

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Peer-Reviewed (Refereed/Scholarly), Indexed and Open Access Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 8, August 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Lisa Pavithran

Assistant Professor

KSMDB College, Sasthamcotta, University of Kerala

Kollam, Kerala. India

lichith@gmail.com

### Appropriating Space: Place in Eudora Welty's Fiction

#### Abstract

Place is the space we know, a physical and psychological appropriation of space. Space influences the characters in the choices they make. The sense of place is evident in almost all works of Eudora Welty who hails from the American South. According to her, place is where we put our roots and for her family symbolizes an order rooted in an ethic defined by the economic factors associated with place, the history of place and that place in time. One of the main concerns in her fiction is the relationships within family and family's relationship with community through various historical periods. Her novels focus on family gatherings, the influence of war on the people, the after effects of the Great Depression, the intensities and complexities of family relations, the life in the Natchez Trace, class divisions, racial violence and many other such events connected with the South. The readers also get a visual imagery of the landscape of the South. The main contention in her works is that attachment of the individual to place gives him definition and detachment from place diminishes human integrity.

Space is defined as a dimensional, physical extent occupied by human beings. Place is then referred to as a space we know, endow with value. Turning space to place is a form of personal and psychological appropriation. It expands and diversifies into perception, desire,

vision and memory. There are texts which deals with how space interacts and influences the characters in the choices they make or how home and landscapes can modify a character's perception of them.

A sense of place has been central to the literature of the American South. Eudora Welty, the Pulitzer Prize winning American author of the twentieth century, set her stories and novels in the American South, and her works are a fine blend of the language and culture of the region. She emphasizes the crucial role of place and location in her fictional narratives in her essay "Place in Fiction", "Place has always been bound up with the local, the real, the present, the ordinary day-to-day experience." She is in fact touched off by place. For her the subject exists at a place, in time and a fiction writer honestly begins in being true to those two facts of time and place. "Place is where we put our roots, wherever birth, chance, fate or our travelling selves set us down. But these roots reach toward "the deep and running vein, eternal and consistent and everywhere purely itself-that feeds and is fed by the human understanding" (Welty 781).

Historian David J. Bodenhamer observes that writing shows awareness of the accumulation over time of the events and actions that have happened in a particular space. According to Flannery O' Connor, the best of American fiction has always been regional (Connor 173). Welty is a Southern writer who lived all her life in Jackson, Mississippi. She draws strength from this setting in most of her stories. The reviewers laud her work because of her ability to convey a strong sense of place. Bessie Chronaki, in her essay "Eudora Welty's Theory of Place and Human Relationships" says, "The major category of inspiration for Welty deriving from "place" is family. For Welty the family symbolizes an order rooted in an ethic, which is especially defined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the economic factors associated with place, the history of place and that place in time" (38).

The uniqueness of Welty's works lies in her ability to capture the emotions and feelings experienced within human relationships. The relationships within the family and family's relation with community throughout various historical periods are one of the main themes expressed in her works. Family has always been important in the South. Loyalty to family was also of utmost importance. Welty has emphasized the importance of family and also extended family in the South on many occasions. In an essay on Jane Austen in 1969, she wrote, "... the interesting situations of life can, and notably do, take place at home" (13). She got instances from her family and also from that of her friends. In her interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund she says, "... in the homes of my friends, who grew up with large families around them, that is where I got an insight-and when I went to my parents' homes, especially my mother's in West Virginia, where she had five brothers" (12-13).

Her novel *Delta Wedding*, set in Yazoo-Mississippi Delta centers on the Fairchild family's preparation to marry off Dabney of the Shellmound plantation. Laura Mac Raven comes to Delta to attend the marriage of her cousin Dabney, the daughter of her Uncle Battle and Ellen. The family is not happy about the marriage because Troy Flavin is inferior in social status than the Fairchild family. The concern of the family members is seen through the fact that they did not reveal their disappointment to Dabney as it is a marriage of her own choice. This love and concern is also reflected in their attitude towards Laura, the motherless child of the same family. She is substituted as a flower girl, when one of the flower girls fell ill. Also when Aunt Ellen asks Laura to stay with them at Shellmound, Laura's happiness knows no bounds and is excited to be considered as a member of their family. George Fairchild, Ellen's brother-in-law, is for the children the 'best loved' uncle, the lover, protector. He is depicted as the conscience of the family. He risked his life to save his brother's demented daughter Maureen. This incident elevated George's position in the family and he is regarded as the personification of God to the entire family.

Almost all the characters are aware of the importance of their family. Even if some of them cannot wrongly sense its importance, they begin to accept it in the course of time as is reflected in the character of Robbie, George's wife. She is a typical Southern woman and wants her husband all to herself. George is not happy with his rather possessive wife. She understands the family's demand on George but refuses to be part of the Fairchild family. She scornfully says that she did not marry into the Fairchilds, she married George only. She even humiliates the entire Fairchild clan before the wedding gathering. But all the while he realizes his love and need for her. Gradually, towards the end she recognizes the family's love and adoration for him and understands his indispensability towards the Fairchild family.

Though the novel centers on the large family's preparations for wedding, the novelist also emphasizes the reactions of family members to the wedding and to the people and the events related. We see an extravaganza of meals at the plantation; vegetables, chicken, turkeys, fruits and pies. Cakes abound in the preparations. For the children of the Fairchild family, attendance at parties and dances are a daily occurrence. The family is materially self-sufficient. A sense of roots pervades the lives of characters. The family members resemble both male and female. Love as a binding force is also a protection against the dangers of the outside world. This sense of love and protection might be the reason why they scorn the outsiders like Troy and Robbie.

Welty's *Losing Battles* also tells the story of a family reunion at the hundredth birth anniversary of Elvira Jordan Vaughn, simply called Granny. The story is set in the 1930s, the depression era, in the Tishomingo County, Mississippi. The farmhouse in which the story takes place is built by Jacob Jordan, Granny's own grandfather. Granny is a strong lady capable of having created a loyal and loving family. Within a short period of time of action there is birth, marriage, death, separation all woven together. Granny's home is presented as

the centre of the universe. Vaughn-Beechem-Renfro family gathers at the Renfro homestead.

Welty describes the fullness of family thus in the opening section of the novel:

Now there was family everywhere, front gallery and back, tracking in and out of the company room, filling the bed-rooms and kitchen breasting the passage. The passageway itself was creaking; sometimes it swayed under the step and sometimes it seemed to tremble of itself, as the suspension bridge over the river at Banner had the reputation of doing. With chairs, beds, windowsills, steps, boxes, kegs, and buckets all taken up and little room left on the floor, they overflowed into the yard, and the men squatted down in the shade. Over in the pasture a baseball game had started up. The girls had the swing.

(Welty 444)

Welty skillfully blends together the happiness and also the struggles of the family in the course of the novel. Granny has been portrayed as an extraordinarily courageous woman who had kept the family together by bringing up seven orphaned children after her only daughter and son-in-law were mysteriously drowned in the river one night. Welty focuses on how the Depression has affected the entire family. There was widespread poverty around the nation with the factories closed resulting in unemployment. The farmers began dumping or holding back their products to protest the low prices they were receiving, which was not enough to cover the cost of growing the food. These kinds of the ravages of financial hardships are seen throughout the novel. There is a threatening starvation seen at the reunion because of failure of crops. The soil in the hills is made of gravel and sand which is not suited for farming. They arrive in a car with a flat tyre, a Ford with gasoline leakage which reveals their financial deficiency. While depicting the impact of the Depression on farming, Welty also highlights how the farming culture is the part and parcel of the life of the people in the Mississippi Delta. The families coming to the reunion brought whatever they had in their farm.

Remembering the efficiency of Jack at farming, Uncle Percy whispered, “While Jack’s been sitting over there right sprang in the heart of the Delta. And whatever he sticks in the ground, the Delta just grows it for him.” (501)

Welty explores family relations extensively in her novel *The Ponder Heart* with its quirky characters and exaggerated events. The story is told by Edna Earle Ponder and centers on her uncle Daniel. Because they are close in age, their relationship is like that of a big sister looking after a naïve younger brother. Daniel is an embodiment of goodness. He is innocent and strives for the goodness of others. In spite of hailing from a wealthy family, he is not at all materialistic. The only thing he values in life is to have good company. Rather he values company over meaningful relationships. When he is taken to the mental asylum, he tricks the authorities into admitting his father and he leaves him there so that he can race into the town and tell his company his hilarious story. Grandpa is all love for Daniel that he does not take it personally. Out of his immense love for his son, he could not accept Daniel’s marriage with Bonnie Dee and dies heartbroken. Such a strong bond exists between the family members in the novel. Daniel expects all his good qualities in others as well and this is the reason why he could not suspect of Bonnie Dee to have wrong motives. He will give away anything for the people whom he loves. He offers his house and old family car to Bonnie. Edna Earle remains unmarried to take care of her grown up uncle Daniel. Being raised by her grandfather, she developed the quality of caring especially towards her uncle. She must also care for the reputation of the family as the prime member of the family. Theirs is an old Civil War family of respectability and social status and throughout the novel Edna Earle acts as the savior of the family.

Welty’s Pulitzer Prize winning short novel *The Optimist’s Daughter* depicts a wide range of family relations. It is the story of Laurel, “the slender, quiet-faced woman in her mid forties” (883) who travels to New Orleans to take care of her father Judge McKelva after his

eye surgery. He dies shortly after the surgery. Her father's second wife is much younger to her and her indifferent response to the Judge's illness accelerates his death. Both the women travel to Mount Salus for the burial. Later Laurel leaves to Chicago with the memories of her past life. She shows several marriages in flashback, some healthy and vibrant and others confusing. When reading the novel we get the impression that Laurel's marriage to her husband Phil would have been a healthy one if it had lasted. In fact her parents had a very healthy relationship until her mother's death. Having grown up watching such a healthy relationship Laurel could make a good choice for herself. Parent-child relationships are depicted through Laurel's childhood memories. The close knit communities and eccentric figures feature this novel.

Carl O. Sauer, American geographer, figures prominently in the studies of agriculture, the diffusion of plants and animals and the impact of the conquest upon the indigenous American societies. He is a long time advocate of a less destructive attitude towards the environment. According to him landscape is an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural. The landscape has identity based on recognizable constitution, limits and generic relation to other landscapes, which constitutes a general system. The landscape is considered to have an organic quality. Welty's works respond to the public issues of Mississippi's social and historical landscape. In *The Robber Bridegroom* she depicts traces the life in the Natchez Trace and the dangers that lurk around. She says, "Perhaps it is the sense of place that gives us the believe that passionate things in some essence, endure whatever is significant and whatever is tragic in a place live as long as the place does though they are unseen and the new life will be built upon those things regardless of commerce and the way of rivers and roads and other vagrancies. The entire Trace is known for banditry and violence" (64). Both well travelled and dangerous, the Trace provides the mixture of verisimilitude and mystery that characterizes the book's tone.

Welty's depiction of the landscape in her novels is much striking. The Sylvan pastoral setting, the richness of the land, the culture of its inhabitants is presented picturesquely. The sky in the colour of violet, the snow-white moon, the reddest sunsets, the China berries, pinkish white vines, mockingbirds all abound in the landscape. The clouds are larger than anything except the plantations. In spite of the violent changes of weather, racial riots, war and bloodshed, the life in the landscape in her novels moves on. Welty suggests that the mutual resistance between individual and family identity results in the strengthening of both identities. Also the attachment of the individual to place gives him definition and detachment from place diminishes human integrity.

## Works Cited

- A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty*. Ed. John F. Desmond. London: The Scarecrow Press, 1978.
- Bodenhamer, D. J., Corrigan, J. and Harris, T. M. (eds) (2015) *Deep Maps and Spatial Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Carl O. Sauer: On Culture and Landscape*. Ed. William M. Denevan and Kent Mathewson. Louisiana State University Press, 2009.
- Chronaki, Bessie. "Eudora Welty's Theory of Place and Human Relationships." *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43.2 (1978): 36-44.
- Connor, Flannery O'. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970
- Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw. University Press of Mississippi, 1984.
- Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*. Ed. Dawn Trouard. The Kent State University Press, 1989.
- John A. Allen, "Eudora Welty: The Three Moments," *A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty*, ed. John F. Desmond (The Scarecrow Press. 1978)
- Welty, Eudora. *Complete Novels*. The Library of America, 1998.
- Welty, Eudora. "Place in Fiction." *Eudora Welty; Stories, Essays & Memoir*. The Library of America, 1998.
- Welty, Eudora, "The Radiance of Jane Austen", *33 Great Writers on Why We Read Jane Austen*, ed. Susannah Carson (Random House Trade Paperbacks.