

## ANALYSIS

*Delta Wedding* (1945)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“The most important thing about the novel is its formal structure. But if the nature of its design has, perhaps, escaped many readers, the reasons are not hard to find. There is considerable prejudice against a ‘serious’ novelist’s treating material of this kind with such an attitude of sympathy as Miss Welty assumes. Certainly it was obvious from the start, to a reader with any sensitivity at all, that *Delta Wedding* was not simply another Mississippi plantation, ‘historical’ novel, designed for a bosom-and-columns dust jacket. But, if the author’s irony is felt from the first sentence, its essence is very subtle. And the patience of a good many of the liberal reviewers a few years ago was pretty short....

The story is about the Delta, at the most—not the South, not even Mississippi. Yankees, of course, are unthinkable... And the circle is drawn even closer; Troy Flavin, who is largely responsible for the significance of the wedding as a symbol of threatened disruption, is alien by virtue of being a *hill-country* Mississippian.... Robbie Reid, whom the family wisely regard as a far greater threat to the insularity of their world even than Troy, is foreign as a native of the town of Fairchilds, as distinguished from the plantation.... The barrier between Robbie Reid and the Fairchilds is greatest for several reasons—simply that she is a woman, that she is the unworthy wife of the darling of the family, but most important of all, that she is a lifelong near neighbor.... Troy Flavin, not so much out of mere stupidity as simply because his origins are more remote, finds nothing so terribly formidable in the family he is ‘marrying into’—as he puts it with confidence which dismays and amuses those who know the Fairchilds.... Their baffling otherness, their exclusiveness and possessiveness, threaten both to invade and to shut her out at every level of her sensibility....

The action takes on from the beginning, and never quite loses, even at the highest pitch of visual excitement, the somewhat cool, formal tone of the conscious pastoral. [More typically, Huck Finn is pastoral but not formal, and warm not cool.] One may take as an initial statement of the conventional ‘paradox’ of pastoral, the familiar principle of inversion of values.... The fact that the visit, to ‘nature,’ out of the life of the city, is a *return*, functions similarly to the same fact in Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’... The tradition of the Southern novel has been all but exclusively pastoral from the start, of course—and in a great many different ways, both Naturalistic and Romantic. But there has been before no such fully *conscious* exploring of the implications of the mode as Miss Welty’s, an insight which finally carries beyond the significance of the form for the *mores* of the society which produced it. (Something of this sort—its wit, its merging of realism and magic, its delicacy, its formal and elegiac ironies, its universal mythiness, and basic to all the rest its struggle between anonymity and self-consciousness—is inevitable toward the *end* of any cycle of pastoral. And the reader might well have to go back to the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries of English literature for instructive parallels....

Laura comes into the Delta country with the bemused aloneness of the adventurer into an enchanted forest. Other people, as people, are secondary realities—the signs of their existence, to the extent that she is aware of them at all, becoming talismans of a significance entirely private to her, the ticket she had stuck in her hat band, ‘in imitation of the drummer across the aisle.’ It is things that are most alive—the fields, the train itself becoming a creature of the fields... There is no immediate plunge to that depth of the private consciousness in which the particular becomes the universal.... The reader is never permitted actually to ‘feel sorry’ for Laura; the ‘poor Laura, little motherless girl’ greeting which she anticipates has only a ritualistic solemnity, no real sadness... Conversely, we are assured that the personal ‘problems’ of the others aren’t going to matter a great deal either... We get, in other words, the symbolic sense—we begin to see things with a great, though not quite a whole, measure of aesthetic distance....

A few things do manage to happen in the course of the novel—Dabney and Troy do marry, Robbie comes back to George, it is decided that Laura will stay at Shellmound, at least for a time. But this is not a great deal, after all. And—the marriage is the most obvious example—it is perfectly clear that none of these things is of great moment in itself. The word ‘wedding’ in the title is important. It is in a sense with the wedding, the ritual, not the marriage, that Miss Welty is concerned. The ritual sense is private, of course; the ceremony itself is passed over in a few words—‘Mr. Rondo married Dabney and Troy.’ Mr. Rondo’s status, the status of the church in the Fairchild world, perfectly defines the more than baronial self-sufficiency of the family, their superiority to any larger public, institutional significance of their affairs.... There are no raw emotions in the novel—and little of a structure of personal involvements, conflicts... The incidents are important mainly as points of refraction, from which light is cast back upon various moments of symbolic perception in the minds of the several characters. This is where Miss Welty is at her best, and where one has to start looking for the ‘meaning’ of the novel, in the whole particularity of the moment, the single, illuminating, still act of private *perception*....

There are the various lights, with the obvious significance of light, especially of light inside something. The lamp which the aunts give to Dabney, a nightlight, notably, itself an object of family tradition but, given to Dabney, becoming the prime symbol of her independence, her private rebellion of indifference when she carelessly breaks it, carrying out the theme of general disaster which the very flame itself, the intended source of light and comfort, draws out upon the shade.... The same lamp in India’s perception, precious and cherished, but in infinite secrecy, and so again a symbol of impenetrable isolation, the magic circle of her privacy—‘India made a circle with her fingers, imagining she held the little lamp’—the vessel of light filled, paradoxically, ‘with the mysterious and flowing air of night.’ The light on the back porch, when Shelley comes in alone for a moment away from the dancers, and ‘the mother spread upon the screens, the hard beetles knocking upon the radius of light like an adamant door,’ as she falls into musing; the light in her room, as she sits writing in her diary...

With the recollection of the dear and familiar object of their childhood play, the lamp itself having the radiance of its associations too already mingled with the light of the toy, is much of the pathos of Shelley’s ironic realization that the public gaiety of the wedding party, the extraneous and trivial display of the ‘occasion’ which the visit of so inconsequential and alien a personage as them mayor epitomizes, is a mockery of that darkness of marriage which has closed between her and Dabney. (The darkness which is the inevitable privacy of any marriage, the darkness which for Shelley is especially associated with Troy Flavin, of his hateful ‘overseer’s soul,’ of the blood of Negroes on the floor of the office.)...

The various place of hiding and retreat. The seemingly innumerable rooms of the house itself. The wood in which Ellen walks, with its mysteriously ageless, directionless paths... The sudden, isolated moments of private illumination.... The loneliness of Laura, abandoned during the game of hide-and-seek... Or more definitive still, the sound of Mary Lamar Mackey’s piano—the constant music.... It made the house like a nameless forest, wherein many little lives lived privately, each to its lyric pursuit and shy protection... The momentary perfection of the pastoral vision.

And it is this sort of thing, of course, that gives the novel its first appearance of disorder. The characters seem hopelessly unpredictable, their actions unmotivated and obscure, without intelligible issue; the transitions, from one scene to another, from the reflections of one character to another, appear entirely capricious. It would seem at first glance that Miss Welty has sacrificed an order of the whole entirely in the interest of an illusion of life in the details.... An order of recurrence... informs the whole action of the novel. The order of the novel is a poetic order—of recurrent themes, symbols, and motives of symbolic metaphor. And it must be close-read, as a poem.

Perhaps the thread nearest the center of the design is that of the story, told and re-told, again and again reflected upon and alluded to, of George and Maureen on the railroad trestle.... It was just after the incident on the trestle that Troy and Dabney had ‘gone on up the railroad track and got engaged’—thus beginning the latest threat to the solidarity of the Fairchild world. It was then that Robbie Reid, providing the climax to the story with her accusation, ‘George Fairchild, you didn’t do this for *me!*’, brought into the open the whole complex of bitter feelings which the Fairchilds entertain... their resentment at the love of poor, common little Robbie for George... their ideal of Fairchild man... Robbie’s thinking of herself at that

moment, her indignation at George's willingness to sacrifice himself for the semi-idiotic Maureen, defines perfectly for the Fairchild *women* especially her hopeless failure to understand their vision of themselves—and their investment of that vision in Denis, of whom nothing remains but his daughter Maureen... Robbie's behavior at the trestle is all of a piece with the absurdity, the hopeless childishness, of her taunt that the Fairchilds are 'not even rich!'—her failure to comprehend the myth of their aristocracy....

Basically, the train and the bridge (trestle) are communication symbols.... The train is one of several means of transportation which have a symbolic function, more or less explicit, whenever they appear.... The separate incidents of the trestle episode itself and of [Ellen's] meeting with the girl in the wood are brought together in her mind, after the photographer has told her the wedding party of the girl his train has killed on the way down from Memphis, in a single, comprehensive vision which opens the way to her wordless communication with George at the dance.... Ellen's 'knowing' George is, after all, only a final understanding of the fact of his independence, the fact that he *is* unknowable. The legend makes George himself a symbol.... It is notable that none of the *men* in the novel admit the reader very often to their minds. Such is the Fairchild women's notion of their men, which the author accepts as a technical principle, that they are a kind of serviceable gods—infinately capable, having access to wonderful powers of the outer world, and always *decently* keeping their own counsel....

In Ellen's vision of the hero, George, what appears to be a devastating criticism is implied—the Fairchilds' 'myth of happiness' would seem to be myth clearly in the worst sense, a childish retreat from reality. And it is possible to infer that the 'wedding' of Dabney and Troy is a mockery of the failure of true marriage everywhere—even the marriage of Battle and Ellen; the marriage of the Fairchilds with the past, or with the future...the marriage of minds among all the characters.... Troy is the field god, and as such he is a principle of rejuvenation. The marriage promises ultimately, perhaps, not disruption but renewal... And while Troy is not in a sense an influence from outside, it is defined...and complemented, partially by the role of George—and that, paradoxically, is an essential part of his status as the family hero. It can hardly be denied that Miss Welty does see the strength for rejuvenation as in part the family's own strength, the strength of their own myth as they themselves understand it, though she sees with equal clarity the limitations of that understanding.... And, finally, Laura herself—who comes closer than anyone else to being Miss Welty's stand-in in the novel—remains to live with the family on terms which are, though again qualifiedly, both sympathetic and hopeful....

The last scene of the novel sums up the situation. We come back to the mind with which we began—Laura McRaven's mind. And Laura achieves her sense of 'belonging' at last. She has been told that she is to stay, that Marmion is to be hers some day. The picnic, for her, is a celebration of her reception as a member of the family. But she accepts the decisions from the first with the secret thought that sometime she may go back to Jackson, to her father. The reservation does not diminish her present joy. But it is there. And the moment at which she feels most overwhelmingly at one with the family is when she can hardly see any of them, but sees *with* them the falling star.... For the moment of its falling, it brings them together. Laura, and the Fairchilds, and the star, are one in the light of the star—and turning again with a gesture of embracing them she embraces the firmament, 'both arms held out to the radiant night.' That one moment of pure vision, the people themselves in darkness, unseen, the star unseeing, becomes the sufficient thing in itself—the one thing."

John Edward Hardy  
"Delta Wedding as Region and Symbol"  
*The Sewanee Review* 60.3 (Summer 1952)

"*Delta Wedding* (1945) is a delicate and whimsical portrait of a family: the Fairchilds, of Fairchild, Mississippi, a fictional town on the Yazoo River near Delta City. The story, or rather the situation, since there is no cohesive plot, is seen chiefly through the eyes of a little girl, Laura McRaven, who comes to Fairchild for the marriage of her cousin Dabney Fairchild with the 'low-born northern Mississippian Troy Flavin, who works as an overseer on the Fairchild fields. The Fairchilds are a closely-knit clan who quarrel with each other but present an impenetrable wall to outsiders; those who marry into the family must either accept its ways and lose their identity in it or be cast out. Their huge old house, full of sisters, aunts, cousins, and innumerable Negroes, is the center of a life of fascinatingly disorganized eccentricity; its fixtures include a demented woman, and a number of precocious children.

The chief events of the novel are the quarrel between an uncle, George Fairchild, and his wife Robbie, which begins when George ignores her safety to risk his life rescuing the feeble-minded Maureen, his niece, from a train (an act symbolic of the inward loyalty of the Fairchild clan); and the gradual acceptance of Troy by the clan, which admits him into its circle only on the assumption that Dabney will go on living in the family as before. None of this is related explicitly; it is conveyed chiefly through dialogue of a particular colorful and whimsical irony, and the story is revealed only gradually and obliquely. As the novel ends Troy and Dabney move into Shellmound, a spare Fairchild mansion which has remained vacant for years, and Robbie and George agree to occupy The Grove, another family house, so that their lives will remain within the Fairchild circle.

Other characters are Battle, brother of George and head of the family; his Virginia-born wife Ellen, still an outsider after spending a generation in the family; the elder daughter Shelley; and Ellen's nine-year-old daughter India, a precocious child who is free from the smugness of most literary children of her type. A high moment in the novel is the account of the birth of Shelley, in which the bumbling Dr. Murdock anesthetizes himself with his gas machine and leaves Ellen to deliver her baby alone. This scene well demonstrates Miss Welty's skill in relating broadly farcical material in a subdued and faintly ironic style."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 258-59

"The most impatient and unsympathetic of readers will find himself drawn in gradually, even charmed, by the Fairchild clan of *Delta Wedding*. They are indeed a 'capricious and charming Southern family' (quote from paperback edition cover). That the foundation of their charm, the leisure in which to develop their charm, is something wholly ugly and unacceptable—the obvious exploitation of Negroes, inside an accidental economic structure in which the Fairchilds are, certainly, American nobility in spite of their lack of real wealth—is something one comes to accept, just the same as one comes to accept the utter worthlessness of certain characters of James and Proust, in social and human terms, but maintains an interest in their affairs.

And then it is stunning to realize, as one nears the conclusion of *Delta Wedding*, that in spite of the lovingly detailed story, in spite of her seemingly insatiable generosity toward these unexceptional people, Miss Welty understands clearly their relationship with the rest of the world. So much cute nonsense about a wedding!—and then the photographer announces, making conversation, that he has also taken a picture of a girl recently hit by a train. 'Ladies, she was flung off in the blackberry bushes,' he says; and Aunt Tempe says what every aunt will say, 'Change the subject.'

The dead girl may have been as pretty and flighty and exasperating as the young bride, but her human value is considerably less. She is on the outside; she is excluded from society. Her existence is of no particular concern to anyone. So, a member of this claustrophobic and settled world may well venture into hers, make love to her, leave her, and her death is a kind of natural consequence of her being excluded from the 'delta wedding' and all its bustling excitement. It is more disturbing for the mother of all those children to be told, by her Negro servant, that he quite seriously wishes all the roses were out of the world—'If I had my way, wouldn't be a rose in de world. Catch your shirt and stick you and prick you and grab you. Got thorns.' Ellen trembles at this remark 'as at some imprudence.' Protected by her social position, her family, her condition of being loved, protected by the very existence of the Negro servant who must brave the thorns for her, it is only imprudence of one kind or another that she must tremble at."

Joyce Carol Oates  
*Shenandoah* 20  
(Spring 1969)

"The first paragraph of Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1945) suggests how the life of this region, the Mississippi Delta, is integrated. Despite the presence of the railroad, life remains traditional and patterned, with little intrusion from the modern spirit. The railroad, in fact, is accommodated, its local nickname serving to take the edge off its functional name. The paragraph is a masterpiece of coherent life.... The

novel takes a familiar pattern: a small child watches all manner of behavior in the adult world, which does not quite register because she is too young.

She [Laura McRaven, an avatar of Laurel McKelva in *The Optimist's Daughter*] is, then, like James's Maisie...although what she sees is basically comic, with tragic elements intermixed. She perceives not only adult perfidy, but the whole fabric of Southern society, the focus being the marriage of the Fairchild girl, the prettiest of the clan. It is a clan affair, a tribal custom being performed, and it is made up of insiders. Such a celebration could never occur in the city, for it requires not only a halcyon time, 1923, but a rooted place. Everything external is excluded; so that Laura's very presence is foreign. That marriage is a moment fixed in time and space, an Edenic moment indeed. Although several members of the extended Fairchild family have 'fallen,' all is forgiven in the celebration, a kind of secular mass.

What Welty has forged in this brief novel is a panoramic view of the Old South, an integrated society which has exchanged black slaves for black servants; the old plantation for the new landed property; Civil War disruption and chaos for an ordered, Edenic existence. Insofar as modern ideas have not penetrated, this part of the Delta has returned to prebellum South. Welty has revived the old pastoral Eden, without the stain of slave chattel—a benevolent, carefully wrought society in which the 'good Negro' still does his work, but without the contamination of a slave culture. The novel balances for only the briefest time; for its moment passes into the next one, when we begin to think. Then we recognize that the Delta, no less than the earthly paradise, is, in the main, fantasy.”

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 73

Michael Hollister (2015)