



A LITTLE LESS TALK: FEMINIST LISTENING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTHERN  
WOMEN'S NOVELS

by

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## Introduction: Feminist Listening: A Rhetorical Framework for Examining Literature

Twentieth-century Southern women writers are known for their emphasis on storytelling.<sup>1</sup> What has been less noticed is the centrality of the act of listening, as characters engage in conversation with one another or as the narrator engages in conversation with the reader. This dissertation examines listening as a feminist rhetorical act in twentieth-century Southern women's fiction, shifting critical attention from the speaking characters to the listening characters within the novels of Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers. Taken together, these works show the rich, complicated, and understudied legacy of gendered listening within Southern women's novels.

*A Little Less Talk: Feminist Listening in Twentieth-Century Southern Women's Novels* confronts the absence of research on the role of the listener in literary criticism, but particularly within the works of Southern women writers. I argue Southern women writers have brought listeners to the forefront in their novels, highlighting the ways female and male listeners behave, react, and respond to speakers and demonstrating the benefits or consequences of sharing information with another person. I propose that these Southern female authors view listening as a skillset that should be mastered and a valuable feminist rhetoric due to the nature of listening as an act of empowerment for both parties within discourse. In essence, these authors effectively demonstrate the inherent value of listening and the rhetorical power of the listener within their works, reclaiming the art of listening as a vital part of communication.

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<sup>1</sup> See Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks's *The History of Southern Women's Literature*.

My introduction provides an overview of listening as a feminist rhetoric and explains why it is pertinent to Southern women's fiction using gender as a framework for analysis. I first explain why listening is an undervalued rhetoric and why it is gendered feminine. I then distinguish effective listening from ineffective listening, defining "feminist listening" skills. I also establish the ways the South is known for its strict gender roles, which have positioned women as natural listeners and stereotyped men as "bad" listeners, providing a rationale for the study of Southern literature from this feminist and rhetorical angle.

### **Continuing Current Feminist Conversations**

My work builds upon and adds to the current conversations in feminist rhetorical and southern literary criticism. Early feminist scholars of rhetoric, such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, noted the myriad of ways that women have been silenced or oppressed.<sup>2</sup> Similarly Southern literary scholars, such as Tillie Olsen, focused on the oppression and silencing of women, noting that female authors struggled to get their work in print or to find time to write at all due to patriarchal conditions in the South.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the recognition that women had been systemically silenced, both rhetorical and southern literary scholars began to insert missing female voices into the fold of rhetorical and literary canons<sup>4</sup> to demonstrate women's expression of voice and

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<sup>2</sup> See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's *Man Cannot Speak for Her*.

<sup>3</sup> See Tillie Olsen's *Silences*.

<sup>4</sup> For feminist rhetorical scholarship, see Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold*, Andrea Lunsford's *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, or Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald's *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetorics*. *Available Means* includes essays from Zora Neale Hurston, one of the authors in my study, positioning her as a feminist in both rhetorical and literary fields. Also, see Susan Jarrett's "Performing Feminisms, Histories, and Rhetorics," which discusses the need to unbracket "women as a category and

their subversion in the face of oppression. This important work allowed scholars in both fields to explore and expand the definition of feminist rhetorics.<sup>5</sup> Despite the value of this foundational work, recently feminist critics are beginning to examine the ways earlier approaches left out groups of women who were making significant contributions—women who were perhaps still silenced or did not overcome oppression in extraordinary or exceptional ways.<sup>6</sup> For example, in “Including Conservative Women's Rhetorics in an ‘Ethics of Hope and Care,’” Charlotte Hogg argues that the field of women's rhetorics should pay more attention to conservative women, as she traces the history and the consequences of what we've chosen to call the field (typically women's rhetorics or feminist rhetorics). My work contributes to this recent analysis by examining listening as a feminist rhetorical act that women are more socially equipped to perform, but which has gone unnoticed.

I choose to define my project on listening as feminist rhetoric rather than women's rhetoric because as Patricia Bizzell explains, “to discover that a woman somewhere has used language somehow is not to do feminist research on rhetoric” but rather “feminist rhetoric is characterized by distinctive methodologies that although they draw on multiple fields come together in synergistic ways” (*Feminist Rhetorical Practices* xi). My project draws upon several fields of inquiry (Rhetoric, Literary Studies,

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authorship as a practice” (1). For feminist historical scholarship on the South, see Carol S. Manning's *The Southern Female Tradition* and Patricia Yeager's *Dirt and Desire*.

<sup>5</sup> For examples, see Karen Foss and Sonya Foss's work *Women Speak: The Eloquence of Women's Lives*, Jacqueline Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, and Lindal Buchanan & Kathleen Ryan's *Walking and Talking*.

<sup>6</sup> See Barbara Biesecker's “Coming to Terms with Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric” for an account of the ways that only looking at women in speaking roles has led to tokenism. Also see Vicki Tolar Collin Burton's “The Speaker Respoken: Material as Feminist Methodology,” which seeks to “reclaim women's historical texts and support the epistemological worth of women's ordinary experiences” (147).



and Southern Studies) in order to create a methodology as Bizzell has suggested. Furthermore, women's rhetoric tends to focus on acts that are gendered feminine rather than acts that can be performed by all genders. While listening has been gendered feminine and women are more likely to become feminist listeners based on social training, I argue anyone can learn and master feminist listening skills and emphasize that listening is integral and equal to speaking during communication no matter what one's gender.

In the quest to insert missing female voices into the realm of the public sphere, feminist scholars often unwittingly reaffirm that the speaker is the most powerful role in communication. Scholars have demanded that female voices be heard alongside their male counterparts as a means of illustrating that the genders are equal and that both have a right to the dominant part of discourse. Fighting to speak has become parallel to fighting for equality between the genders.<sup>7</sup> This position incorrectly assumes that the listening party is not an equal to the speaker; that listening is not an equally important skill to hone. To assume that speaking is the more powerful position in communication "characterizes the act of listening as an undesirable and subordinate position" (Ballif 55). This mindset creates problems because it embraces the patriarchal culture of competing to speak. In "Border Crossings: Intersections of the Rhetoric and Feminism," Lisa Ede, Andrea Lunsford, and Cheryl Glenn recognize that feminist rhetorical criticism needs to move beyond examining women's work through a masculine lens, thus opening up conversations about how and what a feminist framework would look like. I am suggesting that viewing listening as a framework would be one possibility because if

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<sup>7</sup> See Mary Kelley's *Learning to Stand and Speak*.

scholars only focus on speaking, they forsake the reality that to be heard and recognized for your ideas, someone must be listening.<sup>8</sup> In her work *Rhetorical Listening*, Krista Ratcliffe explains, “We speak because someone is listening” (28). In other words, speakers rely upon listeners to give their words meaning. However, one must ask, is listening necessarily an empowering or feminist act? The answer, of course, is no, which is why a heuristic of feminist listening, as will be shown, is needed to distinguish between acts of feminist listening and passive hearing.

Ratcliffe’s seminal work, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender and Whiteness*, develops the concept of rhetorical listening as a trope for interpretation in which one takes a stance of openness toward a person, text, or culture (1). Ratcliffe promotes what she defines as active listening: listening to understand, not refute. While she concedes that rhetorical listening can be used for many purposes, she specifically focuses on negotiating gender and whiteness within the public sphere and composition pedagogy (1). While Ratcliffe’s work with rhetorical listening is groundbreaking and radical in that it equates listening with speech as a powerful rhetorical act available to women, she does not discuss rhetorical listening as a feminist act in the way that I am defining it as empowering for both speaker and listener, nor does she apply it to literary studies. Ratcliffe makes clear at the end of her work that she is inviting further research and application; my work is in many ways entering the conversation that Ratcliffe has initiated, adding to the definition and importance of listening and extending it into the literary field.

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<sup>8</sup>In “When I was a Young Soldier for the Revolution: Coming to Voice,” bell hooks notes that to speak in a liberated voice “one must know to whom we speak” (55), explaining that audience is integral to communication. However, the emphasis in the essay is still on the ways that the speaker is empowered rather than the listener.

In addition to Ratcliffe, the framework for feminist listening has been ably developed by rhetorical scholars Michelle Ballif and Alice Rayner as well as communication scholar Deborah Tannen.<sup>9</sup> A number of their points inform my analysis in the chapters that follow. In "The Audience: Subjectivity, Community and the Ethics of Listening," Rayner suggests that listeners have autonomy within a conversation as they are able to adjust their conscious listening. This concept is important for framing listening as a choice and not a requirement as well as for supporting the idea that the listener plays a powerful role in communication, perhaps even more so than the speaker. In "What is it that the Audience Wants?" Ballif distinguishes between hearing and listening, claiming that listening is a "radically different enterprise than hearing" in that listening equalizes the participants in conversation whereas hearing maintains a hierarchy (usually between a male speaker and female listener): "To hear a speaker is to 'understand' him to 'identify' and to 'recognize' him. . . .to listen rather than to hear is to resist the speaker's demand that one identify with him" (59-60). While Ballif raises some interesting questions about what it means to listen, one cannot deny that society shapes our gendered definitions and perceptions of listening as a passive act and, therefore, codes it as feminine even as we push back against this classification. My work suggests that feminist scholars reclaim the act of listening as a rhetoric of empowerment for women. In *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen claims that men and women speak in different ways and suggests cross communication between the genders will be best if both sides knows the ways in which the other communicates. Her work

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<sup>9</sup> While I acknowledge that there are other disciplines and works that could be placed in conversation with Tannen, such as within the communication sciences or work in audiology, I am limiting the scope of my research because I am looking at how these dynamics play out in creative or fictive works with mimetic rhetorical effects.

provides a means of looking at gendered communication, but I shift the emphasis to the ways that the gendered talk has also led to gendered listening habits. Thomas Farrell's "Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric" also discusses gender differences between the ways men and women speak, suggesting that the female model of speaking is more complex and harder to master. Again, his focus is on speaking rather than listening, but I argue his work intimates that due to the complexity of women's speaking patterns, women must also master the art of listening in order to be in conversation with other women. While Tannen would suggest that the genders listen differently and that one way is not necessarily better than another, I argue that some ways of listening are more empowering than others and that Southern men are not as socially equipped or trained to be active listeners, in Ratcliffe's definition of the term, as their female counterparts. All these scholars influence and shape my project, which seeks to broaden and extend these rhetorical theories into literary scholarship.

### **Feminist Listening: Empathy, Dialogic Retention, and Reciprocity**

As I define it, feminist listening is active listening, which enables the speaker and listener through a process of empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. Learning to listen and listen well is an ability that Ratcliffe claims can lead to better understanding and better communication as a whole. In order to assess the listening skills of the characters marked as listeners in the selected works of Welty, Hurston, O'Connor, and McCullers, one must first ask, what makes a person a good listener? To create a working definition of good listening skills, I draw upon and contribute to the scholarship of Tannen, Rayner, Ballif, and Ratcliffe by categorizing these attributes in what follows in the introduction and by interrogating these qualities in later chapters in relation to

Southern women's novels and the gendered social training that creates listeners in Southern society.

### **Empathy**

Having empathy and patience plays a significant role in the listening process. One must be willing to set aside the time to listen to someone else, to solely focus on that person while he or she is talking. An outward sign of this type of listening skill might be looking the person in the eyes while he or she is talking and/or being free from distractions that would prevent concentration on the conversation. According to Tannen, most people believe the idealized way to listen is to allow one person to speak at a time without interruption, or while others are silently paying attention: "Most Americans believe one speaker ought to speak at a time regardless of what they actually do" (*Understand* 195). Yet, silence does not equal disengagement. There are ways to demonstrate that one is listening while remaining silent. For example, nonverbal cues, such as nodding, smiling, or touch, etc., can be evidence of listening that is participatory. While silence is not all of the equation, it does play a major role in learning to listen well.

As shown in the novels I will examine, speakers need the space to speak. Patience with the speaker allows the speaker the opportunity to finish her thought regardless of whether or not the listener agrees with the statements being made. Interruptions may disturb the thought-process or cut the speaker's content off abruptly. According to Tannen, interruptions are seen as a hostile act,

a kind of conversational bullying. The interrupter is seen as a malevolent aggressor, the interrupted an innocent victim. These

assumptions are founded on the premise that interruption is an intrusion, a trampling on someone else's right to the floor, an attempt to dominate. (189)

Though interruptions can disturb the flow of conversation, Tannen maintains that interruptions are not inherently bad, but the manner in which one interrupts can be viewed negatively. For example, interrupting to change the topic would show a lack of interest or patience with the speaker. However, interrupting to clarify a point or to ask a question highlights interest and engagement with the speaker, encouraging her to continue. Examples of both types of interruption can be found throughout the works I examine in this study, drawing attention to the positive and negative effects a listener can have upon the conversation as a whole.

Having empathy for the speaker also means a willingness to listen to ideas and viewpoints that are not one's own or that may be upsetting, startling, or otherwise emotionally laden. Ratcliffe explains that listeners should display an openness to hearing contradictory opinions and viewpoints, which entails choosing to listen to "exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves" (25). Ratcliffe equates listening to contrasting views to listening to discordant notes being played at the same time. Rather than achieving harmony or compliance, one seeks to listen to dissonance in order develop listening skills that enable us "to argue for what we deem fair and just while questioning that which we deem fair and just" (25). In addition, in "Towards an Ethics of Listening," Ballif deems this openness as listening to the speaker on her terms and within the terms of the conversation (931). Alice Rayner also expresses the need for open listening, explaining, "such adjustment allows for the

possibility of learning something genuinely new, not just what one already knows” and leaves room within the listener for the “summation of prior meanings and a communicative effort to open up toward meaning in a space of desire” (20). Thus, listening to opposing opinions allows the listener to sharpen, reinforce, challenge, or dismiss his or her own thoughts on a given subject before speaking about it in the future, and patiently listening to these differing thoughts facilitates understanding. Dissenting voices and backgrounds pervade the works in my study, creating conflict between the characters. Listening with an open mind helps these characters learn from one another, build relationships, and find understanding if not agreement. However, these novels also demonstrate the negative consequences of closed-minded listening, which results in a lack of empathy, respect, or understanding between the two parties, which can lead to violence.

### **Dialogic Retention**

In order to listen for a sustained amount of time, one needs to develop dialogic retention. Dialogic retention builds upon the notion of open listening because dialectic involves the engagement and synthesis of opposing ideas in order to reach an understanding.<sup>10</sup> One cannot reach an understanding without retention of the material involved in discussion. Retention of the dialogue helps the listener to know what questions to ask. As Tannen illustrates, “Asking questions indicates a need or want to listen” (114). However, there is a difference between questions that build upon the topic and those that demonstrate that the listener has no knowledge as to the subject of conversation.

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<sup>10</sup> See Plato’s *Gorgias* for a definition and a working example of such an exchange.

Remembering what the speaker is saying is key to staying engaged with one conversation to the next and also displays interest in the speaker, which helps establish rapport and intimacy between the two. In essence, remembering the words of the speaker also demonstrates a knowledge of the speaker herself. Rayner explains this phenomenon: "In this context, what is heard is not the person or the subject as much as the memory, desire, and hope that emerge through the person" (16). She further explains that memory of the conversation does not necessarily imply recovery but creation (18). The memory of the words develops into the memory of the context, which develops into the memory of the person. In "I Heard What You Didn't Say," Tannen explains how conversations between two people over time accumulate meta-messages, which are implied messages of the literal statement. Listening for meta-messages is complex because it requires past knowledge of prior conversations. Understanding and communicating with meta-messages is a sign of alignment and caring (1-4). However, in order to understand meta-messages, one must apply memory of past exchanges.

If the listener cannot remember what the speaker said, the listener appears disinterested, which in turn could give the impression that the listener devalues the topic of conversation or the speaker herself. Tannen explains, "A lack of listening can be viewed as an inability to see value in another person" (134). In this case, listening does not merely mean hearing the words, but retaining the information. As shown in these novels, retention plays a crucial role in the conversation, especially when the listener is expected to spread the story to others, keep certain parts of the story secret, or internalize the information.



## **Reciprocity**

The roles of listener and speaker are not fixed designators nor should they be. These roles are meant to shift as conversation develops. As will be seen in these texts, problems arise when the acts are not reciprocal. Tannen notes the expectation of reciprocity for healthy conversation (*Understand* 143). Thus, one should practice being in the role of the listener during an exchange rather than dominating the conversation. As Ballif asserts, good speaking is born out of good listening habits, which implies, that as one skill develops, so does another.

Developing these listening skills requires practice in order to interpret the message once heard. The more one practices the art of listening, the more one will be able to pick up on social cues, intonation, and subtext that are needed for understanding both what is said and what is not said within the conversation. In *Unspoken*, Cheryl Glenn explains that silence comes with its own grammar and functions as a form of rhetoric. Thus, silence can speak and be understood if one knows how to listen. Rayner agrees, "The idea of audience suggests specific capacities to hear meaning in the spoken and the unspoken"(16). Practicing listening to the silence and deciphering its various meanings requires effort for listeners unaccustomed to this mode of conversation. My project highlights the ways that characters build rapport with one another and are capable of understanding that surpasses verbal communication in some instances. In essence, listening to one another strengthens the bonds between these characters and empowers both the speaker and the listener.

## Gendered Listening

While listening skills can be mastered by both men and women, the act of listening has been gendered within our society. In her work *Gender and Discourse*, Tannen asserts that men and women are systemically taught to view conversations differently from a young age, which ultimately impacts their views of listening. For men “conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others’ attempts to put them down and push them around” (25), while for women, “conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus. They try to protect themselves from other’s attempts to push them away” (25). Put another way, men view conversations as a chance to prove their status, and women view conversation as a means of gaining intimacy. Tannen’s arguments may be viewed as essentialist, but it is important to understand the ways that communication has been stereotyped by gender and how literature reinforces or abandons these stereotypes as will be seen throughout this dissertation.

These gendered viewpoints about conversation as a whole cause both men and women to perceive listening in different ways. Because men view talking as a means to maintaining their power within social groups, they may feel powerless in the position of listener. Tannen asserts, “Some men really don’t want to listen at length because they feel it frames them as subordinate” (*Understand* 143), which is why some men avoid listening and situations where they are placed in the role of listener altogether. Ironically, men need listeners to feel validated and maintain the social hierarchy (131). Yet, the very system of hierarchal communication prevents them from finding willing

listeners in other men. In *The Will to Change*, bell hooks explains the unfortunate pattern of men “sharing intense feelings with a male buddy, only to have that buddy either interrupt to silence the sharing, offer no response, or distance himself” (143). Tannen agrees noting, “Men are dismissive of other men’s concerns in order to maintain their own position within the hierarchy” (56), and men minimize other men’s problems (58). Thus, men reinforce the idea that they are not good listeners for one another. Because men cannot find listeners among their own gender, they turn to women, placing them in the role of listener sometimes unwillingly. Tannen admits that women find themselves involuntarily in the role of listener more often than men (124) and suggests this may be due to the fact that “women are more comfortable than men at supporting others” (133); one way to show support is by listening to someone else.

In contrast to the male perspective of communication, women view conversations as a means to maintain relationships, so they learn to listen attentively. They are inclined to willingly take on the role of listener with friends and family members and as shown above are likely to fulfill the role in support of others who may not be friends or family. Hooks notes, “Unlike most men, most women have been taught relational skills” (184). Thus, both men and women view listening as means of validation, but women are more likely to validate or empathize with the speaker. Tannen explains, “Women are more inclined to ask questions. . . . They provide a feedback loop. And they respond more positively and enthusiastically, for example, by agreeing or laughing” (*Understand* 142). These opposing reactions to listening results in a gendered imbalance in which men gain practice speaking and women practice listening (*Understand* 135).

Again, while Tannen's study could be viewed as essentialist, she notes that these gendered views of communication are based upon a hegemonic system. So, there may be men who are well equipped to be listeners, but these men are the marginalized minority. For a man to be considered a good listener is to defy the patriarchal structure. According to bell hooks in *The Will to Change*, "Patriarchal dads do not listen" (xvi). She continues to claim "that patriarchal culture requires boys deny, suppress, and if all goes well, shut down their emotional awareness and their capacity to feel" (41). Listening requires empathy and an emotional awareness, which means that men may choose not to hear in order to avoid emotional connection. Kay Leigh Hagan associates listening with defiance of the patriarchy:

Good men can be somewhat disturbing to be around because they usually do not act in ways associated with typical men; they listen more than they talk; they self reflect on their behavior and motives, they actively educate themselves about women's reality by seeking out women's culture and listening to women. (qtd. in hooks 186)

Both women and men view listening as effeminate. While men certainly cultivate masculinity norms, women are also complicit in reinforcing them. Despite the fact that, as Tannen claims, "He doesn't listen is one of the biggest complaints made of men" (*Understand* 78), women have helped define listening as a sign of femininity, which marginalizes men who exhibit such behavior. In *Guyland*, Michael Kimmel claims, "Women say they expect a man might be gay if he's interested in what she's talking about, knows something about what she's talking about, or is sensitive and a good

listener” (49). This idea is reflected in McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* when both characters and critics alike question the sexuality of Singer, who displays exceptional listening skills. Though the works in this study generally reinforce the gendered norms of communication, they suggest that claiming listening as a feminist rhetoric is not a negative but a positive association as listening becomes the driving force of communication as a whole and has the potential to produce better speaking abilities as well. To put these theories into practice, I examine the works of four twentieth century Southern female authors: Welty, Hurston, O’Connor, and McCullers.

### **Why the South?**

I choose to limit my study to Southern female authors, illustrating the ways that these women use their available means to position listening as a powerful feminist rhetoric, for several reasons. First, the South has strict gender norms, positioning men as speakers and women as listeners, which is mirrored in Southern literature. Second, Southern literary scholarship has already recognized the power of oral traditions in Southern culture reflected in Southern literature. Finally my project focuses exclusively on Southern women writers in order to add to the feminist revisions of Southern women’s fiction begun by scholars like Carol S. Manning, Louise Westling, Patricia Yeager, and others, who have claimed these works have been undervalued and understudied compared to their male peers.

Postbellum guidebooks like *The Ladies Book of Etiquette and Manual Politeness*, *Colliers Encyclopedia*, and *The Ladies Repository*, cultivated the idea of gendered speech, indoctrinating women and men to believe that “the role of facilitator and listener rather than speaker is deeply inscribed as the preferred behavior for women in conversation”

(Johnson 71).<sup>11</sup> Conversely, according to Johnson, “etiquette literature advises young men to cultivate conciseness and accuracy in their conversation and the general skill of speech making” (68). While this literature was commonly read by both Northerners and Southerners alike, Southern literature is ideal for the study of gendered implications in listening characters because the South, perhaps more than any other region, abides by strict gender guidelines, which would position men as natural speakers and women as faithful listeners. While restrictive gender codes are not confined to the South, In “The Work of Gender in the Southern Renaissance,” Anne Goodwyn Jones notes:

[they] took on a special intensity there, where rigid gender boundaries had always been part of a network of racial and class boundaries as well. To shake the pedestal, or even more disturbing to refuse the phallus, was to put the entire structure of Southern thinking at risk. (43)

Both men and women were trained to adhere to societal expectations befitting their gender.

For white Southern men, a development of oratorical skills was a necessity to “publicly separate themselves from non-elite rivals in their own region and to convince themselves of their superiority over northern contemporaries” (Glover 101). Speaking well became a marker of class and a means of establishing and maintaining status within their communities. Historian Kenneth Greenburg explains that oratory allowed

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<sup>11</sup> For example, *The Glory of Woman* notes, “It is well that every group should have its leader or center; not always the one who talks most or best, but one who listens, manages, suggests, and draws out or gives opportunities to others” (475). Likewise, *Colliers Encyclopedia (1882)* asserts that “the well-mannered woman is depicted listening to the expression of others’ opinions and is generally remaining silent as it is unlikely that opinions she has are sufficiently formed” (qtd. in Johnson 71).

“gentlemen to perform their superior intelligence and virtue” (qtd. in Glover 101). Thus, speech was also a means of displaying one’s education. In the South, the way a man talked often defined his position in society and his influence over others, which is why verbal sparring as well as physical dueling was encouraged.<sup>12</sup> The ingrained notion of language as power positions speaking above listening, and helps explain why men of the South were reluctant listeners or why they viewed talking as a competition. While these ideals were established before the Civil War, the remnants of their influence still pervade Southern society today and impact Southern literature of the twentieth century, which often expresses or reflects upon a nostalgia for the past.

In contrast, women of the South were trained to be listeners as a part of the conditioning of becoming a lady.<sup>13</sup> Feminist scholars and literary scholars alike have examined the particular quandary posed by Southern womanhood.<sup>14</sup> Southern ideology held that part of the charm of the South was that women were “ladies,” meaning they were delicate, submissive, charming, and modest. In “The Desperate Imagination,” Bertram Wyatt Brown explains, “For Southern women of sensitivity and high

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<sup>12</sup> See Kenneth S. Greenberg’s *Honor and Slavery* and Bertram Wyatt Brown’s *Southern Honor*.

<sup>13</sup> Southern belle ideology particularly pertains to white Southern elites; however, there are exceptions to this rule as I will explore through the character of Janie in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

<sup>14</sup> Feminist scholars, bell hooks, Nan Johnson, Karen and Sonja Foss, Jacqueline Jones Royster discuss the ways women in the South are relegated into the private rather than the public sphere. While this is true for speaking, women are positioned as powerful listeners in both spheres. Literary scholars, Mary Weeks-Baxter, Kathryn Siedel, Betina Entzminger, N. Baym have explored the idea of the Southern belle or Southern matron in various ways, noting the characteristics of the belle as well as the ways the belle as a figure can be a subversive character. All note that these ladies are put on a pedestal, meant to be seen and not heard, which does draw a division between speaking and silence, but I posit that while they may be silent, they are also listening, which gives them a powerful position within communication.

intelligence, to fall short of such feminine ideals as beauty, submissiveness, fertility in marriage, and modest reserve was a frequent source of agony” (58). In other words, both men and women of the South perceived the belle to be the ideal, and both men and women reinforced the standards and expectations of being a respectable Southern lady.

One of the tenets of Southern womanhood was the attitude that women should be seen and not heard. Peggy Prenshaw notes, “To remain silent was to acquiesce to voicelessness and invisibility; to assert one’s view or conviction was not only to forfeit the respect and attention of powerful men, as well as that of most women, but to threaten the foundation of the South itself” (78). Prenshaw stresses that the South in particular relegated speaking to men and silence to women. Nan Johnson concurs, explaining that if a woman attempted to step outside her rhetorical realm (the household), she was deemed a “shrieker” who alienated those around her (286). These explanations highlight the gender divide in speech; however, this perception limits the roles of women to an inactive silence instead of an active listening. My study seeks to dismantle the idea that lack of speech is equated with lack of power.

While women were not expected to speak in public spheres, they were expected to maintain relationships with their husbands, children, community, and friends. Listening is an essential element in maintaining these ties. In *The Southern Lady*, Scott explains, the ideal woman of the South “was capable of acute perceptions about human relationships, and was a creature of tact, discernment, sympathy, and compassion” (4). One of the central methods to exhibit these traits is to become a skilled listener, and one of the ways women displayed their technique was by playing the part of the hostess. Readers see this type of behavior throughout *The Ponder Heart* as Edna hosts meals for



community members within the Beulah Inn and in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as Janie hosts Mrs. Turner and later Pheoby. In contrast, men were tasked with being bread winners, which placed them in the hegemonic discourse of men described earlier by Tannen, including asserting command, achieving status, or maintaining hierarchy.

Furthermore, Southern women were taught to patiently listen to their husbands in handbook guides, which taught them “the well-mannered woman is depicted listening to the expression of others’ opinions and is generally remaining silent as it is unlikely that opinions she has are sufficiently formed” (qtd. in Johnson 71). Their male counterparts were instead encouraged to argue their points and to be assertive with one another and with other women in order to maintain leadership. Thus, women were trained to be open listeners whereas men were taught to take command of the conversation.

Women of the South were expected to be listeners, and so it would make sense for Southern women writers to use listening within their works and to create strong listening characters. I posit that Southern women writers are elevating the status of listening throughout their works, highlighting that being a good storyteller requires one to first be a good listener, implying that women are better equipped to tell stories than their male counterparts.

In addition to the prevalent work on gender norms in the South, the narration strategies that Southern authors employ already have received attention from scholars who have argued that oral exchange—speaking and listening—characterizes Southern

culture and its literature.<sup>15</sup> Eugenia Whitlock explains, “No one ever talked about the South without talking about love of the Southern word” (“New South” keynote). In his classic book, *Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash asserts that orality is a primary focus of Southern studies due to the pervasive nature of storytelling and personal narratives of the culture. Similarly, Scott Romine, author of *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community*, notes, “If you ask a Southerner anything, he’ll tell you a story” (15). Yet among scholars who have paid attention to storytelling in Southern fiction, none has asked these important questions: Who is listening to the narrative? Why was this person selected to be a listener? What does the listener contribute to the conversation? What does the listener do with the story once it has been told? What are the gendered implications of choosing the listener? Often, the protagonists in these novels are telling a story to another character who may go unrecognized by critics and readers alike who are enchanted by the narration of the tale. These are important questions because the listening characters provide the impetus for the speaking characters to share their stories.

I choose to focus on the works of Welty, Hurston, O’Connor, and McCullers for a variety of reasons. First, their autobiographies and journals all mention the power of listening and the positive effects that listening had upon their own abilities to become storytellers, which is mirrored in their works through the listening characters. While there are many valuable works of female authored Southern fiction that could be studied in this manner, one of the goals of the dissertation is to not only show that

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<sup>15</sup> See Scott Romine’s *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* and *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community*. Also see “Crossroads of Southern Culture and Narrative” by Robert H. Brinkmeyer and McKay Jenkins’s *The South in Black and White*.

feminist listening exists within these works, but that there is a range or spectrum of feminist listening present, which the study of these particular works provides.

The novels not only demonstrate a range of listening, the authors also represent a range of Southern women. While Hurston is the only woman of color, the writers have varying backgrounds including different races, socioeconomic levels, religious preferences, etc. Thus, while a limited sample in some capacities, they represent a broad scope of Southern women. Patricia Yeager, editor of *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writings 1930-1990* notes, "Modern Southern women writers evoke in their fictions the power of the oracular," meaning their works mimic the oral tradition or are strong pieces of story telling, which provides a portion of my rationale for focusing on this particular era for research on the rhetorical exchange between speakers and listeners in fiction (x).

All four of the women writers I have selected are considered major Southern authors of the first half of the twentieth century and are a part of what is known as the "Southern Renaissance," a time marked by "alternative and resistant constructions of gender" within Southern literature, which Goodwyn Jones notes makes the period ideal for the study of "the representation of and enactment of the works of genders in the South" (47).<sup>16</sup> Though the Southern Renaissance is a time for questioning of gendered norms, these authors celebrate rather than forsake the act of listening, which suggests that they consider listening to be skill rather than a burden. The texts I am using from each, with the exception of Welty's novel, are some of the most well known by each

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<sup>16</sup> In "The Work of Gender in The Southern Renaissance," Anne Goodwyn Jones notes the renaissance is "generally taken to refer to the blossoming of Southern intellectual life after the First World War. . . . The Southern Renaissance traditionally has been limited to literary production" (43).

author: *The Ponder Heart*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Violent Bear it Away*, *Wise Blood* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. O'Connor, McCullers, and Welty have been studied alongside each other in previous works like Louise Westling's *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens* or Sarah Gleeson White's "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness," but no one has noted the pattern of listening in the texts. Furthermore, neither places Zora Neale Hurston into conversation with her white contemporaries as I will do, which helps highlight that the act of listening is not only important or found among white Southern female authors.<sup>17</sup> Choosing these authors and these texts helps demonstrate the need for this rhetorical approach to the literature because while these works have been widely studied, they have not been examined from this particular feminist and rhetorical angle.

### **Chapter Overview**

My study is divided into two parts based on the gender of the listener, the gendered rhetorical situation, and the consequences of listening for the character or resolution of plots. Part One of my dissertation examines novels in which female characters select female listeners, highlighting the ways these listeners are able to meet the speaker's needs within the text. The first chapter analyzes the relationship between Edna Earle and her chosen female listener in Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart* by explaining the benefits of selecting a stranger rather than a known listening partner. Chapter two investigates Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* focusing on the speaker-listener pair of Janie and Pheoby. Unlike the first chapter, Janie's listener

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<sup>17</sup> Goodwyn Jones notes that Hurston is often considered within the context of the Harlem Renaissance, but argues that she should rightfully be anthologized as part of the Southern Renaissance as well (44).

is not a stranger, but rather her best friend. Thus, their interactions are based on a long-term relationship, which informs their discourse and how Pheoby responds to Janie's tale. As in chapter one, I analyze the effects on the narrative of selecting Pheoby as a listener, and I examine Pheoby as what I deem a deliverer, a listener expected to spread the message of the speaker to third parties on the speaker's behalf. Both chapters analyze how these listeners are adhering to or departing from feminist listening skills.

Both of these books employ the rhetoric of gossip during the exchanges between the women. Edna Earle is engaged in gossiping about her fellow townspeople and her family with her chosen listener, and Janie gossips with Pheoby about her life experiences, sexual encounters, and Eatonville. Thus, I use a framework of what Patricia Meyer Spacks refers to as rhetorical gossip in both of these chapters, arguing that gossip is a powerful and meaningful way for women to bond with their listeners. I explain how the use of gossip creates a listening situation for these women wherein both speaker and listener are peers or co-conspirators, sharing intimate details or secrets, which ties the two together within the conversation. Most importantly, during the exchange of gossip, both speaker and listener are seen as equal partners in the conversation, highlighting the importance of and need for a listener. As seen in chapter one, sometimes speakers expect their words to be kept a secret, but as shown in chapter two, sometimes speakers share their stories with the intent to spread the story to a larger audience. Both situations place an added responsibility on the listening party. I argue that Welty and Hurston use this framework intentionally to orchestrate the positive effects of gossip between themselves and their readership.

Part Two examines novels in which the listener is male and illustrates the ways these listeners are not meeting the speaker's needs. The male listeners cannot be defined as feminist listeners to either male or female speakers, and their performances as listeners will be explored through the lens of masculinity studies. As previously stated, men are not conditioned to be listeners and often do not have the skills required to be good listeners as shown in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*. While several scholars accuse O'Connor of aligning herself with the patriarchy in her works, I offer a feminist revision of her work, asserting that her emphasis on the failed male listener illustrates the ways that men are ill equipped to be preachers.

Both of these books employ the rhetoric of preaching, which as Roxeanne Mountford explains in *The Gendered Pulpit*, has been defined as a masculine rhetoric. Unlike the rhetoric of gossip, the rhetoric of preaching assumes a hierarchal relationship between speaker and listener, which places the speaker above the listener. I will examine how male listeners in these texts fail to listen to the speaking characters because they resist this hierarchal structure and devalue listening as a whole.

Part Two also explores the possibility of a male feminist listener, conceding that the hegemonic description of masculinities is limiting and that men are capable of overcoming gendered listening norms. In Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the male listener defies multiple stereotypes becoming a listener that is meeting both the male and female speakers' needs. Because Singer is a deaf mute, this chapter will explain how Singer has been marginalized in society and how the deaf are capable of active listening despite the lack of auditory recognition. Thus a framework of disability studies will be used to highlight the ways Singer's deafness is actually a

prowess he is able to wield rather than an obstacle he must overcome. I argue McCullers uses her text to reinforce the universal need for feminist listening because while Singer is able to meet the needs of others, Singer's needs are not being met by his chosen male listener.

My work adds to the conversations begun by Krista Ratcliffe, Michelle Ballif, Alice Rayner, Deborah Tannen, and others who insist listening is not merely the absence of speech, nor even merely silence, but rather an effort to (in a real sense) make a statement. In the case of these texts, I argue that listening is used as a strategy of the authors to raise awareness, critique, or discuss cultural issues concerning race, gender, class, religion, and disability. Studying the act of listening and the listeners within these Southern novels builds upon these important theories about listening and extends them into literary discussions. These Southern female authors use the act of listening as a feminist rhetoric within these works because they highlight the ways listening is empowering for both parties in communication. In addition, they prove that listening should be valued, practiced, and honed for successful communication, creating heuristics of the listening process that can be used for analysis in other such works.

This dissertation makes important contributions to both feminist rhetoric and literary criticism by examining the importance of rhetorical listening in selected works by Southern authors. It establishes the argument that rhetorical listening is an important vector in understanding the dynamics of interaction among and by Southern male and female characters within gendered listening situations in these texts. While this dimension of literature is important, it has been unrecognized, undervalued, and misunderstood. This dissertation reveals how the nature and dynamics of rhetorical

listening in literary works contribute to our understanding and appreciation of such works. In my conclusion, I elaborate on the ways that the research could be extended to include other listening situations with gendered implications found in Southern literature.



## Part I Chapter I

Strange Company: The Listener in Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart*

*"There's something I think's better to have than love, and if you want me to, I'll tell you what it is—that's company." ---Edna Earle Ponder*

The introduction defined feminist listening as a process that empowers the speaker and the listener through the use of empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. This chapter provides an example of how feminist listening works within Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart* (1954) by analyzing the relationship between the protagonist, Edna Earle, and her unnamed guest. As will be shown, both the speaker and the listener are women participating in the rhetoric of gossip, which forges a bond between the two parties as Edna shares information about her uncle with the expectation of secrecy.

*The Ponder Heart* is ideal for examining the strange listener because the plot is structured around a conversation between two people, Edna Earle Ponder and her unnamed listener, a guest at the Beulah Hotel. Because the guest is unnamed and unknown to Edna Earle prior to this conversation, the listener is what I deem a strange listener: a listener capable of providing a clean slate for the speaker, offering a chance to craft an ethos apart from preconceived opinions. As seen in this chapter, a strange listener allows Edna Earle to frame her story according to her preference, which provides her more control over the interpretation of the message. The conversation between the two parties takes place after Edna Earle's uncle, Daniel, is placed on trial for the murder of his late wife Bonnie Dee Peacock. Despite the fact that Daniel is acquitted of the crime, lingering questions remain as to why or how the jury reached

this verdict. Edna Earle feels ostracized by the community and desperately wants to talk to someone about her life, her uncle, the town and the trial, which makes this stranger a convenient listener. To analyze the nature of a strange listener, this chapter will explore the following questions about the novel in detail: Who is the strange listener? What motivates Edna Earle to select a strange listener? Most importantly, does Edna's guest fulfill the role of a feminist listener?

To highlight the benefits of a feminist and strange listener, I contrast Edna Earle's conversation with her female guest to others within the novel. Most of Edna Earle's interactions are with her male relatives, which pose a problem because, as noted in the introduction, men (Southern white men in particular) are not socially trained to foster feminist listening habits like their female peers. As seen in this chapter, Edna Earle's conversations with Uncle Daniel and Grandfather Ponder fit the description of masculine hegemonic discourse, a term used to define hetero-normative communication behaviors or the ways in which men and women are socially trained to speak and listen to one another. Thus, they fail to effectively listen to Edna Earle. The chapter also examines Edna Earle's conversations with Bonnie Dee Peacock to demonstrate that while Southern women are often predisposed to meet the demands of feminist listening, they too, can fall short of the mark.

Gossip creates a listening situation wherein Edna Earle's guest is a willing participant in the conversation; however, as shown in the trial scene of this novel, listeners are not always selected by the speaker nor are they always willing participants in discourse. During Uncle Daniel's trial, Edna Earle is forced to testify in front of a jury "of her peers," but while these men live in the same town, they are not necessarily

Edna's peers. Some are not of the same social standing and none are of the same gender, creating an unequal power dynamic between speaker and listener. In addition, because Edna speaks to a variety of listeners at the same time, she has less control of the way the message is received. For example, she is forced to answer a set of questions rather than talk at her leisure, as is the case with her guest. Hence, her capacity to shape her own ethos is limited. I use the court scene as a further contrast to Edna Earle's conversation with her guest and the benefits of a feminist listener. Ultimately, the chapter highlights the importance of a feminist listener within communication by examining a range of listening throughout the text.

The latter portion of the chapter will be dedicated to examining how Welty uses the construct of a strange listener and the framework of gossip to instruct readers about the values of feminist listening. As such, I will ask the following questions: Why would Welty, or Southern women writers in general, value a strange listener? How can readers act as strange listeners? In order to seek answers to these questions, I examine Welty's autobiography, essays, and letters as well as the critical opinion of Welty and her works. I draw upon the theories of rhetorical gossip in an attempt to highlight how Welty herself is as savvy a rhetor as her character, Edna Earle, and how Welty can be defined as a feminist listener. Overall, this chapter is of rhetorical and literary significance because it provides a rhetorical framework with which to analyze novels, offers a new understanding of a previously minor character, and explores one of Welty's minor works, often overlooked by critics as less complex than her later novels, such as *Delta Wedding*.

## Effects of Rhetorical Gossip

Welty's use of rhetorical gossip is one of the major reasons that Welty scholars often leave *The Ponder Heart* out of critical conversations and scholarly texts.<sup>18</sup> When the novel is mentioned, it is usually a subject of critique. For example, Brooke Allen, author of "A Universal Region: The Fiction of Eudora Welty," notes *The Ponder Heart* is "merely a comic tale rather than a novel" and is "marred by sentimentality and cuteness" (4). The "cuteness" Allen refers to is the nature of the narrative itself. Edna Earle recounts her family history, leading up to Uncle Daniel's trial, to her listener in a manner that would typically be defined as gossip as Edna Earle unabashedly discusses the peculiarities of her family, friends, and neighbors and relays them to her guest in confidence. Viewed as gossip, the novel is unsurprisingly downgraded to a lesser status than that of Welty's other works. Throughout the history of rhetoric, gossip has been denounced. For instance, Virgil claims that gossip flies all over and disrupts everything in its path.<sup>19</sup> Heidegger refers to it as "idle talk" and explains that when it is applied to the page "it takes the form of scribbling" (qtd. in Spacks 17). Defining gossip as idle talk belies the rhetorical power and intentional qualities of the term.

Gossip has been viewed as negative in the past, but I argue Welty's *Ponder Heart* demonstrates the benefits as well as the consequences of gossip. In *You Just Don't Understand* social linguist Deborah Tannen believes gossip can be a negative or positive form of communication depending on how it is used. For example, she claims that there is a marked difference in "talking about" someone versus "talking against" someone (120). However, in *Gossip*, rhetorical scholar Patricia Meyers Spacks claims that even

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<sup>18</sup> See Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, Ruth Vandekieft, Micheal Kreyling, and Pearl McCainey.

<sup>19</sup> Found in book five of the Aeneid.

when gossip involves talking against another, it retains positive qualities for those participating in the act, noting that gossip is at times a powerful “weapon for outsiders—a weapon appropriately directed at the façade of reputation people construct around themselves. And the weapon can be converted to a bond: a means of alliance, a way of feeling united as insiders” (45). The bond forged between the two gossipers helps alleviate the pressure from a shared oppression. In the case of Edna Earle and her listener, Edna Earle’s community has become an oppressor excluding both parties, as will be explored later in this chapter. Spacks claims that literature can highlight the ways that gossip is an effective means of communication specifically citing Welty’s works as evidence of such a feat: “Many writers employ gossip as characterizing speech. Few have mastered the technique so completely as Eudora Welty” (10). Though she does not mention *The Ponder Heart* specifically, the novel employs the type of positive gossiping that Spacks praises.

Along with Spacks, other feminist scholars debate how the term rhetoric should be defined and argue that the definition and study of rhetoric has been constrained by a male dominated perspective. In *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, Christine Mason Sutherland states:

There is a woman’s rhetoric, one arising from women’s experience in the private rather than a public sphere. I think it can be seen in selection of subject matter; in the relationship with the audience (communication rather than self-expression); in a conversational style. (321)

Gossip adheres to the above requirements, especially as viewed through *The Ponder Heart*. From the comfort of her own inn, Edna Earle communicates with her guest in a conversational style about the subject matter of day-to-day life with Uncle Daniel. While Spacks would claim this type of gossip is of the “kitchen table variety,” she would also claim that gossip has persuasive properties:

Even the most private forms of gossip, the kitchen table variety, often have effects in the larger world. The anxiety aroused by a gossip derives partly from its incalculable scope. One can never know quite where it goes, whom it reaches, how it changes in transmission, how and by whom it is understood. Whether or not gossipers hope to create important effects, their talk may travel, may change opinion, may have unforeseen consequences. (6)

The consequences Spacks points to here suggest that the person initiating the gossip has the power to influence his or her listener’s opinions about people, places, and events. Though gossip seems harmless, the effects can be widespread and life changing. As will be shown, Edna Earle suffers the effects of negative gossip about her family after Daniel’s trial, which consequently results in a lack of hotel guests or income and establishes the need for Edna Earle to engage in gossip, sharing her “truth” with a stranger. Gossip might begin in the home, but it has the capacity to travel from one home to the next until the news eventually enters the public sphere, causing gossip to be just as powerful as any other form of rhetoric. Welty’s use of gossip demonstrates her mastery over this form of rhetoric. Though some would dismiss her novel, Welty’s style of writing is more complex than meets the eye, as are her characters.

### **The Listening Southern Belle**

As noted in the previous section, gossip is typically relegated to the private sphere and therefore, deemed feminine. As the text demonstrates, Edna Earle uses gossip to her advantage, illustrating her understanding of its use in rhetorical situations. She realizes she is barred from certain spheres, especially given her Southern upbringing along with its Southern belle ideology, dictating that a Southern woman should be a symbol of charm and grace, an ornament for people, mainly men, to adore. In other words, Southern belles are measured by their beauty rather than their words. Schulz explains that Southern women “are condemned to *hearing*, accepting, and living by the self-destructive myths” (93; emphasis mine), one of which dictates that women should take on the more passive role of listener rather than the masculine role of speaker. While I argue that feminist listening should not be considered passive and that the listening process contributes equally to discourse, Edna Earle is raised in a society which privileges speaking but one that does not grant everyone the same opportunity to speak. This context simultaneously contributes to Edna’s yearning to tell her story as well her awareness of the importance of listeners and the utility of gossip.

In the South, women were, and still are, expected to be listeners; they were not considered the heads of households, rendering them incapable of speaking on behalf of the family. Glenn notes that in the past, “women have been designated idiots who sustain family, friendships, and their public discoursing men from within the *oikos* household” (1). The South’s patriarchal structure still clings to the ideas of a Southern belle who is best seen and not heard well into the twentieth century as Southern

scholars including Weaks-Baxter, Johnson, Scott, etc. have observed. Edna is no different except that Edna is burdened with an uncle who is intellectually inept and also incapable of being the talking head of the community.

Throughout the novel, Edna plays her stereotypical role as domestic worker, as a housekeeper, or in her case innkeeper, and as caretaker to her older male relatives including her grandfather and her uncle. In addition, Edna occupies in the role of listener throughout the text without the hope of reciprocation, a burden she finds difficult to bear because of her professed intelligence, which causes her to want to be heard and valued by her male relatives. Edna tells her guest, "It's always taken a lot out of me, being smart" (10). In her book, *The Southern Belle in the American Novel*, Kathryn Siedel lists the stereotypical traits of the belle including grace, beauty, modesty, chastity, etc. Note that intelligence is not listed among the requirements. As such, it is easy to see why Edna feels that being smart has placed a burden upon her that normal belles are not expected to bear. She is an outsider among her female counterparts. She tells her listener: "Though you may not be able to read in the dark, I can" (55). Her choice of words is revealing. First, she highlights that not many women read; second she mentions she reads in the dark, suggesting that reading should be done in the dark where it won't be seen; scholarship is not becoming for a lady.

In addition to realizing her intelligence is a personal and cultural burden, Edna Earle must also face the fact that her Uncle Daniel is not gifted with the same amount of intellect, rendering him ill suited to be the spokesman of the family. Edna points out she "can't help being smarter than Uncle Daniel" (57). Edna Earle also realizes Uncle Daniel requires a protector. She explains, "Of course, I'm intended to look after Uncle Daniel



and everybody knows it" (26). Thus, Edna becomes Uncle Daniel's spokesman and protector, a position contrary to the notions of Southern gender ideology. In his 1854 *Sociology of the South*, George Fitzhugh, explains:

So long as [the Southern woman] is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness. . . . woman, like children, has but one right and that is the right to protection. (77)

According to Southern ideology Edna's one right as a woman is to be protected, something Daniel is incapable of doing himself, and something that he prevents Edna from obtaining from anyone else like Mr. Springer, a potential male suitor. By not fulfilling the role of breadwinner or protector, he forces Edna into a role reversal without the full benefits of either gender. In other words, she has to be the head of the household, but society does not respect her in this position. If Edna were to step outside the bounds of her rhetorical sphere and become the speaker of her house, she would be challenging her Southern upbringing, metaphorically stepping off the pedestal and onto the podium, a type of gender trespass.<sup>20</sup>

So while she is more capable of undertaking family business outside the home, Daniel, as the male successor is the one tasked with communicating to the town. He has the power to say where the money goes, and Edna is reduced to listening to how he has

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<sup>20</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains that the Southern way of life is built upon "the subordination of women" in order to maintain a "white elite culture of honor and shame" and for "white women to step off the pedestal was to shake the very foundation of white Southern culture" (qtd. in Donaldson 569).

carelessly given it away. Daniel is viewed as the talking head of the family, regardless of his ability or inability to fulfill this role. Glenn explains, "Rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment (including who may speak, who may listen, or who will agree to listen, and what can be said)" (1-2). This ideology is reflected when Edna tries to take charge of her family matters in her community. When she speaks out, she is laughed at or ignored. Edna recounts one instance at the county fair when she tries to leave a ride in order to help her uncle Daniel. She explains, "And I couldn't get off the Ferris Wheel til I'd been around nine times, no matter how often I told them who I was" (23). Her comment suggests the name Ponder means something in the town, but even if that is the case, her status as a female member of the Ponder clan overshadows the weight of her last name. Even when she is given some authority, such as her task to find Daniel a suitable wife, the nature of the task only reinforces her relegated domestic duties.

Because Edna Earle is conscious of her position as a Southern belle and the delegated rhetorical sphere for women, she utilizes gossip as a means of rhetorically reconciling her limitations with her desire to tell her story. Gossiping about Uncle Daniel with her guest would be considered a socially acceptable form of communication for women, and one in which she could be the speaker. Having been in the position of listener multiple times, Edna Earle is cognizant of the important contributions of listeners throughout discourse and thus values finding her own listener, one who will alleviate Edna Earle's anxieties and, more specifically, will allow Edna more agency over her own ethos.

### **Who is this stranger?**

Gossip demands a listening party and creates a listening situation for these women wherein both speaker and listener are peers or co-conspirators, sharing intimate details or secrets, which ties the two together within the conversation. Thus, an examination of Edna Earle's listener is needed as well as Edna's reasons for selecting such a listener. While Seaman and Walker explain that Edna Earle "desperately needs a listening ear" (66), the focus of critical discussion often centers on the novel's narrator, Edna Earle Ponder, rather than on her unnamed listener. Critics have become so enraptured with the telling of the story that they have neglected to afford the listening character the same treatment. This section seeks to explore the listening character in more depth than has previously been afforded in order to paint a detailed picture of Edna Earle's guest and her significance as a listener.

Throughout the novel, Edna provides clues about the stranger's identity that classify this person as a strange listener, but also suggest certain identity markers like class, race, and gender. Edna makes assumptions about the listener based upon her appearance that provide readers with more insight about Edna's listener. Whether or not these claims can be verified is not necessarily important. What is important is that Edna chooses to talk to this stranger based upon Edna's hypotheses about her guest. These deductions reveal the attributes that Edna values in a listener and expose aspects of Edna's personality and character.

Readers learn from the opening pages that Edna's listener is a stranger to the community. Edna notes, "You're only here because your car broke down, and I'm afraid you're allowing Bodkin to fix it" (11). Edna's words explain why the stranger is stopping

through town and lodging at her inn. Any resident in the town could, of course, have car problems and decide to pop in to visit with Edna, but Edna's reference to the fact that she is afraid that the visitor is allowing "Bodkin to fix the car" implies that Edna believes everyone in the town knows that Bodkin is not a dependable or efficient mechanic, something that Edna feels the visitor would have known had he or she resided in the small Southern community. In addition to this explanation about Bodkin, Edna frequently describes each member of the community having any bearing on her story to her listener, including the Sistrunks and the Peacocks, further suggesting that the listener has no prior knowledge of these residents.

While talking to her listener, Edna also reveals the listener's gender, marking her guest as female through her description of Uncle Daniel: "He's good as gold, but you have to know the way to treat him; he's a man, the same as *they* all are" (16; emphasis added). The use of the word "they" in relation to men suggests that this listener is not male and that the two women have a shared understanding of how "they" (men) are based on shared gender.

Readers also learn that this strange woman, while not a resident of this community, is a Southern woman by the way Edna contrasts her to the occasional Yankee visitor at the hotel:

I used to dread he [Uncle Daniel] might get ahold of one of these occasional travelers that wouldn't come in unless they had to—the kind that would break in on a story with a set of questions, and wind it up with a list of what Uncle Daniel's faults were: some Yankee. But

Uncle Daniel seemed to have a sixth sense to avoid those, and light on somebody from nearer home always. He'd be crazy about you. (17)

Edna's insistence that Daniel instinctively knows to avoid Yankees coupled with her assurance that Daniel would love the listener implies that Edna Earle believes her guest is not a Yankee, meaning while she is a stranger to this community, she is not a stranger to Southern ideology and the Southern way of life, something that Edna clearly prizes in a confidant.

Readers are also aware that the listener is a young white woman, again, not by what Edna says about her visitor but by what she says about others. Edna confides to her guest, "You can't trust a one of them" (103), referring to one of the African American servants. Her statement implies that the listener is not African American, and given that these women are Southern natives, it makes sense that the listener is Caucasian. The guest's age is never verified by a specific number, but readers surmise that she is either middle aged or younger when Edna directly refers to the listener as "child" (70), which could be seen as a Southern euphemism like "honey," but also could be directly referring to the fact that this listener is younger than Edna is herself. She also notes that Uncle Daniel "didn't mind old dirty people the way you and I do" (91). Edna assumes a connection to her listener here, insinuating not only that she shares a common dislike for older people, but that she and her listener are not among the older generation.

Edna also infers that her listener is in the middle or upper class when she discusses her dislike for her late aunt-in-law, Bonnie Dee Peacock's taste in wardrobe and her lack of status in the community. For example, Edna Earle's critique of Bonnie

Dee discloses that Edna considers herself and her listener to be superior in style and class. Edna points to Bonnie Dee's inadequate wardrobe, exclaiming she is "without a hat to her name" (33), noting Bonnie Dee's lack of wealth and lack of understanding of gender expectations of the time period. Edna's opinions about class and background divulge aspects of her listener since Edna would likely not speak about such things with someone she felt of a lower class than herself. Thus, the reader can deduce that the strange woman in the Beulah Inn is dressed fashionably, at least in Edna Earle's estimation, in comparison to Bonnie Dee's stylistic choices.

While readers are not given an explicit description of the guest in the novel, Edna's words reveal the listener's identity and characteristics. Edna Earle perceives similarities between herself and her guest in regards to race, gender, and class. Knowing this information about the listener helps readers better understand both women and provides insight for Edna Earle's decision to speak to this stranger, which I argue is a deliberate rhetorical act.

### **Benefits of a Strange Listener**

In talking to her guest, Edna also discloses the benefits of a strange listener along with her reasons for selecting one. Because the guest is a stranger, she has no prior knowledge of the negative gossip concerning the Ponder family. As such, the stranger serves as a clean slate for Edna, enabling her to form a bond or socialize with this woman, establish herself as an individual apart from her family dynasty, and reclaim her family history, by positioning herself as the Ponder Heart: the center of the family.

*Building Intimacy and Establishing a Friendship*

As previously mentioned, gossip forges a bond between those participating in the act, and Edna Earle finds herself in need of such a confidant, especially after Uncle Daniel's trial, which has left Edna ostracized by the community, estranged from those closest to her. As a result, Edna Earle has been deprived of the needed socialization the strange listener offers. As noted, the town no longer frequents the Beulah, and no member of the community is seen rising to Daniel's defense on the witness stand. In addition, Edna confides that her own house servant, Narciss, "just washed her hands of us" during the trial (103). While Edna proclaims, "You can't count on them for a single minute," referring to African Americans in general, Edna Earle's racist comments about Narciss deflects the hurt she feels from what she perceives as disloyalty in the face of the town scrutiny (103). Narciss certainly does not owe Edna her loyalty, but Edna believes that she does. She tells her guest that her grandmother "raised her from a child and brought her in out of the field to the kitchen and taught her everything she knew" (32). According to Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco, authors of *Culinary Capital*, knowledge of proper foodways and learning specialty recipes is a means of social advancement through cultural capital. In Edna's estimation, her grandmother was helping Narciss climb the social ladder. To Edna, this warrants Narciss's devotion if not her love. For Edna, losing Narciss is the ultimate disgrace because according to Southern historians like George Fitzhugh and Bertram Wyatt-Brown having African American servants is a marker of wealth and prosperity and a necessary part of elite white Southern culture. Without Narciss, Edna has lost a form of social status. The loss of social status within the community further separates Edna from her peers and leaves

her without any potential confidants. Thus, her guest presents a rare opportunity for socialization as well as a chance to tell her side of the story.

In addition to providing Edna Earle with much needed companionship, the guest also allows Edna Earle to tell her side of the events leading up to Bonnie Dee's death, which brings the guest into Edna's confidence. As will be examined later, Edna Earle tells her guest a different version of Bonnie Dee's death than her testimony in the courtroom. Edna's "confession" further links the women together by a shared secret.<sup>21</sup>

### *Individual vs. Ponder Identity*

Telling the story to a stranger is a move to protect her family's history and name, but it is also a move to distinguish her own identity separate from the Ponder family or heritage. All her life she has been known only in relation to her male relatives: Grandpa Ponder and Uncle Daniel. She has been seen as a part of a group, an insignificant part at that, rather than an individual with her own hopes and dreams. Telling the story from her own point of view allows her guest and readers to see Edna as her own person free from the constraints of the Ponder family name. While Edna is proud of her Ponder heritage, as will be shown in this section, she desperately wants to be recognized for her own gifts and to live her own life free from family obligations.

Because Edna and Daniel have a shared last name, they have a shared identity within their small Southern community where one's family heritage is known by all and serves as either a source of pride or consternation. In small southern communities, generational knowledge of families is not uncommon. As Schulz points out, "In its twentieth-century fictional embodiment, The South has been frequently portrayed as a

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<sup>21</sup> There is no concrete evidence to suggest that either version of the account of Bonnie Dee's death is the truth.



society in which one's identity is determined by who one's family is or who one's father is or was" (89). This knowledge is both comforting and stifling. It's comforting to know as Edna explains that everyone will notice if you are gone, but it's stifling to know that you are judged not by your own actions but by those of all your ancestors, which is why Edna needs this particular guest to listen to her story. Her visitor does not possess the same generational knowledge of the Ponders as the residents in Edna's community.

Labels are important to Edna, and she is just as guilty as the next at applying labels to groups of people and especially to families within her town. For instance she notes that the Sistrunks are beneath her family because they are "big Baptists" (21) and also insinuates that all the Peacocks are white trash. While Edna knows that she participates in perpetuating these labels and that her own family must bear with their own label within the town, I assert that at times she would rather not exist within the boundaries of these confining marques.

Edna is simultaneously proud and resentful of her identity as a Ponder, particularly her connection to her Uncle Daniel. Edna's silence as well as her speech indicates her complex feelings for her Uncle Daniel. In their article, "It's all in a Way of Speaking: A Discussion of *The Ponder Heart*," Gerda Seaman and Ellen L. Walker posit, "In the narrative is her salvation. And in this activity of telling and only in this one, Edna Earle and her Uncle Daniel are adversaries rather than allies" (74). Though Edna Earle never openly criticizes Daniel for his actions, Seaman and Walker note, "It is often the unspoken, the absences and evasions rather than the direct statements of [Welty's] narrative that give such depth to her fictions" (35). As noted in the introduction, sometimes the unspoken is just as powerful or more powerful than words. Edna's

unspoken opinion of Daniel is revealed when she explains, “When somebody spoke to Uncle Daniel, I tried to answer for him too if I could” (120). Edna finds Daniel untrustworthy and cannot allow him to answer for himself because she believes that what he says is a reflection of the Ponder family as a whole.

From the outset, Edna makes sure her guest knows that she and Uncle Daniel are nothing alike. She claims to be the responsible, reliable family member blessed with the brains in the family; whereas she claims Daniel is thoughtless, idiotic, and impulsive. Seaman and Walker note, “In defining Uncle Daniel’s character, she is defining her own: intelligent, efficient, and indispensable” (70). In comparing the two, she concocts an image of herself and of Daniel for her listening guest. Spacks notes, “Gossip serves purposes of aggression or exposure; it too may prove ‘innocent’ or purposeful” (50). In this case, Edna’s gossip serves a purpose that could be viewed as a sign of aggression toward Daniel; it creates a reputation for Edna separate from Daniel and depicts Daniel in a less than flattering light. Furthermore, by marking herself as the reliable, dependable, intelligent Ponder member, she disassociates herself from the rest of her family.

#### *Reclamation of the Ponder Heart*

While Edna’s family history may be of little consequence to others, it is of huge consequence to Edna who, as a female, has never been able to take control of her family’s narrative. Rather, Edna is forced into listening to her male relatives without the possibility of reciprocation, not allowing her to tell her own stories. As feminist scholars like Glenn, Ratcliffe, Beisecker, Campbell, Lunsford, etc. have recognized, women are frequently not given opportunities to share in the creation or formation of

history. In some cases, women are written out of history altogether. In her pivotal text, *Rhetoric Retold*, Glenn observes:

The ideal woman has been disciplined by cultural codes that require a closed mouth (silence), a closed body (chastity), and an enclosed life (domestic confinement). Little wonder then that women have been closed out of the rhetorical tradition, a tradition of vocal, virile, public- and therefore men. (1)

Family stories are important to the maintenance of family life: “A family tale is ultimately reassuring; it protects the individual from the world outside, because like fairy tales, it is stored in memory and repeated over time” (Randisi 43). When the events are repeated and shaped over time by male relatives, they do not necessarily reflect the whole truth. Seaman and Walker explain the damage of a limited male perspective in this novel: “Daniel’s telling limits her ability to tell, and thus to shape the world and define herself. Telling and giving are alternative ways of relating to society, but only if you have the material for both” (75). Seaman and Walker’s explanation not only highlights how Edna has been viewed as giver rather than teller, but reinforces the importance of reciprocation, an integral part of feminist listening.

While I argue that listeners play an important role within communication and that listeners should be recognized for their contributions to discourse, Edna has been confined to the role of a listener within her family, which, in some cases, is problematic. Family stories live on in perpetuity so that the story becomes more important than the actual happening: “The reason for talking is therefore psychologically profound; language is stronger than an event. . . adding to the story is a way of perpetuating the

life of the family” (Randisi 43). Recounting family history and events is a means of keeping the memory of family members alive. Therefore, the storyteller has the power to determine who remains alive in the memories of others. Edna Earle’s function as a listener is beneficial to the other Ponders because she serves as keeper of the memories. However, she also needs a listener to ensure her memories are a part of the Ponder legacy. Seaman and Walker point out that when Daniel is talking to others, “Daniel never talks about Edna. He speaks her out of his life’s existence” (75). Much like women have been written out of rhetorical history, Edna Earle has little place in the history of the Ponders, which is why the listening guest plays an important part in helping Edna reshape her own history.

Edna enlarges and enhances her role in the Ponder family to reflect her version of events, reclaiming her past. Glenn would call such work restorying: “Restorying entails our rethinking texts, approaches to narrative—and history itself. The writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities” (3). Talking to a strange listener allows Edna to say whatever she wants to about the past without the possibility of refutation because this guest has never encountered Uncle Daniel or any other member of the community. Whether Edna is telling the truth about her past is inconsequential in this case because Edna’s truth is the only version the listener has heard, giving Edna complete control over the shaping of the tale.

Edna simultaneously seeks to overthrow Daniel as the symbol of the family by reframing family events and becoming the narrator rather than the narratee. The

community is not privy to Edna's side of family events primarily because Uncle Daniel overshadows Edna as the male member of the family. Daniel has come to represent not only himself, but the entire Ponder clan, a fact that Edna is very much aware of while speaking to her listener—so much, in fact, that she is very careful never to denounce Daniel for possible fear of implicating herself.<sup>22</sup> Critics have noted her care to always refer to Daniel as generous rather than stupid. Allen notes, "Uncle Daniel Ponder, the novel's ostensible focus, is a retarded gentlemen, although true to the mores of his community the word "retarded" is never used least of all by the narrator, the sensible Miss Edna Earle" (Allen 4). Though Allen's terms are outdated, the implication remains that Uncle Daniel's mental limitations are being simultaneously exposed and protected by Edna Earle. She may call herself more intelligent, but she never admits a mental impairment on Daniel's part for fear of what such a label would do to the family name. For example she explains, "Uncle Daniel may not have a whole lot of brains, but what's there is Ponder, and no mistake about it"(35). Her words imply that even with little brains, the Ponder brain is still superior to that of other families. However, while she is careful to protect the image of the family Daniel projects to the community, this guest becomes an opportunity for Edna to reposition herself within her family to become the symbol of her family in the eyes of this guest.

Edna's story is no doubt different than what Daniel would say of the same events. Seaman and Walker note, "In [Daniel's] telling he defines events and characters

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<sup>22</sup> In *The New Rhetoric*, Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca explain how an individual can symbolically stand in for a whole: "If an individual who is a member of a group has become a symbol of this group his behavior will be regarded as more important, because it is more representative, than that of other members of the same group" (333).

and his definitions will not be the same as hers” (75). For example, he sees Bonnie Dee Peacock as a pretty young bride, whereas Edna sees her as plain white trash. The world may view Daniel’s actions as a result of his lacking mental capacity, but Edna sees them as a result of his over-caring Ponder heart. The ability to tell the story of Daniel and Bonnie Dee to her guest gives her rhetorical agency over the story and the definitions of the people within it affording her the opportunity to shape her own history in the process. Seaman and Walker explain, “A truly dedicated narrator, she prefers ownership of the story to ownership of the Ponder fortune” (75). John Hardy agrees, “The heritage is more valuable to her than the inheritance she might have hoped to receive but for Daniel’s unhappy alliance with Bonnie Dee” (101). In her version of the events, she is the mastermind behind all the Ponder happenings: figuring out how to get her grandfather out of the insane asylum, arranging Daniel’s marriage to Miss Sistrunk, securing Bonnie Dee’s return to Uncle Daniel, spinning Uncle Daniel’s defense at the trial, etc. In her version of history, she is the most important family member, the one who must weather the storm for the Ponder family name no matter the circumstance. In telling the narrative to her guest, Edna has brought her own character up from minor to major status within the family.

### **Failed Listeners**

To illustrate the importance of Edna Earle’s guest, this section highlights the occasions that Edna has deliberately sought an audience only to be rejected by those she loves most: Grandpa Ponder, Uncle Daniel, and even Bonnie Dee. All of these characters fail to adhere to the ideals of feminist listening during their conversations with Edna Earle due to a lack of empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. Edna’s

failures to entice her relatives to become listeners illustrates a need to change her strategy and seek out the ear of a strange listener.

The text confirms that Edna Earle has been denied an audience for the majority of her life, cast as the designated listener in her family by both her male relatives. In her article "Fathers and Daughters in Welty and O'Connor," Louise Westling claims, "For Eudora Welty, the father is always human and vulnerable. He is a beloved man on the periphery of the daughter's life, seldom intruding and always Other" (111). However, in *The Ponder Heart*, the men in the family take center stage, overshadowing Edna and causing her feel like the "other" by commanding the conversation. Grandpa Ponder cannot be described as a feminist listener due to his lack of reciprocity. Edna notes, "He was the poorest listener in the world" (17). Edna explains that whenever her granddad came to visit, it was usually so that he could relay a story to Edna about Daniel's misfortunes: "He'd come to tell me the latest Uncle Daniel had given away" (9), but he never stays to listen to Edna in return.

Uncle Daniel fails to practice reciprocity as well, preferring to be in the speaker's role or the limelight. Edna notes several occasions in which Daniel refuses to be quiet and listen, specifically at the inn and at the trial. Daniel enjoys entertaining people with his stories. Daniel's appetite for talking is so intense that Daniel cannot remain in the country home for long periods of time: "He wanted somebody closer than three miles away when he had something to say right then" (56). Thus, Daniel realizes the importance of listeners, yet ironically refuses to reciprocate the gesture. His thirst for company and desire for listeners causes him to spend the majority of his time with others, mostly at the family's inn. Edna describes him as the life of the party at the

Beulah Inn, filling up the dinner conversation without giving Edna the chance to speak, which is why Edna relishes the opportunity to talk to this guest before she has the chance to meet Uncle Daniel. Edna is determined to find a listener, and this guest presents her with such an occasion.

Daniel's insistence on dominating the conversation indicates a deficiency of empathy, another one of the feminist listening traits. Daniel prefers to be the speaker even at personal detriment to himself and the Ponder family during his trial. Though his lawyer warns him not to testify, Daniel insists on taking the stand, exclaiming, "You all didn't tell me I was going to have to do so much listening. It ain't good for my constitution. . . . I'd rather be up there talking myself than hear you and every one of these folks put together" (130). His words reiterate his unwillingness to listen to others or to be open to any ideas but his own. Choosing to testify despite these warnings shows a callous disregard for the ways in which his testimony will affect not only his future, but Edna Earle's future as well, displaying a lack of empathy for Edna and the future of the family's inn. His actions also show no signs of empathy for Bonnie Dee's family as they discuss his late wife at the trial and on the stand.

Daniel's lack of reciprocity during conversation also impacts his ability to exercise dialogic retention, an equally important part of feminist listening skills. Seaman and Walker assert Edna Earle's stories revolve around Daniel, but note that Daniel never talks about Edna (75). One reason he likely never talks about her stems from the fact that he has not taken the time to get to know Edna's thoughts or opinions by taking turns during their discourse, and thus, he cannot recall any information about



Edna in conversations with others. Though he neglects to talk about her, he never hesitates to talk to her, effectively limiting her rhetorical agency on both fronts.

During her interactions with Edna Earle, Bonnie Dee also neglects to practice feminist listening habits, highlighting that, despite the stereotypes that women are superior listeners, both men and women are capable of becoming “bad” listeners. Like her male counterparts, Bonnie Dee refuses to participate in an exchange of ideas or reciprocity, but rather deliberately bars Edna Earle from the conversation. When Edna Earle goes over to pay Bonnie Dee a visit, Edna reveals, “She never said good evening to me. When I spoke she held her ears” (139). Bonnie Dee’s deliberate refusal to listen to Edna forces Edna back into the role of listener herself. She admits that in the face of such a gesture she “sat myself down on the piano stool, crossed my knees, and waited for the visit to start” (139), implying that in order to “visit” with Bonnie Dee, she had to let Bonnie Dee do the talking on her own terms. If Edna resents listening to Grandpa Ponder and Uncle Daniel, two Southern men who are more powerful than her in this society, she would no doubt be affronted by Bonnie Dee’s refusal to listen to her, considering her belief that Bonnie Dee is beneath her in the hierarchy of Southern women.

Bonnie Dee’s actions are not only a failure of reciprocity but display an absence of empathy for Edna Earle as well. Bonnie Dee does not empathize with Edna Earle’s desire for companionship and appears ungrateful for Edna Earle’s gifts, particularly the lavish dresses that Edna Earle purchases for her. Though Edna Earle buys Bonnie Dee the dresses, Bonnie Dee refuses to wear them, which is a means of rejecting Edna’s advice on taste. While Edna Earle’s actions could be perceived as a means to control

Bonnie Dee, they could also be interpreted as a generous act of kindness or a bid for friendship, which is the way Edna Earle describes her intent to her guest. If the latter, Bonnie Dee's response is particularly hurtful. Ultimately, Bonnie Dee does not listen to Edna Earle or appear open to her ideas or opinions related to Uncle Daniel, housekeeping, dress, etc.

### **Multi-dimensional Listening: Uncle Daniel's Trial; Edna Earle's Testimony**

So far, I have explained the benefits of Edna's Earle's choice to confide in a strange listener, and I have illustrated how others have neglected to be feminist listeners for Edna Earle. All of the exchanges above are examples of failed listeners between one-to-one exchanges, but in this section, I will examine discourse taking place between Edna Earle and multiple listeners at once. Most of the narrative focuses on Edna's strategic use of communication with her selected listener at the Beulah Inn. However, Edna's rhetorical ability is also on display when she is in front of a larger crowd, highlighting her purposeful use of language and audience awareness. The section serves as an additional foil to Edna Earle's guest and also illustrates the overall power of the listener in conversation.

The rhetorical situation of the trial creates an imbalance of power between speaker and listener as the jury's decision bears weight on the fate of the witness. As described above, Edna's Earle's guest is similar to her in age, class, and race. Since Edna assumes a shared background with her guest, she also predicts and anticipates her listener's reaction and response, believing they share similar values, tastes, and opinions. However, in the courtroom, Edna finds herself surrounded by people of differing classes, races, gender, and ages. For example, readers know that not only are

the wealthier members of the community gathered in the courtroom, but the lower class as well because Edna Earle tells her guest the courtroom is comprised of the poorer Peacocks, Peppers, Bodkins, coupled with the more financially stable Ewbanks, Sistrunks, and Clanahans. The courtroom is not only divided economically, but racially as well, as shown when Edna Earle mentions that both Big John and Narciss were in the courtroom to testify. While the jury is divided economically (Edna Earle mentions some of the Bodkins and Peppers are members along with their wealthier counterparts the Clanahans and the Sistrunks.), it is an all white male jury. In addition, the judge and both lawyers are also white males.

The differing perspectives and backgrounds conglomered in the courtroom make it especially difficult for Edna Earle to foresee the reactions or response of the jury, which is why Edna Earle decides to lie under oath about the circumstances of Bonnie Dee's death. While she confesses to her guest that Bonnie Dee dies laughing face down into a pillow after being tickled by Uncle Daniel, she testifies that Bonnie Dee was already dead by the time she and Daniel arrived for their visit. She is aware that the jury is ultimately responsible for her uncle's fate, and does not want to risk telling the truth to those who might not be empathetic to the situation. When Daniel tries to tell the truth on the stand, Edna Earle warns him, "Nobody'll believe it!" (143). In the end, it appears that Uncle Daniel knows Edna Earle is right because rather than continue with his own testimony he leaves the stand and begins passing out money to everyone present in the courtroom. Immediately following Daniel's gesture, the verdict is declared not guilty. While the listening jury does not convict Daniel, the listening public's actions after the trial suggest they have convicted him in their minds regardless

of the jury's decision. Overall, this scene is important because it demonstrates Edna Earle's audience awareness, sets up the need for her confession later in the text, and reinforces the power of listeners within conversation.

### **Guest's Reaction and Response**

Welty notes that Southerners are "used to a listener and that does something to our narrative style" (qtd. in Harrison 35). What Welty refers to here are the ways a listener reacts or responds to a story, allowing the speaker to adjust to meet the listener's needs. Known for her ability to mimic conversational style in her narratives, Welty is conscious of the important role the guest plays in the novel, as the listener, in shaping the text.

A listener's reaction and response are imperative in determining whether or not he or she can be classified as a feminist listener. I draw a distinction between a reaction and response, defining a reaction as nonverbal feedback to the speaker in contrast to a response, which is verbal. Both nonverbal and verbal feedback can help determine whether a listener practices empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity.

The narrative is told from Edna Earle's perspective, so readers are only privy to the listener's reaction and response through the eyes of Edna Earle. In other words, readers know only what Edna reveals about the listener. Yet, Edna's actions and words intimate her listener's reaction. For example, at the beginning of the story, Edna implores her guest to become an active listener by asking her to put down her reading material and pay attention to what Edna has to say: "And listen: if you read, you'll put your eyes out. Let's just talk" (11). The statement reveals that the Beulah guest was not an active listener at first. However, readers are lead to believe that the guest becomes

such a listener once Edna begins her story because Edna never comments on her listener's reactions again. All we know is that she puts down her reading material in favor of listening or at least pretending to listen to Edna.

The fact that Edna does not pause her story to reiterate that her guest should listen to her suggests that the visitor was in fact an active listener from the time she put down the book to the moment that Edna calls Uncle Daniel downstairs to meet her. It is possible that Edna is so enthralled with the opportunity to talk that she is blinded to her guest's reaction. However, given that Edna is seated in close proximity to her guest in the inn and that Edna Earle is a very outspoken and opinionated woman, it is hard to imagine that she would not say something to her guest should she feel that the visitor was not paying attention to her. After all, she was not afraid to tell her to stop reading at the outset of the story. It stands to reason that she would at least try to gain her attention again if she felt that it had been lost in the process of the narration.

The listener's response is also significant because the guest's silence seemingly validates Edna Earle's version of events as well as Edna's Earle's beliefs about womanhood. As previously explored, the guest serves to mirror back the qualities that Edna Earle values and helps Edna Earle solidify her own identity as a belle. Edna uses her guest and Bonnie Dee to help her establish her own identity by placing them on a continuum. Bonnie Dee is a perversion or mimicry of the Southern belle, and it is clear that Edna believes her listener to be the epitome of the definition of the Southern lady. So, by using Bonnie Dee as a contrast to her listener, Edna is placing herself closer to the listener than Bonnie Dee and thus defining her own womanhood according to her standards.

The importance of the listener extends beyond helping Edna Earle define herself. The listener's silence seemingly confirms Edna Earle's accounts of both Bonnie Dee and Uncle Daniel because she neither questions nor refutes Edna's version of events. Edna Earle's ability to talk to this stranger before Uncle Daniel is significant because Edna Earle's narrative potentially changes the way her listener will receive not only Uncle Daniel, but anything that Uncle Daniel may say to her upon arrival, causing both the listener and readers alike to question his speech and behavior. While critics have generally understood Edna to be protecting Uncle Daniel, it is entirely plausible that Edna is in fact coloring her listener's opinion of him in an unflattering light by subtly disguising insults as compliments, a strategy similar to the Southern euphemism "bless your heart." The phrase is a rhetorically savvy maneuver that simultaneously condones and condemns the recipient. Edna has achieved the equivalent of this maneuver by complimenting Daniel's generous spirit while at the same time pitying his lack of intellect. In essence she is saying, "Daniel does not know how to behave himself in public; bless his heart" or "Daniel has bad taste in women; bless his heart." While Edna never says these things and, as critics have noted, never actually names his mental impairment, she strongly implies it. Framing Daniel in this manner shapes the listener's perception of Daniel from charming to pitiable.

The guest's silence also grants Edna the chance to speak for an extended period of time and to wield her story in order to give herself the upper hand with the guest, ensuring that she is at least granted an equal footing before Daniel swoops in to dominate the discussion. Readers know that Uncle Daniel is a talker, and that his persuasive powers are a rival for Edna Earle's own rhetorical abilities with guests, often

leaving Edna out of the dinner table conversation. For once, Edna has caught a listener's attention before her uncle, allowing her to shape Uncle Daniel's identity before he has a chance to open his mouth. In Edna's mind, her ability to captivate her listener could be considered a victory given that in the past, everyone in the inn fawns all over Uncle Daniel and his tales, leaving her devoid of a voice.

The guest's continued silence allows Edna Earle to cast Uncle Daniel in a pitiable light at length, perhaps hindering his chances at charming or romancing this female guest in the same manner he is accustomed. When Edna places herself and the listener on the opposite end of the belle spectrum from Bonnie Dee and even Teacake Magee Sistrunk she insinuates that Daniel always marries beneath his station. Thus, Daniel's conquests are linked together, meaning the reputation of one mars the other. Edna specifically casts the listener in a different category from the other women Daniel has loved. Therefore, it might almost be seen as an insult to the listener if Daniel were to flirt with her at dinner, the implication being that he values her the same as the likes of Bonnie Dee, seeing them as equals and not as opposites as Edna has intimated.

Why would Edna want to soil any potential relationship the listener might have with Uncle Daniel? Daniel answers this question upon moving into the Beulah when he claims, "I got good news for you. I'm coming to live with you for keeps" (153). Having Daniel live with Edna "for keeps" ensures that she will not be alone and will have a better chance at gaining Daniel's ear unrivaled by another woman or even her grandfather. It also ensures that Edna will have a better chance of controlling her Uncle Daniel and his spending habits. As this novel reveals, Edna Earle has become a master manipulator, pulling the strings of her family's affairs in private. While it would be

inappropriate for Edna to appear anything less than submissive to Uncle Daniel in public, she can exert her power over him in the comfort of her inn, which given Uncle Daniel's retort, he seems to be fully cognizant of at the time. Edna's acute awareness of the benefits and limits to her rhetorical power help explain why she feels the need to keep Uncle Daniel close to home. In speaking to this guest first, Edna has possibly prevented another person from falling prey to Daniel's charms and thus secured his need to continue to live with Edna, ensuring her ability to keep a watchful eye on him.

Still, readers cannot be certain of the guest's reaction to Edna Earle's tale or her disparaging descriptions of Daniel because her reactions (body language and facial expression) are denied to the reader. All readers have to contend with is the guest's silent response. Yet, whether or not the listener believes Edna is irrelevant. What matters is that Edna is able to complete her tale and her perception of the guest's reaction and response is positive. By the end of the story, it is apparent that Edna believes she has been understood and vindicated by her guest. Otherwise, it seems unlikely that she would surrender her guest to Uncle Daniel whom she calls downstairs once her story is complete.

### **Guest as Feminist Listener?**

While the listener may have helped Edna Earle find a voice, the question of whether or not she can be classified as a feminist listener has still gone unanswered. As noted in the prior section, Edna's visitor did not speak throughout the entire novel nor were readers given access to her private thoughts, as is the case in chapter four with John Singer. These conditions combined make it difficult to ascertain the classification of the guest as a feminist listener. However, based on the deductions made in the



reaction and response section, the argument can be made that Edna's guest has the potential to be a feminist listener.

Because the guest does not interrupt Edna Earle's story, she appears to be open to new ideas and receptive to Edna Earle's version of events. Furthermore, the guest's decision to put down her book in favor of listening to Edna Earle is a sign that the guest is willing to listen free of distraction. By remaining silent throughout the entire story, the guest also shows incredible patience with Edna as a speaker. Taken together, these traits all display empathy, which is one of the tenants of feminist listening.

Whether or not the guest practices dialogic retention or that the exchange is reciprocal remains to be seen. Readers cannot determine whether or not the guest remembers the conversation or the details of Edna's story because the novel ends immediately after Uncle Daniel comes downstairs and before any words can be exchanged between the guest and Uncle Daniel or with Edna for that matter. However, it does appear that once Daniel comes downstairs the guest will be given an opportunity to chat with him as well as to talk further with Edna Earle as the visitor does not appear to be leaving any time soon. There is no indication that her car has been repaired, and it seems very likely she will stay at the inn for dinner where readers know that conversation is a given. So, while readers cannot be one hundred percent certain that the guest is a feminist listener, she is the closest thing to a feminist listener Edna has had throughout the text and certainly has the potential to be one beyond this exchange.

### Participating in the Gossip: Readers as Strange Listeners

Using Spacks's theories of gossip, I claim Welty's writing allows readers to become the stranger who visits the Beulah hotel, metaphorically inviting readers to listen in on the Ponder family history or "to transform that reader—the willing stranger—into something like a family member" (McWhirter 115). Spacks explains that there is an inherent nature of gossip between author/narrator and the reader present in all works of fiction:

Gossip also supplies a form of analogizing the exchange between narrator and reader: the novel's basic economics. The reader brings to this relationship a body of general knowledge and of personal experience; the narrator brings particularized knowledge of the story being told. Of course, no literal exchange takes place: the reader can't talk back. But the idea of exchange expresses the activity involved in reading as a process. (21)

This process is enhanced in Welty's *The Ponder Heart* because, at times, Edna Earle appears to shift from talking to her listener to speaking directly to the reader, suggesting that the listener and the reader are one and the same. For example, when Edna first attempts to engage her listener in conversation, she explains:

I don't run the Beulah hotel for nothing: I size people up: I'm sizing you up right now. People come here, pass *through this book*, in and out, over the years—and in the whole shooting match, I don't care from where or how far they've come, not one can hold a candle to Uncle Daniel for looks and manners. (11; emphasis mine)

Her use of the phrase “through this book” on a literal level might refer to the hotel guest book. However, Welty’s choice of words is interesting and could be interpreted as a meta-statement acknowledging the readers and inviting the reader to take the place of the stranger in the hotel through the duration of the reading of the book.

The intentionality of this metaphorical invitation welcoming readers to participate as strange listeners is believable given the value Welty places on listening in her other works. Welty attributes her skills as a writer to her capacity to listen. Her autobiography quickly reveals how much value Welty places on listening as her first chapter is entitled “Listening” and examines the role listening plays in developing voice. Welty explains the importance of being able to listen, remarking, “As a child, long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening for them is something more acute than listening to them. And such ‘listening for’ rather than listening to let alone presuming to tell” (124). Her remarks make it clear that listening is multifaceted. One can always listen to someone else tell a story, but to be a skilled listener, in Welty’s estimation, one must be able to “listen for” a story. In other words, one must be capable of listening at a moment’s notice should the opportunity arise, a seemingly small feat, but surprisingly difficult to master in a world where speaking is the privileged rhetorical art.

Furthermore, Welty indicates that she views listening as equivalent if not greater than speaking, for her stories are born out of listening to other people. Welty also indicates that in order to read her fiction readers must be adept listeners, knowing how to read both what is said and what is implied, or as defined within the framework of feminist listening, readers should use dialogic retention to understand meta-messages, which arise out of both verbal and nonverbal communication. She explains that

Southern women are taught such skills in early childhood: “Listening children know stories are there, and taught to listen for the unspoken as well as the spoken” (127). As examined earlier, Welty frequently uses rhetorical silence to her advantage to reveal not only the listening character but aspects of Edna’s personality as well, teaching readers to be savvy listeners in order to grasp the entire story.

Keeping the listening character silent throughout the story is an intentional rhetorical maneuver employed to help the reader identify with the listening character. Spacks differentiates the listening character from the reader, noting

The listener engages in dialogue with [the narrator], breaks in, asks questions; the reader has no such freedom. Yet the reader’s fascination approximates that of hearing an extended and absorbing piece of gossip: interest not only in the person’s spoken of but in the speaker’s sensibility. (10)

However, in this novel, the unnamed listening character is never given the opportunity to speak or to ask questions. Readers hear from Edna alone, which further correlates the reader to the listener since both are privy to the gossip, but neither are allowed to question its veracity aloud. So, while Spacks claims, “the material gossip in writing implied something different from that evoked in speech; the silent alliance of storyteller and reader differs from that of two talkers” (22), I argue that in the case of this novel, the two can be considered one and the same.

Edna Earle’s use of gossip allows both her listener and the reader to participate in the narrative by forging an intimacy between the two parties through the sharing of family secrets. Just like Edna’s guest, readers are privy to Edna Earle’s confession of

how the events of Bonnie Dee's death occurred. Edna Earle confides in her guest in the privacy of her inn generating a one to one conversation that Spacks claims mimics the reading experience between narrator and narrate: "To think of [reading] in relation to gossip calls attention not only to the intense intimacy of the narrator-reader relationship—an absolute privacy of two—but to their mutual contribution to an understanding generated by exchange" (22). In both cases, the listener and reader are capable of being active listeners, as neither attempt to refute the narrative but rather to understand Edna Earle's story.

Welty's fiction viewed from the rhetorical angle of the listener enhances the understanding of Welty's work and of her writing prowess in general. Understanding Welty's ethic of listening discredits the arguments of critics who dismissed her work because they believed her topics were not as grandiose as her Southern peers:

John W. Aldridge argues that in her early writing Welty was a little too precious or ladylike to be taken seriously. She lacked the sweep and mythic largeness of her fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, having limited her own creative interests to the minor and peripheral.  
(qtd. in Manning 5)

Brooke Allen echoes Aldridge, claiming, "If Welty has not generally been accepted as one of the century's heavyweights, it is probably because she has been thought too regional and too feminine" (5). Both critics site Welty's weakness in writing as being too feminine. These critiques raise the question, what marks the text as feminine? Is it due to having a female protagonist? Is it because of the narration style? All of the above? And more importantly why is being labeled "feminine" a bad thing? By using rhetorical

gossip to her advantage and illustrating the value of listening, Welty is highlighting specific types of rhetoric that have been revealed to be very powerful weapons for Southern females where other forms of persuasion have been denied to them. As seen in this novel, gossip creates a form of persuasion, presents a view of reality, and argues for a position. Once the complexity of the rhetoric, specifically the rhetorical relationship between speaker and listener, are understood, Welty can be fully appreciated for her writing prowess.

### **Moving Forward**

This chapter has examined Edna Earle's guest as a strange listener as well as a potential feminist listener. The chapter applies the heuristics laid out in the introduction to explore whether or not the guest can be classified as a feminist listener. It also creates a new set of heuristics in order to further delineate the listener as a strange listener and to describe the benefits of such a listening type. These concepts create a transportable theory of rhetorical listening that can be applied to other texts, thereby meeting the overall goal of the dissertation, which is meant to display a variety of listening situations. In this case, Edna and her guest are both females participating in the traditionally marked feminine rhetoric of gossip. The next chapter furthers the discussion of rhetorical gossip between female speakers. However, in the next chapter, the speaker and listener are not strangers like Edna Earle and her guest, but rather best friends. This new dynamic between speaker and listener allows for another perspective on feminist listening and showcases how expectations between speaker and listener can impact the narrative. For example, in this chapter, Edna Earle expects her story to

remain a secret between the two women, but as will be shown in the next chapter, Janie expects her listener, Pheoby, to spread her story to other members of the community.

In addition, this chapter provides a new interpretation of *The Ponder Heart* by focusing on a previously minor character and shedding new insight about her identity and narrative function throughout the text. The next chapter also seeks to bring a minor character to the forefront through the examination of the listener, Pheoby Watson, in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While critics have largely ignored the listener or dismissed the listener as inconsequential to the narrative, this dissertation seeks to overthrow the long held belief that speakers have the most power within communication.

Lastly, this chapter has shown how Welty's strategic use of the rhetoric of gossip invites readers to actively participate in the text. The next chapter builds upon this idea by showing how Hurston uses gossip to strategically endear herself to her primarily white audience, allowing them to better understand Janie and Pheoby, suggesting that race as well as gender does not factor into one's ability to become a feminist listener.

## Part I: Chapter II

“Hungry Listening”: The Listener in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*  
*“Pheoby’s hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story. So she went on thinking back to her young years and explaining them to her friend in soft, easy phrases while all around the house, the night time put on flesh and blackness.”* *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The prior chapter discussed the benefits of rhetorical gossip between a speaker and listener who are strangers; this chapter analyzes ways that gossip can strengthen friendships as well. In Welty’s novel, the unnamed listener at Edna Earle’s inn is expected to keep the information she received from Edna a secret from Uncle Daniel, forging a bond between the women and placing a demand upon the listener. However, in this chapter, Janie’s listener is not expected to keep the gossip a secret, but to spread it to a broader audience of listeners known in the novel as the porch sitters. Thus, Pheoby Watson is what I call a deliverer: a listener who serves as a spokesperson on the speaker’s behalf to a larger audience often due to the speaker’s lack of ethos with the community he or she desires to reach.

As in the previous chapter, both the speaker and listener are women, which is significant when one considers that the men in both Edna Earle and Janie’s lives have proven to be bad listeners. Past scholarship by Rudolphi, Pines, Peoples, Wiener, Marks, etc. has explored the relationships between Janie and her three husbands at length, but not with this particular focus. In this chapter, I contrast Pheoby with Janie’s failed listeners who, with a few exceptions, are mostly men. The chapter illustrates that the dynamic between speaker and listener is best when the parties are considered peers.



Problems arise when the listener does not view the speaker as a peer and vice versa. As shown in the introduction, within the bounds of hegemonic discourse, male listeners often struggle to see listening as equal to speaking and also view speaking as a competition or a means to achieve status in the social hierarchy, which may explain why Janie's husbands are failed listeners. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates the strengths of Pheoby as a listener and reaffirms the status of the listener as a powerful position in communication.

Past scholarship by Clarke, Awkward, Angelou, etc. of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* focuses on Janie's discovery of voice. Wendy McCredie, author of "Authority and Authorization in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," proclaims Hurston's novel is the "story of Janie's struggle to articulate, to appropriate her own voice and, through her voice, herself" (25). While the importance of Janie's empowerment cannot be denied, I want to shift the conversation to focus on how Janie's listener serves a vital role toward helping Janie become empowered and how the act of listening is likewise empowering. Therefore, the first portion of the chapter is fueled by the following questions: Why is Janie in need of a deliverer? Why is Pheoby equipped to take on this role as a listener? How is she different from the other listeners in Janie's life? How does she react or respond to Janie's message, and what does she do with the message once received?

The rhetorical condition of gossip creates a listening situation wherein Pheoby is a willing participant in the conversation. Yet, just as in *The Ponder Heart*, Janie finds herself in court where the rhetorical conditions are changed, creating a space where listening is a forced activity, which could result in passive listening. In addition, Janie finds herself speaking to a mixed audience consisting of both white and black men and

women, generating an unbalanced power dynamic between the speaker and listener. In *The Ponder Heart*, both Edna Earle and her chosen listener were white middle-class women. In *Their Eyes were watching God*, both Janie and Pheoby are black middle-class women. While some of the implications of these pairings lay outside the confines of this analysis, the pairings support the idea that the two see each other as peers, which affects how the listener responds to the message. Yet within the court scenes, the women are not free to choose their own listeners. I use the court scene in this novel to contrast Pheoby's reaction with those of the members of the jury and audience at the trial. Interestingly, this scene also affirms the inherent power of the listener because while Janie did not select them to be her audience, they have the power to decide her fate based upon listening to her descriptions of Teacake's demise. Taken together, the scene in this novel coupled with the court scene in the prior chapter problematizes Tannen's assertion that forced listening subordinates the listener to the speaker because in these scenes, the listeners retain the authority over the message regardless of whether they are active participants or can be labeled "good listeners."

The latter part of the chapter examines the rhetoric between Hurston and her readership. As in the case of Welty's novel, I suggest that rhetorical gossip does not merely bind the characters in the novel together, but is also used to connect Hurston to her readers. I turn to Hurston's primary materials like her autobiography, her letters, and her essays to explore the ways Hurston crafts the narrative to simulate oral conversation and the ways she highlights the benefits of a deliverer and asks her audience to become deliverers themselves.

### **Consequences of Negative Gossip**

The last chapter discussed the benefits of gossip, and while Janie and Pheoby's discussion could certainly be categorized as positive gossip, Janie is also the victim of gossip in this novel. Consequently, Janie needs Pheoby to not only listen to Janie tell her side of events, but to spread Janie's story to those who have victimized her. From the beginning of the novel, the reader knows that Janie is the subject of negative gossip. While both Spacks and Tannen claim gossip can be positive, it becomes negative when it devolves into "talking against rather than talking about" (Tannen 120). Spacks adds that gossip can be condemned for its "circulation of slander, betrayal of secrets [and] its penetration of privacy" (33). Janie falls victim to negative gossip in the opening chapter when others seek to slander her good name by talking against her.

The gossip ensues when the women of Eatonville spy a disheveled Janie returning to Eatonville on foot and in overalls, a far cry from her prior wardrobe of expensive dresses. The townspeople watch Janie's ascent back to her Eatonville home from the rockers on their front porches and greet her with sneers and laughter. They believe she has fallen from grace and from her social position as the former mayor's wife. Janie explains, "They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song" (2). They imagine various scenarios as the cause of Janie's return to Eatonville after having left with Tea Cake, a younger man, whom they suppose was after her money more than her love.

The gossip seeks to elicit a rhetorically calculated response from Janie, but Janie refuses to speak to these women, which adds fuel to the fire. Pearl Stone says, "Don't keer what it was, she could stop and say a few words with us. She act like we done done

something to her” (3). Tannen notes, “Women can be undone by gossip if they do not show the proper respect for it” (*Understand* 105). In this case, Janie is the topic of gossip because of her unwillingness to participate in the gossip herself. Though their versions of events are incorrect, Janie deliberately does not divulge the details of her tryst with Tea Cake to them directly.

Janie’s refusal to discuss the matter with the women is not because she wishes to keep the details to herself, but because she knows that no matter what she says, they will not listen to her, at least not with open ears as Ratcliffe suggests. They have their minds made up about her already. Pheoby reiterates the closed mindedness of the porch sitters, saying, “An envious heart makes a treacherous ear. They done ‘heard’ about you just what they hope done happened” (5). In other words, despite the fact that Janie has not spoken to them, the porch sitters have already assessed her situation and judged Janie according to their biased ideas. Her ethos has been damaged and may be beyond repair in the minds of the porch sitters. Her decision to ignore the women and her refusal to talk to them directly is an example of her rhetorical agency in selecting a listener with care. Though Janie does not want to discuss her life with these women directly, she does hope to reach them indirectly by sharing her experiences with her “bosom friend,” Pheoby Watson, knowing that Pheoby will spread her words to the others.

Wolff would argue that Janie does not concern herself “with answering the porch sitters. Her story has another purpose: it is both a presentation of experience and an encouragement to experience—and experience in itself” (32). In his essay, Michael Awkward also claims Janie is uninterested in discussing her return with the porch

sitters on the basis that they are all talk and no action (16). Awkward's main argument is that through her experiences with Tea Cake, Janie has come to value words that are accompanied by actions, which would resonate with her need to seek a listener who is categorized as a deliverer in the first place. While I do believe Janie's message encourages people to go out and live their lives evidenced by the repeated phrase "you got tuh go there tuh know there" (191), I also assert that Janie does indeed want to answer the porch sitters. She knows the porch sitters are gossiping about her, and Pheoby confirms her suspicions.

The porch sitters believe everything Janie has done has been frivolous or self-serving. They also believe she is returning to the town disgraced and downtrodden; none of which are true. However, because Janie lacks credibility with the porch sitters, they have effectively denied or silenced her voice from being heard: "The women judge Janie for going off with a younger man. . . . These actions reveal ways in which the community works to silence Janie. However, Janie's voice perseveres and makes itself heard through the recounting of her story to Pheoby" (Haurykiewiez 51). Janie hopes that by sharing the truth and negating these lies, she can not only set the record straight but help someone else learn from her experiences. hooks explains the power of speaking out: "speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" ("Young Soldier" 53). Janie makes her own transformation as she speaks, becoming the subject of her story rather than the object in Logan's, Joe's, or Teacake's. Janie has been previously defined by her relationships with men in the eyes of her relatives and of the

townspeople of Eatonville. Consequently, as hooks describes, Janie's actions have been interpreted by others, and the interpretations have been less than flattering.

Though Janie may want to confront these misinterpretations, unfortunately, she knows she can't bear the message to the others without Pheoby's assistance. At an MLA conference, Thad Davis explained:

While Janie is the teller of the tale, Pheoby is the bearer of the tale.

Janie's experimental life may not allow her to effect changes beyond what she causes in Pheoby Watson's life; but Pheoby, standing within the traditional role of women, is the one most suited to take the message back to the community. (Davis, qtd by Washington xv)

Davis seems to agree that Pheoby should be classified as a deliverer of Janie's message.

Janie knows her story of turmoil and redemption are important, and she wants the community to know the truth behind her absence and about her marriage, thus she seeks a listener whom she trusts and knows the community will respect, Pheoby Watson.

### **Pheoby as Ideal Listener**

The conversation between Pheoby and Janie can also be considered gossip as defined by Spacks: "It takes place in private, at leisure, in a context of trust" (5). While some of their talk could be labeled scandalous, such as the information regarding Janie's sexual awakening and experiences, its primary purpose is not to talk against others but rather for the two women to come to an understanding about life, love, and friendship. Spacks explains the highest level of gossip involves "its capacity to create and intensify human connection and to enlarge self knowledge predicated more on emotion than

thought” (19). The gossip between Janie and Pheoby can be classified in this manner as the two women intensify their bond through the telling of Janie’s life story. While Janie is the victim of gossip in Eatonville and later at the muck, she still values this form of rhetoric and is shown throughout the text to have a desire to participate in it. Yet, Pheoby is the only one she is finally able to secure as a willing participant in the activity. This section highlights why Janie chooses to confide in Pheoby and the significance of their relationship.

As the listener to Janie’s tale, Pheoby is privy to information the rest of Eatonville is not, which emphasizes her importance in the novel as well as to Janie, causing the reader to question Janie’s motives for selecting her as listener in the first place. Janie makes the rhetorical choice to pick Pheoby as a listener due to their long-standing friendship, mutual trust, and Pheoby’s reputation within Eatonville versus Janie’s reputation within the community.

The reader knows that Janie and Pheoby have a long-standing friendship based on mutual trust. Janie lists this as her reason for talking to Pheoby: “Pheoby we been kissin’-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah’m talking to you from dat standpoint” (7). Pheoby also acknowledges the intimate relationship between them when she tells the gossiping women, “Well, nobody don’t know if it’s anything to tell or not. Me, Ah’m her best friend, and Ah don’t know” (3). Not only does this establish the relationship between the women; it also reinforces that the two have shared intimate information with one another on a regular basis. Pheoby alludes to the familiarity between the women when she goes to visit Janie at the beginning of the novel: “When she arrived at the place, Pheoby Watson didn’t go in by

the front gate and down the palm walk to the front door. She walked around the fence corner and went in the intimate gate with her heaping plate of mulatto rice" (4). She does not enter Janie's house through the front door, or even pause to knock or ask for permission to enter. Rather, Pheoby feels comfortable enough to approach Janie from the back of the house, a place most would consider more private than other areas of the home.

Scholars have examined the significance of the porch as a site of resistance or intimate space for Janie (Awkward, Johnson, and Pattison). Some have pointed to the porch as a means for the community of Eatonville to resist white authority, but Pattison adds complexity to this argument, asserting that the porch is not only an important location for storytelling in the novel, but also that the porch is marked as a feminine space: "The intimate space Janie produces through the back porch has more to do with her feminine subject position than with her African American identity" (12). The women in the beginning of the novel can be seen sitting on the front porch gossiping about Janie, highlighting that women typically occupy this space. As shown Janie has been excluded from this feminine space. Rather than sit facing the women at the front of her home, she retreats to the back porch: "The porch's rhetorical power resides in its public and private dimensions as both an intimate space connected to the house and an exterior space accessible to the public" (13). Though Janie is outside, she is not easily accessible to the other women of Eatonville, who are in front of their homes. Pheoby is the only one allowed to penetrate this space, and it is important to note that Pheoby does not hesitate to enter this domain. When Pheoby comes through the back gate, Janie does not act surprised; rather she welcomes her friend as though this entrance was common



practice between the two women, illustrating that Janie is comfortable with Pheoby and that their friendship knows no boundaries.

The prior relationship between the women plays a huge role in Janie's rhetorical decision to tell her story to Pheoby over another person within the community. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, M.M. Bakhtin explains how a listener interprets words through his or her own lens based on his or her own unique experiences, which is precisely why speakers tend to be selective of their listeners based on the listener's ethos with the speaker (xx). Pheoby has good ethos with Janie because they have an established relationship based on trust.

Tannen notes that trust is often built between women through conversation in the telling and listening to secrets: "Not only is telling secrets evidence of friendship; it creates a friendship, when the listener responds in the expected way" (*Understand* 98). Janie and Pheoby have been sharing their life experiences with one another for years. Throughout the novel, the reader catches a glimpse of the exchanges between the women. For example, before Janie leaves Eatonville with Tea Cake, she discusses the matter with Pheoby, confessing that the two of them are lovers: "We'se just as good as married already. But Ah ain't putting it in de street. Ah'm tellin *you*" (115). Janie trusts Pheoby to keep information a secret when asked.

Numerous references are made to Pheoby's ability to keep a secret and Janie's trust in Pheoby as a confidant. Pheoby clearly wants to protect Janie's reputation within Eatonville even before Janie leaves with Tea Cake. When she goes to visit with Janie about her concerns regarding Janie's relationship with a younger man,

Pheoby picked her way over to Janie's house like a hen to a neighbor's garden. Stopped and talked a little with everyone she met, turned aside momentarily to pause at a porch or two—going straight by walking crooked. So her firm intention looked like an accident and she didn't have to give her opinion to folks along the way. (112)

Pheoby knows if she walks in a direct path to Janie's house, the other women will inquire about her visit, and she wants to avoid even the risk of being asked about her friend. She removes the possibility of gossip before it can begin. They may be talking about Janie and Tea Cake already, but Pheoby is not going to add fuel to the fire by showing that she is also concerned.

When she reaches Janie's home, Janie is forthright with Pheoby about her blossoming sexual relationship with Tea Cake, something that the other women would find scandalous because Janie and Tea Cake are not yet married. She asks Pheoby to keep this information to herself, and Pheoby responds, "Ah just like a chicken. Chicken drink water, but he don't pee pee" (114). In other words, Pheoby makes clear she is there to listen to Janie, but she does not intend to tell, which adds new context to Janie's description of the women as "kissing friends" (7). A kiss is an intimate act, and as the old saying goes, a lady never kisses and tells. In this case, the kiss is not only meant to represent the physical act of affection, but also the metaphorical passing of information from one mouth to another. Pheoby assures Janie that her lips are sealed on the subject of Tea Cake at least for now.

Janie not only places her trust in Pheoby, she respects her as well. Janie illustrates her respect by listening to Pheoby when Pheoby cautions her about Tea

Cake's motives for marriage, hiding the recommended two hundred dollars in her breast pocket for safe measure upon Pheoby's behest (117). Thus, Janie obviously values Pheoby's words of advice. So, it comes as no surprise to Janie when Pheoby walks into her home to hear the latest news about her friend, and though Janie did not seek out Pheoby's counsel this time, it is obvious that she has been waiting to talk to her friend: "Ah depend on you for a good thought" (7). When she tells Pheoby, "tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it" (7), it becomes clear that she intends to tell Pheoby everything no matter how long it takes for Pheoby to understand her meaning.

Janie refers to Pheoby as her "kissing friend" (7), which implies the women are already intimate acquaintances prior to this conversation. Janie elaborates on her definition of kissing friends, explaining, "Mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (6). While I argue that Janie is expressing her trust that Pheoby will recount the story as told by Janie, there are obviously sexual connotations associated with this definition. While there is no indication that the women have engaged in sexual activity within the text, the phrase does imply a level of homosocialism between the women.

In her book, *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick discusses the idea of male interactions as having homosexual connotations within certain social situations. The catalyst for these interactions typically involves a love triangle between two men and a woman in which the men become acquainted with one another or interact with one another based on their mutual relationship with a love interest or in some cases a sibling. While the woman allows for such a relationship to be forged, the relationship between the men becomes just as central as the relationship

between the men and women, and in some cases, even more intimate. An example of such an interaction takes place between Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* In this novel, Bon and Henry become friends and to ensure the continued friendship between them, Henry introduces Bon to his sister, Judith, which sparks a possible engagement. However, little is seen of the interaction between Bon and Judith. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the interaction or bond between Bon and Henry, which is certainly affectionate and intimate. Sedgwick argues that relationships between men that are foregrounded by their obligatory heterosexual relationships with women (brothers or sons in law) can be interpreted as homosocial, meaning that the men have a strong bond separate from the bond they share with their female partners, but that they use the female bond to forge a deeper connection to the male bond (3). Sedgwick's book focuses mostly on male relationships because she says that female intimate relationships are not as scandalous or socially unacceptable as male relationships. For example, women can hold hands in public without people necessarily assuming that they are lesbians, but if men were to do the same, the immediate assumption is that they are partners.

Despite her emphasis on men, Sedgwick's homosocial theory can easily be applied to the relationship between Janie and Pheoby.<sup>23</sup> While holding hands might be interpreted as an innocent act, kissing, especially French kissing, would likely be labeled as a homosexual activity. The exchange between the two women in this novel follows the pattern Sedgwick outlines for obligatory heterosexual behavior because the

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<sup>23</sup> Sedgwick's homosocial theory explains that often women are passed between men in order to cement male relationships. In this case, conversation takes the place of intercourse. In other words, the women converse about their male companions in order to solidify their relationship with each other.

subject of conversation between the two women is based upon Janie's interactions (mostly sexual) with men: Logan, Joe, and Tea Cake. Thus, the catalyst for the conversation between the two women is male centric. Even Pheoby's comments to Janie at the end of the novel tie directly back to her own heterosexual relationship with her husband, Sam. Thus, the conversation and the level of intimacy between the women has developed due to their need to discuss the men in their lives. Yet, the discussion of the men has forged an intimacy between the women that is clearly central to the story in ways that the male relationships are not.

While both women either have been or are currently involved with men, their relationship with one another could be viewed as more intimate than any relationship the two have shared with their male counterparts and is certainly more intimate than that of their relationships with other women. Janie does not refer to any other woman in the novel as a "kissing friend." Though the novel focuses on Janie's sexual awakenings through her marriages to three different men, readers are still privy to some of Pheoby's interactions with her husband Sam. The relationship between Sam and Pheoby may be more loving than that of Joe and Janie; however, it is obvious that it still leaves much to be desired. Pheoby's response to Janie's story indicates as much when she says she can no longer live life the same and that she will be asking Sam to take her fishing. She is implying that she and Sam do not typically engage in social activities together. Further evidence of this can be found subtly throughout the novel when Sam is seen at the town store and Pheoby is at home with the porch sitters. In fact, readers rarely see the pair together throughout the novel's entirety. When they are together, it seems as though Sam's function is only to emphasize the importance of Pheoby's

relationship with Janie. For example, when Sam hears rumors about Tea Cake and Janie in town, he tells Pheoby she better go set Janie straight or talk some sense into her (111). Once more, Pheoby and Janie are being brought together by the male forces in their lives.

Janie's relationship with Pheoby is drastically different than those she has with her various husbands. The most noticeable difference is the lack of emotional or physical violence. The relationship between the two women is harmonious. When she is talking to Pheoby, Janie is at peace because she knows Pheoby will not raise a hand to slap her mouth shut, nor will she condemn or chastise her for her words. Donald Marks, author of "Sex, Violence, and Control in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" explains that Hurston seems to inherently equate heterosexual relationships with violence (152). He notes, "It is not until Janie has killed Tea Cake and all her lovers are out of the novel that she can find real peace and independence" (152). Marks would argue that Janie's discovery of peace is only possible when she is alone after having told Pheoby her story (157). However, I argue that is with Pheoby and in the process of telling her story that she finds peace. This peace is merely found with a woman rather than a man.

Furthermore, Pheoby allows Janie the space to speak that all the men in Janie's life on some level denied her, which as pointed out in the introduction, is a marker of good listening skills. Pheoby makes it a point to tell Janie that Sam's supper can wait while she listens to Janie: "It's all ready and waitin'. If he ain't got sense enough to eat it, dat's his hard luck" (7). Her statement implies that she does not care how long it takes Janie to tell her story, a sign of Pheoby's patience as a listener.

Pheoby and Janie's conversations are markedly different than that of Pheoby and Sam or Janie and her mates because when the men speak to the women, it is usually with the intent of telling them what to do whereas when the women speak it is to build intimacy. The contrasts between the ways the men and women interact in the novel illustrate the difference Tannen coins "report talk" and "rapport talk": men use conversation to report information, and women use conversation to build relationships (*Understand* 81). The husbands in this novel talk not only to report, but to command. As Tannen states in her introduction, commands "distinguish the speaker from the addressee and frame him as having more power" (156). For example, as illustrated above, Sam commands Pheoby to go to talk to Janie about Tea Cake despite Pheoby's insistence that Janie is a grown woman capable of making her own life choices (111). Readers see this time and again in each of Janie's heterosexual relationships: Logan commands Janie to do housework and manual labor despite Janie's protestations of gender norms; Joe commands Janie to wear a head rag even though she doesn't want to; Tea Cake tells Janie to end her relationship with Mrs. Turner. These are but a few examples. According to Michael Kimmel, author of *Guyland*, men are taught that to be "manly, they must command respect, be tough, not talk about problems, and dominate females" (42), which may account for the behavior of these men. In all these cases men declare their stance rather than inquire about the women's stance on any given situation. Once these men make a pronouncement, they refuse to budge from their positions and rarely do they take into account what the women have to say in response. In other words, they are not active listeners if they can be categorized as listeners at all.

When Janie and Pheoby talk to each other, however, the purpose is not to instruct, but rather to reach an understanding, which according to Ratcliffe is a means of listening with intent.<sup>24</sup> Almost every conversation between these two women is marked by questions rather than declarations, which is a way of expressing interest in the conversation as shown in the introduction. For example, Pheoby does not tell Janie not to marry Tea Cake as Sam instructs, but rather asks her if she knows what she is doing by running off with him. She warns Janie about the rumors she has been hearing from Sam about Tea Cake's motivations for courting Janie: "Tea Cake, whilst he ain't no jail bird, he ain't got uh dime to cry. Ain't you skeered he's jes after yo money—him being younger than you?" (112). While Pheoby broaches the topic of Tea Cake with Janie, her approach is drastically different than that of the men. Pheoby points out Tea Cake's supposed flaws but also asks Janie what she thinks. Once Janie responds that Tea Cake is a nice guy, Pheoby replies, "Janie, you'se yo own woman, and Ah hop you know whut you doin. Ah sho hope you ain't like uh possum—de older you gits, de less sense yuh got. . . . Well, if yo' mind is already made up, tain't nothin' nobody kin do" (113). Though she voices her concerns, Pheoby does not tell Janie to end her relationship with Tea Cake. She acknowledges that Janie, as her own woman, has her own agency and can make her own decisions, even if Pheoby may not agree with them. Likewise when Pheoby tells Janie to think about what happened with Miss Tyler, a woman who lost her fortune to a younger man, Janie acknowledges that Pheoby has a good point. She does not dismiss Pheoby's advice or refuse to listen to Pheoby's warnings. The questioning

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<sup>24</sup> My analysis in some ways contradicts that of Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*, who claims that Pheoby is a "true pupil" and Janie is a "true pedagogue" (199). While I agree that Pheoby learns from Janie, I argue that the conversation between them is mutually beneficial.



between the women opens up the conversation and allows for both voices to be heard, which is a marker of reciprocity, demonstrating that the women practice taking turns listening to each other. One person does not typically dominate the conversation.

Because the women are accustomed to talking and listening to one another, they have forged a relationship that goes beyond the surface level. They are most likely able to anticipate how the other will respond because of their familiarity. Tannen refers to this ability as being able to read meta-messages in conversation, a sign of a feminist listener. In "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," Walter Ong also notes the importance of past conversation on present discourse:

The spoken word is part of present actuality and has its meaning established by the total situation in which it comes into being. Context for the spoken word is simply present, centered in the person speaking and the one or ones to whom he addresses himself and to whom he is related existentially in terms of the circumambient actuality. (10)

Janie's prior conversations with Pheoby have proven to Janie that Pheoby is a worthy and reliable confidant. Thus, Janie feels comfortable sharing the intimate details of her life with Pheoby because she is already confident that Pheoby will not judge her the way the porch sitters do.

Knowing how Pheoby is likely to respond gives Janie comfort, but also more autonomy and freedom over her message. In her article, "When I Was a Young Soldier for the Revolution: Coming to Voice," bell hooks notes, "Knowing who is listening provides an indication of how our voices are being heard" (56). By limiting her audience

to Pheoby, Janie has more control over how her words are being interpreted, which makes Janie open to speak freely, a luxury she is not afforded often.

### **Failed Listeners**

In contrast to Pheoby, most of the people in Janie's life have been poor listeners. This section highlights the various people in Janie's life who have refused to listen to Janie or who are not feminist listeners. While these listeners are both male and female, the majority of them are male, which is predictable based on Tannen's assertion that hegemonic discourse positions men as speakers who are not trained to listen. Janie's husbands all conform to traditional patriarchal structure in varying ways, which has an impact on their listening. In *The Will to Change*, bell hooks explains why some women may also prove to be poor listeners: "Unlike most men, most women have been taught relational skills. It is clear though that more often than not women have used those skills in the service of domination, of patriarchy, and not in the quest for freedom or love" (184). As will be shown, Janie's grandmother and Mrs. Turner are poor listeners because they want to further the patriarchal structure, which they have been taught to cherish.

Janie has been forced to remain silent throughout a majority of her life often by those who claim to care for her the most. First, her grandmother refuses to hear Janie's desires, forcing her to marry Logan Hillicks against her will. Later, she dismisses Janie's complaints about her marriage as foolishness, cutting off her words and sending her on her way. Janie's grandmother has a set idea of what Janie's life should look like and is unwilling to accept any deviation from her own plans for Janie. These plans consist of Janie marrying well so that she can become a lady of the house like her wealthy white

counterparts. While Janie's grandmother has good intentions, her goals for Janie are based upon a societal standard that suggests that women are subservient to men and that the best they can hope for is a good home where they can be protected. She silences Janie's reaction to marriage because Janie's words have the potential to ruin her own vision of Janie's future. Maria Wolff, author of "Listening and Living: Reading and Experience in *Their Eyes were Watching God*," explains:

Janie's search for identity is not a temporal, progressive process but involves the representation and evaluation of a series of experiences or images. These include various "mirrors" or portraits of Janie herself, presented by others or viewed by the heroine. (Wolff 30)

Janie's grandmother paints a portrait of Janie's life that she believes will be in Janie's best interest.

Ironically, in silencing Janie, her grandmother denies Janie an audience for her own dream, something she laments happening to her. She tells Janie, "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (16). She believes that Janie's marriage to Logan will give Janie a higher social status and perhaps an opportunity to speak for other women of color. It is clear that Janie's grandmother understands the importance of ethos or social standing in correlation to being able to speak. There was no place for Janie's grandmother to speak because she is not granted a podium due to her station in life as a poor woman of color. In *The Southern Lady, From Pedestal to Politics*, Anne Scott explains the rules and expectations were different for Southern women depending upon their station:

Wives of small farmers and the slave women lived, bore children, worked hard, and died leaving little trace for the historian coming after. . . .When they sweated in the field or tore their hands digging in the ground no one lectured them on feminine delicacy or told them it was unladylike to work so long and hard. (xi)

No one lectured women of color on what it meant to be ladylike because their existence was built on the fact that they were to work hard and not ask questions; no one cared about what they had to say so long as the job was done. These women were not considered respectable and thus they lived outside the mold of a Southern lady. While still difficult for elite Southern white women to participate in politics, it was even more challenging for women of color. They were denied their “pulpits” on two fronts: status and time. These two factors are interconnected because a higher social standing presumably meant more leisure time to construct speeches or to participate in politics. Janie’s grandmother realizes her own dreams for a pulpit will never come to fruition because she has no means of obtaining any listeners. Yet, while she is lamenting the loss of her opportunities to engage a crowd, she demands that Janie listen to her and in her refusal to reciprocate the gesture of listening to Janie, her grandmother refuses to afford Janie the luxury of an audience.

Janie’s first husband, Logan, is also a poor listener because he isn’t open to new ideas that differ from his preconceived notions of a partnership within marriage. As described in the introduction, a lack of openness is a marker of bad listening skills. While Janie seeks to negotiate the workload between the two, Logan refuses to listen to her, insisting she has to listen and to obey him. For example, when Janie is in the house,

she tells Logan, "Youse in yo place and Ah'm in mine" (31), meaning her place is inside the home, and his is outside. Yet, Logan explains that her place is "anywhere [he] needs her to be" (31). Logan's ideas about marriage differ drastically from what Janie's grandmother had in mind and consequently challenge Janie's own assumptions about marriage. Both Janie and her grandmother believed that Logan's wealth would guarantee that Janie would be treated like the wealthy white elite, meaning Janie would remain in the home rather than working in the field. Rather than allowing Janie to live a life of luxury, Logan treats Janie like a workhorse. Janie's protests make no difference to Logan, who still insists that Janie "pull her weight" in their home. Janie is once more denied a listener.

Janie's second husband, Joe Starks, is also an inept listener. He exhibits traits consistent with male hegemonic discourse including devaluing and refusing to listen to women's voices, commanding the conversation, and using it to maintain and reinforce his position within the community. In doing so, Joe denies Janie an audience and also refuses to listen to Janie himself. Janie runs away with him in order to free herself from the restraining lifestyle she leads with Logan. However, she soon realizes that a life with Joe comes with its own restraints. Joe tells Janie he intends to be a "big voice" in the town of Eatonville, but fails to tell Janie that in order for him to have such a voice, hers would need to be subdued. Just like Janie's grandmother, Joe feels he has been denied an audience: "He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves" (28). The white men had refused to listen to Joe based solely on the color of his skin whereas Joe refuses to listen to Janie based on her gender.

Joe's ideology about women appears to be that women should be seen and not heard, which is a common ideology as Tannen explains: "most people feel instinctively (if not consciously) that women should be seen and not heard so any amount of talk from them seems like too much" (77). One reason Joe does not want Janie to speak is because he believes women are incapable of intelligent thought without the aid of a man and does not want to be embarrassed by her in a public setting. He tells Janie, "Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves" (71). Perhaps this is why Joe denies Janie the opportunity to address the townspeople when they ask for her to give a speech. Before she can respond to their request, he says, "Mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat" (43). As I will examine, Joe does not want an equal partner in the relationship; he merely wants a trophy wife to display around the town to establish his own status.

Because Joe's goal is to attain the power of white men, Joe emulates their behavior along with the acceptance of the ideology of the Southern woman as the angel of the home. He tells the townsmen that Janie is "uh woman and her place is in de home" (43). Unlike Logan, Joe does believe that women belong in the house because he views having a woman at home as a luxury or status symbol, illustrating that he does not need her to work in order to maintain his lifestyle. Popular opinion among the elite white Southern men maintained that women should "shrink from public gaze, and from the struggle and competition of life" (Fitzhugh qtd. in Scott 17). Joe surmises that speech making for women would be unladylike and unbecoming of Janie's status as the mayor's wife. Thus, he takes it as an affront to himself when the idea of Janie delivering

such a speech is even brought up in conversation. He belittles Janie's abilities and denies her an audience. While she confesses "she had never thought of making a speech, and didn't know if she cared to make one at all," she feels slighted by Joe's actions, noting, "it must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things" (43). Joe's actions suggest he believes Janie has nothing of value to say.

Though Janie wants to talk to the community, Joe does not allow her to associate with them. Janie explains that though "she thought up good stories" to share with the men at the store, "Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn't want her talking after such trashy people" (53). His excuse for silencing Janie is in his mind a compliment; he believes he is putting Janie up on a pedestal. Mary Weaks-Baxter, author of *Reclaiming the American Farmer*, explains the plight of southern women, noting that Southern ideology dictated "Southern womanhood as an institution only worthy of the pedestal" (97). Weaks-Baxter specifically refers to southern white women here, but the ideology applies to Janie in this case because Joe's aspirations are to gain the power and authority of a white man. Essentially he implies that Janie is above the type of conversation going on in the store and also above associating with these people based on her marital status.

Joe believes that in keeping Janie a "lady" and separate from the public, he is granting her a type of power within the community as mayor's wife. Hurston echoes this idea in her letters. In a letter to her editor, Mitchell Burroughs, Hurston discusses Southern womanhood, explaining, "You know yourself that a woman is most powerful when she is weak. All a woman needs to have is sufficient allure, and able men will

move the world for her” (Kaplan 562). Her ideas about the correlation between beauty and power become a central theme within *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, especially as the concepts play out within Joe and Janie’s marriage. Joe is initially attracted to Janie because of her appearance. He calls Janie a “pretty doll baby” (29), and he explains to her that her beauty grants her the ability to “sit on de front porch and rock and fan [herself] and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (29). So, in his eyes, setting Janie above the common folk of Eatonville is giving her a power over them. She is to be served, not to be the server. In describing the novel, Hurston herself lists the ideas of beauty and power as central to the conflict. She describes the plot of the book to William Stanley Hoole in 1925, which is more than ten years before it is published, illustrating how long Hurston spent developing her novel. In reference to Janie, Hurston reveals:

My next book is about a woman who was from childhood hungry for life and the earth, but because she had beautiful hair, was always being skotched upon a flagpole by the men who loved her and forced to sit there. (366)

Her description of Janie’s beauty seems to suggest, however, that her beauty does not translate into a power—at least not the type of power Janie wants. Hurston’s description of Janie as a girl with beautiful hair illustrates her point that women can use their looks in order to be alluring and gain power. Janie could have remained in a position of power, worshipped or adored by richer men. Yet, she chooses to leave that behind for life on the muck. Hurston elaborates:



At forty she got her chance at mud. Mud, lush and fecund with a buck named Teacake. He took her down into the Everglades where people worked and sweated and loved and died violently, where no such thing as flagpoles for women existed. (366-67)

Some would view Janie's decision as a relinquishing of power, but for Janie, the ability to choose is a power in its own right. When given a choice, Janie does not prefer her life with Joe. Though being married to Joe means Janie does not have to work as hard as other members of the community, she feels stripped of her agency and of choices. She is isolated from the people she supposedly lords over. Most importantly she has no listeners and thus feels she is misunderstood and unloved.

Because Joe insists that Janie remain quiet in public, the other women, with the exception of Pheoby, do not interact with Janie at all because they interpret her silence as snobbery, which once more leaves Janie without listeners. Even Pheoby tells Janie "You always did class off" (112). Wolff explains that Janie's reputation and her own perception of herself is comprised of "the spoken opinions of others and corresponds to the 'outside' image of her," which because of her silence "is almost forced on Janie" (30). Janie attributes her lack of female companionship as a combination of Joe's imposed isolation from them and general envy. Janie explains, "She slept with authority and so she was a part of it in the town mind. She couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit" (47). Marks asserts, "Aside from Joe's overt efforts to separate Janie from the townspeople, the very fact that she holds a position of authority in a hierarchal social structure divides her from the remainder of the community" (154). In other words, the community believed Janie to be an extension of Joe's power, but had no idea that Janie

was actually oppressed. They saw Janie's house as a symbol of wealth and power because Joe built it to resemble a plantation home with two stories and pillars. Janie observes, "The rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (48). The house further distances Janie from the other members of the town, who were jealous of her position as mayor's wife. They believe Janie prefers to be in her big house rather than outside with them, but on the contrary, Janie found the house to be more like a prison than a palace. She confesses to Pheoby, "Ah always did want tuh git round uh whole heap, but Jody wouldn't 'low me tuh" (112). When Janie is not under Joe's watchful eye at the store, he keeps her confined to their home where Janie says she could feel the "walls creepin' up on [her] and squeezin' all de life outa [her]" (112). In "Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotype of the Folk," Duck explains, "Joe limits Janie's interactions with the community in order to assert the couple's bourgeois social status" (136). Though Janie does not desire a higher status, the community views them as a cohesive unit. The neighbors feel Janie's silence is her way of shunning them, but in reality she wants nothing more than to be among the people.

Joe removes Janie from potential female listeners, but is also unwilling to listen to Janie talk in both the public and the private sphere. Janie soon learns it is better to keep her mouth shut than to defy Joe and start an argument, "so gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush" (71). Tannen asserts, "Men resist receiving information from women and women resist relaying information to men in order to preserve the conversational hierarchy which has been socially ingrained" (63-64). Janie is afraid to disrupt Joe's conversational hierarchy, so she no longer tries to initiate conversation with him. Scott notes that silent suffering was not only prevalent but an

expectation placed upon Southern women: “It was her nature to be self-denying, and she was given to suffering in silence, a characteristic said to endear her to men” (4). Silence is certainly endearing to Joe, who has based his whole existence upon gaining the authority of a white man, not to change the social order, but to replicate it.

Janie struggles to repress her voice initially, but Joe silences Janie into submission because she realizes her words are useless against him since he chooses not to listen, emphasizing the ultimate power of a listener to incite or eliminate conversation. Janie learns the value of a listener through this experience because she recognizes her voice is falling on deaf ears with Joe:

She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about.

Things packed up and away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. (72)

All the tension of things left unsaid in their relationship continues to build up in Janie until she is no longer capable of holding back her anger and resentment.

Janie tries to mend their relationship one last time before Joe dies. She confronts him on his deathbed, hoping that before he dies he will finally hear what she has to say, citing their biggest marital problem as his inability to be a listener: “You wouldn’t listen. You done lived wid me for twenty years and you don’t half know me atall” (86). Sadly even on his deathbed, he is unwilling to hear Janie’s words. He dies leaving Janie not only without a husband, but also without friends, with the exception of Pheoby.

So, even though Janie is finally free to express herself, she is met with an unreceptive audience in the town. Because Joe was the vocal one, they feel closer to him

and mourn his death. They do not realize that Janie was being oppressed and find her attitude toward Joe's death disgraceful, including refusing to wear black and taking up with a younger man shortly after Joe's demise. Janie knows that even if she wanted to talk to them, they would turn a deaf ear toward her much like Joe. Julie A. Haurykiewicz, author of "From Mules to Muliebriety: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," explains that by ignoring Janie, the porch sitters are effectively silencing her: "The women judge Janie for going off with a younger man. . . . These actions reveal ways in which the community works to silence Janie" (51). When Pheoby urges Janie to talk to the townspeople after her return to Eatonville, it is not hard to imagine why Janie says, "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. Tain't worth de trouble" (6).

Though Janie portrays her life in the Everglades with Tea Cake as a wonderful experience, those Janie encountered on the muck and outside of Eatonville both male and female were poor listeners as well because both genders are attempting to maintain their own image of patriarchal society. Janie is rarely seen communicating with women workers in the glades, but one woman in particular, Mrs. Turner, seeks her out for companionship. Janie notes, "She had seen her [Mrs. Turner] several times during the season, but neither spoke" (139). However, once the working season was complete, "they became visiting friends" (139). It is important to note that Mrs. Turner is the one who pursues a visiting relationship with Janie. She places herself in the speaking role and Janie in the listening role from the beginning of their relationship. Janie explains, "When she happened to drop in and catch Janie alone, she'd spend hours chatting away" (140). Thus, Mrs. Turner is the dominant voice in the exchange. During their conversations, it becomes even more apparent that Mrs. Turner intends to do

most of the talking, especially in regards to their talk about Tea Cake. Thus, Mrs. Turner does not practice reciprocal listening, granting Janie the same opportunity to talk that she expects to receive on these visits.

In addition to talking command of the conversation, Mrs. Turner is dismissive of Janie's opinions, highlighting that she is not an open or receptive listener. An example of this behavior occurs when Janie and Mrs. Turner discuss the hot button issue of the social status between varying complexions among African Americans. As this scene demonstrates, dark men are marginalized and granted less status within the social hierarchy even among members of their own race. Mrs. Turner's insistence that Janie leave Tea Cake and her refusal to hear another point of view on the matter highlight Mrs. Turner's complicity with this social order. Similar to Janie's grandmother, Mrs. Turner believes she is steering Janie toward a better and brighter future, one that upholds the patriarchy. Mrs. Turner's ideas about race naturally draw her to Janie, who has a light complexion: "To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from Negroes. That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie's coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked the fields" (140). In Mrs. Turner's eyes, Janie's appearance makes her a worthy friend despite any other class divides: Mrs. Turner owns a diner and Janie works as a laborer in the fields. However, Mrs. Turner has strong opinions about marrying within one's own class, and it becomes clear that Mrs. Turner feels that Janie, in marrying Tea Cake, has married beneath her. She seems on a mission to convince Janie that she has better options even going so far as to suggest her brother as a more viable option for marriage because Tea Cake is dark skinned and her brother

is a lighter shade. She tells Janie, "You oughta meet mah brother. He's real smart. Got dead straight hair" (142). Mrs. Turner's specific mention of her brother's hair is an indication that her brother is of a mixed race. Even though Janie tries to insert herself into the conversation and explain that she is happily married, Mrs. Turner cuts her off and responds in disbelief: "Why you, Mis Woods! Ah don't b'lieve it. You'se jus' sorter hypnotized, dat's all" (141). Janie tries to explain to Mrs. Turner that being darker skinned is not a bad trait, but Mrs. Turner won't listen to Janie's point of view and thus can't reach an understanding of Janie's life choices.

When the conversation is switched to politics, the same situation occurs: Mrs. Turner attempts to persuade Janie but is not really interested in Janie's perspective. She turns the conversation into a lecture, consistent with the male form of hegemonic discourse, rather than a mutual sharing of ideas. Once Mrs. Turner's position becomes clear to Janie, Janie "sat without speaking at all, But Mrs. Turner went on" (142). In both instances Mrs. Turner dominates the conversation, refusing to take on the position of listener: "Mrs. Turner finally rose after being very firm about several other viewpoints of either herself, her son, or her brother. She begged Janie to drop in on her anytime" (143). Though she invites Janie over to her house, it seems doubtful that the dynamics of the conversation will be any different.

The conversation with Mrs. Turner sparks another conversation between Janie and Tea Cake in which Janie is placed into the listening position without the courtesy of Tea Cake reciprocating the gesture. Rather than ask Janie whether or not she likes the company of Mrs. Turner, Tea Cake proclaims, "Ah hates dat woman lak poison. Keep her from round dis house" (143). His words are a command not a request, and he does

not pause to hear whether Janie wants these visits to continue or not. He turns the conversation into a lecture, which according to Tannen is another indicator of hegemonic discourse (124).

Tea Cake not only refuses to listen to Janie talk to him; he does not even listen to her when she is talking to others. Ironically, he tells Janie, “Ah been heah uh long time listenin’ to dat heifer run me down tuh de dawgs uh try tuh tole you off from me” (143). His words indicate that he has been eavesdropping on the conversation between the women, but he apparently only paid attention to Mrs. Turner’s words. Though, as highlighted above, Janie consistently told Mrs. Turner that she loved Tea Cake and didn’t find anything wrong with darker men, Tea Cake appears to have selective hearing, choosing to hone in on Mrs. Turner’s complaints rather than Janie’s compliments of him. Like Mrs. Turner, he isn’t interested in what Janie has to say in her defense or in taking Janie’s feelings into account before making a decision that directly affects Janie’s social activities.

Like Joe Starks, Tea Cake denies Janie the opportunity to bond with female members of the community, a prohibition which Janie appears to resent despite her love for Tea Cake. After hearing Tea Cake’s accusations against Mrs. Turner, Janie replies, “So dat whut she wuz up to? I didn't know” (143). Her response is interesting on multiple levels. First, it is clear that Janie did know that Mrs. Turner felt her brother was the better match for Janie. Otherwise Janie would not have felt the need to tell Mrs. Turner that she was a happily married woman, and there was no use for her to consider another man. So, why is she playing dumb with Tea Cake about the subject? Her response could be her way of reassuring Tea Cake that those thoughts never even

entered her mind, or they could be a way to convince Tea Cake that Mrs. Turner is a harmless woman, thus allowing her the chance to continue to engage in social interactions with Mrs. Turner. Despite their differences, Mrs. Turner is one of the few women in this new environment that has chosen to befriend Janie. Janie has uprooted her life in Eatonville to live with Tea Cake on the muck and that includes abandoning her long-time friend, Pheoby Watson. Perhaps Janie felt Mrs. Turner could fill the void of female companionship. It appears that Tea Cake at least somewhat picks up on Janie's hesitancy to be rid of Mrs. Turner because he tells Janie, "Ah'm telling her husband tuh keep her home. Ah don't want her round dis house" (143). His words suggest that he does not trust Janie to take care of the "problem" herself.

Though the relationship between Tea Cake and Janie is certainly different than that of Joe and Janie, Tea Cake has his own methods for oppressing Janie and denying her an audience. Marks claims that Janie's relationships are either marked by passion or by control. He places Janie's relationship with Tea Cake in the former category; however, I assert there is sufficient evidence to claim that he belongs in the latter alongside of Logan and Joe. Marks argues that Tea Cake allows Janie "to move out from herself and participate meaningfully in an organic community" (152). There is evidence to support this theory. For example, Tea Cake asks Janie to work alongside him in the fields, which allows her to interact with the other workers, and he allows her to participate in the games that take place outside their home. Janie notes:

The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to



the rest. Because she loved to hear it, and the men loved to hear themselves, they would “woof” and “boogerboo” around the games to the limit. (134)

Yet even these allowances could be viewed as a form of control. When Tea Cake asks Janie to work with him in the fields, he says, “Ah gets lonesome out dere all day ‘thout yuh. After dis, you betta come git uh job uh work out dere lak de rest uh de women—so Ah won’t be losing time comin’ home” (133). While Janie interprets this to be a romantic gesture, just lines before his explanation she was wondering if he was coming home so often from work to keep an eye on her. Tea Cake himself admits, “De boogerman liable tuh tote yuh off whilst Ah’m gone” (132). This exchange could be viewed as romantic, but it could also be viewed as manipulate and restrictive as though Tea Cake has to have his eyes on Janie at all times. It appears he does not trust her to be alone without the possibility of someone else, male or female, occupying her attentions. So, while it may appear he is getting her out into the community, he is really only limiting her privacy and access to other people when he is not around.

One of Tea Cake’s strategies is to remove the possibility for certain exchanges to take place, most notably between Mrs. Turner and Janie. In order to prevent Mrs. Turner from coming over to visit with Janie, Tea Cake tracks down Mr. Turner to say, “Yo’ wife don’t seem tuh have nothin’ much tuh do, so she kin visit uh lot. Mine got too much tuh do tuh go visitin’ and too much time tuh spend time talkin’ tuh folks dat visit her” (144). Without Mrs. Turner, Janie has no female audience with which to air her grievances, should there be any, with Tea Cake. Tannen explains that sharing and listening to each other’s grievances is one of the ways women bond: women use trouble

talk to “confirm their feelings and create a sense of community” (59). Tea Cake eliminates that possibility, when he refuses to allow Janie and Mrs. Turner to visit. Tea Cake takes this a step further by explicitly telling Janie to give Mrs. Turner the silent treatment should she decide to pay Janie a visit despite Tea Cake’s warning: “All you can do is treat her cold whenever she come round here” (144). Though Tea Cake claims he is trying to punish Mrs. Turner, he is not thinking about how his instruction is affecting Janie. He is stripping her of her voice and of a potential confidant.

Tea Cake’s inability or unwillingness to listen to Janie devolves into acts of violence and aggression. Tea Cake does more than merely remove Janie’s audience; he physically silences her into submission. In order to make sure Mrs. Turner received his message, Tea Cake beats Janie to show Mrs. Turner he is in charge of Janie and has the ultimate say and power in his household. Kimmel explains men have a primal urge to “be in charge, to be aggressive and powerful” (55). Beating Janie is one way to assert his command over her and to prove his masculinity to other men. He explains to Sop de Bottom, “Ah didn’t whup Janie ‘cause she done nothin’. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss. Ah set in de kitchen one day and heard dat woman tell mah wife Ah’m too black fuh her” (148). Tea Cake does not listen to Janie’s side of the story about the exchange with Mrs. Turner, and even though Janie tells him that she will have nothing to do with Mrs. Turner, he still feels the beatings are necessary to exert his male authority. While he maintains that his actions are a message for Mrs. Turner, they are also a physical reminder to Janie that she should not defy his wishes.

When the other men see Janie’s bruised face, they are envious of Tea Cake’s power over his wife. Sop de Bottom laments, “Mah woman would spread her lungs all

over Palm Beach County” if he beat her (148). His statement illustrates that the purpose of beatings is to ultimately silence a woman. His envy resides in the fact that when he beats his own wife, this effect cannot be achieved. He exclaims, “Lawd! Wouldn’t Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don’t even holler. She jus cries, eh Tea Cake?” (148). Sop de Bottom obviously prefers silent women even during a beating. He also prefers women whose appearance can be altered by a bruise, which he views as a badge of honor for the abuser. Both of these ideas are problematic for obvious reasons, but the idea that silence is maintained through violence is prevalent from both men’s perspective of the event. Whether Tea Cake means to silence Janie or Mrs. Turner, both instances involve the silencing of women, placing them in the position of a forced listener. Even more disturbing, Tea Cake tells his friend the beating was not prompted by anything Janie has done: “Ah ain’t mad wid her for whut she done, ‘cause she ain’t done me nothin’ yet. Ah’m mad at her for thinkin’”(148). Apparently, for Tea Cake, it is dangerous when women think. Perhaps he believes a few slaps to the head will not only stifle a voice, but put a stop to the inner voice as well. His actions in this section demonstrate his inadequacies as a listener. It appears as though Janie has merely traded one bad listener for another.

### **Multi-dimensional Listening: A Black and White Courtroom**

So far, I have contrasted Pheoby’s relationship with Janie to the other men and women in her life, illustrating how others have failed to listen to Janie in the same manner as Pheoby. All of the exchanges above are examples of failed listeners between one-to-one exchanges, but in this section, I will examine discourse taking place between

Janie and multiple listeners at one time. The section serves as an additional foil to Pheoby's response and also illustrates the overall power of the listener in conversation.

When a speaker is able to select one person as the audience, the power of speech is in his or her favor because he or she can anticipate a response, especially if the listener is a known entity. However, when multiple listeners are present, the speaker has less control over the conversation and how the speaker's speech is interpreted by the listening parties because it is harder to determine the listeners' intent and what they will do with the message once received. No scene highlights this dilemma better than that of Janie's trial. When Janie is tried for Tea Cake's murder, she is in front of a mixed audience: "Plenty of white people came to look on this strangeness. And all the Negroes for miles around" (185). Janie indicates that the white audience is motivated to come to the trial due to its oddity or for the entertainment value of the spectacle. "What need had they to leave their richness to come look on Janie in her overalls?" (185). Given the time period and the long history of black executions and lynchings in the South, it is easy to assume that there is no real need for this white audience to appear at the courtroom other than to enjoy the excitement of a trial and a possible public execution. However, ironically, it is not the white women who are unsympathetic to Janie's tale; it's the black crowd that cries out for justice (in the form of capital punishment) to be done: "They were all against her she could see. So many were there against her that a light slap from each one of them would have beat her to death" (185). As demonstrated, the two factions have varying intents for listening to the testimony at the trial.

Race is not the only thing that separates the people and their reactions in court. Gender also plays a major role in how Janie views the audience and how the audience responds to her. Janie notes that the majority of the white audience, with the exception of the judge and the jury members, were white women whereas the black crowd was of mixed gender. After carefully observing the crowd of white women, Janie explains, "They didn't seem too mad" (185). Janie believes the white women are more likely to empathize with her story than the others at the trial. Minchin notes, "Women in all groups place more emphasis on obtaining their listeners' sympathy and understanding for the social, and indeed, personal aspects of the events they narrate" (8). Janie seems to delineate her audience, not only in terms of race, but gender, feeling more of a connection with the women present, believing they might be more sympathetic listeners: "It would be nice if she could make them know how it was instead of those menfolks" (185).

Though Janie feels she could gain the women's understanding, she realizes that ultimately the decision of her fate lies within the hands of white men and seems worried that they may not be the best listeners for her case. Janie has not had much contact with white men prior to the trial, but she has had contact with black men, and most as already shown, were not receptive listeners. Janie seems to question the jury's ability to understand her experience based on their race and gender. Before the trial begins, Janie asks herself, "For who was it didn't know about the love between Tea Cake and Janie?" (185). However, a scary answer to the question is quite literally staring her in the face: the judge and jury know nothing of their life or their love. Therefore, their

decision must be based solely on Janie's version of events coupled with the testimony of others.

The people in the crowd who do know of Janie and Tea Cake all seem to be against Janie: "She felt them pelting her with dirty thoughts" (185). Janie notes immediately that the black audience did not come to listen; "[t]hey had come to talk" (186). They were not interested in hearing Janie's truth. Tannen asserts, "At an early age, men learn to take over the floor and avoid listening to others especially women" (135). These men live up to the stereotype as they had their own version of events already prepared to share. Sop de Bottom, one of Tea Cake's friends, explains to the crowd that Janie shot Tea Cake because she already had another man lined up to take his place. The black audience came into the courtroom "with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks" (185-6). They know their own words might fall on deaf ears due to racial tensions.

The courtroom is turned into a competition for authority between the black and white men. Tannen claims, "Men feel comfortable talking when there is a need to establish and maintain their status in a group" (94), and both the white and black men are asserting their status with one another and over the proceedings by trying to silence the others. Like Janie, the black men are conscious of the fact that Janie is not being tried by a jury of her peers, but rather by white men, who do not seem to care what the black crowd has to say. At one point, when Sop de Bottom claims he has something to say, Mr. Prescott the prosecution attorney, tells him, "If you know what's good for you, you better shut your mouth up until somebody calls you. . . .We're handling this case. Another word out of *you*, out of any of you niggers back there, and I'll

bind you over to the big court” (187). Mr. Prescott emphasizes that all the black members of the courtroom are to remain silent even though they knew Janie and Tea Cake best. Though they wrote to the bailiff and asked permission to testify against Janie for Mr. Prescott, they are never actually called to the stand.

Janie explains that while the courtroom proceedings are going on “the white part of the room got calmer the more serious it got, but a tongue storm struck the Negroes like wind among palm trees. They talked all of a sudden and all together like a choir and the top parts of their bodies moved on the rhythm of it” (186). They are trying to have their voices heard in a system that has denied them the opportunity. Janie claims, “The judge who had put on a great robe to listen *about* her and Tea Cake. And twelve more white men had all stopped whatever they were doing to listen and pass on what happened between Janie and Tea Cake and as to whether things were done right or not” (185; emphasis added). It is important to note that Janie does not say that the judge and jurors came to listen *to* her but rather *about* her. Though she is granted the opportunity to testify on her behalf, she is uncertain whether or not her own words will be heard by the jury or the crowd.

Janie is given her opportunity to talk in court, and while she is not actively silenced like her counterparts, one wonders if the jurors are actually listening. As shown throughout this chapter, silencing can occur when someone makes the conscious decision not to speak, but it can also occur when someone else makes the conscious choice not to listen. There is a distinct difference between passive hearing and active listening, as noted in the introduction. There is no guarantee that the white audience or the black audience has really heard her words; they could have ignored her speech even

while seeming to listen. When the verdict comes back innocent, it might be easy to assume that Janie's words were important in swaying the jury's opinion, but readers must factor in the other testimony delivered in the courtroom that day, most notably Dr. Simmons, a white male doctor.

Dr. Simmons testifies that he "was scared for her [Janie] and thought to have Tea Cake locked up in the jail, but seeing Janie's care he neglected to do it" (186). His testimony highlights Tea Cake's position as a black male threat not just to Janie but to society at large. The fact that the doctor would have had Tea Cake thrown in jail emphasizes his belief that Tea Cake should be separated from society, that he might hurt others beyond just Janie, perhaps even white people. The attorney feels that this testimony is so powerful that he rests his case immediately following the doctor's words. He seems to know that the ethos of the doctor's race and social standing is enough to convince an all white male jury that Janie is an innocent party. Perhaps he is right. Janie is allowed to take the stand only after the black crowd insists on talking. She is arguably placed on the stand as a way to silence a majority of the black audience. In "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Barbara Johnson speculates that the trial scene is meant to represent the complex relationships between black women and the white hegemony in comparison to black women and black men. Because the audience is comprised of both genders from both races, the rhetorical situation becomes more complex and the audience harder to manipulate. Johnson explains that if a black woman sides with a white person, she is automatically seen as a turncoat to her race, but if she sides with her own race, she must adhere to the gender roles of the race as well. Either way she winds up oppressed. In the case of the trial, it is



a white jury that chooses to side with Janie's version of events, but Janie herself points to her preference for the white women in the audience over either the black or white men. Thus, Janie's acquittal by an all white jury has aligned her with a white audience and caused her to be forsaken by her black counterparts at least for the time being (53).

Janie wants to present her words in such a way that both audiences receive the message correctly. According to Johnson, it seems there is no way for Janie to tell her story and win both audiences over, which is ultimately what Janie fears most: "It was not death she feared. It was misunderstanding" (188). Yet, during the trial it is apparent that initial understanding could not be reached. Sop de Bottom speaks out against her and tries to have Janie convicted. Later Janie notes, "Sop and his friends had tried to hurt her but she knew it was because they loved Tea Cake and didn't understand" (189). Part of the reason they don't understand is because they will not listen to Janie's perspective of events with an open mind.

Even after the trial, the men do not entertain the value of Janie's testimony as a determinate in the outcome of the verdict. Immediately following the trial, Janie witnesses a group of Tea Cake's friends talking about how unfair the trial had been. First they say that Janie must have been acquitted because of her appearance: "Aw you know dem white mens wuznt gointuh do nothing tuh no woman dat look lak her" (189). This is an echo of Hurston's ideology of beauty in conjunction with power. The men seem to suggest that because Janie is an attractive woman, she has the power to convince the jury that she could not possibly be capable of such a violent act. In conjunction with Janie's appearance, the men believe Janie's position as a black woman granted her her freedom: "Well you know whut deysay 'uh white man and uh nigger

woman is de freest thing on earth.' De do as dey please" (189). The black men further highlight Johnson's ideas about black women being aligned with the white hegemony at the risk of alienating their black counterparts.

When Tea Cake's friends gossip about Janie outside the courthouse, it is parallel to the opening scene of the novel in which the porch sitters of Eatonville are seen gossiping about Janie in a negative way, talking against Janie rather than about her. The only difference is that this time the group consists of men, not women. In both cases, the crowd is a hostile audience, unwilling to listen to Janie's version of events. In this case, Janie goes to great lengths to mend her broken relationship with the muck men. She invites them to Tea Cake's funeral despite the horrible things they said about her both inside and outside of court, and she notes, "They wanted her quick forgetfulness. So they filled up and overflowed the ten sedans that Janie had hired and added others to the line" (189). The reason that Janie is capable of mending the relationships with these men without the aid of a deliverer lies in her prior social standing within the muck community. Unlike in Eatonville, Janie was not separated from the workers, but rather among them, playing poker, telling stories, working the fields, and singing. She has a rapport with them that she has never had with the porch sitters of Eatonville. Prior to the trial she was accepted as a community member, so perhaps it is easier to bring her back into the fold. However, the porch sitters present a different predicament, making Janie's conversation about her life experiences with Pheoby all the more important upon her return to the town.

### **Pheoby's Reaction and Response**

As I mentioned in the prior chapter, a reaction and a response are differentiated by the nonverbal and the verbal participation in the message. In this chapter, Pheoby's reaction and response to Janie not only remind the reader of the role of the listener, but indicate that Janie has had a profound effect upon her listener, making Pheoby feel dissatisfied with her own life, suggesting she will change her own ways as a result of this exchange.

While I argue that the act of listening and the role of the listener are central to the text, some view Pheoby's character as unnecessary. For example, Stepto refers to Pheoby's response as "the clanking of Hurston's narrative," believing that Pheoby's words are nothing more than "rhetorical machinery," which "calls attention to itself when Pheoby offers her sole remark in the final half of the frame" (165). It is true that Pheoby's words are brief and that readers are privy to only small portions of Pheoby's actual thoughts about the story. Private thoughts and spoken words are entirely different entities. It is possible, for instance, for Pheoby to respond positively to Janie's message vocally, but inwardly feel that Janie is lying or full of herself. However, based on the prior information we are given about the two, it seems unlikely that Pheoby would not tell Janie exactly what she thinks since prior excerpts show Pheoby openly expressing her opinions even when they were in disagreement with Janie. While her words are abrupt and seemingly contrived given that Pheoby is not granted any other opportunity to respond to Janie's tale, her response is important. Pheoby's presence is necessary to give Janie's story significance and validate her experiences. Henry Louis Gates explains, "Who speaks, indeed proves to be of crucial import to Janie's quest for

freedom, but who sees and who hears at all points in the text remain fundamental as well" (215). Without Pheoby, Janie's discovery of personal voice could not be fully realized.

As I mentioned in the introduction, a listener's silence does not necessarily equal disengagement, but may be a sign of respect and patience for the speaker. Silence also does not mean that the listener is bored or uninvolved with the conversation. While Janie is talking, she notices Pheoby's nonverbal response. She realizes Pheoby is paying attention to her tale, which encourages her to be more forthright: "Pheoby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story"(10). Hurston describes Pheoby's listening here as "hungry," implying that Pheoby has the desire to be filled with the sustenance that Janie's words can provide.

Pheoby's reaction is reaffirming and encouraging to Janie because Janie realizes she has an active listener. When Janie sees that Pheoby is being nourished by her words, "she went on thinking back to her young years and explaining them to her friend in soft, easy phrases while all around the house, the night time put on flesh and blackness" (10). The story comes alive, taking on "flesh" in the presence of a willing listener. Elbow notes, "Talking to the perfect listener makes us feel smart and come up with ideas we didn't know we had" (51). For Janie, Pheoby is the "perfect listener," the type of listener that Janie needs in the moment. Wolfe explains, "For the teller and the listener, there come a kind of participation" (32). Participation can only occur with an active listener, one who listens with intent, as Pheoby has done.

Janie reaps the benefits of an active listener in several ways. Having Pheoby listen to her story allows Janie the opportunity to relive her experience. McCredie notes,

“Janie’s voice becomes the self-actualizing voice of authority. As she tells her past, she incorporates it into her present; for her present is the narration that her past constitutes” (25). In other words, telling her story grants Janie authority over her own life experiences. Sharing her story also allows Janie to release it to another person, to have someone else live through it with her: Minchin explains, “We tell stories for many reasons, but their primary roles are to help us impose a structure on our own experience and to give us a format for sharing our experience with each other” (3). In addition, Spacks notes that gossip allows participants to not only talk about others but “reflect about themselves” (5). Janie needs to tell her story so she can understand her experiences alongside of her listener.

While the act of telling the story is empowering for Janie, the act of listening to the story is equally empowering for Pheoby who is able to live through and to learn from Janie’s story, taking an active part in the telling. Wolff notes, “Between the teller and the listener there is almost a dialogue, the latter being called in to evaluate the teller’s story. Yet, the teller must present the story in such a way that the listener can ‘live through it’ (32). There is evidence to suggest that Pheoby is able to live through Janie’s experiences. Alicia Kent, author of *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism*, explains, “Janie encourages Pheoby to go out and experience the world for herself. . . . Implicit in this statement is a dual layered call to action: a call to participate and a call to migrate” (64). After Janie completes her story, Pheoby tells her friend that she won’t be content to live her life the same way any more. Now she will have to ask Sam to take her fishing, which suggests the call to go forth and live anew has been accepted. Thus, while Janie’s story is intensely personal, it

is also relatable because Janie senses that many women may feel oppressed like she was by her husband. She seems to want Pheoby, and by association the other women in Eatonville, to take ownership of their own stories and by extension their own lives. Pheoby's reaction to Janie shows she has been able to place herself in Janie's metaphorical shoes and now wants to change her own life for the better. Pheoby's strong reaction to Janie's story shows Janie the impact her words might have on others, providing Janie with a glimpse of how her words might also affect the porch sitters once they hear her story.

### **Pheoby as Deliverer?**

Ultimately, one must ask whether Pheoby will act as a deliverer for Janie. Awkward argues, "In a text which concentrates so intensely on the question of Janie's establishment of a powerful black cultural voice, one feels that such a concentration should be complimented by action" (17). Janie cannot act on her words with the community, and unfortunately, after Janie concludes her story, readers are unsure whether or not Pheoby will become the deliverer or bearer of the message she has received from Janie. While her actions beyond the narrative are a mystery, there is enough evidence to predict what Pheoby will do next, such as Pheoby's established relationship with the porch sitters, her previously stated intent to share the information with them, and her insistence that Janie's words have impacted the way Pheoby views marriage and love. All these factors indicate that Pheoby will share Janie's story as Janie hopes she will.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> While her focus is on political theory rather than the nature of listening within the novel, Melissa V. Harris-Perry, author of *Sister Citizen*, agrees that Pheoby's role as listener is aligned with my definition of a deliverer. She notes that Janie tells the story to

Pheoby is an ideal deliverer because she has friendships with these other women that have been established through social interaction, mainly porch sitting. The reason these women are fond of Pheoby and not Janie has to do with the fact that Janie did not partake in this activity with them. Pheoby's words are trustworthy in their eyes because she has conversed with them on a regular basis. At the opening of the novel, Pheoby is among the porch sitters; in fact, she might be classified as a porch sitter herself, given that she is partaking in the act of sitting on the front porch talking with these women. Though Pheoby condemns the other women for gossiping about Janie, it is not unrealistic to believe that Pheoby has partaken in gossip herself about other topics, which is why the other women like her in the first place. It seems only logical to conclude that Pheoby would converse with them again, and most likely Janie's story would enter into the conversation.

Prior to going to see Janie, Pheoby assures the porch sitters that if Janie has anything to report, they'll know. These words establish her intent as a listener to report back to the women. Pheoby tells the women before her visit with Janie, "If she got anything to tell yuh, you'll hear it" (4), implying that she will only tell them what Janie wants them to know. Janie makes it clear to Pheoby that she wants the story told to them, and so the reader can naturally assume that Pheoby will oblige both parties by acting as a middle man. Both Pheoby and Janie are aware that the rest of the town will want to hear the story secondhand. In fact, the other women implore Pheoby to go find out about Janie's situation. Lulu says, "You bettah go see how she feel. You kin let de rest

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Pheoby "knowing that Pheoby will share the story with the other women in town. . . . Pheoby's task is to hear Janie's story, be made taller by it, and use it to demand changes in the systems of racism and patriarchy that circumscribe American life" (22-3).

of us know" (4), implying that she expects a full report. Janie concedes, "Ah know all dem sitters and talkers gointuh worry they guts into fiddle strings till dey find out whut we been talkin' 'bout. Dat's alright Pheoby tell 'em" (191). Even before she begins talking to Pheoby, she knows the story will be retold, which allows her to say everything she wants to tell the town using Pheoby as a conduit. Janie explains to Pheoby that Pheoby delivering the message to the others is "just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is mah friend's mouf" (6). The difference is that the town is more likely to listen to Pheoby than Janie, which marks her as a significant figure in Janie's life and in the perpetuation of Janie's story.

Both Janie and Pheoby predetermine whether the information brought back to the others will be filtered. Wolf claims Janie's account of her life is "not an example of forceful telling" (32). In other words, she feels Janie is inviting interpretations of her story from the listener. She uses Janie's prior statement that she is telling Pheoby the story for "a good thought" as evidence for this type of sympathetic active listening. Wolff's theory holds true for Pheoby, but fails to take into consideration the secondhand listeners of the townspeople. While Pheoby may be invited to make interpretations and to offer her own thoughts about Janie's story, Janie is very blunt about what she wants the other women to take away from her message. Because Janie knows she is telling Pheoby the story for the benefit of the entire town, she specifically asks Pheoby to speak what Janie believes to be the moral of her story:

You must tell 'em dat love ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone dat's  
de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it  
touch. Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes



its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore.

(191)

While it is safe to say that Pheoby will talk to the porch sitters, readers do not see this take place and do not know when it will take place. After Janie has concluded her story, Pheoby “hugged Janie real hard and cut the darkness with flight,” leaving the reader to guess at the reaction the porch sitters might have to this information (192).

Evidence suggests that Pheoby will share Janie's message with Sam as well. Readers cannot know for certain where Pheoby has gone after leaving Janie's home. However, at this point in the novel, Hurston gives readers insight into Pheoby's mind for the first time, explaining that the silence after Janie's last words made Pheoby “think of Sam waiting for her and getting fretful” (192). Based on this information, it could be surmised that Pheoby will return home immediately after leaving Janie's house. Furthermore, her prior statement, “Ah means to make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this,” (192) suggests that Pheoby might try to persuade Sam to treat her differently by sharing the story of Teacake and Janie's romance.

Still, because readers do not see these interactions take place, they can never know whether the story will be delivered according to Janie's instructions. The very nature of gossip can cause stories to become convoluted, misrepresented, taken out of context, or not told in full. What if Pheoby cannot remember everything Janie has said in the morning? What if Pheoby misunderstood the message entirely? What if Pheoby concludes that Janie is an unreliable narrator? What if Pheoby is an unreliable listener? All of these questions are left unanswered by the novel's end. The next chapter will focus more on answering these questions based on the responses of unreliable listeners

and illustrate what happens, specifically when listeners do not deliver the story as intended by the speaker. However, in this particular novel we do not see this type of exchange between the deliverer and second-hand listeners take place even though readers know that the sharing of the story precipitates a deliverer.

### **Readers as Kissing Friends**

Like Welty, Hurston attributes her capacity for storytelling to her desire to listen to others to and collect stories as a child. The chapter “Figure and Fancy” from her autobiography explains that her favorite pastime was listening to men at the local store gossip about women and have “lying” sessions where they competed with each other to see who could come up with the best story (*Dust Tracks* 45-48). Listening to these men speak helped Hurston develop her own knack for coming up with tales.

From childhood, Hurston viewed gossip as entertainment, a means of bonding, and a way to learn valuable information. Hurston was aware that gossip travels from one listener to the next, but unlike some, she did not view the transference of gossip as negative, which is apparent by her use of the term “kissing friends” both in the novel and in her autobiography. She directly addresses her readers in the autobiography saying, “Let us all be kissing friends” (*Dust Tracks* 232). The metaphor is interesting because to kiss implies a transference from one mouth to the next, which is certainly in line with the idea of passing the story on to others by word of mouth. Using the rhetoric of gossip binds Janie and Pheoby together in the novel, allowing them to become kissing friends, and it also invites readers to be kissing friends with Hurston, passing her work on to others and becoming her deliverer.

Just as Janie is aware of the implications of her choice to select Pheoby as a listener, Hurston crafts the novel with her listeners in mind. She relies on listeners to spread her ideas to others and realizes that much like Janie in the courtroom scene, she is addressing both a white and black audience. While Janie and Pheoby are peers within the text, Hurston would not have been considered a peer with some of her readers. Tannen explains how gossip can forge friendships: “Not only is telling secrets evidence of friendship; it creates a friendship, when the listener responds in the expected way” (98). Hurston uses the rhetoric of gossip shared between Janie and Pheoby to allow other women reading the novel to take Pheoby’s metaphorical place as listener regardless of race or class, welcoming the reader to participate in the gossip and forging an intimacy between herself and them.<sup>26</sup>

Using gossip as a framework allows Hurston to make demands upon the reader. Spacks explains that viewing literature as gossip works because “literature originates in the life outside the text and has for the reader consequences extending outward” (23). The reader is charged with spreading the story to other potential readers. Hurston uses this to her advantage by framing her novel as a conversation between two women or what Gates refers to as a “speakerly text” (195). Doing so helps generate conversation between herself and her female readers, who during the time period the book was released were predominantly white. Like Janie, Hurston realizes that she may not have enough ethos to get her words to the masses on her own due to her marginalized position as a woman writer of color. Thus, she reaches out to her white female counterparts to be her deliverers in a time when racial tensions were high. Evidence

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<sup>26</sup> Gates agrees that the book serves as a powerful piece of rhetoric with “implicitly political import” for the discussion of race (185).

suggests that this novel is not the only instance where Hurston uses this strategy. Several critics including Kaplan, Angelou, and Wright accuse Hurston of pandering to a white audience in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks*.

Hurston's trial scene serves as an interesting parallel to critics of her work. At the trial, Janie notes that the black crowd demands she be punished while the white women are understanding of her situation. As I alluded to earlier, this may be because the white and black men present are not adept listeners. Interestingly, after reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright, Hurston's black male contemporary claims, "*Their Eyes* as a novel did for literature what the minstrel shows did for theater, that is, make white folks laugh. . . . the novel carries no message, no theme, no thought" but rather exploits "quaint aspects of negro life that satisfied tastes of a white audience" (qtd. in Washington x). His stance indicates he has not been moved by the gossip in Hurston's novel.

Tannen explains that gossip is often viewed negatively by men. She records the response of one male interviewee, who claims gossip is "a discussion of the weaknesses, character flaws, and failures of third persons, so that the participants in the conversation can feel superior to them. This seems unworthy, hence gossip is bad" (119). Men have been granted the power to name the rhetoric and label it as distasteful despite the fact that most claim they don't bother to listen to these conversations much less participate in them. Since Hurston's narrative can be classified as gossip, it makes sense for Wright to view the work in such a negative way. To him, talking about the African American race in this manner is negative whereas to Hurston it is positive.

Wright views it as talking against, rather than talking about, which, as established, is the demarcation between what Tannen labels negative versus positive gossip.

The rhetoric of gossip may not bridge the divide between Hurston and a male audience, but it is a strategic way for her to reach other women. Hurston's narrative highlights listening as a powerful rhetoric, and it also illustrates Hurston's understanding that once the story is told, it belongs to the listeners. The novel stresses the idea that women are superior listeners. Thus, Hurston reaches out across racial divides to gain the ear and respect of her female audience. I am not the first to recognize that Hurston's novel highlights the powerful connection among women beyond the page. Stepto asserts, "Hurston is after a treatment of Janie and Pheoby that releases them from their immediate posture of storyteller and listener, and that propels them to one in which their sisterhood suggests a special kinship among womankind at large" (166). I add that this kinship is founded on the understanding that only active and feminist listening can achieve.

Hurston intimates that feminist listening is possible between black and white women within the novel. While the white women in the court scene may have initially come to gawk at the spectacle of a black woman on trial, Janie believes that if they listen to her words, they will understand her experience. This connection can also be made between Hurston and her readership. Both white and black women readers are asked to place themselves in Pheoby's position listening to Janie and then becoming deliverers in their own right.

Hurston was right to place her trust in female listeners as evidenced by Walker's reclamation of the novel after years of neglect. Currently, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were*

*Watching God* is one of the most canonical novels in my study. However, as John Lowe explains, Hurston's recent status has not always been the norm: "Perhaps no other literary figure in American literary history save Herman Melville or Emily Dickinson has had such a spectacular return to prominence after decades of neglect than Zora Neale Hurston" (*History* 379). It was not until Alice Walker heralded the work that it received the attention it deserved.

Walker explains that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* changed her life; the power of Janie's voice enabled Walker to find her own voice and to become a writer herself. At first glance it appears that Walker identified with Janie's character, but her statement also implies that Janie's words have empowered her, which would mean that Walker took on the role of listener to Janie's tale, much like the fictional character, Pheoby Watson. Pattison alludes to the role literary critics, like Walker, can inhabit as deliverers in their own right: "Literary criticism, then, can fulfill the promise of Janie's request to Pheoby; by using the discourse of race and gender both in the realm of literary criticism and in the classroom, we participate in a tradition that Hurston insists is necessary for cultural growth" (Pattison 26). In spreading Hurston's or Janie's message to others, Walker has actually aligned herself with the role of listener and, more importantly, the role of the deliverer.<sup>27</sup> Walker mimics the role of deliverer by praising the novel and encouraging further study of the work, ensuring Janie's story and Hurston's novel will be spread to new generations of readers.

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<sup>27</sup> Harris-Perry also places readers in the same position as Pheoby "relative to Janie," explaining, "We have heard the story and now it is our job to make politics out of it" (23).

## Moving Forward

Ultimately, the rhetoric in the novel as well as the rhetoric between Hurston and her readers demonstrates that listeners have an innate power in discourse, which places her alongside her Southern female contemporaries. As I have shown, both Welty and Hurston use gossip as a catalyst to create listening situations in which the listener is a peer and which grants authority to the listener to either keep the information secret or to spread it to others. Both scenarios emphasize the listening character's active participation in the narrative as both make demands upon the listener. Both female protagonists place their trust in female listeners after having been let down by male listeners in the past.

The next chapter explores O'Connor's novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away* in which the speaker and the listeners are all male. Interestingly, the male listeners in these texts are still not feminist listeners despite the gender of the speaker. In other words, these texts suggest that while the men in Welty and Hurston's novels do not listen to women, the men in O'Connor's texts don't listen well to other men as well. Taken together these works imply that men are not skilled listeners. However, I argue that O'Connor's work takes it a step further to suggest that listening skills directly impact speaking skills, which implies that because men are not good listeners, they may not be the best speakers either.

## Part II: Chapter III

### A Little Less Talk: Hostile Listening in Flannery O'Connor's

#### *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*

*"I never wasted my life talking. I always done something"—Frankie Tarwater*

In order to gain a broader perspective about how listeners can function within literature, one must examine a gamut of ways listeners react and respond to speaking characters. The prior two chapters have examined female characters speaking to a selected female listener engaging in the process of feminist listening. This chapter focuses on male characters speaking to male listeners and highlights how a listener can prove hostile to the speaker through the absence of the feminist listening attributes: empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity.

The prior chapters examined how female listeners responded within the framework of gossip, a rhetoric traditionally marked feminine. In both the previous chapters, the female listeners are shown to be a captive audience or the ideal listener for the speaker, reacting or responding to the message in the manner the speaker expects. In this chapter, the listeners are male participating in the rhetoric of religious discourse, which is traditionally marked masculine. Whereas the rhetoric of gossip forges a bond between speaker and listener in which the participants find themselves on equal footing, under the framework of religious discourse, listeners find themselves in an unequal power dynamic, which contributes to their rebellious listening habits. Unsurprisingly, the listeners in this chapter do not react or respond ideally, which I



argue is due to the fact that they are male and not predisposed or trained to value the art of listening like their female counterparts.

The past chapters have discussed some of the ways in which men were failed listeners for the female speaker. For example, both Joe and Daniel were potential listeners for Janie and Edna, but both failed to meet the mark. While the men in O'Connor's work are also failed listeners for female speakers, this chapter highlights how they are failed listeners for other men, ultimately demonstrating that ineffective listening hurts both men and women as they seek to be heard and understood by others. In addition, this chapter expands the understanding of failed listeners to include not only those who refuse to listen to others by physically removing themselves from the conversation, but those who are hostile listeners, meaning present for the conversation but combative with the speaker. As mentioned in prior chapters, hearing and listening are not synonymous; as will be shown, Frankie and Haze hear the message, but do not process the information and at times, become hostile to the speaker or subject matter. Aristotle defines hostile listeners as those who are already predisposed to disregard the speaker's message (Kennedy 112). In this chapter, I argue that these Southern men are predisposed to disregard the speaker's message because they are socially trained to acquire and foster good speaking skills rather than listening habits, resulting in a contentious environment during conversation. I build upon the definition of hostile listening to include the absence of one or more of the feminist listening skills outlined in the previous chapters: empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity.

In contrast to the prior chapters, which examined novels in which the speaker and listener were considered peers, this chapter examines interactions wherein the speaker and listener are not peers due to age difference. Both *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away* are coming of age stories for the two young male protagonists, Hazel (Haze) Motes and Francis (Frankie) Tarwater. Both young men are positioned among competing male voices all vying for their souls. Frankie and Haze do not have the skills needed to listen effectively to all these male influences and make a rationale choice about their futures due to the fact that white men in Southern society are typically not socially conditioned to be listeners. As a result, when a listening situation presents itself to Haze or Frankie, they are inclined to practice avoidance, apathy, or hostility. Both of these novels demonstrate the overall tragedy of failed listening as both culminate in violence: Haze dies and Frankie becomes a murderer and the victim of sexual assault.

Ultimately, I argue O'Connor uses her novels to advance a feminist critique of masculine listening by bringing male listeners to the forefront of the novel and illustrating that male characters do not empower others through the act of listening. O'Connor's choice to use listeners as protagonists, rather than minor characters as has been the case within the previous works examined in this dissertation, emphasizes her critique of masculinity as it intersects with the rhetoric of listening. Whereas Pheoby and Edna's Earle's guest gained power through their strategic listening, Frankie and Haze do not end up enabled but rather confused, molested, homeless, or dead by the end of the novels. Likewise Haze and Frankie do not vitalize the speakers they converse with in the same way that Pheoby and the guest do for Janie and Edna Earle.

O'Connor scholars have focused a majority of their criticism on the subject of the grotesque and religion while ignoring the crucial role that listening is playing in O'Connor's works. As Paul Grant explains in his essay "O'Connor's Comic Vision: Faith and Humor in *Wise Blood*," "O'Connor's stylized use of the grotesque has received more attention than any other aspect of her fiction except her Christianity" (95). While the grotesque and faith are certainly important themes, they have overshadowed the role of listening for too long. According to George A. Kilcourse, author of *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination*, the word Jesus or Christ is mentioned 147 times in *Wise Blood* and also appears frequently within *The Violent Bear it Away* (50-51). The abundance of the term reiterates the importance of religion in O'Connor's works. Yet, the emphasis on preaching, blaspheming, or otherwise using the term "Jesus" also places an emphasis on speaking and listening, which, I argue are similarly central to O'Connor's fiction. The term "listen" appears 42 times in *Wise Blood* and 53 times in *The Violent Bear it Away*, and the act of listening in response to such a command permeates the texts.

My interpretation of O'Connor's male listening characters in these two novels opens up new possibilities for reading O'Connor through a feminist lens, contradicting prior notions of O'Connor's fiction as adhering to the patriarchy of the Catholic Church. For example, in *The Obedient Imagination*, Sarah Gordon claims O'Connor's work "speaks monologically and unflinchingly from the patriarchal Church and patriarchal literary establishment" (89).<sup>28</sup> In the latter portion of the chapter, I draw upon

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<sup>28</sup> Also, see Katherine Prown's *Revising Flannery O'Connor* whose introduction asks the question: "Can a Misogynist be a Feminist?" Prown's major argument is that O'Connor's aesthetic is "hardly feminist" but nevertheless "peculiarly female" (23). She traces the ways O'Connor has been cast as a misogynist and expounds upon the reasons her novels are often considered "masculinist."

O'Connor's primary materials such as her prayer journal, her essays, and her autobiography to offer a feminist revision of her work, suggesting that O'Connor's novels critique hegemonic discourse norms, and my analysis thus places O'Connor in conversation with her female contemporaries Welty and Hurston.

### **Conforming to Hegemonic Discourse: Men as Passive or Hostile Listeners**

O'Connor's novels demonstrate that men are ineffectual listeners because in both texts the listener refutes rather than affirms or understands the position of the speaker. As explained in the introduction, feminist listening involves the empowerment of both the speaker and the listener through the process of empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. For example, as I argued in the last chapter, Pheoby proves to be a patient, open, and understanding listener for Janie, granting her the space to speak that Janie's husbands deny her. Likewise, Pheoby is empowered by Janie's story, which encourages her to think critically about her own life choices and marriage. However, when the men interact with one another in O'Connor's novels, they do not reap the same benefits. In *Wise Blood*, Haze's inability or refusal to listen to those around him results in his own disempowerment. In contrast, while Frankie is seen listening to several other male characters in *The Violent Bear it Away*, he manages to disempower all the speakers around him by the novel's end, proving that as the listener he has the ultimate control over the conversation. Taken together, both novels illustrate that Tannen's model of hegemonic discourse outlined in the introduction, which claims that men and women view communication in gendered opposing ways, is problematic for men.

Communication researchers have identified some common traits of male speech, which explain why O'Connor's male characters struggle to listen, including viewing talk as a means of independence, commanding the conversation, and giving orders rather than seeking advice. These things combined leave men resisting the role of the listener in favor of the role of speaker, which becomes a problem when men are in conversation with one another as seen throughout these novels. According to Tannen, "For most men, talk is a primary means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchal social order" (77). In other words, listening to someone else implies a dependence upon that person for information, advice, or attention, which as seen throughout these novels, men may be reluctant to admit they need. For instance, Frankie mimics this behavior by refusing to listen to new ideas regarding education, clothing, and food, often responding with a forceful "no," silence, or an insult to these suggestions in order to establish his independence from his uncles.

Hegemonic discourse, a term used to define hetero-normative communication behaviors or the ways in which men and women are socially trained to speak and listen to one another, indicates that men speak more than they listen because men are conditioned to command attention rather than cooperate (*Understand* 136). Both Haze and Frankie exhibit this behavior during interactions with others throughout the texts. As will be shown, Haze competes with Hoover Shoats for the crowd's attention. Frankie demands attention from both his uncles but does not want to follow their instructions. In both instances these young men do not cooperate with other speakers and actively refuse the role of listener.

Lastly, Tannen notes, men tend to view talking as a means to relay information or to give orders, often turning conversations into lectures (*Understand* 41,125). This type of communication places an additional burden upon the listener, one that few men are willing to uphold as the listening party. In other words, men place expectations on the listener but avoid the listening position themselves so they do not have to follow through with the expectations and parameters established within hegemonic discourse. For example, Mason is comfortable ordering Frankie to bury him, baptize his cousin, and become a prophet. However, Mason is not comfortable listening to Frankie in return. Therefore, unlike Pheoby and Janie from the prior chapter, Mason and Frankie do not practice reciprocity, an integral part of the listening process established in the introduction. As a result, both are left without the intimacy or reassurance that they crave from the other.

Haze and Frankie's age and Southern upbringings also contribute to their ineffectual listening skills. Both Haze and Frankie are young white Southern adults who are struggling to find and define their masculinity. Kimmel explains adolescence is the "most gendered stage of a person's development. . . . the stage in which the struggle to prove manhood becomes even more intense" (41-42). For Southern white boys, being considered a man depended on several things including autonomy and oratorical prowess.<sup>29</sup> These traits combined make it especially difficult for young men to be active listeners since they view asserting their independence and displaying their speaking abilities to be markers of manhood within communication. In the "Desperate Imagination: Writers and Melancholy in the Modern American South," Wyatt Brown

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<sup>29</sup> See Lorri Glover's *Southern Sons* and Bertram Wyatt Brown's *Southern Honor* for more information about displays of oratorical prowess among Southern men.

notes, that those “unable to meet the criterion” of Southern masculinity “found themselves the object of suspicion, ridicule, or even violence” (56). As will be shown through the examination of Haze in O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, violence is often escalated a result of the competition to speak or to prove one’s manhood.

Instilling independence into young men while simultaneously trying to mold them into model citizens of the South becomes a dual-edged sword:

It was essential in the minds of Southern parents, that their boys understand both the importance and the proper style of manly independence. Learning to meet that ideal, of acting autonomously but according to societal expectations, of living independently while being dutiful was a struggle facing parents and young men. (Glover 27)

Readers see this brand of independence clearly with Frankie in *The Violent Bear it Away* as both Mason and Rayber feel compelled to control Frankie even while instilling him with a sense of autonomy. For example, Frankie is encouraged to do chores on his own at Mason’s house, but given specific instructions about how they are to be fulfilled. While at Rayber’s, he is instructed to study on his own accord, but provided with specific books to read. Frankie is taught independence is good, but simultaneously that he should obey his relations, which makes him more prone to rebel against them. Glover notes that a boy’s age often determines the likelihood of whether he will listen to his kinfolk, explaining that older boys are less inclined to do so (29). Haze, who is slightly older than Frankie, is shown throughout *Wise Blood* directly contradicting his upbringing by being promiscuous and refuting the teachings of the Bible.

Because their male relatives pride themselves as being accomplished speakers, establishing their credibility, autonomy, and independence is intensified for Haze and Frankie. As Glover explains, in the South white young men grew up with the expectation that they would uphold the family honor by matching their predecessors in fame and ability. Several scholars note that value of family bonds, genealogy, and heritage are ingrained in Southerners from an early age. Lineage is a major facet of Southern white culture; Southerners not only knew their ancestors, but often studied them relentlessly.<sup>30</sup> Readers discern that both Haze and Frankie know a great deal about their own pasts, including their relatives' occupations and "successes." For example, Haze knows that his grandfather is a well-known preacher within his community. Likewise Frankie knows that Mason considers himself a prophet and that Rayber considers himself an accomplished scholar and schoolteacher. All of these occupations involve the ability to speak well. So, Haze and Frankie realize that they, too, are expected to become orators. Haze admits that he "knew by the time he was twelve he was going to be a preacher" (*Wise Blood* 10). Likewise Frankie knows he is being trained to be a prophet and is expecting to be called into the profession at any moment like his great uncle before him: "Tarwater knew that when he was called he would say, 'Here I am Lord, ready!'" (*Violent* 8). While both are aware of the expectations placed upon them to be powerful speakers, in their quest to assert themselves and fulfill this legacy, they often fail to listen even to those who are trying to mold them into the men they are to become.

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<sup>30</sup> See *Southern Honor*, *Southern Sons*, *The Mind of the South*, etc.



Examining the conversations that occur under the framework of hegemonic masculine discourse highlights the ways that this ultimately prevents men from being effective listeners for one another. I break these interactions down by book and by character for the benefit of the reader. While both Haze and Frankie converse with multiple people throughout the texts, I explore the conversations in which both Haze and Frankie are in dialogue with representatives from both the Christian faith and those from the secular world. Both stories imply that as the listening party, both young men must ultimately decide whose advice or opinion they will elect to take. Their inability to listen results in violence as both Haze and Frankie ultimately choose to assert their independence rather than to listen to and take the advice of any of these characters.

### **Haze as a disempowered listener with Grandfather and Shoats**

Prior scholarship on *Wise Blood* has examined Haze as a grotesque and alienated figure. Some have claimed he is comedic or satirical in nature. Others focus on his professed atheism.<sup>31</sup> Yet, none have examined Haze as a listener. While Haze is positioned as a listener throughout the novel, he does not listen with the intent or desire to understand the speakers, but rather to refute them. Thus, he cannot be defined as an active listener. Because he does not engage in listening as a process, which involves empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity, he cannot be labeled a feminist listener either. As a result, Haze is not enabled through the act of listening, but rather

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<sup>31</sup> See Marshall Bruce Gentry's *The Religion of the Grotesque* for an example of Haze as a grotesque figure. See Andrew B. Leiter's "Comedy and the Anti-existential in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" and Paul Benedict Grant's "O'Connor's Comic Vision: Faith and Humor in *Wise Blood*" for an example of Haze as a satirical or comedic character, and see Susan Amper's "I believe, I believe": The Miracle of Christ in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*" or Kilcourse's *Flannery O'Connor and the Religious Imagination* for interpretations of Haze as an atheist.

left in a constant state of confusion, turmoil, and anger. Ultimately, Haze's inability to listen culminates in violence and ends with his demise.

Haze Motes is a reluctant prophet, on a personal quest to preach against God. He enters Taulkinham, believing he will liberate the townspeople by proclaiming that there is no sin and no redemption, thereby freeing them from the unexplained yet lingering guilt that he has been plagued with from childhood. Yet, his interactions with the townspeople prove that this community consists of sinners who have no need for Haze's message and furthermore do not consider him a credible source. While Haze is often viewed as a preacher, those seeking to counsel or to lecture him in regards to his religious beliefs frequently place him in the position of the listener throughout the text. O'Connor's portrayal of the town forces readers to question, in a world with hostile listeners, how much is speech worth? In this section, I analyze some instances in which Haze fails to listen to those around him in order to highlight Haze's lack of engagement with the listening process outlined in the introduction.

Haze is in conversation with several characters throughout the novel. While there are female characters that are influential to Haze and that speak to him within the text, including Mrs. Watts, Sabbath Hawkes, and Mrs. Flood,<sup>32</sup> I am narrowing my focus in this chapter to conversations occurring between men because as previously noted, this chapter serves as a contrast to the prior two chapters which focused primarily on the conversation between two women and highlights that hegemonic discourse, which privileges speaking over listening, ultimately has negative consequences for men. I

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<sup>32</sup> For a feminist perspective on these characters please see Marshall Gentry's "Wise Women, Wise Blood" or Patricia Smith Yeager's "The Woman Without any Bones: Anti-Angel Aggression in *Wise Blood*."

further focus my attention on the conversations Haze has with his grandfather and Hoover Shoats because they represent a range of men competing to influence Haze about religion.

*Interactions with Grandfather: Selected Hearing, Competition, and Autonomy*

During his interactions with his grandfather, Haze shows a lack of dialogic retention, highlighting his disengagement with listening as a process. Instead he conforms to hegemonic discourse or masculine listening habits by competing with others to speak or commanding attention from an audience. Haze's poor listening skills and speaking habits are the result of socially ingrained ideology that promotes male independence. Thus, Haze tries to assert his independence by becoming a speaker rather than focusing on his listening skills.

Though Haze has brief contact with his grandfather throughout the text, Haze's grandfather has made a huge impact upon Haze and his religious beliefs. The narrator explains that during Haze's formative years, his grandfather made frequent trips to Eastrod to preach, and Haze was often found among the crowd gathered to hear the gospel. While Haze is present and hears the message, readers know that Haze does not listen to the message in full but rather fixates on certain aspects of the sermon, particularly the portions that talk about redemption, which demonstrates Haze's lack of dialogic retention. For example, Haze recalls his grandfather describing him as "that mean sinful unthinking boy" and also claiming that despite these attributes, Haze had been "redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever" (10). Haze retains this information about Jesus, but despite the fact his grandfather preached numerous sermons, is unwilling or incapable of recalling any other details. Some of Haze's

misunderstandings about Jesus and salvation could have been rectified if Haze had been an active listener during his grandfather's sermons, but readers never see Haze attempt to synthesize or understand his grandfather by asking questions, demonstrating a lack of empathy or openness.

Because Haze does not retain all the information from the sermon, Haze's view of Jesus and redemption are negative and limited in scope. Haze bases his opinion of Christ as someone "lurking in the shadows," waiting to catch one in sin, on a small portion of his grandfather's sermon, cementing his opinion of salvation throughout the rest of the text, which becomes a source of his own later disempowerment when he is unable to overcome his fears of Jesus (10). Haze's opinions are ingrained in his mind rendering him incapable of being open to new ideas about redemption, which results in a lack of empathy for those with differing viewpoints, such as Shoats.

Rather than utilize feminist listening, Haze conforms to Tannen's descriptions of the masculine mode of discourse, viewing speaking as a means of competition and a way to demand attention. Haze notes the attention his grandfather obtains from the public, attributing it to his grandfather's showmanship. Throughout his grandfather's sermons, Haze seems more focused on the performance than on the message. He recalls, "People gathered around his car door because he seemed to dare them to. He would climb up on the nose of it and preach from there and sometimes he would climb up onto the top of it and shout down at them" (10). Haze appears both shocked and awed by this presentation, which could explain why he tries to emulate the experience in Taulkimham. He believes this style of preaching will naturally attract a crowd and command attention.

Haze's decision to imitate his grandfather by becoming a preacher but presenting the opposite message could be viewed as Haze's way of competing with or challenging his grandfather as a speaker. Rather than preach that Jesus came to save all sinners like his grandfather, Haze uses the same showmanship, but tells his audience that there is no such thing as Jesus or redemption. Instead of advocating a Christ-centered church, Haze preachers the Church Without Christ. Haze's performances mirror his grandfather's, but he fails to gain as many listeners as his grandfather retained, which may cause Haze to feel like a failed speaker. However, as I will demonstrate in the next section, rather than accepting the advice of his audience, Haze still refuses to listen to any suggestions for improvement.

Haze's decision to contradict his grandfather's teachings is also a means of establishing his independence from his family, which Tannen notes among men is often done through "exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as story-telling, joking, or imparting information" (77). Haze tries to assert his independence and manhood throughout the text in various ways, including leaving Eastrod, having intercourse, buying a car, and renting an apartment. These acts free him, geographically, bodily and monetarily from his family, but preaching the opposite doctrine frees him spiritually as well, allowing Haze to redefine himself apart from his roots.

#### *Interactions with Hoover Shoats: A Competition for the Pulpit*

Haze also proves to be an ineffectual listener during his interactions with Hoover Shoats because he does not listen with an open mind and turns the conversation into a form of competition in an attempt to reclaim his autonomy. While

Haze exhibits these poor listening skills with his grandfather, doing so with Shoats further demonstrates Haze's refusal to listen to other men because Shoats and Haze's grandfather have such differing perspectives regarding religion. While both men "preach" to the crowd, one is doing so to encourage a conversion experience, while the other is doing so to earn a quick dollar. As will be shown in this section, the fact that these men represent two perspectives on religion highlights Haze's lack of listening skills no matter who is talking to him.

Haze demonstrates his closed mindedness by refusing to take Shoats's advice about cultivating his ethos with the crowd. For example, Shoats encourages Haze to abandon the harsh rhetoric he has been using to garner the crowd's attention: "If you want to get anywheres in religion, you got to keep it sweet" (80). Haze sees first hand the positive effects of this method when Shoats uses it to draw a crowd to him, yet Haze is still uninterested in acquiring Shoats' help, and twice tries to force him to leave. In "The Audience: Subjectivity, Community and the Ethics of Listening," Rayner claims open mindedness is needed for genuine understanding to take place. As previously noted, Rayner explains that open listening "allows for the possibility of learning something genuinely new, not just what one already knows" (20). Haze refuses to believe that Shoats' words could help him in any way, which prevents him from learning anything new about how to better interact with his own audience.

Rather than attempt to cooperate or share the space with Shoats, Haze continuously interrupts Shoats while he attempts to speak to the Taulkinham public, resulting in a competition for the "pulpit." For example, while Shoats is speaking, Haze interjects to tell the crowd, "I never saw him before tonight. I wasn't preaching this

church two months ago and the name of it ain't the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ!" (78). As discussed in the introduction, while Tannen claims that some interruptions can demonstrate interest in the speaker, this type of interruption is not moving the conversation forward, or building upon an idea, but rather an attempt to discredit Shoats with the audience (*Understand* 81). Thus, Haze's combative behavior is an example of hostile listening not feminist listening.

As with prior interactions with men, Haze feels a need to establish his autonomy, and he does so with Shoats by competing to speak and refusing to accept advice. In *Southern Sons*, Glover suggests the need for white Southern men to both attain autonomy and master oratory could become counter-productive as men often asserted autonomy by distancing themselves from relatives and authority figures who might offer advice for improving speech (29). Challenging other male authority figures is one way of accomplishing this feat. Haze's interruptions are attempts to separate himself from Shoats, who has tried to insert himself into a position of authority over Haze. Calling Shoats a liar in front of the crowd distances Haze from Shoats and also establishes Haze's autonomy as a speaker. In doing so, he denies that he and Shoats are partners or that both men represent the same church and ideology.

Haze not only interrupts Shoats, but ignores his advice despite Shoats's years of experience in winning over a crowd. Glover's work implies that Southern men were expected to speak well but simultaneously encouraged to avoid listening or heeding advice of others in deference to forging their own paths. Haze exhibits this behavior when he chooses to ignore Shoats even after Shoats proves himself to be a reliable source. For example, Shoats pleads, "You ought to listen to me because I'm not an

amateur. I'm an artist-type. . . . You got good idears but what you need is an artist-type to work with you" (81). Even this does not persuade Haze to hear and apply Shoats's ideas to his own speeches. As mentioned in the introduction, men tend to view conversations as a means of maintaining status and establishing a hierarchy. Haze does not listen to Shoats because he does not want to be forced into a subordinate position or admit that he needs help with public speaking. His refusal to listen is ultimately an aversion toward dependency on another person.

Haze's refusal to actively listen to either of these speakers is merely the beginning of what becomes his ultimate attempt to shut out all voices, retreating into a world of darkness and silence of his own making: by the novel's end he blinds himself and stops preaching. While some would claim that Haze returns to Christ by the end of the novel, there is no definitive proof to suggest he has developed listening skills enabling him to hear God or to understand Christianity.<sup>33</sup> For example, some conclude that Haze's removal from oratorical competition is a sign of growth and a means to better contemplation or listening to God's will.<sup>34</sup> However, I argue that Haze's retreat is more about ignoring all voices rather than an attempt to listen to them more clearly.<sup>35</sup> Haze is neither listening to secular nor religious advice by the novel's end, but rather living life relatively secluded from others, especially from other men. Mrs. Flood, Haze's

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<sup>33</sup> Several scholars have argued the significance and the religious implications of Haze's blinding: Cumberland, Grant, Amper, and Kilcourse. These interpretations should not go unnoticed; however, while these religious interpretations are integral to the text, I argue that Haze's maiming could also be viewed from a rhetorical perspective by examining what his silence is communicating to the reader as well as other characters within the text.

<sup>34</sup> This is not to claim that a secluded lifestyle cannot lead to greater spiritual understanding or oneness with God, but to argue whether or not that was Haze's intent.

<sup>35</sup> Cumberland also views Haze's silence as a negative rather than a positive change attributing it to a sign of his "stoicism" (18).



landlord, notes that he rarely leaves the house, and when she suggests that he return to preaching, Haze appears apathetic.

Furthermore, when Mrs. Flood, Haze's last remaining contact with the outside world, tries to talk to him, he berates her and ultimately grows tired of her insistence that they marry, causing him to venture blindly off into a storm and to his death. Though Haze is disabled and the union might benefit his health and happiness, he refuses to listen to Mrs. Flood and insists on maintaining his independence. This is not to suggest that Mrs. Flood is a "good" person. She initially wants to marry Haze for his money, but as time passes, she does seem to develop genuine feelings for him: "Her first plan had been to marry him and then have him committed to the state institution for the insane, but gradually her plan had become to marry him and keep him" (117). Mrs. Flood tends to his every need including laundry and meals. As she explains to Haze, "every blind and sick man is not so fortunate as to have somebody that cares about him" (117). Her suggestion that they get married as she explains it to him is for their mutual benefit: "If we don't help each other, there's nobody to help us" (118). However, Haze does not even entertain the thought of marriage, but instead walks off the porch toward his own death. The ending of the novel suggests Haze would rather die than listen to anyone, especially a woman.

### **Frankie as a Disempowering Listener with "The Voice," Mason, and Rayber**

Scholars have examined Frankie, the novel's protagonist, from several angles including as an orphan, prophet, and victim.<sup>36</sup> However, no one has examined Frankie's

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<sup>36</sup> For an example of interpretation of Frankie as a orphan, see Gary M. Ciuba's "Not His Son': Violent Kinship and the Spirit of Adoption in *The Violent Bear it Away*." For an interpretation of Frankie as a prophet, see Richard Giannone's "Dark Night, Dark Faith:

role as a listener. Frankie is positioned as a listener throughout the text in the midst of three warring speakers, who view Frankie's salvation as their personal responsibility. Like Haze, men in both the religious and secular realm influence and try to shape Frankie's opinions. His great uncle Mason claims to be a prophet of the Lord, and his other uncle Rayber considers himself a man of science and textbooks. Both Mason and Rayber see their teachings as binaries and believe that Frankie must ultimately choose one or the other to emulate.<sup>37</sup> Rayber explains, "The boy would go either his way or old Tarwater's and he was determined to save him for the better course" (115). Gary Ciuba, author of "Not His Son" explains that both men "turn the boy into the focal point of their antagonism" (69). In other words, the boy has only two paths, and must eventually choose one over another, select one speaker over another. However, as I will explore, readers are aware of a third speaker known as "the Voice," who is also fighting for Frankie's ear and attention. All these men expect Frankie to respond favorably throughout their discussions. When Frankie does not respond in the manner they expect, they become disempowered and ultimately, as in Haze's case, Frankie's ineffectual listening leads to violence.

Frankie's behavior as a listener, like Haze's, is probably due to his age as well as his gender. Unlike Pheoby and the unnamed guest at Edna Earle's inn, Frankie is not an adult, so his reactions as a listener may signal a lack of maturity. At fourteen, Frankie

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Hazel Motes, the Misfit, and Francis Marion Tarwater" For an example of an interpretation of Frankie as a victim, see Ruthann Knechel Johanssen's "Transfiguring Affliction: Simone Weil and Flannery O'Connor."

<sup>37</sup> Several critics explore Mason and Rayber as binary influences in Frankie's life including Desmond, Ciuba, Brinkmeyer, Asals, and Kilcourse. While these critics discuss these male characters as representations of the secular and Christian world, none discuss the power of that speech as it affects the listener or as the listener affects the speakers.

wants to become a respectable man, but during his interactions with his uncles and the Voice, he is not treated as an equal partner within communication. These speakers place a high importance on Frankie's instruction because, as Glover explains, "Southern men universally agreed that youth was the only time to develop the traits that would allow for an honorable reputation—and avoid the lifelong consequences of ignominy" (83). Thus, the speakers feel intense pressure to instill certain behaviors in Frankie, which places the speakers in positions of power. Repeatedly he is told that his opinions are of little consequence and that his age and upbringing leave him in a position of subordination. For example, Mason tells Frankie that he refuses to consider Frankie's opinion because he "takes directions from the Lord God. . . . I don't take them from you" (24), meaning Frankie is not qualified to give Mason advice. Perhaps, in Mason's view, no human is qualified to give him advice in comparison to God; however, Mason appears to imply that this is especially the case with Frankie due to his age and inexperience as he does expect that Frankie take advice from him based on Mason's position as an elder and guardian. The Voice questions Frankie's maturity and tells him he has been a fool to believe in Mason all these years, daring Frankie to disobey his uncle's teachings and prove he has some sense. Rayber belittles Frankie, claiming, "You're going to grow up to be a freak if you don't let yourself be helped" (173). Thus, as I will explore, Frankie's responses to these speakers can be interpreted as acts of rebellion.

Throughout his conversations with these male influences, Frankie may appear to exhibit some signs of listening but does not engage with listening as a process as defined in the introduction. Frankie is capable of retention because he recalls the

information he receives from the speakers, even going so far as to memorize certain aspects of their monologues. For example, Frankie knows Mason's testimony to the point of being able to tell when he has skipped over certain aspects of the story. Frankie notes, "The old man's thought did not always move at the same rate of speed through every point in his story. Sometimes, as if he did not want to think of it, he would speed over the part where he shot the nephew and race on" to other parts of the story (8). Frankie can also quote his uncle Rayber's words, remembering that Rayber tells him "My guts are in my head" (221). Yet, while Frankie is capable of retention, he is not performing dialogic retention, which requires not only rote memory, but understanding of the material and openness to new or conflicting ideas. Frankie is not open to the ideas and opinions of his uncles or even the Voice by the novel's end, which also shows a lack of empathy and awareness of the speaker. Thus, while he appears to listen, he is not engaging in the feminist listening process. He is determined to live life according to his own standards and, by the end of the novel, sets out on his own path. The conversations and interaction he has with each of these characters illustrates Frankie's failings as a listener.

*Interactions with The Voice: Nonverbal Defiance*

Throughout the novel, Frankie is in conversation with an audible presence, known as "the Voice," that attempts to persuade Frankie to turn his back on his family and commit heinous crimes. The Voice is not explicitly gendered, but O'Connor critics have viewed this presence as male.<sup>38</sup> Given that this presence is unmarked, one can

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<sup>38</sup> For example, In "Transfiguring Affliction," Ruthann Johanson claims the Voice is a representation of Frankie himself that takes "paradoxical forms as both stranger and friend throughout the novel" (qtd. in Srigly 107).

safely assume the masculine form according to feminist research, which has noted that in hegemonic discourse, the masculine pronoun is the default just as Caucasian is the default race when characters are not explicitly labeled otherwise.<sup>39</sup> In other words, had this Voice been female, O'Connor most likely would have described it as such. Frankie is seen listening to the Voice and even entertaining some of His ideas; however, by the end of the novel, Frankie disempowers the Voice by banishing it from his thoughts, as will be shown.

Textual evidence suggests that the Voice is very influential in Frankie's life throughout the novel. He does manage to gain Frankie's attention, but ironically, in asking Frankie to listen to him, he insists that Frankie learn not to listen to anyone else. He tells Frankie, "Be like me young fellow, don't let no jackasses tell you what to do" (166), implying that Frankie should ignore the opinions and advice of the other male members of his family. The Voice first successfully convinces Frankie to disobey Mason's last requests to give him a proper Christian burial and to stay away from his other uncle, Rayber. The Voice accomplishes this task by telling Frankie that Mason has been "crazy all along" (37) and that he has nothing to fear from either burning the body or seeking out Rayber's company. With Rayber, the Voice persuades Frankie to baptize Bishop despite Rayber's protestations.

Though Frankie may take the Voice's advice from time to time, he eventually grows tired of the Voice, and defies his wishes. He still listens to the Voice, but does so only to refute rather than understand the Voice's perspective as he progressively begins

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<sup>39</sup> For example, in a *New York Times Magazine* editorial (1993), Deborah Tannen explains, "The unmarked forms of most English words also convey 'male.' Being male is the unmarked case."

to devalue this presence. For example, after the unfortunate death of Bishop, Frankie returns to Powderhead where the Voice tells Frankie to “go down and take it” (237), and though the Voice claims, “we can take it over together, just you and me” (237), Frankie refuses to entertain the idea. In fact, he seems repulsed by the suggestion. Though Frankie does not respond verbally, his nonverbal reactions indicate his intent to defy the Voice. For example, the narrator notes, “The boy shuttered convulsively” (237) and “shook himself free fiercely” from the shadowy presence, which he now viewed as an “adversary” (238). Thus, Frankie’s nonverbal reaction is in direct opposition of Pheoby, who affirmed Janie’s words through her facial expressions in the last chapter. Frankie physically disempowers the Voice by setting the area on fire, creating a barrier between himself and the Voice and watching the presence of the Voice go up in flames (238).

These observations are not meant to claim that the Voice should be obeyed, but rather to point out that Frankie is not a feminist listener. Being a feminist listener does not mean that one must always agree with the speaker or approve of the speaker’s behavior. It also does not mean that the listener cannot object or correct the speaker if so led. Rather, as outlined in the introduction, being a feminist listener involves being able to empathize with the speaker even when one disagrees with his or her views, providing the speaker the space to vocalize thoughts or opinions, and earnestly pay attention. In what follows, Frankie demonstrates his unwillingness to entertain other viewpoints even when, unlike the voice’s advice, listening to them might be in his best interest. Because he lacks listening skills, Frankie is incapable of discerning which speakers are worthy of his attention.

*Mason and Rayber: Failed Prophets with No Audience*

Both Mason and Rayber have tried and failed to gain listeners in the past, and each views Frankie as his last chance to make a difference within their family as well as the larger world around them. Though both Mason and Rayber present different types of information and represent different theologies, both ironically use similar rhetorical styles to convey the message; both appear to be prophets in their own right, wholly invested in their cause to facilitate Frankie's conversion experience either to Christianity or to secularism. Unfortunately for them, Frankie does not fulfill their desire to be heard, understood, or followed. As will be shown in this section, throughout his conversations with Mason and Rayber, Frankie thwarts both speakers in several ways. For example, he does not affirm Mason's experiences as a prophet<sup>40</sup> or his relationship with Rayber, and he defies Mason's instructions for burial despite his pleas for the contrary. All these responses contradict or belittle Mason as the speaker and highlight Frankie's lack of empathy for Mason. Likewise, when Frankie is with Rayber, he demoralizes Rayber by making him feel inadequate as a scholar, father, and speaker when Frankie chooses not to accept Rayber's advice or to listen to his instruction, illustrating Frankie's aversion to listening to differing viewpoints.

Because he is such a poor listener, Mason has attempted to preach both to the community and his family to no avail. He notes with disdain that he is unable to reach his sister whom he believed to be promiscuous and in need of spiritual cleansing: "Even after she married, she would not listen to any word that had to do with her salvation. He

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<sup>40</sup> It is hard to ascertain whether or not Mason is a true prophet or if he is, as Rayber suggests, merely suffering from senile delusions. O'Connor's attempts to make both characters's view points seem plausible to her readership effectively keeps the reader questioning the truth about Mason's "calling."

had twice been thrown out of her house by her husband” (58). Mason also tries unsuccessfully to witness to Rayber, who ultimately rejects religion in favor of the academy. In both these situations Mason tries to preach without hearing the words of those he condemns. In other words, his lack of reciprocity, one of the feminist listening skills, costs him an audience as he is unwilling to hear their side of the story or to empathize with their situations. Mason’s last hope to be heard and to obtain a potential follower lies in his young nephew Frankie, the last of the Tarwater line.

Rayber has also failed to retain any listeners of his own. Rayber has not taught at the university for quite some time, leaving him with no traditional students, and Rayber is also unable to homeschool his own son, Bishop, who has Down syndrome. Thus, Frankie is a welcome opportunity for Rayber as he becomes the son Rayber never had. Desmond elaborates, “Marriage for Rayber was solely a means to father a son he could raise in his own image, a plan confounded when Bishop turns out to be handicapped. Now he would transfer that plan to young Tarwater” (41). With his wife gone, Rayber has no chances of producing further progeny, but Frankie serves as a suitable replacement. Thus, both Mason and Rayber have high hopes for Frankie as a listener.

While Frankie represents a last chance for these men to pass on their respective brands of wisdom, I am not suggesting that these men are sympathetic characters whose wisdom should necessarily be deemed important or obeyed despite the fact that I do believe that Frankie could have benefited from listening to his uncles’ life experiences so as to avoid the same misfortunes. Within O’Connor’s universe, there are few likable characters. The same applies to this novel, as with the exception of Bishop,



none of the characters are especially sympathetic. Thus, I am not making claims about them in regards to likability, but simply the way they listen or do not listen to each other. However, one could suggest that the fact that they are competing to speak while simultaneously not listening to each other actually does make them that much more unlikeable.

#### Interactions with Mason: Absence of Empathy and Respect

A far cry from Pheoby's "hungry listening," which left Janie feeling liberated, Frankie's responses to Mason leave him in a state of turmoil and anxiety as Frankie questions Mason's abilities as a speaker/prophet, his requests for a Christian burial, and his insistence that Frankie refrain from engaging with Rayber. Mason's hopes for Frankie are foiled throughout Frankie's time with him in Powderhead, and Mason dies not knowing if his words have made any impact on Frankie at all. Frankie fails to affirm Mason as a speaker, displaying a lack of empathy for his elder.

Frankie demonstrates his deficiency for empathy with Mason in several ways including interrupting Mason's stories, criticizing Mason's abilities as a prophet, and denying Mason's last requests for burial. Unlike Pheoby and Edna's guest, who sat quietly while Pheoby or Edna told their stories, Frankie is impatient with Mason and constantly interrupts Mason's speech in an attempt to contradict Mason's version of events. The narrator notes Frankie's impatience with Mason, claiming that Frankie "had ideas of his own," which caused him to listen with "impatient conviction that he would not make any mistakes himself when the time came and the Lord called him" (6). Frankie's impatient insistence that he would be a better prophet than his uncle causes him to miss the potential life lesson that Mason's experiences could afford him. I say

“potential” life lessons here because readers like Frankie are not privy to Mason’s full story as Frankie continually interrupts the flow of conversation, preventing Mason from sharing more about his strategies for witnessing or living a Godly life. As seen in the last chapter, Pheoby claims that listening to Janie’s story helped her to see flaws in her own marriage that she is now equipped to rectify. Frankie, however, feels he has nothing to learn from Mason.

At times, Frankie’s vocalizes his annoyance or impatience with Mason through interruptions or interjections during Mason’s story, which also displays an absence of empathy for the speaker. While some interruptions can be beneficial if used to clarify a point or to further the conversation, as noted in the introduction, Frankie’s interruptions berate rather than encourage the speaker. For example, as Mason recounts the story of his relationship with Rayber, he tells Frankie Rayber was glad to see Mason after years of separation, which provides Mason hope that Rayber is still capable of being redeemed from a life of sin. Rather than validate Mason’s interpretation of events, Frankie interrupts Mason’s recounting of the memory multiple times to tell him, “It might have sounded to you like he was glad to see you. . . . It don’t sound that way to me” (69). Frankie’s interruptions do not afford Mason the freedom or space to speak he needs.

Frankie also shows a lack of empathy with his uncle when he criticizes Mason’s abilities as a prophet, chastising his uncle for not witnessing to the city dwellers: “You always said you were a prophet. . . . Now I see what kind of prophet you are. Elijah would think a heap of you” (27). These comments devalue and discredit Mason’s life experiences and also his story. Frankie does not try to understand the difficulties Mason

faced while in the city, and he does not seem to care about hurting Mason's feelings. Frankie's words are not affirming or validating.

Lastly, Frankie's response to Mason's requests for a proper burial is not supportive and once more highlights an absence of empathy for the speaker. Before his death, Mason provides Frankie with very specific instructions to bury him in a hole "ten foot deep" (14). When Frankie questions his abilities to bury Mason properly, Mason pleads:

I never asked much of you. I take you and raised you and saved you from that ass in town and now all I'm asking in return is when I die to get me in the ground where the dead belong and set up to a cross over me to show I'm there. That's all in the world I'm asking you to do. (14-15)

Despite Mason's obvious need for reassurance that his death will be handled honorably, Frankie does not provide him any solace. Instead, he tells him, "I'll be doin good if I can get you into the ground. . . . I'll be too wore out to set up any cross. I ain't bothering with trifles" (15). Frankie fails to comfort Mason, and his response indicates an inability or unwillingness to understand the importance of Mason's requests. Frankie's response leaves Mason feeling powerless in the presence of his listener because unlike Pheoby, Frankie leaves his speaker questioning whether his requests will be fulfilled.

*Interactions with Rayber: Resistance to New Ideas*

After Mason dies, Frankie follows the advice of "the Voice" and seeks the counsel of Rayber. While Frankie's actions might be interpreted as a sign of a feminist willingness to listen to new ideas and learn new information, Frankie's interactions

with Rayber prove otherwise as he only listens to Rayber with the intent of refuting or disobeying any advice Rayber provides, leaving Rayber feeling inadequate as a scholar and mentor. Frankie's obstinacy reveals itself on numerous occasions with Rayber, but particularly leaves Rayber impotent when Frankie refuses to attend formal school or to be educated, seeks refuge in worship despite Rayber's insistence that there is no God, and decides to baptize/drown his cousin even though Rayber tells him repeatedly to "forget about Bishop" or to leave him alone (117). Ultimately, as will be explored in this section, Frankie cannot reconcile his need to assert his independence with his desire for more information about the world around him, which Rayber could provide, including a formal education, professionalism, social etiquette, etc.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Edna Earle's hotel guest, Frankie does not even give the impression he will be open to listening to new ideas, which becomes apparent during his conversations with Rayber about school. Rayber tells Frankie, "I want you to learn all you can. I want you to be educated so that you can take your place as an intelligent man in the world" and insists that Frankie start school (110). Rather than consider the option or appreciate the opportunity that Rayber is trying to afford him, Frankie immediately shuts down the idea: "I ain't taking no test. I'm free. . . . I'm outside your head. I ain't in it. I ain't in it and I ain't about to be" (111), asserting what he feels is his right to control his own knowledge. This response naturally discourages and weakens Rayber's resolve since he is a schoolteacher by profession and views education as of the highest importance.

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<sup>41</sup> After Mason's death, the Voice appears and confronts Frankie about his ignorance of the world and questions what he has learned from Mason as well as what he has been taught about Rayber. This prompts Frankie to seek out Rayber for more information (35-50).

Frankie is also not open to listening to Rayber's commentary about the community or his surroundings. While out on the town, Rayber tries in vain to educate Frankie about the community, how the city works, information about the infrastructures they visit, only to be blatantly ignored. Rayber notes, "He had talked as much as he had walked, and the boy for all the interest he showed might have been the one who was deaf" (108). Rayber believes Frankie lacks interest because Frankie does not provide any nonverbal cues to demonstrate that he has been listening. As noted with Pheoby and Edna Earle's guest, these cues indicate a listener has been paying attention and encourage the speaker to continue. Frankie, consciously or subconsciously, fails to provide Rayber with any indication that he is interested in this information or that he has understood it. Once more, Frankie makes Rayber feel inadequate as a speaker and an educator, which has been a source of pride for Rayber in the past.

In addition, Frankie appears unwilling to entertain differing views about religion. Frankie knows that Rayber is an atheist and that he considers attending church nonsensical, but rather than listen to Rayber's rationale or to ask why Rayber is opposed to attending church, he deliberately disobeys Rayber by leaving the house unaccompanied at night and attending a church service. In chapter two, though Pheoby and Janie disagree about certain topics, Pheoby encourages Janie to elaborate, which helps the women reach an understanding of one another. However, Frankie's behavior makes Rayber feel like his words are meaningless and falling on deaf ears. Readers can sense Rayber's defeat with Frankie when Rayber confronts Frankie after the service, observing Frankie with "the wooden look [he] wore when his hearing aide was off"

(135). When Frankie tells Rayber he just attended church “to spit on it,” Rayber responds, “I’m not so sure of that” (136). The subject is never broached again, and thus an understanding is never reached between the two in regards to religion or church attendance.

Frankie further demonstrates his reluctance to consider Rayber’s views by denying Rayber an audience when the subject of baptism is raised. In the first chapter, Edna Earle’s guest seemed uninterested in Edna’s story at first, but regardless of whether she later became enthralled in the story or not, she stayed seated to hear Edna’s story unfold in its entirety, illustrating her patience with Edna Earle. The same cannot be said of Frankie, who physically removes himself from conversations he finds uncomfortable. For example, Frankie jumps ship during a boat ride with Rayber when Rayber brings up the issue of baptizing Bishop. When Frankie abandons the conversation, Rayber “feels as if he had just run across a mined field. . . . and [Rayber] decided it would be best to linger on the lake a while” (176). Tannen claims, “Being listened to can become a metaphor for being understood and being valued” (142). In this case, Frankie’s refusal to listen has the opposite effect. Frankie’s tactics succeed in temporarily disempowering Rayber, rendering him mute in the absence of a willing listener.

### **The Consequences of Hostile Listening**

Frankie ultimately disempowers those who attempt to guide him toward a suitable future. Frankie does not affirm or uplift the speakers through the act of listening. Neither does he adhere to any of the advice he has been given by the influences in his life. Instead, Frankie separates himself from his male relatives and

establishes his autonomy through his insistence that he is not about talk, but rather action. He repeatedly tells Rayber, "All you can do is think what you would have done. Not me, I can do. I can act" (196). Similarly, he accuses Mason of being an inadequate prophet because he cannot procure a bigger audience. He tells him that the Lord "don't mean for me to finish up your leavings. He has other things in mind for me" (10), implying that Frankie is capable of doing the things that Mason only speaks of doing, hinting that Frankie is the superior prophet and has "won" the unspoken competition between them.

Frankie's choice to ignore his male relatives leaves him battered and abused by the end of the novel. Had he listened to Mason when he warned Frankie that he was the "kind of boy that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride, and to ask you your bidnis. You had better mind how you take up with strangers" (58), he might not have hitched a ride with a trucker or been so easily convinced to take a walk into the woods with a rapist outside of Powderhead. Rayber likewise tried to instill some street smarts into Frankie by teaching him about his surroundings, but Frankie turned a deaf ear to both men and winds up naked and alone in the woods.

Frankie seems determined to live life according to his own path. Just as he left his home at Powderhead earlier in the novel to escape Mason's influence, he leaves Rayber behind, electing not to hear any more of his teachings.<sup>42</sup> Shortly after returning to Powderhead, Frankie shakes off the shadow of the Voice as well. These actions

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<sup>42</sup> In "Not his Son," Ciuba also notes that the decision to murder/drown Bishop is proof that he has disavowed both Mason and Tarwater, but he uses this scene to illustrate that Frankie chooses neither father, and I add that it is more proof that Frankie chooses not to listen to either speaker.

indicate that Frankie has chosen to forsake all the speakers in the novel. While his listening cannot be categorized as feminist because the act of listening neither empowers Frankie or those who are speaking to him, his actions testify to the power of a listener. A speaker can call forth a response, but a listener has the power to decide how to interpret the message and what to do with it once it has been received.

Taken together, the novels demonstrate the negative consequences of hegemonic discourse for men, suggesting that men have a difficult time communicating with one another or listening to each other in meaningful ways. The patriarchal system of communication fails to meet the needs of any of the men and teaches new generations of men to perpetuate the same habits. In *The Will to Change*, bell hooks notes, "Patriarchal dads do not listen" (xvi), which proved to be the case with Frankie and Haze as their male role models did not practice reciprocity and simultaneously taught their young charges to do the same. For example, readers never see Haze's grandfather listening to him; likewise Mason and Rayber refuse to listen to Frankie. Mason tells Frankie he only listens to God and while Rayber claims he is willing to listen to Frankie, he can't resist taking over the conversation. For example, rather than asking Frankie what is bothering him, Rayber says, "I intend to tell you what it is" (193). This behavior reinforces the idea that listening is not important.

In order to highlight the necessity of developing listening habits alongside speaking skills and to encourage a reform of masculine discourse, O'Connor's characters face extreme consequences as a result of their inability to listen. While these characters are at times "saved" through a divine intervention that smacks them in the face with these acts of violence (as one might argue is the case with Frankie), had the



characters simply listened to one another or to God in the first place, these violent repercussions would not be necessary. In “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” O’Connor explains:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures. (13)

Thus, her novels culminate in death and molestation in hopes of scaring readers so the cycle of bad listening among Southern men does not continue.

### **A Feminist Revision**

Both novels demonstrate that the chosen male listeners exhibit bad listening skills by refusing to be open to new ideas and showing a lack of patience by interruption or competition to speak. O’Connor’s attention to rhetorical listening is not coincidental; rather, she is performing a critique of masculine discourse, more specifically of masculine listening, opening up new feminist approaches to the text. Katherine Prown’s *Revising Flannery O’Connor* suggests that O’Connor can be viewed as a subversive feminist both in her life and in her works despite the fact that many associate her with “masculinist values” (2). She appeals for a “need to bridge the gap between southern literary studies and mainstream feminist criticism, which has generally neglected O’Connor’s work” (3). My analysis answers her call and adds to the conversations of O’Connor as a potential feminist by illustrating that her work can be read from a feminist and rhetorical standpoint under the framework of rhetorical

listening. In this section, I draw upon O'Connor's primary materials, such as her prayer journal, as well as criticism about her works to highlight the value that O'Connor places on the act of listening.

O'Connor's work is a testament to her knowledge of the power of a listener, and her attention to the act of listening demonstrates she believes listening is a powerful rhetorical art.<sup>43</sup> Like Welty and Hurston, O'Connor credits her ability to write to her superb listening skills. However, instead of listening to her relatives' gossip, she claims to draw inspiration from listening to God. The last chapter defined the role of the deliverer as one who listens with the intent to spread a story to others, and O'Connor views herself as God's deliverer. Her prayer journal corroborates this theory. O'Connor writes, "Don't ever let me think, dear God, that I was anything but the instrument for your story—just like the typewriter was mine" (11). Her words indicate that God is the author of her stories, and she is merely the transcriber of the message, a middleman between Him and other potential listeners. Later, O'Connor claims her words are divinely inspired: "I didn't know how to write it but it came" (11). She once more gives God the credit for her works, including *Wise Blood*, which was written around the same time as the prayer journal, saying: "God has given me credit for a few of the things He kindly wrote for me" (23). Thus, O'Connor views herself as a preacher or prophet in her

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<sup>43</sup> Carol Shloss's work, *Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference*, suggests O'Connor was a powerful rhetorician that honed her rhetorical skills in her novels through particular attention to her readers, demonstrating audience awareness and attention to the listener's response: "We know certainly that we are dealing with an author who recurrently anticipated audience reactions and played against attitudes and ignorance that she supposed were prevalent and conducive to certain patterns of reading responses" (36).

own right.<sup>44</sup> Her novels are a means of participating in the religious discourse she has been excluded from as a woman.

Prown explains that O'Connor allies herself with "a masculinist literary and cultural tradition" by "perpetuat[ing] an androcentric world view, endors[ing] patriarchal social relations, and deny[ing] or obscure[ing] female subjectivity and agency" (2). While O'Connor's work may at first glance appear to be promoting the patriarchy because the plots are male centric, studying it through the lens of the listener allows readers to question scholars' views about O'Connor's adherence to the male-dominated church. O'Connor's male characters are aspiring preachers who are also failed listeners, which has a direct bearing on their ability to communicate effectively with one another and with the public. The examination of *The Violent Bear It Away* illustrates how this cycle of bad listening perpetuates itself through generations of men in one family. In fact, a central question within *The Violent Bear it Away* becomes how can one claim the title prophet with no one to prophesy to? (38). Without listeners, speech is rendered meaningless. The male characters in O'Connor's texts demonstrate a lack of audience awareness by not listening on several occasions. As outlined above, Haze does not listen to Shoats and therefore does not improve his sermons. Frankie does not take Rayber's or Mason's advice, which results in a failed baptism/murder. So, despite the fact that O'Connor's characters are mostly men, they are not ideal, and her depiction of them suggests flaws in the religious system, not a need to keep a male-centric system intact. Prown suggests it is "possible for women writers to use

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<sup>44</sup> Other critics also posit that O'Connor is proselytizing to her readers or that she views herself as a prophet including but not limited to Shloss and Giannone. However, George Kilcourse makes the opposite claim in his work *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination* (26).

masculinist narrative forms and male characters” to meet their own ends (22-23), which I argue she does throughout these novels by bringing listening to the forefront of the narratives, showing that speaking in a persuasive way about religion requires the ability to actively listen and suggesting that men are deficient listeners.

### **Moving Forward**

In order to gain a broader perspective about how a listener can function within literature, one must examine a spectrum of ways listeners react to speakers. This chapter highlights how a listener can prove hostile to the speaker through the absence of the feminist listening attributes: empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. As shown, both Haze and Frankie failed to utilize all components of the feminist listening process, ultimately demonstrating the negative effects of hegemonic discourse for men and highlighting the ways that the men in this text struggle to find other men willing to fulfill the role of listener for them. Ultimately, men as well as women are hurt by adopting the gendered norm that listening is a task relegated to women as seen in these novels. This chapter also reveals that O’Connor’s works serve as a feminist critique of masculine listening, opening up new ways of viewing O’Connor’s texts that have heretofore been largely unnoticed or ignored. For example, those that note that O’Connor is aligned with the patriarchy point out that O’Connor largely draws from the male experience. In other words, the majority of her characters are male and her female characters are rarely as well defined as their counterparts. By shifting the attention from speaking to listening, readers gain a robust understanding of the rhetorical situation in these novels from a feminist perspective, which grants listening equal status to speaking, and thus listening characters to speaking characters. Though this

chapter focuses on the male interactions in these texts, future studies can utilize the feminist framework of rhetorical listening to illustrate that the female listening characters, while seemingly minor, become major contributors to the text. In addition, using the heuristics of feminist listening empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity as it applies to the male characters in conversation with one another allows the reader to view O'Connor's works not as a glorification of the male experience but rather a critique of hegemonic discourse.

The next chapter builds upon the ideas about male listeners within McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Though O'Connor's work shows a plethora of ineffective male listeners reinforcing the gendered stereotypes, McCullers presents readers with an alternative outlook, suggesting that men are capable of becoming active and feminist listeners. Her protagonist, John Singer, is an effective male listener, empowering those around him especially Mick Kelly. However, Singer is disabled and marginalized within his community, which causes him to have problems finding listeners of his own. McCullers's work ultimately shows that listening is an essential part of life, love, and friendships.

## Part II: Chapter IV

Embodied Listening: The Silent Listener in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely*

*Hunter*

*"The mute's eyes were cold and gentle as a cat's and all his body seemed to listen" (23).*

The prior chapter illustrated hegemonic male discourse within the novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*. In both those texts, the male listeners failed to meet the speaker's expectations and lacked one or all of the critical listening skills provided in the introduction: empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. Thus, the men in the novel lived up to the male stereotype of "bad" listener.

While I propose that women are the most equipped listeners throughout these novels, not all men are poor listeners as this chapter will illustrate. However, when a man becomes an adept listener, he is stepping outside the bounds of patriarchal discourse, often marking himself as effeminate or marginalizing himself within society. In his work *Guyland*, masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel notes that the most common complaint against men is that they are bad listeners, but that men who do try to listen are often seen as effeminate or even assumed to be gay (49), supporting the theory that for men to be categorized as good listeners is somehow emasculating. Unsurprisingly, critics have questioned the sexuality of the listening protagonist in McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, John Singer.<sup>45</sup>

Singer is already marginalized within society because he is deaf. However, rather than view his disability, which I argue actually makes him a better listener, in a

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<sup>45</sup> See Gleeson-White, Kay, and Russell.

negative light, the people in the community revere Singer and seek him out as a confidant. McCullers elevates the status of listening within her works by portraying a male listening character who is not ridiculed or degraded by his peers for his listening skills, but appreciated by both the men and women with whom he interacts. While her main character highlights the benefits of men adopting the feminine rhetoric of listening, McCullers likewise shows the negative effects that arise when people do not have access to listeners, positioning listening as an act of empowerment for both men and women.

McCullers refers to Singer as a “deaf mute” which calls into question his ability to be a listener and to respond to the speakers. Examining Singer through the lens of disability studies challenges the perceptions of what it means to listen as well as the characterization of disability as a deficit. In doing so, I will expand the definition of listening, demonstrating that Singer is capable of “active listening” and understanding through various means like lip reading, body language, and sign language. While he cannot audibly hear his guests, he is able to determine what they are saying. I likewise examine Singer as what I call a silent listener. As noted in the introduction, silence does not necessarily signal disengagement; there are other nonverbal ways that a listener can take part in the conversation, while still giving the speaker the space to speak uninterrupted. Singer’s deafness forces him to be silent, yet all those who visit him interpret his silence as patience and understanding, highlighting the benefits of this type of listening.

McCullers contrasts Singer to others in the novel, particularly other men, who do not have listening skills, showing how this ultimately leaves them angry, depressed,

and emotionally unfulfilled. The conversations between Blount and Copeland about race serve as an excellent example of men competing to speak while simultaneously failing to listen.<sup>46</sup> While there are many instances of such failed communication between the men in this novel, I choose to focus this chapter on the relationship Singer has with a teenage girl named Mick Kelly for the following reasons: Mick's relationship with Singer is significant because she is his only female visitor. Mick serves as an interesting contrast to Frankie and Haze from the previous chapter because of her age. Thus, analyzing her in this context allows for a broader understanding of the differences between the ways Southern men and women were socially trained to handle conversation. As will be seen in this chapter, Mick struggles with Southern society's definition of a lady, which leaves her feeling ostracized by both genders. As a marginalized character herself, she seeks solace in Singer, seeing him as a kindred spirit. Ultimately, their relationship establishes that effective male listening can be empowering for women, something that was lacking from the lives of characters like Janie and Edna Earle in the previous chapters.

In addition to exploring the speaking and hearing dynamics between Singer and Mick, I offer a parallel reading of Singer and Antonapolous, who serves as Singer's silent listener. This analysis demonstrates that not only is Singer practicing feminist listening with his guests, he is keenly aware of the importance of the listener, valuing Antonapolous for what Singer perceives to be active listening skills. The section highlights that even the perception of feminist listening can be valuable to speakers.

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<sup>46</sup> See the exchange between the men in the following passage: (295-305).



The latter portion of the chapter takes a step back from the novel to engage with McCullers and her readers through the examination of her autobiography, essays, and letters. Like her contemporaries, McCullers sees an inherent value in listening, surrounding herself with people she could listen to and learn from throughout her lifetime. I posit McCullers uses this novel to highlight the importance of listening, using Singer's character as a stand in or a synecdoche for her readers.

### **What is Listening?**

In order to understand how Singer can fulfill the role of listener, one must separate the act of listening from that of hearing. Because McCullers refers to Singer as a "deaf-mute," both terms deserve analysis. I will therefore not only analyze his deafness but also his silence. Many have focused on his lack of rhetorical agency,<sup>47</sup> but few have noted that Singer's silence is actually a strength for a listener. As the prior chapters have argued, silence and listening are often marked as feminine modes of rhetoric, which are just as, if not more powerful than, the masculine mode of speech.<sup>48</sup>

Singer's hearing impairment calls into question his ability to listen, which is commonly defined as merely hearing the words of another. However, as has been shown in prior chapters, hearing and listening are separate entities: Hearing is taking in auditory stimuli, but listening is taking it in and trying to understand or process it. Though Singer is incapable of hearing auditory stimuli, he does have an alternate system of communication that allows him to hear, potentially to listen, and to understand. In his work *Words Made Flesh*, deaf studies scholar R. Edwards also differentiates between hearing and listening: "Hearing [sound] does not require active

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<sup>47</sup> See Gleeson-White, Whit, Yardley, and Bell.

<sup>48</sup> See Glenn and Ratcliffe's *Silence and Listening*.

listening” (85). He goes on to argue that members of the deaf community are equipped to actively listen with each other as well as with those outside this community. In other words, both deaf and hearing people alike have the option to passively “hear” rather than understand. Likewise, the deaf have the ability to actively listen despite the fact that they cannot hear sound. So, the question then becomes how can one hear without sound?

Singer’s means of talking, and alternatively listening, is a combination of sign language and lip reading. As explained in the introduction, adept listeners have the ability to understand meta-messages taking place in nonverbal exchange. Thus, Singer’s capacity to listen is potentially amplified by the loss of his hearing because he is forced to concentrate more on body language, facial expression, lip reading, and other emotive devices to retain any information at all.

Despite common assumptions, being deaf has advantages over being a naturally hearing person. Some argue being “deaf” implies the *loss* or absence of language. The deaf are typically thought to be silent, or voiceless because they often have difficulty speaking as well as hearing. Carol Padden, author of “Talking Culture: Deaf People and Disability Studies,” explains “Deaf people were essentially silent and silenced—deemed without sound. . .”(509). However, Cheryl Glenn notes that silence “carries with it a grammar, value, and most of all meaning,” highlighting that silence can be interpreted and used as a means of communication (7). In addition, Lane explains, being deaf should not be “associated with loss rather than difference and *gain*” (Lane 12; emphasis mine). In addition to the heightening of his other senses, Singer is able to communicate in a variety of ways that the average hearing person may lack. For

example, while Singer is not audibly bilingual, he does “speak” many languages and has been trained to master complex and varying grammatical patterns. Padden notes, “Sign languages have grammars and these grammars vary” (509). In addition, Edwards asserts, “While the grammars of sign and English are different, both have grammatical rules” (64). Singer’s fictional education at a deaf institution serves as an example of the multiple grammars of sign language. Singer recalls, “He had learned to talk with his hands and to read. Before he was nine years old he could talk with one hand in the American way—and also could employ both of his hands after the method of the Europeans,” demonstrating his mastery of two different languages with differing grammatical structures (11). The characters who interact with Singer throughout the novel seem to share Lane’s understanding of deafness as a gain rather than a loss. They are attracted rather than repelled by Singer despite his difference as “each aligns disability with other-worldly wisdom,” due to his seemingly enhanced perceptive nature (Russell 61).

Evidence of the fascination with Singer’s difference surfaces within the town’s social hub, The New York Café, as several customers stare at Singer when he arrives, watching him with intense curiosity as he eats or interacts with those around him. In her book, *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes that when people encounter peculiarities or visible differences in the body of another, they are prompted to stare: “Such confusing sights both affirm our shared humanity and challenge our complacent understandings. The visibly disabled body intrudes on our routine visual landscape and compels our attention, often obscuring the personhood of its bearer” (20). Consequently, staring is often associated with negative connotations. The

residents of the community certainly stare at Singer, recognizing him as being mute. For example, Jake Blount “paid no attention to anyone in the place [The New York Café] except the mute” (23). Mick can’t help but stare at Singer as well: Mick “turned her eyes to the center of the room where the mute sat at his table alone”(19). Thomson explains that staring too long at another person is typically thought to be rude, and while Singer may feel uncomfortable under the town gaze, readers learn that those staring at Singer are not staring with disgust but with admiration.

Each resident crafts his or her own story of Singer’s background, but interestingly enough each story glorifies Singer. In *Reading Embodied Citizenship* Emily Russell notes, “Singer’s ability to embody all things to all people depends on social perception of disabled bodies as outside the limiting norms of modernity” (76). Because Singer is silent, the people surrounding him infer his attributes or his character, often elevating him to a higher plane. Because Singer cannot speak, each member of the community invents their own version of him: “So the rumors about the mute were rich and varied”(200). Singer becomes different things to different groups of people: “The rich thought that he was rich and the poor considered him a poor man like themselves. And as there was no way to disprove these rumors they grew marvelous and very real. Each man described the mute as he wished him to be” (223). Because the characters are able to fashion the silent individual into anyone they desire, Singer transforms into a larger-than-life figure. Each of his actions becomes profound, each gesture majestic, and each smile omniscient.

Though Singer cannot communicate vocally, his appearance and facial expressions communicate to others on his behalf, drawing people to him. In the first

chapter, he is described as having an intelligent air: “The other mute was tall. His eyes had a quick, intelligent expression” (1). Edwards explains that eyes can be particularly communicative between deaf and hearing populations and the importance the deaf community places on their sight: “An observer of the deaf noted the expression of their speaking eyes. Deaf people commented on the importance of their eyesight. The deaf mutes must work with their eyes more than speaking people” (83).<sup>49</sup> Though the eyes are silent, they are represented as a powerful form of communication used especially by the deaf. Biff Brannon seems to confirm Edward’s assumption about the power of facial expression, claiming Singer communicates to him through the use of his eyes: “[Singer’s] eyes made a person think that he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before” (25). Blount finds Singer’s presence comforting, frequently looking into Singer’s eyes for comprehension: “He stared at them so long that he almost hypnotized himself. He lost the urge to be riotous and felt calm again. The eyes seemed to understand all that he had meant to say and to hold some message for him” (69). When the citizens in Singer’s community discover he is mute, rather than consider it a flaw, they view it as a mark of wisdom, demonstrating that, though silent, he communicates to people through nonverbal means.

Singer communicates not *despite* of but *because* of his silence. Padden notes that deaf people have been thought to be “comprehensible only to those few who knew sign language” (509). Despite the fact that those interacting with Singer in the small Southern community do not know sign language, they all believe they can understand

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<sup>49</sup> For more information about how the face or eyes communicate to others see Ekman and Frieson’s *Unmasking the Face* (11) and Levine and Rowe’s *Introduction to Linguistics* (331).

Singer's silence, and more importantly, that Singer understands them. For example, Mick Kelly seems especially attuned to Singer's form of communication, relaying that his advice "was a thing that could not be spoken with words or writing. Maybe he would have to let her understand this in a different way. That was the feeling she had with him" (307). As will be explored later in the chapter, Mick is determined to discover whatever it is Singer has to say even if it means navigating his silent language. Ultimately, Singer's silence draws people into conversation with him, makes them feel comfortable, and encourages them to continue talking.

I will examine Singer's disability and listening within the context of his interactions with Mick. Though Singer serves as a listener to all of the major characters of the book—indeed his acts of listening structure the novel's plot as all the characters seek Singer's counsel and perceived wisdom—my focus on his relationship with Mick allows me to foreground the gendered dynamics of his listening. Focusing on listening when examining the relationship between Singer and Mick illustrates that the two have made a meaningful connection, which has the potential to sustain Mick even after Singer's death.

### **Mick's Need for a Feminist Listener**

To highlight Mick's need for a listener like Singer, this section will examine the ways that Mick fails to communicate with others or to find willing listeners due to her age, gender, and nonconformist behavior. The prior chapter featured the coming of age stories of two male protagonists who struggle to conform or reform societal perceptions of masculinity within discourse. Within this chapter, Mick's coming of age experience is also riddled with difficulties as she fails to meet Southern societal

expectations of femininity, choosing to defy an upbringing that conditions women to become silent and ladylike, hindering her ability to find listeners. To complicate matters, Mick does not identify with her female counterparts, causing her to feel estranged from both genders and unable to confide in anyone lest she be further marginalized.

Mick remains silent about her ambitions of becoming a world traveler and a musician because she realizes that her class and gender limit her choices in life. Thus, rather than ask her parents for music lessons, Mick uses her lunch money to pay for the piano lessons herself (161). Louise Westling, author *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, indicates that Mick is plagued by the “conflict between serious ambition and the pressure of conventional femininity” (114). Mick’s ambitions to become a pianist contradict the expectations of her family and do not coincide with the female expectations of the era.

Along with her personal ambitions, Mick’s attire and appearance contradict social norms for young women, which makes finding female listeners difficult. Mick feels caught between childhood and adulthood, more specifically between the masculine and the feminine. In “Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and The Case of Carson McCullers,” Gleeson-White notes, “While tomboyishness may have been acceptable in the preadolescent southern girl, at puberty, she was expected to cultivate her charm to become a gentlewoman” (6). Mick seems reluctant to make the change, and as Gleeson-White suggests, continues to “preserve [her] masculine ways” (6). Her refusal to dress the part of a young lady is one example of conflict that separates Mick from her sisters. In contrast to her sisters who wear dresses, Mick is

typically seen in trousers. Her sister, Etta, tells Mick, "It makes me sick to see you in those silly boy's clothes" (41). Later Portia, the Kelly's housekeeper, echoes Etta's sentiments, telling Mick she is "coming to an age when she ought to fix up and try to look the best [she] can" (278). Portia's and Etta's remarks draw attention to Mick's deviant dress. She is reprimanded for her outward appearance, which adds to her anxiety about being different. Though Mick explains to her sisters, she doesn't "want to be like either of [them] and [she doesn't] want to look like either of [them]" (42), they ignore her protests and do not listen to her reasons for wanting to dress in masculine clothes, which reinforces her sisters' perception and Mick's growing fear that Mick is abnormal.<sup>50</sup> Mick's sisters do not empathize with her desire to dress in this manner and are not open to Mick's ideas about the subject; thus, they cannot be labeled feminist listeners in this situation.

Mick's interactions with potential male suitors are also atypical of the Southern belle prototype, as she explicitly states she has no intention to "marry with any boy" (275).<sup>51</sup> Mick does attempt to get close to her neighbor, Harry Minowitz, but as their friendship transforms into a physical relationship, Mick finds herself unable to talk about it, which in turn impedes her chances of finding listeners. Mick prevents Harry and her family from fulfilling the role of listener after her sexual encounter with Harry by remaining silent on the matter perhaps out of fear of rejection. Though Harry wants to discuss what has happened, Mick feels, "Things would be better if only he would just

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<sup>50</sup> For additional information pertaining to Mick's violation of gendered norms, see Catherine Martin's "Speech, Silence, and Female Adolescence in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*."

<sup>51</sup> For more information about the Southern belle, see Anne Scott's *The Southern Lady*, Kathryn Seidel's *The Southern Belle in the American Novel*, and N. Baym's "The Myth of the Myth of Southern Womanhood."



quit talking” (276). Mick knows that she has violated the social mores befitting young women and does not confide in her parents about her transgression. However, she reveals, “She would feel better if they [her family] could look at her and tell. If they knew”(278). Her statement indicates that she wants to be known and understood by her family, that she is in need of listeners.

Mick’s fear of rejection from those she loves prevents her from communicating with them effectively, depriving her of listeners. Though Mick needs and wants human interactions, in the end she is still left with the feeling of separateness that has plagued her. Mick knows from the beginning that “always there had been one person after another” with whom she has desired to share her inner self, “and every time it was like some part of her would bust in a hundred pieces” when she is unable to communicate with them (52). Mick admits she remains silent most of the time: “She had always kept things to herself. That was one sure thing” (52). She finds it difficult to put into words exactly how she feels or what she wants even to herself: “I want—I want—I want—was all that she could think about—but just what this real want was she did not know” (52). Mick struggles to articulate her ambitions because her gender has limited her capacity to envision a future for herself that differs from that of her mother or sisters. Furthermore, she feels voicing these ambitions would be met with a lack of understanding or empathy from listeners as has been the case in some of the above instances.

### **Singer as Feminist Listener**

In contrast to her family, Singer makes Mick feel heard, understood, and accepted despite her difference. Singer’s silence allows Mick to interpret their

interactions for herself, and, thus, his silence only affirms the preconceived notions Mick has of Singer, allowing her to feel comforted and loved by him in a manner she has not felt from anyone else within the text.<sup>52</sup> Singer emboldens Mick to share intimate details of her life she has kept secret from others by a display of empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity.

While Mick keeps her love for music and travel a secret from her family, she feels comfortable talking to Singer about them because he appears to listen to her and encourage her pursuits. For example, Singer buys a radio for his guests as a Christmas present. To Mick, the radio is a sign that Singer has been listening to her dreams to pursue music, which is an example of Singer's use of dialogic retention, meaning the ability to retain information from prior conversations and to interpret meta-messages. Furthermore, Mick could view the gift as a truly selfless act given that Singer cannot hear the music himself. Though Mick does not voice any of the aforementioned conclusions, readers know she is extremely grateful for the gift: "Her face was very red and she asked him over and over if it was really his and whether she could listen" (210). When Singer nods his understanding and acquiesces to her request, "she grinned at him," and "her eyes were wet and she rubbed them with her fists" (210). Mick is clearly moved by the gift and has likely never received something as expensive or thoughtful before from either her parents or siblings, who are for the most part, oblivious to her dreams of being a musician. Mick feels the gift is a sure sign of affection from Singer, and she claims, "she loved him better than anyone in the family" (313). The radio intimates to Mick that the feeling is mutual because it is a sign that Singer has listened

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<sup>52</sup> Martin explains that Singer is a "feminine blank space to be penetrated by meaning" (9).

to her and accepted her. The radio becomes a symbol of a shared intimacy formed through the act of listening.

Mick's sisters and brothers cause Mick to feel uncomfortable in her own skin and potentially unloved because she does not dress or act according to gender norms, but Singer appears to accept Mick in spite of what Gleeson-White calls her "freakishness." Mick does not feel loved unconditionally by the members of her family. While playing with her brother George, she asks him, "Do you love me?" When he responds, "Sure I love you. Ain't you my sister?" (311), Mick interprets him to mean that if she were not his sister, he would not love her anymore. In other words, she feels that there is something unlovable about her and that her family feels the same way. Yet, with Singer "it was different" (313). For example, Singer puts Mick at ease at a time when she is particularly worried about her clumsiness: "Once when she was excited and caught her shirt-tail in the electric fan he acted in such a kindly way that she was not embarrassed at all" (91). While Hazel, Etta, and Bill seem annoyed by Mick's presence, Singer doesn't mind Mick's random visits to his room. He even "let her meddle with his cute little chess men" (91). She would have been scolded for touching one of her sister's things.

Though Mick feels she cannot confide in her parents or siblings about her life choices, she trusts Singer with her private thoughts, believing he will empathize with her and give her good advice. For instance, when Mick is confronted by her family and persuaded to drop out of school to start working at Woolworth's jewelry store, she is clearly conflicted about her "choice" and asks for Singer's guidance (316). Readers realize that Mick is reluctant to accept the job as she continually insists that the job is temporary: "I just want to work during vacation and then go back to school" (317).

However, she knows that the reality of situation is that “the job wouldn’t be just for the summer—but for a long time, as long as she could see ahead” (318). Mick turns to Singer, believing he will be the voice of reason: “What he had to tell her would be right—and if he said the job sounded O.K. then she would feel better about it” (319). She is uneasy and reluctant to make a decision, but believes Singer can assist her while keeping her anxiety over the situation between the two of them, demonstrating she trusts Singer to keep her concerns private.

### **Learning to Listen: How the School for the Deaf Impacts Singer’s Reaction and Response**

While Mick’s need for a listener is important, the listener’s response is equally important to her as well as to establishing Singer as a feminist listener. Mick may have varying reasons for selecting Singer as a listener, but she ultimately has no control over how Singer reacts or responds to her. I make a distinction in this section between Singer’s reaction and response because as noted in prior chapters, a reaction refers to nonverbal means of communication like facial expression or body language whereas a response is a vocal, or in Singer’s case, written response. This distinction is especially important for Singer since a majority of his communication is dependent upon the nonverbal. As explained earlier, Singer’s reactions to other characters are largely interpreted or perceived by those around him. However, readers are occasionally given glimpses into Singer’s thoughts during the exchanges he has with others, shedding insight into his views on his guests and about the communication between them.

Singer’s responses to Mick are influenced by the ways he has been taught to communicate with and respond to those within and outside of the deaf community. His

experiences while attending a school for the deaf as well as the cultural attitude toward deafness during the time period have shaped Singer's worldview and have taught him the value of listening. Like Mick, Singer also feels isolated from society, which may explain why he reacts and responds to Mick in a particular way.

Singer, like Mick, has felt the pang of isolation throughout his lifetime. He never knew his family and spent his childhood in a school for the deaf where "he had learned to talk with his hands and to read" (11). Carol Padden, author of "Talking Culture: Deaf People and Disability Studies," explains that it was common for deaf children to be sent to asylums especially by hearing parents who did not know how to communicate with them. Eli Clare, author of *Exile and Pride*, notes, "Disability has been soaked in shame, dressed in silence, rooted in isolation" (91). It is not only the disabled who feel shame regarding their circumstances. Singer's parents may have felt his disability was a personal shame upon their family, leading them to abandon their son to the asylum.

Institutions for the deaf were both praised and admonished for the ways in which they nurtured and trained their boarders. Institutions provided a community and sanctuary for the deaf but were also divisive in terms of their teaching practices. Padden views the schools as a means of bringing deaf children under protective care (510). She notes the value of these institutions lies in the ability for "deaf children [to] meet others like themselves" (510). Likewise, in his book *Words Made Flesh*, Edwards notes, those entering an institution meant "going from a world in which they were alone and deaf to one in which they joined a Deaf community" (88). Yet, some schools were not comprised of an all-deaf faculty, and thus methods for teaching the deaf were varied. While McCullers does not describe the school in depth, evidence in the text

suggests that Singer's instructors were not deaf and that they practiced controversial treatments of the deaf involving teaching them to speak.<sup>53</sup> Those who prescribed this method of instruction were known as "oralists." Evidence that Singer was instructed by oralists manifests when Singer explains, "Although he had been born deaf since he was an infant, he had not always been a real mute. . . . He had been taught to speak" (11). Singer claims that at the school, he was considered to be very intelligent, citing his intellect as the reason he was instructed in this manner.

An oralist education further alienated Singer from society at large as well as those within the Deaf community. Edwards notes that maintaining the hierarchy of speech over sign language was one way the deaf were made to feel inferior by their hearing counterparts: "By making the acquisition of English, and especially spoken English, the overriding goal of deaf education, oralists succeeded in making those deaf people who could not speak feel like oral failures" (75). The school was supposed to alleviate "the isolation and ignorance to which [his] deafness tended to subject [him]" (Edwards 88). However, as Singer's mastery over sign language grew and the expectations of his teachers increased, he may have felt isolated from his peers who were not capable of the same mastery. In addition, his inability to speak as well as his instructors hoped might have caused him to feel further isolated from them too. Singer explains that talking was very uncomfortable for him: "He could never become used to speaking with his lips. It was not natural to him, and his tongue felt like a whale in his

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<sup>53</sup> The practice of oralism has been controversial since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and remains so today in some deaf communities despite the fact that manualism and oralism are integrated into many deaf schools' curriculum at present. The push for an oralist education is referred to as the "the dark ages for deaf education in America." (Weinfield 4). During the time the novel was written, this debate was in full force.

mouth" (11). Edwards asserts, "Those whose deafness could not be cured were encouraged to work hard to pass as hearing by using speech," as is illustrated by Singer's instruction (88). Yet, it was often difficult for the students to make these transitions.

While the act of speaking is a strain for Singer, he is further demoralized by the reactions of those he engages in conversation using his voice: "From the blank expression on people's faces to whom he talked in this way he felt that his voice must be like the sound of some animal or that there was something disgusting in his speech" (11). In his essay, "Exploring the Hearing Line," Krentz explains the predicament a person like Singer experiences while trying to "pass" as a hearing person by attempting to speak: "The deaf person tries but inevitably fails to negotiate the world of sound, and the gap while humorous, frequently buttresses the view of hearing people as superior and the deaf as pitiable, self deluded, bitter, or just ridiculous" (239-40). Singer dislikes using his voice because he believes using it makes him pitiable or, to use his words, more like an "animal" than a human being.

Today, oralist education is rejected by a large portion of the Deaf community who see it as an attempt to destroy their culture; however, during the time period in which the novel is set, this type of education seemed preferable. Edwards notes the oralist approach to education was meant to eventually integrate the deaf into the hearing society, which makes sense given that Singer leaves the school in Chicago to move to the Southern town where he resides at the opening of the novel (183). Successful integration into the hearing community, while seemingly impossible, was a goal for oralists because of the extreme prejudice against the deaf during the time

period known as audism: “Like racism and sexism, audism insists that inherent biological factors determine individual traits and capacity” (Lane 10). While a majority of the characters in the novel view Singer as a source of fascination, some, like Charles Parker, do seem to be audistic.

The cultural context of the novel sheds insights into why audism was such a problem. During World War II, the deaf were rounded up alongside the Jews to be exterminated. Lane notes, “Sixteen hundred Deaf people were exterminated in concentration camps in the 1940s; they were considered ‘useless eaters’ with lives unworthy of being lived”(19). The novel is set during this time period, and Singer is both deaf and a Jew, rendering him doubly susceptible to judgment.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, in the United States, in an attempt to prevent others from being born deaf, deaf adults were strongly encouraged “to abandon plans for marriage and reproduction or to submit to voluntary sterilization, and the clamor about Deaf eugenics also led untold numbers of hearing parents to have their Deaf children sterilized” (Lane 17). Even the deaf themselves often did not believe they were equals in society. Edwards points to the diary of a deaf student attending one of the very schools that Singer was sent to as a child: “I believe that deaf mutes are worth *nearly as much* as speaking people. . . . But they are *not* worth more than speaking people who can hear and speak” (qtd. in Edwards 83; emphasis mine). Singer likely has similar feelings of self worth ingrained in him by a predominantly hearing culture.

Though Parker is the only openly audistic person in the novel, Singer is also keenly aware of potential prejudice due to his disability, suggesting he has been victim

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<sup>54</sup> See Larry Hershon for an analysis of Singer as a Jewish figure.



of such scrutiny before moving to the town.<sup>55</sup> Readers know Singer is attuned to audism because he routinely keeps his hands stuffed into his pockets while out in public. In *Staring: How we Look*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson asserts, “The lively flying hands of signers are a staring occasion for anyone within visual range. Hearing people often stare at signing because sign language seems novel to the unaccustomed eye. So Deaf signers are often starees” (121). Stares, no matter the reason, can feel uncomfortable, and clearly Singer does not wish to be a staree. Singer chooses to minimize his hand movements even around those in the community who know Singer the most, reducing his chances of being “othered”: “Singer was always the same to everyone. He sat in a straight chair by the window with his hands stuffed tight into his pockets and nodded or smiled to show his guests that he understood” (92). Keeping his hands forcibly in his pockets is clearly painful for Singer, who explains that his hands were always ready to shape the words he had to say. However, he knows that the other characters will not understand the signs and believes his hand movement would be interpreted as freakishness rather than communicative. Throughout the novel, Singer’s hands remain in his pockets except in the presence of Antonapolous or when he is using them to write, a more acceptable form of communication.

Singer’s education and his personal experiences have enabled him to become a feminist listener. He is able to empathize with those like Mick who have felt ostracized because he has been a victim of such treatment. His education emphasized dialogical retention because he had to pay careful attention to his instructor’s lips, body language,

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<sup>55</sup> While most people within the community uncharacteristically admire Singer, he still experiences audism from Charles Parker, Antonapolous’s cousin, who generally ignores Singer and views Antonapolous, who is also deaf, as a social burden (9-10).

and signs in order to respond. Thus, he is skilled at nonverbal cues that some members of the hearing population might lack. Furthermore, he has been taught the importance of reciprocity because, as I have explained, he most likely found himself without listeners even among his peer group at school.

### **Symbiotic Listening: An Evaluation of Reciprocity between Singer and Mick**

Singer's interactions with Mick do not appear to be one-sided like his relationships with the other "speaking" characters because both make an effort to understand each other, creating a symbiotic relationship. Their exchanges are an excellent example of reciprocity, a part of the listening process and a component of feminist listening practices. Mick notes, "Talking with him was like a game. Only there was this whole lot more to it than any game"(91). Her words demonstrate the complexity of deciphering meaning during conversations with Singer. Mick is forced to pay close attention to Singer's reactions and facial expressions, but she is one of the only characters seen attempting to "hear" Singer. Edwards explains the deaf can be understood by the hearing through the "metamorphosis of hearing eyes," which explains how Mick is able to interpret Singer's response (51). In other words, though Mick cannot hear Singer with her ears, she still has the capacity to listen to Singer using her other senses. Mick becomes accustomed to Singer's movements and believes she is able to tell the difference between when he "hears" her correctly and when he needs further clarification. Mick observes, "He turned his head to one side" when he misunderstands her (307). Mick also recognizes that Singer reads lips, so she makes sure to speak slowly and emphasize her words: "She repeated the words slowly and waited" in an effort to ensure Singer understands her (319).

Readers are aware that Singer has a basic comprehension of Mick's questions and of the conversations she has with him. Singer talks to Mick primarily by nodding, but he also writes to her on his notepad, proving that, with Mick at least, Singer is listening with the intent to understand. For example, Mick asks, "Mister Singer have you ever lived in a place where it snowed in the winter-time?" and he "nodded yes, and wrote on his pad with his silver pencil" (307). In this case, Mick received a visual and a written response to her question. In addition, though Singer claims he does not understand Mick's ramblings about music and travel in his letters to Antonapolous, it is important to gauge the word "understand." Here he is clearly able to understand what Mick is saying, easily picking out her desire to listen to music and to travel to different places. So, when he uses the term "understand," it is not in relation to what she is saying but to why she is saying it. Readers know that Singer is attempting to understand Mick in a greater capacity, illustrating his desire to know her on a deeper level. After Mick has been to see Singer many times, "He became so used to [her] lips that he understood each word [she] said, and after a while, he knew what [she] would say before [she] began, because the meaning was always the same" (205-6). He's beginning to understand that Mick, like his other guests, desperately wants to be heard and that she feels misunderstood and unloved by others in the community. Singer's reaction to Mick's words and his attempt to understand her beyond the sentence level prove he is an active listener by Ratcliffe's definition.

Singer's isolation and his own need for acceptance could cause him to empathize with Mick. Evidence of his empathy is demonstrated when Singer continues to allow Mick to come back to the room, never hesitating to open his doors for her. Singer

understands, “It was better to be with any person than to be too long alone” (206). His statement applies to both of them as Singer realizes that Mick is also often alone. In providing her the space to speak, he is granting her an audience, which becomes a gift in its own right.

### **Singer’s Impact as a Listener**

Given that Singer commits suicide near the novel’s end, one must ask whether or not Singer was able to encourage Mick through the act of feminist listening to attain the secret desires she holds dear. Was their relationship significant? Despite the potential to read this novel as only demonstrating failed communication and offering no hope for any of the characters involved, I argue that at the novel’s end, there is still hope for Mick. The physical presence of her listener is gone, but he still remains in her inner room, a place within her mind containing all her secret pleasures.

Though Mick becomes concerned the room is locked to her forever, evidence suggests it remains alive and well. Even before Singer’s death, Mick claims that she has been locked out of her inside room, a room that allows her the space to compose her own music and to enter these far off places in her imagination. After his death she laments:

Now no more music was in her mind. That was a funny thing. It was like she was shut out from the inside room. . . . And she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn’t know how. It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her. A very hard thing to understand. (353)

Yet, despite the fact that Mick claims this room is locked to her now, readers see a glimpse of it again as Mick starts to imagine a world where she could still have the

things she wants, namely buying a piano and continuing her music lessons. Mick is still capable of imagining a new life for herself as evidenced by her day dreaming of a place to put the hypothetical piano, how she would be able to purchase it, and who would be allowed to play it. Though her world looks bleak, she begins to focus on the good that came out of her relationship to Singer. For example, she notes, “She did have Mister Singer’s radio,” a physical reminder that he was listening to her hopes of being a musician (353). The knowledge that Singer had listened to her and that she still had this small piece of him encourages her to think “maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon” (354). So, even in death, Singer encourages Mick to believe in a brighter future.

If Singer and Mick’s interactions are viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis and therapy, one could argue that in training Mick to calm herself and thereby becoming her own listener,<sup>56</sup> Singer has empowered Mick through the act of listening. As outlined in the introduction, letting a person speak uninterrupted is a form of establishing empathy and leads to dialogic retention. Additionally, psychologists have discovered one of the most valued types of listening is done in silence. Many psychologists<sup>57</sup> prescribe to Carl Rogers’s theory of Person-Centered therapy, which is based on the idea that a patient needs a sounding board in order to help him or her find the solution to problems. One of the techniques used in this type of therapy is called “reflective listening,” or “therapeutic silence,” which maintains that while the therapist is silent, the client is more likely to fill the void, or talk more freely or openly to the

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<sup>56</sup> In a *Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke explains how one can become his or her own listener (38). See also Burke’s *Language as Symbolic Action* (301).

<sup>57</sup> See Anderson, Crisp, Quinn, Tobin.

therapist. The therapist does not add any new words to the conversation. Mick's interactions with Singer particularly mimic the type of reflective listening that Rogers promotes. When Mick enters the room, she talks uninterrupted about music and her dream of going to far off places with snow. Even though Singer occasionally answers her questions, such as whether or not he has ever been to a place with snow, he adds nothing new to the conversation. Rather, he lets her draw her own conclusions about what he is thinking or feeling. Yet, the fact that Singer gives her his attention is reassuring for Mick. In his article, "Postmodern Collaborative and Person Centered Therapies: What Would Carl Rogers Say?," Harlene Anderson explains the central idea behind reflective listening, stating, "Simply my *presence* is releasing and helpful" (342). Yet, as shown in this novel, the same strategies can be employed in everyday conversation and help to highlight the value and need for the silent listener.

While I am not the first to suggest that Singer functions as therapist to the other characters within the novel,<sup>58</sup> nor am I the first to suggest that therapeutic conversation can be feminist,<sup>59</sup> I posit that Singer's brand of therapeutic listening is a feminist act, which empowers those around him, particularly Mick. According to some therapists, like Carl Rogers, the ultimate goal of therapy is to enable or empower the client to help him or herself. After visiting the therapist for a period of time, the client should have developed coping mechanisms rendering her capable of becoming her own therapist or listener in a way. When viewed from this angle, Singer has fulfilled his role as a feminist

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<sup>58</sup> See Jennifer Murray's "Approaching Community in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*," which explains that each character's relationship to Singer is "more akin to that of the patient and the psychiatrist, a site of projection and transfer where inner conflicts may be aired and worked on" (112).

<sup>59</sup> In *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen notes, "In a sense the values of therapy are those more typically associated with women's ways of talking than with men's" (121).

listener. After visiting him, Mick is now able to motivate herself to make her own choices. She no longer needs Singer's reinforcements to retain her positive outlook on life. The reader can see evidence that Singer's "therapy" has worked toward this goal when Mick convinces herself that her future is still bright without his aid. At a low moment after work, Mick is contemplating her situation wondering, "what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense (354). Rather than lapse into a deeper depression, Mick convinces herself that all her hard work will amount to something eventually, repeating to herself, "And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good!" (354). The repetition of the phrase and the exclamation that it had been some good at the end of her reflection indicate that Mick has become her own positive reinforcement. Before Mick needed Singer's approval to take comfort in her situation, but now she is capable of providing herself with that service. One could argue that the memory of Singer's acceptance is enough for Mick to empower herself, and thus, he is still in her mind, serving as a feminist listener.

### **Singer's Silent Listener**

Singer's struggle to find a listener mirrors Mick's, including keeping certain topics within his "inside room" for fear of being further ostracized or marginalized within the community. Like Mick, Singer ironically chooses to confide in a silent listener, Spiros Antonapolous, and is empowered to communicate through what he perceives as Antonapolous's listening, highlighting that perceived listening can be just as powerful as the act of listening itself. However, in contrast to Mick, when Antonapolous dies, Singer is unable to become his own listener, which leaves him in a

state of despair, demonstrating that the need for listeners is profound and universal. This section traces Singer's failed communication, highlights why Antonapolous is an ideal (if not feminist) listener for Singer, and discusses the consequences of the deprivation of listeners.

In the small Southern community, Singer struggles to find listeners who can engage in conversation with Singer using his preferred method of sign language. While Singer's choice to remain mute in public is deliberate, evidence suggests Singer does want to communicate using sign language but lacks an audience for his form of communication. Edwards explains the dilemma as a socially constructed condition in that being deaf does "not necessarily cut [one] off from conversation" (85). Rather a person is cut off from conversation "because he did not have a means to communicate with them, nor they with him" (85). Thus, the inability to find a listener can leave a person metaphorically voiceless, whether or not they have the capacity to speak. Edwards notes, some deaf students mistakenly believe

that hearing people would make the effort to learn the manual alphabet in an attempt to do what they could to include deaf people in the social life of the larger community, just as deaf people were doing what they could, namely, mastering English, in order to be included as well. (81)

Singer is under no such delusions. Though he has mastered English and is capable of both lip reading and writing, those in his small Southern community have not been taught how to sign in public schools. Thus, they can never communicate with Singer in his first language.



Finding engaged listeners is a challenge for Singer even with those who do practice sign language as is evidenced when Singer encounters a group of other mutes. The encounter ends badly because, as prior chapters have pointed out, conversations between groups of men can become competitive. Tannen explains that men establish hierarchies among themselves by “holding center stage through verbal performance such as story-telling, joking, or imparting information” (77). The other men are signing so fast that Singer feels he cannot keep up, and when he is given the opportunity to say something “he could think of nothing else to tell about himself. . . . Singer stood with his hands dangling loose. His head was still inclined to one side and his glance was oblique” (325). Rather than pausing longer to give Singer an opportunity to speak or asking Singer a question to keep him engaged in the conversation, “after a while they left him out of their conversation. And when they paid for the rounds of beers and were ready to depart they did not suggest that he join them” (325). The group intimates that they do not have a genuine interest in learning about Singer or befriending him when they neglect to pause their conversation or to ask him questions (114). Thus, sharing a mode of communication is not enough to cement a speaker-listener relationship.

In contrast to Singer’s other potential listeners, Antonapolous allows Singer to speak in his chosen form of communication uninterrupted, makes Singer feel loved and understood, and has established a long-term friendship with Singer, which helps him understand nonverbal language or meta-messages during their interactions.

Antonapolous creates a perceived intimacy between them by allowing Singer to speak uninterrupted for long periods of time. For example, during one of Singer’s trips

to visit Antonapolous at the sanatorium, Singer excitedly and rapidly begins to talk to his friend, shaping

the words with wild speed. His shoulders shook with laughter and his head hung backward. Why he laughed he did not know. Antonapolous rolled his eyes. Singer continued to laugh riotously until his breath was gone and his fingers trembled. He grasped the arm of his friend and tried to steady himself. His laughs came low and painfully like hiccoughs. (220)

During this entire encounter, Antonapolous does not sign anything back to Singer, allowing Singer to express himself fully while also leaving readers wondering if Antonapolous even understands the signs. Singer assumes that Antonapolous alone understands him, but admits he “never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him. But it did not matter,” implying the perception Singer has of their relationship potentially outweighs the reality (5). Regardless, Singer leaves the conversation feeling loved and understood. The experience highlights that the perceived listening of a silent person is just as valuable to these characters as one who is actually listening.

Singer and Antonapoulos not only share the same disability, but have been roommates for ten years, allowing them to have mutually shared experiences that Singer does not have with any of the other characters.<sup>60</sup> Like Janie and Pheoby from chapter two, Singer and Antonapolous have a long-standing friendship that allows them

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<sup>60</sup> In *Strange Bodies*, Gleeson-White asserts that Singer has unspoken sexual desires for Antonapolous (39), which causes Singer to share intimate details of his life with him. While this attraction may exist, I add that Antonapolous’s perceived listening empowers Singer to communicate.

to understand one another in complex ways that surpass the boundaries of speaking. Because they are familiar with one another, they are able to interpret each other's body language, facial expression, and meta-messages more accurately. For example, each day, at their parting, Singer grasps Antonapolous's arm, and looks silently but intently into his friend's face, which serves as silent admission of love and friendship between the two men. Though Singer at times doubts the Antonapolous's education level or his ability to understand some sign language, readers never see Singer question these embodied moments of understanding between the two of them. As noted in the introduction, the ability to decipher meta-messages, the unspoken along with the spoken, takes practice and is a sign of adept listening skills.

Singer's perception of his relationship with Antonapolous, and consequently Antonapolous's listening ability, is amplified within Singer's imagination because, like Mick, Singer cultivates an inside room, where he relives and creates memories of those he holds dear. Just as Mick's inside room contains Singer, Antonapolous dwells within Singer's inside room, marking listening figures as central to personal and psychological wellbeing. McCullers hints at Singer's inner room in her outline of "The Mute," the original title of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*<sup>61</sup> and evidence of Singer's inner room emerges in several places throughout the text; each time Antonapolous is present. Thus, even when Antonapolous is sent to the asylum, Singer still feels connected to his friend through his ability to picture Antonapolous as a fixture in his mind. Singer notes, "When he dreamed at night the face of his friend was always before him, massive and gentle. And in his waking thoughts they were eternally united" (322). Singer feels that "behind

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<sup>61</sup> See the section labeled "Author's Outline" within *Illumination and Night Glare* (138).

each waking moment there had always been his friend. And this submerged communion with Antonapolous had grown and changed as if they were together in the flesh” (60), which keeps their relationship active inside Singer’s inner room.

Many people, as the characters in this novel demonstrate, mistake silence for listening—even Singer, ultimately suggesting that the perceived listening of someone else is better than having no listener at all. In other words, because Singer is silent while the other characters are speaking, he gives the illusion that he is listening intently to their words even if he does not fully comprehend their speech. Antonapolous serves a parallel function for Singer. For example, just as Singer’s visitors equate Singer’s silence with brilliance, Singer believes Antonapolous’s silence is evidence that he is wise and understanding. Singer professes, “No one knew [Antonapolous] was wise but him” and describes Antonapolous as having a “wise and smiling” mouth and “eyes [that] were profound” (204). His perception of Antonapolous compels Singer to confide in Antonapolous. Singer explains, Antonapolous “watched things that were said to him. And in his wisdom he understood,” which echoes the beliefs of other characters in relation to Singer (204). In addition, despite the fact that Antonapolous could not read, Singer tells Antonapolous, “I write it to you because I think you will understand” (219). Singer admits, “He had always known that his friend was unable to make out the meaning of words on paper,” but separation and time lead Singer to have second thoughts: “As the months went by he began to imagine that perhaps he had been mistaken, that perhaps Antonapolous only kept his knowledge of letters a secret from everyone” (212). Because Antonapolous is silent, his literacy remains a secret, and Singer is left to deduce Antonapolous’s intelligence for himself, which allows him to

imagine the best-case scenario. Thus, McCullers's novel problematizes the idea of listening through the mechanism of silence or what happens when silence looks like listening. So, one must ultimately ask the question: is perceived feminist listening just as valuable as actual listening? In the case of these characters, the answer is a resounding yes.

While the novel demonstrates the power of a silent listener, it also demonstrates what can happen when the need for a listener goes unmet. When Singer learns of Antonapolous's death, his depression culminates in his suicide. Vickery writes, "Singer removes himself from the world as soon as his membership in it, symbolized by Antonapoulos is withdrawn" (17). Unlike Mick, with the physical presence of his listener permanently removed from him, Singer is unable to keep his inside room intact. Thus, when Antonapolous dies, so does Singer's inside room or his hopeful imaginings for a brighter future. He is unable to become his own listener, and as readers have seen earlier in the novel, Singer finds talking to himself to be shameful, which is why he "kept his hands stuffed tight into the pockets of his trousers" (12). When he is alone and his thoughts are with Antonapolous, "his hands would begin to shape the words before he knew it. Then when he would realize he was like a man caught talking aloud to himself. . . the shame and sorrow mixed together and he doubled his hands and put them behind him" (182). He renders himself incapable of maintaining a feminist listener after Antonapolous's passing because he is incapable of sustaining a private world where he and Antonapolous can coexist. As Gleeson White indicates, in Singer's mind, "Singer and Antonapolous can only be as one in death" (*Strange Bodies* 60). Moving back to the therapeutic nature of silent listening, one could argue that the therapy Antonapolous

provides Singer has not reached a point where separation from the therapist is possible; Singer is unable to self-medicate.

Singer's death leaves a lasting impression on all those in Singer's life. Readers are left to ponder what the remaining characters will do now that their listener is dead. The ending of the novel looks bleak for these remaining characters that now must find another means to relieve their loneliness. Virginia Carr argues that throughout McCullers's canon, "freakishness is a symbol of character's sense of alienation, of his being trapped within a single identity without the possibility of a meaningful connection with anyone else" (qtd. in *Strange Bodies* 38). However, I argue that McCullers has provided a glimmer of hope for Mick by demonstrating Mick's ability to take on the role of feminist listener for herself.

The characters in *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter* reveal the invaluable role of the listener in communication. All characters aforementioned notably selected a silent listener as a preferable outlet for various reasons. Yet, each is compelled to feel heard and accepted, even Singer. Garland-Thomson notes that the disabled characters in literature are often caricatures: "The plot or the work's rhetorical potential usually benefits from the disabled figure remaining other to the reader—identifiably human but resolutely different" (11). Singer, though disabled, is depicted as similar to the other characters in the novel who embark on a quest for love, acceptance, and communication. Singer is one of many seeking a listener. His choice to confide in his friend Antonapoulos demonstrates that the need for silent listeners is universal, further validating listening as an important reciprocal practice for successful conversation.

### **McCullers and Feminist Listening**

Like her contemporaries, McCullers saw an inherent value in the act of listening. In her essay, "The Vision Shared," McCullers notes, "All artists realize that the vision is valueless unless it can be shared" (264), suggesting the importance she places on those listening to her as well as her words on the page. In addition, her autobiography, *Illuminations and Night Glare*, references the cherished memories and opportunities McCullers had to listen to others. She describes spending her early childhood listening to her Mommy and, occasionally, her cousin: "My eldest cousin would tell us fairy tales about the glass mountain, Aesops fables," (9). Later she notes the importance of listening to her friend, Edwin Peacock, who for the first time introduced her to Marx and Engels (13), which had a profound impact on her life and works. She had the opportunity to listen to and work with several authors including Tennessee Williams, W.H. Auden, Richard Wright, etc., and even moved into a large home with a group of them to work and collaborate.

In addition to listening to others for inspiration, McCullers valued the moments when she has a feminist listener. While O'Connor's works serve as a critique of masculine listening, McCullers suggests that men can become feminist listeners perhaps based on her real life experiences with those around her. As previously noted, McCullers surrounded herself with male critics, friends, and acquaintances, and clearly valued their input and encouragement of her writing. Her professional and personal relationships with these men demonstrate her belief that men are capable of overcoming the gendered stereotypes of speaking and listening and of stepping outside the bounds of hegemonic discourse. In addition, McCullers recognizes her husband,

Reeves, for being such a listener, describing him as a great encouragement: “Every day when I would finish my work, I would read it out loud to Reeves, and at one point I asked if it was any good. . . . He said ‘No! I don’t think it’s any good—I know it’s great!’” (18). She attributes the time and affirmation that Reeves provided as beneficial and essential for helping her complete *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Reeves is also a good example of a silent listener capable of listening for an extended period of time without interruption as McCullers frequently read her work aloud to Reeves in their home.

In presenting Singer as both deaf and a feminist listener, McCullers also promotes the perception that disability is more an identity marker than a lack or absence of productivity, which aligns with Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s assessment in *Staring: How We Look*. This perspective of disability is especially poignant considering that McCullers herself could be labeled disabled in more ways than one: she suffered from several bouts of cancer, resulting in the amputation of her leg and crippling pain in her hands.<sup>62</sup> Diane Herndl explains that though literary history “was made up of disabled women writers,” that disability “remains invisible until we uncover its real history; understanding the degree to which women writers were both disabled and productive may be one way that we come to a different understanding of disability itself” (195). McCullers disability never stopped her from achieving her goals, as even on her deathbed, she continued to write, dictating her autobiography to her nurse.<sup>63</sup>

While it cannot be ascertained whether McCullers’ nurse was indeed a feminist listener,

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<sup>62</sup> See *Illuminations in Night Glare*, *The Lonely Hunter*, and *Carson McCullers: A Life* for further details about her ailments.

<sup>63</sup> While these friends are not disclosed in Carlos Dew’s edited version of *Illumination and Night Glare* or *Carson McCullers, a Life*, I speculate that they included Mary Mercer and Ida Reeder (despite the fact that McCullers claims the latter was illiterate) as both were among the only people given such lengthy access to McCullers before her death.



the trust McCullers places in her to transcribe her autobiography over other possibilities suggests that McCullers valued her as a listener and potential editor, censor, or co-writer of her work.<sup>64</sup>

Overall, McCullers' work can be viewed as a testament to her belief in the power of listening and, one could infer, the importance she places on her audience/readership for the process of meaning-making. It's possible that McCullers is inviting readers to think of Singer as a synecdoche for her readership when we consider that readers are silently listening to the plights of all the other characters in the novel along with him. Though the reader cannot vocally respond to these characters or to McCullers, an exchange is taking place in which the act of listening, and therefore, the reader's role is elevated. When asked in an interview whether Singer was meant to be an allegory or to "stand for more than himself," McCullers responds in the affirmative, claiming the people in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* serve as "symbolism . . . of man's isolation to each other and the terrible need to try to communicate" without any success (Savigneau 306). In other words, these characters were in desperate need of a listener, parallel to a common plight of mankind, including her readership. Whether her readers will be feminist listeners cannot be determined, but I invite scholars to think of the ways McCullers is using Singer's example of feminist listening, which is exemplified throughout the narrative as a potential guide to be emulated by the other characters as well as by McCullers's audience.

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<sup>64</sup> McCullers describes Ida Reeder as "the backbone of [her] house" and one of her "most faithful and beautiful friends." She continues to say Ida "regulates my daily habits, such as reading and working. Other people come and go, but Ida always remains" (Savigneau 320).

## Moving Forward

Overall, this chapter has met the goals of the project by utilizing the heuristic of feminist listening and providing another example within a range of listening situations, expanding the ideals of feminist listening to include the hearing impaired, and, therefore, broadening the understanding of listening in general. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is one of McCullers's most well known novels, but surprisingly it has not been thoroughly explored through the lens of disability studies despite the fact that McCullers labels John Singer a "deaf mute."<sup>65</sup> In addition, scholars have tended to focus on Singer's silence as an indication of his oppression rather than on his capacity to listen as a form of empowerment.<sup>66</sup> However, by paying attention to Singer's disability and considering his listening from a feminist perspective, I challenge the reading that the novel offers no remedy for the alienation of its "grotesque" characters.

Analyzing the novel through the lens of disability studies invites future criticism of this text as well as others within McCullers's *oeuvre*. Prior criticism of the novel refers to Singer as "grotesque," incorrectly characterizing Singer's deafness.<sup>67</sup> In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland Thomson encourages new interpretations of prior works,

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<sup>65</sup> Some scholars, like Harlan Lane, argue that deafness is not a disability. Others, like Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Jennifer Nelson, and Michael Davidson, argue the Deaf can be viewed through this framework due to societal perceptions of the culture. Still, others like Carol Padden, note that while intersections between Deaf studies and Disability studies exist, they have separate histories and can be viewed as separate disciplines (513).

<sup>66</sup> Russell notes that Singer is made powerful by "virtue of his disability" but does not explore Singer as a listener as I do here. In addition, Murray calls Singer a "careful listener" but does not use listening as a framework for her analysis or build upon this concept (112).

<sup>67</sup> Melissa Free explains that Singer is labeled grotesque for his status as a mute: "The visual and the aural are often linked in McCullers, and just as the mute seems to hear with his eyes careful readers can discern the silent in her fiction speaking in image as the grotesque" (426).

explaining that often “the grotesque becomes equated with physically disabled characters” within literary criticism (111).<sup>68</sup> McCullers’s works in particular are riddled with characters, like Cousin Lymon or Willie, who could be viewed using this lens.

Focusing on listening when examining the relationship between Singer and Mick illustrates that the two have made a meaningful connection, which has the potential to sustain Mick even after Singer’s death. As shown, Singer has effectively met all the criteria of feminist listening, empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity, enabling him to affirm and empower Mick Kelly. My interpretation of the text disrupts prior conversations of Singer as an oppressed character by shifting the conversation of him as a passive mute figure to an active listener. McCullers’s works contain many silent characters that might benefit from such a new perspective, including but not limited to Private Williams in the *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, Amelia in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, and the red-haired neighbor in “Court in the West Eighties.” Shifting the focus from silence to listening grants these characters more agency within the texts. The prevalence of these listening characters throughout her *oeuvre* suggests that McCullers views listening as a powerful form of rhetoric, a necessary component for sustaining the narrative.

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<sup>68</sup> In *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, Emily Russell claims, “The mutual burden shared by the grotesque and disability coincides with a shared history in the approach to physical difference in literature” (60).

### Conclusion: New Horizons for Feminist Listening

I gained interest in feminist listening after reading the following words from bell hooks: “No longer is it merely the absence of speaking voices, but the absence of hearing ears” (*Talking Back* 6). hooks argues that if men are not willing to listen to women, speaking is rendered mute. From this passage, I learned two things: first, listeners have an immense amount of power within communication. Second, men are not always conditioned to be the best listeners. Her words caused me to reflect about the act of listening and its gendered implications, which has been the driving force of my research agenda ever since. As a literary scholar, I began to notice the myriad of characters that were designated listeners throughout their respective texts, particularly throughout the works of Carson McCullers, the subject of my Masters thesis. The realization led me to ponder whether other female Southern authors utilized the same tactics, and as shown throughout this project, the pattern of listening across these works is undeniable. My goals for the project have been four-fold: to demonstrate the prevalence and importance of rhetorical listening within Southern women’s fiction; to expand the definition of rhetorical listening by claiming listening as a feminist act; to develop a heuristic or methodology by which other works could be evaluated; to examine why Southern female authors privilege listening through an examination of the rhetoric within their texts.

### **Contributions**

This dissertation makes important contributions to both literary criticism and feminist rhetoric by examining the prevalence of listening characters and the importance of listening within the works of four Southern female authors and five

texts. I argue that rhetorical listening is an important vector in understanding listening characters in these Southern women's novels, correcting current literary scholars' assumption that listening characters are mere "rhetorical machinery," altering the previous perspectives of the listener's agency from passive to active within the text, and establishing a method for feminist listening as defined in this project (Step 165).

Rhetorical scholars like Wayne Booth, Steven Mallioux, and Kenneth Burke have long-held the belief that literature can be examined rhetorically, yet feminist rhetorical scholars have yet to examine literature through the framework of rhetorical listening.<sup>69</sup> Thus, this project contributes to our understanding of how rhetorical theory can apply to novels by applying and expanding Ratcliffe's concept of rhetorical listening to fiction in the following ways: I suggest that listening is a skill set and potentially feminist act when viewed as a process that involves empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. I assert that listeners can be categorized according to their response/ purpose within fiction and beyond (strange, deliverer, silent). Prior rhetorical scholarship suggests that listening plays a crucial role within social situations, but this dissertation suggests that authors incorporate listening characters and the act of listening within their novels with intent for rhetorical effect. I illustrate that listening is a powerful form of rhetoric that can be used to attend to power dynamics and critique hegemonic discourse through the examination of listening situations within these novels. Listening is a rhetorical strategy that enriches the authors' ability to make a statement about cultural issues concerning race, gender, class, religion, and disability.

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<sup>69</sup> See the following works for examples of this scholarship: *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Booth), *Rhetorical Power* (Mallioux), and *Philosophy of Literary Form and Counterstatement* (Burke).

In addition to creating a methodology for feminist listening and listening characters, I assert that listening has gendered implications, primarily that women and men are socially trained to listen in varying ways, especially in the South as shown in these novels. Prior scholarship in gender studies<sup>70</sup> and Southern studies<sup>71</sup> suggests that men and women are taught to speak differently; however, the Southern novels I have examined in this project imply that listening skills are uniquely developed or tailored to the genders as well. Thus, this dissertation advances the argument that female listeners are more socially equipped to become feminist listeners than their male counterparts, which has major ramifications if listeners are deemed as equal to or greater than speakers within conversation. While scholars have insinuated that women are more likely to be trained as listeners, as this dissertation demonstrates within chapter four, both men and women can become skilled listeners by applying the above principals of feminist listening to conversation.

My work also contributes to the understanding of these female authors in relation to their readership, implying that these women are savvy rhetors who have an awareness of their audience and who have elevated the status of listening within their works by attending to the social dynamics of listening as it intersects with gender, race, class, religion, and disability. Both Welty and Hurston have been criticized for the narrative structures of *The Ponder Heart* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, namely for the use of the listening character. Critics believed these characters overly “feminized” the text or served as the “clanking in the narrative,” as shown in chapters one and two respectively (Allen 5; Stepto 165). Yet, this dissertation shows that these characters are

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<sup>70</sup> Nan Johnson, Deborah Tannen, Roxanne Mountford, etc.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Weaks-Baxter, Ann Scott, Lori Glover, etc.

a means of inviting the reader to participate in the conversation/gossip of the narrators, thus forging a bond between the author and the reader.

O'Connor and McCullers have been accused of adopting a masculine approach to writing rather than establishing themselves among their female peers. For example, O'Connor has been criticized for supposedly adhering to the patriarchy by writing primarily about the male experience, yet as demonstrated in chapter three, using a framework of feminist listening, readers note that rather than elevate the status of the male characters, her works critique masculine listening skills. McCullers' critics laud McCullers as "first rank among Southern women writers," and "second only to Faulkner," simultaneously accusing and praising her of adopting a more masculine approach to writing in order to attain success, but as seen in chapter four, her focus on rhetorical listening within *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* places her alongside her female contemporaries (Perry and Weeks-Baxter 402-3). Thus, this project establishes a pattern within Southern women's fiction wherein listening is deemed as a valuable component to the narrative.

### **Future Endeavors**

While my project fosters an expanded understanding of rhetorical listening as a feminist act within fiction, it represents only the cusp of what might be gleaned from such an examination within other works. At present, my project is limited by several factors: the author's gender, the Southern genre, the time period of publication (early 20<sup>th</sup> century) and the authors' race. Moving outside these parameters would undoubtedly offer a fuller understanding of listening characters as well as the act of feminist listening within fiction. For instance, do Southern male authors create listening

characters within their fiction, and how do these characters differ from their female counterparts? Do they have the same agency within the text? Do they seem to reflect the same theories about hegemonic discourse? For instance, in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, there are several speakers and listeners throughout the text, who are mostly male. Do these listening characters exhibit feminist listening traits like Singer or fall into hegemonic discourse patterns like Frankie or Haze?

While I have argued that Southern authors are ideal for this study due their gendered norms and oral culture, their Northern counterparts have also created a plethora of listening characters. For example, Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* features a listening character much like Edna Earle's guest, who serves as the catalyst for the story and is introduced in the beginning of narrative but remains mostly silent throughout the tale. Looking beyond geographical barriers could further the argument that women writers in general place an emphasis on rhetorical listening throughout their works.

In addition, while my study does include a chapter on Zora Neale Hurston, it does not look at a wider range of authors of color. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fit nicely into the project because Joe Starks aspired to attain the same privileges of his white counterparts and thus imposed the same standards of living on Janie, including the Southern belle ideology, which maintained women were to be submissive, silent, and charming. As shown throughout this project, these standards not only taught women to be adept listeners, but also instilled in them the value of listening. However, as Ann Scott points out in *The Southern Lady*, black women were often not held to same standards of Southern womanhood as Southern white women, mainly because they were expected to work. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's grandmother hints at



this when she tells Janie black women are the “mules of the world”(44). Given this information, it would be interesting to examine a wider range of African American authors to see if the act of listening was still emphasized throughout the texts. Also absent from my study are Chicana and Latina authors who are a growing population of the South. The addition of more minority writers would certainly build upon Ratcliffe’s idea of rhetorical listening as a cross -cultural trope for communication (1). Including these authors would help answer the questions do other minority authors use rhetorical listening as a tool within their fiction, and how does this affect the reading of the works?

Furthermore, all the listening characters within my project were selected by the speaker, suggesting that the speakers make a rhetorical choice in regards to whom they share their stories. What happens when this choice is taken away from the speaker: in other words, how might one categorize or evaluate rebellious acts of listening within fiction like eavesdropping? Looking at eavesdroppers would expand the analysis of rhetorical gossip used in chapter one and chapter two by illustrating the consequences of words heard by an unexpected audience or listening party. How might such an occurrence affect the speaker and impact the narrative?

### **Lasting Impressions**

*A Little Less Talk: Feminist Listening in Twentieth-Century Southern Women’s Novels* examines Southern literature, shifting the critical attention from the speaking to the listening characters within the novels, noting the integral roles the listener plays within the text. In the past these characters have been viewed as minor or insignificant, but through this study they have been brought to the forefront and shown to possess

agency within these works. Throughout the narratives, the female listening characters are represented as exhibiting the traits of feminist listening to a greater degree than their male counterparts with the exception of John Singer in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which I argue is due to his marginalized position as a deaf character placed outside hegemonic discourse.

In addition, all the authors in my study have claimed either in their essays, their diaries, or their autobiographies that listening has played a vital role in their own development as an author, suggesting that the act of listening enabled them to become better writers. The characters within these works mirror their own experiences, asserting that to be a good speaker first requires listening skills.

This project encourages modern scholars to read literature with a heightened awareness of the listening characters that are often marginalized, minor, or ignored and to consider how the act of listening affords these characters agency and contributes to the overall meaning of the texts. From this study scholars not only realize the important role that rhetorical listening plays in such works of literature but how it is a critical but heretofore underdeveloped dimension in feminist rhetoric. With the use of these new tools of analysis, scholars now have the ability to examine listening characters wherever they are found with the knowledge that these characters should be recognized as significant components for sustaining the narrative that deserve to be re-examined, analyzed and regarded as equals to the speaking characters.

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## ABSTRACT

## A LITTLE LESS TALK: FEMINIST LISTENING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTHERN WOMEN'S NOVELS

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"A Little Less Talk: Feminist Listening in Twentieth-Century Southern Women's Novels" examines listening characters in novels by Eudora Welty, Zora Neal Hurston, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers in order to examine how they reinforce, challenge, or disrupt what has been described by rhetorical scholars and social linguists as hegemonic discourse. In particular, this dissertation examines how listening characters negotiate the gendered dynamics of listening within the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts characterizing the Southern United States in the early twentieth-century. While listening characters have been considered minor, insignificant, or mere plot devices by past literary scholars, this project asserts that these characters make major contributions to discourse in the novel and to narrative more generally. The dissertation, which builds upon recent work in feminist rhetorics, is a necessary complement or corrective to the focus on women's "voice" that emphasizes speaking characters and ignores listening ones. The project argues Southern women novelists foreground listeners, highlighting the ways female and male listeners behave, react, and respond to speakers and demonstrates the benefits or consequences of sharing information with another person.

This dissertation expands the work of Krista Ratcliffe to define feminist listening as active listening, which empowers both the speaker and listener through a process involving

empathy, dialogic retention, and reciprocity. Employing this heuristic to evaluate listening skills in fiction, this dissertation examines a spectrum of listening types and categorizes listeners according to their behavior: silent, strange, hostile, deliverer. Furthermore, the project adds to scholarship on the rhetoric of gossip in fiction and its relationship to listening. This dissertation contributes to the study of American literature, Southern literature, rhetoric, and women and gender studies through the examination of the listening character and by putting rhetorical theory in conversation with literature, particularly twentieth-century Southern women's novels. Overall, my dissertation concludes that these Southern female authors use listening within their works to interrogate its social dynamics and intersections with discourses of gender, race, class, religion, and disability in the Southern United States in the early twentieth-century.