



UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN *THE PONDER HEART*

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Abstract

This essay explores the unreliable narration in Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart*, focusing on how she employs unreliable narration to create ironic effects. The essay delves into the three axes of unreliability proposed by James Phelan, discussing how Welty artfully conspires with readers to create irony by revealing the complexity and contradictoriness of her narrators. Through a multilayer analysis, the essay presents a clearer picture of the story world and the mindstyles of the characters, highlighting the distortion of human nature and alienation between human beings. Welty's use of unreliable narration, including misreporting, underreporting, misinterpreting, and misevaluating, is pervasive in her stories, functioning as either bonding or estranging unreliability. Ultimately, this essay reveals Welty's tactics in using unreliable narration to dissolve the boundary between reality and imagination, guiding readers to understand the people and the society depicted in her works.

Keywords

Unreliable narration, Distortion, Alienation, Eudora Welty, *The Ponder Heart*

In Welty's writings some of the characters and narrators are mentally retarded or mentally disordered so as to offer a fallible and untrustworthy narration. Booth defines narrators who articulate values and perceptions that differ from those of the implied author as unreliable narrators. He believes that when readers find the narration or judgement unreliable, it will produce an ironic effect.

All of the great uses of unreliable narration depend for their success on far more subtle effects than merely flattering the reader or making him work. Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against all those, whether in the story or out of it, who do not get that point. Irony is always thus in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded. In the irony with which we are concerned, the speaker is himself the butt of the ironic point. The author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting (1983: 304).

In *Living to Tell About It* and *Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of "Lolita"*, after elaborate observation and reflection of the loopholes of Booth's model and scorching debate and argument from other theorists, Phelan provides his full-fledged comprehension and insightful perspective. Firstly, Phelan complements the third axes of value, providing two more types of unreliability as misregarding/misevaluating and underregarding/underevaluating, constructing a more comprehensive taxonomy of six types of unreliability (misreporting, misreading, misregarding, underreporting, underreading, underregarding). He emphasizes the parallel relationships among the three axes. Secondly, Phelan innovatively diverts to the consequences of the unreliability for the relations between the narrator and the authorial audience, avoiding existing controversial issues such as the location of unreliability or the utility of the concept of the implied author. Phelan distinguishes

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estranging unreliability, by which he means unreliable narration that underlines or increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, and bonding unreliability, by which he means unreliable narration that reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience (2005: 20 & 2007: 223-224).

In this essay, *The Ponder Heart* will be examined in the three axes of unreliability so as to show how Welty artfully conspires with the readers to create ironical effect for her writings. A multilayer analysis of the three axes and their interrelated connections will help present a clearer picture of the story world and the mindstyles of the characters, so that the readers can have a collusion with the author and dig out the irony in between the lines.

The Rootless Heart

Edna Earle Ponder, the only narrator in *The Ponder Heart*, has polyvalent roles as the hotel owner, social worker and primary caregiver in a family of male egocentrics. As readers go through the novella, they gradually discover that this central narrator is sometimes reliable and sometimes fallible, determined by her family inheritance, traditional values and personality limits. As a great story-teller, Edna starts her story in the most light-hearted way, highlighting Uncle Daniel as the most central character and impressing the readers of Uncle Daniel's transcendent kindness and easygoingness. Edna is never petty about her admiration and praise for Uncle Daniel by describing him as possessing "the sweetest disposition" "the nicest, politest manners" and being "the sweetest, most unspoiled thing in the world" and "as good as gold" (*The Ponder Heart* 11). As readers get carried away in Edna's description and build their trust in the narrator, Uncle Daniel's marriage stories start to catch the readers' attention. Marriage and divorce, separation and running away, funeral and trial, the readers are exposed to the twists and turns of Uncle Daniel's poignant life in the disguise of Daniel's joyous nature. It is until then readers notice the narrator herself as a participator and bystander. She is narrating Uncle Daniel's story and peeping into his marriage as a spinster herself. She is observing Uncle Daniel as an affiliated attendant, out of her own affection. She is burying herself onto the story, yet she struggles to stand out in the crack. She is emphasizing the status and prestige of the Ponder family while the story showcases that the family are no longer taking the mainstream. *The Ponder Heart* is not a dictum of Uncle Daniel, but also of Edna Earle Ponder and Grandpa Ponder. Edna Earle Ponder as the "last Ponder" represents the present and future of the Ponder family and the name is already on the decline. The readers come to discover the complexity and contradictoriness of the sole narrator, which in turn intrigues readers to observe more carefully and make their own judgement so as to perceive when Edna Earl is reliable and when she might be untrustworthy. In the following section, the three axes of communication proposed by Phelan will be observed for a fuller understanding. It is enlightening to investigate the reasons behind this ambiguous narration so as to understand the Ponder family, the town of Clay, the 1940s-1950s southern American in a more multifunctional way.

Welty talked about how she wrote about *The Ponder Heart* and about Edna Earle Ponder in one interview. "My story was really about her, and it was her vision of these people that I was writing about. So I knew them through her. I did everything through her" (*The Collected Stories* 9). Edna Earl Ponder as the sole narrator, is conducting and guiding the story in her intrinsic and skillful way. Readers can see the narrator generally as an honest and candid story-teller, yet she diverges and creates suspense, restoring the Ponder family and Clay life in the most southern way.

Edna Earle loves to practice the fall-rise pattern to create humorous effect. She contradicts herself in saying first that she is "a great reader that never has time to read" (*The Ponder Heart* 55) and otherwise claiming to have read *The House of the Thousand Candles* a thousand times. She preaches herself to be grandpa's favorite grandchild, adding "besides being the only one left alive or in calling distance" (*The Ponder Heart* 9). She also believes herself to be rather smart by providing evidence that "I did pass him in the seventh grade, and hated to do it, but I was liable to have passed anybody. People told me I ought to have been the teacher" (*The Ponder Heart* 9-10). Edna Earle Ponder is getting used to making fun of herself so as to bring herself closer to the listeners. The tall tale characteristic of southern tradition comes alive in Edna. Intentionally or unintentionally the above-mentioned facts can be regarded as underreporting by Edna Earle Ponder. What has caused the above underreporting? Is it due to Edna's lack of education or restricted outlook as an old maid? The reasons are far more complicated. The self-mockery gives full evidence to Edna's lack of self-consciousness and self-confidence. As a commoner Edna can only be proud of herself being a Ponder, but she flinches whenever it goes to her personal capability, intelligence and characters. Despite of her role as the last Ponder devoting all her life to taking care of Uncle Daniel and running hotel Beulah, she is awkwardly in no place in the family. Grandpa clearly doesn't want Edna to inherit the hotel by saying "it put me in quandary" but Edna can only struggle by explaining "Not that Grandpa minded me having the hotel" (*The Ponder Heart* 12-13). Contrary to meticulous care and consideration from Edna, Edna never recounts any concerns or gratitude from Uncle Daniel, however gold-like or slow-witted he is. Indiscreetly Edna is revealing herself in an uncertain and unassured way, sometimes so confident that she believes Uncle Daniel will never need to worry too much as "he had me" (*The Ponder Heart* 54), sometimes in helpless doubt of herself so as to articulate "I'm here, and just the same as I always was and will be, but then he never was afraid of losing

me”(*The Ponder Heart* 154). She builds up herself as a proud Pound heart and soul, which ridiculously is never envisaged by Grandpa and Uncle Daniel, or other folks in town.

Edna is inconsistent in some other occasions. For example, when Uncle Daniel mentions he has attended Tom Thumb Wedding, Edna spontaneously remembers it as the “sweetest miniature wedding” and later she refutes by saying “but I don’t remember it—I don’t remember it at all” (*The Ponder Heart* 34). There is an intentional hiding-from-the-truth effect which wise readers can never let slip. Besides, the mention of “Mama’s Pageant” produces a confusion, bewildering the readers as to what is the exact event that Edna Earle remembers. This underreporting implicitly leads to Edna’s complicated perception of her mom’s pageant² and her mom’s leaving the family. It can be conjectured that Edna’s aversion of beauty and fashion is reinforced by mother’s leaving after her Pageant. The childhood trauma of being deserted and abandoned is understated yet it has infringed enormous pains on her immature soul. Furthermore, Edna never conceals her resentment for beauty and fashion. In her description Miss Teacake’s hair is as black as tar- something she gets from Silver City and puts on herself in front of the mirror (*The Ponder Heart* 26). Edna obviously does not know wig or naturally resisted the wearing of wig. Echoing to this, Edna comments that Silver City’s too progressive. The degree of progressiveness can be seen as a misevaluating in this context. Silver City is too progressive for its rich resource of fashion on the one hand, and it is also progressive for its distance and unfamiliarity to the Ponder family as it is where Uncle Daniel marries her second wife Bonnie Dee Peacock, carried away by a whim and unwitnessed by any townspeople. It is defined as “progressive” only in the sense when it affects and violates Edna’s normal routine life track.

As Phelan delineates, the discrepancies between the narrator's reports, interpretations, or evaluations and the inferences of the authorial audience have the paradoxical result of reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience in bonding unreliability (“Estranging Unreliability”, 2007: 225). The previously-mentioned misreporting or underreporting undermines Welty’s image as a reliable and objective narrator, as more of her personality flaws is revealed. Yet this exposure of defect enables readers to understand Edna Earle and develop sympathy for Edna’s miserable childhood experience and her awkward position in the Ponder family, therefore reducing the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience and bringing Edna closer to her listeners. This gap to previous affirmation of what Edna has told is assuring the readers of Edna’s possible exaggeration of the Ponder family and traditional values, but at the same time it is obscurely reminding the readers of the possible deficiencies of the narrator so as to help readers to build their confidence in making their own judgement, preparing the readers for a clearer vision in the following of the story. Although the readers are illuminated to be detached so as to see a panorama of the complicacies, they are affectively and ethically drawn closer to Edna for her candidness and also misfortune-driven compassion.

The Fallible Sentiments

Uncle Daniel’s story is told in an entertaining way but sentiments and emotions are insufficiently expressed throughout the story. On the one hand, Edna misevaluates people’s feelings. As she declares “Grandpa worshiped Uncle Daniel” (*The Ponder Heart* 12). Later she diverts that Grandpa wants to teach Uncle Daniel a lesson by threatening him with the asylum (*The Ponder Heart* 14). This sudden diversion confuses readers as it does not accord to how Edna depicts Uncle Daniel as good as gold. In Uncle Daniel’s two marriages there appears not a single description of love and affection between the married couples except some unsure conclusions such as “I think he liked her” (*The Ponder Heart* 27); “I don’t really think Uncle Daniel missed Bonnie Dee as much as he thought he did” (*The Ponder Heart* 54). On the other hand, Edna herself is as apathetic as any other Ponder. The funeral of Grandpa never sees the tears and memory of his beloved descendants or it is never tinged any sense of sadness or regret, with Edna’s focus on trifles such as Miss Teacake’s singing and Uncle Daniel’s new haircut. This misevaluation on sentiments and emotions exposes Edna’s weakness, which is typical of the Ponder family. “Our heart” which Edna repetitively mentions is frail and sensitive to blows and changes, and it is weak and impotent to undertake emotions and affections. Avoidance of emotional feelings can also be observed in other occasions. When Uncle Daniel is charged with murder, not a single feeling of worry, anxiety or melancholy is conveyed, as in stark contrast with Edna’s deliberate plan in court to protect Uncle Daniel. It turns out the plan is meeting trouble half way, therefore producing a forceful ironical effect. The underevaluation of normal affective response sets up an image of Edna trying to hide something adverse, making the innocent guilty and overreaching herself.

Edna, the narrator, is representative of southern conservativeness, which can be manifested in the underinterpreting in topics such as marriage and urbanization. “Of course, I’m intended to look after Uncle Daniel and everybody knows it, but in plenty of marriages there’s three—three all your life. Because nearly everybody’s

² The Miss America pageant has never been a progressive event, but in 1968, it sparked a feminist revolution. As women organized the first protest against Miss America, they were responding not only to the pageant and its antiquated, misogynistic attitudes toward women and beauty, but also to how the United States, as a whole, treated women. (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fifty-years-ago-protestors-took-on-miss-america-pageant-electrified-feminist-movement-180967504/>)

got somebody” (*The Ponder Heart* 26). There has been a lurking misunderstanding and unhealthy perception towards marriage, speculatively stemming from familial influence and social impact. It is further complemented by grandpa’s opinion towards marriage³. “He regarded getting married as a show of weakness of character in nearly every case but his own, because he was smart enough to pick a wife very “nearly as smart as he was” (*The Ponder Heart* 26). As an old school southerner, Grandpa fully embodies the patriarchal family tradition, regarding highly of himself and showing despise for women. Edna, the granddaughter, silently accepts and inherits all family heritage of spiritual restriction and prejudice but is never awarded any superior wealth or property.

Throughout Edna’s storytelling, no other place out of Clay other than the Silver City and Memphis is mentioned. This is the furthest place that Uncle Daniel can think of. The City of Clay is also the place Uncle Daniel will never go beyond. The readers will soon come to realize that it is exactly the same for Edna Earle Ponder. In the 1950s, the City of Clay was in slow development as a southern town. “It was last year we had a passenger train at all.”(*The Ponder Heart* 16) The highway was also new at that time. Edna is never showing any sense of acceptance towards these changes. *The Ponder Heart* was published in the 1950s in which Uncle Daniel’s first marriage lasted two months in 1944, and his second marriage lasted 6 years to the 1950s. It is a high time for US railway development⁴. The traffic connects the small Southern town to the outside world, while Edna retains a closed mind to her much-familiarized birthplace. Edna’s underevaluating of the ongoing and irresistible social changes exposes to the readers Edna’s narrow-mindedness and prepares the readers for a more subjective understanding to how the following story goes. Furthermore, it’s the same with Edna’s response to new advanced applications such as the telephone. In times of emergency when Bonnie Dee is in danger, Edna never thinks of the telephone. Instead she gets the hay wagon boy running for help and opens the window hollering as loud as she can. Whether or not it wastes the best treatment time is never reflected by Edna but simple enough for readers to judge. Placing telephone in such a crucial yet subtle conflict is quite ingenious. Welty once wrote: “The ravishment of their countryside, industrialization, standardization, exploitation, and the general vulgarization of life, have ever, reasonably or not, been seen as one Northern thing to the individualist mind of the South” (qtd.in Gretlund, 2007: 506). The underevaluation produces a strong ironical effect and reinforces both the contingency and inevitability of this tragedy.

When it comes to the axes of perception and the axes of values, readers are going to reacquaint their storyteller Edna Earle. A deeper perception of partiality and ignorance make their presence in Edna’s narration. The conventional and confined recognition of family heritage, wealth and social customs takes its hold and leaving an impression of Edna’s indifference and stubbornness, which results in the alienation between the narrator and authorial audience. Women’s role in family is no more than a devoted caretaker, as is represented by Edna; women’s role in marriage is no more than a furnishing vase, possessing the skeleton of either a good voice or an attractive young countenance, as is represented by Uncle Daniel’s two wives. The inherited prejudice of “poor whites” and negroes⁵ is pervasive throughout the story.

Southern poor whites, who would be the beneficiaries of much of the government aid, had negative associations in American culture that stretched back to the colonial period and which these agencies were obliged to address to cultivate and retain public and political support for their expensive programs (Kidd, 2007: 110).

There has been a long-traced-back history for the negative associations for the poor whites. The prejudiced poor whites as the Peacocks family appear as showy, swank, thin and frail in Edna’s depiction, compared to the large head of Uncle Daniel and Grandpa Ponder. As Edna reveals her distorted comprehension of the surrounding people and the world, the authorial audience substitutes a much harsher view of Edna, increasing the ethical and interpretive distance between Edna and the readers.

Therefore, estranging unreliability and bonding unreliability in different axes work in an intricately and intertwined way to delineate the central character, Edna. As Shen Dan observes, the three axes of facts & events, perception and values are not only parallel but also causal, a full survey of which reveals the subtle complexity of rhetorical strategy and showcases the rich multifaceted nature of the narrator's character (2006:135). Besides the parallel and causal relationships among the three axes, the author of the present dissertation finds progressive

³ In American South, marriage is an important part of social structures which unify men and women, regardless of their personalities, interests and economic statuses. The joys and sorrows, the rise and decline of families are the miniature of the whole world and represent the rise and fall of the society as a whole. The Ponder family’s disdain for marriage can be a sign for family decline.

⁴ The American railway was developing at a fast speed in the 1950s. Ever since its appearance, railroads have brought great influence to economic development. Railroads in the 20th-century continued to develop. By 1970, rail freight began setting all-time yearly records. Between 1970 and 2000, rail freight doubled. There were, however, many big adjustments along the way.

⁵ African Americans and poor whites are dual victims of Southern capitalism. They are repetitively depicted in many of the southern writers’ works, such as the Mississippi native Steve Yarbrough.

relationship among the three, as some of Edna's misevaluation and underevaluation of the surrounding world lead to her misinterpreting and underinterpreting of core values, strengthening the effect of Edna's implacability and the interpersonal estrangement of small town Clay.

Unreliable narration observed in *The Ponder Heart* provides new perspective to look into Welty's works. Welty said in an interview in 1977: "I never write stories or novels with the object of criticizing people. I want the reader to understand the people, and people as individuals. I'm not condemning people at all and I never have" (*The Collected Stories* 202). Characters such as Edna Earle Ponder can be better appreciated with a dialectical point of view. They are never to be criticized or condemned because of their personal defect and flaws, but rather they enable the readers to see through the topsy-turvy world in their eyes, with Welty tactfully designing and frankly showing behind the stage. The unreliable narration consists of misreporting, underreporting, misinterpreting, underinterpreting, misevaluating, underevaluating is pervasive in Welty's stories and functions as either bonding unreliability or estranging unreliability, sometimes adhering the narrator and the authorial audience, and sometimes separating them. Vice versa, the rhetorical effect enables the readers to see the multifaceted sides of the narrator so as to make their own reliable judgement. As Phelan has argued,

At one end of this spectrum is what I call mask narration, a rhetorical act in which the implied author uses the character narrator as a spokesperson for ideas that she fully endorses. Indeed, the implied author employs the mask of the character narrator as a means to increase the appeal and persuasiveness of the ideas expressed ("Estranging Unreliability", 2007: 224).

The character "I" in *A Memory*, is a typical spokesman for Welty the author, fully displaying the illusionary nature of an artist. This moment of epiphany enrolls the audience into the narrator's imagination world, creating a sense of wandering and roaming. Welty herself is an artist, a photographer and a gardener, who observes the world in the snap of her camera, and in the growth with the changing seasons and appropriate environment. Her writings are also captured and nurtured in the same way. The little girl is likely to be the reminiscent I of Welty, indulged in one of many of her illusionary creations, the readers to trust her sense of aesthetic values.

In a nutshell, it is observed that Welty allows her characters to speak for themselves in the most distinct ways. Unreliable narration in Welty's stories plays a significant role so as to create contrasting and ironical stories. Distortion of human nature and alienation between human beings are pervasive among the story. This provides a vivid picture of American South in the 20th-century in which worldly materials corrodes spiritual soil and common people find themselves in a plight of solitary and degeneration. Welty is making full use of the narrative skills so as to have a dialogue with her characters and the readers. This obscure and inconspicuous attempt marks Welty as a mature and skillful storyteller, a kin and acute observer, a balanced and intelligent thinker, writing about the world she sees and writing about her inner mind.

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