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Under the Blow Dryer: A Study of Three Fictional Beauty Shops

Leslie Johns Ray

UNDER THE BLOW DRYER: A STUDY OF THREE FICTIONAL BEAUTY SHOPS

by
Leslie Johns Ray

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Approved by

Deborah Barker
Advisor: Professor Deborah Barker

Kathryn B. McKee
Reader: Professor Kathryn McKee

Ethel Young-Minor
Reader: Professor Ethel Young-Minor

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ABSTRACT
LESLIE JOHNS RAY: Under the Blow Dryer: A Study of Three Fictional Beauty Shops
(Under the direction of Dr. Deborah Barker)

In this thesis I explore how the beauty shop provides economic and social power to the women who own, operate, and patronize the fictional beauty shops over a seventy year time span in Eudora Welty's short story "Petrified Man," Robert Harling's play *Steel Magnolias*, and director Bille Woodruff's film *Beauty Shop*. I have researched historical and sociological studies on American beauty shops and literary studies of these works to discover common themes between fictional and actual beauty shops. Within the beauty shop, women often create a space independent of gender, race, economic, and class barriers present outside the shop walls. Women create relationships in the beauty shop that result in information exchange enabling the beautician powerful insight and knowledge about her clients. The shift from an all-white 1930s beauty parlor in Depression-era, segregated, rural Mississippi to a 2005 beauty parlor with a slightly more diverse racial make-up in urban Atlanta suggests continued struggles in the beauty shop to define a male role within the traditionally female space and to integrate black and white women within the historically segregated space. The authors allow outsiders a look at an exclusive space, which allows readers or viewers to see the opportunities women have to create more than hairstyles in the beauty shop. The beauty parlor creates an

isolated world of its own that outsiders can view through popular fiction, drama, and film. Larger sociopolitical problems, be it a depression, segregation, or feminist movement, can be marginalized or contested within the walls of the beauty parlor.

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Introduction

The beauty parlor creates an isolated world of its own that outsiders can view through popular fiction, drama, and film. Larger sociopolitical problems, be it a depression, segregation, or feminist movement, can be marginalized or contested within the walls of the beauty parlor. This study focuses on three works that show the complex nature of the beauty parlor in different southern locations across a seventy-year time span. Eudora Welty presents an all-white cast in a small-town, Depression-era Mississippi beauty parlor in her short story "Petrified Man"; Robert Harling portrays a late 1980s beauty parlor preserving a segregated South in a Louisiana parish in his play *Steel Magnolias*; and director Bille Woodruff's 2005 film *Beauty Shop* introduces an African-American beauty parlor in urban Atlanta. In her examination of relatively recent "cinematic depictions of the beauty parlor," Jennifer Scanlon argues, "the beauty parlors in these films also provide a setting in which women negotiate rather than simply participate in beauty culture . . . characters in these films participate in a feminine culture defined within but not entirely subordinate to beauty culture; beauty becomes negotiated and claimed in ways that empower the self" (313). The prevalence of beauty parlors in literature and film suggest that it serves as a cultural symbol in the form of popular entertainment. The study of literary, dramatic, and cinematic beauty parlors reveals the possibility of female empowerment and economic independence in the space, but also

unresolved concerns that play out differently in the different time periods of each work. Conflicting ideas of feminism and gender roles, male sexuality, and racial acceptance and integration in relation to the beauty parlor remain contentious and debatable across the time and intraregional span. The fictional beauty parlor shows a shift from the Depression South to the South at the dawn of the twenty-first century through different presentations of those unresolved frictions, paralleling the constant evolution and relevancy of the beauty parlor in relation to larger social issues.

Women in these fictional beauty shops create a space of autonomy, ensuring their success as well as that of the business, a business focused on the commoditization of hair. The client pays the operator to do her hair, implying hair is undone until the operator's service renders a finished product. However, the client-operator relationships provide a starting point from which the women can attempt to equalize class lines. While the beautician is defined as working class, from the 1930s to the early twenty-first century, the class of her clientele diversified as professional hairstyling gained popularity and credibility. Women who own shops have control over whom they hire, what their operators wear, and how much to charge for services. In her book *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop*, Julie Willett traces the historical emergence of the beauty shop throughout the United States and explains that even in the business's infancy in the 1920s, "social interactions, which led to lasting relationships between customers and operators, provided opportunities for operators to effectively negotiate wages, hours, and working conditions" (54). Because of the power that evolved from those relationships, the owner of the shop would often discourage operators from becoming too close with clients because if the operator became unhappy with working

conditions in a certain beauty parlor, she could leave and take her clients with her to a new shop (Willett 83-84). Willett concludes that at least into the 1930s

> the seemingly trivial conversations that came to characterize the everyday operations of the beauty shop not only provided beauticians with one of the most effective means to negotiate labor issues, but also held out the possibility of entrepreneurship and the kind of independence few service workers enjoyed. (84)

While the economic advancements available to owners and operators of beauty parlors remain a consistent theme in "Petrified Man," *Steel Magnolias*, and *Beauty Shop*, the authors present class, gender, and race factors that differentiate the time periods and affect how the women reach levels of economic advancement and female empowerment.

Although Willett acknowledges men's involvement in taking credit for early beauty shop industry practices and inventions, from the thirties to the late eighties men appear unwelcome in the fictional beauty shop in any capacity and unwilling to enter, leaving the business largely owned and patronized by women. Before the feminist movement, the beauty shop offered women one of only a few job opportunities, either separate from the home, or as a business run from within the home. Women thereby gained a space to commune with other women, while earning income independently of husbands. The women in "Petrified Man" escape to the beauty parlor where they primarily discuss two types of men: a rapist representing male violence and lazy, unemployed husbands suggesting male inadequacy. Beauticians, who display their strength in contending with the threat of sexual violence and heading single-income families, render both types of men impotent. Rather than confront their husbands, the women in *Steel Magnolias* complain about them to each other and actively keep the

beauty parlor a space unwelcoming to men by emasculating them in the shop gossip. They only discuss dissatisfaction with male partners in the shop; therefore, it becomes a space of reluctant feminism, but not one for full engagement in gaining complete equality. Though the women do assert a degree of economic independence (they all have jobs or careers outside the home), they are inactive in asserting sociopolitical independence or marital equality. By the turn of the twenty-first century, though, men are attempting to break into the beauty shop business.

Beauty Shop differs from the earlier works by bringing men into the shop. However, the film allows only feminine-acting males who are assumed to be homosexual into the beauty parlor business and culture. The modern time period allows for the suggestion of homosexuality, a step to a more open-minded policy in a historically exclusive shop, but by categorizing males (incorrectly, in one case) as homosexual and conventionally less male, the women revert back to excluding males by taking away the male sexuality that is threatening to the women. Even the association of the young boy with the beauty shop in "Petrified Man" suggests a covert homosexuality, reflective of a closed-society South in the thirties. The loss of heterosexuality with men associated with beauty parlors offers another way in which the women protect their all-female space – if they cannot physically keep men out of the shop, they can make them leave masculine traits outside. The complexity of the contemporary, urban *Beauty Shop* challenges the traditionally homosocial culture, which reacts with assumptions about male sexuality within the shop.

Racial segregation and its lasting effects pervade southern studies, and the beauty shop offers a complicated look at how different aspects of racial difference combine in

one space. In her entry "Beauty Shops and Barbershops" in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Minoa D. Uffelman writes, "[i]n the South the shops exhibit the gendered aspects evident throughout the rest of the country and also represent the racial divisions unique to the South. . . [i]n a region where beauty is valued, both white and black women valued hair appointments so that they could look their best and perhaps share friendly conversation with friends and neighbors" (40). The women in the legally segregated South of "Petrified Man" constitute a completely white cast of characters, without any mention of black people, thereby ignoring race and promoting the beauty shop as a place only for the economic empowerment of white women. In 1987, fifty years later, the women in *Steel Magnolias* continue to ignore race, allowing de facto segregation to reign and furthering the implication that the independence they experience in the beauty shop is for white women only. In *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson argues that "*Steel Magnolias* displaces blackness, willfully re-creating a segregated Louisiana from which a new white lady emerges, a move that covers over the rollback of Civil Rights taking place during the 1980s [to] express the South's (and the nation's) inability to conceptualize what racial contact might even look like" (165 – 166). Almost twenty years later, *Beauty Shop* suggests the possibility of trying to solve the larger sociopolitical problem of segregation, characteristic of years of struggle across the South, with a shop for both white and black women to gain economic independence and approach a subject ignored in the earlier beauty shops, though it primarily focuses on the dynamics of a majority black shop.

Racial difference has played a large factor in determining American, especially Southern, beauty definitions. Historically, southern whites controlled all aspects of

southern life, even beauty standards, and Tiffany M. Gill explains in *Beauty Shop Politics*,

> [i]n the eyes of early European traders and slavers, the tightly curled hair texture of Africans was vilified as a marker of difference along with their darker skin color. While in the Americas, African and African American women were confronted with the dilemma of embracing their hair in its natural state or trying to modify it to resemble, though never truly mimic, the hair of whites. (3)

Black beauty shops may have been enforcing white beauty standards through hair straightening services, but "beauticians had a degree of independence relative to other blacks – especially black women – whose occupations were usually under the watchful eye of whites . . . [b]eauticians worked within black female-owned establishments, were supplied by black manufacturers, and were patronized by black female clients within segregated communities" (Gill 120). Two of the earliest, most well-known, and successful African-American beauty product entrepreneurs, Annie Malone and Madam C.J. Walker, arguably made money in the first quarter of the twentieth century by promoting "an elaborate system of hair manipulation" and their "companies were vilified for straightening and changing the texture of African American women's hair to imitate whites and therefore provoked cries of lack of racial pride" (Gill 24-25). Despite their critics' claims, the two women "diversified the black beauty industry to include not only the selling of products but also the selling of beauty, independence, and financial success," advantages hard to find in other work (Gill 19). Within the segregated South, black beauticians gained independence through their work in the beauty shop, which Gill argues led to the beauty shop as platform for further political advancements.

Even in the most recent work in my study, *Beauty Shop*, the audience sees elements of continued racial difference, as the first shot of protagonist Gina Norris shows the African-American beautician straightening her hair with a flat iron. The first hairstyling scene in the movie prepares the viewer for the importance and contradictions of hair and beauty. Although Gina straightens her hair, white beautician Lynn later dons a "black" hairstyle in order to work at Gina's black beauty shop – opposing the historically common beauty standard that even Gina conforms to in upholding the naturally straight hair of whites as most desirable. What both Gina and Lynn demonstrate in altering their hairstyles is the fundamental aspect of the enduring, and constantly evolving, focus on hair and beauty. Gill provides a timeline of acceptable black hair policies from "hair that was chemically straightened" in the 1940s, to "the afro or natural as it was also called" in the 1970s, to the 1980s onward when "ideas about what constituted a beautiful and stylish black women [sic] expanded to include chemically straightened and natural styles" (122 – 124). In each time frame, though, hair standards seem to be affected by or positioned as reactions against white hair standards. By studying a fictional film, the racial dynamics presented alongside economic advantages and feminine dominance shed light on the contradictions of the beauty shop and how it exists to further more than just beauty standards.

The beauty parlor setting remains central to the operators' and owners' financial success. Simultaneously, beauticians can use their shops to promote their own agendas – maintenance or dismantling of segregation, jobs away from home and husband, and association with women across class lines. Those political advancements are harder to see in the white-dominated Jim Crow South of "Petrified Man" only fifteen years after

the Nineteenth Amendment passed granting women the right to vote, a first step to gender equality. Though the white women in *Steel Magnolias* live in a post-Civil Rights and post-feminist era, they hide any social or political advancements made by southern African-Americans and confine their own political advancements to careers and sensitive discussions within the shop. In 2005, *Beauty Shop* offers a protagonist who appears to have taken advantage of historical political advancements while furthering the process of gaining a more complete independence from men, personally and in her business, and promoting integrative business practices, in terms of race, gender, and class. Throughout the seventy-year time span of the three works in this study, the beauty shop provides more than updated hairstyles; it offers ways for the women to maneuver societal restrictions, or ignore them, whether they be limited economic opportunities, rigid class systems, racial institutions, gendered limitations, or uncertain sexual orientation.

Significance of the Beauty Parlor in Eudora Welty's "Petrified Man"

Eudora Welty's short story "Petrified Man," provides a glimpse into the unexpected perversity of the beauty parlor of the 1930s South. Welty incorporates the beauty shop as more than just a setting in "Petrified Man" by making it a character that ironically reveals women's ugliness and competitiveness behind the guise of a beautifying institution; it becomes a catalyst for women's desire for knowledge and power. As Katherine Anne Porter wrote in her 1941 Introduction to *A Curtain of Green*, "'Petrified Man' offers a fine clinical study of vulgarity – vulgarity absolute, chemically pure, exposed mercilessly to its final subhuman depths . . . [Welty] has simply an eye and an ear sharp, shrewd, and true as a tuning fork" (xviii). Welty's sharp observational senses make it clear that she not only set the story in the 1930s, but also wrote it during that decade amid a segregated, economically depressed Mississippi society, thereby providing a tone of contemporaneity rather than retrospection. Because the story was written in the 1930s about the 1930s[1], it provides a more realistic depiction of the institutions and atmosphere of the time, including the beauty shop, the central agent in the story. While hindsight may involve a factually accurate account, contemporaneity provides a subtle, but crucial tonal accuracy in women's relationship to and within the beauty shop environment Welty had likely personally observed. Laura Berlant argues in

[1] The story was first published in *Southern Review* in 1939, after originally being rejected in 1936, and was later included in *A Curtain of Green* in 1941.

"Re-Writing the Medusa: Welty's 'Petrified Man'" that the story's goal is "not to assert that monstrosity and violence are essentially feminine, but to refuse the nostalgic and sentimental construction of female superiority [. . .] to insist that monstrosity is female as well as male, and to explode any discourse of mastery which wants to establish its own authority absolutely" (60). However, Berlant does not focus on the importance of the beauty parlor as the epicenter and cause of that monstrosity's manifestation. Welty refutes the myth of the beauty parlor as a setting where genteel Southern women congregate to keep up-to-date on the latest hairstyles by showing it as a center for displays of power, knowledge, and money to surface in the women's ascendancy of class and gender.

Set in a beauty parlor in an unspecified town in Mississippi with geographically confirming references to Jackson and Vicksburg, "Petrified Man," centers around Mrs. Fletcher's weekly appointments with her beautician, Leota, that lead to exchanges of information and personal stories. Conversations that range from pregnancies, to the freak show next door, to Leota's escapades with her new tenant (Mrs. Pike, a former beautician from New Orleans), show the power struggles among the women for dominance over each other and their spouses. Without the beauty shop, Leota would be unable to gain economic power over her husband through her business, Mrs. Fletcher would be unable to demonstrate her power over her own body and pregnancy through independent interaction in a feminine space, and Mrs. Pike would be unable to profit from the discovery of the petrified man's true identity without her ability to overrule her financially dependent husband.

In "'Because a Fire Was in My Head': Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination," Patricia Yaeger argues that further support for Welty's overturning the regional myth of white womanhood comes from her use of language because "the language that women writers have begun to develop to subvert or deconstruct this system is at once traditional and feminocentric. Language is not a reductively patriarchal system but a somewhat flexible institution that not only reflects but may also address existing power structures, including those conditioned by gender" (955). Welty's language reinforces the physical setting in providing the women the tools needed to break out of social and regional constraints. Welty's use of language, in conjunction with and appropriate in her setting, underscores the theme of inversion among class and gender. Yaeger argues, "women write about their own lives by appropriating masculine traditions and transforming them, adapting what has been called 'phallocentric' diction to fit the needs of 'feminocentric' expression" (955). Through inverted language used to her own ends, Welty allows her female characters to overturn gender roles (especially Mrs. Pike in her dominance over her husband and Mr. Petrie for economic benefit) by working from within the system to gain their own power, turning patriarchal strategies against the men. In comparing Welty to William Faulkner as contemporary Mississippi writers, Barbara Ladd suggests that in many of her other stories and novels, "resistance to the patriarchal narrative provides Welty with a strategy for making female experience visible, and audible" (60).

In the case of "Petrified Man," the beauty parlor provides the necessary setting for such a narrative. Because a female cannot remove herself from the male-dominated system in order to employ a strategy for changing the social system, she must employ

tactics, such as the resources available in the beauty shop, to chip away at societal norms. Michel De Certeau defines "a tactic [as] an art of the weak . . . determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (author's emphasis 38), and in Welty's 1930s South, she illustrates how "weak" women can find power by using tactics in the beauty shop and in their marriages, while she simultaneously uses them as a female writer. Mary Burgan elaborates on the idea of tactics in feminist writer's language, maintaining,

> American modernists like . . . Eudora Welty were indeed formalists; their *écriture feminine* privileged compression over expansion. They perceived that it was in their power to manipulate the signifying moment in narrative structures of their own devising so as to represent the rhythms of feminine understanding in a tour de force of language. (278)

In Burgan's understanding, in making writing feminist, writers turn mainstream formal writing techniques to their own use: formal made feminine. In other words, available resources are made into useful tactics for achieving socio-political and socio-economic gains.

Welty also uses language as a tactic for identifying and then inverting the social order of the women in the beauty shop to the lower-class operator's advantage. The operator calls the client by the formal "Mrs. Fletcher" implying the client's higher social status, which also allows her to call the operator by her first name only, an informal address. The unseen narrator continues to make class distinctions by identifying operators by their first names and clients by their honorific name even when not in direct dialogue between characters. Mrs. Pike, however, is an exception; she is a retired

beautician, but called by her proper name, creating a categorical conundrum leading to her eventual exclusion from the beauty parlor environment. The early language identifiers foreshadow Mrs. Pike's hazy position in relation to the other women. Leota and Thelma, the operator of the neighboring chair, minimize and reverse the class ranking created by name differences through demeaning or unsightly nicknames for their clients, including "honey," "precious," and "Horse Face," to make their dominance in the beauty parlor more apparent (Welty 71). By chipping away at the nomenclature dividing social classes, Leota and Thelma perpetuate their power over clients, which would not be available without the familiarity bred in the beauty parlor between client and operator. Other language indicators of Leota's lower class standing are her dialect and incorrect grammar, such as, "I habm't told any of my ladies and I ain't goin' to tell 'em – even that you're losin' your hair. You just get you one of those Stork-a-Lure dresses and stop worryin'. What people don't know don't hurt nobody" (73). Within this grammatically incorrect statement, though, Leota asserts her power in the secret knowledge of Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy, which she can choose to either spread or contain despite class barriers outside of the shop. By confiding in their beauticians through verbal and non-verbal communication, clients unknowingly assist in altering that societal power structure to the advantage of the beautician.

In a time and place dominated by white males, Welty's female characters find a socially radical space within the beauty shop because it gives them access to equalizing factors needed to assert authority and create change largely unavailable to them outside of or without contact with the beauty parlor. The narrator emphasizes the dominance of women by giving first-hand accounts of only four characters, three of which are women,

all with direct connections to the beauty parlor. The reader only has direct contact with male representation in the form of a young child, which accentuates the diminished role of the male within the social construct of the beauty parlor.

Although a socially resistant atmosphere in respect to class line subversion, the shop remains within regional racial confines of the 1930s South because segregation limits this particular beauty shop to a place where only white women go.[2] The absence of African-American characters and language about race again reflects the time and place in which the story was written and is set. Due to segregation and the mindset of the whites who enforced it, the absence of racial examination in "Petrified Man" underscores the two separate, if neighboring, worlds of black and white, pervasive in the 1930s South. The white women in Welty's beauty shop are already socially superior to black people according to the law; therefore, in their minds those black people are nonexistent, underlined by their absence in the story. Instead, the focus of the white women is on how to climb higher in society, which means overtaking other white women and then white men.

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[2] Although the characters in the story are not directly described as white, nor do they specifically talk of race in their conversations, Welty includes a few clues that demonstrate the cast is white. For example, Leota mentions that Mrs. Fletcher once went "to the Robert E. Lee Beauty Shop in Jackson," most likely an establishment frequented by white patrons (76). Because of the de jure segregation of 1930s Mississippi, the assumption is easily made that an entire beauty shop was operated by and supported by the same race; therefore, Leota is most likely white because she is Mrs. Fletcher's current beautician. Another confirmation that the beauty shop in "Petrified Man" serves white customers and that the characters in the story are white occurs in Leota's story of another customer, Mrs. Montjoy, who, "Come for her shampoo an' set [and] in an hour an' twenty minutes she was layin' up there in the Babtist [sic] Hospital with a seb'm-pound son" (79). The Baptist Hospital in Jackson was not desegregated until 1969, meaning Mrs. Montjoy must be white to have been admitted to the hospital in the thirties. Evidence that Leota's customers are white verify that Leota and the other women associated with the beauty parlor in "Petrified Man" are most likely white, especially when the Jim Crow laws of the time are taken into account.

Beyond the class struggle between beautician and client, other indicators of class discrepancies imposed on beauty shop workers are important to situating "Petrified Man" within the historical time frame and its beauty parlor as a space providing economic opportunities for women. In *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop*, Julie Willett explains that during the Depression, "hairdressing was not classified with doctors and dentists, white-male occupations, but with domestics and porters, jobs disproportionately filled by African Americans," who occupied a lower class by virtue of their skin color (115). Through their association with service work and African-American workers, even the white hairdressers in "Petrified Man" are considered part of a lower class. New Deal legislation attempting to regulate the beauty shop industry during the 1930s "would help define the trade and preserve a sense of respectability based on whiteness regardless of class. To be sure, various white hairdressing associations and individuals argued in support of regulation because it would improve conditions for the sake of both worker and consumer" and disassociate the business from racial stigma (Willett 119). The setting of "Petrified Man" in Mississippi during the Depression entails an even more significant racial division as the South endured more stringent racial segregation under Jim Crow regulations than the rest of the nation. Also, the lack of acknowledgement in "Petrified Man" of African-Americans, who surely would have been present in a Mississippi town, could present one more way in which white beauticians, like Leota, attempt to further their own pursuit of social power by distancing themselves from the association of their type of service work with the lower social strata that African-Americans represented in the 1930s, particularly in the South.

The absence of any black characters, either in or out of the beauty shop, reinforces the idea of the beauty shop as a homogenous space, not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of race. Although liberal in some aspects as it gave women more control socially and economically, the beauty shop was not a stage for challenging all of society's shortcomings, maintaining its own behavioral code, particularly apparent in relation to the story's southern regionalism. The racially limited cast allows Welty to focus on one particular group of people in one particular locality and how they interact without too many uncontrolled variables. Peggy Prenshaw observes in her essay, "Welty's Transformations of the Public, the Private, and the Political," that "[a]s snapshots of Mississippi people and places and as constructions of literary modernism, the world of these stories [in *A Curtain of Green*] is mostly one in which political talk and action rarely occur" (26). However, Prenshaw goes on to discuss Welty's increasingly political writings as her career progressed through "a World War in the 1940s, McCarthyism in the 1950s, and the violent resistance to the civil rights movement in the early 1960s [which] all greatly lessened whatever trust she had had in the political macrocosm and bolstered her belief in the microcosm as the only efficacious, viable sphere of human understanding and negotiation" (38). Even as Welty professed her liberal political leanings in later interviews, perhaps her early stories lacked racial diversity or acknowledgement because of the time and place in which she wrote them and in which she matured in Jackson, Mississippi. In her 1965 essay, "Must the Novelist Crusade?" Welty defends fiction writers against the increasing pressure during the Civil Rights movement to make a political statements through writing, particularly sensitive to the issue as a Mississippi resident, explaining, "while the Southern writer goes on

portraying his South, which I think nobody else can do and which I believe he must do, then if his work is done well enough, it will reflect a larger mankind as it has done before" (*Eye of the Story* 156). In writing her earlier stories about the South, then, she was by default making statements about the society in which her characters lived – the South in which she lived. Prenshaw does offer two exceptions to the "mute presences or monologic voices" in *Curtain of Green*: "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" and "Petrified Man," "posing as they do public discussions (on the street and in the beauty shop) of what constitutes right action" (26). Welty may have delayed broaching the regional racial stronghold, but she does offer commentary on female subversion of the regional social construct.

Welty demonstrates one such power structure creation in the relationship between Leota, operator, and Mrs. Fletcher, customer. Although Welty does not clarify whether Leota is owner, operator, or both in her shop, Leota wields her power by influencing Mrs. Fletcher in their seemingly innocent gossip sessions. The gossip provides more than entertainment; it is a source and outlet of power. When Leota discovers Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy, she tells her she cannot get an abortion because her husband will find out and disapprove, saying "Mr. Fletcher would beat you on the head if you didn't have it now [. . .] after going this far" (Welty 72). At first reading, Leota is merely giving advice, made more meaningful by the relationship that has developed between the two women as beautician and customer. However, upon further analysis, Leota's reaction to Mrs. Fletcher's mention of abortion comes across as a possible threat. If Mrs. Fletcher hides the pregnancy from her husband, how would he find out except through Leota's disclosure? Therefore, Leota's power manifests itself with the threat of revealing the

client's secret outside of the beauty shop walls. The beauty shop is the basis of the relationship between Leota and Mrs. Fletcher and without it, Leota would not have reason to know or disclose the secret knowledge, nor would it provide her with power without the beautician/client relationship.

The way in which Leota suspects Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy reinforces the closeness of operator and client that provides the tools by which to wield power over the client. As the beauty session begins with a combing of Mrs. Fletcher's hair, Leota comments that her hair is "commencin' to fall out" which is a sign of pregnancy, reinforced by gossip previously overheard in the next booth on the same subject (Welty 70). Mrs. Fletcher confesses to the pregnancy, but is angered by the way in which Leota found out: the gossip that provides one more aspect of authority to the beautician through knowledge. Although Leota knew the rumor of the pregnancy, her ability to read her client's body, through the hair loss, confirmed both her suspicions and another aspect of her control.

Further support of a beautician's ability to read the female body emerges when Leota succumbs to Mrs. Fletcher's pestering about who revealed her condition, admitting her friend Mrs. Pike made the observation. Mrs. Pike, newly arrived from New Orleans, is "very observant, a good judge of character," attributable to her former work as a beautician, and knew by watching the unaware Mrs. Fletcher walk from her car into a drugstore that she was pregnant (74). Welty's word choice should not go unnoticed, as Donald Ringe elaborates in his article "'Pike:' To Be Nosy, To Pry" on the New Orleans-based meaning behind the word pike. Ringe explains that New Orleans residents "recognize the verb *pike*, possibly related to *peek*, meaning 'to be nosy, to pry, to look or

watch with great curiosity.' One usually pikes at his neighbors from behind half-closed blinds or semitransparent curtains" (606). Welty's apparent knowledge of this definition adds a new dimension to Mrs. Pike's character as an all-knowing, gossiping beautician. Ringe notes that, "identified as a native of New Orleans, this character is the perfect pike, forever sticking her nose in other people's business [. . .] A real busybody, she observes all the others without herself being seen, learns all their business and gossips about it" (607). This description underwrites her astute surveillance of Mrs. Fletcher from inside her "1939 Dodge" in the drugstore parking lot which, along with her beautician's eye for reading the female body, led to the conclusion of the pregnancy (Welty 73). Mrs. Pike never appears or has any first-person dialogue in the story, but she remains a constant presence due to her peeking into the lives of the other characters, giving her control over other women.

As demonstrated in her language and word choice, Leota's detection of and knowledge of Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy gives her power not only over a specific client, but also allows for alterations in larger societal class structures within the beauty parlor. Berlant sees evidence for class inversion in the symbol of Leota's purse, which she controls and grants admittance into when asking Mrs. Fletcher to "'[r]each in my purse and git me a cigarette without no powder in it if you kin'" (69). Berlant suggests that "[w]hile the class hierarchies of the outside world are reproduced in the way they address each other, the 'superiority' Mrs. Fletcher holds in the real world breaks down in Leota's den: it is she, not Mrs. Fletcher, who has access to the purse which is the sign of the beauty parlor enterprise" (63). Although the control of the purse may be an extension of the dominance gained through the beauty shop business, it is not "the locus of her

economic power," (68) as Berlant states, but rather a symbolizing result of the power, in terms of both economics and class, gained from the true basis of her control over the purse and the relationship – the beauty shop.

Mrs. Pike creates a riff in the class structure of the beauty shop when Leota reveals her as the discoverer of Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy, yet defends her against Mrs. Fletcher's ensuing anger. Although Leota has had control of their relationship, Mrs. Fletcher takes offense at her alignment with Mrs. Pike, and Berlant suggests that "[i]n self-defense, [Mrs. Fletcher] adopts a tone of class superiority which mirrors Leota's report of Mrs. Pike's tone" (67). The competitiveness among women fostered by the beauty shop shows itself in Mrs. Fletcher's attempt to gain power through assertion of higher class standing in relation to Leota and Mrs. Pike. This class superiority appears in the dialogue comparing the two women's husbands and their marital relationships when Mrs. Fletcher says with "dignity" that she "met Mr. Fletcher, or rather he met me, in a rental library" as compared to Leota and Fred who "met in a rumble seat eight months ago" (Welty 77). One couple met in a setting associated with books and education, frequently middle or upper class luxuries, whereas Leota shows her lower class impropriety by omitting the formal, courting phase of a relationship and implying sexual promiscuity in the back seat of a car. Mrs. Fletcher attempts to assert her higher class within the beauty shop when normally it only applies in the outside world, which brings Berlant to conclude that "[t]his attitude puts Mrs. Fletcher in direct competition with Leota, who tends to seek power by contiguity [and] the net result of Mrs. Pike's entrance into the scene is that class hierarchies of the dominant culture are inserted into the once

fluid discourse of the beauty parlor" (67). The beauty shop becomes a space for women's competitiveness for class and economic dominance to materialize.

According to Leota, Mrs. Pike was a beautician "before she married" and "it don't leave you," reinforcing the ever-present thread of the beauty shop that ties the characters and their competitive desires together (Welty 77). Leota feels betrayed by Mrs. Pike, a fellow hairdresser, when Mrs. Pike does not share the wealth available from the gossip and inside information about the petrified man. Leota has considered her an equal, has even tried to get her a job at her own beauty shop, and on her lunch break she gives Mrs. Pike a facial, "You know – free. Her bein' in the business, so to speak," she explains to Mrs. Fletcher (78).

Leota may resent Mrs. Pike's refusal to share the money, but shows the perversity of the way in which she earned the money when she tells Mrs. Fletcher, "I guess those women didn't have the faintest notion at the time they'd be worth a hundred an' twenty-five bucks apiece some day to Mrs. Pike" (83). By commodifying the women, Leota and Mrs. Pike show the ugly nature of monetary power because Mrs. Pike is willing to profit from the literal rape and murder of other women. Berlant attributes that willingness to her "double sexual identification (as a woman in a man's discourse) [which] signifies the corruptedness of all desire for mastery" (68). Even though Mrs. Pike has gained economic independence by rebuking the male-dominated system of the 1930s South, she remains a woman. Her perverse acceptance of profit at the expense of other women shows that white southern women are not as pure and wholesome as myth would have them, but instead suffer the same side-effects as men in gaining a competitive economic edge – even using male sexual domination for personal gain. Michael Kreyling takes

note of "the emergence of this composite 'character' as she gradually appears amid an array of literary experiments with voice and point of view, style, subject matter, and narrative structure," referring to Welty's multitude of early short story female characters who deal with the issues of rape and violence, not least of which are "the women of 'Petrified Man' [who] seem energized by the threat and news of rape" (79). Even beyond "Petrified Man," Welty bares the unexposed perverse curiosity of 1930s Southern women, providing an alternative to traditional regional hegemony. Perhaps then Welty's "study of vulgarity" in her characters risks creating not "subhuman depths," as Katherine Anne Porter suggests, but more importantly a human depth not allowed to southern white women kept on a pedestal of purity, needing the protection and support of white men. Welty forms a different perspective on regionally gendered norms through her realistic characters.

In particular, Welty overturns gender roles in terms of economic desires and motivations. Berlant writes, "Mrs. Pike is motivated by economics: Mr. Petrie is exchanged for a reward. Her position is identifiable as traditionally patriarchal because she is in control of all exchange: she derives profit from men, women, children, information – all commodities in her system of value" (68). Mrs. Pike benefits from Mr. Petrie's raping four women, at their expense and then his, which illustrates the disturbing side of women's economic gain and competitive nature, denying regional stereotypes of purity in white womanhood. However, Berlant also argues that "her allegiances are with men, not with women . . . she has no place in the beauty parlor, then" (68), but her economic independence should not automatically align her with men. Instead, Welty suggests that women can be as greedy or willing to sacrifice other people for economic

independence as men. The women internalize qualities historically associated with men while retaining their autonomy. The traditional gender roles are shaken, expanded, and crossed as the women become more equal to men because of opportunities stemming from the beauty shop.

The pregnancy is one of many instances in which Welty scrutinizes typical gender roles. For example, Mrs. Fletcher displays her power in the relationship by taking responsibility for choosing her own solution to the pregnancy, first abortion and later acceptance of the child, asserting that the decision is her own because as she tells Leota, "I ask Mr. Fletcher's advice now and then, and he appreciates it, especially on something important, like is it time for a permanent – not that I've told him about the baby. He says, 'Why, dear, go ahead!' Just ask their *advice,*" referring to women who give the appearance of asking their husbands' advice when really the decision has already been made (Welty 80). Her assertion of bodily control and decision-making does not fit with Berlant's argument that Mr. Fletcher's power as a male is exhibited because "pregnancy [. . .] is an infection women catch from men" (64). On the contrary, Mrs. Fletcher never implies that her pregnancy is only the fault of her husband because that would give him control of the situation. Mrs. Fletcher apparently makes her own decisions while letting her husband think he is involved in the process, which actually gives her more power because she allows him to think he is involved in her "important" decisions. Because he does not know what the important ones are, she can make significant personal decisions without his interference or prying for extra information.

The story's time frame creates other background factors important in supporting the increased power women gain over their husbands. During the Depression, jobs were

hard to find, as illustrated by the joblessness of Mrs. Pike's and Leota's husbands. The women's ability to maintain an income because of the beauty parlor, when their husbands cannot, increases their economic independence and power over their husbands. For example, Mr. Pike does not want to turn in the rapist Mr. Petrie for reward money until Mrs. Pike stands up to him saying, "You ain't worked a lick in six months, and here I make five hundred dollars in two seconts [sic], and what thanks do I get for it? You go to hell, Canfield" (Welty 82). Mrs. Pike has apparently been supporting her husband, first as a beautician in Louisiana and then as a millinery saleswoman upon moving to Mississippi. She shows her authority in the relationship by making the decision to take the reward money despite her husband's opinion.

In Leota's marriage, stereotypical gender roles are further overturned because not only is Leota the primary wage-earner but her husband stays home and cooks, which was traditionally the wife's responsibility. Leota's husband is described as lazy, and according to Leota, he "lays around the house an' bulls – did bull – with that good-for-nothin' Mr. Pike. He says if he goes who'll cook, but I says I never get to eat anyway" (Welty 80). This account of Fred reveals that he partakes in conventional female activities, such as cooking, but also participates in fruitless "bull," another name for gossip. Unlike beauty shop gossip, the men's gossip is unproductive and furthers the image of their idleness and waning manhood. The bull as a male symbol becomes useless as Welty turns it into a sign of emasculation when used in conjunction with the lazy husbands. The image of a stomping, flared-nostril, horned bull is replaced by a tamed, unproductive image devoid of traditional masculine symbolization. Through symbolism Welty demonstrates Yaeger's point that "A reinscription of phallocentrism

may be a sign not of weakness or plagiarism but of woman's own ability to signify, that is, her ability to play with, to control, and to restructure patriarchal traditions," (959) such as inverting gender roles, symbols, and language to fit her purpose. In contrast to the abstract chatter between the men (untranslatable as useful knowledge), the beauty parlor gossip provides the women an advantage in furthering their economic independence.

When Mrs. Pike turns in Mr. Petrie, alias the petrified man, she asserts authority over her husband as primary breadwinner, but also over a rapist. In this respect, the petrified man is the only male character in the book to forcefully assert his masculinity, but his downfall occurs at the hands of a woman. When describing the petrified man of the freak show to Mrs. Fletcher, Leota details the extent of his immobility, which only allows him to "move his head just a quarter of an inch" (Welty 75). Leota then contemplates the idea of being married to a petrified man and realizes Fred is lazy enough she "wouldn't be surprised if he woke up some day and couldn't move" (75-76). Fred's paralyzation stems from lack of virility or masculinity, whereas Mr. Petrie's overt sexual aggressiveness has defied acceptable societal standards – enforced by white men trying to maintain power through the law – so that he becomes petrified in trying to evade recognition and capture. Sexual boundaries narrow acceptable behavior even for men, who traditionally enforce those boundaries. Men on either extreme become petrified. The petrified man could represent the ultimate reduction of manhood to a motionless state. Although the petrified man might symbolize the height of male power in his perpetual hardness, it actually renders him impotent, allowing a woman to take advantage of him by revealing his identity. Similarly, the husbands described appear to have lost all control in their relationships with women, resulting in complete immobility, like the

petrified man. The inhabitants of Welty's 1930s beauty shop challenge traditional southern norms of patriarchy because they overtake the men in money-earning ability, and Mrs. Pike even enables a fugitive man's capture.

Ultimately, Leota denounces Mrs. Pike, the rapist is jailed, and Mrs. Pike leaves town. Order is restored in the beauty shop when Leota and Mrs. Fletcher unite against young Billy Boy's reaching into Leota's purse by spanking him. Berlant suggests that the purse represents the economic independence of the beauty parlor and goes on to claim that "when Billy Boy intrudes on the purse, he becomes a 'man' in the women's eyes, and so has no place in the beauty parlor. The rejection of him is a rejection of Mrs. Pike's intrusiveness, and of the Petrified Man for the absolute sexual and economic threat [. . .] he represents" (69). Until this moment, Billy Boy has embraced the feminine atmosphere and lent a hand to the beautifying process, losing his masculinity in the meantime. For example, Leota's comments about Billy Boy suggest girlish tendencies, since he stays at the beauty shop because his mother "got her a job but it was Fay's Millinery. He oughtn't to try on those ladies' hats, they come down over his eyes like I don't know what" (Welty 72). Leota's implication is that the boy is inclined to wear women's accessories, perhaps in place of the more traditionally masculine baseball or driving cap. Billy Boy assists Leota in the shop by running errands between operators, about which she explains to Mrs. Fletcher that he is "only three years old and already just nuts about the beauty-parlor business" (72). His small jobs in the shop also contrast with the other men in the story who are either jobless or members of the travelling freak show. Billy Boy's willingness and ability to work partner him with women instead of men, emasculating even a young boy because of his association with the beauty parlor.

Ironically, the beauty shop aligns its occupants with femininity, but also with employment and money – traditional aspects of the male's role in society.

At the end of "Petrified Man," Mrs. Pike leaves town with her ill gotten, if not power-providing, money, but Leota retains the loyalty of her customers, which constitutes perhaps the most important aspect of gaining power in the beauty shop. Willett writes that

> the seemingly trivial conversations that came to characterize the everyday operations of the beauty shop not only provided beauticians with one of the most effective means to negotiate labor issues, but also held out the possibility of entrepreneurship and the kind of independence few service workers enjoyed (84).

Leota's continued relationship with Mrs. Fletcher and the arrival of her "eleven o'clock customer" at the end of the story (84), provide evidence of Leota's maintenance of a good business with growing knowledge from as yet untold gossip. By the end of the story Mrs. Pike has made enemies of both Leota and Mrs. Fletcher, apparently restoring the relationship between operator and client through unification against a common threat (Berlant 68). According to Berlant, by spanking Billy Boy in the final scene, the women are not merely punishing him for reaching into Leota's purse for peanuts, but taking revenge on his mother, thereby signifying both "their alienation from a world of male-centered sexual and economic desire," in order to simultaneously, "negate maleness and realign the beauty parlor with female ideology and female sexuality" (69). Even if Billy Boy has the last words in the story, asking, "[i]f you're so smart, why ain't you rich?" he says them as he exits the beauty parlor, ultimately leaving the women in control of the space – even if it is not the wealthiest space, it remains essential to their independence.

He proves his masculinity, and intolerable presence in the beauty shop, when he associates power with money only, not understanding the wider range of wealth available to the women there. Without the beauty shop setting, the women would not have an opportunity to create the roles that encompass the power in their relationships with each other and their husbands or the knowledge and money that feed that power. Even with the limiting social factors of the 1930s, Welty shows a cast of women asserting feminist notions through work outside the home, arresting male sexual violence, and negotiating class lines.

When the Beauty Shop Takes Center Stage

Within the beauty shop of Robert Harling's play *Steel Magnolias*, six women congregate every Saturday to focus on hairstyles, manicures, personal issues, and their relationships inside and outside of the shop. Truvy Jones owns the beauty shop and remains head beautician after hiring nineteen-year-old Annelle as a second stylist in the opening scene. Truvy's regular customers include middle-class M'Lynn Eatenton and her daughter Shelby, widow Clairee, and wealthy divorcee Ouiser. In his author's note, Harling insists that "[t]he women in this play are witty, intelligent, and above all, real characters. They in no way, shape, or form are meant to be portrayed as cartoons or caricatures" (5). This note serves as a warning that the characters are exaggeratedly comedic, vulgar, and sentimental in their assertions of personal independence within the beauty parlor, but also that they represent the true significance of the beauty parlor to those unrestricted conversations and friendships, should be taken seriously, and merit further investigation. Within the beauty shop, the characters dismiss typical class lines and gendered economic disparity fairly easily, but broach topics of male inferiority and lack of women's rights mostly through conversation and rarely through action.

Truvy's beauty shop provides the only setting in *Steel Magnolias*, first performed in New York City in 1987. However, the 1989 film adaptation provided scenes in other everyday settings around a small, fictional Louisiana town in Chinquapin Parish in

addition to the beauty parlor scenes. In writing *Steel Magnolias*, Harling wanted to convey the importance of the beauty parlor community to women. In an interview, he said, "the nature of this play . . . was very hermetic because it was sealed in the idea of a beauty parlor where a sense of community existed between these women that came to literally let their hair down" (*In Full Bloom*). Because of the strict focus on the beauty parlor, the play better emphasizes it as a space where each woman can tell her own story, individualizing the women, who come from different backgrounds and have different stories, but are connected through the beauty shop, creating a community out of six individuals. The beauty shop is not another errand to run, but a once-weekly opportunity for pampering and congregating within a strictly female space. In her article debating the role of the beauty parlor in different films and its translation into real life, Jennifer Scanlon agrees that in *Steel Magnolias*, "female characters actually use the space of the beauty parlor not simply to empower themselves as individuals but instead to overcome class differences and connect with each other" (319). However, Scanlon does not consider the important economic factor of the beauty parlor in providing gender differences between the women of the beauty shop and their male counterparts, specifically relevant to the economic dominance the women in *Steel Magnolias* display. Instead, she focuses on the beauty shop in the films she analyzes as "sites of female activity [which] serve to engender positive female identity, challenge rather than simply reinforce negative notions of female beauty, and sometimes promote solidarity across differences of class, race, and age," but not of direct male confrontation (309). The idea of "positive female identity" also further supports the independence women gain from men through participation in the beauty shop. The beauty shop becomes the locus of the

women's empowerment, which makes Harling's original play more effective in its portrayal of women's ability to transcend societal barriers, specifically class and gender, because of the intense focus on the beauty shop setting.

Tara McPherson argues in *Reconstructing Dixie* that, "[t]he film revolves around core contradictions, contradictions between women's 'freedoms,' freedoms explored in the woman-centered space of Truvy's, and other obligations, obligations to family and patriarchy" (167). While the women do seem to maintain a certain degree of autonomy within the beauty shop, the contradictions surface in their discussions of job dominance in comparison to men while simultaneously suffering through often unhappy marriages. An important distinction of McPherson's analysis is that she looks at the film, not the play. The women may support certain conventional female roles in their lives outside of the beauty parlor and even in their maintenance of a weekly appointment to maintain a superficially pleasing hairstyle, but the play only offers their lives as seen through the 1980s beauty parlor lens. The beauty parlor then becomes a forum for discussions and conversations of uncomfortable topics, where the women can talk about slothful or unhelpful spouses, and receive consolation or advice.

The friendships created within the beauty shop cross over into the women's lives outside of the beauty shop, unlike the restricted relationships in "Petrified Man," which means all the women are connected in the exchange of gossip, not simply the operator and client. The exchanges about personal issues, sometimes mired in larger social issues, are willingly relayed in a safe, communal place because they cannot be as easily commodified as the covert exchanges between only Leota and Mrs. Fletcher in "Petrified Man." The power in the beauty shop is spread to all the participants, not merely the

beauty operator. Because of the comfortable, safe environment presented by the community of women, the beauty shop remains a powerful space for the women. For example, in a vein similar to that of "Petrified Man," the violently grotesque emerges alongside the seemingly harmless gossip in the beauty parlor, but as another aspect of the discussions of male inferiority and bonding across class lines while defying a traditional southern female decorum. Perhaps political feminism does not occur in the beauty shop of *Steel Magnolias*, but the women do not remain completely silent and submissive to issues of gender inequality because of the freedom and empowerment of the beauty parlor space.

Paralleling the centrality of the beauty shop in Harling's play, Truvy looks at the world in relation to the beauty shop – underlining its important role for an owner on a more extreme level than simply an economic outlet. For example, in talking about visiting one of her twin sons who is leaving home, Truvy exclaims, "I've always wanted to go to Baltimore. I'm told it's the hairdo capital of the world" (11). In his 1987 *New York Times* review of the play, Mel Gussow claims that this line and others prove that "Mr. Harling has a grasp of local language, as in Ms. Martindale's [the actress playing Truvy] remarks, many of which seem filtered through the imagery of her profession." The language Harling employs through his characters does emphasize the intensely local setting, both in a small Louisiana town and in one particular beauty parlor, emphasizing the centrality of both to the characters' worldview. Therefore, the beauty shop does not simply provide an avenue for economic independence and female companionship, but creates a spatial identity for the women who participate within its environment. Truvy situates the world in relation to beauty parlors; when referring to Shelby's honeymoon

destination, Las Vegas, Truvy remarks, "The weather's supposed to be nice. I hear it's like living in a blow dryer" (23), which is apparently ideal weather to the owner of the beauty parlor. Later, on hearing of Clairee's intention to travel to New York City, Truvy says, "I'm green with envy. Promise me you'll go to the first floor of Bloomingdale's and tell me everything. *Woman's Day* says it's impossible to walk through there and not get made up" (50). Because Truvy's world and Harling's play are substantially centered on the beauty shop, the feminist agenda remains limited. In her essay, "The Southern-Fried Chick Flick," Deborah Barker argues that in chick flicks, including *Steel Magnolias*, "[t]he southern setting, therefore, serves as a place to explore issues of female empowerment without invoking the political problems or solutions associated with feminism and womanism and/or as a place where traditional feminine values still reign" (93). The southern setting in conjunction with the beauty parlor setting (and Truvy's positioning of other cities' merits based on their beauty parlors) makes that limited exploration even more pronounced. The beauty parlor, then, becomes a starting point for the women to engage in discussions of gender hierarchy and class inversion and begin to view the rest of the world on their own terms – a sign of the power the women do take from the space.

Truvy brings gender issues to the beauty parlor discussion when she declares her dominance, while simultaneously degrading her husband's manhood, in announcing, "the last romantic thing my husband did was in 1972. He enclosed this carport so I could support him" (Harling 20). Her announcement confirms a number of important characteristics of the beauty shop. First, she reaffirms the notion of the women's community within the beauty shop as a space to share personal information, such as

marital difficulties. Secondly, she proves the power gained by owning a beauty shop as it permits a woman to take on the role of main provider in the family. Lastly, Truvy suggests her husband, who is never referred to by name in the play[3], has not been romantically or sexually involved with her in approximately fifteen years, as the play is set in the late eighties. She later describes her husband as a "sofa slug," which reinforces his trait of inactivity, in terms of both occupation and sexual desire (53). The description of Truvy's husband introduces the idea of decreased masculinity in men associated with the beauty shop because "the beauty parlor signifies her husband's inadequacy both romantically and economically," (Barker 97). Truvy further emasculates her husband and emphasizes the independence of the women in the beauty shop when she tells Clairee, "I've got a husband who hasn't moved from in front of the TV set in fifteen years. It's up to us to figure out why we were put on this earth" (16), as encouragement to Clairee to find happiness on her own instead of mourning the life she led as the late mayor's wife. Truvy supports an economically dependent husband by owning a beauty shop, which also becomes a physical space from which she can encourage her clients to find their own economic and social independence from the men in their lives.

M'Lynn stresses the distinctive, yet simultaneously feminist and feminine, atmosphere of the beauty parlor when she explains, "Drum [her husband] would never set foot in a beauty shop. This is women's territory. He probably thinks we all run around naked or something" (Harling 26). Thus, the beauty parlor is set aside for women and makes up a culture separate from and inaccessible to men. M'Lynn explains Drum's feelings about the beauty parlor after Clairee discovers a "huge gun," belonging to Drum,

[3] In the film, Truvy's husband is called Spud - perhaps reflecting of his "couch potato" lifestyle.

in M'Lynn's purse. Drum had been using the gun to shoot birds out of the trees in the backyard in preparation for Shelby's wedding reception, disturbing the whole neighborhood in the process. Upon finding the gun while looking for hard candy, Clairee, asks, "[d]o you suck on this often?" (26). Harling uses linguistic innuendo to suggest the gun as a phallic symbol, which M'Lynn takes away from her husband, confidently explaining he will not risk coming into the "women's territory" of the beauty shop to retrieve it. Truvy declares, "[t]aking the gun was a stroke of genius, M'Lynn" (26), which reinforces the beauty shop's gendered atmosphere of female dominance, but also as a protective barrier which men cannot break.

Truvy's beauty shop also provides an avenue for operator Annelle to overcome financial obstacles she faces as a nineteen-year-old married to a runaway felon. Annelle divulges that "[h]e took all the money, my jewelry, the car. Most of my clothes were in the trunk . . . he's in big trouble with the law. Drugs or something. He never paid the rent so I got thrown out of our house and had to move in at crazy old Mrs. Robeline's [boarding house]" (29). About Annelle's first husband abandoning her, Ouiser consoles, "[m]en are the most horrible creatures" (29), likening them to animals, which makes them inferior to women due to a less-than-human quality. In a later scene, Clairee again relegates men to the lower ranks of animals, who have not mastered the "ability to accessorize," which, according to Clairee, is "[t]he only thing that separates us from the animals," the "us" implying women (63). Just prior to learning of Annelle's worthless husband, Clairee referred to Ouiser's veterinarian in animalistic terms: "Whitey Black is a moron. I'm not even sure he has opposable thumbs" (28), a quality that scientifically separates most primates from other animals; Clairee diminishes the vet's status to less

than even a monkey or an ape (also ironic because he is a doctor specializing in animals). The numerous and elaborate comparisons of men to animals and their subsequent inadequacies are examples of Barker's argument that, "[w]hat in a more overtly feminist venue would be seen as male-bashing, in the traditional world of *Steel Magnolias* is presented as charmingly humorous" (97), furthering the claim that the women in the play hover just shy of maintaining true power over and independence from men. By only talking negatively about the men, rather than formulating a plan of action, the women engage in a less fruitful form of gossip in the beauty shop, without effectively engaging in productive feminist goals.

Annelle recognizes the economic opportunity available at the beauty shop and by the end of the play she has become a successful beautician. However, she also embraces traditional female roles by marrying another man and becoming pregnant by the final scene. Despite taking on the traditional roles of wife and mother, she maintains her job at the beauty parlor even while pregnant and does not suggest she will quit after having the baby. In a display of further economic dominance over her husband, while she is at work, she tells the other women, "[m]y husband's back at the apartment cooking up a storm. He's convinced that his red beans and rice will make everyone feel better. . . Sammy runs me off whenever he starts cooking. That kitchen is so tiny he's scared he'll hit me in the stomach with a spatula" (64). While maintaining a protective attitude towards his pregnant wife, Sammy still demonstrates his aptitude for typically female domestic chores while his wife makes a living outside of the home. Similar to Annelle, M'Lynn manages to work outside the home, sharing the news that she "might be promoted to administrator of the Mental Guidance Center," an opportunity for a position

of authority, perhaps over other men at work, and to maintain a job independent of her husband (24). However, Barker suggests, "[t]he not so subtle postfeminist message of *Steel Magnolias* seems to be that the model of the superwoman is too much for the daughters of the next generation" (98) due to the differences between M'Lynn who "is not overtly feminist, yet she is a woman 'who has it all'" and Shelby who dies trying to maintain a nursing career, a marriage, and motherhood (96). Barker's argument focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, which does not consider Annelle, a generational contemporary of Shelby, who is happily enjoying the economic benefits of working at the beauty shop, but also the traditional role of wife and mother-to-be. The primary difference between the two women's abilities to maintain a home and career seems to be in the choice of husband. Annelle can succeed as a working mother because her husband helps with domestic chores while maintaining an outside job; Shelby fails as a working mother because her husband maintains an outside job, but does not assist with domestic or parental chores. Unlike Leota's husband's culinary inclinations in "Petrified Man," depicted as negatively feminine, thus weakening to his character and his wife's by association, by the 1980s, a cooking husband is a source of pride for the wife because it strengthens her own freedom and is socially lauded by the other women.

Truvy emphasizes the political and social significance of the fifty-year time difference in a conversation with Shelby. Shelby discusses the difficulty of caring for a fifteen-month-old baby while working as a nurse and dealing with her own diabetic health issues, to which Truvy responds, "Don't try to do it all yourself. You get that husband of yours to help. They're supposed to be helping out this decade [the 1980s]" (53). Truvy's statement supports Barker's argument that the film version suggests, "the

daughter does not have the steel, or in this case the insulin, to duplicate her mother's life [of 'doing it all']" (98). However, Truvy is simultaneously suggesting an alternative unavailable to women of M'Lynn's generation – that men should bear as much responsibility in raising children as women, a feminist notion that would allow Shelby to maintain a career and have a child, while equalizing traditionally gendered domestic roles. Despite Truvy's suggestion, Shelby laments, "[Jackson] helps, I guess. Mama doesn't think he does. But he does. Sometimes. When he thinks about it. Which isn't often. Most of the time he doesn't do a damn thing. And every weekend he's off hunting" (53). The feminist contradiction here is that although women of the decade are expecting more equality with their husbands, Shelby's particular relationship does not fit with the larger political movement, but the woman who advises her to make her husband help is the independent beauty shop owner. According to the stage direction, Truvy is "surprised" at Shelby's comment on Jackson's noninvolvement in his son's life, implying she expected someone like Shelby to be in a relationship reflective of modern times (53). The beauty shop provided an outlet for Shelby to express her disappointment in her husband and for Truvy to encourage equal gender roles. However, the beauty shop also remains a space for consolation among women at the expense of reinforcing the patriarchal mode of dominance in which the husband earns money outside the home while the wife raises the children. In the next line Truvy acquiesces that "Jackson certainly is a good provider" as compensation for his physical absence as a father and husband (53). This discussion does not take place in the film, to which Karen Hollinger refers when she argues in her book *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* that *Steel Magnolias*

> never questions Shelby's decision [to have a baby at such high stakes] because it never questions woman's traditional social roles under patriarchy; instead, it celebrates these roles as natural and positive even if a woman must kill herself to fit into them. It glorifies women's suffering and self-sacrifice in the service of the female procreative role and champions female friendship as a way for women to console each other in their pain (80).

Even though Hollinger's argument is based on the film and its significant omission of the discussion between Truvy and Shelby, it is convincing even in application to the play because Truvy does not push her point, but tries to find a positive side to the life-threatening struggles Shelby faces due to an unequal partnership with Jackson. Although the women in the beauty shop do not engage in political debates about feminism, the dialogue between Shelby and Truvy gives another dimension to the possibilities for discussions diverging from hairstyles and manicures, hinting at a hazy feminism in the beauty parlor.

The contrast between Annelle's ability to maintain a career and a family and Shelby's inability to do the same is another idea left out of the film. Therefore, Annelle's situation contradicts Hollinger's argument, but only in the play. In the film, Annelle does not discuss Sammy cooking the red beans and rice by himself; instead, the film leads the viewer to assume that Annelle initiated the idea of cooking the red beans and rice for the Eatentons when after visiting the grocery store together, she tells Sammy, "I already bought all the stuff and it's in the 'freezes beautifully' section of my cookbook and I want to take something that freezes beautifully." Sammy acquiesces, but is clearly not in charge of the cooking, and Annelle soon asks that he leave upon discovering his beer in

her refrigerator and his insistence on keeping the alcohol in her apartment. The scene also takes place before they are married or expecting a baby, in contrast to the play's version of the scene. The day after making the red beans and rice (by herself), Annelle rushes frantically out of her front door carrying a Dutch oven to meet Truvy, claiming anxiously, "I overslept because I was up late cooking. I've got to get these beans to the Eatentons and it's my Sunday to count the offering and I just know I'm going to miss church. . . I just don't know what I'm going to do." In this scene, Truvy reassures her that the beans will be delivered and insists that Annelle join her at her own church; the independent beauty parlor owner retains the role of comforter and problem-solver because in the film Annelle has no male support system.

Instead of depicting Sammy as a young husband helping his wife by cooking independently while she supports them working outside the home, the film portrays merely a beer-drinking, grocery-sack toting boyfriend. The film dismisses any complication or politicization of gender roles by creating Sammy's character in the same mold as the other male characters, while simultaneously emphasizing the idea "of the crucial element of the southern chick flick: female empowerment through female bonding" (Barker 113), by enhancing Truvy's role as caretaker for the other female characters, particularly when and because their male counterparts fail them. Later in the film the women host a bridal shower for Annelle at the beauty parlor; and, by the final scene, Annelle and Sammy are presumably married as the film ends with Annelle rushing to the hospital with labor pains. However, the film provides no explanation as to how or why Annelle married or even renewed any relationship with Sammy after receiving no help making her all-important red beans and rice in her already busy schedule and telling

him to leave indefinitely upon finding his beer in her refrigerator – a vice strictly against her religious convictions. According to the film, then, Annelle seems to be in the same position as Shelby in relation to feminism and lack of marital gender equality. The film's alteration of certain scenes significantly de-complicates the gender roles as discussed in the beauty shop of the play. The play provides a more realistic depiction of a group of women in the late eighties through a gesture at diversity in the men they marry, but Annelle appears to be the only character taking advantage of the post-feminist society.

Widow Clairee, completely shed of a male partner, declares economic autonomy and enters a male-oriented profession when she buys KPPD radio station at Shelby's urging and Truvy's encouragement. Clairee accesses a traditionally male arena by owning her own radio station, but goes even further when she enters the press box of the high school football team as "the color announcer for the Devils" on her radio station (38). The beauty parlor serves as the medium in which women share their accomplishments free of a male presence, in contrast to an outside world often dominated by men. Most of the men in the women's lives seem incapable of success – monetarily, socially, or in their relationships with women. For example, Ouiser does not wish to reunite with high school boyfriend, Owen, saying, "I managed to run him off and marry the first of two total deadbeats . . . I managed in just a few decades to marry the two most worthless men in the universe and proceed to have the three most ungrateful children ever conceived. The only reason people are nice to me is because I have more money than God" (41 – 42). Although Ouiser did conform to traditional female roles of wife and mother, the community of women brought together in the beauty parlor allows her to express her unhappiness and dissatisfaction in those conventional roles and an

unwillingness to repeat them with an ex-boyfriend. Although Ouiser admits to a friendship with Owen by the end of the play, the depth of their relationship remains ambiguous.

In the beauty shop, the women hesitantly maneuver gender boundaries while more effectively erasing class lines among themselves. Scanlon points out that, "[w]ere it not for Annelle's presence in the salon, where she can reveal her own truths about abandonment by her husband to these other women . . . she might be employed as hired help at this upper-class wedding, but she certainly would not appear on the guest list" (320). The dialogue between the women is essential to disrupting class barriers between upper class Ouiser and Clairee, middle class M'Lynn and Shelby, and working class Truvy and Annelle. The homosocial atmosphere and commonality of hairstyling, as either client or operator, provides a space conducive to private revelations necessary for building relationships with people, despite class differences. In the opening scene, the beauty shop is established as an equalizer, indicating the class of its occupants, when Shelby informs newcomer Annelle, "[y]ou're working with the best. Anyone who's anybody gets their hair done at Truvy's" (12). A woman's status seems to increase by connection specifically to Truvy's beauty parlor, but everyone's status is also the same because of the connection to the same beauty parlor. The variety of careers present among the characters in the 1980s South provides a contrast to a representative cross-section of the 1930s southern beauty parlor of "Petrified Man." Therefore, the class dynamics between Leota and her customers differed because she had something her clients seemed to lack – a job, exposure to the outside world, and the ensuing worldly knowledge that enabled her to maintain a manipulative power over them. Truvy's power

in the beauty shop is less pronounced because of the variety of employment and careers enjoyed by her patrons. Truvy's leverage stems from her position as the central figure, the reason the women gather together every week in a homosocial space to evaluate their various jobs and relationships.

Truvy's subtle power as the beauty operator appears because she owns the beauty shop, the catalyst for the no-secrets code, without which the other women would not have access to each other's personal lives or have the opportunity to cross class lines. Truvy also controls the physical appearance of the women, to some extent, because she is the head hairdresser, thus garnering slightly more power. When M'Lynn enters the shop in the first scene, Truvy allows Annelle to do her hair, first telling the new stylist that "[h]er coiffure card is right on top" (14), indicating Truvy keeps track of her clients' hair preferences and styles in order to better know them. Her familiarity with the clients coincides with the familiarity bred in the beauty parlor, allowing the women to feel comfortable enough to share their personal stories.

The comfort level between the women and knowledge of the client feeds the operator's ability to read the client's body, an important theme connecting the 1980s beauty shop of *Steel Magnolias* to the 1930s beauty shop of "Petrified Man." Leota discovered Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy due to her thinning hair, and Truvy shares information she has recently learned about the same topic, "that stressful times can unleash deep dark hostilities that make your hair fall out" (13). The main reason for the beauty shop's existence, hair, is the most important source of knowledge and power for the operator. Another parallel to "Petrified Man" is the unveiling of a secret pregnancy within the beauty shop. Before the other women enter the scene, Shelby reveals to her

mother that she is pregnant, despite her doctor's and mother's warnings about the severe health risks. Ouiser emphasizes the open communication of the beauty parlor in order to pry out what M'Lynn calls a "secret," by reminding her, "[o]bviously there's no such thing in this room," convincing Shelby to reveal her secret pregnancy to all the women, before even telling her own father (42).

Shelby's pregnancy differs strikingly from Mrs. Fletcher's, though, because Shelby insists against her mother's pleadings not to have a baby, "I think it would help things a lot," implying her marriage and relationship with Jackson needs help (Harling 34). Whereas Mrs. Fletcher takes control of her own body and away from Mr. Fletcher through making her own decision of whether to keep her baby, Shelby's pregnancy becomes a plea for acceptance from her husband. Unlike Mrs. Fletcher's unexpected pregnancy and Mr. Fletcher's ignorance on the matter, Shelby makes clear Jackson's heavy involvement in her search for a baby – through adoption, buying one, or ultimately giving birth despite the physical danger. Because of Jackson's explicit involvement in the process, Shelby loses control over her own body to her husband; perhaps M'Lynn recognizes the danger of Shelby's pregnancy as a submissive act, beyond the diabetic health risks. In trying to gain her mother's support, Shelby insists, "[n]o one is going to be hurt or disappointed, or even inconvenienced," M'Lynn responds, "[l]east of all Jackson, I'm sure," in a tone implying Jackson is willing to take what he wants from Shelby, but at no cost to him (34). Significantly, three important secrets are revealed in the beauty shop at this point: a risky pregnancy, a rocky marriage, and a dangerous attempt to salvage the marriage. The beauty shop provides the space in which Shelby feels comfortable sharing these revelations with her mother, who in turn tries to impress

upon her daughter the idea of self-importance. Shelby's attempt to have a marriage, a child, and a career (to Truvy's earlier query about quitting nursing while married, Shelby responded, "Never! I love it" (17)) ultimately fail because of an apparent desire to please and depend on a man, who offers no reciprocal support.

In the next act, Shelby's body again discloses a secret in the beauty shop. Truvy notices bruises on Shelby's arms and knows something is wrong; upon discovering that M'Lynn has concealed Shelby's dialysis treatments from them, the other women are shocked because she broke the no-secrets code of the beauty shop, which goes beyond client-operator confidence in *Steel Magnolias* to include all the women gathered in the beauty shop, a community apparently maintained even outside of the physical shop. Both of the revelations about Shelby also create opportunities for the women to console each other, another experience tying them to the beauty shop and to each other.

Interestingly, M'Lynn works at the Mental Guidance Center, which has similar traits to the beauty shop. Truvy says, "I just think it must be fun for M'Lynn to have access to all that secret personal information. Come on, M'Lynn. Tell us some of your most bizarre mental cases and let us guess who they are. There's a lot of sick tickets in this town" (24). Ironically, Truvy has access to secret knowledge as a beautician with gossip, but at the Mental Guidance Center, M'Lynn has the role of beautician because she controls the space. She confirms another parallel to the beauty shop when she replies, "I will not discuss office business in a social setting. People need a place they can come unload their problems. I would never violate their confidence" (24), which replicates the role of the beauty shop as a place for the women to discuss problems and possible solutions without fear of disclosure outside of the shop. In conspiring with Mrs. Pike in

"Petrified Man." Leota breaches the trust bred in beauty shop relationships by gossiping about a client (Mrs. Fletcher) with an outsider. Although she does not act on it, Truvy's curiosity about the "bizarre mental cases" and "sick tickets in this town" provides a parallel between the two beauticians in their constant interest in scandal. Truvy's interest in private, disturbing, and personal matters also plays into the idea explored in "Petrified Man" of the perverse nature of the beauty shop and its women.

In "Petrified Man," the women expose a certain perversity in discussing the freak show, the defeat of Mr. Petrie, and the women he raped. The women in Truvy's beauty shop expose a similar tendency to use grotesque and violent language to describe everyday occurrences, further encouraging the idea of the beauty shop as a space that fosters a freedom of language that might usually be reserved for men. However, the women in the shop are not squeamish as Shelby deems her fingernail polish unnaturally dark because "[i]t looks like a stuck pig bled all over my hands" (14). She uses violent imagery of a stabbed pig and bloody hands to describe pink nail polish, something normally used to enhance the femininity or delicateness of a woman's hands. Even though Shelby is complaining because the nail polish is not pink or delicate enough, she still uses grotesque language to describe a feminine product, contradicting the female ritual of beautification that should result from painting her fingernails. Blood and death appear elsewhere in the grotesque language the women use in the beauty shop, such as a "bleeding armadillo groom's cake" (30) at Shelby's wedding reception, further detailed as "repulsive. It has gray icing. . . the cake part is red velvet cake. Blood red! People are going to be hacking into this animal that looks like it's bleeding to death" (19). Again, a commonly female and bride-centered celebration and a product of a woman's baking in

the kitchen are associated with bleeding road kill. Lisa Tyler argues in "Mother-Daughter Myth and the Death of Marriage" that when "[e]ven the comic gray armadillo groom's cake that Jackson requests has a luridly violent appeal" the women are further supporting their contempt of "the institution of marriage" (99 – 100), using grotesque imagery to symbolize weddings and marriage as unsightly affairs, not merely using such animalistic terms as a linguistic rebellion. Apparently the groom's cake at Shelby's wedding is an accurate introduction to her husband's family. After a visit to Jackson's parents later in the play, she tells the women, "on Saturdays they leave the house at the crack of dawn to start hunting furry little creatures. . . I could tell they were anxious to start killing things" (32), describing her in-laws as violent monsters hurting harmless and innocent animals, while associating both her father and mother-in-law with the same violent description of hunting, dismissing it as a male-only hobby. The grotesque in *Steel Magnolias* differs from the earlier work as it serves to reduce manhood in the shop, but not as a reflection of the women's dominance outside the shop, limiting their advancement in reversing a gender power structure.

Steel Magnolias, also like "Petrified Man," maintains not only an all-female cast, but also an all-white cast of characters. Much scholarship on the film adaptation of *Steel Magnolias* has focused on the racial homogeneity of the core characters, where only a few black people appear, as maids, wedding guests, and nurses; in the play, black people are excluded completely, both in physical and dialogic appearances. In the play, no mention of any race appears in the conversations among the women in the beauty shop. Referring to the film, but applicable to the play, McPherson argues that "[t]he narrative pursues contact across class and generational difference, but it cannot even think about

contact between races," which in combination with contradictory femininity in the beauty shop results in "reestablishing white southern womanhood as the foundation to stable white identities in the 1980s South and masking recent histories of feminism and the Civil Rights movement" (166). Barker concurs that "[t]he film collapses the past into the present, creating a 1950s small southern town, minus any signs of racial unrest or protest" (99). Because the play offers only a view of the beauty shop (which has historically been segregated because of Jim Crow laws in the South, leading to years of racial separation and a lack of knowledge about different types of hair even after the official end of segregation), McPherson allows that it is "a space that might reasonably remain entirely white" (164). Whereas the film shows a town that has not moved beyond the 1950s when reality dictates that it has, the play does represent a realistic 1980s small-town, southern beauty parlor – remaining as segregated as Welty's 1930s small-town, southern beauty parlor. The long history of racial separation, particularly in the South, remains prevalent in a privately, locally owned beauty parlor with no mention, attempt, or desire to change it. Men are unwelcome in the shop because they represent an "other" and impose on the commonality of the shop's population, but at least the women acknowledge their existence. Black people represent a second "other" that the white women in Truvy's beauty shop are even more unfamiliar with than men; therefore, they are excluded in the play. Scanlon writes that "[r]ace serves as a subtext to mark the female characters as white and, arguably, to mark the class differences among them as more easily overcome than would be challenges posed by race" (326). In the 1980s South, race remains a barrier in the beauty shop. Gussow laments in his *Times* review of the original staged production in New York that, "'Steel Magnolias' does not succeed in gathering its

resources and transcending its existence as a slice of Southern life," but perhaps the point of the play is just that: it is merely a slice of one particular collection of female lives in a specific gathering spot, a microcosm of a larger South.

Urban Complexities of the Beauty Shop

In the twenty-first century, the beauty parlor remains largely a segregated space, in terms of both race and gender. However, director Bille Woodruff's 2005 film, *Beauty Shop*, traces one hairdresser who successfully crosses both racial and gender boundaries as an operator and then owner of her own beauty parlor. Ken Marks, film reviewer for *The New Yorker*, writes that "[t]he dishing in the shop is neither as funny nor as shocking as it's meant to be; caricatures of white people, black people, gays, men, and women are distressingly superficial; and the push-button approach to film 'entertainment' is truly disheartening" (1). While the stereotypes presented in the film may be exaggerated, by creating popular culture entertainment, the film creates the opportunity for conversations about complexities left unexplored in earlier, more homogenized fictional shops. At the beginning of the film, black, widowed, single mother Gina Norris, played by Queen Latifah, works in an upscale, white Atlanta hair salon under owner Jorge Christophe (Kevin Bacon). However, she quickly tires of his controlling behavior and quits, determined to realize her long-time dream of opening her own beauty shop. Gina's beauty shop proves that ultimately hair care is a business, providing a platform for women to gain economic and social access to historical and contemporary societal changes, represented by the multicultural aspect of Gina's beauty shop including a white

female hairdresser for mostly black clients, two upper class white female clients, and a black male operator.

The feasibility of the African-American beauty business began in the early twentieth century with hair product innovators Annie Malone and the more widely known Madam C.J. Walker, whose portrait hangs in Gina's beauty shop, emphasizing the history and ability of black women to become financially and socially successful entrepreneurs in the beauty industry. Tiffany M. Gill looks at the political changes and debates affecting and affected by African-American beauty shops and their owners, customers, and operators in *Beauty Shop Politics*, but realizes that "[w]hile it is highly unlikely that there will ever be a consensus on the meaning of beauty in black women's lives, one thing is without question: Black beauty is big business. Whatever the changing aesthetics and political implications, black beauticians continue making themselves and their services relevant and necessary" (124). The adaptive and independent nature of the beauty shop makes it a particularly enduring business for black women. According to Adia Harvey Wingfield, in her 2008 sociological study, "black women are estimated to comprise approximately 100,000 of about 300,000 women employed as stylists nationwide, with about 50,000 black women self-employed as salon owners" (36), providing modern statistics for the prevalence of black women in the beauty shop industry and part of Gina's incentive in opening her own shop: the prior and current success of women in similar circumstances.

Like many of the African-American women interviewed in Wingfield's *Doing Business with Beauty*, Gina displays a "spontaneous" transition to ownership because she has not saved money, planned when to quit her current job, or set a specific time frame

for opening her own shop (43). Her sudden decision to quit working for Jorge is the result of class tension between Gina and Jorge's hierarchical salon system of owners, stylists, shampooers, and exclusively upper-class clientele; Jorge's racial discrimination and condescension toward Gina; and Jorge's male-superiority complex over Gina and the other stylists in his salon. Jorge tries to quell his stylists' power in order to maintain a hierarchy not only between clients and stylists, but also among the staff in the salon. Jorge attempts to implement certain rules for his stylists and shampooers in order to maintain control over them, such as requiring a standard uniform, imposing a strict hierarchy, and forbidding the display of personal photographs in their workspace because "Jorge's was not named Best Design Salon in Atlanta for having Scottish [sic] tape on the mirrors." These rules are the owner's effort to stifle the powerful personal relationship between a stylist and her client from developing. Not only does Gina assert her independence by taping a photograph to the mirror at her booth and gossiping with clients, but also by crossing Jorge's hierarchy lines when she tells shampoo-girl Lynn (Alicia Silverstone) to finish client Mrs. Dexter's hair when Terri, a well-to-do client played by Andie McDowell, arrives. By encouraging Lynn to move up from shampooer to stylist, Gina is wielding power reserved for the owner, at the top of the beauty shop hierarchy. When Jorge discovers his power has been undermined he immediately informs Gina that "you don't get to give the shots here at Jorge's; I give the shots . . . the stylists here, they work for me; they don't work for you," causing Gina to quit as the tension between owner and operator reaches its breaking point.

Gina follows the lead of a long line of beauticians who "ignored managerial policies and relied heavily upon the operator-client relationship to negotiate workplace

demands [because] the operator-customer relationship proved far too elusive for owners and managers to control" (Willett 85). When her demands were not met, she left, and two of her customers soon followed. Her class-crossing relationships with customers in part enabled and supported her economic independence in moving across town to her own shop, which in turn sustained her own class movement within the beauty parlor's hierarchy from stylist to owner. For example, shortly after Gina's move, Jorge investigates a wealthy client's cancelled appointment at his salon and sees her through Gina's shop window, showing even Jorge's recognition of the economic significance of Gina's relationships with her clients in her ability to maintain their business and take it away from his now competing salon.

The spontaneity of her decision to quit working at Jorge's salon and open her own beauty shop puts her at an economic and logistical disadvantage in starting a new business, including her difficulty in obtaining a loan to start the business. In order to establish a physical space in which to open her shop, Gina seeks a bank loan, but her apparent lack of "credit, collateral [and] capital" proves problematic. In response to the initial loan denial, she uses the tools of her future business to convince the bank worker she will succeed if given the loan. Gina uses paper clips to give the stuffy, drab, white, female banker a new hairstyle, and the power of a good hairstyle convinces the banker to give Gina a thirty thousand dollar loan, to which Gina responds, "what kinda shop can I buy with that?" Despite Gina's initial concern and disappointment, she settles for the small loan because she realizes it is the best, and perhaps only, option available. Her difficulty in obtaining any loan at all and her response to the small loan she does secure emphasize the high cost of starting a business, especially when starting at such a

disadvantage. The women Wingfield interviewed in her study faced similar difficulties in gaining "start-up capital," and Wingfield argues "that the unavailability of funding from government sources and financial institutions reflects the influence of gendered racism in the economic sphere," meaning Gina's difficulty in obtaining a loan stemmed from her position as a black woman, not necessarily her lack of credit (47). Because Gina receives only a minimal loan, she relies on family and friends to help her clean up and redecorate her new shop, as she cannot afford professional, outside help, reinforcing the community aspect of the beauty shop in which women rely on and help each other.

In addition to help from friends and family, Gina's success is furthered by her ability to bring her upper class, white clients with her to her new shop. The ability to disrupt class lines through assertion of power over a client provides a connecting thread between the 1930s beauty shop in "Petrified Man" and the 2005 shop in *Beauty Shop*. Leota, in "Petrified Man," needs to distinguish herself from the lower-class categorization of the beauty shop with other domestic work (and its primarily African-American workers) in the 1930s South, whereas Gina needs to distinguish herself as a successful racial minority competing in a predominantly white, upper-class workspace in the contemporary South. Both women accomplish class ascendancy through working at a beauty parlor and distorting the power structure therein to their benefit. Julie Willett argues that "[b]eauty operators relied on the familiarity bred by conversation [. . .] and while it mitigated class differences between operator and client, it also created gendered alliances between worker and customer" (83). While working at Jorge's salon, Gina's relationship with her designer clothing-clad, white clients, such as characters Terri and Joanne, blurs class lines through the trust created between operator and client in the

beauty shop. The beauty shop changed the dynamic between who controls whom in the non-traditional domestic relationship, allowing Gina to assert her authority, as seen when Terri and Joanne adjust to accommodate Gina's move to a new shop. Client-operator relationships, like those illustrated by the women in *Beauty Shop*, resulted in increased social and economic power for the operator (Willett 83).

In *Beauty Shop*, Gina's awareness of her customers goes further than simply knowing their hairstyle preference, thereby deepening the client-operator relationship. When chunks of Terri's hair fall out as Gina gives her a shampoo, she instinctively asks, "you havin' problems with Steven again?" Terri admits to having marital problems and listens to Gina's advice on how to solve them. Gina demonstrates the operator's ability to interpret her client's lives through changes in their bodies, from the same symptom Leota noticed in Mrs. Fletcher almost seventy years prior: hair loss. Like Mrs. Fletcher, Terri feels comfortable enough in her relationship with her hairdresser to discuss the most private of issues, which reinforces the changing class dynamics permitted within the beauty shop as well as the importance of trust and loyalty between the two women. However, Mrs. Fletcher discovers that Leota has been notified of her pregnancy before realizing the hair loss, implying Leota may not have connected the symptom with the diagnosis without an earlier tip-off. Gina, on the other hand, takes the symptom as uncontrived evidence for her own diagnosis. Both hairdressers use body signs to gain personal information about their clients, but Gina seems more genuinely attuned to the client's body.

Terri is not the exception to the rule in discussing relationships with Gina; minutes before Terri walked into the salon, Gina gave advice to client Mrs. Dexter on

improving her sex life. The discussion topic itself represents a lowering of class propriety, as regards traditional mores, upon entering the beauty shop and reinforces the operator's control of the situation. Even when Terri goes to Gina's new beauty shop, still complaining about Steven, the other stylists warn her he is cheating on her, which turns out to be true when Terri announces in the final scene, "y'all all knew he was cheating on me, now I know, and now I'm free." The beauty shop provided a therapeutic space in which she could relay the symptoms of her troubled marriage, receive a diagnosis, and return to celebrate after leaving her husband – reinforcing the stylist's powerful insight and leverage as interpreting therapist in the relationship.

Gina's class status rises with the power she gains as a hair stylist, but her customers are also willing to ignore certain outside class barriers in order to have Gina do their hair. Instead of patronizing Jorge's Salon for its high-class reputation and its location in a wealthy area of Atlanta, customers like Terri and Joanne frequent his salon because of Gina's hair styling ability and personality. Therefore, when Gina opens her own shop in a poor, inner-city neighborhood, Terri conspicuously arrives in her Range Rover in order to have Gina fix her unruly hair. At Terri's next appointment, she brings Joanne (another former Jorge's Salon patron) with her after she "ran into [her] at Sak's," showing yet again the outside indicators of economic class discrepancy that are ignored in order to maintain superior hair treatment. In his *New York Times* review of *Beauty Shop*, A.O. Scott, accurately noting the class diversity within Gina's shop, writes, "[t]he customers include local matrons (including one played by Della Reese), divaesque wives of professional athletes (including real-life diva wife Kimora Lee Simmons) and wealthy white women . . . who follow Gina from Jorge's and soon discover that the warmth and

high spirits make up for the lack of valet parking." The beauty shop entices a variety of women and also creates a space of equality among women of differing social and economic classes. Rich customer Joanne, who paid eight thousand dollars for each breast implant and has connections at Cover Girl, provides affirmation of the unimportance of class. She assumes her class holds certain advantages over the other women in the shop, claiming Gina's attractive male operator James would prefer her over "wannabe black" Lynn and calling one black stylist, "Little Miss Hip-Hop," starting a heated argument between the women. When Gina tries to placate them, Joanne thinks that her status as the client, a wealthy one specifically, precludes her from blame and should result in Gina firing the stylist. When Joanne threatens to Gina, "you can forget about your meeting with Cover Girl and you can forget about me as a client," she assumes her money and connections allow her behavioral freedom while maintaining Gina's goodwill. Gina refuses to submit to Joanne's requests or accept her behavior, even at the expense of losing a regular, well-paying client, and a deal with Cover Girl for her homemade hair product because it would mean relinquishing her control as stylist and owner, the basis of her independence. Gina's beauty shop creates a space of equality, but also demands equality of its occupants, further empowering the women within its realm. The women of the shop reject Joanne's attempt at class domination, expelling her from the space.

The class crossovers among the characters in *Beauty Shop* overlap with the economic advancement of the participants in the business, but because of the racially segregated history of beauty shops, racial differences also create confusion within the shop and relate to class and economic standings. Although the South of 2005 is more than thirty years removed from the height of the Civil Rights movement, the Atlanta in

Beauty Shop remains a racially divided city, illustrated in the contrast between Jorge's and Gina's salons. Gina's first customer in her new shop, Mrs. Towner (Della Reese), asks lone white operator Lynn, "when did y'all get to be so integrated around here?" to which Lynn brightly responds, "[t]his morning," emphasizing the novelty of racial integration as recently as 2005 and also the atypical nature of Gina's hiring a white operator in her shop, located in a black neighborhood. Gina's hiring Lynn illustrates at least three important and overlapping characteristics of the beauty shop: social mobility, economic mobility and competitiveness, and racial presence.

Jorge stifled mobility within his salon, forcing each person to remain in his or her position; however, mobility within the shop is a historically central tenet of the beauty shop business because it enables economic improvement – something Gina understands. After finding Lynn styling Mrs. Dexter's hair while working at his salon, Jorge sternly reminds her, "I don't remember saying you could leave the shampooing area. You are the shampooing girl, you should be shampooing," reinforcing his hierarchical and uncompromising business. He allows no room for advancement and reminds his employees they are just that: employees, with no independence. His business model ultimately fails because he underestimates his stylists' and shampooers' desire for social and economic mobility within the shop, which should be attainable because of their work in the beauty shop. Gina supports her decision to allow Lynn to finish her customer because Lynn is a licensed stylist and Gina has previously approved of Lynn's styling at a competitive hair show. Gina's own desire to ascend from stylist to owner in order to gain more power and money allows her to recognize the same desire in Lynn, another underappreciated, but qualified, beautician.

Gina's hiring Lynn presents another dimension of the economic competitiveness between beauty shops, even as hard-pressed as Jorge is in admitting that Gina's shop is competing with his own. Inculcating loyalty into both its customers and operators is an important aspect of a successful beauty shop. Lynn's absence comes as a surprise to Jorge, who has not even been involved enough to recall her name, and he must shampoo a client's hair himself, proving his ineptness when a fountain of water squirts from the sink soaking the client. Lynn's transition both to stylist and to another shop adds to Jorge's exposition as an unrealistic and unqualified salon owner, operator, or shampooer. Unlike Jorge, Gina maintains her business through personal relationships, both with Lynn (employee) and Terri and Joanne (customers), the building blocks of any business, but made particularly acute in the competitive atmosphere of the beauty shop setting.

Perhaps the most obvious, and most focused upon, aspect of Lynn's working at Gina's new shop is the surfacing of racial tension within the beauty shop. After Gina redecorates the out-dated, run-down beauty shop of the previous owner, she discusses the new business with her five black operators, who worked there under the previous owner. However, when Lynn enters and Gina introduces her as "one of the baddest hairstylists to ever set foot out of . . . Blue Ridge, Georgia; she got mad skills, the girl is talented, and she is going to be working here in the shop with us . . . as a stylist," two of the black operators refuse to work with her, claiming Gina is "trying to whiten up the place" with a girl from rural Georgia. Gina risks losing those two operators and any others who refuse to work with Lynn, enforcing the idea of a business built on skilled stylists, not one on race. One of the black operators, Chanel, chooses to stay claiming, "no white girl is going to mess up me and my money," touting the more fundamental characteristic of the

beauty shop as a source of income, not of racial, social, or cultural homogenation. Gill's explanation of beauty shops as "a platform for black women to heal from and challenge the limitations imposed by the intersecting challenges of sexism, racism, and economic disenfranchisement" because they "remain places where black women feel safe to deal with intimate issues that are for the most part ignored in the larger society" (136) provides reasoning for the conflict a white operator brings to an otherwise black-owned and operated shop in a predominantly black neighborhood. Despite the modern, post-civil rights setting, Lynn's race remains a barrier between her and the other women, threatening their comfortable, unifying space centered around similar backgrounds and hair textures.

Lynn must prove her competence in order to gain social acceptance in Gina's beauty shop. Black beauty shops usually offer different styling services due to the difference in hair texture between white and black women; therefore, the ability to render those services becomes a point of contention between Lynn and the other operators. As Lynn prepares to do Mrs. Towner's hair, Chanel condescendingly asks, "what do you know about doing black folks' hair?" alienating Lynn from the beauty shop's population by doubting the quality and diversity of work she is capable of doing because of her race. One of the older black operators, Ms. Josephine (Alfre Woodard), often quotes Maya Angelou, and on one occasion the other women in the beauty shop join in the climactic refrain, including Lynn, who receives silent glares at her attempt to participate. By quoting Angelou's poetry, Ms. Josephine reinforces black female empowerment, further elevating the beauty shop as a political space, as argued by Gill, where women are the central focus, but specifically black women, leaving Lynn in a position of limbo in trying

to acclimate to the environment. Lynn's situation reflects Gina's earlier position as the only black person, either employer or patron, at Jorge's salon. Lynn does not appeal to her fellow stylists, but she also struggles to attract clients, reminding Gina that Mrs. Towner is the only client she has served since her arrival.

Lynn's experience of racial discrimination within the shop directly contrasts to the equalizing and reversal of socioeconomic class distinctions. The common denominator of race takes precedence over the gender commonality of the beauty shop in determining social acceptance. When Gina's younger sister-in-law, Darnelle, explains to Lynn that "some folks just feel comfortable kicking it with people they have something in common with," she means race, a barrier seemingly larger than the common career and gender Lynn shares with the other operators and clientele. The different factors intersect within Gina's beauty shop, though, providing a space in which the conflict can present itself and find resolution. Lynn recognizes Darnelle's explanation of her exclusion as "racial profiling" and protests that at her mama's shop in Blue Ridge she "did black, white, polka-dotted hair, it don't matter." When Darnelle replies, "This ain't yo Mama's shop in Blue Ridge this is . . . the ghetto, and you need to show people that you're trying to fit in, I mean look the part," she brings up another factor contributing to Lynn's isolation from the rest of the women – her rural, small-town background contrasting with their urban background. The urban location of Gina's beauty shop provides another variable involved in the complexities arising within the shop because cities offer a wider variety of shops, enabling specialization, whereas a small town may only support one beauty shop, which must master various techniques. The close proximity of city-dwellers may also influence a tighter bond among minorities and increased hostility to outsiders.

Darnelle insists that Lynn's acceptance "is all about the visual. You could be the best hairstylist up in here, but can't nobody tell by looking at you; girl, presentation is the key," starkly opposing Gina's original reasoning in hiring Lynn: her professional skills and friendship regardless of a different background, race, class, or economic standing. The black, urban beauty parlor maintains a certain code, but one that can apparently be broken with the right appearance. Lynn demonstrates her desire and ability to overcome the racial barrier, in order to succeed in the beauty shop, in the scene immediately following her makeover. With hair and make-up more in-keeping with popular black styles, she has a black customer in her chair and unabashedly joins the other women in responding to the black radio personality "Hollerin' Helen," often on the air in Gina's shop. In her article "'If My Husband Calls I'm Not Here': The Beauty Parlor as Real and Representational Female Space," Jennifer Scanlon concludes that in *Beauty Shop*, "race is recognized in ways that go beyond the recognition available in the other films [such as *Steel Magnolias* and other films in her analysis], lived as a real social construct and negotiated into friendship" (330). Whereas "Petrified Man" and *Steel Magnolias* ignore race and reserve the beauty parlor for white women's empowerment, *Beauty Shop* suggests the space is open to a wider variety of people.

Lynn succeeds in proving she can do black hair just as Gina successfully proved in Jorge's salon that she can do white hair, enough so that combined with her bedside manner, she attracts white customers to her new shop. Like Lynn, Terri and Joanne struggle to gain acceptance into Gina's beauty shop, again illustrating the lingering segregation of the beauty shop as both a social and business institution. Because of her work outside the working-class, black community, Gina more willingly accepts

customers like Terri and Joanne, but the other operators are more wary, an effect of the long-time segregation, particularly in the South, violently enforced by whites. After a failed attempt at small talk with the other women in the shop on her first visit to Gina's, Terri gains cultural acceptance upon eating collard greens from local food vendor Catfish Rita. Reciprocally, her enjoyment of collard greens, a representation of black and lower class culture, signifies her genuine acceptance of that unfamiliar culture. Terri's sincere liking of a specific food provides a connection between the two cultures that meet in the beauty shop, easing the racial and class tension. Unlike Lynn and Terri, Joanne is unwilling to compromise her whiteness or richness to become part of the beauty shop and cannot find a place there.

The tangled society of Gina's beauty shop presents some confusing dynamics between class, race, and the economic and power structure within those, arguing that the beauty shop has an open-door policy to a diversity of people, but outsiders must make certain racial or class concessions before reaching acceptance within the group. In Scott's *Times* review, he contends that, "the plot of 'Beauty Shop' is a loose, rambling affair, and not really the point of the movie . . . and in any case, too much intrigue and worry would take precious time away from the relaxed, funny banter that is the movie's main reason for being." Even though the dynamics of Gina's beauty shop often conflict in attempting to present a clear idea of who can be included within its walls, without the beauty shop setting and Gina's overarching transition from stylist in an upscale, all-white salon to owner of a lower class, mostly black shop, the "funny banter" would not exist or make sense. Conversely, the conversations illustrate the power, social, racial, and financial structures available in the beauty shop. The chatter within the shop reflects and

narrates the action of the women within the shop, creating an atmosphere conducive to power assertions among women, but also a space where women find economic freedom and independence from men. Males are either banished from the beauty parlor or give up their masculinity in order to be a part of it.

Gina's male counterpart in the beauty shop world, Jorge Christophe, embodies effeminate characteristics in an effort to fit in to the women's realm of the beauty shop. Jorge speaks with a fake Austrian accent, wears garish, tight-fitting clothes, keeps his hair long and highlighted, and walks with a sway in his hips, all of which diminish a traditional idea of masculinity. Jorge also presents evidence of homosexuality when he tells a male client to "leave the jacket, take off your pants – I'm kidding," before inadvertently squirting him with water in his ineptness at shampooing. Gina then further emasculates him by providing competition from an actual woman, in a black, lower class part of town, for the loyalty of his wealthy, white customers. Despite his efforts to derail those relationships, Jorge is unable to maintain control as a male business owner or as a male trying to fit into the female-controlled world of the beauty shop because the power and competition of the female hairdresser are too much for him to overcome. At the end of the movie, he reveals his true identity as native Nebraskan George Christy, complete with American Midwest accent. In attempting inclusion in the beauty shop, Jorge formulated a new identity that excluded his masculinity. Whereas Lynn can "look the part" in order to fit in at a predominantly black beauty shop, Jorge's attempt to reside within the beauty shop space with an effeminate façade does not work. His problem is the opposite of Lynn's; gender is his obstacle, not race, in acceptance into the beauty shop culture.

Another male character in *Beauty Shop* who has a questionable sexual orientation due to his association with the beauty parlor is James, the young, black, male operator Gina hires to braid hair in her new shop. The female operators in Gina's shop observe and comment on different characteristics that lead them to the conclusion that James is "gayer than Peter Pan and a pair of ice skates." The women find clichéd evidence of James's femininity in the way he drinks cappuccino with his small finger extended, the fact that he styles women's hair, wears the same smock as the female operators, watches Oprah, and divulges his habit of plucking "unruly back or chest hairs." He also wears a purse, or as he explains, "a man bag, it's like the hottest new accessory in men's fashion." His connection with the beauty parlor eclipses his masculinity to the point that a man outside of the parlor accuses him of being "frou-frou," resulting in a punch to the face from James. The punch could be cause for contradiction to his lack of masculinity, but could also reinforce the idea if seen as a catfight with feminine connotations, especially when James pulls back shaking a hurt hand. However, by the end of the film, James has begun a relationship with Lynn, Gina's white, female operator. Despite his relationship with a woman, James nevertheless lost his appearance of masculinity by working in the female culture of the beauty parlor. The operator's ability to understand the body and read into people's lives is limited to women since Gina and her operators misread James and are duped by Jorge's act as a sophisticated, foreign hairdresser. While undermining the idea of an omniscient hairdresser, it reinforces the idea of the beauty shop's specific relationship and importance to women, who share a specific closeness not applicable to cross-gendered associations, hence the misreading of the males associated with the business.

Gina's hiring of James parallels her earlier hiring of Lynn because neither fits the mold of the beauty shop majority, but both are skilled hairdressers, and both eventually meld into the group. Unlike Jorge, though, James succeeds in the beauty shop, which creates a complication in the argument for the beauty shop as an exclusively female space. Because Jorge's sexuality is not confirmed, that could be the main difference in the two men and the reason for Jorge's downfall: metro sexual tendencies may be acceptable, but not homosexual ones, at least in a mainstream film. Competence in the beauty shop is another prerequisite for success that Jorge lacks, both in hairstyling, managing employees, and maintaining customers – necessities he cannot overcome by trying to uphold a certain image. By the end of the film, viewers are lead to believe Jorge's career is quickly deteriorating, whereas James, an ex-convict previously employed as a truck driver for "Big Mike's Hauling and Moving" Company, has improved his situation through an improved career path and newfound love interest at the beauty shop, even though he does seem to sacrifice a certain sweaty, truck-driving manliness in the process.

Beauty Shop approaches gender in the traditionally female space differently than both "Petrified Man" and *Steel Magnolias* by simply allowing men into the script. In the earlier works men are incompetent, as financial supporters and sexual partners, but also unwilling to enter the female space of the beauty parlor. *Beauty Shop* unsettles these gender stereotypes associated with the beauty parlor by presenting two men actively participating in the traditionally female-controlled space. In the beginning, both Jorge and James are characterized as and assumed to be gay, offering one explanation of male acceptance into the female beauty parlor: sexually non-threatening men are allowed.

However, Jorge's ambiguous sexuality leaves him unsuccessful as a salon owner and stylist, whereas James remains successful after confirming his heterosexuality in dating Lynn. *Beauty Shop* thereby further complicates the idea of gender and sexuality, leaving it much less clear-cut than the earlier works. In the end, skill, perhaps in some conjunction with heterosexuality, becomes the ultimate deciding factor of success in the beauty parlor, in-keeping with Gina's focus on a new business model based on economics rather than either race (in the case of Lynn and Terri) or gender (in the case of James).

Despite the anomaly of James, Gina's beauty shop emphasizes the enterprise as a vehicle to economic independence and power for the women who work there, in opposition to Jorge's domineering and hierarchical enforcement of his strict rules. For example, when Gina first talks to her new operators, she informs them that "in order to work as a team, we got to look like a team" and that everyone will be wearing "new smocks, one size fits all," which the operators wear, despite complaints of stifling individuality, because of their representation of equal team membership. Jorge's harsh reminders of the social hierarchy within his male-owned shop are his attempt to enforce his power, whereas Gina sees her space as one of female compatibility. After opening for business, Gina reminds Ms. Josephine to wear her smock, to enforce the idea of equality and accessibility; however, when Ms. Josephine reveals her updated smock, she has added "a little motherland flavor" with kente cloth trim. Unlike Jorge, who snubbed Gina's personal photograph in her booth and garnered her competitive revolt, Gina allows Ms. Josephine's smock customization in order to maintain the respect and loyalty of her stylists – a smart business move recognized by a female owner, not a male. The respect and loyalty Gina garners represent an important aspect of the dominance available

to female beauty shop owners. At the end of the film, Gina attributes the success of her shop and the demise of Jorge's to their gender differences. After realizing Jorge has been bribing the State Inspector to fine her business for unsound reasons and vandalized her shop in his efforts to undermine her competitive business, she tells him, "I'm still standing and my shop is open and doing very good business and you will never ever intimidate me because I'm a phenomenal woman – kinda like what you try to be, but don't really pull off," informing Jorge and other critics that because she is a woman and he is not, her beauty shop has thrived, providing her economic success, specifically triumphing over male competition.

The beauty shop also provides a haven within which women are independent of men and safe from their aggressive, often demeaning, behavior and language. Providing another similarity to the women in "Petrified Man" who eject young Billy Boy from their beauty shop, Gina does not allow young teenager Willie, son of the neighboring pawnshop owner, to remain in her shop when he begins to threaten the female dominion. Gina strictly enforces gender boundary lines when she throws him out of her shop warning him, "don't bring your little behind back here til you learn how to speak to a lady," referring to the offensive language he used in talking about women's bodies in the shop, offering Gina "some five-dollar chocolates to go with those healthy milk-sacks." In the beauty shop, women may advise and inform one another on the same subjects prohibited to men's comments within their controlled boundaries. For example, upon Terri's arrival at the shop in a final scene, the other women exclaim, "look what the collard greens did to [enlarge] her booty." The women embrace commentary about the female body, but only from other females. Earlier in the film, Gina banished from the

shop a group of men gawking at a customer's large behind, informing them, "this ain't Magic City," an Atlanta strip club. The admonishment to the men authenticates the specifically Atlanta location, while confirming the beauty shop as a female-centered space, but for females' satisfaction, not men's, as is the case at the strip club – a business in stark opposition to the female-empowering beauty shop. Scott considers these scenes the director's attempt "to balance the feminism of the script with a bit of discreet ogling," but because they result in male expulsion from the shop, they are actually supporting the feminism of the beauty shop.

Gina further exemplifies the power stemming from owning a beauty shop when contrasted with her sister-in-law Darnelle, who has several different boyfriends, still lives with her mother, does not have a steady source of income, and spends a night in jail for carousing with one boyfriend on his stolen motorcycle. She offers to repay Gina the bail money with a wad of cash given to her by another of her boyfriends, claiming at Gina's suspicions on the origin of the money, "If a dude want to pay my bills, I'm gonna let him pay my bills." Gina, who has been struggling to pay her bills, but maintains her own economic independence because of the beauty shop, reprimands, "you sound real stupid right now; you just lazy, you just lazy and you're wasting your life," and refuses to take Darnelle's unearned money. Instead of depending on a man to pay the bills, Gina makes Darnelle work in her beauty shop in order to pay her debt, trying to teach Darnelle the value of hard work and self-reliance – tools for long-term economic success and independence, unlike Darnelle's quick-fix, degrading methods of relying on different men. The beauty shop specifically offers independence from men as well as higher stature among women and in the community at large. It is a source of pride and respect

for women, as noted in the final scene when Darnelle shows Gina her new smock embroidered with "Atlanta Beauty School" to prove that she has taken charge of her life by enrolling in beauty school – an understood mark of success noted by Gina's elated speechlessness. Darnelle's character's transformation centers on the beauty shop, the focal point and instigator of the different themes of the film.

Darnelle appears to have realized what Gina demonstrated throughout the film through her connection to the beauty parlor. Like Leota and Truvy, Gina gained economic success in the beauty parlor, but created an even more progressive business by incorporating race and gender differences into the economic model. She also gained true independence from men by defeating business competitor Jorge and only engaging in a romantic relationship with a man when it does not interfere with her business commitment – and choosing a solidly employed man, unlike Leota and Truvy.

Conclusion

In "Petrified Man," *Steel Magnolias*, and *Beauty Shop*, the beautician always attends to her duties in observing changing hairstyles and emotions in her clients in order to maintain the close relationship imperative to her own economic, social, and personal power. Simultaneously, the client experiences her own freedom within the beauty shop, freedom from gendered limitations and the freedom to discuss dissatisfaction with such limitations, in the cases of Mrs. Fletcher, Shelby, and Terri in particular. Despite the stigma of the beauty parlor as enforcer of rigid outward appearances dictated by societal expectations of women, the beauty parlor actually offers individual women opportunities to loosen restrictions: job opportunities, gender hierarchies, racial segregation, and class lines. Despite a consistent focus on women's hair, complexities within the beauty shop are not completely resolved, leaving questions about the acceptance of males in the beauty parlor, women's complete independence from men, and racial integration.

The continued adherence to detail and observation in the beauty shop across the seventy year time span of the three works appears in Leota's and Gina's suspicions of trouble when they notice their customers' hair falling out. A minor detail at first glance, hair loss forms a locus of the beauty shop. It suggests a biological health deficiency or reaction, an emotional reaction, and a spark for conversation between client and operator. Despite the medical reasons for the hair loss, the client looks to her hairdresser for

confirmation of the symptom, a diagnosis of the problem, and a solution to the problem. Hair loss is an outward sign of a deeper problem, usually involving a male counterpart: Mrs. Fletcher's unwanted pregnancy, M'Lynn's spousal fighting, and Terri's cheating husband. According to Leota, "lots of times that'll make your hair do awful funny, fall out and God knows what all. It just ain't our fault, is the way I look at it" (Welty 71). If the women do not have control of the cause of the hair loss, they come to the beauty shop and find solutions to take control of the situation, through therapeutic, beneficial gossip with their hairdresser and sometimes other women in the shop. Through these interactions within the all-female space, the operator demonstrates her prowess in recognizing maladies in the personal lives of her clients through her knowledge of hair – ultimately resulting in economic success for the operator and independence from men for both women. Under pressure, Mrs. Fletcher makes her own decision of whether or not to have her baby, M'Lynn takes away Drum's gun and advances in her career, and Terri leaves her husband. Presumably, the women's hair loss abates with their assertion of independence from men, and their loyalty to the beauty shop increases, as it serves as the setting of the recognition and solution to their outside problems.

The individualized service and attention in the beauty shop's hair care service renders the clients vulnerable to a personal connection with the operator, and in all three works the relationships between women in the beauty shop, particularly between client and operator, minimize class discrepancies based on wealth. While maintaining those personal relationships that diminish class lines, which persistently categorize the beautician as working class, the isolationism of the beauty parlor as a homosocial space

begins to open to the possibility of including different races and genders in the most recent work, showing a progression from the Depression-era beauty shop.

In "Petrified Man" and *Steel Magnolias*, men neither desire to join, nor are invited into, the beauty shop, apparently satisfied with their own male-centered barbershops, which would provide an interesting comparison to the beauty shop. However, by the early twenty-first century, *Beauty Shop* suggests that men are making limited appearances in the female-oriented business, but with a catch. The women of *Beauty Shop* assume both Jorge and James, the primary male characters, are gay because they work in the beauty shop. Association on an equal level with women, participation in the same job, and payment from women in return for a personal service blur boundary lines between gender differences, resulting in emasculation of men in the beauty shop. Loss of masculinity equates to loss of heterosexuality in these works, leaving men the option of either staying away from the beauty shop to maintain traditional maleness or risk losing gendered identity markers. Even in the thirties, young Billy Boy has a propensity for female activities (wearing millinery and associating with women) because of his affiliation with the beauty shop. The women use a hint of a gay boy in the thirties, disregard for alternatives to white, heterosexual relationships in the conservative backlash of the eighties, and the more overt suggestion of male homosexuality in the twenty-first century as defense mechanisms to retain control of the beauty parlor.

The lingering inconsistency appears when James remains a hairdresser in Gina's shop even after revealing his heterosexuality. Jorge, whose sexuality is not confirmed, loses business and his long hair in a comically violent scene in which James and an accomplice hold him down, cutting Jorge's hair with a large pair of scissors (a symbolic

castration for a hairdresser). Perhaps James has aligned himself with Gina and a female-owned beauty shop, or perhaps James is acting as a lower-class operator against an owner in compliance with the hierarchy inversions in the beauty shop. Maybe James is trying to find a place within the female business for heterosexual men, but Jorge represents a conformist to the feminine ideal expected in the shop, thereby slowing down opportunities for other men, unwilling to leave behind heterosexuality, to find success in the beauty shop. More simply, Jorge is a corrupt competitor in the business and must be eliminated. The women in Gina's beauty shop accept James and ostracize Jorge, but the reasoning is left unclear and the future of men and sexual orientation within the beauty shop is uncertain without further research of men's position within the business.

The exclusion of males from the beauty shop, with the exception of James, suggests women use the space to work toward an economic and social independence from men. The women in "Petrified Man" succeed to an extent through independent decision-making, working outside the home, and capturing a rapist; however, the women still suffer through marriages supporting unemployed husbands or husbands unaware of important pregnancy decisions. The patriarchal dominance of the 1930s appears too strong for the women to completely overcome, at best grotesquely benefitting from other women raped by Mr. Petrie – a grave violation of womanhood and freedom from men. By the 1980s, only anomalous Annelle succeeds in reaching a feminist platform of spousal equality, suggesting only the character who has experienced an extreme relationship, like Annelle's with her convicted drug-addict first husband, can understand the full import of female empowerment in a successful relationship. As demonstrated by Truvy's consoling conversation with Shelby about Jackson's lack of support, the other

women in *Steel Magnolias* stop short of finding true marital equality or success. Widow Clairee, though, provides another option for women seeking true independence from men – no husband and owner of and announcer on a radio station. Gina follows Clairee by moving from Chicago to Atlanta with her young daughter after her husband dies, moving in with her mother-in-law, and finding a hairstyling job. Gina is the only shop owner or operator who embraces completely the possibility of female dominance offered by the beauty shop. She leaves her job under a domineering white, male boss to open a competing business, trumps the white man in business, and finds a male love interest on her own terms.

Beauty Shop also differs dramatically from the earlier works in its integration of black and white hairstylists and clients in one shop. The shift offers a new South in which the beauty shop remains heavily segregated, but acknowledges racial difference and the difficulties, but possibility, of overcoming the barrier. Women of different races and class backgrounds threaten the homogeneity of the shop, but the congeniality among the different characters at the end of the movie demonstrates the possibility of a new, diverse beauty shop culture. The remnants of a white-based beauty standard remain in the absence of any prominent black characters wearing natural hairstyles, providing more questions than can be sufficiently answered here about the beauty shop's role in promoting certain hairstyles as more socially acceptable than others.

Race-based hairstyles present one form of beauty oppression, while gendered definitions create another. Women commonly go to the beauty parlor in order to maintain long, dyed, or processed hair, services implemented by other women for monetary gain. The emphasis on hair as a marker of beauty, class, social status, race, or

gender and its monetary value involves yet more research, but once in the beauty parlor the focus often strays as the women get caught up in stories and gossip and lose track of the hair treatment. In the middle of explaining the gruesome story of the petrified rapist, the narrator of "Petrified Man" jumps back out of the interior narrative to the beauty parlor setting reminding the reader, "[a]t some time Leota had washed [Mrs. Fletcher's] hair and now she yanked her up by the locks and sat her up," and later forgot completely about tending to Mrs. Fletcher's hair as "[s]he was only sitting there, wrapped in a turban, but she did not mind" (Welty 81 – 82). The gossip among the women remains a building block of the beauty parlor, revealing more about the women than a desire for a cut and curl.

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