
Teaching the Works of

EUDORA WELTY

Twenty-First-Century Approaches



Edited by Mae Miller Claxton and Julia Eichelberger

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Teaching the Art of Welty's Letters

—Julia Eichelberger, College of Charleston

Anyone who teaches or conducts research on Welty's works should become acquainted with her remarkable correspondence. Whether studied on their own or as aids for interpreting other Welty texts, these letters are impressive linguistic and literary achievements that deserve a place in our classrooms. In addition to providing biographical and historical information about an acclaimed author, they also capture Welty's private voice in intimate conversation with friends who cherished her wit, compassion, and creativity.

Some letters display Welty's sharp-edged humor, as in one where she complains about another writer at Yaddo:

Thank God I am not in the same house with her again. I won't be glad when she is dead, particularly, but I don't stop in my tracks and send up thanks ever that she is alive. I know you wouldn't like her if you only knew her! (she said eagerly). [...] Just to think of her here at my kitchen table makes me furious and I will start banging pots and pans in a minute. (*Tell* 29)

Whether satirical or sincere, Welty's letters document a supremely attentive mind observing impressions as they enter it. She often imagined her correspondent sharing the moment with her:

There is a blue sky, small silver clouds. A thrush is singing by himself. I must go now. When I got your letter I played the Mozart and some of the other things to think how they would sound in Sicily with maybe ocean sounds behind them. Don't forget how the Mozart symphony is, ever. I must go. It is so good to hear from you and it changes everything sometimes when things have happened in

the world that make a fresh mystery of how you are. Please take care of yourself.
(*Tell* 101)

In particularly memorable letters, new meanings coalesce as the letter concludes:

Every evening between 8 and 9 you can watch the Calypso daylily opening—it is a night daylily—palest pure yellow, long slender curved petals, the color of the new moon. To see it actually open, the petals letting go, is wonderful, and its night fragrance comes to you all at once like a breath. What makes it open at night—what does it open to? in the same progression as others close, moment by moment. Tell about night flowers. Love, Eudora. (*Tell* 63)

Welty did not revise or revisit these letters; her insights seem to have appeared on the page as she wrote. Deploying powers of observation that matched her stylistic gifts, whenever Welty the correspondent records what she is doing, thinking, or feeling, she captures transitory moments and creates a powerful connection with a faraway reader.

Now that so much correspondence is available for study, Welty's letters can enhance our teaching in numerous ways.¹ First, instructors can encourage students' exploration by directing them to four volumes of letters that have now been published. A brief description of each book can steer students toward eras and subjects that interest them. Michael Kreyling's *Author and Agent* quotes extensively from Welty's thirty-year correspondence with her friend and literary agent Diarmuid Russell. Suzanne Marrs's collection *What There Is to Say We Have Said: The Correspondence of Eudora Welty and William Maxwell* presents almost all extant correspondence between Welty and her *New Yorker* editor Maxwell and his wife, Emily. My project, *Tell about Night Flowers: Eudora Welty's Gardening Letters, 1940–1949*, includes Welty's letters to Russell and John Robinson (Welty's 1940s love interest). *Meanwhile There Are Letters: The Correspondence of Eudora Welty and Ross Macdonald*, coedited by Marrs, contains 1970–1982 correspondence between Welty and another man she loved, the mystery writer Ross Macdonald (Kenneth Millar).² Students will be interested to know that recent collections include photographs and examples of Welty's handwritten or typed letters.³ We can also remind students that a book's index will help them find references to a particular story or topic, and that three of these volumes include helpful endnotes that can bring letters to life by identifying the people and events mentioned in them.⁴

For more focused classroom learning, instructors may present particular letters for study. For an upper-level course with three weeks allotted to Welty's works, I had students explore selected letters as a homework assignment. Groups of students were assigned letters relevant to the day's reading.⁵ I scanned these letters and their editorial annotations (unfortunately positioned at the end of the volume), then posted the scans inside my institution's learning management system. Students completed a worksheet responding to four prompts: describe important information found in these letters; discuss possible connections between letters and fiction we are studying; identify memorable, interesting, or disturbing parts of these letters; offer advice for reading and enjoying these letters and Welty's fiction. Students made photocopies or took photos of their worksheets before submitting them at the beginning of class, so both student and teacher could refer to them during discussion. This low-stakes assignment was equivalent to a quiz grade; students were free to submit carefully argued paragraphs or informal notes. I used a similar exercise in an American Literature survey course in which the only Welty text was "Petrified Man."⁶ In survey courses, reading these letters could be an optional extra credit activity. Welty could also be one of several authors from different eras whose letters are available for study throughout the semester. For teachers who prefer not to assign more homework, a mini-lesson using letters can facilitate richer discussion of a work of fiction. After presenting a letter or two in class, instructors can invite students to identify Welty's shifts in tone or subject, and then to speculate on what makes each letter enjoyable or meaningful.

More ambitious learning opportunities exist for advanced students; teachers could ask them to comment on or supplement the annotations provided by the letters' editors, or have students use letters to document Welty's political views, her favorite artists, her social class, or some aspect of daily life in Jackson, where many letters were written. With hundreds of letters available for research in the Eudora Welty Collection in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, instructors can travel there with student researchers, an enjoyable experience I have found genuinely useful to my own work. Unlike writing literary criticism, where it can be more difficult to collaborate with students, archival research and textual editing can be significantly advanced by carefully trained graduate or undergraduate students. My students have proved quite helpful in researching factual information for footnotes and conducting the multiple rounds of proofreading necessary to eliminate errors in transcription. Students accompanying me to the archive have helped me locate letters and transcribed photocopies after we return. Some institutions,

like mine, may offer undergraduate research grants for such travel, covering students' expenses and honoring them with a competitive award. Students enjoy the chance to work in an archive, to tour Welty's house and hometown, and to contribute to a future publication.⁷

For all my students, reading these letters has proved an enjoyable way to get to know Welty. They become intrigued by her relationships with her correspondents and by her interest in politics, art, and the unspoken rules of Jackson society. Letters help students become more accustomed to encountering whimsy and poignance, sincerity and mockery, within a few sentences. Students find that some letters' rapid twists and turns that are confusing at first are pleasing by the end of the letter, as in the Easter 1942 letter that, in three paragraphs, goes from Welty's plans for a seed box to a description of zoot suits worn in Jackson on Easter to an evocative dream about an iris (*Tell* 56–57). Whereas students are reluctant to admit being confused or put off by a story their teacher clearly considers important, one that (they assume) should be admired from a respectful distance, they are usually willing to explore the meandering in a Welty letter.⁸ Once students have noticed and even been puzzled by gaps in a letter, they may be better prepared for the poetic shifts and gaps within Welty's fiction.

Students' homework suggests that the letters deepen their engagement with Welty's work. Several students have praised Welty's lyrical accounts of nature and gardening. "She can make something as simple as smelling a flower a spiritual experience," one student wrote. Aspiring fiction writers were intrigued by Welty's comments on her work in progress.⁹ Another student "laughed aloud" over Welty's snide remarks about Carson McCullers, delighted that a revered American author could write letters that were as entertaining as "gossip about your own town . . . They are meant to be enjoyed not to be intimidating." One student wrote that, after reading Welty's epistolary skewering of some of her acquaintances, he'd decided the tone of "Petrified Man" and "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" was more humorous than moralizing. He wrote of being equally intrigued by a 1941 letter describing "the emotions of a wanderer" and the "journey through or towards something" that Welty hoped her stories would express. These letters, he said, helped him stop searching for a Welty story's "meaning"; he could relax and enjoy it as an exploratory experience, with no definite message or denouement.

Welty's letters, rewarding in their own right, can equip instructors and students to take greater pleasure in her stories and novels. Compared with her published fiction, Welty's private letters are more accessible and less intimidating—briefer, more straightforward accounts of daily life and the people and ideas she found funny, admirable, or infuriating. These accounts are like her fictional texts in that they do not always advance in a clear direction,

but linger within an individual's subjectivity. While updating her correspondent on her recent activities—reminiscing, complaining, gossiping, meditating, free-associating, and delighting in the transaction between reader and writer—Welty performs the same complicated sensibility that informs her fiction. As one of my students wrote, when asked for advice on how to read and enjoy the letters, “I’m not sure how to tell people to enjoy them because I enjoy them inherently—but I guess I’d say just to feel, remember to feel the language she uses and watch how she takes some little moment—some tiny scene in nature—and transforms it into this vast far-reaching idea, and you’re not really sure how she does it, but it’s wonderful.”

I understand why readers are initially puzzled by some of Welty’s narratives, wondering what their “message” may be. As the narrator of “A Curtain of Green” puts it, “Just to what end Mrs Larkin worked so strenuously in her garden, her neighbors could not see” (*Stories* 131). Welty does not explain why the rain at the end of that story is described as “the sound of the end of waiting” for Mrs. Larkin (134) or why, after she collapses and the rain strikes her face, “her lips began to part” (134). Similarly, in Welty’s “Powerhouse,” the “marvelous, frightening” artist (158) never tells the crowd at the World Café what has happened between himself and his wife: “Truth is something worse, I ain’t said what, yet” is all he discloses (168). No resolution has appeared at the end of “The Winds,” either. The storm has passed, leaving Josie with only a fragment of a letter, addressed to someone else, asking, “when are you coming for me? . . . When?” (267).

If Welty’s texts—her fiction and her letters—do not solve a riddle, reach a clear destination, or attain a denouement, what *are* they doing? Both kinds of texts allow readers to experience something intensely, as Welty herself experienced her world. An encounter with mystery, a re-creation of someone else’s wonder and awe, may be, for Welty, the most important “message” of any letter or any story. The letter-writing artist is a little like Powerhouse, “giving all [he’s] got, for an audience of one” (160). Thanks to these letters, readers now have new ways “to enter into the mind, heart and skin of a human being who is not myself.” According to Welty, this is no small achievement: “It is the act of a writer’s imagination that I set most high” (829).

Notes

1. In addition to Kreyling’s groundbreaking monograph *Author and Agent*, three volumes dedicated to Welty’s correspondence appeared between 2011 and 2015. Additional letters are quoted in Suzanne Marrs’s *One Writer’s Imagination*, her 2005 biography, Fuller’s *Welty and Surrealism*, and McHaney’s *A Tyrannous Eye*. Welty’s forty-year correspondence with Frank Lyell, a friend from Jackson who became an English professor, is mostly unpublished, but

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