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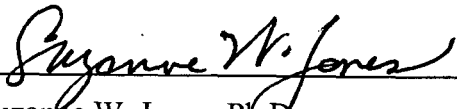
FROM FANCY WOMEN TO DEMIMONDAMES:
WORKING CLASS WOMEN IN PETER TAYLOR'S SHORT FICTION

Frank Sung Cha

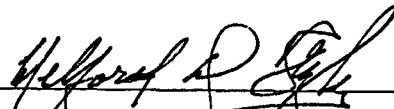
M.A., English
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Dr. Suzanne W. Jones

In "The Fancy Woman" and "The Old Forest," Peter Taylor examines the identity of working class women in the southern social structure and the roles they play in revising class and gender perceptions. Josie Carlson, "The Fancy Woman's" protagonist, discovers the stifling nature of class divisions. The gap between the working and upper-middle-classes remains as the social hierarchy and Taylor himself lock Josie in a subordinate position. They prevent her from attaining any sense of liberation. However, the working class 'Demimondames' in "The Old Forest" exhibit a stronger independence spirit, compelling society to reevaluate traditional social perceptions. Although they too feel the burden of social limitations, their independence destabilizes traditional class delineations and forces the higher classes to reevaluate their social perceptions. Revision in Taylor's portrayal of working class women underscores the evolving nature of the South's social order and reveal how individuals must force or adjust to these changes.

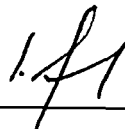
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Suzanne W. Jones", written over a horizontal line.

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FROM FANCY WOMEN TO DEMIMONDAMES:
WORKING CLASS WOMEN IN PETER TAYLOR'S SHORT FICTION

By

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B.A., University of Virginia, 2001

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For many writers and historians, the southern lady has always been an intriguing and somewhat mythical figure. Her social grace and noble conduct represent the perfection of southern culture. However, this dignified image of the southern lady does not necessarily encompass working class women. These working women find themselves placed into an inferior position by the established social structure. However, as social and gender ideologies evolved, so did the perception of working class women. Their presence and their significance became more apparent as class lines begin to blur and as women's rights moved to the forefront of social discussion. Peter Taylor explores the development of these women and the perceptions that others have of them. Numerous critics have explored how his upper-middle-class women adjust to the South's evolving social order. Critics like Walter Shear and David M. Robinson examine how the changing dynamics of the South disrupt the lives of older women like Harriet Wilson in "A Long Fourth" and Leonora Logan in "Miss Leonora When Last Seen." These women face the challenge of maintaining traditional ideologies while the world around them begins to embrace more progressive ideals. Yet, little has been said regarding Taylor's portrayal of how working class women seem to force some of these changes that allow them assert themselves as members of the working class and as women. His working-class women represent a new generation of southern women who retain some values of the established social thought but also demand a reevaluation of the social order. In "The Fancy Woman" and "The Old Forest," Taylor explores the southern social landscape and evolving relationship between social ranks. His portraits of working class women reflect his own evolving views on class and gender as well as the changing

dynamics of social and gender ideologies and their effects on the attitudes towards these other southern women.

Taylor's assessment of working class women takes into consideration the common perceptions of the southern lady. Linda Tate notes that "the prevailing image of the white southern woman has been that of the aristocratic lady who reigns precariously on her pedestal" (45). Upper-middle-class women were viewed as unblemished citizens who preserved the South's cultural and social excellence. Society held an immense admiration for them, creating a desire to protect their integrity. They attained a persuasive quality, as Anne Goodwyn Jones remarks, "the idea of southern womanhood has exerted through time tremendous power to define actual roles for southern (perhaps all American) women of the white middle and upper classes" (9). While these upper-middle-class women, such as Harriet Wilson in "A Long Fourth" and Helen Ruth Lovell in "A Wife of Nashville," interest Taylor, it is the working class women who truly fascinate Taylor and influence his exploration of gender and class ideologies.

With both narratives set in the 1930s South, it is important to note the significance of class and the region's social demarcations that Taylor touches upon. Economics is one factor in defining social status in the South. The upper-middle and upper-classes evolved from the origins of the southern aristocracy who triumphed economically and socially during the antebellum period. Many found success in agricultural matters while others "pursued commercial and industrial profits" (Boney 1391). The working- and lower-middle-classes found more modest and limited economic success. Although economic position is pertinent to social classification, other factors are integral in defining class divisions, specifically in Taylor's portrayal of the South's social structure. According to

J. Wayne Flynt, social position in the South can be determined by examining “how a person lived, who his family was, and how people in the community judged, interpreted, weighed, and compared these factors” (1383). In this sense, social status relates more to the issues of behavior, manners, and moral character than to economics. In “The Fancy Woman” and “The Old Forest,” Taylor illustrates the complexities of these social demarcations.

At the time Taylor wrote “The Fancy Woman” in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the U.S. witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of women entering the workforce. With the economic turmoil of the Great Depression still lingering and the desire for self-dependency increasing, women viewed work as the solution to satisfying their economic and personal needs. Many women found jobs in mills and factories. As Mark Frederickson notes, “the incentive of cash wages attracted thousands of women to millwork,” especially in the South where the onset of industrialization created new opportunities outside of the region’s traditional agriculture-based economy (16). While the majority of women workers were black domestic employees in the early twentieth-century, by 1940 60 percent of female workers in the South were white women working in various positions such as clerks and beauticians. In addition to the growth of industrialization, the onset of World War II led to more females entering the labor force as women assisted the war effort through their work in military factories.

While the female labor force made significant gains in the late 1930s and early 1940s, many women encountered a gender segregated work environment. As Jane De Hart-Mathews notes, “for working-class women...life was still one of constant toil” as they faced low wages, long hours, and layoffs” (440). Class divisions also created

hardships for working women, especially those outside of the middle or upper-middle-class. De Hart Mathews goes on to contend that “middle-class women fared better than their working-class counterparts” with their easier access “to the educational and professional opportunities that would equip them to function in the world outside the home.” Many of the working-class women solely depended on their own income while middle-class women found greater economic security “as wives and mothers than as workers” (440). The disparity between classes among the female workforce illustrates the complexities of the social and gender ideologies of the mid-twentieth century. However, the advances that women made created a greater dialogue about these ideologies, one that Taylor enters with his portrait of working-class women.

“The Fancy Woman” (1941) unfolds as Taylor’s exploration of the relationship between the upper-middle-class and its working class counterpart. Centering on a weekend excursion between a working class woman and her upper class lover, the story reveals a distinct division between these two worlds. George, a divorcee from the Memphis upper-middle-class, takes Josie Carlson, the story’s protagonist, as a lover. She is an employee of a second-rate department store unhappy in the relationship. While she longs for his affection, he displays an indifference towards her. Taylor emphasizes the lack of emotional connectedness in the relationship. Their relationship appears to be nothing more than physical. Although the narrator notes that George’s wife left him and “there was, then, a place to be filled,” Josie does not appear to be a possible wife for George (*FW* 175). Rather, he seems to place her into the role of the submissive lover, only there to satisfy his sexual needs. As the narrative continues, Taylor illustrates Josie’s growing frustration over the relationship and her inferior role as merely a lover.

Taylor's narrative scheme underscores Josie's mounting insecurities and despondence. While he employs an omniscient narrator, he alternates between limited points of view. He begins the story with George's perspective. George proclaims that "he wanted no more of her drunken palaver" (167). This opening line has a profound effect on the reader's judgment of Josie. Although the reader is initially unfamiliar with George's disposition, his statement establishes Josie as a character with questionable characteristics. He goes on to compare her to his children, suggesting her juvenile tendencies and reckless behavior. By beginning with George's perspective, Taylor immediately places Josie into an inferior position and the subject of the male gaze. He underscores George's paternalistic attitude towards her. However, the reader is unaware of Josie's class status at this point in the story. She merely comes across as an unruly woman with an alcoholic disposition. In several letters to Robert Lowell, Taylor reveals an unsympathetic approach in crafting Josie. Hubert H. McAlexander notes that he describes her as a "drunk bitch" and "drunken hussy," underscoring her role as a flawed individual (63). He immediately creates a biased portrait of Josie, leading readers to believe that she is far from a sympathetic character.

The story moves from George's frustration over Josie's behavior to Josie's own dissatisfaction with this relationship. She is a woman stifled by the lack of sympathy from her lover. The transition from George's dissatisfaction to hers complicates Taylor's portrayal of Josie. Taylor also reveals George's character flaws, compelling readers to sympathize with Josie. She is simultaneously the victim of George's insensitivity and the source. Taylor's rather ambivalent depiction of Josie appears to stem from his own indecision in crafting her character. He reveals that he wrote the first line of the story and

“had no idea where [he] was going from there” (63). Taylor appears to work through his own attitudes of Josie as the story progresses. At times he views her as a drunken hussy, but he still seems compelled to sympathize with her on other occasions. Overall, he reduces her to the stereotypes of her social class.

While Taylor notes the flaws that Josie and George see in one another, he also reveals the irony in their behavior. While George views Josie as a fairly unsophisticated woman, he also grants her a certain ladylike attitude. He notes that “*he*, who couldn’t have walked straight around to her place if she *hadn’t* been lady enough to leave, sent *her* from the table” (167). Later in the story, Josie further exhibits ladylike qualities with her reserved and pleasant behavior around George’s guests. In addition, her favorite song is “Louisville Lady,” a traditional piece whose name suggests an identity that she longs to attain. George at times hardly resembles a real gentleman. Josie states that “he didn’t have any manners” (175). He also treats Josie in a rather rough fashion. He takes her horseback riding not as a friendly gesture but rather as a form of punishment for her drunkenness. As he forcibly pushes Josie to prepare for the ride, he repeatedly informs her, “I’ll sober you up” (172). In a sense, George’s authoritative rule over Josie is a means of concealing his own insecurities. Already having lost a wife to divorce, he controls Josie to prevent her from leaving him. Taylor’s subtle irony in his depiction of George and Josie is poignant in that these characters do not appear to be who readers initially think they are. At times, their behavior contradicts their perceptions of one another, creating a complexity in their characters.

Throughout the narrative, Taylor highlights Josie’s frustration over her inability to assert any sense of identity or authority in her relationship with George. She is upset

with the fact that George “would never pay attention to what she said,” leaving her voiceless and powerless (171). George only responds to Josie’s distress with playful laughs or disingenuous affection. He views her insecurities as trivial, thus rendering her ineffective. With her limited role in the relationship, Josie attempts to liberate herself from George’s psychological constraints. She decides that she “was going to look out for her own sweet self from now on” (174). However, her statement is only a personal desire. She cannot vocalize her emotions because she believes that George will not acknowledge her needs. He shows an indifference towards her desire for recognition. In doing so, he silences Josie and leaves her unable to attain the position she so desperately craves.

The class division between Josie and George becomes more apparent as Taylor further illustrates their relationship. She declares her desire to liberate herself from George’s grasp and in turn, she begins to question his elevated social status. She states that “he was no different from a floorwalker” in the department store where she works, suggesting that his elevated social rank is solely artificial. In an attempt to weaken his authority, she declares that she “just wouldn’t think about him as a man” (175). David M. Robinson argues that her “dehumanizing [George] in some fundamental way” signifies Taylor’s emphasis of Josie’s inferiority as a woman (95). However, her longing for power and authority also underscores Josie’s inferiority as a working class woman. By relating George to her supervisor in the department store, Josie attempts to undermine the social division that separates her from him. She wants to believe that he is just like her regardless of his higher social class.

While Josie desires to attain the same status as George, Taylor’s portrayal of her relationship with the black servants suggests she does not have the skills to do so.

Throughout the story, Taylor notes Josie's racial contempt for the servants. She refers to them as "tight- mouth niggers" and as a "black bitch," suggesting a racist mentality, which stands in contrast to the polite paternalism of the upper-class (168-9). Robinson argues that she is unsympathetic towards the servants and attempts to "assert a superiority that she does not actually feel" (94). But while her hostility relates to the issue of race, it also concerns the issue of class. Josie craves George's social status and refuses to accept the servant's position. At one point, she berates George as she asks him "what black nigger do you think you're talking down to?" (171). However, she and the servants do not possess George's social rank. As members of the working class, Josie and the servants cater to George and the rest of the upper-middle-class. They are both under the authority of George, the white, male head of house. She insists on displaying a false sense of authority over the servants, but they refuse to acknowledge it. They do not see Josie as a superior. Amelia, the head servant, displays a scornful attitude towards Josie. She responds to Josie's condescending statements in a "hateful" fashion. She appears to patronize Josie when she refers to her as "Miss Josephine" (169). Further in the story, the servants ignore Josie's request for assistance when they do not respond to her ringing bell. The servants' behavior informs her that she is not better than them, compelling her to show a greater disdain for them in order to elevate her status. Though she may indeed hold racist beliefs, much of her animosity towards the servants appears to stem from a preoccupation with George's place in the upper-middle class.

The appearance of George's Memphis friends further illustrates Taylor's concern with class. As Josie hears the guests arrive, she begins to feel that George "was ashamed of her" because of her lower social status. In order to ease her anxiety, she attempts to

undermine the rigid social delineations that separate her from the higher class. She hopes to detect the flaws in their character and uncover the artificiality of their upper-middle-class identity. However, as the Memphis set appears, Josie's insecurities swell. Once again, Taylor notes her overriding anxiety over her lower social position:

She looked down at her yellow linen dress and straightened the lapels at the neck. She thought of the women with their lovely profiles and soft skin and natural- colored hair (179).

Here, Josie's concern over class intensifies as she convinces herself that the society women will exhibit a beauty that she does not possess. Her growing insecurities stem from her obsession over how others will perceive her. She constantly compares herself to those around her. Taylor's narrative form highlights her insecurities by focusing her perspective on how she sees herself in relation to others. Throughout the story, her thoughts are prompted by her interactions with George, his friends, and/or his children. She initially views the society people as unblemished individuals; thus she sees herself as inferior. She mentally isolates herself further from the Memphis set because she worries if these women saw her working at the department store. However, she believes that "they had probably never been to one of those cheap stores" (179). Josie's thoughts illustrate the noticeable contrast in Taylor's portrayal of Josie and the Memphis set without even formally introducing George's friends. Her preliminary observation of this contrast allows Taylor to maintain the rigid social divisions that trouble Josie. Although the division is solely seen through her perspective, Taylor's desire to maintain the class division remains apparent.

Though Josie's behavior resembles common social anxiety when confronted with unfamiliar company, Taylor exaggerates it. She seems too obsessed with class; thus she

herself maintains her own inferior position. Taylor's heightened depiction of Josie's anxiety allows him to situate Josie and the Memphis set in two contrasting worlds for the sole purpose of conflict. While Taylor establishes this distinct contrast between Josie and the Memphis set, he simultaneously creates a gap between Josie and the conventional model of the southern lady. Anne Goodwyn Jones notes that "the image of the southern lady represents her culture's idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial, and social perfection" (9). Josie imagines that the high society women achieve and embody this perfection. However, Josie cannot fully embody the southern lady image because the existing social ideologies, the Memphis set, and Taylor do not allow her to. Taylor depicts Josie as a woman who lacks the social grace and intellectual sophistication that the southern lady embodies. George and his friends also appear to view her as a woman who does not possess the upstanding manners of the upper-middle-class. By keeping her in her lower social position, Taylor is able to maintain an orderly and manageable social structure. He wants to explore how Josie responds to social conventions but prevents her from coming into a higher class. He sets his characters into extremely rigid roles with little room for development and growth. Josie's anxiety keeps her in her place as a working class woman and she does not seem to develop further throughout the story.

As George introduces Josie to his friends, she remains trapped by her preoccupation with class. While the others are outspoken, she remains voiceless, silenced by her own trepidation over their presence. Attempting to undermine the class division, she assures herself that they are not the beautiful women she envisioned, describing them as "old and plump" (180). She meticulously examines their appearances and identifies the slightest flaws. However, Taylor prevents her from taking any positive

action after making these observations. They are only vocalized internally and she remains passively cordial. Josie's thoughts return to her own shortcomings as she notes that "it's plain [George] don't want 'em to know who I am" (181). Though she recognizes that her perceptions of the society women's idealized perfection are false, Taylor restricts her from discovering her positive attributes. At each instance where Josie attempts to assert herself, Taylor relegates her to an inferior position.

Throughout the friends' visit, Taylor notes the class division that separates Josie from the rest of the Memphis set. During the guests' first night, Josie overhears a conversation between George and the male guests as they discuss her. Later one man tells George, "you'd better get *her* out" (182). The conversation underscores the separation between Josie and the Memphis set. They view her as an outsider, leaving Josie frustrated over her marginalization. However, she moves back and forth from finding faults in their characters to longing to be part of their circle. As George's friends begin a night of drinking, Josie declares, "I bet they don't act any better than I do after they've got a few under their belts" (183). Her statement suggests her desire to undermine their upper-middle-class integrity. She wants to believe that she is like them. Later, she hints at her desire to befriend them. Though she longs to prove their shortcomings, she craves a sense of belonging and acceptance. She gravitates towards Mrs. Roberts and believes that "maybe [they'll] get to be good friends" (185). Regardless of her intentions, the issue of class is the pivotal point of interest.

Although Taylor prevents Josie from escaping her social insecurities, his portrayal of George's Memphis friends reveals his frustration with upper-middle-class behavior. Though the Memphis set maintains a sense of dignity and class, they also take part in

reckless debauchery. They revel in an alcohol-fueled romp, straying from conventional high class manners. As the night of drinking concludes, George retires to his room with Mrs. Jackson. Meanwhile, Josie ends up with Jackson's husband. The partner swapping reveals an unexpected sexual looseness among the Memphis set, thus narrowing the gap between Josie and George's friends. David M. Robinson contends that the rampant drinking and sexual play provide Josie with "an ironic confirmation...that she is George's equal" (96). Taylor's critique of the hypocritical nature of some high society individuals appears to stem from his own experiences with women and class ideologies. In the early 1930s, his relationship with Virginia Jett, a free-spirited artist from a prominent Memphis family, awakened him to the importance of class and gender. Although Jett possessed the same independent nature as Taylor, she decided to embrace a more stable and traditional life centered on marriage and family. Jett married a successful cotton broker, and Taylor found himself rejected because he was a writer. Hubert H. McAlexander notes that Taylor "did blame the social order" for his rejection (*WL* 63). His portrayal of the Memphis set's unruly behavior distances him, as McAlexander argues, from "the very culture that produced him" (63). Taylor illustrates that George's friends are far from upstanding members of the elite class.

However, after Taylor criticizes the Memphis set for their immoral behavior, he directs his criticism back to Josie. The morning after the guests' revelry, Josie once again reveals her uncontrollable concern over the social gap. Rather than elevating her status by describing the immoral actions of George's friends, Taylor places Josie back into an unsympathetic role. On discovering that George has spent the night with another woman, she emphatically states that "none of 'em any better than the niggers...by god, nobody's

better than I am" (185). While George's and his friends' behavior diminishes their moral character, Josie does not receive a chance to prove that she is better than them. Taylor prohibits her from exposing the Memphis set's corruption, and she finds herself trapped by the very class division that frustrates her. Her conversation with Mrs. Jackson the next morning illustrates the Memphis set's perception of Josie. When Mrs. Jackson asks Josie "and how do *you* feel this morning," she isolates Josie from the Memphis friends. Mrs. Jackson, remembering her manners, then derisively includes Josie as one of them, finishing the question with "like the rest of us?" (189). The comment does not appear to signify an acceptance of Josie, but rather she appears to "mock Josie as an unworthy social climber" (Robinson 96). However, Josie convinces herself that "probably Mrs. Jackson hadn't meant anything" because she so wants to be a part of the Memphis set's world (189). While her plan to marry George is a scheme to attain his money, it also signifies her interest in social climbing. She believes that marriage is the only means of becoming a part of the upper-middle-class and gaining the respect of those around her. As much as she criticizes the Memphis set's flaws, she definitely desires to be in their social rank.

The arrival of George's sons becomes an opportunity for Josie to bridge the gap between herself and the Memphis set. Jock's and Buddy's innocence as children prevents them from relying on the rigid social ideologies that George and his friends depend on, but they still come from the upper-middle-class world. As she observes the children play badminton, the image becomes "the prettiest scene ever," forcing her to "go weak all over" (186). She describes the children as "lovely" and "too marvelous," signifying the attractiveness of upper-middle-class life for Josie. However, Taylor

distances Josie from this life as she can only observe it without engaging in it. Her very captivation in the beauty of the moment propels her back into frustrated thoughts as she notes that “she didn’t want any of their snobbishness” (186). The line suggests Taylor’s desire to lock Josie into an inferior position. He does not allow her to escape her social anxieties, and the class division remains intact. She ceases to see Jock and Buddy as children and merely views them as products of an unwelcoming social group. Taylor attempts to show that the high class defines the role that she plays as a working class woman. Josie’s psychology reflects the helplessness that working class women faced. As much as she fights to be a part of the upper-middle-class, the ideologies and ironically Taylor himself contain her in an inferior position.

Josie’s interactions with George’s children reveal her limited power in controlling her social potential. With the older Jock, she appears to crave his attention. She convinces herself that he observes her during the night: “Jock had tried to get in through her bathroom last night, or he had been so on her mind that her ears and eyes had made up the signs of it.” Her fixation on Jock does not necessarily signify a desire to be with him. Rather, she believes that his voyeurism validates her sexual power. Josie’s only substantial power throughout the story is her sexuality. She uses it to attract George, his friends, and his own adolescent son. She revels in discovering that George sent Jock home. She wants to make George jealous by sexually luring his son. Her sexual power is the only means of getting back at George and undermining his authority. She imagines that “George was beaten” because “one of his kids that he was so mortally fond of” found her attractive (195). When George informs her that he is sending her home, she believes that she succeeded in demonstrating her own power.

While Josie embraces her potential sexual power over Jock, she discovers the dangers of this power in her interactions with Buddy. George asks Buddy, a sincere and gifted child, to recite Algernon Charles Swinburne's "The Match" for his guests. While the recitation is innocent in nature, Josie sees Buddy's performance as an opportunity for him to judge her. Buddy recites a stanza to each lady in the room and presents Josie with a stanza saturated with sexual undertones:

If you were queen of pleasure,
And I were king of pain,
We'd hunt down love together,
Pluck out his flying- feather,
And teach his feet a measure,
And find his mouth a rein (190-1).

Taylor portrays Josie's reaction as both incorrect and overly dramatic. Enraged, she believes that the stanza relegates her to the position of a sexually promiscuous woman. For Josie, "'Queen of Pleasure' sound[s] just as bad as a whore" (191). She fails to acknowledge Buddy's true intention of merely displaying his talent for reciting verse and views it as an act of disrespect. Taylor denies Josie an ability to comprehend Buddy's innocence. He reveals her as a victim of self-defeat, unable to escape her anxiety over social rank.

The story's climatic moment occurs when Josie unconsciously reveals her overwhelming concerns to Buddy. When Buddy chooses Josie as a subject for a sketch, she playfully asks him "clothes and all, Bud?" (197). Her response suggests her inability to perceive of herself as anything more than a sexual being. He makes a genuine effort to accept her and welcome her into his world. Instead, she views the request as an indication of her permanence as an inferior woman. Ironically because of her reaction, Buddy furiously proclaims that Josie is "a fancy woman" (197). Overwhelmed with her

sense of isolation from those around her, she cannot see Buddy's request as a simple act of flattery. Robinson argues that she "is not conversant with the world that produced him" and cannot comprehend his sincerity (98).

Although Taylor focuses on one individual woman's struggles, his portrait of Josie reflects a compelling examination of working class women's psychology from the upper class's viewpoint. While he is critical of high class pretentiousness, he appears more concerned with working class women. Josie struggles to resist the pressures of the social ideologies that govern her world. Throughout the story, Josie fails to assert any sense of power or freedom not because she is incapable herself, but rather because Taylor does not provide her with the necessary means to do so. He forces her to see herself only through George's gaze and the Memphis set's social ideologies. Josie discovers numerous opportunities to assert herself only to have Taylor place her back into an inferior position. However, Taylor leaves the narrative open-ended. As Josie locks herself in her room with a bottle of bourbon and her beloved "Louisville Lady" playing the background, she appears to acknowledge both triumph and defeat. She emphatically states that "I'm not gonna think about [Buddy] ever once I get back to Memphis." The statement suggests that she will move past these incidents and finally carry out her notion of looking out solely for herself. She plans to remove the burdens of the social divisions that plague her throughout the narrative. However, she simultaneously ponders what will become of her. As she silently waits for George to break down the door, she wonders what lies in her future. She ponders "just what George'll do to [her]" (197). While his perspective is absent, the male gaze still exists. Even after she declares her independence, she cannot help but think of her fate in George's terms. As the story ends, the reader is

left to imagine what will become of Josie. However, this ambivalent ending appears to be only feasible way for Taylor to conclude the story. He comprehends that he cannot fully alter the established social structure, yet he reveals that the class divisions between Josie and the Memphis set are not as rigid as they appear.

By the time Taylor began writing "The Old Forest" in the late 1970s, the social and gender ideologies of the 1940s had evolved significantly. The second wave of feminism marked the period as the issue of gender came to the political and social forefront. While females still faced prejudice in the workforce, more and more women organized collectively to advocate women's rights. Groups such as the National Organization for Women and the Women's Equality Action League attempted to undermine the notions of female inferiority and fought for social parity. In addition, the class disparities in the female workforce of the 1940s were no longer as prevalent. Jane De Hart-Mathews notes that "those who worked outside the home were no longer predominantly young, single, or poor" (444). Although middle-class did find themselves as working women in the mid-twentieth century, their presence was more prominent by the 1970s. This growth of middle-class women workers signifies the evolution of class divisions as the disparities between the working-class and the middle- and upper-middle-classes became less apparent.

Like "The Fancy Woman" (1979), "The Old Forest" highlights working class women and their relationship with the Memphis upper-middle-class. However, "The Old Forest" appears to be a reworking his portrayal of working class women in "The Fancy Woman." With the hindsight of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Taylor modifies the relationship between classes in order to illustrate the evolving social and

gender ideologies. While “The Fancy Woman” emphasizes the ineffectuality of working class women like Josie, “The Old Forest” creates a more three-dimensional portrait of these women and suggests their importance and influence in the changing southern social order. The ideals of the feminist movement appear to effect Taylor as he revisits 1930s Memphis in the story, compelling him to explore the changing notions of gender and class. The story reveals a greater fluidity between classes, and the social divisions portrayed in “The Fancy Woman” are not as rigid.

The story centers on the complex gender ideologies of the changing South. The story unfolds as a recollection of Nat Ramsey, the narrative’s male protagonist, who revisits a car accident in his past that changes his future. The story’s narrative technique is different from that of “The Fancy Woman.” While the omniscient narrator of “The Fancy Woman” primarily focuses on the working class woman’s reaction to class divisions, Nat, the first-person narrator of “the Old Forest,” observes lower class women from a high society perspective. However, Nat’s retrospective point of view shifts between his youth and his maturity. The reader observes an older and wiser Nat reliving his experiences as a somewhat foolish and naïve, young man. By doing so, Taylor creates two distinct mindsets in one narrator. He utilizes the younger Nat’s unreliability to emphasize the naïvete of those individuals reliant on the established social ideologies of the old South. In addition, Nat’s narration suggests Taylor’s attempt to work through his own misperceptions. By employing a recollection, Taylor illustrates how Nat’s beliefs have changed or have not changed. Taylor’s use of Nat as a first-person narrator is intriguing in that it provides readers with the closest glimpse at Taylor’s own words coming through the voice of his character. Nat’s experiences mirror Taylor’s own in

numerous ways. In a 1985 interview, Taylor notes that like Nat, he “did have an accident...and [he] was studying Latin” (89). Though parallels exist between the two, Taylor does not imply that he and Nat are one and the same. However, their similarities suggest that Nat may echo Taylor’s own attitudes and conduct.

While Taylor employs a male narrative voice, the focus remains on the women. Nat informs the reader that the accident itself was not notable, but rather “the accident plus the presence of that girl” (*OF* 30). What makes the incident unusual is the fact that “that girl” was not his fiancée of the upper-middle class, Caroline Braxley, but a working class, female companion, Lee Ann Dechart. Nat notes that it was typical for society men like himself to maintain relationships with other women up until marriage. The relationship between these women and the upper-middle-class men resembles the relationship between Josie and George in that they both relate more to physical intimacy than emotional connectedness. Nat notes how the working class women were “liberated in many respects, but about all else...liberated sexually” (63). Although he states that they were not promiscuous, it appears as though they found themselves used sexually to a degree. Like George, many of the society men found working class women to be a source of physical gratification. Being with women like Lee Ann allowed the society men to temporarily escape the traditional life they were to accept. The society men understood that they “were not to ‘go to bed’ with society girls” and turned to the working class women for their sexual needs. However, Nat reveals that he never consummated his relationship with Lee Ann. He notes that she “was in all respects like the girls we called ‘nice girls,’ by which I suppose we really meant society girls” (64). The statement weakens the disparity between the characteristics of the social classes.

Although the society men see the working class women's sexual liberation, they still see them resembling the society women they are to treat with respect and ultimately marry.

However, Lee Ann's lower class status draws attention from the entire Memphis community because of the publicity surrounding the accident. In addition, Nat's mere decision to retell this story emphasizes the importance of the incident. It still resonates in his mind forty years later. Although he states that "it is not as though I have lived an uneventful life during the years since," it is this story that deserves and requires retelling (42). He goes on to note such serious events as the deaths of his parents, brothers, and children. However, Nat insists that the accident is so significant because of its context. He states that "life was different in those times" where his upper-middle-class world "did not have the rest of the world crowding in on it so much" (43). His statement suggests that the accident disrupted the tranquility of the sheltered world he knew and changed it forever.

As in "The Fancy Woman," Taylor creates a notable division between working class and upper-middle-class women. However, he establishes the contrast in a manner that omits the negative characteristics found in his portrayal of Josie. Although the men call them the "Memphis Demimondames," Nat states that the term is solely used to distinguish between the working women and the Memphis debutante set. However, the name suggests a false sense of moral and social superiority for the men even as Nat hints that some failed to understand what the name implied. His initial description of the Demimondames is far more flattering than the preliminary description of Josie in "The Fancy Woman." Nat notes that these were "bright girls" who engaged in intellectual matters such as reading and attending operas, and were far different from the "innocent,

untutored" upper-middle-class girls that Memphis men would marry (31-2). The Demimondames' intellectual pursuits are a stark contrast to Josie's feigned interest in books. Josie only pretends to read in order to impress George who appears to recognize that Josie's interest in books is only simulated. In contrast, Lee Ann and the other "city girls" possess a sense of sophistication that Josie lacks. While both the Demimondames and Josie enjoy drinking, the Demimondames control their behavior unlike Josie's reckless alcoholism. Although the working girls in "The Old Forest" frequent the raucous, Memphis roadhouses, their behavior is more refined than Josie's. In addition, while Josie fails to articulate her emotions and concerns, Nat reveals that the Demimondames were outspoken and frequently voiced their disdain for the upper-middle class. This initial description of the Demimondames does not sway readers one way or the other on their character. Instead, Nat merely informs readers of the contrast between them and the high society girls without designating each group as inherently good or bad. If anything, Taylor appears to imply that these lower class women possess an independence that is both refreshing and apparent. While Josie remains in her isolated inferiority held there by society, Taylor, and her own insecurities, the Demimondames demand the attention of those around them. Unlike Josie, the Demimondames attempt to resist the pressures of social distinctions. Nat states that "the girls were not interested in such distinctions of origin, were not conscious of them" and they "did not care who each other's families were or where they had gone to school" (58). Most of these working class women did not desire to be a part of the upper-middle-class world. However, Lee Ann's hiding her grandmother's identity signifies that the pressures of social status do indeed affect these women. Though this stress on class is an issue at times, the

Demimondames begin to undermine the upper-middle-class's perception of them with their desire to exist outside of their social position.

Nat's fiancée, Caroline, represents the high class world, a contrast to the independent lives of the Demimondames. She is the model southern lady who "knew what was going to be expected of [her] in making a marriage and bringing up a family" (48). Her home, "where everything seemed quiet and well ordered and unchanging," further positions Caroline in the upper middle class. (43). In addition, she is one of the "old-fashioned society girls" meant to inherit a privileged, respectable life and marry a reputable Memphis man like Nat. Caroline does not possess the freedom of the Demimondames because she must uphold the ideals of her high class elders. She must embrace the traditional values of marriage and family and the integrity of moral behavior. Meanwhile, society does not require Lee Ann to uphold these values because she is not part of the upper-middle-class. These expectations or lack thereof are crucial to Taylor's portrayal of working class women in the narrative. Rather than criticizing the Demimondames' rebelliousness, he justifies their behavior by revealing that society does not expect them to maintain the flawless image of the southern lady. This is not say that Taylor implies that the Demimondames are immoral or reckless like Josie, but rather that they develop outside of the high class social codes that Caroline must abide by.

While Taylor notes the Demimondames' independence, Nat simultaneously describes their limitations in the southern social order. Although, as Philip Heldrich contends, "there is no proper place for [Lee Ann] in Memphis' s explicit social hierarchy," she and women like her find themselves socially limited by the controls of the established male patriarchy (51). Nat notes that girls like Lee Ann "must not suffer from

the misconduct of any Memphis man or group of men" (33). At first glance, this compulsion of men to protect lower class women appears respectable. They perceive that given the Demimondames' precarious position as independent women, they must shield them from harm. Nat notes that "these men of position and power had to act as surrogate fathers during a transitional period" in order to provide a "sort of communal fatherhood" for the working class women. They believed as men, specifically as upper-middle-class men, they were to protect women from harm. However, the older men discover the diminishing power of the Memphis patriarchy. Nat states that "they were a generation of American men who were perhaps the last to grow up in a world where women were absolutely subjected and under the absolute protection of men" (67). These men recognize that their traditional ideals of class and gender give way to more progressive views, the same views that Taylor encountered when writing the story in the 1970s. Heldrich suggests that these women "belong to an emergent, contemporary South, seeking to open a space for women like her" and in doing so, become "a threat to the established patriarchy" (51). Here, Taylor once again revises his portrayal of working class women. While he denies Josie the power to undermine the social division set forth by the high society, he empowers the Demimondames as the Memphis men recognize the risk they pose to male authority.

Thus, he appears to recognize the emerging power of working class women and the influence they have over the social order. Lee Ann and the Demimondames come to resemble the real life working girls of the twentieth-century South. Mary Frederickson describes these working class women as individuals "uncowed by adverse circumstances and the economic and social realities of southern society." Taylor seems to comprehend

this social ruggedness as he replaces the vulnerability and obsession over inferiority in the Josie character with, as Frederickson notes, the “dogged determination to control their fate and ultimately change it” found in working girls like Lee Ann (22). Most of the Demimondames do not require the support of a husband or desire a life centered on the domestic sphere. However, others like Fern Morris, appear to possess Josie’s desire to be a part of the upper-middle-class world. Fern resembles Josie in numerous aspects. Nat notes that she was not as intellectually sophisticated as the other working class girls and that she “was more domestic” than the other Demimondames. Much like Josie, she views marriage as an opening into upper-middle-class society. Nat believes that she hoped that her brief relationship with Nat “might end in matrimony” (75). Caroline’s response to Fern’s desire for marriage mirrors Mrs. Jackson’s opinion of Josie. She sees Fern as a lower class woman who seeks a higher social position. She impersonates Fern whenever she thought Nat “was being silly about some other woman, usually a woman she considers her mental and social inferior” (76). While Fern may desire the life of a society girl like Caroline, she still maintains a sense of respect for the working class. She does not inform Nat or Caroline where Lee Ann is and in doing so, protects the integrity of the Demimondames. Taylor’s inclusion of the Fern character highlights the diversity of working class women. While “The Fancy Woman” portrays a single and somewhat stereotyped example of working class women, “The Old Forest” illustrates the intricacy in defining working-class.

Nat’s car accident and Lee Ann’s subsequent disappearance underscore Taylor’s revision of his portrayal of working class women. While the collision represents the clash between the established and the emerging, it does not appear to signify a class

conflict. Rather, Taylor illustrates that the accident and Lee Ann's running away signify her influence in Memphis's upper-middle class. She runs into the old forest, a region that Nat describes as powerful force, embodying mysteriousness and the spirits of the past. While Heldrich contends that Lee Ann hides in the forest "to escape the town's rigid social structure," it appears that Taylor also suggests that the forest further empowers her (50). Her running away and disappearance is less about her weaknesses than her ability to control her destiny and the influence of the high society that governs the community. As Madison Smart Bell notes, Lee Ann hold "a power to destroy....as she passes through the old forest, where no rules apply," and she forces the high society, both women and men, to confront the frailty of class divisions (260). Her disappearance also illustrates the power of the Demimondames as a unified group. The other girls rally around her, allowing her to remain hidden. By doing so, the working class women hold the upper hand as the rest of the community struggle to determine her whereabouts. Taylor reveals that almost the entire town, including its most prominent figures, joins in the search for Lee Ann. Although their motivation is to protect the established social order by protecting the working class woman, the search magnifies the control that Lee Ann holds. Lee Ann is absent for much of the story; yet her presence and authority is ironically highly visible.

Nat's changing attitude toward women reflects Taylor's own change in thinking about working class women like Lee Ann. Coming from the upper-middle-class, Nat's change signifies a need to reevaluate the class divisions that thwart Josie in "The Fancy Woman." He comes to comprehend the significance of women like Lee Ann who liberate themselves from rigid social and class demarcations thus disrupting the disparity

between the working and higher class. She and the other Demimondes, as David M. Robinson argues, “were all freed from old restraints put upon them by family and community,” leaving them fairly confident in their own identities. However, Lee Ann does feel some shame about her past. Taylor reveals that she had concealed the identity of her grandmother, the proprietor of a low end roadhouse. Robinson argues that “her shame about her family, originating in a sense of social or class inferiority,” signifies that Lee Ann is vulnerable to the overwhelming pressures of social attitudes (84). This embarrassment over her past parallels Josie’s own shame over her lower class status. However, what Lee Ann does and Josie cannot do is discover the significance of her lower class identity and subsequently accept herself. She must confront the world without ignoring her past or masking her class. Thus, Lee Ann dispels her sense of inferiority and weakens the social ideologies that plagued her. Taylor leads his readers to see the importance of working class women, and he compels them to comprehend the necessary role they play in changing not only the social ideologies of the high class but also of the entire social system. Nat’s father reluctantly admits that “that’s what the whole world is going to be like someday,” and women like Lee Ann cannot be stopped (67). By acknowledging her origins, she learns that her working class background and status cannot prevent her from attaining success or happiness. She no longer resents her working class ties and becomes more aware of the relationship between social ranks.

The rigid class categories that Taylor presents in “The Fancy Woman” begin to crumble in “The Old Forest,” as he bridges the gap that exists between working and upper-middle-classes. Throughout the story, Nat describes how the Demimondames were not far removed from the upper-middle-class society. He notes how some of these

women are daughters of prominent businessmen and others are even related to some of the upper-middle-class families. These connections further weaken the existing class divisions. Lee Ann and Caroline are not as different as they initially appear to be and by the story's end, Taylor reveals his most compelling example of revision. Caroline's role in the search for Lee Ann becomes the crucial facet to Taylor's reversal of lower class women. She plays an active part in the search, and she is the one who ultimately finds Lee Ann.

Here, Taylor begins to show the connectedness between two women of two different social ranks. Rather than highlighting the contrast between their respective classes, he indicates the parallels between Lee Ann and Caroline. Although the two women are not socially connected, they share an underlying desire for freedom. Lee Ann's actions trigger Caroline's own skepticism of the gender ideologies she grew up with. As Caroline and Nat meet Lee Ann's friend Fern Morris, Taylor places Fern and Caroline in the foreground while Nat remains passive. He further illustrates this as Caroline informs Nat that "this is something I have to do without you" (79). Caroline's assertiveness and ability to extract information from the Demimondes exposes the waning division between classes. While she understands that her future depends on her status as Nat's fiancée, Caroline asserts the limited freedom and power she possesses. More importantly, her success in finding Lee Ann and Nat's ineffectiveness signify Taylor's acknowledgement of his misperceptions of working class women and women all together. These lower class women no longer face the stifling and degrading title of "the fancy woman." Instead, they project an urgency and ability to change the perceptions that others have of them. Lee Ann's disappearance becomes a test for the upper-middle

class to assess its knowledge of the Demimondes' power and influence. It also forces Nat to question the legitimacy of the established social divisions.

As Nat and Caroline speed down the Bristol highway in search of understanding, Taylor clearly reverses his previous depictions of the upper-middle and working classes. Nat declares that the Demimondames' "names and personalities and way of life had occupied our thoughts and had seemed to threaten our future" (85). However, neither the upper-middle class nor the entire society could ignore the value that working class women possess. Nat begins to develop a new perception of how the established class division wrongly relegates the Demimondames to an inferior position. Caroline informs Nat of her jealousy of Lee Ann and her friends:

‘It isn’t only Lee Ann that disturbs me,’ she said. ‘It began with her, of course. It began not with what she might be to you but with her freedom to jump out of your car, her freedom *from* you, her freedom to run off into the woods—with her capacity, which her special way of living provided her, simply to vanish, to remove herself from the eyes of the world, literally to disappear from the glaring light of day while the whole world, so to speak, looked on’ (85).

Caroline’s emphasizing of Lee Ann’s freedom indicates the reversal of power. It is the working class woman who can afford to control her fate and to break free from the constraints established by the existing social order. She tells Nat that she desires the liberation that Lee Ann possesses. It is not the working class woman who longs to be part of the high society as Josie does, but rather it is the high class woman who craves the freedom that Josie and Lee Ann occupy. Although the high class isolates them, Caroline envies the Demimondames’ intelligence and bravery to define their own destiny and identity.

Nat's silence during the drive allows Caroline to force him to confront his own misperceptions of working class women. She points out how Nat and men like him misconstrue the Demimondames' real nature. She also reinforces the Demimondames' ability to "occupy the real city of Memphis as none of the rest of us do," producing a definite sense of credibility that Nat fails to see. Nat recognizes his silence as his own bewilderment. He has been wrong about the role of these women and failed to comprehend their significance in his life. Taylor allows Caroline to explain her side of the experience at the story's climactic moment. He provides a female perspective to help work through the males' misperceptions of women. Taylor allows Caroline to speak in order to explore more comprehensively the social and gender ideologies. Through Caroline, Taylor reveals how class and gender perceptions change. He understands that working class women no longer allow themselves to be victimized by social misperceptions. Women like Lee Ann require men like Nat to reevaluate their notions of gender. Nat states that his silence "was due in part to my impatience to see if she would explain *herself* to me" (86). His need for explanation can be viewed as Taylor's need for his characters to develop for themselves. He cannot merely place Lee Ann in the role that Josie occupied and Caroline and Nat do not neatly fit into the role that George's friends held. Instead, Taylor allows them to exist without the rigid positions he implemented in "The Fancy Woman." By doing so, he attempts to revise the social order itself, even if his success is minute. Caroline works within the high class to protect the "power of a woman in a man's world" that Lee Ann projects. Her explanations to Nat signify her desire to rectify the pretenses that high class men abide by.

Nat himself abandons his father's business to accept a more modest career as an English professor. Although his revision is subtle, it demonstrates progress between classes unseen in "The Fancy Woman." At the story's conclusion, Nat reveals his need for liberation as he states that "I must make the change" and that Caroline "would dedicate her pride of power to the power of freedom I sought" (89). By concluding with Nat's need for freedom, Taylor stresses the necessity and inevitability of revising the perceptions of class and gender especially by those who rely on and benefit from these attitudes. It is not only the working class women who seek freedom but also the upper-class men who need to liberate themselves from the social ideologies they so greatly rely on.

"The Fancy Woman" and "The Old Forest" reveal the evolving social and gender ideologies that not only affected the South but the entire nation. Taylor creates contrasting portraits of working class women in "The Fancy Woman" and "The Old Forest." Although they share certain similarities, they possess distinct characteristics that lead them either to self- defeat or personal triumph. For Josie Carlson, the issue of class is unavoidable. She cannot perceive the world without the divisions that separate her from a higher class because the social structure and Taylor himself prohibit her from doing so. Thus, she fails to discover or assert any significant power that would allow her the social mobility and freedom she desires. For Lée Ann Deehart, she learns to acknowledge her working class roots and live without the concerns of class. Her place is on the periphery of the Memphis social structure. However, Lee Ann's experiences with those within it are vital. She forces the upper-middle-class to reevaluate their own values and beliefs while examining her own. The contrasting portraits of working class women

underscore the evolving gender and social ideologies and how the South's social structure adapted to these changes. What Taylor uncovers is the frailty of the social divisions that he grew up with. While he maintains these divisions in "The Fancy Woman," he revises his position in "The Old Forest." Although the social divisions remain in place, Taylor allows his characters a greater awareness of their own identities in the evolving southern social order.

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Biography

Frank Cha is originally from Annandale, VA. He received his Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of Virginia in 2001. Before beginning his graduate studies, he worked for Share Our Strength, a national, non-profit, anti-hunger organization, in Washington, D.C. His interest is in twentieth-century American literature, specifically in southern literature. In March 2004, he presented *Blue Flame, Southern Sky: Sexual, Ethnic, and Racial Otherness in "Orpheus Descending"* at the 2004 Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference in New Orleans, LA. In the fall of 2004, Mr. Cha will begin his doctoral work in American Studies at the College of William and Mary.