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“BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE IN THE FACE”: RECONFIGURING THE SOUTHERN
BEAUTY MYTH THROUGH THE SHORT FICTION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
WRITINGS OF EUDORA WELTY

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of English

The University of Mississippi

by

KATHERINE E. HOWELL

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

From her personal appearance as the “ugly duckling”¹ of southern literature, to her narrative preoccupations as a writer of grotesques, Eudora Welty has been critically separated from the realm of southern beauty and femininity. Drawing textual evidence from Welty’s strategic invocation of beauty acts and products in her short fiction and autobiographical writings, this thesis insists upon Welty’s lifelong stake in beauty culture, as it is practiced by southern women across the socioeconomic spectrum. Across her body of short fiction—a substantial portion of which was first published in women’s fashion magazines—Welty details the ways in which beauty, as expressed through personal grooming rituals and consumer acts, allows women to tangibly project their interior identities to society, transcend the limitations of patriarchal authority and social class, and command creative control over their personal narratives. Bridging the gap between high culture and the everyday, Welty’s beauty-inflected writings acknowledge radical potentialities for the universal feminine experience of “making up,” thus lending a recognizable praxis for studying the conflicting and often inexplicable emotions, rituals, and iconographies that comprise beauty culture in the American South. Ultimately, I contend that Welty is preternaturally equipped as a writer to initiate the messy, yet essential communion between mainstream beauty practices and radical gender politics by revising the popular myths that surround southern womanhood, and enabling her female characters to reclaim beauty for their own socioeconomic and creative advancement.

¹ Tolson 74.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my endlessly supportive parents, Angie and David Howell, my friends and loved ones in South Carolina and Mississippi, and my academic mentors who have encouraged me throughout the years. These individuals have helped me find my voice, both in writing and in life. In particular, I thank my Poppa Bob and my Nana, both of whom passed away during the writing of this thesis. The memories of their profound pride and belief in my work continue to inspire me.

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All possible gratitude goes to my advisor, Dr. Annette Trefzer, for her support and mentorship over the past year, and for inspiring me, during one of my first graduate seminars, to enter into Welty's world and discover new possibilities for my imagination. I also extend my appreciation to my committee members, Dr. Leigh Anne Duck and Dr. Katie McKee, for their support, on this project and others.

I also thank my fellow graduate students and friends in the English Department at the University of Mississippi, for fostering my research interests, and sharpening my ideas with their own.

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INTRODUCTION

There was no reason for making a Hedy Lamarr turban, except that my hair had gotten too long and instead of getting it cut I wondered if I couldn't just hide it. As for making it the hard way, that is because I am Southern. We Southern women would not think of having a washing machine installed in the home, but we may at any moment descent (or ascend) to some form of heinous physical drudgery, emerging only to declare our prowess before falling flat. I don't know what causes this. We all do it.²

—Eudora Welty, reflecting on her youth for the *Junior League Magazine*, November 1941

Eudora Welty wrote several autobiographical sketches in her lifetime, culminating in a memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*, which was published in 1983. These personal anecdotes are both humorous and instructional, entertaining the reader with Welty's signature wit and precise observational skills, while also detailing her lifelong development as a storyteller. Inevitably, Welty coalesces her memories with cultural commentary and creative elaboration, as fleeting fragments and images come to resemble more cohesive narratives. Much has been written about Welty's tendency to blur these categorical distinctions that separate fact from fiction; Pearl A. McHaney, in her critical exploration of the intersections between Welty's photography and nonfiction, ultimately determines, "No fiction is devoid of the autobiographical impulse as no nonfiction can ignore the pull of the imagination."³ According to this logic, combing through the

² Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 60.

³ McHaney, *A Tyrannous Eye*, 6.

nonfiction in search of prominent themes from Welty's fiction—namely, beauty culture and its role in the cultivation of southern femininity—is an effective exercise toward grasping the writer's intimate relationship with her creative content.

Given the communion between Welty's lived experience and her interior life, this project employs excerpts from autobiographical texts, primarily Welty's memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983), alongside close readings of selected short fiction from Welty's first two collections, *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943). By tracing the writer's imaginative development, as it pertains to the anchoring imagery of feminine beauty, I insist upon the necessity of reconciling Welty, the author of southern grotesques, with the aesthetic appeal of southern beauty culture. Welty's legacy of grotesqueness has been well-documented by literary critics, who interpret the connotations of Welty's female characters, and their often polarizing appearances and behaviors. Appraising the same era of fiction as this project, Sarah Gleeson-White contends that Welty's first grouping of published short stories exemplify "feminine ugliness,"⁴ on the grounds that Welty portrays her female characters as deliberately repulsive to critique southern sociopolitical inequalities, thus rebelling against the region's gendered norms. Similarly, Patricia Yaeger finds that Welty belongs to the class of "...the best women writers in the American South [who] turn[ed] away from the beautiful body" during the early and mid-twentieth century, favoring instead a female body that was incomplete and unsettling, yet dynamic and impossible to restrict or define by any myths.⁵ Given this line of critical thought, liberation and radical visibility belong to southern women who refuse to conform to their culture's norms of dress and manners; accordingly, examining Welty's fiction for its stake in fashion and beauty might appear an inconsistent point of analysis.

⁴ Gleeson-White 49.

⁵ Yaeger 2.

Yaeger's and Gleeson-White's acknowledgment of the agency found within Welty's fiction is crucial, yet their readiness to preclude beauty from this notion of radical femininity merits intervention. I argue that Welty's fiction promotes a more expansive view of femininity that cannot be reduced to a straightforward identification of "beautiful" or "ugly." Rather, the beauty acts that Welty models through her female characters acknowledge popular conventions of twentieth-century beauty culture that would be recognizable to her readers, while also effecting the more radical ends of amplifying feminine creative voices and rendering beauty profitable for women. By affirming that women who "make up" might also share ambitions with women who "act out," Welty's fiction discredits the southern myths that associate feminine beauty with whiteness, submission to male authority, and elitism; instead, feminine self-presentation becomes dynamic and transformative, a creative act of social visibility.

Accordingly, interrogating this question of beauty is necessary toward understanding the full breadth of Welty's artistic and personal vision as a southern writer and a woman, on multiple levels. First, the fashion industry largely enabled Welty's professional writing career, as it is remembered today. Welty accessed her creative calling by way of her early work as a society columnist for the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*,⁶ her brief stint as a fashion photographer for a Jackson department store,⁷ and ultimately, her fictional and nonfictional contributions to women's fashion magazines, such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Mademoiselle*⁸—all positions that required Welty to interact closely with beauty practices and products, as they were marketed and sold to women across the socioeconomic spectrum. Through these firsthand experiences in

⁶ Waldron 65.

⁷ McHaney, "Eudora Welty's Early Journalism," 125.

⁸ Claxton, "Beauty and the Beast," 78.

journalism and advertising, Welty learned that beauty had its own language, as well as its own power, particularly in the lives of southern women.

Welty's publication in women's fashion magazines had definitive creative and economic consequences, which, I argue, informed her vision about beauty culture's peculiar utility to the modern southern woman. For Welty, her affiliation with magazines, most importantly *Harper's Bazaar*,⁹ fostered her art, but also, imparted her with financial independence and previously unreachable popularity as a writer. For some critics, Welty's inclusion in *Harper's Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle* was more forced than appropriate to the content of her short fiction; as Mae Miller Claxton observes, "The public read her [Welty's] work interspersed with advertisements and pictures of the latest fall fashions. Incongruous, perhaps, but there were practical reasons to seek out the fashion magazines for publication, primarily publicity and money. These magazines paid well."¹⁰ Here, participating in beauty, even through indirect means, proved profitable for a modern woman with modern values. Additionally, I argue that Welty's profitable experience with print culture might have inspired her to implement beauty and fashion as a means of socially elevating her female characters, some of whom are also storytellers.

Because more readers were able to consume Welty's writing under these circumstances, more young women were exposed to radical ideas about feminine identity and rebellion, even as they participated in the "incongruous"¹¹ act of reading a complex short story, such as "The Winds" or "The Purple Hat," within the glossy pages of a glamour magazine. In fact, it is possible to interpret fashion during this era as a complement to literature, social reform, and modernist progress, rather than as an oppositional, regressive influence upon young women.

⁹ Pollack, *Eudora Welty's Photography and Fiction*, 140.

¹⁰ Claxton, "Beauty and the Beast," 78.

¹¹ Claxton, "Beauty and the Beast," 78.

Many women's magazines that Welty worked with, including *Mademoiselle*, were specifically targeted toward female readers with professional or educational aspirations, women who sought to cultivate their minds as well as their appearances.¹² During this era, fashion magazines in general were becoming increasingly more democratic and experimental. According to Linda M. Scott, during the late 1930s and early 1940s, "fashion became allied to art more than to aristocracy," as magazine editors, such as Carmel Snow of *Harper's Bazaar*, became interested in modernist art and surrealism, as well as popular culture, such as film.¹³ The imaginative and intellectual possibilities of these images were multiplied by their mass-marketed appeal; in *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media*, Carolyn L. Kitch finds that the content of women's magazines during the early-to-mid-twentieth century would "systematically blur the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture" through the printing of literature from well-renowned authors alongside advertisements for mundane cosmetics that could be purchased at a drugstore.¹⁴ The multiplication of references contained within popular beauty iconography during this time imparted more female readers with the opportunity to find their faces, as well as their imaginative fuel, within the pages of a fashion magazine.

I argue that Welty, given her literary and personal background, is a thoroughly qualified figure to narrate the cultural revolution that occurred within the realm of beauty during the first decades of the twentieth century. Beauty operates as a site of tension in Welty's short fiction that was published in magazines, as well as in her autobiographical writings, which trace her development as a young woman who consumes these popular images, and in turn, invents her

¹² Scott, *Fresh Lipstick*, 205.

¹³ Scott, *Fresh Lipstick*, 212.

¹⁴ Kitch 7.

own. Taken together, Welty's fiction and nonfiction depict her careful weighing of the popular myths of feminine beauty against her vision of radical self-construction. The epigraph at the start of this introduction derives from a short sketch titled "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!," embodies the full influence of such iconography upon the mind of a young southern girl.

Published in a 1941 issue of the *Junior League Magazine*, this yarn is largely driven by Welty's humor and nostalgia toward the fancies of southern girlhood, which tend toward the superficial and beautified. Welty recalls an early yearning to engage her enterprising mind with the construction of a turban, much like the kind that Hedy Lamarr, one of the most glamorous film stars of the Golden Age of Hollywood, often wore. Welty offers the following explanation for embarking on such an ambitious project: "...my hair had gotten too long and instead of getting it cut I wondered if I couldn't just hide it."¹⁵ Here, Welty gestures toward the type of vanity that is expected of southern women,¹⁶ while also underscoring the scrutiny that surrounds acts of self-fashioning. The idea of hair becoming "too long,"¹⁷ and thus needing to be concealed from public view, implies Welty's anticipation of social criticism, and perhaps some subconscious shame at her own appearance, which might be perceived as slovenly or unbecoming.

Consequently, at several points in her narration, Welty denigrates the quality of her hair: "Here came a Spanish shawl, but it seemed to be all fringe—just like my hair."¹⁸ Welty's light tone, as well as her attempts at circumventing conventional grooming standards, somewhat offsets this shame; her inventiveness troubles the straightforward beauty rituals that southern girls are expected to follow, immediately casting Welty as a deviant. As the sketch progresses, Welty complicates her playful resistance to beauty norms through several key reversals. At one

¹⁵ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 60.

¹⁶ Seidel 32.

¹⁷ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 60.

¹⁸ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 60.

moment, she purchases a readymade turban, thus introducing the concept of consumerism toward the physical construction of femininity: "...it [the turban] was a grand concealment for my hair, which was growing longer and longer. I had now, approaching the subject through some other angle, begun the Ogilvie Sisters' Home Treatment, with much brushing, extended through absentmindedness and brooding, and I daresay the back hair was growing about an inch every other day during all this period."¹⁹ While the turban achieves the desired effect—covering Welty's unruly hair—the scalp treatment that Welty employs has the effect of lengthening her hair, counteracting her original intention. This fluctuation in motives, and the careful consideration that Welty devotes toward each of her personal beauty decisions, indicates the high stakes of engaging in beauty culture for the southern girl, as predicated upon the transformations promised by the products themselves.²⁰

Welty emphasizes the effectiveness of the Ogilvie Sisters' treatment, but marks her use of the product with "absentmindedness and brooding,"²¹ perhaps implying some compulsory quality to these labors. According to Blain Roberts, "...long hair stood as evidence of southern women's virtue, of their obedience—of their very identity as southern ladies."²² While long hair signals the familiar deference and purity of the belle figure, the artificial means through which Welty lengthens her hair was, in fact, frowned upon. During the first decades of the new century, when the beauty industry was in its nascent stages, "[c]onsumption of beauty aids was blamed for the loss of traditional femininity," as it demonstrated a woman's aptitude for being "calculating and visually deceitful."²³ Welty embodies the contradiction at the center of this

¹⁹ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 61.

²⁰ Conor 113.

²¹ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 61.

²² Roberts 35.

²³ Conor 119.

discussion. Through her implementation of commercial products that lengthen her hair and improve its overall quality, Welty grooms herself to suit her region's traditional understandings of feminine beauty, even as she speaks from a more subversive perspective of deliberate self-construction.

Despite her efforts at enhancing her hair, Welty persists in the assembly of the turban, and concludes the story with an appraisal of her handiwork: "When I got through with it [the turban], it was tacky. It had ears. When I brushed my hair and put it on, I looked like a lady in *Popular Mechanics*, ready for goggles and a rocket ship. It served me right, I suppose. But what with the snow melting and all, and the birds singing, I went down the next day and got a haircut and have been taking life easy ever since."²⁴ Disappointed with the execution of her plan, Welty accepts this aesthetic loss as a sort of punishment for her deviance: "It served me right, I suppose."²⁵ Rather than undermining her region's gender norms by styling herself in a way that projects creativity over conformity—and, as implied by the reference to "goggles and a rocket ship,"²⁶ aligns her actions with boyish enterprises—Welty cuts her problematic hair, having performed the role of southern girl who frets about her appearance, seeks a creative solution, but ultimately fashions herself according to the acceptable codes of femininity.

Even with this return to "proper" behavior, Welty offers her readers a muddled message about beauty culture. The sketch's title itself is an imperative, complete with multiple exclamation points, for "Women!!" to "Make Turban in Own Home!", although Welty abandons the utility of said turban in favor of scalp treatments and trims that rehabilitate her hair. Welty's mutability in this anecdote, her fluctuation between liberation and self-regulation, reflects the

²⁴ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 62-63.

²⁵ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 61.

²⁶ Welty, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!", *Occasions*, 61.

ambiguous reality of beauty culture for southern women, whose hairstyle and cosmetics choices constitute, quite literally, the “face” that they present to society.

Here, beauty operates as a site of tension, as it enables young women like Welty to express themselves and render their identities visible, even as they play into certain gendered myths that might be perceived as limiting. Many critics acknowledge the paradox that undergirds physical expressions of femininity in the South, especially given the specter of the tragic belle figure, who is destroyed in her pursuit for autonomy over her own body. Despite these negative associations, Roberts leans toward embracing beauty culture and its hallmarks, maintaining, “Even if they failed to upend southern sexual relations, these products and rituals created possibilities for a femininity that was deliberately crafted by women themselves.”²⁷ Such acts carry significant symbolic weight, and contribute to consequences that are more than skin deep.

In her autobiographical sketch, Welty introduces several key dimensions of beauty culture that I will elaborate upon elsewhere in this project, including the influence of print culture upon personal grooming decisions (the intrepid mentality behind Welty’s turban-making was fostered by *Popular Mechanics*, “the only magazine I [Welty] ever would read”²⁸), the enforcement and modeling of proper beauty behavior from the southern mother (Chestina Welty lends scissors to her daughter, and asks, “Are you going to cut your hair?”²⁹), and the ways in which beauty necessarily implicates matters of economics and social class (Welty constructs her turban “from an old Lord & Taylor Budget Shop dress panel,”³⁰ emphasizing its cheap, but readily attainable quality). In constructing her appearance, the southern girl negotiates multiple conflicting forces. At varying moments, she acts as both subject and object in her own beauty

²⁷ Roberts 10.

²⁸ Welty, “Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!”, *Occasions*, 57.

²⁹ Welty, “Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!”, *Occasions*, 62.

³⁰ Welty, “Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!”, *Occasions*, 60.

journey, purchasing cosmetics, receiving treatments, interpreting advertisements, and styling her body, thus straddling the thin line that separates personal pleasure and autonomous choice from the social pressure to conform.

This sketch engages with Hollywood glamour and modernity, modeling the peculiar power of these concepts within the imagination of a young southern girl. Essential to my critical analysis of beauty acts in Welty's short fiction and autobiographical writings will be the concept of "experiential space,"³¹ borrowed from David McWhirter's study of film and regionalism in Welty's collection, *The Golden Apples*. Making the important distinction between the high culture of Welty's literary modernism and the low culture of the movies that she invokes in her fiction, McWhirter observes an innovative crossover in style that distinguishes Welty for her willingness to amalgamate preexisting forms as a means of unveiling her characters' interior lives.³² This pastiche recalls Welty's construction of the turban—the high glamour of Hedy Lamarr, crossed with the mundane reality of a girl with scissors, cheap fabric, and too many ideas from *Popular Mechanics*.

Ultimately, McWhirter elevates popular culture's power and functionality in the everyday, imaginative life of a southern girl, interpreting the Hollywood imagery in Welty's stories as offering her young female characters "a language for articulating racialized fears and desires connected to sexuality." He continues, prioritizing film at this specific temporal moment "...as the site for a new kind of gendered, transnational public sphere proper to the alternative modernity of the 'non-modern' space known as 'the South.'"³³ Similarly, cosmetics and hair products connected southern girls to a modern, commodified, and global network through the

³¹ McWhirter 71.

³² McWhirter 69.

³³ McWhirter 71.

visual dissemination of ideals about femininity, style, and desirability. Much like the film industry, the beauty industry relies upon the use of rhetorical persuasion to integrate an individual into a broader network of potent iconography.

During Welty's girlhood in the 1910s and 1920s, just as she was forming her storytelling sensibilities, the advertising industry was becoming a dictating force in American cultural trends.³⁴ Capable of reaching even the most sheltered young woman, advertisements, and the beauty products that they peddled, imparted viewers with sleek visions of glamour, sexuality, adulthood, and cosmopolitan escapade. For many southern girls, visibility was an essential component of that vision. In *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*, Liz Conor contends that "[a]ttracting a gaze was posited as one of women's ultimate goals and adventures enabled by their guided participation in consumerism."³⁵ A substantial part of beauty culture's original allure, therefore, derived from its ability to render a woman conspicuous. For the southern woman in particular, beauty aids in the form of cosmetics and hair products defined new ideals about femininity, visibility, and modernity. The material culture of beauty products, and the rise of the modern fashion industry, destabilized gender conventions on all levels: from the southern belle on down to the lower and middle classes. For all women involved, beauty culture enabled the transcendence of tradition-based institutions, and the popularization of modern ideas about social de-stratification, financial independence, and even feminine empowerment.

Welty's short fiction and autobiographical writings contain a collection of references to commodified goods that relate to feminine grooming and personal care. The effect of invoking these items, even in a cursory fashion, is Welty's cultivation of a realistic atmosphere, as

³⁴ Claxton, "Beauty and the Beast," 71.

³⁵ Conor 116.

predicated upon the small details of daily life. Such beauty items include Stella Rondo's Kress eyebrow tweezers that appear in "Why I Live at the P.O.,"³⁶ the various polishes and powders that Leota wields in her beauty salon "with strong red-nailed fingers,"³⁷ in "Petrified Man," and "bottle after bottle and jar after jar"³⁸ of Miss Baby Marie's racially inclusive cosmetics line that she peddles in "Livvie." In "A Sweet Devouring," Welty's nonfiction piece about her reading life, the nostalgic scent of "sandalwood from the incense counter"³⁹ connects the fantasy world of Welty's beloved childhood books to bottles of perfume, which could be purchased at the same department store. These products simultaneously evoke beauty, memory, fantasy, and economics, painting portraits of women-as-consumers who require the acquisition of concrete tools in order to actualize their desired appearances.

Welty's awareness of the ubiquitous presence of beauty products in the lives of southern women derives from several realities. First, several critics have already identified Welty's narration as being preternaturally tuned toward the power of objects, and the influence that they exert upon her characters' physical and interior lives. Accordingly, her female characters often employ and interpret these objects in symbolic ways that connect their personal experiences to their social and material settings. In his analysis of *The Optimist's Daughter*, Travis Rozier contends that "Welty uses the object world of the novel to dramatize the struggle of the white Southern woman to adapt to social change."⁴⁰ The most prominent social change that the symbols in *The Optimist's Daughter* subliminally invoke is the industrialism of the post-World War Two era, and its gendered consequences, including an increase in female economic

³⁶ Welty, "Why I Live at the P.O.," *Collected Stories*, 46.

³⁷ Welty, "Petrified Man," *Collected Stories*, 17.

³⁸ Welty, "Livvie," *Collected Stories*, 213.

³⁹ Welty, "A Sweet Devouring," 31.

⁴⁰ Rozier 138.

engagement. This newfound purchasing power, Rozier finds, broadened southern women's access to goods at competitive prices, "perhaps supplanting genealogy and wealth as indicators of social standing."⁴¹ Moving beyond the exclusivity of ownership that typified the stratified antebellum South, the twentieth century enabled southern women to elevate themselves beyond limiting stereotypes through the strategic possession of objects. There is much left to be said about the specific capacity of beauty objects to materialize a woman's social identity, and Welty's lifelong fascination with the symbolism of such goods, which recurrently emerges in her short fiction.

Next, perhaps the most compelling coincidence that links the cosmetics industry to Welty's life and writings is the fact that they were quite literally born alongside one another. In *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, Kathy Peiss charts the boom of mass-marketed beauty products, placing its peak during the first two decades of the twentieth century: "Between 1909 and 1929 the number of American perfume and cosmetics manufacturers nearly doubled, and the factory value of their products rose tenfold, from \$14.2 million to nearly \$141 million."⁴² Welty, born on April 13, 1909, experienced her girlhood amid this international cultural revolution in feminine self-presentation. The rise of the beauty industry, however, was not simply a distant background occurrence; in fact, young girls like Welty were the intended consumers of such goods, and their purchasing power was highly sought after by beauty brands. According to Roberts, "Most beauty products, tools, and rituals of the Jim Crow era were designed to appeal to younger women on the cusp of adulthood."⁴³ This widespread privileging of the opinions and fancies of young girls was unprecedented in American culture. The innate

⁴¹ Rozier 138.

⁴² Peiss 97.

⁴³ Roberts 12.

synchronicity between the adolescent female experience and cosmetics usage underpinned Welty's recollections of youth in *One Writer's Beginnings*, as well as her other autobiographical writings, and encouraged her to integrate these products into significant moments in her female characters' personal narratives.

Ultimately, beauty objects signified opportunity and change in the early twentieth century, operating as genuine currency for young women who might otherwise not enjoy much social influence. Roberts defends beauty culture's significance toward understanding the historical development of gender politics, arguing that ostensibly "small-scale" consumer acts allowed young southern women "to stake out a place"⁴⁴ in the male-dominated economic sphere—an embodied political demonstration of sorts. Given its sudden amplified range of brands and products during the first decades of the new century, the beauty market became noted for its democratizing capacity: "In a very short time, cosmetics had become an affordable indulgence for American women across the socioeconomic spectrum."⁴⁵ As I will illustrate in the second chapter, many of Welty's female characters from the lower-middle classes engage with beauty products and practices to render themselves more conspicuous, and thus destabilize the boundaries of class and gender conventions that bind them.

While the practical consequences of beauty culture are worthy of emphasis, given their sociopolitical value, the more abstract, idealized dimension that surrounds beauty certainly tempted Welty's imagination as well. In *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*, Susan K. Cahn writes, "In the early to mid-twentieth-century South, an adolescent girl's sense of self, her romantic fantasies, and her image of the future commonly incorporated a world of

⁴⁴ Roberts 17.

⁴⁵ Peiss 97.

material goods like clothing, makeup, shoes...,”⁴⁶ and the list goes on. To be sure, these commodified items are often affiliated with the domestic space and heteronormativity, as they are primarily used in the home for the sake of promoting a socially approved version of femininity, yet it is possible to study their significance with an eye toward more subversive applications. One possible application, which Cahn recognizes in her study, derives from the escapism afforded by beauty and glamour, and the expansive experiences that a product as simple as a tube of lipstick can exemplify for young southern girls.

Drawing from her own adolescent experiences, Welty understands female beautification as an intrinsically creative act, and therefore, an effective storytelling device. Sarah Elise Baker’s theoretical perspectives on the peculiar rhetorical power of glamour complements this notion:

Glamour is one vision of what “the good life” looks like, whereby the consumption of things can supposedly make life more pleasurable and attractive. Glamorous objects often appeal because they trigger a sense of the already enjoyed and provoke idealized visions of the future. While it could be argued that many styles work in this way, glamour is an aesthetic that makes us acutely aware of the imaginative process.⁴⁷

Although the beauty industry is undergirded by the hard facts of capitalism, its importance to young women is largely determined by its appeal to their imaginations and sensory lives.

Operating as a highly visual reservoir of unfulfilled dreams, beauty allows young women to engage with “a form of secular magic”⁴⁸ that promises them multiple opportunities for self-determined transformation throughout their lifetimes. As a storyteller who prioritizes the interior lives of her female characters, Welty naturally gravitated toward this aesthetic symbology in her

⁴⁶ Cahn 130.

⁴⁷ Baker 58.

⁴⁸ Thrift 14.

early short fiction, recognizing the utility that it served for young women looking for an escape from mundane realities and limiting personal circumstances.

Having identified the various practices and ideologies that lend beauty objects their power, I want to consider a staged photograph that has often been used as evidence of Welty's satirical dismissal of beauty culture. The image is titled "Helena Arden" (see *fig. 1*), and features Welty, "...draped in a sheet and applying some very strange cosmetics."⁴⁹ With wide eyes and a stoic expression, Welty is seated behind a collection of household products, including shoe polish, kitchen cleanser, and dietary supplements. Her hand is uplifted to her cheek daintily; instead of a cosmetics brush, her fingers hold a toothbrush. Taken together, these details evoke the familiar image of a woman seated at her vanity mirror, ensconced by products that promise to make her beautiful. The photograph is clearly staged, an example of Welty's well-documented penchant for camp and theatrics,⁵⁰ yet the humor is also underscored by an intellectual dimension, much like her earlier society columns. For many critics, including Mae Miller Claxton, the tone of the photograph reflects "Welty's sophisticated understanding of advertising,"⁵¹ her willingness to interrogate the common persuasive ploys of beauty campaigns, which target female anxieties and ideals for the sake of commercial gain. Ultimately, the symbolism behind "Helena Arden" speaks to a greater conversation about the contrived, artificial nature of beauty culture, as it is packaged and sold to women.

In *Eudora Welty's Photography and Fiction: The Body of the Other Woman*, Harriet Pollack devotes substantial attention to this photograph, and the truths that it reveals about

⁴⁹ Welty, *Photographs*, xxi.

⁵⁰ Nissen, "Queer Welty, Camp Welty," 209.

⁵¹ Claxton, "Beauty and the Beast," 70.

Welty's perception of media messages aimed at women. Ultimately, Pollack interprets the photograph as exposing the hypocrisy that exists at the center of the beauty industry:

To catch Welty's attitude toward commercial images institutionalizing ideas of beauty in order to sell products, you only have to know the spoofing photo "Helena Arden,"...a title combining two well-known cosmetic brand names: Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden... Welty's "Helena Arden" lampoons the contradiction [of the labor required to become beautiful] and mocks the promise; the lotions and potions summoned to produce female possibility are clearly identified as products routinely used in daily female regimens of domestic maintenance and drudgery, at odds with fashion iconography's glamour.⁵²

Here, Pollack makes the important distinction between the alluring beauty myth that is marketed to women, which fulfills their desires for escape and self-actualized transformation, and the reality that such products continue women's subservience to male-serving standards. In grooming their bodies to suit a specific aesthetic ideal, women augment their domestic responsibilities, adding beauty labor to their preexisting household labor. Pollack's recognition of the deception that fuels advertised images of glamour aligns with Welty's own words: "It [advertising] was too much like sticking pins into people to make them buy things that they didn't need or really much want."⁵³

Welty certainly fathomed the shortcomings of these industries. Accordingly, rather than countering arguments that defend Welty's interrogating spirit and general suspicion of the social conventions that impede the modern woman's progress, I would like to allow space for two theoretical possibilities to exist together. Welty did not understand beauty as one thing, but as

⁵² Pollack, *Eudora Welty's Photography and Fiction*, 90.

⁵³ Welty, qtd. in Waldron 48.

many things—a site of flamboyant play and experimentation that naturally appealed to her creative interests, as well as her personal life. Axel Nissen aptly observes a theatrical tendency within Welty’s humor, even borrowing a line from Susan Sontag’s foundational essay, *Notes on Camp*, to describe Welty’s style of writing: “‘The Camp sensibility,’ Sontag observes, ‘is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken.’”⁵⁴ Extending the notion of camp to Welty’s lifelong study of beauty culture gives way to an unexpected synchronicity between how a woman is perceived by society, and how she seeks to cultivate her appearance as an individual. Through the perspective of camp, a woman is enabled to combine popular images and influences related to feminine beauty with her own self-constructed ideas about identity, modernity, and progress. In this space, mainstream notions of beauty might exist naturally alongside the authentic, embodied experience of beauty; rather than producing an unresolvable discomfort, this contradicting rhetoric about femininity imparts the female subject with a sort of personalized agency, as she negotiates her own specific relationship to the monolith of ideal southern beauty.

I argue that Welty’s attitude toward beauty culture is predicated upon this “double sense,” this awareness of multiplied meanings within the realm of female self-presentation. When a woman styles her body, she does so deliberately, even with subliminal messages that derive from advertisements, popular culture, and regional ideals about beauty. What Welty effectively communicates through her fiction and nonfiction is that beauty is consciously constructed with tools that are as commonplace as dish soap and shoe polish. These staples of everyday consumerism, while aligned with the corporate world, are accessible to women across all social classes, enabling women of various circumstances to engage with the rhetoric of glamour,

⁵⁴ Sontag 281, qtd. in Nissen, “Queer Welty, Camp Welty,” 228.

sexuality, and visibility. The pastiche of “Helena Arden” filters into Welty’s short fiction, which is similarly experimental, and defiant of the myths that seek to pinpoint and regulate a woman’s body with exacting standards. By demystifying the glamour of the beauty industry, and rendering it mundane and ubiquitous, Welty democratizes the pursuit of beauty itself. Perhaps beauty’s true allure lies in its capacity to transform not only a woman’s physical appearance, but also, her social power, as she commands control of her body through her role as an active economic consumer.

My interrogation of southern beauty culture, as it relates to Welty’s fiction and nonfiction, requires two components: first, an understanding of the traditional, exclusive, standards of beauty by which southern women were measured during the early twentieth century, and second, the ways in which those unattainable standards were radically revised by women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds for their own aggrandizement. Carol Ann Johnston finds that Welty offers her readers both familiar and unfamiliar perspectives about gender and social class in the American South; Welty’s favoring of this new category of womanhood works to complicate her legacy as a “traditional” southern writer. As Johnston observes, “Welty’s Southern ladies play both with and against type; most are not aristocratic, but even the most impoverished among them attempt to carry themselves in a manner that reflects Southern aristocracy, while remaining true to their individual wit and desire.”⁵⁵ Extending Johnston’s argument, I find that the same female characters within Welty’s *oeuvre* who blur the reliable markers of class, manners, and dignity also reconfigure the standards of beauty through their shamelessly conspicuous displays of autonomy. Welty’s fiction is primarily preoccupied with these women who command social space in such a way that insists upon their visibility, in spite

⁵⁵ Johnston 276.

of their social status or perceived adherence to gendered conventions. Here, participation in beauty culture becomes transgressive, as Welty charts the twentieth-century dissolution of the ideal southern belle, and replaces her with a woman who manipulates superficial appearances to narrate her story of selfhood.

The first chapter of this project illustrates Welty's stake in destabilizing the dual mythology—the plantation myth and the myth of southern womanhood—that held southern women to the requisite and oftentimes destructive beauty of the belle. In detailing the tragic demises of Clytie Farr in “Clytie” and Miss Sabina in “Asphodel,” Welty explodes cultural myths that interpret the belle's association with the plantation as the origin of her beauty and social worth. Instead, Welty extricates these dramatic belles from their patriarchal settings, and allows them to engage in self-fashioning as a means of publicly displaying the internal trauma wrought by these gendered standards. By conveying the extent of Clytie's and Sabina's psychological declines through their choices in clothing and accessories, as well as their encounters with mirrors and other reflective surfaces, Welty allows her repressed belles to directly confront reality through their appearances, and thus define themselves beyond the cultural myths that sought to bind them.

The second chapter follows Welty's personal and creative interrogation of self-fashioning through several prominent icons of femininity, including Rapunzel and Medusa. Through these seemingly paradoxical figures, Welty recognizes the innately transgressive potential within beauty, which she ascribes to the working class, modern southern girl who engages with beauty culture as a consumer, and thus erases markers of her social status. In the habit of most southern girls, Welty's initiation into the broad matrix of beauty iconographies occurred at both subtle and critical junctures throughout childhood, which she identifies throughout her autobiographical

writings. Initially, Welty mediates her understanding of beauty through memories of her mother, Chestina Welty, a figure who represents the more conventional, upper-class version of southern womanhood; despite her position of privilege, Chestina introduces Welty to the imaginative potential of beauty through her personal grooming habits and ardent love of literature, which she often correlates in conversations with her daughter. Accordingly, Welty invokes beauty products, acts, and concepts to demonstrate how talismans of femininity affected her development as a writer. *One Writer's Beginnings*, as well as her other autobiographical writings and assorted ephemera, speaks to Welty's early awareness of beauty's complicated power. This complicated power inspires the creation of fictional characters, including Ruby Fisher in "A Piece of News" and Cornella in "The Winds," two young women who harness beauty's sensory power to transcend their current socioeconomic circumstances. By engaging with their bodies through the strategic manipulation of beauty rituals and products, Ruby and Cornella fashion new possibilities for their lives.

For Welty, beauty functions as an imaginative device, allowing her to access weighty topics such as race, sexuality, class, and economic power. Ultimately, Welty's autobiographical texts, which foreground her personal initiation into beauty culture, promote an expansive reading of beauty as enabling, and capable of enlarging a woman's engagement with the world. I argue that to Welty, fashion and beauty were languages, entry points into the world as it is experienced by women on a daily basis. Rather than dismissing it as frivolous, Welty recognized mainstream beauty culture's utility, as a creative and conceptual device for women, as well as a means of connecting with her readers on the common ground of physical presentation. Welty's definition of beauty is necessarily broad, malleable, and democratic, capable of being revised under radical

terms, and expressed by southern women as a means of attaining power, visibility, and currency, in both literal and abstract senses.

I. “DRESSED UP SO THAT YOU COULD SEE HER COMING”: SOUTHERN
SOCIAL VISIBILITY AND THE BEAUTY OF THE BELLE

*Chollie Knickerjackson tells me that Sallie Beard looked regal in white crepe at the Phi Mu dance Tuesday eve... Winifred Green was the radiant southern beauty in black silk with white collar and a colonial bouquet... Louisa Green was vivacious over French flowers on her white organdy frock... And many another beautiful Phi Mu came deliciously gowned to her dance...*⁵⁶

—Eudora Welty, writing for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 17, 1933

Between 1933 and 1935, Eudora Welty mobilized her professional writing career as a society stringer for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, her first paid position as a published writer. As the newspaper’s resident reporter for debutante balls, weddings, fashion shows, galas, and other exclusive social events in the Jackson area, Welty was charged with the task of documenting, often in excessive and hilarious detail, the latest fashions of the upper crust. Far from assuming an objective editorial voice in her recitation of society lines, Welty allows her trademark satirical impulse to dictate these descriptions, particularly when underlining the extraordinary lengths that women would go to appear fashionable and desirable. Operating as a surveyor rather than an active participant in the social rigmarole, which her commentary largely characterizes as frivolous and redundant, Welty tends to critique the artifice that surrounds the

⁵⁶ Welty, *Early Escapades*, 135-136.

construction of white southern femininity, thus entrenching her position as an outsider to this system that glorifies the beauty of the belle.

In recent years, critics have returned to these columns, recognizing the significance of Welty's early society journalism toward her development as a fiction writer. While society pages typically spotlight inconsequential details that serve to gratify the upper class, critics identify a more nuanced quality to Welty's contributions to the paper. Reflecting upon the disparity between Welty's high-brow social commentary and her intended audience in Jackson, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee, Ann Waldron infers that "[r]eaders had never seen anything quite like this *Vanity Fair* style in the society pages of the *Commercial Appeal*."⁵⁷ The incisive humor that underlies these columns speaks to Welty's creative and intellectual capabilities, not to mention her early willingness to play with form and test the conventions of polite southern society—traits that she would retain and further sharpen throughout her writing life. This bold narrative style surfaces most conspicuously in her first two short story collections, *A Curtain of Green* and *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, which are governed by an arguably more experimental and deviant brand of fiction than that of Welty's later novels.

In addition to her playful narrative style, the columns expose Welty's thinly veiled attitudes toward her hometown's social regime, specifically the remnants of the Old South aristocracy, a class that endured through the antebellum era and entrenched its influence into the twentieth century. Reflecting upon the consequences of Welty's brief foray into print journalism, Pearl McHaney concludes, "The society columns are as contagious as the fiction that is to come; they serve as an apprenticeship for the characters Welty would create, although few, if any, debutantes appear in her fiction."⁵⁸ To be sure, the female characters that Welty gravitates

⁵⁷ Waldron 66.

⁵⁸ McHaney, "Eudora Welty's Early Journalism," 122.

toward rarely belong to the privileged world that was the compulsory subject of her early journalism. When belles do emerge in her fiction, their portrayal unequivocally troubles traditional notions of southern femininity.

Welty fathomed the ideological significations that tied the belle to a harmful and limiting antebellum past, as evidenced by her subtle critiques of the Jackson debutantes in the *Commercial Appeal* society columns. By exposing the frivolous trappings of the southern aristocratic set, of which she was arguably a part of, if only in terms of socioeconomic class, Welty separates herself from the appearances and values that collectively glorify the plantation myth and the myth of southern womanhood. For Welty, southern beauty, as mediated through this dual mythology that comes to rest in the belle figure, ultimately implicates women in a narrow system of requisite whiteness, youth, chivalric courtship, and patriarchal submission.

Despite the burden of such tropes, it is worth mentioning that the myth of southern womanhood also comes with its own privileges. In *Entitled to the Pedestal: Place, Race, and Progress in White Southern Women's Writing*, Nghana Tamu Lewis acknowledges the crucial reality that many white women writers strategically employed such myths for literary recognition and commercial gain through their publication of fiction, especially in the early twentieth century, when antebellum ideals enjoyed a popular resurgence.⁵⁹ Even as these female writers attempted "...to negotiate sites of contradiction, limitation, and possibility in their own lives"⁶⁰ through the frequent invocation, and sometimes, subtle repudiation, of these myths, white women were a protected class in the American South, implicitly given the advantage of the public's trust and faith in their own goodness. Lewis' discussion of the privileges afforded to white women writers should weigh upon the study of Welty's engagement with antebellum

⁵⁹ Lewis 6.

⁶⁰ Lewis 165.

emblems of femininity, race, and class, since Welty herself, as the daughter of a successful Jackson businessman,⁶¹ benefitted from the assumption that she was a mild-mannered woman of good breeding. By trafficking in familiar myths, Welty gained access to an entire readership that perceived her as “the friendly, generous, sweetly intellectual white lady”⁶²—hardly the reputation of a dissident. This staid reputation imparted Welty with two advantages: a pedestal from which to survey her social context, and a shield to partially shroud her subtle rhetorical dismantling of the gendered myths of her culture.

With her intimate knowledge of the belle, and the undermining rhetoric that encircles her, Welty uses her fiction to craft belles who are typically corrupted, defeated, or forgotten. Often, these belles have reached the end of their lives, such as the titular character of “Clytie,” as well as Miss Sabina in “Asphodel,” two figures that I will explore later in this chapter. Despite their upper class positions, both Clytie and Miss Sabina defy the expectations of southern propriety through the slight eccentricities of their appearance, such as the wearing of tattered clothing in public,⁶³ as well as the public visibility of their psychological traumas. Like conventional belles, these women and their bodies are objects of intense scrutiny, yet they earn notoriety by replacing the illusions of feminine beauty and innocence with the realities of old age, violence, and emotional turmoil. The tragic fates of Clytie and Miss Sabina imply that Welty recognizes the weightlessness of beauty and social eligibility as the sole measures of a woman’s personal worth, even in the South where such superficial traits are considered essential feminine virtues.

The violence and horror that Welty assigns to Clytie’s and Miss Sabina’s appearances as distorted relics of the belle archetype are not without their own power. Much has been written

⁶¹ Prenshaw, *Composing Selves*, 258.

⁶² Yaeger 62.

⁶³ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 76.

about Welty's career-long fascination with female bodies that exceed their sanctioned social boundaries, bodies that, due to their unseemly behavior or unbecoming appearance, do not resemble the Jackson society queens that decorate the pages of the *Commercial Appeal*. Harriet Pollack designates the female subjects of Welty's invention "flashers" who "expose themselves beyond what a lady should be."⁶⁴ Collectively, these "flashers" work to confound straightforward depictions of femininity by refusing to surrender their autonomous identity within a stifling family dynamic, marriage, or social milieu. Typically belonging to lower socioeconomic classes, flashers invite attention in public settings, enacting their agency through prominent displays of sexuality and emotion.⁶⁵ The flamboyance of such displays, which contradicts the rules of decorum for respectable ladies, implies that Welty's women cannot aspire to beauty in the traditional sense. Instead, they invent alternative modes of visibility that threaten the status quo and effect their own liberation from myths that exclude and restrict them.

Pollack's study of highly visible, inappropriate women complements Patricia Yaeger's recognition of "a new female vastness" across Welty's fictional works, particularly in her first short story anthology, *A Curtain of Green*, published in 1941.⁶⁶ Such figures emerge out of spaces that seek to contain female bodies by requiring their participation in traditions and institutions that are no longer sustainable for the modern woman.⁶⁷ Accordingly, Welty's women spill over their proscribed stereotypes, shattering the legitimacy of the southern lady, and replacing her polished, demure story with new narratives of radical visibility. The complex foil to the high society lady that Welty imagines is fearless and fearsome, unapologetic in her own excess.

⁶⁴ Pollack 6.

⁶⁵ Pollack 24.

⁶⁶ Yaeger 139.

⁶⁷ Yaeger 140.

While debutantes did not complement Welty's radical vision of southern femininity, they nevertheless occupied a significant portion of the cultural imagination, and informed much about gender politics, class hierarchies, and regional iconography during the era of Welty's early publications. This project, which traces Welty's intervention in beauty culture, and defends her diverse representation of feminine self-fashioning, first requires a baseline understanding of the myth against which all other images of southern womanhood are weighed before revised versions might be conceptualized. While Welty rejects the core myth itself, she employs her intimate knowledge of the belle as a means of establishing and then subverting the strict communal expectations that regulate female appearances and behaviors. Welty's women, however, complicate the one-dimensional identity of the belle with their conspicuously different displays, such as Clytie's decision to "[dress] up so that you could see her coming"⁶⁸ and Miss Sabina's menacing, yet undeniable beauty that evolves and even expands with age. These belles translate the body-based scrutiny that they receive into concrete social currency. Through such characters that redefine what it means to engage with beauty practices, Welty revolutionizes the idea of feminine appearance as a space of possibility, mutability, and agency, one that enables southern women to blur boundaries and exceed the limitations of their social class and gender. In her dismissal of the traditional belle, and her joint refusal to preserve the ancestral plantation that enhances the belle's symbolic power, Welty overcomes the dual mythology that hinders the modern southern woman's progress, ultimately enlarging the promises of beauty culture beyond the aristocratic class.

Beauty and the Belle: Confronting the Myth

⁶⁸ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 80.

In the southern United States, feminine beauty is naturally aligned with the social designation of “the belle,” a category of demure womanhood that has its origins in antebellum lore, but maintained its relevance well beyond the Reconstruction period. Given the long-reaching and ever-evolving impact of this feminine icon, the project of defining the belle is somewhat challenging. Often portrayed as a metonym for the South itself, the belle functions as a potent rhetorical tool, and its “metaphorical and mythic significances”⁶⁹ are frequently invoked in fiction and popular discourses. Accordingly, the belle enjoys wide public recognition and resonating cultural power. At her core, the belle embodies the abstract ideals of purity, beauty, and deference to patriarchal authority, as reflected by her participation in socially sanctioned domestic experiences, such as courtship, marriage, and motherhood.⁷⁰ Her apparently effortless and willful conformity to these rituals, augmented by her exalted status in literature, encourages compliance among other southern women to fulfill their feminine duties and preserve the antebellum hierarchy that first enabled the belle’s inception.

While many of the descriptions of the ideal belle linger on moral attributes, such as passivity, decorum, and virginity, the belle’s glory is undeniably appearance-based.⁷¹ Kathryn Lee Seidel recognizes that the belle, as envisioned by antebellum society, is foremost “a beautiful object”⁷² who gratifies her male suitors, and provokes envy among her female acquaintances. In order to be socially visible, the belle must be desirable, and take painstaking measures to accentuate her natural assets and distinguish her looks from others through acts of self-fashioning. Blain Roberts reiterates female beauty’s requisite place in southern culture, quoting a line from a 1922 public address by North Carolina governor Thomas Walter Bickett as

⁶⁹ Seidel 18.

⁷⁰ Brown 759.

⁷¹ Manning, “The Real Beginning of the Southern Renaissance,” 45.

⁷² Seidel 32.

proof of this uncompromising standard: “No woman has a right to be ugly. An ugly woman is a mistake; a misfit; out of joint; out of tune; at war with the law and the purpose of her being.”⁷³ Bolstering his personal biases with his political power, Bickett establishes beauty as the belle’s destiny, her social obligation, even her claim to citizenship and human dignity. This historic reading demonstrates that across the generations, the popular image of the southern belle remains linked to male-privileging understandings of feminine beauty.

These decorative and submissive qualities must also be accompanied by the belle’s youth, which brings with it a certain charm that supposedly dissipates with age and experience. Seidel emphasizes the ephemerality of glory for southern women who choose to abide by the traditional belle’s codes: “The heyday of the belle is shortlived; from a debut at sixteen or seventeen to the threat of spinsterhood by nineteen, her career lasts for the few short years in between.”⁷⁴ Implied within this exacting age limit is the successful fulfillment of heteronormative rituals that result in marriage and procreation, as effected by the belle’s initial ability to beguile male suitors. Betina Entzminger acknowledges a glaring paradox within this set of social expectations, as true belles are expected to possess “negative sexuality,”⁷⁵ refraining from demonstrating any knowledge of carnal matters, or even admitting to their own desire. Intrinsically, then, the belle must deny the full experience of embodiment for the sake of propriety, which mandates her deference to patriarchal authority as she is transferred from her father’s domain to her husband’s, all the while suppressing her interiority and autonomous identity.

⁷³ Bickett, qtd. in Roberts 16.

⁷⁴ Seidel 61.

⁷⁵ Entzminger 9.

The belle's legitimacy is not simply earned on the merit of her ability to style her body to suit cultural beauty norms; race and class also inform her social worth. Historically, the subsection of females who were capable of embodying the virtues and cultivating the image of the belle was isolated to white women of substantial means. Engagement with beauty products and beauty acts should be understood as a deeply economic act with inherent sociopolitical implications, as fashion monitors and visualizes race and class-based hierarchies.⁷⁶ Emily A. Schwalbe identifies fashion as a long-preferred tool of southern women for publicly communicating both their personal assets and ideologies: "Material goods were significant to upper-class Confederate understandings of identity, and this was particularly true of wealthy women who projected their status through material culture and self-fashioning."⁷⁷ Applying the sociological theory of costly signaling to the southern hierarchy, Schwalbe outlines how a belle might construct her beauty on the basis of discrimination, making social differences legible on her body through the types of commodities that she strategically purchases.⁷⁸ To be sure, the fundamental act of consumption requires some degree of privilege and status, yet beauty-related consumption, which, in the south, is always undergirded by the myth of southern womanhood and the plantation myth, is noted for its narrow accessibility.

The beauty of the belle, then, is undemocratic by design. For women of lower social ranks, whose financial status does not enable participation in commodified glamour practices, and women of color, who fail the test of compulsory whiteness, beauty culture enforces the same discriminatory hierarchies as the rest of southern society. Roberts lingers on the significance of race toward the construction of beauty in the South, ultimately concluding that, more than any

⁷⁶ Black 25.

⁷⁷ Schwalbe, 38.

⁷⁸ Schwalbe 47.

other end, the iconography of the belle “served to sustain Jim Crow.”⁷⁹ The stakes of preserving the belle as both icon and ideal, then, were political, and largely centered on securing the superiority of southern white powerholders into the twentieth century.

With all these parameters in place, ranging from appearance and race to moral decency and domestic harmony, there is some question as to the potentiality of a woman ever achieving ideal belle status. In *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Tara McPherson goes so far as to doubt the legitimacy of the belle as a practical figure, suggesting that the belle might have been an image invented to complement the overarching Confederate myth. While she underscores the contrived quality of the archetypal belle and the virtues that typify her, McPherson ultimately concludes, “Whether or not women embraced these ideals, their popularity had material effects in women’s lives, be they black or white, rich or poor. The belle and the lady are more ideology than reality... but they are ideologies with reality effects.”⁸⁰ These reality effects emerged in the form of southern social protocol, as institutions and cultural products were molded to correspond to antebellum iconography and thus project a consistent feminine ideal for women to strive toward. Within the critical conversation that surrounds literature from the Reconstruction era and beyond, there exists the tacit understanding that southern women writers, more so than their male counterparts, understood the artificial nature of such rhetoric, and the necessity of contextualizing, if not outright resisting, these myths for the sake of their own advancement. In *Feminism & American Literary History*, Nina Baym identifies this struggle against southern stereotypes as one of the foremost influences upon the development of American women’s writing at large. As a reflection of this struggle, “...at least some Southern women writers at the end of the century and after turned against the postbellum

⁷⁹ Roberts 194.

⁸⁰ McPherson 152.

Southern myth and attempted to expose it *as* myth in order to move the South and its women beyond its restrictions.”⁸¹ Baym’s acknowledgment of the staying power of these ideals indicates that even in instances of resistance, the belle remained a crucial aspect of literary and cultural discourse in the South.

Anne Firor Scott, one of the first contemporary critics to conceptualize southern womanhood, uses belle interchangeably with the “southern lady” trope that emerged in the twentieth-century, recognizing that both characters fulfill “some important psychological need” for a region that has historically emphasized tradition and feminine purity.⁸² Similarly, Seidel contends that the belle transcends temporal moment, in part because of the continued appeal of the myths that surround her; despite this staying power, Seidel identifies a substantial shift in the belle’s representation during the post-Reconstruction era, specifically among the writers of the Southern Renaissance. More willing to interrogate their collective regional past than their predecessors, specifically the detrimental consequences of antebellum values upon women and people of color, these writers continued to invoke the belle, but with a more nuanced characterization that renders her incompatible with the social and sexual progress of the early twentieth-century.⁸³

It is feasible, then, to infer that the pervasive rhetoric of the belle, which inspired and confounded other writers of the Southern Renaissance,⁸⁴ also contributed to Welty’s attitude toward southern notions of feminine beauty. Critics have addressed Welty’s personal relation to the belle by underscoring her fundamental separation from the ideal itself. In her unauthorized biography, Waldron characterizes Welty as the antithesis of a belle, citing as evidence the

⁸¹ Baym 184.

⁸² Scott 221.

⁸³ Seidel 169.

⁸⁴ Prenshaw, “Southern Ladies and the Southern Renaissance,” 74.

opinions and recollections of anonymous acquaintances who operated within or somewhere around Welty's social circle. These voices congregate in their juxtaposition of Welty with the popular, attractive young women of Jackson's elite families: "'The thing you have to understand about Eudora is that she was not a belle,' said a man a few years younger than Eudora who grew up in Jackson. 'She was not pretty, and that is very important.'"⁸⁵ This source characterizes Welty's looks as the defining feature of her adolescent life, indicating that the legacy of a southern woman depends upon the memory of her appearance, rather than her accomplishments or personality. Waldron goes on to quote another primary source, referred to as a "former Jackson belle," who recalls Welty's social reputation through the lens of her own beauty: "'I was pretty... so our paths didn't cross much.'"⁸⁶ This unnamed belle implies several crucial dimensions about Jackson society, including its stratification along the lines of physical superficiality, and the general atmosphere of competition and comparison that such a system engenders among women. While they provide an overwhelmingly incomplete portrait of Welty's upbringing, these judgments gesture toward Welty's early initiation into the beauty-inflected codes of the southern social order, and perhaps, her readiness to expose the insidious hierarchies that these ideals preserve.

Given their ubiquity, these beauty codes filter into Welty's critical language as a journalist, and eventually, as a fiction writer. Numerous fashion-based consumer practices appear across Welty's society columns, which are, as McHaney notes, "highly visual"⁸⁷ in their narrative style. Welty characterizes each gown and garment in finely wrought detail, signaling the wealth of the wearer through descriptions of luxurious fabrics, flowers, and jewels. The

⁸⁵ Waldron 9.

⁸⁶ Waldron 10.

⁸⁷ McHaney, "Eudora Welty's Early Journalism," 39.

public nature of the society pages entrenches the prominence and exclusive power of the belle, and, in turn, allows antebellum ideologies about gender, class, and race to survive. While Welty enjoyed the license to interrogate these institutions in her fiction, she was obliged to report on the often disproportionate facts of Jackson society.

Mae Miller Claxton confirms Welty's awareness of consumer culture's racialized implications by close reading several key short stories and photographs that demonstrate women shopping for or engaging with material goods. Grounding her analysis in *Window Shopping, Grenada, 1930*, one of Welty's Depression-era photographs that depicts a black woman poised on the sidewalk, staring through the glass into a store's merchandise display, Claxton argues that Welty conceptualized "the store as a kind of stage set where scenes of discrimination played out."⁸⁸ Focusing on underrepresented subjects, such as women of color, Welty exposes the segregated reality of public spaces through what Claxton reads as simple but effective portraits of distance and longing.⁸⁹ Given its widespread promotion of monolithic white femininity, which is built upon the foundation of economic privilege and unrestricted access to the goods that project status, the beauty industry amplifies the differences that Welty was naturally attracted toward understanding and representing in her fiction and photography.

Welty's thematic interests as a photographer deviate sharply in *Home Open to the Public*, a vignette that she captured during the annual Natchez pilgrimage (see *fig. 2*). The setting is Dunleith, an antebellum home that immediately invokes the plantation era of chattel slavery and patriarchal authority. Pilgrimages, a popular ritual in southern towns that boast such architecture and history, provide "a southern mise-en-scène of imagined hospitality," according to McPherson. The period attire of the subjects in Welty's photograph further reanimates memories

⁸⁸ Claxton, "'The Little Store' and the Segregated South," 95.

⁸⁹ Claxton, "'The Little Store' and the Segregated South," 110.

of the southern aristocratic class that is the clear focal point of the photograph. Adorned in similar stark white, hoop-skirted gowns, which complement the tall Doric columns of Dunleith, the women who ornament the lawn and grand entryway possess a redundant, uncanny quality. Faces, which are turned to the side or recessing into the shadows of the background, are blurred by Welty's physical distance from her subjects. These are women in silhouette, women whose billowing clothing, disproportionately large bonnets, and elaborate hairstyles have disfigured them. Bereft of their autonomous identities, these women morph into a cohesive image of the belle, an essential feature of any antebellum home or spring garden party.

While Welty captures the belle on film in *Home Open to the Public*, her attitude toward the scene at Dunleith should not be confused with glorification or nostalgia. Much like the faceless individuals who have congregated about the lawn, the composition of the photograph is somewhat distorted. The off-kilter camera angle imparts the columns with the illusion of steadily sinking downward, perhaps working as an allegory for the incremental decay of the Old South since the Civil War, as represented by the plantation home itself. The bowing suitors, the triumphant belle at the center of the attention, the cameraman filming the scene before said central belle – all of these figures belong to the fantasy of the moment that has been recreated for the spectators and participants of the pilgrimage. This tableau, Welty seems to acknowledge, is just that: a tableau, contrived in order to serve a specific cultural need.

The artificial social display featured in *Home Open to the Public* resembles the content of Welty's early society journalism for the *Commercial Appeal*. In both projects, Welty observes the lifestyle and personal habits of the southern upper crust, while simultaneously inserting the occasional sardonic remark or visual flourish, most often at the expense of the belle figure. This social commentary emerges again in Welty's fiction, yet the tone evolves as her critical eye

becomes more attuned to the nuances of female embodiment. While Welty's female characters depart from the archetypal belle, as she is traditionally represented in literature, Welty's two "belles," Clytie and Miss Sabina, borrow the familiar iconography of the ideal southern lady for the sake of muddling popular understandings of class, sexuality, beauty, and feminine agency. Prior to their inclusion in short story collections, "Clytie" and "Asphodel" were both published in 1941 issues of the *Southern Review* and *Yale Review*, respectively, roughly six years after the formal conclusion of Welty's career as a society stringer. As early examples of some of Welty's first published fiction, perhaps "Clytie" and "Asphodel" retain a thematic foothold in the south's familiar past so that her audience might engage with, and even question, the preexisting discourse of their culture's myths, while Welty refines the subtle critiques that she developed in her journalism.

Critically speaking, Clytie and Sabina seem to fit within the category of the grotesque, exemplifying the monstrous feminine that horrifies and confounds polite southern society with demonstrations of violence and emotional excess. Monica Carol Miller identifies Clytie's defiance of beauty and behavioral norms as the source of her ostracism: "From the story's beginning, it is Clytie's appearance that leaves a wake of disturbance among those whom she encounters; and ultimately, it is the power of her ugliness which draws her to her death; like Medusa, she is captivated by her own power."⁹⁰ Here, Miller acknowledges two important factors that direct the critical conversation about Welty's "belles": first, their monstrosity, and second, their inevitable, tragic demise. So blatantly does this characterization contradict the faultlessness of the traditional belle, it is little wonder why Welty's women are contextualized as the antithesis of ideal beauty.

⁹⁰ Miller 73.

Multiple categories used to describe incomplete or atypical belles already exist within literary criticism, often used to contextualize the belles who “act out” or fall short of social expectations. The monstrous belle, which Miller and Yaeger discuss at length in their respective texts, is physically repulsive, violent, and irredeemable in her psychological instability. The monstrous belle exists at the far end of the spectrum of deviant belles, as she does not seem capable of rehabilitation, nor is she reintroduced into the respectable society of her origin. Instead, throughout the course of her highly visible decline, she experiences total ruination, often resulting in her own death. Entzminger recognizes an overlap between this monstrous woman and her own conceptualization of “the belle gone bad,” a derivative of the classic *femme fatale* trope who embraces her sexuality and, in the process, disrupts the authority of patriarchal figures. According to Entzminger, “...both figures [the belle gone bad and the monstrous belle] represent societal conceptions of women who have stepped beyond the gender roles defined by their culture.”⁹¹ United by their conspicuous contradiction of the traditional myths that govern southern society, these women expose the limits of feminine passivity, thus serving as productive characters for critiquing the south.

Since both Clytie and Sabina are portrayed as undesirable, they cannot be categorized as belles gone bad. The more negatively connoted assignation of the monstrous belle, while encompassing the mental decline and social ostracism that these characters endure, does little to challenge reductive views of femininity, which punish and isolate women for failing to traffic in appropriate beauty and behavioral codes. I argue that there is more to be gleaned from Welty’s understanding of southern feminine embodiment, with all its outward and inward complexities, especially by turning toward the idea of voluntary self-fashioning as the source of these belles’

⁹¹ Entzminger 7.

power. I argue that Welty, by rendering physically visible the psychological trauma that Clytie and Sabina endure through their implication in a plantation patriarchy, subverts the destructive rhetoric of the belle and the cultural myths that surround her, but while also keeping intact her belles' agency and interest in styling their bodies. By extricating the concept of morality from acts of beauty, Welty allows her belles to communicate their autonomy from their oppressive upper-crust families in the familiar and public language of dress, self-fashioning, and social performance.

Welty's Two "Belles": Clytie and Miss Sabina

As an expression of what I perceive as Welty's critical mission to thwart the dual mythology that binds demure southern femininity to the remnants of plantation aristocracy, Welty chooses to initially define her belles through their relation to their ancestral homes. In her text, Lewis appoints the plantation as "the structural symbol of the southern aristocracy,"⁹² as it signifies both the commodified experience of wealth, and the tradition-heavy iconography that undergirds much of southern cultural history. McPherson takes this property-based symbolism a step further, positioning the plantation home as interchangeable with the southern lady, and claiming that their specific relationship is what renders "the selling of the South" so popular and profitable.⁹³ Much like Welty's photograph of Dunleith on the day of the pilgrimage, the belle is part and parcel of the plantation home, an ornament on the lawn and front steps, whose sheer presence communicates the values and hierarchies of her social class. The traditional belle, then, is a cipher, projecting codes and obtaining meaning according to what she represents, more so than what she does.

⁹² Lewis 72.

⁹³ McPherson 40.

Well-aware of this history, and the necessary reciprocity between the belle and the plantation as the mythic anchors of southern culture, Welty situates both Clytie and Miss Sabina in columned mansions, which are elevated by the wealth and legacies of the women's ancestors. Both are aging women who, like the homes they inhabit, have fallen into disrepair and obscurity, despite the prestigious families from which they hail. Clytie Farr lives in an "old big house"⁹⁴ situated on the fringes of Farr's Gin, a small, predominately agrarian Mississippi town. Jenn Williamson explores the significance of the town's name at length, emphasizing in particular its economic connotations—namely, that in their prime, the Farr family possessed enough property (and, as a consequence, slaves) to both own and operate the town's cotton gin, *and* to lay claim to the wider community itself.⁹⁵ This inference establishes the basis of the Farr family's aristocratic identity, which, though dwindling in terms of material wealth by the point of the story's central action, still impacts their perception of and prominence within the town; at the beginning of "Clytie," Welty's narration acknowledges that "...the Farris were too good to associate with other people."⁹⁶ While the plantation home itself is "dark and bare"⁹⁷ on its interior, bereft of its former vitality and superficial charms, it nevertheless exists as a symbolic fixture in the community, reminding spectators of the patriarchal, white-privileging institutions that first enabled its power.

Miss Sabina's relation to an ancestral home in "Asphodel" is somewhat more complicated, as she gains access to the plantation by way of her marriage to Mr. Don McInnis. Their union operates foremost as a compulsory exchange between Sabina's father and her husband, reminiscent of the second "plantation situation" that Baym outlines in her chapter on

⁹⁴ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 75.

⁹⁵ Williamson 753.

⁹⁶ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 75.

⁹⁷ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 76.

the myth of southern womanhood. This specific scenario, a common trope within southern literature, involves the father authorizing his daughter's marriage for the elevation of the family's social standing and the consolidation of their wealth, and, in turn, assuring that prosperity will extend to future generations.⁹⁸ Patriarchal forces dictate the direction of Sabina's life: "Miss Sabina's father came bringing Mr. Don McInnis home, and proposed the marriage to him. She was no longer young for suitors; she was instructed to submit."⁹⁹ The language of this scene accentuates Sabina's lack of agency and compulsory silence, as her father orchestrates her fate, and compounds the double burden of the plantation myth and the myth of southern womanhood.

The plantation thus earns a definitively masculine quality within the story, exemplified by a long lineage of "the McInnis men of Asphodel,"¹⁰⁰ who share the ancestral obligation of maintaining the property and tyrannizing their rotating cast of submissive wives. Don, Sabina's former husband and the plantation's current owner, is likened to "an animal"¹⁰¹ and "a torch carried into a house"¹⁰² on account of his domineering and deeply irrational personality. The latter description implies that Don, in fact, is actually destructive to the home that constitutes his own authority. So inscrutable are his various expressions of violence and misogynistic fury toward Sabina that Don becomes "a riddle that young ladies could not answer."¹⁰³ Central to Welty's portrayal of plantation aristocracy is this unstable male dimension that, while outwardly fixated with proving and solidifying their own power, is ultimately unproductive.

Because of the patriarchal culture that surrounds Asphodel, which requires Sabina's passivity and perceived identity as a possession for men, Sabina comes to understand the

⁹⁸ Baym 189.

⁹⁹ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 183.

¹⁰⁰ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 183.

¹⁰¹ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 183.

¹⁰² Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 183.

¹⁰³ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 183.

plantation as a repellant and despised location. The three ladies who have gathered to eulogize Sabina emphasize her lack of connectivity to the estate: ““If there’s one place in the solid world where Miss Sabina would never look for us, it’s Asphodel... She forbade it... She would never tolerate us to come, to Mr. Don McInnis’s Asphodel, or even to say his name.””¹⁰⁴ Here, Welty enacts a crucial departure from the southern mythology, as she separates the feminine connection to the domestic space. If the original myth requires that the belle be interchangeable with the plantation, and uplift the values that it represents,¹⁰⁵ then Sabina contradicts the ideal, simply through her aversion to the plantation. Without the essential feminine presence that completes the myth, Asphodel becomes depleted; in fact, the plantation in this particular story is never portrayed in a dynamic light. Asphodel is first introduced as “a golden ruin,”¹⁰⁶ with only its columns remaining, immediately reflecting the collapse of the plantation society and the ideals that reinforce it. At the end of the story, Don McInnis interrupts the ladies’ picnic, standing “as motionless as one of the columns”¹⁰⁷ and “as naked as an old goat.”¹⁰⁸ His appearance provokes shock among the ladies, which eventually evolves into outright mockery; their laughter reduces and humiliates him, effectively stripping the plantation’s patriarch of any authority. Welty’s retelling of the plantation myth, then, transforms these grand family homes into relics of violence, impotence, and futility.

Indeed, this renunciation of the plantation as a symbol of the vestigial southern aristocratic class works to topple masculine authority, but it is also Welty’s means of prioritizing the interior lives of her female characters, and thus exhibiting their agency that was suppressed

¹⁰⁴ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 181.

¹⁰⁵ McPherson 216.

¹⁰⁶ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 181.

¹⁰⁷ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 187.

¹⁰⁸ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 188.

by the plantation hierarchy. According to Patricia Chaffee's analysis of Welty's short fiction, "Miss Welty's homes reflect psychological, emotional and social imprisonment more frequently than protective shelters."¹⁰⁹ Chaffee uses Clytie as a working example of this pattern, citing Clytie's tragic death by drowning, which occurs after multiple attempts at liberating herself from "the house-cage"¹¹⁰ of the plantation, as the ultimate expression of the trauma that she endures as a captive to outdated institutions. The Farr estate does enact its own brand of patriarchal oppression upon Clytie, not unlike Don McInnis' hostile treatment of Sabina in "Asphodel," yet I would like to push back against readings of "Clytie" that contextualize her character solely through the tragedy of her demise.

Whether or not Welty's radical belles possess any agency is a point of critical contention. For example, Entzminger faults Welty's tendency to employ "orthodox" storytelling techniques, namely, "death for the unconventional female characters."¹¹¹ The continued use of these tropes, Entzminger claims, promotes a reductive view of femininity that echoes the limitations established in antebellum literature, and does little to redeem the complex women at the center of these stories.¹¹² I contend, however, that Welty strategically employs and revises familiar tropes of southern womanhood, and, in a crucial departure from previous storytelling traditions, privileges the interior life of her female characters. These interior complexities are also communicated through the female characters' styles of outward presentation. During their lifetimes, Clytie and Sabina exist as disruptive forces within their respective families and communities; their embodied acts of defiance exceed the cultures that they live within, rendering them highly visible figures who exist on the borders of respectable society, in line with Pollack's

¹⁰⁹ Chaffee 113.

¹¹⁰ Chaffee 114.

¹¹¹ Entzminger 134.

¹¹² Entzminger 134.

notion of “flashers.” Through these two belles, who define themselves beyond the captivity of their ancestral homes, Welty dismantles the sanctity and strength of the plantation myth, and ultimately proposes a new category of southern womanhood: the dramatic belle. Welty’s incorporation of self-fashioning and beauty norms into her descriptions of Clytie and Sabina complements her nuanced understanding of their psychological perspectives, and signals some degree of previously unexplored autonomy within these “tragic” characters.

Out of the two dramatic belles under examination, Clytie is the more troubling figure. Some dated pieces of Welty scholarship dwell upon Clytie’s idiosyncrasies, specifically her mental handicaps,¹¹³ in such a way that precludes any reader responses, apart from pity or even visceral disgust. While modern critics have largely moved beyond narrow readings of Clytie’s psychological state, and, in many cases, recognize her agency in defying southern social codes,¹¹⁴ they still tend to define her behavior in negative terms. These judgments, which cast Clytie as a grotesque belle, replicate the social ostracism that Clytie experiences within the context of the story, and somewhat impair the study of the character from an open-minded perspective.

Despite the multiple attempts, both critically and narratively, at isolating Clytie to the borders of respectable society, Clytie desperately seeks engagement with her community, as revealed by both subtle and ostentatious acts of visibility. Lorinda Cohoon recognizes that Clytie’s yearning for society contradicts the mentality of the other Farris, who have long since abandoned any communication with the outside world, save for the sanctioned few interactions with a small cast of figures, including Mr. Bobo, the barber who makes scheduled visits for the grooming of the family patriarch, and Old Lethy, a black woman who is not even granted access

¹¹³ Chaffee 114.

¹¹⁴ Miller 73.

into the house.¹¹⁵ The apathy and isolation that Clytie experiences in this setting further reinforces Welty's reading of the plantation as a site that inherently limits female agency. The root of Clytie's defiance thus derives from her radical pursuit for a relationality that exceeds the captivity of her ancestral home, and enables her to project an identity that is independent from the oppression of paternalism and her inherited obligation to a futile past.

Given this subtext, the story begins with a quotidian, but symbolic journey, as Clytie travels from the plantation into Farr's Gin, the town that was once the locus of her family's power. Her movements are "hurried"¹¹⁶ and frantic as she "dart[s]" between her intended locations at the town's center, undeterred by the rain, even though "everyone else had gone under cover."¹¹⁷ Clytie's tenacity in this journey, which reflects the intensity of her desire for connectivity, is contradicted by the reality that "no one spoke to her any more,"¹¹⁸ on account of her perceived mental instability, and her family's decline from prestige. Exempting one cursory moment when someone calls out for Clytie to "[g]o in out of the rain"¹¹⁹—a direction that Clytie ultimately chooses to ignore—the spectators within the community speak *about*, rather than directly *to*, the eccentric elderly woman who rushes into town daily, searching for a sense of belonging that continually evades her.

The judgments that surround Clytie regard not only her polarizing behavior, but also, her age and appearance. Throughout the story, Welty attaches the moniker of "old maid"¹²⁰ to Clytie, a term that accentuates her age, as well as her separation from the marriage market and by default, the domain of the traditional belle. Charlotte M. Wright interprets the old maid as a

¹¹⁵ Cohoon, "Unmoveable Relics," 47.

¹¹⁶ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 75.

¹¹⁷ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 75.

¹¹⁸ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 75.

¹¹⁹ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 76.

¹²⁰ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 76.

woman who has been fully stripped of her heteronormative sexual power, and therefore reduced to an object of sympathy or scorn on account of her inability to attract a mate, and thus play into the myths that undergird southern culture.¹²¹ Being the pariah of Farr's Gin, Clytie does not have any romantic prospects, nor express any romantic inclinations, as she remains linked to her girlhood home and her family, despite her persistent efforts at expanding her community. Welty's assignation of the old maid trope upon Clytie poises this character for an insurmountable disadvantage, given the old maid's shame-based reputation in southern society. Unlike "the Southern matron"¹²² figure, a woman who has also exceeded the youth of the belle, but still exists as the pinnacle of successful femininity through her implication in both marriage and motherhood, the old maid's age only exacerbates her personal distance from both the domestic space and the interconnected social sphere. Clytie's inclination to "watch faces,"¹²³ which she believes to be "[t]he most profound, the most moving sight in the whole world,"¹²⁴ demonstrates the extent of the loneliness that the old maid must endure, as the world beyond continues moving and bonding without her. Additionally, Clytie's interest in faces evokes the conversation about physical appearance, which is so central toward understandings of the belle, and southern beauty culture at large.

In spite of her disadvantages, the old maid is not without her own peculiar agency, which she might implement to counteract her lack of conventional social currency. Wright traces the rise of more empowering representations of the old maid in twentieth-century literature, emphasizing how these characters display alternative modes of expression: "The old maid, shunned by society, was left to her own resources, and thus had to develop a different type of

¹²¹ Wright 30.

¹²² Baym 193.

¹²³ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 77.

¹²⁴ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 77.

self-image, one apart from her value as a potential sexual or marriage partner.”¹²⁵ In a way, her exclusion from the strictures of heteronormative relationships allows the old maid to craft an independent identity, unburdened by the imperative to appear alluring for male spectators, or to devote her time and labors toward the rearing of children. Partnered only to herself, the old maid boasts the privilege of being shamelessly self-focused.

Exclusively reading Clytie’s character through the lens of the liberated old maid, however, poses some problems. First, Clytie’s agency is impaired by the reality that her reputation has been predetermined by the residents of Farr’s Gin, as well as by her oppressive family. The collective judgments of these figures work to suppress Clytie’s power as an autonomous being, most notably demonstrated through the repeated ignorance or silencing of her voice. Throughout the story, Clytie struggles to speak up to her domineering older sister, Octavia, who is described as talking to Clytie in a “vindicative voice—a loud voice, for she was usually calling.”¹²⁶ In response, Clytie only “manage[s] to say”¹²⁷ cursory phrases, which usually trail off in ellipses, unaddressed and unresolved. During family conversations, Clytie defers her voice to her sister’s: “Clytie did not make an answer, as Octavia always did during these scenes...”¹²⁸ Clytie’s verbal passivity extends into town, where she speaks in “soft-voiced explanations that nobody could hear.”¹²⁹ In the rare moments when Clytie does raise her voice, she seems incapable of communicating in discernible phrases, using “the wildest words that came to her head”¹³⁰ and various other curses, which further polarizes her from others.¹³¹ These scenes evince that language further enlarges the gulf between Clytie and the society with which

¹²⁵ Wright 73.

¹²⁶ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 76.

¹²⁷ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 76.

¹²⁸ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 79.

¹²⁹ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 75.

¹³⁰ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 78.

¹³¹ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 80.

she yearns to connect. Welty's strategic silencing of the story's protagonist emphasizes the necessity for another language, perhaps a silent one, to intervene on behalf of Clytie's often ignored perspective.

One essential form of communication for Clytie is her habit of dress, which often mirrors the complexities of her largely obfuscated interior life. In one of her few expressions of autonomy—and, one of the most detailed visual cues that Welty uses to characterize her protagonist—Clytie chooses and changes her clothing, alternating between two distinctive outfits. The ladies of Farr's Gin notice and narrate these shifts in fashion, reinforcing the importance of appearance toward a southern woman's visibility. For much of the story, Clytie wears tattered clothing and accessories, which signal her social worth, as well as her state of psychological deterioration. Unlike the ideal belle, who is meticulous in her mode of dress, for much of the story, Clytie adorns herself with a "faded jumper"¹³² and a cheap makeshift hat "with an old black satin ribbon pinned to it to make it a better hat."¹³³ Neglected by the passage of time, soaked by rainwater,¹³⁴ and, to quote Welty's narration, "absurd and done for,"¹³⁵ these garments secure Clytie's reputation as an outsider to her community.

Clytie's threadbare clothing contrasts with her former wardrobe of vibrantly colored silk, which the ladies recall her wearing into town in the past. Welty's language is especially rich in her detailing of the ensemble that once brought Clytie so much attention:

For years, every once in a while, she [Clytie] would come out in what was called an "outfit," all in hunter's green, a hat that came down around her face like a bucket, a green silk dress, even green shoes with pointed toes. She would wear the outfit all one day, if it

¹³² Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 80.

¹³³ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 76.

¹³⁴ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 75-76.

¹³⁵ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 77.

was a pretty day, and the next morning she would be back in the faded jumper with her old hat tied under the chin, as if the outfit had been a dream. It had been a long time now since Clytie had dressed up so that you could see her coming.¹³⁶

This outfit, when she wears it in public, signifies some degree of disruptive agency. Additionally, it implies information about Clytie's personality and life, which might otherwise remain unavailable to the public on account of Clytie's silence. The boldness of the outfit, as told by the sheer excess of items, all in monochromatic green, reveals Clytie's longing to be conspicuous, and perhaps even desirable. Her decision to wear "a hat that came down around her face like a bucket,"¹³⁷ however, seems to contradict this desire for visibility, gesturing toward Clytie's residual shyness or lack of confidence as a woman who has lived on the fringes of society. The decision to only wear the outfit on "pretty day[s]"¹³⁸ introduces another important concept: that Clytie, and the ladies who scrutinize her, understand fashion as a reflection of one's mood or frame of mind. Dressing oneself to suit a particular style is a conscious act with a range of connotations; even more meaningful for Clytie, who struggles with verbal communication, beauty decisions can be shared and interpreted tacitly. While Clytie is never described as beautiful or desirable, she still exhibits an interest in self-fashioning, as evidenced by her rotating wardrobe, and the messages about her interior state that they communicate to the public.

Clytie's transition from the gaudy silk outfit to the shabby jumper is, on the most practical level, a fashion choice motivated by finances. As the daughter of a man who was once prominent in their community, Clytie and her wardrobe visibly mirror the loss of the Farr family's superior wealth. The ladies of Farr's Gin assume this critical stance, as they observe

¹³⁶ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 77.

¹³⁷ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 77.

¹³⁸ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 77.

Clytie bustling through town and conclude, “nothing that came anywhere close to the Farrs’ house was nice for long.”¹³⁹ While clothing, which consists of commodified goods, is capable of signaling one’s social standing, Welty also employs her character’s wardrobe to trace trauma. Welty includes the crucial detail of Clytie trading in her ostentatious green silk garb for a wardrobe of entirely black, as though entering into a state of mourning. The ladies, who pay keen attention to the nuances of outward appearances, identify a clean break in Clytie’s fashion habits, noting that “a long time”¹⁴⁰ has passed since Clytie felt inclined to wear her signature outfit. Their recognition of the correlation between the weather and Clytie’s garb further reinforces the affective quality of dress, and, perhaps, intimates their willingness to see Clytie as an individual capable of emotional depth, rather than as an unfeeling “beast”¹⁴¹ who trudges through town, disengaged from her surroundings. Through the manipulation of her outward appearance, Clytie strives toward communicating the extent of her internal turmoil, and thus proving her humanity in the eyes of the society that has excluded her. In this context, self-fashioning evolves into a vital, but silent language, a means of rendering oneself visible and worthy.

Many feminist critics, in their attempts toward reclaiming beauty culture from misogynistic interpretations, have read beautification as an essential act of self-expression for the modern woman, as it offers women “a more embodied way of being in the world,”¹⁴² and thus enables them to command attention. Since fashion is often perceived as a personal choice, beautification assumes a positive, uplifting tenor, perhaps also due to its association with glamour and luxury.¹⁴³ Welty’s literary invocation of beauty acts, however, troubles this effortlessly

¹³⁹ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 80.

¹⁴⁰ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 77.

¹⁴¹ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 76.

¹⁴² Cahill 43.

¹⁴³ Baker 49-52.

empowering quality of a woman's engagement with her own body, as fashion primarily emerges in her short fiction for the sake of tracing narrative trauma. I contend that several of Welty's female characters, most notably her "belles," counteract their lack or loss of conventional physical beauty with the use of beauty products and practices in order that they might gain or retain their social visibility. Through these strategic beauty acts, Welty arbitrates space for southern women, even if that space is fraught with conflict.

As an extension of this beauty-centric approach toward understanding a character's interior life, Welty's short fiction consistently exposes the writer's interest in southern women's confrontations with the mirror. Whether these confrontations emerge literally within the context of the narrative, or on a more ideological, abstract basis, Welty's female characters are often forced to mediate their personal conceptualization of self with the façade that they have cultivated for social scrutiny. Mirrors, therefore, are both productive and problematic zones of contact for navigating the diverse dimensions of self-presentation. Perhaps more than any other Welty story, "Clytie" reveals the trauma that undergirds feminine appearances, as it concludes with the protagonist's fatal confrontation with a makeshift mirror in the form of a rain barrel. I contend that Welty invokes elements of fashion and beauty culture within this suicide scene as means of emphasizing Clytie's desire for visibility and conformity, which she can never actualize due to her fundamental separation from sanctioned expressions of southern femininity.

Before the rain barrel turns deadly, however, it tempts Clytie with its captivating surface, signifying the duplicitous nature of appearances. She perceives the water "with impatient gratitude"¹⁴⁴ as she draws closer, engulfed by its sensory excess. According to Welty's narration, "The rain barrel was full. It bore a dark, heavy, penetrating fragrance, like ice and flowers and

¹⁴⁴ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 83.

the dew of night.”¹⁴⁵ This passage, with its emphasis on scent, evokes perfume and the associated iconography of beauty, which Welty adopts to comprehend the southern woman’s fraught relationship between self and self-fashioning. Clytie’s fragmented understanding of self becomes evident as she searches “the kind, featureless depth”¹⁴⁶ of the water, incapable of finding her own reflection. Cohoon acknowledges that Clytie’s fixation with the water does not involve vanity, like the archetypal Narcissus myth, but a curiosity that mutates into abiding horror.¹⁴⁷ The positive language that surrounds the water dissipates when Clytie finally beholds “the face she had been looking for, and from which she had been separated,”¹⁴⁸ and then drowns herself. The confrontation with the mirror, at least for Clytie, initiates a disembodied experience, which can only be resolved with the erasure of self as a means of circumventing trauma. The mirror thus becomes a trap from which the southern woman cannot escape.

The final image of the story—the drowned Clytie with her legs sticking up out of the barrel—further attests to self-fashioning’s instrumental role in Clytie’s life and death: “When Old Lethy found her, she had fallen forward into the barrel, with her poor ladylike black-stockinged legs up-ended and hung apart like a pair of tongs.”¹⁴⁹ Here, Welty’s narration assumes a pitying tone, noting Clytie’s attempts toward achieving social acceptance through the outward performance of feminine respectability. This futile pursuit is epitomized by the “poor ladylike black-stockinged legs,”¹⁵⁰ a small detail that implies much about Clytie’s investment in her physical presentation, which corresponds to her desire for relationality with the ladies of Farr’s Gin. Though she strives to make herself visible through self-fashioning, and succeeds, to a

¹⁴⁵ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 83.

¹⁴⁶ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 83.

¹⁴⁷ Cohoon, ““Unmoveable Relics,”” 50.

¹⁴⁸ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 83.

¹⁴⁹ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 83.

¹⁵⁰ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 83.

certain extent, Clytie cannot find pleasure in the mirror, as she has constructed an image that fails to reflect her authentic identity. The outright destruction that mirror gazing brings for Clytie reveals that Welty cannot reconcile the agency of self-fashioning in a context where both the plantation myth and the myth of southern womanhood continue to oppress her female characters.

In “Asphodel,” Welty continues to interrogate how these myths impact the expression of a woman’s autonomy, especially in matters of styling the body. Miss Sabina is somewhat of a departure from Clytie, in that she plays into the myths at certain points in her life, even fulfilling the primary objective of the traditional belle: marriage that leads to childbearing. According to Rebecca L. Harrison, “Welty initially casts Miss Sabina as the diadem of southern womanhood,” noting her pattern of submissive behavior toward her domineering husband, as well as her role as a fixture on his finely wrought plantation.¹⁵¹ Sabina’s deference to patriarchal influences is an inherited tendency, as she was ““born grand””¹⁵² and raised in a home that ““commanded the town that came to be at its foot.””¹⁵³ Her performance of proper femininity, while not permanent, nevertheless indicates the sway of these myths that unite the belle to the plantation, and establishes them as the norm from which Sabina eventually deviates.

Another significant departure from Clytie is the sustained narrative attention paid to Sabina’s beauty. Cora, Phoebe, and Irene, the three old maids who have gathered on the lawn of Asphodel to eulogize their newly deceased friend, devote much time toward describing “...how she [Sabina] looked, the legend of her beauty when she was young.”¹⁵⁴ Whenever Sabina’s appearance is invoked, the old maids emphasize that her beauty belongs strictly to the past, given the reality that at the time of her death, she was one of the “grand ladies of the South grown

¹⁵¹ Harrison 55.

¹⁵² Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 183.

¹⁵³ Welty, “Clytie,” *Collected Stories*, 182.

¹⁵⁴ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 182.

old.”¹⁵⁵ The work of defending Sabina’s former glory preoccupies the old maids, insinuating the importance of aesthetics toward securing a belle’s legacy. Fascinatingly, the sole reference to Sabina’s beauty within the story originates from these female companions, who extricate the beauty of the belle from the male gaze, and complicate the notion that beautiful women exist as “a derivative of male desires.”¹⁵⁶

The primary vehicle through which Cora, Phoebe, and Irene appraise Sabina’s appearance, apart from their shared memories, is a portrait of Asphodel’s former mistress. Unlike “Clytie,” there are no mirror scenes in “Asphodel,” yet I interpret the portrait as a reflective image of Sabina that is capable of disclosing similar truths about her interior life, which might otherwise be concealed. Sabina’s friends consider this portrait an insufficient representation of her former beauty, yet they conjure its features in graphic detail, allowing the reader to share in the experience of scrutinizing the façade of the faded belle:

“She was painted to be beautiful and terrible in the face, all dark around the eyes,” said Phoebe, “in the way of grand ladies of the South grown old. She wore a fine jet-black wig of great size, for she had lost her hair by some illness or violence. She went draped in the heavy brocades from her family trunks, which she hung about herself in some bitter disregard. She would do not more than pin them and tie them into place. Through such a weight of material her knees pushed slowly, her progress hampered but she came on.”¹⁵⁷

The portrait conjures several crucial features of Sabina’s appearance, which tangibly demonstrate her lifelong endurance of trauma, and the indomitable spirit that she cultivates as a result.

Perhaps the most striking point of tension is the paradoxical language that Phoebe employs to

¹⁵⁵ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁵⁶ Cahill 51.

¹⁵⁷ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

describe Sabina's face, at least as it is rendered by the portrait's artist. Sabina's beauty is checked by the presence of something "“terrible,””¹⁵⁸ which shadows her overall appearance with the vague premonition of violence. The emphasis placed upon Sabina's shadowy features, including her "“dark””¹⁵⁹ eyes and "“fine jet-black wig””¹⁶⁰ all attest to a disturbance that looms beneath the beauty of the belle. Further, it is noteworthy that Welty designs both Sabina's hair and eyes to reflect this darkness, as Entzminger, in her consideration of descriptive patterns surrounding the belle gone bad figure, finds that "[i]n life, as well as in literature, women's hair and eyes often are believed to be the source of dangerously seductive power."¹⁶¹ Entzminger's emphasis on the disruptive capacity of feminine beauty elucidates much about Sabina's paradox-laced appearance, which is at once tempting and polarizing. Deeply implicated in the system of vestigial plantation aristocracy, Sabina comes to embody the violent power struggles of her ancestral line, as well as her own dark power as a woman who exceeds her proscribed boundaries. The portrait thus permanently casts Sabina as a potent and fearsome figure, alluring despite her separation from conventional beauty.

The language of darkness that encircles Sabina, while aligned with feminine agency, also complements Phoebe's repeated references to Sabina's sufferings. The trauma that Sabina endures is ambiguous, yet the old maids consistently invoke it when discussing Sabina's beauty, shrouding her personal narrative with mystery. One such example derives from her hair—often interpreted as the crowning glory of southern womanhood¹⁶²—which has been removed by "“some illness or violence””¹⁶³ and replaced with an artificial wig. This unknown ordeal strips

¹⁵⁸ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁵⁹ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁶⁰ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁶¹ Entzminger 3-4.

¹⁶² Roberts 23.

¹⁶³ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

Sabina of an essential symbol of her femininity, further isolating her from the traditional belle, who strives to project an immaculate appearance. By depriving Sabina of her hair, Welty counteracts the impulsive superficiality of southern society with the visualization of trauma, a narrative decision that gestures toward the complex interior life of her female protagonist. Welty's belle has endured tremendous psychological strain that comes to the surface in the form of her physical features and manner of self-presentation. The evidence of this trauma, as it is expressed in aesthetic terms, has added weight because the belle's primary means of attaining social visibility is through her body and beauty. Even if her trauma renders her "a pathetic caricature of the lady,"¹⁶⁴ as Harrison argues, Sabina still traffics in the familiar codes and postures of the ideal southern woman. The fashionable nuances of Sabina's portrait, much like Clytie's mirror image, discloses interior truths that might otherwise remain repressed or ignored—truths which the old maids grasp toward understanding in the wake of Sabina's inexplicable death.

Sabina's wardrobe in the portrait offers one potential explanation for the origins of her mysterious trauma, and how Sabina chooses to cope with their consequences. The garments that she wears are made of "heavy brocades from her family trunks,"¹⁶⁵ the weight of which significantly encumbers Sabina's mobility. While Welty does not allow her protagonist to be permanently deterred by the restrictive fabric—"her progress hampered but she came on"¹⁶⁶—she nevertheless emphasizes Sabina's frustration at adorning herself in this clothing, which seems to be forcibly worn, citing her "bitter disregard"¹⁶⁷ of the various garments, as well as her

¹⁶⁴ Harrison 55.

¹⁶⁵ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁶⁶ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁶⁷ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

lackadaisical habit of ““pin[ning] them and t[ying] them into place.””¹⁶⁸ As burdensome family relics, Sabina’s clothing reaffirms the notion that the ancestral southern home is toxic and destructive to the belle. Welty does not conceal Sabina’s aversion to these symbols of prestige and tradition that encumber her mobility as an independent woman, ultimately reflecting the long-term debilitating effects of patriarchal dominance over the belle.

Unlike Clytie, who retains some degree of passivity and silence, Sabina actively resists her role within the plantation myth that seeks to groom the belle into submission. Although Sabina is implicated into the domestic sphere as a wife and mother, she steadily distances herself from both responsibilities, sometimes through violent means. Welty writes that the oppression surrounding Sabina’s forced marriage to Don renders her ““so outraged and so undone,””¹⁶⁹ that she begins to act out, eventually resorting to physical aggression to drive him from the plantation that is the source of his authority. As Harrison writes, ““Asphodel’ simultaneously reveals such constructs of womanhood as unfruitful—her three children die before maturing to adulthood—and, yet, all powerful.””¹⁷⁰ The literal and figurative entrapment that Sabina experiences between the walls of Asphodel compels her to translate her internal chaos into visible retaliation.

Phoebe’s memory of Sabina’s hands and associated accessories suggests this tendency toward rebellion, and how beauty might narrate psychic shifts: ““Her hands were small, and as hot to the touch as a child’s under the sharp diamonds. One hand, the right one, curved round and clenched an ebony stick mounted with the gold head of a lion.””¹⁷¹ Notably, Phoebe’s description counteracts Sabina’s childlike or passive features—her ““small””¹⁷² hands that look and feel as

¹⁶⁸ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁶⁹ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 184.

¹⁷⁰ Harrison 55.

¹⁷¹ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁷² Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

though they belong to a child—with details that emphasize power, even blatant violence—the cane adorned by “the gold head of a lion.”¹⁷³ Even more telling is the way in which conventionally feminine symbols, such as jewelry, assume a menacing tone; Sabina’s diamonds are “sharp,”¹⁷⁴ almost weaponlike, echoing a previous description where Sabina “...made fists with her hands, with the sharp rings cutting into her, and called down the curse of heaven on everybody’s head...”¹⁷⁵ Here, jewelry becomes more dynamic than decorative as Sabina summons her strength against the male hegemonies that have worked to confine her on various plantations for her entire life. By creating an empowering purpose for the baubles that have mostly served to accentuate the superficial beauty of southern belles, Welty exposes the trapped potential that surges beneath the surface of these complicated women.

Sabina translates the power that the reconstructed use of beauty symbols affords her, however, into the only language of authority that is demonstrated to her on the patriarchal southern plantation: physical aggression and oppression. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of Sabina’s conscription of these oppressive masculine codes emerges when she forces Don from Asphodel, prior to setting fire to the entire home: “Like a demon she sprang from the door and rushed down the long iron steps, driving him before her with the buggy whip, that had a purple tassel.”¹⁷⁶ In this scene, Sabina borrows her husband’s tendency toward violence, and, through her use of the whip, invokes the troubling imagery of the slaveocracy. In an interesting convergence of patriarchal violence with feminine beautification, Welty ascribes the whip a fashionable detail in the form of “a purple tassel.”¹⁷⁷ While fashion does operate as an effective

¹⁷³ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁷⁴ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁷⁵ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 184.

¹⁷⁶ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 184.

¹⁷⁷ Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 184.

visual language toward narrating Sabina's expanding agency as a female character, the violence itself is nevertheless the symptom of trauma that she endures as a victim of her husband's physical and psychological brutality. Harrison qualifies the descriptions of Sabina's emerging power by interpreting her rebellion as a repetition of the masculine hegemonies found on the plantation: "This transformation from silent, suffering wife to potent social force illuminates the ways in which women can be equally responsible for their own oppressed plight by both obeying and wielding patriarchal dictates..."¹⁷⁸ According to this logic, Sabina's rewriting as "the tyrant"¹⁷⁹ who is "bent upon destruction"¹⁸⁰ still does not effect her liberation from the system that first initiated her oppression.

By narrating the stunted potential and tragic fates of Clytie and Miss Sabina through the language of beauty culture, Welty demonstrates that self-fashioning as a reflection of feminine power cannot thrive within the confines of the plantation myth. As these characters deviate from the standards of the archetypal belle and strive toward radical visibility, they are subjected to scrutiny from female spectators within their respective communities. Social interest in the physical evidence of Clytie's and Sabina's rebellion reaffirms what Pollack describes as "the pattern of being fascinated by another woman's overexposure,"¹⁸¹ which emerges across Welty's fiction. The ladies of Farr's Gin, who freely share their opinions and critiques of Clytie's appearance, might be interpreted as personified versions of a society column. Their punitive commentary on Clytie's departure from the norms of self-presentation illustrates the precedent placed upon a southern woman's participation in beauty and fashion culture. Similarly, the gossiping old maids in "Asphodel" deconstruct Sabina's appearance in the portrait with exacting

¹⁷⁸ Harrison 56.

¹⁷⁹ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 186.

¹⁸⁰ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 186.

¹⁸¹ Pollack 24.

detail, finding fault with the age and severity that it bestows upon Miss Sabina, and insisting among themselves, ““*We* knew she had been beautiful.””¹⁸² In this instance, the belle’s body becomes a contested object, a social commodity that must align itself with the available iconography about southern femininity in order to retain its legitimacy. Without this verification of Miss Sabina’s beauty, youth, and status, the old maids seem to imply that her story has no claim to immortality.

Welty’s preoccupation with the narratives of these unconventional belles, as communicated in the form of memories and hearsay shared between women, however, defies that assumption. While their eligibility as belles has expired, and society has deemed them failures according to the myth of southern womanhood, both Clytie and Sabina earn another form of notoriety through the recounting of their tragic narratives, an act that is not without its own power. This power, I argue, derives from the incorporation of female voices into southern mythmaking, and, in turn, reconfiguring beauty as a means of expressing trauma. Rebecca Chalmers notes that “Asphodel” is “...an interestingly drawn story about how myth and legend are created and the power they have over readers...”¹⁸³ The three old maids’ active enactment of mythmaking gestures toward the possibility of moving beyond the dual mythology that locks the traditional belle into her submissive role on the plantation. Through Welty’s short fiction, and the female voices it prioritizes, a new narrative of southern womanhood emerges, which challenges the superiority of plantation aristocracy, renders female trauma visible through bold acts of self-fashioning, and multiplies the potentialities of southern beauty culture by associating it with aesthetic pleasure, terror, and power.

¹⁸² Welty, “Asphodel,” *Collected Stories*, 185.

¹⁸³ Chalmers 98.

II. “ALL THAT WOULD BECKON...ALL THAT WAS BEAUTIFUL”: ACCESSING
LANGUAGE AND SELFHOOD THROUGH COMMODIFIED ACTS OF
BEAUTY

I believe they [“the Camp Fire Girls” book series] were ten cents each and I had a dollar... They were printed on yellowed paper with corners that crumbled, if you pinched on them too hard, like old graham crackers, and they smelled like attic trunks, caramelized glue, their own confinement with one another and, over all, the Kress’s smell—bandanas, peanuts, and sandalwood from the incense counter. Even without reading them I loved them.¹⁸⁴

—Eudora Welty, recalling her consumption of books as a child, “A Sweet Devouring,” 1957

The epigraph to this chapter derives from Welty’s nonfiction essay, “A Sweet Devouring,” which reflects upon her adolescent reading life, and establishes the significance of books to the expression of her identity as a woman and a writer. Printed in the December 1957 issue of *Mademoiselle* magazine, “A Sweet Devouring” introduces early versions of several autobiographical yarns that Welty would later refine and expand in *One Writer’s Beginnings*. These interrelated memories are predicated upon the foundation of Welty’s ardent fascination with written words, coupled with her recollection of the tangible objects that mark her reading journey. For Welty, the joy of reading originates from its stimulation to the imagination, as well as its aesthetic appeal; in one section of the essay, she declares, “I was in love with books at least

¹⁸⁴ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

partly for what they looked like; I loved the printed page.”¹⁸⁵ Both the content and the appearance of books captivate the young Welty, and enact what critics such as Géraldine Chouard have recognized as Welty’s “visual language.”¹⁸⁶ Here, Welty acknowledges a crucial dimension of her relationship to literature: that reading is an act of beauty, an entry point into her appreciation of aesthetics, both on the page and in the world.

Additionally, as the epigraph and relevant excerpts from *One Writer’s Beginnings* reflect, Welty’s childhood relationship with literature can be narrated by material objects. These objects, which Welty conjures from her memories of books and imagination, situate her story in time, and allow the reader to engage with the visual aspects her world, as she remembers it. In the epigraph, Welty lists several commodity goods from Kress’s department store, including “bandanas, peanuts and sandalwood from the incense counter,”¹⁸⁷ which she associates with the little “Series Books”¹⁸⁸ that she consumes rapaciously. In this passage, Welty emphasizes the cheap and accessible quality of the small volumes, which were “as light as a matchbox,”¹⁸⁹ “printed on yellowed paper with corners that crumbled,”¹⁹⁰ and could be purchased in bulk; Welty maintains that the ability to purchase “ten to read at one blow” is the primary allure of this particular series.¹⁹¹ Welty’s recollection of the books themselves, specifically her experience of obtaining them, is definitely rooted in the object world. Often, these objects derive from the world of fashion and beauty. Welty acknowledges the scent of “sandalwood from the incense counter,”¹⁹² integrating perfume and other unmentioned cosmetics that the department store sold

¹⁸⁵ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 30.

¹⁸⁶ Chouard, “Things in Images,” 114.

¹⁸⁷ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

¹⁸⁸ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

¹⁸⁹ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

¹⁹⁰ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

¹⁹¹ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 32.

¹⁹² Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

as essential fixtures of her shopping experience. By listing the perfume alongside “bandanas, peanuts”¹⁹³ and the cheap Camp Fire Girls books, Welty hints that beauty is just as attainable as the small trifles that she purchases with dimes—a reality that empowers her working class female characters, who are liberated from the strictures that plague Welty’s dramatic belles of privilege.

This scene also displays Welty’s tendency to combine the lofty and imaginative with the material and mundane, which appears across her fiction and nonfiction. In her article, Chouard discusses Welty’s adolescent penchant for constructing “comic collage books” from newspaper articles and magazine advertisements, “...re-appropriating easily accessible iconographic documents that featured a large number of objects, mostly consumer goods” for the sake of crafting an entertaining narrative, which she would then share with neighborhood friends.¹⁹⁴ This custom of pasting together images, even those that might appear incompatible, indicates Welty’s experimental imagination, as well as her interest in incorporating elements of the everyday into her fictional world. In punctuating her reading life with remembrances of consumer culture, specifically beauty culture—a habit that I argue she gleaned from her mother, Chestina—Welty entrenches the accessible power of beauty to impact the imaginative and intellectual development of young southern girls, regardless of background.

The autobiographical element of this short essay is particularly telling with regards to Welty’s family dynamic and socioeconomic status, and how it cultivated her consumer identity. First, Welty receives the money to purchase the Camp Fire Girl books as a part of a Christmas gift from her grandfather, who “...sent along in his box of presents “an envelope with money in

¹⁹³ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

¹⁹⁴ Chouard, “Things in Images,” 114.

it for me to buy myself the book I wanted.”¹⁹⁵ This money belongs to Welty, and enables her to practice economic consumption on an independent scale for the sake of her educational and creative advancement. There are other subtle ways in which money comes into play in this essay. When discussing the exchange of other Christmas gifts, Welty mentions, “My father had showed us the mirror he was giving my mother to hang above her desk, and Kress’s is where my brother and I went to reproduce that by buying a mirror together to give her ourselves, and where our little brother then made us take him and he bought her one his size for fifteen cents.”¹⁹⁶ Here, Welty’s father, as the financial head of the family, enacts his purchasing power, which his children seek to replicate through their own means. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw maintains that Christian Webb Welty, with his position as a prominent insurance executive in Jackson, “...provided a comfortable income for the family.”¹⁹⁷ This upper-middle class status rendered the department store and its goods even more attainable for Welty and her family. Fascinatingly, the item that Christian purchases for Chestina (which their children also clamor to buy) is a mirror, an essential symbol of feminine beauty culture. This mirror resonates with the previous chapter of this project, specifically my analysis of reflective surfaces found within Welty’s short fiction, which enable a woman to confront her psychological trauma and repressed identity. Additionally, it introduces my impending argument about the ways in which social class and traditional femininity inform Welty’s conceptualization of beauty culture as a compelling storytelling device.

Across Welty’s autobiographical writings, her mother, Chestina, embodies traditional femininity, yet she also awakens Welty to beauty’s subversive power. Speaking to these more

¹⁹⁵ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

¹⁹⁶ Welty, “A Sweet Devouring,” 31.

¹⁹⁷ Prenshaw, *Composing Selves*, 258.

traditional influences, Harriet Pollack interprets the anecdotal details and personal photographs contained within *One Writer's Beginnings* as evidence of Welty's privilege and sheltered upbringing, at the insistence of her mother. According to Pollack, the "white lace frocks" that Chestina dresses the young Eudora in operate as "provocative signifiers revealing class identity," as well as "...signifiers in a culture that protects its girls, encasing them in fabrics that suggest both constrained, decorative fragility and something restrictive to keep clean."¹⁹⁸ Pollack's critical perspective implies that Welty's mother operated as the enforcer of beauty norms that were considered appropriate for young girls of their social class; additionally, it displays the moral and material consequences of feminine self-presentation in the American South. Tara McPherson refers to this commitment to regulating the female body as "keeping up appearances,"¹⁹⁹ indicating the regional precedence placed upon visually perpetuating an illusion of perfection through conformity in dress and fashion.

Such interpretations establish Chestina as a prominent influence in Welty's feminine development. I argue that Welty's memories of her mother also informed much of her understanding about traditional beauty's possible manipulation as a radical creative device. Speaking to these series of influences, the publication of this short sketch is notable, given its place in the timeline of Welty's personal life. Suzanne Marrs pinpoints Welty's writing of "A Sweet Devouring" during a season of distress, as Chestina was extremely ill and, due to her failing eyesight, in need of constant attention. Assuming the role of "a solitary caregiver"²⁰⁰ to her mother, Welty suspended much of her writing during this season, despite the growing economic hardships that she faced.²⁰¹ The content of "A Sweet Devouring," with its emphasis on

¹⁹⁸ Pollack, *Eudora Welty's Photography and Fiction*, 26.

¹⁹⁹ McPherson, 150.

²⁰⁰ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, 267.

²⁰¹ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, 266, 268.

the domestic space, consumerism, socioeconomic status, and individual creativity, thus mirrors Welty's circumstances at her time of writing this essay. Through this autobiographical sketch, which became more fully developed in Welty's later memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty negotiates the ideals that her conventionally beautiful mother imparted her with, and ultimately creates her own meaning of femininity out of the varied childhood lessons and memories. It is striking that Welty's successful publication of "A Sweet Devouring" in *Mademoiselle* magazine, which broke her financial and creative drought, again aligns her literary career with mainstream beauty culture by allowing her to profit from beauty, on her own radical terms, during a time of personal need.

In this chapter, I will portray how beauty culture, as exemplified by the plentiful references to hair, makeup, and consumer products in Welty's short fiction and autobiographical writings, enables southern girls to use their purchasing power to transform appearances and exceed the limits of their social class or personal circumstances. In the same way that beauty practices trace psychological trauma, they also can narrate the southern girl's initiation into her own body, and the cultivation of her sexuality through feminine influences and authority figures. The relational, experiential power of beauty iconography thus transcends any concept of ideal or conventional beauty; it is a potent imaginative force that is available to all women, regardless of perspective, appearance, or socioeconomic status.

Rapunzel Meets Medusa: Beauty as Bartering Power

As a grown woman, reflecting on her girlhood in *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty primarily conceptualizes the idea of femininity through the figure of Chestina Welty. Conventionally, a woman's relationship to her body, in an aesthetic and semiotic sense, has been

interpreted as a manifestation of her relationship with her mother. Psychoanalytic feminist scholars, such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, maintain that the mother is the site of both nurture and tension as the child develops his or her awareness of gendered identity and selfhood. Building upon Lacanian principles, Kristeva notes the sensuous connectivity between the mother and the child: “Toward the mother there is convergence not only of survival needs but of the first mimetic yearnings.”²⁰² This bond creates a replication of maternal habits, which might transmute into outright rejection as the child grows to understand power relations, and consequently, the mother’s lack of authority relative to masculine figures. In *Monster / Beauty: Building the Body of Love*, Joanna Frueh discusses the tensions between the mother and the daughter specifically, identifying the possibility of “intergenerational corporeal warfare”²⁰³ in instances where the daughter comes to loathe her mother’s appearance or her scruples about the body due to suppressed knowledge of these power differentials. According to this logic, the memory of the mother’s body is prominent in all stages of feminine development.

In her biography of Welty, Marrs recounts a conversation with the author that reveals Welty’s awareness of her own feminine embodiment, as negotiated through the maternal icon: “...I suggested that Eudora resembled her mother, only to be contradicted: ‘No. My mother was a beautiful woman.’ Then early in the 1990s, I was surprised to hear Eudora and Charlotte Capers agree that their mothers had always wanted them to be prettier...”²⁰⁴ This anecdote illustrates an immediate opposition between Eudora and Chestina, which implies Eudora’s failure to meet normative southern beauty standards. If, as Frueh writes, “the Eternal Feminine lives on in images of a wife-and-mother who is young, fair-skinned, and dressed in white,”²⁰⁵

²⁰² Kristeva 32.

²⁰³ Frueh 133.

²⁰⁴ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, 566.

²⁰⁵ Frueh 250.

thus haunting the daughter with her successful fulfillment of cultural requisites, then Welty's emotional distance from Chestina might be interpreted as a separation from her mother's ideals about the body, womanhood, and marriage.

Notably, one of the personal photographs that Welty includes in *One Writer's Beginnings* depicts Chestina, "coming down the stairs at 741 North Congress Street, Jackson,"²⁰⁶ clothed entirely in delicate white, her hair piled into an elegant chignon, her gaze casted demurely downward. The domestic space of the home is essential toward Welty's characterization of her mother, who Peggy Whitman Prenshaw describes as "the keeper of the hearth, the ardent shelterer..."²⁰⁷ However tenuous their relationship might have become as the years progressed, Welty preserved her fascination with her mother as the fulfillment of productive femininity, which was predicated upon her designated role as the protector of home and children. *One Writer's Beginnings* includes various lessons and values that Chestina imparted upon Welty, which are often grounded in appearance-based objects and acts. While Welty sought to escape these suffocating boundaries that were imposed by the polite southern society of her childhood, she no doubt drew upon her highly visualized memories of Chestina to create female characters in her fiction²⁰⁸—women who might, or might not have, lived up to the lofty ideals that Chestina represented.

This interest in maternal beauty is more than metaphorical or nostalgic. For Welty, the memory of Chestina is definitively rooted in the object world. In an early passage of *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty recounts, with richly layered imagery, her encounters with a stowed-away length of her mother's hair:

²⁰⁶ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, fig. 10.

²⁰⁷ Prenshaw, *Composing Selves*, 259.

²⁰⁸ Millichap 85.

In my mother's bottom bureau drawer in her bedroom she kept treasures of hers in boxes, and had given me permission to play with one of them—a switch of her own chestnut-colored hair, kept in a heavy bright braid that coiled around like a snake inside a cardboard box. I hung it from her doorknob and unplaited it; it fell in ripples nearly to the floor, and it satisfied the Rapunzel in me to comb it out.²⁰⁹

Here, the switch of Chestina's hair operates as many symbols at once: a juvenile plaything, a tangible reminder of maternal vitality, and a source of mythical power. Welty alludes to her mother's hair at several key moments throughout her memoir, using the hair to address abstract topics, such as mortality and self-identity, for which she lacks a conceptual framework or concrete experience. Temporally speaking, the memoir recounts Welty's perspective at time when her world was rather insular, and she still found herself involuntarily “sheltered from”²¹⁰ many of the hard truths about life in the Deep South at the turn of the twentieth century. By piecing together images of her mother's appearance, specifically those that relate to her hair, Welty communicates to the reader her fledging understanding of more weighty topics, such as femininity, gender politics, and sexuality, while also demonstrating the imprint that beauty left upon her imagination.

Welty's adolescent encounters with her mother's hair work to uphold feminine beauty as a potential force of radical change. If, as Blain Roberts emphasizes in her text, long hair is essential to the formation of traditional southern femininity,²¹¹ then Chestina's shorn hair transgresses the cultural requirement for that physical proof of a woman's intact purity. Tucked out of sight in the bureau drawer, where it lays “coiled around like a snake,”²¹² the hair suddenly

²⁰⁹ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 16.

²¹⁰ Pollack, *Eudora Welty's Photography and Fiction*, 92.

²¹¹ Roberts 35.

²¹² Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 16.

assumes a threatening quality. Even though it is detached from Chestina's head, no longer a physical part of her, the hair, and the past trauma that it represents, is still essential toward her characterization. Perhaps the young Eudora's fixation with her mother's disembodied hair derives from its representation of a potentially forbidden or subversive feminine beauty, which must be concealed from public view, and only admired in private. In observing and attempting to process the secrets that are hidden within this switch of hair, Eudora begins to fathom the social power that women can command through the strategic manipulation of their bodies.

Welty's allusion to Rapunzel in this scene from childhood also warrants further discussion, as it introduces the significance of fables and myths to the writer's imagination, and integrates the familiar iconography of fantasy stories with her close study of the female body. Rapunzel emerges again in *One Writer's Beginnings*, when Welty remembers her penchant for dressing up as the princess, alongside other imaginary characters.²¹³ Clearly, these childhood fancies lingered, because during Welty's early writing career as a teenager and college student, she frequently returns to images of ideal or fantastical beauty. "Burlesque Ballad," Welty's poetic sketch about the captive Rapunzel, published in a 1922 issue of the Mississippi College for Women's newspaper, *The Spectator*, includes brilliant images of the princess' "coils of golden hair"²¹⁴ that ultimately "strangled"²¹⁵ the knight in his futile attempt at rescuing her from the tower. Here, a woman's hair, while desirable and idealized, evolves into an overt hazard to masculine intervention. Clearly, Welty was enchanted by the potentiality of Rapunzel's beauty being deceitful, as represented by her violent disruption of the fairytale, as it is conventionally narrated.

²¹³ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 20.

²¹⁴ Welty, *Early Escapades*, 80.

²¹⁵ Welty, *Early Escapades*, 81.

Rosamund, a princess-figure that resembles the traditional Rapunzel, later appears in Welty's 1942 novella, *The Robber Bridegroom*, indicating that fantasies of beauty remained significant aspects of Welty's inspiration as an artist throughout her writing career. Given the conventional beauty of this character, Betina Entzminger characterizes Rosamund as an example of the "exaggerated feminine types"²¹⁶ that have continued to enchant male and female writers alike for centuries. Ultimately, Entzminger finds fault with Welty's invocation of these tropes in *The Robber Bridegroom*, determining that such storytelling techniques are "orthodox"²¹⁷ and "limiting"²¹⁸ to female characters and readers, who are taught that conforming to heteronormative standards is the only way to productively practice femininity. The aesthetic perfection of Rosamund contradicts what critics observe as Welty's tendency to create physically flawed, subversive female characters; as Mae Miller Claxton maintains, "Except for her fairytale heroine Rosamund in *The Robber Bridegroom*, Welty seldom describes her female characters as beautiful."²¹⁹ Given this critical rejection of the feminist potential of Rosamund, Welty's sole beauty, it is clear that her fiction must gravitate toward another female type altogether, one that affords more obvious opportunities for obtaining power.

The Medusa figure, which is often counterposed as the symbolic foil to Rapunzel, emerges more frequently in critical analyses of Welty's female characters.²²⁰ Both Rapunzel and Medusa are cultural figures that possess magically mutated hair, yet they arouse contradictory understandings of femininity, power, and sexual experience. Lauren Berlant identifies traces of the Medusa motif in Welty's short story, "Petrified Man," which takes place in a small town

²¹⁶ Entzminger 129.

²¹⁷ Entzminger 134.

²¹⁸ Entzminger 134.

²¹⁹ Claxton 83.

²²⁰ Miller 73.

beauty parlor, occupied by women who exchange pieces of gossip, undeterred (that is, until the story's end) by male intervention. To Berlant, Medusa is the mythic reservoir of all "[c]ritical horror"²²¹ aimed toward women who freely express their opinions and sexual desire, and therefore appear capable of violence, especially to male spectators. Drawing heavily from psychoanalytic theory, Berlant deduces that the snake-haired Medusa "represents knowledge of sexual difference,"²²² and that Welty's deliberate invocation of the Medusa myth in her stories ultimately attests to the reality "that monstrosity is female as well as male."²²³ Berlant follows the pattern of other critics who associate the maligned Medusa figure with radical feminist ambitions.²²⁴ More saliently subversive, Medusa seems a natural motif for Welty to latch onto in her descriptions of women whose voices and appearances threaten to destabilize the functioning of society along its acceptable gendered lines.

In contrast, the golden-haired Rapunzel exemplifies a sanctioned version of femininity that is untouched and chaste, what Jeana Jorgenson refers to as "a narrow ideal of doll-like feminine beauty."²²⁵ The lack of sexuality and agency that Rapunzel represents makes her an obvious enemy to radical feminist enterprises, as her beauty is largely male-serving.²²⁶ Still, Welty repeatedly grasps for the Rapunzel motif in her writing, perhaps because of its familiarity, or because of her desire to revise its storytelling function. It is noteworthy that in the scene from *One Writer's Beginnings* that prompted this discussion of female hair and folklore, Welty compares *herself*, not her beautiful mother, to Rapunzel: "...it satisfied the Rapunzel in me to comb it [the hair] out."²²⁷ This reversal of expectations prioritizes Welty's active participation in

²²¹ Berlant 61.

²²² Berlant 61.

²²³ Berlant 60.

²²⁴ Currie 178.

²²⁵ Jorgenson 49.

²²⁶ Jorgenson 56.

²²⁷ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 16.

beauty acts, rather than her distance from an unattainable ideal. Although Welty does not view herself as beautiful, she still exacts pleasure from grooming and engaging with the conventional hallmarks of femininity, especially when her imagination recontextualizes these familiar symbols for more subversive ends.

I argue that, to fulfill this end, Welty constructs a dual motif by combining Medusa's destruction with Rapunzel's beauty, dissolving the assumptions that separate and seek to simplify the power of these two icons. The transgressive effect of this revised fairytale is heightened by Welty's invocation of her mother, another allegorically weighty feminine figure. For Welty to compare Chestina's switch of hair to "a snake,"²²⁸ only to position her next description in the more appealing imagery of Rapunzel's long tresses, reveals not only Welty's wide allusive range, but also, her nuanced understanding of womanhood that refuses to settle on binary oppositions. Through her mother, and the visual aspects that surround her memory, Welty confronts the cultural myths that bind women into narrow tropes and deprive them of the ability to construct their own embodied experience.

I interpret Welty's short fiction as a democratic envisioning of feminine self-presentation and its possibilities. In Welty's world, beauty exists on a spectrum, but it is equally accessible to women of all economic circumstances, social statuses, and physical appearances. Importantly, Charlotte Currie notes that Medusa, a figure who is typically regarded as repulsive, actually bridges the gap between feminine beauty and monstrosity, which are the "two complementary faces of female power."²²⁹ I extend the same concept to Welty's fiction and female characters, who are often characterized as too grotesque to be included in the realm of conventional beauty. Welty's deft amalgamation of the feminine ideal with the feminine outlier allows readers to

²²⁸ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 16.

²²⁹ Currie 172.

conceptualize the complex ways in which beauty has become entrenched in their memories, and how the terms of beauty might be manipulated and reinscribed on the body for personal gain.

Chestina's hair prompts another lesson that is essential toward Welty's education as not only a writer, but as a woman learning to cultivate the power of beauty. In the following excerpt, Welty recounts a memory from her mother's childhood that demonstrates how a young woman might negotiate power differentials by strategically resisting and complying with beauty standards. Showing her daughter the home in West Virginia where she was raised, Chestina reflects on the origins of her lifelong fixation with the literature of Charles Dickens:

“Why, Papa gave me that set of Dickens for agreeing to let them cut off my hair,” she [Chestina] said, as if surprised that a reason like that wouldn't have occurred to me. “In those days, they thought very long thick hair like mine would sap a child's strength. I said *No!* I wanted my hair left the very way it was. They offered me gold earrings first—in those days little girls often developed a wish to have their ears pierced and fitted with little gold rings. I said *No!* I'd rather keep my hair. Then Papa said, ‘What about books? I'll have them send a whole set of Charles Dickens to you, right up the river from Baltimore, in a barrel.’ I agreed.”²³⁰

This anecdote resonates on multiple critical levels. First, and most intriguing to this project, Chestina's story demonstrates that an indelible connection exists between a young woman's physical appearance and her imaginative, intellectual life. Rephrasing this scene from *One Writer's Beginnings*, and contextualizing its significance to Welty's development as a writer, Prenshaw notes that Chestina “sacrificed her long hair” for the Dickens volumes because of the assumption that heavy hair “dissipated mental energy.”²³¹ According to this perspective, long

²³⁰ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 47.

²³¹ Prenshaw, *Composing Selves*, 259.

hair, largely considered to be the prize of southern ladies, in fact limits a young girl's cognitive capacity. In cutting her hair, Chestina enables herself to access not just books, but high-brow literature, and the possibilities that such an education might afford to a young woman from a limited, rural setting.

Chestina's exchange with her parents also indicates a value for books over other precious commodities typically associated with the cultivation of femininity, such as the "little gold rings" that were so popular with other girls her age.²³² Chestina emphasizes that she would "rather keep [her] hair"²³³ than receive a pair of these dainty earrings, creating a hierarchy of priorities that does not deny the importance of hair to the formation of a young girl's identity; even then, Chestina parts with this symbol of femininity for the sake of her education and imagination, thus solidifying her lifelong reputation as "an expressive and passionate reader"²³⁴ whose future home and family were both predicated upon a firm appreciation for literature. By insisting that books were, quite literally, more precious than gold or vanity, Chestina teaches her daughter that literature and the worlds it creates offers more long-term stimulation and satisfaction than the material world. For Chestina, the imaginary space of books presented her with sufficient opportunities for travel, and perhaps was the source of "the fierce independence"²³⁵ that she passed down to Eudora, even though Chestina never seemed to transfer these vibrant experiences beyond the page.

As a fellow ardent reader, Welty clearly internalized her mother's lesson about the possibilities afforded by literature, but she did not replicate Chestina's example entirely. In order to become a true author, Welty expanded her realm of influence beyond the imaginary, and

²³² Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 47.

²³³ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 47.

²³⁴ Prenshaw, *Composing Selves*, 259.

²³⁵ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 60.

consequently, beyond the confines of her family home in Jackson. In her text, Prenshaw interprets Welty's literary life as a manifestation of her complex relationship with her mother. Foregrounding Welty's conflicted evolution into a writer through the lens of this relationship, Prenshaw explains why Welty eventually abandoned her mother for the sake of her individual creative development:

Welty's tendency to identify reading with the maternal world and authoring with male power is hardly surprising; it is a long established and common association in Western culture, much discussed by feminist critics and writers and evidenced by many of the texts studied here. Like so many others before her, she grounds her authorial identity in the legacy from the father, associating her journeying away from home and literary ambitions with the model of the father. But this correspondence is fraught with unease, for the leave-taking of the mother creates an unavoidable residue of guilt.²³⁶

This regret that Prenshaw mentions speaks to an excerpt from Marrs' conversations with Welty, during which Welty recalls an instrumental trip to California with her father that occurred at the age of fifteen. In a practical sense, this trip forces Welty to temporarily abandon her mother in the domestic space, but it also reflects a symbolic departure from her mother's visions about her identity and future. In Welty's own words, "The first thing, in the hotel room in Los Angeles, I washed my hair and sat brushing it out of the window to blow in the day, smelling and breathing the Pacific air, transported with the strangeness and the distance from home. As I sat drying my hair at this high window, I was aching with guilt for all my mother had given up and all that was ahead of me."²³⁷ Much like Chestina was forced to sacrifice her hair in order to obtain the

²³⁶ Prenshaw, *Composing Selves*, 260.

²³⁷ Welty, qtd. in Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, 15-16.

books, she also sacrifices her connection to her daughter, so that Eudora might enlarge her experiential realm, and consequently, strengthen her capacity to write compelling fiction.

Rather than lingering on the sense of Welty's trip being "purchased by her mother's deprivation,"²³⁸ as Marrs does, I want to reconcile this scene with Welty's complex understanding of her mother, whose feminine beauty and intellectual power helps Welty shatter and overcome the uncompromising Medusa-Rapunzel binary. A reality that neither Marrs nor Prenshaw recognize is that during this moment when Welty acknowledges her separation from her mother, Welty engages in a timeless feminine beauty ritual. As she recounts the multi-stepped process of "wash[ing]," "brushing," and "drying"²³⁹ her hair, Welty comes to terms with the fact of her liberation. This moment echoes the earlier scene from *One Writer's Beginnings* where Welty brushes her mother's switch of hair, and recognizes that beauty, even from a conventional angle, might also represent transgression.

Ultimately, Chestina's childhood story about the set of Dickens volumes establishes beauty as bartering power, as a tool for a young woman to harness to overcome situations that limit her on account of her gender or social status. I argue that through the icon of her well-groomed, well-educated mother, Welty marries the material world of consumer culture with the imaginative world of literature, thus conceptualizing beauty as the great leveler for women of all backgrounds. If Welty's narrative perspective is that of "the daughter onlooker, who is determined to *see*,"²⁴⁰ as Prenshaw contends, then her gaze is naturally conditioned by Chestina's lessons about both feminine beauty *and* feminine intellect. Welty's imagination subtly bridges the divide between these two perspectives, and, in the process, allows her to craft female

²³⁸ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, 16.

²³⁹ Welty, qtd. in Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, 15-16.

²⁴⁰ Prenshaw, *Composing Selves*, 262.

characters who implement beauty acts and products to negotiate discrepancies in power, circumstance, and experience.

“[T]he pity and beauty and power of her death: “A Piece of News” and Beauty’s Storytelling Capacity

Prior to its inclusion in Welty’s 1941 collection, *A Curtain of Green*, “A Piece of News” was one of Welty’s first published short stories. Printed in the 1937 summer issue of the *Southern Review*, the story introduces Welty’s signature narrative style through several elements and themes that recurrently appear across her fiction, including a central female protagonist who possesses a vibrant interior life, a “dreamlike atmosphere”²⁴¹ that is rich with complementary sensory imagery, and an ambiguous, but generous narrator who further confounds the reader’s understanding of reality. More specific to this project, “A Piece of News” operates as concrete evidence of Welty’s interest in demystifying feminine beauty as an elusive or exclusive ideal. Instead, beauty, as it is conjured and wielded by the lower-class protagonist, Ruby Fisher, becomes a vital entry point into knowledge about complicated topics, and the means by which a woman of few means might actualize her agency, escape from her narrow sphere of influence, and reclaim control over her personal narrative. This reclamation is even more significant and necessary, in light of critical assumptions about the perceived limits of Ruby’s social status and inferior intellect.

The narrator presents Ruby as a relatively straightforward character who, according to most descriptions, does not seem to possess much depth. “[L]onesome and slow,”²⁴² Ruby is immediately characterized by her lack of mental stimulation, and the starkness of her

²⁴¹ Nissen, ““Making the jump,”” 3.

²⁴² Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 12.

surroundings in a cabin that is noted for its “sparsity”²⁴³ and isolation from society. Since this rustic setting affords her no companions for conversation, Ruby invents a “little song about the rain”²⁴⁴ to occupy her time and fill the silence that overpowers the cabin. Marrs goes so far as to call Ruby “a simple-minded woman” on account of her “routine and barren existence,”²⁴⁵ which requires her to create her own drama, no matter how laughable and implausible the circumstances. The assumption of Ruby’s simplicity is also rooted in her apparent difficulties in reading the newspaper, which delivers her the news that disrupts the stability of her mundane life. As she reads the newspaper, Ruby is described as “looking and spelling so slowly,”²⁴⁶ struggling with each word, and perceiving the page with uncertainty, “like a young girl watching a baby.”²⁴⁷ Taken together, these details reinforce Ruby’s perceived identity as a naïve, childlike country housewife whose perspective cannot be trusted without some mediating voice of wisdom.

Importantly, Nissen identifies the story as “deceptively simple,”²⁴⁸ paying keen attention to the deft cleverness of Welty’s language, which embellishes upon Ruby’s paltry intellect. Though she appears a largely senseless character, Nissen portrays Ruby as “willing of body and imagination,”²⁴⁹ an easy vessel for the intervening voice of the narrator, whose storytelling sensibilities order the sequence of events, and somehow rationalize Ruby’s unfounded perspective. Ultimately, “...the narrator is the only one to see Ruby as she wants and needs to be seen, on her own terms, however melodramatic they may seem to us. For Ruby is a performer—a

²⁴³ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 12.

²⁴⁴ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 12.

²⁴⁵ Marrs, *One Writer’s Imagination*, 30-31.

²⁴⁶ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 13.

²⁴⁷ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 13.

²⁴⁸ Nissen, ““Making the jump,”” 3.

²⁴⁹ Nissen, ““Making the jump,”” 3.

performer without an audience. No matter what she may feel, there is no one watching Ruby Fisher.”²⁵⁰

This patient narrator that Nissen describes seems to be Welty herself. Her personal sensitivity to the interior lives of female characters of all backgrounds predisposes her for this task of unbiased observation, this narrative acceptance of difference. Rather than speaking on Ruby’s behalf, and thus diminishing her agency as a character, however, I argue that Welty allows Ruby to speak for herself through the layered depictions of her embodied experiences. Much of “A Piece of News” seems to be caught in the abstract, imaginary world. As Mitch Frye observes, “For several pages, the story inhabits a *Twilight Zone* world in which a newspaper might deliver the news of the future and not of the immediate past; this prophetic medium is its weird novum, its point of departure from the real.”²⁵¹ What is real in this story, what renders Welty’s inexplicable story so tangible, is its definitive rootedness in the female body. By charting Ruby’s repeated acts of grooming and self-luxuriating, Welty illustrates a woman’s striving to construct and control her image, and consequently, her story. These moments of embodiment, which are achieved through Ruby’s engagement with beauty culture, demonstrate the ways in which beauty lends southern women an essential experiential language that renders them conspicuous and autonomous.

Whenever Ruby finds herself veering away from reality, Welty grounds her character by having her return to thoughts or sensations surrounding the body that she inhabits, and the aesthetic pleasure that she receives in beholding it. These moments have an anchoring or clarifying effect upon Ruby, on account of her evident pride in her own beauty. Notably, the story begins with Ruby’s gratitude at her solitude after getting caught in the rain, as it enables her

²⁵⁰ Nissen, ““Making the jump,”” 7.

²⁵¹ Frye 90.

to slowly and sensuously dry “her wet yellow head,”²⁵² and further pamper herself in the isolation of the cabin. Welty lingers on Ruby’s hair throughout the story, invoking it to capture and measure her character’s unspoken interior experiences:

She [Ruby] was pleased with herself now. As she sprawled close to the fire, her hair began to slide out of its damp tangles and hung all displayed down her back like a piece of bargain silk. She closed her eyes. Her mouth fell into a deepness, into a look of unconscious cunning. Yet in her very stillness and pleasure she seemed to be hiding there, all alone. And at moments when the fire stirred and tumbled in the grate, she would tremble, and her hand would start out as if in impatience or despair.²⁵³

In the passage above, Welty emphasizes several crucial components of Ruby’s character, including Ruby’s growing satisfaction with her appearance, which she regards through touch and sensation. At the same time, Welty also implies the presence of an intimidating outside force, as represented by the fire, which might fault Ruby for her self-gratification. At the start of the story, Ruby exists in seclusion and self-sufficiency, wholly removed from social scrutiny, exempting the narrator’s observational perspective. Warming her clothing and drying her hair by the fire, Ruby accompanies her grooming rituals with leisurely, languid movements, as well as song. Welty notes Ruby’s “closed... eyes” and her “stillness and pleasure,”²⁵⁴ all qualities that resemble either a state of meditation, sleep, or perhaps even sexual satisfaction. The thoroughly physical and sensuous tone of the passage implies the latter reading. By focusing on the visual aspects of Ruby’s appearance, and the indulgence of tending to her hair, I argue that Welty calms and empowers her protagonist with the sheer reminder of her feminine embodiment. These

²⁵² Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 13.

²⁵³ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 12-13.

²⁵⁴ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 12.

reminders temporarily stave off the interloping disturbance from the outside world that threatens to disrupt her private moment of pampering.

Further, the narrative grounding of Ruby in sexualized images of beauty discloses additional information about the position that she holds in society, as well as her degree of power relative to that position. Welty writes that Ruby's long blonde hair is "all displayed down her back like a piece of bargain silk."²⁵⁵ Welty acknowledges the cheap quality of Ruby's personal style, almost in passing, yet Nissen interprets this description as proof that "...it [the hair] (and metonymically) its owner are not expensive."²⁵⁶ According to Nissen's reading, Ruby's appearance, while beautiful, cannot be confused as authentically glamorous. Carol Dyhouse defines glamour in the early twentieth century as being linked to "a desire for something out of the ordinary," as glamorous objects exude the owner's "luxury and excess"²⁵⁷— all qualities that seem at odds with Ruby's primitive cabin and simple lifestyle. Marrs echoes this sentiment when she notices within the narration another beauty-based marker of Ruby's socioeconomic status: "...for her [Ruby] a gift of coffee is a luxury, owning a nightgown, especially a new nightgown, is possible only in dreams..."²⁵⁸ Here, Marrs demonstrates how certain commodified goods, especially those that are new and exotic, are unattainable for Ruby, given her limited means, and perhaps her geographic location. Taken together, these interpretations that stress Ruby's low social status might increase the reader's pity toward Ruby, rendering her an object of sympathy or scorn rather than a capable example of female sexual agency.

The judgmental undertones of the scene continue to expand as Ruby becomes attuned to the presence of some unnamed surveilling agent in the cramped cabin. As she reads the paper

²⁵⁵ Welty, "A Piece of News," *Collected Stories*, 12.

²⁵⁶ Nissen, "Making the jump," 3.

²⁵⁷ Dyhouse 3.

²⁵⁸ Marrs, *One Writer's Imagination*, 31.

that discloses the news of her apparent death, “An expression of utter timidity came over her [Ruby’s] flat blue eyes and her soft mouth. Then a look of fright. She stared about... What eye in the world did she feel looking in on her? She pulled her dress down tightly and began to spell through a dozen words in the newspaper.”²⁵⁹ Perhaps this specific moment, and the evident self-consciousness that it provokes from Ruby, operates as a narrative enactment of the body-based shame that a confident, independent, sexually aware young southern woman might experience during this era. Ruby’s impulse to “[pull] her dress down tightly” directly after her acknowledgment of an “eye”²⁶⁰ in the room implies that she feels humiliated at the thought of someone witnessing her self-luxuriating and clear pleasure earlier in the scene. Cahn confirms the correlation between the rising beauty culture of the 1920s and 1930s, and a young woman’s nascent sexual knowledge: “As adolescent girls entered into a culture of consumption, their encounters with material goods stimulated desires, prompted actions, and evoked feelings that related, directly or indirectly to their sexual desires and decisions.”²⁶¹ While Ruby, unlike the traditional female consumer of this age, does not appear to own an abundance of cosmetic products, she nevertheless engages with her body in a dynamic, self-controlled manner that conjures the same essential feelings that the beauty industry markets to young women. Speaking to this point, Paula Black contends that simple acts of personal pampering operate as a necessary “corollary” to the commercial beauty world.²⁶² Despite the temporary shame or paranoia that she experiences during when she considers her private moment becoming public, Ruby’s exploration of her body allows her to step outside of the boundaries of her social class, gender, and personal status, indicating the transgressive potential of feminine beauty.

²⁵⁹ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 13.

²⁶⁰ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 13.

²⁶¹ Cahn 130.

²⁶² Black 15.

As this scene progresses, Welty continues to incorporate other beauty dimensions in her narration of Ruby's dramatic awakening. She likens the fire to "a mirror in the cabin, into which she [Ruby] could look deeper and deeper as she pulled her fingers through her hair, trying to see herself and Clyde coming up behind her."²⁶³ Here, Welty overtly aligns her female character's pursuit of independence and beauty, specifically evidenced through her fixation with her hair, with an almost forbidden, foreboding power, something that threatens the patriarchal authority in her life. This comparison of the fire to a mirror is not a perfunctory metaphor; it is a confident confirmation that beauty is the force that awakens Ruby's imagination, and encourages her to tell her story through her body. In the same way that Welty uses mirror-like surfaces to reveal interior truths about her two belle figures, Clytie and Miss Sabina, she allows Ruby to tap into the fire's power, and thus release her stifled agency as a woman of few means, who perhaps does not even own a mirror. Not only does this fire establish Clyde as Ruby's adversary, but it also rewards Ruby with a rare moment of unadulterated self-recognition. By bringing closer to her reflection, the fire allows Ruby "to see herself,"²⁶⁴ perhaps, for the first time, as she wants to be seen. In the fire, Ruby simultaneously confronts her appearance, her marriage, and her personal narrative, which she soon revises with unbridled enthusiasm and creativity.

I interpret what has been called the "melodramatic"²⁶⁵ turn in "A Piece of News" as concrete validation of Welty's desire to empower her female characters by grounding them in the highly attainable imaginative reservoir of beauty culture. After reading the newspaper and finding her face within the fire, Ruby swiftly takes control of the story, rewriting her narrative in such a way that she might obtain the very commodified goods for which she yearns, but she

²⁶³ Welty, "A Piece of News," *Collected Stories*, 13-14.

²⁶⁴ Welty, "A Piece of News," *Collected Stories*, 14.

²⁶⁵ Marrs, *One Writer's Imagination*, 31.

cannot obtain on account of their cost. After confronting the hard “reality” of her death, Ruby allows herself to engage in lively self-reflection: “She lay silently for a moment, composing her face into a look which would be beautiful, desirable, and dead. Clyde would have to buy her a dress to bury her in.”²⁶⁶ Here, Ruby centers the experience of death in superficial, beauty-based terms, dwelling upon the countenance that she will eternally wear in the grave, as well as her funeral dress. There is almost glee in Ruby’s realization that her husband will be forced to purchase her a new garment suitable for the public occasion; as a woman who possesses a considerable amount of denied vanity, Ruby delights in Clyde’s potential submission to her luxurious aspirations. While Ruby is not an active consumer within the practical context of the story, she is a dreamer who recognizes the power that fashionable items lend to a young woman who feels trapped by her circumstances. During these funeral preparations, Ruby ensures that her legacy will be predicated upon her physical appearance: “beautiful, desirable, and dead.”²⁶⁷ The privileging of the adjectives “beautiful” and “desirable”²⁶⁸ over the unyielding fact of death further entrenches Ruby’s reliance upon her superficial worth, and her desire to immortalize herself according to those traits.

Through the reclamation of her personal narrative in this feverish vision, which temporarily liberates her from the confines of her isolated cabin and her marriage, Ruby crafts her own unique experience of glamour. According to Dyhouse, glamour possesses “a dimension of sensuality and magic through touch, texture and scent;”²⁶⁹ this dimension is activated whenever Ruby feels or cares for her body, which transports her into some unknown realm. By and large, beauty is the vehicle through which Ruby escapes; it is the atmosphere that surrounds

²⁶⁶ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 14.

²⁶⁷ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 14.

²⁶⁸ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 14.

²⁶⁹ Dyhouse 6.

her “dreamy walk,”²⁷⁰ and the iconography that transforms her simple life into “an untouched mystery.”²⁷¹ Welty takes this transformation one step further, enhancing the imaginative, subversive capacity of beauty through Ruby’s engagement with print culture. Much like the act of brushing her hair, reading the newspaper operates as a deeply embodied, visceral experience for Ruby. Even after Clyde interrupts her solitude and shatters the narrative that she wrote for herself with the fact that she was not murdered, “It excited her [Ruby] even to touch the paper with her hand, to hear its quiet secret noise when she carried it, the rustle of surprise.”²⁷² Here, the newspaper, and the physical sensation of holding it, operates as Ruby’s link to a separate world, one in which she is significant and newsworthy. Even as Marrs criticizes Ruby’s rustic intellect, she acknowledges that reading is essential toward the character’s personal awakening: “The newspaper story strikes her imagination. Scarcely able to read, Ruby is nevertheless affected by the written word.”²⁷³ Clearly, Welty recognizes that beauty culture and print culture are intrinsically connected, and tap into similarly potent aspects of a young woman’s imagination.

“A Piece of News” illustrates the subversive, class-transcending power of beauty by allowing Ruby to engage with her sexuality and creativity on unprecedented levels. Ultimately, Welty’s narrative arbitration transforms this simple country wife into a complex character—perhaps more complex than critics of Welty’s short fiction have typically accepted. Ruby, though low-class and uneducated, is a woman who contains and channels unspoken forces through her experience of feminine embodiment: “There was something in her that never stopped.”²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 12.

²⁷¹ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 13.

²⁷² Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 15.

²⁷³ Marrs, *One Writer’s Imagination*, 31.

²⁷⁴ Welty, “A Piece of News,” *Collected Stories*, 13.

Welty's acknowledgement of this internal complexity, as manifested by Ruby's personal grooming and self-care rituals, allows Ruby to reclaim her voice, her body, and her imagination. By commanding her narrative, even temporarily, Ruby orients her gaze outward, and expands her possibilities for connecting with her sexuality and independent identity: "She kept looking out the window, suffused with the warmth from the fire and with the pity and beauty and power of her death. The thunder rolled."²⁷⁵ As this moment indicates, Ruby discovers her own power through the language and depth that beauty lends her.

"I will never catch up with Cornella": Beauty's Democratizing Function in "The Winds"

In "A Piece of News," Welty confronts the issue of social class by narratively lingering on material details that illustrate Ruby's lack of purchasing power and accordingly, her restricted access to commodified goods. This story, however, does not include another female character against whom Ruby can measure her degree of wealth or beauty; the idealized vision of glamour that Ruby crafts solely exists in her mind, perhaps inspired by images of models in newspaper or magazine advertisements, yet mostly operating as an impetus for her isolated imagination. In another surreal short story, "The Winds," which was published in the August 1942 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* prior to its inclusion in the collection, *The Wide Net*, Welty establishes an obvious juxtaposition between two female characters, Josie and Cornella, both young women who belong to varying socioeconomic positions and family circumstances. Josie, the protagonist of the story who lives across the street from the teenaged Cornella, possesses an abiding fascination with the older girl, upholding her as an image of beauty, maturity, and ambition. Through the imagery that surrounds Cornella, which becomes amplified by the story's fever-

²⁷⁵ Welty, "A Piece of News," *Collected Stories*, 15.

dream atmosphere, Josie negotiates complex questions, including how to define her own budding femininity, and why the female body is an inherent vessel for storytelling.

The inclusion of the “The Winds” in *Harper’s Bazaar* was a noteworthy landmark in Welty’s literary career. Ann Waldron points out that Mary Louise Aswell, longtime fiction editor of the fashion magazine, considered “The Winds” as “the best story Eudora had ever written;”²⁷⁶ Aswell also featured the story in her 1944 anthology of women’s writing, *It’s a Woman’s World*. Pollack underscores the advocating role that Aswell played during Welty’s early literary career, yet she struggles to reconcile the rhetoric of women’s magazines with the content of Welty’s short fiction; according to Pollack, “...magazines such as *Harper’s* showed a considerable and fascinating divide between the support they gave to avant-garde women’s writing and the cultural messages in their product advertising. Magazine culture in both its articles and its advertising routinely addressed topics of female authority and vulnerability, and current notions of the natural female body were routinely sold there but from schizophrenically different points of view.”²⁷⁷ Pollack brings up the essential reality that women’s fashion magazines of early-to-mid-twentieth century, even those that featured “highbrow” fiction from female literary luminaries, were ultimately dictated by mainstream opinions about beauty, which often prioritized superficial, homogenized beauty over the conceptual depth, diversity, and radical gender politics espoused in Welty’s short fiction. Bearing Pollack’s contention in mind, I argue that the narrative complexity of “The Winds” is preternaturally suited for this task of negotiating the tensions between mainstream beauty culture, as it was marketed and culturally imagined in the 1930s and 1940s, and the intellectual and imaginative development of young women, particularly in the American South.

²⁷⁶ Waldron 119.

²⁷⁷ Pollack, *Eudora Welty’s Photography and Fiction*, 140.

Much like the young Welty in *One Writer's Beginnings*, Josie's adolescent imagination is largely centered on images of feminine beauty and personal grooming habits, as embodied by the women who populate her inner circle. For Josie, the realm of beauty belongs to the more mature "big girls" who have the freedom to dress themselves, and the mobility to embark on mysterious adventures, far removed from the surveillance of parents or the curiosity of younger children. Josie plays the role of spectator for much of the story, conjuring visions about "the long white-stockinged legs of the big girls,"²⁷⁸ and their forbidden life that fascinates her imagination. The primary object of Josie's attention, however, is Cornella, an inscrutable young woman whose habits and appearance assume an almost mystical quality. During an intense storm that occurs on the vernal equinox, Josie's gaze instinctively searches for Cornella, "...the big girl who lived in the double-house across the street."²⁷⁹ When Josie's eyes settle on the house, she perceives a fantastical occurrence, which seems to be activated by the violent weather: "There was a strange fluid lightning which she [Josie] now noticed for the first time to be filling the air, violet and rose, and soundless of thunder; and the eyes of the double-house seemed to open and shut with it."²⁸⁰ By acknowledging how the shifting forces of the storm vivify the house across the street, Josie prioritizes that location, and Cornella within it, as essential players in the story, which ultimately contributes to the formation of her identity as a young girl.

For multiple reasons, including its categorization, and consequent oversimplification, as a "girl's story,"²⁸¹ "The Winds" is an overlooked piece within Welty's *oeuvre*. Joseph Millichap offers some essential commentary regarding the innovative structure of the story, as it is established in the quoted passage above, and what truths this narrative structure helps to disclose

²⁷⁸ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 190.

²⁷⁹ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 192.

²⁸⁰ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 192.

²⁸¹ Kreyling 593.

to the reader. Millichap argues that the story mirrors Josie's development as a character, also finding that her interior conflicts as a young woman on the cusp of maturity tap into more global changes that Welty focuses on elsewhere in her writing:

The inner feelings Welty evokes in "The Winds" involve personal and cultural anxiety about imminent disorder and alteration. The framing narrative employed here, Josie's slow awakening to the night of storms and then to the brighter morning following, clearly references her personal development from girlhood toward adolescence—as the tale's few critics all agree. Moreover, the filtering of cultural developments through Josie's emerging consciousness marks it as a story of artistic as well as female maturation. Criticism has only touched on the cultural significance of "The Winds," however, in terms of meanings that may be fully developed through consideration of its geographical and chronological settings as well as its allusions to art, epic, and autobiography.²⁸²

Millichap encourages a more expansive, symbolic reading of "The Winds," one that gives credence to the nuances in character and setting that Welty intended. Answering Millichap's call for studies that acknowledge "the cultural significance"²⁸³ of this specific story, I interpret Josie's captivation with Cornella as an manifestation of the democratizing function of beauty culture. The allure of the house across the street, and its metonymic connection to Cornella, reflects multiple components of Josie's awakening, which extend beyond her physical development as a young woman. Josie's awakening is fraught with the undertones of transgression, the most significant source of disobedience deriving from the class disparities that exist between Josie and Cornella. Josie's rapt fascination with Cornella, which borders on idol worship, and perhaps even homoerotic desire, shatters the socioeconomic boundaries that

²⁸² Millichap 84.

²⁸³ Millichap 84.

buttress traditional southern society, and thus elevates Cornella to a lofty status that might otherwise be unattainable for a young woman of her circumstances. These transgressions are effected in part by Cornella's engagement with beauty culture, and Josie's subsequent internalization of beauty as a viable device for self-transformation, with both practical and imaginative consequences.

Carolyn L. Kitch traces the role of the commercial beauty in the dissolution of previously inflexible social boundaries, identifying the Gibson Girl of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a key figure that paved the way for the more sexually liberated flapper: "As a matter of clothing and hairdos, the Gibson Girl look enabled the 'rising' classes to imitate upper-class style in their own appearances. And on tangible, ownable objects, her image enabled them to import that style into their homes."²⁸⁴ According to this logic, purchasing power, exercised for the sake of "making up," was the means by which a young woman attained unprecedented social mobility. It is important to remember that cosmetic products, the centerpiece of female-centric consumer culture, were relatively affordable and accessible after the commercial beauty boom of the 1920s, given their presence in metropolitan department stores and small town drugstores alike.²⁸⁵ With cheap beauty aids on the rise, a young woman of Cornella's lower-middle class status could have feasibly purchased several beauty treatments or tools each month to pamper herself, prepare her face for social scrutiny, and most significantly, manifest her "desired place in the social order."²⁸⁶

Before Welty demonstrates the full capacity of beauty products and other cosmetics to transform Cornella's public image, she forces Josie to confront the unsophisticated reality of

²⁸⁴ Kitch 41.

²⁸⁵ Peiss 97.

²⁸⁶ Cahn 133.

Cornella's personal life. Cornella and her family inhabit a world that is indelibly different from Josie's. Cornella's house, which Josie imagines coming to life during the summer storm, discloses her family's low socioeconomic status and precarious domestic circumstances. As the story progresses, Josie acknowledges the home's state of disrepair with some degree of pity, yet she continues her pattern of personifying its features, as though the home exists as an extension of Cornella herself: "This worn old house was somehow in disgrace, as if it had been born into it and could not help it. Josie was sorry, and sorry that it looked like a face... It watched, and by not being what it should have been, the house was inscrutable."²⁸⁷ In this passage, Josie does not permit the home's "disgrace"²⁸⁸ to prevent her from seeking to understand it, or from making excuses on behalf of its inhabitants. Perhaps the source of the home's "inscrutable"²⁸⁹ façade is Cornella herself, whose aesthetic allure to Josie troubles any straightforward assumptions about how the relative poverty or poor manners should affect her judgment of the family and their home. Even so, other material details from the property give away Cornella's unrefined circumstances, including the "always exactly eight"²⁹⁰ children who bustle about "the barren yard,"²⁹¹ quite different from the easy luxury of Josie's home, as evidenced by her well-contained family unit and their veranda filled with "[g]reen arched ferns, like great exhalations."²⁹² In perhaps the most overt signifier of Cornella's disparity, her home is separated from the neighboring property by what the narrator calls "the strongest fence that could be built."²⁹³ Taken together, these details appear to craft an insurmountable disadvantage from which Cornella must redeem herself in order to overcome shame and social invisibility.

²⁸⁷ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

²⁸⁸ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

²⁸⁹ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

²⁹⁰ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

²⁹¹ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

²⁹² Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 193.

²⁹³ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 196.

In contrast to Cornella's surroundings, Josie's world is gilded and sheltered, the quintessence of pampered southern girlhood. She rides a bicycle emblazoned with the words "golden Princess"²⁹⁴ across its handlebars, and inhabits a home that is spacious, with ample markers of wealth and leisure, such as "the dark hall clock"²⁹⁵ and "[t]he curtains" which "hung... like poured cream."²⁹⁶ Much like her conflation of Cornella with the double-house across the street, Josie recognizes that her home operates as a surrogate for her family's collective identity as privileged and protected fixtures of the neighborhood's highest class: "She ran and jumped, secure that the house was theirs and identical with them—the pale smooth house seeming not to yield to any happening..."²⁹⁷

The members of Josie's family reflect this constancy, especially Josie's mother. In his analysis of "The Winds" and Welty's personal revision of epic literature, Millichap observes multiple parallels between the young Eudora and Josie, beginning with the women in their lives: "The mother is the most influential feminine image for Josie... Like the Chestina Andrews remembered in *One Writer's Beginnings*, Josie's mother was raised on a farm and keeps her own 'small tender Jersey' in the pasture for its milk. Moreover, she is unimpressed by the threat of the storms and argues with her husband about waking the children to move in from the sleeping porch."²⁹⁸ Much like Welty's own mother, Josie's mother is introduced as a straightforward, no-nonsense figure of authority, as well as femininity. Josie lingers on "the scent of her mother's verbena sachet"²⁹⁹ while recounting the reprimands that her mother directed at her and her brother. Additionally, in the same way that Eudora enjoyed brushing Chestina's switch of hair,

²⁹⁴ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 193.

²⁹⁵ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 193.

²⁹⁶ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 191.

²⁹⁷ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 193.

²⁹⁸ Millichap 85.

²⁹⁹ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 191.

and grew to interpret it as a source of comfort and power, Josie shares a fixation with “[h]er mother’s dark plait [which] was as warm as her arm, and she tugged at it.”³⁰⁰ As Josie touches her mother’s hair against the backdrop of the storm, she finds herself surrounded by vivid visions: “In the coming of these glittering flashes and the cries and the calling voices of the equinox, summer was turning into the past. The long ago...”³⁰¹ This scene of maternal connection and feminine self-exploration reflects Josie’s growing understanding of beauty as a complex imaginative force, one capable of imparting her with new and nostalgic experiences.

In order for Josie’s full awakening to occur, however, she must redirect her focus from her mother, who does not fully condone her wandering imagination, to Cornella, her new source of feminine inspiration. Millichap recognizes Josie’s desire for “an appropriate role model”³⁰² who liberates her from the sheltered strictures of her domestic condition. When Josie attempts to have her mother recognize Cornella—“I see Cornella. She’s on the outside, Mama, outside in the storm, and she’s in the equinox”³⁰³—she is swiftly reproached: “How many times have I told you that you need not concern yourself with—Cornella!”³⁰⁴ Here, Cornella’s “outsider” status becomes more apparent, and more transgressive to Josie’s mother, who is the essence of conventional, upper-class womanhood. Accordingly, the frustration that she expresses toward Josie’s fascination with Cornella is better understood as fear, perhaps at the example that Cornella sets for her daughter, and what her appearance reflects about the changing state of social and gender relations.

³⁰⁰ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 192.

³⁰¹ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 192.

³⁰² Millichap 86.

³⁰³ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 192.

³⁰⁴ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 192.

While the beauty industry boomed in the early twentieth century, and was largely embraced by the younger generations, others, as Liz Conor notes in her text, vilified the artificiality of cosmetics, and the social disruption caused by such “disreputable exhibitionism.”³⁰⁵ This element of deceit derived from a woman’s ability to manipulate cosmetics as a means of concealing or enhancing certain features of her appearance, thus rendering spectators at a disadvantage when it came to discerning authentic looks. Rather than being “ladylike” and rejecting attention, women who conspicuously wore makeup invited public scrutiny, and engaged in what was once considered to be vanity. Beyond shattering norms about proper feminine behavior, women who engaged in cosmetic enhancement were also able to revise their social standing by projecting new identities. Given Cahn’s observation that “[be]yond the home, the body served as the primary carrier of class distinctions,”³⁰⁶ The image of physical beauty that Cornella projects ultimately negates the poverty signified by her home. Josie’s mother’s dismissal of Cornella is actually a recognition of the grievous threat that Cornella poses to the social order. By her standards, Cornella is a social interloper, a negative influence, and according to Josie, a more alluring candidate for a role model.

Despite the social consequences that undergird this fixation, Cornella, at least in Josie’s imagination, seems to exist in an idealized realm beyond her material circumstances and familial deprivation; in fact, Josie (and Welty) invents ways to separate and elevate Cornella from the realities that encumber her mobility. The first qualification appears when Josie distinguishes Cornella from the other residents in the dilapidated double-house: “Cornella was not even a daughter in her side of the house, she was only a niece or cousin, there only be the frailest indulgence. She would come out with this frailty about her, come without a hat, without

³⁰⁵ Conor 119.

³⁰⁶ Cahn 133.

anything.”³⁰⁷ This passage implies that Cornella might be of a different, perhaps more eminent bloodline than her relatives, to whom Josie assigns the poverty of the house. What’s more, the fact that Cornella first arrived to the home “without a hat, without anything”³⁰⁸ demonstrates that she has now attained enough means to purchase beauty commodities and reconstruct her public identity.

Welty continues her narrative trend of uplifting Cornella and imparting her with a luster that contradicts her surroundings when Josie recounts Cornella walking out of the house and down the street. During these moments, Cornella’s relatives, who signify her low-class status, “disappear as if by consent,”³⁰⁹ allowing Cornella to project an identity that is independent of their socioeconomic reputation. The sheer act of stepping out of the house is significant, as it renders Cornella, and her beauty decisions, visible to the rest of the neighborhood: “Then lightly down the steps, down the walk, Cornella would come, in some kind of secrecy swaying from side to side, her skirts swinging round, and the sidewalk echoing smally to her pumps with the Baby Louis heels. Then, all alone, Cornella would turn and gaze away down the street, far, far away, in a little pantomime of hope and apprehension that would not permit Josie to stir.”³¹⁰ By emphasizing that Cornella embarks on these walk “all alone,”³¹¹ Welty establishes Cornella as an independent, self-reliant protagonist, un beholden to her affiliation with other individuals or institutions. What’s more, Welty emphasizes the ways in which Cornella regulates her body strategically. According to Lorinda Cohoon, the shoes that Cornella wears during these walks “...serve as material evidence of her difference and distance from Josie and the worlds that

³⁰⁷ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 196.

³⁰⁸ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 196.

³⁰⁹ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 196.

³¹⁰ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 197.

³¹¹ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 197.

Josie's family will allow her to experience."³¹² More specifically, Cohoon finds that these heels, with their "medium-height,"³¹³ communicate the "liminality"³¹⁴ of Cornella's class position and personal vantage point—all details that further captivate Josie, and solidify the peculiar potential of commodified beauty goods to bridge those gaps in experience and privilege.

Josie's lauding of Cornella, however, is not consciously attuned to these social dimensions, given the protagonist's youthfulness and emotionality in this story. Instead, Cornella serves as Josie's personal fairytale, a low-class Rapunzel of sorts, echoing Welty's own childhood fascination with the long-haired princess. Josie deliberately invokes Rapunzel when she imagines calling, "Cornella, Cornella, let down thy hair, and the King's son will come climbing up."³¹⁵ This moment, while playfully enacted, renders Cornella royal—a lateral gain for her social status, which implies that one day, Cornella might be redeemed from the double-house. Further, Cornella shares the same "bright yellow, wonderfully silky and long"³¹⁶ hair as the princess, which she tends to with near-religious devotion and regularity. In Josie's imagination, Cornella exists in a constant state of physical freshness, much like the unattainable ideal of a princess: "She would have just bathed and dressed, for it took her so long, and her bright hair would be done in puffs and curls with a bow behind."³¹⁷ Taken together, these details elevate Cornella to such a lofty level, any previous reminders of poverty or unsightly imperfection are obscured and rendered irrelevant.

While Josie appears mostly preoccupied by the aesthetics of Cornella's beauty rituals, Welty emphasizes the labor and creativity behind these acts of self-transformation. Rather than

³¹² Cohoon, "A Woman's Serious Foot", 43.

³¹³ Cohoon, "A Woman's Serious Foot", 43.

³¹⁴ Cohoon, "A Woman's Serious Foot", 43.

³¹⁵ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

³¹⁶ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

³¹⁷ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 196.

characterizing self-care as frivolous, or an expression of a young woman's vanity, Welty portrays it as a necessary and thoroughly industrious aspect of Cornella's daily routine: "In the morning was Cornella's time of preparation. She was forever making ready. Big girls are usually idle, but Cornella, as occupied as a child, vigorously sunned her hair, or else she had always just washed it and came out busily to dry it."³¹⁸ Here, Welty distinguishes Cornella from the other "big girls" who populate the neighborhood and enchant Josie's imagination to a lesser degree, recognizing that Cornella grooms herself as an extension of her self-pride, as well as her motivation to move up in the world by presenting a fresh face. Working "vigorously" and "busily,"³¹⁹ Cornella executes her beauty rituals as though she were completing a vital task, as though the viability of her transformation depends upon the precision and order of each step. In his critical text, *Beauty and the Beast*, which charts the revolutionary potential of fashion alongside global sociopolitical movements, Michael Taussig arrives at the conclusion that beauty, rather than being the "antithesis"³²⁰ of labor, *is* in fact labor itself: "There is a praxis here, the praxis of labor, meaning the interaction of body and mind and the material worked on."³²¹ In "The Winds," Cornella's body is the material being worked on, and the process of preparing the body for public display engages both her mind and physical self, as well as the imagination of Josie from across the street.

While Welty does not disclose the resolution of Cornella's personal narrative as a modern woman on the rise, she displays her abiding influence by demonstrating the ways in which her example of beauty impacts Josie. Over the course of their largely imagined relationship, Cornella awakens Josie to truths about femininity and maturity, allowing her grasp topics that might

³¹⁸ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

³¹⁹ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

³²⁰ Taussig 87.

³²¹ Taussig 95.

otherwise elude her, given her sheltered upbringing. Much like the unfathomable storm, Cornella's beauty assumes a natural quality: "And her hair was as constant a force as a waterfall to Josie, under whose eyes alone it fell."³²² Cornella awakens Josie to her budding consumerism as a young southern woman. After witnessing Cornella's delicate heels and elegant hair ribbons, Josie finds herself tempted to similarly engage with the glossy glamour of the beauty industry. Toward the end of the story, Josie, speaking as though trapped within a fever or a dream, calls out for her mother to bring "'my muff that came from Marshall Field's'"³²³ Her mother denies this request, focusing instead on Josie's health, yet Josie persists in her request: "'I want my little muff to hold.' She ached for it. 'Mother, give it to me.'"³²⁴ The concept of a young girl "ach[ing]"³²⁵ for a fashionable item is reminiscent of Welty's childhood yearning for a turban that would allow her to transcend her current circumstances. In a similar vein, after observing Cornella's hair done up in "puffs and curls with a bow behind,"³²⁶ Josie finds herself overpowered by "the pity for ribbons,"³²⁷ which subsequently provokes "a wild capering that would end in a tumble."³²⁸ There is humor behind Josie's childlike desire for the world of "grown up" beauty, yet Cornella's example leaves an indelible imprint upon Josie's feminine consciousness. Through Cornella, Josie learns what it means to engage with her body, and with consumer culture.

Perhaps the most striking consequence of Cornella's evolution into Josie's primary feminine icon, however, is how the symbolic and aesthetic power of her physical appearance cultivates Josie's imagination as a storyteller. This is the attribute that Welty seems to share most

³²² Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 194.

³²³ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 199.

³²⁴ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 199.

³²⁵ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 199.

³²⁶ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 196.

³²⁷ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 197.

³²⁸ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 197.

closely with her child protagonist, and the one that she also frequently ascribes to her female characters who engage with beauty culture's rhetorically compelling iconography as a means of negotiating difficulties in their lives, and defining their own identities as women. In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty turns to the recurrent image of her mother's hair in times of crisis or instability, such as after learning about the premature loss of her baby brother: "Now, her [Chestina's] hair was long again, it would reach in a braid down her back, and now I was her child. She hadn't died. And when I came, I hadn't died either. Would she ever? Would I ever? I couldn't face *ever*."³²⁹ The existential dread that Welty communicates in this passage, and the way in which she grounds her experience, or lack of inexperience, in the familiar plait of hair indicates that feminine appearances narrate stories of their own. Hair also serves as Josie's entry into difficult existential questions; during one daydream, Josie imagines that "...where she waited a hand seemed to reach around and take her under the loose-hanging hair, and words in her thoughts came shaped like grapes in her throat. She felt lonely."³³⁰ Here, Welty assumes an menacing tone to demonstrate the extent of Josie's desperation for language, and for interpersonal connectivity. Feeling stifled by her lack of experience, Josie seeks a means of freeing her interior thoughts by pinning them to something concrete and visible.

Ultimately, Cornella's example of feminine beauty and self-presentation awakens Josie's pensive mood, and allows her to put a name to fleeting ideas or emotions. After the storm, and her invocation of Cornella within it, Josie finds herself overpowered by numerous questions that have no answer: "For the first time in her life she thought, might the same wonders never come again? Was each wonder original and alone like the falling star, and when it fell did it bury itself

³²⁹ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 18.

³³⁰ Welty, "The Winds," *Collected Stories*, 198.

beyond where you hunted it?”³³¹ At last unleashed and freed from its experiential lack, Josie’s imagination runs without ceasing; through Cornella, Josie learns her place in the world, and her desire for something beyond her insular surroundings. While Josie ultimately concedes, “I will never catch up with her [Cornella]. No matter how old I get, I will never catch up with Cornella,”³³² perhaps implying that Cornella is an ideal that can never be replicated, she concludes the story with the awareness of her eternal access to “the beauty of the world.”³³³ For a storyteller with a compelling and capable mind, tapping into the imaginative reservoir of mainstream beauty culture can awaken a more democratic vision of beauty: one that is transforming and aesthetically pleasing, yet universal and attainable across all sociocultural boundaries.

³³¹ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 199.

³³² Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 195.

³³³ Welty, “The Winds,” *Collected Stories*, 200.

CONCLUSION

*And beauty is not a blatant or promiscuous or obvious quality; indeed, it is associated with reticence, with stubbornness, of a number of kinds. It arises somehow with a desire not to comply with what may be expected, but to act inevitably, as long as some human truth is in sight, whatever that may call for.*³³⁴

—Eudora Welty, “Looking at Short Stories,” *On Writing*, 2002

In the passage above from her 2002 instructional book, *On Writing*, Welty addresses the topic of aesthetics, as it relates to the craft of short fiction. According to Welty’s perspective as a writer and lover of language, beauty is an inexplicable quality that cannot be manufactured through one specific formula or approach to storytelling. Beauty in fiction, as in reality, belongs to “a number of kinds,”³³⁵ yet the sheer multiplicity of its possible expressions does not render its essence easier to comprehend. The pursuit of beauty in language is complicated, yet at the same time, organic, unforced, as harmonious and straightforward as the experience of beauty in reality. This transcending beauty mirrors the sort that William Faulkner captures in his short story, “The Bear,” one of the texts that Welty appraises in this chapter of *On Writing*, and ultimately upholds as an authentic depiction of beauty in its most inimitable form. For Welty, it is sufficient for a

³³⁴ Welty, *On Writing*, 27.

³³⁵ Welty, *On Writing*, 27.

writer to rely upon their sensory intuition, and trust that "...beauty we may know, when we see it."³³⁶

The beauty that Welty contemplates in *On Writing* regards beauty in the abstract, literary sense, rather than physical beauty, as it is manifested in human appearances. Physical beauty is equally relevant to a conversation about Welty's short fiction; as this project demonstrates, Welty's literary output reflects a lifetime of beauty-based commentary, which began in the society pages of the *Commercial Appeal*, and continued through short fiction published in women's magazines. These experiences exposed Welty to the prominent myths about feminine embodiment and social worth, which she challenged through her female characters' personalized revisions of beauty culture. Extricating the concepts of morality, conformity, and class superiority from the pursuit of beauty, Welty attuned her storytelling insights toward the inherent agency and creativity behind a woman's cultivation of her public image. In the same way that Welty sought to discern literary beauty, in its multiple forms, I argue that she also undertook the complex project of defining feminine beauty, and exploring its impact upon gender politics, class struggles, and the experience of modernity in the American South, embracing the trouble caused by beauty's inherent role in rebellion.

The stories and sketches included in the previous chapters congregate around their shared depiction of women arbitrating personal and public space through beauty. Using the common cultural currency of beauty, southern women of various backgrounds are seen visually enacting their narratives, displaying both trauma and empowerment at varying stages. Through these visible acts, which might mask subversive behavior with an appropriate appearance, or vice versa, Welty's female characters defy the gendered myths that seek to define their identities and

³³⁶ Welty, *On Writing*, 27.

regulate their bodies. This rebellion reinforces Liz Conor's understanding of the modern woman's unprecedented control over her body, and the radical messages that she might project to society through her habits of dress: "Indeed, by turning themselves into spectacles women could enter new feminine categories even as they were being imaged and typed by modernity's representational systems."³³⁷ Welty's women exemplify this phenomenon of spectacularization, as they confront the expectations of their families, communities, and cultures with the materiality of their physical appearances, which, through subtle and overt visual cues in the form of clothing, cosmetics, hair styles, and accessories, narrate their past experiences, as well as their ambitions.

As this project illustrates, Welty establishes her female characters as visual targets of the scopopic gaze of their respective communities, a gaze which, in Clytie's case, seeks to reinstate the plantation regime, and thus uphold the destructive myths that bring about Clytie's and Miss Sabina's personal declines. Clytie's apprehension to "[dress] up so that you could see her coming"³³⁸ indicates the demoralizing success of these critical spectators at stripping Clytie of her agency and social visibility. Miss Sabina's companions, who narratively conjure her appearance through memories and extant images, are generally more forgiving, and eager to acknowledge the power behind her choices of self-fashioning. Their acknowledgment of the "'beautiful and terrible'"³³⁹ dimension of Sabina's appearance, which renders conspicuous her experience of trauma, perhaps operates as the most fitting distillation of Welty's understanding of beauty's multiplied meanings, and occasionally violent expression. Through Clytie and

³³⁷ Conor 29.

³³⁸ Welty, "Clytie," *Collected Stories*, 80.

³³⁹ Welty, "Asphodel," *Collected Stories*, 185.

Sabina, Welty demystifies the romance of the southern belle, and accurately depicts the shifting face of the southern woman as she entered into the modern era.

This transformation of cultural mythology emerges in “A Piece of News” and “The Winds,” two stories that depict the democratizing utility of beauty culture, which enable women to successfully transcend their limiting circumstances. Importantly, through the characters of Ruby and Cornella, Welty displays women as delighting in their own appearances, removed from social scrutiny. In this context, beauty, as reclaimed by the working class, gratifies the subject, as evidenced by Ruby’s and Cornella’s shared pleasure in brushing their luxurious hair. Additionally, the narrators of both stories, who seem to view these visual targets without the burden of bygone southern mythology, are generous and sympathetic to their lower-class characters that seek to rewrite their narratives by harnessing beauty’s imaginative potential. Ruby and Cornella exemplify Harriet Pollack’s conceptualization of “[t]he provocative and rule-breaking body of the other woman in Welty,” the woman from another social class who enables Welty to transcend her own limited experiences as a sheltered, “middle-class daughter, shaped by cultural expectations.”³⁴⁰ Ultimately, it is Welty who serves as the observer, narrator, and author of these spectacles of femininity. Through her female characters, Welty demonstrates an array of material and aesthetic consequences for the modern southern woman who consciously engages with beauty culture as a means of self-expression.

To conclude this project, I want to acknowledge a crucial figure who informs Welty’s personal understanding of the act of storytelling, as it relates to the experience of fashion and beauty conventions. Discussed by Welty at length in *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Fannie was the black sewing woman who made home visits across Jackson and, in the process, amassed “a great

³⁴⁰ Pollack, *Eudora Welty’s Photography and Fiction*, 3.

provision of up-to-the-minute news”³⁴¹ regarding the elite personalities of the city. In her memoir, Welty recalls Fannie strategically disclosing this classified information with her clients during fittings. Fannie provides the requested service of constructing garments for parties and other events, yet affixes her personal flourish of society gossip to each fashion. The young Welty, who cannot grasp the lurid and mature meanings of certain stories that Fannie conveys, nevertheless admires the way in which the seamstress can “...speak in a wonderfully derogatory way with any number of pins stuck in her mouth.”³⁴² Here, Welty lingers on Fannie’s skill for sewing, as well as her ability to craft a tale, which is enhanced by her scathing humor. Welty thus comes to identify Fannie’s scandal-sharing as a creative and personally fulfilling enterprise, as evidenced by her emphasis on the gratification that Fannie derives from gossiping: “...Fannie didn’t bother about the ear she was telling it to; she just liked telling. She was like an author. In fact, for a good deal of what she said, I daresay she *was* the author.”³⁴³ To be sure, Fannie’s role as a seamstress models beauty work in action, but it is her specific alignment with narrative-weaving that lends a compelling dimension to Welty’s budding conceptualization of fashion and its utility for women.

Besides the fact that, as Géraldine Chouard observes, Welty’s fiction includes several female characters who are directly “involved in textile processes,”³⁴⁴ it is evident that Welty internalized her early experiences with Fannie, and ultimately applied her own approach to storytelling through fashion. I argue that the deliberate integration of this sewing scene into *One Writer’s Beginnings* lays the groundwork for a pattern in Welty’s future fiction, where the writer seems less interested in the garment itself, and more interested in the garment as a facilitator for

³⁴¹ Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, 14.

³⁴² Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, 14.

³⁴³ Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, 14.

³⁴⁴ Chouard, “Sew to Speak: Text and Textile in Eudora Welty,” 8.

a story. In her discussion of Welty's early journalistic work as a society pages columnist, Pearl A. McHaney notes that, despite the at times mundane and ludicrous nature of her job, "Welty seems ever capable of delivering fresh descriptions [of dresses]."³⁴⁵ This ability crops up again in Welty's longer works; she lingers on the fine features of wedding gowns in her first novel, *Delta Wedding*, and funeral fashions in her final novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*—both texts worthy of deeper analysis than the scope of this project can offer. That being said, these examples, among others, reflect Welty's realization, as reached through the influence of Fannie, that fashion can be manipulated by female hands to command attention and create a narrative on the common ground of dressing, a compulsory social performance for women of all backgrounds. The invocation of beauty and fashion, which comprise "a culture of shared meanings and rituals"³⁴⁶ only strengthens the resonating power and accessibility of a woman's story.

Even more significant is the reality of Fannie's social status as a black woman who labors for white families. Despite her race and restricted circumstances, Fannie demonstrates some degree of mobility, and even agency. Welty characterizes Fannie as "the worldliest old woman to be imagined,"³⁴⁷ emphasizing her wide range of knowledge, as well as her social presence across Jackson. As Welty recounts, "nothing could stop her."³⁴⁸ Her impression of Fannie combines awe and respect with an implicit trust in her authority as a laboring woman who uses her hands as well as her voice to incite change and become visible. In her analysis, Laura Wilson reads Welty's rapt attention to Fannie's yarns as proof that "...the author possessed an acute awareness of subjugated stories from the very start."³⁴⁹ By recognizing a black seamstress as an important

³⁴⁵ McHaney, *A Tyrannous Eye: Eudora Welty's Nonfiction and Photography*, 38.

³⁴⁶ Peiss 62.

³⁴⁷ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 14.

³⁴⁸ Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 14.

³⁴⁹ Wilson 105.

player in her personal evolution as a writer, Welty gestures toward a more expansive understanding of creativity, while also promoting an unconventional reading of fashion's possibilities for southern women.

A future project might focus on the other acts of transgressive self-fashioning that appear across Welty's short fiction, including potential instances of cross-dressing. In "Why I Lived at the P.O.," the story's narrator describes her uncle parading around the house while wearing "...one of Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimonos, all cut on the bias, like something Mr. Whitaker probably thought was gorgeous"³⁵⁰—a radical move in the 1930s, even in private, and even for an eccentric southern uncle. In "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden," a story about a traveling sideshow, a native man is dehumanized and humiliated before a crowd, and, in a fascinating choice of fashion, styled as a woman; as one of the male spectators comments, "It was supposed to be a Indian woman, see, in this red dress an' stockin's."³⁵¹ This story is replete with references to the "maiden's" various garments, and merits more sustained discussion about its representation of ethnic and gender prejudices, as communicated through the accessible imagery of dress. In Welty's world, fashioning an appearance through the available conventions of gender and social class is tantamount to fashioning an identity, as well as a story.

In 1994, Sally Wolff conducted an interview with Welty to reflect upon her creative practice of storytelling, as it related to a lifetime of domestic and personal experiences. During this conversation, the topic of sewing emerges, echoing Welty's observations of Fannie in *One Writer's Beginnings*. When pressed by Wolff, Welty admits, "[Chestina] tried to teach me to embroider. My mother had to leave the room when I threaded the needle—she couldn't stand to

³⁵⁰ Welty, "Why I Live at the P.O.," *Collected Stories*, 45.

³⁵¹ Welty, "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden," *Collected Stories*, 37.

watch.”³⁵² Here, Welty acknowledges her failure to live up to the gendered norms that define productive or successful femininity, according to her region’s cultural understandings. What Carol Ann Johnston refers to as “the myth of Welty as the naive Southern belle, and the sheltered Southern spinster”³⁵³ cannot coexist with the authentic version of Welty that emerges in this interview, as Welty proves to be a southern woman who possesses little interest in or aptitude for the traditional domestic arts, and little shame for her perceived shortcomings. Throughout her literary works, Welty explodes the myth of the southern belle, and manages to prove the relational, experiential power of beauty culture, even for the most isolated southern girl.

Revising the standards by which southern society might judge Welty, Wolff finds a way to metaphorically reconcile Welty’s failure in the domestic arts with her literary success:

Collecting stories, and stitching them, together with tradition and memory, into a whole cloth, is the essence of Eudora Welty’s fiction. In her discussion of sewing, with implication for the literal and the figurative, Welty’s memory reaches back to childhood and pins the floating images into patterns, establishing a chronology, as do her books of fiction and photographs. She says she was not “good” at sewing, although her mother tried to teach her. But perhaps without knowing, her mother bequeathed her the tools; her daughter would find her own art of embroidery.”³⁵⁴

Drawing from Wolff’s analysis of Welty’s capacity for weaving the written word, as predicated upon the creative foundation of her autobiographical experiences, I argue that Welty’s distinctive “art of embroidery”³⁵⁵ derives from her heightened understanding of the relationship between self and self-fashioning. Through the concrete signifiers of beauty and fashion that emerge across

³⁵² Welty, qtd. in Wolff 24.

³⁵³ Johnston, “Sex and the Southern Girl,” 281.

³⁵⁴ Wolff 24.

³⁵⁵ Wolff 24.

her fiction and nonfiction, Welty acknowledges the inward and outward complexities of her female characters, as well as the varied identities of the women who fostered the development of her creativity. Even more so, Welty recognizes her personal triumph over the myths that might have limited her legacy on account of appearances or circumstances. Welty's revision of southern beauty culture, which occurs across decades of writing, and recognizes the underappreciated power of subtle acts of subversion, encourages women to transcend social expectations by making up *and* acting out.

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APPENDIX



Fig. 1: *Helena Arden*, from: Welty, Eudora. *Photographs*. 2000, p. xxi.

*Personal scan for illustrative purposes only.



Fig 2: Home Open to the Public, from: Welty, Eudora. One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression. 2002, p. 48.

*Personal scan for illustrative purposes only.

VITA

KATHERINE E. HOWELL

EDUCATION

Master of Arts student in *English Literature* at the University of Mississippi, August 2017-present. Thesis title: “‘Beautiful and terrible in the face’: Reconfiguring Southern Beauty Culture through the Short Fiction and Autobiographical Writings of Eudora Welty.”

Bachelor of Arts (May 2017) in *English Literature and Government*, Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of *English*, University of Mississippi, August 2017-present. Responsibilities include: assisting professors with the preparation and presentation of undergraduate courses, grading, facilitating discussion section.

Instructor of Record, Department of *Writing & Rhetoric*, University of Mississippi, August 2018-May 2019. Responsibilities include: preparing and presenting materials for writing composition courses, grading assignments and papers, corresponding with and mentoring students.

PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

Howell, Katherine. "Fashioning (Non)Conformity: Cosmetics, Visibility, and the Discursive Power of the Femme-Presenting Lesbian of Color." English Graduate Student Body Panel, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, 8 November 2019.

Howell, Katherine. "Complicating the Gendered, Globalized, and Embodied Act of Making Up Through Chris Abani's *GraceLand*." 25th Annual Southern Writers/Southern Writing Graduate Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, 18 July 2019.

Howell, Katherine. "Powder, Paint, and Power: Examining Beauty Culture and the Liberation of the New Woman in Katherine Anne Porter's and Eudora Welty's Short Fiction." 90th Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, Birmingham, AL, 4 November 2018.

Howell, Katherine. "Powder, Paint, and Power: Examining Beauty Culture and the Liberation of the New Woman in Katherine Anne Porter's and Eudora Welty's Short Fiction." Southern Writers, Southern Writing Graduate Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, 21 July 2018.

Howell, Katherine. "Provocative Porter, Wild Welty: Dignity, Visibility, and Body Politics." 18th Annual Isom Student Gender Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, 5 April 2018.

ACADEMIC AWARDS

Peter Aschoff Award for Student Writing, Department of *Southern Studies*, University of Mississippi, May 2018.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Eudora Welty Society.

Phi Beta Kappa.

Society for the Study of Southern Literature.