In considering one of Eudora Welty’s most ambiguous short stories, this essay foregrounds the productive relationship between the artist’s writing and her photographic practice, and pinpoints her innovative perspective on issues of identity in the context of the South’s dominant 1930s ideology of race and gender. Furthermore, it examines strategies of storytelling that unveil the subtle but pervasive naturalization of oppression in the politics of daily life.

In the United States, the economic crisis of the 30s, triggered by the stock market crash of 1929, after a decade of overproduction, and worsened by the effects of the Dust Bowl, led to a national identity crisis. On the political level, the reforms of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration went hand in hand with a rise in racism (expressed in the South by the Ku Klux Klan) and increased left-wing militancy. Simultaneously, both literature and the visual arts questioned the parameters of American identity and the role of the individual in the national mythic narratives, providing the troubling vision of a society caught up in its own contradictions (Ramalho, 1999: 201-203).

The South became the privileged site of this conflict, not only because of its overwhelming poverty, but also because it represented alterity of the North since the Civil War (Donaldson and Goodwyn, 1997: 3-4). The region was then experiencing an unprecedented creative outburst in the literary and critical fields – Faulkner published the core of his work during the 30s; Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate edited important university magazines such as *The Southern Review*¹ and established the basis of the New Criticism which was to dominate the North American academy for decades to come. While the New

¹ Beck (2001) argues that American literary modernism started in 1922 with the magazine *Fugitive*, published by the University of Vanderbilt, and investigates the role played by small Southern magazines in the shaping of national writing throughout the following decades.
Critics emphasized that aesthetics should not be tinged with empirical intentions, some members of the movement advocated recovering the ideology of the Old South – the Agrarian ideal of a perfect, self-enclosed society (which paradoxically depended upon the growing capitalist market) centered on the plantation system, and sustained by a strong *pater familias*, able to maintain in place the racial, social, and gender hierarchies (Jones, 1982: 3-50; Donaldson, 1997).²

At this time the photographers of the Farm Security Administration – Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shan and Arthur Rothstein, among others – traveled widely through the South and, concentrating on rural poverty, pictured “the common men” betrayed by the American Dream (Jeffrey, 1996: 164-165; Price, 1998).³ Between 1935 and 1936, Eudora Welty worked as a Junior Publicity Agent for the Works and Progress Administration (WPA). This experience allowed the artist to acquire a broader social perspective, to come into contact with sectors of the population from which her upper-middle-class background had sheltered her. At the same time, it provided a rich context for her photographic work, focused mainly on the black community, then either ignored or stereotyped by the media. These journeys also gave her the opportunity to engage in storytelling, a communal activity with specific rhetorical strategies that her texts foreground.⁴

According to Welty, “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden,” included in her first collection, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941), grew from such an oral exchange:

“Keela” (...) came about in a special way. In my job I would go to different county fairs and put up booths for the WPA. Once some of the people in the midway – I used to go out and drink coffee with them and so on – were talking about the sideshow act of something like “Keela, the Outcast Indian

---

² Jones offers an insightful contextualization of the woman writer in the South from the late 19th century to the first decades of the 20th century.
³ For a comparative study of Welty’s photographs and some of the 30s documentary approaches, see Almeida (2008), “‘Every feeling waits upon its gesture’: Eudora Welty’s ‘Snapshots’ and the Art of Fiction,” in Blurring of Boundaries: Intercultural Dialogues, ???
⁴ My still unpublished PhD dissertation, entitled The Contours of Light and Shadow: Storytelling and Photography in Eudora Welty’s Short Stories, University of Lisbon March 2007, analyzes how storytelling works as a productive metaphor of authorship in Welty’s fiction, conferring centrality on the female community and other social groups usually excluded from the discursive arena.
Maiden.” (...) it involved a little black person who had been carried off. Well, of course, my story is not about that; it’s about the moral response to it made by three different people. It troubled me so and I tried to write my story in response to that situation. (Prenshaw, 1984: 178-179)

Though a realist writer, rooting the fictional world in her empirical experience, Welty maintained that her creative process distanced the actual events from the situations narrated in her literary texts. Is it a mere coincidence that the author broke this basic rule of composition in two stories dealing with race issues (Pingatore, 1996: 52)? Or could it be argued that these exceptions – the second one being “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”, written in 1963, on the same night the civil rights leader Medgar Evers was assassinated, and later changed because the circumstances detailed were too close to the real events under investigation – reveal Welty’s visceral concern with racial inequalities in the South?5

In the above quoted interview, the writer explains that her text focuses on three different receptions of the same story, which provide divergent points of view illustrative of the complexity of Southern discursive articulations around race and gender topics. This respectful attention to “the dignity and purity of singularity”6 over generalization, made it impossible for the author to “crusade,” to privilege one discursive framework for didactic purposes, because she perceives identity as a dynamic process which involves a dialogue with alterity.7 Indeed, Welty’s

---

5 The political implications of this story were underlined by Welty herself, when she chose to read “Keela” after a public lecture at Millsaps College in December 1964 (just three months before that institution opened its doors to black students), Marrs, 2005: 313-314. See also Marrs, 2002: 177.

6 In her essay “Reality in Chekhov’s Stories,” Welty says that “It was not in Chekhov to deny any character in his stories the dignity and purity of singularity. He would have found it not only alien to his art but morally unjust to slur over a man—even a horse thief— as only an example of his class or sex or calling in life,” 1989, 64.

7 In her controversial essay “Must the Novelist Crusade?” (published in 1965), Welty describes the subject’s identity in organic terms, as integrated into an evolving social system: “No matter how fast society around us changes, what remains is that there is a relationship in progress between ourselves and other people (…). There are relationships of the blood, of the passions and the affections, of thought and spirit and deed. There is the relationship between the races. How can one kind of relationship be set apart from the others? Like the great root system of an old and long-established growing plant, they are all tangled up together,” 1998, 810.
texts deconstruct the Southern hegemonic ideologies, favoring indeterminacy of meaning over a totalitarian narrative.\textsuperscript{8}

Besides having emerged from a “troublesome” real story, “Keela” seems inspired by the sideshow universe depicted in a series of photographs taken by Welty at the Jackson State Fair in 1939, the same year she wrote this short story.\textsuperscript{9}

Evincing a keen interest in popular art forms, common to some other modernist photographers (namely Walker Evans), Welty captures frontally several posters advertising the Fair’s attractions. Not surprisingly, many of these naïve paintings betray the Southern patriarchal society’s misogyny, depicting headless pin-ups, in a mock version of the Medusa (Fig. 1), or monstrous figures (half animal, half human), such as the “mule face woman” (Fig. 2). This popular iconography accentuates the borderline status of women, in between the supranatural and the animal dimensions. It is significant that the artist, who emphasizes questions of gender identity repeatedly throughout her writing, chose visual representations of female grotesques, with strong sexual overtones.\textsuperscript{10} These carefully decontextualized posters (cut off from their immediate surroundings) suggest that identity is a performance, presenting the body as a text overloaded with cultural inscriptions.

Moreover, the State Fair photographs deal with the relationship between the artist and her audience, separated by a symbolic frontier which is underlined in “Hypnotized” (Fig. 3) where the props and the scenery (composed of a series of quadrangular paintings of amazing creatures) stress the “mystifying” quality of the show (quoting the neon sign on the upper left corner of the photograph). “Hypnotist” (Fig. 4) catches the emphatic gesture of a man dressed as a judge (who stands behind the table in the lower right corner of “Hypnotized”) talking to

\textsuperscript{8}Freeden states that ideologies tend to stabilize discursive frames: “An ideology attempts to end the inevitable contention over concepts by decontesting them, by removing their meanings from contest. (…) By trying to convince us that they are right and that they speak the truth, ideologies become devices for coping with the indeterminacy of meaning. This is their semantic role,” 2003, 54.

\textsuperscript{9}“Keela” was first published in New Directions in Prose and Poetry, in 1940, having previously been rejected by the Story and The Southern Review.

\textsuperscript{10}As Harriet Pollack and Suzanne Marrs observe, in her photographs Welty uses irony as a political weapon, “to bring into focus perspectives that should not go unseen, to expose myths and misconceptions, smugness and self-deception,” 2001: 224.
the audience, against neon signs that read (in fragments) “Mysterious Girl Cleopatra.”

In the album *Photographs* (1989), these two pictures are followed by a third one (Fig. 5) which seems to comment on the implied tall tale being told by the performer holding the microphone on stage. The composition of the album suggests a narrative link between the portrait of these three boys and the preceding photograph (“Hypnotist,” Fig. 4) at which they appear to be looking with inquisitive and skeptical faces. The boy in the center of the image, in particular, seems to be able to see beyond the surface of the confidence game played by the sideshow act, and probe deeper into the mysteries of reality: he represents, I argue, the ideal reader, capable of engaging in a creative critical analysis.

Welty’s short story “Keela,” embodies similar themes and centers the semantic field of vision by structuring its narrative as a stage play. Its rhetorical strategies, namely ambiguity and repetition, self-reflexively indicate the interactive quality of the exegetic process and its political implications.

The opening paragraphs privilege the perspective of the black character, Little Lee Roy, who first hears then sees two “white men talking.”11 Sitting on the front porch of his house, while his family is out working, he plays the role of the spectator, while his swept front yard – an African custom inscribing in the text a performatic valence of the Southern black culture – evokes an amphitheater, where the other characters will act out the Southern white man’s identity crisis.12 The reader is cast in the spectator position as well, since the short story is structured through direct speech, with few narratorial interventions. Nonetheless, as the narrative develops, the contiguity between stage and audience becomes more and more evident, vexing the paradigmatic dichotomy (in the Southern master narratives) between the public and the private spheres of action.

---

12 This spectacle challenges the traditional religious Southern context, for “Welty substitutes the evangelical site of personal confession of sins for a public or political space of redress of civil grievance” Prenshaw, 2001: 29.
Steve, “the young man who was doing all of the talking, (...) so excited he did not seem to realize that they had arrived anywhere” (48), represents the solipsistic discourse of guilt characteristic of so many white, male protagonists in the Southern literary universe (notably in some of Faulkner’s novels, such as The Sound and the Fury and Go Down, Moses, from 1929 and 1942). Welty’s character seems to personalize his culpability, in a pathetic expression of self-pity which reverses the roles of perpetrator and sacrificial victim: “I guess I was supposed to feel bad like this, and you wasn’t. (...) This other had to happen to me—not you all. Feelin’ responsible. You’ll be O.K., mister, but I won’t. I feel awful about it. That poor old thing” (52). Driven by the obsessive need to tell his story, reminiscent of Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner (Warren, 1989 [1944]), Steve’s soliloquy deploys in fragments an allegory of horror that posits in hyperbolic terms the South’s complex of race and gender relations.

Max, the owner of a bar during the Prohibition years, oscillates between comic detachment (“I don’t hear anything. I got a jukebox, see, so I don’t have to listen,” 50) and curiosity, trying hard at times to make sense of Steve’s chaotic recollections. Fulfiling a metaliterary function, he starts by questioning the troubled young man about the identity of the black person facing them, who seems to constitute the only possible reference for meaning, and then he tries to confer cohesion on Steve’s narrative – by rephrasing it, for instance, or picking up its main ideas to contribute to its informational progression.

Far from being a model reader, though, Max seems incapable of relating to Steve’s confession in compassionate terms:

“Look, (...) I know I ain’t nobody but Max. I got Max’s Place. (...) I don’t claim to been anywhere. People come to my place. Now. You’re the hitchhiker. You’re tellin’ me, see. You claim a lot of information. If I don’t get it I don’t get it and I ain’t complainin’ about it, see. But I think you’re nuts,

---

13 Pitavy-Souques (1999: 12) alleges that Welty liberates the Southern literature from the guilt-complex that had marked it for a century.

14 For instance: “Just tell me, Bud (...). Is this nigger the one? Is that him sittin’ there?”; “Tell me again (...) Somehow I can’t get it straight in my mind. Is this the boy? Is this little nigger boy the same as this Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden?” (48 and 49, respectively).
and did from the first. I only come up here with you because I figured you's crazy." (51)

The text presents a variation on the prototypical encounter between a traveler and an innkeeper, but Max, the figure who represents institutional stability, holds on to his social position and refuses the exegetic task, unwilling to take the imaginative “leap in the dark”\textsuperscript{15} that for Welty initiates the aesthetical experience. This lack of empathy and concern prompts a scornful disdain towards the hitchhiker, whose voice is categorized as insane and thus excluded from the realm of socially sanctioned linguistic utterances.

The text’s negativity (in the sense of W. Iser’s theories of reception) highlights the paradoxes of Southern narratives of race and gender, through the humorous and grotesque image of a crippled black man kidnapped by “the force of circumstance,” according to the storyteller’s version:

The way it \textit{started} was (…) the show was just travelin’ along in ole trucks, and just seen this little deformed nigger man, sitting on a fence, and just took it. It couldn’t help it.

(…) they just kind of happened into it. Like a cyclone happens: it was nothin’ it could do. It was just took up. (53-54)

Steve’s discourse reifies the black man (referring to him at all times with the pronoun “it”)\textsuperscript{16} and deprives him of volition, victim of an overpowering system whose inevitability is stressed via the comparison with a destructive atmospheric phenomenon.

Kidnapped by the circus, Little Lee Roy is then forced to act as a transvestite, a detail that associates the South’s race and gender issues, whereby the ideal of racial purity rested upon the Southern Belle, constantly menaced by the black

\textsuperscript{15} The expression is used by Welty in the opening and closing paragraphs of the essay “Words into Fiction,” 1987 [1965], 134 and 145.

\textsuperscript{16} Curiously, when mentioning Keela, Steve uses the pronoun “she” (50), as if the fictional persona Little Lee Roy was forced to impersonate was “more human” than the black figure facing him. The ex-barker will use the pronoun “him” at the end of the story, when talking about his intentions towards Lee Roy, “I was goin’ to give him some money or somethin’” (55).
man’s bestial desire.\textsuperscript{17} Dehumanized in a live act reenacting the frenzy of primitive rituals, he plays the role of a terrible savage who eats live chicken on stage, “awful fast, an’ growl the whole time, kind of moan” (50). Representing three oppressed minority groups – defined in racial and gender terms – this character is maintained in utter isolation and deprived of language,\textsuperscript{18} cast out of the symbolic realm:

“the reason nobody ever come clos to it (…) was they give it a iron bar \textit{this long}. And tole it if anybody come near, to shake the bar good at’ em, \textit{like this}. But it couldn’t say nothing. Turned out they’d tole it it couldn’t say nothin’ to anybody ever, so it just kind of mumbled and growled, like a animal.” (49, my italics)

As the exophoric references\textsuperscript{19} (in italics) testify, the storyteller acts out his words and takes on the roles of the other characters involved in the main action; such dramatization contributes to highlight the exemplary status of the related event.\textsuperscript{20}

Steve was the barker of this horrific show, a mission which at first seemed unproblematic and even honest (from a commercial perspective), because it simply required him to serve as a mouthpiece:\textsuperscript{21}

“They dressed it in a red dress, and it ate chickens alive (…). I sold tickets and I thought it was worth a dime, honest. They gimme a piece of paper with the thing wrote off I had to say. That was easy. ‘Keela, the Outcast

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{17} Katherine Anne Porter parodies this inextricable link in the short story “Hacienda,” ascribing the following line to one of the male characters: “Ah, yes, I remember,’ he said gallantly, on meeting some southern women, ‘you are the ladies who are always being raped by those awful negroes!,” n/d, 153-154.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Describing the black figure’s growing excitement as Steve tells his story, the narrator had already delineated a racially biased cultural norm, wherein blacks should maintain a “respectful silence” when interacting with whites: “Little Lee Roy was looking from one white man to the other, excited almost beyond respectful silence,” 49. The text also particularizes the hierarchical linguistic formulas used by members of each racial community to address each other: Max calls Little Lee Roy “boy” and the later replies using “suh” or “mista” (50).
\item\textsuperscript{19} In discourse analysis “exophoric reference” (vs. endophoric reference) is a cohesive device that uses deictics pointing to the external world where the text is being enunciated by the speakers.
\item\textsuperscript{20} Steve seems to be always moving across the “stage” (“He walked up and down the bare-swept ground,” 50), being presented as an actor at several points in the story, for instance at the beginning when he repeats an explanatory mechanical gesture (“He talked constantly, making only one gesture–raising his hand stiffly and then moving it a little to one side.” (48), or when he mimics his own barker’s spiel (51).
\item\textsuperscript{21} This “unmarked” discursive position is later problematized by Steve: “They said–I mean, I said it, out front through the megaphone … I said it myself” (50).
\end{itemize}
Indian Maiden!’ I call it out through a pasteboard megaphone. Then ever’ time it was fixin’ to eat a live chicken, I blew the siren out front.” (48)

The iterative nature of Steve’s account, reiterating the same detailed information about the spectacle, confers a visual quality on this reenactment, and enmeshes the reader in the storyteller’s mental distress. Through repetition, the informational progression is thwarted and the resultant ambiguity enhances the text’s self-reflectivity, for it blocks identification, forcing the reader to become aware of his position.

Though the act never ceased to fascinate him – “’I’d go in an’ look at it. I reckon I seen it a thousand times” (50) – when caught by the sheriff, Steve pleads innocent on the pretext of ignorance and fear, as if, having repeated his call long enough, he ended up believing the story – “’I kep’ tellin’ ‘em I didn’t know it wouldn’t hit me (...) an’ kep’ tellin’ ‘em I didn’t know it could tell what you was sayin’ to it” (53). The barker’s voyeurism amounts to an inability to see, to interpret facts in their context of occurrence, as if meaning can only emerge in retrospect, since the Southern exegetic frame is rooted in the past – “I didn’t know. I can’t look at nothin’ an’ be sure what it is. Then afterwards I know. Then I see how it was” (54).

This visual impairment, a by-product of the naturalization of the hegemonic discursive frames, contrasts with the acute vision of the anonymous spectator who sees through the show, freeing Little Lee Roy from public imprisonment. This model reader is distinguished by his suspicion (like the boy in Fig. 5 analyzed above, “he frowned a lot. Kept frownin’. Whenever he’d buy a ticket, why, he’d frown,” 52) and by his empathy for the human being hidden behind the freak (“Do you wanta get out of this place, whoever you are?”, 53, my italics).

Questioning the surface and rereading the text (he went to see Keela several times, even when the show was not on, “whether it was fixin’ to eat a chicken or not,” 52), this spectator disentangles the web of signifiers that mask Little Lee Roy’s body.

---

22 The conceptual disjunction between self and other, leading to the animalization of alterity, is further illustrated by Steve’s amazed remark regarding Little Lee Roy: “And it could talk—as good as me or you,” 53.
The dense semantic field of vision, with its traditional epistemological connotations, denounces the paradoxical invisibility of the race issue in the segregated societies’ daily life, a recurrent motif in the writing of Southern women (Yaeger, 2000). The topic of blindness further introduces the problematics of memory, for none of the characters involved in the rescue seem to remember the hero’s physical traits, as if that figure become reduced to his daring action, which freed both Little Lee Roy and Steve. This amnesia contrasts with Steve’s obsessive reiteration of his story, as the author ironically remarks when Max, bored with the storyteller’s detailed description of the rescue, observes “You got a good memory” (53). Civic responsibility comes out of collective memory, but Steve seems unable to move beyond his traumatic experience into a broader political perspective.

Steve’s inability to connect on a human level with the victim of his blindness, whose presence he fails to acknowledge during all his act of expiation, repeatedly prompts Max to urge him to see. But Max’s detached stance hints at his own failure to read, as mentioned above, despite his boasts of his ability to decipher signs of identity:

“You wouldn’t of knowed it either!” cried Steve in sudden boyish, defensive anger. (...) “You’d of let it go on an’ on when they made it do those things—just like I did.”

“Bet I could tell a man from a woman and an Indian from a nigger, though,” said Max. (55)

Playing Everyman, Steve disclaims responsibility for the perpetuation of the status quo, and deflects / restricts agency to others (“they made it do those things”). Max’s stubborn lack of empathy feeds the rising dramatic tension that

23 C.f.: “I’ll never forget that man as long as I live. To me he’s a sort of—well—” / “Hero,” said Max. / “I wish I could remember what he looked like.” (51); when asked if he still remembers his savior Little Lee Roy answers negatively, then he turns the tables on his white interlocutors, and, referring to Steve, says “Now I remembas this man,” (54).

24 The saviour’s agency has epistemological connotations since it illuminated Steve: “But if it hadn’t been for that man, I wouldn’t of knowed it till yet. If it wasn’t for him bein’ so bold. If he hadn’t knowed what he was doin’,” 54.

25 Max invokes Little Lee Roy’s presence as the over-simple evidence that nothing is wrong: “Look, you got him right here,” said Max quickly. “Use your eyes. He’s O.K., ain’t he? Looks O.K. to me. It’s just you. You’re nuts, is all,” 52.
climaxes when Steve hits him, as if the storyteller must force the audience into revelation – “I had to hit you. First you didn’t believe me, and then it didn’t bother you” (*idem*).

The punch seems to awaken Max who, still on the ground, takes time to look at his surroundings and weigh up the situation. Mimicking the hero’s gesture when he rescued Little Lee Roy (“He just laid his hand out open there,” 52), Steve tries to attune for his violence, but encounters Max’s pragmatism:

“I hope it don’t stay black for long,” said Steve.

“I got to be going,” said Max. But he waited. “What you want to transact with Keela? You come a long way to see him.” He stared at Steve with open eyes now, and interested.

“Well, I was going to give him some money or somethin’, I guess, if I ever found him, only now I ain’t got any,” said Steve defiantly. (55)

In the short story’s context, the expression of Steve’s worries about Max’s black eye should be read as authorial irony, underlining the permeability of race boundaries and the fact that identity is a provisional construction after all. The failure of the hitchhiker’s pilgrimage is again emphasized in this passage, which seems to question the validity of monetary compensation for the unjust treatment of human beings. In fact, Max gives Little Lee Roy some coins and sends him off stage (“Go on back in the house. Go on,” *idem*), while both he and Steve exit to solve another practical question, getting something to eat.

The black character’s portrayal contributes to the short story’s high level of indeterminacy, because the accumulation of grotesque details – it is worth noticing that the text does not erase suffering, detailing its material dimension (dirt, blood, whip scars on the body) – is paralleled by Little Lee Roy’s increasing amusement (“Hee! Hee!” It was a soft, almost incredulous laugh that began to escape from Little Lee Roy’s lips, a little *mew* of delight,” 49, my italics). Besides,

---

26 C.f.: “He raised up on one elbow and lay there looking all around, at the cabin, at Little Lee Roy sitting cross-legged on the porch, and at Steve with his hand out” (55).

27 This could also be read as a veiled criticism to the national policies regarding the freed slaves and the expropriated Native Americans.
this figure is placed in between boundaries: the title qualifies Keela as an “outcast,” one ostracized by her own community; the masquerade changes both Little Lee Roy’s race and gender; in several instances this character is characterized by references to animals.\(^{28}\) These ambiguous notes may suggest Little Lee Roy’s alienation – it seems he has integrated the dynamics of racial oppression so fully that he exhibits a childish joy in being turned into spectacle.\(^{29}\)

On the other hand, his stamina, rather than a sign of idiocy, makes him a prototypical survivor,\(^{30}\) like several other black individuals depicted by Welty’s texts and photographs. In fact, laughter hints at his ability to overcome past traumas, in opposition to Steve’s psychic stasis, which forces his physical mobility (“Been feelin’ bad ever since. Can’t hold on to a job or stay in one place for nothin’ in the world,” 53).\(^{31}\)

One might thus see Steve as the traditional character of the trickster being tricked (Appel, 1965: 146), a reading visually highlighted through the image of a pyramid, recalling African or native American totemic art and subverting the racial hierarchy: “The little man at the head of the steps where the chickens sat, one on each step, and the two men facing each other below made a pyramid” (50).\(^{32}\)

This image crystallizes the ironic reversal of the black character’s status, from being the attraction in a freak show to becoming the spectator of the white men’s strife (in harmony now with the domestic animals he was once forced to eat alive). The sudden outburst of violence amongst the whites induces total immobility in him, which is understandable in the social context of the 1930s, where lynch mobs took justice in their hands throughout the Southern states: “Little Lee Roy suddenly sat as still and dark as a statue, looking on” (55). This excerpt reinforces the figure’s inaccessibility, for “darkness” both describes his

\(^{28}\) In the above quoted excerpt the character is associated with a cat; his exhibitionism is described in comparison to a monkey (“Little Lee Roy held up a crutch and turned it about, and then snatched it back like a monkey,” 54); he seems to be in complete harmony with / close to the animal world (“a sparrow alighted on his child’s shoe,” 54).

\(^{29}\) May (1972) considers “Keela” a “morality play” (559) arguing that Little Lee Roy “is the center of the reader’s response to the story” (561), fulfilling the cathartic role of scapegoat.

\(^{30}\) Appel (1965) suggests that Little Lee Roy represents the spirit of rebirth, 148.

\(^{31}\) Note that this character’s last words are “But when it cools off I got to catch a ride some place,” 56.

\(^{32}\) Welty introduced this image when she revised “Keela” to include it in her first anthology, Pingatore, 1996, 51.
physical traits and points out his enigmatic quality, while the comparison to a “looking” statue underlines his active resistance to appropriation as alterity.

The last paragraph (which, on the page, a blank space separates from the rest of the narrative) describes Little Lee Roy’s frustrated attempt to share the afternoon events with his family:

“Today while you all was gone, and not a soul in the house,” said Little Lee Roy at the supper table that night, “two white mens come heah to de house. Wouldn’t come in. But talks to me about the ole times when I used to be wid the circus—“

“Hush up, Pappy,” said the children. (56)

The text leaves the reader to make sense of this enigmatic ending, which again portrays a storyteller facing a reluctant audience. While some critics consider that this ending consolidates (malgré tout) Little Lee Roy’s social integration, others refer to the family’s callousness. 33 Welty herself has commented on the implications of the passage, maintaining that it exposes the victim’s feelings about his past and the refractory, “unknowable” quality of horror. 34

In 1989 (fifty years after having written “Keela”), in the long interview that served as an introduction to the album Photographs, Welty refers to the story in the following terms:

It’s a psychological story I wrote in “Keela.” I was interested in what sort of points of view people could have toward such an atrocious thing, including that of the victim himself. He, I guessed, like people in many a kind of experience, might have rather enjoyed it years later in his looking back on the days of excitement. You know, things, awful as well as not, get to be kind of interesting in a different way after you’ve lived through them and

---

33 Howard maintains that “Little Lee Roy, although feebleminded, is the father of a family and enjoys normal human relationships,” 1973: 35. Mortimer, however, claims that Little Lee Roy’s children “are not prepared to allow him the sense of significance his narration might restore,” 1994: 65.

34 Asked if the ending signals a lack of communication, Welty answers: “Everybody is thinking about how he feels, Steve and Max and Little Lee Roy, to whom it happened. I just wanted to show how he felt by starting to tell the children. I think it was the children who are the ones that really knew the reality of it, that it was almost too terrible. They knew what it really was, what had happened to him, and they just don’t want to hear any more of it—it’s just too terrible. It was kind of a sign off for the story, too. The whole thing was just too awful to contemplate,” Prenshaw, 1996, 23.
they are embedded in your past. Lee Roy had eventually forgotten all the humiliation and the horror. (Prenshaw, 1996, 198)

Underlining once again that the story is structured through the interplay between several viewpoints, the author recognizes the fictionalizing nature of memory and values the individual’s capacity of survival, the ability to transmute experiences imaginatively and keep “the joy of being alive” (Welty, 2002 [1971], 10). This is evident in the artist’s photographs of the poor Mississippian black community in the 1930s and in A Curtain of Green, where the last two stories – “Powerhouse” and “A Worn Path” – feature black protagonists representing the writer and reader in their quest for meaning.

In conclusion, the short story’s ambiguity implicates the reader in the core of Welty’s avowedly ethical perspective. The text’s self-reflexiveness foregrounds the topic of legitimacy, by problematizing the ways narrative tries to impose order upon a “real story” – that is, first on the actual event related to Welty, then on the experience of two of the characters “onstage.” Not only does the text frustrate the reader’s demands for closure, through a series of misunderstandings and hesitations, as we have seen, but it also highlights the official ideology’s failures, since the horror of the related incident seems to evade all possibilities of meaning. The fact that the body of the black character (though it remains somewhat opaque till the end) emerges as the site of negotiation of meaning, points to the textual nature of physicality, as a classificatory system and a metaphor for a larger social body. In a strategy that anticipates later theoretical approaches, identity is presented as performance, implying the responsibility of the audience – both the Southern society with its “peculiar institution,” and the reader, faced with the reification of alterity and ultimately with the authority underlying all narratives.

35 In her analysis of “Keela,” Pingatore (1996, 66) referred to this same passage of Welty’s preface to her first photographic album One Time, One Place.
36 For an analysis of the complex politics of racial identity in some of Welty’s first short stories, see Harrison, 2005.
37 In several of Welty’s texts, the grotesque is a strategy to question the conventional mapping of center and periphery, leading the reader to confront herself as Other, see Weston, 1994.
Works Cited


-------- "'Every feeling waits upon its gesture': Eudora Welty’s ‘Snapshots’ and the Art of Fiction," in *Blurring of Boundaries: Intercultural Dialogues*, ???


Images
1. Sideshow, State Fair / Jackson / 1939 (picture number 133)

2. Sideshow, State Fair / Jackson / 1939 (picture number 136)
3. Hypnotized, State Fair /Jackson /1939 (picture number 137)
4. Hypnotist, State Fair /Jackson /1939 (picture number 138)
5. Sideshow, State Fair / Jackson / 1939 (Picture number 139)