

EUDORA WELTY'S STILL AND SILENT LIVES

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Eudora Welty's Still and Silent Lives

Eudora Welty published her first short story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," in 1936 at the age of twenty-six. This story of a lonely traveling man was included in her first collection of short stories, A Curtain of Green and Other Stories, which appeared in 1941. A second collection, The Wide Net, was published in 1943. Nearly all of the stories in these two collections, as Robert Penn Warren has observed, "deal with people who in one way or another, are cut off, alienated, isolated from the world."¹ To portray such people Welty often relies on capturing revealing quiet moments, like a skillful photographer. "The moment crystallized in time and forever removed out of time," writes Ruth M. Vande Kieft, "the still moment, the quiet center, the instant of revelation, the elusive gesture captured--these are all moments in Miss Welty's fiction when a picture is taken, and she has caught for permanent safe-keeping a precious scene or person, an act, a thought, a feeling."² Although Welty does not neglect the sound and the action of the world in which her lonely people exist, she is especially adept at capturing the silent, crystallized moment and depicting the revealing scenes of silence and stillness. In A Curtain of Green and The Wide Net, Welty characteristically uses such scenes and

moments to expose the extreme loneliness of her characters, a loneliness often intensified by the intrusion of motion or noise.

The extremely silent world of the twelve-year-old deaf-mute Joel in "First Love" accents the loneliness made more painful when he leaves the only home he knows to follow after his first love. In 1801 Joel Mayes walks through the frozen streets of Natchez which for once shares his silence because of the extreme cold. "The little town of little galleries was all laden roofs and silence. . . .Men were caught by the cold, they dropped in its snare-like silence. . . .Natchez people turned silently to look when a solitary man that no one had ever seen before was found and carried in through the streets, frozen. . . ." ³ Welty brings this freeze on Natchez to reveal Joel's sense of isolation because of his deaf-muteness.

Joel Mayes. . . saw the man brought in and knew it was a dead man, but his eyes were for something else, something wonderful. He saw the breaths coming out of people's mouths, and his dark face, losing just now a little of its softness, showed its secret desire. It was marvelous to him when the infinite designs of speech became visible in formations on the air, and he watched with awe that changed to tenderness whenever people met and passed in the road with an exchange of words. He walked alone, slowly through the silence, with the sturdy and yet dreamlike walk of an orphan, and let his own breath out through his lips, pushed it into the air, and whatever word it was it took the shape of a tower. He was as pleased as if he had had a little conversation with someone (p. 5).

A "little conversation," for Joel, would provide communication with another person. His pleasure in seeing his breath look like the breath exhaled by others when they speak is so great that Joel hardly takes note of a dead man. Welty writes

that this is a revelation of his "secret desire."

At the inn where he earns his keep by boot-blackening, Joel awakens one night to discover Aaron Burr and Harman Blennerhassett talking in his room. Joel feels violated at first, but then Aaron Burr gestures to him: "It was like the first movement he had ever seen, as if the world had been up to that night inanimate. It was like the signal to open some heavy gate or paddock, and it did open to his complete astonishment upon a panorama in his own head, about which he knew first of all that he would never be able to speak. . ." (p. 11). Joel has found his first love in Burr and has learned about himself, but he bears the pain of knowing he can never speak what he has found.

Burr and Blennerhassett continue meeting in Joel's room nightly until one night Burr stays behind to sleep on Joel's table. Until that night Joel had always thought that "talking was Burr's appearance" (p. 16). But now Joel realizes as he looks at the silent sleeping face of Burr that this is the last night Burr will come to talk with Blennerhassett in his room. "Joel stood motionless; he lifted his gaze from Burr's face and stared at nothing" (p. 27). In reference to this silent stillness of Joel's, Alfred Appel in Seasons of Dreams writes, "Joel senses that, even if he could speak, he would not find the words to express his love--its history of sorrow and the dreams it has contemplated."⁴ Just as Welty set Natchez in silence to show her reader Joel's secret desire,