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Eudora Welty's "Clytie", the Mirror Stage, and the Grotesque

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At first glance, Eudora Welty's short stories seem to exist in paradox with the writer's own intentions. Welty is well known for co-opting the "plots, settings, characters, image patterns, and vocabulary" of Gothic literature (Brantley 7), yet upon being asked if she was a Gothic writer, she responded vehemently: "They better not call me that!" (Welty and Prenshaw 137). What is a reader then to make of Welty's short story "Clytie" which is saturated with homages to the imagery of the Gothic—the display of psychological breakdown of an isolated family trapped in a crumbling, memory-haunted mansion, centering on a trapped, unmarried woman who slowly realizes her own monstrosity? A closer look at the psychological framework of Gothic literature reveals that "Clytie" is at first a comedic exaggeration of the narrative, and then an equally comedic deviation from it. Welty appropriates the Gothic genre's conception of self-realization in "Clytie" to demonstrate the grotesque mismatch inherent to the full expectation of Southern womanhood.

The grotesque body, as a Gothic archetype, is a fundamental mispairing between the visual expectations of what society deems a complete person and the lived embodiment of a person's true but incomplete and "hybrid" form (Chao 97). More often than not in Gothic literature, the grotesque is tied to "unruliness... of the female body," as it spills over impossible boundaries set for it and is denied true entry into society (Milbank 76). This is especially true of Southern Gothic literature of the Southern United States, where the ideal of 'Southern daintiness' offered a template for femininity which women could not map themselves realistically onto (Milbank 76). A cognizant framework for dealing with the production of the grotesque form in Gothic literature is offered by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who theorized heavily on the development of the self in relationship to society.

Lacan posited three stages of development, with progress through all three culminating with productive interaction with society. The first stage is The Real: a neonatal state of need in which there is no concept of the self separate from the parents, and the self exists as a fragmented body since "the infant, due to his/her sensory and 'motor un-coordination', experiences his/her body as piecemeal or shapeless" (Chao 94). A child emerges from this and enters the Mirror Stage when they look into a mirror and "mis/identify with the unified (and yet alienated) image of his/her own body in the mirror" (Chao 94). This misrecognition of the self as whole leads to the birth of the ego and the recognition that they are separate from the world around them and yet have a coherent place within it. Having internalized this, a person will continue to search for mirrors, including those of their societal role models such as parents, that allow a person "to identify with his/her images of wholeness as a promise of 'self-mastery' throughout his/her life" (Chao 95). However, the child will come away emotionally unfulfilled because these relationships are inherently narcissistic. Lacan's final

stage is The Symbolic, in which the child is able to enter into society through their association with the imagery of whole, perfect concepts: the use of language and the acceptance of the ‘name-of-the-father’, or paternalistic societal law (Gallop 62). To fully realize love, a child must enter the symbolic stage so they can enter into the societal symbolism and pacts necessary to make the pursuit of others non-narcissistic. This framework of self-realization permeates the Gothic genre’s treatment of a protagonist’s interactions with the world.

Demonstrating this, the Gothic grotesque body stands at the irreconcilable door between the true fragmented self and the whole self that society demands identification with. In other words, “the grotesque body lays bare the chaotic, turbulent nature of the *real experience*, ‘fundamental monstrosity’, by peeling off the illusory *gestalt* veneer of rational unity” (Chao 96). The revealed existence of a fragmented, grotesque hybrid body of which there is no language to describe then fractures society’s “means of conveying meaning” (Chao 97), cutting the grotesque off from proper means of communication.

Concurrently, to recognize the self as fragmentary within a mirror, instead of projecting the whole and symbolic onto the self, becomes a monstrous act in relation to society. Afterall, the existence of an individual who reveals that all meaning is merely projected threatens society, since society is merely a patchwork of communally agreed upon meaning. To defuse this threat, the individual is excised from society as monstrous. From this framework emerges the grotesque monster throughout Gothic literature, drawing from the prototypical Frankenstein, who upon seeing his deformed reflection for the first time (in comparison to his ideal, imagined self) expressed: “I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am” (Shelley 139).

As a heroine of the titular story, Clytie finds herself navigating the same well-trodden Gothic/Lacanian path to self-realization in the post Civil War era of the Southern United States. Although Clytie was born into the upper echelons of Southern society, the narrative focuses on the ways that she is excluded from entry into the society around her as a result of her inability to live up to the standard of Southern womanhood. On a psychological level, Welty manifests this gap in realization as by portraying Clytie as searching but continually separated from The Symbolic stage at which language and entrance into society can grant her meaningful personal relationships. She lacks the characteristics of this stage: language and the ability to meaningfully network within the world. Demonstrating her lack of appropriate routes for self-expression, her ideas are usually entirely expressed by others, or cut short and “trail[ing] off in ellipses, unaddressed and unresolved” (Donovan-Condran 346). In the rare moments she does find a voice to communicate, she does so in a way that alienates her from others and lacks appropriate symbolic contextualization, using either a “childish voice” (Welty 131) or “the wildest words that came to her head” (Welty 128).

Without language, there is no way for her to productively enter into society. Thus, she is described as an entity separate from the other women in the town, who are described as "ladies," a term that indicates their participation in a "distinct, historically informed social order" (Williamson, 762). On the other hand, her identity as an "old maid" (Welty 125) in their eyes separates her from the correct performance of womanhood in Southern society.

Welty reveals that this suspension in self-realization for Clytie seems to be driven by a literal detachment from the Mirror Stage, from "some face that had once looked back at her... that had been very close to hers, almost familiar, almost accessible" (Welty 130). Clytie is identified as an "anti-Narcissus" (Wells 257) in Welty's work, when to progress through the Mirror Stage requires a Narcissus-like gaze at one's wholeness. She has been detached from this through some gap within her memory and is searching for re-realization. Throughout the narrative, Clytie is continually associated with this process of detachment of memory through her spatial and social parallels with another character: Lethy, the family's previous Black caregiver, whose name "recalls the river of forgetfulness, Lethe, in Greek mythology" (Wells 267). Expanding upon this, Wells argues that rainwater in the story, from Clytie's entrance in the rain— when it starts raining, she immediately "had forgotten herself" (Welty 126)— to her submersion into the same bucket of rainwater, all represent "the oblivion of the river Lethe" (Wells 269). Thus, due to the loss of this memory, Clytie is perpetually reset to the first stage of self-development, living out her whole life in a prelude to the inter-personal struggles typical central to Gothic plots.

To fix this, Clytie desperately attempts to reconnect with the Mirror Stage, as demonstrated in her obsession with looking at the faces of the townspeople in search for the face "from which she had been separated" (Welty 90). In pursuit of a previous mirror-like connection that is now lost, her singular attempt at connection or social realization is to search for "identity markers or familiarity amongst the members of the community" (Williamson 754). Important to this narrative is how her "movements and positions relate significantly to the mythical story of Clytie" (Cohoon 48), wherein she is turned into a sunflower to forever look towards the face of another. It demonstrates that this contrast search is not productive, but "traps her, just as the Farr family traps Welty's Clytie." (Cohoon 49). Clytie's attempts at connection fall short because, as Lacan notes, to look for a mirror is inherently self-projecting, and so she only recognizes in others fragmentary pieces of herself. For example, upon gazing at a child, she only recognizes traits that she is later associated with: his "open, serene, trusting expression" (Welty 126) is mirrored in her interest in open spaces, maintaining serenity in her home, and trusting the judgment calls of her family.

Without success with the townspeople, in a continued attempt to find a mirror-self that has power and autonomy in her life, Clytie also manipulates her

wardrobe to match symbols of power within her life. If she cannot find her representation outside, perhaps she can find it in the representations within her own home. Her outfit, “all in hunter’s green, a hat that came down around her face like a bucket, a green silk dress, even green shoes with pointed toes” (Welty 131) mirrors the “bronze cast of Hermes” (Welty 132). In most classical descriptions, he wears a bucket-shaped hat, has winged feet with pointed toes as he floats up into the air, and, as a bronze statue, ages to a green patina. That she wishes to find her mirror in a god associated with “liminal spaces and movement” (Cohoon 48) is not surprising, because she is associated with motifs of entrapment and a lack “of autonomy within the home” (Wells 260). However, Hermes does not offer freedom or a found identity for Clytie because he is just a statue that is “quite still, like one of the unmovable relics of the house” (Welty 126), his concrete existence divorced from his freeing symbolic identity. Thus, at every turn, she remains stymied from realization.

At first glance, it appears that Clytie is halted from a progression beyond the Mirror Stage and into society as simply a result of the enclosure and isolation of the Farr household. As she asserts, it was “their faces came between her face and another” (Welty 130) and her isolation within the narrative is imposed upon her primarily through her association with the “Farr house’s ethos of enclosure” (Hicks 219). Furthermore, Lacan posited that the entry into society is mediated by the acceptance of the ‘Name-of-the-father,’ or the acceptance of the paternal embodied in societal law (Gallop 62). However, Mr. Farr is described as an “inert and uncommunicative patriarch,” (Hicks 217), from whom Clytie is kept physically separated, not allowing her to use his paternal influence to enter into society. His impotence is a gross encapsulation of the “fate of the Southern patriarch after the Civil War” (Wells 263), with the structures that were meant to mediate and uphold Clytie’s place as a woman within society instead falling into disrepair.

When the Farris are seen as symbolic stand-ins for broader societal issues, it becomes apparent that the true barrier to Clytie’s progression into a realm of objective societal connection is her existence as a woman in the American South. To be a woman in the American South requires a woman to be stuck in a paradox of self, to be forever unfulfilled in the pursuit of a reflection that is whole. This issue is at the heart of any reading of Gothic literature, where “the genre’s patriarchal social structures have long seen women as—and have caused women to become— abnormal, abject, perverse.” (Donovan-Condran 340). Gender roles were rapidly changing in the early 20th century environment “Clytie” is set in, leading to the expectation that women should uphold the created myth of the Southern plantation belle to mitigate regional anxiety about new social structures that existed in ways that “disrupted male power narratives” (Donaldson 573). Because a woman could never actually fulfill the made-up imagery of what

antebellum life was imagined to be, the entire projection of womanhood was unsturdy ground. Clytie could not find the whole-self that she was expected to be reflected back at her anywhere because it was actually unachievable and inexpressible, both for her and everyone else around her. That is why she discovers that "there was no more familiarity in the world for her" (Welty, 83), because the place she may have imagined to exist for her in society as a child in the antebellum South is actually now absent but still expected for her. Her interactions can never heal her alienation because the whole town is "part of the same historical and cultural system which engenders the wounds and identity loss from which she suffers" (Williamson 762).

When Clytie looks into a bucket of rainwater and sees "the face she had been looking for, and from which she had been separated" (Welty 136), she finally realizes this truth of the fundamental mismatch between the whole-self she is expected to be and the fragmented self she exists as. She realizes that "her own face in the water is the one for which she has been searching" (Donovan-Condran 346), but her face tells a different story than the idealized face that she expected to appear. This new realization is driven by her recent interaction with Mr. Bobo, wherein after imagining a rich internal world that exists for him, "she put out her hand and with breathtaking gentleness touched the side of his face" (Welty 135). However, this act of physical touch starts and repels her because his true identity is merely what he appears to be to everyone else, revealing there is a mismatch between the pure and complete world that Clytie yearns to have reflected at her and the actual reality of physical interaction. When she looks in the rain barrel so soon afterward, this truth becomes doubly apparent to her: that there is an inseparable "tension between her internal imagined world and the realities of the external world" (Hicks 225), or her expectation to be able to fit with society's mold of womanhood and her objective, lived reality.

Within Lacan's framework, this is the moment of realization of the monstrous grotesque truth of her body: she will never be able to project the whole-mirror self onto the fragmentary, gestalt truth of her existence. To cement that she will never be able to complete the Lacanian entry into society, the last thing she sees before throwing herself into the water is a "mouth old and closed off from any speech" (Welty 136), representing her "entire abandonment of the symbolic" (McLaughlin 60). Presented with the reality of her grotesqueness, "like Medusa, she is captivated by her own power," (Howell 37) and her reflection paralyzes her, entombing her within the rain barrel.

Through fulfilling the framework of the Lacanian grotesque up until her suicide, Clytie is set up to be the perfect Gothic monstrous. Then, in committing suicide, Clytie interrupts the typical realization of the Gothic grotesque monster within the plot. It is as if Frankenstein, upon recognizing his monstrosity in the mirror, had turned around and unmade himself stitch by stitch and left the reader

with nothing but blank pages. “Clytie” is thus revealed as a type of parody of Gothic literature in which the narrative is absurdly truncated. Welty hijacks the machinery of the Southern Gothic, and by breaking the narrative of the grotesque within it, reveals a powerful truth about womanhood. As Donovan-Condron expresses, “her willful demise on recognition of her grotesqueness suggests that femaleness in Southern Gothic is implicitly monstrous, and is a state that cannot, should not, be borne” (Donovan-Condron 346). In a narrative that is otherwise saturated with Gothic narrative mechanisms, the unexpected is nonetheless “the only thing [Clytie] could think of to do” (Welty 137), and it is a surprised expectation that drives the reality of monstrous Southern womanhood home.

Although Welty’s denial of the Gothic label may at first appear paradoxical, owing to her use of traditional Gothic imagery and archetypes, “Clytie” demonstrates that Welty appropriates these images only to ultimately deny them and create plots that are uniquely her own. By manipulating the traditional narrative of self-realization and formation of the monstrous in “Clytie”, Welty demonstrates the inherently unbearable and grotesque nature of Southern womanhood. This ultimately explains the inevitability of Clytie’s fate. Within the Gothic genre, female realization and action upon the grotesque can be an emancipatory action that can “challenge the social tyranny of its own time” (Milbank 77). However, Welty’s stories, at their roots, are not Gothic literature, and are thus ultimately unconcerned with the potential for individual power and social activism. Instead, her focus is on the possibility of interpersonal connection and the capacity for love. She asserts: “What other kind of story is there? It’s... what makes the human... Human relationships are all that matter” (Wolff and Welty 21). Although to exist as grotesque within society may have granted Clytie autonomy or power, Lacanian analysis reveals it never would have granted her a pathway to love. Since the realization of a narrative about connection was the shared goal of both Clytie and Welty, suicide was the only bearable option in the face of female monstrosity.

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