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NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN EUDORA WELTY'S "THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM"

Dr.B.V.V.PADMAVATHI
Assistant Professor
VR Siddhartha Engineering College, Kanuru, Vijayawada
bvvpadmavathi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
American short story writer, novelist, essayist and memoirist Welty is often designated as one of the notable southern regionalists, along with such writers as William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. Welty has distinguished between two styles in her writing, which she labels "inside stories" and "outside stories." The Inside stories are introspective and the thoughts and emotions of her characters are clearly delineated. They include the novels "Delta Wedding" and "The optimist Daughter" and many other short stories. Outside stories are those in which the reader has no access to the characters' thoughts. Characterization is achieved through dialogue. Storytelling and action, outside stories including "The Robber Bridegroom", "The Ponder Heart" and "Losing Battles" are often humorous and light, although not without messages. While these categories are not exclusive, they do reflect Welty's deliberate exploration of different narrative techniques. The fruits of Welty's wide reading appear in much of her work, most notably the novella "The Robber Bridegroom" which incorporates elements from fairy tales, folklore, classical myth, and legends of the Mississippi river and the Natchez trace during pioneer days. It is her first novel, and is one of her richest most complexes in terms of the variety of themes it explores--- the general history of a region, the effects of the steady passage of time, the question of personal identity, the inability distinguish between reality and fantasy and the dual nature of both man and the world he confronts.
key words: southern regionalist, narrative techniques

American short story writer, novelist, essayist and memoirist Welty is often designated as one of the notable southern regionalists, along with such writers as William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. Her stories of family life in small towns in the Deep south are built around what Paul Marx has called "the complex network of judgements, misjudgements, and prejudgements," and sometimes take on the elusive qualities of dreams. However, critics stress that if there is such a thing as a "southern School of writing,' Welty has remained independent of it. She has lived all of her life in Jackson, Mississippi and nearly all of her

fiction is set in the American South. In an essay entitled "Place in Fiction" Welty contends that grounding works of fiction firmly implanted in a particular location aids the achievement of universality.

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The fruits of Welty's wide reading appear in much of her work, most notably the novella "The Robber Bridegroom" which incorporates elements from fairy tales, folklore, classical myth, and legends of the Mississippi river and the Natchez trace during pioneer days. It is her first novel, and is one of her richest most complexes in terms of the variety of themes it explores--- the general history of a region, the effects of the steady passage of time, the question of personal identity, the inability distinguish between reality and fantasy and the dual nature of both man and the world he confronts. This complexity has been generally overlooked, perhaps primarily because of the disarming and deceptively simple method of Welty's presentation. The style is elemental, almost childlike as she combines a number of fairy tales from the grim Brothers with southern folk humour and legend. More important to the development of the multiple themes, however, is the author's use of the tradition of the old south west humourists. The tension between the comic and the serious is effectively utilized by Welty in "The Robber Bridegroom" in which her concept of the duality of all things—man, the wilderness, time, history and reality are displayed.

"The Robber Bridegroom" is, of course, a fairy tale, and as such it invites speculation with regard to its classification in the context of the present discussion. In so far as it is a non-realistic work of fantasy, it departs from the norms of the traditional novel and allies itself with that order of ficfiction which is more dependent upon the imagination than upon empirical observation.in its exaggeration of innocence and evil, with Clement and salome, it willingly surrenders credibility of character. In its use of magic and miracle, the locket, the milk that won't spill, the talking head—it appeals to the supranational more than to the reason. In so far as it mythicizes history, with the Harps and Mike fink and even Jamie Lockhart, it deliberately distorts what passes for recorded fact. It thereby undermines the notion of a fixed reality, just as the use of disguise does, and in a more serious way, as the use of the theme of doubleness does, Clement tells us that all things are double, are divided in half, and in doing so, he casts doubt upon the certainty of any one thing. And finally the prose, appropriate to a fairy tale or a fable in its ballad like rhythms and its frequently sensuous images, is thoroughly artful in its contrived simplicity, the very antithesis of the even tone and orderly march pf the sentences in, for example, the common-sensual divine Jane. "New Orleans was the most marvellous city in the Spanish country or anywhere else on the river. Beauty and vice and every delight possible to the soul and body stood hospitably, and usually together, in every doorway and beneath every Palmetto by day and lighted torch by night. A shutter opened, and a flower bloomed. The very atmosphere was nothing but aerial spice, the very walls were sugar cane, the very clouds, hung as golden as bananas in the sky."

As it is a fairy tale, like others, with meaning and not a purely autonomous prose work, Clement Musgrove is a comment, for example, on the cycle of history, seeing the historical process as part of the transitoriness of things and people and social structures. In the largest sense, the novel performs the task of many fairy tales by arousing fear and creating suspense, and then offering a catharsis by asserting the triumph of virtue and imposing an idea of order upon the total experience it relates. In the end, it is a fairy tale very different from those told by John Barth or Donald Barthelme. It does not turn the tale topsy turvy, as Barth wished to turn fiction on its head. It does not reduce the tale to meaningless shambles, as Barthelme, does when he deals with snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Which in his hands becomes a vehicle for the

meaningless chaos he sees around him. Welty does not move this far toward modernism, but she moves far enough in this novel to seek some of its freedom from traditionally realistic prose.

In a talk before the Mississippi Historical Society, Welty decribed what she saw as the structure of "The Robber Bridegroom." "The line between history and fairy tales is not always clear and it is not from the two elements taken alone but from their interplay that my story, as I hope, takes on its own headlong life." Though such blending of the historical and fantastic certainly occurs, the fairy tale element forms the essential core of the action. And since such fairy tale plots are not unusual, an understanding of the rather pure form presented in this novella can enhance an understanding not only of "The robber Bridegroom" but also of such plots when they appear in more complex guise. So it may be aptly characterizes as a fairy tale. The fairy tale atmosphere thar is maintained by Welty throughout the novel makes one assume that the young couple will live happily ever after. But the general tenor of the novel will not allow such an interpretation without considerable qualification. The suggestion of doubleness, the blending the comic and the serious which is prevalent in so many of the south west humorists' sketches in general, and in "The Robber Bridegroom" in particular, depends in part, upon the reader's realization that the characters and deeds depicted are so short-lived, so subject to the passage of time. More importantly, the basic form of the plot resembles that of a classic fairy tale.

Welty has identified some of the elements of myth and fantasy that figure in "The Robber Bridegroom" –Grimm's Fairy Tales, the legend of Cupid and Psyche, Claiborne's history of Mississippi, and the frontier tales of Mike Fink and the thieves along the Natchez Trace. In "The Robber Bridegroom" there are characters whose roles are taken from legend and who are more appropriate to romance than to realistic fiction. Rosamand is the beautiful daughter, Clement Musgrove is the innocent, kind father, Saloma is the wicked stepmother, and Jamie Lockhart, the robber bridegroom, is the Prince Charming.

The landscape and characters in "The Robber Bridegroom" are the ingredients of fantasy and romance, but there is also allegory. Clement learns that there is a fundamental "duality' in nature, that if he kills the famous robber Jamie Lockhart he also kills his daughter's bridegroom . the country around the Natchez Trace is symbolic and in it characters and details represents aspects of the psyche.

As Welty implied, the world of "The Robber Bridegroom" does not entirely resemble that of a classic fairy tale because there is more particularization of time, person, location, and event than one orally finds in thi s genre. But the individual and historical elements disturb only slightly the timelessness appropriate to a fairy tale because the author has tinged these elements with fantasy. At the opening, the actual Mississippi River, flows through the land but in an almost once-upon—a- setting ruled by the foreign king of spain and overlaid with exotic hues: 'the sun sank into the river the color of blood, and at once a wind sprang up and covered the sky with black, yellow, and green clouds the size of whales, which moved across the face of the moon.' This is also the world of the old Natchez Trace, a wilderness inhabited by men and creatures often fearsome and always larger than life. Even the similes, which frequently describe the environment, set it apart from mundane existence, as when "the stars like little fishes nibbled at the night," in addition to the muting of the historical through a separation in time and by language, the numerous explicit references to fairy tale and dream and the implicit parallels to these establish the 'the tone for the whole'.

Some reviews called the novel a dream. Welty's own metaphor suggests that her technique is one of revelation. "I think," she says, "it is more accurate to call it an awakening to a dear native land and its own story of early life, made and offered by a novelist's imagination in exuberance and joy.' Welty mingles the sleeping and waking worlds, repeated images throughout the tale, accepting that the exaggerations of the tall tale world and language express a distorted psychic truth, as dreams do. Talking decapitated heads are economical guilt symbols and funny, too. Welty's narrator affirms those characters who share her vision, a vision shaped by the antirational power of the imagination to re- organize and comprehend reality; narrow restricted characters are symbolically blinded by images of caves, blindfolds, or eye-gouging. While some of welty's southern contemporaries like Faulkner or Penn Warren see the past as repressing individual growth,

she turns to the history and legends of the Natchez Trace, part of the old sourhwerstern frontier and the setting of her later fiction, to liberare, to 'awakn' the inner self.

For Welty, fantasy is pioneering within the imagination, a conscious breaking away from experienced realty. It is an effort to create a new world, to explore the unexpected, to live freely and independently, yet in harmony. Its boundaries, like western ones, are inward, limited only by the author's vision. If Welty's western territory mirrors her inner landscape, then within her imagination "nothing seemed impossible." In the west's liberation of the inner self, Welty also finds irrationality, but with different results. Instead of a chaotic unconscious filled with dark impulses, she discovers a creative vision which is capable of synthesizing fragmentary experience. There may be danger in accepting freedom and instinct over regulation and restraint: Salome and Little are both capable of murder and rape, while big Harp (the decapitated head) is a persistent reminder of violence. These characters triumph because they accept the irrational as one more mystery in human experience. Like their narrator, they integrate reality and fantasy, responding creatively to the wilderness's savage disorder. They exert some control over their lives by seeing more than is "really" there and by living to tell the tale.

Rosamond is a character whose imagination is eager to convert the bizarre things that happen to her into exaggerated stories that cannot forestall disaster but often help protect her from it: from the assaults of the Indians who appear like magicians from out of the wilderness; from the incompetent con man, Goat, who literally butts his way into other people's business; and especially from her stepmother, Salome, so greedy that ""he poor contamination of her heart broke out through her words until it showed even on her skin, like the signs of the poor."

South-western humor and tall tales blunted emotion, exposing the sentimental or the hypocritical, particularly in such social institutions as family, church and politics. The broad, blind cruelty and grotesquery is one kind of response to the terrors of wilderness life; so many corpse jokes debunked the dignity and fear of death. Expressed emotions, particularly love or affection for another, were some of Western humor's maajor targets; the barrage was strongest against any hint of sentimental language. The dark and satiric view of human nature dominates the novel, but readers tend to remember best the moving passages where Huck and Jim Peak both truly and emotionally, revealing their shared humility. This novel ends with harmony and emotionally, revealing their humility. This novel ends harmony and reconciliation, with an affirmation of human possibility, for Jamie and Rosamond, as fertile as the land they inhabit, pass the weltering spirit on to the twins they produce t the books 'close.

Welty's narrative structure allows her to challenge conventional emotional responses to experience without dulling or denying the importance and complexity of emotional needs. For Welty's narrator, emotions become manifest in fantastic and exaggerated circumstances and symbols. Clement, Welty's version of the innocent American Adam, makes his way through his wilderness life unharmed because he trusted the unveil world; he is incapable of violence until he seeks the bandit who stole his daughter. Tall tales are always more about the teller than about the tale. Through her narrative voice, Welty focus the reader's attention on how to tell a story, on the imagination at work. She manages to restore the spirit of the west, while questioning some of its assumptions about human behaviors, to imply to the reader that a pioneering expedition into America's past, a wonder-filled place, is a natural symbol for an exploration into the powers of the extravagant American imagination. Here is Welty's closing speech to the Mississippi Historical Society, where she describes her characters and her technique; but she might be describing her own response to westering . 'So I present them all – the characters of "The Robber Bridegroom" to you historians in order that you may claim them. They're fanciful,

Overcharged with high spirits, perhaps, and running out of bounds when advisable or necessary, some of them demented –but they are legitimate. For their children of their time, and fathered rather proudly, by its spirit. If I carried out well enough my strongest intentions fantasy does not take precedence over that spirit us serves the better to show its forth. It partakes, in a direct way possible to fantasy alone, of the mood and temperament and drive of those challenging times, in the wild and romantic beauty of that place. The novel id

firmly based on the Mississippi history, as Welty has pointed out, and the Mythical Pearl is the name Mississippians gave to one of their rivers. It is the story of white settlers in the wilderness pursuing their of a new world. In the novel Welty, though employing her own style, as master of technique, is consciously engaged in a form familiar in American Fiction. Pursuing the dream of a pastoral reality in the new world is, as Leo Marx has written, one of the most stubborn topics in American Fiction.

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