

Themes In Eudora Welty's Short Stories

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William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, two of the most outstanding Southern writers of U.S.A. have made their impact on the literary scene by their realistic stories. Reynolds Price and Anne Tyler in particular, have acknowledged their indebtedness to Welty, for, it was her writing which inspired them to explore the immediate world around them. Though the nature of life in the Southern States of U.S.A. have rapidly changed, its representative writers, especially Flannery O' Connor and Carson McCullers have learnt from Welty that the language, characters and concerns of the South are valid materials for exploring human truths.

The scope of this chapter is to analyse Welty's major themes viz, theme of mysteries, the theme of love and separation, the theme of isolation as explored in the stories. A Memory Flowers for Marjorie, A Still Moment, Death of a Travelling Salesman, Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden and A Piece of News.

Welty considers that a writer's primary concern should be human nature and only human nature.

I mean human nature, of course, fictions which world is human nature. That will never be changed either I suppose. But the imagination is the only thing that can find anything about it and the only way you can see it. (Boyd 8).

Welty generally analyses the fundamental issues of like in her short stories and probes into the impalpability of existence in human beings. She deals with human nature mainly with the inner world, the changing mystery and the enigma of man's being She projects the fact that love

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and separation are a recurring phenomena in human relationship. The theme of isolation is of utmost importance in Welty's stories., because she believes that isolation leads to contemplation which inturn leads to self realization. Welty's characters possess none of the other qualities normally associated with Southern country people in the work of other writers.

Welty's short stories are undoubtedly dotted with misfits and lonely men but her characters are not Faulknerian like that of grotesques, degenerate morons, perverts or madmen. They are not obsessed with sex, tormented by guilts, or driven to commit acts of violence and outrage. If they were any of these they would undoubtedly be far more compelling as characters but far less convincing as people. Welty has to be admired for having the courage to preserve them in their authenticity, even if she has had to forfeit some measure of dramatic intrest.

While the theme of human existence and experience is pervasive throughout Welty's works, it is more eloquently dealt with in the first two volumes of her short stories a curtain of green and the wide net. Welty explores the individual's relationship with society and how it differs from person to person , by analysing the characters deeply. Thereby she brings out the conflict and dilemma in which they often find themselves in.

Welty herself says,... you have idea of human nature which gradually take form as a character probably from an observation of thousands of things mixed together (Rogers 9)

Welty here highlights the fact that individuals differ from each other and therefore prove to be unique. Her characters remain distinct despite the disillusionment and disenchantment with various aspects of their lives. Her main characters achieve magnitude and profundity mainly because of their awareness and enigmatic quality.

Welty, however, depicts the externals of personality such as mannerisms and habits, for, they serve as an expression of the inner-self or the personality which lies beneath the mysteries of human nature

Welty herself says,

The sense of mystery in life do well to be aware of. And of course, I think we do try to suggest the mystery in writing a story ... by simply presenting way things happen (bunting 57)

The stories from volume 1 and volume 2, a memory, flowers for Marjorie and Still Moment portray the theme of mystery effectively. Welty's keen insight and understanding of people enable her to penetrate into inmost recesses of human nature and seize the elusive essence of human life that is intangible. To quote Ruth M. Vande kieft:

Miss Welty's [works] are largely concerned with the mysteries of inner life. She explains that to her the interior world is new and alluring and relationship is a pervading and changing mystery ... the mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to. The term mystery has here to do with the enigma of man's being – his relationship to the universe; what is secret, concealed, inviolable in any human being, resulting in distance or separation between human beings; the puzzles and difficulties we have about our own feelings, our meaning and our identity (Eudora welty 14).

One of the most memorable stories of Welty a memory is more or less autobiographical. The narrator is a young girl, sensitive and naively austere, who tells how her day-dreams on a city beach are interrupted by the arrival of a disquieting group of bathers – a man, two women and two boys.

The sight of these perverted but ordinary looking people on a public beach erases from the girl's mind all thoughts of the boy she loves, the subject of her morning reverie; and the disorderly state in which the people left the scene makes her feel the insubstantiality of the youthful dreams. A memory as the title indicates refers to the young girl's remembrance of the young boy about whom she knows nothing but with whom she is fiercely in love. The story is one of the best written 'brutal' mysteries of Welty.

The mystery in the above mentioned story lies in the very nature of the girl child and her reaction to the unpleasant behaviour of the bathers which provokes her to foresee a bleak future. She wants to identify with whatever comes in her vision and make judgements according to that. Since the child has a passion for form, order and control she has an urge to identify and categorize everything. She does this by making small frames with her fingers as she says, “ever since I had begun taking painting lessons, i had made small frames with my fingers, to look out at everything” (collected stories 75).

She makes this in order to impose some kind of order upon reality. She is of the view that reality can be discovered or perceived only if one is patient and vigilant as it is always hidden somewhere. In other words, reality is not something conspicuous. Mystery here refers to the secret that may never be completely revealed and when girl’s remark at this instance proves this: “I do not know even now what it was that I was waiting to see but in those days I was convinced that I almost saw it at every turn (collected stories 75). Another instance of the child’s experience of an uncanny feeling is when her boy friend had a nose-bleed. When the boy had a nose-bleed it shocked her as it was “unforeseen but at all same time dreaded”, (collected stories 76). She leaned heavily and fainted and it was at that moment she received her first clear revelation of mortality. Though it appears to be a trivial incident, it offers the child an insight into the ultimate reality that is death. The commotion that follows the boy’s sickness reminds her of the chaos that exists in this universe.

That incident makes her all the more anxious about the boy and she recognizes sudden violence, the horror of reality against which she is helpless. Therefore she muses, “I felt a mystery deeper than danger which hung about him” (collected stories 77)

All these incidents leave the child utterly confused and unnerved and she no more finds respite in painting as she did before. Her inability

to bring order to these chaotic experiences drives her to take a nihilistic view of life as she realizes that “beyond everything lies the total meaningless” (collected stories 77)

Thus while the mystery in the above mentioned story is explored in the young girl’s scarcely conscious anticipation it is dealt with in an altogether different way in *Flowers for Marjorie* which is one of the best of Welty’s dark mysteries.

Flowers for Marjorie is about a poor young Mississippi couple, who are desperately in search of work during the days of depression of the 1930’s. Howard has been engaged in a humiliating and fruitless attempt to earn his livelihood and Marjorie his wife is pregnant. He has now reached such a point of despair that he loses his hope completely. He imagines that nothing can happen to break the constantly following pattern of being bereft of work, food and hope. In his view there is not even a slight chance of change because for Howard time has become still. Marjorie on the other hand, holds the opposite view for she firmly believes in the transience and preciseness of time, and the progression that accompanies it. In her hope and submission, her gentle and loving reproaches against Howard’s anxiety, she seems to him almost “faithless and strange, allied to the other forces” (collected stories 101). He finally screams at her out of his deep love turned into horrible despair.

Just because you can’t go around forever with a baby inside your belly, and it will really happen that the baby is born that doesn’t mean everything else is going to happen and change ... (collected stories 101)

In a moment of objection to the inevitable and prospective change in her whole being he stabs her with a butcher’s knife. By murdering Marjorie, he derives the satisfaction of having corrected the only apparent flaw in his desperate logic of futility. He is so obsessed with his view of time and futility that he does not even hesitate to murder his own wife, for she had tried to alter his perception of time. But ironically, he does

not fail to offer flowers to his dead's wife.

Welty analyses the change in Howard's character after the murder of Marjorie. Howard who is now in a respectable position indulges in a kind of self analysis wherein he realizes that mystery is the essence of human beings, and he is not an exception. He is rather haunted by this aspect of his character when others question him about his marital status. He himself is unable to comprehend why he murdered his wife. Unable to answer questions about his marital life, Howard tries to escape from the interviews only to be caught by the police.

Howard's misery is unalterable and the mystery in Howard's character lies in his despair. He had acted only in accordance with his own tragic fate. The story on the whole is thus a psychological study of the individual personality.

Welty here uses the external reality merely as a means to achieve her end, that is, to understand the mysteries of the self, underlying the banalities of everyday life. Welty seems to reflect the absurdist's belief that life is essentially futile and meaningless. The mystery in her characters is revealed through their desires and deeds. The absurd confronts us through the experience of Howard. In Welty's short stories the absurd evokes laughter or fear, pity or terror – more often a combination of all these.

In the second volume *The Wide Net*, the same theme of mystery is brought out very effectively in the story *A Still Moment*. This story brings three men to a chance meeting near a great forked oak. Here they are all struck by the beauty of a snowy heron which is seen flying down to prey and during this brief encounter they reveal their innermost natures.

Welty here briefly reflects the mystery of life by emphasizing the way in which the three characters Lorenzo Dow, James Murrell and Audubon grapple with their innermost nature.

In this story the character who is introduced first is Lorenzo

Dow, the evangelist whose burning desire to save souls makes him blind to human love. "I must have souls! And souls I must have!" (Collected Stories 189). The second man James Murrell, a murderer and a self-declared devil emerges from the cane brake to ride along with Dow, his next intended victim. The third man James Audubon, the naturalist is consumed by a desire to communicate something a burning urgency. The three reflect their own fanaticism. Welty describes how each of them is essentially frustrated with his own mission. Yet the uniqueness of each character lies in the way he carries on the struggles to discover himself. The enigma of man's being and his secret self is brought out through these three characters.

The theme of isolation is predominant in Welty's earlier stories. In the first volume Lily Daw and the Three Ladies.

Lily Daw example is isolated by her childlike mind from the adult community she is determined to be part of. The title of the story itself points towards the alienation of the central character. While the protagonist herself is a lady, Welty has entitled her story as Lily Daw and the Three Ladies isolating her from the rest of the ladies.

The greatness of Welty lies in her ability to deal with every aspect of isolation. If she can deftly analyse the isolation that results from an individual's forced separation, she is second to none in portraying the problems of a character, who feels isolated, because of her unique nature. The central characters of Lily Daw and Three Ladies and Keela the Outcast Indian Maiden and A Piece of News bear ample testimony to this fact. The major problem with these three characters is their childlike innocence. In their innocence they are unable to comprehend the wily ways of society and this result in their isolation. Again, all the unpleasant people in the story Why I live at the PO are isolated from one another as well as from the rest of Mississippi. Though the theme of isolation is explicated in many of the stories in the first volume, A Curtain of Green it is more deftly analysed in the stories

the satisfaction of making reparation, since he has no money to give Little Lee Roy.

The irony of Steve's isolation is that the victimized man himself has no comprehension of what his experience has meant. When Max takes Steve to the little Negro Steve narrates his story, Little Lee Roy sits quietly and happily now and then emitting murmurs and squeals of delighted recognition. He is flattered by his visit and pleased at the revival of this important episode in his life.

The much needed consolation eludes Steve as little Negro is not in a position to grasp Steve's problems and pardon him. So Steve hopes to find consolation somewhere else, "I got to catch a ride some place" (Collected Stories 45).

Steve's real tragedy lies in his misunderstanding of the restaurant operator, to whom he looks upto for sympathy and kindness but in vain and the failure to evoke any kind of response in the club-footed nigger.

Thus the readers' vision is shifted from the loud shocking central fact of the story to a wondering contemplation of the strangely contrasting positions of the main characters in relation to it.

In A Piece of News, the next story taken up for analysis, is about the self-imagined isolation of Ruby Fisher. In this story Welty seems to offer a solution to isolation, for the central character tries to bridge the gap between herself and her husband by imagining herself as being in a precarious situation. Here, the dream and fantasy overtake Mrs. Ruby Fisher with her total sense of reality. This story revolves around a Piece of News. "Mrs Ruby Fisher had the misfortune to be shot in the leg by her husband this week" (Collected Stories 13).

When Mrs. Ruby Fisher reads the news she identifies herself immediately with the person referred to in the newspaper. Though the lady Ruby Fisher in the news is different from the protagonist of the story, the sight of her name makes the protagonist imagine herself in a similar predicament. Welty here probes into the psychology of Mrs. Ruby.

She hints at the basic human tendency to indulge in exaggerated self imagination and pity. If the lady mentioned in the news is shot in the leg, the protagonist Mrs. Fisher, imagines herself as being shot in the heart. She imagines very realistically and as a result she begins to cry in self pity. Again in her fantasy Ruby imagines Clyde saying, “Ruby, I done this to you” She would say only a whisper. “That is the truth, Clyde- you done this to me” (Collected Stories 14).

Ruby plays this part aloud, “Composting her face into a lock which would be beautiful, desirable and dead” (Collected Stories 16). The fantasy continues. The lonely character Ruby now and then will challenge her isolation some way.

For the simple minded Lily Daw in the means of escape is to imagine a wedding and a normal life. Here in this story for Ruby Fisher it is a more nearly normal but still childlike capacity for day-dreaming that makes her seize upon the chance appearance of a name like hers in a scrap of newspaper from another state, and build up fabulous fantasy out of it.

Ruby’s fantasy wound is more glamorous than a leg wound and assuming as it is, the imaginary episode reveals her longing for attentions.

Cycle would have to buy her a dress to bury her in. He would have to dig a deep hole behind the house, under the cedar, a grave. He would have to nail her up a fine coffin and lay her inside. Then he would have to carry her to the grave, lay her down and cover her up. All the time he would be wild, shouting, and all distracted, to think he would never touch her one time (Collected Stories 14-15).

Welty effectively brings out the result of isolation and its effect on the character.

Mrs. Ruby Fisher resorts to this dramatic incident with herself, for, she is fed up with her monotonous life and longs for more attention from Cycle, her husband. But she is also trying to escape human loneliness, and it is really her attempt to break her isolation by reaching out to Cycle

that has universal significance.

Thus Welty revels in portraying human nature in all its multiplicity and contradictions. Her themes though not very exclusive and rendered most effectively by the use of such techniques as Stream of Consciousness and mythic framework.