

**“Like an Old Song They Carried in Their Memory”: Eudora Welty’s  
Transformation of Folklore in *The Wide Net and Other Stories***

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## Introduction

Eudora Welty considers that “folklore and fiction are different branches of the same thing” (Ferris 168). As one of the oldest methods of storytelling, folklore serves as an inspiration for the fiction of Welty and countless other writers from numerous backgrounds because what is fiction if not another way to tell a story. Since folklore comes from all over the world, some stories have been told to countless audiences while other stories are only shared in small communities. Some stories are more easily recognizable than others, so Eudora Welty utilizes folklore with different levels of renown. Because Welty uses different genres of folklore, she can intersperse more well-known folklore into her stories as a grounding point for the lesser known lore, allowing her to continue a cultural tradition of the South without tying herself too firmly to specifically Southern tradition. While Welty looks to different aspects of folklore for her inspiration, she breaks from lore’s traditional expectations by creating ironic contrasts for additional depth and realism, allowing her readers to relate more closely to her folkloric characters placed in modern surroundings.

The term “folklore” means a variety of different things dependent on the context. Alan Dundes considers “that a folk society [is] not a whole society, not an isolate in itself. It is rather a ‘half society,’ a part of a larger social unit (usually a nation),” implying that folk society is both inclusive and isolating, but his is just one definition of folklore (6). Stephen Benson believes that “folkloric ‘prose narrative’” includes “myths, legends, and folktales” (9). A more encompassing definition would include aspects of folklore like “folksay,” “folk literature,” “customs and beliefs,” and “folklife” (Brunvand

3). Alexandr Vaschenko offers an even broader definition, saying that “in the American tradition, folklore is understood in a broad sense to include almost all of the manifestations of folk life, not just verbal art” (9). With folk tradition, an individual within a group “may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity,” and these traditions allow the group to come together (Dundes 7). In this way, folklore brings people together even when they have little else in common besides the lore of their culture. Welty utilizes folklore’s both inclusive and exclusive abilities to make her readers aware of the position of the characters within her fiction.

Folklore contains a vast number of ideas, a great variety of stories and aspects of different cultures. One might consider the differences in definition of folklore as a variation on one theme. Certain aspects of folklore cross international and cultural boundaries. While these aspects may not appear in all cultures, they do occur frequently enough to make them cross-cultural occurrences. These common folk aspects allow people from different cultures to connect with one another, so they can also do a lot to connect people from within the same region or city. In her collection of short stories *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, Eudora Welty pulls folkloric inspiration from all around the world and from numerous genres and types of folklore; these various inspirations give Welty’s reader the chance to experience folklore from multiple perspectives and cultures, allowing her readers to see the connections that folklore attempts to create as well as allowing her readers the chance to relate more effectively to her characters and stories through the creation of oppositions to folkloric archetypes.

For the purposes of this essay, folklore is categorized similarly to the classifications in Stephen Benson or Alexandr Vaschenko's definitions of folklore: myths, legends, folktales, almost all manifestation of folk life. This broader definition of folklore allows Welty to express the universality of folklore. The thing that makes folklore universal is that "all folk groups have folklore" (Dundes 9). In the words of Alan Dundes: "it is in folklore that folk groups are defined" (12). The folklore of a group connects that group and defines that group as different from other groups. While folklore is most frequently defined as an unwritten aspect of culture, "the text of an item of folklore is essentially a version or a single telling of a tale, a recitation of a proverb, a singing of a folksong," and Welty finds a way, within her works, to record these items of folklore (Dundes 23). While the folklore that Welty writes is individualized to her stories and her characters much as a storyteller would alter a story dependent on the audience's reaction to the tale, the lore is also a part of the folklore community from which it comes. For Welty, little separation occurs between folklore, myth, legend, fairytale, and memory: "fairy tales—Grimm, Anderson, the English, the French, 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves'; and there was Aesop and Reynard the Fox; there were the myths and legends, Robin Hood, King Arthur" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 8). For Welty, "telling it is her way of confronting the memories;" telling her stories allows Welty to interact with her history, to consider her past, to bring others into things that happened to her (Gretlund 167). Welty's memory allows her to bring her local folklore to a reader unfamiliar with her folklore, to people who are not in her tribe.

While folklore brings together groups like families, tribes, and larger communities, helping people relate to one another more effectively, Eudora Welty finds

“a fuller awareness of what [she] need[s] to find out about people and their lives ha[s] to be sought for through another way, through writing stories” (*One Time, One Place* 8). As Welty finds her awareness through writing, her reader finds a similar awareness through reading her stories, through seeing that they do not, in fact, differ so very much from the characters in her stories. Again, Welty’s reader becomes part of her tribe as they read her stories, as they familiarize themselves with her folklore, as they learn her folk speech and come to understand her legends. While Welty does utilize folklore from her own locale, giving her reader a chance to get familiar with lore that seems alien, she also grounds her reader by including folklore that is more well-known, lore from fairytales and from mythology, lore that is much more well known to someone from outside of the South. Instead of simply dropping her reader into her own cultural lore, Welty utilizes other, more recognized, Western lore. This more well-known lore serves as an easier stepping off point for a reader unaware of the lore of the South; if a reader starts with something he or she knows, it is easier to transition into something that he or she does not know.

As the reader has to become accustomed to unfamiliar lore, he or she is able to relate more effectively to the characters within Eudora Welty’s stories since many of the characters are also struggling to find their footing within the context of their own situations since those characters often stray from archetypal perfection. In the stories of *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, folklore plays a number of roles; one of the main roles is folklore’s ability to establish connections between people both within the stories and outside of the stories. By establishing a relatable, folkloric framework for her stories, Welty creates more effective connections between her reader and her characters. Welty also adds modern aspects to her folkloric themes which further create a relatable

atmosphere for her reader. Welty does not just present fairytale princesses, but she takes the idea of the fairytale princess and adds an additional level of modern complication in order to create a more realistic and relatable character in her stories. While the characters within the stories attempt to enter into or exit from their communities, the reader also attempts to break into the society of the story in order to better understand the lore of a particular society.

There is quite a bit of research on the relationship of folklore to Eudora Welty's work, especially in reference to *The Golden Apples* and *The Robber Bridegroom*. However, relatively few discussions occur about the folklore in *The Wide Net and Other Stories*. In his essay on Eudora Welty's use of symbol, William M. Jones notes that the stories in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* "take on more of the general characteristics of the folk tale and thus become less obviously stories that draw on folk material," but he devotes less than half of his essay to all of the stories in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (177). Harry C. Morris also notes "the vaguest mythopoeia" of *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (36). Morris focuses only briefly on aspects of *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, discussing other works in the greater portion of his work. While Alexandr Vaschenko focuses heavily on aspects of folklore, he looks only briefly at the "legendary atmosphere" that "clearly manifested through the structure of the language and imagery" employed within the stories, so while he considers atmosphere, he does not consider so much the other folkloric aspects of the collection (11). Though several critics consider the folklore of *The Wide Net and the Other Stories*, only a small number devote more than a few pages to the lore in this collection. In contrast, this thesis will focus on *The Wide Net and Other Stories* to show how the folklore in the stories can either bring together or tear



apart the bonds between the individual and that individual's society as well as create a situation which allows a reader to immerse himself more completely in the world of Welty's lore. Also, it will show how Welty's presentation of folklore permits her reader to consider the possibility of folklore in the real world since the real world is more complex than the world of folklore. These complexities show the reader the ways in which folkloric ideals are challenged by real world situations.

## Chapter 1

### The Role of Memory

Jennifer Randisi notes the importance of oral tradition as it relates to culture when she says that “telling stories, like attending weddings, reunions, and funerals, is a way of reasserting and strengthening family ties against a world that is perceived not only as precarious but also as hostile and threatening” (39). Though Randisi focuses on familial lore, the same thing can be said about the lore of larger groups; it is through stories that children learn what is appropriate within their cultures. Local legend “is not only a method with which to educate the young; it is also a way to reinforce the behavior of grownups” because it reminds its audience of what is important within a culture as it helps define what makes membership within a group (van Sunsum 385). Folklore stands as a way to pass culture from generation to generation within a group, large or small; some folklore covers only the history of a village while other folklore discusses the history of an entire nation, and as an audience discovers culturally similar ideas within lore, he or she can find it easier to relate to other individuals within the same group, allowing for a support system in a world that can often feel alienating.

Before written literature became easily accessible, the most common way to relay stories about local culture and history was to tell those stories orally, so each generation had to learn the stories. Otherwise, the stories and the culture they captured would die, and that is why memory is so important to folklore. Without memory, folklore gets lost. Eudora Welty is aware of the importance of memory in folklore and in literature, noting

that “memory is a living thing...all that is remembered joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead” (*One Writer’s Beginnings* 104). Without memory, a group cannot relate as freely to its past; when an individual remembers, he connects himself to everything in his memory. Because of the associative nature of memory, Welty utilizes memory frequently in her stories and discusses memory in her critiques of literature as a way to connect frequently alienated characters to their cultures and communities if only in the psychological sense.

In *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, Welty frequently notes the importance of memory both subtly and overtly. The discussion of memory begins in “First Love” where Joel Mayes becomes aware of the tenuous nature of memory. For Joel, memory has no solid basis; it “work[s] like the slinging of a noose to catch a wild pony. It reach[es] back and h[angs] trembling over the very moment...and then it turn[s] and start[s] in the opposite direction” (*The Wide Net* 157). Joel has no control over his memory; it goes where it wants, leaving Joel to remember things in a random fashion at times when he may not want to focus on certain memories. Once Joel’s interaction with Aaron Burr ends, he will likely only remember it in bits, as his memory sees fit to remind him. Memory frequently comes as it wants to, bringing humans memories whether those memories are welcome or not. In this case, Welty’s description is accurate in depicting how memory really works; random interactions bring forth old thoughts, and Joel notes here that his memory works in an associative and seemingly random way.

Since Joel’s memory works in this way, it is not surprising that his last interaction with Aaron Burr triggers something more intense within his memory than Joel might have expected. After Joel watches Burr walk away for the last time, Joel sees frozen birds

on the trail and “f[alls] down and we[eps] for his father and mother, to whom he ha[s] not said good-bye” (*The Wide Net* 168). Little connection appears between the three events, but one leads so fluidly to his reaction to the other that the story’s reader cannot help but think of a time when he or she had a similar reaction to seemingly unrelated events. In this story, Welty explores the mystery of memory so effectively that her reader cannot help but relate to Joel’s thoughts on memory. The reader sees the associative nature of memory and realizes how memory serves as a connection to those who are no longer in the physical world; Joel can meet with his parents nowhere but in his own memories, so when Welty presents the results of Joel’s associations, the reader relates to his plight and his thought process.

While Joel’s memories are of his family, the titular character in “Livvie” surrounds herself with memories that do not belong to her or her family; because Livvie moves in with her much older husband, Solomon, at such a young age, she loses her connections, both physical and emotional, to her family and community. She has to give up her familial experiences in order to become a part of Solomon familial experience. Everything in Livvie’s house belongs to Solomon, even the “fresh newspaper cut with fancy borders on the mantel-shelf, on which [are] propped photographs of old or very young men printed in faint yellow—Solomon’s people” (*The Wide Net* 228). Livvie has no choice but to disregard her memories for Solomon’s and is expected to accept Solomon’s memories over her own, expected to care for his customs instead of considering hers. Even the traditions that the couple observes belong to Solomon, including the bottle trees, because “he t[akes] as much pride in his precautions against spirits coming in the house as he t[akes] in the house” (*The Wide Net* 229). While

Solomon considers these bottle trees a necessary part of familial safety, Livvie thinks of them as pretty decorations, the colored glass of the bottles lighting up beautifully when the sun hits it just right.

Since none of the traditions or memories belong to Livvie or her family, she does not connect to her new home or culture. Nothing in her home brings her into a group that protects her from the outside world; nothing roots her in the place in which she currently lives. When Livvie leaves Solomon's home, she does so effortlessly because she feels as if she does not belong there. In fact, it is a memory of her earlier life that inspires Livvie to step out of Solomon's world in search of another world in which she can belong seamlessly; when Baby Marie, the cosmetics sales woman, gives Livvie lipstick, the scent of chinaberry flowers transports Livvie to "a purple cloud she s[ees] from above a chinaberry tree, dark and smooth and neatly leaved...and there [is] her home that she ha[s] left" (*The Wide Net* 234). In this memory, Livvie even sees her parents on either side of the tree, and this brief moment of connection to something larger than herself is enough to draw Livvie out of Solomon's home to search for something to which she relates. If Livvie and Solomon had created memories together instead of repressing Livvie's memory while foregrounding Solomon's, Livvie may have had difficulty leaving Solomon initially; for Livvie, leaving Solomon's home both before and after his death is easy because she has no connection to the memories or culture there. Shared memory and lore create the kind of connections that Livvie did not find within her husband's home.

Livvie's experiences show that relationships forced without mutual memory and culture do not have strong bonds; it is much more effective to base a relationship upon a

set of shared or even easily relatable experiences. In “The Purple Hat,” three strangers gather and discuss the lore of the city in which they have settled, and their interaction is more effective because it is based on an attempt to share lore and culture. Though based on the memory and experience of one character, the story exists because that character wants to create a shared experience between himself and the other two men at the bar. “The Purple Hat” shows how memory can turn into story and how story can become folklore. The narrator, a bouncer at the Palace of Pleasure, attempts to engross the other patrons with his “reminiscent tone” that “seem[s] to put the silent thin young man on his guard” (*The Wide Net* 223). Though the bouncer is not getting the most positive reactions, he is at least getting some kind of reaction from his audience of two.

The group of men listening to the tale are only interested in the sense that they do not want to leave the bar in order to avoid hearing the story, but the two men do become more engaged as the story gets more interesting; the bartender stays level throughout the telling of the tale, giving the kind of half-hearted responses that bartenders give when their patrons are talking too much, but in the end, the bartender betrays the fact he actually cares about the story when he asks “is she a real ghost?” (*The Wide Net* 227). As the bouncer leaves, he promises to return in order to tell the bartender how the woman’s story ends; in this way, the folklore continues even after the story’s conclusion. While the bartender has been blasé about the story throughout its telling, the mystery of the woman and the fact that the story is happening in his time so close to where he works draws the bartender into the lore, and he is taking an active interest in the story. The young man in the bar, however, may not take an obvious interest in the story, but he gets so emotionally involved in the story, so involved in spite of his best efforts to look neutral and

nonchalant, that he “move[s] out of the bar and disappear[s] in the rain of the alley” seemingly without realizing that he has done so (*The Wide Net* 227). The three men, willing or not, are coming together in the creation of a story that may one day be local legend. Though the bouncer longs for an audience and tells his story despite the audience’s seeming lack of interest, he convinces his audience to care and makes his audience a part of his lore, a part of his memory. The bouncer has taken something from his memory and made an unattached audience take part in it; he makes lore a living, changing beast by telling a story that is yet to have an ending.

Though the story in “The Purple Hat” displays lore’s ability to change fluidly dependent on memory and retelling as well as lore’s ability to bring together people who may have very little in common, “Asphodel” is a more complete and evolved example, displaying the power of collective memory and lore’s ability to transcend the bounds of distance and mortality. The three women in “Asphodel” come together to remember their deceased friend, and in telling Miss Sabina’s story, Irene, Cora, and Phoebe ensure that their friend is never forgotten because Sabina’s story is “like an old song they carr[y] in their memory,” and they want to make sure that they always remember (*The Wide Net* 201). By telling Sabina’s story, the three women guarantee that at least they will never lose her even though she is gone.

Of course the story that the three tell is local lore, something created by their memories of Sabina’s life; another storyteller who did not know Sabina as well would have had a completely different perspective on her life, and with that in mind, the three cycle in and out of the role of narrator, seamlessly shifting between storytellers. It is the shifting of the narrators, the changing perspectives, that makes the telling of Sabina’s

story unique; in this case, the story does not just involve audience interaction but shifts in storytelling as well. The narrative shifts allow for alternate memories to enter into the lore, creating a more diverse basis for the story, and while these shifts add a new perspective, the narrative change is smooth enough that it does not discombobulate or confuse the reader. In fact these shifts show the extent to which “the narrative [is] only part of memory now, and its beginning and ending might seem mingled and freed in the blue air of the hill” (*The Wide Net* 202). Miss Sabina’s story is so much a part of her town that the narrative blends into the landscape itself and becomes a part of collective memory, just proving how intensively lore connects to memory and landscape. The way in which Cora, Irene, and Phoebe relate Sabina’s story allows the three to take full advantage of their intimate knowledge of Sabina’s life as they connect their individual memories of Sabina to create a collective story of community history which their entire town can share.

It has been said that “story...and history have a close rhetorical relation” (Orr 112). Local history and local legend are so frequently entwined with one another that it can be difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. Because of the ways that individuals relay personal or local histories to one another, history sounds like local storytelling. Eudora Welty considers that “the greatest confluence of all is that which makes up the human memory—the individual human memory,” so the memories of individuals play a large role in creating collective memories within cultural groups (*One Writer’s Beginnings* 104). Because of this belief, Welty utilizes the individual memories of her characters when telling her stories; these character memories create a story as unique as the characters themselves, and as the reader relates to the characters, they will



relate to the story as well. Welty's stories are built by the memories of individuals within a community, giving fuller exploration of the role that lore plays within a community and showing how lore is created.

## Chapter 2

### The Magic of Place in Lore

Eudora Welty herself frequently notes the importance of place in fiction and the role which place plays in forming the characters and plots of her own stories, saying that “something shapes people, and it’s the world in which they act that makes their experiences—what they act for and react against...a place [that] produces the whole world in which a person lives his life” (Yellin 15). Because of her beliefs about place, it is not surprising that all but one of the stories in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* takes place along the Natchez Trace, creating a consistent and extraordinary setting.

Welty makes her reader immediately aware of the magic of the Natchez Trace in the first line of the first story in the collection, saying that “whatever happened, it happened in extraordinary times, in a season of dreams, and in Natchez it was the bitterest winter of them all” (*The Wide Net* 153). In “First Love,” readers are not fully aware of what will make this place and this season so astonishing, but they know to be aware and to realize that something unusual will occur within this setting; because the weather is so extremely different, people are reacting to it in extreme ways, and Joel Mayes is an example of one of these intense reactions to a strange season. While he had been happy or at least satisfied to be nothing more than the deaf boot boy at the local inn, his interaction with Aaron Burr during this exceptionally bitter season makes it so that Joel “did not see how he could ever go back and still be the boot-boy at the Inn” (*The Wide Net* 168). While he has been effective and satiated in his role in the inn, this extreme season transforms him into someone who is dissatisfied with both his place in

and his relationship to the world around him, almost as if the extreme cold acts as an ice bath which jolts Joel into a new awareness of his situation. As Joel faces his violent past and his growing dissatisfaction, he knows that he must do something else with his life; he knows that he must find a new place in the world even if he does not yet know what that place is to be. For Joel, a severely cold season in the place in which he has grown up awakens him and makes him aware that he has grown beyond that place; if the winter had not been so severe, Joel may have stayed in his routine indefinitely. The magic of the season and the magic of the Natchez Trace awaken Joel from half-waking existence and show him that he should strive to be more than he has been.

As the Natchez Trace serves as an area of transformation for Joel Mayes, another area of the Trace serves the same purpose for William Wallace and his wife, Hazel. The Pearl River is the transformative setting for the title story, "The Wide Net." For William Wallace and Hazel, their transformation is fueled by more than their own individual needs for change and their "imbalance in awareness between family and individual identity" (Chronaki 39). As a newly married couple with a baby on the way, the two have to discover "how balance is achieved between individual and group identity" (Chronaki 39). William Wallace and Hazel are still connected to their individual lives, still too in tune with their emotions from when they did not have to think as responsible members of a familial group. William Wallace's immature decision to stay out all night drinking causes "Lady Hazel ... to jump in the river" or at least causes her to threaten to jump into the Pearl River (*The Wide Net* 174). In "The Wide Net," the season is magical; fall is coming, and as Doc notes, "Everything just before it changes looks to be made of gold," causing William Wallace to remember how precious Hazel is (*The Wide Net* 176). As the

men immerse themselves even further into their changing surroundings, they find that they are taken in by the tide of change that surrounds them.

As the men begin their immersion into the waters of the Pearl River, William Wallace states that he does not know the name of the river that he has lived next to his entire life, as if he holds onto an ignorance that will only leave him once he faces his trial by water, once he is baptized by the waters of the Pearl River. Though he considers himself the leader of the river dragging, he has to convince the other members of his dragging party, and it is only after William Wallace's full immersion in the Pearl River that he becomes the recognized leader of his group of river draggers. As William Wallace "dive[s] down and down into the dark water, where it [is] so still that nothing stir[s]," he stays under as long as possible, and as he communes with the nothingness in the depths of the river, he realizes the seriousness of Hazel's disappearance and begins to take on the role of the patriarch in his household (*The Wide Net* 180).

The river offers the perfect setting for William Wallace's rebirth, a ritual cleansing which will allow him to become a better man; it is within the depths of the Pearl River that he finds his new place in society, the place that he must take before he can be a proper father to his unborn child, "able to grow toward the new person he needs to be in the changing, and larger, relationship with his wife" (Chronaki 39). It is in this time on the cusp of two seasons, in this time when the weather and the trees are changing so rapidly that Hazel and William Wallace can take advantage of this transformative opportunity to become true adults.

Though "A Still Moment" does not allow as obvious a chance for transformation as the other stories in the collection, the place in which "A Still Moment" occurs still

defines the action of the story and creates the opportunity for action within it. For Lorenzo Dow, James Murrell, and Audubon, the Natchez Trace offers a perfect intersection in which the three can come face to face with one another, no matter how unexpectedly the meeting occurs. Although each of the three men appears as “the ‘loner’ in Welty’s relational-oriented South ... appear[ing] as a misfit or failure,” the three find each other unexpectedly within the forest (Chronaki 40). For Audubon, the forest is a majestic and awe-inspiring place, but for Dow and Murrell the forest is just something that will convey them to their eventual goals, a place that they have to move through before they get where they genuinely want to be.

All three men refuse to move from their respective perceptions of the world; Dow rides off to continue his ministry while Murrell, who considers himself the “leader as he [is] bound to become of the slaves, the brigands and outcasts of the entire Natchez country,” stays in the clearing to dwell in the chaos he believes that he has caused. Audubon flees the scene, heron corpse in hand so that he can study it in depth. The three take little from the interaction with one another and do not change, but it is the forest setting that allows them to interact without the fear of being found out by society, without having to present themselves in the guarded way that they might had they been among a greater number of people (*The Wide Net* 195). Each remains stuck in his own individualized and non mingling world despite their brief interaction with one another, and though they refuse to transform in order to better fit into each other’s worlds, their interaction could not occur outside of this isolated clearing, which allows them a moment in which they do not have to perform their roles for the benefit of those around them.

While the interaction in “A Still Moment” occurs among a triad that refuses to change, the triad in “Asphodel” has a very different interaction in a very different setting. “Asphodel” could occur nowhere but on the eponymous property for which the story is titled, a property decorated in the trappings of a neoclassical Southern plantation, a place perfect for a tale told by three Fates about a seemingly evil sorceress like woman who dominates the small town in which she lives. The three women with sufficiently Greek names gather under “a golden ruin: six Doric columns, with the entablature unbroken over the first two” in order to tell this tale with nods to mythology (*The Wide Net* 200). During their meeting, the three women tell the story of an influential, small-town woman who holds the town under something of a spell.

While the three women who tell the story do so at Asphodel, the story that they tell occurs in the small town in which Asphodel is located. The story of Sabina’s disappointing life and shocking end could only be recounted by people who had known her and knew her family history, by people with “family memories and family things...the sense of [Sabina]’s full life and what happens to [her] in the course of it” (Yellin 15). It is this intimate knowledge of Sabina and her history that allows Cora, Irene, and Phoebe to tell Sabina’s story with sympathy, respect, and deference. Someone outside of the Natchez Trace probably could not tell it with the same delicacy or consideration, and the tale might seem like more of a freak show tale than an explanation of a woman’s unhappy life. The intimacy with which the narrators tell the story makes the story relatable to Welty’s readers. If Sabina had been from another place, her history would have been less important, less interesting, and overlooked by audiences like Cora, Irene, and Phoebe. This understanding of her history causes the people within Sabina’s

town to allow her to have such control (or the illusion of control) over their lives and to accept her displays of power.

While the size of the town in “Asphodel” affects Sabina’s range of influence, the size of the town in “The Winds” similarly affects Cornella’s ability to interact with those around her. As common knowledge of Sabina’s history forces those around her to accept her more openly, a lack of history causes neighbors in this story to avoid each other because of the fear of the unknown. Because “Southerners are always being asked to account for themselves,” such is the curse of Cornella in “The Winds” (“Place and Time” 545). If Cornella’s story had taken place in a larger town with less focus on family history, maybe no one would have noticed her or taken the time to segregate her, and it is Cornella’s place as “not even a daughter in her side of the house, she was only a niece or cousin” which causes other families to question the girl’s origins and judge her accordingly (*The Wide Net* 216). Because Cornella is a girl with no history and no recognizable familial connections aside from those with distant relatives, Josie’s mom does not want Josie to admire Cornella. Even if Cornella had come from a shabby family with a traceable history and origin, Josie’s mother would perhaps be more willing to allow Josie to befriend Cornella, or if Josie had lived in a place where family history did not make a person’s image, Josie’s mother would not judge Cornella so harshly. While a town’s respect for history can produce a more caring surrounding in which to tell a story, that nurturing surrounding seems only to occur when the characters in question are a distinguishable part of society, but if the characters are not as tied to their societies, then their societies are not as sympathetic. It is the Southern small town’s obsession with history that forces isolation in characters like Cornella.

Much like Cornella in “The Winds,” the mysterious woman in “The Purple Hat” is under suspicion because she has no past, no history, no connection to the town in which she finds herself. In the only story in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* to take place away from the Natchez Trace, “The Purple Hat” explores the seedy bar and casino scene in New Orleans. This sudden change in setting offers readers an opposing picture of lore as it occurs in a large Southern city. While a big-city narrator creates lore in a different setting than his small-town counterparts, his story comes from similar inspiration. The narrator tells his story of a mysterious woman in an empty bar on a rainy night; the dark bar offers the perfect opportunity to tell the haunting and mysterious story of the woman in the purple hat. The grouping of three completely disparate men, who make little note of their own pasts or futures, comes together in a setting which allows them to speak freely without fear of becoming too intimate with one another. The fact that this story occurs in a large, impersonal city allows for more interaction among people of differing stations and less judgment over the pasts of those involved in the telling of the tale. A bar is an ideal setting for paranoid stories of questionable merit, so it is fair that the narrator of the tale comes into a bar hoping to grasp the attention of everyone else in the bar; unfortunately there are only two other outcasts in this bar who are willing to listen with mild interest to his eccentric story. While this seedy bar offers the perfect combination of social interaction and separation from one another, only the telling of the story occurs in the bar.

The lady with the purple hat appears in a casino named the Palace of Pleasure. Within the walls of the casino, the lady is anonymous, faceless, ignored by the masses, who are caught up in their own lives and their own games. The casino offers the woman



anonymity enough that she may appear with a different man every night, escaping the notice of everyone but the very bouncer who will later tell her story in a bar. If this woman's story occurred in a small town, everyone would notice her as an unfamiliar face, as an outsider; people would take note of her, intrigued by her novelty. It is in New Orleans, a city filled with faceless masses that she can go unnoticed by most of the people around her. Since the woman spends her time at a table in a casino, a place where she is not the central focus of those around her, she gives herself anonymity and adds to her own mystery just in case someone, like the bouncer, is paying attention to her. Though the Natchez Trace offers characters a chance to interact as a result of their histories, some characters and stories cannot exist in the Natchez setting, so the lady with the purple hat and the triad pondering over her mystical nature cannot exist within the context of the Natchez Trace; it is within the indistinctive crowds of New Orleans that the woman and the men who contemplate her can exist. By placing the woman in the purple hat in an urban setting, Welty shows lore as a universal occurrence, taking place in different kinds of areas in all kinds of settings. Folklore is not just old wives' tales told in small kitchens in country houses; folklore is everywhere and is being altered all the time.

While "The Purple Hat" offers a brief break from the small-town atmosphere of the Natchez Trace, "Livvie" returns the reader to the cadence of the small Southern town. As the woman in the purple hat lives independently while surrounded by a multitude of people, Livvie aches for human interaction because she lives away from everyone except for her much older husband. Solomon has chosen to isolate his wife because of his fear that someone "would steal her back from him" (*The Wide Net* 228). Because Solomon has grown up in a world where men must abscond with their women in order to keep

those women from playboys or marauders or anyone else who might run away with a young bride, he does what he feels will keep him from losing his wife, but it is this isolation that prompts Livvie to seek escape and refuge somewhere outside of Solomon's home but well within his influence. Because Livvie is so isolated from her family, her friends, men, women, everyone and anyone, she does everything possible to have the kind of social interactions for which she longs. Solomon, however, in his old age and poor health, does not have the energy or ability to keep Livvie in the company in which she would like to be kept, so Livvie looks for an interaction outside her home, spurred on by a brief encounter with a make-up saleswoman. If Livvie had not been forced into such stark isolation, she would not have felt the need to get back into society; it is the setting in which she lives that breeds her desire to escape from that setting.

While Livvie lives in isolation forced upon her by her worried husband, Jenny in "At the Landing" lives in isolation that her grandfather begins and she later decides to continue. Jenny is very much the product of a small town where "every person that move[s] [is] watched out of sight" by other members of the community; everyone in town knows her, knows her history, her family, and she in turn knows everyone else and is well aware of the histories of the families in her town (*The Wide Net* 243). The size and location of the Natchez allows Jenny to get coddled by the older women who watched her grow up when she needs coddling, to escape to the woods when she needs to be alone; the size of the town also makes it possible for people like Jenny and Billy Floyd to remain on the edges of their society. With Jenny, the whole town knows her family history, but they allow her to separate herself because they know her grandfather and understand the trauma through which she has been; Jenny grows up in a small town

without parents, but the reader never finds out what happened to her parents, as if it is some local secret that no one talks about anymore. Billy Floyd's outsider status comes with a different kind of notoriety than Jenny's. Billy is a staple of the local gossip mill because he is mysterious, dark, and silent, and since no one can get any facts on his origin, the townsfolk assume and create the facts of his life, make him into something possibly much more interesting than he actually is. It is this mystery, this quiet mystique that makes him so irresistible to Jenny; he is someone that she feels she can relate to in her separation from her town. Because of the setting of their story, Jenny and Billy have more notoriety within the town, but they also have the chance to play into or against their roles. Their town offers a sense of support and community as well as a sense of alienation and judgment when the community feels one or the other extreme is called for. As it is in Miss Sabina's case, the size of the town can encourage community while setting up opportunities for isolation.

As Eudora Welty says, "Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering-spot of all that have been felt is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress" ("Place in Fiction" 62). In every story of *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, Eudora Welty uses place to solidify the folkloric ideas within her stories; folklore is abstruse and fantastic, so to modernize the lore and make it more relatable, Welty sets her stories in unmajestic towns "in which the terrain is precarious" (Randisi 35). The towns in which her stories are set create unique characters and situations that could not exist outside of those towns, and Welty knows when to break a theme in setting in order to create a more realistic story. The setting of Welty's stories is what takes the folklore from interesting but suspect to realistic, even plausible;

the practicality and conventionality of the small-town setting or the grubby sensibility of the New Orleans dive offers a stark contrast to the magic generally offered by folklore. It is this departure from the overwhelming magic of most folklore that makes Eudora Welty's folklore distinctively Southern, distinctively hers; with her inclusion of the Southern town, Eudora Welty provides each story her own regional flavor, creates more relatable characters and situations, and brings a modern slant to folkloric ideas. The combination of local characters, community memory, and locale-based events creates this Southern interpretation of folklore.

### Chapter 3

#### The Atypical Women of Welty's Lore

Little girls grow up playing at “being alluring, beautiful women, brides, mothers with husbands and children to command...dreams of love com[ing] true with a pretended lover or baby” (Prenshaw 46). Even though they do not realize it, girls who play at these roles play into the idealized archetypes of appropriate female behavior. In *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, Eudora Welty utilizes folkloric archetypes in order to create the basis for her own female characters. Though Welty eschews the flat, simplistic caricatures of female identity occurring frequently in folklore, she takes advantage of these characters and builds upon them to define a believable, more relatable character. Welty takes the evil crone, for example, and shows her reader what causes the crone's bitterness and isolation; Welty tells the story of the beautiful princess whose prince never saves her. The women in her stories initially seem similar to the women in folklore: the witches, the crones, the princesses, the peasant girls. As Eudora Welty builds her characters, however, she expands the experiences of the women in her stories and allows her reader to see the reality beyond the folklore; life is never as magical as a reader might hope, and Welty shows her reader the dark reality of folklore come to life. As Welty uses place to instill realism into folklore, her evolution of folkloric females further adds believability to her folklore: Prince Charming will not save every lonely girl with a kiss, but a mysterious man might come into a lonely girl's life and leave once he has gotten what he wants. Embracing this reality, Eudora Welty creates a world of archetypal women in atypical, folk-inspired worlds.

One of the folkloric concepts which Welty utilizes is the idea of the triad. Groups of three occur commonly in folklore; the Grimm brothers relay the tales of three little men in the wood, three spinsters, three snake-leaves, and three feathers while Greek mythology tells of the Fates, who also travel in threes and appear on “the third night” after major events (Lawson 125). Eudora Welty utilizes the idea of the female triad and makes her triad into the keepers of local legend in “Asphodel”; the three women gather at a place of mystical power. The place is decorated like an ancient Greek temple, and the three recall the story of their late friend’s life, a woman who was a staple of their small town.

The women of the triad have Greek names: Phoebe, Irene, and Cora. Phoebe’s name aligns with Artemis, goddess of the hunt and the moon; she is also the virgin goddess, who would not allow a man to sneak a look at her naked body without harsh punishment. Cora’s name comes from the Greek for maiden and is another name for Persephone, the bride of death dragged to the Underworld against her consent. Though her name does not link directly to a Greek goddess, Irene’s name means peace. The three convene at a property called Asphodel, a white flower found in Hades and sacred to Persephone. The woman of whom the triad speaks is Miss Sabina, a name evoking the mythical Sabine women of ancient Rome, who were stolen from their homes by Roman men in order to populate Rome and who, instead of fighting against the Romans and trying to escape, took part in Roman society and united the two cities. The connections that Welty’s characters have to their mythological roots emphasize the epic quality of the characters’ struggles and purposes. Miss Sabina, for example, is pushed into a marriage with a man she does not want. Because of her age, she has no other suitors and is

“instructed to submit” to the marriage (*The Wide Net* 202). Like the Sabine women, she is given no choice in her future.

As implied by their names, Cora, Irene, and Phoebe are all spinsters, with no indication that any of them has ever had a serious thought of marriage or anything but their devotion to Miss Sabina, having “cried [their] eyes dry” after Sabina’s funeral (*The Wide Net* 200). While the three storytellers align to the Furies, the Fates, or the Graces, they are oppositional to those groups in mythology in a few ways. While the Fates know the future, Cora, Irene, and Phoebe are discussing the past. While the Furies go after those who have done wrong, Cora, Irene, and Phoebe are chased away by goats, and while the Graces are beautiful and young, Cora, Irene, and Phoebe are spinsters.

Connecting her characters and setting to ancient mythology while creating clear ironic contrast, Eudora Welty turns her story into one of almost religious devotion. Brought to a religious fervor by food and drink, the three recite their story in a trancelike state, transitioning smoothly from narrator to narrator, sometimes speaking in unison, like religious fanatics involved in a large-scale ceremony. Cora, Irene, and Phoebe go through Miss Sabina’s story in great detail, including her forced marriage to the “great, profane” Don McInnis, the tragic and unexpected deaths of all three of her children, her betrayal at the hands of Don McInnis, and her transition into controlling and frightening soothsayer of her home town (*The Wide Net* 202). Their reaction to the death of their friend, the leader of the triad, the sibyl to whom they owe tribute, rivals that of religious groups who have lost a leader and must struggle to find their place when they have no one to guide them. The three women tell Sabina’s story with the detail and reverence of ascetics, “for its narrative [is] only part of memory now” (*The Wide Net* 202). The telling of the tale

releases Sabina's spirit from her worldly trouble, from the curse of her life as it releases Irene, Phoebe, and Cora from their devotional duties to Miss Sabina, showing how "the sibyl's prophetic power is subversive" because it is based on the oral tradition instead of the written tradition (Schmidt 80). As Miss Sabina conveys people's futures by oral and not written means, Irene, Phoebe, and Cora tell Sabina's story to release her influence from the town, not relying on some written version of the story to get through the telling. The telling of the tale also releases the town, freeing the community of their imposing crone, the commanding woman to whom they had to pay constant tribute. In this way, Miss Sabina displays the way in which "the sibyl is repeatedly linked with the Medusa figure, demonstrating that for Welty prophecy also carries a frightening price" (Schmidt 80). While everyone respects Miss Sabina and gives her the tribute she requests, they do so because they pity or fear her. Sabina's place as a sibyl only alienates her further from those around her.

While Welty includes the archetypal old crone or witch character, she invents a detailed past for her. Her reader understands why the crone is angry and controlling, has a grasp of the history that has made this woman into an old, bitter, dominating crone. As Miss Sabina's community tolerates her controlling behavior and forced self-inclusion because they know of her past, the reader begins to understand that perhaps old crones are not born bitter but are made by their situations. Welty provides a reason for the crone's actions, something not typically included in traditional folklore. As the reader understands her history, Sabina becomes more human and more sympathetic.

Welty does not always give such specific motivations for her characters' actions. In "The Purple Hat," the three men in this story have no such reverence or understanding



for the woman of whom they speak. One of the men, the bouncer telling the story, does not know the woman, has never met her but feels that he can tell her story accurately because he watches her every night at a casino. The other two men do not know her, have not heard of her, and have nothing to add to her story. They do not even know what to call her, referring to her as lady, ghost, and creature throughout the story.

The three men never piece together what the lady with the purple hat actually is, though the bouncer is convinced that the woman is a “lover that [is] a ghost” because of her “long thick black hair” though she abides by few of the other folkloric constructs typically aligned with ghosts (*The Wide Net* 225). As the three men ponder the genus of the “old and disgusting creature,” they do not look to other types of folkloric creatures for explanations; the bouncer, however, assumes that his ideas about the woman’s origins are correct, and he presents no alternate theories for the type of creature that she might be (*The Wide Net* 224). She may be a lamia, a creature with a “thirst for blood” and a tendency towards lasciviousness (Lawson 174). In one story a lamia that crushes unwitting men that she finds walking around at night; it is not implausible for that story to move from the cobblestone streets of ancient Greece to a casino in New Orleans (Lawson 175). In another case, a lamia is spurned in love by a man and kills him brutally in response; maybe the lady in the purple hat has been ignored or left by a lover and, as a result, takes revenge on every unsuspecting young man that she can lure (Lawson 176). In other legend, lamiae are known to seduce men and drain their blood. Maybe the lady in the purple hat is prowling the casino in search of another young male victim.

Perhaps, the woman is not a lamia at all; she may be a witch or a demon or even a vampire. She attracts young men and appears with a young man who is “not always the

same young man” on a nightly basis, the same time every night no matter the weather (*The Wide Net* 223). The most mysterious aspect of this woman is the way in which she has been murdered twice in the casino and still returns regularly with “no signs afterward, no trouble” (*The Wide Net* 224). Once she is shot; once she is stabbed with her own hat pin, but neither of these attacks has a lasting effect, causing the bouncer to consider that “it will take a third time” if this mysterious woman is to stay dead. He seems to stalk her like a jungle cat or hunter or even a Van Helsing-like vampire slayer, following her, considering ways to kill her.

In his intense scrutiny of the woman, the bouncer notes her “great, wide, deep hat such as has no fashion and never knew there was fashion and change” which the woman wears like a shield every time she comes to the bar (*The Wide Net* 225). The hat, like the woman, never changes, never shows wear. In fact, maybe the woman is not magical at all; maybe the magic lies only within the hat, and it is just by luck or happenstance that the woman even has the hat; the reader is never sure which aspect of the story has the magic: the hat or the woman. While the hat is unusual and easily recognizable, it is not the real amulet, the thing she protects; the bouncer theorizes that object that sits on the hat has the real the value: a small vial filled with no one knows what. The vial could just be a vial, or it could be filled with poison or something worth millions; it could be protective, or it could be nothing at all. The reader and the men in the story never know; the lady may not know, but there seems to be something important about the hat and the vial especially. As the reader and the men in the story do not know exactly what the lady is or what is special or magical or dangerous about her, they know something about the woman makes her the stuff of folkloric legend.

While the woman in the purple hat has a certain mystery, some characters are more clearly connected to their folkloric predecessors. Several of the young female characters are reminiscent of the lost princesses who occur so frequently in folklore, especially fairytales. The first of these princess figures is Cornella in “The Winds.” Cornella, like Cinderella, is a girl with no close family, dropped into a home where she is “not even a daughter in her side of the house, she [is] only a niece or cousin,” and not closely linked to anyone in her home (*The Wide Net* 216). While a evil witch “who possess[es] great power, and who [is] feared by the whole world” isolates Rapunzel, the community isolates Cornella because no one knows her history (Grimm 66). Josie’s mother even tells Josie that she “need not concern [her]self with—Cornella” because of who Cornella is and where she comes from (*The Wide Net* 211). Of course, it is neighbor girl Josie who truly considers Cornella royalty, referring to her as queen and begging Cornella to “let down [her] hair, and the King’s son will come climbing up,” directly connecting Cornella to Rapunzel (*The Wide Net* 214). Though Cornella connects with fairytale princesses in her isolation, she is not as successful as those characters in many ways.

In the Grimm brothers version, Rapunzel’s prince attempts to save her and meets up with her years later to share a happily ever after; in other versions of the story, Rapunzel’s prince also saves her from her imprisonment by the evil witch, but Cornella is not so lucky. Cornella hopes for an escape from her lonely and disappointing existence; she even has a prince, of sorts, whom she hopes will take her away from everything and will share her happy ending, but for Cornella, there is no happily ever after. The end of “The Winds” leaves Cornella with an uncertain but distinctively unpromising future. The

reader does not see what happens to her directly, but the note that Josie finds makes it clear that Cornella cannot depend on a prince to save her. Instead Cornella is left questioning: “O my darling I have waited so long when are you coming for me? Never a day or a night goes by that I do not ask When? When? When?” (*The Wide Net* 221). It is clear that Cornella will have to continue to ask when; it seems that her lover is more important to her than she to him. While fairytale princesses can depend on their loves to rescue them, girls on the Natchez Trace do not have such a luxury. While the princesses in fairytales are beautiful girls who are so frequently rescued from their bad situations, the isolated princesses in Eudora Welty’s stories are not so lucky.

Isolated like Livvie but for different reasons, Jenny in “At the Landing” is kept by her grandfather from the outside world in hopes of keeping her safe. Like Cornella, Jenny has no biological parents living with her. During her entire life Jenny lives without her mother, but she is constantly surrounded by her mother’s influence, paintings, and needlepoint work, surrounded by a mother that she has never known. Jenny hopes that “one day she [will] be free to come and go” as she pleases, and as an extension of this desire, she begins to interact with Billy Floyd, whose mysterious origins attract Jenny to him (*The Wide Net* 242). Jenny has never really known her mother except through what is left of her in the house and when she, “given permission, walk[s] up there to visit the grave of her mother” (*The Wide Net* 243). As if sent by Jenny’s mother, Billy Floyd appears near the grave himself already shrouded in local lore because no one “ha[s] ever been told quite who he [is] or where he [has] come from” (*The Wide Net* 254).

Jenny falls for the mysterious Floyd though she feels she cannot touch him or speak to him because “no kiss ha[s] ever brought love tenderly enough from mouth to

mouth,” so better not to touch than to give improper respect to love (*The Wide Net* 244). This mystery and this possibility of escape draw Jenny, and she believes that she is in love with Billy Floyd. She longs to escape with him, and she gets her chance during the flood; in fairness, he does save Jenny from the flood, but her safety costs her. Jenny notes that she is “obedient to her grandfather and would be obedient to anybody,” so she obeys Billy; sometimes he asks something as minor as having her eat something that he has cooked over the fire, but at least once he forces himself upon her, and though she does not consent, she allows the action to occur because she is obedient (*The Wide Net* 242).

Once he has raped her and dropped her at her home, Billy Floyd disappears, goes on an extended fishing trip, leaving Jenny to clean up after the flood and heal herself “of the shock of love” (*The Wide Net* 253). As Jenny heals from the initial encounter, she continues to think about Billy, wondering about a “love...filled with quiet” (*The Wide Net* 255). Though he has left her, Jenny never gives up the hope that he will come back, moving to the river and sleeping with any man who approaches her. Jenny keeps up “waiting for Billy Floyd” forever; she does not believe that he would just abandon her, though it seems quite obvious that he has done just that (*The Wide Net* 258). While Jenny interacts with the men on the river banks, she appears almost asleep or in a trance just like Briar Rose in the Grimm tale. Though numerous princes “perished miserably” in the attempts to save Briar Rose from her sleep, Billy Floyd takes on the role of the anti-Prince Charming because his actions have forced Jenny into her spell, and Billy Floyd has no intention of saving her from her half-sleeping existence (Grimm 170). Although Jenny’s love initially saves her, neither she nor Cornella gets a happy ending; instead

they are both disappointed in the men they thought might save them; they are both left to fend for themselves with little knowledge of the world.

Though Cornella and Jenny fail as princesses because their princes are unreliable, Livvie in “Livvie” is a different kind of princess. As a young woman, Livvie marries a much older man, Solomon. He spirits her away to a place where she never interacts with people because “an old man d[oes] not want anybody in the world to ever find his wife, for fear they w[ill] steal her back from him” (*The Wide Net* 228). Solomon attempts to protect Livvie from the dangers of outside in several ways. First, he does not “let her look at a field hand or a field hand look at her”; if Livvie cannot see anyone and no one can see her, she cannot leave Solomon (*The Wide Net* 230). Then, Solomon takes great care to create “a line of bare crape myrtle trees with every branch of them ending in a colored bottle” to keep spells and evil spirits at bay (*The Wide Net* 229). Though the bottle trees are only supposed to keep magic at bay, they seem to be sufficient at keeping visitors at bay as well.

All of Solomon’s work effectively isolates Livvie from her family, any friends she might have, and even spirits that would attempt to commune with her. As Snow White is left “bewildered at the sight of so many trees,” Livvie is also left alone in the woods with nothing but a convalescing old man to keep her company (Grimm 180). Though Livvie feels alone, she focuses her energy on being an ideal wife and prides herself on the fact that “she ma[kes] a nice girl to wait on anybody,” and she attempts to keep a pleasant house for Solomon and worries over his food, even though he scarcely notices her efforts (*The Wide Net* 230). Like Cinderella, Livvie is “obliged to work hard

from morning to night” with no reward except for the roof over her head and no acknowledgment of her efforts (Grimm 87).

It is not until Livvie meets Miss Baby Marie, the traveling cosmetics saleswoman, that Livvie realizes she can come and go from her house as she pleases, and with this realization, Livvie leaves her home and meets not a prince but a field hand, Cash, whose appearance seems to be well beyond his means. In an action in direct opposition to that of most fairytale princesses, Livvie “fasten[s] her red lips to [Cash’s] mouth” only to feel “in that instant...that Solomon’s death [is] at hand” (*The Wide Net* 236). While most fairytale kisses bring life, Livvie’s kiss with her antiprince serves as an omen of death, possibly because it is Livvie who initiates the kiss with a man who is neither her husband nor a prince; this kiss serves as another inversion of typical folkloric action. Livvie returns to her husband’s side for his death but leaves directly after, sensing that he has given her his blessing in his repentance for the sin of “keeping [Livvie] away from her people and from all the young people” (*The Wide Net* 239). Livvie leaves the home of her captor in the arms of her prince, proving that it might pay to be a more pro-active princess.

In *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, Eudora Welty’s female characters all have a depth not commonly seen in their folkloric counterparts; frequently that depth excludes a happy ending, but sometimes it is the break from the expected role that can lead to freedom, as in “Livvie.” Whether or not the women have success in their lives, the reader feels a greater depth of compassion for the characters because of their complexity. The story of the princess or the peasant girl finding love against odds is delightful in its escapist sentiments, but most people cannot relate to the plight of the poor girl marrying

up. As Welty gives a nod to the realities that these folkloric archetypes would face in the modern South, she makes her female characters into relatable women who gain the reader's sympathy. Though the basis of the character may be a monster or a princess, the characters remain similarly relatable because of the personal histories imparted to the reader; it is easier for a reader to feel sympathetic when he knows a character's history. While a reader may not have assumed he or she could feel the same amount of sympathy for Briar Rose and the lamia, Eudora Welty's collection of short stories allows for just that amount of understanding because of her transformation of archetypal characters within modern Southern settings.



## Chapter 4

### Rites of Passage

According to Alan Dundes, “a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member...will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group” (7). Groups have core traditions which designate members of the group as different from outsiders, and it is frequently necessary to have a ceremony in order to solidify and celebrate that distinction between members and outsiders, allowing members to show the ways in which they share “a certain kind of moral-social world, a certain sort of collective identity” with their group (Comaroff). In this way, rites of passage play a role within the folklore of a group. Groups often have traditional rites of passage in order to distinguish between different types of members like distinguishing those on the outer edges from those within the inner sanctum, children from adults, temporary from permanent members, and leaders from everyone else. Rites of passage are important within the cultural context of inclusion because “the process of learning movements or positions and the process of learning associated feelings both necessarily take place within a social and cultural context, that is, a community.” (Norris 111). The actions which occur during a rite of passage serve to teach members of the community meanings within the culture. While most think of rites of passage in terms of tribal living or religious groups, Eudora Welty brings rites of passage into small town Mississippi in several stories in *The Wide Net and Other Stories*; Welty involves types of rites of passage for characters intending on entering different parts of society: rites of passage for leaders and marginalized individuals and even those individuals simply wishing to enter the middle ground of their communities.

The Natchez Trace is evidently brimming with its own rites of passage. Though few rites of passage exist for females, the rituals in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* occur mostly for and around groups of men. Some of the men taking part in the rituals want to become leaders while others want nothing more than to be accepted within their own society; the success of these characters varies from story to story and ritual to ritual. Sometimes the ritual occurs within a group; sometimes the character must take part in the ritual alone. At least once, the character within the tale does not take part in the rite of passage but only watches from a distance, imagining the inner workings of the ritual to be much more glamorous than they actually are. It is this variance in the types of ritual and the meanings of those rituals which adds a greater amount of intrigue and interest to the action of the story; watching the characters go through the trials of inclusion creates a feeling of sympathy and compassion within the reader that does not occur if the reader is unaware of the ritual.

The character who takes the most passive though attentive part in the rites of passage is Josie in “The Winds.” Though Josie is too young to be an active participant in the ceremonies of young womanhood, she observes covetously as the older children enact their roles in young adult society; throughout her exclusion, Josie constantly wonders: “Am I old? Am I invited?” (*The Wide Net* 209). Josie is unaware of what actually constitutes the rituals of becoming a young woman, but she knows the markers of female maturity because she sees them in the garb of her heroine, Cornella. As the ideal of young femininity, in Josie’s mind if nowhere else, Cornella dons all the elements of “the big girls” (*The Wide Net* 209). Cornella’s appearance, with “her skirts swinging round” and “her pumps with the Baby Louis heels,” always causes Josie to become rapt, as if

hypnotized, and renders Josie incapable of anything but awe (*The Wide Net* 216). For Josie, Cornella is different from the other big girls, which is why Josie obsesses over Cornella more than the other girls; though “big girls are usually idle,” Cornella constantly busies herself with her physical appearance, specifically with her hair (*The Wide Net* 214). Cornella fusses with her hair all morning whether washing, sunning, or drying it dependent on the day and time of the morning. This careful preparation leaves Josie to fixate on Cornella’s hair, comparing Cornella to Rapunzel and referring to her as “the golden Princess” (*The Wide Net* 212).

Josie longs to have the same markers of maturity that Cornella has, longs to join the society of female young adults within her neighborhood. While Josie will eventually be old enough to take part in the same rituals in which Cornella takes part, Josie still mourns the fact that she “will never catch up with [Cornella]. No matter how old [Josie] get[s]” (*The Wide Net* 214). Though Josie will become grown up, she regrets that she will never be as grown up as Cornella, utilizing Cornella as the ideal of youthful femininity, as the prime example of how a big girl should act and present herself. While Josie is not yet able to take part in these preparations or ceremonies, not allowed to utilize these markers, she notes Cornella’s constant emphasis on these markers and celebrations of young adulthood, finding inspiration and near obsession in Cornella as she “explores this crucial stage of initiation in the lives of girls and young women, a time when the path [she] will follow is determined by [her] own choice or by the force of circumstances” (Kerr 133). The mysterious nature of these rites of passage makes the markers of adulthood all the more interesting to Josie, who finds that “mutability constitutes a challenge to grow that will replace cocoon like comfort with an ache that shows no signs

of being temporary” (Kreyling 25). Because Josie cannot yet take part in these feminine rites of passage, she has to experience them vicariously through her fantasies of how Cornella experiences the ritual of womanhood, and Josie’s fantastic ideas of feminine ceremony make the idea of growing up even more attractive.

Though the experiences which lead to womanhood are mysterious and something to wonder at and covet, the rites of passage for men are presented more directly within the context of several stories in the collection. Sometimes the ritual occurs within a group, but sometimes the boys trying to become men are very alone and do not even have the admiration of a younger generation to keep them company. Such is the struggle of Joel Mayes in “First Love.” Isolated because of his disability and familial disconnection, Joel must transition into manhood without the leadership or support of anyone; Joel is on his own. Early in his life, Joel “learn[s] what silence mean[s] to other people” and realizes how different he is from collective society (*The Wide Net* 155). Prior to the mysterious arrival of Aaron Burr, Joel is happy within his role in society. As the local inn’s boot boy, Joel considers that his work is important, “not a slave’s work, or a child’s either. It [has] dignity: it [is] dangerous to walk about among sleeping men,” so Joel considers that he has a place among society, even if it is a liminal place (*The Wide Net* 156). Once Aaron Burr, the infectiously enthusiastic stranger and infamous celebrity, bursts into his life, Joel finds that he has little choice but to take part in greater society, and in order to join society, Joel must discover his own rites of passage because of his inability to communicate effectively with his community.

Joel considers his interaction with Aaron Burr and his own entrance into his community as little more than “a new adventure,” but of course it is Aaron Burr’s joie de

vivre that initially causes Joel to reconsider his place in society (*The Wide Net* 156). As Aaron Burr unknowingly forces himself into Joel's surroundings, Joel cannot help but get pulled into the society in which Burr exists. Though Joel only sleeps in an empty room that is his "as it would have been a stray kitten's that came to the same spot every night," he still feels a certain ownership of the room and feels slightly violated when two strangers enter his room, with no intention of getting permission first; this feeling of violation displays Joel's desire to keep his distance from society (*The Wide Net* 155). While the strangers' presence initially repels Joel, he quickly becomes intrigued by the two men, allowing them to "open some heavy gate or padlock" which allows "nothing but brightness, as full as the brightness on which Joel had opened his eyes" (*The Wide Net* 157). It is this enlightenment that starts Joel's interest in joining the community and causes him to begin his rites of passage.

Joel's rite of passage involves living more like the average person because Joel's successful "breaking through to this world is in the balance"; he must not enter society in an exaggerated fashion, or he will fail in his transition (Kreyling 17). In an attempt to become a part of society in a subtle, simple way, Joel makes slight changes to his routine in order to make his world more presentable to Aaron Burr and those like Burr. Instead of simply falling asleep on his bench, waking only to clean boots at night, Joel begins to take more pride in his surroundings, begins to make the few items that he owns as presentable as possible for other people, Burr in specific. In his attempts to impress Burr, Joel notes "the fine polish he [gives] the candlestick, the clean boards from which he [scrapes] the crumbs," all of these actions to become more presentable for greater society (*The Wide Net* 158). Though he cannot take part in Burr's conversation, Joel watches

every night in rapt admiration, becoming involved in the dialogue in as much as he memorizes the nuances of Burr's motions and feels Burr's excitement over everything Burr says.

Joel studies Burr to the extent that Joel "kn[ows] nothing in the world except [Burr's] sleeping face," and Joel attempts to mimic Burr's actions during Burr's last night on the Natchez (*The Wide Net* 164). While this interaction and study bring Joel to be intrigued by the idea of community, he finds himself alone at the end of his story, grieving the family that he has lost. Perhaps as Joel copes with the loss of his family and his hero, he will utilize his rite of passage and enter society with the subtlety and grace of Aaron Burr, allowing Joel to fall out of the liminal position of deaf boot boy as he falls into another position in the middle of society, nothing too haughty, nothing too unimportant as it is Joel's position to thrive in the middle of things.

As Joel Mayes looks for a position in the moderate places in society, several of Welty's characters attempt rites of passage for positions of greatness, even if the greatness in the positions exists only in the character's mind. In "A Still Moment," three distinctively different characters attempt similar rites of passage for different positions of greatness. Lorenzo Dow, James Murrell, and Audubon are not that different in their desires in that "what each of them want[s] [is] simply all. To save all souls, to destroy all men, to see and record all life that fill[s] this world—all, all" (*The Wide Net* 196). Their desire for all, however, varies in its intention; Lorenzo is a spiritual man on a holy mission to save souls. James Murrell is an outlaw intent on chaos and destruction. Audubon is nothing more than a student content with observing and drawing the natural world. These three men represent "three visions of life that meet"; they have different

aspirations that run parallel to one another's aspirations (Haller 315). While the rites of passage in which they participate are vastly different, they all attempt to become one of the most well-known members in the groups to which they belong.

Lorenzo Dow plans to become a great man within his religious community by playing the role of "itinerant Man of God" more effectively than any other man of God (*The Wide Net* 189). In order to become this ideal version of himself, Lorenzo separates himself from the woman he loves in order to focus exclusively on God's work; he takes himself away from the one thing that might distract from achieving his goal, leaving his wife in Massachusetts in order to spread the word as far South as Mississippi. The only dialogue that Dow has sounds as if it came from a sermon, as if he attempts to convert the birds and bugs and trees. To prove his devotion to his task, Dow acts "at the command of an instinct" which he interprets "as the word of an angel" or "the word of the Devil," and it is his reaction to these light or dark influences which displays his ability to play up to his role in the church (*The Wide Net* 190).

In direct opposition to the greedy way in which Dow collects souls, James Murrell "believ[es] himself to be an instrument in the hands of a power," and he believes that power is evil (*The Wide Net* 191). Murrell finds his rite of passage in outdoing his own dark deeds; his worst deed is possibly when he kills a man "disguised...as an Evangelist," and his desire to kill an Evangelist adds another level of darkness to Murrell's deeds (*The Wide Net* 194). Though Murrell attempts to become the worst possible criminal, he is straightforward in his desire to destroy everything in his path, and he certainly feels no guilt about his actions. With the increasing darkness of his actions

and his inability to feel remorse for those actions, James Murrell appears to be at the forefront of evil activities.

While Lorenzo Dow and James Murrell's actions occur on the opposite sides of the moral spectrum, Audubon acts with no reference to morality, his mind only focusing on pure science. Audubon "disturb[s] nothing in his lightness" as he moves through the forest observing nature, coaxing himself to "always: remember" (*The Wide Net* 193). Acting only in reference to whether or not something will help him understand the environment, Audubon does not consider good or evil, and it is this lack of consideration which leads to Audubon's murder of the heron for science's sake. As all three characters stand enthralled by the bird, it is Audubon, arguably the most neutral character, who ends the heron-induced mania and moves the three men away from each other. Audubon's rite of passage involves becoming the most expert naturalist, and if he has to kill a bird to do so, he has no moral objection to that action; whatever will allow him to understand his world more successfully. While killing a heron is thought to be bad luck, Audubon does not seem worried about the stigma or consequence attached to his action.

Seemingly, the three men in "A Still Moment" have little in common; one acts for good, one for evil, and one for nature, but the three men attempt similar goals within their unique groups. Their actions vary, but the desired result is the same: to gain a position of expertise. The brief interaction of these three men, their mutual attraction to the heron, displays their similarity, and it is through this interaction with one another that the three men learn that "when man at last br[ings] himself to face some mirror-surface he still s[ees] the world looking back at him"; the ways in which these men interpret themselves are dependent upon their interactions with the world and, ultimately, the placement of the



others within the world (*The Wide Net* 197). It is within this interaction with one another that the three see how similarly they are acting, even if only for moment, and it is that realization that drives them away from one another.

Though Lorenzo Dow, James Murrell, and Audubon realize the parallel paths of their actions, they continue to move along their mundane routes, but in “The Wide Net” William Wallace Jamieson changes his actions because his wife, Hazel, forces him to do so. In changing his path in order to save his wife from killing herself in the river, William Wallace takes part in a rite of passage which makes him into a leader in his community. Like Odysseus, William Wallace leads a group on an epic, water-bound journey of self discovery. In contrast to Odysseus’s leading a group of soldiers home from war, and the William Wallace of Scottish history leading the Scottish against British oppression, William Wallace Jamieson does not lead such an impressive mission. While folk heroes lead great men on incredible journeys, William Wallace leads several rednecks on a river dragging during which no one intends to find a corpse. Eudora Welty, again, plays the awesome nature of folklore against the tedious nature of reality as she mocks the self-important nature of male rites of passage. When he leads a group of men in dragging the river, William Wallace has to orchestrate everything himself, including determining that it takes “some Malones...the six Doyles and their dogs, and [Virgil] and [William Wallace], and two little nigger boys” to drag the river effectively (*The Wide Net* 172). William Wallace, also, has to convince Doc of the necessity of dragging the river, though no one seems to genuinely believe that Hazel has drowned herself.

In his anxiety and ignorance, William Wallace forgets the name of the river in which Hazel supposedly drowns, and Virgil has to remind him that it is the Pearl River; it

is after this reminder that William Wallace decides to firmly take the role as leader and complete the rites which will allow him to take that role in the community. While Dante's Virgil is the wise guide in an underworld expedition, Welty's Virgil appears in ironic contrast to the Virgil of classical tradition because he thinks that knowledge comes automatically with his name. Though Virgil is with William Wallace throughout the river dragging, staying dry through William Wallace's submersion, Virgil only half-heartedly supports William Wallace, agreeing under breath with William Wallace's snide comments and attempting to take leadership from William Wallace on a few occasions. Virgil serves as yet another example of the foolishness of machismo.

In order to add her perspective to the ritual in "The Wide Net," Welty attempts to "use comedy to refigure the misogynistic and doomed masculinity" that appears within her story (McWhirther 42). Welty shows how ridiculous male ritual becomes when it is brought into the modern world; it is foolish to tie oneself too firmly to a purely masculine rite of passage especially one that mirrors the ritual of "The Wide Net." As the other characters take their roles around the net either pulling the net along or riding behind the net keeping the slack out, William Wallace dives straight into the river, spending "most of the time...out of sight, swimming about under water or diving," leading the men with a quiet work ethic (*The Wide Net* 177). Though his companions constantly ask William Wallace to prove his strength through physical interactions by requesting that William Wallace "rassle with" every eel that gets through the net, William Wallace ignores the request in order to focus on finding his wife (*The Wide Net* 179). As he ignores the request for displays of power, he is able to break away from "the resulting rituals of masculinity" that "are characterized by violence; by an avoidance of relational

entanglement; by an assertion of dominance over the uncontrollable threatening natural world” (McWhirter 48). His unwillingness to engage physically with the creatures that emerge from the net further aligns William Wallace’s story with *The Odyssey* in that Odysseus preferred to outsmart his enemies instead of defeating them physically. It is these typically masculine displays of inclusion Welty intends to avoid, and while she attempts to break William Wallace of his masculine attachments, he acts out in other ways in order to come to terms with his discomfort about this change. Some of the river creatures, like the eels and alligators, are neutral animals because they have opposing meanings in different elements of folklore, so they lend themselves to the idea of gender neutrality that Welty presents in her rites of passage. Despite these attempts at neutrality, William Wallace acts out when he continues to feel threatened by people “horning in on this river and anything in it,” as if William Wallace owns the river (*The Wide Net* 179). To get away from the stress of this threat, William Wallace continues his exploration of the river’s dark depths.

As William Wallace dives to what he believes is the deepest part of the river, he realizes that “if she [is] not here she [will] not be anywhere” in the Pearl River, and this realization helps William Wallace focus on his rite of passage while he no longer has to worry about Hazel’s safety (*The Wide Net* 180). As William Wallace emerges from his deepest plunge with “an agony of the blood and of the very heart,” he knows that something has changed within him, which will allow him to fulfill his place in society (*The Wide Net* 180). This emergence from the depths of the Pearl River serves as William Wallace’s rebirth, allowing him to “disavow...the evidence ...of [his] own inevitable biological destiny” as he “produce[s] or give[s] birth to [himself]” (McWhirter 47). This

rebirth gives William Wallace the power to transcend purely masculine or purely feminine rituals in order to become a more complete leader.

As the men devour the fish from the net, William Wallace disengages from the group in order to enact another ritual to gain his leadership. William Wallace ignores the discussion of the river dragging and begins “doing a dance so crazy that he would die next” then taking “the big catfish and hook[ing] it to his belt buckle” in an attempt to establish himself as the dominant male among the men in his group, and the men around him respond to his actions and cheer him on in seeming agreement to William Wallace’s leadership role (*The Wide Net* 181). The last action which solidifies William Wallace’s place as a leader is his interaction with a water snake. The so called “King of Snakes” challenges William Wallace by staring at him, attempting to charm him, but William Wallace refuses to break eye contact until the snake submerges again, showing the other men that he is the one in power (*The Wide Net* 182).

Once the men reach the end of the river dragging, William Wallace gives away the remaining fish and goes to his mother-in-law’s house to claim his bride; while he has convinced the men of his primacy, William Wallace must convince the women in his life of the same fact. Just as Odysseus has to battle many female creatures, William Wallace must do battle with his emasculating mother-in-law in order to finish his quest, and instead of attempting to fight his mother-in-law physically, he continues on Odysseus’s inspired path of nonviolence. He refuses to fall to his mother-in-law’s pressure and “turn[s] his back on her” in an attempt to disengage from her aggression (*The Wide Net* 185). As he walks home with Virgil, William Wallace takes one last chance to establish dominance when he forces Virgil to the ground in attempts to get him to admit William

Wallace's control of the river dragging. As Virgil nods to William Wallace's power, the two break apart, allowing William Wallace to go to his home and find his wife, having established himself as masculine leader. In a last nod to *The Odyssey*, William Wallace finds his wife waiting patiently at his home; she remains faithful in his abilities to fulfill his duties as leader and is genuinely pleased when he returns home victorious in his quest to become a leader.

It is within these rites of passage that the characters are able to take their individual places within their societies. Though rites of passage are common in folklore, Eudora Welty establishes her own ceremonies for acceptance within the community. Basing her rituals upon a folk traditional base, Welty is able to update traditions and make rites of passage part of modern lore. Male or female, involved directly or watching in admiration, attempting normalcy or leadership, rites of passage occur for everyone within a society. These modernized rituals fulfill the same roles as folkloric rituals, but the modern changes make the rituals more interesting and more relatable to Welty's readers.

## Chapter 5

### Folklore's Influence on Isolation and Inclusion

Community connects people to one another, and folklore allows members of a community to share their history, their culture, and their ideals with one another. Folklore also serves as a way to explain culture to those from outside cultures. While a particular cultural ritual may seem bizarre to those unfamiliar with it, the history behind the ritual creates a clearer cultural picture of that ritual and the reasons for its existence, making it easier for outsiders to understand and relate to the ritual. Frequently when individuals are separated from their culture, either by physical or emotional distance, they feel isolated from those around them who do not share their culture as well as isolated from their own culture, isolated from individuals like themselves, and folklore serves “as a means of escaping this isolation” (van Suntum 378). Whether an individual feels the need to share his cultural heritage with those different from him or simply holds onto his culture’s lore in order to remember those like himself, folklore has the ability to connect people, to bring them together. In this way, folklore “is ultimately reassuring: it protects the individual from the world outside” and reminds the individual of the sense of community from which he is separated (Randisi 43). Shared folklore brings individuals together within a community because people are ultimately social creatures, and for the most part, people need and appreciate human interaction.

Keeping in mind the idea of community, individuals are often isolated in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* and folklore in general. In folklore, fairytales especially, isolation appears as a punishment. In the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* alone, Rapunzel is kept in a tower away from everyone because her father stole from a neighbor’s garden; Briar

Rose is forced into a deep sleep because her parents forced isolation on a local wise woman, and the frog prince is pushed away from his entire species because of some unstated wrong. These stories exemplify the ways in which humans consider isolation a punishment, something undesirable and terrifying. One reason for this fear of isolation comes from the fact that people's identities are linked to their cultures, and if a person does not have a culture, he has to find another way to understand his identity. Lisa A. Rainwater van Suntum discusses "the resilient bond between Jewish folkloric traditions and the creation of Jewish identity," but people of all cultures use tradition to discover identity within their groups (380). It is when people fall away from their cultural ideas of identity that they begin to feel isolated within their communities, and in many stories of *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, Eudora Welty considers the plight of characters who have not yet found their identity within their cultural tradition, displaying the struggle that characters often have as they try to integrate themselves within society; Welty, however, adds an original turn to these stories of cultural confusion when she gives characters an understanding of their culture which gives those characters the freedom to alter their own positions within society. While not all characters have this ability, the characters who understand their societies the best and have the means to alter themselves often take advantage of this opportunity to change their societal placement.

In "First Love," Joel Mayes is a boy who has found an atypical place for himself in society, and he is happy as "a little part of the place where [time] pass[es] over him" (*The Wide Net* 155). Though he lives an unusual sort of life, he fits himself nicely into his community and exists as the kind of outsider who is still acceptable by his culture's standards, "alone in the way he like[s] to be alone," not forced into loneliness by his

inability to meet some cultural norm (*The Wide Net* 156). After his interaction with Aaron Burr, Joel attempts to find a more normal place in his society, not looking to be a hero but not looking to return to his marginal position as boot boy. Joel considers what his identity should be in society, and because he is a child and should have the same identity as any other boy in his group, he weeps both for the loss of his parents and his inability to attain his cultural identity because of his unique circumstances. When he becomes dissatisfied with his place in his community, he has to consider his identity and determine how to change both his cultural identity and the place in society that goes along with that identity.

Cornella, in “The Winds,” is another character whose cultural identity is marginalized because of circumstances which are out of her control. As the distant relative living in the home of the neighborhood’s poorest family, Cornella becomes the girl that classier neighborhood girls “need not concern [themselves] with” (*The Wide Net* 211). While Cornella can count herself among the neighborhood’s big girls, she is not the chosen companion of most of the other girls and must entertain herself with her primping in her front yard most days. Though Josie idolizes Cornella “as a forbidden playmate,” no one else seems nearly as impressed with her even her own family tends to leave her alone in the yard (*The Wide Net* 213). As Joel’s lack of a family keeps him from certain identities within society, Cornella “search[es] for an appropriate role model” to help her attain an identity (Millichap 86). Though Cornella cannot find a fitting place in her community, the end of “The Winds” implies that she wants to find a place somewhere when Josie finds a note indicating that Cornella is waiting for someone to take her away from her current life, someone who has not yet come to get her. Cornella fails to find a



new place in society because she depends on someone else to save her and depends on someone else to lead her, and since she does not alter her position in society, she is stuck in her marginalized place. As Cornella does not live up to the norms of her current community, she finds herself isolated from members of the community both within and outside of her own household, and the only way for her to find acceptance and a new position is to find a new community, but thus far she has had no luck in her escape and remains the lonely girl fixing her hair in the yard.

Another girl made lonely by her familial influence is Jenny in “At the Landing.” Jenny’s grandfather keeps her locked in his home away from her community in order to protect her, and “the shy Jenny” fulfills the role as attentive, obliging, and obedient granddaughter, but when Jenny’s grandfather dies suddenly, she loses her role (*The Wide Net* 241). Because of her forced separation from her community, she does not know what other role she can fulfill, and she is left to determine where she fits without the benefit of sufficient cultural knowledge. When Billy Floyd helps her during the flood, she attempts to find a place with Billy, and she allows him to violate her and attempts “to please and flatter him” when the two are together (*The Wide Net* 252). No matter what role Jenny attempts to fill in her relationship with Billy Floyd, she is left in the end, the empty and longing product of a failed effort at cultural normalcy, yearning to be something to someone and telling everyone that she is still waiting for Billy. While Cornella lacks the means to save herself, Jenny lacks the knowledge, but both find that a girl cannot depend on a man when attempting to change her societal position. Because of her inexperience within her community, Jenny lacks the knowledge to find her cultural identity and

become a part of her community, and she suffers for her ignorance, showing that knowledge of cultural norms is a necessity for inclusion within a society.

While Jenny isolates herself because of her lack of cultural knowledge and experience, some characters isolate themselves purposefully. In “Asphodel,” Miss Sabina takes part in normal cultural rituals like marriage and childbirth only to reconsider her identity after her children’s death and her husband’s affair. Miss Sabina goes from wife and mother to shaman within her community, and while few people are happy to have Sabina prophesy over their family events, they tolerate her because she is fulfilling a marginalized role within their lives. Though she “proclaim[s] and wield[s] her power” over the people in her town, she also gives the town expensive and impressive gifts, so people play into her eccentric actions (*The Wide Net* 204). She lives among the people, telling their futures and taking their offerings but keeps herself separated from the people in the way that she avoids the post office, the only place that does not fall under Sabina’s control. Miss Sabina lives within her new role and enjoys “the mystical and rigorous devotion” she receives because of her actions, but she does not actively participate within community activities (*The Wide Net* 205). As a character that chooses to move into a more liminal position in society, Miss Sabina shows that “learning to exist in personal relationships is crucial because it is what insures survival” (Randisi 38). Because Miss Sabina knows how to interact with people in ways that are advantageous to everyone, she is allowed to become the seer of her community and live in an eccentric position in her society.

As Miss Sabina begins in the role typical of a Southern woman and transitions to a peripheral position within her community, William Wallace Jamieson in “The Wide

Net” goes from average married man existing in his community to assertive small town leader taking control of all aspects of his life. Initially, William Wallace is just a guy coming home from a night of drinking, only worried about whether or not his wife is going to speak to him and how long he will have to sleep on the couch, but what William Wallace finds is that “she’s vanished, she went to drown herself” (*The Wide Net* 169). His life is so out of control that he cannot even manage his hormonal wife’s overreaction to his irresponsible behavior, so he steps into a leadership role which is unique to his culture, becoming the leader of a river dragging which intends to find his wife’s body. During the dragging, William Wallace faces many struggles and completes his tasks like a true leader, constantly reasserting his leadership role throughout the quest. Whether diving to the bottom of the Pearl River, standing up to his mother-in-law, or capturing a giant catfish, William Wallace fulfills his community’s requirements for a leader, and as he becomes a leader, he gains an understanding of how to be a responsible husband and father. In filling his community role, William Wallace can more effectively fill his domestic role as well.

The characters in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* have an awareness of how their cultures influence their identities. Some of the characters learn to use the identities created by lore to their advantage; they know enough about the available social roles to choose a role most appropriate while keeping a place, though it might be marginal, in society. However, the less savvy members of society do not have as many options; generally it is the unaware member of society that ends up in the most isolated role. According to Jennifer Randisi, “the deepest fears in Welty’s fiction often surround questions of identity,” and this collection of short stories certainly delves into issues of

identity and the ways in which identity influences a character's feelings of isolation or inclusion (41).

Society is the predominant influence on identity because society constantly shows members examples of cultural norms by which the members are supposed to live. While Linda Orr states that she “can’t even conceive of [her] own family history, [her] own identity, without being completely entwined in that inseparable couple, southern history and literature,” the characters’ identities in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* are equally as entwined with and defined by the region’s history (132). The ways in which these characters fit into their roles allow them to take a more or less active role in society dependent on the character’s knowledge of society; while some characters are less involved in choosing their roles because of their ignorance of available roles, some characters choose to be less involved in society. This awareness of societal position and the fact that the characters actively influence their own positions in society alter the reader’s perceptions. Individuals are not stuck and can move from their levels of interactions as long as they are familiar with the systems of society and know how to play the system. Even as they play with society’s rules, they still allow themselves to be shaped by their cultures; they just take a more active role in the shaping.

## Conclusion

Eudora Welty fills *The Wide Net and Other Stories* with references to all types of folklore, but instead of presenting folklore in only its classical forms, Welty transforms the folklore into something modern and more relatable. She allows the folklore to fulfill several functions within her stories; through folkloric means, her characters find their identities, fulfill their roles within society, and relate their stories to others similar to or different from themselves all while Welty notes the frequently ridiculous archetypes in folklore and creates opposition to those archetypes within her work. Her characters take on the roles so often seen in folklore, but Welty allows her characters to expand beyond the archetypal roles upon which they are based; she gives them more realism than folkloric characters. Welty changes the setting of folklore in order to make the folklore occur in a realistic, if slightly foreign, surrounding.

When the settings become real, the characters follow, and this added realism makes the characters relatable. As readers begin to relate to Welty's characters, the audience finds it more difficult to see the characters as stereotypical rednecks; the characters are not humorous freaks but people with histories and good reasons to react in the ways that they do. While folkloric archetypes are the basis of her characters, Welty's additions make her characters in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* believable within real-world settings. The men and women in the collection attempt folkloric goals but fail because of their real-world weaknesses, shortcomings, and setbacks just as real people often do.

Welty frequently speaks of the importance of folklore in the formation of fiction, and it is her ability to interpret folklore in new ways, in ways that make it more relevant

to a modern audience, that allows her to break from typical lore. With this break from lore, Welty creates many ironic contrasts to folklore like Jenny's anti-Prince Charming and Livvie's kiss of death. She also finds ways to mock some folkloric archetypes like the masculine rites of passage in "The Wide Net." With these changes to the folklore, Eudora Welty accomplishes several things; she makes unfamiliar folklore more accessible and expands the folklore to make it her own while paying homage to her culture. Eudora Welty takes great pride in Southern lore, and she presents lore in her stories in order to share the lore with audiences who are not familiar with it, and in order to make that lore more accessible, Welty eases her audience into her folklore by including more widely known folklore as a grounding point as well as in her expansion of the traditional definitions of folkloric archetypes into their ironic opposites. *The Wide Net and Other Stories* displays the ways in which folklore's universality allows people from different backgrounds to relate more readily to one another through a common understanding of folklore.

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## Vita

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee to Thomas and Linda Pendergrass, Leigh Pendergrass is the younger of two children. She attended the Baylor School in Chattanooga, Tennessee from seventh to twelfth grade. For college, Leigh attended Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio where she was in the Honors program. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor's of the Arts in English and was awarded the President's Award for the senior athlete with the highest GPA in May, 2007. In August, 2007, she was accepted into the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's Master's program where she studies English with a concentration in Literature. In the Fall of 2008, she presented a paper at the Symposium on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga during a panel on women's Civil War literature called "'What Anybody Now Could Do to Anybody: How the Civil War Changed Race, Class, and Gender in Eudora Welty's 'The Burning.'" In the Spring of 2009, she presented three papers at the First Annual Graduate and Undergraduate Student Conference on Literature, Rhetoric, and Composition at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; the papers were titled "Dominating for America: Gendering the Frontier in Willa Cather's *One of Ours*," "Looking through Death: How the Eyes Determine the Character in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," and "The Evolution of Female Power in Arthurian Literature." She is also currently a member of the Sigma Tau Delta Honors Society. Leigh is currently working on her Master's thesis: "Like an Old Song They Carried in Their Memory": Eudora Welty's Transformation of Folklore in *The Wide Net and Other Stories*."