

HOW EUDORA WELTY SPEAKS TO US THROUGH HER
USE OF NAMES IN DELTA WEDDING

Louise M. Harder

Potsdam, New York

That Eudora Welty uses place names and character names consciously and skillfully is not speculation. She says, "Names reveal so much about people . . . Their financial circumstances, their backgrounds, the types of people they are. Especially in the South there are city names and country names, fancy names for people born in straightened circumstances, and so forth [sic]... I spend a lot of time on my names."¹

In her essay, "Place in Fiction," Welty writes, "The truth is fiction depends for its life on place."² Further, on the magic of place she says, "Might the magic be partly, too, in the name of the place--since that is what we gave it? Surely, once we have named, we put a kind of poetic claim on its existence; the claim works even out of sight--may work forever sight unseen. The Seven Wonders of the World still give us a poetic kind of gratification. And notice we do not say simply 'The Hanging Gardens'--that would leave them dangling out of reach and dubious in nature; we say 'The Hanging Gardens of Babylon,' and there they are, before our eyes, shimmering and garlanded and exactly elevated to the

Babylonian measurement."³ It might be added as evidence of Welty's interest in and awareness of names that in 1945--the same year Delta Wedding was published--she reviewed George R. Stewart's Names on the Land for The New York Times.

Professor W. F. H. Nicolaisen, in his article, "Why Study Names in Literature," addresses us all to the problem of "our lack of wide angle vision and the absence of a sense of comparison."⁴ He makes abundantly clear "that the stated findings [in these papers] are essentially determined by the stated expectations, and that, if the latter are bland, the former are bound to be equally pedestrian."⁵ He is concerned and disappointed that "we do not seem to be listening to each other or to be reading each other's publications; for in the first seven volumes of LOS there is hardly a cross-reference to anybody else's work (Len Ashley is a noble and almost unique exception)."⁶ Among other things, he exhorts us to "pay attention to the ways in which authors speak to their readers through names and constellations of names."⁷

Eudora Welty does speak to us through her use of names in Delta Wedding. But first of all how may place be transferred to the pages of a novel? Welty maintains this can be done through use of explicit things, physical texture: "Location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out of the story in its course. These charges need the warm hard earth underfoot, the light and lift of

air, the stir and play of mood, the softening bath of atmosphere that gives the likeness-to-life that life needs."⁸

And, indeed, in Delta Wedding, Welty gives us just that in loving, careful detail. We are slowly introduced image by image until a whole matrix is filled out, until we can see, smell, almost touch the fullness of the Delta region of the Mississippi, that rich, alluvial land of cotton where the Yazoo River joins the Mississippi, a place teeming with life of all kinds, where the air itself is filled with things; ". . . it's the shining dust that makes it look so bright."⁹

On the surface, nothing much happens in Delta Wedding. In the late summer of 1923, Laura McRaven, a nine-year-old girl from Jackson whose mother has just died, comes to visit Shellmound, where her Uncle Battle and Aunt Ellen Fairchild live with eight children (expecting a ninth), two great-aunts, a young cousin who is "not quite right in the head," and the assistance of numerous Negro servants. Laura is there to attend the wedding of Dabney, next to the oldest daughter of the Fairchilds, to Troy Flavin, a man fourteen years her senior and the overseer of Shellmound. Uncle George Fairchild, estranged from his wife, Robbie, arriving shortly after Laura, is reunited with his wife at Shellmound after Robbie's confrontation with the Fairchild women. The wedding is accomplished. The newlyweds rejoin the family after a three-day honeymoon in New Orleans. Laura makes the decision to return to

Jackson to live with her father instead of remaining at Shellmound. Robbie and George discuss the possibility of returning to The Grove. All this takes place within the short span of about two weeks.

Five plantations are mentioned in the book, three of which--Shellmound, the Grove, and Marmion--provide the locus for most of the action. These had to have been named between 1823 and 1890, a time when cotton had replaced tobacco and rice as principal crops in the South. George R. Stewart notes in his chapter, "Flavor of the New South," Names on the Land, that "Once plantations had been named for English towns or estates, or else the names had a masculine ring, brusquely informal as in all those places called Hope or Folly or Chance. In the New South the plantation names were feminine--delicate, and fragile and pretty, like fine porcelains."¹⁰ Names like Canemount, Ashwood, and Rosemont began to appear. The influence of French and Italian was felt in such names as Bellvue and Della Rosa. Names were drawn from the works of Shakespeare, Campbell, and particularly Scott, such as Woodstock, Waverly, and Rotherwood. Inverness and Marmion are names from Scott's works; Shellmound and The Grove are descriptive names; Lookback is a throwback to the brusque, masculine type of name used often before the new naming patterns of the New South took place.

The names of these plantations--Shellmound, The Grove, and

Marmion--become central, integral to the characters who inhabit them. Within the confines of these three places which take on different aspects of the Fairchild family, the theme of the novel, the search for self-knowledge within the mini-cosmos of the family, is amply developed. Shellmound is the place where things happen; The Grove is the place where they have happened; Marmion is the place where things must happen to ensure the future. In fact, one of the more striking ways in which Welty uses place to define or reveal character is to have that character define a particular place.

Let us examine the interaction between some of the place names and some of the character names, beginning with Shellmound, the largest of the three plantations owned by the Fairchild family:

Facing James's Bayou, back under the planted pecan grove, it was gently glowing in the late summer light, the brightest thing in the evening--the tall, white, wide frame house with a porch all around, its bayed tower on one side, its tinted windows open and its curtains stirring, and even from here plainly to be

heard a song coming out of the music room. . . .¹¹

Filled with music, laughter, and voices, teeming and fuming with life, Shellmound is at the very center of the life of the Fairchild family. Its glowing appearance reflects one of the

physical characteristics of the blooded Fairchilds, their light hair, their fair skin. It is a fitting backdrop for the fun-loving, energetic family which inhabits it, a place which allows, even encourages with its sprawling rooms and abundant clutter, frenetic activity. Like the family, it runs off in all directions. Its disarray is apparent in such details as ". . . an old lopsided baseball [that] lay all summer in a silver dish on the lid of the paper crammed plantation desk. . . ,"¹² in tables never quite cleared, cotton lint on the ceilings, little square butterflies in the upstairs balcony, June bugs knocking. To Laura McRaven, it is a source of wonderment and delight, almost magical in its appeal: "When people were at Shellmound, it was as if they had never been anywhere else."¹³ It seems to heighten one's sense of immediacy, the sense of the here and the now. But Laura also thinks of Shellmound in terms of cage images. She herself is "a little messenger of death" like the raven.

Ellen Fairchild, mistress of Shellmound, an outsider from Virginia to whom it had been entrusted, bears the full responsibility for its care and the care of all those living in it. She finds it unwieldy, tiring, needing constant attention. A book-loving choir singer, she seems a displaced person here. Even her name, a form of Helen, evokes an image of that other Helen carried to a foreign land. Ellen reigns with Battle at this fortress called Shellmound.

Dabney, the bride-to-be, sees Shellmound (in contrast to The Grove) as hot, noisy, the things in it uncared for. As her wedding approaches, she is more inclined to make a break with it, as she is with The Grove. To Aunt Tempe, Shellmound is primarily outdated, with its high ceilings, plethora of unmatched mismatched things, "little knickknacks and playthings and treasures all shaken up together."¹⁴ She is fashionable, in touch with Memphis, in tune and step with the times. Her name reflects this. Robbie sees Shellmound as evidence that the Fairchilds are not even rich, "You're just medium. Only four gates to get here, and your house needs a coat of paint! You don't even have one of those little painted wooden niggers to hitch horses to!"¹⁵ This outburst shows just how little Robbie understands about wealth and landed families. Having come from an unlanded family, she does not recognize the true indicators of wealth. Knowing little of the Fairchilds, she is very much out of her element in this place and it seems to bring out the worst in her. Robbie, too, has robbed the Fairchilds of George--in a sense.

Shellmound is aptly named. For all its sense of immediacy and activity it is at bottom (basically) a huge mound of bits and pieces from the lives of the family as assorted and various as the mound of shells on which it was built.

If Shellmound is the place where things happen, The Grove, the first home built by the Fairchilds, is the place where they

have happened. Though owned by George Fairchild, it is the home of two maiden aunts, Jim Allen and Primrose:

The house at the Grove, a dove-gray box with its deep porch turned to the river breeze, stood under shade trees with its back to Shellmound road. It was a cypress house on brick pillars now painted green and latticed over, and its double chimneys at either end were green, too.¹⁶

It was on the bank of the shadowy Yazoo River.

The Grove, pastoral in its setting, is well ordered in contrast to the disarray of Shellmound. Dabney notices that the parlor furniture which is identical to that of Shellmound looks so different here: "Grandmother's and Great-Grandmother's cherished things were so carefully kept here . . ."¹⁷ Aunt Primrose could not tolerate a speck of dust in her house and every room was ready for the inspection of the Queen."¹⁸ Unlike hot Shellmound with its noisy fans in every corner, "It was eternally cool in this house; like the air of a dense little velvet-green wood it touched your forehead with stillness. Even the phone had a ring like a tiny silver bell."¹⁹

A portrait of Mary Shannon Fairchild, the grand matriarch of the family, seems to almost cast a spell on Dabney, reminding her of all the family legends. A few moments later in a state of discomfiture, Dabney feels like breaking the little parlor things

she had so cherished minutes before. Soberly, she reflects, "It is because people are mostly layers of violence and tenderness--wrapped like bulbs."²⁰ Though impatient to be off, she wants to accept a gift from her aunts--a night light, with a picture of a city on it, which when lit becomes the great fire of London. Symbolically, Dabney accidentally shatters this light on the steps of Shellmound as soon as she returns, an unconscious act of her break with the past. Two other things are discovered about The Grove during Dabney's visit: That it has rats and a ghost.

Welty also reveals George's character in a Dionysian escapade at The Grove with his wife, Robbie, when he flings her down on a bed of sweet peas, pulling vines and all down on her. In fact, George is seen throughout the novel as a kind of demigod. His influence on the other female members of the family is one of liberator. He inspires them to cast off whatever bonds confine them.²¹ At the end of the novel, he decides to return to The Grove to preside over it. He says, "Further than cotton, I might try fruit trees, might try some horses, even cattle."²² He had aspired to godliness; now full circle he returns to the land, a farmer, as his name implies.

If ever a place inspired mystery and awe, it is Marmion. It is first seen by Dabney reflected in the Yazoo River [the river of death]--"an undulant tower with white wings at each side, like a hypnotized swamp butterfly, spread and dreaming where it alights."²³

. . . Marmion--the magnificent temple-like castle-like house, with the pillars springing naked from the ground, and the lookout tower, and 25 rooms, and inside, the wonderful freestanding stair--the chandelier, chalice, golden in light, like the stamen in the lily down-hanging."²⁴

The name is taken from Sir Walter Scott's poem, "Marmion," whose hero is ". . . an English knight, valiant and sagacious, but profligate and unscrupulous, who meets with various adventures in Scotland. . . ." ²⁵

Marmion occurs again in the novel in a related context. It is also the name of Laura's doll, which her mother made for her before she died, a stocking doll whose "breath was the wind and rain of her street in Jackson."²⁶ The plantation Marmion had belonged to Annie Laurie, Laura's mother, before she gave it to her brother Denis, and one day may become Laura's. When Laura asks her mother the name of the doll, Annie Laurie replies almost grudgingly as if ". . . everything in that whole day's fund of life had gone into the making of the doll and it was too much to be asked for a name too."²⁷ "Oh--he can be Marmion."²⁸ This truly must be considered a knowing comment on how exhausting finding the right name can be. Marmion the doll becomes Laura's tangible link to Marmion the place. But for the time being, Marmion is Dabney's future, the place where she and Troy will live. Its aspect is at

once reassuring yet as nebulous as the future.

Some of the names that Welty uses cannot easily be confined to categories. To do so in the strictest sense would not yield much that is profitable, would not even be desirable. An example is Troy Flavin, the name of the overseer who marries Dabney. It is true that much is made of his red hair, the hairy red tufts in his ears and on his hands, the way in which his physical appearance clashes with American Beauty colors, red blending to white, chosen by Dabney to be worn by the wedding party. Why didn't Welty name him Reid? (In fact, there is a Reid in the novel--Robbie Reid--George's wife, the poor town girl.) In other parts of the novel, Troy is described as "a black wedge in the lighted window,"²⁹ an allusion perhaps that he is marrying into a family with higher social status than he himself enjoys. More striking is Aunt Primrose's comment, "But I think of him as part horse--you know, the way he's grown to that black Isabelle in the fields."³⁰ In other places, he is described as having "cat eyes and a mus-tache,"³¹ as foxy-haired, high-shouldered, inviting indignation. We learn that he is from Bear Creek, Tishomingo Hills, the hilly part of Mississippi. He observes, at one point, "Two years back I would have just as soon have been in Timbuktu as Fairchilds, not to see one hill."³² Upon hearing his name for the first time, Tempe says, "Flavin is a peculiar name."³³

The author sets him apart as being different from the Delta

people in a number of ways. The name Welty chose for him was singular in that community where names were almost religiously perpetuated, thereby identifying him deftly and irrevocably as an outsider. Does his first name also conjure up images of Greek myths, centaurs, ancient battles? Is there a suggestion of his carrying Dabney off from the family, though it is just to a nearby plantation? Perhaps. Also perhaps such associations, whatever they may be, are best left as matters between the author and the reader.

Eudora Welty speaks eloquently and poetically to us through the names in Delta Wedding. The place names are descriptive, embellished selectively with rich and lavish details to make us believe in their existence. The character names are deeply rooted in this sense of place that she establishes. They work within it and are delicately controlled by it. Given the same theme with another place, another set of characters would not work, for the interplay between place and character is integral to their very existence. George must have his Grove and Ellen her Shellmound to function.

The place names and character names suggest, allude to, make possible certain associations that focus, enlarge, and frame the theme. But many of these names also have a mystery and enchantment about them that serves us, too, by allowing us just to enjoy them.

Louise M. Harder
Potsdam, New York

NOTES

¹John E. Burke, "Eudora Welty's Use of Character and Place Names in Sixteen of Her Short Stories," in The Scope of Names, South Central Names Institute Publication 7 (Commerce, Texas: Names Institute Press, 1981), p. 88.

²"Place in Fiction," in The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 118.

³Ibid., p. 119.

⁴W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "Why Study Names in Literature," in Literary Onomastic Studies, IX, 1982 (Brockport, N. Y.: State University College, 1982), p. 12.

⁵Idem.

⁶Ibid., p. 13.

⁷Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁸The Eye of the Story, p. 128.

⁹(New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1946), p. 137.

¹⁰Names On the Land (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958), p. 250.

¹¹Delta Wedding, p. 6.

¹²Ibid., p. 8.

¹³Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 163.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 40.

²⁰Ibid., p. 42.

²¹John Alexander Allen, "The Other Way to Live: Demigods in Eudora Welty's Fiction," in Eudora Welty: Critical Essays (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1979), p. 35.

²²Ibid., p. 243.

²³Ibid., p. 120.

²⁴Ibid., p. 122.

²⁵William A. Wheeler, Dictionary of the Noted Names of Fiction (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1889), republished (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1966), p. 234.

²⁶Delta Wedding, p. 230.

²⁷Ibid., p. 232.

²⁸Idem.

²⁹Ibid., p. 53.

³⁰Ibid., p. 111.

³¹Ibid., p. 44.

³²Ibid., p. 94.

³³Ibid., p. 111.