

INTRODUCTION



Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

Eudora Welty published most of her best short stories in her first collection *A Curtain of Green* (1941), she went on to become one of the most beloved writers in the world, and she was the first living author included in the *Library of America*. Often compared to William Faulkner, her Mississippi neighbor and friend—"I liked him ever so much"; "It was like living near a big mountain." Welty complements Faulkner in her vision of humanity and the South: more feminine, pastoral, sociable, and mellow. She was first labeled a regionalist, then admired as a Realist for her characterizations through the revealing dialogue of common people, as in her most popular stories "Petrified Man" and "Why I Live at the P.O." She is much more than that, as was immediately recognized by Katherine Anne Porter, who generously promoted her. Welty is a Modernist in the mode of *holistic realism*, with an evocative objective ironic style like Porter and Hemingway rather than Expressionistic like Faulkner. Her writing is rich in similes, metaphors and occasional Expressionistic imagery like Porter, unlike the characteristic plain style of Hemingway.

Welty is exceptional among great writers for her humility, warmth and generosity: "It turned out that I became the loving kind." The common reader is likely to enjoy her characterizations most of all. The opposite of Postmodern solipsists, Welty loves to create other human beings, the main source of her depth and appeal. Among the greatest writers of dialogue, she often allows her characters to reveal themselves and their relationships through rambling, digressive talk—as in "Petrified Man" and "Why I Live at the P.O."—rather than through terse evocative statements like Hemingway. Her aesthetics in dialogue are pastoral rather than Neoclassical. On the other hand, she is Neoclassical in the structure and densely ironic texture of "Powerhouse" and in its instructive social value. Like other Modernist fiction writers, Welty is frequently allegorical in the tradition of Hawthorne. As a Modernist (1) she often uses the mythic method, most effectively in "A Worn Path"; (2) she transcends race and gender as in "Powerhouse"; and (3) she evokes transcendent consciousness, as in "A Curtain of Green." Welty published over 40 short stories, 5 novels, 3 books of nonfiction, and a children's book.

BIOGRAPHY

In 1909 the year the Modernist movement began, Eudora Welty was born in the quiet southern town of Jackson, Mississippi to a schoolteacher and her husband, the president of a life insurance company. She grew up with two younger brothers. Her mother encouraged her reading and her father her photography. At that time Mississippi was the poorest state, mostly rural with a racially segregated population. William

Faulkner, down in Oxford just south of Jackson, was 12 years old, hanging out on the galleries of stores around the town square listening to old veterans telling stories of the Civil War.

EDUCATION

Welty attended Jackson High School, Mississippi State College for Women, and the University of Wisconsin, where she majored in English literature: “We are taught by Hemingway”; “Chekhov is one of us”; [Virginia Woolf] “is the one who opened the door.” She graduated in 1929, the year of the stock market crash. “Through travel I first became aware of the outside world; it was through travel that I found my own introspective way into becoming a part of it.” She went on to study advertising for two years at Columbia University in New York, but could not find a job during the Great Depression and returned to Jackson, her permanent home for the rest of her life. “As certain as I was of wanting to be a writer, I was certain of *not* wanting to be a teacher.”

EARLY CAREER

While beginning to write fiction, she worked for a radio station and newspapers. Her best job was as a publicity agent for the government in the Works Progress Administration, traveling all over Mississippi taking photographs and interviewing people, generating ideas for characters and stories. She held social gatherings at her family home, a Tudor style house on Pinehurst Street in Jackson, where friends and fellow writers socialized, calling themselves the Night-Blooming Cereus Club. In 1936 she had a one-person show of her photographs in New York and her first story, “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” was published in a small magazine. She began to write full time in 1938 and got stories accepted by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, editors of *The Southern Review*. With their support, moving on up she published in *The New Yorker* and in other prestigious magazines. “I’ve always been lucky—my work has always landed safely among friends.” She won a Bread Loaf scholarship in 1940 and published “A Worn Path” and “Why I Live at the P.O.” in *The Atlantic Monthly*. “A Worn Path,” one of the greatest stories ever written, won second place in the O. Henry Award contest in 1941, the year her first collection *A Curtain of Green* was published with an Introduction by Katherine Anne Porter, establishing her reputation. She joined the staff of *The New York Times Book Review* and went on to win three first place O’ Henry awards.

NOVELS

Her first novel *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), a modern southern fairy tale, was Faulkner’s favorite among her novels, perhaps in part because it was not historical like his own work. She kept publishing stories and winning awards, including Guggenheim fellowships in 1942 and 1949, which funded travel in France, Italy, and England, where she was a resident lecturer at Oxford and Cambridge. Her second novel *Delta Wedding* (1946), a realistic story of a modern plantation family, was serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Her third novel, *The Ponder Heart* (1954), is a delightful folk pastoral comedy of small-town life in the South comparable to Faulkner’s *The Hamlet* (1940). Awarded the William Dean Howells Medal, this novel got dramatized and had a successful run on Broadway in 1956. One of the characters gets tickled to death. For the rest of her life, Welty lectured at various colleges and universities and gave workshops. Despite all her honors, she did not achieve national fame until the publication of her novel *Losing Battles* in 1970. Her last novel *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1973), based on the prolonged illness and death of her mother, won a Pulitzer Prize.

PRINCIPLES OF WRITING

Welty dramatized her creative process in the story “A Memory” and she published essays on writing. “Born subjective,” she said, “we learn what our own idea of the objective is as we go along”; “Passion is the chief ingredient of good fiction”; “Great fiction shows us not how to conduct our behavior but how to feel”; “The most important point: that morality as shown through human relationships is the whole heart of fiction, and the serious writer has never lived who dealt with anything else”; “I hoped to differentiate characters by their physical qualities as a way of showing what they were like inside”; “What I do in the writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart and skin of a human being who is not myself—it is the act of a writer’s imagination that I set the most high”; “I put my faith in [the personal] not only as the source, the ground of meaning in art, in life, but as the meaning itself”; “A plot is a device organic to human struggle designed for the searching out of human truth”; “You must know all, then not

tell it, or not tell too much at once: simply the right thing at the right moment”; “Symbols have to spring from the work direct, and stay alive”; “Style does not obtrude.” [the opposite of postmodernist Academic Expressionism by Nabokov, Pynchon, Hawkes, Barth, and others]

POLITICS

Welty created some of the most sympathetic and admirable black characters in American literature, especially in “Powerhouse” and “A Worn Path.” As a white writer, she stands with Twain and Faulkner in her contributions to improved racial understanding. In response to the murder of the black civil rights leader Medgar Evers in Mississippi in 1963, Welty wrote a story called “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” rendering the perverted point of view of the unknown murderer, which was published in *The New Yorker* soon after the killer was identified and arrested.

Despite her contributions to social justice, during the 1960s politically correct liberals attacked Welty for not crusading for civil rights. She responded with “Must the Novelist Crusade?” in *The Eye of the Story*: “The crusader’s voice is the voice of the crowd and must rise louder all the time, for there is, of course, the other side to be drowned out. Worse, the voices of most crowds sound alike. Worse still, the voice that seeks to do other than communicate when it makes a noise has something brutal about it; it is no longer using words as words but as something to brandish, with which to threaten, brag or condemn.” As a Modernist, she transcended politics: “In my own view, writing fiction places the novelist and the crusader on opposite sides....The zeal to reform, which quite properly implies the editorial, has never done fiction much good. The exception occurs when it can rise to the intensity of satire.... Large helpings of naivete and self-esteem, which serve to refresh the crusader, only encumber the novelist....In reading great works one feels that the finished piece transcends the personal.”

DISAGREEMENT WITH FEMINISTS

According to Eudora Welty, “All that talk of women’s lib doesn’t apply at all to women writers. We’ve always been able to do what we’ve wished. I couldn’t feel less deprived as a woman to be writing.” Carol Ann Johnston, *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1997): “One despairing comment about the feminist movement delayed feminist readings of her work for 20 or 30 years”; “When asked in a 1970 survey what she thought of ‘women’s liberation,’ Welty gave a one-word answer: ‘Noisiness’”; “Welty does not want her work to be categorized with any political agenda, specifically a feminist agenda”; [The same is true of all the best women writers.] “A number of American feminist critics have begun to join French theorists in asserting that language is a patriarchal institution.” Welty is politically incorrect in her portrayal of some women characters, as in “Petrified Man.” The rise of radical Feminism appalled her: “We are like flies with our feet not in honey but in venom. It’s not love that is the gluey emotion; it’s hate...This is a devastating emotion. It could kill us.”

LATER CAREER

In 1973 a selection of her photographs illustrating southern rural poverty during the Great Depression were exhibited in a one-woman show at the Museum of Modern Art. She taught at Harvard during the 1970s and published her lectures there in *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1983), the first book published by Harvard University Press to become a *New York Times* Best Seller—for 32 weeks! She responded to the Postmodern rejection of literary classics with dismay: “The challenge to writers today, I think, is not to disown any part of our heritage.”

DEATH

Of all her many characters, Welty identified most with Miss Eckhart the spinster piano teacher in “June Recital”: “What I have put into her is my passion for my own life work, my own art. Exposing yourself to risk is a truth Miss Eckhart and I had in common. What animates and possesses me is what drives Miss Eckhart, the love of her art and the love of giving it, the desire to give it until there is no more left.” Eudora Welty died peacefully in Jackson of natural causes at the age of 92.

Michael Hollister (2013)



Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter