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Revising Women's Agency in a Curtain of Green

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Revising women's agency in *A Curtain of Green*

By

Caroline Rebecca Brandon

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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2019

Revising women's agency in *A Curtain of Green*

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In the mid-twentieth century many critics considered Eudora Welty's work regionalist, which limited the interpretation of its social and political implications. However, by the late 1980s there was a renewed dedication to examining the subtle social and political implications present in her fiction. In keeping with this critical trend, I examine Welty's revisions to four stories in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*. Previous interpretations of "Clytie," "Why I Live at the P.O.," "A Memory," and "A Curtain of Green" do not adequately address how the female protagonists of these stories challenge traditional expectations for women. I argue that Welty's revisions provide fundamental support for the female protagonists so that they can challenge existing social order in covert ways.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>COG</i>	<i>A Curtain of Green and Other Stories</i>
<i>EWB</i>	<i>Eudora Welty: A Biography</i>
<i>EWFP</i>	<i>Eudora Welty's Fiction and Photography: The Body of the Other Woman</i>
<i>EWP</i>	<i>Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?</i>
<i>EWWR</i>	<i>Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race</i>
MDAH	Mississippi Department of Archives and History
<i>OWB</i>	<i>One Writer's Beginnings</i>
<i>OWG</i>	<i>One Writer's Garden: Eudora Welty's Home Place</i>
<i>OWI</i>	<i>One Writer's Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Southern Review</i>

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Scholars often cite Diana Trilling's 1946 *Nation* review of Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* as the spark for interpreting Welty's fiction as regionalist and apolitical. Trilling's review suggests that "Miss Welty has turned away from the lower-middle class. . . becoming. . . just another if more ingenious dreamer on the Southern past" (578). Welty also became associated with her contemporaries the Southern Agrarians, especially her editor at the *Southern Review*, Robert Penn Warren. While *Delta Wedding* certainly adheres to some of the stereotypical portrayals of an idealized agrarian South, it also challenges and engages subtly with political and social concerns. Trilling's review may have stifled Welty studies, but this trend that lasted well into the twentieth century was also fueled by Welty's often misinterpreted essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?" in which she questions a writer's duty to engage in politics. However, by the late 1980s, there was a renewed dedication to examining Welty's work to reveal the subtle social and political implications present in most of her fiction. Suzanne Marrs and Harriet Pollack's edited collection, *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?*, emerged in 2001 as perhaps the most significant work to this critical movement in Welty studies. I examine similar themes and trends in four of Welty's short stories from *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*. This collection in particular is a rich body of stories with implications for social and political life in the mid-twentieth century. Published in 1941, *A Curtain of Green* provides a vast array of perspectives, ranging from those in the highest ranks of society to those who

experience extreme poverty. The social order Welty portrays is still recovering from the enduring effects of slavery in the midst of Jim Crow legislation and the Great Depression in Mississippi.

In “Clytie,” “Why I Live at the P.O.,” “A Memory,” and “A Curtain of Green,” I examine how revisions to these stories affect the social and political performances of their female protagonists. King Adkins notes that “the common element of place” remains the most obvious justification for considering *A Curtain of Green* as a short-story cycle (12). Adkins’ recognition that the “rural nature of these towns predominates” applies directly to the four stories I examine. “Clytie,” “Why I Live at the P.O.,” and “A Curtain of Green” all focus on protagonists who are widely accepted as members of preeminent families in their respective towns: Clytie Farr in Farr’s Gin, Sister in China Grove, and Mrs. Larkin in Larkin’s Hill. While “A Memory” has an unnamed protagonist, there are clear socioeconomic markers that distinguish the narrator’s family from other people in the story. While analysis of women in these stories—who all more or less *should* function in service of the patriarchy, especially given their assumed familial status—does exist, it does not fully address the social and political implications of Welty’s characterizations of these protagonists. For example, Sister in “Why I Live at the P.O.” is examined at length, but criticism focuses on her lack of agency instead of exploring how she enhances Welty’s contribution to a complex depiction of women in the American South.¹ Rather than focusing on the physical bodies of the female protagonists of these stories, as Harriet Pollack does in *Eudora Welty’s Fiction and Photography: The Body of the Other Woman*, I examine how these women function in relation to societal expectations of them. A significant portion of my thesis incorporates the use of the Eudora Welty Collection housed at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), including manuscript drafts of

¹ See Bouton’s “The Struggle for Agency in Eudora Welty’s ‘Why I Live at the P.O.’”

Welty's early stories and her correspondence. Drawing from this material, I argue that Welty's revisions create women who are complex and resist circumscribed behaviors that reinforce the patriarchy in the early twentieth-century American South.

In addition to considering these stories and revisions through a feminist lens, I also incorporate narrative theory into chapters two and three to more adequately examine Welty's revisions. Dan Shen's *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots* argues that covert textual progression functions as "an undercurrent running throughout the prose text" which "characteristically relies on non-metaphorical stylistic and structural techniques" and "forms a purposeful rhetorical strategy of the prose writer" (1). Shen proposes that the "process of uncovering the covert progression is a process of revealing the intricate relationship between artistic techniques and ethical concerns," a topic frequently discussed in Welty studies. As I hope my introduction shows, there are varying degrees to which critics assert that Welty's ethical stance reveals itself through her fiction, ranging from an idyllic representation of the antebellum South in *Delta Wedding*, or simply remaining unaware of the social concerns in Mississippi, to the more recent approach suggesting that Welty's interrogation of social and political issues is oblique but not hidden. Shen defines two categories for unveiling covert progression: Category A consists of instances in which the "covert textual progression subverts the overt plot development," while Category B consists of stories in which the "covert textual progression supplements the overt plot development" (23-24). In both categories, the ethical implications of the covert progression can be agreeable or disagreeable.

Welty's revisions in *A Curtain of Green* reveal numerous instances in which stylistic choices contribute directly to a covert textual progression that enhances our understanding of a story. This framework is especially important in the chapters two and three where I examine

“Clytie” and “Why I Live at the P.O.” However, in my fourth chapter, I focus instead on a biographical interpretation of “A Curtain of Green” and “A Memory,” where it is increasingly apparent that Welty seeks to provide alternative expectations for women of the twentieth century. Susan V. Donaldson notes, “The stories in Welty’s first collection may be populated . . . by figures on the margins of small southern towns . . . but those marginal figures are nearly always policed by white southern ladies who take it upon themselves to guard and maintain the rigidly defined racial and social hierarchies of their small southern towns” (*EWWR* 59). The protagonists in these stories exist on both ends of the spectrum—those who are in the margins and those who are expected to reinforce boundaries. Whether through narrative theory or biography, it becomes apparent that although Welty portrays women who adhere to social and cultural expectations rooted in the patriarchy, most of her revisions allow women to consider or even pursue alternative routes that challenge traditional social expectations. In essence, Welty’s revisions allow characters to revise their social performances in order to subvert the existing social order.

A significant body of Welty criticism informs my own research. Even prior to the important shift in interpreting Welty’s oeuvre marked by *Eudora Welty and Politics*, Noel Polk, Michael Kreyling, and Peggy Prenshaw stand out as critics who were already working to address new questions in Welty criticism. In 1973, Polk compiled “A Eudora Welty Checklist,” a comprehensive list of scholarship related to Welty. The *Eudora Welty Review* updates this list each year. In 1976, Michael Kreyling gave a brief but noteworthy illustration of Welty’s life and writing for the Mississippi Writers in Context project; more recently, Kreyling traces Welty’s relationship with her agent through their correspondence in *Author and Agent: Eudora Welty and Diarmuid Russell*. Prior to *Conversations with Eudora Welty* and the subsequent edition *More*

Conversations, Peggy Prenshaw edited two collections of critical essays on Welty in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

More recently, Rebecca Mark's *The Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples* (1994) shifts the discussion of feminism in Welty studies by demonstrating how Welty's work occupies and subverts the male literary sphere. Mark's study builds on previous work comparing Welty's writing with that of other women, namely Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Elizabeth Bowen, and Elizabeth Spencer. Mark's primary interest is in "Welty's confrontation with, and transformation of patriarchal myths and masculinist texts" (3). Mark notes that Welty's texts are often in conversation with those by authors such as William Butler Yeats, William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Sir James Frazer. Ultimately, Mark suggests that Welty is "parodying, battling, and above all transforming the subtext of masculine superiority embedded in their texts" (4). In doing so, Welty allows for a constantly evolving definition of feminism to occur, one in which dominant cultural narratives are placed in question and ultimately revised to allow "women to speak their minds" (28). Mark's work is especially relevant to my own research because we are both interested in how Welty revises dominant cultural narratives, especially those that center on a marginalized female character. Just as Mark finds revisions to cultural and mythological narratives in *The Golden Apples*, stories in *COG* both subtly and overtly question the patriarchal undergirding of twentieth-century life in Mississippi.

Harriet Pollack introduces *Eudora Welty and Politics* by noting that Welty's fiction addresses what academic theory was beginning to acknowledge in the late 1970s:

for the marginalized historical subject, history was not the chronicle of great deeds and battles, borders, territories, legislation, or ratification, but consisted rather of accounts of

lives on the periphery of official history and culture—of lives silent in history because they stood outside official power and event. (3)

Similar to Mark, Pollack acknowledges that often Welty's work reveals itself to be "suspicious of, and *about* [Welty's] suspicion of, old story patterns," which is unquestionably political (4). *EWP* has a unique goal in that it deliberately incorporates political vocabulary into discussion of Welty's writing so that we are not left to question whether the "private single consciousness" has political implications (5). The essays in this collection are all in conversation with each other and lead to new research questions in Welty studies, often focused on race. As Pollack suggests, questions about race are intrinsically connected to questions about class, gender, and mythologies of the South. *EWP* marks a distinct turning point in Welty studies; however, analysis of stories from *COG* in the collection is limited. I hope my research will begin to fill that gap.

Along with the comprehensive *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, Suzanne Marrs delves into Welty's fiction in her 2002 book, *One Writer's Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*. While Welty's life is the guiding force behind this study, it is not limited to that approach. The first two chapters, "En Route to *A Curtain of Green*" and "Eudora Welty's Secret Sharer: The Living World and the Writer's Imagination in *A Curtain of Green*," are especially pertinent to my own research. In these chapters, Marrs offers valuable insights into Welty's life where there are clear connections in her fiction. While the first chapter focuses on Welty's years spent away from Jackson and the second focuses on the initial years of her return, both emphasize the role of poverty and class in Welty's fiction. Likewise, Marrs notes an important connection between Welty's imagination, fueled by her observations of Mississippi Depression-era life, and the manifestation of those observations in Welty's characters. As my research also emphasizes, the

significance of class and social status pervades Welty's fiction as she interrogates the ramifications of class structures on private lives in *COG*.

In Victor Thompson's *Eudora Welty: A Reference Guide* (1976), he finds the most common themes of critical works are dedicated to place, myth, and social criticism, as well as the grotesque and Welty's comic sensibility fiction. More recent criticism has certainly continued to address many of the themes identified by Thompson, but it seems to have narrowed its focus in some of these aspects. Examination of "A Memory" continues to result in interpretations consistent with Welty criticism prior to 1975, emphasizing the grotesque, mythical allusions, and the nature of memory.² More recently, critics discuss how the grotesque relates to marginalized characters who are often protagonists in *COG*. In doing so, critics are able to address more explicitly issues of race, gender, and sexuality in these stories. Several critics have also incorporated Welty's photography from the 1930s into their analyses of her fiction. This naturally lends itself to a New Historicist approach, interpreting these stories in the context of the Depression and all the social and economic implications which lie therein.³ There has been an increase in focus on gender and sexuality in much of Welty's work. In particular, interpretations of "Petrified Man" and "The Hitch-Hikers" focus on a sympathetic view of homosexuality because of Welty's relationships with homosexual men.⁴ Discussions of gender and sexuality are pervasive in scholarship on Welty's work, and my own research focuses on

² See Gleeson-White's "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor" and Kelly's "American Fat: Obesity and the Short Story."

³ See Claxton's "Beauty and the Beast: Eudora Welty's Photography and Fiction," Martin's "Vision and Revelation in Eudora Welty's Early Fiction and Photography," Millichap's "Eudora Welty's Photography and Fiction in the 1930s and After," or Pollack's *Eudora Welty's Fiction and Photography: The Body of the Other Woman*.

⁴ See Johnston's "Sex and the Southern Girl: Eudora Welty's Critical Legacy," Nissen's "Queer Welty, Camp Welty," and Olson's "The Ambiguities of Gender in Eudora Welty's 'Petrified Man.'"

Welty's revisions of female protagonists with political implications, which has yet to be fully examined.

In particular, Peter Schmidt's *The Heart of the Story* (1991) discusses Welty's entire short story oeuvre and pays close attention to the same stories I discuss. By examining all of Welty's short stories, Schmidt "discover[s] hidden connections, affinities, rememberings, and foreshadowings among the tales that cannot be seen as well when the stories are read separately or seen merely as 'background' for her novels" (xiv). Schmidt questions some of the critical trends in Welty studies that were undoubtedly influenced by Trilling's review and Formalism. It seems that the renewed interest in Welty's body of work coincides with the displacement of Formalism as the dominant critical school (*EWP* 1). Schmidt's assessment of Welty is similar to Rebecca Mark's in that they are both interested in Welty's revision of archetypal and cultural mythologies and in their assumptions about gender, sex, class, and race. Unlike Mark, though, Schmidt seeks to situate Welty among women writers from early American literature. In relation to my own research, Schmidt's assessment is a vital precursor. My own approaches to "Clytie," "Why I Live at the P.O.," "A Memory," and "A Curtain of Green" are in conversation with Schmidt's readings. While Schmidt's interest lies in how Welty revises the opportunities for women in their original context, I hope that my research will offer an interpretation of how these stories remain relevant in the twenty-first century.

A continuation of Harriet Pollack's interest in the political and social implications of Welty's work, *Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race* offers a profound analysis of race in Welty's fiction. As Pollack notes in her introduction to the collection, it "seeks to spotlight and clarify Eudora Welty's concern for and depiction of African Americans, the color line, segregation, and Jim Crow as well as her commentary on patterns of whiteness, including its patterns of

blindness, insensitivities, and atrocities” (1). Pollack suggests that Welty’s awareness of race certainly transformed from her early years of writing because of the intense social environment during the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. Pollack notes three major conclusions that arise from Welty’s fiction and the essays in *EWWR*: first, Welty consistently makes the color line visible, forcing readers to consider her portrayal of marginalized black characters; second, Pollack writes that Welty’s “fiction repeatedly shows us that Welty understands race, like gender to be a performance” (10); and, third, Welty demonstrates an awareness of white privilege and its consequences in terms of “white material advantage and of black deprivation” (11). While critics will have to continually revisit the function of race in Welty’s body of work, Pollack’s edited collection of essays provides a concerted and deliberate effort to start that conversation.

Pollack’s most recent work, *Eudora Welty’s Fiction and Photography: The Body of the Other Woman*, as its title suggests, attends to Welty’s portrayal of bodies, particularly bodies of women who stand in the margins of society. This inquiry traces how Welty’s fiction fits into the “recurrent traumatic intersection between issues of class, gender construction, and race—all written on symbolic bodies.” The body of the other woman varies but frequently belongs to the lower-class and is “disturbingly exposed and expressive.” Pollack juxtaposes the body of the other woman with that of a “sheltered female,” especially in Welty’s “girl stories” (1).

Incorporating theory from Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Foucault, and Judith Butler, Pollack asserts that the body is “expressing collective social ideas, and its discipline as both public and personal” (3). Pollack pays close attention to issues of race, class, and gender, interrogating how they work against societal expectations. Pollack’s work informs my own research in that it has laid the groundwork for examining social performances of women.

Previous work often cites “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” and “Powerhouse” as the most suggestive stories in *COG* that reflect Welty’s political and social stance.⁵ However, by examining the revisions, I argue that Welty’s early fiction is consistently defined by her perceptions of circumscribed social patterns in the South. What is often noted as “oblique” results in my approach to Welty’s work from Shen’s theoretical stance—I look for the covert textual progressions that have larger implications for the social and political significance. In stories like “A Memory” and “A Curtain of Green,” where these implications are more readily apparent for the reader, I turn to biographical material, as do Marrs and Prenshaw, to closely analyze how the private sphere does in fact become the political sphere especially for women in the South.

⁵ See Ford’s “‘Serious Daring’ in Eudora Welty’s ‘Powerhouse’ and ‘Where is the Voice Coming From?’,” Marrs’s “Eudora Welty: The Liberal Imagination and Mississippi Politics,” and Pollack’s *Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race*.

CHAPTER II

AGENCY, TRANSGRESSIONS, AND THE COVERT PROGRESSION IN "CLYTIE"

In "Clytie," perhaps the most Gothic of her short stories, Welty depicts the plight of two southern women who must deal with restrictions upon their independence and the loss of their family's social preeminence. Octavia embraces the traditional southern class structure even as she challenges its patriarchal order and becomes a ruling, even tyrannical, force within her family. The other, Clytie, suffers under the restrictions and conventions placed upon southern women. She remains in her family home, unmarried, subservient, and mad, albeit not in the attic. She longs for a sense of human connection outside of her family but finds none. The Farr family struggles to understand their changing position in Farr's Gin, which results in Octavia's forceful dedication to upholding traditional class distinctions and Clytie's longing for human connection. Welty's story also incorporates numerous references to Greek mythology and Roman history that play an integral part in understanding the overt plot in "Clytie." Although Clytemnestra might seem the obvious allusion, the sun nymph Clytia, known for her unrequited love of Helios is an equally compelling association; ironically, rather than following the sun, Welty's Clytie searches for human connection only to find it in the bottom of a water barrel ("Clytia"). Octavia Farr's imperious nature aligns with that of her Roman namesake, Augustus Caesar, whose name until being crowned emperor was Octavian ("Augustus"). Octavia, unwilling to sacrifice social position, presents a depiction of female authority that results in abuse of her power, and Clytie, unable to embrace any sense of self, presents just the opposite, leading to the loss of her life.

While the dynamic between Clytie and Octavia remains the focus of the overt plot, Clytie's desire for human connection remains the most important thematic development. Dan Shen's *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots* defines six types of covert progression. Shen argues that "The process of uncovering the covert progression is a process of revealing the intricate relationship between artistic techniques and ethical concerns. . . . it highlights how ethical issues can be non-didactically, finely, and uniquely conveyed by the literary writer" (4). "Clytie" fits into Shen's category of a supplemental covert progression in which the "Covert and Overt Go in the Same Direction" (24). The overt plot development depicts how Octavia's insistence on upholding the patriarchy brings about the demise of the Farr family and most significantly brings about Clytie's death. Meanwhile, the covert progression demonstrates that Clytie acts against Octavia's wishes by seeking connections that transcend class boundaries; this covert progression becomes increasingly apparent through Welty's revisions to the initial, unpublished version of the story. Consistent with Shen's theoretical apparatus, Clytie's acts of defiance exist as a parallel movement of textual progression that allows Clytie to seek connections beyond the limitations of class and family status. Welty's revisions, therefore, suggest a keen awareness of stylistic changes that provide for a more ethically agreeable interpretation of the story.

Previous criticism that examines textual variants in "Clytie" focuses on Clytie's lack of agency and self. Specifically, Lorinda B. Cohoon recognizes how the overt plot development contributes to Clytie's final act of the narrative: "Clytie is the only Farr who has not entirely given up association with people outside the family. . . . She eventually commits suicide by holding her face in a rain barrel after concluding that her desire to connect with others cannot coexist with the Farr family rules" (47). Cohoon's assertion recognizes the Farris' confinement to

the family home through examination of three textual variants. In these variants, Cohoon argues, the “revisions emphasize the positions taken by the members of the Farr family and their direction and movement in relation to each other,” revealing “Welty’s concern for the nuances of the controlled movement and position of the characters within the space of the story” (47). Similarly, Don James McLaughlin focuses on revisions to “Clytie,” but he instead emphasizes that the revisions Welty makes per her agent’s critique result in the story’s acceptance for publication in 1941 in *Southern Review*. For two years Welty’s agent, Diarmuid Russell, experienced difficulty in finding a place of publication for “Clytie” (53). Through a psychoanalytic examination of the story, McLaughlin’s focus on Clytie’s relationship with her mother perhaps explains the “obscurity” Russell observed. While McLaughlin’s conclusion that Clytie “appears devoid of any coherent sense of self or agency” is justifiable given the revisions he cites, his analysis again focuses on the overt plot development (48). He examines instances in which Clytie’s agency is taken away, but he fails to address actions outside of the overt plot development. McLaughlin’s argument continues as he examines the only instance in which Clytie’s mother is mentioned in an earlier draft of the story: with the early draft as support, he asserts that Clytie searches for the face of her mother.

Cohoon’s and McLaughlin’s conclusions note textual variants and revisions that focus solely on the overt plot development. Cohoon’s analysis of Octavia’s authority and its limitations for herself and her siblings is valid, and I agree that most of the revisions in “Clytie” serve to reinforce Octavia’s strict adherence to traditional class structures of the early twentieth century. However, revisions specifically pertaining to Clytie contribute to the covert progression of the narrative by creating an opportunity for connection that transcends class boundaries and Octavia’s dictates. Clytie’s search for a face remains the commonality between the overt plot and

the covert progression. While McLaughlin maintains that Clytie searches for her mother's face, I suggest that Clytie searches for her own face.¹ Focusing on the development of the theme of self-discovery reveals that while Clytie's agency is significantly limited by Octavia's demands, there are instances in which Clytie attempts to harness some sense of agency. My focus, however, is twofold: 1) revisions to Octavia's character and actions that contribute to the overt plot and 2) revisions to the characterization of Clytie that contribute to the covert progression throughout the story but have not been explored by previous critics.

Through consideration of Southern Gothic characteristics, thematic elements of the overt plot in "Clytie" become more evident. While Octavia and Clytie both clearly exhibit grotesque behaviors and appearances, Octavia's adherence to tradition distinguishes her from Clytie. In "Making a Spectacle: Welty, Faulkner, and Southern Gothic," Susan V. Donaldson highlights the blurring of lines between spectator and spectacle, calling readers of and community members (often the narrative voice) in Welty's stories to consider their own actions as they critique actions of others in the public sphere. Donaldson's most noteworthy analysis of Welty's fiction focuses on Clytie as a "gothic heroine," who momentarily seeks an alternate narrative. While I will later argue that Clytie in fact does exhibit agency that most critics deny, first I focus on Octavia's role in this system because her persistent dedication to upholding it severely limits Clytie's ability to form a sense of self. Octavia's enforcement of the previously established patriarchal social order manifests itself through her insistence on maintaining a superior social position in Farr's Gin, her reliance on traditional expectations for women, and her claim to authority within the Farr family.

¹ Kellie Donovan-Condrón also argues that Clytie searches for her own face; however, Donovan-Condrón's analysis of Clytie is brief and focuses on monstrosity in the Southern Gothic (346).

Octavia clearly retains an understanding that her family's position no longer exists in the town. As Clytie checks for open windows, she reflects that for Octavia "Ruin or encroachment, even upon priceless treasures, even in poverty, held no terror for her; it was simply some form of prying from without, and this she would not forgive" (102). Perhaps Octavia, after recognizing the decline of her own family, believes she can maintain some semblance of their previous status by keeping Farr's Gin at a distance from the family. While Octavia does not fear poverty, because it is clear that everyone in Farr's Gin is financially unstable, she does fear an equal class status with other residents of Farr's Gin. Welty's revision to this passage emphasizes the significance of the Farris' superior position in the community. In Welty's initial draft of "Clytie" the previous quotation reads: "Ruin or encroachment, even upon priceless treasures, and even in poverty, held no terror for her; she simply would not forgive it. This was to be seen in her face."² By revising to include the phrase "it was simply some form of prying from without," Welty emphasizes Octavia's desire to maintain a sense of privacy and superiority. At this point in the narrative, though, the community also values this distinction. While it is clear the community has modernized without the Farr family, the ladies watching Clytie from the porch use the separation as justification for actively criticizing and looking at the Farris as a spectacle. Also, in keeping some mystery in "the old big house," Octavia reminds the community of the previously established social order that in turn preserves her own family's status. The Farris' home, therefore, becomes a citadel—a space that stands against time—as the world outside it continues to move forward. As Donaldson suggests, "these women find themselves in various forms of confinement and entrapment, and quite often their imprisonment is signified by the boundaries of the stories that enclose them and by the communities and readers who scrutinize them" (570). In

² The manuscript consulted for "Clytie" is in Series 2, Box 2, Folder 3 of the Welty Collection housed at MDAH.

this sense, Octavia holds tightly to her home, a space that protects her family from time as a marker of change, resulting in a character who adheres to definitions of the Southern Gothic that might seem limiting to readers now. Meanwhile, the community also values the boundary created by the Farr home, consistent with Donaldson's interpretation that the "boundaries of the stories" allow the community to critique the Farris.

Despite the community's concerns about the Farris' sanity, they do not challenge the traditional social order upheld by Octavia. Octavia scolds Clytie for walking through the town: "But you must sneak away and not answer when I call you. Go off and wander about the streets. Common—common——!" (101). Octavia indicts Clytie's behavior as "common" as well as blatantly categorizing the community as such; in doing so, Octavia upholds her understanding of the family's position in the community as well as establishing herself in a superior position to Clytie within the domestic sphere. By placing herself as head of the household, Octavia, in turn, also places herself as head of the community. The Farris are no longer financially stable and cannot make logical decisions on behalf of the community, which challenges ideas typically associated with families of the upper class. Instead, the community has come to expect that even the Farris' bills "would never be paid any more than anyone else's" (99). Since Octavia's efforts to maintain social status are unthwarted by other members of the community, the Farris' actual financial status remains irrelevant. Brannon Costello argues that despite the South "becoming more business and urban oriented, white southerners nevertheless conceived of class in terms of a mythical but powerful vision of the Old South aristocracy" (4). Farr's Gin clings to these traditional models of wealth. Observing that actual financial means has no real consequence for class structures, it becomes clear that other factors—most notably, race—are more important to preserving paternalism.

In addition to overt categorization of her family as above the remainder of the community, Octavia relies on the mythologized cultural ideal for white southern women to enforce the patriarchy throughout the narrative. Anne Firor Scott describes the ideal figure: “Physically weak, and ‘formed for the less laborious occupations,’ she depended upon male protection. To secure this protection she was endowed with the capacity to ‘create a magic spell’ over any man in her vicinity. She was timid and modest, beautiful and graceful” (4). Scott’s description of the ideal southern woman is most apparent in Octavia’s gesture with her broach, revealing that the ideal remains paramount in her understanding of society and her role in it. Welty’s revisions again strengthen Octavia’s character as a vestige of the past. As Octavia waits at the top of the stairs, rather than just her “unresting fingers” it is Octavia’s “wrinkled, unresting fingers” that “took hold of the diamond cornucopia she always wore in the bosom of her long black dress” (101). Welty’s addition of Octavia’s wrinkles emphasize not only the decline in Octavia’s physical appearance but also Welty’s use of the cornucopia. Welty juxtaposes the cornucopia—typically a symbol of abundance—and the Farrs’ precarious financial situation in order to develop the irony of Octavia’s understanding of herself and her family’s status. While she holds fast to the actions that defined her prior to physical deterioration, Welty’s revisions suggest that Octavia has an acute—though unacknowledged—awareness of her own status. Welty’s initial draft reads: “It was an unwithered grand gesture of hers, fondling the cornucopia, almost offering it.” Welty deletes “almost offering it,” implying that Octavia is not someone capable of entering courtship or marriage. However, by holding on to “grand gestures,” Octavia privileges the mythologized southern woman as a means of preserving some semblance of the prominence her family once held.

While protecting the established order is perhaps the most important motivating factor, Octavia overtly challenges the patriarchy through her assumption of power, her dismissal of Old Lethy, and, perhaps most consequential, her influence over Clytie. Octavia holds fast to patriarchal ideals by embracing social class and her family's position in the community, but she challenges the same ideals by assuming the role typically fulfilled by a man. Octavia assumes this power when the Farr men no longer fulfill their expected positions in the family and community: her father is medically incapacitated, her brother Henry is dead, and her brother Gerald remains confined to the Farr home.³ According to patriarchal norms, Gerald should maintain control of the store, as well as Clytie's and Octavia's actions. However, it appears that after Gerald's wife leaves him, he loses any sense of authority he once had. Traditional modes of masculinity define the authority Gerald employs during his marriage to Rosemary: "How had it happened that she had left him so soon? It meant nothing at all that he had pointed the gun against her breast. . . . he had wanted to show her that he loved her above life and death" (104). Gerald relies on the gun as a means of power and authority in his relationship with Rosemary, but he fails to consider what the ramifications of his actions will be. Gerald threatening Rosemary mirrors the extreme behavior Octavia exhibits through her encounters with Clytie.

Although Octavia assumes authority typically denied to women, Scott acknowledges that "[m]en were aware, too, that the woman who had been so firmly put in her place, the home, often showed unusual power within that restricted domain," which Octavia clearly embraces as she remains in the domestic sphere (19). Given Octavia's dedication to the family's social status, it seems likely she would want to maintain outward signs of financial stability and markers of upper-class families, such as a cook or maid. However, Octavia's dismissal of Old Lethy stands

³ See Cohoon for further discussion of Gerald's confinement (51).

in contrast to traditional markers of class and suggests that as Octavia negotiates the financial constraints that limit her family's authority, she preserves their class status by isolating her family from Farr's Gin. Clytie recollects that although "Old Lethy and their father had both pleaded that they might be allowed to see each other, Octavia had shouted as she always did, and sent the intruder away" (102). Octavia's designation of Lethy as an "intruder" negates the relationship between Lethy and Mr. Farr. Welty's revisions offer further insight into the relationship between the Farr family and Old Lethy: rather than the original description of Old Lethy as "a remnant from his childhood," Old Lethy is "his nurse in childhood" (102). Welty's revision lessens the distance between Mr. Farr and Old Lethy by changing the function of Old Lethy in Mr. Farr's memory; a childhood nurse is a more meaningful figure than a mere "remnant of childhood." Perhaps Octavia's fear resides in the intimacy between Old Lethy and Mr. Farr, which could offer Old Lethy a more prominent position within the household and community to challenge the class structure Octavia works so desperately to maintain. While the town dismisses Octavia as mad and the narrator does not depict any real consequences of Octavia's authority in Farr's Gin, the ramifications of her authority are felt more severely in the Farr home. Octavia's authority over Lethy is understood as a part of a larger system, but she holds the same power over her incapacitated father, deliberately and directly challenging the patriarch.

Dismissing Lethy is an obvious contradiction to the paternalist class structure that Octavia upholds. Lethy's name, like Octavia's and Clytie's, has wider implications, though. Drawn from one of the rivers in the underworld, Lethy's character becomes a symbol for the power of memory and what happens when memory fades. Rather than Lethy forgetting about the Farris, it seems the Farris are the ones determined to forget about Lethy. Especially for Octavia,

ignoring Lethy acts as a means of preserving Octavia's limited understanding of the Farrs' status. More important, though, is Lethy's presence as the only African American in "Clytie." David McWhirter's observations about African American characters in Welty's *The Golden Apples* are relevant to our understanding of Lethy. McWhirter argues that "the marginalization of African Americans. . . call[s] our attention to the lives and histories this narrative isn't, in any direct way, telling" (*EWWR* 122). Lethy certainly fits McWhirter's characterization of Welty's African American characters: Lethy is only observed when she comes to check on Mr. Farr and is adamantly sent away first by Octavia and then by Clytie. Lethy's last visit in the story, though, reveals her as what McWhirter calls a "secret agent" (*EWWR* 118-19). Although readers hardly see Lethy, she acts as a reminder of the heavily circumscribed expectations for interactions between blacks and whites in early twentieth-century Mississippi. Lethy returns to the center of the narrative when she discovers Clytie upended in the rain barrel. If Lethy had remained in the Farr home, perhaps Clytie would have been successful in finding human connection, even if that connection were transgressive.

While the Farrs' financial position and Octavia's usurpation of power defy traditional expectations, one significant consequence of Octavia's dominance is Clytie's alienation from her family and community. On the surface level of Clytie and Octavia's relationship, the limitations of Octavia's power become increasingly apparent. In the overt plot of the narrative, Clytie takes on a subservient role within the home and community. Suzanne Marrs compellingly argues that "the problem for Clytie is not a lack of imagination, but the inability to use her imagination to create her own identity and to connect with others" (38). Clytie's lack of self is exacerbated after her father's stroke and the family's financial decline, as she is forced to take on roles that strain her ability to create any sense of her own identity. Clytie's speech, which more often than not

stems from Octavia's demands, suggests that in the overt plot she relinquishes any sense of agency. Just as Clytie sends Old Lethy home, comparable episodes of verbal tensions occur between Clytie and their neighbors. In these instances, the community assumes that Clytie speaks on behalf of Octavia as the description of Clytie "running straight out the house, flaming with her message from Octavia" evinces (106). Even when she is not conversing with another person, Clytie follows Octavia's behavior, which the narrator addresses in a similar manner: "Everybody said, in something like deprecation, that she was only imitating her older sister, who used to go out to that same garden and curse in that same way, years ago, but in a remarkably loud, commanding voice" (106). Whether it is sending Old Lethy home, pulling up the rosebush, or cursing out of her own frustrations, Clytie's speech reiterates Octavia's misguided attempts to maintain social class rather than expressing any of Clytie's own desires.

The community members also note a decline in Clytie's appearance and sanity as Octavia becomes increasingly demanding. The narrator notes, "For years, every once in a while, she would come out in what was called an 'outfit,' all in hunter's green, a hat that came down around her face like a bucket, a green silk dress, even green shoes with pointed toes," which suggests at one point in time Clytie did act based on her own desires (105). However, as the narrator continues, it becomes clear that in the overt plot development Clytie abandons any sense of self that once defined her: "It had been a long time now since Clytie had dressed up so that you could see her coming" (105). In addition to tracking a decline in physical appearance, the community believes that "Miss Clytie's wits were all leaving her . . . the way her sister's had left her" (99). Until Clytie sees her own image, she has difficulty identifying the influence of Octavia's power and the degree to which it affects her. Clytie's memory of "the face of Octavia [being] thrust between," indicates that at one point in time Clytie could recognize the consequences of

Octavia's power. Clytie's inability to form relationships with others or an understanding of herself agonizingly demonstrates the limitations to Octavia's demands.

While most critical discussion of "Clytie" asserts that she lacks any sense of agency or ability to act independently, I argue that a parallel textual progression emerges; furthermore, Clytie's lack of self-knowledge does not mean that she exists without any agency. As Shen emphasizes, a distinguishing characteristic of a covert textual progression is that it is an undercurrent throughout the entire narrative rather than an unrevealed secret. Peter Schmidt argues that "we may speak of the apparent misogyny of stories like 'Clytie' or 'A Visit of Charity' as the first 'secret' of their narratives and those stories' feminist anger as their even more deeply hidden secret, the one that when it is named will be even more startling to its hearers than the first" (192). My analysis differs from Schmidt's in that I suggest neither the "apparent misogyny of those stories" nor the "feminist anger" are secrets to be uncovered. First, the "apparent misogyny" is characteristic of the patriarchal social order that Octavia maintains throughout the narrative; it is a fact of life in Farr's Gin. Second, Clytie's anger—primarily expressed as Clytie's cursing in the garden—stems from patterning her behavior after Octavia, which Schmidt fails to acknowledge. Through comparison of Welty's early drafts and the published version, covert progression in "Clytie" is increasingly apparent. While many critics focus on Clytie's weaknesses⁴, I interpret these revisions of Clytie's interactions as significant moments when she not only demonstrates a sense of agency but also subverts the existing social order by transgressing class boundaries. Shen argues that in covert textual progressions,

⁴ See Marrs (*OWI* 38-40). Similarly, Cohoon argues that the sense of gothic confinement is echoed in Clytie because her search for a face leaves her "disappointed, tied to her family, [and] without a clear purpose" (49). Through a psychoanalytic lens, McLaughlin suggests that Clytie's "limited speech patterns" lead to an interpretation of her in which she "appears devoid of any coherent sense of self or agency" (2).

behind the irony against the protagonist in the overt plot, there is uncovered a deeper ironic progression against social forces which largely account for the weaknesses of the protagonist. This kind of ironic undercurrent shortens the distance between the protagonist and the author/narrator/reader. (8)

Clytie's weaknesses serve as a prime example of this type of ironic development. Likewise, Octavia's unwavering adherence to traditional social structures prevents the Farr family from legitimately remaining as retainers of Farr's Gin. More important, though, is that it leads to Clytie's devastating and suicidal self-discovery, as this seems to be the only viable alternative to life with Octavia. Furthermore, Clytie's "weakness" or inability to form a sense of self becomes questionable as the social structure is exposed as the truly confining agent in the narrative.

The most significant revisions that demonstrate a sense of agency for Clytie occur early in the story after she comes in from the rain. The initial draft reads, "She put the window down without making a noise, and then went through the parlor, the library, and the dining room on her tip-toes," while the revised and published version reads, "The kitchen window was wide open—she had done it herself. She closed it gently" (102). The first draft suggests Clytie upholds the environment Octavia has established; however, Welty's revision literally leaves open a more deliberate possibility for Clytie to form a connection through the open window, contrasting the confinement Octavia demands. In addition to the literal possibility for a connection, Welty's revision is also worth considering stylistically. Cohoon notes the gothic sense of confinement throughout the narrative; however, this moment challenges that notion. Welty does not leave the kitchen window cracked; it is left "wide open" and then Clytie's action is set off by a dash. While it is the narrator who comments "she had done it herself," the dash interrupts the sentence in a way that allows for a focal point as the narrative transitions into a moment of free indirect

discourse. The portion of the sentence following the dash reads as Clytie's reflection on her own actions, both opening and closing the window.

A few pages later, Welty adds another "secretly open window" to the story. As Clytie cooks breakfast, "out the open window, a freight train passed"; the phrasing changes to "Far out past the secretly opened window a freight train was crossing the bridge in the sunlight" (107). McLaughlin examines this portion of the original draft because it includes a reference to Clytie's mother; he cites this moment in the initial draft to conclude that Clytie is looking for her mother's face. However, the window becomes more significant in terms of Clytie gaining a sense of agency and an ability to challenge the existing social order. The addition of one word, "secretly," simultaneously reinforces Octavia's demand for seclusion and privacy from the community and allows Clytie a secret of her own. As Octavia's name suggests, she exists as a dictatorial force throughout the narrative who seems ever aware of Clytie's actions in and out of their home. Welty leaves the window open for Clytie twice, suggesting a real possibility that Clytie might connect with the world outside of her own family. In this reading, the windows metaphorically correlate with Welty's descriptions of Hermes throughout the narrative; the windows and Hermes both act as potential portals for communication that contribute to a continuous covert progression. Hermes's responsibility as messenger required excellence "in the use of speech and eloquence in general" and it "necessarily implied the notion that he was the promoter of social intercourse and of commerce among men" ("Hermes"). A consistent ironic comparison between Hermes's role in mythology and in "Clytie" emerges.

Clytie's desire for connection, which remains always at the threshold, could be achieved if she held the same expertise as Hermes. Welty's first description of Hermes occurs early in the story when Clytie lights the fixture at the bottom of the stairs, at a threshold of sorts: "the bronze

cast of Hermes was holding up a gas fixture.” The description of the Hermes statue itself does not overtly suggest any means of communication. In fact, the lines immediately following his description suggest the opposite, as “at once above this, lighted up, but quite still, like one of the unmoveable relics of the house, Octavia stood waiting on the stairs” (100). In this instance, Hermes has the potential to benefit Clytie and Octavia’s interaction, but the messenger god ironically is unable to deliver as a static bronze statue. Even as Hermes stands between Octavia and Clytie, their communication is clearly stifled by both Octavia’s physically superior position as she stands at the top of the stairs and her position of matriarchal authority over Clytie. As in the previous example, Welty’s revisions help illuminate the covert textual progression that allows Clytie an increased sense of agency despite her conflict with Octavia’s authority. Tracing the instances in which light, often portrayed as a literal flame in *COG*, Marrs argues that fire becomes “an emblem of memory and imagination itself” (*OWI* 23). However, she does not address the moment that Welty adds when “Clytie took a match and advanced to the stair post” (100). In the early draft, the descriptions of Hermes and Octavia remain relatively consistent, but Clytie does not interact with the statue in the same manner. Confronted directly with Hermes, a clear symbol of the importance of light, imagination, and communication, Clytie actively seeks a productive form of communication—even if it is with Octavia. Perhaps it is Octavia’s inability to transgress that prevents Clytie’s connection with another person.

Near the end of the story, Clytie’s interaction with Mr. Bobo again exemplifies Welty’s use of Hermes as a symbolic figure when Clytie attempts to form a connection but fails to do so. Consistent with the Southern Gothic, Mr. Bobo enters the Farr home as an outsider and as a symbol of progress in Farr’s Gin. However, despite their obvious decline in wealth and social position, Mr. Bobo’s deference to serve the “upper class” supports his return each week.

Furthermore, because Mr. Bobo is allowed into the Farr home, he acts as the town's and the reader's proxy. Clytie seems almost to form a connection with the Hermes-like Mr. Bobo: "Instead of telling him that he might go in and shave her father, she put out her hand and with breath-taking gentleness touched the side of his face. For an instant afterward, she stood looking at him inquiringly, and he stood like a statue, like the statue of Hermes. Then both of them uttered a despairing cry" (109). Welty's comparison of Mr. Bobo to Hermes becomes an ironic allusion: just as Hermes serves as the messenger for the gods, Mr. Bobo serves as a messenger for Clytie, but no message reaches her.⁵ Mr. Bobo finds nothing to love in Clytie, and is in fact terrified of this experience as he challenges class boundaries, preventing him from communicating effectively with Clytie. In contrast, Clytie's apprehension in this moment is not defined by class as she examines Mr. Bobo's "small, doubtful face," asking herself, "What fear raced through his little green eyes! His pitiful, greedy, small face—how very mournful it was, like a stray kitten's. What was it that this greedy little thing was so desperately needing?" (109). Clytie neglects the barriers enforced by society in an effort to form a connection but finds no solace in her only links to the community. Welty's consistent incorporation of Hermes throughout the narrative suggests a textual progression that runs parallel to the overt plot; by repeatedly alluding to Hermes, an additional layer of irony emerges that exposes the limitations class places on communication and acts as further illustration of Octavia's insistence on distance as an essential element in maintaining the Farrs' status.

⁵ In addition to Hermes's role as messenger, he also "conducted the shades of the dead from upper into the lower world" ("Hermes"). Marrs's interpretation follows this duty of Hermes, as she argues that the Hermes-like Mr. Bobo ushers Clytie away (*OWI* 40).

Clytie's interaction with Mr. Bobo forces her to contend with humanity physically and it correlates directly with her overt plot—looking for faces in Farr's Gin. The narrator describes Clytie's "mediations":

the number of faces seemed to Clytie almost infinite. She knew now to look slowly and carefully at a face; she was convinced that it was impossible to see it all at once. The first thing she discovered about a face was always that she had never seen it before. When she began to look at people's actual countenances there was no more familiarity in the world for her. The most profound, the most moving sight in the whole world must be a face. Was it possible to comprehend the eyes and the mouths of other people, which concealed she knew not what, and secretly asked for still another unknown thing? (101)

Again, Welty uses free indirect discourse to deliver Clytie's thoughts about all that a face can reveal. The sense of pity, which is often present in the narrator's voice when speaking as a community member, vanishes as the narrator defines Clytie's motivations. The two most common possibilities for the face Clytie looks for are that of her mother or of a romantic interest. However, more compelling is Marris's suggestion that rather than looking for the "face of love," Clytie looks simply for the face of someone with whom she can form a connection. As Marris proposes, Clytie's "inability to imagine a life beyond the demands of family and community and her inability to identify with others are the forces that doom her. Imagination can be healing and restoring, but only if it leads to communication" (*OWI* 40). Returning to Clytie's interaction with Mr. Bobo, Clytie must first recognize a sense of self before she can form a connection with another person. Having found neither at this point, Clytie continues looking for the face, leaving her in an intermediary state where she does not fit in the Farr home or outside of it.

By looking for and discovering herself in the rain barrel, Clytie's primary goal becomes self-discovery and a sense of belonging outside of her family. Welty's revisions create a more universal thematic development as "Clytie's quest throughout the final story is more figurative than literal" (Marrs, *OWI* 39). After Clytie sees her own image in the water, she cannot find anything to love in herself:

Of course. It was the face she had been looking for, and from which she had been separated. . . . Everything about the face frightened and shocked her with its signs of waiting, of suffering. . . . Too late, she recognized the face. She stood there completely sick at heart, as though the poor, half-remembered vision had finally betrayed her. (110)

Clytie's death comes after Octavia's "monumental voice" calls for the water. Thus, it is Octavia who provokes Clytie's final action of the narrative. While Marrs proposes that the Hermes-like Mr. Bobo "leads Clytie to her death," I suggest instead that it is the simultaneous occurrence of Octavia's demands and Clytie's self-recognition that lead to her death (*OWI* 40). Clytie recognizes what the community has witnessed all along: Octavia's dominance prevents Clytie from forming a sense of self or any fruitful human connection. After she plunges into the rain barrel, she finally escapes Octavia's control. Through her search for a face, Clytie yearns to fulfill an intrinsic need of human existence—an understanding of herself so that she can discover the secret meaning in a face and an answer to her question: "Was it possible to comprehend the eyes and the mouths of other people, which concealed she knew not what, and secretly asked for still another unknown thing?" (101). Clytie's self-discovery answers some of these questions, but it also demonstrates the limitations of Octavia's power. As Clytie searches for connection that transcends class, Old Lethy ironically finds "her poor ladylike black-stockinged legs up-ended and hung apart like a pair of tongs" (110). Similar to the mythological figure Hermes, Old Lethy

is as another opportunity for connection, but one that is denied by Octavia because it would violate the traditional social order. For Clytie, even if social structures were upended, Octavia's adherence to those same structures prevents Clytie from forming any meaningful bond with another person.

It becomes clear that Octavia, faced with the uncertainty of change, holds on fiercely to tradition in order to maintain her own position. Scott recognizes that a "society increasingly threatened from the outside had every reason to try to diminish internal threats to its stability. . . . If the distance between myth and reality became so great that it could not be overlooked, then the situation might be threatening indeed" (21). Octavia privileges an understanding of her own position that aligns more closely with the myth of a southern woman that Scott defines rather than the reality of the Farris' circumstances. Threatened by a change in position, Octavia fails to comprehend what her reality could become when not protected by the patriarchy. Clytie, on the other hand, defies those patriarchal expectations for class and her behavior, seeking something that transcends established boundaries. While some critics argue Clytie's decision to remove herself from the constraints of life with Octavia and essentially life defined by patriarchal expectations implies that she lacks any sense of self, it does not necessarily imply that she also lacks any sense of agency. Welty's revisions traced here suggest that Clytie in fact does exhibit small acts of agency, which I argue contribute to a covert textual progression that runs parallel to the overt plot development, specifically, a progression that subverts patriarchal authority and expectations for women. The undercurrent that begins with secretly opened windows metaphorically connects to the potential for communication through Welty's use of Hermes. These moments come to fruition in Clytie's self-recognition, despite finding "a wavering,

inscrutable face” (110). Despite Clytie’s agency in these moments, though, what are the larger ramifications of her transgressions? Does Welty show punishment for those who transgress?

Given Clytie’s suicidal ending, it would be easy to suggest that Welty does punish transgressors. However, Clytie is not the only character who transgresses—Mr. Bobo and Lethy also deviate from circumscribed patriarchal behavior. Not only does Mr. Bobo’s physical contact with Clytie clearly defy convention, but also his decision to enter the home without being invited inside stands in contrast to typical interactions between the upper and middle classes. Similarly, Lethy’s repeated visits to the Farr home suggest that, despite being turned away, Lethy values the intimacy of her relationship with Mr. Farr above what society and Octavia dictate as appropriate behavior. Mr. Farr’s physical decline becomes the barrier for their relationship as he could “no longer hear or knew enough to beg to see her” (103). Even though Mr. Bobo and Lethy become physically separated from the Farr home, the ending for their characters does not have the same sense of finality that Clytie’s suicide brings. As Ruth Weston notes, the influence of British and American Gothic thrillers is clear in Welty’s fiction as the larger modes become a “fiction of alienation” that has “come to deal in psychological realism” (22). Clytie’s interactions with Lethy, Mr. Bobo, and the open windows, all act as covert opportunities for connection that transcend class, but Clytie fails to recognize them as such. By the close of the story, Welty’s final version suggests that Clytie’s alienation devours any sense of agency that she holds throughout the story; completing Welty’s allusion to Narcissus, Clytie’s search for self becomes obsessive and unsuccessful, revealing patriarchal limitations as the most detrimental factor in her search for autonomy and relationships. Even so, Clytie’s small transgressive acts—leaving windows open and reaching out to touch Mr. Bobo—culminate in her defiance of the limitations of patriarchal authority that Octavia enforces. In essence, the revisions to “Clytie” suggest that

although Clytie remains unable to transgress boundaries that lead to human connection, she nevertheless consistently searches for those opportunities.

CHAPTER III

ACCIDENTAL REVELATIONS: COMPLICITY IN PATRIARCHAL SYSTEMS AND SEEKING AGENCY IN “WHY I LIVE AT THE P.O.”

In the previous chapter, I demonstrate how Shen’s description of a covert textual progression that subverts the overt plot and challenges existing social order applies to “Clytie.” Through her search for faces, Clytie seeks human connection that transcends class boundaries. Although she fails to recognize an alternative for her life, she remains determined to continue looking. Through Clytie’s search, in an ethically agreeable way, Welty exposes the limits that the patriarchy places on human relationships, suggesting instead that connection—even if it transgresses established boundaries—allows for a better understanding of self. Likewise, in “Why I Live at the P.O.” Sister struggles to negotiate her own place within her family that is dominated by patriarchal order. In the overt plot, Stella-Rondo returns to China Grove, having “separated” from her husband, Mr. Whitaker; she garners even more attention because she brings home an adopted two-year-old child, Shirley-T. Questioning the validity of Stella-Rondo’s account, Sister recognizes the child’s resemblance to both Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy. After Stella-Rondo turns the entire family against Sister, Sister sees no other option but to move out of the family home and into the post office. On the surface level, Welty’s use of humor and southern dialect depicts a family disagreement that centers on the rivalry between Sister and

Stella-Rondo, a subject widely explored in critical discussion of the story.¹ In addition, Sister is rarely taken seriously as a narrator capable of revealing any significance in the family's disagreement.² However, I suggest that despite the humorous bits of dialogue and the seemingly lighthearted narrative voice, Sister's task as narrator is more complex and meaningful than simply relaying a family quarrel. Through Sister's inadvertent revelation of her own family as one complicit with racism and one that works to reinforce gender roles in early twentieth-century Mississippi, Welty strategically exposes the limitations of the patriarchy. In addition, I argue that despite questions about the reliability of Sister's narration, she embraces agency as a story-teller in a way that challenges notions about whose voice is authoritative in a patriarchal world.

As first-person narrator, Sister quickly establishes the family hierarchy as a significant component of her daily life. Taking into consideration the setting of the story, the Fourth of July, Sister is forced into a position typically fulfilled by "black labor" (*EWWR* 121).³ After responsibility for ensuring that domestic tranquility is transferred to Sister, she becomes aware of the possibility of exploitation, establishing a parallel textual progression that interrogates race, class, and gender norms. While Sister certainly recognizes how gender confines her, she fails to acknowledge that her own independence typically relies on the labor of another person. Reine Dugas Bouton suggests that Sister's narrative is incoherent and untrustworthy, resulting in Sister "becom[ing] a spectacle rather than an authority" (205). However, close attention to Welty's revisions of "Why I Live at the P.O." demonstrates that Sister maintains agency as a narrator and

¹ For discussion of Welty's use of humor, see Gina Cross and Lois Welch. For discussion of Welty's use of southern dialect see Heather Russel.

² For discussion of Sister as an unreliable narrator, see Reine Dugas Bouton. In contrast, Geraldine Chouard examines the role of anger in "Why I Live at the P.O.," which results in an analysis of Sister as a character who demonstrates a sense of agency.

³ David McWhirter discusses the presence of "black labor" in *The Golden Apples*, but his reading applies to the presence of marginalized black characters in "Why I Live at the P.O." as well.

exhibits growth as a protagonist. In addition, Welty's use of humor—especially humor directed towards Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo—allows for the sustained development of a covert textual progression that begins with Sister's questioning of gender roles and norms. Papa-Daddy's and Uncle Rondo's authority in the home is displaced as they become the object of humor, which allows for Sister to embrace a sense of her own authority that she commands when she moves to the post office.

A significant component of Shen's theoretical framework questions the ethics of the narrative. While in "Clytie" subversion is undoubtedly working towards a more ethical interpretation, this conclusion is less readily apparent in "Why I Live at the P.O." It seems Uncle Rondo is the only character who not only transgresses gender norms but also is aware of the family's exploitation of African American labor. In the overt plot, Uncle Rondo primarily functions as an object of humor, as he drinks "prescriptions," leaving him inebriated and wearing Stella-Rondo's kimono (59-61). However, his actions contribute to a significant component of irony and humor in the covert textual progression, revealing "a deeper ironic progression against social forces which largely account for the weaknesses of the protagonist" (Shen 8). If we are to consider any "weakness" in Sister's role as narrator to determine the ethical context of "Why I Live at the P.O.," it is that she—along with most of her family—fails to recognize the exploitation of African American labor in their home. "Why I Live at the P.O." underwent an extensive revision process. I examine three distinct components of the revision that contribute to the covert textual progression: Stella-Rondo and Mama adhere to the mythological ideal of the "Southern Lady"⁴ in order to reinforce the patriarchy; Welty's portrayal of African American

⁴ See Anne Firor Scott for an in-depth analysis of the mythology of the "Southern Lady."

labor suggests a nuanced awareness of Jim Crow performances; and, Sister's speech allows for an increased sense of agency.

The most obvious revision is to the name: Welty changed it from "Adam" to "Rondo," which has been extensively discussed in previous criticism.⁵ Another substantial revision early in the story suggests a sense of social awareness in a small community as Welty revises "divorce" to "separate" throughout the story.⁶ Heather Russel notes that "in the first half of the twentieth century, Southern women were expected to be polite and unassertive—and that elaborate linguistic techniques developed out of a need to discuss 'unladylike' emotions and events" (44). The topic of divorce would certainly be a questionable topic of conversation for southern women. Welty's awareness of social expectations is highlighted through a specific instance of this revision. When Stella-Rondo sees her uncle dressed in the kimono, in the initial version of the story, she questions his intentions: "knowing I just got home last night after a harrowing divorce and hung my negligee up in the bathroom, just as nervous as I could be?" The revised version of the story reads, "*knowing* I only got home this morning after my separation and hung my negligee up on the bathroom door" (61). Italicizing "knowing" places increased responsibility on Uncle Rondo, as a male authority figure, to be aware of what occurs in his home. In addition, Welty lessens the shock of a taboo conversation topic by not only changing "divorce" to "separation" but also by deleting "harrowing." Welty's revision of "divorce" throughout the story demonstrates an awareness of appropriate topics for conversation for southern women aptly reflected in Stella-Rondo's discourse.

⁵ See Thomas Lewis. Schmidt also acknowledges that the Rondo name alludes to the fact that "repetition and contrast produces only discord and disorder" (114).

⁶ The manuscript consulted for the initial draft of "Why I Live at the P.O." is in Series 2, Box 2, Folder 2 of the Welty Collection at MDAH.

A more substantive revision includes the addition of physical violence within their home as a means of upholding the patriarchy and disregarding members of the family. In an attempt to bring Mama to a realistic conclusion about Stella-Rondo's situation, Sister tells Mama, "Just like Cousin Annie Flo. Went to her grave denying the facts of life," to which Mama responds, "'I told you if you ever mentioned Annie Flo's name I'd slap your face,' says Mama, and slaps my face" (62). Welty's addition of this bit of dialogue shows that Mama ignores family members who place her social position in jeopardy and reinforces the patriarchy through physical violence. While Sister quickly moves on from this experience, it insinuates that violence was an acceptable means to enforce expected behaviors, including private discussions amongst family members. Bouton argues, "For Sister, authority seems to mean that one voice must be heard above all others, and that voice must be her own" (202). However, this addition suggests that Sister's is not the only voice that must be heard; Mama's desire to control the family narrative seems to be most important in this episode. Lois Welch asserts that "Most Welty stories conceal a terrible past event that might overwhelm the narrative if it were turned loose" (151-52). Is Mama attempting to conceal aspects of her family's past that would place their social position in danger? Mama's husband is absent, which Peter Schmidt describes as a "telling omission" (116). If Mama's situation bears similarity to Stella-Rondo's, that would be a plausible explanation for why Mama sides with Stella-Rondo. Furthermore, it is unclear exactly what Cousin Annie Flo has done to be ignored by the family, but it must be extreme enough to threaten Mama's, if not the entire family's, position for her to resort to physical violence when asserting herself as an authority figure.

In addition to maintaining a hierarchy within the family, economic status motivates them. Schmidt discusses Sister's interpretation of her role as postmistress: "The status that Sister

briefly had in the family with Stella-Rondo gone was much more various than the role of only child. Because of her job as the postmistress at the post office of China Grove, she is also able to hold the honored (and traditionally male) status as the family's principal breadwinner" (116). While I agree that the post office gives Sister an alternative to filial roles and responsibilities, there is not ample textual evidence to support his claim that she serves as the "family's principal breadwinner." Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, Sister is less concerned with the family's wealth and more attuned to the fact that her family takes for granted the domestic work she performs. Brannon Costello defines class as a term that "refer[s] to a social stratum whose membership is determined both by possession *and* consumption of wealth" (5). Early in the story, Sister comments on her family's wealth. Describing Papa-Daddy, Sisters says, "He's real rich. Mama says he is, he says he isn't" (58). This alone does not clarify their financial status, but Uncle Rondo's consumption habits confirm that the family belongs in the middle or upper class. They have money to spare and to spend on nonessentials, especially Uncle Rondo's "horribly expensive" prescriptions, his purchase of the radio, and Sister's trip to Mammoth Cave "all expenses paid" (59, 63-64). These markers of socioeconomic class set them apart in China Grove as their "wealth [and] income is put on public display" (Costello 4).

Costello's argument about the Fairchilds of *Delta Wedding* also applies here: "wealth, privilege, and power is inconceivable without coerced black labor, but openly to acknowledge such a bluntly economic relationship would violate the fundamental tenets of the status order" (45). This is perhaps most readily apparent through Mama's discussion of black labor in their home—labor that is questioned because the servants are denied the ideals that the setting of the story evokes. The Fourth of July marks a distinct intersection of class, race, and gender roles as Sister slips into a role within the home that she typically would not fulfill. She notes, "So I

merely slammed the door behind me and went down and made some green-tomato pickle. Somebody had to do it. Of course Mama had turned both niggers loose; she always said no earthly power could hold one anyway on the Fourth of July, so she wouldn't even try" (61). A couple of significant revisions occur in the previous passage. A minor revision, but one that further establishes the family as wealthy, occurs when Welty revises "the nigger" to "both niggers." This suggests that they were financially secure enough to employ the labor of two African Americans, placing them in a more prominent position than, say, Clytie's family. Harriet Pollack provides a full account of Welty's continuous revision of the use of the epithet "nigger" in "Why I Live at the P.O.," which was removed from the *Collected Stories* but preserved in *Stories, Essays, and Memoir*. Pollack remarks, "From the 1930s through the 1950s, racism was more than taken for granted as part of Mississippi's social order: it was repetitively, horrifically, and brutally defended as the very basis of cultural and social organization" (*EWWR* 8). Sister's use of "nigger" when describing the African Americans present in her home inadvertently exposes her own and her family's complicity in racism. Pollack's introduction to *Eudora Welty, Whiteness, and Race* concludes that Welty's "fictions over and again look at whiteness in ways that have the potential to make its behaviors visible, to expose its social and cultural practices, its assumptions, its voices, its blindness" (10). While Sister unintentionally exposes her family's "blindness" to racial exploitation, it nevertheless resonates as a social practice worth questioning and subverting.

The more significant revision occurs when Welty replaces "no human power" with "no earthly power." While it seems that Mama is aware of the tension between the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality that the Fourth of July symbolizes and the coerced labor of African Americans in her home, she does not question the economic system that allows for her own life

to remain one of leisure. This nuanced alteration reveals that Mama understands the exploitation of labor as an inherent part of her existence. Welty's revision demonstrates that Mama places responsibility for exploited labor in an "earthly power," suggesting that the economic base is not a human construction but rather something inherent to earthly existence. Costello's analysis is again useful for consideration of Mama's complicity in the paternalistic class structure. He argues that in *Delta Wedding*, Shelley "realizes that class distinctions and social relations are slippery and malleable but realizes also that her family's status rests on a firm belief in rigid class differences" (57). Likewise, Mama clearly understands that to maintain her position—economic, social, and filial—she must reinforce and uphold the distinctions that allow her family to be considered part of the aristocracy.

As previously noted, the setting of "Why I Live at the P.O." offers a distinct intersection in which we can look at class, race, and gender. After assuming domestic responsibilities, Sister has a new understanding of the extent to which race and gender are performances that is also demonstrated through her own performance as story-teller. These performances resonate especially with the time in which Welty writes—Jim Crow Mississippi. Richard Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" and Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." were published within five years of one another. After an incident while working at an optical company in Jackson, Wright recalls: "When I told the folks at home what had happened, they called me a fool. They told me that I must never again attempt to exceed my boundaries. When you are working for white folks, they said, you got to 'stay in your place' if you want to keep working" (5). Wright's experience corroborates Sister's presentation of her family's relationship with African American labor; it exposes the family's complicity in a system in which they are the benefactors. In the brief discussion of African Americans in the story, Welty adds, "It turned out that Jaypan fell in the

lake and came within a very narrow limit of drowning” after noting that Mama could not “hold one anyway on the Fourth of July” (61). At this point in the narrative, Sister has yet to be scolded or realize the precariousness of her own position, thus she still perceives her family and the black servants as the “perpetual, contented children” in “a natural, organic extended family” (Costello 58). At this point, Sister maintains a paternalistic understanding of Jaypan. It seems as though Jaypan almost drowns *because* he was not working in their home.

Sister’s enlightenment comes soon after, though, as Mama relies on Sister to fill the gap in domestic work. Examining the green-tomato pickle, Mama determines it is inadequate for Uncle Rondo and Shirley-T., going so far as to say, “Shame on you!” (61). In addition to the physical violence she deploys with Sister, she verbally scolds Sister for failing to sufficiently complete responsibilities within the home. Sister does point out the hypocrisy of Mama’s critique, though, implying that Stella-Rondo should be under more severe scrutiny for returning home separated and with a child that is older than her own marriage. The simple remark “That made me tired” expresses Sister’s early frustration with her family and the role she is now required to fill (62). Upon Stella-Rondo’s arrival, Sister is “over the hot stove, trying to stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child into the bargain, without a moment’s notice” (57). Sister performs a function in the family that is unfamiliar to her. In addition to the sibling rivalry that seems to have been present from the moment Stella-Rondo was born, Sister is further distanced from her family as she, like Clytie, takes over as family cook. Not much later, Sister again emphasizes her position in the family: “Stella-Rondo hadn’t done a thing but turn [Mama] against me from upstairs while I stood there helpless over the hot stove” (63). While Sister blames Stella-Rondo for creating discord in the family, Sister’s ultimate isolation is exacerbated by her loss of independence as she assumes duties typically

fulfilled by African American laborers; responsibilities that alter Sister's daily routine affect her relationships in the family in a comparable way to Stella-Rondo's return home. Welty exposes the limits of leisure, the family as complicit in maintaining racial hierarchies, and Sister's position within the family as "slippery and malleable," as Sister is the only person aware of any change in habits due to the absence of domestic labor (Costello 57).

The revisions discussed thus far suggest that Welty maintained a nuanced attention to the portrayal of social performances in Jim Crow Mississippi. Peggy Prenshaw argues that "Welty came to see in the rural story a possibility of—and human habitation for—active debate and discussion of topics that were . . . not merely private needs but also political issues" (*EWP* 38). Sister's role within the Rondo home clearly places her independence and agency at risk of being taken away. As Sister contends with her need to maintain independence, the Fourth of July ironically places her in a position that threatens her identity, demonstrating Prenshaw's assertion that Welty explores larger political and social issues within the private sphere. Although Sister may not be fully aware of the extent to which paternalism works in the larger community, she does recognize that unless she does something to assert her independence, she risks falling into a lower status. Although she examines Sister's and Stella-Rondo's competing narratives, concluding that Stella-Rondo's voice is privileged over Sister's. While Bouton does not recognize Sister's challenges to patriarchal authority, Bouton asserts that "Welty's characters, who are often marginalized, seem to be trying to find their voices. One way of doing this is by mastering the art of telling stories, for an effective story-teller gains a position of power—of agency—that enables the speaker to feel a sense of control in a world where he or she exists only in the margins" (201). In particular, revisions to Sister's character give her a voice that challenges the patriarchal authority structure within her home and community. By giving Sister

more authority as a story-teller, Welty reveals the ideological foundations of her family rooted in racism and explores the limits of gender norms. Sister promptly establishes Papa-Daddy as head of household and China Grove in her narration. From buying Stella-Rondo an Add-a-Pearl necklace, which seems like a frivolous purchase since Stella-Rondo “threw it away playing baseball when she was nine, with only two pearls,” to securing Sister’s job as post-mistress of China Grove, Papa-Daddy is at first a character whom Sister has no intention of upsetting (57-58).

However, Welty utilizes humor to sustain a covert textual progression of subverting male authority. Pollack describes “Welty’s comedies” as “social performances” in which Welty “mined the comedy innate in and intrinsic to everyday performances that are socially scripted and so familiar; many of her comic characters have the quality of revealing a society in which the performance of race, gender, or power verges on parody” (*EWWR* 11). In Sarah Ford’s “Laughing in the Dark: Race and Humor in *Delta Wedding*,” she argues that “We must first, however, see laughter as a tool of subversion, as a way of speaking back to those in power” (*EWWR* 132). It is necessary to distinguish between laughter, humor, and comedy in “Why I Live at the P.O.” There are certainly moments that are humorous and elicit laughter from Sister’s true audience, the reader. However, Lois Welch notes that “The incongruities of ‘Why I Live at the P.O.’ are hilarious—but not one of the characters is laughing” (150). Welch accurately asserts that Sister and the Rondo family do not laugh at their own circumstances; however, Ford’s assertion holds true in that Welty uses humor “as a tool of subversion.” In an interview with John Griffin Jones, Welty discusses her use of humor:

In a way it may be a way of entry, too, through humor. It’s a way to try, risk something, a way to get around something to make it endurable, to live with it or to shrug it off. And

then it's inherent in a whole lot of living, I think. I think it's just there. It's there! If you can show it and make it a process of revealing, that would be its justification; not for its own sake but to show something. People show an awful lot of things through humor, both conscious and unconscious. (330)

As Welty suggests, humor often occurs unconsciously; Sister's humor especially fits this category as she uncovers the ideological underpinnings of her home and community. Frequently in "Why I Live at the P.O.," Sister presents the men in her family as objects of humor that "verges on parody," subverting patriarchal norms and displacing male authority in the home.

Papa-Daddy's interaction with and discussion of his beard is humorous to the reader as he "l-a-y-s down his knife and fork" and asks Sister, "'Bird's nest'—is that what you call it?" (58). Consistent with Welch's analysis, as the reader laughs, Papa-Daddy finds this interaction a serious matter of concern that results in him calling Sister a "hussy" for supposedly suggesting he should cut off his beard. Welty's addition of Papa-Daddy's characterization of Sister as a "hussy" does not align with expectations for women of an upper- or middle-class family who remains prominent in a rural community. While it is clear that Papa-Daddy uses this characterization as an attempt to maintain control in his home, Welty does not leave Sister to be categorized in this manner without retort. Sister defends herself as she tells Papa-Daddy, "I do not enjoy being referred to as a hussy by own grandfather," challenging expectations for women in the family and the domestic sphere (59). Papa-Daddy resumes his own story about why he should not cut off his beard, which contrasts with Mama's slap. In both instances, Sister challenges the patriarchal structure within her home by resisting the established power. It is interesting to note that Papa-Daddy relies on language to counter Sister's challenge, while Mama relies on physical violence to reinforce familial hierarchies. Papa-Daddy relies on rhetoric to

reinforce his authority, suggesting an awareness of the power of language and distinguishing him from the domestic sphere that Mama inhabits.

At the end of dinner, Papa-Daddy removes himself from the central location of the narrative out to the hammock in the yard, where Uncle Rondo also becomes the object of humor. Conveniently, as both men in the story are displaced from their authority, they are also distanced physically from the women in the story. More specifically, though, humor centered on Uncle Rondo masks the implications of his actions as they pertain to gender performances. Often discussed as a humorous character and even disregarded by Sister as being “a good case of a one-track mind,” Uncle Rondo decides to wear Stella-Rondo’s kimono after consuming his prescriptions (59-60). Uncle Rondo’s prescriptions lead to inebriation, but they also allow him to challenge prescriptions about gender roles and performances. Regarding Uncle Rondo, Gary Richards argues that “to assert a gay or lesbian identity openly in the mid-twentieth-century South was implicitly to counter the heterosexuality on which this patriarchal family rested” (16). Richards describes Uncle Rondo’s wardrobe as “androgynous items with few connotations of masculinity” (35). Uncle Rondo’s cross-dressing may not overtly suggest anything about his sexuality, but it does suggest that he ignores circumscribed expectations for his own gendered performance. Dressed in the “terrible-flesh colored contraption” as Sister describes Stella-Rondo’s trousseau, Uncle Rondo pushes the boundaries of expectations for men. His attire undermines gender roles and norms as he seems quite comfortable in a garment designed and intended for women. Perhaps because Uncle Rondo cross-dresses and is in essence “othered” by his family, he seems more aware of the his family’s status and privilege despite having a “one-track mind.” After all, Uncle Rondo pays the girl at the end of the story who helps Sister move her things to the post-office. While he does not explicitly challenge paternalism typically

associated with slavery when he pays the girl, his actions do suggest an increased attentiveness to his role within the system.

Ultimately these moments of humor that undercut male authority in their home allow Sister to form a voice and tell her story in the public sphere. Sister takes on an increased sense of authority and agency through two extensive revisions in the closing scene of the story as she discusses her role as postmistress in China Grove. The first change occurs when Uncle Rondo initially remarks, “You won’t ever see anybody but One-Eye Beasley comin’ after our mail, that’s the way we’ll do . . . And I’ll thank you from now on not to read every order I get on a postcard, as you have been doing in the past.” In the published and collected versions of the story, Uncle Rondo tells Sister, “I’ll thank you from now on to stop reading all the orders I get on postcards and telling everybody in China Grove what you think is the matter with them.” Also in the revised versions, Welty adds Sister’s response: “but I says, ‘I draw my own conclusions and will continue in the future to draw them. . . . If people want to write their inmost secrets on penny postcards, there’s nothing in the wide world you can do about it, Uncle Rondo” (67). In this moment Sister demonstrates a sense of self-reliance and defends her own ability to think, which stands in contrast to Stella-Rondo’s dependence on the family.

The second change occurs when Sister discusses the possibility that people will stop buying stamps to show their loyalty to Papa-Daddy. Welty changes “You’ll see which is which” to “I know which is which” (69). Although only two words are altered in this statement, there is a clear indication that Sister has a more developed sense of independence and is unafraid of the consequences that may ensue because she breaks from her family. Sister takes ownership of her perspective and ideas in way that drastically differs from her earlier direct statement to the reader. Bouton does acknowledge one instance in which Sister seems to fully take control of the

narrative: “she can threaten the communication between Mr. Whitaker and Stella-Rondo. She has been unable to control the communication between Stella-Rondo and the men in their lives up to this point” (205). Bouton immediately qualifies her assertion: “And while it seems as if Sister has finally won, the fact that Mr. Whitaker probably will not contact Stella-Rondo makes this an empty victory” (205). Bouton’s conclusion that Sister gains agency by controlling Stella-Rondo’s discourse with men is really just the beginning of Sister’s agency. Although Sister’s narrative may have flaws, she succeeds in finding a way to be heard when her family ignores her. In addition, the revisions noted here imply that Sister gains a sense of independence from her family, who all seem to rely on one another to an extent verging on co-dependency.

With humor as the focus, Welty veils the fact that Sister finds agency as a story-teller just as humor veils the larger political and social implications that Welty questions about race, class, and gender. Therefore, humor allows for the subversive covert progression to become the overt plot. After close analysis of her revisions, it becomes clear that Sister is capable of creating a story. Consistent with Rebecca Mark’s argument that Welty subverts the masculine literary order, I argue that Welty’s revision process further reveals her interrogation of the masculine canon as Sister embraces agency as a story-teller. As Sister confronts the order of her family, Welty confronts the established patriarchal and literary order. Anne Goodwyn Jones notes the importance of gaining control over one’s voice:

To have a voice is to have some control over one’s environment. To have the vote, for example, is to have a voice in and therefore some power over the political world. But in another sense—a sense familiar to writers—to have a voice is to have a self. Learning to express the self in language is intimately related to learning to be. Thus voicelessness

may imply selflessness both in the familiar and in the more sinister meaning. For southern women, particularly, the quality of voice reveals the condition of selfhood. (37)

Despite Sister's inability to maintain a consistent narrative, she does form a voice that resonates with her audience. As Jones continues, "The woman who writes must therefore find her own plot, her own images, and her own voice. And that plot is the *quest* for her plot, her story, her self" (40). Sister's move, therefore, is about escaping the confinements of domesticity and familial relationships that inhibit her ability to form a voice and actually use it. Welty creates an opportunity to use that voice in the public sphere as she moves to the post office. Rural setting notwithstanding, the post office remains a government entity that acts as a poignant site of communication and alludes to the expansion of work opportunities for women in the mid-twentieth century.

Sister's role as postmistress provides an alternative to the roles she is expected to fulfill in the Rondo home. Schmidt argues that Welty's heroines "upend social roles" as they "try to envision a new form for a woman's selfhood," but ultimately they fall short as their subversiveness becomes "not a quest for a new identity but merely a tantrum like Sister's, a delusion like Clytie's, or an irrational nihilism like Mrs. Larkin's" (31). While Sister certainly exhibits frustration with her family and she may not have truly attempted to reconcile with them, I argue that instead of a "tantrum" she has legitimate fears about her own labor within her home being exploited that the post office alleviates. Rather than answering to Mama, Papa-Daddy, or Stella-Rondo, who all seem to remain unaware of their dependence on others to carry out daily tasks, Sister becomes part of a larger system that theoretically supports her independence. *Theoretically* is the key word here. After the entire family turns against Sister, she recognizes that they do not appreciate or even acknowledge what she contributes to their home.

Furthermore, the exploitation of labor that has dominated class systems and subjected African Americans now extends to Sister.

In addition to the story taking place on the Fourth of July, which invokes the ideals of liberty and equality, we can conclude that it takes place during World War II, albeit prior to the United States' entrance. Uncle Rondo's army cot he offers Sister comes from when he served in France; Sister remarks that she takes the radio to listen to "the war news" (69). The roles that were offered to women through New Deal reforms—one of which Welty benefited from as a Junior Publicity Agent for the Works Progress Administration—are early examples of how women took on increased roles in public life a few years later during World War II. Julia Brock et al. note that "6 million women joined the workforce and another 350,000 joined military services between 1941 and 1945" and by "1944, women comprised more than a third of civil service jobs" (xvi, xxi). Perhaps Sister's move to the post office, in addition to being an escape from her family, acknowledges a desire to take part in newly defined roles of independence for women. These roles for women emerged during a moment of national crisis—whether because of the Depression or because men were away from the home, the patriarchy was not firmly reinforced. Sister's role as post-mistress is a unique opportunity for her to enter the public sphere and communicate in that sphere without any limitations. Sister's role presents itself as especially relevant to the current political moment in which the patriarchy—by way of the presidency—is consistently interrogated by the media and the 2018 election led to the largest number of women in congressional office to date.

Sister's decision to leave the family home certainly challenges Anne Firor Scott's observation that "[m]ore than other Americans, perhaps, southerners had put their faith in the family as the central institution of society," even as more working opportunities for women emerged (213).

Sister's newfound role as *post*-mistress also intimates that she may willingly choose to avoid familial and marriage obligations, as she takes pride in her position that subtly hints at a life unconcerned with the duties of a typical mistress. While Welty never went so far as to completely separate from her family, her life parallels Sister's decision to pursue alternative roles. Despite remaining close to home, Welty left home for college, frequently travelled, and never married. Welty's exploration of independence for women in the 1940s was not an entirely new topic, though. Scott explores a century of transformation for women in the South: "The common thread . . . was a movement from simplicity to complexity. Southern society itself had become more complex: people lived in wider variety of styles, earned their living in many more ways, and were subjected to more diverse influences" (229). Sister's presentation of her family certainly confirms Scott's conclusion. Stella-Rondo returns home without a husband and with a child; Uncle Rondo pushes gender boundaries by way of his professional career; Sister embarks on a journey for independence, for a voice, and for a self.

CHAPTER IV

EXPOSURE AND SUBVERSION IN “A MEMORY” AND “A CURTAIN OF GREEN”

In my chapters two and three, Shen’s theoretical framework offers a new opportunity for examining Welty’s revision process, specifically how her revisions affect the portrayal of female protagonists. Through this analysis, I conclude that Clytie, while she may not have a coherent understanding of self, exhibits agency that questions the limits of patriarchal class structure and authority that previous critics have not fully explored. Similarly, while Sister’s narrative in “Why I Live at the P.O.” may not be the most reliable, she nevertheless develops her voice and uses it in the public sphere to challenge prescribed roles for women. In these stories, the revisions illustrate Welty’s “intricate relationship between artistic techniques and ethical concerns” as she interrogates the patriarchy by the development of a covert textual progression (Shen 4). My final chapter explores two stories that overtly provide alternatives for women to subvert gender norms.

In my discussion of “A Memory” and “A Curtain of Green,” I argue that the alternatives for women of the twentieth century are recognizable in the overt plot; while I will not utilize Shen’s framework to examine these stories, Welty’s revision process remains the primary focus of my analysis.¹ In both “A Memory” and “A Curtain of Green” Welty’s revisions reinforce exposure as a vital component of life for an artist. Harriet Pollack defines exposure in two distinct ways: the first sense of exposure comes when a young female protagonist encounters an

¹ W.U. McDonald discusses textual variants in “A Memory,” and Thomas Lewis examines them in “A Curtain of Green.”

“othered female body” that is in essence exposed and put on display in a way that she is “making a spectacle of herself”; through this exposure, young female characters see a woman willing to transgress and become more open to transgressing social norms (1-3). The second definition of exposure Pollack utilizes relates more specifically to the term as it is used in photography; Pollack uses this definition to discuss Welty’s feeling of being exposed when her work is made accessible to the public (7). Both of these definitions are at work in my argument. Often considered an autobiographical sketch, “A Memory” parallels the “daring life” Welty describes in her memoir, *One Writer’s Beginnings*. My reading extends Pollack’s argument by focusing on the sense of vulnerability that accompanies being exposed, especially in Mrs. Larkin’s character.

Scholarly consensus recognizes that Welty often drew on her own experiences, even those from her childhood. However, unlike the young narrator in “A Memory,” Welty had models for challenging prescribed roles. Although not explicitly autobiographical, Mrs. Larkin in “A Curtain of Green” has a striking similarity to Welty’s mother. In an early draft of *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty acknowledges, “After the death of my father, my distraught mother worked all day long most days in her flower garden behind the house. . . . in becoming her never-ending work, it became her solace” (*OWG* 67). In addition, Suzanne Marrs notes that Welty’s mother Chestina “was a model for defying convention” in contrast to the “typical Jackson lady” (*OWI* 4). Mirroring Chestina Welty’s process of grieving, Mrs. Larkin’s tireless efforts in her garden adhere to gendered hobbies, but she rejects the social groups that define gardening as a feminine hobby. More specifically, Welty’s revisions to “A Curtain of Green” reinforce the breaking down of culturally inscribed boundaries that is metaphorically present in the abundance of Mrs. Larkin’s garden.

In his discussion of classical myth in Welty's oeuvre, Joseph Millichap observes that Welty's "canon is united in a quest for fulfillment as a woman and as an artist" ("Personal Epic" 77). He argues that "A Memory" examines "autobiographical reflections concerning the personal and cultural complexities of gender relations" in a way that pays close attention to the "extended treatment of artistic development" ("Personal Epic" 83). The young, first-person narrator carefully negotiates between familial expectations for her life and her own desires as an emerging artist. Welty makes two revisions in the opening scene of the narrative that reinforce the narrator's identification as an artist. At the close of the first paragraph, Welty adds "Ever since I had begun taking painting lessons, I had made small frames with my fingers, to look out at everything" (92). This addition explicitly characterizes the narrator as an artist and as an observer. As she continues establishing the scene, the narrator is "looking out from this shield to see everything" (SR 319).² Welty revises for the collected edition so that as the narrator puts her fingertips together she is "looking out by this device to see everything" ("Memory" 92). The difference between a shield and a device implies that initially the narrator seeks some protection from the unfamiliar or the unknown. The older narrator in "A Memory" is more consciously aware of those distinctions and how she might be able to present them as an artist.

Welty's revisions to the opening scene of the story after its initial publication in the *Southern Review* further emphasize class relations. Harriet Pollack argues the adult narrator "obliquely, but willingly, uncovers and expresses her most private self and discloses the story of her escape," which reveals an increased awareness of the young narrator's expectations of class

² Page numbers reflect the version published in the *Southern Review* in 1937 (Series 22, Box 101, Folder 5) that is consistent with the manuscript in Series 2, Box 3, Folder 10 in the Welty Collection at MDAH. The typescript copy prepared for the collection (Series 2, Box 4a, Folder 4b) is consistent with the version in *Stories, Essays, and Memoir*.

(*EWFP* 42). In the *Southern Review* version, the narrator's parents "believed that [she] saw nothing in the world which was not strictly coaxed upward like a vine on our garden trellis" (317). However, Welty changes "coaxed upward" to "coaxed into place" emphasizing the parents' strict adherence to circumscribed expectations for class and behavior. The narrator continues acknowledging that her parents "would have been badly concerned if they had guessed how frequently the weak and inferior and strangely turned examples of what was to come showed themselves to me" (92). As Pollack notes, though, the "sheltering seems to be parental, but needs to be recognized as cultural," especially in the context of "the southern social order's racial domination, enforced through ritual lynching, and the discourse of white womanhood" (*EWFP* 25-26). The narrator clearly understands her parents' desire to protect her, although the young narrator does not recognize the cultural expectations that go along with her parents' desire. More specifically, the young narrator's fears about her crush illustrate the difference between her social status and others that belong to a lower class. She reflects that the young boy's "house might be slovenly and unpainted . . . his mother and father might be shabby—dishonest—crippled—dead" (94). The tension between the narrator's observations and her parents' expectations—which enforce larger cultural expectations—again reflects the limitations of class distinctions similar to those discussed in "Clytie" and "Why I Live at the P.O."

The narrator's observation of the bathers stands out as another poignant example of her exposure to people outside of her own social class.³ Although Pollack acknowledges Welty's

³ Harriet Pollack discusses the woman bather at length in *Eudora Welty's Fiction and Photography: The Body of the Other Woman*. She argues that the bather serves as a double for the young narrator and allows the narrator to "wander into wonderings that obliquely focus on escape from sheltering" (41). Pollack also pays close attention to the physical description of the woman bather who is exposed as an "excessive 'common' woman" (40).

last-minute addition of “common” as a description of the bathers,⁴ she does not address the full revision to that portion of the text. It is also important to note that the primary focus of this passage is the male bathers, which implies that the narrator’s judgment could be affected by gender norms in addition to class distinctions. In describing the male bathers who arrive at the beach, the narrator initially remarks how their bathing suits “did not hide either the energy or the fatigue of their bodies” (SR 319). For the collected version, Welty adds “but showed it exactly” to the narrator’s description of the bathing suits (95). This addition suggests the narrator “formed a judgement” about the relationship between the male bathers’ physical appearances that informs how she interprets their continued presence on the beach (92). Welty makes another revision to the description of the boys who “were running in wobbly ellipses about the others, pinching them indiscriminately and pitching sand into the man’s roughened hair.” The narrator suspects that a form of hierarchy exists within the group of bathers that perhaps resembles her own family’s structure. However, this expectation is overturned when Welty adds “as though they were not afraid of him” as they throw sand towards the man (96). The male bathers’ physical appearances and their lack of fear become distinguishing marks of class for the young narrator.

Similarly, Welty’s revisions to the female bather further develop the narrator’s sense of exposure that are in conflict with cultural norms. The young narrator’s description of the female bather as “unnaturally white and fatly aware” further reinforces class distinctions that are represented through physicality. Anne Firor Scott notes that the southern woman should be “delicate, frivolous, [and] submissive,” but here the physical description of the woman suggests exactly the opposite. Furthermore, Welty’s revisions to the female bather support Pollack’s

⁴ More recent critical discussion has started to consider class lines, especially the designation of “white trash.” What the narrator describes as “common” might now be referred to as “white trash.” See Newitz and Wray for further discussion of class and economics.

argument that the other woman allows the narrator to realize the “possible dissolution of her disciplined, restrained, and confined female self” (*EWFP* 41). Welty revises the “rage in her narrowed figure” to the “genie-like rage” (*SR* 320, “Memory” 95). In addition to the connotations of a wayward traveler, the woman as genie becomes “a fantastic apparition” that draws the narrator further into a sense of exposure (Duggan 114). The second alteration Welty makes to the female bather presents her as intentionally harnessing emotions rather than subject to being overcome by emotions. In the *Southern Review*, “the girl in the green bathing suit suddenly whirled about, rigid and helplessly angry” as “She reached stiff arms toward the screaming children” (321). Welty removes “helplessly angry” in the collected version, leaving the passage to read, “But at that moment the girl in the green bathing suit suddenly whirled all the way around. She reached rigid arms toward the screaming children” (96). This deletion alters the characterization of the woman bather in a way that more explicitly challenges gendered behaviors. Extending Pollack’s argument, I contend that the revisions demonstrate Welty’s awareness of stylistics in order to present a woman who challenges the narrator’s expectations for class and gender. Similarly, as the older narrator looks back on her day at the park, she seems to be more aware of the possibility for risk-taking that the female bather elicits that day.

The older narrator, then, embraces an increased sense of agency as an artist and risk-taker. Welty revises “My memory presents them only as simultaneous” to “I am presenting them, you see, only as simultaneous” (*SR* 319, “Memory” 94). The initial draft suggests an unconscious ordering of events, whereas the revised version gives the narrator more authority in telling her own story, much like Sister in “Why I Live at the P.O.” Early in the story the narrator recalls, “from any observation I would conclude that a secret of life had been nearly revealed to me—for I was obsessed with notions about concealment, and from the smallest gesture of a

stranger I would wrest what was to me a communication or a presentiment” (93). The young narrator adheres closely to the interpretation of a presentiment as foreboding because she consistently uses language that illustrates a fear of exposure; however, the older narrator looking back recognizes that exposure will be essential to her role as an artist. Welty further emphasizes the narrator’s role as daring artist when she adds “squaring my vision with my hands” in the closing scene of the story (97). Moreover, this revision highlights the dual life the narrator describes as an “observer and dreamer” (93). As the narrator embraces her position as artist, the sense of exposure that she associates with this memory becomes an underlying element to the meaning of her narrative. In this sense, the narrator/artist figure emerges as one willing to break away from circumscribed cultural roles.

As I previously noted, critics often discuss “A Memory” as an autobiographical sketch, and there are parallels between the story and Welty’s correspondence. Just as the female bather exposes the narrator of “A Memory” to an alternate mode of being, Welty had models for challenging gender norms. Welty and Katherine Anne Porter maintained an extensive dialogue that played a significant role in Welty’s early career. Welty elaborates on the importance of her friendship with Porter in “My Introduction to Katherine Anne Porter.” Published in 1990, this work includes several of Porter’s letters, along with commentary on the two writers’ experiences at Yaddo. After Porter recommended Welty to Ford Madox Ford, Porter also offered to write a letter of support nominating Welty for a Guggenheim Fellowship. Reflecting on these early signs of encouragement, Welty writes, Porter’s “letter was an act of faith, and I was able to recognize this.” Despite being rejected for the Guggenheim the first time, Welty continued to rely on Porter, noting that “it was the existence of Katherine Anne Porter’s hopes for themselves, successful and unsuccessful alike, that filled me with gratitude” (14). Welty’s relationship with

Porter proved to be invaluable, as Porter understood the difficulties Welty faced as an emerging writer. In 1940, Porter writes to Welty about the challenges of not conforming to what publishers and editors want: “We have *got* to beat down this conspiracy against collections of short stories . . . [sic] It’s a long war, but we will win” (16). Similar to the narrator in “A Memory,” who is motivated by her exposure to the female bather to embrace her role as an artist, Welty acknowledges, “Katherine Anne was helping me to recognize living with difficulty as a form of passion” (23). Welty’s reflection on Porter illustrates a specific example Welty had as a model for a successful career and life as an artist, despite the difficulty that comes with creating art.

In addition to Porter, Welty’s mother Chestina was also an important model for independence and seeking alternatives to circumscribed roles. While in “A Memory” it is clear the narrator pushes back against her parents’ desire to protect her, the parallel between Mrs. Larkin and Chestina Welty offers contrasting images of mothers in Welty’s life. Welty describes the tension between a mother’s desire to protect and simultaneously instill a sense of independence:

the fierce independence that was suddenly mine, to remain inside me no matter how it scared me when I tumbled, was an inheritance. Indeed it was my chief inheritance from my mother, who was braver. Yet, while she knew that independent spirit so well, it was what she agonizingly tried to protect me from, in effect to warn me against. It was what we shared, it made the strongest bond between us and the strongest tension. (*OWB* 904)

When considering “A Memory” and “A Curtain of Green” together, the tension between a parent’s desire to provide protection and a child’s longing for independence that Welty describes in her memoir becomes increasingly apparent. For Welty, independence is most fully developed through her writing and imagination. Discussing the collection as a whole, Marrs notes, “A

Curtain of Green is perhaps the darkest of Welty's work, but the imagination, which illuminated Welty's own life, also provides the possibility of hope and meaning for characters who seem otherwise trapped and defeated" (*OWI* 43). The narrator in "A Memory" finds an alternative through her exposure to the female bather and her subsequent ownership of her status as an artist.

Similarly, Mrs. Larkin in the title story uses a form of artistic expression to work through her grief and reclaim an identity that exists outside of traditional identifiers for women in the early- to mid-twentieth century. In recent critical discussion of Mrs. Larkin, Elizabeth Crews and Cliff Hudder offer thought-provoking interpretations of the character's adherence to prescribed roles of gender and race. Crews examines the story from a feminist perspective, arguing that for Mrs. Larkin gardening is an equivalent task to writing, defined as *écriture féminine* by Hélène Cixous. Paying closer attention to the function of race, Cliff Hudder argues that Mrs. Larkin is "a complete inversion of the usual, stereotypically entitled white woman of privilege" who was employed to bolster white supremacy (46). Crews's and Hudder's assessments of Mrs. Larkin can be extended through closer analysis of Welty's revisions. While Hudder notes that Welty "presents a particular vision of the natural world, one with implications for race, gender, and agency," I argue that Mrs. Larkin's subversions resemble both what Welty observed in Chestina and ultimately what Welty presents as subversion throughout her fiction.

Mrs. Larkin's process of grieving baffles her neighbors and ultimately leads to further isolation from her community. Early in the story the narrator establishes that Mrs. Larkin lives "alone now, since the death of her husband" (130). The neighbors view her garden's perimeter as a "border of hedge, high like a wall, and visible only from the upstairs windows," which places Mrs. Larkin in a physically isolated position. While most critics agree that Mrs. Larkin retreats to her garden as a coping mechanism, the consensus about whether or not she does so intentionally

is less clear. Sally Wolff argues that “the garden . . . metaphorically represents Mrs. Larkin’s psychic landscape and is a self-made protective shield she creates to avoid intrusion into her physical and psychic space” (53). Similarly, Crews’s interpretation that Mrs. Larkin uses gardening as a means of creative expression suggests a deliberate choice. Hudder describes Mrs. Larkin as “retired behind the walls of her garden, isolated from the community, where she spends her days among the plants and flowers in what seems an attempt to enter the mystery of the nature that did away with her husband so summarily” (46). His understanding of the garden as “a zone of natural precision [that] has grown out of control,” emphasizes the power of natural elements and forces, of which grief is a part, and is a more nuanced interpretation of Mrs. Larkin’s isolation.

Another significant component of Mrs. Larkin’s isolation, though, is the neighbors’ presumption that she “was unable to conceive of any other place” because of her increased devotion to caring for her garden since her husband’s death. Initially, her neighbors follow traditional customs to visit the bereaved: “they had called upon the widow with decent frequency” (131). Crews notes that “the women of the neighborhood feel that Mrs. Larkin’s behavior negates that which is considered acceptable to the Larkin name, perhaps ironically also suggesting that the death of her husband renders her nameless” (25). While the community attempts to console her in traditional ways, the narrator’s classification of Mrs. Larkin as “the widow” may push her further away from her community, reminding Mrs. Larkin of her loss. Furthermore, the absence of any real connection to Larkin’s Hill results in Mrs. Larkin losing any sense of agency except through gardening. Rather than maintaining a relationship with other people in Larkin’s Hill, Mrs. Larkin tries to compensate for both the loss of her husband and a part of her identity by cultivating a connection to the land. Her work in the garden, however,

reaches a point of self-negation as she returns inside “with a drooping, submissive walk” that ironically aligns with the mythological ideals for southern women (131). The narrator’s description of Mrs. Larkin as working “almost invisibly, submerged all day” depicts only one side of the narrative, though, as her ritualized practice of gardening displaces the pain of her grief (131).

Isolation in “A Curtain of Green” is twofold: Mrs. Larkin is physically and socially removed from the community, and the community feels no real connection to her after Mr. Larkin’s death. Wolff argues that Welty critiques “those who abandon, forget, and lose patience with those who grieve too long” (55). It is only after the neighbors have given up on communicating with Mrs. Larkin that they look down at the garden and see how “the slight, heedless form of its owner daily lost itself” (132). The distance between Mrs. Larkin and Larkin’s Hill becomes more apparent as she struggles to confront the reality of her husband’s death which occurred despite “her love for her husband [that] was keeping him safe” (133). Assuming that Mrs. Larkin “had not appreciated” being called on, the neighbors looked for her each morning in the garden and “then forgot her” (131). If the neighbors’ interactions with Mrs. Larkin are based solely on the loss of Mr. Larkin, perhaps the garden is an alternative to the identity to which Larkin’s Hill confines her.

As Mrs. Larkin’s isolation becomes more pronounced in the narrative, she in turn becomes more vulnerable to the uncontrollable forces of nature. Welty writes, “But her voice hardly carried through the dense garden. She felt all at once terrified, as though her loneliness had been pointed out by some outside force whose finger parted the hedge” (133). Although secluded in the safety of her garden, Mrs. Larkin is not immune to feelings of exposure and vulnerability to forces beyond her control. Mrs. Larkin demonstrates a “portrait of Welty . . .

fascinated by the threat of exposure” that contrasts with the narrator in “A Memory,” who has not yet learned how to channel exposure into artistic expression (*EWFP* 9). In addition to facing the reality of her husband’s death, Mrs. Larkin’s vulnerability reveals that the true risk she takes is through her desire and ultimate inability to protect her husband from natural forces: “There had been no warning. [. . .] she had spoken in a soft voice to him, never so intimate as at that moment, ‘You can’t be hurt’” (“COG” 132-33). In Welty’s initial version of the story published in the *Southern Review*, Mrs. Larkin whispers, “You can’t be killed.”⁵ The revision here from “killed” to “hurt” may seem insignificant as it does not alter the overall sentiment or outcome of the story. At first glance, one might conclude that the deletion of “killed” takes out a sense of abruptness while Mrs. Larkin recalls the accident in a dreamlike-state, in favor of a word that is more fluid with her recollection. However, this seemingly minor revision intensifies Mrs. Larkin’s desire to protect, and the ensuing consequences of her inability to do so, resulting in vulnerable exposure to uncontrollable forces.

In addition to ignoring societal expectations for her physical appearance, Mrs. Larkin neglects to care for her garden according to societal expectations, particularly those of the local garden club. Significantly, Mrs. Larkin’s physical appearance mirrors the untamed appearance of the garden that her neighbors describe as a “jungle” (132). Early in the story, the narrator describes Mrs. Larkin’s unconventional approach to her garden:

She planted every kind of flower that she could find or order from a catalogue—planted thickly and hastily, without stopping to think, without any regard for the ideas that her neighbors might elect in the their club as to what constituted an appropriate vista, or an

⁵ The manuscript consulted for “A Curtain of Green” is in Series 2, Box 3, Folder 3 in the Welty Collection housed at MDAH.

effect of restfulness, or even harmony of color. . . . And if she thought of *beauty* at all . . . she certainly did not strive for it in her garden. (131)

Not only does Mrs. Larkin disregard any sense of order in the plan of the garden, but her neighbors are under the impression that she has no understanding of “*beauty* at all” (131). The garden club brings to the forefront women’s organizations that were often created to keep women in the domestic sphere and were shaped by the patriarchy. In a comprehensive study of the Welty’s own garden, Susan Haltom and Jane Roy Brown conclude that “Garden clubs were natural offshoots of woman’s clubs—as was the case in Jackson, Mississippi—because the home grounds fell squarely into the female realm, morally and physically” (44-5). Mrs. Larkin seems to reject these conventional attitudes about gardens, much like Chestina Welty who “did not strive to attract her neighbors’ adulation” (*OWG* 51). Marrs also notes that while Chestina Welty was a founding member of the garden club in Jackson, it was a “‘working, digging, neighborhood group’—not a club for elaborate refreshments, stylish frocks, and pleasant conversation” (*OWI* 4). While it is clear that Chestina did not shy away from community expectations altogether, she did challenge existing notions about the function of such organizations. Welty, too, expresses resistance to cultural expectations for women’s social groups. In a letter to Frank Lyell, Welty writes, “Last week 200 women came to town for a conference of WPA women and they all contacted me for various things. . . . You know how even a bridge-table of middleaged females can enervate me. Multiply the exhaustion by 50 and you get a high temperature and bad dreams” (15 July 1936). Although the WPA did not function in the same manner as many women’s social groups, Welty’s frustration with social expectations for her interactions with other women is quite clear. In a more extreme instance, Mrs. Larkin, by

rejecting these groups, completely isolates herself from the other women in Larkin's Hill, defying the expectation that she should rely on them while grieving the loss of her husband.

As noted before, Welty's revisions in "A Curtain of Green" are quite subtle, but the effect of a slight change in word choice is especially telling when Mrs. Larkin openly defies expectations for women neglecting to send flowers to the bereaved. Welty's initial draft reads, "They might get sick and die, and [Mrs. Larkin] would never know or care." Welty revises the published version to read, "They might get sick and die, and she would never send a flower" (131). Despite only changing a few words, Welty implicitly defines the cultural expectation for women to send flowers to the bereaved that Mrs. Larkin defies. The change stresses Mrs. Larkin's refusal to participate in the social ritual rather than her obliviousness to society. It also fits more appropriately with Mrs. Larkin's dedication to her garden. Given her commitment to creating an area of abundance, it is reasonable to assume that she would want to share that abundance with others who experience a loss similar to her own; however, Mrs. Larkin clearly challenges the expectations of those in her community, whether it is not sending a flower or her insistence on maintaining a private life after the loss of her husband.

Mrs. Larkin also rejects expectations for her physical appearance. Haltom and Brown discuss social expectations for gardening attire: "Equally if not more important, women got advice about what not to wear . . . It was not until the 1940s that women could shun skirts for more practical trousers or breeches without social repercussion" (18). Mrs. Larkin's physical appearance overtly challenges expectations for women, often communicated through popular media sources. The narrator describes Mrs. Larkin's "clumsy, small figure in its old pair of men's overalls rolled up at the sleeves and trousers" that appears in the garden each day (130). The men's overalls imply that Mrs. Larkin wears her husband's overalls in the garden each day,

holding onto an object that signifies her loss, which aligns with Freud's concept of melancholia. Crews acknowledges that Mrs. Larkin has internalized the loss of her husband, but she does not examine the overalls in her discussion of melancholia. The overalls literally alter Mrs. Larkin's appearance by acting as an external expression of her internalized loss in addition to redefining her appearance. As the narrator continues, it becomes clear that Mrs. Larkin, much like Clytie, no longer puts any effort into her appearance: "Every morning she might be observed walking slowly, almost timidly, out of the white house, wearing a pair of the untidy overalls, often with her hair streaming and tangled where she had neglected to comb it" (130). In contrast, the neighbors watch Mrs. Larkin enter the garden each day as they "brushed studiously at their hair in the morning" (132). Her overalls are later described as "stained . . . almost of a color with the leaves" (132), supporting the narrator's revelation that her only activity is working in the garden and thus breaking down the constructed boundary between the natural world and humanity.

As this boundary continues to break down, Mrs. Larkin's indifference to societal expectations results in an abundant garden. The garden flourishes with life after Mrs. Larkin loses the most important person in her life. Welty's juxtaposition of these images—the "extreme fertility of her garden" and the recollection of her husband's death that "tightened about her easily"—poignantly reveals Mrs. Larkin's coping mechanism for her grief. Early in the story Welty writes, "It might seem that the extreme fertility of her garden formed at once a preoccupation and a challenge to Mrs Larkin. Only by ceaseless activity could she cope with the rich blackness of this soil" (131). The overgrowth is consistent with the return to a natural state suggested by the color of the overalls. Mrs Larkin has no interest in maintaining order and balance. Her desire to do so in the past could not protect her from losing her husband. Her inability to protect and maintain control over her environment leads to the state of her garden:

“To a certain extent, she seemed not to seek for order, but to allow for an overflowing, as if she consciously ventured forever a little farther, a little deeper, into her life in the garden” (131). In the wake of her husband’s death, Mrs. Larkin seeks the disorder and overabundance of the garden as an alternative to attempting to assert authority against uncontrollable forces.

While Mrs. Larkin’s garden certainly depicts the wild forces of nature with which she is at odds, her actions in the garden reflect her own relinquishment of control over her emotions. Only one person, the young, black Jamey is allowed in Mrs. Larkin’s garden. Her interaction with Jamey, though, exposes Mrs. Larkin’s raw emotions as she struggles to cope with her grief. Marrs asserts that in “A Curtain of Green,” “the gardener, like the writer, confronts the dark irrationality of human experience and attempts to deal with that irrationality. . . in the process, she finds that the garden provides not solace but immersion in a hostile force” (*OWI* 7). Recent criticism examines more explicitly the racial implications of this moment in the narrative. Cliff Hudder argues that “Mrs. Larkin is presented as . . . a parody[] of the dangerous mythic white woman who evokes such paternalism from white patriarchy” (48). While Hudder contends that Mrs. Larkin presents a “consciousness that sees past the categories” of race, Susan V. Donaldson recognizes that “‘A Curtain of Green’ . . . does focus on a near-encounter with death that parallels with unsettling force the terrifying confrontation with and recognition of the mythic white woman” (*EWWR* 58). Comparing Richard Wright and Eudora Welty, Donaldson concludes that Welty and Wright “on either side of the color line” present “a complex and powerful indictment of the damage wrought by a racially obsessed society” (*EWWR* 50).⁶ Although Donaldson cites Mrs. Larkin’s “sudden impulse to behead her hired laborer” as a problematic “misplaced sense of entitlement—and the security afforded by whiteness,” she

⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois defines the color line as the “problem of the twentieth-century” (34).

ultimately argues that the story deeply questions the narrative in which a simple “glance” or “word” from a white woman “can serve as a death sentence to a black man” (*EWWR* 59).

Contrasting Hudder’s description of Mrs. Larkin as a “parody[.]” and extending Donaldson’s assertion that Welty’s fiction demonstrates a nuanced awareness of the color line, I argue that Welty’s revisions further develop her use of color as it pertains to racial boundaries in Jim Crow Mississippi.

Standing over Jamey with the garden hoe, Mrs. Larkin “gripped the handle tightly, tightly, as though convinced that the wood of the handle could feel, and that all her strength could indent its surface with pain” (134). At this moment, Mrs. Larkin has not yet registered Jamey below her; instead, she attempts to transfer her pain to the garden hoe, where it might be visibly felt and furthermore accountable. After seeing Jamey below her, Mrs. Larkin contemplates, “Such a head she could strike off, intentionally, so deeply did she know, from the effect of a man’s danger and death, its cause in oblivion; and so helpless was she, too helpless to defy the workings of accident, of life and death, of unaccountability” (134). As she stands in a position of power over Jamey, Mrs. Larkin’s exposure to uncontrollable forces allows her to more directly consider the pervasive social structures of the South. Initially, it appears that Mrs. Larkin is in a position of “white fragility.” Robin DiAngelo defines the concept of white fragility: “[the] insulated environment of racial protections builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress. . . . White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (54). On this day in her garden, Mrs. Larkin feels vulnerable and exposed, and, inevitably, she responds defensively in an attempt to assert some means of control in her life as she stands over Jamey.

Consistent with DiAngelo's definition, Mrs. Larkin's reaction is an "outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt" (54). However, when the rain begins, Mrs. Larkin collapses rather than maintaining her position over Jamey. DiAngelo notes that often the behaviors associated with white fragility "function to reinstate white racial equilibrium" (54). Mrs. Larkin's position while "compelled to continually wield" the hoe over Jamey is juxtaposed with Jamey's physical position of superiority at the close of the story: "Jamey ran jumping and crouching about her" as he observes "the shapeless, passive figure on the ground." In fact, it is Jamey who feels pity at the close of the story as he "stood looking at poor Mrs. Larkin." Welty revised the end of the story such that Jamey "bent down" as he calls Mrs. Larkin's name "in a horrified, piteous, beseeching voice" (136). Furthermore, Welty's use of color and her revisions to color suggest that instead of reinstating a racial equilibrium, Mrs. Larkin again favors the dismantling of socially constructed boundaries. Describing the "extreme fertility" of the garden, Welty writes, "Only by ceaseless activity could she cope with the rich blackness of the soil" (131). As previously noted, Mrs. Larkin's connection to and cultivation of the land allows her to deal with her grief privately. As the narrator continues to describe her gardening, though, Mrs. Larkin's dedication to "overreaching their boundaries" and to "allow an overflowing" foreshadows her desire to reject culturally constructed boundaries about race, class, and gender.

In addition, there is one noteworthy revision that establishes Mrs. Larkin as an active agent in cultural institutions and as an individual. Aware that the afternoon rain will soon arrive, Mrs. Larkin observes Jamey transplanting zinnia shoots and reflects that "She had to make him finish before it began to rain" (132). In the initial version of the story, Welty writes, "She had not let him wait until after the rain to do it." The connotative difference between "had to make him finish" and "had not let him wait" gives Mrs. Larkin's character more control in this moment. By

establishing Mrs. Larkin as a character who embraces a position of authority, Welty emphasizes that Mrs. Larkin's subversion of cultural boundaries is also intentional. Welty also made one revision that challenged the existing racial hierarchy of the South. After Mrs. Larkin's daydream that recalls the memory of her husband's death, she returns to her garden work. In the initial version, Mrs. Larkin "continued to hoe the black ground, to beat down the juicy weeds," equating black with the land as well as a physically lower position than herself. In this reading, Mrs. Larkin's continuous desire to cultivate the land could also be interpreted as a desire to 1) cultivate African Americans or 2) continue to devalue African Americans by "beat[ing] down the juicy weeds." Either result would reinforce the mythology of racial caste systems in Mississippi. However, Welty revises this sentence to read, "She continue to hoe the breaking ground, to beat down the juicy weeds" (133). By focusing on the land itself, Welty eliminates an instance in which Mrs. Larkin might seek to reinstate cultural boundaries and instead reinforces Mrs. Larkin's attachment to the land. Moreover, Welty's use of color precipitates Mrs. Larkin's fainting spell and presents a desire for a unified vision of race. Welty writes, "Was it not possible to compensate? to punish? to protest? Pale darkness turned for a moment through the sunlight, like a narrow leaf blown through the garden in a wind" (134). Mrs. Larkin's desire to break down boundaries comes to fruition in the juxtaposition of the "pale darkness," just before she faints and Jamey bends down to an equal level as he calls Mrs. Larkin's "shapeless, passive figure" back to consciousness (136).

While critical discussion has recently focused on the racial implications of Jamey's presence in the story, it is important to consider some of Welty's notes about Chestina's work in the garden. Haltom and Brown acknowledge more directly "the oblique" connection that Marris demonstrates in *OWI*. Haltom and Brown cite Welty's draft material for *OWB* in which she

discusses a “fellow apprentice, ‘a round-faced youth of about sixteen known by the initials J.W.’” (67):

As I saw him there without a name to his initials, wishing for a world without its roses, but caught in the thick of them, encircled by wide-open Silver Moons and pricked on every side by their strong thorns, with their fragrance and the gold dust of their pollen sweeping his cheeks, it might have been the first time I knew the compulsion to step back and place myself at a story-teller’s remove. It seemed to me an archetypal moment of some kind. (68)

Critics have also recognized the story as an “archetypal moment,”⁷ as it demonstrates the correlation between gardening and writing that Marrs and Crews have discussed at length. It also suggests that Welty sought to create an alternative narrative (such as one that Hudder discusses) through her fiction. Welty’s notes continue: “When the storm broke, it was like a story falling all over the garden. I turned it into one I called “A Curtain of Green,” at a considerable remove from our real lives then. It was the first time I had consciously placed myself at a story-teller’s remove, right there on the spot” (68). The idea of consciously placing oneself in the position of story-teller resonates especially with the narrator in “A Memory,” but in both stories, exposure seems to be the most significant factor in subverting expectations for southern women. While the narrator of “A Memory” directly confronts differences in class that push her towards becoming a deliberate risk-taker, Mrs. Larkin’s vulnerability allows her to reject the systemic distinctions of race, class, and gender. Although Welty has frequently acknowledged that her early stories underwent little revision, the subtle changes Welty did make allow her female protagonists to deliberately subvert patriarchal order.

⁷ See Millichap’s “Personal Epic” and Parker’s “Portrait of the Artist”.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Through the pattern of revision that I trace here, it becomes clear that Welty consistently portrays female protagonists who challenge traditional expectations for women. Ultimately, the female protagonists in “Clytie,” “Why I Live at the P.O.,” “A Memory,” and “A Curtain of Green” subtly challenge expectations for women in rural southern communities of the twentieth century. Anne Firor Scott writes that “For most southern women the domestic circle was the world . . . Most southern women would not have tried, or known how, to free themselves from the system which was supposed to be divinely ordained, but there is considerable evidence that many of them found the ‘sphere’ very confining” (42, 46). Clytie, Sister, Mrs. Larkin, and the narrator of “A Memory” very easily fit into Scott’s category of women who found the domestic sphere and patriarchal tradition restricting. Instead of simply accepting that sphere, though, Clytie challenges class boundaries that have limited her entire family and perhaps community from forming meaningful and restorative relationships. Sister verbally and physically separates from her family. The narrator of “A Memory” embraces an unprotected world that her parents diligently work to keep from her. Mrs. Larkin defies community expectations and privileges the breaking down of boundaries. Although Welty wrote to Diarmuid Russell that “Why I Live at the P.O.” “seems now only like a little impersonation I was giving, that did not show her but only talked like her,” it is clear that prior to the collected publication in 1941, Welty’s revisions to female characters made them more authoritative in an effort to carry out the plot that already

existed in Welty's initial drafts. These subtle changes provide fundamental support to female protagonists so that they can challenge the existing social order in covert ways.

As I discuss in the fourth chapter, Welty is simultaneously fascinated by exposure and fearful of it in her artwork, perhaps reflecting a timidity in presenting an overtly political text. Prior to Welty's essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?," Katherine Anne Porter's introduction to *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* undoubtedly influenced critical reception of Welty's work. Porter observes:

[Welty] has not expressed, except implicitly, any attitude at all on the state of politics or the condition of society. But there is an ancient system of ethics, an unanswerable, indispensable moral law, on which she is grounded firmly, and this it would seem to me, is ample domain enough; these laws have never been the peculiar property of any party or creed or nation, they relate to that true and human world of which the artist is a living part; and when he dissociates himself from it in favor of a set of political, which is to say, inhuman, rules, he cuts himself away from his proper society—living men. (xv)

Porter's introduction reflects a similar approach of reluctance in identifying the private as the political. More recently, though, Peggy Prenshaw argues that Welty's primary concern is with the private individual, suggesting that, for Welty, the private domestic sphere addresses issues that are inherently political: "Welty shows unmistakably that what she regards as the politics of substance and courage, politics that is truly public, civil, and communal, is the human connection between freely operating individuals who confront issues that directly affect their lives" (*EWP* 46). In the stories I examine, critics often focus on the limitations of the settings for these characters that in turn keeps them from being "freely operating individuals who confront issues that directly affect their lives." However, through Shen's framework, I argue that artistic and

stylistic concerns often reflect the ethical concerns of the story, such as those that Porter identifies. I hope the previous chapters demonstrate that Welty's close attention to stylistic choices create more authoritative interpretations of the women in these stories and an interrogation of systemic hierarchies that limit a person's ability to deeply connect with someone else.

It is important to acknowledge, though, that the stories I have focused on all center on white women. The absence of African American characters in Welty's fiction has been extensively studied. Most critics cite Toni Morrison's assessment that Welty writes about African Americans like she should, without projecting her own white experience onto the characters (Watkins 47). However, Welty does have African American characters as the center of some of her early stories: "A Worn Path," "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden," and "Powerhouse" come to mind. "A Worn Path" was originally part of my project. After examining manuscript drafts, though, I found that Welty made very few revisions and none that substantively altered an interpretation of the story. "Keela" and "Powerhouse" repeatedly occur as the center of critical discussions about Welty and race, but my research was more interested in how Welty creates a complex portrayal of women. My time at MDAH was limited, and so I could not examine every story in the collection. Moving forward, my examination of "Clytie," "Why I Live at the P.O.," "A Memory," and "A Curtain of Green" suggest that Welty's earliest collection needs to be revisited in critical conversations. Whether through examination of revisions or other thematic concerns, *A Curtain of Green* remains a vital component of Welty's oeuvre. Critics often note that thematic concerns Welty focuses on in *The Golden Apples*, *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles*, and *The Optimist's Daughter* all begin in her earliest stories.

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