

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The tendency of Southern women writers such as Welty to evoke images of monstrous women has to do with the regional tensions and anxieties surrounding the rapidly changing gender roles, and the emergence of the New Southern Woman during the first half of the twentieth century. In the works examined, we gather that Welty's prominent female characters are mainly monstrous, marginalized figures, incarcerated by societies that reject them in favor of the Southern lady. Such representations were reminders that the roles of women in the twentieth-century South were changing as the True Woman of piety, submissiveness and purity began to give way to "the single, highly educated, economically autonomous New Woman" (246). These female monsters represent Southern women reacting against the antebellum Southern lady in order to seek and establish their own identity. They reflect the "profound unrest in the heart of the girlhood of the New South" as these women yearned for "a higher, stronger life" and "the right to do and dare" (Manning, Female Tradition 46).

Welty is "half sympathetic toward and half horrified" by the spectacle of these monstrous figures caught in-between tradition and change (Donaldson 2). She "penetrate[s] beneath the surface of the harsh or unprepossessing monster with quick, passionate sympathy", drawing attention to these women as "being hurt by the dominant other", whether this is a male character or the community at large (Donaldson 4). Such women find themselves in various forms of confinement and their imprisonment is often signified by the patriarchal literary conventions that stereotype them, traditions that confine their

freedom or the merciless, collective gaze of communities which scrutinizes them (Donaldson, Making a Spectacle 2).

Welty appropriates these figures into her stories to explore their potential for subversiveness. Monstrous women make spectacles of themselves, pursue excess, and transgress the boundaries of the expected and ordinary; they serve as potent figures of women's anger, protesting against conventions, constrictions and limits. Their violence is an articulation of protest against the difficulties women face in finding their own voices under a constricting Southern community.

Emphasizing the Southern lady's powerlessness embodied by the image of the angel in her stories, Welty argues in favor of women working to obtain power within the existing social structure. Hence, it may seem as though Welty prefers the monstrous to the angelic as monstrous women are able to liberate themselves momentarily from restricted plots and envision alternative stories for themselves. Although they inscribe suffering in their bodies, they also suggest the possibility of different worlds, orders and perspectives. Welty directs our attention time and time again to these women who engage in boundary-breaking endeavors to demonstrate their transgressive, subversive strategies (Donaldson, Making a Spectacle 4).

An important subversive strategy employed by these monstrous figures is the act of inverting the simplistic model of male power/female oppression via rape. Viewing rape as not only the deprivation of sexual self-determination for and concentrated act of oppression on women, but also as "a demonstration of power, of a will to assert authority and to dominate, [and] an attempt to (re)establish male dominance by physical violence" (Moorti 44), Welty disrupts this system of oppression through female characters who react

indifferently toward being raped or take on the role as rapist in the story. The three stories trace Welty's trajectory in exploring the idea of female sexuality and the power of rape over women. Her heroines are unabashed about their sexuality. In The Robber Bridegroom, she begins by portraying Rosamond as a sexually curious being who anticipates dangerous sexual experiences. Although Rosamond suffers a rape experience, she also finds herself attracted to her rapist. In The Golden Apples, Welty pushes the female character's search for her own sexuality further through Virgie Rainey, who wildly engages in countless sexual relationships with men while never allowing herself to be controlled by them. The threat of rape is also undermined through Miss Eckhart's indifference toward her experience of a sexual assault. Welty's exploration of female sexuality reaches its climax when Fay rewrites violence in The Optimist's Daughter through a figurative rape of her husband, a role reversal that altogether erases the female position as victim. By playing the rapist, Fay takes on a masculine position and becomes the subject of violence.

While Southern women need to emancipate themselves from patriarchal oppression, Welty critiques the violent measures some women adopt to achieve it as these measures merely reflect their acceptance of patriarchal definitions of femaleness. Southern women organizing and participating in radical feminist movements (represented by the monster figure in Welty's stories) perpetuate the idea that passivity, unassertiveness, or the inability to make decisions are typical female traits, a perspective that mirrors male supremacist interpretations of women's reality. Hence, Southern women have not broken the simplistic either/or view of women's reality as defined by men. Welty also shows that women who stubbornly resist and persist in making spectacles of themselves in the public gaze, suffer and find themselves stepping deeper into the other end of the patriarchal mould of

femininity, which is that of the monstrous. Through characters such as Salome, Miss Eckhart and Fay she demonstrates that women's exercise of power, if unguarded, would not be any less corrupt or destructive than men's. Like men, women have been taught that dominating and controlling others is the basic expression of power. In an attempt to reconceptualize power, Welty suggests that before women can work to reconstruct society, they must reject the notion that radicalism or violence will necessarily advance feminist struggles to end sexist oppression (hooks 91-94). Struggles for power (the right to dominate and control others) such as the destructive acts of Salome and Miss Eckhart, who in the end destroy themselves, perpetually undermine the feminist movement and are likely to hasten its demise.

Nevertheless, suggestions that violence in women can lead to their own destruction while fighting for feminine space and an alternative lifestyle may deter some from making any effort to initiate change. Remaining docile, they stand in danger of becoming trapped forever in the role of the repressed angel. Virgie demonstrates her fear of rejection by society which drives her to momentarily deny her ambitious pursuits and take on the role of the domesticated woman. Laurel's devotion to her mother's memories almost leads her to give up her career in the city in the same way.

Welty suggests the confluence of these two extremes as the solution toward a positive concept of female heroism that will not destroy women but enable them to make positive changes that do not end in self-annihilation. Showing how society is socialized to think in terms of opposition rather than compatibility, Welty demonstrates that Southern women need to accept the complex nature of their experience and know that they can reject patriarchal definitions of their reality which perpetuate the notion that women are only

either politically violent and dangerous or passive and unassertive by converging the oppositional states of passive angel and dominant monster. Her young heroines, Rosamond, Virgie and Laurel are not extremes. Instead, they embrace the creative power and energy of the monster woman while tempering it with traits of the angel. Her female characters, therefore, no longer reflect either/or definitions of womanhood but construct and produce new definitions about women and femininity. These are Welty's New Southern Women. Through them, Welty emphasizes the understandings of power that are not destructive but creative and life affirming.

This dissertation shows that Welty's theme of confluence defines her New Southern Woman and explains how the convergence of these oppositional states relates to Southern female representations and to Southern history. There is room for further research in Welty's works in terms of the analysis of gender and history through theoretical approaches such as New Historicism, as well as further exploration into Welty's view of female sexuality. Welty's narratives demonstrate a preoccupation with the notion of rape and female sexuality little noticed and researched by critics. Future research can move from an emphasis on feminist intertextuality to how Welty's analyses of gender attempts to say something about entire sex/gender systems, and about how these systems are historically constituted. Although this dissertation has not been able to delve into these possible directions in more detail, it hopes to open doors that will lead to future findings which will uncover Welty's subtle but "serious darings" in refashioning the image of the Southern woman during a time of massive cultural gender reformations (Welty, One Writer's Beginnings 104).