“All things are double”: Eudora Welty’s Prismatic view

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Quoted from The Robber Bridegroom (1946), a Gothic story that rewrites one of the Brother Grimms’ fairy tales, the expression “all things are double” seems to concentrate the essential spirit of Welty’s fiction. Showing a deep understanding and respect for this doublessness, which is not only the cause for conflict between characters, but also the reason for their interest in one another, Welty’s writing was always able “to see a thing from all sides”, the most appropriate technique to reveal the complexity of human relationships such as only a prismatic and photographic view is able to apprehend. The radical experiments in subject and form, that led Welty to consider her stories as “visions”, show that she only could demonstrate a very subtle engagement with the politics of her time, for the simple reason that she was much more interested in art. Indeed, in her essay “Must the Novelist Crusade?”, she insists that her work was not political, and defends that a novel is an act of imagination that should never be confused with journalism or political speeches. Consequently, the novelist’s purpose should be to avoid generalities and judgments in order to present human beings as real as possible, observing and revealing their inner truths through passion and not for the sake of a cause. Welty’s integrity, honesty and insight could only lead her to conclude, in the above mentioned essay, that “love and hate, hope and despair, justice and injustice, compassion and prejudice, truth-telling and lying work in all men; their story can be told in whatever skin they are wearing and in whatever year the writer can put them down.” (Welty, Eye of the Story 157).

Very interested in experimenting with composition, using light, pattern, textures, framing and perspective, Welty wrote stories and took photographs to reveal the complexities of the lives of the population living in the segregated South. In order to capture their authenticity and all their
varied forms of expression, she assumed a certain aesthetic distance that, instead of ignoring their dramas and injustices, exposed the multiplicities of their grotesque realities. This distance suggested the authenticity and particularity of characters whose identities and actions were not to be judged by an author who refrained from turning fiction into a platform for her opinions and deemed it to be something “highly personal, but objective” (ibid. 142). Her photographic practice helped Welty to develop and maintain an essentially visual and objective style that still preserved the passionate approach of her writing. Indeed, her characters were kept at a distance and transmuted into something universal through the power of her observation, because she knew that “frame, proportion, perspective, the value of light and the shade, all are determined by the distance of the observing eye” (Welty, One Writer’s 21). This approach preserved the integrity of Welty’s vision and voice, preventing her from generalizing and giving her the possibility of studying people from within, of exercising her power of observation and reaching the inner truth of individual human beings, which she sought to transmit in her fictional texts (Welty, Eye of the Story 149).

Thus Welty developed a prismatic view, in order to expand the scope of her subject, common to all writers, since “our subject is humankind. When we write about people, black or white, in the South or anywhere, if our stories are worth reading, we are writing about everybody” (ibid. 156). Thus, she sought to apprehend the multiple aspects of people’s personalities in their relationships with each other and to dramatize life as it is (not as it should be), because “great fiction shows us not how to conduct our behavior, but how to feel” (ibid. 154). In fact, “relationship” is a key word to define Welty’s fiction, because all elements in her fictional universe are related and complement each other through opposition and contrast, as it happens in her black and white photos. What really interested her was the dynamics, the complementarity and the harmony of relationships, at an individual and communal level, taking into consideration several factor, amongst them family lineage and race, as she underlined:

No matter how fast society around us changes, what remains is that there is a relationship in progress between ourselves and other people; this was the case when the world seemed stable, too. There are relationships of the blood, of the passions and the affections, of thought and spirit and deed.
There is the relationship between the races. How can one kind of relationship be set apart from the others? Like the great root system of an old and long-established growing plant, they are all tangled up together; to separate them you would have to cleave the plant itself from top to bottom (ibid. 155).

In “The Love and the Separateness in Miss Welty”, Robert Penn Warren went deeply into the dialectics of Welty’s fiction and confessed he admired the stories in *A Curtain of Green*, because each of them was “a fresh start in the business of writing fiction, as if she had had to take a new angle each time out of a joy in the pure novelty of the perspective” (71), also noticing her interest in the variety of the world, specially in the “variety of ways in which one could look at the world” (72).

This prismatic view allowed Welty to deal with several aspects of the same subject simultaneously instead of concentrating in only one of them and lent her fiction a more interesting and complex dimension. Such is evident in the interconnected stories of *The Golden Apples*, where we can see how different individuals in a closely knitted community cope with isolation throughout a generation. “A Still Moment”, one of the six stories of *The Wide Net*, offers another example of this prismatic approach, featuring three very different male characters, an Evangelist, an ornithologist and an outlaw, who are united by the intensity of their visionary response towards a heron they encounter in the Mississippi forest.

The true nature of Welty’s writing is apprehended by J. A. Bryant when he underlines her ability “to make language suggest several dimensions of reality simultaneously, by use of allusion, by selection of detail, and by free (and sometimes licentious) use of metaphor; [and above by] all her most infallible ear for idiomatic diction and rhythm” (quoted in Howard 175). “The Purple Hat”, a ghost story, is a god illustration of the critic’s argument as well as an apt translation of Welty’s visual penchant, showing how an enigmatic tale can intensify our awareness of the world, suggesting that our imaginative minds create and are trapped by obsessions, such as gambling. Such obsessions distort our sense of reality making victims of people who are “ensnared” by ghosts of destruction and hypnotized by their mysterious powers. This Gothic tale fosters enough obscurity to allow the reader to see something for himself without the need for an argument or an explanation, since the text’s enigmatic aura opens it
to several readings; we should remember that Welty declares "there is absolutely everything in great fiction but a clear answer" (Eye of the Story 149). This accounts for the combination of different angles, polarities, dichotomies and contradictions, because all these help to produce that creative and enigmatic complexity which is the basis of a writing that, above all, is an act of insight and a refusal to compromise with just one cause (Welty, Ed. Prenshaw 289). Part of that complexity comes from the creation, in her early fiction, of so many demented, isolated, disturbed and alienated characters, such as murderers, suicides, deaf-mutes or mentally retarded figures whose psychotic isolation seems to transcend questions of class and race, and induces the readers to penetrate into the dark-side of that not so "green curtain" that hides some grotesque reality beyond the immediately visible.

During the 1960s, so often accused of not being directly engaged in defending certain political causes, of not writing about black people in a racial perspective, and of being indifferent to the larger social and political problems, Welty very often decried the effect that ideological blinders can have upon readers, being more interested in the literary qualities of her work, mainly in its language, structure, and character development, because she really wanted her stories to be as complex and ambiguous as the world they depicted. That is why she declared that she considered all her characters as individuals not as symbols (ibid. 152), since, though "All [her] life [she had] been opposed to such things as racism and injustice and cruelty", she "[wanted her] stories to show [all wrongs] as they are, to let them speak for themselves [, not] to preach" (ibid. 168).

This commitment to truth led Welty to depict human life in all its duplicity, which may explain her ambivalent assessment of gender and racial roles in the South, "writing about human beings as human beings with all the things that make them up, including bigotry, misunderstanding, injustice, and also love and affection, and whatever else" (ibid. 203). To the many complaints she received during the social crisis in the 60s, accusing her of not writing about racial injustice, she answered that that had always been the theme of her fiction, but not in a propagandistic way (ibid. 184). She went on stating that her intention was not to write social criticism, but to reveal life’s mysteries in a process she compared to photography, so that people could read a story as if they were watching a
negative develop, slowly taking shape before their eyes. Welty was aware of the complicated relationship between the races, but she felt that writing about this issue could not be a deliberate choice; instead she chose to write about all people, being conscious that her characters were “about half and half black and white” (ibid. 334).

To apprehend the complexities of all these polarities, Welty recurrently used in many of her short stories and novels the theme of the “double”, so common in Gothic fiction. The Robber Bridegroom, a novella set on the Natchez Trace during the late 18th century, which combines South-western humor with the genre of fairy-tale, tells the story of the frontier and its settling. Keenly aware of how much it owed to her celebrated prismatic view, she stated: “In [this text] I used fairy tales and real folklore and historical people and everything alike and simultaneously” (ibid. 210). In fact, this aesthetic technique finds its fictional equivalent in some characters’ exceptional vision, which gives them “the power to look both ways and to see a thing from all sides” (Welty, Complete 88). The benefit of this point of view is to develop a broader perspective on life, as Welty argued in “Place in Fiction”, where she states: “We see that point of view is hardly a single, unalterable vision, but a profound and developing one of great complexity. The vision itself may move in and out of its material, shuttle-fashion, instead of being simply turned on it, like a telescope on the moon” (Eye of the Story 132).

Her dynamic vision in this satiric fantasy makes readers aware of human duplicity, since all the three main characters have doubles, a strategy echoed in the following remark by one of these figures:

For all things are double, and this should keep us from taking liberties with the outside world, and acting too quickly to finish things off. All things are divided in half — night and day, the soul and body, and sorrow and joy and youth and age,

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1 Walker Percy seemed to perfectly understand Welty’s position, since he approached questions of race saying that “From a novelist’s point of view, human relations are much more complex than saying that the white racist is wrong and the black protester is right. I mean, Faulkner was always dealing with the complexities of human relations between white people and black people and between black people and black people” (ibid. 110).
and sometimes I wonder if even my own wife has not been the one person all the time, and I loved her beauty so well at the beginning that it is only now that the ugliness has struck through to beset me like a madness. (Welty Complete 61)

This duplicity illustrates Welty’s idea that “characters in the plot connect us with the vastness of our secret life” (Eye of the Story 90). Indeed, all of them have secret identities proving that nothing is what it seems: Clement Musgrove is both a wanderer and a planter; Rosamond, his daughter, is a beautiful woman and a liar; Jamie Lockhart is a bridegroom and a bandit. According to Warren French, Welty’s point here cannot be simply resolved in terms of dichotomous categories, because she “is concerned rather with the quite non-Aristotelian notion that people are two things at once and that their ‘identity’ at any given moment is determined by the context in which they are discovered” (84). This context transforms The Robber Bridegroom into a complex tale revolving around the rape of two young women and their different, racially-identified fates. Rosamond and the Indian maiden act as doubles within this novella, as mirror images of one another, since Welty is exploring the dichotomous relationship of women and race and also confronting the issues of race and rape in the Natchez Trace. What the repeated use of the rape imagery “reveals, in fact, is Welty’s assessment of gender and racial roles in the South. In both her short [and longer] fiction (…) Welty uses rape to reveal cultural norms and expectations in Southern society” (Donald 24-25). However, race and rape are not the only subjects that Welty focused upon in this novella. In One’s Writing Imagination (2002), Suzanne Marrs observed that “Welty uses legendary history to depict the destructive nature of self-glorification” (56), because by acting solely in self-interest the characters violate the sanctity of others. Thus the writer establishes a parallel between the dominating moral wilderness at the Natchez Trace, inhabited by thieves and murders in the 19th century, and the social climate dominated by the Axis leaders in the 1930s and up till 1945, where the dark side of the American experience was also revealed. Definitely, Welty possessed the gift of perceiving doubleness in everyone and everything, because reality showed her that nothing was what it seemed to be, which made her bring into the “heart of fiction” the subversion of moral and ethical values characteristic of her Age. Her vision of life’s duplicity appears to be the very condition of our time, when we
seem to live the same terrible contradictions, which led Eudora Welty to comment that hers was “an age when modes and matters are ruled by mediocrity” (Ed. Prenshaw 169) and when “so many of the people who (...) feel the most are, powerless, and so many of the wrong-headed people have all the power” (ibid. 253).

Possessing a visual imagination and a tendency to see things in their connectedness respecting their different identities, it is understandable that Welty disliked all the generalities that could reduce the specific qualities of her work to mere labels. It is in this context that her negative response to being called a Gothic writer should be evaluated: “When I hear the word I see in my mind a Gustave Doré’s illustration for ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. Anyway it sounds as if it has nothing to do with real life, and I feel that my work has something to do with real life. At least I hope it has.” (Ed. Prenshaw 152). But Welty’s affinities with the Gothic mode do not come directly from the classic Gothic romance, but from the tradition of the American lyric short story developed since Poe and Hawthorne. Indeed, as Ruth Weston highlights in Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty: “[Welty] does not share Hawthorne’s extreme pessimism, still she shares with him the fascination with the Romantic idea of the primitive and fragmented self: of doubleness and loneliness, of love versus freedom and enclosure versus space” (50). On the other hand, considering “The Burning”, a Civil War story, Harold Bloom declares that this enigmatic tale is “the most formidable of all Welty’s stories” and it “belongs to the dark genre of Southern Gothic, akin to Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’ and O’Connor’s ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’” (6). The symbolism of Welty’s story is directed to the presence of an old Venetian mirror that reflects the happy times of a flourishing civilization and not to the tragic events that led a traditional but decadent family to ruin, at the exact moment the black maid, Delilah, gathers the bones of the last inhabitant of the totally burned house where she lived with two demented high-born ladies. Contaminated by the madness of her mistresses, the black woman crosses a river towards her freedom and/or her death, a double destiny that remains very ambiguous at the end: “Submerged to the waist, to the breast, stretching her throat like a sunflower stalk above the river’s opaque skin, she kept on her treasure stacked on the roof of her head, hands laced upon it” (Welty, Collected
To conclude, I would like to emphasize that the idea that “all things are double” persists in Eudora Welty’s work and it translates this author’s ambivalence towards race, the South, and violence. In fact, we may take the author’s words regarding a painting by Goya, as emblematic of her approach to fiction, since she asserts that what fascinates her is the nuances of light and darkness, “half the action revealed and half hidden in dense, clotting shade” (Eye of the Story 90).

Works Cited


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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Eudora Welty’s vision was influenced by the American Gothic tradition, with its emphasis on doubleness and mystery. Indeed, not only in several interviews conceded throughout her career but also in her essays and in her fictional writing, did Welty refuse to indulge into conclusive generalizations or to moralize her readers. Thus, she revealed an extraordinary capacity to probe the constitutive ambivalence of situations and characters, and to allude to the flux at the heart of life.

KEYWORDS

Eudora Welty; American Gothic; Ambivalence.

RESUMO

Este ensaio defende que a visão de Eudora Welty foi influenciada pela tradição do Gótico Americano, com a sua ênfase na duplicidade e no mistério. De facto, não só em diversas entrevistas concedidas ao longo da sua carreira como também nos seus ensaios e na sua escrita ficcional, Welty recusou entregar-se a generalizações conclusivas ou a assumir diante dos leitores uma postura moralista. Assim, revelou uma extraordinária capacidade de auscultar a ambivalência constitutiva de situações e personagens e de aludir ao fluxo da vida.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Eudora Welty; Gótico Americano; Ambivalência.