

“He must get back to where he had been before”:
Death as Dreamlike Phenomenon in Eudora Welty’s
“Death of a Traveling Salesman”

GLS Symposium 2019

Christopher McBride, Stanford University

Eudora Welty (1909-2001)

- Born and died in Jackson, Mississippi
- Published many books and short stories in her lifetime
- She was the first living writer published in the Library of America Series
- Took many photos during her lifetime;
Worked as WPA photographer in 1930s
- Pulitzer prize (1973) for *The Optimist's Daughter*



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“Death of a Traveling Salesman”

- Her first published short story appeared in the journal *Manuscript* in 1936
- Republished with some minor changes in her 1941 collection *A Curtain of Green*
- The story reveals many of her lifelong themes: separateness, the search for self, the power of myth (and mythology).

Welty's remarks on the story's origins

In her autobiographical lecture collection, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty explains:

My first good story began spontaneously, in a remark repeated to me by a traveling man—our neighbor—to whom it had been spoken while he was on a trip into Northern Mississippi: “He’s gone to borry some fire.” The words, which carried such lyrical and mythological and dramatic overtones, were real and actual—their hearer repeated them to me. (87)

Welty as Photographer



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Plot and Characters

- There are three characters in the story:
 - R.J. Bowman (the traveling salesman)
 - An unnamed woman
 - Sonny, the woman's companion



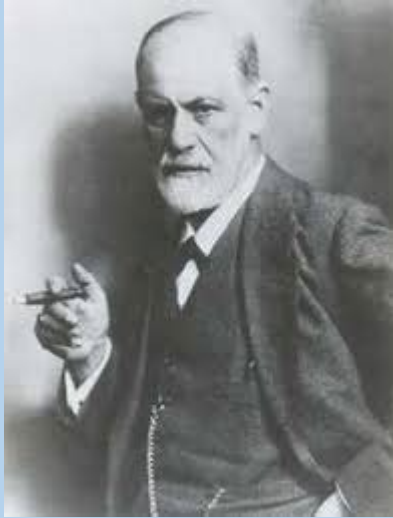
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Dream and Images

- Freud and dreams



- Welty's conscious and unconscious sources as photographer

Dream-Like Language Examples

- “Where am I?...Why didn’t I do something?” (120).
- “his heart began to behave strangely...and he could not think” (121).
- “Stock-still in his confusion, he dropped his bags, which seemed to drift in slow bulks gracefully through the air” (120).
- “he could not hear his heart.” (121).

Plot and Characters

- There are three characters in the story:
 - R.J. Bowman (the traveling salesman)
 - An unnamed woman (sibyl-like)
 - Sonny, the woman's companion



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Mythology in the Story

- **Persephone:** “Earth-Mother” who spent part of each year in the underworld
- **Prometheus:** provider of fire to humans (against Zeus’ wishes)
- Northrop Frye: “Dante has to pass through a ring of fire...to go from the mountain of purgatory, which is still on the surface of our own world, to Paradise or the apocalyptic world proper...In Classical mythology, the story of Prometheus indicates a similar provenance for fire.”

Welty Photo: rural cabin



Relationship theme of the story

- Welty reflecting on her creation: “I had received the shock of having touched, for the first time, on my real subject: human relationships.”
- Bowman: “[t]here was nothing remote or mysterious here—only something private” (129).

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Bowman's last thoughts...

- “he must get back to where he had been before” (129).
- ““There will be special reduced prices on all footwear during the month of January”” (129).
- Leaves the cabin: putting “all the money from his billfold under [the lamp's] fluted glass base, almost ostentatiously” (129).

Santa Fe Artist Carole Pigott Images of Welty stories



<http://www.carolepigottstudio.com/eudora-welty-oil-paintings.html>

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