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Swimming Free of the Matriarchy:
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by Brannon Costello

Critics have often commented upon the strong feminist and sexual implications of Eudora Welty's story-cycle *The Golden Apples*. Patricia Yaeger calls *The Golden Apples* "a beautifully crafted and gender-preoccupied novel whose emphasis on sexuality . . . has not been fully comprehended" (956). Julia Demmin and Daniel Curley note the book's emphasis on "not only the ancient myths of the male godhead but also the even more ancient myths of the female mysteries" (242), and Daniele Pitavy-Souques points out the "strong sexual connotation" (263) of the mythical stories that lend the narrative a sort of structure. One aspect of *The Golden Apples*' powerful sexual imagery that has long gone unexamined is Welty's unique and subversive connection of sexuality with water imagery. Scholars have frequently ignored (or at least not fully explored) the thematic ramifications of the ever-present water images in *The Golden Apples*. Moon Lake, the Big Black River, the Mississippi River, even the Pacific Ocean: water images pervade and unite the stories that compose this volume. Noel Polk has observed that in Welty's work, water "is the matrix, our nourishment, and our source of life; but it is also mysterious and fraught with peril" (96). In *The Golden Apples*, Welty intensifies the peril as well as the nourishment, forming a subtle but significant link between the water images and the themes of feminine and sexual power, a link that manifests itself most obviously and powerfully in "Moon Lake" and "The Wanderers."

The lake at the heart of "Moon Lake," central to *The Golden Apples* both physically and thematically, stands as the most important of these bodies of water; it practically bursts with almost too-obvious phallic imagery, a

curious and significant reversal of the convention that always regards water as a feminine symbol. From the outset, Welty identifies the girls' daily immersion as utterly male through the whimsical song "Mr. Dip," which the counselors and campers almost worshipfully sing as they prepare to enter the lake (113–114). The girls fear the "water snakes [that] were swimming here and there," and Jinny Love wants to sacrifice the orphans to "get the snakes stirred up" so that they will "be chased away by the time *we* go in." Mrs. Gruenwald warns of "stobs and cypress roots" (115) in the water, where "the sharp hard knobs came up where least expected" (116). Before Nina, Jinny, and Easter have their nautical misadventure, Jinny Love protests that "there's stobs in the lake. We'd be upset" (130). Further, the young girls hardly seem adept in the water. Although Welty notes that some of the girls rather eagerly "ripped their dresses off over their heads" (114), she also states that none of the orphans "could or would swim, ever"; instead, "they just stood waist-deep and waited for the dip to be over" (115). The Morgana girls seem scarcely more at ease; although Nina claims that she can swim, Jinny Love points out her inexperience (130). This plethora of phallic imagery and the girls' floundering fear in the water paradoxically suggest that the lake serves not merely as a site for refreshment but also as a symbol of dangerous male sexuality.

Since Moon Lake abounds with such powerfully sexual symbolism, the question of who controls the lake becomes crucial to an understanding not only of this story but, in fact, of the whole novel. The overprotective matriarchal regime of the camp at Moon Lake reflects the ordering principle of Morgana itself. The token male presence, in the forms of Booney Holifield and young Loch Morrison, possesses little or no real authority. Although Mr. Holifield serves as "the man to be sure and have around the camp" (121), he has a well-known record of lazy obliviousness: Julia Demmin and Daniel Curley note that in "June Recital" he "slept through love and fire and madness" (245). In the story, Nina Carmichael observes, "He hasn't got a gun to jump out with" (121), a none-too-subtle jab at Booney's lack of sexual and physical power.

The other male, Loch Morrison, does at first appear to have more power. After all, Loch (whose very name suggests water) serves as "Boy Scout and Life Saver" (112), and he does seem to have some control over the girls, who must "keep waiting till Loch Morrison blew his horn before they could come out of Moon Lake" (117). However, Welty takes care to depict Loch not as a man but as a mere boy. Not there by choice, Loch "had been roped into this by his mother" (113) and displays no sexual attention to the girls; indeed, he refuses even to watch them swim,

choosing instead to stare at “some undisturbed part of the water” (112). He “despise[s] their predicament, most of all their not being able to swim,” and chooses to dive in “when the lake was free of girls” (113). The women who run the camp probably even schedule his horn blowing. Loch’s boyish lack of maturity becomes even clearer when Nina and Jinny Love observe him undressing in his tent. The narrator deliberately refers to him as “little old Loch Morrison” and describes his penis as “a little tickling thing hung on him like the last drop of the pitcher’s lip” (115), certainly not an image classically associated with the conquering hero or the empowered masculine protector.

Thus, if the male contingent at Moon Lake possesses no appreciable power, then that power must belong to the older women of the camp. Miss Lizzie Stark holds a lofty yet somewhat aloof position as the significantly-titled “camp mother,” the one for whom the girls obsessively tidy up the camp: “the tents even now were straight and the ground picked up and raked for her, and the tea for supper was already made. . .” (148). Stark’s anti-male sentiments, displayed so obviously in “Sir Rabbit” with her posted sign—“No Pigs With or Without Rings” (106)—become apparent at Moon Lake as well. While Loch frantically resuscitates Easter, Mrs. Stark “was valiantly trying to make up for all the Boy Scout was doing with what she was thinking about him: that he was odious,” and she even succeeds in making Loch’s actions “lose a good deal of their significance” (147) for the gradually less-enthralled campers. However, since Miss Lizzie resides away from the camp, Mrs. Gruenwald runs the camp’s daily operations. Although Loch’s horn-blowing signals the time to enter and leave the lake, Mrs. Gruenwald truly controls the girls’ immersion. Not only does she lead their ritualistic daily round of “Mr. Dip,” but her military-style commands impel the campers into the murky male depths, commanding them to “take hands—march! Into the water! *Don’t* let the stobs and cypress roots break your legs! *Do* your best! Kick! Stay on top if you can and hold the rope if necessary!” (115).

Mrs. Gruenwald comports herself differently from her young charges in the water. She possesses none of the campers’ girlish inexperience in the lake. Indeed, she seems quite comfortable. She enters the lake “with a vast displacing” (115)—doubtless of the supposedly dangerous male-ness lurking below the surface—and appropriates the water as her own, floating “in a sea of her own waves and self-generated cold” (116). While the bravest of the campers only enters the water as deep as her chest (116), Gruenwald freely immerses her face without fear or trepidation (117). In fact, Mrs. Gruenwald reinforces their frightened inexperience by marching

them into a shallow, controlled, roped-off section of the lake, where they stand “each with a fist in front of her over the rope, looking over the flat surface as over the top of a tall mountain” (114); even the ones who can swim somewhat still “held to the rope” (117). According to Lowry Pei, “the roped-off part of the lake seems to offer us an image of human consciousness in its safe, civilized form: small by comparison with the entire lake, and shallow” (418). This assertion seems to fit well with an assessment of the lake as a symbol of raw masculinity; the lake pulses with pure male power, and the older women, particularly Mrs. Gruenwald, believe that these young girls should not yet become fully exposed to its dangers—and perhaps even its pleasures. The camp matriarchy protects its exclusive claim on the lake’s power by not permitting the girls to explore beyond their innocent swimming hole mini-baptisms. However, by confining the campers to the shallow, roped-off section of the lake, they also protect the girls from the lake and its submerged phallic threat until they believe the campers old enough to deal with it. The matrons dole out doses of sexuality as they see fit, controlling (or repressing) the sexual awakening of their young wards, and, by controlling that awakening, control also the formation of the girls’ personalities.

Parnell Moody might stand as a prime example of the sort of woman they want these girls to become. Although Miss Moody does go out on the lake with a date, her virtue seems unsullied, at least to the girls. Even though “she lets them [her dates] hug her out there” (136), Nina “had herself seen the silhouette of the canoe on the bright water, with the figures at each end” (136), a suggestion that perhaps Parnell possesses truly untrammelled chastity. She even takes special care to protect herself from the water, “wearing a brassiere and bloomers under her bathing suit because, said Jinny Love, that was exactly how good she was” (141). Miss Moody, young and undoubtedly influenced by the older matriarchs (perhaps she even attended Moon Lake as a young girl?), seems like the perfect product of the controlled sexual awakening that Mrs. Gruenwald and her ilk have in mind for the campers.

However, at least one of the campers refuses that slow descent into the water with all the lack of personal and sexual sovereignty it implies. The orphan Easter refuses the women’s delicate rations of experience. Standing on the threshold of sexual maturity, Easter is “at once the most tomboyish of girls and the first to show signs of sexual maturity” (Jill Fritz-Piggott 32). Indeed, she has “started her breasts” and this manifestation of her sexuality warrants a look and even a touch from the deacon, although Easter rewards him with a feral bite (119). However, though she has begun

to exhibit signs of maturity, she can still “fall flat as a boy” (117) when the need arises. A burgeoning adolescent, Easter is also more: Pei notes that “she seems to be in touch with mysteries sexual and otherwise” (424).

Perhaps because of her imminent sexual awakening, Easter chooses not to stay with Mrs. Gruenwald’s rigidly ordered “dips,” but rather to discover Moon Lake in her own way. She amazes the other campers with her first display of sexual sovereignty, her refusal to go to the lake at the traditional time. When Nina offers to let Easter use her bathing shoes, Easter retorts, “Never mind your shoes. I don’t have to go in the lake if I don’t want to” (124). Her casual declaration of individual autonomy leads Nina and Jinny Love to attempt a similar rebellion; they decide to flee the camp (notably at basket-weaving time, not swimming) and thrill to the idea that “they’ll think that we’re drowned” (125). In the course of their trek through the wilderness, they meet Easter on a solitary quest. She leads them to an old boat, a destination perhaps inspired by stories of Miss Moody’s moonlit midnight rendezvous in just such a vessel. However, this particular avenue of exploration proves futile. The boat provides no more freedom than their carefully divided section of lake back at the camp. Although they hope that a journey upon the lake in the boat might lend them some greater understanding, “an old mean chain” thwarts their plans (132). The chain, tied to an old stump, “which had almost grown over it in places” (132), inhibits their progress as handily as any of Mrs. Gruenwald’s militaristically matriarchal tactics. Merrill Skaggs notes that Jinny Love, Easter, and Nina exhibit their sexual innocence by entering the boat “oarless and therefore helpless” (227); their oarless state indicates the lack of a necessary male presence to complete a full awakening.

However, Easter refuses to give up and in fact does eventually discover a way to get around the restrictive matriarchal rules. Though her plan places her in radical danger, Easter, I argue, intentionally plots her near-fatal drowning and violent resuscitation. However, Easter alone cannot carry out her plan under the watchful eye of Mrs. Gruenwald; thus, she decides to incorporate the masculine in her plan to fully awaken herself through an intensely complete communion with the water. On the last day of camp, Easter skillfully uses two males to accomplish her goal. While the girls swim in the lake, Easter climbs the high dive (formerly Loch’s exclusive domain) and places herself “high above the others at their swimming lessons” (140). When Exum, a young black boy, touches her, she plummets deep into the lake. Although it may seem that Exum directly causes her fall, the text actually suggests that Easter controls the situation. Exum does not violently shove or push her; instead, he gives

Easter's heel "the tenderest, obscurest little brush." Yet when Easter feels this innocently mischievous contact, she "dropped like one hit in the head by a stone from a sling" (141), hardly the reaction one might expect from a hardy, life-toughened young orphan like Easter. Perhaps, then, Exum's touch is exactly the chance she looks for; she uses the young boy's prank to allow herself to enter the water, seemingly not of her own volition but because of the action of a male. The narrator's statement that Easter "*was let* into the brown water" (141, emphasis added) suggests that although Easter may have chosen to take her baptism, the powerfully male water nevertheless retains some authority.

However, the mere entrance into the water does not complete Easter's quest or complete her use of males to accomplish her ends. By falling into the mysterious and phallic-laden water, Easter forces Loch into action. Although "nobody called" for Loch, he "swam destructively into the water" (141); indeed, the consequences of his swimming and life-saving prove to have destructive consequences for the status quo. When Loch finds her, he does not merely bring her in to safety, but "he join[s] himself to her" (142). This overt sexual link between Loch and Easter becomes even more explicit when he attempts to resuscitate her. Loch "hid her from Mrs. Gruenwald" (144) and from the type of power that she represents in preparation to attempt to save her. Yet his method of salvation obviously looks like a rape, a violent sexual violation performed in outright defiance of the horrified Miss Lizzie Stark. He "reached in and gouged out her mouth with his hand" and "with a groan of his own fell upon her and drove up and down upon her, into her" (145). Loch "arched himself off her back, dug his knees and fists into her" (146), attacking her until he "crushed in her body and blood came out of her mouth" (150). Because of Loch's long salvific attempt, "the Boy Scout seemed for ever part of Easter and she part of him" (151), the two united as though through intercourse. The brutality of Loch and Easter's symbolic sexual intercourse suggests an inherent violence in the sexual act and sexual relations that Easter and many of the young girls had perhaps not considered, but that the older ladies know well. Although Fritz-Piggot suggests the pseudo-rape represents "a recognition and realization of his masculine power and dominance" (32), Loch's actions actually serve the same purpose as Exum's prank, of allowing Easter to experience sexuality free of the oppressive constraints of the Morgana matriarchy. After all, even in her unconscious state, Easter resists the effects of Loch's attempts to revive her: "If *he* was brutal, her self, her body, the withheld life, was brutal too" (145). Elaine Pugh observes that "Easter . . . transforms

Loch's innocent 'rape' into her own action" (444), a transformation that Rebecca Mark reads as "an image of female resistance and strength" (138). And when Easter does finally agree to return to life, "she finally accepts his action . . . on her own terms" (Pugh 444).

Unsurprisingly, Easter does not awake and thank Loch for his long efforts. She refuses to surrender her power to Loch; instead, "she fell, but she kicked the Boy Scout," and, "ridiculously, he tumbled backwards off the table. He fell almost into Miss Lizzie's skirt; she halved herself on the instant" (152). Her fall, Mark states, "knocks down both the woman who cannot understand the passionate new female power and the male who cannot revive her" (142). Loch's "ridiculous" spill serves as a reminder that he has not yet reached manhood and holds no power over anyone; women still control his life—though not Easter's—and his penis looks like a "little tickling thing." Through her cunning use of the masculine, embodied by Exum and Loch, Easter has achieved the goal she sought: she has baptized herself in the mysterious, sexually powerful waters of Moon Lake and has experienced something like a sexual encounter—and the women of the camp have stood powerless against it. Surprisingly and somewhat problematically, Easter remains voiceless and passive for the brief remainder of the story. She seems weak from her ordeal, entreating the girls to "carry me," and the narrator observes that she "pulled her dress downward" (153)—in an expression of shame or modesty—before the campers put her to bed. Perhaps Easter has obtained more than she bargained for; she could not have prepared for the brutality and the physical and emotional trauma that can often accompany this first sexual act. Nevertheless, she has proved her independence from the matriarchal forces that command the camp; by refusing to allow Mrs. Gruenwald or Miss Lizzie Stark to control her access to the water, she has also refused to let the Morgana matriarchy control her sexual awakening, though that sexual rebellion may have caused her great pain. Her baptism of water has become a baptism of fire.

The themes of the dictatorial matriarchy and of Easter's expression of independence through a sort of baptism appear elsewhere in *The Golden Apples* as well, most obviously in connection with Virgie Rainey, who appears most significantly in two stories, "June Recital" and "The Wanderers." In "June Recital" she appears as a sexually rebellious young girl, living "in total independence of social proprieties" (Westling 114) and engaging in loveplay with a young sailor (a sly reference to water) in the old MacLain house. Even at this young age, she maintains control of the situation: "It was she that had showed the sailor the house to begin with,

she that had started him coming" (24). The implication that Virgie has not only "started him coming" to the house but "started him coming" in a sexual sense suggests that Virgie controls his sexuality as well as her own. Not only does she retain power over her paramour, but she also defies the patriarchy and their strict sexual rules. As Skaggs puts it, "as a young woman, Virgie had tripped defiantly past most of Morgana's female population" (235). When she has to flee the house unexpectedly "in utter recklessness" with the half-dressed sailor, they encounter a company of local women. Yet, "Virgie face[s] them as she turn[s] towards town," and none of the ladies gather the presence to say anything to her until she has passed them on her way to town (89–90).

When "The Wanderers" opens, this image of Virgie as an unconcerned sexual rebel has mysteriously vanished. Virgie, now a middle-aged woman, uncharacteristically seems trapped by Morgana's patriarchal values. Her mother, Katie, has died and the house now swarms with activity and memories, all in some way controlled by the older women of the town. Although Lizzie Stark skips many of the funeral activities, she still makes her presence known by sending her maid to cook and care for Virgie, "what any old woman owes another old woman" (231). When everyone sets up for the funeral, they have the feeling that "had Miss Lizzie Stark been able to come . . . it wouldn't have happened quite the same way" (253). In fact, without Stark in charge, "there was something about it nobody liked, perhaps a break in custom" (238). And, near the end of the day and after many frequent consoling hugs, "her body ached from the firm hand of—in the long run—Miss Lizzie Stark" (260). Clearly, the patriarchy still holds sway over Morgana, powerfully influencing the townspeople's social customs and controlling their beliefs about how they should conduct certain activities. In fact, the women's power does not end with the social; when King MacLain attempts to recount a semi-scandalous story about "Katie Blazes" setting her stockings on fire, Snowdie says that "he has her mixed up with Nellie Loomis" (246), perhaps indicating that the women control not only the societal realm but the realm of memory and truth as well.

Why, then, does Virgie continue to live in Morgana, under the thumb of the older women, when everyone thought that she would go elsewhere? Later in the story (but actually earlier in Virgie's life), we learn that the stifling pressure of the town did indeed eventually become too much for Virgie, and she chose physically to run away. However, when she returns, she returns to the same sort of patriarchal power from which she fled. Her mother does not welcome her prodigal daughter back with open

arms; instead, she tells her, “You’re back at the right time to milk for me” (265). Virgie must relinquish much of what gave her life meaning before. As the narrator points out, “For Virgie, there were practical changes to begin at once with the coming back—no music, no picture show job anymore, no piano” (265). As Jean Baranow puts it, “If the first part of Virgie’s life is characterized by rebellion, the next part is spent in solicitous caretaking” (129).

Yet Virgie does in fact maintain her independence; though she sacrifices the outward manifestations of freedom, she retains an internal sense of personal identity and sexual freedom through a series of symbolic immersions in the Big Black River. Unlike the young Easter, who “was let” into the water, the more mature and experienced Virgie “let herself into the water” (248). Virgie goes down to the river, “on moonlit nights in autumn, drunken and sleepless,” where “from the eyes to the moon would be a cone, a long silent horn, of white light” (267). The river even seems to display characteristics much like those of a lover—“the water, warmer than the night air or the self that might suddenly be cold, like any other arms, took the body under too, running without visibility into the mouth” (267)—and it reminds her “of some bondage that might have been held dear” (248). These descriptions suggest a more symbiotic, mutual relationship than did the images of the jagged phallic symbols that frightened the girls in “Moon Lake.” The “cone” of light connecting the river and the moon symbolizes the way that Virgie’s “dips” in the river connect her with the world beyond Morgana’s narrow confines. Unlike Easter’s violently frightening baptism, Virgie’s series of immersions serves not as a brutal introduction to sexuality, but as a more tender and reciprocal return to the unabashed and unembarrassed sexual freedom of her youth. Welty refers to the feeling of freedom that Virgie perceives just before returning from Morgana as “a kind of glory” (265), and Pei notes that “Virgie keeps herself alive by seeking that same ‘glory’ over and over again” (431). Through these small but important “dips,” Virgie can keep herself from becoming just another part of Morgana society; they allow her to keep her personal individuality and freedom as “a private, inviolate space” (Baranow 131) while outwardly submitting to Morgana’s matriarchal rules.

Significantly, Virgie also proves capable of retaining power in her sexual relationships. In the baptism that the narrator describes at length, the phallic symbols in the Big Black seem much less powerful and awe-inspiring, and much more like just another part of the river that Virgie casually encounters: “if she trembled it was at the smoothness of a fish or a snake that crossed her knees” (248). When she emerges naked from the

river, the two (equally naked) boys who spy her “did not move or speak” (249), their silence indicative of their awe at the intimidating power that goes along with her sexual independence. On a more personal level, she seems completely in control of her affair with Mr. Mabry. The townsfolk gossip that he has “been taking out his gun and leaving Virgie a bag o’ quail every other day. Anybody can see him go by the back door” (233). Baranow notes that Mabry gives her the quail “as if at the altar of a goddess” (131). And when Mabry visits with her at the funeral, he leaves her side only after she has given “him permission to go into the other room” (242). Although Jinny Love encourages her to “marry now . . . don’t put it off any longer!” (255), Virgie chooses to remain solitary and independent rather than become just another “Mrs. Someone” in Morgana, her identity forever defined by the family history of the person she marries.

Thus, because she has maintained this “inviolable” place of sexual and personal freedom inside her, the matriarchy of Morgana cannot affect her, cannot draw her into their web of influence. As Skaggs observes, “Virgie deliberately baptizes herself and rises to new life determined to wander” (227). Now that Katie, her only real link to Morgana any more, has died, Virgie becomes free to leave the world, to “sell the cows to the first white man I meet in the road” (268), to cast off the symbols of her servitude in Morgana and wander where she will. Finally, Virgie has become free to listen to “the magical percussion, the world beating in [her] ears” (277).

Interestingly, though images of water saturate this narrative, only female characters—Virgie and Easter—ever actually take a “dip” or a baptism; only the women ever immerse themselves fully and thereby gain that ultimate independence and freedom that accompany that immersion. Pei notes that Virgie “achieved the freedom that King sought perhaps in vain” (432). In fact, King MacLain, the central male figure of the collection, fakes his own baptism to achieve a sort of physical freedom. In the first story, “Shower of Gold,” Katie Rainey recalls that he “walked out of the house one day and left his hat on the banks of the Big Black River” (3), pretending suicide as an attempted escape from the workaday world of Morgana. His tactic seems at first to work, and his wife Snowdie grieves for him “the decent way you’d grieve for the dead” (3). However, “The Wanderers” finds King back again in the heart of Morgana and almost utterly powerless. He expresses his frustration to Virgie in the form of “a hideous face . . . a silent yell . . . at everything” (257). His frequent sexual escapades (such as his interlude in the woods with Mattie Will in “Sir Rabbit”), while presented as evidence of his great freedom,

have actually irrevocably bound him to Morgana. After all, the narrator once describes women as “Mr. MacLain’s doom, or Mr. MacLain’s weakness” (108). Unlike Virgie, he has not preserved an “inviolable” place inside himself; now he finds himself led “down a divergent path” (259) by Snowdie. No longer does he retain “a rush and a stampede of the pure wish to live” (264). Perhaps if King had truly baptized himself, he could become as free as Virgie, instead of a harried and henpecked husband. Snowdie even cautions King that he “should remember to keep off rich food” (259). Or perhaps Welty raises this problem to suggest that the men in the collection prove innately incapable of taking to the water (with all its phallic power) and baptizing themselves, that their simple-minded obsession with sex allows women to control them. Not only do women hold control, but only other women—perhaps, as with Easter, with the incidental and accidental help of men—possess the qualities needed to “baptize” themselves and break that control.

Whatever the case, Welty masterfully uses the recurring images of water and baptism to symbolize a breaking free of the constraints the matriarchal society places upon the citizens of Morgana. *The Golden Apples* paints a picture of a society in which the feminine and the female possess nearly all societal and sexual authority, and in which women must struggle in order to gain and maintain individual identities separate from the oppressive restrictions of the patriarchy.

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