Finding (M)other’s Face: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Eudora Welty’s “Clytie”

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An early draft of “Clytie” accompanied the first letter Eudora Welty ever sent Diarmuid Russell, the Dubliner turned New Yorker who would remain her agent from 1940 to 1973. A response to Russell’s initiatory request that she hire him as such, the letter consents, “Yes—be my agent,” explaining, “Just as [your] letter was given to me, I finished a story, and holding one in each hand, it seemed inevitable…. As a sign of the agreement, I enclose the story just written” (qtd. in Kreyling 23). Three days later, Russell wrote back, pleased with the working relationship commenced but less impressed with “Clytie” itself, admitting,

I like it but I don’t think it is as good as others of yours that I have seen. There seems to me to be some obscurity about it that makes it difficult to understand. The face of love that you refer to is obviously some dream or imagination that has haunted Clytie…. But I think that that dream or imagination is hardly made clear enough to the reader to [explain why] Clytie commit[s] suicide. (qtd. in Kreyling 24)

Russell immediately qualifies the critique, instructing, “If the comment seems unjustified you dismiss it and write the agent a letter calling him an unliterate ass” (Kreyling 24–25), but the evaluation soon proved prophetic. “Clytie,” the story of a woman’s incessant search for a face, took on the life of a similar quest—a seemingly endless search for a place, or a journal willing to publish it. While Russell preferred to find publication for all that would compose A Curtain of Green and Other Stories, he met significant resistance with three stories in particular—stories Michael Kreyling calls the “orphans” of the bunch—“Clytie,” “The Key,” and “A Visit of Charity.” When, at one point, Harper’s Bazaar actually agreed to buy “Clytie,” they soon switched it out for “The Key” instead. Kreyling, retaining his orphan metaphor, describes the rest of the story’s journey: “Poor ‘Clytie’ was out on the street again. Russell sent her down to The Southern Review, and she was published...
there shortly before the magazine folded in 1942” (66).

Welty’s wandering “Clytie” had finally found refuge.

Demonstrative of the story’s significance to Welty and Russell’s working relationship, on the one hand, the brief history recapped above serves also to introduce that “obscurity” addressed by Russell, which is the greater subject of this study. The letter Welty wrote Russell immediately following his critique shows her brief attempt to elucidate the protagonist’s bizarre behavior. She writes, “The face Clytie was seeking would have been more definite, except that Clytie could not ever concentrate. Perhaps the events were not strong enough to justify her sticking her head down the rain barrel, but I felt sorry for her” (qtd. in Kreyling 34). Regardless of what reservations Welty had about the rain barrel at the time, she did not throw out the drowning scene when she revised “Clytie” for Russell afterwards. And while the revised version appears to have satisfied the agent according to correspondence that followed, the story can hardly be said to have lost its obscurity—obscurity as to what face she is searching for, why the face haunts her, and why she drowns herself by the story’s end. Now nestled safely inside a box at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, an early draft of “Clytie” may be the best resource for answering some of these questions presently. By paying close attention to what Welty subtracted, added, and altered in the story’s revision, I aim to illuminate Clytie Farr’s behavior in psychoanalytic terms as a type of regression, a failure to establish herself within the symbolic order. Demonstrating this failure with her limited speech patterns, in reactions reminiscent of what Julia Kristeva has called abjection, and in her preoccupation with the human face (which I tie to prelingual modes of identification), I find that Clytie appears devoid of any coherent sense of self or agency, a deficit corroborated all the more by Welty’s revisions. Contextualized in terms of this regression, Clytie’s final impulse to submerge her own face in a barrel of rainwater may signify a final descent back into a womb-like space—into the maternal chora to use Kristevan terminology—an ultimate escape from that symbolic order into which she has failed to assimilate. Informing all this, finally, is my overarching hypothesis that the face Clytie seeks is, in part, that belonging to her mother, the member of the household missing from the story whose absence, I contend, may be linked logically to those failures of development observable in Clytie.

In a study of regression, there may be no better place to begin than with that identity, away from which the subject in question appears to be regressing—for Clytie that is her symbolic selfhood in all its manifestations. During the course of the story, Clytie speaks very little. The narrator describes her standing “speechless … as usual,” in one instance, and in another says, “If anyone spoke to her, she fled…. When anyone called her by name, she turned first red, then white, and looked somehow, as one of the ladies in the store remarked, disappointed” (105). Not only resistant to speaking herself, then, Clytie avoids being spoken to, also. That the sound of her own name disturbs her is even more significant, perhaps. Because the articulation of one’s name in language ultimately indicates that individual’s identity as subject, Clytie’s intense physical reaction against being named may very well imply resistance, however subconscious, to identifying a self within the symbolic order.

The few times Clytie does speak in the story, the reader finds her almost entirely in conversation with or imitation of her older sister Octavia, and this too implies the incompleteness of Clytie’s initiation into language. When Clytie takes up the habit of cursing, for example, all the townspeople remark “in something like deprecation, that she was only imitating her older sister, who used to go out … and curse in that same way, years ago” (106). Similarly, Clytie’s only violent outbursts quoted in the story appear tied directly to messages dictated to her by Octavia. Reproaching a neighbor of theirs for planting a rosebush near their fence, Clytie screams “My sister Octavia says you take that rosebush up!” (106). Exposing the extent of Clytie’s dependency on Octavia, the narrator observes further, “Sometimes in the middle of her words [outside in the garden] Clytie glanced up to where Octavia, at her window, looked down at her. When she let the curtain drop at last, Clytie would be left there speechless” (106). Pictured within and bordered by this window frame, the
The revisions Welty made to the early draft suggest an intended emphasis on this lack of agency. Changes made to individual sentences imply, in part, that Welty wanted there to be little sign of conscious decision making on the part of her protagonist. Describing Clytie as she stands in the middle of the road during a downpour at the story’s beginning, for instance, Welty alters the original account that “she couldn’t remember now what she had come for” (“Clytie Draft” 2), saying instead that “she would just wait there to be told to go home” (“Clytie” 99). Distancing the reader from Clytie’s thought processes by omission of the word “remember,” on the one hand, the revision achieves a second implication somewhat more subtly, depicting Clytie as one “waiting to be told” what she should do, as one lacking the autonomy to decide such things for herself. Describing Clytie’s hat in the same paragraph, the narrator explains in the original that “following some notion of her own, Clytie had once tacked an old black satin ribbon to it” (“Clytie Draft” 2), but says in the published version only that it is a hat “with an old black satin ribbon pinned to it to make it a better hat” (“Clytie” 99–100). Once again, the difference is subtle, but the repercussion is the same: the effective removal of any “notion” the first Clytie might have demonstrated.

In a similar vein, at least one revision underscores Clytie’s increasing reversion to childish behaviors. The scene, present in both versions, shows Clytie and Octavia tending to their father, an invalid whose unshaven face Clytie watches intently. The narrator describes the man’s face, saying, “Tomorrow was the barber’s day, and the sharp black points, at their longest, stuck out like needles all over the wasted cheeks. The old man’s eyes were half closed” (“Clytie Draft” 5, “Clytie” 103).6 Watching the face “[w]ithout taking her eyes from [it],” Clytie sputters “rapid, bitter words … the wildest words that came to her head” (“Clytie Draft” 5, “Clytie” 103). Insofar as the father’s cadaverous presence provides the catalyst for this scene,7 Clytie’s reaction may evoke what Kristeva has called abjection—a response to a perceived “collapse of the border between outside and inside” (Power 53), the border between subject and object, which generally yields some ejection of physical contents. Beginning with an ejection of words—quite corporeal, arguably, in that they are not linked in order to signify but merely spit out as they “c[e]me to her”—Clytie’s confrontation with the abject does proceed to manifest itself tangibly when “soon she beg[ins] to cry and gasp” (“Clytie Draft” 5, “Clytie” 103). But Welty adds a simile to this in the revised version, saying, “[S]oon she began to cry and gasp, like a small child who has been pushed by the big boys into the water” (103, emph. added). Highlighting Clytie’s lack of agency, on the one hand, the addition also ties her dilemma directly to regression, towards that of a “small child.” That she is pictured pushed into “the water” may be read as foreshadowing, an anticipation of the water into which Clytie will push herself by the conclusion, water like amniotic fluid indicating an ultimate regression, regression to a womb-like space.

That what Clytie requires is a maternal figure with whom she might engage her own identity—a figure Octavia has replaced but refused to embody— is clear from the outset. Opening the story with the start of a thunderstorm, the narrator describes “a hen and her string of yellow chickens” running across the road in “great alarm” (99). Realizing that Clytie will not seek shelter without being told to do so, one of the townswomen call out to her, beckoning her to seek shelter from the storm. Clytie takes off immediately, “clench[ing] her hands and [drawing] them up under her armpits, and sticking out her elbows like hen wings,” clearly duplicating the image of the chickens fleeing the storm (100). The analogy prepares Welty’s reader well for Clytie’s functioning in all areas of life. She is a baby chick without a mother hen, identifying with and following any person or thing that might momentarily fill an absent mother’s space.

Of course, as with absent characters in any story, it is difficult to assess the extent to which this mother’s absence has something to do with Clytie as we find her, especially since this mother is nowhere mentioned in the text. But a close reading of the draft at the MDAH finds that the early draft actually does mention the mother. It is only once, and it provides no grand revelation, but it holds clues, nevertheless. With Clytie by herself in the kitchen and cooking breakfast, the line reads, “Out the open window, a freight train passed, the white church gleamed across a field where they had gone in their mother’s lifetime, and some negroes filed by in the road going fishing” (“Clytie Draft” 9). Most remains in the final version—the “window,” the “freight train,” and the “negroes” all there and changing little in their descriptions—but everything from “the white church” to the “mother’s lifetime,” has been removed. The line is informative, despite its brevity. One learns that the mother is deceased, that she took the family to church when she was alive, and that the image of this church, visible from
the kitchen window, has had the potential to remind Clytie of this past daily. A mother who was not opposed to participating in the outside world (on Sundays, at the very least), she may represent a life and time in direct contrast to the Farr family pictured deteriorating in the present, a reclusive bunch who, excepting Clytie and her curious excursions through town, no longer make meaningful contact with the world outside.

It is impossible to know why Welty deleted such a seemingly innocuous phrase, leaving the rest of the sentence and its contents mostly intact. Regardless, the sentence appears to hold special significance in yet another way. Written in pencil and inserted between “Out the” and “open window” in the early draft, the word “secretly” sits, adjusting significantly what the sentence entails. Clytie being the only one in the kitchen during the time described, it can be inferred that she is the culprit, the one who has opened the window to the outside world in secrecy. As conveyed through her mad dashes through town, she desires contact with the outside, contact with something other. But outside, she moves, as Lorinda B. Cohoon has articulated, “only in an unproductive orbit around the town and her house….her family interrupt[ing] or block[ing] her movements, so she cannot connect” (17). Resurrecting the presence of the mother pictured as part of the outside, we might read Clytie’s conundrum anew—she can not connect because she does not know how, because the mother that might have propelled her into identification with the other is dead.

Beginning here, I interpret Clytie’s search for a face, in part, as a search for the face of an absent mother. To my knowledge, I am the first to venture this hypothesis. Critics generally imagine the face to be either Clytie’s own (implied by the reflection she discovers in the rainwater by the story’s close) or, as Ruth D. Weston has speculated, one belonging to some lover (real or imagined) now long-gone (31). And while the former is certainly an obvious and relevant deduction, the latter may be an extrapolation that is difficult to sustain. Likely informing the notion is Clytie’s namesake, the water nymph in Greek mythology whose unquenchable obsession with the god Apollo—he, an ex-lover of hers—leaves her debilitated, staring at the sun and yearning for him incessantly. But Welty does not imply any such unrequited love in her own story. Rather, her narrator describes a childlike Clytie, explaining “it was hard [for Clytie] to remember the way [the face] looked, or the time when she had seen it first. It must have been when she was young” (“Clytie” 105). And while this face might certainly be Clytie’s own, it may very well be her mother’s simultaneously. It is comparable to that relationship Luce Irigaray articulates in the renowned essay, “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other,” the daughter explaining to her mother, “I look like you, you look like me. I look at myself in you” (61). Incapable of individuating herself in the symbolic, Clytie is caught regressing to a place where her face and her mother’s may not be perceived as separate.

Not a few psychoanalysts have elaborated on the significance of the mother’s face in infant development. Among the most influential of these, D. W. Winnicott has theorized that “the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face” (111). Gradually, the functioning infant matures past this mode of identification, separating the “not-me from the me” as Winnicott words it (111). But he stipulates, “If no one person is there to be mother the infant’s developmental task is infinitely complicated” (111). Likewise, Alice Miller explains that any infant lacking this maternal mirror “for the rest of [its] life would be seeking this mirror in vain” (32). Evocative of Clytie’s mad dashes through town, excursions dominated by an unquenchable quest for a missing face, the prognosis describes her dilemma perfectly.

Of course, I cannot argue, specifically, that this mother died while Clytie was still in infancy. But if Clytie is stuck in some regression, this detail does not matter—she is, when the story finds her, in the middle of such an identity crisis with no mother there to launch her forward. Additionally, Winnicott maintains that “when the average girl studies her face in the mirror she is reassuring herself that the mother-image is there and that the mother can see her and that the mother is en rapport with her” (113). Problematically essentialist in its sweeping claim, perhaps, the assertion is still not far from Irigaray’s own and may be particularly applicable to the case of Clytie. Finding her reflection, a “wavering inscrutable face” in the rainwater, near the story’s end, she realizes, “It was the face she had been looking for, and from which she had been separated” (110).

Locating the face, finally, Clytie immerses herself inside it, “thrust[ing] her head into the barrel, under the water, through its glittering surface into the kind, featureless depth” (110). It is the final descent into that womb-like space Kristeva has called the chor, and, appropriately, Clytie sees in her reflection, immediately before she enters, a “mouth old and closed from any speech” (110)—her entire abandonment of the symbolic. Of course, this can mean only death for Clytie. If biological drives alone constitute the pre-symbolic chor, after all, the “death drive,” for Kristeva, remains the “most instinctual” of those drives (Revolution 28). Diving inside her watery (w/t)omb, Clytie achieves the solace she has so desired, reconciling body and image—Clytie’s reflected image and the mother-image therein. Leaving the subject to die, the object to remain, its “poor ladylike black-stockinged legs
up-ended and hung apart like a pair of tongs” (110), Clytie returns to something calm, quiet, “featureless,” freed finally of the face and failed separation that has haunted her.

Notes

1 Kreyling quotes at least two subsequent letters Russell sent to Welty in which he references the “obscurity” of the original version of “Clytie” as a means of comparison to stories he considered equally nebulous (see 48, 60).

2 The original manuscripts of “Keela the Outcast Indian Maiden” and “Why I Live at the P.O.” may be found inside the same box.

3 According to The Welty Collection by Suzanne Marrs, Welty sent this particular draft to John Robinson (30). A note at the top of the draft reads, “How are you? I’ve just been to Rodney in a regular Texas wind—Love E-.” A sketch of a car, drawn as though blown by the wind, sits adjacent to the note, and a nearby caption reads, “The car from rear ⇒.” That Welty still calls the “face” for which Clytie searches in this draft a “face of love,” as does Russell’s response to the original, indicates that the drafts she sent to Robinson and Russell would have been comparable, perhaps identical. Marrs speaks of one other draft in the collection that also refers to this face as a “face of love” (Welty Collection 7). While I have not yet reviewed that draft, it would certainly be worthwhile to compare it with the published versions as well as with the draft that I discuss in this essay. Welty would make this “face of love” simply a “face” by the time The Southern Review published the story.

4 Kristeva borrows the term chora from Plato’s Timaeus. In Revolution in Poetic Language, she relates it to what she terms the semiotic, an ordering that “precedes the establishment of the sign” for the developing infant (27). The chora thus indicates that which is unrepresentable, a space or “receptacle” that is “deprived of unity [or] identity” (26), an “ordering” that is “oriented and structured around the mother’s body” (27). The rain barrel into which Clytie plunges may embody a womb-like space, then, but also the less definitive space of the “chora,” both of which indicate a pre-symbolic incorporation of the world.

5 Additionally, the word “notion” functions in the early draft as a pun on the satin ribbon described, which may also be called a “notion” in sewing terminology. It would appear, then, that Welty even sacrificed some of the story’s witty humor in order to emphasize Clytie’s want of self-directed behavior.

6 The one difference between the versions is the presence of a hyphen between “half” and “closed” in the original.

7 Abjection’s quintessential trigger is the “corpse,” Dino Felluga has explained, “[for it] traumatically reminds us of our own materiality.”

8 This hand-written amendment would be made permanent by the time the story was published. In its revised form, the beginning of the sentence thus reads, “Far out past the secretly opened window”—an alteration that turns the original adjective “open” into the past participle, “opened,” thus indicating more fully Clytie’s action in opening the window. Still, the added words “Far” and “past” remove the outside world from Clytie all the more and further underscore the meaning behind her surname, “Farr.”

9 Robert Penn Warren suggests that Clytie is, in fact, “isolated in … sexual frustration” (qtd. in Johnston 161).

10 It should be clarified that the phenomenon Winnicott demonstrates here is that the daughter does in some way actually see her own face in her mother’s. “In other words,” Winnicott writes, “the mother is looking at the baby and what she [the daughter] looks like is related to what she sees there” (112).

11 Specifically, Miller is speaking here of mothers whose faces respond poorly to the developing infant. One may infer, however, that a mother’s absence would impede maturation similarly.

Works Cited


