

Natchez Trace, this uncle was coming to be near Great-Great-Grandfather (14). Does she mean for him to be Great-Great-Grandfather's brother? If so, a third "great" needs adding. Moreover, as Welty tells us, Great-Great-Grandfather Fairchild was also named George.

² Tempe says she is the "oldest sister" (106); Jim Allen is "next to Denis" (39) and will be 44 in October (110). One comment suggests that Denis may be oldest child as well as oldest boy (67), but if he is, and Jim Allen is next to him, then how can Tempe be the oldest sister? Primrose is next to George, the youngest, and was seven years old when her mother died (39). Welty offers no hint as to the ages or birth order of Rowena, Annie Laurie, and Battle.

³ Denis, a married man by 1917, in his late thirties and with a child, seems an unlikely World War I soldier, but Welty clearly portrays him as such. He exemplifies a romanticism and a recklessness in taking on such a role, which no draft board would have demanded of him. In the character of Denis, Welty portrays a familiar type that emerged in the twenties—a beloved brother, the most talented, the most cherished, the most promising, cut off in the World War. Such a death, of course, amplifies all the superlatives repeated about the brother. In Denis and George, Welty also extends her narrative reach from the Mexican War (where Great-Great-Uncle Denis died) through the Civil War to the Great War. Her definition of the past is by no means focused on the Civil War.



Welty with a bouquet of roses at Harvard University for the inaugural Massey Lectures in American Civilization, 1983. Photo courtesy of the Harvard University Archives.

"The treasure most dearly regarded by me": Eudora Welty's Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization

Carol Ann Johnston
Martha Porter Sellers Chair of Rhetoric
& the English Language
Dickinson College Department of English
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

I had almost finished my second year in graduate school (1983) when I heard that Eudora Welty would give the first annual Massey Lectures in American Civilization at Harvard University. As a displaced Texan from a very

small town, my peace with Harvard was shaky. I was homesick for the South, for the breath of emotional openness one can feel even from a stranger in the grocery store, and for the rhythms of southern speech. My first day in Cambridge, the clerk at Out of Town News had refused to sell me a *Boston Globe*—then 35 cents—throwing my five-dollar bill back at me in disgust because I first hadn't understood from his South Boston r's that he wanted correct change and then had nothing

smaller. Hoping for some kind of respite from the struggle to understand and from everyday aggression, I attended Welty's lectures each afternoon for three days, in Longfellow Hall, in the Radcliffe section of campus.

Longfellow Hall is wider than it is long, with large windows in the back. An uncharacteristically warm spring allowed the windows to be opened, and the hall was full enough that many stood outside and leaned in on the window ledges to hear Welty speak about memory, time, and about listening itself. She wore a striking silk dress, deep navy and white. After each lecture, Welty stood next to the podium on the raised platform, with the Americanist Daniel Aaron by her side, and spoke with every person in line, signing books until the hall had emptied. As I listened to her lectures and observed her speaking with her admirers, I did

feel that familiar breath of emotional openness, and it became my *idée fixe* to meet her while she was in Cambridge. I did not, in fact, meet her then, but when I introduced myself to Welty at her home on Pinehurst Street in the mid-nineties, I did have several tales of attempted meetings in Cambridge to tell her.

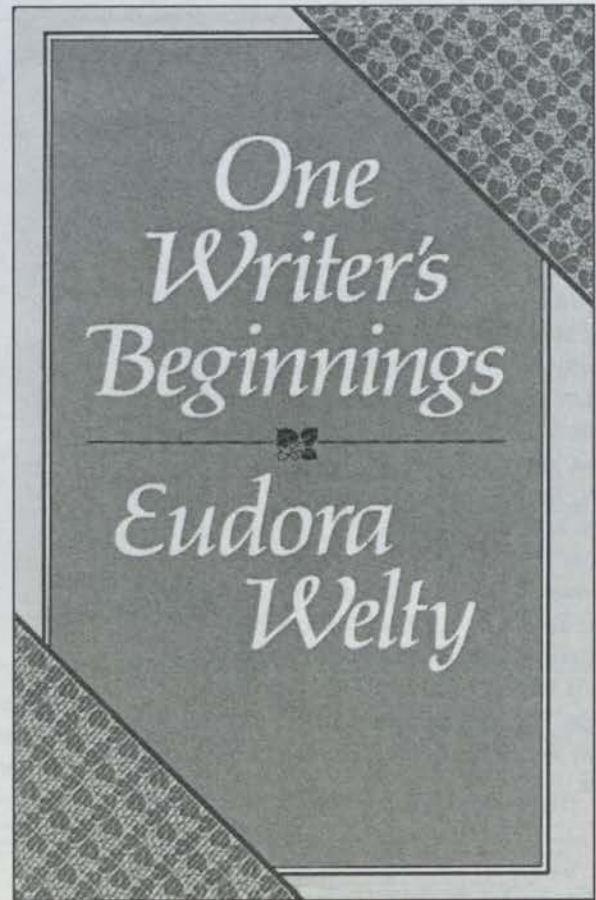
My one conversation with Welty at her house in Jackson has its own zany quality. I was writing a book on her short fiction, and my editor wanted an interview for the book. I penned a careful letter to Welty, explaining my purpose and suggesting I come to Jackson at her convenience. When she didn't reply, I sent several more copies of the letter by registered mail. She still did not reply. Unsure of what to do and happening to be in Cambridge, I visited Daniel Aaron, who had invited Welty to give the Massey Lectures at Harvard. "Oh," he said, "She must be

quite old.” (Prof. Aaron himself was in his eighties, near Welty’s age, still biking to work and playing tennis.) “She probably doesn’t read her mail. Why don’t you just go down to Jackson and show up at her house?” He pulled out a card and gave me her address. It was so crazy I thought it just might work. My undergraduate research assistant, Emily Wylie, and I did just that. We arrived at Welty’s house early one June morning, greeted by her housekeeper. No, she wasn’t in, but we could leave a note and return in the afternoon.

At 4:00, I knocked on the door, onto which Welty had affixed a Clinton/Gore bumper sticker. No answer. I turned to leave, while Emily looked in the window and saw Welty gesturing to us, as her motorized chair boosted her to a standing position. We went inside, and I explained that, as strange as it might seem, Daniel Aaron had suggested that we just drop in. I added that I knew Prof. Aaron from having attended her Massey Lectures. Her eyes lit up and then lowered. She had been anxious about going to Harvard, she said with some shyness; she had not known whether she had anything to say to Harvard men. Then, more sharply, she added that she had not known if all those East Coast men *could* hear or *would* hear what she did have to say. But, she yielded, she had been grateful to Dan for inviting her, and for giving her the freedom and the subject. She had learned a lot from writing the lectures: she never would have written about the “naked eye” without the assignment.¹

Our conversation that afternoon covered the terrain I found fascinating in Welty’s work—poetry, lyricism, visual framing. The character of her responses to our questions followed the pattern she set initially: a few shy remarks, punctuated with some very pointed, and at times droll, observations. An Anne Tyler manuscript lay in her lap—*Ladder of Years*—which she was reading and marking with pencil, so we talked about Tyler and how much Welty loved her work. I knew that Seamus Heaney sent her birthday cards, since they share the same birthday, and she affirmed that she loved his poetry, as she loved Yeats’s poetry. A book by Brian Friel was on the table, along with *The Hidden Life of Dogs*. Welty was most interested in talking about the Jefferson commemorative coin on the table, beneath some books. Jefferson, Welty believed, would dominate any room he walked into, and she told the story of visiting Monticello at night. The caretakers had allowed Welty to stay the night, and at dark, they all took up candles and walked through the entire house, in order to see it as Jefferson had seen it, in the halo of candlelight. She broke out in chill bumps as she told the story.

Welty, of course, would not allow herself to be entirely the center of conversation, and before long, she had turned interlocutor. I did have a few mad stories to tell about tracking her during her visit to Harvard. As I thought back on my escapades during Welty’s residence, I admitted to her rather sheepishly that I could easily have been construed as a stalker. In my defense, several of my fellow graduate students had enabled me, and even had egged me on. One of those, Tom Price, was a student of David Donald, the Southern historian who, along with Daniel Aaron, had invited Welty to give the lectures.



Cover of *One Writer's Beginnings*
(Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984).

Tom, a southerner himself, was that rare graduate student who had a car in Cambridge, so Prof. Donald had asked him to drive Welty around during her stay. Tom had seen the collection of Welty books in my dorm room, and he came to announce his good fortune. “But you’ve never even read Welty,” I said, and shoved my library into his arms. (At the conclusion of Welty’s visit, Tom returned my books, all signed.)

With Tom as my mole, I knew most of Welty’s movements in Cambridge, down to her departure plans. She

was headed to Bar Harbor on some little vomit comet out of Logan Airport to visit a friend. Pride prevented me from asking Tom if I could ride around with him and just—what?—absorb Welty's aura. I'd told myself that hearing the lectures would be great enough, but as anyone who has met Welty knows, her charisma led an audience to believe either that they knew her already or must get to know her as soon as possible. After the first lecture, I told my friends Bryan Washington and Martin Melaver that it would be great to meet her. They told me that I should. Just call her up and invite her to coffee. No, I didn't think I could do that; she was busy, and lots of people were probably bothering her....

Bryan interrupted with a story he had heard in seminar. William Faulkner stayed for an extended period at Harvard—a semester, perhaps—and legend held that he spent lots of time sitting in the Yard, and out by the Charles River, alone. Later, when someone asked how he fared at Harvard, he said that he was very lonely. No one would speak with him. The story ends with the sad twist: everyone at Harvard had thought he wanted to be left alone, and had rigorously protected his solitude and privacy.

Tom Price had Welty's phone number. But for some reason, we decided to try to see Welty in person, in her room at the Faculty Club, rather than call. Martin, Bryan, and I made it past the desk clerk, and we crept down the hallway to what we thought was her room. Who knows if it was; no one was in. We snuck out past the desk again, and the next morning I called Welty in her room. Surprisingly, I got through, and Welty listened carefully to my proposal that we have tea. I still feel a surge of warmth when I think about her reply: she hadn't yet finished writing her lecture for the next afternoon. I should call around ten the next morning, and if she had finished by then, we could have tea. I had put off writing my final essays that term—how could I work on them when I was trailing Welty all over Cambridge?—and I'd never felt so ennobled in my negligence. Even in the thrall of graduate student narcissism, however, I recognized the qualitative difference between our predicaments. When I called the next morning Welty had not completed her lecture.

I wasn't defeated, yet. On her last day in Cambridge, Welty was to attend a reception in her honor in the faculty club. Or so Tom had told me. Receptions were held in the lobby of the building and were easy to crash. Meeting Welty had now become a quest. We showed up half an hour early, sitting in plush chairs along the walls. Waiters streamed in with food and drink while a small crowd straggled in. I fidgeted. Martin gazed at the crowd. "This isn't right," Martin said; I assumed he'd gotten religion

about our interloping. "No," he said, "look at the crowd." I looked. Bryan looked. So? "All women," he said, "no men in the room." Well, I rationalized, Welty *is* after all a woman writer. Martin was skeptical. Gloria Steinem walked in, surrounded by acolytes.

Welty listened to this last anecdote with particular seriousness. She commented that it was a good thing that Steinem didn't know that she had been mistaken for her. And, she added, it was a good thing that I had not mistaken *her* for Gloria Steinem.

Harvard's simultaneous hosting of Welty and Steinem becomes both more strange and more apt as I reflect upon this synchronicity. Women were scarce as hen's teeth on Harvard's faculty in 1983 and were very recent additions to Harvard's undergraduate population. The male faculty who invited Welty to lecture may have viewed her as a "safe" role model for their female students—someone to counteract the radical presence of speakers such as Steinem and (a year or so later) Betty Freidan, who held a residency. Of course, no one would mistake Welty for Steinem then or now. Welty's work in some ways is more radical than that of the first wave of American feminists, in the same way that a fifth column can be more effective in the long run than a marching battalion. In Welty's world, girls imagine themselves as boys, initiate sex, enjoy the sight of full frontal male nudity; women identify rapists for the police, discuss openly how to thwart and control male sexual advance, revel in their sexual activity. The argument over the effectiveness of the crusade against that of representation seems insoluble, but even Gloria Steinem is now married.

Whether or not Professors Aaron, Donald, and their colleagues intended it, symbolically Welty's status as the first Massey lecturer at Harvard initiated a student-led transfer of literature by southern women writers onto the unwritten list of possible topics for honors theses and even doctoral dissertations. Graduates and undergraduates alike spoke of her lectures long after she delivered them, and I would not be surprised to hear that the entire first run of *One Writer's Beginnings* sold out in the Harvard Square bookstores within weeks after its publication. I picked up my copy the day it arrived. But change in curriculum at traditional institutions often occurs as rapidly and gracefully as an elephant's mastery of ballet. During my doctoral oral examinations, for which no reading list existed, my committee asked me to discuss Faulkner's novels. When I sought to make a case for Welty instead, the examiner noted, "Nobody in this room believes that Welty is a writer of Faulkner's caliber." I talked about Faulkner. After I began to teach, two of my honors students wrote theses on Welty exclusively, and

several included Welty in broader cultural studies. Welty's lectures caused a stir among undergraduates well beyond my purview; the Harvard archives list seven undergraduate theses on Welty between 1984 and 1994, none before or after. Thus far one Harvard graduate dissertation (1992) includes an important section on Welty.²

Before Welty's lectures, Southern writing did have a particular place in the Harvard curriculum. One of my first classes in graduate school had been a class in Southern Literature. The professor announced, as she handed out the syllabus, that we would begin with the novels of Faulkner, since he presented the most realistic picture of what living in the South, even in the 1980s, was like. I thought she was kidding, but as I looked around the room as my fellow students gave their names and undergraduate institutions, I realized that this is probably what everyone in the room, including the professor, believed. Before I could introduce myself as being from East Texas, surely casting myself as one of the Snopes's Texas cousins, I left the room. I'd been stung already the first time I'd spoken in another class when everyone had tittered at my nearly Cajun cadence. I had never before been conscious of my accent; the voice I heard in my head when I read and wrote was without regional inflection. William Alfred's Anglo Saxon Seminar convened at the same time one floor up, so I joined the class, hoping that reading Old English aloud might occlude my regionalism.

Hearing in Welty's memoir, that spring one year later, incidents of early travel by car, attending school under a strict school mistress, fascination with cameras and Gramophones and all kinds of new mechanical toys, stories similar to those I'd heard from my own parents and grandparents, I felt that Harvard men—and the few Harvard women—must reconsider how they read and heard a southern story and the assumptions they made about southern life. The now well-known opening of Welty's first lecture, the lyrical description of her parents sharing a duet of the *Merry Widow Waltz*, followed by a detailed description of her father's—and consequently hers and her siblings'—love of mechanical tools, games, and toys, without a doubt represents several of Welty's primary memories of childhood. However, these opening pages also illustrate her brilliant strategy of addressing with her customary forceful indirection her concerns about her

audience. Welty's fear about her reception in the Harvard of 1983 led her to open her lectures emphasizing that part of Southern life in the early twentieth century that embodied her "father's fondest beliefs—in progress, in the future" (*OWB* 5). As she knew intuitively, or from experience, her Harvard audience saw the South, and Southern writers, through the received view of a Faulkner whose work embodied a socially diseased south, obsessed with the past and with a myth of failed aristocracy; depicting a world comprised of poor, depraved white men preying upon others: women, African Americans, the mentally ill, or anyone they found poorer and more depraved than they found themselves.

Naturally, then, Welty shaped her lectures as an antidote to her audience's received views. And naturally, the section following her meditation on machines and progress details the reading she did as a child from her parents' library, one that contained: "the Unabridged Webster, the Columbia Encyclopedia, Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia, the Lincoln Library of Information, ... the Book of Knowledge... [and] the new 1925 edition of the Britannica, which my father, his face always deliberately turned toward the future, was of course disposed to think better than any previous edition" (*OWB* 6). She tells the story of her mother's saving her set of Dickens from a fire, and adds that as a girl her mother had

read "Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson ... *Jane Eyre*, *Trilby*, *The Woman in White*, *Green Mansions*, *King Solomon's Mines*.... In time she absorbed herself in Galsworthy, Edith Wharton, above all ... Thomas Mann of the *Joseph* volumes" (7). Among southern writers, only Mark Twain receives favorable review in this section; *St. Elmo*, the "wildly popular Southern novel" (7), didn't pass muster in the Welty household. Placed in its Harvard context, Welty's emphasis on her broad reading experience as a child of literate parents seems more than merely information about formative influences. She made clear to us that we decidedly were not in the presence of southern decadence and depravation.

One Writer's Beginnings has been criticized by some readers for obfuscating, not illustrating, Welty's influences.³ Some readers view the lectures as they view many of her other essays and interviews, as Welty's gaudy perfume, something she put on to throw readers off the scent



Mary Godolphin's *Sanford and Merton in Words of One Syllable* adapted from Thomas Day's *Sanford and Merton*.

of the “real” trials of living as a woman in the “old south.” Reading the lectures within their context, however, suggests otherwise. Having heard these lectures, and having tried to find my place in Harvard as a southerner and a woman, I see these lectures as Welty’s attempt to offer a corrective to what she believed her reception in Cambridge would be. Neither a wallower in nor an inventor of myths of the depraved southern past, and neither a southern belle nor a Gloria Steinem, Welty represented herself as a traditional intellectual, and depicted the kinds of intellectual influences that touched her in her innocent childhood. The darker facets of that childhood surface in the lectures—her mother’s tendency to smother her at times, for instance, and to distort her own problems to protect the young Eudora—but an emphasis on these aspects would have played into the hands of her audience’s expectations. Welty’s work transcends expectations in many ways, especially in the envisioning of a redefinition of gender roles in *The Golden Apples*, and once we readers catch up to her vision, a rereading of *One Writer’s Beginnings* may focus upon the extraordinary juxtapositions that yield her vision.

One such juxtaposition is embodied in her father’s most cherished book, Thomas Day’s *Sanford and Merton*, a moralizing work often associated with the Bluestocking Circle, a group of female intellectuals and poets writing during the Romantic period. As Welty is careful to point out, while the title page to her father’s copy is missing, his version actually is an adaptation of Day’s work into monosyllabic form by Mary Godolphin: *Sanford and Merton in Words of One Syllable*.

Godolphin wrote a series of adaptations of classics into monosyllables⁴—transforming *Pilgrim’s Progress* must have been a particularly arduous descent into hell—and Welty absorbed the lessons represented by her father’s cherishing this book. This one book he kept from his childhood signifies the thing he loved, the solving of a difficult puzzle, in this case the puzzle of rendering a text into single syllables. Welty’s absorption of her father’s values dominates the first part of the lectures, and his particular valuing of Godolphin’s book irradiates Welty’s lectures and her work as a whole. A writer must solve difficult puzzles in language, and that writer—that master of puzzles—certainly can be a woman. “Do what you ought, come what may,” Day admonishes the Welty clan in Godolphin’s monosyllables. In her Harvard lectures, as in her work as a whole, Welty does what she ought—what she must—do.

Notes

¹ At the time we spoke with Welty, I felt it rude and unfair to turn the tape recorder on without having given her the chance to review questions in advance of our visit. Instead, Emily and I returned to our bed-and-breakfast and regurgitated what we remembered of our conversation into the tape recorder.

² The archives list only undergraduate theses that receive the grade of magna or summa cum laude, so the actual number is larger. Allison Pingree’s dissertation is entitled “‘It’s two that makes the trouble’: figures of replication in the fiction of Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers” (1992).

³ Carolyn Heilbrun epitomizes this reading of *One Writer’s Beginnings* in her introduction to *Writing a Woman’s Life*: “Welty, living in our own time, has camouflaged herself.... She wishes to keep meddling hands off the life. To her, this is the only proper behavior for the Mississippi lady she so proudly is” (13–15). Heilbrun’s reading is hasty and ill conceived.

⁴ Also known as Lucy Aiken (1781–1864), Godolphin adapted *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Pilgrim’s Progress*; wrote a novel, *Lorimer*; and penned several “memoirs” of English courts. She may have been the love child of William Congreve, who left her his estate. See <http://gutenberg.net/> for a sample of her work.

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Delta Wedding and the Many Faces of “Abdul The Bulbul Amir”

Jim Shimkus, Georgia State University

As Michael Kreyling has pointed out, music is a “key” to Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding*. All of the songs Welty mentions in the novel serve to establish the atmosphere of plantation life in 1923, as well as draw attention to certain characters and situations. The first song mentioned in the novel is “Abdul the Bulbul Amir,” sung by Laura’s cousins as they whisk her off to Shellmound.