Fusion of Inner Mind and External Life in Welty’s “Delta Wedding”

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Abstract: This article aims at taking a fresh look at Psychological Realism from a modern perspective. Psychological realism offers the possibility by allowing readers to reconstruct each aspect of information offered in a text through the different "angles" or "perspectives" that they choose to view it. Eudora Welty’s Delta Wedding achieves an accurate and effective portrayal of psychological realism, which is understood for the duration of this essay as a strong emphasis on deep interior characterisation and an understanding of how these interior psychological processes influence external actions.

Keywords: Psychological Realism, Eudora Welty, Delta Wedding

This article aims at taking a fresh look at Psychological Realism from a modern perspective. The reading of literary texts is not the same as reading expository texts as they offer different kinds of information to the readers. Expository texts deal mostly with facts. Literary texts, on the other hand, deal with life stories; and being life stories, will also incorporate (among other things) human behavior, different geographical, cultural, and political settings and perhaps a host of other things. Psychological realism offers the possibility by allowing readers to reconstruct each aspect of information offered in a text through the different "angles" or "perspectives" that they choose to view it. It is a process that allows for the creation and recreation of new texts out of the same text - not marring content but weaving instead a beautiful and colourful tapestry out of these pieces of creation.

"The theory of "psychological realism," influenced by American pragmatism and phenomenology, has evolved from James Gibson's ecological psychology of perception. Psychological realism analyzes the interaction between persons and environments, each being defined only in terms of the other. In 1884, Henry James announced that the “supreme virtue” of fiction, and the quality by which its success should be judged, resides in its ability to produce an “air of reality,” or an “illusion of life." James, like many other American writers of the late nineteenth century, embraced an aesthetic of realism, which valued unsparring, accurate representations of the psychological and material realities of American life. Some realist writers, known as “social realists,” were interested in exploring problems of economic inequality and in accurately capturing the experience of urban life that was transforming the nation at the end of the nineteenth century. Others, known as “psychological realists,” were more concerned with delving beneath the surface of social life to probe the complex motivations and unconscious desires that shape their characters’ perceptions.

The 1940s saw the flourishing of a new contingent of writers, including poet, novelist- essayist Robert Penn Warren, dramatists Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, and Tennessee Williams, and short story writers Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty. All but Miller were from the South. All explored the fate of the individual within the family or community and focused on the balance between personal growth and responsibility to the group.

Eudora Welty is a Pulitzer Prize winning American novelist, who has transformed the common American landscape by her literary efforts into Mississippian colour and code. A clear and proper understanding of the Southern Literature is essential to comprehend Eudora Welty as a novelist with modern standards. South’s literary Renaissance has come in the twentieth century when the region was changing from a settled; contained community into its modern role. Realism in Southern literature is supposed to have started with Ellen Glasgow. She was justly proud of her role in opening up new areas of experience in fictions. There was never a time in America than this, when private life seemed so much more attractive than the public life. The quest for privacy was reflected in the fiction of the period.

Human dependency and human interdependency are the twin poles in which Welty’s fictional imagination turns. Her works shows a pre-occupation with themes of love, human separateness and isolation and awareness of the drama of the inner self in the process of perception and communication. The themes are by no means unique; it is her approach to them is unique in its sensitivity and subtlety. The mystery of inner life is
Eudora Welty’s central concern. This mysterious inner world is revealed through the inner mind of the characters. To her, the inner world is always, ‘new, alluring, and mysterious’.

“This Fiction”, Welty says, “has must keep a private address. For life is lived in a private place, where it means anything is inside the mind and heart” (Eye of the Story 178). Her works are largely concerned with the mysteries of inner life. She explains that, to her:

The interior world is endlessly new, mysterious and alluring and relationship is a pervading and changing mystery: it is not words that make it so in life, but words have to make it so in fiction. Brutal or lovely, the mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extremes they run to (Eye of the Story 179).

Welty is always interested in the inward life of her character. She is even willing to risk obscurity or too much obliqueness in her attempts to provide the reader with delicate psychological effects and sensitive insights. Welty is perfectly willing to give us normal people, ordinary folk, though in her perspective, their inner lives often turn out to be not in the least ordinary. But like many other Southern writers of the twentieth century she frequently writes about people who are isolated, cut off from the usual human relationship or even twisted and warped physically or spiritually.

Although most of her fiction took place in Mississippi, she was not confined to this region, either in her fiction or sensibilities, and the critic Ruth Vande Kieft points out that “for all of her attachment to Mississippi, Eudora Welty has also shown a detachment, a breadth of perspective, that comes from both her personal history and her temper cement” (Vande Kieft 9). However, in order to write stories that took place outside of Mississippi, Welty explained, “I had to write every one of them from the point of view of the traveler or the outsider” (Conversations 329). Further she illustrates,

We cannot in fiction set people to acting mechanically or carrying placards to make their sentiments plain. People are not Right and wrong, Good and bad, Black and white personified; flesh and blood and the sense of comedy object. Fiction writers cannot be tempted to make the mistake of looking at people in the generality — that is to say, of seeing people as not at all like us. If human beings are to be comprehended as real, then they have to be treated as real, with minds, hearts, memories, habits, hopes, with passions and capacities like ours. This is why novelist begins the study of people from within (Eye of the Story 806).

Through her Fiction, Eudora Welty mirrors the spirit of the decadent age of the thirties and forties by exposing man’s imperfection by showing how man falls short in expressing himself and is in competent in communicating with others, and inadequate in his communication. This is because we are bound and inhibited by our mental process, by our memories, obsession, prejudices and reactions. Our vision of reality is top sided and limited because we are retreat too far into our inner ideal kingdoms, or permit, at the other extreme, our thinking to be harnessed predominantly at the sensory level by the material environment.

Eudora Welty deals with the themes of isolation, loss of innocence, disorientation, separateness, depravity and madness of individuals together with a pervading sense of guilt and grotesquery. She is interested in decadent and isolated individual characters. Welty’s individuals in their subtle relationships with other individuals, who are often grotesque, fail to know themselves or their neighbours. Again on the part of her characters it is a frustrated attempt to love and communicate. Her people, both of the city and of small town, live isolated lives seeking love, recognition and identity in the society to which they belong and from which they drew their substance. In her fiction there is an irrepressible struggle between the individual and the institution, between the individual and the environment and the struggle of human beings against the unconquerable forces of the world where the quintessential man is pitted against the inexplicable cosmos. Welty was aware of the disappearance of traditional values and the coming of technical age had disoriented man from his secure past. She wanted to communicable modern man’s anxiety and uncertainly through his fitting channel of communication. Welty writes that there is “no explanation outside fiction” for her stories; they are gifts from the writer. She continues,

It is not from criticism but from this world that stories come in the beginning; their origins are living reference plain to the writer’s eye, even though to his eye alone. The writer’s mind and heart, where all this exterior is continually becoming something—the moral, the passionate, the poetic, hence the shaping idea—can’t be mapped and plotted. (Eye of the Story, 109)

Miss Welty's stories go deep into the motives and moods and compulsions that move her characters—but we never doubt that they live and have their being not far from the streets of Jackson and the bayous and cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta country or Natchez country. Part and parcel with elevating everyday activity to the level of literature was the detail of description that realism sought to register. It certainly has in Miss Welty's case. Her full length novel, Delta Wedding, has all the Excellencies of her short stories with all the advantages of a wider pattern. It gives her a chance to tell us more about her people and their ways of life; it gives us the pleasure of seeing a full drama rather than a one act play. And, beyond that, it is true to human life as you will find it at a considerable distance from the Mississippi Delta. Eudora Welty believed that a novelist had a responsibility to bring alive both the mystery of humankind and the darkness. That's exactly purchase what she
does in this story: As you read the closing line, you know she has captured life in Mississippi as it existed then, as well as the prevailing cultural mindset.

*Delta Wedding* is Miss Welty’s first full length novel in which she presents a clear psychological analysis of the Delta family through a nine year old girl Laura McRaven, a victim of loneliness. It is the study of the relationship among the individual members of Fairchild family, on what distinguishes the men from the women, the insiders from outsiders, the perplexities of their relationship to each other and society, unique joyous or painful growth of each private sensibility, both as it reflects the others and it begins to discover it. Despite this family warmth and shares activity Welty beautifully points out to the readers, that the Fairchilds are private identities. Their thoughts and feelings seldom break into words, their perceptions are intuitive and their analysis is internal. The setting for the story is Shellmound, the Mississippi plantation that is the home of Battle Fairchild; his wife, Ellen Fairchild; and their eight children, as well as of various female relatives and black servants. Welty uses this specific setting to depict some of the major cultural challenges facing the Mississippi Delta in the early part of the twentieth century.

*Delta wedding*s nine-year-old Laura recognizes herself as a member of a wider community of life through her sensory interaction with non-human living forces. Laura sees herself in the larger community of the natural world:

Outside, she picked up a striped kitchen that was stalking through the grass-blades, and held him to her, pressing against the tumult in her fingers and in his body. The willful little face was like a question close to hers, and the small stems of its breath came up and tickled her nose like flowers. In front of her eyes the cardinals were flying hard at their reflections in the car, drawn up in the yard now…… A lady cardinal was in the rosebush, singing so hard that she throbbed between her shoulder blades. Laura could see herself in the car door too, holding the kitten whose foot stretched out. She stood looking at herself reflected there-as if she had gotten along so far like an adventurer in an invisible coat, as magical as it as unsuspected by her. Now she felt visible to everything. (*Delta Wedding*, 72)

Laura doesn’t become “visible” to herself and others until she becomes immersed in the non-human environment – the throbbing heartbeat of the cat, the singing bird, and even the reflective surface of another “Machine in the garden”, the automobile. It is the keen awareness of the living presence around her, rather than the flat bodies in the Fairchild portraits that gives Laura the ability to see herself as an embodied member of “the flesh of the world”, no longer hidden by her status as an outsider but now fully visible to those around her. The world becomes a viable source of knowledge and communication. In other words, there is something that nature and the non-human can offer, that “they themselves” create within one’s own body. Such a radical shift in perception begins to smudge the edges of other boundaries erected by society, such as class, race and gender. By creating a world in which protagonists realize that there is “another way to be” based on what might be learned when “you felt, touched, heard, looked at things in the world”. (*Delta Wedding*, 42)

Welty’s Delta landscape embraces the ecological tension between decay and fecundity, acknowledging life’s pain and uncertainty while also finding in its very ambiguity the possibility for positive transformation. Her emphasis on the individual’s tangible, physical interaction between all living beings offers an alternative route to knowledge that resonates with other modernist experiments including stream-of-consciousness writing and other novel explorations of human subjectivity. Further, perceiving the world as an embodied being stimulates a new awareness of the ways in which all people (of all races), and possibly all living beings (human or otherwise), are equal partners in the world.

An overall reading of Eudora Welty’s literary canon reveals a remarkable number of rivers and streams, while careful considerations of these salient features in her imaginative landscapes demonstrates her sustained personal and creative engagement with them throughout the course of her career. Welty establishes geographical and historical realism with the rivers of her native Mississippi, but she also employs them to a larger thematic and symbolic purpose. As both realistic images of cultural changes in her region and archetypal symbols of psychological transformations in her characters, the bright surfaces and of course depths of Eudora Welty’s Southern rivers reveal the most profound themes and meaning of her writing. Welty’s first full-scale novel *Delta Wedding* marks an even more complex recreation of rivers in her work. The narrative of *Delta Wedding* is suspended between its realistic surfaces and its psychological depths.

All readers of Welty’s fiction encounter her recreated rivers, and some critics of her work consider some of these streams individually; analyzing all of Welty’s literary rivers provides an additional index to her genius of place and in turn, to the place of her genius as one of the truly great writers to emerge within the geographical and historical limits of Southern literature.

In Southern literature, interactions with the land have often defined the people themselves. Although Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* has been labeled as a southern pastoral, the natural world in the novel doesn’t operate solely on a symbolic level; the environment Welty creates is thoroughly palpable. The heaving shoulder blades of birds in song, skin wet with Bayou water, the heartbeats of kittens, and the sting of a bee-are example of how non-human forces interact with her characters to create a natural world that is tactile and animate. Furthermore, character’s sensory contact with the natural world shapes the novels’ themes of finding community.
and coping with the pain and loss necessary for new growth, as well as destabilizing hierarchical relationships between different classes and races of people. Understanding how nature functions as a physical presence in the novel is critical to recognizing Welty’s critiques of the society living within it. In her autobiography, Welty explains “[t]he outside world is a vital component of my inner life” (One Writer’s Beginning, 76). Similarly, her characters, Laura and George, gain new insight into their relationships with other human and the land through embodied encounters with the environment. The philosophy of ecophenomenology illuminates how Delta Wedding intertwines humans within ‘the flesh of the world’ in this case, the daily symbiotic union of humans and the landscape of the Mississippi River Delta, portending the slow evolution of positive change created by sensory interaction and small variations in repeated cycles of life. Thus, an ecocritical approach to Delta Wedding troubles reductive readings that oversimplify how Welty characterizes the rural South and reveals the novel’s subtle disruption of social hierarchies.

Eudora Welty’s Delta Wedding achieves an accurate and effective portrayal of psychological realism, which is understood for the duration of this essay as a strong emphasis on deep interior characterisation and an understanding of how these interior psychological processes influence external actions. To understand how Delta Wedding exemplifies psychological realism, we must consider the psychology of the mind itself, drawing on theories from both philosophers and psychologists, focusing on William James, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud, and their theories of the stream of thought, metaphysics and creative evolution, and dream theory, respectively. These theories, placed within the context of Welty’s use of the mystery of inner life in Delta Wedding, illuminate her successful attempt to infuse her novel with psychological realism as she explores the complex processes of the interior mind.

Psychological realism in Welty’s Delta Wedding is clearly not merely approached or attempted, but fully achieved. Her representation of the interior mind is stunningly accurate, and undoubtedly modernist not simply in her style, but in what she is choosing to portray: focus on the internal psychology of character, fragmented as it may be, is a far cry from novels which seek only to tell a story. Delta Wedding does indeed successfully tell a narrative story, but it also tells the story of the human mind, in all its glory, or even lack thereof. As a novelist, Eudora Welty is concerned with human life in its myriad hues and shades, the unfathomable mysteries of human personality and the subtle unfolding of human relationships in the act and process of actual living.

References