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Living on the Margins: Secluded Characters in Southern Literature

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Abstract

The South of the United States has often been looked at as a marginal region by historians and literary critics alike. The works of white Southern authors like William Faulkner (1897-1962), Flannery O'Connor (1925-1965) and Eudora Welty (1909-2001) have been associated with this so-called marginality, despite the writers' efforts to keep clear from this inescapable reputation. More often than not, the unwanted marginality pervades the novels and short stories of these authors: misfits, disabled and reclusive characters people their stories. In some of their works, Faulkner, O'Connor and Welty depict characters who defy the norm, whether it be through their bodies or their actions. The secluded way of life of these characters tends to amplify their abnormality and anchors them deeper into the margins of their homes, in the recesses of Mississippi, in the Georgia countryside or on the outskirts of the fictional land of Yoknapatawpha. This study seeks to analyze the marginality of reclusive characters in white Southern literature – more precisely in selected works by Faulkner, O'Connor and Welty – and underlines the liminal aspect of margins. The first part of this article focuses on the depiction of abnormality in these works: whether they challenge the social norms or even the bodily norms by way of grotesque traits, the authors' secluded characters embody the margin. The last part demonstrates the paradoxical realistic power of the margins, as they allow for the surprising representation of unamable taboos. The secluded characters of the works under study are marginal figures in a seemingly marginal world, but actually use marginality to cross boundaries.

Keywords: American South; Southern Studies; Flannery O'Connor; William Faulkner; Eudora Welty; seclusion.

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According to Fred Hobson, "the South has stood alone as an alien member of the national family" (Hobson 1983, 9). Although this statement predates the New Southern Studies School, the notion of the South as "alien" is still one of the key themes of the southern narrative. As Charles Reagan Wilson notes in *The American South, A Very Short Introduction*, "pervasive southern storytelling and American stereotyping have highlighted the South's places and peoples as different from those elsewhere in the nation" (Wilson 2021, 2). Indeed, the rural South especially is often referred to as a strange land, a space symbolically separated from the rest of the country. By way of example, in his introduction to *Away Down South, A History of Southern Identity*, historian James C. Cobb recalls singing "Dixie" as a northern elementary school pupil in the 1950s. Cobb came to realize that "the initial popularity of 'Dixie' among New Yorkers had reflected an already well-established tendency among northern whites to see the South as a primitive and exotic land distinctly apart from the rest of America" (Cobb 2005, 1). To readers outside the region, the literary works crafted by Southern authors are likely to echo this marginal status, which seems to make Southern literature a literature of the margins.

The very notion of marginality suggests a literal or figurative place which differs from all others, but which is somehow simultaneously connected to the norm. Etymologically, the name "margin" directly comes from Latin *marginem,* 'edge, brink, border.' What lies on the margins of a given society does not stand *out* of it so much as it stands *on* its limits. As a matter of fact, the South as liminal space is one of the chief focuses of twenty-first-century Southern Studies. In *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, Deborah Cohn and Jon Smith evoke a "liminal south, one that troubles essentialist narratives *both* of globalsouthern decline *and* of unproblematic global-northern national or regional unity, of American or southern exceptionalism" (Cohn & Smith 2004, 13). In addition, the concept of margin depends on an interplay between a so-called 'norm' and the deviancy that is positioned against it. Finally, it also entails the people who *live* in that special space and who might be considered abnormal. Southern literature encompasses these three aspects insofar as it

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stems from a region perceived as otherized and as it sometimes happens to portray characters who continually escape the norm. Indeed, on the one hand, if the South was involved in the economic dynamics of the country and if Southern Studies are now turned towards the place of the South on a global scale (by focusing on its relations with South America and the Carribbean, notably), another movement partly nourished by nostalgia tourism and Southern Studies themselves can "preserve" the region (McPherson 2003, 9). On the other hand, Southern literature is regularly believed to primarily focus on "freaks."

As a matter of fact, Southern literature is often viewed by people outside the region as the kingdom of freaks and grotesque figures. Canonical white Southern writers such as William Faulkner (1897-1962), Eudora Welty (1909-2001) and Flannery O'Connor (1925-1965) are known to depict marginal characters: O'Connor's work, for instance, essentially includes tramps, misfits, disabled young women—alien characters who live in the dark recesses of Georgia. However, if O'Connor's work is partly famous for its 'freaks,' the works of all three writers happen to portray characters who escape the norm and live literally apart from the communities they should belong to. This article will particularly shift its focus to "A Rose for Emily," *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* by Faulkner; "Clytie," "Keela the Outcast Indian Maiden," "Livvie" by Welty; "Good Country People," "Parker's Back," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and "The River" by O'Connor. The reclusive and/or marginal characters depicted in these stories are deeply isolated in a region still perceived as Other: seclusion and southernness collide so as to emphasize the otherness of the South.

Through a stylistic, narratologic and contrastive perspective, this paper will seek to study the marginality of secluded characters in selected works by William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, three white Southern authors who both wrote *about* and *from* the margins. This analysis will first focus on the abnormal and the grotesque before examining the depiction of taboos allowed by the marginal status of the characters, for, in the end, seclusion seems to enhance marginality.

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The South and the Abnormal

Challenging Social Norms and Expectations

The marginality of the secluded Southern scene allows some characters to defy both the reader's expectations and the norms of the society they reflect. In Welty's short stories, for example, the female characters tend to break free from their isolation. By the end of "Livvie" (from *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories,* published in 1941), the eponymous character leaves her husband and his house. Although she is young, the character is married to Solomon, an old man she does not love. The spouses live in a remote area by the Natchez Trace, far away from any town: "Solomon carried Livvie twenty-one miles away from her home when he married her. He carried her away up on the Old Natchez Trace into the deep country to live in his house. She was sixteen—only a girl, then. Once people said he thought nobody would ever come along there" (Welty 1980, 228). Livvie and Solomon live out in the Southern countryside, and the location of the house mirrors their marginality. Although the narrator insists on the remoteness of Solomon's house, the story rather depicts Livvie's path towards freedom: a modern Persephone taken away by an old and feeble Hades, she eventually meets Cash, a charming young man who is synonymous with a new life and love. As Livvie laments through indirect speech, "Oh, for a stirring of the leaves, and a breaking of the nets!" (Welty 1980, 230). Here embodied in the subtle movement of the leaves, the motif of spring which courses through the text hints at the change that will turn Livvie's life upside down for the best: when Solomon dies and confesses to her that he was wrong to marry her and waste her youth, Livvie leaves the house with Cash:

> They moved around and around the room and into the brightness of the open door, then he stopped and shook her once. She rested in silence in his trembling arms, unprotesting as a bird on a nest. Outside the redbirds were flying and criss-crossing, the sun was in all the bottles on the prisoned trees, and the young peach was shining in the middle of them with the bursting light of spring (Welty 1980, 239).

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Persephone finally leaves the Underworld. Compared as "a bird on a nest," Livvie is ready to fly as the next sentence immediately picks up with the flight of the redbirds. What is more, the hypallage or the use of the adjective "young" to qualify the peach serves as an indirect way to qualify Livvie, thus underlining her new-found vitality. It is also noteworthy that the short story ends with the word "spring": finally, Livvie fully enters the spring of her life. As it is often the case, Welty puts her characters on a self-discovery quest. Livvie is meant to challenge herself and the norms associated with both her gender and her literary status as a character: Livvie does not fit the role of the widow who will mourn her husband forever, nor does she remain a recluse. Contrary to popular belief, seclusion is a deeply plastic state: if seclusion is commonly defined as the state of being alone, usually in a closed space, in the works of Welty, O'Connor and Faulkner it is not always synonymous with a complete asbence of motion and a total exclusion from sociability. The depiction of seclusion in those works rather echoes the etymology of the word: Latin *recludo* (re-claudo) once meant "to open." According to Paulette L'Hermite-Leclerc, *recludo* only began to be associated with the act of closing around 200 AD (L'Hermite-Leclerc 1988, 219). Welty, O'Connor and Faulkner's secluded characters are standing at the threshold, sometimes tempted (Welty) or invaded (O'Connor) by the outside world, sometimes rejecting it altogether (Faulkner). As a consequence, the representation of as well as the very concept of seclusion in these Southern works echoes the liminality of Southern literature: those secluded characters evolve on the fringes of society, and even go back and forth at times, thus challenging both the reader's expectations (who expect secluded characters to stay put) and the social norms of the diegesis (female characters who remain unmarried, for instance).

This liminal position allows some characters to violate prohibitions that would otherwise be too visible. In Faulkner's *Light in August*, Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden's marginalized way of life allows their forbidden relationship to thrive. Joe Christmas, nicknamed "Faulkner's marginal man" by Robert M. Slabey's (Slabey 1960, 266) is a character whose racial identity is ambiguous. He is believed to be black by most characters,

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but this allegation is never confirmed in the novel. However, just like a single drop of black blood made anyone fully black, Joe's supposed blackness makes him black to the rest of the town. As such, the character is marginalized and is involved in a marginal relationship with Joanna Burden, another one of the marginal characters of the novel, who lives alone on the outskirts of Jefferson. The descendant of Northerners who were involved in anti-slavery endeavors and a spinster who helps blacks, Joanna is at odds with southern mores. In the words of John T. Matthews, "Joanna suffers primarily for her race activities, but she's also sneered at for being an undomesticated woman in Jefferson" (Matthews 2009, 163). The marginalized status Joanna and Joe share, though not for the same reasons, allows them to be involved in a relationship daylight would prohibit. By having an affair with Joe Christmas, whose racial identity is unclear, Joanna enters into a gray area: it is impossible to assert that this union is indeed prohibited by the law or not. Despite this ambiguity, Joanna falls back into the raped white woman category once she is dead as Joe will be accused of murdering her. As Diane Roberts reminds us, "the white woman with no man (husband, father, son, brother) to protect her was, according to the plantation ideology, at risk of becoming an object of black vengeance, of experiencing individually what the land had experienced collectively: rape was the habitual metaphor for the 'invasion' of the South" (Roberts 1994, 155). In *Light in August*, it is the association of Joe with blackness which transforms Joanna's status. Both characters challenge the social norms of their time: while segregation prohibited the romantic and sexual union of blacks and whites (especially of black men with white women), Joe and Joanna are still involved in a relationship. In addition, Joanna is older than Joe, and is even going through menopause: an affair between a younger man and an older lady, seen by the rest of the town as an old maid, adds to the strangeness of the relationship and to its opposition to the norms.

Echoing the abnormality of Joe and Joanna's union, O'Connor's family units look discordant in the United States of the 1950s. Indeed, these families are very often incomplete and stand against the praised model of the nuclear family. According to Isabel Heinemann,

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> In the period from the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution to the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of the extended family as an economic and social network was replaced by that of the nuclear family as the nation ideal, consisting of two generations, parents and children, characterized by separate spheres with a homemaking mother and a breadwinning father (Heinemann 2012, 7-8).

O'Connor's families do not correspond to this ideal: they are generally composed of mother and daughter, sometimes accompanied by a female sharecropper and her family. In "Good Country People" (from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, published in 1955), Mrs. Hopewell lives alone with her daughter, Joy (who calls herself 'Hulga') and Mrs. Freeman, her sharecropper. "A Circle in the Fire" shares the same model (Mrs. Cope lies with her young daughter named Sally Virginia and her sharecropper, Mrs. Pritchard). In these texts, the sharecroppers' husbands are mentioned, but they do not play any role in the stories. O'Connor shatters the image of the ideal postwar American family by literally breaking the family units into pieces. In the words of Jon Lance Bacon, "the families inhabiting O'Connor's pastoral settings lack the moral virtues that made the domestic ideal so emotionally powerful, so psychologically reassuring, to postwar Americans. Here again, O'Connor undermines an assumption basic to the ideology of domestic containment – in this case, the integrity of the American family" (Bacon 1993, 48). Furthermore, the families are deeply dysfunctional: more than the absence of a husband and father, the families struggle with a lack of understanding and communication, as well as a lack of affection. "The River" features a nuclear family composed of the parents and their son, Harry Ashfield. The little boy suffers from the absence of his parents who neglect him. One day, his baby-sitter, Mrs. Connin, takes him to a healing service by the river and Harry is transfixed by it. Looking for solace and the Kingdom of Christ, he ends up drowning into the river. Though nuclear, the Ashfield family is completely dysfunctional and is blown apart at the end of the story. As Margaret Whitt notes, "O'Connor's family units are spiritually broken, physically flawed, or intellectually limited. For many of these characters, home, usually thought as a place of sustenance and nurturing, becomes a place of hostile

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endurance" (Whitt 1997, 114). O'Connor's characters, and even moreso her secluded characters, embody a shift from the norm and thus a dive into a world of marginality in which freaks roam the Southern countryside.

The Southern Freakshow

In *Creating Flannery O'Connor, Her Critics, Her Publishers, Her Readers*, Daniel Moran remarks that "some of O'Connor's readers find that O'Connor's thematic concerns transcend specifics of time and space, just as she intended them to do. However, such an approach is found less frequently than ones that disparage the South as a land of freaks" (Moran 2016, 176). The connection between southern literature and freaks is deep-seated in American culture: the freak, as the abnormal one against which normalcy is defined, echoes the narrative of the region an Other against which the rest of the nation would define itself. As Erik Kline writes:

> Because the freak occupies this vague space determined largely by the whims of what is historically normal or superior, its malleability allows its producers to consistently reframe it as a negative signifier to normalcy. In the national imagination, it tells consumers what they are not; it fulfills their desire to assert their own "normal" subjectivity. As the nation's freak show, then, the South gets caricaturized as what the nation wishes itself not to be: racist, violent, poor, ugly, obese, incestuous, stupid, and so on (Hagstette et. Al 2023, 305).

There is a double movement in the context of the South: outsiders make the region Other and freakish, but southern literature itself nourishes this tendency. Indeed, Kline goes on by stating that the "literature of the U.S. South enfreaks the region through both fictional and nonfictional representations and similarly depicts both historical freak show exhibits as well as real southerners as freaks of nation" (Hagstette et al. 2023, 305). In other words, the South is otherized from within and from the outside, and freaks are one aspect of this dual tendency: one the one hand, the South is perceived as a "land of freaks" (Moran 2016, 176); on the other hand, some southern works do include freaks and are often connected to the grotesque mode.

Freakish characters are indeed often associated with the grotesque which, according to Michael J. Meyer, is akin to "an estranged world fraught with frightful and ludicrous

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incongruities: human degradation abounds, disfigurement of an aberrational nature assaults the senses, organic and mechanical elements interpenetrate, the categories of a rational and familiar order fuse, collapse, and finally give way to the absurd" (Meyer 1995, 1). The grotesque turns everything upside down and grotesque characters might be viewed as marginal by nature. They are the margin incarnate: their marginality is imprinted on their flesh. In "Parker's Back" (from *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, published in 1965), Parker fills every patch of his skin with tattoos. He was captivated by a fully tattooed man he once saw at the fair, and took to imitate him. However, Parker is endlessly unsatisfied by the tattoos he gets and always looks for new ones:

> He did not care much what the subject was so long as it was colorful; on his abdomen he had a few obscenities but only because that seemed the proper place for them. Parker would be satisfied with each tattoo about a month, then something about it that had attracted him would wear off. Whenever a decent-sized mirror was available, he would get in front of it and study his overall look. The effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him and he would go off and find another tattooist and have another space filled up. The front of Parker was almost completely covered but there were no tattoos on his back. He had no desire for one anywhere he could not readily see it himself. As the space on the front of him for tattoos decreased, his dissatisfaction grew and became general (O'Connor 2009, 514).

Parker was willingly contaminated by the freakishness of the man he saw at the fair (who was, in all probability, a freak). The tattoos are visual proof of his marginality and bring forth his interior freakery. O'Connor is known for her many freaks, deformed outcasts who mostly live on isolated farms, as if their marginal localization informed and amplified their grotesque nature. As Anthony Di Renzo puts it, "[h]er grotesques, too, are marginal, literally living on the margins of legitimate society: backwood prophets, bastard children, escaped criminals, shiftless farmhands, sharecroppers, migrants, hitchhikers, refugees" (Di Renzo 1993, 12). The particularity of "Parker's Back" lies in the depiction of the enfreakment process: Parker's tattoos not only marginalize him, they above all make his otherness visible to the rest of the world. As often with O'Connor, the body expresses the character's inner state: in "Parker's Back," this expression is epitomized by the overwhelming presence of

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tattoos, while in most of O'Connor's story it is rather symbolized by a physical lack, as in "Good Country People." Joy Hopewell is a thirty-two-year-old woman's leg was accidentally shot off in a hunting accident when she was a child, causing her to wear a wooden leg. Joy is simply described as "a large blonde girl who had an artificial leg" (O'Connor 2009, 271) who has a PhD in philosophy. The grotesqueness of her character seems to be incarnated in her leg and in her name, which she changed for 'Hulga' as soon as she left for her studies. 'Hulga' is both reminiscent of the adjectives 'hulk' and 'ugly.' Mrs. Hopewell is then convinced that her daughter purposely chose the name for its ugliness: "When Mrs. Hopewell thought the name, Hulga, she thought of the broad blank hull of a battleship" (O'Connor 2009, 274). In a purely grotesque way, Mrs. Hopewell's daughter is objectified through her name and becomes a part of a boat. The alliteration in -b ("broad blank battleship") embodies Hulga's brutality, the brutality of her fierce opposition to her mother as the two cannot get along. Joy-Hulga's freakishness and marginality is epitomized by her name, her leg, and her divergence with her mother's ways and the "good country people" she adores. O'Connor's characters are out-of-place, and this otherness is incarnated in their bodies.

Eudora Welty acknowledged she used grotesque devices in her early fiction, and pointed to the role of the body in the process: "[I]n those early stories I'm sure I needed the device of what you call the 'grotesque.' That is, I hoped to differentiate character by their physical qualities as a way of showing what they were like inside—it seemed to me the most direct way to do it" (Prenshaw 1984, 84). Unlike O'Connor, the physical difference of Welty's characters' is not only the bodily expression of some inner condition, but also a test for the humanity of the rest of the characters. As Charles L. Crow points out,

> The audience at a sideshow pays for the voyeuristic enjoyment of the grotesque, a complex and morally compromised position depending on rubes, or bumpkins in the audience enjoying awe or revulsion whilst believing in their own safe superiority or normalcy. Indeed,the relation of rube gawking at freak mimics,in many ways, the relationship of the audience and the Gothic text or horror movie. But this relationship depends on the smug sense of otherness: whatever we are,we are not like that. (Crow 2009, 129-130).

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Welty humanizes her freaks and uses their freakery as a bridge between her characters. In "Keela the Outcast Indian Maiden" (from *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, published in 1941), Little Lee Roy, a club-footed diminutive black man, was kidnapped and forced to perform as a Native woman and to eat chickens alive. The reader's first reaction is not to feel reassured by their own normalcy (compared to Keela's freakery) but, on the contrary, to sympathize with the freak. To Crow, "the response of the reader is less likely to be horror or dread than a thoughtful and sympathetic consideration of the story's implications" (Crow 2009, 130). Clytie from the eponymous short story elicits the same reaction. Though not physically different, the character is perceived as a strange lady who does not know how to properly communicate with her peers:

> It might be simply that Miss Clytie's wits were all leaving her, said the ladies standing in the door to feel the cool, the way her sister's had left her; and she would just wait there to be told to go home. She would have to wring out everything she had on—the waist and the jumper skirt, and the long black stockings . On her head was one of the straw hats from the furnishing store, with an old black satin ribbon pinned to it to make it a better hat, and tied under the chin. Now, under the force of the rain, while the ladies watched, the hat slowly began to sag down on each side until it looked even more absurd and done for, like an old bonnet on a horse. And indeed it was with the patience almost of a beast that Miss Clytie stood there in the rain and stuck her long empty arms out a little from her sides, as if she were waiting for something to come along the road and drive her to shelter (Welty 1980, 81-82).

The comic aspect of the scene emphasizes the grotesque ways of the character. In addition, the phrase "she had been known" underlines Clytie's odd habit and the passive form insists on the community's gaze. Everyone in town recognizes the strange recluse who cannot hold a discussion with the inhabitants, let alone form any bond with them. At the end of the story, Clytie throws herself head first into a rainbarrel, and the uncovering of her body is treated in an extremely grotesque manner: "When Old Lethy found her, she had fallen forward into the barrel, with her poor ladylike black-stockinged legs up-ended and hung apart like a pair of tongs." (Welty 1980, 90). The visual quality of Welty's isolated characters highlights their grotesque nature, which in turn informs their own marginality. The freakshow these

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characters roam in embodies the discrepancy that stands between the secluded characters and the normative, 'normal' community which looks at these characters as aliens. The freakish quality of these Southern stories thus contributes to create marginal characters who are *physically* inscribed in the margin and always tell something about human nature.

The Margin as a "Gateway to Reality"

Depicting Transgressions

In the words of Flannery O'Connor, "[t]o call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality. It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking" (O'Connor 1990, 54). The margin, insofar as it refers to a borderland or fringes, encapsulates the limitation O'Connor mentions. Writing from the South, in other words writing from a region perceived or represented as Other, might offer a special vantage point, a "gateway to reality." Writing *about* the margin thus allows the authors under study to depict actions which are normally hidden because they escape the norm and, as such, cannot be accepted by the other characters or even readers and society at large. In these works, the margin is a gateway to the unthinkable and becomes the land of transgression.

In *Trangression*, Julian Wolfreys endeavors to define the notion of transgression and underlines three main aspects:

> the common assumptions that inform any definition of transgression have to do with (a) form or identity; (b) a movement or motion, a passage of some kind, and therefore implicitly a duration or temporality; and this passage from being on the side of the law to being lawless for example; hence trespass, to pass over or across, to infringe or impose; (c) spatial and relational position or location (Wolfreys 2008, 3).

In two cases out of three, transgression has to do with space – and space might be connected to identity as well, then overlapping all three definitions. In the works under study, to

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transgress means to cross a line *from the margins*, in other words from a liminal space. This particular position seems to spur or facilitate the character's transgressions: standing on the margins, the characters of the corpus are less concerned by social norms than other characters. They do not have to abide by them or, at least, can use the mysterious privacy of their homes to conceal their transgressions.

Indeed, the marginalized status of secluded characters allows the narrators to deal with particularly reprehensible transgressions in the segregated South. In Faulkner's *Light in August*, Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden's marginalized way of life allows their forbidden relationship to thrive. Joe Christmas, nicknamed "Faulkner's marginal man" by Robert M. Slabey's (Slabey 1960, 266) is a character whose racial identity is ambiguous. He is believed to be black by most characters, but this allegation is never confirmed in the novel. However, just like a single drop of black blood made anyone fully black, Joe's supposed blackness makes him black to the rest of the town. As such, the character is marginalized and is involved in a marginal relationship with Joanna Burden, another one of the marginal characters of the novel, who lives alone on the outskirts of Jefferson. The descendant of Northerners who were involved in anti-slavery endeavors and a spinster who helps blacks, Joanna is at odds with southern mores. In the words of John T. Matthews, "Joanna suffers primarily for her race activities, but she's also sneered at for being an undomesticated woman in Jefferson" (Matthews 2009, 163). The marginalized status Joanna and Joe share, though not for the same reasons, allows them to be involved in a relationship daylight would prohibit. By having an affair with Joe Christmas, whose racial identity is unclear, Joanna enters into a gray area: it is impossible to assert that this union is indeed prohibited by the law or not. Despite this ambiguity, Joanna falls back into the raped white woman category once she is dead as Joe will be accused of murdering her. As Diane Roberts reminds us, "the white woman with no man (husband, father, son, brother) to protect her was, according to the plantation ideology, at risk of becoming an object of black vengeance, of experiencing individually what the land had experienced collectively: rape was the habitual

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metaphor for the 'invasion' of the South" (Roberts 1994, 155). In *Light in August*, it is the association of Joe with blackness which transforms Joanna's status. Both characters challenge the social norms of their time: Joanna is older than Joe, and is even going through menopause – an affair between a younger man and an older lady, seen by the rest of the town as an old maid, adds to the strangeness of the relationship and to its opposition to the norms – and, while segregation prohibited the romantic and sexual union of blacks and whites (especially of black men with white women), Joe and Joanna are still involved in a relationship and thus also relate to the taboo of miscegenation.

Miscegenation is often cited as a *Southern* taboo as interracial relationships were forbidden in the South. The taboo is recurring in Faulkner's work: it is at the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*. In the first novel, Thomas Sutpen marries Eulalia Bon while he is a foreman on a plantation in Haiti. Sutpen finds out that Eulalia is part black when he thought she was of Spanish descent. Following this discovery, Sutpen abandons Eulalia and their young son, Charles. The latter is killed by Henry Sutpen, his half-brother, when he is about to marry his sister, Judith. In other words, Charles Bon dies as he is about to repeat the transgression of racial boundaries, him being part black and Judith being fully white. The marriage of Charles Bon and Judith Sutpen would have transgressed two taboos: incest and miscegenation. However, Henry seems much more bothered by the mixing of races than by incest, as evidenced by the dialogue between Henry and Charles imagined by Quentin: "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest which you can't bear" (Faulkner 1995a, 356). For Henry, an interracial relationship is more dangerous than an incestuous one and Henry's profound fear of miscegenation leads him to kill Charles. However, in some cases, miscegenation can be committed on purpose: Thomas Sutpen also has a daughter from a black slave, Clytemnestra (nicknamed Clytie). As Biljana Oklopcic notes, "when he achieves his design through the body of legally white Ellen Coldfield, Sutpen consciously and willingly commits miscegenation with his female slaves" (Oklopcic 2014, 8). Miscegenation is part of a gray area, stricltly forbidden between blacks males and white females, but

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tolerated between white males and black females: in the first case, the walls of a marginal space (the isolated house of a spinster in *Light in August*) is needed; in the second case, the microcosm of the plantation is enough. Life on the margins allows the narrator to shed light on trangressions which are more likely to occur on the brink of society because this liminal space provides a shelter from the world. In her study of ritual as chronotope in Mesopotamia, Carolyn Nakamura argues that transgressions "were obfuscated by certain ritual gestures that exploited not only liminal spaces, but also liminal times. In such liminal states, one can cross borders, act against certain strictures with impunity […]" (Gunter 2019, 323). Liminality is a privileged place and state for transgressions, as well as a way for authors to shock the readers in a frame which simultaneously softens the impact of the transgression – precisely because the actors of the transgression evolve on the margins.

William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930) plays on this dichotomy as it partly unsettles the reader thanks to a strategy of concealment. Told from an external and collective narrator, the story hinges around Emily Grierson, a mysterious woman who ends up locking herself away in her father's house after he dies. For a while, the people of Jefferson think she might marry a man named Homer Barron, but the latter suddenly disappears while Emily had been seen buying arsenic from the druggist. The reader and the whole town think she is going to kill herself, and the final scene of the short story comes as a terrible shock: Emily is found dead in "one of the downstairs rooms" (Faulkner 1995b, 129) and, after the funeral, the 'we' narrator makes an even more dreadful discovery on the second floor:

> The man himself lay in the bed.
>
> For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.

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> Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair (Faulkner 1995b, 130).

The reason for Homer Barron's disappearance is solved at once. The man lies in one of Emily Grierson's beds. The position of the corpse emphasizes the lack of a second body which would have been embraced. The use of the adverb "apparently" shows the subjectivity of the collective point of view and underlines their hermeneutic quest. Although the reader is not given any direct explanation, as the story ends abruptly, they can guess Emily once lay on the bed, next to the man's body, because of the "iron-gray hair" that is found on the second pillow. Emily's isolation allows her to transgress the taboos of murder and necrophilia, with the impenetrable walls of her house sheltering her actions. Emily's marginal position is echoed by the physical space of the house. Indeed, as Diane Roberts points out, Emily and Faulkner's other spinsters

> in some ways reflect and perpetuate the image of the maladjusted, predatory, manless woman judged by her access to or denial of 'normal' sexual relations or the possibility of marriage, marginal to the favored definitions of the feminine in the South. Despite this (or because of it, maybe) they are dangerous women literally on the edge, who construct and, to some extent, control fictions that shape their world (Roberts 1994, 150).

By standing "literally on the edge," Emily subverts the expectations of the readers and of the rest of the characters. The supposedly passive lady turns into active murderer: in the words of John N. Duvall, "because people categorize Emily as a lady, the passive and decorative object, they constantly misread her" (Duvall 1990, 128). Margins both provide a protective screen for transgressive actions and spur – or at least facilitate – such actions. These transgressions suggest that even within a given marginal space, several margins can overlap: in these Southern works, the marginality of the characters is amplified by the Otherness of the South, precisely because of the cultural dimension of the taboos represented in the stories. Miscegenation has a particular status in the South, and so do women – in the timeframes of the stories studied here – who are trapped into a predefined

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role (either a daughter, a wife or a widow). Both Emily Grierson and Joanna Burden subvert this narrative by being involved in forbidden relationships (with a man perceived as black or with a dead Yankee). To Diane Roberts, "Miss Emily harbors a covert sexuality that destabilizes not only the integrity of the spinster lady but the whole edifice of southern history and class" (Roberts 1994, 158). The destabilizing power of Emily's "covert" actions thrives in the shadows of the multi-layered margins of the story (her status as a murderess, a necrophiliac, a spinster; the particular southern echo of her manless existence).

The margin within the margin

In the words of Hetherington, "margins are spaces of traffic" (Hetherington 1997, 27). This statement highlights the movement inherent to the concept of transgression and suggests that margins stand out because of their capacity to foster such movement. If the margin corresponds to what stands *on* the limits of a given society, then one might consider this space as a place like no other which welcomes all kinds of "traffic," namely trangressions. This peculiar status is reminiscent of the concept of "heterotopia" (Foucault 1994, 752-762), a distinct place which is often the reversed version of a "normal" site, thus offering an alternative to a given location. As such, "heterotopia are spaces in which an alternative social ordering is performed" (Hetherington 1997, 40). They allow transgressions to thrive so as to create a new order. Heterotopia and transgression are consequently interconnected notions: Bertrand Westphal understands heterotopia as "the space imbued by literature in its capacity as a 'laboratory of the possible,' the investigator of the integral space that sometimes occurs in the field of reality and sometimes outside of it" (Westphal 2011, 63). This "laboratory of the possible" is then home to several layers of marginality – deviancy from the norm.

The characters from the works studied here are marginalized because of their secluded way of life, but should they not be isolated, they would all probably be viewed as marginal characters nonetheless. O'Connor's Lucynell from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own"

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(*A Good Man is Hard to Find*, 1955) for instance, is a simple-minded, deaf young woman. Her grotesque behavior and way of speaking add to the marginality of her status as a recluse: "The daughter was leaning very far down, hanging her head almost between her knees watching him through a triangular door she had made in her overturned hair; and she suddenly fell in a heap on the floor and began to whimper" (O'Connor 2009, 149). Lucynell would be considered as a 'freak' anywhere else. Likewise, Faulkner's Joanna Burden is seen as a stranger by the inhabitants of Jefferson:

> She lives in the big house alone, a woman of middleage. She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction. A Yankee, a lover of negroes, about whom in the town there is still talk of queer relations with negroes in the town and out of it, despite the fact that it is now sixty years since her grandfather and her brother were killed on the square by an exslaveowner over a question of negro votes in a state election. But it still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the town had reason (or thought that they had) to hate and dread (Faulkner 1990, 46-47).

Joanna's isolated existence undoubdtedly emphasizes her strangeness, partly because of the symbolic echoes that come with it, primarily the eerie witch who lives in the woods. However, were she not a recluse, she would still be marginalized in the South: as her family name suggests, Joanna carries the *burden* of her ancestry. Her family came from New England right after the American Civil War (1861-1865), during the Reconstruction era (1865-1877). Even though she was born in the South, to the rest of the town Joanna is still a Yankee, and as such she could never fully belong to the society of Jefferson. Joanna perpetuates the legacy of her grandfather and uncle who advocated for the civil rights of black people, by helping blacks as she can, which is seen as queer by the Jeffersonians. Joanna's status as a manless (and manlike) woman is not sufficient to account for her marginality: it is her connection with other marginalized people (blacks, Yankees) which pushes her further in the margins, as if marginality were contaminating. The "wrong" connections have an ostracizing power over the characters of *Light in August*.

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The impact of relations with other characters is central to Eudora Welty's short stories, especially "Clytie" in which the eponymous character is also twice marginalized: Clytie is both a recluse who lives in an isolated manor with her family *and* a character who is profoundly socially inadapted. The young woman is unable to communicate with other people. She flees whenever she is spoken to and cannot seem to bound with anyone:

> If anyone spoke to her, she fled. If she saw she was going to meet someone on the street, she had been known to dart behind a bush and hold a small branch in front of her face until the person had gone by. 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* (Welty 1980, 86).

Clytie's behavior is rendered in a very visual way by the narrator who describes the character's every move as well as the intense colors of her face. The reader cannot help but smile at Clytie's rather disproportionate reaction and at the way she tries to hide herself: a small branch is certainly not enough to cover her entire face. The character's behavior is then quite paradoxical as she attempts to avoid contact with the bystanders but is nevertheless *seen* trying to hide. Because of her strangeness, the townsfolk think Clytie is mad: "It might be simply that Miss Clytie's wits were all leaving her, said the ladies standing in the door to feel the cool […]" (Welty 190, 81). Contrary to Faulkner who uses relations as a lethal weapon which marginalizes his characters further, Welty plays with the *lack* of relations. In "Clytie," it is the lack of social bonds outside *and* inside the house (the Farrs are a dysfunctional family in which blood ties seem to supplant love) which marginalize Clytie, as well as her own behavior. When Clytie touches Mr Bobo's face at the end of the story, she cannot bear the contact with the man. Mr Bobo's flight is barely described and only the overwhelming feeling of hyperesthesia remains: "The terrible scent of bay rum, of hair tonic, the horrible moist scratch of an invisible beard, the dense, popping green eyes – what she had got hold of with her hand!" (Welty 1980, 89). Clytie is both unable to *escape* people (they see her trying to hide) and unable to *connect* with them (any physical contact is overwhelming). An erratic character, she continuously stands on the margin, as if the margin always called for more marginality.

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The literature from the South of the United States has historically been connected to the notion of 'margin,' insofar as the perceived marginality of the region seems to contaminate its literature. The fiction of the South as 'other' pushes the region into the margins of the country, both literally and figuratively. To many readers outside the region, writing *from* the South seems to mean writing *from* the margins about a different way of life. In *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature*, Richard Gray points to "the acceptance, not just of the South, but of southern writing as distinctively separate and implicitely 'regional' even before the term was invented, an acceptance that characterizes many writers from the South themselves as they struggle with the sens of being 'other,' writing on and from somewhere far on the margins" (Gray 2007, 64).

This old and enduring vision of the South as a region on the fringes nourishes a "southern imaginary": in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee define the notion as "an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, ideas, attitudes, practices, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographic region and time" (Barker & McKee 2011, 2). Barker and McKee explain that the "southern imaginary" is "not a false representation that must be stripped away to see the real South but a multifaceted, multivalent concept that informs our understanding of U.S. culture, especially in relation to ideas about race, gender, and region" (Barker & McKee 2011, 3), thus highlighting the continuing importance of this imagined, fantasized South as object of scholarly interest as well as a place where the margins – the idea of the South as Other – meet the center – the idea of the South as a fully part of a national *and* global nexus. Barker and McKee's view echoes John E. Bassett's who states that "Southern writers are both part of and separate from American literature if we think of both pedagogical and scholarly categories" (Bassett 1997, 18), which reinforces the position of the South as a liminal space and which places its literature on the fringes of American literary productions. The liminality of the South complicates the categorization of its authors who

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find themselves in the midst of a greater, contagious narrative, caught between universal, national, and purely regional interpretations.

In the stories studied here, Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty use margins not solely in order to isolate their characters, but rather to depict the "traffic" (Hetherington 1997, 27) that is spurred or facilitated by this liminal position: the margins depicted in these Southern works can give birth to a "land of freaks" (Moran 2016, 176) but, above all, they establish a land of transgressions. Southern margins call for movement and boundary-crossing, and bridge the gap between the fringes and the center.

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