.

Finally, "The Burning," from Welty's collection *The Bride of Innisfallen*, shows the brutalization of a Confederate woman by a conquering Union soldier. Thus, Welty demonstrates how the raping of the enemy's women becomes the literal sexual domination of the male enemy. The women are seen as the property of the enemy soldier, and to violate them is to humiliate the enemy. The chastity of these women belongs to their husbands, fathers, or brothers, and the taking of this is a loss to the men. Likewise, the white women see their slaves as something to offer the soldiers. Just as white men claim the chastity of white women as their own property, so white women claim the chastity of black slaves as their own. Delilah, the black servant, is offered to the conquering Union soldiers; she is the property of the mistress, and the mistress can offer her to the soldiers in her own stead.

Although "The Burning" does explore race, the contrast between the two rapes in the stories is not as clearly defined by race as it is in Welty's novella, *The Robber Bridegroom*. In Chapter Three, I explore Welty's commentary on race in southern society through her contrasting rape scenes in *The Robber Bridegroom*. *The Robber Bridegroom* shows that the young, white maiden's chastity is the property of her father to be awarded to Jamie Lockhart.



Although Jamie, the bandit, rapes the maiden, taking what he desires, he does eventually marry her. By contrast, Welty also describes the assault of a young Indian girl by Jamie Lockhart's nemesis, Little Harp, who rapes the Indian girl because he believes her to be Jamie's "one true love." Not only does Little Harp discard the Indian girl, but also he sees her as completely disposable; in fact, he kills her. In doing so, Little Harp believes he has violated Jamie, by killing the one Jamie treasures.

Each of these works denotes the value of women and suggests Welty's assessment of the roles of women in southern culture. She clearly demonstrates that women are viewed as commodities in the marketplace. Additionally, Welty acknowledges that chastity is what makes the woman valuable, and, once that is taken, the woman is deemed worthless. Although the language Welty uses to describe these scenes is often vague, the message she reveals about southern culture is not. Like her ambivalence towards violence in general, Welty's use of rape imagery may seem ambivalent because of its lack of specificity. But the repeated use of rape imagery invites further exploration of its significance in Welty's fiction. What this repetition reveals, in fact, is Welty's assessment of gender and racial roles in the South. In both her short fiction and

in her novella, Welty uses rape to reveal cultural norms and expectations in southern society.

Chapter 2  
"To Celebrate Her Ruin":  
Gender Roles and Rape in Eudora Welty's Short Fiction

Eudora Welty is perhaps best known as a short story writer. Although her short stories portray a wide range of characters and reflect tonal variations throughout her four collections, there are constant themes that occur through her work. Welty herself acknowledges in her essay "Writing and Analyzing a Story" that "it may become clear to a writer in retrospect. . .that his stories have repeated themselves in shadowy ways, that they have returned and may return in the future too—in variations—to certain themes (773). Indeed, Welty's short stories do often return to the same theme. Repeatedly throughout her short fiction, she addresses the issue of rape "of one kind or another," and in doing so, she addresses the role of women and this specific kind of victimization of women.

Rape in Welty's work is never explicit; it is most often merely alluded to. In fact, often rape is talked about in a dream-like quality that leaves the reader questioning what has taken place. In spite of the vague language with which Welty depicts sexual violations in numerous short stories, the rape imagery in Welty's fiction reveals her constant attention to the role of women in the South. Through her repeated use of rape in her short

stories, Welty comments on gender roles in the South. In fact, in spite of her reputation for being apolitical and in spite of the vague references to rape in her work, Welty offers clear depictions of strict gender ideology and the disempowerment of women through the treatment of sexual assault in her short stories.

At times, Welty's female characters respond to rape as if it were the first step in courtship in which they are taken by force by the man they hope to marry. At other times, women observers turn against female victims of rape, mimicking and sometimes exaggerating the strict codes of gendered behavior by which they, themselves, have been defined. Regardless of how the brutalization takes place or how the victim responds to it, the rape references in Welty serve to define Welty's South, a South in which gender roles are distorted into strict, hierarchical models of female subjugation. But Welty's assessment of gender roles in the South does not settle on the predictable indictment of misogynist male characters. Instead, much of Welty's focus in her use of rape imagery is on women's response to rape and on other women's responses to rape victims. Consistently in her treatment of assaultive behavior in her short fiction, Welty more thoroughly

portrays characters' responses to rape than the rapes themselves.

Given the strict conventions of female behavior in the South, it is not surprising that Welty should focus her attention upon women's adherence to gender conventions, even in the face of violence towards women. Welty, living in Jackson, Mississippi, at a time when strict gender ideology would have thoroughly defined sexual roles, had ample evidence of the ideology and its resulting impact upon women. Numerous scholars of southern literature have acknowledged the important role gender ideology plays in southern literature. Peggy Prenshaw, for example, in her assessment of roles for women in contemporary southern literature, acknowledges the terms by or against which southern women live:

If the South has sought to conserve its traditions the races, no less has it sought to maintain its time-honored roles for women: the Southern lady, the belle, the sheltered white woman on a pedestal, the pious matriarch the naïve black girl, the enduring black mother . . . . Rarely does the Southern woman of fact or fiction ignore the region's old binding stereotypes; rather, she acknowledges and reacts

to the roles with rebellion or accommodation, or both, in what becomes finely tuned irony. (viii)

Although Welty's use of rape imagery might at first seem aloof and undeveloped, her attention to the distorted roles for women in southern society, as either victims of sexual assault or as victimizers of other women, is the finely tuned irony of which Prenshaw writes. Welty's portraits of women in the South may seem harsh and unthinking, but Welty carefully constructs these female characters as such strict adherents to the code of southern conduct that their responses to other women, especially women victims, is fitting.

Other critics of southern literature have recognized the importance of the strict laws of female decorum, as well. Ilse Dusoier Lind, in her essay "The Mutual Relevance of Faulkner Studies and Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry," explains the significance of adhering to what is considered proper behavior of a Southern lady:

the importance of the cult of Southern womanhood . . . was still central to the region's conception of itself. Constituting a mix of strongly felt convictions about class, race, and patriotic identification with the Old South, the

idealization of women exerted a powerful influence on the Southern white women. . . . The Southern white woman was expected to be the incarnation of personal beauty, chastity, and social grace. (29)

In her short fiction, Welty uses rape scenes to demonstrate the incredible lengths to which women will go to maintain their idealized status; Welty highlights the reality that women in the South, in emulating the coded behavior by which they have been reared, hold all other women to the code of behavior as well. Through her use of rape in her short fiction, Welty exposes not only southern culture, with its strict gender ideology, but also the women who adhere to it, even to the extent that they turn against their southern sisters. Unlike other, more stereotypical portraits of southern womanhood that portray group after group of ya-ya sisterhoods and supportive, unified groups of southern women, Welty shatters the romantic, idealized notion of female community in the South with her ironic portraits of women, especially their responses to rape.

The only Welty short story in which the word "rape" is ever mentioned is "Petrified Man," from *A Curtain of Green*. Ironically, the victims are unknown to the reader, and no description is ever given of the violation. Instead rapes

have occurred prior to the story's opening, and the women in the story profit from their recognition of the rapist.

In an article by Charlotte Capers, "The Narrow Escape of 'The Petrified Man': Early Eudora Welty Stories," Welty gives the interviewing Capers a history of the story's publication: "'The Petrified Man' went every where, and was finally sent back from everybody. . . That was when I tore it up" (31). Welty further explains that she burnt the original story "in the stove in the kitchen" (32). However, the *Southern Review* requested that Welty resubmit the story so that the editor might have another look at the story. Welty describes her response to this request: "When *Southern Review* wrote back and wanted to have another look at 'The Petrified Man' I wrote it over" (32). With the recreation of this story, Eudora Welty wrote what would become one of her most anthologized stories. While the story may be popular because of its notable southern dialect and impeccable capturing of a female southern ritual, visits to the beauty parlor, the story also offers a problematic view of women's response to rape.

At the onset of the story, the reader is introduced to Leota, a beautician, who narrates the story. Leota is joined by Mrs. Pike, her neighbor, and Mr. Petrie, "The Petrified Man" in the travelling freak show. Although the



story is full of hilarious southern dialect and exaggerated, eccentricities that anticipate those of Flannery O'Connor, Welty reveals a haunting picture of rivalry. The female characters of the story not only strive to dominate the men in their lives, but they are in competition with one another, as well. Each woman strives to prove herself the better woman.

The story centers around Leota and Mrs. Pike's trip to the freak show and Mrs. Pike's realization that "the Petrified Man" is not only a rapist, but is also her former neighbor, Mr. Petrie. Although Mrs. Pike's realization propels the story, few critics have noted its importance, let alone that the realization concerns rape.

Numerous critics have commented on "Petrified Man," but their primary focus has been on the use of Medusa imagery within the work. Peter Schmidt, in his critical commentary "Sibyls in Eudora Welty's Stories," argues that the women of the beauty parlor are not the Medusas, but that mass culture's expectation and definition of beauty is in actuality the Medusa:

If there is a Medusa in "Petrified Man" who turns all who gaze on her to stone, it is the world of commercial culture, not the women who are its victims. And it has done its work not by merely petrifying its

victims with a vision of ugliness, but also by hypnotizing them with a vision of false beauty. (86)

Schmidt sees the women as the victims of societal expectations. The beauty parlor's patrons and employees have become slaves to society's notion of what is beautiful, and they will do anything to obtain the ideal. Schmidt does not, however, explore the ways in which the women, albeit victims of society's expectations, then willingly, even happily profit from the victimization of other women.

Focusing on the phallic imagery in the story, Price Caldwell, in his article "Sexual Politics in Welty's 'Moon Lake' and 'Petrified Man,'" argues that the world Welty has created for her characters is one controlled by matriarchal rule. Caldwell does acknowledge the competition between the women in the story; he notes that "Petrified Man" "describes the world of women who are in direct competition with each other to prove their dominance over men" (174). In spite of his attention to the sexual imagery in the story and to the women's rivalry, Caldwell does not explore the significance of the fact that Mr. Petrie has been a rapist.

As Caldwell notes, the women are indeed in competition with one another, so much so that they are willing to

commodify other women. By controlling the future of Mr. Petrie since she knows he is wanted for rape, Mrs. Pike has thrown down the gauntlet in her competition with other women. Indeed, Mrs. Pike has won control over the man who has committed a heinous crime against women, rape, a crime of violence and sexual domination. Thus, by controlling Mr. Petrie, Mrs. Pike has controlled the most uncontrollable of men. However, to control Mr. Petrie, Mrs. Pike has commodified his victims.

Leota and Mrs. Pike assign the four women who have been raped a dollar value. When her husband is hesitant to turn Mr. Petrie in, Mrs. Pike defends the action and delights in its profit: " 'You ain't worked a lick in six months, and here I make five hundred dollars in two seconds, and what thanks do I get for it? . . .'" (*Collected Stories* 27). Leota, like Mrs. Pike, further dehumanizes the victims by minimizing their value: "'Four women. I guess those women didn't have the faintest notion at the time they'd be worth a hundred an'twenty-five bucks apiece some day to Mrs. Pike'" (*Collected Stories* 27). Leota very candidly substantiates bell hooks' claim that "rape victims in patriarchal society [are] seen as having lost value and worth as a result of the humiliation they endured" (218). For Mrs. Pike and Leota, worth is translated into a dollar

value; therefore, in their eyes the victims have regained some worth through the bounty paid for Mr. Petrie's apprehension. Mrs. Pike and Leota compete for the money and for control of Mr. Petrie's fate and, therefore, the value of the women he raped. They are willing not only to demoralize but also to commodify women who have been violated in order to extend their own control.

In creating this short story, Welty creates a work that is full of humorous dialogue and bizarre details; however, this humor quickly turns dark as the central issue in the story becomes control, specifically control of someone who has raped four women. Upon interrogation of the work, it is clear that Mrs. Pike becomes the controlling force of the work, for she not only controls her husband and her friendship with Leota, but she also has done the seemingly impossible; she has gained control over the fate of the one man who violently exerts control over women. In "Petrified Man," Welty's critical eye is not turned on the rapist but on the women who benefit from his crimes and who are thus exposed by the author as complicit in the crimes.

If "Petrified Man" is an exercise in dark comedy, then "At The Landing" is an excursion into the violent nature of the world. In an interview with Patricia Wheatley, Welty

commented that "At The Landing" was "not a very good story" (126). In spite of Welty's deprecation, the dreamy, dark story reveals a surprisingly violent episode.

"At The Landing" tells the story of Jenny Lockhart, a young woman who has been shielded from the world by her grandfather. Upon the grandfather's death, Jenny seeks out the one person she feels is truly alive and part of the natural world, Billy Floyd. This enigmatic, self-isolated young man rapes Jenny and then leaves her behind at the landing. Jenny goes in search of Billy, and once again Jenny is violated; however, this time she is gang raped by fishermen who know she is in search of Billy Floyd.

Numerous critics contend that the rape in "At The Landing" is a vehicle through which Jenny may find fulfillment. Louise Westling, in her work *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, argues that the story shows a character obtaining sexual wholeness:

Welty does not react to such frank eroticism with the horror Faulkner expresses through Quentin Compson's anguish or Jason's contempt. Indeed throughout her fiction, she champions women's free choice of lovers and their essential sexual wholeness. This inviolability is most clearly seen in the representation of rape. . . . In "At

The Landing" Jenny Lockhart is raped first by Billy Floyd and later repeatedly by the fishermen at the landing when she goes out in search of the elusive Floyd. The story implies that she is finding the fulfillment she lacked while living with her genteel grandfather. (99)

Westling maintains that Welty uses rape as a transition into sexual wholeness for Jenny. From Westling's perspective, then, being violated repeatedly is better for Jenny than living in the protected world of "her genteel grandfather." Westling seems to disregard any horror that one may associate with Jenny's rape, ignoring that Jenny is in fact raped, that she is forced to satisfy male sexual desire.

Likewise, Barbara Carson, in *Two Pictures At Once In Her Frame*, reads the rape of Jenny as catapulting Jenny into the world of the living:

For Jenny, who has had the courage to leave behind the sanctuary of imperviousness created by her grandfather, this violation is at least life-while the rose-protected bower of her former existence had been as life-less as a fairy-tale existence. . . .Jenny and the rivermen are united not only because the act of the men makes

possible Jenny's further initiation, but also because they are finally alike. Equal and identical in their need for a fuller life, they all set off from the landing, from their own individual emptiness, pursuing in their different ways their quest for life's wholeness. (39-40)

Carson argues that these rapes are Jenny's initiation, and the crimes committed against Jenny aid her in achieving wholeness. Carson further argues that Jenny's violation makes her equal with the violator, for after she is raped by Billy and the fishermen "they all set off from the landing, from their individual emptiness." Thus, Carson suggests that the victim and the victimization work to bring all of the characters mutually out of emptiness and make them capable of searching for a life of wholeness. Again, the forced sexual encounter seems significantly less important than the presumed freedom and life that the actions bring about.

In agreement with both Westling and Carson, Ruth M. Vande Kieft in her article "The Mysteries of Eudora Welty" argues that Billy Floyd is responsible for bringing Jenny into the world:

Billy Floyd, a wild creature of mysterious origins who fishes on the river, rides along

on the flood and is master of it, is the one who brings her into the world: not only by his sexual violation of her, but more quietly and surely through her adoring response to his wild beauty, through the revelations which come to her about herself and him, and about love, which are the chief concerns of the story. (58)

Like so many other critics, Vande Kieft believes that Billy Floyd, one of Jenny's rapists, brings about an understanding of the world for Jenny. Vande Kieft even credits Billy with Jenny's responses and revelations. Again, neither Billy's action nor those of the fishermen seem important; that Jenny's sexual awakening comes through force seems irrelevant.

Reading the text in its mythological context, Carol Manning, in her book *With Ears Opening Like Morning Glories*, discusses the Appollonian and Dionysian figures within the work. Manning argues that Jenny's grandfather represents "an over-protective Appollonian figure" and Billy Floyd is a "free-spirited Dionysian figure" (90). Manning writes that "the Appollonian approach to life produces a dull and lonely existence, yet also an orderly and secure one. . . the Dionysian way of life is more interesting but also potentially dangerous" (90). Manning



believes that Welty's story favors the Dionysian approach: "Though Welty takes nothing away from either side, critics tend to conclude that she favors the adventurer, her implication being to avoid knowledge of the larger world is merely to exist, not to live" (91). Manning argues that for the character to exist in the "larger world" of the Dionysian character, then she must open herself up to possible violation.

These Welty scholars have interrogated the text of "At the Landing," exploring the issue of the rapes of Jenny Lockhart; however, they have come to the conclusion that her brutalization serves as a form of initiation into the world of the living. In addition to their conclusions that the rapes are somehow good for Jenny, critics have categorized the tone and circumstances of Welty's Jenny as a rite of passage.

These critics could even be found in agreement with the Freudian suggestion that women often really want to be brutalized. As Brownmiller explains, "It wasn't until the advent of Sigmund Freud and his followers that the male ideology of rape began to rely on the tenet that rape was something women desired" (*Against Our Will* 350). These Welty critics seem to argue, then, that not only did Jenny

desire sexual violation, but that she needed the violation to become part of the living world.

Clearly, Jenny is a young woman becoming aware of the world of desire; however, Welty uses not only tone but also dialogue to raise questions about how a woman may express or experience desire. The narrative reveals that virginity is often deemed the one thing of value that women bring to a heterosexual relationship. "At the Landing" further reveals that a woman whose virginity is violated by rape will often attempt to right the wrong done against her by revising the distorted relationship into an acceptable one.

For Jenny, sex is equated with death. Once Jenny has been robbed of her one item of value, her virginity, she has nothing left to trade in a marital market place. She must marry the one who has taken her virginity or be condemned to sexual isolation or sexual prostitution. In conjunction with Jenny's loss of virginity, Welty traces the shattering of Jenny's romantic notions of male gentility.

Once Jenny's grandfather dies, Jenny Lockhart finds herself drawn to Billy Floyd. The narrator's description of Billy gives him a surreal quality:

He stopped and looked full at her, his strong

neck bending to one side as if yielding in pleasure to the wind. His arms went down, his fist opened. But for her, his eyes were as bright and unconsumed as stars up on the sky. (*Collected Stories* 244)

Jenny feels the stirrings of desire. Billy's actions parallel forces of nature, the wind, and his eyes are compared to the heavens. These descriptions make him appear as a force of nature itself. Although Billy is described as god-like, the sexual stirrings that Jenny feels for Billy are tied to death. The narrator describes a scene in which it becomes clear that for Jenny sex is death and for Billy sex is life:

Another day, they walked for a little near together, each picking some berry or leaf to hold in the mouth, on their opposite sides of the little spring. The pasture, the sun and the grazing horse were on his side, the graves on hers, and they each looked across at the other's. The whole world seemed filled with butterflies. At each step they took, two black butterflies over the flowers were whirring just alike, suspended in the air, one circling the other rhythmically, or both moving from side to side in

a gentle wave-like way, one above the other. They were blue-black and moving their wings faster than Jenny's eye could follow, always together, like each other's shadows. . . (*Collected Stories* 244)

That Jenny's sexuality is associated with death is indicated by the placement of the grave on Jenny's side. Billy, however, is associated with the living: "The pasture, the sun, and the grazing horse were on his side." For Jenny, sex means the end, but for Billy it is considered natural behavior, so much so that he is at one with nature and numerous elements of nature are "on his side."

Jenny has imagined what true love is like, and she has imagined what loving Billy will be like. She assumes that after Billy violates her, he will love her. In a dreamlike state, romanticizing what being with Billy will be like, Jenny encounters Billy in nature. The rape of Jenny takes place on a riverbank. She is awakened from a sleep and "he violate[s] her and still he was without care or demand as gay as if he were still clanging the bucket at the well" (*Collected Stories* 251). For Billy, the world is his for the taking. Like the food he eats, it was all a "taking freely of what is free" (251).

The language and the situation in this story bear resemblance to the fairy tale "Snow White." Harriet Pollack in her article, "On Welty's use of Allusion: Expectations and Their Revision in 'The Wide Net,' *The Robber Bridegroom* and 'At the Landing,'" discusses the fact that *The Robber Bridegroom* and "At The Landing" are stories that double for one another. Furthermore, "At the Landing" takes on a fairytale quality, and *The Robber Bridegroom* is a Grimm's fairytale retold. In the fairytale, Snow White is whisked away and kissed by the fair prince who awakens her, and they live happily ever after. Unfortunately, Jenny does not live happily ever after. Jenny, like Snow White, does seem to believe that "one day my prince will come"; however, Jenny's prince comes in the form of Billy Floyd, a rapist.

Billy awakens her, not with a kiss like that of Prince Charming, but with a command and a violation of her. Jenny presumes that they will now live happily ever after. She says aloud, "'I wish you and I could be far away. I wish for a little house'" (*Collected Stories* 251). However, Billy does not acknowledge her comment: "ideas of any different thing from what was in his circle of fire might never have reached his ears, for all the attention he paid to her remarks" (*Collected Stories* 251). Billy has taken

what he wanted, and now Jenny is to be discarded; she has served his purpose—to satisfy his desire.

Jenny returns to The Landing, and there she attempts to wash away any remains of the river from the house, cleansing herself of any reminder of Billy Floyd:

But once inside, she took one step and was into a whole new ecstasy, an ecstasy of cleaning, to wash the river out. She ran as if driven, carrying buckets and mops. She scrubbed and pried and shook the river away. Even the pages of books seemed to have been opened and written on again by muddy fingers. In the long days when she stretched and dried white curtains and sheets, rubbed the rust off knives and made them shine, and wiped the dark river from all the prisms, she forgot even love, to clean. (*Collected Stories* 253)

Jenny attempts to wash away any reminders of what has happened to her. Billy is associated with the flood and the river, where her rape takes place; therefore, purging her home of the river, Jenny is able to forget "even love."

For Jenny, rape and love are one; Jenny believes she loves Billy, and he takes the one item she has to trade in the marketplace, her virginity. Billy does not join in with

Jenny when she wishes for "a little house." Jenny's symbolic cleansing of the house, and, by extension, herself, allows her to forget the pain of the rape, which she has equated with love. Jenny eventually, however, goes in search of Billy again once she has recovered from the shock of their intimacy:

But at last the trembling left and dull strength came back, as if a wound had ceased to flow its blood. And then one day in summer she could look at a bird flying in the air, its tiny body like a fist opening and closing, and did not feel daze or pain, and then she was healed of the shock of love. (*Collected Stories* 253)

In this passage it becomes clear that for Jenny the taking of her virginity, the taking of what was free, somehow equals a show of love, and the rape is translated into something as benign as "the shock of love." Once Jenny is "healed of the shock of love," she goes forward in search of Billy Floyd, the man who must love her, she reasons. Jenny does what the women of the town demonstrate to her, after they had come by "to celebrate her ruin" (*Collected Stories* 254). The women encourage Jenny's misguided obsession with Billy, "Why don't you run after him?" (*Collected Stories* 254). Billy Floyd is looked upon by the

women as the only man who would want Jenny now, and the women encourage Jenny to try to recreate the relationship in an acceptable form.

Jenny does run after him, and it is then that she discovers the full meaning of the narrator's comment, "Just like all men, he was something of an animal" (*Collected Stories* 254). The men in the fishing camp where Jenny ends up waiting for Billy, like Billy, live up to their animal-like reputations. Jenny is gang raped by the men of the fishing camp. With the description of the assault, Welty paints the picture of a violently horrific act.

But after a certain length of time, the men that had been throwing knives at the tree by the last light put her inside a grounded houseboat . . . One by one the men came in to her. She actually spoke to the first one. . .

When she called out, she did not call any name; it was a cry with a rising sound, as if she said 'Go back,' or asked a question, and then at the last protested. A rude laugh covered her cry . . . (*Collected Stories* 258)

Jenny has become something to be used. She has no value, for she has neither a husband nor her virginity; therefore, she is considered "ruined" and something to be used and



discarded. The men demonstrate no recognizable guilt or even concern for their actions.

The end of the story leads the reader to believe that indeed Jenny has nothing to offer. She stays on the river, and, as each young boy grows up, he becomes the next man to use Jenny and discard her: "The younger boys separated and took their turns throwing knives with a dull *pit* at the tree" (*Collected Stories* 258). The older men who "had been throwing knives at the tree" gang rape Jenny; the story leads us to believe that the young men will follow the animalistic examples set forth for them by their fathers. The boys at the end have begun to emulate the behavior of their fathers by throwing knives at the tree, the ritual they were performing prior to raping Jenny.

Welty's "At the Landing" tells the tale of a young woman violated repeatedly by men. Although the rapes of Jenny are vague, the town's response to these rapes exposes the societal notion that Jenny might deserve such treatment. Helen Haste, in her work *The Sexual Metaphor*, asserts that women have been placed in two categories: Nice Girls and the Other Kind. Haste describes the different types of women in the following way:

Nice Girls didn't use bad language, express explicit sexual interest, or wear provocative

clothes. The underlying assumption was that women were supposed to operate the sexual constraints, and were rather delicate creatures who needed protection from the unpleasant manifestations of sexuality. It was also assumed to be a protection: Nice Girls didn't get raped because they aroused chivalry rather than lust. (277)

Although Jenny is, arguably, a "Nice Girl," the town's response to her rape, especially the women's dismissal of its seriousness, negates such clear, causal categories.

In both "June Recital" and "The Burning," Welty leaves behind the dream-like state of her victim in "At the Landing." She also departs from the farcical tone used in "Petrified Man." In both "June Recital" and "The Burning," the rape victims are not naïve girls looking for love, nor are the rapists men whom the victims would choose for husbands. The rapes in these stories are violations in a larger sense of "southern womanhood," rapes of women who must reckon with this violation in the context of their mature lives.

In the short story "June Recital" from Welty's collection *The Golden Apples*, Welty tells the story of passion and the artist. She returns to the idea of the misunderstood artist, a theme also explored in

"Powerhouse." Gail Mortimer, in her work *Daughter of the Swan*, examines the reasons the women of Morgana, the setting for "June Recital," find Miss Eckhart, the story's protagonist, different:

Miss Eckhart is an outsider, too different from anyone else in Morganna to fit into their notions of acceptability. She is ostracized because she is German in an era that included World War I, a Lutheran (an unheard of religion), unmarried, passionate about the music her pupils play, a stern teacher, rumored to be in love with a shoe salesman who does not return her feelings, and (so the local grocer reports) an eater of cabbage and pigs' brains. (127-128)

Mortimer does not include in this lengthy list the one item that is a part of Miss Eckhart and that in the eyes of the town's women sets her further apart from them, her rape. Mortimer does ultimately acknowledge the rape; however, she does not explore its purpose. Likewise, Carey Wall, in the article " 'June Recital': Virgie Rainey Saved," mentions the assault of Miss Eckhart in passing, much the same way it is treated in the short story itself. The rape of Miss Eckhart is often acknowledged by critics but rarely, if ever, explored.

The role that the rape plays in the story is difficult to discern because it does not happen within the time span of the story. The reader learns of the rape from Cassie, the narrator. The reader never hears an account of the violation by Miss Eckhart herself. The reader has only the tone of the story and the accounts of Miss Eckhart's life to use in an attempt to understand this rape. Not only is the rape used by Welty to further separate Miss Eckhart from the townswomen, but her reaction to the violation further places Miss Eckhart in the role of a foreigner. Miss Eckhart does not allow the rape to define her, and she breaks away from the standards of southern womanhood that the other women in Morgana would have been taught to obey. Miss Eckhart does the unthinkable for the women of Morgana; she ignores "the region's old binding stereotypes" which would have dictated how she should react to being raped.

In fact, Peter Schmidt, in *The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty's Short Fiction*, highlights this focus on women's ostracizing one another: "'June Recital' brings into focus as none of Welty's other stories do the social pressures that ostracize a woman" (86). Indeed, the reader is shown a woman who is ostracized by the community. Schmidt adds to the list that Mortimer gives, the list of ways that Miss Eckhart does not fit into Morgana society:

. . .the very name by which Miss Eckhart is known proclaims her foreignness. Married women from the best families in Morgana are still properly addressed using their first name and their maiden name,. . .Such a custom both acknowledges their status as married women yet preserves their earlier position as leading members of some of the town's most important families. . .though this practice can be properly called 'matriarchal' because it proclaims the importance of original family. . .it also concedes that their group remains subordinate to the male institution of marriage and the church: the courtesy title 'Miss,' their first names, and their 'maiden' names belong to the women, so to speak, and are used when they address each other, but their last names remain their husbands' and are used in those situations where their husbands power must be acknowledged. (90)

Schmidt argues that by using "Miss" and her last name, Miss Eckhart "immortalizes her foreignness"(90). Schmidt writes that Miss Eckhart's "name, like her church, is 'unheard of' . . .; it represents as much violation of the town's rules

of speech as her life does its rules of good behavior” (91).

Indeed, the reminder of patriarchal rule in Miss Eckhart’s refusal to use her given name does cause disdain for Miss Eckhart by the women, but it is her disregard of their view of what would constitute a proper response to rape, especially rape by “a crazy Negro,” that causes the community to separate from Miss Eckhart.

That Miss Eckhart has been attacked by a black man makes her response all the more appalling according to Morgana’s unwritten rules. Diane Roberts, in her work *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, comments upon relationship between white women’s sexual and racial identities; noting, “Her sexual purity translated her into the emblem of racial purity” (102). It is Miss Eckhart’s refusal to behave as an emblem of both sexual and racial purity that separates her from the women of Morgana.

Miss Eckhart’s disregard for what the women of Morgana feel would be appropriate behavior further separates her from the other women and distinguishes her even more as an outsider. Miss Eckhart’s rape reminds the women that they, themselves, would have to follow what would be considered proper behavior by a patriarchal society. Patricia Yaeger, in *Dirt and Desire*, acknowledges the importance of Miss

Eckhart's response to rape, but Yaeger's focus is on the pupils' treatment of Miss Eckhart:

Miss Eckhart is caught up in her community's drama. . . . This means there is no need to rape this woman in fact to make her conform: she is raped repeatedly in the communal imagination. And this communal rape is not just the subject of adult brutality. In Welty's story Miss Eckhart is attacked, her rape reenacted, among the community's children, who have internalized a model of female powerlessness and continue to enforce this model on each other and within themselves (Yaeger 126).

But the children are not alone in their response to Miss Eckhart. The description of the rape by Cassie and the reaction of the women to Miss Eckhart's rape not only demonstrate how she differs from the women, but it also reveals how even women resort to the notion that women who do not conform to societal stereotypes are active participants in their own violation. Cassie's description of Miss Eckhart's victimization exemplifies how women devalue another woman's experience when she does not react in a way that is congruent with the social norm:

One time, at nine o'clock at night, a crazy Negro

had jumped out of the school hedge and got Miss Eckhart, had pulled her down and threatened to kill her. That was long ago. She had been walking by herself after dark; nobody had told her any better. When Dr. Loomis made her well, people were surprised that she and her mother did not move away. They wished she had moved away, . . . then they wouldn't always have to remember that a terrible thing once happened to her. But Miss Eckhart stayed, as though she considered one thing not so much more terrifying than another . . . .It was because she was from so far away, at any rate, people said to excuse her, that she couldn't comprehend; . . .Miss Eckhart's *differences* were why shame alone had not killed her and killed her mother too; that differences were reasons. (*Collected Stories* 302)

To the women of Morgana, nothing could be as horrible as being accosted by a black man. The accosting of Miss Eckhart is so significant in the community that even young Cassie Morrison appears to know the story of Miss Eckhart and the crime committed against her. Cassie Morrison recalls the story she has heard about the violation of Miss Eckhart. The passion of the music Miss Eckhart is playing



prior to Cassie's recollection of the rape overwhelms  
Cassie:

What Miss Eckhart might have told them a long  
time ago was that there was more than the ear  
could bear to hear or the eye to see, even in her  
music. The music was too much for Cassie  
Morrison. . . .She stood back in the room with  
her whole body averted as if to ward off blows  
from Miss Eckhart's strong left hand. . . .

*(Collected Stories 301)*

Miss Eckhart's passion, expressed through her music, is too  
much for Cassie to bear. Through her music, Miss Eckhart  
breaks from the strictly coded, dispassionate role of a  
southern woman. Cassie finds it easier to remember a  
sexual assault in which Miss Eckhart was the victim than  
listen to the violently passionate playing of Miss Eckhart.

Cassie's connection of Miss Eckhart's music to the  
rape further demonstrates Miss Eckhart's separation from  
the community. In fact, Cassie eases her own pain at never  
being able to become a passionate musician by recalling the  
victimization of Miss Eckhart. Miss Eckhart's lack of  
commonality with the other women in the community not only  
explains her behavior, but also allows the women to  
maintain what they hold true about themselves, the

importance of behaving like southern ladies. Miss Eckhart's ignoring of these roles set her far apart from the women of Morgana; therefore, to comfort themselves, the women subjugated Miss Eckhart to ease their discomfort at her rejection of "time-honored roles for women". . . (Prenshaw viii). Miss Eckhart fits into none of these time-honored roles; therefore, the fact that she has been violated and that this violation has not killed her or at least made her leave town in shame allows the women of Morgana the freedom to fully reject her without taking a close look at themselves.

Like the women of Morgana, Miss Myra and Miss Theo in "The Burning," from Welty's collection *The Bride of Innisfallen*, adhere to the "time-honored code of southern womanhood" even in the face of rape. "The Burning" gives the reader a picture of Civil War Mississippi. Miss Myra, Miss Theo, and their slave Delilah are the center of the story. The Union soldiers, coming to rape, conquer, and pillage, order the women to leave their home before it is burned. The story tells of the day of the burning, and offers as well a strong commentary on war, rape, and the position of black women during the Civil War.

Several critics have considered the importance of this story, but few have focused on the rapes in the work.

Harold Bloom, for example, in *Modern Critical Views: Eudora Welty*, addresses the issue of violence within "The Burning"; however, he does not explore the aggression associated with the rape of Miss Myra or Delilah. Bloom focuses on the violence associated with the burning of the home and the deaths of Miss Myra and Miss Theo. Michael Kreyling in his work *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order* focuses on Miss Myra and Miss Theo in his analysis: "A world 'inflicted' upon the woman's heart and the reaction of that heart in its suffering, is the bit of the pattern that 'The Burning' fulfills. Women are the sufferers; men are the inflictors" (124-125). Indeed, the men in this story are the "inflictors"; however, the women, Miss Myra and Miss Theo, are also "inflictors."

Shortly after the arrival of the Union soldiers, Miss Myra is raped. The attack of Miss Myra is handled as a casualty of war; the ravishment of Miss Myra allows the soldier to assault the Confederate soldier. That women have been used in war as property upon which enemies can both realistically and symbolically act out subjugation of their opponents is a well-documented tradition in the history of war. In his history of sex, Robert McElvaine explains this traditional use of women in war:

. . .planting the victors' penises in the women of the vanquished has often been as much a symbol of victory as the planting of the winners' flag in the soil of the defeated. 'It is,' the authors of a recently published world history text say, 'a time-honored battle strategy: one hurts men by hurting their [sic] women.' (292)

Catherine Clinton, in *Tara Revisited: Women War & The Plantation Legend*, explores this tradition, as well, and Clinton highlights the way that sex, in general, and rape, in particular, was dealt with differently depending on the race of the victim:

War was full of particular dangers for women, none more feared than rape—or, as white Southerners styled it, 'dishonor infinitely worse than death.' Evidence suggests that in this, as in other sexual matters, double standards abounded. Rape was a frequent byproduct of slavery. . . .(128)

This "particular danger," this tradition in war, is acted out by the Union soldiers upon Miss Myra, and, in an effort to protect her, Miss Theo offers her slave, Delilah, in her stead. The Union soldier announces his victory by raping Miss Myra. Welty uses minimal description to describe the

brutalization of Miss Myra, leaving the impression that rape is an everyday occurrence, a casualty of war:

. . .the first soldier shoved the tables and chairs out of the way behind Miss Myra, who flitted as she ran, and pushed her down where she stood and dropped on top of her. (*Collected Stories* 483)

Welty's description, that the soldier "dropped on top" of Miss Myra, euphemistically indicates the rape of this plantation mistress. When she sees this attack on her sister, Miss Theo quickly directs the soldier's attention towards Delilah in an attempt to thwart the soldier's advance on Miss Myra and on their family home:

. . . 'I'm afraid you found the ladies of this house a trifle out of your element. My sister's the more delicate one, as you see. May I offer you this young kitchen Negro, as I have always understood- ' (*Collected Stories* 284)

bell hooks, in her essay "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood," recognizes that "as far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last" (217). Like many southern white men,

some white women also saw nothing wrong with the raping of black women. In fact, in "The Burning," Miss Theo acts as if Delilah is simply a possession to be traded. Delilah's virtue is in no way as valuable to Miss Theo as is Miss Myra's, not only because Myra is Theo's sister but also, and more obviously, because Delilah is black.

hooks further analyzes the exploitation of black women: "White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped" (217). Likewise, Sandra Gunning in *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* argues that the rape of black women was not really seen as rape at all in American society: "Black women were regularly victims of white sexual aggression. This fact was consistently masked by the ancient charge that, because she was the female equivalent of the black rapist, the black woman could never be raped" (10). Indeed, the flippant way in which Miss Theo offers Delilah to the soldiers supports Gunning's thesis that the black woman is assumed to have no moral code that would require others to respect her body. The sisters, Myra and

Theo, regard Delilah's sexuality as a commodity to satisfy the soldiers, not as a virtue whose sacrifice would matter.

Welty offers only sketchy details of what happens to Delilah after Theo offers her to the soldiers. However, the details of what happens, as scant as they are in the story, demonstrate that sexual domination by white men over black women was not something to be accepted painlessly. In fact, Welty at least gives Delilah a voice to respond to the violation. Delilah is the only character in a work by Welty to respond violently and loudly to her mistreatment:

Miss Myra slowly lifted her white arm, like a lady who had been asked to dance, and called, 'Delilah!' Because that was the one she saw being lifted onto the horse's hilly back and ridden off through the front door. . . .Delilah, from where she was set up on the horse and then dragged down on the grass, never called after her.

She might have been saving her breath for the screams that soon took over the outdoors and circled that house. . . She screamed, young and strong, for them all. . .(485)

This description of Delilah's rape in the published version of "The Burning" makes Delilah's violation appear to be an uniting force, as if she is experiencing the pain that Miss

Myra and Miss Theo are suffering at the burning of their home. An earlier version, entitled "The Ghosts," housed at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, depicts the rape of Delilah (known as Florabel in the earlier version) as a separate act, not one that joins her with the others:

Miss Myra slowly lifted her white arm, like a lady who would dance, but she only called 'Flor,' because that was the one she saw being taken off through the door. . . . soon this poor given-away black girl's rising screams began outside in the yard around the house springing up every where she ran, like all the green in the world after a hard rain, that poor people, any other July, in those fields, would have had to start chopping on right away—all feeling sorry for Florabel (6).

In this version, Delilah/Florabel does not scream for everyone; in fact, everyone and, more importantly, everything laments the violation of Florabel. But Welty emphasizes in this account that Florabel is "given away." Welty reminds the reader in this earlier manuscript of Theo's role in Florabel's demise, and makes Florabel's rape separate from Theo and Myra. The women do not share in the



violation of Florabel's body or the destruction of their home.

Both accounts of Florabel's/Delilah's rape seem to support the argument that "black male rape of white women has attracted much more attention and is seen as much more significant than rape of black women by either white or black men" (Hooks 217). Indeed, Welty's account of the rape does demonstrate the insignificance of the rape of a black woman. Although Welty's earlier manuscript more clearly details what happens to the rape victims, "The Burning" also highlights the way in which race separates the treatment and social hierarchy of the victims.

In her short fiction, Eudora Welty reveals a haunting portrait of women who are victims of male rape and of other women who exploit their vulnerability. Unlike the more stereotypical portrait of women's communities as supportive and empowering, Welty's portrait of the South, especially the portrait of sexual violence towards women, emphasizes the lack of community and the lack of support and power that women show one another. In fact, in Welty's short fiction, female characters so fully identify with the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of southern society that they often further violate the women who have been violated through rape. What has been read as euphemistic,

almost flippant portraits of rape in Welty's fiction may, in fact, be a strategic shift of focus in Welty's work. Welty does not highlight the actual act of rape or the behavior of the rapists. In Welty's fiction, the fact that men will rape, that women will be raped, seems to be a foregone conclusion in the southern society she captures. Instead, Welty focuses on women's response to sexual assault, and she indicts the response of other women in the society who profit from, enjoy, or even encourage the victimization of other women.

### Chapter 3:

#### "The Black Half of His Deeds": Race and Rape in Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom*

In 1942, Eudora Welty published her first book-length work of fiction, *The Robber Bridegroom*. The novella appears on the surface to be an exercise in Southwestern humor combined with the genre of the fairytale, leaving many Welty readers with the impression that *The Robber Bridegroom* is a light-hearted, simplistic work. However, Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* is a complex tale revolving around the rape of two young women and their different, racially-identified fates.

*The Robber Bridegroom*, set on the Natchez Trace during the late eighteenth century, tells the story of the frontier and its settling. In the novella, the wealthy planter, Clement Musgrove, grows wealthier with the additional acres of forest that he destroys. The gentleman bandit of the Natchez Trace, Jamie Lockhart, profits from his adventures and exploits. Unlike Clement and Jamie, the women characters do not acquire possessions, however. They are the possessions. Like the bountiful land of the Trace, Rosamond Musgrove and an unnamed woman known only as the Indian maiden are commodities used and then discarded by men.

Although this novella has received considerable attention from critics, the significance of the two contrasting rapes of Rosamond and the Indian maiden has not been fully considered. Welty, herself, has given hints about the significance of the duality set up between Rosamond and the Indian girl, suggesting that the rape of the Indian girl is essential to the work. In December, 1948, Welty wrote to her longtime friend, John Robinson, and discussed the importance of the rape scenes, indicating that Rosamond and the Indian maiden act as doubles within the work:

About the Indian girl scene, I'm not sure. I feel in one way that the murder or rape should stand- because in that scene, (bandit scene with [the] girl who might have been Rosamond if she weren't herself) we have detached Jamie from it, as hero, and all that really pertains to him is the black half of his deeds- and is a reality of the times- and I feel that actual horror should be given- simply and quickly, but no mistake- I feel that this element should be in it.

Cutting off her hair would not be strong enough, would be only a shading of it, a delicate suggestion such as Rosamond has already given in

the stealing of the clothes, when it is turned of  
[off] as comedy. . .

Welty and John Robinson were working to turn the *Robber Bridegroom* into a screenplay, and they were concerned about how to handle the rape scenes in it. Welty is obviously hesitant about leaving the Indian maiden rape scene in the work, but she nevertheless wants to make it clear to viewers. In this contemplation, Welty acknowledges the connection between Rosamond and the Indian maiden, suggesting that the Indian maiden might be mistaken for Rosamond, might be Rosamond "if she were not herself." But this coordination between Rosamond and the Indian girl, obvious according to Welty, and the contrasting rape scenes of these two women, are so obliquely embedded in Welty's fairy tale that their significance has not been fully explored. Welty's letter to Robinson, as well as the details of the story, argues for further exploration of the rape scenes and their significance in the work.

Through the use of the fairy tale and the sly, raucous humor of the Southwest as the backdrop for her story, Welty forthrightly confronts the issues of race and rape in the frontier South, the Natchez Trace. But with such a setting, where the treatment of women and the division of race have always had a complex history, the issues of race and rape

are further complicated. Welty explores in this work the dichotomous relationship of women and race.

Along with the dichotomous treatment of women, Welty adheres to a true fairy tale form by creating characters who operate as mirror images of one another. Jamie and Little Harp, Rosamond and the Indian girl, even the frontier and the South serve as doubles, each mirroring the other's image. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, acknowledges the use of doubling in fairy tales: "The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent—not good and bad at the same time, as we are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child's mind, it also dominates fairy tales" (9). With the characters Rosamond and the Indian girl, Welty sets up the polar opposites that Bettelheim discusses. Through her portrait of Rosamond and the Indian girl, Welty comments on two significant issues: as doubles of one another, Rosamond and the Indian girl demonstrate the duality of human beings, and, at the same time, because of their opposing racial identities, their unequal fates demonstrate how one's color alters one's fate. In fact, not only are their fates different, but the language depicting the victimization of the characters differs, as well.

Several Welty critics have examined the issue of doubleness within *The Robber Bridegroom*, but have primarily focused on the double identity of Jamie. Charles E. Davis, in "Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* and Old Southwest Humor: A Doubleness of Vision," analyzes the "dual nature of both man and the world," examining the doubleness within Jamie Lockhart and the wilderness (71). Davis also demonstrates how Welty uses Southwest humor to depict the "tension between the comic and the serious" to reinforce the "duality of all things-- man, the wilderness, history, and reality" (71).

Warren French also comments on the issue of doubleness within *The Robber Bridegroom*. In his essay " 'All Things Are Double': Eudora Welty as a Civilized Writer," French focuses on Welty's use of place. He observes that Welty's settings, the wilderness and market place, reflect one another. French also discusses how Jamie Lockhart, for example, is a double character, for he is a man of the frontier and a man of the market place.

Ellen L. Walker and Gerda Seaman, in "*The Robber Bridegroom* as a Capitalist Fable," focus on the capitalist values within Welty's work. The authors do briefly look at the rape of Rosamond in contrast to the rape of the Indian girl, but the doubling of these characters and the

significance of their contrasting fates deserve further critical inquiry. Even Barbara Carson, who has scrutinized the duality within Rosamond's personality and the way Salome doubles for Rosamond, has not explicitly focused on the rapes within the novella and the significance of the racial boundaries within. In fact, critics have yet to fully explore the importance of the rape of Rosamond and of the Indian girl. The ways in which the Indian girl is the "darker" version of Rosamond, and the rape of the Indian girl a more brutal version of Rosamond's rape, have been virtually ignored.

In *The Robber Bridegroom*, the author draws two contrasting depictions of rape. Welty details the rape of the young, white "southern belle," Rosamond, and the rape of a young Indian woman. At first reading, the rape of Rosamond is easily missed by the reader. Welty shows a southern belle who does not acknowledge either to the reader or herself that she has been raped. In fact, the belle's life is never threatened, and she eventually marries her victimizer, leaving the impression that, as long as marriage is the end result, rape is an acceptable way for white men to claim white women as their brides. In contrast, the author depicts the rape of the Indian maiden very differently, leaving the reader with no doubt that a



rape has taken place. The victimization of the Indian girl is a more obvious, even savage act of power by her white victimizer. Using a setting that draws upon images of both the "frontier" and the "South" as the historical backdrop for her novella, Welty captures the differing sexual mores for white women and Indian women through contrasting rape scenes.

Many works of Southern literature have portrayed the complex way in which white women, especially, have been perceived as at once virginal and also fertile, and women of color have been perceived as almost wholly sexual. Race has always had an important impact on sexual assumptions in the South. In their essay, "Haunted Bodies: Rethinking the South Through Gender," Donaldson and Jones describe the significance of race in thinking about sex in the South:

Surely no bodies ever appeared more haunted by society. From the body of the white southern lady, praised for the absence of desire, to the body of the black lynching victim accused of excessive desire, southern sexuality has long been haunted by stories designating hierarchical relationships among race, class, and gender. (1)

In light of these dynamic relationships between race and gender, Welty's contrast of the rape of a white woman with that of an Indian woman strongly parallels the historical attitudes towards race and sex in the South.

Susan Brownmiller, in her book *Against Our Will*, states that the rape of Indian women as well as white women "was a casual by-product of the move westward and The Great Frontier" (150). However, Brownmiller further points out that the white men of the frontier used the rape of white women by Indians to "excuse their own behavior" (150). The behavior that the white men attempted to excuse was the rape of Indian women and the murdering of tribes. The rape and retaliation scenario of the frontier parallels that of the white woman's being raped by a black male and the "justified" lynching of the black man. However, in both settings, the frontier and the South, it is the woman, the victim, who pays the price. In his history of sex, *Eve's Seed*, Robert S. McElvaine examines the values assigned to white and Indian women:

Because the white woman had come to represent civilization itself, it was inconceivable that she could be penetrated by someone who was taken to represent savagery. It was, however, quite proper for civilization to penetrate savagery

. . .(And this is just the sort of language that was used, as in a pioneer 'penetrating the wilderness.'). (274)

In this context, then, the wilderness of the Natchez trace, it is "inconceivable" that Rosamond could be penetrated by someone who represents "savagery," a bandit or someone of color. However, it is conceivable that the savage, the Indian maiden, could be penetrated by what is supposed to represent civilization, the white man. The premise that racial hierarchies assign differing sexual values to women according to race can be seen clearly in *The Robber Bridegroom*.

Early in the novella the reader is introduced to Rosamond, the young "southern belle" of the novel, who is raped by Jamie Lockhart, the bandit of the story whose desire is also to be a "southern gentleman." However, in reading the passage, the reader at first may not be sure whether an actual rape has taken place. The language is sexually charged, but the lyrical description suggests not so much a rape as a romantic encounter,

Then the horse stood stock-still, and Jamie Lockhart lifted Rosamond down. The wild plum trees were like rolling smoke between him and the river, but he broke the branches and the plums

rained down as he carried her under. He stopped and laid her on the ground, where, straight below, the river flowed as slow as sand, and robbed her of that which he had left her the day before. (65)

The language Welty uses, "wild plum trees," "rolling smoke," "the river flowed as slow as sand," romanticizes the rape itself. The language makes the rape appear to be something uncontrollable; it is wild and smoky, yet it is slow and flowing. Rather than assault, the scene suggests courtship. Even though Jamie rapes Rosamond, he appears as a gentleman, for he "lifted Rosamond down" from the horse. Jamie does not violently take "that which he had left her with the day before"—her virginity.

Because Jamie Lockhart, the southern gentleman bandit, takes her virginity in a fairy tale setting, the scene raises questions of whether in fact Rosamond has not freely given herself to Jamie. But the reader cannot ignore Jamie Lockhart's motto, "Take first and ask afterward" (69). Jamie takes what he wants—Rosamond. Jamie Lockhart is a bandit who not only robs Rosamond of her clothing and French pins, but of her greater treasure—her virginity. Reading the encounter as a rape is further complicated by the fact that no physical violence is depicted in the

scene. Finally, to further confuse the reader, Rosamond eventually marries her victimizer, never having acknowledged a rape. As the omniscient narrator explains, "As soon as Jamie had truly dishonored her, Rosamond began to feel a great growing pity for him" (76). The reader is left with the impression that Rosamond's response to Jamie is curiosity at first and the affection. There is little or no indication that Rosamond realizes she has been raped. Even after she has married her the bandit lover, Jamie continues to play the role of the rapist, recreating his dominance over her: "When she tried to lead him to bed with a candle, he would knock her down and out of senses, and drag her there" (84). Once Rosamond has become Jamie's "property," she is even further commodified; she becomes something to be used and abused.

Unlike Rosamond, the Indian girl initially is brutally attacked by Jamie's double, Little Harp. Also unlike the ambiguous sexual scene between Rosamond and Jamie, the reader is left without doubt that indeed the Indian girl has been violently raped.

The rape of a young Indian girl by Little Harp, Jamie Lockhart's foil, makes a significant departure from the otherwise fairy tale story. Like Jamie Lockhart, Little Harp rapes a young girl; however, few further similarities

exist. The rape of the Indian girl is one of violence and one motivated by Little Harp's desire to take what he believes Jamie cherishes, the bandit gang and Jamie's one "true love." By raping the girl he believes to be the "true love" of Jamie Lockhart, Little Harp believes he has planted his seed in the "property" of his enemy.

However, Little Harp rapes the wrong girl. And whereas Jamie rapes in an almost romantic, gentlemanly way, Little Harp's victimization of the young Indian girl is brutal and violent:

. . .he threw the girl across the long table, among the plates and all, where the remains of of all the meals lay where they were left, with the knives and forks sticking in them, and flung himself upon her before their eyes. (Welty 132)

Not only does Little Harp "[fling] himself upon her before their eyes," but he also forces her to drink the "Black Drink," and he "cut off her little finger, for it offends me and he cut off her wedding finger" (Welty 131-132).

The description of the rape of the Indian contrasts starkly with that of Rosamond. The Indian girl is thrown upon the table; she is not lifted down as Rosamond was from Jamie's horse. She is thrown down among plates that held the remains of discarded food. It is revealing of Little

Harp's barbarism that he rapes the Indian girl among these remnants, for he views her as something to be consumed and then discarded. His violent rape of the Indian girl is clearly not the romanticized version one sees in the rape of Rosamond. Furthermore, the contrasting scenes demonstrate that race determines the way in which these women, these sexual objects, are handled.

True to the form of the genre of the fairy tale, the reader is shown horrific events, which nevertheless come to a happy ending. Like Hansel and Gretel baking in the oven of the witch, the rape of Rosamond, at least, resolves happily. And yet this fairy tale turned novella deals with a larger issue—the treatment of victims of rape by their victimizer.

Although Welty's depiction of these rapes of the young "southern belle" and the woman of color take place against a fairy tale backdrop, her novel nonetheless raises serious questions the way ideas about race intersect with ideas about gender. For example, the novel suggests that the rape of a white woman may be the prelude to a "legitimate" sexual relationship, such as marriage, while the rape of a woman of color may be conducted as an act of revenge committed by one man on another, using the devalued woman of color as the property upon which the revenge is reaped.

In the marketplace of a Southern patriarchal economy, women of color are less valuable than white women because, even when available for marriage, they are not considered marriageable because of racial lines. The white female of *The Robber Bridegroom* is a southern lady, a belle, the sheltered white woman on the pedestal, rather than a rape victim. The fact that her victimization, her loss of virginity, is not made explicit for the reader has the effect of maintaining her illusory purity—her pedestal status. Rosamond does not acknowledge that she has been brutalized and so lives an illusion of the privileged status. The novel implies, however, through the parallel or doubled characterization of white belle and Indian victim, the harsher consequences of the commodification of women and the use of rape as an act of power and control.

Although at first glance the roles of belle and Indian girl seem to be far apart, they are closer than they appear. Although strict racial lines separate the two women, their roles as objects on which men express sexual aggression, in this case rape, are the same. The characters do endure their victimization in ways suitable for their roles: the white "belle" refuses to acknowledge her rape, and the young Indian "squaw" is killed and tossed aside for she has served her purpose, Little Harp's attempted



revenge. Welty's Rosamond and the Indian woman reflect the assumptions of their culture about their sexuality in relation to their race, and both are objects consumed by the men who rape them.

Throughout Southern literature, works which give accounts of the Southern white woman being raped are numerous. We see victims of rape not only in the works of Eudora Welty, but also in William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and Elizabeth Spencer's *The Voice at the Backdoor*. In these works, Faulkner and Spencer explore not only rape, but also the desire of female victims to align themselves with the rapist. As we have seen, Welty's fiction goes even further in portraying not only rape and its victims but also the complicity of other women in shaping southern cultural attitudes toward rape, as well as showing the effect of race upon society's valuing of women.

An interrogation of Welty's work shows a distinct theme in the area of sexual aggression towards women. In her short fiction, Welty focuses on the response of women to rape. She depicts women who benefit from the brutalization of other women, and women who ignore and even ostracize the victims of rape. In her novella, Welty depicts two rapes, and she compares the racially fated treatment of rape victims. Despite the sometimes vague

rendering of rape in her fiction (and even her own  
hesitance on occasions to acknowledge this repeated theme  
in her work), the evidence of repeated occurrences of rape,  
extreme examples of the subjugation of women, shows Welty  
exploring the multiple and complex roles of women in the  
South, roles that all too often comprise unacknowledged--  
or denied-- sexual exploitation.

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## Vita

Nicole Donald is the Director of Student Enrichment and Career Services at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. In this capacity, she organizes orientation and Freshman Year Experience Courses for the college, and she serves as a liaison between students and faculty to resolve retention issues. In addition to her directorship, she also serves as advisor to transfer students. She received her undergraduate from Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, and she is completing this thesis for the Master of Arts in the Department of English at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.