

Interrogating Sex and Gender in Eudora Welty's "Fairy Tales"

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Eudora Welty and the Influence of Fairy Tales and Elements of the Gothic.

The use of fairy tales as inspiration is mentioned often by Eudora Welty. In her 1943 talk to the Mississippi Historical Society she says: "I think it's become clear that it was by no accident that I made our local history and the legend and the fairy tale into working equivalents in the story I came to write" (*The Eye of the Story* 305). In her article *A Sweet Devouring* (1957), she writes that "Trouble, the backbone of literature, was still to me the original property of the fairy tale..." (*The Eye of the Story* 279), and in her essay on *Place in Fiction* she again refers to fairy tales when she states "of course we shall have some sort of fairy tale with us always – just now it is the historical novel" (*The Eye of the Story* 117).

Fairy tales themselves contain elements of the Gothic such as doubling, labyrinths, mazes, invasions, and premature burial, and it is these elements which present themselves in different guises in many of Welty's short stories. Furthermore, the element of horror as part of the Gothic repertoire is an aspect of authors of fairy tales, the Grimms brothers, in their versions of *The Robber Bridegroom* with its claustrophobic space, acts of horrific mutilation and women as flesh and body parts (Worley 69-71). It is fair therefore, to assume that from Welty's continual references to fairy tales in her autobiographical writings, the broad ideas of archetypal fairy tales served as a backdrop of her short story collection *A Curtain of Green and*

Other Stories originally published in 1941 and republished in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* in 1998, referred to here.

The Use of Doubling in Welty's Stories

If society insists upon clear boundaries and definition when it comes to issues of gender and identity, the use of doubling found in both fairy tales, Gothic stories and Welty's stories resists categorization. As Butler argues:

If prohibition creates the 'fundamental divide' of sexuality, and if this divide is shown to be duplicitous precisely because of the artificiality of its division, then there must be a division that *resists* division, a psychic doubleness or inherent bisexuality that comes to undermine every effort of severing (qtd. in Horner and Zlosnik: 26).

This doubling that Butler refers to is a device used in many classic Gothic texts, where what is feared, and unknowable is often embodied in a double or alter ego. The use of doubling, a Gothic literary device, enables the reader to explore alternative possibilities of gender and identity which provides further insight into the story. As Butler notes, doubleness serves to test limits, boundaries, and definitions, which is a function of the Gothic in literature. In Eudora Welty's short stories, *Old Mr. Marblehall*, *Why I live at the P. O.* and *A Visit of Charity*, the use of doubling, problematizes ethical and moral questions through issues of identity and gender. Mr. Marblehall's identity is that of a bigamist, who happily deceives those who love him, whereas the narrator "Sister" in *Why I live at the P.O.* criticizes her family while at the same time revealing her own sexual complexes and crises. In *A Visit of Charity*, Marian runs away from the two "witch women" for whom she is meant to feel sympathy, yet who disturb her sense of self and feelings of equilibrium about her identity.

Old Mr. Marblehall

Mr. Marblehall, like the fairy tale Bluebeard, is a patriarch and a bigamist, who controls his wives by virtue of his deception. According to Horner and Zlosnik, a figure, which condenses various identities and monstrous character traits, could be described as Gothic (112). Mr. Marblehall “condenses” the identity of Mr. Bird, his double, who is married to another woman, yet his “monstrous” character traits are not blatant until one undertakes a closer reading of the text. To begin with, Mr. Marblehall can be seen as a control freak who, traverses from one identity to another with impunity. Anne Williams suggests that the control of women and their curiosity as is evident in the fairy tale *Bluebeard*, is the exercise of male power over subversively curious women (qtd. in Horner and Zlosnik: 104). Mr. Marblehall’s wives display some of this curiosity, (Mrs. Marblehall “wonders” about things and Mrs. Bird curiously investigates Mr. Bird’s “Terror Tales”), but they have no agency. In contrast, Mr. Marblehall can move around, walking “briskly as possible” while Mrs. Marblehall is “servile, undelighted, sleepy and ... tortured,” and Mrs. Bird is “so static she hardly moves...she stands still and screams to the neighbors” (94). The image of the vital dynamic figure of Mr. Marblehall is contrasted with the static, frustrated, and tortured images of his wives, highlighting their discontented immobility in contrast to his cheerful activity.

The two wives in *Old Mr. Marblehall*, could be seen as binary oppositions of each other. Their goodness and badness in their roles of wives are mainly manifested through their behavior, which is contrasted and highlighted by the “other”. Mrs. Marblehall, the good wife, is “cruelly trained” and sings when requested to do so, whereas the bad wife Mrs. Bird, is witch-like and screams at the neighbors. Mrs. Marblehall who is speechless and obedient, personifies

the obedient wife that the fairy tale Bluebeard was looking for, whereas her alter ego Mrs. Bird, personifies the disobedient, nagging wife when she screams and “fills the house with wifely complaints” (OMM 94). Mrs. Bird does what men are afraid that women will do – she tells the truth about what Mr. Bird does in bed – he reads “Terror Tales and “Astonishing Stories” which deal with sex and death. Although Mr. Bird does not kill and amputate Mrs. Bird for not being the perfectly obedient wife, the way Bluebeard does to his disobedient wives, Mr. Bird “scares her to death” with the murderous images which seem to jump off the pages of his magazines to terrorize her. It seems as if the stories were a sublimated form of violence, which Mrs. Bird, the screaming “fishwife,” deserves to get for her nagging and gossiping. What is more, the horror of these images is amplified in the light of the naked bulb because, moans Mrs. Bird “respectably,” Mr. Bird “doesn’t even want a shade on the light” (OMM 95). The phrase “this wife moans respectably” is ambiguous – is she moaning about her husband’s lack of a shade when he reads, or is she moaning respectably because she is suppressing screams while she is being abused, so the neighbors don’t hear what is happening to her? The “cruel” training of Mrs. Marblehall and the “respectable” moaning of Mrs. Bird hints at wife abuse by old Mr. Marblehall.

Schmidt interprets the behavior of the wives as containing rage that he sees as being hidden in all the women in the town, including that of the narrator’s voice that he interprets as the collective voice of all the women in the town (22). Male fear of women’s speech and gossip is, according to Dale Spender, the fear of having their control over women undermined as it constitutes a threat to the patriarchal order. Spender notes that there are no terms for male talk that are equivalent to chatter, natter, prattle, nag, bitch, whine and of course, gossip and that although men indulge in these activities, they are called something different (106).

Why I Live at the P.O.

In contrast to the private and secretive double life of Mr. Marblehall, the first-person narrator in *Why I Live at the P. O.*, Sister, possesses no secrets. She tells the reader everything – her worries, complaints, her family’s quarrels, and weaknesses. However, on closer inspection, the reader realizes that the narrator is adept at hiding things from herself, and her subjective interpretation of events is open to question. Sister’s story is a reverse of the classical *Cinderella* fairy tale. Whereas in fairy tales, the hero or heroine are placed in distressing circumstances at the beginning which are resolved at the end of the tale, Sister’s happy existence at the start of the story is shattered by the appearance of her younger sister and at the end she is left alone and unhappy. Unlike Cinderella, Sister’s story does not have a “happily ever after ending,” but a Gothic premature burial in the backroom of the local post office.

According to Bettelheim (1982), the Cinderella fairy tale is primarily to do with sibling rivalry – a degraded heroine winning out over her siblings who abused her (236). Sister’s double is her younger sister Stella-Rondo, and the Cinderella role is shared between the two of them in a strange reversal of the tale. Instead of finding Prince Charming at the end of the story, Stella-Rondo runs off with her Prince Charming, Mr. Whitaker, and the story opens with her return home after their separation. Mr. Whitaker had first dated Sister and it is here that the reader is given the first indication of sibling rivalry between the sisters. According to Sister, Stella-Rondo broke up the relationship by telling Mr. Whitaker that Sister was one-sided, bigger on one side than the other. The necessity of telling such a falsehood perhaps indicates the closeness in appearance of the two. Sister and Stella-Rondo aren’t doubles like Mr. Marblehall and Mr. Bird, who is essentially one individual living two different lives. Rather, to use Hawkins’s words “their

counter-images seem photo-negative reversals of each other, or two sides of one coin" (27). Stella-Rondo is married, spoiled and gorgeous and Sister is "one-sided" and unmarried. Sister only learned to read when she was eight years old whereas her younger sister is clever. Sister seems to be a faded photocopy of Stella-Rondo, exact in shape and size, but flawed in precision and color.

The way that Sister describes herself, (as being one-sided and bigger on the other side) is ugly and rather grotesque. According to Gleeson-White (2003), this ugliness is mainly embodied in female characters, and saturates the fictional worlds of Southern writers, like Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor. She suggests that these female grotesques "that so loudly dominate these stories engage in a politics of dissent" (46). Gleeson-White points out that these women interrogate the oppressive image of white southern womanhood that have dominated female gender in the south – that of the "southern lady and the southern belle" (46). Concurring with this view, Yaeger (1996), points out that white southern women writers who follow Welty's lead in creating images of grotesque women, are exchanging the beautiful body for a more politically active view of southern females (139). Sister, in fact, becomes a type of caricature of herself in her description of her body as being "one-sided." Kelly (1989) notes that the genre of caricature deliberately transforms the features of its victims to expose their weaknesses and faults (21). Indeed, in the story, Sister's whiny complaints against her cartoonish family expose her own shortcomings, which leads to her "unhappily ever after" ending.

The use of doubling of the characters in the story, further highlights the spiteful and ill-intentioned feelings the Rondo family harbor towards each other and enables the reader to

discover hidden feelings of anger and aggression that they have for one another, but which is “disguised” by Sister’s first-person narration. Stella-Rondo returns home with a little girl, whom she insists is adopted rather than her own child. By carrying out this charade, Stella-Rondo maintains her virginal purity and wholeness like her unmarried sister. In this way she “twins” herself with her virginal spinster sibling and “takes over” Sister’s life by disrupting her relationships. Unlike the doubling of Mr. Marblehall’s character in the form of Mr. Bird or the binary opposition of the characters of Mrs. Marblehall and Mrs. Bird, the depiction of Stella-Rondo’s “doubling” of Sister has a consuming parasitic quality to it. Stella-Rondo literally attempts to “be” Sister by inserting herself in Sister’s place in the family’s affections and becoming a spinster herself, by refusing to reveal to anyone the full story of her motherhood or her failed marriage.

Unlike Sister and Stella-Rondo, the two men in the story, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo are opposites of each other. Papa-Daddy is obsessed with his symbol of masculinity, his long beard, that he has grown since age fifteen, and his opposite is Uncle Rondo, who experiments with gender-bending when he dresses up in Stella-Rondo’s kimono, taken from her trousseau. Like the two sisters, the men argue and bicker. Uncle Rondo pleads with Papa-Daddy to stop swinging the hammock because it makes him as “dizzy as a witch to watch it,” but as Sister comments, this is what Papa Daddy likes about the hammock. The structure of the sentence is purposefully ambiguous – is it the swinging he likes to do or upsetting Uncle Rondo? Welty’s ambiguous use of language seen here and in *Old Mr. Marblehall*, further problematizes the issues of conflict and truth presented by the narrative voice and underscores the shifting paradigms of gender and identity that the Gothic use of doubling creates in these stories.

Schmidt notes that the Rondo family is farcical (112) and if one takes this idea further, the element of farce is heightened when one applies the figure of Cinderella's fairy godmother to the two men in the Rondo family, almost like the traditional Christmas pantomimes where women dress as men and men as women. Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo can be seen as reverse fairy godmother figures who are doubled as fairy godfathers, and who create unhappiness instead of happiness for Sister at the end of the story. Papa-Daddy, whose extremely long beard creates a wizard-like appearance, is about "a million years old," a piece of information which conjures up an immortal fairy-like figure. He gets Sister her job as a post-mistress, which gives her a status in the family and like a traditional fairy godmother who transformed Cinderella into a princess, Papa-Daddy "transforms" Sister from a stupid, "one-sided" female, into a figure of authority.

Uncle Rondo, on the other hand, is a cross-dressing male who is addicted to prescription drugs. He behaved like a fairy godmother once before when he sent Sister to the Mammoth Cave, all expenses paid, and so he is there to grant Sister her wishes at the beginning of the story. Like the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*, Uncle Rondo facilitates Sister's move out into the world, but this is where the similarity between the benign female fairy godmother and the vengeful transvestite godfather ends. When he is angry with Sister for saying he looks ridiculous in the kimono, Uncle Rondo takes revenge by throwing firecrackers at her and as a result he sends her into a self-imposed Coventry, rather than into a "happily ever after" ending.

A Visit of Charity

Welty's reliance on fairy tales as the "backbone" of her stories, allows her to move seamlessly from realism into fantasy in the creation of her characters and settings. The fairy tale motif and the use of doubling is carried through to *A Visit of Charity*, where Marian, a Campfire Girl, decides to do a good deed and earn some points as a committed member of this altruistic group, by visiting an old woman at the Old Ladies Home. Welty's story resembles the fairy tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, where a little girl wearing a red coat, goes on a goodwill visit to an old woman (her grandmother). In *A Visit of Charity*, Marian wears a red cloak and undertakes to visit an elderly female. In the fairy tale, the wolf gobbles up the grandmother, wears her clothes and manages to fool Red Riding Hood, whereas in Welty's story the wolf/grandmother of the fairy tale has turned into a bleating sheep-like figure lying in bed who terrorizes Marian.

Further evidence of Welty's reliance on fairy tales as an inspiration in her stories, can be seen in the figure of Addie, the "sheep woman," who seems to be based on the figure of the White Queen in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (TTLG), where the White Queen metamorphoses into a bleating sheep, sitting in a shop, knitting. Like Addie who addresses Marian with the question "Who-are-you?" the Sheep's first encounter with Alice is a question, "What is it you want to buy? (TTLG, 85)

The metamorphosis of spaces from one state to another, could also be based upon the depiction of spaces in Carroll's fairy tale about Alice. In Carroll's story, the shop that Alice finds herself in, is a dream-like space where everything seems to metamorphose from one state to another: full shelves change into empty ones, a doll changes into a work box and suddenly Alice

finds herself in a boat with oars. Like the confusing spaces of dreams where nothing seems to hold its character, Marian's experience of the room in the Old Ladies Home is like Alice's experience of the shop. Rattan feels soft, a hand feels like a petunia leaf, and like Alice who is in a dream world and can't seem to do the simplest task like choosing something to buy, Marian can't even remember her own name.

The prostrate "sheep" in the bed contradicts every word her companion says. When she calls her flowers "pretty" the sheep woman says "Stinkweeds!" The two old women argue whether a Campfire girl had come to see them that month already, but the most crushing remarks that the prostrate Addie makes of her companion is her assertion that almost everything she says never happened:

"You never went to school You never came, and you never went. You never were anything – only here. You never were born! You don't know anything. Your head is empty, your heart and hands and your old black purse are all empty, even that little old box that your brought with you bought empty – you showed it to me. And yet you talk, talk, talk all the time until I think I am losing my mind! Who are you? You're a stranger – a perfect stranger! Don't you know you're a stranger? Is it possible that they have done a thing like this to anyone – send them a stranger to talk and rock and tell away her whole long rigmarole? Do they seriously suppose that I'll be able to keep it up, day in day out, night in night out, living in the same room with a terrible old woman – forever?" (AVOC 116)

This outburst of Addie's, although directed at her old woman companion, could instead have been directed at Marian, who is disturbed and bewildered by the tirade. Marian could be compared to Alice who is bewildered and upset when confronted with the twins (doubles), -Dee and Tweedle-Dum, who tease and harass her. They seem to echo Addie's comment "You were never born!" when they tell Alice "You know very well you are not real" (TTLG 71).

Red-Riding's wolf in the *A Visit of Charity*, is placed in sheep's clothing yet it's ability to wound and terrify is evident – Marian's first instinct is to flee. Is she fleeing the witch-like old women or is she fleeing her sudden confrontation with her innermost self? Welty presents us with a young girl to whom appearances count - she is dressed in the latest fashions, a white cap, and she undergoes the motions of kindness as a Campfire Girl, to score points with her friends and troupe leaders. Addie's comments about the emptiness of her companion's life could equally apply to the vain and superficial girl who, quickly forgets about her ordeal and runs off to catch her bus after she retrieves her apple. In his analysis of the story, Schmidt notes that the apple, unlike the apple of Snow White, returns Marian to sunlight and sanity, instead of casting her into a death-like sleep as it did to Snow White (17).

According to Pitavy-Souques (69-92), referring to the influence of artists on Welty, the modern artist does not say or show things directly and he hides the real intention or meaning behind masks, screens so that the complete meaning of the work is not immediately accessible. He points out that the deconstruction in Welty's texts is an aspect of this indirection. Welty's exploitation of the Gothic elements of fairy tales, with its use of metamorphosis, doubling, and the fantastic, results in her delightful but sometimes, unnerving, short stories that interrogate sex and gender.

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