

ABSTRACT

POWELL, LISA LANIER. *Dispatches from the Homefront: Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding*. (Under the direction of Dr. Michael Grimwood.)

During an interview, Eudora Welty described her inability to write directly about World War II: "I couldn't write about it, not at the time, it was too personal. I could write or translate things into domestic or other dimensions in my writing, with the same things in mind" (qtd. in Ruas 66). The purpose of this paper is to examine Welty's 1946 novel *Delta Wedding* as a translation of, or response to, the war. Welty goes out of her way to avoid any association with the war; she conspicuously places the novel in the year 1923 because it was not a "war year." She retreats from the epic violence of war into the seemingly peaceful, pastoral delta country of Mississippi. Yet, by its avoidance of war, *Delta Wedding* paradoxically depicts the war by providing a negative image of the war.

With the mobilization of men to the front lines during the masculine event of war, the feminized homefront left behind became another negative image of war. During World War II, traditional patriarchies were transformed into practical matriarchies. Women entered the workforce to help fill the labor shortage left by men, often taking jobs traditionally thought of as "men's only." This proved to be a turning point for women in American history. In *Delta Wedding*, Welty's portrayal of a matriarchal family on a patriarchal plantation mirrors the 1940s society. She depicts women in various stages of life, which reflect the stages in Susan Lichtman's cycle of the female hero. They include the virgin, mother and crone stages. Through such characters, Welty celebrates the female journey toward self-actualization, helping the reader to value such a journey as heroic. In doing so, she gives an alternate view of the hero: not typical war hero of the time, but instead the hero of the everyday, not limited by gender.

**DISPATCHES FROM THE HOMEFRONT:
EUDORA WELTY'S *DELTA WEDDING***

by
LISA LANIER POWELL

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh, North Carolina

2007

APPROVED BY:

Dr. Barbara Bennett

Dr. Elaine Orr

Dr. Michael Grimwood
Chair of Advisory Committee

BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Lanier Powell was born August 29, 1962. Her parents are Coyte and Gladys Lanier of Garner. After graduating from Garner Senior High School in 1980, she attended Appalachian State University for two years before transferring and graduating from North Carolina State University in 1984 with a BS in Science Education. Her lifelong love of reading led her back to school to study literature and writing.

Lisa lives in Angier, North Carolina with her husband, Jon, and their three children, Spencer, Clayton, and Ben.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: America in Context	10
Chapter 2: The Home Front (and Center)	14
Chapter 3: River Country.....	18
Chapter 4: Women, Heroes at Home	25
Chapter 5: The Men of <i>Delta Wedding</i>	49
Conclusion	58
Works Cited	61
Works Consulted.....	64

Dispatches from the Homefront: Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*

Introduction

During an interview, Eudora Welty described her inability to write directly about World War II: "I couldn't write about it, not at the time, it was too personal. I could write or translate things into domestic or other dimensions in my writing, with the same things in mind" (qtd. in Ruas 66). In *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, Suzanne Marrs observes that war occupied Welty's attention, making it impossible for her to concentrate on writing fiction in the early 1940s (136). When Welty did attempt to write, Marrs reports "the war seemed too large for her fictional canvas" (137). Marrs identifies two paradoxes of America's war effort that would influence Welty and help her return to writing fiction. The first is the United States' attempt to protect nations and individuals from "arbitrary assertions of power" by using tremendous power itself, and the second being the criticism of reductive stereotypes abroad, even though such stereotypes persisted at home in America (137). These paradoxes, Welty believed, must be confronted in the private place where life is lived, which for Welty was the subject of fiction. As she wrote "The Delta Cousins," "A Little Triumph," and finally *Delta Wedding*, she dramatized more fully her deepest and most personal response to war (137).

Written during the war, in 1943, *Delta Wedding* may be described as Welty's "war correspondence," her "translated" response to the war. She went to great lengths to separate this novel from the contemporary, setting it during a period of peacetime in America, perhaps in reaction to the chaos and uncertainty at the time of its writing. Despite its timing twenty years earlier, the novel still reflects the character of American

society in 1943. A novel that celebrates the feminine, most of its action and thought comes to the reader through the female characters' perspectives, and the female perspective in the United States during the early 1940s had acquired an elevated status. For the war effort, some women had taken jobs previously considered by most Americans as "men's only," and thanks to rationing, the domestic world became significant to everyone, not just to homemakers. Superficially, the novel would seem the simple story of a family as it prepares for a daughter's wedding, caught up in decisions about food and flowers--hardly the stuff of heroes. Yet as John A. Allen observes, "The subject of heroism is explored and developed in fugue-like fashion in almost every corner of the book. . ." (16). During wartime, heroes are born on the battlefield every day, but heroics also occur on the homefront, if we know how to look. Through the art of Eudora Welty, *Delta Wedding* redefines heroism for all people, men and women alike.

While the wedding preparations provide most of the background action for the novel, another event is the catalyst for much of its drama and exploration of heroism. The incident takes place on the train trestle, where some of the Fairchilds are walking when a train, the Yellow Dog, approaches. All but two jump to safety into the dry creek bed below. Maureen, who is nine years old and mentally impaired, catches her foot in the track. Her Uncle George stays to help her wrestle it out, despite his wife's pleas to jump and save himself. The train engineer manages to bring the train to a stop at the last possible moment, just as George frees Maureen by holding her as she pushes him backward. George and Maureen land safely and the tragedy is averted, but this incident becomes the source for other problems throughout the novel as family members recount the story again and again, making it a part of the family history.

Even though *Delta Wedding* takes place during a peaceful period of American history, the fact that Welty wrote it during wartime places special significance on the relationships between its men and women and their characterizations. In *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* historians tell us that “war must be understood as a *gendering* activity, one that ritually marks the gender of all members of a society, whether or not they are combatants” (4). War is traditionally a masculine theater; the world wars, especially, were fought abroad almost exclusively by men, with women in supporting roles on the battle fronts as nurses, ambulance drivers, and headquarters’ staff. During World War II, by September 1943 some ten million men had joined the ranks of the military and gone to war, shifting authority in many homes from a traditional patriarchy to a practical matriarchy. Many families no longer had a “man of the house” at home and depended on a woman to fill that role. Eventually, the labor force came to depend upon women to supply the “manpower” needed to meet the demands of a country at war, as well as to maintain the nation’s economy.

Despite her “inability” to write about the on-going war, Welty—like most Americans—remained preoccupied with it. In fact, the war influenced her emotional life so that it stifled her fiction writing in general. Suzanne Marrs observes: “Throughout her career Eudora passionately sought to transform experience into fiction; doing so was a way of understanding, coping with, even redeeming what seemed irredeemable” (90). But she notes that between August 1942 and December 1944, Welty wrote very little out of her own experience (90). In the early 1940s, Welty worked on a group of short stories set in the Natchez Trace, which would be finally be published in 1943 as *The Wide Net and Other Stories*. Even with the publications of this collection and the 1942 novella, *The*

Robber Bridegroom, this period proved somewhat stagnant for Welty. “The war had become a major force in her emotional life,” writes Marris, “but it now resisted transformation into fiction” (90). Welty read analyses of wartime politics and reviewed books about the war, but above all, she experienced the war on a personal level as she agonized over relatives and friends who were fighting overseas. Her worry left her unable to concentrate on fiction writing, until she found it was her way to respond to the war (136).

With her brothers Edward and Walter serving in the Pacific theater, and her friend John Robinson stationed in Italy, she followed news from the front closely. Robinson and Welty had known each other since their days at Jackson High School, but had become very close friends in the late 1930s. Marris describes Robinson as “a man so handsome that one of Eudora’s New York friends would call him an ‘Adonis’” (56) and refers to him as “the man she [Welty] loved” (85). Portrayed as “tall, slender, and rather debonair,” Robinson may have been a prototype for the character of George Fairchild in *Delta Wedding* (56). In her biography of Welty, Ann Waldron downplays the relationship and categorizes Robinson as “Eudora’s wartime man,” someone to whom she could write and worry over (qtd. in Pollack, 176). By citing correspondence between Welty and her agent, Diarmuid Russell, however, Marris builds a strong case for the seriousness of Welty’s commitment: “‘My friend John Robinson, of New Orleans,’ she told Russell, ‘is in the Air Force now and what can I do but think about his life, which is dear to me & close to mine. I know it is the same story everywhere’” (89). Welty corresponded with Robinson throughout the war and received through him her most intimate knowledge of life on the front lines. Even though she could not write about the

war, she encouraged Robinson to document his experiences: “I have meditated about a book by you and I start like this, that the truth of the event will come from the man greater than the event—because understanding is more vision than it is watchfulness . . .” (106). Welty felt that Robinson, who had experienced the war, could write with some authority, but he resisted her suggestion.

Anxious to involve herself with the war effort, Welty volunteered at the Red Cross in her hometown Jackson, only to realize how ignorant her fellow workers were to the horrors of war (96). Welty wrote to Robinson that “those scatterbrained ladies have domesticated the war and talk all cosily [*sic*] [. . .] It terrifies me when little scatterbrained women are blood-thirsty—[. . .] they don’t know what they are wishing for” (qtd in 97).

Still hoping to use her writing talents, Welty sought employment with the Office of War Information, but without success. During the summer of 1943, however, she managed to complete an essay for *Harper’s Bazaar* entitled “Some Notes on River Country.” Reflecting her fascination with the Delta region and its history, this essay would set the stage for the short story “The Delta Cousins,” which actually evolved into the novel *Delta Wedding*. Welty wrote this story specifically with Robinson in mind, hoping to brighten his spirits. His family had lived in the Delta country since antebellum times, and she thought with this story she might “send Robinson a piece of home” (Marrs 102). Completed in November 1943, this was Welty’s first story in over a year, ending a long period of writer’s block. She sent it to Robinson, who liked it very much, and to her agent, Diarmuid Russell, who had some reservations about it, which he shared with Welty, “every individual section seems good and yet as a whole it doesn’t quite have the

effect it ought to have” (qtd. in Marrs, *Eudora Welty* 103). Despite its lack of commercial appeal, the story pleased Welty because Robinson enjoyed it.

In May 1944, after winning a prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Welty traveled to New York City to accept it, and she extended her visit. While there she obtained an internship at the *New York Times Book Review* as a copyeditor and reviewer. Some readers found her wartime book reviews lacking credibility simply because they were written by a woman, so Russell created a male pseudonym for Welty—Michael Ravenna. Welty had hoped that her work with the *Times* might lead to a job as a war correspondent, but such work proved quite scarce. In October 1944, she returned to Jackson, Mississippi, where she began to write fiction once again. As Marrs reports, “in the midst of—and perhaps because of—her renewed concern for Robinson and her sense of his heroism, Eudora returned to fiction and the characters she had created for him in “The Delta Cousins” (*Eudora Welty* 120). Working to expand the story, Welty turned to diaries from Robinson’s family, who had lived in the Delta region since antebellum times. These diaries of Nancy McDougall Robinson helped Welty realize the heroism of the pioneering women of the Delta. She wrote to John Robinson: “There was a kind of greatness about her that seemed to make everything else fall in place” (qtd. in *Eudora Welty* 127). Inspired by the strength and tenderness of Nancy Robinson, Welty worked to evolve “The Delta Cousins” into her first novel, *Delta Wedding* which she dedicated to John Robinson, who was away in the war.

This novel, which was written during the war, goes out of its way to avoid any association with war. Welty stated that she chose the year 1923 as the setting for *Delta Wedding* because she “had to pick a year—and this was quite hard to do—in which all

the men could be home and uninvolved. It couldn't be a war year" (*Conversations* 49). By its avoidance of the war, *Delta Wedding* paradoxically depicts the war by providing a negative image of the war. Welty creates a feminine world in which to escape from the masculine world of war which has resulted in separation of families, food shortages, gas rations, battles, bombings, and death. *Delta Wedding* represents everything wartime is not. At a time when families were separated, it enacts reunion. At a time when scarcity prevailed, it depicts plenty. War is not a time when the entire family gathers to celebrate new beginnings, nor a time of indulgence, when wedding cakes arrive from Memphis, nor a time of dining tables laden with two meats, assorted vegetables and desserts, and not a time for joy rides into town. Instead, war is a time of separation for families, sacrifice of loved ones and luxuries. In fact, this novel, set in the domestic realm with women journeying through various stages of life, would seem the very antithesis of a "war novel." A "typical" war novel, such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), portrays the soldier on the front line, suffering the male experience of war, which may include memories of sister, mother, girlfriend, or wife back home. *Delta Wedding* focuses on women, for they are the survivors of war who endure after the men have killed each other off.

In order to examine *Delta Wedding* as a war correspondence, we must place it in the context of American society during the 1940s. In Chapter 1, I will explore how the masculine event of going to war feminizes the homefront, and how World War II would cause Americans to reconsider the limitations placed on people based on gender. During this time women defied the conventional ideas about their inability to perform certain jobs simply because they were women. The matriarchal home of the Fairchilds in the

patriarchal setting of Shellmound Plantation mirrors the transformed American homefront during World War II.

This period of history not only placed women in unconventional roles, but it also emphasized the importance of women in their traditional role of homemaker, as Chapter 2 will show. The shortages during the war and the necessity of rationing stressed the importance of homemaking to all Americans. Welty's focus on the domestic realm in *Delta Wedding* celebrates homemaking skills, as well as contrasts the scarcity of the present with the abundance portrayed in the novel.

Place in writing was critical to Welty, especially during the war. Chapter 3 explores River Country, the place that Welty sought out to escape the influence the war had on her writing. Here she finds a pastoral setting for the writing that would help her break through what had been a stagnant period of creativity for her. Welty attempts to escape the harsh, violent, masculine images that dominate the present war by retreating to the pastoral, feminine landscape of the river country, but the violent history of the region intrudes.

The women in *Delta Wedding* in their various stages of female development demonstrate that the 1940s were a transforming time for women in American society. Chapter 4 will analyze various women characters at the stages of female development distinguished by Susan Lichtman and will consider the emergence of the female hero.

Finally, Chapter 5 retrieves the male characters from the background. Welty does not allow the reader directly into the thoughts of the men, but the men are central to the novel, as they are often the focus of the women's thoughts. During the war, heroes emerged from the battlefields every day, but Welty offers another idea of war heroes, the

ones born on the homefront. Her insight encourages the reader to consider the heroism available in all people during a time when it had been so strongly identified exclusively with men.

Chapter 1: America in Context

Welty's novel actually reflects the experience of American society during World War II, when it relied on women, yet subordinated them to men. While women had to fight the battle on the homefront with ration books, few women served on ration boards or made policy regarding rationing. Doris Weatherford asserts, "Women had no real input into the plans they were expected to implement, and they did not demand leadership roles commensurate with the responsibilities they assumed. Instead they became excellent troops of followers . . ." (216). Women did the same work as many men in defense factories, but often made less than their male co-workers, and sometimes a job received a different name depending on whether a man or a woman was doing it. Women serving as WACS had to fight for recognition as a part of the military. Some historians argue that the war instituted changes that ultimately revolutionized women's status; others have viewed the changes as temporary (*Behind the Gender...* 25). In her book *Our Mothers' War*, author Emily Yellin, describes what this time meant for her mother, a Red Cross worker during World War II: "I saw that it had been a transforming time for her, a time when she first came into her own, exerted her courage and took advantage of new opportunities for herself, as a woman" (Yellin x). By placing her women characters in the foreground of her novel to highlight their stories, Welty captures this transforming spirit of the time, even in a novel set twenty years earlier.

At a time when men were becoming heroes on the battlefields of Europe, Africa, and the South Pacific, women were becoming the unsung heroes of the homefront and pioneers in the armed forces. Most of their experiences differed drastically from those of the traditional male war hero. But instead of discounting their feats as ordinary or

unheroic, perhaps we need to refocus the lens through which we view them and put them into a new perspective. In *The Female Hero in Women's Literature and Poetry*, Susan A. Lichtman writes, "For women to see themselves as heroes of their own life experiences is itself a liberating prospect. It allows us a valuation of personal experience, a valuation of those details of life so traditionally seen as women's venue. But it also allows women to view themselves as complex, ever-changing human beings" (13). In *Delta Wedding*, Welty presents women as "complex, ever-changing human beings," some of whom have taken traditional paths and others of whom are searching for their own way. Welty, according to Louise Westling, "tells the story of her own generation who needed to question the traditional complacencies of Southern domestic life and find alternate possibilities for fulfillment" (*Sacred* 4). American women during the 1940s found themselves in a position to challenge society's conventional ideas about gender. In fact, the United States government encouraged women to infiltrate the traditionally male jobs, not for the sake of equality for women, but for the sake of the war effort.

More than any previous war, World War II was a battle of production. As Doris Weatherford states, "Production was essential to victory, and women were essential to production" (Weatherford 116). With ten million men enlisted in the armed forces, America's labor force felt the strain. America and her allies were playing "catch-up" with the Germans and Japanese, who had a ten-year head start on amassing weapons (116). As labor shortages loomed, the traditional perception of women as "fragile creatures, ill-suited for work outside the home, much less for hard labor, seemed a peacetime luxury" (Yellin 39). Moving out of the shadow of the home, women in the workplace became the focus of editorial attention, as in a September 1943 *Business*

Week: “Now it can be seen. Our entire manpower problem is most acutely a problem in womanpower” (qtd. in Weatherford 116).

Early in the war, the United States still suffered high unemployment because of the Depression; therefore, the first defense jobs went to any available men. After the available male labor force was accommodated, women who needed to work took these traditionally male jobs. Then came the realization that to find sufficient labor to win the war, a “new type of worker” had to be recruited – “the housewife who didn’t necessarily want or need to work” (116). The Office of War Information understood that this group of women would have to be convinced that they were vital to the war effort. Brenda Ralph Lewis quoted the *Basic Program for Womanpower*: “Jobs will have to be glorified as patriotic war service if American women are to be persuaded to take them and stick to them. Their importance to a nation engaged in total war must be convincingly presented” (Lewis 69-70). The call for women workers went out over the air waves and through the print media. A poster showing three female war workers above the slogan “Soldiers Without Guns” cast a heroic light on war work and appealed to women’s patriotism. In answering this “call to work,” women achieved a new stature in American society, if only temporarily, but defense worker Barbara Walls believed something from their war work would stay with them:

Some of the Rosies did very heroic things. And they didn’t want to give up what they had experienced or achieved during their war work. But even as they left their jobs, I’m sure that a seed was planted, that women can be heroic. (qtd. in Yellin 70)

This heroism did not require shipping out overseas, but staying home and doing whatever needed to be done. For some women, it was managing a household and family during food and resource shortages; for others, it meant learning new skills at untraditional jobs. Women could indeed be heroic.

Chapter 2: The Home Front (and Center)

At the time Welty was writing *Delta Wedding*, women found their experiences suddenly very important, even vital, to the nation's well-being. Due to rationing, grocery shopping and meal planning became topics of significance not just for women, but for all Americans. Women who took jobs in defense plants and shipyards faced the difficulties of finding child care, and this issue became apparent to everyone, prompting some companies to offer on-site child care for their female employees. Women's issues no longer belonged just to women; they were now national issues, at least for the duration of the war. During the war, the shift in American society from the traditional patriarchy to a practical matriarchy temporarily elevated the status of women. According to Susan Lichtman, because women's status in conventional patriarchies is usually low, the dominant males perceive women as peripheral to human existence (10). The "true" human experience had to be the male's experience; therefore, women were pushed to margins of human history with little regard for their life experiences (10). But in the Second World War, women found themselves pulled from the fringes, becoming the focus of domestic campaigns for rationing and defense work. At last, the world of women—home and family—became a focus of society. Women's "stories" of managing a household and child care became vital to the national interest, such as how to manage without meat, dairy products, sugar, rubber products, leather goods, and other rationed items. Lichtman reminds us that women have always shared "stories," if only with each other. Even if the stories were not considered "to be deep, accurate, or educational," they strengthened the bonds between women, validating their experiences (10). The novel of development, "the articulation of the woman hero's life span," according to Lichtman,

can inspire us to study and valorize the experiences of over half the world's population (10).

Delta Wedding is a novel of female development written during the latter part of World War II at what would prove to be a critical point in the history of gender relationships in America. The novel “celebrates the feminine” as it “dramatizes stages of the feminine life cycle in the portraits of young girls and nubile maidens, as well as middle-aged matrons and tottering remnants of the matriarchal past” (Westling, *Sacred* 4). As our country was fighting an epic war on foreign soil, Welty conspicuously places the novel twenty years earlier in the pastoral setting of what she considered a matriarchal society in the Mississippi Delta. Unable to write about it, Welty turned away from the masculine war to the pre-war feminine homefront, only to find it transformed by the wartime perspective of the 1940s. In a 1980 interview, Welty describes this transformation:

In the Delta it's very much of a matriarchy, especially in those years in the twenties that I was writing about, and really ever since the Civil War when the men were all gone and the women began to take over everything. You know, they really did. I've met families up there where the women just ruled the roost, and I've made that happen in the book because I thought, that's the way it was in those days in the South. I've never lived in the Delta, and I was too young to have known what was going on in anything in the twenties, but I know that that's a fact. Indeed it's true of many sections of that country after the Civil War changed the pattern of life there. (*Conversations* 304)

In her attempt to escape the war of her own time and the pseudo-matriarchy it has created, Welty turns to a place that has already been rendered matriarchal by a previous war. Albert Devlin observes that Welty's choice of 1923 for the novel's setting has screened "*Delta Wedding* from its wartime environment of composition—not a surprising strategy for a writer such as Welty who distrusts the topical" ("Making" 252). Still he sees the novel as an echo of "Welty's considered response to the bristling historical present, especially the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which she shared with Diarmuid Russell in late December 1941" (Devlin 252):

It is true, it must be, that it is the outrage to the world spirit . . . that we feel above the viciousness of each single thing, and all seems to be in the solemn shadow of this violation—no, in the shadow of this spirit to which the violation is done, which is still as powerful as ever and in being denied is the more irrevocably defined. All this must take place in each heart—how strong our heart must be that nothing has ever been too much. (qtd. in Devlin 252)

Devlin takes this statement to be a "blueprint" for Welty's framing in *Delta Wedding* of the threat of the outside world to Shellmound and its defense to George Fairchild, who has witnessed the "violation" of the world through his experiences in World War I (252). Devlin's analysis continues: "War, 'the outrage to the world spirit,' must be bracketed within the complex set of motives that led Welty to test her hope for 'the universe' in writing *Delta Wedding*" (252). While Welty may have trusted the work of defense to George, she places "her optimism [...] in the interpretative vision of reason" of Ellen Fairchild (252). With these "assignments," Welty validates the role of

men on the frontlines of war, where they witness firsthand the “violation of the world,” but reminds us that women must be responsible for the hope of the future, certainly a different role from the men, but no less important.

Chapter 3: River Country

Welty chose the Natchez Trace in the Delta country of Mississippi as the setting for most of the stories of *The Wide Net* collection and her first novel *Delta Wedding*. This small section of Mississippi along the Mississippi River consists of “a little chain of lost towns between Vicksburg and Natchez” (Welty, *Some Notes* 7). The area preoccupied Welty and her agent, Diarmuid Russell, during the summer of 1940. Both read *The Outlaw Years* by Robert Coates then, and were taken with its rich folklore and history. Russell suggested to Welty that she string “a series of stories on the necklace of the Natchez Trace” (Kreyling 51). The idea captivated Welty, and she began to research her Natchez stories by reading the *Journal* of Lorenzo Dow, a notorious criminal of the Trace in the 1800s (52).

A few years later, in the summer of 1943, Welty documented the Trace’s violent history of Indians, wars, floods, earthquakes, bandits, and traitors in her essay “Some Notes on River Country.” This setting also became home for her second collection of stories, most of which she wrote as war raged in Europe, before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Maintaining her avoidance of the current war as a subject of fiction, she set this essay in the Mississippi past, seemingly escaping from the contemporary violence. But what drew her to the Delta’s past most clearly, in “Some Notes on River Country,” were precisely its episodes of violence and war. The Delta to which Welty “retreated” from the war by writing *Delta Wedding* was a place defined by the violence she recounted in “Some Notes on River Country.” This essay outlines the history of the Delta through a series of violent conflicts and tragedies.

Welty traces the history of the Delta back to the Native Americans. The Natchez Indian tribe, “a unique nation among Indians,” lived in the Delta country during the seventeenth century (Welty, *Some Notes* 17). Welty identifies violence as central to the core of their being; she writes, “Fire, death, sacrifice formed the spirit of the Natchez’ worship” (17). The Natchez were slaughtered in just one day by the French, “in a massacre for a massacre” (17). Welty’s description of the women of the Natchez tribe surely inspired her as she created the strong women characters in her Natchez stories: “The women—although all the power was in their blood, and a Sun woman by rigid system married a low-caste Stinkard and bore a Sun child by him—were the nation’s laborers still” (17). The Natchez tribe believed in sacrifices; when a Sun man died, the tribe would strangle his wife and friends to attend him in death, and parents would sacrifice their infants to his memory (19).

Welty’s history of the Delta continued to emphasize violence through the Civil War. When Vicksburg was being shelled during the war, its population sought refuge in tunnels they had dug out in the bluffs of the Mississippi: “it was the daily habit of the three thousand women, children and old men who made up the wartime population to go on their all-fours into shelters they had tunneled into the loess bluffs” (10). Port Gibson, Welty writes, “is still rather smug because General Grant said it was ‘too pretty to burn’” (8). The towns of Grand Gulf, Bruinsburg, and Rodney’s Landing were not so lucky. Images of ruin and demise haunt the landscape; the remains of Windsor, once a formidable estate, rise up like a skeleton in an “old gray field” (11). Ancient cemeteries remind visitors of where towns once stood. A rosy-red brick church bears the scars of wars as “cannon balls were stopped by its strong walls, and are in them yet” (16).

The Delta has suffered not only the brutality of man but the fury of nature as well. Towns, such as Grand Gulf, have been lost entirely to the flooding waters of the river, but still their citizens rebuild and start anew. Yet Welty senses that “something always hangs imminent above all life,” and in the town of Rodney, “the imminent thing is a natural danger”—the river (16).

Still, it was man, not nature, that caused the ivory-billed woodpeckers, once plentiful in the river country, to vanish from the earth. Audubon reported in his diary that the Indians began the slaughter of this bird, but according to Welty, the advance of agriculture drove it to its death (23). However, reports of rare sightings of the ivory-billed woodpecker still existed in the Delta in 1943 and lent hope to the wildness and fortitude of this land (23).

Superficially, the lush landscape of the Natchez Trace, even with its violent history, created a peaceful retreat for Welty and her readers from images of the ruins of Europe during World War II. Indeed, Welty paints a vivid picture of a rich, fertile region in “Some Notes on River Country”: “Deep in the swamps the water hyacinths make solid floors you could walk on over still black water, the Southern blue flag stands thick and sweet in the marsh” (21). She describes the bounty of muscadine and scuppernong grape vines that grew along the stream banks together with the wild wisteria and passionflower. Her essay, which documents the violence of the Delta’s past, ends with an emphasis on endurance and continuity. Welty’s descriptions take on a “pregnant” quality; the hardwood trees were, she writes, “dark and berried and flowered” with the magnolia being the most spectacular with “its heavy cups” bearing “dense pink cones” (21). This maternal imagery offers stark contrasts to the area’s violent past as well as to the harsh,

barren images of bombed-out towns that appeared in the newspapers and magazines that Welty was reading at the time. Despite the region's history of annihilation of both man and beast, Welty leaves us with a vision of hope.

Welty's decision in 1943 to set a novel in a year that was as remote as possible from a "war year" paradoxically confirms that *Delta Wedding* is a war novel, though it treats the war by avoiding such treatment, by pretending not to treat it. In this way she could focus on the "solidity of this family and the life that went on on a small scale in a world of its own" (50). Yet, just as "River Country" reveals that war and violence had permeated the Delta since the Indians had lived there, the Fairchilds of *Delta Wedding* cannot escape the consequences of war. War and violence have left their scars on Shellmound and the Fairchilds, and consequently, the matriarchal culture portrayed in *Delta Wedding* echoes the contemporary culture of the 1940s. The pastoral plantation culture presented by the novel is a counter-image to a military culture, but beneath its idyllic shell, like the historicized pastoral landscape of River Country, it is deeply marked by war.

Welty recognized the vitality of place in a novel; in her essay "Place in Fiction," she elaborates: "The good novel should be steadily alight, revealing. Before it can hope to be that, it must of course be steadily visible from its outside, presenting a continuous, shapely, pleasing and finished surface to the eye" (44). Welty carefully crafts the landscape in *Delta Wedding* so that it will illuminate the story. As Laura McRaven first enters the Delta at the beginning of the novel, Westling notes that the landscape Welty describes has a "dreamy, fertile quality that completely overwhelms the rational mind" (*Eudora Welty* 100):

Thoughts went out of her head and the landscape filled it. In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky. . . . The land was perfectly flat and level but it shimmered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly. It seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it. . . .

In the Delta the sunsets were reddest light. The sun went down lopsided and wide as a rose on a stem in the west, and the west was a milk-white edge, like the foam of the sea. The sky, the field, the little track, and the bayou, over and over—all that had been bright or dark was now one color. From the warm window sill the endless fields glowed like a hearth in firelight. . . .” (Welty, *Delta* 3-4)

In *Literary Women* Ellen Moers characterizes Welty’s Delta as a “clearly female landscape,” similar to other “open, sweeping terrains in women’s writing which she finds to be places of self-assertion” (qtd. in Westling, *Eudora Welty* 100). The moors from *Jane Eyre*, the ocean in *The Awakening*, and the vast plains in *My Antonía* all function in similar ways for their characters; all these landscapes illustrate the fertility and vulnerability of women to the masculine forces of violent disruption (101). According to Westling, Welty “presents her glowing, hearthlike Delta as a complex feminine topography embodying forces of both life and death” (101). The imagery often evokes a sense of renewal and continuity; the meadow looked “round” and “had a bloom like fruit” and “the sedge was glowing” (Welty, *Delta* 40). Shellmound seemed to be the hub of the “wheel of the level world” (37). Through such fertile images, Welty has prepared the soil for her characters to grow. Yet, the Yazoo River, or literally, the “River of Death,” winds

its way through the Shellmound world, a constant reminder of mortality and the threatening outside world (256).

Welty underscores the fertility of the landscape with the harvest of cotton, the pregnancy of Ellen Fairchild, the birth of Mary Denis's baby, the "coming through" of Pinchey, the black servant girl at Shellmound, and of course, Dabney's wedding. The cycle of life goes on and on. At the end of the novel, riding in the wagon on the way to a picnic, Ellen notes that "repeating fields, the repeating cycles of season and her own life—there was something in the monotony itself that was beautiful, rewarding—perhaps to what was womanly within her" (317).

The maternal quality of this pastoral novel may have been quite soothing to readers disturbed by the disruption and scarring of war. Westling suggests that Welty's version of the pastoral is very different from the "dominant masculine traditions of pastoral escape found in American literature" (*Eudora Welty* 89). She argues that the American heroes of Cooper, Melville, and Faulkner "have been seeking to recover a kind of prelapsarian innocence by fleeing into nature to evade the corruption and complexity which they associate with civilization and the feminine" (89). Through this pattern, these writers have attempted to mask or rewrite a history of masculine guilt for the consequences of westward migration – the slaughter of Native Americans and the exploitation of the land (89). While Faulkner "communicates an anguished understanding of this problem," he could find no hope for resolution (89). Yet Westling notes that "the pastoral vision of *Delta Wedding* depicts a community of women and men cooperating with each other in harmony with the landscape" (89). Welty's answer to Faulkner's "tragic and decaying Mississippi patriarchies" is the Fairchilds, a mother-

centered family that stresses cooperation and revitalization (90). But like the Delta landscape itself, which bears under its lush surface the scars of war, the pastoral quality of *Delta Wedding* camouflages the prejudice, racial tensions, and violence on the plantation.

Chapter 4: Women, Heroes at Home

In attempting to avoid writing about the war, Welty creates in *Delta Wedding* a counter-epic, avoiding conventional masculine heroism and offering her readers the alternative heroism of the female. In fact, the circular imagery that helps define the feminine, pastoral qualities of the Delta also mirrors a model of female development discussed by many critics. Mary Anne Ferguson describes this pattern as circular, rather than the spiral journey of the male (59). The male hero leaves home to find his identity, tests himself through a series of adventures, and returns home with a greater knowledge of self, ready to begin again with “the ending a new beginning on a higher plane” (58). By contrast, Ferguson maintains that “female heroines remain at home. Instead of testing their self-image through adventures in the outside world, women are initiated through learning the rituals of human relationships at home” (59). She argues that “women in most novels are presented as incapable of autonomy and integrity”; they simply exist as a part of the world which men test in their own self search (59). In the male novel of development, women’s passivity has been essential (59). In *Delta Wedding*, Welty does not require her male characters to be passive; she does, however, place the men in the background of the novel, never allowing the reader into their private thoughts and feelings, while arranging the women’s thoughts and perspectives to take center stage.

Lee R. Edwards examines feminine heroism in literature in her book *Psyche As Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form*. She asserts that heroes are volunteers who behave passively and humbly; they are “part of a category described by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner as ‘threshold people,’ ‘liminars’” (qtd. in Edwards 7). “Necessarily ambiguous,” heroes from this category allow themselves to be reduced so

that they may be made anew (7). “Marginals” are another group of people described by Turner who also dwell on the borders of social groupings, but “unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity” (qtd. in Edwards 8). They have not “allowed” themselves to be reduced, but instead have been “reduced” by society’s definition of them. The liminar’s status may be temporary, but the marginal’s status is determined by society, and therefore, is fixed, until society redefines it (8).

“In patriarchal circumstances where woman’s status is seen as categorically lowly,” according to Edwards, “the tension between this reduction and heroic aspiration marks the woman hero as quintessentially marginal” (8). She describes male heroes within a patriarchy as liminars. The male hero’s isolation is not permanent or as pronounced as that imposed upon female heroes because his heroism depends on something other than his sex (8). However, the female hero will always be an outsider within a patriarchy because she is the “other” sex. The male hero, Edwards asserts, is “capable of forcing society to change,” but is “nonetheless unable to negate the assumption at the culture’s heart: the idea that society itself is inextricably bound up with prerogatives exercised exclusively, and necessarily, by men” (9). No matter how marginal or isolated he may seem, his liminal status will always be only temporary. Therefore, Edwards concludes that a male hero can hardly be “used to pose the deepest threat to patriarchy’s authority, to divide power from sex, gender from honor, strength from violence, and society from male supremacy” (9). A woman hero is needed for this job, “for in patriarchy, femaleness is the ultimate and ineradicable sign of marginality” (9). Because patriarchy has assigned women characteristics that are alternative to men’s,

making femininity and masculinity complementary rather than overlapping categories, a woman hero can use culturally feminine traits to challenge the belief that society as an idea must rest on war and conquest (9). The female hero can reveal “fundamental conflicts within patriarchy” and the resulting need for change (15). During World War II, the women who served their country in the armed forces, in defense factories, in shipyards, and at home unwittingly revealed cracks in the patriarchal foundation by demonstrating woman’s ability to do whatever was necessary for the war effort and their country.

Ferguson asserts that women are initiated through learning the rituals of human relationships at home in order to replicate the lives of their mothers (59). Susan Lichtman also identifies the cyclical nature of the female journey in “The Female Hero’s Journey of Self Actualization.” This journey involves a three-phase cycle that embraces virgin, mother, and crone, the stages of a woman’s physical and psychological growth that “taken together represent the whole span of a woman’s life from ignorance and passion to the birth of the social being and finally, the arrival at wisdom and legacy for the future generations” (11).

In the virgin phase, according to Lichtman, the female hero begins her life’s adventure by separating from her mother and starting menstruation (11). The female hero descends into self in order to become self-aware and self-involved with the promise of her body (12). Lichtman suggests that the “hero may experience a *hieros gamos*, a sacred marriage, which becomes a part of her education but by no means the extent of it” (12). Usually an older woman acts as a mentor or guide to the young initiate (11).

The second phase of development is the mother stage. While Lichtman describes it in terms of maternity and nurturing, the object of creation and nurture may or may not be children. The focus of this stage is to “bring the hero out of self-absorption and self-development and into a more social realm of community; the creations of the mothers allow or ensure the perpetuation of the human species” (12). Community can be family, village, sisterhood, or any group of people that come together to strengthen the chances of human survival (12). At this stage the mother learns and accepts a certain degree of selflessness to enable her society to continue (12).

The last stage is that of the crone, “harbinger of death and the new life or generation that follows” (12). This phase of selfhood in relation to eternity begins with menopause, which the ancients interpreted as the beginning of wisdom (12). Lichtman describes the crone as the keeper of the family or community history; she passes on the stories and lessons of her generation to the next. “She becomes the mistress of two worlds: life and death” (12).

Turning away from the “masculine” events of World War II, *Delta Wedding* seeks to explore the sensibility of women, and as Bolsterli astutely observes, “Welty’s exploration of the experience of women proceeds so naturally they hardly seem to issue from a ‘woman’s point of view’” (149). Welty offers no female heroes who throw down the gauntlet at the feet of the male oppressor and fight him to defeat; instead, she seriously and carefully depicts women’s culture (149). Through the female characters Laura, Dabney, Shelley, Ellen, Aunt Shannon, Aunt Mac and others in *Delta Wedding*, women can see themselves celebrated at all points in their life journeys. Jane Hinton observes that “through learning what it means to be a member of the Fairchild family in

the Mississippi Delta, each [woman] learns more about what it is to be a human being in a world where there is no one answer to its mysteries” (122). Hinton makes an important distinction: the women learn to be, not just women, but *human beings* in a very precarious world and how American women during the 1940s would identify with this concept. Welty builds the novel around the preparation of the wedding of Dabney Fairchild and within this framework, this circle of family life, women emerge as fully realized characters, no longer on the margins of a story, but central and even heroic.

Laura McRaven introduces us to the world of Shellmound as she arrives there for her cousin Dabney’s wedding. Laura’s virgin phase has begun early with separation from her mother through her mother’s death, and now she journeys away from her father and home, alone for the first time. Although she is related to the Fairchilds by birth, she regards herself as an “outsider” trying to negotiate her way into the circle of Fairchilds, perhaps hoping to restore the sense of family unity she has lost. This feeling of separation and loss within the family permeated the country when *Delta Wedding* was published. Welty and millions of others experienced anguish like Laura’s: “‘My mother is dead!’ said Laura” (Welty, *Delta* 10). Laura remembers her mother’s observation that the Fairchilds “never seemed to change at all,” a comment Laura takes to be a compliment (17). But for her mother, a Fairchild who had moved away from Shellmound, this comment might be interpreted as an admonition against stagnation on her family’s part. The Fairchilds, according to the sharp eye of the oldest Fairchild daughter, Shelley, “are solid to the outside,” and “self-sufficient against people that come up knocking,” but can the Fairchilds keep the world out forever (110)? At Shellmound, Laura is at times overwhelmed by her boisterous extended family, who, in her keen

observation, seemed to “change every moment” as if “an iridescent life was busy within” (18). Although Welty purposely chose the year 1923 because “nothing happened” and the Fairchilds seem to remain constant, unaffected by the outside world, the 1943 reader knows that Shellmound cannot “keep the world out forever.” The security of Shellmound will be forever changed by the Great Depression in the next decade and World War II in the following decade. Welty’s pastoral escape to Shellmound is a rare pause in history, and how well the 1940s reader realizes this.

Laura, who was nine, was fascinated most by her boy cousins. Welty would have been about Laura’s age in 1923, so these boys would have been Welty’s contemporaries. These were the “boys” who now fought in Europe and the Pacific during 1941-45. Paradoxically, in this woman-centered realm, the boys and the men, according to Laura, “defined that family always. All the girls knew it” (16). The boys—Orrin, Roy, Little Battle, and Ranny—are seen by Laura as a “unified group” (Harrison 52) “constantly seeking one another, even at the table with their eyes, seeking the girls only for their audience when they hadn’t another” (qtd. in Harrison 52). Laura allows them to define her even as they edge her out of participating in their activities. In other words, she becomes a marginalized observer: “When she looked at the boys and the men Laura was without words” (Welty, *Delta* 16).

Initially, Laura seems to want to be one of the Fairchilds, and Ellen brings her into the family by having her help make Mashula Hines’s coconut cake from a family recipe. Later, as the children play the circle game, Laura’s ambivalence is evident as she muses over the game: “It was funny how sometimes you want 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. . . . It was never a good circle unless you were in it, catching hands, and knowing the song” (94-95).

This imagery of circles and enclosure re-emerges at Laura’s initiation experience at Marmion, a mansion that is to become Dabney and Troy’s home. James Fairchild, Battle’s father, built Marmion, but he died after being shot during a duel the year it was completed. His wife, Laura Allen, died broken-hearted soon after, leaving the “two poor Civil War-widowed sisters to bring up the eight children” (157). The mansion was left to ruin because it was “too heart-breaking” to live where so much tragedy had occurred (157). Even in the paradise of Shellmound are reminders of its turbulent, violent past. Perhaps Welty had Marmion in mind when she wrote in “Some Notes On River Country,” “Whatever is significant and whatever is tragic in its story live as long as the place does, though they are unseen, and the new life will be built upon these things . . .” (*Some Notes* 24). Now Marmion has come full circle as it waits for new life to fill it. At the abandoned mansion, Roy and Laura enter a “vast room, the inside of a tower” (Welty, *Delta* 230), and there in its center is Aunt Studney and her mysterious sack, from which, according to Roy, “Mama gets all her babies” (228). Here they participate in a “dual ritual, blessing the old mansion and symbolically initiating Roy and Laura into puberty” (Westling, *Eudora Welty* 114). Aunt Studney prepares the mansion with a fertility ritual. Laura runs around and around, and Roy follows her – “and so it was a chase,” and Aunt Studney turns herself in place around and around (Welty, *Delta* 231). As Roy runs up a spiral staircase and Laura sounds a note on a little piano, Aunt Studney sounds out too – “a cry high and threatening like the first note of a song at a ceremony, a wedding or a

funeral” and suddenly bees that seem to come from her sack are swarming the room (232).

Westling reminds us of the long association of bees with feminine fertility; they are a highly organized community of insects ruled by a powerful queen. Bees serve a vital role in nature by pollinating plants to ensure their continued reproduction. With the flower-like chandelier that hangs from the ceiling, Westling suggests that Welty intended this ceremony to be a sort of pollination ritual to prepare the old house for a “new flowering of life” that will come with Dabney and Troy (*Eudora Welty* 115).

Lichtman suggests that symbols associated with the virgin stage include “the season of spring, enclosures, and images of becoming”: blooming flowers, secret rooms, and hidden treasures (12). As Laura and Roy leave the house, an image of enclosure, Laura finds a pin shaped like a rose. The pin is the one for which Ellen has been looking. Originally a courtship gift from Battle to Ellen, the pin represents female sexuality and is found by Laura, who is on the brink of puberty (Westling, *Eudora Welty* 116). She denies Roy the talisman, and for the moment, any knowledge of women: “You can’t have it, you can’t have it, you can’t have it,” she tells him repeatedly (Welty, *Delta* 234). Unable to hold on to it, however, she loses it when Roy throws her into the Yazoo River, the river of Death. Laura sinks until Roy fishes her out by her hair. He “thought girls floated,” to which Laura replies “You sure don’t know much,” and, thus, Roy receives his first lesson regarding women (235). Welty compares Laura’s “baptism” to Aunt Studney’s sack: “As though Aunt Studney’s sack had opened after all, like a whale’s mouth, Laura opening her eyes head down saw its insides all around her—dark water and fearful fishes” (234). Westling suggests with this comparison that the river is also the

womb of life, and Laura's baptism "cleanses the taint of her mother's recent death so that she can participate in Dabney's wedding" (*Eudora Welty* 116). In terms of Lichtman's virgin phase, this immersion or return to the womb for a girl or woman is a "descent into self" (12). This "return to the womb" serves as another image of enclosure, which as Suzanne Harrison points out, paradoxically "leads to growth and expansion, to a movement toward selfhood for Laura" ("The Other Way" 55).

For the female hero, Lichtman maintains, "The search for self is the refusal to be victimized or stereotyped even by one's own shadow or sense of otherness" (15). Laura recognizes this sense of being "outside the circle," and finally embraces it. Although Ellen finally invites Laura to stay with them at Shellmound, Laura knows that she will return to her father in Jackson because "absorption in Shellmound would be a kind of doom" (Westling, *Sacred Groves* 93). She sees that "when people were at Shellmound it was as if they had never been anywhere else" (Welty, *Delta* 175) and for Laura, being absorbed in the "circle" of Shellmound would mean losing a part of her self. She will "refuse the Fairchild denial of loss and reclaim her grief in order to recover her mother" (Harrison, *Eudora Welty and Virginia Woolf* 33). Just as the year 1923 was a fleeting, fragile moment in history when "nothing happened," Laura's time at Shellmound—ostensibly—can only be a brief, pastoral interlude.

Like Laura, Dabney and Shelley are in the virgin phase of self-development, although they seem to be taking different paths to their next phase. Dabney is preparing to enter her *hieros gamos*, her "sacred marriage," with Troy Flavin, the overseer at Shellmound, and the preparation of this wedding is the center of most of the novel's action. Troy, whose name evokes images of classical warfare, stands in stark contrast to

the Fairchilds, with his slow temperment and flame-red hair. These differences attract Dabney as she begins to distinguish her own values from those of her family: “slowness made any Fairchild frantic, and Dabney delighted now again in Troy’s slowness like a kind of alarm” (Welty, *Delta* 160). She feels the need to break away from her family; sometimes being a Fairchild just was not important: “that she was one of the Fairchilds was of no more need to her than the locust shells now hanging to the trees everywhere were to the singing locusts” (40). Dabney represents the new generation who has no trouble letting go of the past and its ways. She rejects the masculine notion of “honor” as it had been “drummed” into her father’s generation; she sees the absurdity of letting a beautiful home like Marmion stand empty because of a foolish duel over cotton.

Through Dabney, Welty counters the masculine “chivalry” that was supposed to be the “gallant inheritance of Civil War heroes” (Westling, *Eudora Welty* 123). By seeing this behavior through “the clear-headed practical perspective of a young white woman, exactly the kind of pure young lady for whom the knights of the Lost Cause claimed they fought their war, Welty refutes its claims and concentrates instead on its disastrous results” (123). Dabney declares, “I will never give up anything! [. . .] Never! Never! For I am happy, and to give up nothing will prove it. I will never give up anything, never give up Troy—or to Troy!” (Welty, *Delta* 159). While she does recognize that giving up one’s life for something demonstrates passion or “the privilege of fieriness in the blood,” which she felt in herself, young Dabney cannot imagine what would ever drive her to sacrifice (159). Harrison underlines the fact that as triumphant, determined, and singular as Dabney seems to be, Welty reminds us that “Nobody had ever told her anything—not anything very true or very bad in life” (*Eudora Welty and Virginia Woolf* 301-302).

Dabney's happiness by her marriage to Troy threatens the pastoral, ideal world of Shellmound, because while Dabney may not escape, she has allowed an alien in (Weston 101). As Ruth Weston notes, Dabney's engagement is "an obvious rebellion against the cultural expectations of her class and family hierarchy" (100). The "mildness" with which her family has accepted her "circle-breaking fiancé" (100) troubles Dabney: "The rehearsal was tonight. If they didn't say anything to her now, or try to stop her, it was their last chance" (Welty, *Delta* 160). Even when Ellen faints, Dabney hopes her engagement was the cause. She begins to understand that the world of Shellmound does not revolve around her, as her wedding draws closer and still no one has tried to stop it: "I always wondered what they would do if I married somebody they didn't want me to. Poor Papa is the only one really suffering. All her brothers would try to hold her and not let her go, though, when the time came actually to leave the house" (244). Thomas Landess has argued that Dabney knows their permissiveness "is not the result of love but of indifference" (qtd. in Weston 100).

Dabney's sexual awakening conforms perfectly with Lichtman's description of this phase. On her solitary ride out early one morning before her wedding, the world of nature seems to reflect Dabney's desires, and "she alone is in possession of her sexuality" (Fuller 301): "...the little filly went delightedly through the wet paths, breasting and breaking the dewy nets of spider webs. [...] The occasional fence smelled sweet, their darkened wood swollen with night dew like sap" (Welty *Delta* 156-7). She takes the opportunity for one last look at the whirlpool before she is married. The sensuality of the moment is evident as she parts "the thonged vines of the wild grapes, thick as legs" and

looks in, “feasting her fear on the dark, vaguely stirring water” (161). Danielle Fuller recognizes the ambiguities at play in the scene:

Welty’s imagery both entrances and repulses her reader, suggesting both allurement and fear, celebration and enchantment. It is as if Dabney were paying homage at a shrine of female sexuality but one which encapsulates the difficulties and complexities facing women who wish to play out their sexual desires in heterosexual relationships. (301)

By contrast, Shelley, the oldest Fairchild, suspects that marriage will not be her way out of Shellmound. Intellectual and introspective, she is the daughter over whom Ellen worries: “There was something not quite *warm* about Shelley, her first child. Could it have been in some way her fault?” (Welty, *Delta* 278) Through her love of language, reading, and writing, Shelley has already begun to distinguish herself from the rest of her family. Harrison observes that “through her diary entries, Shelley challenges the patriarchal discourse of Shellmound and resists its insistence on marriage as she watches her sister Dabney ‘walk into something you dread and you cannot speak to her’” (“The Other Way,” 53). Shelley longs to engage in this love affair with the written word in the privacy of her bedroom, but her father “seeks to tame and restrict the pleasure that Shelley finds in her writing” (53). He refuses her permission to take a lamp to her room to read and write by, instead insisting that she “can read in the lower part of the house with [her] clothes on like other people” (Welty, *Delta* 109). Perhaps Battle’s reaction reveals an underlying fear of the knowledge that Shelley might attain through her reading and writing.

Welty's inclusion of Shelley's diary entries subverts and thwarts such a restriction and gives a voice to the feminine commentary that the novel's patriarchal world seeks to silence and deny (Harrison 53). In the end Shelley's knowledge of men and their ways comes not from books but from witnessing Troy as he "handles" the Negroes (Welty *Delta* 125). Shelley walks in on a confrontation between Troy and some of the field hands; Troy pushes her behind him just before he shoots the hand of one of the workers. When Welty wrote the novel in the 1940s, most white Southerners were protected from witnessing the masculine exercise of force necessary to maintain white supremacy (Westling, *Eudora Welty* 124). By witnessing the confrontation, Shelley understands better than most of her family the violence and pain simmering behind the façade of their graceful plantation life. Instead of fear, Shelley reacts with anger that Troy, not even a true Deltan, could give such a "convincing performance" of "an overseer born and bred" (Welty, *Delta* 259). Then the thought occurs to her that all men simply imitate each other, never analyzing their own behavior. Like Dabney, Shelley rejects the masculine heroic code, and she sees at its core ignorance and immaturity (Westling, *Eudora Welty* 125). While she believes that women do "know a *little* better," however, they must keep this superior knowledge to themselves (Welty, *Delta* 259).

Shelley's journey to self-awareness has been thrown off course by Dabney preceding her, the oldest daughter, in marriage. Since the engagement, Ellen notices that "Shelley had been practicing a kind of ragamuffinism" (Welty, *Delta* 278). Shelley both desires and fears the sacrifice of self that the wedding signifies to her (Prenshaw, "Woman's World" 54). Marriage is the expected course for young women of Shelley's age and social class, and to Welty's credit, Shelley seems to be making a conscious

choice about marriage. Ultimately, Shelley realizes that in her fear she has limited her vision for herself: “Why do you look out thinking nothing will happen any more? Why are you thinking your line of trees the indelible thing in the world?” (Welty, *Delta* 289) In dancing with George, against his “firm,” “cavorting body,” Shelley feels excitement and sees her “vision of choice” (290). She becomes convinced that “things” would happen to her, even if they have not yet (290). Initially for Shelley, Dabney’s marriage was like a door closing to her, but instead of seeing another room with another door, she envisions herself going to an “opening wood, with weather—with change, beauty...” (290). Westling describes Shelley’s future: “Whereas Dabney’s world will be one of domestic enclosures, Shelley’s will be figured forth in wilder terrains. Thus once again, feminine assertion expresses itself in terms of movement over wide landscapes” (*Eudora Welty* 126). Shelley’s initial journey away from Shellmound will be temporary, a trip to Europe, a graduation gift from her Aunt Tempe. In 1923, a trip to Europe represented a cultural excursion, a rite of passage for young ladies of wealth, but Welty’s 1940s readers would be reminded of the great loss and ruin of the current war and question the future of the Fairchilds. While Welty leaves little doubt that Shelley will grow into her next phase as mother and nurturer to some creative force, she shadows her predictions with the uncertainty of the outside world that will ultimately penetrate Shellmound.

The character of Ellen Fairchild provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the second stage of female heroic development, the mother stage. Ellen is introduced as “the mother of them all” when she comforts Laura, who has become sick after her long journey (Welty, *Delta* 11). Mother of eight children of her own; surrogate mother to Maureen, her mentally handicapped niece; and pregnant for the tenth time—Ellen is the

calming center of the clamorous Fairchild family. Much to the consternation of her Mississippi-born and -bred sister-in-law, Tempe, she has retained her Virginia ways, distinguishing her as a town girl from Mitchem Corners. Always busy, she never waits for the help to wait on her. Clairvoyant, she relies on dreams to help her know when things are missing or when she is needed, for “she was too busy when she was awake to know if a thing was lost or not” (84). By lending credence to her dreams, which seem always to be accurate, Welty again “gives a voice to woman’s traditionally silenced knowledge” as dreams are “traditionally feminine genres” like Shelley’s diary (Harrison 52).

True to the mother stage, Ellen nurtures “not through domineering nor coddling, but through a deep understanding of individuals, seeking always in quiet tactful ways to help those about her toward responsible maturity and personal fulfillment” (Vande Kief, “The Love Ethos” 247). For her, nurturing comes before housework, decorating, even dressing. She retrieves a silver goblet from the sandpile, allows dead zinnias to remain in the front parlor, permits Bluet’s (the baby of the family) flower bouquets to reside in heirloom vases, and leaves “fairy gifts” on napping children’s pillows. Jane Hinton observes that, “Intuitively, Ellen strives for others rather than for herself. As a mother in this matriarchal society, she is concerned chiefly with the happiness of all those who are Fairchilds . . .” (122). Ellen brings Laura into the family with the ritual of hearth as they bake Mashula’s coconut cake from a family recipe. Welty intertwines the making of the cake with Ellen’s concern for Dabney’s marriage to Troy, which, for Ellen, was connected to George’s marriage to Robbie, who like Troy the Fairchilds considered beneath them: “As Ellen put in the nutmeg and the grated lemon rind she diligently

assumed George's happiness [...]. But—adding the milk, the egg whites, the flour, carefully and alternately as Mashula's recipe said—she could be diligent and still not wholly sure—never wholly” (Welty, *Delta* 32). Ann Romines notes that “Ellen is also subject to the powerful erotic charge of Dabney's beauty; it makes her dizzy, and she wonders, as the cake becomes a metaphor of Dabney's survival as a passionate and traditional woman, ‘was the cake going to turn out all right? She was always nervous about her cakes’ (Romines, *The Home Plot* 223). If only ensuring happiness were as easy as following a recipe.

In spite of her family's gentle teasing, Ellen relies heavily on her intuition. In an admonitory dream, she is warned that she will find her rose-shaped garnet pin, an engagement gift from Battle, under a cypress tree. One afternoon after having this dream, Ellen takes a shortcut through the bayou woods where the cypress trunks “stood opened like doors of tents in biblical engravings” (Welty, *Delta* 89). In these “ancient” woods, instead of finding her pin, she encounters a girl, about the age of Dabney, out alone. The girl has an uncommon beauty, a freshness made “startling” by her leafy hair and her soiled cheek; she is like no person Ellen has ever seen. Westling observes that as “Ellen begins to represent ‘a mother to all the world’ in the deepening mystery of the encounter, the lovely girl assumes the role of the eternal daughter” (*Sacred Groves* 85). Upon learning that the girl is heading to Memphis, “the old Delta synonym for pleasure, trouble, and shame” (Welty, *Delta* 93), Ellen feels compelled to warn her about “good and bad” (92). While Ellen has been unable to caution Dabney against her “sudden decision to marry or questioned her wildness for Troy or her defiance of her father's wishes” (41), she can scold this stranger for being “way out here in the woods” where the

girl will “bring mistakes” on herself (92). The words that Ellen cannot bring herself to say to Dabney come easily with this mysterious young woman: “Stand still,” she tells the girl so that she can assess her; “You’re a stranger to me,” Ellen cannot admit that she and Dabney have grown distant since Dabney’s engagement; “I was speaking about men—men, our lives. But you don’t know who I am,” and “I’m not stopping you, [. . .]. I ought to turn you around and send you back—or make you tell me where you’re going or think you’re going” (92). Her warning, however, goes unheeded or proves too late. The girl responds to Ellen, “You couldn’t stop me,” (92). With those words, the girl asserts her freedom, speaking for herself, Dabney, and all the daughters of the world who must find their own paths to their true selves.

When Ellen first encounters the girl, “a whole mystery of life open[s] up” for Ellen, and something, “almost bringing terror,” makes her think of Robbie Reid, her estranged sister-in-law (91). The intuitive Ellen cannot ignore this ominous thought or feeling, and this strange girl will touch Robbie’s life, if not all their lives. The young woman’s presence in the story demonstrates the inability of Shellmound to remain insulated from the outside world; it will penetrate their boundaries. Her death by the Yellow Dog proves the inherent danger to George and Maureen on the trestle that day. Even into the pastoral setting of Shellmound, danger and violence will intrude. Welty attempts to escape the present violence of World War II with her retreat into *Delta Wedding*, but the hostile world manages to penetrate through in the form of the Yellow Dog. Hinton explains that “the knowledge this outsider gives Ellen provides her with ‘a vision of fate,’ or an awareness of darkness in life which allows her to see more clearly the Fairchilds and their mysteries” (122). This young woman has somehow become a

surrogate for the Fairchilds to take on the tragedies of the world: the Fairchilds would escape the Yellow Dog, and Fairchild women could wander the fields and bayou of Shellmound without fear of becoming victims. Most of the Fairchilds will experience the brutality of the world indirectly, through others' misfortunes, such as Ellen does through the girl in the woods or as Shelly does by witnessing Troy as he "handles" the help. Welty, as well as other Americans on the homefront, may have identified with the insularity of Shellmound, safe at home while others sacrificed their lives for the very security those at home enjoyed.

Later that evening after Ellen's encounter with the strange girl, George approaches Ellen in the yard; he unties and removes her apron, releasing her from her role as homemaker. He encourages her to "forget everything out here" (Welty, *Delta* 101). But instead of forgetting, she remembers and tells George of her encounter with the runaway girl; it has not occurred to her to tell anyone else. George reacts subtly with "gratification and regret" and tells her that he had met the girl also (102). Ellen is stunned that they would both encounter the same mysterious girl, and George admits to Ellen that he had slept with the girl at the "old Argyle gin" (103). According to Westling, by sleeping with the girl, "George had made her the Persephone who disappears into the world of death. If Shellmound were not a place where myth overlaps with ordinary experience, this sacrificial substitute could not have banished danger from Dabney's life" (*Sacred Groves* 86). Once again George has "rescued" the Fairchilds. Ellen produces no verbal retort to his admission, experiences no disbelief, and concocts no "quick to comfort" Fairchild response, and no condemnation. Instead she makes an admission of her own, concerning Dabney, confirming the link she senses between the success of

George's marriage and Dabney's future happiness in her marriage: "Sometimes I'm so afraid when Dabney marries she won't be happy in her life" (104). George, who would not succumb to the Fairchilds' "legend" of happiness, can only comfort Ellen with a pat on the arm, offering her no false hopes for Dabney, and revealing his own uncertainty regarding his relationship with Robbie.

Only Ellen's gentle, nurturing ways can bring Robbie and George back together. Defiantly, Robbie goes to Shellmound, hoping to find George, but instead finds all the Fairchilds sitting down to lunch. They begin by pretending that nothing is wrong until Lady Clare gives them permission to turn on Robbie by sticking her tongue out at her. Dabney accuses Robbie of ruining her wedding; Shelly is reduced to tears. But the distraction of a bird in the house releases the Fairchilds from having to confront Robbie, and they leave Ellen to tend to her. Warily, she allows Robbie to vent her frustrations with the Fairchild family. In the charged atmosphere of Robbie's confrontation and the commotion of the family trying to remove the bird, Ellen remembers another time Shellmound was in crisis and suffered loss. The memory of the fire at the gin begins to intrude into Ellen's subconscious. The cries of "Get it out! Get it out!" take Ellen back to that day of the fire when she miscarried her baby that came between Little Battle and Ranny (Welty, *Delta* 214). The cries seemed to be "half-delight," "half distress," and "somehow more joyous than commiserating" though the fire "threatened their ruin" (214). Again the threat of violence encroaches upon the peace of the pastoral interlude, Welty cannot escape completely the atmosphere of violence. As Shellmound once faced the physical danger of fire, Ellen recognizes that it faces another destructive force to its implied legacy of happiness, the fate of Robbie and George's marriage.

Welty shared little about Ellen before she was married except that she was “bookish, dreamy, modest in her youth,” perhaps much like Shelley and even Laura (Prenshaw, *Woman’s World* 71). Like Laura, when Ellen was nine years old she temporarily lost her mother, who ran off with a man to England for three years before returning. The effect on Ellen was that she had “grown up not trusting appearances,” learning that “other people’s presence and absence were still the least complicated elements of what went on underneath” (Welty, *Delta* 206). Ellen feels that somewhere she has lost herself; she sees herself as an anomaly: “providing tremendous meals she had no talent for, being herself indifferent to food, and had had to learn with burned hands to give the household orders about—or for living on a plantation when she was in her original heart, she believed, a town-loving, book-loving young lady of Mitchem Corners” that “belonged to a little choral society of unmarried girls” (286). But this stage of her life, her “middle life” has shown her “how deep were the complexities of the everyday, of the family” (206) and to appreciate the “charmed life,” the little miracles of the every day (219).

Aunts Maureen (Aunt Mac), Shannon, Jim Allen, Primrose, and Tempe complete the hero cycle of female development by representing the crone stage. According to Lichtman, “The crone keeps the history of her family or community. She also must pass on to the next generation the stories and lessons of her group’s past. [...] She becomes the mistress of two worlds: life and death” (12). The older generation meets the criteria to the point of comedy. A long-running competition exists between the great aunts, Shannon and Mac, over which one had “agonized the more or the more abandonedly, over the fighting brothers and husbands” that had been lost in wars or duels (Welty, *Delta*

155). Aunt Shannon seems to have gotten the upper hand with her routine conversations with the dead husbands and brothers, including Aunt Mac's dead husband, Duncan Laws. While Aunt Mac has held onto her wits, she has lost her hearing, but makes up for any deficiencies with her presence. Still dressing completely in black for mourning, she stalks around Shellmound with her "old wine-colored lip stuck out as if she invited a dare" (86). She and Shannon raised Battle and his siblings after James Fairchild was killed in the duel, and "if anything should, God prevent it, happen to Ellen now, she was prepared to do it again" and raise Battle's children (87). Aunt Mac is still the guardian of propriety; she pulls Ellen, Tempe, and Primrose away from the window by their skirts as they ill-manneredly peep out at Troy. She will remind "that Robbie Reid" (51) that she is "in Shellmound now" and there will be no "ugly words" here (215).

The two maiden aunts, Jim Allen and Primrose, pass on the family legends, recipes, and stories to the younger girls. They "[swore] by Mashula Hines's cook book" and knew when "anything ought to be taken off of the fire" (51). Jim Allen and Primrose live at the Grove, which George gave them when he moved to Memphis. Here, even in the hot Delta summer, this house, like a mausoleum, remains "eternally cool" and quiet, with "cherished things so carefully kept" (51). According to Dorothy Griffin, "it is a nest of the past" and is the "primordial house" and "the origin of Fairchild confidence in the world" (104). Not surprisingly, as inhabitants of such a home, Jim Allen and Primrose would serve as the primary keepers of the family history. In selecting a wedding gift for Dabney, they choose the night light that had been "company" as early as either could remember (Welty, *Delta* 57). While unlighted, the lamp is rather benign, with the picture of a little town painted on it. But when lit, the scene transforms into the Great Fire of

London. For the 1940s readers, a fiery London would have brought images of bombed-out buildings and homes after Hitler's attempt to bomb and starve its citizens into defeat during the summer of 1940. "A friendly little thing [...] if you're ever by yourself," declares Aunt Jim Allen, revealing her indifference to the violent design of the lamp as well as its violent history in the family. A family treasure, the night light sits alone on "its table, the pretty one with sword scars on it," reinforcing its history, as well as the Fairchilds', to the violence of war (58). Along with the night light, Jim Allen and Primrose pass on its story to India and Dabney:

And Aunt Mashula loved it—that waited for Uncle George, waited for him to come home from the Civil War till the lightning one early morning stamped her picture on the window pane. *You've* seen it, India, it's *her* ghost you hear when you spend the night, breaking the window and crying up the bayou, and it's not an Indian maid, for what would she be doing, breaking our window to get out? The Indian maid would be crying nearer your place, where the mound is if *she* cried. (57)

With this keepsake, the aunts subliminally, and perhaps unconsciously, give Dabney some warning that life is not without heartache, and this night light, like Psyche's lamp, may help reveal the realities of life to her, if she will only look.

If Jim Allen and Primrose preserve and pass along the family history, then Tempe may be considered the guardian of the family's social proprieties. As she makes her grand entrance at Shellmound amid a "great lot of boxes," Tempe quickly looks around the parlor, hoping to "catch it before it could compose itself" (128). Welty allows us to see her arrival through India's eyes, and in doing so, we can see glimpses of the "lessons"

that Aunt Tempe is passing on to her: “The table lamp provoked Aunt Tempe. The three white marble Graces holding the shade in their six arms, with dust unreachable in the folds of their draperies and the dents of their eyes, were parading the whole lack of Shellmound to Aunt Tempe” (129). Tempe receives her wedding invitation by phone, a serious faux pas in Tempe’s estimation, and appearances matter to Tempe. So for Tempe, especially, Dabney’s marriage is not shocking because Troy is twice her age or because she is marrying at too young an age, but because she is marrying below her social class. Tempe observes to Shelley that “when people marry beneath them, it’s the woman that determines what comes. It’s the woman that coarsens the man” (270). Tempe would be shocked to know that she and “that Robbie Reid” both agree that “the women always ruled the roost” (190). Margaret Jones Bolsterli notes that Tempe is the type of Southern woman who fervently believes “that it is the job of men to make life easy for women and for women to enjoy their ease” (151). Tempe has bought into the social contract that Bolsterli believes forms the basis for Southern society in which women say to men, “I will be a symbol of your honor if you will pay the price; I will be what you want me to be and I will let you possess me absolutely, if you in return give me everything, including protection” (150). Even Dabney, who borders on the superficial, can see that Tempe has never had to “put on her grown-up mind” and remains spoiled—a comforting option, “if things turned out not to be what you thought” (Welty, *Delta* 244).

These “crone” characters often provide much of the comedy in *Delta Wedding*, and that may seem to undermine the “wisdom” that they pass on to the younger generation. By portraying them with a comic twist, Welty questions the stoic reverence for the past and for convention without serious consideration of new ideas and new ways

of thinking and doing. Bolsterli points out that Aunt Primrose and Aunt Jim Allen are trained for nothing but wifehood, yet never marry, and “their domesticity goes to seed; their perfection in dress and makeup [...] has become in middle age a caricature of femininity” (154). But Welty does not let us forget that these Fairchild women persevered, like Mary Shannon who nursed family, friends, and even strangers during a malaria outbreak, and like Shannon and Maureen, who were widowed during the Civil War and later stepped in to become surrogate mothers to their orphaned nieces and nephews. Violence may interrupt the Fairchilds’ lives, but they endure. Welty’s niece Elizabeth was born during World War II while her father, Walter, was serving in the military. Welty’s concern for her brother, as well as his new family, must have deepened with Elizabeth’s birth. Her appreciation of family devotion is portrayed in these crone characters. These grand old women have earned the respect of their family by surviving the violence of the past, while their male counterparts have not. Their endurance provides hope to the next generation.

Chapter 5: The Men of *Delta Wedding*

Delta Wedding, like any good wedding, showcases the women; after all, the bride is the center of attention at a wedding. But without a groom and his groomsmen, no traditional wedding can take place. They are certainly necessary for the ceremony, but still take a backseat to the bride. Similarly, Welty has put the women and their thoughts and perceptions in the foreground of her novel but allowed men a prominent place in the novel as the major focus of the women characters. In doing so, the novel reflects the paradoxically matriarchal atmosphere in the United States at the time Welty wrote it. Women were central to the economy, whether they worked in shipyards and defense factories or managed a household under the ration system. Yet, their focus was on providing for the men fighting for our country.

In spite of the great aunts' attempt to perpetuate the memory of those heroic men, the male heroes of the distant past have lost their individual identities. They have been reduced to "somebodies" and distinguished only by their firearms:

That was Somebody's gun—he had killed twelve bears every Saturday with it. And Somebody's pistol in the lady's workbox; he had killed a man with in self-defense [...]. There [...] was Somebody's Port Gibson flintlock, and Somebody's fowling piece he left behind him when he marched off to Mexico, never to be laid eyes on again. (Welty, *Delta* 130)

The memory of these long-gone "heroes" has faded with the passage of time and each succeeding generation, but the memory of one family hero still burns brightly.

The shining hero of the family is Denis, who was killed in World War I, after which "it was Denis and always would be Denis that they gave the family honor to"

(152). Denis was the one “who looked like a Greek god,” “who had read everything,” “who squandered his life away loving people too much,” and who “could have been anything and done everything” but “was cut off before his time” (152-3). Denis was also whom Aunt Shannon had “torn herself to pieces over” due to his drinking and getting killed (81). The fact that Denis married Virgie Lee baffled the Fairchild family, for they considered her beneath their social class, but his bad match does little to diminish his stature in the eyes of his family. We learn little of his wife, who went mad after dropping their infant daughter Maureen, and causing – the Fairchilds believe -- permanent brain damage for the child. Virgie Lee ran away to the town of Fairchilds after the accident, becoming the town’s eccentric, leaving Maureen for the Fairchild family to raise. Ellen notes that “even the daily presence of Maureen and the shadowy nearness of Virgie Lee had never taken anything away from the pure, unvarying glory of Denis” (82). Denis’s heroism lies more in how he died than in how he lived; as Lisa Cade Wieland asserts, “the single most important thing that Denis did to achieve hero status was to die too young during wartime” (197). Welty gives no details of his death, no evidence of his courage on the battlefield; after all, she deliberately set the novel in 1923 to avoid attention to war. But war manages to break through the “pastoral fence” she has constructed around this novel. War-related violence helps build the very foundation of the Fairchilds’ myth of Denis. Wieland asserts that “the fact of Denis’ heroism is less important than the family’s unflagging belief in it” (197). Carol Manning observes that Welty might agree that “Southern reminiscers have found the early death of a handsome young man or soldier the perfect subject for their myth-making” (*With Ears ...* 124). Had Denis returned home from the war, he might have eventually outlived any heroics on the

battlefield and been seen as the mortal he obviously was. Yet by his ultimate sacrifice, he looms larger than life through the family stories of him. Still, the reality of Denis's humanity resides in his retarded daughter Maureen, who hardly embodies the conventional legacy of a hero. As a novelist in the 1940s, Welty demonstrates boldness, as well as insight, in her subtle critique of a family's treatment of war veterans, both living and dead.

George has assumed the role of the living family hero, and is "adored by all the women in the family as both savior and sacrificial beast" (Westling, *Sacred Groves* 82). George has not attained the perfection of Denis in the view of the family; after all, he was only wounded in the war:

How in his family's eyes George could lie like a fallen tower as easily as he could be raised to extravagant heights! Now if he was fallen it was because of his ordinary wife, but once it had been because he gave away the Grove, and before that something else. The slightest pressure of his actions would modify the wonder, lower or raise it. (Welty, *Delta* 82)

In his recent heroics, he has slain the "'dragon' that threatened to kill Denis's heir—and, by implication, to violate some sacred family spirit" (Westling, *Sacred Groves* 82), which, of course, "he did [...] for Denis," according to Tempe (Welty, *Delta* 152). However, this rescue has alienated him from his wife Robbie, who leaves George after the trestle incident, hoping he'll come find her. Like his brother Denis, George has married beneath himself in the eyes of his family, who maintain their disapproval of "that Robbie Reid." Unlike Welty's William Wallace from "The Wide Net," who dragged the river when he thought his wife had left him to drown herself, George puts no effort into

finding Robbie. In fact George simply goes home to Shellmound, hoping Robbie may turn up there—as she does. For George and Denis, marriage constituted rebellions against the expectations of the family; yet despite their bad matches, the family has continued to celebrate them as heroes. Robbie’s resentment of George’s selfless act of rescuing Maureen may reflect quite accurately the feelings of American families during World War II. Like Robbie, they witnessed their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers willing to sacrifice their lives for other lives unknown to them and possibly unworthy of their sacrifice. Robbie resents George’s recklessness and willingness to sacrifice himself for Maureen, for Denis, and for the Fairchilds, when he hadn’t done that for her (or wouldn’t do that) for her.

George, being the living hero, teeters on his pedestal from time to time, but remains the family’s “lover and protector and dreaming, forgetful conscience” (280). Dabney witnessed his sensitivity early in her life when he broke up a knife fight between two young black boys who lived at Shellmound. His concern for the boys demonstrated his love for the world, not just the Fairchilds “in particular,” and made him different from the rest of the family, especially the legendary Denis (46). Even though Denis was also present at the knife fight, he displayed no concern for the young boys and “just melted away into the light, laughing,” offering further evidence that the family laurels may be misplaced upon him (44). Peggy Preshaw observes that George Fairchild “best exemplifies the individual achievement and self sacrifice that distinguish the male characters who go through the stages of separation and heroic test, and then return to accept the ties of the family” (“Woman’s World...” 64). In his marriage to Robbie Reid and his departure from Shellmound, George firmly establishes his difference from the

Fairchild clan and at the end of the novel, he is considering returning to Shellmound and living at the Grove (64).

After fighting in World War I, George returned home, “a lonely man that noticed wildflowers” (280). Westling states: “Viewed from outside by his demanding relatives, he is heroic, but within himself he is a mere mortal wounded by the horrors he encountered in the war, outside the pastoral haven of Shellmound” (*Sacred Groves* 70). Only those outside the immediate family circle --Ellen, Robbie, and Laura-- realize how much the family demands of George. Laura feels that “they all crowded him so, the cousins, rushed in on him so, they smiled at him too much, inviting too much, daring him not to be faultless” (Welty, *Delta* 98). She wants to rescue him from this crushing love and “give him room” (98). Ellen observes that “only George left the world she knew as pure—in spite of his fierce energies, even heresies—as he found it; still real, still bad, still fleeting and mysterious and hopelessly alluring to her” (104). While George is truly heroic (he has risked his life in war and at home on the trestle), he resists the role of hero, insisting that his family sees him for all his faults. He admits to Ellen his tryst with the girl from the woods and refuses to compete with Denis’s memory in the eyes of their sister Tempe.

Welty’s treatment of the characters of Denis and George, the most recent war heroes of the novel, may hint at what she fears for those fighting in World War II. Most obviously, like Denis, some men would never come home, and those who would return home might forever be defined by their war experiences. Like George, many may reject the heroic expectations conferred upon them; they are no longer disillusioned about heroism, but having survived a war, understand exactly what a hero is and is not. With

the same acceptance of his left-handedness George displays by refusing to be “broken” of it, he leaves the world as he finds it, “still real, still bad” (104). He offers no excuses or remorse for his infidelity, but seems to need for Ellen to know the true George. Ellen feels that George’s intensity is what “held him so still that it resembled indifference” (245). While this endears him to Ellen, Tempe views his “indifference” as a weakness (245): “George [...] was simply less equal to pulling Dabney out of the way of Troy Flavin, Mary Denis out of the way of Mr. Buchanan, or himself out of the way of Robbie Reid” (247). But he was capable of pulling Maureen out of the way of real danger, the Yellow Dog, and despite his family’s belief that “he did it for Denis,” he also did it for Maureen herself. He acted not because she was a Fairchild, but because she was a human being, and “he saw death on its way” (248). Manning states that “his heroism is a ‘quality of his heart’s intensity and his mind’s’, not a fulfillment of the code of family devotion and sacrifice” (*With Ears...* 134).

In contrast to George and Denis, Battle has fulfilled the family’s code of devotion, but to no avail. After George and Robbie marry, they move to Memphis, leaving his home, “The Grove,” for his maiden sisters to live in. Shellmound then is left for Battle to maintain, along with the care of Aunt Maureen, Aunt Shannon, Jim Allen and Primrose. Battle lives up to his family’s expectations, marrying appropriately and providing for his wife and children as well as the aunts who live with them. Westling observes that “he is a reliable fertilizing agent (his wife Ellen is pregnant for the tenth time), a kindly man, and a good provider for his huge clan” (“Fathers and Daughters” 112). To the best of his ability, he has ensured that the Fairchild name will continue and that Shellmound plantation will remain productive. Battle has fulfilled his role of authoritarian plantation

owner and Fairchild family patriarch. Laura, in particular, is intimidated by his power, remembering that he had broken every one of his children from being left-handed (Welty, *Delta* 13). But at times this image is only a shell; we learn that Battle is “no born business man” (84). Ellen is the one who had “dreamed the location of mistakes in the accounts and payroll” that Battle had missed, and discovered how the overseer Mr. Bascom had cheated them (84). Despite his loud, commanding presence, his family frequently ignores him. Aunt Shannon still mistakes him for Denis, and as he tries finally to “confer his paternal blessing” on Dabney, his words are lost in the more pressing issue of flowers for the wedding (268).

In some ways we may consider Battle as the most feminized male character in that he remains on the “homefront” to manage the family property, does what is expected of him, yet is kept in the margins, often overlooked for his more colorful brothers. His diminished status is not lost on Ellen, who thought “there’s no reason in the world why he should have been cowed in his life by Denis and George” (Welty, *Delta* 250). Still, even perceptive Ellen rarely sees the brothers as equals (Manning, *With Ears Opening...* 196). As she remarks to Robbie about a similarity among the three brothers, she emphasizes a quality in Denis and George: “ ‘George loves a great many people, just about everybody in the Delta, if you would count them. Don’t you know that’s the mark of a fine man, Robbie? Battle’s like that. Denis was even more, even more well loved’ ” (*With Ears ...* 196). Her comment reveals Battle’s inferiority to Denis and George, but it also alludes to flaws in the legend of Denis. Ellen begins by pointing out the great love for others the brothers share, but her attempt to acknowledge Denis’s love for others, devolves into a commentary on others’ love for him. Had Denis no “great love” of which

to speak? Manning observes that Welty depicts a southern society that rarely glorifies self-sacrificing, Christian-like behavior, instead rewarding self-centered, assertive behavior (*With Ears Opening...* 191).

Welty's treatment of Battle's character reinforces the idea that for men to be heroic in the eyes of society, they must leave home, face their demons or fight their battles, and return with lessons learned. During World War II men like Battle, who were "4-F" or chose to "stay on the homefront," never quite attained the status of the Georges and Denises of the world. In typical Welty fashion this "feminized Battle" subtly points out that the conventional idea of heroism reveals an injustice not only to women, but to men as well. According to John Alexander Allen, Welty "demolishes" the traditional image of the male hero:

The work of demolition – to call it that – which she performs upon the conventional image of the male hero has the effect not of attacking the male sex and its image of itself but of clearing the way for a conception of heroic action which does fuller justice to the actual potentialities for heroism in men and women alike. ("Eudora Welty: The Three Moments" 13)

The family's indifference to Battle and its romantic idealization of Denis can be linked with the older aunts' attitude toward another generation of Fairchilds killed in war, but in the Civil War. Welty depicts the aunts' grief as neither noble nor romantic, but as funny, ridiculous, and even petty (*With Ears ...* 123). Because Welty implies that Denis's heroism is due to his early death and portrays Denis as a parody of the traditional war hero in Southern literature, Manning asserts that the implication is not directed at

Denis and his family alone (124). In the militarized atmosphere of the country at the time she wrote the novel, Welty shows courage in questioning whom we regard as true heroes.

As John Alexander Allen points out, “the tendency of Eudora Welty’s fiction is indeed anti-heroic; that is, it makes legitimate fun of the posturing male hero-adventurer...” (“Eudora Welty: The Three Moments” 13). For evidence, we need only look to other characters in her works, such as William Wallace from “The Wide Net” or Mike Fink of *The Robber Bridegroom*. In *Delta Wedding* the family, the community in this novel, bestows heroism upon many different characters. They mistakenly attach it to Denis, mislabel it in George, and deny it in Battle and in Ellen and the other women. While the family regards George a hero for the wrong reasons, Allen argues that his true motives make him heroic according to Welty’s concept of a hero. Heroism, for Welty, lies in the “capacity to feel and, through feeling, to know” (Allen, “Eudora Welty: The Three Moments” 16). This emphasis upon feeling and knowing applies to male and female heroes alike, but seems to come more easily to women than to men (19).

Conclusion

For a period of time during World War II, the very thing that Welty loved most dearly—writing fiction—she found she could not do. Concern over loved ones in the war, especially her brothers and John Robinson, dominated her thoughts, leaving her unable to concentrate on her writing. Encouraging John Robinson to write of his war experiences, she expressed to him: “If I feel something and try to say it truly then the easiest way to do it is writing a story, for me” (Marrs, *Eudora Welty* 107). She wanted to write, and she even wanted to write about the war as a correspondent, but only after retreating from the present did she find she could once again write.

This retreat from the “masculine” epic violence of war took Welty to the feminized pastoral country of the Mississippi delta region that she explored in “Some Notes on River Country.” Influenced by the violence of the present war and unable to escape it completely, even in the beauty of the Delta Welty saw its history of violence from the days of the Natchez Indians through the ravages of the Civil War. Her essay helped to lay the foundation for her next work of fiction “Delta Cousins” which led to the novel *Delta Wedding*. With the heroism of Nancy Robinson serving as a catalyst, Welty finally had the solution to her war-induced writer’s block.

Delta Wedding began as short story intended to bring a bit of home to a dear friend away at war. At a time when contemporary society coped with war on a daily basis, Welty sought out a time for her novel when there was no war, when “nothing happened” to interrupt the ebb and flow of the family life of the Fairchilds. She selected a wedding as the means to bring a family together to celebrate. The story and subsequent novel were meant to provide a bit of escape from the day-to-day horrors of the war. For

Welty, writing about the war itself proved too difficult; she was too intimately connected to it at the time. Yet by not writing about it, she developed a picture of war through the negative image she created of everything war is not.

In trying to escape to another time away from war and to a place of natural beauty away from the ruins of battle, Welty could not keep the war from intruding. The violent history of the Delta Country ruptures the pastoral life of the Fairchilds. The land carries the scars of past conflicts. The Fairchild family itself is a casualty of past wars with a generation of men lost in the Civil War and another generation scarred by World War I. As the reader knows (especially the contemporary reader), the youngest generation has World War II to face in twenty years.

During a period of “masculine” violence, Welty’s novel features women and the domestic realm, revealing the heroic in the everyday. With men sacrificing their lives for the American way of life, for their families and homes, the arts of homemaking took on new and greater meaning. The nation relied on housewives to “make do or do without” to get the country through the food and supply shortages that were inevitable during the war. In *Delta Wedding* Welty’s emphasis on the abundance of food and its importance for social occasions would be a sharp contrast to the reality of wartime. Again, by depicting what war is not, she etches the outline of what it is.

In portraying the domestic realm as central to family, Welty depicts its keepers as unlikely heroes. During a time when men became heroes through committing or surviving violence in battle, she offers an alternative and reminds us that heroism happens in the everyday, in the feminine as well as the masculine. Heroism does not require epic events, such as war. Heroes can emerge from everyday moments. The

everyday was full of such moments and as Ellen reminds us, "...one moment was enough for you to know the greatest thing" (Welty, *Delta* 317).

WORKS CITED

- Allen, John Alexander. "Eudora Welty: The Three Moments." *A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty*. Ed. John F. Desmond. Metuchen; The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978. 12-34.
- Bolesteri, Margaret Jones. "Women's Vision: The World of Women in *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles*, and *The Optimist's Daughter*." *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*. Ed. Peggy W. Prenshaw. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1979. 149-56.
- Edwards, Lee R. *Psyche As Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form*. Middleton: Wesleyan UP, 1984.
- Fuller, Danielle. "'Making a Scene': Some Thoughts on Female Sexuality and Marriage in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*." *Mississippi Quarterly*, 48 (1995): 291-318.
- Harrison, Suzan. *Eudora Welty and Virginia Woolf: Gender, Genre, and Influence*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U of P, 1997.
- . "'The Other Way to Live': Gender and Selfhood in *Delta Wedding* and *The Golden Apples*." *Mississippi Quarterly*, 44 (1990-91): 49-68.
- Higonnet, Margaret Randolph, ed. et. al. *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.
- Hinton, Jane L. "The Role of Family in *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles*, and *The Optimist's Daughter*." *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*. Ed. Peggy W. Prenshaw. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1979. 120-131.

- Kreyling, Michael. *Agent and Author: Eudora Welty and Diarmuid Russell*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991.
- Lewis, Brenda Ralph. *Women at War: The Women of World War II – At Home, at Work, on the Front Line*. Pleasantville: The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., 2002.
- Lichtman, Susan A. *The Female Hero in Women's Literature and Poetry*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.
- Manning, Carol S. *With Ears Opening Like Morning Glories: Eudora Welty and the Love of Storytelling*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Marrs, Suzanne. *Eudora Welty: A Biography*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2005.
- Pollack, Harriet. "Reading John Robinson." *Mississippi Quarterly*. 56.2 (2003): 176-230.
- Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman, ed. *Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1984.
- - -. *More Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996.
- - -. "Woman's World, Man's Place." *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*. Ed. Louis Dollarhide and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1979. 46-77.
- Romines, Ann. *The Home Plot: Women Writing and Domestic Ritual*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- Ruas, Charles. "Eudora Welty." *More Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw. Jackson: UP of Mississippi. 1996. 58-68.
- Vande Kieft, Ruth M. "The Love Ethos of Porter, Welty, and McCullers." *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*. Ed. Carol S. Manning. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993. 235-258.

- Weatherford, Doris. *American Women and World War II*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 1990.
- Welty, Eudora. *Delta Wedding*. 1945. New York: Harvest-Harcourt, Inc., 1973.
- - -. *On Writing*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.
- - -. *Some Notes on River Country*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2003.
- Wieland, Lisa Cade. "Cracks in the Wall: Change and Conflict in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*." *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 31 (2000): 187-199.
- Westling, Louise. *Eudora Welty*. Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1989.
- - -. *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor*. Atlanta: U of Georgia P, 1985.
- Yellin, Emily. *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II*. New York: Free Press, 2004.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Agar, Herbert. "The Truth Is Good News." *Harper's Magazine* May 1942: 561–67.
- Appel, Alfred. *A Season of Dreams: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1965.
- Bailey, Ronald H. *The Home Front: U.S.A. World War II* Time-Life Books. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life, 1987.
- Bell Telephone System Advertisement. *Time* 11 January 1943: 7.
- Brookhart, Mary Hughes and Marrs, Suzanne. "More Notes on River Country." *Welty: A Life in Literature*. Ed. Albert J. Devlin. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1987. 82-95.
- Burger, Nash K. Rev. of *The Wide Net* by Eudora Welty. *Journal of Mississippi History* 6 (1944): 55.
- Carrier Corporation. Advertisement. *Time* 25 January 1943: 14.
- Carson, Barbara Harrell. "Eudora Welty's Tangled Bank." *South Atlantic Review* 48.4 (1983): 1-18.
- Chronaki, Bessie. "Eudora Welty's Theory of Place and Human Relationships." *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43.2 (1978): 36-44.
- Cluck, Nancy Anne. "The Aenid of Natchez Trace: Epic Structure in Eudora Welty's 'The Wide Net.'" *Southern Review* 19 (1983): 510-18.
- "Conscripts Will Lead Hard, Healthy Life While Learning To Be Soldiers." *Life* 30 September 1940: 18–19.
- Daniels, Jonathan. "Seeing the South." *Harper's Magazine* Nov. 1941: 598–606.

- “Detroit Has a Race Riot as Whites Bar Negroes from New Homes in U.S. Housing Unit.” *Life* 16 March 1942: 40–41.
- “Draft Limits.” *Newsweek* 12 May 1941: 40.
- Eisinger, Chester E. *Fiction of the Forties*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963.
- Evans, Elizabeth. *Eudora Welty*. New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc, 1981.
- “The Fighting South.” *Life*. 6 July 1942: 71.
- Fussell, Paul. *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Gretlund, Jan Nordby. *Eudora Welty’s Aesthetics of Place*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1997.
- Griffin, Dorothy G. “The House as Container: Architecture and Myth in *Delta Wedding*.” *Welty: A Life in Literature*. Ed. Albert J. Devlin. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1987. 96-112.
- Haney, Richard Carlton. “*When is Daddy coming home?*” *An American Family during World War II*. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press.
- Hardy, John Alexander. “Marrying Down in Eudora Welty’s Novels.” *Eudora Welty: Thirteen Essays*. Ed. Peggy W. Prenshaw. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1983. 71-97.
- Hicks, Granville. “Eudora Welty.” *College English* 14.2 (1952): 69-76.
- Hodgins, Audrey. “The Narrator as Ironic Device in a Short Story of Eudora Welty.” *Twentieth Century Literature* 1.4 (1956): 215-219.
- Jackson, Joseph Henry. “Bookman’s Notebook.” Rev. of *The Wide Net* by Eudora Welty. *San Francisco Chronicle* 27 September 1943.

- Kerr, Elizabeth M. "The World of Eudora Welty's Women." *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*. Ed. Peggy W. Prenshaw. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1979. 132-138.
- Kreyling, Michael. *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980.
- Ladd, Barbara. "'Coming Through': The Black Initiate in *Delta Wedding*." *Mississippi Quarterly*, 41 (1988): 541-551.
- Manchester, William. *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America – 1932–1972*. New York: Bantam Books, 19__.
- Manning, Carol S. "Hurston and Welty, Janie and Livvie." *Southern Literary Journal* 34.2 (2002): 64-72.
- Marrs, Suzanne. "Eudora Welty's Snowy Heron." *American Literature* 53.4 (1982): 723-25.
- . *One Writer's Imagination*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002.
- . *The Welty Collection : A Guide to the Eudora Welty Manuscripts and Documents At the Mississippi Department of Archives and History*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1988.
- Morgan, Arthur E. "The Community: The Seed Bed of Society." *The Atlantic Monthly* February 1942: 222–28.
- Mortimer, Gail L. *Daughter of the Swan: Love and Knowledge in Eudora Welty's Fiction*. Athens: U of Georgia P.
- Neault, D. James. "Time in the Fiction of Eudora Welty." *A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty*. Ed. John F. Desmond. Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978. 35-50.

- “Office Help Problem.” *Newsweek* 2 March 1942: 10.
- Paton-Walsh, Margaret. *Our War Too: American Women Against the Axis*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2002.
- Pepsodent. Advertisement. *Time* 4 January 1943: 14.
- Pitavy-Souques, Danielle. “Of Suffering and Joy: Aspects of Storytelling in Welty’s Short Fiction.” *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*. Ed. Dawn Trouard. Kent: Kent State UP, 1989. 142-150.
- Pullman. Advertisement. *Time* 18 January 1943: 39.
- Redding, J. Saunders. “A Negro Looks At This War.” *American Mercury* Nov. 1942: 585–92.
- . “The Mobbing.” *Harper’s Magazine* July 1942: 189–98.
- Romines, Ann. “How Not to Tell a Story: Eudora Welty’s First-Person Tales.” *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*. Ed. Dawn Trouard. Kent: Kent State UP, 1989. 94-104.
- Schmidt, Peter. *The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty’s Short Fiction*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1991.
- Sprengnether, Madelon. “Delta Wedding and the Kore Complex.” *Southern Quarterly* 25 (1987): 120-130.
- Stafford, Jean. “Empty Net.” Rev. of *The Wide Net* by Eudora Welty. *Partisan Review* 11 (Winter 1944): 114–115.
- Studebaker. Advertisement. *Saturday Evening Post* 8 January 1941: inside front cover.
- Thomas, Mary Martha. *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women and the Second World War*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1987.

Thompson, Lewis Marshall. "Men Making Bombers." *Harper's Magazine*. April 1942: 481–488.

Vande Kieft, Ruth M. *Eudora Welty*. Rev. ed. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

Underwood Elliott Fisher. Advertisement. *Harper's Magazine*. March 1942: inside front cover.

Vitalized Ventilation. Advertisement. *Time*. 18 June 1943: 6.

"Wartime Living." *Time* 15 June 1942: 16.

Welty, Eudora. "Asphodel." *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1980. 200–08.

---. "At the Landing." *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1980. 240–58.

---. "First Love." *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1980. 153–68.

---. "Livvie." *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1980. 228-239.

---. "The Purple Hat." *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1980. 222–27.

---. "The Wide Net." *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1980. 169–88.

---. "The Winds." *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1980. 209–21.

- Westling, Louise. "Fathers and Daughters in Welty and O'Connor." *Female Tradition in Southern Literature*. Ed. Carol S. Manning. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993. 110-124.
- - -. "Food, Landscape and the Feminine in *Delta Wedding*." *Southern Quarterly* 30.2-3 (1992): 29-39.
- Weston, Ruth D. *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994.
- "What WAACS Will Wear." *Time*. 1 June 1942: 47.
- "When You Go South." *American Mercury* December 1941: 98-104.
- Winkler, Allan M. Winkler. *Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II*. Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986.
- "Women at Work." *Newsweek* 5 January 1942: 36.
- "Women Find Troubles in Path of Connecting With War Jobs." *Newsweek* 16 March 1942: 44-46.
- Woods, Katherine. Rev. of *The Wide Net* by Eudora Welty. *Tomorrow* 3 (1943): 54.
- Yaeger, Patricia. *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.