



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

**A Refereed Open Access e journal
Vol.2/No.2 June, 2017**

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



Eudora Welty on Woman's Question

Dr. M.Uma Devi

Associate Professor of English
Department of Science and Humanities
Sreenidhi Institute of Science and Technology
Ranga Reddy
Telangana, India.

Abstract: Eudora Welty is a South-American short story writer. The literary history of the American South since the Civil War has been fascinating. Later on account of modernization, consequent upon industrialization and urbanization, there has been a decline in the spiritual and ethical values in the Modern American South. And these find expression in the literature of the times. Eudora Welty being a strong observer of her surroundings and people draws her themes and characters from the South-American life. She mainly focuses on woman's queries. She also gives more importance to place in her fiction for she firmly believes in that the place and environment in which one is brought up shapes one's character. She is known for her characterization as her characters are drawn from her personal experience in the American South. They are from real life and appear natural in their emotional and behavioral aspects. Besides all this, her fiction mainly focuses on femininity. The present article deals with the writer's personal experiences as a woman and a writer and her views on the problems pertaining to the women of the American South. Her reflections on the importance of place, characterization, gender differentiation and Feminism would be discussed at length in the full paper.

Key words: femininity, place, gender, characterization, women's question.

* * *

Eudora Welty was born on April 13, 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, in South America and died on July 23; 2001. She is a well known American writer. She has written a number of short stories and novels. Her works mainly focus on the regional manners of people



inhabiting a small Mississippi town that resembles her own birthplace and the Delta country with great precision. Besides a number of short stories and an autobiographical work *One Writer's Beginning*, she has to her credit a few novels titled *Delta Wedding*, *The Ponder Heart*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter*. She won a Pulitzer Prize for her Novel - *The Optimist's Daughter* in 1973. She was also awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, besides many other awards. The literary history of the American South since the Civil War has been fascinating. Later on account of modernization, consequent upon industrialization and urbanization, there has been a decline in the spiritual and ethical values in the Modern American South. And these find expression in the literature of the times. Although there were only a few women writers in the 19th century, their number increased in the 20th century. Some of the significant women writers of this period are Katherine Anne Porter, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Caroline Gordon, Carson Mc Cullers, Eudora Welty and Flannery O. Connor.

Eudora Welty being a strong observer of her surroundings and people draws her themes and characters from the South-American life. Through her fiction she focuses mainly on woman's questions. She also gives more importance to place in her fiction for she firmly believes that the place and environment in which one is brought up shapes one's character.

Eudora Welty's artistic vision her general habit of drawing material from the American South of her times on the basis of her personal experience, and her clear understanding of human nature are reflected in her fiction. In her fiction Welty depicts the American South in transition. She depicts American men and women of the South caught up in a whirlpool of modern civilization. Despite her emphasis on the importance of "place" in fiction, Welty is primarily concerned with human values on which the order of civilization is based. Welty considers the family as important institution, which is most essential in everyone's life. Although at times she deals with modern aspects such as alienation, separation from family and society in her fiction, she emphasizes strong family relations.



Eudora Welty being a writer of new fiction has chosen the themes from the American south. Welty's stories are predominantly about women and their place in the southern world. Welty is able to introduce different characters fusing into them the two worlds i.e., the inner and the outer world. She has a fine air of observation and gifted imagination that enabled her to create characters that appear lively. Each of Welty's character has his or her own identity. Though her name is among the 'Gothic' writers, Welty never uses the symbols of southern decadence. Further, Welty strongly believes that fiction must be firmly grounded in a place. Welty says, " - as a writer I think background matters most in how well it teaches you to look around and see clearly what's there" (Prenshaw 83). Welty has defined the role of place in literature. Its function is primarily to attach precise local values to feelings. Further, Welty strongly believes that fiction must be firmly grounded in a place. Thus the place, obviously, derives from its existence in time and people living in it. In spite of her strong opinion regarding the place in fiction, Welty doesn't restrict all stories to one place as William Faulkner's 'Yoknapatawpha' country. In Faulkner's fiction one can find more regionalism but not so much in Eudora Welty's. But Welty's characters are real people caught up in the transition period. She changes the locale and also projects some of her inherent aristocratic characters that try to keep up their family tradition fail in their lives and alienate themselves. On the whole her characters are timeless and universal.

Eudora Welty uncovers a world filled with life-natural, sensual, rational and moral. She invests in her characters an unlimited capability as male and female, for bodying forth the rich diversity. They try for attention when they save their lives in submission to prehistoric laws of birth and death or when they follow a personal vision heroically. As Simon de Beauvoir says, "We are accustomed to thinking of these two human destinies as characteristically sexual" (Prenshaw 48). traditionally the woman's place is in the home, she is the mother who gives us life and with it our morality. Welty belongs to the transition period in South America. Her short stories generally reflect the feminine point of view. This article



deals with the author's opinions concerning the gender difference, the importance of place, characterization etc.

Welty has a good family background in which she never experienced any gender difference. Both her parents were educated and she was treated equally with her two brothers at home since her childhood. She was fond of reading books from their home library. Her childhood reading is reflected much later in her writings. During her time some of the writers and critics were of the opinion that women couldn't write good stories. They expressed their own doubts about female writers. But Welty says that she had never been handicapped in writing for being a woman even when the society was discriminating between the male and the female. As she says, "I am a woman; in writing fiction imagination comes ahead of sex. A writer's got to live inside all characters, male, female, old, young, to live inside any other, in male or female is sub-ordinate..." (Prenshaw 54). Moreover she never showed any kind of interest in politics or any movements related to it. When she was questioned in this regard she said that she did not believe in any kind of female liberation movement. As she says, 'I'm not interested in any kind of a feminine repartee. I don't care what sex people are when they write. I just want the result to be a good book. All that talk of women's lib doesn't apply at all to women writers. We have always been able to do what we wished. I couldn't feel less deprived as a woman to be writing' (Prenshaw 54). She adds that she was never deprived of any privilege that men enjoy.

Even when there was a conspicuous discrimination between men and women, Welty did experience such a one except once i.e., with an Editor of a Magazine. As she says, "...I've never met so far as, I know with any prejudice from editors because I was a woman - with the exception of my story "Petrified Man ", which was turned down by Esquire Magazine because I was a woman.... I was too ignorant to know that they did not take stories by women" (Martha Van Open 21-22).



Eudora Welty's views on the "femininity and feminism"

Welty in her short stories depicts the kinds of responsibilities and commitments women have. She also shows the plight of women who suffer in fulfilling them. She believes strongly that women have more commitment and responsibility than men. They were ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of the same. She says: "... although I didn't marry, I had a family that was working with and helping to care of ..." (Martha Van Open 20). But in her case these responsibilities never caused her any disturbance to her career or they have not taken anything away. As she further says, "... human responsibilities come first. That would be blaming another person if you didn't get your writing done. I am speaking absolutely personally. My life was easier..... I' m sure, but I grew up in the depression which wasn't too easy , and my father died the year I got out of college, which wasn't too easy ,but that was just all in the way life was. You can write no matter what goes..." (Martha Van Open 21). By listening to her words we can conclude that her philosophy on life is that depressions, ups and downs in human life are part. The people should accept them the way they come up on each individual. They should withstand the adverse situation with courage and a determined mind.

Like Tillie Olsen, Welty also believes that women have always been at a disadvantage. But personally, as earlier stated, she never experienced any disadvantage and she has never aligned herself with any writers group. As an artist at work she has remained a solitary figure. She experienced consideration, kindness and politeness instead. According to Welty women's movements do not achieve anything. Some of the female chauvinists loudly demanded equality, forgetting that the rights cannot be demanded or gained but equality should be obtained by means of assertion. She also says; "All that talk of women's lib doesn't apply at all to women writers. We have been always able to do what we wished" (Prenshaw 54).

Most of Welty's characters suffer and experience the problems and difficulties which are common to women in general. Some of her characters such as Laurel Mc Kelva, Sabina, Virgie Rainey, Laura, and Miss Eckhart have been depicted differently from the other female characters. Even the few female characters portrayed as revolting are forced to do so under



the pressure of circumstances. For example, Sabina slaps her husband in front of many people for being oppressed and insulted for a long period. Her patience was lost. This shows us that Welty is not a feminist but feminine in her character portrayal. In general, her characters do not stem from feminism. Circumstances have forced them to deviate and go against the accepted norms. In fact, sometimes, she became critical of the feminists who agitated and raised slogans and made demands over petty reasons. She is of the opinion that "...some of the movements, women are making fools of themselves, and I'm sorry for that, because it's cast a wry sad light on the real facts of the matter" (Martha Van Noppen 22). Even though Welty was against Feminism as a political movement, she admits that it has improved the position of women. She bitterly criticized feminists, when they tried to make the entire women folk look comic. Welty says, "I hate the grotesque quality of it I think it should be done, but if it's making comedians all of us, I don't know that it's worth it. It can be done in another way" (Martha Van Noppen 23). By this we can conclude that Welty is neither a supporter of feminism nor a strong representative of the traditional woman.

Significance of "place in fiction"- Eudora Welty's viewpoint

Eudora Welty strongly opines that story/tale must be firmly grounded in 'place.' Irrespective of her characters and the universality of her themes, she has depicted most of her stories in southern culture and Mississippi in particular. The function of place is primarily to attach precise local values to feelings. Fredrick J. Hoffman says:

Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting and therefore credible, gathering- spot of all that has been felt ,is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress. Location pertains to feeling, feeling profoundly pertains to place, place in history partakes of feelings, as feeling about history partakes of place. (Hoffman 13-14)

Thus the place obviously derives from its existence in time and the people living in it.

Place in Welty's view has come to mean "home", the family. The home is a place arranged by a man for peaceful private life according to certain norms. In a fundamental sense the entire south is a family, rather than a state or a region. According to Andrew Lytle,



particular families were, "...the institution of southern life" (Lytle 76). The emphasis on family as an essential feature of southern life is generally evident in the works of writers belonging to the American south.

The southern writers, according to Welty retain their natural way of looking at things, the sense of the continuity of life and the sense of the family. The southerners generally prefer to live in one place where they can see whole life spread out around them. It enables them to develop a natural sense of the description of the life lived by the people which can become a readymade form for the story. Welty says that place is "a source of inspiration" and giving her knowledge. As she says, ".....as a writer, I think background matters most in how well it teaches you to look around and see clearly what's there" (Prenshaw 83).

Eudora Welty's views on "character portrayal"

According to Welty in characterization, background is very important because it is –

something shapes people and it is the world in which they act and that makes their experiences- what they act for and react against. And with its population a place produces the whole world in which a person lives his life. It furnishes the economic background that he grows up in and the folkways and the stories that come down to him in his family. It is the fountainhead of his knowledge and experience upon which we grow further. (Prenshaw159)

The southern writers have the talent for tale telling. Children of the southern families are receivers of family stories and active participants in the oral tradition. So the dialogues written by the author most of the time are colloquial in a typical southern style. Having known this tradition, Welty is distinctive in tale-telling when compared to other southern writers.

As Welty says, "All the characters are conceptions of the imagination, which are invented to carry out what I want to do them in the story. I endow them with things I have observed, dreamed or understood, but no one represent a real person" (Prenshaw 213-214). Although she emphasizes that all her characters imaginary, one can find familiar people



around. Thus her characters are real people. Through her characters Welty has shown the transition period in the American South. The impact of the North America is shown through some of her southern characters. She is neither against change nor does she strongly support the traditional woman. She is of the opinion that in spite of change the southerners have a great respect and reverence for the life, family and the sense of history.

Welty's characters constitute a combination of the tragic and comic elements. Some of her characters being unable to cope up with the changing environment alienate themselves. Charles E. Davis points out:

Her characters are often caught up in the tragic dilemma of either trying to maintain a tenacious grip on an outmoded and dying heritage or facing an essentially rootless existence which offers no viable substitute for the old tradition. Seen from this perspective the major theme which runs through Welty's short stories and novels are indeed that of a changing south and "the fact of isolation" which Warren found in 1944 to provide the basic situation of Miss Welty's fiction is most often the result of the individual ability to assimilate himself into that altered world. (Davies199)

She adopts the technique of changing the locale and also cast some of her inherent aristocratic characters which try to sustain their family tradition fail in their lives and distance themselves. Thus one can say that Welty is a keen observer of surroundings and the life in its truthful manner and projects very realistically and her characters are timeless and universal. .

Works Cited

Davies Charles E "The South in Eudora Welty's Fiction: A Changing World," *Studies in American Fiction* 3 (Autumn, 1975), pp199.

Hoffman, Frederick J. "Definitions and Limits", *The Art of Southern Fiction: a Study of Some Modern Novelists*, 1967, rpt.Carbondale; Southern Illinois University Press,1968, pp 13-14.

Lytle, Andrew. *The Hero with the Private Parts*. Baton Rouge. Louisiana State University



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.2, No2, June, 2017

Press, 1966, pp76.

Noppen Martha Van. "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," *The Southern Quarterly*, Vol. XXNo.4 (summer, 1982), pp21-22.

Prenshaw, Peggy W. *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, Jackson , University Press of Mississippi, 1985.

---."Woman's World, Man's Place: The Fiction of Eudora Welty." *A Form of Thanks*.

Ed.Louis Dollarhide and Ann J Abadie, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1979, pp 48-54.

* * *