Chapter V

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The greatness of a writer depends on two main factors, the first and possibly the most important being his reaction to life and the world around him. The author may view the world with a clouded gaze, or he may be carried away by the surface reality and may not strive to probe into things. Welty, on the other hand, belonged to the category of writers who observed the world with a clear and unclouded gaze. Coupled with this is her ability to penetrated into the core of things, thus enabling her to reflect truthfully that which she saw around her. In Must the Novelist Crusade? Welty states:

The writing of a novel is taking life as it already exists, not to report it but to make an object, toward the end that the finished work might contain this life inside it, and offer it to the reader. The essence will not be, of course, the same thing as the raw material; it is not even of the same family of things.¹

The second factor is the presentation—that is the art itself, which does include character, plot, style, technique etc., the means by which the

writer transforms the raw material into art. On the writer's perception depends the type of work written. Swift, for example, was a misanthrope, and so he viewed the world with hatred and scorn. His *Gulliver's Travels* mirrors this hatred. Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* reflects the author's concern with transition—the dying of an old order, paving the way for the birth of a new. Welty, was attracted, not by a slice of life, but life as a whole, with its many dimensions, its varied colors and shapes. Welty regarded art as "the voice of the individual, doing its best to speak, not comfort of any sort, indeed, but truth. And the art that speaks it most unmistakably, most directly, most variously, most fully, is fiction..." One, therefore, ought not to be surprised by the diversity and the variety of stories that Welty was able to write. In her collections of short stories, and novels, one encounters a wide range of characters, people as dissimilar and as diversified as the people on earth, so much so, one is tempted to apply to Welty's works, Dryden's praise of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*—"It is sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty."  

Walty believed, that life with all its ups and downs was meant to be lived and enjoyed, as is clearly depicted in *The Robber Bridegroom* which unites a confrontation with the monstrousness of life with a recognition of its

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wonder, a vision that transforms wandering in a maze into a dance. This evaluation of life is very similar to that reflected in the Hindu legend about the God Shiva. It is in the teaching of how to live in such a world that Welty's tale offers help for travellers in life's wilderness, alive as it is with Indians, outlaws and wild animals.4

In her *The Robber Bridegroom* Welty points to the dual quality of life, signifying an awareness of the terrible as well as the marvellous, an awareness that is like a beacon light, assuring the storm tossed, wearied traveller, of the rest and comfort that will soon be his. Another strategy for survival in this trouble-ridden world is to have someone to love. Clement's life with Salome is made bearable because of Rosamond, whom he loves, and so life is bearable to him. Similarly, Rosamond's love for Jamie makes life with her step-mother tolerable. It is this love that is a source of strength and courage to her while she passes from one obstacle to another, in her search for Jamie Lockhart. The novel seems to imply that the problems and difficulties of life will appear insignificant if there is someone we can love. The motivation in life springs from the aspirations to love, to conquer, to outwit and overcome the enemy, to reach the goal in view.

And, in the end, to find out what we all wish to find out, exactly who we are and who the other fellow is, and what we we are doing here all together.  

Welty's skill as a writer is revealed in her use of history to present, not a historical novel, but a fantasy. A mode resorted to, to make the readers aware that life is meaningful and beautiful and man can make the best out of it, by not succumbing to the hurdles strewn on his path.  

The core of *Delta Wedding* is not Laura's visit to Shellmound, but the family, and the mystery the novel celebrates is love that binds the members of the large Fairchild family together. What makes the Fairchild family individualistic is the capacity of a sufficient number of the people in it to participate with compassion, selflessness, and intensity in the daily lives of all the others, whether linked by blood or by simple affection.... family living is participation moment by moment in whatever comes or happens; and George's unusual capacity for that is the door by which Robbie returns and the window by which Laura comes to see.  

*The Golden Apples* is a collection of tales, that deals with man the wanderer - an endless seeker after a multiplicity of things. Like

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the seeker of Yeats’ *The Song of the Wandering Aengus*, man yearns and seeks for things that are elusive and beyond his reach. Some like MacLain, attain partial success, others like Ran are destined only to seek the gold, never actually to see it, some others are like Eugene, and find the glitter gone from their dreams, and many others are destined to continue with their endless quest.

*The Ponder Heart* is a novel with a difference. It does not re-create life, but strives on the other hand to point how life can be. The restlessness and the misery and unhappiness of the wanderers in *The Golden Apples*, is here replaced by contentment and happiness, stemming from Uncle Ponder's and Edna Earle's non-attachment to the world, and its glittering but shallow attractions. It also stems from their ability to love selflessly. *The Optimist's Daughter* is a brief novel, perfect in its concept and execution and profound in its implications. The characters are few, but perfectly developed. Welty "proceeds from page to page with professional ease and subtlety, utilising the death of a prominent citizen to display devotion, treachery, vanity the pretence and hypocrisy among survivors and friends alike." 7

*The Optimist's Daughter* draws attention to Welty's ability to view the world realistically, but with a glance that is filled with sympathy and compassion.

*Losing Battles*, the longest novel written by Welty, is the story of a family re-union. If the wisdom of this novel is to be savoured to its fullest, every inch of the surface must be carefully inspected,

7 "The Optimist's Daughter," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 48, No. 4, (Autumn 1972), p. 120.
which infers, a careful following of the conversation, taking in every word and phrase to comprehend its full significance. The greatest achievement of Losing Battles lies in its sharp and serene remembrance and evocation of things past.

The setting for most of Welty's stories and novels is Mississippi. Referring to the importance of place in fiction Welty states:

The more narrowly we can examine a fictional character, the greater he is likely to loom up. We must see him set to scale in his proper world to know his size. Place, then, has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it.  

and again:

It is through place that we put out roots, wherever birth, chance, fate or our traveling selves set us down; but where these roots reach toward - whether in America, England or Timbuktu - is the deep and running vein, eternal and consistent everywhere purely itself, that feeds and is fed by the human understanding. 

Welty occupies a place on par with Hawthorne, Mark Twain and Faulkner by her ability to plunge to the very heart of humanity, thus bring-

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9 Ibid., p. 133.
Mississippi to life, in story after story of hers. The act of photographing turned Welty's eye to Mississippi and to the richness of visual detail that was there to be seen and recorded. Thus it is, that Mississippi comes alive in Welty's stories, teeming with all kinds and types of people, busy attending to their routine work. Welty's works are a record of life in Mississippi, but at the same time it is not just Mississippi but rather the world that we find unfurling before us. Though Welty's works are bound by a strong sense of an ordered community, yet it is to the dark inner lives of the characters, and not their public lives or faces, that Welty is drawn to. It is individual self-deception that concerns her and not social hypocrisy. This is why, to the reader of the twentieth century, Welty appears an adventurer of the mind.

Welty discovered the key to art in the themes that engaged the mind and soul of man everywhere. She wandered marvelling over the landscape of the soul and the senses, never permitting the smallest change in either to escape her notice. Welty was more concerned with man's efforts and longings than in his guilt and weaknesses. She deals with people whose lives are curtailed by various factors like malignity, snobbery, self pity, vulgarity, mania of various kinds etc. But her technique saves her work from succumbing to the many faults commonly found in fiction that portrays reality. Slackness, sensationalism and hardness are some of the faults committed by writers who take up portraying reality. The tone in Welty's stories is controlled
With sureness and delicacy. Her diverse shading in tone, the shifts, the blending of two or more tones together, and the complexity - all do wonders with the material. Toughness continuously controls, where otherwise pathos would get out of hand, and bring ruin. Her blade of satire cuts through human evil with unfailing sharpness, and she adds her scalding humor; as well as an enviable compound of compassion and just condemnation. The result is a totality, that refuses to be stricted to any one conventional attitude.  

Welty resorts to the grotesque to evoke a sense of evil as for example in "Keela the Outcast Indian Maiden," where Lee Roy is made to eat live chickens and drink their blood to amuse the spectators at a fair, or as in "The Purple Hat," where Welty pictures a jewelled hat pin entering the ribs and piercing the heart of its victim, or in "Clytie," where the almost insane Clytie, who longed for companionship and love, and realises that with Octavia around, and as a member of the Fair family she would never find it. Clytie drowns herself by putting her head into a barrel of rain water and holding it there. Welty, in her use of the grotesque, does not come anywhere near Poe. The latter conjures up scenes of horror for their own sake, as for example "The Cask of Amontillado," a tale of revenge, which clearly indicates Poe's use of the grotesque to heighten the feeling of horror and terror as the avenger Montressor takes his victim Fortunato into the catacombs and buries

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him alive in the catacombs.

A moment more and I had fettered him to the granite. . . . I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials and with the aid of my throwel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance to the niche. 11

Welty's use of the grotesque is not to conjure up scenes of horror but rather to make her characters acquire the semblance of reality, and her fantastical characters actual persons.

Welty reveals herself to be one of the greatest short story writers of the modern age by her artistic and subtle use of fantasy to portray the loneliness, dreams, aspirations and fears of her characters. Referring to this inter-relationship of the external and the internal, Eunice Glenn calls it Welty's "forte" and adds, "Instead of serving as an escape from ordinary experience, fantasy brings it into a fuller light and contributes to its interpretation." 12 Fantasy or day-dreaming is a mental process that has come into its own only in the present age. Very few writers, with the exception of psychologists, have utilised this process in their works. Welty is, in fact, one of the first short story writers to draw the reader's attention to this natural

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phenomenon, thus rendering her stories as true to life as is possible.

Ruth M. Vande Kieft referring to this special achievement of Welty's, of projecting the hidden inner life, claims:

... there is another large group of modern short story writers and novelists to whom she has an equal if not greater general debt than to Faulkner and other Southern writers. James, Proust, Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf all extended the range of fiction by developing new methods of catching and conveying the inward atmosphere, the subtle nuances of human thought and feeling.  

Welty does not employ the stream-of-consciousness style that Virginia Woolf and the others are noted for. Nor does she 'slip into' characters of her own level of education and intelligence as these writers do. Welty's move into the minds of her characters is to portray their fantasies, thus revealing the minuteness with which she observed and recorded the life and people around her. "Old Mr. Marblehall," "A Piece of News," "Powerhouse" and "Death of a Travelling Salesman" are works that dispel all traces of doubt the reader might have of Welty's understanding of human psychology. Eunice Glenn considers Welty's unique distinction, in her use of fantasy to be in her method, and comparing Welty's use of fantasy to Kafka's, she says:

Miss Welty relies more upon fantasy, by

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14 Ibid., p. 177.
it implying much of the factual; while Kafka, at least in his short stories, does the opposite. Miss Welty employs fantasy to reveal the heightened consciousness of man, and relates it to surface reality. The individual even in his irrational state, becomes rational and capable of choice. The effect is one that is compelling; and rare in modern literature. 15

 Welty does not manipulate her characters, as if they were puppets, meant only to represent her ideas. In her hands, they become real people, people of flesh and blood, with their own peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, thus emphasising Welty's power of discrimination, her keen psychological insight coupled with her ability to understand the subtleties and complexities of human behaviour. Welty's characters speak in a language appropriate to their class and position in life, as for example Clyde and his wife, Ruby Fisher in, "A Piece of News." They speak in the language of the working class people. So also Leota of "Petrified Man," whose "Honey, them goobers has been in my purse a week if they's been in it a day. Mrs. Pike bought them peanuts" (C.G.p. 32), is clearly indicative of the fact that Leota belongs to the working class. It is not just the working class, but the blacks, the snobs, the dim-witted, all speak in a manner appropriate to the role and status assigned to them by Welty. Welty wanted her style to be a suitable

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vehicle for her stories "Better than Hawthorne and equally" as good as "Mark Twain and Faulkner, she showed how a disciplined use of folk idiom authenticated her themes and character."\(^{16}\)

Welty shares an affinity with Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield and Elizabeth Bowen. Her quiet skepticism, compassion and pervasive tolerance, her comic vision and the ability to discern the ludicrous and the pathetic are what make her characters appear like "authentic American versions of Chekhov's Russian peasants. . . . Both Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield developed individual techniques for conveying psychological subtlety."\(^{17}\) Neither Chekhov, nor Katherine Mansfield was concerned with event as event. It was its repercussions and its effect upon character that concerned them. This is exactly the technique that Welty employs in many of her stories. "At the Landing" and "First Love" are examples of stories where Welty employs this technique. The violence of the storm, conspiracy, rape, trial, flood are completely subdued, while the important action takes place in the mind and heart of the young girl and boy. Welty's work resembles Elizabeth Bowen's in that like her, Welty believed that art should not be an expression of the self, and that a story should not be a reflection of the author's ego. Welty also regarded the short story as passionate and lyrical, thus linking itself to poetry. Like Elizabeth Bowen's, Welty's stories were also sparked off by place, rather than by persons. Another aspect in which the two writers resemble each other, is the


importance both writers gave fantasy in their work.

There are no hard and fast rules as yet framed to enclose a short story. It can become anything a writer chooses to make of it. There is no reason why it should not be as close to a poem, a piece of music or an Impressionistic painting, as words can make it and also attain an amount of interest and beauty. Welty's greatest contribution to the genre lies in those stories in which the traditional element of setting, plot, theme, character and feeling are most spontaneously blended,

in which no single element appears to be manipulated, radically outbalancing the others. She seems to be able to achieve this balance most effectively when she is, in every sense closest to home . . . . At home she has both her distance and involvement: more than enough knowledge of her material to make the story convincing; the objectivity to shape it; and the feeling and sensibility to give it the unmistakable lyric impulse which identifies it as her own unique product. 18

Welty's role as a short story writer is not that of a moralist, but rather that of a recorder and depictor, faithfully depicting and portraying life and people as she sees them. This does not imply that there is nothing to be learnt from her stories. There is, but it lies in the reader's ability to read and understand and not in the writer

18 Ruth M. Vande Kieft, p. 183.
taking the stand of a preacher or teacher, dictating what is right and what is wrong. In *Must The Novelist Crusade?* Welty states,

> The novelist works neither to correct nor to condone, not at all to comfort, but to make what's told alive. He assumes at the start an enlightenment in his reader equal to his own, for they are hopefully on the point of taking off together from that base into the rather different world of the imagination.  

Welty, thus, did not regard her role as a novelist to lie in pointing her finger in judgement, but rather to part the curtain, that invisible shadow, that prevents man from being humane and understanding of each other's plight and wonder. Welty moves into the deeper rhythm of her characters' natures and moods and makes the reader care for them. The world in her fiction is endowed with sensibility and interest, and the characters who people this world - the deaf and dumb, the old country Negro, the child, are all equally and infinitely precious, because of their common and unique humanity. Much of the meaning and effect in the stories are obtained through the symbols that are made use of, as for example, The Palace of Pleasure in *The Purple Hat* is symbolic of the world of fantasy to which old women flee to escape boredom and to which young men, the born victims are drawn in search of what is exotic and sinfully pleasurable. *The Humming Birds* was the title under which *The Wanderers* appeared, when first published. The *humming* birds make their appearance in *The Golden Apples*, and we

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a more complicated symbol, signifying man's attempt to suck the honey from life. Their swift darting, from flower to flower is symbolic of the elusiveness of joy. The stone man of Petrified Man is symbolic of the pettiness, hypocrisy and shallowness of the women who visit the beauty parlour. The heron in A Still Moment is a symbol of various things - awe, beauty and unattainability - to each of the characters in the story. The apples referred to in The Golden Apples are also symbolic. In most folklore, the apple is a love-symbol and the golden apples, guarded by the Hesperides at the garden at the world's end, are associated with the search for love and the search for the heart's desire.  

Welty's use of myth has not only fascinated her readers, but has also held them in thrall. The rich texture of allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, folk tales, European and Celtic legends suggests that she adopted a mythical method found in the poetry and fiction of other twentieth century figures - Eliot, Joyce, Yeats and others - who, perhaps like Welty herself, turned to the work of such anthropologists and psychiatrists as Frazer and Jung for information and inspiration.

A close study of Welty's works reveals that her use of myth cannot be contained within R.L. Phillip's definition. It goes far beyond this,


including the time honoured methods of using myth to illustrate a point or to enhance the beauty of a line or a work. Uncle Ponder's answer at the court, in The Ponder Heart makes this point clear. "Work?.... What would I want to work for? I'm as rich as Croesus." (p. 132). An answer that not only calls up the splendour and riches of the Lydian King, but also emphasises the fact, that though Croesus' name became "a proverb for wealth" his wealth brought him no happiness, while Uncle Ponder's non-attachment to wealth was the key that opened the doors to perpetual and lasting happiness. Welty also does not use myth, just to manipulate "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity." Myth, in fact, forms the basis, the very threads from which she weaves the texture of her stories. Myth in the stories of The Golden Apples forms the link that binds the various strands of the stories together. The stories contained in The Golden Apples, were written as unconnected stories, but one can trace the connecting link in the mythical allusions. Almost all the stories and novels written by Welty contain myth. In some, like Shower of Gold and The Golden Apples the mythical allusions are obvious. In some others, like Death of a Travelling Salesman, it is not very obvious. One familiar with myth will be able to discern the mythical allusion in the name Bowman. Besides the mythical names that Welty has given her protagonists, thus making use of mythical allusions, Welty also resorts to intro-


ducing myth into her works by speaking of hyacinths, and statues of Juno, and Mercury, decorating the houses, of her characters. Myth is also hinted at by the role assigned to some of the characters in her story, as for example in "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies." The role assigned to the three old Ladies, who take upon themselves the task of deciding what's best for Lily Daw, is heightened by Welty's description of Mrs. Carson. Welty describes her as having a measuring tape round her neck, thus making explicit the fact, that the ladies were in fact enacting the roles assigned to the Fates - of spinning, weaving and cutting the thread of man's life. It is this varied, yet unique use of myth, that makes Welty's short stories rich in overtones and meaning, adding to their beauty and interest and thus rendering them some of the greatest short stories ever written.

Welty's use of fairy tales and legends require a special word of appreciation. Her use of them clearly indicates her wide reading and the ability to skilfully interweave them into her stories. *The Robber Bridegroom* is a romance that deals with myth, legends, and a vast number of fairy tales, thus trumpeting and acclaiming Welty's greatness as a writer. Introducing myth, legends or fairy tales into a story is a natural process - a process many writers have resorted to. The magnitude, subtlety and dexterity with which Welty makes use of myth, clearly points to a writer of exceptional excellence - which, undoubtedly Welty is.

In addition to these outstanding traits, Welty's prose style,
which is clear, original and evidently self-taught, has also won for her the honor of being 'original' and 'unique.' She has never strained her language for the sake of innovations and whose originality is in her unstudied observation of people and places, so that we see human nature as it had not been seen before. She is a great craftsman and thus a perfect case of art added to genius.

Louis D. Rubin has paid great tribute to Welty's style. He considers it one of her outstanding qualities as a writer, a quality that is mainly responsible for Welty's greatness as a writer in the twentieth century.

The most outstanding quality of Eudora Welty's art is her style, shimmering, hovering, elusive, fanciful, fastening on little things. Entirely feminine, it moves lightly, capriciously, mirroring the bemused, diverted quality of the people whom it describes. Like the humming birds that appear frequently in her stories, it darts here and there, never quite coming to rest, tirelessly invoking light, color, the variety of experience.

Welty's initial artistic interests - painting and photography have had a great influence upon her as a writer. The eye of the

painter is clearly evident in her descriptive passages, revealing her minute scrutiny of nature. An instance in point is "The Whistle," whose introductory descriptive passage, carries the reader mentally to the Morton's farm, enabling him to share in the bleakness, and the bitter cold of the winter. The Curtain of green with its impenetrable, thickly interlaced pattern of leaves, is another instance in point. Coupled with these minute descriptions are the vivid colors with which the stories are painted. A photograph imprisons a moment in time, so does art, painting, literature etc., and this is what one finds in Welty's fiction - a moment being caught and imprisoned in her pages, to afford pleasure and satisfaction to the readers.

In her long and distinguished career as a short story writer, Welty has held firmly to her commitment to art. She uses art to help others see, hear, taste, smell and to feel humanity expressing its sorrows, triumphs, joys, defeats and frustrations. It is this that makes her a major artist, one, who holds her own with Hawthorne, Mark Twain and Faulkner. Her use of myth, fantasy and homely realism has not only greatly enriched the American Short Story but has also added a further dimension to the form. Welty's reputation as a short story writer is tied up with the future of the short story, and the relative value that will be placed upon it. The advantage of a short story is that it can be viewed as a complete whole, in all its perfection, offering the reader that sense of pleasure and delight one experiences when looking at a rare, perfect and beautiful gem. Many of Welty's short stories offer this sense of delight and pleasure. "A Worn Path," and A Curtain of Green are a few examples.
Miss Welty has also extended the range and potential of the story by the variety of her experiments in length, subject matter, theme, form and feeling. Only when the totality of her work is known does one begin to see the whole as possibly greater than the sum of its parts. All she has hoped is to give us each story bright and new, like a surprise. She has wished no more than that we should see each particular story solitary - as a "little world in space, just as we can isolate one star in the sky by a concentrated vision."\(^{26}\)

The star that has to be isolated needs not much of an effort for concentration, as it draws the gazer's attention to itself by standing out by its brightness and sparkle.

An accurate assessment of Eudora Welty's and her contemporary short story writer's achievements and contributions to the development of the short story in America, at present, would be a difficult task. As it is only in perspective that one is able to view the development, the deviation, the contribution as well as the influence of a writer on other writers. One would not be wrong, if one backed Ray West in claiming that

\[\text{complete maturity may or may not be achieved by the present generation. Yet it seems likely now, that we may some}\]

day come to view the short story as the particular form through which American letters finally came of age, through which the life of its people and the vision of its artists more nearly approached full completion.

Welty's greatness as a short story writer, thus, lies in her style, technique, plot, theme, character portrayal, in the eye of the painter and the art of the photographer, that combine to make her stories, masterpieces of art. More than all these, it is Welty's unique use of myth and fantasy that make her one of the greatest short story writers in America, in the twentieth century, thus acclaiming her as a writer who belongs not to one age or time, but to all ages and all time.