CHAPTER - VI

Comic Element, Mystery of Life and Love in the Novels of Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty’s novels written in the 1930s, 40s and 50s are the unique contribution to the American story writing. They are having elements different from the black humour found in the Faulkner’s novels and old order romanticism present in Katherine Anne Ponter’s Miranda stories. There was an impact of these earlier writers on her as she said, “indeed, learning to write may be a part of learning to read. For all I know, writing comes out of a serious devotion to reading” 66

Welty’s most clear-cut departure from the American tradition of the short story has been in the shape of her story. In her reading of the nineteenth century Russian writer Anton Chekhov and of the British writers Jane Austen, who wrote in the late Eighteenth century and Virginia Woolf, who wrote in the early part of the Twentieth century, Welty explains the way that she sees subject and point of view shaping a certain kind of story. Welty has understood that Chekhov takes away the action-based plot and replaces it with a design based on his character’s mental

associations and insights. Like Chekhov, Welty does not narrate a story in the conventional sense of the phrase. She rather conveys through the story a feeling for the interior life of the people she depicts. It can be affirmed that the lyrical, passionate feeling sense of daily life is articulated by her in her novels. As far as Jane Austen is concerned, Eudora feels that her narrator is very close to the community that she represents and this closeness shapes the readers’ view of community. Coral Ann Johnston writes, “In Chekhov, Austen and Woolf, Welty recognizes kindred minds who understand that history and fiction on large scale often don’t depict the crucial moments in life. Intimate gestures outside the main stream of active life, like those of lyric poetry are those that shape the individual and in turn the individual fashions history with action”. 67

Eudora Welty has found this world fraught with contradictions and paradoxes. So the same world is shown by her in her novels. She feels that a life led apart from society leaves an individual in the dark unprepared to go out in the world. In ‘The Robber Bridegroom’, Rosamond faces the same predicament. She could not read the inner machinations of Jamie Lockhart. She

67 Ibid., p. xv
started loving him despite his being a bandit—a man who robs things from the people. In another way, Eudora Welty stresses the blurring of these two categories: out of the sheltered life comes its just opposite, the daring life. Warren finds both love and separateness in her works. Vande Kieft places stress on the love in her work. In her discussions of the ‘Bride of the Innisfallen’, she sees the women in the stories as lonely yet believes that they all find resolutions to their unhappiness. Thus Vande Kieft’s theory sees only one facet of the life, the ‘loving’ sheltered Welty not the separate ‘daring’ Welty. Louise Westling describes Welty as a photographer whose world is ‘largely’ sheltered from poverty and violence. Noel Polk feels that critics ‘can think of nothing finer than to celebrate (Welty), in simple return, because her work is such a splendid celebration of us – of all the things that makes our own lives joyful and sad, mysterious and profound’ (Polk, 1995). Similarly the novelist Reynolds Price gives a piercingly succinct and accurate assessment of the criticism that had addressed Welty’s body of work to that point in his review of the Collected Stories in 1980, ‘Welty’s career has been a long performance and one which though it has never lacked praise and devoted readers has presented critics with the kind of
fearless emotional intensity, the fixed attention to daily life and technical audacity that have mercilessly revealed the poverty of scholastic critical methods’.

But it can be said that these critics have concentrated exclusively on Welty’s inner ‘Daring’ aspect rather than on her ‘Sheltered’ life in the south. Welty departs from plot-driven and conventional fiction and describes non-linear aspects of her writing in visual terms. Her stories move in synchronic fashion rather than diachronically. In her own words, ‘They move in a ‘poetic’ rather than a ‘plotted’ manner’. Synchronic writing produces fiction that is meditative resulting in a single dilating point- rather than plotted, proceeding along a line. Carol Ann Johnston aptly says, “Her fiction is more like a poem on photographs than the traditional story; that she understands her writing in visual terms, with the narrator as keenly observing eye”68

The themes of Eudora Welty are different in different novels. But the progressive ideas are found in each of them. In the ‘Shower of Gold’ (Golden Apples) the scholar finds Snowdie Mclain a woman devoted to her house and its welfare. She looks after the

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68 Ibid., p. 15
interests of family sincerely even in the absence of her husband King Mclain. In that way the novelist pinpoints the all important role of the women in sustaining the family. The second story in this collection ‘June Recital’ revolves round ‘Miss Echart’ all embracing obsession with music. She has a student named Virgie who shows the novelist’s vision of a ‘free’ woman. She is not subservient to any body and does work in her own way.

Besides, Welty’s great sense of humour and a sharp wit is seen in her ‘The Shoe Bird’. It was thought of Robert Frost that his poems begin in delight but they end in wisdom. Same is the case with Eudora Welty’s ‘The Shoe Bird’. It reminds the reader of Aesop’s Fables and Jataka Stories. The story is focused on birds like parrots, dodo, owl and phoenix, which speak, think and behave like right thinking human beings. They ponder over things and come to right conclusion for chartering their life to the path of upliftment. This gives the younger readers an insight into human truths blended with humour. Hargrove aptly writes, “Not only it is a delightful, universal and thoroughly enchanting story, but it is also extremely well written, contains themes which are found in Welty’s adult works, and portrays characters that are appealing and skillfully presented. Best of all, it is filled with
humour as well as wisdom, making its readers both laugh and learn, for Welty uses all the elements of comedy with expertise and obvious joy in telling this wonderful tale”\textsuperscript{69}.

This children book has a didactic aim in it. With the help of words of the birds it teaches the children how to face the rigours of life and get advancement in life. The parrot knows that he can get promotion only by dint of his studies and by sharpening his mind. Besides, Welty knows that, “words have strong meanings; so much does depend on the way they are said”\textsuperscript{70}. For substantiating that idea of Welty, the following lines can be cited, “some things you can’t buy. Some things you don’t sell. Such as our born gifts”\textsuperscript{71}

Welty’s works consist of both light and comic elements on the one side and dark and grotesque on the other. The reason behind it is that she enquires into the nature of the protected and isolated individual through her works. The brightness in her vision comes out in her comic stories of women who find unexpected solutions to the claustrophobia of their lives. In ‘Why I Live at P.O’ sister devotes her entire narrative explaining the

\textsuperscript{69} Hargrove, Nancy D., \textit{Humour in Eudora Welty’s The Shoe Bird}, Children’s Literature in Education 23.2, op. cit., p. 76
\textsuperscript{70} Welty Eudora, \textit{The Shoe Bird}, op. cit., p. 83.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., pp. 66-67.
reasons of her residing at the post office, away from her family. It
is sister’s first person narration that provides much of the story in
comedy. Besides, this story is an expression of highly comic
events surrounding the return of Stella Rondo to the family with
This child of two after she has run off with Mr. Whitaker, the
traveling photographer. Sister insists that Shirley T. is the ‘spit
image of Papa- Daddy if he would cut off his beard’ and that “she
looks like Mr. Whitaker’s side too ---- she looks like a cross
between Mr. Whitaker and Papa – daddy”

The story shows, how an intensely close family can be not
only suffocating but also impossible to escape. In the end, family
ties are so powerful that sister’s moving to the P.O merely
intensifies her connection with and dependence on her family.

The tension between sister’s limited control over her life and
her over estimation of her power creates a comic situation in the
story. But while sister’s unquestioning acceptance of her
sheltered life may be comic, she does much better than Clytie, the
other grown up daughter living with her family in ‘A Curtain of
Green’ instead of moving out and interrupting her routine of
cooking, cleaning and caretaking of her screw ball family, Clytie

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goes outside and drowns her in a barrel of rainwater. Staring at her reflection in the barrel, Clytie sees herself and her situation for what they are. She is a young woman with no chance of escape from her tortured life of taking care of the members of her family, who are ill and insane. The similarities between sister’s and Clytie’s situations point out several important aspects of ‘A Curtain of Green’. In this collection Welty uses the narrator’s position to indicate levels of awareness in her characters. Other stories like ‘Clytie’, ‘Petrified Man’ and ‘Lily Daw and the Three ladies’. ‘A Curtain of Green’ explores the difficulties for women in the society that, while attempting to shield them from danger, may also subjugate them.

Welty’s second book of stories ‘The Wide Net and Others Stories’ provides a slight opening out of the sheltered life. Contrary to the stories in her first book-‘A Curtain of Green’ where the stories depict women in a constricted situation, here it is found that women are acting to loosen their bonds in ways potentially in a more successful manner. ‘Livvie’, for example, shows the collapse of Livvie and Solomon’s marriage. At the outset, it seems that this may be liberation for Livvie, a young black girl whom Soloman has claimed in his old age as a kind of
trophies or spoil for the evening of his life. Livvie is the bird in Solomon’s cage. The image of the bird defines Livvie even at the end of the story when Solomon died after seeing Cash at his bedside. But the story ends with its most striking image, not of the bird but of the bottle tree—the beginning of a new freer life with Cash. But quite contrary to it, Jenny’s fall in ‘At The Landing’ is one of the darkest moments in all of Welty’s work and the harshest condemnation of the sheltered life. This story imparts this message the more strictly a person in guarded, the great the danger she faces when she goes out into the world.

With the stories of the ‘Golden Apples’, Welty is able not only to suggest bright light at the end of Virgie Rainey’s insular life but also to intensify her scrutiny of sheltered individuals. Carol Ann Johnston aptly says, “Virgie Rainey, the most convincing example of the bright side, the one who seems to project from her experience, is left at the end of the Golden Apples on the blink of his life. Welty’s emphasis here is on Virgie’s victory over her experience another than on Virgie experience in Morgana”. 73

73 Ibid, p. 31
The ‘Bride of the Innisfallen’ shares explorations into the sheltered life with Welty’s other collections. The stories range from an account of a woman who decides after taking the ferry from England to Ireland to leave her husband to the narrative of two sisters fleeing then plantation in the wake of union troops destroying the estate. The Burning’ is Welty’s most balanced consideration of the secluded life and sums up the balance of the ‘Bride of the Innisfallen’ as a whole.

In Welty’s fiction vision can be in the form of a metaphor, an object representing something bigger and deeper than itself. Lock’s telescope in ‘June Bental’ and Clytie’s last glimpse of her face in the reflective pool in Clytie for example are each uses of visual metaphor that point to larger issues. The telescope suggests Lock’s developing perspective on the world outside as he matures into adolescence and Clytie’s reflection indicates the belated discovery that her face is the face – and identity – she has unknowingly searched for throughout her life. In ‘A piece of New’ Welty represents a storm’s passing with a descriptive metaphor of wagon crossing a bridge. The story opens with Ruby Fisher running in out of the rain, but the metaphor of the rain storms takes on a deeper meaning by the end. Nature’s storm by the end
of the story has transformed into the emotional storm raging between Ruby and Clyde, brought to head of the newspaper report from another country that tells of violence done to another Ruby fisher.

‘A Memory’ named story is one of the more visually interesting story in the collection ‘A Curtain of Green’. It begins with narrator’s reminiscence of her caring of the age, which is her reflection on the conflation of her memory of her love and observation of the events going on around her. Some forty years after publishing ‘A Memory’ Welty delivered a series of lectures that became her autobiographical work ‘One Writer’s Beginnings’. In the course of these lectures, she remarks on her visual method and details the principle behind the narrator’s framing in ‘A Memory’ as well as in other stories of ‘A Curtain of Green’. As she wrote ‘Death of Traveling Salesman’ she discovered that “ My temperament and my instinct had told me alike that the another, who writes at his own emergency, remains and need to remains at this private remove. I wished to be, not effaced; but invisible actually a powerful position perspective, the line of vision, the frame of vision- there set a distance.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p.87
As far as Welty’s style is concerned she uses a visual technique as the fundamental organizing principle in her stories. Individual stories often seem like a collection of scenes or snapshots rather than the sequential, causal telling of a plot. Early in her career Welty often combined this synchronic narrative strategy with a journey motif. In other words, the linear structures of the journey supported her use of visually grounded technique, which in turn providing a shape to the emotional revelation. In ‘A Worn Path’ Phoenix Jackson walks from her house in the country into town to get medicine for her grandson. The inherent structure of the journey frees Welty to combine memory and dream as she captures the wanderings of the old woman’s mind while Phoenix travels along the path to town, her mind meanders throughout the events of her past. Welty attains a similar effect in another story in ‘A Curtain of Green’, ‘Death of a Traveling Salesman’. In this story Welty traces the journey of Bowman, a shoe salesman on “his first day back on the road after a long seizure of influenza”75. “He was feverish and he was not quite sure of the way”76, he has a car accident. He leaves his car and walks to a nearby farmhouse where he first misjudges, then

75 Ibid., p. 119
76 Ibid., p. 119
discovers something very surprising to him about the relationship between the man and woman living there. The conceit of Bowman’s illness, which gives him a foggy mind like the device of Phoenix Jackson’s advanced age, allows Welty to weave various disconnected scenes across the straight lines of his physical journey.

Moreover the scholar comes to this conclusion that sight and insight are connected in her stories. The examples of this aspect are ‘Death of a Traveling Salesman’ and ‘A Piece of News’. She discusses the link between observation and sensitivity in her essay ‘Place in Fiction’ (from The Eye of the Story) which she composed after A Curtain of Green. The link she makes in this essay between looking and feeling provides a thought on ‘A Memory’, Welty defines observation in terms of focus: ‘Focus then means awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight-They are like the attributes of love. The act of focusing itself has beauty and meaning; it is the act that continued in turns into meditation, into poetry’.

Welty defines ‘focus’ as a metaphor for the mental process of concentration, a metaphor that is just one indication of the centrality of the visual to Welty’s writing and to her thinking
about writing. Secondly, by comparing the act of focusing and the sensation of love Welty gives a particular slant to each term. For example, she equates the attributes of focus – ‘awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight’ with those of love. While these may well be some characteristics that we associate with mental focus – the act of thinking about a narrow subject - Welty imbues the physical mechanical act of visual focus with these qualities as well.

Welty shows her awareness of her position as the observing narrator, first at a great distance, then drawing closer and closer. She links this narrative position with her ‘real subject: human relationship’. She is troubled by the idea of love and how it works in a relationship. At the same time, she must not experience this love but only observe it, creeping toward its center but not actually touching it or entering into it. In other words, for Welty, Love is blended with ‘spatial distance’-‘Love and separateness’, love with the attributes of focus- ‘awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight’. This has been the guiding principle looming large over her works.

It is found after taking composite view of the works of Welty that her narrator does not seem to grow or change during ‘A
Memory’, the story does give the analysis of a complex view of Welty’s narrator. ‘The use of first person narration in ‘A Memory’ represents the coming of age of an artist, the distance between writer and narrator seems very slight. Welty herself has said that this story represents her memory of day dreaming on train trips she looks as a girl with her father: “The (young girl’s finger) frame only raises the question of the vision. It has something of my own dreaming at the train window’⁷⁷. Yet the story’s first person narration and subject matter create a misleading sense of intimacy; it is very difficult to locate and attribute certain feelings in the story.

Welty also makes use of classical Greek myth, Celtic myth and Mississippi folk tales. Welty herself says that myth grows out of her as she writes as one might use salt and pepper during a meal. But it can be affirmed that she uses myth to enhance the flavor of her stories. She does not import myth into her work in order to preserve the myth rather she uses myth in service of her own stories.

The ‘Golden Apples’ is Eudora Welty’s most complex work. It is neither a collection of short stories nor a novel, but it is

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grouping of interconnected stories about the residents of the fictional town of Morgana, Mississippi, a name itself derived from myth. Carol Ann Johnston says, “Morgana’s illusionary nature provides a perfect setting and environment for Welty’s mythic revisions” 78

Here, King Maclain has taken a mythic status, he is a chimera. His action too suggest a world of myth. He is first seen through Katie Rainey’s eyes. Snowdie comes to announce, “I am going to have a baby too, miss Katie, Congratulate me” 79. Katie then describes Snowdie in this way, “She looked like more than only the news had come over her. It was like a shower of something had struck her like she’d been caught put out in something bright” 80. The reference here to the title, ‘A shower of Gold’ and to the myth it invokes is unmistakable. This story conjures up the myth of Danae and her rape by the God Zeus, Danae’s father having heard the prophecy that he would be destroyed by his daughter’s offspring locks her in a cell so that she cannot have children. Zeus comes into the cell in a ‘Shower of Gold’ and rapes her. Danae’s offspring by Zeus, Perseus eventually carries out the prophecy and kills Danea’s father,

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78 Ibid., p. 74.
79 Welty, Eudora, The Collected Stories, op. cit., p. 266
80 Ibid., p. 266.
though unintentionally. At this point in a ‘Shower of Gold’, there is no information of King’s offspring doing him anything or not. In ‘Sir Rabbit’ the King is associated with the mythic form of Zeus as a swan. It is crystal clear that the cultural currency that Welty exchanges by engaging the myth of Zeus as an all powerful sexual predator, in the person of King Maclain, is the currency of male power and privilege.

Welty touches on the myth again in ‘Moon Lake’ one of the stories from ‘The Golden Apples’ Moon lake is at the centre of a girls from the town of Morgana have been sent for the summer, along with orphans from a local home. Both ‘Moon’ and ‘Lake’ are strongly identified with the female in mythic iconography. The Moon represents the female because it is passive; it does not generate its own light or heat, and reflects both as these come from the sun, the traditional symbol of maleness. The lake also is passive, a still vessel, in opposition to more active, phallic river, which is moving stream. When Easter falls into ‘Moon Lake’ where she has not been able to swim before, she falls into her female identity.

Moreover, in her novel - ‘The Optimists Daughter’ Welty talks about the marriage of Laurel and Phil in terms of
‘confluence’. They ride in a train over the “confluence of the waters, the Ohio and Mississippi-----. They themselves were a part of the confluence. Their own joint act of faith had brought them here at the very moment and matched its occurrence, and proceeded as it proceeded. Direction itself was made beautiful, momentous. They were riding as one with it right up front”81. For Welty ‘Confluence’ is not only descriptive of an ideal relationship it also signifies her central use of myth.

On the whole, in ‘The Golden Apples’ Welty has explored graphically the central myths about women that shaped her generation’s expectation of what Women should do. These myths dictated that women should be passive, beautiful objects of male vision. Like Eve, a woman should shoulder the guilt for the fall of mankind like Yeat’s ‘Glimmering girl a woman should be beautiful, elusive but pure object of male sexual desire and like Medusa, if a woman should become aggressive, should step outside of her social role. As a woman and a writer, Welty cannot support these myths without destroying the artistic part of herself. Besides she cannot also alter the world in which she lives. The Compromise that visionary writers such as Welty can

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strike is one of creating a fictional world as a laboratory of change. Welty creates a world that begins with her own world and then creates a world in which she would like to live. She says in one writer’s beginning that of all her characters, she feels closest to Miss Eckhart, “At last I realized that Miss Eckhart came from me what I have put into her in 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 these is no more left. Even in the small and literal way, what I had done in assembling and connecting all the stories in ‘The Golden Apples’, and beginning them off as one, was not too unlike the June Recital itself”.

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82 Eudora Welty, One Writer’s Beginnings, op. cit, p. 101