

## The Dynamics of Identity and Community in Eudora Welty's *Delta* wedding

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### Abstract

This paper explores Eudora Welty's novel *Delta Wedding* through the lens of identity and community dynamics in 1920s Mississippi. Welty intricately portrays the insular world of the Fairchild family, a white aristocratic clan grappling with tradition, interpersonal relationships, and societal change. Through detailed analysis of character interactions and narrative structure, this study examines how Welty navigates themes of class distinctions, racial tensions, and familial obligations within the closed community of the Delta region. This analysis underscores Welty's profound insight into Southern society's complexities and contradictions amidst historical transformations, highlighting the enduring legacies of the past on personal and communal identities.

**Keywords:** Identity, Community, Traditions, closed society, Southern, Class , Negroes , Story telling

### Introduction

This paper takes up an interesting study of the interrelationship between individual and community in Southern life. Welty's fiction combines a realist's sensitivity to everyday life, a storyteller's imagination and pleasure in entertaining a story's lover's family with many traditions of written and oral narrative. Since her childhood, she had been fond of observing all that she read and saw. Southerners have a voracious love of story telling and reading stories, so was Eudora Welty. Story telling is a way of life, an oral tradition what happened. This gave an opportunity to the individuals to mix-up with the community and other folk. Southern Culture was entirely different from that of North, Northerners did not have the craze for such things as story telling. Eudora Welty has learnt many things directly from the society around her and had been influenced by the life of the southerners. Her characters are real as well as types. She has represented them as they are. She represents their abnormality and intelligence side by side.

During the age of Welty, Negroes as well as Whites were existed in Mississippi. They both considered themselves separate. They viewed differently. Whites were rich and the Negroes of that area were poor. They were employed in the white American's field. They were considered below than whites before the Civil War.

Eudora Welty generally relies on regional setting and generalizes individuals who were alienated and isolated from the world. Before the Civil War, there was the large gap between different class and community. They all hated to one another like black to white, Red Indians to White. They all considered themselves separate, but with the passage of time, this vacuum has been filled up. Eudora Welty, belonging to that particular time, has been minutely observed that situation that once had existed; she has tried to depict that authenticity in her short stories as well as in the novels. After the Civil War, people of different communities came in contact with one another and formed a community by establishing certain rules. Her novel **Delta Wedding** is a true portrait of a closed society. In this novel, both the community whites and blacks have been depicted by her in an authentic manner. The novel begins when Laura McRaven came to town by train to attend the marriage ceremony of her cousin Dabney Fairchild.

All the family members at the home are of different nature. They are true to their type. They have all the characteristic of the whites. They are very conservative. They all have a world around them.

Eudora Welty characterizes the day-to-day routine of Fairchild's family. She tries to make us care for them, portraying them in depth, she attaches them firmly to time, and place, reveals their past, leads us to wonder about their futures, and shows us the social and cultural milieus which have formed them. Welty tells us about people who live there or about Laura McRaven, the nine years old daughter who meet the people and the Fairchilds for the first time. Laura is a very close relative to Fairchilds even she did not know much about Fairchilds. She was meeting them after very long.

Poor Laura, little motherless girl, they would all run out and say, for her mother had died in the winter and they had not seen Laura since the funeral.(Delta Wedding p.3 )

The people are brought to life through Welty's detailed enumeration of fashions in dress, hairstyles, nature of one to another. Welty makes us by here mentioning of Laura's McRaven straw hat and Buster Brown, hair-do, by making us listen to:

I wish I could shimmy like my sister Kate or uncle Pinck's favourite ... stop yet Ticklen, Jock. The girls that were old enough, dressed enough, dressed in colors called Jade and Flamings, danced with each other table until the boys came to get them.(Delta Weddind p. 9 )

The whole community was so closed that they all want to look alike.

All the Fairchilds in the Delta looked alike – Little Battle, now, pushing his bobbed hair behind his ears before he took up a fresh drumstick, looked exactly like Dabney the way she would think it the window. They all had a fleetness about them, though they all were tall, solid people. (DeltaWedding p.14)

One try to copy another, Welty has often pointed out, the attitudes of Fairchilds from Delta Wedding. Welty has taken up the time it was a year in which nothing catastrophe or extraordinary happened in the Delta. A year so peaceful, it seems, that it could be contemplated with some nostalgia by a young writer who has just live through World War II.

Welty has taken up the time when nothing unusual catastrophe happened. 1923 was the period of peace. But the year was not totally uneventful in the Delta as the almanac led Welty to believe. In 1922 there had been an overflow of the river, and it had been difficult to retain enough labour for 1923. Blacks by the thousands left the Delta and went north to work in industrial plants. They were anxious to leave, as their circumstances were often those of latter of bondage with coercion, severe economic deprivation dietary problems, and a high rate of pellagra, rickets, and death. The uneasy planter businessmen who saw the black labourers head North tried to restrain them from leaving in many ways, at time by force. Welty's Delta novel is not based on her own family life experience. It is according to Michael Keryling, primarily based on the history of the Robinson family, who had lived in the Delta since before the Civil War. Who had all the snobbery fit to the true southern family. They were alienated from the society. They behaved according to themselves. **Delta Wedding** is dedicated to Welty's friend John Fraiser Robinson. It seems that while he was overseer during World War II, Welty visited regularly with his family in the Delta, where she talked with them about the family's cultural history and read diaries and journals by their ancestors. Welty's own impression of the Delta is then primarily a product of the first half of the 1940's. The story is told carefully and in a great detail. Like the Yazoo River the narrative moves slowly it at all. But the lack of change or the rejection of all changes, is ultimately death, and Welty's Delta novel is a story of the beginning of the end for the Fairchild's way of life. Shellmound is

“like a lagoon in a foreign world”(Whitman p.194) and it is situated by the Yazoo River, which means “River of Death.”(Whitman p.194)

On her wedding rehearsal day Dabney Fairchild decides to ride out alone. She wants to keep herself alone as at that time the house was full of people. Each character in the novel love their separateness. Dabney is possibly unlike the other Fairchilds. She is about to marry a man of her own choosing rather than the family’s choosing guy. On the other hand, it may be worth noting that Dabney’s extreme individualism is based on the conviction that the Fairchilds will stand by her whoever she chooses for a husband. Dabney feels that the change in her life is reflected in the metamorphosis of the awakening sense of community around her. In her awareness of coming change, the young woman is not the typical Fairchild. Her extensive family at Shellmound are convinced that they live safely in their Shell in an unchanging world with seasons of changeless weather. They know that they live in close contact with each other. Dabney is very much aware of the fact that nobody is agree at home for her marriage because of Troy’s lower status but Dabney wanted her freedom. So that she chose to marry Troy.

Dabney gazed at them thinking, I always wondered what they would do if I married somebody they didn’t want me to, Poor Papa is the only one really suffering. All her brothers would try to hold her and not let her go. ... mother fainted ... but Dabney actually to leave the house for Troy.(DeltaWedding p,185)

The immediate impact of the novel on a reader is that it is one long tribute to the Fairchilds and their way of life. On the whole the impression of this family of the Delta aristocracy is singularly positive. George Fairchild risked his life to try to rescue Maureen Fairchild, the half-crazed daughter of his dead brother Denis; her foot was caught in the track. The incident on the trestle occurred when the family and ‘ten or twenty Negroes’ were on their way back from a fishing trip to Drowning Lake. The Yellow Dog, which is the Dry Greek trestle. Mr.Dolittle, the engineer of the train could perhaps be expected to curse people who endanger their lives on the tracks, but his actual reaction is to apologize to the Fairchilds for having frightened them only because of the same class:

On the trestle Maureen danced and caught her foot. I’ve done that, but I know how to get loose. ... and the Dog stopped just before it hit them and ground them all of prices ... The engineer looked out the window he said he was sorry.(Delta wedding p.19)

The Fairchilds know Mr.Dolittle and Mr. Terry Black, the conductor, by name. The incident demonstrates the stability of the social order in the Delta in the fall of 1832. The engineer would have probably crushed anybody of the other class who has risked his life so carelessly. White Saved white and do not concern about black.

Among the Fairchilds, George Fairchild was considered the incarnation of Southern Society. He was a meditative sort of person, who always concentrated about himself. He marries Robbie a bit feeling in him that he was getting married to a girl who was below his status rather he did what he wanted. This marriage afterward proved a curse to both of them. The young Fairchild demonstrated a tendency to marry beneath their social and cultural standing. Because of their difference in background Robbie and George cannot get along in their marriage. They simply did not understand each other’s way of thinking. The Reid values are pitted against those of the Fairchild World. Robbie grew up in the hamlet of Fairchilds and had known the family at Shellmound all her life. Before she married George, she worked in a general store. She was a daughter of justice of the peace and a school teacher, she had herself wanted

to teach. Unfortunately, the Fairchilds seem only to remember her as her granddaughter of old man Swanson, who had been a laughing stock of the county for his walk and his stutter.

As Troy Flavin, the overseer of the plantation, is also of a poor white background as Dabney was, as far as her family was concerned about to repeat George's mistake. The tradition in the Delta and in the Deep South in general was that a white upper-class family

Was almost strictly an endogenous group. Children of one original ancestor married children of another founder; the third generation intermarried among themselves; cousins married cousins until all were intertwined in an intricately kinship pattern. (Gretlund. p 160)

What really troubles the Fairchilds about Troy is that nobody knows anything about his family, except that he has a mother in the hills of Northern Mississippi. This is certainly not enough of a background to satisfy Battle Fairchild, who is Dabney's father and head of the family. Robbie Reid and Troy Flavin were outsiders, and they were not treated with much compassion by the prejudiced Fairchilds. Aunt Mac, one of the old ladies of the family always had a feeling of hatred towards Troy Flavin. She says about him.

Throwing Troy Flavin in the buyers in front of the house and letting the minnows chew him up. (Delta Wedding p.67)

Even if they knew, no one among the Fairchilds would even dream of considering what the Reids and the Flavins think about these marriages. Nevertheless, the wedding referred to in the title of the novel is ultimately a wedding between classes. The Fairchilds cannot survive in the modern world without relinquishing some of their class and caste privileges. Welty shows how badly the family is in need of someone who can face the realities of the time. The Fairchilds will just have to hope that a Reid and a Flavin, in payment for their social ascent, can learn to behave and think like members of the Fairchild class and that they will stop identifying with the class of their birth. Old man Swanson's granddaughter and the fatherless Flavin from the hills may not be the most charismatic character of the novels they entirely lack the accomplishment, charm, and grace of a Cradle Fairchild – but on close inspection they turn out to be the most sensible and realistic people in **Delta Wedding**.

When she was a child, the bride-to-be saw George stop a knife-fight between two young blacks, and she hated to see him intercede.

Wonderfully, he had reached up and caught the knife in the air. Disgracefully, he had taken two little black drills against his side. (Delta wedding p 36)

Not because she worried about safety, but because she did not want him to care about anything in the world except the Fairchild. She sees it as a potential danger to the family that George worries about anybody outside the family circle, and the other members of the family share her concern. In her criticism of him for his humanity and charity, Dabney reveals the severest limitation of the Fairchilds and by implication of their class: they are supreme egoists. Within their family they formed a **closed circle**, and little do they care if other people suffer. The family may serve as a vital centre for its members, but seen from the point of view of an outsider the constant demonstrations of undeviating family solidarity appear threatening. This is also what scares Robbie most about her new family. One day at Shellmound when she is informed by Aunt Mac that as for her Reid background is painfully well-known, nothing she can say will 'amount to a row of pins' it comes to a showdown between Robbie and the Fairchilds. Robbie's reactions to the Fairchilds are mostly justified. It is not that she fails to understand their family pretensions; she just fails to accept them. She criticizes their vanity while she tries not to feel intimidated by the old women of the family, even when they accuse her of having married George for her money.

Robbie is looking for a realism that is hard to come by in their deceptively blissful world at Shellmound. Aunt Mac sums up her view of the family in these words:

You are all spoiled, stuck up family that thinks nobody else is really in the world! But they are You've just one plantation. With a little crazy girl in the family, and listen at Miss Shannon. You are not even rich! You're just medium. Only four gates to get there, and your house needs a coat of paint! You don't even have one of these little painted wooden niggers to hitch horses to!( Delta wedding p163)

Robbie has some misconceptions about the family's financial status, but her basis criticism of the Fairchild is realistic enough and has far-reaching implications. She has tried to become a true Fairchild, but her background prevented the transformation. They all belong to the **tight-knit society** who cannot easily transform themselves. What they are, they must be. Robbie Reid now sees it.

You are either spoiled in the world or you're born not spoiled. And people keep you that way until you die.(Delata Wedding p 164)

Socially unable to participate fully in charmed plantation life at Shellmound, Robbie recognizes that the Fairchilds just love themselves in each other over and over.

You have just loving yourselves in each-other yourselves over and over again.!" ... and with a circle of her arm including two live old ladies too. "You still love them, and they still love you. No matter what you've all done to each other. (Delta Wedding p165)

Though she probably never thinks of this in these terms, as she is not supposed to be able to word her feelings, Robbie's criticism of her husband's family for their narcissism in the states of a left-over plantation world is implicitly an attack on the continuation of the past in the present life of the family. And the family is, of course, the institution of southern agrarian life. The Fairchilds behave as if past, present, and future are one. This attitude serves to liberate them from the tyranny of time. They live as much in the past as in the present. And for them the past is a real alternative to the present, both epistemologically and ethically. By ignoring that they can live in the present only, they deny specificity and separateness to both past and present. It is not necessary for the Fairchilds to make a distinction or to accept that the past has shaped the present and therefore can be distinguished from it. For this Delta family the sense of continuity is so strong that the past is also their present. The past represents an inviolable part of the Fairchild identity. Their everyday ways of experiencing and behaving keep alive the family past and with it much of what we consider old south ways.

In the Fairchild clan the family past is constantly present. The past is kept alive in several ways, among others through old family stories that are considered very holy or very passionate. It is their self-centeredness that convinces the family that the portrait of Grand-mother Mary Shannon by John James Audubon, the famous artist, is no match for a portrait of her painted by her husband. Although she is of the landed class, Ellen Fairchild the mistress of Shellmound, has remained an outsider. Her origin as a Virginian, supposedly from Mitchem Corner would always prevent her from becoming a true Fairchild. Significantly, none of her nine children look like her and she would have been surprised if one of them did. Ellen is aware of the peculiar atmosphere in her family, and it does not surprise her to hear them repeat to each other. "The Fairchilds are the happiest people. Their happiness in the present is founded on their detailed knowledge of past generations of happy Fairchilds. The legend of happiness is the family legend.

The Shellmound plantation house is a tall, white, wide frame house with a pore all around and with a bayed tower of memorabilia such as the books, portraits, and firearm of the past generations serves



as a remainder of this connection. Each object from a Great-Grandfather Fairchild's Walnut and cane chairs, great 'grandmother's magnolia bush, and the tumbler with the Young Pretender engraved on it, to Mushula's dulcimers and treasured coconut cake recipe has its own story and is encapsulated in the family mind. Thus Welty's Delta family is a true portrait of a **Southern Closed Society**.

The old aunts are the final authorities on the family history and traditions and by their mere presence they obligate everybody to honor the past. In their reverence for the past the Fairchild conform fully to the standard behaviour of white upper-class families of the time, which meant an effective indirect control by long-dead generations on the lineal-kin group of the present. Aunt Shannon one of the highly visible old ladies of the family, is constantly mixing her past life in the present. She is one of the most snobbish women who does not like to talk to the Negro servant and always scold them. She even does like Troy Flavin. Aunt Mac whose husband is died very earlier. Still dressed in her mourning cloths. She is so closed tighten her past that not even herself she could loosen.

The closeness is echoed in the family names. Every Fairchild is named for an ancestor, and connected with each name there are stories like Laura McRaven, **George Fairchild, Dabney Fairchild, Aunt Mac Fairchild, Aunt Shannon Fairchild**, Robbie Reid, Troy Flavin etc. They all are closely interlinked with each other. If one is no more in the world, other Fairchilds always try to keep him revive in their imagination. Denis Fairchild who is remembered and revered as the true aristocrat. He is not only remembered for in the imagination of the family members he is apparently as alive as any other Fairchild. An important source of identity for these self-styled planter aristocrat resides in the legend of Denis and the tradition he has come to represent.

Old South of large plantations, was the inhuman treatment of other people, especially poor whites and blacks. John Edward Hardy, who has written the best critical essay on **Delta Wedding**, finds that "Welty is apologetic about the treatment of blacks in this novel"(Hardy p.21) In **Delta Wedding**, Ellen sees in the wood a girl and a ailing woman. The matriarch of Shellmound asks the girl:

Are you one of our people? Girl, are you lost then?" Still there was no answer, but no running away either. Ellen called, "come here to me; I could tell, ... And if you belong somewhere, I'am going to send you back unless they're mean to you, you can't hide with me, but if you don't belong anywhere, then, I'll have to think.(Delta Wedding p.167)

These kinds of feelings they have in the family. In their family they have numerous Negro servants, young and old, to do most of the physical work. Their children, from Bluet, a toddler to eighteen year old Shelley, have the leisure to pursue their interest and pleasures, aware that there is always a servant only as far away as a yell. Like the McGenees of Start Young is **So Red the Rose**, the Fairchilds are a large, **close-knit** plantation family proud of their high position in the area and appreciative of family history and family values. Negroes always have to stay outside of the room. They consider them servants and always treated like that.

All the windows were full of black faces, but the family servants stood in a ring inside the parlour walls. Pinchystole in all in white and she looked wild and subdued together now in the snowiness with her blue-black. Maureen upto her and gave her a red rose from her basket, not being, as a flower girl, able to wait. Partheny stood at the front of all the Negroes, where the circle had its joining, making the circle a heart. Her head was high and purple, she was thistle like there, and perhaps considered herself of all the Negroes the head and fount. **Man-son, Sylnanus, Juju**, more than that were all in the hall, spellbound

and shushing one another. Aunt Studney, wherever she was keeping out of sight.( Delta Wedding p21)

Negroes can never feel ease with whites. They have created themselves a society. They have a feeling of hatredness. But because of their poverty they have to do and bear the nuisance. Negroes were always ready to carry out the order of their master when they took their lunch or dinner, these Negroes have to joined them not for having lunch but for carrying out the order.

There stood Pinchy in the dining room, swatting an old September fly. For a few days a creature of mystery, now that she had come through she was gawking and giggling like the rest. “You swat every fly, Pinchy, That’s what you’ for, now this whole day”, she said sternly. “I’ll get in, said Pinchy. (Delta Wedding pp.203-204)

Thus **Delta Wedding** portrays a true portrait of the Southern White Society with the concept of their alienation from the other world that is Negroes.

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