

(DE)CODING THE CHURCH: CHRISTIAN PERFORMANCE AND WHITE SOUTHERN
GIRLHOOD IN WELTY'S *ONE WRITER'S BEGINNINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Eudora Welty's memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* conveys the author's childhood enchantment with reading and education. Critical engagement with the text often centers its impact on readings of her fiction or Welty's relationship to other memoirists. I argue, however, that *One Writer's Beginnings* also reveals a departure from southern belle-styled femininity through Welty's interactions with formal schooling and the Church. Her family's comparatively secular position in such a conservative, Christian population distinguishes Welty's positionality from many of her immediate peers, making her a unique example of Christianity's secular reach throughout the South. Her memoir is of particular interest because it presents historical verisimilitude as negotiated through self-definition, which adds another dimension to existing studies of Welty's life. Examining the ways Welty narrates the extremes of women's publicly available identities and the class performance inherent in church membership, I trace the young author's abandonment of the southern belle archetype through her critique of her childhood Jackson, Mississippi and its religious practices.

DEDICATION

For my family, who support me in all things. For Matthew, who always encourages me to pursue my interests and reminds me that my worth extends beyond my academic work. For Hannah and Aubree, whose invaluable friendship keeps me afloat. Neither this project nor this degree would have been possible without such a fierce and loving support system.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT..... ii

DEDICATION..... iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iv

(DE)CODING THE CHURCH: CHRISTIAN PERFORMANCE AND WHITE SOUTHERN GIRLHOOD IN WELTY'S *ONE WRITER'S BEGINNINGS*.....1

REFERENCES.....35

(DE)CODING THE CHURCH: CHRISTIAN PERFORMANCE AND WHITE SOUTHERN GIRLHOOD IN WELTY'S *ONE WRITER'S BEGINNINGS*

Eudora Welty's memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* reveals an evolution of self-definition haunted by Christian praxis. Welty's autobiographical writing reveals that her family found community primarily through Sunday School rather than formal teaching and doctrinal practices, though, to be sure, they still participated in limited demonstrations of Christendom. Welty's discussion of her childhood suggests that Christianity's secular reach prescribed and maintained conservative, normative gender roles throughout her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi in the early twentieth century. Her parents' overprotection likewise demonstrates a perhaps reactionary and inverse mode of repression compared to that of the South more broadly. A thorough examination of Welty's autobiographical writing deconstructs the religious didacticism of southern girlhood to uncover a rejection of belle idealism amid patriarchy. Divided by the ways and impulses of her extended family, all hailing from different areas of the United States, "Welty asserts her legitimate claim as daughter of complementary regional influences, the practical, progressive, logical North and the fanciful, imaginative South" in *One Writer's Beginnings* (Prenshaw, *Composing Selves* 261-62). Welty, then, is a peculiar figure within the matrix of southern patriarchy because of her subtle regional difference and her family's comparative secularity. Her rejection of outmoded limitations on young women's independence represents the fissures in the region's Christian hegemony. *One Writer's Beginnings* presents a case study for confrontations between Christianity and secular female independence, both privately and publicly. In her memoir Welty abandons the belle archetype for herself while stopping short of asserting a broader feminist stance in keeping with its 1980s' publication.

The archetypal southern belle, with her attendant standards of dress and behavior, sets unrealistic and unsustainable expectations on the lives of actual southern women. Her idealization by a broader regional society helps construct a fabricated nostalgia for antebellum propriety and, with the twentieth-century help of characters like Scarlett O'Hara, they establish a standard for southern girlhood. Young women, then, must conform to the region's code of genteel femininity or risk social exclusion from the arbiters of its classification. Southern history scholar Margaret Ripley Wolfe diagnoses the peculiar liminality of these figures, writing,

The ephemeral southern lady occupies an elusive but equally real spiritual dimension in the southern mind. Suspended above the sin and shame of both the Old South and the New South, she endures, safe in her goodness, steeled by her suffering, and sedated by the ever-present fragrance of the magnolia blossoms. Meanwhile the historical southern woman has possessed a triple handicap beginning with the stigma associated with being southern—that is, the full weight of southern history, mythology, and legends (Wolfe 8).

As Wolfe argues, codified expectations reinforce patriarchal limits on southern girlhood. Young women are encouraged to settle for domestic work on behalf of their present and future families and are steered away from supposedly 'male' interests in public life. Dually punished by Christian (mis)teaching, women must avoid public life for fear of danger or rebuke. Many of these teachings weaponize Christianity to reinforce outmoded gender dynamics that place men at the center of society and push women into supporting roles.

The often demure and gender-based socialization of young women throughout the American South complicates the region's religious backing as Christianity becomes an expedient means for sustaining white patriarchy. The secular application of evangelical theology constricts southern girlhood; in such communities, Biblical literalism reaches beyond the pew to redirect young women's burgeoning independence and self-definition. As Old Testament portraits of a vengeful God beget conservative upbringings, young women of the South are consistently told

through word and deed to make themselves small¹. Though facets of this patriarchal system may be found globally, region-specific histories of racism and disempowerment reconfigure a broader ‘American’ experience into the specific dynamics of oppression as diagnosed by Wolfe above. Thus, the South’s grappling with—and systemic whitewashing of—enslavement and racial justice differentiates the region’s specific socio-historical context from that of the nation at large. Racial dynamics, in turn, underscore the distinctive positionality of *southern* girlhood.

The material effects of belle-femininity’s perpetuation by conservative Christians are felt most in the private sphere of the home; public, performative Christian teaching extends religious leaders’ influence beyond the pulpit to encode private life. I draw on Butlerian notions of performance² here to characterize the repetition of sexist undercurrents of the South’s fulfillment of Christ’s mission in the world, as it were. Congregations throughout the region then “become sites where meaning is created from the collusion of the private and the public” to capitalize on religious leaders’ status as “one of the predominant creators of meaning” through whom “many heteronormative gender ideals are passed down” to prolong male hegemony (Amende 32). Southern Christianity therefore provides the dual function of sustaining patriarchy and class performance. In this vein, church members can secure their position in the social hierarchy by ascribing southern belle mythos to upper-middle class niceties; southern religious practice thus develops a performativity that connects religiosity more to class maintenance than to salvation. Religious strands of southern chauvinism are made so pernicious by the plausible deniability of

¹ See Amende’s *Desire and the Divine* for an extended study of evangelical theology’s constriction of southern girlhood, in which “through cultural conditioning, [southern] girls learn that they must strive for holiness, that they must sacrifice to be truly good, and that they must deny all sexual passion. On the other hand, they are also taught that religious passion is not only condoned, it can get them noticed and even revered” (63).

² Judith Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter* that gender “performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted. [...] It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject”. Repetition’s integral role in gender performance informs my evaluation of Christian praxis’ impact on southern girlhood.

their ubiquity, which fosters abuse in the name of Christ. Subtextual limitations on women's independence are folded into mainstream discourse under the cover of 'Christ's mission' to render any questions of that status quo as sacrilege. Young women must therefore defy a sociological context in which fantasies of a broad, shared reality are regulated by Christian social and political dominance. To that end, women's life writing offers a unique perspective for studying such imaginaries.

The generic implications of memoir adjust the narrative distance of existing studies of southern life by representing historical reality precisely through the construction of lived experience. If "both the myth of the essential self and the myth of the textual self obscure the historical dimension of any self" (Fox-Genovese, "Individualism and Community" 25), memoir invites us to reject the convenient binary of fiction-*or*-nonfiction and instead seek understanding within that stylistic liminality. Memoir, and autobiographical writing more broadly, offers a productive vantage point for investigating southern girlhood by positioning lived experience alongside historical veracity. The self-representation in these works often replicates or abandons the social mores of their author's culture and instead offer an autobiographical cross-section of historical inquiry. "The overlapping and segregating systems of gender and race," Peggy Whitman Prenshaw writes in *Composing Selves: Southern Women and Autobiography*, "bear directly upon the 'I' constructed by southern women in their presentation of self in autobiography" (Prenshaw 10-11). Abandoning the (supposed) accuracy of traditional methods of history or sociology, memoirs offer a strategic, constructed view of the self, and, by extension, southern life, that is sometimes excluded from broader historical study. In presenting a certain view of their lives, memoir writers engage in an act of external legitimation on their own terms. Authors' projections of voice and experience can complement strict historical fact to construct a

broader understanding. Autobiographical writing's very subjectivity, and thus historical ambiguity, reimagines the effects of Christianity and secular patriarchy on girlhood to reveal an adherence, yet ultimate resistance, to 'southern belle' hyper-femininity.

Critical attention to *One Writer's Beginnings* since its publication in 1983 has, largely, amounted to another lens through which to analyze Welty's fiction or as a control against which to judge other authors' 'more interesting' autobiographical work.³ Much essential scholarship compares *One Writer's Beginnings* to Welty's novel *The Optimist's Daughter* and other fictional writing⁴. However, these studies mostly forgo attention to the memoir as a standalone text and instead use it as a means for analyzing each successive work. Though critics' foundational contributions to Welty scholarship should neither be trivialized nor ignored, *One Writer's Beginnings* now warrants scholarly engagement on its own merits. Although its larger themes center her journey toward authorship, anecdotes throughout the text reveal the pervasiveness of southern Christianity and its secular influence. The memoir's portrait of religious didacticism offers a reimagined path for autobiographical Welty scholarship and dovetails with developing trends in girlhood and southern studies.

Lucinda H. MacKethan's 1990 monograph *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story* places Welty's autobiographical writings in conversation with those of Ellen Glasgow and Zora Neale Hurston. Hers is one of the first to engage with *One Writer's Beginnings* on its own and marks Welty and her contemporaries as early proponents of memoir-

³ See also James Olney's 1990 "Autobiographical Traditions Black and White" from Berry's edited collection, which juxtaposes Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* with Richard Wright's *Black Boy* or Will Brantley's discussion of *One Writer's Beginnings* with Ellen Glasgow's *The Woman Within in Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir*.

⁴ See, in particular, Ciuba's "Time as Confluence: Self and Structure in Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*", MacKethan's *Daughters of Time*, Millichap's "Eudora Welty's Personal Epic: Autobiography, Art, and Classical Myth", Pollack and Marrs' *Eudora Welty and Politics*, Prenshaw's "Eudora Welty's Language of the Spirit", Pruitt's "Locating the Sacred and Secular: Organized Religion and the "Holiness of Life" in Eudora Welty's Novels", Turner and Harding's *Critical Essays on Eudora Welty*.

writing as a form of personal exegesis. Departing from the storied American traditions of life writing,⁵ these authors, argues MacKethan, “journey to self-definition, centered in struggles to find and master a new language” within the bounds of southern society (MacKethan 6, 7). Additionally, MacKethan’s study relies so heavily on family systems and the construction of the ‘daughter’-- all ways that underscore the private’s interconnection with public life. She acknowledges that each of these authors “went against cultural and familial expectations in risking the changes that their roles as storytellers demanded” (MacKethan 13). These figures reimagine southern womanhood beyond genteel femininity. MacKethan’s exploration of Welty’s positionality within her family and larger class system informs my discussion of the author’s ultimate rejection of the region’s cyclical infantilization.

Will Brantley further develops MacKethan’s vision of women’s economic status in southern society by characterizing the South as “a region that has valued a woman’s ability to endure silently” in his 1993 monograph, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir* (Brantley 127). He claims that the South prioritizes women’s chasteness so that the idealized belle can remain a metonym for the entire region (Brantley 128-29). The economic necessity of women’s chasteness is further evidence of their societal infantilization. Though Brantley’s framing of memoir-writing as means of self-definition grounds my study, he too falls prey to the existing pattern of scholarship on *One Writer’s Beginnings*; his discussion of Welty primarily establishes a contrast for and better emphasis of Ellen Glasgow’s distinction as a memoirist, rather than offering a robust reading of Welty’s work itself. Since I am primarily interested in Welty and her

⁵ The first portion of MacKethan’s book examines the antebellum life-writers Harriet Jacobs and Catherine Hammond to track the development of women’s self-definition in relation to violent white patriarchy and its prescription of “southern women’s identity and destiny” (7). Its section on Welty, Hurston, and Glasgow, then, is contextualized within the evolution of their predecessors’ south.

interactions with religious patriarchy here, Brantley's work offers only minimal contextualization for the present study.

In an interesting departure from much of Welty scholarship, Danièle Pitavy-Souques questions Welty's confining regionalism in the public imagination; she chooses to instead examine *One Writer's Beginnings* within the pantheon of American literature at large in her 2001 essay "Private and Political Thought in *One Writer's Beginnings*" (207). Though women writers are often unfairly relegated to the regionalist wings of American literary discourse, Pitavy-Souques' erasure of Welty's southernness obscures the particular dynamics of her lived experience. Americanizing—and thus homogenizing—Welty's memoir negates the historical ramifications of gender discrimination throughout the South, as well as the specter of Jim Crow-era racism. Doing so, perhaps unintentionally, aligns Welty with the celebrated class of American mythos. While Pitavy-Souques' masking of identity and blurring of nuance does compellingly assert southerners' place in an oft-western or northeastern-centric American collective, doing so specifically through Welty's life-writing obfuscates the embeddedness of these oppressions in southern literature and life.

Spearheading theological criticism of memoir, prominent Welty scholar Peggy Whitman Prenshaw grounds her argument throughout "Eudora Welty's Language of the Spirit" in *One Writer's Beginnings*' brief rumination on formal, organized religion. However, Prenshaw here falls into the same preoccupation with autobiographical criticism as do other scholars and primarily uses *One Writer's Beginnings* as further means for studying Welty's fiction. Notably, her article does call for future investigation into "Welty's own secular sense of social justice" and its connection to "the prominent tenets of Methodism's Social Gospel" as "an interesting and almost untapped area for future Welty research" (Prenshaw, "Language of the Spirit" 14). As

Prenshaw indicates, Welty made use of the sacred through secular praxis in her fiction and eventually constructs what Prenshaw deems “Weltian revisionary theology” (“Language of the Spirit” 17-18). Building upon Prenshaw’s work, I examine Welty’s portrait of Christian Jackson as the genesis of her extra-religious spirituality.

Nicholas T. Pruitt situates Welty’s childhood entanglement with religion similarly to Prenshaw. He notes that she and her family did not attend church and were not traditionally-practicing believers. He writes in “Locating the Sacred and Secular: Organized Religion and the ‘Holiness of Life’ in Eudora Welty’s Novels” that “while her novels often trivialize organized religion in Southern society, her stories still give deference to personal spirituality and religious practice and stress the sacredness of human experience,” which thrives beyond the confinement of organized religion (Pruitt 47). His methodology for analyzing Welty’s fiction could be fruitfully applied to her autobiographical writing as well. Pruitt’s argument traces the “inver[sion of] the sacred and secular” in her novels and forges a connection to the holy without the entanglement of institutional faith (Pruitt 47). His discussion of Welty’s fictional portraits of religious life complement my examination of her autobiographical construction of childhood faith life.

The present study aims to delineate gendered manifestations of Christian performance in secular life, as demonstrated by Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings*. Building from the aforementioned scholars’ necessary groundwork, I will further investigate the interplay of secular religiosity and self-definition throughout Welty’s girlhood. Though Welty did give numerous interviews and publish several essays throughout her life, her memoir is of particular interest for its window into childhood and her understanding thereof. Unencumbered, or, perhaps, differently encumbered, by the public performance inherent in essays and interviews,

Welty's self-construction within her autobiography gives scholars a more direct view of her interpretation of public life in the Jackson of the early twentieth century. Welty, however, does not reveal her observations directly; *One Writer's Beginnings* has "a somewhat elliptical structure" much "like a musical composition," throughout which "themes appear, disappear, and reappear" to create an intricate portrait of southern girlhood (Brantley 111). Her treatment of religion is similarly opaque throughout, which suggests that its pervasiveness is both natural and, at the time, unremarkable. Upon closer study, Welty's sparse commentary on religious life compels deeper examination of her resistance to Christianity's secular influence throughout the region. Insight into her self-perception and developing voice could deepen our understanding of larger socio-political dynamics throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

To begin to uncover patterns of gendered infantilization in southern girlhood we must first scrutinize Welty's portrait of her home, which itself is feminized by prevailing understandings of domesticity. The inner sanctum of the home, the private realm of the family, constructed in *One Writer's Beginnings* presents a life full of intellectual exploration, curiosity, and freedom. However, traces of systemic limitations on femininity and emergent self-definition diverge in Welty's separation of private and public life; the formative intellectualism of her parents' guidance shapes her later scrutiny of Jackson's mainline Protestantism, all while revealing fissures in their progressivism. Having been influenced by their ethos, she lauds her parents throughout her autobiography and lionizes them as figures unmoved by outside politics. Challenging this characterization, as Carolyn Heilbrun⁶ and others have noted, her memoir's saccharine tone suggests that beneath Welty's gilded representation of her past lies a more

⁶ As paraphrased by Noel Polk within Pollack and Marrs' edited collection *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade*, Heilbrun was "upset with Welty precisely because Welty did not express her anger more overtly" and thus divested her autobiographical project from material social and political action (59).

complicated reality. Its depiction of her parents, therefore, upholds a mirror to her own self-definition in a microcosm of intergenerational trauma born of Christian patriarchy. Indeed, throughout *One Writer's Beginnings*, “the political,” including the gendered implications of surrounding religious culture, “intrudes where a reflection on writing is a reflection on life or vice versa” (Pitavy-Souques 213). Discerning which events, mannerisms, and themes are laid out prominently versus which are left to lurk under the surface offer an evocative view of Welty’s selfhood. As Welty reminisces on her childhood, these lapses in content reveal the covert, perhaps even accidental, childhood performativity of religion. Juxtaposed with the narration about her family, Welty’s life-writing becomes a recuperation of a deceptively halcyon past in the context of an evolving world.

Welty’s binary division of private and public life throughout *One Writer's Beginnings*, a facile division from the outset, seems to be an attempt to ameliorate her parents’ memory by insulating them, and thus her nostalgia, from the sociopolitical realities of their historical moment. Clearly distinguished from the confinement of southern belle-styled femininity, Welty’s portrait of her adolescence suggests that her parents’ strictness centered on issues quite different from those of her peers. Instead of upholding standards of appearance or bowing to inane decorum, Welty’s parents championed intellectual rigor, though perhaps to a fault. Indeed, her mother, Chestina, generally “encouraged her daughter to excel in academics when other Jackson ladies might speak dismissively of girls who were ‘brains’” (Marrs 33). By pressuring their daughter to immerse herself so fully in her studies, Welty’s parents may have been trying to disrupt the reproduction of Christian hegemony. Impeding that social progress in part, however, is the gendered divide between their male and female children’s upbringings. Throughout their youth the Welty children, one daughter and two sons, were frequently given “toys that instruct

boys and girls (*separately*) how to build things” (Welty 4, emphasis added). While this anecdote does underscore the family’s class stability, and thus their parents’ ability to foster leisure activities, it also confirms an intriguing demarcation of their learning potential that implies young boys and girls require different styles of instruction. Although both the male and female Welty children were encouraged to try their hand at engineering, their division subtly upholds standards of genteel femininity, especially since Welty’s narration makes nothing of it. The children’s separation limits their relationship as collaborators, as co-conspirators as they each grow and explore throughout their youth. Notably, however, it is Santa whom Welty credits with these gifts, rather than her parents directly (Welty 4). In doing so, she places her intellectual isolation at the feet of larger social imagination and constructed nostalgia; further insulating the senior Weltys from any parenting malpractice, this vignette highlights the pervasiveness of gendered division even outside the Church. Young Welty is therefore given an outlet for scientific discovery within the restrictions of Christian patriarchy, but is nonetheless confined to her own sphere of intellectual curiosity.

Although Welty composes the image of a much more loving family life than might be expected of the upper-middle class at the turn of the twentieth century, lasting intellectual burden still haunts much of her memoir. While some of the spotlight on education, and the trauma thereof, throughout *One Writer’s Beginnings* aligns with its *künstlerroman*-esque subject matter, it nonetheless contradicts the very image of childhood freedom and independence she otherwise so meticulously projects. Cracks in Welty’s narrative facade mark the beginnings of her own performative Christianity as the South’s mores infiltrate her own psyche, both past and present. The senior Weltys’ parenting styles resist binary designations of ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ since Christian and Chestina’s visions of social progress remain untenable, as demonstrated by Eudora’s

resistance to their constraints. However, it is remarkable how much her mind was valued and cultivated as a child in the 1910s and '20s, when many other young girls likely did not receive similar guidance.

The first third of *One Writer's Beginnings* continues this focus on education and discovery; again and again, her reverence for her parents does not convey their limitations on her mind. Though much of Welty's memoir is spent extolling the virtues of her parents, the following passage is representative of her good will: "I live in gratitude to my parents for initiating me—and as early as I begged for it, without keeping me waiting—into the knowledge of the word, into reading and spelling" (Welty 9). Here, Welty marks her parental bond as one of utility, as she implies that their love was largely didactic as she grew to become a writer. Juxtaposed, then, is the romanticized curiosity of education with the overwhelming pressure to succeed that were both formative to Welty's childhood. Her "initiation" into letters and intellectualism also labels her parents as gatekeepers, perhaps of a mind to further distance themselves from their community's culture of fundamentalist Christianity. Education became a vehicle for Welty's eventual escape from Christian patriarchy. Young Eudora's burgeoning scholarship from such a young age does mark a deviation from restrictive gender roles, but the senior Weltys' commitment to material social change seems tenuous within the larger context of their family dynamics, which maintain facades of respectability and classism.

Despite their dubious progressivism, Welty makes it abundantly clear that her parents aimed to give their children the best opportunities. She writes that her father's gifts and lessons throughout her childhood convey his "fondest beliefs—in progress, in the future" and allowed him to "prepar[e] his children" for adulthood (Welty 5). Her narration implies that his goals for his daughter laid beyond traditional domesticity and motherhood. Despite that breakthrough, it

remains unclear what doctrine it is that framed Christian Webb Welty's vision of "progress." Further reforming his legacy, Welty's use of "fondest" here amplifies the sense of nostalgia upon which the memoir's vision of her parents rests. Rather than opting for a stronger adjective denoting strength or vigor, she instead uses one connected to subjective, intangible emotion. Welty's diction here counters her own desire for independence by grounding her eventual success in her father's constructed, perhaps hyperbolic, affection. This anecdote represents one of many instances in which the writer's adult and adolescent selves converge, and she thus alters her self-definition with the refined hindsight of maturity. Welty's narrative distance at the time of writing obscures the exact dynamics of her childhood in favor of rose-colored nostalgia. Similar recuperation occurs when she later characterizes her parents' overbearance as "overprotection," noting that "*of course* it's easy to see why" they raised her as they did (Welty 18, emphasis added), as if their excess was an unremarkable and immutable fact. The result is a lasting portrait of affectionate parents that contradicts the strictness of southern, upper-middle class culture and reflects larger patterns of parental control. Welty's subjective agenda-setting power, as author and narrator, sows doubt into the veracity of her parents' portrayals; the rehabilitation of her father's memory prefigures Welty's ultimate escape from didactic Christianity and willingness to forgive past wrongs. Himself the son of religious leaders (Wheatley and Welty 130), Christian Welty's distancing of organized religion, at least in his adult life, still belies the deep influence his pious upbringing must have had on his moral code and thus on the raising of his children. These and other glimpses into the Welty household sustain interest in the secular influence of Christian praxis throughout the region.

Welty's portrait of her mother extends the memoir's narrative ambiguity and leaves much of her character open to speculation; it is largely out of these maternal absences that Welty's

echoes of genteel femininity erupt. Many of the vignettes involving her mother underscore the Weltys' class position that further distinguishes them from their peers and also obliquely establish a shared distrust of the Church. Chestina is often described as prioritizing reading, both educationally and pleurably, in her children's day-to-day activities. The family's abundance of both books and leisure time with which to enjoy them betrays a comfortable upper-middle class position. Contrasting Christian Welty's gravity and foreplanning, Chestina Welty's 'femininity' manifests throughout *One Writer's Beginnings* in her love of literature. So strong is her affinity for recreational reading that it comprises one of Welty's first maternal lessons: "I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me" (Welty 5). Books became an investment for the Weltys' "future," since neither of her parents had "come from homes that could afford to buy many books" (Welty 6). Young Welty had more or less unfettered access to all of the books her parents had acquired, which allowed her to read most everything in their expansive library; such exposure set her up to become wildly successful academically and, eventually, authorially. Having overcome the limitations of their own upbringings, Welty's parents' relative comfortability in adulthood obscures their daughter's social constraint. However, the family's collective love of books takes on new meaning in light of their connection to class performance and academic success.

Once Welty began school, her mother put her under enormous pressure and made her believe that "it was unclouded perfection I was up against" (Welty 25) while also having to weather her mother's infantilization. Rather than being made to replicate genteel femininity herself, young Welty was instead required to excel academically. Her parents' expectations were not without peculiarities, as many odd limitations marked the intrusion of genteel femininity on

an otherwise boisterous education. She recalls her mother telling their public librarian that nine-year-old Eudora was allowed to check out any book she liked from any part of the library “with the exception of *Elsie Dinsmore*,” “because Elsie the heroine, being made by her father to practice too long and hard at the piano, fainted and fell off the piano stool” (Welty 29). This is a humorous, though slightly violent, example of patriarchal pressure to excel in supposedly feminine arts, like music. Tellingly, Chestina locates fault not with Elsie’s demanding father, but with the girl herself. Doing so implies that young women must be self-reliant, as they cannot count on others to protect them. Revealing her own overprotectiveness, Chestina continues, saying, “‘You’re too impressionable, dear,’ [...] ‘You’d read that and the very first thing you’d do, you’d fall off the piano stool.’” (Welty 29). Chestina’s vision of young Eudora’s impressionability reveals the mutual misunderstanding between the pair. Chestina infantilizes her daughter while projecting what could be her own latent immaturity; Eudora, by contrast, presents this memory within the larger context of Chestina’s protection and therefore obscures her mother’s overreaction. As Welty notes, her mother “tend[ed] to make the world look dangerous, and so it had been to her,” and she must have been “relieved” that Welty “chose to be a writer of stories” since that career was thought to be “*safe*” (Welty 39, emphasis added). Here again Welty ties her intellectual development, even her career itself, to her mother’s fear and potential trauma. Overprotective as she may be, Chestina is somewhat right here. Welty’s intellectual success is an escape from religious and gendered violence, as it provides an independence that insulates her from the church’s secular reign. Her sheltering from intergenerational trauma is not without its own costs, for, as Welty writes, “all my life I continued to feel that bliss for me would have to imply my mother’s deprivation or sacrifice” (Welty 19). She ties her emotional response to a desire to “protect...back” those who sheltered her, and “never managed to handle the guilt”

of not being able to do so (Welty 20). Within the context of Chestina's possible trauma, Welty's admission reads like survivor's guilt; thus, Christian patriarchy maintains its hold even over women who escape its direct congregational influence. Such is the church's secular legacy.

Welty's opaque religious commentary further manifests in *One Writer's Beginnings* through biblical reading in a divergence between public religious practice and its private remains. In addition to secular reading for entertainment, the Weltys also regularly read the Bible, which potentially informed their ethos as well as Eudora's eventual authorial style. Praising the King James Version's "cadence" (Welty 34) over its instruction for Christian living further divides the Welty's personal religious expression from common formal practice. Here she appears to regard it more as a compelling piece of art and literature than as the answer to life itself. Suggesting a reason for the Bible's un-deification, Welty indicates that the family's sacred reading may have been haunted by a trauma rooted in her mother's religious past. She writes that revisiting its "stern books" like the epistles reminded her mother of her steely great grandfather (Welty 33). Welty later recalls that her mother would say she was "so strongly reminded of Grandpa Carden" while reading Paul's letter to the Romans (Welty 59). The Weltys' relationship between patriarchal figures and social prescription from the Bible exemplifies the larger system of Christian patriarchy in miniature. Since Chestina locates her punitive religious practice within her father's domain—and not her mother's—it follows that her own southern girlhood was limited by its patriarchy.

Welty further demonstrates that much of her Christian faith is inextricably linked to nostalgia through discussion of her extended family. She recalls her mother spending a lot of time in her childhood visiting Welty's maternal grandparents, the Cardens, as well as to her paternal grandparents. Each of these family stories affect the fantastic tone of an adventure or a

fairy tale—Welty makes her family seem larger-than-life, and their importance manifests in her own self-definition. A story about her Grandpa Carden’s “bedtime prayers” evolves into a whimsical anecdote about his “thunder[ing]” voice as he prayed in the barn while her young uncles were “delight[ed]” to “listen to Grandpa pray” (Welty 59). In this story, as in others surrounding her family, Welty ascribes wonder not to the Divine, but to her family’s grand legacy. Her mentions of church and faith life center memories of certain family members unyolk the memories from demonstrations of actual faith (Welty 66-68). Instead, these scenes strengthen the foundation of Christianity as a gathering ethos for their family that was established in Part 1. Welty “learns to see,” as it were, directly from the stories her parents pass down about their larger-than-life families. As a result Welty’s self-definition, though rooted in the Christian faith, more closely bonds with and grows out of family on both her mother’s and father’s sides. “Christened as babies” mainly to appease patriarch Grandpa Welty, the largely unchurched Weltys of Jackson were thus “variously different from most of the families [they] knew” (Welty 31). Faith works more to establish family ties than to make a compelling argument for salvation. With such a strong sense of self through family, the Weltys may not be as reliant on faith to ground their identities. Welty is eventually able to find holiness untangled from biblical truth.

Underscoring all of the family’s nostalgia, however, is the direct harm of the church on the female Weltys. That Welty’s mother continued to read her Bible as an adult without also regularly attending church suggests she may have held some kind of deeply-rooted trauma response to conservative church politics, or perhaps an unwillingness to publicly belong to a faith tradition that may have scorned her as a child. Several years after publishing her memoir, Welty tells an interviewer that her parents’ rejection of public faith could have been “a reaction” since “both had preachers in the family” and grew up “in very religious households” (Wheatley

and Welty 130). These divulgements further establish the southern Christian church's mistreatment and eventual alienation of women, especially. Chestina's escape from that sort of tightly-controlled environment would have likewise informed the way Eudora herself experienced religion. In the introduction to an essay titled "Women, Society, and the Southern Church, 1900-1920," Wayne Flynt asks, "How does private spirituality liberate women at the same time that cultural religion often shackles them?" (Flynt 179). The same might be asked of Chestina Welty based on her portrait in *One Writer's Beginnings*. Focusing her spirituality away from the public eye by not attending church and reading the Bible at home erects a safe haven. In that space, faith can triumph over class performance associated with formal organized religion throughout the region. Prenshaw makes similar claims about "Weltian revisionary theology" (Prenshaw, "Language of the Spirit" 18), as the young author finds spirituality outside the bounds of the Church.

Welty's religious commentary then becomes more direct with an anecdote about its more punitive effects as biblical imagery continues to haunt secular life. Although her parents appear to have rejected traditional southern culture by means of conservative Christian didacticism, its external influences still seep into Welty's narrative, and thus, presumably, her life, through extensive religious metaphors. Despite not being traditional believers, the King James Version of the Bible still informs Chestina's reprimands of her misbehaving children. As Welty recalls, an echo of Matthew 5:22 became a common refrain to break up fighting between herself and her siblings: "He who calleth his brother a fool...is in danger of hell fire" (Welty 35). Though the Weltys potentially had little to no fear of biblical judgement, judging by their religious non-practice, the prevalence of this Christian imagery reflects its larger cultural authority. Moreover, her mother's castigation further reproduces the intergenerational religious trauma that lurks

throughout *One Writer's Beginnings*. As Welty reflects, “the evidence, or the ghost of” the King James Version of the Bible “lingers in all our books” much like it instructs their lives (Welty 34). A biblical tone infiltrates Welty’s—or, supposedly, her mother’s—diction as her reprimand itself is reminiscent of the KJV. Considering Welty’s experience, its passages offer both comfortable nostalgia for southern writing at large and smaller-scale behavioral terror for its children. Welty once again finds a secular application for religious imagery while narrating this scene. Drawing from that language, the writing style of her memoir itself affects a Christian performance as these glimpses of religious limitation infiltrate and work to define her self-conception. Religious commentary’s pervasiveness reveals a much more negative impulse in her otherwise cheery familial nostalgia. Although she is not actively writing about faith in large sections of *One Writer's Beginnings*, religion still informs many of her interactions with family and authority figures. Christianity’s narrative function in her memoir echoes its actual familial role for the Weltys.

Despite their religious disaffection within the home, Welty’s parents play a complex role in the South’s public Christian hegemony. Due to the family’s evangelical background and the contemporary popularity of home missions as “the most accessible avenue for southern Methodist women to participate in public social action” (Prenshaw, “Welty’s Transformations” 30), the sexual politics of the sacred likely informed their secular parenting. Seeming arbiters of social change on some level, as demonstrated both by Welty’s memoir and other scholars’ extensive research on the family,⁷ the Weltys instead reproduce other modes of intergenerational gendered oppression through their children. Though Welty’s mother stayed above the petty

⁷ For further reading on the Welty family’s entanglement with politics and social action, see Marrs’ *Eudora Welty: A Biography* and Harriet Pollack and Suzanne Marrs’ edited collection *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?*

requirements of courtesy and “let none of” the “idling” of social decorum “pertain to her” (Welty 12), her private parenting style still echoed public religious sexism. The elder Welty’s separation of social conservatism and Christian praxis appears to have merely invited new forms of overbearance to replace traditional gendered ones. Suzanne Marris, in her major biography of Welty, characterizes Chestina and Christian Welty as a relatively liberal couple that tested the social hierarchy while keeping it intact for their own benefit; they imparted to their children “a sense that society’s conventions could be both meaningful and irrelevant or even ridiculous,” but their “protectiveness” from that system and all outside threats grew to be occasionally “oppressive” (Marris 33, 34). The intricate power dynamic that Marris reveals complicates the freedom Welty lays claim to while characterizing her parents, of whom she rarely writes a bad word. Marris thus challenges the inspiration for and ramifications of the elder Welty’s parenting styles, which adds new insight to Welty’s self-described “sheltered life” (Welty 104). Through Marris’ lens, Welty’s division of her private life from public dynamics becomes less of a historical reality and more, perhaps, of a constructed narrative distance.

Welty’s ventures outside of the home and its inner life further reveal Christianity’s public didacticism in 1920s Jackson as the church’s undue influence pervades even the semi-secular Welty home. Christ and conservative gender roles still encode her family’s private life, as previously discussed; however, *One Writer’s Beginnings* also demonstrates that religious conservatism maintained an even more active hold on public life. Welty’s observations range from casual scenic depictions of fellow Jacksonians to brief meditations on the efficacy of organized religion at large to underscore the ubiquity of Christian life and ethos throughout the South. Many of young Welty’s experiences in the public sector, namely those aimed specifically at children, echo the teachings of the bible through their often facile didacticism; the hyper-

presence of religion and sacred imagery in school and other secular places reiterates the public clout of Christian political goals and can further contextualize broad historical understanding of this system. Didactic patriarchy manifests in lockstep with moments of secular Christianity, perhaps in a move to implicitly dampen young southern women's aims of independence or political radicalism.

Evolving from an evangelical practice of disciplining parishioners for their supposedly untoward social behavior outside the church (Ownby), twentieth-century southern Methodist ethos oscillated between prudence and the burgeoning Social Gospel to affect a wide-ranging influence in secular politics. Through both faith traditions, Christians sought to “preserv[e] moral strictures not only for individuals but for society as a whole” (Wilson and Silk 16). Though this is not to say that all Christian work at the turn of the century was similarly punitive, my focus lies with these and other negative impacts on southern girlhood and the power dynamics thereof. Paraphrasing a sermon series on women's place in the church from eminent pastor Dr. Lansing Burrows, Wayne Flynt writes that, “women should not ‘usurp’ man's role” in public life, because any such position would “strip away her *modesty* through which she exercised her greatest influence” (Flynt 185, emphasis added). Seeming to reconfigure women's home missions into covert means of disempowerment, Burrows' diction hides, or excuses, the infantilization of women precisely through their own constructed emancipation. Through his frame the outside world becomes a masculinized realm of danger unbefitting of docile, sensitive women. His rhetoric, and others of its kind, sustains male hegemony by further disenfranchising women. Though subtly, *One Writer's Beginnings* bears the scars of derogatory public sentiment. As Pruitt writes of Welty's fiction, the author “identifies stereotypical representatives of the local denominations and subtly provides alternatives that reflect the ‘holiness of life’” and “thus

invert[s] the sacred and secular” (Pruitt 47). Her memoir does similar reclamatory work: it seeks holiness outside of traditional organized religion.

Though Welty admits that her family did not regularly attend church while she was growing up—casting doubt on the depth of her faith—the sacred infiltrates her representation of life in Mississippi. Extending beyond the church’s general evangelizing mission, the “religious-minded society” of Welty’s youth (Welty 31) drove its outreach into the political realm so as to potentially, in their minds, sustain their own hegemony and safeguard the whole community’s salvation. Likely drawing from her community’s history, Welty would later tell an interviewer that her distrust of organized religion stems in part from preaching’s similarity to being “editorialized at,” which underscores sermons’ often condescending and irreligious nature (Wheatley and Welty 130). This later commentary better contextualizes her childhood experiences with the church. Welty’s quizzical representation of faith and church life in her memoir reveals the sacred’s distancing, or, perhaps, attempted erasure, of the secular. Having sidestepped the confines of Christian patriarchy as an adult, the narrative distance of *One Writer’s Beginnings* places young Welty—as a character—in a peculiar liminality. Remembering the limitations of southern girlhood with the perspective of adult freedom, her profiles of public life are multivalent. As Pitavy-Souques argues, “the technique of the self-portrait...gives writers great freedom to play with light and shade, to privilege what side of themselves they want to reveal to the public eye” (Pitavy-Souques 207). Welty’s agenda-setting buries religious commentary under seemingly innocuous stories and rarely brings it to the forefront.

Continuing the author’s narrative passivity, the first section of Welty’s memoir, “Listening,” depicts the young author as a burgeoning journalist, of sorts, as she observes her surroundings. This section title marks Welty as a passive spectator, or perhaps an unwilling

participant, in empty, performative Christian practice because it prescribes an acquiescence to her surroundings. That is to say, Welty's careful listening, as opposed to more direct action, demonstrates her limited control over the ways that public Christian didacticism seeped into her private life. Women in the church, especially when they are young, are told that listening is their action of choice; doing so renders their initiative as one of passive participation. Welty's impressions of Christians in Jackson are as follows:

On Sundays, Presbyterians were not allowed to eat hot food or read the funnypapers or travel the shortest journey; parents believed in Hell and believed tiny babies could go there. Baptists were not supposed to know, up until their dying day, how to play cards or dance. And so on. We went to the Methodist Episcopal Church South Sunday School, and of course we never saw anything strange about Methodists (Welty 31).

Her descriptions denote comfort with the familiar and an Othering of that which is different, all softened by the author's constructed childlike wonder. However, since *One Writer's Beginnings* was, of course, written in adulthood, Welty's writing of her childhood milieu further exemplifies denominational opposition to young girls' independence. Welty, through her former self, paints whole denominations with a broad brush; she erases their histories to instead foreground attempts at expansive social control. Moreover, her study of the Christians surrounding her is, for the most part, devoid of doctrine. This omission underscores the importance of social mores and community in Christian life, in which inane rules of conduct pervade children's minds more than do the meaningful tenets of their faith. Furthermore, promises of salvation from the King of Kings ring hollow when decorum truly reigns among the chosen. Welty's observations here highlight the specious nature of the religious performativity surrounding her, which suggests that class maintenance and social prescription were more important than the true practice of faith. While 'true' is, of course, subjective, Welty's vision of southern evangelical tradition severs its doctrine from its social prescriptivism.

The one instance of religious dogma in the above passage tellingly positions faith in opposition to childhood freedom: children and adults alike must submit to living respectably, by the church's standards, in order to find salvation. Since, as Welty illustrates, many adults feared damnation for themselves and their innocent children, the church's hold on social behavior grew stronger as it reinforced the connection between austerity and devotion. Notably, such doctrine prioritizes asceticism over piety and good deeds, and it extends the church's influence on young girls' behavior and self-definition. Even in her memoir when she is, by its nature, vocal and active, Welty's ability to self-define is haunted by her religious past. Since, outside her home, it appears she is primarily only given the language of self-definition through the lens of Christian service, she must carry on in theological stasis until she can later find the sacred outside of organized religion.

Welty's narrative distance extends into her own religious experiences as well; she writes of Sunday school as the grounds of community-formation—replete with imagery incongruous with her own more secularized ethos—rather than as the source of the religious doctrine so publicly feared by parents in Jackson. The church found additional ways to exert influence on southern girlhood, most dramatically revealed through appearance and wardrobe standards. Welty's description of Sunday school and the associated dress juxtaposes genteel femininity with its caustic effects. Each young woman was expected to wear the appropriate garb of a proper belle, including hats that “sawed” their faces (Welty 31). Perhaps most revealing of the connection between genteel femininity and religious performance is that Welty and her counterparts were expected to carry on singing in a choir as they endured such discomfort (Welty 31). Here the mundanity of their performance marks the very antithesis of its everyday violence. This example of class performance is inextricably linked to the social mores of Christianity and

community; from Welty's characterization emerges further corroboration of historical record. Without resistance to Christian heteropatriarchy, whether on their own or by a role model, young women are entangled in cyclical self-subjugation as their femininity only becomes legible if they weather bodily confinement with a coy smile on their face. As Amende observes, "sacrifice, of course, is among the most powerful ideas in the hymns and liturgies of mainline southern Protestant denominations of the twentieth century" because self-negation is so ubiquitous that women throughout the region "are often taught to sacrifice their own happiness and social and erotic fulfillments for the sake of their men" (Amende 38). Therefore, young women like Welty are inundated with expectations that they deny their comfort in service of public appearances. Welty, however, resists and ultimately escapes patriarchy's infantilization, as demonstrated by her eventual authorial success.

Welty's Sunday school performatively adheres to Christianity as a means of class maintenance and a facade for many underlying repressive themes found in its hymns and readings. The sacred music she describes carries similar duality, and inherent contradictions, as other examples from Welty's young faith life. As Welty observes, "those favorite Methodist hymns all sounded happy and pleased with the world, even though the words ran quite the other way" (Welty 31). The hymns' words are also linked to the secular because they "set your feet moving like the march played on the piano for us to enter Davis School" (Welty 31). In comparing religious music with schooltime militarism, Welty also denies hymns their supposed sanctity and instead assigns them a pedestrian function. Like its secular counterpart, Welty's Christian education denied young women the independence to discover or develop faith on their own terms. Instead, they were made to fit the roles prescribed for them.

Welty's formal education was often more punitive than exploratory, in direct contrast with the intellectual curiosity her parents fostered at home with books and engineering projects. Based on Welty's scrutiny it would seem the female authority figures in her life were either themselves marred by this Christian patriarchy or contributed to its limitations on southern girlhood. She depicts her elementary teacher Miss Duling as "a lifelong subscriber to perfection" whose "standards were very high and of course inflexible, her authority was total" (Welty 22, 23). Indeed, Miss Duling would punitively ring a bell to direct students during passing periods; it "belonged" to her "as though it grew directly out of her right arm, as wings grew out of an angel or a tail out of the devil" (Welty 23). Welty then says that as a child she "did nothing but fear" Miss Duling's "bearing-down authority" (Welty 23). Welty's characterization here seems to masculinize her teacher, drawing from fantastical and biblical imagery to establish her distance from traditional genteel femininity. Doing so suggests that women must replicate southern belleisms when they lack formal positions of authority, at which time their femininity becomes incongruous with the holding and wielding of power.

Miss Duling is not the only woman from Welty's childhood whose authority harms her public image. Another teacher was said to have a "mournful, Presbyterian expression" (Welty 27), as if that were a judgement both on her personhood and on her soul. Likewise, Mrs. Calloway, the public librarian, daily "sent her strong eyes"—elsewhere described as a "dragon eye"—"down the stairway to test you; if she could see through your skirt she sent you straight back home" (Welty 29). While a generous reading of this passage may highlight Mrs. Calloway's care for the girls' well-being, Welty's diction underscores a more complicated dynamic. Rather than being a supportive mentor for young women, Mrs. Calloway's inscrutable gaze carries with it the burden of internalized patriarchal judgement. Welty's failure of

womanhood bars her from education and intellectual curiosity, since she is not allowed in the library in such a state. The long-term effects of this kind of pressure could cloud young girls' growth into the independence Welty so clearly aspires to throughout *One Writer's Beginnings*. Educators' severity led Welty and her peers to believe that "saying 'might could' was bad, but saying it in the basement made bad grammar a sin" since "Presbyterians," among whom she counts her teachers, "believed that you could go to Hell" (Welty 28). Here the sacred once again interrupts the secular by collapsing a childish fear of authority figures onto the dissolution of women's femininity by broader society.

Perhaps since children have been so inculcated with ideas of patriarchy and religion throughout their youth, Welty reproduces that prejudice—however unwittingly—in *One Writer's Beginnings* by not allowing these women three-dimensional personalities. Here, again, Welty reasserts her agenda-setting power as writer and architect of her own narrative; the one-sidedness of their characterizations speaks to the limitations the public would have placed on them. "It is clear from her portraits of both" her elementary teachers "and her mother," writes Brantley, "that Welty admires strongminded women but that such women, though they may be sources of inspiration, also impinge on her own sense of independence" (Brantley 114). In a broader sense, Miss Duling and Mrs. Calloway's gravity could mark their own reaction to the patriarchal gender norms to which they are subjected. If so, their desire not to replicate the weakness and disenfranchisement they may have felt in their youth instead reproduces social confinement on the next generation.

Other public examples of womanhood could have been similarly influential on Welty and other young girls' conceptions of femininity. A 1906 article in the newspaper from nearby Starkville, Mississippi describes features of "the girl we all like" that conjure the image of a

demure southern belle. Beneath its universalization lies an implicit understanding that the author's patriarchal standards only apply to white, upper-middle and upper-class women. Among other traits, an ideal woman—who is notably infantilized by the writer's moniker of 'girl'—is "sunny," "loyal to her church," "avoids silly books," speaks softly, and ensures "religion shines in her life" ("The Girl We All Like"). Though not directly referenced in *One Writer's Beginnings*, this excerpt from a newspaper written shortly before her birth further contextualizes the relationship between religiosity and female submission that is implicated throughout Welty's memoir. Indeed, the disparity between her teachers and the ideal 'girl' classifies the available public identities of southern women of this era; women must contort themselves to fill these roles or risk social and political disenfranchisement. Welty, however, forges her own path between these two extremes

One passage from Marrs' biography of Welty epitomizes her escape from the trap of becoming 'the girl we all like.' Marrs places one of Welty's other teachers at the opposite end of the Duling and Calloway 'dragon lady' spectrum, writing that, "one popular high school group Eudora belonged to despite grave reservations—the Hi-Y Club" was sponsored by a teacher who "was obsessed with puritanical notions and often told the girls cautionary tales" of young trollops who "let themselves be kissed...like some befuddled version of *The Scarlet Letter*" (Marrs 14). Revealingly, the teacher's vision of young women blames them for their burgeoning independence and isolates their actions from those of their, supposedly, blameless partners. In this vein a young woman's consent matters less than her capitulation to male desire, though she is also damned for that very submission. Welty, however, marks her escape from the South's genteel femininity since "a narrow-minded and moralistic set did not then, or ever, appeal to" her (Marrs 14). Indeed, "though she lacked the appearance and flirtatious manner of a belle, she did

not crave them” (Marrs 13). Welty’s parents may be credited for her attitude toward gender performance, as their focus on intellectual development allowed her to transcend a socially prescribed development into a southern belle. Her distance from the belles of her school likewise develops out of her younger journalistic observation of religious life to eventually affect the biting social commentary found in much of her fiction.

In Welty’s secular classrooms, ever-present Christianity takes on an almost theatrical quality. Students’ performances seem to devolve from a place of religious belief into the rote demonstration of middle-class security, drawing Christian performance into the (misleadingly) secular world of education. As revealed by *One Writer’s Beginnings*, public education reinscribes the same traditional gender roles ordained by the church and trains young women to be obedient. The Christianity of Welty’s Jackson overwhelmed its school system, where “even in high school, pupils were used to answering the history teacher’s roll call with a perfectly recited verse from the Bible” (Welty 31). Rather than constituting an act of worship, the students’ almost Pavlovian repetition of Christian teaching distracts from whatever the pedagogical intent of the lesson was and instead perpetuates Christian exceptionalism. As Bible recitation becomes a bearer of social clout, these verses lose all sacred meaning and affect a secular power. Perhaps their responses speak to an inculcated desire for belonging, for identity-formation through majoritarian ideals. Such homogenization also, of course, narrows the possibility for students’ self-definition within the bounds of a socially acceptable performative Christianity.

Welty’s indictment of southern femininity is most poignant in its intersections with the passionate revivals that characterize much of southern Protestantism. Itinerant evangelical preachers were so common, so cyclical for life in Jackson that “they seemed to be part of August” inextricably (Welty 32). The unremarkable ubiquity of their fire-and-brimstone

theology, alongside the often-profligate men who delivered it, likely affected children's psychology and, eventually, perception of reality. Interestingly, Welty still makes little of traveling preachers' interruptions to Jackson's Christian ecosystem, since throughout her memoir she faults not the church leaders themselves, but instead the limitations of organized religion at large. While her eye for systemic fault does contribute to *One Writer's Beginnings*' larger project of religious disenchantment, it is interesting that the same hindsight that made her so deeply scrutinize her female teachers glosses over the likely egomaniacal male figures who haunt church revivals.

Welty's anecdote about so-called Gypsy Smith particularly illuminates her rejection of organized religion in favor of personal salvation. She writes that "he was so persuasive that, as night after night went by, he saved 'everybody in Jackson,' saved all the well-known businessmen on Capitol Street" (Welty 32). That the primary symbol of Jackson's capitalist elite represents religious exception as well underscores the complicated network of Christian influence on southern life. The spectacle and (perceived) uniqueness of this particular itinerant carries with it additional social capital for the redeemed; even if "they might well have been churchgoers already...they never had been saved by Gypsy Smith" (Welty 32), and, therefore, they needed to be redeemed again. Smith's commodification of religious performance lays bare the hollowness of southern Christianity revealed by *One Writer's Beginnings*. Other contemporary accounts of Smith revel in his charismatic, off-the-cuff preaching and celebrate his dedicated evangelism across the globe. Apparently Welty's own city of Jackson decided to pay him "a free will offering of \$6,648 for the great good accomplished in that city during the recent revival" in the summer of 1922 ("Shady Dell"). A seeming arbiter of New Thought or the eventual Prosperity Gospel, Smith's financial entanglement with communities across the country

complicates the salvational message of his preaching. Welty appears to perceive his ministry's deception, which could be part of why she herself did not go up to be 'saved' by him. It's possible that "Gypsy Smith may have been a Methodist; I don't know" (Welty 32). Here, suddenly, doctrinal and social classifications lose meaning, and all denominations are welcomed into—or collapsed under—his figurative big tent. Welty's narrative deflection in this story directly challenges the earlier passage in which she painstakingly reports each denomination's unique traits. Smith, in his masculine salvation, is able to transcend Welty's labels in service of Christian hegemony and not social progress. In doing so, he reifies existing patriarchal mores through these performative, raucous displays of faith. Although she obfuscates Smith's denomination, Welty is not a victim of his act. Instead, she breaks from the social expectations of her peers.

Welty's rejection of organized religion was not without precedent. Though her parents appear to have only disrupted the status quo when it would directly benefit them, Christian Welty was, notably, not "among the businessmen who were saved" when Smith came to town; it was "as if the whole town were simply going through a temperamental meteorological disturbance, he remained calm and at home on Congress Street" (Welty 33). Based on this description, Welty acknowledges that religious fervor is natural, though intemperate. Welty rises above its mania because of her strong familial connection that insulated her from the church's more abrasive qualities; Christian's singular avoidance of Smith's ministry exemplifies its outlandishness. Moreover, Welty uses her father's resistance to performative 'saving' by Smith to foreground her own abandonment on the same page. She "does not become a self by leaving her forebears behind but by taking them with her" (Ciuba 84). Her central community is her family, yes, but it

itself is inculcated by prevailing religious praxis. The stylistic parallelism in this scene codifies their family's intergenerational disruption of Christian hegemony.

Welty's most scathing indictment of organized religion in *One Writer's Beginnings* follows the example set by her father. She recalls that her "Sunday school class was expected to attend [Smith's revival], but I did not go up to be saved" (Welty 32). This expectation, as well as her flouting of it, reiterates the community-based theatricality of revivals. Likewise, Welty's refusal to play along again distances her from her more devout peers. Though she did attend, as was socially necessary, she established and held her own boundaries. Smith's theatrics helped her discover that her idea of spirituality was incongruous with the church: "I never felt anything like the pang of secular longing that I'd felt as a much younger child to go up onto the stage at the Century Theatre when the magician dazzlingly called for the valuable assistance of a child from the audience in the performance of his next feat of magic" (Welty 33). Likening Smith to a magician, and a lousy one at that, Welty rises above performative Christianity in favor of her own extra-religious spirituality.

Welty reaches the apex of her extra-religious spirituality after Smith's formative revival. She "painlessly came to realize that the reverence I felt for the holiness of life is not ever likely to be entirely at home in organized religion" (Welty 33). That her discovery can be painless and society's religiosity somewhat escapable speaks to Welty's privileged position. If performative Christianity functions as a marker of class position, then the ability to transcend or reshape it offers more mobility for Welty than other women with less privilege. She instead finds divinity in the secular, public sphere of European architecture. The inanimateness of architecture, as well as Europe's geographic and ideological remove from the Old South, speaks to the paralyzing effect of religious trauma on self-definition. Buildings are neither inherently religious nor

directly related to people, and therefore can be divorced from community and the prying eyes of church folk that haunt her childhood. According to her nonfiction, “she is not trying to challenge belief in God nor deny the integrity of personal religious devotion. Instead, she confronts the shallow, vapid religiosity she believes the organized church promotes” (Pruitt 65-66). Welty comes to realize that life can be holy without the regulation of women’s minds and bodies. Such marks her ultimate escape from the infantilization wrought by Christian hegemony. As Pruitt observes, “Welty’s position does not reflect a hostile attitude toward religion per se, but rather a measured caution and withdrawal from denominational life in the South” (Pruitt 50). Cultural distance offers her the personal and creative license to escape the limitations that her religious surroundings place on her. That “holiness for life” can now join the intellectual curiosity fostered by her parents as she grows into a successful author.

The Christian praxis of *One Writer’s Beginnings* reveals a dirtiness within southern women’s socialization. Divided by class, religion becomes more exclusionary than salvation-bringing. Welty demonstrates the inherent falsehood of a docile southern Christian belle to reject the region’s extrinsic socialization that limits women’s independence and self-definition. They disregard calls to contain their excess, to fit inside the prim and proper life that is prescribed for them by southern Protestantism. The inconceivability of expectations placed on femininity by white patriarchy, working through the church, culminates in a dirty abjection from polite Christian society. Just as Welty could not find salvation in Jackson’s ordained performance, so, too, must women grapple with the South’s genteel femininity.

The legacy of patriarchal Christianity within *One Writer’s Beginnings* extends beyond Welty’s experience, both in and out of southern women’s life-writing. As historians Charles Reagan Wilson and Mark Silk affirm, “the role of religion in the public life of the South has

evolved as a result of growing secularism, expressed in the power of media in communications centers distant from the region to inculcate moral ideas different from the region's churches" (Wilson and Silk 195). The relationship between the secular and the sacred evolves from not only Welty, but also the autobiographical work of Zora Neale Hurston to Dorothy Allison into twenty first-century authors like Jesmyn Ward, with countless others in between. Despite Welty's escape from the limitations of southern Christian praxis, its effects on femininity linger and deepen in conjunction with larger intersections of class and race. Further research on these and other authors' life writing would continue to illuminate the dynamics discussed here: the southern belle, both elusive and, seemingly, inescapable, hangs over girlhood at large. Its "image is neither fixed nor singular, neither entirely woman formed nor woman forming" (McPhearson 20). Contributing to existing work within the fields of girlhood and new southern studies, memoirs echo the religious didacticism of their surrounding cultures to offer a unique window into the lived experiences of southern women.

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