

Are You Ready for the Journey? Images of Female Identity in Welty's "Kin"

In this essay I will briefly analyze Eudora Welty's short story "Kin," which features an itinerant photographer who takes over Uncle Felix's house in Mingo, under Sister Anne's command. She has managed to squeeze the local community onto the front porch and, referring to those attending the photographic session, declares: "They've left the fields, dressed up like Sunday and Election Day put together (...) April's a pretty important time, but having your picture taken beats that! Don't have a chance of that out this way more than once or twice in a lifetime!" (Welty, 1983: 550).¹ Welty, herself a serious photographer, recalls the itinerant photographers that roamed Mississippi during the Depression, when she traveled extensively all over the State, working for the Works and Progress Administration:

A man (...) came through little towns and set up a make shift studio in somebody's parlor and let it be know that he would be taking pictures all day in this place, and a stream of people came. He had backdrops — sepia trees and a stool — then let them pose themselves. That was an itinerant livelihood during the Depression. Itinerants were welcome, bringing excitement like that, when towns were remote and nobody ever went anywhere.

(Welty, *cit.* Cole and Scrivivasan, 1989: xx)

¹ Later on, she exclaims: "Oh, it's like Saturday and Sunday put together. The round the fella [she's referring to the photographer who went around attracting costumers] must have made!" (1983: 552)."

“Kin” is included in *The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories* (1955), a collection that thematizes the motif of the journey, according to several critics.² We are guided on this journey by a first-person narrator, who is (almost) an outsider, for she has been living away from Mississippi since she was eight years old, and only comes for short visits. The scene opens in “Aunt Ethel’s downstairs bedroom,” where the visitor (just as the reader) tries to keep up with references to people and stories constantly evoked by cousin Kate and her mother, in the Southern conversational style (Welty 1983: 538).³

The process of communication is foregrounded in the text through multiple allusions to reading and writing, or to misunderstandings that underline both the arbitrary nature of the signifier and the need to negotiate meaning within a community of speakers.⁴ Exegesis is constantly highlighted through references to communal linguistic practices, be they Sister Anne’s letter, or the spelling matches organized by the family’s local church. Dicey’s publicized visit (even the town newspaper wrote a note about her arrival) becomes after all a journey into the past, a quest for self-identity and knowledge, dramatized by her constant self-awareness⁵ and by her manifold memories.

In the opening lines, the wordplay on Mingo suggests the importance of place and amplifies its semantic potentialities, conferring to it a metaphysical status: “‘Mingo?’ I repeated, and for a moment I didn’t know what my aunt meant. The name sounded in my ears like *something* instead of *somewhere*” (1983:538, italics in original).⁶ The ambiguity lasts for another page, since the narrator is not only dealing with too much information, but also eager to “confide” (using her own expression), to describe herself and her contextual circumstances. Her identity is based upon family connections (her aunt and her cousin in the first scene, plus an array of relatives she had forgotten), and upon her plans to marry soon, since she “was not going to be an old maid!” (idem). Referring to the small Mississippi town the short story is set in, Dicey evokes the

² Cf. Appel (1965: 240-243); Polk (1989).

³ About the Southern dialect in Welty’s first-person-narrator fiction, cf. Pickett (1973).

⁴ In her essay “Words in Fiction” (1965), the author points to the similar and complementary nature of reading and writing, emphasizing the dialectical quality of communication (Welty, 1989: 134).

⁵ The narrator contemplates her reflection in mirrors twice (1983: 542, 545).

⁶ Analyzing this excerpt, Kreyling (1980:129) refers to a passage that Welty later removed from the initial manuscript.

exuberance of springtime: the unique smell of the South, the urgency of birds, “so busy you turned as you would at people as they plunged by,” the roses blooming; this synesthetic quality pervades the text, reflecting the narrator’s acute perception and her sensuous approach to experience (1983: 539).⁷

In a domestic universe typical of Welty’s fiction, the women talk about the two other main characters in the story — Sister Anne, a spinster who takes care of the sick members of the family, and Uncle Felix, the dying patriarch, both associated with a cluster of stories and homely jokes. Since Aunt Ethel has been feeling sick, it is decided that the girls will pay them a visit, taking a bunch of roses and a cake, because the much commented “remote kin” is known to be extremely fond of sweets, although lacking the ability to cook. These are some of her flaws, together with having been abandoned at the altar, already forty years old, or having fallen into a well in the expectation of being rescued by a gallant.

This figure is humorously ridiculed throughout the narrative, even if Aunt Ethel rebukes her daughter for being cruel (“‘There’s such a thing as being unfair, Kate,’ (...) ‘I always say, *poor* Sister Anne’”) (1983: 542, italics in original) or puts in a word for her:

‘She used to get *dizzy* very easily,’ Aunt Ethel spoke out in a firm voice (...) ‘Maybe she did well — maybe a girl might do well sometimes *not* to marry, if she’s not cut out for it.’

(1983: 543, italics in original)⁸

The compassionate reader may also understand Sister Anne’s dilemma. Led by the author’s invisible hand, the reader may see beyond the narrator’s highly subjective depiction, and forgive Sister Anne for “her self-centered callousness [that] troubles both Dicey and Kate”.⁹ In other words, to understand fully the question of gender identity, there’s still another frame of reference to consider, the cultural context evoked by “Kin.” In the traditional South, if a woman is *not cut out for* marriage, if her personality does not fit the standard requisites for an eligible bride,

⁷ Welty uses a few impressionistic rhetorical devices in this short story, such as synesthesia and hypallage.

⁸ Kreyling (1980:129) suggests that in the last excerpt quoted “Welty dramatizes Dicey’s internal conflict obliquely”.

⁹ Kreyling (1980:130) is here commenting on the fact that Uncle Felix, with so many visitors around, got locked in the utility room.

she will probably be *cut out from* social connections. Sister Anne, whose “nickname” teasingly alludes to her celibacy,¹⁰ exemplifies precisely this paradox, the confinement of women to stereotyped social roles, which allowed them few choices, often condemning them to solitude.

On the surface, Dicey’s perspective prevails, though, and “Kin” relates her joyful ride through the countryside, till she reaches “the home place” (1983: 539). Once in Mingo (her symbolic movement underlined by references to several thresholds, or borders, such as the gate to the property, the doors and the curtains), the protagonist enters a *mundus inversus*. Photography plays a role in providing various motives that dramatize this transition: first, the crowd and the vehicles outside the house lead the girls to believe that Uncle Felix is dead and those are his mourners, which points to the temporal dimension of photography, the art of the transitory, and generates ambiguity. Furthermore, technical details of photographic practice create a surreal scenery: the house displays “a queer intensity for the afternoon,” (1983: 547) and once they are inside “a sudden flash fill[s] the hall with light, changing white to black, black to white” (1983: 449-550).¹¹

The symbolic dimension of the journey is also underlined by the disruption of temporal linearity, which characterizes memory: “the corner clock was wrong” (1983: 549) and in “the hall (...) a banjo hung like a stopped clock” (1983: 553). Working through sudden flashes, kindled by several objects that Dicey beholds in the house, memory leads the protagonist to past moments among her kin, allowing her to reconstitute important temporal stretches. The music box, the bell in the yard, the breezeway where she used to play, “as long as a tunnel through some mountain,” (1983: 553) the utility room where her uncle is confined, and mainly the stereopticon endow Dicey with a special vision:

I remembered the real Uncle Felix (...) / I remembered the house, the real house (...) the island we made, our cloth and food and our flowers and jelly and our selves, so lightly enclosed there — as though we ate in pure running water. (...) / That expectation — even alarm — that the awareness of happiness can bring! Of any happiness. It need not even be yours. It is like being able to prophesy, all of a sudden.

(1983: 557)

¹⁰ Remember Aunt Ethel’s comment about this character’s epithet: “Well, of course the teasing element is not to be denied” (Welty 1983: 542).

¹¹ Note that this passage can be read as a metaphor of the photographic negative.

The stereopticon (an optical instrument that superimposes two pictures of the same object, creating a three-dimensional effect) motivated a ritual between Dicey and her uncle, who sat on the porch after the family meal, observing slides in silence. The technical characteristics of this instrument parallel the working of memory, and comment on the art of fiction, which creates a reality effect adding a further dimension to the flat surface of the page, through the suggestive power of words combined. Moreover, this scene highlights the persistent work of vision, which excludes other distractions (Uncle Felix was “invisible” to his other nephews’ calls while “looking his fill”) and thrives on repetition, till it almost causes a physical effect on the viewer —“it seemed to me the tracings from a beautiful face of a strange coin were being laid against my brain,” the narrator says (1983: 558).

Epiphany is multiple: Dicey secretly recognizes the tragic nature of the human condition¹² and establishes a bond with her dying uncle Felix, who mistakes her for an ancient lover and writes her a note asking for a secret date at midnight.¹³ Looking at Uncle Felix’s “letter” later on, Dicey gets impatient with Kate’s inability to read, because she has intuitively realized that interpretation goes beyond the literal meaning of words, beyond surfaces, into the core of mystery:

She could always make the kind of literal remark, like this, that could alienate me, (...) much as I love her. I don’t know why yet, but some things are too important for a mistake even to be considered.

(1983: 564)

As suggested above, place articulates the revelation experienced by the protagonist, for it “is not merely the inert ground on which human act and things happen but (...) the lively medium that makes things possible and confers identity” (Kreyling: 1980:129). It is significant that Mingo alters the sequential nature of chronology to a spiral movement that allows the characters to experience time in a creative, unified way, which is a recurrent motif in Welty’s writing, as several critics have noted.¹⁴

¹² Near the end, after a laughing fit with Kate, just outside the gates of Mingo, the protagonist refers mysteriously to “our impeding tragedy” (Welty 1983: 565).

¹³ Appel (1965) notes the phonetic similarity between Dicey and Daisy. Kieft (1989:199) further elaborates on this, arguing that in the Southern dialect the pronunciation of these names is nearly identical.

¹⁴ Cf. Adams 2000: 151-175, and Carson 1992.

In fact, this conception echoes the author's seminal essay "Place in Fiction," where she says:

It is by the nature of itself that fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that *feelings* are bound up in place. The human mind is a mass of associations — associations more poetic even than actual.

(Welty 1987:118)

On a metaliterary level, "Kin" invites the reader to engage in a reflection about the Southern literary conventions of character and place, parodying place and identity as masquerade.¹⁵ This is especially evident in the scene where Sister Anne, with "a sort of pirate hat" (Welty 1983:558),¹⁶ is posing for her free portrait, while the young women are hiding behind the parlor curtain, spying their cousin "about to be martyred."¹⁷ Dickey's remark about the "big piece of scenery" (1983: 552)¹⁸ points out the illusory nature of place and of photography: "What would show in the picture was none of Mingo at all, but the itinerant backdrop — the same old thing, a scene that never was, a black and white and gray blur of unrolled, yanked-down moonlight, (...) just behind Sister Anne's restless heel" (1983: 560).

It happens that behind that frame hangs still another image that the narrator suddenly remembers: the picture of her Great-Grandmother Jerrold. This palimpsest dramatizes the essential mystery of vision, and further enhances the complexity of memory, underlining the idea that knowledge, personal enlightenment is only possible through the passionate connection with the forces of imagination. I believe it is worth quoting Dickey's description of the invisible portrait:

And I remembered—rather, more warmly *knew*, like a secret of the family—that the head of this black-haired, black-eyed lady who always looked the right, mysterious age to be my sister, had been fitted to the ready-made portrait by the painter who had called at the door (...) none of it, world or body, was really hers. *She* had eaten bear meat, seen Indians, she had married into the wilderness at

¹⁵ Cf. Polk (1989).

¹⁶ The masquerade had been previously enacted with Dickey's hat (1983: 541, 542, and 545).

¹⁷ Dickey is actually referring to the passage when Sister Anne decides she "need[s] to freshen up a little bit" to get ready for her photograph, (1983: 556). The same image is used later, after the picture is taken: "The flash ran wild through the house (...) filling our lungs with gunpowder smoke as though there had been a massacre." (1983: 562).

¹⁸ This expression comes from the long and detailed account Sister Anne gives of the photographer's arrival that morning, which provides technical and sociological information about the itinerant photographers' work.

Mingo, to what unknown feelings. Slaves had died in her arms. She had grown a rose for Aunt Ethel to send back by me. And still those eyes, opaque, all pupil, belonged to Evelina—I knew because they saw out, as mine did; weren't warned, as mine weren't, and never shut before the end, as mine would not. I, her divided sister, knew who had felt the wilderness of the world behind the ladies' view. We were homesick for somewhere that was the same place.

(1983: 561, italics in original)¹⁹

Thus, the meaning of the title broadens, since *kin* refers not only to the myriad family connections that Dicey tries to catalogue, but also to the feeling of kinship, the communicative bond established between human beings, beyond spatial and temporal barriers. The rose, a constant presence throughout the story, is an emblem of this chain: because exchanging flowers is a sign of Southern hospitality and friendship, Aunt Ethel sends her relatives a bunch of roses, that “like headlights” metaphorically illuminate Dicey’s journey (1983: 547).²⁰ This flower also symbolizes the quest for knowledge and female sensuality; Welty plays with both these connotations using the rose as a fairy tale motif, since the young women’s journey turns out to be a walk into the forest.²¹

Furthermore, the roses underline Sister Anne’s passion, for she gets cut by their thorns, literally shedding blood. Noticing it, Dicey comments: “With reluctance I observed that Sister Anne’s fingers were bleeding” (1983: 553).²² Thus, the spinster’s name still has another ironic ring to it, since this figure is excluded from sisterhood and explicitly complains about her solitude. When she begs the girls to stay, though, they both utter brief, cruel remarks and leave (1983: 562).²³ Once again, Welty presents

¹⁹ This excerpt establishes an intraliterary relationship with the stereopticon, commenting on the institutionalization of the female gaze, for, according to Dicey, “The slide belonging on top was ‘The Ladies’ View, Lakes of Killarney’” (1983: 557).

²⁰ There are several other references to the luminous quality of the roses (1983: 549-551, and 555).

²¹ Roses are directly associated with the transition towards sexual maturity in still another excerpt, Dicey and Kate, ready to leave to Mingo, drop by Aunt Ethel’s bedroom to take the roses that were in a vase near her bed: “Aunt Ethel [who impersonates Sleeping Beauty here] stayed motionless, and I thought she was bound to look pretty, even asleep. I wasn’t quite sure she was asleep. / ‘Seems mean,’ said Kate, looking between the thorns of the reddest rose, but I said, ‘She meant us to.’ / ‘Negroes like them full blown,’ said Kate,” (1983: 545). Plus, the fact that characters are referred to by their (family) function playfully echoes the rhetorical conventions of the fairy tale.

²² The scene where Sister Anne takes hold of the flowers and puts them “with unscratchable hands (...) into a smoky glass vase too small for them” follows a reference to Dicey’s “ring”, the symbol of her future marital status (1983: 551).

²³ Cf. Sister Anne’s prior denial of ever feeling lonely, and her empathy towards the photographer, who symbolically enhances her itinerancy, since she also moves from place to place caring for the sick members of the family (1983: 552).

the maid's dilemma obliquely, commenting on the parameters of female identity: can a woman not be a lady?

The Edenic nature of Mingo is alluded to once more, in Dicey's last glimpse when she sees Uncle Theodore's Cabin with hedges "shaped into a set of porch furniture, god-size, table and chairs, and a snake (...) hung up in a tree" (1983: 566). The race issue is hinted at here not only through the reference to the biblical Garden, but also through the parodic invocation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestseller, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Still in grace, the young bride Dicey returns in the end to the romantic plot, remembering her lover: "I thought of my sweetheart, riding, and wondered if he were writing to me."²⁴ It is up to the reader to get back to "Kin" for still other journeys.

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²⁴ In Aunt Ethel's opinion, Dicey is "bookish," and the fact is that she actually associates both Sister Anne and Uncle Felix to illustrations of books for children (1983: 542 and 559 respectively).

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