



## **Doubleness in Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom***

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### **Abstract**

Eudora Welty adopts double identities as a core artistic device to explore cultural tensions and value reconciliations, which culminates in her novella *The Robber Bridegroom*. Set on the multicultural Natchez Trace in the late 18th century, the work merges Southern traditionalism with modernist aesthetics, integrating history, folk legends and fairy-tale elements. Focusing on the dual identities of Jamie Lockhart and Rosamond—bandit/gentleman and naive maiden/planter's daughter—it unfolds conflicts between virtue and vice, tradition and modernity. Welty dismantles simplistic binaries, revealing the doubleness of human nature and Southern society, and conveys profound reflections on cultural inheritance and human complexity.

### **Keywords**

Eudora Welty; *The Robber Bridegroom*; Double Identity; Duality; Southern Culture; Fairy Tale

In many of Eudora Welty's representative works, she deliberately adopts **double identities** as a distinctive artistic device and narrative strategy to convey her profound ponderings and subtle reflections on the delicate balance between conflicting cultural visions, moral outlooks and social values. Among her canonical writings, *The Robber Bridegroom* stands out as a highly enriched and sophisticated masterpiece embodying this contradictory yet internally orderly ideological conception. The novella seamlessly infuses the essence of Southern traditionalism with the experimental spirit of literary modernism, blending folk legend, romantic imagination and realistic depiction. Through dual character images, ambiguous relationships and layered narrative tones, Welty skillfully reconciles tradition with innovation, reveals the spiritual paradoxes of the South, and deepens her persistent exploration of human nature, cultural inheritance and spiritual belonging.

### **Doubleness in the Miscellaneous Cultures in Natchez Trace**

After Welty's short stories "The Key" and "The Visit" (later "The Charity Visit") were again rejected by the Virginia Quarterly in 1940, she conceived a story of "robbers and romance" at a place called Rodney's Landing, near Natchez on the Mississippi River. The story, which began as a hazy dream, became a favorite of Welty and her agent Russell. Eudora Welty has had the story in her mind for a long time with mixed elements of planter's beautiful daughter, the Indians and a lifetime of fairy-tale reading. She recalled: "Everything in it is something I've liked as long as I can remember and have just now put down" (Prenshaw, 1984: 4). The story lingers on Welty's mind as a sweet afternoon dream and it stays in Welty's mind as time elapses.

The characters, settings, and many details from *The Robber Bridegroom* derive from Welty's reading of Robert M. Coates's *The Year of the Outlaw*. Published in 1930, *The Year of the Outlaw* is a detailed account of the notorious road robbers who traveled the Natchez Trail from 1780 to 1810. On this little-noticed page of American history, the United States was expanding westward at breakneck speed along the banks of the Mississippi, and pioneers, merchants, settlers, and fugitives hid and ran in the Natchez Wilderness. At a time when American institutions and laws were still weak, crime flourished, and these bandits acted with no scruples, most notably the Harpes brothers, whose vicious and cruel methods terrorized the people of the region for nearly a decade in the late 18th century. The people spontaneously assembled to hunt down the robbers, but with little success. They lived in constant fear, not knowing when bad things would happen to them. Robert combines history and legend to tell the story of two centuries ago in a dynamic narrative and storytelling which is compelling and mysterious, with

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numerous concrete names, places and dates. One can read in Coates the real-life stories with extended ferocity and cruelty.

Welty borrows Coate's description in many details, such as character depiction, scene description and life customs, and she also imitates Robert's mysterious and rough style of writing. The Harpes, for example, are two

robbers known for their cruelty in Robert's book. The Harpes are notorious robbers with unidentified parentage which adds to the mystery of their identities.

The two men were brothers: 'Big Harpe'—Micajah; and Wiley—'Little Harpe.' Both had been born in North Carolina, one in the year 1768 and the other two years later. There were rumors as to their parentage: many thought them part Negro: "their tawny appearance and dark curly hair betrayed a tinge of African blood." (Coates,1930:24)

The brothers try to live as settlers before they became the notorious bandits. They are driven and forced to become robbers as it is the place where neither law nor gospel can reach. "Paca had been wounded and struggled: his head had been split with the tomahawk. Both had been stripped of their clothing. The Harpes had continued westward." (Coates,1930:32) Various ways of being "tomahawked, disemboweled<sup>2</sup>" and so on are recorded in the book, to show the ferocity of the bandits at the time. As is charted in the book, many settlers in the districts are criminals "either escaping from, or apprehensive of, public justice." Most of the owners of the small inns are infamous people, therefore a wise way to judge whether it's good or vicious is to observe the landlord's ears. At the time, criminals in town are very much likely to be clipped or cut away entirely for their misbehaviors. The above-mentioned truths and facts have been tactfully infused in the story, greatly restoring the precarious life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Natchez Trace.

In addition, Welty recreates this period of history through rich imagination and she incorporates elements and narrative features of fairy tales and folk stories, making the fantasy story set in Natchez full of regional characteristics and romantic poetry. she told the Mississippi Historical Society, "I made our local history and ...legend and the fairy tale into working equivalents. It was my firm intention to bind them together" (qtd. in Skaggs, 1976: 96). In terms of plot arrangement, Welty combines many classic stories from Grimm's fairy tales, such as "Robber Groom", "Snow White", "Cinderella", "Rumpelstiltskin", "The Fisherman and the Wife", and the plots of "Cupid and Sage" in ancient Greek mythology. Together, they construct the twisted love story of Jamie Lockhart, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Southern American robber and Rosamond, the daughter of a rich planter.

A trace of the history of Natchez Trace will be inspirational for understanding the complicated mixture of different cultures back in the 1800s. With cotton and river trade being the main economic mainstay, the population was highly heterogeneous with a mixture of Spanish, Anglo-Americans, western Africans and French, the place was characterized as quite cosmopolitan. At that time, the place of origin or the color of the skin was never seriously differentiated as is discussed in the book:

"French Huguenots, Negro thieves, Scotch Highlanders, up-county Germans, cadets of the Virginia houses, the Regulators, plain English evangelicals, half-pay British colonial officers, poured in from Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia. The eight or more European strains not only freely intermarried with each other, but also practiced miscegenation with the various African peoples. If there is also added the mixture of both whites and Negroes with the Choctaw Indians, it may be said that the population of the Natchez district was colorful." (Hamilton, 1944: 392)

As can be seen from the above record, the Natchez population is indeed a melting pot. This has provided an unconstrained setting for Welty to write her stories unbounded, in which the merchants, the Indians, the bandits and the planters are intertwined, the voices of which converse and the cultures of which intersect. The prosperity of population brought vitality to the district. Luxurious goods such as wine and silk were transported in and exchanged in the market. Natchez enjoyed a double life, preserving the ancient living of ocean-going vessels and unfolding the modern vigor of new goods and new ideas. Huge profits obtained from sales of merchandise attracted bands of outlaws. The bandits would commit crimes in the US territory and then take refuge in Spanish Louisiana.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Outlaw Years* has recorded many brutal crimes at the time. "Tomahawked", "disemboweled" had repetitively appeared in the narration which Welty has borrowed in her story-telling. Another scene of women's wearing apparel scattered in the bandit's bundle also echoes with Welty's important design of the episode in which Rosamond was deprived of her clothes in her first meeting with Jamie Lockhart.

“Not infrequently they would put in an appearance at Natchez-under-the-Hill, made famous as one of the most sin-filled towns on the Mississippi” (Coker, 1972:51). The double identities of Welty’s protagonists have had their historical origins.

The staple cotton industry in the novella brings the Clement family wealth and fame, but also jealous and calamity. After the Civil War the American Southern economy regressed almost 20 years. The plantation diminished by 20% and working efficiency decreased by 70%. The liberation of slaves caused slave-owners a loss of 6-8 billion dollars of investment. The cotton production did not recover to that of 1860 until 1878. During 1867-1877 Restoration, the southern plantation economy greatly declined, not supported by other new economy. The cotton economy was the pillar industry of American South for over a century, making up of the main economic income of the district. Yet the unitary economy of social industries was never reliable. The cotton, for example, slumped during 1929-1933 Depression, which suffocated the Southern farmers, bringing the economy to the edge of collapse. The cotton business brought glory, development and decline to the South. A retrospect of the glorious plantation time in the novella can be seen as a tribute to the past, bringing the past and the present into a constant dialogue.

According to Joseph Campbell, the monstrous, irrational and unnatural motifs of folk tale and myth are derived from the reservoirs of dreams and vision. On the dream level such images represent the total state of the individual dreaming psyche. But clarified of personal distortion and propounded by poets, prophets, and visionaries, they become symbolic of the spiritual norm for Man the Microcosm. They are thus phrases from an image-language, expressive of metaphysical, psychological, and sociological truth is (1969:34). The dream-like story created by Welty indeed gives out much of Welty’s philosophical thoughts about the what is traditional, what is modern and how double identity combines the two.

### Double Identities and Duality

The opening of *The Robber Bridegroom* is finely drawn and sets the stage for the whole story. At the beginning of the story, Welty graphically depicts the Rodney picture with images of carriage, galleries, flatboat men, steeples and racetrack, tokens of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rodney life, which is a combination of wildness and modernity. The protagonist Clement<sup>3</sup> makes a rather impelling appearance, and the description of the windy and ruined environment sets off the particularity and importance of this figure. Welty depicts Clement with the tone of describing a hero’s staging, the storm creates a tense atmosphere, and the description of Clement’s action and language is concise and powerful, in line with the personalities of the character, and more in line with the characteristics of fairy tale writing. The core story, described in different genres and styles, set in different eras and cultures, produces different meanings and values as it is told and retold. The story of Johnny Appleseed must have greatly inspired Welty in her creations of the Natchez Trace stories. The pioneer Johnny fulfills the writer’s imagination about the American territory culture in which the settlers are hardworking, perseverant, virtuous and visionary. Johnny Appleseed not only grows apples from Pennsylvania to Ohio and lastly to Indiana, he is also cultivating the pioneering spirit across the land. A great story teller, a brave settler, a barefoot traveler, a prestigious pioneer, a pious vegetarian, the legend of Johnny Appleseed spreads, as tall tales about him spread. In the Natchez Trace stories, Welty is describing the typical pioneer image of Johnny Appleseed, disclosing her attachment to American primitivity spirit in expansion.

Welty also successfully reproduces the stylistic features of fairy tales in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and structure. Clement “disembarked”, the wilderness was “beset” with dangers, the river was stained “the color of blood” and the clouds appeared “the size of whales”. The innocent Clement, with his limited sharpness, detects the loss of left ears and discerns the secrets of the first two inn owners, arrives at the third landlord’s house, who is believed to be honest. Unsurprisingly, Clement is carrying bags of gold with him. He is plotted by Jamie Lockhart the bandit, with great craftiness. In the seemingly-insipid outset, characters of Clement and Jamie have been depicted versatily, Clement from innocent to gullible, Jamie from brave and resourceful to sly and avaricious. A bundle of coincidences and rollbacks occur along the storyline, making the plot amusing and alluring to the readers. The couple in love, Jamie Lockhart and Rosamond Musgrove, meet rarely and all in particular occasions. They meet for the first time when Rosamond appears as a fancy lady and a big talker in the far forest end above the Natchez Trace. Jamie Lockhart, in this meeting, is a vicious bandit with his face all stained in berry juice for a disguise. They have been attracted onto each other with the discrepant identities under that circumstance. They carry on their identities for the second meeting and mutual affection grows on. It is the third meeting in which new

<sup>3</sup> The image of Clement derives from the popular American folktale character John Appleseed, who is also a real-life character. **Johnny Appleseed**, byname of **John Chapman**, (born September 26, 1774, Leominster, Massachusetts—died March 18?, 1845, near Fort Wayne, Indiana, U.S.). He has traveled across large swaths of land planting apple orchards from seeds. He is a legendary character, one of the earliest pioneering spirits and also a symbol of American culture. Welty endows her character Clement similar qualities and characteristics. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Chapman>)

identities merge in. For the third meeting, Jamie Lockhart is invited as a gentlemen guest to Rosamond's house, to whom Clement is planning to ask for a favor to defend for his daughter's honor. Rosamond, however, appears as the raunchy, disheveled and clumsy daughter of a rich planter. "As for Jamie, he shone like the sun from cleanliness, youth, wisdom, and satisfaction, and with the dirt and stain gone from his cheeks he was the perfect stranger to the bandit" (Welty, 1987: 49). It is clearly observed that the lovers fail to sparkle any love in between them with their new identities. The dual pressures from both stepmother and the father, the intense struggle between affection and wealth force Jamie to make a choice. Jamie has been wavering between wealth and beauty. He is caught in between Clement's wealth and Rosamond's beauty, Clement's virtuousness and Salome's viciousness. At the time he chooses the later, out of a stronger yearning to shake off the old identity and bind himself with a respectable social rank. Rosamond's affection toward Jamie continues to grow and she visits the bandits and is kept as the housekeeper of the robbers and the lover of the bandit. In the bandits' cabin Rosamond is happily intertwined with Jamie, but frets over his true appearance. Intimacy and love increase while suspicion and concealment are foreshadowed in this ongoing relationship as is revealed in the Cupid and Psyche myth. Every night Rosamond begs Jamie to show himself but he resolutely refuses.

Being incited by the badly-intentioned Salome, Rosamond takes the secret recipe and decides to find out about her husband's true countenance. In the faint candlelight, the lovers disclose their dual identities for the first time. Shame, anger, deceiving and incredibility pervade the room and Jamie runs away from his wife as she discovers who he is, dishonoring his most feeble self. It is not until this moment that the two have turned the tables for the second time. Jamie's self-esteem is smashed and disemboweled and he flees out of consciousness. Rosamond, on the other hand, retains the upper hand in her identity which is equipped with wealth and social ranks. After that, "Everything has now worked out to the most perfect fraction of calculation" (Welty, 1987:101), either worked out by Salome, or by destiny or by Welty, it carries on consecutive coincidences that bind the storyline into attractive fantasy. This separation finally brings the two protagonists to courageously confront their inner selves deprived of their disparate and contradictory identities, it is love and tenderness that finally rules.

Yet reunion is timely postponed as the climax comes to present all conflicts in one short assembly, with all the characters captured in the Indian camp. In the camp, conspiracy and all darkness has been exposed. Rosamond is set free on her lying practice, Jamie wins the chance to get free with his wisdom and courage, Little Harp ends his life of viciousness. Salome goes frantic and tries to challenge the sun, she dances until death, with her jealousy, lust, maliciousness, she puts an end to her own life. Clement, sarcastically, is set free one more time for taking his wife's body away.

The closure of the story echoes to its outset in the most magical ways. The lovers are making great efforts to find each other, but the reunion does not come until almost the last moment, highlighting their unyielding affection towards each other. Mike Fink reappears after his absence in the beginning scene. Yet he has got a new identity from the greatest flatboat man<sup>4</sup> to a mail rider on the dry land, which he believes is a great dishonor. He has lost his respectable identity for being cheated by Jamie Lockhart, yet he regains his venerable identity because he helps out Jamie Lockhart's wife in search of her husband. The story starts with Clement coming back from New Orleans and ends up with Clement traveling to New Orleans again, uniting with his beloved daughter and completing a full circle. Depicted as the most marvelous city in the book, New Orleans is Welty's finest entrust in which new life starts afresh here with new identities. "But now, in his heart Jamie knew that he was a hero and had always been one, only with the power to look at both ways and to see a thing from all sides" (Welty, 1987:134). The gist of doubleness and duality is condensed into this very expression.

The dialogical intentions and inquiries of double identities have run through the whole novella. The main characters are multifaceted and fully convey a trail of strength between virtuousness and viciousness. They are husband and wife, father and mother, brother and sister, master and servant, rival and friend, each character switches between different roles, bringing in unexpected results. The protagonists Jamie Lockhart, Rosamond and Clement all reflect doubleness distinctly or elusively. Jamie and Rosamond, both double-identified, are interactively opposing to each other. With their unwillingness to confront their double identities, their destinies intertwined, misunderstandings arose and stories twisted. Neither Jamie nor Rosamond is comfortable with their dual identities. Their different identities intersect with each other, leading to frequent misunderstandings, plot twists and turns. In the end, with various tests, both realize that identity is just a label, and does not have much meaning. Welty is implying to contemporary readers how to face the desire and pursuit of identity and fame.

Many of the setups in the story have their double-functions. The image of the talking raven which appears in the initial is a token of fairy tale, and it works differently to contrast Rosamond's power to make rebels and Goat's weakness to adhere to obedience. Rosamond's unconscious will to tell lies is also a clever arrangement as it mystifies the story on the one hand, extruding the character's defect yet allowing it to save Rosamond's life in

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<sup>4</sup> The occupation of flatboatman has been greatly honored in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as water was the main transportation means. The reign over the water represents the rule of transport. Here the shift from a flatboatman to a mail rider indicates the transformation from water to the land. As industry begins to develop, the traditional water transport has been gradually replaced by something new and different, indicating a time of innovation and reform.

crucial moment. Clement's incompetency as a father and as a husband overshadows his role as the family core, yet it makes space for Salome's showing of her dark nature. Salome's maliciousness, poorly resented by every promising reader, still works arduously to lure out of the dark nature lurking inside every single soul. Many dialogues of the story are in the contrast and comparison. Mink Fink and Jamie Lockhart's fight, Jamie Lockhart and Little Harpe's argument all give a hint of the tall talk tradition in American South, which is one of their means for a trial of strength. Salome and Clement's dialogue about plantation expansion is an avid output of desire and contentment.

"To encompass so much as that is greedy," said Clement. "It would take too much of time and the heart's energy."

"All the same, you must add it on," said Salome. "If we have this much, we can have more." And she petted the little nut-shaped head of the peacock on her lap.

"Are you not satisfied already?" asked her husband.

"Satisfied!" cried Salome. "Never, until we have got rid of this house which is a little better than a Kentuckian's cabin, with its puncheon floor, and can live in a mansion at least five stories high, with an observatory of the river on top of that, with twenty-two Corinthian columns to hold up the roof." (Welty, 1987: 70-71)

The dialogue resembles that between the fishman and his wife. What Salome wants is more than that, which goes beyond infinite. So is her wickedness. A contrast is formed between Clement's way to be content with what he possesses and Salome's wild ambition to wealth and beauty.

When Rosamond is deprived of all her clothes and returns home naked, kindhearted Clement and greedy Salome make utter different response. Salome says, "Rosamond, speak! Where are the pot-herbs I sent you for?" But Clement says, "In God's name, the child is as naked as a jay bird." (Welty, 1987: 36) Ironically, neither of them shows any sincere concern for Rosamond. The father is far more concerned about the fact that nakedness will do harm to her prestige and honor, while Salome cares about the lost herbs, refracting her outrageous pursuit of wealth. Avid aspiration for wealth and resolute defense for honor form a dialogical conversation, which can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century South America.

Clement, the most merciful and fame-free character, brings about his dialectical opinions on the double nature of the universe. When he learns Jamie's dual identity, he makes a philosophical reflection and differentiated the duality of everything in the world incisively and vividly. Clement reflects in the most dialectical way:

If being a bandit were his breadth and scope, I should find him and kill him .... But since in addition he loves my daughter, he must be not the one man, but two, and I should be afraid of killing the second. For all things are double, and this should keep ills from taking liberties with the outside world, and acting too quickly to finish things off. All things are divided in half— night and day, the soul and body, and sorrow and joy and youth and age .... And perhaps after the riding and robbing and burning and assault is over with this man you love, he will step out of it all like a beastly skin, and surprise you with his gentleness (Welty, 1987: 90-91).

This paragraph illustrates well how Clement understand Jamie's double identity. It implies that Clement discloses the secret of Jamie's identity and holds a sober understanding, an open tolerant attitude and a positive hope for it. Welty does well in granting Clement the God's eyes and passes on her thoughts to readers in Clement's role.

The novella is also dialectical in terms of genre. It falls into the mixing genre types of adventure romance and fairy tales. Dramatic and reversed adventures occur from time to time while magical power and non-sentimental fluctuation permeate the storyline, making the novella exotically attractive. Rosamond, the charming and sweet-tempered protagonist, resembles a lot of heroines in fairy tales, such as Snow White who is vehemently hated by the stepmother, Cinderella who is roughly maltreated by her father's new wife, Rapunzel who is locked up by her wicked guardian and sings songs to attract a prince. She owns a magic token, a locket from her mother whose magic power will protect her from harm, and she can talk to a raven. What's more, lies ridiculously flow out of her mouth against her own will. Salome, the vicious and greedy stepmother, accords with all fairy tale stepmother images and resembles the fisherman's wife in terms of infinite greediness as she is always demanding more and never satisfied. "If we have this much, we can have more." (Welty, 1987: 70) Clement, the benevolent father and indecisive husband, mirrors the caring and unwise fathers in many fairy tales and the laborious and flabby fisherman. However, he is as chivalrous as Don Juan when he is caught fighting with a willow tree in the

dark. Fairy tales please us, Bettelheim says, not because they incalculate moral lessons like fables, or teach painful wisdom like myths, but because they deal with our common predicaments and desires, and then promise that we can win psychologically satisfactory solutions for them (Skaggs, 1976: 101). It is the imagination, the tensions among the diversified elements and what has been projected in our real-life experiences that eventually strike an accord with the blood and flesh readers.

## Conclusion

Welty says that *The Robber Bridegroom* is a unity of reality and fantasy. The main characters in the story, Jamie Lockhart and Mike Fink, have their historical counterparts. She tries to erase the traces of time and space in the creation of the story, but the wild Indian culture in the late 18th century, the brutal bandit culture, frontier culture and hard-working plantation culture in the Natchez region of the southern United States all make their presence in the story. "Beauty and vice and every delight possible to the soul and body stood hospitably, and usually together, in every doorway and beneath every palmetto by day and lighted torch by night" (Welty, 1987: 132). Welty tells the cycling of trust and deception, good will and wickedness, obedience and rebellion, desire and restraint, reflecting the human nature of good and evil, beauty and ugliness in the mixture of all different cultures. *The Robber Bridegroom* is such a fairy tale retelling, which is wonderful southern romance. It's like a well-designed, coincidentally crafted work of art by Welty, filled with Welty's thoughts on human nature and human relations, transcending time and space and forming a classic.

Doubleness and duality within the Welty Canon are not simple binary oppositions, but mixed juxtapositions of different values. Order against chaos, kindness against evilness, chance against eternity, defects against wholeness, all of which are embodied in a blending form of allegory, fantasy, mythology and reality. As Brown has pointed out, "The romantic mode allows Miss Welty to deal with the doubleness of human nature as cogently as tragedy or comedy would have." (qtd. in Clark, 1973: 637). Welty produces these jumble creations out of random choices, yet it imprints a self-evident routine at Welty's disposal. This diagram is explicit of the following features. Firstly, it piles up mounts of details to describe scenes and episodes, the sight of which are both illusionary and real. Secondly, characters are defective in common, either mentally or physically. The defects are sometimes defects, but in other cases the flashing points. Thirdly, though obscure, Welty's stories always pass on positive inspirations and reflection to allow readers to apprehend and ponder on.

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