Chapter 1

Introduction
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Eudora Alice Welty, one of America's greatest short story writers of the twentieth century, was born on April 13th 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, where she has spent most of her life. Welty's mother Mary Chestina Andrews Welty, hailed from West Virginia, and her father Chirstian Webb Welty from Ohio. Welty was the eldest of the three children. She was introduced to books at the early age of two, by her mother, who made it a habit to read to her. Referring to her passionate love of books Welty says:

I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them - with the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself. Still illiterate, I was ready for them, committed to all the reading I could give them.¹

An avid reader, Welty devoured everything she found around her, and could lay her hands on, including legends, Mississippi history, fairy tales and adult fiction. To her parents, Welty owed her early acquaintance to Mark Twain and Ring Lardner.

During her undergraduate days, Welty was greatly interested in Russian novelists. Writers like Virginia Woolf, Faulkner, and other modern writers, were also read by her during this period. Welty obtained her bachelor's degree in 1929 and being interested in equipping herself to earn a living, she entered the School of Business at Columbia University and took up advertising for a year. While at Columbia University, Welty enjoyed a pleasantly varied social life. On completion of the course, Welty tried for a job, but failed to procure one, as it was the years of the Depression, and so returned to Jackson, where she held a number of jobs in advertising and publicity, and did some free lance writing. Her job as Junior Publicity agent with the Works Progress Administration and with the Mississippi Advertising Commission, helped her blossom forth into an artist. A sensitive observer, Welty was attracted to the colors, shapes, and textures of the world around her. She was able quite early to combine her youthful interest in painting with a subsequently developed interest in photography.

Speaking of the experience she gained as a photographer, Welty says:

It had more than information and accuracy to teach me. I learned in the doing, how ready I had to be. Life doesn't hold still. A good snapshot stopped a moment from running away. Photography taught me that to be able to capture transience, by being able to click the shutter at
the crucial moment, was the greatest need I had. There were things a story writer needed to know. And I felt the need to hold transient life in words—there's so much more of life that only words can convey—strongly enough to last me as long as I lived. The direction my mind took was a writer's direction from the start, not a photographer's or a recorder's.2

In 1936, quite a number of Welty's unposed studies of Mississippi Negroes were displayed for a month, in a small New York camera shop. More important, was the publication of Welty's first short story in June of the same year. The story was Death of a Travelling Salesman, which appeared in a small magazine called Manuscript. This story was the natural outcome of a statement made to Welty by a travelling salesman. This story made Welty realise that she had touched upon her real subject, which was human relationship. During the next two years, The Southern Review published six of her stories including A Memory, A Piece of News and Petrified Man. A Collection of short stories, titled A Curtain of Green appeared in 1941. "Her stories were well received; and with her literary career safely launched, Miss Welty was able to give up odd jobs and devote herself more fully to writing."3 A series of other stories

2 Eudora Welty, One Writer's Beginnings, pp. 84-85.

followed in quick succession, *The Robber Bridegroom*, a short novel, in part derived from a Grimm folktale, was published in 1942, and her second collection of short stories, *The Wide Net*, in 1943. *Delta Wedding*, a full-length novel, appeared in 1946; a collection of connected stories titled *The Golden Apples* in 1949, and *The Ponder Heart* in 1954. Welty's last collection of stories appeared in 1955. Besides stories, Welty also tried her hand at criticism, and *Place in Fiction* appeared in 1957. 1972 was a landmark in Welty's career as a writer. It was the year, Welty was awarded the Gold medal for fiction, for the *The Optimist's Daughter*. In 1973 Welty received The Pulitzer Prize for the same work. *Losing Battles* appeared in 1970, and *The Eye of the Story* in 1978. Besides these, some essays and a poem were also published.

It is not difficult to assess Welty's greatness as a writer. All one has to do is to take into consideration the number of awards that were conferred upon her. Besides the awards received in 1972 and 1973 there were those received for *The Wide Net* and *Livvie is Back*, these were the O. Henry Memorial contest awards, then there was the Dean Howell's medal for *The Ponder Heart*. If these awards are insufficient to assure one of the author's greatness, then a consideration into the fact that Welty's works have not only been dramatised and produced on Broadway, but they have also been anthologised and translated into many languages would be sufficient assurance.
Welty's short stories came at a time when America was playing a very leading role in the development of the short story as a literary genre. This does not imply that the short story came into existence only during the nineteenth and twentieth century. The short story is as old as man himself and springs from man's urge and impulse to tell a story - an impulse that is as natural and spontaneous as breathing. The story teller of ancient times was always respected and honored. He was given high honors and important offices, by the primitive tribes, and ranked in importance next to the chief. The stories that were narrated were based on the superstitions, fears and fancies of the people. The myths of the present day are not much more than such stories.

It has taken the story longer than any other literary form to reach the perfection of art. The drama had become art by the fifth century B.C. The novel took somewhat longer, coming of age in the eighteenth century. The essay was well defined by the seventeenth century and poetry like painting assumes new shapes, but does not progress being full-grown at birth. But the arrival of the story at the status of art is a fact of only the past hundred years.4

The existence of the short story as a distinct literary form for about a century and half, has enabled the American writer to participate in its development from the beginning. This does not mean that no other country had a share in developing the short story. Other countries have also had a share in contributing to its development, chief among them being France, Russia and England, but it is particularly in America, that the short story has flourished. Writers like Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Twain, etc. played a leading role in establishing and developing this form, thus giving us a body of literature of great richness and variety.

The publication of *The Sketch Book* in 1820, by Washington Irving (1783 - 1859) marks the first notable advance in the development of the short narrative in America. Irving collaborated with his brother, and with James Paulding and published a series of essays and sketches, like Addison and Steele's *The Spectator*, entitled *Salmagundi*. There is perhaps no other story in American literature as famous as that of the lazy but likeable Rip-Van-Winkle. *Rip-Van-Winkle* is a rich and subtle story, with psychological overtones.

The artistry which enabled Irving to give enduring interest and appeal to *Rip-Van-Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and which is present also, if in a lesser degree elsewhere in his short fiction and the influence he exerted on Hawthorne, Poe and other writers, justify
calling him, as historians of American Literature have done, the 'father of the American short story.'

Hawthorne (1804-1864) the next important figure to contribute to the development of the short story, used symbolism and allegory, to penetrate into the moral and spiritual nature of man. *My Kinsman Major Molineux,* and *Young Goodman Brown* are two of Hawthorne's best short stories. Though he was not much concerned about technique, Hawthorne was able to achieve a compactness of structure and unity in his short stories. Melville is regarded as the only American before the Civil War, excluding Hawthorne, to have produced noteworthy stories with profound significant themes. His *Bartleby* anticipates the initiation story as written by Hemingway. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) if not the first, was one among those who regarded the short story as belonging to the highest form of art. It was Poe who suggested the formal discipline necessary for writing a short story. He implied that the creation of a story is a mechanical and highly conscious process. Poe liked to think of himself as a realist and he believed that art should be firmly based on life. Poe relied entirely on effect in some of his stories as for example *The Cask of Amontillado.* He is credited with being the father of modern detective fiction, with stories like *The Purloined Letter.* Poe can be

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regarded as the forerunner of such very different writers like Dostoevski, Sri Arthur Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells and R.L. Stevenson.

If the critical revaluations of our own day have tended to exalt Melville and Hawthorne and to reduce the stature of Edgar Allan Poe; it is nevertheless to these three men that we must look for the beginnings of the short story in America, the short story as we know it to-day.\(^6\)

There were many writers, before the Civil War and also after it who were responsible in some way or the other to the development of the short story in America. A consideration of all these writers in a work of this sort, would be an impossibility. So while admitting to many contributory streams and rivulets, it is the main current alone, that is focused upon here. This brings us to Mark Twain (1835-1910) who was supreme in the yarn and comic anecdote, as is revealed in Baker's Blue Jay Yarn. Twain was too much the raconteur and improviser to be able to give his tales appropriate form and artistic unity. Many American writers are indebted to Mark Twain, but their debt is to the Mark Twain of Huckleberry Finn "who spoke in the language of real speech, with high art and truth, on the great

theme of the encounter of innocence with experience. To O. Henry (1862-1910) the credit goes of carrying the carefully plotted story to its ultimate length. None of O. Henry's predecessor's exploited the contrived story with as much deliberation and calculation or with more ease than O. Henry. He was often referred to as a yankee Maupassant, and is praised for his literary artistry and broad understanding of humanity. Though Henry James (1843-1916) did not contribute much to radically modifying the form of the short story, he is credited with, limiting the point of view, instead of employing omniscient narration. Henry James' conception of fiction as a fine art, exerted a tremendous influence on twentieth century short story writers.

Modern criticism, taking its lead from James, sees the short story as an organic whole, in which none of its parts may be considered in insolation and in which each element must contribute towards the final effect. Incident, action and atmosphere also serving and directed towards the final effect. The influence of Flaubert, Chekhov and Joyce, in addition to the newer psychological theories, also had a great share in forming and moulding the short story into a form that is familiar to us today.

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The decade of the 1920's can be regarded as one of the great periods in the development of the American short story. Anderson Hemingway, Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter being the most important contributors to the development of this genre, during this period. Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) makes use of a lot of verbal irony and symbols. Hemingway exerted a great influence on Chekhov, Joyce and Katherine Mansfield. Referring to The Old Man and the Sea which won the Pulitzer prize, Voss says it has much poetic beauty and richness of meaning. "In its conception and execution it is certainly the most ambitious and in many respects the most impressive short narrative of a great master of the short story".  

William Faulkner (1897-1962) was another name for a world-for history-that could not be reduced to a style. There was a familiar elusiveness about him, even at the end. He had always made a point of being completely private, the most inaccessible and unassimilable writer in the United States.

Hemingway always wrote straight at the reader, to present him with a picture. Faulkner's books seemed part of each other, like

dreams of the same man. Unlike Hemingway who trained himself to write each time like a champion who must not lose. Faulkner gave the impression first of not writing for anybody, then of not knowing whether he had an audience, and finally of not caring what this audience thought.\footnote{Alfred Kazin, \textit{Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Story Tellers from Hemingway to Mailer} (Toronto: Little Brown and Co., 1973), pp. 23-24.}

Faulkner was the embodiment of everything that made Southern writers feel that their time had come. For many Faulkner is the South - in literature and in life. At a time when American writers helplessly attacked bigness, commercialism the facility of mass communication, Faulkner expressed the primeval force at the heart of human conduct, the violence and intractability and mad obstinacy of the human heart. Mark Twain at last, had a successor, a spirit as large as his own. Faulkner's best stories are those in which he wrote of his own region as for example \textit{Red Leaves}, which is a masterpiece of short fiction. \textit{Go Down Moses} is a significant collection of stories that shows Faulkner's talent at its finest. This and the other collections of short stories, give testimony to Faulkner's weaknesses, his tendency on occasions to be obscure, over rhetorical, didactic and fuzzy. Almost all of them show to some extent Faulkner's magnificent powers of invention and his superlative story telling genius. "Faulkner
is not only the best known of Southern writers, he is among the best known writers of this century in any language and deservedly so. 10

The Depression years of the 1930's saw much social protest reflected in American fiction. The best of the short story writers to come into prominence in the 1930's is Katherine Anne Porter (1894-) Porter has written only a small body of fiction, three volumes of stories and one novel, yet, as Robert Penn Warren has remarked, she is a writer whose artistry and originality entitle her to be ranked with such acknowledged masters of the modern short story as Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Anderson and Hemingway. The title story of Flowering Judas is "one of the finest of all twentieth century stories". 11 It conveys its meaning and achieves its comic, ironic and poignant effect through style and symbol in a highly subtle and complex way.

The achievement of the short story writers of the 1940's cannot as yet be assessed, as their careers are incomplete. It is sufficient to state that the most talented among them continue in the footsteps of Hawthorne, and Melville through Henry James to Ernest Hemingway, down to Faulkner. The term Southern Literature came into prominence during this period and came to be applied to the


works of writers like Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote and Flannery O'Connor. The term does not imply any particular or common style that could link the writers together, but rather to the fact that they hailed from the South. Each of them is different in tone, style, subject and approach from the other. Each is unique in his own way. Welty's stories show variety in both tone and manner, but they also develop a consistent attitude towards the world in which she lives, towards her experiences of that region, whose present she was familiar with, and whose past she gleaned from the talk of the elders and from her reading. Referring to the attitude of these writers to their craft, Ray B. West states that they did not view their craft as a means of gaining a livelihood, or of building a reputation, but as a means

Where by significant human values may be disclosed and examined. Their total work is also distinguished by a high percentage of significant stories - stories which, when viewed as the production of a decade, represent an important contribution to the short story in our generation. . . . As craftsmen, these authors may be said to have incorporated in their best work most of the virtues of their predecessors of the 1920's.
and 1930's. In a sense, and despite their differences, they may be said to be carrying on in the tradition of those author's whose achievements we rate highest in the history of the American Short Story.12

'Eudora Welty, when questioned as to if she ever felt part of a community of Southern writers, including those of her time like Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Carson McCuller and Flannery O'Connor, her answer was a definite no. Welty claimed that "although she and fellow writers knew and respected each other's work .....she was not aware of any definite links or passing - about of influences. Yet no where else in American Literature is there a group of accomplished women writers so closely bound together by regional qualities of setting, character and time".13 Westling goes on to claim that the Southern women writers share a definite historical tradition, and so one should not be surprised to find much closer resemblance among them than acknowledged. A vivid pervasive sense of place and local color binds the works of Welty, McCullers and O'Connor. The three of them grew up in towns not very far from each other.

Besides this, Westling also finds an "interrrelationships of theme, character, and symbol, which give immense value to their collective work - a kind of richness and power which is far less apparent or affecting when they are taken separately."¹⁴ The Southern writers of the twentieth century are in fact exploring their own personal identity, and hence there is both ample love and hate in the works of these modern Southern writers. Instead of uncritically accepting the political, social and religious standards of their community, these writers are conducting "a searching and often agonizing critique of those values within themselves."¹⁵

One wonders where to draw the line, as the reader is left with two contradictory claims. The one, claiming that Welty and the women writers of the South are Regional and are bound by time and place and the other claim, backed by the authors themselves, is that they belong to no Southern School, and that each is individualistic and original in her own way. There are similarities in their works, as for example the "preoccupations with feminine identity which are shaped by the traditional Southern veneration of the lady."¹⁶

¹⁴ Louise Westling, p. 2.
There could also be differences, as for example their treatment of place. Though Welty does repeatedly turn to the Delta Region of Mississippi to provide that sense of place, which forms the basis of some of her work, yet Welty's stories are discussed as transcending locale. The term regionalism, applied to Welty's work, is only the result of a superficial judgement, as Welty views the innocent life within, and her emphasis is more on the character and the incidents. Her works re-create for the reader, the loneliness, the longings, the fears, the hopes and the dreams of the characters who people her universe. These people are universal, people one might encounter anywhere, in one's journey through life. Welty's world is the wide world, and not just Mississippi or the South. Further, a reading of O'Connor, McCullers and Welty's works would clearly bring home the difference. Welty's plots are modest, her settings real and her characters simple. Carson McCullers was at war with the world. She left the South and lived in New York, a sexually unconventional life among intellectuals and artists, and it is her battle with the world that finds expression in her stories of tomboys who failed or were punished. O'Connor's major concern is with problems of human pride and ultimate spiritual destiny. Her works on the other hand are regarded as the most intense and classically crafted fiction of all the three. "Virginia Woolf's description of Charlotte Bronte fits both McCullers and O'Connor: 'One sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be
deformed and twisted. . . . She will write of herself where she
should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot! Welty
was at peace with the world and with her lot. Her characters are
created with love and concern and not with hate or anger. Anger is
evident in some of the short stories, as for example The Burning,
but its a justified anger at the beastly, and inhumane nature of man.
These differences and deviations clearly indicate that these writers
cannot be labelled Southerners by virtue of their style, treatment
or subject matter. They could be called Southerners, for the simple
reason that they hail from the south.

Welty's voracious reading helped her when it came to writing
her stories. The numerous legends, fairy tales, history and myths
that she had read, are used in her stories, not as a means of enhanc­
ing the beauty of her work or as a comparison, or to amplify or
clarify a point, but it forms the very basis, the very threads, from
which she wove the fabric of her stories. No other writer, before
Welty has such an achievement to his credit. The Golden Apples,
The Robber Bridegroom, Delta Wedding, "Asphodel," "The Worn Path," to
mention a few, are works in which myth, fairy tales and legends
are woven into the stories. Dreams and fantasies also form a major
portion of Welty's works. "A Piece of News," "Old Mr. Marblehall" are
examples of works, where Welty has clearly indicated that one does
not have to read books on psychology to learn about fantasising,
or day-dreaming. All one has to do is be alive to oneself and
to the world around one.

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17 Louise Westling, p. 5.
Every writer, one believes, has a string of authors, he has admired, and strived to follow. Welty, one believes, is no exception. In an interview with Charles Ruas, 18 Welty referring to the constant question regarding herself and Faulkner, that is, if she was influenced by that great writer, stated that she was happy she came from the same place, other than this, she found no other connection between herself and Faulkner. Welty admitted to Chekhov being her ideal, though she did not consciously try to base her work on a master like him. She also added that she felt closer in spirit to Chekhov. "Chekhov is one of us - so close to to-day's world, to my mind and very close to the South . . . . His Russian humor seems to me kin to the humor of a Southerner." 19 Welty's work reflects the careful disorder of Chekhovian fiction, coupled with her accurate yet spontaneous rendering of detail that was peculiarly her own. Welty admired Virginia Woolf. She was greatly captivated by Woolf's To The Lighthouse. Welty claimed that once certain expressions from To The Lighthouse were heard, one could never forget them, 'It's like sending a bucket down the well, it always comes up full.' 20 Welty's work reflects 'the modernism, in some of its facets at least that characterises Woolf's fiction. The door she opened for Welty, she herself had passed through with Joyce, Kafka, Proust,

20 Ibid., p. 79.
Musil and other early twentieth century makers of experimental avant garde fiction.\textsuperscript{21}

Welty observed the world with an intense and unclouded gaze that penetrated beneath the surface of the harsh, unprepossessing reality, with a passionate sympathy, and the truth perceived, often yielded an image of beauty that was arresting and breath taking. Welty admired Jane Austen, and owes much to her.

With little interest in history or social themes, she concentrates on the ordinary people of her country who go about the business of loving and hating and talking about their neighbours, as if there were nothing more important in the world. But within this close range, she scrutinizes her subject and registers its vibrations with a tenderness of attention that places her closer to the heart of her region than Faulkner himself.\textsuperscript{22}

In American fiction after the 1940's human relationships have become more important than philosophical speculations, and love has proved to be more vital than nuclear physics. The writers of this period were able to find solace in the hope that if tomorrow could not be better, it at least could not be worse. The terrors of the forties and fifties, were, for the present at least forgotten, obliterated from the mind, leaving the writer free to rejoice


\textsuperscript{22} Elmo Howell, "Eudora Welty and The City of Man" \textit{The Georgia Review}, 33, No. 4 (Winter 1979), p. 770.
and partake in limited pleasures. Welty's short stories as well as her fiction are a clear indication of the pleasure and joy she experienced in looking at and appreciating the world around her. It was not her aim to criticise the people, but rather to reveal life as she saw it, thus permitting the characters to reveal themselves, and leaving the reader free to draw his own conclusions. Referring to this idea of hers Welty has stated

I feel there is a close connection between fiction and the real world. No matter how far you may range in fancy or imagination, I feel that your life line is connected to the real life around you. I couldn't take off without a firm base, so I do use the real world as well as I can. It helps me, defines things for me, and makes me understand my feelings about life in general. Unless any story connects with life, it doesn't have an impact on anybody, does it?23

Welty, like T.S. Eliot,24 was of the opinion that a writer's private life should be kept private. What a writer writes about

23 Charles Ruas, Conversation with American Writers (Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd, 1986), pp. 5-6.
should be, an objective piece what he has put down on paper and
not some account of his life; Welty believed that a writer cannot
write about any feeling or emotion that he has not experienced.

What I like to do is invent the characters, situations, action that drama-
tizes it, which will act out my emotions. . . . So I often write about
some things it would seem to you I wouldn't know about, but I know about
them deeply in my own experience, of my own perceiving, or I would
not want to write about them. Well I've never murdered anybody. I
have murderers in my stories. But I can certainly feel and understand anger
and so on.25

Statements that are backed by Welty's short stories. A perfect example
is Where is the Voice Coming From, a story that deals with an actual
incident, an assassination, and Welty was able to give a perfect picture
of the murderer, even before anything pertaining to the assassination
was published, thus clearly underscoring her greatness as a writer.

Welty, a master of the tall tale, is a humorist, as well as
a chronicler of man's helplessness before the forces of time and
change. These, and other traits - a clear intense, unclouded vision,
an ability to see and record everything she saw, the gift or pene-

25 John Griffin Jones, Eudora Welty : Mississippi Writers Talking
I ed., Peggy W. Prenshaw (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,
trating to the core of life, in addition to her manner of narration and presentation, the skill with which she dexterously and intricately weaves legends, folk tales and myths into the fabric of her story, have obtained for Welty the title of being not only an outstanding writer of her generation, but also one of the greatest modern Short story writers of America.