Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing pages, an attempt was made to examine the various factors—familial, communal, sexual and racial—that shape the female consciousness in the novels of Welty. It now remains to draw the threads of this discussion together and indicate the main line of development in this novelist’s approach to women’s issues and in her delineation of the female character.

Among the most potent influences in the formation of an individual’s character and outlook is that of family relationships. Welty portrays the family in its domestic setting, exploring the intimate and collective bond among its members and revealing the strength and weakness of such family ties. She makes evident that whenever the family insists upon viewing experience exclusively from the outside and moulding reality according to corporate desires, the effect is to stifle the growth and development of the individual psyche. One’s deeper emotional needs are best served by intimate personal relationships and not through communal interaction. The mythic archetype of this bonding is that between Demeter and Kore. By placing the female-centred myth of Demeter and Kore as central to the narrative of Delta Wedding and The Optimist’s Daughter, Welty asserts the older feminine values of nurturance and co-operation upon which civilization depends for its continuity. The psycho-analytic paradigm for female development offered by Nancy Chodorow is borne out in the mother-daughter bond between Ellen Fairchild and the natural and surrogate daughters in Delta Wedding and in the
relationship between Becky and her mother and between Becky and her daughter Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter*.

By picturing the Southern community's disapproval of women's intellectual development, its double standards, its insistence on submissiveness and restraint in women, the strong defences women have to develop to retain their self-respect in the face of the cohesiveness of the community, and the power of the past living on in oral tradition, Welty demonstrates that communal factors are just as important as family relations in their influence on the mentality of women. This theme is highlighted in *The Golden Apples*, *The Ponder Heart*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter*. While examining the role of sexual and racial factors in shaping the female consciousness, Welty dramatises the failure of love, the outbursts of sexual violence in rape and murder, sexual exhibitionism, sexual intimidation, sexual victimization and the insanity of sexually abused women on the one hand, and sexual gratification resulting in a contented marital life on the other. Welty illustrates how the lives of black women are weighed down by the twin burden of racism and sexism, how the black female protagonists are strengthened by their native traditions, how ethnic differences influence relations between blacks and whites.

The novelist's portrayal of unmarried women who are emotionally satisfied marks a significant departure from the literary stereotype of the sterile old spinster. She grants a near-heroic stature to those who stand apart from their family and peers. Their fulfilment depends on their detachment from family life and their readiness to accept the pain that can result from such an alienation. Imaginative, independent women who do not embrace the
time-honoured roles of wife and mother are almost invariably regarded as eccentric by other women whose identity depends upon their place within the family structure. In their struggle against the condemnation of others and the devaluation of society, these women are forced to develop singular strengths. Their being spinster may enable them to have a better understanding of themselves and others. Liberated from too deep an emotional attachment to persons they are better able to cultivate impersonal social love and draw upon unsuspected reserves of strength in their rich interior life. The maiden aunts Primrose and Jim Allen in *Delta Wedding* lead a contented life, passing down stories of the ancient family matriarch and engaging in the feminine arts of cooking, sewing and gardening.

Welty's unmarried women often choose socially useful occupations like school teaching as seen in the case of Miss Julia Mortimer in *Losing Battles*. Miss Julia's respect for learning, her attempt to understand the significance of her own experiences, her battle against the ignorance and small-mindedness of the Banner community, her reflective nature, the writing of the will which expresses the culmination of her reflection and introspection, and her battle with her pupil Gloria who tries to find an identity through marriage against her expressed wishes mark her off as a woman of a radical temperament and outlook. Not surprisingly she is mocked for her advanced views and strength of character by the Renfro-Beecham women who feel threatened by her potential influence on their children. Miss Julia, who has no living kin, dies on the very morning when the Renfro-Beecham clan gathers to celebrate the birthday of Granny Vaughn. Against the festive background, spurred on by imminence of death, Julia engages in an extensive re-examination of her past
which argues a concern for integrity not to be found in her self-complacent detractors. Lexie Renfro, herself a spinster and a former student of Miss Julia who acts as her nurse during her last days, displays the less agreeable traits of the typical old maid. Like the postmistress in “Why I Live at the P. O.,” Lexie is embittered by her exclusion from family and community life. Being unimaginative, inflexible, shallow and of an unfeeling nature, she appears as a precursor of Fay Chisom whose rigidity prevents her growth. Lexie takes refuge in incessant monologue in which she attempts to justify herself and her actions but succeeds only in cutting a ridiculous figure.

Many of Welty’s female protagonists are unmarried women of considerable imaginative resource who seem to find fulfilment in self-knowledge and self-expression through art. It may be that, being a spinster herself, Welty is inclined to ennoble spinsterhood and look upon the duties and loyalties attendant upon marriage and the rearing of family as an impediment to artistic creation. In Welty’s fiction, self-reliance confers strength upon characters who free themselves from the debilitatingly blind loyalties to family traditions and conventional ideas of family behaviour, as happens in the case of the women artists, Virgie and Laurel. Often, too, this freedom from personal attachments may extend to freedom from love of material possessions. The most courageous female characters are capable of dissociating themselves from attachment to material possessions which are customarily cherished by women since they realize that love’s continuity lies not in making a fetish of objects like quilts and breadboards. The girl artist in “A Memory,” the music teacher Miss Eckhart and her favourite student Virgie in The Golden Apples are spinsters who achieve this self-sufficiency and who
have come to look upon art as the most effective medium for self-realization and self-fulfilment; so does the middle-aged widow Laurel in *The Optimist’s Daughter*. Most of the female protagonists in Welty are self-consciously assertive like the girl-artist in “A Memory.” Edna Earle, the spinster who manages the Beulah hotel in *The Ponder Heart*, takes on the character of a mother figure for Grandpa Ponder and Uncle Daniel with her protectiveness and assertiveness.

On a close reading of Welty’s shorter and long fiction, an evolution can be traced in character drawing from pre-occupation with female types that are markedly negative, repressed and repressive in the early stories to those that are open to liberating ideas and influences in the later works. In her first collection of stories, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941) several of the older female characters appear to be emotionally unbalanced, repressive and negative and their repressions are reflected in the distortions of their mind and outlook. There are typical “old maids” like the tyrannical ladies in “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” ill-tempered women like Octavia in “Clytie,” frustrated women like Old Addie in “A Visit of Charity.” Old Pheonix Jackson in “A Worn Path” with her strength of mind, Ruby Fisher in “A Piece of News” with her youthful energy and independence and Marjorie in “Flowers for Marjorie” with the sobering influence of marriage and motherhood stand in contrast to them and to counterbalance them. While the ladies in “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” are acting self-satisfiedly as the defenders of the patriarchal society assigning roles for men and women, Old Addie in “A Visit of Charity” expresses her suppressed resentment against society in her sullen refusal to be sociable. Mrs. Larkin in the title story “A Curtain of Green”
voices her rage against the social restrictions placed on women and launches a vigorous attack on society's standards of women's behaviour.

Betty Friedan's observation, “for woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfilment—autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self actualization—is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted”¹ proves right in the case of the failed woman Clytie in the story “Clytie.” Since family and society repress her inner desire for self-fulfilment, she retaliates by turning rebellious; her repressive sister Octavia is similarly enraged against those who thwart her natural impulses. Though “A Worn Path” glorifies the self-generated heroism of a woman, “A Curtain of Green” questions such an ideal. “A Memory” foreshadows the later works The Golden Apples and The Optimist’s Daughter in which isolation is a necessary condition for creative fulfilment. Vande Kieft feels that after the first two collections, human isolation and loneliness are not perceived as necessarily tragic, but are “right and necessary.”² Like Ellen in Delta Wedding and Cassie Morrison in The Golden Apples, the girl-artist approaches an understanding of life’s mysteries through her function as an observer and interpreter. In her introduction to A Curtain of Green, Katherine Anne Porter expresses her preference for stories like “A Memory” and “A Worn Path” in which the “external act and the internal voiceless life of the human imagination almost meet and mingle on the mysterious threshold between dream and waking, one reality refusing to admit or confirm the existence of the other, yet both conspiring toward the same end.”³ The girl artist’s aggressive imagination and her ability to structure her experiences rescue her from despair. Her sensitivity to art as non-verbal communication
as well as her “presentiments” about the mysteries of human relationships are
part of a pattern which is seen again in *Delta Wedding, The Golden Apples*
and *The Optimist’s Daughter*.

*The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), Welty’s first novel, in which there is a
blending of historical, fantastic and fairytale elements, features a repressive
stepmother in the character of Salome. She takes the traditional position of
the inhibiting, forbidding, and punishing wicked stepmother who herself gets
punished in the end. Guided by unresolved jealousies, she envies her
stepdaughter Rosamond, tries to monopolize her husband and waits for an
opportunity to destroy her stepdaughter. *The Robber Bridegroom* and the
second volume of stories, *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943) mark a shift
in Welty’s comic art from comedies of rigidity to comedies of transformation or
rebirth in which women are prominently featured. In stories written after
1942, the year of her first novel, Welty is more and more concerned with
female figures who act as role models, women with nurturing, supportive
qualities. In *The Wild Net and Other Stories*, there are many strong women
characters like Hazel Jamieson in “The Wide Net,” Josie, Cornella and the
cornetist in “The Winds,” Livvie in “Livvie” and Jenny Lockhart in “At the
Landing.” Except for Livvie and Jenny, the female protagonists in *The Wide
Net* are supported by a small group of independent women, all defenders of
the feminine faith. Unlike in *A Curtain of Green*, the early collection featuring
old repressive women who are prisoners of their psyches, the liberating and
empowering effect of an older woman artist on a young girl’s imagination is
pictured in “The Winds.” Josie, the young girl takes two women as role
models who teach her the art of “metamorphosis,” Cornella, an orphan girl,
and an old woman musician. The repressive foster mother of Cornella and the overprotective mother of Josie are balanced by the nourishing mother figure of the old musician, who teaches her the metamorphic power of art. Cornella is as rebellious as Easter in “Moon Lake,” Virgie and Miss Eckhart in “June Recital.” The highly imaginative Josie who is neither self-sufficient as Phoenix nor dependent as Livvie develops a spiritual relationship with a powerful mentor as does Virgie with Miss Eckhart in *The Golden Apples*.

In *Delta Wedding* (1946), Ellen Fairchild is the Demeter figure mothering, nurturing and protecting the Kore figures and other members of the family. She uses her intellectual and emotional faculties to empower others, to build other people’s strength, resources, effectiveness, and well-being. In contrast to Ellen, her sister-in-law Robbie Reid appears as a repressive woman who is incapable of creating life-enhancing relationships with members of the family except with her husband, George Fairchild. Young women like Dabney, Shelley and Laura in *Delta Wedding* are confused by perceptions which they cannot express either to one another or to the adults within the family. Welty conveys the young women’s unfocused desires through evoking a lyrical description of their longing which seems to be bound up with memories crystallizing around specific landscapes in “A Memory” and “At the Landing.” Robbie’s feistiness distinguishes her as an individual and allies her to both Virgie and Gloria who also fight for their individuality which they feel is threatened by the intense cohesiveness of relationships within families.

*The Golden Apples* (1949), the third collection of stories, presents heroic women along with comic portraits of male protagonists like Loch
Morrison, King MacLain and the more sombre figures of Ran and Eugene MacLain, who become the primary target of Welty's satirical gaze for the first time. The narrator in the opening story “Shower of Gold”—Katie Rainey—expresses the Morgana women's indignation at King MacLain who marries Snowdie Hudson and then flouts that marriage by wandering in and out of the town and surrounding woods seducing women. But the husbands of Morgana consider him a hero though they are jealous of all the attention he gets. “Sir Rabbit” is a mock-epic version of King MacLain. “Moon Lake” is an expansion of “The Winds” as it centres on the relationship between an aristocratic adolescent girl and an orphan girl. While Jinny Love Stark and Nina Carmichael take the place of Josie in “The Winds,” Easter is a later version of Cornella. Both “June Recital” and “The Wanderers” show a continuation of Welty's concern with kinds of power or powerlessness that may affect women who are outsiders. Only Virgie Rainey, who is clearly portrayed as a heroic woman, manages eventually to control and direct the course of her life. Cassie Morrison's perceptions cast light on the principal characters and on her own personality, indirectly, in “June Recital.” It is the meaning of past events which interests Cassie, who is in this respect a forerunner of Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter* and a successor of Ellen Fairchild in *Delta Wedding*.

Female heroism not only involves moments of insight but also demands the ability to incorporate into one's life whatever one learns from these moments. Welty's strong female protagonists eventually see the need for changes in their lives. Upon the death of a parent, these women have the freedom to embrace a new way of life. Like Virgie, Laurel also chooses to leave the small town of her birth, on realizing the oppressive nature of society.
Heroic female protagonists like Virgie and Laurel manage to transcend both sentimentality and the almost exclusive involvement with family and material possessions. In *The Golden Apples*, the power of art is actualized in the lives of the spinsters Miss Eckhart, Virgie and Cassie whose artistic creativity takes precedence over the creative power of sexuality. It is the androgynous view of Miss Eckhart and Virgie which equips them with a sustaining sense of their own worth. In her relations with her mother Virgie is empowered by love and bondedness. Virgie possesses the independent thinking of a new woman who cannot restrict her rebellious acts within the conventional family domain. Gathering up courage by self-discovery, Virgie and later on Laurel transgress all the histories and stereotypes that have imprisoned the lives of women.

The comic novel, *The Ponder Heart* (1954), narrated by the eccentric spinster Edna Earle is an adaptation of the comic woman's monologue used in early stories like "Why I live at the P. O." and "Petrified Man." Edna Earle, the mother figure trying to guard the male Ponders against the consequences of the ponder heart philosophy of life stands in sharp contrast to Bonnie Dee with her erotic and indifferent femininity, threatening the continuity of the family. Fay Chisom, the young second wife of Judge McKelva in *The Optimist's Daughter*, is an heir to Bonnie Dee Peacock, the young second wife of Uncle Daniel. Careless and purposeless, lacking imagination and initiative, Fay is incapable of performing the duties of a devoted selfless wife that is the hallmark of the Southern aristocratic woman. The repressive Bonnie Dee is counterbalanced by the assertive and ambitious Edna Earle. The Peacocks in *Ponder Heart* are the forerunners of the Dalzells and Chisoms, the self-preoccupied families introduced in *The Optimist's Daughter*, who lead an insensible uncaring life.
The Bride of the Innisfallen (1955), Welty's collection of stories, exposes themes in European settings suggested by the author's own travels abroad. The title story "The Bride of the Innisfallen" involves the perceptions of a young wife who leaves her husband and travels alone through Wales to Ireland in an attempt to realise her identity. This story and "Going to Naples" seem to lack the authenticity and colour of her Mississippi fiction since she is very keen on capturing the flavour of the foreign environment. Welty recasts the male-oriented Circe-Odysseus myth by relating the story through Circe's point of view in "Circe." The story "Kin" is the most important source for her longest novel Losing Battles (1970). The strongly individualist Gloria in Losing Battles attempts to keep up her identity against the pressures towards conformity exerted by the clan. Her jealousy and revulsion against the family arise from her possessive love of her husband. The frustrating dilemma of loving the favoured man in the extended family which regards her as an intruder, and the strong desire for a relationship free of outside interference place her on a par with Robbie in Delta Wedding.

The pattern that gets established in Welty's fiction by 1970 is the necessity for a naive young woman to face the consequences of her dream of social or sexual love, though they are less disastrous for the dreamer than for the people she interacts with. In Losing Battles, Gloria Renfro's exclusive love for her husband Jack is reciprocated. Fay, the young second wife in The Optimist's Daughter cannot materialise her dreams of a sexually-satisfied married life with her aged husband. Even the young woman Laurel's dream of an ideal marital life is thwarted by the unexpected death of her loving partner. Julia Mortimer makes lifelong efforts to extend the benefits of
education and banish ignorance from the Banner community. Just as Miss Eckhart's hopes for Virgie are destroyed by Virgie's insistence upon her own individuality, Julia's expectations are quashed by Gloria's efforts to find an identity through marriage. Miss Eckhart's role as a mentor might have inspired the author to reconceive the role of the female school teacher in Julia.

If, in *Losing Battles*, Welty explores from contrary angles the consequences of spinsterhood for the spinsters themselves, in *The Optimist's Daughter*, her last novel, she studies the polarities of response to widowhood of those reduced to this state. While Lexie's insensitivity and shallowness reappear in Fay, Julia's respect for learning and her interest in self-knowledge and self-fulfilment emerge again in Laurel. The determination to learn from the past and the commitment to comprehend and assimilate the experience of others along with her insistence upon her own independence mark Laurel as the most successful outsider in all of Welty's fiction. She has a successful career and an honourable adult identity unlike any of her predecessors like Virgie or Gloria. As a middle aged widow with a brief but contented family life to her credit, Laurel counterbalances her widowed stepmother Fay. The repressive, rigid Fay is an antithesis to Becky, the determined, ambitious first wife of Judge McKelva. As Noel Polk has put it, Fay is so easily made happy, so easily satisfied since she is so selfish and materialistic. In the *Robber Bridegroom*, in *The Ponder Heart* and in *The Optimist's Daughter* Welty pictures the antithetical second-wives like Salome, Bonne Dee and Fay. Laurel eventually feels compassion for Fay who is spiritually maimed and for Judge McKelva whose optimism blinds him to the selfishness of Fay and allows him to marry her.
Welty's novels provide readers with illuminating experiences that are broadly human and centrally feminine. In her efforts to contradict the traditional narrative discourse empowering patriarchy, she brings back the traditions of female strength and independence through a selective use of myth. In contrast to the heroic masculine tradition that portrays nature as an antagonist, Welty pictures human experience as evolving in harmony with the rhythms of natural processes and the lives of women as central to this creative interaction.
Notes


2 Vande Kieft, Eudora Welty 33.

3 Katherine Anne Porter, Introd. to A Curtain of Green xxi.

4 Peter Schmidt, The Heart of the Story 121.


6 Louise Westling, Eudora Welty 50.