

## CHAPTER 3

### **THE GOLDEN APPLES: REDEFINING THE HERO**

The Golden Apples is Welty's most complex and encompassing work. Neither purely a collection of short stories nor a novel, The Golden Apples is a group of interconnected stories focused on the residents of a town called Morgana. According to Ruth Vande Kieft in Eudora Welty (1962), the unity of the book is derived not only from its apparent unifying factors of character, place, symbolism and theme but more importantly from its rich mythical patterns of organization (111). Harry C. Morris in "Eudora Welty's Use of Mythology" (1955) considers The Golden Apples to be "experimental" because of the writer's elaborate use of mythology (30). The book is "teeming with allusions to myths, fusing the ancient myths with the modern lives in Morgana" (Gygax 43-47). The name of the town Morgana is in itself derived from myth, bearing its association with Fata Morgana, the Italian name for a misleading vision originally seen at sea from the coast of Calabria. Welty expresses her fascination with this imaginative association: "I was drawn to the name because I always loved the conception of Fata Morgana - the illusory shape, the mirage that comes over the sea" (Prenshaw, Conversations 88). According to Johnston, Morgana's illusory nature provides a perfect setting for Welty's mythic revisions. Myths, stories and even characters take on dreamlike qualities in Morgana, making them more mutable and pliable (74).

Shinn in "The Wheel of Life: Eudora Welty and Gloria Naylor" (1996), points out that the title "The Golden Apples" firstly alludes to the golden apples of the Hesperides. These apples were said to confer immortality and bear connections with the apples of immortality held by the Norse Idun (21). Harris in "The Thematic Unity of Welty's The

Golden Apples” (1994) adds that other allusions made are to the golden apple of discord which led to the Trojan war and the golden apples which Melanion let fall from his chariot to distract Atalanta in the race. These are the false apples that lead one astray and distract one from any goal however intent on it one may believe oneself to be (Champion 132).

However, there is an even more pervasive and oblique reference to the fabulous fruit, suggested by the fragment of W.B. Yeats’s “The Song of the Wandering Aengus” from The Wind Among the Reeds (1899). Welty’s collection is titled after the final lines of this poem. In One Writer’s Beginnings, Welty mentions that “the poem that smote [her] first was ‘The Song of the Wandering Aengus’ ” (81). She says: “it was the poem that turned up, fifteen years or so later, in my stories of The Golden Apples and runs all through the book” (OWB 81).

Yeats’s poem concerns the quest of a passionate and restless Celtic hero-god, Aengus, who is associated with youth, beauty and poetry. During a ritual fishing expedition on a starlit night, he catches a trout that changes into a “glimmering girl”. Lured by the beautiful vision of her, he sets out on an endless pursuit to find and possess her and to pluck the apples that would grow from the blossoms in her hair.<sup>1</sup>

Welty uses the story of “The Wandering Aengus” as the mythic identity for several heroic characters in The Golden Apples. According to Vande Kieft, the stories share many iconoclastic wanderer figures who are engaged in the search for the glimmering vision of love, art, sexual and spiritual fulfillment, knowledge and adventure. And yet, for any Morgana wanderer, this dream of fulfillment may be only a “Fata Morgana”, a mirage or illusion that remains forever out of their reach (89).

Following the patriarchal literary tradition, Yeats's poem emphasizes the idea of the male hero and expresses the dominant view that only men have the liberty to "wander" and pursue life's fulfillment. In sexual terms, the poem depicts a man's sexual "wandering" after his ideal fantasy woman. It therefore posits that men have license to chase after visionary women and sexual fantasy while women, on the other hand, are merely the objects of fantasy and are not allowed to be aggressors or pursuers (Johnston 78). The female persona in Yeats's poem merely exists to enable the male wanderer to define his presence and desires. She is what Yeager calls "the shadow or penumbra" of his mind, a mere figment of his imagination (143). Although she appears briefly in human form, she is reabsorbed later into nature and into the poem itself. Hence, the "glimmering girl" in Yeats's poem is merely an object assimilated into a masculine story (Yeager 143).

Initially, Welty appears to return to the notion of the male wandering protagonist in The Golden Apples. King MacLain, in one way or another, embodies the elements in Yeats's poem. A Zeus-like figure, he obsessively wanders in and out of town and the surrounding woods to seduce women. Ever the wanderer, he leaves Mississippi to travel west after impregnating his wife with twins. He comes home to Morgana for brief periods and ends his restless roaming only very much later in life.

Although King MacLain may appear as the invigorating wanderer figure of Morgana, he is not ultimately the heroic, authoritative figure in The Golden Apples. Welty's treatment of King is comic, causing him to appear absurd rather than heroic. He is a flat character, underdeveloped, mythical, existing outside the complex world which the other main characters know to be real and pressing (Vande Kieft 116). Unlike Aengus who figures prominently as the speaker in Yeats's masculine poem, King never voices his own

experience; instead, his character is simply bound to the depictions of female narrators. In “Shower of Gold” we are introduced to his antics by the gossiping voice of Katie Rainey and throughout the story, King exists as a figment of Katie Rainey’s imagination. Welty therefore, reverses the stereotypical portrayal of the male wanderer in The Golden Apples by turning him into the narrative subject in the fables of Morgana’s women. King now takes on the role of the “glimmering girl”, disappearing and reappearing in women’s fancies (Westling, Eudora Welty 130-31).

Conversely, the true heroic wanderer figures that appear in Welty’s book are predominantly female and not male. Welty revises and expands on the essential significance of the Aengus myth by creating opportunities for her female characters to be the protagonists and play the assertive role of the hero which has been restricted all this while to the male wanderer. Yeats’s “fire in my head” description of passion is identified with at least three women characters: Cassie Morrison quotes the poem and Miss Eckhart starts such a fire in “June Recital”, while in “The Wanderers” we learn that Katie Rainey was known as “Katie Blazes” for setting fire to her stockings. However, it is in the character of Miss Eckhart that Welty has invented the most direct and disturbing counterpart to Yeats’s male wanderer (Yaeger 152). Of all the characters in The Golden Apples, it is Miss Eckhart who literally experiences the “fire” in her head, thus signifying her as the essential representation of the Wandering Aengus figure in the book.

While many critics have referred to how Welty’s prominent female characters take on the active role of pursuant, her idea of the female hero is far more complex than a mere straightforward revision of the Wandering Aengus. Welty also makes allusions to the Medusa to further her idea of the female hero. The myth of the legendary gorgon presents

the idea of a strong, masculinized woman that becomes an inherent danger to man. Since she is unnaturally powerful and difficult to control, she must be destroyed. In her depiction of Miss Eckhart, Welty illustrates how the female hero is viewed by patriarchal society as essentially monstrous since in her dauntless pursuit for fulfillment in life, she refuses to passively conform to the masculine rules of society. Miss Eckhart's heroic qualities set her apart from the common townsfolk as she refuses to subscribe to the behavior codes of Morgana. Her iconoclastic attitude towards society's norm is viewed by the public as an aberration that they cannot accept. In short, they view her as the Medusa of Morgana. Through the eyes of Cassie Morrison, who represents societal judgment of her, Miss Eckhart is seen as a woman who possesses unruly hair and an ungovernable restlessness and wildness in her soul. Her hair catches fire and she is described as a "tireless [. . .] spider" (288), a human being "terribly at large, roaming the face of the earth" (330). Welty herself hints that Miss Eckhart possesses "abnormal" qualities and unacceptably violent traits: "Miss Eckhart was a very mysterious character [. . .] a very strange person. [. . .] She herself was trapped [. . .] with her terrible old mother. [. . .] [T]hey had tantrums in that house, and flaming quarrels" (Prenshaw, Conversations 304-05).

"June Recital" thus traces the tragic story of how Morgana's heroic, unconventional music teacher, Miss Eckhart, is driven to madness by the enclosures of its restrictive patriarchal norms. Refusing to conform to the town's social rules of behavior and gender expectations, Miss Eckhart finds herself trapped in a stifling environment that confines, paralyses and eventually destroys her. The conflict faced by Miss Eckhart as a female hero is represented at the end of "The Wanderers" by a picture of Perseus lifting the head of Medusa which Virgie Rainey, her pupil, notices on her wall. Miss Eckhart, the heroic figure

of the story, may be thought of as a Perseus figure who tries but fails to destroy Morgana's view and labeling of her as Medusa, the eccentric monster, that ultimately takes over her imagination and drives her mad. The story of her downfall brings to focus the social pressures that ostracize women, forcing them to choose between conformity and monstrosity, being a lady in the parlor or a madwoman in the attic (Schmidt 86). As the story unfolds, we are made aware of the costs such a female hero as Miss Eckhart has to make, and how she is inevitably incarcerated by society as a Medusa, a perception which she tries endlessly to eradicate.

Very early in the narrative we see the condemning attitude of a community that is opposed to her artistic impulse and ambition. A music teacher fiercely devoted to her art, Miss Eckhart is an example of the female artist who yearns for artistic fulfillment. Music thus becomes the "glimmering" goal of her heroic pursuit. Having come from the North to Mississippi, she is determined not just to make her living by teaching piano but to show the status-conscious citizens of Morgana that they are provincial, with little knowledge of sophisticated Old World culture such as music (Schmidt 86). According to Binding in The Still Moment: Eudora Welty, Portrait of a Writer (1994), her concern with an art that is part of "Hochkultur" outside Southern life and remote from the interests of all around her, sets her up for strong opposition (172). However, Miss Eckhart's musical skill is not so great a threat to Morgana's provincial culture as to the masculine economy since it manifests the energy of female creativity. Conducting her music lesson from a rented house, she employs an important tactic that women use to negotiate a public presence from home. Walker in "Home and Away: The Feminist Remapping of Public and Private Space in Victorian London" (1998) explains that this juxtaposition of the home and work turns the home into a

political sphere where women can command a social presence and initiate social change (67). In a culture where the “town” is normally understood as a masculine domain and the center of the world of work and institutions of power, the identity of a woman is closely bound to the home and also by her absence from public life. Miss Eckhart’s act of turning the house she occupies into her own music studio is thus a way of redrawing the boundaries between the public (town) and the private (home), creating social space and access for herself as a woman to work, to pursue her ambitions, control her social actions, and form her identity as an independent female artist. On one occasion, Mr. Voight, a roomer in the same house where she resides, protests the noise the music lessons make by appearing unclad at the end of the hall. With bathrobe open and his face violently grimacing, he exposes himself with the intention of disrupting her music lessons: “It would be plain to Miss Eckhart or to anybody that [Mr. Voight] wanted, first, the music lesson to stop” (294). Mr. Voight with his blatant show of phallic strength is a patriarchal assault on Miss Eckhart’s efforts in raising a new generation of creative female artists and her attempt to invent space for women in the sphere of art. Yaeger mentions that Miss Eckhart is “ostracized and incarcerated – punished more severely for her iconoclasm than are the men in Morgana” for giving the daughters of Morgana’s community a “forbidden vision of passion” available to a woman artist (153). Ignoring Mr. Voight’s assault, Miss Eckhart refuses to show fear but strives on vehemently towards her artistic ambitions in the face of opposition, defying the patriarchal structures that seek to disrupt and end it.

Miss Eckhart’s students view her as a “formidable” (288) music teacher. Strict and exacting, she is inexorable and terrifying (Vande Kieft 117). A large and heavy woman, she casts a dreadful, monstrous shadow in her studio:

[T]here were times [. . .] she walked around and around the studio, and you [would feel] her pause behind you. Just as you thought she had forgotten you, she would lean over your head [. . .] her penciled finger would go to your music, and above the bar you were playing she would slowly write “Slow”. Or sometimes, precipitant above you, she would make a curly circle with a long tail [. . .] it would be her “p” and the word would turn into “Practice!!” (289)

One after another, each little girl sits quivering under her scrutiny and is forced to yield to the discipline of her metronome. A mistake brings a sharp slap from the flyswatter on the back of their hands. A good performance brings no praise, just a curt “[e]nough from you for today” (289).

The townsfolk’s skepticism of Miss Eckhart is rooted in their inability to accept her origins and foreign idiosyncrasies. Being of German descent, middle-aged, single, and living with her near-senile mother, her alien language, religion and traditions set her apart. She also cooks food in strange ways and eats strange things such as cabbage cooked in wine and pigs’ brain. The very name by which Miss Eckhart is known also proclaims her foreignness:

[. . .] if Miss Eckhart had allowed herself to be called by her first name, then she would have been like other ladies. Or if Miss Eckhart had belonged to a church that had ever been heard of, and the ladies would have had something to invite her to belong to...(sic) Or if she had been married to anybody at all, just the awfulest man – like Miss Snowdie MacLain that everybody could feel sorry for. (308)

Married women from prestigious families of Morgana are addressed using their first name and maiden name which acknowledge their status as married women while preserving their



earlier position as leading members of some of the town's most important families. According to Schmidt, the "practice pays homage to the belief that a woman from the town's aristocracy gives up none of the power and prerogatives that she had as an eligible daughter when she marries" (90). Miss Eckhart, in contrast to the other women of Morgana is called "Miss" simply because she has not married and this, coupled with her refusal to allow anyone to call her by her first name, is considered a transgression of their naming tradition as she "taints the honorary title 'Miss' with suggestions of spinsterhood, eccentricity, and poverty" (Schmidt 90). Such a procedure, like her habits and religion, not only immortalizes her foreignness but also signifies her permanent social exile: she must always be addressed formally, never intimately (Schmidt 90-91). In a community where women are required to serve men as wives and mothers to their children, Kerr in "The World of Eudora Welty's Women" (1979), points out that a woman is relegated to an inferior status if she is unmarried and plays other roles whether by choice or necessity (147).

Miss Eckhart's foreignness becomes more evident in her unconventional reaction towards a sexual assault by a black man. The town's people consider rape as the ultimate disgrace for a woman and expect her to leave in shame after the incident. Instead she accepts no condolences from them and continues with her life as if nothing has happened. According to Gretlund in Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place (1994), Welty specifically points out that Morgana's unwillingness to accept Miss Eckhart is not due to "the terrible fate" of her being attacked by "a crazy Negro" or the memory of the unpleasant incident evoked by her presence but due to her indifference to it: she never talks about the attack and treats it as if it were an unimportant incident (128). Refusing to be discomfited by the

dent, she refuses to comply with the unwritten codes of behavior for the women of Morgana and challenges their definition of pure Southern womanhood. Her nonchalance is overcoming of the fear and consequences of rape which, according to MacKinnon in "Reflections of Sex Equality Under Law" (1991), is used as a mechanism of terror to control women (380). Since rape is an act of dominance over women that works systematically to maintain a gender-stratified society in which women occupy a disadvantaged status, Miss Eckhart's reaction proclaims her refusal to see herself as being in a disadvantaged, subordinate position in a male-dominated society (MacKinnon 380). However, she remains undaunted by this experience and continues in her pursuit of equal standing and recognition of her talent.

Miss Eckhart not only disregards the town's standards of proper behavior by violating its ideas of proper womanhood, she confidently follows her own private ideas of what a lady should be. In her romance with Mr. Sissum, the local shoe-store salesman, Miss Eckhart displays ungovernable passions a proper "lady" must avoid. After Mr. Sissum accidentally drowns in the Black River, Miss Eckhart demonstrates her strong feelings for him instead of silently denying and repressing her emotions like a delicate lady. During his funeral she makes an outlandish spectacle of herself by crying loudly and oddly with a surge, hysterical rocking back and forth like a madwoman. To the people's horror, she suddenly presses to the front, breaks free from the circle of mourners at his funeral and tries to throw herself into his grave.

While Miss Eckhart's defiance and eccentricity may be the subject of gossip and comment in Morgana, Donaldson contends in "Recovering Otherness in The Golden Rules" (1993) that she nonetheless possesses the power to suddenly terrify them with her

unpredictability and inscrutability (500). Once during a thunderstorm, Miss Eckhart reveals the force of her passionate temperament in an impromptu performance to an uncomprehending group of girls. Cassie and Virgie witness and hear the release of the passionate nature in Miss Eckhart's wild playing of a Beethoven sonata. Translating her sorrow into her art, the piece flows "like the blood under the scab of a forgotten fall" (301). The music makes her pupils uneasy for they do not expect such violent emotion to lie in her:

Performing, Miss Eckhart [is] unrelenting. Even when the worst of the piece [is] over, her fingers like foam on rocks [pull] at the spentout part with [unstill] persistence, insolence, violence" (302). While this unexpected self-exposure is alarming, the girls perceive that "something [has] burst out, unwanted, exciting [. . .]. This [is] some brilliant thing too splendid for Miss Eckhart [. . .]. (301)

To their surprise, they discover that a beautiful soul with a powerful, rich and ingenious capacity for creativity lies just beneath the formidable exterior of their monstrous teacher, the Medusa of Morgana. It is this capacity for fine passion, the outburst of her talent and creative energy that the inhabitants of Morgana reject and are afraid of, but what Welty defines as admirable. The writer extols Morgana's music teacher for her idealism and passion for art: "What animates and possesses me is what drives Miss Eckhart, the love of her art and the love of giving it, the desire to give it until there is no more left" (Welty, One Writer's Beginnings 101).

Miss Eckhart lives for her highly organized public June recitals. Her career as a music teacher is by and large frustrating. Caught in Morgana's rigid norms and compelled to teach music to the town's indifferent and untalented children, she succeeds in creating an

annual June recital out of the dreary routine of music lessons. Each June recital is lively and elaborate with festive preparations for new dresses and colorful sashes, printed programs and decorations. By initiating this recital, Miss Eckhart creates an event in which the town must acknowledge her authority and give her some public form of power. The event does not recognize a higher, patriarchal authority or supervision; nor does it recognize boundaries to a woman's authority. It is the one time when the rest of the town may enter her private world, the one time when her authority is recognized, unchallenged and even celebrated. In the month leading up to the concert, Miss Eckhart seems to be the schoolmistress of the entire town, defining the rules and instructing all on their proper behavior. In fact, she has all the authority of a bride, planning her wedding arrangements before she is married. She orders all the "bride's-maids" dresses and treats the event as if she is "married" to her vocation as music teacher. In the midst of the June recital, Miss Eckhart's attitude proclaims the self-sufficiency of her bond with her female students and the fact that she is compelled to teach them not just social skills but the ability to discover a distinctively individual, independent, and "unheard of" woman's voice: a voice that they have partially or wholly suppressed in order to blend into society (Schmidt 93-95).

However, Miss Eckhart's authority over her pupils ceases once they enter adolescence. The "graduation ceremony" of the June recital marks the moment when Miss Eckhart's pupils pass from her control and influence as a surrogate mother figure, to enter into the adult world of womanhood that exists in subordination to patriarchal institutions: institutions of family, church, jobs and higher learning. Such a ritual anticipates the later, crucial step that they will make that is, marriage, (represented by their bridesmaids' dresses), when they will be given to a husband and live under his authority. The

townspeople therefore see it as another ironic example of Miss Eckhart's self-delusion: a pathetic attempt to give her "graduations" the importance of a marriage ceremony and thus an attempt to recoup some of the status and power that comes from marrying well (Schmidt 96).

Miss Eckhart's method of making social contacts is also a violation of social norms. The unwritten social rules of the town dictate that women's socializing should not occur except through events centered around gatherings such as parlor parties, church going, political rallies, concerts, family gatherings, marriages and funerals. Miss Eckhart's social contacts are arranged by her alone, without supervision of patriarchal power structures, and she appears to want no relationships other than those with her female pupils, especially her protégée, Virgie Rainey. Her control over her social relations is a form of separatism which she uses as a strategy of liberation from masculine influence. Her independence coupled with the fact that she is unmarried makes her close contact with her pupils vaguely suspicious and an affront to proper womanhood. It is Miss Eckhart's relationship with Virgie that makes these "unheard of fears" heard and spoken of repeatedly in the town's gossip (Schmidt 92).

Virgie becomes Miss Eckhart's hope for the fulfillment of her dreams and ambitions. Everything that has to be repressed in her public life in Morgana is channeled into her friendship with Virgie. Wild and independent, Virgie is described as possessing masses of dark, silky curls and is "full of the airs of wildness", giving way to "joys and tempers" (291). Kreyling in Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order (1980) points out that "Virgie's hair is the flag of her indomitable self-possession and vitality" (103). Like Miss Eckhart, she possesses traits of the monster woman which gives her the forceful

independence to conduct herself according to her own fierce motives. Virgie's unconventionality, passion and gift for music are qualities she shares with her teacher. Seen as Miss Eckhart's successor and spiritual daughter, Virgie is also perceived as a kind of monstrous being in Morgana.

Much of Virgie's wildness and rebellion can be seen in her proud refusal to be defined by the town's smug standards. She refuses to be tied by Morgana's convention by exhibiting a flagrant disregard for propriety. As upholders of conventional morality, the respectable women of Morgana believe in patriarchal definition of ladylike purity. Cassie Morrisson's conventional view of sex alerts us to Virgie's refusal to accept stereotypical feminine standards in the way she handles the magnolia bloom (traditionally a symbol for white Southern womanhood) as she rides on a bicycle: "She would ride over on a boy's bicycle [. . .] with sheets of advanced music rolled naked [. . .] and strapped to the boy's bar which she straddled, the magnolia broken out of the Carmichael's tree and laid bruising in the wire basket on the handlebars" (289-90). The rich white blossom is bruised as it bounces along in Virgie's bicycle. Virgie's rough treatment of it seems to suggest the speed and energy with which femininity can be borne and her open acceptance of sexuality (Westling 136). When Virgie comes to Miss Eckhart's for her piano lessons, she is often seen "peeling a ripe fig with her teeth" (290). According to Vande Kieft, references to ripening, or ripe, juicy, sweet fruit are usually associated with sexual anticipation or fulfillment (144). Figs have also been traditionally regarded as directly related to the idea of sex and sexual knowledge. Significantly, at the beginning of "June Recital", Loch sees from his bedroom window the ripening of figs on the fig trees nearby while Virgie is making love to her sailor in the MacLain's room upstairs.

Welty uses food as a sexual symbol in The Golden Apples. She mentions Miss Eckhart's and Virgie's preoccupation with food. If Miss Eckhart eats strange German food, Virgie is similarly eccentric in the way she invents exotic sandwiches. While both share the same preoccupation with food, there is a slight difference: Miss Eckhart's fine and delicate taste for *küchen* and other traditional German food and her high regard for classical music indicates that she possesses conventional, romanticized notions of love, while Virgie's invention of exotic sandwiches and preference for contemporary music expresses her bolder and more expressive sexuality. Miss Eckhart's love relationship with Mr. Sissum is depicted as nothing but a pathetic falling in love with the notions of romance. Their romantic expressions are but a comical parody of courtly lovers which Lacan in "The Meaning of the Phallus" (1982) views as "the only way of coming off elegantly from the absence of sexual relation" (141). Virgie mocks Miss Eckhart's superficial treatment of sexuality and highlights the pathetic incredulity of it. During an outdoor summer concert, in which Mr. Sissum plays the cello while Miss Eckhart watches in the audience:

Virgie put[s] a loop of clover chain down over Miss Eckhart's head, her hat [. . .] and all. She hung Miss Eckhart with flowers, while Mr. Sissum plucked the strings above her. Miss Eckhart sat on, perfectly still and submissive. [. . .] She let the clover chain come down and lie on her breast. Virgie laughed delightedly and with her long chain in her hand ran around and around her, binding her up with clovers. (298)

We are told that Miss Eckhart is "sweet" on Mr. Sissum, but Virgie's preternatural intelligence guesses correctly that it will be a doomed love affair (Schmidt 100-101). Miss Eckhart is trapped in the fantasy and fringes of love, never reaching true sexual knowledge

or intimacy. Virgie on the other hand, bites and peels into the ripe figs with her teeth, indicating her direct engagement in violent and animalistic enjoyment of sex.

Virgie parades her defiance by expressing her sexuality outside marriage. In "The Wanderers", we are told that she has already had several affairs. While the name "Virgie" may suggest virginity, Welty's Virgie is far from the traditional chaste woman of the patriarchal text. "Virgie" therefore more adequately suggests the idea of her being a virgin from male control: she is free, independent, not bound to her relationships with any man. She loves freely but not exclusively, dictating her relationships and enjoying the men in her life without wanting to keep any of them.

While the older townsfolk criticize Virgie's perversity, Morgana's children are aware that it is this deviant quality that makes her heroic. Virgie's air of abandon makes her different and "exciting as a gypsy", causing them to "think of her in terms of the future" (291). She is recognized as someone who "would go somewhere [. . .] far off", leave Morgana and become a missionary or serve as "the first lady governor of Mississippi" (292). Her bold and adventurous nature creates for her endless possibilities to determine and control her own future.

Miss Eckhart's praise of Virgie's skill is always couched in her native tongue: "Virgie Rainey Danke schoen" (304). By using German, Miss Eckhart demonstrates that Virgie is the only student with whom she will ever allow to share a part of her life, skill and passion of her art (Schmidt 93). Virgie gives her a reason for living and makes all the drudgery and disillusionment of teaching classical music in provincial Morgana worthwhile. Virgie however, both courts and resists Miss Eckhart's attention. She is honored but also threatened by it. Inheriting the independent and ambitious traits of the



monster woman, she surpasses her mentor and seeks to break free to develop her own identity. Virgie brashly defies her teacher by willfully breaking her rules and refusing the discipline of Miss Eckhart's precious metronome, insisting on setting her own rhythms. Knowing the recalcitrant and independent nature she is dealing with, Miss Eckhart senses, even before it happens, that Virgie will flout her authority and determine her own way. Virgie finally stops studying music on her fourteenth birthday and goes straight to playing piano at the Bijou, abandoning Miss Eckhart, her ideals and her discipline. Her work as a theater pianist becomes for her a means of connecting with the larger community of Morgana and finding another way of developing her own identity (Vande Kieft 118). Both Virgie's sexuality and the defiant way she disappoints Miss Eckhart's hopes for the full development of her talent mark her as Miss Eckhart's mirror image, a person with similar ambitious qualities but who chooses a reverse sexual and artistic pattern for deploying them.

The lines from Yeats's poem "The Song of Wandering Aengus" that Welty alludes to in "June Recital" illustrate Miss Eckhart's love and passion for Virgie. Like Aengus, she tries to recapture a "glimmering girl" who vanishes into adulthood. In the face of evidence that her pupil has grown up, left her, and renounced her art, she gives in to her anger and despair. The line "Because a fire was in my head" in the poem is relevant as it alludes to Miss Eckhart's hair catching fire in her tragic decision to destroy her studio in the MacLain house with Virgie upstairs. "Her hair aflame, Miss Eckhart becomes an archetype of woman's fury and desire" (Yeager 163). Her madness is also fired by anger against the society that has ostracized her. Her reenactment of her June recital seeks revenge against the social standards of Morgana threatened by both her independence and her desire to give

her girls an independent voice. In her delusion, she tries to attack the town's entire social structure by burning down the house of one of Morgana's best families. Miss Eckhart's eventual succumbing to madness and her act of terrible revenge on the community is proof of her ungovernable misery.

Miss Eckhart is not just attacking Morgana by burning the house; she is also attempting suicide. The final target of her anger is thus not Virgie or Morgana but herself. Miss Eckhart has so absorbed society's judgments against her that she now directs her anger inwards as well as outwards. Like Yeats's wanderer she has a "fire in her head," but the image turns in on itself and becomes parodic as she strikes back not at society, but at herself (Yeager 163). Miss Eckhart's suicidal despair is due to the fact that she has absorbed Morgana's delusionary image of herself as a monstrous enchantress of their children. For this reason, the stories of "Fata Morgana" and the Medusa are relevant to Miss Eckhart's life. Welty has said that one of the reasons she picked the name "Morgana" for her imaginary town in The Golden Apples was because it reminded her of Fata Morgana or "mirage". However, the phrase is also associated with dangerous supernatural female beings such as Fata Morgana in Ariosto, Morgan Le Fay in English legends, and (because Morgana was said to be in league with the infernal deity Demogorgon) the three Gorgons, including Medusa. A "Fata Morgana", Cassie Morrison's mother describes the teacher's studio as being similar to the witch's house in Hansel and Gretel. Miss Eckhart of course, is the residing witch in Mrs. Morrison's mind. Of all the women in Morgana, only Miss Eckhart has enough isolation and power to qualify her to be compared with such demonic figures. Miss Eckhart's unmarried and isolated life, her unfashionable and

sometimes frightening appearance, her temper, and her dangerous powers all make Morgana's other women think of her as if she were their resident Gorgon.

Much of the burden that Miss Eckhart experiences can be explained in "The Wanderers" by the painting Virgie Rainey remembers hanging in her studio "[which] showed Perseus with the head of the Medusa" (460). The picture emphasizes the hero's victorious deed. Nevertheless, the underlying paradox in the encounters between Perseus and Medusa, according to Evans in Eudora Welty (1981), is that the heroic act requires a victim (75). Miss Eckhart and her artistic fervor makes her the story's female hero. Yet, while she strives to uphold the role of the heroic female artist, she inevitably goes against the main current of Morgana's patriarchal stream and consequently must fend off all male cultural attacks against her and her art. Opposing the social codes of the town, Miss Eckhart becomes the Medusa, the destructive female presence that society seeks to destroy. Since a hero must have a victim, her heroic pursuits therefore find their victim in herself when she succumbs to madness in failing to subdue a greater monster, Morgana's patriarchal order. Miss Eckhart's forceful violations against the patriarchal order may at first be perceived as a bold opposition against patriarchal authority, but in the end, they destroy her. By endeavoring to be the ultimate hero, she inevitably and ironically conforms to Morgana's image of her as a monster and frames her own destruction. Miss Eckhart in the end is neither vigorous nor redemptive. We see her at the end of her life trying to destroy her studio, the seat to her passion and art, and failing that, being led away to a mental institution. However, women such as Miss Eckhart are institutionalized not to be healed but in order to position conservative gender codes as sane. Such acts of confinement

demonstrate a more profound madness within society than the behaviors for which the insane are confined (Johnston 99).

Virgie, Miss Eckhart's spiritual daughter, is a more successful hero who learns to resolve the tension between Perseus's heroism and Medusa's rage (Schmidt 61). As a young piano student, Virgie at first accepted the legacy that Miss Eckhart offered her, yet later rejects it. As Virgie begins to understand the myth of Perseus and Medusa, she perceives it to be both heroic and destructive. Virgie leaves Miss Eckhart's dream for her behind because she "believe[s] in the Medusa equally with Perseus" (460). If she believes that the female artist is heroic, she must also believe that it is monstrous; a terror that must be pursued and destroyed (Johnston 99). Virgie sees the toll that "absorb[ing]" (460) dualistic life takes on Miss Eckhart; she also sees what happens to a woman when she tries to break through the mythic barriers: Miss Eckhart is ostracized, laughed at, pitied, shunned, and in the end, driven mad. Being a similar object of discrimination, Virgie is afraid of the ostracism that results from such connections with Miss Eckhart: "Perhaps nobody wanted Virgie Rainey to be anything in Morgana any more than they had wanted Miss Eckhart to be, and they were two of them still linked together by people's saying that" (306).

The choices for Virgie are grim: either conform to passive domesticity like her mother, cook, sew; or become the monstrous woman, and follow passion, desire, art, but be ostracized, laughed at, driven mad. Virgie's early choice in her first return to Morgana is to take on the domestic role and to hate everything that Miss Eckhart stands for. She resolves to become domesticated rather than the artist of Miss Eckhart's tutelage. Living dutifully with her mother, she milks her mother's cows and allows her fine pianist hands to be scarred

from outdoor chores, her talents to lie buried and her life to be spent following the pattern her mother has chosen.

When Katie Rainey dies, Virgie's domestic ties are cut. The description of Virgie during the few days surrounding her mother's funeral primarily include scenes which suggest Virgie's release from her lifelong ties to her mother. On the evening before her mother's funeral, Virgie performs a symbolic baptism that represents a kind of rebirth as she undresses and lowers herself into the river near her house:

She saw her waist disappear into reflectionless water; it was like walking into sky, some impurity of skies. All was one warmth, air, water, and her own body. All seemed one weight, one matter – until as she put down her head and closed her eyes and the light slipped under her lids, she felt this matter a translucent one, the river, herself, the sky all vessels which the sun filled. She began to swim in the river forcing it gently, as she would wish for gentleness to her body. She began to swim in the river, forcing it gently. She felt the sands, grains intricate as little cogged wheels, minute shells of old seas, and the many dark ribbons of grass and mud touch her and leave her, like suggestions and withdrawals of some bondage that might have been dear, now dismembering and losing itself. (439-40)

Virgie's experience in the river suggests harmony between her body and nature (Gygax 67). However, the passage where Virgie touches the sands, shells, grass and mud also suggests that Virgie experiences nature's closeness as a "bondage"; the "dismembering" implies a separation typical of Virgie's independence and attempt to break bonds that might hold her (Gygax 67). Since nature is closely linked to the maternal, Virgie's baptism suggests her newfound freedom to leave the world of domesticity and servitude to live a new life after

Katie's death. In addition to this, we are told that when the mourners leave the Rainey house before the funeral, Virgie feels that "[t]hey seemed to drag some mythical gates and barriers from her view" (439).

Hence, with her mother's death, Virgie is given a second chance, and she contemplates what this chance means as she sits gazing at Miss Eckhart's framed picture of Perseus and Medusa. Virgie "[shears] it of its frame" (460) then focuses on one detail: It is the "vaunting [. . .] that lifted arm" (460). "Vaunting", from the Latin "vanitas", means pride. Virgie realizes that there is a third choice for her in which she does not have to be the extreme and proud "hero" artist that Miss Eckhart embodies, publicly defying all cultural mandates for women and turning herself into an outsider. Rather, Virgie can make her own way, by conforming to neither the strictures of the closed domestic community of Morgana nor retaliating in extreme ways. She frees herself by maintaining the tension of opposites (Prenshaw, Woman's World 73). Virgie embraces and accepts what is both Katie and Eckhart, the angel and the monster, the lives of the insider and outsider, the married and the single, the drudge and the artist, the "common sensible" and the insane (Prenshaw, Woman's World 73).

Virgie gains a perspective which will allow her to live the rest of her life in a kind of harmony with the opposing forces represented by the intolerable demands of Miss Eckhart, on the one hand, and Virgie's own natural instincts, on the other. Initially, Virgie had thought she hated Miss Eckhart for trying to force her into the rigid discipline of a musical career, and therefore rejected what Miss Eckhart offered. She had given up the things she did best: "no music, no picture show job [. . .] no piano" (452). Yet unknowingly, she had always been driven by the natural forces similar to those motivating

the hated, grim German spinster who so longed to pass on her musical vocation to her gifted pupil (Westling, Eudora Welty 102). After her mother's funeral, Virgie is disturbed by an apparition which reveals how the maternal qualities of nature are related to the restless yearnings she once expressed in music. In her dreams, her art is transformed into the practical work of domestic households: "as she dreamed one winter night, a new piano she touched had turned, after the one pristine moment, into a calling cow, it was her own desire" (453). Through the long years of life with her mother, she used her talented fingers for milking her mother's cows. Virgie now realizes that the cry of her mother's cows, calling to be milked is similar to her yearnings which can only be relieved by playing the piano. She is also roused by an encounter with an old woman who gives a night-blooming cereus to her as a tribute to her former beauty and music. The flower, which acts as an image of beauty, restoration and growth, symbolizes the positive effects music can return to Virgie's life. Music can rejuvenate the lost spirit of adventure and earnest vision of her youth, leading her to a richer, fuller life.

As Virgie sits to contemplate, she begins to understand the significance of Miss Eckhart's emblematic picture of Persues and Medusa and the importance of Miss Eckhart's influence in her life:

Miss Eckhart, whom Virgie had not, after all, hated – had come near to loving [. . .] had hung the picture on the wall for herself. [Miss Eckhart] had absorbed the hero and the victim and then, stoutly, could sit down to the piano with all Beethoven ahead of her. With her hate [. . .] love [. . .] and with the small gnawing feelings that ate them, she offered Virgie her Beethoven. She offered, offered, offered – and when Virgie was young [. . .] she had accepted the Beethoven, as with the dragon's

blood. That was the gift she had touched with her fingers that had drifted and left her. (460)

Finally able to come to terms with the image of the Medusa that has haunted strong heroines such as Miss Eckhart, Virgie learns to limit or resist society's power to now cast her into the role of a monster. Although she is also a rebellious protagonist, she is at least partly accepted as a role model for her community, and not treated as an outsider. She is the precursor to other heroines that are empowered to build "a place on earth" where even exaggerated figures such as Miss Eckhart can survive.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I went out to the hazel wood,  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread;  
And when white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor  
I went to blow the fire aflame,  
But something rustled on the floor,  
And some one called me by my name:  
It had become a glimmering girl  
With apple blossom in her hair  
Who called me by my name and ran  
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
And walk among long dappled grass,  
And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon,  
The golden apples of the sun. (Yeats 45)