STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND: VERIFYING THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC-GROTESQUE IN THE SHORT FICTION OF WILLIAM FAULKNER, CARSON McCULLERS, FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND EUDORA WELTY

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Abstract

For many critics, it is an undisputed fact that William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty are the major writers of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque canon. Remarkably, however, few have paused to consider the validity of such a claim. What exactly *is* the Southern Gothic-Grotesque? What are the elements that constitute the genre? Why have Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty been identified as its major writers?

A synthesis of the theories of authorities on the Gothic-Grotesque produces criteria which state that works identified as Southern Gothic-Grotesque must display four characteristics: disharmony, as it appears in the form of clashes, conflicts, contrasts and incongruities; prominent physical details; deformed or aberrant characters and a distressed writer who expresses his or her anguish through the aforementioned disharmonies, physical details and abnormal characters. Research on the Gothic-Grotesque also brings to light the idea that the Grotesque assumes certain standards or norms and alienates those who do not conform. Feminists argue that these standards are informed by patriarchal ideals and instituted for the sole purpose of repressing women.

The stories of Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor consistently demonstrate all four of the characteristics outlined in the synthesised criteria. Most perceptibly, these writers were labelled "grotesque" and marginalised because they did not coincide with the standards of their society. McCullers and O'Connor were at variance with the conventions of Southern femininity and Faulkner, too, found himself unable to act the part of the Southern gentleman. These writers expressed their pain by exacerbating, through their freak characters, the very grotesqueness that caused them to be marginalised in the first place. Welty's story, although it

fails to meet some of the criteria of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque, displays expression of another sort. She draws on the elements of the Gothic-Grotesque to subvert the social order that denies the subjectivity and autonomy of its individuals.

Therefore, by demonstrating, through their stories, that the Southern Gothic-Grotesque is an agent of expression for individuals who find themselves outsiders in the closed and exclusive world of the South, Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty justify the intuitive labels of principal Southern Gothic-Grotesque writers.

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Introduction

> And she bare *him* a son, and
> he called his name Gershom: for
> he said, I have been a
> stranger in a strange land. [1]

It has come to be expected that whenever the names William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty are grouped together, one must almost certainly be talking about that genre in American literature called the Southern Gothic or Southern Grotesque. It is the habit of many critics to assert that Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty are the finest writers of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque genre. Ruth D. Weston includes in her book, *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty,* a passage that demonstrates clearly this propensity to label these four writers "Southern Gothic-Grotesque":

> The most famous exponent of the American "school" of Southern Gothic is Faulkner, mainly because of *Absalom, Absalom!,* with its Byronic villain and haunted house, and such macabre shorter works as "A Rose for Emily" and *As I Lay Dying.* O'Connor's fiction is best known for characters whose physical deformities symbolise spiritual deformities, as does Hulga's wooden leg in "Good Country People." The tradition is exemplified in McCullers by nightmarish, near-surreal spaces on the margins of life, like the Southern army post during peacetime in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and the bizarre living quarters of the grotesque characters in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (4-5).

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[1] The title of this thesis, "Strangers in a Strange Land", is a slight adaptation of the original phrase found in Exodus 2:22. Jake Blount of Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* claims that he, too, is a "stranger in a strange land" (19). The phrase is also the title of Robert Heinlein's best-selling science fiction novel.

Although Weston argues for the exclusion of Welty in the Southern Gothic school, her views on Faulkner, O'Connor and McCullers are representative of the countless writers and critics who have plastered the labels "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque" on these writers with almost unthinking haste.

As a case in point, the *Norton Anthology of the Literature of the American South* speaks of an "American tradition of darkness, of sin and guilt..." of which Faulkner is a descendent (Andrews 436). The series *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, in its ninth volume called *American Literature*, identifies Faulkner as the grandfather of the Southern Gothic mode, claiming that neo-Gothic novelists have lost the rage and urgency that were "original and organic" to Faulkner (Ford 477). The *Pelican Guide* also adds, more to the point, that "Faulkner was seen as a dispenser of Southern Gothic, chronicler of a primitive and frightening South" (Ford 465).

McCullers, in turn, has invariably been compared to predecessors of the Gothic. In his comprehensive book, *Fiction of the Forties*, Chester E. Eisinger claims that "The American [gothic] tradition which [Poe, Hawthorne and Melville] initiate and carry forward survives in the forties in the work of writers like Paul Bowles and Truman Capote and Carson McCullers" (16). The St. James Press' *Reference Guide to American Literature* includes in a summary of McCullers' work the rationale that "[b]ecause she is southern, some have assumed that the bizarre situations and grotesque characters in...*The Ballad of the Sad Café* categorise McCullers as a writer of sensational and comic southern gothic" ("McCullers" 578). In her article "Beyond Gothic and Grotesque: A Feminist View of Three Female Characters of Carson McCullers", Ann Carlton remarks that when writing about McCullers, the "consistent labels are *gothic* and *grotesque*" (54). Finally, the *Critical Survey of Drama* states

that McCullers' "preoccupation with the bizarre earned for her a major place in the literary tradition known as the "Southern Gothic", a phrase used to describe the writers...who use Gothic techniques and sensibilities in describing the South of the twentieth century" ("McCullers" 1190).

O'Connor was not exempt from the pigeonholing endured by Faulkner and McCullers. *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* observes the shocking violence and God-haunted characters of O'Connor's short stories as plain evidence of her chilling version of "Southern Gothic" (Ford 474). *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* unhesitatingly labels O'Connor's novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, as Gothic and her short stories, grotesque ("O'Connor" 483). *The Norton Anthology of the Literature of the American South* considers O'Connor's position as a "writer of the southern grotesque" unchallenged and indisputable (Andrews 818).

Similarly, Carol Ann Johnston points to several critics who refuse to view Welty's work as anything but "symptomatic of southern provinciality and of a terminal attachment to the gothic" (8). Louise Bogan identifies a "definite Gothic quality" (Johnston 8) in Welty's short stories and even went so far as to title her review of a collection of Welty's stories, "The Gothic South" (Donaldson 567). A reviewer for *Time* found that *A Curtain of Green* displayed an obvious penchant for "melodrama...the demented, the deformed, the queer, the highly spiced" (Johnston 8). For these critics, it is inevitable that writers from the South, Welty clearly being no exception, *should* produce gothic or grotesque stories.

In spite of all these claims and assertions that lock Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty into the school of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque, there is a palpable deficiency of scholarly investigation to determine what it is that constitutes the genre itself. Few critics, with the

exception of Susan V. Donaldson, have even acknowledged the importance of defining the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. Donaldson's article, "Making a Spectacle: Welty, Faulkner, and Southern Gothic", challenges the inclination to take for granted the meanings of the term and the implications of classifying a writer in the genre. *Dirt and Desire,* Patricia Yaeger's upcoming book on Southern women writers, displays careful analysis and re-examination of the Grotesque in all its forms (Donaldson 568). But Yaeger is only one of the few writers who have recognised the need for such a study. Most critics and reviewers, as Donaldson claims, find the "catch-all category of Southern Gothic" an easy and effortless term to describe the physically and psychologically aberrant characters, uncanny events and violent acts that characterise the stories of writers hailing from the American South (567). It is precisely because of this easy "catch-all" nature that the stories of Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty have been pushed into the genre of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. Critics are far more interested in designating specific writers to specific genres than they are in defining the characteristics of a particular genre. As a result, concerns about the elements which comprise the Southern Gothic-Grotesque and the extent to which the works of Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty display those elements have, for the most part, been ignored.

Central to the process of validating the claims that Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty belong in the Southern Gothic-Grotesque genre is an independent study of the elements of the genre itself. Naturally, the study should be one informed by sources that *do not already* regard the works of Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty as Southern Gothic-Grotesque. This study was achieved by synthesising the findings of writers on the Grotesque and the Gothic (including sub-genres of the Gothic such

as "Southern" and "female"). From this synthesis emerged a set of criteria of the elements and features that ought to be a part of any work of fiction categorised as Southern Gothic-Grotesque. These criteria, which are comprehensive without being fastidious and inclusive without being too general, maintain that works of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque should display four elements: disharmony – in the form of conflicts, clashes, contrasts and incongruities; an emphasis on the tangible; physically or psychologically deviant characters and a tormented author who, in turn, communicates his or her pain through disharmony, physical details and aberrant characters in the story.[2]

Research into the Gothic-Grotesque reveals also that definitions of the Grotesque generate significant feminist implications. The Grotesque always assumes a norm; anything that departs from this norm is labelled "grotesque". Feminists contend that these norms are erected by a patriarchal system whose aim it is to suppress women. This aim is expressed clearly in Mikhail Bakhtin's claim that the Grotesque is encapsulated in the image of an old, pregnant hag (25). The norms against which an old, pregnant hag rebels are youth, thinness and beauty. Such standards, to which the culture of the postbellum South adds passivity and chastity, are unattainable ideals which function to deny women their subjectivity. Threatening social alienation and the label of "grotesque" for anyone who departs from the norm, patriarchy objectifies women by ensuring that they strive for youth, thinness and beauty – qualities that debase females but gratify the male gaze. Thus, women lose their autonomy and are reduced to pawns in the game of patriarchal control.

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[2] The system of developing criteria against which stories are measured and then either accepted or discarded suggests the detached objectivity of scientific practice. This risk is fully acknowledged and, as will become clear later, is not as much of a risk as anticipated. The method may be scientific but the tradition of literary analysis prevails.

The "Southern" aspect of the Gothic-Grotesque finds its roots in historical events. Following the Civil War, the culture of the South instituted strict codes on feminine appearance and behaviour. Women who did not correspond with the South's idea of what a woman should look like and how she should behave were outcast and alienated. As women living in the postbellum South, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty were expected to abide by certain rules and to conduct and attire themselves appropriately. Frustration was rife for McCullers and O'Connor, who preferred learning and creating to mending and cooking, wearing masculine clothes instead of high-heels and dresses. This frustration found expression in the Grotesque freak characters of their stories. McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and O'Connor's "Good Country People" exhibit all the elements of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque.

Faulkner, although he was a male writing in this culture which ensnared women, was not exempt from certain conventions on proper manners and behaviour for Southern gentlemen. Similarly, his frustrations with these expectations are displayed in "A Rose for Emily" which displays his sympathies for the enslaved Southern woman and, like *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and "Good Country People", opens a window onto the confining stereotypes of Southern culture.

By contrast, Welty managed to remain undisturbed by the problems that plagued McCullers, O'Connor and Faulkner. "Petrified Man" reveals some disharmonious elements and certain evocative nuances which provide an idea of setting and character. But by and large, it fails to display many marks of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. Welty does not appear to be frustrated or distressed and her story is not populated with the freak characters essential to the literature of the Gothic-Grotesque. Moreover, where McCullers, O'Connor and Faulkner utilise Gothic-Grotesque stories

to relieve their personal angst, Welty transcends her pain, using aspects of the Gothic-Grotesque to undermine the patriarchal influence of her society.

Despite the apparent lack of scholarly research into the components of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque, the claims that the works of Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor belong to the school of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque are, essentially, substantial. Independent study of the Gothic-Grotesque shows that the elements of the genre are, indeed, the same elements displayed in the stories which best represent the individual styles of these writers. Only certain elements in Welty's story, however, follow in the tradition of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. Unlike "A Rose for Emily", *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and "Good Country People", "Petrified Man" cannot, technically, be considered a true Southern Gothic-Grotesque story. Although close inspection reveals certain Gothic-Grotesque elements in her story, Welty chooses to subordinate these markings so that she might express her real concerns with the plight of Southern women and to subvert from within, as it were, the patriarchal outlook of postbellum society.

Because Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty were all raised in a culture renowned for its idealistic expectations and ensnaring demands of individuals, it is a natural and not altogether illogical conclusion that the South creates Gothic-Grotesque literature. But to say simply that any Southern writer whose work demonstrates aberrance or disharmony belongs to the Southern Gothic-Grotesque tradition is surely to make an impetuous claim. It is not necessarily because one *is* Southern that one produces Gothic-Grotesque literature. It is because of the imprisoning social order cultivated by the South that particular free-spirited individuals feel alienated and become outcasts. Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty are often found categorised together as the major writers of the

Southern Gothic-Grotesque tradition by virtue of their shared status as exiles of Southern society and their choice to convey this experience through the literature of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque.

Chapter One

Defining the Southern Gothic-Grotesque

> Not that the story need be long,
> but it will take a long while
> to make it short.[3]

Two things will necessarily arise out of the attempt to define the Southern Gothic-Grotesque [4] genre. The first has to do with the two terms "Gothic" and "Grotesque". Are they interchangeable? Are they two different words that simply mean the same thing? The second matter concerns the word "Southern" which always precedes the words "Gothic" or "Grotesque" in claims made about Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty. Is the genre predominantly Southern? Why isn't there a Northern Gothic or even an Eastern Grotesque? Answers to these questions will become clear only through the process of forging a definition of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque.

In defining the Southern Gothic-Grotesque, it is first crucial to understand what it means to label something "Gothic". The Gothic is a term which, while not as old,[5] is more pervasive in literature than the term "Grotesque". Sub-genres of the Gothic such as the Southern Gothic and the Female Gothic are such an indication of this pervasiveness. The word "Gothic" first entered literature when Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* was published in 1764. Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* are other

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[3] Henry David Thoreau. "Letter to Mr. B.". *Essays and Other Writings* 239-243.

[4] Whether or not the words "Gothic" and "Grotesque " are spelled with a capital 'G' is largely a matter of personal preference. Because a significant part of this thesis focuses on defining both these words as terms and genres, I think it appropriate that they be capitalised. The term Grotesque is denoted in the text by a capital 'G'. Where it is spelled with a lower-case 'g', the word is used as an adjective.

[5] Wolfgang Kayser claims that the term "Grotesque" was first applied to literature by the 16th century French essayist Michel de Montaigne who described his own essays as "grotesque and monstrous" (24). According to M.H. Abrams, the word "Gothic" became a literary term only as late as the 18th century when Horace Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (78).

stories that followed in this tradition and came to be known as Gothic novels. M.H. Abrams' summary of the 18th century Gothic novel is one of the most comprehensive provided:

> Authors of such novels set their stories in the medieval period, often in a gloomy castle furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels, focused on the sufferings imposed on an innocent heroine by a cruel and lustful villain, and made bountiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences. The principal aim of such novels was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors (78).

The term Gothic is also used to describe works of the 19th century such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, novels that dispensed with castles, dungeons and villains, relying instead on melancholy atmospheres, abnormal events and psychological deviants to terrify. In 18th and 19th century Gothic novels, horror was nearly always shrouded, never materialising into solid reality but taking, instead, the form of a spectre or a phantom.[6] Citing Edmund Burke's formula for this kind of conventional Gothic work, Claire Kahane contends that terror demands a certain ambiguity and mystery which allows the reader's imagination to run riot (55). Fear nearly always arises from that which is unknown and unfamiliar.

Terror in the 20th century Gothic novel, on the other hand, is given a significantly more physical form; it is "unveiled and even more terrifying for being seen" (Kahane 55). Karen Rhodes suggests that the field of visual arts, particularly the cubist work of Pablo Picasso, participated in this shift from the unseen to the seen. Picasso's painting, *Portrait of Dora Maar* (see Appendix I) depicts a figure whose eyes are both visible to the observer

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[6]M.H. Abrams notes, however, that "sensational and supernatural occurrences" (78) in a Gothic novel were very often backed by rational explanations. Similarly, Emma Mai Ewing observes that the Gothic antagonist is a "rakishly handsome man who plays the villain until almost the last page – and who then comes to [the heroine's] rescue" (Holland and Sherman 279).

although she remains in profile. The unseen eye becomes seen; that which was hidden is now disclosed, the unknown made known. So what kind of terror is it that has now become seen and known in 20th century Gothic? For Ellen Moers, self-disgust and self-hatred is terror in its visual form (107). The freak character that dominates 20th century Gothic stories is a physical manifestation of this self-hatred. These freaks, the contemporary counterpart to 18th and 19th century monsters, are grotesque, deformed human beings often afflicted with a physical or mental abnormality. Eisinger's description of the 19th century Gothic writer as an artist "whose deepest spiritual needs, whose intimacy with the terrors of darkness and death, demanded and found symbolic expression" (16) remains true for the 20th century Gothic writer and, as shall be presently examined, particularly true for the *female* Gothic writer. Spiritual distress and other kinds of inner torment find release in the form of the Gothic novel. The image of the freak is the contemporary Gothic expression of pain and angst wherein physical aberrations reflect the state of mental anguish.[7]

Nowhere is this concept that the angst-ridden writer finds release in Gothic literature more apparent than in the American South. Over the years, it became evident that the region produced unusually large amounts of Gothic fiction, prompting critics to label any work with even slightly peculiar characters that emerged from the South, "Gothic" or "Grotesque". The South's defeat in the American Civil War is often pinpointed as the foundation on which was built a culture full of pain and bitterness. After the war, Southerners suffered from an economic depression; they felt excluded from the American dream of success. Etched forever in their

[7] Carson McCullers must certainly have been referring to such a concept when she wrote, "Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about – people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love – their spiritual isolation" (*The Mortgaged Heart* 280).

consciousness was the knowledge that the Old South, the "most perfect of all civilisations" (Sullivan 258), had been destroyed and replaced by a new world. Consequently, the region, more so than any other part of America, creates literature steeped heavily in Gothic primacies.

Although William Faulkner and Truman Capote [8] are often regarded as the patriarchs of Southern Gothic, it must be conceded that the majority of writers in this genre are female. Culturally stereotyped images of the "southern belle" and "Georgia peach" account partly for why females outnumber males among the Gothic writers of the South. They not only share with their fellow Southerners the pain of defeat in the Civil War but, as women, they are bound by the South's strict codes of femininity. Juliann E. Fleenor claims that whenever women writers have wished to communicate pain, rage or terror, it is the Gothic literary form they choose to convey these emotions.[9] Regarded from the outset as a "feminine form" (8), the Gothic is also favoured by female writers concerned with patriarchal society's repression of women.[10]

Terror in the female Gothic is also of a distinguishably physical nature. As Picasso's painting illustrates, the unseen eye becomes seen; similarly, as Kahane suggests, the ghosts and spectres of 18th century Gothic emerge in the 20th century female Gothic as an actual, physical, female figure (55). As will be discussed later, the idea that a woman is the descendant of the traditional Gothic monster or villainous force reveals considerable feminist ramifications.

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[8] The harrowing events in Faulkner's life and his sympathies with the plight of the repressed Southern woman, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Two, are the reasons why he, and not Capote, has been chosen to stand alongside three women in a study of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque.

[9] Ellen Moers identifies this kind of writing as the "female Gothic" (90). Cultural myths of femininity reveal how women and the Gothic (in its associations with death and darkness) have always been closely linked. Jurij Lotman argues that graves and women both have similar features of darkness, warmth and dampness. Entry into the grave and the woman – through the acts of death and conception, respectively – are viewed also as "mutually identical" (Bronfen 65).

[10] This feminist theme is more pervasive in Gothic literature of the 20th century, although Syndy McMillen Conger points to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as a principal example of the woman writer protesting against society's definitions of femininity (92).

Building on the idea that 20th century Gothic gives "*visual* form to the fear of self" (Moers 107), Kahane purports that there is an inherent female "problem". This problem is signified by the mother figure – that physical embodiment of terror. The male can escape this problem by virtue of his physical difference from the mother. But it is precisely because of her physical *similarity* to the mother that the female is trapped by this "maternal blackness" (47) and cannot comprehend her separateness from the mother. She is trapped by her own female-ness. Where this problem was traditionally symbolised in pre 20th century Gothic by entrapment in a haunted house or castle, in the modern female Gothic, it is the female body that imprisons the heroine (Kahane 55). As the response of the trapped heroine in 18th and 19th century Gothic was to flee the castle, so the contemporary Gothic heroine also seeks a means of escape from the female body that traps her. To do this, she must place herself outside the boundaries of society's codes for femininity and, thus, become a freak. That inherent female "problem" is now located at the site of the female body which is, as Kahane says, "perceived as antagonistic to the sense of self and is therefore freakish" (55). In the case of the female Gothic, when the unseen is made visible, what is seen is the image of bodies which are distorted, monstrous and freakish. Hence, the Gothic turns into the Grotesque.

> There can be no precise point at which one says, "the grotesque stops here; commence using some other term", because the grotesque is not a genre to which a work either does or does not belong. (McElroy 2)

As McElroy's comment recognises, the chief difficulty in defining the Grotesque lies in the fact that the boundaries of its categories, meanings and uses are ambiguous and indistinct. Constantly defying definition, the

word "grotesque" may designate a genre of art or literature or it may simply be used to describe anything peculiar, inappropriate or out of the ordinary.

The word "grotesque" finds its origins in the Italian *la grottesca, grottesco* and *grotta*, meaning "cave". It was first used in the late 15th century to describe a style of ornate decoration characterised by a gaudy interweaving of human, animal and vegetable forms. As an aesthetic term, the Grotesque is predominantly visual and physical. This is similarly evoked in literature through detailed narration and description of characters, scenes and events.

The cardinal feature of the Grotesque is disharmony; this might refer to an amusing combination of opposites or a violent clash of entirely conflicting elements. The fusion of terror and comedy is one such example of this clash in the Grotesque. Although an unlikely mixture, the elements of fright and amusement complement one another and have more in common than is at first apparent. Philip Thomson maintains that it is the uncanny combination of the terrifying and the comic which gives the Grotesque special impact (21). McElroy's corresponding explanation is that the tragic-comic elicits responses of confusion and uncertainty causing typical reactions to terror – such as fear and disgust – to be subverted. In this way, the gruesome elements of the Grotesque are made all the more vivid and intense to the reader (20). In short, the comic element in the Grotesque increases readers' sensitivity to the horrifying which, on its own, would have a numbing effect. The Grotesque would lose some of its shock value in an imaginary world where anything is possible; it functions more powerfully when it exists in the real world (Thomson 23).

The Grotesque is that which is absurd and distorted. Realms previously separated are suddenly fused; the meaningful becomes meaningless, the logical, illogical and the normal, abnormal. In this same

sense, the Grotesque might be seen as a form of aggression. It relies on strange and peculiar occurrences or phenomena to shock, bewilder and terrify. It removes all that is familiar and secure, replacing it with the unfamiliar and bizarre. It is this characteristic revolt from the norm that marks the Grotesque as "the genuine anti-bourgeois style", claims Thomas Mann (O'Connor *Grotesque* 5). The Grotesque is a reaction against the bland and unimaginative conventions of the middle class.

Reactions to the Grotesque such as fear, repulsion, amusement and disgust betray a defence mechanism at work. Abnormality and deformity in the Grotesque educe responses which fluctuate between laughter, amusement and delight to horror, disgust and repulsion (Thomson 24). Certain laughter, however, has nothing to do with amusement. It is laughter as an expression of horror, a defence mechanism the mind activates when it is unable to deal with emotional shock or torment.

The painter Hell Bruegel, "master of the grotesque" (Kayser 32), found his greatest influence in the work of Hieronymous Bosch. Bruegel embraced Bosch's viewpoints and philosophies alongside his artistic style. Bosch's painting, *The Millenium* (sic) (see Appendix II), exhibits traces of misogyny in its interpretation of the creation of woman as the "birth of evil" (32).[11] In a similar vein, Bakhtin finds the Grotesque best embodied by the figures of senile pregnant hags:

> This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent...There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags...[T]he grotesque body is...not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits...[T]he emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose (25-26).

[11] The left panel of the painting depicts the creation of woman in The Earthly Paradise. This "birth of evil" is symbolised by a crescent on top of the fountain, the crescent being the "symbol of heresy" (Kayser 32).

For Bakhtin, the standard against which all else is measured lies in the ideal of the "finished, completed" classical body (25). His definition of the Grotesque thus emphasises the aspect of excess and that which disrupts the norm. Senile, pregnant hags represent a full departure from everything that is the accepted norm. Where the norm is youth, she exceeds that by being old and senile; where it is thinness, she violates that by being fat and pregnant; where beauty is the norm, she once again exceeds that boundary by being a hag, an ugly woman. Finally, she transgresses natural law by falling pregnant post-menopause. For Bakhtin, the female body in all its natural physiological processes is a perfect encapsulation of Grotesque excess. Like Bosch and Bruegel, Bakhtin's ideas on the Grotesque produce serious feminist implications.

Aside from the obvious difficulties presented here by the works of Bosch, Bruegel and Bakhtin, feminist scholars have a great many other concerns with claims on the Gothic-Grotesque. Chief among these concerns is the claim that woman becomes the antagonist in 20th century Gothic, which is to say that she is a descendant of the monster villain of 19th century Gothic, a claim made implicit in Kahane's article. The 20th century Gothic novel demonstrates a shift with significant repercussions in the portrayal of women. Where 18th and 19th century Gothic stories depicted the woman as the victim pursued, the contemporary Gothic transforms her into the villainous pursuer. She pursues a female figure that may well be herself. Woman is being hunted down by woman. In this lies Kahane's claim that the modern Gothic heroine is trapped by none other than her own female-ness. The heroine's situation represents universal concerns with female identity which Kahane explains:

> [T]he prevailing social situation of female rule over infancy promotes ambivalence toward all women. [M]other and infant are

> locked into a "symbiotic relation," an experience of oneness, characterised by a blurring of boundaries between infant and mother – a dual unity before the emergence of a separate self (48).

Although the heroine's problem has been recognised as the trap of female identity, it is still the mother – a *woman* – who is the source of this problem. The fact remains that the problem is an inherently female one. Attempting escape from female-ness always renders a woman "freakish" and "grotesque".

In assuming certain norms and limits, definitions of the Grotesque reveal considerable feminist ramifications. To exceed the established norms and limits is to be marked "grotesque". For example, where the norm is "normal" or "formed", that which is *ab*normal or *de*formed is Grotesque. In the context of Bakhtin's observations about senile, pregnant hags, it is clear that patriarchal society has established certain norms and limits such as thin-ness and youth. Women going through the process of pregnancy and aging exceed these norms and are, therefore, Grotesque.[12] Female anger and pain at being labelled "grotesque social misfits" are expressed through hysteria and madness.[13] Such expression is, itself, a form of excess that must be silenced.

Viewed point by point, the Southern Gothic-Grotesque might be seen to encompass many incompatible and contradictory elements. It is Gothic, which means that it is marked by terror and gloom, both of a suggestive and physical nature. Sub-genres of the Gothic – Southern and female –

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[12] Naomi Wolf documents the case of a woman who was discriminated against because of her age. Christine Craft was discharged from her job as an anchorwoman because, as her employer said, she was "too old, too unattractive, and not deferential to men" (35). The same rules did not apply to her male colleagues. Craft claims that, of television anchors over the age of forty, 97% are male and 3% are "fortyish women who don't look their age" (35). Evidently, the idea of an ageing woman in frontline television was too "grotesque" for the television network. The phrase "not *deferential* to men" (emphasis mine) suggests also that the industry is not only male-oriented, but also male-controlled.

[13] Further study on madness and hysteria as a result of patriarchal repression may be found in Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980.*

reveal the genre's popularity with writers who, for various reasons, have felt marginalised. The component "Grotesque" emphasises the physical nature of the genre and raises ideas about "clash" and "disharmony", elements present in discussions about the both the Southern Gothic and the Grotesque itself.

For the purposes of this paper, however, the Southern Gothic-Grotesque is best defined in terms of criteria against which the stories of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty might be measured and the claims that they are Southern Gothic-Grotesque writers justified.

The principal feature of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque is disharmony. This is an element present in all aspects of the concept – the South, the female Gothic[14] and the Grotesque. The South displays a clash between its own defeated state as a region and the undefeated position of America as a country. Females exhibit this disharmony in the difficulty they have reconciling knowledge of their self-worth with the fact that, as females, they are denigrated by society. Conflict in the Grotesque occurs between disparate elements, particularly terror and comedy because of the sheer incongruity and absurdity present in such an unthinkable fusion.

Because its Grotesque origins are in the field of visual arts, the Southern Gothic-Grotesque, even as a literary genre, retains, as its second vital feature, an emphasis on the physical and tangible. Literature classified as Southern Gothic-Grotesque invariably displays meticulously detailed descriptions of character, setting and atmosphere, evidence of a scrupulously observant eye that misses nothing.

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[14] Emphasis is laid on the sub-genre female Gothic here because of the significant fact that it is anguished women in particular who find release and expression in the Gothic literary mode.

The physical element of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque is further established by its third feature: presence of freak characters who reverse the social norm through either physical or behavioural differences.

Freak characters, however, are merely literary symbols for the final essential feature: the condition of spiritual agony. Freaks are physical manifestations of a writer's agony. Fleenor has validated the existence of the sub-genre, female Gothic by documenting the effectiveness of the Gothic literary mode for frustrated women writers wanting to express their rage. However, this claim that the Gothic is an avenue of release for the angst-ridden is applicable to any writer, male or female. Both the Gothic and the Grotesque exhibit characteristics fitting for a literature of despair and angst. By retaining certain historical traditions of terror and melancholy, the contemporary and more physical Gothic is a genre appropriate for writing about pain. As previously noted, Southerners, women in particular, are in specific distress, producing, therefore, an extraordinary amount of Gothic literature. Especially common in the writings of Southern women are female characters made freakish by their defiance of the social codes of appearance and behaviour. The following chapters investigate the works of four well-known Southern writers and bring to light the different ways in which the Gothic mode is, if at all, employed as a release for pain and frustration.

The intrinsic elements of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque then are disharmony – in the form of clashes, contrasts, conflicts, incongruities or the fusion of two disparate elements; a strong emphasis on the physical and tangible; the presence of a freakish and deformed character who, in many instances, is a monstrous and unconventional woman; and a writer whose personal grief and frustration finds release in the Gothic literary mode. These elements constitute the criteria by which the stories of William

Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty may be evaluated and claims that these writers are the premium writers of the genre validated.

Chapter Two

A Rose for "Miss" Emily?: William Faulkner's Tribute to the Southern Belle [15]

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword![16]

A solemn thing – it was – I said –
A woman – white – to be –
And wear – if God should count me fit –
Her blameless mystery – [17]

Given that the Southern Gothic-Grotesque genre can sometimes function as a literary form of release for angst-ridden writers, it is not surprising that many writers of the genre are Southern women. These individuals, in particular, are in specific distress because they suffer the indignity associated with both their gender and their regional origin. Consequently, one might speculate as to the inclusion of William Faulkner in a list of major Southern Gothic-Grotesque writers all the rest of whom are women. That Faulkner was one of the original writers of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque is significant; only Edgar Allen Poe and Mark Twain, themselves renowned masters of the Gothic-Grotesque, precede Faulkner in the tradition of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque.

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[15] Judith Fetterley claims that, by referring to his protagonist as "Emily" and not "*Miss* Emily" in the title of the story, Faulkner shows that the true injustice done to Miss Emily is the creation of her as a lady through the label "Miss". Faulkner liberates Emily by omitting the "Miss" from her name in his title.

[16] Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,* I, 7.

[17] Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.* 123. Around the time this poem was written, Dickinson began wearing her famous white dress, what was to become known as her "Uniform of Snow". Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that, for Dickinson, the colour was "the ultimate symbol of enigma, paradox, and irony" (*Madwoman* 614). Gilbert and Gubar also argue that white is an essentially female colour. It is representative of the Victorian feminine ideal of chastity, purity and piety which is, itself, manifested in the "virginal pallor" and "marble forehead" of the true Victorian woman (*Madwoman* 615). These same ideals were carried across the ocean to the New World and formed an integral part of the culture of the American South.

Critics often argue, however, that Faulkner was sympathetic to the predicament of the Southern woman. This predicament involved a kind of subordination that appeared in the cunningly subtle form of veneration. Judith Fetterley argues that acts of kindness and reverence towards women conceal the secret desire to insult and demean (38). Diane Roberts claims that Faulkner's portrayal of females challenged myths of the perfect and virtuous Southern belle and served to disable the view of women as models of virtue and piety (103). On the other hand, Leslie Fiedler considers Faulkner's stories to reflect a misogynistic attitude wherein the author displays a palpable unease with and contempt for the woman who transgresses the social boundaries of her gender. Fiedler claims that Faulkner's stories exhibit revulsion, disturbance, even a degree of queasiness over female "usurpation of male privileges" (304). Even so, Fiedler grudgingly acknowledges that, in the evening of his career, Faulkner made amends for these profanities against women by attempting to "redeem" his fallen women.[18] The character of Temple Drake demonstrates this transformation in Faulkner's female characters. In *Sanctuary*, Temple is perceived in a negative light; her name itself evokes that which so repulsed Faulkner: woman as the "sexual aggressor – more drake than duck" (Fiedler 300). In *Requiem for a Nun*, the sequel to *Sanctuary*, Temple is seen much more favourably, now redeemed and "aching with a higher lust for religious belief" (303). James Ferguson emphasises that, in spite of the odd vestige of misogyny and various other problems with female sexuality, Faulkner was always compassionate and understanding towards the wronged woman (73-74). Fetterley concurs with

[18] Leslie Fiedler's persistent use of the word "redeem" and "sacrifice" when referring to Faulkner's treatment of his female characters reveals certain chauvinist strains. Fiedler clearly views women as the fallen sinners for whom Faulkner is the Saviour, the Christ figure. Fiedler goes on to add that, in atoning his scarlet women, Faulkner resorts to "sentimentality and maudlin pity" (303).

this view, claiming that Faulkner's writing demonstrates sympathy for Southern women restricted by the conventions of their society (38).

Because Faulkner has so often been identified as one of the pioneers of the Southern Gothic mode, it is important that his work be analysed and evaluated to determine the validity of this claim. Fetterley's competent and convincing interpretation of "A Rose for Emily" translates the short story both as a challenge to the concept of the venerated Southern woman and as Faulkner's tribute to the Southern anti-belle. It is logical, then, that "A Rose for Emily" should emerge as the most appropriate story to determine the Southern Gothic-Grotesque in Faulkner's work.

Published in 1930, "A Rose for Emily" is the earliest of the short stories considered here. Appropriately, it demonstrates the highest degree of traditional Gothic features. Miss Emily's old, decaying house with "cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies" (489) is built under the influence of 18th century Gothic architecture. The interior of the house is dim and shadowy, smelling of disuse; heavy leather furniture is visibly dusty in the weak sunlight. Miss Emily's physical appearance also induces a feeling of dreariness. She is described as a small, bloated-looking woman with a pale, doughy face, dressed completely in black. These descriptions of setting and character evoke a sense of the 18th century Gothic – the traditional isolated and decaying castle with a gloomy and solitary inhabitant – and establish for the remainder of the story a persistent feeling of foreboding darkness and melancholy. These bleak feelings create an atmosphere that primes the reader for Miss Emily's disturbing act at the conclusion of the story (West 66).

Because of its origins in art, the Grotesque is, fundamentally, a physical mode. This physicality is conveyed in literature through detailed

descriptions of character and setting. As demonstrated by the depictions of Miss Emily and her house, "A Rose for Emily" displays this conscientious interest in tangible detail. Consider the following passage and the evident delight with which Faulkner has written it:

> They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse – a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlour. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father.
>
> They rose when she entered – a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand (490-91).

Although this passage renders faithfully the physical details important to the Grotesque tradition, the overall tone of the passage is characteristically Gothic. The shadow into which the stairway mounts calls to mind elements of the dark and unknown while the cracked, dusty leather furniture and the tarnished gilt easel suggest the decaying "decadence of fallen aristocrats" (Morris 317). Gothic architecture of the 18th century, while distinctively ornate and highly wrought, also evoked a strong sense of gloom and isolation; large and lavishly decorated castles were very often home to only one person. Miss Emily's living room with its heavy leather chairs now cracked and dusty and the gilt easel now dulled and discoloured induces a definite Gothic sense of excess wasting away. Miss Emily herself

is described as "bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water", looking as though she had drowned and her white decomposing body had risen to the water's surface. This description fuels the unmistakable feeling of death and decay already established by the scene in the dusty and neglected parlour and accentuated by the "close, dank" and tomblike smell of the dim hallway.

A certain relish is perceivable, also, in the way Faulkner unfolds Homer Barron's deathbed scene:

> A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valence curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured. Among them lay a collar and tie, as if they had just been removed, which, lifted, left upon the surface a pale crescent in the dust. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it the two mute shoes and the discarded socks.
>
> The man himself lay in the bed.
>
> For a long while, we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust (500-501).

Faulkner's compellingly physical depictions of Miss Emily, her house and the occupant of its upper chamber are faithful to the Gothic-Grotesque tradition and accomplished with the finest literary precision.

Ferguson observes that many of Faulkner's stories depend on a slow, dream-like accumulation of detail before the final horror is sprung full force onto the unsuspecting reader (133). In the passage above, Faulkner's narrative delays the peak of the scene by lingering on insignificant details; these small details serve as an "appetiser" before the climactic "main

course" is delivered. The reader is made to pause at Homer Barron's dressing table and to observe everything laid out upon it before being allowed to gaze finally, with a certain morbid pleasure, on the putrefying, dust-ridden corpse. This technique of momentarily suspending the action forestalls the scene's climax, thus accentuating its gruesome and truly shocking nature.

The 20th century Gothic story, claims Kahane, is considerably more physical than the traditional Gothic tale (55). Significantly, terror is given a physical form in the shape of a female figure. Faulkner's Miss Emily may be interpreted as such a monstrous figure. Donaldson argues that Faulkner's creation of Miss Emily is a response to the changing roles of women after the Civil War. The general feeling in society over these re-definitions of gender roles was one of great distress. Faulkner himself was alternately sympathetic and horrified by these changes (568). Appropriately, he created a female character who, in posing a threat to traditional ideas on gender roles and behaviour, was terrifying and dangerous.

To the town of Jefferson, Miss Emily represents "an ideal of *past* values" (West 69). She is much revered and respected as a testament to the glory of the days before the Civil War. Utterly horrifying, therefore, is the final discovery that, under the pretence of abiding by all the correct social laws, Miss Emily has been secretly harbouring a bizarre and "covert sexuality" (Roberts 158). When finally revealed as a façade, Miss Emily's distinguished reputation renders her abhorrent act all the more bewildering and appalling. It is not simply her inversion of the accepted social norm which makes Miss Emily terrifying; instead, it is her simulation of consenting to these conventions meanwhile indulging in the unthinkable

that horrifies, scandalises and, ultimately, devastates the community of Jefferson who have held her in the highest regard.

Miss Emily is also monstrous because, as a member of the "high and mighty Griersons" (492), she violates the unwritten conventions of her society by allowing the unsuitable Homer Barron – a Yankee day-labourer – to court her (Roberts 159). Miss Emily further disrupts the social norm by poisoning Homer after he refuses to marry her. Miss Emily's murder of Homer disputes the integrity of the Southern belle because, as Fetterley argues, it is a presumed fact that jilted women commit suicide and not murder (41). In daring to love a man outside her social class and to murder him, Miss Emily's character represents the New Belle who "challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power" (Donaldson 571).

In questioning the customary practices of society and rejecting patriarchal traditions, this New Belle was terrifying because she threatened to unsettle the foundations on which the postbellum South was built. By refusing to be venerated as a monument of bygone ideals, the New Belle put her society in an extremely unstable position. As Donaldson notes, "For...women to step off the pedestal...was to shake the very foundation of...Southern culture" (572). Fetterley claims that part of the terror Miss Emily evokes stems from the fact that she has usurped power from male attitudes towards her. Miss Emily's status as "Southern lady" secures her immunity to the consequences of her rash criminal act (Dowling 146). Miss Emily uses the assumptions that she is a "proper Southern lady" as a smokescreen for her final revenge on the system that has trapped her (39). Faulkner encapsulates through the character of Miss Emily and her startling subversion of the conventions imposed upon her, the rise of the new, unpredictable and terrifying Southern woman.

The fundamental feature of the Gothic-Grotesque – disharmony – appears in "A Rose for Emily" in the form of a clash between expectations and the reality of what is delivered. Fetterley describes the Grotesque as the result of "stereotypes imposed on reality" (43). Miss Emily is, therefore, considered Grotesque because the stereotype of the pious, submissive and moral antebellum woman is imposed on the reality of a woman with real, impious and amoral desires. Miss Emily's very appearance might also be regarded as Grotesque. The reality of her fat figure robed in black does not coincide with the town's memory of her as the conventionally beautiful Southern belle, "a slender figure in white" (493). Miss Emily's appearance corresponds with the appearance of the old hag which Bakhtin described as the perfect embodiment of the Grotesque. Miss Emily's Grotesqueness derives from disharmony. The community of Jefferson, with all the characteristic patriarchal trappings of a small Southern community, impose upon Miss Emily the idea that a true lady should always look beautiful and do nothing to disrupt tradition. Miss Emily, grown fat and bloated in her old age, prefers her black robes to her white dresses. Furthermore, as the townspeople later discover in the upper room of her house, she has been living her life in secret contempt of the laws and traditions of society. Miss Emily's appearance and behaviour are incompatible and conflict with her society's ideas of proper womanhood. She is thus Grotesque because of her failure, or refusal, to comply with the norms of society. The extensive feminist implications of such claims will be examined later.

Ray B. West identifies further disharmony in "A Rose for Emily" when he points to a clash between the past and the present wherein the "suspension of a natural time order" produces a distorted and illusory world (66). This suspension is represented through the complex way in which

time is handled in the story.[19] Part One is set after Miss Emily's death, in what readers presume to be the narrator's present time. Following this is a flashback thirty years ago to the episode concerning the "smell". The story's sequence is thrown into added confusion when, in the middle of this flashback, the narrator probes further into Miss Emily's past to describe her relationship with her father and his death. The ensuing two sections of "A Rose for Emily" continue in a logical order of time but the fifth and final part shifts the clock back to the story's beginning – Miss Emily's death and the visit to her house. Ferguson claims that this convoluted approach to time emphasises a point which is central to understanding the story – "the encroachment of the past on the present" (130). The characters of Miss Emily, her Negro servant, Tobe, Colonel Sartoris and the old Board of Aldermen who uphold Colonel Sartoris' edict on taxes represent the past. The present is signified by "the next generation with its more modern ideas" (490), the narrator (who represents the collective voice of Jefferson), the new Board of Aldermen and Miss Emily's beau, Homer Barron. Miss Emily's house, "lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps" (489), is a symbol of this contrast between the past and present. The irreconcilable clash so essential to the Gothic-Grotesque occurs with Miss Emily's reluctance to acknowledge the present and to continue to live, instead, in the past. Miss Emily's denial of her father's death and her insistence that Colonel Sartoris, himself already ten years dead, has remitted her taxes highlight her inability to accept change. It is Miss Emily's final act of rejecting the present and clinging to the past, however, which produces the ultimate Grotesque horror. When Homer Barron refuses her, Miss Emily seeks solace in the comfort of her static and unchanging world, symbolised by her isolated and forlorn-

[19] James Ferguson notes the difficulty critics have had attempting to decipher the *fabula* of the story's events through intricate chronologies and time-lines.

looking house. Miss Emily preserves Homer Barron in "the attitude of an embrace" (500) within the secret chambers of this strange and peculiarly surreal world. In furious denial of the present fact that her beau is "not a marrying man" (496), Miss Emily tries foolishly to sustain her past happiness through the only means available to her, tabooed and violent as they may be. Miss Emily's desire to circumvent time is "monstrous" because it results in the grotesquely disharmonious act of necrophilia (West 66). "A Rose for Emily" demonstrates how the subtle confusion between past and present mushrooms out of proportion to generate unforeseen acts of sadism. Such disharmony produces the Grotesque.

The claim that Miss Emily is a Grotesque freak and the modern version of the traditional Gothic villain holds great feminist implications. She is a freak and a villain only because she goes against the grain of convention. These conventions are applied through the act of veneration. Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes that female subordination is achieved through the exaltation and veneration of that woman (Donaldson 572). Fetterley points out also that the act of veneration both subordinates and traps Miss Emily (38). By labelling her a woman – through the title of *Miss* Emily – the town then imposes a certain set of conventions and laws on her. Fetterley also suggests, more radically, that this veneration is not simply subordination but violent. They venerate because they desire to see her fall. They have succeeded, as the first sentence of the story describes: "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a *fallen monument*" (489 emphasis mine).

For every convention of correct behaviour and dress that was imposed upon Southern women, however, there were just as many

expectations of a Southern gentleman. It is an ironic fact that perhaps no one better understood what it was like to be an unconventional Southern woman than an unconventional Southern man like Faulkner himself. This might be the reason why many critics described the writer as sympathetic to the oppressed Southern woman.

As early as childhood, Faulkner realised that he was different to other boys his age. His peers thought him "quair" because he loved art, reading and poetry and his best friend was a girl (Oates 13). All through life, Faulkner was to remain conscious of his small five-feet-and-five-inches and the rather feminine looks he had inherited from his mother (14). At home, Faulkner did not have a proper male figure on which to model himself. His father was uncomfortable with his son's girlish ways and they maintained an uneasy relationship (13). By contrast, Faulkner was a real "mother's boy" and his loyal devotion to her later produced guilt over his erotic feelings for women at puberty (13-14).

This confused and insecure young boy, already keenly aware that he was unlike most normal people, grew up to become a tortured and misunderstood man. He was constantly in love with women who could not or would not have him. Estelle Oldham, his childhood love, was forced to marry another although she and Faulkner had a "private understanding that...they belonged to one another" (Oates 20). Helen Baird, Faulkner's next object of affection, rejected his advances and married somebody else. Faulkner pursued Gertrude Stegbauer, a friend of his mentor, Phil Stone, and lavished gifts on her but she, too, did not respond and broke his heart (32). In his despair over numerous failed romances, unrequited love and a career that seemed slow to flourish, Faulkner became reliant on alcohol to relieve his pain. In nearly every instance of depression, Faulkner sought out the bottle and spent days on end in semi-conscious, alcoholic hazes (157). When his baby daughter, Alabama, died at only ten days old, Faulkner was

overcome with pain, fury and bitterness; it was the one time he refused to drink (103). Grief entered Faulkner's life yet again when, on the tenth of November 1935, his younger brother, Dean, was killed in an airplane crash. Faulkner actually tried to help the mortician reconstruct his brother's horribly disfigured face and, in the end, they could do nothing and had to settle for a closed casket (133-134). Following these horrendous events, Faulkner was given electroshock therapy to treat his hysteria, depression and mental breakdowns (260). The writer was later to announce that "he no longer trusted people in the outer world; he trusted only his fictional characters, the figures and symbols of his own fumbling dream" (69).

Quite evidently, Faulkner's life was one of deep grief and anguish. In the creation of Miss Emily, a woman made grotesque by her refusal to acknowledge social customs, Faulkner was able to express his rage at life's injustices and, at the same time, endorse the New Belle's violation of social laws. Thus, the character of Miss Emily might be seen not only as a release for Faulkner's own bitter frustrations but as his way of supporting the struggle of the imprisoned Southern belle.

"A Rose for Emily" may be considered a Gothic-Grotesque story based on the intensity rather than the frequency with which features of the Gothic-Grotesque occur. Certainly, it is difficult to ignore Faulkner's highly elaborate descriptions of character, setting and atmosphere, in particular those tangible details so important in the Grotesque tradition. Unquestionably, the strongly detailed depiction of Miss Emily helps validate her place as the female monster figure of the contemporary Gothic-Grotesque. Faulkner makes plain Miss Emily's grotesquerie through his astute portrayal and meticulous description of her various disharmonies and "irreconcilable clashes"; her physical appearance, manners and behaviour are in terrible discord with the appearance, manners and behaviour that

befit a respectable Southern lady. There is no doubt in the reader's mind that Miss Emily's act of necrophilia is grotesque by any standards. The instances of almost unparalleled anguish in Faulkner's life also reveal how his personal angst is reflected in his Grotesque characters who think nothing of flouting the laws of a society which has hurt and betrayed them. "A Rose for Miss Emily" is, without a doubt, a Gothic-Grotesque story of the finest merit.

Through the story of Miss Emily, Faulkner creates a New Belle, simultaneously contesting traditional notions of the Southern woman as the emblem of purity and piety. Faulkner releases the Southern belle from her cage of lofty moral expectations by paying tribute to Emily Grierson, an icon of society who usurps the power of her pedestal to reverse the imposition of convention, thus collapsing the symbolic order that has ensnared her.

"America is now wholly given over
to a damned mob of scribbling women."

Nathaniel Hawthorne*

* Hawthorne complained to his publisher after he noticed, with great alarm, that, due to the increasing popularity of novel writing among women in America, sales of his own work were beginning to flag (Weaks and Perry 9).

Chapter Three

The Lonely Hunter's Heavy Heart: Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café* as Expression of Angst

> When we are lost what image tells?
> Nothing resembles nothing. Yet nothing
> Is not blank. It is configured Hell:
> Of noticed clocks on winter afternoons, malignant stars,
> Demanding furniture. All unrelated
> And with air between.
>
> The terror. Is it of Space, of Time?
> Or the joined trickery of both conceptions?
> To the lost, transfixed among the self-inflicted ruins,
> All that is non-air (if this indeed is not deception)
> Is agony immobilized. While Time,
> The endless idiot, runs screaming round the world.[20]

Writers and critics have always been swift to include Carson McCullers in the company of such legendary Southern Gothic-Grotesque writers as Truman Capote and Katherine Anne Porter. In the introduction to *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*, Lisa Logan explains how McCullers' name has become synonymous with the label "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque":

> Most critics tend to agree that Carson McCullers was concerned with human isolation and loneliness, and with the inability to mediate this condition through love. They tend to agree that she conveyed these ideas through her use of freaks, misfits, and adolescents, or what is sometimes termed, after the tradition of Southern writers, the grotesque (1).

McCullers has very often been recognised as possessing deep sensitivity and a startlingly acute understanding of human anguish, qualities that gave

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[20] "When We Are Lost" by Carson McCullers was published in *Voices* in the fall of 1952 (*Mortgaged* 293). The poem evokes the terror and despondency of human loneliness, a condition with which McCullers was consumed. Her emphasis on Time in this poem lends a particularly frightening aspect to the prospect of a lifetime trapped in loneliness and purposelessness.

rise to her being hailed one of the supreme Southern Gothic-Grotesque writers of her time.

The novella, *The Ballad of the Sad Café,* is described by Frances Kestler as McCullers "at her gothic best" (34).[21] The story, which centres on the relationship between a giant, laconic woman and the object of her affection, a chattering, hunchbacked dwarf, has at its core McCullers' favourite theme of spiritual isolation. Louise Westling describes Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon as McCullers' "two greatest freaks" (*Sacred* 119). As it is frequently considered one of McCullers' most bizarre tales, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* serves as the ideal story by which to determine McCullers' "Southern Gothic-Grotesqueness".

The element of disharmony – whether this refers to an irreconcilable clash, a conflict or a mixture of opposing elements – has consistently been identified as the principal feature of Southern Gothic-Grotesque literature. Miss Amelia Evans, the female protagonist of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, epitomises this sense of disharmony. The initial impression given of Miss Amelia shows how this is so: "She was a dark, tall *woman* with bones and muscles like a *man*" (198 emphasis mine). Miss Amelia's physical appearance depicts a clash; she is a woman who looks like a man. Miss Amelia's behaviour also exhibits signs of inconsistency. She owns and runs a store, operates a still, farms and kills hogs, all of which might be considered men's work. On the other hand, she demonstrates some maternal intuition as the town's doctor, being particularly gentle when healing sick children, and as a mother figure to Cousin Lymon. She is fond of collecting small articles – the acorn she found the day Big Papa died and the two little kidney stones – and ascribing special sentiment to them. Yet

[21] In the introduction to the *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers*, Virginia Spencer Carr also notes that *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was McCullers' personal favourite of all her works (vii). The extent to which McCullers' private life became a part of her writing will be presently examined.

she stomps around the shop and, at the end of a meal, tightens her fist and strokes the hard muscle of her arm. Miss Amelia's female instincts collide with her male habits. She is neither completely feminine nor completely masculine. McCullers ably summarises this clash in a single image: "[Miss Amelia's] *red dress* was pulled up quite high in the back so that a piece of her *strong hairy thigh* could be seen by anyone who cared to look at it" (243 emphasis mine). The assumption made here, of course, is that a red dress symbolises femininity while masculinity is represented by a hairy thigh.

It is an inability rather than a failure that Miss Amelia does not subscribe to either the masculine or the feminine. Ann Carlton accredits this inability to the lack of influential female figures in Miss Amelia's life (60). With the exception of Stumpy MacPhail's wife and Mrs. Mary Hale – both of whom are described only in relation to men – other females in the story are referred to only as "housewives" or "the women". The only female relatives Miss Amelia has are a recently deceased aunt and an estranged cousin. Miss Amelia's own mother is absent from the story and McCullers provides no lengthy explanation for this except to say that Miss Amelia wore her "dead mother's bridal gown" (219). Having been born female but with certain unnatural traits such as her height of six feet two inches and her "dark...somewhat queer...face" (206) and her female-less upbringing, it is no wonder then that Miss Amelia is incapable of relating to either the masculine or the feminine. She is, as Carlton pertinently describes, "a woman who is the product of circumstances" (60).

The character of Cousin Lymon Willis also points to the feature of disharmony. He is male but inclined towards feminine habits such as gossiping and chattering, socialising and prancing around the café like a little girl. He is physically small, occasionally childish and petulant, yet it is impossible to tell if he is twelve or forty years old. Cousin Lymon's very

state of dwarfishness is disharmonious. His deformity does not coincide with society's ideas on the proper appearance for a man: tall, strong and handsome. The most incongruous element of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, however, is the relationship between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon. As lovers, the strapping, Amazon woman and the sickly, deformed dwarf are physically incompatible. As possible cousins, for Lymon claims to be "kin" with Miss Amelia, their "possibly sexual" relationship clashes with the social morés against incest.[22]

The disharmonious fusion of terror and comedy is an unmistakable feature of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin, both of whom have produced ground-breaking work on definitions of the Grotesque,[23] sustain the idea of "play" as the chief concept of the Grotesque. McCullers understood well the importance of this blend of the terrifying and the comic. Frances Kestler writes of *The Ballad of the Sad Café:*

> Knowing, however, that her...story might, if too solemnly told, seem wildly melodramatic, [McCullers] skilfully uses...humour to sweeten the...tale (34).

Infusions of humour in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* lighten what would otherwise be a numbingly melodramatic and unbelievable tale.

Merlie Ryan is a character who, with his mental illness and silly nature, provides much of the comic relief in *The Ballad of the Sad Café:*

> He has the three-day malaria, which means that every third day the fever comes on him. So on two days he is dull and cross, but on the third day he livens up and sometimes has an idea or two, most of which are foolish. It was while Merlie Ryan was in his fever that he

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[22] In several Southern states, marriage between first cousins is considered legal. Although the South has always been more lenient about cousin-marriages than other U.S states, it is, nevertheless, still considered "questionable".

[23] Kayser's most notable writing on the Grotesque may be found in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* while *Rabelais and His World* contains Bakhtin's significant efforts to "define the nature of the beast" (McElroy 2).

> turned suddenly and said: "I know what Miss Amelia done. She murdered that man for something in that suitcase" (205-6).

When the dangerous Marvin Macy strides onto the premises of his worst enemy, Miss Amelia, it is Merlie Ryan who breaks the tense and uncomfortable silence with an inappropriate question:

> "Did you have a good time in the penitentiary?" asked Merlie Ryan, with a silly giggle (234).

The comic element here results from the incongruous image of Merlie Ryan, a *man*, giggling like a silly little girl. Functioning not only as a factor for effective comedy, incongruity is also an important part of the "clash and disharmony" aspect of the Gothic-Grotesque. This will be discussed at present in more detail.

The wrestling match between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy is a wonderful scene, thrilling and frightening all at once, and charged with an almost unbearable tension. However unintentional, it is once again Merlie Ryan who relieves the serious mood:

> Poor Merlie Ryan had his mouth so wide open that a fly buzzed into it, and was swallowed before Merlie realised what had happened (249).

McCullers' narrative also displays signs of the comic. Her observant eye and talent for the written word captures even the smallest detail of human behaviour. Her description of the old couple having dinner at Miss Amelia's café – "They were brown, shrivelled, and like two little walking peanuts" (229) – evokes amusement because, although clever, it is both unexpected and irreverent to call them "peanuts".

In the following passage, McCullers gently mocks the situation of the overly sensitive Morris Finestein. The situation, if described seriously, would only arouse pity and perhaps even aversion to his sorry state:

> Morris Finestein was a person who had lived in the town years before. He was only a quick, skipping little Jew who cried if you called him Christkiller, and ate light bread and canned salmon every day. A calamity had come over him and he had moved away to Society City. But since then if a man were prissy in any way, or if a man ever wept, he was known as a Morris Finestein (202).

By reducing Morris Finestein's mannerisms, his emotional tendencies and culinary preferences to a single sentence, McCullers uses humour to downplay what might otherwise be considered a melodramatic account of Morris Finestein's mental condition.[24]

The comic touch in Southern Gothic-Grotesque literature is also used to emphasise the more gruesome elements of the story. McElroy suggests that the strange mixture of the terrifying and the comic causes uncertainty and bewilderment; sensitivity is increased and the elements of horror and dread are intensified and made even more vivid (20).

McCullers utilises the terror-comic through characterisation. Cousin Lymon's appearance – the big head, short, skinny legs and large pale ears – as well as his behaviour – the way he goose-steps about the café "with his hands clasped behind his head" (230) – is comical. Yet, he is ultimately horrifying because he betrays his lover, Miss Amelia, to follow the "real" man Marvin Macy (Gilbert and Gubar "Fighting" 150). Miss Amelia's crossed grey eyes – an expression of her deep grief and loneliness – are also comical, as crossed eyes nearly always look amusing:

> "...those grey eyes – slowly day by day they were more crossed and it was as though they sought each other to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition (252).

Miss Amelia's wedding to Marvin Macy is also an incongruous and comical affair:

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[24] Karen Rhodes notes that it is a conclusion of numerous studies on the Comic that "reduction", as it serves to diminish and lessen the importance of a person's situation and esteem, is an essential element of comedy.

> [Miss Amelia] strode with great steps down the aisle of the church wearing her dead mother's bridal gown, which was of yellow satin and at least twelve inches too short for her. At last when the lines were spoken and the marriage prayer was done Miss Amelia hurried out of the church, not taking the arm of her husband, but walking at least two paces ahead of him (219).

Traces of the comic interspersed with the more serious elements of the story create a feeling of uncertainty. McCullers uses humour to relax her readers; once their guard is let down, serious elements are introduced with a considerably more dramatic effect.

Another striking feature of the Gothic-Grotesque is the profusion of the concrete and tangible. In literature, this is transmitted through the use of extensive detail and painstakingly meticulous descriptions of setting, character and atmosphere. The characters of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* are depicted in such intense detail. Long after the end of the story, the figure of Miss Amelia – her dark, queer face, short hair brushed back from the forehead; her tall muscular body and large brawny arms; her sad, grey, crossed eyes – echoes in the mind, an image once easily visualised but not readily forgotten. Nothing is left to the imagination; McCullers makes certain her readers see her characters the way she intended them. The character of Cousin Lymon is equally well crafted. He makes a bizarre first impression:

> [The man] was a hunchback. He was scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, dusty coat that reached only to his knees. His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp little mouth. His face was both soft and sassy – at the moment his pale skin was yellowed by dust and there were lavender shadows beneath his eyes (200).

Cousin Lymon is not an attractive sight. His subsequent behaviour confirms that he has just as unattractive a personality. In depicting the character of Cousin Lymon, McCullers preys on her remarkable understanding of the human psyche – in this case, the psyche not of Cousin Lymon but of her readers. She slowly and deliberately develops Lymon's character so that he evolves from a noisy but likeable fellow to a spoiled attention-seeker and finally, to an ungrateful and vindictive traitor. He arrives in the town late one evening to claim kinship with the rich, powerful but reclusive Miss Amelia who, for reasons unbeknownst to anyone else, finds a soft spot for the dwarf and takes him in. The town is thrown into a frenzy of speculation when Cousin Lymon fails to appear the following day. His grand entrance later in the evening betrays his knowledge that he has become the talk of the town: "The hunchback came down slowly with the proudness of one who owns every plank of the floor beneath his feet" (209). Miss Amelia installs Cousin Lymon in her luxurious quarters and proceeds to pamper him like a baby. His effect on the gruff Amelia amazes the townspeople. He alternately loafs around lazily or struts proudly around the premises, snatches money from the store's cash register, boasts, tells lies and eats great big helpings of Miss Amelia's dinners. She, in turn, seems blind to all Lymon's flaws and threatens to make miserable anyone who lays a hand on him. McCullers is unswervingly accurate in her depiction of the cocky, irritating hunchback Lymon. He is also frequently depicted using animal imagery. When trying to impress Marvin Macy, he flutters his eyelids so that they look like "pale moths" (235) and later, he sits on the porch banister like a "sick bird" (268). During the spectacular fight scene at the end, he flies through the air "as though he had grown hawk wings" and grabs at Miss Amelia with "clawed little fingers" (250). The use of animal imagery to portray Cousin Lymon, one of the story's two stock grotesques, is particularly pertinent

because of the claim that the Grotesque is monstrous because it combines animal and human characteristics.

Through careful physical detail, McCullers also cultivates successfully for her tale an atmosphere of dreariness and depression in which her misshapen characters act out scenes of further melancholy. The novella is set in a Southern town, "lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world" (197). The white sky burns above like a "sheet of flame" (225), only a few twisted peach trees line the roadside and there is not a soul to be found or a thing to do anywhere. McCullers' use of tangible detail and her unwillingness to leave to the readers' imagination any aspect of her setting, characters and atmosphere reveal strains of the physical tradition of the Grotesque.

It is Kahane's assertion that terror in the 20th century Gothic story takes on a more physical form (55). In addition, where this terror was traditionally symbolised by a monster or ghostly fiend, the villain of the contemporary Gothic takes the form of a female figure. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Miss Amelia is this foreboding female character. Built like a man and more than capable of doing men's work, Miss Amelia is terrifying because she causes uncertainty; she fits into neither the category of the male nor the female. Miss Amelia goes against all the social conventions of femininity. What makes her truly alarming, however, is not her manner or her physical appearance. Miss Amelia horrifies because she is evidence that when a person's natural tendencies do not coincide with the conventions of society, one must deny one's desires in order to be accepted; to choose personal fulfilment is to choose social alienation and isolation. The extensive feminist ramifications of Miss Amelia's violation of these conventions will be taken into account at a later stage.

Eisinger contends that the Gothic-Grotesque is a path of release for writers in particular torment or distress (16). Sub-genres of the Gothic such as the female Gothic or Southern Gothic show that the Gothic literary form as a means of emotional release is especially popular among writers from socially-marginalised groups. As a Southerner and as a woman, McCullers was expected to adhere to the codes of Southern femininity.[25] Like many women of the modern South, she was confronted by "multiple layers of alienation" (Weaks and Perry 202). They were confined by their age, region, gender and race, all of which marked them as different and alienated them from the rest of the nation. The Southern belle mentality, which set impossibly high standards for women, is partly responsible for creating and reinforcing this alienation. Although Southern belle ideas had been conceived mainly in the antebellum period, its effects were to become deeply entrenched in the culture of the South for years following the Civil War. Roberts attributes these far-reaching effects to the fact that, for the defeated South, the Reconstruction meant a loss of not only its dignity but also its prospering civilisation. Roberts maintains that the Southern belle was carried through the Civil War and the Reconstruction into the postbellum as a "heroine of the white South's most cherished story about itself: its designated work of art, bearer of its ideals", her body "inscribed with the integrity and glamour of the South itself" (102). The Southern woman was regarded as an icon of the Old South; to revere her was, in some measure, to preserve the fading splendour of the region.

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[25] In the anthology *Southern Women's Writing, Colonial to Contemporary*, Mary Louise Weaks and Carolyn Perry quote George Fitzhugh, one of the advocates of such codes of traditional Southern femininity: "So long as [a woman] is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness. [W]oman…has but one right and that is the right to protection. The right to protection involves the obligation to obey. If she be obedient, she is in little danger of maltreatment" (5). Fitzhugh's statement summarises the fundamental nature of the imprisoning attitudes towards women of the antebellum South.

It was to the region's complete shock and dismay when the postbellum revealed the South void of material wealth; all that remained were the values and ideas formulated prior to the Civil War.[26] Many men blamed both the War and the Reconstruction for debilitating their political and sexual power. Control over land, slaves, legislatures and, to a certain extent, over women had become significantly undermined. Organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan and Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy were formed as a means to regain this lost power (Roberts 104). These groups only served to perpetuate the old ways of slavery and proliferate the Southern belle mentality. In the effort to reconstruct the glory of the Old South, emphasis had been placed on these old values – narrow-minded and regressive as they were – as if, in some way, they might compensate for the physical loss of land and wealth.

The myth of the Southern belle, with its origins in the patriarchal system of old England, declared that the proper Southern woman should conform to the "Cult of True Womanhood...which stressed domestic skill, submissiveness, piety and moral rectitude", qualities without which a lady would be regarded as "unfeminine" and "unacceptable" (Weaks and Perry 5). Wyatt-Brown also notes that the South, in particular, enforced the subordination of women because such subordination formed the very basis of Southern culture; it was "required for the maintenance of a white elite culture of honour and shame" (Donaldson 572). "Subordination" in the postbellum American South referred less to tactics of obvious subjugation and repression and more to the veneration of a woman and the stipulation that she behave like a true Southern belle: chaste, subservient and virtuous.

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[26] Weaks and Perry conclude, "[The] southern world...was indeed changing. Slavery was ended, and the mask of southern social harmony was lifted. Many whites were left clinging to the myths of the Old South, alarmed that their slaves would no longer be there to care for their needs" (96). Although this remark refers specifically to the shifting racial climate of the time, it also documents soundly the instability of postbellum society and the desperation with which Southerners grasped at their rapidly vanishing culture.

The preservation of antebellum Southern mentalities – even at the expense of the women – helped assuage fears of a "decaying 'aristocracy'" (Burns 106). These overwhelming expectations and the resulting alienation formed a web from which Southern women struggled to extricate themselves; it became an added strain not to turn and rebel against the only institution they felt included by, even if this was the same institution responsible for their confinement.

McCullers was overcome by the expectations of her society and when she failed to live up to them, this must almost certainly have resulted in feelings of complete alienation. Various aspects of McCullers' life depart from the norm of Southern femininity. She struggled with issues of sexual identity; this much is clear from Virginia Spencer Carr's introduction to the *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers*, where McCullers is quoted: "By the time I was six I was sure that I was born a man" (ix). McCullers was frequently besotted with women; she was also in the habit of wearing trousers and had an androgynous, little-boy look about her (Carr ix). Critics described McCullers as a childlike or adolescent, sexually ambiguous Southern "girl" (Logan 7). This kind of behaviour no doubt set McCullers apart from the traditional Southern belle. As a writer, McCullers was also considered an "artist" by Southern estimation. Weaks and Perry note how the educated woman in literature of the South is depicted as a grotesque, often alienated, figure (202). Westling attributes this hostility towards the intellectual female to the fact that the veneration of women – superficially, a chivalrous action – produced in men a strong sense of guilt which powerful intelligence in women threatened to expose (*Sacred* 27). The idea that the educated woman is an outcast of society stems from the traditional Southern notion that women were not taught or even expected to write. A girl went to school only to

learn needlepoint and other skills that would transform her into a true Southern lady.

The situation of Mick Kelly, the budding musical talent in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, is a situation which McCullers, herself a gifted musician, would have related to. Mick realises, eventually, that as a female, her purpose is expressly sexual (Carlton 57). Mick's alienation stems from her desire to be independent (Sosnoski 84) and, like McCullers, to spurn ladylike manners.[27] Indeed, the traditional Southern belle represented ideals of femininity that educated or artistically inclined women found themselves unable to meet (Weaks and Perry 202). McCullers, as an educated and artistic Southern female writer, faced all possible forms of alienation. She was plagued, also, by ill health in the later stages of her career. Before the age of thirty, McCullers had had three major strokes which left her almost completely paralysed (Carr viii). McCullers was to marry and divorce the alcoholic Reeves McCullers twice, the second marriage ending when Reeves took his own life (Carr xiii). McCullers' lonely and grotesque literary figures – Miss Amelia, rejected and abandoned; Frankie Addams, disillusioned with plans of being included but becomes, ultimately, excluded – might well be expressions of the grief she herself felt over her failed marriage, crippling illness and frustrated sexuality.

Conclusions drawn on the Southern Gothic-Grotesque consistently display widespread feminist ramifications. To emphasise the point, consider that the word "grotesque" develops from *grotta*, the Italian word

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[27] Mick has a pronounced aversion to the feminine habits and behaviours of her sisters: "I don't want to be like either of you and I don't want to look like either of you. And I won't. That's why I wear shorts. I'd rather be a boy any day..." (35). Flannery O'Connor's deformed Joy-Hulga too shuns conventional femininity. She listens with disgust to the detailed accounts of Carramae and Glynese, Mrs Freeman's two daughters – one pregnant and the other with many male admirers. Both Mick and Joy-Hulga despise those who conform to social conventions of femininity.

for "cave". Consider also Mary Russo's observation of the physical similarity between the *grotta*/cave and the "cavernous anatomical female body" (1). *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, as it exhibits several features of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque, is no exception to these feminist implications.

The claim that disharmony and irreconcilable conflict is Grotesque, for example, emerges in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in the character of Miss Amelia Evans. The reason for this is partly biographical. McCullers, consigned to the sidelines of Southern society for being an educated, artistic bisexual, vents her anguish by writing, at first, about girls who prefer boys' clothes and games and refuse, initially, to be feminised. McCullers' ultimate expression of frustration, however, was the creation of the giant Miss Amelia. Westling describes it thus:

> *The Ballad of the Sad Café*...[depicts]...a masculine Amazon whose transgression of conventional sexual boundaries brings catastrophic male retribution. Unlike [Isak] Dinesen, who portrayed an uneasy compromise between proud female autonomy and reluctant masculine homage, McCullers sought to deny the feminine entirely and allow a woman to function successfully as a man. She could not sustain her vision, because she knew it was impossible (126).

The Ballad of the Sad Café is McCullers' comment on the way society considers a woman Grotesque simply because she does not surrender to the social conventions on sexuality and other behaviour. Miss Amelia is torn between two forces: the external world's demands and her internal desires. In the landmark article "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Elaine Showalter writes:

> In defining female culture, historians distinguish between the roles, activities, tastes and behaviours prescribed and considered appropriate for women and those activities, behaviours and functions actually generated out of women's lives (260).

There is a clash between what is "prescribed" and expected of a woman and that which is "actually generated", that which she desires. For Miss

Amelia, this clash exists between the townspeople's expectations that she will get married and be changed "at last into a calculable woman" (219) and her own desire to lead a solitary life without male companionship. Miss Amelia's inability to resolve this conflict between expectation and desire is symbolised by her grotesque physical appearance.

The idea of an "irreconcilable clash" is linked, also, to the concept of the "split-self", a concept strongly associated with feminist theory on female madness and schizophrenia. Showalter's book, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture*, includes a succinct description of the condition caused by the clash between social demands and personal desires:

> [S]chizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor for the female condition, expressive of women's lack of confidence, dependency on external, often masculine, definitions of the self, split between the body as sexual object and the mind as subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity (213).

Esther Greenwood, the young protagonist of Sylvia Plath's haunting, autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, details the experience of the split-self by reporting on her activities from a strangely detached, almost omniscient point of view: "[T]he hand that hung at my right side" (138) and "[T]he hollow voice said..."(124). Feminists claim that madness in women, schizophrenia in particular, is triggered by the pressures and demands of patriarchal society. Karen Sosnoski observes:

> [Women are caught] in a double bind. [T]hey either rebel and become socially isolated, or they succumb to social pressure and are caught in a trap of alienation and self-deception" (82).

Thus, a woman becomes a "freak" not by her own choice but because she is ensnared by social conventions. Peter Schmidt describes such a trap as "the either/or choice between conformity and madness" (31). Miss Amelia's

naturally masculine behaviour was not considered "right and proper"; she was labelled a freak only because the town turned her into one.

The two striking features in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* that distinguish it as a Southern Gothic-Grotesque work are Miss Amelia and her house (Schorer 92). The story begins and ends with her, a solitary and crazed figure shut up in an isolated building. As previously discussed, the deranged figure is an essential element to feminist claims about the Southern Gothic-Grotesque: a woman repressed will exhibit her frustration through madness. For Sybil Korff Vincent, the house represents the fact that most female perils are internal (157). Kahane's coinciding claim is that the house in the Gothic tale signifies an imprisoning maternal space. In the contemporary Gothic, terror is represented by a female figure. The house, the female womb and terror all coincide and are symbolic of each other.

Traces of the comic in the Grotesque also bear significance for feminist claims. In Vincent's article on Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* as a comic novel, she claims that humour is a "self- deprecating" device to express the "terrible ambivalence about being female" (155).[28] In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Miss Amelia is portrayed as both horrifying and comical. McCullers uses the humorous aspects – such as the way Miss Amelia holds up her red dress to expose her hairy legs and the way she stomps heavily down the aisle at her wedding – to deprecate and ridicule women. From her claim that she had been "born a man" (Carr ix), it is evident that McCullers felt deeply uncomfortable in a woman's body. Using humour to mock and belittle her female characters provided relief from this discomfort.

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[28] Westling documents the difficulty Southern women had abiding by strict standards of femininity: "Southern women's diaries and letters…were full of self-deprecation, prayers for greater purity of spirit, and admonitions to live up to all the ideals their men held for them" (15).

Of all the claims made about the Southern Gothic-Grotesque, the contention that terror in the contemporary Gothic materialises in the form of an unconventional woman generates the fiercest feminist implications. This contention echoes the theme of female violation of male-prescribed boundaries. The depiction of Miss Amelia in the role of the monster in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was earlier recognised as McCullers' attempt to experiment with a female character who refused to yield to the conventions of society. The same depiction might be read quite differently, however, as Laura Mulvey notes: "the female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt to erase signs that mark her physically as feminine" (Russo 2). Miss Amelia's masculine habits and mannerisms are, therefore, merely a response to the patriarchal society that denigrates and constrains her. Using Mulvey's framework, Miss Amelia's strong muscular body, hairy thighs and her insistence on dressing in swamp boots and overalls signify a defence mechanism at work. Miss Amelia realises that women in her community are obscure and marginalised figures; power belongs only to the men. In casting off feminine guise and adopting masculine dress and habits, Miss Amelia has internalised the belief that women are unequal and inferior to men.

Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café* represents the Southern Gothic-Grotesque with unerring accuracy. Disharmony, in all its possible forms, is displayed on several occasions and on many levels. The novella is also intensely physical, indicating the genre's roots in art. The unforgettable character of Miss Amelia epitomises terror in the form of an unconventional female "monster". McCullers' masterpiece showcases most poignantly, however, the grief and angst in her life which ultimately found release in the outcast, sexually ambiguous and grotesque female characters of her stories.

Chapter Four

The Displaced Author: The Southern Gothic-Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" as Signs of Social Dislocation

> Most readers these days must be sufficiently sick of hearing about Southern writers and Southern writing and what so many reviewers insist upon calling the "Southern school". No one has ever made plain just what the Southern school is or which writers belong to it.
> If you are a Southern writer, that label, and all the misconceptions that go with it, is pasted on you at once, and you are left to get it off as best you can (28, 37).
>
> Flannery O'Connor
> *Mystery and Manners*

Readers and critics continually draw attention to the prevalence of the bizarre and the disturbing in Flannery O'Connor's work. Clearly, however, O'Connor herself resented – or at the very least, felt reluctant about – being regarded as a Southern Gothic writer. She was concerned with the negative stereotypes placed on writers from the South. To O'Connor, the art of writing was simply writing itself; she never intended to produce stories that were "Gothic" or "Grotesque":

> It never occurred to me that my novel [*Wise Blood*] was grotesque until I read it in the papers (Hassan 79).

> I have written several stories which did not seem to me to have any grotesque characters in them at all, but which have immediately been labeled grotesque by non-Southern readers (*Mystery and Manners* 32).

O'Connor was aware that the tags "Gothic" and "Grotesque" were more confusing than they were effective. Although Carter W. Martin acknowledges the findings of Sumner J. Ferris who declined to use both these "meaningless" terms (153), Martin concludes finally that qualities of the Gothic and Grotesque in O'Connor's work are too extensive to ignore.

The short story "Good Country People", which was published in O'Connor's first collection of stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, is often hailed as the finest piece in the O'Connor canon. For Gilbert H. Muller, the story "presents a brilliant and relentless vision of the grotesque" (28). Similarly, Joy-Hulga Hopewell, the protagonist of "Good Country People" whom Anthony di Renzo pertinently refers to as a "deluded egghead" (73), is regarded as O'Connor's most lucidly Grotesque character. The validity of both these statements is contestable. As argued in Chapter One, claims made about the Gothic-Grotesque often expose an inadequate understanding of the elements which constitute the genre. Only a study of the Gothic and the Grotesque that lies independent of a critique on the work of a Southern writer, such as Chapter One sought to do, might justifiably and accurately lead to the conclusion that "Good Country People" is a Gothic-Grotesque story. However, claims similar to those made by Muller and di Renzo serve to establish "Good Country People" as an appropriate story by which to evaluate Flannery O'Connor's place in the league of Southern Gothic-Grotesque writers.

As has already been emphasised in the preceding chapters, the primary mark of the Gothic-Grotesque is disharmony. This might include clashes, contrasts, conflicts, incongruity, the fusion of contradicting elements, disruptions of the norm or, more perplexing still, a combination of one or more of all these elements at the same time.

Joy-Hulga Hopewell of "Good Country People" embodies several disharmonies. Her very name is an ill-matched blend, wherein her given name, "Joy", signifies happiness and bliss, and "Hulga", the name she has chosen for herself, has a big, heavy, hulking sound to it and evokes images of industry. Joy-Hulga is thirty-two years old yet she behaves like a child, sulking at the dinner table, being rude to guests and wearing a ridiculous

old yellow sweatshirt with a cowboy on a horse embossed on it. The character of Joy-Hulga presents a disturbing and grotesque incongruity where her physical appearance and behaviour do not correspond with her real age.

Besides these external clashes, Joy-Hulga also displays a number of internal disharmonies. Cheryl Z. Oreovicz's character analysis calls to attention Joy-Hulga's interest in philosophy, particularly Malebranche's belief that the soul or mind is discrete from the body. It is Oreovicz's logical claim that because Joy-Hulga has probably internalised this Cartesian-inspired system of ideas, she walks a tightrope between self and society, between developed mind and undeveloped, deformed body (222). Joy-Hulga struggles to maintain a balance between her true self and the social self. In a society where courtship is highly valued, Mrs. Freeman's daughters epitomise the approved social standards; Carramae is married and pregnant and Glynese has her share of devoted admirers. In providing a contrast, the Freeman girls are the key to understanding Joy-Hulga's tightrope dilemma. Carramae and Glynese are romantically successful whereas Joy-Hulga sits on her neck reading philosophy all day and looks "at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity" (276). O'Connor's choice of names for her characters accentuates this contrast between the girls. "Caramel" and "Glycerin", Joy-Hulga's nicknames for Mrs. Freeman's daughters, suggest sweet, sticky substances while Joy-Hulga's chosen name, "Hulga", conjures up images of machinery (Whitt 77). Although extremely educated with a Ph.D. in philosophy, Joy-Hulga's weak heart and wooden leg continue to aggravate her. Her fascination with the belief that the body should be discrete from the mind thrusts her into a quandary. She is unable to reconcile her strong, sharp mind with her feeble, ill-formed body. In addition, there is an obvious conflict between Joy-Hulga's intellectualism and her urge to be beautiful, which is demonstrated

by the sudden use of Vapex, "since she did not own any perfume", in the efforts to seduce Manley Pointer and by her scorn for Carramae and Glynese, which might be interpreted as jealousy. She is torn between personal desire and the hypnotic lure of social convention. Joy-Hulga's hybrid name is the clue to the inner conflict between her mind and her body, between her true self and the self her mother and her society want her to be.

The character of Joy-Hulga displays yet another form of disharmony in the conflict that exists between her conscious, acknowledged self and her unconscious, unacknowledged self. Frederick Asals states that the unconscious and unacknowledged in O'Connor's stories exist as a "violent force denied" (95). The character is driven to a recognition of his/her true self usually after the astonishing climax of the story. The climactic hayloft scene in "Good Country People" confronts Joy-Hulga with Manley Pointer, the terrible trickster who unwittingly uncovers the true Joy-Hulga Hopewell. Joy-Hulga realises that she is not the cynical atheist she thinks she is, for Manley is far more cynical and nihilistic than she is. Joy-Hulga's pathetic plea "Aren't you just good country people?" (290) shocks her into the realisation that her "denied self" is a self exactly like the mother she has previously scorned: "In this moment, she becomes the mother she has so often belittled" (Whitt 78).[29] Joy-Hulga's encounter with Manley Pointer, her *Doppelgänger*, means she must finally acknowledge and accept her simple, *un*cynical and true self. The Grotesque materialises in the conflict

[29] Joy-Hulga's terror over this realisation reveals what Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia", the fear of becoming like one's mother. Using Kahane's framework, Joy-Hulga's terror adds another aspect to her Grotesqueness and the ensuing feminist ramifications. Kahane argues that all daughters desire to but can never escape their problematic femaleness (55). They want to break away from this femaleness as symbolised by the mother figure but to escape femaleness is to violate the boundaries of correct femininity and render oneself Grotesque. Joy-Hulga tries to escape her mother by choosing intellectualism instead of her mother's farming ways: "Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for [her weak heart], she would be far from these red hills and good country people" (276). Hers is a double tragedy because not only has she become Grotesque by choosing to mute her femaleness, but she discovers, the hard way, that escape has been futile. Faced with genuine evil, Joy-Hulga finds that, underneath it all, she is really her mother's daughter.

between the self Joy-Hulga thinks she is and the true self she despises. Furthermore, Joy-Hulga's recognition of her true self comes at a great price – her artificial leg. By the time Joy-Hulga realises how vile Manley Pointer really is, she has already been raped of her wooden leg and, now both physically and emotionally maimed, is far more grotesque than ever.

Joy-Hulga very plainly exemplifies the disharmonious clash of the Gothic-Grotesque. The way she stomps morosely around the house and insists on wearing a cowboy-embossed sweatshirt at the grown age of thirty-two is disturbingly incongruous. The conflict between Joy-Hulga's brilliant mind and her distorted body; between her true innocent self and the nihilistic self she imagines herself to be and the clash between her personal aspirations and the standards of society demonstrate how disharmony is present in "Good Country People".

In a much different way to Joy-Hulga, Manley Pointer, the story's antagonist, also embodies the characteristic disharmony of the Gothic-Grotesque. Where Joy-Hulga's conflict is largely internal and personal, Manley Pointer's conflict is external; he is "highly contradictory... [and]...always *creates* disorder" (Muller 28 emphasis mine). Manley Pointer's true identity as a con-man is all the more shocking and contradictory because of his masquerade as a Bible salesman. He deludes Mrs. Hopewell with his earnest "good country people" act and even succeeds in deceiving the cynical Joy-Hulga who, ironically, prides herself on her brains and ability to "see *through* to nothing" (287). Manley Pointer's simpleton demeanour lures Joy-Hulga into assuming a falsely superior position to him, leaving her completely unprepared for his evil seductions and the unexpected capture of her wooden leg. Manley Pointer's deceptive character is best symbolised by the Bible he carries in his briefcase. As Manley's claim to be a simple Bible salesman holds no water, so the Bible he brings to the picnic turns out to be a hollow Bible. Manley

is not really a Bible salesman at all but a trickster. Similarly, the hollow Bible is not only *not* a Bible, but it contains alcohol, pornographic playing cards and a box of contraceptives – an "unholy trinity of offerings", representations of the worldly life in direct conflict with the godly life (Feeley 27). Disharmony is present in the conflict between Manley's purported identity and his real identity.

The seduction scene between Joy-Hulga and Manley Pointer in the hayloft also exhibits marks of grotesque disharmony where love clashes with hate. It is immaterial whether or not Manley's affections for Joy-Hulga were inspired by true love. The point is that his *actions* and *words* towards her were loving and, ultimately, seductive but his final act is perverse, violent and hateful. Westling's supporting claim is that sexuality in the story is more vindictive than erotic (*Sacred* 149). This is symbolised by Manley's eyes, which turn hard as "two steel spikes" (289) as he approaches his moment of cruel victory. This conflict between love and hate, vindictiveness and eroticism illustrates the irreconcilable clash inherent in the Grotesque tradition.

The hayloft seduction scene offers another Grotesque aspect of "Good Country People" because of a disharmony which Carol Shloss claims is derived from a "stark incongruity" (43). Manley and Joy-Hulga's encounter, although it displays typical romantic behaviour such as clumsy kisses and hot breathing, is peppered with peculiar moments, not in the least romantic. Manley begins their conversation with the unlikely question "You ever ate a chicken that was two days old?" (283) and Joy-Hulga attempts to allure Manley by dabbing Vapex on her dirty shirt collar before their picnic date. Another Grotesque disharmony occurs when Manley overturns Hulga's plan to slowly seduce him. He disrupts her plan by seducing *her* instead. This disruption is grotesque both because it is unexpected and because it demonstrates a clash; Hulga's intentions stand in

violent opposition to Manley's (Muller 79). Asals also notes that, throughout the story, Joy-Hulga and Manley have been cast as contrasting antitheses: she as the sophisticated academic and cynical atheist, he the innocent country bumpkin and naïve Christian. For Asals, the Grotesque aspect of this develops when the action takes a shocking turn and the two opposites exchange roles and turn into the other (104).

The incident of Joy-Hulga's seduction is grotesque because it goes against all expectations. It disrupts the reader's sense of normalcy. It shocks and bewilders. The scene in the hayloft – "one of the most bizarre representations" of romance in recent literature (Shloss 43) – clashes with the idea of "normal" romance. The Grotesque emerges when all expectations are overturned. It is Joy-Hulga and not Manley Pointer who is hoodwinked. It is Joy-Hulga's wooden leg and not her virginity that Manley seizes. The action is reversed at every turn and the reader's expectations clash with the reality of what O'Connor delivers.

The characters of Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman demonstrate the aspect of Grotesque disharmony concerned with the fusion of two opposing elements. While the incongruous nature of this fusion is always unsettling, it is particularly disturbing when human and non-human elements fuse to form one. The word "grotesque" was, in fact, originally used to describe artistic carvings that depicted animal, vegetable and human elements intertwined as one. O'Connor renders Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman Grotesque by depicting them with machine-like characteristics. Their words and gestures are mechanised and economised (Shloss 46). Mrs. Freeman's facial expressions are described resembling a car's gears – neutral, forward and reverse – while Mrs. Hopewell's personality is condensed to a list of clichéd sayings such as "Nothing is perfect" and "That is life!" (272-73). O'Connor's descriptions obliterate all human qualities, reducing the women to mere machines. With "their personalities

distilled into a set of banal preoccupations" (46), they appear flat, lifeless and grotesquely subhuman.

The Gothic-Grotesque has always placed great emphasis on the physical and tangible. "Good Country People" has an unmistakable sense of the physical. But because O'Connor had the ability to find the exact word to describe a person, place or situation, her stories rely not on sustained descriptions but, rather, sparsely located sentences of few, well-chosen words. Her characters are not described in full at the beginning of the story but left, instead, to slowly impress themselves upon the reader. Joy-Hulga is first described as "a large blonde girl who had an artificial leg" (271). At subsequent intervals throughout the story, it is discovered that she "lumbers" and "stumps" instead of walking, prefers to be glum-faced and rude instead of smiling and very often turns an "ugly red" when her private matters are intruded upon (285). The character of Manley Pointer is depicted in a little more detail:

> [H]e had on a bright blue suit and yellow socks that were not pulled up far enough. He had prominent face bones and a streak of sticky-looking brown hair falling across his forehead (277).

Manley later appears with a new hat, "toast-coloured with a red and white band around it and...slightly too large for him" (285). In these few lines, O'Connor effectively alludes to, rather than makes obvious, Manley's character. For the reader reading between the lines, he appears as a too-thin, over-eager, badly dressed and rather pathetic young man. Nothing is left to the imagination, however, in the scene where Joy-Hulga's artificial leg is finally unveiled:

> Very gently he began to roll the slack leg up. The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump (289).

The full force of this grotesque scene hits the reader hard. O'Connor's observant eye and precise words bring to her stories a shocking reality of physical ugliness.

Another feature of the Gothic-Grotesque is the monstrous female character. As Kahane's article clarifies, terror in Gothic literature has evolved from the intangible to the more physical (55). Disposing of ghosts and phantoms, the new and tangible Gothic terror emerges in the actual, physical figure of a woman. This woman is made monstrous and terrifying because she undermines and defies the social norm. Although Joy-Hulga shuns the physical world,[30] she is the characteristic embodiment of the contemporary Gothic female monster. It is precisely her freakish and unconventional behaviour that causes her to be terrifying. Joy-Hulga departs from "normal" femininity in a number of ways. In a society where courtship and marriage are highly prized, her preference for books, her Ph.D. and single marital status at the age of thirty-two mark her as abnormal. Joy-Hulga is a large blonde girl with absurd clothes, spectacles and a wooden leg; her physical appearance relegates her to the margins of a society where beauty is necessary for courtship, marriage and, ultimately, reproduction.

O'Connor further emphasises Joy-Hulga's role as the female monster by demonstrating through the character the idea that sex and reproduction are available only to attractive women. Joy-Hulga, heavy-set, badly dressed and bespectacled, is set in contrast with Carramae and Glynese Freeman who are successful in courtship and reproduction. O'Connor pertinently displays this in a passage where Mrs. Freeman has been referring to

Carramae's pregnancy "in the tube". In the following sentence, Joy-Hulga "[cracks] her two eggs into a saucer" (282), symbolically destroying (cracking) her fertility and chances at motherhood and "normal" femininity (Whitt 77). It is made clear that society considers an intellectual, disabled girl like Joy-Hulga an unsuitable candidate for marriage. Reflecting this, Joy-Hulga's lack of interest in men may be interpreted as a defence mechanism against a system that alienates unattractive women like herself from courtship and sex.

Like Faulkner's Miss Emily and McCullers' Miss Amelia before her, Joy-Hulga's monstrosity arises out of her defiance for the social requirements for proper femininity. Implicit in O'Connor's depiction of the bookish and grotesque Joy-Hulga is the notion that, in order to be desirable marriage material, a woman must not be educated. In fact, Weaks and Perry claim that Joy-Hulga, with both her Ph.D. and her wooden leg, best exemplifies the "educated woman...of the South [who] is often transformed into a grotesque, lonely figure" (202). Joy-Hulga is denied her right to personal fulfilment. Her choice to take a Ph.D. in philosophy and become an educated woman costs her the acceptance of society. Claims that a woman is Grotesque are built on the idea that there is a norm against which this woman rebels. This norm is established by patriarchy and confirmed by the desire to repress educated women who threaten the patriarchal order. Joy-Hulga is locked in a system that dictates the codes for her acceptance, disregards the importance of personal ambition and condemns misfits to its sidelines.

Joy-Hulga's inversion of the social conventions on proper behaviour and correct physical appearance for women epitomise her as a female monster. This claim gives rise to widespread feminist ramifications. Naomi

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[30] Josephine Hendin argues that, because of Joy-Hulga's deformed leg, she has rejected the physical world in favour of the abstract world of her philosophy books. Joy-Hulga holds only contempt for

Wolf explains how the belief that physical attractiveness is essential to successful reproduction has become intrinsic to the Western mindset:

> Women must want to embody [beauty] and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless (12).

According to Wolf, the exaggerated importance of feminine beauty safeguards a "belief system that keeps male dominance intact" (12). Since losing the power to perpetuate myths about other areas of the feminine experience such as motherhood, domesticity and chastity, men have sought to regain control by using certain images of feminine beauty to suppress women (11). By establishing certain images of feminine beauty as the norm, men are able to control by punishment or alienation any woman who departs from that norm. At the end of "Good Country People", Joy-Hulga is punished by a male force for her independence and rebellion against conventional femininity (Westling *Sacred* 173). Manley Pointer clearly demonstrates a strong revulsion towards deformed women – women who are not conventionally beautiful because of the artificial eyes and legs that replace their deformities. Westling has argued that, in the theft of the wooden leg, Manley Pointer, whose obviously phallic name identifies him with the patriarchal system of the South, robs Joy-Hulga of more than just her artificial leg (*Sacred* 152). Rhodes suggests that what Joy-Hulga loses after Manley escapes the loft is her last shred of physical normality. Hence, Manley's deep loathing for the female sex is made all the more evident. The theft of Joy-Hulga's wooden leg authenticates that control tactic to which Wolf refers. Manley's act of violent exploitation exposes his hatred

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animals, flowers and nature; she has willed herself blind to all physical objects (70-71).

for Joy-Hulga whose physical defect does not correspond with the images of feminine beauty patriarchy has established.

The traditional belief that women should be uneducated and left to keep the house and raise children might be outdated but it is, nonetheless, an almost universal one. The American South is particularly notable for its conservative values. Reasons for this were examined in the previous chapter. The South's defeat in the Civil War left the thriving land ravished and destroyed; the once economically prosperous and progressive empire was left broken and destitute. After the South's social and economic position was destabilised, the sole reminder of its previous glory was found not in material possessions but in the customs and values of the old culture. Chief among these old customs was the tradition that women should be pious, submissive and domesticated. From these postbellum ideas rose the stereotype of the Southern belle – a chaste and perfect woman who, by iconising traditional ideals, sustained, at least in part, the dying splendour of the Old South.

Although she was born more than half a century after the Civil War, Flannery O'Connor lived and wrote in a society that continued to place great emphasis on the traditions embodied by the Southern belle. Westling documents how O'Connor rejected such values:

> Personally she refused to play the part of the Southern lady…[A]t home she preferred to wear old jeans and loose shirts with their tails hanging out…[H]er speech was characteristically blunt, delivered with a nasal tone, and often peppered with the expressions of the poor whites she brings to life in her stories (*Sacred* 135).

Westling substantiates Moers' suggestion that the exaggerated models of femininity and the excessive emphasis on beauty in the South contribute to the "female gothic" in literature. In an argument similar to Wolf's, Moers claims that beauty and the visualisation of the self are paramount to the

female experience from the moment of birth until death. Pressure to conform to a prescribed standard of femininity becomes intolerable; many women find an outlet for this anguish in the creation of Gothic literature (Moers 107-108). Karen F. Stein's concurring argument contends that monsters and madwomen are "Gothic emblems...powerful figures in the work of women writers, expressing profound conflicts between aspects of the self" (136). This trend for angst-ridden writers to produce Gothic literature is particularly significant among female writers in the South because of the culture they live in.

O'Connor herself, no exception to this trend, appeared indifferent to many of the ideals of Southern womanhood. In his introduction to *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*, Robert Giroux writes, "Flannery had less vanity than anyone I have ever known" (xii). For the book jacket of her novel *Wise Blood*, O'Connor willingly submitted a picture of herself with thinning hair and cortisone-induced bloatedness, signs of the lupus with which she was very ill. She was often described as unladylike and remained single until her death in 1964. O'Connor evidently did not correspond to Southern ideas of femininity. Furthermore, as an intellectual woman, a writer, a Southerner and a Roman Catholic in the heavily Protestant South, O'Connor must almost certainly have felt a social misfit.

In the creation of Joy-Hulga Hopewell, O'Connor is shown to have understood the extent of her alienation from society. As Eisinger suggests, writers who suffer social alienation very often discover release for their angst in the Gothic literary mode (16). Likewise, it is Moers' contention that women writers have responded to society's tremendous emphasis on feminine beauty by creating a new breed of monster, on many occasions a female, who terrifies because of physical or psychological aberrance (107-108). It is tempting to conclude that O'Connor's illness and intellectualism caused her grief from which she found escape through the creation of Joy-

Hulga. Insights into O'Connor's life suggest, however, that she was not in any particular anguish. She happily chose to dress in old shirts and trousers and it was by her own free will that she offered a less than attractive photo of herself for public display. Perhaps O'Connor was less concerned with her personal gain than she was with wanting to examine the effect of society's strict codes of femininity on women. If this is the case, then Joy-Hulga and many of O'Connor's other socially incorrect female characters are not, as Moers argues, vehicles to liberate pain so much as they are a challenge to traditional Southern ideas of femininity. This is certainly the opinion of Ted R. Spivey who felt that no writer better collapsed the "feminine mystique"[31] exemplified in certain Southern women than O'Connor (9). Indeed, O'Connor never regarded the antebellum South as a standard of values. Her stories feature women who reject traditional standards of femininity, standards which the South exaggerated.

Westling champions the opposing view which argues that O'Connor was, indeed, in much anguish over the standards of femininity in her society. Westling points out a "liberate then punish" pattern in several of O'Connor's short stories. In "Good Country People", the grotesque Joy-Hulga, whom many have claimed is autobiographical,[32] is an outlet for O'Connor's frustration. O'Connor depicts Joy-Hulga as intellectual, disabled and unmarried, qualities that clash with the ideal of the Southern belle. In the same way, the extremely intellectual O'Connor became disabled in her later years from the disease lupus and remained single all her life. Using the autobiographical Joy-Hulga, O'Connor was able to express feelings of pain and angst that were otherwise "too dangerous for

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[31] The phrase "Feminine Mystique" was coined by Betty Friedan in her groundbreaking book of the same name.

[32] Flannery O'Connor pointed out, in several of her letters, the remarkable resemblances between herself and Joy-Hulga Hopewell, in particular, "Hulga's fierce intellectualism" (Brinkmeyer 145). Stanley Edgar Hyman, one of O'Connor's earliest critics, calls Joy-Hulga "the author's cruelest self-caricature" (16).

women to admit in ordinary life" (Westling *Sacred* 174). Recognising a similar pattern in women's writing of the 19th century, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe:

> [B]y projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatise their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them.... Indeed, much of the poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be (*Madwoman* 78).

Joy-Hulga is the "mad creature" through whom O'Connor is able to articulate her frustration and release her inner clashes and contradictions. Although O'Connor allowed her personal rebellion to be expressed in this way, she was still very much trapped by Southern traditions and finally had to yield to that which she hated. Westling notes that Grotesque women of O'Connor's fiction who defy social conventions are ultimately punished by an authoritative male figure (158). While Joy-Hulga is free to choose intellectualism and nihilism over dating and marriage, O'Connor is not under any illusions that Joy-Hulga can successfully rebel against the traditional social order of the South. Joy-Hulga's defiance must be punished in order to reinstate the dominant patriarchal values of society.

Such an interpretation of Joy-Hulga proposes that, in spite of her anti-Belle ways, O'Connor was still very much a captive of the values and traditions of the postbellum South. O'Connor may, therefore, be considered one of the countless women writers whose frustration with impossible ideals of femininity find release in the freak characters of their Gothic stories.

Most tellingly, Westling refers to the correspondence between O'Connor and a friend, "A", where

"Good Country People" meets all the criteria for the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. The story displays the essential marks of the genre: disharmony, an emphasis on the tangible, a female monster as the protagonist and an author in distress. Disharmony is dealt with in a very complex way. It is examined in all its possible guises: the *conflict* between Joy-Hulga's mind and her body, the *clash* between her social self and her private self, the *contrast* between the conventionally beautiful Glynese and Carramae Freeman and the bookish, disabled Joy-Hulga and the *incongruity* of her relationship with Manley Pointer. These disharmonies found in Joy-Hulga provide a significant basis for the claim that she is the female monster of the contemporary Gothic-Grotesque. In turn, her monstrosities arise out of her physical deformities. As O'Connor's self-confessed fictional double, Joy-Hulga makes evident the writer's anguish and frustration with Southern conventions and the need to channel this pain into the creation of a Gothic-Grotesque tale. The label "misfit" that Southern society attached to O'Connor disturbed her so profoundly, it drove her to produce intellectual, disabled, ill and grotesque female characters that were, ironically, exactly like herself.

O'Connor confirms "A"'s observation that Joy-Hulga is autobiographical (*Sacred* 150).

Chapter Five

Still Waters Run Deep: The Hidden Gothic-Grotesque in Eudora Welty's "Petrified Man"

> "First, there's the room you can see through the glass –
> that's just the same as our drawing room,
> only the things go the other way."
> In another moment Alice was through the
> glass, and had jumped lightly down
> into the Looking-Glass room.[33]

Critics have never failed to ascribe the term "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque" to Eudora Welty. Weston claims that Welty's relation to the Gothic has been an inevitable topic of discussion since the publication of her first story (1). Nevertheless, for Johnston, the terms "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque" amount to calling Welty's stories "prose versions of B horror films [such as] *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*" (8). Welty herself quite vehemently denied being a Southern Gothic writer. She once said to Alice Walker, "They better not call me that!" (Donaldson 567).

"Petrified Man" is one of Welty's most famous and best-loved stories, based on the author's colourful and accurate dramatisation of her regional dialect. It is also one of the first stories to be written in the comic genre for which Welty came to be famous (Schmidt 120). For Westling, it is the best example of "Welty's comic gift with dialogue" (*Eudora Welty* 69). It is also a story that never fails to make a serious impact on its readers. Schmidt says that whenever he teaches the story, his students'

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[33] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, 112-113. Peter Schmidt claims that the story "Petrified Man" is like a mirror that Welty uses to reveal to her readers the dangerous stereotypes of modern culture (86). Like the Looking-Glass where things "go the other way", Welty's story reflects how contemporary culture has distorted the truth about feminine beauty. Incidentally also, Moers identifies certain elements of Carroll's "Wonderland" as Grotesque. The "sneezing pigs, smiling cats, preaching caterpillars, and gourmandising walruses" suggest, to Moers, a monstrous and grotesque fusion of the animal and human species (101-102).

reactions are always ones of unease and undecidedness: "[They] are as disturbed as they are amused by it" (85). Because Welty has so frequently been labelled a Southern Gothic-Grotesque writer, and because "Petrified Man" is one of the two stories said to be most representative of Welty's style,[34] it is logical that "Petrified Man" be scrutinised to prove the validity of the claim that Welty belongs in the genre of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque.

Physical detail has always been an important part of the Grotesque tradition. As a term first applied to the carved artwork of the 15th century, the Grotesque has since expanded and is even employed as a literary term. The preceding chapters have made clear that the Grotesque is a fitting term to describe the stories of Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor who revel in long, detailed descriptions of character and setting. By contrast, however, Welty is content to allow small details and a few sentences of well-turned Southern dialect speak to the reader. Although most of the action of "Petrified Man" takes place in Leota's beauty parlour, Welty does not provide a lengthy description detailing every nook and cranny, smell and sight of the salon. The two passages of sustained description are only a few lines long:

> Hidden in this den of curling fluid and henna packs, separated by a lavender swing-door from the other customers, who were being gratified in other booths, she could give her curiosity its freedom (17).
>
> Mrs. Fletcher was frowning, her hair-line eyebrows diving down toward her nose, and her wrinkled, beady-lashed eyelids batting with concentration (18).

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[34] The other most widely anthologised story is "Why I Live at the P.O.". Steve Dorner, the creator of the famous e-mail program Eudora, was so impacted by this story while he was at college that he later named his creation after Welty, even rearranging the title of her story to form the program's motto: "Bringing the P.O to where you live!" (Tallmo).

Leota's "yellow curls" and "red-nailed fingers" (17) and Thelma's "blood-red lips" (18) are the only other attempts at physical description in this story. Welty does not establish her characters, setting and atmosphere by devoting long paragraphs to them at the opening of the story. But by some means, it becomes obvious that the characters of "Petrified Man" are middle-aged, gossipy women living out the mundane drama of their lives in the beauty parlour of a small Southern town. Welty achieves this by infusing the story with the occasional detail at varied intervals: Thelma, Leota's salon assistant who comes in to take a "drag from Leota's cigarette" (18); the Jax beer "made right in N.O." (20) that Mrs. Pike and Leota sit drinking; and *Screen Secrets,* the celebrity gossip magazine Mrs. Grover reads while she gets a "perm'nent" (25). Welty need only name a character "Thelma" and have her "drag" on someone else's cigarette; the imagination has already been prompted to visualise a skinny, heavy-lidded girl with "bottle-blond" hair and a somewhat loose mouth. Likewise, Mrs. Grover with her copy of *Screen Secrets* might easily be imagined as an overweight woman clad in a shapeless, dowdy, print dress, snoozing under the perming machine, dreaming of the fluids and chemicals in her hair which will make her as beautiful as the film-stars in the magazine she clutches. These, of course, are the harsh realities which Welty never states but makes implicit in her portrayals of these characters. Katherine Anne Porter says that Welty is never tender towards her characters. Instead, Welty's descriptions of her characters are so accurate that what first appears as cruel caricature is simply a clear presentation of reality (Johnston 156).

Another technique Welty uses to create the right setting and atmosphere with minimum use of physical detail is her reproduction of the Southern dialect:

> "Thelma, honey, throw your mind back to yestiddy if you kin," said Leota, drenching Mrs. Fletcher's hair with a thick fluid and catching the overflow in a cold wet towel at her neck (18).

And:

> Thelma batted her eyes. "Naw, precious, she come on Thursday and didn't ev'm mention your name. I doubt if she ev'm knows you're on the way." (19).

Consider also:

> "Sunday, Mrs. Pike an' me was all by ourself. Mr. Pike and Fred had gone over to Eagle Lake, sayin' they was goin' to catch 'em some fish, but they didn't a course. So we was settin' in Mrs. Pike's car, it's a 1939 Dodge – " (20).

This is literary magic as only Welty, with her "ear sharp, shrewd, and true as a tuning fork" (Johnston 156), can produce. Welty's magic makes her stories tidy and economical. She is able to see, in her mind's eye, a particular person in a specific scenario speaking in a certain way and then, with unfailing precision, find exactly the words she needs to execute the passage. As "Petrified Man" shows, Welty does not participate in the Grotesque tradition of extensively detailed physical description as Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor have done before her. It cannot be concluded, however, that the story does not abide by the physical tradition of the Grotesque. "Petrified Man" certainly exhibits the signs of the physical Grotesque but it does so more by provocation and implication then by actual textual detail.

Freaks – those who are diseased, deformed or aberrant in any way – are another essential ingredient of Southern Gothic-Grotesque fiction. Kahane has claimed that the Gothic terror of the 20th century is no longer a ghost or shadowy phantom. The contemporary Gothic monster emerges,

instead, in the form of a freak – a malformed human being. In "Petrified Man", the main plot revolves around Mrs. Fletcher, Mrs. Pike and Leota, whereas freaks only exist in the sub-plot of the story (Schmidt 80-81). Mr. Petrie, with his joints like stone and his head turning just a quarter of an inch, appears, at first, to be the only real freak of "Petrified Man". Yet, Welty's genius disguises, once again, the true elements of her story. According to Schmidt's interpretation of "Petrified Man", Mr, Petrie is only the secondary freak of the story. The true freaks are the women in the beauty parlour. They are not conventionally Grotesque in the sense that they are not physically deformed. But it is their *minds* that are warped. Schmidt argues that Mrs. Fletcher, Mrs. Grover and all the other women in the beauty parlour have been inundated with false images of female beauty and then conditioned to believe that it is their duty to transform themselves into replicas of those images (84). Welty's choice of words to describe the machines in the parlour suggests that, regardless of the pain it costs them, the women will stop at nothing to achieve beauty. The parlour is filled with various instruments and apparatus that "cook" (18), "pinch" (19), "pin" (24) and, generally, torture the women. Schmidt claims that Welty deliberately establishes a close connection between the women in the parlour and the travelling freak show to indicate that the women are the real freaks of the story (83). To begin with, the freak show settles down in "the vacant store next door" beside Leota's beauty parlour, so that the two contrasting businesses – one dealing with beauty, the other with ugliness – become neighbours (82). The women also relate their personal lives closely with the freaks (83). This is seen most clearly in the conversation between Mrs. Fletcher and Leota where Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy gives the women a chance to talk about the Siamese twins at the freak show:

> "Aw. Well, honey, talkin' about bein' pregnant an' all, you ought to see those twins in a bottle... Born joined plumb together – dead a course." Leota dropped her voice into a soft lyrical hum (20-21).

Leota's singing at the end of her remark adds a note of carelessness to the conversation, as though it were a perfectly normal thing to be telling a pregnant woman about dead Siamese twins in a bottle.

It is not the women's bodies but their minds that render them Grotesque. As radioactive substances in the environment have sometimes resulted in the birth of a limbless or faceless child, so the images from *Screen Secrets* and other magazines have distorted the women's minds, impressing wrong ideas about femininity upon them (Schmidt 84). The women are freakish because their minds have been deformed. This warped mentality reveals itself in Leota's sour remarks to Mrs. Fletcher about Mrs. Pike:

> "Four women. I guess those women didn't have the faintest notion at the time they'd be worth a hundred an' twenty-five bucks apiece some day to Mrs. Pike... So Mrs. Pike gits five hundred dollars. And my magazine, and right next door to my beauty parlour" (27).

The envious tone of Leota's comments show how her mind has been so twisted that she views women not as people but as objects or commodities. Thus, these seemingly normal women are, on closer inspection, the real freaks of "Petrified Man".

One of the foremost qualities of the Gothic-Grotesque is disharmony. The Grotesque delights in that which is unsettling and disturbing; disharmony, with all its clashes, conflicts and contrasts, is certainly disconcerting. In "Petrified Man", this disharmony exists on a number of levels. For Robert Towers, there is a disquieting clash of the comic and the horrible in the story wherein "[i]mages of mutilation and disfigurement...lurk just beneath the hilarious surface" (Pingatore 33).

Take, for instance, the passage where Leota describes the pygmies at the freak show:

> "You know, the teeniest men in the universe? Well, honey, they can just rest back on their little bohunkus an' roll around an' you can't hardly tell if they're sittin' or standin'. That'll give you some idea. They're about forty-two years old." (21).

Leota's description of the pygmies rolling round on their little rear-ends is comical enough. At the same time, one gets the feeling that laughter is somehow not appropriate, for it is cruel to laugh at another's disfigurements, especially from the safe position of spectator. Like Schmidt's students, one is torn between laughter and alarm – the typical reaction to the Grotesque of shock and bewilderment.

Pingatore claims that the behaviour of the women in the story is disharmonious because it is at odds with the "natural" behaviour of women (35). A normal woman is interested in the female matters of sexuality, pregnancy and motherhood. The women in "Petrified Man" rebel against these ideas. Pregnant Mrs. Fletcher does not seem in the least pleased about her baby-to-be; instead, she pouts and sulks because the whole town knows she is expecting. Leota's confidential whisper, "that you was p-r-e-g.," (18) reflects the general negative attitude of the women towards female interests. The episode at the end of the story where Leota gives Billy Boy a hearty paddling with a hairbrush does not suggest parental discipline but, rather, a highly *un*maternal, wrongful enjoyment of hurting a child. There is a clash between the behaviour of "normal" women and the women in the story.

This claim instigates an array of feminist implications. What is considered "normal" or "natural" behaviour for a woman? Is it the patriarchal system that establishes this norm of behaviour? Moreover, Leota's and Mrs. Fletcher's antagonism about pregnancy and motherhood

very likely stems from the media's idea that a woman's body is only beautiful when it is slender and shapely. Therefore, a woman with child can never be attractive. If this is how society conditions its members, it comes as no surprise that pregnancy, a normal physiological process ("inflicted" by men, it might be added), is viewed not as beautiful but vile, grotesque and to be avoided.

The women in "Petrified Man" imagine that they are in control of their husbands and the various other male figures in the story, such as Billy Boy. But it is plain to see that these poor women are under an illusion. As Schmidt has already pointed out, the women are not their own persons but, rather, freakish slaves to the icons of beauty constructed by the media. Mrs. Fletcher boasts that "Mr. Fletcher can't do a thing with me," in response to Leota's suggestion that Mr. Fletcher might beat Mrs. Fletcher over the head if she didn't have the baby "after going this far" (19). Poor Mrs. Fletcher obviously does not remember that it *is* Mr. Fletcher who got her pregnant in the first place (Westling *Eudora Welty* 71). Westling also shows how naïve the women are by pointing to the episode where they discover that the Pikes' ex-neighbour, the petrified man in the freak show and the man wanted for the rape of four women, is one and the same person. The women in this small Southern town are dangerously unaware of the perils of con men like Mr. Petrie (71). Even little Billy Boy being spanked by Leota manages to get the last word as he taunts the wild-haired ladies, "If you're so smart, why ain't you rich?" (28). There is a blatant inconsistency between the control the women imagine they have and the actual fact that it is *they* who are being dominated.

As both McCullers and O'Connor have demonstrated, the Gothic-Grotesque literary mode can function as a means of release for personal angst and frustration. The chapters on McCullers and O'Connor show quite

clearly that both these writers were frustrated because they were unable to align their personal ambitions with the demands of their society. In particular, their tendencies to be outspoken and unladylike did not bode well in a society still entrenched in the ways of the Old South. Nothing in Welty's life suggests, however, that she may have needed to vent any anguish. Unlike McCullers and O'Connor who felt ensnared by the South and expressed this by portraying their fictional houses as traps and prisons, Welty was inclined to view houses as "temples of family life" (Westling *Sacred* 6). Furthermore, where O'Connor's landscapes tended to be rigidly symbolic and McCullers' settings nearly always confined to the indoors, Welty had an enthusiastic view of the land. Westling suggests that this joy and exuberance about houses and, particularly, the land reveal Welty's understanding that the land is identified with femininity, thus reflecting her ease with herself as a woman (5-7).

McCullers noted on one occasion that her grotesque freaks were, indeed, symbols of spiritual alienation. O'Connor, too, admitted that Joy-Hulga, certainly one of her more grotesque creations, was autobiographical. Both these writers discovered catharsis in their fictional Grotesques. Welty, on the other hand, saw the Grotesque simply as a way "to differentiate character by their physical qualities as a way of showing what they were like inside" (Donaldson 579). In "Petrified Man", the physical grotesqueness of Mr. Petrie – as opposed to the mental grotesqueness of the women – provides a contrast which is essential to the women's "sense of their own normality" (Schmidt 83). In using Mr. Petrie to measure their own normality, the women are blind to the fact that *they* are the true Grotesques of the story. Their minds have been warped by the images in the media. They have been fooled into believing that beauty is a "fixed smile" or a "perm'ment". Thus, for Welty, the Grotesque is a way to show how blinded the women are to their social conditioning. She does not need

a grotesque female double through whom to release her frustration. Welty is completely at ease with her womanhood, so much so that she is able to use the Grotesque as a literary tool to make a comment on her society.

Based strictly on the synthesis of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque produced in Chapter One, "Petrified Man" does not fall into the category of Southern Gothic-Grotesque. The story displays only one aspect of the genre: disharmony. This is shown in a fusion of terror and comic; a clash between acceptable and unacceptable female behaviour and a discrepancy between the control the women imagine they have and the reality that they are *being* controlled. But, unlike Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor, Welty shows no evidence of being frustrated, angst-ridden or having led a tormented life. Consequently, deformed characters, which might symbolise a writer's angst, feature only in the subplot of the story; the main characters are all physically normal. There is also a decided lack of tangible detail in Welty's story.

Close scrutiny of the story shows that certain Grotesque aspects of "Petrified Man" are well hidden in the story's woodwork. Welty does not indulge in lengthy detailed descriptions but her stories become vivid through small and significant details. Likewise, the women in the story seem normal on the exterior but their minds have been twisted to accept wrong ideas on femininity. To claim that the women, with their warped minds and values, are the true freaks of the story is to make a sound and logical conclusion. However, the basis of Kahane's argument that woman is the monster of the contemporary Gothic novel is derived from the notion that terror evolves from the unseen to the seen and emerges in the *physical* figure of a woman. The physical is clearly a crucial element of the Grotesque. Therefore, it stands to reason that characters who are freakish because of some hidden, internal deformity are not freakish in the sense of

the physical Grotesque. Leota, Mrs. Fletcher, Mrs. Pike and the other women in the story may be mentally warped but they do not correspond with the description of the 20th century female monster.

The hidden elements of the Gothic-Grotesque in "Petrified Man" do not suggest that Welty was secretly tormented and anguished. On the contrary, as Schmidt's interpretation suggests, Welty uses the Grotesque to expose modern culture for what it truly is (86). Like the shield Athena gave Perseus to deflect the dangerous stare of Medusa, the Grotesque elements of "Petrified Man" act as a mirror Welty offers her readers so that they might recognise and avoid the brainwashing gender stereotypes of contemporary culture. Thus, Welty uses the very elements of the Grotesque that threaten to enslave as a means to undermine the patriarchal regiment.

Without an angst-ridden author and with no true Grotesque freaks, "Petrified Man" does not *technically* belong in the category of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. But it is fine example of Welty as a feminist before her time (Schmidt 80). Most anguished writers found the genre a form of release. Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor all led troubled lives in one way or another and their work reflected this angst. But Welty, who also grew up in the postbellum South, remained largely unperturbed by society's expectations and demands of her as a woman. Hence, she finds no need to release frustration through an autobiographical, unconventional and freakish female character. For her, the Southern Gothic-Grotesque is not an agent for her rage but a means to censure the values of a patriarchal system. "Petrified Man" demonstrates Welty using the Gothic-Grotesque to sabotage, from the *inside out,* those damaging and imprisoning stereotypes of her Southern culture.

Conclusion

The Southern Gothic-Grotesque in the Short Fiction of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty Verified

verify / 'verɪ,faɪ / *v.tr.*
1. establish the truth or correctness of
by examination or demonstration.

William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty have long been recognised as the major writers of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque tradition. This is made clear by the various anthologies and works of criticism of Southern literature which herald these writers as the chief exponents of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. Equally clear, however, is the relative lack of evidence to support the views held by these critics. Little research has been done to determine what it is, precisely, that defines the Southern Gothic-Grotesque genre. Consequently, those claims that distinguish Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty as the pre-eminent writers of the tradition ring hollow.

With the intention, therefore, of substantiating such claims, the stories of these four writers were evaluated against criteria that emerged from research of the works of leading theorists on the Gothic-Grotesque. The criteria synthesised from the authoritative works of these theorists identified four features essential to any work of fiction classified as Southern Gothic-Grotesque: disharmony, which exists in contrasts, clashes, conflicts and incongruities; freakish and peculiar characters; a strong emphasis on the tangible; and a tormented author who finds cathartic value in creating stories marked by such disharmonies, bizarre characters and physical details.

All four stories examined display the mark of disharmony. "A Rose for Emily" exemplifies this in the character of Miss Emily whose realistic

appearance, sexual desires and murderous behaviour are in discord with social stereotypes and expectations. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café,* disharmony appears as a fusion of terror and comedy which produces feelings of uncertainty and suspicion in the readers, causing them to be unprepared for the shocking events of the story. Miss Amelia, a masculine woman, and Cousin Lymon, a stunted adult, are also grotesquely disharmonious; both are neither completely one thing nor another. Joy-Hulga, of "Good Country People" is alarmingly grotesque because she is incongruous. She is an adult but behaves childishly; well-read but innocent in the ways of the world; and intellectual but physically deformed. Like McCullers, Welty saw great potential in the terror-comic approach to Grotesque disharmony. Readers of "Petrified Man" find themselves in a quandary – unable to laugh freely without being haunted by the sense that they should, in fact, be more frightened than amused.

Both Faulkner and McCullers revelled in intricately detailed physical descriptions that left nothing to the imagination. The tangible details in their stories sustain the characterisation of their grotesque protagonists. The stories of O'Connor and Welty, on the other hand, display considerably less physical details. "Good Country People" and "Petrified Man" display what is sometimes called "telling detail"; only a few, carefully selected words are used to convey an entire character in a story that is, otherwise, relatively free of long, detailed descriptions.

The protagonists of "A Rose for Emily", *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and "Good Country People" are all monstrous women whose reasons for terror stem from their unwillingness or inability to observe social codes of femininity. Miss Amelia and Joy-Hulga try to defy the conventions of Southern womanhood but are vanquished in the process. Faulkner's Miss Emily, although she, too, rebels against these conventions, does not succumb to male control as McCullers' and O'Connor's women do.

Knowing that the final silence of the tomb is unchallengeable, Miss Emily secures her victory by leaving behind for the town to discover the grotesque mystery of the upper room. There are no physically grotesque female characters in "Petrified Man". Unlike the hairy-thighed, strapping Miss Amelia, the fat, black-clad Miss Emily and the wooden-legged, bad-tempered Joy-Hulga, the women in this story are, instead, emotionally warped.

All four marks of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque are found in "A Rose for Emily", *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and "Good Country People". But "Petrified Man" displays only two characteristics of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. This conclusion proves – or, in Welty's case, at least partially disproves – the claim that these writers belong to the tradition of the Southern Gothic-Grotesque. Nonetheless, this process of verifying the claims made about Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty has done more than simply prove and disprove those claims. Much has been revealed about the writers and their place in the Southern Gothic-Grotesque tradition.

Earlier chapters have shown how the Southern Gothic-Grotesque is a literary form that befits the expression of emotion, particularly feelings of rage and frustration over unjust confinement and restriction by society. Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor, who were labelled "grotesque" and outcast because they did not meet society's expectations, expressed themselves by exacerbating the very Grotesqueness that caused them to be outcast in the first place. For them, the feelings of frustration and anguish brought on by the pressures of society found expression in stories about grotesque characters, eerie settings and bizarre events. On the other hand, Welty, as a seemingly happy and contented "Miss" at the age of ninety-one, appears indifferent to the stifling traditions of Southern culture.

Similarly, her stories lack the blatantly physical grotesqueness evident in McCullers or O'Connor.

Mikhail Bakhtin is a major figure in the field of Grotesque theory whose insights in *Rabelais and His World* have shaped and influenced many other theoretical works in the same field. Therefore, his assertion that the figures of old pregnant hags, in their excess of norms, best exemplify the Grotesque is a serious concern for feminist scholars, as it suggests that only certain physical appearances are acceptable and those which are not risk being marked "grotesque". Bakhtin's contention is the basis for many ideas about the Grotesque with which feminists find fault. McCullers and O'Connor illustrate, through their stories, what happens when women are unable to withstand and fold to the pressures of patriarchy. Both Joy-Hulga and Miss Amelia emerge physically and emotionally wounded from their battles against male authority. What is more, women who are repressed by a patriarchal culture sometimes internalise the belief that the male sex is superior and turn against their own femininity. For McCullers, this was reflected in the way she populated many of her stories with men and very few women. O'Connor, in turn, often portrayed uneasy relationships between women. Her particular focus on explosive mother-daughter relationships suggests that, in anticipation of the "maternal blackness" (Kahane 47) a daughter inherits from her mother, the daughter strives to remove herself from the source of her negative legacy.

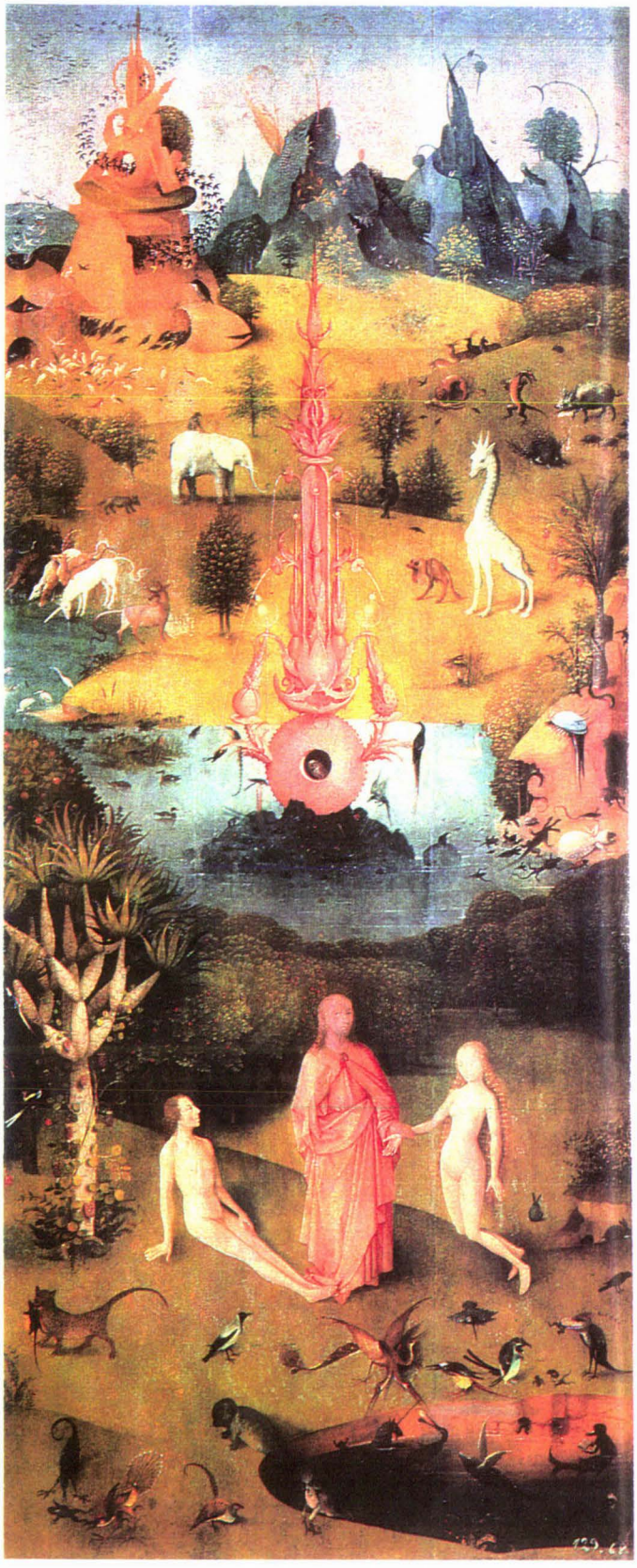
Although Faulkner cannot be said to have suffered the same plight as McCullers and O'Connor, he experienced a great many traumatic and heart-breaking events in his lifetime and certainly felt suffocated by Southern conventions on gentlemanly behaviour. Miss Emily, surely one of literature's more grotesque female characters, was a channel through which he expressed feelings of rage at life's adversities.

But for Welty, on the other hand, society's pressures produced in her the urge to fight against the values that produce these pressures. "Petrified Man" shows how Welty finds the strength to overturn the force of society's expectations by using elements of the Grotesque which threaten to ensnare to subvert, from within, the values of the patriarchal system.

As different one from another as Faulkner, McCullers, O'Connor and Welty were, there is one overriding factor that draws them all together. All four writers were out of place in the culture of their society and, in one way or another, chose to express this through their writing. Welty took advantage of this difference and used her art to fight against the pressures of her culture. But for Faulkner, McCullers and O'Connor, their differences became sources of anguish and frustration. Their unhappiness surfaced in the form of abnormal and deviant characters who found themselves at odds with the patterns of their society and, like their creators, felt themselves strangers in a strange land.

Appendix I

Appendix II



The Garden of Eden
(detail from *The Millenium)*

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