

*Sexing the Domestic: Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding  
and the Sexology Movement*

---

LAURA SLOAN PATTERSON

**E**UDORA WELTY PORTRAYS a growing sense of sexual freedom for women during the 1920s through the 1940s within the southern United States domestic tradition. When read in conjunction with the historical artifacts and texts of the early twentieth-century sexology movement, Welty's work reconfigures the stereotype of the isolated 1920s Southern woman who remains uninfluenced by her Northern sisters and the popular culture depictions of their increasing sexual freedoms. Critics of Welty's work, like those of many other Southern women writers, sometimes overlook her references to historical events and ideological shifts. Yet Welty catalogs a distinct shift in domestic thinking—one that integrates domestic and sexual roles for the Southern woman even in her supposed isolation from such innovation. This shift was due in large part to the new availability of sexual information and to the general cultural influence of the sexology movement. As Welty's characters navigate conventional images of the Southern belle, plantation culture, and social groups such as the garden club, they are indeed *navigating*, rather than making binary choices between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" roles.

**The Fusion of Sexual and Domestic Identities**

In her analysis of sexuality in *Delta Wedding* (1946) and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972), Danielle Fuller remarks that "the multi-voiced narrative of *Delta Wedding* makes it impossible to ignore the parallels and echoes between the journeys toward selfhood of Laura, Shelley, Robbie, and Dabney" (297). In her comparisons of these characters' changing roles as women, Fuller clearly equates selfhood with at least some degree of realization of a sexual role. She is right to note that Welty's narratological structure of multiple, fused points of view insists on exposing women's sexual identities in relation to one another, not as purely heterosexual dyads nor as individual journeys. Fuller does not address the role of

---

LAURA SLOAN PATTERSON is a lecturer in English and women's studies at Vanderbilt University. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, domesticity, cyberculture, technology, Southern literature, and twentieth-century literature of the United States. She has published in *Mississippi Quarterly* and has an article forthcoming in *Women's Studies*. Her current project is a study of the expansion and politicization of domesticity in twentieth-century Southern literature.

domesticity on the formation of these identities; however, Welty's characters frequently evaluate each other in terms of more than sexuality. In *Delta Wedding*, for instance, several Fairchild women regard Robbie Reid with suspicion not only because of her overt sexuality, but also because of her domestic ineptitude. Welty crafts a narrative structure that allows the reader to eavesdrop on the women's judgments of each other. Frequently these judgments do not focus entirely on the performance of one role or the other. Instead, the female characters examine how well another woman has integrated her sexual and domestic identities.

Rather than using domestic skills as the sole measurement of a woman's worth, Welty creates characters who struggle to integrate new attitudes about sexuality into lives rich with family traditions and legends. Instead of placing her characters in an isolated Southern cultural bubble, Welty places them squarely within their era: an era saturated with many new ideas, including new ideas about sexuality, sexual practices, and women's sexual roles. This is not to say, however, that Welty crafts polemical novels that do for sexology what Fielding Burke did for unionization. Welty's incorporation of cultural materials, such as her use of advertisements, songs, and fashions, is typically subtle, as are her references to a new sexual culture. But if we overlook these references, however subtle, we risk the marginalization of Welty as just another Southern woman writer, isolated from her larger environment.

It comes as no surprise that the women in Welty's 1920s-1940s Mississippi might turn to one another for guidance on establishing and maintaining domestic norms. Ann Romines comments on the conditioning of Southern women to "read" the "texts" of domestic products, such as cakes and recipes, for their commentary on social life: "In the United States, especially in the South, most cakes have been baked by women, and domestic female culture has often been oriented to texts such as the cake, while male culture has been devoted to objects and destinations of fixity and permanence" (602). Romines claims for cakes—specifically, the cakes of *Delta Wedding*—the status of land ownership or job titles for men; she remarks that one "might say that culture consists in—recipes" (602). At first glance, a recipe might appear to be wholly asexual, even in its cultural associations. Yet as Romines notes, the cakes of *Delta Wedding* tend to take on narrative lives of their own. In an examination of Ellen's cake-baking narrative, Romines remarks on the contiguous nature of text and recipe as "a single rich text," one that is even capable of producing an actual cake (609). But is the "single rich text" simply made up of narration and recipe? I would argue that Ellen's thoughts—of how "Robbie had tantalizingly let herself be chased and had jumped in the river with George in after her, everybody screaming from where they lay" (30)—form a sexual subtext to the recipe-narrative, a far stronger element than what Romines describes as Ellen's meditations on George's "troubled" marriage (608). What we have instead is a metaphorical rape-within-a-recipe-within-a-narrative. Welty seamlessly weaves together Ellen's action of beating eggs with her mental re-telling of the "rape and rescue" scene.

Critics acknowledge the significance of both the sexual and the domestic in *Delta Wedding*, but the two realms of experience have not been fully explored in relationship to one another and as interdependent forces.<sup>1</sup> The two elements often appear directly linked, and even intertwined, as either a scene of domestic action infused with a meditation on a sexual topic or a primarily sexual scene infused with domesticity; during the aforementioned rape and rescue, Jim Allen and Primrose are seen “trembling for their sweet peas” (31). Critics’ dissections of the scenes, on the other hand, often privilege one element or the other.<sup>2</sup> I would attribute this critical tendency, at least in part, to Welty’s image as a writer, an image Rebecca Mark describes as that of a “nice southern lady.” In *The Dragon’s Blood*, Mark notes a critical ellipsis in terms of Welty’s “implicit and explicit critique of a Western heroic tradition.” Mark claims that this ellipsis occurs “not only because no one could imagine a nice southern lady doing such a thing, but primarily because no one has consistently applied a close feminist textual and intertextual analysis to this collection of stories [*The Golden Apples*]” (4). Challenging the notion that Welty’s allusions are solely mythological, Mark forges new feminist connections<sup>3</sup> among Welty’s stories in *The Golden Apples* as well as noting Welty’s implicit cultural criticism of masculinist American modernism.

Mark’s work is clearly a valuable addition to feminist studies of Welty, especially in its contextualization of Welty as a writer aware of, and consciously responding to, her cultural and literary milieu, including her image as that of “nice southern lady.” I agree with Mark that this very image can inhibit the critics of Southern literature from noting the sexual and the sensual in Welty’s writings, particularly when the allusions to desirous bodies are framed in secrecy and darkness.

Interestingly, Welty’s autobiography reveals a certain self-consciousness about the desire to know the sexualized unknowable, even from the time she was a small child. Critics often cite the first section of *One Writer’s Beginnings*, “Listening,” as early evidence of Welty’s concern with both narrative and drama, forces that would later make her a “scenic” writer.<sup>4</sup> Yet Welty is often more explicit: not only did she want to hear stories, she wanted to hear the stories that remained untold, at least to her ears, specifically because of their content:

This was Fannie. This old black sewing woman, along with her speed and dexterity, brought along a great provision of up-to-the-minute news. She spent her life going from family to family in town and worked right in its bosom, and nothing could stop her. My mother would try, while I stood being pinned up. “Fannie, I’d rather Eudora didn’t hear that.” “That” would be just what I was longing to hear, whatever it was. “I don’t want her exposed to gossip”—as if gossip were measles and I could catch it. I did catch some of it but not enough. “Mrs. O’Neil’s oldest daughter she had her wedding dress tried on, and all her fine underclothes featherstitched and ribbon run in and then—“I think that will do, Fannie,” said my mother. It was tantalizing never to be exposed long enough to hear the end. (15)

Fannie's liminal position—neither household domestic worker nor professional seamstress, but instead “sewing woman”—offers a unique glimpse of the lives of other domestic situations and the ability to hear those stories. The lack of loyalty to one family, as well as Fannie's status as racial and class Other to the families she works for, allows her the freedom to exchange the stories she hears. Welty's choice of words—the positioning of Fannie in the “bosom” of town as well as the sense of “exposure” to gossip as exposure to disease—casts a distinctly bodily nature on the discourse within the domestic scene of females being fitted for clothes. Welty marks her complicity in the fascination with bodies by remarking that what she “caught” was “not enough.” Finally, Welty tantalizes her reader just as she remembers being tantalized—within this vignette she only gives the reader a small portion of the story, surely not a full “exposure.” Fannie begins a figurative “undressing” of the bride, noting first her wedding dress, then her underthings. Yet just at the moment that we might see the naked, virgin (or not so virgin) bride, Mrs. Welty interrupts the narrative to stop the force of “gossip.” In this way, the reader receives a piece of information almost as shocking as the vision of the bride undressed. Through Welty's vignette, we learn of the existence of an untold narrative which complicates a normative, heterosexual marriage plot. We learn, just as the young Eudora Welty did, that there are other sexual options for women—including premarital sex, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and homosocial if not homosexual relationships—even if those options cannot be told in full detail. In recounting her childhood memories, Welty forges an important link between the home, the domestic activities of women, and the exchange of sexual information.

This pattern of the exchange of sexual information in the midst of women's domestic routines prevails throughout Welty's novels and short stories. For instance, in *Delta Wedding*, the aunts chide India for her mention of Dabney's honeymoon, though the marriage and the honeymoon itineraries are well known within the larger family circle (59). Later, the same aunts refer to Dabney's remark about having children right away as “something a little ugly, a little unbecoming for Battle's daughter” (63). The implication is less that these remarks are inappropriate in themselves than that they are not polite conversation for afternoon tea with one's maiden aunts. With their peer group, Dabney, India, and the other girls at Shellmound feel free to exchange this type of sexual information. India casually asks Dabney whether or not she will bring the nightlight on her honeymoon (59), Dabney jokes that her bridesmaids are “Those fast girls I run with. . . . The ones that dance all night barefooted . . .” (55), and Lady Clare tells Laura to “Ask Shelley can Troy French-kiss” (94). The girls are comfortable with this type of exchange even in the midst of a “purely” domestic situation such as the ritual of tea or the custom of “bringing something” when one pays a visit. But to the characters of the aunts' generation in Welty's novels, the “something” one brings to a neighbor or family member's home should not be a piece of sexual gossip nor a sexualized confessional narrative, as indicated by their protests to these “inappropriate” remarks (55, 59).

Yet Welty clearly portrays a difference between the generations, in both their stringent domestic standards and their opinions on which personal information can and cannot be shared socially. But why might Welty want to showcase the shift in attitudes about sharing one's sexuality or sexual information? What were the cultural influences of the 1920s through the 1940s that might have led her to replay the need for "exposure" that she expresses in *One Writer's Beginnings*? For one possible answer, we may turn to the growing field of early twentieth-century sexology.

### Sex, War, and Havelock Ellis

*Delta Wedding* (1946) is set in 1923. Welty chose this year by looking in the almanac "to find a year that was uneventful" (Bunting 50), a year "without wars or other natural or economic disasters to disrupt the domestic sphere" (Romines 605). In her reading of the cakes of *Delta Wedding*, Ann Romines notes that Welty chose

a year during the period of her own adolescence, when she would have been fourteen, deep in puberty and engrossed in the issues of gender, family and self-possession that the novel explores. *Delta Wedding* inscribes the ambivalence of the 1920s toward two of the most traditional forms female power has taken: childbearing and housekeeping. It is the story of a plantation daughter's wedding, in the course of which a whole household of girls and women must puzzle out what those traditions may mean for them. (605)

Yet despite the choice of setting the novel in a year in which nothing supposedly happened, and Welty's focus on feminine domestic practices and relationships, *Delta Wedding* (like Welty's other novels and stories) is not without cultural references to its historical setting. Though many critics allude only briefly to race and class as the historical markers of a primarily insular, domestic, family-oriented text, Welty draws on a wide variety of cultural materials, even beyond the well-covered areas of music and mythology. As Rebecca Mark notes, "Welty uses every kind of cultural artifact from folktales, literary texts, fairy tales, and oral narratives to musical scores, popular songs, advertisements, children's rhymes, and newspaper articles to challenge dominant literary conventions" (3). For example, in the opening of *Delta Wedding*, Welty sets the scene of the Fairchild household, depicting the older girls dressed in the fashionable colors of "jade and flamingo" and dancing to songs such as "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate" and "Stop Yer Ticklin', Jock" (9). With these references, Welty depicts a household in touch with its cultural milieu, with the subtle indications of a modern sensuality. Given Welty's concern with this wide variety of cultural materials as well as her concern with gender and family, it follows that she would have been well aware of changing attitudes in the 1920s. Also, because of her concern with the "untold" stories, as highlighted in *One Writer's Beginnings*, she was likely aware of the specific alterations in thinking about sexuality (including a new openness in the discourse) that occurred during the early twentieth century, largely due to the growing influence of a new discipline: sexology.

Sexology can be thought of as, quite simply, “the scientific study of sex” (Irvine 531). Yet its origins also speak to its wide range of influence. Sexology is not a single type of study, but instead “an umbrella term denoting the activity of a multidisciplinary group of researchers, clinicians, and educators concerned with sexuality” (531). In his groundbreaking work, *Psychology of Sex* (1933), Havelock Ellis notes the importance of what he calls “Sex Psychology” (prior to the rise of the term “sexology”), or “the subject of sex in its psychic and social bearings.” Further, Ellis proclaims that, for medical practitioners, a knowledge of sex “confined to general anatomy, physiology, and pathology, is now altogether inadequate” (v).

Studies began in Europe, as a strategy for coping with the public problems of prostitution and venereal disease. Sexology also received support as a movement from eugenicists and racist groups seeking to limit reproduction in “supposedly inferior groups such as immigrants, Blacks and Jews” (Irvine 531). Unlike Freud himself and Freudian psychologists, sexologists were concerned primarily with practical applications of sexual surveys and studies, including sex therapy. As early as the late nineteenth century, in a climate of rising industrialism and urbanization, sexual ideologies began to shift away from a reproductive model of sexuality and toward a model that held as its ideal the sexual pleasure and fulfillment of both partners. The first sexological institute was founded in 1919 in Berlin, but much of the German research was destroyed by Nazis in raids during World War II. Leaders in this movement included the British Ellis and the later American sexologists Clelia Mosher and Robert Latou Dickinson (Irvine 531-32). The work of Ellis, Mosher, and Dickinson paved the way for later and more widely acclaimed studies by Alfred Kinsey in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as by William Masters and Virginia Johnson in the 1950s and 1960s.

Although sexology had become an important and established field by the advent of World War II, it is important to note the ways in which the earliest sexologists and their purported views differ from both later twentieth century sexual liberalism and from nineteenth-century home-centered sexual ideology. On one hand, Ellis explicitly claims a feminist identity for himself, yet throughout his *Essays In War-Time* (1917) he refers to his belief in biological determinism. Like the men and women of Welty’s *Shellmound*, he has no qualms about women as leaders, but he clings to the notion that “a woman is a woman throughout, and that difference is manifest in all the energies of body and soul” (95).

Ellis was also strongly influenced by World War I and wartime culture. In *Essays in War-Time*, he counters the procreation propaganda of the day, claiming that war’s effect of “pouring out the blood of the young manhood of the race” is positive because it avoids the “menace” of overpopulation (29,74). Further, Ellis casts himself as a pacifist, resisting German and other European propaganda that claimed that war made for strong, healthy (and presumably white, Anglo-Saxon) populations. He writes that, in 1917, “we are not called upon to choose between the manly virtues of war and the effeminate degeneracy of peace” (40). He calls,

instead, for the “virtues of daring and endurance” that “will never fail in any progressive community of men, alike in the causes of war and peace” (40).

In essence, Ellis resists the glorification of war as a necessary or “natural” event. Further, he resists the masculinization of war and the feminization of peace, as well as the call to support one’s country through sexual reproduction within marriage. In the light of Ellis’s politics (which were some of the most influential in the sexology movement), Welty’s choice of setting her novel in 1923 can be seen as more than a simple desire to avoid the larger, “masculine” trope of war and to concentrate on a smaller, domestic, and intrinsically “peaceful” sphere. Welty’s notion that “a sheltered life can be a daring life” (*One Writer’s Beginnings* 114) clearly resonates with Ellis’ idea of “daring and endurance” within peacetime. Welty furthers this questioning of wartime sexual and gender politics by her portrayal of Denis’s “fineness” and of his death in the war as a wasteful tragedy: “the fineness could look so delicate—nobody could get tireder, fall sicker and more quickly so, than her men. She thought yet of the other brother Denis who was dead in France holding this look; from the grave he gave her that look, partly of hurt: ‘How could I have been brought like this?’” (28). Like Ellis, Welty questions the hyper-masculinity of war, as well as the notion that war breeds fertility and moral and physical strength. For Denis, war castrates rather than bolsters; war fells a sensitive man (one who might have flourished as a “refined” Delta character) and marks him—“brought like this”—as infertile, unable to carry on the family line, despite his heroism.

Beyond his scope as a popular wartime essayist, Ellis made his greatest inroad in the field of sexology with his publication of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, a massive seven-volume work collected and published in installments between 1897 and 1928. The work marked two major changes from the field’s former conception under the heading of gynecology. First, in his treatise on sexology, Ellis claims that gynecology goes beyond the purely physical; there is a psychological aspect of the physiological that has been largely ignored. Second, he disdains the current medical training which offers only “an unqualified warning against what would now be called contraception” (v). Here, Ellis notes the newness of even the term “contraception.” The remaining content of Ellis’s work, including basic notions of anatomy and biology, Freudian “erotic symbols,” homosexuality, and “the sexual impulse in youth” was considered somewhat revolutionary in his day, particularly because it was intended to be used in the training of future physicians.

Despite the progressive nature of his work, Ellis did not intend to offer purely amoral, psychological and biological information and advice, nor did he feel that such was the proper role for the general practitioner. He writes:

Certainly the sexual impulse may, within limits, be guided and controlled at will to a much greater extent than some are willing to admit. But the sexual impulse is, to an incomparably greater degree than the nutritive impulse, held in certain

paths and shut out of other paths, by traditional influences of religion, morality, and social convention. There are a few physicians who hold that these influences should be ignored. The physician has nothing to do with morals or with conventions, they argue; he must consider what is for his patient's good and advise him accordingly, without any regard to moral and conventional dictates. That, however, is a short-sighted course of action which leads to many awkward positions, to all kinds of inconsistencies, not seldom to a greater evil than the evil it is sought to cure. For it is the special characteristic of the sexual impulse, as distinct from the nutritive impulsive, that its normal gratification involves another person. (5)

Ellis notes the presence of "evil," revealing his continuing reliance on, and advocacy of, morality in sexology. Yet Ellis's closest site of comparison for the "sexual impulse" lies within "the nutritive impulse." While he notes that sexual practice contains even more religious, moral, and social constraints than eating, he cannot escape the linkage of sex and food practices. Welty also celebrates this link throughout *Delta Wedding*. Yet Ellis writes from a masculinized viewpoint. It seems likely that Welty would disagree with Ellis that the "sexual impulse" is a moral one because it involves another person, while "the nutritive impulse" is less moral because it does not. For Welty, the larger realm of familial domestic practice always circumscribes both sexuality and foodways. Or, to put it another way, sex and food are always family affairs.

Throughout *Delta Wedding*, Welty critiques the stereotypical sexual roles of women—the type of "pure" sexuality that can only be expressed through maternity and domesticity. She treats her characters who support the solely maternal sexuality of women with more than a little facetiousness. For instance, Welty treats Dr. Murdoch, who appears in the graveyard when Shelley, India, and Laura visit Laura's mother's grave, as almost a mirage, a caricature of the type of "moral" doctor Ellis recommends. Dr. Murdoch gears his advice toward reproduction, asking "How many more of you are there?" after only tipping his hat (176). After pointing out where the Fairchild dead will be placed within the graveyard and how many children each is likely to bear, he asks Shelley, "You—what are you going to do, let your little sisters get ahead of you? You ought to get married and stop that God-forsaken mooning. Who is it, Dickie Boy Featherstone? I don't like the white of your eye." The doctor then "all at once" pulls down Shelley's eyelid with his thumb for a closer look. He continues his unsolicited proscription, saying "You're mooning. All of you stay up too late, dancing and what not, you all eat enough rich food to kill a regiment, but I won't try to stop the inevitable" (177).

The doctor's disapproval of Shelley's "mooning" reflects a more generalized anxiety about the sexuality of single women during the 1920s. Marriage is presented as a cure for "mooning," a label that might have been attached to any type of mental or intellectual pursuit of a young girl, including not only daydreaming but also "excessive" writing, bookishness, talking, unguided walks or journeys, and unsanctioned fantasy. Any activity beyond either the domestic realm or the



“proper” pursuit of marriage was thought suspect because it might lead to either “unsuitable” marriage or spinsterhood. Dr. Murdoch continues to expound on the unhealthy nature of Shelley’s environment by critiquing the family’s habits: staying up late, combined with dancing and rich food, are likely to cause disease, discomfort, death, or even worse, a type of non-normative domestic life. Yet Welty shows her skepticism of the doctor by presenting him as a buffoon, unable to make polite conversation, and certainly unable to understand the ways of Shellmound, thus critiquing the “moral” sex-oriented doctor. As they are leaving the company of the doctor, all three girls vow that they will never marry, subverting medical (and social) authority.

### **The Family Romance**

It is important to note that while Ellis and other sexologists were not ready to forsake the moral stance of doctors, they were able to understand the purpose of, and even approve to an extent, the sexual activity of unmarried young girls. In his chapter on “The Biology of Sex,” Ellis notes the importance of the early tactile stimulation of young girls as leading to a type of normative sexuality, remarking that “the sexual awakening of girls at puberty shows itself in a desire for kisses and caresses rather than intercourse” (42). While Ellis overlooks the possibility that a young girl, even under a doctor’s questioning, might admit only to this type of desire, he displays a progressive attitude in espousing any type of sexuality at all for girls at this age, an age when they were expected to be at the height of their “purity,” both sexually and socially.

Welty, too, reflects the changing sexual mores of the period in respect to young girls, again, largely through Shelley, who is constantly made to defend her lack of marriage prospects. Within the “southern belle” ideal, the type of coquetry that leads to multiple dance partners and “harmless” flirtations is tantamount to social success; one who does not have these social skills is viewed as seriously defective. Shelley, as the oldest Fairchild daughter, is quite literally “out of order”: she is not marrying on time (as noted by Dr. Murdoch and many others) and her sister has surpassed her. The discomfort with a younger daughter marrying before an older daughter extends beyond Shelley’s emotions and the family’s questions, however. Dabney seems to compensate for her unease with the disorder in another way. With all of her breathlessness and flushes, combined with her choice of a less than socially suitable groom, it is as if Dabney must over-act to perform the role of the bride. Dabney chooses her groom (and we can assume this choice is Dabney’s, based on her active social life with other young men), then sexualizes her performance of the bride role<sup>5</sup>: “How beautiful she was—all flushed and knowing” (19). The combination of these actions hints at a certain urgency of the marriage, a need to prove the “wild” Fairchild women as marriageable and therefore completely socially viable.

Shelley’s reaction to the events around her is not what the reader might expect. But what Shelley lacks in outward displays of jealousy she makes up for in

her reaction to Dabney's performative, normative sexuality. When Mr. Rondo, the preacher, comes to lunch, the Fairchilds begin the train trestle narrative. For the Fairchilds, this narrative serves as a quick character sketch and family history all rolled into one. It is as if the Fairchilds use this scenario to explain to themselves and to others their quirky brand of loyalty and bravery, as well as their "natural" tendency to become hapless survivors of near-tragedies. They use the story as a kind of boundary marker: Laura wasn't there, therefore she cannot fully participate in the telling or in Shellmound; she will always experience their world as a visitor. Robbie Reid was there but cannot understand. She will always be marked as "family by marriage" and she will never understand the Fairchild creed of loyalty to family and to family "type." George must always play the role of romanticized defender because that is how his family sees him, just as Battle will always be the harried father because to be a Fairchild means a complete willingness to succumb to the "quirk" that has been assigned by the family.

Though Shelley is tapped by Battle to do the honors of storytelling, she cries "Oh, Papa, not me!" and allows India to narrate (75). Shelley's cry serves as both an answer to his request that she tell the tale and as an answer to the novel's unasked question, "Why doesn't Shelley marry before Dabney?" As well as answering her father on the question of marriage and narration ("not me!"), Shelley also performs what we can assume will be her next step, should she continue to shun marriage: she hands the situation off to India. In this way, the telling of the tale acts as the feminine birthright to first marriage among sisters, a birthright still actively championed among some contemporary American families who feel that it is somehow "not right" to marry off a younger sister first. Within this schema, the narration of the "family tale" is distinctly feminized. While it might seem that George's bravery is at the center of the narrative, the sub-text and context of *the scene of the narration* indicate that much of the family history is based on the choices of its women, both about and within their marriages.

Shelley, however, has internalized to the ultimate degree the family rhetoric on conformity to type: she has become the sensitive, artistic daughter her family expects, but she has learned to play this role so well that she cannot conceive of integrating her current role with the role of bride. In essence, the Fairchild clan has begun to valorize familial role-playing and loyalty to family and above all else, even the expansion of the clan through its progeny. Again, this shift in thinking remains consistent with the sexology of the time, particularly in light of Ellis's claim that a declining birth rate would lead to a prosperous, resourceful nation (*Essays in War-Time* 29, 74). Despite the new acceptance of declining birth rates, Shelley herself is not insensitive to the events surrounding her. She expresses herself in a manner true to her family type, especially during the trestle narrative, just at the point when India relates Robbie Reid's outrage:

Dabney cried, "You should have heard her!"  
Shelley went white.

"Robbie said, 'George Fairchild, you didn't do this for me!'" India repeated.  
 "Look, Shelley's upset."  
 "Shelley can't stand anything, it looks like, with all this Dabney excitement," said Battle. "Now don't let me see you cry."  
 "Leave me alone," Shelley said.  
 "She's crying," India said, with finality. "Look, Mr. Rondo: she's the oldest." (79)

Dabney's cry of derision at the recollection of Robbie's behavior places Dabney herself at the center of the family narrative for a moment. More importantly, it also establishes Dabney as one of the arbiters of protocol, a position she has only begun to occupy as a bride, even if through a less-than-ideal marriage. Shelley turns white not because of some unspoken sympathy with Robbie, but because she realizes that the familial acceptance of Dabney's judgment on Robbie signals that Dabney is no longer a child within the family. In short, Shelley has not been able to create a bulwark against her greatest fear—the disruption of the family—through her decision not to marry. India's exclamation for Mr. Rondo to "look" because "she's the oldest" is not far off the mark. India realizes that Shelley has been replaced in her social standing as the oldest by her relinquishment of the marriage birthright. While she might have been in Dabney's position of marking family insiders and outsiders, she has now been reduced to the position of a child admonished not to cry, figuratively changing places even with India, who has successfully documented the family history for the minister.

Shelley realizes the exact nature of her familial displacement, making it all the more emotionally painful for her. She is, however, able to reconfigure her new position within the bounds of her sense of agency. Obviously this reconfiguration cannot take place until Shelley's narrative section of *Delta Wedding*; the reader needs Shelley's voice to know how Shelley will re-position herself in the family. Yet Shelley's narrative voice alone is not quite forceful enough for such a task; instead, Welty allows Shelley free reign for her "revenge" in the novel's only explicitly embedded text: Shelley's journal. Shelley writes:

I heard Papa talking about me to Uncle G. without knowing I was running by the library door not to meet T. when he came in (but waiting, I did) and Papa said I was the next one to worry about, I was prissy—priggish. Uncle G. said nobody could be born that way, they had to be humiliated. Can you be humiliated without knowing it? I would know it. He said I was not priggish, I only liked to resist. So does Dabney like it—I know. So does anybody but India, and young children.  
 (111)

Shelley uses her journal not only as a creative outlet, but also as a form of emotional defense. She claims her agency as she writes, denying a past humiliation while asserting a preference for resistance to sexual advances, for the choice to resist. Further, she normalizes her sexuality by aligning herself with Dabney. This alignment is made possible through Shelley's view of Dabney's entire marriage

not as an act of submission, but as an act of resistance. Shelley casts the marriage as Dabney's resistance to family norms, a kind of "acting out" against the social conventions that dictate that Dabney should marry from her own class. Shelley sees the marriage as a resistance to the family romance already in play, alluded to throughout the novel even in the descriptions of the family (their "lips caught, then parted, as if in constant expectation" [26]) and their postures ("now the two sisters stretched on the settee, each with her head elevated and her stocking feet in her sister's hair" [22]).

In his groundbreaking work on female sexuality, Robert Latou Dickinson, an American follower of Ellis, writes that the family frequently serves as "the love affair of youth" (299). Dickinson and the other sexologists draw on the Freudian concept of the family romance, but for them the family romance is even more literal than the Freudian construct. Throughout his chapter entitled "Family," Dickinson relates cases of incest in his patients' own words with no medical or psychological commentary other than a brief introduction that places family experiences as developmentally important in terms of sexuality. Interestingly, the term "incest" is never used, and the long line of case histories strung together without medical commentary serves to normalize the cases of incest that are reported within the text. One woman even notes her fiancée's regret "that I did not have intercourse with my brother. When he was twelve, a ten year old cousin who had not menstruated lived with his family and they had intercourse daily in the attic for three years" (313).

This pattern of case histories melded to present a unified whole serves to normalize a variety of sexual behaviors that might be considered "deviant" by conservative twenty-first century standards, as well as criminal in some cases. Dickinson further naturalizes a wide variety of sexual behavior—including premarital sex, "auto-erotism," child-to-child incest, homosexual sex, and celibacy—through his reliance on the sexual history's ability to speak for itself. When the history does not speak for itself, rather than offering medical commentary Dickinson takes the unusual step of supplementing his research with quotations from literary sources. These quotations do not serve as epigraphs or chapter subtitles; rather, they are fully integrated into the text of the case histories, often with little or no introduction and no explanation. In a section of his introduction to *The Single Woman* entitled "Unity," Dickinson comments on his methodology:

The exposition quotes from poetry, letters, autobiographies and other studies by the single [person]. This is because literary material is from the raw stuff of case histories; literature only projects case material clarified and arranged in design. The violent and casual remarks of the sick about sexual life and desire often differ from poetry only as the latter has superior thought and form.

The juxtaposition of poetry with the most extreme sexual statements and with detailed descriptions of the sexual organs is a way of saying that expression is from one origin; words and muscular movement are from the same impulse; poetry is

heart-beat and music is the nervous system. The loose verbiage, cruder sexual manifestations, possible local inflammation and general illness of the patient are best understood if related in source with all human expression. (xvii)

This methodology typifies the interdisciplinary aspects of sexology. In an ideology akin to late twentieth-century postmodernism, Dickinson valorizes the case history, Freudian psychology, a personal letter, and passages of poetry equally in terms of their commentary on human sexuality. Dickinson also remarks that “‘Fact’ and fiction each properly labeled may even be used in combination. . . . Witnesses of the ideals and standards of behavior of the past are ephemeral and in time fiction about them is the only fact that remains” (xvii). Like Welty (who uses songs, poems, slogans, newspaper articles, advertisements, and other cultural materials in her writings), Dickinson draws on a wide range of cultural artifacts to craft a full picture of feminine sexuality. A further similarity in the methodology of Welty and Dickinson lies in their tendency to meld and fuse narratives together. If the reader is confused about the identity of a given narrator, the border between one narrative and the next, or the boundary between narrative and cultural artifact, then all the better. Because of the necessity of documenting changing conceptions of sexuality, both in medicine and in fiction, new narrative forms are born, and the new types of narratives are made to correspond to the nature of the sexuality they document. The enclosed narrative of earlier twentieth-century Southern domestic novels cannot encapsulate a freely formed, fluid sexuality. The new narrative patterns reflect a sense of changing American mores: specifically, the notion that perhaps one type of sexuality, and even one type of specific sexual practice, is just as valid as another. Yet Dickinson pushes the point even further in his speculation that the literary artifact *is* a case study; it tells a sexual history that can be said to represent its cultural milieu.

#### **Robert Latou Dickinson and the National Committee on Maternal Health**

Dickinson was not alone in his groundbreaking sexology studies and methodologies. In fact, the support he garnered from a portion of the medical community may have been part of the reason he felt free to publish previously unavailable information in an innovative format. His support came from a committee that was formed in 1923, the same year as the setting of *Delta Wedding*. In that year, the National Committee on Maternal Health was formed, with the goal of following dual “lines of inquiry: first the actual sex life and endowment of socially normal persons as revealed in medical case histories; and second, the control of fertility by such measures as contraception, sterilization, therapeutic abortion and the prevention and relief of involuntary sterility” (Dickinson, *Single Woman*). Given these “lines of inquiry,” the committee’s name (The Committee on *Maternal Health*) seems ironic, especially since many of the above items under “inquiry” were controversial to say the least, and were procedures specifically designed to *prevent* motherhood. Dickinson’s books within the series “Medical

Aspects of Human Fertility,” issued by the National Committee on Maternal Health, include titles such as *The Single Woman, A Thousand Marriages, and Control of Conception*. The rubric of “maternal health” seems designed, at least in part, to disguise the radical intent of the committee to distribute accurate information about sexual practices and effective birth control to the general public by way of like-minded practitioners. *Control of Conception*, for instance, credits Margaret Sanger, an extremely controversial figure known for her birth control clinics, for aiding the committee to have “samples of nearly all contraceptive devices . . . in hand” and “for the privilege of making records of their remarkably complete collection gathered in Europe” (vii).

Though the term “maternal” was gaining new, sexualized import with its medical and psychological association with birth control methods, it is important to note that this change did not happen overnight. Similarly, despite the progress that had been made on the contraception front, reliable methods of birth control were not always universally available. Although the Committee for Maternal Health, along with other organizations at the time, worked to distribute information about birth control, this information was often inaccurate in the late 1920s and 1930s (Fig. 1). For instance, douching was still touted “as a contraceptive measure” used “among the better conditioned classes in Europe and this country” (69). Further, Dickinson realized the social strictures that might prevent one from buying contraception, though it was available in many drugstores. To alleviate the problem of purchasing contraception, he makes mention of a class of “household remedies” that blend domestic work and sexology. Suggested “remedies” included douches and pre-coitus foams, mixed up at home from the “recipes” Dickinson provides, using soap, vinegar, alum, shaving creams, toothpaste, or even a Lysol solution (43). It is not difficult to imagine that these “remedies” might have caused a variety of gynecological problems, not to mention the physical discomfort and the probability of failure as birth control methods.

Though condoms were available, Dickinson remarks that they might be used with some reluctance by married couples, owing to the popular wisdom that “the condom is the great engine of debauchery and promiscuity” (62). Further, just how “available” condoms may have been, especially to women hoping to procure them on their own, remains debatable. Dickinson notes that condoms “are not uncommonly put up for sale and concealment in cigarette papers and in cigarette cases” (65). Even if a woman should ask her doctor or clinician for condoms, Dickinson recommends that “the husband be sent for, to be sure he treats his sheath properly; and if each condom is used several times, that he knows how to clean and dry and keep it rightly” (66). Despite the supposed attitude of “openness” about female sexuality and health among the sexologists, it is clear that many felt that some tasks were better left to men. Even if the couple was able to procure this preferred method of birth control, the quality of the condoms that were available left much to be desired. Patients at one clinic reported a

CONTROL of CONCEPTION CHART of CHIEF METHODS		
PROTECTION for EACH OCCASION BIRTH CONTROL	PROLONGED PROTECTION ARREST	PERMANENT PROTECTION STERILIZATION (without unsexing)
	<p>CELIBACY (with continence) DEFERRED MARRIAGE</p> <p>ABSTINENCE (in marriage) LACTATION SAFE PERIOD</p>	
<p><b><u>WITHDRAWAL</u></b> <i>Interruptus</i> <i>Reservatus</i></p> <p><b><u>CONDOM</u></b></p> <p>DOUCHE plain medicated (lathering)</p> <p><b><u>CHEMICALS</u></b> (vaginal) jellies suppositories tablets</p> <p>VAGINAL OCCLUSIVE DEVICES; <b><u>PESSARIES</u></b> <b>Mensinga</b> <b>Ramses</b> cervix-caps tampons sponges</p>	<p>INTRA-UTERINE DEVICES cervix &amp; corpus stems RINGS in corpus silver silk-worm HORMONES SPERMATOXINS <i>HEAT to TESTICLE</i> <b><u>VASECTOMY</u></b></p> <p>IRRADIATION x-ray, radium to ovary, (uterus) to testicle</p> <p>REVERSIBLE OPERATIONS burying ovary or end of tube <i>vasectomy</i></p>	<p>IRRADIATION x-ray, radium to ovary, (uterus) to testicle</p> <p><b>TUBE-CLOSURE</b> a. intra-uterine chemical stricture cautery stricture electro-coagulation b. <b>laparotomy</b> abdominal vaginal ligature partial excision. HYSTERECTOMY</p>
THERAPEUTIC ABORTION		<p>CASTRATION (un-sexing) <i>removal of testicles</i> <i>removal of ovaries</i></p>

Figure 1. Control of Conception (Dickinson 6).

50% failure rate for the condom as contraceptive measure. Condoms made of animal skins were very common, even though they had no elasticity. The advice that condoms should be washed and re-used repeatedly, and the notation that a single condom might last from three months to three years, made them far less effective than the condoms of the end of the twentieth century. Near the end of his section on the condom, Dickinson even offers up a recipe for the proper type of rubber for making condoms, complete with gram weight measurements and heating instructions. Presumably this recipe was intended for other medical experts, yet with ingredients such as glue, water, glycerin, and castor oil, the recipe appears less complex than the cake Ellen bakes at the beginning of *Delta Wedding*. Throughout *Control of Conception*, Dickinson, along with his assistant, Louise Bryant, treats the subject of sex not as an abstract medical field but as a real-life practice involving trips to the doctor, the drugstore, and even the kitchen. In short, rather than a mystery or a medical "problem," sex is integrated into the overall practices of lives, both feminine and masculine. Hence, Dickinson and Welty seem to construct their texts from the same principle of integration: Dickinson concerns himself primarily with incorporating the details of one's everyday life and circumstances into a full picture of sexuality, while Welty shows how one's sexuality functions in conjunction with the overwhelming details of domesticity.

In this same vein of integration, "maternal health" is used as a tool for the committee to gain recognition and financial support (The Committee for Maternal Health was incorporated nationally in 1931). It was also a buzz word (along with "fertility") for the investigation of sexual health, practice, and education—but most importantly, to research and educate on the topic of birth control. In this manner, the committee and its publication also worked to change the concept of the very term "maternity." If medical maternal research now included birth control, then maternity was no longer an "accident," a "natural consequence," or a simple mystery. Instead, the very word "maternal" might now carry the connotations of sexual choice and sexual agency, a marked change from Victorian American gynecology.

With the figure of Ellen, Welty, too, plays with the concept of what it means to be maternal. One of Ellen's primary characteristics, and one that separates her from the Fairchild brood, is a sense of frankness untainted by "feminine" whimsy. This frankness, in part, makes her one of Welty's more reliable narrators, as well as a somewhat reputable source for "outside" information on the Fairchild clan and their characteristics. We gather hints of Ellen's honesty as she narrates a dream, one that turns out to be heavy with sexual import, to her youngest child as a bedtime story. Within this act, Ellen draws on her frank nature to seamlessly blend the notions of the maternal and the sexual. In the paragraph preceding Ellen's telling of her dream, Bluet is described as "like a busy housewife" as she fills her days with the play that is the child's work. Directly before the dream, Ellen holds down Bluet's leg "which wanted to kick like a dancer's" (83).



These two images, of Bluet as both housewife and dancer, serve as a miniature portrait of Ellen's struggle between the orderly world of the stereotypical Southern maternal role and the "dark woods" realm of sexuality and the creativity of formulating one's own sensual life and persona. Though Ellen must literally hold Bluet down (or raise her within the confines of social norms), at the same time she has no qualms about privately telling Bluet her own sexual history (disguised as a dream), one that might have easily been incorporated into the 1920s and 1930s sexology studies of Ellis or Dickinson:

"Mama dreamed about a thing she lost long time ago before you were born. It was a little red breastpin, and she wanted to find it. Mama put on her beautiful gown and she went to see. She went to the woods by James's Bayou, and on and on. She came to a great big tree."

"Great big tree," breathed the child.

"Hundreds of years old, never chopped down, that great big tree. And under the tree was sure enough that little breastpin. It was shining in the leaves like fire. She went and knelt down and took her pin back, pinned it to her breast and wore it. Yes, she took her pin back—she pinned it to her breast—to her breast and wore it—away—away . . . (83-84)

Because Ellen is describing something "lost" long before Bluet's birth, the facile interpretation functions as a representation of Ellen's lost sexual innocence. Yet I would argue that, because of Ellen's agency within the dream, as well as her agency in choosing to pass on the sexual tale to her youngest female offspring, something else has been "lost." First, Ellen does not appear melancholy about this loss. Instead, she dresses up to meet it, putting on a beautiful gown, as though she would need to woo the thing lost. Also, she knows to look for the breast pin under a tree, where she finds it "shining . . . like fire." As a symbol of Ellen's sexual agency and sensuality, the breastpin is not an object of remorse or pity, but something that still burns in Ellen's mind, something that she is capable of reclaiming, unlike sexual innocence. The halting, repetitive nature of Ellen's narrated act of reclamation—"Yes, she took her pin back—she pinned it to her breast—to her breast and wore it—away—away"—reveals Ellen's desire to see this dream come to fruition and to know herself as a sexual being, not only as a mother. Interestingly, after Ellen tells the dream, Bluet's leg is quiet, as though her mother has calmed the non-domestic "dancer" in her. The narrator remarks that "The dream Ellen told Bluet was an actual one, for it would never have occurred to her to tell anything untrue to a child, even an untrue version of a dream" (84). This story, however, does more than calm a restless child. Through the dream, Ellen offers a subtle pattern for sexual agency; she suggests that women have choices in terms of their sexual destiny, and that a sensual side awaits, to be pinned back to one's breast, whenever one wishes.

While Ellen reclaims her sensuality primarily within a dream, and not within her waking life, several parallel scenes within the novel suggest that the reclama-

tion of a sexual self that is both maternal and sensual is not “only a dream.” When Ellen does set off into the woods, she finds not the breastpin, but a wayward traveling girl. At first Ellen cannot conceive of the girl’s existence. She is white, alone in the woods, clearly running away, and unknown to Ellen and the Fairchild clan. Ellen notes her own surprise: “for a moment the girl was not a trespasser, but someone who lived in the woods, a dark creature not hiding, but waiting to be seen, careless on the pottery bank” (90). Like the breastpin, she is not so much lost as not yet found, or waiting to be found again and anew. Yet the surprise almost proves too much for Ellen to comprehend, as she notes, “So she was white. A whole mystery of life opened up” (90). The mystery is not the girl’s identity nor the fact that she could exist in the woods, but instead, the existence of unprotected female “virtue,” or more accurately, unaccompanied and unbounded white feminine sensuality. Ellen expresses surprise that the girl is white; for her, white femininity needs protection because of its very desirability. In contrast, Ellen views African American femininity and sexuality as invisible because her relationship to African Americans is one of employer to employee. When the African American women she knows are not working for her (as in the case of illness), she infantilizes them, once again erasing any kind of sexuality. So, for Ellen, a black woman or girl alone in the forest might have been safe, because in Ellen’s mind, her sexuality was invisible. A white girl, in contrast, represents other possibilities that Ellen has not yet accounted for, such as a white woman expressing sexual agency, or roaming through an unfamiliar forest.

Reading this scene as a parallel to the dream of the pin places the girl in the same position as the pin. She acts as Ellen’s reminder that there is another way; white feminine sexuality is within easy reach, but it offers both pleasures and risks. Ellen seems to feel something like relief when George later tells her that he slept with the girl in the old gin: “She [Ellen] seemed to let go in her whole body, and stood languidly still under her star a moment, then pulled her apron where it still shone white in the dogwood tree and tried to tie it back on” (90). If George slept with the girl, then Ellen was right: the unbridled sexuality of a young, single, white woman is dangerous, and Ellen is not obligated to go into the woods and pursue her lost sexuality again, whether in her dreams or in her reality. The “mystery” of a woman acting on her own is no longer mysterious. The girl cannot escape the social threat of sexual danger to young women who do what they please. Ellen may now tie on her apron, the talisman of her domestic role, without guilt. She has not “lost” an opportunity to craft her sexual life so much as she has narrowly escaped danger herself, a notion supported when the girl from the woods is eventually killed by the train. Ironically, the danger the girl encountered came from within Ellen’s familial circle. Yet George’s confession does not rattle Ellen; rather, it makes her correct on two counts: danger did come to the girl, and sexuality does, ultimately for Ellen, belong within the rubric of familial roles, not as an “outside” opportunity for women. Much like Laura, later in the novel (233), Ellen has seen the breastpin up close only to lose it once again.

Like Ellen, Laura adopts a sense of peacefulness on the subject of her loss, in her case, of the literal breastpin: "It was in the Yazoo River now. How fleetingly she had held to her treasure. It seemed to her that the flight of the ducks going over had lasted longer than the time she kept the pin" (236). Unlike Ellen, however, Laura does not have to console herself with a substitute for sexual agency within the chimera of domesticity or familial devotion—at least not yet. The new sexual possibilities opened to Laura by way of Shelley's refusal to marry, combined with her creative endeavors, and Dabney's marriage to a man outside the Shellmound social realm, suggest that Laura may have even more options for sexual agency because of the rapidly changing sexual climate of her time period. Laura McRaven is still a pre-pubescent—nine years old—in 1923, the year of the formation of the National Committee for Maternal Health, the largest federation of American sexologists up to that time. In 1942, four years before the publication of *Delta Wedding*, and in the year that would have been Laura's twenty-eighth, Planned Parenthood was formed from the American Birth Control League, with Margaret Sanger as its honorary chairperson. The event met with the following brief announcement in the *New York Times* on 6 March 1942:

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc. is the new corporate name of the Birth Control Federation of America, Inc., according to the organization's board of directors. Dr. Richard N. Pierson, the president said the organization would continue to emphasize the proper spacing of children or limitation of births as dictated by medical or sociological conditions. (23:7)

Given the increasing coverage of the birth control movement during the 1940s, and given Welty's annual trips to New York (77-78), as well as her position at the *New York Times Book Review* copy desk in the summer of 1944 (McHancy xiii), it seems likely that she would have been aware of these developments. In this context, Welty creates a character whose sexual awakening and transformation into adulthood parallels the rise of the sexology movement, which began with concerns over wartime birth rates and would later become, in effect, the birth control movement. Because of her young age in a rapidly changing sexual climate, Laura will not face the stifling binary choice of a large family or spinsterhood. Her choices for sexual identity and sexual agency will likely extend even beyond Dabney's groundbreaking choice of a husband who lies outside of Shellmound's social norms.

The multiplicity of the voices that Welty uses to craft her narrative seems to stand, in a way, outside of time. Because Laura McRaven hears the voices as a blend, as a force akin to the steady hum of the cotton gin, propelling her onward, the voices are inseparable. Each voice gives a message, either a command or request about what the "poor motherless girl" should or might do. Even the stories that the Fairchilds "tell on themselves" come to represent a demarcation of boundary lines, of who does and does not belong within the inner circle of Shellmound and why. Often these boundary lines are explicitly sexual. While

class, race, and gender configurations might seem to place a character at a certain excluded or included position in terms of what “is” and “isn’t” Fairchildian, it is ultimately a character’s sexual behavior that cements that status. The most obvious example of this use of sexual or sexualized behavior as a family boundary can be found in the character of Robbie Reid. Much of the novel’s surface-level confrontation—and, in fact, the novel’s most explicit arguments—center on Robbie Reid’s violations of the rules for sexual behavior. It is acceptable, for instance, to express a brand of sexual rebellion by marrying outside of one’s class (as in the case of both Dabney and Robbie Reid), but it is less acceptable to exhibit one’s sexual desire and sexual need once the cross-class marriage has been made.<sup>6</sup> In short, just as the women will eventually inherit the control of land that does not belong to them,<sup>7</sup> they are also expected to inherit the family standard of sexual self-control for women. Even the most private searches for the “uncontrolled” sexual self (as with Ellen’s) are likely to be, at best, futile. At worst, they may reveal “ugly” truths about sexual double standards for both men and women and between “blood” and “non-blood” Fairchilds. Any indiscretion on Dabney’s part might be overlooked, while Ellen must be far more careful.

Yet it is important to remember that without a mother, Laura has little guidance to sort through the cacophony of voices she hears and the various remarks she will make herself. She is the perfect fulcrum for the novel because she promises her reader early on, through her flighty yet detailed descriptions of her journey to the Delta by train, to absorb everything equally. That opening, in which the death of Laura’s mother and the flight of a yellow butterfly seem to take on equal narrative weight, serves as a precursor to Laura’s function. She is not a narrative filter, but a narrative sieve, letting everything through, merely stopping on certain events longer than others. Just as the train pushes her onward to Shellmound, so will the group force of all of the voices she hears there propel her narrative journey through the novel. Welty also implies that what Laura hears at Shellmound—stories of domesticity, sexuality, and the creative forces that bind and navigate the two—will inform her persona as she ages, making the Delta not a mystical Southern fairyland, but a microcosm of contemporary United States culture bombarded by new voices about the changing sexual and domestic roles for women. While the daily details of each woman’s role might seem virtually unchanged, many women would embark on a radical change in perception: they began to see themselves as integrated selves, not as “bedroom” selves one moment and “kitchen” selves the next. This type of ideological change sets the course for new literary models of domesticity and new modes of writing women’s experiences.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Louise Westling and Ann Romines provide helpful readings of certain aspects of female sexuality in conjunction with domestic acts. These readings appear in the context of arguments for the power of the feminine role in Welty's work. For discussions of fertility and community, see Westling's *Eudora Welty*. Westling also explores the themes of motherhood, fertility, feminine ritual, and sexual imagery in *Delta Wedding*, often in comparison to *To the Lighthouse* (See *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*). In *Fiction of the Home Place*, Helen Fiddiment Levy focuses on Welty's rewriting of "her American history, the narrative of the woman's home" (168). Her discussion centers on time, cycles, and "the female artist's memory" (175), but she finds that the "harsh environments" of "man-made modernisms" and "the undomesticated natural world" "allow neither the feminine emotion nor the female sexuality full and safe expression" (166). While I agree that Welty's characters do not feel safe expressing every emotion and sexual desire, I argue that the younger generations of Shellmound women especially show signs of progress in their freedom of expression. I am also interested in the ways that sexuality and domesticity become narratologically and thematically fused, a topic that has yet to be further analyzed.

<sup>2</sup> Fuller, for instance, privileges sexuality, arguing that "Welty's female characters subvert, question, and re-present female sexuality in ways that reveal the power imbalances involved in heterosexual relationships" (292). I would add that Welty's female characters often employ domestic acts and rituals in much the same way. Ellen's cake-baking narrative simultaneously interrogates imbalances in both domestic power and heterosexual relationships. Ellen questions the relationships between George and Robbie Reid and the relationship between Dabney and Troy, even as she questions her own ability to bake a "nice" cake and to continue binding the family together (32-33). In a discussion of what she terms "empowering pleasures," Susan Harrison analyzes sexual imagery and pleasure in language in *Delta Wedding*. Romines, on the other hand, clearly privileges the domestic in *The Home Plot*, reading domestic rituals which sometimes have sexual content and symbolism, and sometimes do not. In her wide-ranging study of Welty's work, Ruth Vande Kieft describes the "variety of resonances even the word *home* has in Eudora Welty's fiction" (52) as well as the "most simple and primitive rituals of the home, or the private rituals that come from a repeated performance of an action of love" (59). Yet in reference to the cake-baking narrative, she finds "nothing in the language of this passage to weld the two different sets of experience [the outer and the inner life]" (80).

<sup>3</sup> For early feminist readings of *Delta Wedding*, see essays by Jane Hinton, Elizabeth Kerr, and Margaret Jones Bolsterli in *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*, edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, as well as Prenshaw's essay "Woman's World, Man's Place: The Fiction of Eudora Welty" in *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*. In *Serious Daring From Within: Female Narrative Strategies in Eudora Welty's Novels*, Franziska Gyax builds on these works in her feminist study of narrative patterns in Welty's work. Her chapter on *Delta Wedding* examines various forms of female initiation, including sexual initiation.

<sup>4</sup> See Prenshaw, "Sex and Wreckage in the Parlour" (107). Helen Levy connects Welty's interest in women's voices and narratives to this section of *One Writer's Beginnings* (162). Gail Mortimer finds evidence of how Welty learned to "explore her beliefs about the nature of knowledge" in the visual construction of several scenes from "Listening" (5-7).

<sup>5</sup> For another example of Dabney's sexualized performance of the bride role, see the opening of chapter 2: "Dabney came down the stairs vaguely in time to the song Mary

Lamar Mackey was rippling out in the music room—'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes.' 'Oh, I'm a wreck,' she sighed absently" (34). Here, the act of descending the stairs to music prefigures the wedding march, with both the song and Dabney's manner indicating a languorous, sensual performance of the bride role.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen expresses this type of disapproval of female sexual desire, especially within the context of cross-class marriage: "They [George and Robbie Reid] lay there smiling and worn out, but twined together—appealing, shining in moonlight, and almost—somehow—threatening, Ellen felt" (31). When Ellen mentions her memory of this evening to Battle, he remarks, "You mean when they put on the Rape of the Sabines down at the Grove?" (75). While Battle characterizes George as the aggressor in this comment, the phrase "they put on," as well as Battle's sarcasm, would seem to implicate Robbie Reid as partially responsible for an overtly sexualized performance as well.

<sup>7</sup> Welty writes, "The women it was who inherited the place—or their brothers, guiltily, handed it over." In this section of *Delta Wedding*, Robbie Reid notes that the women seem to recognize the need for masculine performance of land ownership: "In the Delta the land belonged to the women—they only let the men have it, and sometimes they tried to take it back and give it to someone else" (190). Robbie Reid's narrative also catalogues various specific transfers of property that conform to these Delta gender conventions. In an interview with Jo Brans, Welty notes the power of the Delta matriarchy, commenting on women who "ruled the roost" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 304).

#### WORKS CITED

- Bunting, Charles T. "'The Interior World': An Interview with Eudora Welty." Prenshaw. *Conversations with Eudora Welty*. 40-63.
- Brans, Jo. "Struggling against the Plaid: An Interview with Eudora Welty." Prenshaw. *Conversations with Eudora Welty*. 296-307.
- Dickinson, Robert Latou, and Louise Stevens Bryant. *Control of Conception: An Illustrated Manual*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1931.
- Dickinson, Robert Latou, and Lura Beam. *A Thousand Marriages: A Medical Study of Sex Adjustment*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1931.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Single Woman: A Medical Study in Sex Education*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1934.
- Ellis, Havelock. *Essays in War-Time: Further Studies in the Task of Social Hygiene*. Boston and New York: Houghton, 1917.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students*. New York: Emerson Books, 1937.
- Fuller, Danielle. "'Making a Scene': Some Thoughts on Female Sexuality and Marriage in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*." *Mississippi Quarterly* 48 (1995): 291-318.
- Gygax, Franziska. *Serious Daring from Within: Female Narrative Strategies in Eudora Welty's Novels*. New York: Greenwood, 1990.
- Harrison, Suzan. "'The Other Way to Live': Gender and Selfhood in *Delta Wedding* and *The Golden Apples*." *Mississippi Quarterly* 44 (1990-91): 49-67.
- Irvine, Janice. "Sexology." *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History*. Boston: Houghton, 1998. 531-32.
- Levy, Helen Fiddymont. *Fiction of the Home Place: Jewett, Cather, Glasgow, Porter, Welty, and Naylor*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992.

- Mark, Rebecca. *The Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.
- McHaney, Pearl Amelia. Introduction. *A Writer's Eye: Collected Book Reviews*. Eudora Welty. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994. xiii-xxviii.
- Mortimer, Gail. *Daughter of the Swan: Love and Knowledge in Eudora Welty's Fiction*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994.
- "Parenthood Group Renamed." *New York Times* 6 Mar. 1942: 23:7.
- Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman, ed. *Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Sex and Wreckage in the Parlour: Welty's 'Bye-Bye Brevoort.'" *Southern Quarterly* 33:2-3 (1995): 107-16.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Woman's World, Man's Place: The Fiction of Eudora Welty." *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*. Ed. Louis Dollarhide and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1979. 46-77.
- Romines, Ann. *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Reading the Cakes: *Delta Wedding* and the Texts of Southern Women's Culture." *Mississippi Quarterly* 50 (1997): 601-16.
- Vande Kieft, Ruth M. *Eudora Welty*. Boston: Twayne, 1987.
- Waldron, Ann. *Eudora: A Writer's Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.
- Welty, Eudora. *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*. New York: Harcourt, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Delta Wedding*. New York: Harcourt, 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *One Writer's Beginnings*. New York: Warner, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Optimist's Daughter*. New York: Random, 1969.
- Westling, Louise. *Eudora Welty*. Women Writers Ser. London: Macmillan, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sacred Groves and Ravages Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985.