CHAPTER I

EUDORA WELTY AND THE SENSE OF PLACE IN HER SHORT STORIES
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Compared with plot, language, or character, place as an aspect of fiction, has often been relegated to a secondary place. But it is precisely place, "the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting ... gathering spot of all that has been felt,"¹ argues Eudora Welty, that constitutes the real essence of a story. It makes an aesthetic experience concrete by lending the experience a local habitation and a name. It enables the reader to keep his feet firmly planted on the ground. "The truth is," as Welty has written, "fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the cross-roads of circumstance, the proving ground of 'What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?' — and that is the heart's field."² In her essay 'Some Notes on Time in Fiction,' she establishes time and place as "the two bases of reference upon which the novel, in seeking to come to


²Ibid., p. 251.
grips with human experience, must depend for its validity.  
While time for her, is abstract and fluid, place which is concrete provides the balance:

Place has surface, which will take the imprint of man - his hand, his foot, his mind; it can be tamed, domesticized. It has shape, size, boundaries; man can measure himself against them.  

Place, for Eudora Welty, is just as important as character and plot. This statement, a few generations ago, would have been meaningless, since no novelist would have thought of telling a story without reference to a location. But with the general uprooting of life, and with a growing subjectivity in art whereby characters are more likely to talk than act, Miss Welty's statement has acquired a special importance. Southern writers, even the most modern ones, however, have never been deficient in attaching its due significance to place. If anything, they may be said to be too much place-conscious. The peculiar history of the South has made the Southerner place-conscious. With him place becomes almost

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4Ibid., 483.
an important aspect of fiction, and to the advantage of his art.

Discussing Eudora Welty's rendering of place, Paul Binding says that it is a very individual blend of the objective and the subjective, of the precise and the atmospheric, of the detached and the involved. She can evoke places very different from her own South. Like many of her generation, she learned from Faulkner the advantage of putting to a literary use that which is near and familiar. She is more deliberate than Faulkner in her use of the regionally distinct and perhaps lays a greater burden on the reader from the outside. But with her devotion to the small and the inconsequential in daily life, she is in some respects even closer to the heart-beat of her region. Faulkner is concerned with men and ideas and the course of history; Eudora Welty is most at home in a domestic situation where people talk about something and stand still in a particular place.

The art of rendering a place as handled by Miss Welty seems to have qualities of the photographer's art.

with the difference that it is a sensate account lyri-
cally depicted which she reveals through her stories
like 'The Bride of the Innisfallen' and 'Music from
Spain.' The scenes are often set in the South. Welty's
narrative art is seen to the fullest extent in these
scenic descriptions. Matches Trace in winter is depicted
as follows:

The coated moss hung in blue and shining
garlands over the trees along the changed
streets in the morning. The town of little
galleries was all laden roofs and silence.
In the fastness of Matches it began to seem then
that the whole world, like itself, must be in
transfiguration. The only clamor came from the
animals that suffered in their stalls, or from
the wild cats that howled in closer rings from
the frozen cane. The Indians could be heard from
greater distances and in greater numbers than had
been guessed, sending up placating but proud
messages to the sun in continual ceremonies of
dancing. The red percussion of their fires could
be seen night and day by those waiting in the dark
trance of the frozen town. Men were caught by the
cold, they dropped in its snare-like silence. Bands
of travellers moved closer together, with intenser
cautions, through the glassy tunnels of the Trace,
for all proportion went away and they followed
one another like insects going at dawn through
the heavy grass. Matches people turned silently
to look when a solitary man that no one had ever
seen before was found and carried in through the streets, frozen the way he had crouched in a hollow tree, grey and huddled like a squirrel, with a little bundle of goods clasped to him.⁶

The above passage shows Eudora Welty's capacity for juxtapositions which contribute to compression and a demonstration of the imaginative leaps of a poet. "The red percussion of their fires." "all laden galleries and silence" - such expressions show how Welty, while seeming to present the literal, moves in the direction of a deeper exactitude. The townspeople bet on whether river passengers are alive or dead. The feeling that the whole world had receded from the town shows how while the scene is described with an exactitude, it is the human response and the human event which seem to be central to the description. While the description gives the reader the feeling that he is being held in the contemplation of a scene, all the time the movement is in the direction of the human event which is a dominating feature of the story. As Welty says in 'Place in Fiction,' place gives the theme, and "Human life

is fiction's only theme." Further, for Eudora Welty, a specific place suggested a specific story. Out of the colonnaded house came the story, 'Asphodel'. Out of Rodney's Landing and the Natchez Trace country beyond came the extraordinary short novel, *The Robber Bridegroom*. A house, a cafe, a village, a suburban garden, a station waiting-hall, a lonely farm, a dance hall appeal to her. A typical example is the enigmatic story of the Negro orchestra leader in a Negro-town cafe, 'Powerhouse'. Eudora Welty's sure touches of reality, as she describes the reaction of the local whites and Negroes to this personage, are revelatory of the sense of place which is central to her art.

Eudora Welty makes a realistic evocation of the Mississippi background. She took hundreds of photographs collected into an album, 'One Time, One Place.' The following passage reveals her art of story-telling, and the connection between the impulse that made her take the photographs and her literary urge:

I learned quickly enough when to click the shutter, but what I was becoming aware of more slowly was a story-writer's truth: the thing to wait on, to reach there in time for, is the moment in which people reveal themselves. You have to be ready, in yourself; you have to know the moment when you see it. The human face and the human body are eloquent in themselves, and stubborn and wayward, and a snapshot is a moment's glimpse (as a story may be a long look, a growing contemplation) into what never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling. Every feeling waits upon its gesture. Then when it does come, how unpredictable it turns out to be, after all. A few photographs taken by her are of places without people - a ruined colonnaded house; two cabins in a ghost river town; some country churches. But in almost all the pictures the setting is of very great importance. Indeed, one cannot imagine places without their backgrounds. And so it is with the fiction. Welty has written the best essay on place in fiction where she says:

Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling as feeling about history partakes of place. Every story would be another story and unrecognizable as art if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else ... It is only too easy to conceive that a bomb that could destroy all trace of places as we know them, in life and through books, could also destroy all feelings as we know them, so irretrievably and so happily are recognition, memory, history, valor, love, all the instincts of poetry and praise, worship and endeavor, all bound up in place. From the dawn of man's imagination, place has enshrined the spirit.  

Place for Welty is an angel like character, plot, and the rest. It is subservient to feeling, but its importance lies in the fact that it is a repository for feelings which eventually inhabit the novel. Eudora Welty complimented Faulkner for his "shining fidelity to place" in which lies the heart and secret of the comic glory of 'Spotted Horses'.

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Miss Welty, typical of a sensitive Southerner, was deeply concerned with the racial unhappiness and the violence of the Sixties. But as a creative artist, she refrained from offering an overt treatment of the southern problem. She precluded from her consideration the propagandist's approach and eschewed distinctions based on externals. She was interested in the life within and in offering a blend of her personal visions and universal myths. An examination of the black musicians in the short story 'Powerhouse,' or old Phoenix Jackson in 'A worn Path,' or the face of the retired mid-wife, Ida McToy, shows how cruel and limiting any system is which discriminates against such people. Eudora Welty's object in writing these stories is to celebrate the forms, the lives and the natures of certain unique individuals who nevertheless happen to be black. In an interview with Reynolds Price for the New York Times Review of Books on the occasion of the publication of the volume of her essays, 'The Eye of the Story,' she replied to the question, "Do you have a sense of a single source within yourself from which the stories come?" in the following words:
Well, I could answer generally, I think it probably is a lyrical impulse to - I don't know if the word praise is right or not ... I think it's probably that. I imagine again that must be the most common impulse that most of us dosshare and I think it's a good one to share ... I think it presumes that you will be attentive to life, not closed to it but open to it.  

Eudora Welty wrote stories that partake equally of intensely personal visions and universal myths. These are rooted in the South. For instance, the stories 'First Love' in which young Joel Mayes, deaf-mute, boot-black, and orphan in the Natches of 1807, finds his first opportunity to know and communicate love, and 'A Still Moment' in which Lorenzo Daw, evangelist, Audubon, painter and ornithologist, and Murrell, outlaw of the Natchez Trace, confront a heron in the forest. Audubon represents the mystery and ruthlessness of art. His attempt to know the bird intimately symbolizes the futility of fathoming the mysterious loveliness that surrounds him in the Mississippi forest. Welty reminds the reader in these stories of a folktale in which Natches Trace, the forest and the river

country, the swamp and the delta, and so on are all accessible to the Southerner, Welty's Natchez Trace, extensively recreated in two essays ('Some Notes on River Country' and 'Fairy Tale of the Natchez Trace'), two short stories ('First Love' and 'A Still Moment') and a short novel (The Robber Bridegroom), is a real and fictional country set in a place not far south of Faulkner's wilderness. The doubleness of wonder and reality, fairy tale and novel, co-existed in the spirit and the adventures of the time. They are made to exist again in Welty's writing. Placed against the Natchez Trace background, the validity of a work like The Robber Bridegroom lies in the human motivations apparent in the history of a time and in the timeless fairy tale. The Robber Bridegroom, set in Mississippi when it was under the rule of Spain in the late eighteenth century, is a novel of antiquity containing characters with real and folklore elements. Eudora Welty's fictional countryside, like Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha, provides the setting for many of her tales. In her most recent novel, Losing Battles, Welty has included a map of the place, in the northeast of Mississippi, whose major elements are the road ('Trace' means a path or road) which crosses the country from south to north and the
There are novelists who write about place for its own sake. The south has had more than its share of this type in the form not only of the literary "drifters" who specialize in out-of-the way places, but native writers who suddenly realize the marketability of the home material. In some cases, writers of small talent make a reputation by presenting their region in a light favourable to the national audience at a particular time, without strict regard to accuracy. Even the most scrupulous are tempted by the popular vogue.

Miss Welty writes out of what she calls a "saturation of place," by which she means not only the outward visible country of her origin but the ways of thinking and feeling that lie too deep for the casual observer. For place has its own free masonry, which puts the outsider at a disadvantage. He is never quite sure of the signals, in spite of research or even long residence, unless that residence means striking roots in the soil.

In the generation of writers following the Civil War, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, and a score of women novelists built up the romantic legend
of the Old South. By the turn of the century, Ellen Glasgow, a young Virginia novelist, declared that the Southern novel was not in a state of health and that she was going to do something about it by writing "of the harsher realities beneath the romantic nostalgia present."  

Faulkner is one of the richest in delineating the Yoknapatawpha landscape. He is a triumphant example in America of the mastery of place in fiction. How different is the world of Caldwell, who came on the scene about the same time as Faulkner, with superficially at least the same raw interest in Southern life? *Tobacco Road* and *As I Lay Dying* are about the agricultural morons of Georgia and Mississippi - gross, funny, and improbable. Yet such is the devotion of Faulkner to place that his Bundrens have immediacy of life. It is all a matter of commitment. Faulkner's Bundrens are more than a phenomenon to be eradicated by social planning. Shut off on their wretched hill farms in the backwash of Southern history, they gaze out on the world with tragic and sometimes comic futility.

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suggestive of the South in the aftermath of the War and Reconstruction.

Even Miss Welty sometimes seems too conscious of the theory she has formulated concerning place and too conscious about being a Mississippian. With so much of folk material lying about her, she sometimes goes too far and drowns her story in folk tale as she does in her most recent novel, Losing Battles. One comes away from the Beechain family reunion with the feeling that Miss Welty set out to write a novel about a particular family so as to communicate the texture of life in the hill country of North Mississippi. This, of course, she does superbly. With a single stroke of pen, a gesture or turn of phrase, she sums up the life of her people in the process of narration. In 'A Worn Path' an old Negro woman stops a white woman on the streets of Natches and asks her to tie her shoe. The white woman lays down her Christian bundles on the pavement and ties up the old woman's shoe, an act which says a great deal about race relations in a particular time and place. To the casual observer, the scene is startling. The white woman is too proud to refuse the request and the Negro has learned how to take 'subtle revenge' on white people by exploiting their pride in this
Both the white woman and the black woman know their responsibility from a long contractual relationship of the two races, even though they never saw each other before. In isolation, the scene is meaningless, grotesque. In the context of place, it takes on the quality of poetry.

For the Southern writer, the history of his country places on him the burden of self-consciousness. He may go too far in his identification with place in the belief that his region has a special value in the fictional field. He writes from a land whose natural aspect as well as its history and social forms strike him in a vivid, almost tactile way. If he loves it, as Miss Welty does, his fidelity to place can add an important dimension to his art. It is the writer's duty, Miss Welty says, "not to disown any part of our heritage," but to accept it all as uniquely our own and to build on it. Like Carson McCullers, Welty shares in the southern tradition of the neo-conservatives. But her attitude towards the shape of southern society is at best passive. In spite of a defined social scheme present in her

work, Miss Welty's preoccupation is with the mystery of personality. As Faulkner portrayed the large outer world of historical action, Welty would paint her China and poetically evoke the inner world of psychological nuance. Ruth Vande Kieft, a critic of Eudora Welty, noticed that biographical facts give us reason to call Welty a "second generation" Southerner. Her parents came from Ohio and West Virginia and that is partly responsible for her detachment from "that strong sense of blood inheritance" which shaped so many other southern writers. Miss Welty's place is, of course, Mississippi - its towns, rivers, and Delta bottoms, and her distinct sense of place has helped her to sift the essential in a character, incident or setting from the irrelevant, meaningless and random elements of life. Place is an all-inclusive framework which gives her a sense of direction and a point of view as well. Welty's essay, 'Place in Fiction,' is frequently used to clinch the argument about the significance of place as a novelistic aspect: "I think the sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind." This indeed sounds

14 Dean Flower, 'Eudora Welty Come from Away' Hudson Review, 38, 3 (Autumn, 1985), 474.

as if Welty is echoing the Agrarian manifesto of 1930 and taking her stand. "Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too." Clearly this language refers to people in general: "It is through place that we put down roots, wherever and whenever birth, chance, fate, or our travelling selves may set us down; but where the roots reach toward is the deep and running vein of the human understanding." This shows how in Eudora Welty's fiction place is bound up with human experience.

As a southern regionalist with a difference, in the exercise of her creative imagination, Miss Welty lives in close proximity to the past. Her constant effort is to repossess the past so as to make it meaningfully depict the contemporary experience of her characters. Though the past of the South, of the Natchez Trace country, interests her most, her treatment of character and situation does not reveal any attachment to history in an ordinary sense. One becomes aware of myth and legend in her treatment of the past. Her treatment of the myth, which is another dimension of her preoccupation with the past, gives rise, as Chester Eisinger has noted, to the "conviction that mythic patterns

are deeply ingrained in the human consciousness and possess therefore a perennial relevance."\textsuperscript{17}

Associated with the sense of place is the sense for the language of the place. Eudora Welty's acuteness of ear for dialect is astonishing. Many southerners pronounce 'isn't' as 'idn't' and 'Wasn't' as 'wadn't', turning the standard Z sound into a 'd'. Reading 'Petrified Man,' we can notice how Miss Welty has unerringly picked up and recorded the dialectal variations. She has also recorded another curious 'Z' to 'd' shift involved in the pronunciation of 'business' as 'bldness.' The action of 'Petrified Man' is set in a small town. The speech that we hear there is raffish and vulgar in a pseudo-citified way. It is the conversation in a rather cheap beauty parlour. The beautician named Leota who dominates the other characters in the story is "wonderful to listen to in the same way as are some of the shabbier characters in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales."\textsuperscript{18} Edna Earle in 'The Ponder Heart' rattles off glib comparisons revealing Welty's grasp of the speech of the country people

\textsuperscript{17} Chester E. Eis\textsuperscript{inger}, Fiction of the Forties, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 261.

\textsuperscript{18} Cleanth Brooks, 'Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom,' Eudora Welty - A Form of Thanks, ed. Louis Dollarhide and Ann J. Abadie, (Jackson: Mississippi Univ. of Mississippi, 1979), p.9, 15.
of the South.

The places in Mississippi define and nourish the lives of Eudora Welty's characters. We are told that the Delta really belongs to the women. Miss Welty's women move freely and comfortably across the landscape. Her landscapes are wide and joyous. "She sees the world through their eyes, lovingly reaffirming the old female powers of the land as she reaffirms the fruitful alliance of male and female humans and celebrates their domestic arrangements." The problems they have articulated are not limited to the South. Because of the Southern tradition of the lady, the difficulties of defining a positive feminine self can be felt more intensely. The myths and the prejudices articulated by Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor may have a Southern accent but they are closely akin to those which all women must confront. Welty's *Delta Wedding* celebrates the gracious Southern Life. The New Women of the South emerge in this novel, Virgie Rainey in *The Golden Apples* and Laurel Hand in *The Optimist's Daughter* have forged independent, clearly

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feminine identities. The problem of identity confronts us in the fiction of Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor and Flannery O'Connor and Flannery Welty. Like Carson McCullers, Welty constantly examines the question of identity and isolation while forcing upon her characters the demands of love which can be fulfilled only through communication. Her themes are those universal preoccupations that shape all modern literature— isolation and human need for community and communication, the price of growing up with innocence lost and knowledge hard-won.

From Miss Welty's first published story, she has worked toward a fusion of the universal mythic elements embodied in various culture-heroes with the regional world that she knows at first-hand. She began by taking the characters common to several mythological systems and translating them into present-day Mississippians. William Jones traces the development of Welty's technique as a fusion of myth, fantasy and everyday Mississippi. 20

The country around Natchez Trace is symbolic and in it are characters and details that represent aspects of the

psyche. Eudora Welty's stories take place in Morgana, a Mississippi town. She sees the rich life of people there and describes it in terms of myth and fantasy. At times she gives us glimpses of the shallowness of the small-town experience. Or she evokes the interior of a mind or an allegorical landscape. Associated with the mythic consciousness and the element of fantasy which capture an allegorical landscape is Eudora Welty's sense of place which gives her a concrete setting, and "historical and emotional anchor."21