CHAPTER-III

LOSING BATTLES:
The Struggle for Survival
Losing Battles (1970) has proved a favourite Welty novel for critical discussion. For example, five essays in Prenshaw’s critical essays deal specifically with Losing Battles. Jonathan Yardley, reviewing it in The New Republic, commented on “the sheer variety” of Welty, her unparalleled use of simile, while allowing that the novel “is too long and a trifle out of focus”. Other reviewers used the opportunity of Welty’s first publication in fifteen years to survey her overall achievement. Louise Y. Gossett, for example, uses the concept of the pairing of opposites to examine themes and narrative methods throughout Welty’s fiction. Larry J. Reynolds also discusses narrative structure and theme in Enlighting Darkness. He says that in Eudora Welty’s Losing Battles “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 Boatsright’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”. Judge Moody Transformed.”
The events are centred on a family reunion at the so-called 100th birth anniversary of Elvira Jordan Vaughn. She is simply called Granny. It is summer time in 1930s. Welty’s focus is on the farmhouse of the Vaughn Beecham-Renfro family originally built by Jacob Jordan, Granny’s own grandfather. Granny’s world is fruitful and frolic, and she was able to create an entire, loyal and loving family. Her’s is a physical world with children, the earth, the roof and above all the reunion feast. Losing Battles supplies all the happenings in one’s life – birth, marriage, death, separation – within a short period of time of action. It begins with the Granny’s ninetieth birthday and the family reunion which goes with the celebration, the first anniversary of Granada Vaughn’s death, the death funeral of Julia Mortimer, the school mistress, the first day of the school year, Jack’s return and reunion with his family, Gloria’s second wedding day, discovery of the identity of Gloria’s mother, and above all the rising of the full moon and a rain storm which ends a long season of drought.

Welty designed her novel by taking great care on the governing pattern, instituting a relationship of parts subtle enough for letting them have enough of an air of spontaneity to feel well for the time being. She divided the book in six parts with no sub-titles to them.
They can be called logical divisions. In the beginning of Part I, Jack and Gloria Renfro are the young couple just getting their married life under way. They end Part I by leaving the family reunion to go on a family mission. Later on in the novel the family mission takes an ironic turn. Part II ends by their return to reunion. Part III and IV end with identifiable incidents of the reunion and Part V deals with the happenings during day with shifts in the time of day corresponding to changes in the emotional fabric of the narrative.

Part VI of the novel begins with a new battle which progresses from morning to noon of the next day and again Jack and Gloria occupy the last pages but not unanimous about their plans for the future, the previous emotional cycle is half repeated and the novel thus ends on a hopeful, joyous note which in turn, is transitory.

By the time the sun sets, all the battles are familiarised, the family’s battle for survival, the battle of Gloria to sustain her individuality among the identity strifling family and Julia Mortimer’s valiant battle to banish ignorance from among the citizens of the Banner.

Welty’s revelation of patterns of living feelings, values, emotions and attitudes are at their best in this novel. In an interview
she said. “I wanted to show that the relationships run the whole gamut of love and oppression. Just like any human relationship has the possibilities of so many gradations of affection, feeling, passion, resistance and hatred.”

The ravages of financial hardships are seen throughout the novel. There is a threatening starvation seen at the reunion because of failure of crops. The soil in the hills is made of gravel and sand which is not suited for farming. Jan Nordby quotes in his book Eudora Welty’s aesthetics of place. The land in Boone country is parched, like a full red cotton shirt-sleeve and snakes come up to the yard to drink with the chickens.

Welty weaves the past events which generate emotions and speculations in the present. She portrays Granny Vaughn’s home as the centre of the universe. Vaugh-Beechem-Renfro family gathers at the Renfro homestead for Granny’s birthday. They are about fifty members at the family reunion. They arrive in a car with a flat tyre, a Ford with gasoline leakage which reveals their financial deficiency. C.Vann Woodward considers this distinctively “un-American” and yet common characteristics of living in the south from the early years of the civil war until the time of the novel. Granny Vaughn had kept the family together by bringing up seven orphaned children after her only daughter and son-in-law who were mysteriously drowned in the
river one night. She had displayed strong, extraordinary courage in meeting the stupendous task of bringing up her grand children.

The great grand son Jack Jordon Renfro of Granny and son of Beulah Beecham had been in Parchman, the state penitentiary for the guilt of stealing a safe from Curly Stovall, the greedy money lender and lecherous store keeper to whom Renfros owe money for shopping in his store. Jack did not retrieve Granny Vaughn's wedding ring, a family heirloom that his younger sister Ella Fay had carelessly let to Curly Stovall. But Jack never mentions his sister's name in court, which shows his magnanimous heart. Jack married Gloria but had not lived with her because of the guilt he committed in getting back his family heirloom. When he was in the penitentiary, the financial situation of the family had deteriorated alarmingly. His love for his family made him escape from jail to be present for the celebration. He found his horse, Dan, sold by the family for want of food and he was moved by the harrowing experience the family had been undergoing. Gloria awaited her husband's arrival anxiously along with her daughter who had never seen her father since she was born. In the words of Barbon Henrel, "Jack is also the embodiment of the family's hope for escape from the cycle of "losing battles" and the centre of the heroic imagery in the novel. To his family – Jack is the Knight –
or Welty's version of a Comic Fisher King returned to bring new life
to the wasteland.6 Aunt Birdie voices hope when Jack returns.
"When Jack jumps out in those fields tomorrow, he will resurrect
something out of nothing" (p.326). Jack establishes himself as a hero
in this novel by exhibiting tremendous power of courage despite the
hardships which surrounded him. Welty explored the indomitable
human spirit in the characters of Granny, Beula Renfro, Julia
Martimer and the school teacher, brilliantly in this novel.

Jack saves the judge from an accident not knowing that he is
the same person who had sent him to jail. After knowing this, Jack
plans to charge down the judge into the old Bywy river. But in the
confusion, Jack, Gloria and the Baby fly out in front of Judge's Buick
and in a desperate attempt to save them he avoids running the car over
them and he himself drives it to the Banner Top which is the highest
point in the Banner community. Jack feels really grateful to the Judge
for saving the life of Gloria and the Baby. The Judge who has
punished Jack once, in contrast accepts the hospitality of Renfro
family who are celebrating the reunion party.

The next battle is of the school teacher, Miss Juila Mortimer.
This battle is between Miss Beula and Miss Julia which reflects the
conflict between change and tradition. Miss Beula, a typical southern woman represents hill folk. She insists on the common run of things without entertaining change even if it implies progress. On the other hand, Julia, the school teacher sets herself a noble task of bringing light into the lives of poor Boone country people through education. She wages a battle against ignorance until her death. She fights against it with unflinching courage. She has taught almost all those people who had gathered for the reunion. She is prepared to teach herself to death. She strives to achieve her goal which lies in the prosperity of her students. But in making her dream come true, she attacks the cherished pattern of beliefs of the hill folk, and as a consequence she meets with disapproval. The ultimate charge that is levied against her is that ‘she did not damage our spirits much.’ The undercurrent of bitterness, however, “suggests that they clumsily sense how blindly they walk by every door she tried to open. Their pride in clan and state is defensive. The family is ignorant and incompetent; the state is at the bottom of the ladder.” She has taught throughout her life to most of the Banner community. But at last she is requited with ingratitude to the mercy of insensitive Miss Lexie, an old woman. “Miss Julia is the most progressive outsider.” She explains about her defeat in bringing about a positive change in the
Banner community in a letter to Judge Moody. “All my life I have fought a hard war with ignorance. Except in those cases that you can count off on your fingers, I lost every battle.....Oscar, it’s only now, when I have come to lie flat on my back, that I have had it driven in on me – the reason I never could win for good is that both sides were using the same tactics ..... A teacher teaches and a pupil learns or fights against learning with the same force behind him. It’s the survival instinct. It’s a mighty power, its an iron weapon while it lasts. It’s the desperation of staying alive against all odds that keeps both sides encouraged. But the side that gets licked gets to the truth first.” (p.298) She dies in desperation due to dissatisfaction. In her will she states that all her pupils are to be her mourners. They are told to attend her funeral and she is to be buried beneath the doorstep of the Banner School but she insists that school should run on that day.

Gloria plays multiple roles in this novel, as an orphan, wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She is educated by Julia Mortimer. She marries Jack and enters into Granny-Beechen-Renfro family as a new bride. She gives birth to a baby, May. Throughout the novel she is presented as a maladjusted person in such a large family. She is a possessive and narrow-minded girl. In the words of Sarah Ford Gloria, “Lady May’s mother and an ‘outsider’ is anxious that Lady
May not be affected by the traditional family but be progressive like herself.\textsuperscript{9} That is why she longs for a separate house to live in, along with her husband. She aggrandizes herself though she came with a mysterious background. She does not care for either school or the family or for the past. Louise Gossett states that Gloria, the orphan, "is the voice of the present disclaiming the past."\textsuperscript{10} When she notices Jack’s attachment towards his family is growing stronger, she immediately tries to pursue him away from his family. Physically it is difficult for her to live in a very small house with such a large family with Granny, Beulah and Ralph Renfro, and their children, three girls and the little brother Vaughn. She pesters Jack: "When will we move to ourselves"? (p.111) and such statements as ‘If it was not for all the other people around us, our life would be different this minute (p.112). She is defiant towards every one and wishes to have freedom for her small family of Jack and Lady May.

At the end of the novel both Jack and Gloria join the physical world of Granny and the intellectual world of Julia Mortimer. Ultimately Gloria breaks away from the chains of the past and the present and attains the goal of freedom in her life. To put it in Louise Y.Gossette’s words, "in Losing Battles the focusing of the drifts and pulls in the mind of a woman like Gloria, as she enacts her multiple
roles of wife, mother and daughter-in-law of practical problem-solver and romantic idealist, is typical of Eudora Welty’s vision of behaviour and relation.11 A scene in the cemetery closes the novel, symbolizing the dead past and the dead people who are no longer there to influence the reunion of the couple Jack and Gloria. The celebration of a birthday ends in the celebration of death but the celebration is Jack and Gloria’s stepping into a new and hopeful life.

The younger generation in the novel in spite of their longing to belong, want to be free. They are strongly individualistic in nature and want move away from the strings of the family and achieve something in the world. In Delta Wedding the youngsters remain in the family whereas in Losing Battles they want to leave the family, establish their identity, and come back to the family victorious.

As Elizabeth Ken says Losing Battles represents not only the universal fate of man, but also the unresolved conflict between two views of life .... The mythic view that life is timeless and cyclic and the historical view that life is temporary, changing and irreversible.12
References


