CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION
In her introduction to *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941), Katherine Anne Porter quotes Eudora Welty as having commented: “I haven’t led a literary life at all... But I do feel that the people and things I love are of a true and human world, and there is no clutter about them.”¹ Indeed, through more than a half century of writing short stories, novels, criticism, and autobiography, Welty has consistently presented her readers with fundamental truths and essential humanity, all the while avoiding the clutter of fads, fancies, ideologies and inanities. Like her nineteenth century literary progenitor, Robert Browning, she has focused on the human soul in action, developing dramatic moments of character in which the speakers and actors typically reveal far more than they realize. Like her twentieth century Mississippi neighbour William Faulkner, she has been especially interested in “the human heart in conflict with itself.”

No full-length biography has been written and, for the time being at least, the chronology in Ruth Vande Kieft’s *Eudora Welty* (1962; 1987), used in conjunction with the anecdotal reminiscences of the autobiographical one, *Writer’s Beginnings* (1984) provides essential biographical highlights.²
Welty has, however, been gracious and relatively open in granting interviews for publication, twenty-six of which are collected in Peggy W.Prenshaw’s *Conversations with Eudora Welty* (1984).³ Her literary papers, manuscripts, literary correspondences, unpublished writings, and so forth are collected primarily in two repositories: the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin. Much of the correspondence, however, remains in private hands, and other collected letters and manuscripts are scattered about in colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Biographical aids for the Welty study begin with Noel Polk’s *A Eudora Welty Checklist,* published in a special Welty issue of Mississippi Quarterly in 1973, which includes the most extensive listing of her works up to that year.⁴ Victor H.Thompson’s *Eudora Welty: A Reference Guide* (1976) offers a comprehensive compilation of secondary materials, including reviews from 1936 to 1976 of Welty’s fiction, as well as listings of biographical materials and of her non-fiction, exclusive of reviews.⁵ Updates of Polk’s “Checklist” have periodically appeared in *The Eudora Welty Newsletter.*

The first, and in many ways still the most important, full-length study of Welty’s work is Ruth M. Vande Kieft’s *Eudora Welty*, originally published in 1962 as part of Twayne’s United States Authors Series. In it, Vande Kieft established the standard work against which all later studies have been measured. She attempts to convey the inner life of Welty’s fiction by offering a series of careful and telling interpretive readings, drawing on Robert Pen Warren’s seminal essay, “The Love and the Separateness in Miss Welty.”

Vande Kieft stresses the ingredients of dualities of experience, experimentation and lyricism in Welty’s works. She calls attention to great variety, both of form and content, in the fiction, and proceeds to examine most of what have become the standard points of critical
discussion: the importance of place, the evolving technical virtuosity, the use of comedy, dream, and fantasy, and the ability to arrive at the universal. Finally, Vande Kieft attempts to trace patterns of relationships among the various works. In 1987, Vande Kieft offered a revised and updated edition that includes analysis of Welty’s work since 1962, as well as a substantially revised chapter on *The Bride of the Innisfallen*.

Michael Kreyling, in his *Eudora Welty’s Achievement of Order* (1980), shifts the focus to technique as the unifying force in Welty’s fiction. Continuing the emphasis on her work as more lyrical than narrative, Kreyling moves behind close interpretive readings of individual works and beyond the tracing of regional, mythological, and folk roots in an attempt to identify the unique voice that characterizes Welty’s art. In this first full-length study to include discussion of her work through *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1972), he traces Welty’s growth in artistic sensibility into what he considers her most encompassing *Losing Battles* (1970). Kreyling’s sensitive approach offers an intelligent and stimulating counter balance to Vande Kieft’s more analytical criticism.
Drawing on Welty's own insistence upon the importance of place working on the author's imagination, Albert Delvin's *Eudora Welty's Chronicle* (1983) attempts to clarify and trace the historical aesthetic in her fiction as it is rooted in her home state of Mississippi. Delvin finds an essential underlying cultural unity in the fiction that is informed by the cumulative effect of her historical imagination. Agreeing with Kreyling that formalist and mythological readings do not closely enough approach Welty's over-riding vision, he posits that "The intense subjectivity that Welty portrays in her most characteristic work may indeed be historic in origin." After mapping Welty's Mississippi Chronicle from the beginnings of the territory to the present day, Devlin concludes by sketching her literary kinship with modernist writers such as Yeats, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.

A number of other book and monograph length studies of Welty's work have also appeared. Alfred J. Appel, Jr., published *A Season of Dreams* (1965) as the first volume in Louisiana State University Press Southern Literary Series. It is a highly derivative book based heavily on Vande Kieft and several other important essays, such as Warren's "Love and

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 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 lyrically 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. Natchez 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 Natchez it began to see them that the whole world, like itself, must be in transfiguration. The only clamour came from the animals that suffered in their stalls, or from the wild cats that howled in closure 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 fire could be seen night and day by those waiting in the dark trace of the Frozen town. Men were caught by the cold, they dropped in the snare like silence. Bands of travelers moved
closer together, with intenser caution, 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. Natchez 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 hallow tree, green and huddled like a squirrel, with a little bundle of goods clasped to him.\footnote{15}

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 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.”\(^{16}\) Further, for Eudora Welty, a specific place, suggested a specific story. Out of the colonnaded house came the story, ‘Asphodel’. Out of the Rodney’s landing and the Natchez Trace country beyond came the extraordinary short novel, *The Robber Bridegroom*. A house, a café, 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 café, ‘Power House.’

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 move 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 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.\textsuperscript{17}

Welty, typical of a sensitive southerner, is deeply concerned with the racial unhappiness and the violence of the sixties. But as a creative artist, she refrains from offering an overt treatment of the southern problem. She precludes from her considerations the propagandist’s approach and eschews distinctions based on externals. She is 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 ‘Power House’ or Old Phoenix Jackson in ‘A Worn Path’, or the face of the retired mid-wife, Ida Mc Toy, 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 .... That must be the most common impulse that most of us do share 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.¹⁸

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 folk lore elements. Eudora Welty’s fictional countryside, like Faulkner’s mythical Yoknapatawpha, provides the setting for many of her tales. In her *Losing Battles*, Welty has included a map of the place, in the North-East of Mississippi, whose major elements are the road (‘Trace’ means a path or road) which
crosses the country from South to North and the Railway track which

crosses from West to East.

There are novelists who wrote about place for its own sake. The south has made 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.

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

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 areas 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 special 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, suggestive of the south in the aftermath of the war and reconstruction.

Even 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 folktale as she does in Losing Battles.

One comes away from the Beechain family reunion with the feeling that 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 phase, she sums up the life of her people in the process of narration. In ‘A Worn Path,’ an old Negro woman
stops a white man on the streets of Natchez 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 way. Both the white woman and the black woman know their responsibility from a long contractual relationship of the two races. 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 this 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 Welty does, his fidelity to place can add an important dimension to his art. It is the writer's duty, Welty says, "not to disdowm any part of our heritage."19 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, Welty’s preoccupation is with the mystery of personality. As Faulkner portrayed the large outer world of historical action, Welty would paint her picture and poetically evoke the inner world of psychological nuance.

Ruth Vande Kieft noticed that biographical facts give us the reason to call Welty a “Second Generation” southerner. Her parents came from Ohio and West Virginia, that is partly responsible for her detachment from “that strong sense of blood inheritance” which shaped so many other southern writers. 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 their relevant, meaningless and random elements of life. Place is an all inclusive framework which gives her a sense of direction and a point of view. Welty’s essay, ‘Place in Fiction,’ speaks about a novelistic aspect thus: “I think the sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind”. This indeed sounds 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." Welty's *Delta Wedding* celebrates the gracious southern life. The new woman 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 feminine identities. The problem of identity confronts us in the fiction of Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora 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.

*Delta Wedding*, a full length novel published in 1946, was often greeted with the same “here we go again” criticism. John Crowe Ransom sees beyond the setting and characters and praises Welty’s skills with actual telling of the story as she alternates between the ‘drama’ of dialogue and external action, on the one hand, and interior monologue on the other. “Peggy Prenshaw shows Welty’s portrayal of the complex social structure of the twentieth century south to be anything but stereotyped in *Cultural Patterns in Eudora Welty’s ‘Delta Wedding’* ‘The Demonstrators.’ John Edward Hardy’s 1952 essay on “Delta Wedding as Region and Symbol” sees Welty at her best in this novel, focusing on her skill at conveying the meaning of
her novel in the whole, particularity in the moment, the single, illuminating still act of private perception.  

By the 1949 publication of *The Golden Apples*, more and more criticism was being focused on Welty’s remarkable command of narrative technique. Margaret Marshall’s review for *The Nation* continues the complaint that Welty has indulged herself in finespun writing that becomes her mode. One is scarcely ever made aware of the mixed racial background which must surely affects the quality of life. Interestingly enough, Katherine Anne Porter, in her introduction to *A Curtain of Green* eight years earlier, had identified and answered this criticism by saying that there is an unanswerable, indispensable moral law, on which Welty is grounded firmly, and this, it would seem, is simple domain enough. These laws have never been the peculiar property of any party or creed or nation. They relate to that true and human world of which the artist is a living part. Since the publication of ‘Where is the Voice Coming From?’ in 1963 and ‘The Demonstrators’ in 1966, both in *The New Yorker*, acknowledgement has been widespread of Welty’s concern for and gift of expressing the racial conflicts of the region. Vande Kieft in her revised study goes so far as to call “The Demonstrators” possibly the greatest story to come out of the Civil Rights era.  

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Much of the criticism of *The Golden Apples* has focused on Welty’s use of myth. Vande Kiefts longest chapter in both editions of her book examines *The Golden Apples*, with mythic motifs receiving much of her attention. Thomas L. McHaney in “Eudora Welty and the Multitudinous Golden Apples” traces Greek and Celtic mythological references and surveys criticism of the work up to 1973. Patterns of initiation are the subject of Carol S. Manning’s “Male Initiation, Welty Style” with emphasis on “Moon Lake.” J.A. Bryant, Jr, examines *The Golden Apples* and finds a special way of seeing or perceiving.

Moving in a new direction, Patricia S. Yaeger in “Because a Fire was in My Head: Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination” uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s linguistic theories to discuss *The Golden Apples* as a beautifully crafted and gender preoccupied novel whose emphasis on sexuality and intertextuality has not been fully comprehended.26

*Losing Bottles* (1970) have proved a favourite Welty novel for critical discussion. For example, five essays in Prenshaw’s Critical Essays alone deal specifically with *Losing Battles*. Jonathan Yardly, reviewing it in *The New Republic* commented on the sheer variety of
Welty, her unparalleled use of simile. Louise Gossett uses the concept of the pairing of opposites to examine themes and narrative methods throughout Welty's fiction. Larry Reynolds also discusses narrative structure and theme in "Enlightening Darkness: Theme and Structure in Eudora Welty's Losing Battles" and points out that beneath its entertaining surface the story of an intense struggle for survival is subtly and carefully told. Criticism of the novel has frequently focused on the family and / or the family versus Julia Mortimer, as in James Boatwright's "Speech and Silence in Losing Battles" and William McMillen's "Conflict and Resolution in Losing Battles". Suzanne Marrs has written three articles that trace the development of characters and plot: "The Making of Losing Battles: Plot Revision."27

**The Optimist's Daughter** appeared in the book form in 1972 and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The work received almost unanimous praise by critics in early reviews, including that of Granville Hicks, who in "universal Regionalist" writes of being awed by the novella's richness." Marilyn Arnold traces the imagery, in particular the bird imagery, in the novel to show characters: especially Laurel's revelations about freedom and evading the past. Lucinda H.Mackethan examines The Optimist's Daughter, along with Delta Wedding, Golden Apples and Losing Battles, and synthesizes many
of the main modes of Welty criticism as she discusses place, sense of identity, relationships, time, and perception. She feels that the characters' main challenge in the works "is to perceive, understand, and transmit the moments when place yields up its 'extraordinary' values." She notes a greater "sense of fragmentation" in *The Optimist's Daughter* because of Welty's new treatment of the "insider" character.28

In more than five decades since her first story was published in 1936, Eudora Welty has created a large, varied, and most impressive body of prose that continues to appeal to readers and to challenge critics. This brief survey of the scholarship surrounding her canon is merely suggestive, certainly not exhaustive. For as Welty's literary statute continues to grow, scholarly examinations of her works and canon have begun to multiply.
References


