ABSTRACT

ERIK MCMURRAY RUSS. “It’s a Man’s, Man’s, Man’s World:” Peter Taylor’s Investigation of Potential Social Orders through the Female Characters in The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court. (Under the direction of Professor Grimwood.)

Peter Taylor, a twentieth-century, Southern author, investigates women’s social roles, limitations, and opportunities in 1940s Memphis, through an unreliable, unnamed male narrator’s quest for an alternative to patriarchy, in his 1993 novella, The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court. In this semi-autobiographical story, the narrator interacts with various women who help him gain greater perspective on patriarchy’s oppressiveness, both for women and himself, a male forced to choose between the patriarchy and something else. My study attempts to root Taylor in a socially critical dialogue that transcends gender and seeks an alternative to patriarchy that does not rely on hierarchy, control, and duplicity. After witnessing the efforts of various women to solve the problem of patriarchy in their own lives—including especially the attempt by the title character, his Aunt Gussie Jones, to assert female power by co-opting the patriarchy—the narrator realizes that a more egalitarian social order is unlikely to be implemented in the South, but individuals, such as he, may be offered a choice, or choices, that allow them to escape patriarchy without sacrificing love and comfort. Oracle questions the legitimacy of war, the effect of killing another human, but primarily it inquires about women’s status in a changing world, and the narrator’s choice between remaining complicit in an oppressive culture and breaking free so that he may find an egalitarian alternative to his parent’s values, and a space he can earnestly call home.