

The Grotesque as Feminist Revision of the “Southern Lady” in Carson McCullers’s and Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction

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The fiction of both Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor addresses issues of gender roles, particularly in relation to the rigid gender roles defined by the ideals of the American South, which is the setting of nearly all of their writing. And while it is purported that the two authors did not admire each other’s work, as Louise Westling comments in *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, “O’Connor had an almost constitutional aversion to Carson McCullers,” and that “McCullers was jealous of O’Connor’s success . . . feeling that . . . [O’Connor] had been poaching on her territory” (137), they share many similarities in their lives and work. Both women, as bright, ambitious young women in Georgia during a time when intelligence and career ambitions were not considered proper attributes for women in the South, demonstrated a kind of tempered rebellion which allowed them some outlet for their frustrations, while keeping them enough within social tolerance that they were not completely ostracized. McCullers was a determined tomboy, dressing in men’s clothes, smoking cigarettes, and as Westling reports, drinking “beer in bars frequented by soldiers from Fort Benning” (49). While O’Connor was never as outrageous as McCullers, she also quietly rebelled, intentionally wearing ugly clothes and refusing to participate in dance class. Both women also suffered debilitating illnesses which seriously affected their physical independence and ultimately claimed both their lives.

More importantly, though, is their shared disdain for the icon of the Southern Lady. From both their personal rebellions against this ideal, and even more so from the characters they created, it is clear both saw the ideal of the white Southern Lady as a major impediment to women’s independence and equality. Both McCullers’s and O’Connor’s fiction abound with loner adolescent girls who resist the Southern Lady ideal either by being tomboys or by being purposefully disagreeable. Both authors also present characters who lampoon the ideal, by employing the grotesque either through direct parody or through gender bending. Susan V. Donaldson correlates the use of the grotesque with gender role issues in “Making a Spectacle: Welty, Faulkner, and the Southern Gothic,” proposing that “the particular propensity of modern southern writers to evoke the gothic, the macabre, and the grotesque might very well have a good deal to do with regional anxiety about rapidly changing gender roles in the first

half of the twentieth century” (2). Though there is increasing interest in analyzing gender issues in both McCullers’s and O’Connor’s fiction, very few critics see the two authors as feminists. The fact that most of their female characters succumb to male dominance in one form or another is often cited as evidence of their lack of feminist vision. Katherine Hemple Prown cites this same point in *Revising Flannery O’Connor* to claim that O’Connor rejected a female authorial voice, concluding that “the strain of misogyny that runs throughout her work . . . makes the identification of O’Connor as a feminist problematic, if not impossible” (11). Despite the fact that most current scholarship interprets McCullers and O’Connor in this light, it should be clear from direct textual analysis that both authors satirize the Southern Lady, and any strains of misogyny in their work reflect a realistic depiction of the society their characters inhabit. It should also be clear that in both authors’ satire of the Southern Lady ideal, part of what is satirized is the Southern Lady’s acceptance and validation of the misogynous society of the Old South.

It is true that few of McCullers’s or O’Connor’s female characters ride off into a sunset of opportunity for the “Modern Woman.” Westling notes, “neither McCullers nor O’Connor could really manage to envision any positive, active life for women of her own generation” (176), but such endings would be very unrealistic for the setting of both authors’ fiction. Even the most improbable of McCullers’s or O’Connor’s plots are more plausible than the success of a modern feminist character in the rural South of the 1940s or 1950s. What was plausible to both McCullers and O’Connor was that many young women in the South were unhappy with the narrow expectations set for them, and that many saw the ideal of the Southern Lady as a grotesque of real womanhood, even if they were not certain as to what constituted real womanhood. The vision of the Southern Lady as an icon of purity, virtue, beauty, grace, fragility, and obedience reduces womanhood to a tragic-comic role of empty idol, a pretty puppet, that denies women complexity in their emotional and intellectual lives and denies them power over their own lives. Despite current trends in scholarship on McCullers and O’Connor, it is clear that both viewed the icon of the Southern Lady as a goliath that needed to be destroyed for truly modern women to gain social acceptance. The lampooning of Southern Lady characters uses the indirect humor of satire to show the icon for the empty, pretty puppet she is. And though McCullers’s and O’Connor’s adolescent female characters who resist the ideal are often not pretty nor even likeable, they forge ahead and attempt to create a place for themselves in a society that does not accept them.

McCullers’s fiction focuses heavily on female characters who resisted the Southern Lady ideal. Two examples of this are Mick Kelly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and Amelia Evans in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Both are tomboys, though only Mick is still physically an adolescent. Both characters also have limited contact with female role models, especially those who embody the Southern feminine ideal. While Mick lives with her mother and sisters, she has very little interaction with them and treats her traditionally feminine sisters with indifference, much preferring her father and older brother. Mick’s impression of her priming sisters Hazel and Etta is that they “were O.K. as far as sisters went. But Etta was like she was full of worms. All she thought about was movie stars and getting in the movies” (50). When the sisters chide Mick for her tomboy clothes, Mick responds, “I don’t want to be like either of you and I don’t want to look like either of you” (51). Amelia Evans’s experience is entirely male centered. Amelia is raised by her father alone, and no other female characters are involved in her life. Amelia grows into a formidable adult tomboy “with bones and muscles like a man” (4), taking over her father’s store after his death. She

is a successful and fierce businesswoman, carpenter, butcher, and distiller, and as the narrator notes, she is clearly more comfortable with a life traditionally viewed as a bachelor's: "often she spent whole nights back in her shed in the swamp, dressed in overalls and gum boots, silently guarding the low fire of the still" (4). Both Mick and Amelia exemplify the antithesis of the Southern Lady ideal.

Mick and Amelia are also both ambitious. Mick develops a passion for music and spends hours trying to build a violin and compose music. She also ventures out after dark, despite warnings from other girls that "a man would come out from somewhere and put his teapot in [you]" (122), to listen secretly to people's radios on the wealthy side of town. For Mick, "that was the realest part of the summer—her listening to this music on the radio and studying about it" (123). Amelia's ambition has already been fruitful for her, for at the beginning of the novel she is a very accomplished and capable woman, if not very personable. As the narrator observes, "the only use Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out of them. And in this she succeeded. Mortgages on crops and property, a sawmill, money in the bank—she was the richest woman for miles around" (5).

Despite the fact that both characters are made to suffer for their independence and ambitiousness—Mick is forced to abandon studying music to work at Woolworth's to help support her family, and Amelia is betrayed and vanquished by her Cousin Ly-mon and her arch enemy/ex-husband Marvin Macy—both characters make rebellious stands against the Southern Lady ideal. Westling posits in "Tomboys and Revolting Femininity" that "ambitions are the psychological equivalents for the physical assertiveness of the tomboy, and again the requirements of submissiveness and restraint for the southern lady have traditionally discouraged the pursuit of professional, artistic, or political goals" (157). For both characters to pursue openly their own ambitions is a direct act of defiance against the submissive and deferential Southern Lady ideal even more so than their masculine dress and mannerisms. Suzanne Morrow Paulson argues this point further in "Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café: A Song Half Sung, Misogyny, and 'Ganging Up,'*" claiming that Amelia is clearly a heroic feminist character who struggles "to contribute actively to a misogynistic community, to control her own destiny, and earn respect from the men" (188). The reality that neither character succeeds in achieving lasting independence reflects their society's vicious refusal to accept them, rather than on the characters' or the author's lack of vision. It would not have been plausible in realistic fiction depicting the mid-twentieth century American South to have written conclusions in which characters such as Mick and Amelia triumph in rejecting the social restrictions of womanhood.

McCullers also whittled away at the Southern Lady ideal through parody. McCullers often parodied this ideal through either grotesque caricatures or gender-bending characters. Perhaps the most comical and pathetic caricature of the Southern Lady ideal is Baby Wilson from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Baby's exaggerated femininity and fragility at the age of four is a sickly sweet miniature of the ideal. Partly due to her age and partly due to her mother's tutelage, Baby is a tiny, pretty puppet of purity, virtue, beauty, grace, fragility, and obedience. On the day that Mick's brother Bubber shoots Baby with his rifle out of frustration over her inaccessibility (a sly commentary on the ambivalence men also felt toward this ideal), she is wearing "last year's soiree costume—with a little pink-gauze skirt that stuck out short and stiff, a pink body waist, pink dancing shoes, and even a little pink pocketbook. With her yellow hair she was all pink and white and gold—and so small and clean that it almost hurt to watch her." When she crosses the street, she "prisse[s] . . . in a cute way" (197), but won't face Mick or Bubber. Baby fully embodies the dainty, preening delicacy

of the Southern Lady, but the ideal becomes absurd and freakishly sexualized when mirrored by a toddler. Baby does not exhibit any of the normal behaviors or interests of a toddler, but instead shares more in common with a vain young woman; she is more concerned with her clothes and hair, and her comportment than she is with playing, candy, or toys. Through Baby, McCullers exposes the shallow perversity of the Southern Lady ideal.

The more common approach McCullers took to parody ideal femininity was through androgynous or gender bending characters. McCullers's tomboy characters certainly can be seen as grotesque or freakish in their androgyny. And while Amelia's exaggerated manliness and crossed eyes seem more obviously grotesque, Donaldson asserts that "the female adolescent is perhaps even more grotesque than her adult counterpart for not only is she female, but also she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood and . . . between masculine and feminine gender identification" (3). Thus the nature of Mick's physical, psychological, and social transformation from child to adult renders her freakish.

However, a more subtle parody of the Southern Lady ideal comes in the form of McCullers's feminine male characters such as Biff Brannon in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and Cousin Lymon in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. After the death of Biff's wife Alice, who he had not slept with for years, he begins to transform. He carefully redecorates the bedroom, washes the lower half of his body for the first time in years, and begins to experiment with Alice's toiletries. When he finds a leftover bottle of Alice's Agua Flora, he develops the habit of applying the cologne not like a man would apply after shave, but "to the lobes of his ears or to his wrists" (270) as would a woman. He also begins to spruce up his diner with decorations and flowers with, as the narrator notes, "an eye for color and design" (275). Biff begins to transform into a freakishly androgynous man who adopts the Southern Lady's concern for beauty and grace.

He also becomes increasingly maternal toward his niece Baby and diner patron frequent Mick. Biff tends to Baby in a distinctly motherly fashion. After Baby is shot, she becomes sullen, and though her mother, Lucille, has difficulty handling her, Biff succeeds. When Baby refuses to take off her coat at the diner, Biff takes "the situation in charge. He soothed Baby with a ball of candy gum and eased the coat from her shoulders. Her dress had lost its set in the struggle with Lucille. He straightened it so that the yoke was in line across her chest. He retied the sash and crushed the bow to just the right shape with his fingers" (276). Biff's feelings for Mick are more ambiguous, but he maintains an interest in her from a distance, and wishes he could do something to help her. When he fantasizes about adopting boy and girl toddlers, he imagines himself making dainty frocks for the little girl, a girl he envisions to be "like Mick (or Baby?) at that age" (282). By the end of the novel when Mick appears older and less in need of mothering, Biff notices that he no longer feels drawn to her, but feels "only a sort of gentleness" (428). Biff's transformation continues into a motherly role as a social matron, further embodying the ideals of the nurturing Southern Lady.

Cousin Lymon in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, while not motherly like Biff, is also a very feminized man. Upon his arrival at Amelia's store, his hunched back and shabby clothes make him appear very weak and small. Additionally, when he appeals to Amelia to take him in, he breaks down and cries. When the local men see this, they call Lymon a "Morris Finestien," after a Jewish man "who cried if you called him Christ killer" (8), and who came to symbolize any prissy behavior in a man. It is Lymon who encourages Amelia to open the café and who also serves as its host and local gossip, and the narrator comments that "it was the hunchback who was most responsible for

the great popularity of the café. Things were never so gay as when he was around" (37). Cousin Lymon becomes like the "belle of the ball" at the café.

Lymon's femininity becomes even more pronounced when Amelia's ex-husband Marvin Macy returns from prison. Lymon becomes infatuated with Marvin immediately, and openly flirts with him when Marvin comes to the café by "wigg[ing] his large pale ears" (45). When that doesn't impress Marvin, Lymon goes so far as to flutter his eyelids at him and dance around. Lymon follows Marvin around like he is lovesick, and ultimately pairs up with Marvin and with him betrays Amelia in a perverse love triangle.

Feminine male characters such as Biff and Cousin Lymon are grotesque in their distortions of gender images and roles. By representing traditionally feminine behaviors of the Southern Lady in male characters—delicacy, motherliness, obsequiousness, and weakness—McCullers casts those behaviors in contrast to the more favored attributes of a patriarchal society. Whatever success the two characters have is largely in spite of their feminine behavior, for after all, they are still men. When the two characters exhibit feminine behavior, they appear silly and comical, frivolous and freakish, and their behavior highlights the superficiality of the Southern Lady ideal.

O'Connor's fiction also abounds with characters who resist the Southern Lady ideal. Rather than being tomboys, O'Connor's characters adopt a certain contrariness to the attributes of the ideal. Westling observes that, for O'Connor's characters who resist the ideal, "nothing could be further from the beauty and grace of the southern belle than the glasses, ugly braces, and extra pounds of O'Connor's twelve-year-old girls or the wooden legs, bad hearts, and fondness for ridiculous sweatshirts and girl scout shoes for her mature daughters" (*Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens* 146). O'Connor's resistant characters stand as a counterpoint to the facade of the Southern Lady ideal.

Two prime examples of these characters are the twelve-year old girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and Joy/Hulga Hopewell in "Good Country People." The unnamed daughter in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is nearly the antithesis of the Southern Lady, with her "fat cheeks and . . . braces" which "glared like tin" (237), and is shown in stark contrast to her visiting fourteen-year old cousins Joanne and Susan who "put on lipstick and their Sunday shoes and [walk] around in the high heels all over the house, always passing the mirror in the hall slowly to get a look at their legs" (236). The girl has no interest in boys, makeup, or in being pleasant and social. When the girl's mother arranges for two local boys to take the cousins to the fair, the girl's fantasy about her own interaction with the boys is that they served in the war together: "They were under me and I saved them five times from Japanese suicide divers" (239-40). When the mother arranges a backyard dinner for the cousins and the boys, the girl, offended by their flirtations, refuses to eat with them. The girl repeatedly thinks ugly things about the people around her, and acknowledges when she is praying that "she knew she would never be a saint. She did not steal or murder but she was a born liar and slothful and she sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody" (243). In thought, manner, and comportment, she resists and rejects the Southern Lady ideal.

Joy/Hulga Hopewell in "Good Country People" is an adult parallel to the twelve-year-old girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." She is another surly, disagreeable daughter who refuses to be ladylike or dress in a feminine way. Joy/Hulga wears glasses, and has a weak heart and a wooden leg, and she accentuates the leg when she walks, deliberately stumping around the house. She purposefully dresses in an absurd fashion, wearing "a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy

on a horse embossed on it" (276). She also changes her name from the upbeat and feminine Joy to Hulga, specifically because it is the ugliest name she can think of. She is extremely proud of this accomplishment, and envisions the name "working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called" (275). Joy/Hulga revels in her defiance of the ideal.

The twelve-year-old girl and Joy/Hulga also share exceptional intelligence, which further accounts for their distaste for the Southern Lady ideal. Whereas the ideal Southern Lady was not supposed to ever make a man feel threatened or challenged by her intellect, both the girl and Joy/Hulga are proud, even arrogant, of their intellectual abilities. The girl thinks that her cousins are stupid, terming them "practically morons," and takes solace in the fact that "they were only second cousins and she couldn't have inherited any of their stupidity" (236). The girl also decides that the local boys are stupid as well because they are in school to become Church of God preachers, assessing that "you don't have to know nothing to be one" (239). When the cook scolds her for calling the cousins and boys "stupid idiots," she asserts that even if God struck her deaf and dumb, she would "still be smarter than some" (242). Joy/Hulga is also assertive with her intellect. She has a PhD in the very unladylike field of philosophy, with a firm grounding in existentialism and nihilism. She does not hide her disdain for those whom she views as less intelligent, and looks "at young men as if she could smell their stupidity" (276). Both characters refuse to hide or temper their pride in their intelligence.

Both the girl and Joy/Hulga resist the Southern Lady ideal by reversing its dictates; while the ideal promotes attention to physical appearance, the two characters are intentionally homely, and while the ideal promotes unthreatening sociability, the two are confrontational and abrasive. Both characters are repulsed by the idiocy of the feminine ideal and see themselves as having to relinquish too much of what they value in themselves to live up to it. Instead of modeling themselves on male authority figures—since, unlike McCullers's tomboys, O'Connor's daughter characters rarely have living fathers—the girl and Joy/Hulga resist by defining themselves in opposition to the ideal. Like McCullers's characters, O'Connor's characters who resist the ideal rarely triumph over their circumstances, though they, too, should be viewed as feminist despite this because of their efforts to assert themselves outside of the strict dictates of gender role. Westling concludes that the larger reason for the lack of success of O'Connor's resistant daughter characters is not because of O'Connor's lack of feminist vision, but because the characters are "too intelligent, well educated, and sourly independent to ever assume 'normal' roles as wives and mothers" (*Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens* 146). The characters' abrasiveness is also probably the result of their awareness of the fact that their society has no place for them.

Like McCullers, O'Connor also peoples her fiction with parodies of the Southern Lady ideal. O'Connor adopts a more direct approach than McCullers by turning all paragons of the Southern Lady ideal into haughty, shallow, manipulative bigots. Prown observes that "for O'Connor, ladyhood was a comical state at best, a perilous state at worse. Women who embraced it deserved their fate" (6). From this observation, Prown asserts that O'Connor is misogynistic. However, it should be clear that it is the ideal that O'Connor is satirizing, not all womanhood. For O'Connor's Southern Lady characters even more so than McCullers's, their devotion to the ideal exposes the underlying ugliness of the Southern Lady ideal, which, in turn, often causes their downfall.

Many of O'Connor's stories have characters who parody the Southern Lady ideal. Two examples are Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation" and the grandmother in "A Good Man

is hard to Find." Mrs. Turpin is obsessed with proper behavior and social class. While in the doctor's office waiting room with her husband, she sizes up all the patients' social status according to their dress and habits. She has determined that a trio, a pair of women and a child, are white-trash based on their shabby clothes and lack of manners because the women don't require the child to move so Mrs. Turpin can sit down. As Mrs. Turpin surveys the room, she thinks the boy "should have been told to move over and make room for the lady" (488). At night Mrs. Turpin often muses over how she would solve the dilemma if Jesus made her choose between being either "a nigger or white-trash" (491), always hoping not to have to choose a fate inferior to her present status. She frequently considers how to rank people by race and class, and usually concludes that "[o]n the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and then above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged" (491). Mrs. Turpin exults in her superiority as a white Southern Lady.

Mrs. Turpin is so self-assured of her superior status as a lady that she is very free with her judgments. She chats with the one other woman she deems to be a lady in the waiting room, making disparaging racial remarks, yet she repeatedly asserts that "it's a heap of things worse than a nigger" (498). The other lady's daughter, Mary Grace, an overweight, acne-faced college girl, becomes increasingly enraged by Mrs. Turpin's racist talk. When Mrs. Turpin thanks Jesus for making her so wonderful, with "a little of everything, and a good disposition besides" (499), Mary Grace hurls her psychology textbook at Mrs. Turpin and hits her in the eye. It is Mrs. Turpin's investment in her exalted status as a Southern Lady that, to her, validates her ideas about race and class, yet which simultaneously validates her ugliness to the reader. By assuming the rights of her status as a Southern Lady, Mrs. Turpin transforms herself from the ideal lady to a grotesque bigot.

The grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" also reveals the inherent ugliness in the Southern Lady ideal. Miles Orvell in "A Critical Study of 'A Good Man is Hard to Find'" describes the grandmother as "foolish, xenophobic, racially condescending, and self-righteously banal," representing a "remnant of Southern gentility" (118). She is very attentive to outward appearance and femininity, wearing "a navy blue sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print" for traveling in the car on vacation. She makes a mental note that if the family had an accident and she was "dead on the highway," anyone "would know at once that she was a lady" (118). Clearly, the grandmother wants to assert her status as a Southern Lady, even in death.

She is also very manipulative and plays on her status as the family's Southern Lady matron to get her way. She tries a variety of ploys to convince her son Bailey to take the family to Tennessee, where she has relatives, instead of Florida, where the family wants to go. First, she uses a newspaper story on the Misfit serial killer to try to steer the family from their planned destination, proclaiming "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it" (117). When that doesn't work, she tells the children a story about an old plantation house with trap doors and hidden silver to take the family off track. Bailey drives down a dirt road she claims leads to the mansion, which causes them to have an accident and run into the Misfit. While the Misfit proceeds to execute the family, the grandmother attempts various appeals to save her own life, yet makes no appeal for her family. Because of the Misfit's polite demeanor, she mistakes him for a good God-fearing man, and appeals to religion. When this also doesn't work, she returns to her tried-and-true tactic of the Southern

Lady matron. She declares to him, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children" (132), which prompts him to shoot her several times in the chest. Stephen C. Bandy, in "A Contrasting View of 'A Good Man is Hard to Find,'" argues that when she exclaims this, "she sets out to conquer him" with "sentimentality" (127), rather than shower him with maternal generosity. This distinction emphasizes O'Connor's aim to make the grandmother appear grotesque and render her portrayal as satiric rather than sympathetic.

Mrs. Turpin and the grandmother both believe in the exalted status of the Southern Lady and are proud to exemplify it. In doing so, though, both reveal the racist and bigoted assumptions upon which the ideal is based. Like Mrs. Turpin, it is the grandmother's committed belief in her status as a lady that deludes her into thinking she is superior and beyond harm, and as Bandy confirms, "her vanity is remarkable. But the grandmother prefers to see herself as a valiant defender of social decorum in a world of barbarians" (129). At the same time, however, the grandmother's behavior reveals to the reader that she is a vain, shallow, and shrewish old woman, just as Mrs. Turpin's gratitude for having been made so well by Jesus reveals her self-satisfied bigotry. O'Connor's searing satire of these characters is clearly an indictment of the ideal they proclaim to exemplify, rather than a symptom of authorial misogyny. It is because of the reign of the Southern Lady ideal and its devotees that O'Connor's characters who resist the ideal are so bitter and have such limited futures.

McCullers and O'Connor were certainly not feminist authors in the way current culture would define such. Neither author made clear statements of solidarity for other women authors, let alone for women's rights, and few of their characters are successful modern women. However, both authors present female characters who resist the traditional feminine gender roles and who attempt to assert their independence, ambitions, and intelligence. While these characters are not altogether likeable, they are often protagonists, and readers often sympathize with these characters despite their flaws. In an important way, these characters are more like real women than idealized feminist characters would be, because they do not represent a socio-political agenda; they try to represent their own individuality. Additionally, while parodying female and feminine characters may appear to be misogynistic, overall, both authors use satire specifically on characters who represent the idealized feminine gender role that the "resister" characters are trying to avoid. The icon of the Southern Lady is the very problem facing McCullers's Mick Kelly and Amelia Evans, and to O'Connor's the twelve-year-old girl and Joy/Hulga Hopewell, and is the biggest impediment to their individuality. McCullers's Baby Wilson, Biff Brannon, and Cousin Lymon, as well as O'Connor's Mrs. Turpin and the grandmother, all reveal the grotesque nature of this feminine ideal. It is also fairly clear from information on both McCullers's and O'Connor's lives that both saw the icon of the Southern Lady as an impediment to their own ambitions. Both saw it as the antithesis of themselves and rebelled against it. While neither McCullers nor O'Connor may have been sure what should replace the Southern Lady ideal, both knew it was important to dismantle it in order to make room for a new way to define gender roles.

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