

FREEZE-FRAME: TIME AND VISION IN
THREE EARLY WELTY STORIES

by

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My memories of university life and English study always include a professor by the name of George Fortenberry. I offer a special thanks to him for deepening my love of literature through his teaching and challenging me to follow my instincts through his friendship and mentoring.

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ABSTRACT

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Eudora Welty's early short stories provide a fitting career transition from photographer to writer. In particular, her creative figuration of time—enriched by her employment of photographic vision—graces her earliest collection, *A Curtain of Green*. In this paper, I apply a critical approach based on the narrative theory of time by Paul Ricoeur to discover meaning in three of those stories: "A Curtain of Green," "The Key," and "A Memory." Using Ricoeur's proposition of three mimetic stages—prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration—and taking the liberty to peer through the camera lens,

I identify a unifying theme of feminine emergence that finds its definition within Welty's stop-action narrative style.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ABBREVIATIONS	viii
CHAPTERS	
I. ARRESTING TIME	1
II. BEHIND THE CURTAIN	10
III. UNLOCKING A MYSTERY	20
IV. "GIRL, INTERRUPTED" ¹	37
V. "SENSITIVE ENOUGH"	50
REFERENCES	60
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION.....	63

¹Title borrowed from the book written by Susanna Kaysen, © 1993 Vintage Books

ABBREVIATIONS

Key to abbreviations appearing in this work:

CG	<i>A Curtain of Green</i> by Eudora Welty
ES	<i>The Eye of the Story</i> by Eudora Welty
MHF	<i>Memory, History, Forgetting</i> by Paul Ricoeur
OTOP	<i>One Time One Place</i> by Eudora Welty
OWB	<i>One Writer's Beginnings</i> by Eudora Welty
TN (I, II, III)	<i>Time and Narrative</i> by Paul Ricoeur

In textual explications for “A Curtain of Green,” “The Key,” and “A Memory,” all page references are from *A Curtain of Green* by Eudora Welty.

Please see References for complete citations

CHAPTER I

ARRESTING TIME

A snapshot is a moment's glimpse . . . into what never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling. Every feeling waits upon its gesture. Then when it does come, how unpredictable it turns out to be, after all.

Eudora Welty, *One Time One Place*

Eudora Welty created narratives that invite and satisfy a range of analytical approaches. Beginning with her earliest short story collection, *A Curtain of Green*, published in 1941 (CG), critics have discovered intriguing angles that shed light on her use of place, symbol, and myth; they have offered character analyses that examine her singular ability to peg the universal human experiences of love and isolation, suggested parallels with other writers from her native south to Chekhov in Russia, and explored her use of recurring themes like journey and initiation.

However, it is Welty herself who offers the greatest insight into her work. Through her photographs, essays, interviews, and critical pieces on the work of other writers, she offers readers the tools to share her imaginative vision, and empathetic character portrayals.

Before she became a writer, Welty spent a few years in the 1930s as a junior publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration, and during that time, she took a significant number of photographs in rural Mississippi. When asked how photography taught her about perception and creative technique, she said, “Some perception of the

world and some habit of observation shaded into the other, just because in both cases, writing and photography, you were trying to portray what you saw, and truthfully. Portray life, living people, as you saw them. And a camera could catch that fleeting moment, which is what a short story, in all its depth, tries to do. If it's sensitive enough, it catches the transient moment" (Cole, 30).

Her concern with "that fleeting moment" of time figures prominently in her fiction, and the subject of time recurs frequently in her non-fiction. Perhaps "subject" here is not the most precise word; Welty personifies time as "one of the main actors" in Katherine Anne Porter's stories, so "actor" may be more apropos here as well (ES, 37). At the beginning of her expository *One Writer's Beginnings* (OWB), Welty states that time was a favorite subject in the daily lives of her entire family. "I don't know whether or not my father's Ohio family, in having been Swiss back in the 1700s before the first three Welty brothers came to America, had anything to do with this; but we all of us have been time-minded all our lives. This was good at least for a future fiction writer, being able to learn so penetratingly, and almost first of all, about chronology. It was one of a good many things I learned almost without knowing it; it would be there when I needed it" (OWB, 3).

Early on, the genesis of her narrative vision and approach included time management and stop-action imagination:

I learned in the doing how ready I had to be. Life doesn't hold still. A good snapshot stopped a moment from running away. Photography taught me to be able to catch transience, by being ready to click the shutter at the crucial moment, was the greatest need I had . . . I learned that every feeling waits upon gesture . . . these were things a storyteller needed to know. And I felt the need to hold transient life into

words—there’s so much more of life that only words can convey—strongly enough to last me as long as I lived. The direction my mind took was a writer’s direction from the start, not a photographer’s, or a recorder’s. (OWB, 92)

In moving from photography to writing, Welty found that she would have greater challenges from the notion of time, which she called the familiar “enemy” (ES, 164). She found it necessary to cultivate an even greater amount of patience than she had in taking snapshots, when she focused on “allowing [subjects] to reveal themselves” and generating “relaxed poses, gestures, and facial expressions.” She knew that unlike photography, “the world of fiction is not of itself visible . . . it has to be made so” (ES, 32). She also asserts, “Fiction does not hesitate to accelerate time, slow it down, project it forward or run it backward, cause it to skip over itself or repeat itself. It may require time to travel in a circle, to meet itself in coincidence. It can freeze an action in the middle of its performance. It can expand a single moment like the skin of a balloon or bite off a life like a thread. It can put time through the hoop of a dream, trap it inside an obsession. It can set a fragment of the past within a frame of the present and cause them to exist simultaneously.” (ES, 166)

Thus, when Welty became a creator of narratives, she had to learn to lasso time and bring it under her control. She adopted an unusually scenic writing style, informed by her action-stopping photographic approach and ability to manipulate time through narrative. Her work causes an enduring response in the reader and brings about “an awakening” of the mind’s eye to memorable colors, icons, and characters (ES, 166).

The narrative content, meanwhile, inspires curiosity and pathos. In *A Curtain of Green*, the narrative voice focuses deeply and empathetically on moments that define a

change, signal a transition, or discern significant features in the lives of edgy but believable personae. She writes, “The events in our lives happen in a sequence of time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily—perhaps not possibly—chronological. The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation” (OWB, 75).

Early on, the short story became a fitting training field for her to play with time, as she used it to define and expose the inner workings of human consciousness, memory, and response. During her examinations, she revealed both the characters’ connectedness and the lack of it; their perception and their inability to perceive.

Twentieth-century readers welcomed such a style, but Welty herself pondered the intricacies of time, questioning her place as a writer even as she created her earliest short stories. She was aware that the times she lived in—including the cultural and literary trends that accompanied that point in history—influenced her and her contemporaries, but it appears that she wasn’t always comfortable within that time frame. In her essay about Jane Austen, Welty puts herself and the reader in touch with a past that Austen inhabited, a past that she longs for. Being rooted in the twentieth-century south, “Welty envies Austen's state of ‘belong[ing] to her world,’ an envy that suggests that she finds her own observations distorted by a contemporary sense of alienation” (Johnston, xiii). Thomas Porter identifies this dilemma as “the mind of the southerner caught between idyllic past and an undesirable present” (Porter, 11-12).

Welty acknowledges that the prevailing mode in twentieth-century fiction is characterized by what she calls “the knothole . . . of alienation” (ES, 10).

Regardless of her nostalgic nod to the literary trends of Austen’s day, Welty’s early work clearly defines her characters’ predicaments in terms of this alienation. Using the writer’s pen and a figurative lens, she creates and examines characters who are alienated from those around them, and in some cases even from themselves. To zoom in on the plights of the personae, she emphasizes the personal isolation of her characters—how they are set apart in worlds of their own imagination, worlds that are not comprehensible to others. She does this in part through her photographic vision—finding the specific setting and situation for discernment—as well as through compassion for her characters. Most significantly, her expert use of the familiar “actor” and “enemy,” *chronos*, characterizes her style.

This technique finds a firm ground in a model elaborated by Paul Ricoeur in his treatise *Time and Narrative*. He explores two modes of time. The first is an ongoing “river” with no points of separation or definition. This concept, Heraclitean (*panta rei*) and Bergsonian (*élan vitale*), celebrates constant motion without a terminus. It is the perceptible dynamic of the universe.

The second mode is psychological, creating divisions like past, present, and future. Narrative is a prime example of this type: a phenomenological experience by which we dominate the flux: what went before, what is happening now, what will happen later, and their relation to one another. Ricoeur then marks a fundamental bifurcation within narratives dealing with past, present, and future: historical and

fictional (TN I, 54). Historical narrative uses a chronological base; the fictional narrative presents the psychologically and phenomenologically significant events that constitute an action. So Ricoeur calls narratives “the most exemplary attempts to express the lived experience of time.” In characterizing fictional narrative, he further indicates that “the poetics of narrative deals with . . . so many knots to be untied” (TN I, 241). In our analysis of Welty’s texts, we can begin to untie the knots or complications that the events depict: conflict, struggle, alienation, and reintegration within the boundaries of narrative temporality.

Ricoeur’s theory of narrative time consists of three distinct stages: Mimesis₁ is common to ordinary experience and to narratives; it apprehends or anticipates an action—a marriage, a journey, a murder, a revolution—and divides it into beginning, middle, and end. The story teller envisions the action to be created and begins by setting the stage for narrative action; so prior to its unfolding, the plot of the story is first “grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character.” Reader and writer come to the narrative experience with a comprehension of these values. (TN I, 54)

Mimesis₂ is the *emplotment/arrangement* of such events that shape mimesis to a fictive purpose. The writer draws selectively on past experience and imaginative potential to create a sequence of events that make a plot: a single, whole action from scene, movement, development of characters, and dialogue. Mimesis₂, he says, “is the concrete process by which the textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work” (TN I, 53).

He stresses the mediating character of the story's movement between what is recognized at the beginning of comprehending the narrative and what takes place upon full apprehension of the story's conclusion. He explains, "a plot already exercises, within its own textual field, an integrating and, in this sense, a mediating function, which allows it to bring about, beyond this field, a mediation of a larger amplitude between the preunderstanding and, if I may dare to put it this way, the postunderstanding of the order of action and its temporal features" (TN I, 65).

Finally, then, the "postunderstanding" may be designated as *mimesis*₃, a realization that something significant has happened. It connects us with *mimesis*₁, that is, with our previous experience of the action represented in the plot, and signals a significant change from the plot's opening situation. The reader recognizes that the events on the page resemble our construction of events in actual experience into unitary "actions": romance and marriage, vindication of an accused innocent, the discovery of a murderer.

Using pockets of arrested time that can be started, stopped, emphasized, repeated, and rearranged, the narrative gains a power all its own. Relationships, motives, conflicts, and resolutions unfold within the narrative's temporal framework. The result, according to Ricoeur, is that "*mimesis*₃ marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality." Then, "it is in the hearer or the reader that the traversal of *mimesis* reaches its fulfillment" (TN I, 71).

As narratives unfold, Ricouer suggests, we can discern three distinct figurative stages, and these are the ones I will examine in my thesis: *prefiguration*, the existing setting and situation as the story begins; *configuration*, the sequence of events that connects the opening with the conclusion; and *refiguration*, the resulting setting and situation as the story draws to a close. The stories I have chosen for this exercise are “A Curtain of Green,” “The Key,” and “A Memory,” all from Welty’s first collection, *A Curtain of Green* (1941).

First, we will see how prefiguring identifies the moment, scene, and agents of the action. Pictures establish a set of preliminary spatial relationships, background and foreground, the situation of the persona(e) in relation to the setting and, in the case of two or more characters, to one another. We can quickly understand each story’s unique structure, symbolic framework, and temporality during this stage.

Second, configuration provides movement from beginning to end, relations of thought and choices that give impetus to action. Because Welty looks inside the minds and hearts of her characters so effectively, configuration manifests itself in both internal or psychic and external or physical action. Here, as the figurative camera zooms to a scene, Welty often stops the viewfinder to look within, revealing not only physical detail, but also memories, motives, and private thoughts. What visually appears to be a moment can actually span several paragraphs or pages of narrative time.

To provide an effective contrast to this psychological examination in these three explicated stories, Welty employs the use of minor figures whose presence provokes a strong response on the part of the main characters within the passage of prescribed time.

Each of these outsiders are unfamiliar with the predicament of the hero or heroine. They are strangers who seem not to belong to the rich psychological landscape depicted by the author. Their identity and purpose are not immediately clear, but in varying degrees they serve to enlighten and guide the principal agent or agents.

What we can deduce is this: 1) The principal agents live and struggle within a predicament of seclusion represented by their physical surroundings—a garden, a train station, and a beach; 2) minor characters, who do not belong to the realm of existence inhabited by these personae, play a stimulatory role in the emplotment, demanding a significant response; and 3) the conflict brought about by these outsiders creates a triggering factor that drives the action to its refigured denouement. Let us look at their varying levels of success.

CHAPTER II

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Eudora Welty utilizes a variety of photographic techniques in her narrative approach to fiction. In *The Eye of the Story*, she writes, “The artist needs and seeks distance—his own best distance—in order to learn about his subject” (ES, 48). In the story, “A Curtain of Green,” she experiments with distance and perspective. She begins by examining the lighting and defining angles of perspective.

Like the other two stories I have chosen for my study, “A Curtain of Green” opens by lighting the scene. In “A Curtain of Green,” it is the sun, which “seemed almost to spin in a tiny groove in the polished sky.” Before this day, rain had been falling around the same time every afternoon. Therefore, the fact that the sun is still shining at this hour is an oddity. This change in the daily routine suggests tension and a sense of expectation in oppressive light and heat, during which “every leaf reflected the sun from a hardness like a mirror surface.” Mrs. Larkin, who shuns company and dresses to blend in with her surroundings, cannot escape the intense light that, “like a tweezers picked out her clumsy, small figure” (209).

Under the sun’s persistent light, the scene “down below” in her garden features the neighbors’ bird-eye perspective. Mrs. Larkin’s garden is secluded, “visible only from the upstairs window of the neighbors.” They are looking down from the windows of their houses on Mrs. Larkin’s garden, “fanning and sighing, waiting for the rain.”

Mrs. Larkin only appears in the garden; she is a reclusive widow who still grieves the tragic loss of her husband: “since the accident in which her husband was killed, she had never once been seen anywhere else.” So the only contact with her neighbors is her appearance going to the garden and her return to the house at the end of the day. “Every morning she might be observed walking slow, almost timidly, out of the white house” and at the end of the work day “she would . . . appear at the house.” The observers can only watch her and wonder (209-210).

She appears daily in chameleon-like fashion, wearing an “old pair of men’s overalls rolled up at the sleeves and trousers” (209) that are “stained . . . now almost of a color with the leaves” (212). Her hair is “streaming and tangled where she had neglected to comb it” (210). She stands out against the curtain of green as if plucked to the surface by tweezers; her dress, on the other hand, resembles a disguise and a camouflage. She approaches her daily tasks in the garden timidly and uncertainly. “And then a sort of sturdiness would possess her—stabilize her . . . as if a blindfold were being removed; and then she would kneel in the flowers and begin to work” (210). Her actions seem mechanical, robotic. At the end of the day she would go back to the house “with a drooping, submissive walk,” quite changed (211).

Her fierce commitment to planting and pruning does not extend to pruning, guiding, and controlling growth; she doesn’t establish boundaries and perceptible divisions. “And yet, Mrs. Larkin rarely cut, separated, tied back . . . To a certain extent, she seemed not to seek for order, but to allow an overflowing, as if she consciously ventured forever a little farther, a little deeper, into her life in the garden” (211). Rather

than impose order on her works and days—controlling space and seasons—she encourages the flora and fauna to grow without measure with her in the midst of it.

Her life is absorbed by the garden and its powers. Her relationship with the surrounding world, with her neighbors, is one-sided at best—she is an object of their observation, and they do not appear within her field of consciousness. After the death of her husband, those around her tried to show their sympathy and concern by calling frequently, but they felt she had not appreciated their efforts and gradually withdrew to observe her occasionally from above. In the garden she planted her flowers “without stopping to think, without any regard for the ideas that her neighbors might elect in their club as to what constituted an appropriate vista.” She did not share her ideas, her purpose or her fine flowers with any of them. [The garden] appeared to the on-lookers as “ a sort of jungle, in which the slight, heedless form of its owner daily lost itself” (211-12).

In the introduction to her snapshot collection, *One Time One Place*, Welty defines her role as an artist: “my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other’s presence, each other’s wonder, each other’s human plight” (OTOP, 8). These neighbors seem to represent this “veil of indifference,” to be callously disregarding the widow’s plight, but it is also true that Mrs. Larkin has not shown any interest in joining their company. She is “heedless” of her proximity to them and gives the impression of cultivating her solitude. So this veil is

not necessarily woven of malice or disdain on either side; in this case, “the veil” is a curtain—a curtain of green.

To complete this prefiguration of Mrs. Larkin’s milieu, on this morning a third figure appears in the garden, Jamey. “He was only the colored boy who worked in the neighborhood by the day.” He comes now and then to help out in the garden. The neighbors notice him first when they hear him whistling. He appears in good spirits and Mrs. Larkin tolerates him and his whistling. Indeed, if she wants help, Jamey is her only option (212-213). He provides another working presence, but hardly companionship.

From the beginning, the prefiguration establishes elements that reveal and others that conceal. Like experiential human time, the significance of this single day in her life is not fully evident. The elements of the scene—“a large, densely grown plot running downhill . . .” with a “border of hedge, high like a wall . . . visible only from the upstairs windows of the neighbors . . . slanting, tangled . . . over-abundant and confusing”—points to Mrs. Larkin’s isolation and confusion. The physical elements present what appears and also what conceals. Likewise, the personae’s relations form a triangle, elements of which are both visible and hidden. Mrs. Larkin is focused, with the absent neighbors at one apex and the present, vulnerable Jamey at another. Today she is in a mood to “tolerate” Jamey, but her tolerance reaches only so far.

At this point, the developing action—configuration—begins. Throughout the afternoon, Mrs. Larkin keeps checking on Jamey’s transplanting; she is nervous about his finishing before the rain. She is hoeing under the sunlight, she raises her head to

stare at the flashing sky, her eyes dull and puckered “as if from long impatience or bewilderment,” her mouth in a sharp line. Suddenly without warning her memory quickens, and projects the details of Mr. Larkin’s terrifying, tragic death the summer before: “the enormous tree . . . suddenly tilting, dark and slow like a cloud, leaning down to her husband”—not crashing down, but *leaning*. “From her place on the front porch she had spoken in a soft voice to him. ‘You can’t be hurt.’ She had waited there on the porch for a time afterward, not moving at all . . . But the tree had fallen, had struck the car exactly so as to crush him to death” (214). Her daily routine—going to the garden, throwing herself passionately into her work—has served to keep this memory at bay. When the rain does not begin to fall as expected, her memory flashes to the past, that moment when the tree crashes down and the unimaginable happens. Her love for her husband has failed to save him.

Though she is busy with the hoe, the garden seems suspended in time—no wind, no bird-calls, the leaves thickened. Jamey too is motionless, his whistling quieted, kneeling in a spot across the yard. In the stillness, the once-sheltering pear tree is now a dark and foreboding “callous” shadow. In the heat, impending rain, and her descent into grief, Mrs. Larkin experiences a rush of alarming emotions. She feels a fear “as though her loneliness had been pointed out by some outside force whose finger parted the hedge.” As she draws her hand to her breast, she feels an “obscure fluttering” and she hears a “force” babbling, “The bird that flies within your heart could not divide this cloudy air” (215).

She is struggling with this sensual onslaught when she inexplicably turns her attention to Jamey. The sight of his “look of docility” infuriates her. She walks toward him angrily, carelessly dragging the hoe across the flowers she has cultivated. Then, “she forced herself to look at him, and noticed him closely for the first time.” In the stillness, without distance or distraction of any kind, Mrs. Larkin sees that Jamey is “lost in some impossible dream of his own.” In her sorrow and self-absorption, it had been easy enough to ignore the prying neighbors, and she had tried to keep Jamey at the same distance. Without warning, she becomes maddened by his vulnerability: “the way he looked like a child” with “helpless suspicion and hunger, a soft, rather deprecating smile on his face.” Jamey’s face is turned aside with a half-smile that reveals “a teasing, innocent, flickering and beautiful vision—some mirage to her strained and wandering eyes.” The fierce feeling that seizes her is hopelessness entwined with a jealousy that would annihilate pleasant dreams that are forbidden her. Any sense of reality from the previous moment is lost. As she raises the hoe above her head, the “clumsy sleeves” of her disguise “both fell back, exposing the thin, unsunburned whiteness of her arms, the shocking fact of their youth.” Mrs. Larkin is no middle-aged matron, but a young woman (215-216).

She grips and squeezes the handle of the hoe as her brutal intent focuses on the still and silent boy. In her mirage, Jamey’s head in all its explicit detail—clustered hot woolly hair, its intricate, glistening ears, its small, brown, branching streams of sweat, the bowed head—is meant surely for destruction precisely because it holds “so obviously and so deadly its ridiculous dream.” Jamey’s dream of life and happiness is

doomed sooner or later. She could save this boy the pain of loss, the inevitable hopelessness that reality spawns, with a purposeful swipe of her hoe. She was just as helpless against the effect of danger and death, the havoc wreaked by sheer accident with no one accountable: “life and death, which now meant nothing to her but which she was compelled continually to wield with both her hands, ceaselessly asking, Was it not possible to compensate? to punish? to protest?” (216-17). Jamey, dreaming the impossible dream, offers Mrs. Larkin a compelling opportunity to compensate, to punish, and to protest against the emptiness of her life: she can become at once Jamey’s savior and destroyer.

At that moment, it begins to rain and the configuration draws to an end. “The first drop touched her upraised arm. Small, close sounds and coolness touched her.” With sudden force, the garden becomes transformed to a place of beauty and newness, coolness and brilliance, sight and sound, where “everything appeared to gleam unreflecting from within itself in its quiet arcade of identity. The green of the small zinnia shoots was very pure, almost burning.” She sees the living plants reaching out to greet the rain. The pear tree, no longer casting an ominous shadow, moves in symphony with the wind, “a soft rushing noise, like the wings of a bird alighting.” The bird that fluttered in her heart, now freed, settles in the sheltering tree. She becomes aware of the whiteness of the house behind her, sending a signal, waiting for her return.

Then Jamey—the rain providing a mild shock that shakes him from his dream—turns to face her, smiling, stretching, and stammering “a few disconnected words. She does not react or respond. The rain holds her total attention, its scattered soft drops on

the leaves ringing like a bell from a pitcher on the doorstep. The boy stood silently by, not knowing what to do and brushing his face to dispel his confusion. The rain and wind beat steadily against Mrs. Larkin; the levee of her daily routine breaks, and tenderness sweeps through her.

“It has come, she thought senselessly.” Darkness is coming on. She looks forward to the “loud and gentle” night of rain falling on the roof above her head. Her day’s work in the garden would be over, and she would lie abed in motionless peace: “against that which was inexhaustible, there was no defense.” She reviews this vision of the “inexhaustible,” the daily round, the sudden rush of memories, and the refreshing rain that invites the peace of a dreamless sleep in her white house. Exhausted by the intensity and swing of emotions, Mrs. Larkin faints and lies, eyes closed, among the flowers. She seems to move slightly, lips parted, “in the sad adjustment of a sleeper.”

Jamey rushes about, jumping and crouching, not venturing to touch her. “He then stands back at a little distance and looks in awe at the unknowing face, white and rested under its bombardment.” He remembers how he stayed very still when he felt her standing behind him, and “he would not have turned around at that moment for anything in the world.” He remembers the neighbors now out of the picture, closing their windows against the rain. He begins to call her name “in a horrified, piteous, beseeching voice . . . “Miss Lark’! Miss Lark’!” invoking the return of the little bird.

The more specific “lark” is principally an Old World species, celebrated by poets for its morning song. It is not colorful, but rather streaked black, brown, and buff

like Mrs. Larkin in her gardening outfit, and it seldom perches in trees, but walks and nests among plants on the ground.

The lark and its song appear in Shakespeare's canon with varied dramatic effect. In *Cymbeline* (2.2: 20-8), the rapacious Cloten summons the musicians to "penetrate" Imogen with the song "Hark, hark the lark." In *Romeo and Juliet* (3. 5: 6-7; 27-30), when Juliet insists the birdsong they hear is the nightingale, Romeo points to the dawn: "It was the lark, the herald of the morn;/No nightingale. And Juliet laments: "It is the lark that sings so out of tune . . . Some say the lark makes sweet division/This is not so, for she divideth us." This lark, however, "could not divide the cloudy air" of Mrs. Larkin's heart, enmeshed in grief.

The "motionless peace" that Mrs. Larkin anticipates at the end of the day will not survive the sunrise and the birdsong; her gardening, which confers a kind of peace, is anything but motionless. She stirs, showing some sign of life, then Jamey jumps up and runs nimbly out of the garden. This startling and abrupt refiguration—Jamey's flight from the scene after making sure she is alive—shows a deep awareness of his prescribed place in the social order and the need to make a hasty retreat. The dreams of the mistress of the house and the dreams of the black servant in each instance yield to the code of the "neighbors" who would misunderstand the vignette—a prostrate white woman and a black boy standing over her.

One of the compelling qualities of Eudora Welty's photographs that carries over into her prose is the way the overt poverty of the scenes frame the dignity, the resolution, and the steadfastness of the persons in them. "A Curtain of Green" renders

that same kind of juxtaposition of opposites in her figurations. Her protagonist comes “uncertainly” wandering in the garden; she is “possessed by sturdiness” and throws herself into her work. Her “fine flowers” in abundance confer no beauty on scene; it is a “kind of a jungle” and the owner is “heedless.”

In the freedom of “gaily turning her head,” “a motion she was now forced by memory to repeat”—she is both free and forced in this motion. The accident that killed her husband is “incredible” because her love was keeping him safe. She calls to Jamey “angrily,” and is “at once terrified.” While she holds the hoe, “the head of Jamey” is “witless, terrifying, wonderful.” In the rain, the green of the zinnia shoots was “pure, almost burning.” When she looks forward to retiring, “the loud and gentle night of rain” would come. When she lies prostrate in her faint, Jamey looks in awe at the “unknowing face, white and rested under the bombardment.” Jamey jumps “nimble” to his feet in leaving the garden.

These oppositions and contrasts, the juxtaposition of contraries, without explanation or apology, produce small shocks that command attention and require a second look at what seems a simple enough tale. Peering through the curtain of green, a much more complex and dramatic picture appears.

CHAPTER III

UNLOCKING A MYSTERY

In writing about her role as a listener, Eudora Welty tells about a certain neighbor she knew while growing up who loved to tell stories. Young Eudora loved to listen. “She enjoyed my company perhaps even more than my mother’s,” she writes. “What I loved about her stories was that everything happened in *scenes*.” Eudora would sit between her mother and the neighbor and say, “Now *talk*” (OWB, 14-15).

The unfolding of narrative scene by scene became a favorite method of Welty’s. In particular, “The Key” paces along much like a series of photographs; the story of a couple who spends hours in a train station moves subtly, inviting a closer look and presenting a complex meaning. Narrative distance sets the stage.

Allison Mae Miller writes, “As a writer and photographer, Welty struggled with the artist’s need for distance. The camera provides the perfect medium to achieve this ‘distance.’” Welty says as much in *One Writer’s Beginnings*: “getting my distance, a prerequisite of my understanding of human events, is the way I begin work. Just as, of course, it was an initial step when, in my first journalism job, I stumbled into making pictures with a camera. Frame, proportion, perspective, the values of light and shade, all are determined by the distance of the observing eye.” (Miller, 38)

Many of her pictures are shot from behind the subject(s), implying an unobtrusive attitude on the photographer’s part. She says, “I have always been shy

physically. This in part tended to keep me from rushing into things . . . I drew near slowly, noting and guessing, apprehending, hoping, drawing my eventual conclusions out of my own heart, I did venture closer to where I wanted to go. As time and my imagination led me on, I did plunge” (OWB, 24). The freedom afforded her by writing gave her even greater control over distance, movement, and detail.

Less distant than the aerial view at the beginning of “A Curtain of Green,” the opening scene in “The Key” is close to the story’s subjects, in the interior of a “remote little station” where sound and light intermingle. The story opens: “It was quiet . . . except for the night sounds of insects. You could hear their embroidering movements in the weeds outside, which somehow gave the effect of some tenuous voice in the night, telling a story. Or you could listen to the fat thudding of the light bugs and the hoarse rushing of their big wings against the wooden ceiling” (56). These sounds bring the night to life, but with an ironic twist—the personae in question, Albert and Ellie Morgan, are both deaf and cannot experience it. Throughout the story, they remain within their silent circle.

As in “A Curtain of Green,” the light source—a round, yellow light fixture on the wooden ceiling that creates at best a “prickly light”—illuminates the waiting room. “Some of the bugs were clinging heavily to the yellow globe, like idiot bees to a senseless smell” (56). There is an air of expectation (like “some tenuous voice in the night”) in the quiet of the remote little station.

The people in the station present a prefigurative arrangement, triangular as if in a photograph. At the first point is the uninvolved public—people waiting for a train. At

the second point is a couple, Albert and Ellie Morgan. At the third is a mysterious stranger.

The first point helps define the scope of the setting and provides a backdrop for the action, as prescribed by the opening sequence: “two rows of people sat in silence, their faces stung, their bodies twisted and quietly uncomfortable, expectantly so, in ones and twos, not quite asleep. No one seemed impatient, although the train was late. A little girl lay flung back in her mother’s lap as though sleep had struck her with a blow.” (56)

The second point of the triangle forms the initial focal point. Albert and Ellie Morgan “were sitting on a bench like the others waiting for the train and had nothing to say to each other.” The latter conclusion, made by the casual and distant observer who is unaware of the couple’s muted plight, shows that their limited communication is obvious. The suitcase at their feet is “strapped crookedly shut, because of a missing buckle, so that it hung apart finally like a stupid pair of lips.” Just as dogs sometimes look like their owners, possessions resemble or tell about those who tote them. The suitcase’s appearance echoes their own—unworldly bumpkins who have come in from the country, with their inability to talk perceived as “stupidity” by onlookers.

Ellie is, at about 40 years of age, “a large woman with a face as pink and crowded as an old-fashioned rose . . . Her face worked and broke into strained, hardening lines, as if there had been a death—that too-explicit evidence of agony in the desire to communicate” (57). The images of the rose and death suggest a funereal metaphor: Ellie is at the end of one of life’s passages as she awaits the train ride.

Albert, on the other hand, is like a worn afghan. He “looked home-made, as though his wife had self-consciously knitted or somehow contrived a husband when she sat alone at night.” Although their appearance and attitudes indicate that they are together quite often, Ellie remains “alone,” with Albert functioning more like a favorite garment. Albert is “holding his hat in his lap with both hands—a hat you were sure he had never worn,”—a new accessory he purchased for the trip—has “a shock of very fine sunburned yellow hair” and wears a brown suit “neatly and carefully.” In contrast to Ellie’s “agony in the desire to communicate,” Albert is “soft” and “too shy for this world,” indicating the need for a gradual and slow approach. As Ellie’s partner, his shyness and slowness—albeit his *unwillingness* to communicate—has frustrated Ellie to the point that she is “tense and solid as a cube,” her “nameless apprehension” aggravated by “the thought of travel.” (57-8)

On the wall behind him, framing Albert’s head, is a “familiar” poster, “dirty with time.” Mirroring Ellie’s “nameless apprehension,” it displays “an old-fashioned locomotive about to crash into an open touring car filled with women in veils.” (58)

The couple hopes to find elusive romance at Niagara Falls, or so Albert indicates to Ellie through signing; he says, “Maybe when we reach Niagara Falls we will even fall in love, the way other people have done . . . not for the other reason—both of us being afflicted in the same way, unable to speak, lonely because of that” (62). The poster forecasts the outcome of the journey, a collision with disaster to follow. However, “[no] one . . . was frightened” by the alarming picture, not even Albert and Ellie.

All around them are references to the color yellow, a color of the harvest, the end of the growing season: both have yellow hair, and they sit under yellow light in a yellow station. The lettering on the suitcase indicates that they are from Yellow Leaf, Mississippi, indicating the decline of their youth: “I have lived long enough: my way of life/Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf” (*Macbeth* 5.3:23). Not yet in the elder years of winter, the couple have reached the time “When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang” (Shakespeare, “Sonnet 73”). The ambiguity of their situation invokes pathos; the yellow leaf will curl and fall from the bough into the dead of winter. Furthermore, “they must have been driven into town in a wagon, for they and the suitcase were all touched here and there with a fine yellow dust, like finger marks.”

The last persona in the triangle is an enigmatic young man who exists apart from the others, “strong-looking, . . . alone, hatless, red haired, . . . standing by the wall while the rest sat on benches.” The camera then zooms in on this man: “He stood and stared in distraction at the other people; so intent and so wide was his gaze that anyone who glanced after him seemed rocked like a small boat in the wake of a large one. There was an excess of energy about him that separated him from everyone else . . .” (59). Initially, his powerful presence has a mysterious and clandestine quality—“he might have been a criminal or a gambler”—yet he is “craving . . . communication,” has “eyes widened with gentleness,” and possesses a look “of a very tender and explicit regard.” Furthermore, his red hair “seemed to jump and move, like the flicker of a match struck in a wind.” The “prickly” light plays a part in accenting his appearance: “The ceiling lights were not steady but seemed to pulsate like a living and transient

force, and made the young man in his preoccupation appear to tremble in the midst of his size and strength, and to fail to impress his exact outline upon the yellow walls. He was like a salamander in the fire. ‘Take care,’ you wanted to say to him, and yet also, ‘Come here.’”

In *The Book of Lambspring* (*theatricum chemicum*, 1602), emblem 10 shows an artisan with a triple-pronged trident aimed at a salamander in a fire. The salamander has a row of stars along its back. The accompanying verses reveal that the creature bathes and is purified in the flames of a great mountain, and when it goes back to its cave, the alchemist captures and pierces it. Its blood is “the most precious Medicine on earth [. . . driving] away all disease,” yet by giving its blood, the salamander gains “immortal life,” and “death has no more power over it.” Through the blood of the salamander, the “Sages . . . attain the Heavenly Gift . . . the Philosopher’s Stone.” In alchemy, the philosopher’s stone refers to a magical substance that can turn plain metals into precious ones or ward off aging. In spiritual alchemy, it is an agent that brings enlightenment. This metaphorical reference adds to the stranger’s intrigue, implying that he possesses preternatural powers. Significantly, the yellow dust on Albert and Ellie resembles sulfur, a compound used by metallurgists to create precious ores (Eliade, 48) and prized by alchemists as one of the three heavenly substances. (http://www.chemsoc.org/viselements/pages/alchemist/alc_sulfur.html)

The stranger’s brilliant, flamelike hair is his signature, and he carries a mysterious key with him. He also has an uncanny energy about him, delivering a shock to the beholders. In the perspective produced by this tableau, the young man is the most

prominent figure. His “excess of energy” separates him from others; his charismatic image takes on a magical quality, as if from a superior sphere (59-60).

In addition to their physical appearances, the personae make unusual gestures that contribute to the sequential prefiguration. As we have seen, Ellie’s tense “face worked and broke into strained, hardening lines.” Albert “held his hat so still; and yet how softly his eyes fell upon its crown, moving dreamily and yet with dread over its brown surface! Every now and then . . . a sudden alert, tantalized look would creep over the little man’s face, and he would gaze slowly around him, quite slyly. Then he would bow his head again; the expression would vanish” (58). The young stranger “had a small key in his hand and was turning it over and over in his fingers, nervously passing it from one hand to the other, tossing it gently into the air and catching it again” (59).

The photographs change in the next sequence. The key is in the air; suddenly it falls to the floor, making “a fierce metallic sound like a challenge, a sound of seriousness” that is lost on the deaf couple. The other people who respond to it jump at the intrusion on their patient waiting for the train’s arrival. “Little walls of reproach went up about them all.” (60)

Albert, looking down and unaware of the clatter, sees the key in the dust at his feet. The young man watches the crowd’s reaction with a “flicker of amusement,” then walks over to retrieve the key. When he sees Albert “with wonder written all over his face and hands,” he stops. Albert takes the key’s appearance as some sort of special sign, a revelation meant especially for him. So the stranger does not reclaim the key,

but draws back, “a peculiar flash of interest or of something more inscrutable, like resignation, in his lowered eyes” (61). “Flicker” and “flash” recall the fire and salamander imagery that represents the alchemical power of the red-haired stranger.

Here the configuration begins, with more photographic detail as each scene unfolds. Possession of the key transforms Albert; he is animated, moved by memories of past mysteries, strong and innocent—“a fish he had once spied just below the top of the water in a sunny lake in the country when he was a child.” As he weighs the key in his palm, his face lights up with delight and his lips are trembling. Ellie frees her hand from the handle of her purse and with her fingers begins to talk to her husband.

The stranger is watching them, intrigued. His focus remains upon them throughout the interval, as if he wants to interact or assist them in some way. Unable to understand the signing, he is concerned that Albert is over-reacting to his good fortune at finding the key; his wonder and joy seem misplaced. A murmur moves through the room as others in the waiting room notice the animated fingers signing; they are “embarrassed, vaguely aware of some crisis and vaguely affronted.” (63)

Albert cannot contain the drama of his interior world, which triggers communication with Ellie. He has become suddenly empowered by this key: “it belongs to me. It is something important! Important! . . . You can take hope. Because it was I who found the key” (62). Albert holds the key in his “wide-open hand”—indicating a willingness to receive—and recognizes it as access to power and a new beginning. Hopefully, he shares his thoughts with Ellie. He found the key; it came to him mysteriously. He asks Ellie, who believes in miracles, to believe that the key is an

answer to her prayers. He now has control; she no longer needs to be ashamed of him. Ellie is self-conscious, concerned about other people's reaction: "'You are always talking nonsense. Be quiet.' But she was secretly pleased." Ellie is taken with Albert's newfound self-confidence; it is what she seeks. The stranger, who had remained still and intent during the "speech," turns away and moves back to the wall, where he lights a small spark—a cigarette.

When Albert's animated recital ends, he slides the key into his pocket, and the couple falls silent. No longer communicating, they sit quietly, their hands folded in their laps. In this suspended interval of silence, the anticipated train rolls into the station, picks up its passengers, and pulls out into the night. The couple has missed their train, and with it, their chance for union at the Falls.

The train's arrival and departure signals marked changes in the photographic sequence. The station has emptied out, the people "all changed from the way they had been" (64). Although "the two deaf-mutes and the loitering young man were still in their places," all three have changed. Instead of appearing a criminal or a gambler, the young man "was dressed like a young doctor or some such person in the town, and yet he did not seem of the town." He is a respectable and decorous figure, and his presence looms even larger.

How unfortunate, then, that he might "never express whatever might be the desire of his life." Instead of being his significant feature, his youth now became "a medium for his activity." His presence in the room is like a chiaroscuro photograph, "blackness together with the light, the negative beside the positive." Furthermore, he

contains “joy and despair” as well as “fullness and emptiness” (65). He personifies the union of opposites, the yin and yang, and the desire to unite them. According to the BBC’s online “h2g2” encyclopedia, “The mystery of alchemy was about a reconciliation of the opposites . . . by connecting . . . masculine with feminine.” Furthermore, “the alchemist also gave equal attention to regulating the fire (keeping it alive) and watching the changes taking place in the substances” (The Secret Art of Alchemy). In Albert and Ellie, he sees the separation caused by their opposite natures, and he seeks to help them connect. He does so by attentively watching them and tending the “fire,” which is indicated by his fiery red hair, the salamander image, and the cigarette. He is also the holder and bestower of magical metal keys, the matter of his art.

The first magic key elevates Albert to a new status. He holds a sign or token of the “beyond,” made from a “heavenly metal” (Eliade, 27). In his impassioned address he says to Ellie: “You must see it is a symbol . . . something that we deserve, and that is happiness.” They are to find the happiness of a new union in Niagara Falls. The key completes something previously denied and untouchable. It appears that, with this key, Albert can join Ellie with honest intent.

However, with the train gone, their hope of renewal now exists in stasis like an insect in amber. Replying to the darkness of the night outside and the need for illumination, a railroad man comes in with more flickering light, “swinging a lantern which he stopped suddenly in its arc” and manages to communicate to the couple that the train is indeed gone. Ellie reacts with a hopeless resignation, but her husband, still

clutching the key, has not lost heart; the missed train, after all, does not cancel his sense of mission and control. The railroad man hurries away, leaving the lantern aglow beside Albert's foot.

At this point, the others waiting in the station fade out of sight as the photographer's light and viewfinder focus on the couple and the stranger. The distance between them diminishes, and the young man's presence becomes powerfully evident to Ellie and Albert. He has been a prominent figure all along, but the light of the lantern, which also has a magical quality, finally makes the self-absorbed couple aware of him. As if closing a circle, he walks over and stands silently near them. Ellie reacts to the stranger's presence with suspicion, but she responds by taking off her hat, an odd gesture of deference. She asks Albert, "What does he want?" He replies, "The key!" Without knowing the origin of the key, Albert still instinctively connects its presence with the man. Instead of ignoring him, Ellie nods at him, and he smiles faintly. Her eyes shine, but her deep-seated discomfort with the outside world is not allayed. Albert fancies himself the master of the situation. He assures Ellie that he has kept the key safe in his breast pocket, where "no one can find it, and there's no hole for it to fall through," but she is not reassured (67).

As the stranger hovers nearby, the couple's innermost thoughts rise to the surface, as if he has bidden them to do so—to come forward and be reconciled. Albert believes that "happiness . . . is something that appears to you suddenly, that is meant for you" (69). In fact, "that is the way things happen to you always. But Ellie did not comprehend this" (67). Until this point in time, Albert took comfort in the security of a

routine approach to life. Questioning, wondering, and analyzing only upset the status quo: the imposed silence of his deafness allowed for a peace that is fostered by the daily round on the farm: chores, working in the field as the woman works in the house, crops growing, the sky “like a coverlet over it all.” If you leave it alone, you feel a repletion, “in need of nothing, and nothing needing you” (69). Unfurling hands and talking can destroy this serenity; in making observations or replying to the other’s worried questions, everything is jolted, disturbed, out of control.

Conversely, Ellie enjoys the dramatic. As they exchange signings, she becomes progressively more excited. The isolation of their silent communication creates for her a sense of conspiracy, a counter-plot against the pressure of the auditory world outside their knowledge and their ways of communicating. But Albert, for whom talking seemed a burden, it continued to be a “rough and violent game which Ellie, as the older and stronger, had taught him to play with her” (66).

When Ellie takes a Niagara Falls postcard from her purse—a symbol of all she has worked for and a hope for true marital union that has eluded them—the red-haired man draws closer and bends to see it, *joining them* in a sense. As he observes the couple in minute detail, the view through the zooming lens becomes even more acute. He discovers that Ellie has a metal object of her own: a sewing needle “stuck in her collar where she’d forgotten it, with a thread running through the eye—the final details” of her hard work at “knitt[ing] or somehow contriv[ing] a husband when she sat alone at night” (70; 57-58). Standing very close and studying her intently, he sees the yellow dust on her skin, another sign of alchemy. These details attest to years of endurance—

indeed, her life's purpose of waiting throughout the ponderous passage of time for the promise of more abundant life and marital union. In addition to working and saving, she has worked at the magic herself.

The stranger cannot understand their interchange, but they are talking about the scene in the picture, Niagara Falls. Ellie's eyes are puckered, her hands "tight and wrinkled with pressure" as she swings her foot "in the new Mary Jane slipper with the hard toe." She is full of energy, hope, determination. Albert confirms her good spirits by pointing out the rail that protects onlookers standing on the edge of the Falls, another metal object that offers a special promise. From the moment she had heard about such a place—another time illumined by a "magic-lantern," a teacher had pointed out that, leaning against the rail, the vibrations of the roaring water allowed the viewers to "hear" the falls, as Albert says, "with your whole self . . . arms and legs and body" (70). After such an experience, Ellie would never forget what hearing is. Albert has repeated this story "hundreds of times" at her request, and she has never tired of hearing it.

The rail set in the rocks around the thundering cascade offers Albert and Ellie the opportunity to connect with the natural world in a way that ordinary hearing does not afford. As a symbol of love's essence, water promises them the hope of deeper connection and sincere emotion (*The Elements*). Ellie then looks back at the red-haired man, but he looks away.

Ellie returns to their present predicament: "By now, we'd have been there, if we hadn't missed the train." They are aware that the train has gone, but not of the distance that remains—Niagara is "miles and days" away from their home and the little station

(70). The hope she has put in the journey to this magic place is as unrealistic as the projected distance there.

The chasm between the opposites of male and female, husband and wife becomes more apparent. The key he grasps securely in his pocket offers Albert the means to join Ellie in this new lease on life. Albert did not really believe in the promise of the Falls: he had lived a mundane life from day to day, never thinking that they might really go on the journey. He had never looked into the future, “into the changing and mixing of their lives together when they should arrive at last at Niagara Falls.” He imagines what it might be like, standing pressed against the rail, pressed together “with their lives being poured through them, changing . . .” Taken aback by his thoughts and unable to face the prospect of such an amalgamation, “He bent his head and tried not to look at his wife.” Albert’s fear rises to the surface as he apprehends the meaning of true union, that thing conveniently “postponed like the paying of the mortgage.” At this point, he glances up at the stranger pleadingly, “as if to say, ‘Won’t you come with us?’” In spite of his earlier bravado, he doesn’t feel he can face this prospect of union with Ellie by himself. Being there at the station, with suitcase packed and ticket in hand, he faced the impending actuality of carrying out their plans. He feels that “the key had materialized to show him the enormity of this venture” (71-72). First, the key made him feel he could rise to the occasion. Then he hid it away, and his doubts

Meanwhile, Ellie ponders “the secret and proper separation that lies between a man and a woman, the thing that makes them what they are in themselves, their secret life.” She

recalls that she had put the hope of union in the magic of Niagara Falls—a stop to this separation that to her “was unhappiness.”

Sitting close beside him, Ellie then startles Albert. In the light of the lantern, she looks the stronger of the two, brave and determined. Sensing her resolution, he shrinks from it, and his doubts and fears multiply. He is not sure what he thinks of the key: was it happiness with Ellie or rather a symbol of a peaceful boon for himself—of a strange and unexpected turn of fortune? Indeed, “How terrible it was, how strange, that Albert loved the key more than he loved Ellie. He did not mind missing the train. It showed in every line, every motion of his body. The key was closer—closer” (68).

Ellie, who was previously “lacking,” now has a bold and brave look in the light of lantern’s fire. However, Albert falls back into his dreaming, waiting for “something” to give him peace. His secret, that “something which he could have alone, only for himself” is compromised; it has lost its luster. Instead, it is Ellie’s strong face in the light of the lantern that fills his senses, looks “terrifying” and shows “no joy” (72-73). Ellie has gained a new sense of her own accomplishment that includes, but does not depend on, the confused Albert.

Closing whatever distance is left, the stranger intervenes for the first time. He takes another key from his pocket, “a key with a large pasteboard triangular tag on which was clearly printed ‘Star Hotel, Room 2,’” and gives it to Ellie (73). This second key integrates various elements of the story. The hand of the stranger—hands being the agents of communication—has entered the Morgans’ silent sphere. Husband and wife now each have a key. The “star” recalls the stars on the back of the salamander—a bit

of magic, an award granted to Ellie, a star for ascendancy. The key to “Room 2” will accommodate them both, unlike Albert’s key, which he hides and keeps to himself, and which points him to a nameless and uncertain destination, and which interrupts and halts the journey in progress. The triangular tag refers to the three-way relationship, but now the triangle refers not to *group of people-couple-stranger*, but to *male-female-chemist* accompanied by the purifying agency of fire—the lantern light—and signaling the refiguration.

The stranger moves into the night, leaving the station and the Morgans behind. He remains isolated and alone, feeling that his intervention was useless, even despising the fact that he had done it. As an act of consolation, he lights a cigarette and pauses momentarily to stare at the fire of the match. He has seen the role reversal that the couple experienced. Initially, the first key suspended the moment in time and caused Albert’s sudden, dramatic feelings of power and purpose. But later, he retreated to his former state while Ellie pondered what missing the train really meant, then emerged brave and strong. What she sought in the supposed magic of the Falls is discovered in her newfound strength. No longer focused on a nebulous destination, she becomes independent, self-possessed.

The young man realizes that despite his intense observation, his concern for the pair, his “simple compassion,” he cannot enter the Morgans’ lives. His intense personal power separates him from the couple. He remains alone, his wild and searching eyes weary and familiar with the “comic” nature of human relationships such as marriage,

which remain paradoxical—a pairing on one level, a struggle for unity on another, a portrait of ambiguity. It is something the outsider cannot remedy or transform (73).

CHAPTER IV

“GIRL, INTERRUPTED”

Certain images in her snapshot collection testify to Welty’s fascination with the bizarre. Photographs of roadside carnivals, amateur signage, and Mardi Gras regalia are enduring examples, and the inclusion of freak shows in stories like “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” and “Petrified Man” add to these unforgettable images.

According to Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, memory subsists in images: “We say interchangeably that we represent a past event to ourselves or that we have an image of it, an image that can be either quasi visual or auditory” (5). Photographs offer, in some cases, a representation that is likely to be remembered by both the subject and the photographer, a shared moment frozen in time.

Some philosophers theorize that memory is always shared, but Ricoeur does not agree. Clarifying Halbwachs’s theory of collective memory—that memory functions in relation to a group—Ricoeur argues that “childhood memories are an excellent reference” to the singular and subjective nature of memory. “They take place in socially marked places: the garden, the house, the basement, and so on” yet “the influence of the social setting has become imperceptible to us” in that it shapes our behavior and our memories without us knowing it, becoming “a dimension inherent in the work of recollection.” Halbwachs does note that “It is only . . . when rival influences battle within us that we take notice” of social settings and social action; thus

the resulting memories “are not explained by our natural spontaneity, but ‘by the meetings, within us, of currents that have an objective reality outside of us’” (quoted in Ricoeur, *Memory*, 121-122).

Welty’s story, “A Memory,” investigates these concepts. In it, a grown woman remembers herself as a girl, and a separation between these two personae is essential to understanding the narrative. She recalls that the girl was ruminating on a memory when she was thrust into the “unwelcome realism” (OWB, 97) of a certain social setting. In the memory recalled by the woman, rivaling influences battle to drive the girl to a stage of sexual awakening. It is a clear presentation of the two major components of memory—*recollection* and *recognition*—on the woman’s part, for it is unclear if the girl was aware of the effect the immediate experience had upon her; in all probability, it was of the “imperceptible” nature mentioned by Ricoeur. It is in the woman that *recognition* takes place. The narrative displays a very private and subjective *recall* of events that probably are not remembered at all by any other personae in the narrative, and certainly not the way the girl or woman remembers them. During the process of recall, the woman recognizes that this particular set of memories played a large part in the development of her sexual consciousness.

Like “A Curtain of Green” and “The Key,” the setting of the story is singular and confined to one spot, offered in a series of photographs. Time, however, plays a more challenging role here than in the other stories. The narrator, who abides in the present, tells a story that happened in the past. Memory forges a link between past and present, causing its recurrence in the narrative present. It functions like “the twofold

sense of the word ‘history,’ considered as the set of events that have occurred and the set of reports on these events” (Ricoeur, *Memory*, 305).

Ricoeur points out that adult memories are like those of childhood in that “the social framework ceases to be simply an objective notion and becomes a dimension inherent in the work of recollection” (Ricoeur, *Memory*, 122-123). Indeed, just as the woman’s past becomes present in this narrative, her recollection unites her with the girl who lived the experience. Remarks by the adult, such as “Even now it does not seem trivial” (151), “I do not know even now what it was that I was waiting to see” (148), and “I still would not care to say which was more real—the dream I could make blossom at will, or the sight of the bathers. I am presenting them, you see, only as simultaneous” (151) indicate such a connection.

The narrative events take the form of a recollection where the woman’s past interacts with the girl’s memories of her own past, which monopolize the latter’s thoughts. All action occurs in a former place and time where the girl’s mind vacillated between her memory and a present reality, so it is recorded in past tense. The “present” of the girl included the arrival of a “roughened” family of bathers on the landscape. Their vigorous horseplay is described in a comical language that, when filtered through the process of recall, becomes a grotesque ritual—much like a freak show.

The prefiguration of “A Memory” presents a quiet and peaceful place, with the girl lying on the sand of a small lake in the park after swimming. It was a clear, bright summer midday, with only a few people around. In an allusion to the photographer’s viewfinder, the narrator says, “Ever since I had begun taking painting lessons, I had

made small frames with my fingers, to look out at everything” (147). She describes the scene in artistic terms—smooth and shining water, oddly assorted figures in “fixed attitudes” as in a painting, and an iconic white pavilion that provided a focal point. The photographic scene was framed by oak trees, “like the engraved thunderclouds surrounding illustrations in the Bible” (147). Similar to the foliage in Mrs. Larkin’s garden in “A Curtain of Green,” the border separated the girl from others. She sought to control what entered her field of vision by choosing a sylvan resting place and framing soothing sights with her hands. However, the place she chose was a park that was open to the public.

In conjunction with the outer scene, the woman details the girl’s thoughts and perceptions. First, characteristic of feminine pre-adolescence, she was hypersensitive, judgmental, and easily frightened. Anything that she did not prefer or expect to happen filled her with apprehension, sorrow, and a “vision of abandonment and wildness.” Second, she was vigilant, expectant, and dramatic, feeling “obsessed with notions about concealment” and thinking about “secret[s] of life.” Third, she was infatuated, thinking endlessly about a brief encounter that blossomed as she lounged on the beach. She lived “a dual life, as observer and dreamer” and spent her days in school “perpetually alert, fearing for the untoward to happen.” (148-149)

The girl was aware that her inner wanderings eschewed the protection of her parents, who had tried to keep things that entered her frame of reference “strictly coaxed into place like a vine on our garden trellis” (148). Her willful turning away from strict parental control resulted in fear and insecurity, so she tried to allow entrance

only to what she wanted to see and hear while longing for an outer world that conformed to her ideas.

The object of her affection was a boy who was not even an acquaintance; her lack of familiarity with him allowed her to idealize him. She loved to dwell on a memory of a brief encounter with him on the stairs at school: “I touched my friend’s wrist (as if by accident, and he pretended not to notice).” Her lack of knowledge about the object of her affection—she didn’t know where he lived or anything about his family—and his lack of concern added to her uneasiness and apprehension: “I felt a mystery deeper than danger which hung about him.” (150-51)

The configuration of “A Memory” occurs on two different levels: the girl’s interior world and the exterior beach landscape. The first is an extension of the girl’s reverie. The narrator recalls the time when “the untoward” did, in fact, happen; the boy suffered a nosebleed in Latin class, and this brought an unwelcome and unforeseen shock to her senses. It broke through the “protection” of “the dreariness and regularity of the school day.” The boy “bent suddenly over and brought his handkerchief to his face.” While “the older girls laughed . . . the boy rushed from the room” and “the teacher spoke sharply in warning.” The “older girls” represented those already in adolescence, the teacher’s warning spelled impending doom, and the boy’s embarrassed actions hinted at bodily emission. The sight of blood in the same frame with her beloved brought menstruation to mind. The blood was not merely red, but “vermillion,” and it stained the white handkerchief he raised to his face, flowing over his “square-shaped hand.” (150)

The nosebleed incident made her even more hypersensitive in her fantasy about the boy. When she thought of her love's plight, the photographic landscape of memory took on dark and foreboding qualities: "his house might be slovenly and unpainted, hidden by tall trees . . . his mother and father might be shabby—dishonest—crippled—dead." (150)

Combining the girl's inner experience with her observation, the woman weaves together four arrested points in time past—the frame-forced scene on the beach, the nosebleed, the wrist-touching incident, and the boy's imaginary home life. Together these produced tension in the girl's "dual life," belying the quiet lakeside environment. As mentioned earlier, the woman recognizes the simultaneous nature of the dream she could invoke and the appearance of the bathers along with the inability to distinguish "which was more real" (151). It is unclear whether or not the girl going through the awakening recognized this synchronicity.

The exterior configurative action begins with the arrival of the intruders. Like Jamey in "A Curtain of Green" and the young stranger in "A Key," the family of bathers occupied the landscape and their presence caused the girl's inner tension to climax. Unlike the other two stories, where Jamey and the young stranger are already members of the photographic scene, these interlopers came suddenly into the girl's view. Like the nosebleed, they were unannounced, repellant, and disturbing to the girl. These two incidents, the nosebleed and the bathers' appearance, connect the two levels of configuration and the dual phenomena of recall and recognition.

How the family arrived on the beach, “so close to me,” is a mystery the woman ponders. “Perhaps I fell asleep, and they came out then” (151). Regardless, they activated the girl’s “dual role” of “observer and dreamer,” causing two sequences to appear side by side: the dreamy girl on the beach in self-absorbed, self-imposed isolation on one side, her perceptions of the “group of loud, squirming, ill-assorted people who seemed thrown together only by the most confused accident” on the other (152). She calls the bathers “brown and roughened, but not foreigners.” Their raucous hilarity and its intrusion on her isolation struck her with astonishment and dismay. That they inhabited the same frame with her special daydream caused a sensual confrontation. In her heightened state between naïve childhood and aroused sensibility, she could not ignore their very physical vitality.

The setting in a public park, with the characters clothed in “old and faded” swimsuits “which did not hide either the energy or the fatigue of their bodies,” accentuated the girl’s heightened sexual feelings that, until that point, were idealized fantasy. The harshness of human physicality came to the forefront. There were two boys at different stages of development, a man and woman, and a female whose age approximated that of the observer. Filtered through her sensitive and unwilling awareness, the family’s antics seemed angry, violent, and cruel. Auditory phenomena bestowed a nightmarish quality as well: “A slow repetitious sound I had been hearing for a long time unconsciously, I identified as a continuous laugh which came through the motionless open pouched mouth of the woman.” Furthermore, there were “moans

and frantic squeals” along with “the thud and fat impact of all their ugly bodies upon one another.” (152-53)

While the boys ran and chased one another, the man, woman, and “younger girl” lounged in “leglike confusion,” and the woman’s body became at one with the sand, arousing revulsion in the young observer. The man laid on his side, his “relaxed eyes . . . squinted with faint amusement” and scooped the sand around the older woman’s legs. Fatty tissue hung from various body parts “like an arrested earthslide” and her loose skin was “unnaturally white.” Her bathing suit had “no relation to the shape of her body.” She was a mother-earth figure, with breasts like pears and legs like bulwarks.

As the daydreaming girl witnessed this scene, her angry counterpart on the beach watched from a separate vantage point—one of greater proximity and even intimacy. She was “curled tensely upon herself,” wearing “a bright green bathing suit like a bottle from which she might . . . burst in a rage of churning smoke.” The observer remembers, “I could feel the genie-like rage in her narrowed figure as she seemed both to crawl and to lie still” (152-153). The girl in green resembled a larva emerging from the cocoon during metamorphosis; her appearance reflected the observer’s own inner birthing process about to take place. It was not a joyous birth, however, but one riddled with youthful rage.

Peering anxiously from her cool and controlled interior world, the dreamer entered the Weltyan “knothole . . . of alienation” (ES, 10). The disgust she felt at the antics of these people echoed the concerns that surfaced at the sight of the nosebleed.

Her identification with the girl in green complicated matters; that girl's anger represented a tension that she couldn't understand or even acknowledge. In marked contrast to visions of her placid, self-contained beloved, the boys' crassness assaulted her sensibilities with wildness and male violence. It seemed odd that she was so fixated on them. The woman says, "I began to comprehend a progression, a circle of answers, which they were flinging toward one another . . . in the confusion of vulgarity and hatred which twined among them." Their impassioned and habitual activity was like a "wreath of steam rising from the wet sand" (154). In this progression of scenes, sexual feelings that the girl struggled to suppress rose to the surface—crass, obscene, and incomprehensible; she is repulsed, yet her gaze remained fixed on the family.

Next, she experienced a rough initiation. The man poured sand between the woman's breasts, and the family members laughed at her as it hung "brown and shapeless." This action caused the angry girl in green to escape from her cocoon at last, "her stiff, cramped legs jumping and tottering." The emergence "flung her to her feet and tossed her about the beach." The boys pointed and howled, and the man smiled and gazed about "carelessly." In doing so, he made eye contact with the observing girl: "He even looked at me, and included me." She found herself staring back at him, even though she was angrily fighting this response. She condemns them all for their violation of her privacy: "I wished that they were all dead." (154)

The boorish antics of the family continued to evoke unbidden visions of strange erotic dances. The girl in green, unrestrained, "suddenly whirled all the way around . . . reached rigid arms toward the screaming children and joined them in a senseless chase."

The larger boy jumped onto a bench that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Enthroned atop this perch, he called to the others, who laughed at him. He jumped from the bench, “heavy and ridiculous,” and fell “exaggeratedly” into the sand. He pointed and screamed at the fat woman, who was then leaning over the man. In response, the angry girl, full of energy but still moving awkwardly, ran aggressively toward the bench “as though she would destroy it,” then “dragged herself through the air” and jumped over it with “a fierceness that took my breath away.” The smaller boy came flying out of the water to “dig his fingers into her side, in mixed congratulation and derision.” She responded by pushing him down “angrily” (155). Their antics mimicked male-female conflict.

The daydreaming girl, awakened by harsh reality, had crossed over into a condition of both child and woman. The woman-narrator here reports on the metamorphosis that took place. She struggled to confine the family to a separate frame and retreat back to her inner daydream by pressing her eyes shut, but the voices from the beach continued to assault her. She discovered that she had lost her ability to conjure up the daydream at will. She could feel the “shudder of my wish shaking the darkness” and “the heavy weight of sweetness,” but the image had disappeared. She fought to find her familiar story and discovered that it had vanished; it left her when the man made eye contact and “included” her in the bawdy symphony. “I did not know, any longer, the meaning of my happiness” she says, referring to the memory of the incident on the stair and the feelings that accompanied it (156). The banal scene had completely eclipsed her inner daydream.

The two-dimensional nature of the configuration becomes even clearer. As the girl fought to stay within her dream world, imaginatively touching the wrist of her beloved, the antics of the bathers assaulted her sensibilities with sights and sounds that ruined her romantic vision and in all likelihood caused her to remember the effusion of the nosebleed and its implications with greater intensity. Although she tried to ignore the sights and sounds, she was compelled to turn her attention to the bathers and behold a critical moment. The fat woman, standing opposite the “smiling” man, bent over “in a condescending way” and pulled down the front of her bathing suit to empty the “lumps of mashed and folded sand.” Her alter-ego, the narrator notes, “felt a peak of horror, as though her breasts themselves had turned to sand, as though they were of no importance at all and she did not care” (156). The sequence ends with this note of sexual dismay.

When the family left, the signs of their presence were etched in the sand. The landscape revealed the figurative “ravages of a storm.” An “unfinished bulwark” remained where “they had piled and shaped the wet sand around their bodies,” as if to signal the beginning of the girl’s own to-be-completed sexual realization. Just as the motions of the girl in green echoed her metamorphosis, the swirled left a mark in her psyche, an etching that represented the turmoil of maturation.

Through the young dreamer’s eyes and within the recollection of the woman-narrator, the bathers appear as in a Dali painting, surreal and alarming. She may even have identified them in this way with herself, through her artistic vision. But as Carol Johnston points out, the double voice results in a conundrum: “We must pull back and ask ourselves, ‘Which narrator feels this way; is it the young girl sitting on the beach, or

the adult who is telling us of the memory of sitting on the beach?” (Johnston, 57). The adult ultimately defines the movement and outcome of the configuration; it is not clear that the girl was even aware of the relationship between the dream and the bathers as it was happening. “The truth is that we shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it,” writes Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory*. “Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day” (135). The woman narrator, through recollection, brings the full meaning of the girl’s experience into a fuller and clearer vision. She recognizes that it had an effect on her then that carries into the present.

The girl turned her scrutiny elsewhere on the beachscape and viewed “the small worn white pavilion” from the opening frame—an icon that she identified with the familiar, simple purity from the past, a visual entity that she could focus upon to make her life feel safe, secure, predictable. “I felt pity suddenly overtake me,” she remembers, “and I burst into tears” (157). The adult realizes that her sorrow came from her inability to go back to childhood. The innocence and ignorance of the child are gone. The violence and attraction-repulsion of sexuality, mortality, and impending maturity brought her face-to-face with a new world of possibilities, not all of which were pleasant or escapable.

“That was my last morning on the beach,” recalls the woman. She recognizes that witnessing the scene altered her life. It is the type of memory that Bergson called habit-memory, something that doesn’t remain in the past but becomes “part of my

present, exactly like my habit of walking or of writing; it is lived and acted, rather than represented.” The habit referred to here is psychological rather than physical. The memory “no longer *represents* our past to us, it *acts* it; and if it still deserves the name of memory, it is not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment” (Bergson, 81-82).

“A Memory” creatively documents the way in which images and impressions define the psyche. Having occurred at the opportune moment, the arresting beach scene and the feelings it produced in the girl shaped the woman she has become. With the bathers gone, the girl could again enter her dream world, but it is not the same world, and she would never see it in quite the same way.

Following the sorrowful episode, the girl returned to the comforting essence of her daydream. In the refiguration stage of this memory, she was already feeling the change. She focused not on the past, but instead on the future, conjuring up stories about her beloved. She recreated the same image of him, but he had become totally inaccessible. She imagined returning to school “with this hour on the beach accompanying my recovered dream and added to my love.” She envisioned the boy coming into the room. He would be staring back, but not like the man on the beach stared back—in fact, not even staring *at* her: “his unconscious eyes looking beyond me and out the window.” She has changed, but he has not and cannot—he is imprisoned in her imagination. In this final photograph, the boy is an image in aspic, “solitary and unprotected . . . speechless and innocent.” (157)

CHAPTER V

“SENSITIVE ENOUGH”

To say that woman is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances.

Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

On the surface, the three very different stories we have discussed seem unrelated, but all three have these elements in common: 1) highly visual, photographic representations that join the three narrative stages together, 2) an enigmatic coda that involves a minor character, and 3) an insight into the responses of female figures in defining circumstances.

First, the enduring photographic images provide a backdrop for the mimetic action. In “A Curtain of Green,” Mrs. Larkin is seen in the prefiguration from above, working in her overgrown garden. Thinking of the past, she recalls a memory of the tree falling on her husband as she herself “gaily turn[s] her head,” not knowing it is happening (213). During the configuration, she and Jamey are in two different areas of the garden, working individually; then she stands over him, threatening the boy with a raised hoe; next he stands over her she lies prostrate in the flowers with rain falling softly upon her. The refigurative action concludes with a very excited Jamey rushing off.

Albert and Ellie Morgan stay in place throughout the stages of “The Key” while the scene around them changes. The station is full of people awaiting the train in the prefiguration; in the configuration, the crowd thins out. The deaf-mutes call attention to themselves through signing; the young stranger shuttles back and forth to them and away, and the trainman comes in with a lantern that lights the scene. Albert’s countenance and body language reveal undue excitement as he picks up a magic key, and a reticent spirit that is both shy and selfish as he hides the key later. Ellie receives her special key at a time when a newfound courage glows from her face. Other images include the locomotive poster on the wall and the Niagara Falls picture. In the climax of the story, Albert’s fear of pursuing the dream shows in his face, just as strength and courage emanate from Ellie’s in the light of the lantern. In this picture, she looks directly into the light, as if facing the challenge, while Albert’s eyes have filmed over. Then, the refiguration leaves us with the young stranger lighting a cigarette and departing the station.

The prefiguration in “A Memory” features a girl lying on the beach and holding her fingers to her eyes to frame the landscape. The images in her mind’s eye are of a boy’s nosebleed in class, a wrist-brushing incident with him on the school stairs, and pictures of his imagined danger in a slovenly home. The configuration is filled with a procession of vivid pictures of the mother earth, the genie-like girl in a green bathing suit, and the rest of the coarse and vulgar family in various poses. At the refiguration, however, there is only the solitary, beloved boy.

At the end of all three stories, the perspective switches; instead of offering an easy resolution, these codas focus upon a minor figure. Jamey jumps “nimble to his feet and ran out of the garden” (219). The young stranger goes out “abruptly into the night,” feeling his action was useless and despising it (73). The beloved young boy of “A Memory” is a vision standing in a classroom, staring blankly out the window. These intriguing endings point to the difficulty of educing meaning from detached circumstances. Rebecca Chalmers comments on Welty’s second collection, *A Wide Net*, which appears to apply to the trio from *A Curtain of Green*: “These texts seem so experimental and vexing that, in the process to discover meaning, readers may well become the subject of the experiment.” (Chalmers, n.p.)

Looking at a few of the other stories in the collection, we can see that Welty’s penchant for such endings extends to those as well. In “The Hitch-Hikers,” Harris bestows the dead man’s guitar on “a little colored boy”—another minor figure whose appearance concludes the action (146). At the end of “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” it is unclear whether or not Lily is on the train; some people think she is and others think she isn’t. “Clytie” concludes not with her death, but with Old Lethy, a minor character, who finds her body sticking up out of a barrel. Much like in “They Key” and “A Curtain of Green,” others end with a distinctly abrupt departure. Billy Boy, a minor annoyance in “Petified Man,” has the final say in the story as he stomps defiantly “through the group of wild-haired ladies” and goes out the salon door (55). Marian escapes on the “rocketing” bus at the end of “A Visit of Charity” (230). Other departures signal endings, but not as abruptly, such as when Phoenix walks out of the

doctor's office and down the stairs in "A Worn Path" or the policeman escorts Howard from the scene in "Flowers for Marjorie."

All of these stories end on a strikingly visual note and are clearly informed by Welty's propensity for the stop-action photograph. As Howard and the policeman leave and roses fall from Howard's fingers, "the little girls [run] stealthily up and put them in their hair" (208). Clytie's "poor ladylike black-stockinged legs [are] upended and [hang] apart like a pair of tongs" (178). The final image from "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" is "a straw hat . . . thrown into the telephone wires" (20).

Carol Ann Johnston proposes an angle for viewing these stories and the reader's relationship to them. "Welty's stories are more like stops on the way to somewhere; when we encounter them, we walk into them as if they were places unto themselves and turn slowly, taking in all sides" (15). We become what Welty calls the "privileged observer" (OWB, 23); when a story ends, so does our privilege. We do not learn whether or not the dreamy girl on the beach ever becomes acquainted with the blond boy. We will never know whether Albert and Ellie get on the next train or go back home. Was the young stranger trying to help them, and why? Will he come back? As readers, we have no clue. Furthermore, we may be reasonably sure that Mrs. Larkin is still alive, but we don't know if she's able to get up, and whether or not Jamey ran to get help or merely escaped. If the story is the stop on the way, its ending is the souvenir snapshot that concludes our visit, and it does not provide meaning or closure. The final image is the back page of the photo album, the last in a stack of pictures we are viewing as someone shares thoughts about them. Nothing actually "happens" at the story's end.

Just as a photograph is framed, displayed, presented, and talked about, but never changes, the images in these stories go only so far. The stop-action narrative method prevents further speculation.

However, the picturesque postscripts do serve to unify the otherwise diverse stories in the collection. A comprehensive factor in the acting is the theme of emergent womanhood. At the heels of first-wave feminism, which culminated in the United States in 1933 when equality in all rights was ratified, the 1930s were a time when women's individuality earned greater recognition and inspired fuller examination (De Beauvoir, 125). Without direct reference to political and social norms, these personae each offer a study that examines the female psyche, taking a focused look to examine the longings of the heart.

For example, Mrs. Larkin presents a portrait of a grieving, lonely, and isolated widow. Her sadness becomes superlative, forcing her into the state of an automaton. What could make her so, other than an emptiness she cannot fill? She is most likely a victim of the feminine mystique described decades later by Betty Friedan: "a woman would say, 'I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete.' Or she would say, 'I feel as if I don't exist'" (Friedan, 20). "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society," writes Simone De Beauvoir, "most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being" (De Beauvoir, 425). Without Mr. Larkin, she confronts a very perplexing situation: having found her identity through husband and marriage, she belongs to the last category; she is quite lost. If she was ever interested in social life, we have no way of knowing. She responds to her predicament by returning each

day to the very place where she was when the chinaberry tree fell and killed her husband. She works herself to exhaustion senselessly.

On the day in question, the rage at her incompleteness rises to the surface and threatens to drive her to murder. As that anger escalates, her buried inner self finally emerges, and questions overtake her mind: “Was it not possible to compensate? to punish? to protest?” Hoe in hand, she wants to strike out at nature and its ability to kill, that “curtain of green” around her. She focuses instead on “small, close sounds” and “coolness” and “listened to the rain falling. It was so gentle.” Her feminine spirit gives in to nature’s gentle rhythms. “It has come,” she thought. It seemed that she was referring to the rain, but something else had arrived—an unwitting acceptance of her plight (217-219).

Ellie Morgan’s story, on the other hand, depicts the state of “undauntedly wondering, unsatisfied, waiting for the future” that plagues her as a woman who is married, yet lonely (71). “Loneliness is never more cruel than when it is felt in close propinquity with someone who has ceased to communicate,” writes Germaine Greer. “Many a housewife staring at the back of her husband’s newspaper . . . is lonelier than any spinster” (Greer, 274-275).

Ellie’s deafness imparts to her a deep “suspicion of the whole outside world,” so she focuses all her efforts on building a connection to her husband, even going so far as to knit him into a “home-made” specimen (57, 66). She regards the condition of her marriage as more than mere emptiness (68). According to Carol Gilligan, “women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in

terms of their ability to care.” Ellie, a product of this tendency and a woman of determination, focuses her efforts on the one relationship over which she has influence. She plays the role of “nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of [the relationship] on which she in turn relies” (Gilligan, 17). Her “anxious, hovering body could wrap him softly as a cradle” (68).

Albert and Ellie personify Gilligan’s male and female polarization: “masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment,” and each is threatened by their polar opposite (Gilligan, 8). Ellie “must worry about it, talk about it” when she feels disconnected from Albert, who shrinks away from anything other than a mundane interchange (68). When he holds the key close, his actions say, “I can’t share my innermost self with you.”

By the end of “The Key,” Ellie has realized that in spite of working her whole life, missing the train, and focusing on a hope that was unfulfilled, she does not need to continue pursuing union with Albert. She glances at the male outsider but ignores any prospect of magical intervention. She emerges strong and brave—her courage even “terrifying”—not avoiding the light but staring directly into it (70-73). Then, to Ellie, the key—also representing her innermost self—is bestowed upon her. She has finally earned the right or privilege to be autonomous.

The female portrait in “A Memory” is a complex one. The woman clearly remembers her feelings as a maturing girl, as explained in *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir: “The girl hardly connects . . . [bodily] enjoyments with her womanly destiny [. . . and] now she feels herself shot through with confused emotions in which

she does not even recognize herself” (De Beauvoir, 318). She also “attaches meaning to the disturbances of her flesh,” such as the wrist-brushing incident, but “her part is to await, to want . . . she scents danger in her alienated flesh.” She is “dedicated to ‘purity’ and ‘innocence’ just when she is discovering in herself and all around her the mysterious stirrings of life and sex.” Furthermore, the “young girl would rid herself of her mother’s yoke, but she feels also a keen need of her protection” (De Beauvoir, 318-322).

During the narration, the remembering woman pauses only on a few occasions to remark in the present in an objective fashion, but it is enough to remind us that she is there. She looks back to reflect on the development of her identity that began with emergence from the cocoon. Her psyche, now fully developed in the narrative present, can realize the full significance of the “hour on the beach.” Betty Friedan writes, “The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity” (Friedan, 71). To counter this, De Beauvoir promotes a healthy narcissism: “all her life the woman is to find the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification.” By revisiting a significant episode of her youth and recalling the powerful struggles of obsession and sensual assault, the woman reaches a healthy self-integration as well. She will not fall into the tragic woman trap mentioned by De Beauvoir, wherein women disconnect from their past; having “quietly buried certain episodes of childhood or youth which have had great importance in their lives.” (de Beauvoir, 634)

Looking only as far as another story from *A Curtain of Green*, we find the most extreme example of the Welty woman who witlessly follows her own emptiness and tragic lack of identity until it leads to her death by suicide. The iconic Clytie, presumably a simple-minded old maid, watches faces and thinks about them as “the most profound, the most moving sight in the whole world” (163). She discovers that her troublesome family’s “faces . . . had come pushing in between, long ago, to hide some face that had looked back at her. And now it was hard to remember the way it looked” (168). Finally, she looks into the rain barrel and sees “the face she had been looking for, and from which she had been separated.” She at long last beholds her own visage. At the sound of her sister’s voice, which threatens once again to come between her and the identity she seeks, she pushes herself into the water, becoming one with her reflection in the mirrored surface and drowning in the process.

Thankfully, the three heroines in the chosen stories—the married woman, the widow, and the girl—do not end up like Clytie, but rather find the means to cope with their life situations. In doing so, they and other female characters represent the changing role of women during this time period without being openly feminist examples of it.

If we look back to the preface to her snapshot collection, *One Time One Place*, we find that Welty sought to portray the “dignity and self-respect” of her subjects regardless of their sex, age, skin color, or social status (OTOP, 8). She does the same thing in her earliest narratives by empathetically bringing a shared human experience to

life. In this way, her stories are indeed “sensitive enough,” to catch the “transient moment,” much like an engaging photograph (Cole, 30).

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Barbara Coots earned her B.A. in English in 1975 from U. T. Arlington. Following a long-standing career with American Airlines, she returned to U.T. Arlington to complete her M.A. in English. A professional writer and editor, she is currently a member of the curriculum development staff of the American College of Education.