

## ANALYSIS

### *The Ponder Heart* (1954)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“*The Ponder Heart* (1954) is similar in content [to *Delta Wedding*] but different in technique; it is presented in the form of a long monologue spoken by Edna Earle Ponder, one of the central characters. The Ponder clan resembles the Fairchild family, although it is neither as large nor as aristocratic. The key figure of the plot, Uncle Daniel Ponder, is an old gentleman so eccentric that one occasion he is locked up in a mental institution; his apparent feeble-mindedness, however, is due mainly to his benevolent impulsiveness (the ‘Ponder heart’) and to the fact that he lives in a private world of his own particular logic. The novel relates chiefly his marital adventures: how he was at one time captured by the designing Miss Teacake Magee and escaped only after a brief ordeal of matrimony, and how he is later tricked into marriage with the cheap and self-centered Bonnie Dee Peacock. Subsequently Bonnie Dee dies under ambiguous circumstances (the truth seems to be that Uncle Daniel playfully tickled her to death) and the Peacock clan, bent on revenge, has him charged with murder.

The trial is the climax of the novel; it is an extended and skillfully related farce in which the vulgar Peacocks are contrasted with the tradition-proud and essentially upright Ponders. Uncle Daniel is acquitted, mainly because he gains the crowd’s favor by passing out his entire fortune to them in greenbacks while the court is in session. The best of this short novel lies in the portraits of Daniel himself, of Bonnie Dee, and of Edna Earle, who is skillfully characterized as the one sensible member of the family through her own rambling style of telling the story.”

Donald Heiney

*Recent American Literature* 4

(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 259-60

“*The Ponder Heart* is in its presentation one long unbroken monologue issuing from the lips of Edna Earle Ponder, the proprietress of the Beulah Hotel, the main hostelry of Clay, Mississippi. Let no one object that Edna Earle isn’t really one of the folk since she has deserted the countryside and become a townie, subject to some of the corruptions of a citified existence. In the first place, Clay is evidently not very much of a town. It merges easily into the country. The inhabitants of Clay are, to all intents and purposes, as Edna Earle would say, still country people. I admit that she is capable of amiably putting someone down by advising him not to be ‘so small town.’ But that is part of the joke. If Clay isn’t small town, what town is?

In any case, Edna Earle is uncommonly good company. In her exuberance and in her earthy complacency, she reminds me of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath. Like the Wife, Edna Earle is perceptive, on occasion even witty, and always the complete mistress of her own little domain. And like the wife of Bath, how Edna Earle can talk!... Edna Earle compels a hearing even as Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner did, and like the Ancient Mariner she evidently does all the talking. Whether her victim eventually leaves her as a wiser and sadder man, we do not learn. But one fact becomes plain: Edna Earle is clearly not a devotee of Yeats’s written tradition.... She is a high priestess of the oral tradition.

Someone has said that the many clichés and trite expressions that Miss Welty’s characters, including Edna Earle, employ ‘reflect unimaginative thinking and [a] distrust of the new.’ [She] rattles off glib comparisons such as ‘she was shallow as they come,’ she was as ‘pretty as a doll,’ ‘he ate me out of house and home,’ ‘good as gold,’ could ‘cut your hair to a fare-ye-well,’ ‘didn’t bother her one whit,’ and so on. These are well-worn phrases, but all oral art makes use of such formulas and couldn’t proceed without them. The English and Scottish folk ballads are filled with such conventional phrases, and even Homer in his *Iliad* uses over and over again such formulas as ‘the rosy-fingered dawn’ and ‘the fleet-footed Achilles.’

Another critic may ask: 'Don't her people often use literary words that are quite out of character with their usual vocabulary?' For example, Edna Earle Ponder conjectures that 'Maybe anybody's heart would *quail*, trying to keep up with Uncle Daniel's 'Jack Renfro asks his father, 'What brought you forth?' and tells Judge and Mrs. Judge Moody that 'Banner is still my realm.' How did these bookish terms, 'quail' and 'realm,' not to mention 'brought forth,' get into the folk speech? Easy as pie, as Edna Earle would say. Right out of the King James Version of the Bible, or out of the hymns sung every Sunday morning in the Methodist and Baptist churches. If we need a reminder of the latter source, Miss Welty makes verses from the popular evangelical hymns resound again and again through the pages of *Losing Battles*....

The words are pleasantly out of date and may in fact sound 'literary' just because they are not the ordinary speech of everyday as we hear it typically on national television or read it in *Time* magazine.... Eudora Welty is an artist, and she has permitted Edna Earle to be a kind of artist too. In proof, listen to Edna Earle's summary account of her addle-pated Uncle Daniel's marriage to Miss Teacake Magee: 'At any rate, Uncle David and Miss Teacake got married. I just asked her for recipes enough times, and told her the real secret of cheese straws—beat it three hundred strokes—and took back a few unimportant things I've said about the Baptists. The wedding was at the Sistrunks', in the music room, and Miss Teacake insisted on singing at her own wedding—sang 'The Sweetest Story Ever Told.' This is masterly.'

Cleanth Brooks  
"Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom"  
*Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*  
(U Mississippi 1979)

"In *Ponder Heart* (1954), Welty demonstrates that the Southern pastoral ideal is fading. Snopeses are everywhere, and the town of Clay is slowly being turned to concrete. The highway has altered life—the intrusion of the modern element—turning a sleepy place into a municipality where people roar in and out at ninety miles an hour. Such people want a room that minute, or ask what there is for dinner; and they are not a class of people 'you'd care to spend the rest of your life with at all.'

This class of people is never defined—neither Jews nor blacks nor foreigners in particular—but it is composed of all those who do not belong, who see in the landmark Beulah Hotel not a focus of traditions but a conglomerate of beds. They are traditionless people, responding to the automobile and the highway, to objects rather than to sensibilities. The propensity of Uncle Daniel, he of the 'ponder heart,' to give away his goods and money is a response to change which he cannot accept, no less assimilate. His choice of a disaffected girl-bride, the vulgar Lolita-like Bonnie Dee Peacock, is his way of seeking a kind of Dickensian arrangement, where brother-sister relationships blissfully contrast with husband-wife arrangements, power struggles that the man always loses.

By choosing a daughter, Daniel tries to bypass what marriage means. For a woman his equal would introduce into his life the full force of modernity, and this he cannot accept. Welty's rather casual method, then, suggests more than casualness; it adumbrates very distinct social elements working their way threateningly into Southern life, the nuances and subtleties of ever-changing patterns. Like Jane Austen in this respect, she perceived how tiny rents enter the social fabric, and she set herself a grand goal: to prevent those rents from becoming gigantic, unfillable holes. Nothing less was at stake than pastoral ideals themselves."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 73-74

"Welty's *The Ponder Heart* (1954), a short novel, which had appeared the previous year in the *New Yorker*, was her one attempt at pure comedy after the manner of 'Why I Live at the P.O.,' the most popular story in her *A Curtain of Green*. In it a benevolent Edna Earle Ponder, manager of the Beulah Hotel in Clay, Mississippi, prepares a casual visitor, unavoidably detained there for the afternoon, for a supper encounter with her mildly retarded Uncle Daniel, a permanent resident at the hotel. Throughout the garrulous Miss Ponder's long narrative we come to appreciate Uncle Daniel's greatness of heart, his joyful

habit of irresponsibly giving away everything he owns, and his equally joyful but ill-fated marriage to the poor white Bonnie Dee Peacock, who dies of fright during a thunderstorm.

Charged with murder by Bonnie Dee's grasping parents, Daniel convinces the court of his innocence and promptly gives away the remainder of his inheritance to all present, including the astonished Peacocks. At the end of the story we find him still happily making gestures of giving even though he no longer has anything to give, as Edna Earle urges her visitor to go along with the pretense and accept Daniel's routine offering with thanks. The popular success of *The Ponder Heart* as a novel prompted playwrights Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields to write a dramatic version of the piece, which played on Broadway in 1956 with equal success."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 143-44

Michael Hollister (2015)