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FREEDOM AT THE FREAK SHOW:
CARNIVALESQUE IMAGERY IN THE FICTION OF EUDORA WELTY, FLANNERY
O'CONNOR AND KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Mississippi

Virginia McCarley

May 2018

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the function of the circus and the sideshow in the work of Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter, arguing that all of these authors employ Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque as a reaction to and against the expectations put on them as women who are pressured to conform to the Southern ideal.

In the first chapter, I argue that Eudora Welty uses the carnivalesque to reveal the performativity of normalcy in both "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" (1937) and "A Memory" (1937). These performances, in the first story particularly, offer a critique of the eugenics movement that was popular at the time.

In the second chapter, I argue that O'Connor's work queers the heterosexual ideal of the Southern lady both inside the circus tent, where a hermaphrodite becomes both preacher and the Virgin Mary, and outside of the tent, in a comical waiting room where the anti-Southern belle becomes a powerful prophet and the main character's moves towards grace coincides with a move towards disfigurement and androgyny. For O'Connor, the chaste religion associated with the protestant ideal of the Southern lady serves as a humorous construction, and real revelation comes only when freaks are first in line to heaven.

In chapter three, I will focus particularly on the idea of carnivalesque laughter in Porter's fiction, examining both "The Circus" (1934) and "Holiday" (1960). Porter's early story "The Circus" becomes almost a parody of the carnivalesque, where the power of the patriarchy erases any possibility of transgression or freedom even during carnival; however, "Holiday," published

much later in her life, serves as a sort of anecdote for this dire prediction. Through these two stories I will trace the evolution of carnivalesque laughter in Porter's fiction, which turns from terrifyingly cruel to hopeful.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mom and dad, Michael and Beth Cooper. Without your brilliant guidance and support, as well as your constant selflessness and willingness to help whenever needed, this thesis never would have gotten started. Thank you both for being shining examples of what it means to be parents.

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Most of all, I'd like to thank my husband, Will McCarley, who pushed me to pursue this degree and spent many nights wrangling our kids alone so I could finish it. And thanks to Lucy and Jude McCarley, who have turned our life and house into a circus in the most delightful way.

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INTRODUCTION

Barnum and Bailey’s “Greatest Show on Earth” entranced isolated American audiences with thrilling sights and sounds from around the world: acrobats, elephants, and clowns cavorted across the stage. Oddities unmentionable in other contexts—hermaphrodites, conjoined twins, the abnormally tall and short—elicited horror and awe from audiences behind the drawn curtain of sideshow tents. The golden age of the American circus coincided with America’s period of economic prosperity between 1870 and 1915.¹ The decline of the circus was also tied to the economy; when the Panic of 1907 sent the financial markets crashing, circus attendance began declining as well. The circus was not finished—indeed, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey’s Circus became a permanent fixture for nearly a century and a half—but the grandeur and popularity of the circus began to wane.

During its peak, the circus was a particularly popular pastime in the South, where a traveling circus could “literally shut a town down” (Renoff 1). The significance of the circus in the South was not simply tied to the unmatched entertainment it afforded rural and hard-to-reach areas. The circus in the South also acted as a great unifier in a very divided climate: on a show day, “a black sharecropper who spent the previous day staggering behind a mule and a plow, and a white lawyer who spent the day before working in a well-appointed office, might stand

¹ Ernest Albrecht gives a thorough history of the circus in *The New American Circus*.

alongside each other” (Renoff 5). Besides offering racially divided Southerners a place to experience “unparalleled social mixing,” the circus was also a site for Southerners to experience sexuality. The circus allowed spectators a place to, “test established ideas about virtue, whether that meant attending a circus at night for a woman or eyeing a lightly garbed female equestrian for a man” (Renoff 7). The respectability of the circus as a whole even lent credibility to its more sordid aspect: the sideshow. Since the sideshow existed within the circus, a form of “respectable” entertainment to almost all Southerners, circus-goers could sneak into the exhibits with little threat of negative repercussions: “Evangelicals could press and exceed the boundaries of appropriate and moral behavior by attending an exhibition deemed sinful by their pastor, even though they had maintained to others that they would pay admission only to see the animals in the menagerie” (Renoff 7). For the South in particular, as for the country as a whole, the circus was a unifying pastime offering glimpses of a socially and culturally changing nation.

Sideshows, also known by the more derogatory term freak shows, were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the United States between the 1840s and 1940s.² Sideshows offered their audiences an assurance of their own normalcy in comparison with those on stage in an era where scientifically based intelligence testing gave doctors the opportunity to categorize people according to IQ and medical advances affixed labels to previously undiagnosed deformities. Thus, these shows represented not only the exotic and the otherworldly, but also a cast of characters from whom the audience could comfortably disassociate: “The freak

² Viewing deformity as a form of entertainment was first popularized by museums in the 19th century before the practice was adopted by traveling circuses. Monetizing physical deformity was, of course, not a new phenomenon. As Fahy chronicles in a brief history of the subject, French essayist Michel de Montaigne decried the practice as early as the 16th century in his essay “Of a Monstrous Child” (5).

represented what the audience was not—the Other, someone excluded from mainstream society for being different” (Fahy 2). However, though the abnormal bodies inside the tent did assuage the underlying anxieties of audience members by offering an othered body against which to define and confirm their own normalcy, the bodies also revealed the tenuous nature of the difference between spectator and spectacle by revealing “surprisingly insecure power structures and sugges(ting) underlying anxieties about the ways individuals defined and related to each other in modern America” (Fahy 2). The gaze of sideshow audiences was not, however, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes, purely judgmental. Rather, it was an ambivalent gaze, also a sign of envy on the part of the spectator: “The spectator enthusiastically invested his dime in the freak show not only to confirm his own superiority, but also to safely focus an identificatory longing upon these creatures who embodied freedom’s elusive and threatening promise of not being like everybody else” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 69). For both viewers and artists, the sideshow provided an unparalleled space from which to consider questions of identity and difference in an era where technology and industry were dramatically changing the landscape of America. The sideshow, and the “freak” than inhabits it, provided a space of freedom from the exacting cultural norms of the time where bodies—particularly female bodies—were increasingly measured and regulated.³

By the beginning of the twentieth century, medical advances caused disability to be viewed as increasingly “pathological rather than monstrous,” which in turn changed the

³ Two dramatic examples of this regulation include the “Ugly Laws” many cities enacted in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which made it illegal for disabled people to go out in public, and the popularization of sterilization of othered female bodies during the 19th and 20th centuries.

audience's attitude from one of gaping awe to one of pity (Fahy 11). In addition, advances in technology and rapidly increasing entertainment options such as the cinema also contributed to the decline of the freak show, as did economic issues. By the mid-twentieth century, freak shows were quickly becoming an outdated relic of the past.

However, despite the decline in viewership, the freak show hardly disappeared from the American imagination. The sideshow remained in literature, offering a place for writers at mid-century and beyond to use "the freakish body as a tool for exploring problematic social attitudes about race, disability, and sexual desire in American culture" (Fahy 13). It is precisely this use of the freak show as site where othered sexuality could be discussed and considered that I wish to investigate in this thesis, examining the ways in which Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter use the circus and the freak show in their fiction. Welty, O'Connor, and Porter each use the circus as a place where young, sheltered girls can encounter their budding sexuality outside the bounds of a society that resists any mention of the topic, and as a space where the idea of normalcy is challenged. The significance of these stories is not just that these young, prepubescent girls experience sexuality, but that they experience a sexuality outside of the bounds of their decidedly heteronormative societies. For these authors, the representations of the circus "freaks" destabilize an idea of "normalcy" and reveal the performativity of gender, creating a third space where disability has the power to unravel the idea of normalcy and difference can be acknowledged and embraced.

The role of the sideshow in mid-century fiction has inspired a wealth of criticism, particularly in the past decade, though many important studies predate the recent upswing in interest. The study of sideshows as an important and unique site for examining changing

American ideals and perceptions can perhaps be traced to Robert Bogdan's landmark 1988 study *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. By focusing on the three-way relationship between performer, entrepreneur and spectator, Bogdan proves that the "freaks" starring in the sideshow were more a product of performativity than disability, often highlighting (or even faking) difference that would go undetected outside of the tent. By exploring the agency of the performers and their complacency in the relationship, Bogdan argues that "during its prime the freak show was a place where human deviance was valuable, and in that sense valued" (268). Rachel Adam's 2001 *Sideshow U.S.A.* picks up this same argument more than a decade later, again pointing out the performativity of the identity of "freak." Adams writes that sideshow acts "negotiate the relationship of individual nonconformity to a social context intent on discriminating between normality and deviance" (18). Adams restores a sense of agency to sideshow performers, leaving space where "freaks can talk back" and analyzing the role of the freak show in a wide variety of contexts, from visual representations such as Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* to literary representations such as Carson McCullers' *Member of the Wedding* and *Clock Without Hands* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (21). The 2005 book *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture*, continues Adams' work of applying theories of the sideshow to literature, while also expanding the definition of the term "freak" to include racial and ethnic outsiders. In the study, Nancy Bombaci looks at the work of such diverse authors as Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Tod Browning, and Carson McCullers, arguing that by exploring "freakishness," these artists locate a difference "between those who are born freaks and those who, through strenuous effort, aim to become freaks by identifying with human oddities" (1). In this thesis, I wish to both continue and expand this trend of circus criticism, narrowing the focus

to three women writers whose works center around the ability of the carnivalesque to momentarily disrupt ideological systems of control. In the work of Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter, the freak show and othered bodies outside of the space of the circus disrupt tightly controlled ideas of normativity, particularly the ideal of the Southern lady or Southern belle.

For Welty, O'Connor, and Porter, the freak show is like Mikhail Bakhtin termed the "carnival," a space of liberation from these stifling expectations. Bakhtin argues that during carnival times "the new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated" offering a time of unparalleled "unmasking of unvarnished truth from under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks" (x). In *Dostoevsky's Problem of Poetics*, Bakhtin traces the carnival to the Feast of Fools, a medieval festival held around the first of the year. Later, he expands the theory in *Rabelais and His World* and notes that the phenomenon has occurred in festivals throughout history as far back as the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia. In this study, I would like to trace the phenomenon forward to the traveling carnivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America, which bear marked, physical similarities to Bakhtin's carnival: both the American circus and the Bakhtinian carnival featured "fairs and various open air amusements" as well as "giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals" (5). Both offered a world in which "all . . . people participated more or less" and a "suspension of all hierarchical rank" (6, 10). Both also offered an "obvious sensuous character" that was otherwise absent in mainstream culture (7). In his study of François Rabelais, Bakhtin also examines the way in which the carnivalesque works outside of actual carnivals, festivals, and feasts, in a literary mode he terms grotesque realism. For Bakhtin, grotesque realism has a strong, bodily element. In this genre the body is "deeply

positive” and represents the “collective, ancestral people” (19). This style is also concerned with degradation or the lowering of the abstract or the spiritual to the realm of the earth and body. For Bakhtin, grotesque realism “degrades, brings down to earth, turns subject into flesh” (20).

Due to the belated publication of Bakhtin’s work in the United States, Porter, O’Connor, and Welty would not be aware of his theories of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism.

Rabelais and His World was originally written as Bakhtin’s dissertation, and, although it was never approved, it was published in 1965. The book was not translated and published in the United States until 1968, a few years after the death of O’Connor and almost a decade after the publication of “Holiday,” the latest of the short stories I will be examining for this study.

However, even without being aware of his theories, the three writers were using constructions Bakhtin identified, which have been used before and are, due to the universality of the emotions and images Bakhtin articulates, still being used today. Bakhtin developed and articulated his theories during the brutal and highly-censored time of the Stalin regime and genocide, and his work—like that of O’Connor, Welty, and Porter—pushes against totalitarian ideologies, offering an escape through laughter and difference.

In this thesis, I will argue that Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter utilize the circus in their stories in much the same way as Bakhtin argues Rabelais uses the carnivalesque in his novels, offering a space of temporary liberation from societal taboos and a suspension of hierarchy. In the work of these three authors, their young, female narrators on the cusp of adulthood can confront their sexuality in different, and often comical, ways. The encounter serves a different purpose in each story: in Welty, it offers a subtle critique of eugenics, while the circus for O’Connor offers a space to highlight the universality of religion,

and Porter uses the the circus as a striking example of the failure of the carnival spirit to evoke any change in a patriarchal, terrifyingly white society. Though all three of these authors do address the actual space of the traveling circus, the spirit of the carnivalesque pervades their work through its literary mode, grotesque realism. In this study, I wish to examine how the carnivalesque works for these three authors both inside the sideshow or circus tent and outside of the tent. In each section, I have paired one story that directly addresses the physical space of the circus with one story that has elements of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. By doing so, I hope to prove that these three authors were interested in exploring freakishness both inside and outside of the circus. By creating carnivalesque scenes outside the space of the carnival, Welty, O'Connor, and Porter could push against the idea that disability and othered bodies could or should only exist in the sideshow. By carnivalizing ordinary scenes such as a beach, a doctor's office, and a quaint inn, these three authors explore many of the same ideas of othered bodies and spaces outside of the circus as well. Exploring how Bakhtin's theories function in the work of these authors both inside and outside of the physical space of the circus reveals the ways in which these authors challenge normalcy and ideological control throughout their work.

Welty, O'Connor, and Porter were not the only women authors during this time who used the circus in their fiction as a vehicle for exploring disability and difference. Carson McCullers also used the circus and sideshow extensively in her work as a means of pushing against the ideal of the Southern woman, and her circus imagery has been studied extensively.⁴ In this study, however, I have chosen to focus on three authors whose work has not so closely been linked to

⁴ Leslie Fielder, Rachel Adams, Nancy Bombaci, and Thomas Fahy are four authors who fruitfully examine Carson McCuller's fiction and the circus in book-length studies.

the carnivalesque. In addition, I chose to focus only on white women authors for this study. Because Welty, Porter, and O'Connor were all writing against an ideal of the Southern lady, an exclusively white and female ideal, the circus operated in a different way in their fiction than it would for black authors or male authors at the time. For these white women authors, all of whom—at least in that they were born into white and socially secure families—fit into the parameters of “normal,” the circus served as a means for examining how this normalcy was a construct and a performance.

In the first section, I will argue that Eudora Welty uses the carnivalesque to reveal the performativity of normalcy in both “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” (1937) and “A Memory” (1937). Much of the criticism surrounding Welty’s use of the circus focuses on her story “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden,” where the sideshow plays a large and ambivalent role.⁵ Though “Keela the Outcast Indian Maiden” certainly plays with elements of the carnivalesque and with gender roles, in this paper I am choosing to focus exclusively on stories featuring young, white, female protagonists at the circus. The function of the carnivalesque varies widely in the work of each of these authors, but they are all reacting to and against the expectations put on them as women who are expected to conform to the Southern ideal. In this section, I will trace how Welty writes against both this ideal and an increasing push for eugenics through the character of

⁵ Alfred Appel argues that the story is a “parable of the South’s collective guilt concerning slavery” (146). Mathew Martin sees the story as indicative of Welty’s activism, focusing on the relationship between spectator and spectacle, while Louise Westling asserts that through Keela Welty “has made a complex statement about how the process [of ostracism] works, by identifying this scapegoat with marginal ethnic groups—blacks and red Indians—and with the feminine” (61). Ladislava Khailova extends Westling’s claim, arguing that Keela “policing the category of the Southern white woman” during a time of “growing anxieties about the dissolution of traditional patriarchal and racial structures in the region” (276).

Lily Daw, and also the carousing family at the beach in “A Memory,” stories that employ the carnivalesque to highlight how both normalcy and difference are a performance.

Flannery O’Connor highlights the performance or façade of normalcy throughout her writing as well, perhaps most strikingly in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (1954) and “Revelation” (1964). In the second chapter, I will argue that O’Connor’s work queers the heterosexual ideal of the Southern lady both inside the circus tent, where a hermaphrodite becomes both preacher and the Virgin Mary, and outside of the tent, in a comical waiting room where the anti-Southern belle becomes a powerful prophet and the main character’s moves towards grace coincides with a move towards disfigurement and androgyny. For O’Connor, the chaste religion associated with the protestant ideal of the Southern lady serves as a humorous construction, and real revelation comes only when freaks are first in line to heaven.

While both Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor highlight the power of the carnivalesque to create change, Katherine Anne Porter’s early fiction sees no such possibility. In chapter three, I will focus particularly on the idea of carnivalesque laughter in Porter’s fiction, examining both “The Circus” (1934) and “Holiday” (1960). Porter’s early story “The Circus” becomes almost a parody of the carnivalesque, where the power of the patriarchy erases any possibility of transgression or freedom even during carnival; however, “Holiday,” published much later in her life, serves as a sort of anecdote for this dire prediction. Through these two stories I will trace the evolution of carnivalesque laughter in Porter’s fiction, which turns from terrifyingly cruel to hopeful.

CHAPTER I

THE PERFORMANCE OF NORMALCY IN EUDORA WELTY'S "LILY DAW AND THE THREE LADIES" AND "A MEMORY"

Both an anxiety about and an interest in the circus began for Eudora Welty at an early age. Welty chronicles this duality in her autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings*, where she recalls a memory from her grammar school days when a terminally ill boy in Jackson, Mississippi had the enviable honor of having the circus parade pass his house.⁶ "Just for him the ponderous elephants, the plumes, the spangles, the acrobats, the clowns, the caged lion, the band playing, the steam calliope, the whole thing!" she writes (*Welty* 881). Young Welty's perspective shifts, however, when the boy dies: "He had been tricked, not celebrated, by the parade's brazen marching up his street with the band playing, and we had somehow been tricked by envying him—betrayed into it. It is not for nothing that an ominous feeling often attaches itself to a procession" (*Welty* 881).

⁶ Linda Simon reiterates Welty's involvement with the circus in her book, *The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus*: "Growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1900s, Eudora Welty often saw travelling circus troupes, stopping for one performance in the town's Century Theatre on their way to New Orleans" (215).

Welty's continued fascination with the circus is evident in the many photographs she took of the Mississippi State Fair in 1939.⁷ The black and white photographs show posters advertising such oddities as a headless girl, a cow with a human face, "twisto" the rubber man, and siamese calves, among others.⁸ Welty continued to explore the colorful images of the circus in a large mural she painted of the state fair, which features a ticket taker, livestock, a fortune teller, a fat lady tipping in at more than 500 pounds, as well as a hoard of interested onlookers.⁹ Welty's interest in the circus is not simply that of a reveling onlooker; Welty's many short stories about the circus also exhibit the revelatory nature of the spectacle. The circus served, for Welty, as a fascinating background not only for her photographs, but also for many of her short stories.

In "Petrified Man," a story published originally in *Southern Review* in 1939, three women in the beauty shop discuss the "travelin' freak show" that has been through town (*Welty* 26). Leota, the woman who attended the show, describes "twins in a bottle," "the teeniest men in the universe," and a petrified man whose "joints . . . has been turning to stone" (*Welty* 27). Mrs. Fletcher, Leota's customer in the beauty salon, attempts to justify her own normalcy in response to the destabilizing descriptions of the freaks. In the end, the women discover that the petrified man was, to use a term from Richard Bogdan's landmark work, a "gaffed freak," completely faking his act (Bogden 8). His performance of disability hides a dark secret: Mr. Petrie, the

⁷ One local newspaper, the *Jackson Free Press*, makes note of Welty's predilection for photographs featuring the sideshow and comments on the disappearance of the once-popular acts: "The fair from the good old days also offered now-unfamiliar attractions."

⁸ See photographs 132-35 in *Eudora Welty: Photographs*.

⁹ The precise time period Welty painted the mural is unknown, though it is thought to have originated around 1930 ("Welty Painting Installed at Visitor's Center")

petrified man, is wanted for raping four women in California. In the hilarious and seemingly-innocuous banter of the women in the beauty parlor, Welty explores topics of disability, abortion, eugenics, and the threat of violence and sexuality.

In one of Welty's stories that focuses on the ambivalent nature of the freakshow, "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden," Steve, a former circus barker, takes an acquaintance to see Little Lee Roy, a club footed black man who was presented in the sideshow as the bloodsucking Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden. The men ostensibly visit Lee Roy as a chance for Steve to assuage his guilt at participating in the dehumanization of Roy, though he fails to make amends. Instead, Steve continues to dehumanize Lee Roy throughout the visit, talking only at and about him and never allowing him a voice of his own. However, Welty flips the power narrative at the end of the story. Sitting around the table with his children that night, Lee Roy tells them that "two white mens come heah to de house" and "talks to me about de ole times when I use to be wid de circus" (*Welty* 56). His children, who seem tired of hearing their father's stories, tell him to "hush up" (*Welty* 56). Welty, unlike the men, gives Lee Roy a voice and agency, adding a layer of ambivalence to the story. In this final exchange, Welty reveals the duality of the sideshow: the memories of the men highlight the grave injustices that can take place, while the conversation between Lee Roy and his children demonstrates the amount of freedom, agency, and opportunity the circus could provide those with disabilities.

In both of these stories, Welty reveals her innate awareness of the ability of the circus to destabilize the normativity of the highly structured and gendered space of the South. As Stephen Fuller notes in *Eudora Welty and Surrealism*:

Welty instinctively understood the surreal potential of the carnival atmosphere . . . and her photography documenting the freak shows and sex shows of traveling carnivals and Mardi Gras parades demonstrate a conviction . . . [that] such events have significance because they subvert traditional categories of experience, propriety, and decorum (170).

Welty's keen observation of the carnivalesque nature of the sideshow in "Petrified Man" and "Keela, and the Outcast Indian Maiden" is something she examines at length in one of her earliest short stories "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," which was originally published in 1937 in the literary quarterly *Prairie Schooner* and reprinted the following year in *The Best Short Stories of 1938*. In "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," Welty explores the idea of both normalcy and disability as performance. Lily Daw, a woman who does not live up to the expectations of the Southern society in which she lives, is considered a threatening presence in the small town due to her difference; however, the carnivalesque space of the sideshow offers a temporary freedom from the constraints of a highly regulatory society where Lily Daw's sexuality and body, which are a constant source of anxiety for the women of the town, become normalized. This normalization of her othered body becomes a powerful critique of the eugenics movement, revealing the performativity and relativity of normalcy. By contrasting the highly-structured and hierarchical town of Victory with the carnivalesque space of the traveling sideshow, Welty reveals that both normalcy and disability are largely based on performance; and, through this focus on the impermanence of difference, the story becomes a powerful argument against the eugenics movement.

In “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” three women head out to tell Lily Daw, who they believe to be mentally disabled, that she has been accepted to the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble Minded of Mississippi, only to discover—to their horror—that Lily has met a man at the circus she intends to marry. The women, who see Lily only as a victim, believe the man took advantage of Lily Daw and fled town. They attempt to bribe Lily with new items for her hope chest, if she will agree to go to Ellisville. However, once they have successfully deposited Lily on the train bound for the institution the man shows up. Lily is dragged unwillingly off of the train and a wedding quickly planned, her hope chest ominously still on the train bound for Ellisville.

The highly separated, gendered nature of the fictional town of Victory is set up from the very beginning of the story. By choosing the socially-significant word “ladies,” Welty defines parameters of behavior for the women. “Ladies” is a term “used as the female counterpart of gentleman and regarded as more polite or genteel than woman; in some contexts, however, this usage may be considered sexist or patronizing” (OED “lady” 5 a.). By labeling the three matriarchs of the town—Mrs. Watts, a widow; Mrs. Carson, a preacher’s wife; and Aimee Slocum, an excitable mailwoman—as “ladies,” Welty sets up a gendered and tightly socially controlled town.

The matriarch’s interest in controlling and regulating the behavior and sexuality of their small town reflects the sexual repression and control of the South during the time Welty wrote the story. Lillian Smith, writing almost a decade after the publication of *A Curtain of Green*, but concerned with the pre-1960s South, recounts the austere rules of Southern white womanhood: “Sex was pushed out through the back door as a shameful thing never to be mentioned . . . Out

through the back door went the unpleasant and unmentionable (141). Smith describes the puritanical nature of the South, where families strove to live a “‘normal’ life” and society was divided strictly along gender lines (141). Though the book is often referenced as an extraordinary and influential critique of the psychological and moral cost of segregation, the memoir also examines the “intricate system of taboos that undergirded Southern society,” including sin and sex, two ideas Smith argues were conflated in Southern society (27). Smith begins the book discussing the prohibited nature of the topics in Southern households:

Neither the negro nor sex was often discussed at length in our home . . . I do not remember how or when, but by the time I had learned that God is love, that Jesus is His Son and came to give us more abundant life, that all men are brothers with a common Father, I also knew that I was better than a Negro, that all black folks have their place and must be kept in it, that sex has its place and must be kept in it, that a terrifying disaster would befall the South if ever I treated a Negro as my social equal and as terrifying a disaster would befall my family if ever I were to have a baby outside of marriage (27-8).

Smith contends throughout the book that the unmentionability of sexuality was an integral part of the concept of Sacred Womanhood embraced by the South, in which women were expected to maintain a “sexual blankness” (137, 140). The three “ladies” constantly reinforce their own “sexual blankness” throughout the story. Even an oblique reference to Lily’s “maturity” is enough to make Mrs Carson look “wildly.” The women continue to maintain this horror of sexuality throughout the story, “clutching one another” and fanning themselves whenever the

topic is brought up (*Welty* 6). For the women, maintaining their own sexual blankness and that of Lily Daw is vitally important for order and propriety in the town.

Throughout the story, the three matriarchs of the town seek to both exoticize Lily Daw and highlight her sexuality, making her into a performer of disability and difference. As Bogdan writes, circus showmen sometimes presented a sideshow act in the “exotic mode,” where the exhibit was constructed in such a way “so as to appeal to people’s interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic” (105). In these acts, then, men and women would be dressed “in a style compatible with the story” and would act accordingly. By so othering the sideshow actors in this way, the audience was reassured of their own normalcy: “The freak represented what the audience was not—the Other, someone excluded from mainstream society for being different” (Fahy 2). As in this dynamic, Lily Daw is presented in an exoticized and bestialized way throughout the story. As the women walk up she begins sucking on a zinnia “like a jay bird” (*Welty* 8). Mrs Watts worries that she will wear only a petticoat at the institution, looking “like a Fiji” (*Welty* 11). Her body also reflects difference and violence in a “wavy scar on her throat” visible “if you knew it was there” (*Welty* 8). The women also exoticize Lily by constantly referring to the threat of her perceived sexual promiscuity and the ensuing possibility of a pregnancy:

“The point is, what did she do after the show?” asked Mrs Watts practically. “Lily has gotten so she is very mature for her age.”

“Oh, Etta!” protested Mrs Carson, looking at her wildly for a moment (*Welty* 6)

Though Lily Daw is exoticized in the town, the women seek to normalize her through dress and religion, buying her underwear to wear and sending her to church, having her “baptized as a Baptist,” buying her clothes and doing her hair (*Welty* 7).

Throughout the story, Lily’s inability to fit into the tightly controlled society in which she lives is coded in her language and dress. When the women walk up to her house, she is dressed in nothing but underwear: “There she sat, wearing a petticoat for a dress, one of the things Mrs Carson kept after her about” (*Welty* 8). Her sexuality is also coded through her hair, which “streamed freely down from under a new hat” (*Welty* 8). The women also assume that Lily is interested in sex, offering a “pink crêpe de chine brassière with adjustable straps” in a last ditch effort to persuade her to go to the institution (*Welty* 11). Any perceived or actualized sexual activity outside of marriage or the norms of the era could be disastrous, particularly for poor women like Lily Daw and for women of color. Sexual activity could be considered a cause for forced sterilization, as exhibited by the language of many eugenics laws. North Carolina’s eugenics program targeted individuals seen as “delinquent” or “unwholesome,” two words which include sexually active women (“Unwanted Sterilizations”). A purposeful lack of systematic safeguards guaranteed that the process worked in a similar way in Mississippi. Unlike most states, “Mississippi . . . showed little faith in medical judgments, instead relying on a jury to determine the necessity of commitment” (“A Far Greater Menace” 33). A medical doctor was not required to verify mental deficiency in the state; instead, the majority of patients never saw a physician before being admitted and many did not leave without first being sterilized (Kaelber).

Perceived sexual promiscuity was not the only or the most common reason for sterilization. Beginning in the early 20th century, when scientifically based intelligence testing

gave doctors the opportunity to categorize people according to IQ, institutionalizing and sterilizing individuals labeled “feeble-minded” was also gaining momentum in the South (“The Public Face of Southern Institutions” 31). This separation from society was due, in part, to a growing anxiety about the hereditary nature of intelligence. For proponents of eugenics, the practice was a way to ensure that only the best, brightest, and most capable citizens passed on their genes: “National eugenic discourse was concerned with fortifying Caucasian racial purity, limiting the ills perpetuated by the ‘degenerate and feeble-minded,’ and preventing ‘dysgenic’ marriages” (Arant 70). There was a class-based discrimination to the practice as well as race and intelligence-based anxieties: “Most women labeled as feebleminded in the early twentieth century struggled against class prejudices as well as sexual stereotypes,” writes Noll, noting that scientists in the male-dominated field often infantilized women and demonized the lower classes (“A Far Greater Menace” 34). The underlying and opposite term to the then often-used and rarely-defined phrase “feeble-minded,” is the idea of “normality,” “a concept whose origins Lennard Davis has convincingly traced to the development of statistical science in the nineteenth century” (Adams 9).

The eugenics movement began in England with the work of Francis Galton who, inspired by his cousin Charles Darwin, coined the term and sought to “replace traditional religious narratives of creation and fallen humanity with secular conceptions of evolutionary progress” (Arant 70). Galton differentiated between “positive eugenics,” which encouraged marriages between “socially ascendant men and women” and “negative eugenics,” which “focused on preventing marriages between those deemed unfit” (Arant 70). Though the eugenics movement had its beginnings an ocean away, the repercussions of the movement resounded close to Welty’s

native Jackson, Mississippi. Less than 100 miles away from her home in the suburbs, the Mississippi School and Colony for the Feebleminded in Ellisville, Mississippi, was actively involved in the eugenics movement. H.H. Ramsey, superintendent of the school, wrote in 1929 that the average disabled woman acts as both victim and as threat: “With her weak power of inhibition, with a developed body and retarded mind, she readily falls victim to designing persons, and aside from her own sad plight becomes a menace to the morals and health of the community” (qtd. in Arant 73). The unvoiced insinuation behind Ramsey’s interest in the “morals and health of the community” is a fear that the feeble-minded woman will be sexually active, and thus run the risk of perpetuating her mental disability through procreation.

This spectre of eugenics pervades “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies.” The three women from the town continue to express anxiety not only about Lily’s presumed predilection for sexual promiscuity throughout the story, but more importantly about the possibility of a pregnancy. For the women, the only possible solution to the “problem” of Lily’s sexuality is to remove her from the town: “‘We’ve really just got to get her there—now!’ screamed Aimee Slocum all at once. ‘Suppose—! She can’t stay here!’” (*Welty* 11). Here, the women’s concerns are hidden in what they choose to not say, rather than what they do say. Aimee Slocum’s em-dash reveals an anxiety about an unfit pregnancy, uncontrolled sexuality, and the possibility of dysgenic procreation in their small town. For the women intent on controlling the “normalcy” of the town, a pregnancy that would perpetuate the “unfit” is the worst possibility. Through the power of absence, *Welty* is able to discuss topics that might be deemed unfit for a woman otherwise: “From *Welty* we learn how Southern women discuss the central taboo topics of female sexuality and of female powerlessness in the face of aggressive male sexuality” (Johnston 281). For the three women,

institutionalization is the only way to control Lily's behavior and preserve the integrity of the town. "The ladies of Victory move to institutionalize Lily...because of Lily's sexual maturation, and the concerns they articulate could be straight from the pen of eugenicist H.H. Ramsey" (Arant 74). Susan Cahn reiterates this point: "What drives the story is not Lily's own desires but the desires of her community to put her safely away . . . before her budding sexual interest brings disrepute or chaos to the town" (*Welty* 157). The women continue their monitoring of Lily's sexuality, even as Lily sits on the train bound for Ellisville. "'Don't—look,' said Mrs. Carson very distinctly, as if, out of all she had ever spoken, she would impress these two solemn words upon Lily's soft little brain" (*Welty* 13). Here, Welty again uses an em dash to hide Mrs. Carson's anxiety about sexuality, particularly sexuality which would result in "dysgenic" breeding (Larson qtd. in Arant 70). Mrs. Carson seeks to control Lily's actions, even as she is on her way to leave the women's small town. In "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," Welty creates a highly regulatory female environment, where only the eugenically "fit" women have the right to speak, and the "feeble-minded" Lily is left to abide by their rules.

Though the sideshow is only mentioned in hearsay, it functions as a space where Bakhtinian freedom from hierarchy and expectation can flourish apart from the stifling expectations of the women. The incident is revealed in the opening paragraphs of the story: "'Last night at the tent show—' said another [woman], and then popped her hand over her mouth" (*Welty* 5). The woman stops, embarrassed to admit she was there as well, though Mrs. Carson, the preacher's wife, says that she knows "there are such things in the world" (*Welty* 5). Though few details are given about exactly what they saw in the tent show, the euphemisms the two ladies share imply that it was a freak show. As in Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, this tent

show in the traveling circus in Victory offers a time where “life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (*Welty* 7). As a young, female, othered body, Lily Daw is subject to the strict hierarchical order of the town. However, at the tent show, she finds, in Bakhtin’s words, “temporary liberation from the prevailing truths and from the established order” and “suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (*Welty* 10). In “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” the carnivalesque space of the sideshow offers a break in the highly gendered and regulated small Southern town. Outside the prohibitive environment of the town and the controlling force of the three ladies, Lily Daw is no longer the abnormal outcast or threatening presence the women deem her otherwise. Instead, in the freedom of the tent, Lily finally achieves what Mrs. Watts, Mrs. Carson, and Aimee Slocum have been trying so hard to instill in her: she is “so nice” and “a perfect *lady*” who never taking her eyes from the xylophone, the nameless woman reports (*Welty* 6, emphasis added). The sideshow also offers Lily Daw a place to experience a relationship, albeit a very brief relationship, during a time period in which “marriage involving one partner with a mental disability was a eugenic worst-case scenario” (Arant 70). In the carnivalesque freedom of the sideshow, Lily Daw’s sexuality and body, which are a constant source of anxiety for the women of the town, become normalized. This normalization of her othered body becomes a powerful critique of the eugenics movement, in a story revealing the performativity and relativity of normalcy. The sideshow creates “radical ambiguity” and “an emptying of certainty” that the three women, with their strict views of propriety and normalcy, so espouse (Stout 115). By contrasting this space of radical ambiguity with the tightly controlled space of Victory while simultaneously highlighting the performance

that pervades both places, Welty playfully argues against the idea of the “normal” that necessitates the eugenics movement and devalues difference.

Lily Daw’s ability to achieve the status of “a perfect lady” within the space of the circus, unmask the relativity of normalcy. In this scene, “normalcy” becomes a performance just like the freak show is a performance. Krystyna Pomorska notes that one of the essential aspects of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque is “the ‘unmasking’ and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary rank” (x). In “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” the sideshow serves as a space where the truth of the women’s ideal, standardized world is revealed to be as much about performance as the carnival.

Descriptions of the xylophone player, Lily’s love interest, also reveal the performance of normalcy. The man merits little discussion when he is first introduced, noted within the carnivalesque freedom of the tent show, but when he is seen outside of this space his defects or “oddities” are immediately chronicled: “He wore a cap and was short and seemed to have on perfume, if such a thing could be” (13). Here, Welty again hints at an othered sexuality, feminizing the man with both scent and stature: “Mercy! He’s small, isn’t he?” Mrs. Carson asks (14). Though his size was never mentioned in the space of suspended hierarchy at the circus, on the train platform his differences are immediately noted. The man is, however, accepted by the women as an appropriate match for Lily, though she “hung her head” when he kissed her (*Welty* 15).

Arguing for the necessity of institutionalizing and sterilizing women, Superintendent C. Banks McNairy of North Carolina’s Caswell Training School for the Feeble-Minded, wrote in a report for the school that “humanitarianism demands their protection, care, and training. Society

and good citizenship demand their segregation and asexualization” (“Far Greater Menace” 31). The women in “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” are deeply committed to this way of controlling social and moral propriety, after internalizing what they consider to be the “acceptable” gender role norms, and the eugenics movement offers the women a chance to impose the “normal” bodies they so highly value through biological control. Normalcy, in this story, becomes as much about performance as the shows in the carnival tents. Only people the women deem “normal” have a voice.

Conversely, the freak show offers a space for those people the women view as “othered” to exist in a world of relative freedom. Adams addresses the portrayal of sideshows in art and literature, where the practice fulfills an important role: “What these representations share is a willingness to grapple with the complex dynamics of identification and disavowal set in motion by confrontations with the extraordinary figures exhibited on the sideshow platform” (*Welty* 4). In “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” the freak show talks back to an idea of what is “fit” or “normal,” presenting a view of humanity that is “abnormal,” “unusual,” and “freakish.” However, within the context of the circus, even those who are considered abnormal—Lily Daw and the unnamed xylophone player—become normal. By focusing on the relationship between the women and Lily Daw, and playfully showing the women’s attempt to dress and control Lily Daw to make her into a lady, Welty reveals the performativity of normalcy. Just as Bogden theorizes about the freakshow, normalcy in the story becomes more about the relationship between performer and spectator than a quantifiable difference. The freak show gives a voice to those who are outside of the norms the women deem acceptable, and in doing so explores how the labels of both “freaks” and “ladies” is nothing more than performance.

“Freakishness abides at the heart of the normal,” writes Adams, an idea that Welty demonstrates with characteristic hilarity in the highly structured space of Victory. Though the women in Victory are preoccupied with promoting “normalcy,” the three ladies “demonstrate dangers inherent in claiming moral intelligence since their confidence in their own ethical superiority functions as justification of their morally compromised treatment of the mentally disabled Lily Daw” (Arant 72). Welty deftly demonstrates that meeting the eugenic ideal of being “fit” is not what gives you worth. Instead, in the story, normalcy is nothing more than a performance and each person, whether “freak” “feeble-minded” or “normal,” becomes an actor on their respective stages. In Welty’s playful narrative, then, normalcy becomes nothing more than a performance, which powerfully undercuts the very concept and thus the eugenics movement as a whole.

As in “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” where the tent show is only mentioned in a conversation—a retrospective visit related through hearsay that nevertheless causes a flurry of anxiety—Welty’s camera lens is rarely pointed directly at the circus. Instead, she chooses to photograph the colorful and bizarre sideshow advertisements or the faces of circus-goers. One of Welty’s most famous photographs that exemplifies this artistic decision features three elementary-aged boys looking presumably on a sideshow act, hands on hips with faces simultaneously bemused and disgusted (*Eudora Welty Photographs* 139). In this photo the young boys are voyeurs, gazing at a scene they seem to not fully understand.

Only once in her collection of state fair pictures does Welty photograph the actual space of the sideshow. In this picture, the camera is focused on an open, nearly empty tent, a large question mark propped up against the door and SEX MAD blazoned across the top. In the

bottom right corner of the shot is a sign explaining the curiosity found within the tent's built-up facade: "Male AND Female, Life in the Nude" reads the lean-to poster. The picture is out of character for Welty, when viewed within the context of her other photographs and short stories, depicting the sideshow directly rather than through its representation or discussion. Here, on display, is the otherness and sexuality that the ladies from Victory are so reticent to voice. However, the promise of promiscuity heralded by the tent's advertisements is unfulfilled. Rather than a risqué performance, the photograph presents a nearly empty tent, with a handful of people milling aimlessly. Welty, behind the camera, is an outside observer of this sideshow act—presumably, from the advertisements, a hermaphrodite. Here, Welty puts the spectators in the center of the frame, making those watching the act become the performers.

Welty uses signifiers of the carnivalesque such as sensuous bodies and carnival laughter to show how transgressive females can upend the performance of normalcy outside the physical space of the circus as well as inside the circus. Welty explores this possibility in the central story of the same collection, "A Memory." The story, which tells of a daydreaming adolescent girl's attempt to reconstruct the memory of her first love on a very noisy beach, is concerned with remembrance, change, and reflection: it is a memory within a memory, the attempt of the mature narrator to remember how she once remembered her first love.

"A Memory" appeared in the *Southern Review* in 1937, one of Welty's first to be published in a literary magazine, and was later collected in *A Curtain of Green* in 1941. In her introduction, Katherine Anne Porter singles out "A Memory" as "one of the best" of the collection, noting especially the narrator's proclivity for using her hands to frame the world as "the gesture of one born to select, to arrange, to bring apparently disparate elements into

harmony within deliberately fixed boundaries” (16). Though criticism has been wide ranging, many critics focus on the autobiographical nature of the story. Courtney Bailey Parker argues that the story criticizes the subjectivity of artists and questions traditional art objects, while also complicating the form of the literary epiphany as constructed by Welty’s contemporaries James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Stephen Fuller focuses on the construction of the story, arguing that “A Memory” is ultimately concerned with the interconnected narratives that constitute a living memory. Patricia Yaeger, in her landmark book on Southern women’s writing *Dirt and Desire*, argues that “although nothing happens, a little girl’s secure Southern world comes crashing down around her” (117). For Yaeger, the image of the gargantuan woman on the beach “tears at the social fabric” of the young girl’s world and “tries to leave it in shreds” (121). Yaeger argues that the memory shapes the artistic character of the child, a young version of Welty herself, and “the results are the highly rebellious and political stories in *A Curtain of Green*” (117).

Just as Yaeger focuses on the body of the gargantuan woman as a political tool to shatter the young narrator’s “feminine obsession with the romance ethos,” I also wish to focus in this section on the ways in which “A Memory” is—just as in “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies”—concerned with the performance of normalcy, the performance of the freakish, and the freeing power of the carnivalesque. Though “A Memory” takes place outside of the space of the circus, on a warm summer day at the beach, Welty constructs a carnivalesque atmosphere in the scene through degradation of the body and the bawdy laughter of the family. In “A Memory,” Welty uses the gargantuan woman and her family to upend ideas of propriety or normalcy and demonstrate, for her young narrator, how the stifling conventionality to which she clings is nothing more than an illusion or performance.

The power of the carnivalesque scene of the gargantuan family at the beach is due, in part, to its stark contrast with the highly controlled, regulated, and “normalized” space of the rest of the narrator’s life. From the opening of the story, Welty establishes the narrow lens through which the narrator views the world. She quite literally uses her hands to narrow her scope of vision, making “small frames with my fingers” to look out at everything, delineating “who’s in and who’s out, who’s valuable and who’s not” (*Welty* 92, *Yaeger* 132). Anything that does not adhere to her idea of “normal” is terrifying for the young girl, as reflected on by the framing narrative of her older self: “When a person, or a happening, seemed to me not in keeping with my opinion, or even my hope or expectation, I was terrified by a vision of abandonment and wildness which tore my heart with a kind of sorrow” (*Welty* 92).

The young narrator finds even the threat of the abnormal terrifying, particularly when it could be associated with her own world. Though she is hopelessly in love with her classmate, an unnamed boy she worships from afar, her love is tinged with the fear of what she does not know and cannot categorize about this boy. Since she does not know the boy or—more importantly for her interest in maintaining strict separation of social classes—his family, she lives with a “constant uneasiness” that his house might “be slovenly and unpainted” or that his parents might be “shabby,” dishonest,” “crippled” or “dead” (*Welty* 94). According to this older, reflective version of the narrator, any deviance from her idea of normalcy was threatening: “I felt a necessity for absolute conformity to my ideas in any happening I witnessed” (93). Not only does she dread difference, “fearing the untoward would happen,” but she also rejoices in monotony: the “dreariness and regularity of the school day were a protection for me” (*Welty* 93). Here, the narrator tellingly reveals her thought process and concern with normalcy: for her, as was the

eugenic thought process of the time, disability, just as much as poverty, were signs of being unfit. For the narrator, the idea that her love interest could exist outside her idea of what was “normal” was a terrifying source of constant anxiety.

The older, framing narrator highlights one ordinary experience that becomes terrifying for her younger self, an episode where both her sexuality and her vision of normalcy and difference is suddenly threatened. The event that most threatens her idea of the normal occurs one day at school where, sitting in class, the boy whom she idolizes has a nosebleed. This seemingly-insignificant event is seared into her memory:

I remember with exact clarity the day in Latin class when the boy I loved (whom I watched constantly) bent suddenly over and brought his handkerchief to his face. I saw red—vermilion—blood flow over the handkerchief and his square-shaped hand; his nose had begun to bleed . . . But this small happening which had closed in upon my friend was a tremendous shock to me; it was unforeseen, but at the same time dreaded; I recognized it (*Welty* 93).

In speaking of recognizing the blood, the narrator makes an oblique reference to her own menstruation. In this scene, the narrator’s view of the difference between men and women is blurred, and she “is terrified at this splitting open of the male body, afraid of its dirtiness, its democratizing blood” (Yaeger 133). Older girls in the classroom react differently, they “feel the incongruity of this reversal and laugh,” but the young narrator finds it so startling she faints (Yaeger 133). However, this very act restores the “normalcy,” the hierarchy to the situation. The narrator becomes the stereotypical fainting heroine, restoring order to the situation that resolves the threat of sameness and identification with her romantic other.

It is in this highly regulatory environment that the young narrator constructs for herself—an environment where blood is threatening and the mere possibility of anything untoward existing a lurking danger—that the carnivalesque beach scene indelibly transforms her vision of the world. The fat family are characterized in what Bakhtin would term “grotesque realism,” the literary equivalent of the carnival. The scene, though it is not a public “folk spectacle,” operates in many of the same ways and accomplishes the same goals. The grotesque is “the expression in literature of the carnival spirit,” incorporating the primary values of “incompleteness, becoming, ambiguity, indefinability, noncanonicalism—indeed, all that jolts us out of our normal expectations and epistemological complacency” (Clark and Holquist 312). The beach family in Welty’s story “A Memory” embodies the carnivalesque spirit through their representation of the universal, deeply positive view of the body and their carnivalesque laughter, ultimately challenging the tightly held values of normalcy to which the narrator clings, and offering a drastically different vision of a messy, uncontrollable world.

In grotesque realism, the body becomes a significant site of renewal and change. From their very introduction, the family is described in bodily terms. Their bathing suits “did not hide either the energy or the fatigue of their bodies, but showed it exactly” (*Welty* 95). They are “greatly overgrown,” with bodies that “protruded” and cheeks that “balloon,” and people lying in “leglike confusion” (*Welty* 95). The gargantuan woman is described in not just bodily, but earthly terms. Here, as Bakhtin notes, grotesque realism “degrades, brings down to earth, and turns the subject into flesh” (20). The romantic relationship between the couple on the beach, a sort of grotesque mirror of the romance the narrator is attempting to construct in her head, lowers the narrator’s romantic notions of love to grotesque, bodily, earth-centered imagery. The two lie

in “leglike confusion” and the gargantuan woman is “unnaturally white and fatly aware,” with fat “hung upon her upper arms like an arrested earthslide on a hill” while her “breasts hung heavy and widening like pears in her bathing suit” and her legs are “shadowed bulwarks” (*Welly* 95). As Bakhtin notes about Rabelais’ use of the bodily in his work, the body here “becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (19). The family encapsulates the aspects of grotesque realism that are so important for Bakhtin, being described in terms that represent “fertility, growth and a brimming-over abundance” (Bakhtin 19).

However, the young narrator does not recognize the deeply positive aspects of the family who serve for the daydreaming young girl as a vehicle of degradation: they disrupt her tightly held ideas of romance, lowering “all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract . . . to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 19-20). Where the narrator wishes to find stability and normalcy, the images of the bathers show instead how “nothing is completed, calm or stable” (Bakhtin 26). Instead, life is the “epitome of incompleteness” (Bakhtin 26).

The carnivalesque atmosphere of the beach scene is created also through the laughter of the family. Not only does the fat family at the beach defy the young narrator’s ideals of love through their very physical bodies, their laughter also serves to degrade her image of a sterile romance. From the beginning of their scene, the family is described in terms fitting a folk spectacle: they are “brown,” “roughened,” and “common,” enjoying everything with “a hilarity which astonished my heart” (94). Though the narrator is shocked by the family’s “foolish intent to insult each other,” the family’s insults fall into the Bakhtinian category of “abusive language”

a common carnivalesque mode which contributes “to the creation of the free carnivalesque atmosphere” (17).

These ambivalent insults are not the only thing the family does that precipitates laughter. The young narrator hears “a slow, repetitious sound I had been hearing for a long time unconsciously, I identified as a continuous laugh which came through the motionless open pouted mouth of the woman” (95). In one particularly carnivalesque scene among the family, the man pours sand into the bathing suit of the gargantuan woman. The laughter among the family becomes “universal,” the woman “laughed” as the sand poured “down inside her bathing suit between her bulbous descending breasts” (96). Here, as in the spectacle of the carnival, the grotesque realism leads to a universal laughter, making “them all laugh” (96). The little boys “pointed and howled” and the man “smiled, the way panting dogs seem to be smiling” (96). He even attempts to include the narrator in their ambivalent laughter: “He even looked at me, included me” (96).

Here, the family’s laughter becomes “a festive laughter” that pervades the scene. It is “not an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic event’” but it becomes instead “the laughter of all the people” (Bakhtin 11). The family’s laughter “is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity” (11). The laughter of the family is also the ambivalent laughter of the carnival, a laughter that is both “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revivies” (12). For the young narrator, the carnival laughter of the family completely changes her vision of the world. Though she attempts to reconcile her love with what she has just experienced, the family with their carnival laughter has changed her vision

completely. No longer is she able to square the world as she once was. Though she once again squares her vision with her hands, the memory is changed. Instead, she imagines walking into the classroom where she would “watch him with this hour on the beach accompanying my recovered dream and added to my love” (98).

In “A Memory,” Welty uses both grotesque realism and carnival laughter to question the tightly held ideas of normalcy and propriety for her young narrator. In the story, the fat, freakish bodies and the raucous laughter of the family challenge the ideas of propriety and decorum so tightly held by the young girl and throw into stark relief the performance of normalcy the girl values. She seems only to halfway come to this realization in the moment, attempting instead to “withdraw to my most inner dream, that of touching the wrist of the boy I loved on the stair” (97). However, following the family’s carnivalesque performance, “the memory itself did not come to me” because “the story of my love, the long narrative of the incident on the stairs, had vanished” (97). Her certainty is now replaced with uncertainty; this shift is reflected in the topography of the beach, which the family “changed . . . like the ravages of a storm” (97). The older, framing narrator of the story reveals just how deeply the carnival laughter of the family altered her vision of the love and the future: “The truth is that never since has any passion I have felt remained so hopelessly unexpressed within me or appeared so grotesquely altered in the outward world” (93). As Yaeger notes, “A Memory” begins “a new era in one writer’s consciousness” and is “a suggestive description of that moment in Welty’s own life when the feminine obsession with the romance ethos shatters, to be replaced with a passion for the ordinary power plays of Southern life” (138). In “A Memory,” Welty continues the work of examining the construction of normalcy and difference begun in the space of the circus in “Lily

Daw and the Three Ladies.” In both stories, Welty uses othered bodies to examine how the idea of “normal” is constructed and performed in a world where difference is threatening.

CHAPTER II

THE FREAKISHNESS OF HETEROSEXUALITY IN “A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY GHOST” AND “REVELATION”

In “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” and “A Memory,” normalcy, particularly as it relates to female sexuality, is tightly regulated in the space of the small towns of the young protagonists, and the carnival and its literary equivalent, grotesque realism, disrupts and challenges these expectations. Though Flannery O’Connor’s characters are less concerned with maintaining the status quo, questions of morality and sexuality also pervade her stories, particularly her stories concerned with gender and sexuality. For O’Connor, the circus becomes a way of renewing and reclaiming the sacred by first subjecting it to irony.

O’Connor does not chronicle her experience with the carnival in her letters and personal writing to the extent that Welty does, but she most certainly would have attended the circus as a child in Georgia in the early 20th century.¹⁰ Though she does not discuss the circus in her autobiographical pieces, her “deliberate choice of deformed and grotesque characters” reveals an interest in images of the sideshow (Scott and Streight 123). O’Connor herself famously defended her choice of freakish characters:

¹⁰ As Renoff discusses, the railroad circus “literally shut the town down” in O’Connor’s home state of Georgia when she was a child (1)

Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological (*Mystery and Manners* 44).

For O'Connor, Southern writing is marked by a theological conception of a fallen man, and her characters reflect a "Christ haunted" landscape (*Mystery and Manners* 44). O'Connor doesn't shy away from the term "freak," because for her, the characters in her fiction are "freaks," a reflection of a fallen, sinful humanity. Though most of O'Connor's characters are characterized by their most absurd qualities, they are not "any more freakish than ordinary fallen man usually is" (*Mystery and Manners* 43). O'Connor's protagonists often seem more fit for a sideshow than the outside world: Manley Pointer, a traveling Bible salesman and con artist in "Good Country People," has a fetish for women's prosthesis which he gets from the "big spectacted" and one-legged Hulga (CW 275). Mr. Paradise, a religious skeptic in "The River," has "cancer over his ear" and is "like a giant pig" or "some ancient water monster" (CW 174). General Sash, a 104-year-old former general in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," has "white hair that reached to his shoulders behind," no teeth, and feet "which hung down now shriveled at the very end of him" (CW 135). Even though "freaks" abound in the fiction of O'Connor, only twice does she deal explicitly with a sideshow performer.

In "Parker's Back," O.E. Parker goes to a side show as a young boy and sees a man "tattooed from head to foot" (CW 662). Overcome with wonder, Parker spends his young adult life slowly covering his own body with tattoos, save his back, which Parker neglects because "he

had no desire for one anywhere he could not readily see himself” (CW 663). Parker, who has no use for religion to the grave disappointment of his fundamentalist wife Sarah Ruth, is nearly killed when the tractor he was riding flips and bursts into flames. Following this Moses-like burning bush experience, Parker goes into town and gets the Byzantine Christ tattooed on his whole back, filling in the last space on his body and completing his metamorphosis into the sideshow performer that inspired him. Sure his wife will be pleased, he goes home to show her. However, the image is idolatrous to Sarah Ruth, who beats him with a broom until “large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ” (CW 674). The story ends with O.E.—now Obadiah Elihue, “God of Him”—leaning against a tree, “crying like a baby” (CW 675). By becoming the tattooed freak, then, Obadiah Elihue becomes one with God.

“A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” written almost a decade earlier, addresses many of the same themes as “Parker’s Back.” In this story as well, the sideshow performer acts as a powerful impetus moving the narrator towards God. Here, too, a move towards the freakish is a move towards a more realized and complete conversion experience. “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is O’Connor’s only other story to deal with the sideshow and, interestingly, also one of her only short stories to deal openly with sex.

“A Temple of the Holy Ghost” was first published in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1954 and included in the 1955 short story collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Though the collection as a whole received glowing reviews, “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” was initially largely ignored. Orville Prescott, writing for *The New York Times*, noted that “of the ten stories, two are mediocre” (*Contemporary Reviews* 37). Though Prescott never specifies the stories with which he is unimpressed, “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is notably left out of the review. Ben Griffith,

Jr., writing for the *Savannah Morning News*, leaves no such ambiguity. O'Connor's stories have "great narrative fiber," he writes, with two exceptions: "A Stroke of Good Fortune" and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (34). Of the 38 reviews of the collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find* in *Flannery O'Connor: The Contemporary Reviews*, only two mention the story at all. As late as 1962, O'Connor wrote to Betty Hester puzzling over the lack of critical acclaim the story received: "Nobody notices it. It is never anthologized, never commented upon" (*Habit of Being* 487). While literary critics have not remained as silent about the short story as contemporary reviewers, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" remains relatively neglected, compared to the extensive criticism available on O'Connor's limited body of work.

The story is told from the third-person point of view of an unnamed twelve-year-old girl, about a weekend with her slightly-older second cousins, Joanne and Susan. The girls, who are visiting from their Catholic convent school, are interested primarily in boys and endlessly amused by calling themselves Temple One and Temple Two, an inside joke from a recent school lecture by the nuns about how their bodies are vessels of God. The protagonist finds this thrilling, but the girls find it hilarious (CW 238). The girls go to the fair with two neighbor boys, where they see a hermaphrodite in a sideshow act, an experience they later describe to their younger cousin. The narrator and her mother drive the girls back to school, where they all participate in mass before driving home, the young narrator changes after intimately experiencing the presence of God.

As with many of her stories, O'Connor's letters provide insight into her personal objectives for the narrative. In a 1955 letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor writes that the story was one about the mysteries of chastity: "Purity strikes me as the most mysterious of the virtues and

the more I think about it the less I know about it. ‘A Temple of the Holy Ghost’ all revolves around what is purity” (HB 117). O’Connor later clarifies her position: “As near as I get to saying what purity is in this story is saying that it is an acceptance of what God wills for us, an acceptance of individual circumstances” (HB 124).

Due no doubt to O’Connor’s own published views on the story, the primary lens through which most critics view “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” is that of a young girl’s spiritual awakening. In his biography of O’Connor, Brad Gooch writes that the narrator discovers “her identity in the body of Christ, held up at a Benediction service in a convent chapel” (250). In this story, then, “sexuality [is] sublimated into religious expression” (Gooch 250). Denise Askin traces the similarities between the unnamed protagonist and O’Connor, arguing that O’Connor is endorsing herself as a prophetic artist, whose vocation is predicated on a connection between the comic and the holy, between the “carnival and the temple” (557). James W. Horton focuses on the subject/object relationships that make up the story, arguing that the hermaphrodite is the one character who acts as both subject and object, and that these relationships are mirrors of a relationship with God.

However, though religion plays a large role in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the story is a work unique in the O’Connor canon in that it is concerned with burgeoning sexuality and othered sexuality, an element that is central to the story. As Harold Bloom writes in his introduction to *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Flannery O’Connor*, O’Connor’s stories live apart from the author’s intent. Thus, according to Bloom, applying a different (or secular) reading to O’Connor’s stories—even in the face of a stated meaning from the author in a letter or

lecture—does not devalue O’Connor’s work. Instead, viewing the stories as separate from her own criticism enhances the power of the narrative:

To find something of a gap between O’Connor as lay theologian and O’Connor as a storyteller verging on greatness may or may not be accurate but in any case intends to undervalue neither the belief nor the fiction. I suspect, though, that the fiction’s implicit theology is very different from what O’Connor thought it to be, a difference that actually enhances the power of the novels and the stories” (4).

O’Connor’s work, a powerful example of a religious writer, should not be taken simply as didactic theology. Instead, her work must be viewed in its complexity. Horton notes that, “it is important to remember that the hermaphrodite is not just another O’Connor freak, but a *sexual* freak” (35, emphasis in the original). O’Connor’s use of an intersex performer at the sideshow as the Christ-figure, or the impetus for the narrator’s epiphany, is a significant choice that disrupts and de-values the heteronormative sexuality criticized elsewhere in the story. The story is not just about a spiritual awakening, as is often the focus of criticism; more notably given the lack of sex in other O’Connor stories, the story is also one of queering heterosexuality, a move made possible by the carnivalesque freedom of the visiting sideshow. In “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the carnivalesque sideshow becomes the impetus for a powerful reversal, where the heteronormative sexuality of the two girls becomes the freakish, while the othered sexuality of the intersex performer at the fair becomes imbued with spirituality and significance.

The circus around which “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” centers is precisely the “folk spectacle” Bakhtin examines in the fiction of Rabelais, a carnival marked by an “obvious sensuous character and . . . strong element of play” that brings about “change, renewal,

rejuvenation, and redemption” (Bakhtin 7, Rath 9). However, it is not the only connection between the two authors. Bakhtin’s description of the power of Rabelain images could easily be said about O’Connor’s work:

Rabelais’ images have a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook (3)

Much like O’Connor’s stories, “many of his images remain an enigma” (Bakhtin 3). Though O’Connor never wrote about Bakhtin in her letters or mentioned going to the carnival, she seems innately aware of the freedom such events precipitated. In “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the ritual spectacle of the sideshow is “sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials” of the visit to the school chapel later in the story (Bakhtin 5). Indeed, the sideshow act “built a second world and a second life outside officialdom” where religion is able to be reconsidered and reconceptualized (Bakhtin 6). In the space of the freak show, the hermaphrodite invokes the “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (Bakhtin 9). In “Temple of the Holy Ghost,” Flannery O’Connor uses a hermaphrodite at a freak show not only to reveal spiritual truths, but also to disrupt and challenge the idea of an able bodied, heteronormative sexuality where gender is fixed and women are passive belles, receptacles, or vessels.

From the beginning of the story, O’Connor parallels images of the spiritual and the sexual, the humorously gendered and the androgynous, powerfully revealing the ways in which

an “acceptable” heteronormative sexuality can debase religion, through the older cousins’ mocking of the idea of their bodies as holy and obsession with boys, while portraying a move towards androgyny as a move towards the deeply spiritual. Like Lily Daw in Welty’s story, all three of the girls in the story are on the very cusp of sexual maturity: “the ages of the girls—all Catholic—emphasizes the story’s prevailing themes of adolescence, chastity, and the relevance of religion to everyday life” (Odom 176). The age of the slightly older cousins is tellingly revealed in the beginning of the story: the young narrator knows that “if only one of them had come, that one would have played with her, but since there were two of them, she was out of it and watched them suspiciously from a distance” (236). Susan and Joanne, despite their obsession with boys and flippant attitudes towards sex, are at a pivotal age, stuck between childhood and adulthood. From the beginning of the story, the parallel themes of a spiritual awakening and sexual awakening are intertwined. When the girls get in for the weekend, they immediately move to physically disregard spirituality and take on sexuality in their clothing choices. They discard their convent clothes in favor of “red skirts” and “loud blouses, and they use their “Sunday shoes” to “get a look at their legs” (CW 236).

The descriptions of the two girls continues to be imbued with an obsessive heterosexuality throughout the story, making them hilarious caricatures of the Southern belle with the unnamed narrator as their androgynous double. The girls are sent to the convent because “if they had gone to regular school, they wouldn’t have done anything but think about boys” (CW 236). When the narrator’s mother is trying to find an activity to keep the girls occupied, the narrator suggests the Wilkins boys as a distraction. Though her mother worries that the girls will “turn up their noses at them” since “they’re only farm boys,” the narrator points out the one thing

the girls are really after: “They wear pants. They’re sixteen and they got a car” (CW 239). Here, the girls’ sexual adventure is taken to the extreme and mocked, even by their younger cousin.

Though much of the focus is on the sexuality of the two older cousins, the slightly younger narrator moves from a state of innocence (or repugnance) towards a degree of sexual understanding in the story as well. The narrator, through whose perspective the story is told, watches the girls carefully throughout, though her daydreams clearly indicate the “bisexual ambivalence of the pre-pubertal adolescent” (Burns 18). In one, she is a military commander who rescues the Wilkens boys, only to court-martial them when they propose marriage. Through this daydream, the narrator reveals both her interest in, and disgust with, the heteronormative sexuality of her cousins. As the girl “emerges from childhood and begins to construct a sense of herself as an adult,” the self she constructs defies the norms required of her in a world where women were expected to be subordinate to men (Westling 143). By comparing herself in daydreams to powerful military commanders and, later, Christian martyrs, the young girl escapes “the demeaning conditions of adolescent femininity” by claiming “an independence which may be freakish in the eyes of the world but which is sanctified by God” (Westling 143).

The young girl’s challenge of gender constructions shown in her daydreams, where a move towards celibacy is a move towards God, is also powerfully visualized in the narrator’s second hand encounter with the doubled sex of the hermaphrodite at the circus, through a story told to her by her cousins. After coming home, the older cousins tell of the one thing they did not enjoy at the circus, a “freak with a particular name but they couldn’t remember the name” (CW 206). The sideshow act, an intersex performer, “was a man and a woman both” (CW 206). The cousins’ description of the hermaphrodite, as a “man and a woman both” places the intersex

performer within a Catholic tradition as a representative of God, according to the catechism of the church:

In no way is God in man's image. He is neither man nor woman. God is pure spirit in which there is no place for the difference between the sexes. But the respective 'perfections' of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfection of God: those of a mother and those of a father and husband (Catholic Church 370).

Appropriately, given the duality of the sex of the performer, the "blue dress" the girls describe also links the hermaphrodite to St. Mary, the mother of Jesus. The color blue, often associated with the Virgin Mary in the Catholic church, makes the intersex performer representative both of the Holy Ghost or God himself and the Virgin Mary. As Marshall Bruce Gentry points out, both the color of the dress and the hermaphrodite's "submissiv(e)" response, one that "the Virgin could" make—"This is the way [God] wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way"—links them together (64, CW 207). In the story "the Holy Mother becomes a hermaphrodeity, and her androgynous power provides a symbolic resolution to the problem of gender limitation" (Kahane 350). The sideshow freak becomes the embodied perfection of God, both man and woman. For O'Connor, the intersex performer—a "freak" in the eyes of the cousins—is a powerful vessel of the Holy Spirit as well as a vision of how the masculine and feminine are spiritually inextricable.

Though the young narrator does not understand the sexual nature of the freak, she immediately understands the spiritual significance of his words. In her dreams, he becomes a priest, offering a radical vision of Christianity in which the sideshow tent becomes the chapel:

She could hear the freak saying, 'God make me thisaway and I don't dispute hit,' and the people saying, 'Amen, Amen.'

God done this to me and I praise Him.’

‘Amen. Amen.’

‘He could strike you thisaway.’

‘Amen. Amen’

But he has not.’

‘Amen.’

‘Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God’s temple, don’t you know? Don’t you know? God’s Spirit has a dwelling in you, don’t you know?’ (CW 207).

In this vision, the intersex sideshow performer becomes a preacher, and the cousins’ joke becomes a sacred story of the mystery of God. Through the carnivalesque, the sacred is reimagined and imbued with new significance, and the hermaphrodite becomes the nexus of morality in the story: he is “the figure of goodness is the story's freak because of his meekness, while the ‘normal’ characters, the narrator's cousins, who are proud and vain, are decidedly morally inferior to him” (Finck 237). However, the hermaphrodite is not only a figure of goodness, he is a powerful representation of God incarnate, the true “Temple of the Holy Ghost.”

The turning point for the narrator towards a more developed sexuality comes the next day, as the child rides to the convent with her cousins and her mother. During the church service, the child thinks about the circus performer in chapel, particularly during the rite of communion. As the priest raises the monstrance with the “Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it,” the child thinks of the “tent at the fair with the freak in it” (CW 208). Here, the body of Christ (the Host) and the body of the “freak” become one. By again conflating the body of the intersex

performer with the body of Christ, O'Connor clearly points to the God-ordained nature of the othered sexuality of the freak. The heteronormative sexuality of the girls is profane, but the sexuality of the hermaphrodite is a mystery, as perfect and sacred as the elevated Host.

Following this revelation, the narrator "enter[s] upon the road to sexual maturity" a change clearly demonstrated at the end of the narrative (Burns 18). As the narrator rides home from the service, the sun, which on the trip to the chapel had been "ivory" is now "a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood" (CW 209). As it sinks from the sky it leaves "a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees" (CW 209). These images, the blood of menstruation and the road to adulthood, imply that her parallel sexual awakening is beginning as well (Burns 18).

Just as the heteronormative sexuality of the girls becomes freakish and the othered sexuality of the sideshow performer becomes a powerful example of the body of Christ, the world outside of the circus is set up as a distinctly parallel space, the one as freakish as the other. The unnamed narrator, who has attended the circus last year on a "special afternoon for children," describes all of the characters in her world as circus people (CW 203). At the circus, she notes that she had seen the "monkeys and the fat man" (CW 203). Characters in the story, then, become like these oddities from the circus. Miss Kirby's beau, Mr. Cheatam, is the parallel image of the fat man she described:

He wore a pale green shirt with a thin black stripe in it and blue galluses and his trousers cut across a protruding stomach that he pressed tenderly from time to time with his big flat thumb. All his teeth were backed with gold (CW 198).

The boys who are chosen to keep the girls company on their trip to the circus, Wendell and Cory Wilkins, take the place of the monkeys the narrator saw on her visit. Just like primates, they sat with “their knees on a level with their shoulders and their arms hanging down between” (CW 201). By describing the things that she sees in terms of the circus the narrator has visited, an immediate connection between the world inside of the circus and the world outside of the circus is established.

The metaphorical fat man and monkeys are not the only things described as freakish outside of the circus. The older cousins are “positively ugly, particularly Joanne who had spots on her face anyway” (CW 197). O’Connor’s narrator invokes the specter of dysgenic breeding more thoroughly explored in Welty as well, noting that the girls are “practically morons and she was glad to think that they were only second cousins and she couldn’t have inherited any of their stupidity” (CW 198). However, even the narrator becomes a circus freak: she has “fat cheeks” and braces that “glared like tin” (CW 198).

By setting up parallel images in the world outside of the circus and the world inside the circus, O’Connor creates a direct comparison between the two spaces; then, this juxtaposition is used to demonstrate that the heteronormal sexuality valued by Susan and Joanne, as well as the town as a whole, is freakish, whereas the atypical sexuality of the intersex sideshow performer is God-ordained. The girls’ lack of awareness of the enormity and importance of their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit,¹¹ and their blatant disregard for the import of it, makes them hideous: “All weekend the two girls were calling each other Temple One and Temple Two, shaking with

¹¹ The nuns’ statement and cousins’ subsequent joke is a reference to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

laughter and getting so red and hot that they were positively ugly, particularly Joanne who had spots on her face anyway” (CW 197). However, it is not just the girls who get the idea of the body as a temple wrong, O’Connor seems to insinuate: the nuns, who serve to illustrate the negative aspects of patriarchy in the story, see the holy phrase as a useful tool for controlling the sexuality of the girls under their care. Rather than link the idea of the body with the deity, the nuns debase the concept, using it as a tool for controlling what their young charges do in cars with boys. The nuns, “keep a grip on” the “necks” of their female students so that they will not “think about boys” (CW 197). The vision of the body as a temple then becomes distinctly feminine and a mechanism of control, a vision that O’Connor seems to powerfully decry in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.”

Throughout “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the heteronormative sexuality of the two girls is described as freakish; however, the move towards an androgynous sexuality—a shift that is only possible in the heterotopic space of the freak show—is a move towards the powerful mystery of God. In this story, then, O’Connor is able to “investigate the mysteries of gender and the need for androgyny” in the carnivalesque space of the sideshow (Gentry 71). The carnivalesque freedom of the freak show tent works in opposition to the restrictive space of both the narrator’s home and the Catholic school the girls attend and, in the freedom of the freak show tent, the two girls see an example of sexuality radically different from their flippant, heteronormative ideas of boys in cars and their legs in heels that is, O’Connor seems to suggest, a patriarchal ideal both controlled and encouraged in their society as exemplified by the nuns. Though the narrator is not physically in the tent, hearing the story from her cousins allows her also to experience the deconstruction of the dominant ideas of sexuality, a sexuality she has

observed with disgust throughout her weekend with her cousins. The carnivalesque freedom of the sideshow allows the narrator to “come into contact with other bodies” and experience herself as “a member of a continually growing and renewed people” separate from “all that oppresses and restricts” (Bakhtin 92). The true freaks in the fiction of Flannery O’Connor are not the physically disabled or othered, but those who are unable to understand and accept the mysteries of God, a mystery, O’Connor shows, that is concerned with things far greater than constructions of gender or control of sexuality.

In “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” O’Connor uses the carnival to reimagine and reclaim the mystery of the church from a patriarchal mechanism of control into a transformative truth for her young character. While the nuns use the image of the female body as a temple as a means of controlling the sexuality of their charges, O’Connor challenges this simple interpretation. The intersex performer challenges boundaries of sexual identity “by its existence” and “mirrors both the infantile wish to destroy distinction and limitation and be both sexes . . . and the fear of that wish when it is physiologically realized as freakishness” (Kahane 347). For both O’Connor and her young double, what is “normal” or sanctioned becomes freakish, while the side show performer becomes a powerful image of God incarnate, a priest, and the Virgin Mary.

Published almost exactly a decade after “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and included in O’Connor’s posthumously published collection of short stories, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, “Revelation” picks up many of the same themes explored in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” at a drastically different stage in O’Connor’s writing career. Just like “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” “Revelation” is concerned with the corrective power of the carnivalesque. Though

the story does not take place in an actual circus, O'Connor constructs a carnival atmosphere in the setting, a mundane doctor's office.

O'Connor completed the draft of "Revelation" in eight weeks, rewriting it and selling it to *Sewanee Review* in 1964 (CW 1255). The story won first prize in O. Henry Awards that year, just months before O'Connor died of kidney failure following a risky operation that led to a relapse of lupus. "Revelation" is considered one of O'Connor's "finest stories" and, according to Frederick McDowell's insightful essay "Toward the Luminous and the Numinous: The Art of Flannery O'Connor," one of O'Connor's most humanizing and sympathetic examples of the grotesque (Scott and Streight xi). The vast majority of the contemporary reviews, perhaps in part due to O'Connor's death less than six months prior to its publication, praise the overall brilliance of both the writer and the stories. Many critics laud the humor of the stories, particularly "Revelation." Stanley Edgar Hyman, writing for the *Danbury News-Times*, writes that the story is "wonderfully funny," while Richard Poirier, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, found the story to be a remarkable example of O'Connor's ability as a "mordantly comic writer" (208, 226). For Poirier, the story perfectly encapsulates O'Connor's ability to find the "possibilities of Redemption . . . in the grossest things," making the story one of "the few masterpieces of the form in English" (227).

Written at the very end of her life, at the peak of her maturity as an artist marked by the "deepening of her literary craft and vision," "Revelation" has been the source of much, often disparate, criticism (Scott and Streight xi). Early critics such as Robert Fitzgerald and Sister Bertrand Meyers interpreted "Revelation," and O'Connor's work as a whole, in largely theological terms, while many critics in the past decade have been perplexed by the story,

mapping onto it a variety of theories and influences. Jacky Dumas and Jessica Hooten Wilson argue that classical allusions—not just Biblical ones—are vital to understanding the story, looking closely at how Plato’s Allegory of the Cave informed the work and arguing ultimately that Mrs. Turpin’s revelation in the story is “as close minded as eye opening” (73). For Benjamin Saxton, who sets the story alongside Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, “Revelation” offers an example of the positive work accomplished by the grotesque. George Piggford argues that the story owes a debt to the work of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, whom O’Connor was reading at the time of her death. For Piggford, the story works as an existential movement towards God, which is reminiscent of Buber’s own philosophy that even in light of the Holocaust, humans were not beyond hope.

In *Flannery O’Connor and the Mystery of Love*, critic Richard Giannone compares two of O’Connor’s characters most closely linked to the carnivalesque, the gargantuan Ruby Turpin and the tattoo-obsessed O.E. Parker. For Giannone, who is interested primarily in how O’Connor’s work is affected by theology, the two characters are linked by their redemption: “The future for O’Connor is the message of freedom. Freedom brings the future into view. When emancipated from self-centeredness, the protagonists (of “Parker’s Back” and “Revelation”) see their rightful place in the whole” (213). Though he does not use Bakhtin in his argument, Giannone’s perceptive comparison of Turpin and Parker evokes the specter of the carnivalesque, revealing O’Connor’s interest in a freedom from hierarchy that is ultimately the vehicle of salvation for her characters. “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and “Revelation,” written at very different times in O’Connor’s life, are in some ways opposites. The narrators, one an old married woman and one a young, prepubescent girl, experience the work of salvation in much different

ways; however, the reversing power of the carnivalesque transforms them both. By constructing a carnivalesque space outside of the physical bounds of the circus, “Revelation” pushes the bounds of Bakhtin’s theory, revealing Bakhtin’s “applicability of late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century fiction” (Donahoo 24). In “Revelation,” O’Connor highlights the correcting power of the carnivalesque, reversing the typical social structure to which Ruby Turpin so tightly clings, and creating a world in which androgynous, ugly females are powerful prophets and freaks are first in line to heaven.

“Revelation” chronicles Ruby Turpin’s visit to the doctor with her husband, Claud, who is having problems with his leg after having been kicked by a cow. Throughout the story, as she waits with her husband to see the doctor, Mrs. Turpin’s obsession with social class becomes hilariously apparent. She spends her time categorizing everyone in the room and chatting with the only woman she deems a “lady” (CW 639). The two women exchange pleasantries while the lady’s daughter, Mary Grace, stares at Mrs. Turpin judgmentally. Mrs. Turpin feels a “terrible pang of joy” for her station in life, and is in the middle of praising Jesus for his blessings when Mary Grace hurls a book at her head and begins to choke her, telling her to “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (CW 644). Mrs. Turpin, disfigured and disillusioned, returns to her farm where she has a vision of marching to heaven, behind all of the people she once deemed unfit.

From the very beginning of the story, Flannery O’Connor invokes a carnivalesque atmosphere through the equalizing space of the doctor’s waiting room. The dimensions of the room become the first joke: “The doctor’s waiting room, which was very small, was almost full when the Turpins entered and Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her

presence” (CW 633). In addition to being funny, O’Connor uses this dichotomy of size to symbolize Mrs. Turpin’s inflated ego. O’Connor continues to highlight the ridiculous contrast between Mrs. Turpin’s presence and the room, with Mrs. Turpin “looming” large and making the room look “inadequate” and “ridiculous” (CW 633). From the opening, the waiting room becomes a carnival space, a ridiculous theater with a cast of characters both amusing and—to Mrs. Turpin—freakish. There is a little boy in a “dirty blue romper” with “arms idle,” an old man whose “eyes were closed as if he were asleep or dead or pretending to be so as not to get up and offer her his seat, a “fat girl” who sits scowling with a face “blue with acne,” a “thin leathery old woman” in a dress made from chicken feed sacks, and a “lank-faced” woman whose “lips were stained with snuff (CW 633-5). Only one woman in the room, a “well-dressed lady” who has on “red and grey suede shoes to match her dress” lives up to Mrs. Turpin’s expectations (CW 635).

However, despite Mrs. Turpin’s harsh judgements, all of the patients are equal in the space of the waiting room. They are all waiting to see the same doctor, all sitting on the same chairs. Just as in carnival, “a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (Bakhtin 10). Though Mrs. Turpin seeks to reaffirm these boundaries, they bear no significance. Suddenly, on the carnivalesque stage of the too-small waiting room, Mrs. Turpin finds herself uncomfortably equal with those she deems unworthy.

The carnivalesque nature of the story is developed not only through the actual space of the waiting room turned stage and freakish cast of characters present, but also through O’Connor’s use of funny scenarios throughout the story, which include the reader in the carnivalesque humor. From the beginning of the story, Mrs. Turpin becomes a clown-like figure,

making jokes that cause the reader to join in on the carnival laughter. The laughter, in this story, serves a Bakhtinian purpose. It is “universal” in scope, indicting not just the characters but also the reader, and “ambiguous” serving both a “gay, triumphant” at the same time “mocking, deriding” purpose (Bakhtin 11-2). O’Connor continues to emphasize Mrs. Turpin’s role as a clown in the carnivalesque room of oddities by allowing the reader to be privy to her thoughts, which often read like jokes in a circus. After judging everyone’s economic station by their shoe choice, Mrs. Turpin’s nightly ritual is revealed: “Sometimes at night when she couldn’t go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn’t have been herself” (CW 635-6). She imagines that Jesus give her just two options, telling her she can “either be a nigger or white-trash” (CW 636). Though she “wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, ‘All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one.’ And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” (CW 636). This scenario, a hilarious back and forth between Mrs. Turpin and Jesus, reveals her racist and classist attitudes.

Ruby Turpin’s racism and classism is comically mirrored in the woman she labels “white trash,” her worst categorization. After Ruby describes her infantilizing and racist attempts to find black workers to pick cotton on her farm, the woman announces “Two things I ain’t going to do: love no niggers or scoot down no hog with no hose” (CW 639). Ruby takes great pride in her hogs who hilariously live in a “pig-parlor,” a concrete slab built up to keep them out of the dirt, but the other woman reveals the inherent absurdity of Ruby’s attempts to sterilize a farm animal. As the woman’s statement implies, clean hogs are still hogs, and washing them down with a hose at night does not change their nature. O’Connor makes a call back to this joke when Mary Grace

throws a book at her head, telling her to “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (CW 646).

O’Connor’s use of humor mirrors the function of laughter in the carnival, according to Bakhtin, who writes that the carnival humor of grotesque realism serves the essential function of “liberat(ing) the world from all that is dark and terrifying: it takes away all fears and is therefore completely gay and bright. All that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (*Rabelais and His World* 47). O’Connor explores this dichotomy throughout “Revelation,” using humor to reveal the hate, racism, and sexism that pervades the story. For Bakhtin, as O’Connor demonstrates through the character of Ruby Turpin, “fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness,” but this “narrow-minded and stupid seriousness” can be “defeated by laughter,” which offers “complete liberty” (Bakhtin 47). For Bakhtin, just like for O’Connor, then, there is a “strong conceptual bond . . . between laughter and the motif . . . of Christian love, or *apage*” (Coates 134).

Thus, laughter has a pure and positive focus in both O’Connor and Bakhtin. This positive focus works to reverse the hierarchical structures Ruby Turpin finds so crucial by revealing them to be nothing more than humorous constructions. Though much of the laughter is precipitated by the dichotomy between what Mrs. Turpin says and what she is thinking or what the reader knows to be true, the patients in the waiting room participate in the laughter as well. When the “pleasant lady” makes a marked comment about her daughter, Mary Grace, saying “‘I think people with bad dispositions are more to be pitied than anyone one earth,’” Mrs. Turpin responds by complimenting her own personality: “‘I thank the Lord he has blessed me with a good one,’ Mrs. Turpin said. ‘The day has never dawned that I couldn’t find something to laugh at’” (CW 643).

Her husband cracks a joke and everyone in the waiting room joins in on the laughter, aside from Mary Grace and “the white-trash” (CW 643). It is in the moment of forced laughter and pointed comments that Mrs. Turpin is suddenly overcome with gratitude for her place in life: “Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!” she cries aloud, and Mary Grace hurls her book, *Human Development*, directly at Mrs. Turpin’s face (CW 644).

Throughout the story, Mary Grace has been characterized in a grotesque and androgynous way. She is “ugly” with a “pitiful” face, Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks (635). Her looks are described as almost animalistic or freakish. She is a “raw-complexioned girl” and looking at Mrs. Turpin she “snap(s) her teeth together” (CW 640). She snarls at Mrs. Turpin throughout, “Her lower lip turned downwards and inside out, revealing the pale pink inside of her mouth. After a second it rolled back up” (CW 640). Mrs. Turpin notes that it “was the ugliest face Mrs. Turpin had ever seen anyone make” (CW 640). However, much to both the reader’s surprise and to the surprise of Mrs. Turpin, the girl becomes a holy prophet in the story, precipitating Mrs. Turpin’s turn towards God. While the white-trash woman sees the girls as a freak—“That there girl is going to be a lunatic, ain’t she?” she asks—Mary Grace becomes the force of salvation in the story (CW 647).

In a shocking move that destabilizes common images of bodily perfection or normalcy, Mrs. Turpin’s own appearance becomes more disfigured as she comes closer to her moment of revelation. The closer she gets to God, the uglier she gets: looking in the mirror, Mrs. Turpin sees that the “the protuberance over her eye had turned a greenish-blue (CW 648). Later, as she is leaving the house to walk to the pig parlor, her physical deformity becomes a harbinger of the reckoning that is to come:

The dark protuberance over her eye looked like a miniature tornado cloud which might any moment sweep across the horizon of her brow. Her lower lip protruded dangerously. She squared her massive shoulders. Then she marched into the front of the house and out the side door and started down the road to the pig parlor. She had the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle (CW 651).

As Ruby Turpin's appearance changes and morphs from the neatness she once prided herself on to an androgynous warrior with a distorted appearance, so does her relationship to God. In this reversal, Mrs Turpin becomes no longer just a respectable farmer's wife, but an old testament prophet, a "female Jacob" as O'Connor wrote to her friend Maryat Lee (HB 577).

In the end of the story, Mrs Turpin sees "a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire" on which "a vast horde of souls were tumbling toward heaven" (CW 652). Instead of the hierarchy she has spent many of her sleepless night imagining, she sees "whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs" (CW 652). Coming very last, at the bottom of the hierarchy are "those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the given wit to use it right" (CW 652). In the climax of the story, the powerful revelation, Mrs Turpin's entire vision of the world and order she so values is flipped completely upside down.

In both "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "Revelation," O'Connor uses the carnivalesque and grotesque realism to reverse secular power dynamics. In these stories, the most unlikely characters—sideshow freaks and lunatic girls—become vehicles of grace, prophets of God. For Bakhtin, "to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of

nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (206). In both “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” and “Revelation,” Flannery O’Connor queers the normal in order to create a new vision of the world and of religion, a vision of carnival.

CHAPTER III
LIMITS OF THE CARNIVALESQUE IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S "THE CIRCUS"
AND "HOLIDAY"

Welty and O'Connor's young women narrators find a certain amount of freedom—and the radical disruption of normalcy—in carnival. Their stories are replete with transgressive fat women, “freaks,” and nonconforming daughters who use the reversing power of the carnival to transgress the tightly controlled bounds of their society in a powerful, though perhaps momentary, way. In this reversal, othered bodies become powerful vehicles of change; however, for Katherine Anne Porter, whose work precedes both Welty and O'Connor by a few decades, carnival does not clearly bring about change or provide moments of transgression. Though Porter's fiction reveals an implicit understanding of the powerful possibility of universal connection and liberty the circus provides, this possibility is never realized. Instead, even the potentially transgressive space of the circus affirms the stifling normativity imposed by the “old order” in Porter's early story “The Circus” (1935). It is not until the very end of her career, in “Holiday” (1960), that Porter reexamines and finds connection through carnivalesque laughter.

Like Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty, Porter would most certainly have attended the circus growing up in the South at the beginning of the 20th century, the heyday of the institution. Though she only directly addresses the space once—in the short story “The

Circus”—Porter’s other projects and collaborations reveal that she spent much of her life interested in spaces that provided moments of reprieve from the order of the society in which she was born. Porter collaborated in 1929 with William Doyle on the interestingly titled play *Carnival*, which opened in New York City on April 24 of the same year. Though little information still exists on the short-running production, Porter mentioned the play in a letter to friend Josephine Herbst the following month, noting that “THAT play, *Carnival*, had come in, run four weeks and closed again, and until now I have not had a line from my collaborator such as he is, nor a penny” (*Selected Letters* 60).¹² Later in her life, Porter would write several friends about her favorite movie *Carnival in Flanders*, a French comedy from 1936, which explored themes relating to the freeing possibility of the carnivalesque. Though a few of Porter’s stories deal with the folk spectacle and images of the grotesque, it is not until years later, in “Holiday,” that the freeing potential of the carnivalesque would inform her fiction.¹³ While in “The Circus” carnivalesque laughter serves only to enforce and highlight the separation and tragedy of the patriarchal structure of the “old order,” Porter’s later story “Holiday” offers laughter as a solution, a momentary reprieve where even women who do not fit into the patriarchal society can connect, and in this moment of connection, Porter offers hope for the future.

Much like the young, unnamed protagonist of “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” whom many critics associate with O’Connor, Katherine Anne Porter’s Miranda character bears a marked resemblance with the author. Like Porter, Miranda is a motherless young girl haunted by

¹² The experience would later inform Porter’s 1930 short story “Theft” (*Selected Letters* 349).

¹³ “María Concepción” and “He” have both been connected with the folk humor and grotesque realism Bakhtin defines and examines.

an obsession with and fear of death following her own mother's death in childbirth. When Alice Jones Porter died a few months after the birth of her fifth child in 1892, the Porters moved, like their fictional counterparts, to live with her father's mother, Catherine Ann Skaggs Porter. The elder Porter proved to be such an inspiration to the young writer that she—born Callie Russell Porter—would legally change her name to Katherine Porter following her first divorce in 1915 and begin to call herself Katherine Anne Porter in honor of her grandmother the same year (CS 1023). Porter's fictional heroine Miranda appears frequently in her fiction, as the protagonist of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and "Old Mortality" as well as the "significantly titled" short story sequence *The Old Order* (Bradley 69). Porter uses the young girl's perspective to examine the rapidly changing space of the South as it moves from "old" to new.

Many of the Miranda stories, as *The Old Order* is often called by critics, were published in 1934, a prolific year for Porter, but it was not until a decade later in 1944 that the collection was published in full as part of *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories*. "The Circus," originally published by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks in 1935 in the *Southern Review*, is placed in the very middle of the sequence with three stories before ("The Source," "The Journey," and "The Witness") and three stories after ("The Last Leaf," "The Fig Tree," and "The Grave). As the central story of the collection, "The Circus" can be read as a turning point for Miranda, who discovers the difference "between illusion and reality, the myth of Southern history and the initiatory force of real time" (Bradley 69). In "The Circus," Porter uses the freeing and transgressive possibility inherent in the space of the circus to underscore the power and repression of Southern society.

In the story, a young Miranda attends the circus with her entire family. The outing serves as a “family reunion” of sorts, with her extended family filling up an entire section of the bandstand (CS 355). Though the family matriarch, the Grandmother, disapproves of the outing for her youngest granddaughter, she permits it “this once” (CS 356). Miranda, accompanied by her black caretaker Dicey and thrilled to be allowed to come along on the family venture, regrets this allowance almost immediately: when the acrobat begins his show, she is terrified of the performance and begins to scream and cry. Miranda and Dicey leave the tent, encountering a dwarf on their exit, and head home. Later, the family pokes fun at Miranda for her inability to enjoy the show. Miranda and Dicey fall asleep together, the last word of the story significantly given to Dicey. While many of Porter’s stories contain elements of the carnivalesque and reveal an interest in folk culture, “The Circus” is Porter’s only work that deals directly with the space of the carnival.

Critical scholarship on the story varies widely. In one of the first readings of the story in 1958, S. H. Poss argues that Miranda is failed by “the myth of Having Fun” in this story, which dramatizes the “seeming impossibility of establishing a relationship between the public myths and individual sensibility” (22-3). For another early critic, Edward G. Schwartz, the story highlights Miranda’s innocence. Not fully comprehending the conventions that make the circus enjoyable, Miranda “catches a glimpse of the terrors and frustrations of human living” (Core 70). Patricia Bradley takes a closer look at circus conventions, fruitfully examining the story in light of Paul Bouissac’s circus theory. For Bradley, Miranda’s experience at the circus highlights her “ingenuous acceptance—indeed, at this moment, her preference—for the illusions that serve the myth of Southern history” (71). Janis Stout aptly draws a connection between Porter’s story and

the circus scene in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, noting that the acrobat serves for Miranda as "an encounter both with death and with (sexual) emergency of life, the two as a unity" (116). While the story is filtered through Miranda's young consciousness, the failure of the carnival spirit to evoke change or momentary freedom is perhaps not a matter of Miranda's preferences, but rather a startling example for both Miranda and the reader of the unyielding power of the myth of Southern history and the oppressive rules of decorum that determine Miranda's life.

For both Welty and O'Connor, the circus acts as a place of carnivalesque freedom where normalcy is challenged; however, though Katherine Anne Porter's story "The Circus" incorporates elements of the carnivalesque, these elements do not create a space of freedom or example of transgression. Instead, the carnivalesque in the story becomes terrifying, precisely because it fails to accomplish its Bakhtinian purpose of connection and freedom. In the story, then, elements of the carnivalesque—sexuality, laughter, and the suspension of hierarchy—become agents of control rather than freedom. In this reversal, Porter reveals the power of the patriarchal society even in the face of transgression, and the separation rather than connection that is precipitated.

In "The Circus," the "obvious sensuous character" of the carnival in Porter's fiction becomes not a site for difference to become transgressive, but a site where a normalized femininity and sexuality is upheld and enforced (Bakhtin 7). For Bakhtin, the liberating humor of the carnivalesque offers a temporary space to expose dominant structures and offer a different vision and possibility for how things could be, a space where the woman's body is "not separated from the rest of the world" but is instead "rampantly physical, reveling in . . . endless coupling of bodies" (Bakhtin 26, xix). The carnival element of sexuality is present in "The Circus," but

rather than offering a space where Miranda can experience alternative forms of sexuality, the carnival instead serves to enforce the dominant vision of sexuality, which is introduced in the opening paragraphs of the story. While the protagonist Miranda has trouble finding her place in the world, her double—also named Miranda—perfectly encapsulates the flawless vision of a Southern lady, who embodies “the ideals of her culture . . . Christian virtues . . . and a racial purity” (Westling 8-9). Cousin Miranda is “a most dashing young lady with crisp silk skirts, a half dozen of them at once, a lovely perfume and wonderful black curly hair” (CW 356). She sits between two “extremely handsome young men who might be cousins but who were certainly in love with cousin Miranda Gay” (CW 355-6). Miranda Gay serves as a reminder of what the young protagonist is not, and her family seizes the opportunity to “foreground her unsuitability to fulfill the role of a proper Southern woman” (Bradley 70). Immediately following this perfect exhibit of Southern femininity, the young Miranda “peeped down between the wide crevices of the piled-up plank seats, where she was astonished to see odd-looking, roughly dressed little boys peeping up from the dust below. They were squatted in little heaps, staring up quietly” (CW 356). However, though the young Miranda stares at the boys, “trying to understand,” she is quickly admonished and chastised by her black caretaker, Dicey to “stop throwin’ yo’ legs around that way. Don’t you pay any mind” (CW 356). While cousin Miranda, representative of the beautiful and chaste ideal of the Southern lady, has male suitors admiring her, the young Miranda becomes unwittingly involved in the opposite of this ideal. Not only does this serve as an example of the Bakhtinian concept of “degradation,” in this case, a lowering of the lofty ideals of Southern womanhood, it also serves as a striking example of the young Miranda’s unsuitability for the world she inhabits.

Sexuality is not the only Bakhtinian element of the carnivalesque that is employed and reversed, showing the power of the patriarchy even in transgressive spaces. Even the antics of the clowns at the carnival enforce the family's patriarchal ideals. These clowns, the modern examples of the clowns and fools Bakhtin credits with "mimick(ing) serious rituals" and through the resulting laughter offering "a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations," instead become an enforcing presence of the old order as well (Bakhtin 5-6). While for Bakhtin the carnival offers a space of alternatives and freedom from expectation where clowns and fools become actors "represent(ing) a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time," the clowns in Porter's story become tools of the family's attempt to control Miranda's body and sexuality, transformed from agents of freedom to agents of control (Bakhtin 8).

In "The Circus," the two clowns do become representative of life, but rather than represent the possibility of an idealized life they become terrifying representations of the whiteness and segregation of Miranda's world. The first clown Miranda sees, who becomes the source of her excruciating anxiety and precipitates her dramatic exit, is an acrobatic clown described in terrifyingly white terms.¹⁴ He is wearing "a blousy white overall with ruffles at the neck and ankles," and has a "bone-white skull and chalk-white face" (CS 357). Here, for Porter

¹⁴ Throughout the story, and the collection as a whole, Porter uses images of terrifying whiteness to reveal the tragic separation of Southern society. In the first story of the collection, "The Source," the family travels to their farm, run by black sharecroppers, for the summer. Before their arrival the farm is but "black, rich soft land" but upon their arrival everything is "thickly whitewashed" (334-5). The grandmother's clothes are also representative of this segregation: her grandmother always tries on a woven straw hat, but never wears it, opting instead for "a stiffly starched white chambray bonnet" (333). These images of black and white are continued throughout the short stories, culminating in Miranda's high of anxiety about the white acrobat at the circus.

is the “crisis of whiteness” and the “convulsive white bodies” that portray “white panic” (Yaeger 11). In the hierarchy of the circus, the white-faced clown becomes the “epitome of culture,” and in this story, the white acrobat serves as a visual representation of the culture and history that is repressive and harrowing (Bouissac qtd. in Bradley 71). Miranda is not initially scared of the acrobat, she imagines that he “was walking on air, or flying,” but when she sees the wire “she was terrified” (CS 357). She sees his “flapping white leg” wave in the air and she “shrieked with real pain, clutching at her stomach with her knees drawn up” (CS 357). As Bradley points out, Miranda’s initial acceptance of the clown’s ability to fly through the air is consistent not only with her childlike naivete, but also with the “romantic notions of life that support her family’s various roles in the myth they have made in southern history” (71). In this story, the central story of the collection and a moment of profound change and perhaps-unrealized insight for Miranda, the epiphany rests in the image of the acrobat. For Bakhtin, “the struggle of life and death in the individual body is conceived by grotesque imagery as the struggle of the old life stubbornly resisting the new life about to be born, as the crisis of change” (50). In this story, then, the acrobat acts as an embodiment of this old life, without the possibility of a new one; he becomes a terrifying image of whiteness in a story intimately concerned with race and change.

While the acrobatic clown serves as an embodiment of the terrifying whiteness and false notions on which the family has based their history, the second clown Miranda encounters on her hurried exit from the circus serves to demonstrate terrifyingly for a young Miranda the difference between illusion and reality. This clown, the “auguste or ugly clown,” seems inhuman to Miranda: he was a dwarf wearing a “woolly beard, a pointed cap, tight red breeches, long shoes

with turned-up toes” (CS 357).¹⁵ Miranda, mad and terrified, strikes at him, evoking a “look of haughty, remote displeasure, a true grown-up look. She knew it well” (358). Just like with the white acrobatic clown, this look “chilled her with a new kind of fear: she had not believed he was really human” (CS 358). Here, again, the horror of the circus for Miranda lies in its ability to reveal illusion and break down barriers through a reversal of the carnivalesque; rather than freedom, Miranda finds a terrifyingly real, grown up world.

However, the element of the carnivalesque that becomes most terrifying for Miranda is what, for Bakhtin, holds the most power and possibility: carnival laughter. In the Bakhtinian carnival, laughter is a crucial element that “deflates power and points up absurdity” (Titus 102). The laughter of the carnival “consecrate[s] inventive freedom” and “liberate[s] from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” and offers instead “the chance to have a new outlook on the world . . . to enter a completely new order of things” (Bakhtin 34).

In “The Circus,” however, the laughter of the spectators offers no such renewal or perspective. Instead, the laughter serves—for the young narrator who does not understand the conventions of the circus—to highlight the savagery and immutability of her world. The laughter of the crowd comes after the white acrobatic clown pretends to fall: “he paused, slipped, the flapping white leg waved in space; he staggered, wobbled, slipped sideways, plunged, and caught the wire with frantic knee” (CS 357). At this sight, the crowd “roared with savage delight, shrieks of dreadful laughter like devils in delicious torment” (CW 357). The crowd’s laughter,

¹⁵ Here, as Stout insightfully notes, the dwarf’s “thin white wand” and “little woolly beard” serve as two phallic symbols which “hint at the sexual dimensions of adult life” (357).

interpreted through the lens of the young girl, “seems less like the deep, liberating belly laugh of Bakhtinian carnival than the barely repressed hostility that Freud attributed to defensive forms of humor” (Adams 177). The laughter, terrifying in its inability to connect Miranda to her family, is so powerful and all encompassing that it is “not wiped from” her father’s face as he watches her terrified screams and tears. For Miranda, the laughter of the spectators at the acrobat highlights the separation she feels from her family and from the expectations they have for her.

Following Miranda’s terror at the acrobat, Porter highlights another incongruity of their day at the circus: Dicey is a caretaker and not a participant in the outing. Miranda is so scared and disruptive following the acrobat’s show that her father demands that Dicey, “take her away,” yet Dicey does not want to leave (CS 357). She is “almost in tears herself” and “all the way home was “cross,” “vicious but cautious” not to cross the line where “Miranda could say outright: ‘Dicey did this or said this to me . . .’” because she is well aware that she was allowed only “a certain freedom up to a point” (CS 358). Though Dicey’s presence initially is consistent with the erasure of hierarchy at the carnival highlighted by Bakhtin and her role as spectator “foregrounds [a] potentially transgressive social circumstance” her expulsion with Miranda through no fault of her own eliminates this possibility and instead reinforces once again the terrifying white power that is so important in the old order.

In “The Circus,” Miranda feels horror at not being part of or understanding the universal laughter of the carnival; instead of connection, she feels a separation from the crowd and her family. Just like the young Miranda is entranced by the highwire act until she realizes with a shock that it is real, with the potential for deadly consequences, so Porter seems to say Miranda can accept the myth of southern history until she realizes the brutal impact of slavery. While

Miranda's ongoing preoccupation with death and her burgeoning sexuality are both explored in this story, Miranda does not find a carnivalesque freedom from the stifling white patriarchal society that so dominates *The Old Order*. Rather than accomplishing the anti establishment goals of Bakhtinian carnival, "The Circus" becomes a story concerned with the terrifying whiteness of Miranda's world and the tragedy and racial exploitation of the black characters moving within this world.¹⁶ For Miranda, then, the "excursion is a true, if ill-understood, initiation experience" into the patriarchal order her family espouses (Stout 116).

In an essay "Irony with a Center," Robert Penn Warren writes that the young Miranda finds "a truth that will not be translatable, or, finally, communicable. But it will be the only truth she can win, and for better or worse she will have to live by it. She must live her own myth. But she must earn her myth in the process of living" (qtd. in Bradley 70). In "The Circus," the turning point of this process, Miranda is initiated into the power of the old order, a system so powerful that it can turn even the transgressive Bakhtinian conventions of the carnivalesque into a place where order and patriarchal politics are enforced.

Published in 1934 and written at the beginning of her life and career, "The Circus" does not reflect the possibility of change. The laughter of the crowd is harsh and unfeeling; Dicey is evicted from the circus without a thought; the young Miranda will never become the ideal southern woman like her cousin; the politics of the patriarchy is incontestable. However, throughout the intervening decades before she published "A Holiday," another story centered on

¹⁶ As Patricia Bradley deftly demonstrates in her brief reading of the story, the afternoon acts as a "patriarchal conspiracy" in which Miranda is judged according to the standards of the old order and found lacking, "in which Miranda's youth and inexperience are remarked upon and confirmed" (70).

laughter, Porter's interest in the carnivalesque would mature and develop. One of Porter's favorite movies, *Carnival in Flanders*, a French comedy, explored the power of the carnivalesque against the tyranny of unified ideological control. In the film, a group of 17th-century Dutch middle-class women entertain invading Spanish conquerors who come to raze the town. The carnival is so successful, in fact, that the invaders leave the town as they found it and give the inhabitants a year without taxes. Porter chronicled her obsession with the movie in letters to several friends. In a letter to Abby Mann, Porter writes that *Carnival in Flanders* is, "my favorite picture of ALL time: have seen it at least twenty times since I saw it five evenings running the first week it appeared in Paris in I think 1934. And when I see it announced again anywhere near me, I'll see it again!" (*Selected Letters* 292). She reiterates this point in a later letter to Mann: "Through the long ages, I remember as my very loved comedies, *The Italian Straw Hat*, *Carnival in Flanders* . . . I am sure there are others but these are the ones that come first" (*Selected Letters* 295-6). Porter clearly chronicles an interest in the freeing power of spectacle, an interest which found resolution in the story "A Holiday," where the carnivalesque laughter shared by two women disrupts the power of the patriarchy in the story.

"Holiday," a story whose protagonist bears marked similarities to Miranda, was published nearly twenty five years after the publication of "The Circus." Though the story was not included in the Miranda sequence and the protagonist is unnamed, many critics "consider 'Holiday,' a part of the group" (Unrue 11). Regardless if the first person narrator in "Holiday" is a mirror of the young Miranda, the two doubtless both can be linked to Porter herself. As Mary Titus insightfully argues in *The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*, the artist is rarely

separated from the art in Porter's stories: "Throughout Porter's texts, the fictive 'she' is always a hairbreadth away from the 'I'" (182).

Though it was not published in *The Atlantic Monthly* until 1960, "Holiday" had its beginnings nearly four decades before in 1923. Porter would complete three versions of the story in subsequent years, returning finally to the first for publication ("A little stolen holiday" 73). In her introduction to the 1965 *Collected Stories*, Porter chronicled the trouble she had writing "Holiday": "The story haunted me for years and I made three separate versions, with a certain spot in all three where the thing went off track" (v). In a study of unpublished manuscripts of the narrative, Mary Titus traces Porter's problematic "spot" in the narrative to the opening of the story, where the narrator reflects on her reasons for taking a holiday. The published story alludes to "troubles," but does not chronicle what they are, noting that "It no longer can matter what kind of troubles they were, or what finally became of them" (CS 421). Here, Titus points out, the Porter of 1960 is injecting the wisdom that comes with age. Though Porter did have troubles at both times in her life—the dissolution of her first marriage and the death at birth of her only child—neither is mentioned directly in the text, though both inform the final work ("A little stolen holiday" 73).

The story is a bit of an outlier for Porter. It is longer than most of her short stories and not included as part of a collection, but it has received a good bit of critical attention following its publication. Due to the many references to the family's Germanic heritage and the intervening war and subsequent anxiety about facism in the United States following the initial writing and slightly before publication of the story, many early readings focused on the patriarchal Müllers. Robert Brinkmeyer described "Holiday" as a parable of the totalitarian state, "with the Müller

family representing the emerging power of Germany under Fascist ideology” where individual identity is subsumed by the power of the organized family’s corporate identity (224). For George Core, the story is a pastoral tale at its core about “suffering and labor,” which is concerned with life and death, order and disorder (152). Mary Titus critically examines the lengthy pre-publication life of the story in “‘A little stolen holiday’: Katherine Anne Porter’s Narrative of the Woman Artist” and takes a closer look at the story in her 2010 book *The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*. For Titus, the story reflects Porter’s own feelings of “alienation and sterility” as a woman without children in a patriarchal world where “a woman is defined by her biological capabilities” (“A little stolen holiday” 74-5). In the story, then, Titus finds a representation of “Porter’s most positive fictional resolution of the conflicts between being a woman and being an artist” (“A little stolen holiday” 90). In her book, Titus builds on this idea and finds the answer to Porter’s unspecified “problems” in the moment of laughter shared by the narrator and a young girl. This section builds on the work done by Titus, linking the unrealized carnivalesque aspects of “The Circus” to the moments of carnivalesque disruption in “A Holiday.” Written before “The Circus,” but reworked significantly and published decades later, “Holiday” rethinks the limits of carnivalesque laughter exposed in “The Circus,” offering instead of disconnection and ambiguity a brief moment of connection for the protagonist and hope for the future.

In “Holiday,” the unnamed, Miranda-like protagonist takes a trip to the country at the suggestion of a friend, Louise, following some “troubles” (CS 421). She spends a month on a Texas farm with a German family, the Müllers, observing the patriarchal family and their disabled daughter, Ottelie, as winter turns into spring. After arriving at the farm, the narrator

observes, from the periphery, the rhythm of the boisterous family's patriarchal life, which revolves around marriage, childbirth, and the care of the farm. The narrator of the story feels an anxiety about Ottelie's place in the family, and, when the matriarch of the family dies, the two ride off together, sharing a moment of connection and freedom in laughter.

From the beginning of the story, the Müller's farm becomes a simultaneous carnivalesque and separated space, which acts as a temporary escape from the "troubles" of the protagonist's everyday life inhabited by clownish characters while also adhering to strict patriarchal ideals (CW 421). The young Müller boy who picks the protagonist up from the train is described with clown-like imagery: he has "round cheeks," a "round nose," a "round chin," and features that are neatly circular "as if drawn in bright crayon" (CS 423). His shoes, also comical, are "old clodhopper shoes" that were "several sizes too big for him" (CS 423). Altogether, he was "not to be taken seriously" (CS 423). Porter continues the carnival imagery throughout, noting that the cart he rides to the house on has a "drunken, hilarious swagger" (CS 424).

Not only does the story open with images clearly evocative of the circus, the story is replete with what is for Bakhtin the essential principle of grotesque realism: degradation, characterized by acts of "copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (Bakhtin 21). Fecundity and images of bodies and the cycle of life pervade the story. Children run around the Müller household, six total between the two married daughters, who "ravened and gorged and reached their hands into the sugar bowl to sprinkle sugar on everything they ate" (CS 429). Another child, a boy, is born while the narrator is staying at the home. This excess of children and abundance of new life is not just evident in the children the women have produced, but also in the farm they have attended. The narrative is loaded with "imagery of maternity: women marry,

give birth, care for human and animal offspring, milk cows, and feed men in a landscape moving from winter to spring where the fields lie ‘ploughed and ready for spring’” (Titus 93-4).

Abusive language or coarse humor, another key element of grotesque realism, is also abundant in the Müller household. For Bakhtin, “abuse exercises a direct influence on the language and the images of this literature and is closely related to all other forms of ‘degradation’ and ‘down to earth’ in grotesque” (27). For the Müllers, this abusive language is a reprieve over coffee and beer, particularly following a birth. They are “ribald and jocose,” with “hearty gutturals . . . swallowed in the belly of laughter” (CS 443). For a few moments, the “hard-working wives and mothers saw life . . . as a hearty low joke, and it did them good” (CS 443). Even the men come in for a moment and add “their joyful improprieties” (CS 443).

However, like in “The Circus,” these images of the carnivalesque and its literary equivalent grotesque realism disrupt momentarily the tight patriarchal order of the Müller family, but seem to have no lasting effect. Despite the hilarity of the family and the many carnivalesque images of the narrative, these moments of disruption serve only to show the “unified ideological control” of the Müllers patriarchal household, evincing no change or possibility of change (Titus 93). The Müllers continue to espouse a rigid patriarchy as pictured powerfully during their meals, where the men eat first with the women standing behind them. This powerful order of the family is evident in a scene where the order between men and women is tested, when the youngest and newly-married daughter, Hatsy, is asked to carry the heavy milk yoke for her mother. Her husband, “wishing to spare his dear bride such heavy work” tries to lift the pails for her, which precipitates the only outburst in the story from his mother-in-law: “‘No!’ shouted Mother Müller, so the poor young man nearly jumped out of his shirt, ‘not you. The milk is not

business for a man” (CS 444). Here, Mother Müller’s outbursts evince the degree to which patriarchy and order are important to and enforced by the family. Though there is carnivalesque imagery throughout the story, it is powerless to evoke lasting change or create a new order or possibilities for the future.

The one incongruous image in the tightly ordered Müller family is their disabled daughter, Ottelie, who acts as an ambivalent figure for the narrator and the story. Ottelie becomes, to use Yaeger’s words, a “throwaway body” who is a “discomforting emble(m) of neglect” that moves readers to reconceptualize the neat, patriarchal structure of the family, “through the explosion of monstrosity or violence, the flickery image of injustice (which remains unconceptualized, unacknowledged but also well known)” (Yaeger 8). Ottelie, who the narrator initially thinks is a servant, is introduced a third of the way into the narrative as the family is gathering to eat. The narrator notices a “crippled and badly deformed servant girl” whose face was “so bowed over it was almost hidden, and her whole body was maimed in some painful, mysterious way” (CS 429). Her very presence is deeply troubling for the narrator, who feels the incongruity so acutely she wishes she would die: “Let it be now, let it be now. Not even tomorrow, no, today. Let her sit down quietly in her rickety chair by the stove and fold those arms, and let us find her there like that, with her head fallen forward on her knees” (CS 442). For the narrator, Ottelie’s separation from the patriarchal family is emblematic of what she feels is her irreconcilable separation from society as a motherless and unmarried woman. They are “both . . . alienated from the patriarchal household, from its language and strict gender roles, especially the generational cycles of marriage and parturition” (Titus 97). However, this separation and the

anxiety produced by it finds a solution—at least, a momentary escape—in the carnivalesque laughter the narrator shares with Ottelie on a festive afternoon.

After milking the cows in the rain, Mother Müller catches an undiagnosed illness and dies in a matter of just a few hours. The family is thrown into “communal grief,” but as usual Ottelie and the narrator remain on the outskirts of the mourning (CS 447). When taking a nap in her room during the funeral, the narrator wakes up to “the howling of a dog” that she soon discovers is Ottelie, crying in the kitchen (CS 448). The two then take a ride together, a “little stolen holiday” that, through a carnivalesque laughter, radically connects the two women, offering respite from the patriarchal expectations of the family (CS 450).

The women’s ride in the carriage is reminiscent of the narrator’s first ride to the farm; however, this time the carnivalesque provides a moment where disorder breaks up and out. The two “caree[n] down the path, the “wheels spinning elliptically in a truly broad comedy swagger” and Ottelie becomes part of the spectacle, her head nodding “with the clownish humor of our trundling lurching progress” (CS 448, 9).

The first moment of realization of the possibility of life outside of the patriarchal structure comes when the narrator touches Ottelie, an act which, in Bakhtin’s words, “leads to the breaking away of the body from the single procreating earth, the breaking away from the collective, growing, and continually renewed body of the people with which it had been linked in folk culture” (23). In radical scene of human connection, the narrator’s “fingers slipped between her clothes and bare flesh, ribbed and gaunt and dry against my knuckles. My sense of her realness, her humanity, this shattered being that was a woman, was so shocking to me that a howl as dog-like and despairing as her own rose in me unuttered and died again, to be a perpetual

ghost” (CS 449). In this moment, a moment reminiscent of the Bakhtinian grotesque where birth and death are intertwined, the narrator comes to the stark realization of Ottelie’s humanity and realizes also “fully and irrevocably this other woman’s difference from traditional womanhood and similarity to her alienated artist self” (Titus 101). The scene is a “sudden hilarious celebration of the grotesque, unnatural self” of both Ottelie and the narrator as artist (Titus 102). Ottelie “gave a choked little whimper, and suddenly she laughed out, a kind of yelp but unmistakably laughter, and clapped her hands for joy, the grinning mouth and suffering eyes turned to the sky” (CS 449). Here is Bakhtinian laughter full of “a joyful and triumphant hilarity,” which “liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power . . . laughter opened men’s eyes on that which is new, on the future” (38, 94). In this moment, this shared laughter, both Ottelie and the narrator find respite from the patriarchal tradition in which they do not have a place; their laughter is freeing and regenerative, and just as the narrator notes she feels a “breath of spring air and freedom,” so their laughter points to a regenerative new season of gender-thinking for the woman narrator (CS 449).

In his 1979 introduction to *Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Robert Penn Warren writes that concern for the “alienation of the artist” is “implicit over and over” in Porter’s fiction (11). This alienation of the artist is evident in “The Circus,” where a young Miranda finds only separation and anxiety in the carnivalesque laughter of the circus. However, in the later story “Holiday,” Porter questions and offers hope and perspective on this alienation, again using carnivalesque laughter but this time, instead of a moment of disconnect

offering a moment of connect. In “Holiday,” laughter marks “the victory of the future . . . over the past” in the grotesque body of the narrator’s double, Ottelie (Bakhtin 256). The power of the old order has been, at least momentarily, disrupted, and a new spring is coming for the two women.

CONCLUSION

In a review for the New York *Sunday Herald Tribune* of Flannery O'Connor's final collection, Theodore Solotarff wrote that it occurred to him "that all that emphasis on old-style femininity in the South which produced the typical 'belles' had also produced an even more highly developed version of the 'misfits'" (*Contemporary Reviews* 228). These six short stories from a swath of Southern women writing at midcentury prove Solotarff's point to be valid. For Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter, the circus and carnivalesque constructions outside of the space of the circus proved a fruitful space for breaking down the "old style femininity" and building powerful "misfits" who transgress expectations to become radical agents of change.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, both the carnival and grotesque realism were ultimately revolutionary in their ability to create such a disruption during a time of great repression. In the disruptive images of carnival, Bakhtin finds "the victory of this future over the past" (256). Bakhtin's book, then, "carnivalizes the present because it is a hope for the future" (Holquist xxiii). The epigraph to *Rabelais and His World* is a quote from Russian author Alexander Herzen, who famously theorized that "It would be extremely interesting to write the history of laughter" (59). For Bakhtin scholar Krystyna Pomorska, Bakhtin wrote such a history and used it as his greatest weapon against the Stalin regime: "In [Bakhtin's] words, written during the great terror of the Stalinist night, we may not hear a chorus of the people, but surely we can discern at

least a single voice that is still there to remind others how necessary to the pursuit of liberty is the courage to laugh” (xxiii).

Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Katherine Anne Porter also embrace the powerful possibility of change and liberty implicit in both the carnival and in laughter, writing against the ideal of the Southern lady by creating female characters who instead become powerful figures of everyday transgression. Though the carnivalesque functions differently for all three authors, each is unified in their reaction against the ideals of the domesticity and docility required of Southern women at midcentury. As Welty, O’Connor, and Porter recognized, the carnival and grotesque are “a source of powerful, disruptive potential,” with the ability to “pose an affirmative challenge to the idealized classical body and the normative social order it enforces” (Adams 156). In these six stories, these women authors pose just such a challenge to the idea of normalcy, deftly defying the construction of normalcy and replacing it with the destabilizing potential of othered bodies.

Katherine Anne Porter’s “Holiday” ends on a note of optimism, a barking, joyous laughter that creates space for joy amidst bodily suffering, and a hope for the alienated and othered artist who exists apart from the patriarchy. For Bakhtin, as for Porter, spring and new birth comes from just this laughter:

The birth of the new . . . is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old . . . In the whole of the world and of the people there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is being born” (256).

In this thesis, I have attempted to prove that for these three women authors, the circus served as an unparalleled space where difference, disability, and othered bodies could be explored and addressed. The circus functions differently in each of their stories, though it ultimately functions as a space to question prevailing ideology of race and gender. For Welty, the circus becomes a parallel stage to the constructed stage of the Southern identity, which highlights the performance inherent in both freakishness and in normalcy. Welty uses this parallel to decry the eugenics movement by revealing the worth inherent in difference, and offers a reflection on how the grotesque vision shapes her own writing. For O'Connor, the circus becomes a space where the sacred can be subject to parody and reimagined, a carnivalesque reversal in which a hermaphrodite becomes the very body of God. Through this radical transformation, O'Connor writes against the patriarchal control of women's bodies, instead highlighting the radical mystery of faith. Outside the circus, freaks are first in line on the march towards heaven. For Porter, the carnival initially becomes another site of control, a position that is, eventually, reversed through the power of laughter. For all three of these women, misfits in their own way, the circus serves as the answer to normalcy.

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VITA

EDUCATION

2013 B.A. English and French, University of Alabama, Alabama
Graduated Summa Cum Laude with Departmental and University Honors
Honors thesis: “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Unifying the theology of O’Connor and Luther”

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Graduate Instructor, University of Mississippi: Fall 2016 to Present
WRIT 101: First Year Writing I
WRIT 102: First Year Writing II (Business theme)

Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Mississippi: Fall 2015 to Fall 2016
ENGL 224: Survey of American Literature since the Civil War
ENGL 225: Survey of British Literature to the 18th Century

Instructor of Record, University of Mississippi: Summer 2016
ENGL 225: Survey of British Literature since 1800

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

“Freedom at the Freak Show: Eudora Welty, Eugenics, and Gendered Spaces,” South Atlantic Modern Languages Association, Jacksonville, Florida, November, 2016. Secretary.

AWARDS

Graduate Assistantship, Graduate School, University of Mississippi, 2015-2018
Graduate Assistantship, English, University of Mississippi, 2015-2018
Full Academic Scholarship, University of Alabama, 2009-2013

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Freelance Writer and Editor, Oxford, Mississippi: September 2014 to Present

- Contribute features articles to a variety of publications including Oxford Magazine, Invitation Oxford, the Oxford Eagle, Shelby Living magazine, the Shelby County Reporter, and develop copy and social-media marketing for San Francisco-based travel website Luckyday.co

Staff Writer, Shelby County Reporter, Columbiana, Alabama: January 2014 to September 2014

- Reported government activity and community events in six municipalities
- Researched and wrote approximately 15 stories per weekly news cycle, including features stories and breaking news
- Held a hands-on role in the editing process for all Shelby County Newspaper publications, including three weekly newspapers, two monthly magazines, and four special publications
- Contributed features stories to Shelby Living, a monthly magazine distributed by Shelby County Newspapers
- Wrote and updated web content for Shelbycountyreporter.com