CHAPTER III

THE GOLDEN APPLES AND THE ELEMENT OF MYTH
When Charles T. Bunting asked Eudora Welty about the genesis of *The Golden Apples*, she made the following point: "In *The Golden Apples* they exist on their own as short stories; they have independent lives. They don't have to be connected, but I think by being connected there's something additional coming from them as a group with a meaning of its own."¹ Since Eudora Welty has herself suggested that *The Golden Apples* is more than just another collection of short stories, the structural unity of the book has engaged the attention of critics in general. In the process, attempts have been made to establish close parallels between Greek mythological characters and incidents and the various characters and incidents in *The Golden Apples*.

In this collection, Eudora Welty uses what Eliot calls the "mythical method" which is "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance

to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." That Eudora Welty intended to experiment with the mythical method in a sustained and deliberate manner is indicated by the genesis of this collection. The first story of the cycle, 'June Recital' was originally called The Golden Apples, and it appeared in Harper's Bazaar under this title partly inspired by Yeats's 'The Song of the Wandering Aengus' which tells of an elusive ondine and of the quests that she inspires for the golden apples of the sun. Thus the myth of the golden apples which Atlas stole for Hercules symbolises also the quest of a Mississippi Irishman, King Maclin, who fished for trout in many streams, dreamed of gold till his life wore out, and passed his restlessness on to others without quite realising what it was he had been looking for us. Thus we have among Welty's characters Virgie Rainey contemplating with melancholy the futility of her own wandering.

2T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth,' Dial, 75 (Nov. 1923), 483.

end of the book, as she sits staring into the rain, she thinks suddenly that even such a familiar sight as rainfall is never confined simply to Mississippi. It is the "rain of fall," and perhaps the whole south is involved in it. As she hears the rain's percussive music, she senses her participation in the perennial vibrations of earthly life.

The search for the apples provides a thematic link between the different stories. *The Golden Apples* represents the artist's attempt at showing the universality of myth. The fabric of mythological names and echoes is part of Eudora Welty's technique whereby she seems to show that she uses mythology in order to suggest that she is writing about universal passions which are eternally meaningful and relevant. Fused into an ordered whole by a chronological time scheme and by characters or families which appear prominently, *The Golden Apples* achieves greater intensity and a larger dimension in the treatment of such themes as the outcast within the community, search for love and the failure to find it, the appetite for life, and the desire to know the self.

'Shower of Gold,' the first story in *The Golden Apples*, introduces a pervasive sense of community by making
use of the mythic dimensions. Mrs. Rainey, Welty's narrator in this story, tells a passer by about Snowdie Hudson and King MacLain. She is apparently aware that there is something very special about Snowdie and King. But she is not aware that certain phrases in her monologue allude to the classical myth. Snowdie, an albino, to everybody's surprise marries King. But the latter could not settle down in Morgana. Once he tried to make the people of the town believe that he had drowned himself in the Big Black River. Tales circulate in the town that King is in California. But King comes back to Snowdie now and then. Comments from Mrs. Rainey reveal her fascination for a quality of life which she does not understand and of which perhaps she is envious. She describes Snowdie as "whiter than your dreams" and when Snowdie is pregnant she looked, in Mrs Rainey's words, "like a shower of something had struck her" (p. 6). The references in Mrs. Rainey's story are to the classical stories of Danaë and Nêda. Though Mrs. Rainey is not aware of the mythological allusions, they make the experience of the readers richer. Mrs. Rainey senses that

4Eudora Welty, 'Shower of Gold,' The Golden Apples (New York: Harcourt, 1949), p. 5. Subsequent references are to this edition of The Golden Apples and all further quotations are incorporated into the text.
King has transcended the dimensions of every day, ritual bound, gossip-ridden Morgan to experience freely the joys of fertile marriage. Snowdie MacLain announces to her friend Katie Rainey, about her having a baby. This carries a deeper meaning. After being away for three years, King MacLain's waiting place is the oak.\(^5\) When Snowdie reveals the fruit of her union with King MacLain, Katie Rainey is struck by her appearance:

She looked like more than only the news had come over her. It was like a shower of something had struck her, like she'd been caught out in something bright... (p. 6).

Out of the long-awaited reunion between a young albino small-town school teacher and her adventurous and often absent husband comes a luminiscence which is "more than the day." Their intercourse is so charged and potent that it vitalizes Snowdie. She stands in the pasture as fertile as the spring field which blossoms behind her. The union produces not one magical child but two. Miss Snowdie's moment, as complex as

character itself, is what Welty calls "a taproot that goes clear down" (p.7).

Snowdie's annunciation not only draws from the Greek myths of Zeus and Danae, but also from the Christian symbolism of Easter which celebrates new life and the legend of Christ's birth as the son of an "absent" God. Like Mary, Snowdie is associated with purity, tenderness, and quietness, and she delivers her good news in Miss Katie's barn.

The interpretation of the Perseus myth in The Golden Apples is put forward by Miss Welty through the thoughts of Virgie Rainey. She appears in 'June Recital' as the most talented piano pupil of Miss Lotte Elizabeth Eckhart. On the morning after the funeral of her mother, Virgie sits on the stile in front of the courthouse enjoying the light rain and the solitude. Her thoughts turn back to Miss Eckhart and to a picture that had hung on one of her walls - Perseus with the head of Medusa. It is not the image of the hero that has become triumphant but the stroke of the sword he wields.

"Cutting off the Medusa's head," she thinks "was the heroic act, perhaps, that made visible a horror in life, that was at once the horror in love,... the separateness Virgie thought..."
The important thing for Virgie is not what Perseus has done to Medusa; it is what the deed, like a stroke of fate, has done to him. The hero Virgie has in mind is not Perseus alone, but a composite being, Perseus - Medusa seen as one. Identification of the hero with the victim is essential to this conception of the heroic act.

Miss Eckhart taught Virgie more than how to play the piano. To Virgie, her teacher appears as hero and victim. Miss Eckhart is isolated from the beginning in Morgana by her foreign origin and ways. With Virgie also she is unsuccessful. Virgie has seen horror in life and love, vicariously through Miss Eckhart and her mother's life and death. On the evening of her mother's death, "alone, untouched now, she felt like dancing; knowing herself not really, in her essence, yet hurt; and thus happy" (p.234). Although, in the eyes of the world, Virgie Rainey has achieved nothing noteworthy, she is, in her context in The Golden Apples, a type of the true hero. Like the Virgin goddess, Artemis, she is self-sufficient and inviolable. The harmonious accord which she has reached exists between herself and natural things, the Eig Black River and the moon. Within herself the external
pair of mother and daughter, woman and child, continues to exist in peaceful oneness. Mother and daughter are the contemporary elements of a whole feminine personality, a whole self. This is beautifully suggested by Miss Welty in the waking vision which comes to Virgie late at night after her mother's funeral:

She knew that now at the river, where she had been before on moonlit nights in autumn, drunken and sleepless, mist lay on the water and filled the trees, and from the eyes to the moon would be a cone, a long silent horn, of white light. It was a convention, visible as the hair is in air, between the self and the moon, to make the self feel the child, a daughter far, far back.6

Virgie's uniqueness, the child in herself as the source of her renewal, is sometimes lost for a while, but it will always be remembered. The mother, mistress of the cycles of natural things in time, will include her always, for however long she may remain a wanderer.

In *The Golden Apples*, Miss Welty has found for her art the ideal form. The names, Cassie Morrison and Virgie Rainey, are emblematic of a distinction between a character who is afraid and rejects the understanding and freedom of life in its deeper dimension and one who accepts it. Cassie, as Cassandra, can cry out the woes of the land, but she is only a Morrison. Virgie, however, is a Rainey and certainly, by the second story in the series, not a virgin.

Cassie Morrison, the daughter of Morgana's newspaper editor, is aware of another, richer dimension. But because she is afraid to venture, she rejects the freedom it has to offer her. Cassie, Loch, her younger brother, and her parents live next door to the MacLain house, the house where Snowdie MacLain and her twin sons used to live. The house is vacant, when the June-recital takes place, except for the night watchman, Mr. Holfield, who is in the house during the day. The house has a very colourful past. King MacLain, head of the household, resembles Zeus, wandering in and out of Morgana and fathering a progeny, many of whom live in the country home. Miss Eckhart, who came from Germany, had rooms in the MacLain
house and taught piano to the children of Morgana until
Morgana became suspicious of her when the First World War began.

In the beginning, Loch Morrison is sick with malaria. He is not so ill as not to use his father's telescope to spy on the MacLain house. A great deal is going on there for Loch to see while the watchman sleeps. Upstairs, Virgie fornicates with a sailor. Downstairs, an old lady who is none else but Miss Eckhart, who has escaped the Country Home, decorates the house with newspaper and then tries to see the house afire. Cassie, in her room and dyeing a scarf, does not see these events. The sound does not arouse her curiosity about what might be happening next door, but it brings back memories. The song is one which Virgie, the star piano pupil, used to play for Miss Eckhart. Cassie remembers that the relationship between Virgie and Miss Eckhart was never particularly peaceful and that Virgie seldom did things as Miss Eckhart wanted them done. Nevertheless, both possessed, as Cassie senses, an exciting freedom. On one occasion when Miss Eckhart actually played for her pupils, Cassie felt that "something had burst out, unwanted, exciting from the wrong person's life." Virgie expresses what for Cassie is
a rather terrible freedom; her playing is not the rigid, lifeless repetition of notes on the page measured by the metronome. She interprets according to her own feeling. Cassie remembers how when Virgie finished playing a Beethoven piece in one of the June recitals, she was wet and stained as if she had been stabbed in the heart and a delirious and enviable sweat ran down from her forehead and cheeks (p. 65). Cassie, even though she envies Virgie, cannot be like her. She knows that "both Miss Eckhart and Virgie Rainey were human beings terribly at large, roaming on the face of the earth" (p. 85), but for her such an experience can come only in unfulfilled, frustrating dreams. She had dyed a scarf especially to wear for a hayride, but when she thinks over the events of the day, prominent among her memories is "the way she herself had let nobody touch even her hand" (p. 84).

Virgie differs from Cassie in that she accepts freedom. In the final story, 'The Wanderers,' we sense that Virgie consciously defines and understands herself in terms of the permanence of myth and fantasy. Morgana, ever oppressive with its schedules and formulae, embodies a limiting understanding from which Virgie escapes. The events of "The
Wanderers" occupy a three-day period. On the first day Virgie's mother dies; the second day is spent preparing and celebrating the funeral; on the third day Virgie is seen in another dimension. More and more people come to the Rainey house and Virgie feels the encroachment of the community: "Always in a house of death, Virgie was thinking, all the stories come evident" (p.210). In the afternoon all the visitors leave her. What follows for Virgie is mystical. She makes her way to the nearby Big Black River, takes "off her clothes and lets herself into the river" (p.219). Virgie hangs, "suspended in the Big Black River as she would know to hang suspended in felicity" (p.219). She perseveres in her demands upon life. She always goes forward into life keeping up with time itself. Therefore she remains ever young, maintaining her right to the name Virgie—new and whole. Her musings, triggered by the October shower, show that myth is not man's escape from the world but his way into it.

Virgie Rainey, on her way out of town, remembers a picture Miss Eckhart used to have hanging over her dictionary. It showed Perseus with the head of Medusa. As
she considers the picture she comes to understand her own experience in terms of the myth of Perseus. Virgie is identified with Perseus in that she too faced the terrible risk of becoming as lifeless and stone-like as the statue of the angel Cassie had brought to mark Mrs. Morrison's grave. One glimpse of the head of the Medusa would turn the unfortunate beholder to stone. Virgie saves herself from that fate. She had seen the slaying of Medusa. She sees it in the present in her own condition. As Virgie thinks: "Endless Medusa, and Perseus endless" (p. 243).

'Moon lake,' like the MacLain house, provides another significant location in which analogies to other stories intrude and thematic synthesis occurs. The campsite in 'Moon Lake' not only resembles similar places everywhere but also evokes the same type of events. What is most important to the understanding of this book is not that a camper named Easter falls into the lake, but rather that she is "resurrected" afterwards. Renewals of life are as accurately symbolic of universal potential as drowning. The book presents three different drownings. King's faked suicide, immediately differentiated by Katie Rainey from an
event in which someone "honestly drowned," Mr. Sissum's actual drowning with its disastrous consequences for Miss Eckhart, and Easter's near drowning and actual resuscitation. Easter's survival receives the most extended attention. Besides being a setting for a symbolic event, Moon Lake also becomes the site at which all time seems to roll itself into a ball. Before Easter's accident, Nina Carmichael had lain wakefully attentive to the night and the sleeping girls around her. She has noticed Easter's hand hanging like an invitation. 'Moon Lake' is preceded by 'Sir Rabbit.' The latter is a recollection of the idyll in 'Shower of Gold.' Mattie will Sojourner meets King in the Woods as Snowdie had. The result is the same. In 'Sir Rabbit' the affirmative note is sounded after the complex chord of 'June Recital.' Nina's attempt to occupy Easter's experience is expressed in two key episodes: in one she is a participant, in the other an observer. Easter, Jinny and Nina travel down the Moon Lake, in a leaky rainboat. Moon Lake is the dwelling place of evils like snakes, tangled roots, and deep underwater muck. Images of "the golden apples" of wonder and fulfillment urge Nina to hope for
It hung over the dictionary 'dark as that book.
It showed Perseus with the head of the Medusa.
The same thing as Siegfried and the Dragon, "Miss Eckhart had occasionally said, as if explaining second-best... (Virgie) saw the stroke of the sword in three moments, not one. In the three was the damnation - so, only the secret, unhurting because not caring in itself - beyond the beauty and the sword's stroke and the terror lay their existence in time-far out and endless, a constellation which the heart could read over many a night (pp. 242-43).

From a careful reading of the above passage it is evident that Welty's use of the myth is highly deliberate and creative.

The quest for The Golden Apples, with its mythical connotation is linked to the myth of Perseus. Eudora Welty favours indirectness to pedantry, distant allusion to laboured exercise. By avoiding explicitness, Welty shows a thematic link among the different short stories in the collection, The Golden Apples. Her attempt is to show the universality of the myth. The fabric of mythological names and echoes in this collection of short stories is a technical device which enables Welty to implicitly state that she is writing about
universal passions as eternal as art. In a way her highly sophisticated literary quotations indicate the archetypal nature of human experience. Literature, she seems to suggest, is a mirror. As Daniele Pitavy-Souques has observed, the quotations which Eudora Welty employs constitute the mirror that Welty holds to her fiction. "Perseus does nothing else: the writer is Perseus." Reynolds Price has offered a superb definition of the artist which is relevant in the context of the study of The Golden Apples. According to him, "the central myth of the artist is surely not Narcissus but Perseus — with the artist in all roles Perseus, Medusa and the Mirror-shield." The elements of the myth are Perseus, Medusa and the Mirror-shield. The centre of this trinity is fascination. It refers to the spell by which the gazer loses his identity and becomes a thing or object. Fascination thus, by implication, means death because emptied of all substance, drained of his blood, the contemplator dies, so to speak. In his chapter on gaze, Sartre concludes that


there is also the reverse form of fascination including qualities like shame and self-loathing. Seduction and the will to possess the body of the other are eventually a fascination with one's own death. This is what Sartre calls the obscene. When we examine the development of the myth, we find that there is a strong sexual connotation suggested by it. Originally Gorgo was an ugly creature with hissing snakes as hair. She later became a once beautiful woman who was turned ugly by Hera's jealousy. At the Hellenistic period, she was simply a beautiful young maid whose gaze was deadly.

In the treatment of human relations in The Golden Apples, we find complexities of feeling based on fascination. Attraction and repulsion, loving and loathing, fulfilment and destruction are the thematic complexes unravelled in The Golden Apples. In 'Shower of Gold' and 'The Wanderers', there is the treatment of fascination for an unworthy type like King MacLain who defies social and moral conventions. Central to 'Sir Rabbit' and 'The whole world knows' is the

idea of the self as involved in sex. In 'Music from Spain' and 'June Recital' the theme of fascination shapes the projection of the self on to the idealised alter-ego.

Death is a perilous allure in 'Moon Lake.'

The Perseus myth as treated in The Golden Apples concerns itself with the terrors of the soul and the agony of the heart rather than the ordering of chaos. Perseus is not a "cultured hero" in the sense that Prometheus and Heracles are culture heroes or saviours of mankind who by their heroic action help the progress of civilization. Perseus is the most complex character who alone is able to conceive the full horror of Medusa, since he overcame it.

Because Virgie saw things in their time, like hearing them -- and perhaps because she must believe in the Medusa equally with Perseus -- she saw the stroke of the sword in three moments, not one (p.243).

Those three moments in one represent the utmost fascination and the awareness of it. To this fascination Eudora Welty gives a personal colouring: "Cutting off the Medusa's head was the heroic act, perhaps, that made visible a horror in life, that was at once the horror in love,
Virgie thought — *the separateness* (p. 243) Perseus stands for the fascinated becoming the fascinator. The slaying of Medusa is the equivalent of the lover who can grasp the essence of his beloved only by killing her. In 'A still Moment,' Lorenzo and Audubon know that fascination is a knowledge and love that contains in itself the death of all knowledge and love. The third constituent of the myth, the mirror, points to the fascination of Perseus—his awareness of horror and its fascination to him. The mirror, which offers a reflection is the sign of an identity of opposites:

Virgie never saw it differently, never doubted that all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate; living to dying; but of them all, hope and despair were the closest blood—unrecognizable one from the other sometimes, making moments double upon themselves, and in the doubling double again, amending but never taking back (p. 234).

The stories in *The Golden Apples* collection, are built upon the mirror-image suggesting the idea of reflection and the reconciliation of opposites. In each story, there are two
movements based on the ambiguity between a real experience and a dreamed one, between asserted reality and hypothetical reality. In 'The Wanderers' the axis is "the feeling of the double coming-back" (p.237), as Virgie Rainey experiences it. In 'June Recital' the alternating voices of Loch Morrison and his sister, Cassie, send back and forth a series of reflections that contribute to a scathing criticism of human relations in society. The spectacle which Loch Morrison sees constitutes the epitome of his vision. There is what Daniele Pitavy Souques calls a mirror-effect in each of these narratives.

The stories in The Golden Apples have a plot based on fascination. They are constructed with a "mirror-effect" and a theme of separateness runs through the stories. In other words, the narratives that constitute The Golden Apples are dramatisations of the myth of Perseus which is central to Welty's thought. "Endless the Medusa, and Perseus endless" (p.243). Eudora Welty's use of myth in her fiction, in the context of her presentation of everyday Mississippi, is fascinating. William M.Jones has noted that from the

first published story of Eudora Welty, she has worked "toward a fusion of the universal mythic elements embodied in various culture-heroes with the regional world she knows first-hand." According to him Welty took several mythological systems and translated them into present-day Mississippians.