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Appearances and Reality: Gender Politics in Eudora Welty's "Petrified Man"

Eudora Welty's short story "Petrified Man," originally published in *A Curtain of Green*, is an intimate description of female life in the south. The short story takes place in a beauty parlor, and describes the gossip between the hairdresser, Leota, and her client, Mrs. Fletcher. The female characters are obsessed with appearances, which ultimately mask the darker realities present in the story. Through this, Welty suggests that the female characters' obsession with appearances represents an unsuccessful attempt at female agency that ultimately prevents the women from providing a united resistance to male-dominated power structures.

In "Petrified Man," the characters are preoccupied with appearances, many of which are synthetically constructed. Welty repeatedly mentions the mirrors in the beauty parlor; both Leota and Mrs. Fletcher look at themselves in the mirror several times. Even Thelma, a secondary character who only briefly appears in the story, stops to examine her appearance. Welty describes this saying, "Thelma drooped her blood-red lips and looked over Mrs. Fletcher's head into the mirror" (1095). In addition to this, the characters not only view themselves, but also each other, through the lens of the mirror. Welty writes that Leota and Mrs. Fletcher "stared at each other in the mirror" (1095). The women choose not to look at each other face-to-face, but instead decide to view each other through the mirror, privileging the reflection over reality. This situation exemplifies literary scholar Sarah Gleeson-White's assertion that the southern white woman's "position is thus a tortured one, torn between image and reality" (47). In this case, the women choose to privilege the image, as represented by the mirror, rather than the reality.

Additionally, the appearances and beauty that the women favor are wholly synthetic. Throughout the narrative, Welty describes objects that are lined with lavender. For example, she writes about "the lavender shelf under the lavender-framed mirror" (Welty 1094). The mirror, a symbol of appearances, is lined with lavender, in an artificial attempt to create beauty. The shelf, the mirror, and, later in the story, a swing-door, cloth, and comb are all lavender (1094-1095). The lavender exists to synthesize beauty within these human-made items. Gleeson-White states that the story "constructs feminine beauty not as something natural or innate, but as wholly manufactured: nail polish, hair dyes, permanent waves, and so forth" (50). These lavender items epitomize the artificial construction of beauty within the feminine beauty parlor space; there is nothing natural about these items.

Moreover, these artificially constructed appearances of beauty consistently mask or accompany darker realities present within the story. The first physical description of a character is given when Mrs. Fletcher "looked expectantly at the black part in Leota's yellow curls" (1094). Immediately, Welty highlights the discrepancy between appearance and reality; Leota's black roots lurk beneath her artificially dyed yellow curls. Black often represents darkness, and in this case, the blonde hair-dye masks, but does not change, the reality that Leota's hair is naturally black. This dichotomy between appearances and reality also occurs when Leota tells Mrs. Fletcher about a woman who came into the beauty parlor to get her hair done on the same day that she was having her baby. Leota tells Mrs. Fletcher that, "She come in here not the week before and not the day before she had her baby-she come in here the self-same day" (Welty 1100). Despite the reality of going into labor, the woman chooses to devote her attention to her appearance.

However, perhaps the most disturbing discrepancy between appearance and reality is demonstrated through the character of the petrified man. Leota sees the petrified man initially as a harmless attraction at the freak show. She tells Mrs. Fletcher about this “petrified man, that ever’thing ever since he was nine years old, when it goes through his digestion, see, somehow Mrs. Pike says it goes to his joints and has been turning to stone” (Welty 1097). Despite his seemingly innocuous appearance, Leota later discovers that the petrified man is actually a rapist. She tells Mrs. Fletcher that he was “wanted for five hundred dollars cash, for rapin’ four women in California” (Welty 1101). She reveals that she was initially deceived by his appearance, stating “I didn’t recognize him with that white powder all over his face” (Welty 1101). The makeup he wears is a perversion that masks the petrified man’s true identity, but doesn’t change the fact that he is still the same man who raped four women.

Despite the differences between appearance and reality, the women’s obsession with appearances is an attempt for them to express agency. The story is told within the context of a beauty parlor, a seemingly feminine space. The men in this story are conspicuously absent; within the beauty parlor the women speak freely. At the beginning of the story, Welty establishes it as an almost emasculating environment; Leota talks about Billy Boy, telling Mrs. Fletcher that, “Here, he couldn’t hurt a thing” (Welty 1096). Initially, the beauty parlor is portrayed as a space in which the women are in charge. Even the woman going into labor finds agency in her control of appearances. Leota states that “her husband kep’ comin’ in here, scared-like, but couldn’t do nothin’ with her a course” (Welty 1100). The beauty parlor, and the artificial appearances it represents, seems to act as a barrier, which the husband cannot penetrate. In the same way, the beauty parlor is also a source of income for Leota and a potential source of income for Mrs. Pike. Leota talks about her husband saying “he don’t work” (Welty 1098). Through the beauty parlor, Leota takes on a traditionally masculine role as the sole income earner of her household. Moreover, in the beauty parlor, the women talk about exercising control over the men in their lives. Leota asserts her authority in her marriage stating, “Huh! If I ever ast Fred’s advice we’d be floatin’ down the Yazoo River on a houseboat or somethin’ by this time” (Welty 1100). In the same way, Mrs. Fletcher also asserts that “Women have to stand up for themselves, or there’s just no telling” (Welty 1100). Through the vehicle of appearances, the women in the story attempt to exercise agency over themselves and the men in their life while in the beauty parlor.

The feminine attempt to gain authority is also seen when Mrs. Pike chooses to turn in Mr. Petrie, the petrified man. She exercises control over her husband when she tells him, “You ain’t worked a lick in six months, and her I make five hundred dollars in two seconts, and what thanks do I get for it? You go to hell, Canfield” (Welty 1102). Through turning in the petrified man, despite her husband’s protests, she is able to gain a modicum of control in her life. Moreover, through this action, she subverts the typical portrayal where “White women were depicted as prey, and so as vulnerable, passively in need of protection by their white-clad knights” (Gleeson-White 49). Mrs. Pike does not wait for the men to arrest Mr. Petrie, but instead, she appears to actively take female protection into her own hands.

While these incidents initially seem to create agency for the women, the women ultimately end up hurting each other through these practices. For example, within the beauty parlor, Leota and Mrs. Fletcher end up silencing and deafening each other through these beauty rituals. Gleeson-White argues that while Welty “comically satirizes notions of female beauty and behavior, her stories are also terribly sinister for violence is often frighteningly connected with southern womanhood” (51). These violent undertones are apparent when Leota does Mrs. Fletcher’s hair and “stuffed cotton into her ears” (Welter 1099). Through this, in her attempt to exercise agency

with these beauty rituals, Leota effectively deafens Mrs. Fletcher. Then, as the story progresses, Welty writes that “Leota was almost choking her with the cloth, pinning it so tight, and she couldn’t speak clearly” (1100). Leota, as a woman, silences Mrs. Fletcher in a frighteningly violent manner. Gleeson-White also asserts that women, though subject to inequality, also helped to enforce unequal power structures. She argues that “although white women themselves were the victims of many injustices, so too did they inflict suffering upon others, most notably slaves” (Gleeson-White 48). In this context, even though the women are clearly victims, they inflict suffering not, in this case, on slaves, but on each other. This also occurs when Mrs. Fletcher seems to retaliate against Leota. Welty describes Mrs. Fletcher “letting the swing-door fly back against Leota” (1099). Welty depicts the separation between these women, and provides a mildly violent image of Mrs. Fletcher letting the swing-door hit Leota. The door may also be read as a physical manifestation of the differences and obstacles between Leota and Mrs. Fletcher which prevent them from standing up against the male-dominated power structure.

In the same way, Mrs. Pike’s treatment of Mr. Petrie is also a perversion of a situation that initially hints at agency and female empowerment. Though Mrs. Pike chooses to turn in the petrified man, her attitude towards the female rape victims suggests that she has internalized male views of women and has begun to impose them on other women. At the end of the story, Leota states “I guess those women didn’t have the faintest notion at the time they’d be worth a hundred an’ twenty-five bucks apiece someday to Mrs. Pike” (Welty 1103). Just as the petrified man sees the female rape victims as objects, Mrs. Pike also adopts these views, seeing them as a way to increase her own wealth and position. Gleeson-White makes the argument that “Mr. Petrie’s rape of four Californian women is to some extent re-enacted by southern men, even if toned down somewhat” (50). This attitude of violent and exploitative masculinity is evident through Mr. Pike’s complicity with the rape. According to Leota, “at first Mr. Pike didn’t want to do anything about it” (Welty 1102). Mr. Pike is content to overlook the rape, thereby reinforcing Mr. Petrie’s violation of the Californian women. However, the objectification and exploitation of these women is not only reenacted by the southern men in the story, but also by the southern women. Women are seen as a commodity to be used and disposed of at the discretion of all of the characters in the story.

This self-fragmentation of a unified female front ultimately allows the male-dominated power structures to prevail in the story and invade the supposedly female space. This is made clear when Mrs. Fletcher spans Billy Boy, effectively taking action against the only male character present in the beauty parlor (Welty 1103). However, as soon as she attempts to punish the male figure, the male voice begins to dominate the feminine sphere of the beauty parlor. Welty writes that Billy Boy, “gave angry but belittling screams which penetrated beyond the booth and filled the whole curious beauty parlor” (1103). Immediately, Billy Boy takes over the scene and his voice demands the attention of all the women in the beauty parlor. Moreover, without hesitation, he retaliates against the female figures in a tremendously violent way. Welty describes this stating, “Billy Boy kicked both Leota and Mrs. Fletcher as hard as he could” (1103). Through this scene of intense physical domination, Leota and Mrs. Fletcher are rendered powerless by this male figure. Meanwhile, the women appear chaotic and disorganized. In the final paragraph, “Billy Boy stomped through the group of wild-haired ladies” (Welty 1103). The wild hair is a physical representation of their disorganization, as well as a sign of the futility of their beauty rituals. The women are depicted as powerless over both their hair and Billy Boy.

Moreover, at the end of the story, the female voices are silenced and Billy Boy gets the last word. The story ends when Billy Boy “flung back the words, ‘If you’re so smart, why ain’t you

rich” (Welty 1103). Through this final accusation, the illusion of the female space is shattered and it is clear that even within the beauty parlor, the male voice is paramount. Furthermore, it is not just any male who speaks, it is a young boy, which suggests that the women are so fragmented that even a child is able to enforce unequal power structures. Through the child, who also serves as a representation of the future, Welty suggests that these inequalities will easily endure through the next generation.

In Eudora Welty’s “Petrified Man,” synthetic appearances serve as an attempt to hide the darker realities present in the story. Though the female characters attempt to use appearances to create female agency, this ultimately backfires and prevents them from confronting the dominant masculinity woven within the story. Moreover, the class differences between the characters, especially Leota and Mrs. Fletcher, are an effective method of self-segregation which prevents the women in the story from challenging the existing gender inequalities, for fear of disrupting the current class structures, a thread that deserves further analysis.

Works Cited

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