



The
HEART
of the
STORY

Eudora Welty's Short Fiction

By Peter Schmidt

by Ran (433). Ran's interior monologue is thus "spoken" after Maideen's suicide: "How was I to know she would go and hurt herself," he pleads guiltily and then, in a paroxysm of selfish anger, adds: "She cheated, she cheated too" (392). Eugene's story, in contrast, ends with an act of silent disdain: he returns home and coldly watches his wife and her best female friend in the kitchen after dinner. Eugene's violence and wandering may seem to have temporarily been spent, but actually his misogyny has only taken a more disguised (i.e., latent) form; he remains obsessed with women as devourers: "Eugene tilted back on his chair and watched Emma pop the grapes in" (426).

Such a somber analysis of the tragedy of Ran's and Eugene's misogyny need not assume that the women in these stories are paragons of virtue. Indeed, both Jinny Love and Emma MacLain are two of the most callous women in all of *The Golden Apples*. Jinny quickly takes a new lover rather than trying to help Ran overcome his fear of women, and Eugene's charges that Emma is neglectful, conceited, and hypocritical appear to be at least partially correct. Welty's manuscripts, however, reveal that she revised the beginning and the ending of "Music from Spain"—the two scenes in which Eugene's wife Emma is present—in ways that make it easier for us to question Eugene's view of her as a monster. In the opening scene, Welty's revisions added the detail about the "wounded cry" Emma makes when, upset by her husband's cruel behavior toward her, she burns herself on a toast pan (393); and the concluding scene involving Mrs. Herring, Emma, and Eugene includes more details in the later version that stress the friendship between the two women (425–26). These revisions make Emma seem a more sympathetic character, and Eugene's views of her more irrational.

One final note on these two stories. As interesting as "The Whole World Knows" and "Music from Spain" are, they are not on a par with each other artistically. Only "The Whole World Knows" has the power and compression necessary for tragedy. "Music from Spain" often seems awkwardly written and too slowly paced in comparison with its companion tale; the following sentence, for example, is unintentionally comic: "Eugene, unaccustomed to visions of people as they were not, as unaccustomed as he was to the presence of the Spaniard as he was, choked abruptly on his crust" (408). Furthermore, the char-

acter of the guitar player is ultimately intelligible only as a projection of Eugene's fantasies, not as an identity in his own right—an awkward flaw in a story told using a third-person narrative. The characters who speak to Ran in his monologue, in contrast, are both powerfully rendered independent figures and projections of his own fantasies and fears. Consequently, "Music from Spain" has neither the economy nor the tragic tension between fantasy and fact that gives "The Whole World Knows" its impact. One is not surprised to learn that "Music from Spain" was the last story written in *The Golden Apples* sequence and that Welty herself has had doubts about its success (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 285–86, 332–33). Yet the twinned psychological terrain explored by "The Whole World Knows" and "Music from Spain" is as rich as it is frightening, and the two stories should be read together as Welty's most daring exploration of the tragic causes and consequences of male misogyny.



To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by dis-course, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself . . . to "ideas" . . . that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply reabsorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere. . . .

— Luce Irigaray,
This Sex Which Is Not One

start

Of all of Welty's early stories exploring the way in which women do violence to themselves, none is more incisive than "Petrified Man," and it provides an especially revealing introduction to a discussion of what happens in Welty's tragic stories when a woman rather than a man is the central character. The story seems in part inspired by circumstances that came to the Jackson fairgrounds in the late 1930s; Welty photographed them assiduously—including a side-show poster touting an "Ossified Man" (Marrs 103–04, 113–14). Not coincidentally,

"Petrified Man" is also Welty's first intensive investigation of the meaning of the Greek myths associated with Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon, dragon-like creatures with wings, human heads, snakes for hair, and a gaze that would turn human beings to stone. From the first appearance of Medusa motifs in Welty's stories, Welty seems to have understood that she could use Medusa's story as a means of investigating the dilemmas facing modern American women. A brief reading of the role played by the Medusan gaze in "Petrified Man" may serve as an introduction to "June Recital."

Welty's critics have greatly praised "Petrified Man," but the readings they have given it are somewhat odd, for they are unanimous in blaming the women in the story for the perversions of sexuality that it satirizes. It is rather as if the story's Medusan gaze were so disturbing that its commentators—both male and female—have rushed to cast themselves in Perseus' role and wield righteous swords against the women whom they take to be the story's villains. Most commonly, this takes the form of arguing that the women have assumed the role of men, stripping men of their masculinity and perverting "natural" gender distinctions. In this view, the women are modern Medusas, women who turn to stone the men who come in contact with them. Astonishingly, however, no commentator has fully confronted what it means to have the central male figure in the story be a rapist or explored the connections that the story draws between representations of women in advertising and violence toward women in society. The women may be Gorgons to their men, but the true Gorgon in the story is the world of mass culture, a Medusan world whose uncanny power consists in its ability to make women see themselves only through an essentially male point of view, both idealizing them and treating them as objects of rage and violence. Welty plays a better Perseus than her critics, for she knows how to spot the real villain and decode its dangerous gaze—and all this in 1941, years before the recent developments in feminist criticism and theory that it anticipates.¹²

"Petrified Man" is told entirely through two conversations that take place between Mrs. Fletcher and Leota while Mrs. Fletcher is getting her hair done on 9 March and again on 16 March 1941, in Leota's beauty parlor. The subplot of "Petrified Man" is concerned with lurid

crimes and traveling freak-show exhibitions, whereas the main plot depicts the commonplace violence against women that occurs in a beauty parlor. In the subplot, a rapist joins a freak show and disguises himself as "Mr. Petrie" the Petrified Man, realizing that a man whose body supposedly turns everything he eats into stone will be the perfect cover for his brutal appetites as a rapist. In the main plot, Mrs. Fletcher seeks to disguise the fact of her pregnancy—the fact that her body will change its shape and use its food to nourish another life—with a petrified disguise of her own, a "permanent" hair-do and "fixed" smile that conform to her conception of the eternal forms of feminine beauty. A newcomer to town named Mrs. Pike is the only character in the story who figures in both plots. She first notices that Mrs. Fletcher is pregnant and that Mr. Petrie is the same man as the one pictured in an old copy of *Startling G-Man Tales* with a \$500 reward on his head for rape.

Welty's story is less concerned with Mr. Petrie's private motives for rape than it is with unmasking the cultural connections between the marketing of idealized images of female beauty and the hidden rage and violence against women that underlie those supposedly pure images. For Leota and Mrs. Fletcher have been conditioned to see what is done to their bodies in the beauty parlor not as acts of violence but as acts of love—techniques that affirm their beauty, independence, and importance as women. Such thorough conditioning may be their culture's most disturbing act of violence against women, for unlike the crime of rape the beauty parlor's ideal is universal and disguised as its opposite, as something indispensable to a woman's self-esteem, and it affects more women than all the rapists in the country.

Leota's beauty parlor is an elegantly appointed torture chamber with the female body as its victim. In order to achieve the physical standards that society sets for beauty, an array of tools and machines in Leota's shop remake nature. References to the high technology of the beauty industry are frequent, from the "aluminum wave pinchers" used to make curls to the hair-drying machines that "cook" their occupants (18). The inborn shape of one's hair is given a new "body," and called a "permanent"; one's smile is no longer natural but "fixed" (28) by face powder and lipstick. If the parlor's creations are not truly "permanent"—Welty notes ironically that Mrs. Fletcher speaks of her

"last permanent"—nevertheless the body's new shapes aspire to the permanent and "ideal" standards that the beauty parlor's machinery represents. Even more importantly, Welty shows that the beauty parlor's standards of beauty are themselves created by a larger machine, the mass marketing apparatus of popular culture. Several times she mentions popular reading materials in the story, which vary from the purportedly high-class "rental library" (where Mrs. Fletcher primarily says that she first met her husband) to the "drugstore rental" library supplying the cheap novels and some of the periodicals with names like *Life* is *Like That* and *Screen Secrets* that entertain the parlor's customers while their hair is being dried. As the title *Screen Secrets* suggests, the standards of beauty that the parlor sells are created by the motion picture and advertising industries. Those mass cultural images of perfection become molds that may create endless reproductions of their products in the women and men who are influenced by them. And although pop cultural icons purport to portray healthy images of women as wives and mothers, they in fact teach the women to treat their sexuality as threatening and scandalous—an affront to the static image of proper beauty that the beauty parlor mass-produces.

Welty first alerts us to this fact when she describes the women at the parlor as "customers" who are being "gratified in [their] booths" (17)—a striking verb that suggests sexual pleasure perversely displaced not merely onto consumer objects but onto the narcissistic contemplation of a constructed image that is sold with those products. When sexual relations do occur in the story, they threaten ideal standards of beauty by causing everything from dandruff to pregnancy. "I couldn't of caught a thing like that [dandruff] from Mr. Fletcher, could I," Mrs. Fletcher whines early in the story (18), and Leota on the same page gingerly spells the first four letters of the word "pregnant" (as if it were something that must never be named aloud) and then asks, "how far gone are you?" implying that Mrs. Fletcher's pregnancy is a kind of dying. The women's belief that both sexuality and pregnancy are grotesque rather than beautiful is shown most clearly in their discussion of the traveling freak show that comes to town. Significantly, it occupies "the vacant store next door" to the beauty parlor (20): businesses selling beauty and ugliness are adjacent, as if they were mirror images of each other. Indeed, as the women's conversations show,

they need to have a sense of the grotesque in order to enforce a sense of their own normality, but the more they try to separate what is normal from what is monstrous, the more the two threaten to merge. Welty adroitly shows this largely unconscious connection in their minds by having Mrs. Fletcher's and Leota's conversation about the freak show continually stray from discussing the freaks to discussing their own lives. The show is first mentioned almost in the same breath as Mrs. Fletcher's newly revealed pregnancy; it is as if Mrs. Pike has as keen an eye for the spectacle that Mrs. Fletcher makes as she does for the freaks. As Leota says, "Well, honey, talkin' about bein' pregnant an' all, you ought to see those [Siamese] twins in a bottle, you really owe it to yourself" (20). Part of the women's horror and fascination with this display is that it seems not only to be an example of the frightening disorder of nature (creating two babies instead of one) but also of what they take to be the sickening and unnatural union of mother and child: "they had these two heads an' two faces an' four arms an' four legs, all kind of joined here. See, this face looked this-a-way, and the other face looked that-a-way, over their shoulder, see. Kinda pathetic. 'Glah!' said Mrs. Fletcher disapprovingly" (21).

If the beauty parlor and the freak show next door are the arbiters of the beautiful and the ugly, then, the lines that they draw are not nearly so sharp as implied by the architectural lines dividing the two buildings. The mirrors on the wall of the beauty parlor (perhaps on the very wall that separates the parlor from the freak show) play a crucial role in "Petrified Man": they give us lucid glimpses of the many ways in which society defines beauty and ugliness as mirror opposites. More powerfully than any other piece of equipment in the parlor, the mirror presents a standard of beauty and measures the women against it. When they view themselves in the mirror, they view not only their own image but the ideal image of what they wish to be. The mirror (like a movie screen) holds the spectacle of infinite examples of Beauty itself yet also cruelly presents an (also infinite) spectacle of monstrous failure: "[Mrs. Fletcher] stared in a discouraged way into the mirror. 'You can tell it when I'm sitting down, all right,' she said" (23). Beauty and the Medusa are twinned images, each the "negative" of the other.

The parlor's mirror does not hold an image, of course, so much as

reflect one that is projected upon it. In Mrs. Fletcher's case, Welty shows, she projects that ideal image from her own imagination, which is in turn projected (much like a movie) by the powerful and subtle machinery of popular culture that has invented those beautiful images and then imprinted them in the women's minds. Here lies the subtlety of Welty's diagnosis of how commercial culture may corrupt. The women are dependent upon market images for their sense of beauty and normality, yet they do not realize this; rather, they take those very images as sign of their own independence and power, the irrefutable proof of respectability that they themselves have earned. The most powerful allure of mass culture in Welty's view is not that it sells the comforts of conformity but that it promotes them as their opposite—as heroic examples of an individual's independence and power. The function of the beauty parlor mirror is to show how this hidden process works. Looking into the mirror as she receives her shampoo and set, Mrs. Fletcher proudly boasts: "Women have to stand up for themselves, or there's just no telling. But now you take me—I ask Mr. Fletcher's advice now and then, and he appreciates it, especially on something important, like is it time for a permanent—not that I've told him about the baby. He says, 'Why, dear, go ahead! Just ask their advice'" (25).

The beauty parlor is an all-female domain where they can mock the men and assert their own power over them; this surely "gratifies" them (17) as much as the beauty treatments. But like the beauty treatments, the sense of power that the parlor gives them—power over their husbands, over each other, and over their own bodies—is a dangerous illusion; it is not at all the kind of power it seems. The parlor's images of perfection dictate the terms by which Mrs. Fletcher must define her "independence," and all of those make her dependent upon mass cultural images of perfection that are marketed by men (Marchand 1-51, 66-69). Welty subtly enforces this irony by having Mrs. Fletcher sitting down in one of the parlor's chairs staring at the mirror even as she speaks about women "standing up for themselves."¹³

If there is a Medusa in "Petrified Man" who turns all who gaze on her to stone, therefore, it is the world of commercial culture, not the women who are its victims, and it has done its work not by petrifying its victims with a vision of ugliness but by hypnotizing them with a

vision of false beauty. The presence of a rapist on the other side of the beauty parlor's mirror, moreover, exposes the connection between commercial culture's images of women as beautiful objects and its treatment of them as perverted monsters. The same advertising world that reproduces endless images of idealized women for women to copy also treats women as sex objects for men like Mr. Petrie to possess and desecrate: sexual relations are perverted into either utter passivity (as with Leota's and Mrs. Fletcher's husbands) or violent aggression (as with Mr. Petrie).

Who is Perseus in this retelling of the myth of Medusa? Welty, of course. Like Perseus, she uses her art to allow us to see how the Gorgon's gaze is directed at us without letting us succumb to its power. The story's meticulous commercial details of the parlor's decor and the women's slang may be thought of in traditionally mimetic terms, as a mirror. In Welty's hands, however, this mirror functions differently from the mirror in the beauty parlor or the screen in the movie house: it does not present these images under the guise of the "natural," but reveals them to be representations, a set of artifices and disguises. In doing so, Welty's story exposes the hidden, demonic source of the images that are projected onto its mimetic reflective surface and uncovers how those representations acquire authority until their naive consumers believe, as the title of one of their favorite pulp novels puts it, that "life is like that." Such an understanding of culture is the true "screen secret" of "Petrified Man," allowing us to decode the sexual politics involved in making some forms of representation become accepted as "natural" in mass culture while other ones are excluded. These revelations are the reward Welty reserves for us if we read even more carefully than Mrs. Pike.

"Petrified Man" is one of Welty's greatest comic stories, of course, because of its brilliant imitation of how commercial culture corrupts language and personal relations, but I have found when teaching the story that my students are as disturbed as they are amused by it; in fact, some of them find it very hard to laugh, so uneasy do they feel. Ruth Vande Kieft's comment on the story is most apt: "We can say of this story what a critic has said of the comic spirit of Jonathan Swift: it 'frightens us out of laughter into dismay'" (Vande Kieft 65; see also Sypher 235). The story has generally been praised as an example of

mimesis, the artist holding a mirror up to her culture and stunning us with the image of ourselves that we see. But the story should also be understood as a darkly comic analysis of mimesis as a *Persean mirror*/shield that may either paralyze or protect, depending on how it is used. Welty's gift to us, in effect, should be thought of like Athena's gift to Perseus: it allows us to "see" the paralyzing gaze of popular culture's gender stereotypes without being overcome by it. In Luce Irigaray's terms quoted in the epigraph to this section, Welty uses her skill at mimicry to unveil to us not just the beauty parlor but "the place of women's exploitation by discourse." Like Perseus she remains "elsewhere," her heroic critical energy distanced from such a petrifying language.

*And in her lurid eyes there shone
The dying flame of life's desire,
Made mad because its hope was gone,
And kindled at the leaping fire
Of jealousy, and fierce revenge,
And strength that could not change nor tire.*

*Shade of a shadow in the glass,
O set the crystal surface free!
Pass—as the fairer visions pass—
Nor ever more return, to be
The ghost of a distracted hour,
That heard me whisper:—"I am she!"*

— Mary Elizabeth Coleridge,
"The Other Side of a Mirror"

"June Recital" marks the highest achievement of Welty's tragic art in the short story form. Counterbalancing the stories of the MacLain twins in the *Golden Apples* sequence (it is second and they are penultimate), this story of the downfall of Miss Eckhart, Morgana's music teacher, brings into focus as none of Welty's other stories do the social pressures that ostracize a woman, forcing her to choose between marriage and monstrosity, being a lady in the parlor or a madwoman in the attic, and it allows us to define the ways in which the story of Welty's tragic heroines differs significantly from that of her male tragic protagonists.¹⁴

This feature alone would single out the story in importance, but the tale is also one in which Welty makes her most daring experiments in narrative form, especially in structure and point of view. In contrast to her approach with the MacLain twins, she chooses to tell Miss Eckhart's story from the point of view of two children, Loch and Cassie Morrison, who live next door to the MacLain house that Miss Eckhart called home for many of her years in Morgana. Cassie was one of her piano students (as was Ran MacLain, her only boy pupil), while Loch knows her from the stories Cassie has told and the town gossip he has heard. It is important to ask why Welty chose two distant points of view to present Miss Eckhart's story, rather than the more intimate method she used for the two male tragic protagonists in *The Golden Apples*, and I will confront this question later in this chapter.

The structure of "June Recital" is equally daring. Part I is told from Loch's point of view, first as he observes the action from a bedroom window, and then as he climbs out onto a nearby tree. Part II is told from Cassie's point of view, and focuses not on what she sees but on a strain of music she hears coming from Miss Eckhart's old piano and the flood of memories it releases for her. Part III returns to Loch in his tree; much of the action in this section is viewed upside down, as Loch hangs from a branch. Part IV begins from Cassie's point of view, as she sees Miss Eckhart and joins Loch outside of the house to identify her; then reverts briefly to Loch's point of view; then ends much later in the evening with Cassie in bed, following her thoughts just before and then *after* she has fallen asleep and begun dreaming. Structurally, the story moves simultaneously backward and forward in time. We first see Miss Eckhart in the "present" (the 1920s), as she returns after an absence of about half a dozen years to the site of her abandoned music studio in the MacLain house and, driven insane by what she has lost, tries to burn the house down. Her one-time star pupil, Virgie Rainey, has been in the abandoned house with her boyfriend and has played a tune on the downstairs piano that Miss Eckhart particularly associated with her. Miss Eckhart may or may not have heard Virgie play this tune (the narrative is ambiguous on this point [280-82]), just as it is ambiguous as to whether Miss Eckhart knows Virgie is in the house

inside the burning house with her hair on fire (322). (Compare the Mary Elizabeth Coleridge poem on a similar subject, used as an epigraph to this section.) The disturbing memory of Miss Eckhart is thus buried within her female pupils and may surface even when they are acting most conventionally, as Cassie is through most of the story. It is also not merely a memory of their teacher but, even more disturbingly, of another "voice" that Miss Eckhart tried to teach them to have, a voice that they have all partially or wholly suppressed in order to blend their voices into the chorus of their society.

In the stories considered in the next chapter, the heroines at last are able to come to terms with the veiled image of the Medusa that has haunted so many of Welty's strong heroines. They become Perseus figures as well as Medusa figures: that is, they learn to control or limit society's ability to cast a rebellious woman as a Medusa. Comedies rather than tragedies, these stories do feature recognition scenes, but unlike the recognition scenes of tragedy, they reveal sources for a new identity rather than the causes that destroyed the old. Their rebellious protagonists are at least partially accepted as role models for their communities, not treated as monsters or scapegoats. Thus they begin to build with their own force of will and imagination "a place on earth" where power such as Miss Eckhart's can survive.

CHAPTER 3

Rigidity and Rebirth

Eudora Welty and Women's Comedy

In 1941 Welty published two exuberant pieces that will be excellent springboards to launching a discussion of the development of her comic stories. The first, "Why I Live at the P.O.," became perhaps her single most famous piece of fiction; certainly it is her most well-known comic story. The second piece, "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!" appeared in the *Junior League Magazine* in November 1941 complete with illustrations and the byline "Eudora Welty, Jackson"; it remains largely unknown.¹ It is a witty piece of journalism rather than a story, but when paired with "Why I Live at the P.O." it allows us to approach "P.O." (a perhaps too familiar story) from an unusual angle and see links between Welty's comic sensibility and her interest in issues of gender differences and power.

"Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!" achieves much of its comic edge through incongruity, imitating the voice of a mechanically incompetent woman who inspired by reading too many issues of *Popular Mechanics* tries to build her own version of the latest rage in women's fashion in 1941, a "Hedy Lamarr turban." As the title of the article suggests with its use of italics and its three exclamation points,

this woman is breathy and excited about her project, gallantly admitting her mechanical ineptitude but consoling herself with the fact that her best energies are no doubt mental: "Of course," she admits, after reading all those *Popular Mechanics*, "I never made a thing. As a matter of fact, I am singularly inept at all mechanical tasks. To me, all things are motivated and active enemies, and a stuck table drawer will always be more cunning than I am. But throughout my childhood, I was a constant mental handy-man. I could have fixed anything, and if I had ever wanted to, I could have made anything. I could have changed everything in the household into something else if I had wanted to, just like a witch. But I never did."

Being proud of her mechanical ineptitude is proper for a southern lady, of course: "We Southern women would not think of having a washing machine installed in the home, but we may at any moment descend (or ascend) to some form of heinous physical drudgery, emerging only to declare our prowess before falling flat. I don't know what causes this. We all do it. We are so proud of being able to do anything you might name." But the narrator nonetheless is fascinated with the magazine's "Yankee" bustle and gospel of self-improvement:

The true message of *Popular Mechanics* is: "You want something? You've got it." And that's like having a finger pointed at you. There's a feeling of guilt there somewhere; I still don't think it's a good idea to read things like that unless you have poison ivy. You haven't got this thing you want, such as a high dive for that home-made pool of yours, in its ultimate form, of course: it's your old fireless cooker. But in its lesser state, that high dive is right there looking at you, staring at you. In one more minute you are going to open a box of as horrible a set of tools as I have ever seen outside "The Return of Frankenstein," and work your head off.

As a child, our heroine the narrator did have a very practical interest in reading the magazine: although she could not imagine herself building the contraptions depicted, she did see how the magazine could contribute to a proper girl's activity, her paper-doll collection. She had plenty of mothers and children in paper cutouts (presumably from ransacking women's magazines), but she lacked *fathers*. Fortunately, *Popular Mechanics* was filled with images of men. "The only men in the mail-order catalogue wore long underwear, smiled, and

carried another pair. I think they still do. My choice was the man under water. In *Popular Mechanics*, besides these undersea men at 45-degree angles, and frowning inventors with spangled headlights on their foreheads, you could get standing-up men like Lionel Strongfort and Charles Atlas for fathers of your families. They had their measurements, with fractions, printed on dotted lines across them, I remember. They very nicely matched the mothers with pricemarks on their upper arms." Welty's deadpan humor here works superbly, contrasting the girl's enthusiasm with a very knowing eye for the comically artificial costumes and poses differentiating the sexes and turning all into commodities to be purchased on the market.

Later, when the subject turns to making a turban, the piece's wry mixture of buoyancy and skepticism continues. The Austrian-born actress Hedy Lamarr made her first American movie, *Algiers*, in 1938, as a femme fatale who lured a criminal played by Charles Boyer out of the Casbah, the native quarter in Algiers, to his death. Several scenes in that movie in which she wears a turban inspired women all over America to try out turbans for the next few years. In Lamarr's words,

I was "Gaby," a romantic figure, set off against a romantic North African background

My big break came of all places in wardrobe. The wardrobe mistress wanted to add a touch of sophistication to my dress, something that would lend mystery yet dignity. We experimented, but nothing seemed to do it. Finally I suggested varying the headgear. In a bit of mad inspiration I shaped up a white turban. [Actually, it is a darker color in *Algiers*.] It was just the touch we needed.

. . . . Turbans came into style as a direct result of Gaby. . . .

All the actresses were going brunette and sultry, which motion picture columnists said was my influence. Joan Bennett, Claudette Colbert, Joan Crawford, and Kay Francis, just to name a few, soon looked like Gaby from *Algiers*, and the line, "Hay-dee darling, come wiz me to the Casbah," with [sic: was] the schtik of every night club comic. (63, 70)

This fever for turbans also infects the narrator, who feels that one will be the perfect thing to contain her hair, which "with much brushing, extended through absent-mindedness and brooding," was "growing longer and longer."

With the [department store] clerk's sympathy, I finally had to buy one to take home and study by myself. She explained that she was wrapping up a blouse with the turban, made of the same material and attached to it. I had thought it a part of the turban's tail, and that had added to my confusion.

"Comes with it, hon," said the clerk. "It's an inducement." She pointed to where you could break a thread and separate the things; but she said that I would have to be the one to do it. It was the religion of the store.

Our heroine then tries to use the store-bought turban as a model for one of her own concoctions, out of a piece of maroon silk filled "with a design of little keys" that originally was part of a dress bought at Lord & Taylor's Budget Shop. The result is hardly up to Gaby's high standards: "It had ears. When I brushed my hair and put it on, I looked like a lady in *Popular Mechanics*, ready for goggles and a rocket ship."

"Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!" reverberates with echoes from stories Welty published in *A Curtain of Green* the same year, especially "Clytie," in which a woman's "disreputable and wild" hair (90) is linked to even more rebellious thoughts and actions.² But this little piece of journalism gives it all a farcical twist, deftly skewering women's fashions and the elaborate and absolute gender distinctions drawn in American popular culture. In this piece, gender is literally a construction, a mechanical contraption of misaligned, jerry-rigged parts and contradictory social codes as comic and confining as the suits those undersea men had to wear in *Popular Mechanics*. Welty also dryly notes that these distinctions apply to popular writing: "I even thought of writing a little article to send *Popular Mechanics* on how to make a turban," she says, but then reflecting that girls are not supposed to read the magazine, much less write for it, she ends the fantasy abruptly: "but this is it"—publication in the *Junior League Magazine* for girls and women only.

One way to think of the Rondo family in "Why I Live at the P. O." is as an exceptionally noisy family of paper cutouts. Certainly the characters are as delightfully two-dimensional, and as farcically posed, as the cutouts described in "Women!!" but the story is also a comedy about fashion, gender differences, and power.

"Why I Live at the P.O." is set in China Grove, Mississippi, and features Sister as the narrator, Stella-Rondo (her younger sister), Papa-Daddy (Sister's grandfather), Mama (Sister's mother), Uncle Rondo, Stella-Rondo's two-year-old daughter Shirley-T., and (briefly) a dying woman named Old Jep Patterson. In the beginning of Sister's monologue, most readers tend to share Sister's view of the absurdity of her family members. Sister's main tactic is to show how false their language is. Stella-Rondo, Shirley-T., Mama, Papa-Daddy, and Uncle Rondo all speak an inflated language filled with euphemisms and the brand names of fashionable commercial products. When Stella-Rondo displays the clothes she has brought home, for example, she shows her sister something she has never seen before—a kimono that "happens to be part of my trousseau, and Mr. Whitaker took several dozen photographs of me in it" (49). By replacing her sister's ignorance with exotic and fashionable words such as "kimono" and "trousseau," Stella-Rondo reminds Sister that although she may be older and have a job at the P.O., it is her younger sister Stella-Rondo who married the man they both dated and who escaped to live in the wide world. Thus she plays the sophisticated, well-traveled belle, full of polite condescension and a histrionic sense of martyrdom. In retelling her versions of these events, however, it is Sister and not Stella-Rondo who has the last word: the kimono becomes "a terrible-looking flesh-colored contraption I wouldn't be found dead in." Sister uses a similar tactic when relaying Papa-Daddy's speech to us. "This is the beard I started growing on the Coast when I was fifteen years old," Papa-Daddy boasts, but Sister deflates this boast with the comment, "he would have gone on till nightfall if Shirley-T. hadn't lost the Milky Way she ate in Cairo" (47). All these examples are insults made after the fact, private acts of revenge taken during the retelling of the events to make up for her not being able to have her say earlier. Many of the most delightfully vulgar commercial references in the story, such as Shirley-T.'s Milky Way and the Add-a-Pearl necklace, furthermore, were not in Welty's early draft of the story; neither was fancy vocabulary like "disport" and "trousseau" (originally, merely "eat" and "underwear"). In revising, Welty carefully highlighted the story's comic contrasts of diction.³

In Sister's war of words with her family, she continually seeks to

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