Conservatism in Eudora Welty's Fictions
—An Analysis of the Work of Art in Welty's

*The Golden Apples*

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Introduction

Among the Southern novelists of the Southern Renaissance, Eudora Welty stands out as a major figure in contemporary American and world letters. In the 1940s, after *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, Eudora Welty had published four other books, *The Robber Bridegroom*, *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, *Delta Wedding* and *The Golden Apples*, firmly establishing her respected literary reputation by the end of the decade, especially *The Golden Apples*. It is the fifth book of Welty's fiction, and also is one of her most distinguished and experimental works. Welty employs imagery forms derived from painting and music, and fuses materials drawn from classical and folk myths with realistic contemporary characters and settings of the 20th-century South. Many critics think "[t]he result is a brilliant book that has
As one of the most distinguished 20th century American writers of fiction, Welty presents her conservative idea in her masterpieces. This attitude toward the tradition and the South has its solid soil. The largely one-crop economy inevitably leads to the agrarian pattern of life. Though Southern Renaissance occurred early in the 20th century, the South was still a closed agrarian society.

For Welty, conservatism has a different meaning and a different significance. Her conservatism does not mean exalting the old South or going back to the old South. She attempts to find a way against the industrialization from the restoration of traditional values. After World War I, the South became the most rapidly prospering section of the United States. The vulnerable rural life-style and value were uprooted by the industrialization. The traditional values lose their foundation. Spiritual crisis spread everywhere. So she says the vocation of a writer is to discover a way to make time give back all it has taken, through turning life by way of the memory into art. In Welty’s world, the major content memory is family. Welty draws on the custom of family histories and storytelling. She thinks “the sense of family which gives you the sense of narrative and drama, that’s where we draw our stories”.

Southern writers attempt to advocate a free experimentation on new forms and new techniques in literary creation in order to show the problems and situations in the South. As a major figure of Southern Renaissance, one of the remarkable features of Welty’s writing is her continuous experimentation on new and sophisticated techniques in novel writing. The narrative techniques Welty used to construct her fiction include symbolism and mythic pattern and mythic allusions.

Myth is one way of man’s understanding of the world and human history. The significance of mythic pattern and mythic allusions in literary works chiefly lies in how it helps shape the form of an art work, how it sheds light on the problems the work is dealing with, and how it enhances the work’s significance and deepens its meaning. Therefore, the research of mythic elements in The Golden Apples is primarily to enable readers to understand better the problems in the fictional Morgana and also to reflect the real world.

Welty cultivated a livelong interest in photography and painting. She was interested in taking photographs and often fused pictures into her writing. In 1971, Welty’s photographs were published in book form named One Time, One Place. This hobby can also be sensed in The Golden Apples, in which symbols and images can be detected here and there. They are able to produce a more profound meaning
and a more subtle and enduring effect. With these techniques, Welty creates an apparent detachment from the realistic restrictions and leaves her imagination to operate on various levels.

I. The Myth in the Structure

Welty is productive. She has never confined herself to one particular way of writing. Welty has experimented with different ways to present the mythic dimension, which she finds in the rich texture of human experience. So myth and fantasy in Welty’s fiction has fascinated readers, and mythic pattern and mythic allusions help to give *The Golden Apples* its richness. Apparently, she did not begin with myth and fantasy and make them native to Mississippi, rather, she found that fantasy and myth are expressions of things that she found “around her in life”. Indeed, her way of using myth is different from others.

There are two categories we may define in terms of characters and narrative viewpoint in *The Golden Apples*. The first category is that the narrator uses allusions to traditional myth and fantasy to enhance realistic characters and settings, thus the reader’s task is to interpret the third-person narrator’s insight or, with some first-person narrators, to interpret passing allusions that the speaker does not seem to notice. The second category is that some characters consciously experience the rich and imaginative dimension of myth and fantasy, therefore the reader must deal with the character’s as well as the narrator’s insight.

In the first type, Welty’s narrator often uses myth and fantasy to present characters to their audience, sometimes without being aware that they are doing so. Allusion to the mythical past is for the readers to notice. Mrs. Rainey in the first story “Shower of Gold” is a good example. When Mrs. Rainey tells a passerby about Snowdie’s story, she is apparently aware that there is something very special about Snowdie and King, but she is not aware that her monologue alludes to classical myth. She describes Snowdie as “whiter than your dream” and when Snowdie is pregnant, she looks, in Mrs. Rainey’s words, “like a shower of something” that has struck her. The reference in Mrs. Rainey’s story is to the classical stories of Danae and Leda. But she actually does not know that. From these languages’ hints, a reader begins to notice the allusions. Readers can experience more and can sense that King and Snowdie have transcended the limitations of everyday Morgana to experience freely the primal joys of a fertile marriage.
The second type differs from the first one. In the second type, some characters develop an awareness of a dimension of myth and fantasy. They come to understand themselves as parts of a long tradition that reaches back to the origins of the spirit. “June Recital” and “The Wanderers” are appropriate for comments here.

There are two contrasting levels of experiences that can be identified: the first level is defined by the respectable behavior of the citizens of Morgana; the second level is defined by the dimension of myth that transcends experience.

The significance of the dimension of myth and fantasy can be seen in the roles assigned to Cassie Morrison and Virgie Rainey. Their names are emblems of distinction between a character who is afraid of and rejects the understanding the freedom of life in its deeper dimension and one who accepts it. Cassie as Cassandra can cry out the woes of the land, but she is only a Morrison. Virgie, however, is a Rainey. The seed of rebellion lies in her heart from the early beginning.

Cassie is aware of another, richer dimension, but because she is afraid to venture, she rejects the freedom. Cassie dyed a scarf especially to wear for a hayride, but when she thinks over the events of the day, the prominent sense among her memories is “the way she herself had let nobody touch even her hand”.\(^{[3]}\) She strongly feels the fact that Virgie and Miss Eckhart possess a terrible freedom. On one occasion, when Miss Eckhart actually played for her pupil, Cassie felt that “something had burst out, unwanted, exciting”.\(^{[4]}\) Even though she envies them, she cannot be like them. She keeps the Morrison house, keeps the order and keeps the memory and the past.

Virgie differs from Cassie. She consciously declines and understands herself in terms of the permanence of myth and fantasy. In “The Wanderers”, after Virgie settles her affairs, on her way out of town, Virgie remembers a picture that Miss Eckhart used to have hanged over her dictionary. “It showed Perseus with the head of Medusa.” One glimpse of the head of the Medusa would turn the unfortunate beholder to stone. Virgie saves herself from the fate. She escapes to life in another dimension. She sees the slaying of the Medusa in the permanent condition of humanity existing endlessly. Virgie thinks “Endless the Medusa, and Perseus Endless”.\(^{[5]}\) As Virgie considers the picture, she comes to understand her own experience in terms of the myth. She identified with Perseus. This knowledge of time and myth is mystical, but it provides a vision of the self with a fragment of the history of the imagination.

The three stories in *The Golden Apples* are more helpful to think of Welty’s use
of myth and fantasy in terms of two methods defined from a structural perspective. Her narrators may use myth and fantasy to define characters or she creates characters, like Virgie, who are aware of the dimension of myth and fantasy. By using mythic pattern and mythic allusion, Welty can sustain a dialogue between the past and the present and probe the connection between individualism and community. She also reveals the conflict between the old and the modern. Her social conservatism and literary preference for the past is set against the background of the inevitably changing South.

At the same time, the myth of Perseus emphasizes Welty’s theme in The Golden Apples—the resistance to historical change. Man’s dignity is this endless fight against death and all forms of evil, which are in the forms of death, and against time and change.

II. The Usage of Symbols and Images

Eudora Welty’s photographs have long been admired. As an author, she was strongly influenced by photography and painting. She likes to give a sharp focus to whatever she writes about. Her repeated descriptions of people or objects are often like a series of photographs taken from different vantage points. Welty sharpens her meaning by employing a number of symbols and metaphors, which embody and enhance the themes she seeks out.

Symbols and images abound in The Golden Apples. The images of woods, moon, sun, houses, trees, cemeteries and birds are not difficult to distinguish, which are Welty’s devices to unite her work. The deliberately repetitive usage of these symbols contributes to the integrity of The Golden Apples.

The best example of Welty’s deliberately repetitive use of images, which are highly symbolic, is the cemetery image. Before Virgie leaves Morgana, Cassie Morrison is the last person she sees. "Virgie, and Cassie too, circled the cemetery and drove back the length of Morgana". After leaving Morgana, Virgie Rainey reaches the top of MacLain family plot and contemplates "the cemetery that was visible on the cedar hill", where Miss Eckhart is buried. Virgie has looked in vain for Miss Eckhart’s "dark, squat stone" in the Morgana cemetery during her mother’s funeral, and she has a new understanding of a myth of Perseus. The cemeteries in the fiction are symbols of a past-oriented society.

Cemetery is also Welty’s flavor for picture. Welty’s taking of cemetery photographs was consistent during her years as a photographer. In fact, Welty once
thought of publishing a book of cemetery photos. She took such pictures with all three of her cameras, and images she photographed in the 1930s and 1940s appeared not only in the fiction of those years but also in works of the 60’s and 70’s. Welty has written: “In the most unpretentious snapshot lies the wish to clasp fleeting life. Framing a few square inches of space for the fraction of a second, the photographer may capture—rescue from oblivion—fellow human beings caught in the act of living. He is devoted to human quality of transience.” Welty has written: “In the most unpretentious snapshot lies the wish to clasp fleeting life. Framing a few square inches of space for the fraction of a second, the photographer may capture—rescue from oblivion—fellow human beings caught in the act of living. He is devoted to human quality of transience.”[8] The numerous cemetery photographs are eloquent testimony to that same quality and to the same need to rescue human life from oblivion. Time moves inexorably and life is short. The cemeteries in *The Golden Apples* specially parallel actual cemeteries Welty had photographed. She transforms photographic images when she translates them into language.

There is another important image—woods. Morgana’s woods offer a border between the orderly and the anarchic, the South and the outside. That is a green curtain to protect the closed and harmonious society. At the beginning of the story, the woods are intact. They represent a natural force, a primitive power of regeneration and a pure elemental state of being. Through the woods, human life can be scrutinized. The woods, like the MacLain house and Moon Lake, provide another significant location.

In “Shower of Gold”, King MacLain returned home after a long absence and met his wife, not in their lawful bed, but in Morgana’s woods. After she left the woods, she looked like as if “a shower of something had struck her, like she had been caught out in something bright”. Later she gave the birth of her twins—Eugene and Ran. In “Sir Rabbit”, Mattie was raped at the age of fifteen in the woods. Several years later, she went back in the same woods with her husband, Junior Holifield and his hunting companion, Blackstone. When her husband hunted around the woods, Mattie waited for somebody under the dark tree. The power of woods arouses Mattie’s daydream about King MacLain “[…] At moments the sun would take hold of their arms with a bold dart of light, or rest on their wetted, shaken hair, or splash over their pretty clothes like the torn petals of a sunflower”. Later the playing light comes down on them “like a fountain”.

At the ending of the story, the loggers cut down the trees in the woods. The woods were destroyed. The intact closed society was damaged. The boundary between the South and the outside was disappearing. The traditional lifestyle was challenged by the industrialization. The past was unrecoverable.
By applying these images as symbols to embody the emotional states of the characters and to illustrate a human situation, Welty’s pervasive theme of nostalgia for the unrecoverable past is at once made unforgettable.

**Conclusion**

How to deal with the tradition is an important topic in a transitional society. To deny or to defend, that is a question. Welty, as the first woman writer of Southern Letters for nearly forty years, has presented her conservative idea in *The Golden Apples*. She criticizes modern mechanical civilization by traditional values and her ideal. This shows the essence of conservatism.

Welty’s conservatism has an impact upon later writers and Southern culture. First, this kind of conservatism can help people cherish traditional values and struggle for the new utilitarian commercialism. “A society must develop a certain balance to counteract a wasteful impulsiveness and preserve a sense of the usable past [...] This sort of conservatism we have of course had always with us in a scattered fashion, but it was the solid cultural unity of the South that gave that tempering conservatism a lasting weight and importance.”[10] From this point of view, conservatism obtains the stable position of Southern culture.

Second, with the tendency of conservatism, Welty explores the problems in the modern society from the past. To understand the South is her motive force. Meanwhile Welty continues to experiment on new and sophisticated techniques in her writing in order to express her discovery. *The Golden Apples* is not merely one of the wanders of literature. It is unparalleled and unapproachable.

**Notes:**

[1] Louis D. Rubin, Jr., ed., *The History of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 474.

[2] Charles Ruas, *Conversations with American Writers* (New York: Quartet Books Limited, 1984), 7.

[3] Eudora, Welty. *The Golden Apples*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1977), 96.

[4] Ibid., 56.

[5] Ibid., 276.

[6] Ibid., 271.

[7] Ibid., 237.

[8] Eudora Welty, “A Word on the Photographs”, in *Twenty Photographs* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Palaemon Press, 1980), 296.
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