

A Dark Rose

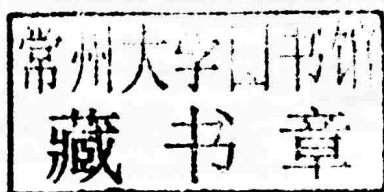
LOVE IN EUDORA WELTY'S
STORIES AND NOVELS

Sally Wolff

A Dark Rose

Love in Eudora Welty's Stories and Novels

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SOUTHERN LITERARY STUDIES

Scott Romine, Series Editor

*For my mother, Elaine Wolff,
and my brother, Sam Wolff*

Birds came down low into the althea bush . . .
as silent as petals shedding from a dark rose.

—EUDORA WELTY, *Losing Battles*

Preface

Reminiscences

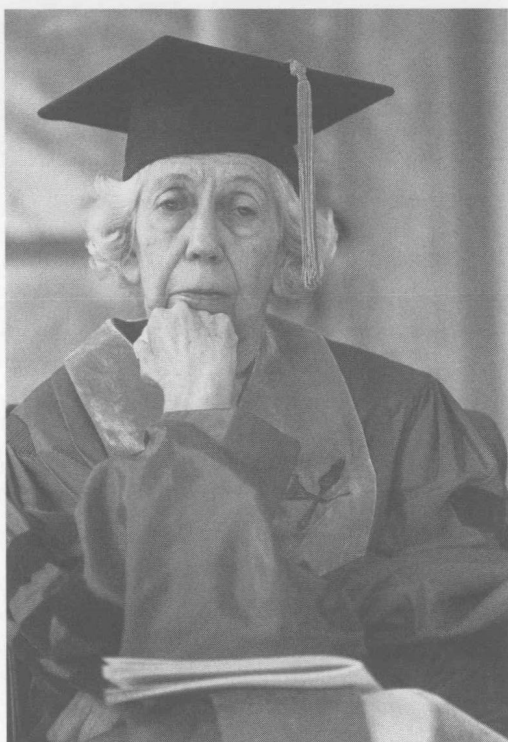
I hope there will be another occasion.

—EUDORA WELTY, telephone communication with Sally Wolff, July 1982

Eudora Welty came to Emory University to receive an honorary degree in June 14, 1982. At that time, I was completing a dissertation on her work. Dr. Floyd C. Watkins, professor of southern literature at Emory and my thesis director, held a welcome party at his home in her honor. I attended the party and met Eudora Welty for the first time.

The evening was typical of faculty parties at Emory. Other English Department professors, graduate students, and a few other friends were talking in the living room and dining room, and extra chairs were scattered here and there for guests. Miss Welty was seated on the sofa, in modest pose, legs crossed at the ankle. She wore a soft, mauve silk dress that was sophisticated but not flashy. Her face had an expression that reflected her characteristically serene composure and even-temperedness as she greeted and conversed with a full house of academicians and other guests who swirled around her.

After a decent interval I approached Miss Welty. She saw me coming, and she held a still but graciously inviting expression on her face. Nervous about meeting the author whose work I had been reading and studying for years but encouraged by her small indication of welcome, I introduced myself. She spoke softly to me and invited me to sit beside her. We talked for twenty minutes. I said I had seen a televised interview in which she talked about unusual southern names that she had heard. I asked her to say again a long name that she had recited that night. She gave it to me in one long rhyming burst: "Ta-li-tha-Ta-bi-tha-Ta-mil-ity-Jane-Ta-ka-ta-line-Ta-ca-ta-line-Ruby-Fisher-Valentine," and then she added "the last name is



Eudora Welty received an honorary degree at the Emory University commencement held June 14, 1982. Sally Wolff met her that night at a faculty party hosted by professor Floyd C. Watkins. Reprinted by permission of Emory University.

Floyd." I am not sure about the spelling of this name and regret not asking about that too, but the lilting cadence in her voice as she said that name, performed like a chant or a song or a poem, in the deep register of her normal speaking voice, is unforgettable.

I asked for other southern names that intrigued her. "I have another one," she said. This one carried more facts: "Elder-Brother-Come-to-Tell-You-All-Your-Friends-Are-Dead-and-Gone." She waited for my reaction. I laughed without fully grasping the underlying serious tone. My reaction was too quick and inappropriate—I was wrong to laugh at this one. This one was deadly serious. After the Civil War, she said, someone had been

told this message—that all his friends were dead and gone. The seriousness of the name is reminiscent of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in which the protagonist lives only to tell the horrific story of what has befallen him. In Welty’s example the name recounted the aftermath of the Civil War. Fallen soldiers could be commemorated not only in the tall statues that would appear in town squares across the region but also in the simple act of naming in honor of the terrible loss. The name commemorated such a somber story.

In our brief encounter Welty had given me two examples of the southern penchant for naming—to celebrate the amusing and to mark the momentous. Also, she had given me perfect samples of her two most famous fictional voices: light and comic, the touches for which Welty is so well known, but also by contrast, the haunting and tragic.

That same evening I asked about her current writing; she demurred and instead asked about my writing. I said I was writing about her fiction and wanted to meet with her at her home in Jackson, Mississippi, for an interview. She said, “All right, that would be fine,” and I was pleased with the prospect of a chance to talk with her longer and more thoughtfully at her home. A month later I telephoned her and reminded her of our having met at the faculty party at Emory. She said she remembered. I asked if I could travel to see her in Jackson to discuss her work and ask her some questions. She startled me with her answer, which was delivered, as if it were a yes, wrapped in the deep tones of her sweet voice, with its distinctively southern charm. Her emphasis on the second and last words of her reply belied her true meaning, however: “*I hope there will be another occasion.*”

In hindsight I see that this reply reveals two of her strongest and most attractive characteristics. On the one hand, she responded with the utmost graciousness of manner. On the other, the answer was a determined no. Eventually, after a period of waiting, I tried again to visit her, and she declined again. I wrote her a letter, described my research project, and asked again to meet with her. She did not reply. Then, thankfully, I described my difficulty to Dr. John Stone, Emory cardiologist and poet, who was also a native of Jackson and knew Miss Welty and her circle of friends. He wrote a letter of introduction that he thought would help. He addressed

the letter to Dr. Patti Carr Black, who was at the time director of the Mississippi State Department of Archives and History and a very good friend of Eudora. His letter, he later said, attested to my earnest interest in Miss Welty's work, and I believe it helped my cause.

When I visited Jackson that summer, my main goal was to work on an article in the Mississippi State Archives, and I had almost lost hope of meeting with the author. After weeks of reading Miss Welty's manuscripts and enduring rather cold archival temperatures, along with the solitary life of an academic in a strange town, I gathered the courage to telephone Miss Welty again. She seemed more receptive and asked why I was in town. I explained that I was studying her manuscripts at the archives and renewed my request to meet her. This time she agreed.

An Octet of Cosmonauts

We decided to go to lunch. Miss Welty chose the location—a local, upscale grill—and as we walked into the restaurant, her power of observation became immediately apparent to me. She said in a deep-toned, soft aside: “Look at that!” and nodded her head toward a table of eight ladies seated for lunch: four on one side and four, facing them, on the other side. They had identical coiffures, teased up high in perfectly round, blonde bubble shapes. We both smiled. In retrospect I see that she had noticed what I had missed. The ladies looked like an octet of identical cosmonauts about to ascend into outer space. Welty had such an eye for the comic. Her stories are rich with these wry moments. Had she still been writing fiction at the time, no doubt she would have landed those bouffants in a hilarious tale.

Her extraordinary receptiveness of the world was attuned not only to simple, ordinary, hilarious, or sad observations but also to the deeply disturbing, complex, and tragic. She transformed what she saw and what she heard in the world into remarkable fiction. One of her best short stories, “A Worn Path,” is a good example. The title is a concise and clear indicator of the story's main image and theme. An old woman walks through woods filled with obstacles and on to town to procure medicine. What at first seems to be a story describing the vicissitudes of old age becomes in the final moments a dark political comment. When the woman, Phoenix

Jackson, arrives at the clinic, a nurse patronizes her in a condescending voice. Phoenix stiffens in response to the insult, but fairly quickly she recovers her dignity and begins her long walk home. A short story, Welty said, should be “like a string pulled taut,” and in this one, like so many of her others, she pulls “taut”—at the end—by giving the reader a startling realization: what might at first seem familiar and reliable is instead tightly knotted ethically, morally, and politically.

Tellingly, a biographical note illuminates “A Worn Path”: during her long walk Phoenix Jackson mentions to a stranger, although she does not explain exactly what she means, that “I was too old at the surrender.” Welty once heard an old woman utter this phrase, and it caught Welty’s acute ear. She asked the old woman what it meant, and the reply was that she was too old at the surrender that ended the Civil War to learn to read. This very phrase set Welty on her course to compose the story. Here is Welty’s power—the moral tale of an old woman who is free yet still shackled by age, illiteracy, poverty, and prejudice.

Our lunch continued. She ordered shrimp remoulade and drank two bourbons. The drinks had no visible effect on her. We talked for almost an hour about politics and nonliterary matters. As I listened to her describe her life, I realized that I was in the presence of an artist whose command of verbal language was as sophisticated as the written. Somehow this phenomenon surprised me. I had imagined that Welty spent long, agonizing hours laboring to find the right metaphor and simile. While that may or may not have been true, what I witnessed that day is that she created metaphorical language seemingly without any effort whatsoever. The metaphors flowed from her speech with the same easy proliferation as in her writing. For example, I brought her a hibiscus with large orange blooms. She said immediately and with another broad smile “It’s a sunrise.”¹ She described having seen a woman on television who had on a large hat with long panels draping down the sides of her temples. The woman had fastened campaign buttons all the way down the panels. Welty’s hands showed with a sweeping motion down the sides of her head where the woman’s hat lapels had flowed and said effortlessly, “It is a waterfall.”

Finally, she fixed her clear, blue-eyed gaze on me with a pointed question: “Why are you here?” I asked her for an interview. She said, “All right,

but we'll have to go to your apartment. My house is not air-conditioned." Her house, as I would eventually be invited to discover, although un-air-conditioned, was blissfully cool in summer because of shade afforded by an enormous old oak tree. The heat of the day was not the reason, then. She must have had another reason for conducting our first meeting elsewhere.

"I Couldn't Bear It Either": Losing and Finding the Climbing Rose

After our meeting at the restaurant, Eudora Welty allowed me to visit her at her home almost every summer, and our friendship lasted until her death. On one occasion in the mid 1980s, I asked to see the backyard. I asked because I imagined that the climbing roses would be there. She had written about them in *The Optimist's Daughter* with deep poignancy, and she mentions roses many times in her gardening letters (see, e.g., Eichelberger, *Tell about Night Flowers* 15, 27, 37, 42). The roses in her novels are symbolic of love, as is common in literature, but for Welty the rose also implies home, memory, grief, and longing: "a heart that can empty, but fill again." I knew the roses were real.

She agreed to show me the backyard. We emerged from the old, Tudor-style house into the yard by passing through the back screened door. As we walked, Welty pointed to bearded irises, the lemon daylilies, and a mimosa tree. It was a hot day in July. Mosquitoes quickly surrounded us. As we swatted them, we talked about the climbing rose canes that had migrated through the fence in front of us and into the neighbor's yard.

"Oh, something awful happened," Welty began. "The man who has been helping me in the yard"—she paused, as in her fiction, to impersonate the voice of the speaker—"he has a deep, gruff voice like this"—she lowered her voice even more to mimic his low tones—"because something is wrong with his throat. He says, 'I can do *anything*,' but the truth is, he *can't* do anything! He grew tired of caring for the roses, so he took the climbers and pulled them through the fence into the neighbor's yard. If they bloomed, I haven't seen them for years."

"Did you ask him to pull them back through to your side of the fence?" I asked her.

"Well," Welty said, "I asked a friend of mine, and she said that the canes have become too inflexible to bend back through to my side." The climbing roses thus had been lost.

"Let me look at them," I offered. "My mother is a rose grower, too, and I'm handy in the garden."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that," she said generously. "It's too hot, and the mosquitoes will eat you alive, and the poison ivy is everywhere." I sensed that even though she once again had graciously demurred, she wanted me to try my hand with the roses. Modesty and politeness, two of her most essential and charming qualities, were all that stood between the roses and me. I headed for the fence and hoped that I had not misinterpreted her reserved southern manner.

Then I found the climbers, planted long ago along the old wooden fence that divided one side of her yard from the neighbor's. The wood railings were tightly knit with less than an inch separating them. The rose vines, gnarled and interlocked with the planks of the fence, had long since grown through the fence into the neighbor's yard. To complicate matters further, honeysuckle vines crisscrossed everywhere and held the rose-bushes in place with heavy growth and thick knots. The climbers bound themselves fast to the neighbor's azaleas. My first task was to pull hard with both arms out straight and all my weight against the honeysuckle vines, to snap them and yank them away.

Miss Welty had long since walked back inside her house to escape the heat and the mosquitoes, but while I was in the her garden, she perched herself at the kitchen window and watched me carefully and steadfastly, and whenever I turned back to look, she was still sitting there, her white hair almost ghostly visible through the darkness of the screened window. Her watchful gaze and her steady position at the window were all the encouragement I needed to see me through three hours of hard work in the July heat among the tangled honeysuckle webs of the rose garden.

Eventually, the roses sprang free, and long green tendrils of the canes whipped high into the air. With coaxing, the thick canes came back through small cracks in the fence railing. From her post in the kitchen, Miss Welty clapped her hands when the vines came home. The last bush, the farthest away, seemed to be the oldest. She called its name "Banksia" and said it



Chestina Andrews Welty, Eudora Welty's mother, in the rose garden at her home in Jackson, Mississippi. Reprinted by permission of Russell & Volkening as agents for the author. Copyright ©Eudora Welty, LLC.

was the first one her mother had planted, years ago.² “It still has the most blossoms and the sweetest fragrance,” Miss Welty said. The trunk of the rose was thick with age, twisted with honeysuckle, and crusted with bark.

The old trunk, three inches in diameter—thick and wide for a climbing rose and a testament to its age—resembled the wood trunk of a tree. This climber still remained trapped between two boards, a job for tomorrow and a good carpenter. This oldest climbing rose, grand even with few blooms that day, with deeply colored, holly-shaped leaves, called to mind the metaphorical prominence that Welty gave the climbers in her novel *The Optimist's Daughter*: “Memory returned like spring. In some cases it was the old wood that did the blooming.”

“My mother was an avid rose gardener,” Welty said to me later, after

the gardening work. "She had thirty bushes in the far garden at the back of the yard. They succumbed to a blight of nematodes before her death. Nematodes destroy the entire inner system of the plant and can kill a whole garden in a matter of days. That's what happened to hers. But by then her sight was so dimmed that I moved the old crabapple tree up to the middle of the yard. That was twenty years ago." She pointed to a great, spreading tree between the front and farthest gardens, where the roses had been. "She couldn't see past that tree. She assumed the rose garden was there. Now I'll have to get out the book and look up the fertilizing time for the climbers," she said in a hopeful voice.

"I still can't get over what you did out there," she said. "When I saw those canes coming over the fence, I just couldn't believe my eyes. You did exactly what my mother would have done—she would have just gone out there and done it!"

We stood in the dark, cool hallway of her house and talked. She was pensive and quiet. "My thanks to you go back many years."

"I couldn't bear it that the climbers were in the neighbor's yard," I said.

"I couldn't bear it either," she said.

The pain may have seemed unbearable to her, but she did endure it, and for a long time.

Honoring Our Mothers' Rose Gardens

Welty's memories of her mother's rose garden, to which both she and her mother contributed years of careful attention, find their way into her stories and novels. Roses take on symbolic and imaginative power in these works. The rose for Welty represents devotion, home, love of family, lost youth—and grief. In "A Curtain of Green," for example, the widow's garden work prompts her mind to roam across the emotional hardscape of doubt, loneliness, and oblivion. For years following her mother's illness and death, Eudora Welty maintained the garden as she and her mother always had. In her own late age, however, Welty eventually found herself unable to keep the garden as she and her mother faithfully had done for decades. That the climbing roses languished in the neighbor's yard for so long indicates the extent of the ravages of time and old age on the writer

and her garden. The degree of distress apparent in Miss Welty's voice and on her face, just in describing the displaced climbers, attests to their importance to her, her inability to reclaim them, and the pain she felt, even a decade later, in having had to let them go.

In the year of the nematodes Miss Welty planted a large apple tree in the forward part of the garden to shield her mother from the truth—that the rose garden was lost. Welty's action in planting the tree was one of protection. She spared her mother the pain of knowing about the lost rose garden. Just as Mrs. Welty had protected and overprotected her daughter, so much so that Welty would later write that she "came from a sheltered life," now it was her turn to shelter her mother. She did so by caring for her mother, physically and psychologically, throughout her mother's elderly years. The apple tree, which hid the diseased rose garden from her mother's failing sight, is a powerful testament of the need of this daughter to guard her mother from hurt and despair. The blight of nematodes and the destroyed rose garden, Welty feared, might crush her mother, psychologically. The loss of the rose garden, which they had both worked hard together over many years to preserve and had enjoyed so much, would be too much to bear.

My own mother is also an experienced rose gardener. She has successfully nurtured a rose garden in our home in Arkansas that was planted by my Romanian immigrant grandfather in 1926. She cultivates, among other varieties, the same beautiful and highly prized hybrid tea roses, and even a few climbers, that Miss Welty and her mother enjoyed. Early in the morning, before I departed each summer on trips to see Miss Welty, my mother would say, "Wait a minute," and she would walk out into her garden to cut a fresh bouquet of roses. She prepared them for the three-hour car trip from our home to Miss Welty's in Jackson, Mississippi, by pouring water into a simple but ample tin bucket and setting them on newspapers on the back floorboard of the car. Then I went on my way to Jackson with the wonderfully aromatic scent of fresh roses on board.

Upon my arrival at Miss Welty's house each summer, I presented her with my mother's bucket of freshly cut roses. I always apologized for not presenting them in a crystal vase. With a warm smile, Miss Welty would gather the roses up in her arms and say how pleased she was to have them—



Elaine Wolff in her rose garden in Dumas, Arkansas, 1976. Photo by Haskell Wolff. Photo courtesy of Sally Wolff.

and how pleased her mother would have been. She and I established a friendship that would last for nineteen years, until her death. We were linked partly by the literature she had written and which we spent long hours discussing, but we also were closely linked by the hybrid teas and the climbers—from my mother and her mother, as the generation turned, to her and me. She would lift the roses from the bucket, take them inside to find a proper vase, and place them on the living room mantelpiece. Then she would turn around, face me, and break out into a glorious smile. We had honored our mothers' rose gardens.

Much later I learned that as a younger woman, Welty's signature gift to others was the rose—taken as gifts to friends (Marrs 225). Although Miss Welty never mentioned that tradition to me, the joy she expressed in receiving my mother's annual summer gifts may have reminded her of her own years in rose giving. Miss Welty was not always happy with the gifts people gave her, and I witnessed that on occasion, too, in her wry comments, but the pleasant reactions she always had on receiving my mother's