

CONCLUSION

This project did not end as expected. With so much passionate re-visioning of the grotesque, especially by Yaeger, Westling, and Gleeson-White, I wanted to find that Southern women writers were using the grotesque generatively—that is, that they were bringing their female characters to an experience through which they were able to find human renewal and make positive changes in their lives. I wanted it to be true that Welty and McCullers allowed their female characters a liberation of sorts in which their identities were refined, their spirits freed. What I actually found was that while the reader may experience a certain element of liberation or new awareness vicariously through the characters' experiences, the characters themselves remain unchanged. McCullers' Madame Zilensky, for instance, awakens readers to the idea that one lives in one's own self-created reality and that it is a conscious choice to step out of this world into awareness, but Madame Zilensky herself chooses to stay in her facade. The only liberation, then, may be in Welty and McCullers' sense of freedom as writers to present an honest depiction of the female predicament in the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps, this honest depiction is victory enough as Welty and McCullers do something quite unique with the grotesque; through it they are able to explore

female identity in a manner that shows women ever-changing and recreating themselves.

The feminine focus of Southern women writers has been studied by many scholars; some have even tied this focus to women writers' use of the grotesque. Still, the ideas in this study reflect not only a different type of grotesque than what scholars have considered, but a different interpretation of the stigma of Southernness itself. I have found the grotesque to be much more subtle and internalized than what has been previously argued. Using Bakhtin's ideas related to carnival, I consider what happens when this carnival—this time of enhanced freedom and awareness—is not a public and ritualistic event, but is internalized through each woman's personal identification with others. As Bakhtin notes:

Every age has its own norms of official speech and propriety. And every age has its own type of words and expressions that are given as a signal to speak freely, to call them by their own names, without any mental restrictions and euphemisms All peoples . . . have enormous spheres of speech that have not been made public and are nonexistent from the point of view of literary, written language.

(qtd. in *Rabelais* 299).

This study looks at the possibility of this freedom of speech and expression, often by considering what goes unsaid—the speech expressed through the inaction of

the female characters. It also explores the possibility of change in a feminine world whose social expectations and artistic standards are imposed by a patriarchal culture. It is not meant to be depressing, but to show that the female characters identify with one another and, in doing so, their own identities are reflected, albeit imperfectly, to the reader. Finally, this study shows that women understand one another and that they relate to the different milestones expected of the female life: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it” (qtd in *Rabelais* 300). Jinny Love Stark peers from the “iron mask of the married lady” (*CS* 444); Cassie Morrison knows that she is expected to stay in Morgana forever; and Nina Carmichael covertly realizes that there are “secret ways,” or other, better ways to live (*CS* 361).

But this study is also about time and the Southern way of life. Southern literature, as considered here, is distinctive because of the burdens the characters carry *within themselves*—that is, the characters feel simultaneously the weight of the past, a sense of loss and alienation, a need to suffer, a need for communion with others. Southern characters have a peculiarity, a sense of heaviness, that cannot be found in literature of any other region. Interestingly, however, their condition can be eased through this internalized sense of carnival. Southern women do not identify with one another only at events, at religious services, at public locations such as the post office, but *continually*. There is an unspoken

understanding that releases the generally accepted ideas of carnival from ties to time, specificity, and public spheres; in fact, carnival becomes an enriching experience that strips away all social hierarchies and classes. This sense of understanding is why the other female characters of Morgana take issue with Miss Snowdie (“Shower of Gold,” “The Wanderers”) when she seems so content that her husband is gone. They understand that she feels free, but they believe that every woman should be cut in half so as to have a side “to feel and know, and a side to stop it” (CS 430). In their unspoken code, pleasuring in this freedom should not be displayed publicly. Katie Rainey says, “We were mad at her and protecting her all at once, when we couldn’t be close to her” (CS 267).

Yaeger finds that Southern women writers use the grotesque in a positive manner that is reflective of the ideas of Bakhtin, but she still considers the grotesque in a physical sense that focuses upon the female body. Noting that the female characters of Southern women writers are ugly, mannish, and androgynous, Yaeger has multiple published articles about the “Southern Gargantua” and how this type of distorted female character becomes representative of the concerns of women. She pushes the boundaries of what the grotesque *can do*, but not what *it is*. By using Bakhtin’s ideas of carnival and mirroring, I have attempted to prove that the grotesque is as much a dynamic phenomenon as it is a visual spectacle. Yaeger considers the “political effects” of the grotesque as well as the “willful

miniaturization of the female body” (“Beyond the Hummingbird” 287, 291), showing that the grotesque female body means something, but I look at the way that grotesque body is truly created, and in doing so, I have discovered that the grotesque lies in the process of creation itself. For example, the beauty parlor of Welty’s “Petriified Man” becomes a place of carnival where the women feel a sense of communion with one another and have the opportunity for personal growth, but because each woman only sees herself through her reflection from another, any truth that she expects to find is inaccurate. The grotesque is found not only in the woman who has shifted from one sense of self to another unstable stance who is lost between the two positions, but in each woman’s constantly changing perception of the others. Through mirroring, each woman only sees the other’s “in-between” state and her constantly changing reflection.

Yaeger does examine the ways in which Welty and McCullers explore the ideological masks imposed upon Southern women. But again, she relates the rebellion against this mask to the physical body. She says, “When the grotesque body marches onto the page, the ideology that controls Southern bodies explodes in the most unexpected ways” (“Beyond the Hummingbird” 293). She further argues that women’s bodies in Southern texts become political. While I agree, I find significance in the manner in which women look at one another and their position within relationships and families. The emphasis is upon the distortion of

the perspective, not the body itself. In Welty's "A Memory," Yaeger finds the grotesque in the body of the morbidly obese woman on the beach while I find it in the way the narrator, the observer, is changed through seeing and interacting with the obese woman on the beach. The narrator absorbs aspects of the obese woman and moves away from her initial charmed, naïve identity to a more unidentifiable and jaded awareness.

In multiple studies, Westling also focuses upon the physical body as depicted by women writers. She sees the persistence of the Southern white woman in Southern texts as "representative of Christian virtues lauded in public to divert attention from the problems of slavery and racism" (*Sacred Groves* 8). And, while Westling finds that O'Connor, Welty, and McCullers form "a coherent group" whose work is illuminated by comparison because each is preoccupied with feminine identity, her only link to the grotesque is in noting the oversized, tomboyish women the authors create. She writes that specifically with these three authors, "Southern women have gained strong contemporary voices which define their condition as it has never before been understood" (*Sacred Groves* 175), but she studies this unity of theme by comparing how the authors question the Southern tradition of the lady and the relationship between mothers and daughters within their texts. My study looks at the effects of these dynamics and others, but it does so internally, by considering each character's mindset.

Finally, I must say a word about Gleeson-White whose article entitled “A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness” caught my attention as I began this project. I have always been fascinated with Southern distinctiveness, and Gleeson-White had me hooked when she asserted that Southern women writers use female ugliness to reveal the tragic history of women, to literally mark this history on the bodies of female characters (46). She emphasizes the importance of Southern women to Southern culture, noting that while the female is much needed she is equally much tortured. Focusing upon the way violence is incorporated into feminine texts, Gleeson-White recognizes that Southern women writers use the grotesque uniquely, but she continues to focus upon the grotesque female body in terms of size and overall appearance. In one article, “Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers,” she writes that McCullers uses the grotesque in order to affirm “growth, promise, and transformation” (109); she sees McCullers’ use of the grotesque as an affirmation of creativity, a sort of “active potential” (113), but she still only considers the grotesque in relation to the physical body. Like Westling, she looks more at the significance of the tomboy than the internal warring in the female character’s mind.

For me, the “inner-freaking out” that Robert Phillips identifies is the clearest path to understanding the situation of the women presented in *A Curtain*

of Green and *The Golden Apples* as well as in the short stories of Carson McCullers. On the surface, the women appear quite normal. In fact, some are even privileged. The heart of the story lies in that which is hidden, but felt deeply. In the end, while it did not prove out (as I had hoped) that Welty and McCullers were creating female characters that improve their cultural and social position through their encounters with the grotesque, each writer does incorporate a more internalized grotesque that explores feminine identity and brings poignant awareness about the concerns of women.