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“Too Little to Count as Looking”: Blackness and the Formation of the White Feminine in Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples*

ALMOST WITHOUT EXCEPTION, EUDORA WELTY’S NOVELS AND SHORT stories focus on the struggles of white characters, typically female, in search of selfhood. For this reason, critics tend to explore the appearance of black characters in the fiction, if at all, as instances of Welty’s penchant for “doubling,” an emphasis which often comes at the expense of the significance of the role of a specifically black double.¹ Perhaps this tendency helps account for the absence of any sustained treatment of the appearances of black characters in the story cycle *The Golden Apples* and the fact that crucial black actors and witnesses in these narratives easily escape notice.² But if these stories dramatize white self-formation, the manifestations of black presences, however marginal in their articulation, must be anything but marginal in import. Mistaking the representation of black characters as extraneous, we fall into a common trap Toni Morrison has cautioned against, the assumption that “the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular ‘Americanness’ that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence” (5). Moving beyond the treatment of black characters in Welty’s work

¹For example, even in an article entitled “Recovering Otherness in *The Golden Apples*,” Susan V. Donaldson almost entirely confines her study of pairings to the white characters; although she mentions Virgie Rainey’s “unspoken bond” (506) with the black beggar woman at the conclusion of *The Golden Apples* collection, she does not elaborate on the particularity of this pairing.

²Suzanne Marrs provides a partial analysis of black characters in *The Golden Apples*, but largely confines her study to *Delta Wedding*, explaining that “Black characters . . . are not so prominent [in *The Golden Apples*] as they are in *Delta Wedding*, but they are essential to the book’s thematic development” (702).

as merely atmospheric or “decorative”³ allows for an explanation of their active role in constituting her depictions of American selfhood, a process revealed intimately in much of her fiction. In “Sir Rabbit” and “Moon Lake,” which figure early in *The Golden Apples*, Welty probes the formation of a specifically white feminine consciousness as it works out its identity in the context of racial and sexual stratifications of the American South and thereby highlights the pivotal role blackness plays in the definition of white sexual normativity.

In both stories the representative white females participate in the construction and valorization of a specifically American mythic masculinity, that of the aloof and violent white Western expansionist, in order to maintain racial privilege even at the expense of sexual subjugation. The perpetual reification of this white masculine ideal benefits the white female to the extent that it reinstates her privileged status as sexual conquest and, inversely, as potential seducer and conqueror of the dominant figure on the mythic American landscape. The white woman enjoys the cultural capital of proximity to the one who is “both white and male,” and thus finds herself potentially in conflict with the black man who, though black, might take advantage of the cultural capital of maleness.⁴ Because the black man’s potential for sexual dominance threatens to uproot the lynchpin of the entire system of white privilege, namely the preeminence of race as cultural marker, his masculinity necessitates emphatic suppression. “Sir Rabbit” and “Moon Lake” depict these crucial categories of racial and sexual privilege to be always already trembling on the verge of collapse, as the white feminine consciousness must call forth and encounter the threatening figure of the black male in order to ensure its repression.

³Morrison remarks on her initial naivete about the presence of African Americans in traditional American literature: “As a reader my assumption had always been that . . . Africans and their descendants were not, in any sense that matters, *there*; and when they were there, they were decorative—displays of the agile writer’s technical expertise” (16).

⁴Robyn Wiegman explores how early pseudo-scientific studies contributed to the construction of an anatomical analogy between the black male and white female brains, a comparison which “simultaneously differentiated and linked two of the nineteenth century’s primary forms of social difference.” The “disembodied abstraction accorded those both white and male” (53) ramifies unevenly and respectively onto the body of the white woman, concretized by her femaleness, the black man, concretized by his blackness, and the black woman, wholly concretized by race and gender together.

"Sir Rabbit," the third story in the collection, centers on the rape fantasy⁵ of the young married woman Mattie Will who, after recalling a youthful and playful, if violent, tryst⁶ with the twin sons of the legendary King MacLain, imaginatively encounters the legend himself. As a fifteen-year-old, Mattie Will reckons only with white doubling in the form of the twins, but as a twenty-two-year-old, she includes as rival and witness to the seduction her husband Junior's black servant Blackstone.⁷ The fantasy opens with King MacLain's appeal that Junior not "shoot" him, as he darts back and forth through the trees in the guise of hunting birds (402). King addresses only Junior, in keeping with the narrative's refusal to recognize Blackstone's masculinity directly, yet the sequence is laden with phallic imagery that involves all of the males present, Junior and Blackstone hunting birds and King MacLain hunting women. From the outset, the narrative systematically calls forth and subverts both Junior's and Blackstone's masculine prowess, linking them as doubles in order to more firmly establish King's preeminence and, ultimately, Mattie Will's victory. As King's potential rivals, both Junior and Blackstone undergo feminization and infantilization, but because Blackstone constitutes a threat not only to mythic white American masculinity but to whiteness itself, Mattie Will's fantasy subjects him to greater humiliation.

⁵Suzan Harrison cites Mattie Will's sexual escapades as actual rather than imagined encounters (290) but does not elaborate on this position. For Danièle Pitavy-Souques, as for Patricia Yaeger, the youthful encounter "belongs to fact," but "the second, the narration of her encounter with King MacLain, suggests day-dreaming" (Pitavy-Souques 113). I would argue that Mattie Will's surreal attitude of cheerful inconsequence towards Junior's gunshot wound in the second episode, as well as its context of marital boredom, signals its status as imaginative.

⁶Rebecca Mark sums up the paradox of this encounter: "Mattie's tumbling on the wet spring ground . . . is neither rape nor lovemaking, but both and neither simultaneously" (103). Franklin D. Carson observes of Mattie Will that "She and the twins behave like innocent young animals exploring the feelings aroused by spring" (284), but he overlooks more disturbing aspects of the twins' behavior, such as the moments when they "pinned her arms," "sat on her," and "blindfolded her eyes" ("Sir Rabbit" 401). This strange blend of childish exploration with iconic male violence suggests a confused effort on the participants' part to act out the kind of frontier-style seduction that will prove central to the adult Mattie Will's fantasy.

⁷Pitavy-Souques remarks on Mattie Will's "casually dismissing a witness" (114) as evidence of her amenable disposition towards the impending tryst but does not examine the nature of the witness or the specific function of the dismissal.

Welty establishes the specific nature of King MacLain's masculinity in the first story of the collection, "Shower of Gold," which, while not quite a rape fantasy, suggests a collective sexual fantasy on the part of the white women of Morgana. King MacLain combines the appeal of the impeccable gentleman with that of the unpredictable, violent, and virile adventurer. His disappearance from Morgana generates ubiquitous sightings around the South, from Jackson, to Mobile, to New Orleans, while the narrator Mrs. Rainey declares, "I believe he's been to California. . . . I picture him there. I see King in the West, out where it's gold and all that. Everybody to their own visioning" (326). Her particular "visioning," however, is clearly shared: she has already remarked that "there are people that consider he headed West" (319). This collective "visioning" points to a certain trajectory and identity, the white male figure imbued with all the dignity of the Southern aristocracy while expanding his field of wealth and conquest on an exotic and dangerous frontier. Mattie Will's personal fantasy participates in this larger social construction of a national icon of masculinity, one that unites notions of manners with violence, cultivated cleanliness with primitive virility, and whiteness with conquest. King, concretized neither by race nor gender, appears initially as a "disembodied abstraction," the essence of what is "both white and male" (Wiegman 53). Mattie Will discerns him as a "white glimmer," whistling with the "clean round" of his "invisible mouth" and prompting her satisfied reflection that "Mr. King even *whistled* with manners." He darts among the trees "in a starched white suit," his "Sunday best," exploiting the primeval forest without so much as soiling his sleeve (403). He is, like the letter that will fall from his pocket, "whiter than white" (410), enhancing his mythical purity even as he garners chthonic powers from the dark forest. The narrative further highlights King's status as virile, white, and violent by describing him as a magnificent white bird, a description that suggests the mythical rape of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan. Shortly prior to his consummation with Mattie Will, King's "linen shoulders" twinkle "white as a goose's back in the sun" (408), while afterwards, he "beat[s] his snowy arms up and down" (411) in protest of her finding him asleep.

In spite of his likewise being both male and white, Junior lacks the qualities of self-sufficiency and violent unpredictability Mattie Will associates with the iconic masculinity embodied by King. Following her recollection of the tryst with the MacLain twins, Mattie Will reflects that such an adventure "was something Junior Holifield would have

given her a licking for, just for making such a story up, supposing, after she married Junior, she had put anything in words. Or he would have said he'd lick her for it if she told it *again*. Poor Junior!" (402). Mattie Will's initial suggestion of Junior's strength, that he "would have given her a licking" for extramarital erotic play, dissipates into the very gesture of pity that segues into the rape fantasy itself. In place of a violent containment of his conquest, Mattie Will locates only an ineffectual gesture that leaves her hungering for a more sensational lover who would give her cause to put something "in words." In the context of the fantasy itself, the narrative deconstructs Junior's every gesture of virility, construing him as obtuse, dependent, and impotent. Although he has ventured into the woods, Mattie Will and Blackstone in tow, ostensibly to shoot birds, Junior first appears having "just knocked off a dead, double-headed pine cone" (402), as if he were castrating an already impotent male body. After King makes himself known, Junior announces idly, "Well, we come out to use up some old ammunition" (403), a phrase that distinguishes him from the purposeful King, who claims provocatively to be checking whether "the birds around here still tasted as sweet as they used to" (402-03). Seemingly oblivious to King's status as an aggressive rival, Junior has merely "another pine cone on his mind" and "ping[s] it" (403).

Insecure when he finally does challenge King, Junior briefly concedes Blackstone's masculinity when he requires his service as a supporting male. Although he acknowledges Blackstone's status in his company as only that of a "nigger" and threatens to shoot him if he misbehaves, Junior assumes Blackstone into the masculine project of containing Mattie Will, saying, "Come on, Blackstone, let's me and you shoot him right now if he budges to catch a holt of Mattie Will, don't care what happens to us or who we hit, whether we both go to the 'lectric chair or not" (407). One questions whether Blackstone would be eager to "go to the 'lectric chair" to defend Mattie Will's, or rather, Junior's, honor. In fact, he withholds his support and escapes this ominous conscription by yelling, "Now it be's our turn and I found my old gun and we done used up every bit of ammunition we had on turtles an' trash!" (407). By claiming a lack of "ammunition," Blackstone seems deliberately to sidestep the invocation of his masculinity, an invocation made solely in the interest of reinforcing competing white masculinities and which literally threatens his life.

But if the narrative, suffused with Mattie Will's perspective, participates in constructing Junior as oblivious and inept, it likewise subverts her contempt by allowing evidence of Junior's actual astuteness to emerge; in the same way, hints of Blackstone's masculinity will surface in spite of her active suppression. Mattie Will whispers, "It sure did look like Mr. MacLain to me, Junior," self-consciously "pretending to be as slow as Junior was"; but almost immediately afterward Junior "pulled her back" (403) from pushing towards the figure in the trees, an act suggesting his awareness of King's and even Mattie Will's intent. In the course of the unfolding interaction, Junior makes a number of oblique but knowing references to King's reputation, declaring finally, "Ain't e'er young lady folling after me, that you can catch a holt of" (405). Junior further articulates King MacLain's mythical status and its link between violence and sexual prowess, saying, "He's the one gits ever'thing he wants shootin' from around trees, like the MacLains been doing since Time. . . . MacLains begun killin' when they begun settlin'. And don't nobody know how many chirren he has" (406). Junior's pronouncement conflates King's sexual escapades with the frontier project of killing and expanding territory and recognizes him as the representative of a specific, entrenched masculine identity, maintained "since Time." But where the narrative permits Junior's masculinity to emerge in explicit rivalry to MacLain's, Blackstone's remains heavily coded.

Blackstone's very name potentially registers his sexuality in a variety of ways. As black "stones" it offers a virile counterpart to Junior's "dead, double-headed pine cone," and likewise hints at origins in the "Big Black River" ("Shower" 319), the mysterious entryway into King MacLain's life of intrigue beyond the borders of Morgana. Brannon Costello remarks that "the ever-present water images in *The Golden Apples*" connote, among other things, "sexual power" (82).⁸ The "Big Black River" seems to signify racial as well as sexual content, positioning the character Blackstone at the crucial intersection of conflicting sexual identities.⁹

⁸Costello links "feminine" with "sexual power," but in its role as a bridge between King MacLain's visible and invisible lives, I would suggest the "Big Black River" connotes masculine sexual power as well.

⁹Noel Polk explores the sexual ramifications of bodies of water in Welty's work and notes that "Water can . . . become a measure of a character's capacity to span the treacherous boundaries between solidity and impermanence, security and independence, oppression and freedom, adolescence and sexual maturity" (137). This liminal space

Further suggestive of a fruit pit, Blackstone's name calls attention to his affinity with the "plum thicket" (404), eventually identified as "his plum thicket" (407), where he can be found, after the climactic meeting of King and Mattie Will, dropping plums into a bucket. The presumable ripeness of Blackstone's dark, rich fruit contrasts with Junior's ostensible blandness and immaturity: King "thumped him, like a melon he tested, and let him lie—too green" (408). If King dismisses Junior as an unworthy male rival, Blackstone's plucking of ripe fruit hints at a more formidable masculine presence. What is more, Blackstone doubles King in the crucial order of imagery from which the narrative excludes Junior: at one point Blackstone "hopped on one foot," imitative of a bird, and shortly thereafter he "flew out in the open and sang . . . like a bird, and beat his pants" (404), a moment echoed when King "beat his snowy arms up and down."

In order to ensure the success of the rape-seduction, both Blackstone's and Junior's masculinities undergo the punishments of emasculation and infantilization, but Blackstone, as a threat to whiteness *and* masculinity, sustains the more appalling humiliation. Junior, whose name itself already signals inexperience, is pictured with a "baby-mouth" (404), and with the peppering of his hat by King's bullets "baby holes shamed it all over" (407). Shot ambiguously in the chest, Junior "kicked and came down backwards" (408), and the narrative seems to gleefully linger on the demeaning exposure of his impotence. With his "head and body on one side of the tree, feet and legs on the other," he "went limp from the middle out, before their eyes. He was dead to the world" (408). Junior retains this posture of spectacular humiliation through the remainder of the story, an unconscious testament to Mattie Will's triumphant seduction of the American conquistador.

Like Junior, Blackstone suffers from Mattie Will's deconstruction of his manhood, but in his case, all of the characters in the drama participate in undermining his status as an adult male. Junior treats him like a wayward child, admonishing him once, "Be still, Blackstone, no call for you to start cutting up yet"; and again, with a predictable combination of condescension and violence, "You hush up, or if he don't shoot you, I will" (404). For his part, King altogether omits consideration

likewise threatens to dissolve fixed racial boundaries; in *Delta Wedding*, for instance, Dabney gazes into a whirlpool and imagines all the "people white and black who had been drowned there" (212).

of Blackstone's presence, with the exception of the moment he includes him in the politely patronizing inquiry, "You boys been sighting any birds this way?" (403). Otherwise, he deals only and directly with Junior, explaining their confrontation as "two hunting men letting each other by and about their own business" (405). The elided though obvious third hunting man can be heard "howling out from his plum thicket" (407), which suggests both his forcible exclusion and the prejudiced perceptions of the other characters who hear bestial "howls" in place of human cries. But if the narrative largely features Blackstone on the margins of the action, Mattie Will suddenly foregrounds him at the climactic moment of her fantasy.

Mattie Will accords Junior a dramatic but unwitting emasculation in a moment of emphatic direct address when she at once invokes Blackstone as a human and, by extension, male presence, and renders his masculinity inconsequential: "Turn *your* self around and start picking plums!" she commands him at the approach of King, and Blackstone "turned around, just in time" (408) to miss the scandalous pairing. By demanding that Blackstone turn around, Mattie Will acknowledges his human status; after all, the ubiquitous dog Wilbur presumably gets the full view without occasioning anxiety. At the same time, however, by insisting that Blackstone merely turn around and pick plums, Mattie Will retains him as a witness while excluding him from any participation in morality or feeling. He is to go on with his duties, unaffected by the goings-on of the white and therefore authentically sexual bodies.¹⁰ Yet the complexity of Mattie Will's command highlights the fact that he would be affected and for this reason must literally look the other way. Mattie Will's imaginative construction of Blackstone's role illuminates the way a white feminine consciousness manages the threat posed by the black male in the formation of American racial and gender identities. In spite of the narrative's active repression, his unacknowledged humanity resists the putting-to-sleep method of emasculation which disarms Junior.

Not consistently accorded human status, Blackstone cannot, like Junior, be brought into open confrontation and ultimate defeat; instead,

¹⁰In her discussion of race in *Delta Wedding*, Betina Entzminger remarks that the character Shelley uses "the word 'real' to mean, at least in part, 'white'" (61). While Entzminger is addressing the implied criteria for a legitimate Deltan, this principle applies to the process defining the legitimate sexual body in *The Golden Apples*.

the residual awareness of his humanity and sexual stature occasions uneasy shifts in the fantasy. He must be present at the iconic moment of triumphant white sexual privilege because he constitutes an actual threat to its system of claims; at the same time, however, he must be made to seem innocuous and superfluous to the action.¹¹ Blackstone's persistence at the margins of the text comports with his persistence at the margins of Mattie Will's consciousness in the crucial moments of her fantasy; not only is he her last concern before the culminating intercourse, recollection of him rouses her from her postcoital reverie: "she moved. She was the mover in the family. She jumped up. Besides, she heard plums falling into the bucket—sounds of pure complaint by this time" (409). Only gradually does she become aware of the sounds that first stirred her and which she promptly records as a mere afterthought ("Besides"). She has only partially succeeded in repressing Blackstone's signifying presence; in spite of herself her narrative leaks in the "pure complaint" contained in the hollow plunking of plums—a profound and violent, though muted, complaint. This complaint occasions recognition and anxiety, so that Mattie Will "threw Blackstone a glance," as if to verify his containment. She construes what she sees in terms that confirm Blackstone's innocuousness: "He picked plums and had a lizard to play with, and his cap unretrieved from his first sailing delight still hung in a tree" (409). Mattie Will does not see him playing but only infers he has a lizard "to play with," assuming a harmless preoccupation suggestive of prepubescent sexuality. Notably, this second half of the narrative is charged with Blackstone's silence; Mattie Will commands him, sees him, and construes him—but only the plums speak. The unretrieved cap,¹² however, though inarticulate, points back to a moment of Blackstone's speech, his crying out in "the ecstasy of knowing

¹¹Welty's selection of the name "Blackstone" suggests an association of the character with Sir William Blackstone, British legal scholar and judge whose *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769) laid the foundation for jurisprudence in the United States. Just as the law may be summoned or kept at bay by those in power, the character Blackstone proves a necessary manipulatable witness in Mattie Will's fantasy: his presence implies a codifying justification of white sexual preeminence, while his turned back signifies the law's compulsory blindness to corruption.

¹²Blackstone's cap, tossed in "his first sailing delight" (409), corresponds with the hat Mr. MacLain "threw off" in precoital anticipation (408), and thus signals Blackstone's potentially competitive virility. By contrast, Junior's hat, "shamed" with "baby holes" from King's bullets, betrays his impotence.

the end . . . ahead of time" (404). Thus, even as the narrative forcibly represses Blackstone's sexual agency, it admits him the privilege of knowledge, a knowledge that both necessitates an active effacement of his masculinity and precludes its success.

If Mattie Will deliberately deconstructs Junior and Blackstone as masculine subjects, she also calls attention to her artificial construction of the larger-than-life virility of King MacLain, indicating herself as a beneficiary in the preservation of the myth of the ideal masculine. Her adoration mixes with a wry realism when she observes, "To his back, he was not so very big, not so flashy and splendid. . . . His puckered face was like a little boy's, with square brown teeth" (408). Although in the moment before he wrenches her to the ground beneath him, "she staggered, he had such grandeur" (408), following the tryst she stumbles upon a now also infantilized sleeping King, whose infamous "parts" look "no more driven than her man's now, or of any more use than a heap of cane thrown up by the mill and left in the pit to dry," and who snores "as if all the frogs of spring were inside him." In her "motherly" gaze at the once-exalted body (410), Mattie Will reveals the essential sameness across the vying masculinities; she has exploited one in particular in order to capitalize on its access to power.¹³ Having secured the orgasmic union with a mythic masculinity, she has joined herself to a national narrative: "she was Mr. MacLain's Doom, or Mr. MacLain's Weakness, like the rest, and neither Mrs. Junior Holifield nor Mattie Will Sojourner; now she was something she had always heard of" (409). Rather than a moment of disappointment, this constitutes a moment of triumph; Mattie Will has become "something she had always heard of," prevailing over the wild white frontiersman, the stuff of legend.¹⁴

¹³In her discussion of Welty's indebtedness to Yeats's poetry, Yaeger remarks that "Welty's references to 'Leda' . . . enable us to measure the relative autonomy of Mattie Will's fantasy even as they remind us that women's desire for pleasure is still inscribed by a male economy" (961). While Yaeger's observation provides insight into the general containment of female fantasy, restricting discussion of sexual economy to gender only elides the advantage the white woman derives from her inscription within a white as well as male economy of power.

¹⁴Pitavy-Souques sees this crucial moment as a let-down, saying, "This episode is no rape, nothing like the rape so powerfully described in Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan'. . . . Instead, the writing of the scene *en décalé* marks Mattie Will's disappointment, her seeing through the legend" (114). I would argue, rather, that Mattie Will's "seeing through the legend" implies the consummation of her mastery over it. By means of fantasy she has paradoxically mastered her own rape, achieving power over the rapist

Paradoxically, to achieve his status as dominant male on the American landscape, King in his embodiment of the masculine must include the specter of miscegenation: as male, he must absorb in order to dominate all females, while as white, he must absorb in order to dominate all races. As established in "Shower of Gold," King's wife Snowdie, an albino whom Mrs. Rainey describes as "whiter than your dreams" (321), occupies an ambiguous racial plane, and his children remind the local black man Plez of "little nigger cannibals in the jungle" (330). Mrs. Rainey offers one of the community's explanations for King's disappearance as an escape from the consequence of miscegenation: "Some said King figured out that if the babies started coming, he had a chance for a nestful of little albinos, and that swayed him" (319). In "Sir Rabbit," by linking herself through her whiteness to King's privileged status, Mattie Will confronts reminders of King's indiscriminate sexual aggression. His ease at maneuvering through the trees evokes traditional literary depictions of Native Americans hunting: Mattie Will sees him "darting around tree trunks" (403); he walks "light of foot" (408) and gets "as completely hidden by even a skinny little wild cherry as if he'd melted into it" (404).

But if the body of King has already absorbed the Native American race through the latter's rapid demise, he still struggles to displace and thereby contain the masculinity of black males: Junior pointedly indicts him, saying, "Ain't e'er young lady folling after me, that you can catch a holt of—white or black" (405). In a risky move, the narrative calls forth the normally non-signifying body of the black woman in order to assert the utter immateriality of the proximate black male body. King's whiter-than-whiteness emerges already compromised, a compromise paradoxically necessary for the maintenance of his mythical whiteness in the midst of a diverse American landscape. In order to attain an ecstasy of power through coupling with the mythical American masculine, Mattie Will finds herself intimately bound up in a project gone awry at its very center:

he put on her, with the affront of his body, the affront of his sense too. No pleasure in that! She had to put on what he knew with what he did—maybe because he was so grand it was a thorn to him. . . . she could answer to his burden now, his whole blithe, smiling, superior, frantic existence. (409)

while reifying the racial and sexual stratification he represents.

The thorn of exploitation pierces the heart of the white expansionist project, a consuming “frantic” effort to maintain an illusory superiority. There might be “no pleasure in that,” but the pleasure of power trumps the pain of guilt. On finding the King asleep and dispossessed of his majesty, Mattie Will promises her part in the preservation of this myth: “And he did not know that there was nothing she could or would take away from him—Mr. King MacLain?” (411).

If in “Sir Rabbit,” Welty explores a white woman’s deployment of a specific masculine ideal, in “Moon Lake,” the story immediately following, she illuminates the volatile process of that ideal’s formation in the minds of young girls on the verge of puberty. Situated in the context of a girls’ summer camp three miles outside of Morgana, “Moon Lake” follows the psycho-sexual development of a group of preadolescent white girls, especially that of Nina, one of the more privileged campers whose thoughts shape much of the narrative. The central event of the story involves the near-drowning of the orphan girl Easter, a figure at once marginalized and catalytic in Nina’s development, and her violent rescue and resuscitation by the adolescent “Boy Scout and Life Saver” (412) Loch Morrison. This dramatic and scandalous climax to the narrative tends to distract critics from its very catalyst, a spontaneous, playfully and gently intimate act by the black boy Exum. Exum qualifies neither as camper nor life guard, inhabiting the margins of the text with the few other black characters; although he is summarily punished for his action, no one in the story attempts to explain his act, other than its having “something of nigger persuasion about it” (437). Betina Entzminger remarks, “Because Welty often casts her black characters in stereotypical roles . . . without revealing their internal motivations, readers tend to ignore these black characters to focus solely on the struggles of the white characters” (53). This proves especially true in Exum’s case, since he seems to merely set the stage for the dramatic and literal struggle to construct white heterosexuality, a struggle which commands the full attention of the white audience within the narrative and all too easily the readers’ as well.

Exum, like Blackstone, is essential to the process of reifying a specific kind of mythic masculinity, as embodied by King MacLain and which the young Loch mirrors in a variety of significant ways. Like King, who dominates the symbolic wilderness and makes conquests of the bodies within it, Loch presides in solitary grandeur over the mysterious dangers of Moon Lake. Also like King, Loch maintains a mysterious aloofness

throughout the story, up until the moment of bodily confrontation; his white masculinity ramifies the more intensely for its disembodiment. Like King, who initiates the process of seduction by whistling with an "invisible mouth" and who proves so formative to white women's fantasies across Morgana, Loch plays taps for the girls "invisibly," yet dominates their collective sensibilities and emotions: "He played . . . so beautifully they wept together, whole tentfuls some nights" (413). Violence likewise informs the sexual conquests of both characters. In "Sir Rabbit," Mattie Will finds herself "caught by the hair and brought down as suddenly to earth as if whacked by an unseen shillelagh" or cudgel (408-09). In "Moon Lake," Loch swims "destructively into the water" (438) and, in his efforts to restore Easter's breathing, "crushed in her body" so that "blood came out of her mouth" (445). He further marks Easter's body out as his conquest, saying, "I dove for her, didn't I?" when others try to interfere (445). With an ambivalence borne of envy and fear, the other girls intuitively recognize this gesture as one of sexual dominance and accordingly in that moment, "they hated him. . . . Almost, they hated Easter" (445).

If, in his role as the quintessential white male, Loch, like King, enjoys a power so ubiquitous it seems at points invisible, he necessarily attains this power, as King does, through the absorption of racial counterparts. Tacitly linked to the "pale dark roaring night with its secret step, the Indian night" (435), Loch pitches his tent "Off with the whip-poor-wills and the coons and the owls and the little bobwhites" (413), resonant of King's Indian-style intimacy with the wilderness. And in the same way that King's expansionist identity contains hints of miscegenation, Marris points to the textual "blacking" of Loch's figure, remarking that "Loch seems almost black to the girls in the camp" (704). His bathing suit appears "black and formal as a minstrel suit" (412) and he eats "all alone like a dog" and lives "in a tent by himself, apart like a nigger" (413). When he dives for Easter, the girls notice "that the powdered-on dirt" of his bare feet gives him "lavender soles" (438). This "blacking" of Loch "others" him just enough to ensure that the actual black male remains sexually inaccessible to the white female consciousness, by means of his double estrangement from her. By means of minstrel mimicry, the heterogeneous white male robs him of both his race and his gender: the narrative observes that "Exum was apart too, boy and nigger to boot; he constantly moved along an even further fringe of the landscape than Loch" (436).

As in “Sir Rabbit,” the white female consciousness in “Moon Lake” includes the black male, in this case not only as witness but as catalyst, in an attempt to evacuate the specter of his masculine prowess and by extension his potential rivalry with the white male’s sexual domination. The narrative reckoning with Exum’s ramifying agency highlights the urgency with which the white female consciousness deconstructs black manhood.¹⁵ Exum’s appearance and actions are thus overdetermined to connote everything but virility, his descriptions alternately and even simultaneously suggestive of the bestial, the infantile, the feminine, the geriatric, and the purely material. Colluding with the white girls’ consciousness, the text sets out to emasculate Exum before it even identifies his action: “They had seen, without any idea of what he would do—and yet it was just like him—little old Exum toiling up the rough barkly ladder and dreaming it up, clinging there monkeylike among the leaves, all eyes and wrinkled forehead” (436). Diminished as “little,” “old,” “monkeylike,” and over-familiar, Exum can scarcely hope to escape mandatory emasculation from such a heavy burden of overdetermined stereotypes. As a fixture at the camp, he is “persistent as a little bug” in his quest for “catching all kinds of things” (436); as long as his claims extend only to undisputed objects, he safely remains “inching” at the borders of the white consciousness (436).

But Exum’s “readily” promised ensnaring of an electric eel (437) hints that his phallic claims might soon extend to the white female bodies herded daily into Moon Lake, a fact that necessitates adamant textual repression. In consequence, in the very moment prior to his catalytic gesture the narrative generates the most emphatic deconstruction of his potentially dominating male gaze: “Now all rolling eyes, he hung on the

¹⁵Rebecca Mark, in her landmark book-length treatment of *The Golden Apples*, does explore Exum’s agency but treats it as a function of poetry rather than of sexuality, saying, “he touches her with the branch that will give her mystic eloquence” (132). For Mark, Exum and the other black figures do not represent a sexual threat but a poetic impulse, a perspective she projects onto the author herself by arguing that “Welty reveals that she sees black people as poets” (127). When it comes to virility, Exum as male proves invisible for Mark, evidenced by her claim that “It is important that Loch is a teenager, not a boy, in this story because the emergence of woman’s regenerative sexual power would have no meaning if the only male in the story were too young to be sexual” (113). Even her claim that “In the magical sphere of Moon Lake Exum would be the next in line to follow Easter as king” (132) confines Exum to an innocuous mythological landscape; at best he usurps the androgynous role of Easter, not the (white) masculine role of Loch.

ladder, too little to count as looking—too everything-he-was to count as anything” (437). That Exum’s eyes should be in the stereotypical process of “rolling” in his head assures the disruption of the powerful act of “looking.”¹⁶ His gaze so threatens the white female consciousness that the syntax confuses his body with his act: he/it is “too little to count as looking.” And in a phrase of stunningly compressed complexity, the narrative delivers the paradox at the heart of the racist construction of black manhood: “everything-he-is,” *black* and *male* demands the active dismantling of Exum’s sexual subjectivity, as manifested by his ability to “look” with the human attributes of curiosity and desire upon the white proceedings and, more specifically, the white female body.

Having effaced his act of looking at this body, the narrative then seeks to efface the humanity and, by extension, virility, in his act of touching it. Reminiscent of a chimpanzee, he puts out a “foolishly long arm” with “little wilted black fingers,” and gives “Easter’s heel the tenderest, obscurest little brush, with something of nigger persuasion about it” (437). This gently curious gesture of intimacy stands out in contrast to the story’s depiction of iconic white masculinity, the “brutal” nature of Loch’s life-saving techniques, the digging in of “knees and fists” (441). Revealing in order to conceal its impetus, the girls’ consciousness locates the unrecognizable act in what purports to be the self-evident realm of “nigger persuasion.” In fact, the only revelation that occurs backfires: an act glossed over as one of “nigger persuasion” must pertain to sexual, therefore powerful, desire. Exum’s gaze and touch are effectual; Easter drops “like one hit in the head by a stone from a sling” (437), launching her sexual initiation in the fish, stob, and snake-ridden Moon Lake. But Loch, rather than Exum, is given pride of place; he rescues her from the “shapeless black matter” (438) at the Lake’s bottom, while all that can be heard of Exum is a “girlish howl” (437). Exum’s feminization and juvenilization is reinforced to the point of annoyance following his decisive moment of agency. Interspersed amidst the iconic drama of unfolding white heterosexuality, Exum “scream[s],” “howl[s],” and “howl[s]” again (438); he “shriek[s]” (439), “howl[s]” a last time, and disappears from the narrative, but not before being “whipped in the willow clump” by Elberta, a woman the girls suddenly “remembered . . .

¹⁶In her discussion of *Delta Wedding*, Entzminger cites the “black characters’ powerfully felt gaze,” which she sees as “manifest[ing] the white characters’ feelings of guilt and fear of being judged for their rebellion” (58).

was his mother,” in a moment that calls forth his complete infantilization (440). Exum suffers both belittlement and punishment for his sexual impetus; his initiative culminates in Nina and Jinny Love’s triumphant gaze upon the naked white male body, whose primacy they affirm even as they subjugate it to their own sexual entitlements, declaring, “You and I will always be old maids” (450).

This seemingly decisive reification of iconic white masculinity comes, however, at the end of an extended and by no means untroubled struggle towards sexual self-definition on the part of the young campers. Approaching white female sexual identity from the malleable perspective of pubescent girls allows Welty to highlight the intrusive fears and desires that, through affirmation or repression, develop into a recognizable collective definition of otherness. This definition trembles, however, as the girls struggle against dangerous identification with the non-signifying black female body,¹⁷ an identification which would collapse their racial and sexual privilege. Twosie, Exum’s aunt, occasions this unease when she unexpectedly addresses the girls “as if a long, long conversation had been going on” (419). This conversation, which turns out to be one of feminine identification, has presumably gone on unheard since time immemorial, and threatens to upset the girls’ developing notions of safety through racial privilege. When Twosie offers a question that calls for engagement in conversation, asking if they know why a diving bird makes the sound it does, Jinny Love responds, but “in a voice of objection” (420), an objection evoked by the empathy established through speech, especially the need to reply through a question. Twosie replies, in turn, from her artificial position of insignificance: “Yawl knows. *I* don’t know” (420). Her speech, signifying her humanity, threatens to upset her exclusion to the farthest reaches of otherness, “Far, far down a vista of intolerable light” (421), so far as to escape signification completely. The narrative emphasizes the anxiety and awkwardness generated by this democratic encounter with a black female, reporting, “They couldn’t seem to get on by her. On fine days there is danger of some sad meeting, the positive danger of it” (420).

¹⁷Early America’s composite racist and patriarchal stratification ensured, as Wiegman explains, that “the black woman was signified only indirectly, as ‘blacks and women’ were so thoroughly marked as corporeal identities challenging the consolidated power and disembodied abstraction of those *both* white and male” (55).

This "fine day" of psycho-sexual exploration and active self-definition runs aground on a "sad meeting" with the chief victim of that system of privilege, whose power the girls are just on the verge of claiming for themselves. Twosie persists in her invitation to a vision of shared humanity and, specifically, shared womanhood, saying, "Yawl sho ain't got yo' eyes open good, yawl. Yawl don't know what's out here in woods wid you." The girls, displeased but nevertheless intrigued, demand, "Well, what?" and Twosie offers them a vision of female solidarity, a racially undifferentiated consideration of the threat of male sexuality: "Yawl walk right by mans wid great big gun, could jump out at yawl. Yawl don't eem smellim." The girls immediately endeavor to reassert their position of racial privilege and its attendant promise of sexual security: "You mean Mr. Holifield? That's a flashlight he's got," Nina replies and looks "at Jinny Love for confirmation." Jinny Love produces an alternative but equally reassuring explanation: "I know who you mean. I hear those boys. Just some big boys, like the MacLain twins or somebody, and who cares about them?" (420). In both cases the girls attempt to stave off the threat of the unknown, the specter of the uncontained black male, but the possible import of Twosie's veiled statement resists repression, as evidenced on a subsequent trip to the swamp, when Jinny Love "cheerfully" remarks, "I hope we don't meet any nigger men" (424). In the moment, in spite of the consoling explanations they have just provided, the girls evince a restless uncertainty; Jinny Love "pretended to fish in Twosie's woolly head" as a gesture of unconcern, but inquires, "Why ain't *you* scared, then?" When Twosie offers the ominous reply, "I is," the girls can no longer safely contain the conversation; the narrative quickly freezes Twosie as an innocuous and submissive figure, predestined to marginality and inconsequence: "While they gazed at her crouched, devoted figure, from which the long pole hung, so steady and beggarlike and ordained an appendage, all their passions flew home again and went huddled and soft to roost" (420). Reconceiving Twosie's female agency as a kind of paralysis, the girls secure their aroused fears and desires back in the "roost" of unquestioned privilege.

By means of Nina's consciousness, Welty illustrates at least the possibility that the individual white female consciousness can prevail over a collective consciousness formed by racist repression. The dangerous invitation to an empathetic identification with Twosie proves difficult for Nina to resist; in her imaginative venture into otherness, the

“other way to live,” she concludes, “I’ve been only thinking like the others. It’s only interesting, only worthy, to try for the fiercest secrets. To slip into them all—to change . . . for a moment into Gertrude, into Mrs. Gruenwald, into Twosie—into a boy” (435). Nina’s daring reflections occasion a momentary breakthrough, as the blackness of the black male disappears from the chart of signification and the conceptual space of “boy” opens up to include Exum as well as Loch. With Exum no longer “concretized” by his blackness, Twosie can figure as female only, escaping the two-fold elision accorded to “blacks and women” (Wiegman 54, 55). This momentary breach in Nina’s internal development of collective racist codes allows her at least briefly to envision solidarity with the black woman as female. Unfortunately, this precious instance of interracial identification proves short-lived: Exum reappears as “boy and nigger to boot” (436), and the narratorial stereotypes rush in to paralyze his maleness through his blackness. The narrative’s hasty restoration of racial codes ominously forecasts Exum’s full erasure from Nina and the other girls’ developing sexual identities by the end of the story; their attention returns wholly to Loch’s iconic white manhood.

By involving the reader in the development and deployment of the white female consciousness, Welty explores the construction of a powerful regional and national American icon, the expansionist white masculine, from the inside out. It might be tempting to conclude, as Joseph H. Gardner does, that in her construction of stereotypical black characters Welty equates the “black” with the “primitive” (73), thereby falling into “unconscious [and] extraordinary assumptions” (71) that situate her in a long tradition of literary racism.¹⁸ Certainly, in one sense, we are invited to participate in the racist gaze. But, as Tenley Gwen Bank contends, “Welty encourages . . . readers to enact the same erasure that the text performs, in effect placing readers in the story with the intention that those sensitive to the story’s racial dynamics will come to realize their own complicity and will as a result adjust their moral allegiances” (59-60). Through breaches, silences, words, sounds, and glances, Welty directs the astute reader to see and understand what her narrators cannot, the burdensome white heritage of twofold violence:

¹⁸Gardner explores what he considers to be Welty’s racist assumptions about blackness in the short story “A Worn Path.” While he does not extend his accusations to her other works, I assume charges of unconscious racism would necessarily apply to anything she produced.

racial oppression and sexual repression. In *The Golden Apples*, Welty demonstrates how the systematic stratification of racial and gender privilege that characterizes the white American consciousness owes its perpetuation to the white woman as well as to the white man. In an unexpected paradox that highlights the complexity of race and gender relations, the white female participates in the deconstruction of black manhood in order to ensure the status of racial and sexual privileges she derives from her subjugation to the dominant figure on the mythical American landscape. The one whose glance is "too little to count as looking" disappears from the stage, and we are left gazing upon the triumphant consummation of white on white sexuality.

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