# CONCEPTS OF SPACE AND TIME IN THE FICTION OF EUDORA WELTY

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Eudora Welty in a review of Elizabeth Bowen's *Collected Stories* made this perceptive comment: "Elizabeth Bowen's awareness of place, or *where she was*, seemed to approach the seismetic; it was equalled only by her close touch with the passage, the pulse of time . . . Time and place were what she *found* here. Her characters she invented, in consequence." What Welty said of Miss Bowen could certainly be a description of her own concerns and she has a significant body of fiction to illustrate both *time* and *place* as basic elements in her writing.

In a real sense, *place* for Miss Welty is geographical. The South is her milieu in the same sense that it was for Faulkner, O'Conner, and for a great deal of the writing of Robert Penn Warren. One would be careful not to construe from this observation that Welty is simply a regional writer. One writes of what one knows best and Mississippi was her turf as it was for Faulkner. What makes a regional writer significant, instead of a special pleader, is the vision which mirrors the universal human experience. As Maurine Howard points out, Welty "is a Southerner as Chekhov was a Russian, because place provides them with reality. . . ." In an interview she once confessed that when she started to write she wrote about the South and the critics thought she was parochial. Then she wrote a book of stories with the setting in Europe and the critics felt she should stay with that which she knew best. Most of her life, then, has been lived in Jackson, Mississippi partly because she believes it doesn't matter where you are since people's experiences — whatever they are — have emotions that are universal.

There is another sense, though, in which Welty's works are not limited to a specific place geographically. Michiko Kakutani observes that "Welty's South is as much a landscape of emotion as it is a geographical location." Some of her work is imbued with mythology which transcends a specific place. Or, place itself is often a setting for emotions played out and narratives told, irrespective of setting. Warren believes that a "flow of feeling" on occasion takes the place of plot. As to mythology, Welty draws freely upon myths. One of her works especially, *The Golden Apples*, is laced with stories permeated by mythology. Geography, then, though important to Welty, is by no means limiting. Her imagination is stimulated not fettered by her South.

It is interesting to see Welty in relation to other Southern writers. We have already related her work to her fellow Mississippian, William Faulkner. She also

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has a continuing friendship with Robert Penn Warren. It is of particular interest to see her in relation to Flannery O'Connor. Besides the obvious gender, they have in common southern residency (O'Connor, Georgia; Welty, Mississippi). Both wrote about freaks and misfits. Both are better known for their short stories than for their novels. While Miss O'Connor's characters and stories bordered more markedly on the grotesque, Welty was not above portraying the violence (which Warren once said lurked just below the surface of Southern life), of rape and murder. A significant difference, however, may be in the importance of a specific place for each writer. It is difficult to imagine Welty anywhere else except the South, but in the case of O'Connor one is not so sure. She certainly captures much of the flavor of the southern scene, much of the dialect, and characterizations of the struggling red-clay Georgians of fundamentalist backgrounds who inhabit so much of her fiction. At the same time, O'Connor is writing stories of damnation, hell, sin, and salvation which transcend geography. Her place seems to be a backdrop for the drama of salvation which sees the horrible state of humans without the grace which comes in cataclysmic ways in order to redeem lost souls. Though the South happens to be the place where she lives, her theological dualism (she has been compared to Dostoevsky) could be played out in any setting, for the human state is doomed unless redeemed by a grace that invades, often in the most violent ways, in order to bring salvation.

For Welty, however, her place is critical. For one thing, she is not writing cosmic dramas. Theological concerns are not her interest. Religiously she is not writing out of a background that intrudes in any way on the story. She is a teller of tales, telling stories of persons whom she knows so intimately that she catches not only the dialect, but the nuances of expressions, the humor, the emotions, the sights, the sounds, and the orality that bring the characters of life whether they be male, female, black, or white. In fact, when one reads Welty for the first time he or she may wonder what makes this writing significant. One may be wondering where the Message is. *The Optimist's Daughter* tells of a woman coming back home for the last illness and death of her father. It portrays a family reunion around the father, a second wife and her family, the old friends, the father-daughter relationship, and a funeral which runs the gamut of emotions, but one might seek in vain for a Message. To be sure there is place, family, estrangement, and a fading Southern culture. One might affirm the clash between the genteel traditions of the Old South and the crassness of the new. But, there is no clear clue in Welty, as there is in O'Connor, to bring us to the *denoument* with a grasp of the author's intentions. (One might get the same reaction from first reading Welty that one gets when first reading Cheever.)

Place and its implications may indeed be the key element in Welty's writing — even more decisive than plot. In any event, Welty herself is clear in believing that her place in Mississippi is integral to her work and life. "Place — and time too — make the framework of any story. The more I see of other cities, I realize how I've stayed in one place, how it's become a source of all the information that stirs

my imagination." It is particularly interesting to note how she couples *place* and *time* in regard to her own writing and that brings us again to the opening observation she made about Elizabeth Bowen, and Bowen's awareness of place and the pulse of time. In fact, in Welty, *place* and *time* are inseparable.

*Time* as *place* has several levels in Welty. As most writers, she sets most of her stories in the present, or at least in the time they were written, but they are often infused with the past. As Joseph Blotner observes, she writes "a present imbued with the past." And the past, for Welty as for many Southern writers, is always a strong motif in their works. The past hovers over the South and the writers embody that in their writings. Miss Welty herself has remarked that the *time* passed is very important. "It gives a person a sense of dramatic narrative because you can watch things happen through generations or through a family." Even the melancholy, which she admits is in her work, no doubt relates to the sense of loss felt by the people in the South. In another place, she reaffirms the continuity of life which she sees in the South since generations could be followed and that continuity gave "a narrative sense without knowing it." That continuity can go back as far as Aaron Burr or Sherman in Mississippi. She has a "clear sense of a social fabric, and particularly a sense of tradition and family that provides a matrix within which most of her characters live." (Botner)

Time, for Welty, is much more than clock time or calendar time. It is what Whitney Balliett calls "Welty time." "It is kind of slow motion in which everything ambles at Southern small town speed, and it takes the place of narrative power. The reader slows to the same walk, as if he, too, were in the story."

Maureen Howard's words provide a fitting summary to Miss Welty's use of *time*. "There is a superb vigilance in Eudora Welty, a present tense: each work is responsive to its time: history, especially in the South, must not reflect romantic distortions. It is only by the rigorous observation which we find in her . . . that the present is verified and the past kept useful and alive."

As in the case of *place*, it is interesting to compare Welty with O'Connor in regard to time. O'Connor too writes in the present tense, placing her stories in the period of their happening. That time is mostly the present. Her stories are not as mythological as some of Miss Welty's and they seem to tell of ordinary people (of a certain genre) who may be brought face-to-face with violence. Of more importance is another aspect of time which does not enter Eudora Welty's works, but permeates most of O'Connor's. One might call it "eternal" time. She is passionately concerned with eternity. In one way or another, her stories are dramas of salvation: Human sin and Divine grace. Time (when the stories are set) is not nearly as important, except as setting, as is the eternal time which transcends the period of any story. A story has its earthly setting but another kind of time hovers over the narrative — one that began with the Cross and ends with the Final Judgment.

Welty's stories are historical, present-tense, and sometimes even mythological, but at the heart they are earthy. There is no story behind the story. She does not seem to be working out of a religious framework. She is a story-teller,

and, of course, probes the depths of her characters as she catches their familiar speech, humor and folkways. Her time, though sometimes walking slowly, walks with our time.

Eudora Welty is a writer for whom *place* is extremely important whether past or present, but it is focused in her South which has ramifications both for geography and metaphor. Her sense of *time* brings traditions into the present and slows them for a kaleidoscopic view by her readers. But more, in both time and place, the reader enters her world and becomes a companion of her believable characterizations.

These two concepts of space and time undoubtedly have ramifications for her grasp of religion, but the particularity of faith does not seem to be her concern. One might derive some implications for religion from these two concepts, though at best they would be tentative.

As to place, the religion revealed would be the typical Southern religions of the region. She has an uncanny eye for characterizing the Baptists, Presbyterians, etc. who inhabit the small towns of her area. In that sense, she reflects the Protestant ethos of the South. No more should be drawn from that fact than that religion is seen as an earthly part of *place* and of the fabric of the human scene.

In regard to time, the tradition of the past is reflected in the religious heritage as it is in other factors that go into making the South's past and it nourishes the continual narrative which is so much a part of her writing. Religion, then, would take its rightful place here. It is in time past and present as integral to the culture in which her characters, live, move, and have their being. Eudora Welty, then, is a writer who stays within the framework of history. Religion, too, as revealed in her writing, does the same.

Richard Rupp, in a theological analysis of several modern writers' work around the theme of Celebration, considers *Feast* to be the key to Welty's work. His conclusions of her novel, *The Ponder Heart*, might well sum up her humanity which might also characterize her religious outlook. "Her feast is a deliberate choice between the open heart and the closed fist. In this sense Uncle Daniel Ponder is the composite Welty hero — romantic, larger than life, essentially childlike, eager to open himself to experience."

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