

Welty

April 13, 1909-July 23, 2001

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *The Optimist's Daughter* and the National Book Award for *The Collected Stories*.

Teaching Southern Women Writers

NCTE 2009, Philadelphia, PA

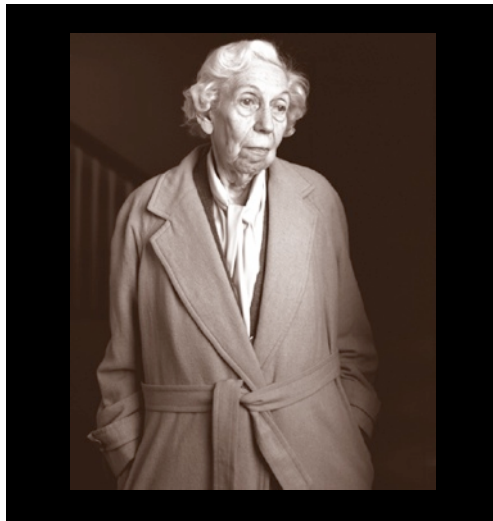
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Eudora Welty

Born in Jackson, MS in 1909, Welty became one of the world's most beloved writers. Despite world-wide attention, she remained in her North Congress Street home, where she was known to open her door to strangers to sign autographs. She would even offer them a glass of iced tea.

People in Jackson still love to tell about seeing Miss Welty at the beauty shop or at her favorite Jitney Jungle.



She received great critical acclaim in her lifetime, winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Optimist's Daughter* and The National Book Award for her *Collected Stories* as well as two O. Henry prizes, two

Guggenheim fellowships, and the French Legion of Honor.

She published novels, short stories, photographs, and non-fiction works (including her autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings* that is a must-read for anyone wanting to become a writer).

She was a friend and mentor to many writers, such as fellow Mississippian and Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Ford who is now one of the literary executors of her estate.

She wrote about her home state, and in doing so became a true treasure of American Letters.



Richard Bausch

*It wasn't until I read *The Ponder Heart*, in 1975, that I realized the **redemptive quality** of her writing. That book...literally called me back from the abyss.*

Richard Bausch is the author of numerous novels and short story collections. He's won both a Pushcart Prize and an O. Henry Prize. He is a professor at The University of Memphis.

*I guess the most important element of this great person's work is **charm**. It's in everything she has ever written or done.*

Ellen Douglas

*The language **transformed**, raised to a new intensity, the land in which I lived, the people I had heard speak.*



Doris Betts

*Happy Birthday, Miss Welty--**tough** under fire, **tender** enough to turn weeds into orchids.*

Writers on Welty

Doris Betts, Ellen Douglas, and Lee Smith are all accomplished Southern Women Writers with many novels and short stories between them.



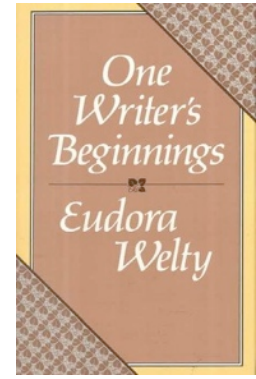
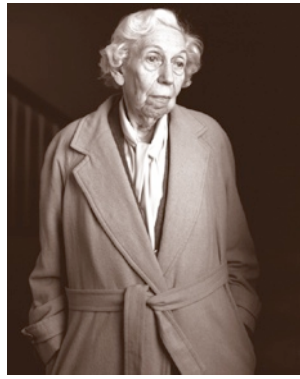
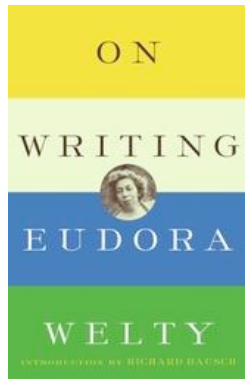
Alice Munro

*I was overwhelmed with a terrible longing...This is my feeling as a reader. The writer's feeling, just as sharp, is a double one. Gratitude and amazed delight. And utter discouragement. **Writing can be this good**. It's been done. Something has been proved here. No use now trying to prove it again.*

Alice Munro, known as "The Canadian Chekhov," is one of the most renowned writers in the world today.

Lee Smith

My immediate response to Welty's visit was to read everything she'd ever written, of course. And it was like that proverbial light bulb clicked on in my head--suddenly, I knew what I knew!



from... "The radiance of Jane Austen"

~The future of fiction is a **mystery**. It is like the future of ourselves.

~Never did it escape Jane Austen that the interesting situations of life can take place, and notably do, **at home**.

from... "Katherine Anne Porter: The Eye of the Story"

~Most good stories are about the **interior** of our lives.

~Ask what **time** it is in her stories and you are certain to get the answer: the hour is **fateful**.

from... "Writing and Analyzing a Story"

~For the source of the story is usually **lyrical**. And all writers speak from and speak to, emotions eternally the same in all of us: love, pity, terror do not show favorites or leave any of us

out.

from... "The House of Willa Cather"

~There is a quality of **animation** that seems naturally come by, that seems a born part of every novel.

~There is **life** in that house, the spirit she made it for, made it out of; it is all one substance: it is her might and her soul, all together, and it abides.

from... "Reality in Chekhov's Stories"

~And so **reality** is no single, pure ray, no beacon against the dark. It might be thought of as **a cluster of lesser lights**, visible here on earth like the windows of a village at night, close together, but not one--some are bright, some dim, some waywardly flickering. **All imply people**; there are people there for every light.

from... "Looking at Short Stories"

~Clearly the fact that the stories have plots in common is of no more account than that many people have blue eyes... **The plot is the Why**. Why? is asked and replied to at various depths; the fishes in the sea are bigger the deeper we go. To learn that **character is a more awe-inspiring fish** and...one several degrees deeper down than situation, we have only to read Chekhov.

~The fact is, apparently, that in pressing to our sense of pleasure, we have entered into another world. We are speaking of **beauty**. And beauty is not a blatant or promiscuous or obvious quality; indeed, it is associated with reticence, with stubbornness, of a number of kinds. It **arises** somehow from a desire not to comply with what may be expected, but to act inevitably, **as long as some human truth is in sight**...

from... "Words into Fiction"

~Writing comes out of a superior devotion to reading.

THE LYRIC

To be lyric means *to have musical quality*. In literature the lyric is usually associated with poetry, one of the oldest literary forms that evolved, if not out of, at least alongside music itself. Early lyrics were often set to music just as they are today in song.

Lyric poetry is also often personal. Many love poems are lyrics, though the lyric doesn't have to be about love so much as about an individual experience of perception and emotion.

Lyric qualities are created in poetry with the help of line breaks, rhythms, and even rhymes. We don't always speak of those qualities as elements of fiction, but some prose is very musical. Indeed, the lyricism of Eudora Welty's prose is one of its biggest strengths.

Look at some of these excerpts from her work as examples. They appear in normal paragraph form in her stories but have been divided with poetic line breaks here to emphasize the point.

Lines from "The Wanderers"

*All was one warmth, air, water,
and her own body. All seemed one weight,
one matter—until she put down her head
and closed her eyes and the light slipped
under her lids, she felt
this matter a translucent one,
the river, herself, the sky
all vessels which the sun filled up.*



Here's another excerpt from the same story in which Virgie Rainey is swimming in the Big Black River after her mother's death.

*Memory dappled her like no more
than a paler light, which in slight agitations
came through leaves, not darkening her
for more than an instant. The iron taste
of the old river was sweet to her, though.
If she opened her eyes she looked
at blue bottles, the skating waterbugs.
If she trembled it was at the smoothness
of a fish or snake that crossed her knees.*

These lines are of Virgie reminiscing about her piano teacher, Miss Eckhart:



*With her hate, with her love,
and with the small gnawing feelings
that ate at them, she offered Virgie
her Beethoven. She offered, offered,
offered—and when Virgie was young,
in the strange wisdom of youth
that is accepting of more than is given,
she had accepted the Beethoven,
as with the dragon's blood.*

*That was the gift she had touched
with her fingers that had drifted and left her.*

What are the lyrical qualities in these excerpts? Where can you find musical elements like rhythm? Where has repetition been used to create musicality? How do the descriptions evoke sounds and/or appeal to the other senses? How do Virgie's emotions come through in these descriptions?

Find a Poem in a Story Exercise

Read a story by Eudora Welty. Look for poetic lines in the story, and create your own arrangement of those lines as your own “found” poem.

Try to make your poem express a general tone, mood, or theme found in the story you have selected.

Example:

Lines from Eudora Welty’s “The Whistle”
arranged by Sharon Gerald

Sarah’s body was weightless as a strip of cain, like a vain dream, like the commotion of some clumsy nodding old bear trying to climb a tree, heard by nobody at all. Like some sleazy dress that has been worn and worn for many winters and always lets the cold through to the bones. Like a conversation or a tale. Like openings which have been stretched shapeless and made of no more use. Like a cold, pressing hand. Strange, like fright. Like a bird trying to find its way out of a room. As tiny and still as a seashell, the colors of green and red, the smell of the sun on the ground.

The moonlight covered everything. Like a white stone in water, among the stretches of deep woods in their colorless dead leaf. Intense and white as the snow that does not fall here.

Example:

Lines from Eudora Welty’s “Livvie,”
arranged by Sharon Gerald

F O U N D

This was the way he looked in his clothes, a different and smaller man, holding his Bible. Like somebody kin to himself.

He was the same to her as if he was dead, far away in his sleep—small, relentless, and devout. Outside, the ground scarred in deep whorls, every vestige of grass patiently uprooted.

Even old men dreamed about something pretty.

Like a commotion in the room, the frogs sung out. In Solomon’s face, came an animation that could play hide and seek, that would dart and escape, had always escaped.

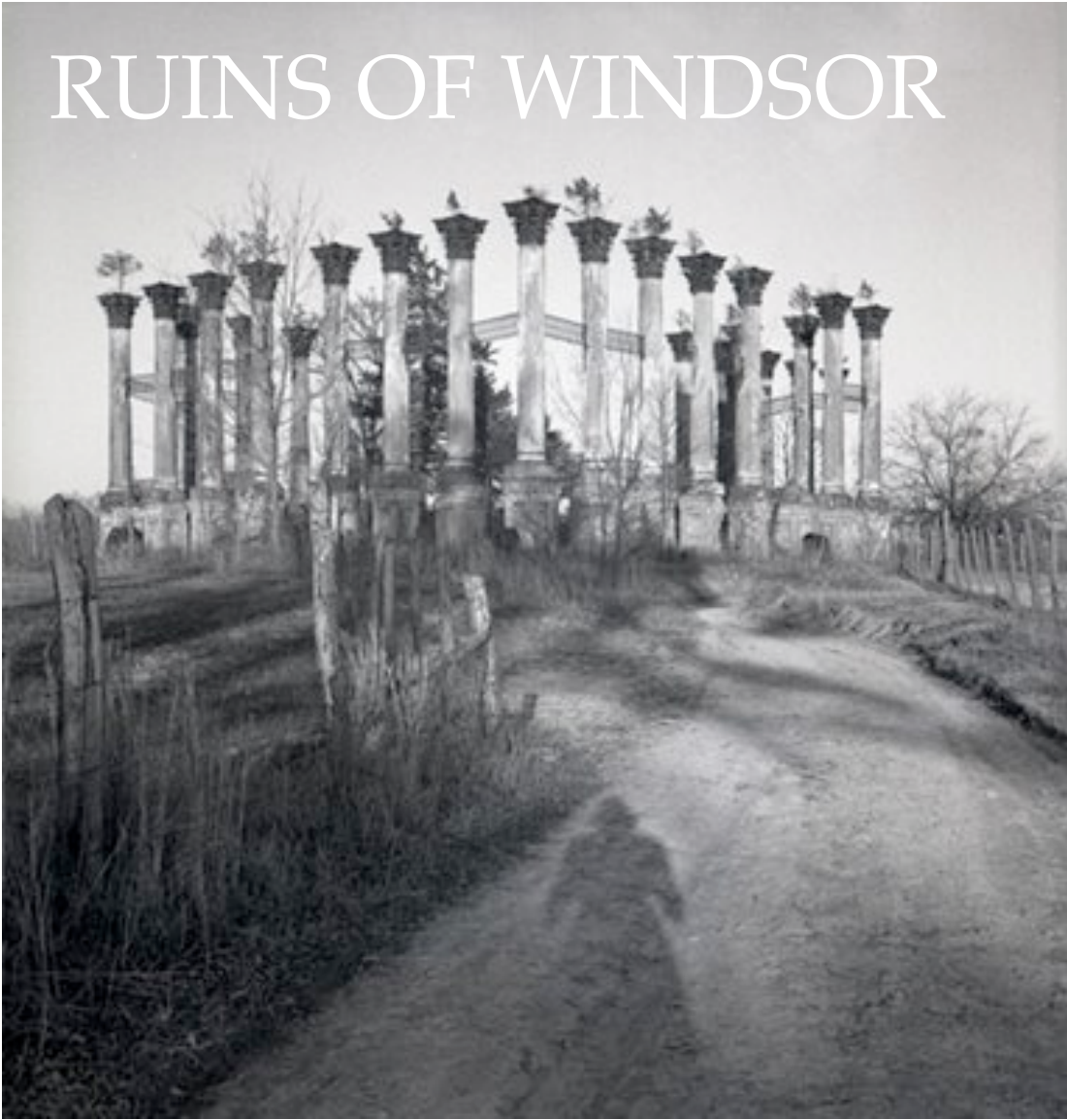
The mystery flickered in him, invited from his eyes, frightened her a little, as if he might carry her with him that way, when he might be going to die.

She could be so still she could not hear herself breathe. She did not think of that, tasting the chicken broth on the stove, gently as if not to disturb some whole thing he held round in his mind, like a fresh egg.

Now I lay eyes on a young man, Old Solomon far away in his sleep, walking somewhere where she could imagine the snow falling.

P O E T R Y

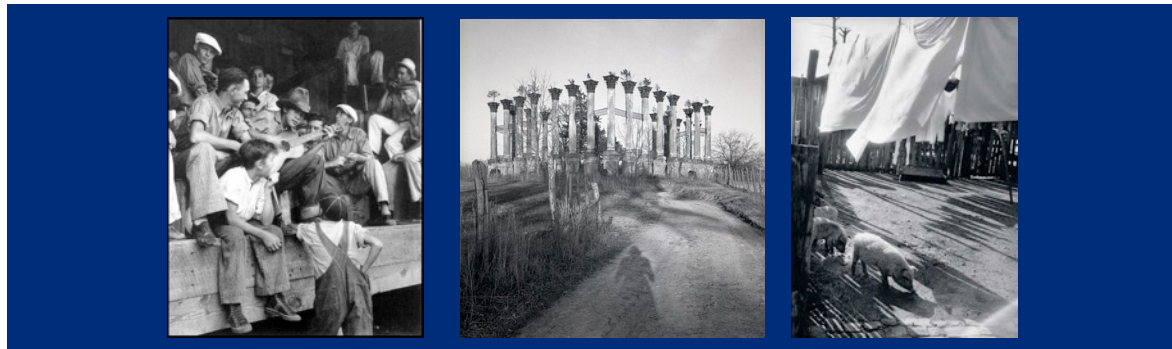
RUINS OF WINDSOR



Though Welty is best known for her writing, she was also an accomplished photographer who began her career taking pictures for the WPA. During the 1930s, she documented the realities of the Great Depression through Mississippi, New York, and other places. Her photographs are available today in her books *One Time, One Place; Country*

Churchyards; and Eudora Welty as Photographer,

and helping to launch her as a writer. The photo will see that it is also a self-portrait. Welty's



among others. She credited her photography for giving her an eye for framing a scene in a story

shown above, "Ruins of Windsor," is one of her better known pieces. Look closely, and you

shadow appears in the scene. How else is shadow used to create a particular effect?



Part I. Reflection

1. What's happening in this picture? Quickly jot down your initial understanding of what you see.
2. What mood does the picture evoke? What do you feel when you see it?

Part II. Brainstorming

1. List at least five details you spot in the image.

2. How are these details important to the visual composition of the image?
3. List things you imagine to be true based on what you see in the picture. Try to think of at least five.
4. What visual cues are in the photograph to lead you to your assumptions?
5. Draw something you think might be happening just outside of the frame of this photo.

6. Freewrite on the story you believe the picture is telling. You could write your idea in story form or just as random observations and reflections.

**Pictured Above:
"Girl on Porch" by Eudora
Welty.**

PART IV. INVESTIGATION

1. Who is the photographer?
What's interesting or important about her?
2. Where and when was the photograph taken? What's significant about the time and place in which it was taken? Do we need to know that to understand the photograph?
3. What cultural or political background information might help us understand the photograph and/or gain a more complete story from it?

PART V. WRITING AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. Write an analytical essay about the artistic composition of the photograph.
2. Find a book of Welty's photography and write a review of the book as a whole.
3. Write a personal reflection essay in response to one or more of Welty's photographs.
4. Interview a person who lived through the Great Depression. Take along copies of some of Welty's Depression-Era photos and use them as prompts to encourage the person to tell about his or her own experiences. Write an essay summarizing and responding to what you learn in your interview.
5. Create a photo-blog in which you collect and write responses to photographs from a

particular era such as the Great Depression. As the last entry, the one that would show up at the top of the blog, write an introduction to the collection as a whole.

6. Write your own short story using one or more of Welty's photographs as a prompt.
7. Write your own poem or sequence of poems using one or more of Welty's photographs as a prompt.
8. Write a song using one or more of Welty's photographs as a prompt.
9. Use MovieMaker or iMovie to create a photo-story using the work of a favorite photographer. Create a voice narrative to record with your photo sequence.
10. Create your own photo project based on what you believe Welty would be photographing if she were continuing her work today. Write an introduction to your work explaining your choices. Write descriptions to go with individual photographs.
11. Read some of Welty's fiction set during the Great Depression. Write an essay comparing the fiction to the photographs. What elements of visual composition do the two art forms have in common?
12. Write an essay that defines a concept (poverty, racism, culture, etc) within a particular

context, such as the American South during the Great Depression. Incorporate photographs into your essay to help illustrate your definitions and explanations.

13. Draw your own illustrations for a Welty short story, telling the story in visual form. Scan your illustrations into digital form and put them together as a slide show presentation.
14. If drawing is a problem for you, find pictures in magazines or online that you can cut out or print out. Draw storyboard panels out on a piece of presentation board, and use the board to create a photo-story version of one of Welty's short stories.

TOPIC FOR INVESTIGATION

Photographs are composed by and can be studied by certain elements of visual design, such as line, color, texture, balance, and so forth. Before working on your project do a basic web search for visual composition, elements of photography, or visual design to learn more.

WHY I LIVE AT THE P.O.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Look through this story for places where the word “smart” is used. How much stake do the sisters have in defining themselves as smart? How many times do they try to outsmart each other? To what end?
2. One of the most memorable parts of this story is the speaking voice. How is the sound of the narrator’s voice created? Go through the story and identify phrases and expressions that lend personality to the narrator.
3. “Why I Live at the P.O.” appeared in the short story collection *A Curtain of Green*, published in 1941. While it doesn’t focus on race issues, certainly it deals with them. What picture do we have of race relations in this small Southern town from this story? How do you imagine the story might be different if it were written today?
4. How many times is food mentioned in “Why I Live at the P.O.”? How important is food to the story?
5. What does living at the P.O. represent to the narrator? What does she accomplish by moving out of her family home?

IDEAS FOR WRITING

1. Write an essay based on one of the discussion topics above.
2. Write the story from Stella Rhondo’s point of view.
3. Write a story with the same characters set twenty years in the future.

Reading Welty
 The four stories addressed in this section are from Eudora Welty’s *Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941). They also appear in Welty’s *Thirteen Stories* as well as her *Collected Stories*.

THE PETRIFIED MAN

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How much of this story is about gender politics, or power plays between men and women? Look for places in the story where the idea of female control in a marriage is mentioned.
2. Humor is often used in fiction (and even in life) to deflect from or diffuse emotional situations. How is humor used in this story?
3. “The Petrified Man” primarily takes place as a conversation between two women. How many other scenes are conveyed

through this conversation? How would the story be different if it actually moved outside the beauty parlor?

4. Gossip is a mainstay in Leota’s beauty parlor. What function does the gossip have? What consequences does it have? Are there positive elements to the gossip?
5. Mrs. Fletcher implies that as long as no one knows about her pregnancy she isn’t committed to going through with it. That’s a very bold statement for 1939, the year “The Petrified Man” was first copyrighted. Is this a radical feminist story?

IDEAS FOR WRITING

1. Write an essay based on one of the discussion topics above.
2. Research 1930’s beauty trends, and put together a presentation about them with references to this story.

3. Write your own story set in a beauty parlor.

POWERHOUSE

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How many ways does Powerhouse communicate? Words, numbers, gestures, sounds, notes? Look through the story for as many ways as you can find through which the musician conveys meaning.
2. How many of the details of the death of Powerhouse’s wife come only from his own

imagination? What's real and what's merely imagined or perceived?

3. What's the emotional impact of the way Powerhouse tells about the telegram announcing his wife's death? How do his friends react? How does the way he tells it change the story?
4. This story takes place in the 1930s. How much does the racial divide between the musicians and their audience matter to the telling of the story? Look for instances in the story where race is mentioned and instances where racial perceptions are at least implied.

IDEAS FOR WRITING

1. Write an essay based on one of the discussion topics above.
2. Research 1930s jazz musicians and put together a presentation on them that includes references to this story.
3. Go to a musical performance and watch a particular musician at work. Write descriptions of that musician and create your own story about what might be happening in the emotional background of the performance.

A WORN PATH

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Welty once wrote an essay responding to the question, "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" She said students kept writing to her to ask. Her answer? It doesn't matter. The story is told from Phoenix's point of view, and as long as she believes him to be alive, the story wouldn't change either way. What do you think?
2. "A Worn Path" often appears in textbooks as an example of descriptive writing. What makes this story so exemplary? Look through the story to pick out examples of effective description. What techniques are used? How can you borrow from these techniques in your own writing?
3. What is a phoenix in Greek mythology? What symbolic value might Phoenix Jackson's name have?
4. Phoenix experiences a few instances when her mental awareness is called into question. How important is this to the story? How does it affect your view of her?

IDEAS FOR WRITING

1. Write an essay based on one of the discussion topics above.
2. Write your own short story describing a journey in great detail.
3. Write a song based on Phoenix Jackson's walk.

OVERVIEW

- What are your general impressions of Welty's writing style after reading several of her stories?
- What themes or conflicts can you find carrying over from one story to another?
- How would you characterize Welty's approach to gender and race issues in her early work based on the four stories covered here?
- Two things people often talk about related to Welty are place and voice. How does she create a sense of each in her fiction?

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