The Theme of Loss in Literary Works of Eudora Welty

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Mitzi Kay Smith

Professor Darlene Mathis-Eddy

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

June 1991

First Summer Session
My focus of study in preparing this honors thesis has been Eudora Welty, a twentieth-century American writer. Being an English major, I thought that it seemed both appropriate and desirable to pursue a literary topic. Reading and reflecting upon some of the literary works of Eudora Welty in the course of preparing my thesis paper has been an enjoyable and valuable experience with which to conclude my studies within the honors curriculum at Ball State University.

The specific focus of this thesis centers on Welty's novel *Delta Wedding*, published in 1946. Loss is a dominant theme in *Delta Wedding*. It is a theme that is also found in many of Welty's other works. This thesis explores the theme of loss in the literary works of Eudora Welty, principally in *Delta Wedding*, and, secondarily, in some of her other works.

Theme is defined in *A Handbook to Literature* as "A central or dominating idea in a work" (502). In any work, a theme is manifested through many avenues. In works of fiction, these can include plot, characterization, and figurative language. The theme of a work of literature constitutes perhaps its most important aspect. It is the substance of the work, and is probably what the reader will remember the most about the work. Welty's usage of plot, characterization, symbolism, and simile in *Delta Wedding* manifests the theme of loss in the novel.

The plot of a work helps to develop the theme of that work by bringing out the theme in the action of the story.
The plot is the series of main events in the story; these events generally reflect back to the theme. *Delta Wedding* begins with nine-year-old Laura McRaven's train ride from Jackson, Mississippi to the Shellmound plantation at Fairchilds, Mississippi. She is on her way to visit her relatives on her mother's side of the family since her cousin Dabney Fairchild is to be married. Sadly, Laura's mother has died eight months earlier. Laura arrives and is swept into the whirlwind activity of the family and the wedding preparations. In the midst of all of this, young Laura struggles with the loss of her mother, and with not feeling like a full member of the Fairchild family although she wants desperately to be accepted as one. While Laura deals with these problems, other dilemmas are occurring in the Fairchild family. Uncle George's wife, Robbie, has left him, and he is naturally devastated. The matter of Dabney's pending wedding is both exciting and saddening for the family; they have apprehensions about her marrying Troy, her fiance; the sadness surrounding "losing" a family member to marriage as she moves off to a new life with her husband is a large part of their concern. The novel follows Laura, Uncle George, Robbie, Dabney and the rest of the family from Laura's arrival through the completion of Dabney's wedding to Troy. By the end of the novel, Robbie has come back to George, Dabney's wedding has been successfully and happily completed, and Laura has been asked to live with the Fairchilds.
Characterization is the way in which characters in a work are presented and developed. By participating in the action of the plot, the characters help to augment the story's theme. In *Delta Wedding*, the meaning and impact of loss is explored through the experience of characters within the novel. Laura McRaven has lost her mother eight months prior to the opening scene of the novel, in which she is travelling to visit the Fairchilds for her cousin Dabney Fairchild's wedding. Loss is experienced between Uncle George and Robbie when their marriage is temporarily severed. Dabney is lost in another sense by her family to her husband and her new married life as she marries and moves out of her parents' home.

Laura, at the early age of nine, must learn to cope with the grief of losing her mother. We find her struggling over her loss in the course of the novel during her visit with the Fairchilds. Since the Fairchilds are her mother's side of the family, Laura is in the midst of constant reminders of her mother. Fortunately, she is in a loving and caring environment with people who loved and cared for her mother as she did. Even with this positive environment, the experience is still not easy for her. Laura reflects to herself:

*Why couldn't she think of the death of her mother? When the Fairchilds spoke so easily of Annie Laurie, it shattered her thoughts*
like a stone in the bayou. How could this be? It must be that she herself was the only one to struggle against this (133).

Laura has trouble understanding how the Fairchilds can seem to accept so easily her mother's death; she naturally feels that she is having the hardest, longest time accepting her loss. Welty's skillful use of thematic simile is exhibited in the above quotation: "...it shattered her thoughts like a stone in the bayou." A simile is "A figure of speech in which a similarity between two objects is directly expressed" (471). Here, the simile helps the reader to feel Laura's sense of loss and frustration, by comparing her feeling of disturbance at the mention of her mother's name to the disturbance of the water of the bayou when a stone shatters its tranquillity. Anyone who loses a loved one is going to have a difficult time getting over the loss; Laura's being a young child who has lost her mother makes the loss very difficult indeed. To a child, her mother is everything in the world; to lose one's world is certainly devastating.

Losing one's world is part of the loss theme in A Worn Path, one of Welty's short stories. The primary character in this story is "...an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods" (142), Phoenix Jackson. As the title suggests, the plot follows her through the woods on a trail that she has apparently travelled many times, to get medicine for her grandson:
"Oh that's just old Aunt Phoenix," she said. "She doesn't come for herself--she has a little grandson. She makes these trips just as regular as clockwork (147).

On another level, though, the path symbolizes Phoenix Jackson's path through life now worn from years of struggling with poverty and with the cold injustice of the world. We learn that she is poor when she tells the nurse that she never went to school, having been too old by the time slavery had ended (148) and by the nurse's curt remark that the medicine Phoenix receives is "Charity" (148). The coldness of the world is seen in the certain lack of compassion of the workers in the doctor's office. While walking the path to the office, Phoenix sees what she thinks at first is a man, then a ghost, and then what she realizes to be a scarecrow.

"You scarecrow," she said. Her face lighted. "I ought to be shut up for good," she said with laughter. "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know. Dance, old scarecrow," she said, "while I dancing with you" (144).

Phoenix Jackson's loss is her youth, and will be, sooner or later, her life. Through the character of Phoenix Jackson the theme of loss in this story is powerfully manifested. The plot of the story, following Phoenix down her "worn
path," affords the symbol of the worn path to represent the path of her life, which from things we can infer from the story, has not been easy and has worn upon her. These factors make the fact that her youth has now been lost and that the end of her life, her worn path, is approaching even more dramatic than it might be since we can see the approaching loss of her earthly life as either a chance to escape the hardship, or as the end of what was never a fulfilled life.

She entered a door, and there she saw nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head (147).

We can see that Phoenix has dreams and aspirations that she has not been able to attain, so in one sense her loss can be thought of as one of defeat. Yet, she is rather lighthearted when she speaks to the scarecrow, and she is a triumphant figure as she leaves from the doctor's office determined to get a little paper windmill for her grandson with the nickel she has been given by the attendant in the office, and the other nickel she picked up from the ground after it fell out of the pocket of a man she happened upon in the woods on her journey. This does not suggest a person who has been defeated by a hard life, but a person who is proud to do what she can while she is still alive, a person who has
endured. Thus, her life has not been in vain, no matter how difficult it has been. A similarity between the loss of Laura's mother in *Delta Wedding* to the theme of loss in *The Worn Path* is that they can each be seen in a positive or negative light. Losing her mother is a terrible tragedy for Laura. It is a given, however, and Laura learns to cope with it through the course of the novel, and to assimilate herself into the Fairchild family. She is surely a stronger person for this. Similarly, while the nearing end of Phoenix Jackson's life is sad, and could be viewed as the sad ending of a difficult life, it is really the triumphant ending of an earthly life in which she has done her best, given her circumstances. She has walked that path many times to help her grandson, and in this she has been a very successful person. I think that a wonderful reason for an author to write about loss is the perspective it affords to readers upon life's losses, tragedies and hardships.

Laura wants desperately to fit in with the Fairchild family, not just as a cousin, but as a real member of the family.

Laura wanted so badly to be taken to their hearts (never wondering if she had not been, at any time before her own wish) that she almost knew what the Fairchild family were like, what to expect, but her wish was steadier than her vision and that itself kept her from knowing. Ellen saw it (*DW*, 77).
Laura is trying to make a place for herself within the family of the Fairchilds; with them lies the chance to be part of a "whole" family again. Yet it is difficult for anyone to easily feel comfortable in a different situation or family, even if the family members are relatives. In fact, relatives often present a special set of problems. With them the expectations are usually higher. From the preceding quotation from the novel, we may think that Laura may even be trying too hard to fit in--so hard that she may not know how much a part of the family she is, or will become. Ellen, her aunt, is aware that this is important for Laura. An important way that Laura learns that she does belong, unconditionally, in the Fairchild family is through the losing of, finding, and subsequent losing of a brooch belonging to Ellen. The brooch is a powerful symbol of loss, which can be correlated to Laura's loss of her mother. Symbolism is the use of one thing to represent another, usually an object that represents a concept or entity of some sort. A symbol already discussed is that of the path representing Phoenix Jackson's life in *A Worn Path*. The symbol of the pin in *Delta Wedding* is likewise quite significant. Ellen has lost her brooch, and is wanting very much to find it to have to wear to Dabney's wedding. Laura and her cousin Roy find the pin on their adventurous trip to Marimon, Dabney's future house. On the journey back in the boat, Laura loses the brooch. "How fleetingly she had held
to her treasure" (179), as fleetingly, perhaps, as she had been able to hang on to the treasure of their mother. Almost instantly after realizing that she has lost the brooch, however, she learns the positive news that Lady Clare, who was supposed to be the flower girl in Dabney's wedding, has the chicken pox. Laura, then, is to be the flower girl. This is wonderful news for Laura because it offers another way to try and fit in with the family. Upon learning this news Laura "...never felt the pain now, though it was renewed" (180). Being the flower girl and being able to be part of the family means enough to ease Laura's pain of loss of the pin and of her mother. In trying to assimilate into the Fairchild's way of life, she is trying to overcome her loss. The lost pin is a symbol of her loss. At the end of the novel, after Laura has been asked to stay and live with the Fairchilds by her Aunt Ellen, Laura debates and decides not to tell her aunt about the lost pin. This is a sign that she is really beginning to feel accepted by the Fairchilds, that she knows that the loss of the pin can be overlooked in view of her relationship with her aunt. In a similar way, Laura is beginning to learn how to accept the loss of her mother and to get on with her life, with her childhood. She probably will stay with the Fairchilds and continue to build the familial ties that she needs. Thus, even though the loss of her mother is a fact which is not changeable, she is learning to cope with loss, and to
assimilate into her new situation.

Similar types of loss are explored in Welty's novella, The Optimist's Daughter. The main character, Laurel, has to deal with losing her mother, her husband, and her father. The novella begins with Laurel's father, Judge McKelva, being in the hospital. He passes away, leaving Laurel to grieve for the loss of her father. As she comes to terms with the loss of her father, she must also learn the final acceptance of the death of her mother, Becky, and the death of her husband Phil, both of which occurred some time prior to her father's death. She must also deal with Fay, the flighty young woman whom her father had recently remarried. Laurel understandsably dislikes Fay, particularly for her role in Judge McKelva's death through her running into his hospital room and throwing one of her typical childish fits. Through Laurel's perceptions, we see how she copes with these losses. The following passage on page 189 of The Optimist's Daughter powerfully expresses how these kinds of losses which Laurel (The Optimist's Daughter) and Laura (Delta Wedding) have experienced affect people:

...the guilt of outliving those you love is justly to be borne she [Laurel] thought. Outliving is something we do to them. The fantasies of dying could be no stranger than the fantasies of living. Surviving is perhaps the strangest fantasy of them all.
A very difficult part of losing a loved one is to be left behind with the task of continuing to live on without that person. The previously quoted passage expresses this fact of the human experience with poignant insight: it is a part of human existence explored by Welty through the characters of Laura and Laurel.

Losses such as those involving aging and death are but one kind of loss. Another kind of loss, seen in *Delta Wedding*, involves the loss of a relationship. Robbie and Uncle George have separated towards the beginning of the novel. The Fairchilds are properly aghast when George comes in and announces: "'I'm in trouble, Ellen'"...his voice wide awake and loud in the half-empty house. "Robbie's left me!" (51). It is ironic that through most of the novel, as Dabney and Troy prepare to join their union, Robbie and George have temporarily lost theirs. George has to deal with the fact that he has, for the moment anyway, lost his wife, and being the deeply-feeling type of person that he is, this is not easy.

A feeling of uncontrollable melancholy came over her [Ellen] to see him in this half-light, which had so rested her before he came out. Dear George, whose every act could verge so closely on throwing himself away--what on earth would ever be worth that intensity with which he held it, the hurting intensity that
was reflected back on him, from all passing things? (80)

The thing that is worth his intensity, of course, is his marriage; he wants Robbie to come back. His loss is different from the loss that Laura has experienced, both in that it is his wife and that she has not died, but has left. Still, when faced with the prospect of her not coming back, his loss looms greatly.

Interestingly enough, it is Troy Flavin, Dabney's fiance, who ventures into the store where Robbie has been working and staying since she left her husband, and who invites her to the wedding. He suggests that she go back to the Fairchild's before the wedding, which she does. Her retort during their exchange, "I didn't marry into them! I married George!" (141) gives some insight that perhaps at least part of the problem has been that her relationship with the Fairchilds has involved some problems. This is easy enough to fathom, in such a close-knit, albeit well-meaning and caring family as the Fairchilds. Happily, Troy seems to understand about this. He says: "Well, it's a close family,...Too close could be" (141). His observation appeases Robbie and coaxes her into going back to George. Troy has some good insight that may help to keep him and Dabney from having similar kinds of problems. Troy is successful in getting Robbie to go back to the Fairchilds, and back to George.
When she gets to the Fairchild's place, after her long and dramatic journey on foot (providing a bit of comic relief and some insight into Robbie's character), she is invited in and sits down at the table with the Fairchilds; George is not there. Coming face to face with her family-in-law is quite awkward; everyone is stiffly polite. There are some words, mostly from the Fairchild side, but they are brief and cutting, and all from the women. Dabney blurts out "You almost ruined my wedding"..."I couldn't get married if George wasn't as happy as I was"; Aunt Tempe asks her "Why have you treated George Fairchild the way you have?"; Shelly in typical character form just blurts out "How could you?" and cries (158). A little later, speaking to Ellen, Robbie says to her:

Once I tried to be like the Fairchilds. I thought I knew how...Don't any other people in the world feel like me?...Don't any other people somewhere love other people so much that they want to be--not like--but the same? I wanted to turn into a Fairchild (165).

These feelings are similar to those of another "outsider" among the Fairchilds, Laura. Like Robbie, Laura is trying to fit in with the Fairchilds; she too, wants to feel that she is truly one of them. In "losing" her husband, Robbie is realizing that this may not be possible or even the right thing for her. What we have is a very close-knit family whom
outsiders find difficult to fully penetrate. For Laura, it may be to her advantage to assimilate completely within its structure; but for in-laws such as Robbie or Troy, it may be better not to expect or even to try, for the sake of their marriages. As Robbie stated in the quotation above, she married George, not his family. A large part of their temporary loss of one another stems from family tensions. It is clear that these things are going to have to be dealt with if this reunion between them (which does occur after George returns to find Robbie there) is going to last.

In Welty's short story *The Key*, there is a similar loss of a relationship between husband and wife. In this story, Ellie and Albert Morgan are waiting for a train to Niagara Falls where they believe that they can rediscover happiness within their marriage. "They had nothing to say to each other" (32) while waiting for the train; this statement from the first page of the story indicates immediately that there is a problem between them. A strange red-headed man is also waiting in the station; Welty writes that "The color of his hair seemed to jump and move, like the flicker of a match struck in a wind" (30). Here is another example of her use of simile; in this case it helps the reader to imagine the way that this man might stand out because of his hair, and draws the reader into the scene at the station with the Morgans. The man has a key, which he drops. Albert Morgan picks the key up; to him this is a valiant action, an
assertion of his resolve to save their marriage. He says to his wife:

"I found it. Now it belongs to me. It is something important...It means something... Maybe when we reach Niagara Falls we will even fall in love, the way other people have done...Now you can stop being ashamed of me, for being so cautious...for taking my own time...You can take hope. Because it was I who found the key. Remember that--I found it" (32).

It is as if Albert Morgan is so desperate to regain their lost love that he is grasping for anything that might fall from the sky to paste things back together--even a key from a stranger's pocket. From information given at the end of the story, it seems as though Ellie has been the one hanging onto the hope of their staying together. Welty writes that Ellie had been told as a little girl that it is customary for people to go to Niagara Falls "to start their happiness," obviously for a honeymoon. The story reads that Ellie saved and saved through the years and had obviously worked harder than had Albert by comparing their hands (36). Welty writes that

He was never looking so far and so deep as Ellie--into the future, into the changing and mixing of their lives together when they should arrive at last at Niagara Falls
Albert, in his overexcitement about finding the key, seems to be trying to take the credit for their finally being able to take their trip to Niagara Falls fully for himself, to take the credit for saving their marriage all for himself. The key is a symbol of his desire to be able to unlock the door between them and to finally be able to love one another as a husband and wife should. Albert even states that it is a symbol to Ellie:

"You must see it is a symbol," he began again, his fingers clumsy and blurring in his excitement. "It is a symbol of something—something that we deserve, and that is happiness. We will find happiness in Niagara Falls" (32).

Albert wants to hold the key to their happiness so much that he has actually convinced himself of this key's importance. Ironically, for all the discussion about the importance of the key and of getting to Niagara Falls in order to find their happiness, the Morgans miss their train, which the red-headed man notes aloud (33). Even though it is sadly ironic that they miss their train, the fact that they do alludes to two things. First, if they truly wanted to get there, and if they felt it was so important, would they have allowed themselves to miss the train? After all, they have been waiting all their lives for this trip. Second, their missing
the train symbolizes in a sense the fact that getting to Niagara Falls has about as much to do with saving their marriage as does the key. If they can not work out their differences at home, being at Niagara Falls is not likely to change anything. The key, then, becomes a symbol of the futility of their going to the station in the first place. It seems as though their loss of love is not going to be soon found, if ever. This prediction is supported by the last sentence of the story: "You could see that he despised and saw the uselessness of the thing he had done" (37). This refers to the red-headed stranger giving Ellie a second key at the end of the story, a key to a hotel room. He knows somehow that it is useless because firstly they will probably never make it to a hotel room, and even if they do the fact of being away from home is not likely to affect their relationship.

A particular quotation from this story exhibits similarities between the character of Ellie in this story, and Robbie in Delta Wedding. Welty writes:

And you knew how she would sit and brood over this as over their conversations together, about every misunderstanding... even about the secret and proper separation that lies between a man and a woman, the thing that makes them what they are in themselves, their secret life, their memory of the past,
their childhood, their dreams. This to Ellie was unhappiness (The Key, 36).

This is quite similar to Robbie's problems about trying to fit in with the Fairchilds. Robbie does not want to have any separation with anything that has to do with George as it seems that Ellie is bothered by any separation also. The similarities between the characters of Robbie and Ellie are a good example of thematic overlap in Welty's works.

With the reconciliation of Robbie and George, Dabney and Troy are married with the family once again intact. Their getting married and starting a new life represents a new beginning; it also, by nature, represents the loss of the way things were before Dabney's being married. She will no longer be one of the Fairchild's little girls, but Troy's wife; and she will move away from the plantation and live with her husband. In One Writer's Beginnings, an autobiographical work of Welty's in which she conveys the course of events in her life which led her into writing, Welty relates a similar sentiment within her own family, in relation to her mother's getting married and moving out of her home when her mother was a young girl:

> It must have seemed to her family behind her that she had been cut off from them forever. They never really got over her absence from home (54).

This sort of loss is also part of the human experience,
examined in *Delta Wedding* through the character of Dabney and those of her relatives. When Dabney and India, a little girl in the Fairchild family, go out to visit their Aunts Primrose and Jim Allen, the mood of their aunts hold a wistfulness towards this loss. Aunt Primrose says: "Oh--growing up and marrying. India, you're still my little girl" (42); and Jim Allen remarks "It's not as if you were going out of the Delta, of course" (44). Dabney does not make this loss any easier on them, and she knows this. She seems exasperated with her family's viewing her marrying Troy as losing her, for to her of course getting married is a celebration, not to be saddened by in any way. She is, however, aware of her aunts' feelings:

"I've done enough," Dabney thought, frightened, not quite understanding things any longer. "I've done enough to them" (49).

She knows how they feel about all this, and she is torn between feeling sorry for her family and a bit unhappy with them for feeling the way they do. When she says, "I hope I have a baby right away" (48) in front of her aunts, she may be asserting her determination to go through with this marriage to Troy. This also drives home the idea to them that things really are going to change, that Dabney is no longer a little girl like India, but a woman.

A glass nightlight, a symbol of tradition in the family,
is given to Dabney by her aunts as a wedding present while she and India are visiting. It becomes a symbol of the loss of Dabney to her new life when Dabney drops it as she runs up the steps of her house. The text says that "They [Uncle George and India, who are there when Dabney drops the nightlight] heard no cry at all--only the opening and closing of the screen door as she went inside" (53). The gift that meant so much for the aunts to give to Dabney is shattered without any visible response from Dabney. This is an assertion that despite what may or may not be important to her family, she is going to proceed with what is important to her: marrying Troy. It is also a symbol of her breaking away from her family, to loosen the ties enough to where she and Troy can make their marriage a success. She never says she does not want to still be a Fairchild. She is merely trying to acquire space in which to grow and expand into her own new life. This is what Robbie and George need to do if their marriage is to be saved from more separations or even a divorce. The breaking of the nightlight symbolizes those breaks that need to occur to facilitate new lives and beginnings. On page 53, it says that "...Uncle George began teasing her [India] about a piece of glass that she would never miss." Dabney does not want to sever all ties with her family, just some of them. They are ties that will hurt to
break at first, but in the long run the breaking of them will not separate her from the family that she loves. The conflicts of the various major characters in the novel are comfortably resolved by the novel's conclusion. Laura is going to be able to cope with losing her mother and to assume a comfortable role within the Fairchild family. Robbie and Uncle George are back together, for the time being at least. Dabney makes a big step towards some independence from her family through marrying Troy. The various losses experienced by these characters are explored and dealt with successfully throughout the novel. Albert J. Devlin, scholar and critic, notes that "The 'truth' of Welty's first novel does not reach us in 'an exhausted and chaotic condition," but with the serenity of mature treatment" (93). This is an accurate praise of *Delta Wedding*.

Eudora Welty is a writer who speaks to the hearts of readers through dealing with universal human experiences. Her feeling for relating to common and shared human experience is seen in this passage from her preface to *One Time, One Place*, a compilation of pictures that she took of people in rural Mississippi during the Depression. She writes:

This book is offered, I should explain, not as a social document but as a family album—which is something both less and more, but unadorned. The pictures now seem to me to
fall most naturally into the simple and self-evident categories about which I couldn't even at this distance make a mistake--the days of the week: workday; Saturday, for staying home and for excursions too; and Sunday (4).

Eudora Welty was able to take these photographs and view them in the whole context of human experience. These were people, no doubt living in hard times, but still living life and dealing with their own existence just as all human beings must do. Her description of her pictorial collection as a "family album" is indicative of her other works. Delta Wedding and The Optimist's Daughter are like family albums of those particular characters contained within them. They, like One Time, One Place, are not "social documents," but stories relating to all human experience, universal types of experiences such as loss. Eudora Welty is able to write about these realities of life in a way that draws the reader in and allows him or her to relate to the truths of the human heart and the strengths of the human spirit.
Devlin, Albert J. "Meeting the World in Delta Wedding."


Works Read

Devlin, Albert J. "Meeting the World in Delta Wedding."


