Finding A Voice: Men in Eudora Welty's "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Where is the Voice Coming From"

Isra' Hashim Taher, Ph.D.

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Baghdad

Abstract

The American writer Eudora Welty (1909-2001) is often labeled as a Southern Gothic fiction writer whose most memorable characters are women, though some of them are grotesque and ugly. Her men, on the other hand, appear to be powerless and marginalized. In short stories like "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Where is the Voice Coming From" the protagonists are grotesquely violent, lonely, and searching for recognition. In her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginning* (1983), Welty describes her initiation into the literary world. She divides her book into three sections that respectively carry the titles of "Listening", "Learning to See " and "Finding a Voice". In the first section she realizes that listening to stories told by family, friends, and teachers, is the first thing she needs in order to establish her literary career. In "Learning to See" section she learns, through traveling, new things about her parents. She also discovers her calling and finds her form: the short story. In the final section she describes how she succeeds in expressing herself through art, namely, fiction. In her writing, it seems that Welty has unconsciously employed what I call for the lack of a better term, "the formula of recognition". In "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Where is the Voice Coming From" she variously uses the "listening, learning to see, and finding a voice." The aim of this paper is to investigate how Welty uses this formula in these two least famous among her short stories, where the main male characters fervently try to find a voice.

Eudora Welty's "Flowers for Marjorie" and "Where is the Voice Coming From"

In the nineteen thirties the Great Depression shook the already fragile economic and social landscape of the South. Farm tenants became destitute and homeless; President Roosevelt labeled the region the nation's number one economic problem. Poverty cut across class lines, threatening the middle class as well as those at the bottom of the social order. (1) "Flowers for Marjorie" is set in such an atmosphere. This short story is taken from Welty's first collection, *A Curtain of Green* (1941). It is the only one in the cycle not set in Mississippi. It is set in New York.(2)

Howard and his wife Marjorie used to live in Mississippi before they moved to New York. The effect of the Depression is heavily reflected on them. Howard is unemployed. He has been searching for a job for months but in vain. At the story outset, he goes to the park instead of searching for a job. He is described as shy and passive. He starts cleaning his teeth as he watches people at the park. When he throws the toothpick at the grass it lands as a tent. He is surprised at his neatness and proficiency. Because he is jobless, he thinks he lacks the skills that entitle him to a job. Now he discovers that he still has proficiency and neatness, but he is unemployed. This surprises him and increases his disappointment. It also startles the pigeons. Throwing the toothpick is an outwardly harmless action, but it startles the pigeons just like finding no job was inevitable during the Depression, but it startles Marjorie and angers Howard. Unwilling to join demonstrators gathering at the park to better economic conditions, immediately Howard thinks of his wife and what to say to her after he misses that job opportunity he is supposed to have that day.

The relation between Howard and Marjorie is represented by the unused chair at their apartment. When he reaches home "Nothing was said, and he sat for a while on the couch, his hands spread on his knees. Then, before he would meet her eye, he looked at the chair in the room, which neither one would use, and there lay Marjorie's coat." (p.99). The couple stand at a distance from each other. Their love is paralyzed. She seems to be remote because of her pregnancy. This leaves him lonely and desperate. Discussing her first short story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" (1936) in *One Writer's Beginning*, Welty talks about her "real subject": " 'Death of a Traveling Salesman' opened my eyes. And I had received the shock of having touched for the first time, on my real subject: human relationship."[3]

Howard is disappointed, unemployed, uncared for, and unloved by his wife. He needs his wife's understanding and support. But, instead, she is

concerned with her baby and its future. She does not listen to him. She does not understand his need for love and support at a time like that. He is suffering and she seems to be safe in pregnancy. Therefore, he thinks she should suffer as well.

> But Marjorie sat as undismayed as anyone could ever be, there on the trunk, looking with her head to one side. Her fullness seemed never to have touched his body. Away at his distance, backed against the wall, he regarded her world of sureness and fruitfulness and comfort, grown forever apart, safe and hopeful in pregnancy, as if he thought it strange that this world, too, should suffer. (p.101)

Marjorie fits the pattern of Welty's female ugliness both literally and symbolically. Like other women in *A Curtain of Green* collection, she challenges the ideal of southern white womanhood as idealized and beautiful.[4] Marjorie's ugliness has not only to do with her being pregnant and having a short masculine hair, but also her being emotionally cold and remote. According to Pearl A. McHaney, Welty's characters are thirsty for love and recognition: "Welty's characters…are knocked unconscious by the realization that they are alone, unconnected to any other human being, unloved; are desperate for recognition, for naming, for belonging"[5] In a moment of pure despair and disappointment Howard kills his wife thinking that she is the only thing that has not stopped, "you may not know it, but you're the only thing left in the world that hasn't stopped," (p.101), he says to himself after losing his job, smashing the wall clock and thinking of getting rid of his wife as well.

He is a mentally unbalanced man. Before he murders his wife, he has his own fantasies. He imagines he has snatched the pansy Marjorie got from the park from her hand "and tore its petals off and scattered them on the floor and jumped on them." (p.99), an action that foreshadows the murder of Marjorie, and his child. The three petals of the pansy stand for his family: he himself, Marjorie and the baby. After he argues with Marjorie about his inability to find work, he starts to have a mirage:

> He stopped, and for a moment a look shone in his face, as if he had caught sight of a mirage. Perhaps he could imagine ahead of him some regular and steady division of the day and night, with breakfast appearing in the morning. Then he laughed gently, and moved even further back until he stood against the wall, as far as possible away from Marjorie,

as though she were faithless and strange, allied to other forces. (p.101)

After he has killed his wife, he flees the crime scene. He goes down town. On the subway he finds the word "Nuts" written on the tiles which finally leads him to his psychiatrist.

Earlier when he is on the subway he reads the words "God sees me" written four times on the wall. He also sees advertisements of people in love, smiling and embracing and a beggar who sings "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." This reminds him of Marjorie and he thinks of the need to

talk to someone. He thinks immediately of his psychiatrist. He used to see

her whenever he has had troubles and she used to help him at least by listening to him. However, even she seems to be busy and uncaring, like his own wife. She refuses to talk to him and advises him to go home and get some rest.

> If he could only tell Miss Ferguson everything, everything in his life! Howard was thinking. Then it would come clear, and Miss Ferguson would write a note on a little card and hand it to him, tell him exactly where he could go and what he could do. (p.104)

She was busy and disinterested

> "I got something to tell you", Howard said. He smiled at her
> "Some other time," replied Miss Ferguson over the sound of the keys.
> "I'm busy now. You'd better go home and sleep it off, h'm?" (Ibid)

He goes to a bar where he has a few drinks and thinks of going back home. On his way home, he is stopped by a woman carrying a bouquet of red roses and a key telling him that he is "the ten millionth person to enter Radio City" and he would appear in a radio program tonight. When the woman begins asking him about his name, job, and family he runs away taking the flowers with him. He starts running in the streets as a mad man, "people seemed to melt out of his way. He thought that maybe he was dead, and now in the end everything was afraid of him." (p.105)

When he reaches home he realizes the atrocity of his action . His house is full of Marjorie's blood. "Then Howard knew for a fact that everything had stopped. It was just as he had feared, just as he had dreamed… he had a dream to come true." (p.105). His inner voice tells him that he has done something wrong and he has to do something about it. Now everything has stopped, he learns to see things differently. He goes downstairs and reports his crime to the police. He listens to conscience. The message he reads in the subway "God sees you" rings in his ears.

In "Where is the Voice Coming From", "the recognition formula" is reversed. The story starts with the voice, not the voice of recognition as in Welty's autobiography, but the speaker's inner voice telling about his obscurity and marginality. The story opens with the voice of the unnamed narrator as he relates how he kills Roland Summers, an African-American Civil Rights activist. On June 12, 1963, Medgar Evers, the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Field Secretary for Mississippi was murdered outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi. That same time Welty wrote her short story "Where is the Voice Coming From"[6]

In her autobiography, Welty says she never writes of anger. But, she adds, there is just one story that certainly anger has lit the fuse of. "…All that absorbed me, though it started as outrage, was the necessity I felt for entering into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been alien …to me."[7] When she was asked about her stories set in the 1960s, she said there were many stories written about the South by outsiders, people who did not know.[8] "I thought… whoever the murderer is, I know him: not his identity, but his coming about, in his time and place. That is, I ought to have learned by now, from [living] here, what such a man, intent on such a deed, had going on in his mind."[9]

The story, Welty's only involvement in politics, is a dramatic monologue told in the first person wherein the unnamed speaker unconsciously reveals his subconscious to the reader. From the interior mind of a white, racist assassin comes the answer to the question posed by the title, where is the voice coming from? The prototype of the assassin is Byron de la Beckwith, and the murderer is Medgar Evers known in the story as Roland Summers.[10]

The deterioration of the speaker's material well-being and the socio-political and socio-economic forces that govern his life, unfold as he describes how he commits his crime. He borrows his brother-in-law's track and drives to his victim's house, because he is unable to afford one of

his own; and so, when he arrives there, he is disgusted to find that his victim lives in a house with a garage and that he has "a new white car" parked in "his paved driveway." Besides "the black man's property has thick grass; the white man is envious of that lawn because his place is barren."[11]. He is also trapped by the national politics, the Kennedys, including Caroline who plans to marry James Meredith; by the media, "on TV and in the paper, they don't know but half of it. They know who Roland Summers was without knowing who I am. His face was in front of the public before I got rid of him, and after I got rid of him…and none of me."(p.606); by his uncaring wife, who in contrast to the murderer's wife, "didn't even leave a light burning when …[she] went to bed" ; by his loneliness/aloneness[12]:

> Once, I run away from my home. And there was a ad for me, come to be printed in our county weekly. My mother paid for it. It was from her. It says: "Son: You are not being hunted for anything but to find you." That time, I come on back home.
>
> But people are dead now." (p.607)

The word assassin comes from medieval Latin and from Arabic meaning hashish user, but Roland Summers' assassin is not high on drugs; "he was low on self-esteem, and a sense of justice."[13] Twice he confirms that he kills for his ""own pure-Dissatisfaction" (p.604, p.605). He is poor and uneducated, but he is also frustrated. He is a white man frustrated that a black man appears on his television. " I says to my wife," you can reach and turn it off. You don't have to set and look at a black nigger face no longer than you want to, or listen to what you don't want to hear. It's still a free country." (p.603) He is a white man frustrated that a black man has privileges that he has not. When the narrator returns home, he is received by his wife whose first question is "Didn't the skeeters bite you?" Then they discuss the murder. She underestimates her husband's sense of originality by telling him that a newspaper already proposed assassinating Civil Rights activists. "My wife says, "What? Didn't the skeeters bite you?" She said, "Well, they been asking that-why somebody didn't trouble to load a rifle and get some of these agitators out of Thermopylae. Didn't the fella keep drumming it in, what a good idea? The one that writes a column ever' day?" (p.605) . She continues demeaning his motives and the significance of his crime[14], telling him, "The N. double A.C.P is fixing to send

somebody to Thermopylae. Why couldn't you waited? You might could have got you somebody better." (p.605)

The unnamed speaker compares his victim to a mockingbird, a bird with a very nice and pleasant voice, in an indirect reference to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). The mockingbird of the novel is Tom Robinson, a black man who is wrongly persecuted for raping a white girl in the Alabama of the 1930s. A victim of racial discrimination, he is not accepted as a human being by the community at large just because he is black, he "is little better than an animal in the eyes of the whites."[15] Here Summers is the mockingbird of Thermopylae which is igniting due to the race riots of the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement. The speaker is not redeemed. He ends his story with a song about "down". He wants to avoid persecution for his crime. Unlike Howard's song that brings him back to his conscious, here the song this man sings is a song of defiance and carelessness. He keeps reminding himself of Summers' murder, and probably of his position, "down, down, down"

In "Where is the Voice Coming From" "only hate has voice…morality is silent."[16] The burden of judgment is imposed on the reader. Two years after Welty had published the story, she wrote an essay called "Must the Novelist Crusade?"[17] In this essay, she writes no, the novelist must not crusade. She attributes crusading to politicians and editorialists, those who write in a hurry, for a particular moment in time to persuade their audience to accept their argument and adopt their agendas. For Welty, fiction is just the opposite and therefore, a fiction writer writes differently from a crusader.[18] Crusading, she argues, produces bad fiction; novelists must produce plot, not argument. "The novelist works neither to correct nor to condone, not at all to comfort, but to make what is told alive."[19] "Fiction is chaotic, messy, filled with passion rather than logic. Good fiction ha[s]…to last more than one moment or one campaign, one season. It need[s]… to be universal and ha[s]… truths for all time, for any time."[20]

In 1964, Eudora Welty wrote a children's book called *The Shoe Bird* (1964).[21] *The Shoe Bird* is the story of Arturo, a parrot that works in a shoe store and which has a motto "if you hear it, tell it." He hears that birds might wear shoes. So he tells it to Gloria, the Goose, who in her turn tells it to the Park Pigeon and the Carrier Pigeon. The word spreads. Gloria invites all the birds to an open house at the shoe store during which Arturo gives each bird shoes. Surprisingly, Freddy the Cat arrives on the scene and the birds are burdened by the heavy shoes on their feet. The Phoenix

arrives in time to share some of his wisdom and ultimately they all learn a few lessons.[22] By the end of the story, Arturo changes his motto into "if you hear it, think it over" and realizes, the surprise of his life is when he finds himself learning, instead of repeating.[23] Welty who listened as a child, learned to see as an adolescent and found a voice as an adult, listened and learned from people's stories in the South. She listened to the inner voice of Howard and the unnamed assassin. She learned to see them and give them voice not as hateful men and murderers, but as human beings crashed under the burden of economy, low self-esteem, politics, and loneliness. That is why she does not condemn her characters. In the preface to her *Collected Stories*, she expresses her position towards her characters; " I have been told, both in approval and in accusation, that I seem to love all my characters."[24] In her essay, "Place in Fiction", Welty explains why. She says since mutual understanding in the world being scarce, it is comforting to remember that it is through art that one country can nearly always speak reliably to another.

> Art, though, is never the voice of a country; it is an even more precious thing, the voice of the individual, doing its best to speak, not comfort of any sort, indeed, but truth. And the art that speaks it most unmistakably, most directly, most variously, most fully, is, fiction.[25]

NOTES

[1] Edward L. Ayers and Bradley C. Mittendorf , eds., *The Oxford Book of the American South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.261.

[2] King Adkins, "Eudora Welty's Other Short-Story Cycle: A Reading of *A Curtain of Green*", *South Carolina Review* 42, no.1 [Fall 2009]: p.13.

[3] Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginning* (New York: Warner Books Edition, 1984), p.95.

[4] Sarah Gleeson-White, "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor", *The Southern Literary Journal* 37, no.1[Fall 2003], http://muse. jhu.edu/ journals/sij/summary/v036/36.1gleeson-white.html, accessed December 3, 2013.

[5] Pearl Amelia McHaney," Race, Rights, and Resistance in Southern Literature in the Age of Obama, *American Studies Journal*, no.56 [2012],www.asjournal.org/archive/56/211.html, accessed December 27, 2013.

[6] Daniel Wood, "At a Loss for Words; Subtext, Silence, and Sympathy in 'Where is the Voice Coming From?' ", *Eudora Welty Review* 3 (2011): p.99

[7] Welty, p.4

[8] McHaney .

[9] Wood, p.99.

[10] McHaney

[11] Wood, p.104.

[12] McHaney.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Casey N.Cep, "A Murder in Deep South", *The New Yorker*, July 18, 2013.

[15] Dean Shackleford, "The Female Voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel", *The Mississippi Quarterly* 50, no.1[1996], www.questia.com .

[16] Cep.
[17] Ibid.
[18] McHaney.
[19]Cep.
[20] McHaney.
[21] Cindy Sheffield Michaels, "Welty's Words for Children and Scholars, Too", *Eudora Welty Review* l [Spring 2009]: p.159.

[22]Ibid, p.161.

[23]Ibid, p.163.

[24] Wood , p.99.

[25] McHaney.

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ايصال الصوت: الرجال في قصص يودورا ويلتي"ورود لميرجوري" و" من أين يأتي الصوت"

د.إسراء هاشم طاهر

قسم اللغة الانكليزية/ كلية الآداب/جامعة بغداد

المستخلص

تصنف الكاتبة الأمريكية (يودورا ويلتي) (١٩٠٩-٢٠٠١) على أنها كاتبة للرواية القوطية الجنوبية والتي من ابرز شخصياتها نساء على الرغم من كون بعضهن غريبات وقبيحات بينما يبدو الرجال عاجزين وهامشيين. في قصص قصيرة مثل" ورود لميرجوري" و" من أين يأتي الصوت" تبدو الشخصيات الرئيسية عنيفة ووحيدة وتبحث عن الاعتراف بها. تصف (يودورا ويلتي) في سيرتها الذاتية **بداية كاتب واحد** (١٩٨٣) دخولها العالم الأدبي حيث تقسم كتابها إلى ثلاثة أقسام تحمل تباعا العنوانين "الاستماع" و"تعلم التبصر " و"إيصال الصوت " . تدرك الكاتبة في القسم الأول إن الاستماع إلى قصص العائلة والأصدقاء والمعلمين هو أول ما يلزمها في مهنتها الأدبية. وفي القسم الثاني تتعلم من خلال السفر أشياء جديدة عن والديها وتكتشف أيضا حرفتها وتجد ضالتها بالقصة القصيرة. وفي القسم الثالث تصف نجاحها في التعبير عن نفسها من خلال الفن وبالأخص الرواية. وفي كتاباتها يبدو إن (ويلتي) قد استخدمت ومن غير قصد ما ادعوه "صيغة الإقرار" وذلك لعدم وجود مصطلح أخر. وفي "ورود لميرجوري" و" من أين يأتي الصوت" تستخدم صيغة "الاستماع وتعلم التبصر وإيصال الصوت" بشكل مختلف. إن هدف هذا البحث هو التحقق من كيفية استخدام (ويلتي) لهذه الصيغة في هاتين القصتين القصيرتين الأقل شهرة بين قصصها القصيرة حيث يحاول شخوصها الرجال وبشدة إيصال صوتهم.