

## ANALYSIS

*The Robber Bridegroom* (1942)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“The wry, deadpan tone with which Welty retells the legendary tale of the Natchez frontier propels the novella. In fact, the caricatures may be taken for the whole meaning of *The Robber Bridegroom*.... The sustaining power of the humor...cannot be overstated. Rosamond, the damsel of the tale, suffers the humiliation of being robbed of every stitch by a dashing bandit. Is she flustered? Not for a second; she calmly returns home clothed only in her tresses and a straight face. Her stepmother demands to know the whereabouts of the herbs she had seen the feckless girl to gather in her apron. What herbs? What apron? ‘In God’s name,’ cries Rosamond’s father, ‘the child is naked as a jay bird’....

*The Robber Bridegroom* accommodates its elements of myth, folk tale, legend, fantasy, blood violence, and historical fact within a theme of the spoiled pastoral—paradise dreamed, desired, lost. Hawthorne made use of such a theme in *The Blithedale Romance*; the ideal society desired by the communitarian reformers was contaminated and finally spoiled by the humans involved. Fitzgerald struck the same note of disenchantment in *The Great Gatsby*.... *The Robber Bridegroom*, although a ‘fairy tale’...acknowledges the torture, death, and violence that the Indians inflict on the pioneers, and vice versa...This is the contradiction that maims the pastoral ideal...

The Indians of *The Robber Bridegroom*, although their tribe is never named, are modeled on the Natchez Indians. The Natchez had been wiped out years before the imagined events of the novella. Yet the facts of their demise ring significantly in the undercurrent of the story. They had been massacred in retaliation for a massacre of their own, and the remnants of the tribe were sold into slavery in Santo Domingo by the French.... The Indians resisted invasion violently and were crushed.... The Indians spark something other than laughter. They are recreated with a depth and quality of sympathy sometimes found in Cooper. Not the whooping stereotypes of greasepaint westerns, they have nobility, mystery, beauty, and pride. They are the spirit of the country.... The Indians furnish a certain gravity in this light-hearted tale. Welty’s choice of a real place for her ‘fairy tale’ infuses it with the undercurrent of irony and deliberate seriousness...

Our glimpse of the Indians while they are yet in their full pride, on the peak from which they will be pushed by civilization, comes from Clement’s early life history, which he relates to Jamie Lockhart in the Rodney Inn. Clement remembers the Indians as both gay and cruel. But, as Jamie comments, ‘This must have been long ago.... For they are not so fine now, and cannot do so much to prisoners as that.’ The Indians had struck Clement with their imperiousness and fierce pride. They were supreme in their power over their captives. He remembers: ‘We had to go whirling and dizzied in a dance we had never suspected lay in our limbs. We had to be humiliated and tortured and enjoyed, and finally, with most precise formality, to be decreed upon. All of them put on their blazing feathers and stood looking us down as if we were little mice.’ Then with scorn the Indians put to death Clement’s infant son, and with contempt dismissed him into the wilderness with his daughter Rosamond and future wife Salome.... The onslaught of pioneers was but a trickle and well within the Indians’ power to intercept. In the first ‘reckoning’ episode of the novella, the Indians do decree and pronounce.... Nevertheless, extinction is their fate. If Jamie Lockhart, the successful bandit and gentleman, has his way, the Indians will be eradicated as if they were ants at his picnic....

Although the Indians and the town of Rodney may be seen as symbols for limited time, extinction, the vanity of human pride and industry, they are never explicitly identified by the author as her symbols.... Welty uses place more subtly, trusting it to generate its own symbolic meaning in its own time.... The extinction of the Natchez and the eventual death of Rodney are always ‘about to be experienced’; they haunt the place of this novella. Welty’s choice of place is essential to the meaning of *The Robber*

*Bridegroom* and must be understood to appreciate her technique....When the second and climactic reckoning falls due, the Indians materialize and apprehend the white offenders as if they (the Indians) were the avenging shapes of the forest itself.... The Indians seize the captives to avenge their people's rape and desecration, symbolically committed by Little Harp, the vicious killer of the Natchez Trace, who violated and killed an innocent Indian girl while Jamie's robber cohorts cheered. This violation scene is a departure from the fantasy of the fairy tale and a vivid example of the violence that threads through the story as local legend.... A new and brutal power had entered the realm of the pacific Indians. The power is the power of greed; everyone is infected.

The second reckoning of the novella is the Indians' twilight; they appear weary and decimated, faint shadows of their former 'blazing' selves. They have been exhausted in the struggle against the intruders... Clement sees, in the faces of the Indians, the human fate of extinction. They are, to him, just another group of humans overtaken by change, as he himself will be overtaken. He is the planter about to give place to the merchant, Jamie. A stronger, more brutally efficient force is always wresting control of the present. The Indians and Clement become relics of the past.... This is Clement's perspective. Through the novella he has resisted and doubted change and 'progress,' quixotically trying to preserve his illusions in a world of real and treacherous forces. He is an innocent, like Don Quixote. But his dream is not romantic chivalry. He dreams of harmony, of a pastoral gentleness, of the kind of mutually beneficial and cooperative human community that lured Hawthorne's Coverdale....

Clement Musgrove is a character in a cast of cartoons. He is round and the others are flat. He is the work of a novelist; the others are the work of the skilled caricaturist. The other members of the pioneer cast can be defined as stereotypes—the hero, the damsel, the wicked stepmother—but Clement must be dealt with as a person of considerable dimension. He enters with the naïve innocence of Don Quixote or Candide; and he grows, through the development of his conscience, memory, and foresight, toward an encompassing vision. Like the Indians, he is pushed aside by time and change.... The Indians were cleared away with the trees of the forest; and the guilt of that offense lodges in Clement's heart.... He lives up to his name; he is a fair, clement man, avoiding extremes of profit and poverty. But he lives in a world of wild extremes. And, as if to underline the contrast between his clemency and the wide-open world of the frontier, a fabulous storm whirls into Rodney minutes after Clement debarks....

A shrewder, more worldly person would not automatically accept someone at face value; he would have the imagination of evil to suspect duplicity. But Clement's imagination is, as yet, innocent of such things. He prefers his illusion of worldly wisdom to a real and vigilant cynicism... Not surprisingly, Jamie entirely misses the import of Clement's story. He listens as a gentleman would, but his bandit's brain all the time calculates how much Clement might be worth.... For Jamie and his fellow pioneers, the chance to grab the wealth of a lifetime in one stroke—the main chance—is too great to be complicated by intangibles like conscience or the reasons for things.... For the pioneer, the past has been left behind. But memory of the past is the keystone of Clement's character.... Clement is moored to the past, like the town of Rodney and the Indians.... Everyone else is wrapped up in the present....

In time, Clement learns that even his own family circle (Salome, Rosamond, and Jamie) have left him alone, pursuing, each in his or her own way, dreams of wealth and success. Jamie Lockhart, even though he locks up the heart of the fair Rosamond, has a locked heart himself.... It has been Jamie's delusion that he could be both gentleman and robber. He has applied the berry stain disguise and washed it off so many times that he finally reaches a point at which he is caught, half-gentleman and half-robber. Little Harp, whom Welty uses as a dark image of the robber half of Jamie, makes this discovery, forcing Jamie to choose between robber and gentleman. Jamie kills Little Harp....

Jamie is very close in instinct and motto to Salome, herself a sour distillation of envy, greed, and ambition. Salome is obsessed with taking, owning, and displaying. She urges Clement to absorb more land, place it under cultivation, and make it pay.... She represents the extreme precipitation of the tug that pulled the pioneers into the new lands. In the character of Salome we see the frightening truth of what happens to human beings when the checks of civilization are left behind. Clement sees it also. If the zest to explore the unknown is one of man's noblest activities, then the cold intent to subject the earth to his possession and to make it serve his desires is one of his least noble.... Clement is about to return upriver once again with the

gold his crop has brought. But Rosamond stays behind, in the city. She is part of the new age that has superseded Clement. The city, the place of doubleness, where vice and beauty live together, is too exotic for Clement.... It is essential to his innocence that he remain clement, leaving action to the Salomes and Jamies, violent resistance to the Indians. His way is contemplation. In his moment of private reckoning, Clement sees each individual tree and bird, and also the continuity of all things.... Clement's personal outlook...is a more conscious and reflective version of the outlook of the Indians....

The real hero of *The Robber Bridegroom* is Clement. Like Don Quixote, he wrestles with evil valiantly, and loses. Clement, more authentically than Jamie, has the power to 'see a thing from all sides.' But seeing the doubleness in all things, he does not attack it; nor does he act as if it were not there. Clement acknowledges the vital necessity of mystery (the limits to human understanding)... Clement, as a hero, retreats. But he has won an integrating vision; he has learned through physical and emotional trial the continuity of time and its concentration in the moment. The technique of *The Robber Bridegroom* works to furnish that moment. The Natchez and the town of Rodney haunt the background as reminders of time past, of human culture and industry done, wiped out, or simply and willy-nilly abandoned. In the foreground the bustle of civilization continues under the spell of progress and profit. But Clement, knowing intuitively the lesson of the past, has seen the future: time is a continuous cycle; the moment of unscaled human vision is the only true stability."

Michael Kreyling  
"The Robber Bridegroom and the Pastoral Dream"  
*Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*  
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Michael Hollister (2015)