Losing Battles Study Guide

Losing Battles by Eudora Welty

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Introduction

In her autobiography, Eudora Welty called *Losing Battles* the most difficult piece of writing she ever produced. She first envisioned what became her longest novel as a short story. When the novel was published in 1970, Welty was a long-established, highly respected writer who had not published a novel in fifteen years. *Losing Battles* is a departure from most of her other work both in its setting (the hill country of northeastern Mississippi) and its form (dramatic, rather than narrative). Most scholars and critics consider the book the pinnacle of her comedic writing, and it was an immediate success with critics and readers alike.

Losing Battles takes place at a large family reunion in the little town of Banner. The occasion is the ninetieth birthday of the matriarch, Granny Vaughn, but the most eagerly awaited guest is Granny's great-grandson, Jack, who escapes from prison one day before he is scheduled to be released so that he can attend the reunion. The Renfros and Beechams are a gang of eccentrics and storytellers, and the bits of family history they tell one another at the reunion□a litany of losing battles□make up the heart of the novel.

Author Biography

Eudora Alice Welty was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on April 13, 1909, to Chestina and Christian Welty. With her two younger brothers, she was reared in Jackson, although neither of her parents was from the Deep South. Her father came from Ohio, and her mother was from West Virginia. Both were teachers by trade until the family moved to Mississippi, where Christian entered the insurance business. Welty remembered having a very happy childhood in which she was surrounded by books and loved listening to her parents read to each other in the evenings. She also recalled how much she loved listening to the ladies in town trade stories, and her habit of noting their speech patterns and colloquialisms served her well when she began writing about the South.

After completing her public education in Jackson, Welty attended Mississippi State College for Women from 1925 to 1927, finishing a bachelor of arts degree in 1929 at the University of Wisconsin. At the encouragement of her father (who wanted her to have a reliable trade), she studied advertising at Columbia University from 1930 to 1931. When her father died suddenly, however, she returned home to Jackson permanently. She worked various jobs with newspapers and a radio station before going to work for the Works Progress Administration, a government program established during the depression that assigned people to work on public projects for much-needed income. Welty also took up photography, snapping pictures of all kinds of people (mostly African Americans) in her native Mississippi. Her first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," appeared in 1936, after which Welty's stories were accepted by top publications such as *Atlantic* and *Southern Review*.

During Welty's early writing career, her work was often narrowly defined as regionalist or feminist writing. Still, she was admired by other writers, and her first collection of short stories, *A Curtain of Green*, left critics eagerly anticipating Welty's future work. Over the next thirty years, Welty had over fifteen books published, including short fiction, novels, and nonfiction. In her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty wrote that *Losing Battles* was the most difficult to write of all her books; she told a *New York Times* reporter that she spent six to eight years working on it.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was renewed interest in Welty's work, partially because of the rise in feminist criticism. (Welty preferred to distance herself from feminism.) Readers and critics continue to be drawn to her writing for her unique style, her handling of daily life, and her depictions of everyday heroism. Her work was recognized with prestigious awards such as a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1942; the O. Henry Award in 1942, 1943, and 1968; the National Institute of Arts and Letters literary grant in 1944; the Gold Medal for fiction in 1972; and a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Welty died of complications of pneumonia on July 23, 2001, in her hometown. She was ninety-two.

Plot Summary

Part One

As *Losing Battles* opens, it is August in the hill country of northeast Mississippi. The time is the 1930s. A rooster crows, and night slowly recedes to reveal an old farmhouse.

The family awakens and prepares for a large family reunion that will honor the ninetieth birthday of the matriarch, Granny Vaughn, who lives in the house with her granddaughter, Miss Beulah; Beulah's husband, Ralph Renfro; their daughters, Ella Fay, Etoyle, and Elvie; their son, Vaughn; Gloria, who is the wife of their elder son, Jack; and Jack and Gloria's baby, Lady May. They all are excited about the reunion, and especially about the fact that Jack will be coming.

First to arrive are Uncle Curtis and his wife, Aunt Beck, with their sons and grandchildren. They bring peaches, chicken pie, and gifts. Next come Uncle Dolphus and Aunt Birdie with their children, grandchildren, and gifts. Uncle Percy and Aunt Nanny, whose two children have died in infancy, arrive with gifts. All talk excitedly about seeing Jack.

Uncle Noah Webster arrives with his new wife, Aunt Cleo. Gloria appears, and most of the guests compliment her beauty. Mr. Renfro's "old maid sister," Lexie, arrives.

Uncle Percy begins to tell the story of how Jack ended up in prison: One morning, Ella Fay went into Curly Stovall's store to buy some candy. Curly teases her about the fact that her family owes him money but is too poor to pay, and to prove him wrong, Ella Fay produces a gold ring she has taken from the family Bible to show off at school. (The ring belonged to her grandmother, who had drowned long ago.) Curly grabs the ring and refuses to return it. When Jack hears of this, he goes to the store, fights with Curly, and takes Curly's safe, into which Curly had put the ring. The safe comes open while Jack carries it home, and all the contents□including the ring but very little money□are lost. Curly presses charges against Jack for aggravated assault, and Jack is sentenced to the state penitentiary. Jack's best friend, Aycock Comfort, who came to Jack's aid during the fight, is also jailed.

The story of Jack's courtship of Gloria is also told. Jack was taken to the penitentiary immediately after his wedding.

During the telling of the story, Jack and Gloria's fourteen-month-old daughter, Lady May, makes her appearance.

Jack arrives and is greeted with joy. He meets his daughter for the first time. Soon after, Uncle Homer and Auntie Fay arrive, and Homer tells Jack that the car Jack just lifted out of a ditch belongs to Judge Moody, the same judge who sentenced him to prison. Homer heard about this at the ice-house, where he stopped to buy ice for the reunion. Apparently the man who caused the judge to veer into a ditch recognized both Judge

Moody and Jack, and has spread the word. Everyone, including Jack, is outraged that Jack has unknowingly helped the judge, whom they despise, and Jack vows to find the man and put his car back into a ditch. Although everyone is enthusiastic about the idea, Gloria insists that only she and Lady May will accompany Jack on his errand.

Part Two

On their way to find Judge Moody in his car, Jack and Gloria run into Brother Bethune, the Baptist preacher who will officiate at the reunion. Brother Bethune tells Jack that he saw Judge Moody recently and knows that the judge will be coming by them soon. Jack and Gloria wait for their opportunity to force the judge's car into a ditch. They are at the top of Lovers' Leap, a high hill with a sharp drop-off known as Banner Top. The road on which the judge will be driving is below them.

At the last minute, the plan goes awry. Gloria slips at the top of the hill and falls all the way down. Jack, holding the baby, tries to help her and also falls. They land on opposite sides of the road; the baby gets away from them and into the road just as the judge's car is bearing down. Gloria throws herself on the baby at the last second, and the judge is forced to drive his car, a Buick, up Banner Top. It stops just short of going over the edge.

The judge and his wife jump out of the car, and Aycock Comfort, who has come along, jumps into the backseat for fun. Jack discovers that the car, still running, is balanced precariously on a wooden sign stuck into the ground. If Aycock moves, it will plummet off the cliff.

Jack is now eager to help the judge, for he has saved Gloria and Lady May. All efforts to find a way to get the Buick down safely fail, however, and passersby are unable or unwilling to help. (Uncle Homer passes by, having left the reunion to campaign for justice of the peace.) One of the passing vehicles is a busload of teachers who are bound for the home of Miss Julia Mortimer, a retired teacher who has died that morning. Gloria is very upset to hear this, as Miss Mortimer was her benefactor. Gloria is an orphan, and Miss Mortimer took her in and helped her get an education.

Part Three

Jack, Gloria, and Lady May return to the reunion, leaving Aycock in the car. Judge and Mrs. Moody go along, as they have nowhere else to go. Brother Bethune has arrived, as has Uncle Nathan. Jack assures the family that Judge Moody has saved Gloria and Lady May and should be treated kindly.

Amid various family stories, the judge is made aware of who Jack is. At first, he does not remember Jack, but when given enough details of the trial, the judge remembers. Jack also tells everyone that he escaped from prison one day before his scheduled release to make the reunion and that he rode most of the way holding onto the spare

tire on the back of the judge's car. Mrs. Moody has to point out to her husband that it was Jack who helped them out of a ditch earlier that day.

Brother Bethune recounts some family history, says grace, and everyone eats dinner. Granny opens her presents.

Among the stories told is how Ellen and Euclid Beecham, the parents of Miss Beulah and her brothers, drowned when their children were young. Their deaths appear to be suicide, but the family members prefer to leave this ambiguous.

Part Four

Willy Trimble, a neighbor, arrives with more details about the death of Miss Julia Mortimer. Willy found her fallen down in the road that morning and took her home, where she died. This leads the family members to reminisce about Miss Mortimer, though unkindly. They all resent her efforts to teach them. Most spiteful of all is Miss Lexie, who had been living with Miss Mortimer and taking care of her.

Willy also brings a book he found on Miss Mortimer's bed. The judge discovers that she has written her will in the book and that it demands that all her former students attend her burial. The family is outraged by this.

Gloria reveals that Miss Mortimer warned her that if she married Jack their child would be handicapped. This implies that the teacher had reason to believe that Gloria and Jack were related. The aunts begin to ponder who could have been Gloria's parents. They soon conclude, based on bits of hearsay and circumstantial evidence, that Sam Dale Beecham, the beloved youngest brother of Miss Beulah, who died during World War I, was Gloria's father. They are thrilled about this, as it makes Gloria truly one of the family□by blood as well as by marriage.

They all return to talking unflatteringly about Miss Mortimer; they are angry that she warned Gloria against marrying Jack. Miss Lexie talks at length about her senility. The judge then reveals that he came to Banner today because he had received a letter from Miss Mortimer, his old friend, asking him to come. He reads the letter, hoping that the family will see in it what a noble spirit the teacher had, but they do not.

Part Five

The talk returns to Gloria's parentage, and the judge points out that they have no real proof that Sam Dale was her father. He also points out that, if he was, Jack and Gloria are cousins, and their marriage is illegal in Mississippi. This causes much distress.

Uncle Homer returns to the reunion. He has been at Miss Mortimer's wake and reports that there are many, many people there, some from quite far away. It is clear that not everyone shares the family's low opinion of her.

Uncle Nathan reveals a story about his past that only Granny and Miss Beulah have known. Years ago, he killed a man named Dearman. This is why Nathan is constantly on the move and allows himself no comfort; he is doing penance for his crime. It is implied that Nathan killed Dearman because Dearman had impregnated Sam Dale's girlfriend. This means that Dearman, not Sam Dale, was Gloria's father, and therefore Jack and Gloria are not cousins.

Everyone except Uncle Nathan, Miss Lexie, and the Moodys leaves the reunion to go home. The rest go to bed.

Part Six

The next morning, in the rain and with much trouble, Jack and the judge finally get the judge's car off Banner Top. Aycock jumps out of the car just before it plunges over the edge.

Much to Jack's consternation, Ella Fay reveals that she and Curly□the very man who caused Jack to be sent to jail□are going to marry.

Everyone attends Miss Mortimer's burial at Banner Cemetery.

Jack and Gloria walk home from the cemetery. Jack is happy to be home with his family and ready to face the challenge of trying to support them on the farm.

Part 1 (through page 50)

Part 1 Summary (through page 50)

This first Sunday of August is no ordinary day in Banner, Mississippi, for it is Granny Vaughn's ninetieth birthday and before the day is out four generations of her family will arrive to celebrate that fact. Even as dawn heralds the arrival of the special day, the Renfro family - Miss Beulah Renfro, Granny Vaughn's only granddaughter; Beulah's daughters: Ella Fay, sixteen; Etoyle, nine; and Elvie, seven; her youngest son, Vaughn, age twelve, and husband, Ralph Renfro - sit down to breakfast.

At the breakfast table, the children begin discussing who of the family they believe will be the last to arrive at the reunion. Etoyle thinks that Uncle Homer and Auntie Fay will take that prize, based solely on the fact that everyone is relying on them to bring the ice, while Elvie decides on Brother Bethune. For her part, Ella Fay says Uncle Nathan. Vaughn decides that his elder brother, Jack, will be the last to make it to the reunion. Miss Beulah does not take kindly to this suggestion, Jack being the apple of her eye.

Just then, the first of the day's guests arrive: Uncle Curtis Beecham, next-to-oldest of Miss Beulah's brothers, and his wife Aunt Beck, in a ten-year-old Chevrolet sedan-cum-hauler laden with dogs, a crowd of children and a cargo of red and yellow peaches. Uncle Curtis notices the house's new roof immediately. Even as the dust settles, Uncle Dolphus and Aunt Birdie Beecham, of Harmony, arrive in an old pickup truck with a flat tire; it too, is packed with people. They too make mention of the new tin roof.

As the newcomers are saying their birthday wishes to Granny Vaughn, another old Ford pulls into the yard, carrying Uncle Percy Beecham and Aunt Nanny. Miss Beulah sends Vaughn on an errand to the cemetery: to deliver a churn of salvia to Mama and Papa Beecham's gravesite; dahlias to that of Grandpa Vaughn's; and milk-and-wine lilies to Sam Dale Beecham. Still, the parade of arriving family members continues, this time with Uncle Noah Webster and his new bride, Aunt Cleo pulling into the yard.

Aunt Cleo, knowing little of the family news, is surprised to hear that Jack Renfro, on whose return everyone at the reunion is waiting, has spent time in Parchman, the state penitentiary. At that moment, Gloria, the woman whom Jack married shortly before his incarceration comes out of the house. Vaughn returns from the cemetery laden with tables from the church dinner grounds and a passenger: Mr. Renfro's sister, Miss Lexie.

At Aunt Cleo's behest, the gathering begins to tell the story of how young Jack Renfro came to be sent to jail. Eighteen months previously, on the first day back at school, Ella Faye, wanting a wine ball, skips across the road to Curly Stovall's store. He, however, does not intend to give her anything and instead starts chasing her around the store, asking when her family intends to pay for the seed and feed he has supplied over the years. Ella Faye, having borrowed Granny's golden ring, shows it to Stovall who promptly snatches it up and refuses to give it back. Ella Faye leaves the store in tears.

Hearing the news, Jack rushes over the road from the school to the store and quickly gets involved in a fight with Stovall. Curly admits to having placed the ring in his safe, but will not open it. During the scuffle, Jack manages to bundle Stovall into a coffin on display in the store and ties it shut with clothesline. Jack then picks up the safe and carts it back to the school. The teacher sends him home with his lunch in one hand and his books saddled around his neck. En route, Jack drops the safe and by the time he gets it home, the safe door, having not been locked, has already opened and the safe's contents emptied somewhere along the road. During the telling of the story, it is revealed that Gloria is the schoolteacher, and that Curly Stovall's store used to belong to the Renfro family.

Aycock Comfort, a friend of Jack, and Ora, Curly's sister, discover Curly in the coffin and free him. At about the same time, Homer Champion, the current justice of the peace, arrives, having stopped there as part of his egg route. The family search for the ring, but are unable to find it. They do discover the mortgage to the store, however, and Vaughn takes it back to Curly.

The next morning, Homer Champion and Curly Stovall arrive at the Renfro home to arrest Jack. Jack, coming from the barn with two buckets of milk, throws one bucketful into Curly's face, but having set the other bucket down to do so, finds himself on the receiving end of a bucketful thrown by Homer. Then the two men hoist the safe and Jack into Homer's van and drive off. Jack is taken to a jail in Foxtown where he digs through the wall of the jail with a pie knife, but finds himself in the fire station next door and is incarcerated once more.

Jack is released on bail. Back home, his family asks what it is that he would like to do before the trial and Jack says that he would like to get married. During the telling of the story, as if on cue, Lady May Renfro, Gloria's fourteen-month old baby comes running out of the house and into the yard. Gloria snatches up the little girl and sits down amongst the family who continue telling the story. Grandpa Vaughn marries Gloria and Jack at Damascus Church on a Sunday evening that spring. However, later that same day, Curly comes to the Renfro homestead to tell Jack that he's expected to be in Ludlow courthouse at eight o'clock the next morning, and just to be sure, sees to it that Jack is locked in Ludlow jail overnight - on his wedding night. Aycock, of his own accord, goes along as well.

Part 1 Analysis (through page 50)

Set in northeast Mississippi in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, *Losing Battles* is the story of one family's struggles, their joys and tribulations, as told by the family members themselves at a reunion organized to celebrate the family matriarch's ninetieth birthday. Because of this, much of the book takes the form of dialogue, with each family tale woven together from the discourse of the various people at the reunion. Aunt Cleo, a Beecham family neophyte, acts as the catalyst for many of these stories, as her questions prompt the family to reveal past woes.

The tone of the book, despite the undercurrent of hardship, abject poverty and misfortune endured by those in Banner is kept light, mostly as a result of the eccentric characters, their quirky behavior and the inherent humor that pervades the stories they tell. The theme of familial piety is a prevalent one, and illustrates the benefits and drawbacks that such a close-knit relationship can bring. The family's devotion to one another is unwavering, but it is also their stubborn adherence to tradition that contributes to their downfall throughout the series of 'losing battles' that punctuate their lives. The new roof is symbolic of a new beginning. With Jack coming home after a year and a half away, the family is buoyed with hope for the future.

Miss Beulah, along with many at the reunion, Vaughn being the one exception, believes that Jack can do no wrong. In addition, as the eldest son it is in him that they have placed their hopes for the future and believe, almost blindly so, that he will be their savior. Though her faith in Jack is somewhat misplaced, Miss Beulah is kind and caring, perhaps more so than anyone else at the reunion. She continually flits between the porch and kitchen, feeding guests and preparing the food for the day while interjecting into the conversation whenever she feels the need.

Part 1 (page 50 through page 94)

Part 1 Summary (page 50 through page 94)

At the trial presided over by Judge Oscar Moody, Curly brings in both the coffin and safe as evidence, the latter of which by this time has a nesting robin in it. Jack corrects the judge, saying that the bird is, in fact, a purple martin. It makes a noise throughout the trial. The judge questions Jack, who admits to having done the things of which he is accused because, he says, Curly is 'aggravating.'

Judge Moody is incensed by the lack of respect shown for those in office (Curly is the marshal in Banner) and decides to make an example of Jack, charging him with aggravated battery and robbery and sentencing him to two years in the state penitentiary. Upon hearing the verdict, Aycock, a long-time friend of Jack, stands up and says that he is going too. Judge Moody enquires as to why and Aycock says because of the fact that he simply stood by and watched the whole incident doing nothing but helping himself to pickles. The Judge obliges him and hands down the same sentence.

The conversation then moves to Gloria, and it is made known that she was an orphan from the Ludlow Presbyterian Orphan Asylum who had been raised by Miss Julia Mortimer, a teacher in the Banner community before being forcibly retired and moved to nearby Alliance. As they chat all the things that Jack has missed during his incarceration are revealed: Curly has taken the truck which Jack had been building from spare parts, the Boone County Courthouse has burned down; and Grandpa Vaughn is dead, having died a year ago to the day. The family also mentions that Jack does not know about the baby.

At that moment, even as the family wonders when it is Jack will arrive, the prodigal son returns. All at once, the entire family is up, shaking hands, hugging and kissing him. At last, the family moves aside and allows Gloria through. She and Jack embrace, and then kiss. Jack compliments the new tin roof, and Miss Beulah is delighted he noticed. Seeing Granny, Jack goes to kiss her, and asks where Grandpa is. They tell him that Grandpa Vaughn is dead.

Gloria tells Jack to shave, and while he does so is introduced to Aunt Cleo, whom Uncle Noah Webster, it is revealed, had found by placing a free ad in the Market Bulletin for a settled white Christian lady. He lives with her in South Mississippi, a fact of which the family is none too pleased. When he is done, Gloria brings him a brand new shirt she had procured from Curly in exchange for a barrel full of black walnuts. Uncle Homer and Auntie Fay arrive.

Uncle Homer, having heard as much from Willy Trimble, asks Jack about the car Jack had helped push out of a ditch on his way home and asks if Jack recognized the driver. Jack says that the driver wore a handkerchief over his face and because of that, he had not recognized him. Uncle Homer then tells him that the man Jack helped was none

other than Judge Moody, the very person who sent Jack to Parchman in the first place. The family does not take kindly to this news, and are dismayed, even incredulous that Jack did not recognize Judge Moody. Uncle Homer, however, is angry simply because he believes that such news will not be well received by the voting public - he is running against Curly for the office of justice of the peace and the voting takes place that very Tuesday.

The reunion decide that Jack should go back and find Judge Moody and see to it that his day is ruined; to pay him back in kind, essentially. The men all stand and are ready to leave with Jack in search of Judge Moody, though they cannot decide whose car to use. Jack says that if his truck was running they could all use it, and it is then that the family tells him that Curly took it away. Jack is devastated but consoles himself with the fact that Curly is unlikely to get the engine working without him. Jack resolves to ride Dan, but the family tells him that they had to part with Jack's horse as well. They tell him Dan had to be shot and taken to the renderers.

At that moment, Gloria brings Lady May out from the house. She runs to Jack who stands on his head and he greets her by name. The family had thought it a surprise, but Gloria had written to Jack in Parchman and told him about the baby. By now, the men are all ready to leave, but Gloria tells them to sit back down and that this is nobody's but Jack's business and that she and the baby will be the only people to accompany him.

Part 1 Analysis (page 50 through page 94)

Throughout their story telling, the family's lack of concern, even distrust for those outside the family is made apparent. They fail to adhere to reason, continually protesting Jack's innocence and laying the blame on others instead, such as Judge Moody and Curly Stovall. "I don't believe any of that courtroom was too well pleased. They wasn't prepared for anything they hadn't come to hear." With this statement, Uncle Percy succinctly demonstrates the ignorance and close-minded thinking that prevails over both, the Beecham and Renfro families. Ironically, despite their own desperate situation, there exists a class system in Banner as well; the Renfros cling to an air of superiority, and look down on the Comforts, referring to them as failures. They are too proud to accept charity, and they look down on those who do.

On his return, Jack and Vaughn joust playfully with a pair of dried cornstalks as a metaphor for their relationship. With Jack away, Vaughn took on the role of the eldest son, doing Jack's chores and more. He even says to Jack, "I've got on your pants." However, despite his efforts, will never be held in the same regard as Jack and now that he is back, Vaughn will once again be relegated to the shadows.

Uncle Homer is concerned with little more than his standing in the community and holding onto his position as justice of the peace. The Moody's arrival is foreshadowed by Miss Beulah who threatens to give Judge Moody a piece of her mind should he show up at the reunion. Her unconditional kindness is illustrated, however, because when he does show up, she invites him to sit down and join them.

The family's skewed notion of justice is revealed once more at their reaction to Jack having helped Judge Moody. They think it only fair that he put the judge back into a ditch the way he was before Jack helped him.

Part 2 (page 94 through page 134)

Part 2 Summary (page 97 through page 134)

Jack, Gloria and Lady May set off away from the farm and across the field towards Banner Top. Along the way, on the well path, they run, Gloria first, followed by Jack and the baby. Gloria slides, and she then trips on a root and is thrown to her knees. Jack releases the baby and there, around a big old pine tree, the couple chases each other. They collapse into each other's arms, gasping for breath, but Gloria tells Jack that *this* is not what they came for and gets to her feet, snatching the baby and her satchel up as well. Jack draws water from the nearby well and brings it to Gloria and the baby in jelly glass.

Soon after, they set out once again along Banner Road and in no time at all find themselves at Banner Top. Jack, holding the baby, steps over the barbed-wire fence hung with 'Keep Off' signs and helps Gloria under it. Taking Lady May on his shoulders, Jack points out the old Bywy River, low and almost gone; then fingers the road towards Banner; and sees Grandpa's chimney. At the sight of it, he laments his grandfather's death. Standing there, the couple sees Brother Bethune making his way towards them. Near the top, he stumbles and falls, spilling everything but his gun. Gloria and Jack help him to his feet and hand his Bible, tuning fork and hat back to him. He does not recognize Jack immediately and, in fact, seems to have forgotten what it is exactly he has meant to be doing today.

Just then, Willy Trimble arrives in his mule-driven wagon, and offers Brother Bethune a lift. He declines and remarks that he is thirsty. Jack fetches him some water from the nearby well and upon drinking it, the taste of it reminds Brother Bethune of his day's purpose, and he recognizes Jack too. Brother Bethune notices a snake crawling over the ridge and, thinking it to be a rattler, shoots and kills it with his gun. Vaughn arrives in a wagon pulled by Bet, the family mule. He disposes of the snake and at Jack's orders takes Brother Bethune to the reunion. Before leaving, however, Brother Bethune tells Jack of how, a little earlier, a pleasure car had almost run him down in the road, spooked his mule, and then the driver asked him how to go about getting to Alliance without having to cross Banner Bridge.

Despite Brother Bethune having told Judge Moody to attempt to cross at Grinder's Mill, Jack is certain that given the state of that bridge, Judge Moody will still came this way. The young family then sits down and chats a while as Gloria breast-feeds Lady May. With the child asleep and wrapped in Jack's own shirt, Jack places her in a small bough of plum bushes and then chases after Gloria. He chases her around Banner Top. Sitting together on the 'jumping-off' place, Gloria reiterates her concern about Jack's intentions to put Judge Moody back into a ditch but he says that it is his duty to keep the family reunion going smoothly and to do that he must do this. He kisses her, and she bumps her head on a small sign with the words "Destruction Is At Hand" painted on it.

Aycock arrives at Banner Top, ostensibly having come to investigate the gunshot he had heard earlier. Jack invites Aycock to help him put Judge Moody into a ditch and he accepts, saying that it will be just like old times. Meanwhile, Etoyle had snuck up on them, scrambled into the tree on Banner Top and now cried out that she sees somebody coming. The plan quickly goes awry: Aycock changes his mind and tries to hold Jack back. Exasperated, Gloria tells Jack to hold the baby and she starts sliding down the bank towards the road, but ends up having to grab hold of a mailbox to stop her self. Jack, in turn, tries to get Aycock to hold the baby, but he refuses. With the baby clinging to his chest, Jack sets off down the bank after Gloria, he trips, lands in a bed of yellow cosmos and is kicked in the windpipe by Lady May, who gets up and runs into the road. Gloria and Jack spring up together and bump into one another knocking Jack off-balance. Gloria runs into the road and grabs the baby.

By now, the car is right on top of them, and seeing Gloria in the road, clutching her baby, swerves off the road and straight up Banner Top. The car comes to rest beyond the tree, teetering on the verge of the jumping-off place. Jack checks on his wife and daughter, and then he calls up to Judge Moody, asking if he is okay. Jack is surprised to see Maud Eva Moody emerge from the car as well; he did not even know the Judge was married.

The Moodys, scared and angry, come down into the road to see if everyone is okay. Jack believes he owes Judge Moody a debt of gratitude for saving his family. Meanwhile, during the commotion, Aycock had seated himself in the middle of the sedan's rear seat and calls down to the people below. Jack runs up to the car where he discovers that it is still in gear. Its wheels are off the ground and held in place only by the small hickory sign placed there earlier in the day by Jack's Uncle Nathan. Jack tells Aycock not to get out of the car, afraid that if he were to do so, it would simply roll off the edge of Banner Top.

Despite protests to the contrary, Jack offers to get behind the wheel of the car and get it back onto the road. Gloria goes up to him and convinces him not to try anything foolish. Back down below, Jack, Gloria and the Moodys discuss how they can bring the car back down again. Jack tells Etoyle to run back to the house and get help.

Soon after, the Broadwees arrive, but they have come only to mock and laugh, not help. Uncle Homer's van comes bouncing along the road, but he doesn't stop to offer any assistance, only throwing a small length of chain onto the ground as he continues on past. So too, a line of buggies, wagons and a Ford coupe, all belonging to Methodists coming back from church, continue on past.

Part 2 Analysis (page 97 through page 134)

Gloria, like Miss Beulah, is none too pleased about Jack's plan, but she accompanies him to Banner Top, as she enjoys the time they spend alone, away from the rest of the family. Whenever they are alone, Gloria asks Jack when they are going to move to

themselves, away from the family. She is the only one who sees that their lives would be different if the family did not continually smother them.

Her struggle for identity compels her to get away from Jack's family, as there she feels they are suffocated, and in a way, they lose their identity, because the family is viewed as a collective. Jack, however, is proud of his family ties and is hesitant to leave them. Jack's laudable qualities, most notably his loyalty, optimism and determination are displayed in this part of the book, but so too the fact that he is quick to rush in, without first considering the consequences of his actions. He is very eager to please the reunion by coming out to put Judge Moody into a ditch, and in the process, though inadvertently, puts his wife and daughter in harm's way. Later, Gloria must dissuade him from trying to back the Buick away from the ledge, a dangerous and foolhardy act, by himself.

Part 2 (page 134 through page 172)

Part 2 Summary (page 134 through page 172)

Elvie arrives in the school bus, having coasted all the way from home. Jack thanks her, and sends her back home, but he cannot get the bus to start. Etoyle, for her part, then arrives riding Bet bareback, laden with trace chains. Using Bet, Jack tries to pull the tree out from behind the car, but a loud bang - a blowout of one of the tires - scares Bet, and with the trace chains snapping in two, the mule sets off for home. At the same time, Elvie appears once more, along with Mr. Renfro. Jack explains the situation to his father, who is intent on removing the tree with a charge of dynamite. The Moodys summarily quash this idea. Mr. Renfro tells Jack it is dinnertime and with that begs his leave.

When the second tire blows, Judge Moody once again asks about his options: Curly Stovall has oxen as well as Jack's truck, but he's out fishing; all the nearby stores are closed for the day and the icehouse, the only thing that may be open, has no phone. With no other option, Judge Moody sets off to find help.

With Mr. Moody having already left, a cloud of red dust signals the arrival of yet another helper. Though before it arrives, Gloria tells Jack that Curly Stovall has managed to get Jack's truck in working order - wary of his reaction, Gloria had left that bit of news to the very last moment, for even as she spoke, that same truck broke into view. Mrs. Moody flags it down.

Curly, thinking that Mrs. Moody had driven the car up there on purpose, threatens to drag it down, but when Mrs. Moody explains that, that's the very thing she wants he says he'll have to charge her a dollar to do it. When Curly notices Aycock Comfort in the Buick, he becomes suspicious, thinking that Jack has orchestrated the entire scene solely for Curly's benefit. He adds another dollar to the price, but then tells Mrs. Moody that he does not do business on a Sunday because it is not Christian to do so.

Jack tries to commandeer the truck, but Curly is ready for him and stops him. Jack tells him that the truck is rightfully his, but Curly responds by telling Jack that Mr. Renfro gave the truck to him to pay for the new tin roof. Curly leaves for his fish fry, and says that he will return in the morning to help. At the same time, Judge Moody returns, having been brought back by Willy Trimble. Judge Moody had not found any help before being picked up, exhausted and returned to Banner Top.

As they stand and deliberate, a short blue church bus arrives, packed full of teachers from the Consolidated School System of Boone County, en route to Alliance where earlier in the day Miss Julia Mortimer had died. The teachers have come to pick up Gloria, a teacher herself before she married Jack. Gloria is shocked by the news, and tearfully refuses to go with the women, saying she would not leave her baby. Lady May, meanwhile, has made her way back up Banner Top, and she is now perched in a small

peephole facing those gathered at the bottom. Jack scrambles up the bank and grabs Lady May before she can fall. The busload of teachers sets off on their way without Gloria, led by Miss Pet Hanks.

With no clear means to free the car and with the day dragging on, Jack invites the Moodys back to the reunion, but before they set out he asks the Judge if he hasn't perhaps seen Jack somewhere before. Judge Moody recognizes him as the Good Samaritan that helped them earlier in the day, but Jack suggests he think back farther than that. Before the judge can reply Jack introduces himself, the Judge remembers the screeching bird in court, but cannot recall the case itself. Jack asks Willy Trimble - the very man who caused Judge Moody to go into the ditch that morning by turning across the road in front of the Moody's car - to take Judge Moody and his wife to the reunion in his wagon. Although none too pleased about it, Mrs. Moody is about to climb onto the wagon when she spots a new pine coffin resting in the back, then refuses and tells Willy to continue on his way without them. As Willy leaves, Vaughn arrives, and is told by Jack to take the Moody's up to the house in the wagon and that he, Gloria and the baby will follow behind shortly.

Before setting out, Jack draws water from the well for the three of them and promises Gloria that before the day is out he will take her to say her goodbyes to Miss Julia Mortimer. Gloria, however, says that she has already said her goodbyes and does not want to go back and tells Jack that Miss Julia Mortimer did not want her to marry him.

Part 2 Analysis (page 134 through page 172)

Unaffiliated as they are with the Banner community, it is through the Moodys that the reader is furnished with a different, if not altogether objective view of the Beechams and Renfros and other eccentric denizens of Banner. Themselves both comparatively highly educated, Judge and Mrs. Moody stand in stark contrast to the poorly schooled denizens of Banner and on multiple occasions react indignantly, even with contempt, to the actions or comments of others.

Moreover, they display bourgeois traits, especially Mrs. Moody, who is concerned with the appearance of her car, as well as that of herself and Mr. Moody and is appalled by the state of many of the things that are dear to Jack and the others, such as Curly's truck and the school bus, for instance. At one point frustrated by Curly Stovall, she says, "Do you know who I am?" as though expecting to be treated better as a result of her husband's station in life.

Though she tries to always look ahead to the future, Gloria remains mired in her past, unable to escape it and is haunted by Miss Mortimer's words to her. Perhaps this is partly the reason why she continually hounds Jack about moving away with her.

Part 3 (page 175 through page 223)

Part 3 Summary (page 175 through page 223)

As the family prepares to sit down to dinner, Miss Beulah tells Elvie to fetch the Renfro Bible for Brother Bethune, and has Curtis and Dolphus carry Granny Vaughn, rocker and all, to her place at the head of the top table. When everyone has taken a seat (Uncle Nathan stands behind Granny, where he would stay for the duration of the meal), Brother Bethune stands, Bible in hand, to deliver the blessing. In addition, even as Brother Bethune speaks, the family starts to eat and chat amongst themselves.

Vaughn returns in the wagon with Etoyle and the Moodys, and seeing them, Miss Beulah, walks over to meet them, heaped-up platter still in her hands. She is curt, but tells them to join the reunion. Mr. Renfro offers up his chair to Mrs. Moody and takes a seat on top of a keg next to Judge Moody, who has been given a school chair to sit in. Ella Fay, with Etoyle and Elvie close behind, carries Granny's birthday cake, adorned with twelve candles, to the table. Granny Vaughn blows out the candles by herself. As the cakes are eaten, Jack, Gloria and Lady May arrive, and once more Jack is kissed, hugged and slapped on the back as he makes his way past the family to his seat. As he does so, Jack compliments Uncle Nathan for the good strong sign that he placed on Banner Top.

Brother Bethune continues his sermon, and everyone bemoans Mississippi's and it is people's fortunes, the drought and the poor crop. Their hopes, however, lie squarely with Jack, whom they think will pull them out of their misery. During the meal, it comes to light that Jack was not due back until the following day; he escaped in order to be back in time for the reunion. He rode a horse out of the prison, with Aycock close behind, traded clothes for those on a clothesline and then hitched rides with various people to get home. He was riding on Judge Moody's spare when they all went into the ditch.

The conversation moves on, and the story behind Jack's truck is revealed: Ears Broadwee, having secured work with the Coca-Cola company had been delivering Coca-Cola to Curly's store when a train, the Nashville Rocket, slammed into the delivery truck, destroying it. Ears Broadwee was not in the truck as he had been chatting to Curly at the time. Jack hauled the parts back to the farm piece by piece and re-built the truck, but Curly held onto the engine and would only trade it if Jack convinced Gloria, whom Jack was courting at that stage, to go fishing with him. The two of them got into a fight. Gloria tells the reunion that Curly has managed to get the truck working, and like Jack, they too are flabbergasted.

Brother Bethune says, on behalf of the reunion, that they are going to forgive Judge Moody. Jack is surprised by this and reluctant to forgive the Judge, while the Judge is incredulous, wondering what it is exactly for which he is to be forgiven. He gets up and makes to leave, but is coaxed back into his seat. Jack explains to Judge Moody that his

family is trying to forgive him for sending Jack to the pen. Brother Bethune takes Judge Moody by the arm and tries to introduce him to Granny Vaughn, but she will have none of it. Jack says that he owes Judge Moody a debt of gratitude for not killing his wife and child, but he will not forgive him for sending him to prison. Finally, Brother Bethune concludes his blessing amidst polite cheers from the family and calls for him to sit down.

Aunt Birdie enquires as to why Judge Moody is in Banner, and he explains that his presence has nothing to do with Jack, but that he was, in fact, on an errand of his own. This leads to Miss Beulah telling the story of how her parents, Euclid and Ellen Beecham died when their horse-drawn bugging plunged through a hole in the bridge into the Bywy River, which at that time was running high. It turns out Ella Fay had lost Ellen Beecham's ring to Curly.

Aunt Cleo notices Uncle Nathan's hand and asks whether it is real or not. He confirms that his right-hand is indeed a prosthetic. Granny babbles and says that she has just been to wake Sam Dale, who, it is revealed, has been dead a number of years. Sam Dale, they say, was the closest thing to Jack Renfro; all the girls were 'sweet' on him. Just then, Miss Beulah calls the children to give Granny her presents: a bag of red-hot-poker seed, a teacup and saucer, a can of talcum powder, a speckled puppy, a bottle of peppers in vinegar, a brown china owl with eyes wired to flash on and off and a large eight-foot-square quilt in the pattern of "The Delectable Mountains." The chapter ends as the family, led by Miss Beulah, break into song.

Part 3 Analysis (page 175 through page 223)

Again, the ignorance and stubbornness of the family is displayed when Miss Beulah insists that Brother Bethune be brought the family bible, reasoning that she does not trust his to have everything it needs in it. Jack's admission that he had escaped from prison only a day before he was due to be released demonstrates, unequivocally, his loyalty to the family, but so too the foolish streak that he cannot seem to keep in check. . The Beechams and Renfros believe that there is nothing more important than family, and cannot understand why others (the law, for instance) do not see things their way.

Sewing imagery is found throughout the text. The quilt given to Granny Vaughn, for instance, is made by the aunts and female cousins of the family, much in the same manner as the varied stories of Losing Battles are patched together by the family members who tell them. In this way, the novel itself represents a quilt, sewn together by a number of disparate narratives that, when viewed separately do not amount to much, but ultimately form a cohesive and beautiful whole.

Part 4 (page 223 through page 277)

Part 4 Summary (page 227 through page 277)

Jack, carrying a syrup bucket stuffed with food for Aycock, leaves the reunion and promises to return once he has told Aycock's mother where her son is so that she does not worry. Not long after, Willy Trimble arrives at the reunion, bringing news about the death of Miss Julia Mortimer; she had made it down to the road where she fell, and that is where Willy Trimble found her. When asked why it is exactly he has come to the reunion, Willy replies that he has already been to Alliance, but was run off by a crowd of people in Miss Julia Mortimer's yard. He had brought her a coffin as a present to thank her for everything she'd taught him as a boy, but they'd already procured one down in Gilfoy for her.

Willy offers to take Gloria to the house, hoping that she will be able to get him in, but the family refuse, saying that Gloria belongs with them, despite having just a moment earlier teased her by telling her to go. They then begin to reminisce about Miss Julia Mortimer, for she had taught almost every single person at the reunion at one time or another. Instead of the regular five months a year, she had insisted on trying to give the children a proper education, starting school in August instead of November and then calling them back in spring after the planting was done.

They remember a time when, even during a cyclone, Miss Mortimer insisted they stay inside the school building and carried on teaching until at last the roof was blown away and they had to take shelter at the sides of the room. It was then that the school chair Judge Moody is sitting in was delivered to the Renfro farm. With the storm over, Miss Mortimer insisted that the first new roof built was the schoolhouse's so as not to lose a day of school. Miss Lexie had, in recent years, been living with and caring for Miss Mortimer, but on this day, she left to come to the reunion.

In order to keep Banner School open, Miss Mortimer kept cows, and cultivated fruit bushes, vegetables and plants for sale, which she did mostly through the mail. At one time, she had sent many of the people at the reunion a peach tree, but most did not bother planting it or did and simply let it wither. Gloria, at the time, helped her with the chores and Miss Mortimer sent her to Alliance High School where she got a diploma with ordinary children, before going to Normal to become a teacher. Miss Mortimer wanted Gloria to take after her and to have a teacher's life.

Gloria tells the women-folk about the last time she saw Miss Mortimer, when she went to tell her that she was marrying Jack. Miss Mortimer thought it was a very un-teacherlike thing to do and when Gloria remarked that she wanted to give all her teaching to one, Miss Mortimer laughed at her. Gloria asked for three reasons why she shouldn't get married and Miss Mortimer replied that Gloria was young and ignorant, that she didn't yet understand her own feelings and that she needed to give a little consideration to the family she was marrying into. Then she asked her rhetorically if she

even knew who she really was. She then told Gloria to find out who she really was before getting married.

Suddenly, Granny Vaughn speaks, and says that a woman by the name of Rachel Sojourner, now deceased, is Gloria's mother. Despite Gloria's protests, the family takes Granny's word as fact. As a baby, Gloria was placed, in a shoebox, on the porch of the home demonstration agent of Boone County who promptly took her to Ludlow orphanage. Mr. Renfro recalls a dewberry picker race between Rachel and Sam Dale Beecham, both of whom claimed to be the fastest in the world. The picked all day and yet, matching each other bucket for bucket, it ended in a tie.

Gloria stands in defiance, but this only allows Aunt Nanny to notice the rip in the dress from earlier in the day when Gloria and Lady May were almost run over by the Moodys. The women all fuss over her dress and its material and then just as suddenly as she revealed the first piece of information, Granny announces that Sam Dale Beecham was going to marry Rachel. Holding Sam Dale in much the same regard as Jack, the family refuses to believe that he would get a girl pregnant and run off.

Granny calls for her Bible, and in a flash, Elvie returns with it. Inside is, among other things, a picture of Sam Dale in soldier's uniform and on the back is a message addressed to Rachel and signed 'Sincerely, your husband Sam Dale Beecham.' The postcard was never sent, but Granny received it, along with Sam Dale's body and his other belongings. Everyone is shocked, but Gloria remains defiant, vehemently denying that he is her father. Miss Beulah embraces Gloria, happy to know that she is of the same blood. Gloria bursts into tears. Everybody else cheers. Gloria says that she does not want to be a Beecham.

Laughing, the various aunts pull Gloria into the yard and to the ground, trying to get her to say, "Beecham" and force-feeding her watermelon. Gloria screams for Jack. They continue shoving watermelon into her mouth and telling her to admit she is a Beecham. Eventually, they give up. Miss Beulah walks over to Gloria and helps her to her feet. Armed with needle and thread, Miss Lexie comes over to Gloria and begins to trim her dress and while doing so recalls the time when Miss Julia Mortimer first came to Banner; she had stayed with Granny Vaughn's family, just as Gloria did when she came to Banner. Miss Lexie aspired to be a teacher but she could not control the children, a fact she blames on having to come after Miss Mortimer, whose shoes no one could fill. Consequently, she took to caring for the sick instead and in time began to look after Miss Mortimer.

Part 4 Analysis (page 227 through page 277)

Gloria, thus far, is portrayed as something of an outsider, initially she even sits apart from the rest of the family as they wait upon Jack's return. Throughout the novel, she struggles with her identity. As a child, she was an orphan, and like many orphans, she has a romanticized view of her lineage. She believes herself to be better than she believes the people of Banner, and when it becomes known that she may actually have

been born in Banner, she is devastated and vehemently denies being a Beecham, even going so far as to say that she does not *want* to be one. At the news that Sam Dale is the father, Miss Beulah throws her arms around Gloria. For in Gloria's existence is her redemption.

While their teasing and snide remarks had thus far remained mostly benign, the aunt's aggression manifests itself in a very real way in this scene. Though it is done supposedly in good humor, the act of dragging Gloria to the ground and force-feeding her watermelon is their attempt to subjugate Gloria, who has thus far staunchly opposed many of the ideals and conventions held by the family. It is a singularly savage scene, as the women, under the auspices of welcoming her into the family, shove watermelon down her throat while trying to force her to admit to being a Beecham - "Let's make her say Beecham! *We* did!" - as though it were some kind of rite of passage.

Miss Mortimer is revealed in a rather unfavorable light by the family, who mostly consider her a bane, but in actuality, all she ever wanted to do was give the children of Banner a proper education and to that end single-handedly kept the school open. The reunion takes Granny's word as fact, despite the old woman proving herself quite senile. They choose to believe what they want instead of listening to reason or fact.

Part 4 (page 277 through page 308)

Part 4 Summary (page 277 through page 308)

Still busying herself with Gloria's dress, Miss Lexie continues recounting Miss Mortimer's final years. At last, Willy Trimble stands and produces a small blue-backed book he had taken from the house after having carried Miss Mortimer back to it that morning; it's Miss Mortimer's will. Upon hearing that, Judge Moody takes possession of the book, and looking through it, finds it addressed to him. Ostensibly, he is an old friend of Miss Mortimer's. Judge Moody informs the reunion that according to Miss Mortimer's will, everyone (that is, everyone she ever taught) is expected to be at her funeral and that she is to be buried underneath the mountain stone that is the doorstep of Banner School.

The family does not take too kindly to being told what to do and each has something to say about Miss Julia Mortimer, none of it too kind. Auntie Fay says she knew about Miss Mortimer's dying wish, her husband Homer having been on the board of supervisors when they received a letter from Miss Mortimer to that effect. The board, however, had voted unanimously not to allow it. Abruptly, Judge Moody stands, pulls an envelope from his breast pocket and begins to read. It is a letter from Miss Mortimer. In it, she tells of her fight against ignorance in Banner, and that, to her mind, she lost every battle with the children. She concludes the letter by asking the judge to come to Alliance soon, because she says she has a story to tell him□ that leads to a child.

Miss Beulah supposes that Judge Moody is kin to Miss Mortimer and is affronted that he would sit there quietly while they disparage her. Judge Moody says that he is not kin to her but that there are other ties and Uncle Noah Webster asks if he wasn't married to her. She, Judge Moody reveals, simply coached him as a child. Her house was across from hers in Ludlow and aiming for college one summer, he was coached by her in rhetoric. Over the years, he handled various matters for her: inheritance, taxes and the selling of her house in Ludlow. The letters he wrote to her, however, were thrown into the pigpen by Miss Lexie.

Judge Moody had, had the letter for the better part of a month and when, on this day, he received an envelope, one of his own that had been used over again, with nothing inside but a map to Alliance that she had scrawled, he decided to come at last. He reveals that because of her, he never moved away from Ludlow, and that he never fully forgave her for it. A somber mood prevails over the reunion, and just then, Granny rises from her chair and starts to sing, Uncle Curtis lifts her onto the table where she begins to dance. She begins to walk off the table, and returning just then, Jack rushes to catch her, she is tearful and comments that he's not Sam Dale. Then, her gaze fixed on him, she asks who he is. He replies that he is Jack Jordan Renfro, "getting himself back home."

Part 4 Analysis (page 277 through page 308)

Miss Lexie shows herself to be a singularly uncaring woman, and in the process proving herself to be quite unfit for her occupation as a nurse. She deprives Miss Julia Mortimer of writing implements, and throws any mail she receives into the pigpen. She locks the door to the house preventing Miss Mortimer from leaving and at one point even ties her to the bed. She does not even believe she is doing anything wrong, and portrays their relationship as a battle of wills, and that *she* was the one suffering while Miss Mortimer was simply ungrateful.

So too, throughout the reunion she has nary a kind word to say, her comments tinged with spite. When asked, she says that Miss Mortimer died of old age, but later at the funeral, Dr. Caruthers reveals that she died of neglect and starvation. She 'fixes' Gloria's dress with her still in it, manhandling the girl and dress in the process. When challenged by Miss Beulah about taking so long to do it, she replies that she takes pains with everything she does and wants her results to show it, but still does a poor job of it; Gloria's petticoat shows after she is finished. When finished, she takes the off-cut material for herself.

Granny Vaughn displays her first real bout of senility, wanting to saddle her horse and leave for home, and then asking for her presents when she had already opened them.

Miss Mortimer's dying wish, that she be buried underneath the entrance to the schoolhouse, is taken as an affront by the people at the reunion. They fail to see that her life revolved around the school and take it to mean that she is trying to order them around one last time. Judge Moody is wracked with guilt at having not come sooner. He, however unlikely it may seem, shares a common bond with the Renfros and Beechams: he has never forgiven Miss Mortimer, for it was his desire not to disappoint her that resulted in his staying in Ludlow, while the Renfros and Beechams will not forgive her for the 'torment' they suffered at her hands as children.

Part 5 (page 308 through page 368)

Part 5 Summary (page 311 through page 368)

Nightfall creeps upon the reunion almost without them noticing, and so everyone reluctantly moves back to the porch. Granny, in her chair, is carried by Jack to her place at the head of the steps. Gloria tells Jack of how Willy Trimble found Miss Mortimer, and of the relationship between Miss Mortimer and Judge Moody, and he says that he heard, he had simply been standing back for a time. She continues, telling him about how the women force-fed her watermelon and that everyone at the reunion believes her daddy to be Sam Dale Beecham and her mother Rachel Sojourner; which means that her and Jack are cousins. She is distraught, but Jack is pleased at the news.

Gloria reveals that Miss Mortimer had sent her a letter saying that if she intended to go through with the wedding, to first come see her, as there were things she still needed to know. When she did not come, Miss Mortimer sent a second letter telling her that the wedding would be scratched off the books and that Jack would have to go to prison. Moreover, she said that if she were to have a baby, it would likely be deaf and dumb.

Judge Moody tells them that if they are related then by a Mississippi law passed some ten years previously, Jack could be sent to jail for ten years or fined and that the marriage would be declared null and void. Many at the reunion see no problem with marrying a blood relation, and in fact are delighted to 'keep it in the family.' Miss Beulah remarks that she had earlier thought everything would turn out all right by having Beecham blood on both sides.

The judge suggests that they move to Alabama where cousins are freely allowed to marry and their offspring are recognized, but no-one will hear of it, least of all Jack. However, at this point, as Judge Moody points out, everything is hearsay, there is no concrete evidence to the fact. Finally, Miss Beulah reveals that Sam Dale Beecham could not be the father, because a piece of coal from the hearth struck him in the lap when he was a baby. Miss Beulah had been sent to fetch slippery elm, but instead of settling for the closest, she searched for the best. Granny and Grandpa Vaughn assumed she had dawdled along the way, and had blamed her ever since.

At last, Judge Moody stands and says that they should just leave it alone and that it would be best to assume that there was no prior knowledge between the partners and thus no crime. Miss Beulah, wanting to lighten the mood, sends Elvie to fetch a thin cardboard, nearly two feet long and seven or eight inches high; the only picture ever made of the whole family. Sam Dale, by racing the crank of the camera, had managed to get himself in at both ends of the picture. Aunt Nanny, pointing at a small blur in the picture asks if that is Rachel Sojourner. No one knows for sure. Miss Beulah orders Elvie to put the picture away.

At that moment, the light bulb in the ceiling rises up and then drops in short, jerky movements before going out. Vaughn comes running up the passage, having caught the culprit; a coon. Vaughn wants to keep it, but he is told to release it, which he does. Homer Champion returns and is not pleased to see the Moodys present at the reunion. He tells them that Miss Mortimer's house is filled with 'big-shots' from the surrounding country. The subject of where she will be buried comes up once more and Homer says that he secured her a plot in Banner Cemetery.

When Homer's rant is finished, Granny tells the gathering that Miss Julia Mortimer was, at a time, courted by a Mr. Dearman, the man, it is revealed, Mr. Renfro lost the store to. Angrily, Miss Beulah explains that Dearman built a sawmill and proceeded to cut down all the trees within forty miles of Banner and that by the end of it, many in Banner owed him money. As well as the store, Mr. Dearman took possession of Mr. Renfro's, which had, by his own admission, a bit of bad luck at just the right time to suit Dearman's needs, home.

Uncle Nathan admits to having killed Mr. Dearman with a stone to the head, and allowed a black sawmill worker to be hanged for the crime. It is to this reason his eremitic behavior is attributed. He takes off his prosthetic hand and shows everyone his stump. Granny, with her now customary interjection, says that she never said Sam Dale was the father, only that he was going to marry Rachel Sojourner. She adds then that she thought he was only doing it to 'get her out of a pickle.' Everyone is shocked. Nathan plays 'Let the Lower Lights Be Burning' on his cornet and Granny falls asleep. The girl cousins begin clearing off the tables and cleaning up while Uncle Nathan, using a hoe draped with coal oil-soaked rags, burns the caterpillar nets to finish the day for the children.

Miss Beulah then calls for the 'joining-of-hands' and the entire reunion work themselves into a circle on the expanded space of the porch. Once in a circle, they sing 'Blest Be the Tie', Brother Bethune gives the benediction and everyone begins to leave. Uncle Dolphus and Uncle Noah Webster shout, surprised by the deep white flower, star inside a star that had bloomed on the porch cactus. Mrs. Moody exclaims that it is a night-blooming cereus and that she had not seen one in years.

The guests depart, with only the Moodys and Miss Lexie, now homeless because of Miss Mortimer's passing, staying behind. Uncle Nathan remains behind, but he will not sleep in the house, instead choosing to pitch his tent in the yard. Granny, awake now, is brusque but melancholy as everyone leaves, begging them not to go. When they are gone, Jack carries her to bed and then he and Gloria sit down on a quilt on the floor. He admits to Gloria that he tried on multiple occasions to escape from Parchman, even trying for the previous year's reunion but asks that she not tell his mother, saying that it would break her heart. Later that night, with everyone sound asleep, Vaughn goes to fetch the school bus left at Banner Top. He, it appears, loves school and has even traded Curly for a geography book, which he treasures. It rains during the night, and a loud crack like thunder can be heard.

Part 5 Analysis (page 311 through page 368)

Judge Moody is, for the most part, an impartial observer at the reunion and the sole voice of reason. While the family's conclusions and decisions are clouded by emotion and prejudices, he insists on 'proper' evidence before coming to any kind of decision about Gloria's birth parents. In addition, while the family insinuates and jokes around they never directly insult anyone, while Judge Moody plainly calls Gloria an idiot.

The revelation that Uncle Nathan has committed murder reveals the depth of the dark secrets held by the family. Many in the family know of this, but have forgiven him and love him regardless. In this way, Welty displays the compassion and boundless love that exists in the family unit.

For most of the book, Vaughn remains in the background, quietly going about his business. He receives no praise for his efforts and is continually compared to Jack -- "Vaughn is not Jack, and never will be," says Miss Beulah at one point. A poignant statement because although she means that Vaughn will never measure up to Jack, she is in essence foreshadowing Vaughn's own success. He is not like Jack□ he is smarter.

Only through education will the family ever surmount the problems that plague them and escape from the downward spiral that has thus far characterized their lives. Vaughn, because of his intelligence, will likely be the family's savior in the years to come. His prized possession is a geography book, he is the best speller in school and he worships both the teacher and school. Similarly, he even knows where Parchman is, when the older aunts and uncles do not.

Part 6 (page 368 through page 436)

Part 6 Summary (page 371 through page 436)

The Moodys, carried in the wagon by Vaughn, have already left for Banner Top as the Renfros sit down to breakfast by lamplight. Mr. Renfro, it comes to light, had tried to dislodge the tree on Banner Top using dynamite during the night - that was the thunder-like sound heard during the night. The family, Mr. Renfro and Lady May excluded, make their way down to Banner Top, where they find the tree blown out of the ground, and hanging precariously over the jumping-off place; the Buick having been scorched and it's back window damaged in the blast.

Curly Stovall arrives in the truck along with his sister, Ora, who intends to write the incident up for *The Boone County Vindicator*. Curly backs the truck up Banner Top and Jack then attaches a length of rope to the Buick. As he does so, he rattles a series of cowbells that had been tied to the vehicle overnight. It is the Broadwees' work. As per the plan, Jack devised, on the count of three Aycock jumps clear from the Buick and as it rolls forward, Curly attempts to drag it back in the opposite direction. Curly stalls the engine however, and the Buick rolls over Banner Top, pulling the truck's back wheels into the hole where the tree had earlier stood. The Buick, hanging by the rope attached to Curly's truck is five or six feet from a small ledge below it. Underneath is the Bywy River, flowing low in this time of drought.

Jack grabs onto the rope, but is pulled headfirst toward the drop and calls for Gloria to hold onto him. Judge Moody grabs the rope and Mrs. Moody onto him. Miss Beulah latches onto Mrs. Moody. Miss Ora, Miss Lexie and Aycock do not help. Uncle Homer arrives in his truck, but is only concerned with the impression that Curly's presence will have on voters. Aycock watches as his guitar, which he left behind in the Buick, falls out. He walks to the ledge below, retrieves it and makes his way home.

Eventually, the rope snaps, sending Jack and Gloria plunging into the fallen tree and then down onto the ledge. The others tumble backwards to the ground. The Buick ends up on its nose on the ledge. Mr. Renfro's dynamite explodes for a second time, ostensibly because of its age, and sends Curly's truck up and out of the hole. It comes to a stop ten feet away in some plum bushes. The tree, too, gives way, and tumbles down below, almost out of sight. Then, Jack manhandles the car into a position ready to haul. Jack siphons some gas from Curly's truck, for which Curly demands four bits, for the Buick, which has, by this time, run out of gas. Mr. Moody manages to drive the Buick, its windshield streaked with cracks, headlights blinded, front bumper missing and covered in mud, back to the road.

Just then, Vaughn comes bouncing down the road in the school bus, en route to school. Jack convinces him to help tow the Buick and Curly's truck, which is now out of commission as well. Jack procures a rope from the nearby well, while Vaughn had brought along a length of rope and some trace chains with him. They set about knotting

the cars together, the school bus at the front, followed by the Buick and Curly's truck. Bet and Brother Bethune's mule appear as Jack whistles, and are hitched to the back of the line to act as brakes.

So, led by the school bus driven by Jack, with the Moodys and Miss Ora and Curly in the truck, and Vaughn riding Bet, the caravan sets off towards Banner School. En route to the school they pick up a number of school children; see Curly's and Homer's election posters and come upon various sites of Banner including Aycock's house, the Methodist and Baptist churches placed on opposite sides of a section of road; and the Banner water tank.

They unhitch the mules and the school bus and Jack drives Curly's truck (pushing the Buick from behind) across the road to the store. Judge Moody decides to use the telephone, remarking that it is better late than never. Arriving at school just then are the three Renfro sisters who had walked from home. Ella Fay runs across the road to the store and after a facetious remark from Curly, Jack punches him in the face twice. Ella Fay reveals an inch-long pearl-handed pocketknife given to her by Curly and hints that she and he may marry sometime soon.

Jack is punched by Curly and knocked out cold. Curly proceeds to cut off Jack's shirt-tail and hammers it to a cross-beam with other shirt-tails he had collected. A wrecker emblazoned with the words "Red's Got It" arrives in front of the store and to everyone's surprise, Mr. Comfort, Aycock Comfort's father, whom many in Banner believed to be dead, gets out of the truck. He reveals that he is working for old Red and that he has come to haul away Curly's truck, which Curly had traded for Foxtown votes.

When he wakes, Jack is dismayed to hear the truck has been towed. They replace the tires on the Buick and using a little bit of his spit, Jack gets the engine to turn over. Miss Mortimer's funeral procession moves slowly past and the Moodys, in the Buick, take their place at the end of the line. Jack and Gloria make their way to the cemetery on foot. Seeing Grandpa Vaughn's grave, Jack swears that he will buy him a proper tombstone someday. So too, they come across the graves of Sam Dale Beecham and of three infants, two belonged to Aunt Nanny and Uncle Percy, the only children they had ever had, and the other was Miss Beulah's last.

They join the assembled crowd around the grave hole. The pallbearers, of whom Judge Moody was one, carry the coffin draped with the Mississippi flag to the hole and the priest, whom no one in Banner knew begins to speak. No one from Banner understands a word he says. At last, the crowd breaks and people begin to move away, leaving Jack and Gloria alone. She remarks that this is the way she wishes it could always be - having Jack Renfro all to herself. She wants them to live in a house by themselves, away from the rest of the Renfro family. Walking back home, Jack spots Dan, the horse that he believed had been sold and killed. Jack laughs until tears appear on his cheeks, so glad is he to see it alive and remarks that he had rather it alive and belong to Curly than be sent to the renderers. Jack vows that he will come to get the horse from Curly when the time is right. He promises that someday he and Gloria will move out.

Part 6 Analysis (page 371 through page 436)

This scene is comical, almost to the point of being a farce. That Jack and Gloria are dragged down with the car, in spite of their efforts, can be interpreted as an indictment of their future together. No matter how hard they try, they may never escape Banner, and instead be pulled down with the rest of the family. Jack, true to his word, finally frees the Moody's car, but the result is considerably less effective than anyone would have hoped for. After the ordeal, the car is in terrible shape.

Jack and Gloria, by the end of the novel have both evolved. While it is questionable if they will ever escape the doldrums of Banner, together they draw strength from one another, helping and supporting each other. Jack gives Gloria the love and sense of belonging she yearns for, while Gloria is Jack's conscience and his moral compass. Throughout Losing Battles, the duality of the family structure is displayed. While the family is capable of dragging one another down, they are also a well of strength, offering support and seemingly unlimited forgiveness.

Similarly, their time in Banner has left the Moodys changed, especially Judge Moody, who, for his part, has come to like Jack, even calling him by his first name towards the end of the book. He also at one point takes the law into his own hands, absolving Gloria and Jack for having married one another, an act of contrition perhaps for his earlier harsh judgment that sent Jack to prison for eighteen months. He shakes hands with Jack, a gesture of friendship.

Jack's truck can be construed as a metaphor for the hardships of the family and that despite their best efforts, and noblest intentions, they will likely never have anything. A fact illustrated by Jack's inability to hold onto it - twice during the course of the novel, he loses the truck. The family, also, are unable to hold onto their meager possessions, Mr. Renfro has lost both his store and house in the past, and the overnight rain, so scarce at the time and a supposed blessing, has done just enough to spoil the hay.

Hope is the central theme of the closing pages of the book. The rain, an oft-used image representing strife and hardship, is finished and as Jack and Gloria make their way back to the homestead, the sun begins to shine. They even encounter Dan, whom Jack had thought killed. Even when it seems all their battles are lost, the small victories in their lives that mean the most.

Characters

Aunt Beck Beecham

Aunt Beck is married to Uncle Curtis Beecham. She is the nicest and most soft-spoken of all the aunts. She often interjects kind and reassuring comments when the other aunts are teasing or challenging someone.

Aunt Birdie Beecham

Aunt Birdie is married to Uncle Dolphus Beecham.

Aunt Cleo Beecham

Aunt Cleo is the newest member of the clan, having recently married Uncle Noah Webster Beecham. She is hearing many of the family's stories for the first time. She is confident, friendly, good-natured like her husband, and openly curious. She asks questions that keep the others' stories going.

Uncle Curtis Beecham

Curtis and the other Beecham uncles are Granny Vaughn's grandsons and Miss Beulah's brothers. Curtis is married to Aunt Beck.

Uncle Dolphus Beecham

Uncle Dolphus, another of Granny's grandsons, is married to Aunt Birdie.

Aunt Nanny Beecham

Aunt Nanny is married to Uncle Percy Beecham. When she arrives at the reunion, Welty writes that she "hauled herself up the steps as though she had been harnessed into her print dress along with six or seven watermelons."

Uncle Nathan Beecham

Uncle Nathan, the eldest grandson of Granny Vaughn, is the only bachelor and an oddball even among his colorful relatives. He is a self-styled itinerant evangelist who paints crude signs with religious messages and sticks them in the ground as he travels. He plants a sign on Banner Top, the local Lovers' Leap, just before Judge Moody's car

roars up the hill, and the car ends up balanced on the sign just short of plummeting off the cliff.

Unlike the rest of the Beechams, Nathan talks very little, and he never eats at the reunion. Near the end of the novel, it is revealed that Nathan, many years before, killed a man to avenge a wrong done to his brother, Sam Dale, and then allowed authorities to hang another man for the crime. His solitary, nomadic lifestyle is his way of doing penance.

Uncle Noah Webster Beecham

Uncle Noah Webster, another of Granny's grandsons, has recently married Aunt Cleo. He is jovial and affectionate.

Uncle Percy Beecham

Uncle Percy, another of Granny's grandsons, is married to Aunt Nanny. Percy has a "weak and ragged" voice, a definite disadvantage in a family of storytellers. He tells his share of tales, however.

Sam Dale Beecham

Sam Dale is long deceased at the time of the story. He was the youngest of Granny's grandsons and died as a soldier during World War I, though not in combat. He appears in the family stories the others tell at the reunion.

Brother Bethune

Brother Bethune is an elderly Baptist preacher who comes to the reunion to fill the role that had previously been filled by Grandpa Vaughn, who has died since the last reunion. He recounts the family history and says the blessing before the meal. Brother Bethune is forgetful and senile, and the aunts do not hesitate to say aloud that he can't fill Grandpa Vaughn's shoes.

Auntie Fay Champion

Auntie Fay, Ralph Renfro's sister, is married to Homer Champion.

Homer Champion

Homer is married to Auntie Fay. At the time of the reunion, he is campaigning against Curly Stovall for justice of the peace. Like Curly, he will do anything to get votes. He spends the day out campaigning□primarily at Miss Julia Mortimer's wake□rather than

with his family at the reunion. Because he puts his own political success above family loyalty, the family does not like him.

Aycock Comfort

Aycock Comfort is Jack's close friend. On the day that Jack fought with Curly Stovall and stole his safe, Aycock involved himself in his friend's dispute enough to be sentenced to prison along with Jack. On the day of the reunion, Aycock escapes along with Jack. After Mrs. Moody's car has climbed Banner Top, Aycock jumps into the back seat for fun before the seriousness of the situation is discovered. When the others realize that the car is delicately balanced on one of Nathan's signs, Aycock has to spend the night in the car to maintain the balance and keep the car from plummeting.

Mrs. Maud Eva Moody

Mrs. Moody is Judge Moody's wife. She is riding with him when he is forced to drive their car□actually, it is her car□up Banner Top to avoid hitting Gloria and Lady May.

Judge Oscar Moody

Judge Moody is the judge who sentenced Jack to prison after his trial in connection with fighting with Curly Stovall and stealing his safe. As a result, the entire extended family despises the judge.

Judge Moody drives from the county seat, Ludlow, to Banner on the day of the reunion while Jack and Aycock manage to stow away on the back of his car undetected. When the judge runs his car into a ditch, Jack helps him get it out, without realizing who he is. When Jack discovers the judge's identity, he vows to track down the judge and put his car back into a ditch. The plan goes awry, however; the car the judge is driving ends up stuck at the crest of Banner Top, and the judge and his wife end up at the reunion.

Miss Julia Mortimer

Miss Julia was the local teacher in Banner for many years and taught most of the family members at the reunion. She retired some years before the reunion takes place, and Miss Lexie Renfro has been living with her and taking care of her. She dies on the morning of the reunion, and everyone attends her burial the next day.

Miss Beulah Renfro

Miss Beulah is Granny's granddaughter and the sister of Nathan, Curtis, Dolphus, Percy, Noah Webster, and the deceased Sam Dale. She is married to Ralph Renfro and is the mother of Jack, Ella Fay, Etoyle, Elvie, and Vaughn.

Miss Beulah and her family live with Granny on her farm. Miss Beulah loves her brood, especially Jack. She is rather shrill, rude, and cranky, especially on the subject of anyone who, in her eyes, has mistreated a member of her family. During the reunion, she, as hostess, continually bustles in and out of the kitchen and around the tables.

Ella Fay Renfro

Ella Fay is the eldest daughter of Miss Beulah and Ralph Renfro. She is sixteen at the time of the reunion and is described as "the only plump one" of the girls. Her tussle with Curly Stovall over a family heirloom leads to the fight that lands her older brother, Jack, in jail. Jack is dismayed at the end of the novel to find out that Ella Fay and Curly plan to marry.

Elvie Renfro

Elvie is the youngest daughter of Miss Beulah and Ralph Renfro. She is seven at the time of the reunion and something of a firecracker. When everyone is trying to figure out how to get Mrs. Moody's car off Banner Top, she runs home, jump-starts the old school bus that sits in the family's yard, and drives it to the site.

Etoyle Renfro

Etoyle is the middle daughter of Miss Beulah and Ralph. She is nine at the time of the reunion. A fun-loving tomboy, Etoyle often watches scenes unfold from a perch in a tree.

Gloria Renfro

Gloria is Jack's wife and Lady May's mother. An orphan, Gloria came to Banner as a novice schoolteacher about two years before the reunion. The families of the town drew straws to see which one would board Gloria, and the Renfros drew the short straw. Jack fell in love with Gloria and courted her, and the two were married the day Jack went off to prison.

Gloria is a quiet, private person, which makes her both an enigma and an aggravation to the Beecham Renfro clan. For her part, she longs for the day when she and Jack can have their own home, away from his family, whom she sees as his biggest problem in life. She tells Jack, "Oh, if we just had a little house to ourselves, no bigger than our reach. . . . And nobody would ever find us! But everybody finds us."

Jack Renfro

Jack, nineteen, is the eldest son of Miss Beulah and Ralph Renfro, and he is the golden boy of the family. On the day of the reunion, it is his arrival that everyone eagerly awaits.

The family hasn't seen Jack since he was put in prison—unjustly, in the opinion of all—a year and a half before.

Jack is a goodnatured, compassionate, hardworking but mischievous young man who loves his family and his wife. He was sent to prison for fighting with Curly Stovall and stealing his safe after Curly took a family heirloom (their mother's wedding ring) from his sister Ella Fay. Jack only wanted to get back the ring, and Curly knew this but pressed charges anyway.

Jack is guided by his own sense of what is right, and by the needs and wishes of his family, rather than by the law. He is honest to a fault; when Judge Moody asks him in court if he did all he is accused of doing, Jack answers, "Yes sir, and a little bit more."

Because Jack's father, Ralph Renfro, is handicapped from an injury, the family depends on Jack to make the farm productive. The time he spends in prison causes them real hardship, and when he returns, all are counting on him to bring better times.

Lady May Renfro

Lady May is Gloria and Jack's daughter. She is fourteen months old at the time of the reunion. Because Jack has been in prison for a year and a half and her parents married the day he went into prison, it is clear that she was conceived out of wedlock.

Miss Lexie Renfro

Miss Lexie is Ralph Renfro's unmarried sister. She has been living with and caring for the retired schoolteacher Miss Julia Mortimer, who dies on the day of the reunion.

Mr. Ralph Renfro

Ralph is married to Miss Beulah. He is partially disabled as a result of a dynamite accident that occurred just before his marriage. Mr. Renfro is the town's "demolition expert," but, based on events and comments in the novel, he seems to not be very good at this job.

Vaughn Renfro

Vaughn is the twelve-year-old son of Miss Beulah and Ralph Renfro. During the time that Jack spent in prison, Vaughn had to do the work of a man to help keep the farm going.

Curly Stovall

Curly Stovall is the villain of the novel, though not a completely despicable one. He owns the store in Banner, and it is his tussle with Ella Fay that leads Jack to fight with him and steal his safe, which in turn lands Jack in prison.

At the time of the reunion, Curly is the justice of the peace. Homer Champion is campaigning against him, and the election is to take place two days after the reunion, the day after Miss Julia Mortimer's burial.

Miss Ora Stovall

Miss Ora is Curly Stovall's sister and lives with him behind the store.

Willy Trimble

Willy is a neighbor of Miss Beulah and Jack Renfro. He is helpful and well-meaning but something of a pest. Miss Beulah predicts that Willy will find an excuse to show up at the reunion, and when he does, she is rude to him but allows him to stay. It is Willy who finds Miss Julia Mortimer as she is dying.

Granny Vaughn

Granny is the matriarch of the clan, and the reunion is held to celebrate her ninetieth birthday. She dozes much of the time and talks little, and when she does speak up, her words are usually tart. When Brother Bethune's recounting of the family history is dragging on too long, and the preacher muses that perhaps Grandpa Vaughn is in heaven wondering why Granny doesn't come to join him, Granny says, "Suppose you try taking a seat. Go over there in the corner."

Themes

The theme of family as both a positive and a negative force pervades *Losing Battles* from beginning to end. As the sun rises on the opening pages, four generations of a family wake up in the farmhouse they share. The family reunion that is about to begin will bring dozens more members of the extended family onto the stage. The story will show the family as a support system and a refuge but one with a dark side.

Although the occasion for the reunion is Granny Vaughn's ninetieth birthday, the center of attention is Jack, her eldest great-grandson, who is returning home for the reunion after spending a year and a half in prison. Welty uses Jack, more than any other character, to portray the positive elements of the family. Family is the hub around which Jack's life revolves. His decisions, actions, and feelings all are determined by his relationship to his family. Through other characters' descriptions of him, it is clear that Jack is loyal to his family and that, until he went to prison, he worked hard to help support them. He went to prison for trying to get back a family heirloom that had been forcibly taken from his sister. His only real objection to being imprisoned was that it deprived him of his family and them of his labor, which was much needed on the farm. to live away from them and cannot see them as anything but a positive force in his life.

In return, the family gives Jack unconditional acceptance and support. When he appears in court, the whole family is there with him, and when he is sent to prison, as far as they are concerned, it is the law and the judge that are wrong, not Jack. In a sense, Jack *was* wronged, not so much by the judge but by another outsider, Curly Stovall, who has also incurred the family's collective wrath. Yet the family's support for its members is sometimes taken to such an extreme that it becomes destructive, replacing truth with wishful thinking and even outright lies.

Near the end of the story, the ever-curious Aunt Cleo demands to know the secret behind Nathan's odd behavior. Before anyone else can speak and possibly tell the truth, Miss Beulah answers:

"Sister Cleo, I don't know what in the world ever
guides your tongue into asking the questions it does!"
Miss Beulah cried. "By now you ought to know this
is a strict, law-abiding, God-fearing, close-knit family,
and everybody in it has always struggled the best
he knew how and we've all just tried to last as long
as we can by sticking together."

Having already heard that Jack has just escaped from the penitentiary to attend the reunion, Aunt Cleo knows, as does everyone else, that Miss Beulah has embedded at least one lie in her defense of Nathan; the family is not exactly law-abiding. And the listeners at the reunion, along with readers, have a strong sense that Miss Beulah is telling an even bigger fib. When Jack presses Nathan to finally share whatever it is he

has kept bottled up for years, Nathan confesses that he killed a man to avenge his deceased younger brother Sam Dale and then allowed authorities to hang a black man for the crime. At that, Miss Beulah asks Nathan, "Now what did you want to tell that for? . . . We could've got through one more reunion without that, couldn't we? Without you punishing yourself?"

Miss Beulah is so protective of her family, so committed to a view of events that holds them all blameless, that she desires to push murder□a double murder, really, since an innocent man was executed□under the rug. Therein lies the dark side of family ties. She refuses to acknowledge any truth that is unkind to her family, and so truth becomes subjective and twisted. There are other instances, too, in which various family members choose a comfortable lie over an inconvenient truth.

Jack's wife, Gloria, is an orphan who has no family of her own. Her dream is for she and Jack and their baby to have their own home, away from Jack's family. She feels that his family is Jack's biggest burden and tells him that she can never love them. Although Jack loves Gloria dearly, he always argues with her□sweetly but firmly□when the subject is his family. He cannot imagine choosing to live away from them and cannot see them as anything but a positive force in his life.

Throughout the story, Welty weighs the positive aspects of family against the negative. In the end, the good outweighs the bad. The story ends with Jack, Gloria, and their baby walking home to the old farmhouse that has been home to generations of his family. Jack will do his best to fulfill his family's expectations that he can make the farm productive and profitable again, lifting them all out of poverty. He begins to sing the old hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves," and, Welty writes, "All Banner could hear him and know who he was."

Style

Simile

Losing Battles is filled with similes, all of them fresh and inventive, some wildly unexpected. The following all appear on a single page:

The dust Uncle Homer had made still rolled the
length of the home road, like a full red cotton shirt-
sleeve.
The farm was as parched now as an old clay bell of
wasp nest packed up against the barn rafters.
Heat, like the oldest hand, seized Jack and Gloria by
the scruff of the neck and kept hold.
They marched through the cornfield, all husks,
robbed of color by drought as if by moonlight.

This frequency is not uncommon.

Welty's similes give the narrative a rich texture by piling image upon image. The images are unified in that all portray the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations of life in the rural South at a particular time. This heaping-up of images has the effect of immersing readers in the time, place, and life of the story.

Dialogue

Virtually all of *Losing Battles* is written in dialogue; the third-person narrator appears only infrequently to set a scene or manage a transition. The technique is appropriate, because nearly everyone in the entire extended family at the reunion is a storyteller and a nonstop talker. The constant, overlapping chatter gives the impression that no thoughts are kept private or left unexpressed; whatever comes into these characters' minds is immediately put into words and sent out to all within earshot. With one exception, the narrator never takes readers inside the mind of a character.

The few characters who do not talk constantly are singled out for their silence, and it is clear that their restraint marks them as black sheep and outsiders. The oddball itinerant and self-styled evangelist Nathan comes to the reunion each year, stands like a sentinel behind Granny's chair, and neither eats nor joins in the storytelling. The other quiet one is Gloria, the outsider who is a foil in every way for the clannish, verbose Renfros and Beechams. They remark on her insistence on keeping her thoughts to herself as they might remark on the customs of headhunters; it is beyond them. Miss Beulah declares, with all the charity she can muster, that Gloria has

a sweet voice when she deigns to use it, she's so spotless
the sight of her hurts your eyes, she's so neat
that once you've hidden her Bible, stolen her baby,
put away her curl papers, and wished her writing
tablet out of sight, you wouldn't find a trace of her
in the company room, and she can be pretty. But you
can't read her.

Among the Renfros and Beechams, there is no such thing as enough good qualities to make up for keeping quiet.

Southern Gothic Literature

Some of Welty's writing is associated with the southern gothic style, and there are elements of this style in *Losing Battles*. Southern gothic writing features settings located in the American South, grotesque characters who are outcast, and bizarre events. Although the overall tone of *Losing Battles* is light and comedic, there are moments when the gothic element prevails. One such moment is when the clan is around the table and Mr. Renfro offers Uncle Nathan the "heart" of a watermelon□the sweetest, choicest portion. When Nathan raises his hand to refuse the watermelon, the following dialogue ensues:

"Hey!" Aunt Cleo cried. "Ain't that a play hand?"
Uncle Nathan's still uplifted right hand was lineless
and smooth, pink as talcum. It had no articulation but
looked caught forever in a pose of picking up a sugar
lump out of the bowl. On its fourth, most elevated
finger was a seal ring.
"How far up does it go?" asked Aunt Cleo.
"It's just exactly as far as what you see that ain't
real," said Miss Beulah. "That hand come as a present
from all his brothers, and his sister supplied him
the ring for it. Both of 'em takes off together. Satisfied?"
"For now," Aunt Cleo said, as they all went back to
their seats.

The choice of words ("play hand," "pink as talcum"), the ring, Aunt Cleo's undisguised curiosity, and the fact that the hand belongs to Nathan, who is odd enough without it, all combine to make the scene grotesque.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

Within two years of the 1929 stock market crash, economic depression was worldwide. In the United States, the drop in the gross national product (the amount of goods and services produced in a year) by 1933 sent that index lower than it had been in twenty years. Because of widespread poverty, the country's production capacity far outstripped the ability of consumers to buy. Factories closed, and young men wandered the country searching for work. Unemployment soared from a pre-crash rate of just over 3 percent to more than 25 percent in 1933. Farmers began dumping or holding back their products to protest the low prices they were receiving, which was not enough to cover the cost of growing the food.

The results for poor and middle-class Americans were disastrous. Many families lived in small shantytowns called Hoovervilles (after Herbert Hoover, the president at the time of the crash) on the outskirts of cities. In the South, 20 percent of all farms were foreclosed between 1930 and 1935, and their owners were evicted. Americans in all regions were hungry.

Losing Battles contains many indirect references to the depression and its effects on Boone County, Mississippi. When the family is discussing a man named Ears Broadwee who is out of work, Aunt Nanny says, "He may have to go to the CC Camp if something more to his liking don't come along." She is referring to the Civilian Conservation Corps, established by Congress in 1933 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal plan for restoring the economy. Young, single men joined the corps, where they lived in camps and worked for the federal government. The work involved improving national parks and other natural resources; for example, CCC workers built trails and tourist facilities in the parks. In 1935, half a million men lived and worked in 2,600 camps; most sent their paychecks home to relatives that desperately needed them.

It is also mentioned at the reunion that the federal government recently sent "wormy apples" to Mississippi, part of a food assistance program. And several references are made to the fact that Gloria is nursing Lady May past the age when a little girl would normally be eating solid food. Gloria says that she does this because food is scarce.

Life in the Rural South

Welty's fictional farmers of Banner, Mississippi, are dealing not only with the depression but also with drought and poor soil, and these conditions were all too common in the 1930s. Topsoil had been worn out by overfarming and by farmers' failure to rotate crops. Yields were down, and farmers had to work harder for what they were able to wrench from the land.

The reason that Jack and his family are so outraged by Judge Moody's sentencing Jack to prison is that he is needed on the farm to feed his large family. Jack's father, Mr. Renfro, is partially disabled from an old injury, so Jack's strength is essential to keeping the farm running. Judge Moody and others acknowledge that being needed at home is an excuse that often gets prisoners released.

Jack and his siblings miss a lot of school because they are needed to work at home, and this, too, is historically correct. During the depression, education became a luxury that many could not afford. Schools closed throughout the South because there was no money to pay teachers. Those schools that stayed open often had few pupils and short school years.

Critical Overview

Losing Battles appeared in 1970 to virtually unanimous praise from critics and is still praised today. *New York Times* critic James Boatwright called the novel "a major work of the imagination and a gift to cause general rejoicing." He continued:

> *Losing Battles* is conclusive evidence of what many have long believed: that Eudora Welty possesses the surest comic sense of any American writer alive. It is a comedy . . . that presents character without fake compassion or amused condescension, a comedy that releases, illuminates, renews our own seeing, that moves in full knowledge of loss, bondage, panic, and death.

Paul Bailey, in *Times Literary Supplement*, wrote that in this "exceptionally beautiful novel" Welty had outshone some of her foremost peers:

> The prevailing tone is one of glorious ordinariness, but one that never sinks into the terminally cute□pace *Our Town* and the jottings of Brautigan, Saroyan, and Vonnegut. The humanity that is everywhere demonstrated in *Losing Battles* does not cuddle itself.... It simply and necessarily informs what is probably the quietest masterpiece to be written in America since the death of Willa Cather.

Similarly, Sara McAlpin, in *The Southern Review*, commended the author's subtle, complex characters, declaring that the family in the novel "is both nurturing and stifling, affirming and negating, supportive and destructive." This balanced portrayal, McAlpin wrote, "enriches rather than diminishes Welty's final presentation of family" and "underscores Welty's extraordinary sensitivity to the complexities of ordinary human beings, as well as her profound respect for the value of each individual person."

Discussing several works of Welty's fiction, C. Vann Woodward wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*:

> Miss Welty seems at her best with sprawling families assembled for rituals, ceremonies, or reunions. For example, the riotous romp and clatter of the Renfros and Beechams and the Banner community through Losing Battles.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. She holds degrees in linguistics and journalism. In this essay, Norvell discusses the significance of the title of Losing Battles.

The sprawling Beecham Renfro clan that populates *Losing Battles* certainly has its endearing qualities. Granny and her grandchildren, inlaws, great-grandchildren, etc., are amusing, and they are survivors. They are loyal to one another, and they take care of their own. The best of the brood, young Jack Renfro, is as loving and lovable a character as readers will find in any work of fiction. Yet there is something about them that a reader could almost miss amid all their hilarity and weirdness: all of them, even Jack, are losers. The book is so funny and the characters are so buoyant that it is easy to forget the title and to fail to notice that virtually all the family's battles are losing battles. In most cases, they manage to lose in more ways than one.

A good example is the battle between Jack and Curly that ends with Jack in prison and with multiple losses for his family. First, Jack fails to recover the ring, a family heirloom, that Curly has grabbed from Ella Fay. Curly's safe comes open as Jack is carrying it home, and the ring falls out. Curly's possessions and the little bit of money that was in the safe are recovered, but the ring is never found. Second, Jack goes to prison for assaulting Curly. Not only is he separated from his wife on their wedding day but there are dire consequences for his family, who need him to work the farm. When Jack returns from prison, his old horse Dan and a wrecked truck he had been putting back together have both been lost to Jack's adversary Curly. Curly is the storekeeper, and things Jack loved have been traded for things the family needed.

Even so, Jack has not finished losing this battle. At the end of the story, Ella Fay, the sister who allowed Curly to grab the ring, reveals that she is going to marry Curly. Jack will have to accept into his family the man who sent him to prison and took his prized possessions from his destitute family. The tussle for which Jack came flying to defend his family's honor, for which he was sent to prison, and for which family treasures were lost (driving his family further into poverty), turns out to have been a mere flirtation. Curly Stovall is going to end up not only with Jack's horse and his truck but with his sister, to boot.

Thanks to Curly, Jack and the family meet their next adversary, Judge Moody. When the judge sentences Jack to prison for assaulting Curly, the family makes him their personal enemy and blames him for all they suffer in Jack's absence. They call him names and long for revenge, but their efforts will be defeated.

First, Jack unknowingly helps the judge by lifting his car out of a ditch. Next, Jack's plan to put the car back into a ditch goes awry. Jack's wife and child end up in harm's way; the judge manages to swerve and avoid hitting them, making the judge a hero. Now Jack very much wants to help the judge get his car off the precipice of Banner Top. But all his efforts to help the judge are as fruitless as were his efforts to harm him. Everyone

who comes along is either unable or unwilling to help. Jack tries to use his family's mule and the old school bus that sits in their yard, but his resources are not up to the task.

Again, Jack has begun a battle that will only lead to a series of losses and humiliations. After spending a good part of the day of his family reunion trying to get the judge's Buick down from its perch, Jack has no choice but to invite the judge and his wife back to the reunion. He brings the enemy into camp, heralding the judge as a hero. Jack and the others try to save face by explaining that they are welcoming the judge without forgiving him, but the judge refuses to be convinced that he needs forgiving.

Jack's humiliation is made complete when the reunion ends and Judge and Mrs. Moody are led to Jack's bed□one in which Jack hasn't slept for a year and a half, thanks to the judge□and Jack and Gloria must sleep on the porch floor. Chalk up another loss for Jack and the Renfros.

In a different way, the family also loses a lifelong battle with Miss Julia Mortimer, quite possibly the most serious loss of all. They talk at the reunion about how they hated her for trying to teach them when they didn't care to learn. They consider books worthless, reading a waste of time, and any suggestion that they should improve themselves an insult. Miss Julia was not like them, so they despise her and are not capable of seeing anything good in her. They have never wanted anything but to escape her, and yet, here, too, they have failed. Miss Julia has the bad timing to die on the day of their reunion, so that they must be reminded of her. Miss Lexie, who has been her live-in caretaker, relates at length how, as Miss Julia fell further and further into senility, Lexie tried her utmost to keep her from communicating with the outside world. Lexie took the old woman's pencil away and refused to mail her letters or to give her mail that came for her. Once again, this is a losing battle. The old teacher managed to get two letters off to her old friend Judge Moody and to scrawl her will into a book with a pin when she had nothing else to write with. As Judge Moody tries to make the family see that the nobility of the human spirit has triumphed, if only in a small way.

In addition, in her will Miss Julia has managed to make one final imposition on her ungrateful former students. She commands that they all be present at her burial. Despite the fact that they despise her, the Beechams and Renfros are aware enough of her authority□and naïve enough□that they sit around questioning whether they still have to obey the teacher even when she is dead. The judge makes clear that, by his authority, if not by hers, they are to accommodate her last wish. Not only do they have to attend the burial, they confront the evidence that Miss Julia was not the monster they all made her out to be. There are many prominent people at the graveside service, including some who have driven all the way from other states. There are doctors and lawyers, and there is even a telegram from a governor. Miss Julia has some success stories; it's just that the Beechams and Renfros are not among them. In the battle between ignorance and knowledge, the Beechams and Renfros chose the side of ignorance and never realized that, in doing so, they were destined to lose.

The novel ends with Jack walking home from the burial, where he faces his next battle: the struggle to make the farm profitable in spite of economic depression and drought.

The reader is quite sure by this time that it will be another losing battle, but Jack clearly has thoughts of a different kind. He sings the old hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves," seemingly confident of a bountiful harvest. It is the indomitable spirit of Jack and his family that make this novel a comedy, not their ability to rise above circumstances; their willingness to get beaten and keep fighting, not their ability to win. Somehow, the Beechams and the Renfros lose all the battles but still manage to win the war□or at least survive it.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on *Losing Battles*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Gray examines how Welty has used William Faulkner's style of repetition and interweaving lives within Losing Battles*, and discusses how her characters use talking and storytelling to remain connected to each other and to reality.*

"*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished*," observes Quentin Compson famously in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe
on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving
on spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical
water-cord to the next pool which the first pool
feeds has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain
a different temperature of water, a different molecularity
of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a
different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't
matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did
not even see moves across its surface too at the original
ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm.

It may seem perverse to begin talking about *Losing Battles* by quoting *Absalom, Absalom!* After all, *Absalom, Absalom!* is arguably William Faulkner's most Gothic novel, where the abiding Southern presence seems to be Edgar Allan Poe. It is melodramatic, even tragic, whereas *Losing Battles* is comic; it deals with the ghost-haunted gentry, while *Losing Battles* invites us into the lives of hill people fallen upon hard times. Faulkner's narrative weaves backwards and forwards over centuries, between Virginia, Haiti, Mississippi, New Orleans, and Harvard. Welty's, on the other hand, focuses on just a day and a half during the Depression and a family reunion; while not quite observing a classical unity of time and place, it seems to be quietly edging in that direction. Quite apart from the Faulknerian resonance of the title, however (which reminds us that Welty shares with her fellow Mississippian a quite un-American interest in the romance of failure and a typically Southern sense of the reality of defeat), there is in *Losing Battles* a deeply Faulknerian sense of the way many lives are woven into one life: repetition and revision are seen here as the norms of consciousness and narrative□so that *maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished*. "I wanted," Welty has said, when talking about how she came to write this novel, "to get a year in which I could show people at the rock bottom of their lives." But the year and more specifically the day that supplies the centerpiece of the story become a tapestry into which Welty can then weave the story of other days in other years. The family reunion, the ninetieth birthday of the oldest member of the clan, "Granny" Elvira Jordan Vaughn, becomes *attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord* to pools of memory, the *old ineradicable rhythm* of life as it has been lived by the Renfros and the Beechams for four generations along with the lives of various neighbors. "I wanted," Welty has also said in connection with this book, "to see if I could do something that was new for me: translating every

thought and feeling into speech.... I felt that I'd been writing too much by way of description, of introspection on the part of my characters." That suggests exactly how Welty weaves the connections between past and present here, connecting one pool, one moment in space and time to another, just as Faulkner does, through the human voice debating, recollecting, revising, reinventing, each character constructing his or her own version of place and past. With sympathy and humor, *Losing Battles* describes people waging a disgracefully unequal struggle against circumstances but remaining hopeful despite everything□remaining so, above all, because they use old tales and talking as a stay against confusion, a kind of temporary defense.

"We need to talk, to tell," said Faulkner of Southerners once, "since oratory is our heritage." He might have been referring to the characters in *Losing Battles*. "Can't conversation ever cease?" asks one character, an outsider, towards the end of the novel, and any reader can easily see what he means. The Beechams and the Renfros, who make up the majority at this family reunion, never seem to stop talking. There are tall tales, family legends, personal memories, folk humor, religious myth, stories of magic and mystery, and everyone seems to possess his or her own storytelling technique. People comment on one another's storytelling abilities: when Uncle Percy Beecham, for example, begins to imitate the characters he is describing, his sister-in-law Birdie Beecham comments appreciatively, "he gets 'em all down pat . . . I wish I was married to him. . . . He'd keep me entertained." The dead, along with the living, are praised for their verbal gifts. Grandpa Vaughn, for instance, is chiefly remembered for his eloquence as a preacher, which his replacement as the local Baptist leader, the unfortunate Brother Bethune, can never match. "The prayer he made alone was the fullest you ever heard," recalls one of his grandsons, Uncle Noah. "The advice he handed down *by itself* was a mile long!" Sometimes, advice is offered to a novice speaker while he or she is speaking. "What's Normal?" asks Lexie Renfro when Jack Renfro's wife Gloria refers to her time at Normal School. "Don't skip it! Tell it!" Lexie receives advice in turn when she is about to embark on one of her more heartless tales about her experiences as a nurse: "Let's not be served with any of your stories today, Lexie," Beulah Renfro warns her. Always accompanying the main text, the talk requiring the reunion's attention, there is a subtext of comment, criticism, and anecdote, like that background of anonymous voices, inherited folk speech and wisdom, that gives resonance to traditional ballads and epic. There is the constant sense, in fact, that each tale or conversation, however trivial, belongs to a larger body of speech, a continuum of storytelling; stories knit into one another, one anecdote recalls another in the series, and tales are told which we learn have been told many times before: "I wish I'd had a penny for every time I've listened to this one," murmurs Ralph Renfro as his wife Beulah begins to recall the story of her parents' mysterious drowning. Weaving backwards and forwards in time, repeating and embroidering, the family reunion fashions a rich tapestry of folk-speech: a web of words that constitute their identity, their moment in space and time.

The figure of weaving is chosen advisedly here, not least because the dearest gift that "Granny" Elvira Jordan Vaughn receives on her birthday is a quilt:

"Believe I'll like the next present better. I know what *this* is." Granny told them, as she took the box covered in yellowing holly paper. . . . She took out the new piece-quilt. A hum of pleasure rose from every man's and woman's throat.
When the mire of the roads had permitted, the aunts and girl cousins had visited two and three together and pieced it on winter afternoons. It was in the pattern of "The Delectable Mountains" and measured eight feet square....

It is not difficult to catch the connection between the literal and metaphorical webs that compel our attention in *Losing Battles*. Both are expressions of communality, representing the strenuous effort to weave a pattern out of□and, in the end, against□the difficulties, discontinuities and downright mess that constitute the basic fabric of these lives. Despite the "mire," the women of the family have struggled to make something that gives them a sense of identity, personal and communal: a feeling of being connected with their neighbors, their family, and their ancestors□other women who have woven something substantial in which to live and, eventually, to die (" 'She'll be buried under that,' said Aunt Beck softly. 'I'm going to be buried under "Seek No Further,"' said Granny, 'I've got more than one quilt to my name that'll bear close inspection.' ") And despite the mess, the battles constantly lost that define their material existences, both women and men also fight to weave an identity out of their words, to use language, not only to give themselves a local habitation and a name, but to make them feel a part of that habitation□its present, its past, and its possible futures. It is entirely appropriate that, immediately following the presentation of the quilt to Granny, all the voices at the reunion rise "as one" in song:

Gathering home! Gathering home!
Never to sorrow more, never to roam!
Gathering home! Gathering home!
God's children are gathering home.

In form and message, the song alerts us to that need for "home," for being and being a part of something that finds its expression in family gatherings, folk-art, and folk-speech. It is also entirely appropriate that the narrative should add this comment□this bassnote, as it were□to that song:

As they sang, the tree over them, Billy Vaughn's Switch, with its ever-spinning leaves all light-points at this hour, looked bright as a river, and the tables might have been a little train of barges it was carrying with it, moving slowly downstream. Brother Bethune's gun, still resting against the trunk, was travelling too, and nothing at all was unmovable, or

empowered to hold the scene still fixed or stake the reunion there.

"Nothing at all was unmovable": the metamorphoses of nature continue, despite our elaborate patternings, our attempts to tame and subdue things. The song, or speech, takes place within a world of flux and constant transformation; it can only give the temporary sense□or, rather, illusion□of stability and control.

There is another reason why the figure of the web seems so appropriate here when talking about the evident need of the characters in *Losing Battles* to talk and to tell. Faulkner once suggested that *The Brothers Karamazov* would have been a much shorter and much better book if Dostoevsky had "let the characters tell their own stories instead of filling page after page with exposition." He was joking, of course, in his own typically deadpan way, but the joke contained a serious point. Like Lexie Renfro, Faulkner believed that people need to "Tell it!"; that all people, not just Southerners, need to speak themselves into being. And, unlike Lexie, Faulkner clearly felt that this was not just a moral imperative but an existential one□not just something that human beings should do, in other words, but had to do if they were fully to function as human. The key text here is, again, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and the key passage is one embroidering an image with which any reader of *Losing Battles* would be broadly familiar:

you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them . . . all trying to make a rug on the same loom, only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug and it can't matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying.

The sense of struggle is foregrounded more here than it is in Welty's use of the practice and figure of quilting. Even here, though, we should remember the mire through which the women struggle to make the quilt□and, of course, the darker shadows cast upon that practice by all those circumstances to which Welty's chosen title for the book alerts us. Battle is never very far from either Welty's or Faulkner's mind when they talk about talking. In both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Losing Battles*, human experience is seen as a kind of feverish debate in which each participant, eagerly or otherwise, struggles to make himself heard, fights to weave his own pattern into the complex web of voices that constitute his life. Both books allow or rather compel the characters to tell their own stories□not for economy's sake of course, so as to save "page after page of exposition," but so as to make the simple, fundamental point that this is how we make our lives.

Voices, talking: the entire process of a life assumes for Welty, as if does for Faulkner, the character of a seamless pattern of dialogue. The individual human being□be he or

she a Quentin Compson or a "Granny" Vaughn□is seen entering a web of relations that constitute human history. To this extent, both writers produce works that are genuinely dialogic, works in which, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggested, "a character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is." "Language, discourse," Bakhtin insisted, ". . . is almost the totality of human life." This could almost stand as an epigraph for either *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Losing Battles*. So, for that matter, could this longer observation of Bakhtin's, which returns us to a familiar image and an abiding obsession:

> The living utterance, having taken its meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads . . . it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.

Welty would almost certainly resist the terms Bakhtin uses here. She belongs, after all, to "a verbal community"□to use Bakhtin's phrase□that was and is quite different from the one Bakhtin himself knew. However, that should not blind us to the fact that for both of them, as Faulkner, communication implies community. What Welty's characters do is what Bakhtin argues the human subject *must* do and therefore the fictional character should do: engage in "the *social* dynamics of speech," as *part of* and yet also *apart* from a common verbal culture. As social beings and yet autonomous individuals, Welty's people participate in what Bakhtin would have called a "great dialogue" or "open dialogue," in which "the object is precisely the passing of a theme through many and various voices." It is, of course, the passing that matters, the process of dialogue. For Welty, as for Bakhtin, language, speech, is an open system, a "mobile medium" (as Bakhtin puts it) that resists closure. "Each individual utterance," Bakhtin observed, "is a link in the chain of speech communication." By its very nature, that chain is of indefinite length or duration; it can have no beginning or end. The possibility of a final, finalizing discourse is consequently excluded, along with the claims of an authoritative one. Each talker is involved for a while in what Bakhtin calls "a continuous and open-ended . . . dialogue" that went on long before they began talking and will continue long after. We are reminded of the potentially unending nature of the human debate, the web of words we weave, when, towards the end of *Losing Battles*, Uncle Noah Webster says this to Gloria, his niece:

> Gloria, this has been a story on us that never will be allowed to be forgotten. Long after you're an old lady without much further stretch to go, sitting back in the same rocking-chair Granny's got her little self in now, you'll be hearing it told to Lady May [Gloria's baby daughter] and all her hovering brood.... I call this a reunion to remember . . . !

Even the reunion that supplies the setting for most of the novel is to be given substance

and weight, it seems, a sense of authenticity, by the feeling that it will one day be the subject of, rather than the occasion for, talk. What happens here and now will become part of a story by being woven into the fabric of speech.

Part of this story that Uncle Noah refers to is the suspicion, entertained at least for a while, that Gloria may in fact be a Beecham, entitled by blood rather than marriage to be a part of the reunion. Clearly, the possibility of incest that this raises is of little interest to the family. What excites them is the bright hope that they can press this apparent outsider into the group, and so close the magic circle around themselves even tighter. "Say Beecham!

. . ." the women chant at Gloria, "Can't you say Beecham? What's wrong with being Beecham?" This is a Southern family romance with a vengeance, in which, as in so many romances from the region, the family tries to enforce relationship, to press the unwilling into membership. For a moment, we are invited to consider a darker side to the reunion, the more coercive element implicit in the talk. After all, the way the family bears down on Gloria is almost like a rape:

> . . . the aunts came circling in to Gloria . . .□all
> the aunts and some of the girl cousins . . .
> . . a trap of arms came down over Gloria's head and
> brought her to the ground. Behind her came a crack
> like a firecracker□they had split open a melon.
> She struggled wildly at first as she tried to push away
> the red hulk shoved down into her face, as big as a
> man's clayed shoe, swarming with seeds, warm with
> rainthin juice.
> They were all laughing. "Say Beecham!" they ordered
> her, close to her ear. They rolled her by the
> shoulders, pinned her flat, then buried her face under
> the flesh of the melon with its blood heat, its smell
> of evening flowers. Ribbons of juice crawled on her
> neck and circled it, as hands robbed of sex spread her
> jaws open.

Not a corncob, on this occasion, but a melon. But it serves a similar purpose to that of the notorious instrument of violence in Faulkner's *Sanctuary*. It enables those "robbed of sex" to force themselves and their will, for a while, upon an unwilling victim; it becomes part of a strategy of violence, to make "one of them" become "one of us." The other part of that strategy is, of course, the chant that accompanies and reinforces the action, turning a violent series of impulses into an equally violent ritual. The chant□"Say Beecham!" "Can't you say Beecham?"□reminds us that what these women are trying to do is drown Gloria's voice and being in their own. "I don't want to be a Beecham!" Gloria cries, just before she is forced to the ground. But the aunts and cousins want her to change her speech: to "say" the name that articulates a new identity. "I achieve consciousness," Bakhtin argued, "I am conscious of myself and become myself only

while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another.... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself." However, neither Welty nor her characters need any help□from Bakhtin or anyone else□to realize that, in human terms, to say is to be, that it is through speech that people enter into consciousness of self and community and so into the possibility of deliberate, moral action. The women who try to force Gloria to "Say Beecham!" understand, only too well, how words enable identity. Through their incantation, they register their own innate sense of the power, and the human inevitability, of language; they also offer us a measure of just how much that power can be used for good or ill.

"A reunion," Welty once said in an interview,

> is everybody remembering together□remembering and relating when their people were born and what happened in their lives, what that made happen to their children, and how it was they died. There's someone to remember a man's whole life, every bit of the way along. I think that's a marvellous thing.

That also explains very clearly why the Beechams and Renfros need to talk, and the way talk enables them to escape from their loneliness into a sense of being and belonging. To put it simply, they feel they are there because they say they are and other people say so too. Yet all the while they are saying so, there are warnings about the other side of things. Quite apart from those elements and moments in the narrative (like the attack on Gloria) that recollect the darker possibilities of language, there are reminders all the time of the mystery of personality, the secret phases of experience, the accidents in life□all those things that no dictionary, no web of words can ever quite accommodate. Gloria Renfro is important here, too, because, despite all the pressure that is put upon her, she continues to insist that she is different□not a Beecham or a Renfro but an orphan, alone and apart. "I'm here to be nobody but myself," she declares at one point, and elsewhere, "I'm one to myself, and nobody's kin, and my own boss, and nobody knows the one I am or where I came from." Sometimes she comes close to feeling defeated. "Oh, if we just had a little house to ourselves. . . . And nobody could ever find us," she exclaims to her husband, and then adds hopelessly, "But everybody finds us. Living or dead." At the end of the book, however, she has not given up. She is still insisting on her separateness, her's and other people's essential privacy ("people," she declares, "don't want to be read like books")□still standing out against the family and what she, at least, sees as the imprisoning web of its stories.

And then there is Judge Oscar Moody, a rather different matter from Gloria, but still a reminder that the story told at the family reunion is a partial one. He is a comic ghost at the feast, brought there by chance, cut off by education and social position from the easy-going manners of his hosts, and slightly embarrassed by the recollection that it was he who put Jack Renfro in jail. The event that brings him and his wife to the reunion is a car accident. Swerving to avoid Gloria and her baby, the Judge drives his Buick off the road, and it ends up balanced uncertainly on the edge of a precipice called Banner

Top. There it provides a grotesque reminder of the way things happen to spoil even our best-laid plans; the accident, in short, calls our attention to the accidental. It seems elephantine, or at least less than sensitive to Welty's light touch, to add that it also offers a comic emblem of the precarious nature of things, the abyss that hovers beneath us and our chattering. Still, the emblem is there, however delicately or allusively it may be sketched in; and it is highlighted by such nice touches as the hickory sign on which the Buick rests as it sticks out over Banner Top, which asks the question, "Where Will YOU Spend Eternity?" The question is never answered, of course, just as the plaintive demands made by the Judge's wife to be returned immediately to "civilization" never meet with a satisfactory response. But the reader is reminded by such things that there are other dimensions of experience, different vocabularies standing on the edge of this particular verbal world. The sign warns us that any sign merely marks out a boundary.

As far as warnings of this kind are concerned, however, one character stands head and shoulders above the rest: Miss Julia Mortimer. During the course of the reunion, the news is brought that Julia Mortimer has died. Many of those present were taught by her, and they remember her, not necessarily with affection, as a magisterial presence. Now they rehearse her story, trying to recollect what sort of impression she made on them. This impression is summed up, really, by their response to her own words in a letter that Judge Moody, another of her ex-pupils, reads out to them. The letter, written by Julia Mortimer not long before her death, is a sort of apologia, an explanation or defense of the aims that sustained her throughout her career. "All my life," she confesses defiantly, "I've fought a hard war with ignorance. Except in those cases that you can count off on your fingers, I lost every battle." The reaction of the Beechams and Renfros, as they listen, is notable for three things above all: uneasiness, incomprehension, and amusement. "Don't read it to us!" several of them cry before the Judge begins, then, when he has begun, "I can't understand it when he reads it to us. Can't he just tell it?" "I don't know what those long words are talking about," complains one hearer, Aunt Birdie Beecham, while another one, Beulah Renfro, appears to speak for most of the Judge's audience when she concludes, "Now I know she's crazy. We're getting it right out of her own mouth, by listening long enough." Julia Mortimer, it is clear, spoke in another idiom, a language foreign to most of those assembled at the reunion. She believed in enlightenment, progress, making something of oneself. "She had designs on everybody," Uncle Percy Beecham recollects, "she wanted a doctor and a lawyer and all else we might have to holler for some day." She also believed in travelling beyond the horizons of one's local community and culture; for instance, she told one Beecham, Uncle Nathan, to see the world. "He took her exactly at her word," comments Beulah Renfro, Nathan's sister. "He's seen the world. And I'm not so sure it was good for him." All her life, in fact, she was committed to a vocabulary and vision that demoted the Beechams, the Renfros, and all that their reunion represents to the level of the provincial, the backward, and the ignorant ("you need to give a little mind to the family you're getting tangled up with," she apparently told Gloria just before her marriage. The Beechams and Renfros, in turn, hardly began to understand her when she was alive, nor do they want to now that she is dead. As they see it, she was domineering, eccentric, or, more simply, crazy. Welty's point is not, of course, that either side is right in this debate, although by setting her book well back from the time of writing it, she may have been working from the assumption that the forces of progress represented by Miss

Julia have been losing less of this particular battle recently than those embodied in the family reunion. What she is doing, rather, is giving a further edge, another accent to the talk of the family reunion—throwing the "remembering and relating" of these hill folk into sharper relief by reminding us of other forms of intelligence, other ways of turning the world into words that for good *and* ill it happens to leave out.

There is also the simple, brute fact of Julia Mortimer's dying. Lexie Renfro was Miss Julia's nurse, and the news of her death prompts Lexie to recall what she was like during the final stages of her life. "All her callers fell off, little at a time, then thick and fast," Lexie remembers. They were put off by her abrasive manner, her unwillingness to suffer fools gladly; and Miss Julia was left waiting, sitting in her front yard, for people who never came. "I used to say," Lexie declares, " 'Miss Julia, you come on back inside the house. You hear? People . . . aren't coming visiting. Nobody's coming.' " But evidently Miss Julia took no notice. So for her own good, Lexie insists, with that bland authoritarianism characteristic of so many nurses, she tied her charge to the bed: "I didn't want to, but anybody you'd ask would tell you the same: you may have to." Miss Julia was reduced to writing letters, incessantly and feverishly. With her tongue hanging out, Lexie recalls with amazement, "Like words, just words, was getting to be something good enough to eat." Lexie mailed them, she admits, because she "couldn't think . . . what else to do with 'em;" and it is, of course, one of those letters that Judge Moody reads out to the bewilderment of the family. Eventually, though, even this resource was taken away from her; Miss Julia's pencil was snatched from her hands by her ever-solicitous keeper ("I could pull harder than she could," says Lexie triumphantly), and she was then reduced to the mere gesture of writing—shaping words with her finger on the bedsheet or her palm. Then Lexie left her—"I had the reunion to come to, didn't I?" she asks her audience plaintively—and it was while she was by herself that Julia Mortimer died, virtually imprisoned, it seems, denied books or writing material, without close friends, visitors, or even sympathy.

The final picture Julia Mortimer presents is a pathetic one, certainly, but pathos is not Welty's primary aim. What she is alerting us to here is something else: a series of subtle variations on the theme of old tales and talking and the need to tell that all her characters share. Miss Julia, the former schoolteacher, betrays the same compulsion as the men and women whom she once taught—to communicate and so substantiate, to create a feeling of being someone somewhere rather than just anyone anywhere through the use of language. In her case, the language is more a written than a spoken one; but that perhaps is less significant than the fact that, for her, the compulsion becomes exactly and simply that—a compulsion. She continues to write herself into life even when the instruments of writing are denied her. Her hands trace out an identity—or, to be more accurate, the need for an identity—far more starkly and finally than even the voices of the Beechams and Renfros ever can. Nobody receives the message, nothing is even written, but Miss Julia still continues to resist death through her compulsive and constant gesture. Faulkner once claimed that everything ever written ultimately carries one message, "*I was here*." And Miss Julia seems to be repeating that message, with a change of tense, as she runs her fingers over her palm or the bedsheet. Not quite "*I was here*," more "*I am here*"; as long as she writes, she senses, she still is. If Miss Julia's writing herself—that is, her writing from, about, and finally *of* herself—is a

shadowy transcription of the speaking themselves, talking themselves into being, favored by her former pupils, then the isolation from which she writes, during her final days, acts in turn as a *memento mori*—a haunting reminder of the vacuum over which any bridge of words is built. The letters, visible and invisible, are another sign like that one on Banner Top, "Where Will YOU Spend Eternity?" They offer the chilling message that, whatever communication and community we may enjoy during our lives—and, in particular, on occasions like a reunion—we must all eventually die alone.

Of course, Julia Mortimer is not the only person writing herself into life; Eudora Welty is doing the same, or something similar. Behind the tellers of the tales in *Losing Battles* lies the teller of the tale *Losing Battles*; the web of words is one that also speaks the message for Welty, "*I was here.*" It is a web of words that begins to establish itself as just that—a web of words, an elaborate verbal construct—right from these opening sentences on the first page:

> When the rooster crowed, the moon had still not left the world but was going down on flushed cheek, one day short of full. A long thin cloud crossed it slowly, drawing itself out like a name being called. The air changed, as if a mile or so away a wooden door had swung open, and a smell, more of warmth than wet, from a river at low stage, moved upward into the clay hills that stood in darkness.
> Then a house appeared on its ridge, like an old man's silver watch pulled once more out of its pocket. A dog leaped up from where he'd lain like a stone and began barking for today as if he meant never to stop.

A portrait like this is a triumph of specificity and containment. Welty presents us here with a shifting, evanescent place which nevertheless seems to have been caught for a while and composed. We are in that allusive, metamorphic and yet somehow briefly harmonized environment where, after the gift of the quilt to "Granny" Vaughn, the members of the family reunion sing their song. Something of the Mississippi hill country at a particular moment on a particular summer morning has been grasped, snatched from the dream of time passing, and framed; and in catching it, Welty matches up to her own description of the ideal photographer or story-writer who knows, she says, just "when to click the shutter," the precise instant at which people or things "reveal themselves." Yet for all that, something has been squeezed out and remains elusive, some quality of the moment remains uncaught and seems to slip through the artist's fingers, eluding every one of her traps and snares. The way this is intimated to the reader is subtle but inescapable. The prose never stops emphasizing its own fragility and artfulness. It is compulsively metaphorical, insistently figurative and even sportive, as though the author were trying to point out that this is, after all, an artifact, a pattern made out of words. Within the space of three sentences, for instance, a cloud is compared to a name; the air is said to change "as if □ a wooden door had swung open"; and a house suddenly appears in the dawn light like a watch pulled out of a pocket (and

not just *any* watch or *any* pocket: here as elsewhere, the figurative reference assumes a dramatic life of its own). The very insistence of this, the constant use of "like" or "as if," little touches such as the metaphor of naming or the dog apparently believing he is barking/ voicing the day into life□all help to remind us that the writer's language, like every other means used to alleviate our separateness, is an imprecise and not entirely trustworthy medium. Even when fought with this weapon, it seems, all battles must be losing battles, although they are never irretrievably lost.

For Faulkner, writing was a quest for failure; for Welty, evidently, it is a losing battle□but a battle that must constantly be fought. And, for both writers, there is clearly a link between their own art and the broader human project that their characters dramatize□of trying to spin a sense of reality out of language. "The mystery lies," Welty has said, "in the use of language to express human life." All her work is concerned with that mystery: the aboriginal impulse that, as she sees it, we all share to render life comprehensible through the use of the spoken and written word. It is, perhaps, wrong to place too much emphasis ultimately on the role the Southern love of talk has played in her life. It is important, certainly, for Welty just as it was for Faulkner; but it is important in that it allows her, just as it did her fellow Mississippian, to learn very early about the power and possibilities of speech□and then quickly led her from this to understanding the vital part that language plays in *all* our lives, regardless of whether we are Southern or not. Quite simply, she came to know through the Southern "need to talk" that we all need to talk in order fully to live. It is hardly an accident, after all, that two of the three sections of Welty's book about her beginnings as a writer place the major emphasis on voice: "Listening" and "Finding a Voice." Nor is it by chance that one crucial moment in what Welty calls her "sensory education" is described in this way:

> At around six, perhaps, I was standing by myself in our front yard waiting for supper, just at that hour in a late summer day when the sun is already below the horizon and the risen full moon in the visible sky stops being chalky and begins to take on light. There comes a moment, and I saw it then, when the moon goes from flat to round. For the first time it met my eyes as a globe. The word "moon" came into my mouth as though fed to me out of a silver spoon. Held in my mouth the moon became a word. It had the roundness of a Concord grape Grandpa took off his vine and gave me to suck out of its skin and swallow whole, in Ohio.

The beauty of a passage like this, like the intricate beauty□on a larger canvas□of her novels, is that Welty manages to convince the reader that words are simultaneously everything *and* nothing. They are everything because they constitute all the world we make for ourselves. Issuing out of our fundamental, definitively human rage for order□not only to see, but to know□they are as vital to us as breath. They register for us the irresistible otherness of things in terms that are, at their best, vivid and sensory.

Another American writer, William Carlos Williams, suggested that a thing known passes from the outer world to the inner, from the air around us into the muscles within us. And the word "moon" seems to achieve the same vital transit. As Welty recalls it, "moon" is not just an abstract, arbitrary sign, it has the "roundness" of a sensory object□it generates the sense that contact between the namer and the named has taken place. This is a gift, offered with "a silver spoon," that we are all offered, although very few of us can take as much advantage of that gift as Welty does. And it can fill us with a sense of presence, as it does the six-year-old girl recalled here. We, like her, can feel that we know and can participate in the world through the word. It is everything, then. It is, however, also quite literally nothing. The word "moon," despite the way it assumes shape and fullness in the mouth, is "no thing"; it is, at best, a powerful, sense-laden sign for the mysterious, distant object that shimmers in the evening sky. Caught in this moment, in effect, as it is caught at length in a novel like *Losing Battles*, is the sense that the world must remain irreducibly other, set apart from all our attempts at naming. Just below the web of words that we are continually spinning in order to tell ourselves that we live is the "something" that must always remain ungrasped and unknown, the "something" that is intimated, for example, in a shifting, metamorphic natural scene, the loneliness of an outsider, or in rumors of the abyss and death. *Losing Battles* is a comic novel, certainly, and as definitively Southern in its own way as *Absalom, Absalom!* But its comedy offers a serious revelation of the human impulse that, above all, makes us human; and its Southerness enables a clearer general understanding, a vivid and universally valid declaration, of the extraordinary ways of words. At least one question is answered, then, by the time the novel draws to a conclusion. "Can't conversation ever cease?" The answer is "no," not while there are people like the Beechams and Renfros around□which means, finally, any people at all.

Source: Richard Gray, "Needing to Talk: Language and Being in *Losing Battles*," in *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring 1997, pp. 72-86.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Kornfeld discusses the reconstruction of American law within the stories of Welty's Losing Battles*.*

Critical Essay #4

In the 1960s, in my home town of Jackson, the civil rights leader Medgar Evers was murdered one night in darkness, and I wrote a story that same night about the murderer (his identity then unknown) called 'Where Is the Voice Coming From?' But all that absorbed me, though it started as outrage, was the necessity I felt for entering into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been more alien or repugnant to me. Trying for my utmost, I wrote it in the first person. I was wholly vaunting the prerogative of the short-story writer. It is always vaunting, of course, to imagine yourself inside another person, but it is what a story writer does in every piece of work; it is his first step, and his last too, I suppose.
(Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*)

In recent years, legal scholars have started to examine the complex interconnections between the politics of narrative and the social construction of American law. Informed both by critical legal studies and poststructuralist perspectives, these theorists view American legal history as a series of contests of power, unequally joined. American law depends upon the telling of stories, but not all stories are heard. Mindful of the centrality of narrative to the construction of legal meaning and social power, these scholars (many of whom are women or men of color) seek empowerment for traditional outsiders through the construction of alternative legal narratives. They argue that the compelling force of narrative itself might create a new sense of empathy with the powerless in America, and fuel the reconstruction of American law across class, race and gender boundaries. They hope that many Americans will join Eudora Welty in her attempt to enter "into the mind and inside the skin" of people traditionally alien and even repugnant to them. This paper will explore this nascent analysis of legal narrative and the construction of power, as well as the imaginative combination of some of its central concepts and the reconstruction of American law envisioned in Welty's own tales of the Depression years in rural Mississippi, *Losing Battles*.

Critical Essay #5

The new approach to American law is rooted in a poststructuralist analysis of knowledge and power, and a recognition of the complex ways in which reality and subjectivity are socially constructed though largely unrecognized discursive practices. Those social arrangements which seem natural, essential, inevitable and immutable are merely representations, created and sustained by patterns of human perception, language and narrative. Language actively inscribes rather than transparently describes the world. To tell one's stories to an audience, then, is to operate within a discourse that shapes social reality; one either consciously or unconsciously perpetuates or challenges prevailing relationships of power. No one who talks or writes can choose not to participate in this process, whether the manifest topic is war, economics, medicine, gender or race relations, or law.

This central insight involves a fundamental deconstruction of the objectivist theory of truth, which has supported American law as well as most other Western intellectual systems for centuries. As Kim Lane Scheppele explains, objectivist theory "holds that there is a single neutral description of each event which has a privileged position over all other accounts. This single, neutral description is privileged because it is objective, and it is objective because it is not skewed by any particular point of view." The law's quest for truth, therefore, leads to earnest attempts "to locate this privileged description, the one that enables the audience to tell what *really* happened as opposed to what those involved *thought* happened.... Truth, in this view, is what remains when all the bias, all the partiality, all the 'point-of-viewness' is taken out and one is left with an objective account free of the special claims of those who stand to gain."

The very serious flaw in this objectivist theory of truth and justice is that there simply are no neutral, objective observers. As psychologists have demonstrated repeatedly over the past few decades, all observers bring to a situation a set of expectations, values and beliefs that determine what they will be able to see and hear. Two individuals listening to the same story will hear different things, by emphasizing those aspects that accord with their learned interpretations and experiences and ignoring those aspects that are dissonant with their views of the world. While this is true of any two individuals, it is still more evident among individuals from different social groups. People with widely varying social experiences and situations tend to see the same event in distinctly and systematically different ways. Hence there is no possible escape in life or in law from selective perception, or from subjective judgments based on prior experiences, values and beliefs.

For these reasons, battles of simple description□or the legal construction of facts□can be just as important and ferocious as battles of complex legal interpretation. Legal stories "may diverge, then, not because one is true and another is false, but rather because they are both self-believed descriptions coming from different points of view informed by different background assumptions about how to make sense of events." Legal judgments, based entirely upon competing stories about events that judges and juries never witness, validate some stories as truth and reject others as false. The social

danger in this apparently neutral procedure is that, historically, the legal construction of facts and judgments "has a distinctive selectivity, one that tends to adopt the stories of those who are white and privileged and male and lawyers, while casting aside the stories and experiences of people of color, of the poor, of women, of those who cannot describe their experiences in the language of the law." The only way to create the sense of objective neutrality is systematically to exclude the stories and judgments of those situated differently in the social world. But this is illusory truth and justice indeed.

If some of this traditional exclusion of social outsiders from American law is attributable to naive theories of objective truth or unconscious legal habits, there can be no doubt that it also reinforces and sustains the power of the dominant group in American society. The narratives that we allow ourselves to hear act to construct American law and society. Thus the privileging of the hegemonic legal narratives of white males is doubly invidious: not only does it render invisible, silent and powerless once again those whose voices have never been heard in American law, but it construes their silence as consent. The abstract language and apparently objective narratives of "neutral law"□including the search for "original intent"□mask continued and continuous contests of social power.

No theorist unmasks these legal contests of power more effectively than the African-American scholar Patricia Williams. As she convincingly argues, "Blacks and women are the objects of a constitutional omission which has been incorporated into a theory of neutrality. It is thus that omission is really a form of expression, as oxymoronic as that sounds: racial omission is a literal part of original intent; it is the fixed, reiterated prophecy of the Founding Fathers." Given this historical context, "the limitation of original intent as a standard of constitutional review is problematic. . . . Neutrality is from this perspective a suppression, an institutionalization of *psychic* taboos as much as segregation was the institutionalization of *physical* boundaries." Moreover, under the new laws of equal opportunity, the social text remains remarkably unchanged: "The rules may be color-blind but people are not." Therefore, the retreat to arguments of original intent and the insistence on formal "neutrality" in American legal discourse ignore historical context and social text alike, and simply perpetuate the injustices of centuries of American law and society.

To counter this long tradition of social exclusion through legal abstraction, Williams tells her own stories of painful discrimination, in her own powerful voice. Indeed, it might be argued that the stunning force of Williams's stories, told in the first person, contributes significantly to the effectiveness of her critique of formal equal opportunity and, more broadly, of legal abstraction and neutrality. Other legal scholars (especially women and men of color) have also begun to construct alternative legal narratives, in the hope of empowering traditional outsiders to American law. Mari Matsuda, Milner Ball, Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell and others "show in the telling of alternative stories how selective narratives come to have the power of truth, though there may be other versions that lead to other conclusions, other ways of seeing." Their alternative narratives, too, constitute interrogations of objectivist theories of truth and justice.

Exposing the politics of narrative and the contests of power underneath "neutral law" is but the first step in the long process of the reconstruction of American law. To this fundamental critique must be added new visions of truth and justice. Counter hegemonic legal storytelling offers such visions, in direct juxtaposition with the privileged story of traditional American legal values. Thus Mari Matsuda, in proposing legal sanctions for racist speech, moves between two stories: "The first is the victim's story of the effects of racist hate messages. The second is the first amendment's story of free speech. The intent is to respect and value both stories. This bipolar discourse uses as method what many outsider intellectuals do in silence: it mediates between different ways of knowing in order to determine what is true and what is just." Matsuda's counterpoint allows us to hear lost voices and to see long-hidden visions of truth and justice in America.

Similarly, Milner Ball approaches the American story of origins itself with a dual consciousness of its regenerative and exclusive power. The story of liberty and equality has been successfully expanded and claimed by some traditional outsiders of late, but certainly not by all: "While the struggle to gain equality for black people may be a prime instance of the transformative effect of the story, the continuing practice of violence against Indian tribes is a critical instance of its destructive effect. The story is a good one, but bound up with and in separable from its goodness and success, it has also served aggression and exclusivity." Ball's desire both to affirm and disaffirm the American story of origins leads him to supplement it with other constitutive narratives and their alternative visions of truth and justice.

Recognizing the limitations of narrative power ("It may transform, but it cannot transfigure"), Ball nonetheless adds devastating Amerindian perspectives on the American story of origins in the hope of creating a dialogic polyphony that might itself be transformative of American law. Separated from the false constraints of "original intent", then, the American story of origins itself might be made truer and more just: "That the American story of origins is still being written is one of the reasons that its effects, content, and telling are not finally settled. Its substance and meaning are still contested. The story of the circumstances attending the foundation conserves but also transforms and is transformed, as polyphonic narrative should in a democratic society." In this sense, telling alternative stories is a performative act, and the contest of power in which it knowingly engages may begin to reconstruct American law.

The construction of alternative legal narratives thus presents a searing critique of the assumptions of "neutral law," and proposes other possible visions of truth and justice. This theoretical bent is accompanied, however, by strongly instrumental, local efforts to reconstruct American law. Indeed, Ball's recovery of the "story of the circumstances attending the foundation," like Williams' recounting of personal stories of unequal opportunity, seeks to provide the necessary context for immediate, fairer judgments for Amerindians and other people of color. Close attention to historical context and particular, personal experience characterize what Matsuda calls "outsider jurisprudence." Its proponents' methodology is "grounded in the particulars of their social reality and experience. This method is consciously both historical and revisionist, attempting to know history from the bottom." Their quest to know history from the

bottom up has led these legal scholars to the sources of the new social history, including private journals, oral histories, and "stories from their own experiences of life in a hierarchically arranged world."

"Outsider jurisprudence" often employs its knowledge of historical context and personal life experiences pragmatically and locally. Existing always on the boundaries between the courts and the streets, the new jurisprudence of women and men of color "accepts the standard teaching of street wisdom: law is essentially political. It accepts as well the pragmatic use of law as a tool of social change, and the aspirational core of law as the human dream of peaceable existence. If these views seem contradictory, that is consistent with another component of jurisprudence of color: it is jurisprudence recognizing, struggling within, and utilizing contradiction, dualism, and ambiguity." Thus Matsuda, Derrick Bell and others focus realistically on the "need to attack the effects of racism and patriarchy in order to attack the deep, hidden, tangled roots," and seek concrete "legal tools that have progressive effect," such as affirmative action, desegregation, reparations, and the criminalization of racist speech. In Matsuda's judgment, "stories are a means of obtaining the knowledge we need to create just legal structure."

If counterhegemonic narratives provide the local knowledge that outsiders need to reconstruct American law, they may also have a larger and more direct impact on that reconstruction. Well-constructed alternative narratives may also compel insiders to listen to outsiders for the first time. As Richard Delgado argues, the insinuative, non-coercive structure and tone of stories "invite the reader to suspend judgment, listen for their point or message, and then decide what measure of truth they contain." Thus effective "counterstories" can subtly subvert the dominant group's own stories with their comfortable assumptions about natural superiority and deserved power. Apparently innocent, alternative narratives can shatter the insiders' complacency and disturb their tranquil sleep: "They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half□the destructive half□of the creative dialectic."

The alternative narrative's potential subversion of the "comfortable dominant complacency that is the principal anchor dragging down any incentive for reform" is particularly important in America, of course, because insiders continue to hold the reins of power; any legal or social reform must include them and induce them to undertake "a type of willing death." Outsiders simply cannot afford to talk only to themselves. Thus the seductive power of narrative might play a crucial, positive role in the process of legal reconstruction, by "overcoming otherness" and "forming a new collectivity based on the shared story." A powerful method of both destruction and creation. "legal storytelling is an engine built to hurl rocks over walls of social complacency that obscure the view out from the citadel. But the rocks all have messages tied to them that the defenders cannot help but read. The messages say, let us knock down the walls, and use the blocks to pave a road we can all walk together."

To succeed fully in reconstructing American law, then, "outsider jurisprudence" must tap and cultivate an appreciation of context and a toleration of difference among dominant social groups long used to regarding abstract, "neutral" language and principles as the highest form of justice. Above all, the legal reformers' venture depends upon the ability and willingness of dominant Americans to develop and exercise a new sense of empathy with the powerless. As Lynne Henderson explains, empathy involves three basic phenomena: "(1) feeling the emotion of another; (2) understanding the experience or situation of another, both affectively and cognitively, often achieved by imagining oneself to be in the position of the other; and (3) action brought about by experiencing the distress of another (hence the confusion of empathy with sympathy and compassion). The first two forms are ways of knowing, the third form a catalyst for action."

Traditional legal discourse systematically "disallows the language of emotion and experience" and thus insists upon "an impoverished view of reason and understanding□one that focuses on cognition in its most reductionist sense." This traditional demand for rationality, order and control deprives American law of a rich source of knowledge and a possible impetus to reform. Empathic understanding might enlarge the visual field and reveal hidden moral and social problems: "The stories or narratives of the law can be heard differently, and more meanings will be available to legal discourse through explicit attempts to understand the situation and experience of others. This can lead to revolutions in habitual legal thinking and transformation of legal problems." The long-term result could be "normatively better legal outcomes."

Unfortunately, empathy (especially for those differently situated in the social world) does not come naturally to everyone. Empathy must be deliberately developed. Arguably, the best possible method of tapping and building empathy is to engage in counterhegemonic legal storytelling itself, placing narratives rich in emotional experience within legal frameworks. Effective empathic narrative "includes descriptions of concrete human situations and their meanings to the persons affected in the context of their lives. It is contextual, descriptive, and affective narrative, although it need not be 'emotional' in the pejorative sense of overwrought. It is, instead, the telling of the stories of persons and human meanings, not abstractions; it is a phenomenological argument."

Precisely because they focus upon context, personal experience and human feeling, then, alternative legal narratives seem to enjoy the best chance of developing the empathy in the dominant social group upon which all serious legal reform depends. Those who tell and those who listen to these stories may succeed most in "making the jump" that Eudora Welty describes "into the mind, heart, and skin" of another human being, whether "a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white." Counterhegemonic legal narratives may thus be critical in creating the dialectic of empathic understanding and social change envisioned by "outsider jurisprudence." In the end, the reconstruction of American law may depend as much on giving full, rich voice to those long silenced in American courts and society, as on a sophisticated theoretical analysis of the politics of narrative.

Critical Essay #6

There can be little doubt that Eudora Welty is one of the consummate storytellers of twentieth-century America. Born to a region, period and family rich in traditional oral culture, Welty early acquired an enduring delight in narratives of all kinds, oral and written. Since her mother and her mother's female friends were the principal oral storytellers of her youth, Welty's own developing narrative perspective was distinctly feminine and, in a strongly patriarchal Southern culture, at least gently interrogatory of the established systems of power. At the same time, Welty's love of narrative and extraordinary empathy with all of her characters infuse her fictional explorations of Southern families and communities with a special caring quality. As the literary critic Carol Manning notes, "Welty characterizes concretely the day-to-day lives and special events of some quite ordinary people. And she makes us care for them. Portraying them in depth, she attaches them firmly to time and place, reveals their pasts, leads us to wonder about their futures, and shows us the social and cultural milieus which have formed them." Attention to context, the personal experiences of ordinary people, and empathic understanding mark Welty's mature narratives.

Eudora Welty's many stories and novels simultaneously celebrate and reproduce the tradition of oral storytelling, and literally give voice to the perspectives of a great variety of characters. Her portraits of a tremendously diverse oral culture stand out even among Southern writers. In Manning's judgment, "Not only are Welty's characters perhaps the most loquacious in Southern fiction, but they also tell more tales, and a greater range of tales, than do other characters." Unlike other Southern authors who draw upon the oral tradition, Welty incorporates many tales of the recent as well as the distant past into her repertory, and includes many more storytellers than "the conventional narrators of such tales in Southern literature□blacks, fathers, elderly aunts, grandparents, and a few other adults." Most distinctively, Welty "puts the tale, whatever its subject and whoever its speaker, in the natural, conversational language of its speaker or speakers. The chatter of her characters, contributing greatly to the noisy, bustling tone of her works, is a major distinction between her treatment of the oral tradition and its portrayal by many other writers."

Most significantly for our purpose, Welty seems to recognize the complex politics of narrative itself, as she subtly portrays her characters shaping the recent and distant past through their oft-told stories. "Whether their tales result from boredom, from a long habit of talking, from nostalgia for the past, from a desire to entertain, from an attempt to honor and please others, or from a combination of these, the family and community do not recount events as they actually occurred but instead reshape the reality behind the tales to accord with their needs and values." Competing or self-contradictory narratives themselves frequently lead us to this realization. This sophisticated demonstration of the (often unconscious) construction of social reality through narrative lends Welty's literature an unusual richness; at once ironically critical and undeniably fond of human creativity, Welty embraces multiplicity. Women and men, young and old, poor and rich, black and white, illiterate and literate, are all permitted to tell their own stories, with their own emphases, concerns, rhythms and intonations, in Welty's mature fiction.

Nowhere does this complex, multivocal narrative style have a more potent counterhegemonic effect than in Welty's novel of 1970, *Losing Battles.* Set in the clay hills of northeast Mississippi in the 1930s, this long comic novel chronicles a series of losing battles waged by an extended rural family; not least of these losing battles is the neverending one against poverty itself. But we are not simply told the Vaughn Beecham Renfro clan's history. Even more fully than in her other novels, in *Losing Battles* Welty abandons the device of the omniscient narrator and allows the family to reveal themselves and their struggles through their many overlapping and partially contradictory stories, told at a reunion celebrating the ninetieth birthday of Granny Vaughn. As Welty explained in an interview, "I needed that region, that kind of country family, because I wanted that chorus of voices, everybody talking and carrying on at once. I wanted to try something completely vocal and dramatized. Those people are natural talkers and storytellers, in a remote place where there was time for that." The result is a thoroughly democratic novel in which dialogue occupies roughly ninety percent of 436 pages, and "the interplay of the characters, what each person says and how others react to his or her words, is the chief means of characterization." Children and adults, women and men, adored and disliked members of the family all participate in the process of creating the family's history, through their competing and sometimes cacophonous narratives.

A central place in the family's tales of their losing battles is reserved for their contacts with the law. Literary scholars have neglected this aspect of the novel, but there can be no doubt about its importance. Despite Miss Beulah Renfro's protestation that hers was a "strict, law-abiding, God-fearing close-knit family" as the novel and reunion begin, the family awaits the return of her son and their hero, Jack, from an eighteen-month incarceration in the state penitentiary. As part of a longstanding feud between the Vaughn Beecham Renfro and the neighboring Stovall families, Jack and Curly Stovall had done battle verbally and physically two years before. When Curly took Jack's dead grandmother's gold wedding ring (the family's sole remaining treasure) from Jack's little sister in payment of the family's debts at his (formally their) store, Jack beat Curly up country-style, covered him with fertilizer, stuffed him into a coffin in the store, and then carried off on his back the heavy safe in which the ring had been stowed. On Jack's trek across country to the Renfro farm, the safe popped open and the ring was lost. This mock-heroic epic struggle ended in an equally strange legal battle, as Curly pressed charges and then posted bail for Jack. But the good-humored fun ended with the trial itself.

As the family relates the story in the first hundred pages of the novel, the trial was one of the family's major losing battles. Strictly applying the abstract rules of law, the courtroom judge completely missed the long-standing and good-natured elements of the feud. In the courthouse in the town of Ludlow (a foreign place to the family), Judge Moody effectively silenced Jack, unable to hear his inarticulate, abbreviated defense and demanding instead a story that Jack could not tell. As Beulah notes, "we knew full well he wasn't going to stand up in front of the public and tell 'em any of our business." Jack was unable to explain that he had defended his family's honor and diminishing property against the rival clan that had (legally) stolen from and indebted them for generations; he did claim, in a very few words but with total confidence, that he had to

be acquitted, because his family needed him so badly to work their heavily-mortgaged farm. But Judge Moody summarily dismissed this contextual defense. In the eyes of context-blind American justice, Jack had committed robbery and aggravated battery upon a governmental official (Curly was town marshal, after all). Jack was packed off to prison for two years, the judge proclaimed, as "a lesson to the rest" to cease "taking things in [their] own hands" and to respect the law and those who own property and have been "raised to office." But as Jack's mother confesses, a far different lesson passed from insider to outsiders in this blatant contest of legal and social power: " 'Of course that judge never got it through his head what it was all about!' yelled Miss Beulah. 'Born and bred in Ludlow, most likely in the very shadow of the courthouse! A man never spent a day of his life in Banner, never heard of a one of us!' "

At the seriocomic heart of the novel, the clan captures the judge and compels him to listen to the repressed narratives of the legal outsiders, and hence to reconsider his initial judgment. In a series of comic misadventures, Jack escapes from prison a day before his parole in order not to disappoint his family at their reunion. Hitching a ride on the back of the fancy car of the hopelessly-lost and unrecognized Judge Moody, Jack first rescues the car from a ditch, and then learns of the judge's identity and determines to force the car back into a ditch, only to watch the judge swerve to avoid Jack's wife and baby and end up with his car teetering precariously on a peak overlooking a ravine. Filled with gratitude, Jack insists that the judge and his wife take refuge in the only possible place, the family reunion.

Here the serious side of the drama unfolds. Forced to sit in a child's school desk chair□the only remaining seat at the bustling reunion□and really to hear for the first time the outsiders' stories of poverty, illness and endurance, the judge is rendered silent. In his learner's chair rather than on his bench, Judge Moody develops a new sense of empathy with the family's long train of losing battles. His empathic understanding is reinforced as the judge personally witnesses Curly Stovall's crass commercial meanness (Curly, who has appropriated Jack's truck and horse in his absence, bickers over the price of rescuing the Moodys' car, and blithely leaves them stranded while he attends to his reelection campaign), as well as Jack's deep sense of honor and family loyalty (now transferred in part to the judge for saving Jack's wife and baby). Judge Moody's comprehension of the complex nature of Jack's "crime" also deepens, as he watches the genial greeting and ritualized rough play of the two rivals. Following Jack's heroic, if somewhat ill-conceived rescue of the damaged car. Judge Moody implicitly reverses his original misconceived judgment. He certainly does not send Jack back to prison for escaping early or renewing his "assault" on Curly in a new fight over the truck, as he certainly would have done eighteen months before. Rather, the former adversaries in legal conception solemnly, if wordlessly, proclaim their new understanding: "Judge Moody put out his rope-burned hand, Jack put up his bloody one, and they shook."

Before the daring and hilarious rescue of the car, and while still in the learner's seat, Judge Moody is called upon to render a second judgment. The issue is the identity of Jack's wife, Gloria, an orphan of unknown parentage. Here the Vaughn Beecham Renfro clan acts as the prosecutor and insider, attempting to encircle, own and

overwhelm the silent outsider, Gloria. Affronted by Gloria's "proud" insistence on her own, mysterious identity and her reluctance to participate in the noisy reunion, the family attempts to claim her as the illegitimate daughter of Jack's long-dead uncle, Sam Dale Beecham. In a powerful scene reminiscent in some ways of a gang rape, the women of the family force the resisting Gloria to the ground and stuff watermelon "as big as a man's clayed shoe" down her throat, as they try to force the recalcitrant outsider to acquiesce in their interpretation of her identity. " 'Say Beecham!' they ordered her, close to her ear. They rolled her by the shoulders, pinned her flat, then buried her face under the flesh of the melon with its blood heat, its smell of evening flowers. Ribbons of juice crawled on her neck and circled it, as hands robbed of sex spread her jaws open. . . . 'Come on, sisters, help feed her! Let's cram it down her little red lane. Let's make her say Beecham! *We* did!' came the women's voices."

Gloria valiantly and wisely refuses to accede to this eradication of her difference. Indeed, the stakes are high not only emotionally, but also legally: the family's interpretation would make Gloria Jack's first cousin; by Mississippi law, their marriage could be annulled, their baby daughter declared illegitimate, and Jack returned to prison for breaking yet another legal prohibition. Hence the importance of Judge Moody, silent witness and now judge of the legal issue. Before his eye-opening experiences at the reunion, Judge Moody would probably have enforced the technical letter of the law; indeed, he has ventured into the rural wilderness specifically to investigate this claim. But now he sees and worries about the context:

" 'It's that baby. I think we'll have to close one eye over that everlasting baby,' Judge Moody said in the same heavy voice."

Given this new empathy and concern about relationships, the judge hears different parts of the proffered evidence and constructs a different, more generous legal narrative. Stressing a portion of ninety-year-old Granny Vaughn's convoluted oral testimony (suggesting that Sam Dale Beecham was accidentally emasculated in infancy and couldn't have fathered Gloria) over another, Judge Moody sets aside the only written evidence (a letter from Sam Dale claiming Gloria's supposed mother as his wife and her baby as his own). The evidence on either side is ambiguous in the extreme, but the judge's empathy for the outsider in this case clearly affects his judgment. From his learner's seat, Judge Moody uncharacteristically rules that there "was no prior knowledge between the partners" and, therefore, no crime committed: "You end up doing yourself the thing you hate most, the thing you've deplored the loudest and longest. . . . Here I am, taking the law into my own hands."

Even this unwonted action fails to exhaust Judge Moody's new empathy with outsiders, or his unexplained legal decisions at the reunion. The most serious and painful case is reserved for last. This is the case of the consummate outsider, Uncle Nathan Beecham, the truly silent evangelical itinerant who litters the country with apocalyptic signs. From the most deeply buried family story we learn that many years before, Nathan had murdered the greedy lumber speculator who had first appropriated, stripped and exhausted much of the family's land; Nathan had then stood by silent and watched as an innocent black man was hung for the murder. Struck mute by his own guilt and the

law's inability to protect the powerless, Nathan had cut off his right hand and exiled himself from his home and family. He appears at the reunion as a stranger. Remarkably, as long-silent Nathan's story is finally and fully heard, Welty realizes at last her goal of "entering into the mind and inside the skin" of a murderer. Moved to empathic understanding of the complicated context of the crime and the prolonged suffering of the criminal, Judge Moody again reaches an uncharacteristic and extraordinary decision. Once more, he takes the law into his own hands and implicitly pardons Nathan by taking no further action. Thus the judge reaffirms his growing conviction that not all legal narratives could be heard in American courts.

Finally, the novel invites us to ponder the impact of his new empathic understanding of outsiders on Judge Moody himself. Initially the main effect is disorientation, as the judge feels himself "lost" without his abstract conceptual moorings. As he wanders literally and figuratively through "a maze" of alien dirt roads and attitudes, Judge Moody loses his customary sense of reality; in the midst of the reunion, he confides to his wife, "Nothing wrong. Only I don't care quite the same about living as I did this morning." And yet, as he is compelled to occupy the learner's chair and listen to alternative conceptions of truth and justice, the judge's sense of reality broadens and deepens. He sees as never before the importance and complexity of human relationships and responsibility, and confronts his own weakness in avoiding the calls for help of a sick and aged friend. Bending the abstract rules of law and acknowledging the importance of context and human experience seem to permit even the quintessential representative of American law to grow and mature.

In joining hands with the outsiders and singing "Blest Be the Tie" to complete the reunion, Judge Moody also embraces Beulah's alternative vision of justice and truth, "we're all part of it together, or ought to be!" Traditional adversaries are reconciled, in large measure, as an insider develops a new empathic understanding of counterhegemonic legal narratives, and the outsiders "forgive" him his former lack of understanding. Stories may be all this poor family have left, but stories have power; as Jack concludes of an old family foe, "I reckon I even love her . . . I heard her story." The novel closes upon "the faces of losers and winners, the forgotten and the remembered, still there together and looking like members of the same family." Thus begins the slow, painful reconstruction of American law through the power of narrative, as imaginatively envisioned by Eudora Welty.

Reflecting in 1971 upon her own long career, Welty confided that the "form of human vision" she had most valued was that "charged with sympathy." She revealed that her central aesthetic and philosophical goal had been formed as she photographed poor, rural, black and white Mississippians for the Works Progress Administration during the Depression: "But away off one day in Tishomingo County, I knew this, anyway: that my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight." Resembling "outsider jurisprudence" in inspiration and content, then, Eudora Welty's vision of personal and social transformation rests upon the dual power of polyphonic narrative

and empathy. Its richness reveals the promise of a reconstruction of law for all Americans.

Source: Eve Kornfeld, "Reconstructing American Law: The Politics of Narrative and Eudora Welty's Empathic Vision," in *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, April 1992, pp. 23-39.

Topics for Further Study

A primary theme of the novel is the struggle between individual identity and family identity. Which do you think is more important: a strong sense of self and independence, or strong family ties and togetherness? Is it possible to have both? Use examples from your life and the lives of people you know to support your answer.

Which character in the novel do you most identify with? Why?

Do research to learn about life in northeast Mississippi today. How has life changed since the time portrayed in the novel? How has it remained the same? Make a Venn diagram or a chart to show the differences and similarities. Consider such things as education, occupations, standard of living, family size, availability of health care, etc.

Choose one passage in the novel that you think is especially amusing. Analyze the passage to see what makes it funny. Notice things such as the author's choice of language, pacing, etc. Try your hand at comedic writing by writing either an additional humorous scene for the novel or an amusing story based on something that happened in your own family.

Given what you know about the family and the setting of the novel, and about the decades after the 1930s, write a short biography for Lady May. Consider how much education she received, whether she traveled, whether she married, and so on.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The United States is in a severe economic depression triggered by a stock market crash. Poverty and unemployment are widespread; hunger is common.

1970s: The United States is in a recession triggered by an oil shortage. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) raises prices and cuts production to punish the United States and Europe for their support of Israel. Economic growth slows, and inflation and unemployment are high.

Today: The U.S. economy faces uncertainty. The longest period of prosperity in the nation's history appears to be over as economic growth slows, the stock market is rocked by instability, and the country becomes involved in war overseas.

1930s: At a time when people have little or no money, and before the age of electronic entertainment, storytelling is a widely practiced and much appreciated art. When people have leisure time, they are likely to gather and listen to family members recall family stories and old tales, as the Renfros and Beechams do in *Losing Battles*.

1970s: Television is in virtually every American home, and going out to the movies is a popular form of entertainment. Instead of telling stories, Americans are more likely to watch them on a screen.

Today: In addition to television and movies, entertainment is now available via the Internet; home movies on video, DVD, and satellite; videogames; and more. Increasingly, people spend their leisure time alone, focusing on their preferred form of entertainment.

1930s: The fictional Granny Vaughn, who was born in the 1840s and is celebrating her ninetieth birthday, has lived half a century beyond her life expectancy at birth, which was forty years. Her great-granddaughter Lady May, now a toddler, has a life expectancy of about sixty-five years.

1970s: A woman born in the United States during the 1970s has a life expectancy of about seventy-seven years.

Today: A woman born in the United States today has a life expectancy of about eighty years.

What Do I Read Next?

Eudora Welty (1986), by noted literary scholars Harold Bloom and William Golding, provides biographical and critical overviews to aid the student of Welty's novels and short stories.

Fellow Mississippian William Faulkner's 1930 *As I Lay Dying* is the story of a poor southern family on a journey to bury their mother. While this book touches on some of the same issues as *Losing Battles* (such as death and family relationships), Faulkner's treatment of these themes is dramatically different from Welty's.

Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories* (1996) provides a comprehensive look at the short stories of another important female writer from the South. O'Connor, like Welty, also wrote novels but is more strongly associated with short fiction.

The *Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (1982) includes all forty-one of Welty's published short stories. Welty is recognized primarily for her short fiction, and this collection is an ideal introduction to her work.

Welty's autobiographical *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984) is a rare glimpse into the author's life experiences. Her writing style is the same blend of humor, observation, and sensitivity that readers enjoy in her fiction.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, *Eudora Welty: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*, Chelsea House, 1999.

Bloom offers a thorough reference to Welty's short stories, for which she is best known. Ideally suited for the reader new to Welty's work, this book explains themes, techniques, and contexts for Welty's short fiction.

Champion, Laurie, ed., *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty's Fiction*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994.

This volume offers the collected criticism of Welty's writing from the 1940s to the early 1990s. The criticism included is drawn from journals (literary and general interest) and contains critical treatments of Welty's fiction by scholars of American and Southern literature.

Price, Reynolds, ed., *Eudora Welty Photographs*, University Press of Mississippi, 1993.

Using Welty's early photographs, Price shows Welty's personal view of the South. The book includes an introductory interview conducted by Price with Welty concerning her photographs.

Weston, Ruth D., *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty*, Louisiana State University Press, 1994.

Weston reviews Welty's work in terms of the gothic tradition to show how she uses gothic themes and narrative techniques within the southern literary framework.

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Bailey, Paul, "Gloriously Ordinary," in *Times Literary Supplement*, June 4, 1982, p. 608.

Boatwright, James, "I Call This a Reunion to Remember, All!," in *New York Times*, April 12, 1970.

McAlpin, Sara, "Family in Eudora Welty's Fiction," in *Southern Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer 1982, pp. 480-94.

Woodward, C. Vann, "Southerner with Her Own Accent," in *New York Times Book Review*, February 19, 1984, p. 7.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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