

Techniques and Narrative Models in Eudora Welty's Fiction

4

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Eudora Welty belongs to a line of writers whose critical tendency has been to resort to some special techniques of 'showing' characters. As stated earlier in the first chapter, Welty is a 'modern' writer in her deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional modes of narration.

This article, "Techniques and Narrative Models in Eudora Welty's Fiction," focuses on how well she represents the process of consciousness in her characters by diverse means of narration. The techniques that Welty employs in her stories are in the tradition of James Flaubert, Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Williams Faulkner but the use to which Welty directs those techniques is peculiar to her. In Welty's short stories narrative is revealed by the characters themselves in random fragments. Character is likewise fragmented by the technique and is revealed in diverse moments of vision rather than in a stream of time. Welty's art thus proves to be highly complex, precise and controlled.

What is peculiar about Welty's characters that even at their funniest, their most picturesque, they seem to be very much in earnest. Welty's people are not all organized and catalogued. A dialogue between any two persons in Welty's stories do not

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reflect their thoughts, for, they speak rather obliquely. What they say is only a remote approximation of what they are thinking. Like the characters of Henry James and Bergson we never know what they are actually thinking. The stories of Welty in general are pervaded by the restless movement of characters in search of a magic key to the mystery of life.

The main characters in her short stories undergo a radical change through a process of realization and development. In other words, they do not remain stable. The flashes of revelation which are seen in the work of James and Virginia Woolf are also common in Welty's short stories. Welty in fact makes an in-depth analysis of human nature and reveals human dilemma in all its complexity. So her plot consists mainly of the internal development of characters Welty herself says: "you have ideas of human nature which gradually take form as a character probably from an observation of thousands of things mixed together" (9).

Against the insight provided by Welty herself this chapter tries to focus on the various techniques by which she attempts to explore the consciousness of her characters. Invariably the chapter examines Welty's skilful use of the Stream of Consciousness technique and such allied aspects as interior monologue and first person narration.

Welty's main achievement has been the projection of her hidden inner life of man. In this aspect, she is indeed indebted to modernist writers who have extended the range of fiction by probing into the hidden, subtle recesses of human thought. As M.H. Abrams puts it, "Stream of Consciousness is the name for a special mode of narration that undertakes to reproduce, without a narrator's intervention, the full spectrum and the continuous

flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious, thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings and random associations" (201).

Welty shows tendencies in this direction. She has a deep instinctive grasp of the minds and feelings of her characters. She endows her characters with an emotional and psychological depth and complexity, which seem to be independent of rational intelligence. In other words their method of apprehending the world is intuitive. The handling of such characters makes a demand on the writer to resort to some mode of expression which will do enough justice to the subject matter. Welty herself talks about how a writer faces this situation:

For a writer those things (mysteries of human nature) are what you start with. You wouldn't have started a story without that awareness that's what made you begin. That's what makes a character, project the plot. Because you write from the inside. You can't start with how people look and speak and behave and come to know how they feel. You must know exactly what's in their hearts and minds before they ever set invisible foot on the stage. (90).

Welty having achieved what she proposes in the above passage becomes an adept in employing techniques like Stream of Consciousness and first person narration. Since this technique has been very skilfully employed in the stories *Death of a Travailing Salesman*, *A Memory*, they have been taken up for our study in this chapter. The story *Death of a Travailing Salesman* traces a series of happenings in the family of Sonnyas seen through the consciousness of the salesman Bowman.

Bowman has a flash of insight into his own identity when he is almost on the verge of death.

The crucial action of this story takes place in the mind of the protagonist, in the last hours of his life. As the story begins, he has recently recovered from severe influenza. Though he had believed himself to be cured, Bowman finds himself surprisingly exhausted and highly anxious during his first day back at work. By midday he has lost his accustomed road and finds to his horror that he has driven his car to the edge of the ravine. While going back he gets caught in the tangle of vine leaves and the next moment he falls on the ground. He wonders, "Where I am I? — Why didn't I do something." He begins to walk toward the only house in view; he feels his heart beating rapidly and widely, so much so that he is unable to think of anything. He feels better after he has entered the house and has been seated in the cool living room.

While Bowman and Sonny's wife, wait for the powerful young man, Sonny, to complete his task, Bowman feels a surge of unaccustomed emotion. He interprets the pounding of his heart as a protest against the lack of love in his life, as a plea that his empty heart should be filled with love. I have been sick and I found out then, only then how lonely I am. Is it too late? My heart puts up a struggle inside me, and you may have heard it, protesting against emptiness ... It should be full, he would rush on to tell her, thinking of his heart now as a deep lake, it should be holding love like others. It should be flooded with love. There would be a spring Come and stand in my heart, whoever you are, and a whole river would cover your feet and rise higher and take your knees in whirlpools, and draw you down to itself, your whole body, your heart too. (125).

Prompted both by his fascination with the life of these country people in Mississippi and his own fatigue. Bowman asks if he may spend the night there. After some time Sonny, the husband returns from a neighbour's house with a burning stick behind him in tongs. Bowman watches the wife lighting the fire and beginning preparation for supper.

“We'll make a fire now”. He woman said, taking the brand. When that was done she lit the lamp. It showed its dark and light. The whole room turned golden-yellow like some sort of flower, and the walls smelled of it and seemed to tremble with the quiet rushing of the fire and the waving of the burning lamp wick in its funnel of light (127).

Here in this passage the simple actions, sights and sounds are conveyed to us precisely through the eyes of a man who experiences an unconscious heightening of awareness, a clarity of vision. Bowman whose life is nearly over feels as though he has to relive his life and undergo the experience of domestic happiness which he has been deprived of in the past. At that moment he realizes that his constant search for underlying meaning even in ordinary events has acquired a new dimension. His yearning reaches its acme when he watches the happy couple.

Throughout the story Bowman is in a semi-delirious state and naturally we are prepared for all the foreshadows and overtones, the exaggerations, blurs and distortions of his perception. In every moment of the couple he finds strange and elusive meanings. Each act and gesture becomes almost ceremonial; each sight and sound richly allusive, portentous, beautiful and deeply disturbing. For instance, the lamplight represents both darker and brighter aspects of life suggesting

the states of dream and reality, his feeling of the warmth of his home filled with love and his fear of being left out. His sensory perceptions are blended together as the golden light seems to him like a fragrant flower whose fragrance pervades the room. The rushing of the light and waving of the lamp suggest the unstable and delirious state of his mind.

The evocative description of Bowman's predicament gives us a glimpse into his complex emotional state of wonder, fear, longing, sickness, pain and love. For instance, the following passage may be considered. "He heard breathing round and deep, of the man and his wife in the room across the passage. And that was all. But emotion swelled patiently within him, and he wished that the child were his" (129). When the moment of death arrives, the images of comfort give way to harsher images, "his heart began to give off tremendous explosions like a rattle, bang, bang, bang" (130). The imagery used here to describe Bowman's thoughts suggests unconscious recognition of his approaching death.

It is this kind of juxtaposition of the two worlds within and without that enables the readers to understand the mystery and the magic of human personality. It also induces autonomy of thought and action. Welty believes that a sound knowledge gained through experience is the fundamental feature and essence of human nature. Welty shares the opinion of Henry James who feels,

Experience is never limited and it is never complete, it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken thread suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-particle in its tissue. (98).

Welty considers that human nature is based on totality of experience. Bowman indeed gains uniqueness mainly through the kind of experience that he encounters and it is what makes him enigmatic, obscure and an uncanny individual. His mind is always filled with different impressions and these impressions form a constant union with each other.

Bowman has a desire or perhaps compulsion to see the world as an extension of his own rootlessness and his own loneliness and consciousness. Travelling actually symbolizes Bowman's distancing himself from humanity, his escape finally from himself. While he enters the house of Sonny, he is erroneous in his judgement of the relationship between him and his wife and his perception of life is quite limited. The fruitful marital life they lead strikes him only later. There were nothing remote or mysterious here only something private. The only secret was the ancient communication between two people. But the memory of the woman's waiting silently by the cold hearth, of the man's stubborn journey a smile away to get first, and how they finally brought out their food and drink and filled the room proudly with all they had to show, was suddenly too clear and too enormous within him for response ... (129).

Bowman finally discovers here at the end of his journey, something which has remained only as illusion to him, it has been rather elusive in spite of his genuine attempt to have a feel of it; "Bowman could not speak. He was shocked with knowing what was really in this house. A Marriage, a fruitful marriage" (129). The discovery is so overwhelming that he starts running away from the house taking his bags. "Just as he reached the road where his car seemed to sit in the moonlight like a boat, his heart

gave off tremendous explosions like a rifle ...” (Collected Stories 130)

Though Bowman’s character Welty proves how the intensity of his experience affects his thoughts, feeling desires. The experience of Bowman denotes something private and subjective, something no man can share with others. Here one may recall the words of Alfred Appel who feels that Welty’s characters are all “undergoing experiences in which they are initiated or reborn into the world” (256). Welty has pointed out that fictional time breaks through the tyranny of chronological time and the communication of feelings. Hence her characters always move freely backward and forward in time and space. She also believes on the value of ‘the still moment’ when the mystery of life begins to shine through. This is the moment when writing turns into ‘mediation’. This reminds us of the number of epiphanies one comes across in the writings of William Wordsworth, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot.

Eunice Glenn an early critic of Welty points out how the significance of Welty’s works lies in the close “relationship of the external and the internal reality and the imagination” (97). If the outer world brings in the irrational, the world of dreams. And Eunice Glenn argues that the conflict between reality and dream gives rise to tension. “Instead of serving as escape from ordinary experience, fantasy brings it into fuller light ...” (Collected Stories 76).

Welty’s allows us a momentary glimpse into the intermingling of fantasy and reality in another character, a child artist in the story. A Memory. This is the story of adolescence where the narrator recollects her life as a child entering into adolescent period. She has always preferred her world motionless,

“ a few solitary people in fixed positions” (Collected Stories 76). She does not view the world with compassion. She is always in search of a meaning behind everything. The narrator notes, “I was at an age when I formed a judgement upon every person and every event which came under my eye, although I was easily frightened” (Collected Stories 75). The child is afraid or being overwhelmed by the world at large.

Terrified by reality, the child isolates herself from her community, thus intensifying her ability or need to observe:

It did not matter to me what I looked at; from any observation I would conclude that a secret of life had been nearly revealed to me – for I was observed with notions about concealment and from the smallest gesture of a stranger. I would wrest what was to me a communication or a presentiment. (76)

The central words here are “to me” which makes it clear that her isolation from the world has led to a double life; she almost leads a dual life as an observer and a dreamer. The young girl is then heading for a crisis. She retreats to the beach where she can dream of the beauty of that moment when she fell in love for the first time with a young boy in her class.

The impact of that particular moment when she “touched my (her) friends wrist” (Collected Stories 76) which happened as if by accident is such that she can remember it “unadulteratedly” even after a long time “until it would smell with a sudden and overwhelming beauty, like a rose forced into premature bloom for a great occasion” (Collected Stories 76). But such beauty is endangered and just as the young girl fears motion, change and reality she is afraid of this beauty, It leaves

her unprepared for the inevitable violent intrusion of reality – in any form.

She is still unable to distinguish between the real and the dream or what she watches and the dream of the bathers happy life. And in their simultaneity, the worlds counterpoint each other. They are exclusive and disintegrative.

The young girl wants to protect herself from the intrusion of the outside world. She says,

I tried to withdraw to my most inner dream, that of touching the wrist of the boy I loved on the stair; I felt a shudder of my wish shaking the darkness like leaves where I closed my eyes, I felt the heavy weight of sweetness which always accompanied this memory, but the memory itself did not come to me ... (Collected Stories 79)

From the beginning to the end of the story we are presented the rhythm of consciousness as it occurs in the character's mind. And the author does not intervene. So there is the exact presentation of the child's consciousness. We may doubt the sanity of a child who faints at the intrusion of an uncontrolled reality. However she emerges as a matured child who realizes that the world of her fantasy and the real world are two extreme poles which can never converge. The incident thus helps her in comprehending reality.

The central characters in the stories so far discussed are incapable of distinguishing between the private and public world. Welty has deftly employed the Stream of Consciousness technique to portray the experiences and the inner torments of such characters. The other important and interesting aspect about

this technique is the first person narration. This mode is consistently employed in her short stories. In a first person narrative, the narrator speaks from his point of view and is himself to a greater or lesser degree a participant in the story. In such cases we readers are bombarded with direct address. This occurs rather frequently in her story Why I Live at the PO.

In the story Why I Live at the PO the narrator protagonist, Sister presents her tale in an assertive manner with her own commending vision. She neither interrupts nor replies others' queries. She tells her story as though she had been confronted with an aversion of experience that she refuses to accept. She is pitted against her rivals who insist on being the protagonists. Her rival Stella-Rondo aggressively advances her own tales and projects her own heroism. Sister can come to terms with the world only by projecting herself into others' situation. And she does this by pre-empting the story's voice for her exclusive use. In this case her voice belongs to a single woman, uncomfortable with the place assigned to her in others' narratives. The characters in these stories try to preserve themselves, by grappling with conventional female plots which would restrain them. Their failures as story tellers, and as heroines mark the success of Welty's stories.

The title, Why I Live at the PO makes it clear that the narrator, here the Sister in the centre of attention and the question of her domicile is of pressing interest to us. But in her first sentence itself we come to know that she is forced to seize the prerogative of being the narrator as her prodigal sister has snatched the role of the protagonist. Hence sister fights for control of means of her narrative. Virtually the only information she renders about Stella Rondo's husband has been referred to

only once in the whole story,. While narrating the problems created by Stella Rondo, she makes a passing remark that Stella Rondo “went with” (46) him first. The very scene of Stella-Rondo’s return, dramatic as it must have been is omitted. Instead in Sister’s first dramatized scene she places herself at the absolute centre of the household. “Over the hot stove” trying to perform feats of domestic magic. And to ‘stretch two chickens over five people and a child” (46). For Sister her family is the world, where she is an important member as her tale begins. But Stella-Rondo’s return results in a set of reversals, repetitions. Sister comes to terms with her predicament by venting her emotions through an interior monologue.

Sister comprehends that plot is power. For her, as in Peter Brook’s opinion, “the logic and dynamic of narrative, and narrative itself is a form of understanding and explanation” (59). Thinking back over the events of the last few days. Sister tiresome kind of order upon those events, a plot which will reinforce her projection of the self as she wishes. She says that she once had a secure place and indeed she was “getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stello-Rondo just separated from her husband and back home again” (46).

She asserts in her first sentence how she has been doing well as a postmistress and as dutiful daughter until the arrival of Stella-Rondo. In Sister’s story, she presents herself as a person concerned with the welfare of the family, in other words, that of the loving housekeeper who makes heroic domestic efforts to take care of everything and everyone. For instance she once warns her drunk uncle Whitaker against dropping ketchup on her Sister’s skill lingerie. Stella-Rondo by her inspired lies robs Sister of her own caretaking language and thus of the secure

position she thought she had. Stella Rondo's lies are the instrument by which she reshapes Sister's story.

Sister's story is fuelled by self-importance and her pride; "If I have anything at all I have pride. So I just decided I'd go straight down to the P.O. There's plenty of room there in the back, I says to myself" (53). Her home is no longer a haven for her with receptive audience. Therefore she changes her locale. She moves into P.O in Mississippi where she holds the position of postmistress. By deciding to move and then by incorporating that decision into a story. Sister recues herself, she becomes her own fairy god father.

Sister becomes very much involved in her job as a postmistress. Therefore the exchange of communication, of story telling, and of domestic life at its best, has become impossible. Sister has "own" by her crucial decision to leave the house. She has shaped and narrated her own self-centered tale, and she has nullified Stella-Rondo's rival version. Sister in fact concludes triumphantly, with a bold declaration which goes thus: "And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this, minute, on bended knees, attempt to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen" (56). Obviously, Sister has found no real independence. Instead, she has gone against some of her own deepest urges and needs in life. For we know very well the importance she attaches to the centrality of family as her language often attests. By leaving the house, She has denied herself yet another pleasure in life, that is, lending ears to what others, especially her sister says. Insatiably curious, she habitually eavesdrops around her family home. But now she boasts of closing her ears against her Sister's voice, shutting out the one story she always loves to hear.

Finally, Sister has incapacitated herself as a storyteller. For her, the true and only subject has been the juxtaposition of her Sister's life and her own in the pattern of rivalry, speech and silencing, which they mutually wove. Just as Stella-Rondo earlier destroyed the authority of Sister's voice, Sister now refuses Stella-Rondo a hearing. But ironically she becomes her own victim, fingers in ears, she is rendered deaf. Sister's story is a triumph of rearrangement of events to suit her needs. The first person narrative here gives greater insight into Sister's character. Sister's character is gradually revealed but the character herself is incapable of recognizing the self-revelation. Sister is not ready in herself for that discovery. Sister's language is the product of Welty's infallible ear; its rhythms are absolutely credible as small-town Mississippi speech and it seems the only imaginable language Sister could speak.

In Welty's fiction, storytelling at its best is a process which serves as a means to explore and discover human consciousness. This process is never ending. She considers story telling as a kinetic exchange. Such story telling for her is a constant interchange, a game which everyone can play.

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