The Robber Bridegroom Short Guide

The Robber Bridegroom by Eudora Welty

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Characters

Working as she does with the fairy tale mode, Welty deliberately creates stereotypical figures, most of whom are one-dimensional and static. As Welty points out in a talk she delivered on The Robber Bridegroom before the Mississippi Historical Society, she uses only one word to describe her planter, Clement Musgrove, the word "innocent." That word, she says, "shines like a cautionary blinker to what lies on the road ahead." Clement's wife, the evil Salome, is also one-dimensional as are the clownish Goat, the braggart Mike Fink, and the bloodthirsty Little Harp.

Rosamond, Clement's daughter, and her lover, Jamie Lockhart, however, are dual-natured. When the beautiful Rosamond opens her mouth the lies fall out "like diamonds and pearls." Furthermore, when she meets Jamie in the woods she pretends to be someone other than herself. He, too, wears two faces. In civilized company, he is Jamie Lockhart, handsome gentleman; but in the wilderness he is the fierce bandit chief who stains his face with berry juice to hide his true identity. Only Rosamond and Jamie undergo change in the course of the novel, both coming to understand the importance of honesty and trust among human beings.

Social Concerns

Although Welty saw a good deal of poverty in her work for the WPA during the depression, and although she grew up in a class conscious South, her work rarely espouses social causes.

Her subject is the humanity that links all people rather than the social issues that divide them. In fact, in 1965, in answer to critics who expected her to use her fiction to promote social equality, she published "Must the Novelist Crusade" in the October issue of the Atlantic Monthly. She insists in that essay that "the zeal to reform, which quite properly inspires the editorial, has never done fiction any good." In another sense, however, all of Welty's writing focuses on social concerns because she writes about human matters, principally human relationships and the relationship between the individual and the community.

In The Robber Bridegroom, Welty takes a piece of her country's past and produces what she says is not an "historical historical novel," but is rather a blend of history and place with fantasy, fairy tale, legend, folklore, and myth. It is a tender, funny, terrifying, wondrous tale of a planter and his beautiful daughter, of a wicked stepmother and her jealous greed, of bandits and Indians, of braggarts and comic grotesques, all brought together in the late eighteenth century along that dangerous traveler's trail adjacent to the Mississippi River, the old Natchez Trace. Among other things, the novel looks at historical processes and the losses and gains inherent in those processes. Captured by Indians and awaiting his fate, the planter, Clement Musgrove, indulges in a bit of philosophy as he looks at "the sad faces of the Indians, like the faces of feverish children." To himself he says, "The savages have only come the sooner to their end; we will come to ours too. Why have I built my house, and added to it?

The planter will go after the hunter, and the merchant after the planter, all having their day." The book is about what happens in the human heart as these processes unfold.

Techniques

Vital to all of Welty's work is the knitting together of the actual and the imaginative. As she says in One Writer's Beginnings (1984), "My imagination takes its strength and guides its direction from what I see and hear and learn and feel and remember of my living world." Nowhere is this more apparent than in The Robber Bridegroom where she uses an actual setting in an historical frame and peoples it with figures from both history and fantasy. (The Harp brothers were flesh and blood outlaws, and Mike Fink was a legendary flatboatman on the Mississippi River.) Some of the book's episodes are based on real events, others are pure invention, and still others are a blend of the two or lifted in fragments from the Grimm brothers or from myth and legend.

Much of the book reads like a fairy tale, and its name, of course, is the same as that of its fairy tale counterpart. Moreover, its oral quality makes for pleasurable reading aloud. The book's magic derives more from its language than from its incidents, though they are magical enough. For example, the book's second paragraph, which describes Clement's arrival at the frontier town of Rodney's Landing on the Mississippi River, captures the flavor of Welty's setting on the borderline between wilderness and civilization and establishes the role of imagination that is to shape events and characters through the course of the book: As his foot touched the shore, the sun sank into the river the color of blood, and at once a wind sprang up and covered the sky with black, yellow, and green clouds the size of whales, which moved across the face of the moon . . .

There were sounds of rushing and flying, from the flourish of carriages hurrying through the streets after dark, from the bellowing throats of the flatboatmen, and from the wilderness itself, which lifted and drew itself in the wind, and pressed its savage breath even closer to the little galleries of Rodney, and caused a bell to turn over in one of the steeples, and shook the fort and dropped a tree over the racetrack.

The book also abounds in wordplay and whimsical humor. The first question Clement asks his prospective landlord in Rodney is, "But where have you left your right ear?" He trusts only people who have both ears, and the larger the better. Later, when Rosamond returns home naked from herb gathering in the woods and reports that a bandit (Jamie Lockhart in disguise) stole all her clothes but left her intact, Clement and Salome are understandably incredulous. "And at first they did not believe her, until there was nothing else to do but believe her, unless they jumped down the well."

Welty likes to attach the unexpected phrase to the end of certain sentences to give an incident a humorous turn, and she uses the tall tale in delightful fun whenever Mike Fink is on stage. In short, this book blends techniques from its various sources as readily as it blends content.

Themes

Welty's principal theme in The Robber Bridegroom is the duality of experience, the gap between appearance and reality. This is a human concern that spans all times and places; it is a truth verified in history, legend, fairy tale, and myth alike. People and things are not always what they seem to be, and an innocent man like Welty's planter working his way through a dualistic world is bound to suffer. Furthermore, Welty attests through the relationship of her young lovers, the planter's daughter and the bandit-gentleman, that duplicity in human relationship leads to distrust and suffering.

One of Welty's favorite motifs throughout her fiction is the function of memory and the past, usually personal memory. Here, however, she uses history and the collective memory of western civilization — in the form of myth, tale, and legend — to tell her story. Thus, The Robber Bridegroom is different from her other fictions, but then so are most of her fictions different again from each other. Welty is probably one of this century's most versatile writers of fiction, using a wide variety of forms and methods to explore the self's deepest needs as these needs confront community expectations and imperatives. At the heart of all her work, however, is storytelling.

She is a master storyteller, and she writes about people who live by the story. But while her other fiction is full of stories and the ritual of mythmaking in communities, The Robber Bridegroom takes existing myths and reveals the large fabric of human truth behind them.

Adaptations

The Robber Bridegroom was adapted as a Broadway musical in 1974. Although the characters essentially retained their identifying traits, the musical was a rowdy, heehawing, hillbilly affair. The production's regional flavor overwhelmed the novel's sometimes delicate humor and its fairy tale atmosphere.

Literary Precedents

The most obvious have already been suggested — fairy tales, folk tales, legends, frontier humor and tall tales, classical mythology, and regional history. The Robber Bridegroom is fantasy, but not in the manner of J. R. R. Tolkien's work or C. S. Lewis's. Welty uses the real world — she does not create a never-never land — and she populates it with earthy people who sometimes behave like characters in a fairy tale.

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