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A SEARCH FOR THE BODY:
L'ÉCRITURE FÉMININE AND DELTA WEDDING

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Diane Truitt Nichols

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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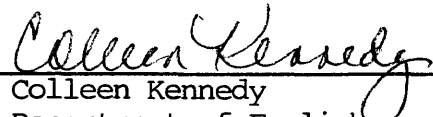
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ABSTRACT

L'écriture féminine ("writing" the body) is the school of French feminist thought that advocates communion with the body as a first step to empowerment for women. Historically, the female body has been accorded only male definitions, both in psychological terms as a literary object of male loss and desire and in social terms as a "vessel" of class concerns. To regain the body and define it for herself should be the aim of woman, the French feminists believe. In addition, female sexual pleasure ("jouissance") can fuel creative writing by women, allowing them fuller access to language.

In southern cultural history, the white female body was elevated to the status of "southern womanhood" in support of the plantation power structure. Any sexual autonomy on the part of southern ladies could threaten the racial division so necessary to slavery. In consequence, white women were robbed of communion with their own bodies, a critical loss, according to l'écriture féminine.

The legacy of southern womanhood provides a cultural context for Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding, and l'écriture féminine a lens through which to view Welty's female characters. Laura, Ellen, Shelley, Dabney, Primrose, Jim Allen and Partheny are studied in this text and found to represent different concerns and paradoxes of the traditional southern culture. Often these women are absorbed in defining the body and, hence, the self in their search for meaning. This thesis maintains that such self-absorption on the part of Delta Wedding's female characters does not make them stock figures of the southern romance genre, but instead makes them quiet revolutionists, beginning to question the part their bodies will play in twentieth-century southern society. In aligning the concept of body closely with autonomy, Welty is not following the conservative path of "plantation novelists," but is instead cracking the old molds that shaped women like the Fairchilds.

A SEARCH FOR THE BODY:

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In feminist terms, how can the Fairchild women of Eudora Welty's novel Delta Wedding be interpreted? Are they simply the stereotypes of a southern romantic vision--"belles" and "ladies"--wholly accepting of their cultural milieu? Or are some of them quiet revolutionists beginning to question their rigidly defined gender roles? Certainly on the surface they seem to be traditionally inclined, unlikely to rustle the fabric of a southern patriarchy. But what about beneath the surface?

Unlike many male literary characters who embark on archetypal questing journeys, female protagonists often stay at home. Most of the Fairchild women are not different in this respect. They remain within their metaphoric houses, within their bodies, within themselves. The depictions of women as "housed" in their bodies could be understood in one of two ways. As readers, we could infer that male writers are simply carrying out in their imaginative roles a pervasive social oppression of women. Indeed, even female writers could be acceding to the male view of women--a view which, after all, undergirds the dominant culture. At least one scholar, Margaret Bolsterli, sees the women of Delta Wedding as trapped in their bodies and therefore restricted in a social sense. Referring to Welty's Fairchild women as "pre-revolutionary" and "bound," principally because their bodies limit their experience and determine their fate, Bolsterli maintains, "These characters are human beings caught in a web of biological determinism and societal expectation

that prevents their self-fulfillment." In Bolsterli's view, there seems a link between the constrictions of the female body and the social oppression of women. 1

But, alternatively, we might sense that Welty understands a deeply creative, rather than restrictive, relationship between women and their bodies. If men seek knowledge and beauty and communion "without" (a theme that Margaret Homans explores from a psychological standpoint in Bearing the Word), then perhaps for women self-knowledge can be found within. Radical feminists assert that it is in the realm of sexuality and inside these "boundaries of the self," a term of Roberta Rubenstein's, that women can seek understanding and empowerment. 2

The school of radical French feminism known as l'écriture féminine ("writing" the body) sees the body as central to any argument for women's liberation. These theorists believe that the repression of female sexuality in the sciences, arts, and symbol systems constitutes the heart of patriarchy. Woman has been denied the right to represent herself within the symbolic order of a patriarchal society. Consequently, she has become an artistic object of the male gaze and a literary figure of male loss and desire. Language, the French feminists assert, especially in fiction, has represented this male-centered thinking and consigned woman to the sexless margins of "the other." Woman has been viewed not as herself, but rather as a concept of male creativity, long believed, as

Americans Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar show in The Madwoman in the Attic, the only legitimate creativity. Woman, historically, has not been permitted to write herself. Instead, as Gilbert and Gubar maintain, male texts have masked the female and have "killed her into a 'perfect' image of herself":

Authored by a male God and by a godlike male, killed into a "perfect" image of herself, the woman writer's self-contemplation may be said to have begun with a searching glance into the mirror of the male-inscribed literary text. There she would see at first only those eternal lineaments fixed on her like a mask to conceal her dreadful and bloody link to nature. 3

The "dreadful and bloody link to nature" evokes the female body not in its artistry but in its actuality--its sexuality and procreativity. An uneasy male connection with the reality of woman springs from her physical link with nature, a link which cannot be male-authored.

Hélène Cixous and other French feminists would agree. According to l'écriture féminine, the body of woman has been repressed in western culture not only because of its "bloody link" but also because of its power and its inability to conform to male symbolic

meaning. Cixous writes: "It is at the level of sexual pleasure in my opinion that the difference makes itself most clearly apparent in as far as woman's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculine economy." 4 This French view of "jouissance" (female sexual pleasure) as a viable force that cannot be male-codified is suggested in Delta Wedding. For Eudora Welty, the feminine is sometimes an enabling concept rather than a restrictive one, hence some critical perspectives of Delta Wedding as a matriarchal world. 5

Welty, in evoking meaning from the essential feminine, is not necessarily following a traditional path. To wrestle the meanings of their own bodies out of the hold of "phallogentric" culture is, the French thinkers believe, the first critical step toward freedom for women. In addition, the feminine libido can fuel creative writing by women and begin a cultural revolution. Living in the body, rather than transcending it marks empowerment. "A woman without a body, dumb, blind can't possibly be a good fighter," Cixous asserts. "She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow." 6

In fictional explorations, how women view their bodily structures relates to the culture that encloses them. Welty's setting for her novel is the deep rural South of the early twentieth century. The Fairchild women belong to an upper-class Delta family, landed and white. For white southern women, the ideology of the female

body has often seemed particularly confusing and problematic.

Because the planters' power rested in part on purity of white bloodlines, racial demarcation became a constant of the ante-bellum southern psyche. One avenue toward maintaining that power was to proclaim all issue of black women--racially mixed or otherwise--"black." This measure effectively kept mulattoes firmly outside the white power structure. The child shall follow the condition of the mother, the southern fathers decreed. Another avenue was to repress the notion of sexual desire in a (white, always) lady. She needed to be alienated from her body, made pure and ethereal, in order for white superiority to stand. In essence, her body was stolen from her in the name of southern womanhood. Not under her own directive, her body became a symbolic field of honor, the "pure" site of a power contest. Perhaps more than any other American woman, the southern slaveholding lady was "killed into a 'perfect' image of herself."

It follows that any attempt on the part of southern women to regain their bodies, considering their inherited cultural burden, would smack of revolutionary change. The struggle to "re-inhabit" the body is a process of definition even for present-day women, according to Nancy Regan. In her 1978 article, "A Home of One's Own," she writes:

literature as a whole [recounts] our long and

only moderately successful struggle to inhabit the body, to live with ease and grace in our animal selves. At a time when women are demanding to be regarded as more than sex objects, a study which makes this critical assumption and reduces women to mere bodies once again may seem unfortunate, yet a look at recent fiction by women writers indicates that the process of self-definition described in many women's novels is first and foremost an attempt to re-inhabit the female body without shame or guilt. 7

Inhabiting the body should not be interpreted too literally, however, since creative writers often extend the human "shell" symbolically into houses and settings. Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space examines the psychological and literary connections between the body and its surrounding spaces. He notes, "With the house image we are in possession of a veritable principle of psychological integration." 8 The soul of the inhabitant extends by way of poetic nuance, according to Bachelard, into its surroundings, becoming one with its house, closet or shell.

Bachelard's insights can be combined with those of Annette Kolodny who explores the feminine symbolism attached to American landscapes: land-as-virgin and land-as-mother. The special

significance of this theme in the South is addressed by Louise Westling: "The expression of this tendency is especially marked in the South and ultimately influences the culture's view of women." That view was often conflicted as Westling notes, "From the beginning the land was seen as female, and the Southern white male's stewardship of this rich possession reflected similar paradoxes to those in his relations with consorts and daughters." 9

If women's bodies and the spaces around them act as identity metaphors as well as patriarchal territories, then in southern fiction they take on added emphasis. The white need for racial demarcation along with the ideology of the Southern Lady offered planters a partial justification for slavery. For the southern male, the female body took on a strict meaning in support of the tradition of slavery itself. His fear of the fragility of his position can be deduced from his almost religious worship of "southern womanhood", which became code words for "southern culture." Hence, in the South, the female body can be interpreted as a heightened cultural emblem. In this sense we can "read" the bodies of Delta Wedding's women and ask some questions of Welty's imaginative universe. For instance, in what ways have those bodies been claimed by southern society? In what ways have the women internalized their prescribed roles and in what ways are they diverging from them? How do they perceive male oppression and how do they deal with it? And, according to French feminist thinking, the most

important: Is the preoccupation of Welty's women with their own bodies and sexual roles really an attempt to find meaning and voice for their submerged identities? Are they hoping to retrieve their stolen bodies?

To begin, it is necessary to place Welty's characters in southern cultural history. The author took great care to pinpoint the exact time of her novel: September 1923. The 1920s in America brought new role models for women by way of consumerism, companionate marriage, growth in the female labor force, and a resurgence of sexuality. And the emergence of the college-educated New Woman seemed a sign of true revolution. But as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg maintains, the New Woman was at best a marginal figure, outside prevailing social custom. Describing the New Woman as "liminal," Smith-Rosenberg adds: "She stood determinedly outside conventional institutions. Indeed, she had to create alternative institutions and careers for herself, since the normative world offered her no haven other than the role of the spinster aunt or the poorly paid and unmarried schoolteacher." Though the New Woman represented complexity and sometimes contradiction, she was at least partially freed from Victorian strictures. 10

The more prevalent sister of the New Woman, the flapper, could be found mainly in urban areas. It is unlikely she resided in any great numbers in the deep rural South. As late as 1934 Carl Carmer wrote in Stars Fell on Alabama that "conventional morality

is a much more generally accepted standard in the deep South than in other sections of the country. The revolt of youth against orthodox moral attitudes during the 1920s did not kindle much of a flame in Alabama." 11

Historian Anne Firor Scott largely agrees:

The importance of the image of the southern lady in the thinking of southerners, in influencing the behavior of both men and women, in shaping women's self-image, has been stressed throughout this book. What happened to the image by the 1920s? As might be expected of an influential idea so strongly held, which had once filled some important psychological need, the image of the lady was slow to die. 12

Though threatened by outside forces, the image of the lady to which Scott refers, would still have held considerable sway in the Mississippi Delta in 1923. Welty's readers need look no further than Ellen Fairchild, the mistress of Shellmound, as a personification of the lady. A "fair child," she seems the burdened representative of ante-bellum southern womanhood, the embodiment of a cherished ideal.

The very fact that the ideal was cherished and so staunchly

defended by southern traditionalists suggests something of its origins. Anne Goodwyn Jones in Tomorrow Is Another Day sums up the hidden agenda involved in the idealization of the lady when she writes that "in general historians agree that the function of southern womanhood has been to justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race." 13 In the iconography of the woman on a pedestal rested the slaveholder's social prestige and his racial security. "It was no accident," Anne Firor Scott notes, "that the most articulate spokesman[sic] for slavery were also eloquent exponents of the subordinate role of women." 14

Of the southern conservatives who upheld slavery and the circumscription of women, some were not above veiling in their words a subtle threat toward any woman who stepped out of line. Consider the thoughts of George Fitzhugh who, after offering protection to the lady, warned: "The right to protection involves the obligation to obey. A husband, a lord and master, whom she should love, honor and obey, nature designed for every woman . . . If she be obedient, she stands little danger of maltreatment." William Harper, who sought to explain the difference between the conduct of southern ladies and that of women outside the South, had this to say:

Here there is that certain and marked line,

above which there is no toleration or allowance for any approach to license of manners or conduct, and she who falls below it, will fall far below even the slave. How many will incur this penalty? 15

Ladies were entitled to their privileged rank only as long as they behaved properly. "If a woman passed the tests of ladyhood," Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes in Revolt Against Chivalry, "she could tap into the reservoir of protectiveness and shelter known as southern chivalry." Such protectiveness, however, could be entirely withdrawn. "Women unable or unwilling to comply with such normative demands forfeited the claim to personal security." 16

Northern ladies were not exempt from demands for socially conforming behavior. But, because of the institution of slavery, the concept of the southern lady held an added color dynamic not found in the ideal of "true womanhood" in the North. In Within the Plantation Household, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes:

Few even admitted to worrying about the possibility that a young woman might be drawn to slave men, but then, such things simply could not be made subjects for discussion. That some southern white women took black lovers could be

freely acknowledged, for it was assumed that the women were lower class and disreputable. But ladies? 17

Such "things" as ladies coupled with black lovers may have been too appalling for discussion, but nonetheless they were the basis for much of southern convention. Southern plantation society was built, in fact, on the premise of that impossibility. According to Wilbur J. Cash, the concept of southern womanhood stemmed

primarily from the natural tendency of the great basic pattern of pride in superiority of race to center upon her as the perpetuator of that superiority in legitimate line, and attached itself precisely, and before everything else, to her enormous remoteness from the males of the inferior group, to the absolute taboo on any sexual approach to her by the Negro. 18

Thus, the premiere "test of ladyhood" was sexual purity. Ladies' bodies carried not only the sexual identification of southern men, but also their class and racial identification. "The vessels to which these men trusted their reproductive potential and cultural values must, of necessity, be unblemished, alabaster representations

of the plantation idyll," Catherine Clinton noted in her work, The Plantation Mistress. "The sullyng influence of slavery must not touch the women of the upper class lest the entire structure crumble." 19

Class and race functioned in less obvious, more internal ways to deny white women their natures. Their need was to dissociate themselves from the women their men had defined as temptresses; for them the slave woman was at once a social inferior and a sexual competitor. As Winthrop Jordan sees it, ". . . white women, though they might propogate children inevitably held themselves aloof from the world of lust and passion, a world which reeked of infidelity and Negro slaves . . ." 20

Jordan stops short of declaring white women to be passionless, describing instead the inevitable ambivalence they felt toward their own sexuality: "A biracial environment warped her affective life in two directions at once, for she was made to feel that sensual involvement with the opposite sex burned bright and hot with unquenchable passion and at the same time that any such involvement was utterly repulsive." The effect of such thinking was felt in a woman's sexual relationships, Jordan maintains. "Accordingly," he notes, "she approached her prospective legitimate sexual partners as if she were picking up a live coal in one hand and a dead rat in the other." 21

Slaveholding women may or may not have expressed passion,

but that seems less important than the fact that social restraints prohibited them from freely choosing the forms or objects of that expression. Also relevant is whether they considered their sexuality a healthy assertion of their identities or whether they felt it to be an unfortunate lapse from self-imposed gender strictures. For many white women, the repression of their expressive behaviors was translated into a frustrated jealousy directed at the sexual partners their husbands sometimes chose: female slaves. Their jealousy was in part a chafing against the double standard, since men were allowed such choices.

Mary Boykin Chesnut touches on the double sexual standard in the following passage:

What do you say to this? A magnate who runs
a hideous black harem and its consequences
under the same roof with his lovely white wife
and his beautiful and accomplished daughters?
He holds his head as high and poses as the model
of all human virtues to these poor women whom
God and the laws have given him. From the height
of his awful majesty he scolds and thunders at
them, as if he never did wrong in his life. 22

Mrs. Chesnut also rails at the image of the southern lady

that dictates women must bear their grievances in silence. "His wife and daughters in the might of their purity and innocence are supposed never to dream of what is as plain before their eyes as the sunlight, and they play their parts of unsuspecting angels to the letter." 23

Thus both cultural and psychological motives compelled a strict vigilance over women's bodies--a vigilance both exerted from without and internalized by the women themselves. Class consciousness, sexual jealousy, patriarchal authority, and slavery itself imposed sexual restraints on women. For the male elite, the body of the white woman provided a touchstone for class rank and power. Clearly, in southern culture the female body is not incidental to the society. Indeed, it is at the center of southern experience. It was at once considered pure and spotless as well as dangerous and anarchic. Both idealized and repressed, it haunted southern thought and convention.

To see the body as a southern centrality is to see contextual significance in Eudora Welty's perception of women. Welty focuses many of her works from a strong female consciousness. Several of her characters live very much within physical selves, so much so that much of Welty's language is highly sensual. Consider her description in "A Worn Path" of Phoenix Jackson's face: "Her skin had a pattern all its own . . . as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath,

and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark." Welty even finds it necessary to include the smell of Phoenix's hair: "Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper." 24 In another of her short stories "A Piece of News," Welty likens Ruby Fisher to a cat drying herself by the hearth. "As she sprawled close to the fire, her hair began to slide out of its damp tangles and hung all displayed down her back like a piece of bargain silk." 25

The same aura of sensuality is immediately evident in Delta Wedding. Welty begins the novel with lengthy images of the fertile and seemingly endless Delta, suggestive of the life force: "The land was perfectly flat and level but it shimmered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly. It seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it," and "In the Delta the sunsets were reddest light. The sun went down lopsided and wide as a rose on a stem in the west, and the west was a milk-white edge, like the foam of a sea." 26

This is the Delta as seen through the eyes of nine-year-old Laura McRaven, who is visiting the Fairchilds, the family of her dead mother. Laura, hoping to learn a secret and surrounded by her kin, "sat among them with eyes wide. At any moment she might expose her ignorance--at any moment she might learn everything" (14). The secret is likely a manifold one. Laura is seeking to

find her place in the scheme of the large Fairchild family and to understand the loss of her mother. But the author gives us another clue in the very first paragraph of the novel: "Of these facts the one most persistent in Laura's mind was the most intimate one: that her age was nine" (3). Laura is approaching her menarche, a stage suggesting that the secret may be a sexual one, especially given Welty's voluptuous language. The Delta itself seems to hold some promise of knowledge; the discovery of secrets lies somehow in the fecundity of the land. In conventional southern culture, Laura's body will indeed be a factor in her adult identity.

As the landscape itself becomes suggestive of the body, Laura clings to another reminder of fertility and procreativity, her doll Marmion. The name "Marmion" comes from the long-empty Fairchild house that assumes a symbolic importance in its imagery and in the events surrounding it. Marmion attaches figuratively to Laura's sexual growth; the house also becomes a culminating image of the wedding itself. When we later learn the circumstances of the making of the doll Marmion and the symbolic connotations of the house Marmion, the name seems associated with Laura's awareness of her sexual self--the knowledge of her body. "It was like a race between the creation of the doll and the bursting of the storm," as Laura's mother makes for her the cloth doll in an atmosphere of hurried excitement:

Now she was sewing on the head with her needle in her fingers. Then with the laundry ink she was drawing a face in the white stocking front. Laura leaned on her mother's long soft knee, with her chin in her palm, entirely charmed by the drawing of the face. She could draw better than her mother could and the inferiority of the drawing, the slowly produced wildness of the unlevel eyes, the nose like a ditto mark, and the straight-line mouth with its slow final additions of curves at the end, bringing at maddening delay a kind of smile, were like magic to watch. (232)

As Peggy Prenshaw points out in her article "Woman's World, Man's Place," the heightened tone of the prose is suggestive of the drama of childbirth. The passage also connotes an intense creativity: a doll is not only "born"; a doll is made. The creation of a face and "unlevel eyes" and a "kind of smile" point to the creation of a distinct identity. The doll is not just fashioned materially from bits of cloth and stuffing into a body. Laura also insists that it have a name, a signifier. Laura's mother names the doll hurriedly, casually, "almost grudgingly" in her fatigue and without thinking. Without the labor of thought, she chooses Marmion as the easiest, most natural name to bestow on

the creation. Laura's request for a name brings to full circle a connection of the body not only with procreativity but also with creativity and knowledge. The doll must be "known" by a name; in order for it to function for Laura, it must take on a conceptual existence by way of language. This intimate connection of body with language is evocative of French feminist thought. It is possible to liken the making of Marmion--the intense creativity and identification--with the fashioning of body and self so critical to the philosophy of l'écriture féminine.

The fact that Laura's mother presents her with the doll (and that the house Marmion would have been Laura's inheritance from her mother) implies that the secrets of female sexuality and creativity are passed from mother to daughter. Significantly, Laura's mother has been dead for several months when the novel opens, her death having severed that creative link. The girl is immediately referred to as the "poor motherless child." The motherless child is perceived as a quester, seeking self-enlightenment and reunion. Laura is very much a traveler having come to Shellmound, the Fairchild plantation, for the wedding of her cousin Dabney Fairchild to Troy Flavin. Part of her search is for her Aunt Ellen's maternal love and for acceptance by the entire clan. But an underlying pursuit is for knowledge of her own body (Marmion) and for a restoration of the creative link.

If the character of Laura seems associated with the house

Marmion, many of the other women in Delta Wedding live within symbolic structures, boundaries of the self, which help to define them. These constructs of settings and houses as extensions of the body's physical boundaries, help determine the identities of Welty's female characters as they seek knowledge and experience. That bodies and, by extension, houses and settings can act as identity metaphors seems central in much of Welty's work. (Picture, for example, in "A Piece of News" Ruby Fisher's tiny cabin suggesting her own limited world, the fire at its hearth her own sexual flame. Or in "Livvie" the house that, being Solomon's, imprisons Livvie's youthful sexuality.) Welty herself, in her essay "Place in Fiction" outlined the importance of setting:

It is our describable outside that defines us willy-nilly to others, that may save us or destroy us in the world; it may be our shield against chaos, our mask against exposure; but whatever it is, the move we make in the place we live has to signify our intent and meaning. 27

The houses that enclose Welty's characters and the landscape that surrounds them often undulate with female sexuality. The women live within carnal selves, rendering much of the author's symbolism sexually imagistic. Associating place with meaning,

we can look at the houses of Delta Wedding as expressive of their female occupants. These houses are often symbolic in their architecture and atmosphere of the sexual identities of the Fairchild women, metaphorically intimating virginity, maternity, or sexual pleasure and awareness. As Gaston Bachelard notes in The Poetics of Space, as a geometric object the house should resist poetic metaphors. But, he continues, "transportation to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy. Independent of all rationality," he asserts, "the dream world beckons." 28

The first of the Delta houses "transposed to the human plane" is Shellmound. Just as its mistress Ellen Fairchild seems the eternal mother figure, Shellmound, a large rambling house with secret crannies, seems the fruition of female fertility. The house is nearly bursting with children, teeming with life: "It was so hard to read at Shellmound. There was so much going on in real life" (54). Before Laura even enters the house, she sees its interior in her memory and imagines that she can "put out her arms like wings" and float, weightless, through its rooms. Such images become indicative of a womb-like atmosphere and one in which fertile imaginings abound. Motherless Laura sees Shellmound as filled with song and fragrance and surrounded by moon vines, "the brightest thing in the evening . . . its tinted windows open and its curtains

stirring" (6). The house appears welcoming and loving, much like a bountiful mother ready to take in and nurture one and all. The maternal image intensifies when we learn that Laura's mother created the doll Marmion when she was still under the "spell" of Shellmound: "(Why, they had been to the Delta--been here! To Shellmound. And come home from it--it was under its momentum that her mother had been so quick and gay)" (233).

But Shellmound, like the southern ideal, is not without its contradictions. Ellen's fertility, despite her love for her children, is in danger of becoming a burden: "But she was tired, and sometimes now the whole world seemed rampant, running away from her, and she would always be carrying another child into it" (78). Ellen continually sighs, bends to a reality she can't control. According to the dictates of southern womanhood, she must surrender her body to bear child after child. The wonder of Ellen's body is also her frustration; thus Shellmound's balconies filled with butterflies contrast with porches that reach nothing but a dead-end. The house with its many rooms is a maze in which its mistress seems, at times, lost. Certainly her dreams are of loss and of the possibility of repossession; in her sleeping hours she is pre-occupied with things "missing."

She dreamed of things the children and Negroes
lost and of where they were, and often when she

looked she did find them, or parts of them, in the dreamed-of places. She was too busy when she was awake to know if a thing was lost or not-- she had to dream it. (65)

The relinquishing of her girlhood identity for marriage accounts in part for Ellen's sense of loss. She left her beloved Virginia to marry Battle Fairchild and come to live at Shellmound. Endless childbearing causes her to dream of recapturing her virginal youth by finding a red breastpin she lost long ago. She is able to see the central role her body plays in her life when she says of the breastpin, emblematic of virginity itself: "I wasn't speaking about any little possession to you. I suppose I was speaking about good and bad, maybe. I was speaking about men--men, our lives" (71). The link for women between the hymen and social identity was an especially strong one in the South; for many women the circumstances of their loss of virginity determined their future lives. Ellen's search for the garnet breastpin impels her to question the role she must play in society; a part of her wants to restore the lost identity of her youth along with her bodily integrity. As Laura observes, Ellen's identity is based almost solely on her position as a wife and mother: "Aunt Ellen never talked about Virginia or when she was a little girl or a lady without children. The most she ever said was, 'Of course, I married young'" (134).

To argue that Ellen is unhappy is to mistake the point. It is also to ignore the often lyrical style of Delta Wedding. In a quiet time of reflection near the novel's close, Ellen dwells on the knowledge she gains from her body:

The repeating fields, the repeating cycles of season and her own life--there was something in the monotony itself that was beautiful, rewarding--perhaps to what was womanly within her. No, she had never had time--much time at all, to contemplate . . . but she knew. Well, one moment told you the great things, one moment was enough for you to know the greatest thing. (240)

Ellen's knowledge is of conflicting opposites: the monotony of her body, its fatigue, is also its joy. As she comes to understand that her search for identity is as complex as the many corridors of Shellmound, the name of the house takes on new significance. "Shell-Mound." Bachelard, on the thematics of the shell, settles on dialectics: that of small and large, free and in fetters, fear and curiosity. "If we remain at the heart of the image under consideration, we have the impression that, by staying in the motionlessness of its shell, the creature is preparing temporal explosions, not to say whirlwinds, of being." Ellen certainly

is caught in the "shell" of her gender role, and yet her sense of self may be all the stronger as Bachelard notes, "The most dynamic escapes take place in cases of repressed being, and not in the flabby laziness of the lazy creature whose only desire is to go and be lazy elsewhere." 29 The image of Ellen's cultural shell is one of protectiveness but also fragility; if the shell should crack or be smashed, her insular world would cease to exist. At the same time, her rich inner life is drawn from the resources of her body.

Another resident of Shellmound is Shelley (another shell) Fairchild, Ellen's and Battle's oldest daughter. Shelley occupies the "best front room" of the house, a room which Welty takes great pains to describe. Many of Shelley's belongings are enclosed or hidden in closet, chest, and jewelry box. Even her journal has a lock and key and is kept hidden in the cedar chest. Shelley's need to pack her possessions away in chests has a psychological suggestion according to Bachelard, who says of chests: "These complex pieces that a craftsman creates are very evident witnesses of the need for secrecy, of an intuitive sense of hiding places A lock is a psychological threshold." 30

In part, what Shelley seeks to hide is her developing self and to prevent the cultural governing of her body. Many of the things she keeps enclosed are adornments for her body--almost all gifts from family members: the evening dresses she doesn't care

about, the jewelry she "would not be caught dead wearing," and a chest full of delicate underwear (including a transparent negligée made by Aunt Primrose) intended for her marriage. All these gifts represent attempts on the part of the conservative Fairchilds to manage Shelley's body and direct its sexuality toward traditionally sanctioned roles. She is further denied a reading lamp for her bedroom and her father's denial is fraught with Victorian repression: "'Plenty light to dress by, and you can read in the lower part of the house with your clothes on like other people,' Uncle Battle said, favoring Dabney as he did and she never read, not having time" (83).

Shelley may be in disfavor because she is the daughter most likely to eschew what her father sees as a normal gender role. She most resembles the stereotypical flapper of the twenties. She is college-educated, she is still unmarried, she is a reader and a writer. Shelley prefers her mother's red garnet pin over the inherited jewelry much as she prefers her youthful flapper image over an inherited set of cultural values. She is also the one most likely to understand that the winds of change are blowing toward the sheltered world of the Fairchilds; she writes in her journal that her family "cherishes its weaknesses."

Shelley must write because she has been muted in other ways; she is not permitted expression through her body. Her sense of privacy is assailed almost daily, and at one point she writes,

"The whole Delta is in and out of this house" (85). Her response is to withdraw even further, causing her father to refer to her as "prissy" and "priggish." An entry in her journal reads: "He [Uncle George] said I was not priggish, I only liked to resist" (85). Shelley must lock her sexuality and enclose her body to prevent its theft by southern society just as she must secret away her thoughts in her journal. L'écriture féminine makes a connection between the cultural repression of body and the silencing of female voices. To take the first step toward language is to re-inhabit the body--to "write" oneself. Hélène Cixous declares:

Write yourself. Your body must be heard. . . .
 To write. An act which will not only "realize"
 the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality,
 to her womanly being, giving her access to her
 native strength; it will give her back her goods,
 her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily
 territories which have been kept under seal; it
 will tear her away from the superegoized structure
 in which she has always occupied the space re-
 served for the guilty . . . 31

Shelley, in writing herself, in hiding in her shell, is preparing to reclaim her body and her sexuality. Or, as Bachelard notes,

she is preparing a "way out." He writes, "A creature that hides and 'withdraws into its shell,' is preparing a 'way out.' This is true of the entire scale of metaphors, from the resurrection of a man in his grave, to the sudden outburst of one who has long been silent." 32

If Shelley and Shellmound represent among other images that of a shell, with its connotations of escape and egress, The Grove seems barren and still, spatially holding the past. Dabney's elderly maiden aunts, Primrose and Jim Allen, live at The Grove, described as a "dove-gray box" next to the "softly colored" Yazoo River (a much different Yazoo from the one Dabney will encounter). The house is spotlessly clean and ordered and holds a silent serenity: "It was eternally cool in summer in this house; like the air of a dense little velvet-green wood it touched your forehead with stillness" (40). Its motionlessness and untouched silence is contrasted with the noise of Shellmound:

How softly all the doors shut, in this house
by the river--a soft wind always pressed very
gently against your closing. How quiet it was,
without the loud driving noise of a big fan in
every corner as there was at home, even when at
moments people sighed and fell silent. (40)

Ancestral portraits cover the walls, and this is the place where family heirlooms are housed and protected from harm. The aunts gain satisfaction in holding things "unchanged." The lace curtains are the same as ever following their repair after a cyclone; the silver doorknobs are still intact. The Grove represents the past with a vengeance; it becomes a museum designed not only to hold artifacts, but also to uphold tradition. Being so immersed in the past, Primrose and Jim Allen cannot be imagined as having a viable present, not to mention a future. Despite Dabney's imminent wedding, most of their talk is of Fairchild ancestors and of the past; Primrose says of her sister, "Jim Allen wants all the ghosts kept straight" (45). Nevertheless, even with all the emphasis on tradition, at one point Mary Shannon looks down on the parlor from her portrait and sees the possessions as "foolish" and "breakable." Perhaps she recognizes the fragility in the 1920s of nineteenth-century values.

Primrose and Jim Allen can be construed as custodians for the southern patriarchal tradition as well as for the family lore and heirlooms. They help to preserve the conventions of society much as they have preserved their own bodies. Any hint of sexual acts even within marriage causes them discomfiture: "'Little girls don't talk about honeymoons,' said Aunt Jim Allen. 'They don't ask their sisters questions, it's not a bit nice'" (46). When Dabney blurts that she hopes she has a baby right away, the aunts

are saddened and embarrassed: "Aunt Primrose took a little sacheted handkerchief from her bosom and touched it to her lips, and a tear began to run down Aunt Jim Allen's dry rice-powdered cheek. They looked at nothing as ladies do in church" (48,49). Because of their reaction, Dabney regrets her words: "'I've done enough,' Dabney thought, frightened, not quite understanding things any longer. 'I've done enough to them'" (49).

Part of the aunts' discomfort with Dabney's conversation stems from their estrangement from their own bodies. As single women in a conservative southern society, they are not allowed expressions of sexuality. Unmarried, they nonetheless parody the ideal of the southern matron and appear to perceive no irregularity in their convoluted roles. They were, after all, cultivated to become southern ladies, plantation mistresses. They wear feminine clothing with "touches," they are skilled at the feminine arts of housekeeping and preserving produce, and they know when "any named thing ought to be taken off the fire" (40). The entire sum of their creative drive goes into homemaking and caretaking tasks since the culture provides no other sanctioned outlet for female energy. If Primrose and Jim Allen seem silly and ineffectual at times, it is because they lack the "native strength" that Cixous insists comes from a knowledge of the body and its creative capacity. Instead, the pair are staunch upholders of conventional southern womanhood, also seen at times as "foolish" and "breakable."

The aunts are keepers of a second symbol of virginity--a porcelain lamp that they insist Dabney take as a wedding gift. When lighted, the lamp gives the illusion of a great fire, emblematic perhaps of a sexual flame. Dabney's lamp inspires deep curiosity in India, Laura's cousin, who is also nine years old. India's innocent question to Dabney, "Are you going to take it with you when you go on your honeymoon with Troy?" (46) shocks the aunts, with its underlying reference to Dabney's virginity. India imagines that she herself would treat it with great care: "India made a circle with her fingers, imagining that she held the little lamp. She held it very carefully. It seemed filled with the mysterious flowing air of the night" (49). Dabney, however, appears thoughtless with the lamp and eventually breaks it.

The lamp can provoke strong emotions in members of the Fairchild family because of deepy-ingrained traditions concerning virginity and sexual passion. In The Plantation Mistress, Catherine Clinton studies the importance of female virginity in the South. Quoting passages of a planter's letters to his niece warning that he perceived her "on the pinnacle of an awful precipice," Clinton notes, "[his] metaphor depicted the explicit and implicit concerns of the planter class: actual impropriety of any sort was inexcusable, but even a hint of sexual suspicion would ruin a woman forever." 33

When Dabney does break the lamp, very shortly after the aunts entrust it to her and before the wedding, the connotations are

that she considers its significance outworn. But young India is grief-stricken: "She could not stop crying, though Uncle George himself stayed out there holding her and in a little began teasing her about a little old piece of glass that Dabney would never miss" (53). George ignores the import that Dabney's body has in shaping her identity and experience as a southern woman. His implication is that it hardly matters and that Dabney will never look back in longing as Ellen has in her search for the garnet breastpin.

When she breaks the lamp, Dabney understands that she has attacked the weight of a southern code that governs her body. But she also sadly realizes that people she loves are keepers of this code, when she suspects her aunts have been violated in some way:

Life was not ever inviolate. Dabney . . . shed tears this morning (though belatedly) . . . it seemed so unavoidable to Dabney, that was why she cried, as if she felt it was part of her being married that this cherished little bit of other people's lives should be shattered now. (193)

What is being shattered is tradition; the way of life Primrose and Jim Allen represent will vanish through rebellious acts like Dabney's. Not only has Dabney defied tradition in breaking the

precious lamp, but she is also marrying beneath her social class in choosing Troy Flavin, the overseer. "Troy came in from the side door, indeed like somebody walking in from the fields to marry Dabney" (212). Dabney is using her own body to flout convention and bend the old rules. As she begins to find herself, she recognizes that her father and the Fairchild name are losing their hold on her, and the influence of the patriarchal society is weakening:

Sometimes, Dabney was not so sure she was a Fairchild--sometimes she did not care, that was it. There were moments of life when it did not matter who she was--even where. Something, happiness--with Troy, but not necessarily, even the happiness of a fine day seemed to leap away from identity as if it were an old skin, and that she was one of the Fairchilds was of no more need to her than the locust shells now hanging to the trees everywhere were to the singing locusts. . . . It would kill her father --of course for her to be a Fairchild was an inescapable thing, to him. . . . The caprices of his restraining power over his daughters filled her with delight now that she had declared what she could do. (32, 33)

In the preceding passage, Dabney sees her rebellion in images of egress from a shell and also understands her defiance of the southern patriarchy. She begins to know the self as a thing apart from class hierarchy and separate from paternal "naming": She has no more need of being a "Fairchild." She also shows remarkable strength of will in resisting the wishes of her father and in attempting to leave behind her cultural "shell."

If Ellen's Shellmound seems symbolic of maternity and Primrose's and Jim Allen's The Grove of virginity, a third house in Delta Wedding, Marmion, suggests the natural power of female sexuality. Marmion is also a symbol of transformation. The house is changed, magically, from a structure meant to denote romantic southern conservatism into a home for Dabney's newly-found knowledge. Dorothy C. Griffin sees Marmion as romantic: "Marmion, the heart of romance, standing structurally in the center of the novel, is the world of 'Once Upon A Time,' where no one lives." Griffin notes that Marmion is and should be the essence of southern architecture. "It is imperative that Marmion, of all the Fairchild houses, be the expected Southern-plantation house design, columned and expansive. Marmion was built on the unreality of the Southern past, when the legend of the Old South was at its height." 34

Marmion does seem filled with drama; there is a heightened sense of mystery surrounding the structure with its twenty-five rooms and dizzyingly high stairway and its splendid chandelier.

And the house does stand structurally at the heart of the novel. And certainly when we learn Marmion's history, we understand that it was in fact built on the "unreality of the Southern past." Because of a dispute over cotton, Dabney's grandfather had been killed in a duel the same year Marmion was completed. Thus, Marmion has never been lived in; the house has stood as an idea of southern honor, waiting and empty for over thirty years.

But all that was in a past that is quickly eroding at the time of Delta Wedding. The Fairchild women now look on Marmion as the suggestion of bodily knowledge. The house now evokes a life-affirming sexuality, its very name expressive of secretive excitement (as in the creation of the doll Marmion). In seeing houses as metaphoric bodies, we can look at Marmion--the body--as having been constructed to fulfill the southern legend, but now rediscovered as a source of sexual power. Marmion no longer seems ethereal; it is the very essence of life since Dabney and Troy will inhabit it after the wedding. The world of "'Once Upon A Time'" is vanishing. Dabney herself resists Marmion's former romantic connection and has always "pouted at the story" of its history. She instead thinks of the house in material terms that actually deny the romantic vision of southern honor and pride:

The eagerness with which she was now going to
Marmion, entering her real life there with Troy,

told her enough--all the cotton in the world was not worth one moment of life! . . . How sweet it was and how well she could hold it, pluck it, eat it, lay her cheek to it--oh, no one else knew. The juice of life and the hot delighting fragrance and warmth to the cheek, the mouth. (120, 121)

Dabney's carnal vision of Marmion elevates nature, negating notions of honor over life. The images she invokes are also resplendent with sensuality. Her sexuality seems associated not just with Troy or with Marmion, but also with life itself. Indeed, Dabney's "jouissance" seems the source of her strength. In the preceding passage, she intimates that women's sexual pleasure cannot be fitted into the world of masculine-defined romance associated with Marmion's legend. In seeing the world of Marmion as one of real life, Dabney resists the pull of the old southern romantic myth; she refuses to be "killed into art."

Marmion is further seen as a human body, "temple-like" and "springing naked." Its magnificent chandelier is like a stamen in a lily. Marmion emerges as the house of sexual knowledge and bodily awareness long denied southern women. For Dabney, that knowledge is delicious and again secretive:

Just now, while they never guessed, she had

seen Marmion--the magnificent temple-like,
 castle-like house, with the pillars springing
 naked from the ground, and the lookout tower,
 and twenty-five rooms, and inside, the wonder-
 ful free-standing stair--the chandelier, chalice,
 golden in light, like the stamen in the lily
 down-hanging. (122)

Dabney is able to see Marmion clearly, listing its wonders and understanding its promise. Laura, however, perceives only intimations of a secret and senses within the house a deep mystery. Laura's visit to Marmion with Roy is replete with sexual imagery. The children are met by Aunt Studney, "old as the hills," whose sack contains a secret that scares and fascinates them. As the children explore the house once haunted with death, it seems now anointed with life. Bees, symbols of fertility, swarm at Marmion, and Roy from his perch on the stairway can see "the whole creation."

For Laura, the visit to Marmion is especially meaningful, for it is there that she finds Ellen's lost breastpin, described as a "treasure" and a "jewel." In a mock pageantry of a coupling, the children drop into the grass outside the house and Roy tries to take the pin from Laura. Later, on the return trip to Shellmound, Roy throws her overboard into the Yazoo River: "As though Aunt Studney's sack had opened after all, like a whale's mouth, Laura

opening her eyes head down, saw its insides all around her--dark water and fearful fishes" (178). While underwater, Laura loses the breastpin as Roy exclaims, "I couldn't believe you wouldn't come right up. . . . I thought girls floated" (179).

The river dunking is momentous for Laura because she is approaching puberty and because she is trying to come to terms with the loss of her mother. She flirts with sexual discovery and experience in hopes of reaching further understanding of herself and her orphaned state. Part of her rightful inheritance that should have been handed her by her mother and is now claimed by Dabney is Marmion, the house of bodily knowledge. To catch even glimpses of Marmion is therefore vital for Laura and at one point she whispers, "I've been in Marmion afore ye. I've seen it all afore. It's all happened afore" (241).

Laura's whispers are transmitted as a secret to India, who is also nearing puberty. We are reminded of the narrator's earlier assertion: "Of these facts, the one most persistent in Laura's mind was the most intimate one: that her age was nine" (3). Laura's "inheritance," the discovery and definition of her body, comes as a result of her journey to the Delta and her experience at Marmion. Because her mother is gone and cannot convey to her the secrets of Marmion, Laura must uncover them for herself. The Delta wedding is for Laura her own awakening into a larger world, a world rendered secretive and fearful with the death of her mother.

Just as Laura's fear causes her to see the "dark water" and "fearful fishes" of the Yazoo, Dabney also has an unsettling experience at the river. The Yazoo seems reminiscent of the Pearl River in Welty's short story "The Wide Net." The Pearl, understood to be brimming with life, is also dark and mysterious--the primal womb. The Yazoo, we are told, means river of death, but it also seems to hold, like the ancient earth goddess, the promise of fecundity. Dabney's experience at the river becomes an initiation into the world of sexuality and childbirth when she notes that this is her "last chance to look before the wedding" (123). She both fears the Yazoo and is drawn to it as she furtively glimpses its sexually suggestive whirlpool. She appears to view her own sexual possibility in the depths of its waters:

She parted the thronged vines of the wild grapes thick as legs, and looked in. There it was. She gazed feasting her fear on the dark, vaguely stirring water. . . . The vines and the cypress roots twisted and grew together on the shore and in the water more thickly than any roots should grow, gray and red, and some roots too moved and floated like hair. On the other side, a turtle on a root opened its mouth and put its tongue out. . . . A

beginning of vertigo seized her, until she felt herself leaning, leaning toward the whirlpool. (123)

The whirlpool image is a complex one, suggesting the social contradictions Dabney faces on the verge of her marriage. She fears the annihilation of self (drowning), the restraint of her freedom (entanglement), and even the power of her newly-discovered sexuality (vertigo). At the same time she is strengthened by her own strivings for independence and intrigued and encouraged by the resources of her body, evidenced when she sees Marmion reflected on the surface of the troubling Yazoo:

Dabney bent her head to the low boughs, and then saw the house reflected in the Yazoo River--an undulant tower with white wings at each side, like a hypnotized swamp butterfly, spread and dreaming where it alights. Then the house itself reared delicate and vast, with a strict tower, up from its reflection, and Dabney gazed at it counting its rooms. (120)

The house indeed has many rooms. The secrets Laura has been eager to learn, Ellen's maternal ambivalences, Dabney's straining against custom, and Primrose's and Jim Allen's virginal trepidation are

all housed at Marmion. Marmion rears "delicate and vast" as the possibility of sexual autonomy for the female characters of Delta Wedding. No more at the time than a presentiment for the Fairchild women, it is a futuristic house, an almost utopian architectural structure in their world.

The houses of the Fairchild ladies are a marked contrast to that of Partheny, the black servant. Partheny's house is not isolated like the "white" houses, but is instead linked to those of her neighbors "from shady porch to shady porch," and covered with chinaberry branches. The little houses are evocative of human bodies with their stovepipes like "elbows of hips" and the "flat earth that was bare like their feet." An air of sensual fertility pervades, with the fragrances and a lush growth of vegetables and setting hens. Partheny's world seems one of secretive but effortless communion with the body; at one point during the Fairchild girls' visit, a guinea pig, with its connotations of fertility, runs under Partheny's skirt. The girls have come to invite Partheny to the wedding but also, significantly, to look for Ellen's lost breastpin. Partheny immediately understands what the pin means to Ellen, in light of her most recent pregnancy: "I don't know what could have become of Miss Ellen's pretty li'l garnet present, and her comin' down agin, cravin' it, who knows. Sorry as I can be for her" (131). Partheny is seen as having powerful insights into love and sexuality; she offer her "little patticake," a love concoction made of a

dove's heart and the blood of a snake. The cake, calculated to inspire love in his estranged wife, Robbie, is a present for George.

But for all Partheny's powers, there is an aura of fear that surrounds her and the other black women of her community. Their houses (bodies) speak of the need for secrecy and protectiveness: "In front of Partheny's house, close up to her porch was an extra protection, a screen the same size as the house, of thick butter-bean vines. . . . The door looked around one side, like a single eye around a veil" (128). Welty's depiction of Partheny and her boundaries of the self evokes a southern traditional culture that is slow to fade. The bodies of slave women in antebellum society were also not under their own direction, but subject to the appetites or brutalities of their white masters. To fill a psychological need to assuage their guilt over miscegenation, the planters saw black women as possessing dark sexual powers. At the same time, the women themselves, constantly vulnerable to bodily intrusion, lacked a "screen" of "extra protection." Partheny's small huddled house speaks eloquently of the plight of those slave women and of their legacy inherited by Partheny and her neighbors. The houses offer a bleak contrast to those of the Fairchild women, who have inherited their own legacy of chivalry and protectiveness. The large Delta houses of the Fairchilds stand apart in the open, their doors and windows usually open. Though the white women also lack autonomy, they have no fear of physical assault, as shown in Shelley's

words: "Did they ever even lock a door. . . . The whole Delta is in and out of this house" (85).

Although all of Delta Wedding's women, white and black, occupy the same general world--a rural stronghold of patriarchy--the paradox of their experience often mirrors the paradox of the female body: It is at once a source of awe and pleasure, an object of abuse and fear and a mythical altar of fertility. But for Welty's female characters to seek to re-inhabit their bodies is a means of refusing the southern male imagination its objects. As Hélène Cixous asserts, to inhabit the female body without shame, guilt or fear would be to transform its meaning, disallowing the definition accorded the body in western culture. This, Cixous maintains, is crucial to social change:

Now women, return from afar, from always, from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture"; from their childhood, which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to "eternal rest." The little girls and their "ill-mannered" bodies immured, well-preserved, intact into themselves, in the mirror. 35

Bodies are often perceived as "ill-mannered," scraping against

the grain of social dicta meant to restrain their expression. In the act of living in their bodies and also groping to define them, the Fairchild women are questioning their gender images--images that had held tenaciously into the twentieth century. In Stars Fell on Alabama, Carl Carmer relates a toast still being offered to southern womanhood in the 1930s: "To woman, lovely woman of the Southland, as pure and chaste as this sparkling water, as cold as this gleaming ice, we lift this cup, and we pledge our hearts and our lives to the protection of her virtue and chastity." 36 This image of the "woman of the Southland" as an integral part of the structure of southern conservatism is threatened when women seek sexual autonomy. The world of Delta Wedding, for all its insularity, will change as its women change. It is the fear of expected change that sends a current of unease through the Fairchild circle. The old comforting definitions no longer hold sway.

Of the old patriarchal definition of woman, Cixous says: "She is given images that don't belong to her, and she forces herself, as we've all done, to resemble them." 37 The Fairchild women are starting to dis-resemble their assigned images. Their bodies, they are finding, hold a rebellious wellspring of power. A race-bound and gender-bound society cannot function when women choose to draw their own boundaries of self. The concept of "southern womanhood" in Eudora Welty's Mississippi Delta will never be quite as safe again.

NOTES

1. Margaret Bolsterli, "'Bound' Characters in Porter, Welty, McCullers: The Pre-Revolutionary Status of Women in American Fiction," Bucknell Review 24 (1978) 95.

2. Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth Century Women's Writing (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986). Homans develops a complex argument based on the Lacanian theory of psycholinguistics: language emerges from the resolution of the Oedipal conflict; because the mother's literal body must be abandoned (and hence, repressed) as forbidden and too dangerous, the male quester invents symbols (figurative language) to replace the dead or absent mother. Women and nature, therefore, must be objectified and distanced, not literalized. The symbol, not the mother, is sought. Women, writing literally, can bring the female back into "existence." For a thesis that sees the female body and its environs as identity metaphors, or "fluid" boundaries, see Roberta Rubenstein, Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction (Chicago: U of Illinois, 1987).

3. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale U P, 1984) 15.

4. Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," trans. Ann Liddle, New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst:

U of Massachusetts P, 1980) 95.

5. For studies that stress feminine power in Delta Wedding, see Peggy W. Prenshaw, "Woman's World, Man's Place," Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks, ed. Louis Dollarhide and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1974) 46-77, and Louise Westling, "Demeter and Kore in Mississippi," Eudora Welty, Women Writers Series, ed. Eva Figes and Adele King (London: Macmillan, 1989) 85-126.

6. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," New French Feminisms, 250.

7. Nancy Regan, "A Home of One's Own: Women's Bodies in Recent Fiction," Journal of Popular Culture 11 (1978) 772.

8. Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space (New York: The Orion Press, 1964) xxxii.

9. Louise Westling, Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985) 10,11. See Annette Kolodny, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975) for readings of the land-as-woman metaphor.

10. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne," Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Knopf, 1985) 257. For a short history of 1920s American Women, see Sara M. Evans, "Flappers, Freudians and All That Jazz," Born for Liberty (New York: The Free Press, 1989) 175-196.

11. Carl Carmer, Stars Fell on Alabama (New York: Hill and Wang, 1934) 14.
12. Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970) 221.
13. Anne Goodwyn Jones, Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1981) 10.
14. Scott 17.
15. Qtd. in Scott, 17. William Harper, "Memoir on Slavery," The Ideology of Slavery: Pro-Slavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860 ed. Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1981) 119.
16. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching (New York: Columbia U P, 1979) 152.
17. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988) 208. Also see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective ed. Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's P, 1983) 372-392.
18. Wilbur J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Knopf, 1946) 116.
19. Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World

in the Old South (New York: Pantheon, 1982) 89.

20. Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1968) 148.

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22. C. Vann Woodward, ed. Mary Chesnut's Civil War (New Haven: Yale U P, 1981) 168.

23. Woodward 169.

24. Eudora Welty, The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty (New York: Harcourt, 1980) 142.

25. Welty 12.

26. Eudora Welty, Delta Wedding (New York: Harcourt, 1979)

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27. Eudora Welty, The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews (New York: Random House, 1977) 122.

28. Bachelard 48.

29. Bachelard 111.

30. Bachelard 81.

31. Cixous, "Medusa" 250.

32. Bachelard 111.

33. Clinton 110.

34. Dorothy C. Griffin, "The House as Container: Architecture and Myth in Delta Wedding," Welty: A Life in Literature ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1987) 106.

35. Cixous, "Medusa" 247.
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37. Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. Annette Kuhn,
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