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| **Eudora Welty**   |  | | --- | | **The story and its analyses are not mirror-opposites of each other. They are not reflections, either one. Criticism indeed is an art, as a story is, but only the story is to some degree a vision; there is no explanation outside fiction for what the writer is learning to do.**  —Eudora Welty, **"On Writing"** |   At the center of Eudora Welty’s first published story, “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” Bowman, the bachelor businessman, suddenly understands both his years of loneliness and the relationship between the older man and the girl who have rescued him from his wrecked car. He sees there: “A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that.” This crucial moment augurs the “fruitful” subject that permeates Welty’s fiction: the intimate and often strange relationships within families. Welty is the twentieth-century master of her subject, and the century’s most gifted and radical practitioner of the short story. She won most of the major literary prizes during her career, including the Pulitzer Prize and the French Légion d’Honneur. Only the Nobel Prize eluded her, and many believe this to be one of that committee’s great oversights. Even a generic description of Welty’s oeuvre—four collections of stories, five novels, two collections of photographs, three works of non-fiction (essay, memoir, book review), and one children’s book—shows Welty’s wide scope as an artist, and reading through her work reveals an astonishing tonal range in subject and style, the most expansive of any twentieth-century American writer. | |
| The simple facts of Eudora Welty’s life, however, obscure for some readers her radical experiments in subject and form. Those facts are well known from essays and interviews published throughout her life and from Welty’s best-selling account of her writing life, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1983). Born April 13, 1909, Welty spent what she describes as an idyllic childhood in Jackson, Mississippi with her two brothers, Edward and Walter, and their doting parents, Chestina, a schoolteacher, and Christian, an insurance executive. Welty lived in her familial homes in Jackson for most of her ninety-two years—one, on Congress Avenue near the center of town (she walked through the state Capitol on her way to grammar school), and a second on Pinehurst Street, where she lived until her death in 2001. Sojourns from Jackson included two years at Mississippi State College for Women (1925-27), several years at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and a year in New York City, studying advertising at the Columbia University business school. Her father’s untimely death in 1931 brought her home from New York, and she worked at a local radio station and wrote about the Jackson social scene for the Memphis, Tennessee, *Commercial Appeal*, a newspaper circulated throughout Northwest Mississippi. From 1933-36 she served as a publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration throughout rural Mississippi, where she also took her most memorable photographs (published in 1989). She began to publish fiction in 1936, was on staff of the *New York Times Book Review* in 1944, and traveled to France, Italy, England and Ireland in 1949-50, funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship. During her writing life she held extended residences at a number of universities, including Oxford and Cambridge (she was the first woman to enter Peterhouse College).  Welty’s education and employment history indicate her comfort in a variety of places and situations. Yet she consistently anchored herself in Jackson, coming home for good to nurse her ailing mother in the 1960s. Along with Welty’s artful gentility and modesty, this idea of the single southern woman spending most of her adult life in her childhood home has mislead some critics into assuming that Welty is little more than a “literary aunt” addressing only polite subjects in her work. Further, anecdotes about Welty’s “niceness” abound in print, especially in her obituaries, and these stories add to the image of the benign Welty. At her funeral in July 2001, for example, Welty’s agent Timothy Seldes reported that he had heard that Welty spoke her last words to a doctor who leaned over her bed and asked, “Eudora, is there anything I can do for you?” Her rumored reply: “No, but thank you so much for inviting me to the party.” As this apocryphal story illustrates, the public Welty was genteel, always humble, always ready to make those around her comfortable. Welty was widely and deeply loved in her region, and the idea of her taking such an exit from life, as if she were one of many guests at a dinner party, epitomizes her generous presence there. These stories, however, present a carefully crafted persona, and readers unfamiliar with the coded language of southern gentility persist in misreading Welty’s work through a one-dimensional version of her life as a southern charmer. A *New York Times* interviewer, more interested in Welty’s personal life than her work, inquired about marriage. Artfully deflecting the question, Welty replied that marriage, “never came up.”[[1]](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/index.html#N1) Such inquiries do little to open the rich ground of Welty’s fiction.  Some recent criticism about Welty’s work has begun to challenge the established view of her as a modest and politically simple writer.[[2]](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/index.html#N2)  Indeed, Welty’s work embodies sophistication on many fronts. Welty’s father, Christian, and his fascination with machines of all sorts gave Welty her intense concentration upon time and clocks, on travel, on telescopes and cameras. The camera that her father would bring out to record all special occasions gave Welty her visual sense and love of photography. Photography has a profound influence on Welty’s mode of writing, teaching her that “Life doesn’t hold still,” as she explains in *One Writer’s Beginnings.* “Photography taught me that to be able to capture transience, by being ready to click the shutter at the crucial moment, was the greatest need I had” (*OWB* 84). Welty’s formal career as a photographer never really materialized, though two exhibitions of her photographs were mounted in New York, and five selections from her photographs have been published to date, most notably: *One Time, One Place* (1978) and *Photographs* (1989).  These collections are beginning to receive international attention from critics in the visual arts, and several exhibitions of her work have been mounted since her death.  As she explains her choice of vocation, she tells us that she “felt the need to hold transient life in words—there’s so much more of life that only words can convey.... The direction my mind took was a writer’s direction from the start” (*OWB* 85).[[3]](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/index.html#N3)  Yet while Welty obviously did feel her primary medium to be language, she did not hold photography in abeyance, but continued to use a camera until 1950, when she left her Rolleiflex on a bench in the Paris Metro, and out of anger at her own carelessness, did not replace it.  Welty’s first collection of stories*, A Curtain of Green* (1941), enlivens the images that Welty stored in her imagination as she traveled across rural Mississippi as a junior publicity agent for the WPA from 1933-36. Among these stories: “The Whistle,” based upon, as Welty explains, a warning of early frost that brought out a beggar’s ransom of clothing, bedding, and floor coverings, to protect the crops against the freeze; “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” “A Piece of News,” and “Petrified Man,” all extended riffs upon the alarm and subtlety with which small-town eccentrics might approach the dangers and fascination of illicit sexuality; “Clytie” and “Why I Live at the P.O.” both depicting the solitary, eccentric young woman in a small town setting, bereft of companions who might buffer her oddness. Prior to the publication of this first book, in 1936 Welty mounted a photographic exhibition in New York, and published her first story, “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” in the literary magazine, *Manuscript*. The story uses a series of frames to depict the last hours of a salesman, who wrecks his car near a young married couple’s shotgun shack. The center of the various frames in the story turns out to be the marriage bed, the symbol of the couple’s relationship, as well as of the relationships that eluded the salesman. “Death of a Traveling Salesman” establishes both the photographic technique and the subject matter that would become the foundation not only for *A Curtain of Green*, but also for all of Eudora Welty’s work. In her description of writing the story, she connects photographic narrative technique with her subject, relationships:  As usual, I began writing from a distance, but “Death of a Traveling Salesman” led me closer. It drew me toward what was at the center of it.... In writing the story I approached [the cabin] and went inside with my traveling salesman, and had him ... figure out what was there.... ‘A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing.’ Writing “Death of a Traveling Salesman” opened my eyes. And I had received the shock of having touched, for the first time, on my real subject: human relationships. (*OWB* 87)  Welty’s “real subject” was apparent to some critics at the publication of *A Curtain of Green.* These same critics, however, were surprised at Welty’s next book, *The Robber Bridegroom*, and its apparent release of that subject. | [Eudora Welty birthplace in Jackson](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/birthplace.html)  © 1997 John B. Padgett  **Eudora Welty was born in this house on North Congress Street in Jackson, near the Mississippi state capitol. A plaque notes that many of the events depicted**    [Tomato Packers Recess](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/tomato_packers.html)  Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History  **This photograph, "Tomato-packers' recess," is one of the photographs Eudora Welty took during the Great Depression as a publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the mid-1930s** |
| *The Robber Bridegroom* (1946), Welty’s fairy tale set on the Natchez Trace, spins the story of a highwayman, Jamie Lockhart, who masquerades part-time as a gentleman. He kidnaps a planter’s daughter, and she falls in love with the thief, whom her father knows only as a gentleman. The tale has plenty of indigenous horrors taken from the history of the Trace—wild creatures and men of various states of savagery—but Welty cut her teeth on *Grimm’s Fairy Tales,* so it should come as no surprise that she injects some of Grimm’s gothic horror into the tale as well. *The Robber Bridegroom* contains all of the virtues of a good fairy tale: mystery, magic, poetic description, and in general a sense of the inexplicable. What the tale lacks, surprisingly given the introspection of *A Curtain of Green*, is any psychological exploration of Jamie Lockhart and his need/desire to be both robber and gentleman, or of Rosamond’s relationships with her family, not to mention with the highwayman. Understanding Welty’s primary subject as relationships, attentive readers of *A Curtain of Green* found her circumscribing such issues in her second book odd.  Welty’s opus contains several other works that defy the genre that she sets up for herself as she describes coming to her real subject in writing “Death of a Traveling Salesman.” *The Ponder Heart,* for instance, seems to be more akin to comedy and farce than to anything else in Welty, with the exception perhaps of the story “Why I Live at the P.O,” Sister’s long rant in high comic mode—when Stella Rondo runs off with Sister’s boyfriend, Mr. Whitaker, and returns home two years later with a two-year-old and an attitude, Sister moves in protest to the post office, where she is post mistress. Edna Earl Ponder of *The Ponder Heart* in many ways is the natural descendant of Sister, telling her story to a captive traveling salesman who stays in her hotel. As with Sister’s narrative, Edna Earle’s stories about her Uncle Daniel leave the reader wondering exactly who in the family is sane, if anyone. | The Robber Bridegroom |
| This high-comic genre in Welty finds its endpoint with the long novel*, Losing Battles*. Welty notes that the novel, portraying two days in the community of Banner in northeast Mississippi, remains the most difficult undertaking in her career. The long novel—436 pages—is almost entirely dramatic, filled with dialogue and interchange among the members of Granny Vaughn’s family gathered to celebrate her 90th birthday. For a writer with professed interests in human relationships and with proven and profound abilities to represent interior life with subtlety, indirection, and complexity, taking the time and effort to write such a novel seems, at first blush, inexplicable. Indeed, the entire lineage of *Losing Battles*—“Why I Live at the P.O.,” *The Robber Bridegroom*, and *The Ponder Heart*—does not follow the pattern that Welty sets for herself initially.  One key to reading these works within the Welty canon, however, lies in the chapter of *One Writer’s Beginnings* entitled “Listening.” Welty describes herself as a child climbing into the back set of the family car and announcing to the other passengers as the trip commences, “Now talk!” Her first impulse was to listen, in other words, to hear a story. “Listening” and “Finding a Voice” form the bookend chapters for the central chapter, “Learning to See,” in Welty’s autobiography, and while observation certainly forms the core of Welty’s gift, these two ancillary abilities reign supreme in the comic Welty. Welty, without the brilliant ear for dialogue and the virtuosic ventriloquism, would bring far less to her readers. Readers who find themselves more drawn to the oblique, introspective Welty, must concede that Welty’s tonal range is one of the most extraordinary in all of fiction. And those readers must also concede that these comic novels and stories are gut-bustingly funny.  Her talent for comedy aside, the most surprising gift that Welty has offered her readers, and the text that speaks most directly about her work as a writer, came to fruition in 1983, when Welty agreed to deliver the first annual Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University. Those attending these three afternoon lectures sat in a packed hall—some in window sills—listening to Welty’s “continuous thread of revelation” as she traced her upbringing and meditated upon the forces, both familial and situational, that shaped her as a writer and as a person. These three lectures became her best selling volume, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1984). Apart from this book, Welty has remained notoriously taciturn about her life, instructing her friends to do the same. When asked in 1989 about how she would explain her work, she responded that she would offer no such explanation, that she wanted “the work to exist as the thing that answers every question about its doing.” This position establishes careful boundaries around what we can and cannot know about Welty, and consequently, also delimits how we may discuss her work in conjunction with her life. Welty has been remarkably influential at setting the terms for understanding her work: one despairing comment about the feminist movement, for example, delayed feminist readings of her work for twenty or thirty years. A recent biography of Welty by Anne Waldrop not only is unauthorized by Welty, but also was actively blocked and discouraged by Welty. Critical enrichment and revaluation of Welty’s work is difficult without such sources as letters, interviews with close friends, and so forth, and is, some might argue, merely speculative. In the absence of such material, Welty’s critics have concentrated on her public persona as a point of entry into her work. Welty has had extraordinary control of this persona, and this control has at times led to a narrow reading of her work.  Welty writes that there is “no explanation outside fiction” for her stories; they are gifts from the writer. She continues,  It is not from criticism but from this world that stories come in the beginning; their origins are living reference plain to the writer’s eye, even though to his eye alone. The writer’s mind and heart, where all this exterior is continually becoming something—the moral, the passionate, the poetic, hence the shaping idea—can’t be mapped and plotted. (*Eye,* p. 109) | Losing Battles |
| One way to read this caveat is as Welty’s response to those critics who would take her “life” and try to fold it back into her work. As the quotation intimates, Welty has written insightful and well-placed essays on technique in her stories—not that she has exhausted the subject—she has, rather, given the critic an abundance of material to work with. The *Eye of the Story* (1979) and *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1984), along with the essay prefacing her collected photographs, and *A Writer’s Eye: Collected Book Reviews* (1994) comprise Welty’s published non-fiction to date. While one job of the critic is, as Welty suggests, to consider the stories as “visions,” as absolute works of art, in order to elaborate upon the technique that fosters them, another job of the critic also entails linking the writer’s vision with her socio-cultural place in the world. By controlling her public persona so carefully, and by firmly insisting that her work is not political, Welty maintains for her work an anonymity among writers whom critics see as trying to change the world in which they live. Even in her autobiographical work, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty does not discuss social or cultural issues outside of those endemic to the immediate family. In all of her non-fictional writing, and in her interviews, Welty attempts to focus critical attention upon some aspects of her technique and upon circumscribed social issues of community and the family, all aspects of her work that she is comfortable writing and talking about.[[4]](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/index.html#N4)  Whatever opinions readers might harbor concerning Welty’s stance towards biography, we must concede that her admonition to read what she has written extends excellent advice. Welty’s best work is among the best work of any writer in the twentieth century. The two volume *Library of America* edition attests as much; Welty was the only living writer to be granted a place in the series. This set collects all of Welty’s novels:, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), *Delta Wedding* (1946),*The Ponder Heart* (!954), *Losing Battles* (1970), and *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1972); as well as the collections of stories: *A Curtain of Green* (1941), *The Wide Net and Other Storie*s (1943), *The Golden Apples* (1949), and *The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories* (1955); two uncollected stories—“Where is This Voice Coming From,” and “The Demonstrators”—and two works of non-fiction, *The Eye of the Story* (1978) and *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1984). Sitting down with these books, reading them straight through, offers not only a panorama of Welty’s extraordinary vision, but also gives the sense, as Welty herself said upon reading *The Collected Stories* (1980), of “watching a negative develop, slowly coming clear before your eyes.” | The Eye of the Story |
| As anyone working in a darkroom knows, there are many levels of exposure, and the rightness of a print’s saturation depends upon the viewer. For me, Welty’s vision burns in perfectly in her collection of interlocking short stories, *The Golden Apples.* Neither short fiction nor novel, strictly speaking, this book brings to fruition the subject Welty meditated upon in her previous collections of stories. As works depicting the sheltered individual within a closed community, both *A Curtain of Green* and *A Wide Net* augur the subject matter of *The Golden Apples.* Set in the community of Morgana, the individual stories focus on different members of the community. This technique offers a prismatic view of Welty’s experimenting with her subject of relationships, the relation of self to family and community. Just as the longer stories of *A Wide Net* represent a deepening of Welty’s concerns with the drama of the isolated life that she initiated in *A Curtain of Green*, the interconnected stories of *The Golden Apples* show Welty broadening these concerns. No longer are we in a singular situation, seeing only one brief span of a life from a single point of view; these stories allow us, and the characters, breathing space. We begin to see how different individuals may cope with isolation both over a span of time, and within a slightly larger community.  As in the stories of her previous two collections, some individuals in Morgana fare better under the protective umbrella of a close family or community than do others. Welty lists the “main families” of Morgana as a preface to the book, inviting us to consider individuals within families, and families within communities. We read first about the MacLains and the Raineys, in “A Shower of Gold”; then “June Recital” features the Raineys, the Morrisons, and Miss Eckhart and her mother. When we look back at the list after reading these two stories, to situate ourselves more securely in Morgana, we see that Miss Eckhart and her mother are not on the list. Miss Eckhart is not “from” Morgana, nor would she and her mother be considered a proper family by native Morganans, much less one of the “main families.” In other words, even before we read a word of *The Golden Apples,* we can discern from this list the clannish nature of the town, and the provincial way that it views family and community. We may also discern from this list and its omissions an indication of narrative distance in *The Golden Apples.* By omitting Miss Eckhart, arguably the central character in the work, from the list of Morgana’s “main” families, the narrator indicates a slightly ironic stance that will last throughout the book. The narrator may represent something that is “true” within the framework of Morgana, but then she may also step back, and show us another “truth,” one that lies outside the framework of Morgana. Miss Eckhart is not “main,” from the point of view of the characters enclosed within the narrow world of Morgana, though she certainly is a central figure if we look at Morgana from the position that the narrator gives us. Once again, we see Welty’s emphasis on visual framing, the technique she introduces in “Death of a Traveling Salesman.” | Morgana: Two Stories from 'The Golden Apples' |
| Merely by her singular existence, Miss Eckhart challenges the prevailing ways that Morganans live. But whether or not Miss Eckhart’s way of living is an alternative model to the potential for claustrophobia within family and community, Welty leaves open. On one hand, Miss Eckhart’s life seems ideal. She is free to follow her own passion and art, and as the town’s piano teacher she shepherds most of the children through their beginning and intermediate keyboard repertoire. Thus as a music teacher, she has the pleasure of her music and the added pleasure of being with children. On the other hand, Miss Eckhart does not seem happy or at peace with her life. When one of her pupils, Cassie Morrison, reflects in “June Recital” upon Miss Eckhart and her legacy, she reports various rumors about Miss Eckhart’s failed relationships. It is rumored that “She had been sweet on Mr. Hal Sissum, who clerked in the shoe department of Spights’ store” (CS 296). As far as Cassie knows, the two never even dated. When Mr. Sissum drowns, Miss Eckhart “would have gone headlong into the red clay hole” (CS 299) of his grave if the minister hadn’t grabbed her. This silent but powerful outpouring of grief suggests that Miss Eckhart harbors an equally powerful feeling for Mr. Sissum; she may, after all, wish to have a family, to “fit it” into Morgana. Mr. Sissum’s death slams the door on this possibility.  Miss Eckhart lives alone with her mother. After the funeral, we begin to realize what an unhappy life Miss Eckhart leads, from the devastating sadness of the narrator’s comment that Miss Eckhart is “a poor unwanted teacher and unmarried.... Of course her only associates from first to last were children; not counting Miss Snowdie” (her landlord; *CS* 306-07). Cassie reports seeing her slap her mother viciously, and “Then stories began to be told of what Miss Eckhart had really done to her old mother.... Some people said Miss Eckhart killed her mother with opium” (*CS* 307). Whether or not these rumors are true, they offer a glimpse into the kind of atmosphere in which Miss Eckhart exists in Morgana. The community is not kind to her, and Cassie concludes that “Her love never did anybody any good” (*CS* 307). What seems on the surface to be a potentially enriching life of following one’s artistic passion and passing that passion on to the young, becomes in the fishbowl of Morgana just as devastating an experience for Miss Eckhart as for any other Welty character caught within a closely-guarded family. Miss Eckhart dies alone in a mental institution in Jackson, which reminds us of Lily Daw, en route to a mental institution until her suspect husband-to-be arrives at the train station and plucks her off the train. If we look only to Miss Eckhart, Lily Daw, and characters like them, the choice for a life within a sheltering community—the very life that Welty herself led—seems to be no choice at all: either marriage or a mental ward.  Other individuals in *The Golden Apples* seem to survive the rigors of the intensely sheltered, myopic community better than Miss Eckhart, and give us a different view of community. Yet these are all members of the youngest generation of Morganans, and we are not shown in *The Golden Apples* how their lives will play out. Both Loch and Cassie Morrison early on thrive on their Morgana upbringing. As we see them in “June Recital” and in “Moon Lake,” each exudes in youth a level-headedness and balance of spirit that is rare in a Welty character. As a young adult, Loch leaves Morgana for New York, presumably for a contented life: “He likes it there,” Cassie says. Loch’s sister, however, stays in Morgana, teaching piano and obsessing over the suicide of her mother, (she plants hyacinth bulbs in a pattern that spells out her mother’s name), not as “happy” as her brother.  Unlike Loch and Cassie, Cassie’s friend Virgie Rainey has struggled under the scrutiny of Morgana. Her family is so poor that her mother dyes shoe strings with pokeberry juice to fashion for her a laced up collar like the one on the latest store-bought sailor blouse. All the town girls make fun of her poverty. Virgie also struggles within her family; her independent spirit allows her musical ability to shine—she is Miss Eckhart’s star pupil—yet music and the arts are totally beyond her family’s grasp. The goats are allowed into the parlor in the Rainey house, where they snack on Virgie’s old practice piano.  The final story in *The Golden Apples* finds Virgie confronting her mother’s death, and with this death, Virgie breaks all ties to family and community. At her mother’s funerary viewing, Morgana tries to reach out to Virgie, but “They were all people who had never touched her before who tried now to struggle with her, their faces hurt. She was hurting them all, shocking them” (*CS* 435). She packs up her mother’s house, sells the cattle, and readies to leave Morgana. Cassie connects Virgie with Loch: “‘You’ll go away like Loch ... A life of your own, away—I’m so glad for people like you and Loch, I am really’“ (*CS* 457). For Cassie, the focus of Loch and Virgie’s future is on the individual’s ability to control or “own” her own life, and to lead that life “away.” These are things, it seems, that Cassie cannot now do in Morgana. With Virgie, Welty suggests for the first time in her stories, that something unmitigatingly “bright” can come out of isolation for one who understands the narrowness of small town life, and who suffers its shackles. Welty leaves open the possibility for Virgie and for Loch that the sheltered, isolated life they have known in Morgana, with its magnified attention to the individual, has prepared them to go out in the world. Perhaps there can be, after all, some redemption from the insular life; the scrutiny that the small town places on the individual can, it seems, give one an impression of one’s own importance and the confidence that accompanies such importance.  With Virgie, Welty shows us that it is possible that the kind of life Morgana offers can also foster a rich and perceptive inner life. The pressures that townspeople and family have placed upon Virgie Rainey seem in the end to act on her as pressure and heat act upon coal: they form a diamond. The images in the final sections of “The Wanderer” all suggest that with the death of her mother, Virgie is able to release some of the anger and resentment that have built up in her: “like suggestions and withdrawals of some bondage that might have been dear, now dismembering and losing itself.... the vanishing opacity of her will.... in the next moment she might turn into something without feeling it shock her.... As though for a long time she had been extremely angry” (*CS* 440-41). Living in a sheltered environment, as Welty indicates, can be lovely in its protective shell, but that shell can also press and retain heat. For some—Miss Eckhart, Cassie and her mother—this pressure causes a breakdown. Virgie, though, seems to emerge from the intensity of her environment poised with self-knowledge. In the end, she asks herself “Could she ever be, would she be, where she was going?” (*CS* 459). All signals suggest that she will come into herself, for in the final sentences of the story, Virgie sits alone in the town square with an old beggar woman and nothing to her name—these very facts would be anathema to Morgana wags—yet she hears “the world beating” in her ears. Not only does Virgie show her self-confidence, sitting in the wrong place with the wrong person and with the wrong trappings of social status, but she simultaneously shows that she is full of knowledge and creativity as well. The world that she hears “beating” is a world of myth and imagination: “The horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon’s crusty slither, and the glimmer and the trumpet of the swan” (CS 461). These have nothing to do with Morgana or with the Mississippi countryside; they are purely the stuff of myth, awaiting Virgie’s fashioning. We leave Virgie in full possession of her self, negating all that the shelter of Morgana has offered, perhaps, but also flourishing out of the strength that she has built up in defiance of Morgana’s probing and pressure. We suspect that Virgie will find her way through the kind of situations that damaged Jenny in “At the Landing,” the haunting account of a gang rape in *The Wide Net*. We have seen already Virgie’s resolve and defiance in the face of the taunting of Morganans; we have seen her intense understanding of music, with its passions and disappointments. |  |
| With the stories of *The Golden Apples*, Welty is not only able to suggest a bright light at the end of Virgie Rainey’s insular life, but she is also able to intensify her scrutiny of the sheltered individual, if for no other reason than the interlocking stories allow a revisitation of characters at various stages in their lives. In all three books, protection of the individual can result in harm, or at least in a static condition in which certain personalities—Livvie, Cassie Morrison, Lily Daw, for instance—can move only from one circumstance of protection to another. Jenny, the victim of gang rape in “At the Landing,” is certainly Welty’s most memorable character of this type, though *The Golden Apples* presents several characters who try to leave Morgana, or try to exist outside of the social system, but cannot. The MacLain twins, Ran and Eugene, each flee Morgana—Ran leaves his wife and tries to live alone; Eugene moves to San Francisco where he, too, is in a troubled marriage—but in the end, both return to home base, in states of defeat. Ran goes back to his wife, even though she does not love him; Eugene leaves San Francisco and his wife to return to his family in Morgana, where he dies. The sustained quality of *The Golden Apples* allows Welty to show the effects of a sheltered life over the course of a lifetime; significantly, she chooses to explore the “dark” side. Nevertheless, Virgie Rainey, the most convincing example of the “bright” side, the one who seems to profit from her experience, is left at the end of *The Golden Apples* on the brink of her life. Welty’s emphasis here is upon Virgie’s victory over her experience, rather than upon Virgie’s experience in Morgana.  Welty’s short story collections are autonomous and beautiful works, yet each volume also suggests connections to the other volumes. Each collection both is an individual project, questioning and reflecting its own emotional place, and each collection also points toward its successor. With her final collection, *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, Welty follows the pattern that she establishes in *A Curtain of Green* and *The Wide Net*, and codifies in *The Golden Apples*. A writer often begins her career with a set of questions about a subject, and in the course of examining these questions, deepens them. We can look at the connections among these books in terms of Welty’s developing sophistication as she weighs the benefits against the perils of shelter. Or to recall the terms with which she ends *One Writer’s Beginnings,* Welty asks with increasing intensity “can the sheltered life also be a daring life?”  A *Curtain of Green* as a collection is focused upon shelter as entrapment; characters in that volume live a secluded existence, alternatives to which they cannot even imagine. Escapes—such as they are—are all provisional, closed, unsatisfactory: Clytie and the wife of Powerhouse’s narrative commit suicide; Sister moves to the post office; Ruby Fisher hitchhikes to get away from her farmhouse. The next collection, *The Wide Net,* presents characters who live in similar circumstances, yet in some cases are able to contemplate escape. Their view of the world is wide, like Solomon’s quilt in “Livvie,” and William Wallace’s net in the title story. The tension in these stories arises from the characters’ partial understanding of their options; they may see more of the world within their grasp, but like the characters in *A Curtain of Green*, they still cannot claim it for their own. *The Golden Apples* acts out the tension between the two streams that Welty tells us run throughout her own life, one dark and one light, with even more intensity than either of the previous volumes. Characters in this third book share the situation with those in previous works; but some—Virgie, Cassie, Miss Eckhart, perhaps—seem to understand their predicament with more subtlety. They know that shelter of a community is at once safe and light, yet can also be smothering and dark. By the end of *The Golden Apples,* Virgie Rainey makes a true escape from this dualism by gaining self-consciousness. The interlocking stories of *The Golden Apples* also allow Welty to broaden her inquiries into the sheltered life; in Morgana we can visit and revisit individuals as they confront the pleasures and limitations of living under the microscope of their fellow citizens.  Eudora Welty’s short stories remain, after many rereadings, the most rich and varied of her work, perhaps because, as she tells us, these stories tell us everything we need to know about Welty herself. They depict a keen observer, taking everything in, remembering, framing, exploring the chiaroscuro of the sheltered life lived remotely, but not without its own considerable daring, risks, and magnificent accomplishments.  (Article first posted February 1998 Updated February 2005)  —[Carol Ann Johnston](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/contributors.html#caj) | [Home with bottle-trees](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/bottle_trees.html)  Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History  **In her short story "Livvie," Welty depicted bottle-trees, like these photographed by Welty in Simpson County. They were believed by some to trap evil spirits     [Eudora Welty: Complete Novels](http://www.loa.org/search/volume_select.asp?ID=125) [Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays, and Memoir](http://www.loa.org/search/volume_select.asp?ID=122) In 1998** [**The Library of America**](http://www.loa.org/) **released two volumes of works by Welty, *Eudora Welty: Complete Novels* and *Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays, and Memoir*, making Welty the first living author whose works have been published by the nonprofit press.** |