

## **Sexual Politics in Welty's "Moon Lake" and "Petrified Man."**

**By**

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In 1982 Patricia Yaeger, probably the most influential of the feminist critics of Welty, asked an important question:

How should we read phallic imagery when it is incorporated within women's texts? If the phallus is, as Lacan suggests, the central signifier of patriarchal culture, is the woman writer who gives phallic imagery a prominent place in her fictions reinstating our culture's patriarchal orientations? (431) <sup>1</sup>

In the case of Eudora Welty, she says, the simple answer to that is no: in "Moon Lake," Welty "explores the ways in which the dominant sex/ gender system erases women's past and endangers her future" (431). The story "describes the ways in which these young women, barely aware of their own sexuality, begin to adjust to even before they can react against a male-dominated world" (431).

According to Yaeger, Welty has used phallic imagery to render the whole landscape an image of the dominant patriarchal sex/gender system. First the orphan Easter, the one self-sufficient female in the story, nearly drowns in the lake Yaeger says has been inscribed with masculine imagery; then she is rescued by the Boy Scout, whose administration of artificial respiration is perceived as a kind of rape. According to Yaeger the episode means that Easter's self-sufficiency is a threat to the masculine order, and therefore she must be brutalized into submission. This "rape," she says, "defines Easter's rite of passage from an active, androgynous life to the stunted and conventional life defined by a masculine hierarchy" (438). Citing Gayle Rubin's Lacanian

formula, she concludes that "the creation of 'femininity' in women in the course of socialization is an act of psychic brutality that leaves in women an immense resentment of the suppression to which they were subjected" (432). The phallus, Yaeger says, is in our culture the "mark of privilege which not only validates the repression of women, but signifies her inferiority to man" (432).

It is possible that this is true; certainly Ms. Yaeger is not alone in this perception. But it needs revision in one important respect: for Welty this evil is not one which has somehow been imposed on modern culture by the patriarchs. For her, this perception of evil is a sign of the paranoia of the culture out of which it comes. For the culture Welty describes is matriarchal, not patriarchal, and "Moon Lake" portrays young girls in the process of being socialized as women by women.

It does not require a particularly close reading to see that what threatens the little girls is not the "masculine principle" Ms. Yaeger says is "inscribed in [the] landscape" (434). It isn't. The only "inscribing" is done by Mrs. Gruenwald, who tries to turn the real sensuality of the lake into a silly, nearly genderless "Mr. Dip."

"Good morning Mr. Dip, Dip, Dip, with your water just as cold as ice!" sang Mrs. Gruenwald hoarsely. She took them for the dip, for Miss Moody said she couldn't, simply couldn't (CS 343).<sup>2</sup>

Comically, Nina Carmichael rejects this metaphoric denial of the sensuous reality of the lake, but in favor of an equally sexless tea-time metaphor: she thinks of the water as having "the temperature of a just-cooling biscuit, thank Goodness" (CS 343). But Miss Welty describes the lake with strongly erotic imagery that is at least as feminine as it is masculine.

"Gee we think you're mighty nice," they sang to Mr. Dip, gasping, pounding their legs in him. If they let their feet go down, the invisible bottom of the lake felt like

soft, knee-deep fur. The sharp hard knobs came up where least expected. The Morgana girls of course wore bathing slippers, and the mud loved to suck them off (CS 345).

It should be clear that what will cause psychic harm to these girls from Morgana is not their real experience with this sensuous lake, but Mrs. Gruenwald's dishonest efforts to remove the sensuousness of it. The only one who is not victimized by this program is Easter, the orphan who has no mother but does have the advantage of not having been prissified. Her consequent vulnerability to the mysteries of sexuality, symbolized by her plunge into the water from the diving platform, puts her in a kind of danger Jinny Love Stark will be insulated from all her life. Easter's strength and precociousness do lead to her premature plunge into a reality she is not ready for. The symbolism suggests that she learns too much too soon about the realities of generation and death. But the real harm is that suffered by Jinny Love Stark and Nina Carmichael, the well-brought-up little girls who are protected from the life Easter knows. In the creation of their 'femininity' we might agree with Ms. Yeager that they are being "brutalized," if that is the appropriate description for the programmatic prissification they endure. But they are being victimized not by the patriarchs but by their mothers.

In my view we need not feel sorry for Easter. Though she is groggy and sick at the end of the story because of her near-drowning, it is easy to believe that she will grow up with a healthy, if hard-won, sense of reality. It will likely be still true, as Nina guessed earlier, that "the reason orphans were the way they were lay first in nobody's watching them. . . . Easter remained not answerable to a soul on earth" (CS 352). But Nina and Jenny Love are answerable to their mothers, the women like Mrs. Gruenwald and Miss Moody and Miss Lizzy Stark who have prissified them and kept them innocent of reality. Being young, they seek romance; but the women will teach them that it doesn't exist: they must keep their wits about them and cut the best deal they can with the "odious" male world. They will be taught that men are the enemy; not that

they are to be opposed, because they are necessary to security; but rather that they are to be traduced. They are to be weakened, first, and then exploited; they are to be broken to harness, not joined in love and reciprocity.

This story is about children, of course, so these lessons are not yet fully explicit. But the signs of this educational process are certainly there. If we must look for the phallic images, let's notice Nina Carmichael's little tin drinking cup that she wears like a ring around her little finger, opening it up to full length to drink out of it, and then collapsing it when she is finished. She will expect to control her husband as easily as that when she is grown up.<sup>3</sup> We might notice Easter's jackknife. When she invites Jinny Love Stark to play a boy's game of mumblety-peg, Jinny Love says, "I may not know how to play, but I bet I win." Her education in the manipulative arts are already well advanced, owing to the formidable tutoring of her mother, Lizzie Stark, who, when she first meets the Boy Scout Loch Morrison at the camp, accuses him of peeing (or worse) in the spring. When the Boy Scout puts the drowned Easter on the picnic table and administers artificial respiration, she can't stand it. "Get him off her," she says, "Ah, get him off her" (*CS* 367-8), even when she fully realizes he is trying to save her life.<sup>4</sup> When Nina Carmichael gets close enough to Easter to contemplate the mystery of her careless body on the table, Lizzie Stark orders her away. "Come stand right here in my skirt," she says. For there, sheltered under her ample bosom, Nina can be safe--from life as well as from death. As for little Exum, the black boy who had brushed Easter's heel with a willow switch as she stood on the diving board<sup>5</sup>, we last see him being chased through the woods by his mother, who is ready to beat the devilment out of him.

As for the well brought up little white girls of Morgana, they must be taught to hate the Boy Scout, out of fear and weakness, when their natural impulse is to love him.<sup>6</sup> By the end they even hate Easter, who teased them with her self-sufficiency at first; now that they see her body "careless" and indecorous on the table, they realize she has gone too far. They are both repelled and jealous. At the end of the story, Jinny Love Stark and Nina Carmichael sneak out into the deep woods on the last night of the week and

witness the exiled Boy Scout standing at the flap of his tent. "He was naked and there was his little tickling thing hung on him like the last drop on the pitcher's lip" (CS 373). At last they see the real phallus, belonging to a boy; they perceive it as a tiny thing and mightily resent the thought that he might be proud of himself for having saved Easter's life. "I'll tell on him in Morgana tomorrow," Jinny Love Stark says. "He's the most conceited Boy Scout in the whole troop, and's bowlegged. You and I will be old maids" (CS 374).

In short, the story is full of evidence that the children, even at the age of nine, have already begun to learn the arts of belittling and neutralizing masculinity. It is the lesson their mothers teach. There is, of course, a "sex/gender" system. But it is the mother's dishonest and subversive complicity with it which prevents these girls from having an honest confrontation with the natural realities of Moon Lake.

But in this story, except for Lizzie Stark, we don't have a clear view of the world of grown women. For that we must turn to "Petrified Man." More clearly and more baldly and more comically than any of the stories in *The Golden Apples*, the beauty parlor in "Petrified Man" exhibits the world of women in their subversive complicity with the "sex/gender system." It describes the world of women who are in direct competition with each other to prove their dominance over men.

It is true that female sexual politics are not often portrayed in Miss Welty's fiction in so harsh or mean a light as in "Petrified Man." In most of her work, the political maneuverings are politely hidden within the institution of marriage, where they belong. But in all cases, the control of men is the object. Women without men, like Miss Eckhart in *The Golden Apples*, are unpitied eccentrics who have little status or influence with anyone, least of all other women.<sup>7</sup> Like most women in most cultures, these women understand that their survival depends on the aggression and strength and wealth of men. The essential female task, therefore--as for Edna Earle, say, in *The Ponder Heart* and Rosamund in *The Robber Bridegroom* and Snowdie MacLain in *The Golden Apples*--is to try to make their men spend their energy and money in

providing security for their wives and families rather than in the tom-fool ways they'd rather spend it. They don't always succeed, but it is their life's work.<sup>8</sup>

This undertaking appears in different guises, depending on whether we are in the higher reaches of Weltian romanticism or at the lower reaches of Weltian comedy. But in all cases women are clearly in control of the institution of marriage. In *The Robber Bridegroom*, marriage renders the wandering bandit (Jamie Lockhart) an acceptable husband automatically, as if through the magic of romance. In less fanciful fictions, marriage is the instrument with which, and the arena in which, women try to control the vices of men: their excessive and impractical idealism, wanderlust, rebelliousness over one thing or another, anger, the many forms of recklessness. In "Lily Daw," marriage is like a box within which Lily Daw's three lady friends mean to seal her up, so she'll be "safe."

In "Petrified Man," however, we see the bottom line--the naked cynicism with which the male principle is traduced. By the testimony of this story, sexual politics is exclusively the preserve of women, who measure their status with each other by the power they have over men. Clearly this is the measure in the competition among Mrs. Fletcher, Leota, and Mrs. Pike. At the end of the story, Mrs. Pike is clearly the winner; at the beginning she already has a clear advantage. As Leota describes her,

"Honey, cute ain't the word for what she is. I'm tellin you, Mrs. Pike is attractive. She has her a good time. She's got a sharp eye out, Mrs. Pike has."

Mrs. Fletcher, on the other hand, is pregnant. Being pregnant is not, in her mind, a blessed event. It means that her husband has "had his way" with her. As Leota says, "It just ain't our fault, is the way I look at it." They obviously feel that Nature itself--or the "dominant sex/gender system"-- is unfair to women. Mrs. Fletcher would like to remedy this unfairness.

"Well. I'm almost tempted not to have this one," said Mrs. Fletcher . . . .

"Mr. Fletcher would beat you on the head if you didn't have it now," said Leota reasonably. "After going this far."

Mrs. Fletcher sat up straight. "Mr. Fletcher can't do a thing with me."

"He can't!" Leota winked at herself in the mirror.

"No, siree, he can't. If he so much as raises his voice against me, he knows good and well I'll have one of my sick headaches, and then I'm just not fit to live with...."

But if Mrs. Pike is so cute, naturally Mrs. Fletcher wants to know her theories about marriage. It pleases her to hear that Mrs. Pike's husband doesn't work, and that she has had several informal relations with traveling salesmen on trains.

"Where did Mrs. Pike meet Mr. Pike?" asked Mrs. Fletcher primly.

"On another train," said Leota.

"I met Mr. Fletcher, or rather he met me, in a rental library," said Mrs. Fletcher with dignity. . . .

"Honey, me an' Fred, we met in a rumble seat eight months ago and we was practically on what you might call the way to the altar inside of half an hour. . . . Course it don't last. Mrs. Pike says nothin' like that ever lasts."

"Mr. Fletcher and myself are as much in love as the day we married," said Mrs. Fletcher belligerently.

For Leota, the processes leading to marriage are natural--sexual, that is to say--but they are not satisfactory. As Mrs. Pike says, "nothin' like that ever lasts." For Mrs. Fletcher, on the other hand, the process involves not sex but sexual politics. She has followed the romantic script that justifies bartering sex for security on the theory that if you withhold sex until marriage you can live happily ever after. As for Mrs. Pike, we can't quite tell. She rides on trains. She enjoys

checking out many prospects, and then she chooses. Whether for love or money, we don't know. Probably as much one as the other.

After Mrs. Fletcher hears the story of Mrs. Montjoy, who came in for a shampoo and set on the way to the hospital so she'd look pretty while she was having her baby, she expresses her philosophy concerning marital relations:

"Her husband ought to make her behave. Don't it seem that way to you? . . . He ought to put his foot down."

"Ha," said Leota. "A lot he could do. Maybe some women is soft."

"Oh, you mistake me. I don't mean for her to get soft--far from it! Women have to stand up for themselves, or there's just no telling. But now you take me--I ask Mr. Fletcher's advice now and then, and he appreciates it, especially on something important, like is it time for a permanent--not that I've told him about the baby. He says, 'Why, dear, go ahead!' Just ask their *advice*."

The passage reveals Mrs. Fletcher's manipulative theory of sexual politics, and its central contradiction. She believes that men have to be kept under control, as her husband certainly is. It is just as evident, though, that she blames Mr. Montjoy for Mrs. Montjoy's tacky behavior. The truth is that she despises weak men; she despises her own husband. After all, she hasn't yet told him about the baby.

But if Mr. Fletcher is the perfect caricature of the hen-pecked husband, the Petrified Man is a grotesque *reductio ad absurdum* of the dominant male. He is to be found in the freak show next door to Leota's beauty parlor. Here is Leota's description of him:

"But they got this man, this petrified man, that everthing 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. . . .

"(Now,) he could move his head--like this. A course his head and mind ain't a joint, so to speak . . . But see, his food, he eats it, and it goes down, see, and then he digests it-- . . . -- and it goes out to his joints and before you can say 'Jack Robinson', it's stone--pure stone. He's turning to stone. How'd you like to be married to a guy like that?"

"Mr. Fletcher takes bending exercises every night of the world [Mrs. Fletcher says]. I make him."

Leota agrees. "All Fred does is lay around the house like a rug."

The phallic imagery is obvious. While the petrified man is totally stiff, Mrs. Fletcher's and Leota's husbands are totally limp. What if, indeed, Mrs. Fletcher had been married to a guy like that? It is not a question that consciously crosses her mind. But if we follow the suggestion of Patricia Yaeger and look for the image of the "dominant sex/gender system" that oppresses all women, the petrified man is surely the absurd comic image of that principle. If the phallus is its symbol, the petrified man is pure phallus. It is as if Eudora Welty has taken the masculine principle and, for the sake of the comedy, reduced it to its most absurd manifestation--the man who not only *has* a phallus of stone, but *is* pure phallus. Leota tells of Mrs. Pike's finding his picture in her copy of *Startling G-man Tales* magazine and recognizing him as the Mr. Petrie who used to live next door to her in New Orleans. The magazine says that he is wanted in California for raping four women, and there is a \$500 reward on his head. Leota tells how Mrs. Pike suddenly recognized him as the Petrified Man in the freak show.

" . . . it all come to her. Like a flash. Mr. Petrie. The way he'd turn his head and look at her when she took him in his breakfast."

"Took him in his breakfast!" shrieked Mrs. Fletcher. "Listen--don't tell me. I'd a' felt something."

Leota, as usual, misses the point. For her, this story is about money. "Four women. I guess those women didn't have the faintest notion at the time they'd be worth a hundred and twenty-five bucks a piece some day to Mrs. Pike. . . ."

But Mrs. Fletcher gets the point. Though nothing quite articulable comes through her head, two half-formed thoughts--one, that this is the petrified man, all of whose joints have turned to stone; and two, that Mrs. Pike took him in his breakfast every morning, and therefore might have been having an affair with him--come together in an implication that makes her shriek. For Mrs. Fletcher thought *she* had done pretty well, having reduced her own husband to total wimpdom--but Mrs. Pike has done far better. She has traduced the Masculine Principle itself. Not only has she betrayed the Petrified Man--sold him down the river for \$500--but she probably enjoyed him first. He is The Man with the Petrified Penis--and he is Mrs. Pike's trophy. In the game of sexual politics, Mrs. Fletcher now knows that she has been outclassed by every conceivable measure.

"Not really petrified at all, of course," says Mrs. Fletcher "meditatively," with what is probably a vicarious post-coital sigh. "I'd a' felt something." But the emotion that makes her shriek is not some warm feminine feeling she thinks Mrs. Pike lacks. It is envy. She envies Mrs. Pike because Mrs. Pike proved she could buy and sell the Masculine Principle itself. She could enjoy it *and* control it, whereas Mrs. Fletcher now knows herself as a small-time manipulator, trapped in paranoia and helplessness, and pregnant by a man she despises.

The story ends with Mrs. Fletcher spanking Mrs. Pike's little boy. Throughout, Mrs. Pike's three-year-old son has been loitering around Leota's beauty parlor, mostly getting into mischief. Now he is swiping old stale peanuts from Leota's purse. Leota tries to catch him, but Mrs. Pike catches him first.

"I caught him, I caught him," giggled Mrs. Fletcher. "I'll hold him on my lap. You bad, bad boy, you! I guess I better learn how to spank little old bad boys," she said.

It is a pathetic effort at revenge. Pathetic first because it is a poor substitute for what Mrs. Fletcher really wants--to punish Mrs. Pike. What makes it doubly pathetic is that Mrs. Fletcher wants to punish her for what is, after all, her own bad faith--for playing her own manipulative game better than she. And what makes it triply pathetic is that while Mrs. Fletcher really blames the whole masculine world for her paranoia, she can only punish children. While Mrs. Fletcher will never meet a man on equal terms, we can predict that she will bully any male who does not bully her first. It should go without saying that this policy promotes male bullying; but that's how she is going to raise her own son. Both he and Billy Boy stand every chance of growing up to be bullies themselves.

There are two obvious points to make about all this. The first is that Mrs. Fletcher's behavior is motivated by paranoia, and that this paranoia is the kind that classically springs from powerlessness. It involves, first, exaggerating the threat, then using what amounts to guerilla warfare to subvert it. Like Patricia Yaeger herself, Mrs. Fletcher and Leota first exaggerate the threat of the "dominant sex/gender system," and that justifies the two-fold program of emasculating the husbands and brutalizing the children.

Point two: as Ms. Yaeger's obvious intention is to dismantle the so-called "patriarchal tradition," she should start by dismantling the paranoia with which that tradition is regarded. It is

appropriate that she, whose interpretation of "Moon Lake" symptomizes that paranoia, herself suggests the way to do it: demythologize the symbol of the phallus. Paraphrasing Lacan, she explains that the phallus is "a cultural construct, and symbol for something other than its physical analogue; specifically, for the transcendent power of the father. The penis, on the other hand, is a physical organ which is not the effective cause of the father's power, but is, rather, an object fetishized by culture as a symbol of man's power over nature, over himself, and over women" (448).

One can only agree with this, though clearly her reading of "Moon Lake" itself represents a fetishizing of the phallus. What brutalizes the young girls in that story is not a dominating male principle somehow inscribed on the landscape by culture, but the paranoid effort of the mothers to subvert and to traduce an exaggerated male threat. If the mothers have their way, the daughters will stay as far from nature as possible, and will thoroughly domesticate, if not emasculate, whatever masculine principle survives.

As for Eudora Welty's role in all this, I think Ms. Yaeger is right to suggest that she "removes the phallus from the overinscribed realm of patriarchal myth." She deconstructs that myth most effectively by caricaturing both the phallus as symbol and the women's competitive efforts to traduce it in all its exaggerated forms. The result, in both stories, is the kind of therapeutic comedy that exorcizes hypocrisy in exhibiting it.

In "Petrified Man," the title character himself, pure phallus, is deconstructed as a *reductio ad absurdum* who has, however, been traduced by Mrs. Pike. The enormity of this deed comically arouses pure jealousy in the other women, who have merely reduced their own men to total wimps. By contrast, the masculine principle in "Moon Lake" is represented only by the brave and immature Boy Scout; yet it inspires such fear and awe in the adult women that to neutralize him in the minds of the vulnerable young girls requires their concerted efforts. The resulting deformation of the girls' sensibilities is as pathetic as it is unnecessary; but Miss Lizzie Stark is apparently frightened to death of whatever it is that little Loch Morrison represents. At last we

have to be glad that the deformation is not total; that the girls still have their youth and resiliency, and they haven't become monsters yet.

Nevertheless, it should be obvious that in neither of these stories do the women accept nature in natural, unexaggerated terms. To the degree that nature contains a masculine principle, they feel obliged to traduce it. In Welty's world, however, nature seems to know its own balance--it is fecund and mysterious, but beyond the sexo-political impositions of human beings. In these stories we watch the comedy of human beings trying to impose their interpretations on nature. The joke is that though they never stop trying, they usually fail. The comedy turns its sharper edge when they succeed, but they become monsters when they do. Usually, though, Nature is bigger than they, and that's what keeps them human.<sup>9</sup>

### Notes

1 Patricia S. Yaeger. "The Case of the Dangling Signifier: Phallic Imagery in Eudora Welty's 'Moon Lake.'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, Winter 1982, 431-452.

2 Citations to "Moon Lake," "June Recital," and "Petrified Man" are all taken from *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), hereinafter abbreviated as *CS*.

3 Ms. Yaeger attempts to minimize the importance of this collapsible cup to Nina, but through a clear misreading of the text. She says (443), "Nina is no more concerned with the loss of the cup when Jinny Love Stark loses it to Easter in a game of mumblety-peg, than Easter is with the gaining of it." In fact, Nina refused Easter's invitation to play for the cup; it's too valuable to her. "You don't know Nina," Jinny Love told Easter. "You'd think it was made of fourteen carat gold. . . ." (ML 121). Later, Nina offers to let Easter use the cup. "I didn't mean you couldn't drink out of my cup . . . . Only you have to hold it carefully, it leaks. It's engraved!" (ML 122). Easter, predictably, shows no interest in it. Apparently she has no need of the manipulative fancy the cup affords Nina.

4 Strangely enough, Ms. Yaeger seems quite proud of Lizzie Stark for this reaction. Having interpreted Loch Morrison's effort to revive Easter as a rape, she accuses Welty of seeming to accept the necessity of the "disempowerment of women within phallogocentric society" (441). Then she gives Welty credit for having Lizzie Stark at least protest against this "rape."

5 Much later, Nina remembers that "by that time they were all saying the nigger deliberately poked her off in the water, meant her to drown." Ms. Yaeger too misremembers the fact, saying (p. 451, note 9) that Exum "pushed" her into the water.

6 "Reveille was his," Welty says of Loch Morrison. "He harangued the woods when the little minnows were trembling and running wizardlike in the water's edge. And how lovely and altered the trees were then, weighted with dew, leaning on one another's shoulders and smelling like big wet flowers. He blew his horn into their presence--trees' and girls'--and then watched the Dip" (*CS* 343).

7 Another reason she has no influence is that she was once raped, and by a black man. Apparently the other women have no respect for her as a result: she should have known better, it is implied; only her foreign origin excuses her. Miss Perdita Mayo, in "June Recital," said that "Miss Eckhart's differences were why shame alone had not killed her and killed her mother too" (*CS* 302). Having no power over men, she has no status among women.

8 Cf. Peggy W. Prenshaw, "Woman's Place, Man's World," in *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979), 46-77, esp. 60-61.

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