CHAPTER ONE

THE GROTESQUE AND SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS

> “Modernist theory and history have (until recently) almost completely written out the grotesque and its associations with the material, the flesh, and the feminine.”
>
> --Frances S. Connelly, *Modern Art and the Grotesque*

For anyone fascinated by the South and its stigmas, it is important to understand the history (some would say evolution) of the place of women within its culture. To do so, there are none better to study than the generations of women who have written their identities into their fiction. Reading the works of Ellen Glasgow, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Fannie Flagg tells us much about women and the South, and this list is just a representative sample. The female characters of Southern women writers reveal as much, and yet, the acceptance (or lack thereof) of women’s fiction itself reveals more. As Patricia Meyer Spacks observed at a symposium entitled *Women Writing the South* (2000), part of any adequate understanding of the South is understanding the crucial place of writing by women (*A Symposium* 73). Additionally, Susan Donaldson discusses in depth in “Gender, Race, and Allen Tate’s Profession of Letters in the South,” the white educated male has been the dominant figure in the Southern literary tradition. Women writers have faced expectations and limitations to the extent that the place of women's writing is an entirely different historical narrative than the place of women in more general terms of gender rights. Women were allowed the right to vote, the opportunities for education, the benefits of career and artistic pursuits, and even the freedom of sexual choice long before it was acceptable for them to write about such things. But much of the story of women is buried in the veiled metaphors and double entendres found in their fiction, originally shunned because of its supposed lack of artistic merit (Kate Chopin is a prime example). For generations, women's identity and autonomy have been defined by her dependence on men. Consequently, the standard of fiction—what one may write about and how—is different for each gender.

1.1 A Subtext of Gender Politics

In "Beyond the Hummingbird: Southern Women Writers and the Southern Gargantua" (1997), noted Southern literature and culture critic Patricia Yaeger addresses the issue of gender, asserting that within Southern women's writing there is an underlying politics that is more pervasive than that of other literature. Southern women writers, she believes, have an agenda and, by necessity, have had to be inventive with their methods and themes. Yaeger cites specific male critics who have hindered the valuation of women writers, in essence, fostering their need for overtness. Richard King, for example, in his *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (1980) finds that women writers do not tackle serious subjects (as he believes that he does) and he believes that women writers are “incapable of devoting themselves to the tortuous process of dealing with the past of the region” (288). Similarly, Louis Rubin Jr., one of the most esteemed Southern critics, slights women by only including one, Eudora Welty, in his *The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South* (1963). Rubin’s compliments for Welty are cloaked in labels that suggest a lower expectation, calling her work “entirely feminine” and like a “hummingbird”; he finds that women do not have a “covert ideology of gender” and refers to women’s writing overall as “mirroring the bemused, diverted quality of the people whom it describes” (133, 134). His comment, of course, spurred the title of the aforementioned article and reflects a lingering traditional perspective of women’s place in the literary world where themes are expected to be naïve, nagging, and bothersome—like a hummingbird.

Yaeger is not alone in her accusations that women’s historical position is determined by men and that women have found unique ways to combat it. In *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* (1997), coeditors Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson assemble a collection of essays (written by such esteemed scholars as Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese) supporting the conclusion that gender is as significant as race in understanding Southern culture: “there is no slave, after all, like a wife,” one of the contributors notes. The premise of the text is that Southern scholarship, like the Southern way of life, has fallen prey to male-dominated traditions. Carol Ann Johnston similarly explains in *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1997) that “received ideas about ‘the South’ and about Southern women in the first half of the twentieth century prevent us from learning about the South and about Southern women in the first half of the twentieth century” (287). Whether through cultural memory, tradition, or family heritage, there is the sense that the female predicament is continually perpetuated, unknowingly, by those who understand no other way of life who are simply maintaining status quo, but also knowingly by men who enjoy their superior position. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced many Southern women writers that are almost forgotten today because their fiction presents unmemorable falsehoods of Southern myth—ultimately, because it is not believed that their subject matter mattered. The tendency for readers, even scholars, is to select the most known female writers and assume their themes and styles are representative.

In fairness, as one studies the evolution of women’s writing, it is appropriate to position it within its historical and cultural context. One must recognize that there are certain issues that have not always been talked about openly, that there are shifting standards of acceptability. Socially, the nineteenth century and even the first half of the twentieth century were entirely different circumstances in terms of social standards, especially for women. Women were expected to be *ladies*, and ladies did not wear jeans, work outside the home, behave like men, or flaunt their independence. Expectations were different for men and women. Jones explains this pervading mindset in “Women Writers and the Myths of Southern Womanhood” (2002), writing that “men thought and were educated to reason and to lead; women felt and were educated to beautify and to follow . . . women could be trained only to the limits of their capacity” (277). Though modernization is reshaping the country, Jones finds today that there are still assumed gender conventions for both men and women. Marriage and children, for example, remain distinct milestones for women.

Interestingly, some have argued that the status quo does eventually equalize. As early as the1930s, Sara Haardt wrote the essays “The Last of the Beaux” and “The Twilight of Chivalry” as if in cordial farewell to the problems of gender expectations. On the contrary, a significant number of critics and writers, both social and literary, are still questioning if the end is in sight today. While Jones explains the journey many Southern myths have taken, slowly disappearing and becoming homogenized into a more nationalistic theme, in both experience and art, she makes the case that this journey is not true for Southern womanhood itself. Though she admits there were different social and culture circumstances in the first half of the twentieth century, and that many of these have changed, she does not find that the place of women has progressed as far as some would like to believe. She asks if the idea of a “modern Southern woman” is an oxymoron even in the twenty-first century (276). Additionally, in *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1981), Jones’ more in-depth study of this topic, she writes that “all deny to women authentic selfhood: all enjoin that women suffer and be still; all show women sexually pure, pious, deferent to external authority, and content with their place in the home” (4). Her comments are exaggerated, perhaps, but it is noteworthy that she finds that women are forced, mentally if not physically, into a predetermined mold along the lines of the ideal Southern woman of the Old South. This, of course, conjures myths of the past that most no longer believe.

Understanding this environment and the hindrances women have faced is important because it reveals the brazenness of some Southern women writers who integrate gender-related themes into their work. Though male predecessors and peers prescribe the writing circumstance for Southern women writers of the early to mid-twentieth century, scholars such as Yaeger, Jones, Louise Westling, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, and others are working to bring justice to the women who reshaped the Southern canon during the same years as the male writers most known as its authors. These critics are finding more complex themes than initially considered in the writing of select Southern women, and they have initiated a retrospective respect and reevaluation of their work.

In addition to themes with larger purposes than previously recognized, critics are finding that some women writers of the time used the most celebrated mode of Southern literature, the grotesque, in new and complex ways. When Yaeger imagines Southern women writers as a “confederacy of poisonous snakes” (*Symposium* 75), she is metaphorically describing the power of some Southern women writers—such as Welty and McCullers—either to bridge the gender gap or to enlarge it. Upon first reading, one may not understand the concept of the Southern “gargantua,” which is Yaeger’s term for the Southern female grotesque who has rejected the feminine ideal. One may simply muse over the over-sized, mannish, distorted, and even disgusting female characters of a writer like McCullers, dismissing them as *Southern* in outward appearance. However, there is much more to it. Yaeger and a host of others are placing new emphasis upon analysis of the raw outward appearance of these characters—finding that the outward reflects the inward—and on trying to understand the *why*: “If there is no adequate definition of the grotesque, can there at least be explanation of why it is used?” A growing area of study aims to understand the purpose behind aberrant or problematic characters such as McCullers’ Amelia Evans, O’Connor’s Mrs.

Turpin, and Welty's Phoenix Jackson. As Yaeger writes, "this panoply of bodies in process or bodies in pain, this parade of beings on the rim, the painful margin of Southern society, appear without ceasing in stories by Southern women. . . . I've set out to answer—why?" (*Dirt and Desire* 219). Contemporary critics believe that these Southern women writers are tackling problems of female identity through their unique employment of the grotesque.

1.2 Re-visionings of the Grotesque

It is well known that Flannery O'Connor contested the traditional view of the grotesque in Southern literature. Believing that literature should show how far humans have drifted from their rightful image as a reflection of God, she uses "moments of grace" to introduce mystery and the unexpected, while allowing hope for spiritual change (*Mystery and Manners* 112). For O'Connor, the grotesque facilitates the bizarre combination of absurdity and spiritual truth found in the human experience and yields the poignant moment the character needs to find new understanding. Of course, in the case of O'Connor, that understanding is found in one's redemption through Christ. To this end, O'Connor purposely creates some of the best freaks in all of Southern literature—each one in need of a spiritual revelation. She realizes that shock and violence prepare the character for his moment of grace when he might have the opportunity for change. I would argue that O'Connor uses multiple variations of the grotesque. In the course of a single story, she may move from the grotesque as delineated by Kayser to that of Bakhtin. She first uses the grotesque to create tragic, freakish characters (Kayser), berating or belittling her women characters. Then, she employs a second, more actionable type of grotesque (Bakhtin), using raw, distorted spiritual encounters that include a sense of community in order to provide the character a comfort zone in which to experience redemption. O'Connor realizes the full power of fiction as an "incarnational art" (*Mystery and Manners* 68) and literature of the grotesque as a focusing and liberating experience. Her use of the grotesque is dynamic.

Critics have found that other Southern women writers, without religious purposes, use the grotesque dynamically as well. Like O'Connor, they are writing female freaks, but most often it is the character discovering her own reflection that creates the dynamic; the character comes to new awareness. Yaeger believes that the grotesque opens political avenues for women writers as the nontraditional method in which they use it enables them to remove themselves from Faulkner's shadow ("Hummingbird" 290). Women writers present the "non-epic everyday" through the grotesque: "its bizarrely opened bodies are particularly useful in bearing witness to the soul-puncturing rigidity of a culture where gender arrangements have been lacerating . . ." (*Dirt and Desire* xv, 232). Admittedly, Yaeger chooses dramatic language to heighten the condition she finds with words such as "puncture" and "lacerate," but the extent of women's isolation as well as the removal from the public realm is devastating. She writes, “The grotesque bodies occupying stories by Porter, Hurston, Welty, McCullers, O’Connor, Gilchrist, and Walker become premier sites for exploring the work of a Southern polity in which women are barred from public power but become central players in its symbolic scripts” (“Hummingbird” 295). Instead of the grotesque as a tool to highlight the absurd, the grotesque of some women writers highlights the absurdity of the normal. For example, the well known Miss Eckhart in Welty’s story cycle, *The Golden Apples*, is not hideous visually (in fact, her appearance is never described), but she is marginalized by the town as an outsider. Her social experience, and hence, her life, is miniaturized and belittled because it does not include the milestones of “wife” or “mother.” Would Faulkner have written a story so completely normal? These women writers confront the myths of womanhood—myths that literally deny them an authentic voice—and integrate the past with the present to establish a new feminine ideal. When studied without bias, some women’s writing, and especially their use of the Southern grotesque, “takes on the function of testimony . . . , forging an immediate, material link between the textual world of characters and other literary representations and the social world that encompasses the bodies and experiences of real readers” (*Symposium* 106). This link causes readers to move from witness to participant, literally moving each specific theme from their heads to their hearts.

Yaeger's "Beyond the Hummingbird," then, is a foundational article. Initially focused upon the visual grotesque, Yaeger reveals the evolution of more encompassing ideas of the grotesque as it is specifically used by Southern women writers; she moves toward a less obvious dynamic grotesque that occurs when social boundaries are breached and characters must choose how to react. She finds both to be equally calculated by the author, and suggests that the author understands the holistic effect of the grotesque no matter how she uses it (219). Yaeger later writes in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (2000) that the gargantuan body organizes and renders readable the South's obsessive "unthought known" and the "sexualized bodies of Southern women" (219). From the article to the full-length work, one sees Yaeger tire of traditional viewpoints and begin to insist upon respect for a grotesque that functions on a much grander scale, literally uncovering the unacceptable social standards forced upon women that are accepted without question by both men and women. In addition, no longer is the grotesque predominately a visual spectacle. Instead, in *Dirt and Desire* Yaeger aligns with the ideas of Harpham and Bakhtin, indicating the radical force of the grotesque to produce change and bring revelation. She writes, "Southern women's writing is filled with bizarre somatic images that seem unnecessarily cruel or out of control, and yet this cruelty has a function: it tears at the social fabric and leaves it in shreds" (293). She finds that the Southern women writers she studies use the grotesque and the characters they create to rage against specific and personal infringements upon their rights as individuals, infringements imposed simply because they are women. In essence, Yaeger rails against the loss of self, writing, “It is this daily loss of legitimation, the inability of traditional or established patterns to make sense of the ebb and flow of everyday life that Southern women writers address in their obsession with the grotesque” (“Hummingbird” 304).

Dirt and Desire analyzes how grotesque female figures function as “a fluctuating, over-determined space where many things can happen at once” (238). Yaeger asks what really happens to the reader as he encounters “page after page of characters who are bizarre, bloated, inundated with wounds” (229). Does it change the reader’s perception? Does it increase the intimacy between writer and reader? Yaeger suggests that female writers have the power to revise the current understanding of the South by using the grotesque to reveal “political things and psychological things, different ways of declaring something wrong in society, something wrong with the female situation” (*Symposium* 74). In other words, use of the grotesque is not a naive, or coincidental act. Its power has been undervalued. Yaeger acknowledges that the Southern grotesque is most easily linked with the ideas of Bakhtin and the carnivalesque, but goes beyond this revelation to claim that women writers use this dynamic to “re-personify people and ideas who have disappeared” (231).

However, to substantiate the argument for a re-visioning of the grotesque, one cannot hinge upon Yaeger only. Critics from various genres, and artistic mediums, have presented similar thinking. Art historian Frances S. Connelly explains in *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (2003), that the grotesque is a different sort of device from what is typically assumed, that it is a revealing device, as “grotesques are typically characterized by what they lack” (4). She defines the grotesque as “images that combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metamorphic” (2). Connelly’s text is indispensable as it outlines the evolution of the grotesque from engravings centuries ago to surrealist photos to television shows such as *The X-Files*. She provides a much needed foundation in a format that is easier to digest than those of better known scholars. Typically, students of literature tend to associate the beginnings of the grotesque with Poe, or possibly much later with Faulkner, not realizing that the mode began in the visual arts and that it has evolved into other realms. Connelly’s approach is also timely considering its multi-disciplinary focus. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that toward the end of her evolutionary progression, she focuses on the female body and abjection, much like the work of literary critic and feminist Julia Kristeva.

Kristeva writes, “the abject and the formless hover on the boundaries of this grotesque, each in its own way resisting form or coherent entity altogether” (2). Connelly uses the term “metamorphic grotesque,” referring to the combining or morphing of usually static parts and the transgression of the intended role of each part, simply for emphasis (4). If, in the world of art, the progressive study of the grotesque moves toward analyzing the specific use of it by women, and how it is altogether different from the use of men, there must be notable literary research as well.

In truth, literary critics do offer similar interpretations, and have for decades. In “The Moral Function of Distortion in Southern Grotesque” (1972), Delma Eugene Presley writes, “The function of distortion in recent Southern grotesque literature is to set forth an interpretation either of the whole man or of what might make him whole” (44). Presley’s interpretation suggests a dynamic or productive grotesque. Additionally, Presley finds that while most critics prescribe this moral function of the grotesque to Flannery O’Connor, an easy correlation since her intent is overtly religious, they overlook the similar vision of Carson McCullers who sets forth the redemptive potential of love (40). She finds that Southern women writers collectively veer toward a similar use of the grotesque. McCullers explores woman’s own perception of what she ought rightly to be and the influence of the cultural obstacles that block her. McCullers writes grotesques that "are in constant struggle with boundaries of the known, the conventional, and the understood" (Connelly 5). Likewise, Welty probes the dualistic nature of the Southern woman, using the grotesque to show the stifled response to the conflict she faces—only freedom from the entrapments of patriarchal structures will make her whole. Both, in essence, redefine female identities through the grotesque. Presley looks specifically at Welty's and McCullers' incorporation of physical aberration, believing that one cannot understand the grotesque in Southern literature without understanding the moral function physical distortion serves.

Author and critic Joyce Carol Oates agrees upon the importance of understanding the raw, physical nature of Southern characters. She writes in "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor," an article that discusses the grotesque as used by O'Connor and other women, that "the grotesque always possesses a blunt physicality that no amount of epistemological exegesis can exorcise" (304). Oates finds that women writers, especially, see the implications of physicality, maybe because of the ubiquitous scrutiny of the female body or the idea that the female may be controlled by physical force. Whatever the case, select Southern women writers have a purpose for the freakishness and violence they incorporate. Oates herself has been attacked for using graphic violence gratuitously, yet she defends her actions based upon her larger purpose. An excerpt from her 2006 novel *Blood Mask* (written under the pseudonym Lauren Kelly) describes a life-like replica of a severed human head, complete with sinewy tissue and blood. The speaker says, “It's frozen solid, don't be afraid. You can't damage it.” But the narrator thinks, “*It will damage me! If I Touch.*” Oates’ emphasis here is upon the observer’s response. The observer immediately questions: *What will happen to me because of what I have seen?* Oates places greater focus upon the reaction than the action. I find this to be a crucial differentiation. It is not that critics are in hind-sight analyzing women’s writing and deciding that the reader will be affected by what he reads, but that the writer intends from the beginning to bring about an effect. Oates values the interplay between the observer and the observed as well as between the reader and the text.

With the dismembered, the Amazon-types, the suicidal, the bizarre, and the ugly, it is hard to focus beyond the physicality of characters, but critics are finding that some Southern women writers of the first half of the twentieth century were especially intent upon communicating social themes to their readers. Louise Westling studies the portrayal of women in three female authors’ fiction in *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Bodies: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (1985). Here, she compares the similarity of the authors’ themes, writing that “their fiction emerges from their experience as women in a society which officially worshipped womanhood but in its imaginative life betrayed troubled, contradictory undercurrents” (3). Taking offense at the many male critics who she believes devalue Southern women's writing as feeble Faulknerian offspring (4) and wishing to extend the work of Anne Goodwyn Jones who Westling believes began the reassessment of Southern women writers, Westling finds some Southern women writers to be bound together by qualities of common setting, character, and time (2). She concentrates exclusively on "their concerns as women: on their treatment of the problems of identity, on attitudes toward the mother, on the ways in which men are perceived, and on the distinctively female uses of place and symbol in their stories" (4). Westling's more gendered focus is often referred to as the "feminine grotesque" and, again, is not an isolated sub-focus of the grotesque.

Feminist author Mary Russo also finds power in the female grotesque, asserting it to be foundational to her modernist themes. In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (1995), she writes, "Bakhtin's view of Rabelais and carnival is, in some ways, nostalgic for a socially diffuse oppositional context which has been lost, but which is perhaps more importantly suggestive of a future social horizon that may release new possibilities of speech and social performance" (61). Russo's radical assertion (and her hope) is that women will find a new paradigm of freedom through presentation of the grotesque body or through experiences within the realm of exceptional experience. For example, Russo emphasizes the idea of women in conjunction with the “grotesque performance” such as the unconventional aviation stunts of Amelia Earhart. Her text is full of photographs of the female body in startling, distorted, and exaggerated positions, normally viewed as outside the norm. In essence, as Russo parallels the feminine grotesque to the carnivalesque ideas of Bakhtin, she realizes how far women can take any newfound freedom, becoming rebellious. She relates the female grotesque to the modern day spectacle, noting that from examples from her own childhood, “making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger” (213). Russo remembers admonitions of her mother, who believed that for a woman, making a spectacle out of oneself “had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessor of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap—a loose, dingy bra strap especially—were at once . . . blameworthy” (qtd. in Donaldson 571).

What Russo is referring to is a silent code. There is a threshold of acceptability that, if crossed, breaks barriers that cannot be rebuilt. The adolescent girl seen smoking or dressed “inappropriately” will always be stigmatized. In *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (1987*)*, Helena Michie writes, “Women’s power under patriarchy comes only at great and psychic cost; its transformation into language . . . is equally painful” (139). Michie parallels the battle raging over women’s physical and social condition to the destiny of her freedom of expression. She finds that, in certain texts, women’s bodies simply disappear as through the rigidity of social dress codes, they become androgynous. The women of television shows such as *Little House on the Prairie*, for example, meant to be cast as entirely feminine and chaste, lose all sense of female identity, in essence becoming genderless.

Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, a noted Welty scholar, explains in “Woman’s World, Man’s Place: The Fiction of Eudora Welty,” that when young girls of the time played (she herself was a young girl in the 1940s), it was always games of pretending to be grown-up, beautiful women, brides and mothers with husbands and children to command. She quickly realizes, however, that Welty’s fiction (and I would add McCullers’) presents a world that is much different. She writes, “But such conventions were not the way of Welty’s world, in which heroes are more often female than male and, regardless of sex, possess a grandeur that ultimately pales in the cycles of nature’s, and the family’s renewing life” (48). Welty’s world, as expressed through her fiction, is much more serious, indicating a crying out of sorts. Welty’s fiction, she says, “was not a girl’s book” (47). Welty’s fiction is not the typical reading of young girls—Welty’s women are not “beautiful,” neither are they focused upon becoming so. In fact, they are retarded, they are outcasts, and they are often literally dirty. Whatever their bizarre predicament, they are not typical Southern belles; they are either unnaturally strong or fighting to find their strength. They embody traits that indicate there is something to escape or overcome. In the end, while one can easily find an exception, it cannot be denied that there is a group of Southern female writers that present female characters that long for freedom. Prenshaw studies this and other needs of these women, relating the idea of their complete freedom to that of belonging to a huge non-gendered, non-role-based, all-accepting family. She writes, "Many female characters in Miss Welty's fiction [and I believe McCullers'] belong to this great interrelated human family that takes joy in an assured, unself-conscious life" (59). Instead of stereotypical or mythical themes, Prenshaw realizes the deeper search for wholeness found in the female characters of these Southern women writers.

1.3 Rebuttals and Incomplete Theories

It should be noted that some critics have problems with Yaeger's theories, and by association, those of her contemporaries. Some believe Yaeger takes her ideas too far, using hyperbole to the extent of creating instances of the grotesque where it does not exist. However, this criticism of Yaeger's nuanced ideas implies that scholars have a clarity of the grotesque that most deny. Though some critics may not wholeheartedly support Yaeger's theories, they are beginning to hedge in their stance as they do respect her newfound direction. Michael Kreyling describes Yaeger's understanding as a "nuanced grotesque" where even the women's "very femaleness is put into brackets by a patriarchal discourse that seeks to control all it surveys” (*Symposium* 86). Though he takes issue on several points, Kreyling effectively sums Yaeger’s interpretation of the grotesque into a workable definition:

> The grotesque is fundamentally a political language in which the silenced Southern population of women writers (black and white) have expressed dissent from the official ideology of race and gender by figuring the ‘unthought known’ in the grotesque, maimed, or deformed body, or just as often in the female body generally. (*Symposium* 89)

As a result, suddenly Kreyling and others are beginning to recognize characterizations not typically associated with the grotesque as such because they are outside the established paradigm for women. Giving much weight to the ideas of social critic and writer Lillian Smith, whom she believed thought that “to be a white Southerner is to know and be the grotesque—to overwrite, overread, and participate in an economy of cruelty, defensiveness, reaction formation and overcompensation,” Yaeger uses the grotesque to “offer routes to Southern pathologies” (*Dirt and Desire* 247). Ultimately, for Yaeger, the grotesque is an inroad to a better understanding of the human condition. Kreyling, Rubin, King, and others, may not be quite there yet in this understanding, but the victory lies in their willingness to listen to the argument. In fact, scholars are beginning to re-evaluate their original assessments. Kreyling, for example, finds that he is embarrassed by his previous biography of Welty (1980), calling it “antique,” and that he is now open to revisionist studies which get women “off the porch” and into the mainstream.

Whether in full agreement or not, noted literary critics—both those with blatant agendas and those without—continue to point toward a special relationship between use of the grotesque and some Southern women writers and to characterize their grotesque as completely separate from that of other writers. In fact, many have specifically studied Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and the grotesque. However, one purpose behind this study is that, even now, many critics belittle women artists by including insults in their revisionist thinking—such as the insistence that Welty and McCullers (and others) were only modeling their male predecessors or presenting modest ideas of women’s liberation from the ideal of the Southern lady. I find that many of these newly directed theories fall short.

April Fallon’s short article, “The Grotesque as Feminist Revision of the ‘Southern Lady’ in Carson McCullers’s and Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction” (2006), is a prime example. Fallon asserts that McCullers and O’Connor use the grotesque to get away from stereotypes of the Southern belle and to show their disdain for the icon of the Southern lady (113): “Young women in the South were unhappy with the narrow expectations set for them, and many saw the ideal of the Southern Lady as a grotesque of real womanhood" (114). Though Fallon is on the right track, I believe these writers do much more than just protest Southern ladyhood. As Yaeger writes, "Southern women writers who appropriate the grotesque are at work constructing a female tradition that refuses the genteel obsession with writing the beautiful body in exchange for something more politically active and vehement: for the angry sex- and class-conscious writing of the Southern gargantua" ("Hummingbird" 312). Southern women writers are not just trying to cast off traditions imposed upon them by traditional historical, cultural, and social paradigms; rather, they are trying to create a new world based upon their own best interests without regard to what is expected of them now or may be in the future. In other words, their focus is upon the female more realistically; they go to extremes to present this model of woman through the Southern gargantua, pursuing what might allow woman's life experience to be complete and fulfilling. The problem with Fallon's idea is that in having these authors reject the idea of the Southern lady, she still situates women in relation to what might be expected of women. Her world is still gender-based.

Another example of a revisionist theory that does not reach its full potential is Carol Marion's *Distorted Traditions: The Use of the Grotesque in the Short Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Bobbie Ann*

Mason (2004). Marion finds the grotesque as presented by these four Southern women writers to result from the assault of modernity forced onto traditional Southern culture. Marion explains how the grotesque parallels the drastic social changes taking place over the first half of the twentieth century, and delves into traditions of Southern culture that have been disrupted as a result of these changes (5). Marion's theory that "the intrusion of modernity has brought the peculiarities of the South to light" is obvious (5), and her subsequent logic that these women writers are somehow confused because of the infiltration of modernism, I believe, discredits them. She writes:

> Lacking direct experience of the loss Faulkner felt, the second-generation writers—Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor (and in Mason's case, third-generation)—do not appear to know whether to laugh or cry, a condition suggestive of the disagreement between Kayser and Bakhtin. The fictional characters seem ludicrous, but are beset by such metaphysical terrors as to render laughter dark if not impossible. On the other hand, these second-generation writers, trapped in the nexus between tradition and progress, face a problem that differs from Faulkner's. For them, the South of Faulkner exists only in memory, preserved by traditions under challenge by change. (6)

While Marion's re-analysis is a good first step, her argument lacks sophistication. It is easy to become radically defensive of the writers Marion studies when she asserts such ideas as the South living only in memory for older generations; in essence, she asserts that a distinctly Southern way of life is dead. Likewise, there is no logic in attributing a character's ambivalent emotional sense to the author's lack of perception about the grotesque. One questions Marion's faulting the authors for their characters' inability to laugh. Why must the characters laugh? Marion notes the lack of laughter in Southern female characters as a lack of character development, yet, in doing so, she is defining Southern female characters according to an outdated standard.

Finally, this generation of women writers may not have had as close a relationship to the "Fall" as Faulkner's generation, but they have just the right distance from the experience to document it with vision. Instead of studying the nuances of these writers, Marion's idea is that these female authors use the grotesque to focus on smaller and less obvious issues than their male predecessors. She views them as lesser authors. She also contends that these writers use the grotesque most overtly in the 1930s and become increasingly subtle in their later fiction. Marion implies that the women mimic their male peers initially and then become less effective with the technique throughout their careers. I argue the opposite to be true as the grotesque as crafted by writers like O'Connor, Porter, Welty, McCullers, and the like in the 1940s and 1950s is by no means subtle (how subtle is Hulga's losing her prosthetic leg to a Bible salesman?), and it is in their later use of the grotesque that these women writers make emboldened statements. Probably the only point with which I agree with Marion is her suggestion that this second generation usage (the first generation being Faulkner's) is the "progress of the grotesque" within Southern literature. She states that "Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor hover between the physical deformity and the psychological limitation of their characters; for these writers, the grotesque is apparent through the behavior of the character if not the appearance" (20). Yet, I would still extend her reasoning. Admittedly these writers use the grotesque to "examine the systematic undermining of those four key principles of Southern life: devotion to one's community, devotion to one's family, devotion to God, and love of place" (Marion abstract); but they do much more than this. Welty and McCullers reconcile all four of these aspects of Southern life and come to terms with what it means to be female in light of this complex circumstance. In doing so, they use the grotesque to bring to light a very individualized sense of self and identity. It is a sophisticated grotesque presented both through distortions of the physical body and through less obvious behaviors and limitations.