

IDEAL CARER: THE CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN WHITE ELITE MATRON IN PETER TAYLOR'S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

In the Old South, the white matron from the slaveholding elites—the domestic angel, the caring mother, wife and lady—was perceived as the only female fulfilling the ideal of the “true woman.” As such, she was also predisposed to becoming the “ideal carer” of the old southern culture. This translated itself into the care of the white elite matron to be also identified with the slavery principle. The article attempts to demonstrate that the old southern role of the white elite matron can be productive in the contemporary, democratic southern context, too. The analysis of selected short stories by Peter Taylor shows that the above-mentioned role can be treated by all southerners as a springboard to a more flexible and diversified identity, be it individually, or with regard to any broader southern scope. As such, the role of the white elite southern matron becomes a fine tool helping understand that the South—the Old and the New alike—is first and foremost a performance to enjoy.

KEYWORDS

Peter Taylor; twentieth-century Southern literature; twentieth-century American short story; southern matrons; true womanhood; ethics of care; identity as performance

In response to the enormous socio-economic transformations which the Industrial Revolution brought about, the 19th century created the ideal of True Womanhood interpreted in the American South as “weakness, dependency, illogicality, and purity.”¹ This ideal was meant to be realized within the bounds of the domestic sphere free from the influences of the outside world, a condition which in turn determined the class and race-oriented character of the southern version of the phenomenon of True Womanhood.² Owing to its “home-bound” conditioning, the model in question came to be identified in the antebellum South with the role of the white elite matron. By the term “white elite matron” I understand two things: one pertains to the fact of such a woman representing the old southern plantation

1. For the extension of the characteristics see Virginia Kent Anderson Leslie, “A Myth of the Southern Lady: Antebellum Proslavery Rhetoric and the Proper Place of Women,” in *Southern Women*, ed. Caroline Matheny Dillman (New York: Hemisphere Publishing, 1989), 19–33.

2. Outside the slaveholding class, women and men were less likely to occupy separate spheres of activity, and, consequently, the roles they acquired proved more flexible. See Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 37–42.

aristocracy, i.e., families in possession of more than fifty bondsmen³; whereas another pertains to her being a married woman. This is because only a married woman, who was already acquainted with sexual intimacy and its consequences (childbearing), could be considered “true,” for she had “suffered and [had] grown strong.”⁴ In effect, the realization of the ideal of True Womanhood in the South exacted one to performing the three fixed roles of Mother, Wife and Lady.

Contemporarily, the concept of the white elite southern matron has only a limited scope.⁵ The existing scholarly sources which discuss the role of women in the South after WWII unanimously discard the white elite southern matron as a positive female model. Instead, they give the crown of the “positive heroine” of the southern culture to the present-day southern black, Appalachian, or working-class woman, that is, the female whose life as a subject of scholarly studies was ignored prior to the 1940s.

It seems to be a different story, though, when it comes to the picture of the white elite southern matron in southern literature after 1945; one of those in whose works southern matrons play a distinctive role is Peter Taylor. Taylor, a Tennessean short story writer and novelist, was himself a descendant by birth of the southern aristocratic tradition. As a writer, he has been acclaimed for his woman-centered vision of the South to the degree that his focus on the contemporary southern upper middle class women has earned him the label of an “effeminate” writer.⁶ This label has secured Taylor a special position among other contemporary southern male writers. He himself justifies his interpretation of southern social reality from the female point of view as follows: “You try to understand how the world is from other points of view. . . . I did write a lot about women, and in a way it was trying to understand them and trying to take the opposite view from the one I would naturally hold”⁷—it is obvious that Taylor assumed the position of this reality’s emphatic, understanding participant rather than its sole “owner.”

The role of the white elite matron is one of the most frequent female roles Taylor depicts in his writings, which might suggest that he does not consider

3. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 7. For a more detailed definition of the slaveholding class in general see James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (London: Norton, 1998), 37–68.

4. See Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 68.

5. Of all the sources that I managed to consult in this respect, only *Southern Women* (1989), edited by Caroline Matheny Dillman, David Goldfield’s *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), and Tara McPherson’s *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) touch upon the question of the contemporary southern lady, and even their books mention the issue only in passing.

6. J. William Broadway, “A Conversation with Peter Taylor,” in *Conversations with Peter Taylor*, ed. Hubert H. McAlexander (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 78.

7. Qtd. in Broadway, “A Conversation with Peter Taylor,” 79.

its essence as written in stone, as southern culture has taught us to perceive it. Therefore, contrary to what the above-mentioned scholarly sources suggest, this role and its realization as the Ideal Carer in the southern culture would be one that cannot be preserved, destroyed, delegated, or superseded. Rather, depending on the point of view, it would prove to be constantly created and recreated—performed really—and the actual meaning of such a performance would depend entirely on our own current potential to (im)mobilize cultural phenomena which resonate with our identities.

The matrons whose literary lives and feelings I intend to analyze are the protagonists of Peter Taylor's short stories "A Long Fourth" (1946), "Guests" (1959), and "The Elect" (1968): Harriet Wilson, Henrietta Harper, and Nell Larwell respectively. All of these women are first and foremost presented to the reader, in bodily terms, as pretty, petite, and gracious. This suggests that, when it comes to the question of physical appearance, they still represent the typical old southern female ideal of the True Woman, which entails an implication of purity and goodness and are thus perceived by onlookers. For example, when observing his wife at breakfast, Edmund Harper, the narrator of "Guests," admires the "graceful curve of Henrietta's wrist as she pour[s] coffee. . . ,"⁸ as well as the "soft arrangement of her hair and the extraordinary freshness of her complexion" (G 185) and thinks that she is a "beautiful woman in every sense" (G 185). Thus, Taylor implies, a woman's individual physical traits (which contribute to southern matronhood) are nevertheless culturally interpreted as sex/gender-marking (that is, in opposition to maleness). As such, they still serve primarily to determine whether a woman is "true" enough to play the gendered role of the matron.⁹

Apart from the physical characteristics that suggest female chastity and therefore outstanding moral power, all of Taylor's matrons are passionate

8. Peter Taylor, "Guests," in *Happy Families Are All Alike* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), 184. Hereafter cited in text as G.

9. This interpretation coincides with the "essentialist" biological perspective that gender (cultural) feminists hold with regard to the sources of femininity. According to them, the female body (and its "motherly" function) constitutes the main source of women's power, for it entails the "constitutional" presence in females of such psychological values as, e.g., modesty, empathy, sympathy, tenderness, care, intuition, sensitivity, and lack of egoism. These qualities are considered morally more valuable than those that are traditionally ascribed to men (i.e., will power, ambition, courage, independence, and low emotionality). For a definitive list of psychological features that are considered typically female see Mary Vetterling-Braggin, ed., *"Femininity," "Masculinity," and "Androgyny": A Modern Philosophical Discussion* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 5–6. On the other hand, southern patriarchal culture at the same time identifies these innate female qualities with sexual suppression (a "good" woman is an asexual woman), ergo, it endows the woman with a gender identity only when she subordinates her biological potential to male requirements, thereby becoming a slave to male sexuality. This indicates that biology, as radical-cultural feminists claim, is more a source of female oppression than of power, for it creates a double sexual standard and makes it a paradigm of all subsequent power relations. That is how the "private" becomes the "political." For a discussion of this problem see, e.g., Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

about cleanliness. This only reinforces their “idealness” and makes it appear all the more convincing. Harriet Wilson, the main character of “A Long Fourth” describes herself as having a “tendency to care more for the cleanliness and order”¹⁰ than her idealized Mama. Also, Henrietta Harper of “Guests” aims at keeping “commodious, well staffed, elegantly appointed house” (G 181). Additionally, all the three matrons under analysis are well-mannered women who always rise to the occasion, offering their tactfulness, good will, emotional support, or consolation to the needy. This can be read as these women’s ability both to creatively organize their life space, and hence to introduce changes in the existing order, and at the same time to preserve this order, which would suggest the contemporary southern matron’s fear of change in general.

Gender feminists are of the opinion that by developing their uniquely feminine characteristics which, apart from personal power, give them an exceptional ability to create bonds (including intergenerational bonds) with others and consequently, to pass this power on and share it, women thus initiate a higher moral order based on what Carol Gilligan refers to as the “ethics of care.” The ethics of care is seen as constituting a better ideological foundation for the world’s functioning because, contrary to the traditional male “ethics of justice” (morality as a set of rules and principles of behavior artificially imposed upon humans), the ethics of care grows out of people’s natural impulses to help others.¹¹

If southern patriarchal culture identifies the ethics of care only with women, then their care might prove unrequited in male-female relations. What crops up instead is, as radical-cultural feminists claim, a collective act of female allegiance to men as well as a confirmation of the male and a greater significance of the masculine ethics. In this way the “ethics of care” becomes a silent homage paid by women to male gender, social and racial divisions that patriarchy imposes upon its followers.¹²

None of Taylor’s caring matrons soils her hands with work, and neither are they worried about the fact of their financial dispossession, for they all consider money matters a male business.¹³ However, even if the matrons depend financially upon their husbands and accept this fact as natural (which is the case with all the female protagonists in question), this does not seem to

10. Peter Taylor, “A Long Fourth,” in *A Long Fourth, and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 134. Hereafter cited in text as LF.

11. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

12. See, e.g., Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

13. This confirms the opinion of radical cultural feminists that, under patriarchy, the ethics of care understood as an exclusively female domain can also be used by women themselves as a sexist way of taking advantage of male cultural resources. As such, it would assume the status of a defence strategy against the ideology that ignores the female need of “financial justice.” See Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 167.

guarantee them the marital happiness they expect in exchange for sacrificing their economic autonomy. This is because the financial reliance upon the spouse seems to also entail subservience when it comes to general decision-making, which, in the case of these women, deprives them of the possibility to exert influence even upon those matters that concern the domestic sphere, one with which they are usually identified and which is supposed to constitute their sphere of authority.

One good example of this is the conduct of Sweetheart, the doctor husband of Harriet Wilson of "A Long Fourth," a story set in Nashville during World War II. When, nagged for five years by his wife to send BT, their black male servant and Sweetheart's personal favorite, away, Sweetheart, the only breadwinner in the Wilson family, always refuses to do so, though not overtly. Whenever Harriet "mention[s] the business about BT or any other business" (LF 130), Sweetheart simply replies, "I declare you get prettier by the year" (LF 130), thus completely ignoring Harriet's wishes. When she retorts, angry, that he never says she grows wiser by the year, Sweetheart replies, "laughing, that it certainly [does] seem she [will] never be a judge of niggers" (LF 130). In this way, by trivializing both Harriet's feelings and her intellectual powers, Sweetheart manipulates his wife out of control over the domestic sphere and into believing that it is the man who pulls all the strings.

As long as such a game serves marriage, in the sense that it allows for learning about another person and thus for consciously creating conditions for giving and taking love, there is nothing wrong with playing it. However, the matron's inability to perceive marriage as a game forces her to resort to *licentia poetica* with regard to the character of her marital relations. By this I mean a situation in which a woman in the contemporary South feels that something is wrong with her marriage and yet she ignores this feeling, choosing to delude herself as to the nature of the forces governing the relations with her husband. For example, in Harriet's case the male manipulation succeeds due to Sweetheart's skillful playing on his wife's culturally imprinted vanity and inferiority complex. Harriet always succumbs to it, demonstrating that, when it comes to her marriage, she hears and sees only what she chooses to. She also avoids open confrontations with her husband: "[S]he had quickly turned her back to him (which was the severest rebuke she was ever known to give her husband)" (LF 130), a practice which only reinforces his positive self-image. Additionally, Harriet deceives herself about her own mental picture: "[S]he had always considered that she was nobody's fool and that she certainly was not merely a vain little woman ruled by a husband's flattery" (LF 130). Such deception allows Harriet to suppress her own "ugly" feelings and sustain her self-image as a person capable of loving unconditionally: "[W]hen he is so sweet to me I realize what a blessing that is and how unimportant other things are" (LF 130). By making Sweetheart the determinant of her own self-esteem, Harriet denies what for readers is already self-evident: that the institution of marriage, with its concept of love which is there to "sweeten the woman's

heart,” as Sweetheart’s name suggests, rather than to care for this heart’s “well-being”, might be oppressive, too.¹⁴

A similar denial pushes Henrietta Harper, the protagonist of “Guests,” into manipulating her husband’s self-worth in order to uphold her own ideal image. Henrietta, a middle-aged woman and wife of Edmund, a successful Nashville lawyer, seems more independent than Harriet Wilson. She construes her image not only around her home life, which is Harriet’s sole occupation, but also around her social work: she busies herself preserving Nashville landmarks, erecting monuments and caring for the downtrodden. Also, she fosters her social contacts by joining clubs and circles and she cultivates family relations by hosting with great zeal her innumerable country relatives. All these activities constitute what Henrietta refers to as her “good works,” that is, projects whose underlying aim is to help others. This is how Edmund, Henrietta’s husband and focalizer of the story, perceives her, too, which pushes him to support his wife in her enterprises.

Although he does his best to assist Henrietta in what he calls her “projects,” he is not satisfied with the outcome of his efforts, for he realizes that they hardly benefit any of their recipients. Yet Edmund never questions Henrietta’s goodness. It is himself whom he considers a failure and continues, even though reluctantly, to participate in his wife’s “good works.” The desire to be seen, too, as a good person incapacitates Edmund to speak openly about it with Henrietta, the more so since he realizes that if he expressed his true feelings he would be accused of “not seeing [Henrietta] through” (G 171). Edmund’s inability to solve this problem to the genuine advantage of both parties therefore makes him feel trapped in the situation which in turn results in his conviction that, as the only good person in their tandem, Henrietta should be the chief provider of their joint goodness. In effect, every time she acts or behaves in a way that is less than “good,” Edmund manipulates her sense of self-worth. Thus Henrietta’s need to be perceived as good turns against her.

The process presented above results from Henrietta’s disappointment with herself. As the story develops, the reader learns that Henrietta would never have left Ewingsburg, the county seat where she and Edmund grew up and got married and with which they identified, if, after the five years of their marriage, she had not “learned pretty definitely that there would never be

14. According to Nel Noddings, a gender feminist, women are more predisposed than men to oppose and eliminate evil. Contrary to men who define evil as rule breaking, women see evil as a situation in which a person is hurt, emotionally or otherwise. Analogically, women do not insist on punishing “sinners” but rather on reducing the “evil” feelings of pain, separation and helplessness. See Nel Noddings, *Women and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 91. Yet, in so doing, as Sandra Bartky, a radical-cultural feminist claims, women keep affirming male morality, even if its values hurt them. Remaining silent in the face of evil and hoping that such conduct will help them salvage their own moral goodness, women become entrapped in their own “ethics of care.” See Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 118.

any children" (G 190).¹⁵ It is only then that Henrietta, hitherto satisfied with their country existence, begins to urge Edmund to leave it for a Nashville career, for she suspects him of "being bored with his life" (G 190). She thereby projects onto her husband her own feeling of failure in the role of the Mother and makes him responsible for the shape of her femininity. Analogously, after becoming a Nashville dweller actively involved in the city's manifold social works, Henrietta is "never satisfied until she had tried to draw Edmund into each activity, and, since she always fails, she is seldom satisfied with the activity afterward" (G 190)—she cannot see as her personal fulfillment anything that has not been overtly "blessed" by the person she has nominated her ultimate authority—her husband. Worse still, Henrietta is hardly satisfied with Edmund's being "entirely sympathetic" (G 190) towards her "good deeds," for her notion of being appreciated as a woman and person embraces male participation in her own projects. In other words, Henrietta is convinced that her self-satisfaction exacts to experiencing the sense of togetherness and unity with the male in every possible walk of life and if she fails to attain it, she also loses her sense of self-worth.

The desire to continually experience the state of symbiosis with her husband also explains why Henrietta eventually gives up her social work only to become a compulsive hostess to her and Edmund's numerous country relatives. This activity guarantees her husband's participation, for she knows that, for him, family is the walk of life from which "there [is] no getting around—not in Edmund's mind" (G 191). This suggests that, first, Henrietta is aware of Edmund's guilty feeling about having failed as a family man, and, second, that she manipulates his sense of guilt and self-worth to compensate for her own "familial" dissatisfactions.¹⁶ As a result, Henrietta, struggling for the "productive" status of her marriage, makes her "goodness" towards her family one more marital power game. This struggle's aim is to deny the reality of her, Edmund's, and their married life's "barrenness." Such an approach confirms that Henrietta actually prefers feeling unhappy, or helpless without a man to feel strong and potent on her own—that is why she puts her fate in Edmund's hands, which, ironically, "reproduces" the model of the subservient femininity characteristic for the Old South. It is therefore obvious why Henrietta is not productive (or else, why, despite her efforts, she does not feel fulfilled as a woman) in the postbellum context which critics of the South customarily refer to as the *new* South.¹⁷

15. We can therefore assume that Henrietta also feels unable to cultivate the ethics of care conveyed to her by her own mother. She is "barren" in the sense of being deprived of an object of care to which she could be a moral authority and which would reciprocate her own care, thus confirming her biological and cultural value as a woman.

16. Having failed as a subjective authority, Henrietta connects herself to someone who will not threaten her sense of constituting a symbol of morality, and, according to her standards, Edmund is the person. He additionally represents objective power, connecting to which will secure Henrietta this power's reciprocation.

17. According to Bartky, this is what happens when, under patriarchy, the woman invests her emotional care in a man who, as a representative of the "ethics of justice," cannot or will not

The same romantic conviction that the relation to the man must be symbiotic also seems to govern the conduct of Nell Larwell, the protagonist of "The Elect," who, accompanying her husband in his election campaign despite the fact that she hates it, climbs on the platform and announces: "Whither he goes, there I shall go also. His people shall be my people."¹⁸ Herself a daughter of a politician, Nell clearly realizes that the role of the wife of a governor-elect requires constant "adjustments" on the part of the woman. She has already "adjusted" to taking over the "business" content of her husband's political campaign: she loves writing cheques, paying monthly bills, and answering formal and informal letters. The management of Judge Larwell's political career is really a pleasure for Nell, for it does not require of her to leave her beloved house. What Nell does object to, however, is her adjustment both to living "like show people" (E 392) for the sake of supporting her husband, and to "intrusions of television and the pressures from PR men" (E 392) in her private life. She also hates when in public she is referred to as Nell Larwell instead of Mrs. Larwell. She dreads the end of the campaign and Judge Larwell's inevitable words of gratitude for her participation in it. As the "show's" final act, these words would reduce her love for her husband (whom Nell supports in virtually every enterprise he ventures) to the role of one more instrument of his political game.¹⁹

This is because in the course of the campaign Nell begins to see that as long as it suits him, Judge Larwell accepts the "domestic" way in which his wife expresses her emotional support for him: ironing his shirts, arranging for his meals when he feels hungry, or else providing him with her company when he feels like it. However, as soon as Nell's devotion to these affairs clashes with her husband's current needs—such as the necessity to present himself in the campaign as a happy family man in order to win public support, which requires Nell's presence at his side also in public—Judge Larwell accuses her of trying to avoid him and suggests that she should find someone else to do what she considers a proof of her love for him: "It's time consuming . . . that sort of little job is. One has to learn to delegate such work" (E 399). This careless attitude of her husband evokes in Nell a "silly, silly sense of being

reciprocate it. By connecting to his objective power, which does not guarantee reciprocation, the woman begins to feel subjectively unwell and, in order to make up for this deficiency, she resorts again to her "ethics of care." She then recommences giving more to a man so as to reinforce her sense of self-worth and ends up looking at the world through male eyes. In effect she loses not only her self-worth but also her sense of autonomy, which ultimately deprives her of the belief in the advisability of her own view of reality. See Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 109.

18. Peter Taylor, "The Elect," in *The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 391. Hereafter cited in text as E.

19. Thus, emotional work that woman followers of the ethics of care perform turns out androcentric again and hence unproductive for women themselves. Perceived as "natural," the female care of other people only solidifies the view that women should always act according to it regardless of personal costs that they have to bear. This makes women, also in their own eyes, mere instruments of care and consequently, of male power. See Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 165.

superseded" (E 401, Taylor's italics). She is thinking about the reality of their mutual love and begins to suspect Judge Larwell of manifesting towards her the same "professional cordiality" (E 405) as he does towards his voters. Such "love" would end as soon as Judge Larwell's wife refused to cooperate with her husband.

This is why, when Judge Larwell ultimately expresses his gratitude for his wife's active support during the campaign, Nell bursts into tears. Her worst nightmares have come true—her husband does not love her, he just limits himself in their relationship to an empty, political gesture aimed at further using her feelings to his own benefit. She "remembered his saying to Joseph at some point in the campaign, 'Do only small favors for others on the ticket, and ask only large ones'" (E 406). However, Nell never reveals that the actual reason for her tears are her hurt feelings. Instead, she tries to rationalize her suffering by referring to the power of her own love for Judge Larwell:

She hated him—but only for the one moment. She loved him; he was her life. But her life would be changed now. The world was changed now, however, and it was only that she must change with it. Everybody had to change with the times. And it was her duty to him to change. . . . Somehow, she would learn. (E 406)

For a transitory (one line long) moment, Nell lets her "ugly" feelings prevail over the overwhelming (three lines out of the four quoted) feelings of loyalty and duty she has for her husband and calls love. It is significant that Nell does not struggle for keeping her emotions in balance. As the proportion of the "good" and the "bad" feelings suggests, Nell is too "love"-overwhelmed to let herself feel "hate," the reverse of love, without which one cannot experience love again when it returns. This in turn suggests that Nell herself is not particularly interested in experiencing marital love, whereas she is very much interested in being perceived as the "one who loves." It allows her to delude herself as to her exceptionality, a feeling which, after she dries away the tears, she formulates as follows: "Many are called but few are chosen" (E 406).

The same quotation has also been used as a slogan in her husband's political campaign. Nell demonstrates clearly that, like Judge Larwell, she perceives marital relations as a "political" struggle of two opponents. As a result, Nell, ironically, also condemns herself (and her husband) to continually play in their marriage the hated role of the elect. This in turn deprives her of a possibility to balance in her private life the role of "Nell Larwell," which she identifies with the lack of dignity, with the role of Mrs. Larwell, which could allow her to gain distance towards herself, her husband, their relationship, or the institution of marriage in general. In effect, Nell does live "like show people," performing for others but never receiving in return what she gave to people during her husband's campaign, that is, "waving, smiling . . . victory signs" (E 391), and thus always confirming others, and not herself first.

That such an attitude can prove destructive, not only for the woman herself but also for the "others" whom she confirms, can be proved best with a reference to Harriet Wilson, the female protagonist of "A Long Fourth." The

title of the story pertains to a holiday weekend at the beginning of World War II occasioned by the visit of Harriet's beloved Son who is returning from his job at a New York publishing firm for a final stay at home before his enlistment into the army. For Harriet, herself a true child of her own mother (now dead for thirty years)—even at present, as a woman of fifty, she lives by her mother's teachings—Son's visit is a momentous event. This is because Harriet "had been worrying for weeks" (LF 132) that her son does not live his life according to her teachings. She knows her son is "not like other men, more sensitive and [with] advanced ideas and . . . so intolerant of inefficiency and old-fashioned things" (LF 132). At the same time Harriet is aware that he can act as a "model son" (LF 141) if need be: he always does so when in Nashville on a visit. Then, Son is always "careful never to offend or embarrass his family with the peculiar, radical ideas which he would naturally have" (LF 141). Thus, Harriet impatiently awaits Son's visit because she wants to find out which is his real self; she also hopes that Son's "home-made" demeanor does not result from mere courtesy but is a guise for his care and love for her.²⁰

Harriet's susceptibility to the slightest sign of Son's devotion to the "domestic philosophy" becomes even more obvious if we realize how strongly she is disturbed by the message that her son is bringing a woman friend, Ann Prewitt, with him. Harriet is afraid not because she is jealous of Ann; she was informed beforehand by her daughter that Son and Miss Prewitt are not in love. Besides, she is certain that Son and Miss Prewitt are not lovers, for although "Son did not believe in marriage" (LF 136), she trusts that he "certainly would not subject his family and the people of Nashville to the sort of thing he did believe in" (LF 136). She is agitated because Son is bringing home to introduce to his parents a woman who is "merely one of the people he knew in his publishing business" (LF 136). This might mean that she worries either because he breaks the southern convention according to which a man brings home to the family only a woman that he wants to marry, or because she secretly suspects his son of being gay. At least this is one of the ways in which we can decode Harriet's present train of thoughts: "[i]n her girlhood people would have called [this kind of relationship] Platonic, but then they would have laughed about it. Mama had always said there could be no such relationship between young men and young women" (LF 143–44). Therefore Harriet is afraid that Ann's visit, by undermining Son's masculinity, will also question the nature of his relation with his mother, a revelation which would lead to subverting Harriet's value system as well.

20. This may suggest that Harriet is in fact afraid that, joining the Army, her Son is turning into a "warrior," which eventually will destroy their bonds. Son's going to the war thus belies the validity of her following of the "ethics of care" as an autonomous moral pattern, for it seems just a guise: in fact it is servile to the war-oriented "ethics of justice." If so, then Harriet's fear for Son would be a projection of her own fear of losing the position of superior moral authority. This clearly indicates that Harriet herself is already at war with the system, thus contributing to both the objective and subjective atrocities that the war brings about.

It is no wonder, then, that, on seeing her Son in gentlemanly attire displaying impeccable manners and accompanied by a very ladylike-looking woman “as an example of his taste” (LF 142), Harriet feels so relieved from her doubts that she bursts into tears and cannot stop crying. When she eventually joins the young people in the parlor she finds out that Ann actually is not accompanying Son on his visit in Nashville; she is only stopping off at Harriet’s house on her own way home. This knowledge, tantamount to the awareness that she is deceiving herself about Son, starts “that train of thought in [Harriet’s] mind” (LF 144) anew as well as it leaves her “trembling again and . . . unable to follow the conversation” (LF 144). From this moment on, Harriet’s identity crisis begins, which compels her to confront the fact that her “true” womanhood is only an illusion. The first such confrontation occurs when Harriet inadvertently eavesdrops on Son’s conversations with Ann about his mother’s tears: “I can’t imagine what it is. Something seems to have come over her. But there’s no visible change. She hasn’t aged any. I looked for it in her hair and in her skin about her neck and in her figure” (LF 145). The cold, analytical tone which Son employs to talk with a stranger about his mother’s body and psyche makes Harriet feel “alienated from all around her” (LF 145). This is because she is beginning to lose the sense of security which she identified with herself representing a “true woman,” or else with the commitment to the role of mother.

Harriet’s uncertainty as to her own womanhood intensifies when she directly confronts Son, who brings her a drink before a party given in his honor as she sits at her dressing table. Then, Harriet hopes for Son to reveal to her “what is in his heart” (LF 160). However, without one good word for her, Son quickly withdraws from the room, leaving Harriet “completely without human emotion of any sort” (LF 160) and thus, in a state of utter shock: for the second time within the same day she experienced Son’s gentlemanly demeanour not as a sign of loving regard for her but rather as a mark of his own emotionless aloofness. The full realization of this fact, however, is virtually forced upon Harriet by Ann after the party. It is then that the young woman suddenly reveals that she is in love with Son. Yet she is perfectly aware, she says, that hers is a hopeless love: Son is incapable of loving another person because he only cares for himself and his public image:

He always thinks a person behaves badly who doesn’t amuse him. He cares nothing for anything I say except when I’m talking theory of some kind. He was very willing to bring me here before your friends to express all manner of opinion which they and you find disagreeable while he behaves with conventional good taste. He even discouraged my bringing the proper clothes to make any sort of agreeable appearance. . . . He has shown a marvelous respect for my intelligence and my virtue. And I, alas, have been so vulgar as to fall in love with him. (LF 162)

Ann finally puts into words what Harriet has long felt but what she was afraid to admit: that she has invested much of her emotional life in a person whose empty civility she took for a genuine feeling for her. This suggests in turn Harriet’s own poor “emotional intelligence,” and consequently, her

questionable status as a “true” woman (and mother) as southern standards define it. On the other hand, the very same emotional poverty makes Harriet (and her Son) the “true” child of her own mother who used to teach her daughter that “[t]he main thing is comfort, dearest” (LF 134). Therefore it is the desire to experience, broadly understood, comfort instead of emotions which, handed down from one generation to the next, becomes the South’s “true” curse—but also heritage. Ironically, this makes Harriet the “true woman”—did she not bring up her babe in the spirit of what the region had culturally most precious to offer?

Apart from the chilling alienation and communication breakdown inside the family, another result of propounding cultural conformism is, as Ann’s revelation suggests, the conformist’s inability to create deep emotional bonds with representatives of the outside world. In the case of a female conformist, as Taylor implies in practically all of his stories, such an inability provokes a woman’s desire to be perceived as an ideal female, particularly in the situations discerned as threatening for the comfort of one being placed on a pedestal (and in the role of the mother).

How fundamental a meaning this role has for a contemporary southern white elite matron can be demonstrated best if we scrutinize what happens if a black woman, too, claims her right to the role of the mother, as is the case with Mattie, Harriet Wilson’s black cook. Although childless, Mattie brought up her nephew BT, a servant at the Wilson house. For Harriet, BT is only a nuisance who, although he works “hard and long and efficiently” (LF 138), has “neither good manners nor the affectionate nature nor the appealing humor that so many niggers have” (LF 139). Harriet accepts black people as long as they fit the stereotype of contented, dependent, childlike servants; only then she feels that she can trust them sufficiently to let them near her. This is the way in which she sees Mattie as well. It is suggested in a scene in which Harriet asks her husband to dismiss BT. When he denies, saying that Mattie loves her nephew and that she “would leave us in a minute if we let BT go” (LF 132), Harriet protests strongly, “Not a bit of it” (LF 132). Thus she also expresses her deep conviction about Mattie’s emotional dependence upon her employers and consequently negates her right and ability to have a life of her own. For Harriet, Mattie exists only as white people’s Mammy.

Harriet learns—unexpectedly—about the superficiality of this identification at the moment in which she confronts the strength of Mattie’s own maternal feelings. This happens when Harriet learns from the grief-stricken Mattie that BT must leave the Wilson household to work in an aircraft factory. Although this message comes at a bad time, for BT was needed during the weekend, Harriet nevertheless tries to console Mattie-Mammy—identified with the role of mother, she knows precisely how, when, and to whom to offer her sympathy and care. Her performance is so convincing that it puts Mattie’s racial and social vigilance to sleep in the effect of which the black woman allows herself to reciprocate Harriet’s feelings and says: “[I]t’s like you losin’ Mr. Son. BT is gwine too” (LF 139). Yet this remark does not push

Harriet to sympathize with Mattie; on the contrary, it causes Harriet to utterly reject her “old friend”:

The small white woman abruptly withdrew her arms from about her servant. The movement was made in one fearful gesture which included the sudden contraction of her lips and the widening of her bright eyes. “Mattie!” she declaimed. “How dare you? That will be just exactly enough from you!” And now her eyes moved swiftly downward and to the porch steps. Without another glance at the woman she had been holding to her bosom she went up on the porch and, avoiding the kitchen where the girls were, she went along the porch up into the U of the house and entered the dark dining room. (LF 139)

The fact that Harriet reacts to Mattie’s appeal with fear, revulsion and anger, that, later on, she pictures Mattie “being tied and flogged” (LF 140), and that, when imagining her vengeance, she recalls “Achilles’ indignation” (LF 140), plainly indicates that she considers the mother role to be the most important, if not the sole attribute of white womanhood only. The acceptance of the fact that this attribute might become also Mattie’s (and hence characterize black womanhood as well) is therefore impossible for Harriet; this would translate primarily into her psychic disintegration. In order to survive, Harriet projects her too complex feelings onto “that Ethiopian woman” (LF 140), thereby symbolically moving them away from her into the sphere of darkness. Consequently, with the reference to herself (the “mother” of the white community), she deploys Mattie (the black womanhood) as her emotional “Mammy.”

However, objectifying Mattie as “Mammy” to white people’s “ugly” feelings²¹ confines Harriet herself into the parallel process of objectification as a noble, always loving “mother.” This knowledge dawns on Harriet when she confronts the truth about her long-awaited Son. We have already pointed out that, as his visit proceeds, Harriet notices that despite the love she has prepared for her idealized Son, he remains indifferent to her affection and seems detached. This falls short of what Harriet would consider an emotional bond, as well as it deeply injures and disappoints her, although she never voices these feelings. When Ann, Son’s female companion for the weekend, finally puts into words what Harriet has long tried to conceal from herself, namely, that there is nothing noble in Son’s emotional relations with the women of his life, Harriet must face the fact that her saintly role of the mother (the one which, in her opinion, elevated her over Mattie) is merely an empty form. It thus serves to objectify the idea of non-existent love, the love that is far from real.

Harriet is nevertheless going to stick to such an idea. She was taught, within the bounds of the patriarchal system that she represents, that only the noble, “good” love of the mother, the love, let us repeat, which is too ideal to be true, is, paradoxically, all she has. This becomes clear when, after the scene with Ann, Harriet, indifferent now to everything, withdraws to

21. This is visible in the fact that from this moment on Harriet perceives Mattie exclusively in “dark” colors: “[s]he was not wearing her white cap or white serving apron, so there was absolutely no relief to her black dress and her head of black hair” (LF 148).

her bedroom and tries to find solace in repeating, with her eyes closed, the Lord's Prayer. Thus she returns to square one, which she so wanted to avoid. Namely, she begins the search for a support (which only a close person can give her) by addressing God—a source of ideal and, consequently, unattainable (in human terms) support. What is more, as a male symbol God represents the support (or love) understood as an adaptation to the existing rules. Ergo, in order to receive God's love, Harriet must first and foremost subordinate herself to abstract, objective, and "patriarchal" norms in accordance with which "her" system has been construed. Harriet's behavior is typical for a woman resorting to the image of mother, and the "heaven-imposed" standard of "Our Father." As a result, Harriet will become the "true woman," the woman who will devote her human right to autonomy and natural care for the sake of becoming an Ideal Carer, a humble assistant of the patriarchal order. In return she will receive in the emotional sense, when she eventually opens her eyes, "the dark" and "chill of autumn night" (LF 166).²²

It is the striking contrast between Harriet as a personification of the idea of Mother in the scene analyzed above (lost, lonely, despaired, and entrusting her despair not in another human being but in an abstract representation of both love and power), and Harriet as one of the three pretty, vivacious, gracious and orderly family women whose collective portrait provides for the best answer to the question whether and how the idea of the white elite matron as the Ideal Carer of southern culture is realized by contemporary southern women. The presented contrast seems to suggest that, first, the idea in question is indeed realized, as Tara McPherson puts it, as the masquerade of womanhood,²³ or else a convoluted way of discovering how the system works as a whole—a performance then. This in turn implies that one effect of contemporary southern matrons' identification with the idea of Ideal Carer is the "awakening" of the subjective "I"—this most autonomous and hence creative part of woman's identity—to recognize that their once sainted image is in fact an image of the "other" in the contemporary southern culture.

As the example of Harriet suggests, the matron's recognition of herself as her culture's "other" is at first perceived by her as disadvantageous. This is because she does not consider the status of the other as a culturally approved way to propagate openness or diversity, or else allowing for unveiling the

22. As such, the role of matron in the contemporary American South can be seen as tantamount to what Simone de Beauvoir called *la Mystique*, that is, a woman whose underlying longing is to be the highest object assigned to the highest subject and who, therefore, often confuses the male with God and vice versa. The matron would be therefore a narcissistic person, for she does not seek for transcendence in God's "love" for her but rather wants to be utterly possessed by Him as His one and only woman. She thus is longing for God's—or male—glorification of her sex and hence, her basically sexual nature. This also means that the devout woman (or very pious woman, as the southern matron was supposed to be) is also the reverse of an erotomaniac. For details see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 709–17.

23. See McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 21.

existing double standards of the patriarchal culture. Instead, the matron equals otherness to victimization, the state of being a person silently bearing her “cross,” or one who openly and unendingly rebels against it. Both only deepen the matron’s sense of being marginalized by the system. Yet, after a direct confrontation with the so far negated otherness the woman eventually finds out that defining it is useless. As Simone de Beauvoir in her *Second Sex* puts it, the only thing otherness has in common with identity or truth is that it exists close to these notions, in a border experience. As such it is often identified with emptiness, and in consequence perceived as a fearful, painful experience. No wonder then that, having recognized themselves as “other,” contemporary southern matrons from the white elites, as the above analysis of Taylor’s stories suggests, resolve to “take good care” of themselves. This does not mean, however, that all of them understand their role of the Ideal Carer in the same way as before the anagnorisis.

To my mind, in the Taylor’s three stories, the re-identification of the contemporary southern matrons with the role of the Ideal Carer translates itself, in opposition to the old southern models, into adapting this role for a woman’s own purposes. This means that in agreeing, as their culture obliges them to do, to perform as the “Mother, Wife and Lady” within the “ethics of care,” contemporary southern matrons understand this care as, primarily, a personal performance. In so doing the contemporary southern matrons of the white elites also manage to forge their culturally “immobile” status of “patriarchy’s slaves” into a symbol of the “new” in general—both in enslavement and emancipation terms. This is because following, as their grandmothers did, also contemporarily the ethics of care as an option rather than the only choice they have, matrons seem to be suggesting that the vision need not be identified solely with oppression, for it could be used for democratic purposes, too. Making such an ideological somersault, which makes the hair of both feminists and patriarchs stand on end, these women thus cunningly create the region they represent as neither “Old,” nor “New,” but rather as one that we might call the “New” Old South.

Taylor juxtaposes the “new” and the “old” Souths in the characters of his protagonists, allows both to interplay, and suggests both structures to be able to communicate and hence act for the sake of a mutual (dis)advantage. This is best visible in that Taylor presents his women—Henrietta, Nell, and Harriet—as (un)able to connect the private and public spheres. It also implies that Taylor perceives white matrons from the South of the 1940s–1960s as ambassadors of the cultures considered entirely incompatible. This latter role gives these matrons a possibility of both interpreting difference as versions of equality, and of choosing the one which guarantees them at a given moment bigger security, comfort, or power without the necessity to overburden themselves. On the other hand, however, via the matron’s care and, in effect, her emotional connection to each of the represented cultures, the role of a cultural ambassador can make a woman the “carer” of illusions

as regards both her own significance and the significance of the cultures she represents.

Taylor does not condemn the white elite southern matrons *en masse*. On the contrary, the way he presents these women suggests that it is precisely the “creators,” or “carers” of illusion that one should understand and empathize with—is it not that Art begins from illusions? Therefore the work of Peter Taylor—the work of a man—would be a suggestion how the ethics of care, the ethics which both men and women have considered women’s “fate,” must be “performed” so as it proves to be, like the motherhood/wifehood/ladyhood of the old days, maximally “productive.”²⁴

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24. This article constitutes a part of a larger, so far unpublished project entitled “20th Century Southern White and Black Women as Presented in Selected Works by Peter Taylor.”

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