INTRODUCTION

"My identities and sympathies, then, are all with the Southern grotesque, having been one and known more than a few."

Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*

This project, and I am sure, many dissertations before it, began naively. Interested in the use of the grotesque and its deeper meaning, I first centered my research upon the most obvious Southern writer, William Faulkner. What I discovered, however, was that Faulkner's grotesque was not prescriptive to other authors in terms of usage or intent. Neither was Faulkner's use of the grotesque a mirror-image of Edgar Allan Poe's, whose influence on literature of the grotesque is, as explained by Joyce Carol Oates, "so universal as to be incalculable" (*Haunted* 305). In fact, no two authors' use of the grotesque could be symmetrically compared as the standard of measure is not standard. Faulkner may model some aspects of Poe; likewise, Katherine Anne Porter may model Faulkner to a certain extent, yet each writer creates a unique dynamic. I began to truly understand critics' persistent arguments surrounding the definition of the grotesque. Is it a mode? Is it a shocking subject matter introduced into everyday circumstances? Is it a freakishness or distortion of the ordinary? Is it all of these

things? Even if one chooses a philosophy, the term, grotesque, is continually used in new ways, defying any previous definition. Consequently, at the time of this dissertation, there are more than 250 literary dissertations containing the word "grotesque" in their titles. That number, I am sure, will continue to grow. The grotesque is a well known intellectual dilemma. Alan Spiegel explains in "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" that the term "grotesque" has been applied "so frequently and so recklessly by so many contemporary critics to so many different literary occurrences that it now becomes increasingly difficult to use the term with any high degree of clarity and precision"—and this in 1972 (426). Imagine the amplification of the issue today. Critics and students continue to try to identify, define, classify, and otherwise explain the enigma while it appears that the only point beyond argument is that use of the grotesque is a constitutive facet of Southern literature.

But what is *Southern* literature? To compound the matter of defining the grotesque, the determination of *Southern* writing—its most common container—can be complex as well. When characterizing fiction as Southern, is one referring to writing originating *from* a particular region, writing *about* a particular region, or writing with a particular style and theme? Is the South still a culturally separate entity? Is Southern literature a viable genre today? Herein lies another intellectual dilemma.

Some believe that Southernness (and hence, Southern literature) is dying and rally the cause. Critics, such as Barbara Ladd in *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner* (1996), denigrate the concept of Southern literature as simply a means to recapture the past or a supposed past (and a supposed South). Additionally, writers try to enter the Southern literary circle by producing *Southern* fiction in a paint-by-numbers fashion which incorporates a Southern setting, a Southern dialect, or a stereotypical Southern lifestyle; these attempts are often hollow and genteel, lacking authenticity. There are as many perspectives on the defining characteristics of Southern literature as there are definitions of the grotesque itself, and the perspectives vary widely in their analysis of Southern literature's separation from other types of writing and in the purpose of the grotesque within it. To proceed in this study, one must recognize the historical context surrounding the explosive mix: the grotesque and the South. In studying these provoking subjects, one finds multiple, and equally valid, interpretations and can create a personal matrix to maneuver through the literature.

Southern Literature

The first step toward a deeper understanding of Southern literature is to recognize the aggregate of roots that produced it. Southern literature cannot be

categorized as having a typical plot, character set, setting, or time. Understanding Southern literature involves acknowledging the larger cultural and historical influences upon the writer—writer and text are not autonomous. Though not without criticism, Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* (2000) should be credited for emphasizing how culture and history influence the literature; he shows a Southern literary microcosm instead of a tangent, a literature that is peculiar to Southern people. Kreyling has been chastised for beginning his study decades too late as he considers much Southern cultural myth to have begun with the Agrarians (most prominently associated with the 1920s and 1930s), but his affirmation that Southern literature is a cultural product that cannot be taught as a craft is well-substantiated. Using the theory of "nationness" first presented by Benedict Anderson in his generally accepted text *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) to apply to "Southernness," Kreyling asserts that Southern identity is "a product culturally and historically fabricated to local specifications by narratives that are more or less cooperative (the narrative of literature cooperative with the narrative of history, for example) and more or less conscious" (ix). The argument is not that other writers are immune to allowing their culture or identity to influence their work, but that writers who have a specifically Southern identity, whether their origins are

geographically Southern or not, produce a literature that is interwoven with a belief in Southern distinctiveness and consciousness.

The Southern canon, then, directed by culture and history, presents themes particular to the Southern region such as community, love, self-sacrifice, and the possibility of a "metaphysical conception of man," or, more basically, human relationships, commitments, and spirituality (Kreyling 141, 144, 10). Taken singularly, these themes cannot be considered unique, but in the embodiment of these themes together, one finds the Southern predicament. Richard Gray, one of the most noted critics of Southern literature adopts this more holistic approach with *The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South* (1977), followed by *Writing the South: Literature of an American Region* (1986). Both of Gray's texts allow for the influence of non-tangible factors, such as love, community, and collective memory; he gives significant weight to these human influences upon the author instead of flatly analyzing the characteristics of the author's fiction. Certainly, no matter what one deems Southern literature to have been or to remain today, there is a relational benefit to knowing one's perspective of it. As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. affirms in the introduction to *The History of Southern Literature* (1985), "for better or for worse the habit of viewing one's experience in terms of one's relationship to that entity [the South] is still a meaningful characteristic of both writers and readers who are or have been part of it" (5). As a

first step, then, following Rubin's theory, one must begin by acknowledging the South as a culturally separate region.

For the purpose of this study, it is implicit that Southern literature is determined by a set of common characteristics, not by the birthplace of the author, the inclusion of select settings, or a particular dialect. In truth, not every writer from the South creates Southern literature. Those who write genuinely Southern literature find their basis in what is known as the Southern tradition, the embodiment of an historical sensibility that produces creative commonalities among its writers. The idea is that certain beliefs about one's life possibilities, one's obligation to community and family, and one's temporal nature that are inherent to the Southern writer and these beliefs are passed along to the writer's characters, creating a distinct literature. Though there are many, I will briefly outline five such characteristics of Southern literature most relevant to the concepts presented in this study.

First, one must recognize that a sense of loss is natural to the Southerner. Southern characters feel the weight of the past pressing upon them more heavily than characters of any other American region and perhaps more than characters found in any other literary genre. The past always exists, simultaneous with the present. This is evident in not only the characters of writers of the late nineteenth

to early twentieth century haunted by racial abuse, gender oppression, or social tragedy, but also the characters of the contemporary middleclass writers of today who have not suffered in any significant way except that they are Southern. There is a sense of guilt and repression that comes from having one's inception in the loss of the Civil War and the inheritance of the legacy of slavery, whether an activist, accuser, or victim. The Civil War, with its issues of rights, race, class, education, and religion began the disintegration of the Southern way of life, and ironically, established the South's identity. It was an innate Fall that continues to be passed down through the generations through collective memory. The Southern character feels a sense of obligation to uphold traditions of his past though it may be a past that has been recreated for him through the mythology of the Lost Cause of the Confederates as well as oral accounts of his family.

Faulkner explains this condition most adeptly when in an interview he answers a University of Virginia student's question with the statement, "There is no such thing as was . . . . To me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing as was, because the past is" (Meriwether 255). He clarifies further in his 1932 novel *Light in August* that "Memory believes before knowing remembers" (119), and in his 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust* that "tomorrow began ten thousand years ago . . . and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet" (187). Without separating what used to be from what is,

Southern characters lack all sense of origin and can never truly have a "clean slate." The characters are, from inception, encumbered. Their sense of loss is rooted in the fact that they never had a nurtured start. This encumbrance extensively complicates the characters thereby making them more empathetic. Southern characters are often tolerant of human limitations and weaknesses because they understand the source in themselves. A general understanding develops around the belief that everyone is flawed, and since there is nothing that can be done about it, the characters continue through life with an angst-driven, often apathetic, outlook. The sense of loss Southern characters feel may be the root of many of their other characteristics.

Second, Southern characters possess an extreme sense of isolation. So many of the characters in Southern texts simply cannot communicate and have no verbal means to achieve fulfillment. Like Oliver from Barry Hannah's "All the Old Harkening Faces at the Rail," who, out of respect, spends twenty years married to a woman he does not love and his entire life viewing himself a liar among his friends, Southern characters act out of habit, ritual, or community expectation; they feel guilty when acting upon their own desires that deviate from others' expectations. Hannah's text, here and elsewhere, puts an individual character's state of being in the foreground, makes the story into a world of its own, and asks the character to try to define himself within that world. What results

is a grand, but futile effort. Without the sense of community beyond one's self, there is only loneliness, helplessness, and frustration. Characters are often left floating, as Oliver literally does, in a "one man boat" with those on the shore staring in disbelief and rejection; they too are confined to the limits of their own prescribed world (Hannah 139). Other characters in Southern stories will not accept protagonists who even consider stepping outside the standard established and passed down through the generations in their community. In "All the Old Harkening Faces at the Rail," the old men on the shore sharply dismiss any attempt at variance as they watch Oliver in his one-man boat, saying "I guess we're all old enough to see fools run their course" (142).

The Southern character's particular state of isolation cannot be overemphasized as it leads to a philosophy of existentialism. The isolation is felt to such an overwhelming extreme that the character either becomes spiritually sick or is already spiritually dead and cannot find his way. In fact, I believe, therein is the source of the "death" of which Katherine Anne Porter speaks when she writes, in the introduction to Eudora Welty's *Collected Stories,* that Welty does not have to experience death to write about it. Welty *has* experienced it because it is a spiritual death felt by the entire South tied to the innate agrarian ideals of land, home, family, community, and religion. Many Southern plot lines revolve around characters that are unaware of their own sickness, such as Mrs. Turpin from

Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Revelation." Mrs. Turpin is literally hit in the head with a book and called a "warthog from hell" before she awakens to realize her spiritual state (*Complete Stories* 500). It takes dramatic and often violent moments such as this to rouse the character out of ennui and self-absorption. Accordingly, the result of these poignant moments is that characters, like Mrs. Turpin, question their doubleness. She asks, "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (*CS* 506). For other Southern characters, the question is similar: How can I do what is expected of me and still be me?

Third, because of the awareness of loss and isolation, the Southern character often feels the need to make intimate human connections. Many plot lines revolve around a character's vulnerability during poignant moments when he feels the need for communion or when he attempts contact, whether successful or not. Human connections are the foundation of plot in many works of Katherine Anne Porter whose much-anthologized "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" reveals the deathbed analysis of connections made and lost during the course of a lifetime. The story shows the elusiveness of human relationships as well as their life-altering impact. As in so many Southern texts, Granny Weatherall's deathbed thoughts reveal how relationships (often failed relationships) change one's outlook: "It was good to be strong enough for everything, even if all you made melted and changed and slipped under your hands, so that by the time you finished

you almost forgot what you were working for" (*Collected Stories* 83). Granny Weatherall tries to appear indifferent even though it is most apparent that her relationships were her life.

Similarly, Eudora Welty's first short story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," shows a Southern character's need for human connection. The story examines poignant moments in the life of a nondescript salesman named R. J. Bowman, who admits (in the very first paragraph) that while he is headed toward Beulah he is not quite sure of the way, and that he distrusts a road without signposts. Driving his sales route, Bowman has an accident and thinks, "What if in fourteen years on the road he had never been ill before and never had an accident?" (*Selected Stories* 205). Welty uses the violence of the accident to make Bowman realize that he has neglected personal relationships, and they now stare at him and follow him "solidly like a wall" (206). When a young couple helps Bowman after his accident, he feels the bottomless loss of not having a genuine, loving relationship such as theirs. He thinks, "I have been sick and I found out then, only then, how lonely I am. Is it too late? My heart puts up a struggle inside me, and you may have heard it, protesting against emptiness" (214). Bowman is overwhelmed as he begins to understand the reality of the true communion between the couple. He realizes the simplicity of it all, and that it has been right before his eyes: "A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing" (220). The

story ends with Bowman breaking into a run toward his own life with his heart, suffering an attack, giving off "tremendous explosions like a rifle, bang bang bang" (222).

Fourth, Southern characters have a need to carry a personal burden in order to work out their own heroism and nobility. They *need* to suffer as they believe it makes them stronger, more whole, and better. Some writers create characters with tangible burdens, such as William Goyen's "Arthur Bond." This story is of a man with a thorn in his flesh—literally a worm in his thigh—as a metaphor of the thing that haunts (whatever it is to each individual) and the way that haunting becomes beautiful, becomes part of one's self. Arthur Bond says, "What I'm thinking is that we can't all see in a bottle the face of our buried torment" (30). This statement comes after the "doll-faced" worm has broken off only to retreat deeper into Arthur's leg (30). Though Arthur eventually dies from the worm's attack, Goyen makes the reader question the source and purpose of the burden. Did God put the worm there as a form of trial? Was it there to make Arthur Bond stronger? Arthur expresses his understanding of the necessity of suffering, thinking, "my God the workings of Jehovah's ways, a worm to make an Angel, oh Lord why is there so much darkness in this life before we see the light of things your ways are strange your ways are dark before we see the light" (33). Like Arthur, the Southern character accepts that trials and pain are necessary for one to live out his destiny.

However, in a spiritual sense, sometimes religious and sometimes simply metaphysical, he needs to understand the deeper meaning of the cards dealt him.

Flannery O'Connor explains in her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (1960) that Southern characters, and particularly grotesque characters, "carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity" (*Mystery and Manners* 44). Moreover, whether through religion or physical deformity or emotional scarring, Southern characters believe that their valor in carrying their burden will lead to nobility and eventual redemption. O'Connor believes that "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" ("Some Aspects" 50). Of course, O'Connor finds that the only redemption is through Christ, but other writers find it elsewhere, through allowing the character to experience redemption of self, of determining one's reaction to life and eventually one's fate. Goyen shows this journey in his short story "Bridge of Music, River of Sand." The narrator faces private demons surrounding childhood memories of his mother and a bridge haunted with past experience. His mother had been terrified of the road, the bridge where "some real things happened on this practical, if magical, device for crossing water" (234). The narrator thinks how ironic it is to have a beautiful "musical" bridge over a dead, dry river. The bridge eventually becomes a path to redemption

for the narrator, but not to religious salvation. The bridge simply leads to an acceptance of circumstances and emotional peace. Additionally, as typical of Southern stories, Goyen insists that the path is not perfect; the character must make his own way and, often, must fight for it.

Finally, Southern characters often find themselves analyzing and redefining their identity; they realize the hold the South has upon them and must decide if they will attempt to break free. Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is a familiar example. Dee tries to escape the "embarrassments" of the South, thinks that she has "made it" by moving to a big city, but returns later to claim one of the reminders of her Southern poverty, her family's homemade heirloom quilts. Suddenly she considers the quilts to be high culture. Exchanging her real name for "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo," Dee believes she has refined and re-classed herself. Dee's sister, Maggie (who has remained at home in the South), does not want to give the family quilts away to someone who will only display them. The difference between the sisters is developed through the extended metaphor of each one's intended use of the quilts. Dee, having removed herself from the South, sees them as something to hang on the wall as a symbol of what she overcame, while Maggie sees them as something for "everyday use." Both sisters are in the process of becoming, or developing their identities. The outcome may not be what the reader expects, however. One wants Dee to realize that her heritage in the South is

just as valuable as a heritage elsewhere, but she does not. She feels the South is something she has to "escape" and leaves her family again to pursue an identity that proves inauthentic. In the end, it is Maggie who finds new self-awareness and pride in her heritage. One sister embraces the South, the other runs from it, from the sense of failure that comes with Southern life. As Allen Tate, one of the Southern agrarians, writes in a 1931 letter to John Peale Bishop:

> The older I get, the more I realize that I set out about ten years ago to live a life of failure, to imitate in my own life, the history of my people . . . . The significance of the Southern way of life, in my time, is failure: those Southerners who leave their culture—and it is abandoned most fully by those who stay at home—and succeed in some not too critical meaning of success, sacrifice some great part of their deepest heritage. What else is there for me, but a complete acceptance of the idea of failure? (qtd. in Gray 122)

Dee, and so many other Southern characters, tries to overcome her invisible failure and reinvent herself.

Richard Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" is probably one of the clearest and most painful stories of one seeking a new identity. Dave, an adolescent boy who is constantly being ridiculed, believes that owning a gun and learning to use it will make him a man. He eventually manipulates others to obtain

a gun, but accidentally shoots and kills his employer's mule, Jenny. To make matters worse, after his cover-up lie is revealed (Dave claims that Jenny has fallen on the sharp point of the plow), he is ridiculed even further and must work off the cost of the mule, which will take an additional two years. He feels completely trapped in both his literal and emotional situation. The story ends with Dave's precipitant decision to jump a freight train to try to start a new life as a new person and is reminiscent of Wright's own story of identity, captured fully in his autobiography *Black Boy*:

> Somewhere in the dead of the Southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air. (187)

Just like Dave, Wright wants to escape his life by fleeing to the North; he wants to understand his Southern heritage and become a new man. He writes, "And if I could meet enough of a different life, then, perhaps, gradually and slowly I might learn who I was, what I might be. I was not leaving the South to forget the South, but so that some day I might understand it" (284).

These five characteristics—the sense of loss, the feeling of isolation, the need for human community, the need for burdens and suffering, and the need to re-determine identity—culminate what is recognized in this study by the term *Southern literature*. This study is founded upon the idea that the South remains today a culturally separate region, and that Southern literature has specific characteristics that continue to make it unique, a sophistication that is equal to, if not greater than, other literature. These ideas are important to establish early in this study because there are so many varying perspectives. It is not just a literary enigma.

From the early twentieth century, scholars have studied Southern distinctiveness and identity with perspectives ranging from H.L. Mencken's nihilistic statement in "The Sahara of the Bozart" (1917) that "it would be impossible in all history to match so complete a drying-up of a civilization" (*History of Southern Literature* 415) to the equally adamant and completely contrary "Southern Manifesto" of the Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Historians and scholars have published extensively about the cultural distinctiveness of the South, including Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Wilbur J. Cash, Carl N. Degler, John Shelton Reed, and W. E. B. Du Bois, among others. One of the most renowned Southern historians who has struggled with the question of distinctiveness is esteemed historian C. Vann Woodward who wrote *Origins of the*

New South (1951), *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (1963), and *The Burden of Southern History* (1959). *The Burden of Southern History* is a series of essays highlighting the ironies that make the region culturally distinct. He, too, acknowledges the importance of the human element. In "The Search for Identity," an essay by William Harvard, included in *The History of Southern Literature* (edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr.), Woodward explains:

> The South's distinctiveness is rooted in its having had a different historical experience from the nation at large: where America has only known success and affluence, the South has known failure, defeat, and poverty; where the nation has thrived on its myth of innocence, the South has experienced, in the awful burden of slavery the reality of evil and a sense of guilt; where the country as a whole has been optimistic and secure in its progressivist creed, the South's historical experience has generated pessimism in Southerners, an awareness of the limitations of the human condition, and a realization that everything one wants to do cannot be accomplished. The Southern historical experience has been closer to the experience of humanity at large than has the national experience, and out of that different experience and the identity the South has achieved through

> it, the South has much in its tradition that it should take care to preserve and much of value to offer the nation. (425)

Woodward finds a unique set of circumstances that creates a peculiar people and separates the South from America; he goes on to suggest that the most genuine embodiment of Southerners and Southernness may be found in the South's literature. Woodward believes that the artist is best able to express experience. Historians, philosophers, and literary critics are then left to analyze it. I have outlined the composition of Southern literature to add clarity to the discussion that follows of the complex relationship between the literature, two of its select writers, and an integral dynamic they used—the grotesque.

The Grotesque

As early as the sixteenth century, artists were incorporating elements of the grotesque, or *grottesche*, into their work. According to Stuart Heath's *Giornale Nuovo: Faces of the Grotesque*, the earliest known example of the grotesque in art is considered to be the ceiling of the Cambio in Perugia, painted about 1500 by Italian artist Pietro Vannucci (known as Perugino). Heavily influenced by Perugino and serving as his assistant, Bernardino di Betti (known as Pinturicchio), painted the cathedral library ceilings at Siena (1502) in a similar fashion. Both Perugino and Pinturicchio, along with other artists such as Italian Renaissance

painter, sculptor, and architect Michelangelo had been commissioned to paint frescoes at the Sistine Chapel, and their later work incorporated grotesque ornamentation, especially in regards to the human face. Though, in actuality, it is impossible to accurately pinpoint the first example, it is true that many artists of the sixteenth century created works in a style that co-mingled realism and the grotesque. Michelangelo explained that the term *grotesque* was originally used in reference to decorative frescoes which "featured elaborate fantasies with symmetrical anatomical impossibilities, small beasts, stylised human heads, and delicately-traced, indeterminate foliage all merged into one unified decorative whole" (qtd. in Heath). Additionally, in his *Lives of the Greatest Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550), Italian painter Giorgio Vasari described Michelangelo's own work as having figures that "rain down from heaven to turn into demons of weird and frightening appearance" (qtd. in Harpham 7). Heath's work, which focuses especially upon the grotesque as it relates to the image of the face, asserts that Italian artists began to mingle with others to spread this new style, so that by mid-century, with the addition of printed designs, the grotesque was firmly established.

Figure one, below, reflects engravings (1555) by Frans Huys of the designs of Cornelius Floris. The human faces are distorted through the addition of vegetation such as leaves and fruit as well as the semblance of wings.

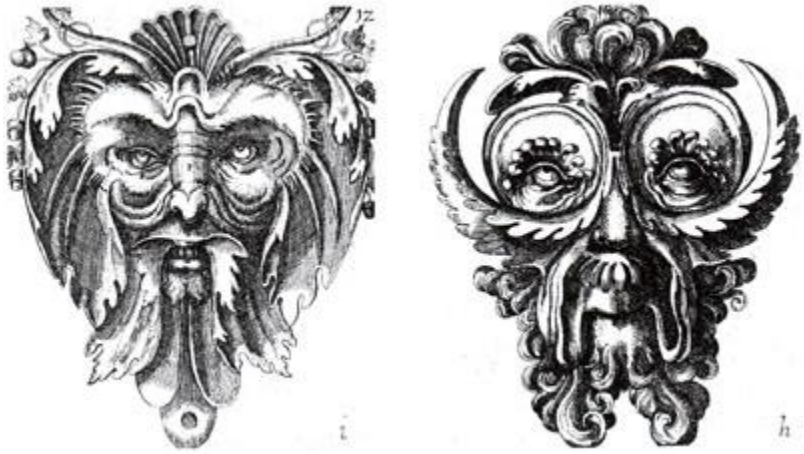

Fig. 1. Frans Huys, engravings, 1555, reprinted in *Barocke Architektur in Böhmen*, 1998.

This melding of forms incites a feeling of incompleteness and loss of identity, or what German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in *On the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,* refers to as the "unform," creating a grotesque body, whether human, object, animal, or vegetation that "outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (26). Kant actually views the grotesque as a threat to form and identity. Moreover, Floris and others begin to create artistic designs that lack beginning and end, showing the merging of nature, humanity, and animals, as well as life and death or good and evil (see Fig. 2). In the end, what they create, according to Kant, is monstrous because it "nullifies the purpose that constitutes its concept" (109).

Fig. 2. Cornelius Floris, ornamental engraving, 1556, reprinted in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, 2006.

In many early artistic mediums, from manuscript decoration to tapestries to embroidery, the exaggeration of human features was so extreme as to be unrecognizable. Though many of the early grotesque faces created by these early artists were intended to be a sort of mask, some of the images are ornately decorative with few qualities of the living—human or animal—such as Christoph Jamnitzer's *Neuw Grottessken Buch* (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Christoph Jamnitzer, engravings, 1610, reprinted in *Barocke Architektur*, 1998.

In fact, most of the designs are quite beastly, losing much of their recognizable human identity. The images below (see Fig. 4) are from an architectural treatise (1677) by master-builder Abraham Leüthner, reprinted in *Barocke Architektur in Böhmen* (1998).

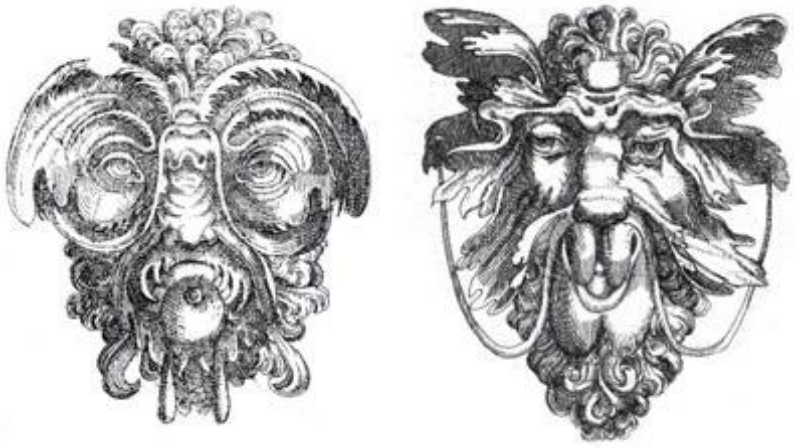

Fig. 4. Abraham Leüthner, engravings, 1677, reprinted in *Barocke Architektur in Böhmen*, 1998.

Contrary to these chimerical images, many examples of the grotesque from the eighteenth century revolved around comic elements. Justus Möser's *Harlequin, or a Defense of Grotesque Comic Performances* (1761) and Karl Friedrich Flögel's *History of the Grotesque-Comic* (1788) are the most cited examples. Mikhail Bakhtin explains in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World* (1965), that Möser:

> explores certain distinct traits of this peculiar world: he calls it 'chimerical,' that is, combining heterogeneous elements . . . thus presenting elements of caricature and parody. . . . Möser stresses the principle of humor in the grotesque and traces the origin of laughter to the human soul's need of joy and gaiety. Such is the first and rather limited defense of the grotesque genre. (35)

Bakhtin, whose work becomes one of the most prominent viewpoints on the grotesque, is quick to point out that Möser and Flögel both focus upon the comic characteristics, and that they naturally view all comedy as essentially happy. The limitation of this viewpoint is immediately apparent. When one does not give equal influential weight to the foreboding elements as well as the comic, the image is not being seen as presented, but as desired.

The early nineteenth century brought a new phase of development in which the comic or the beautiful was used *in combination* with the ugly or the fantastic. An entirely different understanding surrounding the fusion of pleasure and pain dominated the time. In his "Preface" to *Cromwell* (1827), Victor Hugo writes that "it is out of the fruitful marriage of the grotesque type and the sublime type that modern genius is born" (70). Hugo saw the phenomena as part of a more modern (as opposed to Romantic) form that will be the new standard. Consequently, it was during this time, the first half of the nineteenth century, that Southern writers were beginning to use the grotesque with all of its blended characteristics. In fact, Poe's entire lifespan (1809-1849) is neatly contained in this new artistic era of understanding the grotesque, not as an outgrowth of form, but as an aberration. Hugo writes that "The grotesque is everywhere: on one hand, it creates the formless and the terrifying, on the other hand the comic, the buffoon-like" (*Rabelais* 43). Hugo finds the grotesque in reality, in the world of everyday. The

interpretation of the grotesque becomes a swinging pendulum ranging from the ornately beautiful to the horrific to the comic with all combinations of these in between.

In the chapter "Grotesque Renaissance," found in the last volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), English art and social critic John Ruskin presents thinking revolving around the make-up of the grotesque as it pertains to visual perception, finding it to be a combination of "the fearful" and "the playful" (140). He believes conflicting emotions are created in the perceiver when the imagination "in its mocking or playful moods . . . is apt to jest, sometimes bitterly, with an under-current of sternest pathos, sometimes waywardly, sometimes slightly and wickedly, with death and sin" (131). In this essay, and throughout the volume on art and architecture, Ruskin outlines his belief that the grotesque consists of three aspects: the fantastic, symbols, and the freedom of the imagination to engage in "amusement by terror" and that these united form the experience of the common man (132, 131). Central to the creation of the grotesque, for Ruskin, is juxtaposition or unusual connections. He writes, "A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in a bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination" (132).

Ultimately, Ruskin argues that the grotesque is made up of the ludicrous and the terrible in one instant. Ruskin later writes *Modern Painters III* (1856), *Sesame and Lillies* (1865), *The Crown of Wild Olives* (1866) and *Fors Clavigera* (1871-74)—all devoted to the connection between the aesthetic, human morality, and social ideas. Ruskin outlines the markers of what he finds to be the authentic grotesque, including those symbols of man's imperfect nature, and terms the unusual connections between these elements the "Symbolical Grotesque."

Scottish essayist and satirist Thomas Carlyle expresses a similar perception. Whereas Ruskin's published work is focused upon architecture, Carlyle's is focused upon history. In his three volume work, *The French Revolution: A History*, published in 1837, Carlyle dramatizes historical events with grotesque symbols and extended descriptions, such as of the state of the poor, to lead the reader to a new vision of the conditions of a particular time. It may seem entirely irrelevant in a study of Southern literature to mention *The French Revolution*, yet the methods used in this text and in other works by Carlyle (as with Ruskin) are the germ upon which much theory of the grotesque is founded. As George Landow explains in "Carlyle's Grotesque Symbols and Symbolical Grotesques," part of a lengthy study (now available in a hypertext database) that compares Ruskin and Carlyle (among others), Carlyle's expansive history is dedicated "to demonstrating how such confusions of order released abysmal forces," even when simply the

fusion of elements in their natural order. It is quite significant that two thinkers outside the realm of fiction writers are finding connections between the visual and the spiritual. Additionally, Carlyle follows this historical text with *Sartor Resartus* (actually written and published serially in 1833, but published in book form in 1838) in which he grapples with human nature by juxtaposing symbols and using clothing as an extended metaphor for the burdens of men. The text becomes one of the foundational treatises of the Transcendental Movement. Carlyle finds that the distortion that results from trying to grasp uncommon associations changes the reader's perception.

Ruskin and Carlyle are considered sage writers first and foremost, yet each is often cited in foundational discussions of the grotesque's evolution from artistic or stylistic descriptor to aesthetic category. They theorize in art and social criticism what Edgar Allan Poe practices in Gothic literature at the same time with *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) and other works. It is a timely parallel as during the nineteenth century all artistic mediums displayed some variety of the grotesque made up by similarly skeptical, foreboding, or distorted elements. Poe writes of "the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque" in an 1835 letter to T. W. White (*Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* 10) and is known for his fascination with dark images and death. This fascination coincides precisely with the time period of Sigmund Freud's psychological ideas in "The Uncanny" (1919)

where he explains the grotesque as a phenomenon that is "undoubtedly related to what is frightening-to what arouses dread and horror.... Yet we may expect that a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term" (219). Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and E. T. A. Hoffman's "The Sandman" (1816) are published during this time period, both producing in readers a feeling of anxiety or dread; the grotesque erases the boundaries between human, monster, and even the mechanical. Music, art, and literature of this time are full of ghost stories, the supernatural, the Gothic, the fantastic, and the horrific. Particularly in Southern literature, the nineteenth century reveals a grotesque that is demonic and dark.

In the twentieth century, there was a renewal of interest both in the fictional grotesque (and in Southern literature) that produced many critical interpretations. Most of these, however, focus upon the same tragic implications of their nineteenth-century predecessors. In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1963), Wolfgang Kayser, the most widely cited scholar on the subject, presents one of the two most popular points of view, even continuing today. Kayser defines the grotesque as "the estranged world," believing that one is unable to live in his own world if it is suddenly changed (184). Accordingly, Kayser believes that the grotesque incites a "fear of life rather than fear of death" (184). Kayser outlines principles for the individual that upon dissolution create this sudden change: "the

fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of 'natural' size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order" (185). Kayser's viewpoint parallels the tenants of Southern literature as outlined earlier in this chapter, and, in fact, clarifies the stark reality of the human condition. In Kayser's view, a writer's use of the grotesque becomes ominous and foreboding because characters (and possibly readers) are so comfortable or oblivious in their world they cannot accept such radically new circumstances. The "fear of life" that he describes is fear of that new world. Ultimately, Kayser finds that the use of the grotesque may be an attempt to "invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (188). He finds evil in change, and hence, the grotesque. Kayser also finds (related to the characteristic of sudden change) that "the grotesque is a form of expressing the *id,*" that there are inhuman powers governing humanity and human life, turning an individual into a sort of macabre puppet (*Rabelais* 49). In this view, man has no control over his own life. In a sense, Kayser finds the grotesque to be a world turned inside out. As he writes, "The grotesque world is our world–and is not. Horror mixed with smiles has its basis in the experience that our familiar world, seemingly moored in a fixed order turns topsy-turvy, its order nullified" (*The Grotesque* 6). The grotesque,

then, is an inordinate juxtaposition of characteristics, such as laughter in the midst of tragic circumstances.

Many twentieth-century critics and even Southern authors evidence Kayser's brand of the grotesque. Arthur Clayborough's *The Grotesque in English Literature* (1965) is a key example. Clayborough uses concepts of Jungian psychology to deem the grotesque as that which is "ridiculous, distorted, unnatural" or "an absurdity, a distortion of nature" (6). Through analysis of the works of Jonathan Swift, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Charles Dickens, Clayborough finds that the fiction most associated with the grotesque is "progressive, negative, and used as a tool of satire or shock" (Thomson 24). Similarly, Lee Byron Jennings observes in *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (1963) that "the grotesque presents the terrible in harmless guise, and its playfulness is constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to concealed horror" (16).

Clayborough and Jennings are analyzing eighteenth century to early-nineteenth century works, however. Does this theme of darkness continue? A quick survey reveals that it does. While the use of the grotesque may be found everywhere from Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which was first published in 1915, to the Italian theatre, the largest concentration of use of the grotesque in the twentieth century is found in Southern fiction. Erskine Caldwell, for example, is

noted for his sensationalist portrayals of poor whites such as in *Tobacco Road* (1932). In Caldwell's novel, the Lester family is portrayed in the midst of the dire poverty of the Great Depression; their social condition is paralleled with aberrations to their physical bodies, including a harelip and a boneless nose that gives the appearance of a pig's snout. In addition, family members are morbidly fixated upon death, fearing the decay of their bodies, while simultaneously harboring a fantastic acceptance of it. Grandma Lester is run over with the car in a dirt road and her family simply drags her off into the woods to dig a grave. There is no eventual rainbow, happy ending, or positive turn. The story ends in the same depressing circumstances it began with Jeeter Lester and his wife dying in their sleep during a fire that Jeeter himself desperately set. Caldwell's stories are full of grotesque characters whose emotions are disproportionate. The characters are not simple metaphors in which physical aberrations evidence larger spiritual voids; they are more complex as the heterogeneous elements they merge leave the reader unable to process what he experiences. Whatever the case, Caldwell's grotesques are negative, sad, morbid, and absurd.

William Faulkner most often presents a foreboding grotesque as well with characters such as Popeye in the novel *Sanctuary* (1931). Popeye graphically rapes Temple with a corncob (because of his impotence). The novel includes a slew of brutal killings as well as a couple who keep their stillborn child in a box behind

the stove in their kitchen. It is a horrific scene and perhaps one of the most gratuitous as most often Faulkner's use of the grotesque has a larger social purpose. For example, the Snopes family, introduced in *The Unvanquished* (1938) and "Barn Burning" (1939) and developed fully in the trilogy of novels *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959), steals horses and burns barns, highlighting issues of social class and developing the Southerner's burden to family, community, and land. In each representation of the grotesque, as Brittany R. Powell explains in "Don Quijote de Yoknapatawpha: Cervantine Comedy and the Bakhtinian Grotesque in William Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy," Faulkner is showing the individual "trying to do the best he can in the ramshackle universe he's compelled to live in. He has ideals which by the pharisaical standards are nonsensical. His practice of trying to put them into practice is tragic and comic" (qtd. in Powell 482). Georgia author Harry Crews follows suit. Crews writes freaks into his fiction, including a dwarf in *The Gospel Singer* (1968), a midget jockey in *Naked in the Garden Hills* (1969), a sexual pervert (named Oyster Boy) in *The Knockout Artist (1988),* a crippled deaf-mute in *The Gypsy's Curse* (1974), and a hammer-mutilated man in *Scar Lover* (1992). These writers, whether from the older generation or more recently like Crews, are often the most immediately associated with the grotesque. Still, the grotesque is not just about physical and spiritual aberration. There is much more to it than the dead speaking

from their coffins, jaded (and murderous) women sleeping with corpses, or a grown man awakening to discover he has turned into a bug. In fact, there is much more life than death in the grotesque if one can overcome some of the traditional schools of thought.

A New Way of Thinking

In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Mikhail Bakhtin investigates the literary value of Rabelais's sixteenth-century novel, *Pantagruel*. Finding the grotesque images in Rabelais's work to produce reactions among onlookers, Bakhtin focuses upon the surrounding laughter, believing the carnivalesque nature of the grotesque to be a transformative dynamic. He finds that the body is "unfinished" and "ever creating" (26); therefore, individuals who choose to act can further develop themselves by engaging in opportunities for transformation. Bakhtin finds that a carnival's unique sense of time and space creates heightened freedom, and with the added abandon of costumes or masks, individuals find human communion and renewal (Clark and Holquist 302). He acknowledges the reprieve from human expectations, writing, "Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 10). Bakhtin's viewpoint, then, is essential to understanding the grotesque as used in Southern

literature. The individual, or the Southern character, is searching for identity because he feels "unfinished" in some way. Because the character lacks orientation and feels trapped in his rote and pack-like circumstances, even simple experiences can become defining moments. Through his own response to his experiences he finds a vehicle through which to develop himself. It is as if the character is in a mass choir and is suddenly put on the spot to sing solo; his reaction defines him. In essence, Bakhtin finds such freedom in these sudden, liberating moments and this suggests that the individual becomes who he wants to become instead of who he is expected to be.

Geoffrey Harpham presents a similar, optimistic view of the grotesque in his *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (1982). Originally, through studying art and finding the grotesque to consist of "forms in which species are crossed," Harpham applies concepts of what is considered grotesque in a broader sense: "I made a conceptual leap—beneath any given blended or mixed form there might be two distinct ways of understanding the world, one in which such mergings and minglings made sense, and one in which they did not" (xv). In the end, Harpham finds that the grotesque is the confusion between one's life margin and center or between one's perception and dream (xix). The ideas presented by Harpham are surprisingly similar to those of Bakhtin, introduced some two decades prior to Harpham's text. Like Bakhtin,

Harpham correlates the grotesque with human identity. And, like Bakhtin, Harpham's view of the grotesque is affirmative in that in the interval of confusion, or during the height of experience, he finds that one develops a new perspective and can find answers to life's important questions. The grotesque, then, is not evil, but provides an opportunity for growth; it is an "interval of understanding" (xix). Both Bakhtin and Harpham recognize the supplementary awareness created when one is in strange circumstances and awakened from everydayness. Where Bakhtin and Harpham diverge in thought is a basic contrast of numbers. Harpham's principle applies to individuals singularly; Bakhtin's chief mandate is that the grotesque occurs in the collective. In other words, one's freedom comes not just from being in new circumstances, but from being in a crowd, feeling covered and safe. As a literary mode, Bakhtin names this sum of conditions "grotesque realism" (Clark and Holquist 299), but, whether individually or in mass, both men emphasize its power to affect positive change.

There are many legitimate explanations of the grotesque, and each reader must choose his own perspective. That perspective will likely fluctuate based upon the author being read and the perceived purpose of each text. As Harpham writes in "The Grotesque: First Principles," "Perhaps the germ, the secret of the grotesque, lies not in the origins or derivations of the word, but in the conditions of a particular cultural climate, a particular artist, a particular audience. Perhaps

we should approach the grotesque not as a fixed thing . . .” (461). No critic or scholar has yet provided a universally accepted version of the grotesque, but the most important aspect may be found in the unsettled state in which it leaves the reader when he cannot reconcile divergent emotions or scenes. Even Harpham, who bravely delineates his own decided opinion, one that is followed by multitudes of scholars, concedes in the preface to his text that the grotesque is omnipresent and can support nearly any theory; therefore, there appears to be no way to progress to a comprehensive theory (xviii). The most noted scholars on the subject concede that the grotesque cannot be adequately defined and bring to light that it is not only a moving target, but a target to be re-visioned.

In this study, I would like to emphasize the grotesque as a generative force—generative in terms of having the power to develop identity—and avoid the evil or satanic views of the grotesque put forth by Kayser and, perhaps, by some Southern writers who follow his path. I find that the more positive and dynamic grotesque as presented by Harpham and Bakhtin aligns with the intended purpose of selected Southern women writers, namely Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. They use the grotesque in a unique way that highlights the identity of women. Though there may be darkness, even death,within their texts, it is as Bakhtin writes “a pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (*Rabelais* 25). The grotesque for

Welty and McCullers becomes, as German writer and critic Thomas Mann explains in *Mediations of a Nonpolitical Man*, "more than the truth, something real in the extreme, not something arbitrary, false, absurd, and contrary to reality" (qtd. in Harpham xxiv). Mann finds a purpose for using the grotesque—beyond presentation of Southern realism or even the macabre.

To situate this study, it should be noted that though the productive or revelatory nature of the grotesque is an increasingly popular scholarly subject, the revelations studied thus far have not included the development of female characters. I believe that Southern female characters and, separately, their female authors, are in an intimate conversation about their lives. Additionally, a parallel purpose exists between Welty and McCullers; each pursues similar goals through different themes. Ultimately, I contend that some Southern women writers find in the grotesque a vehicle of communication and change, a way to understand and reveal to others the truth of their own historical and social identity. In the stories of these two writers, as Patricia Yaeger writes in her essay "'Because a Fire Was in My Head': Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination," "the 'heteroglossia that rages beyond the boundaries' of a formerly sealed-off cultural universe begins to speak" (958). The characters of these women speak—often all at once—about their human condition, and yet they say different things to different audiences. Their dialogue is predicated upon the listener and the expected response; this

circumscribed predicament ultimately reveals the respective boundaries each writer wants to see women cross. But is complete linguistic freedom even possible? In the introduction to Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist explains that "all transcription systems—including the speaking voice in a living utterance—are inadequate to the multiplicity of the meanings they seek to convey" (xx). According to Bakhtin, language gives an immediacy to one's thoughts, but it can never adequately convey them as they are dynamic and shifting. This study explores the extent to which women's identity is shaped by such limitations.

Though there are other Southern women writers whose use of the grotesque is distinct, Welty and McCullers present female characters that are tortured, torn between their culture's ideal image of Southern womanhood and their starkly different reality; these characters lack the ability to adequately express their predicament. As a result, the suffering their characters incur is expressed through distortion, spiritual sickness, or bizarre actions and reactions, often represented physically through the characters' bodies. In "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness," Sarah Gleeson-White explains that Welty and McCullers acknowledge "in one way or another the ugliness that saturates their fictional worlds, an ugliness that is so frequently embodied—literally—in their female characters" (46). One finds female characters that are anything but feminine; they are often abnormally large, ugly, and mannish. Gleeson-White stresses that specifically with

these writers the "movement away from the feminine ideal transforms a female body into an androgynous, sterile one" (47). The tragic history of women becomes tangible, visible to others.

Sometimes, naively, readers turn to Faulkner for both definition and prescription of the use of the grotesque and accept the place of women as presented within his texts (and also as presented in some stereotyped Southern fiction). In doing so, women are never considered as thinkers or artists, but are overlooked as narrative types—often spiritually dead if not physically so like Addie Bundren. This study takes a fresh look at the peculiar form of grotesque two Southern women write. With birthdates separated by only eight years (Welty 1909, McCullers 1917) and with major works falling in a rough twenty year period (1940 to 1960), this pair struggles to move past feminine constraints and forge a genderless place where women can be true to self, honest and real in their artistic pursuits, and wholly spiritual. What they are seeking is a place where feminine identity can be replaced with simple human identity and all standards of beauty can be exchanged for selfhood. Evaluating their specific usage of the grotesque, one finds the common theme of women's liberation, or "the burden of simultaneously idealized and detested womanhood" (Gleeson-White 49). Welty and McCullers expose the entrapments of the feminine ideal, including the many obstacles prohibiting their artistic ambitions, the social mores shunning their

sexual identity and sense of self, and the gendered expectations that hinder their spirit. These authors present female characters that feel an overwhelming sense of isolation and offer them no easy way to overcome it. Welty and McCullers do not follow the same method, however. Welty takes a fictional photograph of feminine life in the South, creating female grotesques whose lives are distorted by the cultural and social constraints they face. One finds a realistic positioning of the Southern woman instead of a standardized character type. As Louise Westling observes, she was able to show "the limited possibility for feminine life in the South" (*Sacred Groves* 55). Subsequently, McCullers overcomes the barriers to feminine and artistic autonomy for a time, invoking masks of masculinity to receive temporary acceptance for her characters. Her victory is short-lived, however. As McCullers does in her own musical career, her tomboyish grotesques become frustrated and quit prematurely; they stop pursuing their artistic and personal dreams. Gleeson-White finds that "the burden of simultaneously idealized and detested womanhood haunts the stories" of Welty and McCullers ("Peculiarly Southern" 49). My study will prove likewise. Each uses the grotesque in a uniquely productive manner, working toward new understandings about female identity.

In the end, this study is not meant to be a feminist exposé. It is not meant to denigrate male writers or male critics or to criticize a generally patriarchal

Southern culture. It is a re-evaluation of two female writers' use of the grotesque (which critics are now realizing to be unique) as a dynamic force working toward the benefit and human progress of women. The "little monsters" of Eudora Welty, as Katherine Ann Porter refers to them, and the over-sized, mannish women of McCullers need validation by men. Seeing the feminine ideal as propagated by culture (and even literature) as an impediment, Welty and McCullers present females who actively rebel against expectations set for them. In the end, each author presents female freaks who testify to their gendered place in the world in the early twentieth century. The authors turn away from an identity whose basis is in beauty, finding that, ultimately, there is beauty in simply tearing away all facades and understanding one's doubleness, one's warring spirits. Perhaps, as Charles Baudelaire writes in "Exposition Universelle" (1855) when he describes the grotesque, "the beautiful is always bizarre" (956).