

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-15377-5 - Eudora Welty: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Pearl Amelia McHaney

Excerpt

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*A CURTAIN OF GREEN (1941)*

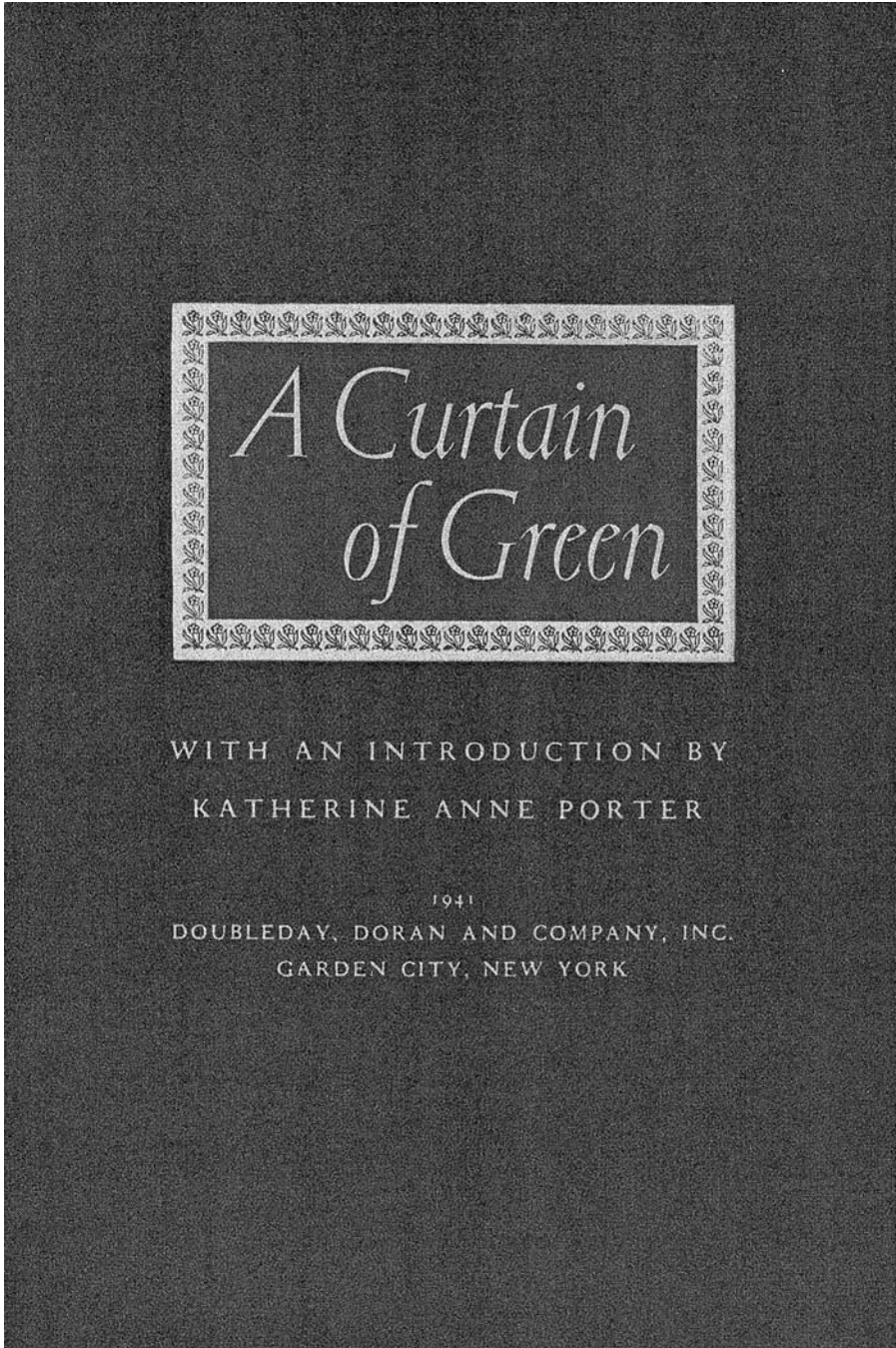
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Rose Feld. *New York Herald Tribune Books*, November 16, 1941, pp. 10, 12.

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In a foreword warm with critical appreciation and generous encouragement, Katherine Anne Porter introduces a collection of short stories by a comparatively new writer, Eudora Welty. That Miss Porter should be attracted by the tales published under the title, "A Curtain of Green," is not strange for they have a great kinship to her own fine work, possessing a quality of mood which surrounds and gives meaning to the incident. In large measure this is a peculiarly feminine genre represented at its best by writers like Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Elizabeth Bowen, Kay Boyle and Katherine Anne Porter. The excellence of several of Miss Welty's stories indicates that eventually she may belong with these: the greater number of them, however, are interesting as examples of the work of an artist who is still in process of perfecting a technique which will sustain incident as well as mood.

As far as formal or conventional plot is concerned, the stories evade retelling. But beyond the incident or series of incidents around which Miss Welty builds her tales, lies the pressure of atmosphere which gives significance to her characters and her facts. Most of her stories are placed in small communities of her native state, Mississippi, and carry the intimacy and intensity of narrow-range observation.

Practically all of the tales hold a note of bitterness and frustration. In "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," Miss Welty tells a twisted story of a half-wit girl. Left alone, Lily might have worked out some destiny of her own; pushed around by the well

intentioned women of Victory, she is left in a state of dreadful confusion. "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden" (Miss Welty needs some one to edit her titles) is another tale of harrowing bewilderment. A youth comes to a little town in Mississippi in search of a Negro cripple whom he had unwittingly exploited in a circus. The tale holds horror and suppressed passion and as Miss Welty tells it, and intends it, the reader's sympathy goes out not to the victim of the frightful hoax, but to the tortured youth who realizes he can make no retribution. "Clytie," "Old Mr. Marblehill," "A Curtain of Green," "Why I Live at the P. O.," carry a mood of incipient madness. In all of them, the characters, twisted for various reasons away from the path of normal experience, make dreadful adjustments to life.

Two of Miss Welty's best stories deal with traveling salesmen. In "The Hitch-Hikers," she tells a tale of a fatality arising out of casual kindness; in "Death of a Traveling Salesman" the story of a shoe drummer who discovers how unbearably empty his life is in comparison with humble people he thought he despised. Again in "Flowers for Marjorie" and in "Powerhouse" Miss Welty devotes herself to the theme of death as an escape from frustration and confusion.

Like Katherine Mansfield, she has a yearning feeling for the world of childhood. Two of the tales, "A Visit of Charity" and "A Memory" turn upon the helplessness of a child against the assault of the adult world. In the first Miss Welty's bitterness embraces the child as well as the old women she visits in the charity ward; in the second it is directed against the vulgarity of humanity. "The Whistle" is a tale of two defeated creatures whipped by suffering into a frenzy of destruction; "The Keys" a weird sketch of a couple of deaf mutes seeking a talisman of hope. In "Petrieved Man," a tale about a criminal

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who evaded the law by a dreadful imposture, Miss Welty comes nearest to showing a sense of humor but even here it is made caustic by her rejection of human frailties. Of all the stories, "A Worn Path" comes closest to holding warmth and kindness. In portraying the old Negro woman who travels miles to bring a Christmas toy to her sick grandchild, Miss Welty writes with warmth that holds no searing quality.

As a whole, "A Curtain of Green" shows too great a preoccupation with the abnormal and grotesque. Some day some one might explore this tendency of Southern writers. Besides serving as an explanatory introduction to the book, Miss Porter's foreword is excellent as an essay on the short story and its place in American fiction.

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Marianne Hauser. "A Curtain of Green' and Other New Works of Fiction." *New York Times Book Review*, November 16, 1941, p. 6.

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Few contemporary books have ever impressed me quite as deeply as this book of stories by Eudora Welty. It seems to me almost impossible to discuss her work detachedly. Reading it twice has not given me any critical distance, but has only drawn me closer into its rich and magic world. To explain just why these stories impress one so appears as difficult as to define why an ordinary face, encountered by chance in the street, might suddenly reveal miraculous beauty, through a smile perhaps, or through an unexpected expression of sadness.

Many of the stories are dark, weird and often unspeakably sad in mood, yet there is no trace of personal frustration in them, neither harshness nor sentimental resignation; but an alert, constant awareness of life as a whole, and that profound, intuitive understanding of life which enables the artist to accept it.

It is this simple, natural acceptance of everything, of beauty and ugliness, insanity, cruelty and gentle faith which helps the author create her characters with such clear sureness. Lily Daw, the feeble-minded girl who wanted to marry a xylophone player, the little clubfooted Negro, the two hitch-hikers or the traveling salesman are only a few of the many characters which the reader will not easily forget.

On each page one senses the author's fanatic love of people. With a few lines she draws the gesture of a deaf-mute, the wind-blown skirts of a Negro woman in the fields, the bewilderment of a child in the sickroom of an old people's asylum – and she has told more than many an author might tell in a novel of six hundred pages.

How does she achieve this? Through the colorful flexibility of her style, the choice of her plot, the clever handling of her climax? Partly, but not essentially. Miss Welty's writing is not intellectual primarily, and what makes it so unique cannot be learned in short-story courses. As Katherine Anne Porter tells in her fine introduction, Miss Welty has never studied the writing craft at any college, or belonged to any literary group. She was born a writer, and could do nothing else but write. Her art is spontaneous, and of that poetic quality which values the necessity of form by instinct. Her stories escape any technical analysis. To point out that they are right in form seems to me quite as superfluous as to state that a tree is right in form.

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Her descriptions of people and things never remain mere observations, but become, as it were, part of a deeper law and meaning, not through conscious symbolism or abstraction, but merely because they are so completely seen and felt. There is in some of her stories an almost surrealist note, an intimate fusion of dream and reality, reminiscent at times of Kafka.

The background of most of the stories is a small town in Mississippi, the author's native State. However, there is nothing particularly regional about them. They could in a way happen anywhere, though certainly not to any one. For the mood and atmosphere of each story form a close unity with its specific characters.

There are no wars going on behind the scenes, no revolutions or headline-disasters. The tragedies which Miss Welty invokes occur in the backyards of life. She needs no outside stimulus to recreate the depths of human suffering.

If Miss Welty's writing is detached from immediate controversial subjects, it has nothing to do with "escapism." I would not think it necessary to make this point if the word had not become a standard expression for any type of literature that does not report or lecture. Escapism is not so bad a word, though if applied thoughtfully one might find that many a war story or newspaper report might come under its heading. But Miss Welty's stories never escape from anything, except from the danger of literary falsehood. She rather explores, follows up and remains within her story to the last to bear the responsibility of her deeper knowledge.

I feel certain that her stories will live for a long time. Her talent is of that rare kind which holds, even at its strongest moments, a hidden wealth of still greater strength, unexpressed as yet. This is why I believe that we can expect much from her in the future, and even more.

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"New Southern Writers  
Unspoiled by Fads."

*Kansas City Star*,  
November 22, 1941,  
p. 14.

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Book publishers usually are pretty chary of offering collections of short stories until the author's position is well established. This is Miss Welty's first book, few of the stories have appeared in magazines, and she has been writing only a few years.

It is, however, a worthy venture; Miss Welty is an innovator in style and presentation, and her pieces are marked by few of the precious qualities that often are found in "little" magazine contributions. In a sensible biographical and critical introduction, Katherine Anne Porter characterizes Miss Welty as a "spontaneous" and "natural" writer who tends to her own knitting in her Jackson, Miss., home, paying no heed to literary fads and fancies. The stories, all of them laid in rural or small town Mississippi, suggest that Miss Welty has done well to stay where she belongs.

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Kay Boyle. "Full-Length  
Portrait." *New Republic*,  
November 24, 1941,  
p. 707.

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In her introduction to Eudora Welty's collection of short stories, Katherine Anne Porter has said a number of profoundly

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true and sensitive things. She has said them of Miss Welty, whom she describes as “a quiet, tranquil-looking, modest girl” who was brought to visit her one hot mid-summer evening in Louisiana; and she says them of Miss Welty as a writer with a writer’s responsibility and problem to consider; and, lastly, she says them of the actual writing Miss Welty has done. I speak of these remarks of Miss Porter’s here because they seem to me to offer as good a set of standards to bring to the evaluation of writers and writing as any I have seen.

Miss Porter tells us that Miss Welty spends “an immense amount of time” writing, although the fact that she does write is either not known or, if known, dismissed as of little importance in the Mississippi town where Miss Welty has spent the relatively few years of her life. We learn that she listens to music, cultivates flowers and leads the “normal social life” which exists in any medium-sized town; we learn, too, that she was never in any hurry either to be published or acclaimed, and that she possessed that happy and “instinctive knowledge that writing cannot be taught, but only learned, and learned by the individual in his own way, at his own pace, and in his own time.” To complete this gravely and brilliantly executed portrait, Miss Porter adds that Miss Welty has been spared a “militant social consciousness,” which Miss Porter believes can only serve to narrow, not to widen, the creative artist’s way. When the artist “disassociates himself from the human world in favor of a set of political, which is to say, inhuman rules,” Miss Porter writes, “he cuts himself away from his proper society – living men.”

Here then is Miss Welty’s equipment, and it is a singularly uncorrupt equipment in much the same way that Emily Dickinson’s was. Add to it what Miss Porter defines as “an active and disciplined

imagination,” and we are, in “A Curtain of Green,” brought face to face with one of the most gifted and interesting short-story writers of our time. The parallel between Emily Dickinson and Eudora Welty need not, I feel, be dropped here. They are both American women writers of exceptional distinction who, each in her own century and in her own conditions, instinctively mistrusted the outer paraphernalia of literary contacts and activity and who, each in her own way, sought and found in silence an inner and almost mystical tongue. That Eudora Welty has just won a prize for her story, “A Worn Path,” in the O. Henry Memorial Collection is interesting to note, but it is of little importance. She is working out something for herself which none of us can have any part in, and whatever honors come must be simply by the way. In the same sense, what small pieces of criticism one might write down are of little importance, for Eudora Welty has probably recognized the weaknesses already and is proceeding beyond them. The first one is her tendency to carry objectivity so far that at times her characters are seen from such a distance and at such an angle that they lose all human proportions, and the approach of the author herself deteriorates into something as unworthy as the spectator’s point of view. This manifests itself notably in the first three stories in the book, and I deplore that they should have been placed where they are. I should like to have seen the collection start off with “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden,” “Powerhouse” and the “Hitch-Hikers,” printed with equal importance and somehow side by side.

It is characteristic of Miss Porter’s own active and disciplined mind that she does not let matters rest here but enters boldly and admirably into the question of the compunction which Miss Welty or any other short-story writer should feel about writing a novel – the publisher’s trap, Miss

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Porter calls it, which he lays for every short-story writer of any gifts at all. "She can very well become a master of the short story," Miss Porter writes. "It is quite possible that she can never write a novel, and there is no reason why she should." In considering this statement I have attempted to project Miss Welty's "case against realism" into a vehicle which would demand more continuity of thought and more development of act. Although I feel that her short stories are (and here is my second critical note) not unlike paintings in that they are absolutely halted as they stand, I foresee no way of failure for her written or unwritten novel. On the contrary, I feel that Eudora Welty could "at her own pace, and in her own time" do whatever she set out to do.

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Dale Mullen. "Some Notes on the Stories of Eudora Welty." *Mississippi Literary Review* 1 (November 1941), pp. 21–24.

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Eudora Welty's *A Curtain of Green* has received a critical attention such as has been accorded to no other first book by a Mississippian in the last decade. There would be little point in this magazine's adding another review. Let me instead make a few notes about Miss Welty, her book, and its critical reception.

It may be said without fear of objection that Katherine Anne Porter and Kay Boyle are two of America's very best writers of the short story, and that Miss Boyle is one of our most sensitive critics. Miss Porter has written the introduction to this book, and Miss Boyle has reviewed it for

*The New Republic*. In her introduction Miss Porter writes, "there are almost perfect stories in this book." Miss Boyle says that Miss Welty is "one of the most gifted and interesting short-story writers of our time."

The only objection to the book that has appeared in the reviews I have read is best expressed in the words of *Time*: "Her worst fault is her lust for melodrama, of the insidious sort which lies less in violence than in tricked atmosphere." Against which may be placed the words of Miss Porter: "In all of these stories . . . I find nothing false or labored."

Eudora Welty was born into a well-to-do Jackson family. Miss Porter writes: "She had at arm's reach the typical collection of books which existed as a matter of course in a certain kind of Southern family, so that she had read the ancient Greek and Roman poetry, history and fable, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, the eighteenth-century English and nineteenth-century French novelists, with a dash of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, before she realized what she was reading." From her home Miss Welty went to school at M.S.C.W., Wisconsin, and Columbia. She studied painting and for a time believed she was going to be a painter. She took up photography and won something of a reputation as a photographer. She was twenty-six before she submitted her first story to a publisher.

Considering her background and education (which, for a Mississippian, was a cosmopolitan one) it would not have been astonishing if she had taken note of Ellen Glasgow and turned her sharp eye satirically upon the society of Jackson and Natchez. (She may yet. If she does, she will do it beautifully.) Instead, she has chosen to write principally of the poor people of the Mississippi countryside.

The point I wish to make is that she is a Mississippian and has felt Mississippi all about her. It has been easy in the last few

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years to become interested in Mississippi: there is a growing body of Mississippi literature; there have been many studies made and books written about the South, and there have been studies made and books written about Mississippi itself. Thus when she began to write, she wrote about that Mississippi which has fascinated such diverse writers as Faulkner, Cohn, Kroll, and Evans Wall.

There is a thesis or an essay to be written on the idea that Mississippi writers are creating not simply a number of books but rather a body of literature. Books of such diverse quality as those of Faulkner and Evans Wall, Street's *In My Father's House* and Cochran's *Boss Man*, have much in common both in subject and treatment. Many forces tend to shape all Mississippi books toward one pattern, but most of them can be covered by mentioning the great current interest in the South as *The South*. And there is the tremendous influence exerted by William Faulkner on nearly every American and surely every southern writer. It is not hard to believe that every Mississippi writer (except Faulkner) has read nearly all other Mississippi writers. Eudora Welty has undoubtedly been influenced by Mississippi's literature; her work has now become a part of it and is influencing and will influence more and more the work of all the state's writers.

But do not imagine for a moment that Miss Welty's work is not superior to most Mississippi writing. In fiction only Faulkner has done better work.

In her review in *The New Republic* Kay Boyle has two pieces of criticism for Miss Welty. "The first one is her tendency to carry objectivity so far that at times her characters are seen from such a distance and at such an angle that they lose all human proportions, and the approach of the author herself deteriorates into something as unworthy as the spectator's point

of view." The second is that "her short stories are . . . not unlike paintings in that they are absolutely halted as they stand." Neither of these criticisms makes sense to me.

Her examples for the first criticism are the first three stories in the book, "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," "A Piece of News," and "Petrieved Man." They contain some of her sharpest satire, and certainly she views her characters with little either of sentiment or sentimentality. But if there is no sympathy for at least some of the characters, if there is not friendliness for all of them, I have read into the stories a great deal that is not there. The characters are real and living people: that one could view them with less than friendliness is beyond my understanding.

As for her second point, I repeat that Miss Welty's people are real and living. One can and does imagine for them (as one could not for the people in many of the stories of the O'Brien anthologies) a past and a future. I feel that I know the heroine of "A Piece of News" so well that I could write, if I could write, a full length novel about her.

If she means that the stories are halted technically as they stand, she makes no sense whatever. Miss Welty is an uninhibited reviser, and "A Piece of News" is a good example of her revising. Of this I shall have something to say later.

Miss Porter writes of the habit publishers have of asking a short story writer or a poet to give them a novel that they may publish before they publish his short stories or poems. To her it is a "trap" and she says that Miss Welty may well become a master of the short story but may never be able to write a novel, that attempting to write a novel may retard her gift for short stories. Miss Boyle considers this but foresees "no way of failure for her written or unwritten novel." There is no point in my entering this controversy; few if any in America are better qualified than these two



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distinguished artists to argue the point. It might be pointed out, however, that Miss Boyle is much better at writing short stories than she is at writing novels.

However, I should very much like to see Miss Welty write a novel. There is at least a possibility that it would be an excellent one.

James Robert Peery, in reviewing *A Curtain of Green* for the *Commercial Appeal*, “hopes” that she will write one about the energetic ladies of Old Natchez. It may be that he has had a hint of her intention to do so. But Mr. Peery may have been hinting no such thing, and I do not wish to start a rumor on such a slim basis.

A few paragraphs back I remarked that it has been easy these last few years to become interested in Mississippi. Apropos of this, I wish to speak of a letter that The Oxford Eagle printed on its front page in 1936.

“I enclose one dollar for which please send me at above address The Oxford Eagle for six months. At the end of that time I’ll try to find the other dollar for the rest of the year. I have been reading your paper in our office (WPA publicity Dept.) and wish to say that in county news I think you are without peer in any state – the flavor is all there. I think it so worthy of preserving that I have made a scrapbook of your county news in my collection of Mississippiana. Please never discontinue your correspondence. Eudora Welty.”

This letter is of interest to me partly of course because The Eagle is my father’s paper, but I am not printing it here in order to pat myself on the back. Miss Welty likes the Eagle not because of any brilliance on his part, but simply because it publishes a great deal of “County News,” and publishes it with no more editing than the linotypist does when he changes “dau” to

“daughter.” And I might add that he does not refrain from editing these columns in order to retain the “flavor” Miss Welty speaks of but rather because he has no time to spend on them.

The thing that may be of interest to admirers of Miss Welty’s stories is the fact that she kept a collection of Mississippiana and a scrapbook of clippings from the “County News” columns of a country newspaper. When one remembers that many of her stories are about the same sort of people who write these columns or are written about in them, it is not difficult to imagine that she has made use of them. And her collection of Mississippiana indicates her interest in Mississippi and Mississippians.

In the review in the *Herald Tribune Books*, it was remarked (apropos of “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden”) that Miss Welty needs someone to edit her titles. I can’t agree: her selections seem almost perfect. However, I feel that a better title could have been found for the book. “A Curtain of Green” hardly seems to indicate the tone of the book. The point could be argued, though.

As for the individual stories: “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” is a beautiful piece, both tender and ruthless in its characterization. “Why I Live at the P. O.” is frightening and uproariously funny. “A Memory” is at once entrancing, painful and harsh. “The Hitchhikers” [*sic*] is a study in loneliness that might, in less certain hands, have become too fantastic for reality. “Pet-rified Man” could have been written by Ring Lardner, if he had been a Mississippian (not since have I seen so clean a delineation of vulgarity). “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden” reminds me, both in its subject and its treatment, of William Faulkner.

Various stories in the book may remind different readers of different writers, but in the end all must understand that this is

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Miss Welty's book and hers alone. William Faulkner would not have written the last two paragraphs of "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden." Their sudden appearance relieves a story that had become almost unbearable. It is a flash of the genius that is Miss Welty's own.

The revisions Miss Welty has made in some of her stories are of peculiar interest to me. They were written by the "promising young writer" who was discovered by John Rood of *Manuscript* and Albert Erskine of *The Southern Review*. They have been rewritten by a mature and competent craftsman. From "Death of a Traveling Salesman" (*Manuscript*, 1936) she has eliminated aspects which seem, after the two versions have been compared, inappropriate and in bad taste. Aside from that, sentence after sentence has been smoothed and sharpened. A story that was already good has been improved in both content and style until it is an almost perfect one.

An easier comparison may be made with "A Piece of News." This is the first paragraph from the story as it appeared in 1937 in *The Southern Review*:

Coming back from the crossroads with the sack of coffee, Ruby Fisher had got caught in the pouring-down rain. In the cabin door she shook her wet yellow head crossly like a cat reproaching itself for not knowing better.

In the 1941 book that paragraph has been replaced by these two:

She had been out in the rain. She stood in front of the cabin fireplace, her legs wide apart, bending over, shaking her wet yellow head crossly, like a cat reproaching itself for not knowing better. She was talking to herself – only a small fluttering sound, hard to lay hold of in the sparsity of the room.

"The pouring-down rain, the pouring-down rain" – was that what

she was saying over and over, like a song? She stood turning in little quarter turns to dry herself, her head bent forward and the yellow hair hanging out streaming and tangled. She was holding her skirt primly out to draw the warmth in.

The early paragraph was all right. It served quite well to start the story. The new paragraphs set the stage and very charmingly introduce our heroine, whom we are to know better and better as paragraph follows paragraph. I liked "A Piece of News" in 1937; the 1941 story I think one of the most delightful of our time.

One may also compare "Old Mr. Marblehall" with the "Old Mr. Grenada" that appeared in the same magazine in 1938. A word has been changed here, a sentence made more rhythmic there. But over and above that we find a clearer picture, a more mature conception of character.

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Louise Bogan. "The Gothic South." *Nation*, December 6, 1941, p. 572.

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The definite Gothic quality which characterizes so much of the work of writers from the American South has puzzled critics. Is it the atmosphere of the *roman noir*, so skilfully transferred to America by Poe? Or is it a true and indigenous atmosphere of decaying feudalism? Faulkner treats the horrifying and ambiguous situations thrown up by a background which has much in common with nineteenth-century Russia in a style darkened and convoluted by, it would seem, the very character of his material. Eudora Welty, who is a native and resident of Mississippi, in the stories of this volume has