

DOES NOT FOLLOW DIRECTIONS:  
RESISTING THE NARRATOR'S LEAD  
IN THE NOVEL, ELLEN FOSTER

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## ABSTRACT

When readers read, it is all too easy to sink back into the comfort zone of suspended disbelief and uncritical thought. Readers may find that they are outraged or reassured over what they read, without taking the time to reflect on why the text is affecting them the way that it does or to discover if the text is even accurately portraying a situation.

This thesis will review and discuss how *scotosis*, defined by Paula Mathieu as a “rationalized [act] of selective blindness that [occurs] by allowing information to be discounted or unexamined” (114-115), operates within the framework of the novel by Kaye Gibbons, Ellen Foster. In this novel, Ellen repeatedly denigrates the character, Aunt Nadine. Readers are led to condemn Nadine as a bad character, based solely on the way Ellen presents her. The reality is that Nadine tries to assist Ellen on several different occasions.

Selective blindness can be discerned when the following questions are asked of the text: What is problematic about Ellen as a narrator? How are the characters framed? What assumptions are we asked to make? What facts are we asked to ignore? What are we expected to dismiss? At the end of this thesis, the story of Ellen Foster will be told from Aunt Nadine’s point of view, to show how radically perspective can change the tone of a story and how pertinent information can be dismissed by a reader.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my son, Max, who I love with all my heart and to my family for being there in support of me while I worked to make this dream come true. Without you all, none of this would be possible.

## SETTING UP THE CONSTRUCT

*A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection not an invitation for hypnosis.*

Umberto Eco

My first introduction to resisting reading came not from Judith Fetterly, but from my own experience reading a pulp fiction novel, a “beach book,” that I picked up at a used bookstore in Jacksonville, North Carolina. The Phantom, by author Susan Kay, is based on the play The Phantom of the Opera, but told with a twist; Kay gives the phantom his own voice, allowing him to tell the story from his own unique point of view. The phantom, originally portrayed as a psychopathic monster, is transformed into a character with depth, someone with whom I can sympathize and relate. By reading the story from his perspective, the tale was even more compelling for me, also impressive was the idea that an author could take a story, tell it in a different character’s words and completely change my empathetic direction. Kay allowed me to see the phantom in a new way: as a deformed child, whose mother could not bear to look at him, who grows up to be a person with many talents and a man who loves deeply. The idea of taking a familiar story and telling it from the perspective of a marginal or maligned character fascinated me.

Fast-forward a few years to find me in an adolescent literature class. We were assigned to read Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons. The novel is about Ellen, a bright, but jaded girl whose sickly mother commits suicide, thus leaving her daughter in the care of her horrifically abusive husband. Following a drunken

assault by her father, Ellen runs away and begins an odyssey in search of a home to call her own. During the course of the novel, Ellen is shifted from one residence to the next, suffering neglect, mistreatment, or bitter disappointment with each potential savior. She finally decides to take destiny into her own hands and seeks the succor of a local foster mother, who agrees to take her in and give her the safe, stable environment she so badly needs.

Our assignment, after reading the novel, was to give a group presentation about it. We were to have an "Ellen Foster Festival." I had also just finished reading Molly, by Nancy Jones. Jones re-tells the story of Nabokov's Lolita from the title character's perspective, and having recently heard Jones speak, my passion for "the other side of the story" had been reignited. For our part in the "Ellen Foster Festival," my group agreed that it would be fun to speak in the voice of Mama's Mama, Ellen's Daddy or Aunt Nadine, three unsympathetic characters, and by so doing, attempt a better understanding of why people could act with such cruelty to others. I was selected to be Aunt Nadine.

I returned to my text and highlighted all of the parts where Ellen talked about Aunt Nadine or had any interaction with her. Then I re-read the entire text through the eyes of Nadine. I was shocked to discover that Aunt Nadine is actually rather charitable to Ellen on several occasions, and at the very least, does some nice things for her. Nadine's behavior towards the end of the book is distinctly petty and childish, but does that earn her unilateral condemnation as a character? Why had I been so willing to see Nadine as a villain the first time I read this story? How could I have missed those signs of helpfulness? I had to



wonder how many “real” people would have responded with Nadine’s same irritation and aggravation after having tried very hard to help a troubled child who was difficult to like, one who had made it clear she felt her helper to be inferior.

I came to realize that Aunt Nadine has her own trials and tribulations, both past and present, which are casually glossed over by the narrator, Ellen. I wasn’t sure what to make of this. Suddenly, I found myself feeling as sympathetic for Nadine as I did for Ellen. When I gave my part of the presentation, I was greeted later with “Wow! That was good! You almost made me forget that Aunt Nadine was a ‘bitch’ for a minute there! What an imagination you have!” I told my fellow students that I had imagined nothing, that they needed only to go back and re-read sections of the book carefully. I hadn’t invented or made up any of the things I had said; my observations were all based on what Kaye Gibbons had written quite clearly for anyone who was willing to see. I doubt if very many people bothered to go back and look. Sometimes readers don’t *want* to comprehend any other way of reading, even when the possibility is plainly laid out before them. This reluctance to consider other viewpoints is troubling. When readers opt for the ease of passivity, they unwittingly opt for selective blindness rather than critical insight. This is ironic especially since reading is often held up as an alternative to “passive” television watching.

The following spring, I found myself immersed in a Cultural Rhetoric class. All of the theories had aspects about them that I liked; most of them *almost* felt right, but were not quite a match for how I feel about the way people read and

interpret texts. I was wandering through rhetorical theory, uninspired until I came upon Paula Mathieu's article "Economic Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Gourmet Coffee." This was what I had been looking for! Mathieu provides an illustration of how some texts create and define a specific "need" for a segment of society; she gives an insightful portrayal of readers' mindsets that allow such an interaction to take place. In Mathieu's case, the social interaction between reader and text she examines is made evident in the marketing strategies used by the Starbucks Coffee Company and the cultural climate in which their marketing discourse takes place.

It might seem strange that an article about economic citizenship should be linked so strongly in my mind with literary critique, but I see many of the same issues of selective blindness (referred to as *scotosis* by Mathieu) at play in both situations. Mathieu's goal is to make her readers aware of the ease with which we can be lulled into this selective blindness. Her analysis illustrates just how little it takes to get well-meaning people to "jump on the bandwagon" without even knowing where the bandwagon is going, and she urges us to resist the conditions of *scotosis* so that we can become more responsible economic citizens. Advertisers need the cooperation of the average person (or millions of them, to be exact) to sell their product; therefore, it is important that consumers understand the ways in which they can be manipulated. Mathieu asserts that "scotosis is rhetorical, in that the narratives create a persuasive worldview within which it is easy and comforting to remain" (125). This can be applied to literature as well. So too do readers need to understand and be aware of the stereotypes

that they accept without question when they allow themselves to be led passively by narrators' limited and limiting perspectives.

Mathieu's rhetorical analysis and reader response theory are similar in that they both deal with how readers read a text and make inferences based on culturally influenced assumptions. Sometimes when readers make such assumptions, they come to conclusions that are not fact-based. In Citizen Critics, Rosa Eberly examines four controversial novels and analyzes the responses they generated from the public sphere. Eberly states, "It is what people do with books and social products, not the books or even the authors in and of themselves, that enables books to affect our shared worlds" (xii). In the case of the four novels, it was public response that influenced readership, not literary critique. Readers have the power to persuade and influence through their choices of what to read or not to read. They can decide whether or not the text will influence them to spring into some sort of social action or to write publicly about what they have read.

The danger of scotosis is that once readers have made up their minds to see things, people, or the world a certain way, it can become very difficult for them to recognize any fallacies in their perceptions. Mathieu illustrates how marketers can play on consumers' unconscious levels of need. She stresses how important it is to recognize these needs within ourselves. We can see how reader response theory also teaches us to acknowledge the level of personal history that goes into every reader's reaction to and subsequent evaluation of a text. Our personal history affects how we feel about a given character or

situation, and how open to suggestion we are while we read. Whether it is fiction, pop culture, advertising, or the other multitude of texts that inundate our daily lives, reader response teaches us to come back to texts repeatedly and reread them in order to reanalyze them as we grow, encounter new experiences, and expand our scope.

It should be noted at this point who “we the readers” are, for readers exist on many different levels and read and interpret texts in many different ways. In the most general sense “we the readers” are the people who are reading this thesis. However, to be more specific, “we the readers” are the ones who initially surrendered to the justifying narratives in Ellen Foster. “We” are the readers who, at some point, had not considered that the characters in this novel are complex. Ellen and Aunt Nadine cannot be conveniently labeled as good or bad; just as in real life, things are never that simple. “We” are the mass of readers who bought Ellen Foster after Oprah Winfrey recommended it on her show and found ourselves gripped by Ellen’s plight. “We” are the massive reading audience who can have the greatest impact on the public. “We” are the readers who are interested in revealing our blind spots by reading literature. In any case, while “we the reader” includes the academic community, it is not by any means limited to it.

## THE STARBUCKS EYE-OPENER

*The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie - deliberate, contrived, and dishonest, but the myth - persistent, persuasive and realistic.*

John F. Kennedy

Mathieu's article, while written in casual language, is by no means simplistic. Perhaps she chooses such discourse in order to reach as many readers as possible, since her goal is to raise critical awareness. Indeed, she begins her article with Edward Schiappa, who maintains that intellectuals should engage in cultural critique "not only [in] the classroom or academic books and journals, but also 'in the streets' and in other nonacademic public and private forums" (*quoted in Mathieu 113*). One of Mathieu's main concerns is getting critical reading and critical thinking beyond the "ivory tower" and into a more public arena than that of academia.

Mathieu maintains, "This case study is an effort to explore how corporations create discourses of consumption and, in doing so, examines just one aspect of economic citizenship" (123). In the groundwork for her analysis she introduces the term "economic citizenship" and explains the relevance of the term in the context of our everyday lives:

Economic citizens act politically by making critical choices as consumers and producers, by buying or refusing to buy, working or refusing to work, by writing and speaking out about trade agreements, IMF practices, and corporate behavior. Additionally, I would suggest, economic citizens act by critically examining and questioning the dominant narratives that are circulated in and about the economic system. (113)

One might wonder how economic citizenship can be applied to literature. By what means can a reader resist the strong power of dominant narratives? Readers must be willing to see what they may not wish to see. They must question the text; they must question the motives of the narrator; they must question their own motives for interpreting texts in certain ways.

In her analysis, Mathieu explores a concept she calls scotosis. Scotosis, as Mathieu defines it, is a “rationalized [act] of selective blindness that [occurs] by allowing information to be discounted or unexamined” (Mathieu 114-115). Whether it is conscious or unconscious, we fall prey to this selective blindness on a daily basis and in almost every area of our lives to one degree or another. Says Mathieu, “One isn’t duped, nor are false needs created. Rather one is persuaded by the justifications offered within the narratives to remain [...] within [the narrative’s] parameters. It is thinking and acting within the frames offered” (115).

Mathieu presents a series of questions that need to be asked by the reader of a text in order to disrupt scotosis:

How do narratives frame people as consumers? What needs do they promise to satisfy? What other needs do they deny? Where and how are the producers in these narratives portrayed? What material contradictions get ignored? What are consumers asked not to see, not to consider?

What lies unspoken outside of these discourses? (115)

Mathieu’s next step is to present her illustration of scotosis at work. For her illustration, she chooses Starbucks Coffee. She gives a brief history of the

company, noting CEO Howard Schultz's aspiration to create a "Starbucks Nation." She examines the illusion of the "Starbucks Nation" and how it is constructed. Mathieu claims, "When we consume Starbucks, we consume justifying narratives along with the products. [...] At Starbucks the justifying narratives can be found within the physical setup of the store, in the process of buying coffee, and within the vast amounts of literature [Starbucks] produces" (116-117). Starbucks' narratives enable consumers to accept uncritically myths that are sold along with their coffee.

After outlining a variety of Starbucks' defining narratives, Mathieu sets the stage for the final and most compelling application of her theory. Consumers are lulled into complacency with the promise of specialized individual attention and the assurance that they belong to an exclusive and discerning group of people; given such self-assurance they are less likely to be skeptical of much that Starbucks offers. Scotosis is at work as Starbucks' narratives systematically romanticize and exoticize the people who plant, grow and harvest the coffee. Within their glossy brochures, Starbucks portrays Third World countries with quaint, antique-looking maps and vibrant, "ethnically interesting" depictions of the workers who produce their coffee, wearing bright, beautiful colors and riding on the backs of elephants.

Nowhere in the brochures are there representations of the poverty, hunger and sickness that ravage these Third World countries. Starbucks does surreptitiously acknowledge such poverty, however, by promoting its own "altruistic" agenda: they offer a special "CARE sampler" of its coffees from

Kenya, Guatemala, Sumatra, and Java. Customers are assured that with every Starbucks CARE Sampler they purchase, Starbucks will donate two dollars to the worldwide organization CARE. Starbucks entreats customers to join their charitable efforts by urging, "Together we can help the people in these coffee-producing countries, and show our appreciation for the years of pleasure their coffee has shown us" (123). Counters Mathieu, "Starbucks shows its 'appreciation for the years of pleasure their coffee has shown' not by seeking to pay workers on coffee plantations a subsistent wage but rather by donating to an aid organization. [...] Consumers are thus encouraged to indulge in connoisseurship fantasies while remaining exempt from any guilt" (123).

I read this article during my very first semester of graduate school and the impact it had on me was profound. I saw for the first time that cultural criticism could be used on a daily basis as a means of examining areas in my life that I might have otherwise left unexamined. Mathieu's article was not just persuasive; it radically changed the way I read, write, and view the world around me. Mathieu boldly challenges all readers to read actively, not passively.

I have adapted Matthieu's rhetorically critical approach to literature by adapting several questions to facilitate my critical reading of Ellen Foster: What is problematic about Ellen as a narrator? How are the characters framed? What assumptions are we asked to make? What facts are we expected to ignore? What are we expected to dismiss? Mathieu's approach helps me to recognize how scotosis operates within the framework of Ellen Foster.



A practical and logical way to examine how scotosis operates within the structure of Ellen Foster is to apply the above questions to the text. However, they can be adapted and used on *any* text, be it advertising, literature, or even critical theory. Readers should be cautious of accepting anything *anyone* has to say without first giving it critical consideration. Authors, even authors of fiction, are rhetorical; they have agendas. Would that not affect *everything* they have to say?

### A FRESH PERSPECTIVE OF ELLEN FOSTER

*Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours.*

John Locke

Jacques Derrida's notions of *freeplay* provide a framework for Judith Fetterly's theory of the resistant reader, a theory that is pertinent to my analysis of Ellen Foster. Derrida defines the field of freeplay as follows:

This field is in fact that of freeplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble. This field permits these infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it; a center which arrests and grounds the freeplay of substitutions. (Derrida 886)

Derrida suggests that all language approaches poetry because all words are metaphorical and language is symbolic, thus allowing no single interpretation of any word or sign. Daniel Schwarz assesses Derrida's theory by noting that

“Derrida would say that anyone attempting to find a single, correct meaning in a text is simply imprisoned by that structure of thought that would oppose two readings and declare one to be right and not wrong, correct rather than incorrect” (209). To read Ellen Foster without considering the various sides of the story is imprisonment indeed. There are many issues embedded and implied that can be easily missed without resistant and persistent reading of this text. What I propose is one interpretation of the novel, an interpretation derived from resistance and persistence, and a respect for freeplay.

Before beginning an analysis of Ellen Foster, there needs to be some discussion of narration and focalization and the impact they can have on readers' interpretation of a novel. Ellen is not only the narrator of this story, but the focalizer as well. Sholmith Rimmon-Kenan separates the narrator from the focalizer, claiming that the two terms are not interchangeable. She explains that the narrator is the person who is telling a story, whereas the focalizer is the person through whom the events in the novel are being filtered (71-73). Rimmon-Kenan cites the character Pip, in Dickens's novel Great Expectations, as a good illustration to explain the difference between focalizer and narrator (73). Pip the adult relating the account, is the narrator; while Pip the child, is the person through whose eyes we see the narrative unfold. Pip the child, the focalizer, is the one who experiences events. In the case of Ellen Foster, she does not have the advantage of intervening years within which she might have gained some insight about her life and the world around her. She is still a child with a child's view of the world as she relates her tale. According to Rimmon-

Kenan's criteria, Ellen also has limited spatial perspective, which means she is not omnipotent; she does not know all (78). This means that everything Ellen says is her subjective perception of the event, not an unbiased account. Ellen's perception is skewed according to her personal history, emotional problems, and limited awareness. Due to her personal issues, Ellen suffers from her own scotosis, a fact that readers tend to forget while reading the novel.

According to Rimmon-Kenan, "the ideology of the narrator-focalizer is usually taken as authoritative and all other ideologies in the text are evaluated from this 'higher' position" (81). Readers are asked to accept as normal and legitimate Ellen's system of values. But *are* they normal and legitimate? In the case of a focalizer who is apparently grappling with emotional disturbances and chronological immaturity, it is doubtful. It is even more important here for readers to try to be aware of the difference between what the focalizer perceives and presents as fact and what actually takes place.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl...

The story of Ellen Foster's young and turbulent life reads very much like the fairy tales we heard as children. There is the young girl (Ellen) who loses her mother and suffers psychological, physical and emotional abuse and neglect at the hands of her alcoholic father (the weak father who abandons his children in the dangerous forest). There are her mother's two other sisters...not stepsisters, but Ellen's aunts. Nadine and Betsy are portrayed as self-centered and uncaring, much like their fairy tale counterparts; Nadine is cast in the role of the more "wicked" of the two. Of course no fairy tale is complete without the evil old

witch, a part perfectly filled by Ellen's grandmother, Mama's Mama. There are some characters that are Ellen's friends: Starletta and her family, Julia (Ellen's art teacher) and her husband Roy, and finally there is the foster mother, her New Mama. New Mama suffices as Ellen's fairy godmother, for she certainly agrees to rescue Ellen and fix her broken life by offering her understanding, a safe home, basic material comforts, and a guaranteed warm meal three times a day. Even Ellen recognizes the fairy tale-like ending of her story when she says of New Mama's tentative welcome; "That sounded a little bit like something from one of my old books but I had waited so long to believe somebody that I just listened and believed" (119).

Fairy tales work to predetermine readers' assumptions about good versus evil. Gilbert and Gubar explicate this angel/monster dynamic: "Every angelically selfless Snow White must be hunted, if not haunted, by a wickedly assertive Stepmother: for every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake called 'the female will'" (28). Female characters that are assertive, aggressive, or sexually aware are considered unfeminine and, therefore, "monstrous."

Who are the monsters and who are the angels in Ellen Foster? We are encouraged to perceive Ellen's daddy, her grandmother, and her Aunt Nadine as the monsters and expected to agree that Charlotte, Ellen's art teacher, and her foster mother are the angels. However, to believe that it is as simple as that is to succumb to scotosis. We would like to see Charlotte as a frail, heroic angel, but

she's not. Charlotte commits suicide, a tragic act in itself, but she also does so in the presence of Ellen and in doing so abandons her daughter to her abusive, alcoholic father. Of all the heartbreaking things that happen in Ellen Foster, this is perhaps the most appalling abandonment of all.

Fairy tales are what we tell to children to teach them lessons, but what values are these tales promoting? In most fairy tales, a pretty, sweet young girl goes through some sort of horrendous ordeal only to be rescued in the end by a handsome prince. Unattractive people in these stories are usually portrayed as wicked or evil antagonists, while beauty becomes synonymous with goodness. Girls in these fairy tales never seem to be capable of helping themselves and instead must rely on a prince as their savior. There are no male rescuers in Ellen Foster, no princes on white horses; ultimately Ellen Foster departs from the standard fairy tale by allowing Ellen to facilitate her own "rescue." Nevertheless, Ellen gets her "happily ever after," though her narrative deviates from standard fairy tales in that we can see that her hardest work is still ahead of her.

#### Taking off the Blinders

Ellen Foster is a troubling novel, no doubt about that. No child would ever deserve the treatment Ellen received, but what of her treatment of others? There are plenty of antagonists in Ellen Foster, but the most unfairly maligned is her Aunt Nadine. Did Aunt Nadine receive any better treatment from Ellen herself? There are many questions within this novel that do not get addressed, and several areas that I find problematic. By answering certain questions, we can more clearly see how scotosis operates within the framework of this novel. What

is problematic about Ellen as a narrator? How are the characters framed? What assumptions are we asked to make? What facts are we expected to ignore? What are we expected to dismiss? In the following sections, I will address these questions.

What is Problematic about Ellen as a Narrator?

Is Ellen a reliable narrator? Ellen frames herself as an innocent, yet worldly, child who has been thrust into an atrocious, uncontrollable situation over which she attempts to gain control and ultimately, she succeeds. Time and time again, her family alternately neglects, abuses or abandons her, and she is left to find solace with friends, teachers or complete strangers.

Wayne C. Booth asserts in The Rhetoric of Fiction, in regards to Katherine Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," "[Miranda] must be alone in every respect, if this lonely experience is to have full power; she can be alone, as she reflects on her story to us, because at every point throughout we are intended to feel with her" (275). Although Booth is referring to the character Miranda, he could just as easily be describing Ellen, for we are expected to feel her aloneness with her. Rather than disparaging the unreliability of Miranda, Booth claims that her tumultuous thoughts add a dimension to the story that otherwise would not exist. Booth says that unreliable narrators "make stronger demands on the reader's powers of inference than do reliable narrators" (159). The same can be said of Ellen Foster; Ellen's vulnerability and child's-eye view of the world do add dimension to the novel, but that does not mean that scotosis is not at work here. Ellen is worldlier than most children, but she still is a child with a child's

interpretation of things she does not truly understand. An example of this is the instance when she refers to her mother's rheumatic fever as "romantic fever" (3).

The readers' allegiance to Ellen does not excuse them from reading critically to observe any ways that she might be misleading them. It is important for readers to remember that every event they read about is filtered through Ellen before it reaches them. This does not mean that they cannot still feel sympathy for Ellen. They can still read critically while at the same maintaining their sympathy for her.

Ellen is not innocent, though. Her opening lines demonstrate this lack of innocence succinctly: "When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this way or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy" (Gibbons 1). She is not saying, "I used to get mad and wish my daddy was dead," as some children will when they are angry; she is revealing that she carefully planned how she would like to kill her father. These are not the words of innocent, childish anger, but of cold adult hatred.

Ellen is a child who has been forced to grow up too quickly. She witnesses her mother's suicide, nurses two sick adults (and sees both die), tends to her drunken father, and experiences a sexually motivated assault by him. Regarding the assault, Ellen never clarifies whether she is able to prevent her father from having intercourse with her, but merely relates that she resisted. Booth asserts, "Every literary work of any power--whether or not its author composed it with his audience in mind--is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the reader's involvement and detachment along various lines of interest"

(123). The utilization of controls to involve the reader is clear as Ellen distances herself from the event by dropping the first person “I” while describing the assault itself and telling about the event from the readers’ perspective, adopting the use of “you”:

You pray to God they forget about you and the sweet young things that are so soft when you mashum and how good one feels when she is pressed up by you. You get out before one can wake up from being passed out on your floor. [...] Step over the sleeping arms and legs of the dark men in the shadows on your floor. You want to see a light so bad that it comes to guide you through the room and out the door where a man stop you and the light explodes into a sound that is your daddy’s voice. (37)

Ellen does not resume the first person again until she is fleeing from the house. According to Booth, “such isolation can be used to create an almost unbearably poignant sense of the hero’s or heroine’s helplessness in a chaotic, friendless world” (274). Ellen must relive the memory of her attack alone, without the comforting presence of the reader. Booth maintains characters like her “must go through this alone in every respect if this lonely experience is to have full power; she can be alone, as she reflects her story to us, because at every point throughout we are intended to feel with her” (275). By using the perspective of “you,” Ellen cements the sympathetic bond between herself and the reader by making the reader a part of the atrocity. Once the reader becomes a part of the atrocity, he or she may feel victimized and violated as well, which might make subjective, empathetic reading painful and disturbing. As Ellen’s story becomes



emotionally resonant and highly personal, readers might find that they are too close to the situation to think critically.

Ellen's account of the episode is muddled, ambiguous, and somewhat reminiscent of the disputably sexual encounter between Quentin and Caddy in William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (171). Just as Quentin's inner dialogue dissolves into a complex stream-of-consciousness, so too does Ellen's discourse. Readers are left to discern for themselves what truly transpires between Ellen and her father. Ellen has pulled us into her confidence, without actually telling the untellable:

Get away from me he does not listen to me but touches his hands harder on me. That is not me. Oh no that was her name. Do no oh you do not say her name to me. That was her name. You know that now stop no not my name.

I am Ellen.

I am Ellen

He pulls the evil back into his self and Lord I run. (37-38)

We see that Ellen is a child who has been emotionally, psychologically and physically abused. She apparently has psychological scarring as is seen time and time again when she refers to her uncontrollable shaking episodes and the spinning inside her head. She describes her emotional delirium as follows:

So what do you do when that spinning starts and the motion carries the time wild by you and you cannot stop to see one thing to grab and stop

yourself? You stand still the best you can and say strong and loud for the circle of spinning to stop so you can walk away from the noise. That is how I walked then. (110)

Ellen's emotional damage has a profound effect on the way she relates to others as well as the way she assesses her shifting living situations and the people around her. She has little patience with people who, in her own opinion, do not "measure up," and she does not hesitate to let readers know that she considers certain acquaintances and relatives, other than her mother, to be inferior to herself. Her behavior towards certain people can be warm and loving, but she can also be hostile, rude, tactless and insensitive and this, in turn, affects the way she herself is seen by others. For instance, when Ellen is with the counselor provided by her school, she views him skeptically and feels he is not worthy of her time. Her condescending, sneering tone mirrors that of the one she uses when referring to Nadine; here we see Ellen highly critical of those who are trying to help her. Her negative attitude ensures the failure of the counselor's efforts. Ellen eventually loses all patience with him and announces, "I do not plan to discuss chickenshit with you" and then marches out of the room (89). This is to neither condemn nor excuse her actions or those of the other characters, but merely a point to keep in mind when reading the text resistantly in order to remain mindful of scotosis.

How are the Characters Framed?

According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The images of 'angel' and 'monster' have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have

also pervaded women's writing to such an extent that few women have definitively 'killed' either figure" (17).

The angelic woman, who ministered to the sick and hovered between the world of the concrete and the spiritual, seemed to already have one foot in the grave, as it were. "The Angel of the House" was the Victorian ideal of femininity, and a "cult of female invalidism" ran rampant in the nineteenth-century, decreeing that a woman was expected to competently run a household, yet also be fragile, sickly, pale, passive and pure. In the novel, Ellen definitely does not fit the "Angel of the House" stereotype, though it is she who nurses both her invalid mother and dying grandmother, referred to throughout the book as Mama's Mama. It is Ellen's mother Charlotte, who appears to be the character that is framed as the "angel"; she is chronically in poor health, thus fragile, pale and passive. In many ways, Ellen serves as the nurturing half of her mother, who is incapable of caring for anyone, least of all herself. Charlotte can be compared to Beth March, of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. Both are examples of what Gilbert and Gubar refer to as "earthly angels" (25). Beth's virginal grace, her fragile health, and her living saintliness are all testaments to the ideal gentility of her time. Her final act of perfection is to die. Gilbert and Gubar note that in reality, many Victorian women did suffer from anxiety or "tonic"-induced illnesses; much of the frailty that debilitated them may indeed have been genuine (54-55). Similarly we see that the ultimate cause of Charlotte's death is an overdose of the medicine that was originally intended to improve her quality of life.

Even though she is framed as a victim, Ellen does not always behave like one. She does not hesitate to employ manipulative intimidation tactics through outright threats, as well as through more subtle verbal and facial expressions. Her knowledge of what intimidates is sophisticated for a child her age. She relates with particular pride how she stands up to Nadine:

I told her flat out not to touch me or I would kill her. I said that low and strong as my daddy said it to me. I said it with my eyes evil so she would think about how I had been found in a house with two dead women and she might see herself just for one second as number three. (113)

When Ellen first tells us about Aunt Nadine, her tone is charged with hostility: “I despise that dress and get your hands off me is what she [Nadine] needs to be told. But I push the bathroom door and leave my aunt on the other side and me to myself” (11). From our narrator’s very first words about Nadine, we are prepared to dislike her. She makes the comment that Aunt Nadine “sashays her large self out of the toilet” (15), and right away we have a mental picture of the woman that is not agreeable. Nadine is framed as a shallow, self-centered imbecile who unjustly treats her niece in a negligent manner. Is she really one of the “bad guys” as Ellen would have us categorize her? Unlike Ellen’s father and grandmother, Nadine’s character does not fit neatly into the “wicked relative” category, tempting as it may be to put her there. Ellen relies on the power of inflection and a physical description of Aunt Nadine to relay an instantly negative message about the person who has given her a dress for her mother’s funeral and might otherwise be thought of as kind for her supportive act.

Ellen uses that one phrase “sashays her large self” as shorthand to describe someone who is pathetic or clownish, thereby shutting down any future sympathy the reader might later have for Nadine. It is Ellen’s way of ensuring that the reader will not see Nadine in a sympathetic light. The framing in Ellen Foster suggests that Ellen is an innocent child, who is unjustly persecuted by her horrid aunt. In this way, the readers are intended to be Ellen’s “ally” against Nadine.

What Assumptions are we asked to make?

There are three important elements of scotosis that take place in Ellen Foster. These elements depend on readers’ cooperation to make assumptions, ignore what we might see if only we are willing to look, and dismiss what we do see as inconsequential if it does not correspond to the ideals of our earlier assumptions. Very early on, we are tacitly called upon to make several assumptions. First, we are being asked to assume that Ellen is a reliable narrator and that her assessments of the situations and other characters are accurate. Yet she is obviously *not* reliable. Ellen is a sympathetic narrator, but that does not mean she is reliable, no matter how much as we would like to believe that. Also, just because she is a sympathetic character, does not mean she has to be perfect. If we do accept Ellen as an unreliable narrator and one with imperfections, then we must also realize that there may be pertinent information that is being left out or glossed over. More information would create a better understanding of events. If we had a better idea of the history between Ellen and her Aunt Nadine, we could better understand how their relationship

developed into such a hostile one. If we do not accept Ellen as a reliable narrator, then we must question her portrayal of Nadine.

Judith Fetterly encourages readers to look beyond stereotypical female characters in fiction and see the lack of options these characters have, as well as the limited and powerless roles they must play in a male dominated culture.

Fetterly writes:

Though one of the most persistent literary stereotypes of females is the castrating bitch, the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the immascultation of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny. (995)

“Immascultation” is the process by which women are inadvertently taught to think like men because they are always immersed in a patriarchal culture. Fetterly notes that this process of inculcation is often disguised so that the reader unconsciously assents to a theme or characterization without questioning it. Fetterly maintains, “The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting reader rather than an assenting reader” (996). To carry Fetterly’s premise one step further, one may suggest that the first act of *any* critic or any reader is to become a resisting and skeptical reader rather than an assenting one. Sometimes readers do not bother to question key assumptions that provide the foundations of texts. Fetterly builds a scaffolding for a critique of American

literature that all readers, not just feminists, can adopt in order to resist scotosis, or the blind, uncritical acceptance of texts.

Ellen is our narrator, focalizer and protagonist; she has a great deal of inner strength but lacks the power to control her own destiny until the very end of the novel. Presenting her as the hero has its drawbacks; she has any number of Achilles' heels. She is crude, streetwise, and behaves more like a grown man at times than a child, much less a young girl. She is also emotionally damaged. Aunt Nadine, however, is stereotypically feminine. She is a mother; she likes to shop, decorate her home, and entertain guests. Ellen, in both word and deed, repeatedly denigrates Nadine throughout the novel.

Ellen is scathingly critical of Nadine's every action. Even the simple act of making conversation is suddenly imbued with ulterior motives. Ellen's derisive tone is unmistakable: "Having sidled herself up beside the smiling man, Dora's mama searches for just the right thing to say. The man will think how wonderful she is and maybe find a job for her" (16). This is not the only time Ellen presumes to tell the reader what Nadine is thinking. She does this often throughout the book, such as when she sees Nadine and Dora at church; "Dora and her mama attend this church on special holidays like the Lord's Supper and Thanksgiving. They both glide all down the row and wish they had mink stoles to flag in our faces" (57). There are many other times when Ellen relates accounts of inane conversations and scenarios involving Nadine that come purely from her imagination:

So you have Nadine and Dora making up lies with the way they carry on together like they are getting prettier every day and what does not come in a shiny package from town is not worth the trouble of opening. [...] I bet Nadine says to her girl some nights oh your daddy is not dead sugar Dora. He's up in heaven strumming on a harp with the angels and he's looking down at how pretty you are smiling at us both right now. Chickenshit is what I would say. She might as well have said sugar Dora your daddy isn't dead. Why he's just up at the North Pole working away on scooters and train sets like a good elf should. Why he's Santa's favorite helper.

(96)

This is troublesome. Why would any reader believe that Ellen is able to envisage what Nadine is thinking? Are we expected to believe that just because Ellen imagines a scenario happening that it surely must have at some point taken place? Must the most stereotypically feminine character in this novel also be less intelligent, less worthy of our respect and, therefore, more deserving of our contempt (as in Aunt Nadine's case)? Is Ellen suggesting that if women are strong, they must pay for it with loss of their femininity (as in Ellen's case)?

Fetterly encourages readers to resist falling into old patterns of thought that have been reinforced over the years, to resist instantly adopting the perspective that the narrator presents just because that is how we are used to reading. Why are we so ready to accept Ellen's certainty that Aunt Nadine is not going to try to help her at the beginning of the novel? We are immediately captivated by the way Nadine is presented by Ellen and we see her negatively,



even though her first act is a charitable one. We are manipulated early on, and fall into the trap of pigeonholing Nadine in the role of the frivolous, shallow, selfish Southern belle. We make assumptions based on the sole perspective of the narrator as well as on gender stereotypes.

What Facts are we expected to Ignore?

The most important fact we are being asked to ignore is that Ellen is not a reliable narrator. First we do not take into account that Ellen is overtly hostile to those around her, which affects the way others treat her. Many of Ellen's more acidic reactions are expressed in thought and by non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and posture rather than by spoken word, but she is still quite capable of letting her feelings be known. In the final exchange between Ellen and Nadine, we learn that her aunt has *not* been ignorant of Ellen's feelings all along, even though Ellen believes that she "hid" her feelings from her aunt. Apparently, Nadine has been sensitive to the fact that Ellen has held herself above her and her daughter, Dora, even though (to our knowledge) Ellen has never said so aloud anywhere in the novel:

[Nadine] just said for me to get out. To find my evil little self some hole to crawl in. That she didn't want me to begin with. That Betsy didn't want me either. That all she and Dora wanted to do was to live there alone and she would be damned if she would tolerate me or my little superior self another day. (113-114)

We are also asked to accept the characterization of older, unattractive and overweight characters as evil, stupid, or self-centered, while the attractive are

virtuous, innocent, and morally superior. It is never stated directly that Ellen is attractive, but it is established by Mavis (one of the field hands) that Charlotte was pretty and that Ellen looks like her (65).

Readers are also expected to ignore that Nadine (for the most part) actually treats Ellen decently. Readers are not to acknowledge Nadine's acts of kindness because we are expected to empathize only with Ellen, who interprets Nadine's every gesture in a negative way. At the beginning of the novel, Nadine brings one of her daughter's outfits to Ellen so that Ellen will have something nice to wear to Charlotte's funeral. Ellen's reaction to this generosity is distinctly unreceptive and seems unwarranted:

Here I am wearing this red checkered suit like a little fool. When the day's over I'll burn it. I know my Aunt Nadine wants to come in here and fix me up. She gave me this outfit like she bought it just for me but I saw her girl Dora get her school picture taken in it last week. I do not have much choice but to wear it. (14)

Even though Nadine kindly tells her that she may keep the dress as her own, Ellen returns it to her aunt, still saturated with Dora's urine and shoved in a paper sack. Nadine also lets Ellen come live in her home, after Ellen's favorite Aunt Betsy is unwilling to offer her shelter. Nadine gives Ellen a private bedroom of her own, takes her shopping and lets her pick whatever clothes she wants. She tries to include her in their Christmas activities. However, even before she comes to live with Nadine, Ellen has already decided to treat Nadine's home like a hotel, ensuring that the arrangement will fail. She declares that the only time

Nadine and Dora will see her is at mealtime and when they pass each other on the way to the toilet (95). When Nadine shows concern and asks what Ellen is doing in her room and what she is reading, Ellen immediately mistrusts her interest. In fact Ellen's inner voice responds acerbically, letting the reader see the disparity between her actual thoughts and the seemingly nonchalant answers she gives:

Whenever I came out to eat or do my business Dora or Nadine wanted to know what I did in my room. I should have said I was going over how grateful I am to have them in my life but I was afraid they might believe me. So I just said I was reading (102).

What are we expected to Dismiss?

Charlotte corresponds to the sickly, long-suffering Beth March role. Like Beth, Charlotte has been sick since childhood. What never gets mentioned in Little Women and is scarcely touched upon in Ellen Foster is how this long term illness would affect Beth's and Charlotte's sisters emotionally. In Little Women, the family dotes on the frail Beth as if she were a delicate pet; likewise, Mama's Mama dotes on Charlotte, to the exclusion of her two sisters, Nadine and Betsy. In fact, we learn that not only are the two other sisters neglected and emotionally abandoned; but they are also physically mistreated as well and forced into what amounted to slave labor.

Among the many other details that the reader is expected to dismiss is Nadine's complicated past, a past that has little to do with Ellen. Nadine was also neglected and mistreated as a child. She is a widow, raising and supporting

a pre-teen daughter alone. She has lost her husband after his protracted illness (95) and by the end of the novel; she has also lost her sister and mother. It could be argued that Nadine is just doing the best she can, just as her niece is. Nadine's life could be just as worthy of a reader's sympathy as Ellen's, though for different reasons.

Nadine and Ellen also have a significant history together that occurs prior to the text's timeline. We must acknowledge this history, since it has a direct impact on their relationship and the way they interact; however, neither character deigns to relate any specific details about it. In fact, none of Ellen's history prior to Charlotte's final illness is explained, and that leaves significant gaps for the reader to fill. She has two aunts who are not "bad" people, yet neither of them wants Ellen to live with them. Is it possible that Ellen's past behavior is consistent with her present unruliness? Would this account for why her aunts do not want to help her? We do not know, but we should at least consider this possibility before we condemn them for not hurrying to this troubled but difficult child's rescue.

Another aspect of Ellen Foster that is completely disregarded in the existing criticism of the novel is the apparent cycle of abuse that began in Charlotte, Nadine and Betsy's childhood. While Ellen is living with Mama's Mama, we learn that Charlotte was the favorite child. We also learn that Mama's Mama neglected her two other daughters and was controlling in the extreme, as well as manipulative with all three. We learn that Mama's Mama put Nadine and Betsy to work in the fields as children. Fieldwork is grinding hard

labor, barely suitable for adults, much less two little girls. Mavis, the field hand, tells Ellen that her grandmother “made the other ones work like dogs but not your mama” (65). Mavis also tells her that Mama’s Mama has always been “peculiar” but since Charlotte died “she had acted touched” (65). Mental illness, emotional neglect, and psychological abuse add up to create the ultimate dysfunctional family. Living in this environment drives Charlotte to run away with a man who only continues the cycle of abuse with an intense viciousness. As a result, Ellen herself grows up in an unstable environment of abuse, neglect and cruelty. The impact on Charlotte’s life and later on Ellen’s is obvious. Growing up in such an atmosphere would have affected Betsy and Nadine as well, especially Nadine, who was apparently the least attractive and least favored child. Is she less deserving of our sympathy? If we are to forgive Ellen her flaws because she came from a dysfunctional family, can we not extend the same sympathy and consideration to Nadine?

## CONCLUSION

I do not particularly like to be led by anyone, nor do I wish to lead. Rather, I would prefer to help readers see that many different theories can be combined and used as a tool to facilitate self-awareness and independent thought. I do not think readers should merely resist, I think they should persist: persist in asking themselves, should I accept this premise or this characterization without questioning? What motive does this narrator have for misleading me or in leading me the direction he or she wants me to go? What do I do now that I recognize the manipulation? Rosa Eberly feels that “fictional texts [can] create

literary public spheres and affect social practices” (3), and in the case of Ellen Foster, it is especially true. There are many people who read this novel and be inspired to speak out on behalf of abused children or even be moved to help them. It is important that we understand the role of rescuer or helper is not always as glamorous or as immediately gratifying as it is sometimes portrayed to be, even when the person being helped is cooperative. It is obvious that even the foster mother has her work cut out for her in helping Ellen and the rest of her girls to learn to cope with all they have endured. Ellen herself tells us about her foster mother’s challenges:

You don’t need to see through walls here to know when my new mama is alone with one of her girls telling them about how to be strong or rubbing their backs. You can imagine it easy if it has happened to you.

And there have been more than a plenty days when she has put both my hands in hers and said if we relax and breathe slow together I can slow down shaking. And it always works. (121)

Resistance and questioning do not equal rejection. Quite the contrary; rather than fix on one particular theoretical approach to critiquing a text, I encourage readers to try several different methods. With each new critical reading, a fresh perspective can occur and something new can be learned. There will be times when, as Mathieu asserts, actions and activism are in order, however there will be other times when nothing more is required than heightened awareness on the reader’s part (113).

It is possible for readers to recognize Ellen's shortcomings yet still be able to sympathize with her situation. Readers can still have consideration for Nadine without sacrificing their allegiance to Ellen. There is a myth that needy people will be grateful to their benefactors and cooperative, but as we see in Ellen Foster, this is not always the case. Quite the contrary, as we see in the cases of Aunt Nadine and the school counselor, sometimes the underprivileged are resentful of those who are trying to help them. Readers can see and understand this. In order to help the unfortunate like Ellen, we must see them in all their complexity as well as with sympathy. To see them as one-dimensional characters that are created only for readers to pity is patronizing and does a disservice to the real Ellens of the world who need us to see them as legitimate human beings with strengths and failings like everyone else.

The purpose of this thesis is not to say that we should never accept what we read, nor is it to shift sympathies away from Ellen. We can allow ourselves to sympathize with Ellen and like her while still seeing her "warts and all," just as we can allow ourselves to see other aspects of Aunt Nadine and that enable us to have some measure of respect for her and her situation, even though she is still not a very likeable character. Rather, it is to be critical of how certain situations are presented to us with special regard to what is *not* being said or what is being said, but overlooked before we make our judgments. Readers should attempt to see how their own preconceptions come into play while reading a text and resist being led blindly. Being a critical reader is the first step to being a resisting reader and being a resisting reader is the first step to freeing

ourselves from culturally imposed limitations of thought. Only when we can persist and see our way out of scotosis, can we begin to see how narrators can and do manipulate us, even heroic narrators like Ellen.



## HEARING NADINE'S VOICE

You know, Ellen Hammond is not the little angel that everyone would like her to be and I'm sick to death of the grief I've been given over what all went wrong between us. She may have looked just like her momma (65), but she wasn't sweet like Charlotte was; the way Ellen went around thinking she was so superior to everyone else just made me sick. And don't think for a minute that it was easy growing up knowing that I didn't somehow measure up to Charlotte's supreme wonderfulness. So Charlotte had rheumatic fever. Why does that mean she should get all the favoring and me and Betsy get treated so bad (3)? I think that if you have more than one child then you shouldn't play favorites--that just isn't right. If my momma didn't have enough room in her heart but to love that one, then she just shouldn't have had me and Betsy. That's why I only have one child myself. That way I can love Dora all I want to and don't have to worry if I'm neglecting anyone.

And momma wasn't any prize to live with either with all her rules and hurtful words. Momma worked Betsy and me like dogs (65), but not her precious Charlotte. I used to just eat and eat, like maybe one day I'd be able to pad myself with a thick enough layer of fat (15) so that she couldn't hurt me anymore. And it did hurt to grow up and know that I was the least favorite of us three.

When I met my husband though, things changed. Here was someone who looked at me like I was somebody. He thought I was pretty. He thought I was smart. He liked me just the way I was. And when I had my Dora, then things just got that much better. Now I had *two* people who loved me just for my

own self, and I was so happy. Then he had that stroke and got sick. He laid up in that bed and withered right before my very eyes (95) and the doctors couldn't do a damn thing about it. That's why I don't trust them anymore. And I make a special point to tell everyone I know how you can't trust them. 'All those doctors know how to do is cheat, gamble and run around' (19) is what I say. They deprived me of the man I loved and my little girl of her daddy. For that I'll never forgive them.

And as if things weren't hard enough, I get saddled with Charlotte's smart-mouthed offspring. If Ellen thought I was either too stupid or deaf to hear her mutter those sass-mouth remarks about us under her breath then she had another thing coming. You know, I tried though, I really did. I took that child into my own home and fed her and bought her clothes...why, on the day of her mother's funeral, I gave her a lovely red-checkered outfit of Dora's to keep (lord knows she didn't own a single decent piece to her name) and what does she do, but after the funeral, she wads it up, pee-stained, stuffs it in a paper bag and hands it back to me, like she was too good to wear second-hand clothes! (14-23). Then she came here and treated us like we were running a hotel just for her! (94). She stayed up in her room all the time, like she was the Queen of Sheba, and even had the gall to announce at supper one night that we would only be seeing her at mealtimes and when we passed each other on the way to the toilet! (96). Can you imagine the nerve?

She antagonized Dora from day one. She sneered down her nose about Dora's bladder problems, she rummaged through my child's room whenever we

left the house (for what reason I couldn't begin to tell you). It's not even like Dora had anything worth prying into; just some raggedy old romance novels, makeup, and a couple of pictures of some boy actor...typical girl things (94). What interest they held for Ellen is beyond me, but she, the grand one who wanted her privacy so bad, should have had more respect for Dora's.

Christmas was a big mistake though. I know I should have done better by that girl who had had so little in her life, but I swear I just didn't know what to give her. When I asked what she wanted for Christmas, she said that all she wanted was a pack of white paper for her art and that the clothes I'd bought for her were present enough (104). I should have known better and it's not to my credit that I was just too weary over dealing with her to even try to find some extra surprises for her from Santa Claus. I was sick to death over her attitude, her mutterings, her squabbles with Dora and the waves of sarcasm that slammed us in the face every time we tried to be friendly to her. When she said that that was all she wanted, I thought to myself "Well, fine then! I'm tired of playing guessing games with you. If that's all you're going to tell me then by God that's all you'll get!" For that, I will never forgive myself.

I was the adult, I should have known better, and she was just a poor, ill-treated youngin'. But you know; I'm only human. At one point or another we all do something stupid, that if we could reverse time we'd gladly undo. But I can't say as how I'm sorry to see her gone from this house. She threatened to kill me you know (113-114). What parent would want *that* kind of business going on in their home? She never wanted to stay with us anyway. She seems happy

enough with that foster family and I'm certainly glad to have some peace in my home again. I would have to say that in the end though, life straightened itself out as life has a tendency to do. Well anyway, that's my story and I'm sticking to it."

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jamy Gearhart was born in Wilmington, N.C. and grew up in Wrightsville Beach. After receiving her B.S. in Anthropology at Appalachian State University in 1999, she was persuaded by friends, family and teachers to pursue her MA in English. After graduation, Jamy plans to move to the Appalachian Mountains with her son, Max, where she will teach.