Petrified Men

On one level, Eudora Welty’s Petrified Man is a simple story, an amusing glimpse into society and relationships in the south in the 1930s. Many feminist critics define this story, with all the taboo topics of rape, abortion, promiscuity and freaks, as a treatise on gender relationships of the time and the sociological subjugation and victimization of women. However, when seen through a gender-based emphasis on the affairs of the men and women in the story, the importance of the clashes between the two women in minimized and covered up with humor. This is a story filled with feminine covert aggression. White and Kowalski, in Deconstructing the Myth of the Non-Aggressive Woman, provide “a feminist interpretation of female aggression.” Employing this gynocentric interpretation of feminine patterns of aggression to examine Petrified Man we see a spectacle, an out-and-out battlefield in a beauty parlor, full of covert feminine aggression, echoed by the symbol of feminine rage hiding behind a beautiful mask, Medusa.

White and Kowalski contend that “female aggression has gone unnoticed and thus, unnamed” due to a limited focus on the study of physical aggression, which is primarily a male behavior. Female physical aggression, rare and usually unexpected, is labeled irrational, and therefore illegitimate, thus women are thought to be non-aggressive because women display physical aggression only when a socially acceptable opportunity is available (White 488). Most of the time women’s aggression is covert, and their weapon of choice is gossip (Hess 1).

That all women are nurturers is certainly a myth. That all women nurture other women is laughably untrue, in fact, jealousy is one of the primary reasons for female aggression (White
Male and female are both aggressive, but in very different ways. The masculine model portrays aggressive behavior as violent, direct and physical. Feminine aggression is almost exclusively manifested by covert means. Feminine covert aggression is characterized by women avoiding expressing anger directly, “being prone to outbursts of ‘fury,’” and is usually motivated by jealousy (White 489).

Searching for an up-to-date gynocentric definition of female aggression was not difficult. It is splashed across today’s headlines and blogs everywhere, and is commonly connected with bullying:

“The words now associated with female aggressive behavior include: excluding, ignoring, teasing, gossiping, secrets, backstabbing, rumor spreading, and hostile body language (i.e., eye-rolling and smirking). Most damaging is turning the victim into a social "undesirable". The behavior and associated anger is hidden, often wrapped in a package seen as somewhat harmless or just a "girl thing". The covert nature of the aggression leaves the victim with no forum to refute the accusations and, in fact, attempts to defend oneself leads to an escalation of the aggression (Oliker).

An expert in all these methods of feminine covert aggression, Leota, with her “strong, red-nailed fingers,” pulls hair, hits, throttles, chokes and threatens. She is vulgar just to be shocking, which is a form of covert sexual abuse toward Mrs. Fletcher, who is clearly trying to hide her naïveté behind a mask of dignity, and fight back using the same means of feminine aggression. The beauty shop is a combat zone.
Conversely, the beauty parlor is also a kind of temple. In this place Mrs. Fletcher will be gratified in many ways, she will be made (reasonably) beautiful, and it is here that she will gain access to the collective female consciousness. “Welty authorizes the space of the beauty parlor – which is both a physical and a narrative space – as one within which the women can safely tell the story of the violence of difference which the Perseus-Medusa myth signifies” (Berlant 62). In the beauty parlor women share esoteric knowledge. Leota holds forth on all feminine matters from beauty secrets to childbirth, incest, and abortion. These dark secrets are hidden behind the mask of feminine “beauty” and are therefore protected symbolically by Medusa, whose head is said to guard the gates of feminine sacred places and protect the feminine mysteries from intrusion by men (Nason).

“Hidden in this den of curling fluid and henna packs, separated by a lavender swing-door from the other customers, who were being gratified in other booths, she could give her curiosity its freedom” (Welty 667). Mrs. Fletcher is in a secret place of women. Here are consultations and ideas and discourse on feminine things. She will learn, compete and be judged. Mrs. Fletcher is soon found guilty of being tender of her husband’s feelings, and believing they are still in love, or claiming to, at least. They tell her it won’t last. Olsen says, “Mrs. Fletcher gives voice to a definition of feminism that assigns most issues and their resolution to a woman’s mind only, but one must consult a man to make him feel needed every once in a while” (Olsen 147). Yet Welty suggests Mrs. Fletcher may only be making a gesture, pretending that her husband has a say in female matters. Mr. Fletcher will be asked his advice only on feminine matters if she needs a perm, but not if she should abort her pregnancy. On the surface, she is nice when Leota is vulgar; however, they are equally and covertly aggressive toward men and toward each other.
A beauty parlor is a place where women gain eminence. Women make themselves attractive, not to please a man, but to be powerful, to win the competition, to be the prettiest, the womanliest, and the one who wins the best man. This man is just another symbol of feminine aptitude and success, no different than a nice house, a great hairdo, or a good manicure. Mrs. Pike, who is a decided (meaning unquestionable) blonde, has clearly reached a level of prominence among women, and Leota uses her friendship with her as one of the opening salvos to wound Mrs. Fletcher, saying, “Honey, ‘cute’ ain’t the word for what she is. I’m tellin’ you, Mrs. Pike is attractive. She has her a good time. She’s got a sharp eye out, Mrs. Pike has” (Welty 667). What woman could want a better description for herself? She is attractive, she has fun, and she is smart. Mrs. Fletcher has been neatly excluded and made to feel inferior, on purpose. Then the claws come out. Mrs. Fletcher accuses Leota of making her hair fall out, Leota resorts to violence with fingernails, chemicals and choking. They compare how tall their husbands are. Leota walks away from the first round, but she doesn’t get the last word, because Mrs. Fletcher hits her in the behind with the door. As a society we find this amusing. It is harmless girl stuff, so common we don’t think about it as aggression at all.

“Leota and the beauticians hold the secret of the Medusa” (Berlant 62). Many elements in the story and the beauty shop reflect the Medusa theme: the mirrors, the freaky hair, the secretive, female-only setting, and the petrified man himself. “Leota rose on her toes for an instant—‘and it goes out to his joints and before you can say ‘Jack Robinson,’ it’s stone—pure stone. He’s turning to stone” (Welty 671). She thrills at his condition and her telling. Leota tells us the men in the story, despite the fact that they are good dressers or fun in the rumble seat, are symbolically petrified, meaning inert or immobile, unable to control their women. Another meaning of petrified is frightened, and this echoes the feminist theory of Medusa as an object of
both lust and terror for men, suggesting that the men in the story are also afraid of the women, subjugated in this southern matriarchal society, controlled by feminine covert aggression.

Seen through the lens of feminine covert aggression, even the story of Medusa suggests looking beyond male/female gender conflicts to help define *Petrified Man:* The beautiful Gorgon Medusa of ancient Greece bragged she was prettier than the Goddess Minerva. Then she had sex with Poseidon in the temple of Minerva, defiling the temple and angering the Goddess. Minerva retaliates to Medusa’s feminine covert aggression by cursing her, making her ugly and turning her beautiful hair into living serpents. Medusa’s face was so terrifying that any man who looked at her was turned to stone. She was killed and beheaded by Perseus, and even in death, she turned men to stone (Nason). Feminist theory interprets Medusa as a representation of women’s rage and anger toward men, as well as their feelings of loss at their deep separation from men (Berlant 59). In a different gynocentric interpretation, an argument could be made that Medusa may represent the hurtful distance between men and women which is created by secretive, back-stabbing, gossiping, rumor spreading feminine covert aggression. According to Nagel, “They live in a world of artifice and monstrous bad manners (Welty 667). However, the infrequent discussion of the feminine covert aggression that led up to Medusa being cursed suggests that the matter of feminine covert aggression is indeed covert. It is hidden in plain sight by the widely accepted societal notion that women are safe because they are typically not physically aggressive, and perfectly illustrated in satirical humor by Eudora Welty’s *Petrified Man.*

Works cited
Petrified Men – Feminine Covert Aggression in Eudora Welty’s *Petrified Man* – Cathy Thornton Brown


