READING THE CONSTELLATION: EUDORA WELTY'S PATTERNS OF TIME, CULTURE, AND MEMORY

by

BARBARA J. SYLVESTER

B.A., Florence State College, 1959
M.A., Kent State University, 1960

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Department of English

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Eudora Welty's full stature in world literature is not clear because her canon has not yet been seen as unified by an advertent thematic structure. This oversight stems in part from the fact that critics, seeing her regional detail as an end rather than a means, neglected Lewis Simpson's insistence that Welty is a modernist writer working, like Faulkner, in the tradition of Proust, Joyce, and Eliot. By applying a modernist paradigm to several major volumes of her fiction, I have traced consistent, discernible patterns that can be communicated in classrooms as well as in scholarly discussions. Welty focuses primarily on major transitional eras in national history that particularly illustrate the inevitable disintegration of familiar cultures. Partly by employing Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes, I show that each era she portrays is systematically intersected by parallel cultures of other eras and locales, evoked by allusions to masterpieces of past art works, to historical similarities, and to myths that gave meaning to human life in times of shared belief. The juxtapositions of different cultures comment on a crucial, universal challenge for all humans: to accept time's mutability without evasion or retreat. The fragments of art form a unifying collage, reminding readers of art's importance in sustaining human life by providing codes for emotional and spiritual survival of change. Welty's final work affirms that humanity can put the details of temporal
existence into an emotionally liberating perspective by recognizing the constant and reassuring cyclic patterns of the natural world, for these patterns can be held in memory and preserved in art.
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INTRODUCTION

A decade after Eudora Welty published her last fictional work in 1972, Albert J. Devlin remarked that critics, bemused by Welty's lyrical artistry, had yet to examine her work with the "informed historical and cultural scrutiny (in Louis D. Rubin's phrase)" necessary to penetrate her mystery and thereby "establish a full circulation of meaning among her memorable texts" (Chronicle "Introduction" xi). A few years later Peggy W. Prenshaw repeated Devlin's assessment: "more attention to the relation between works and to the career as a whole is needed. . . . the fiction of Eudora Welty has not yet received the scale and depth of critical analysis that it warrants" ("Eudora Welty" Bibliographic Essays 267). Too many critics have heeded the caveat early expressed by Ruth Vande Kieft, author of the standard work on Welty's life and canon, that Welty's work did not lend itself to exhaustive analysis. Rather, she explained, beyond a certain point, the sense of mystery so fundamental to Welty's fiction must remain just that--a mystery, one that elicits powerful emotional responses from readers, but leaves them uncertain of the meaning of the work itself. As late as 1987, Vande Kieft advised readers to content themselves by "running with the mysteries in parallel relationship to the stories" ("Teaching" 204).

Over this last decade, Welty criticism has proliferated. Also, Michael Kreyling's 1991 Author and Agent, an account of
Welty's correspondence and relationship with her literary agent, Diarmuid Russell, has provided more details about Welty's work habits and travels. Yet, no single study has offered a satisfying account of either the connections among Welty's texts or the relationship between her works and her career. Eudora Welty herself has insisted repeatedly that readers must look in the expanse of her entire work to comprehend this whole, to understand her vision: "it's what the work shows, comprises altogether" (Price "Introduction" xxviii, emphasis mine). As Jon Smith asserts, in a provocative 1995 review of eight new books on Eudora Welty, "Welty studies continue only to scratch the surface" (554).

While I do not presume in this study to explain the mystery of Eudora Welty's unique genius, I do intend to suggest a key to her method of constructing narratives, which is highly conscious and purposeful. This key should help dispel the assumption that Welty's canon reflects no conscious thematic structure, an assumption that has retarded the recognition of Welty's significance in modern literature. The central critical problem, as Smith claims, is that Welty has not been consistently recognized as a "major modernist" writer.¹ This oversight has

¹Chester Eisinger sees Welty as a transition figure between traditionalism and modernism; Michael Kreyling notes the modern dimensions of the early stories ("Modernism") and pursues the mythological patterns of Welty's later work in his Achievement of Order. Most recently, Rebecca Mark claims that Welty revises the modernist tradition from a feminist perspective, while Suzan Harrison, tracing the interrelation of Welty's novels and Virginia Woolf's, places Welty in the tradition of modernism.
probably occurred because such signs of modernism as manipulations of time, obvious experiments with language, and pervasive use of intertextual allusions are not as clearly signaled in Welty's work as they are, for example, in the work of William Faulkner; so readers have not automatically applied a modernist paradigm to the quotidian, regional surfaces of her narratives. Like Faulkner, Welty uses Mississippi in what appears to be the tradition of southern regionalism. Yet she also employs modernist devices, again like Faulkner, that subtly alter the representative intention of southern regionalism. In Faulkner's work, this particular technique has been compared, by Norman Cantor, to Joyce's treatment of Dublin and tradition: Joyce, says Cantor, "exploited the British tradition of the provincial novel" while "pursuing [an] intense examination of segments of universal experience" (42). We need to recognize the same achievement in Welty's work.

That Welty's structural method is definitively modernist is made clear by Lewis P. Simpson in The Brazen Face of History. Simpson cites Welty and Faulkner as examples of the "Proustian-Joycean literary mind" that took over the post-World War I South.

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2In this book Simpson discusses the development of the modern sense of history in American fiction. For specific references to Welty and to the development of historical irony in southern fiction, see Simpson's chapter, "What Survivors Do" (233-54). In his Chronicle (208-12), Albert Devlin discusses the significance of Simpson's chapter, as well as other Simpson articles, in establishing Welty's control of specifically "southern materials"--the particular concern of Devlin's study.
The emergence of this "literary mind" in the American South, he says, demonstrated a new "southern aesthetic of memory . . . imbedded in the European matrix of memory" (244). Moreover, Simpson selects Welty as one of the "most sensitive and accomplished practitioners" of this modern "aesthetic" (240). Accordingly, central aims of my study are to develop Simpson's insight by a systematic examination of Welty's work as a whole and to arrive at a clearer understanding of her unifying vision.

In "Some Notes on Time in Fiction," Welty herself echoes Henri Bergson's conception of an interior, associative dimension in time, the dimension exploited, of course, by Proust, Joyce, Woolf, and Eliot, as well as by Faulkner and Welty. Welty declares that "Fiction penetrates chronological time to reach our deeper version of time that's given to us by the way we think and feel" (Eye 168). For Welty, it is the characters' selective retention of moments in time, "not chronology" in history, that matters; time is recovered in the present through memory, through "Remembering . . . so basic and vital a part of staying alive.

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3It is understandable that many readers have associated Welty with what Hugh Holman calls, in The Immoderate Past, the "memorial" habit of mind prevalent in pre-World War I southern fiction, a nostalgic habit of mind with little sense of historical irony. Welty's historical verisimilitude, the affirmative aspects of her vision, and her sometimes comic indulgence in representing the traditional southern culture of community and kinship promote this confusion. But as Simpson explains, "writers discovered the modern resistance to the disappearance of the community of kinship, custom, and tradition," and "a flowering of modern literature" occurred in the South when Faulkner, Warren, Welty, and others adopted the "Proustian-Joycean" approach to history and to literary structure (238, 244).
that it takes on the strength of an instinct of survival, and acquires the power of an art" (Eye 169, 171).

Thus, in most of her texts, Welty focuses on transitional stages in life experience or major periods of historical change that particularly illustrate inevitable disruption to familiar worlds. She continually recreates past American eras, each of which also resurrects even more remote eras of American history, as well as European history, myth or folklore. In fact, whether her narratives are set in the eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth centuries, Welty follows Joyce's pioneering modernist method as expounded by T. S. Eliot in his well-known 1923 Dial review, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth": she manipulates "a continuous parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity" as a way "of giving a shape and a significance" to what Eliot regards as "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("Myth" 681). Welty intersects historical times with the modern perspective of the individual mind in order

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Cf. Harrison's study, which appeared after the composition of this dissertation and which focuses on issues of discourse particularly relevant to feminist theory. For her, progress from communal tradition to individual acceptance of change is seen in terms of women's struggle toward a non-patriarchal discourse, facilitating a feminine identity and voice for the writer, the protagonist, and the protagonist as artist. Harrison views Welty's work as artist parables within this paradigm. My study, however, deals with Welty's wider interest in the dissolution of familiar social and cultural structures as a recurrent, archetypal challenge--indeed as the central and most difficult challenge to the emotional survival of human beings, regardless of gender. Thus, my study associates Welty with a central philosophical preoccupation of modernists generally. Inevitably, both studies often refer to the same features in Welty's work, but in different contexts and with different emphases.
to achieve the synchronicity characteristic of much modernist fiction. Employing the same method as did Joyce and Eliot, Welty constructs her texts out of allusions to masterpieces of past art works and to myths that gave pleasure, comfort, direction, and meaning to humanity in various times when coherent beliefs in myth, deity, or nation were consubstantial within a culture, as they are not in twentieth-century Western culture.

To that end, Welty underpins the surface times of her contemporary worlds with echoes of classical myth, world literary masterpieces, and parallel moments in history and culture. She includes musical and visual art forms, folk art as well as high art, and popular art as well as traditional. In her canon, these diverse fragments from the past not only contribute to meaning in the individual works, but also form a unifying collage reminding readers of the importance of art in sustaining human life by providing a code for emotional and spiritual survival—despite inevitable change. Thus, like Joyce, Yeats, Eliot (and Forster and Wilder, as we shall note), Welty is one of those modernists whose work moves toward affirmation rather than alienation. Yet like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Frost (conspicuous parallels), Welty has so artfully embedded modernist devices in

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7Although definitions of modernism vary, many specialists believe that affirmation can be an element in modernist works. For discussion of this view, see Singal 4-10, Gay Freud 21-27, and Ellman and Feidelson, "Introduction" to The Modern Tradition. I locate Welty in this broader view of the modernist tradition, as illustrated throughout this study.
her surfaces of everyday life that their systematic development has been neglected by several generations of critical readers.

Once we apply a modernist paradigm to her work, specific devices of irony, allusion, misdirection, and intertextuality fall into place to enhance the synchronicity of the work. She also employs both ancient and modern literary forms to match each text precisely, thus reenforcing content. At the same time, in an almost archival way, she defines each text according to explicit boundaries of historical time and geographical place. The blend presents a challenge to readers, especially those of us living in an age that has turned away both from history and from the modernist tradition.

Specifically, for the "contemporaneity" in her plots, Welty focuses on the distinctive geography and history of her home state. Throughout my study, I will demonstrate at length that in each work Welty systematically maps out a particular space and a specific time to create what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed the literary device of the "chronotope," a literal fusion of space and time. Bakhtin defines the term as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" ("Forms" 84). Through the chronotope, Bakhtin explains, "the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect . . . take on flesh and blood, permitting the imagining power of art to do its work" ("Forms" 250). The chronotope can express what others have called the novel's world
view or *Zeitgeist*, as well as the variations in each character’s perspective on the world. It is the chronotope, Bakhtin insists, that governs meaning in the novel by making representation possible, an idea that, I will argue, Eudora Welty shares.

Theories on space and time in literature abound, of course, but Bakhtin’s offers a particularly useful framework for a study of Welty’s fiction. With his strong historical sense, he distinguishes and illustrates generic, recurring types of novelistic chronotopes in European fiction, from Greek romance to the nineteenth century. Welty’s twentieth-century American fictions recreate several of these earlier chronotopes, even as Welty establishes unimpeachable geographical and historical verisimilitude in her surface plots. Her meticulous attention to nuances of difference within given eras has sometimes been overlooked by readers who view her work through the values of their own eras, thereby missing the interplay of disparate eras and voices through which meaning evolves in fiction. Studying Welty in the light of Bakhtin’s typology may help readers navigate this obstacle to a fuller understanding of Welty’s achievement. We can begin to discern a full range of meaning in Welty’s canon only when we articulate each work’s chronotope more precisely and more extensively than we have yet done.

For example, Welty’s sense of place, chorus the critics, is one of the great strengths in her work. Welty has generally been credited with chronicling the state of Mississippi in her work.
But, frequently, the critics' recognition is incomplete. Too often, the place acknowledged amounts to a vague and inaccurate generalization called "Mississippi," a far cry from the specificity of the actual place. Such a general rendition of place would be a travesty for a craftsman as careful and precise as Eudora Welty. Rather, Welty's Mississippi comprises several vastly different places.

In fact, Eudora Welty might well have been speaking of herself when, in 1989, she referred to the critic and novelist Louis Rubin as "a mapmaker." With "eyes that see" and the "mind that holds the world in its focus," she explained, the mapmaker "is able to invent, to reinvent, a country" ("Louis Rubin" 258). Eudora Welty, I contend, is a consummate mapmaker, whose large canvas has been crafted of meticulously distinct parts of the whole.

As I will show, she works spatially and systematically through four of the eight discrete geographical sections that

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6Albert Devlin and Jan Gretland are two important exceptions who have carefully addressed Welty's specifics of place and history. In Chronicle, Devlin addresses particularly Welty's historical imagination; he suggests in his conclusion that Welty's "allusiveness" and her "engagement with the most perplexing issues of southern historiography" warrant "scrupulous attention" (205). In his book on Welty's "aesthetics of place," Gretland argues, mistakenly I believe, that Welty is a Southern regionalist whose fiction represents "a cultural continuity of basic Agrarian ideas" (1).

7For vivid and myriad expressions of "a Mississippian's sense of place," see essays collected in Peggy Prenshaw's Sense of Place: Mississippi.
together make up the state of Mississippi. She also recreates another distinct Mississippi entity, the ancient Natchez Trace that crosses several sections of the state. In her inductive approach to her canvas, Welty represents a series of individual experiences in small, separate sections of Mississippi that collectively lead to general conclusions about the universal nature of human experience.

Just as important as space to Welty's mapmaking is time, a dimension in her work that has commanded even less attention than the specific spaces that compose her sense of place. In the volumes to be examined in this study, Welty recreates distinct historic eras in Mississippi, eras that typify not just the experience of Mississippi but the experience of the American Republic as well. Within several of these works, she either compresses or expands time, creating what we might think of as harmonic chords—of past ages and anticipated future ones—to accompany the melodic thread of the present era depicted in each plot. In words markedly similar to Welty's own, Bakhtin describes this process: "Time . . . thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible" ("Forms" 84). In her final novel,  

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8The eight sections, described in the 1938 WPA travel guide, *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State* are the Delta, the Coast, the Natchez District, the Brown Loam and Loess Hills, the Piney Woods, the Tennessee Hills, the Black Prairie, and the Central Hills (3-8). According to the authors, "these eight family-like sections grouped together form the great neighborhood called Mississippi" (7). In dividing the state by physiographic regions, the 1974 *Atlas of Mississippi* follows the same pattern, adding two more small distinct sections (Cross and Wales 4-6).
The Optimist's Daughter, Welty puts human-made calendar time into a different perspective altogether, suggesting that humans can enter the natural world of solar-lunar time by recognizing the cyclic patterns that govern Time itself, patterns that can be held in memory and preserved in art. By adopting this larger, longer view of time, individuals enlarge their vision—a necessary first step for surviving, spiritually intact, the inevitable experience of loss that accompanies changes brought about by time.

The habit of mind that produced Welty's commitment to a system of time and place is disclosed indirectly in The Optimist's Daughter, Welty's most autobiographical novel. When the protagonist, Laurel, studies her mother's desk with its "24 pigeon hole slots like a little country post-office," she notes that Becky McKelva stored letters not alphabetically or by author, but rather according to their "place and time" (OD 160). The old-fashioned country post-office, a fixture in Welty's fiction, stored the mail in the same way, in each time according to each person's fixed place in the county. Early in her career, Welty called attention to this simple organizational scheme with the title of her 1935 book of photographs, which we will discuss later.9 She called the book One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression / A Snapshot Album.

9In The Welty Collection, Suzanne Marrs explains that Welty had two New York exhibits of her photographs, which led her to submit a collection of them for publication. Although the projected book "met with praise" from the publisher, it was rejected as an "unprofitable undertaking" (78).
For Welty, the exterior world embodied in the chronotope shapes human experience, but the final meaning of that experience emerges from the interplay between the exterior and interior worlds of individuals. Asked by renowned folklorist Bill Ferris whether she had ever thought of her work "as sort of a map of Mississippi," Welty replied that she thought of it "more as an internal map. . . . a map of minds and imagination"; but, she continued, "it has to be laid somewhere" (Conversations 160). She had not thought to create a literal map of Mississippi sections in the sense that Faulkner had recreated Mississippi's Central Hills section in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Her interests, she claimed, had always been focused more on the "inside of the characters, to show what they're doing" (Conversations 160). Yet Welty echoes Bakhtin in ascribing the importance of each character's particular time and place to his or her motivation and action in the plot.

Something shapes people, and it's the world in which they act that makes their experiences--what they act for and react against. . . . It furnishes the economic background that he grows up in, and the folkways and the stories that come down to him in his family. It's the fountainhead of his knowledge and experience. . . . And just the knowledge that another person has all this behind him which can help to explain him and give a background to his opinions and his feelings--it's such an easy way to understand, to begin to understand other people. (Conversations 159)

For Welty, then, details of the individual's exterior world explain and chart the traveler's path through life. "Maps," she has explained, "are the contemporary stages of journeys undertaken, answering to the dreams and demands of
travelers" ("Louis Rubin" 256). All her protagonists are travelers, wayfarers, wanderers, or sojourners in one way or another. The works we will examine usually feature some distinctive road, often literal as well as figurative, upon which travelers encounter each other. The Welty canon reveals not only an overview of two hundred years of the historical American experience, but also an imaginative re-creation of the perilous roads navigated by American wayfarers as they have attempted to balance dreams engendered by the new world with the realities encountered in their lives.

One of the most famous "road" scenes in the Welty canon serves especially well as a typical example of Welty's artistic method and thematic interest. To help clarify my continuing discussion of Welty's use of allusion to and ironic juxtaposition of parallel cultures, I will explicate this particular scene from The Optimist's Daughter in some detail now, although I will not examine the novel itself until Chapter 6. This scene embraces both the immediate exterior and the interior world of its protagonist, Laurel McKelva Hand, at an important moment in her life. In the scene, the exterior world--the place and time of Cairo, Illinois, in the 1940s--comments on Laurel's interior romantic illusion, even as it also directs the reader to an earlier work of art. Details of Cairo's history as well as the memory it stirs of Mark Twain's earlier masterpiece, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, undercut the scene's apparent surface meaning.
The scene is recalled by Laurel twenty years after its occurrence. In it, Laurel and her fiancé, Philip Hand, journey by a "crack" Illinois Central train from Chicago down to Mississippi for their wedding. As the sun rises, the train pulls out of Cairo, Illinois, and the two look down on the "confluence of the waters, the Ohio and the Mississippi."

All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world. And they themselves were a part of the confluence. Their own joint act of faith had brought them here at the very moment and matched its occurrence, and proceeded as it proceeded. Direction itself was made beautiful, momentous. They were riding as one with it, right up front. It's our turn! she'd thought exultantly. And we're going to live forever.

(OD 160)

The details of the exterior world in this scene, which Welty could have expected her earlier readers to recognize, shape Laurel's feelings. The "crack" train, The City of New Orleans, traveled for decades the principal route through the deep South, running daily from Chicago to New Orleans and back, transporting generations of young southerners, black and white, who headed north from the poverty-stricken South, dreaming of new opportunities, new jobs, new lives. Even more significant is the town of Cairo. There, the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi River, thus mingling the waters of so many of the nation's rivers that the spot became known in the nineteenth century and is still commemorated in the twentieth
century as the "Confluence of America." Thus, Welty reminds her readers, and not for the first time, that the implications of her work reach beyond the region of Mississippi to embrace America as a whole. Also, in this scene, the geographical confluence mirrors the other confluences in the natural world, whose sight so exhilarates Laurel and Philip.

But at the same time, the allusion to the once-bustling nineteenth-century town of Cairo adds an ironic dimension crucial to a full understanding of the scene. In the nineteenth century, Cairo had been a booming river town, destined—or so it thought—to become a great city. But by the 1940s, the time of Laurel’s train journey, Cairo had sadly declined, dying out as the Mississippi River’s importance as a transportation route waned. The reality of the poverty-stricken twentieth-century town, whose early dreams of immortality had mirrored Laurel’s present ones, underscores the illusory quality of Laurel’s exuberant optimism. Also in the nineteenth century, Cairo had achieved literary prominence as a significant place in Twain’s classic American novel, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, a work from which, Ernest Hemingway believed, "all modern American literature" developed (Green Hills of Africa 22). By repeating Twain’s portrayal of Cairo as the central point in the journey of travelers whose

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10 Established in 1812, a small park between the waters rests on the southernmost point of land in Cairo, marking the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers. A battered sign over its entrance still reads "Fort Defiance, the Confluence of America."
dreams are deferred or shattered, Welty immortalizes Cairo once again in the twentieth century.

In The Optimist's Daughter, Laurel's vision of this apparent scene of order, unity, and optimism is characterized as the "whole morning world" (OD 186). But Laurel's fantasy that "we're going to live forever" lasts less than a year, not even so long as had the early dreams of Cairo, Illinois. Indeed, no part of her idyllic imagined world exists by the time Laurel recalls it in the 1960s. Nor does such a world exist anywhere else in Welty's fiction, except in the early romantic illusions of her protagonists.

This ironic dimension of her fiction has been greatly misunderstood by those critics who claim that Welty venerates the South. Welty neither venerates nor despises the South. Rather she recreates in each microcosm the complexities of vice and virtue that inform any human community. It is her protagonists who at given moments view their world through whatever illusion serves them. Laurel's awed exuberance just before her wedding epitomizes an illusion common to travelers who face a new day in a new world, whether that new world be found in the institution of marriage or in the traveler's anticipation of geographical movement and discovery. Just so

\footnote{For a remarkably similar account of order and confluence, see the final scene of Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp," especially its last line: "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die" (70).}
would have been the feelings aroused in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s seventeenth-century Dutch sailors, as they contemplated the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (Gatsby 182). But Welty knows full well that Laurel’s optimistic sense of immortality is an illusion, that "nothing gold can stay," as Frost reminds us. And Laurel McKelva Hand learns it quickly.

In her novels and short story cycles, Welty captures through microcosms of Mississippi’s sections the bewildering changes that all human beings in all times and places must navigate in the experience of a lifetime. Using various literary genres appropriate to the particular circumstances, Welty places each of her protagonists in a wholly separate place and time, representing a type of situation universal in human experience: the advent of a profound change that will effect the death or at least the radical transformation of a way of life. In these transitional eras, the ordinary people of Welty’s fictional worlds invariably find comfort in various illusions that obscure the threatening change they fear. However, in the end, as I will explicate in some detail in my concluding chapters, Welty eschews the "saving illusions" that so frequently characterize the work of high modernists. For Welty, humans cannot begin to realize their full potential until they can put aside illusions altogether to look steadfastly on life’s most frightening reality: the inevitability of change, loss, and death.
As they adopt, recognize, and then abandon one illusion after another, Welty’s protagonists, I suggest, constitute a developing composite protagonist, who struggles to control the forces that threaten his or her world. This developing protagonist also, I believe, reflects stages in the artistic development of the artist herself. Although we know little of Welty’s private adult life, the composite protagonist addresses difficult human and artistic concerns that Welty must have faced, especially during the middle stage of her career. Eventually, the composite protagonist, in the character of Laurel McKelva Hand, comes to realize and illustrate Welty’s principal belief: that only in the "sense of our own transience" do we experience the absolute necessity to love and to act that moves us to live every moment at our highest human potential (Eye 168).

The protagonists who realize even part of the full potential of their humanity are rare, as we shall discover. For Welty, such individuals must satisfy three requirements involving vision, love, and action. To illustrate these necessary developments, Welty uses images of the eyes, the heart, and the hands to describe her protagonists. The most fully realized of them must not only look resolutely on the reality of the world--its linked beauty and terror--but they must also see clearly the meaning of their experience in the world. Though well aware of the heart’s vulnerability to loss, they must yet hold their hearts open to all life’s
possibilities of connection. Finally, however strange and threatening it may be to do so, they must lift their hands always "to make or do," to participate actively in the world they inhabit or inherit.

In the early and mid-career works of Welty's canon, perhaps the passage most illustrative of the vision necessary to the worthy protagonist comes from The Golden Apples's final story, "The Wanderers," which I will discuss at length in Chapter 1. The protagonist, Virgie Rainey, remembers a picture from her youth: Perseus holding aloft the head of the Medusa, which he had cut off with a stroke of his sword. Believing as much in the Medusa as in Perseus, Virgie, much older and now alone in the world, envisions the story of Perseus and the reality it represents in "three moments": "the beauty and the sword's stroke and the terror" (GA 243). Beyond the three, Virgie perceives, "lay their existence in time--far out and endless, a constellation which the heart could read over many a night" (GA 243). For Virgie, the "sword's stroke" forms the "beat of time." Although Virgie now sees fully the meaning of her experience in time, we do not learn whether she will also use her vision to participate in the world she inhabits. We must wait until Welty's final novel, The Optimist's Daughter, to find Laurel, a protagonist who undergoes a similar moment of clarity of vision and also demonstrates her ability to act on that vision.
As I articulate the connections among Welty's works and their relationship to her career, I will rely to some extent on explication of individual works, as did Ruth Vande Kieft. She believed, early and late, that Welty's work required the "patient and loving scrutiny we apply to poems" ("Preface" Eudora Welty). The very nature of modernist writing exerts pressure on the reader to participate intellectually by pursuing allusions embedded in the text, however subtle or indirect. In Welty's case, wide knowledge of many worlds is helpful: the natural, the historic, the mythic, the literary, and the artistic, just for a start. By supplying some parts only alluded to in Welty's surfaces, especially those references to the historic and literary records, I expect to amplify meaning in the individual works. Only when we reveal as fully as possible the greater range of meaning in each work can we establish the overall pattern governing Welty's canon.

Before examining individual works, however, I will examine in Chapter 1 what Jon Smith has called the "curious shape of her [Welty's] career" (555). I will identify and discuss sources important to the development of Welty's artistic methods and to the eventual pattern of her canon. I will also suggest three broad stages of development in her composite protagonist, stages that help connect Welty's fiction directly to her artistic development. In Chapter 1, I will look particularly at the composite protagonist in two stories from Welty's mid-career period, 1949-1955: "The
Wanderers," from The Golden Apples, and "The Bride of the Innisfallen," from the collection of the same name. The concerns of the composite protagonist, I will suggest, reflect Welty’s artistic concentration during that time on the interior world of the artist, confronted with human as well as artistic choices.

Succeeding chapters will feature analyses of individual works whose sum total presents an overview of the American experience. As I have said earlier, Welty has chosen particular Mississippi transitional eras that also represent stages of change in the United States as a whole, albeit stages that may have occurred earlier or later than Mississippi’s: pioneer settlement of the wilderness; the ascendance of rail and land transportation over river transportation; the initial decline of farming as an occupation; the shift in power from agricultural interests to commercial-industrial interests; the upheaval of traditional patterns of civic life occasioned by the non-violent civil rights movement; the destruction of the nation’s moral fiber by the violence and assassinations directed against the civil rights movement and its leaders; and finally the violence, division, and destruction prompted by the Vietnam War and the domestic anti-war movement.

Working initially in a chronological format (as I will do in ordering the subsequent chapters of this study), Welty deals quickly with the late eighteenth century in The Robber
Bridegroom (Chapter 2); in The Wide Net (Chapter 3) she dwells on the entire nineteenth century, with a brief glance into the early twentieth century. Delta Wedding (Chapter 4), set in the twenties, marks the end of the first stage of development in the Welty protagonist. When Welty moves into the twentieth century, she slows her pace—with one exception, The Golden Apples—and sets her novels in shorter time frames—a month, a week, a day in the twentieth century. As I mentioned earlier, works from Welty's second stage, The Golden Apples and The Bride of the Innisfallen, will be treated in Chapter 1. The third and final stage of development in the Welty protagonist is seen in Losing Battles (Chapter 5), set in the thirties, and The Optimist's Daughter (Chapter 6), set in the sixties.

My purpose, then, in answer to Devlin's call, is to illustrate the pattern and connections that will establish a comprehensible "circulation of meaning" among Welty's works. My study should also eliminate some of the mystery surrounding Welty's acknowledged mastery of the craft of fiction-writing. Although agreeing to accept her work as something of a mystery may be tempting, admirers who do so will miss its full range and power. By examining her varied literary modes and difficult mix of chronotopic values and modernist intertextuality, I hope to offer a paradigm that will allow readers to appreciate Eudora Welty's proper place in the pantheon of twentieth-century American artists.
The "curious shape" of Welty's career, cited by Jon Smith as hindering her recognition as a major modernist, includes circumstances that have been instrumental, I believe, in determining her artistic approach to fiction and focusing her attention on journeys and travelers. Of course, the curious shape Smith refers to is the hiatus in Welty's fiction publishing during the late fifties and the sixties. In his words, Welty had

a few brilliant modernist works in the forties and early fifties, a fifteen-year lull, two relatively realistic novels in the early seventies, then a quarter century of low production (except for the wildly successful, but thin, *One Writer's Beginnings*).

(Jon Smith 555)

But I will suggest that some curiosities in Welty's career began even earlier, indeed even before she started her serious writing. Her initial interest in visual arts, her English major at the University of Wisconsin, her graduate work in advertising at Columbia, her early employment by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the collection of photographs gleaned from that employment, all shaped the direction of Welty's literary development.1 Later circumstances confirmed her belief in her choices: the early recognition and promotion of her work by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in the *Southern Review*, her friendship with Katherine Ann

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1In *The Welty Collection* (77-91), Suzanne Marrs provides an excellent introduction to Welty's photographic accomplishments, including technical details about her equipment.
Porter, her frequent travels, her recognition by E. M. Forster, and her long employment with the *New York Times Book Review*. Over the course of Welty’s long career, personal desires, financial need, and family circumstances contributed further to the unusual course of her literary publication.

In addition to the fiction, Welty published reviews and essays. She wrote book reviews for the *New York Times Book Review*, having been asked by its editor as early as 1943 to join his staff. Even when family responsibilities curtailed her fiction writing, she continued to write periodically for the *Book Review* over a period of forty years. During the fifties, Welty also wrote pieces on the art of fiction writing, most of which reached a wide audience.

Over her entire career, Welty taught and traveled much more widely than is generally known. She made Jackson her home base, but as an adult, she indulged the love of traveling that had begun when she was still a child. She was surrounded by artistic friends, many of them Jackson natives who became highly successful in artistic circles beyond Jackson. Her orientation, therefore, has always been much more cosmopolitan than one would think, knowing her only from her fictional work.

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To give some sense of the effect on Welty’s artistic development of the diverse circumstances of her life, I will review briefly here those most important. Some will help illuminate specific texts; others will suggest parallels between stages of development in Welty’s composite protagonist and stages of artistic development in the author. Since, as I have said, we know very little about Welty’s adult life, I will use the fiction to illustrate some points. I do not suggest that Welty’s work is any more autobiographical than any other artist’s. But certainly reflections of her interior world appear in her created world, particularly in certain female protagonists, featured in one strand of her mid-career short stories. Besides, like Faulkner, she has always "directed" readers who want to "know" her to read her fiction.

We might say that Welty’s fiction, after the first collection of short stories, *Curtain of Green*, can be roughly divided into stages of journeying. For our purposes, I will identify three broad ones: following after, wandering, and gathering home. These stages correspond, as I will show, to developments affecting Welty’s artistic imagination and are represented by the motivation and movement of various protagonists. The texts found in the first and third stages will be briefly noted here, but treated fully later in separate chapters for each text. However, representative parts of the texts found in the second stage will be presented
in this chapter because they reflect more particularly issues that bear on Welty's career.

PHOTOGRAPHING PARTS OF THE WHOLE

Welty's early non-literary employment, I believe, had lasting effects on the direction of her literary career. Welty has said that--growing up in Jackson, Mississippi's capital, and attending her final college years out of state--she knew little about the diversity of her home state. Not until she returned to Jackson after her father's death did she really come to know her state in the intimate detail revealed in her work. During her early job with the WPA, she traveled extensively in the state, taking pictures and talking to people in almost every county. Welty was employed during this period as a junior publicity agent, not as a writer or a photographer; the pictures she took of people and places were primarily for her own pleasure. In the process, however, she determined to become a writer. A writer, she believed, would be able to explore the interior worlds that gave rise to the fleeting glimpses of human character that she was able to capture with her camera in the still moment of a snapshot. This early WPA experience is central, I believe, to the direction undertaken by Welty as a writer.

Although various critics have reported on Welty's work for the WPA, no one has discussed the significance to Welty of the major product of the WPA's Federal Writers' project--a
magnificent state travel guide called *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State*, published in May, 1938. Welty was not directly involved in this WPA project, but she knew of it and contributed three pictures to it. Certain passages in the guide, I suggest, may initially have influenced her decision to use particular parts of Mississippi as settings for her fiction. They at least explain her systematic partition of the state into its separate sections, a fact of Mississippi geography that she refers to, years later, in *One Writer's Beginnings* *(OWB 77)*. For example, the guidebook describes Mississippi as "eight distinct geographical units, each with its own sectional background, and each but a part of the whole" *(Mississippi 3)*. The authors emphasize the necessity of understanding Mississippi's parts in order to counteract the impression conveyed by the state's two best known writers, Stark Young of the Coast and Natchez areas and William Faulkner of the Central Hills section. Each of these writers, according to the guide, has simply pictured "the section that has conditioned him, and nothing more" *(Mississippi 3)*. But, the writers continue, human motivation and behavior vary widely in the eight different sections.

So, as I have said earlier, it can surely be no coincidence that five of Welty's texts are set in one of four

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This guide is extremely well-written and informative. To the usual geographical descriptions and topographical maps, the guide adds full articles on topics such as archeology, history, agriculture, folkways, commerce, and creative efforts.
separate sections of the state: two in the Yazoo-Delta plain, and one each in the Natchez, the Piney Woods, and the Tennessee Hills sections. (Notice that she excludes Young's Coast and Faulkner's Central Hills.) A sixth text is set along the Natchez Trace, the famous historical trail that cuts diagonally across the state of Mississippi, from the Natchez to the Tennessee Hills sections.

Indeed, three of Welty's sectional texts could serve almost as extensions of *Mississippi: Guide to the Magnolia State*. They particularly extend a description of the background and motivation of early Mississippi settlers, found in an historical chapter called "Creative Effort" in Mississippi.

There were three migrations of English, Scotch, and Irish stock to Mississippi. The first was the migration of Tory families to the Natchez country during and immediately following the American Revolution. The second was the migration from the Piedmont of the Carolinas and Virginia into the Mississippi hills and Piney Woods regions immediately after the War of 1812. The third was the "flush times" migration that brought settlers from all classes of the older South, and even from the East and North, into Indian lands opened by the treaty of 1832.

These three groups, though all of one racial stock, came with different backgrounds and purposes. The Tories were comparatively wealthy and by habit were accustomed to a certain amount of ease and gracious living. Their ideal was the English country squire.

... The hill people were in many ways quite different from the Tory group. They did not come to Mississippi to reestablish an empire. Instead, they came from King's Mountain to escape a world that was too much for them. Preferring the alternative of independent isolation, they purposely forsook hope of wealth and leisure to hide themselves in the hilly retreats of northeastern
Mississippi or in the great stretches of the Piney Woods.

... The people who came to Mississippi on the crest of the "flush times" had purposes more nearly like what are considered "American" today. They moved to Mississippi in order "to get ahead." They meant to begin a tradition, not to continue one.

(Mississippi 135-36)

These three waves of migration are represented fictionally in three texts that should be easily recognized by Welty scholars. The Tory would-be "country squire"—only slightly modified—appears in the character of Clement Musgrove, protagonist of The Robber Bridegroom. The reclusive hill people of northeastern Mississippi's Tennessee Hills are exquisitely recreated in the Renfros of Losing Battles. The family motivated by the "American Dream" takes shape as the Fairchild family of Delta Wedding.

Only The Robber Bridegroom, Welty's first novel, is set in the actual historical time of the original migration, the last third of the eighteenth century. The two other novels picture descendants of the original settlers, as they carry on their ancestral traditions in the first third of the twentieth century. In both cases, the protagonists' ancestors are recreated in family stories told within the context of the novels. The fullness and richness of detail in these two later volumes, combined with the sureness of the multi-faceted patterns of imagery, not only capture the essence of each of the groups of settlers, but also preserve a meticulously accurate record of the times for future inquiry.
A fourth text, *The Wide Net*, treats the Natchez Trace, which winds through or near the other Mississippi sections presented. Two other texts, far less obvious about their locale, are set, respectively, in the Delta slightly northeast of Vicksburg (*The Golden Apples*) and in the Piney Woods area near Jackson (*The Optimist’s Daughter*). These last two volumes offer fewer clues to their settings. Morgana, the small, ingrown, fictional hometown in *The Golden Apples*, suggests any town, but exists in Welty’s imagination specifically nineteen miles from Vicksburg. Mt. Salus of *The Optimist’s Daughter* is also a fictional small town probably near Jackson, lying by the Illinois Central rail line.

All of these works focus on the average people in the state, a focus also shared by the Mississippi guidebook. In its preface, the WPA state director and state editor declare their subject.

Main emphasis has been placed upon the typical and average people of the State, rather than the exceptional elements. . . . It is this great agricultural majority, comprising more than four-fifths of the State’s population, that has had no place in portrayals of Mississippi life by William Faulkner at one extreme and by Stark Young at the other.

*(Mississippi "Preface")*

Welty’s depiction of the average people in Mississippi, like the guidebook’s, includes rural blacks as well as whites. Though I will discuss later the issue of race, an area in which Welty has been misread and unjustly criticized, I mention it here only in connection with Eudora Welty’s first completed book, a book of photographs entitled *One Time, One*
Place: *Mississippi in the Depression / A Snapshot Album*, whose subjects are almost equally divided between black and white. Although the book was not published until 1971, it was created during the 1930s from the snapshots Welty had taken on her travels for the WPA.⁴

For the purpose of this study, the most significant detail about this book is its title: *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression / A Snapshot Album*. This title declares the design of time and place that, I contend, governs her artistic approach throughout her life's work. Even within the book, we find section titles that continue the emphasis of specific time: "Workday," "Saturday," "Sunday," and "Portraits." No text accompanies the photographs, merely descriptive titles. But next to each title is carefully printed the location of each shot, usually the name of a specific county, sometimes a town. Place, like time, supplies part of the meaning found in these mostly candid snapshots of rural or small-town people carrying out the normal activities of their lives. Even the "Portraits" section evolves from the unposed snapshots. Most of the photographs present human

subjects; several others capture places, many of which will reappear in her fiction. In her 1971 introduction to the published text, Welty repeats her intention: "I feel that taken all together, they cannot help but amount to a record of a kind--a record of fact, putting together some of the elements of one time and one place" (OTOP 4).

FRAMING REALITY IN A CURTAIN OF GREEN

The stories in A Curtain of Green, Welty's first collection, demonstrate both the photographer's careful eye and the beginning writer's dependence upon that eye. Although this collection made Welty's reputation and has remained one of her most admired works, it exhibits only flashes of the modernist complexity that will inform Welty's later work. The characters in the stories are frequently at some distance from the omniscient narrator. Their characterizations stem primarily from details of external appearance and behavior, and the plot revolves around a specific event. Yet the interior world of the characters seems based almost entirely on the imagination of the writer. Having little knowledge of such interior worlds, the writer sometimes uses dialogue that is totally unlikely, given the condition of the characters.

5According to Michael Kreyling, however, the stories in this collection address the modern age's "moral and philosophical dilemmas as directly as anyone else's [work]" ("Modernism" 19). See also Peter Schmidt for discussion of the engagement of these stories with social and historical forces.
The words spoken in sign language by Albert Morgan, the deaf man in "The Key," for example, are completely unrealistic for a man deaf all his life and poorly educated—as suggested in the story. He would not think of the key he has found as a "symbol," nor would he talk about marrying his wife because of "being afflicted in the same way, unable to speak, lonely because of that" (CS 32). Such vocabulary and ideas belong to the writer—or, perhaps, to the writer in the guise of the red-haired man in the story who observes the deaf couple.

Almost all the stories focus on people who are in some way physically or mentally impaired: feeble-minded Lily Daw, slow—almost illiterate—Ruby Fisher, deaf-mutes Albert and Ellie Morgan, the bigamist Mr. Marblehall, the carnival freaks—Keela and the Petrified Man, the murderer Howard, the eccentric suicide Clytie. The few stories which concern ordinary people who are normal, physically and mentally, place them in crises in their lives that have temporarily deranged them: the recent widow, Mrs. Larkin; the cater-cornered China Grove postmistress; the lonely, dying travelling salesman; the jazz musician receiving word of his wife's suicide.

These stories generally follow Aristotle's unifying techniques, concentrating on a single scene spanning most often a time frame of an hour or an afternoon with all story elements building toward one single effect. The omniscient narrator occasionally steps into the role of one or more characters, but only briefly. The minute, careful, and
comprehensive description of character and setting conveys much of the movement of the stories. They are almost like short mood pieces which elicit intense but transitory feelings and leave half-conscious unanswered questions in their wake. They suggest the sensations we receive in looking at old snapshots, especially if we are curious about lives outside our own familiar ken. External facts of nature are captured completely, but often the interior world of human nature, despite its fascinating suggestiveness, remains elusive.

Further, the characters themselves, especially given their essential difference from the mainstream of society, could in fact be found almost anywhere in rural America. Welty gives them in some instances Mississippi tags either of address or destination, but they are merely tags (sometimes even hypothetical ones, like the non-existent town of Victory). Little in the action or setting of the stories, even those bearing Mississippi place names, would mark the characters specifically as Mississippians.

The one Mississippi characteristic we do see in some stories is the speech pattern of country people: "Why I Live at the P.O" is the best example. In her monologue, the protagonist uses typical pet family names (Papa-Daddy), and the common first and middle proper names for girls (Stella-Rondo and Shirley-T.). She uses the slightly ungrammatical phrases ("say any such of a thing") and the hyperbole ("mortally wounded") that are second nature to southern
country folk. "Why I Live at the P.O." has justly become a classic, not only because of its accurate speech but also because it brings into play the full power of Welty's comic imagination—another of her great strengths as a story-teller. She will repeat this combination with equal success in the novella *The Ponder Heart*, published in the mid-fifties and later adapted for the Broadway stage.

Indeed, the title of this first collection points us in the direction of the theater, where an opaque curtain intervenes between audience and characters. When the heavy curtain rises, the characters stand revealed, but only for a brief time—longer than for a photograph, of course, but not long enough to fully satisfy. The complex portraits of everyday people will begin to emerge in Welty's next stage.

**FOLLOWING AFTER: SOJOURNERS AND WAYFARERS**

With *The Robber Bridegroom*, *The Wide Net*, and *Delta Wedding*, Welty began to move more surely into the first stage of development of her fictional pattern of transitional eras in history and human survival of them. Also, she began to use more consciously artistic methods of manipulating parallel times to enhance meaning in the novels. Added to the exquisite external detail of the photographic eye, as well, are greater penetrations into the interior worlds of the characters. Typically, young protagonists in the works awaken to the possibilities of love and direction, and in almost all
cases, follow after their beloveds. Like Laurel Hand in The Optimist’s Daughter, Welty the artist was learning "to work toward and into her pattern, not to sketch peripheries" (OD 161).

While the fictional Laurel learned from her husband, the primarily self-taught Eudora Welty learned much about writing, I believe, from E. M. Forster, whose novels she greatly admired. I suggest that Welty examined his classic book on writing, Aspects of the Novel, quite early. In 1927, while Welty was still a teenager, Forster had published the widely popular and still influential Aspects, originally a series of lectures he had delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge. It seems highly likely that Welty, the budding fiction writer, well-trained in British literature, would value the observations of this admired, established novelist, a novelist whose best-known epigraph, "only connect," became crucial to her own thinking. Besides, she had also begun her work as a book reviewer during the early forties; she would certainly have been aware of classic works on the subject of novel writing. In 1947, we know, she quoted from Aspects of the Novel in her first major lecture on writing, "Looking at Short Stories" (Eye 85). An expanded version of the lecture, published in installments by the Atlantic in 1949, also alludes to Forster’s Aspects, as well as to his fiction.

But we need not speculate. Her fiction itself provides evidence of his influence, as we shall see later in chapters
on *The Wide Net* and *Delta Wedding*. I am not suggesting that Welty adhered slavishly to Forster’s *Aspects* as she worked on her early fiction. Welty’s imagination needed no such spur. But I do suggest that Forster’s ideas on fiction-writing were important to her. If we think of Forster’s specific excursions into the realm of fictional creativity as a gloss on Welty’s work, as I will do especially in discussing the works of this first period, we gain further insight into the experimental variation in her techniques.

**GATHERING HOME**

Since I will examine in this chapter the second stage of Welty’s fictional journeying, including analyses of illustrative stories, I will comment only comment here on Welty’s third and final fictional stage. This stage includes the two novels published in the early seventies, after the artist’s long lull in publication. The novels of this time, which will be discussed extensively in Chapters 5 and 6, also follow naturally the essential Mississippi pattern begun in the first stage. All through the sixties, Welty had been working on *Losing Battles*, scene by scene, whenever she could spare time from her family caregiving responsibilities. After the deaths of her mother and her brother in 1966, Welty published *The Optimist’s Daughter* in 1969, first in *The New Yorker*. In 1970, she published the long-awaited novel, *Losing Battles*, to a mixed reception. In 1972, after heavily
revising it, she published *The Optimist’s Daughter* as a book. It received a Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The two novels could hardly be more different stylistically. One is long, talky, overflowing with voices and detail; the other is short, stripped, and bare. Yet both converge thematically on a threatened family home and follow the actions of survivors. In them, I believe, Welty completes what she has to say about surviving. If she has not returned to fiction in the quarter century since, it may be because she is fully satisfied with the scope and order of the fictional world she has created.

**WANDERING: "THE WANDERERS" AND "THE BRIDE OF THE INNISFALLEN"**

But in the forties, in the second phase of Welty’s creative expression, such satisfaction was nowhere in evidence. Welty’s forties’ protagonists exhibit an interesting shift in motivation and behavior as, I contend, did Welty herself. Further, I would suggest that E. M. Forster again is partially responsible, this time not through his ideas but through his direct recognition of Welty’s genius. The special bond that Forster thus established with the young writer in her highly productive years in the forties, Welty revealed publicly late in her career. In 1986, at a Montreal conference celebrating Forster’s centenary, Welty read aloud a private letter she had received from Forster in 1947. At the conference, Welty had been asked to
speak, along with a small panel of other distinguished writers, about "the ways in which E. M. Forster had been an important presence in their lives, an unseen figure occasionally guiding their pens" (Herz and Martin 285). Her reply—and the letter itself—warrant quoting in some detail.

I had published a number of short stories but I wasn’t known anywhere, and I received this letter one day in Jackson, Mississippi. It was written in New York City, and dated 28 April, 1947. I copied it off to bring:

Dear Miss Welty: Finding myself in your country I feel I should like to give myself the pleasure of writing you a line and telling you how much I enjoy your work 'The Wide Net'. All the wild and lovely things it brings up have often been with me and delighted me. I am afraid that I am unlikely to have the good fortune of meeting you while I am over here since my itinerary keeps me to the North and to the West. Still there are meetings which are not precisely personal and I’ve had the advantage of one of those through you, and I would like to thank you for it. With kind regards and all good wishes.

Yours sincerely, E. M. Forster.

Well, it was several moments before I was able to read the signature, partly it was his handwriting and partly it was my disbelief. The letter was kindness, undreamed-of kindness. It was also something that belongs to another realm, another kingdom in the sense of animal, vegetable or mineral kingdoms. It was response. It was what I knew Mr. Forster meant me to receive from him. It had been received and had given pleasure. The letter carries some marks of tears and when I copied it off to bring to this conference my tears came back.

(Herz and Martin 298, emphasis mine)

Certainly, Forster’s was not the first positive response she had received to her work.6 But he may well have been the most famous and honored novelist yet to encourage her, to in

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6Welty also received an encouraging letter in 1943 from William Faulkner, who liked The Robber Bridegroom. For details, see Chapter 3.
effect welcome her to the inside circle of artists of stature. Further, his positive comments were on *The Wide Net*, the collection of stories that had received the most stinging rebukes from several critics in the United States. Diana Trilling, writing in *The Nation*, for example, claimed that Welty’s "technical virtuosity" exceeded the "uses to which it is put." But Forster’s approval, a vote of confidence in fact, must have encouraged Welty to move ahead with her experimental emphasis on the protagonists’ interior worlds. During the period of the wanderers, Welty turned aside temporarily from the background of Mississippi history and geography to concentrate on the inner life of an independent woman, particularly an artistic one.

These wanderers appear in the works of the late forties and early fifties. The first to feature a wanderer was a short work, *Music from Spain* (1948), set in San Francisco, later revised and collected in the interconnected suite of stories (Welty’s early designation), published as *The Golden Apples* (1949). The novella, *The Ponder Heart* (1954), and another collection of short stories, *The Bride of the Innisfallen* (1955), followed. With the possible exception of *The Ponder Heart*, the exterior world of time and place is less important to these works than is the interior world of the wanderer. In two particular stories from this stage, the

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7In *Author and Agent* Michael Kreyling gives more detail about the criticisms by Trilling and others (100-101).
wanderers are female protagonists, who explore various paths of development. Since these stories especially reflect the artistic mind of their creator, I will treat them briefly here rather than in later, separate chapters. The two, "The Wanderers" and "The Bride of the Innisfallen," feature characters whom I think of as "eaters of muscadines," women who cannot find satisfaction in the conventional roles for women in society.

These protagonists differ sharply from the typical young protagonist of Welty's first stage, like Jenny Lockhart in "At the Landing," the story ending The Wide Net. As we shall understand when we discuss that story in Chapter 4, Jenny Lockhart strikes off to the river as a "following after" of a potent, life-giving male, planning to wait for him at river's edge no matter what indignities she might suffer. The second-stage protagonists, however, have no such visions in mind. Virgie Rainey of "The Wanderers" and the American wife of "The Bride" expect to travel alone indefinitely, looking for something neither one can quite yet define. The only certainty that either exhibits in our last glimpse of them is that no male will be the purpose of their travel or necessarily await them at their destination. It is not that these women feel hostility to men or to the institution of marriage. It is rather that they long for "something more," perhaps for the ephemeral, alluring vision found in Yeats'
poem "The Wandering Aengus," from which The Golden Apples takes its name.

"The Wanderers"

"The Wanderers" is the last story in The Golden Apples, a cycle of connected short stories that focus on the community of Morgana, an imaginary rural town in the Yazoo Delta. The book, considered Welty's best by many, has received endless critical attention. Many critics have been especially interested in its dimensions of Greek and Norse mythology.\(^8\)

In the fictional town of Morgana, Virgie Rainey and her mother, Mrs. Fate Rainey (Miss Katie), live on the outskirts of the town, beyond the margins of its conventional society. Since they are outsiders, their stories open and close the seven story volume of The Golden Apples, providing a frame tale of sorts. Significantly, Mrs. Rainey comes originally from the Tennessee Hills in northeastern Mississippi, the same section that Troy Flavin, the overseer in Delta Wedding, calls home, and the setting for the late novel, Losing Battles. Katie Rainey, like her ancestors, continues the tradition of subsistence farming and quilt-making that we shall soon see in extended detail in Losing Battles. By virtue of her origins, Katie Rainey, like Troy Flavin, is thought to be a distinctly

\(^8\)For seminal discussions, see Thomas McHaney's "Eudora Welty and the Multitudinous Golden Apples," Ruth Vande Kieft's Eudora Welty, and Danièle Pitavy-Souques' "Technique as Myth: The Structure of The Golden Apples."
lower-class person by the Delta natives. Widowed early, Miss Katie has lived alone with her daughter, in a ramshackle house "beyond the pavement," for almost twenty-three years.

The detail Mrs. Rainey offers about the community in her opening monologue is arresting—much of it accurate, too, according to subsequent episodes told by an omniscient author. The information pertinent to our examination of Virgie Rainey concerns the married life of her neighbors, King and Snowdie MacLain, both descendants of the founding families in the nearby town of MacLain. Although Mrs. Rainey omits pertinent information about her own relationship with King MacLain that later surfaces at her funeral, her early monologue hints that King MacLain fathered her daughter, Virgie, in addition to his wife Snowdie's twin boys. Of course, Mrs. Rainey gives her listener fair warning that there might be inaccuracies in her account when she announces her storytelling philosophy: "Everybody to their own visioning" (GA 10).

That King MacLain represents the life force of Jupiter is quickly established. Nor is there any doubt that almost every woman in the community of Morgana, regardless of age or status, is uncommonly interested in MacLain's affairs and welcomes his passing interest. Mrs. Rainey suggests one reason, sheer excitement: King, unlike other husbands, is endlessly unpredictable. Her own husband, "Fate Rainey," she explains, "ain't got a surprise in him, and proud of it" (GA
6). But the Morgana folks seldom see King; in his role as fertility god, he spends most of his life wandering.

The early hint that King MacLain may have fathered Virgie Rainey gains credence from the facts of Virgie’s life. By far the most vital and gifted of the children of Morgana, she remains always an outsider. With her legal father dead by the time she is in her teens, and her older brother killed in World War I, Virgie lacks male guidance or authority. Like her mother, Virgie is more attuned to the natural world than to communal conventions and becomes an unchecked force of nature.

Even as a child, Virgie bared her wildness to the community. On "speaking-nights," when all the town’s families gathered together to hear speakers and listen to music, "Virgie and her older brother Victor ran wild all over everywhere, assaulting the crowd." Virgie is so energetic that not even her brother can catch her. "She never rested as long as the music played . . ." (GA 45). From her earliest days then, Virgie, like her strange, German-born music teacher Miss Eckhart, has danced to her own tune, oblivious to the conventions of the world she inhabits.

Only the music teacher has touched Virgie, for she recognizes the frightening passion that Virgie expresses at the piano. For a time, Virgie submitted to Miss Eckhart’s overwhelming love for her musical gift and thus for her, accepting from Miss Eckhart the "gift of the Beethoven, as
with the dragon’s blood” (GA 243), the gift that allowed her to experience positively the passion that consumes her. But ironically, Virgie’s artistic ability increases her outsider status. In a fine article on "Art and Artistry in Morgana, Mississippi," Louis Rubin explains the paradoxical position of Virgie, of Miss Eckhart, of any true artist, in relationship to the community.

Places like Morgana—human communities—exist to ward off and mask, through ritual and social complexity, an awareness of the finally unanswerable and inexplicable nature of existence in time and eternity. They are founded on the agreement—it is an unacknowledged compact between its members—not to admit to the existence of chaos and violence that cannot be controlled, explained, scaled down to manageable proportion. . . . And anyone who cannot enter into such a compact, cannot play the game by the agreed-upon rules, is a threat to the security and place of all the others. (Gallery 62)

Virgie can’t play by the rules. Nor can she acknowledge the grief she feels. Virgie has hardened her heart past feeling either the joy of her gift or the pain of her suffering. Only twice, once during a recital, do we see any crack in the "callous[ed] over . . . opaque" shield that Virgie early formed to protect her heart (GA 233):

Virgie had a sudden recollection of recital night at Miss Eckhart’s—the moment when she was to be called out. She was thirteen, waiting outside, on guard at a vast calming spectacle of turmoil, and saving it. A little drop spilled, she remembered it now: an anxiety which brought her to the point of sickness, that back in there [the recital parlor] they were laughing at her mother’s hat. (GA 212, emphasis mine)

The second incident occurs in "The Wanderers," when old Mr. King McLain, home for good at last, gathers with the rest
of the community at Virgie’s house upon the death of her
mother. Surrounded by people who have not set foot in her
house for over twenty years, Virgie keeps up her constant
refrain, "Don’t touch me. Don’t touch me" (GA 212). But as
the community carries out its solemn duties to the dead in the
funeral service, King MacLain does touch her: he makes "a
hideous face at Virgie, like a silent yell. . . . a yell at
everything—including death, not leaving it out—and he did
not mind taking his present animosity out on Virgie Rainey;
indeed, he chose her" (GA 227).

But Mr. King MacLain, an old man, had butted like a goat
against the wall he wouldn’t agree to himself or
recognize. What fortress indeed would ever come down,
except before hard little horns, a rush and a stampede of
the pure wish to live?

(GA 233)

The "moment of alliance" that Virgie feels in that instant
frees her heart, refreshes her. If only temporarily, she
recognizes "kinship"; "it lacked future as well as past; but
she knew when even a rarefied thing had become a matter of
loyalty and alliance" (GA 227).

Virgie’s thought resembles that of Ellen Fairchild’s
understanding in Delta Wedding that "one moment told you the
great things, one moment was enough for you to know the
greatest thing" (240). Ellen’s thought emerges as she rides
under the stars to an evening picnic, pregnant, with her
husband at her side, "breathing a little heavily in a rhythm
that brought them sometimes together." Her children follow in
separate wagons. Ellen, contemplating the "repeating fields,
the repeating cycles of season and her own life," finds "something in the monotony itself that was beautiful, rewarding" (DW 240).

Virgie is alone, however. No husband, no children, no family, no friends—only the "moment of alliance" with Mr. King MacLain. The nearest she has ever come to romantic love, so far as we know, was in her teen-age affair with a sailor, Bucky Moffitt, whose "wild spirit" still—even in her present bereavement—brings a smile to her lips. For her, as for Jenny Lockhart in "At the Landing," only the dominant, forceful male, whose vitality matches her own, commands her attention. But Bucky is dead, killed in World War I; her other men have been "drunk," "embarrassed," or "loud" and "harmless" (GA 242). Further, as a passionate, sensuous woman, Virgie is guilty of "always wishing for a little more of what had just been" (GA 220).

Nor does Virgie have her art for sustenance, having abandoned the Beethoven in her teens to play the accompaniment to silent movies in the Bijou Theater in MacLain. The undisciplined child could not, would not, sustain the disciplined habit of commitment essential to the artist. With all the talent in the world, a gift that people remember twenty-three years later, the young Virgie could not accept the responsibility of direction and purpose. She found it easier to play in the darkened movie house for other people's dreams. After Bucky Moffitt, after her disastrous escapade in
Memphis, Virgie may have believed she no longer deserved the gift, anyway. The crippling mixture of pride, passion, pain, and solitude has stilled her playing hands.

In the final scene, Virgie interrupts her impulsive "escape" from Morgana to rest for a time on the stile before the MacLain Courthouse, just seven miles down the road from home. Rain is falling: "October rain on Mississippi fields. The rain of fall, maybe on the whole South, for all she knew on the everywhere" (GA 244). Memory replays Virgie’s life for her, lingering on Miss Eckhart’s gift to her of the Beethoven, and the "beat of time" endless in Miss Eckhart’s picture of Perseus holding the head of the Medusa. Virgie sits on the stile, "bereaved, hatless, unhidden now, in the rain... all to herself" (GA 242).

But events do not end there. For an old Negro woman, holding a red hen, comes, sits down on the stile, too, and says "‘Mornin’" to Virgie.

Then she and the old beggar woman, the old black thief, were there alone and together in the shelter of the big public tree, listening to the magical percussion, the world beating in their ears. They heard through falling rain the running of the horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon’s crusty slither, and the glimmer and the trumpet of the swan.

(GA 244, emphasis mine)

In this tableau, Virgie experiences another moment of alliance. The "old beggar woman," an outsider, too, welcomes

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9In Chronicle, Albert Devlin notes that this line echoes the language of Gabriel Conroy in the conclusion of James Joyce’s "The Dead" (204).
her with a morning greeting. Both then linger comfortably in the natural world, caressed by the rain of "everywhere," hearing in it the beat of time, thinking of the beat reflected in the constellations, "far out and endless . . . which the heart could read over many a night" (GA 243).

Last in Virgie's list of constellations is the swan, which according to Gail Mortimer, both Yeats and Welty considered a symbol for "the solitary human soul" (Swan 13). Virgie's knowledge of life's beauty and terror, implicit in the story of Perseus and the Medusa as well as Siegfried and the Dragon, has rendered her solitary all her life. But she is no longer completely alone. King MacLain knows her, and so does the old black woman. What comfort there might be in alliance is hers. With it comes the courage to be daring at last, to indulge her need to see that "everywhere."

As a Welty protagonist, then, Virgie has at last developed the vision that can hold life's realities in view without flinching. The brief recognition of kinship with the father represented by King MacLain has pierced the shield held before her damaged heart, if only for a moment. As she sits in the healing rain by the cemetery, she is lifted for the present time, at least, out of the wasteland that has been her life. Whether she will develop from there, we cannot know.

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10 Thomas L. McHaney argues that the old black thief is Minerva, who had come to help out at the funeral and had stolen some of Miss Katie's things. He associates her with Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, who often assumed the guise of an old woman (135).
She has squandered her gift, lost perhaps totally the power of her hands to create art. Until she can lift them again to participate in the life around her, Virgie will remain only a partially realized heroine in the Welty canon.

"The Bride of the Innisfallen"

In "The Bride of the Innisfallen," Welty explores the various stages of commitment that follow declarations of romantic love. An American wife travels by boat-train from London to Fishguard and thence by ferry to Cork in Ireland. Sharing the wife's compartment is an assortment of people, half of them male, half female—mostly Irish—who apparently have little in common except their destination, their shared food, and the idle conversation that develops as they speed through the night. They jostle each other, shift in and out of the compartment in peculiarly stylized motions, and comment on the world that passes by in the train corridor and outside the train's window.

The experimental structure of this story has led critics to focus most of their attention on its journey motif, a somber theme that clashes somewhat with the drawing room comedy aspect of the story's surface. Form and content mesh more easily, I suggest, when we consider them in light of E. M. Forster's discussion of an aesthetic aspect. Literature's aesthetic component of pattern, he explains, can be so definite as to convey a pictorial representation of a work
(Aspects 213-14). The pictorial image of the major part of "The Bride of the Innisfallen" is a bird-cage, filled with lovebirds. Using that image as template illuminates the story and Welty's purpose in demonstrating yet another set of romantic illusions.

A conversation in the compartment about "budgies" points to the dominant pictorial image of lovebirds in a bird-cage. One of the passengers raises "budgies," short for budgerigars—popular cage birds even better known as parakeets or love birds. The budgie owner describes the interesting features of his birds, some of whom sing, some of whom "engage in conversation rather than sing." He adds cryptically, "I might be listening to the conversation," as he looks around the train compartment where the passengers chatter away. He lingers over the description of one particular budgie who had an exotic and voracious appetite for "inappropriate food," an appetite that led eventually to its death—still talking (BI 61).

Although we learn through their conversation that the passengers represent various stages of engagement and marriage, the general impression they give of lovebirds in a cage is reinforced by the striking visual images of the passengers, occasionally in individual description but more especially in the amazing choreography of their movements throughout the story. The story opens, for example, with the entrance of the dominant middle-aged Irish woman, who is
leaving her husband temporarily to visit family in Cork. She is described in the shape and colors of a particularly handsome budgie: her eyes glitter; she cocks her head to one side (BI 50); she has "great white heavy eyelids" (BI 49); on her hat, directly over her eyes, is a "gold pin in the shape of a pair of links" (BI 50); her blue hat is settled on her head "like an Indian bonnet"; from out of the hat's confines, her hair is pulled into two "auburn-and-gray pomegranates along her cheeks" (BI 47); a "chaos of blue veil" falls down behind from the back of the hat (BI 50); her raincoat—which she never removes—flows down her back in its "salmony-pink and yellow stripes . . . expanding as it went" (BI 47).

The other six passengers—for a time seven—also represent some stage of marital commitment. In addition to the dominant Irish matron, there are the American wife; a pregnant young Irish wife who displays her grandmother's needlepoint depiction of a "Wee Cottage," and shepherds an unattended little boy, Victor, back from a family wedding in London; a "small, passionate-looking" married man from Connemara (BI 48); and two young lovers, recently become engaged. When the train reaches Wales, a young Welsh schoolgirl joins them briefly, but buries herself in a book. When she gets off, a tall Welshman takes her place. Although we learn nothing about him, he prompts the conversation that reveals information about the other passengers.
Even more arresting and relevant are the details emphasizing the sounds of the passengers and the look of their abrupt, jerky, highly stylized movements within the confines of the small compartment. The passengers talk and sing; Victor whistles incessantly except to sing or run up and down the scales of his harmonica; all, but for the American wife, constantly jump up and down, shift seats, rush out into the corridor and back in again, fidget with the window shades, haul down food from the overhead bins, eat, fling orange peels. Most telling are the three sudden, repetitious, now-you-see-him, now-you-don’t attempts of the Welshman to get off the train. His hair in "two corner bushes" (BI 55), he hops off the train from the outside door only to pop back up again instantly, having mistaken the station (BI 73-4). Without leaving the door, he chatters again of raising birds—"a cock and a hen?"—before dropping again at the train’s stop into the darkness. And up again he pops. And again he turns the conversation to the birds, trying to elicit confirmation from the bird-owner that the budgie with the inappropriate appetite did, in fact, die "of longings for food from far away" (BI 75). Since the next stop is the right one at last for him, he drops away into the "Welsh black, this time for keeps" (BI 76).

The rush and jostle of the movements combined with the rarely ceasing song and chatter of the people confined in the compartment convey an atmosphere of utter chaotic confusion,
precisely the atmosphere of a crowded bird cage within a private home or in the larger aviary of a public zoo. So realistic is the impression conveyed that readers must use an act of conscious will to separate the players. To direct us to the important point, Welty uses common artistic techniques: the all-important opening and closing sections of the story; the introduction of the inquisitive Welshman, part of and yet apart from the central players; the Welshman's thrice-repeated actions to emphasize a central point.

And to what then are we pointed as we comprehend this little band of wanderers, speeding physically through the night, facing dangerous waters, in order to reach Innisfree, the isle of destiny? Paradoxically, all are caged in by traditional bonds of engagement, marriage, and family that will permit no free individual flight once they reach their destination. But among them all, only the American wife longs for such flight, as the Welshman's talk has already hinted. Before his final exit the Welshman reads her passport out loud, as if it were a "poem . . . with the last verse missing" (BI 75). Immediately, then, he asks once again about the "prize bird" of the man from Connemara, the bird who "died of longings for food from far away" (BI 75).

When the Innisfallen docks on Irish soil the following morning, the American wife emerges on deck, counterpoint to a traditional bride--all dressed in white--who, having also traveled on the ferry, now appears for the first time. As she
stands by the rail, smiling, "all ready to be met" (BI 79), the bride's destiny, like that of the American's fellow passengers, is clear. It is only the American, sole among them all, who steps onto the isle of destiny with no one to meet her, no one or no thing to restrict her exploration and wandering, no check to her effort to experience the "all" of her dream, first described as an American passion in The Robber Bridegroom and "The Still Moment."

As she wanders the streets of Cork, "among people busy at encounters, meetings, it seemed to her reunions" (80), the American wife contemplates this passion for comprehensive experience. In a passage that hints again at the artist's dilemma, never far away in Welty's work, she reflects that she is no longer lonely, that loneliness accompanies a union "with the joy being drawn out of it," not the solitary wandering of a passionate person.

If she could never tell her husband her secret, perhaps she would never tell it at all. You must never betray pure joy--the kind you were born and began with--either by hiding it or by parading it in front of people's eyes; they didn't want to be shown it. And still you must tell it. Is there no way? she thought--for here I am, this far.

(BI 81-82)

As her day of wandering draws to a close, and dusk begins to close out the light, the rain begins to fall, the healing rain after the dangerous waters. The rain is falling even as the American girl joins her "fellow writers" to send a telegram to her husband, a telegram she fails to send, for what finally can she say? She feels herself to be a "heresy,"
occupying a false position in professing any commitment other than the one to destiny as it might reveal itself through the "upper window" at which she gazes, the window "from which the mystery will never go" (BI 82). Her compulsion, as was Circe's, is to unlock that mortal mystery, whatever the cost. If, like the Connemara man’s budgie, she must continue to sample exotic foods from far away, then she must also accept the risk involved. So the American girl wanders in the rainy dusk, knowing—like Virgie Rainey after her mother’s funeral—all she can bear to know at the moment: "light and rain, light and rain, dark, light, and rain" (BI 82).

The missing last verse of the story read in the girl's passport begins here in the rainy dusk of Cork as she pauses at length outside a pub. She listens to a man inside telling his story and shouting in the middle of it, "Ah, it’s a heresy, I told him" (BI 82). And then the American girl walks into the "lovely room full of strangers" (BI 83). For the artist, too, passion is expended and intimacy found among strangers, first the fictional ones who act out the story, and then the literal ones who read the finished tale. For the artist revealed in Welty's work—at least the one indicated in the American bride of Innisfallen—is one at home with Henry Green's definition of prose, one later echoed by Welty: "Prose should be a long intimacy between strangers with no direct appeal to what both may have known" (Green 88). For the American wife, the longing is for the exotic, the unknown,
the tantalizing expectation that what one has longed for will appear just around the corner. Her longing echoes Virgie's, the woman on one plane the daughter of Jupiter, but on the other the daughter of Fate Rainey. Both women see clearly that the conventional paths for women are marriage and procreation.

But the woman artist, moved more by interior longing than exterior societal conventions, faces a complicated road to fulfillment of desire. The solitary male artist, one such as the Spanish musician in *Music from Spain*, inspires awe and adulation in his search for experience and truth. But the solitary female artist often inspires suspicion or pity. Although we are not privy to the circumstances of the private individual, Eudora Welty, the intimate disclosure of the two protagonists we have discussed suggests the complexities facing her during the middle stage of her fictional productivity.

Having considered parts of two major works concerning the "wandering" phase of Welty's composite protagonist, *The Golden Apples*, 1949, and *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, 1955, we turn back now to separate analyses of the early "following after" period of the composite protagonist, the works in which Welty begins to forge a pattern of time and place: *The Robber Bridegroom*, 1942; *The Wide Net*, 1943; and *Delta Wedding*, 1946.
THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM: MIRACULOUS ADVENTURE TIME

"Demon Writing": "As soon as I start writing on it, off it goes with me hanging on."

Welty, Letter (Kreyling Agent 45)

Despite the "once-upon-a-time" mood of Eudora Welty's first novel, a work usually considered to be a fairy tale-fantasy, *The Robber Bridegroom* recreates a particular time in history to convey not only the spirit but also the reality of the Natchez section of modern-day Mississippi as it existed under Spanish rule in the late eighteenth century. This work is the first in Welty's pattern of American historical experience. So well did Eudora Welty succeed in depicting "timeless" time, however, that she herself finally had to explain years later that *The Robber Bridegroom* was her "historical" fiction. Her characters, she claimed in a 1975 talk to the Mississippi Historical Society, were "children of their time, and fathered, rather proudly, by its spirit. If I carried out well enough my strongest intentions, fantasy does not take precedence over that spirit" ("Fairy Tale" 314). In recent years, critics have attended more carefully to the history in *The Robber Bridegroom*, but Welty's remarks suggest that the historical era of the novel deserves still more exploration than it has yet received.¹

¹For discussions that address either specific history or historical implications in the novel, see Albert Devlin (Chronicle), Jan Gretland, Pearl McHaney (52), Warren French, and Charles E. Davis.
This short novel also deserves more careful attention, however, because not only does it recreate a significant time in the shaping of the American continent, but it does so in a place whose historical development has been neglected and misunderstood in American history. Further, in *The Robber Bridegroom* Welty clearly announces the themes and techniques that will occupy her for a lifetime. As a preview of Welty’s developing thematic concern, *The Robber Bridegroom* is central to Welty studies. For that reason, we will examine this text at some length.

In *The Robber Bridegroom* Welty explores the myriad romantic illusions and distortions of vision that govern human choices in times of cultural change and loss. In the novel’s climactic scene, the only wholly serious one, Clement Musgrove, "an innocent of the wilderness, and a planter of Rodney’s Landing," looks for the first time upon the full reality of his changing world *(RB 182)*. With his innocent eyes at last open to deceit and betrayal all around him, Clement retires to a circle of stones in a pine grove to reflect on his condition. "Now," he announces, "there must be a choice made" *(RB 141)*. To clarify the issue governing his situation, Clement asks himself two questions, the answers to which will guide his choice of action. "What exactly is this [issue] now?" . . . "What is the place and time?"

In subsequent novels, Welty will continue to recreate specific places and times—specific chronotopes—which must be
understood by her protagonists before they can understand the meaning of what's happened to them and make their choices about how now to live. Each of her protagonists will face difficult choices in times of specific cultural dislocations and transitions that must also be understood by readers who hope to understand the full significance of Welty's texts.

In plot time, *The Robber Bridegroom* depicts just over one year in the last decade of the eighteenth century; the events of the plot take place in the Natchez area of what was at that time the Spanish-governed province of Louisiana. The Natchez area lay along the eastern banks of the lower Mississippi River, extending from present-day Natchez, the southern terminus of the ancient animal trail called the Natchez Trace, further south to what is now Louisiana. The Natchez Trace was the only land link at that time from the United States to the Spanish area. The first census of the Natchez District, taken in 1785, showed 1619 people, including 498 slaves (Sass 4). The colony, during the final years of Spanish rule, has been described as a "far periphery of British civilization . . . where ruthless exploitation was a way of life . . . where disorder, violence, and human degradation were commonplace" (quoted in Rothstein 97).² No moral compass for behavior

²The quotation comes from the 1986 work, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution*, by Bernard Bailyn. One of the chapters (488-92) describes the life in early Natchez of William Dunbar, "a son of the Scottish Enlightenment [sic] as well as of a British lord."
existed on this frontier. But the abundant natural resources, which inspired larger-than-life fantasies of success and wealth, offset for many adventurers the inherent risks and dangers of the area.

The Old World dominion of the Natchez area is well established in The Robber Bridegroom. Clement's land grant has been bestowed by the King of Spain; hoping to obtain a Spanish passport, Jamie Lockhart asks Clement, a respected land owner, for a recommendation to the Spanish Governor; both men conduct their business affairs in the commercial center of the "Spanish country"—New Orleans; and the latest rage in New Orleans is a Spanish automaton in an iron skirt (RB 25, 19, 182, 27). Welty is meticulous about these details, thus deliberately calling attention to the Spanish dominion as central to the story.

The novel's protagonist, Clement Musgrove, a mild Virginia gentleman, represents the first historical wave of migration into the Natchez District from the English colonies of Virginia and North Carolina, soon to become part of the new Republic of the United States of America. These early immigrants were English Tories, whose sympathies lay with England rather than with her American rebels during the Revolutionary War (Kynerd 153-54). Those who left Virginia to travel southwestward did so not to seek a fortune but rather to try to establish or reestablish a traditional ideal of the English country squire's life. Some immigrants to the New
World were deprived of inherited land by English laws of primogeniture, a practice that was continued to some degree in America (Wyatt-Brown 5-6). Other immigrants, with no possibility of obtaining land in the old country, worked hard in the new one to acquire it. Whatever their original resources, many early landholders in America wished to continue the English tradition. Their customs, values, and often their loyalties were those of the Old World, not the New one.

Acting on the belief that past moments in a particular place inform present ones, Welty also spirals back to the early eighteenth century in the Natchez District. Using historical or fictional narratives about those past moments, she evokes ghosts of the complicated Old World past in the Natchez area: the Natchez Indian civilization, the early French trading post and fort, and the later British sojourners who took advantage of the temporary absence of the Spanish. By extending time to include the demise of these other cultures in the area, Welty accentuates the issue of cultural change facing Clement. Toward the end of the novel, Welty pushes time forward, slightly over the beginning of the nineteenth century, to include the future of the Natchez area: its establishment as a territory of the new American Republic.

This compression and extension of time in The Robber Bridegroom help characterize its chronotope as "a miraculous world in adventure time" (Bakhtin 154). Artistically, the
miraculous element stems from merging in the novel features of two types of chronotopes: the folkloric chronotope and the chivalric romance. The folkloric plot cycle features the turn-of-the-century folk hero Mike Fink, an actual Mississippi River keelboat man whose prowess on the river was legendary. The chivalric romance cycle features Jamie Lockhart, the robber bridegroom himself, and Rosamond Musgrove, daughter of the displaced Virginian Clement Musgrove. In each plot cycle, we find imaginative playing with time, as we have already seen. We also find manipulations of space to convey symbolic meaning. The different spaces occupied by different characters reflect their respective stages of civilization. The scenes move from settlement to planter's clearing, to rude cabin in the woods, to a cave in the wilderness, to an Indian camp in the very depths of the wilderness, and then switch abruptly to the commercial center of New Orleans. The novel also contains such miraculous elements as a talking locket, a talking head, and a talking raven. All these elements, characteristic of the ancient, oral traditions of fantasy and fairy tale, help establish the miraculous chronotope.

Welty also mixes in another oral tradition: the American tall tale, which similarly distorts space, time, and behavior to provide humor. It is this tradition that informs the novel's folkloric frame tale, in which the central characters meet. In the first half of the frame, Clement Musgrove, Mike Fink, and Jamie Lockhart meet in the hamlet of Rodney's
Landing. In the second half of the frame Rosamond Musgrove, abandoned by Jamie Lockhart, is rescued by Mike Fink and carried out of the wilderness in which she has been lost.

The tale enclosed by the frame tale combines Old World European fairy tale and New World local history to create a chivalric romance the like of which had never before been seen, to judge from reader reaction after its publication.\(^3\) The elements of the chivalric romance are there, but they are totally inverted, turned upside down, and inside out. Told with Welty's characteristic off-beat humor, the story treats violence and depravity in the same matter-of-fact tone used to relate adventure and romance. As with fairy tale and tall tales, the overall exaggeration of character and action de-emphasizes serious comment in the novel, but does not eliminate it.

To juggle the several strands of the plot, Welty arranges its episodes in layers that resemble a palimpsest of concentric circles, each circle mirroring a different cycle in the complicated, century-long history of the disputed Natchez land. The structure of the novel, therefore, resembles a Fabergé egg or a Chinese puzzle box, with each plot-cycle opening up to yield yet another one nestled within it, each cycle (except the final one, which bounces forward into the

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\(^3\)Most critics expressed consternation, both negative and positive. Lionel Trilling, for example, panned "this transmogrification" of "European fairy tales into the lore of the American frontier," but George Herbert Clarke declared it "a little classic in its own right."
future) spiraling further back into Natchez history for its events. The novel thus reenacts both the infamous Natchez Massacre of 1729 and the opening of a U. S. mail route to the new United States territory in 1800 (Howell 129-30, Audhuy 34-36). The textual world created by this structure is at once simple and complicated, transitory yet timeless. It is the one Welty work for which William Faulkner "revealed a strong affinity" (Devlin Chronicle 21). In 1943, Faulkner wrote enthusiastically to Welty about the novella: "You're doing all right" (Dawidoff B1).

Each distinct plot-cycle in The Robber Bridegroom features a different member of the Musgrove family: innocent Clement; his romantic daughter, Rosamond; and his greedy second wife, Salome. Most of the cycles include an encounter with the legendary Mike Fink, and all include encounters with the robber bridegroom, Jamie Lockhart. Each plot-cycle reveals in each character one of the different romantic illusions that cloud reality from human vision. Each character survives or fails to survive the cultural transition, according to the reactions dictated by his or her illusions.

THE FRAME TALE MEETING: INTERSECTION OF DIFFERENT WORLDS

The opening part of the frame tale, in which the three principal male characters meet, might be viewed as a forerunner of "The Still Moment," a seminal Welty story
published soon after *The Robber Bridegroom*. Although Clement Musgrove, Mike Fink, and Jamie Lockhart meet in a hotel room in the river town of Rodney's Landing, they are just as much in the wilderness as are the three travelers on the Natchez Trace in "A Still Moment." In their meeting, these forerunners of the characters in "The Still Moment" also have trouble understanding each other, for, as in that story, these men in *The Robber Bridegroom* come from three completely different worlds. Each man's life has been shaped by a different time and a different place, a fact that critics have generally acknowledged about the short story's characters, but not about the novel's. In "The Still Moment," the three travelers are based on well-known historical characters whose diaries and histories, accessible to contemporary readers, emphasize the fact that, figuratively speaking, the travelers do not share the same language. Neither do the men in *The Robber Bridegroom*, but the different worlds that have shaped them have not been so easy to see. In *The Robber Bridegroom*, only Mike Fink is recognizable as a historical figure. Since his fame faded rapidly in the latter part of the twentieth century, few now know that he was one of the great folk heroes of the nineteenth century, considered the equal of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone.

A close examination of the text and the historical context will reveal, however, that the other *Robber Bridegroom* principals are drawn either from a historical type or from
actual historical models that enable us to determine the world views that shaped them. Only the planter, Clement Musgrove, is entirely fictional, but he represents a distinct type, an early English Tory immigrant to Natchez. Jamie Lockhart, the robber bridegroom, is a composite of three famous Natchez Trace outlaws of the time, the principal one being a Northern "city" boy. Mike Fink, as already noted, is based on the historic Mike Fink, a legendary folk hero who came originally from the northwestern frontier of Pittsburg.

The three men, each with his own particular illusion, represent different phases in the exploration and civilization of a wilderness: the frontiersman, the planter, and the robber/merchant. It is perhaps no accident that the meeting of these three types mirrors the meeting on the road of James Fenimore Cooper's three similar types in *The Pioneers*, the first fully American novel. In depicting the settlement of the northwestern frontier in upper New York state, also in the 1790s, Cooper gathers together Natty Bumppo, the frontiersman; Judge Temple, who planted the settlement and fought in the Revolution to keep it; and a mysterious stranger who turns out to be the son and grandson of British Tory military men. Like Cooper's characters, each of Welty's characters has devised an angle of vision that allows him to navigate the wilderness chaos—at least temporarily. But when the men collide by chance, events are set in motion that first reinforce and then destroy their particular illusions. The reactions of the men-
-and of the Musgrove women as well—to change and loss are

typical, but none of them satisfies the ideal of the fully
realized human being, an ideal toward which Welty’s
protagonists will move throughout her canon.

For those ideal individuals, in Welty’s world, must be
able to look steadily and resolutely upon reality and continue
to participate in life, despite the inevitability of change
and loss. They must acknowledge the double nature of human
experience and eschew romantic illusions about people or
cultures. For illusions that deny the truth of human
existence constitute for Welty a "narrowed gaze [which]
contracts the heart" and stunts the soul, a view that is given
its fullest expression in "A Still Moment."

The various patterns of illusions are most easily seen
when we examine the plot-cycles separately: 1) the folkloric
frame tale which juxtaposes Clement Musgrove (time-present),
Mike Fink (time-past), and Jamie Lockhart (time-future); 2)
the chivalric romance cycle in which Rosamond Musgrove and
Jamie Lockhart ignore time (once-upon-a-time); and 3) the
central historical/fantasy cycle of Salome, the Indian Chief,
and the great sun which affirms the impossibility of
controlling time (natural solar time). I will examine each
cycle in turn, filling out the historical context both to
understand better the chronotope of the novel and to
appreciate more fully Welty’s artistic method in blending fact
and fiction. In the process, I will examine the textual patterns and allusions that expand Welty's themes.

CLEMENT: THE INNOCENT OF RODNEY'S LANDING

As the text reveals and historical context attests, the protagonist Clement Musgrove is by no means a typical American pioneer, but is rather an English colonist from the long-established Virginia colony. This distinction is crucial to fully understand Clement's character, which exemplifies many—not all—of the traits attributed to the mythical Virginia cavalier: Clement is peaceful, honorable, forbearing, moderate. His immigration, he claims, was not motivated by ambition. Rather, he explains, there was "a great tug at the whole world, to go down over the edge, and one and all we were changed into pioneers" (RB 20). Albert Devlin has suggested that Clement demonstrates the "pull of a vacant continent" thesis advanced by Frederick Jackson Turner (Chronicle 34-35).

But Clement's pioneering probably represents an earlier historic migration, that of British loyalists who became outsiders in America after the Revolutionary War. Since the British had governed the Natchez area, then known as West Florida, from 1763-1779, British loyalists from the American colonies had immigrated there both before and during the American struggle for independence (Kynerd 153-54). The desire for independence in the American colonies was by no
means unanimous. Historically, more than 100,000 loyalists left the original colonies; some of them headed for the safe haven of the Natchez area, encouraged by the new Spanish rulers who took over in 1779.

The text certainly affirms Clement's preference for peace. In recounting his life story, he warmly recalls his life in "the peaceful hills" of Virginia (RB 20). Also, Clement is described as a "man of peace," who prudently steps to safety when his roommates start a fight in the initial meeting of the three travelers (RB 11).

Clement Musgrove, then, is a man caught between two worlds, much like René in Chateaubriand's famous 1827 work on the theme of cultural clashes, The Natchez. The Natchez, like The Robber Bridegroom, is set in the Natchez area, but during the early part of the eighteenth century. Its plot leads up to the Natchez Massacre at Fort Rosalie, the event that is partially reenacted in Welty's book. Although Welty had perhaps read the early French explorer Chevroloix for factual details of the Natchez Indian tribe (as Chateaubriand had done), it is almost certain that she had read Chateaubriand. As we shall see, she uses the modernist technique of allusion here to enforce and expand the sense of Clement's dilemma in a transitional time.

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4In a letter to her agent sometime in September, 1940, Welty said she had not read Chateaubriand but "maybe I will try it" (Kreyling Agent 43).
Not only in the Natchez Indian content, but also stylistically and thematically, The Robber Bridegroom echoes The Natchez. It compresses time in order to squeeze events occurring over many years into the last year or so before a major change. Its characters are types, each with a predominating trait that defines him or her. Together, the group of characters form a general impression of the characteristics of the time. Idealized, absent characters have similar names: Clement’s dead first wife was Amalie, while René’s beloved sister from the Old World is Amelia. René is repeatedly called the brother of Amelia.

Moreover, a passage describing René just before the Indian massacre must surely have influenced a passage in The Robber Bridegroom describing Jamie Lockhart just before the capture of the settlers by the Indians. In The Natchez, René—who has come from Europe to live with the Indians and who has married the Indian woman Celuta—has inspired feelings of love, jealousy, hatred, and compassion from the other characters. Unfortunately, he cannot share Celuta’s passion of love, or any other passion for that matter, because, like Jamie Lockhart’s, René’s heart is tightly locked. In the fateful period during which the Natchez plot the attack on the French, René is oblivious to the emotional turmoil around him:

Motionless amid so many moving persons; the centre of a thousand passions, which he did not share; the object of all thoughts for widely different reasons; the brother of Amelia became the invisible cause of every effect: to love and to suffer was the double fatality which he
imposed on all who came near him.

(Chateaubriand, I, 275-76)

Compare Jamie's posture in the identical plot moment in The Robber Bridegroom:

There he lay on the ground under a plum tree, napping away with a smile on his face, while the paths of the innocent Clement and the greedy Salome and the mad Little Harp and the reproachful Rosamond all turned like the spokes of the wheel toward this dreaming hub. If the Indians had not stopped them off, he would have been dead three or four times and accused and forgiven once before he woke up.

(RB 147)

Such a similar image may be coincidence, but it is more likely the result of Welty's careful attention to and variation on the work of another admired writer: treating in part the same subject while changing the tone for comic effect.5

Finally, in both works, the major characters try to negotiate two worlds: the wilderness of the New World and the civilization of the Old World.

Clement initially believes that he is quite capable of handling himself in the New World wilderness, but this belief is an illusion. Although he takes pride in his "sharpness," he is in reality "gullible," oblivious to danger, and totally inept in the wilderness, that is, in a frontier land which has no familiar or traditional codes to govern human behavior (RB 3, 20). Twice Clement loses a family to the Indians, and it is he himself who introduces the dangerous robber bridegroom

5For an excellent discussion of the relationship between the Natchez Indian culture and the great epic, see Letha Audhuy's "Natchez in French Louisiana and Chateaubriand's Epic, The Natchez."
into his home, despite receiving visual clues and three spoken warnings of danger from the talking raven. Clement has survived in the wilderness only because of his gallant marriage to the Kentucky widow, Salome, to whose character he turns a blind eye. Although Salome is everything he's not—ambitious, proud, greedy, ruthless, calculating, hard-hearted, and ugly—Clement glosses over even her "destroyed heart" to think of her as a good mother to his motherless daughter (RB 24, 35). Blind as well as innocent, Clement shapes his vision to exclude ugly realities that might disturb his peace. Clement declares that he is "not a seeker after anything," but he deceives himself (RB 20). This Clement seeks peace at any price.

MIKE FINK: FOLK HERO OF THE FRONTIER

In his fictional meeting with Clement Musgrove and Jamie Lockhart, Mike Fink seeks recognition, a gift which was richly bestowed on him in real life. The out-sized keelboat man dominated the Mississippi river during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unlike the flatboat men who floated their crafts downriver and then dismantled them, the keelboat men actually poled their boats back up river, against the current (Blair 8-10). Among these extraordinarily powerful men, Mike Fink was king. His prowess on the river and off outshone even the accomplishments of legendary hunters such as Davy Crockett. Mike Fink was also an early hero of
the new democratic system, representing a generic class not ordinarily raised to heroic stature. His fictional frontiersman counterpart is Cooper's Natty Bumppo, whose name, ironically, is now much more familiar than Mike Fink's, even though the actual Mike Fink, as I have noted, was one of the most popular folk-heroes in America. The life of Mike Fink so captivated the nineteenth-century imagination that he was the subject of numerous books and travelling plays right up through the latter part of the century (Dorson 80-92). Even now, he still pops up occasionally in twentieth-century historical fiction.

Fink enjoyed extraordinary popularity in the American imagination because he was an extraordinary frontiersman, veteran of three separate Western frontiers. Born around 1770 on the northwestern Pennsylvania frontier, he became a scout and Indian fighter in the northwestern Indian wars. He later moved to the Mississippi River, the westernmost boundary of the American territory, to become a boatman traveling down the southwestern frontier. This dangerous and adventurous life presented one of the few possibilities for earning money in that time and place. When the southwestern frontier became more settled, Mike Fink set off up the Missouri River to investigate his last frontier, the unexplored land of the Louisiana Purchase.

Mike Fink's heroic stature was intimately linked to the Mississippi river's role as a major transportation route
during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the historical time of *The Robber Bridegroom*, the inland states of the new republic transported all their goods to market down the Mississippi to New Orleans. With no control except for sail, poles, and oars, the keelboat men had to be strong, adventurous, self-sufficient, and capable of handling trouble, both human and natural. Among them, Mike Fink was an acknowledged leader, known for his brash, brawling manner, his superb marksmanship, his unequaled tall tales, his capacity for whiskey ("a gallon of whiskey daily without staggering"), and for the prodigious virility which allegedly left illegitimate children all up and down the Mississippi Valley. His legendary actions exceed even the exploits of King MacLain, the Jupiter-Zeus figure in *The Golden Apples*.

Mike’s appetite for full experience of the natural world also foreshadows a trait shared by the men in "The Still Moment." For he was associated with the nickname "Bang-All": some historians attribute the nickname to him, some to his Kentucky rifle "Betsy," a beautifully engraved rifle adorned with many figures of nature, combined with the American eagle symbol and Mike’s own lucky six-point star. This nickname may well have influenced the refrain of the Natchez Trace adventurers in "A Still Moment," all of whom long for and search for the "all" in whatever path they’ve chosen. "What each of them had wanted was simply all. To save all souls, to destroy all men, to see and to record all life that filled
this world—all, all—" (WN 88). This compulsion to search for and embrace all of life reappears also in the female characters of Virgie, in *The Golden Apples*, and the American wife, in "The Bride of the Innisfallen," as we have already seen.

Mike Fink also brings to *The Robber Bridegroom* the tall-tale tradition that characterized his age and figured prominently in the later work of southwestern humorists. Welty preserves some of Fink’s actual words (his "half-bull, half-alligator" characterization of himself) and all of the flavor of his spectacular "brags":

I can pick up a grown man by the neck in each hand and hold him out at arm’s length, and often do, too . . . . I eat a whole cow at one time, and follow her up with a live sheep if it’s Sunday. Ho! ho! If I get hungry on a voyage, I jump off my raft and wade across, and take whatever lies in my path on shore. When I come near, the good folk take to their heels and run from their houses! I only laugh at the Indians, and I can carry a dozen oxen on my back at one time, and as for pigs, I tie them in a bunch and hang them to my belt!

(RB 9)

Mike Fink appears as himself in the initial frame chapter of *The Robber Bridegroom*, but Welty fictionalizes his behavior for artistic purposes. In the opening scene of *The Robber Bridegroom*, Mike Fink tries to rob and murder his roommates in their sleep. Although the real Mike Fink had a dark side, there is no evidence that he murdered people in their sleep. Physical confrontation was his strength and his joy, but cowardly, treacherous behavior was more characteristic of the likes of Jamie Lockhart. But since Jamie must appear to be a
brave and honest hero to Clement's innocent eyes, the straight outlaw behavior is assigned fictionally to Mike Fink. This unpalatable behavior of the legendary, super-human, vital individual--able to challenge and survive the forces of nature in the new world wilderness--prepares the reader to appreciate Mike Fink's later fictional downfall. For by the end of the novel, Fink has become himself a victim, not of nature but of human progress. Historically, the invention of the steamboat eliminated the need for brute force on the Mississippi River, and the development of the overland Natchez Trace forecast new land-based systems of transportation for goods and people. The river culture that elevated Mike Fink to heroic stature was obliterated in the nineteenth century by the steamboat and by the expanding use of the overland Natchez Trace.

In the closing scenes of the frame tale, we meet Fink once again, not on the river, but on the Natchez Trace as a mail rider. Fink has fallen into what he considers the "disgrace" of government employment as a "mail rider on dry land" (RB 179). Fink has already suffered some deflation in the hands of Eudora Welty; she terms him a "flatboat man," a much less admired type of river man than the "keelboat man" that he actually was. In this second fictional role devised for Fink, Welty gives the fallen hero a chance to redeem himself, as we shall soon see.
Unlike Mike Fink, just on the verge of becoming an anachronism, and Clement Musgrove, a certifiable anachronism, Jamie Lockhart is "a man of action, a man of the times, a pioneer and a free agent"—at least that is the way Clement characterizes him (RB 27). Jamie prides himself on his ability to see in both directions, behind and ahead, and act to his advantage. He alone navigates the changes brought by the end of the century, moving easily from his role as gentleman-bandit on the Natchez Trace to that of gentleman-merchant in New Orleans. Actually he sees little difference in the two: "the outward transfer from bandit to merchant had been almost too easy to count it a change at all" (RB 184).

The character Jamie Lockhart, I suggest, is drawn primarily from the real-life Joseph Thompson Hare, the "model of the romantic highway man," who plundered the Natchez Trace during the latter part of the eighteenth century (Daniels 104). Hare's character was shaped first by northern cities where he apprenticed for a time in a tailor's shop and developed a life-long interest in fashionable clothes. The adult Hare was a model of elegance and fashion whose clothes and manners charmed people from Nashville to New Orleans. But on the Natchez Trace, in between the cities, he disguised his face with berry juice and robbed and murdered wealthy travelers. One of the travelers he dispatched was a rich Virginia gentleman with a beautiful daughter, Mabel Price
(Daniels 109), perhaps one of the inspirations for the otherwise fictional characters of Clement and Rosamond Musgrove. Like Jamie Lockhart, who asks for Clement’s help in getting a Spanish passport, Joseph Hare acquired a Spanish passport (Coates 97). Conveniently, Joseph Hare kept a diary. Although he did not discuss all his actual murders, he did report regularly his thieving activities. In one passage Hare describes the "loot" taken in one of the raids:

We took three hundred doubloons, 74 pieces of different sizes and a large quantity of gold in bars, six inches in length and eight square—thirty-weight of it. . . . With the others, I found 700 doubloons and five silver dollars, and four hundred French guineas, and 67 pieces the value of which I could not tell until I weighed them. I got twelve or thirteen thousand dollars altogether from the company, all in gold.

(Daniels 106)

Attributing his information to hearsay, the character Jamie Lockhart uses Hare’s words almost verbatim:

Only yesterday I heard of a case where travelers captured in the wilderness gave up three hundred doubloons, seventy-five bars of gold in six-by-eights, five hundred French guineas, and any number of odd pieces, the value of which you could not tell without weighing them—all together about fifteen thousand dollars.

(RB 22)

In much of his behavior, especially in episodes with Rosamond and with other bandits, the Lockhart character copies the actions of two other historical outlaws: Samuel Mason, a fairly respectable citizen turned bandit after his beloved daughter eloped; and Kuykendall, the bandit with whom Mason’s daughter eloped. Samuel Mason, like Hare before him, had acquired a Spanish passport through the recommendations of a
"too-trusting gentleman, met along the way and beguiled by the bandit's manner" (Coates 124). It is Samuel Mason who associated with, sometimes even worked with, the notorious Little Wiley Harpe--called just Little Harp in Welty's novella. Kuykendall contributed a central act to the Lockhart portrait; he seduced and ran away with Mason's daughter, an act for which he paid dearly in real life after accepting the apparent but deceptive "forgiveness" that his new father-in-law, Samuel Mason, offered him. The Mason family's murder of Kuykendall made fugitives of them all, and after that, the Mason gang terrorized the Natchez Trace. Unlike Joseph Hare, who sometimes agonized over his killings, Samuel Mason had no scruples about murder and mutilation and sometimes left a carved message with the bodies of his victims, "Done by Mason of the Woods." Samuel Mason's historical record adds weight to the barbaric side of the robber bridegroom character, a side that is glossed over in the fictional character of Jamie Lockhart. Mason's biography also confirms the accuracy with which Welty has recreated this time in history.

Even the mutilation and decapitations of The Robber Bridegroom belong not simply to the exaggerated behavior of fairy tale but to the historical record of the eighteenth century in the Natchez area. Decapitation of victims and outlaws occurred frequently. Both Little Harpe's brother, Big Harpe, and Samuel Mason went to their graves headless. Big Harpe's head was nailed to a tree in Kentucky where it
remained for many years. Mason’s head was sought and
eventually cut off by Little Harpe for a $2,000 reward
(Daniels 120, 123). Little Wiley Harpe wrapped Sam Mason’s
head in blue clay—just as Little Harp does in Welty’s novel—and carried it in to the authorities to collect his money
(Daniels 119, 123).

In creating the composite of Jamie Lockhart, Welty
emphasizes the Hare model rather than the Mason one. An
entirely accurate Natchez Trace bandit could hardly be the
focus of chivalric romance. A Lockhart entirely like his
historical models would not be a fit object for the
respectable heroine’s affections. Since Lockhart must be
viewed by readers as in some ways worthy—and capable,
perhaps, of being "improved" by love—no mention of murder
adheres to his name, not even the discreet "gentlemanly"
type of killings practiced by Joseph Hare. The brutal murders
and mutilations associated with the historic figure of Samuel
Mason have been shifted to the character of Little Harp, who
may or may not have severed fingers in real life but who, we
know from historian Coates, gloried in all sorts of other
gruesome mutilations of his victims (39, 51-42). Not even
silly Rosamond could have maintained romantic illusions about
such a figure as Little Harp.

6The Natchez Indians also beheaded the French killed in
the 1729 massacre.
So Jamie Lockhart exhibits only the robber bridegroom fairy-tale motifs dealing with robbery and rescue, deception and disguise—motifs that do not preclude the romantic love of a respectable young woman. The unpleasant fairy tale motifs of murder, mutilation, and severed fingers are assigned to Lockhart’s alter ego, the truly repulsive Little Harp. But Harp is presented as an integral part of Lockhart. Jamie Lockhart understands Harp, associates with him, jokes with him, even accepts responsibility for him, though he recognizes it to be a "burdensome" responsibility. Lockhart "finishes off" Harp only when it is a question of his own physical survival.

Lockhart’s vision, then, initially seems more realistic than that of the other characters in the novel. Jamie is "at home" everywhere. He considers himself a "hero" and prides himself on "having the power to look both ways and to see a thing from all sides" (RB 185). But his image of himself leads Lockhart to believe that all things are possible, with no price to pay. Like his alter ego, Little Harp, Lockhart is convinced that "Advancement is only a matter of swapping heads about" (RB 145). Acting on that belief, Lockhart departs for New Orleans, after killing Little Harp in self-defense, and there he becomes a "rich merchant," "a gentleman of the world . . . respected by all that knew him" (RB 183). The price Lockhart has paid for this vision is revealed only in his name: his heart is closed, invulnerable to the deepest
feelings of humanity. He has advanced by his wits, adjusted
to a respectable form of thievery, exemplified the success
story that so beguiles Americans. Cultural transitions from
one time to another can hardly bother him, for he lives
without allegiance to place or time.

The robber bridegroom's sweetheart, Rosamond Musgrove,
doesn't have Lockhart's power of vision. She suffers the
blinding romantic illusion that love will make everything
right. A composite anti-heroine, modeled on the heroines of
the European fairy tales of "The Robber Bridegroom," "Snow
their adventures, but exhibits none of their virtues. For
example, in the traditional robber bridegroom fable, known
under various titles all over the world, the young girl is
lured to the robber bridegroom's lair with promises of
marriage even though the bridegroom's express intention is to
murder and mutilate; a severed finger appears in the tale
always as evidence of the crime, as it does in *The Robber
Bridegroom*. While the young girl in the traditional tale
spies on the bridegroom, sees a murder, escapes undetected
with the finger, and returns to the community to expose the
bridegroom, Rosamond Musgrove observes a murder and forthwith
climbs into bed beside her lover. In Welty's tale, it is
Little Harp who commits the murder and mutilation, but it is
the robber bridegroom, Jamie Lockhart, who shelters Little
Harp and takes responsibility for him. In the blindness of
her love (and much like her father), Rosamond ignores the
warnings of the talking raven and conveniently overlooks the
proximity of the two bandits.

Despite her bold stories and daring adventures, this
silly goose Rosamond has trouble with reality. On those
occasions when troubling reality forces itself upon her
consciousness, take-charge Rosamond sleeps or faints. Waking
from her first sleep after observing another young woman's
murder in her bandit's cabin, Rosamond, "no matter what he had
told her," decides she must learn her bandit's identity.
Using the brew given her by her sly stepmother, Salome,
Rosamond removes the berry stains to see Jamie Lockhart.  
He awakes to see "Clement Musgrove's silly daughter!" He leaves,
she tries to follow, but "falls in the dust," realizes from
"the stirring within her" that she is pregnant, and promptly
takes leave of her senses by swooning: "a cloud went over the
moon, and all was dark night" (RB 134-35). When Rosamond, on
the next day, gets a look at Big Harp's head, held "so it
turned round like a bird cage on a string," she "fainted again
onto the grass" (RB 140). When she recovers and sets off
into the woods once more, one of the marauding Indians appears
"suddenly" in her path, wearing "the mask of a spotty
leopard." Now, a "spotty leopard" has been a stock character
in Rosamond's extravagant tales of her adventures. But when

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7Many critics see Rosamond's action as an allusion to the
myth of Psyche and Cupid.
the real thing appears, Rosamond "for the third time" falls down "in a faint" (*RB* 147).

Rosamond eventually opens her eyes and keeps them open long enough to find Jamie again and marry him. She, like Jamie, is adaptable. In the closing scenes, she makes her peace with her father, and Jamie thanks Clement for the gift of his daughter. For after all, in a fairy tale, the lovers must live happily ever after. So, too, in the tradition of chivalric romance, which the story of Rosamond and Jamie fulfills in every particular, except for the fact that theirs totally inverts the chivalric conceptions of virtue and honor. Their marriage offers a slight concession to social convention, as does Jamie's shift from bandit to merchant. But these minor acts of civility suggest only a transitory thought by the lovers for their new beginning in the city. For the reader remembers Lockhart's assessment of his new occupation as no "change at all" and Rosamond's wistful admission that she "did sometimes miss the house in the wood, and even the rough-and-tumble of their old life" (*RB* 184). The lovers' tale is rollicking good fun, of course, for all but the most sober-sided readers. Who can resist poking fun at our romantic illusions about love?

MIKE FINK: MAIL-RIDER

One of Rosamond's functions in the novel is to provide comic relief, a function she carries out admirably in her
encounter with Mike Fink in his role as a government mail-rider. She meets Fink on the Natchez Trace after she escapes from the Indians. Only with Fink's assistance is she able to get out of the "wilderness," where she is "lost" and pregnant, and search for Jamie Lockhart (RB 168).

Characteristically, Welty has merged fact and fiction in Fink's rescue scene. The action is similar to a real-life event in the life of John Swaney, an early Natchez Trace mail-rider who became famous when he wrote about his adventures. He knew well the terrifying Mason gang of robbers and killers, and he reported their exploits in some detail. He specifically tells of meeting the pregnant Mrs. Tom Mason on the Natchez Trace and carrying her to safety. The fictional Rosamond Musgrove's ride with Mike Fink may probably have had its origin in this incident.

Mrs. Tom Mason was the common-law wife of Tom Mason, a member of the Mason gang headed by his father, Samuel Mason. Two generations of Masons roamed the wilderness with from two to three wives at a time. When his daughter-in-law neared the end of her pregnancy; Samuel Mason, his son, Tom, and the rest of the gang left her behind in the wilderness to fend for herself. Mrs. Mason gave birth alone, flagged down the Natchez mail rider John Swaney, and hitched a ride out of the wilderness, babe in arms (Coates 149).

Involving a mail-rider in the plot of The Robber Bridegroom appears to be an inaccuracy in the time frame. The
Natchez Trace mail route did not begin officially until 1800, two years after the United States acquired the Natchez district from Spain and somewhat beyond the supposed time line of the novel's plot (Bridgforth 387). What at first appears an inaccuracy, however, is merely another example of time extension in the chronotope of "miraculous time." This extension furthers the plot in two ways: it documents the personal decline of Mike Fink, whose fame rose with keelboats and declined with the nineteenth-century advent of steamships and with the greater use of the Natchez Trace; the extension provides yet another cultural transition for the Natchez area, from Old World Spanish dominion to New World American Republic.

In the rescue scene, Mike Fink's conversation with Rosamond Musgrove suggests the problem with his vision. Although Rosamond is lost, pregnant, and wandering in the wilderness after her escape from the Indians, she is still looking for Jamie Lockhart. Fink has seen Lockhart, but assures Rosamond that he's seen only the ghost of Lockhart. Fink, the champion brawler, genuinely believes that he had killed Jamie Lockhart in their original meeting. He did not believe the evidence of his own eyes then, and he does not believe it months later, because his superstition is stronger than empirical evidence. He believes his own legend--in his own time. So Fink tells Rosamond where to find the ghost, protects her from other live bandits, and bears her off
personally on his own horse to the place where he last saw Jamie's ghost (RB 176-79).

In another tangle of communication between two people out of phase with each other's times, Rosamond explains that she must deliver "a message for Jamie Lockhart from another world." Fink asks if she is trying to deliver "a message from out of the past for an old ghost." Rosamond replies that the message is "from out of the future," for the "old ghost" will become "a father of twins next week" (RB 177-78). And hitching rides with successive mail riders all the way to New Orleans, Rosamond, a young woman completely at home in the present, at length delivers her message in person to the wholly alive Jamie Lockhart. The ghost, in this exchange, is actually Mike Fink, whose world and time are on the verge of extinction. As he rides away, we are told that "he did get back on the river and his name was restored to its original glory" (RB 180). But for the historical Mike Fink, who moved on to the Missouri River after the Mississippi River glory days came to an end, the respite was short and not all that sweet. The fictional old ghost, Mike Fink, does not yet recognize the beginning of the end of the frontier and will never recognize it in his lifetime.

SALOME AND THE SUN GOD: CULTURAL PARALLELS

Not content to demonstrate just the transition between the age of the planter and the age of the merchant, and to
chronicle the ascendancy of American power over the Spanish in the Natchez area, Welty embeds in *The Robber Bridegroom* an even earlier cultural transition in the history of the region: that between the cultures of the Natchez Indian tribe and the first European settlers, the French. In *The Robber Bridegroom*, the capture of the planters and robbers by the Indians echoes the Natchez Massacre of the early eighteenth century. Welty’s imaginative spiral back into the earlier history of the area adds yet another dimension of the fullness of time to the vertical time axis (harmonic chord) Welty has established. Welty does not name the Natchez Indian tribe in her novel because, after 1731, the Natchez tribe and nation no longer existed in Natchez. But the surprise capture of the Musgroves by the Indians reenacts the success of the Natchez Massacre at the French Fort Rosalie in 1729. The Natchez success was short-lived because the French retaliation that followed totally destroyed the Natchez civilization. Yet the same French who routed the Natchez civilization shortly afterward gave way briefly to the English who then submitted to the Spanish. By Clement’s time—less than a century later—traces of the French culture have disappeared just as completely as that of the Natchez.

In *The Robber Bridegroom*, however, Welty evokes the Massacre and the Natchez Indian culture in multiple ways: by the description of the Indians’ attack as being carried out in "devious and secret ways"; by the countless references to
revenge and human heads as booty; by the Indians' worship of the sun, practiced among Southeastern Indians only by the Natchez tribe; by the Indians' veneration of their Indian Chief and by subtle references to him as the "sun"; and by the parody of the Natchez sun dance as performed by Salome Musgrove (RB 148, 163, 160-61, 163).

The character of Salome Musgrove also mirrors that of a historical member of the Natchez Indian elite: the "Woman Chief," mother of the "Great Sun." Since the Chief of the Natchez--the "Great Sun"--descended matrilineally, his mother was considered the "Woman Chief" and "held the power of life and death" (Mississippi 56). Like the "Woman Chief," Salome is strong, proud, arrogant, and fearless. She claims that she can make the sun "stand still," an ability that would suggest special powers, indeed, to the Indians who hold her captive. In emphasizing the similarity between characteristics of the Natchez Woman Chief and of Salome, Welty not only strengthens the depiction of the early Natchez civilization, but also provides a reasonable explanation for the Indians' attitudes toward Salome.

The stealthy capture by the Indians of almost all the Musgroves and the robbers echoes the earlier Natchez Massacre. In November of 1729, the Natchez Indians had pretended to go about their business as usual at the French trading post and settlement in Fort Rosalie. Then, at a signal, the Natchez had slaughtered the French "every where at once." "Nearly
three hundred Frenchmen were killed before noon, and the Great Sun sat in the storehouse counting their heads as they piled up before him" (Audhuy 35). The Natchez also captured some four hundred women and children to be used or sold as slaves. Three months later, the French, aided by the Choctaw tribe, retaliated; and by the end of the next year, January, 1731, the few surviving Natchez Indians had surrendered or had escaped to live with the Chickasaw tribe. "Thus was destroyed this nation, formerly the most brilliant in the colony" (Audhuy 35-36).

The designation "brilliant," suggesting the achievements of the Natchez nation, also suggests the special relationship of the nation to the sun. Though small, the Natchez tribe was distinct among its neighbors because it "alone had a complex chiefdom that was ruled over by a Great Sun, an individual who had the power of life and death over his subjects" (Brown 8). Each morning, upon rising, the Great Sun "faced toward his relative, the rising sun" (Brown 19). Although Welty does not include the Natchez hierarchy in her tale, this factual information adds density to Welty's theme of doubleness and her play with complements. Historically, the Great Sun had a brother, known as the "Tattooed Serpent." This brother, like the "Woman Chief" mother, figured prominently in the tribe's culture. The nation's recognition and acceptance of the powers both of light and darkness, sun and serpent, may explain Welty's significant description of the Indians' eyes
as "large, worldly eyes" (RB 144). Certainly, this description of the Indians makes an unusual contrast with the description of Clement as "innocent" or unworldly.

The tribe's claim of kinship to the very sun itself partially explains the chief character trait of the Natchez—their extraordinary pride. In the sixteenth century the Great Sun reportedly replied to a summons from the Spanish explorer De Soto with hauteur: "it is not my custom to visit any one, but rather all, of whom I have ever heard, have come to visit me, to serve and obey me, and pay me tribute, either voluntarily or by force" (Brown 20).

Pride is also the defining character trait of Salome Musgrove. The scene in which Salome finally holds center stage expands the fullness of time in the novel, but it also demonstrates the extent of Salome's hubris, the same hubris displayed by the Great Sun of the Natchez. It was the pride and arrogance of this "ugly woman" that had inspired fear in the Indians who, years before, had captured the Musgrove and Thomas families on their initial voyage downriver to Natchez. Salome's lack of fear persuaded the Indians to release her and the other survivors, Clement and his remaining child, Rosamond (RB 23).

Sure of her purpose from the beginning, Salome is identified in the novel as "the greedy Salome." As such, she complements her planter husband, who has neither greed nor ambition. But since he is never able to deny her—and for
some time even convinces himself that she, too, must be "good"--Clement is as implicated as she in the quest for more land and wealth. Referred to as having an "eagle eye" and an "eagle claw," Salome represents the worst aspect of human greed and disregard for the abundant natural resources of the North American continent. Salome's passion for the material "all" blinds her to reality. "Her eye, from thinking of golden glitter, had possibly gotten too bright to see the dark that was close around her now" (RB 144-45).

Nowhere is Salome's hubris better expressed than in her exchange with the Indian Chief whose model is the "Great Sun of the Natchez." Remembering the special relationship of the Natchez to the sun will help illuminate the comic language in this major scene. The entire passage is built on double entendre, for the sun Salome presumes to command is not only the sun in the heavens of the natural world, but also quite literally the Indian Chief, the Great Sun himself.

'No one is to have power over me,' she cries. 'No man and none of the elements! . . . I am by myself in the world. . . . The sun cannot punish me. . . . Why, I could punish the sun if I wished! . . . I will tell the sun to stand still, and it will stand still! . . . Sun, retire! Go back, Sun! Sun, stand still!' (RB 160-63)

The Natchez recognize Salome's hubris but believe it to be deluded--in her but not in themselves. Her last encounter with the Indians reveals her mortality, as she dies in her frenzied effort to stop the sun and to prove herself superior even to the God of time. If "pity ran through all the grooves
of his [the Indian Chief's] brown face," it is not for
clement, as we have assumed, but for Salome, the proud and
fearless--albeit mortal--Salome (RB 164).

But if Salome is deluded, so too is the Indian Chief and
so, by implication, was the Great Sun. However "worldly" his
eyes and close his kinship to the sun, he does not see that
his tribe and culture cannot endure forever. The difference
in attitudes between Salome and the Indians lies only in their
respective views of the natural world and time. Salome
believes she can command the sun and stop time; the Natchez
believe the sun is "the source of our tribe and of every
thing, and therefore he does not and will not stand still, but
continues forever" (RB 163).

CLEMENT: REALITY AND REACTION

The Robber Bridegroom implies that no humans, whether in
harmony with nature or not, can forestall the relentless ebb
and flow of cultural dominance. Systems within human society
change as regularly as the seasons of nature. Clement alone,
among the characters of The Robber Bridegroom, fully perceives
this truism. But, as we shall see, he reacts by withdrawing
from the field of battle in his time, rather than by
participating fully in the present time that is all we have of
life.

It is Clement, finally, who is most drastically affected
by the discovery that Jamie Lockhart is also the bandit of the
woods. This truth shatters his illusions and drives him, distracted, into the circle of stones in which he asks his basic questions: what is the time and place? what is the issue now? and what choice must I make? In his circle of stones, Clement meditates on the "identity of man." He sees the "singing bird" on each limb in the forest. But, for the first time, he also sees "a beast" creeping across the forest floor. Foreshadowing Rosamond's capture by the Indian "in the mask of a spotty leopard," Clement sees the beast creeping "slowly and softly and forever moving into profile . . . one of a procession, weighted low with his burning coat, looking from the yellow eye set in his head" (RB 147, 141). These whispers of Blake and Yeats open one of the most pessimistic monologues in the Welty canon, one remarkably out of place if this novel is meant to be merely an "amusing romp," as some critics have called it. Clement recognizes both the "lateness of the age" of his old world, and the "time of cunning" in this new world, and acknowledges that he cannot survive in the new one (RB 144, 142).

Clement's eyes are opened at last, but the sight paralyzes him, temporarily at least. As a result, Clement rearranges his "squint" to develop a new view of reality. The new one reminds us of that of an earlier American good man, young Goodman Brown in Hawthorne's story of the same name. Like Goodman Brown, Clement had initially seen only the good in people. When Goodman Brown first sees evil, he loses his
faith completely and thereafter can see nothing but evil. When circumstances force Clement to see that the wilderness is inside as well as outside his clearing, he reacts by squinting in the other direction: no longer can he see or look at any good at all for fear of the danger that might lurk just beneath and beside it.

Clement's final spring visit to New Orleans, after his loss of innocence, demonstrates the latest form of his blindness. Clement is no longer the happy planter we met initially upon his return from a trip to New Orleans. That Clement had returned not only with bags of gold for the sale of his crop but also with many rich and beautiful presents for his family: for Salome a "packet of pins, length of calico, pair of combs, orange, Madeira, and muscadine wine, the salt for the table, and all from the apothecary that he could provide"; and for his beloved daughter Rosamond, golden hairpins, a "petticoat stitched all around with golden thread," and a beautiful silk gown, "the green of the sugar cane," just "like the dresses the Creole girls wore" (RB 36, 41). The Clement we now see in New Orleans has become permanently blind to the good:

New Orleans was the most marvelous city in the Spanish country or anywhere else on the river. Beauty and vice and every delight possible to the soul and body stood hospitably, and usually together, in every doorway and beneath every palmetto by day and lighted torch by night. A shutter opened, and a flower bloomed. The very atmosphere was nothing but aerial spice, the very walls were sugar cane, the very clouds hung as golden as bananas in the sky. But Clement Musgrove was a man who could have walked the streets of
Baghdad without sending a second glance overhead at the Magic Carpet, or heard the tambourines of the angels in Paradise without dancing a step, or had his choice of the fruIts of the Garden of Eden without making up his mind. For he was an innocent of the wilderness, and a planter of Rodney's Landing, and this was his good. (RB 182, emphasis mine)

Even in his reunion with Rosamond, whom he had thought dead, Clement first questions her report of her new and glorious life: "Is all this true, Rosamond, or is it a lie?" (RB 184). And although he consents to see for himself that it is true, he cannot agree to come live with his beloved daughter and her family because Rodney's Landing is his only "good." So, as "the wind filled the sails for the voyage home," Clement takes his bag of gold and returns to the safety of his known place.

Little wonder then that Welty slips in a final irony by the curiosity of mentioning that Rosamond has twins, "one of whom was named Clementine" (RB 183). A daughter named for her grandfather is a memorable gesture to the past, but the association with the doomed Clementine of American history--immortalized in song--is unavoidable: "Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling Clementine / You are lost and gone forever / Dreadful sorry, Clementine."

And what about the other twin, whose name and sex are never mentioned? I suggest that we'll meet her counterpart in the future in the character of Jenny Lockhart, the protagonist of the short story, "At the Landing," which ends the stories collected in The Wide Net.
It is surely no accident that the final story in *The Wide Net* is also set in Rodney’s Landing, known now, however, in the early twentieth century, merely as the Landing, for flood and progress have made it a ghost town. Jenny Lockhart and her grandfather, surely spiritual descendants of the Musgroves, have suffered grievous decline as well. Jenny, a lonely, dutiful young woman, is well-nigh imprisoned in the grand home of her aged grandfather, who so fears everything outside his home that he bars the doors to the outside world. We can only assume that the time of merchant Jamie Lockhart has now passed, just as surely as had that time of Clement Musgrove, innocent planter. It is part of Welty’s method, as it is of all modernists, to make the connections continually between time past, time present, and time future, both within works and between them.
"The thing about this part of the country in the great days is that people like Aaron Burr, J. J. Audubon, Lorenzo Dow, and goodness knows who, were as thick as blackbirds in the pie, and once the pie is opened, they are going to begin to sing."

Welty, Letter (Kreyling Agent 52)

With only one exception, the stories in The Wide Net take place in small hamlets, dotted along the route of the historic Natchez Trace. Welty’s use of the Natchez Trace as setting is significant not only because the major portion of the Trace diagonally traverses her native Mississippi, but also because the history of the Trace mirrors the themes of dreams, realities, change, and continuity that Welty explores in the stories. It began as an animal trail in prehistoric times, rose to prominence in the eighteenth century, and declined as a pathway to new frontiers in the early nineteenth century. Ancient and silent now, the Natchez Trace still suggests the life cycle of the many groups of people whose long journeys on foot made visible and passable what was originally just a series of animal trails through the wilderness.

In her earlier work, The Robber Bridegroom, Welty gave life to representative wayfarers on the Trace from its beginnings right up through the end of the eighteenth century: the Indians—Natchez, Choctaw, and Chickasaw—the first humans known to follow the trail; the Spanish, the first Europeans to explore the trail; the French, the first Europeans to settle Natchez; the British colonists who enjoyed a brief sojourn in the area; the American riverboat men who brought the
marketable resources of inland America down the Mississippi River to New Orleans and then walked back overland to their starting points; the hordes of adventurous pioneers who, just before and after the American Revolutionary War, began to cascade down the trail to the Natchez District, an area that was then not even American territory; and finally the U.S mail riders and the American settlers who journeyed to that distant and remote southwestern corner which, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had just become American territory.

In *The Wide Net*, Welty revisits the Natchez Trace in the nineteenth century, shaping stories around early nineteenth-century, semi-respectable travelers on the Trace, several of them famous historical figures. As the frontier wilderness becomes more settled, the focus moves from Natchez, at the end of the Trace, back up the Trace to isolated houses or small hamlets beside it and to the ordinary people who live there. Several of these stories recreate well-known places, trends, or events in Mississippi history. The time shifts, as well, to the latter part of the nineteenth-century, with one story set apparently in the early part of the twentieth century.

 Appropriately for nineteenth-century Mississippi history, the stories deal with private revelation and action set against a background of change amid continuity. These themes, according to Albert Devlin, are naturally represented in the symbols of the Natchez Trace as well as the Mississippi River, for they "express both the complex organization of human
nature . . . and its incarnation as the reality of history" (Chronicle 72). The Natchez Trace especially, along whose path Mississippi's settlement steadily developed and became visible, pulls together geographically diverse sections of the state even as it presents graphically the layers of history in the state. As a chronotopic symbol for The Wide Net, it offers endless possibilities. The history of nineteenth-century Mississippi, especially the first settled Natchez section, is tumultuous: territorial status at the turn of the century, statehood in 1817, immigrant explosion accompanied by wild land speculation in the flush decades up through the forties, bust and depression in the fifties, civil war in the sixties, reconstruction until the eighties, natural disasters through the rest of the century. The state experienced social change driven by expansion and greed as well as natural land changes occasioned by earthquakes, windstorms, atypical winter weather, and repeated flooding. No single literary chronotope could account for the entire century; but in Bakhtin's typology, we find a general one that serves well for this extraordinary century: "adventure time on the road in

1Devlin's chapter on Welty's historicism (41-79) provides an excellent background for several of the motifs I explore and extend in this chapter. While some parts of my study overlap his work, I extend the material toward a different objective. Suzanne Marrs and Pearl Amelia McHaney have also made important contributions to understanding the historical aspect of Welty's fiction.

2For a detailed history, consult Richard Aubrey McLemore's A History of Mississippi, Vol. II.
everyday life" (113-15). Despite the constant ebb and flow of fortune in this nineteenth-century period of rapid growth, competing interests, and startling decline in the Natchez area, ordinary people continued to experience important, private, extraordinary moments of transformation in their personal lives, moments that would have lasting effects on their identities. These individual moments are the focus of the stories in The Wide Net.

The title of the collection, The Wide Net, conveys a pictorial image that suggests Welty’s approach to her characters. Unlike the curtain image governing A Curtain of Green, which gives advance warning of a barrier between the characters’ exterior and interior worlds, the net image suggests barriers of varying strength and effectiveness, not wholly impenetrable. Net barriers can sometimes—not always—be breached. But nets can also entangle and trap larger creatures, thereby becoming a barrier even crueler than a curtain. Not only can the trapped creature still glimpse the free world beyond, full of sun and shadow, but also the observer can still see the trapped and suffering creature. The net in this particular collection is, significantly, a wide net, one that sweeps through time as well as space. More

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3As Bakhtin explains later in his discussion, this chronotope yields the metaphor of "the path of life," a standard motif in literature. He distinguishes this chronotope from the straight adventure time chronotope by emphasizing that the protagonist journeys through familiar territory but experiences "events that are exclusively extraordinary" (120-21).
significantly, as the narrative of the title story, "A Wide Net," emphasizes, a wide net can be used for the positive purpose of rescue and recovery.

As she deals with themes of mutability and human connection, Welty constructs in this collection an otherworldly atmosphere that suggests E.M. Forster's metaphor for the "fantastic-prophetic axis" in fiction: "a bar of light" that slants across other elements in the fiction (Aspects 102).4 "First Love," rather than the title story, "The Wide Net," opens The Wide Net collection because its first sentence predicts not only the extraordinary content of the story, but of the collection as well: "Whatever happened, it happened in extraordinary times, in a season of dreams, and in Natchez it was the bitterest winter of them all" (WN 3).5 The details of unusual light, stemming from the bitter winter ice and snow, help to establish a special mood throughout the story. All the stories, as we shall see, suggest "extraordinary" times in the everyday lives of people along the Natchez Trace, often couched in specific and significant seasonal times or in years of extraordinary and destructive natural catastrophes.

4Forster never fully clarifies this metaphor, except to say it "implies the supernatural, but need not express it" (106).

5In his seminal article on The Wide Net, Robert Penn Warren identifies this sentence as our entrée into a "special world," one in which we cannot expect "quite the ordinary direct lighting of the actual event" (43).
It is well to remember that the time in which Welty worked on the collection was also extraordinary, for Europe was embroiled in war, and the United States was being drawn inexorably, reluctantly, toward involvement in it (Kreyling Agent 75-76). The talk of war in the air may have prompted some of the choices made as Welty worked with the historical material associated with the Natchez Trace, a subject that she had been contemplating for some time (Kreyling Agent 66). Certainly the fact that she moved back in time to early nineteenth-century American history, with its nearness to the Revolutionary War, its early stirring of national feeling, and its impulses toward Western expansion, was unusual in twentieth-century southern literary tradition. More typical were novels dealing with historical detail of the Civil War, a battle of separation. But the era recreated in "First Love" reflected the contemporary ideas of battle, conquest and expansion.

Only two of the stories, "First Love" and "A Still Moment," touch specifically on themes of conquest, but they are stories central to the collection and to the Welty canon in general. "Asphodel" recounts the process of stagnation and decay in community, while "The Winds" and "At the Landing" detail the destructive threat of the natural forces of storm and flood. Other stories, including the title one, feature quests both with and without mythological underpinnings. All the stories touch in some way on Welty's central concern with
the illusions that dominate the relationship of people to time and to each other.

Since chronotopes vary from story to story as Welty moves through different eras in the nineteenth century, I will examine representative stories in some detail, even though most have already received considerable attention in Welty criticism. I will work through the stories chronologically, as they appear in the collection. In addition to tracing historical detail, I will discuss Welty’s increasing use of images of eyes, hands, and heart to symbolize levels of human understanding and maturity.

"First Love," set in 1807 in Natchez, explores the transforming power of love. "A Still Moment," set in 1811, is a seminal Welty story, an artist’s parable that evolves from an unusual encounter on the Natchez Trace. "Asphodel," with its timeless setting, nonetheless suggests the middle decades of the century with its emphasis on Greek Revival architecture and an aristocrat who tries to arrest time. "At the Landing," set in the latter part of the century or more likely in the early twentieth century, returns to Rodney’s Landing to treat once more the themes of first love, innocence, and experience.

"FIRST LOVE"

"Then the gesture one of the men made in the air transfixed him where he waited" (WN 11).

"First Love" depicts a transfiguration in the life of the deaf orphan Joel Mayes, a transfiguration that reflects the
extraordinary transformation of the town of Natchez itself by spectacular weather conditions and dramatic current events. Having suddenly lost his parents on the Natchez Trace as they traveled south down the Trace from Virginia, Joel now earns his bed and board as a boot boy in a Natchez inn. Since his traumatic loss has caused him to lose all memory of his past, Joel lives completely alone at the foot of the Natchez Trace, frozen into the present life of his silent daily existence. Into his life, dramatically, almost "miraculously," appears one night one of the most famous travelers ever to come to Natchez, the man who will effect Joel's transfiguration—the former Vice-President of the United States, Aaron Burr.

For in the remarkable tale of "First Love," Eudora Welty recreates a major historical event in the life of Natchez, Mississippi. Here, in January, 1807, Aaron Burr was arrested for conspiracy to commit treason. He was tried in the territorial capital of Washington, Mississippi, located just six miles up the Trace from Natchez. Although Welty covers only that part of Burr's bleak experience occurring in the Natchez area, history records the Washington, Mississippi, trial as the third of four such trials, all of which acquitted Burr for lack of evidence. The historically accurate bitter cold in the winter of 1807, atypical for southern Mississippi,

6See Pearl McHaney, 52, for information about Welty's knowledge of Aaron Burr. For relevant discussion of the conspiracy trials of Aaron Burr, see Jonathan Daniel's Ordeal of Ambition: Jefferson, Hamilton, Burr.
persisted through Burr's month in Natchez. On the opening day of Burr's trial, Judge Thomas Rodney, the presiding judge, recorded the temperature as "ten degrees above zero" (Daniels 159).

The extreme weather conditions set the mood for the story in its first line: "in Natchez it was the bitterest winter of them all" (WN 3). The extreme cold and strange light that transfigure Natchez serve not only to establish a dream-like setting, but also to reinforce the atmosphere surrounding the story's leading characters. The bitterness reflects the chilling public opinion endured by Burr as well as the emotionally frozen state of the story's protagonist, Joel Mayes.

The opening paragraphs of "First Love" detail the elements of the extreme cold: "The north wind struck . . . with an insistent penetration . . . screaming down the river bends"; "there was the strange drugged fall of snow"; "Venus shone in the daytime . . . through the new transparency of the sky"; "The Mississippi shuddered and lifted from its bed"; "the ice stretched far out"; the "wildcats . . . howled in closer rings each night from the frozen cane"; "Men were caught by the cold, they dropped in its snare-like silence." The strange daily silence and the clear, cold, glittering air effect a "transfiguration" in Natchez, one that it seems must affect the "whole world" (WN 3-4).
Welty's choice of Aaron Burr, the villainous "bad boy" of American history, as the evocator of the protagonist's "first love" raises immediate questions about Welty's authentic rendering of historical facts--further inspiring a sense of fantasy in the fictional account. But the historical record provides evidence that Aaron Burr provoked just such feelings. The nineteenth-century historian J. F. H. Claiborne, an excellent source of Natchez Trace data, describes a similar picture of Burr as the object of young, first love. Significantly, the actual young lover in history was a girl, Madeline Price, who makes a brief appearance at the end of Welty's fictional account. Claiborne describes her enchantment with Burr in what a later historian has called "song" and "Southern romance" (Daniels Devil's Backbone 161). Neither Claiborne nor later historians express any doubt about Burr's fascination for women of all ages.

But Welty, representing Burr as a whole man, not just a lover, shifts the enchantment to a young boy, even more spectacularly, to a young deaf boy. Joel Mayes' perception of Burr evolves entirely from what he can see; it is impossible for him to hear any sounds of speech. The image of Burr thus conveyed differs markedly from the villainous, treasonous stereotype that has persisted through the ages. Further, it -----------------------------------

7Profound deafness is defined as an inability to hear the sounds of speech. Most deaf people hear "gross" sound, such as a sharp, heavy cough or the roar of an engine. Joel hears the "explosions" of breaking trees and some notes of Mrs. Blennerhassett's fiddle (WN 161, 164).
allows, indeed even encourages—just as history does—debate about "what really happened." Using the point of view of a deaf child, who never hears any of Burr's conversation, reinforces the central historical quandary about Burr's alleged treasonous activity: no factual evidence exists or has ever existed to prove conclusively either his guilt or his innocence on the charge of conspiracy against the United States. Through the wide-open eyes of the orphan boy, we see a different dimension of Burr, one that suggests a much more complicated and appealing man than the black-and-white stereotype of history.

Of course, Welty omits most of the facts, expecting—in typical modernist fashion—that readers will fill these in for themselves. Albert Devlin believes, as I do, that Welty conducted her own research in order to understand both the public and the private Burr as well as possible (Chronicle 61-62). Yet, by constructing our vision of Burr from the point of view of a deaf child, Welty reenacts for contemporary viewers the same lack of access to necessary information that faced ordinary Americans at the time. From the story, we receive no more evidence with which to judge Burr's intentions than did his contemporaries. We do, however, through Welty's artistry, experience vividly Burr's ability to inspire and

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8Twentieth-century scholarship suggests that Burr may have been a scapegoat whose intentions were distorted in reports to President Jefferson from General James Wilkinson in New Orleans. We now know that Wilkinson was, at the time, a secret agent of the Spanish crown.
move people. According to Charles Nolan, a specialist in Burr literary representations, Welty’s portrait of Burr makes "First Love" a "stunning achievement" (112).

Throughout this story—and throughout the collection—Welty associates individual characters with specific time dimensions. While other men and creatures in the bitter-cold winter of Natchez are frozen in space, Joel Mayes is frozen in time. He lives entirely in the present, having no memory that precedes his last glimpse on the Natchez Trace of his parents’ faces.

It [his memory] reached back and hung trembling over the very moment of terror in which he had become separated from his parents, and then it turned and started in the opposite direction, and it would have discerned some shape, but he would not let it, of the future.

(WN 12-13)

We would say now that Joel suffers from shock-induced amnesia. His deafness might also be induced by trauma; we do hear of cases of "hysterical deafness" or muteness. We know at the very least that Joel’s is a late deafness. Joel has not always been deaf and mute: "I could speak if I would, or I could hear," he thinks. "Once I did each thing" (WN 27). Given his amnesia, "everything in the passing moment and each little deed assumed the gravest importance" (WN 13).

Joel perceives immediately that Aaron Burr, engaged in business or in play, has "no awareness whatever of the

9In Aaron Burr and the Literary Imagination, Charles Nolan examines literary representations of this compelling public figure and private man. The Burr portraits have appeared steadily over the last 150 years.
present" (WN 16). Although Burr talks endlessly in Joel’s tiny room, his attentions are directed toward "conquest . . . a dream of delights and powers beyond its walls. . . ." (WN 15). Watching Burr dance later in one of the entertainments arranged in Natchez, Joel knows that Burr’s "eyes saw nothing there and went always beyond the room" (WN 19-20). All is future and elsewhere for Burr, whose reputation has been tainted by his scandalous duel with Alexander Hamilton and will eventually be destroyed by President Thomas Jefferson’s distrust of him. Less than three years after ending his term as Thomas Jefferson’s Vice-President, Aaron Burr stands accused of fomenting a conspiracy to seize Western lands, ostensibly belonging to the Spanish, and possibly of plotting secession of the new Republic’s territories on the southwestern frontier. Did he so conspire? We will probably never know. History is as silent on the actual facts of this matter as are the Burr/Blennerhassett conversations for Joel.

In forming some ideas, then, about the man who has invaded his space in such a magical way, Joel focuses largely on two physical characteristics: the unusual glitter of Burr’s eyes, well-documented in history, and a particular gesture of Burr’s right arm and hand, Welty’s fictional addition (WN 16, 11). For Joel, Burr’s eyes shone "like travelers’ fires seen far out on the river" (WN 16). Joel’s simile clarifies the light as a positive one giving comfort, hope, and renewed energy to those travelers in the cold
darkness, still some distance away from warmth and companionship. It is Burr’s gesture, however, that captivates Joel. When Burr lifts his right arm in a gesture of "sudden nobleness," Joel is "transfixed" (WN 14, 11). Burr’s noble gesture is never described precisely: he "lifted his right arm—a tense, yet gentle and easy motion—and made the dark wet cloak fall back" (WN 11). The gesture is to Joel "like the first movement he had ever seen, as if the world had been up to that night inanimate" (WN 11).

The nature of the gesture that Welty leaves to our imagination might be explained by an historical image that affected Welty’s imagination. A short distance from Bayou Pierre, where, in the story, Burr’s flotilla awaits the disposition of his trial, there still stands an unusual church. The church was built for Reverend Zebulon Butler, a young Scottish minister of the early nineteenth century whose vision became associated with his recurrent gesture. This symbolic gesture so captivated the people of Port Gibson that they erected a lasting memorial to it. Instead of the steeple which would customarily grace the top of a church, the people fashioned a carved hand caught momentarily in the minister’s well-known gesture: "the upraised and clenched hand, with the index finger pointing heavenward" (Daniels 251). The gesture so embodied the essence of the admired minister that when the wooden hand was half-destroyed by nature’s wear and tear, it was replaced in the twentieth century with a gold-leaf replica
which continues to direct upwards the gaze of all observers.
Welty knew the church well, for a picture of it appears in her book of photographs, One Time, One Place (95).

Burr's gesture would have been secular rather than religious, of course; no threat of hell or promise of heaven would be at all implied in it. Indeed, Burr's gesture, we know, is "toward the West" (WN 32), perhaps toward a promise of earthly lands rather than a heavenly home. But the intimation of vision and power implicit in Burr's gesture would be no less memorable for being secular rather than divine.10 We know that Burr's ideas captivated many of the southwestern frontier men, one reason that he aroused such fear and animosity in the government. It is entirely credible that such a man of authority and purpose could awaken the imagination of the orphaned and purposeless child, alone and adrift on the edge of the wilderness.

The moment of transfiguration for Joel comes on the last night of Burr's month-long sojourn in Natchez, the night before his trial. Night after night, "with his eyes wide open in the shadows," Joel has watched Burr talk with Blennerhassett, his alleged co-conspirator. Always the fire in the grate warms the room, but for Joel the flame springs primarily from Burr himself (WN 14). On this important night,

10Welty worried about the reception Burr's gesture might receive in her contemporary war climate. "Do you realize that it might be interpreted as pro-fascist, poor Aaron Burr's unexplained little dream," Welty wrote to her agent, Diarmuid Russell. For more details, see Kreyling, Agent, 76.
Blennerhassett’s young wife joins them to play her fiddle. The sight of her playing, some of the fiddle’s sounds, and the odors in the room speak to the boy of "a place. . . . a country" (WN 24). Then "quite clearly, and altogether to his surprise," Joel breaks through the confines of present time to a time past that he had repressed:

Instead of the fire on the hearth, there was a mimosa tree in flower. It was in the little back field at his home in Virginia and his mother was leading him by the hand. . . . His mother pointed to it. Among the trembling leaves the feathery puffs of sweet bloom filled the tree like thousands of paradisical [sic] birds all alighted at an instant. He had known then the story of the Princess Labam for his mother had told it to him, how she was so radiant that she sat on the roof-top at night and lighted the city. It seemed to be the mimosa tree that lighted the garden, for its brightness and fragrance overlaid all the rest.

(WN 24)

Without at first wholly realizing it, Joel has heard "the sounds of her [Mrs. Blennerhassett’s] song, the only thing he had ever heard" (WN 25). Joel’s recovered memory, prompted by the sensory stimulation, features his mother in an experience of all-encompassing radiance, a radiance that he associates in the present with Aaron Burr. In the moment of his revelation, the radiance spreads, for Joel, to cover all those in room. At that same moment, Joel himself feels love and pity that encompasses all the people in the room because he recognizes the "one thing" they all share: "how far they were from home, how far from everywhere that they knew" (WN 26).

Joel’s love then, while awakened by Burr, is not confined to Burr. It is Burr who receives the benefit of
Joel's new-found agape, however. When, later on the same night, Burr tosses in his sleep, Joel grasps the tortured man's hand in his own, suffers the "fierce" clasp that "hurt his hand," and receives the "furious pressure of this man's dream" until at last Burr quiets and sleeps like a child (WN 28-9). For Joel, the month with Burr has stirred first only awareness of possibilities, then love and compassion for his fellow sufferer, and finally joy and participation. As far as the evidence of the story goes, Burr is the first person the child has touched. Even this early in Welty's career, the awakened eyes that look clearly on all aspects of reality are accompanied by the open heart and the hands that "make or do."

Joel's understanding of Aaron Burr produces no final answer to the question of Burr's innocence or guilt on the charge of treason. The answer to that question remains a mystery for Joel, as it still does for us, one hundred and eighty-eight years later. But Joel's innocent observation of Burr yields greater understanding of the mystery of Burr's charismatic personality. For Joel observes and feels all parts of Burr's nature, his passion, his dream, his suffering. Joel's regard for and identification with Burr—imperfect though he may be—constitutes the "love" that plays such an important role in Welty's fiction. Through that love, the reader glimpses an Aaron Burr clear and whole, worthy of admiration as well as pity. "If love does a secret thing always, it is to reach backward, to a time that could not be
known—for it makes a history of the sorrow and the dream it has contemplated in some instant of recognition" (WN 28).

In this story, the instant of recognition occurs only in the heart of the boy, Joel. There is no reciprocity, nor can there be, for Burr does not acknowledge the present. Rather the spark of connection emanating from Burr reveals Joel’s past to him. It leaps across time rather than space. By helping Joel recover his past, Burr releases the boy from his imprisonment in the present and enables him also to adopt some hope for a future.

"A STILL MOMENT"

"The gaze that looks outward must be trained without rest, to be indomitable" (WN 90).

"in man the enlargement of the eye to see started a motion in the hands to make or do, and . . . the narrowing of the eye stopped the hand and contracted the heart" (WN 85).

The important Welty story, "The Still Moment," portrays the meeting of three widely different men on the Natchez Trace and their various reactions to the sight of a white heron that lands nearby. Early critical discussion has centered on the various perspectives of the three, while recent criticism has approached the story as an artist parable. In the story the artist, John J. Audubon, encounters the evangelist, Lorenzo

11Robert Penn Warren’s oft-cited 1944 article "Love and Separateness" has set the direction for criticism not only of this story but for the Welty canon, as well. See also Nancy Ann Cluck, Paul Binding (155-58) and Danièle Pitavy-Souques (Devlin Life 125-26) for discussion of "The Still Moment" as an artist parable.
Dow, whose rigid views of good and evil match those of the third character, the notorious outlaw, James Murrell. The three dramatically reveal the conflicting views of reality that are central to Welty's artistic method.

Although no specific date is mentioned in "A Still Moment," Welty has specified in her autobiography that the scene occurred in 1811, another extraordinary year in the Mississippi Valley, one which marked the beginning of the end for the Natchez Trace. Charles Joseph Latrobe described the year in The Rambler in North America as the "Annus Mirabilis of the West" (102). Not only did the Mississippi overflow its banks in the spring, and the "splendid comet of that year... shed its twilight over the forests," but "tens of thousands" of squirrels abandoned their northern homes to press suicidally toward the south, most of them perishing in the Ohio River that blocked their march (Latrobe 102). In that year, the ruinous New Madrid fault line trembled, triggering a massive earthquake that continued to rock the fissured earth for two months thereafter. The earthquake caused the Mississippi River to swallow up islands, to run backwards for an hour, and to create the mysterious Reelfoot Lake in northwestern Tennessee (Latrobe 106-11).

In this year the characters in "A Still Moment," all historical figures who roamed the Natchez Trace wilderness during the early years of the nineteenth century, accidentally meet. Historically, it is unlikely that their paths ever
crossed (McHaney "Historical Perspectives" 62-63). Their meeting is Welty's fiction. Although Welty retains their essential personalities and behavior, she infers from their reputations certain habits of thought and adapts them accordingly for fictional purposes. Albert Devlin points out that all three of the travelers have tainted backgrounds. Like Aaron Burr, even the minister and the artist are fugitives from justice: "Dow, never approved for Methodist ordination, disobeyed his superiors . . . to tour the Mississippi Territory"; "Audubon's sketching trip was occasioned by the disgrace of bankruptcy and imprisonment in Kentucky" (Chronicle 63). Murrell, of course, has lived his entire life outside the law.

Welty characterizes each of the men as bound to a specific dimension of time: Lorenzo Dow to the future, James Murrell to the past, John Audubon to a present informed by the past and visualizing the future. The three converge at one moment in time, share at that moment the sight of a snowy heron that alights to feed in the swamp, and then they go their separate ways. The action is slight, hanging as it does almost wholly on the reactions of the three men to the sight of the heron. In this character study, Welty uses an omniscient point of view to explore the mind of each of the characters as he speculates on the meaning of the heron's touching down on the Trace.
Lorenzo Dow, the Puritan evangelist from Massachusetts, lives entirely for the future, for the paradise beyond the earthly present. Dow hurries up and down the Trace on his mission to save all souls from the "wild places" of their earth and their hearts. For Dow there is no life on earth except "the tongue," to speak the words of the scripture. Nature exists only to testify to God's love; true life exists in Christian salvation beyond death. The white heron, for Dow, can only be the sign of God's love made visible and near (WN 86); its destruction must unaccountably be the work of the devil, thinks Dow, as indeed only the "Tempter" can account for the conflicting emotions occasioned in his heart by the heron's death.

James Murrell, the notorious outlaw, proclaims his credo: "Destroy the present!" Murrell believes that "the living moment and the man that lives in it must die before you can go on" (WN 79). An artist of sorts himself, as is Dow, Murrell rides beside his victims and tells them tales of the past, tales that he creates and controls. When he consumes his victims, they will become a part of his next tale. Life exists in the retelling of it. The heron, for Murrell, is merely "whiteness ensconced in darkness," a sight that momentarily triggers a prophetic glance into the future of the Trace, when it will be "lost" with "all these trees cut down" (WN 89).
Only John Audubon, both aware of his past, of the need always to "remember," and conscious of the future he will make through his art, actually lives fully in the present moment. Audubon never speaks, for his mission is to observe all life in the world and to recreate it for posterity. Only he notices, for example, that when the heron feeds, "it muddies the water with its foot" (WN 87). Only he understands that the bird is "defenseless in the world except for the intensity of its life," a description that will apply to all major Welty protagonists, as we shall see (WN 87). Yet Audubon destroys the heron, acknowledging that he cannot reconstruct it accurately from memory. Reconstruction, as well as observation, is part of his mission; he will reconstruct the heron for those who will come after him, in a future which may no longer harbor either snowy herons or wilderness trails. Audubon destroys with the same love and care that he will use to create, even as he wonders still "what structure of life bridged the reptile's scale and the heron's feather?" (WN 87). In his question, Audubon echoes imagery not only of classical Greek poetry but also of new world American Indian folk ritual, both of which recognize the "ethical polarity" of "the bird and serpent as allegoric of the winged flight of the spirit and the earth-bound commitment of the passion" (Campbell 88). Audubon alone reflects the certain knowledge that there is a bridge between bird and serpent, between soul and body, good and evil. Dow and Murrell can survive only by
denying such a bridge, by carefully separating the dual aspects of the human—divine spirit and earthly body, by associating this duality with the contrary concepts of good and evil.

Although all three men exhibit the characteristic American need to conquer "all" in their separate quests, they share no other character traits. The power of the snowy heron, which lives intensely in the present moment, arrests them all for one still quiet moment, and brings Dow and Murrell nearer the question of the bridge between good and evil. But when the moment is shattered, both Dow and Murrell go their separate ways as before, having suppressed the intrusion of the present reality as if it had never existed.

Critics have compared this story to the earlier "A Memory" to explore Welty's thoughts on the creative process (Warren 46-47; Vande Kieft Eudora 14-15, 22). The child of "A Memory" closes her eyes against the ugliness of humanity that confronts her on the beach because it violates the purity of the dream of love that has arrested her passions. In The Robber Bridegroom, Clement Musgrove also narrows his eyes to any full spectrum of reality, seeing first only the innocent singing birds in the trees and next only the corrupt creeping serpent that forever slithers nearer the birds. Both characters prefigure Lorenzo Dow in this regard, and if we merely reverse the reality and the dream, we find James Murrell. But the historic John Audubon tries to blend in "A
Still Moment" both dream and reality, beauty and ugliness, believing that the artistic view, the "gaze that looks outward," must be trained, unceasingly, to embrace whatever comes into view. Yet even Audubon closes his eyes at the moment he pulls the trigger to kill the heron. Such narrowing of the eyes "contract[s] the heart," makes possible an "averting plan" (WN 85). When Audubon opens his eyes to meet the horror in Lorenzo Dow's, he recognizes it for the "first time" (WN 90-1). Thus, the vision of all three men is momentarily enlarged. Dow and Murrell instantly revert to their respective squints on reality. But Audubon, who remembers everything, will take the horror with him into his next encounter with beauty. For always, the past informs his present and provides courage for the future.

One can scarcely avoid speculating on the parallels between Welty's "Still Moment" and Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron." In Jewett's story, an ornithologist, who hopes to capture the rare heron, asks Sylvia, the young protagonist, for help in finding its nest. He offers a reward of ten dollars to "anybody who could show it to me" (Country 233). Hoping to please the ornithologist and driven by "wild ambition," Sylvia climbs alone just before dawn to the very top of the highest great pine tree in the area, "the last of its generation," where she hopes to search out the nest of the white heron that feeds in the marsh. When after her struggle to the top of the tree, she sees clearly both the ocean and
the heron rising into the early daybreak, she experiences an epiphany which renders her incapable finally of reporting the sight to the ornithologist. When she "remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, . . . Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away" (Country 239).

Welty's story adds a new layer to the question of life or death for the heron. Jewett's ornithologist kills and stuffs his rare birds. He preserves the lifeless outward material cover of the bird, its skin and feathers, but nothing remains inside of its life or movement. For Sylvia, then, the choice is clearly between life and death for the heron. Life and non-life, good and evil are compartmentalized for her, just as they are for Lorenzo Dow and James Murrell. Welty's ornithologist, John Audubon, takes the process a step further, however, for as an artist, he destroys as part of a plan to bring the bird to life again in art. To do so, the artist must accurately recreate the complexities of the bird's structure and feathers. But since memory alone cannot furnish such accuracy, the dead earthly bird becomes a model for living art. Thus, where Jewett's story offers either life or death for the heron, Welty's story promises life beyond death: the rebirth of the heron, feathers and spirit, in the artistic re-creation by the artist.
In "The Still Moment" Audubon follows William Faulkner's artistic credo: "The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that 100 years later when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life" (Lion 253). Yet Audubon, in seeing the heron "most purely at its moment of death" and then recognizing the horror in Dow's eyes, understands the paradox of the artist's goal.

He knew that the best he could make would be, after it was apart from his hand, a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts; and that it would always meet with a stranger's sight, and never be one with the beauty in any other man's head in the world.

(WN 92)

Even Audubon's "long labor" of disciplined observation, his concentrated effort to commit to memory the essence of the heron in "all its solitude, its total beauty," his compulsion to recreate in art both the spirit and the passion of the heron as he experiences it in time, is not enough, can never be enough, to communicate fully his vision to the stranger's eyes in another time. But if it is good enough, then the heron will at least live again for the stranger, albeit in a slightly different vision. It is not enough for Audubon, but it is something.

If there is a bridge, then, between the "reptile's scale" and the "bird's feather," the material and the essence, it

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must emerge from the artist's love for his subject and from his passion to make it live again in another time and place. This concept has perhaps been most simply expressed in the last line of Thornton Wilder's 1922 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*: "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning" (235).

"ASPHODEL"

"Her look was the challenging one when looks met" (WN 105). "One hand, the right one, curved round and clenched an ebony stick, mounted with the gold head of a lion" (WN 104-05).

Here are Greek form and Greek mythology on a curve of the Natchez Trace. "Asphodel" is the name given to the Greek Revival style plantation home once occupied by Mr. Don McInnis. When the story opens, "Asphodel" has been reduced to a "golden ruin." The wildflower called asphodel grows "on the poorest soil in most parts of the Mediterranean countries" (Graves 327). An asphodel is a type of lily, associated in Greek legend with the valley of ashes and the walking dead—a most appropriate association for this unusual Welty story.

In exploring the theme of death in life in "Asphodel," Welty abandons any reference to specific Mississippi historical record. She does, however, invoke the general infatuation with Greek Revival style architecture current in the nineteenth century, particularly in the South. Asphodel, before its ruin, would have resembled just such a typical
plantation home. Many of these Greek Revival style homes, featuring classic lines and a variety of Greek columns, were built in the Natchez region during the flush early decades of Mississippi statehood.\textsuperscript{13} Pictures and descriptions of many of these homes are included in the 1938 Mississippi guide book. One particularly beautiful example of the six Doric-column home, and one that Welty would have known, is D'evereaux, built in 1840 on a hill above the old Natchez Trace near Natchez (Mississippi 337). It is highly likely that D'evereaux was a model for Asphodel. Many critics have thought of the ruins of Windsor as the model. Certainly, anyone thinking of ruins would think of the ruins of this extravagant nineteenth-century plantation home, which was destroyed by fire in 1890, leaving only 23 Corinthian columns (Cole 217). But Windsor was more opulent than D'evereaux, and than Asphodel. Besides, its columns were Corinthian, the most elaborate of the Greek order of architecture, rather than Asphodel's Doric, the oldest and plainest in the order.

The Greek revival setting accentuates the forms and themes of Greek drama employed by Welty for this story. In a noticeable departure from earlier presentations, Welty presents in dramatic Greek choral form the remembered story of the town matriarch, the proud and aristocratic Miss Sabina,

\textsuperscript{13}Many of these homes have been carefully preserved in Natchez, which sponsors an annual tour of homes, replete with costumed hosts and hostesses. Thousands of visitors make the pilgrimage each year.
who falls dead of a stroke when she can no longer control the forces of change in her community. She has spent her life imposing her will on the community and trying to impose it on time itself. In her community, Miss Sabina, like Salome in The Robber Bridegroom and Miss Emily in Faulkner’s "A Rose for Emily," commands time to stand still. She demands that the world exist always in the moment of her greatest beauty and authority. Only after her death are townspeople free to live again in present time.

The townspeople, in the tradition of Greek drama, are represented by Cora, Phoebe, and Irene, three spinsters who form a chorus. In postures "that . . . came from a mourning procession" (WN 95), the chorus members gather at the previously forbidden Asphodel at high noon on the day after Miss Sabina’s death to tell, with appropriate ritual and feasting, the story of the doomed marriage between Miss Sabina and Mr. Don McInnis. As in the earliest drama, the entire story emerges from the choral song; the chorus "comments or moralizes or mythologizes upon what happens" (Grant 157). The chorus rests near all that remains of Asphodel—the great Doric columns. As symbols of the "pure Present" in time, they predicate "the negation of time" (Spengler 489). The women of the chorus, luxuriating in their sudden freedom to live in the moment, eat their picnic lunch, lingering over the fruits—"bananas, figs, pomegranates, grapes." After pressing at the
"pomegranate stains on their mouths," they chant the history so fresh in their minds (WN 97).

Although Vande Kieft has called the narrative method of "Asphodel" "puzzling, eclectic, and bizarre" (Eudora Welty 47-48), the method could hardly be simpler nor serve Welty's purposes better. For "Asphodel" fits the structural form of the dithyramb, a ritual form of early Greek tragedy, honoring Dionysus. As the most primitive form became more literary, competitive festivals of "the Great Dionysia" were presented annually. Ordinarily, each day of the festival, three tragedies and a tragi-comic or semi-burlesque "satyr play" would be performed (Grant 156, 153). The plays emphasized "lyric poetry, choral singing and dancing, and mythological subjects" (Brockett 13). "Asphodel" fits the tragi-comic mode.

Welty alters the classic order of the dithyramb; she begins with the parados, an accepted variation in the form. But all the structural elements and dramatic conventions of the dithyramb are clearly visible in "Asphodel." The structural features of the more refined literary dithyrambs include the prologue with its exposition of earlier events, the parados or entrance of the chorus who establish the proper mood, the stasima containing the episodes that develop the main action, and finally the exodus with the concluding scene and the departure of the chorus (Brockett 15). The play ordinarily begins just before the denouement and only the
final scenes are dramatized; the Greek desire to keep violent events off-stage forces a great deal of exposition.

The dramatic choral structure merges perfectly, too, with the oral story-telling tradition of Southern history. Two-thirds of the story, the entire history of Miss Sabina and Mr. Don McInnis, is recounted in the rhythmical, lyrical, alternating monologues of the chorus, who represent the timelessness of the seasons as well as the community observers. Despite the account of bitter disappointment and terrible vengeance, Cora, Phoebe, and Irene "tell over Miss Sabina's story, their voices serene and alike" (WN 98). Since readers have responded more consistently to the Southern story-telling tradition than to the Greek choral tale, "Asphodel" is usually seen as a comic story of Southern spinsters rather than a somber Greek tale of vengeance, destruction, and renewal.

The mismatched mates of the drama, each described as the last of a kind, are familiar types that will figure again in various forms throughout Welty's work. Michael Kreyling sees their union as an Apollonian-Dionysian one, two "opposites" which in reality should be viewed as equal parts of a whole (Order 23). Miss Sabina, proud guardian of the "civilization" that her antebellum culture has wrought, hoards Greek artifacts in her dark house. Although the house, like Sabina herself and her father before her, "stood on the high hill" and "commanded the town that came to be at its foot," it is
set in hard ground where "not one blade of grass grew" (WN 98). On her wedding day, "no longer young," Miss Sabina waits "rigid" for the "great, profane man . . . of Asphodel," Mr. Don McInnis. The Dionysian figure of Mr. Don McInnis is a more civilized Billy Floyd, a less mysterious King MacLain. McInnis comes from the opposite side of the great ring of hills, connected to Miss Sabina's town by a "curve of the Old Natchez Trace." But the road between Asphodel and Miss Sabina's house is "long, winding, difficult, untravelled" (WN 98). McInnis is wild and arrogant, but "the hope was in him, and he knew it" (WN 99).

But hope is thwarted in his life with Sabina: all three children die, Sabina drives him from her house, McInnis disappears, and his own house burns—or is burned—to the ground, leaving only the six Doric columns. However, on the day after his wife's death, Mr. Don McInnis reappears—or so it seems to the sated, dreamy spinsters who loll in the glade beside Asphodel. Out from between the vine-entangled Doric columns steps a naked and bearded man, "as rude and golden as a lion" (WN 109). Though he does not move, soon a herd of goats swarm out of the ruin and chase the fleeing women, who look back even as they flee.¹⁴ And when the goats follow their buggy, the three spinsters toss out the little basket of baked hen that they "had saved back," affirming that Miss

¹⁴The final scene, as Louise Westling has noted in Eudora Welty is reminiscent of the Pan episode in E. M. Forster's story, "Story of a Panic" (76).
Sabina "would have been ashamed of us . . . . She would never have given up the little basket we had saved back" (WN 112).

The chorus has already made clear Miss Sabina's attitude toward hope, new ideas, and new blood in their account of her death in the post office. Miss Sabina despises the post office, the one spot in town "beyond her domain." The chorus explains why.

For there, we might still be apart in a dream, and she did not know what it was. . . . We held onto our letters as onto all far-away or ephemeral things at that moment, to our secret hope or joy and our despair too, which she might require of us.

(WN 106)

Sabina, of course, has neither sent nor received a letter, indeed has never entered the post office until the final moments of her earthly existence. Her descent at last into the little "four-posted whitewashed building," crowded with folks, each person with a letter in hand, is prompted by a desperate need for connection: "Give me my letter," she cries (WN 107). But, of course, there is none. In a fury reminiscent of a Dionysian orgy, Sabina strikes out at the physical evidence of life beyond her control.

She was possessed then, before our eyes, as she could never have been possessed. She raged. She rocked from side to side, she danced. Miss Sabina's arms moved like a harvester's in the field, to destroy all that was in the little room. In her frenzy she tore all the letters to pieces, and even put bits in her mouth and appeared to eat them.

(WN 108)

That Miss Sabina can experience neither hope nor joy is substantiated by her attitude toward time, one that we've seen
in these other Natchez Trace stories. For Miss Sabina acknowledges no sense of time except the present: "When Miss Sabina is at the door, there is no other place in the world but where you stand, and no other afternoon but that one, past or future" (WN 106).

In "Asphodel," the three spinsters, who appear repeatedly in Welty's canon, suggest the Fates, who control man's destiny, or the Hours, those characters of Greek mythology who watch over the works of mortal men. They sometimes represent the seasons as well--spring, autumn, and summer. Welty apparently fuses the representations: the imagery throughout suggests the seasons, as does the pointed reference to the statues of the Seasons beside which the spinsters stand in Miss Sabina's great hall (WN 101). The "golden day" of which Phoebe speaks will endure in their consciousness, not as a closed chapter, but rather as a past moment that informs the present and celebrates the possibilities of the future.15

In its thematic assertion about time, "Asphodel" extends the central idea of "A Still Moment." Although "Asphodel" focuses on the inevitable decline of a civilization that attempts to arrest time, the character representative of that "civilizing" way of life is as oblivious of historical process as are James Murrell, the bandit who closes off the present to live only in the past, and Lorenzo Dow, who suffers the

15A contrasting view is illustrated by Garvin Davenport, who asserts that Phoebe's golden day, "the chance for renewal, seems to be in the past and therefore lost" (Prenshaw 196).
present only for dreams of the future. The chorus of Asphodel affirms the belief of John Audubon, the artist who remembers the past but respects the future, and who can fully experience and appreciate the present which merges the other two. A community that attempts to ignore its past and exclude the change that the future must bring will always come to ruin; without change, life itself becomes still and dead.

"AT THE LANDING"

Although the river country of the Natchez area has many "Landings," most of the descriptive details in this story identify this particular landing as what remains of Rodney's Landing, the eighteenth-century home of Clement Musgrove in The Robber Bridegroom. Historically, however, the fictional Rodney's Landing may be a mixture of two river country towns, Rodney and Bruinsburg Landing.¹⁶ By the 1920s—the apparent

¹⁶See Eudora Welty's "Some Notes on River Country" in The Eye of the Story, 286-299. Also consult "More Notes on River Country" by Brookhart and Marrs, and "Constructing Time and Place" by Meese. Meese calls attention to Welty's picture in One Time, One Place of the ruins of Windsor, entitled "Home After High Water." Windsor's location is given on the picture as Rodney (43). Yet, according to Mississippi: Guide to the Magnolia State, Windsor is at least ten miles from Rodney, but only three miles from Bruinsburg Landing. Also Bruinsburg Landing, not Rodney, was in the nineteenth century the third busiest cotton port in the area, trailing only Natchez and Vicksburg. Bruinsburg Landing, as a ghost town in the twentieth century, also had shantyboats moored to its shore (329-330). These historical facts suggest that Welty merged details of the two towns, probably in The Robber Bridegroom as well as in "At the Landing," to form the fictional Rodney's Landing. If so, then Windsor may be the model Welty envisioned for the home of Jenny and her grandfather. Adding weight to this conclusion is Salome Musgrove's dream in The
time setting of "At the Landing"—the thriving river port of Clement Musgrove's time has lost its river and its livelihood. The Mississippi River which gave life to the town has also ravished it regularly by severe flooding: the area experienced "major floods eleven times between 1858 and 1922" (Cobb 129). In 1876, the force of the river at flood time actually created a new channel for itself, one that left the town of Rodney three miles inland. Despite systematic flood control efforts that began slowly in 1879, periodic flooding continued; "great" floods occurred in 1912, 1922, and 1927 (Blake 336). The 1927 flood was so catastrophic that the federal government took over major responsibility for flood control in the following year.

It is this 1927 catastrophe that drives the plot of "At the Landing," if we can trust the only clue to specific time given in the story. On the morning after her grandfather's death, the protagonist, Jenny, walks into town where she hears "Son Alford" playing his mandolin and "singing his fast song": "Ain't she cute / Ain't she smart / Don't look twice / It'll break my heart / Everybody loves my gal" (WN 193). The verse is a slightly modified version of the popular Tin Pan Alley

Robber Bridegroom of having "a mansion at least five stories high, with an observatory of the river on top of that, with twenty-two Corinthian columns to hold up the roof"—an exact description of Windsor (100).

Hughes and Marrs place the story in the forties. See "More Notes on River Country" 92. For additional source material and pictures, see Marrs "Eudora Welty’s Photography: Images into Fiction" 280-96.
song, "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue," written in 1925 (Shaw 160). An immediate hit, it became standard fare for even amateur musicians with a banjo or mandolin. The song helps establish the year of the flood occurring in the story as 1927.

The song also offers a telling contrast between Jenny, an isolated, inexperienced girl, and the flapper, the typical girl of the twenties. With lyrics that described "my gal" as having "turned-up nose, turned-down hose" and certified her as "flapper, yes sir, one of those," "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue" was the quintessential song of the Jazz Age flapper. The flappers lived their lives with careless abandon, deliberately mocking the conventions of their elders. One has only to think of Zelda Fitzgerald, an Alabama city girl and, perhaps, the most famous flapper of the Jazz age, to comprehend the portrait in the song. Even young rural southern women adopted some flapper traits, as we shall see when we move ahead to Delta Wedding.

For the most part, however, "At the Landing" points back to The Robber Bridegroom. Jenny and her grandfather appear to be the spiritual if not the literal descendants of Clement Musgrove and his daughter Rosamond Lockhart. In the 1790s Clement's house lay on a hill between the Natchez Trace and the Mississippi, with the river just one mile away. Jenny and her grandfather also live on the hill, where they "had always lived," in a many-galleried house, now three miles distant.
from the river; in the house itself hang two paintings that had belonged to Jenny's mother: "The Bird Fair" and "The Massacre at Fort Rosalie" (WN 180). The house next door is the Lockhart house, deserted now except for the albino Mag Lockhart and the fiery red horse that roams the Lockhart pasture (WN 190, 185); and in the cemetery, Jenny can visit her mother's grave whose tombstone records her married name: Lockhart (WN 191). Although the Lockharts of The Robber Bridegroom were left in New Orleans with twins, it is not difficult to imagine a turn in their fortunes requiring mother and children at least to return to Rodney's Landing, to a house built near Grandfather Musgrove's, a common enough practice in a land where family stayed close. We never learn the last name of Jenny's grandfather, but his withdrawal from the world outside his own house strongly resembles the course of action taken by Clement Musgrove in response to his discovery of deceit and betrayal.

Like Joel Mayes, Jenny, is trapped in time when we first meet her. But the time that confines her is the past, not the present. She, too, is emotionally frozen, except for the curiosity aroused in her by occasional glimpses of the mysterious Billy Floyd. For here at the Landing, her grandfather has loved, protected, and almost imprisoned her in his house. Within the house Jenny enjoys light, order, and

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18The "Massacre at Fort Rosalie" refers to the Natchez Massacre of the French garrison and settlement recalled in The Robber Bridegroom.
peace. But her grandfather looks at her with eyes that recall the memory of her mother, who had a "wild desire" to get to Natchez where people milled about. When Jenny goes to the door, her grandfather "would call her back" (WN 182). He keeps the battered family books on a high shelf, "nearly unreachable" for Jenny (WN 181). Although he is frail and gentle, the weight of his hand upon her shoulder is like the "terrifying weight of a claw" (WN 183). Jenny yields to the weight without thought as she would obey "a stranger in the street"; apparently "nothing began in her own heart" (WN 183).

Jenny’s grandfather, like Clement Musgrove in The Robber Bridegroom and like Sabina in "Asphodel," resists any threat to the careful order he has created in his home. He considers any force of nature, a young person’s curiosity, his daughter’s fatal fever, even the Mississippi River, "beneath notice or mention" (WN 183). But, of course, no one can forestall forever the force of nature. On the night he dies, Jenny’s grandfather dreams of "high water." He sees the river "coming" and "all the people in The Landing . . . gliding off

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19 Jenny’s mother probably should be imagined as dying of yellow fever. In "Some Notes on River Country," Welty says, "The girls who died young of the fevers were some of them the famous 'Rodney heiresses'" (292). Devastating epidemics of yellow fever hit Mississippi in 1878 and 1898. Yellow fever appeared again in 1900, localized in Brookhaven and Natchez. See History of Mississippi, Vol. II, 516-21. The last date, as the most likely one, fits the "Landing" time frame, although it suggests that Jenny might be a few years older than she seems to be. However, given Welty’s attention to historical verisimilitude, it’s almost certain that she would have in mind as cause of death one of the major illnesses of the place and time.
and upward to darkness" (WN 179). He also sees Billy Floyd, the local force of nature, a "half-wild" fisherman who fills the role of prophet in his dream. To the grandfather’s Apollonian mind, Billy Floyd represents the most dangerous possible Dionysian disruption.

When the flood comes, sometime after her grandfather’s death, Billy Floyd, thought by the townfolks to be someone’s bastard, a "Gipsy," or a part-Natchez Indian fisherman, reappears with it (WN 207). When Jenny finally speaks her need for sleep, Billy Floyd rescues her from the flood, lets her sleep, then violates her and feeds her. Jenny submits to Billy Floyd’s physical appropriation as humbly and peacefully as she submitted to her grandfather’s protectiveness before his death. She eats his food "greedily," copying and matching his appetite. For the shy, passive Jenny, we remember, would "obey a stranger in the street." She can speak aloud only "words of wishing": "I wish you and I could be far away. I wish for a little house" (WN 201). But such wishing is futile for a half-wild man of the woods and river, as even Jenny realizes when, after the water goes down, Billy Floyd goes down the river in his boat.

20"Gypsy" was the derogatory term applied by the town folks to the fishermen who lived in shantyboats down on the banks of the river. Their lives were semi-nomadic as they moved up and down the river to follow their livelihood. They always tied up by fertile ground, so that they could supplement their fish with garden vegetables. According to Tom Rankin these river folks "made conscious choices to pursue lives of freedom and independence" (336).
Despite the shock of what Jenny presumes to be love, her inclination, like her grandfather's, like Clement Musgrove's, is to hide. "If in all The Landing she could have found a place to feel alone and out of sight, she would have gone there" (WN 204). Since there is no such place, she readies herself to follow after Billy Floyd, just as Joel Mayes in "First Love" follows Aaron Burr when he makes his escape up the "Liberty Road." Jenny, too, feels "a sense of journey, of something that might happen... She looked outward with the sense of rightful space and time within her, which must be traversed before she could be known at all" (WN 206).

Why does Jenny decide to follow Billy Floyd? A "following after" is not quite the same as a journey of endless possibilities. Can it be that Jenny is pregnant? Although the text offers little conclusive evidence on the subject, the talk of the town's three old ladies is suggestive. They liken her to her mother, speak of ruin, suggest that Jenny "run after him" (WN 206). Jenny blushes when Mag brings her a bouquet. As Jenny leaves the Landing, she identifies her movement as a "following after, now--it was too late to find any way alone" (WN 211). It's possible that this hint of a second person involved in her journey refers to Billy Floyd. Yet she has been fairly clear-eyed about Billy Floyd's separateness from the human community. Also, he would be unlikely to accompany her in any direction other than toward the river. An unborn child, however, is a
responsibility forever for a mother. We remember, too, the pregnant Rosamond Musgrove’s "following after" Jamie Lockhart in The Robber Bridegroom. If we are to suppose Jenny alone and pregnant, then the somberness of her mood is more understandable. When she reaches the river camp where she hopes to find Billy Floyd, she views it not with joy, but with quiet resignation.

A great spiraled net lay on its side and its circles twinkled faintly on the sky. Veil behind veil of long drying nets hung on all sides, dropping softly and blue-colored in the low wind and the place was folded in by them. All things, river, sky, fire, and air, seemed the same color, the color that is seen behind the closed eyelids, the color of day when vision and despair are the same thing.

(WN 212, emphasis mine)

Jenny’s vision echoes that of her grandfather as he lay dying and prefigures that of Judge McKelva, the optimist of The Optimist’s Daughter, as he lies, choosing not to live, in his hospital bed. But unlike the two old men, Jenny—if she carries new life within her—is propelled by a connection and commitment beyond her control, one that she must honor, however difficult and painful her journey might become. Jenny herself suspects as she starts out that "what she would reveal in the end was not herself, but the way of the traveler" (WN 206).

A pregnancy might also help resolve one of the critical questions about this story—the meaning of the "original
smile" mentioned in the story's final rape episode. Billy Floyd is not in camp, of course; he's out on the dangerous river which still runs fast. The other fishermen, more cautious, wait in camp for the waters to slow down. As Jenny waits, too, the men fill in their time by raping her, one by one, in the "grounded houseboat" where they've put her. Her cries are covered by laughs; sometimes, outside by the fire, the sounds are heard as "rejoicing" by the women and children (WN 213, 214).

By the fire, little boys were slapped crossly by their mothers--as if they knew that the original smile now crossed Jenny's face, and hung there no matter what was done to her, like a bit of color that kindles in the sky after the light has gone.

(WN 214)

The associations of "original smile" with the Christian term "original sin" brings to mind the story of Eve. For her role in original sin, Eve was condemned to "bring forth" her children "in sorrow" (Genesis 3:16). The juxtaposition of little boys and their cross mothers during the scene reinforces the speculation that Jenny has been trapped, caught in the net of motherhood, just at the moment she might have launched herself into life's possibilities. She no longer has choices; she can only wait.

For Jenny, a smile is also "a barrier." She had recognized it as such when she first saw Billy Floyd smile: "a

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21 The smile has been variously interpreted as her "dream of love" (29) by Vande Kieft and a sign of transcendence by Davenport (199).
smile was always a barrier" (WN 188). She had known then "that he lived apart in delight" (WN 188). His delight, his passion, will always be out on the river; never will he ground himself in a houseboat. Even as Jenny waits in the houseboat, "humility" moves "now deep in her spirit" (WN 213). If Jenny's delight must be Billy Floyd, then she must accept the suffering that goes with it. If her delight is the secret thought of new life within her, the "original smile" may testify to the eternal mix—joy and sorrow—that humans must bear. For sorrow as well as for joy, a smile can serve as protection of the secret self.

The Apollonian and Dionysian elements that stand in opposition in "Asphodel" merge to form a whole, then, in "At the Landing." In fact, in the form of Billy Floyd, the Dionysian element appears as a complete, creative, and positive life force: natural, solitary, dominant, and unpredictable, yes, but also courageous, saving, and life-sustaining. He exerts a fascination for Jenny that we will see again in the reaction of several women in The Golden Apples to King MacLain. This positive portrayal of a traditionally menacing force implies an acceptance of the traditional male-female relationship.

Yet what are we to make of the continuing rapes of Jenny in the "grounded houseboat"? If we think of this story in the context of the flooding Mississippi River, we might conceive an analogy between the men's treatment of Jenny and the
flooding river's devastation of the land. Over hundreds of years, the Mississippi has regularly overflowed its banks, flooding and covering everything in its path, destroying the carefully designed order set out on the land by the human imagination. Yet the destroyer has served also as the life-sustainer because the silt from the great river has made the Mississippi river country earth among the most fertile in the world. The land remains fixed and passive, receiving regularly the river's rich wildness. For despite the devastation, the land endures to produce new life.

Jenny loves Billy Floyd, yes, but if his role is double—at once the potent, risk-taking fisherman of the human story and the symbol of the river itself in the analogy with the natural world—then we must think of him both as life-giver and destroyer. Remembering that Welty serves an earlier, fictional purpose by dividing Jamie Lockhart, the love interest of The Robber Bridegroom, into the lovable Jamie and his despicable alter ego, Little Harp, we might speculate that she does the same for the fictional counterparts of the river in "At the Landing." Billy Floyd serves as the solitary, potent life-giver, while the common fishermen on the shore fill the role of the repetitive destroyers. In the natural world of the river, the two forces cannot be separated. In the artistic world of the love story, they can be separated physically but not spiritually. So Jenny must be violated by
all the fishermen in order for the natural world-human world analogy to hold.

Further, I suggest that the rape scene, in keeping with Welty's non-sentimental view of love and life, is meant to shock the readers' sensibilities. For we remember from our earlier discussion of Virgie Rainey's mature vision of life in "The Wanderers" that both beauty and terror coexist with the "sword's stroke," the beat of time. Only by experiencing these extremes do readers, as well as protagonists, achieve the liberation from fear of loss necessary to participate fully in life. To live fully is to be vulnerable to the paradox of mortal experience.22

The behavior of the mothers by the fire in the fishermen's camp can be more easily understood in light of such an analogy. Also, the description of the old woman who checks on Jenny after the rapes makes sense when we see her as an example of one liberated from fear of vulnerability. The old woman, after all, is "bright-eyed," she nods to "the flowing river" when she hears that Jenny is "waiting for Billy

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22 We might remember that one of Welty's most memorable protagonists, Phoenix Jackson in "The Worn Path," demonstrates such liberation from fear. An unlikely pilgrim in a Pilgrim's Progress on the Natchez Trace, this poor, illiterate, ancient, dignified Negro grandmother undertakes a dangerous journey in quest of medicine for her grandson. Like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, she encounters ten distinct trials, including a Valley of Humiliation. Yet with eyes "blue with age," sometimes covered with "thick tears," sometimes "shut," at other times "opened their widest," always quick to see an opportunity (CS 142, 143, 144, 143, 145), she achieves her mission.
Floyd," and the firelight "following her face" shows "its dignity" (WN 214). All these women know the truth of the natural world: the river runs free and wild in its double role, but the land endures the river's violations, receives its potency, and by its side continues to produce new life. The old woman, in particular, suggests the Yeatsian view of survival in the changing world that we will examine closely in The Optimist's Daughter: "All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay. . . . Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes / Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay" ("Lapis Lazuli" 566, 567).
DELTA WEDDING: "DEADENING" TIME

"the observer. . . observed"
(Welty Writer's Eye 28)

Delta Wedding, Welty’s first novel-length work, depicts family life in the 1920s on a cotton plantation set in what James C. Cobb has declared to be the "the most southern place on earth," the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. The historical model for Welty’s fictional plantation, Shellmound, was a Delta plantation owned by the Scottish-American family of John Frazier Robinson, a friend to whom Welty dedicated the novel. The family’s oral history and written diaries had served first as material for a short story, "Delta Cousins," but the voluminous detail of those sources soon overflowed into the novel, Delta Wedding (Kreyling Author 112). Since its publication in 1946, the novel has received mixed reactions from critics and readers, who have cited as problematic its "exotic" setting, its slight, non-traditional plot, its seeming indifference to moral issues, and its surface emphasis merely on values of family unity and continuity.¹

Indeed, at first glance the novel conveys what Bakhtin might characterize as the idyllic chronotope, frequently found in the family novel. Certainly, Delta Wedding exhibits several of the features Bakhtin customarily ascribes to the

¹For a suggestion of this mixed reception, see John Crowe Ransom’s 1946 response, "Delta Wedding." Although one of Welty’s avowed admirers, Ransom felt "reservations" as he categorized the "many animadversions" he expected would greet Welty’s new novel (73-75).
family idyll. Its spatial setting is defined by unity of place, customarily a "limited" space and "sufficient unto itself." The idyll also limits its material to "only a few of life's basic realities. Love, birth, death, marriage, labor, food and drink, stages of growth." The life of its generations "weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives." This "blurring of temporal boundaries" helps create a cyclic rhythm. Also contributing to the cyclic rhythm is the "conjoining of human life with the life of nature," particularly significant when the union is achieved in the "real life of the agricultural laborer" (Bakhtin 225-26).

As I will show, however, ominous signs of disorder, half-concealed in the rich detail of the novel, punctuate the harmonious flow of life in Delta Wedding. Even in this early work, Welty relies on techniques of concealment, allusion and misdirection to convey meaning. As Louis Rubin has remarked, Welty's "meanings are always, if not hidden, then so thoroughly imaged in the texture of the fiction that they do not readily yield themselves up to thematic paraphrase" (Gallery 50). Delta Wedding is more resistant to paraphrase than most because its plot unfolds along two opposing lines, one line carrying the idyllic melody of the novel's surface, the other forming dissonant chords of allusion and aural imagery that jar the pretty music. In his study of the novel's evolution, Michael Kreyling explains that the
Fairchild family's "uneasy detente with disintegration and change" is more visible in the novel's forerunner, the short story "Delta Cousins" (Achievement 57). John Hardy affirms that themes of "protection and disaster" are intertwined from the beginning of the novel, but adds that meaning becomes visible only when the novel is "close-read" like a poem (88).

I hope to demonstrate through close reading and historical explication that Welty combines in Delta Wedding both an idyllic foregrounded world of family life and a submerged background that signals serious problems with the traditional cotton business of small plantations and foretells the sure destruction of the idyll (Bakhtin 233). Such a world as that of the fictional Shellmound is "fated to perish," as Welty very well knows; her novel recreates the historical signs, but most of her characters are blind to evidence of coming disaster. Her melodic plot line (or idyllic line if we wish to call it that) focuses on the tension between clan "insiders" and "outsiders" to reach a happy ending of sorts. But the dissonant chords in the background, constructed in part with fragments of earlier cultures, in part with glimpses of modern culture, rumble that lasting happiness of the kind revered by the Fairchild clan is impossible. Even as foreboding chords signal destruction of a specific clan's way of life, they also suggest inevitable changes in national cultures as well. This merging of plot lines results in a chronotope that I suggest we call "deadening" time. In the
nineteenth century, this term referred to the Delta practice of clearing fields for cotton plantations by "deadening" off the original virgin forest. At the time, the transition from wilderness to agricultural big business seemed desirable and manageable, but the practice set in motion forces that defy any human community's attempts at control.

To construct her portrait of the subsequent twentieth-century culture, itself already deadening despite its appearance of health and vitality, Welty first works for her usual historical-cultural verisimilitude. Therefore, the time, the place, and the characters in Delta Wedding all contribute to an appropriate sense of excess in the novel; the actual Yazoo-Delta alluvial plain of the setting has been called a "land of excess," the "most intemperate country in the world and the most alluring" (Cobb 311). Also, the planters of the Delta, whose motivations we remember from the Mississippi guide book, descend from those nineteenth-century immigrants hoping to fulfill the American dream of gaining fabulous wealth and success.

Perhaps no better portrayal exists of a pioneer driven by such a dream as that of Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner's great novel Absalom, Absalom! Of course, by 1923, plantations of

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2Frank L. Owsley explains the practice of "deadening" in Plain Folk of the Old South 108-09. With an ax, farmers "girdled" each tree (removed bark in a ring around the trunk). This practice killed the trees quickly, so that they could be burned in the fall. In the meantime farmers planted the crop in the deadening itself.
Sutpen's antebellum type no longer existed in Mississippi. The plantation of Delta Wedding is a neoplantation, actually much like the large wheat and cattle farms of the western states. The owner still holds the power, but the slave labor of earlier times has yielded to sharecroppers or hired labor, still primarily black. While the Delta planters never attained, perhaps, the luxurious wealth of the earliest Natchez planters, most of them did make their fortunes and maintained them well into the first two decades of the twentieth century. Despite the encroachment of the boll weevil and the northward migration of a significant part of the black population, Cotton was still King in the Delta. Few planters in the twenties suspected that their way of life would be utterly changed within another decade, in part through nature and the mortgages of the Depression, but even more so through mechanization, migration, and modernization.

Welty has been criticized for focusing on what appears to be the white planter family's easy life while ignoring the black laborers' difficult life. Some early readers, conditioned by Marxist, class-conscious social novels of the thirties, understandably found Delta Wedding's apparently idyllic aspect puzzling. Later readers, accustomed to the heightened awareness of racial issues in the second half of the century, may blur the distinctions between sharecroppers, hired labor, and slaves. Few readers, early or late, are prepared for Welty's adamant refusal to "crusade" in any novel
for anything. As an artist, she conveys her vision through artistic language rather than discursive discourse. To have mounted an attack on racism in *Delta Wedding* would have violated the historical realities of the 1920s, the literary conventions of the fictional idyll, and ultimately the vision of the novel—which, as we shall see, works precisely because it demonstrates the illusory quality of the idyll itself.

**SHELLMOUND**

In *Delta Wedding* the action unfolds during September, 1923, when the plantation business of picking, ginning, and baling cotton is at its height. The novel’s original dust jacket, festooned with prime cotton balls (Polk Bibliography 47-49), emphasizes the significance of the cotton business to the novel. Indeed, the first title conceived for the novel was Shellmound, clearly focusing attention on the center of the cotton business, the whole of the plantation. The first editions of the novel include a hand-drawn map of the plantation: its three plantation houses—Shellmound, Marmion, Marmion,

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3See Eudora Welty’s famous 1965 essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?" in *The Eye of the Story*. Responding to criticism of Faulkner as "after all, only a white Mississippian," Welty writes that the "novelist and the crusader who writes both have their own place—in the novel and the editorial respectively" (147). Citing Forster’s *A Passage to India*, "an intensely moral novel" dealing "with race prejudice," Welty declares that great fiction writers make their points, "not by preaching at us," but by "being passionately concerned"; not by showing us "how to conduct our behavior," but by showing us "how to feel" (154). Forster’s points are still being read and still good, she reminds us, "because of the splendor of the novel" (154).
and the Grove; Brunswick-town, home to most of the Negro hired help; the cotton gin and press, set beside the railroad track; the several fields and a cemetery.

In keeping Shellmound as the name of the plantation as well as of the primary house sheltering the nucleus of the clan, Welty provides some understated suggestions about the Fairchild clan. The name "Shellmound," alluding to artifacts of a vanished Indian culture, introduces a note of decay and loss. ⁴ Although mounds were constructed in ancient Indian cultures for many reasons, some Indians of the lower Mississippi buried their dead in mounds (Mississippi 58). Rural southerners often decorated cemetery grave mounds, too, with shells either along the top, or completely blanketing the mounds (Jeane 464). In nature, of course, a shell is strong and well-suited to protect the life it shields. But when the shell’s protective covering unnaturally admits neither penetration from, nor entrance into the endlessly evolving world beyond its perimeters, its protected life stagnates and dies. Shellmound in 1923 rings with the sounds of human voices and activities, yet its relentless absorption of the individual into the clan hints at the stagnation to come.

Welty explores in this novel the part of the human condition that will occupy her throughout her career: the

⁴Also see Westling, Eudora Welty, for discussion of shellmounds in Mississippi history, particularly for associations with fertility and with Choctaw traditions (94-95).
paradoxical position of the individual in the community. All humans require a stable, familiar world in order to grow and develop, but eventually the individual human will desires freedom to act outside the community. Further, not even the most highly regulated community can control fate itself, which can upset in a moment the most carefully designed plan. Louis Rubin explains the paradox in his exploration of the artist’s position in Morgana, the fictional setting of Welty’s The Golden Apples: "Places like Morgana--human communities--exist to ward off and mask, through ritual and social complexity, an awareness of the finally unanswerable and inexplicable nature of existence in time and eternity" (Gallery 62).

In Delta Wedding, Welty portrays the most primitive form of the human community, the clan--a group of people united by a common ancestor. The Fairchild clan’s revered Scottish origins are historically accurate. The security offered by the clan and the price demanded for membership are captured beautifully in an early scene featuring the familiar children’s song and game, "Go in and out the window, go in and out the window . . ." (DW 72). As the novel’s young

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5M. E. Bradford discusses this ancient game in "Fairchild as Composite Protagonist." Players form a circle with the person designated "It" inside the circle. As the players sing, the person inside weaves in and out of the "windows" between the players, eventually being caught either inside or outside at the end of the song. Bradford also gives several verses of the tune, relating them to actions of different family members (204-05).
protagonist, Laura McRaven, participates in the game with her heedless Fairchild cousins, she registers its implications.

The song and the game were dreamlike to her. . . . It was funny how sometimes you wanted to be in a circle and then you wanted out of it in a rush. Sometimes the circle was for you, sometimes against you, if you were it. Sometimes in the circle you longed for the lone outsider to come in—sometimes you couldn't wait to close her out. It was never a good circle unless you were in it, catching hands, and knowing the song. A circle was ugly without you.

(DW 73)

Laura's ambivalence toward membership in the clan remains a constant and also suggests the major source of tension that will be treated in the plot of the novel. The larger implications of the individual-community paradox will be expressed in the patterned texture of the novel, as we shall demonstrate later in the discussion.

Within the sprawling grounds of Shellmound, each of the three plantation houses—Shellmound, Marmion, and the Grove—is associated with a separate Fairchild brother, and each illustrates different time values: Battle and Shellmound, the present; Denis and Marmion, the past; George and the Grove, the future—or more appropriately for this novel, perhaps, the new beginning. Only Battle, who runs the plantation, actually occupies his house; he lives there with his wife, Ellen, their numerous children, and two of his widowed aunts—Great-Aunt Shannon and Great-Aunt Mac. Denis, Battle's older brother, was killed in the First World War before he could take over his house, Marmion. Battle and Denis' parents, who had built the grand house of Marmion in 1890, also died before they
could occupy it. Since Denis' widow is insane and his nine-year old daughter, Maureen, brain-damaged, Marmion has sat empty for thirty-three years. Battle's younger brother, George, practices law in Memphis, so he has installed his two unmarried sisters in his house, the Grove. Significantly, the Grove rests close to the railroad track, which—in the Delta—has always been one of the most conspicuous signs of change.

MARMION

Like Shellmound, the name and condition of the house, Marmion, amplify the theme of deadening in Delta Wedding. That a Scottish-American clan might have named its great mansion after Sir Walter Scott's early nineteenth-century historical romance Marmion rings true. Although his works are not widely read today, Scott was a major literary figure whose romances were critically successful and widely popular, in America as well as England. In the 1830s, Scott's novels "became as much a southern staple as cotton itself" (Singal 13). To name a home in his honor would not be peculiar. Welty modeled her Marmion on an actual derelict plantation home named Waverley, the title of yet another Scott romance. Waverley was a home in Alabama, near the Mississippi College for Women which Welty attended in her early college years.⁶

⁶See Marrs' "'The Treasure Most Dearly Regarded': Memory and Imagination in Delta Wedding." Marrs identifies Waverley in a discussion of elements that "characterize" Welty's creative process: "reliance upon distant memories, the impetus to metaphoric thought that distance in time can
The significance to *Delta Wedding* of the *Marmion* allusion is two-fold. Superficially, *Delta Wedding* resembles *Marmion* in its attention to accurate historical detail, lyrical description, and meditation on mutability--on the inevitable waning of established human systems. *Delta Wedding* also echoes several names and significant actions in *Marmion*. One example can be found in the broad resemblance of Battle’s courtship to that of the hero in "Young Lochinvar." This popular romantic poem, excerpted from *Marmion*, was memorized and recited by schoolchildren in the South up through the mid-twentieth century. Battle, in name and behavior, typifies a long line of pre-World War II Delta (and Southern) warriors who, like Lochinvar, valued honor in battle. "O, young Lochinvar is come out of the west, / Through all the wide Border his steed was the best" (Scott 213). Like Lochinvar, Battle journeyed from the west to win his fair Ellen, whose name is also the name of young Lochinvar’s bride.

But much more significant to *Delta Wedding*, the historic cultural and national battle recounted in *Marmion*, the Battle of Flodden Field, invites readers of *Delta Wedding* to view the present world of Shellmound, in part, as the legacy of an ancient pattern of violent deaths of cultures. Scott’s rhymed romance recreates a decisive battle in Scotland’s national political history, a battle fought on September 9, 1573.

provide, the intuitive recognition that a remembered place can define and confine a story’s central issues, a tension between the power of memory and the demands of fiction" (90).
Welty's fictional story begins 350 years later, on September 10, 1923 (DW 3). In the Battle of Flodden Field, the army of King James IV of Scotland was decimated by the English army; by the end of the battle, even King James lay dead on the field. Scott supplied an explanatory note for the fame of this battle: "Scarcely a family of eminence but has an ancestor killed at Flodden; and there is no province in Scotland, even at this day, where the battle is mentioned without a sensation of terror and sorrow" (Marmion, Notes 331). The devastation to a generation of Scotland's young men--of every class--resembled that suffered by the Confederate States' rebels (largely Scottish and Scotch-Irish) three centuries later as well as that experienced by the armies of England and America some three and a half centuries later in the horrors of World War I. The desolate and abandoned plantation house, Marmion, speaks to that loss--its owner, Denis Fairchild, killed in World War I; his immediate survivors, wife and child, deranged and disturbingly incompetent; his extended family joining the rest of 1920s America in the Jazz Age, trying to spend and dance away the disillusioning realization that the world was no better than before, despite the war "to end all wars."

Understanding this background helps us to follow Welty's characters around the Shellmound plantation, which shelters survivors of two national wars. But less than a decade after the last armistice, fledgling signs of a looming social and cultural battle begin to appear in the Delta. Even as the
Fairchilds struggle to preserve the unity of their clan and the continuation of their way of life, warning signs flicker—both inside and outside the plantation. Few of the family notice, but the reader alert to Welty’s modernist strategies sees the beginning of yet another end.

POINT OF VIEW AND OBSERVERS

Welty’s most visible modernist strategy is found in her treatment of point of view. Structurally, the movement in *Delta Wedding* unfolds through disparate scenes observed and recounted by several different observers. Michael Kreyling outlines the world of the novel established in the opening scene:

> . . . the novel ushers the reader into a condition in which conventional representation of action and phenomena is suspended. Not a line, but a field; not a progression in which event after event is encountered in logical lockstep, then lost in the wake of the single line of forward motion, but complementaries in rhythm transforming a line of time into a single moment, and the beholder into the object of attention.

*(Agent 110)*

In 1944, as Welty reviewed Virginia Woolf’s last book of stories, she noted especially Woolf’s technique of having "the observer observed." Kreyling believes that Woolf’s example may have prompted Welty to greater experimentation with "the otherwise strict discipline of representation" *(Agent 108-09).*

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*7In his discussion of Welty’s transformation of the short story "Delta Cousins" into the novel *Delta Wedding*, Kreyling notes the influence of Virginia Woolf (108-09).*
Welty may also have read Joseph Frank's discussion of Joyce and Proust in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," an important article published in three installments in the Sewanee Review during the spring, summer, and autumn of 1945. Such an article would have interested Welty, especially since it appeared in 1945, the same year in which she was composing Delta Wedding. Welty's novel, like those of Joyce and Proust, uses the spatial form of representation Frank describes, one that asks readers to "apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" (381). In Delta Wedding, readers are also required to assimilate the visual patterns and aural rhythms that reappear throughout the novel in order, finally, to experience the ever-shifting perspectives as an organic whole.

Observing the members of the sprawling Fairchild clan—even as they themselves are observed—are three "outsiders," all female and all at different stages of a woman's life. The most important observer is the protagonist, Laura McRaven, who journeys to Shellmound for her cousin's wedding. It is through Laura's innocent observations that the reader first notes some of the ominous details of Shellmound. Though Laura is a Fairchild, too, she is still only a visitor to Shellmound. Her soul has not yet been absorbed by the Fairchild clan whose individual members see only the single entity of the clan, never the individual human beings who constitute the clan. Only rarely does the clan register
details that contradict the appearance of joyous humanity of Shellmound. But Laura's eyes see everything, even the darker details about the place—the large field known as the "Fairchild Deadening," for example, and the whirling buzzards that patrol that field and others. The Fairchild Deadening marks the original field in Shellmound: "this was where the old Fairchilds had started, deadened off the trees to take the land a hundred years ago" (DW 144).

The second observer is Robbie Reid Fairchild, George's young wife. Daughter of a former justice of the peace and granddaughter of Old Man Swanson, the cotton compress attendant and butt of many town jokes, Robbie neither desires nor has been granted a genuine place in the Fairchild family. Like Dabney's prospective husband, Troy Flavin, who is the Fairchild's overseer, Robbie will never be considered quite worthy enough to be a real Fairchild.⁸ Foreshadowing Gloria Renfro in Losing Battles, Robbie Reid believes the clan to be her enemy, always inserting itself between her and her husband. Her eyes are sharp, but her vision is contaminated by her past experience. It is Robbie's reaction to George's heroic action that precipitates the movement of the plot.

⁸See John Edward Hardy's analysis, "Marrying Down in Eudora Welty's Novels," for fuller explanation of these delicate social and economic class lines. See also the discussion of J. A. Bryant, Jr. who calls attention to Troy Flavin's origins in the Tennessee Hills (69), setting for Losing Battles.
The third observer is something of a paradox. Middle-aged Ellen Fairchild is both insider and outsider. She has been Battle's wife for over twenty years and, given her worthy Virginian blood lines, has become the heart of the clan. So completely has she absorbed the Fairchild identity, she no longer has a tangible self-identity. Her little red breast pin, symbol of her individual inner life, has been long lost. Though the pin is found momentarily by Laura, the child immediately loses it in the Yazoo River; this time, it is gone for good. Yet one characteristic marks Ellen still, faintly, as an outsider: she retains the ability--though it is failing--to distinguish one Fairchild from another. Also, she notices feelings and motives, whether they be light or dark. Her vision is one of experience, noticing but no longer arrested by the failings of the clan, for she has become one with it.

Most of the week's events preceding the wedding day are reported from the point of view of one of these outsiders. Their eyes take in the most minute actions and reactions of the entire clan. The wedding of Dabney Fairchild and Troy Flavin may provide the occasion for the gathering, but it is never seen. It is the clan altogether, not just the wedding couple, upon whom the eyes of the beholders are focused.

Minor "insider" observers also abound. The older Fairchild daughters, Shelley and Dabney, comment regularly on the members of their family, especially their Uncle George.
Uncle George figures prominently in a story retold, also, by each of the younger Fairchild children in turn. The action of Uncle George’s encounter with the Yellow Dog had occurred shortly before the novel begins. But Uncle George’s action had, in fact, precipitated what little plot we find in the novel: his niece Dabney becomes engaged and marries; his wife Robbie runs away and then returns. The children’s endless retelling of Uncle George’s "heroic action" emphasizes the central importance of Uncle George to the clan. The retelling also emphasizes the significance of the railroad train, the Yellow Dog, which—given its importance to the cotton business—becomes almost another "character" in the novel, as will later become evident.

PLOT—AN ASPECT OF THE NOVEL

In the story, Uncle George, Robbie, and a group of the Fairchild children had been walking home along the railroad tracks, after a day’s fishing. When they reached the railroad trestle, Robbie and Shelley, the oldest Fairchild girl, refused to cross, Robbie because she was in high heels and Shelley because she was afraid. The others went on, but jumped off fast when they heard the whistle of the approaching Yellow Dog train—all except Uncle George and his niece, Maureen, who had caught her foot in the rail. Uncle George worked futilely but steadily to free the child, even when the engine was upon them. Just before it hit them, the Yellow Dog
miraculously managed to stop. At that exact moment, Maureen had shoved Uncle George so that he, still with a tight grip on the child, had fallen backwards off the trestle, dragging Maureen out of the rail track and down to the ground with him. Robbie, at the edge of the trestle, had been terrified and furious. "You didn't do this for me!" she yelled (DW 88), appalled that her husband would sacrifice himself to family need, regardless of the cost to her.

The children's approaches to narrative define primary characteristics of each young person, even as they help Laura—and the reader—identify the source of tension in the family. Their variations in narrative style and the responses of their audience exemplify "plotting," as taught by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. Forster makes this distinction between a narrative thread and a plot: "With a plot, instead of asking What next? we ask Why?" When George's story is told initially by two of the Fairchild children, we hear only the narrative thread. "For all of them told happenings like narrations," interjects the author, "chronological and careful, as if the ear of the world listened and wished to know surely" (DW 19). Fourteen-year-old Orrin's account is casual and concise while nine-year-old India's is embellished with gestures, sound effects, and dramatic details (DW 19, 58-61). The theatrical India claims, "I can tell it good—make everybody cry" (DW 58). But the narrative in both instances concerns itself entirely with what
happened. Despite the fact that many adult Fairchilds are present at both initial tellings, only the outsider cousin, nine-year-old Laura McRaven, asks why it happened. She receives no answer, but she has provided the crucial element needed to transform a narrative thread into a plot.

Later, as the grown-up Fairchild women reflect on the incident in solitude, each supplies her own explanation for George's action. Eventually Ellen Fairchild, a Fairchild by marriage, also repeats Laura's question: "Why?" Of all the Fairchild children, only the oldest daughter, eighteen-year-old Shelley, refuses to narrate the event, even though "her memory [had] arrested the action and let her see it again and again" (DW 87). Shelley continues to suffer uneasiness about the episode. Her greatest discomfort comes from her memory of Robbie's first furious words after the incident: "You didn't do this for me!" (DW 88). Shelley ponders the meaning of it all, but cannot yet bring herself even to write it in her diary. After the wedding, she acts out her comment by deliberately running her car across the railroad track, just in front of the on-coming Yellow Dog (DW 234).

When Aunt Tempe, George's sister, hears the tale from yet another child--Roy, age eight--she instantly supplies motivation. George "did it for Denis," she pronounces (115). She assumes automatically that the only possible reason for George's action would be to preserve his older brother's flesh and blood, and thereby preserve Denis. A Fairchild through
and through, Aunt Tempe never asks "why," never ponders anything. She has ready-made answers for whatever turn of fate might interrupt the smooth progression of life in the clan.

Robbie, not truly a member of the clan, also fails to wonder why George did it; she is merely angry that he did it. His action is indecipherable to her. Curiously, in her ignorance, she, like Aunt Tempe, distorts reality. Robbie assumes that George just loves his clan better than he loves her. Both women suffer from half-vision. While Aunt Tempe characterizes the clan as all-important and constructive for everyone, Robbie sees it as all-important to George and, therefore, destructive to her. She begins to have nightmares in which George is "lost, without her, a Fairchild man, lost at Shellmound" (DW 149).

The length to which little Robbie Reid Fairchild will go to "have George Fairchild to herself" is foreshadowed by the action of the wife, Hazel, in the short story, "The Wide Net." Robbie surpasses the daring of Hazel, who only writes that she is running away but really stays home. Robbie not only writes a letter of intent and leaves it in a conspicuous spot, but also actually does run away from home (DW 55, 75, 76). She assumes that George will come looking for her, might, like Hazel’s husband, William Wallace Jamieson, "drag the river, even" (DW 141; WN 35). Robbie also foreshadows Gloria Renfro in Losing Battles in her inability to accept George’s
inseparability from his family: "I didn’t marry into them! I married George!" (DW 141).

THE YELLOW DOG AND THE BLUES

The visual image of the Yellow Dog, the familiar name for the Yazoo-Delta Railroad, is more central to the plot of Delta Wedding than readers unfamiliar with the age of trains may realize. Certainly in a general way, the Yellow Dog implies a machine in the garden, but the history of this particular Yazoo-Delta line suggests that, for the Delta, it might almost have been the original machine, figuratively speaking. In describing the Yellow Dog, Welty notifies readers immediately, in the novel’s third line, that the Dog is a "mixed train" (DW 3, emphasis mine). Expecting that appellation to be sufficient for most, Welty waits until almost the end of the novel to elaborate by specifying the train’s "four cars, freight, white, colored, and caboose" (DW 235). The adjectives speak to the causes for the tremendous changes in the Delta, both past and present.

For "even after the Civil War, most of the Delta was still virgin forest" (Frank Smith 209). The transformation of the Delta wilderness into the Delta cotton fields could not have occurred without the presence of the Yazoo-Delta railroad line. Running from Yazoo City north to Tutwiler and eventually connecting to Memphis, Tennessee, the railroad line was established by northern lumber tycoons to transport prime
hardwood north out of the Delta. In the latter third of the nineteenth century, these businessmen set up their base in Memphis, just over the Mississippi border, and then covered the Delta with many dummy railroad lines directly connected to logging operations. By 1890 "Memphis was the largest hardwood market in the world" (Smith 209).

The greatest period of activity for the Yellow Dog, however, came in "the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century" (Smith 212). During that time, the Dog began to transport additional resources north out of the Delta: first the music of the black inhabitants and later the black laborers themselves, upon whose work the Delta cotton plantations depended. The movement had begun slowly at the turn of the century, when a Delta musician, W. C. Handy--famous now as the "Father of the Blues"--began to imagine how the "folk music of his race," as he heard it in the Yazoo-Delta, might appeal to a wider audience. It was not until 1912 that Handy published his first blues song, "Memphis Blues" (Smith 206, 207), but the blues form grew rapidly. Many other Delta musicians followed Handy north as the blues form began to join the mainstream of American popular music. Flowering in the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties, the Delta blues phenomenon soon found a place in Tin Pan Alley and on the musical comedy stage.

In 1914, the Yellow Dog railroad was immortalized in the "Yellow Dog Blues," one of Handy's earliest published blues
songs. The "Yellow Dog Blues" commemorates the train, noting in its chorus that the Yellow Dog crosses another train line in the Delta town of Moorhead. The song made Moorhead the "most famous railroad crossing in the world 'where the Southern crosses the Yellow Dog'" (Frank Smith 209, 205).

The Yellow Dog visual image, with its aural connotation relevant to the novel's theme, furnishes an excellent example of Welty's allusive method. Welty may have noticed William Faulkner's similar use of musical allusion in his famous 1931 short story "That Evening Sun." The title of the Faulkner story pays homage to W. C. Handy by alluding to his greatest popular hit, "St. Louis Blues": the title comes from the first line of the song, "I hate to see that evening sun go down." Most of Faulkner's contemporary readers would have recognized the allusion. Although the "Yellow Dog Blues" never became as well-known as the "St. Louis Blues," we can assume that for many readers in the forties, the Handy blues melodies would still have resonated. Now, however, when even Handy's most famous blues song has been lost to memory and few modern readers recognize Faulkner's allusion, it is inevitable that the full implications of Welty's even more understated allusion would go unnoticed.

But when we understand the allusion, we can see the Yellow Dog not just as a physical threat to Uncle George and Maureen but rather as a major and paradoxical factor in the life of the cotton plantation. In carrying lumber, the Dog
sped up the establishment of the cotton plantation. Positioned and controlled by northern interests, the *Dog* increased the flow of southern natural resources, both lumber and cotton, north for manufacture, while eliminating the possibility of growth in southern manufacture. Heralding the expanded northern labor market of the early twentieth century, the *Yellow Dog* transported burgeoning numbers of laborers, black and white, to the north where better job opportunities awaited them.

The paradoxical immortalizing of the *Yellow Dog* as a blues song makes an especially ironic comment on the surface "gaiety" of life at Shellmound in 1923. For the "vogue of the blues," according to music critic, Arnold Shaw, emphasized most tangibly the fact that "there was something desperate in the prolonged binge of the twenties. . . . It was a response, perhaps, to the loss of limits" (79). It is this *Yellow Dog* imagery that yields the first hint of the similarity of the Fairchilds' situation to that of the rest of the nation. America was rapidly giving itself over to the fun and frivolity of the Jazz age, seeking through escape of all kinds some deadening of the fear and pain occasioned by the major cultural shift following the First World War.

The *Yellow Dog* also has had a revealing encounter with Battle Fairchild, an understated incident recalled much later by his wife, Ellen. As Battle had reconnoitered the Far Field of the plantation, "his horse, unaccountably terrified at the
old Yellow Dog one day, threw him and left him unable to raise himself from the ditch. . . . 'How could I have been brought like this?'" he had cried (DW 23). The question prompts a closer look at Battle, who seems to be the unquestionable leader of a strong, happy family and a thriving cotton plantation. Yet the few things we learn about Battle belie this picture. "Life," we learn from his daughter, "surprises Papa and it is Papa that surprise hurts" (DW 86). The look of the Shellmound interior is "outdated," according to Battle's sister, and the house "needs paint" (DW 97, 163). To his wife, Battle's "glower of fatherhood" covers "its little undermask of helplessness." She trembles to remember his "determined breaking of her children's left-handedness" (DW 22-23). Battle is "as helpless as a child with machinery" (DW 107). Not too good with business, either, he had "let pass" mistakes in the accounts that had revealed how his former overseer, Mr. Bascom, "had cheated them and stolen so much" (DW 65). Now, Battle's new overseer, Troy Flavin, has stolen his seventeen-year-old daughter, Dabney, who is determined to marry the Tennessee Hills man twice her age.

Even more telling of Battle's diminishing business and familial leadership, Dabney, though engaged a scant three weeks, insists on having a big wedding and a honeymoon immediately, during prime cotton-picking time. And Battle permits it. Further, he takes men away from the fields to spend three days preparing Marmion for Dabney and Troy's
occupancy, even after they have all already taken a day to help with wedding preparations and attend the wedding. Throughout, Battle groans and protests his daughter’s "unsuitable" marriage while he worries constantly about getting the cotton picked in time: "The weather’s liable to change any day now,’ he agreed, shutting his eyes. ‘Then the rains’” (DW 227, emphasis mine).

Battle’s inability to confront trouble mirrors, perhaps intentionally, the national leadership of the early twenties. Battle’s good humor and sweetness are reminiscent of Warren Harding’s "sweetness" of nature, according to some contemporaries his "most notable quality" (Edey 24). The new President of the new decade suffered one "vital flaw," however: "he refused to face responsibility" (Edey 24). On a small scale, Battle Fairchild--leader of Shellmound--demonstrates the same flaw. By shutting his eyes to troubles that threaten the status quo within his own family and business, he fails those who depend on him. Not all the love in the world can replace the necessity for keen eyes and responsible leadership, especially in changing times.

PATTERNS OF MUSIC

Even as the multiplicity of points of view in Delta Wedding both constitutes and complicates the plot, Welty continues to augment her theme by continuing patterns of aural allusion and imagery in the texture of the novel. In some
cases, aural patterns of imagery convey even more meaning than visual patterns, especially in the details that suggest the "deadening" aspect of the novel's chronotope. Three of these patterns are especially enlightening: the throb of the plantation machinery, which accentuates the homogeneity of the Fairchild clan; the continual tinkle of popular music within Shellmound, which emphasizes the clan's ravenous appetite for movement and gaiety; and the somber refrains of historical Scottish airs, which prophesy the fate awaiting the clan. Welty's manipulation of these patterns culminates in a revealing instance of musical counterpoint that forcefully illuminates the central idea in the novel: the present Delta way of life, represented by the Fairchild clan and its cotton business, will soon become just a memory, as remote in time as Flodden Field.

THE THROB OF THE COMPRESS

Most of the Fairchild clan have little curiosity about the greater world beyond the familiar confines of Shellmound and the town of Fairchilds. Welty accentuates the Fairchild provincialism and homogeneity by surrounding their family activities with the continuous sound of the machinery necessary to the final production of cotton. The old-fashioned cotton gin sucks up the cotton from the wagon-loads brought in, separates it, and channels it to the compress for packaging. The compress presses the separated cotton into
jute-enclosed, standard-sized bales, all alike. And during
the months of cotton-picking season, the compress throbs
steadily, its sound pervading the surrounding territory. In
Delta Wedding, the compress throb is as familiar as the sound
of a foghorn would be to New England coastal residents. The
compress pulse insinuates itself even into the Fairchild
dining room. "The throb of the compress had never stopped.
Laura could feel it now in the handle of her cup, the
noiseless vibration that trembled in the best china, was
within it" (DW 17). In the evening, the sound occupies the
bedrooms: "the hiss of the compress came softly and regularly
as the sighing breath of night" (DW 86). Even very late on a
weekend night, the machinery works: "Then there was only the
murmur of the night, the gin" (DW 230).

The bales of cotton pressed out by the compress are
indistinguishable from one another, even as the Fairchild
children are all alike, indelibly marked by the dominant
Fairchild genes. They are all gray-eyed, light-haired, with
high foreheads and "a perfect widow's peak in every child" (DW
22); all "without a primary beauty, with only a fairness of
color (a thin-skinnedness, really) and an ease in the body"
(DW 15); all left-handed but "broken" of it by their father
(DW 12); the boys "always rushing, chasing, flying, getting
hurt" (DW 13); the older girls always heading for a dance
somewhere; all of them "generously and seriously of the
moment" (DW 15).
All the Fairchilds, children and adults, live wholly in the present, participating joyfully in whatever activities present themselves, taking particular delight in happy activities such as play and dancing. Rarely do they pause for meditation or reflection of any kind. They love Laura, for instance, pet her and kiss her, but no one of them actually thinks of what her feelings must be on the recent loss of her mother; "the Fairchilds simply shied away from trouble as children would do" (DW 159). In fact, the other outsider—Uncle George Fairchild's wife, Robbie—insists to the Fairchilds that they really have no interest in understanding other people's lives; rather, Robbie claims, the Fairchilds continue "just loving yourselves in each other--yourselves over and over again!" (DW 165). In some ways, the Fairchilds are never still long enough to contemplate complexities; they have a "fleetness about them, though they were tall, solid people with 'Scotch legs'--a neatness that was actually a readiness for gaieties and departures" (DW 14).

THE TINKLE OF THE PIANO, THE SCRATCH OF THE VICTROLA

The background tinkle of a piano contributes to the continual gaiety in the house; a well-used Victrola provides practice music for the unending round of dances the girls attend. Almost without ceasing, a young family friend plays a mix of popular, classical, and romantic tunes in the Shellmound music room: "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes,"
"the wedding song," "Constantinople," "a Schubert song" (DW 28, 179, 189, 110). The friend, Mary Lamar McKay, plays the piano "all day, the whole of her visit . . . . Nocturnes were her joy" (DW 64). When Mary Lamar leaves the stool, young cousin Lady Clare Buchanan occupies it, playing "Country Gardens," a favorite recital piece for beginning piano students all over the South: "The whole house was shaking like the joggling board or the compress, with dancing and 'Country Gardens’" (DW 101).

When the piano falls silent, other musical vehicles pick up the melodies. One Fairchild or another cranks up the old Victrola, which fills the house with scratchy versions of popular songs: "Wish I Could Shimmy Like my Sister, Kate," "Stop Yer Ticklin', Jock" (DW 9), "By the Light of the Stars" (DW 89). Sometimes a human voice or the plucked strings of the children’s dulcimer will pierce the silence: "I’m the Sheik of Araby," "Juanita" (DW 89, 98). At the wedding reception, a "black river band" plays live dance music: "Who," "Whispering," "Linger Awhile" (DW 219), "Sleepy-Time Gal," "Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot" (DW 222, 223).

No listener at the gate could fail to appreciate the sound of music issuing from Shellmound. But the observer within the house might also register some apprehension on hearing the comic, mindless ditty that underscores one of the important incidents in the plot. The faint cracks so far observed in the Fairchild fortress of Shellmound seem
negligible, but their potential for harm is underscored by the powerful beat of "Constantinople." On the night of the wedding rehearsal, the family and the wedding party dance to Mary Lamar Mackay's rendition of "Constantinople." As the family watches, George Fairchild makes up with his temporarily estranged wife, Robbie Reid, and then they, too, dance—holding the center floor while the others dance around them (DW 189). Keeping "time to 'Constantinople'" by drumming her hand on George's back as they dance, Robbie never misses a beat, "for whatever threatened to waste his life, to lead him away, even if he liked it, she was going to go up against if it killed her" (DW 191-92).

To call attention to the title of the tune, Welty reenforces it visually. Nine-year old India blissfully displays the title emblazoned on her stomach:

"Shelley did this," India remarked contentedly . . . and pulled up her skirt and stuck out her stomach, where the word Constantinople was stamped in curlicue letters. (180)

Although the lyrics of "Constantinople" add little to the scene, the title itself does. While every other tune in Delta Wedding appeared before 1923, as dictated by Welty's insistence on verisimilitude, "Constantinople" was not written

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9See John Edward Hardy who argues that Robbie is "at least the equal of any of the Fairchild women in moral character, and possibly their superior in emotional integrity and stamina" (96).
and published until 1928. Further, it was known as a novelty "spelling song," an unlikely choice as the featured dance tune on the celebratory wedding rehearsal night in Delta Wedding. Welty's deliberate use of this anachronism can have only one purpose: to call attention to the city of Constantinople, ancient Christian capital of the Byzantine empire. Its conquest and capture in 1453 by the Muslim armies of Turkey marked one of the greatest military defeats in Western history. The defeat occurred because quarrels among the Christian forces in Europe prevented their maintaining the solidarity that united the followers of Mohammed. Divided against itself, Constantinople fell, and the course of Western civilization changed.

It is true that the name and fate of Constantinople would have been in the minds of the Shellmound party in 1923 because, less than a year earlier, in the aftermath of World War I, Constantinople had once again received world-wide attention. In 1922, the Turkish army had once again moved against Greece. Since the World War I Allies were disunited, Turkey retained possession of Constantinople. This time, Turkey changed the name of the ancient city to Istanbul.

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10Copyright for "Constantinople," words and music by Harry Carlton, was obtained in 1928 by the Lawrence Wright Music Co. in London, England. Copyright for the U.S. was assigned in the same year to De Sylva, Brown and Henderson in New York City.

11In a conversation with the author, literary scholar Horst Kruse remembered "Constantinople" as a "spelling game."
The lyrics of a much later, highly popular 1958 Tin Pan Alley song, named "Istanbul," celebrate the city's name change in words that Americans of 1923 might well have composed at the time:

You can't go back to Constantinople,
No, you can't go back to Constantinople.
Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople.
Where did Constantinople get the works?
That's nobody's business but the Turks.

(Jimmy Kennedy and Nat Simon)

This song, of course, was written long after Delta Wedding was published, but it underscores the message implied by the allusion to Constantinople in a 1923 setting: no national city or religious empire, much less a single clan, can be protected forever from the intrusion of outside forces and the ultimate destruction of long-held belief systems.

THE MOURNFUL AIRS OF SCOTLAND

As we have already seen, Welty's reference to the Battle of Flodden Field, the subject of Scott's Marmion, serves the same purpose in Delta Wedding as the reference to Constantinople. But Welty also uses a series of musical allusions to remind us of the Scottish past so important to a full understanding of the Fairchild family in the present. The most important occurs shortly before the "Constantinople" scene of George and Robbie. Slightly earlier, again as the young members of the wedding party dance to Mary Lamar Mackay's spirited version of "Constantinople," a different song, a different rhythm, rises plaintively in the Shellmound
night. Off in another room in the house trembles the voice of Aunt Shannon, singing "Oft in the Stilly Night," a national Scottish air of remembrance, a memorial to people long dead (DW 182). The image evokes one from James Joyce's classic short story "The Dead": that of Aunt Julia Morkan who—with a voice "strong and clear" but with a "haggard look upon her face"—sings for her annual dance party an old song, "Arrayed for the Bridal" (193, 222).

Battle's aged Aunt Shannon, like Gabriel's Aunt Julia, now lives almost entirely in the past. She speaks to her long-dead husband, who died in the Civil War. She believes that Battle is his older brother, Denis Fairchild, who died in the First World War. She identifies young Laura McRaven as her dead mother, Annie Laurie Fairchild McRaven. Though "Constantinople" quickly overwhelms Aunt Shannon's ghostly memorial song on the night before the wedding, their ominous counterpoint—accentuating mutability, loss, and memory—sounds a sense of danger to the future harmony of the Fairchild family. In fact, after the wedding couple return from their honeymoon and just before George and Robbie leave to return to Memphis, the Fairchilds themselves seem to comprehend some coming dissolution of the clan.

On this final night all together, alone again just with family, the Fairchilds picnic and sing the songs of their ancestors, sweet and mournful. As their procession of old plantation wagons, filled with food and family, journeys
slowly across the fields, across the river, to the grounds of Marmion, first one and then another of the wayfarers starts a song: "Some Sweet Day," "Banks o' Bonnie Doon," "Pu'd a rose," "Loch Lomond" (DW 239, 240, 241). But as the night comes to its close, all the Fairchilds draw together and spontaneously--of one accord--begin to sing, "softly, wanderingly, each his way" Aunt Shannon's haunting Scottish air: "Oft in the stilly night / Ere Slumber's chain has bound me . . ." (246).

Although Welty does not supply in the novel any more lines of this "Scotch Air," collected by the poet, Thomas Moore, we can be sure she knew them. The lines that follow immediately after the ones we hear confirm the clan's feeling of nostalgia:

Oft, in the stilly night,
Ere Slumber's chain has bound me,
Fond Memory brings the light
Of other days around me;

(Moore 142)

By the end of the first verse, the "Fond Memory" has become "Sad Memory." In an image reminiscent of Scarlett's return to Tara, the second verse likens the poet's condition to "one, / Who treads alone / Some banquet-hall deserted," and the verse ends with the repeated refrain, "Sad Memory brings the light / Of other days around me" (Moore 142).12 The allusion confirms

12The association of this verse in Moore's "Oft in the Stilly Night" with Tara, the ruined home of the protagonist in Margaret Mitchell's 1936 Gone with the Wind stimulates yet another association: a Moore poem, "The Harp That Once
the function of memory in the traditional nineteenth-century Delta planter family as "memorial."

But the memorial view of memory displayed by her characters in this early novel is not Welty's own view of memory. Hers departs from the memorial literary tradition of the South. For even as the strains of "stilly night" blanket the Fairchilds, the newest member of the family, son-in-law Troy Flavin, speaks "through the song" to approve George's idea about changing some things at Shellmound, "Growing greens and getting some cows around" (DW 146, emphasis mine). Both Troy, the overseer from the Tennessee Hills, and George, the veteran of war and product of legal rather than agricultural training, are portrayed with as much sympathy as any of the other Fairchilds. At this stage in her career, Welty presents the Janus face of the clan, as an entity looking backward to harmony and stability, but with two or three individual family members looking forward, even relishing the prospect of beginning to change the tradition.

OBSERVATIONS

As Laura McRaven, the innocent observer of the Fairchild clan, has provided our first view of the Shellmound world, so

Through Tara's Hall." Moore's Tara refers to an ancient palace and assembly place in Ireland, long abandoned. A couplet from the poem, recalling Tara, also speaks to what will doubtless be the poignant fate of Battle Fairchild's Shellmound: "No more to chiefs and ladies bright / The harp of Tara swells; / The chord alone that breaks at night / Its tale of ruin tells" (80).
she provides the last on the picnic night. She has, by novel's end, been allowed to come fully inside the sheltering circle of the clan. Even as she claims her place, hugs her Aunt Ellen until "they swayed together," and basks in the clan's contentment, her ambivalence remains. She does not speak it, but her vision and action do. First, she is able to "let go" of Ellen's neck and "run forward a step." Knowing at last that "wonderful, special anticipation that belonged to the Fairchilds," she can act on her own. Her vision, as always, remains clear. She shouts out loud as she spots "One great golden star through the night falling" (DW 247, emphasis mine). She sees yet another one, sees even "where it fell" (DW 247). She turns back, then, to the Fairchild clan of Shellmound, which has given her courage, "both arms held out to the radiant night" (DW 247 emphasis mine). Laura must become wholly a part of the clan before she can fully begin the development of her individual self, the self that will eventually leave the clan's sheltering arms. The Fairchilds of Shellmound both protect and stifle. The mixed image of light and darkness that ends Delta Wedding confirms the paradox that is Shellmound, most particularly for its youngest observer.

But the final word on Shellmound must come from the more experienced observer, the one who most clearly understands the meaning of what is happening to the clan. During the wedding reception dance, Ellen wanders through the crowd, "with Battle
somewhere near, looking among the dancers for her daughters" (DW 220). When George, out on the dance floor, looks in her direction, she unexpectedly sees into his mind and answers, for herself, the question that has bedeviled all the family members. Why did George act as he did to save Maureen on the railroad trestle, even as the Yellow Dog bore down upon them? George, she understands at that moment, has already determined his purpose in life and will always act on it, regardless of any threat from the changing world around him. Ellen elaborates her understanding of George’s behavior:

any act on his part might be startling, isolated in its very subtlety from the action of all those around him, springing from long, dark, previous, abstract thought and direct apprehension, instead of explainable, Fairchild impulse. It was inevitable that George, with this mind, should stand on the trestle--on the track where people could indeed be killed. . . . He was capable--taking no more prerogative than a kind of grace, no more than an ordinary responsibility--of meeting a fate whose dealing out to him he would not contest; even when to people he loved his act was "conceited," if not absurd, if not just a little story in the family.

George Fairchild, brutally exposed to the realities of life by World War I, no longer tries to sustain the Fairchild family legend of "happiness" (DW 222). As a survivor, George seems already to have absorbed the principles that Welty upholds: perceive reality, choose your direction, participate fully--with passion and compassion--in the world you have chosen, keep to your path despite the obstacles that delay or threaten your progress. Of course, our knowledge of George comes only through the perceptions of the clan that idealizes
him, so we cannot identify him explicitly as a character who has fully realized his humanity, according to Welty’s vision. But certainly he points the way toward Welty’s ultimate protagonist, Laurel McKelva Hand in *The Optimist’s Daughter*. George’s commitment still is to the family, the great clan of blood-kin relatives who lean upon him, even though they don’t understand him. As the heart of that extended clan, George knows the protective shell of Shellmound can not protect against the unpredictable forces of the future. Although George doesn’t know what is coming, he can imagine things similar to those that did come in the actual course of history: the catastrophic flood of 1927, the even more catastrophic stock-market crash of 1929, the devastating depression of the thirties, the unimaginable horror of World War II in the forties.

Ellen perceives George as embodying "what was pure at its heart," the quality she loves most. Ellen sees in George the human capacity, most rare, to live wholly in his time, completely independent (she no longer needs to be a "mother" to him) and yet fully responsive to those who need him. George focuses all his attention in a way that resembles detachment, "motionless pity" (*DW* 186). He looks steadily on the world’s complexities, thinks abstractly about them, charts his course, and acts with all his being when action is called for. Such a man differs markedly from the Fairchild clan, in general, which operates by age-old instinct and impulse—the
most powerful impulse being to preserve the well-being and the happiness of the immediate family against the calamities that abound in the world at large. We will meet such a family again in the Renfros of Losing Battles.

Finally, Ellen recognizes George Fairchild as one of those rare people who can relieve "the heart's overflow" (DW 222-23). George, like her, retains the ability to distinguish the individual amongst the family members. Also, he is capable of focusing his entire attention on the moment and the individual within it. When he asks Ellen to dance, she rises at once, despite her advanced pregnancy and her husband's cautioning words. Although Ellen has become completely absorbed by the overwhelming Fairchild identity, she feels again, for the moment, her individual identity.

"I haven't danced in a long time, I guess, and when now again?"

They danced, the music progressed, changed, and slowed. It was "Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot"—it was good night.

(DW 223)
Like *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles* portrays a large family gathering, in this case a family reunion honoring the family matriarch’s ninetieth birthday. However, nearly a quarter of a century passed between the publication of *Delta Wedding* and the publication of *Losing Battles*. During that time, Welty published *The Golden Apples*, *The Ponder Heart*, and *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, all works that centered more crucially on women protagonists who were trying to balance personal—often artistic—needs and family commitments.

Between 1955 and 1970, Welty published no fiction except for a children’s book, *The Shoe Bird*, 1964; two short stories, 1963 and 1966; and the early version of "The Optimist’s Daughter," published in the *New Yorker*, 1969. *Losing Battles* marks the beginning of the third stage—"gathering home"—of Welty’s composite protagonist, even as its structure departs radically from that of *Delta Wedding*, as we shall see. The tone, too, is decidedly different, for here Welty gives free rein to her comic exuberance, despite, or perhaps because of, the serious subject she portrays.

In the comic central image of the closing section of *Losing Battles*, a procession of three battered vehicles and a team of mules—roped together—limps from Banner Top hill down the five-mile drop to the little town of Banner, collecting waiting school children along the way. This image not only comments vividly on an important but seldom-remarked
battle in the novel, but also clearly showcases the institutions responsible for the tensions that beset the community. Further, it suggests the nature of the compromise that might eventually save them all. The vehicles in the strange four-part procession (processions are always important in Welty) carry the novel’s central battlers: at the head of the line rolls the Banner school bus, driven by Jack Jordan Renfro, the prodigal son returned from Parchman penitentiary in time for his great-grandmother’s ninetieth birthday and family reunion; dragged behind the bus is Judge Oscar Moody’s once-stately "pleasure" car, a driverless Buick, now no longer under its own power, considerably diminished by having swerved off the road repeatedly; trailing the Buick and carrying Judge Moody lumbers a reconstructed Coca-Cola truck, formerly Jack Renfro’s but now owned and driven by Curly Stovall, the Banner storekeeper and town marshall; holding tight at the rear plod two mules, the Renfro family’s black one and the Baptist preacher’s white one, both guided by Jack’s younger brother, Vaughn Renfro, who has been given the important task of braking—holding back any precipitous descent by the vehicles, all of which have untrustworthy brakes. Brought together in the procession are the institutions of education, law, commerce, agriculture, and religion, all of them gasping for survival in the desperate conditions of the 1930s Great Depression in Mississippi.
Even though the chronotope of *Losing Battles* echoes that of *Delta Wedding*, there are significant differences, as we shall see. Bakhtin has no term that fits this novel precisely; *Losing Battles* extends some elements of the idyllic into a provincial rather than strictly family novel (229). Since the idyllic may be confined literally to the home-place of the family (232), as is certainly true in *Losing Battles*, we might call this chronotope the ceremonial center in the provincial novel. The family in *Losing Battles*, like it or not, has become more a part of the world outside its home-place; its hero, Jack Renfro, like George Fairchild, has spent time in an alien world, from which he returns for the family celebration.

In discussing *Losing Battles*, critics have focused primarily on the major battle between Jack Renfro’s extended yeoman farmer family (the Vaughn-Beecham-Renfro family) and the institution of public education as represented by the former local schoolteacher, Miss Julia Mortimer. Typical critical responses are those of Noel Polk and Carol Manning, who insist that in the novel, Welty parodies Southern conventions of family and religious community, exposing their failings and hypocrisy. Gretland, on the other hand, believes that Welty celebrates the tradition of an older agrarian order whose family values are superior to those values found in the modern world. Susan Donaldson comes nearer the truth of the matter when, like Louis Rubin, she suggests that Welty here
reveals the instinctive fear aroused in any group whose familiar territory is challenged by the unfamiliar, whatever it might represent. In her analysis, the characters who value only the written words of education are just as stubborn and wrong-headed as the characters who value only the spoken words of the family. Each group, by its initial refusal to actually listen to the other, defeats any effort toward understanding and cooperation.

If there has been little unanimity among critics' responses to this novel, the reason may be supplied by Ruth Vande Kieft's early comment:

Because of the seemingly random quality of folk speech and the episodic nature of much of the comic action, Losing Battles does not appear to have the structural coherence of Delta Wedding, the unifying symbolism and dimension of classical and Celtic mythology to be found in The Golden Apples.

(EW 161-62)

It is true that Losing Battles presents a challenge, in part because almost all present action and all past actions emerge entirely from vernacular dialogue. Welty occasionally uses brief passages of literary exposition to shift scenes. Just once does she stay with exposition for more than a paragraph or so in order to express interior thought. To comprehend the plot, structure and symbolism, readers must listen patiently to the voices of a people who speak in a strange dialect and

\[1\] For discussion of these views see Donaldson "Contradictors," Polk "Going to Naples" 156, Manning, Gretland, and Rubin "Everything Brought Out . . ."
whose world, as Joyce Carol Oates remarked at the time, is as
"remote to most of us as an African nation" (120).

But the novel has suffered neglect for other reasons, having less to do with its artistic merit than with its subject matter and a shift in public preferences. In this novel, for example, Welty abandons her familiar use of folklore or fantasy or Greek mythology as underpinnings for her various works. Instead, she bases Losing Battles entirely on a dimension of Christian mythology that was no longer in favor among many professional wordsmiths when the novel was published in the seventies. In accord with this Christian dimension, Welty replaces the sound of music that admirers have grown to expect in her language. Readers do not find here the balanced notes of Beethoven, the mournful cries of Negro spirituals and early blues, the Tin Pan Alley repertoire of the twenties, or the dazzling American jazz improvisations that customarily reverberate through her works. Instead, Losing Battles includes full choruses of old-time Baptist hymns which both illuminate the action and move it forward.

But this "remote" world of Losing Battles actually existed in Mississippi in the 1930s, as its spiritual counterparts have existed throughout time, and indeed still exist in the 1990s. Although the speech patterns and cultural

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2In an article on the language of Losing Battles, Robert Heilman notes many Biblical allusions. The most important are "The Prodigal Son" (LB 105, 107) and "Belshazzar's Feast" (LB 177). For others, see "Losing Battles and Winning the War" (292-93).
tradition of Boone County, Mississippi, seem foreign, the habit of mind demonstrated by Boone County residents is all too familiar. Ironically, it is the same habit of mind that has created in non-Southerners, especially after the 1960s, a one-dimensional view of white Mississippi farmers. Even Southern readers can sometimes forget how varied the different regions of the South are. Hugh Holman, for example, himself both a Southern native and a distinguished literary critic, faults Losing Battles for not including blacks among its characters. Yet historically there were almost no blacks in the Tennessee Hills section of Mississippi, and for sound economic reasons. The farmers there were far too poor either to own slaves or to hire help of any kind. Few other jobs existed until northern lumbering interests came into the region. They brought Negro help with them, as we see in Losing Battles, but those jobs were transient, not permanent ones. No laborer, black or white, would care to stay on in such dismal farming country when more lucrative agricultural jobs were always available in the Delta country to the west.

Some knowledge of context is crucial, then, to a full appreciation of the world of this novel and its inhabitants. Since Welty is a meticulous historian, much of the context is readily available in the novel, but readers must patiently

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3See Owsley 202-05 for details of slave-holding farmers in Tishomingo County in 1850. Their numbers were few, as were the numbers of their slaves. Population growth occurred in the flatter, more western part of the area which, before 1930, became Alcorn and Prentiss counties.
piece it together as they listen to the many stories of the people of Boone County. My discussion, I hope, will quickly highlight some of the issues which, in turn, should cast more light on some of the battles and battlers in the novel. For as Welty herself has explained in speaking of the problem of getting to know people in the city, "you meet somebody cold, have no idea of his background. Everything has to start from scratch and for that reason can remain more superficial unless you really work at it" (Conversations 178). That problem exists for readers who come for the first time to meet the inhabitants of the isolated Mississippi hamlet of Banner.

It is important for Welty readers to "work at it," for the residents of Banner are neither misfits nor freaks. They are representative products of their culture who exhibit characteristics typical of family groups the world over. Despite idealistic notions of brotherly love promulgated in a Western democracy, individual communities--whatever their size or beliefs--all too often preserve their territory by picturing any change as a direct threat to the order and survival of the community. As community insiders, they feel justified in building a fortress around themselves to exclude strangers and unfamiliar ideas that, according to community myth, will bring chaos. We've already seen this principle in operation in Clement Musgrove, Miss Sabina, and the Fairchild family. All such efforts are doomed, however, for the world changes as surely as it turns upon its axis. Human
communities can do nothing about mutability, nothing at all except perish or find a way to live in a different world. That is the point that Welty makes throughout her work.

In *Losing Battles*, the independent family does try to find a way to live in its changing world, as I will show. To do so, I will supply more of the historical and cultural context for that changing world, focusing specifically on the motivation and situation of the yeoman farmers in Boone County, on the changed nature of the country store, and on the subtly-suggested societal alliance between education and commercialism. Though the battles between the Renfros and the storekeeper are well-documented in the novel, their role as representative of a greater cultural shift in the South may not be so familiar.

I will also argue for the presence of the "structural coherence" and "unifying symbolism" that Vande Kieft believes are missing in *Losing Battles*. The structural coherence evolves from the interdependent battles revealed in the narrative. Since the most obvious battle, the one between the family and Miss Julia, has been well examined by other critics, I will note it only briefly for its role in the pattern of battles. My discussion of some of the novel's other battles will follow two lines: 1) I will provide some historical context for the lesser-known external battles already lost; and 2) I will demonstrate the internal battles

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4See particularly Messerli, Gross, Gossett.
still being waged within the family and community. Finally, I will discuss the resolutions of certain battles that partially support one critic's view of the novel as "a statement of a family's vigor and implicitly of a nation's vitality, the power to endure and survive" (Gossett 350). For the novel's meaning rests more firmly on the chosen actions of participants in present battles—those battles being waged within the time frame of the novel—than it does on the outcomes of those battles lost long ago.

I will also examine the unifying symbolism of the novel's Christian dimension, a dimension that is crucial to the time and place of this novel. As I will show, the Tennessee Hills were initially settled by immigrants bent on preserving the way of life promoted by their primitive Baptist church. Welty's fictional Boone County follows the development pattern typical of the deep South: a church was built just as soon as a settlement was founded (Young 119). In Boone County, Granny Vaughn's father-in-law, a Baptist, had built the first house in Banner and then immediately thereafter constructed Damascus Church, whose pews were "solid cedar, and the pulpit . . . all one tree" (LB 49). Among other denominations only the Methodists made substantial inroads into Banner in succeeding years, the Methodists known particularly for their emphasis on education.
THE YEOMAN FARMERS OF THE TENNESSEE HILLS

As we learn from Welty's careful description in Losing Battles, her fictional Boone County is based on a section of the state known as the Tennessee Hills. This northeastern corner of Mississippi, mostly in present-day Tishomingo County, is bordered by Tennessee to the north and Alabama to the east. Although it has been referred to as Appalachian, this area is not properly part of the Appalachian Mountain range, even though there may be similarities in the inhabitants. The Tennessee Hills are not even mountains, but rather red clay hills. Among them stands Woodall Mountain, the highest point in Mississippi, 816 feet above sea level. The predominantly English and Scotch-Irish yeoman farmers who settled the area in the early nineteenth century formed the second wave of migration into the Mississippi Territory (Owsley 90-91).

Of course the Tennessee Hills section did not offer as much material promise to begin with as that elsewhere in the state. Its rolling hills of red clay were much less fertile than the western alluvial land of the Delta and the black prairie soil of central and southern Mississippi. The bare-bones subsistence of the fictional Vaughn-Beecham-Renfro clan in the 1930s, living wholly in the tradition of its ancestors, is quite realistic.

Unlike the other two historical waves of immigrants into Mississippi--the Natchez pioneers as depicted in The Robber
Bridegroom and the planter speculators of Delta Wedding—the yeoman farmers represented in Losing Battles did not come to Mississippi to make their fortunes. Rather they moved to Mississippi in the early nineteenth century to escape a world that was "too much" for them (Mississippi 136). Many came from the Coastal Piedmont area of the Carolinas after the Battle of Kings Mountain. They hoped to make a modest living in the isolated, less desirable hills of Mississippi and to preserve more easily their family traditions and religious values. For them, the Bible and family stories made up literature. "Utilitarian handicrafts" such as woodworking and quilt-making were the products of their artistic expression (Mississippi 136). We remember from Delta Wedding the myriad quilts sent as a wedding present to Dabney and Troy from Troy’s mother in the Tennessee Hills. Troy remembers the names of all the patterns, too: "Delectable Mountains," "Tizrah’s Treasure," "Hearts and Gizzards," "Four Doves at the Window," "Trip Around the World," "Bouquet of Beauty" (DW 112, 95-96). Generously, Troy’s mother sends her own quilts, for there’s not enough time before the wedding to make new ones. For these people of the Tennessee Hills, family and church constituted the world. Their hope in moving to a new country was to preserve the old ways, not to initiate new ones.

In their attitudes and intentions, these Mississippi settlers were akin to the Pilgrims who settled Plymouth in the seventeenth century and the Mormons who trekked to the Great
Salt Lake in the nineteenth century. The opening section of *Losing Battles* emphasizes the dawning of a new day, the hope of a new beginning in a chosen place. Every detail radiates energy and freshness and new beginnings: the crowing rooster, the leaping dog, the bolting naked baby. Even the chickens described on the opening page are "white Plymouth Rocks loose on the world" (*LB* 3). Both the awakening world of Genesis and the awakening hope of the New England Pilgrims echo in this passage.

**THE FAMILY—JORDAN/VAUGHN/EECHAM/RENFRO**

Since all the battles in *Losing Battles* involve either the Jordan/Vaughn/Beecham/Renfro family in tension with some element of society, or else some individual members within the family pitted against one another, it will be useful to take a closer look at the collective family, gathered on the first Sunday in August for their annual reunion and celebration of the ninetieth birthday of the family matriarch, Granny Vaughn. Significantly, the family gathers at the dog-trot house built by Granny Vaughn's grandfather, Captain Jacob Jordan, in 1811, "the year the stars fell," the *annus mirabilis* that we recall from *The Wide Net*. This original home-place, the ceremonial center of the family, has been occupied by Jordan descendants ever since (*LB* 180). On the day of the reunion, granddaughter Beulah Beecham Renfro articulates the family creed:

this is a strict, law-abiding, God-fearing, close-knit family, and everybody in it has always
struggled the best he knew how and we've all just tried to last as long as we can by sticking together.

( LB 344 )

Throughout the novel, Welty graphically directs our attention to the central characteristics of the collective family: its closeness, its struggle, and its endurance, despite mortal blows. On the cover of the novel, as well as at the beginning of each of the six parts of the novel, Welty features a woodcut of the bois d'arc tree, which has grown for decades in the front yard of the Renfro farm. As an image of "physical and moral order," the sacred tree, the "most widespread of all visual symbols" according to authorities on myth, is always a "cosmic center" (Lowry 59). Just so is the Renfro family's bois d'arc tree which literally overarches the reunion, both physically and metaphorically. In the few instances of expository description in the novel, we hear specific details of the grand bois d'arc tree or "bodock" tree as little Elvie Renfro terms it ( LB 181 ).

It was this big tree that at this hour had taken command of the yard. Its look was this: if disaster ever wants to strike around here, let it try it on this tree. The top had spread almost as wide as the roof, which it had shaded blue as a distant mountain. Its hard, pronged branches could never be well concealed by leaves so constantly stirring, shimmering without a breath of air.

( LB 178 )

Of course disaster has struck the family, and often over the years. Captain Jordan had perched his house there on the ridge "in the thick of the Indians, overlooking the stage road that come threading through the canebrakes up to Tennessee"
The road, of course, would have been the northernmost reach of the Natchez Trace in Mississippi, a pretty rough stage road at the time. Some of the disasters are noted by Brother Bethune as he recites the family history at the reunion dinner: the Union Army’s cannon assault that dented the chimney of the house, the death in battle of both Captain Jordan and at least two of his sons—all during the War Between the States; the accident that early claimed the lives of the Beechams, Granny’s only daughter and son-in-law, leaving behind six orphaned Beecham children; the burning of the old Vaughn family home in Banner; the arrest and imprisonment of the only able-bodied adult male in the home, Jack Jordan Renfro; the death of Grandpa Vaughn himself in his eighty-ninth year while his great-grandson Jack is still imprisoned; the erosion and depletion of the land, the logging of the woods, the hard weather and hard times that have substantially reduced the family’s ability to provide for itself. Signs of these losses are duly recorded on the big bois d’arc:

The tree looked a veteran of all the old blows, a survivor. Old wounds on the main trunk had healed leaving scars as big as tubs or wagon wheels, and where the big lower branches had thrust out, layer under layer of living bark had split on the main trunk in a bloom of splinters, of a red nearly animal-like.

Even so, the Renfro family of the Tennessee Hills remains marginally better off than the tenant farmers in Mississippi. Poor though the land is, the Renfros own it. As long as the
land produces enough to feed and clothe them, the family is satisfied. But having less to start with, the family has no reserve whatsoever to help deal with destructive weather conditions, family calamities, the economic catastrophes of the late twenties, or the changing way of life in the thirties—nor can it remain isolated from any of these troubles.

In their poverty and vulnerability, the farmers of the Tennessee Hills were similar to small farmers—the majority of the population—throughout the Southern states. The per capita income in the South in the early part of the twentieth century was so much lower than that elsewhere that today we would think it typical of an "underdeveloped" country in comparison to a "developed" one (Reed 25). For up through the first part of the twentieth century, there was almost no industry in the South. Only one-third of the Southern population lived in towns or cities; the majority were involved in agriculture, "unprofitably, for the most part" (Reed 25).

Throughout Losing Battles, we find references to the poverty and hard times experienced by the farmers of Boone County. The Baptist preacher, Brother Bethune, states the conditions most forcefully in his reunion address to the family:

I don't reckon good old Mississippi's ever been any poorer than she is right now, 'cept when we lost. And in all our glorious state I can't think of any county
likelier to take the cake for being the poorest and
generally the hardest-suffering than dear old Boone.
(LB 191)

These yeoman farmers in the Tennessee Hills traditionally
distrust "outside" help; their scorn for public "relief" is
unrelieved (LB 191-92). They cling instinctively to their
basic institutions--family and church--as "an ever present
help in time of trouble."

THE BATTLES

All the battles in the novel are associated with that one
most prevalent in the Southern literary imagination in the
period between the two world wars: the struggle between the
old agricultural way of life, whose tradition honors the land,
and the new commercial/industrial way of life, whose tradition
honors profit and technological progress. The old ways
collide with the new thinking in every skirmish in Losing
Battles: the tightly knit family whose lives revolve around
the land versus the landless family whose children must
scatter to the four winds to make their living; the self-
sufficient agrarian community able to feed itself and free to
follow its own traditions versus the new country storekeeper
whose commercial/industrial connections prefigure endless debt
and material loss for farmers; the culture of long-standing
religious and family traditions versus the culture of formal
education drawing on new ideas in science and technology. All
the forces brought together in these skirmishes are essential
to the growth of an industrial democracy. All are treated in *Losing Battles* fairly sympathetically, with the possible exception of the lumbering interests. But we will examine them from the point of view of the extended farm family, upon whom the novel focuses.

**BATTLE ALREADY LOST: AGRICULTURE TO COMMERCE-LAW**

Of the lost battles, signaled in imagery and in the reunion stories, the battle between the agricultural family and the commercial/industrial interests—as represented in the country store—is one of the most elemental. In rural communities of the past, the country store played a central role, along with the church and the school house. Originally, the country store in Banner had belonged to Mr. Renfro and his father before him. But during the First World War, Mr. Renfro lost the store to Mr. Dearman, representative of the only industry in Mississippi: lumbering. During the early decades of the twentieth century, lumber interests moved from the north to the south, where they cut down all the virgin timber in the state, including "every tree within forty miles" of Banner (*LB* 341). Mr. Dearman, who happened to be from "Manifest, Mississippi," where he had "levelled" the Piney Woods area, came to the Tennessee hills, set up a sawmill, took over the country store after Mr. Renfro had an accident,

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*William Faulkner touches on this aspect of Southern history in most of his work, but most especially in "The Bear."*
extended credit for exorbitant interest rates, took over the Renfro house, and eventually left town, leaving nothing but ruin behind (LB 342).

This scene played out all over Mississippi and the South in general during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. Gradually, the country store, which had been the communal social center of the town, became the economic and commercial center, operating under strict-lien laws. Meant originally to protect the farmers, these laws were quickly applied by merchants who were then able to acquire the personal property as well as the real property of the people in the community. Often merchant-bankers, employing a rigid monopoly system, might charge as much as forty per cent interest on credit. Such unscrupulous business practice in the country stores made fortunes for many merchants, but reduced thousands of independent farmers to hopelessly indebted tenant farmers. From the end of the Civil War right up through the 1930s, no institution influenced the farmers' economic life more.

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6 Merchandising as well as farming was risky business in the rural South. Farmers traditionally borrowed against next year's crop in order to buy seed to plant. In years of personal or public disaster from accident, drought, or flood, many farmers lost everything they owned.

7 For full discussion of the country store's economic power, see Edgar T. Thompson's "Country Store"; for detailed information about merchandising and community need, see Thomas D. Clark.
Curly Stovall, the fictional store owner in Banner, makes the point. Although Jack’s only natural enemy seems to be Curly Stovall, the spiritual descendant of Mr. Dearman, it is actually their occupations that are antithetical. The time of the farmer is being supplanted by the time of the merchant/banker. Curly has no malice in him; he’s merely trying to "get ahead" in the best American fashion. To collect payment on the family’s bill, he ruthlessly confiscates from Jack’s teen-age sister her grandmother’s golden wedding ring, the only family memento of their dead grandmother; when Jack tries to retrieve the wedding ring, Curly charges him with theft and precipitates his arrest, conviction, and imprisonment. In payment for family necessities while the breadwinner is in prison, Curly takes first the family’s goat, then a pig, a calf, and finally Jack’s beloved stud horse, Dan. For a new shirt, Curly takes from Jack’s wife, Gloria, a whole barrel of black walnuts. In exchange for the loan that pays for the Renfro’s new tin roof, Curly hauls away the Coca-Cola truck that Jack has spent years reconstructing. And, in fact, Curly had originally charged Jack "out of his corncrib" merely for hauling the parts of the abandoned truck off his property after it had been scattered there by a collision with the train that runs through Banner (LB 24, 77, 89-90, 88). "Finders, keepers" is Curly’s motto, and "pay through the nose."
If any thievery has taken place in Banner, it can morally be laid at the feet of the storekeeper, but in the changing world of the twentieth century, the law is all on his side. Historically, the country storekeeper was frequently prominent in local government, and Curly Stovall in Losing Battles is no exception. Since he is presently the town marshall and is campaigning for the office of justice of the peace, local law and commercialism are indistinguishable, usually to the detriment of the farmer. This powerful combination relentlessly erodes the agrarian tradition of the area.

An excellent source of information on the topic is Thomas Clark's full study of the country store in Pills, Petticoats, and Plows. A painstaking historian, Clark provides the sociological statistics that are given abundant life in Losing Battles. The country store, Clark points out, served in many instances as a community social center and was always closely associated with the institution of education; indeed, it was often located right next door to a school.

In his discussion of the paradox of the country store, "far more symbolic of the southern way of rural life than were other institutions," Clark pays especial attention to the "grim realities of its confiscatory credit system" ("Preface" vii, xi). For even though the country store keeper was "all things to his community" and had a "direct tie with eastern bankers, manufacturers, and distributors," he was also the "connecting link between the rascals of the medicine and eas
money trades and their victims" ("Preface" vii, viii-ix). Clark acknowledges the "weaknesses and failures" of the "ruinous" farm-credit system, but demonstrates its necessity as well, in view of the devastation of the southern agricultural economy by the boll weevil infestation of cotton crops, the clear-cutting of the forests by rapacious lumber interests, and the inflation brought about by World War I in the early decades of the twentieth century.

BATTLE ALREADY LOST: AGRICULTURE TO COMMERCE-EDUCATION

The country storekeeper even had a close connection with the institution of education, again with a hand in the farm family's pocket. Implicit in this association, but little imagined by modern readers, is the extent of the economic hardship worked upon the southern rural family by the early public institution of education. For "public" education in the 1930s was not "free" as we think of it now. The schoolteacher, whose salary was minuscule, had to be boarded in the home of an area family (the Vaughns had kept Miss Mortimer for a time). Children were obliged to buy all their books and supplies from the local storekeeper; it was not until 1940 that the state provided textbooks free for elementary grades (Griffith 403). Every item had a markup, of course, but some books were priced extra high; Vaughn Renfro's big "geography" book, for example, "that he'd traded out of Curly Stovall" (LB 365) would have cost at least $2.00
retail although it would be only $1.00 wholesale (Clark 148). In an area where the average cash income might be no more than $126 per capita (Emmerich 98), or in some years, nothing at all, school expenses could be a severe drain on the farm family's income.

But the expense contributes only in part to the general ambivalence felt by the farm folk toward education. Like commerce, education brings perspectives and values from a bigger world into the isolated community. Fear of these conduits for new ideas and new ways permeates Losing Battles, but is revealed most prominently in the continuing struggle between the Renfro family and Miss Julia Mortimer, schoolteacher and tireless battler for education in the community of Banner. Miss Mortimer attempts to open the minds of Banner children to the larger world beyond the Tennessee hills region of northeastern Mississippi; her guiding belief lies in the power of education to make a child free. When her efforts meet resistance from the Renfro family (and many other members of the community), modern readers, attributing the resistance solely to ignorance, discount the value of the family accordingly. But in Banner, in the first half of the twentieth century, education seems as paradoxical to the yeoman farmer's way of life as commercialism. Although education promises a "better" life for Banner children in the future, it also drains the family resources in the present, both in the supply of physical farm labor and in the daily
expense involved in supporting the school and in supplying the tools for learners. More important, education threatens to deprive the family of their children altogether. The perennial family fear of losing children to a wider world persists in any isolated community, with good reason, as we can see in Losing Battles.

The Christian dimension of Losing Battles is vital to any explication of its theme because, as we have seen, the Baptist religion defines the family portrayed. Biblical allusions also provide references to the ancient cultures that serve as parallels for the culture of the Tennessee Hills. On reunion day, the present-day Baptist preacher, Brother Bethune, has been asked by the family to give the traditional address, prayer, and history of the family. As he surveys the Vaughns, Beechams, and Renfros gathered before him around the reunion supper table, he describes the scene as a Belshazzar's Feast, "without no Handwriting on the Wall to mar it" (LB 177). 8

8Given her interest in art, her quick humor, and the years she needed to complete Losing Battles, Welty may have had a personal reason for this allusion, as well. Belshazzar's Feast is also the name of a "monumental painting" by nineteenth-century American artist Washington Allston. In 1817, Allston conceived the idea for this painting, which was to be an entirely new direction for him, and which he envisioned as crowning his career. It proved to be his albatross, however. Though he worked on it intermittently all his life, Belshazzar's Feast was still unfinished when he died in 1843 (Kasson 43-83).
The allusion, as familiar to the Baptist family as is the giant Renfro Bible that graces the table, evokes the ancient world of the Middle East with the familiar names of its cities, remembered still in modern times: Damascus, Babylon, Nineveh. In the Bible is recorded the history of the earliest known civilization, the agrarian Sumerian kingdom, and the alien cultures which succeeded it over the years: the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Chaldeans.

Brother Bethune’s description of the reunion feast refers to the story of Belshazzar, the last of the Chaldean kings, whose fate is told by the Biblical prophet Daniel. Like his father before him, Belshazzar worshipped false gods. When he gave a great feast in his banquet house, mysterious writing appeared on the wall: "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin." Daniel translated the words for Belshazzar: "numbered, numbered, weighed, divisions." Daniel’s interpretation of the words prophesied disaster for Belshazzar: "God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it; thou art weighed in the balance, and found wanting" (Daniel 5:25-31). That very night Belshazzar was killed and his kingdom delivered to Darius, the Mede.

Despite his announcement that the handwriting on the wall is not applicable to Banner Top, Brother Bethune not only carefully recounts the actual words written, but also reminds the assembled Vaughns and Renfros of Belshazzar’s father, Nebuchadnezzar, who went mad and "ate grass." Brother Bethune piously hopes that Jack Renfro’s father will not do the same.
But ironically, Brother Bethune—in an almost literal as well as figurative sense—is the writing on the wall for the primitive religion brought to Banner by Granny Vaughn’s father-in-law, the builder of Banner’s Damascus Church.

Granny’s husband, Preacher Vaughn, had been the last "living example of a real, real Baptist" (LB 182). Significantly, Grandpa Vaughn had died in his eighty-ninth year, just exactly one year before, at the end of the annual family reunion. Brother Bethune, "a Baptist preacher and a moonshiner" (LB 404) is such a poor substitute for Grandpa Vaughn that even Jack is shocked: "If Grandpa was back on earth to hear him, he’d bore a hole right through him now with his eyes," claims Jack (LB 433). But Grandpa is gone, and when his wife dies, the Vaughn line will end. As they walk in the cemetery, Jack points out Granny’s grave site to Gloria: "Where we’re walking now is where Granny’ll go. . . . The last Vaughn in the world! And not weighing much more for all her years than our baby weighs now" (LB 426, emphasis mine).

"Although everyone understands the term "moonshiner," remnant of Prohibition days in the twenties, not everyone would comprehend its full significance when applied to Brother Bethune. Moonshiners have existed in all eras in the South because local counties retain the right to make production and sale of liquor illegal, even though it might be legal in the state and nation. During difficult economic times, especially in hill country, more than one otherwise law-abiding man has turned to moonshining. However, liquor is anathema to the purist Baptist tradition. So Brother Bethune not only breaks the law, he defies one of the basic tenets of the Baptist faith he professes."
The implication can hardly be clearer. The original kingdom of Baptist farmers established high in the hills above Banner will be unlikely ever to celebrate another such family reunion. In fact, it is highly likely that Granny Vaughn is already dead by the following morning. During the Sunday celebration, she has slipped periodically between the present and the past. On Sunday night, she imagines that her dead husband has come to her in the night, when it is only her great-grandson Vaughn, wearing Grandpa Vaughn’s hat. On Monday morning, she never appears. The family believes she is merely sleeping late to recover from the strenuous reunion day, and that may be the case. But she may well already be gone forever, except as a memory.

Certainly, the founding traditions of the Vaughn faith have vanished. The Vaughn’s oldest grandson, Nathan Beecham, has murdered Mr. Dearman, allowed a Negro man to hang for his crime, cut off his right hand in remorse, and now roams the countryside as an eccentric evangelist, erecting signs that warn of sin, damnation, redemption, and eternity. He has exiled himself from the family, appearing just once a year at the reunion. There he stands silent behind his grandmother, who rests in her rocker on one of her birthday presents, the "Delectable Mountains" quilt, made by the women in the family and "ready to cloak her" (LB 222, 347). Just once Nathan leaves her side to play his cornet for the family. Ignoring requests for "Poor Wayfaring Stranger" and "Sweet and Low," he
plays the tune which lies close to his heart and his mission:

"Let the Lower Lights be Burning" (LB 347).

Brightly beams our Father's mercy
From His lighthouse evermore,
But to us He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.

Let the lower lights be burning!
Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

Dark the night of sin has settled,
Loud the angry billows roar;
Eager eyes are watching, longing,
For the lights along the shore.

Let the lower lights be burning!
Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.

(Bliss 262)

Not all the hymns are sorrowful, however. In the scene down on the road below, where the assembled battlers are trying to save Judge Moody's car, Welty uses hymns as a humorous guide to the action. As the mostly Baptist battlers contemplate some action to prevent the car from plunging over the hill down into the river below, they can hear Methodists down below in Banner singing, "Throw out the life line! Throw out the life line! . . . Someone is sinking today." As the car teeters on the edge ever more precariously, the strains of "Shall We Gather at the River" drift up the mountain. When Mr. Renfro trots down to help, bringing with him the dynamite that he fancies will alleviate any problem, his young daughter sings, "Yield not to temptation / for yielding is sin" (LB 128, 131, 137).
But in the scenes of the reunion up at the very tip of Banner Top, Welty uses the hymns to further define the meaning of the family's Christianity. Welty usually gives only the title, sometimes the chorus, of the carefully selected hymns, again because she could assume that many contemporary readers could easily supply the words or the verse. When further verses will help clarify meaning, I will supply them.

After the reunion dinner, of which Judge and Mrs. Moody have also partaken, Miss Beulah leads the family in singing with "Gathering Home." "All their voices rose as one" (*LB* 223).

Gathering home! Gathering home!
Never to sorrow more, never to roam!
Gathering home! Gathering home!
God's children are gathering home.

(*LB* 223)

Up to the bountiful Giver of life,
Gathering home! gathering home!
*Up to the dwelling where cometh no strife,*
The dear ones are gathering home.

(*Slade & McIntosh 128, emphasis mine*)

In Christian terms, the home, the dwelling, refers to God's heavenly home, of course, but in the novel it also marks the near-sacred view of the eternal, ceremonial home-place on Banner Top created by the revered family ancestors. As the singing of this hymn comes to an end, however, one of the rare authorial intrusions into the dialogue provides another view of the place and family as symbolized in the grand old bois d'arc tree, a view that also resembles handwriting on the wall.
As they sang, the tree over them, Billy Vaughn's Switch, with its ever-spinning leaves all light-points at this hour, looked bright as a river, and the tables might have been a little train of barges it was carrying with it, moving slowly downstream. Brother Bethune's gun, still resting against the trunk, was travelling too, and nothing at all was unmovable, or empowered to hold the scene still fixed or stake the reunion there.  

(LB 223)

Granny Vaughn's later contribution to the singing also sends mixed messages. "She knew every verse and was not sparing them one." But the family cannot decipher the song. "Is it 'Frog Went A-Courting' or 'Wondrous Love'?" asked Aunt Birdie. "Sounds like a little of both" (LB 307). After her song, Granny is lifted to the table top where "She danced in their faces," even though dancing on Sunday is frowned on by Baptists (LB 308).

The final hymn of the evening seems to pull the family back on track. Beulah busily directs the formation of the healing circle:

Where's Jack? Sometimes just making your circle will bring him in. Stand up, catch Granny, don't let her fall down now! Pull up Brother Bethune before he's slipped clear down out of reach! . . . Judge Moody, stoop a little, catch hold of Elvie's hand. . . . Drag Nathan in where he belongs! . . . Now, are we a circle?  

(LB 348)

Indeed, they are a circle as they join hands and sing "Blest Be the Tie."

Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.

We share our mutual woes,  
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.

(Fawcett & Nageli 239)

Given the clear signs that the family circle will probably not be so complete ever again, the Vaughns and the Renfros can only hope to meet again. But they rejoice in the present circle, knowing full well that however far the children scatter, they "shall still be joined in heart." During the singing, "there was only one really mournful voice -- Judge Moody's." For Judge Moody has delayed answering the pleas of Miss Julia Mortimer, has come too late to comfort the teacher responsible for his success.

BATTLES IN PROGRESS

The family's slim hope of all meeting together again is dramatized by the ongoing battles that occur within the family, even on the occasion of the reunion. Welty uses patterns of imagery associated with paired opposites within the family to further elaborate the ever-widening rifts in beliefs. I will concentrate on three of the most significant struggles, the ones that most clearly illustrate the characteristics of the old and new world orders. The first and the most revealing struggle occurs between ninety-year-old Granny Vaughn and her fourteen-month-old great-great-grandchild, Lady May Renfro. Less all-embracing but crucial
is the continuing battle between Jack's mother, Beulah Renfro, and her sister-in-law Lexie Renfro. Most subtle is the struggle between the two Renfro brothers, nineteen-year-old Jack and twelve-year-old Vaughn. But it is the only one that points to some kind of resolution.

GRANNY VAUGHN AND LADY MAY RENFRO: PAST VERSUS FUTURE

No more graphic representation of the struggle between the old order and the new can be found than that one projected in the repeated encounters between Granny Vaughn, born before the War Between the States, and her great-great-grandchild, Lady May Renfro, born in the 1930s. Early in the novel, even before the arrival of the child's father, Jack Jordan Renfro, the characteristic stance toward each other of matriarch and infant is established. When the baby is unceremoniously "loaded . . . onto Granny Vaughn's lap," the usually absent authorial voice explains.

Even before her eyes opened, Granny had put both arms out. Lady May, the soles of her feet wrinkling like the old lady's forehead, went to the weakest and most tenacious embrace she knew. They hugged long enough to remind each other that perhaps they were rivals.

(LB 65)

Later in the day after Granny has opened her birthday presents, the baby comes close to look at them, and Granny leans toward her to ask for one more precious gift: "I want a kiss . . . . I want lovingkindness." But "Lady May bolted" (LB 223). As dusk falls, the baby makes
herself a nest "in the grass" and falls into an untroubled
sleep "where any nest is the same" (LB 312). But very late
that night, when all the family have left or bedded down, Lady
May rests peacefully in a significant new nest: Granny's
recently vacated rocker.

MISS BEULAH AND LEXIE RENFRO: FIRE AND ICE

Two other foils within the family, Jack's mother, Miss
Beulah, and Miss Beulah's sister-in-law, Lexie Renfro,
demonstrate the differences between being connected to family
and being alienated from family. As the mainstay of the
Renfro family, Miss Beulah represents the old order, the
independent agricultural family. Lexie Renfro, whose father
was the original country storekeeper, we remember, embraces
neither an agricultural nor a commercial tradition. Since
her brother, Ralph, has lost the store, Lexie cannot follow
the family trade. But unlike Beulah, Lexie has created no
family of her own. While Miss Beulah's life work has been
holding together the family, both past and present, Lexie has
bitterly steered her course between family and education,
committing herself to neither one. Miss Beulah is optimistic;
Lexie is skeptical and apathetic.

The two contradict each other at every turn. Within the
space of fifteen minutes on the morning after the birthday
reunion, Miss Lexie declares that Granny Vaughn is sleeping
late because she is "Paying for yesterday." On the contrary,
corrects Miss Beulah: she is "Rewarding herself!" When Miss Beulah tells Jack that the Moodys wouldn't wait for him, Miss Lexie reminds him that his own daddy wouldn't wait for him. Miss Beulah readies herself to go watch Jack deal with the Moody's car because "it's a mother's place to be there and see it's done right!" Miss Lexie, however, declares that Jack "may have to do without me watching him" (LB 371, 372, 375-76). Shortly afterward, up on Banner Top where Jack grapples with the big job of saving Judge Moody's car, Miss Beulah flings herself into the human chain hanging for dear life onto the rope that barely holds the car. But Miss Lexie merely stands on the road waiting for her ride and (she says) saving her strength for other battles (LB 386).

If Miss Beulah, surrounded by family, represents a "Mother Earth," a natural maternal instinct in all its vitality and eternal vigilance, then Miss Lexie demonstrates its opposite: the shriveled and embittered human self, with no human commitment in all the world, in whom all capacity for feeling has disappeared. Although Lexie mimics a maternal role in her job as practical nurse and companion to sick and helpless old people, her vitality and vigilance have become hopelessly perverted. Her energy is spent in thwarting any natural desires of her charges and on inventing new ways to bedevil them. For example, in the guise of "caring" for Miss Julia Mortimer, whose life has been devoted to human communication, Lexie throws away her incoming letters, fails
to mail her outgoing ones, and takes away her books, her pen, and paper. When Miss Julia still finds the strength and determination to crawl out of bed to reach writing materials, Lexie ties her to the bed. Finally, Lexie just deserts her patient in order to attend the family reunion. Even Lexie's own family is ambivalent about her arrival at the reunion, for no one in the family ever dreams of calling on her for "assistance." At the reunion, all of Lexie's contributions to the family talk are negative ones. And when she leaves the reunion the next morning, she refuses to ride with the "mailrider" back to the funeral for Miss Julia, who has died in her absence. Instead, she hitches a ride with the "iceman," who is headed in the opposite direction from Banner. Her association with ice accentuates the coldness of her heart, the chill of her touch. Perhaps nothing speaks so tellingly of Lexie's complete lack of feeling as the description of her laugh, repeated twice in the first section of the book: she "dipped her knees and tipped herself back, one tip. She didn't make a sound, but this was her laugh" (LB 17).

JACK AND VAUGHN: ACTION VERSUS REFLECTION

The battle most often remarked in the novel, that between the institutions of family and education, becomes concrete in the subtle and continuing struggle within the family between Jack Jordan Renfro and his younger brother, Vaughn Renfro. We
might characterize their struggle as one between the soldier and the preacher/teacher. Both boys uphold the family heritage, but in different ways. Jack, the older Renfro boy, typifies the confident, self-reliant, headstrong man of action, admired throughout the local community for his farming prowess (*LB* 189). He has been named Jack Jordan for his great-great-uncle on Granny’s side of the family. That Jack Jordan was considered the toughest soldier of the proud Confederate Jordans because the Union army "had to starve [him] to death to kill him" (*LB* 180).

But Vaughn, the younger Renfro brother, is much more given to reflection than is Jack. Vaughn carries the family name of his great-grandfather, Grandpa Vaughn. The Vaughn men, Baptist preachers all, are honored for bringing the early foundations of civilization—the first house, the first church, and the first school—into the frontier settlement of Banner. According to the family myth, Grandpa Vaughn was also responsible for the bois d’arc which has long recorded on its trunk the family history. The tree, it is said, grew from a riding switch he dropped on the ground when he first came to the Jordan, now Renfro, farmhouse courting the young Miss Thurzah Elvira Jordan, now Granny Vaughn.

So while Jack’s name heritage is agrarian, territorial, and military, based on staking a claim to land, living in harmony with it, and defending it against all threats, Vaughn’s name heritage stems from the church, the first sign
of civilization added to the pioneer foundations of Banner. Vaughn, unlike Jack, shows every sign of adding to those civilizing institutions by embracing the substance of formal education, the first male child in the family to do so. Jack is all natural instinct and impulsive action; but Vaughn is all reflection and planned action—for better or worse, to be revealed in the fullness of time. In the eyes of his mother Miss Beulah, at least, Vaughn will always play second fiddle to Jack who, like George Fairchild in Delta Wedding, is considered by all as the protector and savior of the family.

There can be no question that in the family’s eyes generally, the older son, Jack, is the quintessential hero while the younger son, Vaughn, is a necessary but poor substitute for Jack. Of course, Vaughn has lived only twelve years compared to Jack’s nineteen. Even so, in the last two years Vaughn has carried out all of Jack’s family chores; yet the family still finds his efforts inadequate. Indeed they will always be inadequate to Miss Beulah. For her, not even added years and continuing work experience will permit Vaughn to fill Jack’s shoes. This typical example of narrowed-vision family favoritism is so common that almost any reader with siblings should be able to recognize it.

The family view of Jack emerges in one of the most vivid passages in the novel. Throughout the first part of the novel, Welty has built suspense around Jack. Reunion participants have spent several hours recounting the hero’s
trials and tribulations, and speculating on his chances of getting home from prison in time to join the celebration. Amid the family talk, the preparation for Jack’s entrance begins. In a long descriptive passage, Welty uses synaesthesia that evokes from readers feelings of excitement similar to those being experienced at the reunion. The passage’s dazzling display of sights in terms of sounds creates a dramatic, extended drum roll that introduces the long-anticipated hero.

There came a sound like a pistol shot from out in the yard. All heads turned front. Ella Fay had cracked the first starched tablecloth out of its folds—it waved like a flag. Then she dropped it on the ground and came running toward them, screaming. Dogs little and big set up a tenor barking. Dogs ran from all corners of the yard and from around the house and through the passage, streaking for the front gate.

Aunt Nanny grabbed the baby from Gloria’s knees and ran to hide her in the company room, screaming as if she herself had nearly been caught in her nightgown. Miss Beulah raced to Granny’s side. The barking reached frantic pitch as a whirlwind of dust filled the space between the chinaberry trees. As even those chatterers on the back porch and those filling the house started up through the passage, the floor drummed and swayed, a pan dropped from its nail in the kitchen wall, and overhead even the tin of the roof seemed to quiver with a sound like all the family spoons set to jingling in their glass.

Riding a wave of dogs, a nineteen-year-old boy leaped the steps to a halt on the front gallery. He crashed his hands together, then swung his arms wide.

"Jack Jordan Renfro," announced Miss Lexie to the company. "Well: you brought him."

Far from shrinking from the roar of the crowd, Jack Jordan accepts it as his natural due, even adds to the frenzied symphonic excitement with the crashing together of his hands.
like cymbals, then the swinging of his arms dramatically wide in recognition and in acceptance of the thunderous welcome.

Amid the near-hysterical tumult of the family, only young Vaughn maintains some composure. Jack lunges forward looking ready to kiss him, but Vaughn steps back, saying only, "I've got on your pants" (LB 72, emphasis mine). Thus, the struggle begins innocently enough. Indeed, Jack does not even notice the slight deflation of his exalted status as he and Vaughn then joust about with the "dried cornstalks" that Vaughn has brought, "shaking them like giant rattles, banging them about like papery clubs" (LB 72). Shortly thereafter, however, Jack is looking for transportation. When his little sister suggests that Jack drive the school bus, the only vehicle around suitable for his purpose, Vaughn immediately pipes up: "You can't. You ain't the driver, Jack, not any longer" (LB 88, emphasis mine).

Before the end of Part 1, other family members unintentionally take part in reducing the mythic-sized Jack to human proportions. His mother tells Jack that both his truck and his stud horse, his most prized possessions, are gone. And in the final put-down, his wife, Gloria, takes charge of

10Since men's pants were store-bought, rather than home-made, they were expensive and highly valued. Few farm families could afford more than one or two pair at a time. Obviously, the Renfros have one pair only for Jack. And Vaughn has temporarily taken possession of them. See Thomas Clark for more information on the value of men's pants in the rural South.
his business, ordering all the other male members of the reunion—human and canine—to sit down and stay home. She insists that she alone, with only their baby and Jack's dog, Sid, will accompany Jack back down to the road to take care of his unfinished business with Judge Moody (LB 88-89, 93).

Among the excited family members whose image of Jack is fixed, only Vaughn recognizes the series of deflations that Jack suffers during the long day of the family reunion. Even though Vaughn holds firmly to his sense of his own manhood and his responsibilities, he pitches in at every turn to assist Jack as Jack tries—unsuccessfully—to rescue Judge Moody's car. But at the end of the day when the aunts, uncles, and cousins have all gone home, and the rest of the Renfro family has gone to bed, Vaughn sets off alone on Bet, the mule, back down to the road to finish up his own particular business with the school bus. As he plods along in the moonlight, he reflects on his new view of himself and his older brother.

For a year and a half it had been "Vaughn! Vaughn!" every minute, though it would turn before he knew it back into "Jack!" again.

Or would it? Had today been all brave show, and had Jack all in secret fallen down . . . ? Could Jack take a fall from highest place and nobody be man enough to say so? Was falling a secret, another part of people's getting tangled up with each other, another danger to walk up on without warning . . . ?

(VB 363)

Vaughn's moonlight mission is to rescue the school bus, which his little sister, in a spontaneous attempt to help, has rolled down the farm track to the main road and into a ditch.
Vaughn aims to ready the bus for the morning because the new school year will begin then, and he is the new bus driver (chosen not because he's the most popular, like Jack, but because he's the best speller). Effortlessly, he and the mule haul the bus out of the ditch. "Without Jack," he remarks to himself, "nothing would be no trouble at all" (LB 364). Vaughn turns the mule loose, fills the radiator of the bus with water, climbs into the driver's seat where his new geography book raises him up high enough to see, and coasts down the hill to fire up the engine. Just a few hours before, Jack had been unable to start this engine, "stomp as he would" (LB 135). But now almost instantly the engine chirps, and then "bang, bang, bang--the engine was running for Vaughn just as any engine in the world ought to do" (LB 364). Satisfied that his bus is ready for the morning work, Vaughn returns it up the farm track to a new and hidden parking spot, returns the mule to its stall, and then climbs himself to the loft in the barn--with its "upper regions full of Grandpa Vaughn's prayers"--and falls asleep even before he can finish his own prayers.

But in battles the balance of power can shift swiftly, or at least appear to. The next morning, Jack is back in his "own pants" and Vaughn must content himself with his old "knee pants" (LB 371, 373). Despite this symbolic changing of the guard, it is still Vaughn who is up first, who has already taken the Moodys down to Banner Top, and who is completing all
the morning farm chores before leaving for school. Jack, in the meantime, returns to Banner Top where he plans, with the help of Curly Stovall and the old Coca-Cola truck, to complete the rescue of Judge Moody’s Buick. Although the two men do manage finally to get the Buick back on the road, the truck is so battered in the process that it now needs a tow, along with the not-quite-mortally-damaged Buick. The Buick’s engine is still sound and running, though all the car’s tires are flat, its doors are fallen open, its windshield and headlights are broken, its nose is "a little bit out of kilter" (LB 396).

As Jack tries to organize the party to get both vehicles down to Banner, Vaughn comes flying down the farm track, blowing his horn, negotiating the turn onto the road, and smoothly navigating around the bedraggled truck and Buick in his great rush to collect the children and get to school. Vaughn’s easy competence is set once more against Jack’s physical strength and indomitable will, but once again younger brother Vaughn complies with Jack’s frantic shouts to "Stop! Stop!" "It’s no blooming fair," Vaughn complains, even as he accepts Jack’s directions and sets to work to help Jack rig make-shift tow-lines for the battered vehicles in his charge. Only Vaughn and Judge Moody have with them tow-ropes and a length of chain; for the rest Jack uses "Trace chains, well rope, Moody towline, fence wire, and Elvie’s swing" (LB 399). Vaughn even reluctantly gives up the driver’s seat in the school bus to Jack—for just this one day only.
As a last touch to the procession of bus, Buick, and homemade truck, Jack adds mule power, Brother Bethune's white mule and the Renfro family's black Bet with Vaughn on board. Vaughn believes he will at least head the procession, but Jack sends him to hitch on at the rear where he will act as the brakes. For the brakes of the truck and the Buick are both suspect. And Jack has no faith in the world in the "emergency [brake] of the Banner School bus." Instead, he relies on Vaughn. "You've got two good mules. Each with their own good record of behavior. I trust one as much as I do the other" (LB 400). Further, the young Vaughn, as accomplished with the mules as he is with an engine, could hardly be a better choice to hold back what Jack's previous record might suggest would be a precipitous and headlong plunge down the hill road, ending in disaster. And so they proceed, presenting the startling visual image so central to the novel, the procession of vehicles we described at the beginning of this chapter.

The three big hulks ploughed their joined-up way down Banner Road, moving as they'd never been before and never would be again, in one another's custody and in mule custody, above the ragged gullies and under the shaved clay hills that were shining as though great red rivers were pumping through their hearts.

(LB 402)

In every instance Jack and Vaughn illustrate the characteristics and traditions of the ancestors for whom they are named. Jack Jordan is hard-working, loyal to family, impetuous, and in constant motion. His stance toward the world leads him to act first on any threat to his family or
his land, and to ask questions later. He is the active, physical man of the old order in the South. Vaughn, however, is a reflective planner, whose mind works like George Fairchild's in *Delta Wedding*. Equally hard-working and loyal to family, Vaughn is yet devoted to education. Although he has not left the family yet, he can already see the world beyond Boone County in books—and he dreams of seeing that world in person someday.

ONE BATTLE WON—BRIDGING THE GAPS

In contriving first to save Judge Moody's Buick and then to form and move the procession of damaged vehicles down the road to Banner, however, Jack has partially broken ranks with his inherited system of values. Judge Moody, after all, has been his mortal enemy; Curly Stovall has robbed him of his belongings and his freedom. What, then, has brought Jack to aid them?

The Jack Renfro who manages to get to his grandmother's reunion party has benefited from two more years of education, grim though they may have been. Parchman Penitentiary, located in the Delta, filled with blacks as well as whites, has provided Jack a wider perspective on reality than he has had before (*LB* 56-58). The different perspective tempers Jack's traditional Renfro family view, which resists, ostracizes, and pitied "outsiders" whose values do not coincide exactly with those of the clan. Jack now insists on
dealing with the reality of each new situation; hence, after an initial impulse toward revenge, he invites the family’s most recent "enemy," Judge Moody, right into the heart of the reunion. Further, he enlists the aid of his natural and personal "enemy," Curly Stovall, to save Judge Moody’s car.

Jack now creates alliances outside the family, an act crucial to survival in a changing world. In one of his first actions, Jack enlists the aid of his most immediate rival, his kid brother Vaughn. Despite Jack’s distrust of formal education, he wins to his side Vaughn, who "so loved Banner School that he would have beaten sunup" to get there if the doors could be opened for him (LB 364). Vaughn is the first, but he will not be the last Renfro to adapt to a changing world by embracing the education that promises different ways of viewing the world. But Jack ousts Vaughn from the driver’s seat in the school bus heading the procession, strategically situating him at the rear to handle the mules, the stalwart "tools" of the agrarian family. Even though Vaughn then winds up merely as the emergency brake, he cooperates. His role is vital to the procession and reinforces for him the value of the family ways, old-fashioned though they may be. Vaughn will never abandon his family as he shifts some of his allegiance beyond Banner to the world that he has already begun to perceive in his geography book. In this respect, he differs from Gloria, who readily abandoned education and Miss
Julia for love of Jack and now campaigns to dissociate herself, her husband and baby from the Renfro family as well.

Vaughn, thanks to Jack's example, can hold both familial and educational values in his view, each reinforcing the other. For example, in his moonlight reverie at the end of the reunion day, Vaughn looks at the Wayfarer's Bell, which has been silent all through the glorious Sunday when all the scattered family have been gathered together again in the shade of the bois d'arc. But even as he looks, his "heart quailed." For Vaughn, even at twelve, understands that though "no one was lost any more, there could be no bell that does not say 'I will ring again'" (LB 365). In Boone County, the Wayfarer's Bell has biblical as well as family significance. It also reminds us of the secular wayfarer far away from the land in the twentieth century, the wanderer who cannot come home again, either because home no longer exists or because he can neither accept nor adapt to the family's values. When the wayfarer also cannot form his own purpose apart from the old community, he becomes as lost in the darkness as Nathan Beecham.

Jack's further educational experience occurs in the family reunion story telling. There, for the first time, Jack hears Miss Julia Mortimer's side of the feud from Judge Moody. When he can see her as another human being rather than just an opposing force, he once again reacts outside of the Renfro form. He can no longer demean Miss Julia by pitying her. He
understands her passionate effort to honor her values in a losing battle even as Vaughn understands that wayfarers will still sometimes get lost. Although Jack will never embrace formal education, he can no longer criticize and pity its standard bearer, Miss Julia. "I reckon I even love her," Jack explains to Gloria. "I heard her story" (LB 361, emphasis mine). Jack has learned well the lesson of listening; he seems, also, to have added the lesson of inclusion: "Don't give anybody up. . . . Or leave anybody out" (LB 361-62). Most important, he has learned the full meaning of love. He explains it to Gloria: "Don't pity anybody you could love" (LB 361).

It is important to define "love" as Jack uses the word here, and as it is used in much of Welty's work. Jack would define love as that love commanded by God through Moses and Jesus: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19). We think of such love as that of charity for the brotherhood of humanity, charity not in the sense of pity but rather in the sense of understanding and identification. It is a charity that eschews the stereotyping born of prejudice, wherever it might be found.

The shift in Judge Moody's attitude toward Jack makes the point. At their first meeting in the courtroom, Judge Moody shows no interest in the truth and no mercy. Jack has hit the Banner town marshal and has shown no "respect for the law" (LB 56). Since Jack's crime has made him almost sub-human in the
Judge's eyes, Judge Moody gives him the longest sentence possible. But after spending a day in the "school chair" at the family reunion, Judge Moody sees the Renfro family more accurately. As he listens to the family's stories, the family assumes an all too human, all-too-familiar shape. After experiencing the family's history, its burdens, failures, and triumphs, he looks with compassion upon Jack's other possible crime of unknowingly marrying his cousin. (In the family talk, the idea has been briefly entertained that Jack's orphan wife, Gloria, might have been fathered by Jack's uncle.) The Judge's respect for the law has not lessened; but he realizes that human beings are far more complex than one isolated characteristic or action might reveal. Also, family relationships can be more intricate and tangled than even the family can know. Judge Moody is not being hypocritical, then, when he joins the Renfro family circle to sing "Blest be the tie that binds / Our hearts in Christian love."

I do not suggest that the love Welty advocates in her other works is necessarily Christian love. Often it is romantic or familial. Yet always, in her rich and intricate concept of love, lies the spark of recognition and connection that comes through momentary identification of one mind with another. It resembles E. M. Forster's key formulation: "only connect." Though Jack's sense of love is Christian, it is also mixed with identification that leads to connection. This
kind of identification occurs in the moment of revelation we will see in the final scene in The Optimist's Daughter when Laurel identifies with her step-mother, Fay.\textsuperscript{11}

LOSING AND SURVIVING

In the beginning of the thirties, no one could have imagined the cultural transition that would change forever the way of life in the Tennessee Hills. The total ruin of the one-crop system of agriculture was confirmed, the inability of generations of families to continue simply to live off the land became apparent, the rapacious growth of commercial interests in material goods and in lumber turned upside down the possibility of complete self-sufficiency, the necessity of federal relief and regulations thwarted the tradition of self-direction long valued in the country, and progress in educational opportunities would by the forties change the face of the rural south forever. Within a decade the occupation of the majority of the population would no longer be farming. The world evoked in Welty's procession of "hulks" had lost about as much as a community could and still survive.

Any person who would survive the continuing losing battles that occur regularly in an evolving society must be prepared to understand and engage all participants in the battle. In Losing Battles, the means to survival is

\textsuperscript{11}For further discussion of Welty's use of the word love, see Kreyling's "Words into Criticism," 417-19.
exemplified by the human chain that the Renfros and the Moodys form as they cling desperately to the rope that just barely holds back the teetering Buick from plunging off the hilltop. After "holding on for eleven and a half minutes," Judge Moody "suddenly broke out":

We’re all holding on here now by the skin of our teeth! Can’t conversation ever cease? Can’t anybody offer just a single idea? What’re we going to do about this? (LB 390)

The Judge’s first words look ahead to the end of The Optimist’s Daughter, where Laurel McKelva Hand speeds from the ruin of her home-place to meet her future, leaving still spiritually intact by the skin of her teeth. The significant reference in moments of human trial—in both of Welty’s final novels—to Thornton Wilder’s play, The Skin of Our Teeth, has implications for survival that we will discuss in some detail in Chapter 6.

The questions in the Judge’s outburst are ones essential to survival. The survivor must forge a course of action and follow it, regardless of whether he will win or lose the particular engagement. He must finally learn how to lose—and laugh and love and live again. Jack Renfro, as we see in the central image of the procession of hulks, manages just this path—-with the vision, ingenuity, courage, and perseverance that we expect of heroes and survivors. He will doubtless live out the rest of his life in Banner, but through choice rather than necessity—-and with the full knowledge that he could survive elsewhere if he chose.
It is his younger brother, Vaughn, however, who will actively embrace both an education and the larger world that exists beyond Banner, all the time retaining the heroic characteristics of his older brother, characteristics he has already exhibited at the age of twelve. For while Jack exhibits traces of the ancient yeoman, the fundamental Baptist tradition, and the necessity for immediate action in the face of change, Vaughn represents the future which is fast bearing down on the Tennessee Hills. Where Jack's heroic qualities are instinctive and natural, Vaughn's already are reasoned and reflective. With an education, he will be able to bring perspectives beyond just family tradition to bear on the recurring problems of human experience.

At any rate, in Losing Battles the Welty protagonist develops the open heart necessary for identification with those people who are different. He chooses participation in, rather than withdrawal from, the complex world of the twentieth century, however makeshift, inefficient, unworldly, and possibly even doomed that participation might be. If Jack has still one failing as a fully-developed Welty protagonist, it is his vision. He believes himself invulnerable as long as he has his family. As his wife reminds him, "they've taken away everything you've got . . . . Everybody's done their worst now . . . . They can't do any more now" (LB 434). Jack agrees cheerfully because, having still his strength, his faith, and his will, he knows he can provide and endure.
Besides, Jack still thinks immediately of his family as a sure and continuing line of defense against whatever comes: "They can't take away what no human can take away," he exclaims: "My family . . . . My wife and girl baby and all of 'em at home" (LB 434). Further, he plans to add more "little chaps" to the family quickly, just in case: "You just can't have too many, is the way I look at it" (LB 435).

Thus, as the novel ends, the family vitality seems intact, even multiplied. Significantly Jack sees, down in the pasture, his horse, Dan, still alive, although neglected by his new owner, Curly. Dan comes quickly to Jack's call, not all the way to his old master's waiting arms, but close enough to make Jack laugh until "tears popped out on both cheeks." Jack's joy at the sheer animal life in the stallion compensates for the fact that he no longer belongs to Jack. As Dan gallops back into the pasture, the family mule, Bet, wanders into the road. In another allusion to new beginnings, Jack swings Gloria up onto Bet's back, takes the bridle, and leads her home, singing so that "All Banner could hear him and know who he was."

Bringing in the sheaves,
Bringing in the sheaves!
We shall come rejoicing
Bringing in the sheaves!'

Sowing in the sunshine,
Sowing in the shadows,
Fearing neither clouds
Nor winter's chilling breeze;
By and by the harvest
And the labor ended,
We shall come rejoicing,
Bringing in the sheaves.

(LB 436; Shaw & Minor 359)

Looking back from the end of the century, we can see the irony in the ending, even as we appreciate Jack's courage and optimism. We know that family members, of course, are even more vulnerable than material goods. Jack's siblings, equipped with education, can be lured away by the prospect of greater horizons beyond Banner. Jack's children will be taken away by forces that are turning a rural, agricultural nation into an urban, industrialized one. Jack will have to "stand it," just as his great-grandmother, his mother, and Miss Mortimer have had to do. The whole family will eventually be taken by the great death that awaits us all. Jack is too inexperienced yet to visualize all the realities of the future that his wife rushes to embrace. Whether he will quail before that final vision of a changed world, we cannot know.

But in her next work, The Optimist's Daughter, Welty intends to test the possibility of spiritual survival despite the total loss of home-place and family.
The elegiac novel The Optimist's Daughter completes the pattern created over a lifetime by the artistic consciousness of Eudora Welty. Since Welty's over-all pattern is cyclical and continuous, the ending of this last fictional work appropriately refers the reader back to her first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman." At the same time, this device also refers the reader beyond Welty's canon, to similar circularity in a work by another twentieth-century artist--the playwright Thornton Wilder. Thus Welty does more than dramatize, by her structure, Eliot's credo, "In my end is my beginning." Her reference helps to identify that theme in her own work by pointing the reader to its familiar treatment elsewhere--an indirection characteristic of Eliot and other leading modernists. Also, of course, while disclosing her theme in this way, she simultaneously reinforces it by suggesting its wider applicability--again, a device central to the method of those modernists I mentioned earlier.

Actually, Welty's referential process is additionally complex in this case. For the Wilder play to which she alludes, The Skin of Our Teeth, calls attention to and turns on both of the thematic patterns signalled by her allusion: the cyclicity of history and nature, and the supporting suggestion that great works of art address fundamental human issues that do not change with the other changes of history. As we will see at the conclusion of this chapter, the first
act of Wilder's play (1942) echoes Welty's first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" (1936); later portions of the play echo Welty's belief--reflected throughout her canon--that artistic masterworks are a sustaining resource; and the play's conclusion dramatizes circularity.

We have observed throughout her works that for Welty human experience retains the same fundamental patterns, despite differences in the specific times and places that shape communities and their individual members. What varies in the pattern she presents are individual reactions to historical time's inevitable changes. Just as the natural world is subject to change wrought by catastrophic forces beyond human control, human communities reflect continuous shifts in world view brought about by historical forces beyond individual control. Welty portrays different types of communities fostering different illusions to help their members survive emotionally during the inevitable decay and death to which all human systems, like all human bodies, are subject. The accruing suggestion of her works thus far has been that most human beings require such illusions. Yet several of her protagonists have been brought to the verge (Virgie, notably) of both perceiving and acting upon a reassuring awareness of fundamental continuities in history and nature; such perception and action could free them to cope with inevitable changes in their personal lives or their
communities without the support of restrictive, evasive illusions.

Until *The Optimist's Daughter*, however, no Welty protagonist has been portrayed as clearly achieving the fullness of experience Welty's works have defined (by default) as an achievable human goal: the ability at once to see and to feel and to act. We have construed the obstacle to that achievement from the illustrative failures and near-successes of all Welty's protagonists considered together to this point. It is that as long as human beings can salvage some aspect of their familiar personal or cultural circumstances to be dependent upon, they will restrict their vision and their experience accordingly, when faced by cultural change. Total deprivation of the familiar would seem to be required before a Welty protagonist can break free of restrictive illusion.

And that, indeed, is the condition in which Welty places Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter*; that is the extremity that drives Welty's ultimate protagonist to the ultimate realizable human accomplishment pointed to in earlier works. As Laurel is forced to cope with her personal and cultural deprivation, the novel traces her progress toward the liberating perspective afforded by nature and history. It is because that progress and that liberation are so similar to those of Wilder's protagonists in the play just mentioned, that the allusions to the play are particularly useful to Welty. But before I discuss that intertextual commentary more concretely,
I want to explain in some detail the complex internal structure of Welty's novel. Since her ultimate protagonist must be without anything to "squint" at, the timing of Welty's return to composing fiction was highly opportune; for it was during the decade of 1960s, a decade when all fundamental cultural assumptions were undercut more completely, possibly, than at any other time in the lives of her readership during her career. Accordingly, perhaps, she employed the contemporary period. Although The Optimist's Daughter identifies the historical time of its setting only indirectly, there is enough information to confirm the decade. We know that Laurel is in her mid-forties, and that her husband, Philip Hand, was killed when a "kamikaze pilot" struck his ship during a war-time battle. Since "kamikaze" attacks occurred during the 1940s of World War II and Philip Hand has been dead for some twenty years, we can deduce that the action of the novel takes place in the sixties, a period when particularly high expectations of social order were entertained by many and, for many, seemed betrayed. A new president's "new frontier," the "bright, shining moment" of "Camelot," was cut short by internal disruptions of established order: the non-violent civil disobedience of the Civil Rights movement and the often violent responses to it; the assassinations of the president himself, his brother, and civil-rights leader Martin Luther
King, Jr.; the divisive and sometimes violent protests against the nation's presence in Vietnam; and other disenchantments.

The circumstances to some degree match those Welty needed her protagonist to face, and Welty's indirection in disclosing the historical time serves to emphasize the fact that such disruptions are cyclic, not confined to any one age. The "new frontier" resembled that of the early nineteenth century in its division and violence. Yet the spirit of the 1960s was even more threatening to expectations of human order than that of the early 1800s had been. No longer did citizens think of building a unified nation; the populace seemed bent on dismantling all traditionally unified structure. We can therefore accurately characterize this era, one in which "the center did not hold," as a chronotope of the centrifuge.

In keeping with this chronotope, the novel departs stylistically from the opulent detail and experimental layers of Welty's earlier novels. The prose is stripped and meager. No music sounds except for a lone, mocking trumpet in the dying night of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, the incessant song of the mockingbird in the Mississippi town of Mt. Salus, and everywhere the noise of people "blundering." The form of Welty's final fictional letter to the world fits precisely the world through which the protagonist, Laurel McKelva Hand, travels. For Laurel travels light, having made few commitments since the early death of her husband, Philip Hand.
As the plot unfolds, Laurel loses the one other human connection in her life, her father, Judge Clinton McKelva, the traditional optimist of the title. We recall that Jack Jordan Renfro in *Losing Battles* assumed that loss could not hurt him as long as he still had his family. Laurel’s situation tests that belief. What happens when all family is lost, as well as everything else? Deprived of intimate human connection and even ejected from the family home, Laurel faces the fact that she is at last an orphan, completely alone in the world. Even as she recognizes her altered condition, she also receives the full impact of the change in the traditional belief system that governed her upbringing, a change so profound that she cannot begin to imagine how to confront it. The Judge’s surgery in New Orleans for a torn retina in his right eye, his inexplicable decline and death in the hospital, his funeral back home in Mt. Salus, Mississippi, and its aftermath for Laurel prompt Laurel to an elegiac meditation on the nature of humanity, memory, and time itself. Her meditation leads her through a private journey of rage, despair, revelation, and renewal that enlarges her vision, penetrates the shield of her locked heart, and enables her to start over again the difficult and dangerous job of building a life in an unfamiliar world.

Employing a technique by now familiar to us, Welty recreates Laurel’s experience through dialectical opposition of characters and times and imagery of fire and hands, as well
as through intertextual allusions. Certain characters embody the values of past and present, and suggest the shape of the future. Most obvious among the paired foils are Laurel and her step-mother, Fay Chisom McKelva, almost the same age but products of completely different worlds. Among the minor male characters, pairs from different worlds emphasize common values important to survival in difficult times. In efforts to reconstruct their pasts, all the pairs highlight the fallibility of memory. Even more startling and equally revealing is the dichotomy created between artificial human time and natural solar-lunar time. In the four weeks needed for the plot to unfold, the human time of man-made watches, clocks, and calendars governs Laurel’s movements. But even as the minutes tick off in the earth-bound world of Mt. Salus, Mississippi, subtle allusions and misdirections in the human time of the plot point to a natural world in which the patterns of time and experience repeat themselves endlessly. The frequent allusions to similar observations by other creative artists in other times and places (there are more than the Wilder references) strengthen the novel’s submerged assertion that individuals survive change best by comparing their personal and cultural vicissitudes to the larger pattern of recurring change in human history and natural processes. "All things fall and are built again" (Yeats 566, 1.35).
A TRIO OF PROTECTORS

In conveying the lost spirit of the American past, Welty uses fire imagery to characterize two minor characters who in different ways share Judge Clinton McKelva's strength and limitation. Like the Judge, Mr. Dalzell, the hunter, and Major Bullock, the soldier, are protectors of a way of life. Despite the extreme difference in their social classes, both men—Mr. Dalzell, the judge's hospital roommate, and Major Bullock, the judge's long-time family friend—explicitly acknowledge the ancient, invaluable element of fire. Fire represents for them a substitute for the sun, a powerful life force in the natural world. We remember in The Robber Bridegroom the deification of the Natchez Great Sun, who derives his power from the natural sun.

Fire has always played an important role in Welty's imagery. Starting with her first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," Welty associates fire with light, warmth, life, and revelation. The ailing salesman, Mr. R. J. Bowman, is set to "trembling" at the hearth of a primitive cabin when his Promethean host and benefactor, Sonny, enters with his "borry[ed]" fire trailing behind him (CS 127). Bowman drinks Sonny's home-made moonshine "just as though he were drinking the fire off the hearth." "This is good," he announces. "This is what I needed" (CS 128). But Bowman's comfort is short-lived. As he lies by the fire trying to sleep, he thinks of the couple in the home--Sonny and his pregnant wife
--and slowly realizes the great secret contained in the primitive house: "a fruitful marriage," "the ancient communication between two people" (CS 129). In contrast, the emptiness of his own life fills him with emotion and makes him wish that the coming child were his own (CS 129). But as dark night presses in, the fire grows fainter. For Mr. Bowman, who is well and truly "lost," revelation comes too late for action; before dawn, his diseased heart explodes and consigns him to oblivion.

In The Optimist's Daughter, Mr. Dalzell also lies in the dark, along with Judge McKelva. He is "blind, and nearly deaf" (OD 20) and, like Judge McKelva, he is dying. While Judge McKelva no longer bothers even to speak, Mr. Dalzell speaks as much as possible during his final days, but he speaks only out of his past. His monologues resurrect past hunting trips and repeated admonitions to his "long-lost" son, Archie Lee. Over and over, Mr. Dalzell prods Archie to keep alert: "You gonna load that gun or you rather be caught napping?" Even more important is the need to tend the fire: "Don't let the fire go out, son!" (OD 28, 29). Unlike Mr. Bowman, however, who seemed never to have realized how close he was to death, who wanted desperately only to "get back to where he had been before" (CS 129), Mr. Dalzell senses the nearness of his final destination. As he is taken from his room for the operation which will prove futile, he mutters, "Told you rascals not to let the fire go out" (OD 31).
Mr. Dalzell’s remarks give us some insight into the feelings of Judge McKelva, who speaks rarely and then not at all in the hospital room. The Judge has protected his family and community not with guns but with the high ideals of man-made law. But law has not prepared him to function in a changed cultural context any better than his friends can. Laurel senses that he is merely concentrating on time passing, even counting off the minutes, as his inner fire flickers ever more faintly. In his blindness, the old "optimist" at last sees through even his final illusion that he can "save" Fay or anyone at all. The Judge has entered what E. M. Forster calls the "twilight of the double vision," the state in which "the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time" (Passage to India 207); and he is arrested there. Like Mrs. Moore in Passage to India, the Judge withdraws with his knowledge, losing all desire to communicate in any way with anyone (OD 150). Realizing that he can never get back to exactly where he has been, he cannot accept a basis for going forward at all.

The Judge’s old family friend Major Bullock does, of course, continue to nourish the illusion of the protector. His methods resemble Mr. Dalzell’s in their special attention to guns and fires, the mainstays of past times. At Judge McKelva’s funeral, Major Bullock reenacts a past which required guns for defense and fires for important occasions (OD 80, 65). But since the illusion he still cherishes is the
one Judge McKelva finally relinquished before death, Major Bullock's optimism is presented as ironically temporary. For he believes that he can in some way "help" Fay, the Judge's now apparently defenseless young widow—who is in reality an unresponsive creature of values foreign to him. In past times, the obligation of the family friend to assist in times of trouble had been clear-cut and easily assumed. That such assistance might be useless and unwanted is a fact as incomprehensible to Major Bullock as it would be to any other thoroughly conventional man of his community, even to such an isolated and unworldly farmer as Grandpa Chisom.

Grandpa Chisom, Fay's paternal grandfather, is compared to Mr. Dalzell by Fay in her first reference to an individual member of her family. Although she has claimed that her family were all dead and that her grandpa died in her arms, he appears at the Judge's funeral very much alive, as do members of Fay's maternal family. Grandpa Chisom, a farmer, resembles Mr. Dalzell only in his close relationship to the land. He has a clearer sense of his bearings than do the other men, but he has kept it by secluding himself in Bigbee, Mississippi, a place hard to find on a map and miles away from even the crossroads through which a bus to town passes. Grandpa Chisom is obviously alone, self-sufficient, and polite, in the old courtly, back-country-gentleman style. He leaves his pecan trees and anchoring farm when duties owed to the dead create the need, but he hardly knows the modern world beyond his
"Where I got lost," he explains, "is after I got inside of Mount Salus" (OD 77). In his willed innocence (and consequently diminished understanding), he is unable to distinguish Laurel from Fay. Throughout the day he bestows his gift and his familial kiss on Laurel, asking no questions and expecting no reply. Grandpa Chisom has finished with the world outside Bigbee. Like Clement Musgrove in The Robber Bridegroom, who clings to Rodney's Landing after his romantic illusions are shattered, Grandpa Chisom knows his safe place and stays in it. He elects to "squint," however much that reduces the light of reality reaching his eyes. The "something bright"—in his restricted life as well as in his "old man's hatband"—is "the other half of his roundtrip ticket from Bigbee" (OD 96), taking him back to his retreat.

Although this generation of protectors exemplifies different classes, professions, and illusions, their extended families are almost identical. Their sons or sons-in-law are inept, missing, or dead; their daughters or daughters-in-law are crippled in some way; some of their sons and grandsons are diminished and suicidal. The broods headed by Mr. Dalzell's daughter (inversely called "Mama") and Grandpa Chisom's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Chisom, belong to that "great interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them" (OD 84). Both women cluster their families around them and insistently deny the realities of modern life. "Mama," for example, resists modern medical
treatment, preferring her versions of old wives' tales. Her personal belief that all dying folks should have water prompts her to declare war on the hospital staff, if necessary, to moisten the throat of her dying father. With equal dogmatism and confidence, Mrs. Chisom expounds similar unexamined theories, slightly adapted to conform with the modern consumer world and its emphasis on packaging: widows must make a great show of grief in order to express it; high-priced coffins signify the depth of the family's love; familial devotion can be maintained only by physical proximity. No issue is too vast or too complex for Mr. Dalzell's daughter, Mama, or for Mrs. Chisom; their personal experience covers it all—they assume.

With their fathers and grandfathers dying, absent, or destroyed, it is inevitable that the older sons in these two families will be well nigh defenseless in the face of their families' backwardness and the unremitting demands of the modern world. Without any of the fire so carefully guarded by their elders, both sons fix upon suicide as an escape. While Mr. Dalzell in his hospital room retreats to the past and speaks endlessly of passing humanity's torch for safekeeping to his young son, Archie Lee, the now middle-aged Archie sits in the hospital waiting room and methodically drinks whiskey from a pint bottle, sullenly pursuing the slow suicidal path he has chosen. Finding talk useless, he refuses to take his turn for a last visit with his father and petulantly mutters
that "Mama" (who is actually his sister though he speaks to her as if she were his mother) would do a greater service to their father by just shutting up. Archie Lee has long since been lost to his father and the rest of the world alike. For the practice of a simple country life is not possible in the second half of the twentieth century, for someone without financial means. To avoid all aspects of modern life, to hunt and live off the land, is not an option for Archie. With no land, no education, no natural gifts, and no habits of mind except denial and escape, Archie has anesthetized himself for the duration, sullenly waiting to die and have done with it.

Mrs. Chisom's oldest boy, Roscoe, had been less patient. Fay's brother had already committed suicide by the quick and simple method of closing off the kitchen windows and turning on the gas. Mrs. Chisom's grief at the time had been somewhat mitigated by the fact that "he didn't do nothing any more serious to harm his looks. ... In his coffin he was pretty as a girl" (OD 75). The irony of her evasive consolation illustrates her comfort with show rather than substance, a pattern to be duplicated later in her widowed daughter's show of grief.

Mrs. Chisom's other sons continue to live in trailers drawn around their mother's house; their replication of a nineteenth-century wagon train drawn in a tight circle for protection implies that they are stuck forever in the past. DeWitt, the one son who, according to Fay, "talks my
language," is an appliance repairman who never repairs anything (OD 98). Broken-down machines accumulate in his yard while he sulks in his trailer, complaining that not enough attention is paid to his feelings. Fay's brother Bubba, who has at least accompanied his mother to the funeral, runs a wrecking business which consumes almost all his time. The youngest Chisom male at the funeral, Mrs. Chisom's ten-year-old grandson Wendell, exudes an air of inquisitive innocence, the only Chisom there who elicits some positive feeling from Laurel. But even as young as Wendell is, he has already absorbed the Chisom motto, proclaimed on a tin "bumper sticker" on their pick-up truck: "Do unto others before they do unto you" (OD 90). Dressed in his cowboy suit with double holster and guns, he quickly offers to shoot any "bad man" who makes his Aunt Fay cry. His parting shot to the McKelva home is literally that: "Pow, pow, pow," sound his guns as he sways in the back of the pick-up truck, heading back to Madrid, Texas (OD 100).

The name "Madrid" is significant here. For, we remember, it is associated with the New Madrid earthquakes and the year of the anni mirabilis, 1811-1812, when movement of the earth, originating in southeastern Missouri, was so great that it caused the Mississippi River to run backward, flooding the land and disrupting life even in the states of Mississippi and Tennessee. The allusion to New Madrid, coupled with the wrecking business run by Bubba Chisom, can scarcely be more
suggestive in its implication. The destructive power of the Chisom family, reaching its zenith in Fay, has the potential for just such far-reaching devastation, intruding as it does on this Mississippi community.

HAND

In contrast to all the other men in the novel stands Laurel's idealized mental image of Philip Hand, her long-dead husband who remains for her a moral example for the modern world. Laurel characterizes him as the one member of her family able to "do" things—with his hands, his head, and his artistic ability. Throughout the first section of the novel, Welty introduces images of human hands carrying out basic functions essential to a fully realized, civilized life. Welty's frequent use of the trope of hands, explicitly associated with Philip Hand, makes it almost too obvious that the dead Philip represents a model of a worthy and admirable man, who never closes his eyes to the world around him.

In the opening pages of the novel, for example, repeated references to the hands of the male characters demonstrate functions of the hand and, in the cases of Judge McKelva and Dr. Courtland, round out their characterizations by evoking a time and community when trust was taken for granted among men who were both responsible and competent ("handy"). For example, a hand holds or grasps, as Judge McKelva holds his glasses "in his hand," preparatory to his eye examination.
When Dr. Courtland enters the room, the two men shake "hands" (OD 3), a social act symbolizing a promise of friendship or agreement. This symbolic act depends not so much on legal contracts written out by hand as on a traditional faith in the honesty and good will of the two individuals involved. Dr. Courtland’s "big country hands" (OD 4) characterize him as a man with a large and practiced capacity for hard, physical accomplishment. In the judge’s case, Laurel remembers him as demonstrating less strength and practice in physical work, as "holding the shears in both hands," he had earlier attempted inexpertly to prune a bush in his back yard (OD 6). The Judge’s strength lies, rather, in another function of the hand, that of exercising authority and "handing on" traditions or laws: before he retired from the bench, he used "to hand down" a sentence (OD 7). In the present, however, Judge McKelva submits himself to the doctor; "I . . . put myself in your hands" (OD 10). For Dr. Courtland exhibits not only physical skill, but the moral ability to care for, and supervise the fate of, another human being, to model the "good hands" that we trust to "handle" our affairs. "'I'm in good hands, Fay,' Judge McKelva told her" (OD 11).

But for Laurel, Philip Hand had the best hands. Like Dr. Courtland’s, Philip’s were "large, good hands," bespeaking the character of the Ohio country boy he had been. Even more striking than Dr. Courtland’s, however, were Philip’s "extraordinary thumbs--double-jointed where they left the
palms, nearly at right angles; their long, blunt tips curved strongly back." To Laurel his "right hand" when it went "about its work" looked "like the Hand of his name" (OD 161).

Laurel's respect for the hand is clear. Though we take the human hand for granted, Welty reminds us that it is a distinct feature of humanity; the hand's opposable thumb is the major source of our ability to become fully human. Out of the hand's capacity to make and use tools has grown the brain's capacity for continuous development of intelligence. In perhaps its most magnificent function, the human hand began the process of recording and preserving human history, in pictures and in written words. In ancient days, God himself was represented as a hand extended from heaven.

It is Phil, too, whose hands could create; as Laurel explains, Phil had "the gift of his hands." The work of his hands, was "sound and beautiful" (OD 175, 176). By his example--"to work toward and into . . . [a] pattern, not to sketch peripheries"--Philip had taught Laurel to make the most of her gift, too. Even though he had acknowledged readily the truth that nothing made by humans can last, he had designed "houses to stand, to last, to be lived in" (OD 162).

Fulfilling his obligation to his country, he had taken his gift of hands to war, disdaining the safe but passive role he might have occupied as an army engineer, in camouflage, to go directly into the territory of the enemy on a "mine sweeper in the Pacific." "I like to see a thing finished," he had
explained. Appropriately, he had become a "communications officer" on the ship (OD 161-62, 162). In a final irony for the man with the gift of hands, Phil had been killed when an enemy plane had come even closer than needed "to shake hands with" (OD 162). By thus inverting the usual association of the handshake—the mutual respect and trust demonstrated by Judge McKelva and Dr. Courtland—Welty adds yet another violent reminder of the modern reign of distrust and disorder.

The breadboard made by Philip, for Laurel a symbol of the "whole solid past" with which Laurel confronts Fay, represents as well products of the artist's hands. Philip's creations were not only practical and useful; they were beautiful as well, "made on the true" to remain for decades "as straight as his T-square" (OD 175, 176). In its combination of all the human gifts of imagination and craftsmanship, the breadboard represents for Laurel the values of a lifetime, its creator the epitome of all that is best in the human creature. The existence of the breadboard gives proof that Laurel's life itself has had value. For, thinks Laurel, the past "has been everything and done everything to me, everything for me" (OD 179). It is little wonder that Laurel, in her confrontation with Fay, lifts the breadboard overhead, "out of Fay's reach" and, like Ishmael during the destruction of the Pequod, clings to it as to "a raft in the waters" (OD 177). If the breadboard and the values it represents cannot be saved from desecration, if time itself destroys the work of human hands--
work meant to stand forever, if people now deny or denigrate the past, then for what purpose has Phil's life been sacrificed? What has been the point of her own sacrificial existence? Those are the issues at stake for Laurel in this crucial scene.

In her despair, Laurel experiences the final revelation, one received, not—like the first—through dreams, but rather through the saving grace of memory. Although she "had been ready to hurt Fay," to sink to Fay's pitiful fighting level, Laurel does not. For "such is the strangeness of the mind, it had been the memory of the child Wendell that had prevented her" (OD 178). Only four days before, Fay's little nephew Wendell had entered Laurel's view; he was open-mouthed, "about seven, fair and frail," his face as yet "unguarded" (OD 69, 70). Wendell's feelings are still fully intact: curiosity about Judge McKelva's funeral and about his Uncle Roscoe's death, sadness for his grandmother's sad story, and joyful exuberance at the sight of his paternal great-grandfather, Grandpa Chisom. To Laurel, who wanted to guard the child from his destructive family, Wendell was like "a young, undriven, unfalsifying, unvindictive Fay" (OD 76). The memory of his face and feelings restores Laurel's own feelings, unlocks her heart. And with the memory comes her final understanding about the past. The past is dead, is "impervious" to either praise or blame. But human memory acts as a "somnambulist," unconsciously carrying from the past what may be needed in the
living present. Memory, unlike the past, is not impervious to "wounds"; precisely by virtue of its vulnerability "to the living moment," memory continues to live (OD 179). Despite its injuries, memory can still deliver some moment of the past to relieve the suffering of the human heart in the present.

As important to Laurel as all of Philip Hand’s other virtues is his capacity for love. Of all the characters in the novel, he is the one whose heart remains vulnerable to life’s possibilities. We learn this from Philip’s own voice, as recreated in Laurel’s memory on the night she begins to feel again. In raising up the past, Laurel discovers "Phil himself--here waiting, all the time, Lazarus. He looked at her out of eyes wild with the craving for his unlived life, with mouth open like a funnel’s" (OD 154). Laurel had survived his death by locking up the memory of him in a stain-defying shroud of perfection. Her heart had become a closed casket for her perfect companion and for all the feelings that had accompanied their lives together. To protect that perfection, Laurel had effectively buried herself with her dead. But on this final night in her family home, confronted with the tangible evidence of the life that had existed in it, Laurel is overwhelmed by a "flood of feeling" (OD 154). And "yielding at last" the iron effort of control required to suppress that feeling, Laurel finds that the "deepest spring in her heart had uncovered itself, and it began to flow again" (OD 154).
In the midst of the flow, even as she imagines the things that might have spoiled that perfection "If Phil had lived," Laurel hears Phil’s voice: "Laurel! Laurel! Laurel! . . . I wanted it! . . . I wanted it!" (OD 154-55). His voice circles "around the house and around the house" and becomes "a roar," reminiscent of the famous Marabar Caves scene in Forster’s Passage to India. There the indiscriminate magnification of sound became an echo that could "undermine" one’s "hold on life" (Passage 149). There old Mrs. Moore had sensed the ultimate reality: "Pathos, piety, courage--they exist, but are identical, and so is filth" (Passage 149). And there the young Adela Quested had suffered something like "an hallucination" which enabled her eventually to recognize the truth about herself, that she had been "living at half pressure," just on the surface of life (Passage 239), had adopted a near-permanent squint, Eudora Welty might say. But the experience of the Marabar Caves helped her to correct her squint, to live again at full pressure with open eyes and vulnerable heart. Laurel’s experience is almost identical. Laurel, too, has fled from life, is "half-dead" with her "frozen memory" (Carson 137, 152). The revelation in her mother’s old sewing room corrects her "squint," reopens her heart, and nudges her back toward life.
CLOCK-CALENDAR TIME VS. SOLAR-LUNAR TIME

In order to place Laurel's experience of historic time in the larger perspective of cosmic time that Welty envisions for her final protagonist, *The Optimist's Daughter* moves beyond the mythical associations with time that we have seen in Welty's earlier works. By the 1960s many people felt themselves already in touch with a future that seemed to obliterate the need for mythologies from the past, traditionally used by human communities to sustain them in the confusing present and to provide hope for the future. Humans now were journeying into space to explore scientifically the mysterious heavenly bodies whose constellations had for so long mesmerized and reassured earth-bound creatures. In such an environment, Welty de-emphasizes the old myths as gauges of ultimate reality and turns instead to empirical knowledge of the natural world for time references in the rhetoric of the novel. Using a characteristic technique, she develops in the novel a dichotomy between artificial time, ordered by the human ingenuity of clock and calendar calculations, and natural time, ordered by the constant cyclic patterns of earth, sun, moon, and stars. By the novel's end, the clock-calendar time of her fictional microcosm has, in fact, been firmly absorbed by macrocosmic solar-lunar time. Accordingly, the novel's final scene, as we have mentioned, affirms a larger perspective on human experience in time, placing it in the context of reassuringly constant cycles of natural time.
In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel McKelva Hand's consciousness of time evolves from an initial anxious concern with every moment of clock time to a final liberating sense of release from clock time altogether. Welty evokes this consciousness for the reader through subtle references to time measurement units and casual allusions to holidays and festivals, all of which help to measure the duration of events in the plot. But as we come to see, these references not only raise questions about what appears to be a realistic depiction of historic time, but also insistently highlight the unreliability of the clock and calendar time created by humanity to order its civil business. As Laurel experiences the progressive death, loss or destruction of father, home, belongings, and cherished memories, the language of the novel moves more surely away from clock time and into solar-lunar time. In modernist fashion, Welty holds back explicit comment on the implications of her language, expecting her readers to look closely at the temporal details of her plot for provocative and apparently implausible information that will illuminate a range of meaning in the persistent allusions to time. That information, as usual in Welty's work, is topically specific, requiring in this case some recourse to technicalities of time measurement. Further, the information is presented both indirectly and fragmentally, as revelation comes to us in life. Our tenacious participation is justified, therefore, as we discover that the shift thus
revealed from artificial to natural time confirms the positive thrust of Welty's closing view on the means to human survival in time's destructive stream. The final scene portrays Laurel, like Job, stripped of everything in her familiar world, but nonetheless emerging triumphantly into a solar-lunar time of spring renewal and revived hope in life's promise.

To illustrate Welty's method, we must follow her through some of the complicated calculations that attend her allusions to time. Indeed, we must first distinguish her two meanings for the word "time." So far throughout this study, we have noted Welty's use of time in its sense as "epoch"--as an era, a location in history. But in The Optimist's Daughter, Welty also uses time as "interval"--as measurement of the passage of time. In ancient cultures, such measurement followed the cycles of the sun, the moon, the stars, the seasons--natural time markers important and easily accessible to a predominantly agricultural world. These cycles accounted for the natural time divisions of the day, the month, and the year. Over the course of history, nations and cultures have tried, in varying degrees, to devise artificial ways to measure nature's cycles of time consistently enough to accommodate the regular patterns of their lives.

Only in the modern period have human societies all over the world been persistently forced to regulate and standardize measurement of even the tiniest intervals of time, a move that
has required considerable human and mechanical calculation. For despite its regular rhythms, the natural world does not move in intervals nearly so precise as those required by modern science and industrial nations. Thus, humans have developed ever more complicated versions of what is here referred to as artificial time, that time, for example, by which the date of the vernal equinox is determined by a mathematical formula rather than by the always changing actual times that the sun intersects the celestial equator in any given year. Succeeding centuries have always artificially "corrected" solar-lunar time in order to create various calendars that serve the religious and civil needs of human communities. The twentieth century has merely intensified and standardized increasingly minute time measurements in order to serve systems necessarily adapted to machines and computers.

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1See Goudsmit and Claiborne, Chapter 3, for a more detailed explanation. In brief, natural units of time—the day, the month, the year—are based on recurrent astronomical cycles; but the astronomical cycles of the natural world "do not fit neatly together" (58). The day comes from the earth’s "24-hour rotation on its axis," but the rotation is sometimes slow, sometimes fast (55). The month is measured by phases of the moon, but since the full lunar cycle is slightly over 29 1/2 days, the year’s accumulation becomes not 12 months but 12 1/3 months. The year, produced by earth’s revolution around the sun, results in 365 and 1/4 days rather than the 365 days that grace our calendar (58-59). Only once every 19 years do the erratic cycles of sun and moon assume the same "phase relationship" to each other (59). These figures have caused calendar makers trouble for at least 5,000 years (58).

2For details of calendar constructions and "corrections," see Goudsmit and Claiborne, especially pages 58-75. Just recently, scientists have been forced to add "leap seconds" to clock time: the last "leap second" was inserted on June 30, 1997.
We will first examine the changing nature of calendar time in *The Optimist's Daughter*, a need indicated by Welty's references to the holiday of George Washington's birthday and to the festival of Mardi Gras, the only calendar events mentioned, other than Straw Hat Day. The holiday reference appears early in the novel when Judge McKelva explains that on Washington's birthday he had suffered his eye "disturbance"—flashes of light that made him think he had "started seeing behind" himself (*OD* 4-5). Contemporary American readers know the date of Washington's birthday to be February 22, for that is the date marked on their calendars. But Washington was actually born on February 11. His birth-date shifted in 1752, when England and her colonies finally accepted the Gregorian calendar, the "corrections" that Pope Gregory XIII had made in 1582--170 years earlier--to the Julian calendar (Couderc 190). One of his corrections had been to eliminate ten days from the current year. By the time England and her colonies finally adopted the Gregorian calendar, they had to drop eleven full days rather than ten from their current year. At that time, then, George Washington's New Style calendar birthday became February 22. In other corrections, ones that yield information relevant to the end of *The Optimist's Daughter*, Pope Gregory had also moved the date of the new year back to January 1 and had reestablished March 21 as the date of the vernal equinox. Under earlier corrections to the Julian
calendar, March 25 had marked the beginning of the new year as well as the date of the vernal equinox. Under this Old Style calendar, each new year had begun on March 25 (Goudsmit and Claiborne 74).

By themselves, these oddities of history raised by the reference to Washington's birth-date would seem insignificant. However, the next reference given to date the plot is Mardi Gras, a marker for the beginning of the period of Lent and the ensuing celebration of Easter Sunday, the sacred days of the most important "Moveable Feast" in the Christian world. Western readers are thus likely to assume automatically that the novel has a Christian theme of death followed by resurrection—especially in view of the emphasis on biblical mythology in Welty's previous novel, Losing Battles. Yet the scant details about time in the plot of The Optimist's Daughter contradict this initial assumption.

Judge McKelva dies on the last night of Mardi Gras—Shrove Tuesday, and his body is carried home to Mt. Salus on the next day, the first day of Lent—Ash Wednesday. Although Lent always begins on the Wednesday following the last night of Mardi Gras, the date varies from year to year, depending on the date set for Easter. This date is also an artificial, variable, human-made date, one that must fall "within a 35-day period between March 22 and April 25," at least in Western churches (Ford 560). The necessity for the artificial date
stems, of course, from the incompatibilities of calendar cycles and astronomical cycles.3

Yet Judge McKelva’s death cannot realistically be connected to an actual Easter date because he does not die early enough to allow for the period of Lent before Easter. The Judge sees the doctor in "early March," undergoes surgery to repair his retina immediately, but dies in the hospital after "three weeks." A three-week hospital stay, beginning in early March, carries the characters at least to March 21, the calendar date of the vernal equinox. But Lent—the forty-day penance period preceding Easter Sunday--must always begin before the date of the vernal equinox in order to meet the formula requirements that set April 25 as the very latest date that Easter Sunday could ever be celebrated.4 Therefore, an Easter motif could work only if Judge McKelva had died just two weeks into the hospital stay.

Since we cannot assume an absent-minded mistake in Welty’s calculations, the reference to Mardi Gras must be seen to serve a purpose different from its usual one; in this case,

3Since the Council of Nice, 325 A.D., the Easter date has been calculated by a mathematical formula involving an astronomical date to signify the vernal equinox, a full moon to mark the Jewish Passover month, and a following Sunday to note the Christian holy day celebrating Christ’s resurrection (Ford 560; Goudsmitt and Claiborne 58-60, 107). By averaging over several years the dates on which the astronomical day (extending from noon to noon) is perfectly balanced between light and dark, scientists have been able to approximate times for the equinoxes, spring and autumn.

4Such a late Easter last occurred in 1943.
it does not introduce the Christian holy days of penance before the Easter revival of life, but rather it calls attention to the pagan origins of those holy days. The night of Shrove Tuesday especially is the one in which the Dionysian origins of Mardi Gras are most imitated, and the inversion theme of the festival's revelry reaches its zenith. For a night, at least, traditional human order is overturned; human behavior becomes Dionysian--uninhibited and out of control.

It is just such uncontrolled behavior on the part of Fay Chisom McKelva, who aches to join the riotous throngs in the street, that finally causes Judge McKelva's death. In her frustration, she "lays hands" on the Judge, though the doctor has ordered that the patient lie perfectly motionless until his treatment is complete. In a fitting irony, moreover, we discover that this particular Mardi Gras night marks the date of Fay's birth. Early in the novel, then, Fay is associated with the disruption and inversion of traditional order that culminate in the disenfranchisement of her step-daughter, Laurel.

For Welty's purpose in the novel, Mardi Gras and the month of March itself not only draw attention to questions of artificial time and solar-lunar cycles, but also emphasize the image of a world turned war-like and upside-down. The month of March, after all, honors Mars, the god of war. The Judge's New Orleans death, occurring at the culmination of Mardi Gras festivities, sets the stage for Fay's inheritance and her
apparent victory over Laurel in all matters pertaining to her father, her parents' belongings, and her family home. Laurel's subsequent loss of control over every part of the world that has ordered her life marks an extremity of deprivation and defeat.

But indirectly, Welty develops—through the dichotomy of time allusions and their ensuing revelations of clock and calendar time's instability—a thematic motif of Old Style renewal. Laurel shifts from an almost obsessive concern with artificial units of time measurement during the hospital vigil in New Orleans to a consideration of natural units of time measurement when she is alone at Mt. Salus, fully aware that nothing remains for her of the material and cultural world in which she was raised. During the hospital stay, when time for her is governed by clocks and watches, Laurel refers only to artificial divisions: "It's three weeks," she says to Dr. Courtland of her father's hospital stay (OD 24, emphasis mine). She and Fay divide each day into eight-hour segments (OD 17, emphasis mine). As Laurel reads to her father, she checks off time, "moment after moment" (OD 25, emphasis mine).

But after Judge McKelva's funeral in Mt. Salus, the language of the novel emphasizes natural divisions of time measurement. Laurel feels the "spring sun" (OD 105, emphasis mine). She thinks of this "month" in her life. She remembers the extraordinary experience of the train ride (discussed in the "Introduction") in which, passing over the confluence of
the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, she and Phil had felt the confluence of "the whole morning world," and Laurel had felt they would live forever (OD 160, emphasis mine).

We remember, too, that Old Style Julian calendar-reckoning dated the beginning of a new year not on January 1, but on March 25, the date also proclaimed by the Julian calendar as the date of the vernal equinox. Also, we will see in the final scene that Laurel, having begun her saga on a Monday, also leaves her family home on a Monday, the first day of the artificial time unit of the week. She leaves on the stroke of noon, which in astronomical time is the beginning of the natural time unit of the day—"the morning world," figuratively speaking.

The time markers given in the plot are not intended to specify that it is March 25 when Laurel steps off the porch of her family home for the last time. For the whole point is that human knowledge cannot precisely determine celestial timing. But we know that the date is between March 24 and 28—appropriately approximating the Old Style New Year—and that the date is clearly not associated with Easter, as our calendar-time consciousness has prompted us to assume initially. What is exposed is our illusion that human experience can be predicted and measured by human logic. What is implied is that we can find reassurance and continuity in our human experience of the world only in the cyclical patterns of the observable natural universe, cyclical timing.
that is irregular in the short term, yet consistent in the long term. When we contemplate this perspective, we understand Laurel’s perception that experience does finally "get set into its right order, which is not always the order of other people’s time [societal time]" (OD 174, emphasis mine).

The expanded consciousness of time that Laurel attains at last might be explained best by a pictorial image that subtly dominates the McKelva family’s living room. On the mantel above the fireplace sits a grandfather mantel clock—sometimes working, sometimes not—surrounded by three Chinese paintings. The sounds of the clock, a subtle "whirr" (OD 178) punctuated by striking hours, invade the consciousness in the house. But the three Chinese paintings that surround the unreliable clock are in a "changeless grouping," featuring scenes of still and "motionless" time (OD 73). In Chinese classical tradition, the paintings depict, respectively, "cranes in their circle of moon, a beggar with his lantern, the poet by a waterfall" (OD 171). In traditional Chinese landscape painting, each of these scenes has specific symbolic meaning. The cranes in the light of the moon speak to long life and immortality; the beggar with the lantern points to the search for truth and enlightenment; the poet—the most-highly respected artist in ancient China—and the waterfall signify the value of art and its ability to preserve experience in time and to place it in proper perspective. The juxtaposition of the McKelva family’s
grandfather clock and the Chinese landscape paintings places time in *The Optimist’s Daughter* in its proper perspective. The symbol of artificial micro-time, technically called "small time"—specific intervals of human activity—is surrounded, encompassed by symbols of astronomical macro-time, technically labelled "big time"—the continuous cyclic rotation of earth, the sun and moon to which it is bound, and the countless other celestial bodies that make up the cosmos (Sivin 152; Goudsmit and Claiborne 123).

Welty’s pictorial image alludes at the same time to the celebrated pictorial lines from William Butler Yeats’s poem "Lapis Lazuli," a recent (and Western) work of art whose theme is also replicated in hers. The poet’s final lines describe a gift he has received, a scene carved into a piece of lapis lazuli:

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,  
Are carved in lapis lazuli,  
Over them flies a long-legged bird,  
A symbol of longevity;  
The third, doubtless a serving-man,  
Carries a musical instrument.  
Every discoloration of the stone,  
Every accidental crack or dent,  
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,  
Or lofty slope where it still snows  
Though doubtless plum or cherry branch  
Sweetens the little half-way house  
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I  
Delight to imagine them seated there;  
There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.  

(566-67, 1.37-56)
Moved by the "ascetic, pupil, hard stone," Yeats had written of the carved lapis lazuli a year before he wrote the poem. The "supreme aim," he had remarked, is an "act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy" (Friar 551). That, certainly, describes Laurel's final, liberating accomplishment, as she gains the vision of these ancients. It is a vision based on the poem's central recognition, that "All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay" (566, 1.35-36)—exactly the perception freeing Laurel for a more complex optimism than her father's, one open to change because it allows for time's eventual readjustments.

Both Welty's novelistic presentation of time and Yeats's poetic one awaken the reader to the existence of overarching patterns in the natural world that confirm our experience of inevitable individual loss but continual human renewal. For "change, by which we measure time, encompasses everything" (Goudsmit and Claiborne 128). This truism is as ancient as the earth. But only in modern times, according to Goudsmit and Claiborne, with Darwin's publication of The Origin of Species, did the existence of such "big time" become "a concept that could no longer be ignored" (126). As a writer who has never "ceased from exploring" time and change, Welty has fashioned in her final novel a reminder of both the order and the disorder subsumed by time; harmonious melodies and dissonant chords both claim their rightful place in the movement of time.
In Welty's world, the heroic human survivor of time's effects must be fully conscious of his or her place in time. For, explains Welty, it is only in the "sense of our own transience" that we may find the "one irreducible urgency telling us to do, to understand, to love" (Eye 168, emphasis mine). As Welty's most exemplary protagonist faces once more, then, the responsibilities accompanying mortality, she understands full well time's ravages as well as its gifts--memory, attention, and anticipation. If Laurel does not quite rejoice as she hurries from her lost family home, neither does she falter. For in the few days at Mt. Salus, Laurel has experienced a spiritual journey and revelation, leading from feelings of anger and despair to rediscovered feelings of love and hope.

While Fay remains in the kitchen with her "squinted up" eye, Laurel realizes that memory lives "in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams" (OD 179). The "patterns restored" and the revelation experienced in her final hours at Mt. Salus open Laurel's eyes to the implications of the clock and the Chinese paintings in the family home. Her human losses in "small time" take their rightful and comforting place in the "big time" patterns of the natural world. Her vision is that of T. S. Eliot's late work:

We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars.

("Burnt Norton" II, 119)

Humans long for order, for plausible answers to difficult questions, for dates that coincide with meaningful intervals, for closing lines that leave us feeling undisturbed about the universe. But in The Optimist’s Daughter we see, finally, just what Laurel sees: that we can never control Time; that whatever knowledge future epochs might produce, we still will not be able to answer all our questions about the mysteries of life and the natural world; that the best we can ever do to survive Time is to understand its patterns and our place in them, open our hearts to the possibility of love and connection, and use the gift of our hands to participate in the interval of life we are given.

Laurel’s departure from Mt. Salus suggests just this uncertainty about the future, along with the survivor’s renewal of hope for a new world. The bridesmaids, arriving to

5To emphasize this epistemological paradox is the function of Welty’s careful attention to the incompatibility in the human mind of equally valid clock time and cosmic time, together with her deliberate presentation of certain aspects of the plot (the exact physiological circumstances of Judge McKelva’s death, for example) as apparently ambiguous to human logic. All the details of Laurel’s psychological liberation suggest her awareness of this paradox. Thus, what may seem at first reading to be a flaw in Laurel’s vision—a self-deceptive glossing over of ambiguity—is rather, I suggest, her informed ordering of events, based on her acceptance of the inevitable ambiguities that exist within human time.
drive Laurel to the airport, sound a "tattoo"—a call to quarters, on the car horn. As they drive Laurel past the school house, they see Miss Adele and her first-graders in the school yard. Miss Adele waves, and so do the school-children. Laurel's last sight is "the twinkling of their hands, the many small and unknown hands, wishing her goodbye" (OD 180).

WILDER

The final scene of The Optimist's Daughter confirms and reinforces Welty's comment on time, humanity, and the universe. As Laurel whisks herself out of her old world, never to know it again, her friend Tish exclaims, "You'll make it by the skin of your teeth" (208 emphasis mine). The expression thus refers to a time interval, the smallest possible one, perhaps, since it means "only just" or "just barely." But the expression comes originally from the book of Job in the King James version of the Bible, where the wording and the connotation are slightly different. After having been "destroyed ... on every side," the righteous Job questions God and asks pity from his friends, for, he says, "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth" (Job: 19.10, 20, emphasis mine). Since teeth have no skin, Job's description informs us that he retains his life, but has been left with nothing else at all, a hyperbolic description which equally well fits Laurel McKelva Hand.
Both interpretations of the metaphor apply to Laurel's situation, and both apply to that of the protagonists in Wilder's play *The Skin of Our Teeth*, verifying the allusion I mentioned at the outset of this chapter. Welty's prepositional stress on the expression's reference to a time interval is useful, I think, because that meaning is more familiar to most readers and thus more effective in encouraging them to contemplate parallels between novel and play. Yet the original, biblical stress—on survival bereft of anything else—is the more essential implication of Welty's allusion, considered in the context of the play as a whole. *The Skin of Our Teeth* is an allegory in which members of the Antrobus family (representing Adam and Eve, their children, and thereby all people of all times) repeatedly face and survive—both "by" and "with" the skin of their teeth—multiple, literal destructions of their material world. In each of the play's first two acts, the members of the Antrobus family face the coming destruction as they always have: they get up every day, do whatever they can to stem the coming tide, and then go about their usual business of discovering ways to improve the human condition.

By the beginning of the third act, their familiar surroundings have been destroyed once by ice, once by flood, and once by prolonged war. Nonetheless, when the third-act curtain rises, all the members of the Antrobus family are once again in place, ready to start again. Although Mr. Antrobus
has just about lost the desire for rebuilding, his spirit revives when he remembers the things that have always sustained him in the past. Especially important to him in his severest trials have been his books. Now, in the midst of the battlefield rubble that surrounds his home, Mr. Antrobus uncovers a few tattered remains of his beloved library. He remembers the lonely hours on the battlefield when his only comfort was derived from reciting his favorite passages from these books. Actors portraying the final hours of the night come on stage, and each "Hour" recites one of the comforting passages. The memorized words from the world's Great Books fill the stage as the Hours of 9, then 10, then 11 o'clock sound. On the stroke of midnight, these lines are quoted to complete Act III:

And the Earth was waste and void; And the darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Lord said let there be light and there was light.

(SOOT 249-250)

At the last word, the stage is plunged into total darkness. And then swiftly, before another sound, the lights flash on again, and the play starts over from the beginning: Act I, Scene 1.

Welty must surely have had this scene in mind when, in 1973, she wrote her essay, "Some Notes on Time in Fiction" (Eye 163-173). She ends her "Notes" by affirming that time itself may well be a novel's subject as demonstrated with the examples of Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust. Proust's accomplishment she explains in this way:
Proust, discovering a way to make time give back all it has taken, through turning life by way of the memory into art, left masterpieces that are like clocks themselves, giant clocks stationed for always out in the world, sounding for us the high hours of our literature. 
(Eye 172, emphasis mine)

Welty's ending signals Wilder's. Her approach in the novel has been to focus on the destruction of the "world" of one person's consciousness, rather than to address the issue allegorically, as has Wilder, by portraying a literal end and new beginning of the entire human race. But as novel and play echo each other, their implications are consistent. Welty's protagonist enters her new world at high noon, the beginning of an astronomical day, near an Old Style calendar's New Year's Day, and early in the New Style calendar's spring season. Laurel Mckelva Hand's individual experience in an interval of time illustrates the great epochal pattern of human history which Wilder attempted to capture. Since all human systems "fall, and are built again," survivors endure by recognizing their time and place in the age-old patterns of human history, and by observing those patterns of artificial time in the greater context of the astronomical cycles of natural time.

Welty, we remember, resists any squinting which might distort or narrow the human eye's field of vision. Such narrowing causes human beings to see only the immediate circumstance of their own particular day and valley, time and place. As we have repeatedly seen Welty demonstrate, in a life's work portraying different times and places, true
survivors must open their eyes fully to the world, facing both its beauty—the joy of beloved family and friends, the reassurance of familiar cultures—and its terror—the total lack of human control over the certain loss and destruction that accompany the relentless flow of time.

Laurel starts over with not one shred of the past stability of home and family to steady her. She retains, however, the use of her hands and—through memory—the intimate connection to life and love that brings comfort to the lonely human heart. As she begins life anew, going forth to meet the day in time with nature's order, her ensuing commitments to life and her readiness to build again are inevitable; there is no need to specify them. The novel's goal is realized, and with it that of Welty's canon.

The allusion to Wilder's play completes Welty's pattern of timeless and circular renewal in yet one more subtle way. Both artists emphasize the importance of fire, the paradoxical source of life as well as destruction. In the opening scene of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the Antrobus family must "borrow fire"; otherwise, it faces extinction in the final moments of the ice age. It is this act that reminds us of the pivotal scene in Welty's first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman." For in that short story, we noticed earlier, Mr. Bowman asks for help from the primitive couple who must "borry fire" to warm their own hearth and to revive the lost and confused salesman who has found himself at their door.
"In my end is my beginning": Eliot's words indeed proclaim the pattern thus completed by Welty, as the artist herself looks both ways at once in establishing her place among the major writers of the twentieth century.
In writing this study, I have attempted to combat the tendency to underestimate Eudora Welty’s importance in modern literature, a miscalculation based largely on the assumption, as I have said earlier, that her work reflects no conscious thematic structure. A recent reviewer, discussing the critical study *Eudora Welty’s Aesthetics of Place*, illustrates this tendency: "Perhaps she [Eudora Welty] does not have an aesthetics of place, or even a theory of aesthetics in general; she is, in any case, a much better writer than thinker."¹ To counter this attitude (and the resulting tendency toward impressionism in general references to Welty’s work), I have traced discernible patterns in her canon that can be described and communicated in classrooms as well as in scholarly discussions.

Welty’s patterns become more visible when we apply to her work a paradigm of modernism. In most of her texts, she focuses on periods of change that consistently illustrate inevitable disruption to familiar worlds. Her characters register events through subjective individual consciousness of intense moments in time rather than as objective duration of standardized calendar time in history. However, believing with T. S. Eliot that "Only through time time is conquered" ("Burnt Norton" 120), Welty creates as settings accurate

microcosms of cultures in specific times and places in American history, usually in specific sections of Mississippi. Also, by means of allusion, intertextuality, or ironic juxtaposition, she invokes ancient myth or past times of cultural transition that parallel her surface plots and pluralize temporal times of disconnection and loss.

This controlling vision that unites Welty's various microcosms of time and place affirms her modernist belief in mutability as the dominant pattern of history; yet her vision also provides assurance that each human being can find continuity in his or her resources of human connection, memory, and art. Welty attempts, like Thornton Wilder, to find "a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life" by showing how they are set "against the largest dimensions of time and place" (Wilder "Preface" xii). The challenge to Welty's composite protagonist is to maintain a constructive sense of purpose in life even as he or she copes with the inevitable loss of cherished cultural syntheses. The composite protagonist who develops gradually in Welty's canon into an emotionally and spiritually-intact survivor must learn first to face reality and comprehend the meaning of his or her own experience of it. Further, the fully realized protagonist must also lift his or her hands "to make or do" in the community even while keeping the heart open and vulnerable to the spontaneous experience of life.
The insights requisite to surviving change and living fully in each transient moment emerge artistically from the whole of Welty's work. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Laurel, who reflects at one point that "Surviving is perhaps the strangest fantasy of them all" (163), recognizes only in the final scene with Fay the necessity for keeping the heart open so that surviving remains actual life, not fantasy. To reiterate the stages of Welty's indirectly-expressed belief, explicated in this study, we might return to the example of Thornton Wilder's play, *The Skin of Our Teeth* to which the final dialogue in *The Optimist's Daughter* points.²

Wilder's protagonist, Mr. Antrobus, succinctly explains the elements that sustain an individual facing the challenge of survival. In the final act of the play, as he remembers his narrow margins of victory over despair and the temptation to give up the struggle to live again, Mr. Antrobus states his understanding to his wife, Maggie:

Now I remember what three things always went together when I was able to see things most clearly: three things. Three things:

(He points to where SABINA has gone out.)
The voice of the people in their confusion and their need.
And the thought of you and the children and this house.
And . . . Maggie! I didn't dare ask you: my books!
They haven't been lost, have they?

(SOOT 247)

In Welty's canon, as in Wilder's play, the "confusion" most central to human experience occurs when familiar cultures

²In his "Preface" Wilder acknowledges that this play is "deeply indebted to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*" (xiv).
disintegrate, as—for Welty—all cultures must in all times and places. The "need" of the people is to find a way to live with that loss. For Welty, as for Wilder, the intimate connections of family and home supply a strength that allows for separation and death. For Mr. Antrobus, alone on his battlefields, the "thought" of his loved ones suffices. For the ultimate Welty protagonist, Laurel Mckelva Hand, who has no such human connections left, "memory" corresponds to Mr. Antrobus's "thought." As long as it remains "vulnerable to the living moment," memory carries across time the abiding sense of human identification and love essential to human survival in Welty's fiction. In memory, too, live the patterns revealed by art, for Welty as for Wilder. Mr. Antrobus, in his war-time struggles, names the "hours of the night" after authors whose passages have intimated the continuity of these three fundamental stays against confusion (SOOT 248). Welty, following the modernist method, as I have shown, embeds in her works mythology, books, paintings, music, dance, and folk art—all available to memory if not to the present moment, and all constituting tangible reminders of times of shared belief.

But the final words must be those of the artist Eudora Welty, whose vision affirms not just the falling of all things but the building again. "Any life," Laurel comes to understand, is "nothing but the continuity of its love"; and love, as memory, lives "not in initial possession but in the
freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams" (OD 160, 178).
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