DISTORTED TRADITIONS: THE USE OF THE GROTESQUE IN THE SHORT FICTION
OF EUDORA WELTY, CARSON MCCULLERS, FLANNERY O’CONNOR
AND BOBBIE ANN MASON

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This dissertation argues that the four writers named above use the grotesque to illustrate the increasingly peculiar consequences of the assault of modernity on traditional Southern culture. The basic conflict between the views of Bakhtin and Kayser provides the foundation for defining the grotesque herein, and Geoffrey Harpham’s concept of “margins” helps to define interior and exterior areas for the discussion.

Chapter 1 lays a foundation for why the South is different from other regions of America, emphasizing the influences of Anglo-Saxon culture and traditions brought to these shores by the English gentlemen who settled the earliest tidewater colonies as well as the later influx of Scots-Irish immigrants (the Celtic-Southern thesis) who settled the Piedmont and mountain regions. This chapter also notes that part of the South’s peculiarity derives from the cultural conflicts inherent between these two groups. Chapters 2 through 5 analyze selected short fiction from each of these respective authors and offer readings that explain how the grotesque relates to the drastic social changes taking place over the half-century represented by these authors. Chapter 6 offers an evaluation of how and why such traditions might be preserved.

The overall argument suggests that traditional Southern culture grows out of four foundations, i. e., devotion to one’s community, devotion to one’s family, devotion to God, and love of place. As increasing modernization and homogenization impact the South, these cultural foundations have been systematically replaced by unsatisfactory or confusing substitutes, thereby generating something arguably grotesque. Through this exchange, the grotesque has moved from the observably physical, as shown in the earlier works discussed, to something internalized that is ultimately depicted through a kind of intellectual if not physical stasis, as shown through the later works.
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CHAPTER 1

DISTORTED TRADITIONS

Introduction

The term “grotesque,” which has become almost synonymous with Southern literature, generates a great deal of literary disagreement. Originally used to describe something decidedly non-human, applied to the gargoyles perched atop medieval cathedrals, “grotesque” has come to represent a diverse range of conditions. Philip Thomson notes in his historical survey The Grotesque that the term retained its identity as a tangible, visual reference as it moved out of the grottoes of ancient Rome into the cathedrals of medieval Europe and eventually onto the canvasses of painters. However, much of the definitional trouble began as it moved onto the pages of writers. Once the use of “grotesque” moved out of the strictly tangible realm into the intangible realm, disagreements over its significance began in earnest.

What continues to lie at the heart of the debate is an inability to determine what ought to be considered grotesque. Consequently, literary critics such as Thomas Mann, William Van O’Connor, and Leslie Fiedler cannot agree on the “proper” use of the term, leading some critics to complain that the term “has been applied so frequently and so recklessly by so many contemporary critics to so many different literary occurrences that it now becomes increasingly difficult to use the term with any high degree of clarity and precision” (Spiegel 426), while others begin to see the grotesque as the true hallmark of the Modernist genre (Millichap 339). However, the lively debate over what is or is not grotesque suggests that the concept is only undergoing its own metamorphosis into something more in keeping with contemporary views. As Geoffrey Harpham notes, the grotesque is omnipresent and can support nearly any theory; therefore, there appears to be no way to progress to a comprehensive theory (“Preface” xviii).
The core of the debate comes from Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin. Kayser, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, sees the grotesque as that which espouses the horrifying demonic aspect of human life, a negative circumstance to be feared and eschewed at all costs. Bakhtin, on the other hand, in *Rabelais and His World*, sees the grotesque as satanic, but goes on to assert that all laughter is demonic, born out of the fall of humanity; therefore, his view takes on the aspect of Carnival, an idea derived from the festive, democratic, popular culture of the Middle Ages, in which all aspects of the sublunar realm were seen as temporary and all humans were flawed and doomed. Such an idea was heavily influenced by the various plagues that swept Europe, but particularly the fourteenth century bout with the Black Death, which spawned an abundance of grotesque art characterized by a celebratory atmosphere as Death and his minions led a string of corpses in a kind of bizarre conga line. Nevertheless, if these two key opponents in the debate contradict one another on basic premises, how can lesser voices be expected to agree? Moreover, with two such divergent premises, how can the use of the grotesque be understood? And, more important to this dissertation, what does the close association of the grotesque with Southern literature signify?

The answer to this question may be derived in part from Geoffrey Harpham, who offers several observations that are useful and one view in particular that may serve this dissertation. Harpham posits an interpretation of the grotesque that seems to fit the more contemporary perspective, claiming that its depiction can assume a variety of forms; it is, therefore, a “species of confusion” (Intro. xv). Furthermore, the grotesque form need not be strictly tangible in artistic expression; it can also “be experienced as a psychological event” (Harpham, Intro. xv). These two ideas begin to clarify the confusion that has resulted from contemporary modification of the traditionally tangible grotesque. Harpham elaborates:
it is up to the culture to provide the conventions and assumptions that determine its particular forms. Culture does this by establishing conditions of order and coherence, especially by specifying which categories are logically or generically incompatible with which others. (Intro. xx)

Such a requirement points directly to the Southern understanding of the grotesque: As formal systems of order come under increasing attack, cultural coherence slips when incompatible elements are juxtaposed, and the result is frequently grotesque. Furthermore, for Southern culture in particular, such an unraveling of formal order represents a threat to identity and existence itself; as Thomas Mann notes in Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man (originally printed as Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen, 1918, and translated and published by F. Ungar in 1983), the grotesque is “‘properly something more than the truth, something real in the extreme, not something arbitrary, false, absurd, and contrary to reality’” (qtd. in Harpham, Intro. xix). In the Southern consciousness, these are true words, indeed, as the traditional communal, familial, and spiritual truths of Southern life are systematically replaced by incompatible realities.

To anchor this interpretation, Harpham claims that grotesqueries “stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived” (3). Such a margin applies nicely to Southern culture, which is consistently interested in the liminal, thereby producing the phenomenon of “outside” and “inside,” a trait that informs Southern culture, and thereby Southern literature. For example, a Southerner would reasonably consider someone from his own community as a fellow, but someone from a different county would be considered a stranger, and someone from a different state would be a foreigner. Therefore, the stranger might be perceived as grotesque because he is unknown. For example, in Faulkner’s novel Absalom! Absalom!, Thomas Sutpen is grotesque in part because he pointedly avoids ties
with the community. He has no past, which makes him suspect, and he lives outside town, which keeps him unfamiliar. Sutpen is not grotesque simply because he lives outside town; he is grotesque because he stands at Harpham’s “margin.” The townspeople have only rumor and gossip to satisfy their curiosity about Sutpen; therefore, he is simultaneously known and unknown.

In addition to this physical quality of the liminal, behaviors that transgress accepted communal norms and views that are unique or eccentric are also frequently considered grotesque because they are inconceivable for some reason to members on either side of the community in question. Here, perception is key. For example, non-Southern critics have often dealt harshly with Southern culture and literature, partly from a lack of understanding of the Southern temper. H. L. Mencken’s infamous commentary, “The Sahara of the Bozart” (originally printed in the New York Evening Mail, November 13, 1917), contributed to the development of the movement known as the Fugitive-Agrarians, a group of highly educated and cultured men (and one woman) who sought to define and clarify the distinctiveness of Southern letters—indeed, to defend the culture and civilization of the South itself.

Donald Davidson in particular penned a number of responses to similar critical views, the best known of which is “Why the Modern South Has a Great Literature.” In this essay, Davidson describes the conditions surrounding the life of William Faulkner in contrast with conditions present in the North and questions whether such conditions could create a writer of Faulkner’s stature. Davidson details the degree of poverty and deprivation that most Southerners, including Faulkner, faced daily, a circumstance resulting directly from the War Between the States and the lengthy period of Reconstruction that followed. Much business in the South was destroyed through these two events, and in many cases, rebuilding, at least by Southerners, was impossible.
Infrastructure, especially roads and railways, had also largely been destroyed or compromised due to the numerous battles fought on Southern soil. Fortunes were lost by families that had known wealth for generations and by those who had labored to create wealth within a single lifetime. Education became a secondary concern for many because survival took precedence—all hands were needed to work and earn what could be earned. So how could such a region—one beset by devastation, poverty, and ignorance—produce a writer like Faulkner?

Davidson’s response ultimately embraces Vergil’s idea of the happy and blessed man, a man whose knowledge “possesses the heart rather than a knowledge achieved merely by the head—a knowledge that pervades the entire being” (171). Such knowledge, according to Davidson, is the dominant characteristic of Southern society. Such knowledge is derived from sources that John Crowe Ransom would describe as non-economic, focusing as they do on manners, customs, and traditions that preserve the community and the individual’s place within it. Such knowledge suggests that Southern writers are motivated by an understanding of the more metaphysical aspects of life, greater truths than economic forms can discern or produce. Such a decidedly non-scientific, anti-modern view contributes greatly to the perception that the South is full of grotesque behaviors and views, as well as people.

Without doubt, the South is different from other regions of the country and peculiar figures continue to populate its literature. As Flannery O’Connor is well known to have said, a Southerner still knows a freak when she or he sees one (“The Grotesque” 44); such peculiar knowledge has generally been sustained by the distinctive insularity of Southern culture. But the question that remains is this: What constitutes such a freak and how should one be understood? I believe that part of the answer exists within the intrusion of modernity into the South, an unavoidable circumstance that has brought these peculiarities to light. Post War writers, such as
Faulkner, depicted overt physical and psychological deformities, partly in response to the losses incurred by defeat in the War Between the States and partly in response to the inescapable changes brought about by modernity. Faulkner’s society was being unraveled around him as change was forced upon the South both from without and within. This situation contributes to the gothic quality present in many of his works; characters deteriorate because they are trapped in familiar places and patterns that no longer serve their original purposes, e.g. Miss Emily in “A Rose for Emily.”

Lacking direct experience of the loss Faulkner felt, the second-generation writers—Welty, McCullers, and O’Connor (and in Mason’s case, third-generation)—do not appear to know whether to laugh or cry, a condition suggestive of the disagreement between Kayser and Bakhtin: The fictional characters seem ludicrous, but are beset by such metaphysical terrors as to render laughter dark if not impossible. On the other hand, these second-generation writers, trapped in the nexus between tradition and progress, face a problem that differs from Faulkner’s. For them, the South of Faulkner exists only in memory, preserved by traditions under challenge by change, as Welty points out, some of which is necessary and some of which is arbitrary. Nevertheless, change generally creates confusion as traditional patterns are redefined. Moreover, because these second-generation writers are once removed (in Mason’s case, twice removed) from the more immediate changes within Southern culture and, thus, the more overt use of the grotesque, their depictions are frequently less obvious as they tend to focus on more subtle deformities of character and behavior rather than strictly physical appearance. From the 1930s and 1940s, Welty and McCullers tend to rely more heavily on overt grotesqueness; at the very least, their subtlety relies on some external force to reveal the grotesqueness within the community or the individual. Certainly, the 1950s and 1960s see O’Connor commingling
physical and spiritual deformity. With the 1970s and 1980s, Mason’s even more subtle applications reflect the increasingly incoherent culture and the incompatibilities that generate the confused and grotesque response. Part of the pressure forcing the grotesque inward is generated by those outside the Southern culture who cannot conceive of how anyone could embrace the traditions once held dear by the now-grotesque figure; consequently, those inside the culture must attempt to redefine themselves in order to comply with the more contemporary view, becoming grotesque in the process, or they must adopt beliefs and practices perceived as grotesque, a circumstance that generates confusion. Such subtlety, hovering as it does between tangible, physical attributes and the confused psychological state, contributes to the debate over the grotesque.

To begin to tease out the foundation of this debate, and to determine a working definition of the grotesque for this study, Thomson’s history will prove useful. As he states, the grotesque generally grows out of the “co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable” (3). This incompatible juxtaposition, according to Thomson, encourages one of two reactions in the reader: laugh it off or be indignant at the outrage to one’s moral sensibilities. If the reader decides that additional context may help with an appropriate understanding, but the additional context only increases the level of uncertainty, the full range of grotesqueness is achieved. Here is one of the traits of Southern literature: The grotesque is used to depict something laughable in a context in which laughter is incompatible. The Southern writer attempts to dispel perceptions—those of the reader and those of the story’s characters—by showing humans as twisted (a result of the Fall from grace), stripped of all glamour.

Flannery O’Connor, for example, is a master of this technique. She dispels perceptions by juxtaposing expectations and “norms” against unexpected depictions. Consider, for example,
Joy-Hulga in “Good Country People.” Here, we have a thirty-two-year-old woman who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy. The idea is comical when considered in light of Joy-Hulga’s behavior and apparent intellect; she seems like someone insufficiently mature or disciplined to have made the commitment necessary to attain a Ph.D. in any subject, much less philosophy. In fact, she tells Manly Pointer that she is seventeen, a lie that bears more truth than fiction because Joy-Hulga acts more like an adolescent than an adult. She is sulky, rude, and deliberately confrontational. As she tells her mother, “‘If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM’” (O’Connor 274). Moreover, her naïveté seems better suited to a teenager than an adult; despite her advanced education, she is easily fooled by Pointer, an uneducated but savvy country boy. As their romantic encounter unfolds in the hayloft, Joy-Hulga asks, “‘Aren’t you just good country people?’” and Pointer replies, “‘Yeah . . . but it ain’t held me back none. I’m as good as you any day in the week’” (290). Joy-Hulga’s naïveté is further revealed when Pointer tells her, “‘You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!’” (291). Thus, the scene dispels a number of perceptions: Joy-Hulga is not as smart as she thought; the educated do not always triumph over the wily; “simplicity” does not equal morality. Joy-Hulga’s stereotypical view of “good country people” is shattered, and the grotesque takes on a dual function as it simultaneously embodies Joy-Hulga’s physical deformity and Manly Pointer’s spiritual one. Joy-Hulga is literally stripped of any semblance of glamour as her prosthetic leg is stolen, preventing her from leaving the loft without assistance, and her self-image is destroyed as she realizes that a “bumpkin” has duped her. Yet, this bumpkin is both more and less than he appears as his façade of goodness and simplicity conceals a modern view to rival Joy-Hulga’s own. What Joy-Hulga never suspects is that she did not have to attend the university to purge
herself of her rural views; such a nihilistic view was working its way into her territory without her knowledge.

Furthermore, we might reasonably expect a young woman to take an interest in living her life rather than cloistering herself away in an undesirable situation. For example, she might seek employment, and Joy-Hulga does state that except for a heart condition, she would be “far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about” (O’Connor 276). Obviously, the heart condition is not what is keeping her from fulfilling that possibility. In a twisted sense, Joy-Hulga’s refusal to fulfill any of her potential reflects her philosophy that one must accept WHAT IS rather than what might be; therefore, her development is arrested, a fact that supports her lie described above. In addition, one might reasonably expect a young woman to take an interest in her appearance with the goal of attracting a future husband, a traditional avenue of escape from her situation. However, Joy-Hulga has abandoned all sense of tradition because she believes in Nothing. Therefore, because she apparently feels unattractive, Joy-Hulga has deliberately made herself ugly and has rationalized her action as a reflection of WHAT IS. A victim of a hunting accident at age ten, she wears a prosthetic leg, with which she pointedly stumps around, despite her ability to walk more “normally,” without so much noise. Her mother believes that she does it because the sound is ugly. This girl has also changed her name from Joy to Hulga, and the ugliness of her choice pleases her. We are further told that the girl is “. . . brilliant but she didn’t have a grain of sense. It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year she [Joy-Hulga] grew less like other people and more like herself—bloated, rude, and squint-eyed” (O’Connor 276). It is impossible to know whether Joy-Hulga’s appearance has corrupted her spirit or vice versa, but the description above implies O’Connor’s interest in the liminal: Joy-Hulga is ugly on both the
outside and the inside, a detail of reciprocity that suggests the power of the grotesque to leap boundaries.

Part of Joy-Hulga’s grotesqueness comes from the fact that she is simultaneously comic and pathetic. The reader laughs despite reflecting on a dreadful situation. The plausible expectation might be that a young girl would adjust to a deformity such as losing a leg, especially if she had other outlets for creativity, expression, or success. But rather than pursue a compensatory activity, Joy-Hulga embraces what she believes to be repulsive, from appearance to bearing to attitude. (Her attitude will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4.) Even her education fails to please, as noted by her mother:

The girl had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, “My daughter is a nurse,” or “My daughter is a schoolteacher,” or even, “My daughter is a chemical engineer.” You could not say, “My daughter is a philosopher.” That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans. (O’Connor 276)

This comment not only reveals the mother’s dismay over Joy-Hulga’s esoteric choice—philosophy is not particularly useful in a practical context—but it attempts to provide additional context for the reader. Clearly, Joy-Hulga does not come from a family where intellectual pursuits are encouraged or valued. Education should be practical, as the suggested careers above indicate. If Joy-Hulga could find a job, then her education would serve a purpose. Additionally, if Joy-Hulga had chosen to use her study in philosophy to accomplish that discipline’s more traditional purpose—to find happiness through a better understanding of life—she might have been able to benefit from her study rather than use it to rationalize her empty outlook. On the other hand, if she took more interest in her appearance, especially while at college, and her
attitude, she might have made herself more attractive, both as a woman and as a person; thus, she might have found a husband. Either way, she would be out of Mrs. Hopewell’s hair and on her way to creating her own life. However, Joy-Hulga has abandoned tradition, so these avenues are unavailable. To compound matters, we learn that Joy-Hulga has come away from her university experience believing in Nothing, as Mrs. Hopewell learns when reading a heavily underlined passage in one of her daughter’s books:

   Science . . . is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing—how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing. (O’Connor 277)

Herein lies the foundation for Joy-Hulga’s attitude. Where once she had beliefs and traditions, she now has education, and this education has taught her that all we can know is Nothing. Where is the hope or promise in such a view? Where is the human dignity? Indeed, Joy-Hulga’s behavior indicates that she sees no reason to integrate herself into any form of society, no matter how large or small, because nothing that defines her identity or existence matters. Juxtaposed against the absurd idea that only Nothing is something (with apologies to Heidegger), Joy-Hulga remains a pathetic figure. Consequently, this additional context provides little resolution to the tension this juxtaposition creates, so the grotesque remains, both in the physical person of Joy-Hulga and in the situation.

   A second point that Thomson raises also serves in determining a definition of the grotesque for this project. He notes that the present tendency is “to view the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, . . . as an appropriate expression
of the problematical nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change, or disorientation” (11). Nothing could be truer of the South, especially in the period of twentieth century modernization. Certainly, the strife of the War Between the States and Reconstruction was severe in its own right, but it was compounded by the radical changes brought about by the abrupt redefinition of social and racial relations, as well as the economic changes produced by the War. In addition, the South faced the disorientation caused by the violent attempt to remove its traditional society, as Reconstruction, carpetbaggers, scalawags, and modernity seeped into its confines, frequently replacing or distorting more familiar practices, customs, and perspectives. From the overt, such as the elimination of slavery, to the insidious, such as the substitution of science for religion, the foundations of the South were dismantled, one by one, and replaced with something that was alien, confusing, and frequently unwanted. Donald Davidson reveals the source of the primary conflict as he notes that the South was and is a traditional society, meaning a society that “is stable, religious, more rural than urban, and politically conservative. Family, blood-kinship, clanship, folk-ways, custom, community, in such a society, supply the needs . . .” (172) of its members. Such traditions, and especially any sense of stability, were coming under attack as “progress” inexorably made its way into the South.

Gregory A. VanHoosier-Carey partly explains the severity of this conflict between tradition and progress in the South when he points out that “Anglo-Saxonism had played an important role in the formation of national identity in antebellum America” (159). This circumstance likely derives from what many have identified as the South’s romantic attachment to Sir Walter Scott’s novels, but what is generally overlooked in this intentionally derogatory association is the Southern cultural foundation that would make such an attachment logical,
namely the conviction that one must be devoted to God, community, and family, generally in that
order. Because of such a conviction, the events leading to and following the War Between the
States led many Southerners to take this Anglo-Saxon association a step further, ultimately
seeing “themselves in a position they believed to be similar to that faced by the Anglo-Saxons
after the Norman Conquest” (VanHoosier-Carey 162). Just as the Anglo-Saxons had preserved
their distinctive culture within a hostile environment, so the South imagined its culture could
survive, sustained by what Allen Tate has called “knowledge carried to the heart” (qtd. in
Davidson 171). The resultant tension between incompatible cultural views led to grotesque
behaviors and attitudes as we see in the South a dogged determination to retain some degree of
its traditional views and practices, despite the pressure to comply with more modern customs.
Not only does this tendency of Southern perspective point toward a cultural clash, but it also
indicates a temporal clash. Such a temporal disconnect is suggested by Paula Uruburu in her
study of Nathaniel Hawthorne: “. . . any success or failure we experience is the result of our own
human fallibility, coupled with a lack of any defining traditions” (49). Despite his place in New
England society, Hawthorne emphasizes a nineteenth century view that survives into the
twentieth century primarily because the South carries it there. Uruburu’s two points—humanity
as fallen and tradition as sustaining—keenly reflect the Southern view of human existence.
Southern society following the War self-consciously chose to reject the progress of the modern
century in favor of the stability and tradition of an earlier time, thereby concentrating its attempts
to remain separate from the encroaching reality of its circumstance and enhancing its apparent
grotesqueness.

Uruburu further confirms Harpham’s idea of the liminal in her conception of how the
American grotesque is produced. It is the result of the “unavoidable clash between our
pragmatic and our romantic instincts” fed by a “reliance upon order and absolutes in an ever changing society lacking identifiable and reliable boundaries” (27). The culture of the South was indeed suspended between the pragmatic and the romantic as interest in the reality of the concrete (cf. any Southern poetry, especially that by John Crowe Ransom) warred with the allure of ideals (cf. Scott’s sense of chivalry). Reconsider Joy-Hulga: she is governed by the reality of a false leg and the inescapable necessity of doing something with her life, but she is attracted to one of the least concrete academic discipline imaginable as she attempts to “make sense” of her situation. Uruburu sheds further light on the production of the grotesque when she notes that a reliance upon shared cultural beliefs and behaviors that are deemed normal in preserving the “law of the tribe” allows for the inversion of said beliefs, which leads to a questioning of what is normal or abnormal (28). Uruburu is specifically talking about how the pursuit of material wealth creates a paradox when balanced against the ideals of the American dream because part of the tribal law she refers to requires a moral balance. The modern pursuit of material wealth frequently conflicts with this moral balance and causes a paradigm shift. Such an inversion of belief certainly took place following World War I, when thousands of Southern “farm boys” went overseas to answer their country’s call and returned home filled with such confusion. What once had been black and white—namely social and ethical traditions seen for generations as absolute arbiters of order—became gray as the borders of the South were breached. The normality of Southern traditions came into question as the relativism of the twentieth century, marked as it was by the progress associated with urbanization, industrialization, and individualism, became a phenomenon that the South could no longer escape. The confusion generated by this liminal breach—one that violates both the geographical and psychological
thresholds of the Southerner—has led to the creation of the grotesque figures that populate much of Southern literature.

In shifting this concept from the pursuit of the American dream to an analysis of Southern culture in particular, it is useful to turn to John Crowe Ransom, who addresses the phenomenon. In “Forms and Citizens,” an essay that does much to clarify the Southern view of the pragmatic and romantic conflict mentioned above, Ransom notes that we inherit 

economic forms . . . traditional forms of such objects as plough, table, book, . . . and such processes as shepherding the flock, building, baking, making war.

These forms are of intense practicality . . . They are the recipes of maximum efficiency, short routes to ‘success,’ to welfare, to the attainments of natural satisfactions and comforts. (30)

Ransom confirms the utility of such forms in their proper context—they are necessary and useful, but not in every situation. Social encounters, for example, require a more aesthetic approach in order to preserve the values inherent in the situation—dignity, pride, mystery, and respect. Ransom explains the difference between these “work forms” and what he calls “play forms”:

Societies of the old order seemed better aware of the extent of their responsibilities. Along with the work-forms went the play-forms, which were elaborate in detail, and great in number, fastening upon so many of the common and otherwise practical occasions of life and making them occasions of joy and reflection . . . yet at the same time by no means a help but if anything a hindrance to direct action. The aesthetic forms are a technique of restraint, not of efficiency. (30)
Here, Ransom refers to the function of formal, i.e. aesthetic, behavior, an art that springs from a code of mannerly conduct. In Ransom’s model, this code of conduct prevents the hasty acquisition of that which he describes as work forms. As he explains, the tendency of the modern world is acquisition in the most efficient way. The object desired is pursued in a direct fashion, a circumstance that Ransom notes results from the rise of the “natural man” who asserts his rights insistently through his emphasis on his “individualism” and thus becomes “a predatory creature to whom every object is an object of prey” (34). This man is juxtaposed against Ransom’s explanation of the “social man, who submits to the restraint of convention, [and] comes to respect the object and to see it unfold at last its individuality” (34). Here is a clear explanation of what has come to be called Southern chivalry. The traditional and hierarchical society preserves the value of its members by imposing codes of behavior that are intended to allow each individual to retain his dignity as the relationship develops. As Ransom observes, the function of such a code is to “make us capable of something better than the stupidity of an appetitive or economic life” (34). But the code itself has proven to be problematic in the modern world where traditional hierarchies are breaking down and new perspectives create the need for immediate change. Therefore, the code, too, becomes an example of the confusion generated by the conflict between the concrete and the ideal as individuals attempt to preserve it. Such individuals often become grotesque, or at least are perceived that way.

Again, we turn to Flannery O’Connor for a prime example of this conflict. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the grotesque wears two faces: that of the hypocritical grandmother and that of the murderous Misfit. In what can only become a fatal encounter, the grandmother confronts the escaped killer known as The Misfit. Although she never once asks mercy for the lives of her family, she attempts to save her own life by using the “code” on the young man with
the gun: “‘I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!’” (127). Here, she attempts to assert the Southern sense of social hierarchy as she associates the young man with what she understands to be the more desirable level of society. She asks if he would shoot a “lady,” and he replies that he would hate to have to. Repeatedly, she alludes to his upbringing, his family, and his “good blood;” repeatedly, he denies her assertions: “‘Nome, I ain’t a good man [. . .] but I ain’t the worst in the world neither’” (128). Consequently, the two engage in a kind of epistemological conversation. The grandmother “knows” what the young man ought to do and draws her argument from traditional views that endeavor to appeal to the Misfit’s cultural sensibilities: communal responsibility, family ties, and spiritual influence. She also knows that if he would pray, Jesus would help him change his life.

The Misfit, on the other hand, replies in a more modern vein, insisting that he does not need any help from Jesus, but is doing fine on his own. He prefers a kind of empirical quid pro quo:

“Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. Of course . . . they never shown me my papers. That’s why I sign myself now. I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you’ll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you’ll have something to prove you ain’t been treated right. I call myself The Misfit . . . because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.” (131)
Here is the modern man demanding an accounting and insisting that the only thing that can be known is what can be demonstrated. Because he cannot get the demonstration that he wants, he keeps his own record. This type of parity recalls Ransom’s economic forms; the Misfit desires an efficient method of accountability. However, the foundation for the Misfit’s complaint is a spiritual one, and he voices the issue that many people would like to have resolved:

“If He [Jesus] did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.” (132)

Certainly, if the scriptures are true, then the Misfit has spoken rightly; if the scriptures are just myth, then the Misfit has also spoken rightly, not in the sense that only meanness nets pleasure, but in an almost nihilistic way through which the absence of “consequence” would liberate many people to pursue their own interests because earthly actions would no longer matter.

This situation also recalls the conflict identified by Uruburu above, namely that between the practical and the romantic. The Misfit is infinitely practical. He never denies he is a criminal; he gives no suggestion that he will act outside of his character. He does not wish to escape the consequences of his actions; he only wishes the consequences to fit the actions in a quid pro quo relationship. The grandmother, on the other hand, is the romantic proponent of an idealized society in which her role will help her wiggle out of her dire circumstance. Each of these characters is grotesque because of a misapplied perspective. The Misfit desires a tangible and practical accounting of existential questions, and the grandmother desires a practical outcome through aesthetic influences. At the end of the story, the Misfit and the grandmother
come close to making a genuine human connection, what might be considered a bridging of the traditional and the modern. Faced with her own imminent death, the grandmother realizes the level of her spiritual hypocrisy as she acknowledges that men like the Misfit are the product of her variety of “Christianity,” a religious practice that pays lip service to scriptural doctrine but does little to live the true faith: “‘Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!’” (132). When the grandmother reaches out to touch his face in an affectionate gesture that suggests her recognition of her own culpability, The Misfit rejects the encounter and reasserts his individualism as he “[springs] back as if a snake had bitten him and [shoots] her three times through the chest” (132). In one regard, this violent rejection suggests the inability of the traditional aesthetic foundations of Southern culture to survive the demands of the practical modern age while simultaneously suggesting the emptiness of a purely practical existence. A synthesis of the two perspectives might indeed provide a form of cultural salvation, with the practical view forcing a sense of accountability for failure and the idealized view reaffirming the worth of life, but the situation as described in the story is too grotesque to end happily.

This inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to synthesize the traditional and the modern is at the root of this issue in Southern literature, a fact that creates a variety of interpretations of what is or is not grotesque. In some respect, the very effort to connect the two realms generates the oddity. Malgorzata Sikora observes that the central issue for O’Connor is that “modern life has found no substitute for a lost or failing belief in God, and culture is uninhabitable without such a belief at its center” (190). Certainly, this is true (O’Connor’s spirituality and the grotesque will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.), and this loss of the divine center leads to the generation of something grotesque, whether in the form of the character directly or in the situation presented to the character. As Louis Rubin notes, the Southern writer sees humans as
creatures of society by nature; alienation from that society is tragic because the basis of human action is essentially moral and the test of behavior is seldom ascribed to social efficacy alone. What characters do and think matters because it gives them dignity and importance that transcend the merely biological and economic (“Second Thoughts” 39). The three characters used as examples so far fit Rubin’s idea. Each is alienated from his/her society; each is tested by a moral confrontation; each seeks an economic resolution to that confrontation. Consequently, the resolution is unsatisfactory and the situation becomes grotesque as the modern interests and the traditional verities clash.

This degree of incompatibility can perhaps be understood in light of a comment made by Alan Spiegel: “. . . the Southern writer gives us the everyday world as it is experienced by a person who is mentally or physically deformed, while the Northern (that is non-Southern) writer gives us a normal individual who is beset by a surrounding world that is grotesque” (qtd. in Sikora 187). Spiegel is generally correct here, if the observation is applied to Faulkner and writers of the first generation, but those within these later generations do not always rely on this distinction. In fact, as modernity becomes increasingly established within the confines of the South, the literary grotesque assumes increasingly internalized forms. Welty, McCullers, and O’Connor hover between the physical deformity and the psychological limitation of their characters; for these writers, the grotesque is apparent through the behavior of the character if not the appearance. However, for Mason, the grotesque is expressed through an almost purely internalized response to an unfathomable world that cannot merge with the character’s views, thus leaving the character paralyzed by an inability to choose clearly one side or the other.

Such an inability to merge the traditional world of the South with the modern world of the non-south leads to the question of what distinguishes southern culture from that of the rest of
America. Indeed, this is a complex question, but part of the answer lies in the seminal study conducted by James McBride Dabbs, *Who Speaks for the South?* Herein, Dabbs distinguishes between the character of the earliest settlers, who established the plantation system that dominated the eastern seaboard, and the later settlers, dominated by the Scotch-Irish [Dabbs’ term], who expanded through the piedmont and mountains. These groups in particular represent the extremes of Southern culture, but Dabbs’ argument does much to explain not only why the South is different from the majority of the country, but also why such extremes exist within its boundaries.

Dabbs begins by examining the seventeenth century settlers in America, who, generally speaking, were English and can be broken into two broad groups. The first group consists of the Puritans, who settled New England, coming to America with a mission to advance their religious ideas into the wilderness. For them, the New World was an adversary to be conquered and tamed, and this interpretation can be readily confirmed by first-hand accounts such as those left by William Bradford and John Winthrop. As the Puritans succeeded in this process, they intended to establish such a perfect and rigorous example of Puritan practices that all of Europe would imitate them. As Dabbs notes, they meant to

\[\ldots\] cut themselves off from the world, to purify themselves of worldly lusts, and to find God in the wilderness. They meant the physical wilderness of America. Unhappily their search led them, through the centuries, into the wilderness of the individual heart, which, isolated from its world, became a natural core for those wildernesases of steel and stone we call modern cities. (11)

Here begins the great chasm that exists between the North and the South. Characterized by emotional and intellectual intensity, the Puritans applied their religious zeal diligently, engaging
in continuous self-examination in an effort to “prepare a man for its [i.e. the gift of God’s redemption] reception and for its recognition when it came” (Dabbs 13). These traits generally led to the Puritans’ desire to change the world into something more in keeping with their spiritual views. The wilderness of the New World—a place where satanic influence was apparent—had to be confronted and shaped in order to reflect the religious mission the Puritans had undertaken. “From the beginning, the Puritans did not accept the world as it appeared to be. On the one hand, they were afraid of it, tried to flee from it, and purify their hearts of it; on the other, they were scientifically interested in it—albeit with the highly religious spirit of seventeenth-century science” (Dabbs 13). In part because of this intellectual vigor, and in part because of the geographical conditions of the region, the Puritans quickly saw the benefit in establishing towns. Dabbs states that “the Puritan desire for religious and moral control” (14) encouraged this development, but once the town was established, manufacturing was not far behind. And, as history shows, manufacturing led to the growth of cities.

This phenomenon of modern development created a split within the Puritan community. As Dabbs notes, the Puritan idea that the world should be used for the glorification of God was exploited by those within the Puritan community who began to take pleasure in their ability to utilize the wonders of the New World. It was this idea of taking pleasure for oneself that led to the appearance of the Yankee. Dabbs explains the transformation:

But when saints begin to use a wicked world which they do not allow themselves to enjoy, when they self-indulgently allow themselves to take pleasure in their power of using the world, they become something less than saints. Though their catechism tells them their chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, they now begin to glory in the world, and even worship it. Ceasing to be
complete men, physical-spiritual beings in a physical-spiritual world, they become manipulators. They become Yankees. (15)

Such a development provides the two sides of the modern character in the North: the demanding spiritual rigor of the Puritan and the grasping calculation of the Yankee. The bond that connects these personae to the general character of the North is a sense of dissatisfaction with the world as it is. These settlers left an England that was—in their view, at least—oppressive and restrictive. The religious intolerance and socio-economic stratification that was common there generated for the Puritans a sense of disgust with that society. Consequently, the Puritans imagined creating a world that conformed more perfectly to their own views. With such an inspiration, they immediately set to work changing the New World to fit their perspective of a fallen world in need of redemption.

In contrast, the second broad group consists of the settlers who moved south of the rugged and intemperate zones of New England. These men and women found much less to criticize, and were much more Elizabethan in their perspective and their expectations. Although obviously not entirely satisfied with life in England, the Virginia settler had “no desire to remake English religious customs or any other English customs, [so] he gladly took his past with him” (Dabbs 19). This conservative temper is the root of the Southern character, and Dabbs offers additional traits that further serve to distinguish this settler from his Puritan counterpart:

The Virginian was not irreligious; he was only more conservative in his religion. Being therefore more under the influence of the vanished Middle Ages, he was more accepting of the totality of life than was the Puritan; he was not so deeply concerned to purify the spirit from all earthly influences . . . he was less abstract, less modern; he moved more hesitantly into the modern
world. . . the Southerner entered the New World, lured on mainly by the thirst for adventure and economic advancement. (19-20)

This attachment to tradition and to the past came with these early settlers and became engrained in the Southern character. The connection to the past also appears in the Episcopalian character prevalent in the South, where “man was less the isolated individual struggling upward in a world of isolated individuals and more the social being accepting his place in a fixed social order” (Dabbs 22). Such a view works perfectly with the Virginian, who claimed a more English goal in his ventures in the New World: to create a landed aristocracy, to build and maintain great families.

This type of society focuses on the formality of public life, and indeed such was true in the South. Religion, for example, was a “more public, a more inclusive, a more social matter. In this view, much more depends upon custom and ritual, much less upon study and solitary introspection” (Dabbs 24). Here we are reminded of Ransom’s sense of work forms and play forms. The aesthetic of a formal Southern society was modeled on the Elizabethan pattern of a fixed social order wherein manners ruled the day: respect was required for those who commanded it and courtesy, at the least, was required for all others. Unlike the Puritan who sought to impose change upon his world, the Southern character was more at home in the world as it was and thereby inclined to preserve the “relatively static past world of the Middle Ages” (Dabbs 24). Such a trend confirms the likelihood of the South’s conscious attempt, as described above, to preserve nineteenth century perspectives following the War: the character of the South derived from a past age from its inception. Such an attachment to what Tate later describes as a “backward glance” informs its temperament and becomes part of Southern tradition.
This interest in the past also confirms Dabbs’ assertion that the South moves slowly and is not quick to change, a fact that is further confirmed by the generally conservative character of the South. This sense of conservatism (drawing upon the idea of being moderate or cautious as well as the idea of preserving traditional values and customs) suggests that because the traditions of the past are sufficiently important to be preserved within a given community, the past itself has value within that community. Such a conservative character tends to enhance the dignity of the individual by preserving those roles and functions with which the individual is generally associated. Provided the “code” of mannerly behavior is maintained, this level of conservation preserves a formal society in which each member fulfills a clearly defined function and thereby retains some portion of individual significance through the performance of that function.

Although Southern custom tends to focus on preserving the community at large, this goal is achieved through recognizing the part played by each individual within that community. Each individual role is more or less significant, determined by that individual’s place within the overall hierarchy, but each individual nevertheless plays an integral role, much as that seen in the Middle Ages, whether peasant or lord, fool or scholar, cleric or rogue.

While it is true that racial discrimination and segregation within the South often serve to refute such a view, it is also true that individuals of all races were commonly afforded respect and dignity even when the racial groups were not (contrary to the North, where groups were conceptually embraced, but individuals—the discrete and concrete elements of the group—were often treated badly). Such a dichotomy contributes further to the presence of the grotesque within Southern culture: a black retainer might be considered a member of the white family and treated with great respect while that same white family might speak openly about their dislike of blacks in general. Undoubtedly, this ability to separate the individual from the group contributes
to the “peculiar” nature of race relations within the South: individuals may be afforded a
genuine place within the social hierarchy while groups at large may be patently excluded.
Ironically, even this tendency is part of that conservative nature prominent in the South: the
traditional society in the Southern perspective was Caucasian and derived primarily out of the
United Kingdom. “Foreigners” (recall the discussion above), whether by race or nationality—
regardless of voluntary or involuntary presence—were tolerated and acknowledged on an
individual basis as they proved their value and commitment to the community at large.

Such a perspective requires some explanation and Dabbs offers a perceptive one. The
Southerner has a “strong sense of his life as being centered between the past and the future
within a place whose expansible limits reach far into space” (35). This refusal to let go of the
past tends to push the Southerner in circles about the object of consideration, much as if one foot
were anchored in place while the other attempted to walk. If the “free” foot tries hard enough, it
might succeed in dragging the “anchored” foot forward, but only a little at any given time. Thus,
progress is slow. Dabbs also observes that the Southerner is “a realist, not an abstract thinker,
and his respect for reality is positive. [. . . ] Reality is a living, changing, growing thing. The best
you can do is circle it and circle it again” (35). This constant circling is the action of the poet,
not the scientist, and as such, contributes to the external view of the Southerner as a romantic.
However, this method also recalls Ransom’s theory of indirection, his “play forms” that preserve
the mystery of the thing under consideration; such an indirect approach provides time for
contemplation and allows the object of interest to unfold its mysteries slowly, thereby preserving
its dignity and acknowledging its value. Hence, individuals from outside the core social
hierarchy may, over time, come to earn a place within that hierarchy, but groups that demand
admission would be seen as interlopers to be actively and automatically excluded. The Southern
temper would not “cotton” to such precipitous and indecorous efficiency. In the context of the Yankee described above, this typically indirect method would be judged as inefficient; in the context of the Puritan described above, such an interest in earthly reality would be undesirable. Consequently, the Southerner distinguishes himself in part by the way in which he sees the world he inhabits, and is often labeled “grotesque” at worst and “quaint” at best.

This sense of circling reality also points toward a view expressed by Erik H. Erikson, who notes that the American character in general is formed in part by “Puritanism and the tension between home and frontier” (qtd. in Dabbs 36). Dabbs notes that for the Southerner, this tension was different—the Southerner saw home in the frontier, and the frontier in home because he carried more of his past with him (37). Because the earliest settlers in Virginia did not wish to change their lives completely, but intended to set up a traditional landed aristocracy in a new place, their frontier was literal in the sense of inhabiting a new land, although the land itself was similar to the one they had left. Also, the life they envisioned mirrored the life they left, but with an opportunity to create their own aristocracy and landed gentry. Therefore, the early Virginia planters were exploring their ability to move into the upper echelons of an aristocracy that may have been closed to them in England, but was available through their efforts in America. The dangers in the Virginia territory were relatively superficial, although concrete: famine, disease, and Indian conflict. But, as Dabbs notes, the settler there was less afraid of these dangers and less inclined to change this frontier drastically than his Puritan counterpart might be said to be. The past that he brought with him gave him a pattern to follow, and consequently, a sense of confidence in his endeavors. This, too, contributes to the Southern penchant for accepting the world as it is rather than seeing it as something to be “whipped into shape.” The past has already
given it shape; all the present needs to do is preserve that shape, or alter it—albeit slightly—but only when necessity demands.

A series of successive frontiers enhanced this necessity, but more for the North than for the South. For example, as America won its independence from England and began the westward expansion in earnest, many young people in the Northern states began to travel to Europe. Indeed, the continental grand tour became a rite of passage among the children of prominent families, partly to explore what they identified as their genealogical and cultural past, and partly in an effort to affirm their identities and determine their futures. The break with Europe self-consciously engineered by the Puritans had begun to mend. Writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who objected to this influence and urged Americans to determine their own culture and trust their own tastes (cf. “Self Reliance”), confirm this phenomenon. In some respect, this grand tour represented an effort to establish or retain a sense of self and a connection with the known in the face of an ever-expanding frontier characterized by a wilderness that had palpable influence on the settlers’ sense of identity. Certainly, those who settled on the frontier quickly found that “traditions” common in the cities of the eastern coast did not necessarily apply in the increasingly distant settlements of the ever shifting “western frontier.” The allure of this wilderness, and its resultant temptations, harkens back to the Puritans’ concern with the demonic influence they perceived in the “New World.” Such an allure threatened to undermine their society by eliminating the need for such civilization due to the distance and the accompanying isolation imparted by the frontier. Although this perception appears to be more prominent among the seventeenth century settlers, the idea resurfaces in the nineteenth century as settlers in remote areas were often influenced by the necessities of the region before they could “whip it into shape” as part of God’s new kingdom.
This concern over identity was less prominent in the South, where the English past had never been fully abandoned and where the frontier was anchored on at least one side by cultivated lands. Additionally, many Southern families customarily sent their sons to school in England (specifically, rather than to Europe in general) because of the dearth of colleges in the South. Consequently, the search for identity through an investigation of the past was generally unnecessary for the Southerner because he knew who he was and understood his tradition; indeed, he had never left it. Furthermore, the westward expansion that characterized America’s development was less fearsome to the Southerner because, as Dabbs argues, he had this clearer sense of his identity; consequently, he saw the frontier as less threatening and, thereby, less as something to be conquered than his Northern counterpart. Just as the early Virginia settlers saw the land as familiar, so did the nineteenth century settlers, because agriculture, an unfailing system of daily life and economy, tended to bind the past to the present. As plantations expanded in search of fertile soil, and as increasing numbers of small independent farmers, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers sought new fields to plant, the uncultivated coexisted with the arable, the frontier with the familiar. The agrarian model sought to change smaller, more manageable plots as new fields were incorporated into the larger entity; thus, the frontier was less intimidating in the South. As Dabbs states,

. . . what we had scattered over the South, and expressing its chief economic ideal, was the plantation, essentially orderly and rational, established in a natural world still heavily touched by frontier wilderness. Through most of the history of the South, then, wherever the Southerner was, he could feel within himself the tension between settlement and frontier, the tame and the wild, order and chaos, culture and nature. Thus, that economic system of the South encouraged that
sense of life as rooted in the past and growing into the future that English men
originally brought to Southern shores. (43-44)

In this regard, no matter how much wilderness might exist within the geographic boundaries of
the South, order was ever-present, whether through the plantation itself or through the
subsequent social hierarchy that dominated Southern culture.

Coupled with this order and hierarchy imposed by the tradition of the plantation
system, the Southern poetic sensibility, as Dabbs notes, created a circumstance in which the
South expressed its poetic nature not only through “its relation to space and time, but also in its
heavy reliance upon images” (154). Because of the way in which the Southerner perceived
reality, he tended to recognize his world as concrete, a place where “sights and sounds have
meaning within themselves, a world which images forth its meaning” (Dabbs 154). The fact that
the Southerner tends to see the world in concrete terms rather than abstractions supports the
claim that in the Southern perspective, those elements have significance in their own right apart
from the significance imparted to them through interpretation, for example. Such a view is
completely logical within the Christian framework that dominates the Southern culture: if God
made it, it must be important. Because humans are limited and cannot see the whole of God’s
plan, they must trust in the wisdom of the divine. Consequently, the Southerner circles the
object of contemplation, as described above, in an effort to come to an understanding of it
because he knows that it has significance within the world. Moreover, because the Southerner
understands that a gap exists between the divine plan and human understanding, he accepts the
world as it is more readily than his Northern counterpart (also as explained above). Thus, the
slower pace that dominates the South, influenced by the region’s conservative nature, becomes
both logical and essential because it affords the Southerner more time to discover the meaning of
things in the world, whereas “... the extreme modern is so immersed in process, and so hurried forward by it, that, though he sees some meaning in life, that meaning, instead of inhering in the scene about him, exists abstractly in some vaguely imagined world” (Dabbs 154). Herein lies the basic dichotomy between the Southern character and the Northern character. Because it is rooted in a traditionally agrarian system, the Southern character seeks to cling to those traditions that lend value to daily and communal life. In contrast, the Northern character, influenced by the intellectual abstraction embraced by the Puritans, such as the desire to wrest control of the “New World” away from Satan, and shaped by advances in industry and technology, moves forward at the pace of “progress” in those areas, exchanging the old for the new and increasingly “modern.” The traditional and agrarian view as embraced by the South sees the world as part of creation, and humans as custodians of that part; the modern view as embraced by the North tends to see the world as something to be conquered or exploited, and humanity as both initiator and beneficiary of the resultant changes.

When two such divergent views collide, each practitioner is likely to see the other as odd or undesirable, at the least, and grotesque, at the worst. But these differing views alone do not account for the differences between the South and the North. The second major wave of immigration between the United Kingdom and America played a strong role in further differentiating the South from other regions.

As noted by Professor James G. Leyburn, nearly all the settlers in America prior to 1680 were English, but after that date, the number of English immigrants declined sharply and settlers from other areas began to appear in large numbers. For example, beginning in 1717, Ulstermen began leaving Ireland in large waves of migration; in fact, estimates suggest between 200,000 and 300,000 Scotch-Irish (following Leyburn’s use of the term) came to America
between 1717 and 1776 (Leyburn 157). As with all immigrants, reasons for leaving Ireland centered on economic opportunity and desire for religious and/or personal freedom. Leyburn’s study titled *The Scotch-Irish* offers an extensive discussion of the history and motivation of this particular population, but key details will suffice for this study. Generally speaking, the Scotch-Irish who arrived in America via Boston found little welcome or encouragement to stay. Those who arrived in Pennsylvania, however, were warmly greeted, although they were not able to have the frontier to themselves. Arriving at about the same time were waves of Germans, now chiefly Lutheran and Reformed. In addition to these other immigrants, the new Scotch-Irish settlers had to contend with Indians who had prior claim to these frontier areas. Tensions quickly arose between the Scotch-Irish and the Germans, as well as between the Scotch-Irish and the Native Americans (Leyburn uses the term “Indians”). Leyburn states that colonial commentators noted distinctive temperaments:

> It was usual to expect Germans to be orderly, industrious, carefully frugal; they rarely had trouble with Indians; if they interested themselves at all in politics, it was usually on the local level. Scotch-Irish, by contrast, were regarded as quick-tempered, impetuous, inclined to work by fits and starts, reckless, too much given to drinking. No contemporary observer praised them as model farmers. Their interest in politics on the Provincial level was soon to become active, even tempestuous; and their fame as Indian fighters was to become almost as notable as their reputation for causing trouble with the Indians. (191)

Such comments might be considered politically incorrect today, but the evidence of the time certainly seems to support the estimation of the Scotch-Irish character. James Logan, the
Provincial Secretary of Pennsylvania, observed that “‘a settlement of five families from the North of Ireland gives me more trouble than fifty of any other people’” (qtd. in Leyburn 192). In fact, according to Leyburn’s study, the Scotch-Irish caused so much trouble for the Pennsylvania Provincial government that Secretary Logan ceased issuing land patents in an effort to calm the tensions they had provoked with both the Germans and the Indians. However, this legal technicality did not deter the Scotch-Irish from settling on “unclaimed” land. These Ulstermen believed that where land was abundant and unoccupied, “it was only reasonable that they should have it if they were willing to clear the forests and make farms on it” (Leyburn 192). Such practices often led to violence in instances where the Ulstermen encroached on Native American territories or undeveloped lands owned by other settlers. Distances between these frontier lands and the centers of government made enforcement of the laws virtually impossible. Consequently, in order to stave off escalating hostilities, Pennsylvania ended up purchasing more and more land from the Indians—an expensive solution that did little to endear the Scotch-Irish to the other citizens of Pennsylvania.

Perhaps some of these troubles were curtailed in time by yet another Scotch-Irish trait: restlessness. In fact, the Scotch-Irish penchant for transience led them to take advantage of the opportunity to settle the Valley of Virginia, where, beginning in 1730, Governor William Gooch was granting tracts of land to “individual enterprisers” (Leyburn 201). About the same time, frontier territory in the Carolinas was also becoming available to all comers; prior to 1730, the only settled areas in the Carolinas were found in the coastal regions, where Englishmen “tried to live like lords in the New World. The Church of England was, of course, established, and familiar English institutions were introduced for the comfort of the gentry” (Leyburn 211). The fact of this decidedly English presence in the tidewater regions further encouraged the Scotch-
Irish to take up residence in the untamed wildernesses of the frontier regions of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia as these immigrants pushed further south. Furthermore, because the more densely populated lands were expensive, most Scotch-Irish settlers chose the markedly less-expensive regions in the wilderness, although cost was not the only factor contributing to their wanderlust.

The documented character of the Scotch-Irish described above—whether genetic or socially defined—is not unrealistic in light of the history of these particular immigrants. In brief, the English monarchy had tried a variety of methods by which to solve the “Irish problem,” a domestic problem marked by unemployment, starvation, and violent resistance to both the English crown and the Established Church, none of which were successful. Elizabeth I went so far as to try a plan of colonization; however, it suffered disastrous effects. Nevertheless, following her death, advisors convinced James I (James VI of Scotland) that such a plan might be successfully carried out at Ulster in Northern Ireland. The goal of this plan was twofold: to settle the unrest along the border between Scotland and England, thereby eliminating border incursions by the Lowland Scots into the adjacent English countryside; and, to plant a strong “English” presence in Ireland in hopes of calming resistance there to English rule. Fifty-nine applicants for land in the new Ulster plantation were accepted, accounting for a land grant of 81,000 acres (Leyburn 92). A variety of settlements were established, some Scottish and some English. However, over time, the residents of Ulster became a “nation” unto themselves, and ultimately formed the core of what later became the Scotch-Irish, formed out of the intersection of “Scottish Lowlanders, English farmers and Londoners, and Irish natives” (Leyburn 95). Although these Ulstermen discarded much of their Scottish past in favor of the new traditions afforded by life in Ulster, their distinctive characters and customs lent flavor to the new blended
culture they were developing. For the Scottish Lowlanders, for example, Ulster provided a new social arrangement markedly different from the one they had known in Scotland. Feudalism (although it characterized Scottish life well into the eighteenth century) did not exist in Ulster. For all of the residents and tenants, Ulster provided a first taste of individualism in the sense that settlers could decide where they would live, for whom they would work, and in what capacity. Furthermore, Ulster did not rely solely on agriculture, but also established woolen and linen industries. The success of these two industries provided for trade opportunities formerly unavailable to the Scot. Consequently, many farmers abandoned traditional agricultural occupations in favor of something both more profitable and less labor-intensive, a fact that perhaps prepared the Scotch-Irish for ranching and other entrepreneurial pursuits that could prosper in the wilderness areas of America.

In addition, Leyburn points out that Ulster had no traditions such as those a Scot might embrace, including “no traditional ties to bind a man to lord, laird, and locality […] leadership would have to reveal itself by a person’s performance, not by his family’s accustomed status through the centuries” (140). By making their own gentry through their individual achievements, the Ulstermen were preparing for their eventual migration to America while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from the “Scotsmen” they used to be. As Leyburn states, the Ulsterman of 1717 was no longer a Scot, but a person of “a new and different nationality” (142) because Ireland was their “home” and Scotland was but “a folk memory.” Consequently, because they had invested so much personal energy into developing Ulster, they felt a deep, personal attachment to that place. A sense of personal investment developed in such a fashion creates a loyalty that quickly replaces any sense of attachment to a place that exists only in dimly remembered tales. Such tales reflect the abstract, while the place itself is concrete.
This trait of attachment to a particular place—one that is both real and tangible—would also carry over to the American migration, ultimately contributing to the stubborn love of place exhibited in the South where “sweat equity” became a generational phenomenon.

In many ways, this sort of personal attachment contributed to Ulster’s success, primarily economic, and part of the appeal of migrating to Ulster arose from that success. In Ulster, a man might build something for himself that would be unattainable in Scotland. Moreover, the distance between Ulster and Scotland was relatively small, so the risk in such a venture was minimal, evidenced by the fact that by 1620, only ten years after the Plantation was established, Ulster had about 50,000 Scottish and English settlers; by 1640, the number had doubled (Leyburn 111). In fact, the primary risk in moving to Ulster lay in the rancor of the native Irish, who were cut out of the venture entirely, or at best, hired on at virtually slave wages (despite English opposition to employing the Irish at all). Leyburn notes that the attitude of the Ulstermen even at this early time failed to take that native rancor into account, suggesting rather that the lands were in “better hands . . . [and were] being more carefully cultivated” (114), an attitude that most certainly provides the root of the view held by the Scotch-Irish regarding the native territories discovered in America and discussed above.

Remarkably, despite what might be considered sizable obstacles, the Ulstermen built remarkably productive farmlands, but English political unrest threatened to destroy that fiscal success. Moreover, this English turmoil introduced religious conflicts over the form that church government should take, attempting to replace the more Scottish Presbyterian form with the English Episcopalian form. This issue, and other religious controversies prominent in England during the seventeenth century, led to an increase in the English presence in Ulster as Dissenters
fled England’s tumult. However, the increased English presence coupled with increasing discontent over Church policies and growing fiscal curtailments that favored the English settlements over the Scottish ones led many of the Scotch-Irish to abandon Ulster in favor of America.

As Leyburn observes, conditions at Ulster had prepared the Scotch-Irish for their pending emigration; they had learned through experience that “. . . one must fight for what he has; that turning the other cheek does not guarantee property rights; in short, that might makes right, at least in the matter of life and land ownership” (148). Such a view is also characteristic of the Southern temper, and undoubtedly the Scotch-Irish experience influenced that perspective. As the immigrants moved further south, flowing down the Virginia Valley, they not only had to fight native populations, “English” politics, and other settlers, but the wilderness itself. For reasons explained above, they generally chose the more western regions, a fact that necessarily meant areas less hospitable and more demanding. Nevertheless, they managed to build new lives, drawing on their fortitude and past success: if they had prospered in Ulster, they could also prosper in America.

All of this figures into the Southern character in complex ways, but for the purpose of this study, perhaps a simplified summary based on my claim that Southern character—predominantly white, but not exclusively so—is dominated by an emphatic reliance on devotion to God, community, family, and place will suffice.

The Calvinistic zeal characteristic of the Scotch-Irish contributes to the Southern character by generating a sense of strict discipline within the community, governed by God’s will rather than man’s government, suggesting the degree of importance ascribed to God and His church. This view translates into the Southern perspective in the form of loyalty to God, who
necessarily comes first in the hearts and minds of the people of the community. When questions arise, whether related to political or social life, God’s Word is the ultimate authority. Where the understanding of God’s Word is governed by a more educated or aesthetic sensibility, the interpretation may be more formal, influenced by the hierarchical social structure. Where the understanding is governed by an unadulterated reading of the scriptures and taken in a more literal sense, fundamentalism is generally the result. In some respect, this offers an explanation of the religious peculiarities within the South: the formality of the more English Episcopalian system dominant in the Tidewater/plantation areas versus the more literal interpretations exercised by the Calvinistic Presbyterian system dominant in the more western regions. Each group recognizes the importance of hierarchy and loyalty to God within the community, but their methods of application and interpretation differ, generating the more formal liturgy in contrast with the more fundamental meeting. Thus, for the Southerner, God comes first within a traditional society, regardless of the source that directly influences a particular individual.

Following devotion to God, devotion to the community itself might reasonably be considered the next most important aspect of Southern tradition and character. The Scotch-Irish understood the importance of community because they had built one of their own at Ulster. They recognized early on that they would have to contend with numerous enemies, primarily the English but also the native Irish, so they insulated themselves from “outsiders” by stubbornly clinging to their own perspectives and customs. These customs were influenced by what they knew to be right, motivated generally by their Calvinistic beliefs, which they preserved in stiff opposition to English customs. Such Calvinistic zeal tended to produce a quality of bigotry, a derogatory term, as Leyburn notes, but for this study, it explains in part the Southern sense of “us” and “them,” or “insiders” and “outsiders,” recalling Harpham’s margin and the Southern
interest in the liminal. Those who existed outside the community were suspect on at least two fronts: they were “different” and they might be enemies. Consequently, strangers, i.e. outsiders, were not to be trusted until they had proven themselves. Such an insular view also points toward the tendency within the South to accept individuals while eschewing the group at large. For example, Leyburn notes that the Scotch-Irish at Ulster generally despised the Irish, finding them lazy and contemptible, yet there were cases of intermarriage despite English opposition to intermingling with the Irish at all. Perhaps the Ulster experience with merit rather than inheritance explains some part of this tendency. Individuals may exhibit merit and value within a community despite a general disregard for the group the individual represents. By the time the Scotch-Irish began their migration to America in 1717, such views would have become ingrained. The fact that these practices carried over to their American experience as part of the Ulster tradition is not surprising.

This recognition of the merit of the individual also influences the Southern devotion to family. Family is, at its simplest level, a concept governed by blood ties. Within the South, blood is indeed thicker than water, and “kin” outrank outsiders in all confrontations. Even blood relations who go astray may find welcome in times of stress because, after all, family is family. Just the mention of blood connection, no matter how distant, can generate a warm and hospitable welcome. Take, for example, Carson McCullers’ story, “The Ballad of the Sad Café.” Miss Amelia takes in a dwarf claiming to be a long-lost and somewhat distantly related cousin. The validity of the claim is never seriously questioned: blood is blood. Undoubtedly the fierce loyalty to family commonly exhibited in the South stems from the concept of “insiders” and “outsiders” since many smaller communities were formed by families and became multi-generational enterprises. Such a phenomenon would be logical especially among the settlers in
the western regions where communities were more widely separated from one another and interactions between them were limited or nonexistent. However, this emphasis on blood relations sometimes flexes to include “adoptees,” specifically those who have shown merit or who have demonstrated loyalty to the family. Such cases may include retainers, employees, unmarried neighbors, widows, orphaned children, and, in some cases, slaves. Once the Southerner decides that someone is “like family,” the fierce loyalty afforded to blood relations is extended to that individual as well. Such largess can certainly be rescinded should that individual come into conflict with someone of blood relation, but the conflict would have to be a serious one.

The devotion to community and family naturally flow into the love of place. As described above, the Scotch-Irish labored to build the plantation at Ulster and thereby came to love the product of that labor. Upon emigrating to America, they repeated that pattern, building communities out of the wilderness regions they preferred to inhabit and fighting to retain and protect those communities. As they moved further south, they repeated the pattern. Despite the romantic nature of such a claim, the fact is that the Scotch-Irish paid for their communities with sweat and blood. This kind of investment logically leads to a love of the place so hard-won. In addition to the literal struggle to build the community, the Scotch-Irish chose areas that seemed familiar. As Leyburn states, the Irish countryside lingered in the minds of the immigrants; certainly, the wide green valleys and the rounded peaks of the Appalachian and Smoky mountains must have reminded them of “home.” Furthermore, the situation they found in America was similar to the one they had experienced at Ulster. The government was primarily English and the native populations did not welcome them. Consequently, they were going to have to repeat the pattern of Ulster, another fact that contributed to their determination to make a
place of their own. Such a sense of ownership is also evident in the Southern character, and serves to explain part of the devotion to place so characteristic within Southern sensibility.

What makes the Southern perspective interesting is this dual nature of its origin. The plantations of the Tidewater and the smaller communities established by the Scotch-Irish embrace the same general principles, although each group comes to those principles from different sources. Perhaps the older traditions embraced through the plantations allowed for a “softer” or more aesthetic application of those principles, whereas the experiences of the Scotch-Irish generated a more violent response when their principles were challenged. Such a dichotomy contributes to the grotesque tendencies explored by Southern writers as it often contributes to a situation that is simultaneously desirable and appalling. Whereas the principles themselves are generally positive, their application, governed by two essentially different interpretations, can generate results that may be questionable or odd to those who do not share the Southern perspective. Consequently, the Southerners generally understand one another, but may not be understood by non-Southerners.

Herein lies the core of the grotesque. These principles—devotion to God, community, family, and place—serve well enough within a specific context, but that context cannot withstand the onslaught of modernity. On the one hand, Celtic customs such as those embraced by the Scotch-Irish are well embedded within the Southern psyche, and exist in a kind of uneasy relationship with the more Anglo-Saxon customs that also exist there, deriving from both the plantation system of the Tidewater regions and the self-conscious attempt to preserve Southern culture following the War Between the States. As the South is forced to come to terms with its relatively archaic views, these foundations of Southern society are stripped away one by one, leaving a vacuum that is ultimately filled by more modern principles that cannot serve the
Southern perspective, or that serve, but in unrecognizable forms. Because these more modern principles are unfamiliar and often contrary to traditional Southern perspectives, their application within Southern society often generates something that is grotesque, both in physical and non-physical ways.

The goal of this dissertation is to examine the connection between this encroachment of modernity and the subsequent evolution of the grotesque as depicted in the short fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, and Bobbie Ann Mason. Toward this end, I should note that Lewis Lawson makes three observations in *The Grotesque in Recent Southern Fiction* that will be particularly useful. First, he notes that most critics in the 1920s and 1930s were hostile to Faulkner’s works for being too different from the typical Southern novel. These critics realized that older Southern novels were “sentimental evocations of the Southern plantation myth, continuations of a tradition that had originated in response as much to the demands of large-circulation Northern magazines after the Civil War as to the need of the South to believe in a glorious past” (91). This observation acknowledges the Southern tendency toward myth making and suggests one manner of dealing with the inevitability of change. It also provides a backdrop for my own argument in the sense that distinctive “generations” are suggested: that of the Old South itself and that of the first generation of writers, represented most powerfully by Faulkner, who sometimes lamented its passing, but always recognized the dramatic and often confusing changes taking place. Thus, it is reasonable to examine the selected writers named herein as a second-generation, or a generation once removed. Furthermore, Lawson points to the schism between Northern and Southern perspectives—the Northern magazines appearing analytical and economically oriented and the Southern readers
seeking to preserve a more worthy ideal. This idea has already been discussed in terms of the Puritan/Yankee character of the North and the Elizabethan/Scotch-Irish character of the South.

Next, Lawson paraphrases a comment from Edwin T. Bowden’s work, *The Dungeon of the Heart*, stating that Sherwood Anderson’s characters are grotesque because they are “twisted and abnormal, at odds with the world around them, somehow always limited and partial. A few are amusing, but most are pathetic. None is complete . . .” (97). Lawson observes that Anderson’s grotesques live by a single truth, making the truth false and themselves freaks. Certainly, this is also true of some Southern grotesques, such as Hazel Motes in O’Connor’s novel *Wise Blood*. However, part of the contention of this dissertation is that Southern writers generally depict grotesques that are a kind of antithesis to Anderson’s view. Southern grotesques tend to become freaks because they lose sight of essential truth(s) rather than embrace only one, and this loss of truth is a by-product of the introduction of modernity as a substitute for tradition.

Lawson’s third valuable observation appears in a quote from Ihab Hassan’s work, *Radical Innocence*:

“It is in this perspective of estrangement and desire that the currency of grotesque figures in contemporary fiction must be viewed . . . It allows him [the novelist] to extend the range of fiction to those tenebrous realms of which we have become reluctantly conscious. It permits him to question torpid habits and vapid norms, and to shock us through creative distortions into some recognition of truths we dare not face.” (98)

For many Southern writers, estrangement from custom, place, and culture frequently drives the work; desire to return—to a time, place, or condition—frequently informs the characters. What generally creates the grotesque within Southern fiction is the recognition of the truth of change,
the fact of loss, and the sorrow that comes from the realization that the current generation, as
Joan Didion once observed about recent changes in Southern California, will never know what
they have lost or that they should care. Consequently, as this sense of estrangement grows, along
with the recognition that loss is increasingly unavoidable, the grotesque moves from a physical
manifestation to a more intangible one because the problem being addressed exhibits an
increasingly emotional and psychological nature.

This shift from external deformity to internal conflict seems to characterize the progress
of the grotesque within Southern literature, as suggested by the four writers discussed herein.
The debate over what can or cannot be considered grotesque may continue in our contemporary
climate of relative value and acceptability. However, the concept of the grotesque today is most
frequently applied to various aspects of what is definitely human. Even if it seldom applies to
appearances, it continues to modify descriptions of behaviors, social identities and customs,
religious practices, and even interpersonal relationships. Certainly, the advances of the modern
world have in many cases challenged at least and shattered at most those institutions and values
that have historically defined cultures and societies. With the current emphasis on individualism,
what might have been considered grotesque in past days is now in many instances considered
only eccentric, yet, in the Southern consciousness, there is a sense that important things have
changed and the result is unrecognizable. Because of the relaxing of what once might have been
considered social norms, the idea of “grotesque-ness” has moved from outside to inside, meaning
that it is no longer restricted to something observably non-human, but has become integrated
with what is unquestionably human although frequently conceptual rather than tangible. This
shift is also problematic in the Southern view, which is dominated by a reliance on the concrete
rather than the abstract. More and more, however, the concept of the grotesque is implied
through a refusal, or an unwillingness, to comply with contemporary political pressures—certainly the trend of “political correctness” has contributed to this phenomenon, as those who refuse to “get with the program” are not seen as individualists, but as freaks or relics. For Southern writers, such a trend must seem alien, part of Harpham’s nexus between the known and the unknown. In a heavily conservative and traditional region like the South, the collision between custom and modernity has indeed created a conflict between laughter and tears, a fact that plays out in the depiction of the grotesque (at least from a Southern perspective) characters and circumstances.

These transitions have taken place over the past one hundred thirty-five years, but the more profound changes have occurred roughly between 1930 and 1980. The first generation of Southern writers had more immediate experience with the trauma of the War: they survived it directly or their parents or grandparents did. Either way, it was a relatively fresh event for them. Consequently, their fiction reflects a stronger reaction to the loss and their grotesques tend to be represented in more physical forms. By the time we reach Welty and McCullers, most of the trauma exists only within memory, preserved through family and cultural narratives passed between generations. By the time we reach O’Connor, the narrative may be well established, but it is also passing into memory. And, in important ways, Mason had to reach back two generations for her own understanding of her distinctive culture as revealed in her recent memoir, *Clear Springs*. Furthermore, these writers experienced dramatic changes in Southern culture, many of which were positive and necessary, as well as those that were destructive to the Southern identity. Their use of the grotesque grows out of the difficulty of assimilating such changes, of incorporating positive changes into the Southern perspective, and rebutting those changes perceived as destructive. This idea provides the framework for my dissertation.
Although some might consider this second-generation of Southern writers as figurative “outsiders” because of the temporal distance between themselves and the traditions of the South, those traditions are alive in their works, passed between generations of the faithful heart (as noted by many of the Agrarians) through family narratives and customs that have endured despite all challenges. Memory preserves the traditions that inform Southern life and allows these writers to function as “insiders.”

This duality provides the impetus for such an undertaking as Southern writers attempt to reconcile tradition with progress. My contention is that Welty, McCullers, O’Connor, and Mason, covering a span of roughly fifty years, examine the systematic undermining of those four key principles of Southern life herein discussed. Welty’s fiction tends to examine the consequence of the undermining of the Southern devotion to community; McCullers examines the undermining of the family connection; O’Connor examines the substitution of science and technology for God; and Mason examines the attachment to place. Thus, these writers in particular demonstrate the consequences of Southern traditions distorted by modern progress.
CHAPTER 2

EUDORA WELTY:

THE SOUTHERN COMMUNITY

In examining the four writers named in Chapter 1, this dissertation will assume a chronological progression that begins with Eudora Welty as the first representative of what I am calling the second generation of Southern writers. Welty’s earliest stories—composed in the 1930s and published in *A Curtain of Green* in 1941—tend to emphasize the tension between the individual, who is often deformed and literally grotesque, and the community, which often becomes the true manifestation of the grotesque despite a veneer of normality. Her flirtation with the grotesque in these early works is sometimes uneven; her depictions fluctuate between more or less obvious deformities and her ability to maintain the tension between the laughable and the terrifying is more or less successful. Moreover, as Brooke Allen states in the *New Criterion* (Oct. 1999), some of Welty’s earliest experiments in “the Gothic mode, such as ‘Asphodel,’ ‘The Purple Hat,’ and ‘Clytie’ are downright bad, relying as they do on a puerile faith in the power of the grotesque *qua* grotesque” (*Academic Search Elite*).

Certainly, “Clytie” deserves most of Allen’s criticism, but not exactly for the reason Allen gives. The story is reminiscent of Poe’s melodramatic use of the gothic interior in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” relying on dreary, decaying people trapped inside a dilapidated house that has lost any semblance of its former glory. But where Poe generates a sense of causality, and thereby exhibits a masterful ability to describe Roderick Usher’s psychological decline, Welty is heavy-handed in her attempt to depict the decline of the Farr family. She assumes a decayed state within the family before she depicts it, dropping the reader into the story *in medias res*, thereby leaving the reader to accept the Farrs’ present condition without
foundation or explanation. Because of the brevity of the story, Welty does not have or take space to develop the depiction, so the reader has no sense of causation. Consequently, the family simply seems “weird” and becomes part of the stereotypical depiction of the Old South. To this gothic debacle Welty adds elements of the grotesque, enhancing Clytie’s obvious madness and physical decay through association with images of beasts and inanimate objects. Welty draws upon similes that link Clytie with a horse, a squirrel, and a statue. She even equates the three remaining members of the family with an architectural detail: “Mr. Bobo was short and had never been anything but proud of it, until he had started coming to this house once a week. But he did not enjoy looking up from below at the soft, long throats, the cold, repelled, high-relieved faces of those Farrs” (Welty 173). This description suggests the more traditional quality of the grotesque, invoking as it does the gargoyles perched high atop medieval cathedrals—remote and detached, with a smug superiority. “Clytie,” in fact, reflects some of the quality of “A Rose for Emily,” but without Faulkner’s deft touch. Clytie, like Miss Emily, is trapped in a tattered remnant of a former existence, helpless to change the downward spiral of her family. While Allen may correctly assess Welty’s use of “the Gothic mode” within this particular story, she may be overlooking—as many “outsiders” do—an important function of the grotesque within the Southern psyche: the grotesque grows out of challenges to and distortions within the accepted and expected order. For the Southern writer, the bizarre and unfamiliar circumstances of the modern era generate something unrecognizable, i.e. grotesque, not simply something that is suffering from decay or entrapment. Gothic is not synonymous with grotesque, despite the fact that they often appear together.

“Clytie” fails as a story not because Welty relied on a “puerile faith” in the grotesque but because she failed to provide what Caroline Gordon has called a “stout stake,” meaning a reason
to tell the tale. It is not a poor example of the use of the grotesque, per se; it is simply a poor story. Welty’s effort to incorporate the grotesque here is heavy-handed and lacks purpose. The Farrs are a representation of the once-powerful family refusing to admit their socio-economic fall, replete with the useless and overly sensitive brother (Gerald), the decrepit belle (Octavia), the suicide (Henry), the stroke victim (James, the father), and the lunatic (Clytie). The story itself is too self-consciously gothic because Welty has employed every stereotypical element available to the canon of Southern fiction. Moreover, Welty gives the reader no reason to connect with the Farrs. Even a grotesque must elicit some degree of sympathy or revulsion; the Farrs fail to achieve this.

The failure of “Clytie,” caused in part by the absence of concrete detail and specific development, does not characterize Welty’s other stories. In fact, most critics agree that Welty’s strength lies in her ability to utilize the particular, both in her descriptions of place and her development of characters. And within this skill, Welty exhibits her specifically Southern sensibilities through “her peculiarly Southern obsession with family and community” (Allen). For Welty’s more mature stories, the grotesque sometimes appears in the more traditionally-expected distorted form. This application of the grotesque complements the traditional Southern perspective that acknowledges man (and woman) as a fallen creature, separated from God by willfulness and sin. Moreover, for the Southerner, “fallen” refers not only to humanity’s fall from grace, but also to the loss of a way of life and the impending loss of a distinctive culture. The spiritual fall coupled with the cultural fall provides a range of opportunities for the Southern writer, and the fact that moral failings contributed to the cultural loss makes the decline of Southern society all the more poignant, and sometimes bitter, for the Southern writer. Consequently, this fallen state may be expressed by a literal physical deformity (especially in the
fiction of the first-generation writers) or, as we advance more deeply into the modern age, the fallen state may be depicted by a more subtle deformity, whether of heart, spirit, or perspective. Such a sense of separation, not only from God but from other aspects of the old verities, contributes to the sense of grotesqueness depicted in much of Southern literature: the character who has abandoned some essential element of a whole existence, e.g. devotion to the community, to the family, to God, and to place, is deformed and thereby grotesque.

Certainly, the grotesque figures prominently in Southern fiction, especially in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Welty herself remarked in an interview with Linda Kuehl that she needed the device of the grotesque in her early stories because she hoped to differentiate characters by physical qualities as a means of showing their internal qualities (rpt. in Prenshaw 84). Here, Welty alludes to an application of Harpham’s margin that points the way for later writers: the grotesque is literally something on the inside that somehow manifests on the outside as it breaches the external boundary. This boundary can be imagined as something tangible, such as the physical body of a character, or something more ephemeral, such as the limitation imposed by mannerly or moral behavior. When the grotesque is visible, one can more easily decide how to address it, although as Kayser and Bakhtin state, the viewer hangs between laughter and terror. The more traditional representation of the grotesque relied on overt physical deformity, but as we move further into the modern world, our ability to identify the abnormal diminishes due to the contemporary emphasis on tolerance and acceptance of differences. Consequently, that which is considered to be grotesque is often subsumed under the idea of individuality. As modern society becomes a construct of increasingly distinctive individuals—those who see themselves as free of social restraints that do not please—traditional hierarchies and order are shattered, and the grotesque burrows back inside that individual to manifest itself
in a non-traditional form. Although Welty’s early attempts to depict internal qualities through physical qualities do not always succeed, as in “Clytie,” her admission points toward a recognition made evident in her more mature works: deformity is not always obvious and the grotesque frequently appears at first glance to be “normal” by certain standards. Therefore, Welty often juxtaposes the deformed individual against characters who are more truly grotesque relative to the dominant social or cultural norm (whether internal or external) although they may not appear to be physically deformed. In this fashion, Welty’s early short fiction depicts aberrations within the Southern community.

In part, this technique, as used by these second generation writers, stands in sharp contrast to the more overt tendencies of the first generation writers, such as Faulkner. Beginning with Welty, the physical extremes of nineteenth century literature that traditionally characterize the grotesque undergo a transformation. With Southern writers of this second generation, the grotesque crosses that threshold between external and internal expression, and the depiction of the grotesque begins to move from a tangible, visual form to an intangible, verbal form. This is not to say that the grotesque becomes purely abstract, as it might in a non-Southern perspective, but simply that its concretion assumes a new dimension—one that is equally as real as its overt counterpart, but that assumes a less obvious form that often relies on some degree of unexpected self-awareness. Such self-awareness is generally introduced through violence, whether literal or figurative, and tends to bring the character in question into a sudden confrontation with his or her faulty perspective. This confrontation can grow out of the character’s rejection or perversion of traditional Southern values, or it can arise when the traditional values discussed herein can no longer stand under the pressure of modern progress.
For Welty, such confrontations tend to rely on the individual in contrast to the community, and the depiction of the grotesque may or may not be obvious. As discussed in Chapter 1, the definition of the grotesque has become increasingly ambiguous in its move from a three-dimensional visual medium to a two-dimensional print medium, but this ambiguity grows out of an increasing level of uncertainty as to what is “normal” and what is “grotesque.” For the Southern writer, this dilemma reflects the schism between the known world and the unknown, i.e., the traditional Southern society and the modern realm of the “New South.” In Welty’s perspective, the community appears to need a small adjustment rather than a major overhaul; her grotesques are not terrifying, but merely discomfiting. Her Southern community is not yet a lost cause, despite the fact that she is showing the cracks both in its veneer and its foundation. Welty’s community retains more of the traditional foundations of Southern culture than the communities and/or characters depicted by the later writers. Whereas her earlier works utilize evident physical deformities in her characters, such as the simple-mindedness of Lily Daw or the deaf and dumb state of the couple in “The Key,” these grotesques are far from terrifying; they simply are not whole. However, in her later works she begins to reconfigure what is grotesque in her characters, and the obvious physical deformities stand beside more subtle ones.

This tension between the obvious and the unexpected remains a prevalent theme as Welty tweaks her use of the grotesque to depict various aspects of modernity’s impact within the traditional agrarian society of the South. When asked about changes that pleased or upset her, Welty replied that, “Questioning our old acceptances pleases me—that’s healthy and promising. Destruction of things for the sake of destruction upsets me, for the waste and stupidity of it” (Diamonstein 38). Consequently, her stories depict both the ugly side of the Southern community that desperately needs to change and the positive elements of the Southern
community that are being destroyed by more modern influences. The works of McCullers, O’Connor, and Mason take this shift even further. For example, the character that clings to inappropriate, inaccessible, or diminished elements of the past, e.g. Julian’s mother in O’Connor’s story “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” can be grotesque by demonstrating the pitfalls of blindly embracing tradition in defiance of more desirable and modern behaviors. The counterpart of this version of the grotesque is that character who blindly abandons all aspects of tradition and embraces modern replacements that offer no real substance or value in sustaining a positive quality of life, but rather undermine a more wholesome existence, e.g., Shepard in O’Connor’s story “The Lame Shall Enter First.” As these writers illustrate through their short fiction, such violations of traditional Southern codes of behavior, coupled with the undermining of traditional Southern values, can only result in disaster. For Welty, these violations of accepted or traditional behavior are found within the community at large.

As stated above, Welty believed that positive change was a benefit, but that destruction of tradition and culture for destruction’s sake was stupid. Many Southerners recognize the necessity for carefully reasoned change that manages to preserve those desirable elements of the South’s unique culture; thus, one particular aspect of Southern life that calls for the use of the grotesque is the need to redefine certain traditions in a manner that preserves the vital elements of the region’s distinctive identity. In this sense, Welty, et al., provide representations of how the Southern mind and heart re-appropriate those traditions into something more accessible in an urban, industrial, and global world. Within this context, the grotesque character often appears to be caught between a love of the past and a need to live in the present, with the subsequent conflict reducing the character to a static or self-destructive state as the traditional avenues of order fall apart under the pressures of contemporary influences. Consequently, the form of the
grotesque fluctuates between external and internal manifestations, afflicting not only the physical bodies, but also the hearts, minds, and spirits of individual characters. Through the stories included here, the depiction of the grotesque wavers between condemnation and embrace, meaning that sometimes the grotesque is clearly a criticism of the blind embrace of tradition and sometimes it appears almost to be a tender acknowledgement of loss. Nevertheless, it becomes a hallmark of the Southern presence in the contemporary world, indicating someone who doesn’t fit the accepted or dominant cultural context.

The accepted cultural context for Welty emphasizes a mostly traditional and agrarian perspective. Sometimes this perspective is preserved by the Southern community at large and thus, the individual becomes grotesque; sometimes it is preserved by an individual pitted against that community and thus, the grotesque becomes the community itself. In “The Petrified Man,” for example, the grotesque appears through a violation of manners within the community. Such manners are the manifestation of Ransom’s “code” of behavior as described in Chapter 1: a sense of hierarchy and propriety, an application of indirection, and the use of subtlety, ostensibly to maintain a sense of decorum and dignity. The setting for the story is a beauty shop, an irony in itself because neither the patrons nor the beauticians are concerned with anything remotely associated with real beauty, which would require some aesthetic sense, such as an element of graciousness and gentility coupled with a strong sense of decorum. At best, the characters are concerned with façade, superficial illusions that conceal a decided lack of quality. This sense of “quality” in Southern tradition would be associated not only with one’s place within a social hierarchy, but, more importantly, with one’s integrity, especially where the code of social behavior is concerned. Critics might rightly observe that such a view is part of the Southern penchant for “myth making,” and that the self-styled sense of “quality” often becomes a veneer
for hypocrisy (as will be discussed in Chapter 4 on O’Connor), but true gentility reflects a genuine sense of grace because it embraces the appropriate role of the individual within the community, and acknowledges that each individual has a place therein. This perspective has been criticized as elitist because all communities contain members who are not satisfied with their “place,” whether from circumstance or real or imagined assignment. Indeed, the state of race relations within the South (as within the United States in general) has suffered under such a premise because it reflects the sort of thinking that conceived of segregation and Jim Crow laws. However, my intent is not to promote an aristocratic or exclusionary view; my point here is that each member within the community belongs in that community, regardless of the place s/he occupies, and that such a community would be diminished without that individual’s presence and contribution. As Ransom has noted in “Forms and Citizens,” the code of manners is an aesthetic form that does not “serve the principle of utility” (29). Its function is to allow time for discovery—to discern who the person really is—as opposed to a mere satisfaction of appetite, which perceives the person as “object” to be acquired. This code provides a kind of social lubricant in the sense that it allows individual members of the community to retain their dignity as the community in general withholds judgment and learns to accept each of its members for their unique contributions. The characters in Welty’s story are base because they lack the integrity of such a code, becoming instead purveyors of titillation, a circumstance that threatens to undermine the community. Their violation of the tenets of Southern manners makes them grotesque.

The instigator of this grotesqueness is the pivotal character in the story, Leota, the beautician, who serves as a link between the established community, represented by Mrs. Fletcher, and the “outsider” who brings disharmony, represented by Mrs. Pike. Leota is gossipy
and gullible, believing whatever she hears and spreading whatever she “knows,” regardless of its truth or its impact on her community. She is especially taken with Mrs. Pike, a lady from New Orleans who is a “very decided blonde” (Welty, “Petrified” 33). Coming from a large cosmopolitan city, Mrs. Pike represents a level of worldliness to which Leota ascribes a greater value than her own community. Thus, Mrs. Pike’s word becomes golden. Leota becomes, in a sense, a collaborator with modernity because she serves as the agency through which the outside world invades the interior community. She feels no concern over her inappropriate and disconcerting behavior, which disrupts the decorum of the community, because it amuses her to do so, thereby satisfying her appetite for diversion.

Leota also demonstrates how easy it is to disregard communal codes of behavior, and her actions through the story derive from an easy abandonment of those codes. When she remarks on Mrs. Fletcher’s pregnancy, she invades the private domain and makes the information public. This violation eliminates Mrs. Fletcher’s capacity for aesthetic distance because it deprives her of the opportunity for a public announcement of her new state, forcing her to acknowledge openly something she had not yet come to terms with privately. The sudden confrontation with such public exposure drives Mrs. Fletcher to a posture of defensiveness. She says, “‘Well! I don’t like children that much,’” followed by, “‘I’m almost tempted not to have this one,’ ” (Welty, “Petrified” 37). Such remarks would have been shocking in the time period of the story, especially when made in a public setting and to a person who will undoubtedly spread the “news.” Leota’s thoughtless action suggests an inadequate embrace of any communal code and reflects the beginnings of a cultural deterioration within her small community; Leota clearly does not care that she has embarrassed her customer. Leota’s ugly (grotesque) behavior encourages Mrs. Fletcher to follow suit as she reacts with passion rather than according to the code,
exhibiting a loss of emotional control. Mrs. Fletcher’s reaction suggests the difficulty of maintaining traditional forms in an era facing such aggressive challenges to those forms. Such behavior moves her also toward the grotesque as she violates traditional boundaries by slipping into Leota’s realm of appetite.

The other primary character in this story is Mrs. Pike, who is depicted only through Leota’s reports. Mrs. Pike manages to get every bit of information Leota has to give, and on very brief acquaintance:

“Does Mrs. Pike know everything about you already?” asked Mrs. Fletcher unbelievingly. “Mercy!”

“Oh, yeah, I tol’ her ever’thing about ever’thing, from now on back to I don’t know when—to when I first started goin’ out,” said Leota. (Welty, “Petrified” 43)

By using Leota, Mrs. Pike acquires the knowledge of a long-time resident of the community, but without the investment or effort. She by-passes the discovery stage appropriate to communal membership because she is an agent of utility. All she really seeks is something she can use, whether for profit or amusement. She holds no attachment to anything, neither place nor person, which, in Southern terms, makes her grotesque. In fact, Mrs. Pike becomes very much like the traveling freak show that she and Leota visit: She shows up, drains the town of its prime currency (gossip), and disappears, leaving disruption and a sense of betrayal in her wake. Mrs. Pike is an opportunist, insinuating herself into the fold only to discover whatever might benefit her in some fashion. For example, in the story, she discovers a magazine at Leota’s home, one that offers a reward for information on a serial rapist. Mrs. Pike realizes that the Petrified Man in the freak show is the fellow the police are seeking, so she turns him in and collects the reward.
Leota is, of course, outraged that her magazine should net Mrs. Pike $500, but she is more incensed that Mrs. Pike betrayed their “friendship” by not including her in the reward. Leota has forgotten that relationships require time and careful tending; they cannot be forged overnight through an indiscriminate baring of one’s soul. Mrs. Pike is not concerned by Leota’s outrage because she is neither Leota’s friend, nor a member of the community, and the people there mean nothing to her. She is, as Ransom would say, more interested in economic forms by which she can profit. The aesthetic forms that govern behavior and facilitate harmony within a community mean nothing to her as she is “appetite” and, therefore, grotesque.

Thus, despite the presence of a literal grotesque, i.e. the petrified man in the freak show, the three women become the true grotesques in “The Petrified Man” as they undermine traditional communal norms through their descent into vulgar and base appetitive behavior. Welty uses satire in this tale and draws upon realistic detail to create her “little human monsters [which] are not really caricatures at all, but individuals exactly and clearly presented” (Porter, “Introduction” xxi). Nor is Welty’s criticism restricted to the feminine gender in a state of social decline. In “Keela, The Outcast Indian Maiden,” she turns her attention to masculine behavior as she addresses race relations within the Southern community, a circumstance that demands change.

“Keela” revolves around a young man, Steve, who has approached an older man, Max, for help in locating a club-footed “nigger,” Little Lee Roy. Steve, who is a stranger to the community, believes that Little Lee Roy is the person who was presented in a traveling freak show as “Keela, The Outcast Indian Maiden.” As Steve tells his tale, he reveals that he is deeply troubled by his failure to know that “Keela” was not what “she” was said to be. “‘They dressed it in a red dress, and it ate chickens alive,’ he said. ‘I sold tickets and I thought it was worth a
dime, honest’ ” (Welty, “Keela” 75). Steve describes Keela’s behavior in detail, painting a picture of a fierce creature that growls and shakes an iron bar at anyone who comes too close to the cage. “‘But I didn’t know. I can’t look at nothin’ an’ be sure what it is. Then afterwards I know. Then I see how it was.’ . . . ‘You wouldn’t of knowed it either!’ ” (85). Steve’s defensive attitude derives from his complacency in accepting what might be termed the status quo. He accepts what his superiors (elders) tell him and simply does his job. By failing to question the verity of the situation, he becomes an accomplice in its perpetuation. In fact, he refers to “Keela” as “it” in every reference up to the point in his story where he discovers that “it” is a man. Once he learns the complete story of Little Lee Roy qua Keela, he is appalled, both at what happened and at his own blindness. He has sought out Little Lee Roy in order to make some kind of amends, despite the fact that Little Lee Roy has participated in the freak show freely. The idea that a human being could only attain recognition within his community by degrading himself to a bestial level is inexcusable to Steve. Little Lee Roy’s “self” has been completely abased, and by extension, so have the African-American community and the Indian community. By further extension, the white community has also been abased by the fact that their members have participated in such a low scheme.

In his desire to make amends for his part in the humiliation of another human being, Steve thinks to offer money to Little Lee Roy, as if payment could provide a just compensation, but he has none to give. Here we see another application of Ransom’s concept of economic exchange. Steve believes that money can dispel the insult, but economic utility cannot compensate for the aesthetic damage to human dignity, and the belief that money can “fix” anything contributes to the grotesqueness inherent in the situation. Here, Welty uses Max to provide a skillful balance between the ugliness of an economic solution and the dignity of the
traditional behavioral code. In an overture that is intended to make amends within the community, Max bridges the gap between modernity and tradition by giving Little Lee Roy some change and then offering Steve a meal.

Max, as a member of the community, serves several functions within the story, although he may appear at first glance to be rather insignificant. At first, Max pays little attention to what Steve is trying to relate and expresses difficulty in believing the story: “‘Bet I could tell a man from a woman and an Indian from a nigger though’” (Welty, “Keela” 86). Because Steve is an outsider within this community, he has only a minimal ability to influence Max; in fact, he is considered with some degree of suspicion because he is an unknown. What could this young man actually know about Max’s community and why does he care? Max will not be so gullible as to believe a story told by a stranger who might have ulterior motives; he will see for himself before allowing any credence to Steve’s tale. In this respect, Max becomes a kind of custodian of his community, albeit a reluctant one. Moreover, Max is mildly disturbed over the possibility that Steve might be telling the truth, a fact that would unbalance Max’s static social view, which is apparently untroubled that white men might actually orchestrate and accomplish such a scheme. Furthermore, Steve’s gullibility undermines the credibility of his tale, and Max cannot understand how anyone could be so easily fooled. In his mind, there is a tremendous difference between an Indian woman and a “nigger” man, although the truth of their social marginalization might be very similar. This attitude of superior knowledge (“‘Bet I could tell . . .’”) suggests a social denial that any such wrong—as in the emasculation and dehumanization of Little Lee Roy—could occur. Because Max cannot conceive of Steve’s confusion and despair, and because acknowledgement would demand that he reexamine his own views, he is reluctant to give weight
to the story. Nevertheless, he is sufficiently moved by Steve’s passion to offer the compensation that Steve finds acceptable: he gives Little Lee Roy money.

Yet, Max does not appear to think that this act holds any real merit. The token payment is intended to calm Steve rather than compensate Little Lee Roy. In his own way, Max represents what Ruth Vande Kieft identifies as “the apparent opposites of formality and intimacy” (140). Max has no intimacy qua knowledge of Steve or Lee Roy, so his actions—which do not suggest any genuine acknowledgement of the wrong inherent in what has happened—grow out of a sense of formality. As the selected agent of the community in question, Max draws upon what Vande Kieft has identified as the structured community’s ideals of trust, affection, concern, and sense of obligation (140). Max apparently feels sufficient affection or concern for his community to involve himself in the first place. He evidently has some degree of trust in what Steve is saying, or he wouldn’t have taken Steve to see Lee Roy. Also, whether or not he personally feels any compulsion to help right this wrong, Max feels enough of an obligation to his community to take on the duty of seeing this situation through to the end. However, the attempt at an economic resolution suggests that Max’s main interest lies in shutting up Steve before he himself is forced to acknowledge the truth of what he has been told.

This attempt at an efficient dismissal of Steve’s concern grows out of Max’s sense of pride. Rather than confront the flaw within his community, Max attempts the most direct method to make it go away. This expression of his own defensive posture implies his private recognition of the ugly situation and leads him to dismiss any serious concern over Steve’s dilemma. Such a dismissal necessarily leads to hostility because, as Louise Gossett notes, violence is often used to express the suffering of the inarticulate and dispossessed persons by
questioning a faith in progress and asserting the darkness in the heart of man (51). Steve is incapable of expressing the full scope of his distress; thus, Max’s dismissal makes him feel defensive because his distress is being ignored. Consequently, Steve is finally moved to hit Max, knocking him to the ground. The grotesqueness that exists in the dynamic between Steve and Max is clearly seen in the following exchange:

“But I guess you don’t understand. I had to hit you. First you didn’t believe me, and then it didn’t bother you.” [emphasis added]

“That’s all O.K., only hush,” said Max, and added, “Some dope is always giving me the lowdown on something, but this is the first time one of ‘em ever got away with a thing like this. I got to watch out.” (Welty, “Keela” 86-87)

Indeed, Max must “watch out” for the truth, especially when it is delivered with such force, yet the full meaning of Max’s comment is ambiguous.

Clearly, on one level, Max is referring to being punched in the face. Yet, the line also engenders a nagging suspicion that the truer meaning is linked to the truth of change and the violent confrontation between traditional views and modern necessities. Such knowledge of the truth would undermine the status quo, and Welty is providing a clear criticism of Southern customs that denigrated non-white members of the community. As the younger generation awakens to the truth of racial inequities and injustices inherent in the traditional community, they must fight to bring this truth to the older generation, which must eventually admit culpability. The issue is not simply Max’s disbelief; it is his lack of concern that such a travesty could occur. The violence is used in an attempt to shake Max free from his complacency and insensitivity. As Gossett states, the violence does not usually destroy the character, but corrects his view of himself, forcing him to recognize a condition that will enable him to communicate with others.
(102). But herein lies the irony because as the story ends, Max is not exactly convinced that anything dire has happened. His primary interest is to shut up Steve and he uses an offer of hospitality not to express genuine communion, but simply to return to his comfortable routine. “‘Just follow me. We serve eats at Max’s Place, and I want to play the juke box. You eat, and I’ll listen to the juke box’” (Welty, “Keela” 87). By providing Steve with food, Max fills the man’s mouth and effectively silences him. He expresses no interest in communicating his revelation; rather, Max adopts an attitude of “ignore it until it goes away.” Such a lack of interest simultaneously separates Max from the community he has ostensibly tried to uphold and binds him to the status quo of an inappropriate hierarchy. Here, Welty implies the tension between what Gossett identifies as the “taking for the self” and “giving for the clan” (104). Max’s private claim sets him apart from the community as he withdraws from what Allen Tate has described as a sense of “communion” and embraces instead the private communication with Steve. As Max retreats to his familiar surroundings to “listen to the juke box,” his role as defender or challenger becomes vague. Theoretically, he should be changed (and could become an agent of change within the community itself) by the revelation he has experienced, but whether such a change sticks or not is unclear. Here, Welty might be said to imply that it is easy to misunderstand what is truly grotesque, especially in an environment undergoing extreme social changes at an increasingly accelerated pace. Such challenges to the traditional order require time if the community is to sort out acceptable responses. Max appears to move toward the grotesque, as does his community, because of his willingness to seek economic solutions for social injustices. Although Little Lee Roy is the literal grotesque, Max seems more distorted.

Welty’s criticism in these two stories addresses cogent Southern issues. Whereas “The Petrified Man” depicts a loss of tradition that results in an undesirable community that is vulgar
and base, “Keela” clearly demonstrates that certain aspects of the “traditional” community must be challenged. In this manner, Welty suggests that communal structure and forms can preserve what is desirable, but that the community must include all of its members. Hierarchy is not essential to human dignity, but forms can facilitate that dignity by requiring the time necessary to come to a knowledge of the person as a fellow human. In a sense, traditional forms of behavior can lead to a clearer understanding of truth, provided they are applied in an inclusive rather than exclusive manner. The grotesques here are those who ignore or circumvent that truth.

Another form of Welty’s use of the grotesque can be seen in “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies.” Here, Welty again uses a literal grotesque, Lily Daw, who is simple-minded, but not for melodramatic purposes. Three ladies of the town—Mrs. Carson, Mrs. Watts, and Aimee Slocum—have taken it upon themselves to see that Lily has a “proper” life as noted by Mrs. Carson:

“We buried Lily’s poor defenseless mother. We gave Lily all her food and kindling and every stitch she had on. Sent her to Sunday school to learn the Lord’s teachings, had her baptized a Baptist. And when her old father commenced beating her and tried to cut her head off with the butcher knife, why, we went and took her away from him and gave her a place to stay.”

(Welty, “Lily” 7)

This description alone sets up an expectation of grotesqueness in Lily’s life, influenced as it must be not only by her simple-mindedness, but also by the early death of her mother and the abusiveness of her father. Lily’s situation also threatens to impart a level of grotesqueness into the community itself, and the three ladies—acting as self-styled saviors—are determined to avoid shame within their community by saving Lily from any social or physical depredations.
To this end, they have arranged to send Lily to the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble-Minded of Mississippi, where they expect her to be protected from those who might take advantage of her and lead her to dishonor.

Several comments ascribed to these main characters clarify this view of Lily and state the community’s expectations. For example, when discussing Lily’s attendance at the visiting tent show, one lady remarks that, “‘Lily acted so nice. She was a perfect lady—just set in her seat and stared,’ ” and Mrs. Carson replies, “‘Oh, she can be a lady—she can be’ ” (Welty, “Lily” 4). Here, once again, is the tension between the individual and the community so characteristic of Welty. However, the community is not grotesque in this instance. Welty is simply taking communal ritual action seriously as she depicts the comic and satiric elements “inherent in the manners and morals, social life and entertainment of a highly organized and subtly stratified folk community” (Vande Kieft 59). Here, the ladies are afraid that because Lily’s judgment is impaired, she will be influenced by disreputable persons. Because Lily has no mother to instruct her or father to defend her, the three ladies seek to safeguard Lily’s moral character while they simultaneously preserve their view of their own community and Lily’s place within it. In a traditional community, those who were incapable of sustaining themselves would be cared for (or supervised, if necessary) by members within the community. For the agrarian South, this task would generally fall to relatives first, and perhaps church auxiliaries second, but interested individuals with some familiar acquaintance might also step in to fill the need. Mrs. Watt, Mrs. Carson, and Aimee Slocum are filling the void created by circumstances in Lily’s life, helping a poor unfortunate who has limited capacity to fend for herself. Welty’s use of the grotesque here is soft: Lily has a mental deformity, but her abnormality is depicted in a subtle manner. Moreover, the ladies that represent the community are not indicative of particularly negative
elements within that structure; rather, they reflect a mostly positive quality of the true community within the Southern tradition by tending to their own members without outside “help.” Brooke Allen’s comment on tolerance within the Southern community is useful here:

There is more tolerance, in the Southern communities of which Welty writes, for eccentricity, stupidity, drunkenness, want of ambition, and general weirdness than exists elsewhere in America. The tolerance is extended only, however, on condition of a certain measure of surrender to the community, a surrender that amounts merely to a willingness to be measured and defined by the community’s standards. (Academic Search Elite)

This kind of tolerance stems from a sense of charity and a genuine acceptance of the individual’s role within the community, no matter how quirky or freakish that person may seem; as such, it differs from the “tolerance” demonstrated in metropolitan areas of the North, for example, where the quirky and freakish are ignored rather than accepted. The tolerance extended to Lily Daw is derived from that sense of community as the ladies try to be kind and guide rather than direct. Although they do not believe that Lily can make competent choices, the ladies do not simply dictate the girl’s actions, but rather try to persuade her to create at least a semblance of Lily’s participation in free choice.

Still, all of these good intentions do threaten to interfere with Lily’s own choices, and Lily has decided to marry—a revelation that leaves the ladies flabbergasted. When Ed Newton informs them that Lily “‘. . . tole me she was fixin’ to git married,’ ” Mrs. Carson replies, “‘Why she is not. She’s going to Ellisville, Ed, . . . Mrs. Watts and I and Aimee Slocum are paying her way out of our own pockets. Besides, the boys of Victory are on their honor. Lily’s not going to get married, that’s just an idea she’s got in her head’ ” (Welty, “Lily” 6). On the
one hand, the ladies believe Lily is incapable of considering a real life choice such as marriage; on the other hand, they believe that they have pre-empted any attempt on the part of the “boys” in town to court Lily. Thus, Lily’s claim must be a fictional one. However, the offer of marriage turns out to be real and is proffered by an outsider—the xylophone player from the tent show—a device that Welty frequently utilizes to demonstrate how the external modern world transgresses the boundaries of the more agrarian, hierarchical, and traditional South. Hence, it is not the marriage proposal that embodies the transgression; it is the challenge to the communal order—and to Lily’s well-being—that the ladies imagine could arise out of this situation.

Such a breach of the communal order again recalls Harpham’s margin discussed in Chapter 1. When the boundaries of normality are breached, the result tends to be, or to become, grotesque. For the South, such a breach includes challenges to tradition or expectation. In the case of Lily Daw, the girl is literally grotesque because she is simple minded, and in the traditional use of the concept of the grotesque, less than fully human. However, the townspeople do not see her as monstrous; rather, they see her as dependent—a perpetual child who needs adult supervision—and therefore, unable to fulfill traditional expectations. Here, the concept of what is grotesque is more abstract than concrete because it is the idea that Lily might lead a “normal” life that is inconceivable. The ladies find it monstrous to think that a man would actually want Lily to be his wife because they think that such a choice would somehow take advantage of Lily, who, they believe, is incapable of free choice. Because they do not believe Lily’s assertion that she is going to marry the xylophone player, the ladies attempt to persuade Lily to go to Ellisville, preparing a number of gifts to enhance their efforts. They are convinced that the xylophone player either has taken or will take sexual advantage of Lily, and they are keen to get the girl out of town as soon as possible (either to preserve the dignity of the
community or to prevent its honor from being besmirched). When they agree that Lily may take her hope chest with her to Ellisville, the deal is cinched.

As Lily—safely ensconced on the train—prepares to leave town, she sees a man standing on the platform, but Mrs. Carson (who plans to travel with Lily) instructs her not to look. Aimee Slocum nearly runs into this stranger, who is looking for Lily Daw. She asks, somewhat indignantly, “‘What business did you have with Lily?’” and the stranger replies, “‘We was only going to get married, that’s all’” (Welty, “Lily” 17). This comment confirms what Lily has been trying to tell them; the ladies were wrong in thinking either that Lily had been despoiled or that she had invented the incident. She truly did have an offer of marriage. Now they find themselves trying to get Lily off the train so that she can fulfill her “destiny.” The xylophone player who wants to marry Lily has followed through with his proposal despite the fact that he is deaf and also appears a little simple. However, this fact makes his proposal more acceptable: He is apparently not a hustler trying to take advantage of their dear Lily, so the ladies quickly work to accommodate Lily’s desire instead of their own. Nevertheless, by the time the ladies remove Lily from the train, she no longer wants to get married, so once again, they are in the position of forcing their own expectations on her rather than accommodating the girl’s desire. As Lily stands on the platform with her soon-to-be husband, the train pulls around the bend and Aimee Slocum suddenly remembers the hope chest, which is still on the train. The going-away gifts—now used as lures to get Lily off the train again—become a makeshift wedding trousseau, although the hope chest containing only two bars of soap and a washcloth goes on its way to Ellisville, alone.

Here, Welty provides an irony as “hope” slips out of sight while the ladies and Lily await the minister to perform the marriage ceremony. The contents of the chest create an odd
ambiguity, suggesting perhaps that Lily’s former life will not be washed away, or that going to Ellisville would have been “cleaner” than staying in town and marrying this stranger. The ambiguous outcome is further enhanced as Welty concludes the story: “The band went on playing. Some of the people thought Lily was on the train, and some swore she wasn’t. Everybody cheered, though, and a straw hat was thrown into the telephone wires” (“Lily” 20). Life is always uncertain, as these closing lines assert, and reality is difficult to comprehend. What Lily truly wants, and the possibility of a happy marriage, remains uncertain, and the grotesqueness of the situation wavers between such a marriage and the community that would endorse it.

Just as the normal function of the community in this story has been interrupted by the arrival of the xylophone player, who causes them to reconsider their plan and Lily’s future, the small and generally isolated Southern community tends to suffer under the introduction of ideas from the “outside.” Such ideas challenge traditional views and practices, causing confusion and sometimes disaster. These interruptions create new boundaries, and the intersection between the known and the unknown presents a brush with the liminal that is uncertain at best. Welty generally relies on these points of intersection between the Southern community and the external world—train stations, travelers, roads—to provide elements from outside the community in order to clarify or enhance the grotesque. For example, as discussed above, Steve (“Keela”) was an outsider who became the agency through which the grotesqueness of the community was shown. Mrs. Pike from “The Petrified Man” also serves as an agent of grotesqueness as she undermines the normal harmony of the community. Such introductions from the exterior world complement Harpham’s margin discussed in Chapter 1, specifically that intersection between the known and the unknown. Social mores and customs can generally be expected to “control” insiders, those
members of the community itself, whereas outsiders may not be bound by such expectations, rules, or customs.

Such insiders are influenced by a sense of place, which, as Welty asserts, relates to a kind of validity in the raw material used to create the story. For Welty, this sense of place is where she has roots, where she stands, her base of reference to her experience, and her point of view ("Place in Fiction" 116-17). The same is true of her characters. Fiction is bound in the local because feelings are bound up in place. As Welty states, “The human mind is a mass of associations—associations more poetic even than actual. . . . Location is the crossroads of circumstance . . .” (118). This poetic association reflects the ephemeral nature of culture, especially in the South where traditions have been challenged and altered drastically over the past century. As Louise Cowan once remarked, Faulkner especially understood that a Southerner “feels” his “Southernness” in his hips, but such a comment is in itself poetic; it involves a form of emotional interpretation—an attempt to get at something present but beyond the physical realm—that shies away from clear-cut and concrete understanding but that describes a condition that lies just below the surface of tangible reality. Something about the idea feels right, even though a clear expression of what the sentiment means might be impossible.

Faulkner’s observation suggests the kind of shared experience that would cause insiders to smile knowingly to one another while outsiders scratch their heads in puzzlement. In Welty’s fiction, the intersection of this form of the known and the unknown is represented by those “crossroads of circumstance” mentioned above, where the outside penetrates the inside, and the customary associations are changed by the introduction of the unfamiliar. Such a circumstance, especially when on the scale of the modern world’s encroachment into the relatively isolated and agrarian Southern community, produces the grotesque.
Tradition within such communities includes families, often extended, that live multi-generational lives within one place, where, as Welty observes, “they can see whole lives unfold around them. It gives them a natural sense of the narrative, of the dramatic content of life, a form for the story comes readily to hand” (Comment Magazine 21). When this connectedness is disturbed or broken, that sense of narrative—which is a way of understanding life—becomes muddled, and, in a poetic sense, the life formerly described by it is distorted. Consequently, what was once perceived as normal becomes peculiar or ugly and the participant does not know whether to laugh (Bakhtin) or cry (Kayser). To bolster this point, I turn to Louise Gossett, who makes two particularly useful observations.

First, Welty’s precision of detail and content provides “an antidote to depersonalization in the contemporary world. She reinstates feeling as a valid way of apprehending life . . .” (Gossett 100). For Southern writers, particularly Welty, the story is driven by concrete detail and the emotional responses that such details evoke from the characters. The characters, for their own part, are specific and realistic (note Porter’s comment above regarding Leota, et al., in “The Petrified Man”). Contrary to non-Southern writers who write about the South, Southern writers tend not to rely on abstractions or generalities. As Welty observed, these outsiders, i. e., non-Southern writers, are inclined to produce synthetic material that is well-intentioned but remains “generalities written from a distance to illustrate generalities” (Kuehl 83). In this sense, such writing contributes to that depersonalization Gossett associates with the contemporary world. Within the Southern milieu, however, each element is organic, derived from the community it represents. Welty herself (Washington Post, 13 Aug. 1972) objected to the modern trends of her day: “Words almost don’t mean anything anymore. The meanings, anything can be a lie now. It doesn’t make any difference whether something is fair or makes sense” (Mitchell 69). In this
same interview, she further remarked that the decline of personal courtesy, the increasing power of pressure and loudness, and the increasing reliance on shadowy image rather than substantial reality disturbed her as well (Mitchell 69). These comments, coupled with Gossett’s remark, provide one foundation for Welty’s use of the grotesque: it clearly becomes a representation of the decline associated with an increasingly contemporary community.

Second, Gossett also notes that grotesqueness suggests that man may be dehumanized by his instincts and that unaltered wildness lies at its [i.e. the grotesque] center (95). She further states that, “The Southern milieu is a convenience to make articulate the moral hazards of all contemporary life” (96). The implied contrast here supports my earlier contention that modernity’s tendency is to undermine those cultural foundations that contribute to a more wholesome life than efficiency alone can produce. This is not meant to suggest that Southern culture is without flaw—certainly, history reveals contradictions to such an idea. However, the foundations of Southern culture are based on sound principles, and Welty’s fiction reflects the importance of maintaining the integrity of the community. When the community’s integrity is breached, whether by an outsider who does not respect its customs, or by an insider who has lost respect for those customs, the result generally takes the form of something or someone who becomes grotesque by that community’s standards. It is precisely the succumbing to those moral hazards of contemporary life that creates the grotesque. Health for the community resides within order; illness resides within disorder (Gossett 98).

Such illness, however, is not limited to the community; it can also manifest within the family or the individual. In these more intimate manifestations, disorder can afflict the body in a literal sense (producing deformity and thereby a literal grotesque), the mind (moving the grotesque from an external form to an internal one), or the soul (internalizing the grotesque even
further). This progression is clearly demonstrated in the short fiction of Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, and Bobbie Ann Mason. As we will see, modernity’s influence begins at the largest boundary, i.e. the community, and inexorably works its way inside, penetrating next the family relationship, then the spiritual relationship, and finally the individual.
CHAPTER 3

CARSON MCCULLERS:

THE SOUTHERN HEART

As the next representative in the progression of the grotesque, Carson McCullers focuses her literary attention on the individual who somehow rejects love, thereby becoming alienated from meaningful and loving relationships, particularly those that are found within the family. McCullers’ troubled interaction within both her own family and her home state is well documented. According to Delma Presley, McCullers feared a lifeless existence if she stayed in Columbus, Georgia, so she moved north (100). When she left the South, she likely believed it was a permanent escape because, unlike most Southern writers, she never returned in any significant way, meaning emotionally or physically, but only visited on the rarest of occasions and only when necessity demanded it. Some have argued that McCullers’ dissatisfaction with the South is the source of her interest in the grotesque—that it becomes for her a kind of meditation on the fact that one can never truly escape one’s homeland. Others, such as Presley, claim that because she never returned home that she failed to develop a fuller understanding of the South. Presley goes on to state that many writers of Southern fiction have had trouble living in the South; the creative Southerner usually goes away to a northern city and imaginatively recovers his own region while in exile. “It is this act of recovery which identifies most Southern writers, regardless of their places of residence” (100). However, McCullers’ self-imposed exile works well enough as a catalyst for her grotesque depictions. The general consensus among critics is that McCullers’ short fiction does not depict grotesques at all, but rather normal people. Yet, I intend to argue that such is not exactly the case.
For McCullers, the grotesque appears to reflect circumstances in her own life, growing out of a sense of inescapable isolation. This theme of isolation dominates her work because, as Frances Kestler notes, “She [McCullers] is fascinated by the idea of the loneliness of individuals in a world full of individuals” (35). Such an assessment seems highly likely, particularly considering McCullers’ own sense of detachment from the South. The idea also follows logically from the decline of the Southern community as discussed in Chapter 2: as the community breaks down, its members lose their larger significance and become individuals who happen to live near one another with little, if any, relationship. Contrary to the traditional Southern community in which each person occupies a place, is known to his fellows, and enjoys some level of social interaction, McCullers’ individuals (like most individuals in the modern world) tend to lose their identity and purpose. If they remain in the community, they tend to shut themselves away from the other residents, but more often they abandon the community altogether, only to be haunted by memories and feelings of guilt. Because they are detached from their community in some form, they have no roots and no customs or friends to sustain them. It is this neglect of the “solid foundation of place” (Presley 108) that contributes heavily to the grotesque nature of the characters in McCullers’ short fiction.

Such neglect is found in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Counterpoised against the more subtle use of the grotesque in the short fiction, this novella utilizes overtly grotesque physical traits to suggest how the failure of love manifests itself. As with most of McCullers’ fiction, this failure coupled with extreme isolation figures heavily into the psychological disturbances reflected by the deformities.

Miss Amelia Evans, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy are the primary characters, and each is deformed both in body and mind. Miss Amelia, for example, has a face that is “sexless
and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be
exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief” (McCullers, *The Ballad* 197). She
is rich, greedy, and penurious, owning most of what is worth owning in the town, valuing other
people strictly for the material gain they can provide her. In addition to this uncharitable
attitude, she has a paternalistic streak, although her motivation is likely suspicious because her
greed and her paternalism combine to control those around her; by providing free medical
treatment, for example, she can keep the townspeople healthy enough to continue working so
they can continue paying for her goods and other services. Miss Amelia is also good with her
hands; she is skilled in repair, carpentry, slaughtering animals and curing meat, masonry,
distilling, grinding, and general food preparation. To complement these traditionally masculine
skills, Miss Amelia’s appearance is decidedly masculine; she stands six feet two inches tall,
wears her dark hair cut short, and has bones and muscles like a man. Part of this masculinity
may be the result of having been raised motherless, and so she had no feminine model. In fact,
she is closely modeled after her father, dressing similarly to him and carrying his belongings,
thereby emphasizing her grotesqueness through the strong rejection of any feminine qualities.

Miss Amelia eschews the traditional feminine roles associated with nurturing and
compassion. She focuses instead on the more traditionally masculine areas of economic and
legalistic ventures:

. . . the only use that Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out
of them. And in this she succeeded. Mortgages on crops and property, a sawmill,
money in the bank—she was the richest woman for miles around. She would
have been rich as a congressman if it were not for her one great failing, and that
was her passion for lawsuits and the courts. (McCullers, *The Ballad* 199)
Such a utilitarian view of the community—seeing value strictly in the material gain it can provide—further serves to alienate her, and contributes to (if not creates) her isolation. Such a material view seems more in keeping with the generic American perspective that seeks to commodify anything that might have fiscal value rather than the traditionally agrarian view of the Southerner (see Chapter 5). Amelia’s neighbors are more accurately customers of her entrepreneurial ventures or tenants in her rental situations; there is no true relationship, neither kin nor friend.

This lack of kin, however, does not last long. Cousin Lymon, a hunchbacked dwarf, arrives around midnight one evening while Amelia and a few of the locals are sitting on the porch of her store. This uncommon little man claims to be related to Amelia:

He was scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, dusty coat that reached only to his knees. His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp little mouth. His face was both soft and sassy—at the moment his pale skin was yellowed by dust and there were lavender shadows beneath his eyes. (McCullers, The Ballad 200)

After delivering his lengthy but dubious tale of half-siblings and double-first-cousins, Lymon sits down on the store’s steps and begins to cry. The spectators are stunned, but Amelia finally offers the dwarf a meal. Thus, he insinuates himself into the community; to the surprise of all, Amelia never questions his claim, and he quickly moves in with her. Consequently, the audience of townspeople grows as the news spreads. Everyone watches and waits.

The third major character, Marvin Macy, is a handsome man, “being six feet one inch tall, hard-muscled, and with slow gray eyes and curly hair” (217). Macy’s grotesqueness lies in
his wickedness, which could be attributed to his appallingly abusive childhood, except for the fact that his love for Miss Amelia causes him to transform himself into an upstanding and moral young man: he treats his foster family well, saves his wages, learns good manners, and reaches out to God by adopting moral behaviors and attending church regularly. Once he has accomplished the full scope of this transformation, he proposes to Miss Amelia and she marries him, although she doesn’t grasp the concept of marriage or understand fully what her role as a wife will be. She rebuffs Macy at every turn, going about her solitary business as if he weren’t there. His attempts at affection are violently rejected. Finally, she throws him out completely. The marriage lasts only ten days. Such vicious rejection of his love leads Macy to reveal his “true character:”

He became a criminal whose picture and whose name were in all the papers in the state. He robbed three filling stations and held up the A&P store of Society City with a sawed-off gun. He was suspected of the murder of Slit-Eye Sam who was a noted highjacker. All these crimes were connected with the name of Marvin Macy, so that his evil became famous through many counties. (McCullers, *The Ballad* 222)

The maliciousness of Macy is matched by the indifference of Amelia, and their tempestuous encounter amuses the town for a long time. McCullers allows the narrator to observe that only the heart of the lover, i.e. Macy, knows the true story, so whatever the town says or thinks is immaterial because the observer can *watch*, but does not *know*.

To augment the freakishness of the population, McCullers has created a setting depicted through an abundance of gothic elements that is in itself grotesque. The geographic isolation of the town complements the spiritual and emotional isolation of its residents. The nearest
connection to the outer world is three miles away: “. . . the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world” (McCullers, *The Ballad* 197). Such isolation affords little interaction except for a kind of superficial contemplation; because there is nothing to do in this town, the people suffer from a general boredom, broken only by the routine of work and Sunday services. In fact, the lack of activity contributes to the town’s grotesque nature; whether the boredom is a cause or an effect of this stasis is unclear. What minimal entertainment they do get—and it is a passive form—comes from their ability to observe Miss Amelia, but this activity is also a fraud. The townspeople look but do not see. Amelia is not forthcoming, and even if someone had the temerity to ask, she would not likely offer any explanation for her actions. As she becomes the focal point for the town’s gossip and speculation, her genuine self—the true essence rather than the public persona—withdraws deeper into her psyche as she buries herself in physical work or closes herself up in the café, showing the voyeurs of the town only what she is willing to let them see. Thus, she appears increasingly grotesque as she isolates herself further and further from human contact and behaves in ways that seem to deny the emotional turmoil the town imagines she should be feeling. Just as the town did not understand Marvin Macy, neither do they understand Amelia.

Moreover, while the town is observing Amelia, she is observing Cousin Lymon, seemingly oblivious to the rest of them because of the distraction this unexpected love provides: “She seemed to be looking inward. There was in her expression pain, perplexity, and uncertain joy. [. . .] Her look that night, then, was the lonesome look of the lover” (213). Just as Marvin Macy transformed himself in an effort to win Miss Amelia’s love, so she transforms herself in an attempt to please Cousin Lymon, her beloved. She converts the store into a genuine café, and the entire town benefits from the new sense of community. She “fixes up” a little and gives the
dwarf gifts. They talk endlessly about every subject imaginable (except for the ten day marriage to Marvin Macy). By all appearances, Miss Amelia appears content in her six years with Cousin Lymon.

Lymon not only invigorates Amelia, but he also works a change in the town. Within the dreary and dull setting, genuine liveliness cannot exist; the townspeople have no spirit, as McCullers repeatedly depicts through descriptions that evoke images of torpor. They never gather “for the sake of pleasure. They [meet] to work in the mill. Or on Sunday there would be an all-day camp meeting . . .” (213). They are not a true community and the town is more like a trap from which they are unwilling to escape. They exist; they do not live. Cousin Lymon serves as a kind of reverse pharmakos. Unlike the traditional scapegoat whose removal from the city purges all negative energies, Lymon’s arrival drives away the dreary lethargy of the town. Within forty-eight hours, the rumors begin, instigated by Merlie Ryan, who declares that, because no one has seen Lymon since his arrival and admission into Amelia’s store, she must have murdered the man for his belongings. Men begin to gather on the porch of Amelia’s store, waiting for something to happen, and eventually move inside the store itself. When Cousin Lymon descends the stair, they see a man vastly changed from the dirty and pitiful supplicant he was at first. His clothes are clean and mended; he has acquired a shirt from Amelia; he has added an ornamental scarf; and his shoes are polished and completely laced. He walks into the center of the room with his “stiff little strut” (209) and sizes up the occupants. The full description suggests an air of cockiness about him, and he immediately settles into the group as if he had known them all his life. Reciprocally, the town takes to him as if he were one of their own. On one hand, Lymon promises to be entertaining. At the very least, he is lively and certainly unexpected. On the other, his quick insinuation into Amelia’s life suggests an entrée
for the townspeople into that formerly closed realm. The novelty of the situation, derived from both Lymon’s physical appearance and his effect on the town’s leading citizen, can temporarily dispel their dullness.

This grand entrance is the precursor to the beginning of the café, a phenomenon that further serves to generate life within the community as it moves the townspeople from contemplative observation to genuine participation. For the first time, Miss Amelia becomes an integrated part of the community—a peer rather than a superior—and opens her “premises” to the use of all. While congregating in the café, the townspeople exercise an extreme degree of politeness as they adapt themselves to the unfamiliar custom. As the narrator states, “For the atmosphere of a proper café implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behavior” (McCullers, The Ballad 213). To complete the transition from store to café, Miss Amelia eventually begins to sell liquor by the drink and fried catfish suppers, served and consumed to the sound of a mechanical piano. As the magic of community weaves its spell, it touches her further and she mends her manners, much as Marvin Macy had done during his own pursuit of love, becoming less “quick to cheat her fellow man and to exact cruel payments” (214). Temporarily, at least, Cousin Lymon has enlivened the town by becoming a figurative high priest of social interaction.

This apparent change, however, is doomed to be corrupted by the grotesque nature of the characters when Marvin Macy returns. Lymon is the first to see Macy: “He and the man stared at each other, and it was not the look of two strangers meeting for the first time and swiftly summing up each other. It was a peculiar stare they exchanged between them, like the look of two criminals who recognize each other” (233). Such a narrative comment might lead the reader to believe that Macy (who had sworn to avenge himself on Amelia) did in fact know Lymon and
had set up the whole charade. But the outcome of the story is more powerful if these two men are simply kindred spirits who recognize one another’s nature: both are motivated by malice and deceit that masquerade as love. Such likelihood makes Lymon’s attraction to Macy all the more incomprehensible, although it is most likely the attraction of jealousy rather than true affection. Nevertheless, when Macy returns, a perverse love triangle develops: Amelia loves Lymon, who loves Marvin, who once loved Amelia.

The envy that fuels Cousin Lymon’s attraction to Macy stems from the fact that Lymon longs for experience. He groans publicly that Marvin Macy has been to Atlanta and to the penitentiary, as if such experiences are worldly, and therefore, desirable. Perhaps Lymon has delusions of becoming a thoroughly dangerous man, a possibility that seems unlikely, given his physical condition. He obviously craves and relishes attention, seeking the more serious attention of a lover rather than what is afforded him by the clownish role he plays. Nevertheless, his increasingly desperate state of mind leads him to betray Amelia’s affection and trust as he invites Macy to move in with them, an event that presages a fight between Macy and Amelia.

Robert Rechnitz suggests that this fight is inescapable and that Amelia accepts its outcome stoically as a necessity. Rechnitz argues that the three lovers are grotesque because they refuse to know themselves (459). This refusal stems from the fact that “the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved” (McCullers, *The Ballad* 216) in order to see the reality within. If this should happen, as Rechnitz says, the beloved would be forced to know himself (460), an apparently daunting possibility for Amelia in particular, who is apparently not given to introspection. Ironically, despite all of the contemplative isolation embedded in this story, the characters do not know themselves. Their contemplative moments seem more like bouts of confusion than emotional or spiritual insight. Amelia has no knowledge of her femininity; she
refuses to recognize any aspect of her gender, appearing to be what Rechnitz describes as a “mixture of man-woman” (459). Lymon is a “man-child with the prerogatives of the one and the license of the other. Marvin Macy, too, presents an odd mixture of the willful child and the adult outlaw. More forbidding than the others, he also seems part machine: he never sweats . . .” (Rechnitz 459). Thus, the physical grotesqueness of these characters suggests the psychological disturbance with which each wrestles. Rather than accept the role of beloved, as Rechnitz asserts, these three people prefer isolation because the fear of genuine communion is too terrifying to bear, demanding as it does a level of intimacy that would reveal too much of that genuine self rather than the “mask” crafted to endure public scrutiny as mentioned above. To achieve such a level of communion would require not only introspection and self-knowledge, but also exposure of that self and the incumbent risk of acceptance or rejection.

Even the fight between Amelia and Marvin is not over Lymon’s affection. It is a battle for turf. Just as the love triangle points from one to another, so have the sleeping arrangements shifted: Lymon’s bed goes to Marvin; Lymon then takes Amelia’s bed; Amelia ends up on the sofa, which is too short. After a couple of days with little to no sleep, Amelia decides to act, choosing a violent and masculine context through which to determine who retains Lymon. While she prepares for the fight, Lymon stirs up trouble between her and Macy. Moreover, he imitates her walk and mocks her crossed eyes, aping “her gestures in a way that made her appear to be a freak. There was something so terrible about this that even the silliest customers of the café, such as Merlie Ryan, did not laugh” (McCullers, The Ballad 245). Here is the literal grotesque of Miss Amelia’s physical appearance compounded by the grotesque behavior of the dwarf. Perhaps this display forces the townspeople to see Amelia as they have never done before. Furthermore, the fact that she has opened her heart and her home to this dwarf only to be
repaid in such a fashion must strike even the dullest of the townspeople as wrong. The fact that no one participates in Lymon’s ridicule suggests that they have a tender spot for Amelia, even if they do not understand her, and that, on some level, they recognize the betrayal inherent in Lymon’s mockery.

This performance is only the beginning of the revelation of Lymon’s genuine self. During the fight, Lymon shows his true colors and thwarts Miss Amelia’s imminent victory. While Amelia’s fingers are wrapped around Macy’s throat and he is bent backwards and nearly pinned on the floor, Lymon springs from his perch like a bird of prey and lands on Amelia’s back. As the narrator says, “The rest is confusion” (250), but Macy wins the fight, Amelia is left sprawled on the floor, and Lymon disappears. In the morning, both Macy and Lymon are gone, but before they leave, they wreck the café in a vicious display of spite. Consequently, the town is deprived of its communal center and Amelia is plunged back into isolation; Macy has had his revenge after all.

Because Amelia has now known companionship, the return to isolation is devastating. She raises the prices of her goods so high that no one can afford them; her doctoring practices change and she becomes callous and careless; she lets her hair grow ragged and her general appearance changes dramatically, her muscles growing soft and thin as if she had aged suddenly. She appears to be emotionally broken. In the fourth year following Lymon’s disappearance, Amelia hires a carpenter “to board up the premises, and there in those closed rooms she has remained ever since” (252). Such self-imposed isolation suggests that Amelia has submerged completely into the interior life as the town resumes its lifeless preoccupation with waiting for her to act.

Kestler identifies such a disconnection from meaningful life and claims that
“...McCullers, in particular, demonstrates the ability to portray characters whose physical and mental capacities are retarded by both outside and inside forces” (30). Indeed, the Southerner struggles under the pressures that challenge local traditions, both for good and for ill. Whereas Lymon is an external force outright, Macy is an internal force that has been refined by a period of exile. Thus, within this gothic setting, they become the personification of encroachment from the external, larger world. Temporarily, they invigorate the town, but the change is superficial at best because it is disconnected from any meaningful or genuine relationship; it is an entertainment along the lines of a masque, a procession performed by characters who are generally masked and “mum,” representing some allegorical significance but revealing little of their true intentions or purposes.

The scenario almost recalls the Grail legend in which Perceval is shown a processional masque wherein the grail and a lance are presented, but because of social confusion, he fails to ask the right question, and so he fails to complete his quest. Similarly, the reader might imagine a number of questions that Amelia could have asked Marvin or Lymon. Consequently, either man might have asked such questions of her. Even the townspeople might have asked questions of these three characters, but no one has fortitude to speak, to question, or to act. The relationships that develop have no true substance for they are superficial and unchallenged. If the respective lovers cannot solve the dilemmas of their potential relationships, how can those onlookers offer remedy? Therefore, the community that arises out of their “performance” cannot last for it has no substance, either. Although Macy and Lymon do not create the grotesque in this particular story, they serve to exacerbate it by creating the conditions that are conducive to Amelia’s opening herself to the vulnerability that accompanies love. The contrast that results ultimately drives the grotesque inward just as it drives Amelia into total isolation.
Moreover, Kestler’s use of the term “retarded” suggests that the grotesque stems from an inability to keep up with change. Although the pace of life within this particular town is not an obvious issue, McCullers does suggest a dynamic tension between that predominantly static state and the excitement generated by the dwarf’s arrival. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the townspeople are uncertain of how to respond to these changes, behaving timidly and exercising an almost-forced politeness. Even these isolated people resort to the behavioral “code” when faced with the uncertainty of change. For them, moving from contemplative observation to action in any capacity implies a pace that challenges their habit. In a broader regional sense, the pace generally associated with the changes introduced by the modern age has created many problems within the traditionally conservative Southern mind. Distinguishing between what must be preserved and what exactly needs to be changed requires contemplation rather than immediate action. In addition, coming to terms with those traditions in which change is inevitable is a time-consuming process and one that is often faced stoically. The pace of life in the South has traditionally been slow; especially within the more rural or remote areas, there is little need to hurry. However, what seems more likely than an inability to keep pace with modernity is a reluctance to do so. Within the Southern psyche resides a sense that change is not necessarily desirable, a fact that perhaps leads Kestler to emphasize the connection between this retardation and McCullers’ use of the grotesque as reflective of a “special quality symptomatic of the writings in her era—a disturbed psyche and a disturbed time” (36). Kestler is correct not only for the American population in general, but for the South in particular, where the disturbances take on a distinctive quality because they challenge values, perspectives, and traditions, thereby tending to generate stasis—meaning that the Southerner is often inclined to refuse to budge away from those things being challenged.
The South in the first forty years of the twentieth century was undeniably a disturbed place, one that has been—and continues to be—characterized as backward and its inhabitants labeled as unsophisticated “hicks.” Kestler’s retarded grotesque is a by-product of tension between the modern idea of progress and the South’s reluctance to “progress.” The concept of progress itself implies forward movement, but the question that seems to preoccupy the Southern consciousness is “Toward what?” Also, such movement by necessity assumes a movement away from something; for the South, this condition suggests tradition and the familiar. Such movement, away from the known and toward the unknown, once again recalls Harpham’s margin (see Chapter 1), and the technological advances of the twentieth century have increased the pace of change. To a conservative and traditional society, this movement tends to generate confusion, chaos, and an inability to cope, resulting in emotional disturbance at least and mental imbalance at worst. Compounding the problem further is the fact that the community is being undermined by this progress: towns and cities are growing as “outsiders” move into the region, traditions are abandoned in favor of the “new,” and younger generations move away in search of adventure and opportunity perceived as available only in the wider world. When the children (or more accurately, the younger generation) abandon the community, the family disintegrates, a phenomenon reflected clearly in McCullers’ fiction. Such was the case with McCullers herself, and many of her fictional characters are displaced Southerners who do not necessarily find the satisfaction they thought awaited them north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Hence, these characters may appear retarded (grotesque) because they espouse views that are considered backward in their new locale, or they may find that they simply cannot make the adjustment to the demands of the non-Southern society.
Take, for example, the marriage depicted in McCullers’ short story, “A Domestic Dilemma.” Told from the husband’s point of view, this story reflects two distinctive results in the confrontation between Southern custom and modernity. Martin Meadows has been transferred from Alabama to New York. For him, the move represents opportunity for advancement, and as far as the story indicates, he makes the transition successfully. His wife, however, cannot cope with the new situation and turns increasingly to drink. Emily’s descent into alcoholism creates conflicting impulses in Martin. For example, his desire to get home after work diminishes: “It used to be that at this point he would relax and begin to think with pleasure of his home. But in this last year nearness brought only a sense of tension . . .” (McCullers 148). His uncertainty of what he will find at home creates this reaction. Furthermore, in addition to feeling tense, Martin is confused about how this predicament occurred, as shown in his attempt to determine how the social evening drink turned into the serious problem it has become: “But alcohol had never seemed a problem to him, only a bothersome expense that with the increase in the family they could scarcely afford” (151).

As he wonders when exactly the problem came to his family, Martin realizes the causal connection: “It was only after his company had transferred him to New York that Martin was aware that certainly his wife was drinking too much” (151). While in Alabama, Emily—and Martin as well—had the distraction of family (beyond the company of her husband and children) and the comfort of the familiar. She also had the social interaction common within a community. Martin finally understands that the move north has created the problem for Emily—the change has disturbed her:

. . . accustomed to the idle warmth of a small Southern town, the matrix of the family and cousinship and childhood friends, she had failed to accommodate
herself to the stricter, lonelier mores of the North. The duties of motherhood and housekeeping were onerous to her. Homesick for Paris City, she had made no friends in the suburban town. She read only magazines and murder books. Her interior life was insufficient without the artifice of alcohol. (151)

While moving north did not create Emily’s use of alcohol, it did deprive her of a familiar routine aside from the alcohol. As her sense of loss and alienation grow, alcohol becomes an increasingly important aspect of her routine. Her drinking recalls a more pleasant, familiar time as it blunts her discomfort and distances her from an undesirable reality. Her inability or unwillingness to make new friends likely stems from a lack of compatibility and, perhaps, a lack of acceptance between herself and her new neighbors. The “stricter, lonelier mores of the North” must by definition be less tolerant than the closely-knit community wherein Emily grew up. To recall Brooke Allen’s comment above, the South is more tolerant of “eccentricity, stupidity, drunkenness, want of ambition and general weirdness” (New Criterion) than any other region of the United States, provided the person in question submits to the community’s standards.

Like Welty, McCullers seems to be drawing her grotesque models from what offends those societal norms by juxtaposing behavior that had been acceptable against a new set of mores. What is interesting in this story, however, is that Emily was not grotesque in Alabama; instead, she becomes grotesque in New York because her behavior does not measure up against the “stricter mores” of her new environment. Ironically, perhaps, her current excessive behavior would no longer be acceptable in Alabama, either, although public censure might be less likely. What was originally a social activity has exceeded the limit (breached the boundary, as it were) and has generated a grotesque circumstance. For McCullers, the catalyst for this transformation is the withdrawal from friends and family that results in the unbearable loneliness of alienation.
Moreover, emotional distance in this story is not limited to Emily, although she reflects the more profound result. Martin, too, feels alienated, not from his family, per se, but certainly from his wife. Considering his situation, Martin suffers “a moment of rebellion against his fate; he hated his wife” (McCullers, “A Domestic” 155). He has begun to realize that Emily’s behavior is likely to impact his own future, and particularly his career: “His youth was being frittered by a drunkard’s waste, his very manhood subtly undermined” (156). He also worries about the long-term effects on the children. For the moment, they are too young to understand what is happening within their family, but eventually, “once the immunity of incomprehension passed—what would it be like in a year or so?” (156). These concerns quickly expand to a realization that he will be unable to conceal Emily’s deteriorating condition; office gossip and neighborhood rumor will catch up with them, binding Martin and his children “to a future of degradation and slow ruin” (156). Here, McCullers offers a clear demonstration of the Southerner’s perception of the power the community holds over its members. The moral evil of divorce is overpowered by the social evil of being married to a drunk. In a conventional sense, Martin must dissolve his family in order to protect his family, certainly a grotesque twist in the story. But as he watches Emily sleeping, his hard anger changes, his blame melts away, and he sees her through tender eyes once again, although his future course is somewhat ambiguous at the end of the story: “By moonlight he watched his wife for the last time. His hand sought the adjacent flesh and sorrow paralleled desire in the immense complexity of love” (157).

In her sleep, Emily regains the appearance of the woman he loves. Rather than the quarrelsome drunk who mistakes cayenne pepper for cinnamon on the children’s toast, Martin sees the lovely and feminine source of the traits of his children’s faces—the fine arched brow, tilted nose, high cheekbones, and pointed chin. The grotesque Emily has been submerged once
again, in a sort of Jekyll and Hyde fashion. Yet, one is left to wonder how long Martin will endure its lurking presence; the description of his watchfulness could be taken to mean “for the last time” that night, or it could imply something more extreme, such as divorce, abandonment, institutionalization, or possibly even murder. Moreover, the descriptor could suggest that Emily’s transformation is likely to become so profound—clearly it has been getting progressively worse—that she will literally become something other than his wife, spirited away, as it were, into a permanent sherry-induced “Hyde.” As Kestler states, “When the capacity for love has been utterly twisted, the result is the grotesqueness and violence of perversion and an aggregation of misery” (36). Misery such as that experienced by Martin and Emily cannot continue unchecked. Their situation reflects what Robert Phillips rightly identifies as an “inner freaking out” (173). Characters such as Martin and Emily appear normal but suffer from “the feeling of being severed from society, disunited from others, lonely, separate, different, apart” (Phillips 173).

While Emily is more overtly grotesque in her drunken behavior, Martin is also grotesque in his own way. He seems unwilling to attend adequately to Emily’s needs. One might reasonably wonder why Martin does not seek help for his wife, or ask for a transfer back to Alabama to return her to a more amenable location. The ambiguity of the story’s end does not exclude the possibility of medical treatment, although Martin’s financial status does not seem adequate for such an expense. One might also question his apparent willingness to permit her descent into dissolution by his failure to exert his traditional Southern role as head of the family. Of course, it is possible that within the context of their marriage, Martin has tried all that might reasonably be expected of him, but the story itself indicates no such action. Whereas eccentrics abound in the South and family is family regardless of an individual’s ailments, Martin has
bought into the economy and apparently Puritan-based society of the North where family seems to mean less than appearances and fear of public censure dominates. Martin has become more concerned with the opprobrium that might be offered by his neighbors and employer than he is with helping his wife recover. This is not to say that appearances do not matter in Southern circles, but loyalty is, perhaps, more important within the context of traditional Southern values than it appears to be in more modern and economically-oriented areas. Furthermore, the communal reliance on manners in the traditional South would minimize public censure, even if private disapproval prevailed. Martin admits that they drank while in Alabama, and that the move to New York has changed Emily, but rather than help her overcome the problem, he is apparently willing to remove her from the family, or to remove the family from her. This threatened dissolution of the marriage suggests a moral decline as it will undermine the marriage vows, especially the stipulation of “for better or for worse.” Again, within the economy of appearances, Martin’s “acceptable” future becomes more important than saving his marriage, and he becomes the grotesque because his love seems likely to fail, thereby leading him to prefer the modern trend of a single parent household over enduring or solving his wife’s dilemma.

McCullers’ interest in such failures of love also drives “The Sojourner.” Here, McCullers presents John Ferris, a newspaperman who travels the globe. He has returned to the United States from Paris in order to attend his father’s funeral in Georgia. As the story opens, he is in New York awaiting his return flight to Paris. While eating breakfast, he peruses his address book; his father’s death having plunged him into a contemplative state, he wonders about the people represented by the names and numbers there. Such contemplation reminds him of the transience of life: “As Ferris closed the address book, he suffered a sense of hazard, transience, almost of fear” (McCullers, “The Sojourner” 139). Although the immediate significance here is
the transience of mortal existence, one cannot escape the parallel with Ferris’ perpetual mobility, a fact that has caused him to lose connection with the people listed on the address book’s pages.

Suddenly, he catches a glimpse of his ex-wife Elizabeth passing by. This unexpected encounter causes him to reflect on the failed marriage and on his life in general. The story reveals that Ferris had not seen Elizabeth for eight years, during which time she had remarried and had children, and he had moved on to other loves, the most recent one named Jeannine. He cannot understand his emotional reaction to this encounter: “So why the unhinged body, the shaken mind? He knew only that his clouded heart was oddly dissonant with the sunny, candid autumn day” (139). He is obviously in an emotionally elevated state because of the death of his father, but seeing Elizabeth only enhances his agitation. She represents home, commitment, and a potential for some degree of permanence. Although Ferris appears to be the man-about-town with minimal attachment to others, content with his occupation, he evidently longs for what his former marriage could have offered. In his meditation on death and transience, he very likely has realized that without a family to survive his own passing, he too will slip into total oblivion, only to be forgotten in time by all who knew him. This is the ultimate consequence of the anonymity of the modern city in contrast to the more traditional community. The curse of the modern world seems to be a kind of indifference to the individuals that inhabit it. Such indifference denigrates the significance of human existence by devaluing the role of each unique member within a given society. If Ferris were to die, who would notice? Only his family and friends, from whom he is separated, and with whom he has diminishing ties; because he is unmarried and has no children, the number of his connections within the world will steadily decline. His lifestyle has served to deprive him of any meaningful tie with others. Consequently, the story describes Ferris as being plagued by the sense that he has forgotten something, and the
narrator remarks on this several times, for example, “He had the feeling that something unpleasant was awaiting him—what it was, he did not know” (138), and, “As he went from one engagement to another, he was still bothered at odd moments by the feeling that something necessary was forgotten” (140). He returns to his hotel and reviews his itinerary: “He checked over his obligations: take luggage to Air France, lunch with his boss, buy shoes and an overcoat. And something—wasn’t there something else?” (140). Of course, there is something else—connection with family. The idea haunts Ferris, tickling the edges of his mind, but avoiding his scrutiny. Impulsively, he calls Elizabeth and she invites him for dinner.

Ferris is received warmly into the Bailey home, where he meets Elizabeth’s new family, husband Bill, son Billy, and daughter Candy. The description of Elizabeth’s home evokes the gentility and graciousness imparted through her Georgian upbringing. Her children are well-behaved and her husband shows no sign of jealousy while entertaining this ex-husband. Elizabeth does everything within her power to make Ferris comfortable as long as he is a guest in her home. Even the dinner is prepared especially for him: “It was a Southern dinner that evening, and the dishes were his old favorites. They had fried chicken and corn pudding and rich, glazed candied sweet potatoes” (McCullers, “The Sojourner” 144). In fact, Elizabeth has even remembered that this particular day is Ferris’ birthday, and the dessert is a birthday cake complete with candles.

The bleak contrast to this scene of domestic harmony lies in Ferris’ recollections of his past and present relationships. He feels uncomfortable despite the sincerity of the Baileys’ greeting: “Ferris felt himself suddenly a spectator—an interloper among these Baileys. Why had he come? He suffered. His own life seemed so solitary, a fragile column supporting nothing amidst the wreckage of the years” (142). Confronted with the wholeness of Elizabeth’s life,
Ferris is forced to acknowledge the emptiness of his own; the level of detachment in Ferris’ life is an unnatural, although increasingly common phenomenon of the modern age. Among the Baileys he sees the accomplishment that he could not achieve, namely a traditional family relationship. He recalls that he and Elizabeth “. . . had lived together, shared perhaps a thousand days and nights and—finally—endured in the misery of sudden solitude the fiber by fiber (jealousy, alcohol and money quarrels) destruction of the fabric of married love” (143).

His discomfort is enhanced by the music Elizabeth plays before dinner, a Bach prelude and fugue that, appropriately enough, summon “a wilderness of memory. Ferris was lost in the riot of past longings, conflicts, ambivalent desires” (144). Ferris himself exists in a fugue state; unable to engage fully with life, he has taken on an occupation that keeps him moving, thereby making commitment difficult if not impossible. The constant movement demanded by his occupation also keeps him away from home, in the sense of being removed both from family and from place. When the maid interrupts the music with the announcement that dinner is ready, Ferris is haunted by the unfinished melody, suggestive, perhaps, of his own inability to complete what he begins.

This tendency toward fragmentation also characterizes the dinner conversation, but Elizabeth manages to keep the conversation alive, despite the occasional over-long silences. Eventually, Ferris is led to speak of his current romantic involvement with Jeannine, and he says they will be married soon, but this is shown to be false: “The words seemed so true, inevitable, that Ferris did not at first acknowledge to himself the lie” (145). He also admits to himself that Jeannine is still married, though separated, to a fellow that she is unable or unwilling to divorce. Consequently, the possibility of marriage with her is remote at best, so she becomes a “safe” choice. He tries to make amends for the lie by telling the truth, but that is tainted by a lie as well:
“Jeannine has a little boy of seven. A curious trilingual little fellow. We go to the Tuileries sometimes. A lie again. He had taken the boy once to the gardens” (145). One might wonder whether Ferris is attempting to soothe Elizabeth by allowing her to think that he is doing well, but the more likely explanation is that he is attempting to fool himself into believing that his life affords some of the wholeness that he sees in the Bailey household. As soon as the lie is uttered, however, Ferris recalls his lack of connection with Jeannine’s son; he usually has other obligations whenever the boy wants to be taken somewhere. Ferris’ work continues to take priority over his relationships; therefore, just as a lack of commitment to his first marriage resulted in divorce, the apparent lack of commitment in his present relationship is likely to prevent a new marriage.

The disparity between his own empty existence and Elizabeth’s happy, loving family is shocking, and Ferris recalls it with a mixture of longing, envy, and regret. He has made a career out of observing life from a distance, apparently unaware of the full impact such detachment will have. He becomes grotesque partly through his inability to engage fully with life, but perhaps more so through his detachment from that realization. Only after his encounter with the wholeness of Elizabeth’s life can Ferris begin to recognize what he has missed in his own. In fact, it is not simply Ferris himself who is grotesque, but also the transient, detached life he has chosen—a life made possible by modern advances in the world. Such a denial of traditional obligations to family transcends personal fulfillment; it impacts the culture and the community. Not only is his personal life empty, but also he has not been a dutiful son to his parents and he apparently is unable or unwilling to carry on the family line through marriage and children.

For Ferris, isolation is indeed a product of circumstance rather than physical appearance (Phillips 173), but it is a circumstance of his own choosing. Phillips also claims that in her short
fiction, McCullers strove for quiet occasions that nevertheless reveal vital concerns (175), and the dinner with the Baileys qualifies as such an occasion. Furthermore, whereas Ferris appears normal, and certainly in the contemporary world, many resemble Ferris more fully than Elizabeth, the idea of grotesqueness becomes problematic because it has traditionally been used as a physical manifestation of something undesirable. My contention remains, however, that for twentieth century Southern writers, the grotesque eventually shifts away from overt physical deformity to a perversion of belief, attitude, or perspective, and becomes increasingly internalized, resulting ultimately in a kind a static existence such the one reflected in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Bernard McElroy confirms such a possibility, for example, and notes that the concept of the grotesque is not an absolute; rather, it reflects a continuum and may be present in varying degrees (2). Moreover, the contemporary grotesque tends to transform the world from what we “know” it to be to what we fear it might be (McElroy 5). This idea applies nicely to Ferris, who knows that the world, and all life in it, is transient, and who therefore chooses to disconnect himself from it in an effort to avoid the pain of suffering and loss, only to find that his choice creates those very states he seeks to escape. McCullers has used Ferris to reflect what McElroy describes as a twentieth-century man who lives in a vast, indifferent, and meaningless universe where his actions are insignificant outside of his own personal sphere (17), an increasingly common practice within twentieth century Southern grotesque fiction.

Despite a general critical consensus that McCullers’ short fiction does not depict the grotesque, the fact seems to be that she does utilize a dynamic tension between external normality and internal grotesqueness. Louis Ruben states that freakishness for McCullers is the exemplar of the “wretchedness of the human condition” and that her freaks are normality; the physical grotesquery simply makes their freakishness visible (118). Ruben goes on to say that
McCullers’ desire to sympathetically depict pain and loneliness can only be fulfilled through a “social situation in which the patterns and forms and expectations of conduct and attitude are very firmly and formidably present, so that the inability or failure to function within those patterns seems crucial” (119). Such a condition, for the moment, continues to exist within the traditional Southern community, and explains Flannery O’Connor’s claim that a Southerner can still recognize a freak. The grotesque does not exist where everything is permitted, which means that in the modern, non-Southern world, what was previously considered grotesque is becoming increasingly accepted as normal. Neither is there any need for pain or anxiety over individualized behavior, no matter how bizarre it may be, because the contemporary view tends toward the “right” of the individual to be expressive, regardless of the impact on the community or family.

Because the grotesque is a manifestation of those appearances, behaviors, and beliefs that violate the community’s norms, the community must first define a norm in order for the grotesque to appear. Current trends that support unrestrained individualism and relativistic values threaten the very existence of “the grotesque.” However, because communities are likely to establish some idea of normality, even if it serves primarily as a catalyst for tolerance, the grotesque will suffer or benefit from a degree of relativism, and its determination will be left open to some degree of interpretation. As Harpham states, “. . . it is up to the culture to provide the conventions and assumptions that determine its particular forms. Culture does this by establishing conditions of order and coherence, especially by specifying which categories are logically or generically incompatible with which others” (“Preface” xx). Within the traditional communities of the South, the norm derived out of such conditions has been defined as loyalty and devotion to the community, to the family, to God, and to place and memory. As these
conditions have been exposed to criticism, challenge, and revision or replacement, the character of the grotesque has shifted, but Southern writers continue to recognize those conditions that are aberrant to traditional values. Even McCullers, who tends to be considered by many critics to be “un-Southern,” maintained that it was impossible to escape the influences of the region of her birth (McDowell 16). Regardless of her well-documented disputes with the South, she herself continued to regard her works as Southern, touching on the individual’s relationship within the community in general, but emphasizing it through those matters of the heart in particular. Perhaps the most compelling claim of McCullers’ Southernness comes from Louis Ruben, who states that Southern fiction contains one essential element: “Southern literature is filled with depictions of characters who, set for one reason or other on the outside, contemplate the intense coming and going of a community life from a private distance” (123). Nowhere, he says, does this condition appear more essential than in McCullers’ works.
CHAPTER 4

FLANNERY O’CONNOR:

SOUTHERN FAITH

Just as contemplating the community from a private distance is essential to McCullers, contemplating the spiritual condition of that community is essential to O’Connor. Whereas Welty focused on the dismantling of the community in general, and McCullers considered the dismantling of the family in particular, O’Connor turns to the most disastrous assault of all: the methodically scientific and economically motivated undermining of humanity’s relationship with God. Gilbert Muller rightly characterizes her approach when he says that her delineation of the cultural grotesque as her main character type establishes O’Connor as a special kind of regionalist—one who utilizes the South’s special resources and is at odds with it (44-45). For O’Connor, the separation of humanity from God springs from the failure of the community. This idea suggests Allen Tate’s concern that the twentieth century has seen the rise of communication at the expense of communion; hence, the community has suffered. However, despite the fact that O’Connor draws strongly concrete subjects and places, she does not precisely subscribe to the ideal of Agrarian perfection; her characters may occupy rural locales and occupations, and potential for salvation (whether literal or figurative) may exist all around them, but they are fallen creatures and incapable of perfection, driven though they tend to be by the modern attraction to secular humanism.

In O’Connor’s depictions, the grotesque rules; she is a master of the form and her name is regularly associated with that genre, far more so than Welty or McCullers. Despite attempts by some critics to merge what is loosely called the “Southern Gothic School” with practitioners of
the grotesque, O’Connor simply will not comply. Her works are grotesque, not gothic, and
Muller offers a clear distinction between the two genres:

Gothic fiction, whether traditional or modern, is a variety of romance which
dwells upon imaginative terror in order to create a special atmosphere. Rather
than comedy and terror, which are combined in the grotesque, we encounter
suspense and terror in the Gothic . . . (12)

Such “imaginative terror” does not exist in O’Connor’s work; nor is she simply trying to create
an atmosphere. O’Connor transcends the more mundane realities of the community and the
family in their surrender to the assaults of modernity by raising the ante through the introduction
of the relationship between the human and the divine. This third pillar of the traditional
foundation within Southern culture has, perhaps, suffered under the most profound challenges
imposed by the modern age, and ostensibly points to the most profound consequences should the
individual choose wrongly. As Muller goes on to say, while the gothic “merely assaults the
nerves by making us believe in the horror of the supernatural . . . the grotesque forces
metaphysical problems upon the intellect” (12). This is precisely what O’Connor does. She
combines her Southern perspective with her Catholic beliefs and the resultant metaphysical
confrontation—namely that between the traditional view of man’s relationship with God and the
modernized scientific view purged of God—is so powerful that the presence of the grotesque is
unavoidable.

Unlike Faulkner, for whom the past was the inescapable measure by which to analyze the
present, O’Connor’s use of the grotesque expresses a different relationship with the past, one that
is both amused and appalled at the demise of her culture. She never asserts that the South’s past
was “right,” but she refuses to embrace the modern view as superior. Select aspects of that past,
such as the recognition of man’s fallen state, the inescapable need for God, and the impossibility of bridging the gap between the human and the divine, were closer to Truth than their twentieth-century secular humanist counterparts. O’Connor’s perspective remains consistent with the South’s self-conscious embrace of what might be called archaic trends and values. For example, as Di Renzo explains, the medieval grotesque was concerned with energy in motion, specifically the act of creating, transforming, and destroying form. The visual grotesques, e.g., architectural ornaments or carvings, of this era suggest action that has been accelerated as one detail quickly replaces another (151). This acceleration of detail implies “the ever-changing flux of life and the complexity of human subjectivity” (151). As Di Renzo further explains, the acceleration eventually reaches a pitch with which movement cannot keep pace, and the result is a frozen moment: “Tragedy’s aim is to achieve stasis in pain. It depicts the human face as a carved mask with a single, profound expression” (151). Such an explanation of the medieval concept of the purpose of the grotesque dovetails nicely with the Southern perspective, and the concept remains fresh for the Southern writer as both external and internal assaults on familiar and traditional customs increase. Indeed, the very presence of modernity creates new forms and values by transforming and destroying old ones. According to Di Renzo, the grotesque world is constantly in flux with no correlation between the interior state and the external appearance, thus creating a radical disjunction between how one is, how one perceives one’s self to be, and how one is perceived by others (151). Such a state exists within the South, especially during the modern and post-modern eras, and O’Connor draws upon that fact to craft her grotesques.

O’Connor herself says that by using the grotesque, a writer is “looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the
one that everybody sees” (“The Grotesque” 42). Certainly, O’Connor’s grotesques have one foot in the material plane and one in the spiritual, with their grotesqueness growing out of their inability or their unwillingness to bridge the gap. This inability is shown through the grotesque figure’s actions rather than O’Connor’s narrative because she relies heavily on “surface description, gesture, metaphor, [and] analogy . . . rarely [revealing] who her characters are by giving us access to their thoughts” (Di Renzo 108). This approach is both Aristotelian (i. e. material) and scriptural (i. e. spiritual) because it requires the reader to know the character by his actions (fruits). Such an approach is also appropriate for the Southern perspective where forms dominate; thus, the surface would take on greater significance than the motivation. In an age where intent is afforded greater regard than act, where individualized relativism dominates cultural convention, O’Connor’s approach can only produce a spiritually grotesque figure.

These grotesques embody contradiction, which is the fundamental principle of that genre. They offer no clear resolution to the issues raised in her fiction, although O’Connor is clearly using them to criticize current trends. For O’Connor, these contradictions generally grow out of the conflict between humanity’s dismissal of God and its subsequent self-aggrandizement, as evidenced through a smug belief in the superiority of science (as in “The Lame Shall Enter First”) and an impatience for God’s revelation (as in “Revelation”). As Di Renzo notes, the grotesque itself lacks the happy ending of comedy, the moral judgment of satire, and the transcendental closure of tragedy (8). For O’Connor, it grows out of the uncomfortable and tardy recognition of poor choices that generate severe and lasting consequences, usually in the material plane, but also potentially in the spiritual one. Furthermore, the initial laughter and most of the comic quality in O’Connor’s works comes from that sense of superiority expressed by her truly grotesque characters, but as Di Renzo further notes, the dynamic power of her fiction
arises out of a closer scrutiny that undercuts that snide superiority (105). It is the need for this
closer scrutiny that turns the laughter dark and leaves the reader discomfited by the realization
that the story touches on something deeper than initially perceived.

Take, for example, “The Lame Shall Enter First.” The protagonist here is Sheppard, a
recent widower with a ten-year-old son named Norton. Sheppard has taken up volunteer work to
fill the void created by his wife's death, and through his newly-acquired social enlightenment, he
comes to believe that his son is selfish, a fact that causes bitter disappointment. "It was hopeless.
Almost any fault would have been preferable to selfishness--a violent temper, even a tendency to
lie" (O’Connor 446). Partly to teach Norton a lesson about charity, and partly to challenge
himself intellectually, Sheppard manages to persuade Rufus Johnson, one of the delinquents
from the reformatory, to move in with them. Sheppard is convinced that Johnson would change
if only someone showed him the right kind of attention; he is further convinced that Rufus and
Norton will have a salubrious effect on each other—Rufus can benefit from living within a home
environment and Norton can benefit from having an older “brother.” Johnson has a club foot, a
significant part of his identity, which Sheppard also suspects is responsible for much of
Johnson's bad behavior. Kimberly Greene Angle points out that Miss O'Connor's interest is
not only to reveal the fallen nature of humans but also to make her readers
see themselves as fallen and in need of grace. Thus she uses distortion. . . .
people with lame bodies and souls, . . . human beings [who] are corrupted and
often have preconceived notions of God that blur their vision of who they really
are and who God really is . . . (161).

For O'Connor, the overt physical grotesqueness of her characters points toward the tension
between habit or condition and the need for change. Johnson, for example, is literally lame, but
it is not his true burden; his true burden is the necessity of accepting or rejecting God, a fact he himself identifies. Furthermore, the club foot does not represent the greatest deformity in the story, as will be shown below. This tension between the external and internal deformities becomes essential to the story development once Johnson moves in.

Despite his socially ascribed delinquent status, Johnson has a clear sense of his identity. His "questions about life had been answered by signs nailed on the pine trees: DOES SATAN HAVE YOU IN HIS POWER? REPENT OR BURN IN HELL. JESUS SAVES. He would know the Bible with or without reading it" (O’Connor, “The Lame” 451). This backwoods fundamentalism is part of what Sheppard plans to "correct" in the boy's attitude toward life. When Johnson explains his bad behavior by saying, "Satan, . . . He has me in his power" (450), Sheppard retorts angrily, "Rubbish! We're living in the space age! You're too smart to give me an answer like that" (451). Thus, the traditional Southern fundamentalist view and the modern scientific view, which are personified in Johnson and Sheppard, respectively, come into direct conflict. Angle further states that “she [O’Connor] outlines the 'negative' intellectuals . . . to show the failings of human intellect and pride and, thereby, to portray the 'positive' power of God beyond those failings" (171). Such a polarity reveals the diametrically opposed relationship between the human and the divine, with the power of human intellectualism being but a shadowy, and thereby insubstantial reverse image of the genuine power of God. Little does Sheppard know that he will pay a terrible price for his intellectualized version of compassion.

As the story progresses, Sheppard violates another tenet of Southern tradition: he champions the imagined needs of the outsider while ignoring the very real needs of his own. He becomes more and more obsessed with changing Johnson, all the while ignoring his blood son, Norton, in spite of the obvious emotional need Norton exhibits. Sheppard writes it off to
selfishness every time, even down to the boy's persistent grief over the loss of his mother. "This was not a normal grief. It was all part of his [Norton’s] selfishness. She had been dead for over a year and a child's grief should not last so long" (O’Connor, “The Lame” 447). Such a comment points toward the modern tendency to rely on scientific quantification rather than to accept the mystery of the human heart, an act that would acknowledge the inability of humans to know everything. Sheppard’s attitude also points to the idea that he knows what is better for Norton than the boy does, which may be true on many levels, but how can Sheppard say what the bereaved son feels? How can he identify what the bereaved son should feel? His failure to acknowledge the boy’s grief and his dismissal of its significance undoubtedly contribute to its perpetuation.

To combat his own grief, on the other hand, Sheppard has busied himself with rehabilitating Johnson. After a period of adjustment following Johnson's moving in, Norton also busies himself with Johnson, but in a very different pursuit. Johnson’s fundamentalist views—of good and evil, or heaven and hell—intrigue young Norton, who has been raised on what Sheppard believes is the truth. Whenever the boy has asked about his mother, Sheppard has replied, “‘Your mother isn’t anywhere. She’s not unhappy. She just isn’t’” (O’Connor, “The Lame” 461), believing this nihilistic answer to be preferable to what he imagines is the lie of heaven. However, Johnson offers Norton very different responses, stating that if she were a good woman, she would be in heaven, but if not, she would be burning in hell. Such a revelation is unbearable to the child, mainly because it seems tangible enough for a ten-year-old to understand. This sense of the tangible existence of heaven and hell provides the foundation for Christian belief. By eliminating Christianity from his life, Sheppard has essentially guaranteed the despair of his son. The human inability to provide empirical evidence of the scriptures’
promises leads to Sheppard’s dilemma. He has nothing to offer in response to his son’s anxiety because the significance of the conversation is completely lost on him. He has neglected Norton’s need for solace and closure for so long—writing it off to abnormal grief and selfishness—that he is incapable of extending himself to address Norton’s despair. Part of what contributes to his grotesqueness is his inability to understand that his young son needs something more solid than the intellectual nihilism he himself embraces. Even if the concept of heaven and hell cannot be tangibly demonstrated, Johnson is able to provide a sufficiently realistic description that Norton can understand. Sheppard’s offering that the mother “just isn’t” cannot satisfy the six-year-old’s need for concrete reassurance, even if the only concrete evidence exists in the boy’s imagination. Thus, what might be obvious to Sheppard is totally incomprehensible to Norton.

Despite Sheppard’s ministrations, Johnson remains incorrigible, although he adeptly shames Sheppard into believing lies about his whereabouts and activities. He draws readily on Sheppard’s promise to trust him, and turns it back on the man at every opportunity. The relationship between these two exemplifies the power of faith through the contrast between Johnson’s confidence both in Satan’s hold over him and in his ability to change once he is ready and Sheppard’s complete lack of spiritual faith. Whereas Johnson realizes that choice and change are possible through God’s grace, Sheppard recognizes only the direct causal relationship between stimulus and response. Such a direct and economic view, as Ransom would describe it, ignores the necessity of time in the development of understanding; part of the flaw in modern thinking stems from the idea that humans can know the mysteries of life immediately, that the answers provided by science are complete and infallible. Whereas true scientists increasingly acknowledge the fact that science can provide only partial answers rather than definitive ones,
and that mysteries in life still exist, the common view of the layman often seems to be that
science has indeed replaced mystery, providing the story rather than a story. Even if O'Connor
is using Sheppard to show that placing an unquestioning confidence in science can be as risky as
an unexamined faith in scripture, Sheppard's intellectual abilities are impotent in his need for
solace or change. As O'Connor says in The Habit of Being, "'Faith is what you have in the
absence of knowledge'" (477). However, Sheppard believes that he has modern scientific
knowledge; therefore, he has no need for faith.

Johnson’s faith, on the other hand, provides a more essential knowledge, namely that of
good and evil. Although he chooses evil, it is an informed choice. These two schools of thought
come into conflict one night while Johnson and Sheppard are looking at stars through a
telescope.

"Nobody has given any reliable evidence there's a hell." [Sheppard]

"The Bible has give the evidence," Johnson said darkly, "and if you die and
go there you burn forever. . . . Whoever says it ain't a hell," Johnson said, "is
contradicting Jesus. The dead are judged and the wicked are damned. They
weep and gnash their teeth while they burn," he continued, "and it's everlasting
darkness."

The child's mouth opened. His eyes appeared to grow hollow. [Norton]

"Satan runs it," Johnson said.

Norton lurched up and took a hobbled step toward Sheppard. "Is she there?"

he said in a loud voice. "Is she there burning up?" He kicked the rope off his
feet. "Is she on fire?"

"Oh my God," Sheppard muttered. "No no," he said, "of course she isn't. Rufus
is mistaken. Your mother isn't anywhere. She's not unhappy. She just isn't."

His lot would have been easier if when his wife died he had told Norton she had
gone to heaven and that some day he would see her again, but he could not allow
himself to bring him up on a lie. (O'Connor, “The Lame” 461)

This particular exchange provides the basis for the climax of the story. Previously, Norton has
loudly wailed that if his mother were in the penitentiary, at least he could go see her. Sheppard
has told him his mother "isn't anywhere." Now Johnson offers a seemingly tangible possibility,
which he will later counter with the idea of heaven, leading the young boy to a tragic effort to
join his mother. The importance of this conversation is completely lost on the intellectual father,
who thinks he is protecting his son from being brought up "on a lie." In a clear demonstration of
the impotence of intellect where unconditional grace is needed, Sheppard tries to comfort the boy
by saying, "That's all I have to give you, . . . the truth" (462).

As the story concludes, Johnson is finally caught at his crimes, but before he is taken
away by the police, he reveals the genuine truth that Sheppard has denied. "'I lie and steal
because I'm good at it! My foot don't have a thing to do with it! The lame shall enter first! The
halt'll be gathered together. When I get ready to be saved, Jesus'll save me, not that lying
stinking atheist, . . .' " (480). Within Christian tradition, even this hoodlum is not beyond God's
grace, and his grotesqueness is superficial. The true grotesque is Sheppard, who finally realizes
that he has been guilty of the selfishness he was so willing to attribute to his son: "He had
stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed
his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the
eyes of Johnson" (481). Sheppard begins his penitential mantra: "I did more for him than I did
for my own child" (481). As he rushes to the forgiving salvation of his son's embrace, he finds
Norton hanging with empty arms from a beam in the attic, just above the telescope through which, earlier in the day, he had found his mother.

Sheppard has broken with Southern tradition on several fronts, although it is his abandonment of a spiritual life that causes the deepest tragedy. By rejecting any sense of biblical tradition, insisting that sin and evil cannot exist in the “space age,” Sheppard becomes guilty of an intellectual Gnosticism, believing he knows more about the people around him than they know about themselves. As he tells Johnson, “‘... when you understand why you do these things, you’ll be less inclined to do them. . . . There are a lot of things about yourself that I think I can explain to you’” (O’Connor, “The Lame” 450). And Sheppard certainly believes he knows more about what Norton ought to feel than the child himself knows, as evidenced by his claim that the child’s grief is abnormal. The vain attempt to substitute modern intellectualism for the essential knowledge of good and evil causes Sheppard to become the grotesque. His efforts to eliminate his own suffering through work and “good deeds” fail because they are based upon an empty premise, and by failing to put his own house in order before venturing into the larger world, he invites disaster. The suffering he could in fact alleviate is misnamed as selfishness; Norton needs his father’s love and comfort, but does not receive it. The selfishness Sheppard sees in his son is only a reflection of his own selfishness as he relentlessly tries to reshape his world and the people in it into his own image, denying the realities that, within a traditional spiritual perspective, he should confront and accept. Thus, he is more grotesque than Johnson who embraces his deformity and acknowledges the true way to heal it, namely the recognition that human power is limited, but that by accepting God, genuine change is possible.

O’Connor also explores the tradition of spirituality in “Revelation,” although in this story, she couples it with community rather than family. The main character here is Ruby
Turpin, a self-professed Christian who has a clear view of how everything in her world should be ordered. This sense of “proper ranking” extends from the running of the doctor’s office where the reader first meets Ruby to the categorization of all the people in the waiting room. Indeed, to Ruby’s way of thinking, everyone should occupy a particular niche, and their assigned spaces are, of course, below her own. She strikes up a small conversation with a “well-dressed gray-haired lady” revolving around the importance of having a “good disposition.” Ruby notes a teen-aged girl with terrible acne and thinks how pitiful the “ugly girl” is: “Mrs. Turpin herself was fat but she had always had good skin” (O’Connor, “Revelation” 490). She also notes a woman in a cotton print dress: “She and Claud had three sacks of chicken feed in their pump house that was in the same print” (490). Ruby decides that the slovenly child taking up two seats in the waiting room must belong to this woman: “She could tell by the way they say—kind of vacant and white-trashy” (490). As the story proceeds, Ruby reveals her entire social scheme:

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. (O’Connor, “Revelation” 491)

Through this convoluted hierarchy, centered on material possessions, O’Connor reveals the trait that causes Ruby’s grotesqueness: She has allowed herself to undertake the divine right of
judgment. Although Ruby’s scheme may reflect a common tendency among humans, O’Connor points toward the flaw in such a system by allowing Ruby to be overwhelmed by the eventual complexity of the human condition. Like Sheppard, Ruby exhibits a smug satisfaction and a sense of superiority in her view of existence; she thinks she has it all figured out. However, it is this application of worldly values to spiritual issues that results in Ruby’s perversion and by the end of the story, the grotesqueness of her view is revealed.

The agent that facilitates this revelation is the girl with the acne, a physically grotesque character ironically named Mary Grace. As Ruby chatters on and on, first about the impossibility of sending all the “colored people” back to Africa, and then about how terrible ingratitude is, she launches into a kind of shallow praise: “‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different!’” (499). At this moment, Mary Grace hurls the book she had been reading directly at Ruby, striking her over the left eye. In the next moment, the girl is upon her, knocking Ruby to the floor, with her fingers clamped around Ruby’s neck. After the doctor and nurses manage to sedate the girl and remove her, Ruby asks, “‘What you got to say to me?’” (O’Connor, “Revelation” 500). Defiantly, in a low, but clear voice, the girl replies, “‘Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog’” (500). As order is restored, the doctor advises Ruby to go home, put an ice-pack on her eye, and try to relax.

Upon reaching home, however, Ruby cannot relax because she realizes that she “had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now” (502). This marks what should be the revelation of Ruby’s grotesqueness to herself. She worries the thought in her mind over and over, wondering why God would choose such a method and such a message for her. As she stands next to her pig patio—yet another irony because Ruby raises pigs—“scooting them down” with water, her thoughts find voice and her fury mounts as she challenges God’s motivation in singling her out in such a violent manner for such a message:

“Why me?” she rumbled. “It’s not trash around here, black or white,
that I haven’t given to. And break my back to the bone every day working.
And do for the church . . . If you like trash better, go get yourself some
trash then,” she railed. “You could have made me trash. Or a nigger . . .
Go on,” she yelled, “call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call
me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There’ll still be a top
and a bottom! . . . Who do you think you are?” (507)
Ruby’s misuse of her spirituality results in the destruction of her world view. Yes, there will
always be a top and a bottom, but what she has forgotten is that God alone has the right to judge
what constitutes that top or that bottom. Her inflated view of social concerns creates her
grotesqueness because it causes her to violate the basic tenets of Christian belief.

Here, O’Connor is clearly offering a criticism of the traditional social hierarchy which
determines an individual’s worth primarily according to material possessions. Ruby’s spiritual
failure lies in her assumption that such secular concerns would matter to God. By extending the
parameters of community into the spiritual realm, O’Connor satirizes the traditional Southern
view that race and property determine a person’s worth within the community. Welty offers
similar criticism of the racially and materially stratified community (cf. “Keela” in Chapter 2),
but O’Connor’s punch is stronger because it draws upon existential issues, unraveling Ruby’s
hierarchy in a revelation that places Ruby, and others like her, at the back of the line of souls
moving toward heaven: “They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable
as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone
were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were
being burned away” (O’Connor, “Revelation” 508). The virtues attributed to Ruby’s vision are
worldly virtues that might be relevant to a human society, but not to God’s kingdom. Similarly
to Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Ruby confuses worldly concerns with spiritual
demands, thereby basing her entire identity on a meaningless criterion. She is a modernized
corruption of the relationship between the human and the divine because she has adopted the
secularized view of humanity as creator and God as a simple “friend.” In the true spirit of the
modern mind, Ruby has forgotten the mystery of the divine and the unbridgeable chasm that divides us from that entity. Although O’Connor provides Ruby with a fundamentalist’s view of the divine as something concrete, real, and personal, she twists the relationship by allowing Ruby to elevate herself above her own station. When Ruby asks God, “Who do you think you are?” her question is answered in a way that exposes her true nature and rank: a follower, not a leader, whose virtues, not faults, must be altered before she can pass into God’s realm. Indeed, Ruby is not who she thought she was, and she is fully revealed to herself as well as to the reader as the grotesque hypocrite she truly is.

The criticism of the traditional Southern social perspective embodied by Ruby Turpin reflects O’Connor’s recognition of the finitude of historical time and human existence. As Di Renzo explains, attempts to find stability and continuity in some material eternal order or authority, some permanent sense of identity, are frustrated and ridiculed (195). In O’Connor’s South, such an idea is significant; the changes that began in earnest with Reconstruction were accelerated by World War I and further hastened by World War II, as exposure to alternative cultures and customs increased. For many Southern boys, returning to the predominantly rural South after serving in the armed forces was particularly difficult; their exposure to more modern cities around the world served to emphasize their own provincial backgrounds. Hence, change was, on many fronts, desirable and inescapable, but the issue of what should be changed and how remains an area of debate.

In “Revelation,” the attempt to retain order and assign authority is defined by Ruby’s metaphor of the rail fence, a simplified (and perhaps vulgarized) version of the eighteenth century’s Great Chain of Being. Whereas the concept of each member of a society occupying a specific place and serving in a specific role is a traditional view of how order may be maintained and authority assigned, Ruby has determined her scheme based on race followed by wealth. She has ignored the more pertinent values of character and citizenship, a fact that contributes to her inability to sort out the complexities of her vision. She has also neglected the fact that to the Christian mind, the only true eternal order exists in the divine plan. This inability to preserve
order is consistent with the traditional Southern perspective of a fallen world, and is also
consistent with the medieval view of transience within the sublunary realm; nothing is permanent
except God. Both of these perspectives confirm the South’s tendency to retain ideas that are
generally considered outmoded in the modern world. Ruby’s attempt to impose any order, much
less her own version of that order, on a society facing relentless change is doomed to fail. Unlike
her older contemporaries, however, O’Connor tends to focus on the “timeliness of the present,
not the timelessness of the past, . . .” (Di Renzo 196), and rather than depict the South or its past
as awful and tragic, as Faulkner tends to do, she takes it less seriously because human concerns
pale in comparison to eternal truths. Thus, for O’Connor, change in the material realm is
inevitable. To support this explanation, I offer two points raised by Carter Martin. First, as
Martin rightly asserts, O’Connor’s humor derives from the theme of humanity’s triviality against
the background of eternity (214). Such a claim may recall the laughter of Troilus, who looks
down on the petty concerns of humanity as his spirit ascends into the heavens; it may also reflect
the amusement of the reader who smiles as Ruby Turpin is juxtaposed between pig feces and
“trash.” Second, Martin notes that characters in O’Connor’s stories who are depicted as
sociologists and teachers tend to be used as satirical examples of the chasm between the ideals
and actualities of education, especially concerning human values and the old verities, a condition
suggestive of the gap between “knowledge” and “truth” (218). This idea certainly calls to mind
Sheppard (“The Lame Shall Enter First”), who thinks that we are too smart to believe in God
(see above), and Ruby could also be included since her primary interest lies in the configuration
of her society based on what she believes is the knowledge of value. Both of these characters
reflect contemporary trends and views.

Attempts to sophisticate the world, such as the one represented by Sheppard, are made
possible, in part, by the failure or loss of memory: the younger generation has limited
knowledge of its past and therefore subscribes to the modern trend of individualism, creating its
own identities from a perspective ignorant of custom and the old verities. These attempts at
sophistication also grow out of that knowledge that Martin suggests rather than truth, thereby
producing a community that may be respectable in a politically correct way, but one that provides so many accommodations to the whims of its occupants that evil is no longer recognized and the grotesque disappears. Louis Ruben suggests that in a world where God is ignored, those who cannot acquiesce in godlessness are forced to travel strange paths and, in their ignorance, do evil deeds. As he says, “A society which fails to instruct its members in righteousness drives them to hate” (“Flannery O’Connor and the Bible Belt” 55). Sheppard, for example, never intends to do evil; his modern mind does not recognize the existence of such a state, yet his ignorance leads him to participate in evil through his complacency with Johnson and his failure with Norton. Conversely, one might also say that a society that instructs its members poorly or wrongly also drives them to hate, as in the case of Ruby Turpin, who has allowed her prejudices to color her entire social view.

Part of the irony associated with Ruby is that she would never realize that her social view reflects hatred; rather, she would characterize her casual assessment of human beings as obvious truths. In her scheme, the difference between a “nigger” and “white-trash” is so minimal that she would have trouble choosing one over the other because in her view, they are equally undesirable. She imagines a scenario wherein Jesus asks her to choose one of these identities because heaven—as if operating under a quota system—only has room for one of each; she pleads to be allowed to wait until there is more room, but he demands that she choose. Eventually, she decides: “‘All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one.’ And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” (O’Connor, “Revelation” 491). Such an exercise of arrogance serves to pervert the order that Ruby seeks to impose. As Hugh Holman states, O’Connor’s characters cannot deny God’s reality or His intolerable demands because they share “a common, deep, and personal awareness of the awful and awesome presence and power of God in the world” (“Her Rue” 86). Yet, Ruby manages to attach her own prejudice to what she imagines to be God’s plan, one consistent with her own racist view. Even her acquiescence that a “neat clean respectable Negro woman” might be acceptable smacks of paternalism at best, and provides a basis for further criticism. Despite
the fact that order has the potential to redeem the world from chaos and give it community (Holman, “Her Rue” 82), Ruby’s idea of order grows out of her self-righteous and biased attitude, a fact that creates her grotesqueness.

A similar attitude is seen in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” but in this story O’Connor allows the grotesque to hover somewhat ambiguously between tradition and modernity. As in much of O’Connor’s work, the main characters here confront an evil brought about through an abandonment or corruption of traditional principles. The mother (she is never named beyond this) represents the views of the Old South, as evidenced by her comments on identity and the importance of family: “‘Of course,’ she said, ‘if you know who you are, you can go anywhere.’ [...] ‘Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state,’ she said. ‘Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh’” (O’Connor, “Everything” 407). This is the voice of someone who believes in the continuity of blood and custom, and the benefits imparted by both. In contrast, the son, Julian, reflects the modern view: “‘Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven’t the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are’” (407). His role as spokesman for modernity is further clarified when he tells his mother that “‘true culture is in the mind, the mind’” (409), to which she replies, “‘It’s in the heart, ... and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are’” (410). The truth implied here is irrefutable: actions grow out of character, which comes from the training that is informed by one’s culture. Here, O’Connor sets up the conflict between the fundamental concretion of the Southern mind and the abstraction of the modern view. The mother believes that tradition, i.e. the past, is preserved through the practice and application of culture, while Julian, on the other hand, prefers change because he feels no attachment to his mother or her views. In his embrace of individualism, he imagines that culture can be determined on demand by each and all.

In his mind, what one is derives from accident and who one is can be determined by an act of will. Such a view allows Julian to contemplate concepts and shape his perspective a priori rather than to suffer direct experience. Consequently, he exhibits no respect for his mother’s
experience or her perspective. He imagines alternatives she failed to exploit, as shown by his opinion of her:

The old lady was clever enough and he thought that if she had started from any of the right premises, more might have been expected of her. She lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot. The law of it was to sacrifice herself for him after she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things. (O’Connor, “Everything” 411)

He never identifies these “right premises,” but focuses instead on criticism and ridicule, and thinks that “in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts” (412). Yet, he seems to have little, if any, experience with such facts as he imagines facing up to; his mother has borne the change, not he. Julian’s penchant for conceptualization rather than experience also allows him to imagine a sense of loss regarding the family home place—he imagines that he could have appreciated it far beyond his mother’s ability to do so—and this thought causes him to find all of the residences she has provided inferior to what he might have had. Oddly, such a dwelling would be a by-product of the very views and traditions he has condemned; if he had been able to acquire that home, would he not have acquired its “taint” as well? However, because his only connection with that place and time comes from his mother’s recollections, it exists for him as an abstraction alone; therefore, he can imagine it any way he pleases, a fact that moves him closer to the “fantasy world” he attributes to his mother than he would care to admit.

The story is advanced through a bus ride to the downtown “Y” where the mother attends a “reducing class” in her effort to lose twenty pounds as a treatment for her high blood pressure. She refuses to ride the buses “by herself at night since they had been integrated” (405), so she requires Julian to accompany her. Despite her perpetual sacrifices on his behalf (She is divorced and has had to struggle to raise him on her own.), Julian feels that even this small “sacrifice” on his part is too much to ask, and her cheerful disposition, which allows her to claim that
struggling is fun because the victory means something, only adds insult to his imagined injury. To enhance his discomfort, he has completed college, but cannot find employment; thus, he remains dependent on his mother for support, a fact that galls him, especially since she is eternally cheerful about it. He spitefully wishes for something to happen that will, in his opinion, put his mother in her place by showing her the narrow and archaic nature of her views: “There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit” (O’Connor, “Everything” 409). Because of her interest in maintaining what she believes is a respectable appearance, Julian knows that taking off his tie will embarrass his mother, as she confirms when she comments, “‘Why must you look like that when you take me to town? [. . .] You look like a—thug’” (409). Here, O’Connor introduces the motif of appearance and identity that will ultimately drive the story.

Because the mother suggests that one must be what one appears to be—or more appropriately, one must appear as one’s true identity demands—her racially motivated notion that appearance denotes character promises to generate conflict. The inevitability of this conflict is made plain through the presence of a hat, which is described several times as hideous: “A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. He [Julian] decided it was less comical than jaunty and pathetic” (405). For the mother, the hat assumes the responsibility of confirming her uniqueness. As she remarks, “‘I at least won’t meet myself coming and going’” (406). To enhance the irony to be played out later, O’Connor has her further remark that it was the only hat in the store that looked good on her, a fact to presage the tragedy of the story’s conclusion.

As the bus rattles along, Julian wishes for an opportunity to teach his mother “a lesson that would last her a while” (413) by engaging some “Negro” in conversation. He imagines scenarios that would force the mother to confront the fact of integration and admits to himself that his desire to associate with “Negroes” comes from his desire to atone for his mother’s racial sins. When the “large, gaily dressed, sullen-looking colored woman” (O’Connor, “Everything” 415) boards the bus with her small son, Julian’s prayers are answered. The giant woman has obvious attitude, her expression is like a warning sign, and her bright attire suggests a parrot
decked out in red, green, and purple. The outfit would be considered gaudy, but the *coup de grace* is that her hat is identical to the one worn by Julian’s mother. Despite Julian’s efforts to direct his mother’s attention to the twin hat, the mother retains her composure, giving no sign of irritation beyond her reddening face, and the bus ride itself does not afford any dire encounters between the mother and “the Negress.” However, when their stop arrives and Julian and his mother move to exit the bus, the Negress and her child also exit. This coincidence gives the mother a chance to find a nickel to give the child, her custom with any child she encounters, but on this occasion, she can find only a penny. Suddenly, Julian is horrified that his mother will attempt to give the doppleganger’s son a penny; he knows instantly that such an encounter will be more disastrous than even he desires, but he is unable to stop his mother from the attempt. All at once, the huge woman “seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much. Julian saw the black fist swing out with the red pocketbook. He shut his eyes and cringed as he heard the woman shout, ‘He don’t take nobody’s pennies!’ ” (418).

As the stunned and injured mother sits on the sidewalk, also resembling that piece of machinery under too much pressure, rather than attend to his mother’s need, Julian takes the opportunity to explain the meaning of the lesson:

> “Don’t think that was just an uppity Negro woman,” he said. “That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure,” he added gratuitously (because he thought it was funny), “it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means,” he said, “is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn.” (419)

This perfect example of *schadenfreude* not only points to the grotesqueness that Julian exhibits, but also signifies much of the modern view regarding the South. Because he thinks his mother’s world view grows purely out of fantasy, he is incapable of extending himself to understand her.
In the modern sense, she is outdated, representing an era that has passed on. Her refusal to abandon her past only irritates Julian, who is convinced that he knows more than his mother because he’s been to college, where he undoubtedly learned that “things are different now” and that different is equivalent to better. His unwarranted sense of superiority mirrors that exhibited by Joy-Hulga (see Chapter 1) in “Good Country People,” spawned out of a malicious smugness. In his callow dismissal of the old world’s manners and graciousness, he relegates his mother to obscurity as well, both figuratively and literally. While reveling in his triumph over the customs of the past, he fails to recognize that his mother’s blood pressure has caused her to suffer a stroke. With her face “fiercely distorted [,] one eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored. The other remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and closed” (O’Connor, “Everything” 420). Thus, she becomes the literal grotesque as Julian’s instruction takes its ultimate toll, and she succumbs to the realization that her world is gone and follows suit.

This sequence of events points to O’Connor’s multivalent message. On one hand, the past is gone, despite the mother’s relentless embrace of customs that face an increasing level of resistance and incomprehension. She believes that gracious behavior can assuage most of the social ills she encounters, a view consistent in part, at least, with the Agrarian perspective and the code described by Ransom discussed earlier in this work. As Holman notes, “The Southerner, predisposed to look backward as a result of his concern with the past, has tended to impose a desire for a social structure that reflects moral principles and he has tried to see in the past of his region at least the shadowy outlines of a viable and admirable moral-social world” (“Her Rue” 78). This attempt to see an “admirable moral-social world” generates legitimate criticism in the modern context. How can segregation be seen as admirable? How is it possible to defend the disenfranchisement of an entire race? These concerns, in part, fuel the grotesque in this story. As discussed above in Chapter 2, the Southern penchant for discounting the African-American population (cf. Little Leroy in “Keela”) is a grotesque practice, despite the fact that the mother in this story appears to be perfectly mannered and “nice.” Several of her comments point
to her distorted view, for example when she asserts that the world is in a mess and “the bottom rail is on the top” (O’Connor, “Everything” 407) and that “they [Negroes] were better off when they were [slaves] . . . It’s ridiculous. It’s simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” (408). Such observations reveal a clearly racist perspective, couched in gracious rationalization. Yet, for O’Connor, the root of the grotesqueness is not purely the impact of the secular community on its individual members, but the fact that the behavior of the secular community ignores the divine mandate to love one another, to be tolerant, and to withhold judgment. O’Connor’s primary interest is not in racial politics, or even in social politics, but rather in what happens to a community that has abandoned its obedience to God.

The other aspect of this story’s grotesqueness appears in the son, Julian. While some may argue that separation from the parent requires the child to find his/her own way by rejecting much of the parents’ teaching, it is hard to justify Julian’s behavior and attitude. First, he consciously chooses to ignore the facts of his relationship with his mother: “Julian did not like to consider all she did for him . . . Everything that gave her pleasure was small and depressed him” (405). A little later the reader learns that Julian cannot even justify his attitude through his mother’s bad behavior: “Julian thought he could have stood his lot better if she had been selfish, if she had been an old hag who drank and screamed at him” (407). Clearly, he has no excuse; he is simply a horridly ungrateful boy whose exposure to the “outer world” has led him to believe that he possesses superior knowledge of all things; therefore, he becomes the agent of the modern world sent to re-educate the mother.

In this attempt, he repeatedly expresses his contempt for the past as embodied by his mother, showing her disrespect, discounting her feelings and views, and condemning and belittling her at every turn, while longing for elements of her past denied to him by the circumstances of the present. For example, when he thinks of his great-grandfather’s house, “he never spoke of it without contempt or thought of it without longing. He had seen it once when he was a child before it had been sold . . . Negroes were living in it. But it remained in his mind as his mother had known it. It appeared in his dreams regularly” (408). Perhaps the taunting
nature of such dreams contributes to his hateful spite; although he says that culture exists in the mind, he is clearly focused on the world around him, a fact that undoubtedly creates a tension between the cerebral and the visceral. Julian is unable to acquire the culture that exists in his mind, thereby contributing to his hostility. He also recognizes that key aspects of his mother’s past are socially and morally wicked and demand change, a fact revealed through his own thought of associating with “a Negro, in reparation as it were for his mother’s sins” (O’Connor, “Everything” 409). As Irving Malin states, O’Connor depicts the “proud sinner” who violates the great chain of being by attempting to rise above his station, thereby becoming freakish and falling to animalistic depths through the “horrible failings of self-love” (“Flannery O’Connor and the Grotesque” 108). Clearly, this description points to the tension in the story. The mother imagines she retains a station long since eliminated; Julian lusts for such a station, but it is unobtainable. Moreover, he believes himself to be better than his mother, and apparently better than all the residents of a surrounding territory (see below). All he has is his self-love, signified through his sense of self-importance and superiority.

Malin further states that O’Connor’s characters tend to experience false vision; they continually stare at the world, but don’t understand what they see (111). Although such a claim may suggest the literally distorted vision of Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*, it also applies to Julian in this story, whose tendency to look without seeing suggests the gap identified above between knowledge and truth. For example, the reader is told that Julian feels “a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles” (O’Connor, “Everything” 412). Moreover, while riding the bus, he chooses to observe his mother as if she were a stranger: “Julian folded his arms and looked stolidly before him, facing her but as if he did not see her, as if he had ceased to recognize her existence . . . he would look at her as at a stranger who had rashly addressed him” (413). Julian describes this as being objective, but his emotional investment refutes this claim and his apparent agenda pushes him into the grotesque category, especially when compared with his behavior at the end of the story as he realizes that his mother
has suffered that fatal stroke. His lesson, it seems, has been a permanent one indeed, signifying not only the son’s inability to save the mother, but also the inability of the present to preserve the past.

Because O’Connor tends to convey “the horror of responsibility, judgment, and the burden of morality, all presupposing a set of values that transcend the individual and dignify him by their demands” (Martin 160), her use of the grotesque assumes the dual responsibility of offering criticism wherever her characters fail. As stated above, she does not embrace the notion that the South was or is perfect; she certainly does not embrace the notion that the present is superior to the past. What she does is use the grotesque to signify the character’s inability or unwillingness to subscribe to that set of values, and chief among them is a clear-eyed belief in Christian faith. Only through the preservation of the relationship between the human and the divine can humanity transcend those individual appetites and achieve dignity in the greater scheme of the divine. In this attempt, the Southern mind must admit that, as Di Renzo claims, history de-forms the pattern of the past and subsumes it to an emerging gestalt so that new faces can be seen and new voices heard (197). In this way, all members of the community can assume their rightful place. As O’Connor shows through her fiction, the divine plan is the absolute and essential model for successful communal integration. To insist on anything less generates something grotesque.
Much like her famous predecessor, Flannery O’Connor, Bobbie Ann Mason depicts characters that are unwilling or unable to submit to the new values of the modern age; those who try generally find themselves flummoxed and thereby become grotesque either through their ensuing or continuing stasis or their incompatible choices. This problem is rightly identified by Linda Barnes as that of “the South’s identity being submerged into contemporary American life” (139). Unlike O’Connor, Mason focuses on elements of culture, particularly the popular trends and products that dominate the media and the consumer markets, rather than spirituality, in her depictions of the increasingly amorphous character inherent in the contemporary South. As Barnes further notes, “the theme of modern life encroaching on traditional Southern lifestyles dominates her work” (137). In the majority of her works, Mason does offer characters who are stymied in their attempts to reconcile a “harmonious past rooted in traditional family values with a rapidly changing present, in order to imagine an acceptable future” (Price 32). Consequently, Mason’s characters tend to long for aspects of a past that is increasingly distant and impossible to reclaim. However, as Price further notes of Mason’s characters and stories, “the past cannot be repossessed through the current fashion for commodifying former ways of life” (32).

This idea of commodifying ways of life may call to mind the short story “Everyday Use,” by Alice Walker, in which the older, “sophisticated” daughter wants her grandmother’s quilt to hang on the wall, much like a hunting trophy, in celebration of her heritage. The story’s point is that this young woman has no working knowledge of her true legacy; she understands the idealized narrative she has been taught from books and lectures made available in the Northern
universities and by political and activist groups. For her, the quilt represents a skill she does not understand, and thereby becomes a symbol of a past that exists in shadows rather than experience. Ultimately, her younger sister agrees to relinquish possession of the quilt because she knows how to make another, having learned the craft at her grandmother’s knee. Clearly, essential knowledge is retained only through the transmission of actual skills and perspectives rather than the acquisition of simple artifacts. The idea of commodifying the past may also remind one of Allen Tate’s reference to that constant “backward glance” so characteristic of Southern writers, but the view available in that glance is increasingly clouded by time and distance. Separated from any meaningful experience with the habits or views of the past, the current generation tends not to understand what it sees in that glance. Rather than preserving those traditions and values that made sense to earlier generations, the contemporary Southerner is increasingly trapped in a cycle marked by overt consumerism. Value—whether of the community or the individual—resides in product rather than principle, and consequently changes with each new marketing scheme.

With such economic elements dominating the culture and defining its values, character and identity come under attack, thereby recalling Ransom’s code (see Chapter 1). The desire for efficiency that appears inherent in the pace of modern life, in which we increasingly subscribe to the “get it now” mentality, encourages those acquisitive appetites that compete with the forms of an earlier time. Such a precipitous tendency toward acquisition generates levels of familiarity and assumptions of allowable interaction that mimic long-term acquaintance or friendship without any of its substance. Where the forms of conduct, as Ransom described them, encouraged patience and allowed time for genuine understanding to develop between individuals, the economic forms that are common within the contemporary era encourage
immediate gratification, no matter what the circumstance, and thus contribute to what is often called “buyers’ remorse.” Such an idea can easily be adapted to relationships as well as tangibles, in which confusion over motivations can reign and mistakes in judgment flourish because information, i. e. communication, is received or exchanged sans understanding, i. e. communion, and subsequently masks itself as “friendship” (see Chapter 2 on Welty). Therefore, Mason’s characters frequently pursue goals that simultaneously concur and conflict with a contemporary perspective that is governed by the desire for immediate albeit superficial rewards, rather than subscribe to those values that possess merit and benefit as demonstrated by earlier generations. Hence, her characters often engage in motion without movement, thereby becoming static.

Moreover, the pace of this pseudo-progress (characterized most often by change for the sake of change rather than an actual progression) inhibits the individual’s ability to absorb or comprehend the full scope of the changes taking place. Furthermore, as Fine observes, we live in a “world in which popular culture takes the place of formerly framing institutions and conventions, [wherein] happiness comes to the few who are able to believe in popular culture’s salutary power” (299). Such happiness, according to Fine, results when individuals can ally themselves “with corporate culture to make themselves feel accepted” (299). Yet I contend that this condition does not reflect a happiness derived from believing in what Fine calls the “shallow messages” of popular culture, but rather a numbness that results from one’s inability to process the endless stream of data produced by contemporary media. This acceptance of a numb, conformist state generates that homogeneity that dispels distinctive regional traits or customs in favor of the generic “American” character. As McKee reports in her review of Mason’s memoir, Clear Springs, Mason recognizes the “difference in the world beyond the horizons she has
known: ‘Yankee culture sat on me like the rocks Mama set on the lid of a pickle crock to hold the pickles down in the brine’” (“Old Roots, New Routes”). Through such emphasis on the importance of popular culture in present-day America, generated by non-Southern sources and imported inside the South’s borders, Mason is able to show the deterioration of traditional values within the South as well as the increasingly incomprehensible nature of modern life. Thus, with her characters, the grotesque ultimately becomes an internalized phenomenon, generated through their inability to adapt and demonstrated through their confusion over identity or direction.

This question of identity is raised in “Residents and Transients,” and its relation to the issue of place is examined effectively. The main character, Mary Sue, is a native of rural Kentucky, but she has married a “Yankee” who “works for one of those companies that require frequent transfers, and [she] agreed to that arrangement in the beginning, but now [she does] not want to go to Louisville. [She does] not want to go anywhere” (Mason 121). The husband, Stephen, embodies the demands of the modern world: he is transient, detached, disinterested in tradition. “He is one of those Yankees who are moving into the region with increasing frequency, a fact which disturbs the native residents” (121). Whenever Mary—her husband’s modernization of her given name—talks about her family’s practices or values, Stephen dismisses them as old-fashioned: “‘Those attachments to a place are so provincial,’ he says. . . ‘You’ve got to be flexible,’ he says breezily. ‘That kind of romantic emotion is just like flag waving. It leads to nationalism, fascism—you name it; the very worst kinds of instincts. Listen, Mary, you’ve got to be more open to the way things are’” (130-31). Mary thinks as he speaks that he is “processing words,” a clear reference to the facility with which mechanized communication is substituted for meaningful language. The reference also alludes to the loss of
meaning inherent in the mobile life he advocates as the flexibility of modern existence replaces
significant connections with people and places that inform identity.

Mary’s true identity reasserts itself as she discovers how much she loves her home place.
As she witnesses the changes taking place in her aging parents and in her community, the
traditions associated with that location become increasingly important to her. The onslaught of
modernity is indicated as she stands in the canning kitchen of her mother’s house, thinking of the
contrast between the past and the present:

The canning kitchen was my mother’s pride. There, she processed her
green beans twenty minutes in a pressure canner, and her tomato juice
fifteen minutes in a water bath. Now my mother lives in a mobile home.
In her letters she tells me all the prices of the foods she buys. (Mason,
“Residents” 123)

Thus, the essential domestic activity of a traditional home is replaced by modern conveniences
and an inescapable link to economic dependencies, a utilitarian exchange that calls into question
the quality of modern life. Although Matthew Guinn argues that “it is the past that is debilitating
to poor southerners who have no regenerative traditions to lose” (58) and Mason herself says that
“more and more people are getting in on the good life’ (Mason, “Interview,” Wilhelm 37), one
must acknowledge the exchange that modernity demands: independence and self-sufficiency
swapped for a modicum of geriatric security. What was once done for love or duty is now done
for money. In this modern scenario, strangers paid at minimum wage provide the services that
once were the responsibility of family, church, and community. This need or desire to rely on
professional institutions and organizations rather than traditional avenues of support further
emphasizes the dependence on economic exchange rather than acceptance of traditional practices.

Another example of dubious exchange is provided when Mary and Stephen talk about the complicated mortgage they will need in order to buy a new house:

“The thing about owning real estate outright,” he says, “is that one’s assets aren’t liquid.”

“Daddy always taught me to avoid debt.”

“That’s not the way it works anymore.”

“He’s going to pay cash for his condo.”

“That’s ridiculous.” (125)

What Stephen does not state outright is that owning real estate connects a person with a place, a condition he evidently does not desire. Furthermore, the modern concept of credit and debt has created more wage slavery than might have been imagined at one time, again calling into question the quality of modern life. The ability to make payments distances the individual from a true commitment to any set location; the only connection to the lender exists via a number of payment options. “Liquid” assets are portable, and are themselves transient because they are represented by currency that can be exchanged or altered at will. Without any solid connection to place, the debtor can be transient, suggesting the concept of “citizen of the world” rather than resident of anywhere in particular. Although an intellectual tradition such as that posited by Socrates might be said to exist—one through which the individual is connected to a larger context than place alone would allow—such a concept must also be tempered by the admission that even Socrates refused to leave Athens; rather than accept exile in a strange land, he forced the Athenians to deal with him on his home soil, thereby lending strength to the idea that a
person’s connection to a particular place has power over his identity, both in its ability to create and to sustain. In contrast, the modern detachment described above separates the individual from any traditions that might give definition, if not meaning, to that individual’s life, resulting in a homogeneity that is meaningless because of its lack of distinction. The ultimate result is a loss of identity.

Within the story, it is Mary’s life that becomes grotesque. She herself is moved to a point of stasis as she finds her choice increasingly impossible. She can move with her husband and continue her marriage, or she can end her marriage and stay in her parents’ home. The final two pages of the text contain several images of motion without progress or meaning, images that reflect Mary’s condition as well as her inability to choose definitively. She sees a rabbit that has been hit by a car; its legs are working frantically, but its back end is smashed and it makes no progress. She thinks of her husband Stephen as a Raggedy Andy doll, flopping loosely. She also sees one of her cats with eyes reflecting in the dark, one red and the other green; she thinks of a traffic signal caught between cycles. Part of her inability to decide stems from her need to do what is “right.” Although she is married, she has taken a lover (a fact that surprises even her), a local man who values many of the traditional things she values. Ironically, she violates the tradition of fidelity by doing this, but there is something implicitly more appropriate in her relationship with Larry than in her marriage with Stephen. However, divorce would not be “right” within traditional parameters, although it would free her to live the life she desires. Thus, she becomes grotesque as she stands in the yard, listening to the katydids sing, paralyzed by indecision as she waits for the cat’s eyes traffic signal to change.

This stasis appears in a different context in “Nancy Culpepper,” in which the title character demonstrates her connection with the past through her love of old photographs. Nancy
has married a photographer named Jack Cleveland, and has moved “up North.” She was named after a mysterious great-great-aunt whom no one can remember or identify fully, and this mystery becomes a kind of obsession as the contemporary Nancy seeks to learn more about her name-sake. Upon learning that her parents plan to move her grandmother into a nursing home, Nancy decides to go to Kentucky to help, but her true intention is to “save Granny’s photographs,” and, perhaps, solve the mystery of the elusive Aunt Nancy Culpepper. Granny, who is ninety-three, remains closely connected with the past, insisting on doing everything in her customary way, for example, her house is equipped with an “ancient gas range” and she uses “only lye soap on dishes” (Mason, “Nancy” 180). However, in spite of her tangible connections, her more ephemeral connection, namely her memory, comes and goes. So, whereas she alone of the family members could provide reliable answers to young Nancy’s query, age has made her unpredictable. Nevertheless, Nancy proceeds on her quest.

The parents reveal the location of the old photographs and confess that some of the pictures are “‘hid behind Granny’s closet wall,’ . . .” because “‘They were in the way’ ” (180). This seemingly inconsequential remark becomes significant as the story proceeds, suggesting one method of dealing with the past—that is, to conceal it behind the façade of the present. Such an approach suggests the concept, “Out of sight, out of mind.” McKee notes that Mason is more concerned with the “history of the recent rather than distant past, history as it shapes the lives of individuals rather than as it transforms entire regions and cultures” (“Doubling Back” 31). Yet, it is not possible to admit the influence only of selective past moments, although it is logical to acknowledge that more immediate concerns will exert a stronger influence than concerns of an increasingly distant era. However, if retaining values, traditions, or rituals from any realm of the past impedes modern progress, the contemporary trend is simply to set the past aside as if it had
never existed, as if it has no influence on the present, a phenomenon that appears to be true for an increasing number of young people. The tendency to reject the views, customs, and values of the older generation is an inescapable by-product of the ignorance of youth coupled with current trends of popular culture—a tendency that can only be overcome by cultural transmission between generations and experience, if at all. Indeed, young people often reject what they perceive as outdated views and behaviors, creating in the process peculiar hybrids of their training and their current interests. Nevertheless, it is likely that many of today’s youth, much like the generations that precede them, simply lack an appreciation for the influence of the past; as they mature, many come to see the truth of the lessons imparted by parents and grandparents. Furthermore, as they move away from home and kin, or as they approach middle age, many come to appreciate the values they have left and often seek to return from exile with a fuller understanding of the significance of “home.” For Nancy, her parents’ remark strikes a particular resonance because her very identity is shaped by her knowledge of her family’s past. For her, the connection is tangible, made manifest in the person of her great-great-aunt. Nancy recognizes that she cannot truly know herself in the present until she knows “herself” in the past.

Interestingly, Mason uses the device of photographs to promote the concept of “memory,” a concept that is essential to preserving traditional values, as described above, but in the modern world, the device has become corrupted. In Nancy’s traditional realm, the photographs preserve images that promote such memory and are essential to her identity, capturing discrete moments in time by recording the images of people and places associated with her family. In its early days, sitting for a photograph was a solemn occasion, a kind of rite that required appropriate costuming, a styled pose, and patience. In contrast, contemporary photography no longer requires the subject to be still, relying on high speed film and cameras to
capture clear images of subjects in motion. Computer-based editing programs even allow for the insertion of “special effects” to enhance the images or correct flaws in the photo. Even in Mason’s story, where such high-tech capacities do not yet exist, photography does not focus on people and is not used to preserve recognizable images:

Jack photographs weeds, twigs, pond reflections, silhouettes of Robert against the sun with his arms flung out like a scarecrow’s. Sometimes he works in the evenings in his studio at home, . . . , composing bizarre still lifes with light bulbs, wine bottles, Tinker Toys, Lucite cubes. He makes arrangements of gourds look like breasts. (Mason, “Nancy” 185)

The modern photographer depicted in this story focuses on images that are abstractions of the things they represent, functioning like a Rorschach test, or bizarrely dissembling in their suggestion of thing completely unrelated to the object actually photographed. Whereas photographers such as Ansel Adams and Ed Weston may seek to capture what they imagine to be the essence of the subject, or specifically to reveal something that is physically absent but apparent to the camera’s eye, Jack seeks to deceive the viewer or obscure the true nature of the subject by relying on trick photography and double exposures. Even the photographs of Robert, Nancy and Jack’s son, obscure the boy’s identity as they present only silhouettes or distortions. In short, Jack’s photographs become meaningless as they depict images that may be indecipherable, interchangeable, or a complete fraud.

In a sense, Nancy herself lives a life similar to the modern images photographed by her husband. She is a resident of the modern world, caught between the “image” of her time and the “image” appropriate to her family’s “folksy” ways. It is this unwillingness or inability to commit to either time that makes her grotesque. When she first brought Jack home to meet her family,
her parents were self-conscious about the food, which was fried and heavily soaked in grease, and the conversation, which revolved around Nancy’s childhood achievements. She slept on the sofa while Jack slept in her room, and later he accused her of “being dishonest, foolishly trying to protect her parents” (Mason, “Nancy” 188). Her wedding, which took place in 1967, contained no traditional elements of a wedding: it included her fiancé’s dog, Grover, but not her parents; it substituted *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* for traditional organ music; there was no sex on her wedding night. In short, none of her reasonable or traditional expectations came to pass. Even her wedding pictures fail to serve any traditional purpose because they contained “blurred faces and double exposures” (181) rather than preserve the record of the event. At every juncture, Nancy is confronted with some recollection from her past as she tries to make sense of the present. In a sense, her efforts are mocked by the disposable nature of everything in the modern world:

> “Pictures didn’t use to be so common,” Nancy said. Jack’s trash can was stuffed with rejected prints, and Robert’s face was crumpled on top. “I want to keep Granny’s pictures as reminders.”
>
> “If you think that will solve anything,” said Jack, squinting at a negative he was holding against the light. (Mason, “Nancy” 186)

Although Nancy herself is made grotesque through her lack of clear commitment, her world is certainly more grotesque as it moves further and further away from meaningful connection and content. The imminent threat of her own family’s dissolution embodies the full impact of this grotesqueness as her father comments, “‘The government will pay you to break up your family,
Thus, the modern solution to dealing with whatever is “old” becomes the impetus that drives her to seek a resolution between her two worlds.

The crux of Nancy’s dilemma is revealed through a phone conversation with her husband: “‘We’re your family too,’ he is saying. ‘I didn’t mean to abandon you,’ she says” (191). Oddly, this sense of abandonment has plagued her throughout her adult life as she constantly feels as if she has betrayed her parents at every turn. For Nancy, being caught between the past and the present becomes an insoluble problem; her identity is challenged because she can neither commit to a single side nor can she integrate them. Thus, the quest for the photograph becomes increasingly important as Nancy is convinced that it holds the key to resolving her dilemma. And, by the end of the story, Granny offers an identification:

“Nancy Hollins,” says Granny. “She was a Culpepper.”

“That’s Nancy Culpepper?” cries Nancy.

“That’s not Nancy Culpepper,” Mother says. “That woman’s got a rat in her hair. They wasn’t in style back when Nancy Culpepper was alive.”

. . . “Are you sure it’s her?” Nancy says.

“If I’m not mistaken.”

“She don’t remember,” Mother says to Nancy. “Her mind gets confused.” (195)

Doubt emerges even in the moment of recognition as Mason demonstrates how fragile memory can be. Even if memory does not preserve or convey the complete details of the event or person being remembered, we survive by telling stories, passing information from one generation to the next, a trait that continues to inform the character of the South. Such a fact implies the need for editorial judgment and imagination that enhances or diminishes the details of the memory, just as
Nancy’s mother attempts to discredit the memory by disputing the fashion details of the photo. Just as Nancy’s wedding pictures turned out to be “trick photography—[with] blurred faces and double exposures” (Mason, “Nancy” 181), Granny’s memory is blurred, overlapping details through time. Yet, for all its uncertainty, Granny’s recollection is enough for Nancy as it restores a connection with an earlier generation of her family, and the possibility that her quest has been fulfilled overwhelms the potential of unreliable testimony.

This failure of intellect and memory is also depicted in “Shiloh,” where the grotesque takes on two forms as Mason unfolds the story of Norma Jean and Leroy. Leroy is a truck driver who has given up life on the road because of an injury. During his recovery, he develops an interest in craft kits, working on anything from Popsicle log cabins to *Star Trek* needlepoint pillow covers. As his mother-in-law tells him, he is doing womanly things, suggesting a kind of role-reversal that works to emasculate him. As Mason says of Leroy, he has “lost [his] way. [He’s] lost the old definitions of manhood” (Lyons and Oliver 466). Nevertheless, he has developed an appreciation for “how things are put together. He has begun to realize that in all the years he was on the road he never took time to examine anything. He was always flying past scenery” (Mason, “Shiloh” 2). Now, having been home for three months, he is beginning to examine his life and his marriage; he wants to believe that he can rebuild the relationship he does not understand, starting with a log cabin—a real home—for himself and Norma Jean.

Two factors in particular serve as obstacles to Leroy’s plan, however. The fact that their child died of sudden infant death syndrome while they were watching a movie at the drive-in has created a breach in their relationship. Leroy remembers the nonchalant tone of the doctor who casually observes that “it just happens sometimes” (Mason, “Shiloh” 5), and he remembers the movie scene from *Dr. Strangelove* in which Peter Sellers as the President explains the errant
bombers to the Soviet premier, but at the time of the event, he could not remember Norma Jean’s identity. And, in the present, he can hardly remember his son. This failure of memory is a hallmark of the contemporary world in which the present moment assumes significance over the past. As stated above, Mason’s characters seek some way to integrate the past with the present in order to imagine a positive future, but this feat seems impossible for Leroy. As Leroy recalls the incident, he realizes that “nobody knows anything . . . The answers are always changing” (5). Because the baby was the reason they married, his death worked to undermine that relationship; what reason do they have to remain married? Leroy recalls that he used to tell hitchhikers his life story, and he has the impulse to tell his story to Norma Jean, “as if they had just met. They have known each other so long they have forgotten a lot about each other. They could become reacquainted” (9). This, in part, explains his current desire to examine things more closely; he is trying to make sense of the pieces of his life. But when Norma Jean leaves the room to attend to the oven timer, Leroy forgets why he wants to tell her this. His inability to remember, whether from the past or from moment to moment, is exacerbated by his drug use and combines with his increasing feminization to make him grotesque. Not only is he doing things associated with women’s avocations, but he is stymied by his inability to act. As Mason says, Leroy “recognizes that his life has got to change. His situation is difficult, but he now knows he can’t just deny it or ignore it” (Lyons and Oliver 470). Such recognition requires some degree of memory, though, regardless of the fact that Leroy may feel his memory is useless since he has been released from his past in one respect. However, change implies from something to something else, suggesting part of the function of memory. Regardless, Leroy is unable to commit to the action necessary to carry out such change. This failure of commitment stems from his failure of intellect, making him passive and static.
The other obstacle to his plan is his mother-in-law. Now that he is home, he sees “how much time she spends with Norma Jean” (Mason, “Shiloh” 5). He had never before recognized the scope of Mabel’s influence or the effect of her constant presence. Not only has she never forgiven him for “disgracing her by getting Norma Jean pregnant” (5), but she continues to seek control over his life, passing judgments and offering criticism. She even thinks that the baby’s death was fate mocking her. Somehow, she sees her daughter’s marriage as something she can manipulate and shape, turning Leroy and Norma Jean into replicas of her own view of marriage. It is she who insists that Leroy and Norma Jean must visit Shiloh, a site that had salubrious effects for herself as a young bride, but one that will ultimately vanquish Leroy and Norma Jean. Although Mabel claims that this trip will “help” Leroy and Norma Jean, she is simply projecting her own interests in her attempt to recreate “the only real trip she ever took” (6).

Contrary to Leroy’s increasing domestication, Norma Jean has taken up the traditionally masculine art of body building, having completed a six-week course at the local community college, and is working hard to develop her pectorals. Her constant movement has purpose if not direction as she goose steps and flaps her way around the house, ever vigilant of the state of her muscles. She constantly offers suggestions of work opportunities for Leroy—things that would not tax his mangled leg, but that would get him out of the house. While he believes that being home with Norma Jean is the new beginning they need to revitalize their marriage, she “prefers a man who wanders” (15), which means that she would rather have Leroy go away by intervals than to stay home. In her desire to recreate herself, she finds the constant presence of Leroy and her mother an impediment. At least when Leroy drove a truck, he was absent for regular spans of time, a fact that allowed her to “wander,” emotionally and mentally, if not physically. However, his regular presence in her domain is stifling. While at Shiloh, she admits that she
wants to leave her husband, reminding him that they have already started over once and “this is how it turned out” (Mason, “Shiloh” 15). The change in her clicked when her mother caught her smoking: “‘That set something off... She won’t leave me alone—you won’t leave me alone... I feel eighteen again. I can’t face that all over again’” (15). Norma Jean is aware that she is looking for something, an authentic self, perhaps, but she is not certain what will satisfy. As Richard Giannone states, “Meaning cannot be told... it must be discovered from the vantage point of time and distance. The icons of our culture define the time in which we live and lend it shape. They alone are not capable of lending it meaning” (35). While Norma Jean and Leroy have had time together, they have lost the distance that might have allowed Norma Jean to decipher her own interests. She has spent her life so far fulfilling the desires of others. Now that she has begun to develop a self all her own, she feels constricted by her roles as daughter and as wife. Betrayed at a young age by biology or indiscretion, and “forced” into marriage by familial and social expectations, Norma Jean has lost the basis for her marriage; subsequently, the marriage affords her no fulfillment. She and her husband do not have a partnership; they do not have intimacy. What reason do they have to remain together?

The significance of her revelation derives in part from the location wherein it occurs. Norma Jean cannot bear her life as it is; any promise her past may have offered is dead. However, she does not seem completely able to accept significant change, such as that represented by leaving her husband, thereby implying a kind of defeat. Her degree of determination is unclear, yet she removes herself from Leroy’s proximity and walks through the cemetery toward the bluff, a natural phenomenon that limits her progress. Mason insists that Norma Jean is a survivor and does not jump or fall over the cliff (Lyons and Oliver 466), but the association of her name with the real name of Marilyn Monroe supports the idea that she is a
construct of others’ expectations and suggests potential tragedy. The specific nature of that tragedy is ambiguous. Pollack notes that Mason’s women stand “on the verge of being able to say what will make them happy. What they want is not what they thought. The old certainties and sexual roles they were led to believe they wanted have vanished, and the alternative that will satisfy is not easy to name” (97). Perhaps this is the significance of the cliff, just as Shiloh itself suggests a vanquishing, if not of Norma Jean herself, perhaps of her old life. As the story ends, Leroy manages to endure his painful leg long enough to rise and hobble toward his wife, although he cannot read her gesture: is she beckoning or waving him away?

The final line of the story contributes to the ending’s ambiguity, but suggests that nothing significant will change between them: “The sky is unusually pale—the color of the dust ruffle Mabel made for their bed” (Mason, “Shiloh” 16). This reference to the dust ruffle, which earlier in the story is identified as a means of hiding things under the bed, suggests the possibility of the couple’s covering up their problems and continuing as before. Thus, Mabel, who has badgered them into making the trip, becomes the general manipulating troops at the battlefield. By sending them to the cemetery, she has surreptitiously forced them to face the death inherent in their relationship: the baby, their intimacy, and perhaps love itself. Leroy realizes at last that “he is leaving out the insides of history . . . And the real inner workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him” (16). Fine observes that when Mason’s characters seek to be more introspective, “this movement is usually accompanied by a consequent increased distance in his or her relationships with others, since the other members of society remain largely unself-aware and uncommitted to change” (300). While this idea applies to Norma Jean, Leroy’s willingness to move toward his wife refutes it and lends a hopeful tone by suggesting that he is willing to close the gap between them if he can.
In this story, as in the others discussed above, the grotesque hovers in the gap between separation and integration. The past has done much to define Leroy and Norma Jean through disappointment and pain, but avoiding their mutual suffering is not the answer. While Leroy smokes marijuana to numb his pain and Norma Jean buries herself in continuing education courses, the reality is that they share a painful past—the loss of their child supreme among their disappointments. To acknowledge the product without admitting the process that produced it is a hollow enterprise. As McKee notes, “acknowledging your present identity requires a constant process of accepting the forces that have shaped it” (“Doubling Back” 39). Furthermore, McKee also states that “to ignore the past, to listen only to contemporary voices . . . is to deprive the present of its framework for meaning. Dismissing the present is even more dangerous; it means we are left only with memory, at best a reconstruction of a moment we cannot re-enter” (“Doubling Back” 40). For Leroy and Norma Jean, this is especially true. Thus, they become “equilibrists” (cf. Ransom’s poem of the same name), held in stasis by their mutual tension between the past and the future—condemned, as it were, to spin about each other in a static present.

Such inability to choose past or present, or to successfully integrate the two, contributes to the grotesqueness of Mason’s characters. As Price notes, the grotesque draws attention to the strangeness of the intersection between rural tradition and contemporary culture; Leroy’s mangled leg and Norma Jean’s body building generate a sense of bodily confinement that represents the way in which characters are enclosed within their culture and thus feel unable to connect with historical changes (49). Leroy seeks to create what he imagines would be a traditional home; Norma Jean seeks to create a self free of social expectations. Neither of them can accept the change in the other; both are trapped in what Giannone calls a “discrete, hollow
shell of time” because they lack “the felt life of history” (5). A similar circumstance exists for Mary Sue [“Residents and Transients” above], expressed in her concern over abandoning her family, although which family (parents or husband) garners the most concern is ambiguous. She, too, lacks an ability to integrate past and present, rural tradition with contemporary culture. Consistently, she finds a deeper affinity with her home place than with her urban life with her “Yankee” husband, but she cannot commit to a permanent separation although her love of place and rootedness rival her love for husband and child. This inability to integrate is further demonstrated through Nancy Culpepper, whose core identity is challenged by her inability to identify clearly with the past. McKee asserts that Mason’s characters tend to be “rooted in a way of life that is sometimes mindnumbing in its regularity and at other times stunningly extraordinary . . . [they are] country people, tied to a place and a way of living, in part because they know nothing else” (“Old Roots,” Academic Search Elite). While this comment is partly true, it fails to acknowledge that most Southern writers have left the South, only to return happily to what they perceived as home (McCullers excepted, of course). It also fails to note that most of Mason’s characters have some experience outside the South, but have returned, or are trying to do so, by choice.

Much of this dilemma is indeed driven by the economic opportunities and technological advances offered in the modern world, both in the more industrialized and urbanized areas outside the South, and through the introduction of improved industry and technology within the South. Those members of what has traditionally been described as the “lower class” have better economic and educational opportunities today than ever before; in this sense, the new economy (if not the economic forms) has served a positive purpose. However, as Mason notes, “the past is very appealing to a lot of Americans. They see it as something to hold on to, something more
cohesive than this fragmented, chaotic life that we mostly live now” (Lyons and Oliver 451). Such a view is not purely nostalgic, nor does it simply opine the loss of the past; rather, it suggests the perspective that the past is indeed sustaining if not regenerative because it has the benefit of having been examined for a longer period of time. Consequently, it frequently makes more sense than much of what happens in the present because we have had time to absorb and reflect on its significance. As has been stated elsewhere in this dissertation, this phenomenon is particularly true for the Southerner, who tends to be tied to the past by choice and by a sense of the sustaining values inherent in the traditions and principles of an earlier time, a tendency once again that reflects Ransom’s model of forms. Even where that past has been crafted through narrative and selective memory, it still serves to unify the people of this region through that cohesion, whether it be real or perceived. Two additional comments from Mason further reveal the core of the Southern dilemma: first, she notes that the South tends to feel inferior to the North, resulting in either a fierce embrace of Southern culture and traditions or a complete rejection of those customs (Lyons and Oliver 453); second, she admits that cultural repression often results from a loss of confidence in native intelligence when a Southerner goes North (Lyons and Oliver 457). The stereotypical equation of Southern with stupid applies here, encouraging many Southerners to alter or reject their authentic selves in favor of the preferred traits of non-Southerners. Hence, Mason’s characters are unable to come to terms with the conflict between identity and desire for success or acceptance. This inability to integrate—whether it be past with present, rural with urban, concrete with abstract—provides the catalyst that turns the grotesque inward and generates a character unable to advance or retreat, one who is held immobile by the tension of temporal and cultural intersections.
CHAPTER 6: A SUMMARY RETROSPECT

The grotesque, from its beginning as a strictly visual phenomenon to its current transmogrification as a fully-internalized mental or emotional state, shows little sign of departing from Southern fiction. Despite the dramatic changes that have altered Faulkner’s South, Southern writers appear content to wrestle with their common past and their future potential by drawing upon familiar patterns and devices. Even when those components, such as the use of the grotesque, assume disparate forms of execution between individual writers, their underlying concepts and purposes tend to retain a common—and a Southern—function. As Lawson states, “the historical matter of southern fiction was neither retrogressive escapism nor chauvinism, but rather a readily available method of apprehending the present. The past existed not merely for its own sake, but because it provided the metaphors through which the present could be described and understood” (Another 16). For the writers discussed herein, this idea applies nicely. In a world of inexorable change, how can one understand the present? As I have attempted to demonstrate, the contemporary world and the current pace of change create situations that are frequently unfathomable; without the familiar anchor of traditional practices and values to lend meaning, the outcome is, as this study has argued, frequently grotesque.

The particular writers chosen for this study were selected only partially for their association with that literary mode. More importantly, they were chosen for two reasons: their works reflect the progression of cultural dismantling I have tried to delineate; and, their careers cover a significant and uninterrupted span. I suspect that other writers could also have been included easily enough—the grotesque is a common enough device within Southern literature. This is not to say that all writers of the South necessarily utilize the grotesque. As Lewis Lawson notes, although Faulkner dominated the period between 1925 and 1950, since 1940,
about five hundred new Southern writers have appeared on the scene (Another 16). Clearly, writers in the South still have something to say—whether it includes the grotesque or not—and an audience to read it. Moreover, despite the apparently common view that Southern literature is inherently racist, sexist, and elitist (and perhaps the notion that the grotesque reflects those prejudices) in following the principles of the Fugitive-Agrarians, these new writers represent a diverse range of subject, treatment, and voices, as an objective survey of their works would indicate. The real contribution that the Fugitive-Agrarians made to their native literature exists in the principle stated by the Agrarians themselves in *I’ll Take My Stand*: “to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way . . . [and] the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian versus Industrial” (“Introduction: Statement of Principles” xxxvii). This idea appears in the works of each of the writers discussed herein and provides the fodder that generates the appearance of the grotesque. If that Southern way of life were not under attack, there would be no tension from opposing views, and it is this tension that warps and distort the subjects within the stories. Where the assault is freshest, the distortion is most obvious and dramatic, relying on physical manifestations. However, over time, one grows accustomed to the assault, and so the distortion must assume new forms because the subject has learned to apply some form of coping mechanism, even if such a device is only partially successful.

Moreover, the contemporary Southerner sees himself less as a “victim of history” because “the disintegration of society is no longer considered noteworthy . . . Now the concern is with the disintegration of the self” (Lawson, Another 17). This idea is reflected in the progression discussed herein as well. Just as Welty expressed dismay at the pointlessness of many of the social changes taking place around her during the 1930s and 1940s, Mason (in the
1970s and 1980s) is also “a writer for whom the meaning of the present—both individual and collective—remains inextricably bound up with the past” (McKee, “Doubling Back” 31).

Without a doubt, those traditional foundations that would have been essential to a wholesome existence in Welty’s day are largely unavailable to Mason, despite the fact that her characters have partial knowledge of those traditions; thus, Mason’s characters are confronted by choices that differ from those depicted by Welty, McCullers, or O’Connor. As McKee further notes, “meaning [in life] cannot be told . . . it must be discovered from the vantage point of time and distance. The icons of our culture define the time in which we live and lend it shape. They alone are not capable of lending it meaning” (“Doubling Back” 35). Implied here is the mystery of existence, much as O’Connor addressed it through her depictions of faith gone wrong. Also implied is the mystery of the human heart, recalling McCullers’ views of the unpredictable nature of love. Here is where the old verities come into play. Humans are too limited—both by mortality and by intellect—to answer all of life’s mysteries. Science, at best, suggests possibilities and probabilities, not certainties, and the current trend to seek generic and easy explanations for complex issues smacks of ignorance more than insight. By retaining traditions, we would gain the benefit of that time and distance necessary to apprehend meaning in the present.

Furthermore, the dismantling of those traditional foundations that once supported and defined both the individual and the community has left an individual who no longer has a clearly identifiable group in which to participate. Conversely, contemporary Southerners may find that there are so many groups seeking their participation that they are overwhelmed by the need to choose among competitive and therefore exclusive agencies. As Lawson says, the new concern within contemporary Southern literature is the idea that “the southerner must go it alone . . . [and
face) the failure of personality that occurs when one must go it alone” (Another 17-18). This is truer of Mason’s characters than those of Welty, McCullers, or O’Connor, especially her women, who find themselves torn between a past they cannot quite grasp and a future they do not want. However, such a failure of personality derives from their inability to genuinely know who they are: “acknowledging your present identity requires a constant process of accepting the forces that have shaped it” (McKee, “Doubling Back” 39). The only way to accomplish this is by retaining the essential knowledge that identifies and explains those forces. Perhaps this clarifies the South’s intense preoccupation with the past: If that past is lost irrevocably, if memory and its transmission between generations fail, then the Southerner runs the risk of losing a distinctive identity altogether through submersion in that American culture. Such an immersion would likely result in the loss of the boundaries imposed by traditional framing institutions, thereby generating what Laura Fine describes as “complacent, shallow [people] unguided by anything besides the ideology of popular culture” (301). Such a circumstance suggests potential violence, as shown by O’Connor and Mason, and produces something that is, from a Southern perspective, grotesque.

This issue of identity has come under new scrutiny as some sociologists and historians have attempted to explain the distinctions between the South and the balance of the United States. As I attempted to show in Chapter 1, the South was populated by groups that differed markedly from those who populated the Northeast: both the perspective and the motivation of the English gentlemen who settled in the tidewater regions of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia differed dramatically from that of the Puritans who settled in New England. Settlers in the South retained a close association and identification with their English roots, customs, and views. Here is where the Anglo-Saxon character is preserved, and my contention that part of the Southern
identity is shaped by those Anglo-Saxon tendencies is supported through historical study. For example, George K. Anderson offers several points in his study, *The Literature of the Anglo Saxons*, that seem appropriate to the Southern character. The Anglo-Saxon tenaciously retained two possessions: “his language and his individual conception of government, law, and society” (13); following the Norman Conquest, this became increasingly important as native customs were driven underground at best by the dominant Norman culture. Anderson further notes that the Anglo-Saxons were primarily patriarchal and saw the family as “the living cell whence grew the tribe” (14). This tribe generated a primarily agricultural society, and the Anglo-Saxons retained a sense of justice through which the “society transcended the individual” and in which “every human being . . . had an intrinsic economic value” (15). Moreover, Anderson states that like typical Germanic tribes, the Anglo-Saxons were ruled by intensely individualistic kings who embraced a tradition of self-sufficiency that made national unity virtually impossible. The Anglo-Saxon also “possessed a fierce pride in his antecedents . . . [and] an abysmal ignorance of the world outside his little community, and this ignorance continued among his people as a whole until long after the Norman Conquest” (20-21). These traits tended to be expressed in literature through an emphasis on the concrete and a demonstrable love of language represented by an almost “childlike love of sound, rhythm, and fancy that is habitually associated with an isolated people” (45); the Anglo-Saxons loved not only the heroic epic, but also the elegiac lay, riddles, folklore, charms, proverbs, and “gnomic” verse and prose.

So far, all of Anderson’s observations of the Anglo-Saxon character tend to coincide with much of the Southern character. Because the earliest settlements in the South derived out of the efforts of landed English gentry, and because, as Anderson notes, the English character has been slow to change, the presence of Anglo-Saxon traditions and traits in the Southern character
seems to be more than a simple by-product of the influence of those intellectuals and elitists who, in the early part of the twentieth century, consciously sought to create an affinity within Southern society for those ancient traditions. Clearly, the connection is deeper than an academic attempt to reinvigorate pride in Southern culture. Indeed, the views of the elites in question were likely the minority, as such politically trendy views tend to be; the majority of the South’s population probably never knew that its culture was at risk, maintaining, as rural inhabitants tend to do, a somewhat parochial view of outsiders and a reluctance to change. Much of what does make the South different derives out of the fact that Southerners think they are different, and act accordingly, despite the fact that many of these distinguishing traits may seem ephemeral or ineffable to the uninitiated. Many Southerners did (and still do) believe that their way of life is superior to how other people live (outside the South). There remains a large degree of clannishness within the South and the idea of insiders and outsiders still flourishes in the non-urban areas, although it may also exist inside urban areas. Davidson's explanation of a "politically conservative" and "traditional" society still applies to large areas within the South, despite attempts by more urban and modern influences to change that more traditional perspective. There is also a large streak of stubbornness that fuels many of these perspectives. Although current political trends encourage avoidance of what might be perceived as "ethnic stereotypes," I would argue that ethnicity necessarily colors culture and ethnic differences may not be stereotypical although they exist. Certainly, my goal is not to suggest that all Southerners subscribe to these characteristics; rather, I am suggesting that these characteristics are demonstrably present in Southern culture and that they serve a defining role in Southern mentality.

To further support my claim of the enduring influence of Anglo-Saxon culture within the South, I turn to Bobbie Ann Mason herself, who remarks on her conscious use of Anglo-Saxon
language and customs within her short fiction. In her interview with Lyons and Oliver, Mason noted that she tried “to approximate language that’s very blunt and Anglo-Saxon” (458). She elaborates:

Instead of saying “a decorative vase of assorted blooms from the garden,”
I might say “a jug of flowers.” “A jug of big red flowers.” A lot of it is not just the meaning but the sound of the words and the rhythm of the words and the way they come out of a way of talking. It’s also a certain attitude toward the world. Imagine a person who would say “jug” instead of “vase.” (458-59)

Here is evidence of the persistent love of language that links the South with its distant roots, named specifically by the author herself. The particular example she offers also suggests the emphasis within Southern literature on the concrete rather than the abstract as well as an interest in an economy of expression free of pretension. This interest in Anglo-Saxon terms is not unique to Mason. John Crowe Ransom’s poetry, for example, also stresses archaic and Middle English definitions rather than Latinate terms, which suggests a persistent interest in a “native” language that supercedes the use of borrowed terms. Although these two writers alone cannot make a compelling case, such a specific connection also spanning a period of fifty years or so implies a cultural trait rather than an accidental coincidence.

Elsewhere in the same interview, Mason speaks further about her use of language and its significance to her characters:

Their reticence is deep-rooted and it goes back generations and grows out of their class and their culture. They don’t often know what to say, but that doesn’t mean they don’t know words. They don’t know how to approach the subject or to find the courage to say what they could say, or maybe they don’t
want to say it because they are stubborn. . . . [the] characters have two motives for not speaking up. One is a fear of revealing themselves, and the other is pride, a feeling that to say the words is to cheapen the emotion. (455)

This explanation recalls the affinity for “gnomic” verse so common within Anglo-Saxon culture. Not only is the reader expected to share the sentiment, but to fully express the sentiment would demean its value; hence, Southern characters (both literary and real) are often reticent, not out of ignorance or lack of ability, but from a stubborn unwillingness to “give something away.” This resistance suggests Tate’s explanation of the exchange of communion for communication, and the Southerner continues to resist this exchange, as Mason’s characters indicate. Furthermore, “communion” includes the concept of religious fellowship, but particularly Christian, and mutual participation, a phenomenon that exists only among people of like mind or common experience; “communication,” on the other hand, involves signs and systems, art and technology, thereby representing a product of modern technologies rather than a function of the human community. As Mason says of Stephen in “Residents and Transients,” he processes words rather than talks with his wife, suggesting the intrusion of technology where mutual participation should exist, a circumstance that contributes to the grotesqueness implied in the story.

These connections to Anglo-Saxon customs tend to exist in the historical and social character of the first areas settled, namely the Tidewater and Piedmont regions of the Southern states. The more mountainous regions of the South tended to be populated by later arrivals, as explained in Chapter 1. Such an idea is not unique to Dabbs or to Leyburn, but has been formulated as the “Celtic-Southern Thesis” and has been advanced by historians Grady McWhinney and Forrest McDonald, who note that the Piedmont and the mountains were dominated by immigrants from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales rather than those of Anglo-Norman
ancestry. This fact reasonably accounts for much of the internal tension within the South, deriving out of historical and cultural conflicts between the English and the Celts, as I explained in Chapter 1. The character of these later inhabitants who settled in the wilder and rougher regions, and were faced with greater hardships and dangers, was necessarily different from that of the more genteel residents of the Tidewater plantations. In some sense, this historical reality accounts not only for the tensions within Southern culture and customs, but also for some of the differences in the literature produced by Southern writers.

According to Hugh Holman, Southern fiction is marked by three distinctive modes and he offers three specific representatives: Ellen Glasgow represents the Tidewater, Faulkner represents the Piedmont, and Thomas Wolfe represents the mountains (Three Modes 76-77). Generally, Glasgow viewed Southern history as fact, which led her to use that past to comment ironically on the decayed social world of ineffectual patricians (Holman 76). Faulkner also acknowledged the past as fact, but raised an apocalyptic vision of the Southern myth, coming closer to Greek theater in the style of Sophocles and Euripides than the Southern romantics, like Stark Young and Margaret Mitchell (Holman 76). As Holman observes, both Glasgow and Faulkner recognized the benefits of the structure imparted by the Tidewater society, even if they also recognized that the world of manners was nothing more than a pretense intended to preserve a veneer of graciousness (77). However, it is the loss of this organizing structure that generates much of the sense of tragedy that continues to haunt Southern fiction. With that structure obliterated, the Southerner no longer had a framework against which to identify, measure, or check himself. He became that creature of modernity, an individual, as he was cut free from the defining bonds of tradition. Here also is the connection with the Greek notion of tragedy: If the great and powerful could fall so completely, despite their abundant resources, and if they could
become grotesque distortions of what they once had been, what fate awaited the lesser members of the community? This idea of decline is played out repeatedly in Southern literature, as the aristocracy is replaced by the rise of the middle class and the influx of the fiscally challenged.

Here is the idea of class that Mason addresses as she focuses on the poorer members of rural Kentucky society, people who have their roots undoubtedly in both the English immigration of the seventeenth century and the Scotch-Irish immigration of the eighteenth. Whereas Thomas Wolfe applauded the rise of the middle class, as Holman states, and sought to find in himself common American experiences rather than strictly Southern ones (*Three Modes* 81), Mason approaches the rural and mountain life differently. She acknowledges the influence of that more generic American experience, but she shows it as the source of conflict for her characters, who are reluctant to abandon their local and particular traditions and identities. In this sense, she alludes to what Leyburn has described (see Chapter 1) as the Scotch-Irish tendency toward vigorous and sometimes violent resistance to anything perceived as interference with their lives or property. Such resistance remains a Southern trait, particularly in rural and mountainous regions, and often contributes to the presence of the grotesque in Southern fiction, as it does in Mason’s work.

My emphasis here on Mason is not meant to suggest that only she exhibits these traits. The easy case focuses on the earlier writers: Welty is understandably concerned with the grotesque within the community; McCullers is admittedly interested in the often grotesque nature of love; O’Connor could not possibly see the modern decline in faith as anything short of grotesque. What is harder to explain is the continuing interest in social and cultural tensions and their resultant distortions. The fact that younger and more contemporary writers, despite their temporal remoteness from a traditional South, continue to express (in some form, at least) what
is arguably a traditional perspective suggests that the distinctive Southern character shows no sign of being totally submerged into the generic American perspective. Interest in the preservation of community, i.e. “home,” the unity of family, the essential nature of faith, and a love of place continue to define the Southern outlook. These aspects of the Southern character have survived, and it still confronts unfamiliar forces—frequently becoming grotesque in the process—through the work of writers like Cormac McCarthy (cf. Blood Meridian and Suttree, both of which contain traits of the grotesque), James Dickey, Clyde Edgerton, Reynolds Price, and Shirley Anne Grau.

Thus, as I hope this study has shown, the works of these four writers are representative of how the grotesque has become the product of each author’s respective encounter with modernity. Taken together, their short fiction reflects what I have argued to be the sequential dismantling of traditional cultural foundations. My point has not been to defend a backward culture, or to decry modern progress. Rather, my interest lies in rethinking those aspects of traditional Southern culture that are indeed worth defending and saving—namely, those principles that impart true value and dignity to human existence while providing a touchstone by which that existence may be understood. Apparently, modern Southern writers continue to depict their abandonment or loss as a function of the grotesque even though its manifestation has changed over the twentieth century. This study is but a slim beginning toward the examination of that transformation.
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