UNLADYLIKE: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND WHITE WOMANHOOD IN SOUTHERN GOTHIC LITERATURE

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Between 1940-1960, white women authors used the Southern Gothic literary tradition to make political claims about their identity group’s cognizant contribution to oppressive structures and historical narratives alike. Historically, Southern white women’s bodies were a symbol of cultural purity. The Antebellum “Belle” stood for tradition, and her inherent virtue was a tool wielded to absolve the South of its sins. In the Southern Gothic, on the other hand, authors warp symbolic white femininity in an effort to repurpose its political utility in Southern rhetoric. Where white women once embodied regional virtue, they now bore the representational burden of the grotesque, of social evils in the South. I argue that Southern Gothic literature is a set of important political texts, because it provides early examples of white women holding their own community accountable for racism, classism, and a dangerous allegiance to bygone, pre-Civil War social codes. The white women who penned Southern Gothic stories did not seamlessly incorporate the accountability measures of their fictions into their own lives. Yet I argue that it is because of their personal political position that white women turned to the Southern Gothic to make political claims. Their stories sought to delegitimize white women’s innocence, and to contextualize them as political actors capable of committing atrocities. In turn, white women authors of the Southern Gothic suggest politically productive alternatives to the South’s moral system, emphasizing marginalized voices as the authority.
“It is a curious emotion, this certain homesickness I have in mind. With Americans, it is a national trait, as native to us as the roller-coaster or the jukebox. It is no simple longing for the hometown or country of our birth. The emotion is Janus-faced: we are torn between a nostalgia for the familiar and an urge for the foreign and strange. As often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known.”

Carson McCullers

“Art, though, is never the voice of a country; it is an even more precious thing, the voice of the individual, doing its best to speak, not comfort of any sort, but truth.”

Eudora Welty

“The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.”

Flannery O’Connor
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PART 1. WHITE WOMEN AND THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

The language surrounding the Southern Gothic has always been definitively un-feminine. Ellen Glasgow’s 1935 article marks the first formal merger of Southern works under the common epithet. In her piece, she decries the Southern Gothic as an “inflamed rabble of impulses,” a “fantasy of abominations.”\(^1\) Antithetical to the upright, respectable, even dainty set of adjectives set aside for the Southern Romantic literary movement which preceded the region’s Gothic inclinations, literary scholars accompany Glasgow in steadily characterizing the Gothic as a genre of filth.\(^2\) Extolling and denigrating critics alike wield the same key words: dark, macabre, angsty, disturbed.\(^3\) And the crowning descriptor, which crops up irrepressibly: the grotesque.

Grotesque—not a word one would frequently attribute to the Southern narrative of white womanhood, its imagery entrenched long before the Civil War. The genre’s sinister tone and violent themes remain even today incongruous with stereotypes of demure, dutiful, Southern femininity. Yet the Southern Gothic is densely populated by white women authors and characters alike. In comparison with other great American literary movements, white women are remarkably more present, despite its growing out of a more restrictive sociopolitical environment.

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\(^2\) Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, author of *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature*, chronicles the perception and portrayal of Southern Romanticism, characterizing the trend as “an ancient pastoral district famed for its rural peace and simplicity.” Southern pastoral literature, even in criticism, yields gentler language: condemned for “loyalism” and “idealism,” being “uniformly idyllic,” (1999, 3); (2002, n.p.).

\(^3\) This remains true even as authors, scholars, and critics attempt to define an evolving conception of the genre. In 1994, author Dorothy Allison of the neo-Southern Gothic genre defined her literary tradition as “iconoclastic, queer, southern...a lyrical tradition. Language. Iconoclastic, outrageous as hell, leveled with humor. Yankees do it, but Southerners do it more. It’s the grotesque.” (Bailey, 2010, 260). Prior to Allison, Southern Gothic author Tennessee Williams said: “there is something in the region, something in the blood and culture, of the Southern state[s] that has somehow made them the center of this Gothic school of writers...[they share] a sense of intuition, of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience.” (William, eds. Christine R. Day and Bob Woods, 1978, 42). Not all of the commentary is kindhearted. In an essay called, “The Horrible South,” Gerald Johnson described authors of the Southern Gothic as “the merchants of death, hell and the grave,” and “horror-mongers in chief.” (1935, 44).
than its northerly neighbors. The canon for the great American novel is variable, and literary value is difficult to qualify. Consider a list of National Book Award winners for fiction as a mark of literary merit and popularity. Since the stirrings of the Southern Gothic literary movement in 1935 through today, only 22 women received National Book Awards. Of the 22, five are women authors of the Southern Gothic, and nearly half incorporate Gothic elements into their works.4

The Gothic tradition therefore endured in the Southern consciousness with disproportionate popularity. This is particularly true of stories and authors with un-feminine white women characters: Flannery O’Connor, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the titular crone in William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” I attribute the eminence of such stories to historical political conditions. The South’s strict traditionalist, sexist, white supremacist paradigm fortified the symbolic value of white femininity. These limitations hindered free speech on the subject of white womanhood, but also encouraged the sensationalization of the genre, rendering its gender transgressive conventions compelling and politically cogent.5 The Southern Gothic thus became a venue for white women to speak about their identity. As an alternative method of political participation, literature allowed white women authors to contribute to public sphere discourse despite the limitations of their attachment to the private sphere. This new white woman was rendered in contrast to the Southern Belle of the Antebellum era, and as a result, emphasizes the


sexist and racist social systems the symbol of white womanhood so often perpetuates. Gone were the innocent white women of Antebellum romances: static, ancillary characters who functioned as mere plot devices or as setting. White women’s bodies take on never-before-seen forms in the Southern Gothic: queer, violent, and freakish monstrosities.

Southern history generally acknowledges the impact of Southern women authors on the region’s literary tradition and the cultivation of unique Southern cultural sensibilities. But Southern history often fails to underscore the degree to which women shaped the South’s political agenda, by shifting the discourse on gender. The construction of fictitious white women in the Southern Gothic, was the manifestation of actual political desire. I will analyze the works of three major authors: Carson McCullers (1917-1967), Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964), and Eudora Welty (1909-2001), all of whom published the majority of their works between 1940-1960. Viewed in conjunction with one another, these authors invoke a Southern landscape littered with politically charged white women characters. It is through their works that I support my central claim: the Southern Gothic literary genre was a forum for the construction of white womanhood as a category of political participant. No longer a passive symbol but a free agent, this new interpretation of Southern femininity recognizes the power white women had over oppressive structures.

In Section 1, I introduce the specific conventions of the genre. White women co-opted Gothic tropes to convey both gender and racial inequities in the South. These elements are: decrepit settings, cautionary messages, grotesqueries, the presence of the supernatural, and

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violent themes. The genre’s frequent intertwining of horror and history make it an effective forum to distort the symbol of the Southern Belle.

In Section 2, I assess white women’s role in Southern history, beginning with the Antebellum era. I specifically focus on the invention of the Southern Belle as a foundational symbol in literary and political narratives. These narratives glorify the South, and in doing so, both vindicate its oppressive history and make contemporary political strides less feasible. McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty approach their definition of white womanhood using the Southern Belle as a foil.

I then discuss the legacy of storytelling as a form of political participation in Section 3, both as an abstract rhetorical tool, and as a preferred practice in both women’s history and Southern history. Stories enable dialogue, challenge social standards or social “facts,” and advocate for political opinions contrary to the norm. Through the Southern Gothic, white women exerted themselves in the political arena in ways they could not otherwise, given the constraints of their gender role in the public sphere. In this section, I emphasize the political imperative at the forefront of McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty’s works of fiction.

Following this general assessment of political storytelling and Southern womanhood, I begin my analysis of the texts themselves. Part 2 of this paper assesses four themes or tropes across the works of McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty, that re-imagine the category of the Southern woman, reckon with racism, sexism, and/or classism in the region, and transgress against the institutions white women represented. Their intervention, though naturally imperfect and limited by their personal perspectives, was unprecedented.

In Section 4, I analyze monstrous bodies in Southern Gothic fiction. White women characters deviate from the physical expectations of Antebellum symbolism. McCullers,
O’Connor, and Welty map regional transgressions directly onto their physical form. Section 5 centers tropes of girlhood, or coming of age. I focus specifically on the works of McCullers, who validates marginalized narratives, queerness, and loneliness. McCullers contradicts heterosexist institutions and traditional gender roles through characters who suffer not from their sexuality, but from external constraints placed upon it. Section 6 discusses violence. Here, I focus on O’Connor’s fiction. O’Connor uses violence to demythologize white womanhood, ascribe agency to white women, and foreground their deficiencies. In Section 7, I analyze the use of evil tropes and themes to expose and shift the South’s moral position. McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty suggest that Southerners in the margins have the greatest capacity to generate equitable systems.

Having synthesized the political significance of themes and tropes, I conclude in Section 8 with a study of the relationship between authorial intent and political impact in the Southern Gothic example. This section responds to Welty’s own assertion that the goals of storytellers run contrary to the goals of activists. I use textual evidence from her stories and essays to disagree. I suggest that Welty’s very definition of what it meant to write with political intent reflects the constraints of a political system marred by inaccessibility. Welty labored to represent “the real world” in her fiction, and in doing so, discloses the very personal repercussions for Southerners with no outlet to air their grievances or change their fates.

Ultimately, I posit that it was the multi-dimensional, even contradictory nature of white women characters in the Southern Gothic that proved most politically expressive. In defining what white womanhood was, Southern Gothic authors in turn sought to define what white womanhood could be, ought to be. Permissive narratives and constructive critiques do scaffolding work in the creation of new political sensibilities. The genre is both parody and
parable, and for this reason its tales of human folly are not hopeless, but instructive, and motivated by the region’s capacity to change in the future. Though white women characters in the Southern Gothic can never escape their shortcomings or their punishment, the stories’ authors and readers had the option to learn from their example. They could instead become productive political participants, and not symbolic champions of the South’s oppressive tradition.

1.1 THE GOTHIC AND THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

The generic conventions of the Southern Gothic proved hospitable to the construction of white womanhood in the mid-century South. Modern iterations of the Gothic vary widely, but its base tropes impress upon the imagination and merit description, particularly as they pertain to the narrative arcs of women characters. The Gothic tale often begins with an aloof, clever, Morally Righteous Young Heroine. What she lacks in a husband she makes up for in gainful employment. At her opposite is the Man Of The Manor. He may be the villain, unless the story leans romantic, in which case he will prove, though dubious at first, unfailingly and canonically courageous in the last ten pages. There will be cameos from bumbling old women, untrustworthy clergymen, and tyrannical forces of evil. Gothic conventions for the manifestation of heroism across different genders proved lasting.

In the Gothic, setting drives plot. Nineteenth century Gothic tales typically took place within the home. As the genre progressed into the twentieth century, Gothic stories took place in a wider variety of environments. Settings in different stories remains share qualities of deterioration. Decrepit settings are an intentional psychological overlay of the workings of the

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female heroine’s mind. Setting and femininity are tied together in plot by tropes of domesticity. A disruption in the natural order of the setting indicates to the heroine that they are in the territory of transgression. The threat of transgression—for the morally righteous woman of the imagination—functions as the most visceral element of fear. The Gothic favors fear as its most effective allegorical device, and so stories of crumbling settings bode poorly for the women within them, foreshadowing distress or madness. The allegory of ruined houses and ruined minds transfers neatly to Southern narratives because the household was the chief site for the production of Antebellum social structures. Women, being intertwined in identity with the household, were at fault when those structures (both physical and institutional) eventually soured. In traditional horror, instigators of violence are often external or even supernatural threats. There are insiders to identify with and outsiders to root against. The Gothic deals in interior fear. Gothic fear comes from within the house and within the head; its characters have nobody to be afraid of but themselves.

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8 Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman take this line of reasoning a step further in their article "Gothic Possibilities." The relationship between setting and state of mind has much to do with the literarts projection of their own anxieties. This is what makes the Gothic story so disturbing. The castle accommodates the fears we have about home, “because it presents villains and dangers in an archaic language and mise-en-scène, it fits childish perceptions of adult threats. The castle is a nighttime house—it admits all that we can imagine into it of the dark, frightening, and unknown.” (1977, 282).

9 In Peggy Dunn Bailey’s work on the central themes of the Female Gothic, she characterizes domestic space as a threat to the sanctity of the body and sanity, the Gothic home representing: “imprisonment and vulnerability of women within structures purportedly designed for or devoted to their safety, especially the family home.” “Female Gothic Fiction, Grotesque Realities, and "Bastard Out of Carolina": Dorothy Allison Revises the Southern Gothic.” (2010, 273).

10 For classic examples, see the stories of Jane Eyre, Rebecca, or Castle of Otranto, in which women suffer as much at the hands of the physical home as its occupants. The first two stories end with the house in flames, the third concludes with a ghostly apparition shattering the castle walls. The heroines are not so much better off.

11 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues this point in Within the Plantation Household. She seeks to prove that a white woman’s gender and class identification were inextricably connected to their role in the household, and that the state of the household in its entirety reflected upon her status. Her place as one with the home space brought her influence and a degree of control, but also condemned her to fall at the whim of external factors. Any compromise of the homestead—economic, political—reflected poorly on her. (1988, 111).

12 The very first sentence of The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination is “The Gothic is marked by an anxious encounter with otherness, with the dark and mysterious unknown.” This collection of essays is dedicated to the study of Otherness and fear in Gothic fiction, and its political implications. The
There is much fodder for study in gendered Gothic motifs and their evolutions. Many Gothic stories are cautionary tales. Cautionary tales have political implications, because they often define what gender expressions are deviant or frightening, and which are socially acceptable. Cautionary tales are scary stories intended to regulate behavior, and through them we can discern first who exerts their power over communal narratives, and how storytellers use their power to define social standards for deviancy. Cautionary tales also reveal those identities which storytellers regulate to maintain their power. Punishing transgressive women in Gothic fiction, even when the authors themselves are women, is a form of hierarchical maintenance. Despite their inferior positions in the hierarchy, women adopted Gothic conventions to serve their personal interests. The Gothic evolved in two contradicting, concurrent ways: first, as a genre to incite fear in women, second, as a platform for women to articulate their own fears. Punitive gendered tropes and feminist advocacy are not mutually exclusive in Gothic fiction. Women authors both upheld oppressive systems and championed their own interests.
practice was popular—women writers of the nineteenth century flocked to Gothic conditions in such droves it necessitated the creation of a categorically distinct offshoot for analysis: the Female Gothic, which was the first of its kind. The Female Gothic simultaneously implemented gendered social controls, and provided a venue for distinctly politicized and women-centered expression, especially on more deviant subjects: sexuality, desire, gender hierarchies, and abuse.

The Southern Gothic builds upon the Gothic’s generic foundation with conventions fitting to the grotesqueries of the region. The Gothic is unsettling; the Southern Gothic is downright strange. Freakish, even monstrous elements are foundational to the Southern Gothic story. Its people are delusional; its places decrepit, characterized by “irrational, horrific, and transgressive thoughts” about “grotesque, macabre, or fantastic incidents.” In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990*, Patricia Yaeger treats the grotesque like a political inevitability, especially for women: “Southern women writers use the grotesque to map an array of social crises; the open, wounded, bleeding, excessive, corpulent, maimed, idiotic, or gargantuan body becomes the sign of a permanent emergency within the body politic.” Beyond the physicality of their bodies, the genre’s characters are disturbing for their pronounced, distinctly Southern perception of right and wrong. Keeping with the Gothic tradition, the Southern Gothic focuses intently on transgression. Characters often abide by a moral code the author perceives as malicious and condemnable. In fact, the Southern Gothic

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22 Welty said in an interview recorded in *Conversations with Eudora Welty:* “Of all my strong emotions, anger is the one least responsible for any of my work. I don't write out of anger… [However,] there was one story that anger certainly lit the fuse of. In the 1960s, in my hometown of Jackson, the civil rights leader Medgar Evers was murdered one night in darkness, and I wrote a story that same night about the murderer [his identity then unknown]
genre as a whole reads as a virulent rejection of the Lost Cause narrative. Authors satirize and deride the South’s most pernicious political platforms. Racist, classist, and patriarchal institutions are plot devices used to inspire discomfort and fear. Among Southern Gothic antagonists and anti-heroes, slavery is dismissed as a fixture of a bygone halcyon, and ignorance is not only the standard, it’s an ideal. Southern Gothic authors generally trend away from the paranormal and favor realism, but their stories bear living ghosts.

Ghosts, living or otherwise, are in fact what gives the Southern Gothic its cohesive quality. It’s the South’s ghosts that unify the disparate aspects of the genre, aided by a regional obsession with its own history. Southern Gothic author William Faulkner summarized this penchant in his own fiction: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Literary critic Allan Lloyd-Smith contends that the Southern Gothic is about the past returning: the dredging up of

called ‘Where is the Voice Coming From?’ But all that absorbed me, though it started as outrage, was the necessity I felt for entering into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been more alien or repugnant.” (Welty, ed. Prenshaw, 1984, 266). In her correspondence, Flannery O’Connor said: “The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them, and when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror.” (1979, 90).

23 Teresa Goddu argues in Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation that the South as a whole, and not just its literary tradition, functions as a receptacle for the nation’s great shames and sources of discomfort. “Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation’s ‘other,’ becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the Gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot.” (1997, 4). Effectively, the Southern stereotype is the truest assessment of American impulses and value systems, so concretely loyal to the innate paradox of the nation that it is ousted for its unwillingness to accommodate the nation’s Enlightened façade—for the sake of appearances or otherwise. If the Gothic form reveals the true falsities which make up the American paradox/identity, it is one that the Southern white women of the mid-twentieth century noticed, sought to write about, understand, represent and misrepresent according to their own interest and will.

24 There are examples of white women characters who fit this bill under every author: consider—Mrs. Shortley from “The Displaced Person,” by Flannery O’Connor; Mrs. Fletcher and Leota from “Petrified Man,” by Eudora Welty; and even beloved protagonist Mick Kelly from The Heart is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers falls prey to racist stereotyping and classist superiority.

25 In Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts, Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones argue: “In the American South, texts, like their writers and like the excessively gendered culture that speaks through them, are deeply riven. And if texts haunt bodies, bodies can nevertheless produce new texts that remember, dismember, and lay old ghosts to rest.” (1997, 7).

buried secrets, repressed desires, and abused people, all of which went ignored in Southern popular culture for decades following the Civil War. Southern Gothic stories never take place in a singular timeline. There are always dual conditions: what is, and what could have been, if historical atrocities, chiefly the Civil War, had different outcomes. The Southern Gothic does not ignore the narrative of the Old South altogether, but instead seeks to expose its fallacies.

Southern Gothic authors ascribed what would have been typical political views for the privileged Southerner to their stories’ most reprehensible characters, including and especially its white women.

A final popular convention of the Southern Gothic is violence. Violent impulses, brutal landscapes, and cruel actions permeate the Gothic scene. Before the mid-twentieth century, no genre in Southern literary history permitted its white woman characters to be anything more than snide. Even if their husbands, brothers, or fathers, spurred acts of violence in their presence, a woman was neither instigator nor participant. Under the guidance of the Southern Gothic, violent themes became integral to the telling of the white woman’s story. The sheer barbarity of some Southern Gothic stories inspired exaggerated shock and criticism from readers. Though violent characters are, to a degree, purposefully comedic or theatrical, it would be a disservice to

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28 The core argument in Delma Eugene Presley’s “The Moral Function of Distortion in Southern Grotesque,” is that the Southern Gothic valorizes the moral codes of the ostracized, the unloved in the South. In doing so, Southern Gothic authors devalue the standards of “goodness” established by the elite. The Southern Gothic “distorts” decorum and its characterization of the Other, especially its demands on the political, economic, and social histories of the South (1972).
31 Critic Frederick S. Frank asserted the Gothic “was an inferior genre incapable of high seriousness and appealing only of readers of questionable taste.” *Through the Pale Door: A Guide to and through the American Gothic* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), x.
write them off as caricatures. Though the stories are embellished, the directives which guide them are merciless and speak to the lived experience of real white violence.

I take particular interest with the fictional manifestation of violent white womanhood in the South. This is only a minor contribution to a burgeoning field of study on white women as active contributors to an injurious sociopolitical Southern landscape, with an investment in class subjugation and racism. Scholarship on white women’s cruelty—socially and politically—is new. The turning point in academic literature came in 1970, with Anne Firor Scott’s *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*. Scott’s work puts into words the sentiments Southern Gothic authors express through symbolism and themes. The Southern Belle was not passive nor wholly privileged, despite her membership in and preservation of the master class. She was discontented, and her hypocrisies weakened Old South institutions. Scott’s work was radical in its day, but it failed to draw connections between the scope of white women’s power and white violence. To suggest that white women were anti-racist simply because they

32 New research considered the subject on scales ranging from microhistories to sweeping volumes charting change across centuries, each touching on different subjects: the economic, the spiritual, the political. *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, by Stephanie Jones-Rogers, argues white women’s economic power and savvy through the slave trade (2019). *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* by Thavolia Glymph, focuses specifically on the social logic and microeconomy of the plantation home, and how it shaped the exploitative relationship between the construction of white and Black womanhood (2008). *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism*, by Seyward Darby, doesn’t focus specifically on the South, but does integrate nationalist, supremacist propaganda sourced from the South in explaining the manifestation of racial and political extremism in groups of white women (2020). *Sisters in Hate* is a useful source because it contextualizes racist lines of reasoning too often associated with the distant past in the modern day.


34 Ibid.

35 Scott, at times, attempted to sugarcoat the relationship between white and Black women. “Women who lived and worked together often formed bonds of friendship and mutual dependency across the color line,” being a more forthwith example. Even in instances where she acknowledges the particular abuses of white women against Black women in the slave system, her work is predicated upon the notion that plantation mistresses were more victims of the slave economy than beneficiaries, and she attempts to prove slaveholding women to be, therefore, ultimately abolitionists at heart. A great deal of scholarship has since called Scott’s assertion into question, beginning with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s *Within the Plantation Household* (1988). Even Scott herself improved upon her 1970s era work, complicating her own argument about race, gender, and Antebellum power (1984).
disapproved of or subverted patriarchal norms compartmentalizes their agency and their brutality. More recent scholarship links white women’s discontentment with their position in the household and the political arena to their violence against Black people, as opposed to equal rights advocacy.\textsuperscript{36} Though some white women felt aggrieved by Southern social injustices—those pertaining to their own identity, or those targeting Black community members—still many more felt anxiety or even rage over the impending possibility of racial equality. Violence was perhaps all the more prevalent in white women \textit{because} so much of their agency was confined to the private sphere.\textsuperscript{37} Despite restrictions to political participation, violence in their own households went effectively unregulated.

Hampered by the constraints of the “gentler sex,” Southerners in the mid-twentieth century lacked the discursive tools we use today to talk about the violence specific to white women. There were also few political platforms to talk about this violence. Coverture and paternalism worked in conjunction to ensure white women had no real responsibilities and no real sins.\textsuperscript{38} Stereotypes of white purity allowed white women to enact violence against Black people and lower class white people, but did not allow white women to speak publicly about their actions.\textsuperscript{39} Given its generic roots and reputation for brutality, the Southern Gothic became a


\textsuperscript{39} In Martha Hodes’s research on the sexualization of Reconstruction politics, she notes that, though the dogma regarding white women’s sacrality intensified in the decades following the Civil War, “it never cut thoroughly across class lines.” Hodes uses this statement to draw attention to the ways in which stereotypes of white purity allowed white women to enact violence upon members of their own race. The Scottsboro Trials refer to a court case in which nine young black men were falsely accused of raping two white women on board a train in Alabama in 1931 (1993, 417).
medium to narrate structural and interpersonal acts of cruelty by and against white women. Violent themes served a dual purpose: first, to underscore the limitations of their political position, and second, to expose the relative power of their social position. Gender narratives in fiction disclosed a ruthless frame of reference unmentionable in the public sphere or in past literary traditions. This was especially true of stories centering white women in the household, and characters who feel a sense of racial or class-based entitlement. Literary critic Louis Palmer writes that the genre “reflects a cultural shift to a positive, pejorative whiteness—positive in the sense of visible and obvious rather than invisible.”

The Southern Gothic is laden with such arresting imagery: visible whiteness, visible evil, to articulate the political sensibilities of white women writing within the genre.

McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty didn’t shy from judgement when writing their characters. White women in the Southern Gothic aren’t gracious, grand, or just. They’re rarely good people. Yet, speaking generally, the authors sought to do political good in writing them as such. The Southern Gothic subverted existing standards of white womanhood. Its disparaged racism and Southern elitism. This being said, in some instances, their texts upheld a harmful standard for whiteness. Even today, there remains a gothic residue on the myth of modern Southern womanhood, vestige loyalties made more transparent when we excuse the actions of the genre’s most famous authors as products of their time. Carson McCullers was James Baldwin’s contemporary. Flannery O’Connor was born the same year as Malcom X. Before McCullers, O’Connor, or Welty wrote their books, Zora Neale Hurston published *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and set a course for anti-racist feminist liberation in fiction. Southern

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Gothic novels are not so distant as to be outside the canon of “modern” classics: a collection of novels that includes *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1968) by Ursula K. Le Guin. Time, then, is not the excuse for bigotry. And place has never absolved anybody.

1.2 WHITE WOMEN’S ROLE IN SOUTHERN HISTORY

McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty approached white womanhood not as the invention of a new category, but as the revision of an already existing one. The Southern Gothic was a genre born out of backlash against pre-existing, post-Antebellum generic constructs in the South. McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty came onto the literary scene at a moment when white women expressed their identity through a narrow scope of stereotypes, not only in fiction, but across all kinds of political forums. Up until the 1930s, the vast majority of women authors wrote their white women characters as Southern Belles of the domestic sphere: second class citizens in plot and in politics. The conditions through which white women promoted their interests in the post-Antebellum South were disagreeable to the authors of the Southern Gothic.

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41 Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s book *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*, exposes different manifestations of white supremacy for white women participating in post-war politics. Their trajectories varied: networking, journalism, education policy, or lobbying, and all adopt gendered rhetoric. White women wanted to resist integration, but found themselves barred from the South’s more aggressive, vehement, or outrageous organizations. Moreover, media outlets refused to treat white women’s supremacist terror with equal attention. It ran contrary to their rhetorical utility as watchful mothers of the segregationist system. To be a political participant in the white supremacist order, white women had to adopt racist stances which didn’t come in conflict with tropes of femininity. White women couldn’t join the Ku Klux Klan, but they could and did deploy new languages to uphold white supremacy: narratives of “affectionate segregation” or to stoke interracial rape hysteria (2018, 91).


43 Flannery O’Connor said: “The only good things I read when I was a child were the Greek and Roman myths which I got out of a set of a child’s encyclopedia… The rest of what I read was Slop with a capital S. The Slop period was followed by the Edgar Allan Poe period which lasted for years and consisted chiefly in a volume called
O’Connor, and Welty pivot in their presentation of Southern womanhood. The literary shift away from glorified plantation narratives suggests the stirrings of a concurrent shift in the Southern consciousness regarding the political category of white women.

The historical conditions which created and sustained the Southern Belle help clarify the relationship between the symbolic construction of Southern womanhood and the glorification of the Old South. After the Civil War, white Southerners were made to reckon with a number of losses: an overthrow of their economic system, an unmooring of their perception of righteousness, and perhaps most detrimentally, the loss of an institution which united all Southern whites—their position as an overclass capable of owning another race.44 White Southerners set out to regain some of what they lost.45 Southerners asserted “Lost Cause” mythologies in sectors economic to educational, until their fictions became historically recognized as true memory.46 Southerners predicated their justification of the Civil War on the notion that Confederates fought for some larger, philosophically ambiguous cause—honor, tradition, heritage—and lauded themselves for the conviction and bravery necessary to fight at

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44 For a more robust understanding of Civil War fallout in the white social and political consciousness, and a look into the lengths to which white supremacists were willing to go in order to protect their interests and retain control over the South, consider: Charles Reagan Wilson’s *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920.* (University of Georgia Press, 2011).
46 Memorializing pushes continued throughout Southern history, waxing and waning in tune to white anxieties about their power. It was specifically Jim Crow era Southern nationalism that influenced the work of Southern Gothic authors, as well as an intense World War I push, which coincided with the death of the last Confederate veterans. Interestingly, Southern Gothic authors also wrote concurrently with a moment of Lost Cause fervor that arose in response to the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. For more information on different phases of the Lost Cause in the South, see David W Blight’s *Race and Reunion:* particularly the chapters 2: “Regeneration and Reconstruction,” 4: “Reconstruction and Reconciliation,” 5: “Soldiers’ Memory,” and 8: “The Lost Cause and Causes Not Lost.”
In doing so, they absolved themselves of the implications of white supremacy and racism. White people in the North and South alike prioritized the preservation of the union over reparations, ostensibly because that was the cost of Southern states’ viable reentry into the political fold. Southerners succeeded in minimizing white violence in the nation’s political memory. Mythologizing the Old South was an all-consuming, unabating social activity instigated daily by white people. Lost Cause narratives leached into museums and textbooks, holidays and national monuments, until the South was vindicated, and in a feat rarely realized, the “losers” wrote the history.

White women played a critical role in upholding the myth of the Old South. The era’s highly conspicuous expats—public sphere incarnations of Southern nationalist propaganda—shrouded the influence of white women, who managed the domestic sphere and upheld tradition behind the scenes. Nevertheless, white women were equally culpable in normalizing and disseminating white nationalist ideologies. Much of the literature on the postwar racial caste

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48 “The sectional reunion after so horrible a Civil War was a political triumph of the late nineteenth century, but it could not have been achieved without the resubjugation of many of those people whom the war had freed from centuries of bondage. This is the tragedy lingering on the margins and infesting the heart of American history from Appomattox to World War I.” (Blight, 2009, 3).
49 “Americans faced an overwhelming task after the Civil War and emancipation: how to understand the tangled relationship between two profound ideas- healing and justice… [T]hese two aims never developed in historical balance. One might conclude that this imbalance between outcomes of sectional healing and racial justice was simply America’s inevitable historical condition…” (Blight, 2009, 3).
50 A proliferation of speeches beginning at the end of the Civil War (and in today’s white supremacist doctrine), revel in hyperbole, citing historically recognized truths as their evidence: it is what has always been said. For an on-the-nose anecdote: Julian Carr, a wealthy North Carolina white supremacist, said in a speech, “In fact, the historian of the 20th century that does not do justice to the skill and bravery of the confederate Army is an unmitigated fraud” (Domby, 2020, 46). For more detail on the process by which falsehoods infiltrated academic/historical sources, see: Fred Arthur Bailey. "The textbooks of the "Lost Cause": censorship and the creation of Southern state histories." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (1991): 507-533.
52 In *Mothers of Massive Resistance*, McRae writes: “Federal legislation could hardly combat segregationist practices in places that lay far below legislative halls, judicial chambers, and voting booths. Nor could a chronology of massive resistance that relied solely on federal legislation, judicial decision, and violent uprisings capture how the
system writes off white women as marginalized from the political arena, and therefore without influence.53 But they were, in fact, highly organized operatives, championing public campaigns through the Daughters of the Confederacy and Ladies’ Memorial Associations.54 A narrow definition of what it means to be a participant in Southern politics allows white women to maintain their innocence. White men were orchestrators of the public sphere and mandated a great deal of the tangible political actions which would consecrate white supremacy after the Civil War. But it was white women who gave ideologies their staying power. White women instigated a massive rehaul of the Southern education system, with a curriculum that indoctrinated white Southern children into supremacist belief systems and withheld resources from Black schools.55 White women spearheaded confederate monument and memorial initiatives.56 Their Lost Cause narratives infiltrated public spaces as well as the private sphere,

daily, mundane, and local resistance to racial equality persisted...[white women] are at the center of the history of white supremacist politics in the South and the nation. While they toiled outside the attention of the national media (for the most part), white women took central roles in discipling their communities according to Jim Crow’s rules...capitalized on their roles in social welfare institutions, public education, partisan politics, and popular culture to shape the Jim Crow order.” (2018, 3-4).

53 The first chapter of Thavolia Glymph’s Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household (2008, 1-17), and the first chapter of Vron Ware’s. Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History (2015, 1-47), both contain brief historiographies of white women’s role in politics, and more importantly the way their predecessors categorized white women as victims.


55 The United Daughters of the Confederacy national president said in 1906: “It has ever been the cherished purpose of the Daughters of the Confederacy to secure greater educational opportunities for Confederate children, and by thorough training of their powers of mind, heart and hand, render it possible for these representatives of our Southern race to retain for that race its supremacy in its own land.” A little more than a decade later, the UDC published a 23-page pamphlet called “A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books, and Reference Books in Schools, Colleges and Libraries.” This document is available at the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection and details the explicit lengths to which white supremacist women incorporated their belief systems into the education system, fighting curriculum dictates at the national level. (Rutherford, 1920). https://archive.org/details/measuringrodtot00ruth/page/n3/mode/2up

56 Some of the Daughters of the Confederacy’s best known confederate monuments and memorial plans include: the 90-foot Stone Mountain memorial to confederate generals, the attempted “Jefferson Davis” highway, built to match the “Lincoln Highway,” and the Senate approved plans for an audacious 1923 monument dedicated to “faithful slave mammys.” Black women effectively halted these plans through protest (Horwitz, 2010). See also: Karen L. Cox’s Dixie’s Daughters (2003), for a comprehensive study of the United Daughters of the Confederacy as the cultivators of a “Confederate culture.”
including, as is critical for this thesis, through popular literature.\textsuperscript{57} White women wrote in earnest during the post-Antebellum era, stories which would today be categorized as Southern Romanticism: complete with loyal slave tropes, benevolent, even chivalrous plantation masters, and above all, Southern Belles.\textsuperscript{58} It is important to acknowledge the role post-Antebellum women played in constructing the stereotypes that surround their own identities. It is true that the Southern Belle was a product and a victim of the South’s white supremacist patriarchal system. Southern politics stymied even white women’s access to political forums. Nevertheless, many women in positions of power contributed to the makings of the Southern Belle, for reasons ranging from ideological convictions to personal advantage.\textsuperscript{59}

The ambitious public ritualization of gendered Southern stereotypes is a fiction in itself, and an important one. Gender roles within the home upheld paternalism, a hierarchy in turn used to justify Southern race relations.\textsuperscript{60} Idolizing white femininity as another form of white power seeped naturally into the region’s literary texts. The Southern Belle was the mistress of pre-Civil War plantation life. Until recently, she remained an almost universally unscathed icon of


\textsuperscript{58} Though his piece speaks more to outliers in the Antebellum literary sphere, Paul C. Jones’s \textit{Unwelcome Voices: Subversive Fiction in the Antebellum South} defines a selection of more critical and controversial Antebellum era works in contrast to the kinds of tropes which plagued the genre, as listed above. See “Chapter One: Literature and Twentieth-Century Criticism,” specifically (2005, 1-27).


\textsuperscript{60} The relationship between paternalism and racism is well documented in the South and as a wider practice. The gender hierarchy and the narrative of the white man’s burden are intimately connected on an international scale, as it pertains to imperialism. In the South, paternalism was an important justification of slavery. White women, being essential to the domestic dynamic, play an essential role. A variety of sources recognize the impact of paternalism on Southern racism. Consider: Lacy K. Ford. \textit{Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South} (2009); Laurel Clark Shire, “Sentimental Racism and Sympathetic Paternalism: Feeling Like a Jacksonian.” (2019, 111-122). For a broader perspective: consider the appraisal of Southern politics and rhetoric generally in Henry Louis Gates Jr., Chapters 2 “The Old Negro,” and 3, “Framing Blackness.” \textit{Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow}, (2019).
Southern history, absolved of her hold over slavery because she remained a representation of
good womanly virtue. In the years following the Civil War, the post-war “Neo”-Southern Belle
proved an obstinate fixture of the Southern imagination. The Neo-Southern Belle, on the page
and in person, is a bit of a quandary: at once an enemy to women’s political participation, and the
means by which privileged white women exerted their influence over the public sphere. The
Neo-Belle was an apparition identity, an impossible standard for women’s behavior.
Respectable, nurturing, racist, and God-fearing, the Neo-Belle had matters to attend to equal in
importance, but separate from political decision making. Politically active women would serve
little use in securing the white supremacist patriarchal paradigm that protected white men’s
wealth and control over the post-war order. The Southern social imagination required deference
from the Neo-Belle on all matters of state, but contradictorily tasked her with cultivating white
supremacist political beliefs to sanctify and impart onto her children. She was never outspoken
in the public sphere, but was also a well-educated wit, with a stake in matters of virtue and
morality. She was demure and lovely, but simultaneously plain-faced and notable only for her

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61 Examples in academia include: Joel Chandler Harris, “The Women of the South,” reprinted in Rev J.L.
Underwood’s The Women of the Confederacy (1906, 36); Marli Frances Weiner, Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation
Women in South Carolina, 1830-80. (1998, 77-87); Catherine Clinton. The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in
the Old South. (1982).
include: the Cameron sisters in Birth of a Nation (1915), or Scarlett O’Hara in Gone With the Wind (1939), who
embraces the most “liberated” of tropes available to the Southern Belle. Scarlett O’Hara is aware that her empty
headiness is a ruse, but she believes it to be a necessary one. O’Hara is popular, charming, and seeks to embody
feminine virtues, not unlike the characters Melanie Hamilton and India Wilkes, who strive to survive the Civil War
as Antebellum women in much the same way. Nevertheless, O’Hara believes herself their superior. For a real-life
example of the Belle: consider Sallie Ward (1827-1896) of the Kentucky aristocracy.
63 Elena C. Green, “From Antisuffragism to Anti-communism: The Conservative Career of Ida M. Darden.” The
64 Anne Goodwyn Jones. “Belles and Ladies” in Gender, The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, eds Charles
charm and exuberance. The Neo-Belle was always interesting, but had no interests, she was perfectly well-mannered, except when she was coy, and her chief occupation, it seemed, was engendering mutually exclusive satisfactions at once. In fiction and in life, she was a manifestation of the South’s contradictions. As Nina Baym argues in Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, “Southern women, embodiment of these graces, are what the South as a whole has cultivated; they are Southern culture.” The position of white women as a political symbol, though tenable, was essential, because their mythologies were interdependent with wider myths of fealty, family values, loyalty, and tradition, which served to vindicate elite Southerners’ ways of life.

Before the Southern Gothic existed, Southern Romance fiction of the late 1800s and 1900s contributed to the construction of white womanhood. Plantation romances were an act of self-preservation. White authors of both sexes coveted white womanhood as analogous to Southern virtue. White Southern women co-opted aspects of the Neo-Belle persona to ensure an unassailable position for themselves in an era of political upheaval.

67 This is Jane Turner Censer’s central argument in The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865–1895. (2003). Anne Firor Scott, an early scholar in Southern women’s history, is an interesting case in point on the subject. Her work at once exposes the white woman as a powerful figure for her role in upholding traditions, framing her as an active participant in Southern life. She fails, however, to make the connection between Southern Belle stereotypes and the role of white women in upholding white supremacy. Though many scholars built upon her work and clarified the relationship, Scott’s piece remains a useful example of the staying absolution power of white women’s visage.
69 This is especially true for women looking to garner greater social and political power. For specific examples, consider work on white supremacy’s role in the fight for the 19th Amendment in the South: Marjorie Spruill Wheeler and Marjorie Julian Spruill, New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States, (1993); McRae, Mothers of Massive Resistance, Chapters 5 and 6. White women navigated
Brundage’s introduction to *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, he writes that “for many white women, gendered identities could not be separated from their ties to the past, not just their personal, familial past, but also the collective history of the South.” Though the Neo-Belle was trapped on her pedestal, she could at least look down upon her lessers: Black Southerners, poor Southerners, people who wielded less power than she.

This was the world McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty were born into, and it was into the Belle’s tradition they were expected to write. Yet these authors were critical of Lost Cause literature, not only for its racist political implications, (though they were outwardly antagonistic toward writers who romanticized slavery) but for its sexism: the Belles’ lack of dimension and lack of agency, their submission to narrative flow as mere plot device. A Neo-Belle could not accommodate the political intentions Southern Gothic authors had for their fiction. She wasn’t damning enough. The Southern Belle and the Neo-Belle were social constructs, but their functions were inherently political—tools to uphold a racist and patriarchal political system that barred gender and racial minorities from positions of power. With an understanding of the Old South’s myths, one can better evaluate the changes white women authors chose to make when reconstructing their identity in Southern Gothic fiction.

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their political role as the rhetorical inverse of Black men, and the Neo-Belle returned in conversation regarding lynching and rape politics in the South. Here was a most harmful manifestation of the Southern Belle symbol, used to justify the murder of Black men. See: Martha Hodes. *White Women, Black Men*. Yale University Press, 2014.


71 In McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, central character Mick Kelly is an anti-Belle, and her two older sisters Hazel and Etta stand in as the closest thing to the Belle trope possible in their rural and poor community. Our protagonist Mick has little time for the dithering interests and lackluster efforts of her sisters. Mick considers their lives and goals, emblematic of traditional Southern femininity, a waste of their productivity. Etta is “full of worms,” she “primped all day long,” and cried for fear of her ugliness. Hazel is “just plain lazy.” Hazel and Etta attempt to discourage Mick’s anti-Belle tendencies, but Mick rebuffs them. “I don’t want to be like either of you and I don’t want to look like either of you. And I won’t. That’s why I wear shorts. I’d rather be a boy any day...” (42).
1.3 POLITICS IN THE FICTIVE FRONTIER

The impact of storytelling on politics is substantive and well documented, both in the South, and as a wider practice.\(^{72}\) Stories are practical tools for enabling dialogue. Claude Levi-Strauss, in his work “The Structural Study of Myth,” describes two divergent functions of stories. On the one hand, storytelling can be the site of social boundary reinforcement.\(^{73}\) Communities can legitimate social norms by selectively canonizing certain stories and embittering themselves toward others. At the same time, storytelling can challenge notions of tolerance and pluralize our knowledge base.\(^{74}\) As Levi-Strauss connects storytelling to wider sociological processes, anthropologist Michael Jackson connects narrative work to the political process. Narratives are tools for a storyteller to first make sense of the world, then disseminate their standpoint with an ultimate goal of reorienting a story-receiver.\(^{75}\) Storytelling helps put the experience of marginalized groups in the context of universally understood themes. Both Southerners and women more broadly benefitted from narrative work as a point of political entry, and each informed, through precedent, the midcentury Southern Gothic approach.

1.3.1 The Storytelling Tradition in Southern and Women’s Politics

The Southern Gothic is of course not the first example of narratives wielded for a political purpose in the region. As the Lost Cause movement exemplifies, mythmaking has long

\(^{72}\) Beyond the theoretical work of Arendt, recent scholarship on the subject includes Francesca Polletta’s “‘It Was like a Fever…’ Narrative and Identity in Social Protest.” (1998, 137–159), which she followed with a book length study with the same title; and Michael Jackson’s *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, transgression, and intersubjectivity. Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt.* Vol. 4. (2013).


\(^{74}\) The Southern Gothic is characterized by transgressive, even grotesque stories that disrupt Southern definitions of social acceptability. Echoing their place in the social order, white women of the Southern Gothic write somewhere between Levi-Strauss’s two poles. They condemn Southern bigotry, but as I will discuss in the coming sections, they at times perpetuate stereotypes with politically oppressive implications, purposefully or unwittingly. Claude Levi-Strauss, (1963, 206-230).

\(^{75}\) Jackson. *Politics of Storytelling,* 21.
been entrenched in the Southern political tradition. The practice was not limited to elites. Storytelling was democratic, it was pedagogical, and therefore Southerners felt it was important not only to tell their story, but to tell it right.\textsuperscript{76} The Southern predilection for storytelling became a chief motivator for mobilizing political movements across the region’s history.\textsuperscript{77} This was as true for the sixteenth century Carolina merchant as the twentieth century Civil Rights activist—disadvantaged groups traded narratives like political currency and fostered unlikely alliances from them.\textsuperscript{78}

Storytelling has the capacity to run contrary to culture norms asserted by the leaders of the public sphere.\textsuperscript{79} As a form of social critique, Southern Gothic fiction testifies to the abstractness of social regulations imposed by elite Southerners.\textsuperscript{80} Social critiques can threaten administrative control. White elites in the South quelled counter-narratives by relegating the practice of storytelling to the “inconsequential” realm of the private domain.\textsuperscript{81} As a form of leisure or a source of shame, competing political beliefs were less of a threat.\textsuperscript{82} Nevertheless, historically, when the state withheld their recognition of such stories in the public sphere, storytelling intensified.\textsuperscript{83} The insistence upon storytelling despite mainstream barriers was an assertion of political will for those experiencing poverty, racism, and Southern hardship. Activists rose up to give new testimonials—they sought to rewrite popular political discourse

\textsuperscript{76} Francesca Polletta. \textit{It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics}, (2009).
\textsuperscript{77} Polletta argues that narrative solidifies identity and renders life events chronological and intelligible. “Narratives not only make sense of the past and present, but, since the story’s chronological end is also its end in the sense of moral, purpose or telos, they project a future.” (1998, 140).
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. 138.
\textsuperscript{81} Jackson, \textit{Politics of Storytelling}, 101.
\textsuperscript{82} Jackson, \textit{Politics of Storytelling}, 93.
\textsuperscript{83} Lara, \textit{Narrating Evil}, 43.
with setting, characters, and themes familiar to them.\textsuperscript{84} Political power and access propels cultural authority over collective memories. When Southerners fought to preserve their stories in history, they asserted their narratives in the political arena. Southern history recurrently blurs the lines between cultural and political power.\textsuperscript{85} The Southern storytelling tradition, therefore, offers important instruction. Popular narratives dictate who is politically powerful, and who is morally just. As the region’s fiction proclaims, these two categories do not neatly align throughout Southern history.

Women’s proclivity for politics by way of storytelling is similarly deep-rooted and well-studied. Centering the Western literary tradition, literary theorists suggest that, beginning with nineteenth century British literature, middle class women “domesticated” fiction for their own benefit.\textsuperscript{86} Fiction for and about the domestic sphere, with a new political consciousness that centered women, was so widely read it could not go ignored.\textsuperscript{87} White middle class women authors wrote freely about the political possibilities for domesticity and femininity. Most importantly, their fiction became a space in which their identity held the “power of telling” exclusively.\textsuperscript{88} In the British example, power lay in the woman’s ability to represent herself.

\textsuperscript{84} ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Nancy Armstrong writes: “It is my contention that narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations...I am saying the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies.” \textit{Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel}. (1987, 3).
\textsuperscript{87} The purpose of Armstrong’s work was to “explain how domestic fiction happened to survive and acquire prestige while other forms of writing rose and fell in popularity.” (1987, 77). She claims: “The distinction between conduct books and domestic economies changed so that each reached out to the other’s reader. So popular did these books become that by the second half of the eighteenth century virtually everyone knew the ideal of womanhood they proposed” (69).
Feminist literary theorists don’t attribute the whole of the British women’s liberation movement to fiction. Nor do they maintain that fictional political platforms necessarily advocate for the full instatement of equal human rights. Nevertheless, “women’s fiction” engendered an intense and striking production of a new female identity within the domestic sphere, one that influenced women’s political consciousness. I argue that the impact of white women characters in the Southern Gothic can be assessed in much the same way, but beyond the parameters of the domestic sphere. In the Southern Gothic, women are written into political awareness in both the domestic and the public sphere, through characters who articulate a political consciousness that rallies against the myths of the Old South.

When analyzing a work of fiction as a political act, there can be no separating the art from the author. Women’s ascription of particular characteristics to their own identity’s fictional counterpart is not incidental, particularly when these characteristics run contrary to the popular narrative. This is certainly true of the Southern Gothic: an intersection for the histories of women’s and Southerners’ political storytelling. The South’s popular narratives of white womanhood upheld systemic inequality and marginalization, including the marginalization of white women themselves. For McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty, a shift in the political construction of white womanhood was a purposeful objective of their works. In her work on

89 ibid.
90 ibid.
91 Katherine Hemple Prown’s research in *Revising Flannery O’Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship* points to Southern Gothic white women authors’ simultaneous ambivalence and unflinching interest in gender in their fiction. Speaking to O’Connor specifically: “her attempt to ally herself with a masculinist literary and cultural tradition. By masculinist, I mean any political, cultural, or literary construct that privileges male subjectivity...and denies or obscures female subjectivity and agency.” Prown continues, noting that O’Connor felt the need to overcome “artistic sterility” she associated with womanhood status. “Her technical reliance on violence and the grotesque, for example, resulted from the need to distinguish herself from the ladylike writers who...dominated nineteenth century southern letters.” (2001, 2-8). Eudora Welty critic John A. Alan says: “Of course [her stories] present a feminine point of view; but this, in Miss Welty’s work, is a matter of perspective which does not involve distortion. For Eudora Welty, showing the action of a novel through a woman’s eyes is not
feminism in fiction, Lisa Maria Hogeland defines the consciousness-raising novel as stories in which the protagonist comes to see the personal as political. Under this definition, the Southern Gothic novel might be, then, pre-consciousness raising. The characters in the Southern Gothic aren’t necessarily aware that their stories have political implications. This didn’t mean the implications were any less productive. In fact, women and Southern storytellers alike benefited from the rhetorical distance and thematic ambiguity fiction offered.

1.3.2 The Southern Gothic as Political Participation

Given the longstanding storytelling tradition in Southern and women’s politics, it is clear that narratives are effective political tools in their own right. For Southern white women, stories became a solution to the problem of access. Women could share narratives in the public sphere, despite being bound to the private realm. The differentiation between the public realm and the private realm is of course artificial, a patriarchal ideology used to distinguish the socially regulated laws of the home from the politically regulated laws of the wider world. In the mid-century South, convention posited any difference between the two as inherent and natural.

an act of aggression but of illumination.” From: “The Other Way to Live: Demigods in Eudora Welty’s Fiction,” (1979, 35). McCullers works were written in an era of “tension between the changing status of women and the southern ideal of white womanhood, between a growing liberalism on the one hand and segregation and repressive sexual mores on the other.” (Gleeson-White, 2003, 2). Furthermore, McCullers willfully explored the power and tenability of gender constructs in her own life, and sought to integrate feelings of being “an invert” and “born a man” into her fiction. (Carr, 2003, 39, 159, 167).

Isolating the private sphere from the decision making process informally disenfranchises women. A great deal of feminist scholarship assesses the gendered-political damage of the assignment of gender identities and activities to the private and public spheres.\(^96\)

It was not only the constraints of the private sphere that made storytelling an effective rhetorical alternative. The constraints of the Southern political order in particular made it difficult for women to generate change with more straightforward tools, such as treatises or speeches. Southern women did in fact write speeches, and many made a name for themselves in politics.\(^97\) Nevertheless, gender was a barrier to electoral success in the mid-century South. Southern women arrived on the congressional scene by the mid-1920s, albeit sparsely and slowly.\(^98\) The South lagged behind the rest of the nation in benchmarks that facilitate women’s places in elected positions. The accepted pretense is that women generally find less electoral success in politically conservative regions, and the American South is no exception to this rule.\(^99\)

Women in the South were disproportionately underrepresented in politics for reasons beyond the

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\(^{96}\) The writings of Olympe de Gouges, Mary Wollstonecraft, Lucy Stone, Betty Friedan, Barbara Welter, to cite a few. For more information on the gendered conception of “public life” in women’s history, and the relationship between the private and the public which influences it, consider: Sara M Evens’s “Women's history and political theory: Toward a feminist approach to public life.” (1993, 119-139).

\(^{97}\) A primary occupation of the Daughters of the Revolution and the Daughters of the Confederacy was speech writing and oration. White women gave speeches on everything from suffrage, to Civil War memorials, to agricultural antagonisms. Women’s visual presence was integral in villainizing Black men during Reconstruction. Oratory practices were not exclusive to the white supremacist order; and white women also used speeches to advocate their abolitionist or women’s rights agendas. For greater detail, consider: Jane Turner Censer’s *The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood 1865-1895* or Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy.*

\(^{98}\) The first woman to enter the state House of Representatives in the South was Lillian Clement of North Carolina in 1921. But Missouri did not elect a woman into the senate until Mary Grant in 1973. Virginia did not elect a woman to the state Senate until Eva Mae Scott of 1980. Women’s entrance into the more elite ranks in the state government was a slower process, and continues to be unequal today. From: Women’s Legislative Network of NCSL. “First Women to Serve in State and Territorial Legislatures.” *National Conference of State Legislatures*, March 6, 2019. https://www.ncsl.org/legislators/staff/legislators/womens-legislative-network/first-women-in-state-legislatures.aspx.

scope of blatant gender discrimination—Southern states were and generally remain less educationally equitable, less wealthy, and more religiously and socially fundamentalist than other regions. Thus the barriers to women’s self-representation in political forums were structural endowments of historical disadvantages, and not easily undone.

In the South, domestic sphere rhetoric was mainstream and frequently lauded by influential women’s organizations. The veneration of the domestic sphere assured white women of how important they were culturally, though they need not be so relevant politically. White women were harbingers of the social and cultural constructs which allowed white-controlled Southern politics to flourish without critical pushback. By the 1940s, the “cult of true womanhood” became tied to class distinction, the home-bound woman retrofitted to elevate the status of middle class women. Primarily occupants of the private sphere, women were of exceptional theoretical value, but afforded very little practical value. The gendered rhetorical pull of private sphere ideology proved complementary to the Old South’s social and political hierarchies.

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101 McRae summarizes in Mothers of Massive Resistance: “When white southern women entered the polity, many did so with a pledge to uphold legal segregation, and for generations, female grassroots activists sustained and reproduced segregation in their communities. Their constant work was so interwoven into daily life that it appeared unremarkable. As they worked, some invoked and shaped a particular brand of middle-class motherhood that married gender roles and devotion to racial segregation to a political platform of family autonomy and parental rights—a kind of white supremacist maternalism.” (2018, 10).

102 In fact, white women believed that constant work toward sustaining segregation was necessary, they recognized the effort necessary to normalize and institutionalize racism, making it part and parcel with Southern daily life. White women feared apathy, especially that their neighbors might leave the maintenance of segregation up to the Democratic Party, the law, or the high courts. They believed the practice of segregation to be a daily kind of ritual. (Sullivan, 1996). See also: Glenn Robbins. “Lost Cause Motherhood: Southern Women Writers.” Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 44, no. 3 (2003).

Barriers to women’s participation in traditional political forums are an object of study across the world. The South came with its own particular sociopolitical limitations for white women. Where they were invited into the political fold, they were expected to do so in celebration of their femininity, with all the decorum and humility of the plantation Belle.¹⁰⁴ During the 1920s and early 1930s—a defining era for McCullers, O'Connor, and Welty’s sensibilities—white women who did find their way into positions of political power were more likely to have been appointed to them then voted in.¹⁰⁵ Politically powerful as they might have been, these women still encountered the limitations of a sexist political order. Some were puppet politicians, others bound inextricably to the platforms of their superiors.¹⁰⁶ As a result of the South’s lack of gender representation parity, mid-century political bodies failed to initiate platforms that centered women’s problems. Politicians prioritized the maintenance of racial


¹⁰⁵ Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox. Women and Elective Office, 152.

¹⁰⁶ Take for example, the chairs of Mississippi's State Women’s Committee in 1948. The state Democratic party claimed that “for the first time in the history of our State, the women of Mississippi are being given an opportunity to make their voices heard collectively.” Yet, the invitation to participate in politics stressed that men could be actual contributors, and that women could serve by conducting the gathering and making all the “key-note speeches necessary” (McRae, 2018, 132). Nevertheless, chairwomen Mrs. William Kendall and Mrs. O.H. Palmer claimed their role was essential, even though they retained little power aside from their title. Their justification was: “during the last few years we have taken a more active interest in the affairs of government, we have helped elect men to office of whom we are justly proud—we have made our influence felt where it has meant much, and now we must make our voice heard at a time when it will mean much to our children and grandchildren” (132). This is what it meant to do the political duties of even an elected woman, to fight for the welfare of future generations by stepping back and allowing white men to assert their supremacy. Consider too the example of Senator Dixie Bibb Graves, the first woman to serve Alabama in the Senate, and the fourth woman to attain the position at all. Graves had a brief senatorial tenure, and was elected simply because she was the wife of the governor, and expected to honor his interests in Congress. Senator Graves was meant to be a Southern Lady in politics while she was there, certainly not expected to speak up for her interests. See: Daniel Burge’s “Senator Graves’s Speech: Dixie Bibb Graves and the Changing Conception of ‘The Southern Lady,’” (2013, 253- 277).
hierarchies, contingent on paternalistic and patriarchal norms which necessitated the marginalization of white women. Writing fiction, on the other hand, did not bind an author to any such hierarchies.

By the time McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty came of age, “sphere” discourse had long been the dominant language historians, activists, and women themselves used to describe white women’s role in American culture. Sphere discourse discouraged any intermingling of the home and the political arena. This thesis doesn’t argue that white women authors of the Southern Gothic managed or even tried to escape their position in the private sphere. They instead challenge the presupposed value attached to domesticity, and centered the private sphere as a realm of political interest. In following sections, McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty will acknowledge and attempt to dismantle the power imbalances between the spheres.

To understand how and why Southern women used fiction to advocate for themselves from within the private sphere, we can turn once more to wider scholarship on the role of storytelling in politics. In The Human Condition, philosopher Hannah Arendt explores storytelling as a “subjective in-between” that negotiates the confluence of the private and public spheres. Her work explores the strategies storytellers use to transform private ideas into “public meanings.” Narrative discourse enables community members to negotiate the regulations of a social order for groups otherwise barred from political participation. Arendt’s claims about the function of storytelling as a public-private sphere merger can be applied to the

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Southern Gothic example. For women in the mid-twentieth century South, the fundamental power difference between the private and public sphere defined their political experience. As Arendt describes it, marginalized voices (women) are “privatized” (relegated to the domestic sphere/the apolitical sphere) in an effort to limit the responsibilities and interests of public political actors.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 184.} Operating from within the private sphere instead, women created organizations, developed reformist crusades, and told stories.\footnote{The scope of this thesis focuses on storytelling in the South specifically. For notable examples of social organizations with great political influence in the South, consider: Paula Baker’s “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920.” \textit{The American Historical Review} 89, no. 3 (1984): 620–47., which discusses women’s suffrage, church and charity groups, patriotic social clubs, temperance unions, and volunteer squads.} Southern Gothic authors are markedly partial to the reconception of the private sphere as a space in which local politics play out.\footnote{The quotations reference an interview with Eudora Welty in particular: “A Quiet Lady in the Limelight, an Interview with Jonathan Yardley,” \textit{More Conversations with Eudora Welty}, p. 6-11. But the sentiment is universal across the genre. The most useful assessments of the subject include the works of: Harriet Pollack and Suzanne Marrs’s \textit{Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?} (2001).; Katherine Hemple Prown’s \textit{Revising Flannery O’Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship.} (2001).; Leigh Anne Duck’s \textit{The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism.} (2006).} Welty speaks extensively on this subject in her articles regarding fiction, politics, and the malignment of stories characterized by “regionalism.”\footnote{Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction.” \textit{The Atlantic Quarterly}, Durham, NC 76, no. 4 (1977): 438–453.; Welty, “Must the Novelist Crusade?,” \textit{The Atlantic Quarterly}, 148.} Traditional “regionalist” tropes—plantation houses, religion, decorum—make an appearance in the Southern Gothic because they retain their utility as common explanatory tools.\footnote{For setting/plantation tropes, see: William Moss, “Fall of the House, from Poe to Percy: The Evolution of an Enduring Gothic Convention,” in \textit{A Companion to American Gothic} (2013, 177-189). For religion: Chad Rohman, “Awful Mystery: Flannery O’Connor as Gothic Artist,” in \textit{A Companion to American Gothic}, (2013, 279-290). For decorum: Susan Castillo Street, and Charles L. Crow, eds “Introduction,” in \textit{The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic.} (2016, 1-7).} McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty project their own meaning onto these well-worn motifs. As a result, they politicize trivial qualities of rural, domestic, “apolitical” life. Storytelling from the private sphere was a conversational and
cooperative process. Welty said: “Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening for them is something more acute than listening to them. I suppose it’s an early form of participation in what goes on.” Welty defined the purpose of her work differently throughout her life. Sometimes she referred to it as social commentary, sometimes as intra-community coded speech, or an educational tool. Through each of her evaluations, her design remains the same: to express her beliefs through storytelling as a form of participation.

The work of imaginative displacement, the distance of fiction, and the generalizability of themes allowed white women to speak truths unbecoming to their gender identity. Social rules regarding who could participate in politics diverged widely from rules regarding who could write fiction. This was a point of privilege in itself—not all identities were able to speak freely through fiction. White women were endowed with a long tradition of participation in the arts, and storytelling was an acceptable pastime for members of the private sphere. White women writers of the Southern Gothic did not engage with the public arena through electoral politics, but they were still politically active. Audience-author or audience-text interactions elevate the status of private sphere storytelling to that of interactive and generative community speech. The Southern Gothic sets higher expectations for white women, and punishes them harshly, especially after

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116 Carson McCullers wrote in her essay “The Vision Shared,” published in the Atlantic Monthly: “Any form of art can only develop by means of single mutations by individual creators. If only traditional conventions are used an art will die, and the widening of an art form is bound to seem strange at first, and awkward. Any growing thing must go through awkward stages. The creator who is misunderstood because of his breach of convention may say to himself, 'I seem strange to you, but anyway I am alive,” (1950, 268). Flannery O’Connor said: “There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration. When he reads a novel, he wants either his sense tormented or his spirits raised. He wants to be transported, instantly, either to mock damnation or a mock innocence” (1969).


exhibiting racist or classist behaviors. A good deal of Southern readers rejected these intentions as a misguided representation of the region. Critics felt affronted by the violence and defamation of traditional Southern values. Yet to deny the plausibility of the Southern Gothic narrative is in itself productive, because it forces the reader to acknowledge a perspective beyond the boundaries of the norm. It is through these moments of tension that authors most effectively translated their personal subjectivity into communal intersubjectivity, and optimized a widely read genre for their political interests.

PART 2. POLITICAL THEMES IN SOUTHERN GOTHIC FICTION

It would be a totalizing disservice to Southern women authors to suggest that they somehow were their stories, but the action of storytelling is a measure of an author’s political participation. This section addresses the political interests which drove Southern white women’s Gothic stories through four elements: damaged or damaging bodies, gender deviance in the coming of age girl, physical violence, and the presence of evil. Plot, theme, symbolism, and above all characterization are here useful indicators of an author's political interests or social focuses. Literary critic and philosopher George Steiner regards fiction as a rhetorical exploitation of a reader’s better nature. If Steiner is to be trusted, the rhetorical lengths Southern Gothic

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119 I discuss this further in the textual analysis section to follow. However, Susan V. Donaldson writes specifically about the inscription of suffering and rage at the end of Southern Gothic literature in “Making a Spectacle: Welty, Faulkner, and Southern Gothic,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1997): 567–84.

120 Much more information exists on the nationwide attempt to discredit the Southern Gothic for its controversial subject matter, spearheaded by literary scholars and critics. Consider Thomas Ærvold Bjerre’s “Southern Gothic Literature” (2017). Less information exists on how local readers reacted to McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty’s works. Though they today are posthumously lauded in their respective hometowns, the reception of their fiction was more controversial in its day. For example, Carson McCullers faced ridicule in her hometown after the publication of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*; hometown readers felt it an affront and an attempt to belittle their home. (Carr, 2003, 91). See also: Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow. Chapter 1, “Introduction: Down at the Crossroads,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

authors are willing to go to say a great deal about their relationship with their readership within the region. Southern Gothic authors tend toward hyper-realism, even satire.\textsuperscript{122} They appeal to the reader with sympathetic comedy, drawling perversity, and nightmarish irony to examine, among other things, the performance of white womanhood. Through the following case studies, this thesis will explore in greater depth the specific political imperatives of McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty using different narrative techniques within the Southern Gothic. In my discussion of two themes—coming of age and of violence—I narrow the scope of my analysis to the works of only one author, who is especially renowned for their work on the subject. Though I engage with only a few stories in these sections, the tropes and their corresponding political implications remain generalizable, as each was used, to some degree, by each author as they comment on gender in the South. The re-imagining of the category of the Southern white woman was more than a negation of demure Antebellum stereotypes—it was also a reckoning with the racist and sexist institutions white women so successfully upheld for generations, symbolically and literally. Through the acknowledgement of those hierarchies came an opportunity to mitigate future harm.

2.1 WHITE WOMAN BODY HORROR

My analysis contributes to existing literature on white women’s bodies as a site of conflict in the South.\textsuperscript{123} White femininity is a space in which competing Southern perspectives


hash out their own histories and decide how those histories influence the present. An ideal white woman is a disembodied one. A woman whose spirit dutifully upholds wider paternalistic institutions, who leaves her bodily needs behind to model the ethics of an unflinching and benevolent South.\textsuperscript{124} This is why the women authors of the Southern Gothic find such illustrative power in white women characters whose bodies deviate from the norm. From fat, overlarge, ugly, or disabled bodies, they can extract a gendered-political symbol that indicates wider truths about the Southern reality. White women take up a great deal of physical space in Southern Gothic stories, something unbecoming of the Southern Belle.\textsuperscript{125} Their doing so is a form of engagement in what Sarah Gleeson-White calls a “politics of dissent.”\textsuperscript{126} Different bodies challenge different aspects of the institution of white womanhood. McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty all incorporate characters who suffer deeply under the strain of Southern mis-memory, whose bodies manifest the burden of regional sinfulness, and whose spiritual reckonings, as will be discussed in coming examples, come in the form of physical punishment.

2.1.1 McCullers’s Bodies

In Carson McCullers’s major works, every principal, white, female character is ugly.\textsuperscript{127} McCullers’s investment in ugliness is a form of political dissent. These women and girls are

\textit{Transformation of the Plantation Household,} (2008); Jane Turner Censer studies the ways in which white women found autonomy within the confines of their domestic and social roles in \textit{The Reconstruction of White Southern Womanhood, 1865–1895,} (2003); Giselle Roberts studies the confluence of patriotic and feminine values in the figure of the Belle during and following the American Civil War in \textit{The Confederate Belle,} (2003).

\textsuperscript{124} Previous section “White Women’s Role in Southern History” addresses the construction and implications of the institution of the Southern Belle.

\textsuperscript{125} Examples of women with large bodies and a presence to match can be found across the Gothic. For examples from this thesis: O’Connor’s “Everything that Rises Must Converge” (1971, 405-420); Welty’s “Why I Live at the P.O.” (2019, 43-52); McCullers’s \textit{The Ballad of the Sad Cafe.} (3-71).


\textsuperscript{127} In \textit{The Ballad of the Sad Cafe,} “She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed,” 3. In \textit{The Heart is a Lonely Hunter:} “A gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve...at first [Mick] was like a very young girl,” (2000, 18). In \textit{The Member of the Wedding:} “…[Frankie] was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long,” 4.
characterized by bodies incongruous with femininity. Characters feel huge among the bodies of their social superiors, the very excess of their form an expression of nonconformity. Excessively tall girl characters often hide their form in androgynous clothing, anxious of the grotesque impiety-signaling that comes from women who exceed the size of a Belle and transition into the territory of the freakish. In *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), thirteen-year-old protagonist Frankie “equates bodily size with self-control and excessive growth with moral inadequacy.” Her worth is community defined and tied up in her capacity to present as feminine. The superficial manifestation of internal deviance is a tool wielded widely across Southern Gothic literature for characters of all identities. In the case of *Member*, Frankie disparages the unrealistic expectations for the space a “real” woman ought to take up in the South, not only physically, which is a standard Frankie obsesses over, but as a member of her community. The standard for social acceptability was slim in the mid-century South. There was no social space for Frankie to air her grievances, no political space for her to advocate for her protection given her outcast status. For McCullers, this is the true sacrilege of the South’s deaf and inequitable men’s club: not their creation of marginalized groups, but the denial that the margins exist at all, and that they can be the site of rich and worthwhile lives worthy of social admission and political participation. The message in Frankie’s story becomes clear at its conclusion: Frankie may be able to transition her gender anxiety and general inability to conform

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130 “The trouble with me is that for a long time I have just been an I person. All people belong to a We except me. Not to belong to a We makes you too lonesome” (42). “This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person and hung around in doorways, and she was afraid” (3).
to an external definition of femininity from a hindrance to her happiness into a generative state of personal fulfillment. The effect of McCullers’s efforts can be gauged in part by community reviews. Her work made her Georgia neighbors uncomfortable, which proved at the least they were willing to engage with the work at all. McCullers treats women or girl characters’ gender role deviance as a space for productivity. This discourages repression, and creates a narrative for women’s roles in the community outside of the Old South’s heterosexual standard.

In the novella *The Ballad of Sad Cafe* (1951), the protagonist’s gender digression is accentuated by her wealth and status. Miss Amelia Evans is manly in stature and dress, but is most threatening because she lives without a husband and is a participant in the public sphere. Her prominent role in the community falls outside of the activities associated with womanhood. The expectation for Amelia to act like a woman while occupying the position of a man is a parabolic distortion of both symbols, a monstrosity which cannot, and does not, survive the length of the tale. McCullers incorporates the character Marvin Macy to symbolize traditional masculinity. As an aggrandized and often aggressive plot device, Martin highlights Amelia’s failure to honor gender conventions, her body made incongruous to men’s or women’s roles. Amelia appeals to her community, but they ultimately favor the masculinity/femininity

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136 “For Marvin Macy was the handsomest man in this region -- being six feet one inch tall, hard-muscled, and with slow gray eyes and curly hair. He was well off, made good wages, and had a gold watch which opened in the back to
binary over their community construction of right/wrong. With such heavy pummeling, Amelia’s brief transcendence beyond femininity comes to an end, and she finds herself once more in a role dictated by her gender: a spinster. In plot, Sad Cafe is a cautionary tale about gender transgression. Yet the story’s political message doesn’t condemn the grotesqueness of a masculine-performing woman at all. Instances in which Amelia evades the heterosexist constraints of wifehood are also the moments when she is most earnestly honoring her expression of self. McCullers punishes Amelia to stress the shameful ramifications of a community committed to the politics of the gender binary.

2.1.2 O’Connor’s Bodies

Carson McCullers uses gender nonconformity in her characters to encourage a sense of discomfort from outside the normative constraints of the Southern order. She suggests that socially imposed definitions of femininity are what define grotesqueness, not the quality of a person themselves. Flannery O’Connor takes McCullers’s imagery several strides further, using comedic, even satirical characters to condemn white womanhood from within. O’Connor’s white women fail to meet their own symbolic and physical standards for femininity, with devastating personal consequences. O’Connor writes ludicrous white women characters, toeing the line of unbelievability. The satiric quality of O’Connor’s depictions allows her to “turn outward the

a picture of a waterfall. From the outward and worldly point of view Marvin Macy was a fortunate fellow; he needed to bow and scrape to no one and always got just what he wanted. But from a more serious and thoughtful viewpoint Marvin Macy was not a person to be envied, for he was an evil character. His reputation was as bad, if not worse, than that of any young man in the county.” described in contrast, Amelia is “gangly,” and “queer eyed,” (14).

“Miss Amelia was left alone in the town. The people would have helped her if they had known how, as people in this town will as often as not be kindly if they have a chance” (68).

“Miss Amelia let her hair grow ragged, and it was turning gray. Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy. And those gray eyes -- slowly day by day they were more crossed, and it was as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition. She was not pleasant to listen to...” (69).

emptiness within.” In effect, she exploits the ridiculousness of the person—physically and internally—to underscore a ridiculous system. The downfall of white women’s psyche and body mimics the downfall of the South’s legacy; both degraded by a contrived allegiance to an outdated social order.

As with McCullers’s female characters, O’Connor emphasizes the grotesque in her stories. Whereas McCullers uses freakishness to comment on the constraints externally imposed upon white women, O’Connor masterfully exposes the ways in which white women limit their own agency. A selection of O’Connor’s stories assesses the fallout of white women coming to terms with their identity. In works like “Revelation” (1965, published posthumously), “Good Country People” (1955), and “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1953), white women begin their story as disciples of Old Southern womanhood, but their sense of self slowly devolves, through a series of confrontations with the marginalized and silenced Southern underworld. Their disenchantment is precipitated by a violent, physical attack on the white female body, (a blow to the head, the theft of an artificial leg, a murder), distorting its symbolic value. The very recitation of such gruesome encounters reads as absurd, but O’Connor excels in exaggerating Southern deficiencies without surrendering herself completely to comedy. Author Joyce Carol Oates distinguishes between the intent of O’Connor’s fiction—a study of “character”—and the alternative method of storytelling—a study of “humanness.” “Cruel, crude, reductive, very funny,” these caricatures are measuring sticks for the region’s social and political progress.

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142 Ibid, 500, 290, and 132, respectively.
Oates describes O’Connor’s works as “parables of human folly confronted by morality.” Through stories, O’Connor suggests the category of white womanhood is as redeemable as it is ridiculous. This is the political project in O’Connor’s works. Her construction of grotesque bodies exposes the immoral core of white womanhood, which she in turn uses to propose restitution in the present-day South and in Southern memory. O’Connor experts dub her antagonism toward Southern ideals “the most common theme in her writing.” Her criticism, as will be explored in coming sections, comes with instructive intentions. As it pertains to her own identity group, O’Connor doesn’t write her version of some Southern utopia. What she does do, and does quite transparently, is legitimize the decision-making authority of white women characters who cannot, and should not, adhere to Old South standards. She assigns blame to the white woman characters whom she believes to be instruments of Southern oppression, because they are agents of their own will, and capable of sustaining a more just and productive political order.

2.1.3 Welty’s Bodies

Rounding out the roster are the white women characters of Eudora Welty’s fiction. In Welty’s stories, grotesque forms are reflections of a character’s anguish. These white women are made undesirable because their bodies are their forum for dissent. In an essay on gender politics in Southern Gothic works, Kellie-Donovan Condron describes Welty’s white women as “hysterics whose bodies provide expression in the absence of appropriate language.” With no established political forum for the deviant white woman, the body becomes the site of

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145 Ibid. 111.
communication regarding the construct of femininity. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the titular character in her story “Clytie” (1941), Clytie is corrupted by her own powerlessness. Her suicide is the first and only action motivated by her own instinct and desires.\textsuperscript{148} For the majority of the tale, Welty characterizes her as a reactive Southern woman. Her increasing physical detachment from her own body parallels her estrangement from the wider world and her inability to participate in decision making processes regarding her personal and familial life. Her will—exercised only in the decision to end her life of womanly errands and family status maintenance—suggests that the state of femininity is so unavoidably monstrous that it cannot be borne.\textsuperscript{149} White women are the most deluded characters in her stories. They can only identify grotesqueness in others, even when they share similar traits with the characters they condemn. In “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” (1938) and “Petrified Man” (1939), white women patronize travelling “Freak Shows,” circus-like displays of physically deformed people, and talk about them obsessively.\textsuperscript{150} So horrific as to be soothing, the freaks confirm all that is repulsive to the dominant order. Yet the real deficiencies of the community—impropriety, poverty, incivility—are afflictions suffered by the white women themselves. Over the course of just two hair appointments in the story “Petrified Man,” two women putter through increasingly hostile conversations, making ironic accusations of the other’s faults. For reasons of class, propriety, and self-assured notions of status, the two white women believe themselves entitled to good fortune, at the expense of other people. In the end, it takes the fit of a child to highlight their


hypocrisy: “If you’re so smart, why ain’t you rich?” The moral failings they so readily identify in others are injury only to themselves. In her short stories, Welty ranks white women as more functionally and morally encumbered than her pariahs.

McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty all use unfeminine bodies as a horror tactic. The archetypal monstrous female body lords over the genre in a manner explicitly Southern. Centuries of propaganda conditioned the Southern reader to conflate white women’s purity with regional purity. These stories exploit the same logic to make the inverse claim: monstrous femmes represent regional failures. White women authors subvert their inferior position within the same system which subjugated them, by forging a white woman in contrast to the Southern Belle and her purity. A given character’s freakishness is tied not only to her personal history but her contextual social and regional history. Donovan-Conron argues that “the prominence of history in the Southern Gothic deepens the overall genre’s long association of femininity with fear, excess, and the non-normative.” Research done by literary critic Patricia Yaeger suggests the slow chugging of political modernity in the South was conducive to flare-ups of progressive politics in art via “monstrous” or “ludicrous” images—in my analysis, the bodies. The Southern Gothic is an remarkable example of this phenomena, because Southern women themselves fabricate their own caricatures. Contriving monstrous bodies and assigning symbolic significance to them was a means to reckon with the political fallout of an era of gendered upheaval. In the mid-twentieth century, World Wars, technological developments, increased access to education, and new rhetorical movements threatened women’s symbolic roles in the

153 Yaeger, Dirt and Desire, 4.
South, which in turn threatened the preservation of the Old South social order. Southern women wrote in the context of a region grappling with growing pains. For the symbol of Southern Belle femininity to bulwark such changes was a tall order. Grotesque bodies destabilize the ruse of Southern propriety and reveal a more transgressive Southern face.

2.2 LONELINESS, QUEERNESS, AND MCCULLERS’S GIRLHOOD MALADIES

McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty all profess: girlhood is something that gets done alone. No author is so dedicated to isolation and the coming of age experience as Carson McCullers, resident “patron saint of Southern Queer lit” and “pilgrim of loneliness.” Through fiction, McCullers argues that the experience of becoming a woman in the South is inherently isolating. McCullers’s personal loneliness propelled the confluence of her writing and her politics—her identity as a deviant woman, transgressive and queer, went unacknowledged in the public realm. Before she could advocate for her identity, she had to validate its existence. McCullers

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157 In “Carson McCullers and the South,” Delma Eugene Presley writes, “To live in Columbus as those around her lived would have been a painful defeat for Lula Carson Smith.” Presley turns specifically to The Heart is a Lonely Hunter to address how McCullers “transmuted her own feelings of frustration into a shrunken cosmos in which even the most fundamental moral efforts, the most basic attempts at communication, are fruitless” (1974, 28). McCullers lived in Columbus intermittently throughout her life, especially in times of ailment. Yet McCullers feared becoming a “landlocked” Southern intellectual, absorbing the “agony” of her heritage (32). Presley writes, “The most succinct speculation about this problem came from the author herself in an interview in 1963 with a journalist from the Charlotte Observer. The journalist asked why the author never returned to the South. Carson McCullers' quick answer perhaps revealed more than she or her interviewer realized at the time. ‘No roots,’ she replied. ‘No roots.’” (32). Of course, McCullers’s creative and familial roots alike remained in Columbus, the place where she began her writing career. The roots McCullers references, perhaps, are the roots that come with a community of like-minded people, with similar interests and values, who lead lives akin to hers.
believed her fiction was a productive contribution to a wider effort toward political and social tolerance. Her stories of loneliness are attuned to the milieu; freakish characters point at the “untenability of normative concepts of gender” during the first half of the twentieth century, when gender was categorically rigid. More often than not, girls feel set apart in McCullers’s works. They revolt against “bourgeois customs and habits,” not necessarily in ways which benefit themselves or the wider community, but which illustrate the personal and in fact political unsustainability of gender repression. The protagonists of McCullers’s works have no antagonists to go up against. Instead, McCullers writes about girls’ conflicts with incorporeal antagonists: social evils perpetrated so widely there could be no conflict resolution. McCullers makes no effort to remove her characters from the community’s margins, because the goal of her fiction was to validate marginalized identities without suggesting they could or should assimilate. For so long, Southern storytelling, romantic and white-washed, disregarded the

158 World Wars and the early Civil Rights Movement shaped McCullers’s political convictions and had a pronounced influence over her writing, especially her essays. In “Look Homeward, Americans,” McCullers says: “All men are lonely. But sometimes it seems to me that we Americans must be the loneliest of all. Our hunger for foreign places and new ways has been with us almost like a national disease…We must make a new declaration of independence, a spiritual one…” (Vogue, December 1, 1940). In Carr’s biography of McCullers, she describes an “acute social consciousness” of “deep feelings for the oppression of any nation or ethnic group,” and a “conviction that the United States should no longer put off aid to its European allies, her sensitivity to exiled friends with whom she shared such kinship” (2003, 7).


161 “I want - I want - I want - was all that she could think about - but just what this real want was she did not know.” (The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, 129). “So there was nothing to be mad at. It was like she was cheated. Only nobody had cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on. However, just the same she had that feeling. Cheated.” (The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, 354).


163 Carr, The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers, (2003). See: “Chapter 1: Understanding Carson McCullers”; “Chapter 2: The Heart is a Lonely Hunter,” Carr, Understanding Carson McCullers, (2005). McCullers claimed her fiction was the predominant site of her politics, a fact which her major biographers consider essential to interpreting her work. Writing was how McCullers “earned her soul” (2005, 13). About the South, she wrote: “The human heart is a lonely hunter—but the search for us Southerners is more anguished. There is a special guilt in us...a consciousness of guilt not fully knowledgeable and communicable. Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insisted was natural and right
very existence of dissent. McCullers flips the narrative completely, and keeps Antebellum era white families on the outskirts of her Southern tales.\textsuperscript{164} It is McCullers’s tomboys, sissies, and queers who represent a reprieve from the violent institution of Southern patriarchy.

In her private life, McCullers engaged with politics, both at the local and national level.\textsuperscript{165} In fiction, her political beliefs shine through. In 1962, one critic complained that “Miss McCullers dares to "ask" us to take "pervers[ity]...as 'normal'."\textsuperscript{166} Biographers and academics alike are in agreement: McCullers’s sexuality and gender identity, and her outward expression or even political participation in those categories, are rendered all the more visible in her fiction, becoming a place to escape conventional femininity.\textsuperscript{167} The very structure of her fictive universes is oppressive, the towns small and stifling, the house over-stuffed with overbearing relatives, suggestive of the anxieties particular to women as they navigate their individual identities.\textsuperscript{168} In \textit{The Member of the Wedding}, \textit{The Ballad of the Sad Cafe}, and \textit{The Heart is a

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\textsuperscript{164} Adams, “A Mixture of Delicious and Freak,” 553-554.

\textsuperscript{165} A classic and frequently referenced anecdote was McCullers skirmish with her hometown in 1958, when she declined the local library's request for one of her manuscripts. Her reason was that Columbus’s “separate but equal” policies discriminated against Black community members—a position she had espoused a decade before in a letter to the Columbus Ledger: “I understand there has been some altercation about allowing all citizens, both white and Negro, the use of the new Columbus Public Library. I do not understand the concrete issues involved, but I understand too well the abstract ones. Always it has been an intolerable shame to me to know that Negroes are not accorded the same intellectual privileges as white citizens. As an author, represented in the library, I feel it is my duty to speak not only for myself but for the august dead who are represented on the shelves and to whom I owe an incalculable debt. I think of Tolstoy, Chekov, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Paine. I would like to go on record and like to say that we owe to these (the molders of the conscience of our civilization) the freedom of all citizens regardless of race, to benefit by their wisdom, which is our greatest inheritance,” (Presley, 1974, 25).

\textsuperscript{166} Free, “Relegation and Rebellion,” 443.

\textsuperscript{167} Groba, “The Intolerable Burden of Femininity,” 133.

\textsuperscript{168} The relationship between haunted houses and women’s roles is a favorite intersection of the Gothic story. Gothic scholars explain the symbolic use of physical places as a space to map out fear. Terror necessitates comparison: the house falls apart as if in solidarity with the steadily deteriorating mental health of female characters. McCullers evokes the trope of the decaying homestead to talk about the South writ large. For a deeper dive into scholarship regarding the relationship between femininity, autonomy, and the home in Gothic literature, consider: Diana Wallace’s “‘The Haunting Idea’: Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory,” in: Diana Wallace and Adam Smith. (eds) \textit{The Female Gothic}; Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, “Gothic Possibilities,” \textit{New Literary History} 8, no. 2 (1977): 279-94.
Lonely Hunter (1940), McCullers’s characters resist classification into their traditional gender roles. Her works assert that freaks are made unnatural by the social conventions which cast them out, and not for their own desires. She resists this community-sanctioned ostracization above all in the young, queer characters whose deviance parallels her own. McCullers confronts a culture in which queerness is an excuse for violence by promoting a creative space for an array of gender identities, exploring them as equal in legitimacy to the Southern institution of heterosexuality (which was, as defined previously, tied inextricably to the preservation of the Old South’s political controls).

For McCullers, isolation and voicelessness are tantamount to the woman-bildungsroman experience. In her first two novels, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter and The Member of the Wedding, McCullers writes from the perspective of tomboys with anti-assimilationist behaviors. Mick and Frankie, respectively, have been adopted as representatives of a queer Southern movement in literature and in politics—both retroactively and in McCullers’s own lifetime. Frankie is perhaps the clearest example of a young white woman whose queerness exposes the unsustainable standards of Antebellum femininity in the mid-twentieth century South. Her failed attempts at romantic intimacy first shape her fantastical, genderless imagination: a world in which there was a more communicative and dynamic relationship between biological sex, gender

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169 In an interview, Gordon Langley Hall, a friend of Carson McCullers and an early member of the American trans community, recalled a time in which McCullers identified and sympathized with his trans sensibilities. “Carson, her senses sharpened by her own affliction, saw me for what I was in a moment of truth and her heart went out to me.” This affliction, as Hall saw it, was her position as a “freak,” her queer community membership. Hall goes on to express his own identity as a “freak,” akin to the characters in McCullers books. (Carr, The Lonely Hunter, 517-519).


171 Author and ex-archivist Jenn Shapland chronicles the living memory of the artist who, despite her closeting, maintained a presence in queer communities. Articles from the time of her earliest publications through Shapland’s 2020 memoir recognize McCullers’s queer politics. They also identify autobiographical elements in her young characters. Shapland’s logic is at once unassailable and impossible to prove: queer fiction is community coded; gay folks know it when they see it (Shapland, My Autobiography of Carson McCullers, 2020).
expression, and one’s capacity to be a participant in Southern society. Frankie desires for people to “change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted.” McCullers also uses brief sexual encounters to contrive an unsafe and uncomfortable environment for Frankie within the confines of her successful performance of femininity. As a result, Frankie begins to suspect the reality of romance is but another social control, though she cannot explain why this is so, nor why her community has taught her to covet it as she believes she should. She thinks of her failed romantic interactions as, in her own words, “queer,” off kilter and wrong. Rachel Adams puts Frankie’s wording in the context of McCullers’s gender identity and personal politics, as an attempt to “queer” heterosexuality, destabilizing its position as universally desirable and pleasurable. Frankie’s gender deviance allows her to reimagine a world more accommodating to difference than the South was—work which McCullers herself valued and perceived as a component of a larger, deeply interconnected process of articulating and dismantling Southern discrimination across racial and sexual differences.

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172 “[Frankie]...planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted. But Berenice would argue with her about this, insisting that the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved. And then John Henry West would very likely add his two cents’ worth about this time, and think that people ought to be half boy and half girl, and when the old Frankie threatened to take him to the Fair and sell him to the Freak Pavilion, he would only close his eyes and smile,” (97). 
173 Ibid., 96-98.
174 An “unjoined person” who “was afraid,” Frankie’s sole solace was in the idea of her brother’s romance, a sense of community and social cohesion which she could not find in her own relationships (2004, 8). Frankie condemns the freaks and outcasts with whom she is most readily categorized with. Her family’s housekeeper, Berenice, is one such freak. Frankie regales Berenice with tales of her efforts to belong, but Berenice, the person who knows her best, knows she has little real interest in honoring that dream. Berenice is the voice of reason in the story, and confirmation that Frankie is truly unmoored from social norms. Her own membership in the realm of social outcasts is what allows her to see this is so. (Als, 2001, n.p.).
175 McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, 68.
176 McCullers cites this as one of “illuminations” for her own writing. See, McCullers, Illumination and Night Glare, 32 or Carr, Understanding Carson McCullers, 17.
Frankie spends most of *The Member of the Wedding* verging on a nervous breakdown, but not because she herself feels uncomfortable with her queer identity. On the contrary, Frankie is most at peace when indulging herself in impossible daydreams about non-heteronormative intimacy—in love with the idea of her friendship with her schoolmate Mary, in love with the idea of being a participant in the relationship between her brother and his fiancée. Rather, Frankie lives in terror of the way her community will perceive her queerness. Frankie suspects there is something fundamentally unlawful about her existence, but she cannot understand what it is. McCullers uses subtext to blame the wider social order. No particular character denies Frankie the ability to conceptualize a place for herself within her community as a queer woman; that’s the fault of regional norms. For white women, the performance of sexuality is a form of membership which cannot be unbound from the constructs of social status. McCullers centers white women characters who disrupt the Old South narrative by existing in spite of it, thereby exposing its hollow logic. Because of the symbolic value attributed to white womanhood, their distortion of the title highlights the “excesses, contradictions, and

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177 In McCullers’s theatrical adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie frequently speaks her dissatisfied mind, in displays ranging from pubescent angst to genuine emotional volatility. One such monologue is: “I told Bernice that I was leaving town for good and she did not believe me. Sometimes I honestly think she is the biggest fool that ever drew breath. You try to impress something on a big fool like that, and it’s just like talking to a block of cement. I kept on telling and telling and telling her. I told her I had to leave this town for good because it is inevitable. Inevitable. (Looking at her suitcase) That’s my suitcase I packed. If you think it’s all over, that only shows how little you know. If I can’t go with the bride and my brother as I was meant to leave this town, I’m going anyway. Somehow, anyhow, I’m leaving town. I can’t stand this existence – this kitchen – this town – any longer! I will hop a train and go to New York. Or hitch rides to Hollywood, and get a job there. Somehow, anyhow, I’m running away,” (1949, 103).

178 Frankie begins the book lamenting her lack of “we” relationships. Later on in the story, she calls her brother and his fiancée “the we of me” (42).

179 “I think I have a vague idea what you were driving at,” [Frankie] said. “We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don’t know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself. Is that what you was trying to say?” “I don’t know,” F. Jasmine [Frankie] said. “But I don’t want to be caught” (119).
incoherences” that make the Southern order a sham.\textsuperscript{180} With the presence of so many aberrant white woman characters—whose narrative purpose is to oppose “normative behaviors and social distinctions”—the McCullers Gothic causes the reader to question the Old South order’s capacity to regulate the community at all.\textsuperscript{181}

The coming of age trope is a useful backdrop to comment on gender inequities in the South. McCullers writes to this point in \textit{The Heart is a Lonely Hunter}. For thirteen year old Mick Kelly, becoming a man is an acquisition of power, while becoming a woman requires the loss of individual discretion.\textsuperscript{182} Mick is reluctant to give up her androgynous youth, because her gender digression is also the primary space where she experiences economic and creative potential.\textsuperscript{183} The demands of femininity require hard work, on tasks which run in opposition to her goal of becoming a concert pianist.\textsuperscript{184} Similar to Frankie, Mick finds herself at a crossroads, drawn at once to the male-coded public sphere, but still loyal to the woman-coded expectations her family holds for her. Mick has long internalized femininity as foundational to her identity, but she is tormented by her inability to unite her professional goals with her gender role.\textsuperscript{185}

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\textsuperscript{180} Downey, “The Gothic and the Grotesque in the Novels of Carson McCullers,” 373. \\
\textsuperscript{181} Adams, “A Mixture of Delicious and Freak,” 552. \\
\textsuperscript{183} In \textit{Heart}, Mick says to her older sisters: “‘I wear shorts because I don’t want to wear your old hand-me-downs. I don’t want to be like either of you and I don’t want to look like either of you. And I won’t. That’s why I wear shorts. I’d rather be a boy any day” (42). Some of this vehement response stems from Mick’s desire to present herself as contrary to her assigned gender role. But Mick also speaks from a place of anxiety regarding her own fate as a young woman. She doesn’t want to become like her sisters, pulled out of school and forced to work, with no creative outlet and no prospects. \\
\textsuperscript{184} “But all the time – no matter what she was doing – there was music. Sometimes she hummed to herself as she walked, and other times she listened quietly to the songs inside her. There were all kinds of music in her thoughts.” (3).; It didn't have anything to do with God. This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. In this hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. This music was her – the real plain her” (128). \\
\textsuperscript{185} For the majority of the novel, Mick builds an “inner room” to protect herself while she plans for her future and protects herself from the outside world. The inner room is the novel’s only space that welcomes culture, music, and offers Mick the potential for a life she covets. By the end of the story, Mick has forced herself to put the childish fancies of the inside room away. Its existence is in conflict with her identity as a working person and a near-grown woman. “But now no music was in her mind. That was a funny thing. It was like she was shut out from the inside
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Perhaps what might have saved Mick or Frankie—two characters dealt unsatisfying endings—is what saved McCullers own creative and queer capacities: the development of a sympathetic and uncritical community of queer artists. Some of these like-minded people hail from the South, like Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, and some are from mid-twentieth century cultural centers like Paris or New York City. Community was the motivation behind McCullers’s productive artistic and political life, and her characters’ lack thereof bars them from prosperity. The process by which a community redefines “respectability” is a political one, contingent upon community networking and representation. Social bodies guide the definition of transgression and dictate the extent to which political bodies can or cannot punish deviant actors. Literary critics often label the works of McCullers and other Southern Gothic authors—O’Connor, and Welty included—a form of social critique. Interpreted as a form of political activism, these portraits or “critiques” of moments in Southern history are important because they center the voice of the freak, whose transgressions push the boundaries of social acceptability.

2.3 O’CONNOR ON BEARING VIOLENCE
As established in earlier sections, a third and outstanding quality of the Gothic white woman is her violence. This was an unprecedented reimagining of cruelty in Southern literature, as it intersected with gender, race, and class. For so long, the ideals of white femininity absolved actual women of their own influence.\textsuperscript{190} What evils they did contribute to the region were abstracted and intertwined with long established institutions.\textsuperscript{191} The fallacy which pardoned white women for their abject racism and physical violence employs the same logic that stripped them of their agency and capacity to contribute to Southern politics. The Southern Gothic represents a definitive shift away from this treatment of white womanhood symbolism.

Reckoning with violence is an enduring dilemma of the South’s political and cultural history.\textsuperscript{192} In the early-to-mid-1900s, visions of violence became increasingly difficult to ignore. Interpersonal violence became televised, and following the second World War, technology

\textsuperscript{190} Kathryn Lee Seidel, Chapter 1: The Belle as an Antebellum Ideal; Chapter 2; The Belle as the Fallen South. \textit{The Southern Belle in the American Novel}. (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1985). 3-26.

\textsuperscript{191} This trend is enduring and can be seen even in modern scholarship on women’s history. Anne Firor Scott’s pioneering text on white Southern womanhood, \textit{The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930}, both exemplifies and is written in defiance of the abolution of white women from their roles in the slave South. Scott’s research elucidates the spaces in which white women found leadership positions for themselves despite Antebellum era restrictions on their movement and behavior. In her book, Scott proves elite white women had agency and wielded influence. Scott notes the instances in which Plantation mistresses challenge the patriarchal interests which both enslave Black people and repress women. That white women were not powerless suggested room for imperfection. Though Scott certainly condemns slavery, her work posits that white women on the whole were victims of the same system, who did what they could to subvert it. She does not acknowledge the presence of white women who were willing to sell themselves out as a symbol, with a lower ranking in the Southern hierarchy, so long as the exploitation of Black Americans and poor people remained the letter of the day. These two notions are not mutually exclusive—it is true that white women suffered under the hand of a community that valued their well-being figuratively rather than literally. Yet white women, often with great vigilance and in total comprehension, pledged allegiance to the Lost Cause narrative for the maintenance of their class. Scholarship long ignored their role in doing so, belonging almost universally to the Scott school of white woman victimhood (1970). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s work on Southern women’s history provides deeper insight into the controversy that accompanies an indictment of white women’s actions (1988).

\textsuperscript{192} A great deal of David W. Blight’s \textit{Race and Reunion} contends with the South’s inability to reckon with a violent history while also staying true to their ideals. “How does violence influence perceptions of place?,” he asks. “What changes, if any, does it generate?” (2009, 19). These essential questions guide his work. Consider also: Vann C. Woodward’s \textit{The Burden of Southern History}. (LSU Press, 2008).
played a role in externalizing shame.\textsuperscript{193} In the American South, the law forbade interracial and gender-based violence, but community sanctioned abuse forged on behind closed doors and publicly, indicated by the South’s higher homicide and assault rates, and quantifiably more notable degrees of racist persecution.\textsuperscript{194} With white violence against Black people being the most obvious example, activists called the sanctity of Southern political structures into question. How could progress come to pass in a political system created to protect a slave economy? How can a member of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens’ Council protect civil rights for any marginalized group? A variety of Southerners sought to reframe the historical and contemporary role of white violence in the South as a structural problem. Centuries of storytelling about the Southern Belle, coupled with their relative inactivity in public office, had made the kind of violence perpetrated by white women appear trifling, and certainly not systemic.\textsuperscript{195} The Southern Gothic became one space to bring white women into the terrorizing fold.

In her book \textit{Narrating Evil}, political philosopher Maria Pia Lara makes the claim that moral learning happens through public displays of self-examination.\textsuperscript{196} Societies learn to judge human cruelty from focused, personal narratives. Using these individualized stories as guides, community members can make reflective judgements that might be incomprehensible on a wider


\textsuperscript{195} Where white women took up space in the discussion of anti-Reconstruction white politics at all, it is typically in the context of educational and memorial groups like the Daughters of the Confederacy. Most often, white women are passive, the helpless victims of a relatively new taboo: Black male sexuality. Read more on this in Martha Hodes’s “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War.” \textit{Journal of the History of Sexuality} 3, no. 3 (1993): 402–17. For a deeper dive into white resistance to Reconstruction, including a look into the role of white women, consider: Henry Louis Gates Jr. \textit{Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow}. (Penguin, 2019).

\textsuperscript{196} Lara, \textit{Narrating Evil}, 9.
scale, or identify harmful qualities in characters they cannot see in themselves. Violent white women in Southern Gothic literature exemplify the vital relationship between personal morality in the private sphere and political expression in the public sphere. Distanced by fiction, and made deeply personal through setting, characterization, and thematic similarities to one’s lived experiences, authors sought to nudge the South toward a new conception of white womanhood, incorporating a wider discussion of race and class. The efficacy of violent motifs as politically and morally constructive will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. This section addresses the radical fact of violent white womanhood as it stood on its own, how and why white women authors would attribute extraordinary brutality to ostensibly ordinary women of their own identity.

Flannery O’Connor brings the deficiencies of the Southern Belle to the forefront of her works punishingly, and with little sentimentality. One popular and politically charged interpretation of O’Connor’s work is that her white women function as a mirror for the sins of the Southern order. In many stories, O’Connor’s white women find themselves in situations unbecoming of their social stature: dirty, invalidated, embarrassed, challenged, defiled. The

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197 Ibid.
199 Gleeson-White notes that, “O’Connor clearly implicates southern womanhood and the values supporting it in damaging class and racial/ethnic hierarchies” (2003, 5). Literary scholar Claire Katz notes that O’Connor “is peculiarly harsh toward women who try to succeed by their own efforts.” She categorized their grotesqueness as a “negative assertion of power” (1974, 64). Robert Drake notices that women make up “some of her more villainous characters, almost as though she believed in some spiritual double standard,” (1966, 64).
200 Such a formulation says a great deal coming from a woman who wrote: “To know oneself is to know one’s region…is above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility…” (1969, 35). O’Connor's portrayal of white womanhood must be contextualized with O’Connor’s own admission on the purpose of her fiction: “The serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point, usually the flaw in an otherwise admirable character...The novelist doesn't write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated, and the novelist tries to give you, within the form of the book, the total experience of human nature at any time.” (O’Connor, 1969, 96).
punishments are an irreparable overturn of the white woman’s internal caste system. It is the limitations of their own character which brings them to suffer, and O’Connor does not shy away from honoring their culpability. This manifests, for example, in the Grandmother from “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Grandmother forges a spiritual kinship with a criminal and murderer, whose narrative within the story is so grotesque he literally adopts the name Misfit. Suffering does not absolve O’Connor’s fictive white women, but it does generate an opportunity for white women to dismiss their false sense of innocence. The plot in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is straightforward; the Grandmother’s actions have devastating consequences. Yet O’Connor takes pains to stress that the ill fate of her characters are avoidable. Take the example of Mrs. Turpin, another white woman of surprising violence. In the story “Revelation” Mrs. Turpin lays at night fretting over the crumbling and increasingly complicated class system of the South, which does not abide by the laws of her internalized social hierarchy. Consider the excerpt:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them -- not above, just away from -- were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and [her husband] Claud belonged, above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there some colored people who owned their homes and land as well...Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her

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201 “His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, ‘Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!’ ” (O’Connor, 1971,132).; (Basselin, 2, 2013).

202 It is worth noting that O’Connor saw opportunities to change one’s perspective on the grotesque, the good, and the similarities between the two in her own life. O’Connor cites the influence of a disfigured child named Mary Ann Long overseen by nuns who wrote to her. Her own presumptions, based on clichés, evolved as she learned more about the child. She became increasingly able to look into grotesque faces and see goodness, and with that ability came also her penchant to look into respectable faces and see deformities of the soul. In her memoir she reflects: “Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflection with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing-down that will soften their real look.” (1969, 226).
head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a boxcar, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.”

This anecdote arrives mere pages before Mrs. Turpin is tackled to the ground by a teenager and called a warthog from hell. O’Connor establishes Mrs. Turpin as a woman who cares deeply about good breeding, but reveals her to also be the sort of person who attacks livestock with a water hose and throws a tantrum to the sky. O’Connor spares no detail in affirming that Mrs. Turpin’s outward placidity is shallow. She uses the white woman’s immorality and violence to remind a reader of one essential truth: Black and white people, men and women, rich and poor, grotesque and pure, all Southerners die the same death. In “Revelation,” and “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Mrs. Turpin and Grandmother react so violently to their environment that their definitions of goodness become hollow and dubious. They both prove themselves entrants of cruelty contrary to the standards of the white feminine ideal, so long as it allows them to maintain an elevated sense of self. At the end of their stories, it is their own actions which condemns them to a fate akin to that of the Southern order—they fall apart. O’Connor reflected upon her use of violence in fiction as the only force in the world capable of “returning [her] characters to reality and preparing them for grace.”

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204 O’Connor, “Revelation,” 500.
205 Ibid, 507.
206 This is a necessary lesson for Mrs. Turpin, who exalts in the comparison of her superior rank and disposition to that of the other members of the waiting room. Mrs. Turpin concludes the story experiencing an overwhelming revelation of her own pride, and the impact it has on others. In her visions she sees “companies of white trash,” the most distasteful class, by her understanding, leading the way unto heaven. She finds herself in the back of the procession, her virtues being “burned away” (O’Connor, 509). Burning away is as close as Mrs. Turpin can come to grace in this tale.
208 O’Connor writes: “In my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is
reality always comes at the considerable cost of felling the belief systems which incited violence in the first place.

In the Southern Gothic, violence is a tool used to demythologize white womanhood. White women characters seek solace in traditional Southern customs. When tradition forsakes them, they lash out, sometimes against the Southern order, sometimes against its victims. In O’Connor’s literature, white women’s violence is predicated upon fear, bound to race and class, and suggestive of a moral inferiority lurking just below their claims of social superiority. Sometimes irreverent (think: God’s grace as gunfire on a road trip to Florida), sometimes slapstick (white women brawling in a doctor’s waiting room), and sometimes pitiful (woman embarrasses herself so hard she dies from stroke), O’Connor wields the Gothic motif of violence to link the horrors of the Antebellum South with white women’s contemporary role. This is one political claim O’Connor expresses through fiction. Her violent characters aren’t defective examples of white womanhood at all, but rather true acolytes of the Belle ideal. O’Connor makes the status of proper white womanhood contingent upon a deeply set impurity of the soul. Her fiction subversively suggests that a polite bigot is still a bigot, and that physical violence is not contrary to the Southern tradition—in fiction and otherwise. With its signature nervous edge,

seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world.” “On Her Own Work,” in Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, edited by Sally Fitzgerald and (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1969), 107-118.


Katie Frye writes that O’Connor was “no friend to white women,” and qualifies their bodies, relationships, and the lessons they pass down to their children as “impure at best and poisonous at worst.” Frye argues that O’Connor is successful in transmitting such a message because of her closeness to the subject (2017, 147). As Alice Walker reflected, O’Connor “caused white women to look ridiculous on pedestals” (1983, 59).

the Southern Gothic became a space for O’Connor and other authors to write about white womanhood as a strain on individuals and their relationships. The dissonant South, with its glorified history and arduous lived experience, plays out in one body. Having no far-off culprit to hold liable for their own belief systems, characters raise Cain, spill their rot, punish themselves and their bystanders alike.

The legacy of O’Connor’s anti-racist work is contradicted by her lived experience. Her personal letters are at times wholly incongruous with the sermons of her fiction. Her correspondence commentary on race (whiteness and Blackness) ranges from deeply penitent, to silly and careless, to downright anti-Black. Recent popularized exposés have familiarized a wider audience of readers, Catholics, and even uninterested third parties with the racist sentiments of an author famed for her fables of race-based retribution. Some articles introduce O’Connor’s “habit of bigotry” as a literary fact long secreted away by ardent fans unwilling to claim O’Connor as a whole person, preferring her instead as a static paragon of Southern pluck. In truth, O’Connor’s complicated relationship with the directives of her own fiction is well researched. Alice Walker’s personal essay “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of

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213 Angela Alaimo O’Donnell’s *Radical Ambivalence: Race in Flannery O’Connor* is the first book length exploration of the role race played in O’Connor’s published fiction and unpublished juvenilia, letters, and papers. It necessarily chronicles O’Connor’s correspondence. O’Donnell’s study includes previously unpublished materials.

214 Catholic Realism scholar Paul Elie, who wrote on O’Connor in his 2003 work *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* makes this claim in his New Yorker article “How Racist Was Flannery O’Connor?” He writes: “For half a century, the particulars [of O’Connor’s personal papers] have been held close by executors, smoothed over by editors, and justified by exegetes, as if to save O’Connor from herself. Unlike, say, the struggle over Philip Larkin, whose coarse, chauvinistic letters are at odds with his lapidary poetry, it’s not about protecting the work from the author; it’s about protecting an author who is now as beloved as her stories,” (2020).

Flannery O’Connor,” leaves the reader with Walker’s enduring lesson on O’Connor as a beloved writer and a fallible individual—”take what you can and let the rest rot.”216

O’Connor said indisputably racist things in her personal correspondence. She would, for example, impersonate her racist fictional characters and pass them off as facets of her own personality, once signing a letter as the malicious “Mrs. Turpin.”217 O’Connor reveals her bigotry in a series of self-satirizing letters between herself as “the dug-in gradualist” and fellow Southerner and playwright Maryat Lee, in the role of “over-the-top Liberal.”218 It is in this series that O’Connor is most flagrantly discriminatory. She says: “You know, I’m an integrationist by principle & a segregationist by taste anyway. I don’t like negroes. They all give me a pain and the more of them I see, the less and less I like them. Particularly the new kind.”219 In a different letter to Lee, she specified the “kind” of Black person she didn’t like, “the James Baldwin kind,” “the philosophizing prophysizing pontificating kind.”220 O’Connor’s letters to Lee are certainly the most abject examples of her racism, but her bigotry naturally shaped her relationship with the wider world, in albeit more subtle ways. One such place was in her fiction. O’Connor fell flat in her portrayal of Black characters. In her stories, Black people are functional, essential to move the plot along, or to teach a lesson to a leading white character.221 They are often superficial stereotypes who give no indication of an interior world. They are not, in short, like real people.

219 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
Flannery O’Connor’s Black characters were uninspired and misinformed. The same criticism is never extended toward her white women characters. O’Connor’s stories, transparently concerned with race issues in the South, are thereby better understood as parables on whiteness, more so than Blackness. In some of her fiction, O’Connor constructs white womanhood in opposition to Black characters. It is in these kinds of stories in particular that Black scholars qualify her work as politically productive in some regards, ignorant, blundered, or inadequate in others. O’Connor’s personal racism was condemnable, her fictive picture of Black personhood was deeply flawed. These truths inform our contemporary reading of O’Connor; she cannot be a trusted source on the Black experience in the mid-century American South, though she at times attempts to speak on that experience. Where O’Connor’s texts do continue to be useful, not in spite of but because of her personal prejudices, is in her representation of intolerant white women.

It is perhaps for this reason that scholars and readers continue to engage with O’Connor’s work. It is a useful source in the discussion of white consciousness and the development of a distinct Southern voice in fiction. Toni Morrison both acknowledged O’Connor’s insufficiencies and considered her a person who understood “the outcast, the Other.”222 Black artist Benny Andrews said:

“I’ll say up front, Flannery O’Connor is in my mind a great writer. She depicted things bigger than the physical world she lived in. Nevertheless, she also retained a lot of the very worst that she lived in. The truth is that the society that she lived in was sustained by cruelty, oppression and murder. It was an inhumane world...I’ve looked into O’Connor’s works, and I’ve found more than the superficial, much more. She confronts the leaping flames and churning waters. I’ve looked into her works, and I have found revelations.”223

223 This comes from Benny Andrews’s afterward to an elephantine limited edition of “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” for which he made the cover art. (2005, 42-43).
Flannery O'Connor believed racism was a sin, but she made no substantive advancements toward racial equality in her personal life. One could chalk the dissonance between O’Connor’s fiction and letters up to the old adage: a product of her time, exacerbated by her status as a terminally ill, homebound person in the South. But a thorough evaluation of O’Connor’s belief system is likely more complicated, tied up in her conception of personal power and place, the limited control she could assert in her community, and the greater power she held over her fiction.

2.4 WRITING EVIL AND POLITICIZING MORALITY

The previous section addressed the symbolic significance of violent white women in the Southern Gothic. One popular and valid interpretation of that symbol is an intervention of authors like McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty into the construction and maintenance of the South’s moral position. But not all violent white women in the Southern Gothic are meant to be paragons of pure evil, and not all evil characters cross the page violently in thought, word, or actions. This section seeks to understand how white women writing in the Southern Gothic tradition use violence alongside other rhetorical tools to entreat readers to reconsider the morality of both white womanhood itself, and the oppressive structures it protected. As it relates to whiteness and gender, Southern Gothic fiction is a political intervention into the region’s values. Exploiting the symbolic utility of white womanhood, McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty call upon the South’s better angels, and use them to challenge the “traditional values” which fetter

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224 Persuasive, fable-leaning stories are in fact characteristic of the wider Gothic tradition. Scholarship on the Gothic describes such devices: "a pushing toward extremes and excess... of cruelty, rapacity and fear, passion and sexual degradation" that offers "culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety." (Helmsing, 2014, 316); See also: Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 5.
progressive Southern politics. As political texts, these stories are an organized stand against the romanticizing of inequitable Southern policies behind the smokescreen of unassailable Southern culture. If Antebellum fiction represented a kind of memorializing propaganda, the Southern Gothic was its antagonistic counterpart. Southern Gothic authors explore the region’s rural cultural centers with an excessively naturalistic rendering, its violence not “aimless,” as critics described it, but indeed rather pointed.\textsuperscript{225} Though the Southern Gothic certainly isn’t known for its likeable characters, the true villains are never the stories’ antagonists, the dissatisfied and often disenfranchised characters who do wrong on the page. On the contrary, the authors afford a great deal of sympathy and grace to their offenders. Racism, economic disparities, and class oppression muddle the line between villain and victim of circumstance.\textsuperscript{226} As a social critique, the genre grew powerful in its assertion that the value systems which drove Southern politics were the true culprits.

Be it for teenage girls, working mothers, or elderly women, the denouement in Southern Gothic stories that center gender arrives when “taboos are broken, forbidden secrets are spoken, and barriers are crossed.”\textsuperscript{227} Boundary crossing throws the character’s personal philosophy into sharp contrast with the wider ethical standards the author wishes to promote. Often, these characters abide by socially imposed (and for that all the more flawed) principles: racism or

\textsuperscript{225} Ellen Glasgow. "Heroes and Monsters." 3-4.
\textsuperscript{226} Louise Westling writes about McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty’s exploration of the Southern world, human destiny, and punishment in: \textit{Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor}, (University of Georgia Press, 1985). As a product of their heritage, these authors had the ability to betray the “troubled, contradictory undercurrents” of their identity’s faults and the faults of the feminine Southern order (3). Westling argues that it is their position as women that allows them to argue for a moral order that resists conventional definitions of goodness. It is her belief that, for a variety of reasons, male contemporaries such as William Faulkner, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and William Styron could not.
classism codified by patriotism, allegiance to Southern tradition, or Christianity. Character building, therefore, became an effective and necessary space for white women to reflect upon the failures of their identity group, and participate in the collective project of community examination.

An ancillary political forum in the South—which clearly places great rhetorical weight in value-based political directives—is the maintenance and revision of socially defined evils. White women have a foot in the door; their place in the intergenerational transfer of civic virtues long cemented by the ideology of Republican motherhood.²²⁸ Endowed with authority on the subject of rectitude, it was essential for politically progressive white women to express their ideas in the public forum, to a wider audience than that offered by the domestic sphere. In her work Moral Textures, Maria Pia Lara describes storytelling in the public sphere as a “critical juncture” for feminist narratives to influence concepts of morality.²²⁹ Self-disclosure was a way to demand social inclusion and exercise judgement on questions of violence and morality.²³⁰ Given the Southern Gothic’s popularity, their considerations could hardly go unheard. The grotesque “flourished” in the region; the genre was well read and well referenced. Representative works won National Book Awards and Pulitzer prizes.²³¹ Eudora Welty was dubbed “the patron saint of Mississippi,” O’Connor described as “canonical.”²³² Popularized Southern Gothic novels or short

²²⁸ “Married women, in particular, destined by nature to take the lead in educating their children, would no longer be the greatest obstruction to good education, by their ignorance, frivolity, and disorderly manner of living. Even upon the breast, infants are susceptible of impressions; and the mother hath opportunities without end of instilling into them good principles, before they are fit for a male tutor.” Lord Kames, Six Sketches on the History of Man, 8 vols. (Philadelphia, 1776), 255.
²³⁰ Lara, Narrating Evil, 4.
stories were not the first to bear witness to the existence of regional atrocities, but the genre does represent the earliest structured effort on the part of white women to critique their own identity through the literary arts.\textsuperscript{233} The conflicts presented in Southern Gothic stories tend to be small-scale. They often concern individual behavior and localized interests. Yet they pose moral quandaries generalizable to wider ethical dilemmas relevant to the mid-twentieth century South. Posing those dilemmas is only the first part of the political project of fiction. Upon entering the public arena, the message and merits of the Southern Gothic and its displays of human inadequacy could be debated among the audience, whose interpretation of it, positive or negative, contributed to political discourse.

That storytelling has both a moral and political imperative is a foundation of this analysis. The moral critical space afforded to the Southern Gothic by its authors is explicit and purposeful. As Flannery O’Connor said “[A story] must carry its meaning inside it...The writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense.”\textsuperscript{234} In spite, or perhaps because of their dismal themes, O’Connor believed her own stories to be hopeful, and she believed they were accessible to everyday people.\textsuperscript{235} She was “highly annoyed” with the suggestion that her works were an escape from reality, or that the experience of reading a story was external to one’s participation in the wider world.\textsuperscript{236} Southern Gothic authors like O’Connor rely on fiction to convey real-life experiences, not to escape them. McCullers and Welty do the same, using characters to make

\textsuperscript{233} For a more holistic picture of the transition from “Belle romanticism” to the “Southern Renaissance” or fiction as resistance, consider the works of Carol S. Manning, \textit{The Female Tradition in Southern Literature}, (University of Illinois Press, 1993). or Kathryn Lee Seidel, \textit{The Southern Belle in the American Novel}, (Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1985). Both chart the evolution of the Southern novel with a focus on gender.


\textsuperscript{236} She meditates on this idea later in the piece: “Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction,” (1969, 73).
claims about morality and Southern institutions. It is hard to legislate concepts, to drive politics on feeling alone. But as Welty said, “Southerners love a good tale. They are born reciters, great memory retainers, diary keepers, letter exchangers and letter savers, history tracers and debaters, and—outlasting all the rest—great talkers.” The Southerner is faithful to stories and has long used them to communicate their place in the community.

Moral judgements are certainly distinct from political judgements. Nevertheless, there is inherent interplay between the two, especially in the South, where so much of the political justification for class and race subjugation is predicated on moral or value based constructs: religion, familial values, or tradition. Their connection is particularly important for white women, who are at once perpetrators and victims throughout Southern history. Decades past the Civil War, the South continued to negotiate its defeat and resultant economic and cultural poverty. Political infrastructure adapted to the post-war world much faster than the political sensibilities of those responsible for filling its offices. Racism and paternalism overwrought Reconstruction era policies, and powerful white actors rigged elections. Violent ideologies came from within the dominant political order, who oversaw the region’s forum for opposition. Social and political norms legitimized oppression as a necessary and even righteous mechanism.

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237 McCullers returned to the South to “renew her sense of horror,” but also wrote about the South because writing was not only how she “earned [her] living,” but how she “earned [her] soul.” (McGill, 1959, 217).; Virginia Spencer Carr, Understanding Carson McCullers, (University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 13. Welty said: “Great fiction shows us not how to conduct our behavior but how to feel. Eventually, it may show us how to face our feelings and face our actions and to have new inklings about what they mean. A good novel of any year can initiate us into our own new experience.” Eudora Welty, On Writing, (Random House Publishing Group, 2011), 83.

238 Eudora Welty, Occasions: Selected Writings, (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2009), 244.


241 Gates Jr., “Chapter 1: Antislavery/Antislave: Backlash, the White Resistance to Black Reconstruction,” in Stony the Road, 1-54.
of the state. In spite of barriers to expression, alternative constructions of righteousness did come
to pass: in protest, in narrative, and in fiction. The Southern Gothic genre found its place
among many other movements working in conjunction to condemn the faux virtues of white
supremacist politics.

Recall how O’Connor specifically takes a representative of white Southern womanhood,
who might historically have borne the stereotypes of cultural purity and morality, and attributed
to her the horrors of the racial and economic caste system. A tangential power of O’Connor’s
work—and an attribute of the Southern Gothic more generally—is the ability to attribute
goodness to the grotesque. McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty alike close the distance between
evil and Antebellum culture, while suggesting that Southerners who exist on the margins have
the capacity to establish a new and improved moral code.

Welty, for example, employed quotidian anecdotes to communicate the South’s moral
shortages. In “Why I Live at the P.O.” (1941) white women are at first glance little more than a
hollow nexus of clichés, servants to standards of womanhood defined by community members
more powerful than they. The weight of these clichés builds with little fanfare, yet Welty always
topples the facade of artificial goodness in her stories. The protagonist in “Why I Live at the

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242 Lara, Narrating Evil, 140.
243 Francesca Polletta discusses narrative-based political movements in her book It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics, (2009). She focuses specifically on the power of storytelling for Civil Rights activists in spreading information, mobilizing, and forging political alliances. These movements are Black led, and function differently in their communities. But they are contemporaries of Southern Gothic fiction, and Polletta relates instances from which Southern Gothic authors certainly took inspiration.
244 Basselin, Flannery O’Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity, 6.
245 Welty scholarship would have it that her traditional method for doing so is to use the grotesque to reveal the characters their own interior feelings. In this way, she is not unlike O’Connor. That the very bedrock of Southern society has been afflicted is an imperative of Welty’s work. Take, as an example, the name of the beauty parlor in “The Displaced Person”—The Robert E. Lee Beauty Shop. Welty may take her characters seriously, but she is unrelenting in her ridiculousness, the “local color” tinged white women’s sense of self and their relationship with the world, (Khalisova, 2007, 273–88); See also Sarah Gleeson-White’s “A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness,” 49-50.
P.O.,” Sister, is down on her luck. Even while despairing, she distances herself from characters whose lives are worse than hers, although she might have more in common with characters who suffer burdens of disadvantage.\textsuperscript{246} Sister carries a foremost, outspoken fear of encountering the grotesque, but Welty exposes a secondary undercurrent: Sister’s fear of being \textit{perceived as} grotesque by other community members.\textsuperscript{247} Her fear of ostracism stems from wider anxieties, the isolation she feels in a social system which restricts and ignores her, even as she exists to uphold it. Though “Why I Live at the P.O.” is rife with interpersonal conflict, Sister’s major adversary is the evil of a social system which breeds poverty and loneliness. Reevaluating the appearance of evil in a story, personally and societally, is a political act. Grotesque white women—sometimes physically marred, sometimes, as with Sister, morally deficient—challenge a reader's socialized definition of goodness or evil.

“Goodness,” inherently race and class coded, was a barrier to the political participation of many.\textsuperscript{248} A basis for O’Connor’s work lies in the social constructs which compromised her own quality of life: the limitations of being a disabled, unmarried woman in rural Georgia.\textsuperscript{249} O’Connor sought to define morality outside the constraints of Southern patriarchy. Her eccentricity was incisive. “Being a normal southern belle, as many in her family hoped she would, was not simply unthinkable for her but was purposefully fought against.”\textsuperscript{250}

\textsuperscript{246} This is true both of members of Sister’s family and the Black community she comes in contact with. Needless to say, Sister defines her superior position via contrast with poorer characters. (Welty, 43-52).
\textsuperscript{248} Nowhere is this more obvious than in Jim Crow era segregation law and rhetoric. White people believed it essential to dehumanize Black people, to legitimize and normalize race-based oppression. W.E.B. Dubois said: “There was one thing that the white South feared more than negro dishonesty, ignorance, and incompetency, and that was Negro honesty, knowledge, and efficiency.” in “Reconstruction and Its Benefits.” \textit{The American Historical Review} 15, no. 4 (1910): 795.
\textsuperscript{249} Basselin, \textit{Flannery O’Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity}, 9.
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid.
stance on gender politics in the South was clear to all who knew her, given her noted penchant for “turning social conventions on their head.” 251 O’Connor used her personal principles, incorporating elements of fable, to reveal unsustainable and inequitable expectations through Southern Gothic fiction. McCullers made a similar effort to redeem the margins as a legitimate source of good in society. In the microcosm of a McCullers novel, we see a burgeoning community made up solely of alienated participants (white women among them), and in their interactions, we discern the political agendas of the ideologically ignored. 252 The social sphere of McCullers’s invention suggests “that the potential exists for her characters to unite in their shared experience of otherness.” 253 Their united front dissents against the Southern interpretation of who is evil and who is good.

Welty’s The Optimist’s Daughter (1969) is one final example of testimony in favor of new qualifications for what the Southern community considers intolerable or immoral. In conversation with her cartoonishly ill-mannered stepmother Fay, Laurel, a respectable Southern woman, speaks of her unquestioning allegiance to the moral codes of the past:

“I don’t know what you’re making such a big fuss over. What do you see in that thing?” asked Fay.

“The whole story, Fay. the whole solid past,” said Laurel.

“Whose story? Whose past? Not mine,” said Fay. “The past isn’t a thing to me. I belong to the future, didn’t you know that?” (...)

251 Ibid.
252 The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is the most obvious example of this. In each character there is mutual recognition of humanity, all spun out through their mutual connection with a deaf mute. That these characters don’t meet up or share the same struggles is unimportant; they unite under a common alienation, and make their way into the world, by the end of the book, somewhat hopefully. McCullers is able to create community among the most unlikely of characters, notably a drunken socialist activist and an elderly Black doctor. In a review of Heart, author Richard Wright said: “To me, the most impressive aspect of [Heart] is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race. This cannot be accounted for stylistically or politically; it seems to stem from an attitude toward life which enables Miss McCullers to rise above the pressure of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness” (Carr, 2005, 33).
"I know you aren't anything to the past," [Laurel] said. "You can't do anything to it now." And neither am I; and neither can I, she thought, although it has been everything and done everything to me, everything for me. The past is no more open to help or hurt than was Father in his coffin. The past is like him, impervious, and can never be awakened. It is memory that is the somnambulist. (p. 179).254

The Optimist’s Daughter petitions the Southerner to reorient their interests toward improving the future, not maintaining the past. Welty, alongside McCullers and O’Connor, uses fiction to hold members of her own identity group accountable for their transgressions in the past, and their plans for the future. Holding fictional white women to a new standard forces a reader to look inward and evaluate their personal standards for women both as agents of wrongdoing and agents of progress. As it stood, the symbol of white womanhood could not survive; it was too faultless and too capable of inflicting harm. In Southern Gothic narratives, white women are not expected to be emblematic of perfect, Plantation era idyll, but they are responsible for their immorality and given the opportunity to improve themselves in the future.

2.5 MUST EUDORA WELTY CRUSADE?

Eudora Welty qualified her participation in the Gothic tradition. In an interview with Alice Walker, she admits to her fears of association. “Gothic,” as she understood it, was a label that separated her work from the world. “I feel that my work has something to do with real life,” Welty said.255 Welty prioritizes real life in her fiction; issues of race, class, and community

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255 Eudora Welty and Alice Walker, “Eudora Welty: an Interview, by Alice Walker,” in Conversations With Eudora Welty, ed. P.W. Prenshaw. University press: Mississippi. 1984, 137-138. In a different interview with Sara Bonassin of the Jackson Daily News, Welty discusses her stories’ place in “narrating” the South in the 1960s. Her stories “reflect the unease of the time, people’s attitude toward change...not wanting to [change]. There were a whole lot of stories being written all over the country about Southerners as seen from the outside. They were all absolutely typecast and not written by people who knew.” in “The Lady Collects Her Letters,” Jackson Daily News, November 7, 1980.
conflict are tantamount to her telling of the Southern experience. In this interview, Welty divulges her genuine stake in the social and political dynamics which complicate her characters’ lives. She takes this investment in her stories a step further, wanting to situate the morals and themes from her stories in the context of her authentic South. The grotesque, for Welty, is something deeply rooted in her lived experience: a heightened display of realism.

In 1965, following the publication of her major works of fiction *A Curtain of Green* and *Other Stories* (1941), and *Delta Wedding* (1946), Welty published an essay called “Must the Novelist Crusade?” In this essay, she drew a heavy line between the novelist and editorialist, and placed herself squarely in the former camp. Welty claimed her fictions were, though drawn out by personal passion, meant to show or “disclose,” but not to argue.

Regardless of her personal wishes, different groups of Southern activists and scholars went on to adopt Welty’s works for crusading purposes. This at the very least is a worthwhile expression of the power political themes can have in Southern fiction, taking on new life outside of the author’s intentions. From, most recently, the 2020 Eudora Welty Society “Politics of Protest” conference, to the memorializing ventures of essayists and fiction writers, it is clear that generations of readers interpret the care and detail Welty brought to her fiction as political armaments. Welty’s stories of “disclosure” have been and will continue to be perceived as

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258 A flurry of scholarship exists on the subject of Eudora Welty’s race politics. Feminist scholars write about the timelessness of her gendered themes. Even Ann Waldron, the only person to successfully attempt a biography of Welty (and even then only begrudgingly), took a wider interest in race politics in Mississippi. See: *Eudora: A Writer’s Life*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1998. For a second example, see the essay collection: *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?* The work combines a variety of experts on photography, McCarthyism, apartheid, and modernism to answer its titular question—yes, she did. (2001).

259 The Eudora Welty Society, “Politics of Protest Call for Papers,” [http://eudorawelty.org](http://eudorawelty.org); see also the Eudora Welty Foundation’s 2013 Great Topics Seminar: “Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?”
political by future generations of Southern readers who care to draw on her ideological messages. Whether this practice is misconstrued or not doesn’t invalidate the perspective of Welty’s readers, nor the argument in Welty’s essay. In a post-mortem consideration of “Must the Novelist Crusade?,” author and friend Jonathan Yardley wrote about Welty’s political participation outside of her fiction. As a popular author who treated Black people in her fiction with “respect and sympathy,” she was called on to “mount the pulpit” in her Mississippi community in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. She perceived this expectation as an effort to “turn her fiction into an expression of her political views.” This zeal, natural and understandable to Welty, came from a misunderstanding of the task of a fiction writer, who cannot “set people to acting mechanically or carrying placards to make their sentiments plain.” Welty was uninterested in crafting a fable that neatly distinguished between right and wrong. To do so would run contrary to the goal of her fiction, noted in her aforementioned interview with Alice Walker: to mirror the real world. My interpretation differs from Welty’s in that I, among other readers, believe her insistence upon representing the real world was an inherently political project.

In an interview with Yardley in 1973, Welty commented once more on her perception of the role of politics in fiction. “I don't see why, just because I write stories, that should give me the authority about, say, what should happen about abortion. Maybe I'm shirking responsibility,


261 Yardley, “Eudora Welty, Choosing Pen Over Pulpit.”

262 Welty, “Must the Novelist Crusade?” 150.

but I don't think so. Everything I feel is in my stories.” Welty was political in her personal life. She was a racial and gender equality advocate in her career as an essayist, and as a community member in Jackson, Mississippi. The murder of Medgar Evers in her hometown disturbed her deeply, and precipitated her controversial story “Where Is The Voice Coming From?” (1963). Welty’s qualms do not therefore stem from a-politicism, nor does she think herself unable to construct and articulate political thought. Her stance is rather an assertion that she has already done the articulating, through a forum which is not only more accessible to her but which she genuinely believes to be a superior venue to share information. The distinguishing force between my assertion—that the women writers of the Southern Gothic advocated their political interests via a literary genre particularly apt to house them—and Welty’s separation of activism from authorship, is a difference in definition of political action or political space. Welty didn’t believe that storytelling “disclosure” was a form of political behavior. She found the writing process to be deeply personal; work for the private sphere. She therefore did not view her contribution as akin to those in the more conspicuous public arenas.

265 Welty said: “I’m a Democrat, and I suppose I’m fairly liberal, but that doesn’t mean I go along with the party every time.” Welty vehemently disliked Richard Nixon. She called the 1972 presidential campaign “dismal” and “so dispiriting.” Welty and Yardley, “A Quiet Lady in the Limelight,” in Conversations with Eudora Welty, 11.
266 Welty worked as a photographer with the Works Progress Administration in 1935, documenting the depths of Mississippi poverty. As her stories gained popularity, she wrote and gave lectures on her writing. She cultivated community in Jackson, friends in academic and literary circles, as well as locals in Jackson. Welty wielded great influence for a significant amount of time before earning her title of “patron saint of Mississippi.” Claudia Roth Pierpont. “Eudora Welty, Patron Saint of Mississippi,” The New Yorker. September 28, 1998.
268 Welty, “Must the Novelist Crusade?” 146-150.
269 In “Crusade,” Welty says: “Writing fiction is an interior affair. Novels and stories always will be put down little by little out of personal feeling and personal beliefs arrived at alone and at firsthand over a period of time as time is needed. To go outside and beat the drum is only to interrupt, interrupt, and so finally to forget and to lose. Fiction has, and must keep, a private address.” (1961, 149).
Intentionally or not, Welty espouses her personal politics in her writing: chiefly her belief that there was something worth “disclosing” in the lives of marginalized groups at all.\textsuperscript{270} Welty invited a reader into the life, background, and political perspective of some pretty despicable characters. These include bigots of all shapes and ages, murderers, racists, and misogynists. In an interview regarding her contribution to Southern fiction, Welty reflected on “Where is the Voice Coming From?” her work which describes white supremacy most directly. “What I was writing about really was that world of hate I felt I had grown up with and I felt I could speak as someone who knew it.”\textsuperscript{271} Welty asks a reader to consider not only the immorality of a character, but how and why their situated place, as a Southerner, dictates their feelings. Her own identity as a white Southern woman afforded her the power to write about and condemn the organizing forces behind hate in the South from the perspective of credible characters.

In her fiction, Welty believes in and takes a stand for political participation from within the private sphere. Consider the agency exercised by the women of “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” (1937). Mrs. Carson, Ms. Slocum, and Mrs. Ellis intervene into the lives of others, making decisions about who in the community can exercise their individual liberty, and to what

\textsuperscript{270} Her stories “A Worn Path” (1982, 129-138), “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” (1982, 3-11), “Why I Live at the P.O.” (43-52), and “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” (36-42), among others, provide textual evidence for Welty’s belief that the experiences of Black Mississippians or the happenings of uneducated, rural women merited literary attention.

\textsuperscript{271} William F. Buckley. “The Southern Imagination: An Interview with Eudora Welty and Walker Percy.” The Mississippi Quarterly 26, no. 4 (1973): 503. In Welty’s book One Writer’s Beginnings, she comments once more on the murder of Medgar Evers. “There was one story that anger certainly lit the fuse of. In the 1960’s, in my home town of Jackson, the civil rights leader Medgar Evers was murdered on night in darkness and I wrote a story that same night about the murderer (identity unknown) called "Where Is The Voice Coming From?" But all that absorbed me, though it started as outrage, was the necessity I felt for entering into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been more alien or repugnant to me. Trying for my utmost, I wrote in the first person. I was wholly vaunting the prerogative of the short-story writer. It is always vaunting, of course, to imagine yourself inside another person, but it is what a story writer does in every piece of work; it is his first step, and his last too, I suppose. I'm not sure this story was brought off; and I don't believe that my anger showed me anything about human character that my sympathy and rapport never had.” (1984, 54).
degree.\textsuperscript{272} The character Lily Daw ultimately has two paths in life: a marriage, or ostracization at an institution. The three ladies know well the danger of Lily’s future. Wrongfully or not, they elect themselves as advocates for Lily and her rights. The question of Lily’s future is not only a social one, and though the relevant characters are all women, the three ladies debate more than just “women’s issues.”\textsuperscript{273} The essential dilemma in “Lily Daw” has more to do with the limitations of agency for any person without opportunities. In Welty’s stories, women’s spaces are treated as valid, thoughtful forums for political speech, with as much influence over the community. Welty’s stories of “women’s issues” are inextricably tied to the construction of race and class in the agrarian South. She does not untether the lives of women from their contributions to the wider community.

Feminist critic Ladislava Khailova writes about the evolving interpretation of Welty’s reputation as an anti-political author.\textsuperscript{274} Welty may not have crusaded, but there is a reason her works are widely considered to be politically impactful. For Welty, “being a writer is pre-political, post-political, always and already political.”\textsuperscript{275} Welty’s hesitancy to crusade mirrors her hesitancy to be labelled an author of the Southern Gothic: she loathed the narrowness of a category.\textsuperscript{276} Welty equated the label of political fiction with an unwillingness to incorporate beliefs different from her own into a story. She valued her fiction as a place for debate. Welty

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\item \textsuperscript{272} “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” is a story driven by the actions of women. “We buried Lily’s poor defenseless mother. We gave Lily all her food and kindling and every stitch she had on. Sent her to Sunday school to learn the Lord’s teachings, had her baptized a Baptist. And when her old father commenced beating her and tried to cut her head off with the butcher light, why, we went and took her away from him and gave her a place to stay.” (1984, 5).
\item \textsuperscript{275} Prenshaw, “The Political Thought of Eudora Welty,” 629.
\end{itemize}
distinguished legitimate political speech from the inhuman tidiness of “propaganda, demagoguery, intimidating threats, inspired revelation, guilt ridden confession, or fatuous display.” Throughout the mid-twentieth century, Welty found herself increasingly disillusioned with public venues for political speech. Her experience as a Southerner had made it clear to her that specific voices would always be prioritized in those spaces. In her fiction, on the other hand, there is a cacophony of freely speaking voices, all engaged in debate, sometimes within the family, and sometimes within the community, relaying conflicting perspectives on subjects spanning gender, race, and political memory. Welty found the habitation of the private sphere in fiction to be the most salient for the discussion of Southern social and political realities. In her essay “Place in Fiction,” Welty says: “the art that speaks most clearly, explicitly, direct and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood.” Welty inhabits minds with private needs to express political issues. Regardless of whether or not the novelist “must” crusade, Welty has certainly done so.

CONCLUSION

The Southern Gothic literary genre was a forum for the reconstruction of white womanhood as a new category of political participant. A move away from the Belle of the Antebellum social consciousness, who was without agency, this new conception of the Southern

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277 In “Crusade,” Welty elaborates on her perception of the point of fiction, and how she distinguishes its purpose from politics: “The ordinary novelist does not argue,” she writes. “He hopes to show, to disclose. His persuasions are all toward allowing his reader to see and hear something for himself...Great fiction, we very much fear, abounds in what makes for confusion; it generates it, being on a scale which copies life, which it confronts. It is very seldom neat, is given to sprawling and escaping from bounds, is capable of contradicting itself, and is not impervious to humor” (1961, 149).


white woman was more politically influential, if consequently more transgressive. White women faced barriers to political participation specific to their identity. Their image represented a socially constructed and politically preserved definition of Southern cultural decency. Historically, the representative value of the feminine ideal merited greater protection than white women’s rights themselves. Complicating any effort to invert the statuses of white women as symbols versus white women as people, a great deal of elite white women were themselves invested in maintaining the existence of the Southern Belle and the social order to which she belonged. The white women who wrote in the Southern Gothic tradition exploited that very desire, and set about perverting the sanctity of their own symbolic purity. In constructing a new conception of white womanhood as a category of political participant, capable of influence, Southern Gothic authors in turn had to dismantle the long-established safeguards for elitism intertwined with their personal identities.

These personal identities proved at once the radical drive and the limiting force of Southern Gothic fiction. McCullers’s sexuality and gender presentation precipitated some of the most beloved characters in the queer Southern canon. O’Connor’s custom form of Catholic realism guided the parabolic teachings particular to her fiction. Welty’s familiarity with and allegiance to her home state, including its poor and rural regions, motivated her experimental presentation of the mundane South. For all three women, whiteness and relative economic privilege informed their political interests. Southern Gothic authors used their relationship with different identities to stake a political claim, explicitly or implicitly. Their commentary on white womanhood was inextricably tied to other racial groups and classes—sometimes in solidarity, other times writing in Blackness or poverty to offset whiteness. These truths are neither drawbacks nor strengths in a reading of the Southern Gothic as a collection of political texts.
They merely inform a contemporary understanding of how and why the category of white womanhood manifested as it did in Southern fiction.

The Southern Gothic literary genre exists today, but its form and function alike underwent massive overhauls to accommodate new and more diverse generations of writers, with new political claims to make within the tradition of the grotesque. The bones are the same: violent themes, threatening Southern settings, an outcast or two, an air of instability. The Southern Gothic has always been the literary respite for the Other. In the context of my analysis, the Other is transgressive white women characters. But as the canon grew, the category of the Other expanded to explore the lived experience of Black Southerners, as in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) or of victims of sexual violence, in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992). In her research on identity and fiction, Toni Morrison calls upon the language of the Other to formulate “the literature of belonging.”\(^{280}\) Fiction is “an opportunity to be and to become the Other. The stranger. With sympathy, clarity, and the risk of self-examination.”\(^{281}\) The desire to belong, the repercussions of Othering and being Othered, manifest in politics as well as literature. The Southern Gothic presents an integration of the two. Though obstructed from political participation in its more traditional forms, Southern Others found and continue to find alternative means to communicate. White Southern women of the mid-century South did just this, as authors and political contributors. To write Southern Gothic stories was to assume control of and responsibility over one’s own place in the social order. To read McCullers, O’Connor, and Welty is to endure, however transiently, their experience of white womanhood,


and to bear witness to their political project: the redrafting of a symbol, the construction of an identity.
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