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## The Aesthetics and Morality of the “Natural” in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding*

ALTHOUGH EUDORA WELTY’S *DELTA WEDDING* (1946) SEEMS DETACHED from its historical and political moment, critics have demonstrated that the novel is inseparable from the context within which it was composed. The novel depicts the interactions among members of the Fairchild family who gather to celebrate the marriage of a daughter, Dabney Fairchild, to Troy Flavin, the family overseer. It begins with Laura McRaven, a Fairchild cousin from Jackson, entering the Delta on the Yazoo-Delta train nicknamed the Yellow Dog. *Delta Wedding* does not have a central plot with clear causes and effects but consists of various fragmented episodes involving the family members. Welty herself famously stated on several occasions that she had to make “a careful investigation” to find a year in which “nothing very terrible had happened in the Delta by way of floods or fires or wars which would have taken men away” (Kuehl 81-82). She settled upon 1923, “a year that would leave [her] characters all free to have a family story” (Bunting 50).<sup>1</sup> Michael Kreyling’s and Albert Devlin’s observations that the novel dwells more on aesthetic concerns than on political and social ones seems to follow Welty’s lead. Kreyling has pointed out that *Delta Wedding* is “more lyrical than narrative in its attention to setting, event, plot, and language” and that “Its thematic territory is not the world of politics or natural disasters” but “the human heart and its tangled relationships with others” (*Achievement* 55). Similarly, Devlin has related Welty’s “fusion of act and consciousness as the model of artistic perception” to Henry James’s phrase, “experience conditioned” (which appears in an essay, “Mr. Kipling’s Early Stories” [1891]) (256).

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<sup>1</sup>See also Yates 89. However, as Jan Nordby Gretlund has pointed out, “The year was not as uneventful in the Delta as the almanac led Welty to believe,” for there had been a flood in 1922 and it is hard to imagine that the region had recovered from the crisis by the following year. There had also been anxieties about the labor force due to the fact a great number of African Americans were beginning to leave the South to work in industrial cities (156-57).

Central to such readings of the novel is the Yellow Dog episode, which is repeatedly told in various ways by different characters so as to give a thematic unity to the whole novel (Kreyling, *Understanding* 94) and to exemplify the diversity of human perceptions. We hear that the Fairchild family went on a picnic on Sunday two weeks before Laura's arrival in the Delta, and on their way home, Maureen, Denis's intellectually disabled daughter, caught her foot in the railroad trestle. The locomotive approached, but George Fairchild, Shelly and Dabney's uncle and the owner of the plantation, remained on the track to help Maureen out while the others escaped. The train nearly hit them, but stopped just short. The version that Orrin, George's oldest son, tells (*DW* 23) can be regarded as a straightforward, "matter-of-fact" account of the incident (Kreyling, *Understanding* 88). Another version told by nine-year-old India (*DW* 75-78), however, includes digressions and delays and reveals her pleasure in telling the story (Kreyling, *Understanding* 89-90).

Nevertheless, such a vision of *Delta Wedding*—as a whole in which the Fairchilds' different perceptions and conflicts are aesthetically reconciled—can be read as Welty's response to the historical situation of the 1940s, when the South was frequently associated with Nazi Germany because of its racial segregation (Brinkmeyer 2-3). I argue that *Delta Wedding* offers a vision of liberal imagination<sup>2</sup> not only through the issues of race and class, but also through representations of children and adolescents. By reading the novel alongside Welty's memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983), which similarly connects artistic vision with the perceptions of the child, I interpret Laura as representative of aesthetic values. I also focus on Shelley Fairchild, the eldest daughter, who feels ambivalence toward the family and anxiously reflects on the relationships between Dabney and Troy; George and Robbie; and her own parents, Battle and Ellen. As an adolescent, Shelley realizes at the end of the novel her own relative powerlessness as a woman; she starts to enter the adult world, becoming conscious of love, sex, and the division between men and women. Though Shelley retains some of the childlike aesthetic perception associated with Laura, the contrast between her and Laura suggests Welty's perception of the child as a

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<sup>2</sup>See Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*. Suzanne Marrs also draws on the concept of the liberal imagination to examine Welty in the context of Mississippi politics.

moral agent who synthesizes the private world of women with a world governed by men's violence. Through its affirmation of childlike perception, *Delta Wedding* proposes "naturalness" as an aesthetic and moral value that has the potential to overcome oppression, in contrast both to essentialist and to performative identity politics. For Welty, this idea of "natural" identity simultaneously separates and connects individuals—men and women, adults and children—regardless of race and class.

During the 1930s, the Jim Crow South was viewed by many as a cultural blemish on the United States, a specter of the threat of totalitarianism associated with Germany and Italy (Duck 80). In response to such portrayals, southern writers from the late 1930s through the early 1940s "suggest[] that fears of intraregional temporal fragmentation may have complicated even mundane social interactions," reflecting that "southern time . . . was unquestionably contemporaneous with—influenced by and participating in—that of the larger nation and globe" and that "its substantial ties to U.S. culture and governance challenged the idea that southern apartheid comprised an anomaly in an otherwise liberal nation" (Duck 210). According to Duck, however, "this tendency to represent conflicts about race and region as transitory problems sure to be overcome by U.S. liberalism became increasingly dominant during the cold war" (211). *Delta Wedding*, which was originally written as a short story titled "The Delta Cousins," can be placed in the early years of this historical context. Suzanne Marrs, in *Eudora Welty: A Biography* (2005), elaborates on Welty's anxious response to the threat of Hitler. Marrs points out that Welty revised and expanded "The Delta Cousins" into *Delta Wedding* based heavily upon the nineteenth-century diaries of her friend John Robinson's ancestor, Nance McDougall Robinson, which Welty had read in 1945 (Marrs, *Biography* 127-29). Nancy's diaries were full of horrible realities that reminded Welty of the threat of the Nazis (*Imagination* 84-85). Noting, too, that Welty reviewed novels about war as an intern at the *New York Times Book Review* around that time, Marrs concludes, "The transformation of 'The Delta Cousins' into *Delta Wedding* is the record of Welty's growing emphasis upon the very values that she hoped would survive and triumph over the world Hitler envisioned" (*Imagination* 85). Describing these values as "respect for each individual's sacred worth, faith that personal courage and concern for others were as real as the malice and hatred that underlay fascist regimes" (*Biography* 127), Marrs seems to associate them

with the triumph of US liberalism over totalitarianism.<sup>3</sup> Welty herself —“a lifelong Democrat [who] has supported Democratic candidates and liberal causes from the beginning” (Marrs, “Huge” 69)—gave credence to this view when she expressed, in a 1980 interview, a perhaps naïve belief in the United States’s righteousness during World War II: “Everybody honestly believed we were trying to save the world from Nazism. We believed in our country; well, I still believe in my country” (Ruas 66).

Moreover, Welty showed personal opposition to US Senator Theodore Bilbo, whose platform for reelection was “built upon [his] virulent and outspoken racism” (*Biography* 134-45). She was offended by the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, which reported on December 20, 1945, that Gerald L. K. Smith, a disciple of Huey Long, had visited Jackson in the previous day “for the purpose of contacting committeemen and laying the foundation for the development of Nationalist organizations in the South.” According to the article, Smith said, “Communism does not appear to be a menace in Mississippi, but we need the moral force of this great state in Congress and elsewhere to help safeguard the threat of Stalinism, Internationalism and other forms of alienism” (“Bilbo and Rankin”). Responding to this article, Welty sent a letter to the editor on the same day (which appeared in the newspaper on December 23); she describes Smith and his doings as “fascistic.” She continues that the visit “is not even pretending to be innocent” and that for it “the word sinister could not be at all too strong.” Then she asks the newspaper to speak out to “[maintain] some kind of vigilance in keeping Gerald Smith away,”

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<sup>3</sup>Welty wrote another story titled “A Little Triumph” at the same time as “The Delta Cousins,” and she incorporated revised episodes from this story into *Delta Wedding*. One of them is the scene in which George (Uncle Raymond in the original version), emerges naked from a river and intervenes in a knife fight between two black boys. Marrs reads this piece as an “opposition to the racial categories on which Hitler insisted, which had so long characterized southern culture, and which denied the importance of the individual” (*Biography* 121). Not only does the uncle stop the fighting (grabbing the knife and getting blood on himself in the process), hold them, and then ask their names and let them go, but he also hugs Dabney tight to his chest and says that he is sorry for making her feel scared (*DW* 44-46). The uncle’s embrace both of black and white children, according to Marrs, shows that he “lives by values that Nazi Germany abominated and that are shocking to his family members as well.” Welty’s “opposition to the Nazi value system and recognition of a parallel between those values and southern cultural taboos are both implicit in the scene” (*Biography* 122).

saying, "God willing, but it's high time now to put the exodus on this public enemy we aren't even responsible for" ("Voice").

Although Marrs situates *Delta Wedding* within this political context by praising Welty's "faith . . . in the indestructible capacity of the single, separate person to renounce self-glorification and care about more than himself, his family, or race or nation" (*Biography* 122), it seems reductive to associate Welty's political anxieties primarily with racist demagoguery. To be sure, Welty knew that "Smith was . . . a man who had praised Hitler, had blamed Jews for the Great Depression and World War II, and had denied the reality of the Holocaust" (Marrs, "Huge" 70), yet her letter to the editor of the *Clarion-Ledger* does not include a single word that refers directly to race. I argue that it is more plausible to view her political anxieties not as narrowly concerned with race as such, but as more broadly positioned against "fascistic," narrow-minded, authoritarian, and intolerant attempts to govern individuals and organize society. In *Delta Wedding*, the relationship between white and black people represents merely one example of what we would now call essentialist identity, not the only one. Moreover, Welty brings out the particular intertwining of race with class in southern identity politics. Juxtaposing the performativity of class identity among whites with the purported essentialism of race, *Delta Wedding* complicates and even undermines both as potential causes of violent and fascistic social control.

It is through the literary imagery of the child that Welty most clearly resists social oppression in *Delta Wedding*. The novel is closely related to Welty's own childhood experiences; on the same occasions when she mentions how the year of 1923 was chosen from the almanac for the time of *Delta Wedding*, Welty also explains that she included a little girl as the observer because she herself was a small girl at the time (Kuehl 82; Yates 89). In order to clarify Welty's revulsion against fascistic order, her use of childhood should be placed in the context of the Western literary tradition. Late eighteenth-century Romantic writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge made use of the figure of the child as "a rich poetic device, a means for social critique and a psychological- introspective medium"

(Benziman 153). Welty seems to have inherited this tradition by way of modernist writers of the early-twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding modern debates about childhood as an aspect of “a longer-running political and intellectual war about what constitutes majority and minority for persons” (217), Frances Ferguson claims that “the ability to treat children as different from adults is almost as fundamental to modern political thinking—of a more or less liberal cast—as any distinction we make politically” (222). Starting with Rousseau’s acknowledgment of childhood as a time and space separate from the adult world, Ferguson contends that “children become the representatives of the inevitable limitation of the reach of doctrine, of belief, of being able to say what you mean and mean what you say in every moment.” Because “liberalism crucially replaces the question of meaning with the question of representation” (223), the introduction of “generationalism” and age-segregation (225) has made the child a representation that is devoid of—or more precisely, inseparably identified with—meaning in modern, adult society. Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s attack on “the fact-value distinction” (224) in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), Ferguson characterizes Deleuze’s argument about Lewis Carroll in *The Logic of Sense* (1969) as one in which the child has finally become the representative of “an unactualized but perfectly sensible standard” of the modern liberal (utilitarian) tradition, that is, “a statement of the fundamental unactualizability of a knowledge of our own positions” rather than “a simple idealization of childhood innocence or a commitment to potentiality” (232). For philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, the child remains unrepresentable but still can be

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<sup>4</sup>See also Goodenough, Heberle, and Sokoloff, “Introduction” 5-7. According to them, literary criticism has regarded the child as one of the “alternative subjects” that pose “the question of otherness” (1-2). In her work on modernist representations of the child, for instance, Elizabeth Goodenough suggests that Virginia Woolf—who deeply influenced Welty—“celebrates the consciousness of children” as “the purest kind of integrity a character can achieve” and “portrays the individual’s first impressions as the most distilled and authentic moments of life.” But children rarely talk in her works precisely because the “union of self and external world” achieved by children “can never be attained again” (184). Galia Benziman argues that Wordsworth’s idealization of childhood both as “an admirable and distant other” and as “an expression of the authentic, pre-social self of the adult speaker-poet” allowed Thomas Hardy and James Joyce to “defamiliarize the world through a mentally and cognitively ‘othered’ focalization” (156).

accounted for within the perspective of reason, but Deleuze proffers a totally metaphysical and abstract account in which the child is unmeasurable and infinite (232).

Contextualized in Ferguson's conceptual genealogy of the child since the Romantic period, Welty may be located between Freud and Deleuze. Her political anxieties and belief in US liberalism seem to have an affinity with Deleuze's metaphysical conception of the child, since for him (and for Guattari) "Oedipalization involves replacing the schizophrenic body without organs with a collection of organs and organ systems, and developing an 'egoic' perspective that is heroic to exactly the degree that it is fascistic" (Ferguson 228). Nevertheless, Welty is closer to Freud than Deleuze in that she shares his modernist belief that individuals should be understood in "the mythic cycles of one's culture as if they ought to be one's autobiography" (228), even if the collectivist belief in mythic undercurrent sounds fascistic to a certain extent. Ferguson also points out that in Deleuze's and Guattari's accounts, "the regular appeal to things like collective fantasy and a deterritorialization of desire actually is a more individualistic account than those that they critique" (230-31). Placing Welty between Freud and Deleuze suggests that she—especially in *Delta Wedding*—is suspended between collectivist and individualist perspectives.

According to Ferguson, in Deleuze "the child comes to be something like the embodiment of the [Rawlsian] veil of ignorance, a figure who represents a principle of the nonactualized that keeps our relations with other people from involving a simple expression of our own needs, desires, opinions, and interests" (233). In contrast, children in Welty's work remain actualized beings. They are not completely separated from adults, but rather embrace anyone insofar as he or she can be perceived as "natural." Welty developed this idea of "naturalness" by juxtaposing the adolescent with the child, attributing anxieties about sexuality to the former and liberating the latter from them. In contrast to Shelley's realization that she is a woman powerless in a man's world, Welty emphasizes Laura's childlike, generous sensibility as a possible source of resistance to horrible realities. We should be small children rather than men or women, Welty would say, in order to create a world where all are embraced as natural beings.

In transforming "The Delta Cousins" into *Delta Wedding*, however, Welty also added "ominous elements—death and the threat of death, the relation of the family to its African American servants, the class issues



involved in the upcoming marriage of cousin Dabney to the plantation overseer Troy, and the trials faced by the Fairchilds' . . . frontier ancestors" (Marrs, *Biography* 104). These ominous elements are even registered in the novel's place names—for instance, in the change from the Sunflower River (in "The Delta Cousins") to the Yazoo River, translated as the "river of death." It is clear, however, that Welty retained the isolation of the family. Even though the family name—"Shelton" in the original story—was eventually changed to Fairchild, the plantation is named "Shellmound" instead, in which the sound of *shel* continues to imply their "separation from a larger world of experience" and "self-protection in the *shel* of Shelton" (Kreyling, *Achievement* 60-61). Notably, this fact evokes the last passage of *One Writer's Beginnings*: "As you have seen, I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within" (104).<sup>5</sup> It is true that "The Fairchilds of the novel are indeed fair children facing away from the necessity of adapting to the outside world" (Kreyling, *Achievement* 57) and that Welty seems to blur the boundaries between children and adults by describing members of the household—such as Ellen, Aunt Tempe, Primrose, Jim Allen, and African Americans—as younger or more childish than they actually are (Snow 20). Yet, structurally speaking, it seems that these are effects of Laura's visit to the Delta and especially of her being a child. The opening of *Delta Wedding* emphasizes that "the one [fact] most persistent in Laura's mind was the most intimate one: that her age was nine" (1). Laura's fresh and innocent perspective introduces readers to the Delta and represents the whole family as similarly fresh and innocent.

In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty compares summer trips in her childhood to Ohio and West Virginia—her parents' homes—to stories in general, talking about how excitingly fresh and impressive they were and even quoting her own passage from *Delta Wedding*:

I think now, in looking back on these summer trips . . . that another element in them must have been influencing my mind. The trips were whole unto themselves. They were stories. Not only in form, but in their taking on direction, movement, development, change. They changed something in my life: each trip made its particular revelation, though I could not have found words for it. . . . Nor is it surprising to me that when I made my first attempt at a novel, I entered its

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<sup>5</sup>Also in the memoir, Welty writes that her parents "overprotected" her (18) and that "a passion for independence sprang up in [her] at the earliest age" (19).

world—that of the mysterious Yazoo-Mississippi Delta—as a child riding there on a train: “From the warm window sill the endless fields glowed like a hearth in firelight, and Laura, looking out, leaning on her elbows with her head between her hands, felt what an arriver in a land feels—that slow hard pounding in the breast.” (68)

Yet, even if Laura and Welty both “fe[el] what an arriver in a land feels,” and even if George says to Laura—perhaps ironically—that she is “growing up to be a real little Fairchild” (*DW*275), “Laura felt that in the end she would go—go from all this, go back to her father” (313). The novel’s ending suggests that the girl embraces the family from the position of a detached observer: she realizes that in order to appreciate Fairchildness best, she should place herself outside of it.

Even though long middle sections of the novel are not focalized by Laura, her characteristic aesthetic perceptions, especially about the Fairchilds, are present throughout. The nine-year-old girl compares the Fairchilds to “a great bowerlike cage full of tropical birds her father had shown her in a zoo in a city.” Although she “from her earliest memory had heard how they ‘never seemed to change at all,’” she recognizes both that “they changed every moment” and that “the birds that flew were caged all the time and could not fly out” (17-18). This image gestures toward the end of the novel, in which Laura aesthetically objectifies the Fairchilds upon leaving the Delta. Indeed, the novel is full of bird images. Robbie Reid, George’s wife, calls the family “the roost” (190). Robbie is an outsider and has been estranged from George, but even she is obviously linked with a bird. When she returns to George, he recites “Denis’s poetry.” Denis, the mythic first son of the Fairchilds who was killed in the First World War, loved a poem by Horace that describes “*some stray fawn that seeks its mother / Through trackless woods*,”<sup>6</sup> and the silence after George’s recitation is “like the one after a flock of fall birds has gone over” (203-04). When Robbie lets a bird in the house, the servant Roxie says that it means death (209). As Ranny, Laura’s Fairchild cousin, says that the bird is a brown female thrush (221), it recalls the color of Robbie’s fingers (215). Laura and Roy, a Fairchild boy, see dead mockingbirds on the steps of Marmion, another plantation house

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<sup>6</sup>Denis’s fondness for the poem seems to associate Welty’s use of the bird imagery with pastoral tradition. Also, according to Louise Westling, who from feminist perspective reads *Delta Wedding* as “a pastoral hymn of fertility” (65), Battle’s recitation of it not only exemplifies his romanticism but also echoes Mr. Ramsay’s declamations in *To the Lighthouse* (74).

belonging to the Fairchilds (229-30); on the same occasion, Aunt Studney, an old African American woman figured as a fertility goddess, looks “like an old bird over her one egg” (231) as she holds her sack over the floor. The Fairchilds are presented as a part of the natural world, like animals; but it is Laura’s childlike, aesthetic vision that renders human beings in this light and that the novel affirms.

Welty associates children’s sensibilities with the aesthetic imagination in *One Writer’s Beginnings*: “Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the world. Then artists come along and discover it the same way, all over again. Here and there, it’s the same world. Or now and then we’ll hear from an artist who’s never lost it” (10). It is obvious in this remark that she connects both children and art with nature, as indicated through her simile of “animals.” Emphasizing the importance of reading experiences in her childhood, Welty also confesses that “It had been startling and disappointing to [her] to find out that story books had been written by *people*, that books were not natural wonders, coming up of themselves like grass” (5). However, Welty’s sense of naturalness is tricky. Whereas she assumes that there is authenticity in nature, as in the example of grass, she would not immediately deny the naturalness of art. When she writes in “Place in Fiction,” “Fiction is a lie. Never in its inside thoughts, always in its outside dress” (119), it does not mean that fiction cannot be natural and realistic; she would say that even a lie can be natural enough to be true.

While Laura’s childlike sensibilities in *Delta Wedding* offer an aesthetic point of view that perceives the world freshly and innocently, albeit with a certain detachment, Shelley shows a contrasting awareness not only of the family’s situation but also of sexuality and death. For instance, Shelley sees the Yellow Dog episode as a cause of the discord between George and Robbie:

Shelley felt that George and Robbie had hurt each other in a way so deep, so unyielding, that she was unequal to understanding it yet. She hoped to grasp it all, the worst, but fiercely feeling herself a young, unmarried, unengaged girl, she held the more triumphantly to her secret guess—that this confrontation on the trestle was itself the reason for Robbie’s leaving George and for his not going after her. (117)

Such adolescent ambivalent anxiety is indicated by her name, which includes the sound *shel* and thus implicitly embodies both her own alienation and the isolation of the family, just as Kreyling notes the separation and self-protection implied by Shellmound and Shelton. She

is the most self-conscious person among the Fairchilds and tends to withdraw into herself. She has a plan to travel to Europe with Aunt Tempe after Dabney's wedding, but "she could not bring herself to wait that long before beginning to write" in her "Trip Abroad diary" (109, 106). Shelley's anticipation of the trip can be associated with the trip-like aesthetics of the child that Welty talks about in her memoir. She talks to herself using the second person (110-13) in a diary that has a lock and a key (109), which suggests that Shelley's self is both confined and divided within it. Because she feels that she is confined within Shellmound and Fairchildness, Shelley has a desire to be free from it:

Only that morning, working at the wedding flowers with Dabney, she had thought to herself, hypnotically, *as though she read it in her diary*, Why do you look out thinking nothing will happen any more? Why are you thinking your line of trees the indelible thing in the world? There's the long journey you're going on, with Aunt Tempe, leading out . . . and you can't see it now. Even closing your eyes, you see only the line of trees at Shellmound. Is it the world? If Shellmound were a little bigger, it would be the same as the world entirely. . . . Perhaps that was the real truth. (289; emphasis added)

This passage, which presents Shelley's thoughts "*as though she read it in her diary*," indicates that Shelley needs the act of writing to objectify or even to recognize what she really thinks and feels, and in the process to aestheticize it.

As Sally Wolff argues, Shelley also embodies anxieties about sex and death as an autobiographical figure who represents Welty's own childhood experiences (*A Dark Rose* 114-15). According to Wolff, "Shelley's feelings of guilt, anger, worry and fear may reflect the author's own responses to her mother's pregnancies or sorrow for the pain her own birth may have caused" ("Children" 264). Wolff argues, on the basis of *One Writer's Beginnings*, that these feelings stem from Welty's own shocking memories in childhood of learning about sex and death at the same time: when she realized how babies are born, Welty also knew that she had lost a brother before she was even born and therefore that "babies could die, and the loss could be yours" (253). As if reflecting such anxieties, Shelley shows a keen sense of the innuendoes of love and sex that go on around her, which indicates "her upcoming initiation into the mysteries of sex and love" (261). While her longing "to read *The Beautiful and Damned* which was going around the Delta and to read it in the bed" (*DW*109) hints at a desire for romance, there are limitations. Shelley writes in her diary, "I do not know and cannot think how it was

when Papa and Mama wanted each other” (112). Here, as Wolff notes, “Shelley rejects the image of her mother and father as lovers” (“Children” 261). She says she would never love Troy, probably because she is jealous of her sister Dabney, and she also understands Robbie’s anxious feeling for George, crying over what happened on the Yellow Dog trestle. All of these perceptions reflect her own strong self-consciousness as an adolescent in transition from childhood to adulthood.

Shelley’s awareness of love and sex seems to threaten the childlike aesthetics of naturalness that Laura embodies and, by extension, to question Fairchildness. However, precisely because she is not yet an adult woman, Shelley’s perception retains the transient quality of childlike sensibilities. Her encounter with Troy’s performance does not only show that the adolescent doubts the authenticity of the Fairchilds; it also implies that she has still not lost the child’s affinity with the natural. Just as George—whose indomitable individuality has impressed Dabney—stops a fight between black boys, Troy violently settles a quarrel between some African American field hands. The parallel between the two scenes is obvious, but Shelley, instead of being impressed, is shocked by the apparent authenticity of Troy’s performance as an overseer, and asks, even in her anger, whether “the behavior of all *men* were actually no more than . . . imitation of other men” (259). Brannon Costello has argued that “Troy’s performance inspires Shelley to realize the constructed nature of an identity” and even “causes her to doubt further the rigidity of social boundaries and social roles” (56). Yet, given the paradoxical aesthetics of the natural that embrace both nature and art, it seems that the validity of both racial essentialism and class performativity is undercut in *Delta Wedding*. The novel never makes political arguments that refer to identity but instead suggests that identity should be natural—that is, it should be perceived as generous, unprejudiced, and innocent whether it is “really” essential or performative. Costello argues that Welty “reveals that even in the most tranquil and stable year of the Delta’s recent history, the ostensibly stable racial and social hierarchies of the Delta existed in a state of flux and were only precariously, sometimes violently, maintained” (58), but it seems to me that she does not necessarily intend to do so, though certainly she is aware of such flux. Rather, this scene should be read in the context of Welty’s anxieties about violent social control—which is eventually associated with fascistic manners—and what is at stake here

is neither race nor class politics per se, but a more abstract quality of naturalness.

Although Jean C. Griffith also insists on Welty's attempts to undermine racial conflicts by using the performance of class to reveal their arbitrariness, it seems that Welty's affinity with the childlike orientation toward the natural would not completely deny the possibility of an authentic performance. Griffith claims that by associating Troy with George in the two scenes, "Welty crosses lines of class . . . collapsing the distinctions between the working class and the aristocracy that make the marriage between Troy and Dabney so problematic to her family" (150). Referring to the fact that "By 1946, . . . the idea that essential [racial] differences existed among whites had lost much of its influence, largely because such a position, which was at the heart of the 'science' of eugenics, informed the fascist movement against which the United States was at war" (151), Griffith reinforces the argument that Welty attempts to overcome the racial injustice allegedly associated with fascism. She interprets Shelley's witness of Troy's "convincing performance" and her antipathy against it as a feeling about "violence that seems to reinforce rather than preclude the intimacy" that Dabney witnesses among George and the young black boys (154).

However, Shelly's observation does not radically reject the idea of performance as such, because her irritation against Troy's performance is accompanied by a disturbing skepticism concerning her father's authenticity: "But it had previously occurred to her that Troy was trying to imitate her father (Suppose her *father* imitated . . . oh, not he!)" (*DW* 259). When citing this passage to explain that "Shelley begins to worry that all men are equally inauthentic performers of genteel white masculinity" (155), Griffith dismisses the last parenthetical part and therefore fails to understand that Shelley immediately repudiates—or at least tries to repudiate—her own insight into the constructedness of Troy's performance. It is true that Shelly notices that everyone imitates others, but she nonetheless believes—or *wants* to believe—in an authenticity, or naturalness, that verifies the quality of the performances. The adolescent Shelley might want to be liberated from Fairchildness, but she does not want its authenticity to perish *even as a form of imitation*—all of which implies the remnant of her childlike aesthetic affinity for the natural.

Nevertheless, it is true that her doubts about Troy's performance seem to cast doubt on George's natural strength to register her own reluctant

but inevitable entrance into the public world of men—*reluctant* because of her vestigial perceptions of the child and *inevitable* because of her awareness of becoming a woman. When she finds blood on the door of Troy's office, Shelley feels "a sharp, panicky triumph": "As though the sky had opened and shown her, she could see the reason why Dabney's wedding should be prevented. Nobody could marry a man with blood on his door" (*DW*258). Her sense of "triumph" appears like a bird soaring into the sky, but she keeps it a secret, thinking that "what was going to happen was going to happen" (258). While she is running away after witnessing Troy's performance, she seems to identify herself primarily with women, reflecting upon the difference between men and women: "She felt again, but differently, that men were no better than little children . . . Women, she was glad to think, did know a *little* better—though everything they knew they would have to keep to themselves . . . oh, forever!" (259).

Her association of men with "little children" implies that Shelley, though unwillingly, accepts growing up. Repressing her desire to regard her father as an authentic figure, Shelley realizes that she is becoming an adult woman and gaining a "secret" knowledge. Pointing out that marriage symbolizes an important key to the maintenance of the southern social structure, as is evident in the cases of George and Robbie and of Troy and Dabney, Griffith argues that "Shelley's observations suggest that white women have greater awareness of the interworkings of racial patriarchy, but that they can do nothing to change them" (155). Griffith does not mean that women do not act upon this "superior" knowledge; rather, acting upon this knowledge, she contends, white women do not practice the "convincing" performance of men and therefore "do not enjoy (or exploit) white privilege to the extent that white men of all classes do" (160). While perhaps Robbie's belief that the Fairchild women "always ruled the roost" and "In the Delta the land belonged to the women" is also based on this knowledge, it is nonetheless true that they are powerless to change such a social structure (*DW*190). In other words, Shelley's loss of the childlike aesthetics of the natural—which is implied in her separating herself from men and her association of them with "little children"—crucially separates women's secrets from men's social world.

Throughout the novel, how "differently" Shelley feels about the Fairchild men and children remains unclear, but Laura's perception about the Fairchild children earlier in the novel offers a clue to it. After

describing how Laura "loved [the Fairchild boys] dearly" (15), Welty writes:

The boys were only like all the Fairchilds, but it was the boys and the men that defined that family always. All the girls knew it. When she looked at the boys and the men Laura was without words but she knew that company like a dream that comes back again and again, each aspect familiar and longing not to be forgotten. Great-Great-Uncle George on his horse, in his portrait in the parlor . . . even he, she had learned by looking up at him, had the family trait of quick, upturning smiles, instant comprehension of the smallest eddy of life in the current of the day, which would surely be entered in a kind of reckless pleasure. This pleasure either the young men copied from the older ones or the older ones always kept. The grown people, like the children, looked with kindling eyes at all turmoil, expecting delight for themselves and for you. They were shocked only at disappointment. (16)

While Shelley associates men with children, Laura compares children to men. To Shelley, men are like children because they imitate somebody else as children do. Yet to Laura, children "copy" the family traits from the adult men, just as the younger men did from older generations. Laura finds that admirable traits of the boys come from the older men of the family, and to her this is why it looks as if the adults show childlike excitement and disappointment in their eyes. On the one hand, such whimsical emotion is in keeping with the aesthetics of the natural that imbues *Delta Wedding* as a whole; on the other hand, Shelley's association of men with children suggests the moral degradation of childlike sensibilities. While Laura's perception differentiates boys and girls but does not divide men from women, Shelley separates women from the company of children—both boys and girls—and men.

The naturalness of the Fairchilds is on the verge of extinction in the year 1923. Shelley notices this situation as she is growing up, perceiving the ebb and flow of love and its sexual implications. Laura, like Shelley, also will be an adult woman someday, but at least at present she is innocent enough not to realize consciously that the Fairchilds are sheltered. Her childlike aesthetic sensibilities embrace the natural, just as the novel itself does in starting and ending with her. Artificial elements in the novel, such as the Yellow Dog, might themselves be figured as part of the natural world, just as the Fairchilds are associated with the birds in a cage of a city zoo in Laura's imagination.<sup>7</sup> The last

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<sup>7</sup>Kelly Sultzbach, for instance, argues that the Yellow Dog has "organic qualities that seem to reconcile it with Welty's natural environment" and even becomes "another feature of the environment's vitality, a force that both participates in ebullient life and



scene of *Delta Wedding*, in which Laura embraces the unknown natural world, “both arms held out to the radiant night” (326), embodies this vision. Death is also natural for human life, and Welty admires and accepts the cycle of death and rebirth (or reproduction) as the mythic scene at Marmion represents as a natural phenomenon—among dead birds, Aunt Studney, who is “like an old bird over her one egg,” produces “a cry high and threatening like the first note of a song at a ceremony, a wedding or a funeral, and like the bark of a dog too”; bees fly out of her sack as if her egg has hatched and then Laura finds the place alive; Roy, from the top of the house, also sees “the whole creation” (231-32). Yet, the ominous presence of death also lurks in the artificial or the “unnatural,” implying that the sheltered world of the Fairchilds, in Welty’s own words, is “a fragile, temporary thing” (Bunting 50), like Shelley’s transitional adolescence.

In *Delta Wedding*, the child’s sensibility embraces both men and children as detached, aesthetic objects, but the adolescent begins to shut herself in the separate realm of women as she learns about love and sex. In this process, the childlike celebration of the natural is repressed and loses its connection to the world. Although this idea of naturalness is quite vague and arbitrary, it does not wholly deny the constructedness of identity; it also assumes and celebrates some sort of authenticity. Welty aligns this childlike perception of the natural with the liberal imagination of her historical moment, reflecting her revulsion against bloody violence and contesting the “fascistic” social control exercised by men. Even so, *Delta Wedding* suggests that the child’s perception of the natural synthesizes performativity and authenticity into an aesthetic and moral value—but not primarily a political one.

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underscores a ubiquitous threat of violence” (90).

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