

THE LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL FAMILY
ROLES IN PETER TAYLOR'S STORIES AND PLAYS

by 613-8301

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B. A., Kansas Wesleyan University, 1968

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1973

Approved by:

Paul McCarty
Major Professor

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I

Short story writer Peter Taylor was born in 1917 in a small country town in Tennessee and grew up during the Depression in Nashville, St. Louis, and Memphis. Among Taylor's ancestors were judges, congressmen, and a grandfather and a great uncle who were both former Tennessee governors. Taylor took English courses under Allen Tate at Southwestern at Memphis in 1936 and later studied under John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt and at Kenyon College. By the time he graduated from Kenyon in 1940, two of his short stories had already been published.¹ After a brief period of graduate study under Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks at Louisiana State University, Taylor dropped out of school to devote his time to reading and writing fiction. Following four and a half years in the Army during World War II, he began, in 1946, a career of college teaching and fiction writing in which he is still engaged; Taylor now teaches writing at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. He has never earned a graduate academic degree and seems to think of himself as "a kind of journeyman writer"² rather than a scholar.

Taylor's first collection of stories, A Long Fourth and Other Stories (1948), contains a laudatory introduction by Warren and was encouragingly received by the reviewers.³ All of the stories included had previously appeared in Sewanee Review, Kenyon Review, Partisan Review, and Southern Review. This first book was followed by a short novel, A Woman of Means (1950), parts of which had already appeared as short stories.⁴ Four other short story collections, The Widows of Thornton (1954), Happy Families Are All Alike (1959), Miss Leonora When Last Seen (1963), and Collected Stories (1969), and two full-length plays, Tennessee Day in St. Louis (1957) and A Stand in the Mountains (1968), represent Taylor's collected work to date. He continues to publish stories periodically in the New Yorker and Sewanee Review.

Some of Taylor's stories have received national recognition and his work has brought him several foundation awards and fellowships for work and research abroad. His books have been favorably reviewed in the major newspapers and periodicals and his work has been mentioned in studies of the short story and of Southern literature. There have been a few articles analyzing Taylor's fiction and Albert J. Griffith's Peter Taylor is a book-length study of his work.⁵ With increasing frequency, his stories are being selected for inclusion in short story anthologies for college classes.

Taylor's work is generally admired by those who know it, but remains unknown to some critics and historians of

contemporary literature. Perhaps the very qualities which are so distinctive in his writing and which separate it from that of other Southern writers are to blame for this.

Taylor's "'acceptable' subject matter, his quiet style, his indirection and understatement are profoundly unlike the sensationalism, contortion and richly suggestive language of his fellow Southerners."⁶ Taylor's characteristic short story is a fairly long, leisurely memoir in which atmosphere, nuances of character, and subtle conflicts are revealed without a great show of effects. His style has often been described as unobtrusive, or, as one critic puts it, he "writes so simply and powerfully he seems scarcely to be exercising his craft."⁷ Taylor's place in contemporary short fiction is secure with those critics of Southern literature and the short story who know his work. John M. Bradbury finds Taylor's command of the short story medium comparable with that of Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty.⁸ Walter Sullivan calls Taylor "a perceptive artist, a skillful craftsman, and . . . the only American of his generation whose work can stand comparisons with that of Frank O'Connor and Chekhov and Joyce."⁹

Taylor's major theme is the disintegration of the family in the modern South and he has chosen as his special province the kind of world in which he himself grew up. "Peter Taylor's stories are officially about the contemporary, urban, middle-class world of the upper South."¹⁰ His characters,

even though they may be living in Detroit, St. Louis, or Chicago, are Southerners with deep ties to the Tennessee country towns where they were born, but it is not merely as Southerners that they interest us; in considering his characters in relation to their family life, he focuses on the internal tensions and complexities which result from the pressures put upon the contemporary family by the shifting structure of modern society. Barbara Schuler has analyzed the situation in which the families and individuals in Taylor's fiction are caught:

His characters are 'normal' members of the middle-class, vulnerable before the ethically deteriorating influences of urbanization, industrialization and shifting social pressures which have destroyed a way of life and given no satisfactory substitute. The land has been left, and more and more his people find that they have no roots in place, in family, or in self. While the action takes place in the present-day city, the memories are in the land, in a structured society, in personal and cherished possessions, in tradition and family history. Always his characters have broken with the past, but in the midst of their involvement in city life, in the midst of its competitiveness and dehumanization, the dream of one day returning comforts them.¹¹

When Peter Taylor views the disintegration of traditional roles within the family, he is examining a facet of life which is at once a universal concern and a uniquely Southern situation. The importance of the family as a social unit was more clearly evident in the South, says Andrew Lytle, because the agrarian nature of the society "gave the family a more clear definition of its function as not only an institution

but the institution of Southern life. . . . Land keeps the family intact. Husband, wife, children, the old, middle and young generations, all serve it and are kept by it, according to their various needs and capacities."¹²

With this strong tradition behind them, the characters in Taylor's stories, growing up in the Depression thirties and living adult lives in the forties, fifties, and sixties, are both strengthened and hampered by the historically assigned roles they play within their families. For the most part, they face the increasingly impersonal influences of modern life by trying to retain an identity with the communal memories and inherited forms of the past. By cherishing and preserving elements of a time when bonds linking the family members to the land and to each other were stronger, they hope to find some historical security, something to give meaning and order to their lives in the face of modern influences which threaten to leave them with no secure basis of morality, values, and goals.

Because adherence to the past is incompatible with success in the modern world, the responsibility for maintaining contact with a family's historical origins has been delegated to Taylor's women characters. The women find themselves cut off from the men and their world both by their own acceptance of their traditional roles and their roles as links to the past. Taylor's critics have noted this dichotomy in the characters' lives. Morgan Blum writes

about "the split in the lives of the men who've moved on with one moral code for their families and one for business."¹³ Ashley Brown says, "It is Mr. Taylor's contention that after the Civil War the men of the South, as they pursued money as an end in itself, largely abandoned their privileges as arbiters of civilization and left them to their wives and daughters."¹⁴ Griffith refers to the "metaphoric widowhood" of those women who are left "clinging to things the rest of the world values no more."¹⁵ But it is Kenneth Clay Cathey, in an early (1953) attempt at evaluating all of Taylor's fiction, who most accurately assesses the situation: "The women . . . have been hampered in finding their true position in modern life by the hanging-on of old traditions directing their behavior into certain predetermined channels," while the men of the South have escaped into the business world.¹⁶

These traditional conceptions of women's roles, which are no longer appropriate now that the external conditions on which they were founded have disappeared, do a basic injustice to the individual personality: the married women have limited opportunity for personal fulfillment in roles demanding that they assume the responsibility for preserving historical ties of blood and love; the unmarried women must choose between a life of independent enterprise and dependence on family "connections"; the men, in expecting the women to maintain their traditional roles while they themselves turn their attention to making money in the competitive modern

world, find that they have sacrificed, as has the narrator of "Dean of Men," "something of one's self."¹⁷ The stories discussed below illustrate Taylor's treatment of the conflicts arising from the split between the masculine and feminine worlds. Each story explores a different aspect of the hampering effect of the traditional family atmosphere on the married women, the unmarried women, and the men.

II

Cathey has said that "the family atmosphere is the real antagonistic force in all Taylor's works."¹⁸ In several of his stories, the wife and mother finds herself at odds with the traditional conception of her role in the family. While her husband goes out to meet the challenge of the modern world, she is left to perpetuate the traditional social and moral values of Southern family life, an arrangement which keeps her chained to the past and makes her an anachronism in a world of shifting social and cultural mores.

Taylor seems to be saying that these women must find a way to give up their loyalty to tradition without losing their loyalty to the basic family relationships assumed by tradition. Only one character, Sylvia Harrison in "The Dark Walk," gains the insight necessary to recognize the empty customs and attitudes she has been led to accept. Most of the wives in Taylor's stories simply endure situations in which they vaguely feel a lack of personal identity and

achievement. An interesting exception is Nell Larwell, the wife of a newly elected governor in "The Elect," who spends the day after the election in an agony of apprehension over her husband's expected request that she turn over her household duties to someone else and continue the publicly active role she has begun during the campaign. She finds this new life unwelcome and distasteful: "It was somehow as though she were working in an office somewhere, as though she had been widowed and had had to go to work in a man's world and would have to try to forget that she had . . . known these many happy years of keeping house and entertaining for and being cherished by an affectionate husband."¹⁹ Taylor's tone is not judgmental, nor does he simplify the subtle conflicts involved. He blames neither husbands for forcing wives into a limited life nor wives for accepting a dependent, sheltered existence. The wives in these stories show varying degrees of awareness of the ways in which old patterns--of behavior, of thinking, of feeling--continue to dominate their lives.

"A Wife of Nashville" follows the marriage of Helen Ruth Lovell through a period of some twenty years by concentrating on her dealings with a series of Negro servants. The wife of an ambitious young businessman, Helen Ruth is plagued by a kind of vague dissatisfaction. "It seemed to her then that she had so little in life that she was entitled to the satisfaction of keeping an orderly house and to the luxury of efficient help. There was too much else she had not had--an

'else' nameless to her, yet sorely missed--for her to be denied these small satisfactions."²⁰ A key to the story, what Griffith calls its "underlying pattern," lies in the recognition of the relationship between Helen Ruth's problems with the servants and with her own role as a wife. "As Helen Ruth frets in turn over lazy Jane Blakemoor, shifty and negligent Carrie, religious but amorous Sarah, and devoted but deceptive Jess McGeehee, she is really fretting over her own lot as wife."²¹ At two points in the story, once in the early years of her marriage and once at the end of the story, she comes close to realizing the parallel between the emptiness of her life and that of her servants, who have no lives of their own.

The life Helen Ruth leads with John R., her husband, is a curious mixture of dependence and isolation. Involved in a busy life of sport and business activity with "the swells of Nashville" whose names "didn't mean a thing in this state even thirty years ago" (78-79), John R. does not realize that he has left his wife behind by helping to force her into a role that is only a holdover from a way of life which no longer exists. When she feels "a restlessness that she could not explain in herself" and experiences "days when she could not stay at home" (77), John R. only suggests that she see "the wives of his business and hunting friends, or some of the other Thornton girls who were married and living in Nashville" (75). John R.'s suggestions reflect his need to have his wife preserve the ties to the country life they have left.

His family is his link to the more stable and ordered society of his ancestors.

Ironically, the life that seems so empty to Helen Ruth seems ideal to the rest of the world. Her friends praise the independence Helen Ruth seems to enjoy: "'It's too bad more marriages can't be like theirs, each living their own life.'" While Helen Ruth accepts the reasoning that "'because a woman's husband hunts is no reason for her to hunt, any more than because a man's wife sews is any reason for him to sew,'" hearing her marriage described so matter-of-factly "made her understand for the first time what a special sort of marriage it was and how unhappy she was in it" (79). Yearning for a something "else," she continues to accept her life as it is, refusing to learn to drive even though "she would sometimes look out one of the sun-parlor windows toward the street and think of how much she wanted to learn to drive" (68).

There had been one exception to her acceptance of her life, a brief, barely recognizable separation from John R. It is during her self-imposed exile in Thornton with her two small children that she almost becomes aware of a parallel between her lot and that of the women who are her servants. Seeing her first servant, lazy and contrary Jane Blakemoor, who had quit and returned to Thornton after three years, in conversation with her present servant, Carrie, Helen Ruth wonders if "she had really misused these women" (72). For the first time she sees that, despite her undefined

dissatisfaction, her life is not as bad as it could be. The guilt she feels for being unhappy leads her to a decision which will set the pattern of all her remaining years as a wife. "There was no longer any doubt in Helen Ruth's mind but that she would return to her husband, and return without any complaints or stipulations" (72). In returning to John R., Helen Ruth accepts all the mysteries of their way of life, "the mystery of his live of hunting, of his choice of friends, of his desire to maintain a family and home of which he saw so little, of his attachment to her, and of her own devotion to him" (83).

Taylor has no easy solutions for his characters' problems. If Helen Ruth's dissatisfaction had been simply the result of being left out of her husband's life, she should have been happy when, during the Depression, John R.'s business failed and she found herself with "a man who had no interest in anything but his home, his wife, and his three boys" (88). During this period John R. develops back pains which disappear once his business is reestablished and he can once more lead an independent life.

It is about this time that Jess comes to work for Helen Ruth. Even though Jess is devoted to the family and seems a permanent fixture, Helen Ruth worries because she "seemed to have no life of her own, which wasn't at all natural" (90). When, after eight years of idolizing the Lovell family, Jess suddenly pulls an elaborate deception and takes off for

California, it is only Helen Ruth who can understand her reasons for leaving. She knows also why Jane pretended that the baby made her nervous and went back to Thornton, why Carrie quit when she got her undertaker's license, and why Sarah ran off to get married. As she struggles to make her family understand "the loneliness from which everybody . . . suffered"⁽⁴⁸⁾, she feels that it is all somehow connected with the "so much else" that has been missing from her life and the "foolish mysteries" she had so nobly accepted upon her reconciliation with John R. But she cannot bridge the gulf separating her from the men in her family. Unlike the servants who leave because they have no lives of their own, she simply accepts the situation.

Another story, "Cookie," dramatizes a single incident in which the tensions between a man and his wife are masked by deliberate solicitude. The wife in "Cookie," who is never named, is an older version of Helen Ruth. Patiently she serves her unfaithful doctor husband his supper on one of the infrequent occasions when his conscience has led him to appear at home. During the meal the trivial dialogue reveals his guilt and her quiet desperation: "'You're too good to me,'" he says, and she replies, "'Nothing's too good for one's husband.'"²² The tense emotional balance of the scene is disturbed when the Negro cook deliberately mentions some local gossip about the doctor's sordid "secret" life, bringing to the surface the source of the tension. Both the doctor and

his wife, each for his own reasons, choose to attribute the remark to "old-nigger uppitness" (161). As the doctor leaves, he can hear his wife unbraiding Cookie for her indiscretion. He turns toward the driveway where "his car, bright and new and luxurious" waits to take him away. He can hear "their ugly, old voices" inside, can even sense "the righteousness and disillusion of Cookie's, the pride and discipline of his wife's" (162). "Cookie" is a simple story which takes on added significance when it is considered in context with Taylor's other variations on this theme. Like Helen Ruth in "A Wife of Nashville" and like Sylvia Harrison in "The Dark Walk," the wife in this story is bound to a life that is empty, perhaps has always been empty, while her husband makes his real life elsewhere.

"The Dark Walk," one of Taylor's longest stories, is a complex mesh of remembered scenes and impressions centering around Sylvia Harrison; although the immediate setting of the story is in the weeks following her husband's death, Taylor uses events and memories from earlier years as a background for the discoveries Sylvia makes about herself and her world. When her husband dies, Sylvia has behind her almost twenty years of following him from city to city as he moved rapidly from a sort of "efficiency vice president" to the presidency of his own manufacturing firm. Making a kind of career of efficient moving, Sylvia has traveled about the country with "four vans of furniture--almost everything in the way of

furniture that her family or Nate's had ever owned."²³ Always there is the understanding that they will someday return to Tennessee to live. "Home for them would always be Tennessee. Home was not Chicago or Detroit, or any of the other places they had lived" (240). With the heavy pieces of furniture and "the enormous painted tapestries representing scenes and characters from Tennessee history" (250), Sylvia makes each house they live in a monument to life as it was lived back in the country.

Sylvia Harrison's married life has not been filled with the vague dissatisfaction of Helen Ruth Lovell's. Sylvia is proud of the harmonious relationship she and Nate enjoyed. When she visits her girlhood friends who have remained in the country town of Thornton, she finds a kind of vacuum in their lives. "It seemed to Sylvia that the husbands had not been there at all. And yet she observed that these same husbands exercised a kind of inhuman control over their families that their forebears had never done" (246-47). She pities the wife of the typical, latter-day husband in Tennessee who "insists on his right, his necessity to be like other men" while he insists that his wife "must continue to live as she always has" (247). She finds that even her old-maid Jewish friend shares this experience. "Isabel's old-bachelor brothers insisted that all the rituals of the table be observed at their house, yet the brothers rarely ate at home" (248). Sylvia sees none of this in her own marriage.

Sylvia recognizes the forces at work in her friends' lives, but she does not realize that Nate has exerted a much more subtle pressure on her to hang on to all that is traditional. She remembers his having told her before their marriage that "everything changes so fast in our country that a smart person can't hold onto the past--not to any part of it if he wants to be a success" (258). But the gentle indulgence Nate shows toward Sylvia during the years of marriage is calculated to reinforce her disposition towards the places, people, and things of the past. The story opens with an account of a Colorado vacation which Sylvia and her children spend in a dismally isolated and run-down resort which Sylvia has chosen over the more fashionable Broadmoor because it is run by her high-school gymnastics teacher. "Nate had laughed at her for it and had been especially tickled by the fact that she was going to keep in touch with her Tennessee friends during the summer" (239) Nate himself does not come near the place.

Nate had always taken great delight in Sylvia's skill in moving the family, with all the generations of accumulated furniture. "Ever afterward," in describing their first move from the country to Memphis, "Nate described Sylvia as a real trouper that day. He exaggerated the hardships of the trip and pictured her as a sort of pioneer heroine" (254). With a gentle but persistent cajolery, Nate communicates to Sylvia the image of her that he cherishes most. In their most intimate and congenial conversations he is fond of hearing her

"chatter" on about her "things" (257).

The second of the three sections of "The Dark Walk" deals with the three-month period following Nate's death when Sylvia is preparing to take her family back to Tennessee. As she weighs her reasons for returning to the country, the first small doubts creep into her thinking. At first she rationalizes that "it is very much to the interest of the children to go back to Tennessee where their property is and . . . where their name will mean something to them" (266). But she also must admit that her children have become citizens of a modern world. Moving about the country has given them "an appreciation and enjoyment of life as they knew it which was more binding than any mere bond of kinship" (274). Sylvia herself has been too busy preserving ties to the country and the past ever to have become a true citizen of the modern urban world.

Even though Nate has left his family handsomely provided for, Sylvia, much to her children's amusement, insists upon justifying the return to Tennessee by speaking of "having to drag my family back to the country in order to make ends meet" (269). She becomes particularly sensitive to any criticism of her efforts to maintain a continuity with the world she had grown up in. "They found she could not tolerate their accustomed jokes about her furniture, about her long, unbroken correspondence with relatives and girlhood friends in Tennessee, about her clinging to every Southerner she met in Chicago, or about the annual trips back home to see after the

two family houses" (271). She finds herself defending the great "drive" and "genius for efficiency" that had led her husband away from the country town. "Nate never felt any attraction toward a country law practice . . . or toward managing and developing the land he and I inherited. He felt drawn toward things that were in a sense foreign to our Southern, country sort of upbringing" (272). "Incapable of using his intelligence for anything outside the sphere of business" (279), Nate had retained ties to his historical origins in the form of a wife who was dedicated to preserving those ties.

As she prepares for the trip back to Tennessee, Sylvia is besieged by two men who represent for her "the two sides of a rather simple question" (295). Mr. Canada, Sylvia's wealthy old landlord, tries repeatedly to convince her to remain in Chicago. Leander, one of the servants who had accompanied the Harrisons on their first move to Memphis over twenty years before, wants desperately to return to Tennessee with the family. Her children tease Sylvia about the "Black Knight" and the "White Knight," and she begins to feel that she is being selfish in going ahead with the move. "She had never made any effort to understand Nate's business career and thereby to share his greatest interest in life. . . . She had lived as though the great facts of their life were that they had come from Cedar Springs and that they would someday return there" (296). As she tries to sort out her attitudes

toward the move, she feels she can equate Mr. Canada's position with the forward-looking Nate's, but she is troubled to think that Leander represents her point of view.

With a flash of insight that Helen Ruth Lovell in "A Wife of Nashville" never attained, Sylvia realizes that the respect for the past which is her most deeply ingrained character trait was also a part of Nate's most basic needs, a part that he had denied in himself and delegated to her.

She had no side, no voice in the argument, and had never had one. The two voices she had been listening to for weeks . . . seemed to represent the two sides of Nate. He had, through all the years, wanted her to want to go back to Tennessee. . . . Her own wishes had never entered into it. That was what Nate's tolerance had meant. It had meant his freedom from a part of himself . . . that would have bound him to a place and to a past time otherwise inescapable. (298)

When she realizes that Nate had wanted her to insist upon taking all the furniture everywhere they went so that he "might be free to live that part of life in which there somehow must be no furniture" (298), she has at least partially penetrated the nature of the "foolish mysteries" that Helen Ruth accepted at her reconciliation with John R.

Sylvia carries her revelation even further as she remembers the place where Nate had asked her to marry him, the Dark Walk in Thornton, a river pathway that was the traditional place for proposals, a place with an element of mystery and danger. Now the romantic image of herself that she has always cherished, that of "a young girl in white dimity

repeating and sharing the experience of all the other girls to whom life had seemed to begin anew," has been poisoned by a different interpretation of mystery and danger:

it seemed that the experience they had shared there was really the beginning of widowhood. . . . It seemed to her that in some way or other all the men of that generation in that town had been killed in the old war of her grandfather's day. Or they had been set free by it. Or their lives had been changed in a way that the women's lives were not changed. The men of Nate's time had crossed over a border, had pushed into a new country. And their brides lived as widows clinging to things the men would never come back to and from which they could not free themselves. (304)

With her new insight, Sylvia feels the necessity of dispensing with "all that was old and useless and inherited" (310). When she has sent the four vans of furniture back to Tennessee, remaining in Chicago with her family, she finds her image of Thornton, where "she had known the name and quality of everything," being replaced by "the vision of that strange, vague life in that strange, vague city--a city and a life which . . . could only exist as opposites of something else" (301). She feels like "a being who had been set free" (309), as she prepares to furnish her new apartment with only "what was new and useful and pleasing to the eye. . . . Everything would be according to her own tastes, and even of that there would be only enough to serve the real needs and comforts of the family" (310). In reorganizing her life, she realizes that the discovery of her individual identity and the decision she had made "constituted the one important decision that anyone, regardless of sex or age or

physical size, could make" (309). She resolves to build new relationships with her family: "It wasn't that she would love them less; it was that she would . . . learn to love herself more" (307). Sylvia seems to have arrived at the solution that Cathey saw for Taylor's characters: "If they are to find any real happiness, [the women] must give up their allegiance to the tradition without surrendering their loyalty to the basic family relationships embodied in it."²⁴

III

In the fictional world of Peter Taylor it is not only the wives and daughters of men adapted to modern life who are coerced into accepting social roles as "country ladies" long after they have left the environment in which such roles had been appropriate. Women who do not marry, the maiden aunts and family servants, find that opportunities for defining their own functions are limited by traditional values and identities imprinted upon them.

In Taylor's fiction, those who retain close ties to the country towns or never leave them are often part of a futile struggle to preserve the old way of life. In "Their Losses" three women meet on a train and we discover that each is bringing a dead or dying relative back to the country to die or to be buried. None of the women has really found her place in the urban world because each has been profoundly influenced by the struggle to "retain the standards of a past era, a

better era."²⁵ Even family servants can end up clinging to a way of life which no longer exists. "What You Hear From 'Em"? is the story of old Aunt Munsie, the Negro mammy who only wants to know when the Tolliver boys, whom she had raised after their mother's death, are coming home to their hometown to live. When she realizes that they will never return, that they will never again be "her boys," she gives up her pride and dignity and resigns from the world of "quality folks" to wear a bandana on her head and talk "old-nigger foolishness" to the new people in town.²⁶ In "Miss Leonora When Last Seen," Taylor tells the story of a spinster who has devoted her life to preserving the traditions and institutions of her small Tennessee town. When the inevitable movement of progress forces her to give up her ancestral mansion as a site for a new consolidated school, she sets out on an endless car trip, sending postcards that allow the townspeople to trace her route as she "orbits" Tennessee in an expression of ultimate rootlessness and mobility.

The unmarried women who find limitations of small towns intolerable must struggle to find a place in the urban world. Often they compromise by returning to the security of urban family "connections." The apparent freedom of unmarried women in the upper middle-class, urban South to choose a satisfying way of life is mostly an illusion. Deeply ingrained traditional attitudes and patterns of behavior make independent enterprise as impossible for them as for married

women. In Taylor's stories, those who do not marry find that their ideas of fulfillment leave them with only one satisfactory choice: Aligning themselves with their family is the only socially and emotionally satisfactory road open to them.

The women in "Two Ladies in Retirement" are excellent illustrations of the way in which Southern customs reach out to bind even unmarried women to the traditions of the past. Miss Betty, with her companion, Flo Dear, comes to live with her nephew and his family after having made a twenty-five year career of social climbing in Nashville. In deciding to leave Nashville, she has been forced to face the "worthlessness" of the goal that had been set for her many years before by "circumstances and by her personal limitations."²⁷ Unable to fulfill her father's wish that she make her place "in the heart of some gentle, honest man" (182), she had chosen the only available alternative for "the unbeautiful, untalented heiress of a country family's fortune" who had grown up to find that "the country town that gave that fortune its only meaning was decaying and disappearing" (186). She could hardly follow the men of her generation, and later generations, who had gone to the city and had "used their heads, their connections, and their genteel manners to make their way to the top of things" (187). Miss Betty had used her head, her connections, and her manners to make her way to the top of the only world in the city open to a woman of her position: the social world.

Now as she tries to win a place in the family by showering money and affection on her nephew's three young sons, she finds a rival in Vennie, the Negro cook, like "somebody's old granny," who tempts the boys with illicit chocolate cakes and tales of the "old days" in the country. In the society world of Nashville, Miss Betty had not hesitated to use the vicious weapons of blackballing and impeachment to gain her own ends, but when Vance, the oldest boy who has himself been hurt by Vennie, shows her a way she can expose Vennie's pilfering and disloyalty, she is shocked that he thinks her capable of entering into "a conspiracy with little children in the house of her kinspeople" (187). As she looks at the life she has led, she realizes that "every day of her adult life had made her less a woman instead of more a woman" because she has lived by the ruthless, competitive moral code of the men. "Wrong though it seemed, the things a man did to win happiness in the world--or in the only world Miss Betty knew--were of no consequence to the children he came home to at night, but every act, word, and thought of a woman was judged by and reflected in the children, in the husband, in all who loved her" (187). Face to face with the moral responsibility that is but another aspect of traditional life left to the women, Miss Betty sees that she cannot use the ruthless and independent tactics of her former life if she is to gain a place in this family. For within the family a woman's most powerful and indeed her only weapons are love and loyalty to her family and to the traditions which support it. Blum says that

Taylor's characters "characteristically end up instructed by events so that they see more fully developments within their own natures or within the nature of their world."²⁸ This happens to Miss Betty as she sees clearly the two alternatives she has followed, successively, in her life. It is perhaps a result of Taylor's attempt to "see people in their histories, with understanding and a measure of forgiveness,"²⁹ that we can understand how circumstances and her personal limitations have left her no choices except life as either a social climber or a dependent recipient of familial affection.

In two of his plays, The Death of a Kinsman and Tennessee Day in St. Louis, Taylor explores the way in which carefully preserved feminine roles are played out in the modern Southern family in an urban setting. In each play the action centers around the observance of a traditional ritual. In Tennessee Day in St. Louis, the occasion is the annual observance of Tennessee Day when all the members of the middle-class Southern "ghetto" (which is spiritual rather than actual-- "'Tennessee is a state of mind,'"³⁰ as one of the characters puts it) gather to laud the place of their origin. In The Death of a Kinsman, the Wade family solicitously prepares for the funeral of an old man who had "'had an allergy to blood relations,'" but who is nevertheless "'the only relative any of us have in Detroit.'"³¹ In both plays a maiden aunt figures prominently in Taylor's exposition of "'how this family business works'" (147).

As Aunt Lida and the Wade family prepare for the funeral of "Cousin" Harry in The Death of a Kinsman, young Mrs. Wade, the mother of six children, marvels at "'how well we know our roles and how clearly defined are our spheres of authority'" (138). In the ten years since the family left Tennessee, there has been harmony between these two women playing their roles as they have always seen them played in Tennessee, "'the maiden aunt, responsible and capable,'" and "'the beautiful young wife, the bearer of children, the reigning queen'" (135-36).

Miss Bluemeyer, the Northern housekeeper whom Brainard Cheney calls the "lone creature of the industrial city,"³² refuses to play by Aunt Lida's rules. She cannot understand "'anybody who has so little pride and independence'" as Aunt Lida (132), but she feels she does understand "'what is wrong with all the family falderal your sort go in for'" (146). She feels only disgust for the way she sees Aunt Lida using her family position to make a place for herself.

'I understand how it works, for I was one of nine, and I saw the women in my family making the most of it too. And I might have done the same, but I was a queer sort who couldn't make herself do it. . . . I have seen it right along that you are really the same as I in lots of your feelings, Miss Wade, that you are really lost and alone in the world, but you would not have it so.' (148)

Aunt Lida is fully aware of the sacrifice of independence that secures her position, but for a Southern woman of her class, the life that Miss Bluemeyer chooses is the prerogative of the men and is unavailable to the women. The

traditional role as a dependent relative is "'the coin of the realm, and you'd best use what you have of it'" (140), lest you end up alone and embittered like Miss Bluemeyer and Cousin Harry. The circumstances of Aunt Lida's life have forced her to accept a traditional family role which keeps her from realizing a place in the modern world, but Miss Bluemeyer seems to be even more unhappy in her rejection of family life.

In the second and more complex of the two plays, Tennessee Day in St. Louis, Taylor explores other aspects of the way in which traditional conceptions of family roles affect the women in the family. His characters are again the Tolliver family from "Two Ladies in Retirement" (this time with only two sons, Jim and Lanny), with Auntie Bet and Flo Dear still in residence. Helen Tolliver's bachelor brother William is also living in the house and his secretary-lover of ten years, Lucy McDougal (whom the family still politely refers to as William's fiancée) is a frequent visitor. Their guests are Helen's distant cousin, old Senator Cameron Caswell, who is to be the speaker at the annual Tennessee Day observance, and his granddaughter, Nancy. The day is also James' and Helen's wedding anniversary and young Lanny's fifteenth birthday. As Lucy contemplates exchanging her independent career for marriage, the advantages and responsibilities of various traditional feminine roles are held up for examination.

Early in the play it becomes apparent that William intends to take his money and leave St. Louis to make another life for

himself, diserting Lucy in the process. When Lanny learns of this, he is so upset he attempts suicide. Although both Lucy and William have rejected their own families many years before ("His family had ruined his life by trying to discipline him too much. . . . Mine had ruined my life by being so damned poor'" [40]), they briefly propose to marry in order to give Lanny a real home life away from what they feel is an atmosphere too heavily dependent upon its historical identity. "That's no way for a person to think of himself--in terms of his family and where his family came from and what they were there'" (35).

Auntie Bet, whose history we already know from "Two Ladies in Retirement," encourages Lucy to marry William and make a place for herself in a home, to "'play your cards as I have played mine'" (120). Lucy and Auntie Bet have a shared inheritance, the life of an old maid in a small country town, and each has long ago chosen the alternative, "'that of learning to live as men--you, like the men of your generation; I, more like those of my own'" (116). Lucy is not sure she wants to give up her hard-won independence. Each of the other women in the family has "played her cards" by conforming to some aspect of traditional women's roles: Flo Dear made her place by becoming an expert in family geneaology; Auntie Bet is "'the wealthy, domineering old aunt who might change her will 'most any day . . . but wanting awfully to be loved by everybody'" (122); Helen is "'the beautiful mother and wife,

the very ideal of womanhood'" (122). By accepting these remnants of the past, these traditional conceptions, the women make themselves indispensable to the men who are only too willing to have their "'feeling of security and power and superiority'" reinforced (123).

Realizing that this sort of domestic happiness is impossible for her, Lucy sends William on his way. "'It was too late for William and me to marry. The time had passed. I did what I did for myself'" (166). She knows that Lanny will have to find out for himself who he is, and she and William will have no more to do with it than will Lanny's own family. "'Nobody ever saves anybody but himself. It was I who was in the worst danger today. It is I who am saved for the moment. . . . Your family has been here only one generation, and it's all over with already'" (167). And Lucy escapes, tearing, in her haste to get out of it, a dress she has borrowed from Helen. She has decided not to exchange her independence for a role like Helen's. A life devoted to holding a family together with only the ritual and tradition of the past to combat the competitiveness and dehumanization of modern city life strikes her as impossibly limited and futile.

IV

Having left the women to guard the traditional values of the old South, the men in Taylor's stories discover that they have estranged themselves from the families they sought to preserve. The men in these upper middle-class families have not

been content with the limited opportunities to be found in the country towns; they are not the spiritual descendants of Ashley Wilkes, the character in Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind, who mopes listlessly around the plantation after the Civil War. Most of them are business executives in urban Southern cities or in cities of the North or Midwest. As James Tolliver says in Tennessee Day in St. Louis, "'We all came here to make money, you know, and came of our own free will'" (23). Yet, for these transplanted urban Southerners, there was something disturbing about the modern rootless city life they were living. "'Something was wrong for me here,'" mourns a man in "Guests." The loss of "'the old ways, the old life, where people had real grandfathers and real children,'" has left a void in their lives that they cannot fill. "'Our trouble was . . . we were lost without our old realities.'"³³ Their world is sharply divided between the lives they lead at home and their professional or business careers, and anything that crosses the line between the two either threatens or embarrasses these modern men.

Even in a society which assumes that women belong only to the sheltered world of the home, young men like the narrators of "Uncles" and "Allegiance" are confused when they realize the strength of the cultural forces keeping the men and the women in two separate worlds. In the latter story, a young man in London with the American army during World War II visits his aunt, a woman who had long ago broken the bonds

of loyalty to her Nashville family and established her own life in a foreign country. The young soldier is alternately attracted and repelled by "the unique sort of power and truth [she has] discovered or created."³⁴ His "allegiance" to the traditional way of life represented by his mother is shaken by this "discredited" aunt who has found a personal freedom far removed from the "logic and the rarefied judgements" of his mother's social class (204). The aunt, by her independent action and by severing traditional family connections, in a sense has crossed the line between the worlds of men and women and the young man finds this deeply disturbing.

Perhaps nowhere else in Taylor's fiction is the split between the masculine and feminine halves of the family so clearly defined as in "Uncles." The narrator, a Kenyon College freshman returning to his St. Louis home for the Christmas holidays in the mid-thirties, is reluctantly inducted into the world of men.. Met at the train by his two uncles and father, he is taken by them first to the family hat making factory, then to lunch at a men's club. While he yearns for the company of his mother, grandmother, and sister, the young man feels a rising anger and resentment at being forced to spend the afternoon in exclusively male company. He wonders at his "passion to get home and talk to Mother" until he realizes that he has been longing for some relief from "the one-dimensional, exclusively masculine view of life held by college boys and college professors, and I found now, by

businessmen."³⁵

As the young man tries repeatedly to reach his mother by telephone during the long, masculine afternoon, he gets a great deal of static from his father and uncles, who tease him about being a "mother's boy." Taylor uses the men's conversations during the afternoon to show us the place which women occupy in their thinking and attitudes. The uncles' comments on the fact that the narrator's sister, Nora, has failed her algebra course are significant: "'What earthly difference can it really make'?" "'She's smart enough. . . . She's cuter than a barrel of monkeys'" (24). Their "defensiveness about little girls in general" (24) is part of their general opinion that women don't belong in the world of men. "'A smart woman is not actually very smart--not as a woman'" is their judgment, and their patronizing comments about famous women are ironically humorous: Gracie Allen--"'Look what she's done and she's not even good-looking'"; Gypsy Rose Lee--"'She reads Shakespeare and Socrates . . . but she's too smart to let anybody know about it'"; Eleanor Roosevelt--"'Who would want a Mrs. Roosevelt for a daughter, or a wife, either'?" (26).

The business is the real home of the narrator's father and uncles. At the family place of business, "the House," where he is greeted with a "'Welcome home,'" the young man is indignant at the use of the word "home." Yet he must admit that "they seemed different men once we were inside 'the House.'"

They were all friendliness" (25). As they try to interest him in the family business, the men are effusive about their expectations for him: "'Here is the young fellow we are all counting on, Mr. President. Here is the young man who is going to bring us the ideas of the new generation. . . . Here is the white hope of the Ferguson firm'" (26).

Even the wearing of a hat becomes a symbol for acceptance of the serious world of men. When the narrator steps off the train, his father's greeting is "'Where's your hat, son'?" (24). Choosing a hat is equated with choosing the right sort of male role. "'We've got to outfit this boy with a hat, the right sort of hat, one he'll like'" (27). Clearly the making and handling of money is the only fit employment for a man. "'There's something about most men who don't wear hats'" (27). "'Actors and artists are the only men like that who make any sort of success of themselves . . . and they're not really men. . . . They're not very intelligent as men. . . . I understand that almost any Hollywood actor has to have . . . somebody look after his money'" (28). The young man will apparently be granted a temporary reprieve, though: "'Oh, leave the boy alone. . . . Every one of you knows that college boys don't wear hats'" (27).

The narrator chafes at "the thought of their selecting a hat for me and forcing me to wear it to the University Club" (27). When he finally reaches his mother, it is through a poor telephone connection that seems appropriate for a

conversation during which the young man realizes the extent of the gulf which separates him from the women in the family. As he resigns himself to accepting a new hat, "something mature and very masculine" (28), he also reluctantly accepts the distance between men and women in his society.

It came over me that I would never again be able to talk to Mother or to Nora or to Grandmother except in the specific role of a man. It suddenly became clear that everything clever, gentle, and light belonged to women and the world they lived in. To men belonged only the more serious things in life, the deadly practical things--constructive ideas, profitable jobs, stories with morals, jokes with points. In my innocence, I felt that I was stupid not to have understood this before, and felt, or tried to feel, a new passion to adjust myself and assimilate these things that were to be mine. (28)

In "Uncles" the point of view is that of a young man whose eyes have been newly opened to the ways in which old patterns of behavior and thinking are influencing the relationships within his family and limiting his freedom to direct his own life. In "Dean of Men" the protagonist-narrator reveals some of the same subtle historical and cultural forces at work in the adult lives of Taylor's characters.

"Mr. Taylor's art," Blum tells us, "demands the leisurely approach that gives us a full-bodied world saturated with its own history."³⁶ Blum also applauds Taylor's "ability to see in every act a man or woman performs some expression of that being's total history."³⁷ In "Dean of Men" Taylor shows us how events of three generations have contributed to attitudes governing the behavior of one man, a college administrator who

tells his son how the boy's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had suffered different kinds of betrayal and how each had had to try to "somehow go on living among men" (38). The narrator feels that he must tell his son, a student, this bit of family history even though "it is not really about your mother and me or about our divorce," but because "it is a story about you and me--about men" (4). Even though the telling of this story comes many years after the events described, the father hopes to make his son see that he cannot escape from his need to remain "a mere man." The father is concerned about whether his son's future wife "is going to play the male role in [their] marriage--or the female role" (3). He feels that he must educate the boy about the necessity of preserving the sanctity of his life away from his wife. The narrator in this story has obviously grown up in the same family atmosphere and at the same time as the young man in "Uncles" and the sons in Tennessee Day in St. Louis. His knowledge of the ways in which his father and grandfather handled the crises in their lives has affected his own life and he wants to pass along to his son this mythic formula, and a knowledge of its advantages and sacrifices, for the way a man remains a man in the midst of shifting certainties.

The narrator tells his son first of his own grandfather, "a kind of frontiersman-gentleman politician with just the right mixture of realism and idealism," who was betrayed and ruined by his fellow politicians because "he was an honest man.

And he didn't understand the new kind of urban politician who was coming to power in our state at the time" (13). After his betrayal by trusted political friends, the grandfather had retired from public life, only to become "the coarse-tongued old tyrant" in a household of women and children (15).

The narrator's father had been so repelled by his father's life that he had refused to have anything to do with politics and "gave himself to making money and to becoming the family man his father had never been" (15). Yet when he too is betrayed by his trusted business partner during the Depression, he moves the center of his existence from the world of men to his family circle where he disturbs his wife with "long looks and long silences" (36).

For the narrator, business was just as much out of the question as politics had been for his father. He becomes a college teacher and his wife is a fellow teacher who shares his academic life until the first child is born. After that "there were . . . subjects she and I had had to agree to keep off. . . . my professional career . . . how I conducted my classes, my role in the department, my stand on various academic questions, and even my possible advancement in rank" (25). Having seen what had happened to his father and grandfather when they gave up their places in the independent world of men, he guarded his place with a jealous care because any mingling of the two halves of his life threatened him with the same fate. When his crisis came, when he became a victim of the shifting

loyalties of academic politics, even the comfort his wife gave him was somehow ominous. "She drew me into her arms . . . and somehow, for all her tenderness at that moment and despite all the need I had of it, it came over me that this was the beginning of the end for us, that our marriage would not survive it" (34). We are reminded of John R. Lovell in "A Wife of Nashville," who develops a psychosomatic back "condition" because he cannot ask his family for sympathy in any other way. The present narrator's premonition becomes a reality when his wife begins teaching with him again. Within a year after she has entered his professional world, they are divorced and within another two years each is married again to someone who shares none of his professional interests.

Everything in the narrator's history has conspired to make him believe that "a man must somehow go on living among men." He admits that he has had to sacrifice some things, "the books one might have written after the first . . . the love, even the acquaintance of one's children . . . something of one's self even" (38), yet his need to live at least a part of his life completely separated from his family has made these sacrifices necessary. The origin of the attitudes thus imprinted upon him lies somewhere in the traditional roles of a time before his birth, yet their hold on him is still firm. "It is a strange world . . . in which an old man must tell a young man this" (38), but in the fictional world of Peter Taylor, these same attitudes are still eating away at the structure of the

family and influencing a man's relationship to the modern world.

V

The characters in Peter Taylor's stories and plays are suffering from a peculiar kind of "jet-lag." The families, transported to the modern urban world, still cling to traditional conceptions about family relationships. The modern Southern man in these stories has felt the call of business success in the city and has adapted himself successfully to the competitive financial ethic that replaced historical ties to the land. But the pressures of modern life--the constant change in values, the mobility, and the sense of anonymity--cause him to yearn for the past and for the places where he knew the name and quality of everything. He cannot afford to give himself up to this need for the order that belongs to the past, so he has done the next best thing--he has made his family a sort of microcosm of life as it was in the country and has made his wife his link with the past by insisting that she fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother exactly as Southern women have always done. Unmarried women also find themselves bound up in these traditional conceptions about family relationships which include, as Cathey has pointed out, "much that was useful, more that was hampering to modern life; much that was repulsive, more that was attractive to the sentiments of every one of us."³⁸ Peter Taylor's characters are individuals, but they share the inability to find a way to use the past to give

meaning and order to the present without giving in to limitations of traditions which have lost their meaning.

William Peden, in his study of the American short story, has placed his discussion of Taylor's work in a chapter entitled "Jane Austens of Metropolis and Suburbia."³⁹ This is an apt classification for a man whose most characteristic work is a kind of social comedy in which the incongruities of the past and the present offer the material for a gentle, ironic humor, a mixture of nostalgia and mild cynicism that makes no pretense of attempting to build a myth or saga around the sensitive characters he shows us "discovering the dreadful in the trivia of their daily lives."⁴⁰ Like Jane Austen, Taylor selects his material so that he not only creates a coherent and self-contained whole, but a whole which makes a comment upon the unselected mass of experience from which it was derived. Through formative selection, the chaotic materials of life are reduced to structures which stand as meaningful penetrations into that chaos. Limiting himself artistically to a narrow range of experience, Taylor probes deeply into the fictional world he has reconstructed, presenting his characters as they make discoveries about themselves and their world or leaving the reader to make his own discoveries.

Griffith says that "Taylor takes the commonplace subject matter of a William Dean Howells and runs it through the rarefied mind of a Henry James."⁴¹ He preserves the best of the genteel tradition to which Howells belongs without the

sentimentality or primness often associated with it. Taylor can make the everyday life of the urban upper-class interesting, sympathetic, and often dramatic. In treating minor crises and household emergencies, he distills his material to get at the muted drama behind the mundane. He seems to realize, as one of his early critics puts it, "that life itself has a very weak story line."⁴² What Taylor shares with James is the ability to reveal the complex motives which lie behind the simplest actions of his characters. In going after the reality behind the apparent reality of any situation, Taylor quietly uncovers the historical and cultural forces which operate subconsciously to limit the vision and define the lives of his characters.

Peter Taylor's characters are complex and very real. The contemporary, urban, upper middle-class, Southern world he recreates is complete and believable in itself, but the tensions that operate within this world rise above the local and particular to include the universal tensions between the modern world in which the family and the individual exist and the past which produced them.

NOTES

¹"The Party," River, 1 (March, 1937), 4-8; "The Lady is Civilized," River, 1 (April, 1937), 50-54.

²Peter Taylor, "1939," Happy Families Are All Alike (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), p. 222.

³Robert Penn Warren, Introduction to A Long Fourth and Other Stories, by Peter Taylor (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), pp. vii-x.

⁴"Casa Anna," Harper's Bazaar (November, 1948), pp. 137, 212-24; "Dudley for the Dartmouth Cup," New Yorker, 25 (May 28, 1949), 24-28.

⁵Albert J. Griffith, Peter Taylor (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970).

⁶Barbara Schuler, "The House of Peter Taylor," Critique, 9 (1967), 17.

⁷Gene Baro, "A True Short-Story Artist," New York Herald Tribune Book Review (December 6, 1959), 9.

⁸John M. Bradbury, Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920-1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 222.

⁹Walter Sullivan, "The Continuing Renaissance: Southern Fiction in the Fifties," South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), p. 204.

¹⁰Warren, p. vii.

¹¹Schuler, 6.

¹²Andrew Lytle, "The Displaced Family," Sewanee Review, 66 (Winter, 1958), 8.

¹³Morgan Blum, "Peter Taylor: Self-Limitation in Fiction," Sewanee Review, 70 (Autumn, 1962), 577.

¹⁴Ashley Brown, "The Early Fiction of Peter Taylor," Sewanee Review, 70 (Autumn, 1962), 599.

¹⁵Griffith, p. 83.

¹⁶Kenneth Clay Cathey, "Peter Taylor: An Evaluation," Western Review, 18 (Autumn, 1953), 17.

¹⁷Peter Taylor, "Dean of Men," The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 38. Subsequent references to the story will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

¹⁸Cathey, 12.

¹⁹Peter Taylor, "The Elect," The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor, pp. 399-400.

²⁰Peter Taylor, "A Wife of Nashville," The Widows of Thornton (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), p. 72. Subsequent references to the story will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

²¹Griffith, p. 81.

²²Peter Taylor, "Cookie," The Widows of Thornton, p. 152. Subsequent references to the story will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

²³Peter Taylor, "The Dark Walk," The Widows of Thornton, p. 243. Subsequent references to the story will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

²⁴Cathey, 18.

²⁵Peter Taylor, "Their Losses," The Widows of Thornton, p. 18.

²⁶Peter Taylor, "What You Hear From 'Em"? The Widows of Thornton, p. 47.

²⁷Peter Taylor, "Two Ladies in Retirement," The Widows of Thornton, p. 186. Subsequent references to the story will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

²⁸Blum, 562.

²⁹Blum, 572.

³⁰Peter Taylor, Tennessee Day in St. Louis: A Comedy (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 106. Subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers within the text.

³¹Peter Taylor, "The Death of a Kinsman," The Widows of Thornton, p. 103. Subsequent references to the play will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

³²Brainard Cheney, "Peter Taylor's Plays," Sewanee Review, 70 (Autumn, 1962), 581.

³³Peter Taylor, "Guests," Happy Families Are All Alike, p. 206.

³⁴Peter Taylor, "Allegiance," Miss Leonora When Last Seen and Fifteen Other Stories (New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1963), p. 202. Subsequent references to the story will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

³⁵Peter Taylor, "Uncles," New Yorker, 37 (December 17, 1961), 27. Subsequent references to the story will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses within the text.

³⁶Blum, 564.

³⁷Blum, 577.

³⁸Cathey, 13.

³⁹William Peden, The American Short Story (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1964).

⁴⁰Griffith, p. 156.

⁴¹Griffith, p. 159.

⁴²J. F. Powers, rev. of A Long Fourth and Other Stories, by Peter Taylor, Commonweal, 48 (June 25, 1948), 262.

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THE LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL FAMILY
ROLES IN PETER TAYLOR'S STORIES AND PLAYS

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B. A., Kansas Wesleyan University, 1968

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1973

THE LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL FAMILY ROLES IN PETER TAYLOR'S STORIES AND PLAYS

A major theme in Peter Taylor's short stories and plays is the disintegration of the family in the contemporary, urban, middle-class South. In considering his characters in relation to their family life, he focuses on the internal tensions and complexities which result from the pressures put upon the contemporary family by the shifting structure of modern society. Often his work deals with the ways in which traditional conceptions of family roles do a basic injustice to the individual personality now that the external conditions on which they were founded have disappeared. The women in Taylor's fiction are often hampered in finding their true position in modern life by the hanging-on of old traditions directing their behavior into certain predetermined channels. The men have escaped into the business world, but they feel the loss of the meaning and order of the traditions they have abandoned.

In several of Taylor's stories, the wife and mother finds herself at odds with the traditional conception of her role in the family. While her husband goes out to meet the challenge of the modern world, she is left to perpetuate the traditional social and moral values of Southern family life, an arrangement which keeps her chained to the past and makes her an

anachronism in a world of shifting social and cultural mores.

In Taylor's fictional world, it is not only the wives and daughters of men adapted to modern life who are coerced into accepting social roles as "country ladies" long after they have left the environment in which such roles had been appropriate. Women who do not marry, the maiden aunts and family servants, find that opportunities for defining their own functions are limited by traditional values and identities imprinted upon them.

Having left the women to guard the traditional values of the old South, the men in Taylor's stories discover that they have estranged themselves from the families they sought to preserve. The men in these upper middle-class families have not been content with the limited opportunities in the country towns. They have plunged into the modern business world while their wives became their link to the cultural traditions of the past. In these stories they are beginning to feel the tensions caused by the sharp division between their home lives and their professional or business careers.

Taylor's treatment of the modern Southern family's problems reflects his ability to see in every act a man or woman performs some expression of that being's total history. His characters share the inability to find a way to use the past to give order and meaning to the present.