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“The Presentation of Urban and Rural Society and  
Gender Roles in Selected Short Stories  
by Elizabeth Spencer”

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*And the princess and the prince  
Discuss what's real and what is not  
It doesn't matter inside the Gates of Eden*

*(Bob Dylan, Gates of Eden)*

## **LIST OF ABBREVEATIONS**

FD	“First Dark”
SL	“A Southern Landscape”
WA	“The White Azalea”
TV	“The Visit”
IM	“I, Maureen”
JP	“Jean-Pierre”
BV	“The Business Venture”
MS	“The Master of Shongalo”

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 General Introduction

Several critics have dealt with Elizabeth Spencer's novels, but comparatively little has been written about her short stories. To date, there are three book-length studies of Elizabeth Spencer's work, by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (1985), Terry Roberts (1993), and Catherine Seltzer (2009). Prenshaw and Roberts both devote one chapter to all the collected short stories, which gives a useful overview but, naturally, makes it impossible to deal with any of them in much detail. The most recent study by Seltzer dedicates one chapter to the collection *Jack of Diamonds and Other Stories* from 1988. A doctoral thesis about Spencer's work by Angelika Ilg (University of Innsbruck, 1994) also focuses on Spencer's novels.

An explanation for why Spencer has received relatively little attention from academic critics – despite a great number of very favorable reviews – might be “that Spencer has written largely in the tradition of realism. Though she has experimented with multiple narrators, interior monologue, intricate chronologies, symbolic imagery, and many other devices of psychological revelation of character, in the main she has stayed with the traditional forms” (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 160). Her remarkable craftsmanship as a short story writer has been praised, but also been criticized by some reviewers (cf. Prenshaw, *Spencer* 160). I would like to argue that Spencer as a short story writer deserves more attention, because she has published such a variety of multifaceted stories. “Indeed, the range in Spencer's subjects from the sunny Marilee to the dark, disturbed Maureen reflects at once the range of her interest in contemporary life and the flexibility of her extraordinary craftsmanship as a storyteller” (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 14). Therefore, the objective of the paper at hand is going to be the detailed analysis of a representative selection of Spencer's short stories.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Due to this explicit focus on Spencer's short fiction, I am going to omit the sometimes very interesting interrelations between some of the stories with Spencer's novels that several critics have observed.

In the present thesis, I am going to investigate how the author transfers the recurrent theme of female emancipation to different local settings. The observation that many of Spencer's story characters are torn between the need to feel connected to their family and to their heritage, and the urge to become an individual and free oneself from the family ties is, of course, not new. The author herself has acknowledged this as a recurrent theme in her collection *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* in an interview conducted in 1980:

That collection spans thirty-three years of story writing; but, yes, I believe there may be at least one recurrent theme. I think many of the stories are about liberation and the regret you have when you liberate yourself. You see, however much you might want to, you cannot both hold on and be free. And that's the crux in a lot of those stories. (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 56)

It is also Terry Roberts' key argument in his monograph about Spencer's work that "[t]he relationship of the individual to the community had been Spencer's central concern since the beginning of her career" (*Self and Community* 1), and other critics have argued in a similar vein. However, I am going to take the opportunity of an in-depth-analysis of a small selection of short stories to not only investigate the realization of recurrent themes in different local settings, but also attempt to trace developments in Spencer's short story technique over a time span of almost four decades.

A great majority of the main protagonists in Spencer's short stories are female, and most of them are struggling with processes of emancipation in some way. Although Spencer has said that she does not consider herself a feminist (Girard 11), gender roles in the conservative society she grew up in most likely did influence her writing. Spencer commented on this topic in an interview in 1993:

The way I was brought up, though, it was considered that men did all the interesting things out in the world and women were pretty much reduced to a domestic pattern or minor careers. The whole idea of a woman in the arts must have horrified my family at first. They admired English women who had artistic careers, but no Southern women were supposed to be encouraged in that way. (Entzminger, "Interview" 602)

The eight stories I selected for this paper were all taken from Elizabeth Spencer's short story collections published to date; which gave me a choice from a total of forty-



five stories. The selected texts are arranged according to their local settings, and at the same time are connected to Elizabeth Spencer's biography, i.e. her changing places of residence over the years. This structuring device is, of course, an obvious one. However, Spencer has commented on how important these places of residence were for her development as a writer; she has said that leaving the south helped her find her own narrative style (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 61). As one of the main objectives of my thesis is to compare different local settings, this paper is organized in four equal sections about Mississippi, Italy, Montreal, and the US-American south again.

Each of the four main chapters will be subdivided into an introduction, the discussion of two short stories, and a concluding chapter comparing the two stories. Each introduction will present some pertinent aspects of society and gender roles that I found relevant in connection with the local and temporal setting of the respective stories. Each short story will be analyzed according to setting, story characters, the presentation of society and gender roles, and the most important characteristics concerning narrative technique. As has been pointed out above, the present paper uses Elizabeth Spencer's biography, namely her different places of residence, as its main structuring device. Therefore, the second part of this introduction will provide a biographical sketch of the author.

## 1.2 Elizabeth Spencer: Life and Work <sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth Spencer was born in Carrollton, a small town in Mississippi, on July 19, 1921 to a conservative Presbyterian family. "Her parents [...] were affluent and somewhat conservative members of Carrollton society, a tightly knit social fabric she would eventually struggle to escape, both in her fiction as well as in her life" (Roberts, "Spencer" 380). Her parents' families "had lived and farmed in northern Mississippi since the 1830s" (Nettels 71).

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the biographical information was taken from Prenshaw's "Chronology" in *Elizabeth Spencer* and Roberts' article "Elizabeth Spencer."

A list of Spencer's published books with short descriptions by the author can be found on her personal website: <<http://www.elizabethspencerwriter.com>>

Spencer attended Belhaven College in Jackson and completed a B.A. degree in 1942. In Jackson she met Eudora Welty with whom she became lifelong friends. Afterwards, Spencer went to graduate school at Vanderbilt University, where she completed an M.A. in English literature in 1943. In Nashville, she met Robert Penn Warren and other influential Southern writers. For short periods of time, Spencer had teaching positions at a junior college in Mississippi and at a private school for girls in Nashville. Between 1944 and 1945 she worked as a reporter for the Nashville *Tennessean*. Spencer went on to teach English at the University of Mississippi in Oxford until 1951.

After the success of her first two novels, she went to Italy on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1953. The following year, Spencer met her future husband, the Englishman John Rusher, in Florence. They got married in 1956. From 1958, the couple settled in Montreal, which was supposedly their compromise between England and the Deep South. They lived in Montreal for almost three decades. Spencer worked for the graduate writing program at Concordia University, Montreal, from 1976-1986. In 1986, she and her husband moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Spencer taught creative writing at the University of North Carolina and continued writing her fiction. After John Rusher's death in 1998, Spencer has continued to live and work in Chapel Hill.

Elizabeth Spencer has published seven short story collections; however, some of them only contain reprints. *Ship Island and Other Stories* (1968) is a collection of ten stories which were all included in the later collection *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* (1981); in *Marilee* (1981) the three short stories with Marilee Summerall as their main protagonist were reprinted; *Jack of Diamonds and Other Stories* (1988) contains five novella-length stories; *On the Gulf* (1991) is a collection of previously published stories with settings adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean; *The Light in the Piazza and Other Italian Tales* (1996) includes stories with an Italian setting and contains, except for the title story, reprints from the previous collections; *The Southern Woman* (2001) is a volume of previously collected stories with various local settings plus a section with "New Stories" containing six more recent texts.

Spencer has published nine novels; the first three are set in Mississippi: *Fire in the Morning* (1948), *This Crooked Way* (1952), *A Voice at the Back Door* (1956). The third novel deals with race relations in Mississippi, which was, of course, an extremely delicate topic at that time, and “alienated Spencer from her family” (Roberts, “Elizabeth Spencer” 380). *The Light in the Piazza* (1960), a short novel with an Italian setting, has become one of Spencer’s most successful works. It was adapted into a motion picture (1962), and a musical version was first launched in 2003. *Knights and Dragons* (1965) is again an Italian novel; *No Place for an Angel* (1967) features a number of different local settings; *The Snare* (1972) takes place in New Orleans; *The Salt Line* (1984) is set on the Mississippi Gulf Coast after a severe hurricane in 1969; and *The Night Travellers* (1991) is a novel about the Vietnam era. In 1998, Spencer published her memoir *Landscapes of the Heart*. A film documentary about the author with the same title is in progress and is expected to be released in 2012.<sup>3</sup>

Among the awards Spencer received most recently are the Life-time Achievement Award of the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters (2009), the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction (2007), and the William Faulkner Medal for Literary Excellence (2002).

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<sup>3</sup> See *Landscapes of the Heart: The Elizabeth Spencer Story*.

## 2 MISSISSIPPI

### 2.1 Elizabeth Spencer's Home Territory

Most of Elizabeth Spencer's early stories are set in Mississippi,<sup>4</sup> where the author grew up in the 1920s and 1930s. She spent her childhood and youth in a small town named Carrollton, located about half-way between Memphis and Jackson, at a time when Mississippi was, with the exception of a few large plantation owners, a poor and industrially underdeveloped region compared to the rest of the United States (Skates 825). In her memoir *Landscapes of the Heart*, Spencer reminisces about Carrollton as being typical for the old towns in the hill country just east of the Delta, with its "fine old white-painted houses, generous yards of flowering shrubs and cedar-lined walks, a courthouse square with places of business – law offices, post office, bank, drugstore, grocery and hardware store" (6). She remembers that "Carrollton was crowded with churches" (61) and how, as children, they had to attend Sunday School and seemingly endless sermons (62). She grew up in a strictly Protestant environment – Methodists on her father's side, Presbyterians on her mother's side (61).

Until way into the twentieth century, Mississippi was a predominantly rural state, its economy primarily depending on agriculture and on cotton in particular. During the Great Depression, the economic situation was even worse in Mississippi than in the rest of the United States, because of this strong dependency on cotton prices. At the beginning of the 1930s, many farmers had to sell property, and "[b]y the middle of that decade more than one-half of all Mississippi farmers were tenants or sharecroppers" (Skates 833).<sup>5</sup> Despite comprehensive governmental measures to promote industrial development, eighty percent of the state's population still lived in the country in 1940.

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring to the first section of *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*, which includes short stories written between 1944 and 1960. The last story of this section, however, is already set in Italy.

<sup>5</sup> Spencer, too, describes the dire economic situation during the 1930s in her autobiography. Although her family did not have to go hungry (both parents descending from farmers), she does remember that some people in Carrollton were visibly poor. One year, there was no more money to open the Carrollton school (*Landscapes* 126-127).

Skates points out that World War II did mark a turning point for Mississippi in many regards. War-related industries created new and much better paid jobs – compared to the jobs on the cotton plantations. The war also played an important role in easing Mississippi’s long-standing isolation and provincialism in that it brought army camps and soldiers from other parts of the United States to the South (Skates 833). After World War II the importance of cotton declined considerably (with the exception of the Delta region). Tenancy and sharecropping were replaced by a modern mechanized agriculture.

The issue of race relations was, of course, a highly relevant topic throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. After a new constitution in 1890 had practically excluded the black population from politics, segregation laws were established. Jim Crow laws<sup>6</sup> were strengthened during the 1920s (Skates 832). According to Skates, the relatively high ratio of blacks to whites in Mississippi has reversed between 1940 and 1970. The 1970 census recorded 63% white and 37% black population in Mississippi (Skates 833). This major demographic shift was due to a migration wave of black southerners setting in during World War I. “Nearly one-half million black southerners headed north between 1916 and 1920” (Grossmann 182). Scholars have identified various factors that triggered this migration; in summary, it can be said that “the hardening of the southern racial context and increasing economic problems in the 1920s pushed them out of the rural South and toward industrial employment in the North and West. Three million African Americans left the South from 1920 to 1960” (Wilson 28).

Although the issue of race relations is perceptible in most of Spencer’s stories with a southern setting, it is not explicitly treated in the two short stories analyzed in this chapter. Spencer deals with the topic of racial tensions in her novels,<sup>7</sup> but hardly ever in her short fiction. “The Business Venture,” which will be analyzed in the last section of this paper, is an exception in this respect; therefore, the issue will be discussed in more detail in the introduction to chapter five.

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<sup>6</sup> “Jim Crow – a system of law and custom that took its name from an antebellum minstrel song-and-dance – rigidly separated blacks and whites and dominated virtually all aspects of southern life” (Beeby&Nieman 336).

<sup>7</sup> Particularly in *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956).

What certainly needs to be included in this introductory chapter about Mississippi's society in the early twentieth century are the stereotypes of the Southern Lady and her younger, unmarried counterpart, the Southern Belle. They belong to the most prominent images when it comes to the US-American south. It seems appropriate to explore this stereotype and its evolution before delving into the literary analysis, because this is an image that appears in different variations in Elizabeth Spencer's short stories. Keeping in mind the focus on society and gender roles in the present paper, this is a particularly relevant and interesting aspect. In both stories of this first section we are confronted with caricatures of Southern ladies – one being rather funny, the other one also featuring more tragic or even cruel traits.

In how far the two main protagonists of "First Dark" and "A Southern Landscape" respectively comply with the role of the Southern Belle, will be a matter of discussion. Lynxwiler & Wilson offer a concise definition of this stereotype: "Immortalized in popular fiction and Hollywood cinema, the Southern belle, as a stereotype, dates back to the antebellum South. Her popular mystique is organized around youth, physical attractiveness, sensuality, and a command of social proprieties. There is a tendency to view the Southern belle as the larval form of the Southern lady" (113).

The prototypical Southern Lady definitely is an upper class woman from before the Civil War (Scott 4). In magazines, novels, journals, and sermons of the antebellum era she was praised as being "timid and modest, beautiful and graceful", she was supposed to be "a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household"(Scott 4). At the same time, she was thought to be completely dependent on male protection, due to her physical weakness and a natural incapability for any kind of logical reasoning (ibid.). Submissiveness and devotion was not only expected from this ideal lady towards her husband, but also towards God. The prevalent evangelical theology played an important role in propagating the image of the submissive woman. Scott quotes from a number of personal diaries from the middle of the nineteenth century that bear evidence of a certain religious fanaticism among the ladies of the upper class (Scott 10-13).

Originally stemming from concepts of medieval chivalry and books of etiquette, which had been spread widely since the invention of printing, the concept, or even myth, of the perfect lady was certainly not restricted to the American South, but was perhaps equally common in Victorian England and all over the United States (Scott 14-15). It can be speculated, however, why the Southern Lady was idolized more fervently, and why the image was so deeply rooted in Southern antebellum society.<sup>8</sup> Scott offers a convincing explanation that had already been proposed by some nineteenth century scholars, namely that slavery was an important factor in the strength and persistence of the image of the Southern Lady (Scott 16-17). For the maintenance of this system a strictly hierarchical and patriarchal family structure was crucial. Such a patriarchal family structure, of course, implied the absolute obedience of women and children towards the head of the family. In other words: “Any tendency on the part of any of the members of the system to assert themselves against the master threatened the whole, and therefore slavery itself” (Scott 17).

While it stands to reason why men would have been in favor of this concept of the submissive and genteel woman, it is less obvious why so many women believed in this role model and did make such “heroic efforts to live up to what was expected of them (Scott 9). Scott argues that this was mainly the result of “early indoctrination.” “Boarding schools for young ladies [...] emphasized correct female behavior more than intellectual development” (Scott 7). “Churches, schools, parents, books, magazines, all promulgated the same message: be a lady and you will be loved and respected and supported” (Scott 20). Another reason for why men *and* women strongly believed in the importance of maintaining these clearly defined role models in a decidedly patriarchal society is, once again, slavery. With the Southern institution of slavery being threatened by abolitionists, it seems only natural that a community would adapt a particularly conservative attitude and make an effort to maintain the system from inside (Scott 21).

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<sup>8</sup> The claim that the image of the ideal lady was deeply rooted in Southern society is supported by a lot of contemporary evidence, such as journal articles, private journals, and novels. Anne Firor Scott quotes many of these sources in *The Southern Lady*.

## 2.2 “First Dark”

“First Dark” was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1959.<sup>9</sup> It was reprinted in the 1968 collection *Ship Island and Other Stories* and in the first section of the 1981 collection *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*. The story was “often-anthologized” (Roberts, *Self and Community* 90), and in 1960 Spencer received an O. Henry Award for “First Dark” (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 13). The title “First Dark” refers to the ghost story that is told and retold in different versions by different story characters.<sup>10</sup> All the alleged sightings of the town ghost have taken place early in the evening, at first dark. Incidentally, this is also the time of the day when the male protagonist keeps visiting his girlfriend after the death of her mother: “at exactly a quarter past seven in the evening” (FD 37).

The central theme of this story is the presence of the past, or more specifically, the threatening aspects of the past. As important as history and memory may be to a Southerner, the story suggests that there is a certain danger of getting stuck in the past. There is a dichotomy between the desire to remember and preserve the past and the need to free oneself from the overwhelming past in order to have a future. In Terry Roberts’ words: “There is more to this narrative than a Faulknerian mansion and a proud old belle, however. Frances Harvey is suspended precariously between the past and any possible future and is in grave danger of herself becoming a ghost” (*Self and Community* 90). Moreover, “First Dark” is also a story about a very complicated mother-daughter relationship and, last but not least, about class consciousness and overcoming the class divide.

### 2.2.1 Setting

“First Dark” is set in the fictional small town of Richton, Mississippi. Most of the young people have moved away from Richton, or have not returned after the war.<sup>11</sup> The inhabitants that are left, however, are proud of this “pretty old place” (FD 23). They are

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<sup>9</sup> *New Yorker* 35 June 20, 1959: 31-40 (see Barge 577).

<sup>10</sup> I counted four accounts of ghost sightings throughout the story. It turns out, however, that similar versions of the ghost story have been around in this small town community for many years, if not decades.

<sup>11</sup> It is never explicitly mentioned which war the narrator is referring to.



flattered that a young man like Tom Beavers has returned to their insignificant little town. Apart from the inhabitants' perspective, it is also the narrator's voice that creates the impression of quite a charming Southern small town with its shade trees along the streets and the ladies on the porches with their "fine little voices" (FD 23).

As in other Elizabeth Spencer stories with a Southern setting, the respective small town is charming and of certain historical interest but does not have quite enough old houses to become a tourist attraction.<sup>12</sup> "It was a shame they didn't have one or two more old houses, here, for a Pilgrimage – look how Natchez had waked up" (FD 23).<sup>13</sup> In a story about dealing with the past, this adds another twist to the topic: the past could be a source of income. The inhabitants of Richton are aware that the remnants of the past are of some value; they would bring tourists into town, if only there were enough old houses. The home of the female protagonist's family is one of those old houses: "Her family home was laden with history that nobody but the Harveys could remember. It would have been on a Pilgrimage if Richton had had one" (FD 25). John C. Waters emphasizes how important historic preservation is in the South: "Historic resources serve as a link to the past; they reinforce an individual sense of identity and orientation, as well as a sense of place" (118).

Apart from the old road to Jackson just outside of Richton, which is the place of ghostly apparitions, and the town's drugstore, which seems to be an important gathering place for the Richton community, the two houses of the main protagonists' families are of some relevance for the story. There is an opposition between these two houses that clearly illustrates the different social backgrounds of Frances and Tom. The Harvey house, from Tom's childhood point of view: "With its graceful rooms and big lawn, its camellias and magnolia trees, the house had been one of the enchanted castles of his childhood" (FD 34) versus the Beavers' house, from Frances' childhood memories:

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<sup>12</sup> Much like Spencer's home town Carrollton, which, according to Prenshaw, has its own Pilgrimage season nowadays (*Spencer* 3).

<sup>13</sup> The Natchez Pilgrimage Tours are apparently the oldest and most famous tourist attraction of this kind. There is a two-week pilgrimage in fall and a five-week pilgrimage in spring during which a number of antebellum mansions are opened to the public. See "Natchez Pilgrimage Tours."

“His old aunt’s house was at the bottom of a hill. It was damp there, and the yard was always muddy, with big fat chicken tracks all over it, like Egyptian writing” (FD 27). The two houses illustrate, perhaps more clearly than the description of the characters ever could, how big the social gap between Frances and Tom is. However, these are childhood perceptions or memories of childhood perceptions rather, of the two protagonists. We cannot know how much they are exaggerating the grandeur and the sordidness of the two houses, respectively.

The houses in “First Dark” (and in other Southern stories by Elizabeth Spencer) are certainly more than just a detail of local setting. The Harvey house is not only stuffed with remnants of the past, it also seems to have a life of its own: “The house sighed” (FD 37). In the final paragraph of the story the house again appears as almost personified:

mindful, perhaps, of what happened to people who did, they [Frances and Tom] did not look back. Had they done so, they would have seen that the Harvey house was more beautiful than ever. All unconscious of its rejection by so mere a person as Tom Beavers, it seemed, instead, to have got rid of what did not suit it, to be free, at last, to enter with abandon the land of mourning and shadows and memory. (FD 40)

The house could be regarded as a kind of catalyst; it absorbs all the sad aspects of the past. Although closely connected to Frances’ dead parents and her mother’s tragic fate in particular, the house also comes to symbolize the beauty and the positive aspects of the past. Leaving all this behind, however, is the only chance for the young couple to start their own future together. For Frances, turning her back on this house also means leaving behind a part of her identity; but that is the price she is willing to pay for her freedom. The implied danger of looking back is probably an allusion to Lot’s wife in the Old Testament. She was turned into a pillar of salt as a punishment for looking back at the burning Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19: 26).<sup>14</sup> Seltzer suggests that the Harvey house “confers the power of the aristocratic South” (3) and hypothesizes that

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<sup>14</sup> “Petrification symbolizes punishment inflicted for the ill-timed stare. Its consequences are an attachment which persists after the fault itself – the stare which lingers, perhaps from exaggerated feelings of guilt” (“Stone” 941).

we may see the house's rejection of Frances and Tom as indicative of the South's investment in its own myth; in refusing to embrace Tom, the Harvey house asserts the inviolability of the traditional southern hierarchy, even though this position resigns it to its own demise. Thus, 'First Dark' seems invested in the enduring image of the beautifully doomed South. (Seltzer 2)

Another house with some symbolic value is the burnt-down house in the scene where Frances goes to visit the graves of her parents: "She saw a field where a house used to stand but had burned down; its cedar trees remained, and two bushes of bridal wreath marked where the front gate had swung. She stopped to admire the clusters of white bloom massing up through the young, feathery leaf and stronger now than the leaf itself" (FD 36). A little similar to the ruins of Windsor in "A Southern Landscape",<sup>15</sup> this clearing where a house used to stand represents an opposition between death and new life. It is spring and nature is beautiful, everything is in bloom. At the same time, there is something cruel about how nature claims back the ground where that house had once stood. At one moment Frances feels hopeful at the sight of nature's beauty, the next moment the bridal wreath reminds her of wreaths at a funeral.

### **2.2.2 Characters**

The two main characters in "First Dark" are lovers who have to overcome certain obstacles determined by the society they live in. They have radically different attitudes towards the past, at least at the beginning of the story. Frances and Tom represent the two sides of a dichotomy between the urge to stay connected to one's roots and the need to break free from them. While Tom wants "to keep a connection with the past" (FD 28), for Frances "a connection with the past" equals the confinement to an old house with a sick mother to take care of, in a traditionally conservative Southern small town. She thus sees the past as something confining and suffocating. "First Dark" does present us with a number of stock characters of Southern literature. Seltzer perhaps exaggerates a little in saying that "'First Dark's' characters comprise a sort of rogue's gallery of gothic figures – the aging and ever-stoic belle; the dutiful, if tentative, daughter; the presci-

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter 2.3.1 below.

ent but muted outsider; and the eerie but strangely earthly ghost” (Seltzer 1). However, there are some unexpected turns and, for a short story, a considerable degree of character development for the main protagonists.

**Frances Harvey** comes from a rather wealthy family. The reader can deduce this from the description of the house and of her mother’s belongings. Mrs. Harvey owns expensive hats and furs and jewelry; “her mother’s clothes. They were numerous, expensive, and famous” (FD 35).

It is made clear from her very first appearance in the story that Frances is different from the other inhabitants of Richton.

She was a girl whom no ordinary description would fit. One would have to know first of all who she was: Frances Harvey. After that, it was all right for her to be a little odd-looking, with her reddish hair that curled back from her brow, her light eyes, and her high, pale temples. This is not the material for being pretty, but in Frances Harvey it was what could sometimes be beauty. (FD 25)

It is not only her outward appearance, however, that sets her apart from other people in Richton, it is also her frame of mind, her vivid imagination that make Frances special. For example, it takes imagination to see “Egyptian writing” in Tom’s aunt’s chicken yard (FD 27). Also, she finds life in Richton “so confining” (FD 28), because she has done some travelling. Not unusual for a daughter of a wealthy Southern family, she has made “a trip to Europe” (FD 30). There she fell in love with a man from Switzerland. We do not learn much about her ambitions, whether she had planned to get an education. In any case, she had wanted to stay in Europe but was summoned back to Mississippi when her father was dying. Then, the war prevented her from returning to Europe and her romance failed, because the man was married and returned to his wife (FD 31-32). The fact that she meant to leave Mississippi forever and is now stuck with her mother in this small town, makes it surprising that Frances does not seem bitter or regretful about her life.

It is suggested by the narrator that Frances has a wider intellectual horizon than her fellow citizens: “Frances Harvey had been away enough not to look at things from a completely Southern point of view, and she was encouraged to discover that she and Tom had other things in common besides a ghost, though all stemming, perhaps, from the

imagination it took to see one” (FD 28). It is a possible reading that Frances only made up the ghost-sighting as a pretense to get to know Tom better. I think when she first meets him at the drugstore she intuitively understands that this man, who has returned from the big city, might be her last chance to escape from her confined world.

It is suggested that Frances is past her prime and the people in Richton already expect her to become one of those old spinsters. “Her face was beginning to show the wear of her mother’s long illness” (FD 25). From a conversation between postman and the rural deliveryman we learn that “Miss Frances ain’t no more than thirty-two, -three years old” (FD 37). She has been allocated the role of caregiver for her invalid mother, because her younger sister is already married and has moved away from Richton.

Frances has some character traits that are probably not considered to be very lady-like in her community. In the introductory scene at the town’s drugstore she is not shy to ask the men what they had just been talking about. Tom “turn[s] away from her somewhat too direct gaze” (FD 25). “Frances, in her candid way” (*Stories* 33) does apparently not care about the modest and unobtrusive demeanor that is expected from a true lady in Southern society.

**Tom Beavers** makes his first appearance in the story looking like a modern version of the lonesome cowboy. He comes into town with “his Ford, dusty of flank, like a hard-ridden horse” (FD 23). “He wore steel taps on his heels, and in the still the click of them on the sidewalks would sound across the big front lawns [...], then he would be observed walking here and there around the streets under the shade trees. It was as though he were looking for something” (ibid.). In a way, he is a caricature of the romantic loner. Many of Elizabeth Spencer’s characters are somewhat exaggerated, which gives them a funny touch; but she never makes fun of them. As in other Elizabeth Spencer stories<sup>16</sup> there is something mysterious about the male protagonist: “His lashes and brows were heavier than was ordinary, and worked as a veil might, to keep you away

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<sup>16</sup> For example, “Jean-Pierre”, “I, Maureen”, “The Master of Shongalo.”

from knowing exactly what he was thinking” (FD 24). The town’s people cannot make sense of Tom Beavers’ behavior.

To the general astonishment of the inhabitants of Richton, Tom keeps returning to his home town on the weekends to visit his aunt. It can be assumed that he left Richton for economic reasons – he now has an employment in Jackson. In taking care of his aunt, Tom is upholding the, supposedly quintessential, Southern value of being loyal to one’s family. However, looking after his aunt is not his only motivation to return to Richton.

He wanted to keep a connection with the past. He lived in a modern apartment, worked in a soundproof office – he could be in any city. But Richton was where he had been born and raised, and nothing could be more old-fashioned. Too many people seemed to have their lives cut in two. He was earnest in desiring that this should not happen to him. (FD 28)

This expresses the dilemma of becoming estranged from one’s roots, of becoming alienated. People become anonymous in the big cities. Neglecting one’s history means losing part of one’s identity. The above quoted passage is Tom’s argument in favor of staying in touch with one’s past. Tom, who found a job in Jackson after the war, has a feeling of alienation from his roots, from his past. He longs for the ghosts of the past that Frances fears. During their first date, Frances says to Tom: “There’s more than one ghost in Richton. You may turn into one yourself, like the rest of us” (FD 28). While for Tom the past and Richton’s “sense of the past” (ibid.) seem so attractive compared to the soulless and anonymous city where he works, Frances is afraid of getting stuck with the past, of being trapped in the web of family tradition and social constraints. This being trapped is actually a matter of fact for Frances, because the sense of responsibility and loyalty towards her family would never allow her to leave Richton as long as her mother is alive.

Falling in love with Frances and therefore having to deal with her dominant mother makes Tom change his mind about dealing with the past. His romantic notion of tradition and history is shaken to the core when he realizes that Frances’ mother is part of that past he has been idealizing: “Well, he had got what he was looking for; a connection with the past, he had said. It was right upstairs, a splendid old mass of dictatorial female flesh, thinking about him” (FD 34). Tom’s epiphany about how dangerous the

past can be, and that he might lose his girl to the ghosts of the past, occurs at the very end of the story:

In Richton, the door to the past was always wide open, and what came in through it and went out of it had made people ‘different’. But it scarcely ever happens, even in Richton that one is able to see the precise moment when fact becomes faith, when life turns into legend, and people start to bend their finest loyalties to make themselves bemused custodians of the grave. Tom Beavers saw that moment now, in the profile of this dreaming girl, and he knew there was no time to lose. (FD 39)

**Mrs. Harvey**, Frances’ mother, can be considered the third main protagonist of “First Dark.” The dominant role in her family which she seems to have played throughout the years is important in order to understand Frances’ character. Also, Tom has some formative childhood memories about her. We learn about the old lady that

[a]lthough she had never been a belle, never a flirt, her popularity with men was always formidable. [...] and the masculinity that had just been encouraged to strut and preen a little was quickly shown up as idiotic. Perhaps Mrs. Harvey hoped by this method to train her daughters away from a lot of sentimental nonsense that was their birthright as pretty Southern girls [...]. (FD 29)

“First Dark” is also about a very complicated mother-daughter relationship. “Could anyone make Frances as angry as her mother could?” (FD 32). And yet, Frances would never abandon her. The family ties are a permanent bond and are not to be questioned. “Terrible as her mother’s meanness was, it was not half so terrible as her love” (FD 33). – Frances feels trapped. She loves her mother and is loved in return, but this means to be trapped in a small town society and its strict rules that she finds so confining. From Tom’s perspective, there is something cruel about Mrs. Harvey. Tom thinks of her as “a splendid old mass of dictatorial female flesh” (FD 34) at one point; the narrator describes her as a “witty tyrant” (FD 29).

Mrs. Harvey is quite an ambiguous character. On the one hand, she is this kind of tyrant; on the other hand, she must love her daughter unconditionally, because there is a strong suggestion that she commits suicide in order to not stand in the way of her daughter’s happiness. Neither the reader nor Frances can be entirely sure, however, what really happened. Spencer said in an interview that “[t]here comes a point when she

[Frances] doesn't know what her mother did, whether her mother killed herself or not, that she wavers on the brink of substituting or wanting a myth rather than a reality because she simply doesn't know the answer" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 35). Even earlier in the story, Mrs. Harvey is willing to make some concessions for her daughter's sake and tries to forget about her general contempt for men, in order to not scare away her daughter's only romantic prospect. However, the reader cannot be entirely sure whether she is more concerned about her daughter's happiness or about her own reputation and that of her family. – An unmarried daughter in the family would probably be frowned upon in Richton, and it would primarily be seen as the mother's fault. Mrs. Harvey's attitude towards men and marriage will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.2.3.

At the time of narration, Frances' mother is an invalid and looks like a caricature: "Age and illness had reduced the image of Mrs. Harvey to a kind of caricature, centered on a mouth that Frances could not help comparing to that of a fish" (FD 29). She is also a caricature of the 'Southern Lady,' I suppose. Mrs. Harvey is described as well-respected, but also as a little superficial and probably not very well educated. "She was of the old school of Southern lady talkers; she vexed you with no ideas, she tried to protect you from even a moment of silence" (FD 30).

**The ghost**, though not strictly speaking a character, has an important function in the story anyway. On the one hand, it could simply be read as a manifestation of people's superstitions and their fondness of storytelling. On the other hand, it turns out to be a symbol for Frances' repressed guilt towards the end of the story. This town ghost has other functions, too. Not only is it an excuse for Frances and Tom to get together (FD 26), but other people in Richton seem to bond over this ghost. The drugstore clerk calls it "our ghost" (FD 25), and it is kind of a collective experience, because so many town inhabitants claim to have seen it. The ghost story could also be seen as a little escape from the confined small town society. And, last but not least, this whole story is about the ghosts of the past.



### 2.2.3 Society and Gender Roles

Several critics have praised Spencer's ability to illustrate the class-consciousness in Southern small town communities very clearly and effortlessly (see Prenshaw, *Spencer* 138). In her foreword to *Stories*, Eudora Welty mentions "First Dark" as an example for Spencer's talent to describe the typical Southern small town society: "She can faultlessly set the social scene; she takes delight in making her characters reveal themselves through the most precise and telling particulars" (Welty xviii).

It is emphasized throughout the story that the two main protagonists, Tom and Frances, come from different parts of society. The Harveys are a rather affluent family, and Mrs. Harvey, obviously, is very class-conscious. For her it is crucial to come from a 'good' family. Richton is characterized by a two-class society, and Spencer not only manages to "set the social scene" through little details; I find it noteworthy that she shows both perspectives: the ignorance, and sometimes arrogance, of the rich as well as the humiliation of the poor. This is done through the narration of Frances' and Tom's childhood memories mostly.

Frances' memories of Tom's family are very telling about the social gap there is between them: "What had happened to his parents? There was some story, but it was not terribly interesting, and, his people being of no importance, she had forgotten" (FD 27). Another instance for the rich people's perspective is Frances' ignorance when she talks about the black servants they had when she was a child. She does not know, and it is not important, if Jerry was the cook's "son, or husband, or something" (FD 26). And although Frances is a person with a certain education, who has been away from the south for some time, she says such things without further reflection. These little remarks are very telling about the kind of hierarchy there used to be, and for many people probably still is, in this society.

Mrs. Harvey's condescending attitude towards people of a lower social rank is illustrated by an incident that Tom remembers all too well from his childhood. He tells Frances the episode of how her mother chased him off her lawn when he was a nine-year-old boy. Even then, Tom understood quite well that Mrs. Harvey's meanness was due to the

fact that *he* did not belong to a ‘good family’, and he still remembers this humiliating episode clearly: “Mrs. Harvey’s rich tone had been stuffed with wickedness as a fruit-cake with goodies. In it you could have found so many things: that, of course, he didn’t know any better, that he was poor, that she knew his first name but would not deign to mention it, that she meant him to understand all this and more” (FD 33).

“First Dark” is also a story about men and women, about marriage. It is Mrs. Harvey’s prime concern to marry off her daughters adequately. She goes out of her way to make Tom stay, even though she thinks that he is not really an appropriate match for Frances. It looks like she has given up all hope of marrying off her elder daughter, and Tom is just her last resort. For Mrs. Harvey, and most likely not just for her, it is absolutely crucial for a woman to marry ‘well’. However, to end up without a husband, to become an ‘old spinster,’ would still be worse than marrying someone from below your social rank. Mrs. Harvey makes no secret of her opinion that men in general are stupid and not to be taken very seriously. Her effort to accept Tom as her son-in-law is the more astonishing: “It was this complimenting a man behind his back that was too much for her – as much out of character, and hence as much of a strain, as if she had got out of bed and tried to tap-dance” (FD 31). Another illustration of Mrs. Harvey’s attitude towards men is her younger daughter’s marriage:

Mrs. Harvey’s younger daughter, Regina, was a credit to her mother’s long campaign; she married well. The old lady, however, never tired of pointing out behind her son-in-law’s back that his fondness for money was ill-concealed, that he had the longest feet she’d ever seen, and that he sometimes made grammatical errors. (FD 29-30)

Apart from Mrs. Harvey’s attitude towards appropriate gender roles and marriage, it is the townsfolk of Richton (represented by a drugstore clerk, a postman, and some gossiping ladies on their porches) that sheds some light on this aspect of the story. Although there is a great deal of respect for the Harvey family in Richton, people do have their suspicions about old maids, such as Frances. The local postman puts it rather cruelly: “Them old maids like that, left in them old houses – crazy and sweet, or crazy and

mean, or just plain crazy. They just ain't locked up like them that's down in the asylum. That's the only difference" (FD 37).<sup>17</sup>

Another prejudice that Richton's inhabitants seem to share is the one against intellectuals. We are presented with a social environment that is rather skeptical if not hostile towards education and learning: "By 'smart,' Southerners mean intellectual, and they say it in an almost condescending way, smart being what you are when you can't be anything else" (FD 27-28). Accordingly, they are suspicious of people who read books, such as Tom Beavers. It is Mrs. Harvey who informs her daughter about the kind of gossip that is going on about Tom: "They say he reads a lot. He may just have taken up with some sort of idea" (FD 29). In contrast, "[t]heirs [the Harveys'] was a house where the leather-bound sets were actually read" (FD 28). This is another detail to show that they are different from the other people in Richton.

"First Dark" presents a very restricting small town society. Its members have to comply with the rules if they want to live in this town. For instance, it is not acceptable for an unmarried woman like Frances, to invite a man into her house, where she lives alone after the death of her mother. People in town start gossiping about this immediately. Then again, it is not acceptable to go out on a date either, so soon after a death in the family. How long she is supposed to wait is not quite clear though: "there was whispered speculation among those who were at the church and the cemetery that the Harvey house might soon come into new hands, 'after a decent interval.' No one would undertake to judge for a Harvey how long an interval was decent" (FD 35). Her sister later calls her up to say that their mother would not approve of her "receiving gentlemen 'in'" (FD 37). On the one hand, this community does not really approve of unmarried women, on the other hand, Frances would not have a choice if she played by the rules. She is thus put into a desperate and highly absurd situation.

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<sup>17</sup> The stereotype of the 'old maid' or 'maiden aunt' was very common in the South, and she became a kind of "folkloric figure in southern states" (Clinton 167). On the one hand, maiden aunts had a special status, because they were often welcome help in the family of another woman, on the other hand, the fact that a woman would usually inherit through her dowry, put unmarried women at a serious economic disadvantage (cf. Clinton). In "First Dark," Tom's aunt, Miss Rita Beavers, is an example for the often very unflattering depiction of maiden aunts in Southern fiction. She is "old as God, ugly as sin, deaf as a post" (FD 23).

### 2.2.4 Narrative Technique

Terry Roberts says that the “stories from the earliest period,” for which the often-anthologized “First Dark” is representative, are “quite traditional in technique;” “with the action flowing more or less uninterruptedly from one point to another” (*Self and Community* 90). However traditional in technique, it should be pointed out that this story is cleverly crafted with its changing focalization, some well-placed flashbacks, and a narrator with a fine sense of humor.

“First Dark” is told by an extradiegetic, heterodiegetic (or ‘omniscient’) narrator; focalization is variable however.<sup>18</sup> The narration is focalized either by the narrator, by Frances, or by Tom. In a few cases it could be argued that the townsfolk of Richton serve as a character-focalizer; for instance, when they observe Tom walking around in their town (FD 23).

At least in one instance, Spencer employs a technique which Rimmon-Kenan terms ‘reinforcement by analogy’.<sup>19</sup> When Frances fully realizes her dilemma and tells Tom that she cannot abandon her mother in order to live with him, there is a noticeable atmospheric change:

There was a strong wind that evening. [...] the night was streaming, but whether with mist or dust or the smoke from some far-off fire in the dry winter woods they could not tell. As they stood on the sidewalk, the clouds raced over them, and moonlight now and again came through. [...] She felt herself to be no different from anything there that the wind was blowing on, her happiness of no relevance in the dark torrent of nature. (FD 34)

Another episode that can be interpreted as reinforcement by analogy is Frances’ reading Jane Austen aloud. Frances’ summary of the essence of Jane Austen novels in a way parallels her own potential fate: “In Jane Austen, men and women seesawed back and forth for two or three hundred pages until they struck a point of balance; then they got

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<sup>18</sup> About the difference between narration and focalization, cf. Rimmon-Kenan 72-75. The terminology to describe different types of narrators relies on Rimmon-Kenan 95-97.

<sup>19</sup> Rimmon-Kenan treats “analogy as reinforcement of characterization” (67) and distinguishes between analogous names, analogous landscape, and analogy between characters.

married” (FD 28). This also implies that Southern values and gender roles at the beginning of the twentieth century were not very different from those in England about a hundred years earlier.<sup>20</sup>

In “First Dark,” the Southern storytelling tradition is illustrated by changing subordinate narrators.<sup>21</sup> Frances, Tom, and the drugstore clerk serve as subordinate narrators when they relate some of their own memories or retell the ghost story in its slightly different versions. These narrations within the story, of course, imply several analepses (or ‘flashbacks’),<sup>22</sup> which are mostly narrated and focalized by Frances or Tom. The importance of an oral tradition in the south is also emphasized by the use of some local language. There is quite a lot of direct speech to present this local slang, but also a lot of ‘free indirect discourse.’<sup>23</sup> Totsie Poteet, Richton’s drugstore clerk, certainly adds some local color to the story with his narration: “Not only didn’t no wagon ever come, but the man that had stopped them, he was gone, too. They was right shook up over it” (FD 24).

Spencer’s frequent use of myths and tales in her stories also ties in with the above-mentioned storytelling tradition. In a 1981 interview, she commented on the use of myths and tales, which she usually employs “only in a loosely allusive manner” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 70), and said about “First Dark:” “I think the story ‘First Dark’ relates in a way to ‘Rapunzel,’ or actually to any number of tales that explore the theme of an enchanted princess imprisoned in a tower or castle” (ibid. 71).

The narrator’s sense of humor is another striking feature of “First Dark”: “For some people, a liking for the same phonograph record or for Mayan archaeology is enough of an excuse to get together. Possibly, seeing the same ghost was no more than that” (FD 26). “[...] Frances had put on a tweed jacket at the last minute, so the smell of moth

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<sup>20</sup> Asked about whether Frances’ reading Jane Austen in “First Dark” was a reference to Spencer’s own reading, she said: “I came very late to Jane Austen and to women writers generally because I had sort of a snob attitude toward women writers when I was a bright college student. I thought they were apt to be oversensitive and too given to fluttering over details” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 36).

<sup>21</sup> ‘Subordinate narrator’ basically means that there is narration *in* the story; cf. Rimmon-Kenan 92-95.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Rimmon-Kenan 46-51.

<sup>23</sup> On ‘free indirect discourse,’ cf. Rimmon-Kenan 111-117.

balls was in the car, brisk and most unghostlike” (ibid.). “Though almost all her other faculties were seriously impaired, in ear and tongue Mrs. Harvey was as sound as a young beagle” (FD 30). It is the third-person narrator who gives this story a humorous and somewhat light tone, despite the serious topic.

### 2.3 “A Southern Landscape”

“A Southern Landscape” was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1960<sup>24</sup> and reprinted in the 1981 collection *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*. It is the first of three stories that share the main female protagonist Marilee Summerall. The other Marilee stories are “Sharon,”<sup>25</sup> and “Indian Summer.”<sup>26</sup> These three stories were republished together in the volume *Marilee*. Spencer has said repeatedly that she “meant to write some more Marilee stories” (Girard 6), but apparently, she never found the time to do so. In all three stories a grown-up woman who now lives “far away” (SL 52) is remembering the times and places of her childhood and youth – “what ‘far away’ means to Marilee is not for me to say” (Spencer qtd. in Evoy 570).

In the widest sense, “A Southern Landscape” is about memory and storytelling, or, as I would claim, about storytelling as an antidote to human transience. In a similar vein, Terry Roberts says that “A Southern Landscape” “is not so much about the past as it is what the artistic sensibility does with the past. In this way, it provides an early key to Spencer’s own artistic development” (*Self and Community* 91-92).

This story itself means an attempt to preserve some bits and pieces of the past; to try and put something against the general decay. The most obvious symbol for this decay are the impressive remnants of an antebellum mansion. Ignorant nature is taking back this magnificent structure. “It is this ignorant way that the hand of Nature creeps back over Windsor that makes me afraid. I’d rather there’d be ghosts there, but there aren’t” (SL 45).

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<sup>24</sup> *New Yorker* 36 March 26, 1960: 28-34 (see Barge 578).

<sup>25</sup> First published in 1970 (see Barge 579).

<sup>26</sup> First published in 1978 (see Lewis 245).

“What nature does to Windsor it does to everything, including you and me – there’s the horror” (SL 46). The older the narrator and main character of the story gets, the more important the past becomes to her. It gives her security and orientation in a chaotic world.

### 2.3.1 Setting

The title of this story immediately suggests that setting might play an important role. The first three paragraphs of the story are mainly about local setting. The first-person narrator is basically drawing a map for the reader, is giving directions on how to get to her family’s place. On the one hand, this description seems like very practical advice on how to actually get to this place near Port Claiborne, Mississippi. On the other hand, it turns into a very personal and subjective account of childhood and adolescence memories when the narrator talks about smells and sounds along this road.

Coming down the highway from Vicksburg, you come to Port Claiborne, and then to get to our house you turn off to the right on State Highway No. 202 and follow along the prettiest road. It’s just about the way it always was – worn deep down like a tunnel and thick with shade in summer. In spring, it’s so full of sweet heavy odors, they make you drunk, you can’t think of anything – you feel you will faint or go right out of yourself. In fall, there is the rustle of leaves under your tires and the smell of them, all sad and Indian-like. Then in the winter, there are only dust and bare limbs, and mud when it rains, and everything is like an old dirt-dauber’s nest up in the corner. (SL 41-42)

As Karen Evoy observes, the “prettiest road” is described in the light of the changing seasons (571). “There is both continuity and change here, as reflected in the cycle of seasons itself from the lush sensuality of spring to the dust and mud of winter” (Evoy 572).

“A Southern Landscape” is set in a fictional town named Port Claiborne, Mississippi. Elizabeth Spencer mentioned in a 1973 interview (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 43) that the setting of “A Southern Landscape” came from a childhood memory of various trips to Port Gibson in Claiborne County, Mississippi with her family. There she had seen the Presbyterian church with the gold hand and the ruins of Windsor. Apart from those details of setting, the story is, according to Spencer, an invented one and has nothing to do with her personal experiences.

The title-giving landscape is the starting point for painting a larger picture of Marilee's Southern heritage. In her narration, Marilee is creating a Southern landscape in the broadest sense of the word 'landscape.' There is the actual geographical landscape, the small town near Port Claiborne, a little description of the local flora and fauna (SL 42). Moreover, the narrator refers to two famous Southern writers, Faulkner and Mark Twain (SL 43 and 46) and to Southern history, exemplified by the Siege of Vicksburg (SL 43) and the ruins of Windsor mansion (SL 45). In addition to these points, Evoy lists religion, represented by the Presbyterian church with the gilded hand, and family as important aspects of Marilee's Southern heritage (572-573).

The ruins of Windsor, a burnt-down antebellum mansion,<sup>27</sup> are not only a part of the physical landscape described in the story, they are "a dying remnant of the Old South" (Evoy 572). Evoy rightly points out the opposition of sex and death in the scene in front of the decaying Windsor mansion. Moreover, she sees a connection between the decaying mansion and Marilee's "fear of losing touch with her heritage" (ibid.).

### 2.3.2 Characters

The fact that Marilee Summerall is the main protagonist in three of Spencer's short stories, and has a very similar background as the author, has, of course, led to speculation among readers and critics as to whether she is an autobiographical character. In a 1980 interview, Spencer commented on the Marilee character: "Oh, I am very fond of her. I guess I feel closer to her than to any other character I've created. [...] Marilee is a person who takes consideration of everything around her. She has a continuously expanding consciousness of her family and her environment" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 57). To the question whether Marilee was a fictional Elizabeth Spencer, the author answered:

"She's definitely not myself. Her voice, her attitudes, the kind of things she was born into – none of these parallels anything in my life. I do feel close to her, though – not as a friend but as a kind of shadow that I didn't leave. She's a kind of alter ego. Marilee continues my other life. If I had stayed in Mississippi and not become a writer, I think I would have been like Marilee, content or discon-

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<sup>27</sup> For a concise description of the creation and destruction of Windsor mansion and a good selection of pictures see: <<http://tradarchitecture.blogspot.com/2011/04/windsor-ruins-claiborne-county.html>>



tent in a Mississippi way. I don't know why it's not enough just to be Marilee; maybe it would have been better. There's still something very attractive to me about staying home and seeing how things pattern themselves and fit into my life. It's an unanswered question that teases me." (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 57)

**Marilee Summerall** is sixteen or seventeen years old when she first meets Foster, because she tells him that she is "[j]ust a junior" and "hope[s] to go to college year after next" (SL 44). Marilee attempts a direct characterization of herself that also works as an indirect characterization in that it tells the reader something about her modesty:

I guess I don't look like much of any one thing. When I see myself in the mirror, no adjective springs right to mind, unless it's 'average.' I am medium height, I am average weight, I buy 'natural'-colored face powder and 'medium'-colored lipstick. But I must say for myself, before this goes too far, that every once in a great while I look Just Right. (SL 44)

Marilee is young and inexperienced, but at the same time she is quite tough and knows how to take care of herself. Although there is a certain irony in her statement: "I'm convinced you can do anything when you have to" (SL 50), there is evidence in the story that she is a very practical and brave young woman; for example, when she slaps Foster's pushy friend, Fortenberry (SL 47); or when she drives around in Foster's car all night, although she has never driven a car before (SL 50).

Although somewhat independent and adventurous, Marilee is still eager to stick to social rules and norms: "But I had to consider how things would look – I had my pride, after all" (SL 49). – This is her explanation why she decides to help Foster out of the gully. Also, at the night of the high school dance, she drives around until midnight not to make anybody suspect there was anything wrong.

What makes the Marilee stories particularly appealing is the main protagonist's distinctive narrative voice. Spencer said about Marilee that "when she started talking, she wasn't like a character *in* the story. She *was* the story" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 110). While Roberts refers to this narrative voice as "Marilee's warm, wise nature and playful voice" (91), Prenshaw claims that Marilee opens the story "in a breezy, self-deprecating voice" (*Spencer* 139), and Spencer calls it a "sweet, ironic girl-voice" in her foreword to

*Marilee* (qtd. in Evoy 569). Marilee's liking for satire becomes evident, for example, in the scene where she describes Foster's and her mother's little routine: "And they'd go on together like that till you'd think that all creation had ground and wound itself down through the vistas of eternity to bring the two of them face to face for exchanging compliments over peach pickle" (SL 43).

Marilee is not just mocking other people; she is also somewhat self-critical and has an undeniable sense for self-irony. The fact that she revises some of her own statements is perhaps what makes her such a likeable character. For instance, she says about Foster's drinking habits: "It didn't happen all the time, like I've made it sound" (SL 43). Another example for her irony, verging on sarcasm: "I should have walked right off and left him there till doomsday, or till somebody came along who would use him for a model in a statue to our glorious dead in the defense of Port Claiborne against Gen. Ulysses Grant in 1863. That battle was over in about ten minutes, too" (SL 49; after Foster has fallen into the gully).

**Foster Hamilton** is a journalist for the local paper in Port Claiborne, later for the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans. He must be a few years older than Marilee, because he has "just graduated from the university" (SL 43). As it turns out, he is probably an alcoholic, his justification towards Marilee being: "I drink because I like to drink" (SL 52). Marilee first introduces him as "Benjy" Hamilton after Benjy from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, because "he certainly did behave like an idiot" (SL 43). She then admits that "Benjy isn't his name, either; it's Foster. I sometimes call him 'Benjy' to myself, after a big overgrown thirty-three-year-old idiot in *The Sound and the Fury*, by William Faulkner" (SL 43).

Of course we only get to know Foster through Marilee's eyes. She is fond of him right away, because he is the journalist who comes to her school to interview her for the local newspaper. He makes her feel important and special; and that *he* finds her quite ridiculous at first does not seem to matter much to Marilee. Marilee's first impression of Foster: "He wore horn-rimmed glasses; that was back before everybody wore them. I thought they looked unusual and very distinguished. Also, I had noticed his shoulders when he went

over to let the window down. I thought they were distinguished, too, if a bit bony” (SL 44). The important thing is that she finds something unusual about Foster; and, I suppose, that spending time with a young man makes her more interesting among her peers.

Although there are few details about Foster’s family or his background, it is emphasized that he comes from an ‘aristocratic’ family.<sup>28</sup> “[T]here was something kind of glamorous about Foster Hamilton. He came of a real good family, known for being aristocratic and smart; he had uncles who were college professors and big lawyers and doctors and things” (SL 48). Foster’s “real good family” is particularly important to Marilee’s mother, a fact that will be further discussed in the subsequent chapter.

**Marilee’s mother** represents the Southern Lady in this story; or perhaps more accurately, a caricature of the Southern Lady, as Marilee tends to make fun of her at times. Marilee summarizes her mother’s Puritan attitude like this: “an innocent lady like Mama, who said ‘*Drinking?*’ in the same tone of voice she would have said ‘*Murder?*’” (SL 42-43). Although there is actually very little information about Marilee’s mother, she does come across as quite naïve and superficial.

From her language we can infer that Mrs. Summerall is probably not as well educated as her daughter. We get to know her voice through passages of ‘free indirect discourse’:<sup>29</sup> “And she’d say, well, for most anybody else she’d think twice before she offered any [of her peach pickle]” (SL 43). Or: “He had done a really nice article – what Mama called a ‘write-up’” (SL 44). Marilee’s mother – Foster, adhering to a Southern habit, calls her “Miss Sadie” – is famous for her peach pickle and her cold buttermilk and, much like Mrs. Harvey in “First Dark,” she is probably one of “the old school of Southern lady talkers” (FD 30).

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<sup>28</sup> Although the notion of ‘aristocracy’ is in stark contrast with the American dream of a classless society, a Southern aristocracy began to develop as early as the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and usually did not have any connections to the European nobility. Southern aristocrats would typically initiate their social advancement by becoming successful planters. Many of them had little education, but were talented and ambitious businessmen. Their economic success and ensuing political influence was of course only possible due to the existence of slavery (cf. Taylor 55-56).

<sup>29</sup> On ‘free indirect discourse,’ cf. Rimmon-Kenan 111-117.

Mrs. Summerall's idealized image of Foster seems unshakable; she thinks of him as "the nicest boy that ever walked the earth" (SL 42). The fact that Foster comes from a well-respected family is enough to make her ignore all his flaws. Foster, in return, calls her a "real sweet lady" (SL 52). Marilee, who is at first very pleased about her prestigious new boyfriend, is anxious not to let her mother's illusions about Foster be destroyed.

### 2.3.3 Society and Gender Roles

As in "First Dark", there is a recognizable class difference between the male and the female protagonist. It is important indeed whether you "are somebody" in this society. When giving directions to her family's house Marilee says: "Everybody knows us. Not that we *are* anybody – I don't mean that. It's just that we've been there forever" (SL 42). Foster, on the other hand, comes from a very well-respected family, and a good family name seems to be all that matters. It certainly does for Marilee's mother. How else could she stubbornly overlook that he is rather too fond of alcohol?

Foster's respect for a real Southern Lady and Mrs. Summerall's awe and admiration for an "aristocratic" family are both striking, and they are, in a way, both mocked by Marilee, which is what makes the story so funny. Marilee tells us about Foster that "[n]o matter how drunk he was, the presence of an innocent lady like Mama [...] would bring him around faster than any number of needle showers, massages, ice packs, prairie oysters, or quick dips in December off the northern bank of Lake Ontario" (SL 43-42).

Compared to the other Marilee stories, "A Southern Landscape" does not deal with a lot of details about family dynamics; the story is very much focused on Marilee herself. Although she seems to be quite an independent and brave young woman, it matters a lot to her what others think: "But I had to consider how things would look – I had my pride, after all" (SL 49). I think it can be assumed that Marilee, the teenager, is still somehow bound to the traditional image of the Southern Belle. The more critical view of the stereotypes of Southern Belle and Lady supposedly comes from the older Marilee's perspective, who tells us this story twenty years after the narrated events. It is suggested at the end that education is an important means of emancipation. Marilee perhaps would

not be living “far away” now, had it not been for the scholarship to go to college in Jackson (SL 51).

Although race relations are not a major concern in this particular story, Evoy points out that the “mix of black and white blood” is another constant in Marilee’s Southern heritage; and that it is “foreshadowed” in “A Southern Landscape” (577) in the scene where Foster and his friend Fortenberry are involved in a car accident with some African Americans and there is “so much blood on everybody you couldn’t tell black from white” (SL 51). At the beginning of the story, Marilee mentions casually how she “used to play with the colored children” (SL 42) – this was just a matter of fact, and a child or a teenager would not have given it any further thought.

### **2.3.4 Narrative Technique**

“A Southern Landscape” is characterized by a first-person narrator who addresses the imagined reader repeatedly to keep him or her involved: “If you are like me” (SL 41), “Things had changed between us, you realize” (SL 47), “I won this prize, see, for writing a paper on the siege of Vicksburg” (SL 43). One could argue that the focalization of the narrative alternates between the young and the older Marilee, however, most of the time it is hardly possible to decide which one is the focalizer. The opening sentence of the story creates some suspense as to who this narrator is and whom he or she is addressing.<sup>30</sup>

“A Southern Landscape” has a very simple narrative structure. There is only one first-person narrator who openly addresses an imagined reader to tell some events from her own past. The story is framed by an introduction and by a concluding paragraph, both taking place at the time of narration. The introduction locates the story in a certain place, but also introduces Marilee’s narrative voice. And this narrative voice is perhaps the most remarkable quality of the story. It is made clear from the very beginning that this narrator is going to be in the center of the events. Marilee is forcing quite a lot of

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<sup>30</sup> About the distinction between ‘narratee’, ‘imagined reader’ and ‘reader’ see Rimmon-Kenan 87-90.

information about herself on an imagined reader. Yet, we keep on reading because of her light and slightly ironic tone. Marilee is pulling the reader into the story by giving those detailed (and yet unspecific) directions to the house of her childhood and youth.

At the end of the introductory paragraph, the reader learns that the narrator is telling all this in retrospect. Naturally, a first-person narrator is always somewhat unreliable. The reader is made aware of this when the narrator herself puts some of her narration into perspective: “It didn’t happen all the time like I’ve made it sound. [...] Benjy isn’t his name, either; it’s Foster” (SL 43). Then again, such remarks might have the effect of making the narrator appear self-critical, and thus, more reliable. The fact that the first-person narrator is telling all this in retrospect is probably one of the reasons why she is able to do so in this humorous and self-ironic manner. The reader learns right away that the narrator is telling some memories, but only in the very last paragraph is it revealed that twenty years have elapsed since the narrated events.

In between this time frame of introduction and conclusion, Marilee tells the past events connected to Foster Hamilton. She jumps back and forth a little bit in time, as any storyteller would naturally do. Actually, Marilee appears to be a very eloquent and skillful storyteller. She starts the story of Benjy/Foster Hamilton at the time when the two of them were going out on dates, ridiculing Foster right away by telling an episode where he was so drunk she had to pick him out of a barbed wire fence (SL 42), continuing with a presentation of the funny little routine about peach pickle her mother and Foster would have (SL 43). Marilee then moves back in time to her first encounter with Foster (SL 43), moves on to their first kiss and her falling in love, and, after the insertion of a little conversation they had “a long time later” (SL 47), she focuses on the main events concerning the night of the high school dance Foster takes her to.

The description of the ruins of Windsor and the ensuing thoughts about the cruelty of nature and human transience (SL 45-46) are interrupting the narration of the events surrounding Foster Hamilton. Presumably they are focalized by the older Marilee. Of course this insertion also serves the purpose of deceleration; the reader is kept in suspense about how the romance between Marilee and Foster is going to develop. More-

over, the described “undertone of horror” (SL 45) associated with the decaying mansion is in stark contrast with the exuberant feelings of a young girl falling in love: “[...] the whole sweetness of the spring night, the innocence and mystery of the two of us, made me think how simple life was and how easy it was to step into happiness, like walking into your own rightful house” (SL 46).

The concluding paragraph of the story is taking a much larger perspective. The time of narration is specified: “It is twenty years later now” (SL 52), and the narrator is expressing her thankfulness for the stableness and reliability of those landmarks and of her personal memories in an ever-changing world of uncertainties, probably also hinting at the motivation for telling this story at all – to preserve something from the past. The very end of the story might also be regarded as a direct confrontation of the young and the older Marilee: “There have got to be some things that you can count on, would be an ordinary way to put it. I’d rather say that I feel the need of a land, of a sure terrain, of a sort of permanent landscape of the heart” (SL 52). – The “ordinary way to put it” would probably have been the way the sixteen-year-old Marilee would have said it; the second phrase, in all its lyricism and sentimentality, is obviously coming from the narrator who is twenty years older and is anxious to recover and preserve some aspects of the past.

## 2.4 Emancipation from the Home Territory

In an interview Elizabeth Spencer commented on how important the past is to southerners: “I think all southerners have a Proustian sense about time, a sense that the past is never gone. Faulkner said that the past isn’t even the past, that it is the present. [...] Faulkner does a great deal with time and memory as forces that govern the present” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 58). This omnipresence of the past is clearly a central theme in both stories discussed in the preceding chapter. While “First Dark” is more about the presence of the past, and about the threatening powers of the past; in “A Southern Landscape,” the fading of the past seems to be foregrounded. Frances and the older Marilee (the character at the time of narration of “A Southern Landscape”) are of a similar age and they both come from a small town in Mississippi. Yet, they have quite a different perspective on the past and on tradition. Frances definitely sees a danger in the forces of

the past. The past constitutes a power which might suck you in, paralyze you, and keep you from living your own life in the presence. Marilee, on the other hand, has a similar attitude towards the past as Tom Beavers expresses at the beginning of "First Dark." She has a longing for the past and its certainties, for its values and landmarks, for her own history. I think Tom and Marilee are both searching for "a sort of permanent landscape of the heart" (SL 52).

Mother-daughter-relationships are another important aspect in both stories; in "First Dark" even more so than in "A Southern Landscape." Frances' mother is described as a very dominant figure in her family. The story is tragic on different levels: Frances has probably suffered a lot from this dominant mother over the years; the mother (assumedly) sacrifices herself for her daughter in the end. Marilee's mother is more of a comical version of the Southern Lady. She serves as a kind of foil for the younger, better educated, and more independent Marilee. "First Dark" and "A Southern Landscape" both feature a young female protagonist who has "to thread her way between the family's claims and her own desires and ambitions, to find a way of holding on while letting go." (Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* 138). Frances is presented in the midst of this struggle, whereas Marilee, who is telling her story from a local and temporal distance, has already succeeded in this emancipation process.

The mothers in both stories are also important in that they have passed on the traditional gender roles to their daughters. I would claim that Frances and Marilee are both very much aware of the role they are expected to fulfil; and to a certain degree they both do comply with these expectations. However, both take some liberties; Frances perhaps more so than Marilee. Both mothers, on the other hand, could be regarded as caricatures of the Southern Lady; while Mrs. Summerall appears to be rather funny and harmless, Mrs. Harvey is more of a tragicomic figure.

Moreover, the two stories have in common that there is a significant class difference between male and female protagonist. In "A Southern Landscape" this issue is dealt with in a much more light-hearted and playful manner – which is probably owed to Marilee's characteristic narrative voice. Also, the value of an aristocratic family back-



ground is called into question in this story, considering Marilee's depiction of Foster. In "First Dark," in contrast, this class difference is more of an obstacle; also because the stakes are much higher for Frances, whose relationship with Tom might well be her last chance to get married. The stronger focus on the aspect of social class in "First Dark" is achieved by the description of local setting as well as by a number of minor characters who represent the townsfolk's opinions and common prejudices.

The two stories not only have in common the theme of "dealing with the past" and complicated mother-daughter relationships; they are also both about storytelling, which is considered to be particularly popular in the South. In 1980, Spencer said in an interview: "Southerners are great talkers, you know. People used to sit around telling stories just as shocking as some of Faulkner's. I suppose that this southern interest in people and this inclination to talk things over make for the kind of analysis of character and situation that one finds in southern writing" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 59). In a 1992 interview, she commented on how her first-person narrators engage her imagination:

I've done a lot of first-person stories with women talking because I'll just hear a voice somehow. That happened a lot in Montreal when I used to be nostalgic for the South. Just to hear a woman's southern voice talking would lead to my wondering just what stories she had to tell, and listening. Southern women are good story tellers. So that's how a lot of those stories came about. (Girard 6)

Another characteristic quality that can be found in both stories is Spencer's distinctive "serio-comical" tone. In "First Dark" it is conveyed through an omniscient narrator, in "A Southern Landscape" Marilee Summerall becomes the embodiment of this specific tone. Asked about the association of lyricism and comedy in her work, Spencer said in an interview conducted in 1992: "It's in my nature to be serio-comic. I got that maybe naturally, but maybe too from Europeans: Europeans have a lovely way when they're semi-funny and semi-philosophic. C'est la vie!" (Girard 10).

### 3 ITALY

#### 3.1 Moving Into Foreign Terrain

First of all, it should be emphasized that the stories with an Italian setting<sup>31</sup> are still about American characters – most of them Southerners. Again, there is an obvious connection to Spencer’s biography: she spent the years from 1953 to 1955 in Rome and Florence on a Guggenheim fellowship and returned to Italy in 1956 after having spent some time in Mississippi and New York. Spencer had visited Italy before, on a trip to Europe in the summer of 1949.<sup>32</sup> Her Italian stories, however, were all written from a considerable temporal and local distance, when the author was already living in Montreal, Canada.

Travelling to Italy has had a long tradition for Americans, and for a significant number of Southerners. “Affluent Americans had, of course, gone to Italy as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the scions of plantation owners from the South discovered the treasures of that country and praised it as blessed with its mild climate and bewitching landscapes” (Zacharasiewicz, “Perspectives” 492). They took up the tradition of the Grand Tour of Europe, which “was revived after the Napoleonic Wars” (Zacharasiewicz, “Collective Identities” 33). In the antebellum period, a considerable number of Southerners attended German universities. While Germany was an example for its university system, Italy attracted American visitors because of its monuments and pieces of art from Antiquity and the Renaissance (Zacharasiewicz, “Collective Identities” 36). In the nineteenth century, a colony of American artists was established in Rome. The theme of American artists in Italy is picked up in Spencer’s story “The Pincian Gate.” Vance’s *America’s Rome* in two volumes gives an idea about the abundance of works by American painters, sculptors, and writers that were inspired by the city of Rome. Undeniably, Italy has been particularly attractive for American artists for a long time.

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<sup>31</sup> In the short story collections this paper is drawing on, there are only six stories with Italian setting and one (“The Cousins”) that is partly set in Italy.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Spencer, *Landscapes of the Heart*, chapters 21 and 24.

In his study about American expatriate artists and writers in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Earnest claims that “[f]or at least a hundred years of our national existence Europe offered a kind of aesthetic and intellectual experience not available in the New World” (276). His study examines the influence of these prolonged stays in Europe on American art and literature. Expatriates and American tourists produced an abundance of books about the European experience and also a lot of fiction with European settings (*ibid.*).

However inspiring Italy has been for American artists, it has been pointed out repeatedly that Americans had an ambiguous image of that country. The dark side of Italy had been propagated “since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when a bifurcated image emerged and the Italy of humanist endeavor and achievement clashed with the image of a morally corrupt domain of atheists and papal intrigues” (Zacharasiewicz, “Perspectives” 492). “Rome thus originally had for Americans the attraction of the Other, both in the knowledge and beauty that it offered and in the horrors of its spiritual and social condition” (Vance XX).

An aspect about American travelers and tourists<sup>33</sup> to Italy that should be mentioned, considering the focus on gender roles in the present paper, is the fact that traveling has been a male domain for a long time; and that until the beginning of the twentieth century it was certainly unusual, if not inappropriate for women to travel without male company. Moreover, as Buzard points out, women were not even thought to be able to appreciate the picturesque landscapes the European tour had to offer.

The picturesque manner of viewing has been, from its inception, a practice culturally coded ‘male’ – and so, for that matter, has the Continental tour and the whole process of acculturation it represents. [...] The picturesque retained the assumptions of gender given to it by its founders, who imagined a male art of seeing that could correct and complete what a feminized landscape held forth. (Buzard 16)

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<sup>33</sup> About the historical distinction between ‘traveler’ and ‘tourist’ and the positive and negative connotations, respectively, see Buzard’s introduction to *The Beaten Track* (1-17).

## 3.2 “The White Azalea”

“The White Azalea” was first published in the *Texas Quarterly* in 1961<sup>34</sup> and later included in *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*.

The flower that gives the story its title is of course of some symbolic value and reminded me of the white pear tree in Katherine Mansfield’s short story “Bliss” (first published in 1920). In both short stories the white flowers can be interpreted as a symbol of the female protagonist’s bliss. Prenshaw suggests that the white flowers “symbolize a lush vitality and innocence” (*Spencer* 143). The azalea that Theresa chooses to hide her family’s letters is a particularly beautiful one: “[...] she stood noting that this particular azalea was one of exceptional beauty. It was white, in outline as symmetrically developed as an oak tree, and blooming in every part with a ruffled, lacy purity” (WA 69).

### 3.2.1 Setting

“The White Azalea” is set in Rome. The city is seen through the eyes of an elderly lady from the American South, who is on her belated “Grand Tour” through Europe. She sees Rome as the realization of all the travelogues and literary renditions she has read about it. The local setting is described, or almost painted, in very cheerful colors:

An enormous sky of the most delicate blue arched overhead. In her mind’s eye – her imagination responding fully, almost exhaustingly, to these shores’ peculiar powers of stimulation – she saw the city as from above, telescoped on its great bare plains that the ruins marked, aqueducts and tombs, here a cypress, there a pine, and all round the low blue hills. Pictures in old Latin books returned to her [...]. She would see them, looking just as they had in the books, and this would make up a part of her delight. (WA 63)

Theresa has pictures of Rome, and of other European cities, in her mind from old Latin books and from all the travelogues she has read over the years. However, the reality is not quite as splendid as the picture she has had in mind. The city is noisy and traffic is dangerous. “In the street the traffic was really frightening. Cars, taxis, buses, and motor

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<sup>34</sup> *Texas Quarterly* 4 (Winter 1961): 112-117 (see Barge 578).

scooters all went plunging at once down the narrow length of it or swerving perilously around a fountain” (WA 64). William Vance notes that “the perils of Roman traffic become a common motif in Spencer’s Italian stories (420). Nevertheless, Theresa is determined to make the reality match her fantasies, and she is convinced this can be done by just the right way of viewing.

Despite all the traffic and noise, there is an emphasis on the protagonist’s visual impressions, which create a bright and splendid and somehow cheerful atmosphere: “At the top of the steps the twin towers of a church rose, standing clearly outlined on the blue air. Some large white clouds, charged with pearly light, were passing overhead at a slow imperial pace” (WA 69). In a comment about the novella “The Light in the Piazza” Elizabeth Spencer expressed her fascination with the Italian light, “which was beautiful and an outpouring of light so that the feeling is that you can see everything. The shadows are very definite, and all the colors are very distinct” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 29). This observation of the particular quality of the Italian light has certainly influenced her other Italian stories, too. Another detail of setting that adds a lot of color to this story is the “annual display of azalea plants” that Theresa walks into per chance: “The azaleas were as large as shrubs, and their myriad blooms, many still tight in the bud, ranged in color from purple through fuchsia and rose to the palest pink, along with many white ones too” (WA 64).

There is a connection between Rome and Alabama which is not only established by the story’s protagonist herself, but also by the Azalea flower: “The Azalea was, moreover, Theresa recalled, a Southern flower, one especially cultivated in Alabama. Why, the finest in the world were said to grow in Bellingrath Gardens near Mobile, though probably they had not heard about that in Rome” (WA 69). The protagonist is deeply rooted in the American South. This trip to Europe is an escape from her family and all the social restrictions she has been subjected to throughout her life. But even the flowers make her think about the south.

The local people in Rome could be regarded as another detail of the setting; they are not relevant as story characters, but add something strange and exotic to the place. To The-

resa they are a little annoying, probably because they are not part of her picture of Rome that she has construed over the years. The locals are really just extras, as this story is about Theresa and her awakening, first and foremost. For instance, there is a “group of young men” she observes: “They wore shoes with pointed toes, odd to American eyes, and narrow trousers, and their hair looked unnaturally black and slick. Yet here they were obviously thought to be handsome, and felt themselves to be so” (WA 67). Other minor characters are the street vendor who is pestering American tourists, and the Italian workmen moving the large flower pots (WA 68).

### 3.2.2 Characters

**Miss Theresa Stubblefield** is an elderly lady from Montgomery, Alabama (WA 65). Her surname could be regarded as a telling name, expressing that she is a country miss from Alabama. What she thinks of as elegant and “well-bred” might seem rather ridiculous to the Italians. “[...] Theresa, climbing in her portly, well-bred way, for she was someone who had learned that if you only move slowly enough you have time to notice everything. In Rome, all over Europe, she intended to move very slowly indeed” (WA 64).

Theresa is just beginning her Grand Tour of Europe, which is something she has been dreaming of for a long time. For the first time in her life she is free to travel, because during the past years she has been obliged to stay at home “nursing various Stubblefields – her aunt, then her mother, then her father – through their lengthy illnesses” (WA 63).

Like other characters that we have encountered in Spencer’s stories, Theresa is a woman with a lively imagination. She has been dreaming of this kind of trip for many years, and now she is determined to see the place just as it looked in her old school books. Yes, she does notice all the noise and traffic, annoying street vendors and “[s]hoals of tourists” (WA 64), but there is no way she will let those things spoil her delight in being at this place. This makes her appear as a rather cheerful and positive thinking lady.

In the foreign environment, Theresa suddenly has a sense of empowerment. She surprises herself with the “violent” act of tearing apart her family’s letters: “with a motion so suddenly violent that she amazed herself” (WA 68). How she gets these letters, writ-

ten by her Cousin Emma and by her younger brother, respectively, in order to summon her back to Alabama and take care of yet another elderly relative, is quite absurd in itself: “She had reason indeed to wonder how the letter had managed to find her. [...] Cousin Emma had simply put Miss Teresa Stubblefield, Rome, Italy, on the envelope, had walked up to the post office in Tuxapoka, Alabama, and mailed it with as much confidence as if it had been a birthday card to her next-door neighbor” (WA 64).

It is another serio-comical moment<sup>35</sup> when Theresa announces her own awakening or, perhaps, epiphany in an overly dramatic way. Either the historical site has gotten to her head, or she is just not taking herself all too seriously. “*Well, I declare!* Theresa thought, astonished at herself, and in that moment it was as though she stood before the statue of some heroic classical woman whose dagger dripped with stony blood. *My goodness!* she thought, drowning in those blank exalted eyeballs: *Me!*” (WA 69). At the end of the story, Theresa remembers that statue, suggesting in her ironic way that what she has done to her family by burying their letters is pretty harmless compared to how the ancient heroine would have treated them. Also, she is mocking them for not being as well-read as she is.

*Well, it certainly is beyond a doubt the most beautiful family funeral of them all!* thought Theresa. *And if they should ever object to what I did to them,* she thought, recalling the stone giantess with her dagger and the gouts of blood hanging thick and gravid upon it, *they’ve only to read a little and learn that there have been those in my position who haven’t acted in half so considerate a way.* (WA 69-70)

**Theresa’s family in Alabama** is presented to the reader through Theresa’s reflections and memories about her relatives while she is reading their letters.

The Stubblefields, it was true, were proud and prominent, but how thin, how vulnerable was that pride it was so easy to prove, and how local was that prominence there was really no need to tell even them. But none could ever deny that the Stubblefields meant well; no one had ever challenged that the Stubblefields were good. Now out of their very letters, their sorrowful eyes, full of gentility and principle, appeared to be regarding Theresa, one of their own who had

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. chapter 2.4 above.

turned against them, and soft voices, so ready to forgive all, seemed to be saying, ‘Oh, Theresa, how *could* you?’ (WA 68).

That the Stubblefields’ prominence is only local is probably an insight Theresa could only gain by going abroad. The above quote also contains an explanation for her unconditional loyalty to her family until this act of rebellion on the Spanish Steps in Rome. Not only is she obliged to her family because of the traditionally strong family ties in the south; it should be a pleasure to be with her family and take care of them, because they are “good”, and they always “mean well”. Theresa is also suggesting that her relatives are experts in stirring feelings of guilt. Perhaps in an attempt to suppress her feelings of guilt, Theresa is ridiculing her family, for example, by reminiscing about the incident when Cousin Elec had a really bad cramp in his foot (WA 65-66).

Burying her family’s letters is a really dramatic and painful act for Theresa, because she links these letters so closely to the people who wrote them: “The corner of Cousin Emma’s envelope caught on a root and had to be shoved under, a painful moment, as if a letter could feel anything – how absurd! Then Theresa realized [...] that it was not the letters but the Stubblefields that she had torn apart and consigned to the earth” (WA 69). This scene is a crucial moment in Theresa’s life, but, at the same time, it takes on such a ridiculous and absurd fashion that this turns into a rather funny story. That Theresa buries the letters in an Azalea pot, the Azalea being a very common flower in Alabama, is just another little ironic touch to the whole scene.

**Theresa’s younger brother, George**, is the author of the second letter, indirectly summoning her back to her family in Alabama. Theresa describes him as dull and ungrateful. She has always had to take care of him and now he tries to make her feel guilty about leaving the family in times of a crisis. He is suggesting that she should be the one taking care of Cousin Emma, now that she is alone after the death of her brother. Theresa describes her brother as a spoiled little boy: “Poor George! The only boy, the family darling. Together with her mother, both of them tense with worry lest things should somehow go wrong, Theresa had seen him through the right college, into the right fraternity, and though pursued by various girls and various mamas of girls, safely married to the right sort” (WA 65). Theresa reminisces about how George, the only boy in the



family, had been pampered in his youth and asks herself if perhaps “George all along was extraordinary only in the degree to which he was dull” (ibid.).

### 3.2.3 Society and Gender Roles

Theresa is the stereotypical Maiden Aunt<sup>36</sup>, whose family takes it for granted that she will always be there for them in times of sickness and crisis. It was not Theresa’s choice to stay unmarried. As for several of Spencer’s female protagonists, an inappropriate love in her youth is mentioned: “as a girl, she had fallen in love with Charlie Wharton, whose father had unfortunately been in the pen” (WA 68).

From childhood onwards, Theresa has had different opportunities than her younger brother George. Whether it was not deemed necessary for a girl to get a higher education, or the family could only afford to send one child to college is not mentioned. Theresa, who is obviously very eager to learn, got her education out of books while sitting at the bedside of all her sick and dying relatives. “It never registered with them that I had time to read all of Balzac, Dickens, and Stendhal while Papa was dying, not to mention everything in the city library after Mother’s operation. It would have been exactly the same to them if I had read through all twenty-six volumes of Elsie Dinsmore” (WA 67). Theresa is suggesting that she is at least as well-read as her college-educated brother, and that her family is quite ignorant about literature in general.

Theresa’s awakening, her realization of how selfish her relatives have been over the years and how unfairly she has been treated, is probably only possible with the local distance from her family. Theresa’s sense of empowerment and emancipation becomes apparent in the little incident with the Italian workmen. Suddenly, she is able to speak up. She dares to object to their request to move from her spot on the Spanish Steps. The fact that she can communicate this in a foreign language she doesn’t really know (“A little Latin, a little French. How one got along!” (WA 68)), gives her an even greater sense of empowerment and independence. It is proof that she can get along on her own

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. chapter 2.2.3 above.

perfectly well. Nevertheless, she still has a strong sense of obligation towards her family. She feels guilty at the sight of the torn letters (WA 68).

Theresa's decision to bury the letters in one of the Azalea pots springs from a sense of obligation towards the family, not to let those family matters (and the name of her family) be dragged into the dirt, literally and figuratively. However, fear is also a motivation to bury the letters; she is afraid that she might be found out, and that the soiled letters might come back to her in a similarly mysterious fashion as the first time she got them. For Theresa, these letters get to symbolize the family itself. Thus, the act of burying the letters becomes a family funeral. "*Well, it certainly is beyond a doubt the most beautiful family funeral of them all!*" thought Theresa" (WA 69). The "group of young priests in scarlet cassocks" (WA 69) and the splendid flowers fit in nicely with Theresa's fantasy of a "family funeral." Prenshaw suggests that Theresa Stubblefield is another character who is "shaken with the discovery that satisfying both one's public role and one's private needs is impossible. [...] Theresa's methodical burial of the letter in a pot of azaleas, which symbolize a lush vitality and innocence, seems a deliberately gentle way to make an escape" (*Spencer* 143).

American tourists in Rome are presented in a strikingly positive way, which is probably owed to the American character-focalizer; and shows her limited perspective. Theresa observes "smartly dressed Americans" (WA 64), "another well-dressed American lady" (WA 67), and "one more nice rich American tourist lady" (WA 69). The Italians, on the other hand, are described as "odd to American eyes" (WA 67).

### 3.2.4 Narrative Technique

The story is told by a third-person narrator; Theresa is the character-focalizer throughout the story.<sup>37</sup> The time structure is fairly simple, because the time of narration only encompasses the short episode on the Spanish Steps – picking up the letters, reading the letters, the incident with the Italian workmen, and burying the letters. There are a few

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Rimmon-Kenan 72-75.

flashbacks, or analepses,<sup>38</sup> conveying Theresa's memories. They basically serve to characterize the family. The third-person narration is interspersed with some short passages of interior monologue – Theresa's thoughts – which are set off from the rest of the text in italics. Vance has called this story "Jamesian" (420).

In general, the narration is characterized by a very plain and simple style. However, some archaic words, such as "alack" (WA 65), come in when Theresa is thinking about her family in Alabama; probably to emphasize how old-fashioned and archaic they are. In a way, Theresa is making fun of her brother. The descriptions of Rome are somewhat more lyrical. One passage caught my attention as being very rhythmical, having some kind of musicality to it: "A group of young priests in scarlet cassocks went past, mounting with rapid, forward energy, weaving their way vividly aloft among the massed flowers" (WA 69).

Although Theresa is much older than Marilee Summerall, her ironic, and sometimes mocking tone is certainly reminiscent of Marilee's narrative voice. Theresa is a good observer who adds a lot of humor to the narration by noticing little details. For example, the reader gets to know Cousin Emma only through her handwriting: Cousin Emma has written about her brother's death "in her loose high old lady's script – *t*'s carefully crossed, but *l*'s inclined to wobble like an old car on the downward slope" (WA 64). There is far less foreign language than in the Montreal stories. Actually, there is only one brief exchange between the Italian workmen and Theresa (WA 68). The foreign setting is mostly conveyed by descriptions of the particular light, for instance, "large white clouds, charged with pearly light" (WA 69), and the appearance of some exotic characters, such as the Roman youths, or the Catholic priests in their colorful robes.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rimmon-Kenan 46-51.

### 3.3 “The Visit”

“The Visit” was first published in the *Prairie Schooner*<sup>39</sup> and later included in *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*.

Again, this is a story about Americans in Italy. However, it is quite a different part of society than the one the elderly spinster from Alabama, who we encountered in “The White Azalea,” represents. “The Visit” is about the academic circles that came to Italy from the American South. – Circles that Elizabeth Spencer must have known from her own experience. This Americans-in-Italy story, which is “tinged with satire” (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 147), also takes on quite a different narrative style. It employs some gothic elements and some fairytale imagery.

#### 3.3.1 Setting

“The Visit” is set in the Italian countryside, not in Rome, as are most of Spencer’s Italian stories. The local setting of “The Visit” was perhaps inspired by a place Spencer mentions in her memoir *Landscapes of the Heart*:

New acquaintances [she made in Florence] were a whole family named Scaravelli. The family had a beautiful villa at some remove from Florence, in the surrounding hills. Professor Scaravelli was a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Pisa. His houseguest for what seemed an indefinite stay was the Indian philosopher of later fame, Krishnamurti. [...] He was a vegetarian, so we generally dined on omelets. (*Landscapes* 277)

The location of Thompson’s villa is not clearly specified, but the Owensens depart from Genoa for their visit and stay at “the village in the mountains nearest to Thompson’s villa. This village was the usual take-off point for people who went to see Thompson” (TV 74). The important thing about Thompson’s place seems to be that it is quite remote from civilization. The journey up the mountain to his villa apparently is life-threatening, as the owner of the *pensione* warns them (TV 76). “He said that the way was extremely steep and dangerous. There were falling rocks, sharp curves, few mark-

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<sup>39</sup> *Prairie Schooner* 38 (Summer 1964): 95-108 (see Barge 578).

ers. Their tires might be cut to pieces on the stones. Their water might boil away out of the radiator. They might lose the way entirely” (TV 76). And although they first think that this is a blatant exaggeration, it all “proved to be literally true” (ibid.).

The place where the famous scholar, Thompson, lives with his family could be called picturesque. The first impression the American visitors get is the following: “a green plateau appeared before them, and set in it, at a fair distance, the villa. It looked like a photograph of itself” (TV 76). The place looks kind of unreal to the visitors. Thompson and his family live in an old villa with the ruins of a castle in the near vicinity: “Rough and craggy, it was unused except artistically, as a backdrop, or to show people through” (TV 77). At one side, the property is bordered by a cliff dropping right down to the sea.

The ruins of the castle have mainly a decorative purpose, and sometimes serve as a playground for Thompson’s grandchildren (TV 81-82). The setting is beautiful: “The air was sweet and soft, what Italians called *dolce*. There were some beautiful old broken chunks of ruin lying scattered about” (TV 82). Within the ruins of the castle, everything seems magic, strange, a little spooky, unnatural; maybe a little surreal, for instance, when the princess rises up from the seaside: “Suddenly from behind the children, at a notch in the wall, the princess rose up. She was climbing; though as they could not see her feet, she seemed to be rising like a planet” (TV 82). Just the fact that there is a real princess in this place, lends an exotic touch to the story. The little episode at the end of the visit, when Judy sees an Indian couple in colorful turban and sari, adds to the surrealistic atmosphere of the narrative (TV 83-84).

### 3.3.2 Characters

The characters in “The Visit” were quite obviously influenced by several of Spencer’s Italian acquaintances. In her memoir, *Landscapes of the Heart*, she mentions one of the regular party guests at Allen Tate’s place in Rome, the Principessa Caetani: “It was hard to believe in appearance-conscious Rome that here was indeed a real princess. To lunch she wore a plain cotton dress and low-heeled ‘sensible’ shoes” (*Landscapes* 264). In Rome Spencer also became friends with an American historian and his wife, Garrett and Gertrude Mattingly. She was very impressed by Mattingly’s work and thought that “he,

though an American, is among the most noteworthy European historians” (*Landscapes* 265). Spencer relates other details from her stay in Italy that probably went into her short story “The Visit” in one way or another. For instance, there was a strange incident with a confused Lebanese monk at one of her hosts’ places (*Landscapes* 266).

**Judy Owens** is accompanying her husband on a research trip to Italy. She feels insecure and inferior to the scholarly sophisticated people around her: “It’s only that I know how little I know to talk about, Judy thought. That’s why I was so careful [with her dress]. What if they found out about all those books I haven’t read?” (TV 79). The fact that she is kind of overdressed makes her feel bad, because she thinks that this will come across as shallow in this community. Judy is either overmodest or simply lacking self-confidence. There is evidence that she is not that ignorant and badly educated, as her husband would have it. “Judy, who got on rather well in Italian” (TV 75). Also, she apparently is interested in art history; she does have some favorite Italian artists: “Judy loved Donatello” (TV 75).

Judy has a sort of awakening during the visit that is described in this short story. She sees things that her husband does not see. Perhaps this is a sign that she is more imaginative and open-minded just because she is lacking the highly specialized education her husband has been enjoying. For the first time Judy starts to doubt the importance and impeccability of all those scholars, of the academia (where she does not belong). She is only an assistant to her husband, typing his manuscripts. Everything has to be subordinated to her husband’s career; she has even agreed to leave their nine-year-old son in the care of his aunt back home for a full year (TV 75).

**Bill Owens**, Judy’s husband, is a very ambitious young scholar; or, perhaps not *that* young anymore: “with crisp graying hair and heavy glasses” (TV 78). Bill is very eager to please the people that seem important for his professional career. He would do about anything to get some tiny little comment about his research topic from the famous scholar Thompson. Bill does not want to risk “anything unorthodox” (TV 75) when it comes to meeting the famous man. I suppose Bill Owens is very much set in his ways.

He sees nothing outside his scholarly “field” anymore. That his great idol is ridiculing people’s concern with “Fields and fellowships” must be devastating for Bill.

He puts a lot of energy into getting an invitation to meet Thompson: “Bill was always thorough – he was anything but aimless, but in this matter he became something he had never been before: he grew crafty as hell” (TV 74). The narrator also suggests that his competitiveness is something essentially American: “Bill had not been in the academic world fifteen years for nothing; and everything in American life is, in the long run, as we all know, competitive. He poked fun at his scheming mind – yet the goal was important to him, and he pressed forward in an innocent, bloodthirsty way, as if it were a game he had to win” (ibid.).

**Thompson** is the famous American scholar – he is originally from Minnesota (TV 82) – to whom the title-giving visit is paid. One of the ironic things about him is that he does not really look like a scholar. He appears more like a peasant, which is perhaps what he wants to be seen as: “He was grizzly and vigorous, with heavy brown hands. He wore a cardigan, crumpled trousers that looked about to fall down, and carpet slippers” (TV 78). To Judy he confides that he despises the academic world and all the oh-so-important visits that are paid to him, and he freely admits: “I was never a scholar” (TV 83). What he is, or would like to be seen as instead, he does not say. Their encounter in a remote little room of the villa shows a kind of raw sexuality: “Thompson placed a hand like a bear’s paw beneath her chin; his coarse thumb, raking down her cheek from temple to chin, all but left, she felt, a long scar” (TV 83). Earlier, when they all sit at the table for lunch: “His eyes roved savagely around until it lighted on Judy: she felt as if her clothes were cracking suddenly away at the seams (TV 80).

Thompson is referred to as a kind of semi-god in his field – a field which is never explicitly mentioned, but I assume he is an art historian. He is frequently referred to as “the Great Man” (e.g., TV 78). All the young scholars worship him, and a kind of cult has developed regarding the visits that everybody hopes to be able to pay him; the whole routine being utterly absurd.

Thompson sits up in his ivory tower, i.e. his remote ancient villa, and is mocking all those scholars doing research on meaningless topics. He has become quite a cynical man, suggesting “[t]he relation of art to economics” as a useful research topic to Bill (TV 80) and advising him to just use the available fellowships to his advantage, no matter whether he really cares about his work. Thompson is also mocking Bill’s mentor, Professor Eakins, as being narrow-minded and stupid (TV 80-81). Thompson is quite rude towards his guests actually, leaving little doubt about what he thinks of all his admirers coming up the mountain to visit him. After lunch, he just walks off to take his nap. So this rather abruptly ends the audience for Bill.

**Thompson’s family** is a group of strange and slightly eccentric characters. The inhabitants of the villa are his wife, Madame Thompson, who is German; his daughter, the princess; his son-in-law, the Prince of Gaeta, who owns the villa and castle; and their children. While Thompson seems very down-to-earth, his daughter and her princely husband seem to be somewhat detached from the real world. Being real aristocrats, they are allowed some eccentricities, like, for instance, the ski lift they have had installed to ride up from the seaside – the prince brought it home from the Dolomites (TV 79).

The prince, Thompson’s son-in-law, has become a vegetarian, because he claims that the Italians are so cruel to their animals, compared to the English (TV 79). Also, he declares himself a pacifist and says that he is “interested in Moral Rearmament”<sup>40</sup> (TV 79). The prince is also cultivating roses, because he admired them so much in England (TV 81). Although he is the only Italian in the family, the prince seems kind of lost in this environment (TV 81); he seems afflicted by a feeling of alienation in his home country. Madame Thompson – “one said ‘Madame’ instead of ‘Mrs.’ or ‘Signora’ possibly to give her the Continental flavor that she deserved” (TV 78) – with her “vunderful” German accent, smiles like the Mona Lisa (TV 79). In contrast to Judy, who is kind

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<sup>40</sup> Moral Re-Armament was a primarily Protestant movement founded by an American named Frank N.D. Buchman in the 1920s. Because of significant support at the University of Oxford, England, the movement became also known as the Oxford Group. Advocates of the movement sought to live after “four moral absolutes: purity, unselfishness, honesty, and love” (“Moral Re-Armament (MRA)”).



of dressed up for the visit that is deemed to be so crucially important for her husband's career, Thompson's wife and daughter are "dressed like peasants" (TV 78).

### 3.3.3 Society and Gender Roles

While Bill is a successful and very ambitious young scholar, his wife is not his equal concerning education, and Bill apparently likes to point this out. "As Judy had finished only two years of college, Bill often had to put her right about things" (TV 76). Her only job is to type Bill's work. She is even leaving her little son behind in the United States for a whole year, because this stay in Italy is so important for her husband's career (TV 75).

In Italy, Bill and Judy are interacting with a community of young American exiles, which seems to be a kind of parallel world to the Italian society: "They met other attractive young American couples who were abroad on fellowships and scholarships, studied Italian, attended lectures, and frequently complained about not getting to know more of the natives" (TV 73-74).

This community of scholars is also criticized for their narrow-mindedness and their unquestioned submission to certain rituals of the academia. It is a long and intricate procedure even to get an appointment with the famous Thompson (TV 74). The Owenses have been in Italy for about eight months before an opportunity for "The Visit" even arises. Then they have to wait for three days in that village near Thompson's villa, before he graciously invites them up to his place. There is a fixed procedure of approaching the famous professor. There are "legends" about it among scholars (TV 75). It is all quite absurd, and all this effort is made for just any little remark from Thompson that could go into Bill's publication. Even before the crucial visit Bill is already worrying whether it should "go in the introduction, or the preface, or the acknowledgments, or the text itself?" (TV 76). The whole procedure does seem quite ridiculous, and Judy seems to be the only one who is aware of it, or at least suspects it, because it sure sounds like mockery when she elaborates on how much easier it would be to get an audience with the Pope than a meeting with Thompson (TV 75).

Between Judy and Thompson there is some kind of sexual tension from the very beginning. During their lunch, Judy gets the impression that Thompson is undressing her with his gaze (TV 80). Here, and in the scene at the end of the story, when Judy finds herself alone with the great scholar, the image of a very sad and lonesome man is created. “His eyes – large, pale, old, and she supposed, ugly – searched hers. Unreasonable pain filled her for a moment: she longed to comfort him, but before she could think of how to, he tilted her head to an angle that pleased him, kissed her brow, and shambled off, though in truth he seemed to trail a length of broken chain” (TV 83). During this encounter with Thompson Judy is suddenly having problems with her unconditional loyalty towards her husband. – Thompson asks her if she really finds it important that he talked to her husband about his research, and Judy surprises herself by answering: “I don’t know. Oh, I really don’t know!” (TV 83).

Once again, it is the female protagonist who is the more imaginative character. Judy sees and hears things during this visit that her husband does not – because he is staying in the library, anxiously awaiting the reappearance of his idol. Judy seems to be less narrow-minded than her husband and all those other scholars that Thompson so despises. Thompson maybe recognizes that Judy is different, in a way innocent, because she has not been spoilt by the academia. Judy is the one who suggests starting their trip to Thompson’s place from a more interesting village than the rather dull one that is “the usual take-off point” (TV 74). She is actually enjoying herself (TV 75) while Bill is immensely worried about this upcoming visit.

How far-reaching their visit and Judy’s awakening will be for their future, and the future of their marriage, cannot be known of course. However, Prenshaw “suspects that the concluding image of the story foreshadows the consequence of Judy’s seeing too much – dislocation and change from their old relationship” (*Spencer* 148): “From the corner of her eye, Judy saw a huge bolder, dislodged by their wheels, float out into a white gorge with the leisure of a dream” (TV 84).

### 3.3.4 Narrative Technique

“The Visit” is told by a third-person narrator with Judy as the character-focalizer.<sup>41</sup> The time-structure is simpler than might be thought at first. A very short descriptive passage right in the middle of the events (Thompson has gone to take his nap) gives the impression of an in-medias-res beginning, and creates some suspense about where the scene is set, and who this “great man” might be. This brief introduction is followed by Judy’s reflections on Bill’s career and then the events are told in chronological order – from the preparations for the title-giving visit to the departure from Thompson’s place.

Italian is used (in italics), but only single words, or, in a few instances, very short phrases, or in a combination of English and Italian. For example, the princess says to her husband about their ski lift that “[i]t goes very *piano*. It also runs at an *angolo*” (TV 82). She also talks to her children in Italian (ibid.). At the beginning of their visit, there is a little dialogue in Italian between the prince and the man who drives Judy and Bill up to Thompson’s place from the village (TV 77).

Although it would be a little far-fetched to call “The Visit” a gothic story, it certainly uses some elements of that genre. First of all, the local setting seems appropriate for a gothic romance: Thompson lives in a remote place, high up on a mountain. There are ruins of an old castle (TV 77). Also, the villa where Thompson’s family lives is a place where you can get lost easily: “She was left to lose her way alone. / Corridors, wrongly chosen, led her to a room, a door, a small courtyard, a stretch of gravel, a dry fountain” (TV 83). People appear and disappear more or less mysteriously: “He [the prince] turned away, toward nothing” (TV 82). “[S]he [the princess] seemed to be rising like a planet” (TV 82). “The children appeared from nowhere” (TV 81). Moreover, the image of Thompson as the lonely and alienated monster “trail[ing] a length of broken chain” (TV 83) is a, somewhat ironic, allusion to gothic novels. The one thing that is actually frightening for the protagonists is the trip to and from Thompson’s villa: “speeding down the mountain in a suicidal clip” (TV 84).

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Rimmon-Kenan 72-75.

Italy as a gothic setting has had a long tradition in anglophone literature, partly because of anti-Catholic sentiments, partly because of the political conditions in Italy in the nineteenth century (Zacharasiewicz, "Perspectives" 493). In "The Visit," the Italian setting is mainly exploited to create a picturesque and perhaps gothic scenery, which then however develops into something surreal and rather funny at times; for instance, when Judy sees two Hindus appearing out of nowhere and disappearing just as suddenly (TV 83-84). Although things might appear a little uncanny or at least mysterious, Judy does not seem frightened at any point.

Another narrative device to express the fantastic and mysterious atmosphere of this setting are some fairytale allusions. For instance, the princess explains to Judy what she has to say to the children to stop them from climbing around in the ruins of the castle; and this sounds like an incantation, or a magic formula: "Say, 'No, no, come down!'" (TV 81). And it works, too: "The children called to her out of a tower but she said, 'No, no, come down,' so they did" (TV 82).

### 3.4 Awakenings

Elizabeth Spencer takes her Southern characters,<sup>42</sup> that she has explored in earlier stories and naturally knows best because of her personal background, to a foreign territory. Surprisingly, the result for her characters is not alienation, but liberation and emancipation from their conservative family backgrounds. Both stories have a female main protagonist who has an awakening in the foreign setting. While "The White Azalea" has a predominantly comical tone to it, "The Visit" is somewhat more sinister; and maybe has a tendency towards the grotesque. In "The Visit" the Anglo-American tradition of Italy as a gothic setting is taken up and rendered in a more lighthearted and humorous way.

Both stories are very short and do not tell the reader very much about Rome, or Italy in general. The pieces of ruins and the magnificent architecture are mainly there as a decorative backdrop. The narrator of "The Visit" explicitly says so. In the "The White Azal-

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<sup>42</sup> Admittedly, the American couple's place of origin in "The Visit" is never specified.

ea” Rome is depicted as bright and colorful, in correspondence with the protagonist’s sense of liberation and cheerfulness. In contrast, in “The Visit” (as well as in “The Pincian Gate”) a darker side of Italy is presented. The experience of American exiles – a scholar in the one story, an artist in the other one – in Italy is presented. Not everything works out well for them. “The Visit” takes on a somewhat mocking or satirical tone, making fun of the rituals of the academia, of the narrow-mindedness of some very well-educated people.

As much as Theresa’s and Judy’s situations differ – the one being an ‘old spinster,’ the other a wife and mother – they are both expected to dedicate their lives to their families completely and unconditionally. While Theresa’s family apparently takes it for granted that she will take care of all the sick and elderly relatives for the rest of her life, Judy is expected to submit all her plans to her husband’s career.

The foreign language these American characters have to cope with in Italy is a means of empowerment for both female protagonists. Theresa in “The White Azalea” takes pride in being able to communicate with the Italian workmen and even make them act on her request. About Judy in “The Visit” it is at least suggested that her Italian is much better than her husband’s (TV 75) – a fact that is perhaps counterbalancing her inequality concerning education to a certain degree.

## 4 MONTREAL

### 4.1 Quebec in the 1960s and 70s

The stories discussed in the following chapter are distinguished from Spencer's earliest stories by a shift from predominantly rural settings in the American south to the urban setting of Canada's second largest city, Montreal.<sup>43</sup> This shift from the Mississippi small town to a multiethnic city such as Montreal, of course, implies a very different social environment. Although the political situation in Quebec, and the socio-linguistic situation in Montreal in particular, are much too complex to be covered in detail in this brief introductory chapter, it seems appropriate to give some background information on the society that provides the scenery for Elizabeth Spencer's Canadian stories.

Spencer, who lived in Montreal from 1958 to 1986, was, of course, aware of the tensions and conflicts in this city that was basically divided in two. She commented on how she perceived the situation in Montreal in the 1960s when talking about her short story "Jean-Pierre": "there was a constant undercurrent of animosity. The English looked down on the French and, the French felt, treated them badly. I think they considered them second-class citizens" (Entzminger, "Interview" 603).

The 1960s were a time of great changes in Quebec. The beginning of the transformations that became later known as the Quiet Revolution is often dated to 1960, when there was a change from a very conservative to a more liberal provincial government. However, in terms of social changes, the beginning of the Quiet Revolution can be dated back to the Second World War, because that was the time when a rapid urbanization among the French-Canadian population started (Bothwell 87). This movement from a rural, sometimes idealized, society, where religion and family played a very important role, to the cities, where the French population felt their economic inferiority towards the English very strongly, gave impetus to major changes in the French-Canadian com-

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<sup>43</sup> The metropolitan area of Montreal had just over two million inhabitants in the 1961 population census (see *Canada 1970*, 101).

munity and also helps to understand the origins of the conflict between Anglophones and Francophones in Quebec. Economic imbalances between the two population groups were a major source of prejudice and hostility, as a comment by former Liberal senator Jacques Hébert illustrates: “We had always been told that the French were poor and the English were rich because they had been exploiting us for so long” (Bothwell 82). As Ron Graham, journalist and author, points out, religion was another major factor in this conflict, apart from economic and linguistic barriers:

The English were the devils not because they were English-speaking, but because they weren't Roman Catholic. And so, particularly with the control that the church held over the school system, it meant that young francophones growing up in Quebec had an image of *les anglais* as apostates, as the devil incarnate, because they weren't Roman Catholic. You add on to that the class differences that really developed only with depressions. When you add the class element to the religious and linguistic element, then you have this idea of the English as the devil. (Bothwell 89)

The language issue became more and more of a political force in the 1960s. The Francophones in Quebec felt that their language and culture were being threatened by various factors, but mainly by mere demographic reasons – the baby boom of the 1940s and 50s was over. Also, new immigrants to Quebec usually preferred to learn English rather than French (Bothwell 143). The fact that religion was not such a strong source of identification and demarcation anymore made language an even more important issue (Bothwell 153). Very restrictive language legislation was a consequence. The Official Language Act, originally passed in 1969, guaranteed an ‘institutional bilingualism’ in that it ordered that “[t]he French and English languages were to be co-equal inside the federal parliament, the courts, and the civil service,” which “was not well received in much of English-speaking Canada” (Bothwell 143). Moreover, the Canadian Constitution guarantees “the publication of all law and regulations in Canada in both languages, the right to have a trial conducted in the official language of one’s choice, and, most controversially, the right to an education in one’s own official language outside Quebec” (Bothwell 146). In 1974, Bill 22 “made French the only official language of Quebec, channeling immigrant children into French-language schools by removing their parents’ freedom of choice, and compelling English-speaking businesses to erect bilingual signs” (Bothwell 148-149). Bill

101 from 1977, also known as the Charter of the French Language, basically made French the only public language in Quebec (Bothwell 152).

Although the descendants of the two founding nations of Canada have gotten along surprisingly well for more than 200 years, it is not uncommon to see “Canadian history as one long confrontation” (Bothwell 7). The situation of French-Canadians in Quebec is a peculiar one, in that they are a majority in their own province and at the same time a declining minority within Canada. Feelings of inferiority and threat of the French language and culture gave rise to a strong nationalist and separatist movement in Quebec, which culminated in two referendums on separatism in 1980 and 1995.

Canada, of course, has a long tradition as an immigration country and, in the latter half of the twentieth century, has gained a reputation for its political efforts to promote a multicultural and diverse society (Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1985/1988). However, the province of Quebec and its largest city, Montreal, have a special status. On the one hand, Montreal is a multiethnic and multilingual city, having attracted immigrants from all over the world.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, it is probably the only bilingual city in “Quebec [which] is the one province in Canada which is officially unilingual French” (Hecht 101). However, the whole concept of bilingualism is debatable. As former senator Jean-Robert Gauthier pointed out, “a country which has two official languages [...] is a different concept altogether from bilingualism” (Bothwell 144). Similarly, Kenneth McRoberts, professor of political science, has argued that “[v]ery few people are truly bilingual, in the sense that they have equal facility and work in more than one language” (Bothwell 154).

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<sup>44</sup> “In 1971 French Canadians formed 64% of the population (city and CMA); the British formed 11% (16% in the CMA); and the ethnic groups formed 25 and 20%, respectively. Half this category consisted of Italian or Jewish groups; the remainder was formed of many different ethnic groups” (Linteau 1159).



## 4.2 “I, Maureen”

“I, Maureen” was first published in 1967<sup>45</sup> and was included in the collection *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* in 1981. A movie based on Spencer’s short story was released in Canada in 1978.<sup>46</sup>

Prenshaw has called “I, Maureen” “a haunting story of psychological dissolution and pain, one of Spencer’s very finest stories” (*Spencer* 143). Roberts finds that in “I, Maureen,” and some other stories of that time, “the predominant tone is one of unsettled darkness” (*Self and Community* 98). He says that “there is a largely unresolved tension in these mature stories” (*ibid.* 102). While the title of this story reminded Roberts of *I, Claudius*<sup>47</sup> (101), it reminds me of Rimbaud’s famous quote “Je est un autre” (“I is another”).<sup>48</sup> The title might even suggest a kind of split personality – these possible implications will be discussed in chapter 4.2.4. In 1980, Spencer said in an interview that “I, Maureen” was her “most ambitious story with a Canadian setting,” and that she made an effort to get “the ‘southernness’ out of those [stories with a Canadian setting]” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 60).

Main themes in “I, Maureen” are ‘building a new identity,’ ‘search for the self,’ and perhaps ‘struggling with motherhood.’ The girl with her guitar at the very beginning of the story suggests that the narrator is very much concerned with this theme: “bent lovingly, as though eternally, over her guitar [...] they share the tender absorption of mother with child” (IM 341). In an interview conducted in 1993, Elizabeth Spencer said that she does feel close to her story characters during the writing process, despite the comment about detachment that Eudora Welty made in the foreword to *Stories*:

The “I, Maureen” story – well, I never had nervous breakdowns or a need to escape, but you have to go back to what started you on a story. When we were first in Canada, in Montreal, we were living in an area called Lakeshore. There were

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<sup>45</sup> 76: *New Canadian Stories*. Ottawa: Oberon, 1976. 70-99 (see Barge 579).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Brennan, <<http://movies.amctv.com/movie/96172/I-Maureen/details>>

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Graves, Robert. *I, Claudius: From the Autobiography of Tiberius Claudius, Emperor of the Romans, Born B.C. 10 Murdered and Deified A.D. 54*. 1934. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.

<sup>48</sup> From a letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871, cf. Rimbaud 86.

a number of younger couples out that way and the husbands worked in town and commuted. It's the same problem there as it is anywhere except the winters were very long there and some of those women out there that I knew - I didn't have that problem, because I was working myself on writing - the ones who didn't work who were just house-bound seemed to get all kinds of strange neuroses, wanting to get away. (Entzminger, "Interview" 600)

### 4.2.1 Setting

As has been mentioned in chapter 4.1 above, there is a stark contrast between the rural settings of Spencer's earlier stories and the urban settings of her Canadian stories. One aspect of this contrast is the prevailing anonymity in an urban society. In "I, Maureen" the possibility to stay anonymous in the big city, the opportunity to hide in certain parts of the city, is certainly something desirable for the main protagonist.

Prenshaw suggests that the Canadian stories included in the 1981 collection "hint of her appropriation finally of her Canadian home as territory known well enough to inform the imagination" (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 14), and that "in a story such as the 1976 'I, Maureen' she writes of Montreal and the surrounding townships with sympathetic identification and obvious familiarity" (ibid.). Nevertheless, it could be debated whether Spencer writes about Montreal with the same kind of familiarity that is conveyed in the stories with Southern settings. It was my impression that she uses more clichés about Canada than she does about the South.<sup>49</sup>

Marcel Arbeit proposes that in Spencer's fiction "Montreal (and sometimes Canada in general) is shown as: (a) a multicultural place, (b) a haven for the oppressed and the hunted where one can vanish of one's own accord without a trace, and (c) a place of solitude and isolation" (Arbeit 3-4). These aspects are particularly relevant for the story "I, Maureen." However, it should be added that, at least for Maureen, only certain areas of the city, namely the predominantly French, but also multiethnic, East Montreal can serve as a place of refuge. Concerning this aspect of the story, there is a connection to Elizabeth Spencer's biography. In order to get some time and space for her writing the

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<sup>49</sup> For instance, Maureen's boss, "Mr. Massimo had gone to a reunion of retired hockey players" (*Stories* 354).

author used to “rent a small studio – only one large room really – over in East Montreal where I know scarcely anyone” (from a 1983 interview with Laurie Brown, qtd. in Prenshaw, *Spencer* 14).

In “I, Maureen” Montreal is presented as very clearly distinguished into different social strata, which can be associated with certain regional areas of the city. There is N.D.G., which is short for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, where Maureen comes from. N.D.G., located in the city’s west-end, is traditionally home to middle-class and working-class Anglophones with a significant lower-class population. The Parthams, the wealthy family Maureen marries into, owns one of the impressive stone houses in the district of Westmount (cf. Linteau 1158). On the other hand, there is East Montreal, with a great majority of Francophones, but it is, as Maureen points out, also the part of the city where many immigrants have settled; it is not only French, it is multiethnic:

From then on I was on my own, escaping into the mystery that is East Montreal, a fish thrown barely alive back into water. Not that I had ever lived there. But to Westmount families who own houses in Baie d’Urfé, East Montreal presents even more of an opaque surface than N.D.G. It is thought to be French, and this is so, but it is also Greek, Italian, Oriental, and immigrant Jewish. (IM 347)

Another important aspect of the Montreal setting is the weather – something the author herself, being a Southerner, could never quite get used to. It is winter when Maureen goes to visit her son in the hospital: “Night after night I come, through blizzard, through ice and sleet, once in a silenced snow-bound city walking more than half the way into a wind with a -40° wind chill against my face” (IM 357). Apart from describing a phenomenon typical for Montreal, this snow storm is also a metaphor for Maureen’s struggle. It reinforces her feeling of desperation and the threat of losing control over her life: “I recall a winter night, lost in driving snow. There is a madness of snow, snow everywhere, teeming, shifting, lofty as curtains in the dream of a mad opera composer, cosmic, yet intimate as a white thread caught in an eyelash” (IM 356).

### 4.2.2 Characters

**Maureen** meets her future husband, Denis Partham, when she is 25 and, presumably, they have been married for a few years when Denis' accident happens. The time of narration is five years after that, so by then she must be in her mid-thirties. Maureen is not too confident about her outward appearance. She tells the reader right away: "From the age of two, I looked run-down" (IM 341) and also compares herself to a crow (IM 342). She seems nervous and confused from the very beginning of the story, making the reader wonder what could possibly be wrong with this character. In contrast to Marilee's lighthearted attitude, Maureen's ironic tone often turns into sarcasm. There seems to be a great bitterness about her life.

Spencer has commented on the character of Maureen:

The woman in 'I, Maureen' is just psychically unable to bear what most people would think of as a highly fortunate life. She is suddenly thrust by marriage into the circle of a very wealthy Canadian family and can't stand it. So she plunges into a much lower-class environment, which settles her and makes her happy. She was going mad in affluence. (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 218)

Maureen, the narrator, at certain points admits that she has lost control over her actions and is, in quite a literal sense, out of her mind:

I would call a number but strange voices out of unknown businesses or residences would answer [...], and I would begin to talk about myself – me, *me*, ME – relating imagined insults, or telling stories that were only partly true, and though I knew I was doing this, though my mind stood by like a chance pedestrian at the scene of an accident, interested, but a little sickened, with other things to do, still my voice, never lacking for a word, went on. (IM 346)

Also, there are times when she admits that she does not know what is real and what is not. "But some [forays] were also made to me, in my new country. For I saw them, at times, and at others I thought I saw them, shadows at twilight on the edge of their forest, or real creatures venturing out and toward me; it was often impossible to tell which" (IM 349).

How severe her condition is becomes clear when she expresses her desire to die. When running away from her seemingly dead husband she thinks: "But we leave the earth

with difficulty, and I wasn't up to that" (IM 343-344). "A month later I made my first attempt at suicide" (344). Maureen's need to escape from the world her marriage has led her into is really a matter of life and death: "I want my own world, I have been there once. I want to return. If I can't, I might as well be dead" (345).

To emphasize the fundamental changes Maureen is going through, she gradually loses her human traits – in her own perception and in her husband's. She is moving through the city with an ethereal quality. She perceives herself as "[a] woman invisible, floating softly through a June day," and as "[running] like the wind" (IM 348). Later, she seems to take on animal traits: "I wing, creep, crawl, hop – what you will – back into my world" (IM 358). When Maureen finds out that her severely sick son will be fine, she describes herself as an insect heart: "But my insect heart in the unlikely shape of me, almost permanently bent, like a wind-blasted tree, by the awful humors of that phenomenal winter, is incandescent with inextinguishable joy" (IM 358). While Prenshaw concludes that "[i]t is perhaps more accurate to say of characters like Mr. McMillan and Maureen Partham that they undertook radical searches than that they sought desperate escapes" (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 145), Maureen's actions look very much like an escape to me, with all the running and hiding.

Undeniably, Maureen is going through some fundamental changes and transformations. Whether there is a hopeful outcome for her is not quite clear though. In her synopsis of "I, Maureen," Entzminger suggests a basically positive outcome for Maureen:

Maureen's isolation helps her find her voice and become her own person. But before her self-realization is complete, she must risk it by returning briefly to that other world, the conventional one, coaxing her seriously ill son back to health through nightly visits to his hospital room. By reaching out from her self-protective shell, Maureen becomes a complete person, able to care without surrendering her separateness. (Entzminger, "Emotional Distance" 80)

Although I do not see any definite solutions for Maureen in the story, or her becoming "a complete person," there certainly is some sense of empowerment within the world she has created for herself. She is living by her own rules now, for instance, when it comes to her mysterious lover: "But as a fantasy, he [Michel] can be willed away as quickly as he is summoned" (Entzminger, "Emotional Distance" 86). However, it does

not seem like a satisfactory solution to live in a fantasy world. The optimistic reader might assume that this fantasy world is a transitory state that will help Maureen to heal and find her true self.

The most hopeful aspect of the story ending is that the “princess in the silver tower” (IM 361) does not feel the need for all her fairytale fantasies any longer. In the end, her tower, usually seen as a metaphor for isolation, is dissolving: “The tower is dissolving as his [Michel’s] presence fades from it, leaves as water drying from a fabric, thread by thread. It floats invisible, but at least undestroyed” (IM 356). Entzminger’s interpretation is that Maureen “has faced the reality of risks and painful emotions and returned intact, so she need no longer rely on fantasy for protection” (“Emotional Distance” 86–87). There are different possible readings of the rather ambiguous story ending and although the reader cannot know about Maureen’s future, it is certainly true that she has undergone some major changes; and that she has survived, after all.

**Denis Partham**, Maureen’s husband, comes from a really affluent family, and Maureen’s friends and family cannot believe Maureen’s luck: “My family couldn’t believe my good fortune no more than I could” (IM 343). Maureen is skeptical about this union from the very beginning, but she does not seem to have any control over what is happening: “At some point, we got married. But the marriage, I helplessly realized, had taken place already, in the moment he had seen me in the corner of one of the many Partham living rooms in their great stone house, me (Maureen), completely out of place. Before I knew it, he had enveloped me all over, encased me like a strong vine” (IM 343). Maureen feels trapped.

Denis seems just too good to be true. According to Maureen’s description, he is not only rich, but also: “Denis was handsome, a well-built man; younger than I, with dark hair and a strong, genuine smile” (IM 342). She does not quite understand why he is attracted to her at all and says about their first meeting: “I simply judged that he was a rich boy out for more sexual experience, seeking it outside his own class, the way privileged people often do” (IM 342).

Denis' reaction to Maureen's escape is, at first, to try to hospitalize her; later, he makes the concession of leaving her alone in the apartment she has chosen as a refuge in East Montreal. He sends a psychiatrist to see her there and also opens a bank account to support her financially (IM 345). For a while, Denis keeps thinking that his wife will only need some time to recover and become her old self again. He seems convinced that the right doctors and enough money can fix anything, because, as Maureen once mockingly remarks, a Partham can do anything: "(Isn't Nature great? She belongs to the Parthams.)" (IM 342).

At some point, Denis must have given up on his wife and he reproaches her: "'I don't know why you ever had to turn into a spirit at all! Just a woman, a wife, a mother, a human being - ! That's all I ever wanted!' 'Believe me, Denis,' I said, '*I don't know either.*'" (IM 360). Maureen deliberately omits the part of her story where she and Denis get divorced, and, very unexpectedly, she tells the reader about seeing Denis' wife at the hospital, "the one he should have married in the first place" (IM 357).

**Michel** is Maureen's mysterious lover. Maureen's first impression of him is that "[h]e was thin and ravaged, frowning, worried, *pressé*" (IM 353). She thinks that there is "[s]omething revolutionary [...] in his bones" (ibid.). It turns out that Michel is not a Québécois separatist after all, but wants to open "one of those shops that sold hippie costumes, Indian shirts, long skirts, built-up shoes, some papier-mâché decorators' items, and some artwork" (ibid.). Maureen claims that "he seldom told the truth. It was not his nature" (IM 356).

The reader and Maureen do not know where Michel came from and where he disappears to. Moreover, the reader cannot know whether Michel really becomes Maureen's lover, or if this is just part of her lively imagination. He comes and goes as he pleases (or as Maureen pleases, if he is only a concoction of her fantasy). Either way, he seems to have an important role in Maureen's healing process. At the end of the story, she is able to let him go: "The tower is dissolving as his [Michel's] presence fades from it, leaves as water drying from a fabric, thread by thread. It floats invisible, but at least undestroyed" (IM 356).

**Dr. Johnson**, the psychiatrist that Denis sends to Maureen's new apartment, is certainly not a main character, but nonetheless an interesting figure. Although Dr. Johnson is a "plain English-Canadian from Regina, named Johnson" (IM 345), as opposed to the other psychiatrist with "a thick European accent, and an odd name, Miracorte" (ibid.), I find Arbeit's assumption that Maureen rejects Dr. Miracorte because of his ethnic background and a lack of assimilation debatable (cf. Arbeit 5). I assume that she does not like him because he is ignorant and "short-sighted" in a typical doctor's way (IM 344).<sup>50</sup> Dr. Johnson, on the other hand, seems more sympathetic and right away consoles her with the remark: "Everyone's a little schizoid" (IM 345). He tries to convince her that it is normal to search for one's "alter ego" or "other self" (IM 347). Maureen replies "It makes no sense, my other self. None whatever" (IM 348).

**Maureen's children**, a boy and a girl, are the only ones who hold her back, who make her return to her former home on several occasions. Maureen does love her children, there is no doubt about that, and feels guilty about abandoning them. However, they are an integral part of that all too perfect world that is stifling her. "Our children were beautiful, like children drawn with a pencil over and again in many attitudes, all pure, among many Canadian settings" (IM 342). They are part of that other world, they are Parthams; and there is nothing Maureen can do about that. "Oh, my poor children! Could they ever grow up to look like Aunt Vinnie and Uncle Charles? At the thought of them, so impossibly beautiful, so possibly doomed, noises like cymbals crash in my ears, my eyes blur and stream" (IM 352-353). About her son, who is obsessed with his mother after his severe illness, she says to Denis: "Don't worry about him, Denis. He's a Partham, after all" (IM 361). As Greene observes, only during the struggle with his sickness, "the trappings of his father's class fall away," and Maureen feels a connection with her son for a brief moment (Greene 96).

Prenshaw sees parallels between Maureen and the protagonist of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Maureen, like Edna Pontellier, "can neither will herself into submission nor will away her need for separateness. Like Chopin's character, she would sacrifice her

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<sup>50</sup> Also see chapter 4.2.3 below.



life for her children, but she will not give up her identity for them” (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 145). Arbeit confirms that observation about *The Awakening*: “The character of Maureen, the woman who builds a new identity and clings to it at any cost, has an obvious southern literary predecessor: Edna Pontellier from Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* (1899)” (Arbeit 4).

After her son has recovered from his severe illness, Maureen hears from her ex-husband that their son is obsessed with her, that “[h]e thinks you’re a saint, something more than human. Your visits were only half-real to him. They were like – appearances, apparitions” (IM 359). Denis resents her for becoming this kind of ‘spirit,’ and even though their son recovered nicely, he thinks of her as a real threat for their children (IM 359). Entzminger finds it important that Maureen does not tell the reader her son’s name. “Her refusal to tell his name also creates a tension for the readers” (Entzminger 86). “(His name? My son’s name? I won’t tell you.)” (IM 358).

**Carole Partham**, Maureen’s sister-in-law, could be seen as a foil to Maureen’s character. We do not learn much about her, and it is quite likely that her appearance (and miraculous disappearance) is another concoction of Maureen’s lively imagination, but she is described as the perfect upper-middle-class wife that Maureen could never be. “A smart-looking girl, up to the latest in clothes, a luxury woman, wearing suède with a lynx collar, tall brown rain boots, brushed brown hair” (IM 349); “she gave out the air of class” (IM 351). There is the suggestion, or perhaps it is just Maureen’s wishful thinking, that Carole wants to follow Maureen’s lead and break free from her boring upper-class life. According to Maureen’s vague recollections about her sister-in-law, Carole even moves to her street for a while and gets her own job (IM 350-351).

### 4.2.3 Society and Gender Roles

In “I, Maureen” the discrepancy between different social classes is emphasized. Maureen has married into an upper middle-class family. “We had, in addition to the Lakeshore house at Baie d’Urfé, an apartment on Drummond Street in Montreal, servants, two cars, wonderful friends, a marvelous life” (IM 343). Coming from a more modest background herself, Maureen is expected to consider herself very lucky indeed

to have married so well; what Prenshaw calls “a Cinderella-like marriage” (*Spencer* 143). However, she does not react appropriately. She is bored, she feels out of place in all this wealth. In a 1981 interview with John Griffin Jones, Elizabeth Spencer commented that “[...] many of the longer stories like ‘Ship Island’ or ‘I, Maureen’ or several of the others are about women who are at odds with the middle-class view of the world. It’s being tested through them and found wanting, and they are not going to let themselves be forced to submit to it” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 102). In another interview the author said about Maureen: “I think that she was stifled by that very perfect upper-middle class – it would have been like Princess Diana marrying into royalty, you see. It seems like a fairy book romance. This girl was thrown into an absolutely opulent and splendid situation, but she can’t stand it. She stifles to death” (Entzminger, “Interview” 604).

“I, Maureen” is a story about guilt, first and foremost. Maureen is feeling guilty about not fulfilling her role as a wife and mother. To abandon one’s family and little children is something particularly unacceptable for a woman, according to traditional gender roles. There is a scene where Maureen goes back to her family’s house: Maureen is sitting in her old living room alone, waiting for her family to appear and suddenly hears “a silent scream, waxing unbearably” (IM 346). “Here, through the silent scream, Spencer causes us to partake of the enormous guilt that Maureen the narrator is unable to express. Running from the house, Maureen flees from her guilt, bearing a bruise like a mark of Cain on her forehead” (Entzminger, “Emotional Distance” 83). Things escalate in that Maureen becomes a threat for her own family: Maureen visits, or tries to visit, her family: “Here, the tables are turned and the world that she reaches out for runs from Maureen. No longer the victim, she is a dangerous intruder” (ibid.). “Her son’s illness represents the tug of maternal feelings that burden her with guilt and fear, drawing her back into the traditional role she had forsaken. The bitter winter weather of this section contrasts with the summer-time of her fantasy, and she risks entering this storm of reality to save her child” (Entzminger, “Emotional Distance” 86). The red globe at the very end of the story and Maureen’s burnt hands can be read as another symbol for her guilt. “He photographs my hands over a blood-red glass globe, lighted from within” (IM 362).

Entzminger suggests that there might be a particular gender aspect to the repression of feelings that Maureen is obviously employing as a means of defense. “Emotion is one thing that is expected of women, and it can often imprison them in a sense of vulnerability and dependence. For this reason, the rebellion against the control of others sometimes means a rebellion against emotion for Spencer’s female characters” (Entzminger, “Emotional Distance” 74). The solution that Entzminger sees is that Maureen in the end can give up her repression of emotions and start to accept the pain. “Only the next day do I notice that my palm is burned so badly I have to bandage it and go for days in pain. Is the pain for Michel? Damn Michel! The pain is mine, active and virulent. It is mine alone” (IM 362). “She accepts her suffering as part of her identity, but will not let it overcome her” (Entzminger 87).

Maureen is trying to escape from a world where she has the feeling that she is losing herself; it does not suffice for her to be a wife and mother. Prenshaw says about Maureen that “she insists on being known as ‘I, Maureen,’ and in that insistence we find her desperate escape from the enclosed world of selflessness and invisibility” (Prenshaw, *Spencer* 145). Then again, quite on the contrary, Maureen is seeking invisibility and anonymity as a remedy for her psychosis. It is not only the local distance to her old life that brings her some relief, she is escaping to a totally different social environment; she is getting as far away as possible from the upper-class environment she has married into, while staying in the same city – which is probably the compromise she makes because of her children.

Another aspect which is relevant to this chapter is how society deals with Maureen’s breakout and with mental illness. “I, Maureen” could be read as a critique of psychologists and the narrow-mindedness of this society in general: “Doctors wait for something to be said that fits a pattern they have learned to be true, just as teachers wait for you to write English or French. If you wrote a new and unknown language they wouldn’t know what to do with you – you would fail” (IM 344). Maureen is very aware of the fact that she will be sent to “the asylum in Verdun” (ibid.), if she says the wrong things. Events get to a point where Maureen’s in-laws think of her as a threat.

#### 4.2.4 Narrative Technique

“I, Maureen” is told by a first-person narrator who is also the main protagonist of the story, thus, a homodiegetic narrator. Maureen is the narrator and the focalizer.<sup>51</sup> However, the relation between narrator and focalizer is deliberately kept ambiguous. She is telling the events from five years ago, assumedly the time of her husband’s accident that changed her life completely, and it could be claimed that narrator and focalizer are not identical, because Maureen is a completely different person at the time of narration than she was at the time of the events that are being narrated. The narrator referring to herself as “I (Maureen)” underlines the ambiguity between narrator and focalizer; and perhaps suggests that Maureen is still insecure about her own identity at the time of narration. The typographical split of “I, Maureen” or “I (Maureen)” has attracted some critical attention. Terry Roberts suggests that this is one of Spencer’s “experimental techniques to suggest Maureen’s brush with insanity” (*Self and Community* 101).

Her narrative dramatizes the degree to which her personality all but splits into actor and observer. Spencer even suggests typographically this split; when Maureen introduces herself in the first line of the story, it is as “I (Maureen),” emphasizing the subconscious distinction between the two. From that point on, most of her references to herself involve her splitting the first-person pronoun from her name with some sort of punctuation, thus unconsciously splitting her persona. (*Self and Community* 101-102)

Entzminger, too, proposes that the typographical peculiarities, such as “I, Maureen” or “I (Maureen),” are meant to separate narrator and story participant. “In telling the story, Maureen the narrator creates a space between herself and the participant Maureen of the past, whom she coolly observes in her memories” (“Emotional Distance” 80). I think the fact that “Maureen the observer [...] watches without understanding her actions as a participant” (ibid. 83) proves that there is a great distance between narrator and story participant. I also agree with Entzminger that the distance between narrator and story participant creates a great deal of tension for the reader who tries to make sense of

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<sup>51</sup> The terminology to describe different types of narrators relies on Rimmon-Kenan 95-97. About the difference between narration and focalization, cf. Rimmon-Kenan 72-75.

Maureen's narration (ibid.). Perhaps the above mentioned typographical split is simply an expression of her psychiatrist's view that "[e]veryone is a little schizoid" (IM 345).

The narrator is certainly a very unreliable one; not only because any first-person narrator tends to be unreliable, but this one is, quite obviously, mentally unstable. On several occasions the narrator admits openly that some narrated events probably just happened in her imagination, or that she simply does not know what is real and what is not. The narrator addresses the imagined reader directly, not so much as to get the reader involved (as Marilee Summerall would do in her narration), but rather to mock the imagined reader; or perhaps, because Maureen does not want to remember the details of her past: "It was in Baie d'Urfé, one of the old townships, and you can describe it for yourself, if you so desire" (IM 341). Roberts, too, thinks it valid to compare Maureen with Marilee Summerall:

Maureen's dilemma as both actor in and teller of her own tale is even more obvious when compared with that other well-known Spencer narrator, Marilee Summerall. Marilee's supreme confidence in her power to reshape and reconcile the complex forces of her own family life contrasts sharply with that of her northern cousin. Their names suggest, as those of Spencer's characters often do, that their author means this comparison to be made. (*Self and Community* 102)

The very beginning of the story is already misleading for the reader in that it suggests a classical descriptive introduction, in contrast with the rest of the story with its unexpected time shifts and fantastic elements. Entzminger, too, has observed that the beginning of the story adds a great deal of tension for the reader, because "we know only that there is something mysterious and desperate within her that causes her to withdraw" ("Emotional Distance" 81).

The sudden time shifts in the story illustrate the restlessness of the narrator, or, perhaps, her confusion. The changing seasons are an important narrative device throughout the story, in that they often function as time shift markers. After a meeting between Maureen and Denis, towards the end of the story, the end of winter is symbolizing a glimpse of hope for Maureen: "It had been a clear, still, frozen afternoon when we met, but holding just that soft touch of violet which said that winter would at last give over. Its grip was terrible, but a death grip no longer" (IM 360).

While I cannot agree with Entzminger's statement that the passage where Maureen and Michel are getting closer (IM 354) features some "indulgent and romantic language that contrasts with Maureen's usual flat, ironic tone" ("Emotional Distance" 84), I do think that her tone changes considerably whenever she is talking about the love for her children. "Through all this, night was coming on; and summer – that, too, was coming on. Vinnie and Charles were dreams. But love is real" (IM 353). While Maureen's tone is indeed strikingly sober and flat, avoiding any emotions, especially when she talks about her husband and relates her husband's accident, there are more lyrical passages too: "The tower is dissolving as his presence fades from it [Michel's presence], leaves as water drying from a fabric, thread by thread. It floats invisible, but at least undestroyed" (IM 356).

The very last sentence of "I, Maureen," although referring to the cheap piece of art that Michel has made, reminds me of a theme that can be found in several of Spencer's stories, namely, storytelling, or, the importance of storytelling to define our place in this world. "Yet it was created, it happened, and that, in its smallness must pass for everything – must, in this instance, stand for all" (IM 362). I read this as a final confirmation that we cannot know what is real and what is not. No matter if the narrator was not able to give a more reliable account or did not want to.

### 4.3 "Jean-Pierre"

"Jean-Pierre" was first published in 1981 in *The New Yorker*<sup>52</sup> and subsequently became the opening story of the 1988 collection *Jack of Diamonds and Other Stories*.

"Jean-Pierre" is the story of a seemingly mismatched couple. Callie gets married to a much older French-Canadian man she barely knows; and who, soon after their wedding, mysteriously disappears. Critics have often focused on the mysterious aspects in "Jean-Pierre:" Roberts has observed that this story "introduces Spencer's emphasis on the mysterious in human relations" (*Self and Community* 101); Seltzer thinks that "'Jean-Pierre' is atypical of Spencer's work. Unlike most of Spencer's female protagonists,

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<sup>52</sup> *New Yorker* 57 August 17, 1981: 30-40 (see Lewis 245).

[...] Callie is to some extent as mysterious as Jean-Pierre himself” (122). Elizabeth Spencer, in contrast, said in an interview about the female protagonist of this story: “Well, she’s very stubborn. I didn’t think Callie was very mysterious. I think the whole key to that story is very plainly sexual. They just had this singular and completely passionate relationship – a strong center to the whole” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 193-194). No matter what the nature of Callie’s and Jean-Pierre’s relationship is, this story does have mysterious aspects. Seltzer calls it “the collection’s most elusive” story (115).

Main themes that can be traced throughout this story are ‘the impossibility of communication,’ ‘loneliness and alienation in the big city,’ and ‘waiting (for unknown things, or uncertain returns).’ Difficult or insufficient communication occurs between the French and the English, but also between men and women. At the end of the story, when Jean-Pierre unexpectedly returns: “He had promised to tell her. When he told her, would she know? [...] she would seek out the moment under his words, hidden in the thicket of whatever he would talk about” (JP 25). Even if she understands the literal meaning, she will have a hard time understanding the intended meaning. The theme of ‘waiting’ also appears repeatedly. Callie is waiting for Jean-Pierre to return for the better part of the story. Moreover, during a trip to New England, she is (day)dreaming about a woman in the old farm house who is waiting to get up from her nap and bake banana bread (JP 19). “And she, Callie, was waiting, but waiting for Jean-Pierre was not to be compared with other kinds. Everybody and everything, she thought, was waiting, in one way or another. Now she was waiting for Simon Weiss as well, because he had gone somewhere, too” (JP 29).

### **4.3.1 Setting**

“Jean-Pierre” takes place in the early 1960s. The local setting of the story is again Montreal, but also New England as a minor setting. There is an opposition between the urban jungle and the enchanted countryside. The big city is described as a place of loneliness and alienation while the countryside is a place where one can find recreation and peace of mind.

Montreal is mostly defined by street names. Some bits and pieces of (bad Canadian) French provide more local color. The French street names might appear somewhat exotic to an Anglophone reader: Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Côte-de-Neiges, Saint-Marc, Pont Jacques-Cartier, Saint-Laurent. And even more exotic, also to the main protagonist, are the places further in the north of Quebec: “Rimouski, Chicoutimi, she thought, steadying her breath against the strange names. Kamouraska, Rivière du Loup ... They fell through her thoughts as thick as snow. Tadoussac ... Lac Saint-Jean ... Saint-Gabriel” (JP 24).

Again, the division of Montreal into east and west, and the sociological connotations, are emphasized. The poor, French-speaking population traditionally lives in the east of the city. The male protagonist, Jean-Pierre, owns two apartment houses “out in East Montreal,” “dark brick buildings, of forty-five apartments each” (JP 7). When he takes his new wife to see the buildings, she is so bothered by the sight that she has a bad dream about them the following night. “It was a close humid day, misting rain, and narrow iron balconies along the sides of the buildings were crammed like rush-hour buses with sweating people in shorts, T-shirts, and sandals. Smoke rose from a barbecue. The windows all seemed dull” (JP 10). Callie’s sister says about East Montreal: “Nobody lives over there but – oh, you know, plumbers” (JP 7).

While Callie is dreaming about nature in New England, which she only knows from Emily Dickinson’s poetry, the big city seems pretty dreary: “Montreal was muggy, overcast, and dirty that summer. The trees in the residential streets looked cool and full, but downtown near her own apartment, along Sainte-Catherine, vomit dried in various shades of green all day outside the *tavernes*, and all dogs seemed afflicted with diarrhea” (JP 14). The contrast between urban and rural space is vivid in Callie’s mind: “she thought about nature in New England, perhaps still full of tall elms – the elms that were sick and dying in Montreal, some already chopped down and hauled away” (JP 15). The contrast between nature in New England and the city of Montreal is emphasized, but also, when keeping in mind the comparison between northern and southern stories, there is a stark contrast to the southern small town with its shade trees and porches along the main street.



When Callie and her new friend, Simon, finally make a trip to Vermont, Callie's expectations of an idyllic countryside are not disappointed: "It was a fine, clear, sky-blue, fresh summer day. They went south to Swanton, in Vermont, then turned east into beautiful farm country over little-known roads that led through green-and-white villages" (JP 19). Although the story does not offer a more detailed description of this rural scenery, Callie and Simon soon arrive at a quarry, which turns out to be a deeply symbolic place:

Callie opened her eyes, and all around her the squares, rectangles, and trapezoids of the outcropping rock towered or dropped away, like a ruin. Over the tops of the rocks, high and low, sumac was growing, peering out like Indians. It was a wild shrub with long-angling branches, lozenge-shaped leaves, and squat, strong candles of dark brown, with the look of thick wax drippings. After frost, these would turn bright and the leaves would burn red. (JP 19-20)

When Callie wades into the pond that has collected in the middle of this quarry she moves into unknown, possibly dangerous territory: "The water, being whitish with a chalky suspension, hid the rocks it lay over. The rocks were uneven, some slippery, and toward the pond's center they suddenly dropped away. She drew her foot back, feeling it actually elongate in the pull of an iciness that meant depth at the least, maybe something bottomless" (JP 21). Simon tries to follow her but cannot, because he cuts his foot on a stone.

Seltzer convincingly argues that the quarry represents an absence or incompleteness (121). However, Seltzer's statement that Callie is at ease with this absence could be questioned. "Similarly, Callie is also at ease when she is wading in the water that has been trapped by the quarry's steep walls; she does not fear becoming trapped herself and instead imagines the pond to be 'bottomless'. Therefore in its voids and its 'finalities' the quarry is a paradoxical space" (Seltzer 121). The quarry perhaps is a paradoxical space in that there is a pull and attraction to an assumedly bottomless void, while, at the same time, "the water, its thickness and sudden cold" (JP 22) certainly are something potentially dangerous and threatening.

### 4.3.2 Characters

**Callie** is a young woman living in Montreal on her own. Her father and her stepmother have moved to California (JP 3) and she does not want to stay with her sister and brother-in-law, who are still living in Montreal. She does not seem to have any close friends and radiates an air of alienation and disorientation throughout the story. Seltzer has called Callie “a spiritual orphan of sorts” (115).

Callie is presented as young and rather unimpressive, and there is a remarkable connection between her bitter family life and the French language. “Her hair was pale, fine, and straight. It hung down evenly on either side, and was a little longer in the back, where it dipped down into a V” (JP 5). “She was still so young, scarcely turned twenty, and given to quietness. Since her mother’s death she had endured a bitter family life, prone to fights and festering. She had studied French to get the voices out of her head” (ibid.).

Spencer said about Callie that she has “this sense of devotion and fragility, but, you know, there’s a strong center of holding on and being devoted to [her] own feelings” (Girard 8).<sup>53</sup> In an interview from 1993, the author said about Callie:

And the girl in ‘Jean-Pierre’ – to me she was very appealing because she really did want love and affection. She wasn’t finding that at all in her society. She met a man and, without intending to, stumbled on a very passionate relationship, and I wonder if those things don’t occur, when they occur, almost by accident. You don’t go out specifically looking for passion, but it might just happen. And so that was the thing that was holding them together. (Entzminger, “Interview” 603)

There are different explanations for what could be Callie’s motivation to marry Jean-Pierre. My first thought was that this is an act of rebellion against her family, who clearly does not approve of this union. Seltzer interprets “Callie’s attraction to Jean-Pierre” as “a means of delving deeper into the displacement she is already experiencing” (115). Another reason that has to be considered is that Callie and Jean-Pierre may have in common that they are both outsiders. Callie’s own explanation is probably the strangest

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<sup>53</sup> A similar comment on Callie can be found in Entzminger, “Interview” 604.

of all: “‘You know somehow,’ said Callie, ‘when someone is permanent in your life. You can marry them or not marry them; they’re always there just the same.’” (JP 6). The narrator of “Jean-Pierre” has a very simple explanation, too: “For some reason, they cared about each other” (JP 9). In contrast to everybody else in her environment, Callie does not think that she is in any way superior to Jean-Pierre; quite on the contrary: “To Callie, the real question was not why she wanted to marry Jean-Pierre, with whom she felt she belonged, but why he wanted to marry her – this English-speaking girl, so much younger, with nothing to offer him” (JP 8).

In a way, Callie is very adventurous. She is drawn towards mysterious things, such as the quarry in Vermont, and to mysterious men in particular. Jean-Pierre and Simon, the Québécois and the Jew, are both seen as somewhat exotic and mysterious through Callie’s eyes. She does seem very detached from all the strange things happening around her. It is hard to tell whether Callie is suffering from a feeling of alienation after her mother’s death, or whether she is just bored by the conservative middle-class society surrounding her. Seltzer stresses the aspect that Callie and Simon share a feeling of disorientation (120). Callie’s waiting is characterized by a great deal of passivity, as expressed by long afternoons of sunbathing in a neighbor’s lounge chair (JP 12), which “speaks to her feelings of helplessness” (Seltzer 118).

During the summer when her husband is gone, Callie finds solace in reading Emily Dickinson’s poetry. On her trip to Vermont with Simon, Callie starts fantasizing about the poet and, at the sight of a “tall woman in a plain, straight-cut dress, with dark hair,” tells Simon: “I think it’s Emily Dickinson” (JP 22). She reads the poems very carefully and seems convinced that you can learn something about life from poetry. There might also be a parallel between Callie’s and Emily Dickinson’s life concerning their self-imposed social seclusion.<sup>54</sup>

Callie sat and read Emily Dickinson. She read it line for line. A whole book lay before her, and she thought it might just last all summer; poetry went much more

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<sup>54</sup> Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) spent all her life in Amherst, MA. She led an extremely secluded life in dependency on a “demanding, tyrannical, autocratic, and possessive father” (“Dickinson” 216). She wrote her poems secretly and (except for two of them) they were all published posthumously.

slowly than a novel. She learned that nature was marvelous but cruel, that death was inexorable, that to lose your love was another sort of death, that God was somebody whom, if you had any sense at all, you had to argue with. (JP 14)

**Jean-Pierre Courtois** is the man who Callie marries on impulse and whose mysterious absence affects the atmosphere of the whole story. Jean-Pierre is older than Callie and, in her eyes, somewhat exotic-looking. “He was dark, almost swart, with a fleshy face that could, she guessed, go sullen rather easily [...]” (JP 4). Jean-Pierre’s table manners are not very refined, to say the least. Also, he looks a little cheap: “But his clothes were neat, his tie quiet, and the only thing that really set him off from the English-speaking Fletchers was the slight gleam of artificial gloss on his thick hair, and the gold he wore – cuff links, ring, and tie clip, all very bright” (JP 4). When Callie first meets Jean-Pierre she thinks that “[h]e must be thirty years old [...] and probably married” (JP 5). “Jean-Pierre had thick dark hair, darker than most of his friends’, and gray eyes nearly as dark as coal. He looked almost Spanish” (JP 9-10). Seltzer comments that Jean-Pierre “is, in fact, visibly marked as a French Québécois” (116).

Not only is Jean-Pierre much older than Callie, he is also a widower. “His first wife had died. The family blamed him. [...] It seemed he had got a bad name in the French community – the strict side of it” (JP 8). Even within a group of outsiders he is an outsider; something particularly bad in a society where family and community are so important. His relatives and friends are very important to Jean-Pierre. He claims that his family emigrated from France in 1683, “among the first settlers” (JP 10). – To be *pure laine*, i.e., to be able to trace back one’s own ancestry to the original settlers of New France, is something important in his community.

Jean-Pierre often appears cold and detached, especially when he talks about the death of his first wife (JP 9). At the wedding luncheon, “Jean-Pierre smoked a lot and paid Callie little notice” (ibid.). It becomes obvious that Callie knows practically nothing about her husband, but this air of mystery also fascinates her. “If she tried to ask too much he would brood – a brooding so deep and thorough that his eyes seemed to peer beautifully into her soul’s depth. A mystery so deep couldn’t be just about business” (JP 10-11).

One day, Jean-Pierre suddenly disappears without informing his wife where or for how long he will be gone. He reappears just as suddenly and unexpectedly after a period of between two and three months. Spencer said about Jean-Pierre's disappearance: "I think the reason for his mysterious absence was that he got in troubles that he couldn't bear for the English community to find out, so he just absented himself" (Entzminger, "Interview" 604). Seltzer suggests that Callie "sees in Jean-Pierre a complex reflection of her own alienation," however there is an important difference between them: "Unlike Callie, Jean-Pierre is able to slip away from the known world and exist in an environment that remains invisible, and, as importantly, inaccessible to her" (117).

**Simon Weiss** is the young man that Callie meets in the library during the summer when Jean-Pierre is gone. "He had uncontrollably curly dark hair, shabbily cut, and gnawed his fingernails, and he wore a short-sleeved beige shirt and no tie" (JP 16). Callie finds something mysterious and fascinating about him. "He was arranged like a geometrical design. He seemed to be speaking to her through a magnified web of the print he was just reading from" (JP 17). When Simon is watching her in the library, Callie thinks: "He was like someone approaching a door" (JP 16). "He looked intelligent in a harried way; she thought he was probably Jewish" (JP 17).

Simon is married and has a baby girl whom he brings with him to the library every day. His wife earns the family's living, Simon is out of work. "'I'm out of a job. I got fired. My wife works. I have to mind the baby.'" (JP 17). It is embarrassing for him that he has to take care of the baby instead of sustaining the family – certainly an unusual situation in the early 1960s.

Callie and Simon have in common a kind of uncertainty and anxiety about life; they are both waiting passively for something to change. There is a feeling of helplessness, apathy maybe, detachment, passivity. Callie asks Simon: "'Are you scared?' [...] She hadn't meant to say that. 'Of course,' he said breathlessly, and the sense of contact made her dizzy." Seltzer observes that Simon "sees in Callie a kindred spirit," and that "Simon is attempting to communicate his extreme disorientation" (120). His sensitivity seems in stark contrast with Jean-Pierre's coarse manners. "'I've watched you every day,' the

young man said. ‘Something’s the matter with you, too. Nobody reads poetry the way you’ve been doing unless something’s the matter.’” (JP 18). Callie and Simon are both very sensitive compared to Jean-Pierre, who appears more of the rough and inarticulate *coureur des bois*<sup>55</sup> – of course another cliché about the Québécois.

**Bea**, Callie’s sister, should be mentioned because she can be interpreted as a kind of foil for Callie. She has chosen a more conventional, thus, more acceptable way of life, i.e., marriage to a banker of English descent (cf. Seltzer 117). Bea’s comment, which Seltzer calls “a comic example of snobbery” (117), points out Callie’s mistake: “Bart and I make an impression, I know that. Even our names go together – you have to think of everything. But ‘Jean-Pierre and Callie,’ how does that sound?” (JP 7).

**The Cat**, though not strictly speaking a character, is treated almost like a character by the narrator. It certainly has an important function in the story. A stray cat decides to stay with Callie during the summer she is waiting for Jean-Pierre. Callie is grateful for the appearance of this mysterious creature: “She made some contact with the steady slate-blue gaze; a current ran from the sun to her, from the cat to her, from her to the cat. She had felt alone and anxious, numb and half dead, but now there was a joining, a new sense of life” (JP 12-13).

Callie keeps thinking about the cat when she meets Simon. Perhaps she makes this connection because the two of them have a similar function for Callie. They both mean relief from her loneliness; they both turn up unexpectedly. With both of them she instantly has a feeling of connection, of trust. When Callie is wondering about why Simon always sits opposite her in an otherwise empty library, she thinks: “Might as well ask why the cat had put its head up over the fence” (JP 16). A little later, when Simon tries to find out about her problems, Callie is thinking of the cat again: “She didn’t answer – any more than if he had addressed the white cat. Thinking of the cat, she put out her tongue’s tip and then drew it in again. Thus would the cat have done, adjusting one paw” (JP 18). Both, Simon

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<sup>55</sup> *Coureurs des bois* were “itinerant, unlicensed fur traders of New France” (Wien 432). “The independent *coureurs de bois* played a key role in the European exploration of the continent and in establishing trading contacts with the Indians” (ibid.).

and the white cat, give Callie the attention she cannot get from Jean-Pierre: “He [Simon] was watching her sandals walking. The cat, she recalled, watched in a different way, yet this regard, too, cut through the stifling web of her anxiety” (JP 18).

When Callie comes home from her trip to New England, and Jean-Pierre has returned unexpectedly, the cat appears as a symbol of Callie’s anxiety. In befriending the stray cat, she is able to tame her fear. “The arched spring of the cat out of a closet was so startling she cried out. Its back seemed to stand for a moment in the air, the cool silver the color of fear” (JP 23). The story ends with Callie addressing the cat: “‘I won’t leave you,’ she knelt to say. ‘It’s only Jean-Pierre. He lives here too.’” Jean-Pierre says about the cat: “‘He stays because he belongs to you,’ [...] ‘*Il est à toi. Il le sait bien.*’” (JP 24). Whether this is a suggestion that he, Jean-Pierre, will stay too, because they belong together, is of course left to the reader’s imagination.

### 4.3.3 Society and Gender Roles

In “Jean-Pierre” the presentation of society is focused on the conflict between the English- and the French-speaking population in Montreal. The French are thought to be inferior regarding economic success and education; they typically live in the poorer districts of the city. On the other hand, among the English, a feeling of superiority is not uncommon: “When the English managed things, who cared about the French?” (JP 15).

Different story characters comment on this inequality between the two population groups. First of all, the main protagonist, Callie, is very much aware of how unfairly the French are being treated and does not blame them for feeling nothing but contempt for the English:

But then she began to think of what the French went through here, treated as inferior by the English, called names they resented (she didn’t blame them); they preferred a life unmarred by violating eyes and scarring comments – such regard, such words as her stepmother had gone in for. (JP 5)

Callie does not seem surprised or particularly worried that this tension between the English and the French even affects her personal life, when she concludes that Jean-Pierre’s first

kiss was merely an act of contempt: “The kiss had been an act of contempt, she thought; she had got that out of it. The French did not like English-speaking people” (JP 5).

To Callie’s family it is an affront that she is marrying a French-Canadian. The fact that nobody from her family is willing to attend the wedding is certainly very telling. Callie’s sister, Bea, presents the reader with the most common stereotypes about the Québécois: “‘He’s one of those awful Quebec people. They left France so long ago nobody there knows they exist. [...] You’ll wind up with fifteen brats and not even good French’” (JP 6).<sup>56</sup> The librarian who gives Callie a job during the summer also expresses the common condescending view of the Francophone population. Obviously, she finds the fact that Callie has married a Québécois rather embarrassing: “‘Well ... they’re different,’ said Mrs. Gentian, and she looked away, resettling her glasses” (JP 14). Another cliché about the Québécois that Simon learned from his father: “He said the Québécois, if they get in trouble or get scared, they take to the bush. *Coureurs des bois*. They go to places like Chicoutimi, Rimouski, Rivière du Loup, from there upriver, downriver, into the woods. It was just his idea” (JP 21).

One of Elizabeth Spencer’s comments on “Jean-Pierre” confirms her intention to present the great tensions between the French and the English in this story:

That story took place in the sixties, and he [Jean-Pierre] felt goaded and fearful of the judgment of the English-speaking community. You know, the French-Canadians had this feeling that they were looked down on as inferiors. If he was in business trouble he didn’t want her family to get hold of the details of it. You had to read between the lines to get that, but it was part of the Montreal scene and the Quebec scene as I saw it at that time. (Girard 8)

Simon mentions to Callie the British historian Toynbee:<sup>57</sup> “Something he said about societies finding identity, about processes of testing, this way and that way, what to do? The French here might be doing that. Scared, but they have to try. You think so?” (JP

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<sup>56</sup> As a matter of fact, the fertility rate in Quebec had been significantly higher than the fertility rate in the rest of Canada throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but this started to change with the beginning of the Quiet Revolution (Bothwell 139).

<sup>57</sup> Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975), best known for *A Study of history* in twelve volumes (1934-1961).



21) – The French are a big mystery to Simon too. This notion of “finding identity” is certainly a relevant issue for the French-Canadian community at the time of the story. However, it also reflects Simon’s and Callie’s disorientation in the process of finding one’s identity.

Having married a French Canadian, Callie is making an effort to cross the cultural and linguistic borders. She is of course aware of the communication problems that arise in her daily life and is often thinking about the French terms for things in her everyday life (e.g., JP 15). Jean-Pierre’s friends do not seem to appreciate her efforts. They “assumed she knew no French. Yet she understood them well enough. Alone with Jean-Pierre, she spoke to him in his language” (JP 9). Callie knows enough French to be aware that Jean-Pierre speaks bad French; for instance, he uses “bienvenue” as an answer to Callie’s “thank you” – a literal translation of “you’re welcome.”

Moreover, there are religious boundaries to be crossed in this marriage. Callie and Jean-Pierre make a strange kind of compromise at their wedding and get married “in the office of a French Protestant church” (JP 8). For Callie, her husband’s Catholic faith is yet another mystery about him, and she is wondering about whether he is taking this wedding in a Protestant church serious at all: “since he was Catholic, Callie was never sure that he thought he was really marrying her, in the final, true sense, at all” (JP 8).

The society presented in “Jean-Pierre” is clearly a patriarchal one. Callie and Simon have in common that they are both outsiders who do not quite conform to the roles that are expected of them. Jean-Pierre is obviously surprised during his first conversation with Callie about her living alone (JP 3). It is something unusual, if not inappropriate, for a young woman at that time. You either live with your parents, or you get married and share a home with your husband. Simon Weiss, on the other hand, is embarrassed that he has to look after the baby while his wife is earning the money. “I’ve got no job still. Nor money. My wife works. I live in shame” (JP 21). ““I am disappointed in life,” said Simon” (JP 22). Perhaps their somewhat unconventional and insecure position in society is also a reason for the aforementioned feeling of disorientation they are both experiencing.

#### 4.3.4 Narrative Technique

“Jean-Pierre” has an in-medias-res beginning, opening with a slightly awkward French-English dialogue between Jean-Pierre and Callie. He starts talking in English as soon as she says something in French, then switches back to French when she replies in English. This dialogue between the two main protagonists immediately conveys the story’s theme of communication problems. The story also ends in direct speech – this time it is Callie talking to her cat. Apart from a considerable amount of direct speech, the story is told by a third-person-narrator with Callie as the focalizer.<sup>58</sup> Direct speech is often interspersed with single words or short phrases in French, which are set in italics.

The story is characterized by short and syntactically simple sentences. Acceleration of the narration<sup>59</sup>, a technique that is, for instance, also employed in “First Dark,” is used to surprise the reader: “That was in May. In June, she married him” (JP 6). The fairly simple and plain language of “Jean-Pierre” creates a feeling of ‘detachment,’ a notion that critics have taken up repeatedly, inspired by Eudora Welty’s comment in her foreword to *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*. An example for this kind of detachment might be the way the narrator informs us about Jean-Pierre’s disappearance: “In early June, when they had been married for nearly a year, Jean-Pierre disappeared” (JP 11).

The rather prosaic style of the narration is contrasted with some excerpts from Emily Dickinson’s symbolically laden poetry. These poems fulfill various functions. On the one hand, Callie finds a kind of refuge and solace in reading poetry. On the other hand, the short excerpts of Dickinson’s poems mirror the protagonist’s state of mind. The poetry is used to illustrate Callie’s fears and her loneliness. Seltzer has observed that “[t]he poems that seem to hold Callie’s attention focus on loss, a fact that is not surprising given that she is seeking meaning in Jean-Pierre’s absence” (119). Apart from the visual aspect there is to these lines of poetry within the short story, the poems also fulfill a function in the plot of the story, because the shared interest in the mystery and ambiguity of some of Dickinson’s verses makes Callie and Simon grow closer to each other.

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<sup>58</sup> About the difference between narration and focalization, cf. Rimmon-Kenan 72-75.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Rimmon-Kenan 53.

She asks him about what he thinks of some of the verses and metaphors when they sit opposite each other in the library. A particularly haunting symbol is that of the “Atom’s Tomb.” “The ambiguous image of the Atom’s Tomb resonates throughout the second half of ‘Jean-Pierre’” (Seltzer 120). “It is Simon who proposes that the Atom’s Tomb represents the unborn self – he is, ultimately, just as lost as Callie” (ibid.).

Another characteristic feature in “Jean-Pierre” is that a remarkable number of French words and short phrases are used to illustrate bilingualism in Montreal. More complicated sentences are usually repeated or rephrased in English by one of the characters. Jean-Pierre seems to develop a habit of combining the two languages when he speaks to Callie: “All that I know, *mon ange*, I’d like to tell you. *C’est une histoire assez longue.*” (JP 24). Callie and Jean-Pierre have found a way of communicating, but, as it turns out at the end of the story, it might not be enough to learn the other language, to understand the literal meaning of words. The story ending is kept deliberately ambiguous, because “[Jean-Pierre’s] reappearance does not signify a resolution” (Seltzer 122).

#### **4.4 More Radical Ways of Emancipation**

In “I, Maureen” as well as in “Jean-Pierre” the city of Montreal is portrayed as a city of big social differences. Montreal is divided into east and west, poor and rich, French and English. Numerous place and street names, most of them in French, and some of them stemming from indigenous languages, help to establish the setting of a bilingual city and also lend a somewhat exotic touch to the story for an Anglophone reader. Bilingualism in Montreal is also illustrated by the use of some French dialogue in both stories; much more so in “Jean-Pierre.” The language barrier and communication problems are a much greater issue in Spencer’s Canadian stories than in the stories with an Italian setting. While in “Jean-Pierre” the focus is primarily on the opposition between French and English Canadians, there is a stronger emphasis on the different social classes, and on multiculturalism in Montreal, in “I, Maureen,”

Elizabeth Spencer commented on Montreal as the setting of “I, Maureen” and “Jean-Pierre” in an interview conducted in 1993:

[...] Montreal as a city - you see that in the story 'Jean-Pierre' - is divided between the west and the east. The west is mainly English-speaking and the east is a multi-racial, rather lower-class part of Montreal, where you felt completely different about life. And so her flight meant she was changing her lifestyle and approach to life. So that's sort of getting hold of what the city meant, both in 'Jean-Pierre' and 'I, Maureen.' But the women in each story have different problems, don't they? Each feels alienated, but for different reasons. So I think maybe what comes about in each story is how people can't relate to the society they've found themselves in. (Entzminger, "Interview" 600)

In both stories, the protagonists are thrown into an urban jungle, and they react in very different ways. While Maureen appreciates the anonymity of certain areas of the city and regards the east of Montreal as a place of refuge, Callie seems a little lost in the big city. She is finding places of retreat in quiet areas, such as the library, the chair in her neighbor's garden, or an abandoned quarry in Vermont.

In "I, Maureen" and in "Jean-Pierre" the protagonists do not quite comply with the rules of a patriarchal society, i.e., typical middle-class values. Simon fails to support his family and is taking care of the baby instead. Maureen has failed as a mother because of her mental illness. Neither of them fulfills the gender roles that are taken for granted by their environment. Concerning emancipation from a conservative middle-class society, the characters of Spencer's Canadian stories are in different initial situations than the protagonists of her early Mississippi stories. There is no question of rebelling against any outdated role models of *Belles and Ladies*. The families of the female protagonists in "I, Maureen" and "Jean-Pierre" are far away, or not mentioned at all. What Maureen and Callie are struggling with is "the middle-class view of life," as Spencer herself put it in an interview in 1981 (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 102).

In both stories there is a mysterious lover who helps the female protagonist to overcome her problems. Admittedly, in "Jean-Pierre" Simon and Callie do not actually become lovers, and in "I, Maureen" we cannot be sure if the love affair between Michel and Maureen is maybe only happening in the female protagonist's fantasy. Another thematic parallel between the two stories is pointed out by Marcel Arbeit, namely that in "I, Maureen" and "Jean-Pierre" people vanish temporarily; in another Canadian story, "The Search," a person vanishes permanently (Arbeit 6).

Moreover, there are some noteworthy parallels between the French-Canadian population in Quebec and the society that Elizabeth Spencer grew up in in Mississippi two decades earlier. In both societies religion plays an important role, people are generally very family-oriented, very conservative, and both societies used to be backward concerning education and industrialization. Spencer said in an interview that “Canada, like Mississippi, serves as a sort of counterpoint to American society as a whole” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 16). In another interview she commented about the connection between Mississippi and French Canada: “Parallels abound between French Canada and the South – a conquered society with different customs having to exist in terms of a larger, controlling nation” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 126).

Both main protagonists in the preceding chapter share a noticeable emotional lability. While Maureen is definitely classified as mentally ill by her environment, Callie seems to be on the brink of losing control (cf. JP 13) but finds a way out of her crisis. Spencer commented on Maureen’s mental condition: “She’s the most neurotic of the three [Callie, Maureen, and the girl from “Ship Island”], don’t you think? She had a real psychotic side” (Entzminger, “Interview” 604).

The characters’ emotional lability is also expressed in narrative technique, which is much more experimental than in the earlier stories with Mississippi or Italian setting. “I, Maureen” and “Jean-Pierre” both are presented by highly unreliable main protagonists – one being a first-person narrator, the other being the character-focalizer in a third-person narration. Furthermore, both stories feature some fantastic elements. The endings of both stories are quite ambiguous and leave the reader to speculate whether the story characters will come out alright of their struggle. Especially in “I, Maureen,” the narrator’s mental unstableness is conveyed really well by unexpected time shifts that are sometimes hard to trace back, and by the blending of fantasy and reality.

## 5 BACK TO THE SOUTH

### 5.1 The Times They Are A-Changing

One of the characters in “The Business Venture” is referring to a theme that can serve as an overall title for this introductory chapter that brings us back to Southern settings, when he is humming “the times they are a-changing” (BV 137)<sup>60</sup>. Some major changes were in progress in Mississippi in the middle of the twentieth century. The ones that seem most relevant in relation to the short stories to be analyzed in the last section of this paper are changes in race relations and changes concerning gender roles.

The racial conflicts in the American south did not only divide the society into black and white, it also broke up families because of disparate views on desegregation. Elizabeth Spencer reports in her autobiography that one major reason for breaking with her father in 1955 was that he, whom she had thought to have a rather liberal view on racial matters, refused to even discuss the Emmett Till killing<sup>61</sup>. There were other reasons, too, why Spencer no longer felt at home in Mississippi; she had a feeling of “fierce rejection” (*Landscapes* 287) because her parents did not take her work seriously at all.

Seltzer explains that the author’s return to the south was not quite as smooth and effortless as Spencer makes it sound in *Landscapes of the Heart*. Seltzer claims that some interviews and papers reveal a continuing ambivalence towards the South (151- 152). James Cobb says that “[s]uch feelings of alienation were common among the southern white intellectuals who could no longer stomach the race-obsessed South of the 1950s and 1960s” (211). Spencer recalls some personal acquaintances at the University of Mississippi in Oxford who left Mississippi for good because they were in favor of ad-

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<sup>60</sup> The Bob Dylan song “The Times They Are A-Changin’” from 1964 soon became a kind of hymn for the Civil Rights movement. Robert Shelton called this song “[a] summation of the sixties mood” (212).

<sup>61</sup> Emmett Till, a 14 year old black boy, who was murdered by two white men because he had whistled at the wife of one of them. The crime happened only a few miles from Carrollton and caused a great uproar in Mississippi (Kemerait 903).

mitting black students (*Landscapes* 292-293).<sup>62</sup> Some of them were actually threatened by segregationists. It certainly was a deeply divided society in Mississippi in the middle of the twentieth century.

Anne Firor Scott emphasizes in her study *The Southern Lady* that the century from 1830 to 1930 was one of tremendous changes in the South, also concerning gender roles. She describes how the changing role of women influenced families, and thus, Southern society in general. Many women took on a job, and the career opportunities were ever expanding: some women became factory workers; there was a growing number of professional writers, journalists and newspaper editors – which is how women’s issues made it into the newspapers and magazines (Scott 118-121). The economic necessity for women to take over men’s jobs meant a huge step for women’s emancipation. It is hard to tell how many women took on a job out of economic necessity and how many actually wanted to work. However, it is for sure that a growing number of working women challenged the old patriarchal system, because earning their own money gave women a great deal of independence. “Education and widening opportunities for work had diminished the desperate need to find a husband. A woman could wait for a man who suited her or she could choose not to marry at all, as many of the first generation of college graduates did” (Scott 214). After the civil war it became a necessity for many women to care for themselves and their families. However, urbanization and industrialization, and changing family structures that usually come with it took place later in the South than they did in the rest of the United States (Scott 213-214). “The strongly knit rural family with its widespreading kinship system was celebrated in southern memoirs and described in sociological journals well into the twentieth century” (Scott 214).

During the Reconstruction era it became quite common for unmarried women to become school teachers, and several programs for teacher education were established. They were “recruited expressly for their conservative impulses and willingness to work for low wages” (Wells 85). To illustrate the common view that teaching was a suitable

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<sup>62</sup> The infamous ‘Ole Miss Riot’ occurred in 1962 after one black student (James Meredith) had been admitted to the all-white University of Mississippi in Oxford (Sansing 318).

occupation for women, Scott quotes from Ellen Glasgow's novel *Virginia*, which was published in 1913: "she had turned naturally to teaching as the only nice and respectable occupation which required neither preparation of mind nor considerable outlay of money" (Scott 222).

Anne Firor Scott, like other Southern scholars, has concluded from various contemporary sources "that the image of the lady was slow to die" (221). She says that in the 1920s and 1930s, in spite of "[e]conomic independence, education, and professional opportunity [...] the outward forms of ladylike behavior were carefully maintained" (Scott 225). Sociological studies from the latter half of the twentieth century confirm that this famous image of the Southern Lady has lived on for much longer still.

A study about Southern white women business owners conducted in the late 1980s (which is not that far away from the temporal setting of "The Business Venture") revealed that there were still very few female business owners in the South at that time. What is probably special about these Southern female business owners is how they tried to integrate their careers with the traditional Southern scripts (Levin & Thaxton 204). Most of the interviewed women did marry and raise a family; and did not think that their professional ambitions were in contradiction with their feminine side, i.e., being a Southern Lady.

There are other sociological studies supporting the hypothesis that the stereotypes of the Southern Belle and the Southern Lady were still relevant in the 1980s. For instance, Sarah Brabant<sup>63</sup> hypothesizes that white southern women traditionally were brought up to adapt to change quickly; to survive, but also "to survive with as much dignity as possible" (103). A study by Lynxwiler and Wilson might serve to illustrate how important the stereotype of the Southern Belle still was for white Southern women of the upper-middle-class in the 1980s. All these accounts on Southern women stress the importance of *tradition*, a notion that seems to be of utmost importance in the American south.

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<sup>63</sup> Brabant, a sociologist who grew up in the South in the 1930s in an upper-middle-class family, assures us that she was still educated to become a Southern Lady.



## 5.2 “The Business Venture”

“The Business Venture” was first published in 1987 in *The Southern Review*.<sup>64</sup> It is the penultimate story of the 1988 collection *Jack of Diamonds and Other Stories*.

This story is about a woman struggling to establish her own business venture in a small town in Mississippi in the 1970s. It presents the prejudices she is confronted with; on the one hand, because she is breaking traditional gender roles by becoming a businesswoman, on the other hand, because she makes a black man her business partner. Thus, the race issue in the south, a topic that Spencer hardly ever treated explicitly in her short stories, is a major theme in “The Business Venture.” Spencer commented in an interview conducted in 1990: “You think it is going to turn into a love affair between this black man and this white woman, and you never know, though I don’t think they were lovers at all. But the story runs on the edge of whether they were or weren’t” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 202).

“The Business Venture” also explores the complex relationships within a group of friends. Some of them refuse to grow up, to take responsibility for their lives, and to accept changes in their environment. They share the feeling of disorientation we have seen in several characters in earlier Spencer stories. There is a struggle between progressive and conservative forces within this group of friends, and within the small town society that is presented.

### 5.2.1 Setting

“The Business Venture” brings us back to a Southern small town setting, only about three decades after the temporal setting of the stories discussed in chapter two of this thesis. The story is set in Tyler, Mississippi, in 1976. A tiny settlement called Tyler does actually exist in Pearl River County, Mississippi;<sup>65</sup> whether Spencer had this one in mind, I do not know. About the temporal setting of “The Business Venture” the author

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<sup>64</sup> *Southern Review* 23 (Summer 1987): 403-434 (see Lewis 247).

<sup>65</sup> See “Map of Tyler.”

mentioned in an interview in 1988 that a story like this could have taken place in the sixties as well (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 144).

As in several of Elizabeth Spencer's Southern stories, there is a Southern house that is described in some detail, and that is certainly important for its inhabitants' identity. It is the house of Nelle Townshend's family, which is also the place where Nelle opens her dry-cleaning business: "They had one of those beautiful old Victorian-type houses – it just missed being a photographer's and tourist attraction, being about twenty years too late and having the wooden trim too ornate for the connoisseurs to call it the real classical style" (BV 119).

The Townshend house is stuffed with things. All these little Victorian tables on tall legs bowed outward, a small lower shelf, and the top covered katy-corner with a clean starched linen doily, tating around the edge. All these chairs of various shapes, especially one that rocked squeaking on a walnut stand, and for every chair a doily at the head. Mrs. Townshend kept two birdcages, but no birds were in them. There never had been any so far as I knew. It wasn't a dark house, though. Nelle had taken out the stained glass way back when she graduated from college. That was soon after her older sister married, and her mama needed her. (BV 122)

Much like the Harvey house in "First Dark" (cf. chapter 2.2.1 above), this house is stuffed with memories. However, it is remarkable that Nelle took the liberty to make some changes the moment she moved back in with her mother.

## 5.2.2 Characters

**Nelle Townshend**, though not the narrator of the story, is certainly at the center of the narrated events. She opens a dry-cleaning business, which is the title-giving "Business Venture," in her mother's house. Nelle is somewhat enigmatic. We learn that she is "hovering around thirty" (BV 121), and that she has moved back to her hometown after college to take care of her elderly mother. Even her friends do not know much about her: "I wondered just what Nelle was really like. None of us seemed to know" (BV 139). Also, "Nelle Townshend never reacted the way you'd think she would" (BV 138). Even in her outward appearance she is worryingly individualistic: "Nelle Townshend

doesn't look like anybody else but herself" (BV 123), however, the narrator thinks that she is "a grand-looking woman, sort of girlish and womanish both" (BV 139).

What is striking about Nelle's character is that she is absent a lot of the time in the story; which is of course partly due to the fact that another character is the first-person narrator. For instance, Nelle is not there in the opening scene; only later does it turn out that she is a major character, if not the main protagonist of the story. When the friends discuss the complaint against Nelle's business, Nelle is not there either: "only Nelle being absent, though she was the most present one of all" (BV 134).

The fact that Nelle has a black business partner results in a lot of open hostility in her hometown. Also because there are several hints that Nelle and Robin might be more than just business partners. Eileen, the narrator, sees Nelle and Robin dancing their 'dance of triumph' after they have won their case about the dry-cleaning business in court. However, in contrast to most of the inhabitants of Tyler, Eileen "[does not] think they were lovers" (BV 147).

They grabbed each other's hands, black on white and white on black. They started whirling each other around, like two schoolchildren in a game [...] It was pure joy. Washing the color out, saying that the dye didn't, this time, hold, they could have been brother and sister, happy at some good family news, or old lovers [...] But my God, I thought, don't they know they're black and white and this is Tyler, Mississippi? [...] Dumbfounded, I just stood, hidden, never seen by them at all, and let the image of black on white and white on black – those pale, aristocratic Townshend hands and his strong, square-cut black ones – linked perpetually now in my mind's eye – soak in. (BV 146)

Although Eileen is impressed by this scene of joy and reconciliation between the races, she is blaming Nelle for the ugly rumors that are being spread in their town. "She had stepped out of the line and she didn't even bother to notice" (BV 128). It is also striking that the whole group seems to blame Nelle, rather than Robin, for their careless behavior in public.

The rumors that Nelle might be involved with a black man are bad enough. Another thing that makes even her friends uncomfortable and suspicious is that she has gotten too independent. "'Nelle's gotten too independent is the thing,' said Pete. 'She thinks she can live

her own life.” (BV 129). Apart from leading her own business, Nelle is planning to take some classes at university (at Hattiesburg) to be able to teach at the junior college. “So settling in to be an old maid” (BV 128), as Eileen puts it, rather sarcastically. This cliché of the teacher as an old maid is also used in “The Master of Shongalo”.

Not only is it problematic for her fellow citizens that Nelle has her own business, it is, to make things worse, not a very prestigious kind of business: “Better than a funeral parlor, but not much” (BV 122). It smells bad, and it is a health-threat; maybe not for the complaining neighbors, but certainly for Nelle, who has allergic reactions from the cleaning fluids (BV 123). The smell of her dry-cleaning business is another aspect that sets her apart from the others; it makes her almost an outcast.

**Robin Byers** is Nelle’s business partner. Only Eileen, who works for the lawyer’s office entrusted with drafting Nelle’s and Robin’s business papers, knows that they are actual business partners (BV 130). Robin has a wife and two children (BV 140). Eileen describes him as “a Negro back from the Vietnam war who had used his veterans’ educational benefits to train as a dry cleaner” (BV 119). Thus, he is the one who brings all the know-how to their business venture.

The narrator is aware of the common stereotypes white people might have about blacks and says that

[...] Robin Byers was not any Harry Belafonte calypso-singing sex symbol of a ‘black.’ He was strong and thoughtful-looking, not very tall, definitely chocolate, but not ebony. [...] From one side he could look positively frightening, as he had a long white scar running down the side of his cheek. It was said that he got it in the army, in Vietnam [...] All in all, he looked intelligent and conscientious, and that must have been how Nelle Townshend saw him, as he was. (BV 140-141)

Only during the court hearing about their business, Eileen sees Robin a little differently: “[...] Robin Byers, in a suit (a really nice suit) with a blue-and-white-striped ‘city’ shirt and a knit tie. He looked like an assistant university dean, except for the white scar. [...] He was holding a certain surface. But he was scared” (BV 141).

The group of friends thinks that Robin has more sense than Nelle when it comes to social norms and appropriate behavior in public. One of them says: “Robin knows what it’s like here, even if Nelle may have temporarily forgotten. He’s not going to tempt fate” (BV 130). However, eventually they both submit to society’s restrictions. Nelle “quit going out to his house at night. And Robin quit so much as answering the phone, up at her office” (BV 130).

**Eileen Waybridge**, the narrator of this story, calls herself “a twenty-eight-year-old attractive married woman with family and friends and a nice house in Tyler, Mississippi. But with nothing absolute” (BV 156). She has been married to Charlie for five years at the time of narration.

Because there are few things in the world which you know are true. You don’t know (not anymore: our mamas knew) if there’s a God or not, much less if He so loved the world. You don’t know what your own native land is up to, or the true meaning of freedom, or the real cost of gasoline and cigarettes, or whether your insurance company will pay up. But one thing I personally know that is *not* true is that Charlie Waybridge has had only one woman. Looked at that way, it can be a comfort, one thing to be sure of. (BV 121)

This is an interesting connection to “A Southern Landscape.” Seltzer has observed this parallel too: “just as Marilee Summerall finds comfort in Foster Hamilton’s continued drinking in ‘A Southern Landscape,’ Eileen incorporates Charlie’s infidelities into a ‘permanent landscape of the heart,’ finding security in Charlie’s habitual waywardness; his womanizing becomes merely another benchmark of identity” (146).

When her husband Charlie is flirting shamelessly with Nelle at Hope’s party, Eileen is behaving strangely: “I kept on with my partying, but I had eyes in the back of my head where Charlie was concerned. I knew they were there on the couch and that he was crowding her toward one end” (BV 153). As a sort of revenge Eileen then betrays Charlie with Grey, whom she had dated before she met her husband (BV 156). They go to Jackson together and when they return, Eileen’s confusion and sense of disorientation becomes obvious:

The world is spinning now and I am spinning along with it. It doesn’t stand still anymore to the stillness inside that murmurs to me, I know my love and I belong to my love when all is said and done, down through foreverness and into eternity. No, when I got back I was just part of it all, ordinary, a twenty-eight-year-old

woman with family and friends and a nice house in Tyler, Mississippi. But with nothing absolute. (BV 156)

It seems that Eileen is discontent with her situation – being stuck in a Mississippi small town with this unfaithful husband – but does not know what she really wants out of her life. Seltzer relates the passage quoted above to the protagonist’s struggle with her Southern identity.

The ‘spinning’ that Eileen experiences, then, represents the same sort of bewilderment experienced by Spencer’s protagonists who are either not southern [...] or are temporarily displaced from the South [Seltzer is referring to the other protagonists in the collection *Jack of Diamonds* here]. In this way, Eileen’s sense that she possesses ‘nothing absolute’ represents a challenge to traditional constructions of southern identity. (146)

At the end of the story, Eileen realizes that she is not as open-minded and liberal as she would like to believe. When she runs into Robin, she tells him, to her own surprise, to leave this place, because otherwise he was “tempting fate, every day” (BV 159). It suddenly dawns on Eileen that “I might have been my mother or grandmother talking. Certainly not the fun girl who danced on piers in whirling miniskirts [...]” (ibid.).

**Charlie Waybridge**, Eileen’s husband, is described as a notorious philanderer. It is also suggested several times that Charlie is drinking too much. Everybody, including his wife, knows that he is unfaithful to her. “He was big and gleaming, the all-over male” (BV 120). Eileen says at one point that Charlie has acquired an “outlandish reputation” (BV 131) regarding his love affairs but, at the same time, tries to repress this knowledge. However, it is difficult for her to ignore his infidelities; because friends keep telling her about them, and Charlie even kisses other women at parties where Eileen is also present (BV 127). Towards the end of the story it turns out that he and Nelle used to be a couple before he fell in love with Eileen (BV 154). In his professional life Charlie is just as reckless as in his love life. “Charlie’s present way of life was very nearly wild. He’d got into oil leases two years before, and when something was going on, he’d drive like a demon over to East Texas” (BV 131).

Charlie clearly applies double standards. While it is most certainly acceptable for him to have all those extra-marital affairs, he gets very upset, and even violent, when he hears that Grey and Eileen went to Jackson together. Also, there is a little hint that it is all right for white men to have affairs with black servants (BV 151), while the rumor that Nelle might have an affair with a black man is a huge scandal.

**Mrs. Townshend**, Nelle's mother, is quite an ambiguous old lady. On the one hand, she likes to stick to traditions, on the other hand, her interest in reading and discussing politics, rather than the usual, and obligatory, chit-chat about family matters (BV 123), suggest that she is an intelligent and open-minded lady.

"Mrs. Townshend never raised much of a fuss at Nelle. She was low to the ground because of a humpback, a rather placid old lady. The Townshends were the sort to keep everything just the way it was" (BV 122). – This makes Nelle's attempts to change so many things the more outrageous for the people in Tyler. It later turns out that Mrs. Townshend is maybe not such a "placid old lady," but quite a resolute woman who is able to defend herself. She shoots at Charlie, or so the rumor has it, one day at first dark when he is crossing the Townshend property (BV 131-133).

Mrs. Townshend certainly sticks to traditions when it comes to race issues. About Robin she remarks: "'Ain't that a dumb nigger, learning dry cleaning with nothing to dry-clean.' Now, when Mrs. Townshend said 'nigger,' it wasn't as if one of us had said it. She went back through the centuries for her words, back to when 'ain't' was good grammar. 'Nigger' for her just meant 'black'" (BV 119).

Nelle's mother has a strong dislike for her daughter's group of friends. She wants them to leave Nelle alone, because she claims they have a bad influence on her. "You're drinking and you're doing all sorts of things that waste time, and you call that having fun" (BV 155). Such behavior can probably not be reconciled with Mrs. Townshend's Episcopalian faith. She tells Eileen: "I wish you'd let Nelle alone. Nelle is all right now. She's the way she wants to be. She'd [sic!] not the way you people are. She's just not a bit that way!" (BV 124).

**“The crowd,”** i.e. the group of friends, have known each other since childhood (BV 127). Apart from Charlie and Eileen Waybridge and Nelle Townshend, the group includes Grey Houston, Pete Owens, and his wife Hope. They are a careless bunch; they want to have fun in life. In a self-deceiving manner they pretend that things are still what they used to be, but the world around them is changing; they are probably changing themselves, simply because they are getting older. I think they do not like the idea of growing up, although they are all about thirty years old. Eileen explains that “it’s not our habit to ask anything serious. We’re close to religious about keeping everything light and gay. Nelle Townshend knew that, all the above, but she was drawing back. A betrayer was what she was turning into. We felt weakened because of her. What did she think she was doing?” (BV 127). Their complaints about Nelle not fitting in with the group anymore (BV 120) are probably due to the fact that she is moving on in many respects, while the rest of them only want to restore the good old times.

Pete’s wife Hope is the youngest of the group of friends and appears to be the most grown-up of them. She seems very comfortable and happy with the traditional role of a housewife. “We had a saying by now that Pete had always been younger than Hope, that she was older than any of us. Only twenty, she worked at making their house look good and won gardening prizes” (BV 130). After all the trouble concerning the dry-cleaning business, Hope organizes a party in order to restore the old, carefree atmosphere. She says: “I’m getting good and ready for everybody to start acting normal again. I don’t know what’s been the matter with everybody, and furthermore I don’t want to know.” (BV 147). True to their conviction that life should be fun, first and foremost, “[t]he effort was to get us all launched in a new and happy period and the method was the tried and true one of drinking and feasting, dancing, pranking, laughing, flirting, and having fun” (BV 149).

Seltzer stresses the importance of the group identity of Eileen’s “crowd,” which also plays a role in narrative technique. She identifies Eileen’s “conversational and often circular method of story-telling” and says that “Eileen often eschews self-reflection and buries her narrative in a sense of collective identity” (Seltzer 143). Furthermore, “Eileen’s need for the security provided by her friends is evident throughout her narrative, even when she



does not overtly allude to it, and her dependence upon this group and the sense of home created by their ‘love’ becomes one of the tacit themes of the story” (Seltzer 143).

Race issues, a topic that could hardly be ignored in Mississippi at that time, is one of the things the group of friends finds too serious and unpleasant to even talk about. Whether their attitude is just due to laziness, or perhaps fear of stirring things up, is hard to tell. It seems that ‘tradition,’ which is so particularly important in the south, is always a welcome excuse to keep things just as they are.

The thing to know about our crowd is that we never did go in for talking about the ‘Negro question.’ We talked about Negroes the way we always had, like people, one at a time. They were all around us, had always been, living around us, waiting on us, sharing our lives, brought up with us, nursing us, cooking for us, mourning and rejoicing with us, making us laugh, stealing from us, digging our graves. But when all the troubles started coming in on us after the Freedom Riders and the Ole Miss riots, we decided not to talk about it. [...] We couldn’t jump out of our own skins, or those of our parents, grandparents, and those before them. ‘Nothing you can do about it’ was Charlie’s view. (BV 135)

### 5.2.3 Society and Gender Roles

The group of friends that is in the center of this story like to think of themselves as liberal and open-minded, but, at the same time, their views on race and gender issues seem very conservative for a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader. Somehow, they are aware of certain problems in their community but would rather not get involved in anything. They claim that nothing can be done about discrimination and just hope not to be disturbed too much in their free and careless lives by any uncomfortable discussions. They like to think that they have no choice about their attitudes. Things are just the way they are in the south; they cannot, and probably do not want to, escape from what this society has been like for many generations.

Like in any small town, rumors spread quickly in Tyler, and people enjoy gossiping. “Serpents have a taste for Eden, and in a small town, if they are busy elsewhere, lots of people are glad to fill in for them” (BV 128). Some of the rumors are that Charlie might have an affair with Nelle, that her mother shot at him, that Nelle and Robin might be more than just business partners – not even the narrator knows for sure. However,

having business relations with a black man, and treating him as an equal business partner, is enough of a scandal in Tyler, Mississippi:

I used to hold my breath when they went by in the late afternoon together. Because sometimes when the back of the station-wagon was full, Robin would be up on the front seat with her, and she with her head stuck in the air, driving carefully, her mind on nothing at all to do with other people. Once the cleaning load got lighter, Robin would usually sit on the back seat, as expected to do. But sometimes, busy talking to her, he wouldn't. He'd be up beside her, discussing business. (BV 134)

The resentment against Nelle and Robin culminates in a legal complaint about their dry-cleaning plant by some neighbors who are claiming that the fumes coming from it are a health hazard. This incident triggers some reflections on the race issue among the group of friends, who have successfully ignored this subject matter so far.

"Nothing you can do about it" was Charlie's view. "Whatever you decide, you're going to act the same way tomorrow as you did today. Hoping you can get Alma to cook for you, and Peabody to clean the windows, and Bayman to cut the grass." "I'm not keeping anybody from voting – yellow, blue, or pink," said Hope, who had her "ideas" straight from the first, she said. "I don't guess any of us is," said Pete, "them days is gone forever." "But wouldn't it just be wonderful," said Rose Houston, "to have a little colored gal to pick up your handkerchief and sew on your buttons and bring you cold lemonade and fan you when you're hot, and just love you to death?" Rose was joking, of course, the way we all liked to do. But there are always one or two of them that we seriously insist we know – really *know* – that they love us. Would do anything for us, as we would for them. Otherwise without that feeling, I guess we couldn't rest easy. (BV 135)

The above conversation is very revealing about the friends' attitude towards race issues. They like to think of themselves as open-minded and progressive but, at the same time, would find it much more comfortable to keep things as they used to be. Their solution to this dilemma is simply to go back to ignoring this complicated issue. "So we – the we I'm always speaking of – decided not to talk about race relations because it spoiled things too much" (BV 135-136). While Rose might be joking about the "little colored gal," Hope does hire "a nice little colored girl, Perline, dressed up in black with a white ruffled apron" (BV 149) for the party she organizes to welcome Nelle back into the

group. Seltzer rightly observes that “thus Nelle’s ‘homecoming’ is also marked by a pointed reinforcement of the boundaries that she has dismissed” (146).

Eileen recalls an encounter at a party near Philadelphia (i.e. in the north). A white man asked her if she “would have sexual relations with a black. [...] ‘It’s a taboo, I think you call it,’ I said. ‘Girls like me get brainwashed early on. It’s not that I’m against them,’ I added, feeling awkward” (BV 138). It becomes evident here that the south is still set apart from the rest of the United States. Seltzer points out that black sexuality has often been seen as something threatening by the white population in the south. “[B]lack sexuality, whether fully materialized or merely suggested, is seen as threatening to the ideal of white womanhood, and, consequently, white masculinity” (Seltzer 145). “It is particularly significant then, that very little of the group’s anger is directed toward Robin, as might be expected. Instead, the group sees Nelle’s relationship with Robin as part of a larger betrayal” (ibid.).

That racism is still prevalent in this Mississippi small town, is illustrated by an incident in which a woman is mistaken for Nelle Townshend and gets “pushed off the sidewalk”, certainly by “somebody from outside town.” An unheard remark by the offender makes the victim “[yell] out ‘I ain’t no nigger lover!’” (BV 138). Moreover, there are acts of sabotage against Nelle and Robin. Somebody tears down the dry-cleaning sign at Nelle’s house (BV 140). Somebody even sets fire to Robin’s house, but “[b]oth Robin and Nelle said it was only lightning struck the back wing and burned out the shed room before Robin could stop the blaze” (BV 158). Robin’s daughter is bullied “at school by some other black children who yelled about her daddy being a ‘Tom’” (ibid.).

It is hard to tell what the inhabitants of Tyler, Mississippi, find worse – Nelle’s having a black business partner, or Nelle owning a business at all. Nelle’s independency, and her stubbornness about defending it, unsettle and perhaps frighten people around her. It is stressed several times that not only the rumors about her involvement with a black man upset people; the problem is that there are no male relatives around at her house: “Would it have been different if Nelle was married or had a brother, a father, a steady boyfriend?” (BV 133). In a conversation about Nelle’s problems, Charlie expresses his

opinion that marriage would perhaps solve everything: “‘Why the hell,’ Charlie burst out, ‘don’t you marry her, Grey? Women ought to be married,’ he announced in general. ‘You see what happens when they don’t.’” (BV 136). And others comment: “‘If Nelle just had a brother.’ ‘Or even an uncle.’” (ibid.).

Moreover, the threat of becoming an old spinster is looming over Nelle, who seems to be the only one who is not worried about it very much. Note that Nelle, despite all her independence and entrepreneurial spirit, does not hesitate to fulfill her role of the dutiful, unmarried daughter. Just like Frances Harvey in “First Dark,” or Theresa Stubblefield in “The White Azalea,” she is the one who has to take care of her mother. Thus, she returns to her family’s house “soon after her older sister married, and her mama needed her” (BV 122).

#### **5.2.4 Narrative Technique**

The story is told by one of the characters, Eileen Waybridge. She is the narrator and the focalizer, though not necessarily the main protagonist. Thus, we are dealing with a homodiegetic narrator with a limited view, whose reliability is therefore uncertain.<sup>66</sup>

The narration is basically done in chronological order, with some more general descriptive passages, for instance, about Nelle’s house; about the kind of friendship they share; about her husband Charlie’s career. At the very beginning of the story there is some jumping back and forth in time and some repetition – which would naturally occur in oral narration. The narrator’s style is very simple and has a colloquial touch to it. The sentences are rather short; mainly coordinate phrases with very few adjectives are used. There are sometimes incomplete sentences, e.g., “Next, the injunction” (BV 133). Eileen’s narration, which often resembles spoken discourse, is complemented by quite a lot of dialogue between the characters. The story is narrated to an imagined reader who is not explicitly mentioned nor directly addressed.

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<sup>66</sup> About the distinction between narrator and focalizer cf. Rimmon-Kenan 72-75. The terminology to describe different types of narrators relies on Rimmon-Kenan 95-97.

An example for the environment paralleling and reinforcing the protagonists' feelings is the bad thunderstorm right before Hope's party,<sup>67</sup> which Eileen explicitly links to her anxiety about the upcoming party: "I was bound to connect all this with the anxiety that had got into things about that party" (BV 148).

The last paragraph of the story is somewhat reminiscent of the ending of "A Southern Landscape." Eileen comes to the following tentative conclusion: "I think we are all hanging on a golden thread, but who has got the other end? Dreaming or awake, I'm praying it will hold us all suspended. Yes, praying – for the first time in years" (BV 159). In this conclusion Seltzer sees a connection to "Eudora Welty's identification of 'a sense of place' as a 'ball of golden thread to carry us there and back and in every sense of the word to bring us home' ("Place in Fiction" 129). Yet, in contrast to Welty's metaphor, the thread here has unraveled fully, and we see that 'place' is a fragile construction: Eileen has been carried 'there,' but cannot come home again in any but the most literal sense" (148).

This kind of pensive ending, which puts the story into a larger context and perhaps reflects on some universal truth, can be found in several of Spencer's stories; for instance, in "A Southern Landscape," or in "First Dark." Often, these endings are in contrast with the more colloquial style of the rest of the story. Roberts commented on the ending of "The Business Venture" that "[i]t is an unsettling, ominous ending to what had seemed for some pages a social comedy" ("Self and Community" 103).

### 5.3 "The Master of Shongalo"

"The Master of Shongalo" was first published in *The Southern Review* in 1995<sup>68</sup> and is included in the collection *The Southern Woman: New and Selected Fiction* from 2001.

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<sup>67</sup> About 'reinforcement by analogy' see Rimmon-Kenan 67.

<sup>68</sup> *Southern Review* 31:1 (Winter 1995): 91-113.

This story about a young teacher, Milly, visiting one of her former pupils is again a story about social class; but it also leads us back to the theme of dealing with Southern heritage. The family Milly is visiting lives in a house named Shongalo. The mystery surrounding this house starts with the mystery of its name. The narrator speculates that it could be from the Bible, or from an indigenous language (MS 408). Moreover, like many of Spencer's stories, "The Master of Shongalo" is also about the art of storytelling. In the introductory paragraph, Milly, who is the first-person narrator of this story, suggests that she is not completely sure about what actually happened and what is part of her dreams. In the end, I suppose, Milly does not find it crucially important to tell a 'true' story; it is the storytelling as such that matters. Reading about the house's name in an old guidebook, Milly thinks: "But the name, though I dream about it, is a real name. In the dream I know its reality without doubt, though when waking I doubt and am glad to have it proved. Once I see it proved, I can return to the dream. I can see it all" (MS 408).

### 5.3.1 Setting

There is a strong focus on a local setting, more precisely, the house of Shongalo and its garden. "The Master of Shongalo" is one of several of Elizabeth Spencer's stories where the importance of the Southern house is stressed. The Southern mansion as the epitome of Southern heritage and its importance for Southern identity construction has had a long tradition in Southern literature. In E.A. Poe's *House of Usher*, "the plantation house *is* the past, the 'old time entombed'" (Carpenter 50); in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* Sutpen acts "[i]n the American spirit of linking property and identity" (Rausser 81). Carpenter also explains that there is an "intimate relation between house and master in the South," an observation that is certainly relevant for "The Master of Shongalo" (49). The importance of the house in this story is obvious. Not only does it feature in the title, the beginning of the story is also dedicated to the mystery surrounding its name and to the detailed description of house and garden. At least in one instance, the house is personified by the narrator: "Shongalo. Its vast shoulders sturdily asleep in the full afternoon light" (MS 412). Apparently, Shongalo is of some historic importance, be-

cause it is mentioned in a guidebook which “was done by a WPA commission back in the Depression” (MS 408).<sup>69</sup>

Shongalo is situated in Mississippi, somewhere in the Delta region (MS 415). The narrator does give an explanation for the house’s name, which she claims to have learned from a guidebook published by a WPA commission: “We find that it was an old Mississippi town, long since absorbed into another one” (MS 408). There actually used to be a town named Shongalo in Carroll County, Mississippi.<sup>70</sup> The temporal setting of the story is the early 1950s: “TV had not caught such a firm hold here, scarcely into the fifties” (MS 419).

At first, when Milly is wandering around house and garden in the afternoon heat, the reader gets the impression of an abandoned house. There is nobody around, and (except for the “trimly mowed” grass) everything seems to be a bit run-down. Later it turns out that the family is taking a nap at this time of the day. The “large house of mellow old red brick trimmed in white” has an “imposing front portico” and a smaller one at the side entrance (MS 408). Milly moves on into the garden of Shongalo and, though the reader does not know it yet, the introductory description is closely connected to the characters in the ensuing story. The one ordinary fish among the goldfish might well be read as a symbol for how Milly, the poor teacher, is feeling among those Southern ‘aristocrats.’ The one statue missing its mate could be a symbol for Maida who is being kept away from the boy she has fallen in love with.

A sunken garden laid out in a rectangle, slightly shorter and narrower than a tennis court. [...] On one side there is a small statue of a goat figure, dancing, about two feet high, a copy of something Roman. He has no mate; the space for one is bare. [...] But there is water in the shallow rectangular pool, and lily pads at one end, at the other a few lazy goldfish, with one ordinary lake fish, gray among their brilliance, dropped there from the sky or by someone who caught it and judged it too small to eat. Life spared, it swims with a strange race. Such is its destiny. (MS 408-409)

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<sup>69</sup> The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was one of several New Deal Agencies that were established in the United States in the 1930s. Among many other activities, it funded a variety of arts projects, and also supported the documentation of historic sites (Van West 193).

<sup>70</sup> See <<http://www.vaiden.net/Shongalo.html>>

The narrator expresses her feeling that the mysterious quality of this stately home has something very tempting, and she is not ashamed of exploring a stranger's house, because she is convinced that Shongalo is part of her Southern heritage.

What lingers in some of us, in me, of the child exploring the mysterious castle, the château we took refuge in from a twilight storm, the sudden looming structure at the end of a winding road that a mistaken turn has led us on to follow? Once it is seen there, the feeling comes: 'I am no stranger here.' I mean to say that houses like this were part of my heritage, and since I had never lived in one, they were to be possessed only in this way of wandering, a native not to be told she wasn't to explore. For what was I exploring in this case but my own spiritual property? (MS 410-411)

Just like the ruins of Windsor in "A Southern Landscape," this house is part of the main protagonist's heritage, even though she is just a visitor. Later on, taking a walk with the owner of the house, Milly observes the following:

Looking up at the house, mysterious in the westering light that slanted before us, I marveled at how weightless its presence before us seemed. I could suddenly not imagine being anywhere else. 'I kissed a strange man in the library,' I almost said, almost adding, 'I live here.' I had found in the thought a different meaning for that simple phrase, I live here. (MS 421)

### 5.3.2 Characters

**Milly (Mildred Carrothers) Weldon** is a high school teacher from Southern Mississippi. Her hometown is "a hundred miles to the south. The town was named Stubbins, Mississippi. It was dull and hot and tiresome" (MS 410). The prospect of visiting her pupil's family does make Milly somewhat self-conscious about her social status: "I'm nobody really. A teacher from the town" (MS 409). As the narrator of the story, Milly prefers not to talk about herself very much, which is why the reader does not get a lot of information about her. We do learn, however, that she has some ambitions concerning her education; she is in the process of completing a graduate degree (MS 410). At home, in Stubbins, she has a boyfriend whom she only seems to string along as the "necessary escort in the small town" (MS 426).

**Maida Stratton** is Milly's former pupil. "Maida Stratton was blond and plump, a bouncy girl, always looking about ready to laugh" (MS 414).



Maida Vale had a charming face, mainly, I had often thought, because it was so changeable. Serious, she might almost seem to sulk; her thoughts were inward, running over something that puzzled her. She had chubby cheeks when she smiled, lighting up at something from the outside world, small teeth, bursts of crinkles, upturning lips when she laughed, her eyes half-shut with all-out fun. A boy might want to kiss her a lot, I thought. (MS 425)

Maida, who has just finished high school, is young and impressionable, and she absolutely adores her teacher. Maida gets very enthusiastic about things, and sometimes appears quite childish: “Maida whirled up on me, jumping forward in a little rabbitlike spring, throwing slightly sticky arms around my neck” (MS 423). When her former teacher becomes more of a friend to her, she wants her to stay forever: “I want you to always live at Shongalo!” (MS 423). She even makes plans to go to England together. Maida is just as enthusiastic about literature as her teacher; she is obsessed with reading.

The summer before, Maida had fallen in love, and it turns out in the course of the story that Milly was only invited by the Strattons as a distraction for Maida. Her parents only make some vague comments about that boy, but Maida tells her teacher: “‘I was in love last year. It was Garth. They said it wouldn’t do.’ / ‘Who said so?’ / ‘Mother did and Daddy. Daddy was the worst.’” (MS 427). Maida’s mother says to Milly: “You can’t know how pleased I am with this interest you’ve stirred in Maida Vale. She’s always been so active. I get worried sometimes when she gets active in the wrong direction. You can imagine” (MS 418).

**Cousin Edward** is the mysterious stranger Milly kisses in the library. The Strattons later identify him as their Cousin Edward. His background and his motive to come to the house at all stay dubious, and apparently, the family does not like to talk about him. Cousin Edward seems to be the black sheep of the family. He appears to be somewhat eccentric, at least. Milly tries to get some more information about him during the next family dinner without seeming too eager. Later on, Maida tells her about Edward: “He just comes and goes so funny” (MS 423). “Mother likes to see him, though. He makes Daddy mad.” / “Why?” / “Oh ... he thinks she likes him” (MS 423).

Milly's first encounter with Cousin Edward takes place when she is wandering around in the house during nap time and finds him in the formal living room. She surprises him at going through some drawers: "He was tall and rather messily dressed in a long-sleeved shirt but no tie, rumpled tan trousers, loafers. His hair was light, fading to gray. His expression, however, was dark, annoyed" (MS 412). They do not even know each other's name, but start kissing in the library. "The book smell was dense. I stood still as he raked a careful finger around my hairline, damp from the heat, just as my lip would be beaded" (MS 413). – This is a scene that could be part of one of Mrs. Stratton's romantic novels.

Edward has two reappearances in the story, which only make him more unreal and mysterious. There is a phone call during the storm, with really no communication at all happening (MS 426). Then, during her last night at Shongalo, Milly wakes up in the middle of the night and sees a moving shadow, which she thinks must be Edward. However, when she goes down to the garden there is nobody there. The mentioning of little details such as the smell of freshly cut grass, or the damp nose of the dog on her way back to the house might be the narrator's attempt to make this scene more realistic, however, it could all be just a dream.

In the last, short section of the narration, the part which reveals that "[a]ll that was forty years ago" (MS 431), Milly tells us about the letter she took with her from Shongalo. It is addressed to Edward Glenn, presumably the mysterious cousin. This last paragraph reassures me that the whole Cousin Edward story might just as well be a dream, or an invention of later years. The very ending of the story certainly can be read as a hint that this whole story is opaque and ambiguous on purpose. The narrator might be unreliable; or maybe she just felt the need to add something mysterious and romantic to a story about such a romantic setting as Shongalo.

**Robert Stratton**, Maida's father, is the stereotypical patriarch. His property is what makes him the "master." Milly says about him: "Robert Stratton was not an imposing man. He might have been attractive, in a boyish way, when younger. He had discerning gray eyes, fair skin, and an open way of talking, his regard traveling all about you as he spoke. Evaluating, noting, though never staring exactly ... kindly, I supposed" (MS

420). Mr. Stratton runs an insurance company in town – that is all the reader, and Miss Weldon, find out about his professional life.

It is only in connection with his house that Robert Stratton becomes imposing: “[...] having gained the front steps, he ran up them to the porch. In that motion I saw him become imposing. He had the air of the owner of Shongalo” (MS 421). Although Mr. Stratton is not a very impressive or imposing man physically, he has power over his house and over his property, which apparently also include his wife and children. Milly observes that “[h]e was rapidly becoming more bald than any man would have liked. A pale, high forehead crowned him, made his eyes prominent. He was scarcely taller than I; though not frail exactly, he was not rugged either. His regard was for his property. [...] His property included Maida; he was looking after her” (MS 421).

**Linda Stratton**, Maida’s mother, confirms the notion that Shongalo is an integral part of her husband’s identity, and probably a reason why she was attracted to him in the first place. She seriously seems to think that the romantic novels she used to read in her youth are every girl’s dream and goal for life. She claims to have stopped reading romances when her very own romance came true.

“I used to love reading,” Mrs. Stratton volunteered from across the room, putting aside the paper. “But, you know, when I met Robert and married...well, it’s foolish to say so, but all the things I was reading for were all around me, right near instead of somewhere else. I mean I read about these girls who admired some man and then found he liked them too, and so finally they had some sort of romance or got married after a lot of hitches and all that. But wasn’t there always a big estate in it somewhere? A wonderful house and all that? Well, all of a sudden I had Shongalo. Why read about some place I might not even like? This one was good enough.” (MS 417-418)

Mrs. Stratton seems to be leading an incredibly boring life, but is strangely content with it. “She was about to say, I think, that social affairs didn’t interest her much. The lack of interest went with her inward air, her absence of any detailed care for clothes or looks. It made sense that she would be content in her place as Robert Stratton’s wife at Shongalo, not needing to seek anything to fill her time” (MS 419).

There is a kind of curious and ironic connection between Mrs. Stratton and Milly Weldon. The former was reading romantic novels in her youth and now says that all those novels have come true for her and she therefore does not read them anymore. The latter, wanting to be a literary scholar and probably not reading those cheap romances at all, experiences a scene that sounds just like a parody of one of those novels. Milly encounters a complete stranger while everybody else in the house is asleep and they start kissing in the library.

### 5.3.3 Society and Gender Roles

The social divide between the characters is a major theme in this story. The Strattons are apparently rather wealthy. They have a tennis court and a library, a formal living room in addition to the every-day living room. They do have servants (MS 417); a cook is mentioned. Shongalo probably used to be a plantation home. Mr. Stratton mentions that he still keeps “some few head of cattle,” and that “[h]e was glad to be through with row-farming” (MS 421). The Strattons seem to lead a very comfortable and somewhat idle life; at least during the summer months. “Among the rooms at Shongalo trivial conversations could spin on forever. They were like iced tea, cold in tall glasses packed with ice cubes, pale with a moon-shaped slice of lemon” (MS 418). Mrs. Stratton appears to be content with her role as the rich, bored wife.

Milly is aware of her social status as a high school teacher and of the fact that her hosts are way above her on the social ladder. Before her visit, she is therefore somewhat concerned what the family might think of her:

I wondered how I would be treated. A student’s enthusiasm in no way makes a haughty family democratic. Wouldn’t the favored-teacher role set me in a category: poor relation? The decision to chunk me whole into that box would be so immediate they would never stop to think about it. Not saying it, but making me feel it. Yet my clothes were in good taste, and my manners beyond criticism. Money? Was that what gave me pause? It was obviously not plentiful or I wouldn’t be teaching in a Mississippi high school. And what about my single status? Matter of choice – mine or others’? Who does she “go with”? (MS 409-410)

Milly is convinced that this social gap cannot be overcome, but she has her pride, too. “Wasn’t it part of my perception of them that they were different from the ordinary run of people? Not to be easily, if ever, completely seen into? But I’d been used! It was that that hurt, more than if they’d coarsely scorned me at the beginning, or given me a caretaker’s shed room at the back” (MS 430). There is a mutual understanding that they come from different parts of society, and that this distance cannot be overlooked, let alone overcome. Milly thinks the Strattons, with their supposedly democratic views, are hypocrites; for instance, when Maida explains to her why her father did not build a swimming pool at Shongalo: “‘He didn’t know how he would keep the poor children out. He’d hate not to be democratic. We’re all democratic,’ she added. I wondered if she thought the Glenwood country club was democratic” (MS 415). On the other hand, Mr. Stratton cannot resist making fun of Milly’s background. When they discuss the Jaguar his son Bobby had seen in the afternoon, Mr. Stratton’s explanation is: “‘Came for Milly,’ Mr. Stratton bantered. ‘Down in Stubbins they all drive around in ‘em. Yes, sir.’ ‘In Stubbins they raise pickles,’ I laughed. ‘Lots of money in pickles,’ Mr. Stratton said” (MS 416).

Once again, the status of unmarried women is a topic. Although not explicitly mentioned, it becomes clear that a woman’s major concern should be to marry adequately. Milly is worried about what people might think about her single status and about fulfilling the cliché of the old spinster as a teacher. She does have some sort of boyfriend at home, in Stubbins: “I had kept Willie under wraps because there was nothing much to say about him, the necessary escort in the small town, the one you went to the movies with, asked to parties, gave routine good-night kisses to” (MS 426). This suggests that Milly is complying with society’s restrictions and rules. On the other hand, it is obviously not her prime concern to find a good husband. She is getting a higher education (MS 410) instead of being content with her current position as a teacher. Milly is aware of the fact that she will be confined to the role of “poor relative” at Shongalo, but she also does get very angry when she finds out that the parents have been using her as a chaperone, or maybe just as entertainment and diversion, for Maida.

The reason the Strattons want a chaperone for their daughter is that Maida had fallen in love the summer before. As her father puts it: “Some boy she got crazy about here. I say

‘some boy.’ Let’s just say he wasn’t anybody who would do for her. We’ll leave it there” (MS 421). The reasons for why this relationship is undesirable stay vague, but it can be assumed that this boy comes from a family that is not as wealthy as the Strattons.

The world in the South has not changed that much for people like the Strattons. Although farming is not a major source of income anymore, and slavery has been abolished almost a decade ago, Mr. Stratton still is the undisputed “Master of Shongalo,” the patriarch of the family who regards his daughter as part of his property. Ultimately, the story protagonists just have to accept things as they are (in the south). Milly’s only chance to keep her dignity is to leave Shongalo. About Maida we learn in the last section of the narrative that she eventually finished college and “married a Charleston boy” (MS 431). Whether she will pursue a profession, or just settle for the role of dutiful and bored wife like her mother, is left to the reader’s speculation.

### 5.3.4 Narrative Technique

“The Master of Shongalo” is narrated and focalized by the main protagonist,<sup>71</sup> Milly Weldon. Right at the beginning, she directly addresses the fictional reader: “Let me say who I am. I said ‘we’ at first because I wanted to include you, whoever you are. And because, though not everyone should go to Shongalo, you may be among those who should. It is mysterious. It is beautiful” (MS 409). This is a similar strategy as in “A Southern Landscape;” the first-person-narrator addresses the reader and tells him or her right away what this is going to be: a mystery. The style of “The Master of Shongalo” is again that of an oral narrative. However, this narrator, Milly Weldon is capable of a variety of registers that range from short, prosaic statements like “I’m nobody really. A teacher from the town” (MS 409) to more lyrical passages like the one about the pleasure of “[exploring] the mysterious castle, the château we took refuge in from a twilight storm [...]” (MS 410).

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<sup>71</sup> About the distinction between narrator and focalizer cf. Rimmon-Kenan 72-75.

The story is subdivided into eight sections that appear like little sub-chapters in a story that is quite short anyway. The very first paragraph could be read as a suggestion that the following narrative could be just a dream (MS 408). The narration opens with the presentation of an entry about Shongalo in a WPA guidebook. The narrator uses this as proof that her story was not just a dream; and then goes on to explain that now, that the existence of Shongalo is proven, she can go back to dreaming about it. Maybe this is just a hint that the events are far away in the past, maybe she is not sure which parts of her story actually happened and which ones developed in her imagination.

Like many of Spencer's characters, Milly is a skillful storyteller. Even though there is a hint at the beginning of the narration that the following story is told in retrospect, she starts her description of Shongalo in the present tense in order to get the reader more involved. Only after relating the events at Shongalo, which cover approximately four days, the very last part of the narration reveals: "All that was forty years ago" (MS 431). Milly also reflects and comments on her own capacities and flaws as a narrator: "There, I have done it too. Started to say who I am, then got interrupted by another train of thought. Well, I'll start again" (MS 409). Apart from Milly's narration, there is quite a lot of dialogue between the characters.

To claim that the mysterious and somewhat dark aspects in "The Master of Shongalo" are allusions to Southern Gothic would perhaps be an exaggeration. However, apart from the mysterious beginning of the story and the mystery surrounding Cousin Edward, there is an episode where the weather parallels and thus emphasizes the protagonists' state of mind;<sup>72</sup> in this case Milly's and Maida's conflict. A thunderstorm serves as a kind of frame for the climax of the story. The beginning of the above-mentioned scene is marked by a darkening environment: "The rain continued. It hadn't started in the usual rush of wind and flash-bang of thunder, but only as a rustle, muted as a whisper, then growing louder. It seemed to have put out gray arms and enveloped the day. The interiors of Shongalo were shadowy, dim" (MS 424). At the dramatic climax, when Maida runs away from Milly in disappointment and anger, the weather gets even more unpleasant: "Rum-

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<sup>72</sup> A similar phenomenon can be found in "First Dark" (see chapter 2.2.4 above).

bling thunder shook the house softly, like a dog worrying a worn-out toy” (MS 427). When Maida’s parents return from their day trip, the weather is changing again, suggesting a more conciliatory mood: “From an upstairs window I saw the sky clearing, long broken clouds turning to pink scarves, light gleaming on the wet trees” (MS 428).

Another instance of ‘reinforcement by analogy’<sup>73</sup> is the reading Maida and Milly are occupied with just before their falling-out. Milly mentions that they are about to read about “Mordred’s betrayal of Lancelot and Guinevere to Arthur” in Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King” (MS 424). In a way, Maida feels betrayed by Milly, who lies to her about the call from Cousin Edward and also takes her parents’ side in the conflict about Maida’s boyfriend.

## 5.4 Reconciliation with the South?

“The Business Venture” and “The Master of Shongalo” bring us back to a setting familiar from Spencer’s earliest stories. Recurrent themes from the early Mississippi stories can be found again in these mature stories. Roberts observes that Spencer “began to write about the South again in the 1970s with a new and quite different spirituality. [...] Spencer is returning not to the same rural Mississippi of her earliest work but to a southern landscape she has reimagined for her own artistic purpose” (6). He also claims that Spencer’s mature stories are characterized by a sense of reconciliation – after a period of “disillusionment and dislocation followed by reconciliation and [quoting from Spencer’s preface to *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*] ‘something like acceptance, the affirming of what is not an especially perfect world for these seeking girls and women’” (Roberts 89).

A topic that these later stories with a Southern setting share with the early Mississippi stories is the struggle of dealing with one’s Southern heritage. With the temporal distance of forty years, Milly Weldon can say, very confidently, that the Southern mansions like Shongalo belong to her too, that they are part of her identity, although she never lived in one of them. Nelle Townshend, living in a Mississippi small town in the

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Rimmon-Kenan 67.



1970s, is certainly aware of her roots and her heritage, too. She lives in a house with a lot of history and feels obliged to stay there out of loyalty towards her mother. Nevertheless, she does not hesitate to adapt things in the house according to her needs. What is much more difficult to change, of course, is the small town society with its prevalent racism and outdated perceptions of appropriate gender roles.

For both female protagonists, Nelle Townshend and Milly Weldon, education is an important means of emancipation. They are both working women and quite independent. Nelle wants, apart from establishing herself as a business woman, to get an education to teach at the local college. Milly is writing her master's thesis in her spare time as a high school teacher. Milly's pupil, Maida, is going to go to college – which could probably not be taken for granted for a woman in the 1950s.

Mother-daughter-relationships, again, are noteworthy in both stories. While Mrs. Townshend, Nelle's mother, is presented as very conservative, she lets Nelle have her way and does not seem to complain about the problems that arise with Nelle's business plans. Her negative attitude towards Nelle's friends she does express very clearly however. Their carefree and irresponsible lifestyle probably goes against her conservative, protestant convictions. The relationship between Maida and her mother is, of course, different, because Maida is not an adult yet. Her mother is eager to guide Maida towards her own ideals – namely marrying a rich owner of a Southern mansion.

Again, it is a very class-conscious society that is presented in both stories discussed in the preceding chapter. Although the two stories are set at a different time and probably in different parts of society, there are similar mechanisms at work. In both stories we find hypocrites who like to point out their liberal views, or, how “democratic” they are, but clearly do not want anything to change about their own situation. Nelle Townshend, in “The Business Venture” is struggling bravely against all the prejudice and racism in her town. The reader cannot know how her story will continue, whether she will be able to defend her newly gained independence; however, winning the court hearing about her dry-cleaning business is a first step towards becoming accepted, or at least tolerated, as a business woman. The

matter of race relations looks more sinister, though. There is violence against Nelle's business partner and his family, and not much hope that things will change any time soon.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an attempt to trace Elizabeth Spencer's development as a short story writer by analyzing a selection of stories that were published over a time span of almost four decades. A division into four main sections, analyzing two stories in each, has been used to compare stories with different local settings. Moreover, the chronological order of the texts, according to their dates of publication, allowed for an insight concerning developments in narrative technique, which were to be expected in stories written during such a long literary career. All eight stories analyzed in this paper have female main protagonists; from the young Marilee, to the middle-aged Maureen, to the elderly Miss Stubblefield. The four main chapters of the paper at hand are concerned with the following local settings: Mississippi, Italy, Montreal, and the American south again.

The first chapter discusses two early stories that are set in Mississippi, which is the region where Elizabeth Spencer grew up. Both female protagonists in these stories are living in a very conservative environment in the 1940s and 1950s, and have to deal with emancipation from their families, and, in a wider sense, from their past and from their heritage. Both characters are struggling with maintaining a balance between their individual needs and wishes and the expectations of their community.

The second main chapter of this thesis analyzes two stories set in Italy – one in the urban setting of Rome, one in the Italian countryside near Genoa. Both female protagonists in these stories experience a kind of awakening in the foreign territory that would most likely not have been possible in their familiar environment.

The third setting discussed is the Canadian city of Montreal, where Elizabeth Spencer lived for almost three decades. This time, the female protagonists are trying to free themselves from a conservative middle-class society that they find unbearable and stifling. For one character, Maureen, this emancipation process basically takes the form of an escape from her family, and she is seeking self-imposed isolation for a while. Callie in "Jean-Pierre" is abandoned by her family rather, and has to deal with loneliness

and involuntary isolation. Maureen and Callie are not making such an effort to reconcile family and personal freedom, as the Southern characters of the earlier stories do.

While still living in Canada, Spencer started writing about Southern settings again. The two stories analyzed in the last part of my paper are both set in Mississippi. However, Spencer's protagonists are older now, and are thus able to convey a larger image of the society they live in. While "The Business Venture," set in the 1970s, discusses the issue of race relations in the south, the "Master of Shongalo" goes back in time to the 1950s, but deals with some outdated ideals, too – especially concerning gender roles.

Apart from the recurrent theme of emancipation from one's family, there are other themes and motifs that can be found in several stories. Many of Spencer's stories are about storytelling per se; remarkably, except for Maureen, it is only the Southern characters who explicitly reflect on this. Also, reading literature is important to a number of Spencer's story characters. This ties in with the fact that a number of Spencer's female protagonists find that education can be a means of emancipation; some of them by reading books of their own choice, because they do not get the opportunity of a higher education.

Throughout the selected stories, there is a dichotomy between "old spinsters" and married women. The threat of becoming an old spinster is omnipresent for some of the female protagonists. Old spinsters are pitied, looked down upon, or ridiculed. On the other hand, the marriages in the selected stories are often strange, if not dysfunctional. In several stories we find inappropriate or mysterious lovers. Theresa, Marilee, and Frances are each involved with a man who is not deemed appropriate by their families. Callie marries Jean-Pierre despite her family's strong reservations. Maureen and Milly both have a mysterious kind of romance – we do not know for sure, whether these are just concocted in the protagonists' fantasies, however.

A motif that is used in all the Southern stories, but not in the ones with other settings, is the Southern house; it features prominently in all the Southern stories. There are detailed descriptions of houses, of the interior of houses (FD and BV). In "A Southern Landscape," the protagonist's home is not described, but the ruins of Windsor are identified as an important part of the protagonist's identity, of her heritage. The main pro-

tagonist in “The Master of Shongalo,” too, emphasizes that she regards the Southern mansion she is visiting as part of her heritage, that she owns it, in a way. The houses are, on the one hand, presented as being part of the protagonists’ identities, on the other hand, their power can be threatening. Two of these houses become personified in the narrator’s imagination. This, again, stresses that the Southern home is central to Southern identity.

Several first-person narrators in the analyzed texts tell their story in retrospect from a considerable temporal distance, ranging from five to forty years. This often results in an interesting ambiguity between story participant and narrator. A remarkable number of characters in the selected stories are looking for lasting truths – which is perhaps something innately human. Many of them are reflecting on what can be known and what cannot. The narrators of “A Southern Landscape,” “I, Maureen,” “The Business Venture,” and “The Master of Shongalo” are all concluding their narration with general musings about what can be known for sure, what will remain from the past, and what they can rely on in the search for their own identity.

The analysis of a relatively small selection of short stories has shown that Spencer’s narrative technique has developed from stories characterized by fairly simple narrative structures and distinctive “serio-comical” narrative voices, to more experimental stories with characters who are going through some existential crises (most notably the protagonist of “I, Maureen”). Spencer’s mature stories return to familiar settings; however, the protagonists have gotten older, and, accordingly, are able to give a larger perspective on the society they live in. Their narrative voices have become more variable – from the satirical tone of some of the earlier narrators to more sentimental musings about general truths and persisting uncertainties.

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## 9 APPENDIX

### 9.1 German Abstract

In der vorliegenden Diplomarbeit werden acht ausgewählte Kurzgeschichten der amerikanischen Autorin Elizabeth Spencer analysiert. Dabei orientiert sich die Auswahl und Gruppierung der Geschichten an Spencers Biographie. Im Bundesstaat Mississippi geboren und aufgewachsen, lebte die Autorin für mehrere Jahre in Italien, verlegte ihren Lebensmittelpunkt danach für fast drei Jahrzehnte nach Montreal, Kanada, und kehrte schließlich in die amerikanischen Südstaaten zurück. Entsprechend dieser wichtigsten geographischen Stationen in Spencers Biographie, gliedert sich die vorliegende Arbeit in vier Hauptteile.

Stellvertretend für Spencers früheste Publikationen, die in ihrer Herkunftsregion angesiedelt sind, werden im ersten Teil die Kurzgeschichten „First Dark“ und „A Southern Landscape“ besprochen. Der Analyse der Primärtexte geht eine Einleitung über die wirtschaftlichen Verhältnisse im Mississippi der 1930er und 1940er Jahre, sowie über die weitverbreiteten Stereotype der *Southern Belle* und der *Southern Lady* voran.

Der zweite Teil analysiert zwei Kurzgeschichten mit italienischem Schauplatz: „The White Azalea“ und „The Visit.“ Beide handeln von Amerikanerinnen, die aus unterschiedlichen Motiven nach Italien gereist sind und in der Fremde tiefgreifende Veränderungen durchmachen. Der einleitende Teil dieses Kapitels gibt einen kurzen Überblick über die lange Tradition von Italienreisen aus dem angloamerikanischen Raum, und insbesondere aus dem amerikanischen Süden.

Im dritten Abschnitt werden zwei Geschichten präsentiert, die in Montreal und Umgebung angesiedelt sind. Die Protagonistinnen der Geschichten „I, Maureen“ und „Jean-Pierre“ entwickeln unterschiedliche Strategien, um mit Entfremdung und Einsamkeit in einem großstädtischen Umfeld zurechtzukommen. Dieses Kapitel wird von einer Beschreibung der politischen, und insbesondere der sprachpolitischen Verhältnisse im Quebec der 1960er und 1970er Jahre eingeleitet.

Der vierte Teil analysiert zwei Kurzgeschichten aus dem Spätwerk Elizabeth Spencers, „The Business Venture“ und „The Master of Shongalo,“ die wiederum den amerikanischen Süden als Schauplatz haben. Die Einleitung zu diesem Abschnitt beschreibt Veränderungen in der Südstaatengesellschaft im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts, vor allem hinsichtlich gängiger Geschlechterrollen.

Die Analyse aller acht Kurzgeschichten konzentriert sich auf die Darstellung gesellschaftlicher Konventionen und Geschlechterrollen. Dabei wird die These vertreten, dass alle acht Hauptprotagonistinnen einen Emanzipationsprozess durchlaufen, wenn auch in unterschiedlicher Form und unter sehr unterschiedlichen Voraussetzungen. Außerdem soll der Vergleich von Texten, die über einen Zeitraum von fast vier Jahrzehnten geschrieben wurden, Einblicke in die erzähltechnische Entwicklung der Autorin geben.

## 9.2 Curriculum Vitae

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2001 – 2005	Lehramtsstudium Anglistik und Spanisch, Universität Wien
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