

A Cultural Interpretation of the Bodies of Marginalized People in Welty's

A Curtain of Green and Other Stories

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Abstract

A Curtain of Green and Other Stories is a collection of short stories written by Southern American writer Eudora Welty. In the story collection, Welty portrays life and people in Mississippi in the first half of the 20th century, including quite a few marginalized people. Being a photographer as well, Welty has a unique vision for body expression. This essay tries to make an analysis of the body narration of two types of marginalized people in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, including physically disabled people and black people. By analyzing the body culture in Welty's works, this essay tries to give a vivid picture of Southern marginalized people's daily existence, probe into the social circumstances of Southern America in early 20th century, and find a new perspective to interpret Southern American culture.

Keywords: Eudora Welty, body, Southern marginalized people, Southern American culture

1. Introduction

The concept of marginal man or human is first put forward by German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin. According to Lewin, "marginal man refers to people who participate incompletely in either of the two social groups and live between the two social groups." (Lewin, 2003, p. 181) (Principles of Topological Psychology, 2003, p. 181) The Marginal Man Theory is first developed by American sociologist Robert Ezra Park in 1926, and further developed by other scholars, such as Stonequist, Hacker, Weisberger, and Deegan, etc. With the development of the theory, the concept of "marginal man" is expanded. In Robert Ezra Park's theory, marginality is related to race and culture. Then, his student Everett Verner Stonequist develops his theory by stating "marriages, education and other reasons can also induce marginality." (Stonequist, 1937, p. 2, cited in Che & Li 2014) Momentous contribution that Stonequist makes to Marginal Man Theory is his introduction to two categories of social situations which can bring about marginality. The first social situation is one where racial or biological differences are included in cultural differences and the other is one where only cultural differences exist (Wen, 2016, p. 16). In addition, Stonequist proposes marginal persons' life-circle which consists of three stages. The first two stages are stages of preparation and crisis, respectively, and the third stage deals with possible behaviors of marginal persons. Besides biological and cultural factors, social changes can also bring about marginality. Hughes points out that enough social changes can cause appearance of marginal persons who feel confused about their social identities (Hughes, 1949, pp. 58-65).

The academic interest in the body has increased in recent years, especially in the fields of sociology and literature criticism. According to Steve Pile, "the body is both the mind and the body, the personal and the social." (Pile, 1996, p. 185) Elizabeth Grosz gives a definition to body -- "By body I understand a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organization only through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality. The body is so to speak, organically/biologically/naturally 'incomplete': it is indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities which require social triggering, ordering, and long-term 'administration,' regulated in each culture and epoch by what Foucault has called 'the micro-technologies of power.'" (Grosz, 2005, pp. 31-38) The body is not only an individual concept, but also a social one. The body is related to other bodies, gender, race, nationality, and social class. British sociologist Chris Shilling discusses the relation between the body and society systematically in his work *The Body and Social Theory*, and highlights the important role of the body in the modern society. Generally, body can manifest the identification of a particular social group. Studies on body has become a research focus in recent years.

Since their publications, the works of Eudora Welty have been studied by various scholars abroad and at home. The foreign critics mainly interpret Welty's works in terms of writing techniques, myth archetypes, feminism, structuralism, and psychoanalysis, etc. Ruth M. Vande Kieft analyzes many aspects of Welty's fictions, including forms, themes, fantasy, dreams, the sense of places and the technical virtuosity. J. A. Bryant analyzes Welty's modern writing techniques in his essay "The Recovery of the Confident Narrator: *A Curtain of Green to Losing Battles*." Danielle Pitavy-Souques and Thomas L. McHaney pay attention to the forms of Welty's works. They regard the form of *The Golden Apples* as a huge net of myth and try to reinterpret this work from the perspective of myth archetypes. When it comes to the 1970s and 1980s, with the emergence of feminist movements and Welty's own female identity, there are many interpretations of Welty's works from the perspective of feminism. W. Craig Turner compares the males in Welty's works to Perseus, and the females in her works to Medusa. In China, Dr. Zhao Huihui deconstructs the Southern Belle culture with the theories of body poetics, and analyzes the characters in terms of myth archetypes. Prof. Wang Lian utilizes the theory of hegemonic masculinity to analyze the characters in Welty's works in the essay "Strategies for Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Golden Apples*."

Eudora Welty has portrayed all kinds of Southern people in her works, including marginalized people. In her novels, Welty shows her deep concern over the lower class in the Southern American society. Eudora Welty is a photographer as well as a writer. As a result, she utilizes lots of vivid body descriptions in her works. As "the body is the outcome of social forces and relations" (Shilling, 2003, p. 14), the body narration of a specific group of people could manifest their social status and conditions. Although some scholars have studied on the body narration in Welty's works, few scholars have focused on the body narration of marginalized people in Welty's works. Through analyzing the body narration of Southern marginalized people in Welty's works, a new perspective of studying the Southern American society in the 20th century can be found.

2. Analysis of the Bodies of Two Types of Marginalized People

Two types of marginalized people in Eudora Welty's *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* are chosen to be analyzed in this essay. One is the physically disabled people, the other is the black people. Physically disabled people are tend to be marginalized in a society for their physical defects and differences; black people's marginalization is due to the racial inequality in Southern America at that time. The two categories of marginalized people are to some extent representative in Southern America in the first half of the 20th century. "The body is most profitably conceptualized as an unfinished biological and social phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits, as a result of its entry into, and participation in, society. It is this biological and social quality that makes the body at once such an obvious, and yet such an elusive phenomenon." (Shilling, 2003, p. 11) In other words, the body possesses both biological and social attributes, and the body can be disciplined and transformed by the society. At the same time, through the body and body narration in literature, the social conditions can be revealed.

2.1 Analysis of the Bodies of Physically Disabled People

According to Oxford Dictionary, the word "disabled" means "unable to use a part of your body completely or easily because of a physical condition, illness, injury, etc.; unable to learn easily." (Hornby, 2009, p. 563) Many physically disabled people, especially severely disabled ones, are isolated by the mainstream society, thus becoming the marginalized people. According to Chris Shilling, "there is a tendency for the body to become increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity." (Shilling, 2003, p. 1) The defective body of physically disabled people may influence their self-identity both to themselves and other people. In *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, there are two stories about Southern physically disabled people -- "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies", and "The Key."

In "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies", the protagonist Lily Daw is a feeble-minded girl in Victory Town of Mississippi. Three ladies in Victory Town want to send Lily to the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble-Minded of Mississippi, while Lily herself wants to marry a xylophone player. Persuaded by the three ladies, Lily is about to leave for the Ellisville Institute. At the train station, one of the ladies Aimee Slocum meets the xylophone player who comes to marry Lily. At last, Aimee stops Lily and lets the xylophone player marry her. In this story, the author portrays Lily like a traditional Southern lady. When Lily watches the tent show, "Lily acted so nice. She was a perfect lady -- just set in her seat and stared." (Welty, 1982, p. 3) "Didn't turn her head to the right or to the left the whole time." (Welty, 1982, p. 4) Words like "graciously" and "reverent" are used to describe Lily. The appearance of Lily also meets the standard of Southern ladies. The hair of Lily is milky-yellow, and her fingers are small. Traditional Southern ladies are taught to be frail and delicate to preserve their image. In western literary traditions, dark hair symbolizes passion and power, and light-colored hair symbolizes fragile and weak characters. The milky-yellow hair color of Lily is quite light, which matches her fragile Southern lady image. In addition, pudency is another important feature of Southern ladies. Lily Daw is a perfect example of being bashful, "shyness overcame her suddenly" (Welty, 1982, p. 6), "Lily bit her lip and began to smile" (Welty, 1982, p. 7), "asked Lily shyly" (Welty, 1982, p. 8), "she hung her head." (Welty, 1982, p. 11)

Lily is a feeble-minded girl in a small Southern town without parents to take care of her, but her behaviors and appearance satisfy the criteria of the Southern American Belle culture perfectly. The body of Lily has been trained by the Belle culture. From Lily, it is not hard to see that the power of Southern American Belle culture in the patriarchal Southern America is quite strong and strict. The Belle culture is so influential that it can even restrain a poor feeble-minded girl. "Women's experiences of their bodies are distorted by dominant social forces." (Shilling, 2003, p. 56) "Gendered social practices do not simply negate the body but transcend and transform it." (Shilling, 2003, p. 94) The gendered social practices towards women contribute to the gendered body of women. In the male-controlled Southern American society, men implement corporeal oppression against women by distorting and transforming their bodies with the Belle culture, thus maintaining the physical frailty of women and the male dominance. Lily Daw's will and decisions are at the charge of the three ladies in town, who are the accomplice of the Southern patriarchy. At first, Lily wants to marry the xylophone player, but the three ladies persuade her to go to Ellisville. At the station, encountering the xylophone player, the three ladies ask Lily to marry him. "But I don't want to git married," said Lily, beginning to whimper. "I'm going to Ellisville." (Welty, 1982, p. 11) However, Lily's opinion is ignored once again, and Mrs. Carson calls her pastor husband to marry them. Ironically, the thing Lily cares about most -- her hope chest, is left on the departing train. "The body is not simply constrained by or invested with social relations, but also actually forms a basis for and possesses productive capacities which contribute towards these relations." (Shilling, 2003, p. 12) The fragile and disciplined body is the basis of the fragile and controlled will of Southern ladies like Lily Daw. Lily, who has lost her free body and will, is a victim of the Southern American Belle culture and the Southern patriarchal society.

"The Key" is about a deaf-mute couple named Ellie and Albert Morgan, who are farmers in Mississippi. Ellie and Albert Morgan sit in the waiting room of the station, and they are going on a trip to Niagara Falls. A young man in the waiting room makes his key fall on the floor while tossing and catching it. Without hearing the sound of the falling key, Albert picks up the key and regards it as a wonder, a symbol of happiness in the future. Albert and Ellie talk to each other in excitement, and miss their train. At last, the young man gives them the key of a hotel room out of kindness. The body narration of the Morgans indicates their social status and their desire to communicate with the outside world. Ellie and Albert are poor farmers, "they and the suitcase were all touched here and there with a fine yellow dust, like finger marks" (Welty, 1982, p. 29), "Ellie Morgan was a large woman with a face as pink and crowded as an old-fashioned rose" with "straight, strong wrist" (Welty, 1982, p. 29), and there are "dust on her throat and a needle stuck in her collar where she'd forgotten it, with a thread running through the eye." (Welty, 1982, p. 36) Ellie and Albert's low social status can not only be seen through their appearance, but also their physical performance, "she sat there as tense and solid as a cube" (Welty, 1982, p. 29), "he sat motionless beside Ellie, holding his hat in his lap with both hands" (Welty, 1982, p. 29), "he was too shy for this world, you could see. His hands were like cardboard, he held his hat so still." (Welty, 1982, p. 30) They look restrained and nervous in the public space. "The sizes, shapes and heights of bodies vary according to the care and nutrition they receive, while the openness of the body to social relationships and environments also contributes to its elusiveness." (Shilling, 2003, p. 11) The social experience is to some extent bodily experience. In other words, social practices will leave marks on the corporeal existence. In this case, the shabby and restrained bodily existence and conduct of Ellie and Albert at the station is the direct reflection of their low social status and needy living conditions. "The movements and appearances of the body send messages of intent between people." (Shilling, 2003, p. 73) The communication between the couple is so desperate that they are eager to have contact with the outside world, "her face worked and broke into strained, hardening lines, as if there had been a death -- that too-explicit evidence of agony in the desire to communicate" (Welty, 1982, p. 29), "how intensified, magnified, really vain all attempt at expression becomes in the afflicted." (Welty, 1982, p. 31) As a result, they regard the key as a chance to break the emptiness and unhappiness between them. Nevertheless, their attempt is in vain, "he began again, his fingers clumsy and blurring in his excitement" (Welty, 1982, p. 32), "how empty and nervous her red scrubbed hands were, how desperate to speak!" (Welty, 1982, p. 35)

The young man in the story symbolizes something Ellie and Albert Morgan lack and want, which are passion and the ability to communicate. The body descriptions of the young man are in great contrast with those of Ellie and Albert. As for the hair, the young man is red haired, "the color of his hair seemed to jump and move, like the flicker of a match struck in a wind" (Welty, 1982, p. 30); the hair color of Ellie and Albert is yellow, a meek and low-key color. The red hair color of the young man indicates his energy and passion, the power the lower-class Southerners lack. The young man has the quality the Morgans lack, "there was an excess of energy about him that separated him from everyone else." (Welty, 1982, p. 30) At the end of the story, the red-haired man give Ellie a key of the hotel room to help them. Nevertheless, the young man knows the futility of his deeds, "you could see that he despised and saw the uselessness of the thing he had done." (Welty, 1982, p. 37) The key cannot save Ellie and Albert from their desperation and isolation.

2.2 Analysis of the Bodies of Black People

In Southern America, there had been a long history of slavery. After the American Civil War, the slavery was abolished. However, Southern black people did not gain the same rights and social status as the Southern white. For a long time, white people did not treat black people as human beings. For example, the black call the white men “master”, “captain”, “boss”, or “sir”; while the white call black men “boy”, “Jack”, or “George.” From the late 19th century to 1965, the Jim Crow laws which enforced racial segregation were carried out in Southern America. The Jim Crow laws took over the slavery to persecute black people. In Southern society, black people were second-rate citizens, which were a kind of marginalized people. In *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, there are two stories about Southern black people -- “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden”, and “A Worn Path.”

“Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” tells a story that happens between an old black man named Little Lee Roy and two white men. Two white men, Steve and Max, come to see Little Lee Roy out of guilt. Two years ago, the circus Steve worked for caught Little Lee Roy, dressed him as an Indian maiden, and forced him to perform eating live chickens. Then, a white man saved Little Lee Roy and he was sent home. At last, Steve and Max give Little Lee Roy some money and leave. At the beginning of the story, when Little Lee Roy hears two white men coming, he “ducked his head and held his breath.” (Welty, 1982, p. 38) This body description shows black people’s fear toward white people, even at their own houses. When Steve mentions Roy’s unfortunate experiences at the circus, Roy looks strangely excited, “Little Lee Roy sat huddled and blinking, a smile on his face” (Welty, 1982, p. 39), “Little Lee Roy was looking from one white man to the other, excited almost beyond respectful silence. He trembled all over, and a look of amazement and sudden life came into his eyes” (Welty, 1982, p. 39), “Little Lee Roy gave Max a glance full of hilarity.” (Welty, 1982, p. 39) In the meantime, Roy tries to draw two white people’s attention by laughing and making strange sound of “Hee! hee”, “Little Lee Roy burst into hysterical, deprecatory giggles.” (Welty, 1982, p. 40) Through these eccentric and preposterous behaviors, the body image of black men like Little Lee Roy is portrayed to be animalistic and bestial. From the body narration of Little Lee Roy, it is not difficult to see that as a black man in Southern society, Little Lee Roy is accustomed to the sufferings in life and has lost the normal reactions towards his misfortunes. From the perspective of the two white man, they call Little Lee Roy “it”, “nigger”, “little nigger boy”, and “like a animal.” Their derogatory appellations of black people manifest black people’s low social status and marginal position at that time.

Steve tells Max about Little Lee Roy’s experiences at the circus. In the white man Steve’s narration, “it just kind of mumbled and growled, like a animal” (Welty, 1982, p. 39), “if anybody was to even come near it or even bresh their shoulder against the rope it’d growl and take on and shake its iron rod” (Welty, 1982, p. 39), “would sort of rub over the chicken’s neck with its thumb an’ press on it good, an’ then it would bite its head off.” (Welty, 1982, p. 39) It can be seen from the above descriptions, white people like Steve regard black people’s bodies as “uncivilized, uncontrollable sexual and physical beings” (Shilling, 2003, p. 49) “in attempts to legitimize the subordination and oppression of black peoples.” (Shilling, 2003, p. 49) By dehumanizing the bodily existence of black people, the Southern white people can reduce their own moral guilt of persecuting the black. According to Shilling, “Racism has been characterized by repeated attempts to impute negative characteristics to the bodies and general corporeal existence of various peoples.” (Shilling, 2003, p. 52) The negative construction of black people’s bodies plays as the camouflage for white people’s oppressing Southern black people.

In “A Worn Path”, an old negro woman from remote countryside named Phoenix Jackson sets out a journey to the town to get charity case for her sick grandson. Old Phoenix has overcome many obstacles and arrived at the town at last. But, the reactions of Phoenix suggest that her grandson has already died. Welty describes Phoenix’s appearance like this, “her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper.” (Welty, 1982, p. 142) The numberless branching wrinkles indicates the sufferings Phoenix has gone through. The golden color of Phoenix’s skin and the copper odor of her hair all remind people of something tough and tenacious. “she was very old and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock” (Welty, 1982, p. 142) Though Phoenix is old and staggering, she goes on her journey like a hero in epic. When Phoenix goes through a fence, “there she had to creep and crawl, spreading her knees and stretching her fingers like a baby trying to climb the steps.” (Welty, 1982, p. 143) Faced with so many obstacles in life, black people like Phoenix sometimes have to drop their dignity and creep and crawl. The descriptions of old Phoenix reveal Welty’s own opinions of the Southern black people -- oppressed but tough. Though being oppressed, Southern black people still preserve their dignity and hope.

3. Features of Southern American Society

The first half of the 20th century is the transitional period of Southern America, and the reconstruction period of the New South as well. The traditional South was gradually being deconstructed, but some values of the Old South still existed, like the Southern American Belle culture and racial inequality. The oppression of the old values against Southern people can be seen from the body narration of marginalized people in Eudora Welty's body literature.

Many marginalized people in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* have some symbolic meanings. In "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies", the heroine Lily Daw represents traditional Southern ladies. Lily's appearance and conduct are restrained to the criteria of Southern ladies, who are graceful, frail, and obedient. Lily's mental retardation implies Southern ladies' losing their own wills and being controlled by paternity. The three ladies are accomplices of the Southern paternity. Besides, the three ladies' making decisions for Lily reveals the close interpersonal relations in the Old South. According to the author Welty herself, "in that vanished time in small-town Jackson, most of the ladies I was familiar with.....were busiest when they were sociable. In the afternoons there was regular visiting up and down the little grid of residential streets. Everybody had calling cards, even certain children....." (Welty, 1995, p. 12) Welty reveals in the story this tight-knit attribute of traditional Southern community through three Southern ladies. In "The Key", Ellie and Albert Morgan are the lower-class Southern farmers. Their life is filled with hard work, emptiness, and unhappiness. The communication between themselves is empty, and they can not build connections with the outside world. The deafmuteness of Ellie and Albert symbolizes lower-class Southern people's loss of their own voices, their spiritual emptiness, and the isolation state in Southern society. After the Civil War and industrialization, the South is left behind by the whole country. Due to the miserable economic conditions of the South, the South is at a marginalized position in the whole country. In this sense, the marginalization of the deaf-mute couple insinuates the marginalization of the South. In "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden", a black man is transformed into an Indian maiden and forced to eat live chickens. It demonstrates the alienation, dehumanization, and oppression against black people in traditional Southern society. And many black people get used to this oppression and give up fighting back, just like Little Lee Roy. Old Phoenix in "A Worn Path" endures all the miseries in life and still keeps her dignity. It reflects the general living state of Southern black people and their tough attitude towards life.

In brief, the Southern American society possesses attributes of Southern Belle culture, patriarchal society, close interpersonal relations, and miserable living conditions of the lower-class and the black.

4. Conclusion

Through analyzing the bodies of marginalized people in Eudora Welty's *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* from a cultural perspective, a vivid picture of Southern life is given, and the essence and features of Southern American culture is explored. The marginal state of physically disabled people and black people demonstrates the tough living conditions of the lower-class Southern people. During the transitional period of Southern America, Southern women is still being restrained by the Southern American Belle culture and oppressed by patriarchy. Lower-class people like farmers do not have their own voices in the mainstream Southern society, and their spiritual life is empty and unhappy. As for black people, they continue to endure racial inequality and carry on with their toughness. Struck by the American industrialization, the Old South is faced with the crisis of being marginalized. These features are the remnant of the Old South, and the hope of eliminating them is laid upon the reconstruction of the New South.

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