Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Eudora Alice Welty's achievement as a post-war Southern American novelist is singularly marked by her creation of a feminocentric fictional world of which the constitutive elements are the immediate and lived experience of women in interaction among themselves and with the world around them, their beliefs and value systems, their role and identity as women in the family and community. Born and brought up in a sheltered Southern community, where the distinction had been fairly clearly drawn between the roles of men and women despite the official veneration of women, Welty investigates the Southern world with a satiric gaze and depicts the centrality of the feminine which masculine literary tradition tends to defame or marginalize. Through more than half a century of fiction writing, Welty has consistently portrayed women's imaginative quest for a distinctive identity and for meaningful relationships, placing female consciousness as the nucleus of many of her works. As John A. Allen observes, “for Eudora Welty, showing the action of a novel through a woman’s eyes is not an act of aggression but of illumination.”

Welty has expressed her preference against being labelled as a ‘woman writer’ or a ‘feminist’. “I’m not interested in any kind of a feminine repartee,” she told Charles Bunting in 1972. “All that talk of women’s lib doesn’t apply at all to women writers. We’ve always been able to do whatever we’ve wished.” She claims that her gender has never been a factor in her career as a writer and that the women’s movement is not an issue for writers since the
extreme behaviour of some activists has made comedians of all of them. By making the creative, inner self the very basis of her works Welty effectively dismantles the illiberal ideology that holds that creativity and the ability to express the source and nature of one’s creative impulse are a male prerogative. To Welty, literary achievement is a creative effort unscathed by sex.

The lively interest and attention with which readers all over the world have received the works of Welty, and the extensive research already being done on various aspects of her writings underscore her stature as a Southern writer. In the current rather frenzied search for “female consciousness” and female imagination, Welty’s works have not been given due critical attention. Welty explores the human consciousness as both ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, influencing and being influenced by the psycho-social conditions of life. Since the human psyche is not only the outcome of specific social and material conditions of life but also the cause of human behaviour, the diverse personal and social relationships are of immense importance in moulding the mentality of a sensitive individual. As surely as there are definite differences in the physical constitution of man and woman, there are differences in their approach toward events, issues, situations, relationships and commitments. As Eric Fromm points out, “the understanding of man’s psyche must be based on the analysis of man’s needs stemming from the conditions of his existence.” And “the most powerful psychic forces motivating man’s behaviour stem from the conditions of his existence, the human situation.” Welty’s fiction examines this general socio-psychic interaction with reference to women’s role in familial, communal, sexual, and racial relationships.
Peter Schmidt's *The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty's Short Fiction* (1991) and Gail L. Mortimer’s *Daughter of the Swan: Love and Knowledge in Eudora Welty’s Fiction* (1994). A number of studies like Frances Beck Foreman’s “Women’s Choices: A Study of the Feminine Characters in the Novels of Eudora Welty” (1981) and Beverly Hurley Simpson’s “Discovering the Heart’s Truth: Female Initiation in the Novels of Eudora Welty” (1988) have already been carried out. Frances Beck Foreman’s study examines the choices made by numerous female characters in the novels of Welty and asserts that Welty has made a definite contribution toward new understanding of women by writing novels which dramatize in many female characters their feelings about choices. Beverly Hurley Simpson’s study is about the female characters in four of Welty’s novels, who undergo initiation experiences which are significant elements in the content and structure of the novels. These studies about women’s choices and initiation only deal with certain aspects of the feminine world. Hence it is thought significant to broaden the range of treatment to include both the inner life and the outer world of the women characters in Welty’s novels by exploring the female psyche in greater depth. In order to identify and interpret the diverse relationships and factors affecting the female consciousness, certain female characters are chosen from Welty’s short fiction, too.

This dissertation attempts to examine how different types of relationship influence the female mind, how the range of female experience extends across the barriers of age and class, how Welty places female consciousness at the centre of her novels, and how she brings out the distinctive feminine sensibility in each character. The concept of ‘psyche’ as
used in the title may now be looked into. Two approaches to the study of
human consciousness can be distinguished in this context, the one rational
and speculative, the other empirical and sociological. According to C. G.
Jung, 'psyche' is the only phenomenon that is given immediately and,
therefore, is the *sine qua non* of all experience. The contents of the psyche or
consciousness as pictured by Jung are *sense-perceptions* or seeing,
*recognition* or thinking, *evaluation* or feeling, *intuition* or perception of the
possibilities inherent in a situation, *volitional processes* or directed impulses,
based on apperception, which are at the disposal of the so-called free will,
*instinctual processes* or impulses originating in the conscious or directly in the
body and are characterized by lack of freedom and by compulsiveness and
*dreams.* The unconscious is part of the psyche since all the activities
ordinarily taking place in consciousness can also proceed in the unconscious.
Underneath the personal unconscious, there is an absolute unconscious which
has nothing to do with personal experience, but it is a psychic activity which
goes on independently of the conscious mind. Jung calls it the collective
unconscious. The collective unconscious appears to consist of mythological
motifs or primordial images, and hence the whole of mythology can be taken
as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious. The Jungian concept of
the psyche is actually a bridge between sociological and psychological
explanations since it takes in both the individual and the collective. But it is
often understood as operating ontologically, rather than sociologically, and
therefore as being in conflict with sociological views.

Nancy Chodorow, the American feminist psychoanalyst, observes that
people everywhere form a psyche, self, and identity. These are greatly
affected by unconscious fantasies as well as by conscious perceptions that begin as early as infancy. Her explanation of personality differences between male and female has gained widespread acceptance. Her analysis is focused on “social structurally induced psychological processes” rather than on biology or intentional role training. Chodorow argues that a boy defines himself as a male negatively by differentiation from his first caretaker, the mother. He outgrows the mother-child symbiosis, and thereby achieves autonomy and his Oedipus complex affirms his separation from the mother and his adoption of the role of the father. Thereafter, he identifies himself as active, independent, individual, and valued by his family and by society. But, Chodorow points out, girls’ personalities are moulded differently. First, a girl forms her gender identity positively, in becoming like the mother with whom she begins life in a symbiotic merger. Second, she must develop in such a way that she can pleasurably reproduce the mother-infant symbiosis when she herself becomes a mother. Consequently, women develop capacities for nurturance, dependence, and empathy more easily than men do and are less threatened by these qualities, whereas independence and autonomy are typically harder for women to attain. Throughout women’s lives, the self is defined through social relationships: issues of fusion and merging of the self with others are significant, and ego and body boundaries remain flexible.

While male identity theorists like Erikson and Lichtenstein assume that stability and constancy are desirable goals for human personality, Chodorow portrays female personality as relational and fluidly defined, starting with infancy and continuing throughout womanhood. She does not consider female personality formation a predetermined progress, and her argument is
therefore sociological and historical, not biological. She thinks that women are socialized so that mothers can regress to earlier stages of development in the service of maternal nurturance. Primary identity, gender identity, and infantile identification are components of the adult identity that form early in childhood. The process of identity formation continues later; children and adolescents learn various social roles and group identifications around which the sense of their identity or their self-concept consolidates. The social roles are restricted by gender, with a wide variety of acceptable options available to boys than to girls.

The two main roles available to women are those of wife and mother. They assume occupational status as well as denoting personal relationships. These roles then become confused and blended with the girl's infantile identification with her mother since being properly female in a society usually involves both doing the sorts of things mother does and being the kind of woman she is. Female roles often imply the possession of specific personality traits like passivity and nurturance that are considered appropriate for their smooth functioning. For a boy, the adolescent identity crisis tests the components of his individual identity and at its conclusion he accepts a place in society roughly congruent with the society's view of him. The girl achieves her socially accepted roles through marriage and motherhood, social and biological events that can occur independently of a personal identity crisis and that do not require its resolution.

Female identity is thus a process and primary identity for women is more flexible and relational than for men. Female gender identity is more stable than male gender identity. Female infantile identifications are less
imaginable than male ones. Female social roles are more inflexible and less varied than men’s. And the female counterpart of the male identity crisis may occur more diffusely, at a different stage, or not at all. The area of self-concept is especially troubled for women and contemporary women’s writing reflects these dissonances. These writers also stress that the daughter’s identification with and separation from the mother is crucial to the daughter’s mature female identity.

The understanding of human consciousness in Welty’s novels seems more in line with the sociological view propounded by Chodorow than with the Jungian version. The fundamental situation of woman as mother and daughter appears to be central in Welty’s writing and she offers alternative mother-centred narratives in contrast to those of the patriarchy. In her portrayal of the female psyche, Welty does not confine herself to the traditional view of women or to the viewpoint of the modern emancipated women. We see women in varied shades of temperament and as reflecting the tensions of a developing consciousness. Welty’s women belong to different age groups and social classes, different races and different marital status—grandmothers, mothers, wives, aunts, nieces, sisters, adolescents, little girls, infants, aristocratic women, women of the middle class and lower class, white women and blacks, married, unmarried and widows. She explores the situations of women in family and community and allows her female characters freedom from overt action so that they might delve into the mystery of the self. Her feminine sensibility challenges the masculine emphasis on heroism by granting near-heroic stature to some of her women characters. To women readers at least Welty’s creations will come through strongly as
striking resemblances of their real life counterparts in the way they act and react to the world around them.

Eudora Welty was born on 13 April 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, as the daughter of Christian Webb Welty from Ohio and Mrs. Mary Chestina Andrews from West Virginia. Her short stories which appeared in *The Southern Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The New Yorker* and other magazines have been anthologized, commented upon and collected in four volumes. *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941), *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943), *The Golden Apples* (1949), and *The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories* (1955). She has also published, in addition to several uncollected pieces, five novels, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), *Delta Wedding* (1946), *The Ponder Heart* (1954), *Losing Battles* (1970), and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972). She has written the shorter pieces, *Three Papers on Fiction* (1962) and a children's book, *The Shoe Bird* (1964). Her selection of Depression-era photographs, *One Time, One Place* got published in 1971, a collection of her non-fiction pieces, *The Eye of the Story* in 1978, followed by *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* in 1980. In 1984, she revised and published the William E. Massey lectures delivered by her at Harvard University, as *One Writer's Beginnings*. Twenty-six interviews, the best of which come in the years after the publication of *Losing Battles*, were collected and published in 1984 by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw as *Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Her literary papers have been collected primarily in The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre of the University of Texas at Austin. She has received many awards, honours, and grants and many academic conferences have been held on her works.

Welty, a writer of exceptional technical ability, disappoints critics who attempt to draw lines of influence from one writer to another. She believes that composing fiction "has to start from an internal feeling of your own and an experience of your own, and I think each reality like that has to find and build its own form. Another person's form doesn't really help. It shows what they've found, but that doesn't, may not, even apply. I know it doesn't help in the act of writing because you're not thinking of anything then but your story." She does feel that reading the work of other writers inspires one's imagination, exposes new ideas and new techniques of writing. Her fiction resembles that of Jane Austen in which content and form are beautifully harmonized:

... And of this prerequisite world she sees and defines both sides—sensibility as well as sense, for instance—and presents them in their turns, in a continuing state of balance: moral, esthetic, and dramatic balance. ... The action of her novels is in itself a form of wit; a kind of repartee; some of it is the argument of souls."
Most of Welty's fiction is written from the perspective of female observers, whose favourite topic is the family. Other writers congenial to Welty in their artistic sensibility and art of writing are Anton Chekhov, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Anne Porter and Elizabeth Bowen. Welty makes a spontaneous expression of her deep debt of gratitude to Virginia Woolf in her Paris Review interview:

She was the one who opened the door. When I read To the Lighthouse, I felt, Heavens, What is this? I was so excited by the experience I couldn't sleep or eat. I've read it many times since, though more often these days I go back to her diary. Any day you open it to will be tragic, and yet all the marvelous things she says about her work, about working, leave you filled with joy that's stronger than your misery for her.9

As Welty herself has acknowledged, she experienced the kinship between houses and human character in Faulkner, the sense of the concrete and the particular in Chekhov, and learned practical lessons in narrative technique from E. M. Forster. In Welty, one can witness neither the tension between myth and history seen in Faulkner's stories nor that between history and existence in Robert Penn Warren. To Welty, who emphasizes good taste and good manners in her fiction, Henry James appears closer in form and fictional method. But, she never consciously emulated another writer.

In the essay "How I Write," Welty expresses her abiding concern: "Relationship is a pervading and changing mystery. . . . Brutal or lovely, the mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to."10 One continually finds Welty's characters probing into the mysteries of
relationship. Eunice Glenn notes that like Franz Kafka, “Welty seems to regard the relationship of childhood and the dream as very near, since the dream has childlike qualities.” Welty has shown the relative importance of dreams in her fiction by picturing them as component parts of the interior world. “I’ve used dreams, of course, when I need to express something that’s outside the range of what I can show otherwise.” To young girls like the girl-artist in “A Memory,” Jenny Lockhart in “At the Landing,” and Josie in “The Winds,” dreams are important means of perceiving the interior world. While the girl-artist is enlightened through her dreams, Jenny Lockhart is blinded by her dreams of love.

In her comedies, Welty presents social surfaces and external reality through dialogue. In her more serious fiction her sensitive female characters are invariably concerned with reconciling external reality with their own intellectual insights or intuitive modes of perception. This process, which differentiates them from those who accept life unquestioningly, is much emphasized by the author. Her serious minded female characters are viewed essentially from within; they are introspective and show little sense of humour. Welty’s humorous and vulgar characters like the bathers in “A Memory,” the Peacocks in The Ponder Heart, The Renfros in Losing Battles, and Fay in The Optimist’s Daughter deal only with social surfaces. To them nothing is serious or mysterious. The cohesiveness of such families as the Peacocks and Renfros usually perpetuates itself through incessant dialogue and uproarious action. There are women like Virgie Rainey, Julia Mortimer and Laurel Hand standing outside the insulating solidarity, attempting to realize and reconcile with the separate worlds of interior and exterior experience in their struggle for survival.
As far as Welty's portraits of the women are concerned, an evolution can be traced from the early stories to the later novels. On the whole it might be said that the early stories and the first novel show a preponderance of repressive, emotionally unbalanced women as against the nourishing and better integrated characters of the later novels. The repressive mother figure Salome in *The Robber Bridegroom*, an incarnation of jealousy, cruelty and greed, is balanced with characters like the woman musician in "The Winds." In *Delta Wedding*, Ellen Fairchild embodies a positive, nurturing maternal figure, an earth-mother goddess, whose very presence empowers others. Welty pictures women like Ellen who find contentment in the traditional mothering roles they play, in their association with the vitalizing power of nature, culture, art, and music. Ellen Fairchild stands as a transitional figure marking a distinct development in Welty's portrait of the female from a devitalizing figure to a nourishing one. Welty draws attention to both the strength of family bonds and their failures. Central to the family is the intimate relationship between wife and husband and the positive emotions that animate it. The bonds between parents and children, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, sisters and brothers, as in the case of an extended family like that of Shellmound plantation. Welty celebrates the joy of erotic union, the solidarity and resilience of the successful family network; she evaluates the causes and consequences of the failure of these ties, too. Welty, an artist and a lover of music, depicts the power of music, the influence of art on the psyche of young ones who are not hardened by conventions. Mary Lamar's music is everywhere. Without breaking thoughts and conversations she puts both the private and public discourse of the characters to universal music in the novel. Ellen Fairchild finds delight when she enchants the older children to the
alluring world of the piano. In *Delta Wedding*, Welty presents the attempts of the female characters who are on the fringes of family life to penetrate family solidarity.

In Welty's fictional world, we see emotionally fulfilled and perfectly realized female characters who are unmarried. Those women usually choose occupations like school teaching, nursing, teaching music and managing the hotel, but their success in their career does not remove the stigma of spinsterhood. Though society denigrates their spinsterhood, Welty fills their minds with positive feelings of achievement; they are no longer the stereotyped 'dried up old spinsters.' Marriage is the preferred choice, but Welty ennobles the state of being unmarried, maybe because she herself is a spinster.

In *The Golden Apples*, Welty concerns herself with female wanderers and mentors. We notice a transition from the stereotyped view of the communal role of women artists to a more contemporary androgynous view in the characters of Miss Eckhart and Virgie. The term “androgyne” is derived from two Greek words, *andro* (male) and *gyn* (female), and thus literally means male-female. Being androgynous, Miss Eckhart and Virgie are able to cope with the wider variety of situations they encounter in the family and the community. Miss Eckhart, the demanding teacher with revolutionary prowess, is capable of instilling a rebellious spirit in her student so that she might challenge the established order. Virgie Rainey is the headstrong, assertive protegée with the admirable spirit of a new woman and a modern daughter who seeks an independent life distinct from the example set by women like her mother. As a female wanderer she manages to pursue her quest unhindered by social norms and conventions and untouched by male
hegemony. Virgie embodies both the wanderer and the artist seeking heroic fulfilment. Welty’s confession in *One Writer’s Beginnings*, “out of my most inward and most deeply feeling self. I would say I have found my voice in my fiction,”14 confirms the parallels and contrasts between Miss Eckhart and herself. The female characters like Snowdie MacLain, Mattie Will and Easter in *The Golden Apples* stand both as victims and as heroines in the sexual roles they play. Welty explores sexuality and approaches it from the experience of women, a standpoint adopted by nearly all feminist writers.

Both *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*, the family novels, centre on a reunion in which the retelling of stories assumes tremendous proportions. The male and female outsiders challenge the values and beliefs of the extended families. The male hero is observed and indulged especially by women and is associated with women and thereby Welty reverses the traditional pattern of individual male subjectivity with the emphasis on self-domination and self-definition in her approach to characters like George Fairchild in *Delta Wedding* and Jack Renfro in *Losing Battles*. There is a clear distinction made in the portrayal of the most significant female outsiders Robbie Reid in *Delta Wedding* and Gloria in *Losing Battles*. Robbie’s fight against her husband’s family appears mean-spirited compared to that of Gloria. Gloria’s eternal conflict with the Renfro Beecham clan stands for the fight against commitment to “progress” and “change” in history represented by Miss Julia and also against the clan’s “mythical or archetypal mode of existence, which is cyclical and repetitive.”15 The spirit of wisdom and knowledge, the spirit of change and progress are the motive forces behind Julia’s losing battles against the ignorance and the conventional forces prevalent in the Banner community. In the comic novel *The Ponder Heart*,

Bonnie Dee Peacock represents the repressive, if less prominent, female type, a young second-wife like Fay in *The Optimist's Daughter*.

In *The Optimist's Daughter*, there is the balancing of the repressive and rigid stepmother figure with a strong mother figure in the characters of Fay Chisom and Becky McKelva. While the relationship with the repressive stepmother frustrates and cripples the mind of her stepdaughter who is older than the stepmother, the symbiotic merger between the original mother Becky and her independent-minded daughter Laurel enhances the spirit of independence and autonomy. Laurel Hand, the daughter of the optimist Judge McKelva, chooses a career which is traditionally considered a male preserve—fabric designing—and leads a contented life with her husband Philip Hand, who is a true feminist in spirit. A new woman with profound commitment to her career, a widow with deep loyalty to her dead husband, a daughter with fond memories of her dead parents, Laurel makes discoveries about herself and others throughout the novel. Her imaginative flexibility enables her to review the past through memory and she searches for a perspective upon her father's relationship with her dead mother as well as her stepmother. Laurel's strong feeling of repulsion for her stepmother threatens her objectivity and the conflicts between herself and Fay lend considerable power to the narrative. The passivity and rigidity of Fay preclude not only the growth of her own psyche but also that of others. The repressive women in the earlier works evolve and end up in the emancipated woman, Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter*.

In this study the struggle to preserve a sense of one's identity and worth against the pressures of family and community solidarity, the role of mother-daughter relationship, the influence of sexual and racial factors in
moulding the mentality of women are examined in different chapters. The second chapter “Cage, Hot-Bed, Citadel: Welty’s Concept of the Family” demonstrates with reference to the novels *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist’s Daughter* the ambivalence in family relationships—its nurturing, sustaining aspect on the one hand and the stifling, repressive role on the other and how it affects the female psyche. In the third chapter, “Demeters and Kores: The Significance of Mother-Daughter Relationship,” the myth of Demeter and Kore which corresponds in outline to the psychoanalytic paradigm for female development offered by Nancy Chodorow is discussed, with special reference to the novels *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*. In contrast to the symbiotic merger between the nurturing mother figures and daughters, the devitalising relationship between stepmothers and daughters is also examined giving to the treatment of women’s issues a more inclusive range and depth. The fourth chapter “The Private Versus the Communal Self” analyzes the lives of women in relation to the community making use of the theories of Victor Turner about doubleness in social action. This chapter brings out the Southern community’s disapproval of women’s intellectual ambitions as seen in *The Golden Apples*, *The Ponder Heart*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*. The fifth chapter “Race and Sex: The Fight Against Prejudice” examines Welty’s treatment of sexual and racial relationships with special reference to *Delta Wedding*, *The Robber Bridegroom* and the short fiction. The sixth chapter attempts an evaluation of Welty’s conception of the female psyche and the important stages in the evolution of this conception. A synthesis of textual and contextual analysis is made use of in the study, without strictly adhering to a chronological order of the works discussed.
Notes


4 Eric Fromm. The Sane Society 34.


7 Conversations with Eudora Welty 44.


