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Fairy Tale Narratives in Eudora Welty's Short Fiction

(Bakalárska práca)

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Introduction

This bachelor thesis focuses on the elements typical for a fairy tale and the purpose of their presence in Eudora Welty's short fiction, namely the novel *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) and her short story collections *A Curtain of Green* (1941), *The Wide Net* (1943), and *Golden Apples* (1949). Besides a narratological analysis, the thesis will provide close reading of the texts, based on the methods of archetypal and mythological criticism. Drawing from famous folklorists, such as Stith Thompson, Antti Aarne, Hans-Jörg Uther, Max Lüthi, and Jack Zipes, I will try to find and point out elements of fairy tales in Welty's works.

Eudora Welty was born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, where she spent almost all her life. This is reflected also in her work, which is often set in the area. She published multiple short stories, novels, and essays. The most famous are short story collections *A Curtain of Green* or *Golden Apples*, novels *Delta Wedding* (1946) or *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972), and the collection of autobiographical essays *One Author's Beginnings* (1984). She was also interested in photography. Her photographs were sometimes the inspiration for her short stories. Later, they were collected and published in the collections *One Time, One Place* (1971) and *Photographs* (1989). One of the features of her writing is a strong connection to fairy tales and myths. Not only did she incorporate some fairy tale characteristics and mythical allusions into her works, but she also published essays, such as "Place in Fiction" (1956) or "On Fairy Tales" (1963), where she voiced her views on fairy tales. Therefore, her works seem like an ideal object of this kind of study.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to introduce some basic terminology and classification systems in folkloristics. Unfortunately, the terminology is often used rather loosely and finding a consensus is not always simple. Steven Swann Jones introduces three generally recognized types of folk narratives, namely myths, legends, and folktales. Myths are stories of immortal protagonists, gods, explaining the purpose of the universe. Legends are stories containing historical elements. They depict exceptional protagonists experiencing unusual encounters to demonstrate norms and values. Folktales, on the other hand, employ ordinary people living their everyday life. Jones lists four subgenres of folktales, namely fables, jokes, novellas, and fairy tales. The main difference among them is their content and aim. Fables aim to instruct people to be moral, jokes are trying to be humorous, novellas depict romance, and fairy tales deal with the wonders of the magical world.¹

¹ See Steven Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination*, ed. Ronald Gottesman (New York: Twayne, 1995), 8–10.

However, the boundaries between these subgenres are not always clear. Jones notes that the term fairy tale itself is tricky because it implies the presence of fairies, which does not necessarily have to be the case.² More precisely, Jones states that “*fairy tales depict magical or marvelous events or phenomena as valid part of human experience.*”³ This would mean that any magical elements are enough to make a story a fairy tale, but it is not true. For example, personified animals are frequently present in fairy tales, but their presence does not unequivocally signal a fairy tale; animal fables introduce them too, but with a different aim, to illustrate a moral.

Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory provides a definition of fairy tales, focusing mainly on typical motifs and themes:

In its written form the fairy tale tends to be a narrative in prose about the fortunes of a hero or heroine who, having experienced various adventures of a more or less supernatural kind, lives happily ever after. Magic, charms, disguise and spells are some of the major ingredients of such stories, which are often subtle in their interpretation of human nature and psychology.⁴

This definition affirms that while magical elements are typical for a fairy tale, their number or nature is not always the same.

Stith Thompson, in *The Folktale* (1946), offers the following definition:

Although the term “folktale” is often used in English to refer to the [. . .] “fairy tale” (the German *Märchen*), such as “Cinderella” or “Snow White,” it is also legitimately employed in a much broader sense to include all forms of prose narrative, written, or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years. In this usage the important fact is the traditional nature of the material.⁵

Thompson also considers fairy tale to be a subgenre of folktale. In his definition, he stresses the importance of tradition and talks about narratives, which have been passed down through many generations and are so often associated with fairy tales that no one would dispute their fairy tale essence.

² See Jones, *The Fairy Tale*, 9.

³ Jones, *The Fairy Tale*, 9. Italics in the original.

⁴ John A. Cuddon, “Fairy Tale,” in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory*, 4th edition, ed. Claire Preston (1998; London: Penguin, 1999), 302.

⁵ Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Dryden Press, 1946), 4.

However, there are also modern fairy tales with short tradition, which Thompson's definition excludes. Jack Zipes describes the modernization of fairy tales in this way:

The fairy tale adapted itself and was transformed by common nonliterate people and by upper-class literate people from a simple brief tale with vital information; it grew, became enormous, and disseminated information that contributed to the cultural evolution of specific groups. In fact, it continues to grow and embraces, if not swallows, all types of genres, art forms, and cultural institutions; and it adjusts itself to new environments through the human disposition to re-create relevant narratives and through technologies that make its diffusion easier and more effective.⁶

Zipes, after analyzing modern American fairy tales in the 1990s, lists some of their characteristic features. He notices that modern fairy tales are often reproductions of the traditional ones and that they are usually not so straightforward and might offer multiple interpretations. In addition, they might challenge gender stereotypes and rebel against the patriarchal ideology present in traditional fairy tales.⁷

All these definitions seem to fit Welty's writing perfectly. She draws inspiration from fairy tales with long tradition and incorporates their motifs and themes into her own writings. Her characters live ordinary lives but at the same time experience extraordinary encounters and events. In some instances, she even makes use of magic and supernatural elements. Welty wrote only one children's book, *The Shoe Bird* (1964). It is a modern fairy tale featuring a parrot living in a shoe store. This thesis will not deal with this particular work because it was intended to be a fairy tale from the beginning. Rather, it will analyze Welty's other works which are not primarily fairy tales but display some fairy tale features.

The Robber Bridegroom as a Fairy Tale

Welty's work most obviously associated with fairy tales is her novel *The Robber Bridegroom*. It is based on a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, but Welty turned it into a narrative of her own. She changed some details, added more characters or changed their roles, but her work still retained its fairy tale essence. She herself, pointing to the setting, called the novel "Fairy Tale

⁶ Jack Zipes, "The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture," *Marvels & Tales* 25, no. 2 (2011): 222, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389000>.

⁷ See Jack Zipes, "Recent Trends in the Contemporary American Fairy Tale," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 5, no. 1 (17) (1992): 35–6, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308137>.

of the Natchez Trace.”⁸ As R. S. Cotterill writes, Natchez Trace is a few hundred kilometers long path connecting Nashville, Tennessee, and Natchez, Mississippi. It was originally created by indigenous people and later widely used by European immigrants. With the appearance of steamboat, the trace lost its importance, but some parts of it still exist.⁹ The first part of this thesis is devoted to study of fairy tale elements found in this novel.

The Robber Bridegroom is a love story of two young people, Rosamond Musgrove and Jamie Lockhart. Rosamond’s mother died and her father married Salome, who is selfish, mean, and does not like her stepdaughter. Rosamond’s father, Clement Musgrove, is a planter, who travels for business. On one of his journeys, he meets Jamie, who helps him, and Clement invites Jamie to visit his house. While Clement is not at home, Salome sends Rosamond to the far and dangerous end of the garden and wishes that “the Indians might kidnap the girl and adopt her into their tribe, and give her another name, or that a leopard might walk out between two trees and carry her off in his teeth” (*RB*, 17). She even orders Goat, a neighbor’s son, to kill Rosamond. At the edge of the garden, Rosamond meets a robber, who is actually Jamie, but his face is stained with berry juice so that no one can recognize his true identity. He robs Rosamond of her beautiful green dress and the second time they meet of her virginity. Later, Jamie visits Clement’s home but the two lovers do not recognize each other, as Rosamond is covered in soot and Jamie’s face is, on the contrary, clean.

Rosamond falls in love with the robber and leaves her home to live with him and his gang in the forest without telling anyone. Clement thinks that the robber kidnapped her and asks Jamie to save her and bring her home. He promises Jamie that if he finds her, he can have her as his wife. Jamie looks for Rosamond in the forest, not knowing that the girl living with him is Rosamond, Clement’s lost daughter. During his search, he encounters Little Harp, a bandit whose character is based on a real Mississippi figure, one of the Harpe Brothers. As Thomas Burnell Colbert writes, the Harpe Brothers, Little Harpe and Big Harpe, were robbers and murderers operating in the area in the 18th and 19th century.¹⁰ Little Harp decides to kill Jamie and become the leader of the robbers himself. Once, while Jamie is not at home, Little Harp comes to the robbers’ den and asks for Jamie’s lover. The robbers give him an Indian girl instead, whom he brutally kills and then cuts off her little finger. Rosamond watches this from

⁸ Eudora Welty, “The Fairy Tale of the Natchez Trace,” in *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (1978; New York: Vintage, 1979), 300–14.

⁹ See R. S. Cotterill, “The Natchez Trace,” *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 7, no. 1 (1921): 27–35, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42637460>.

¹⁰ See Thomas Burnell Colbert, *Illinois Historical Journal* 90, no. 1 (1997): 68–9, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40193114>.

behind a barrel and the little finger falls into her lap. When Jamie returns, he attacks Little Harp and drives him away.

The only thing that spoils Rosamond's happiness is the fact that she does not know the robber's identity. Salome convinces her to wash his face while he is asleep, and Rosamond does so, but Jamie wakes up. They both recognize each other's true identity, but Jamie feels betrayed, and leaves Rosamond. Then, all the main characters are captured by indigenous people. Jamie, Rosamond, and Clement manage to escape, but Salome is killed for her arrogance. Jamie fights with Little Harp and kills him. In the end, Rosamond finds out that she is expecting Jamie's child, the two lovers meet again, reconcile, and live happily ever after.

Inspiration from Other Fairy Tales and Myths

Even the title clearly points at the fact that Welty drew her inspiration from the Grimms' eponymous fairy tale. Grimms' version tells the story of a daughter whom her father forces to marry an unknown man. The girl goes to visit his dwelling, where she witnesses the murder of another young girl and realizes that her fiancé is, in fact, a murderous robber. The robber severs one finger of the victim, which the young girl later uses to prove his guilt and avoid the marriage.

Similarly, the novel depicts a robber and a young girl, whose hand in marriage is promised to him by her father. However, there are some significant differences between these two texts. The most important one is, probably, the fact that Rosamond falls in love with the robber and is attracted by the dangerous side he possesses. Welty herself writes that "fairy tales are not innocent."¹¹ It is true, fairy tales do not always depict good people doing right things; there is a bit of mischief, wickedness, and that is probably the reason for such an unusual twist.

The Grimms' fairy tale can be classified according to Hans-Jörg Uther's typology, which he gave in his book *The Types of International Folktales* (2004). This type index was first conceived by Antti Aarne in 1910, later expanded by Thompson in 1928 and again in 1961, and finally finished by Uther in 2004. The index divides more than two thousand tales into seven groups, namely: animal tales, tales of magic, religious tales, realistic tales, tales of the stupid ogre, anecdotes and jokes, and formula tales. Each tale has its own entry, which contains its number according to the index; short synopsis; a list of motifs present; a list of other tale types, with which it is often combined; and a list of its variants in the world literature. The

¹¹ Eudora Welty, "On Fairy Tales," in *Occasions: Selected Writings*, ed. Pearl Amelia McHaney (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 109.

Grimms' fairy tale belongs to the section of realistic tales, more precisely designated as type 955, dealing with the topic of robbers and murderers.¹²

The Types of International Folktales is often used together with Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932), which lists various motifs, each labelled by a letter. Each motif then lists all the tale types where the motif is present. Under this type, Thompson names the motif of tests, signed with the letter H. In the Grimms' tale, this motif is present when the bridegroom's identity is tested or revealed by the proof of the severed finger.¹³ Another motif, which is known as the motif of impostures, and is signed with the letter K, is represented by the fake identity of the bridegroom.¹⁴ Lastly, the bridegroom's horrible treatment of the victim girl can be perceived as the motif of unnatural cruelty (S).¹⁵ Both the Grimms' tale and Welty's novel are quite similar regarding the type and motifs present, even though the tests are manifested in a different way in the novel, by cleaning the robber's face and revealing his identity.

Anne Ramirez claims that besides the connection with the eponymous fairy tale, Welty draws inspiration also from other fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. Firstly, when Rosamond's father invites Jamie to their house, Rosamond is dirty, covered in soot and exhausted after all the preparations that her stepmother ordered her to do. This scene noticeably resembles the one in "Cinderella," when the prince visits her house looking for his beloved.¹⁶ Furthermore, according to Richard Gray, the novel resembles "The Beauty and The Beast" in a way that the robber represents something evil, the beast which must be tamed and turned into a prince, or, in this case, a wealthy merchant.¹⁷ This could be seen at the end of the novel when Clement

¹² See Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, Part I* (2004; Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2011), 595.

¹³ See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends, Volume III* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1956), 378, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/B-001-002-766/mode/2up>.

¹⁴ See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends, Volume IV* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1957), 453, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/motifindexoffolk0004unsej-k/mode/2up>.

¹⁵ See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends, Volume V* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1955), 301–2, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/motifindexoffolk0005thom/mode/2up>.

¹⁶ See Anne Ramirez, "Gratitude, Greed, and Grace in *The Robber Bridegroom*: Eudora Welty's Intricate American Parable," *Eudora Welty Review* 1 (2009): 75, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24742095>.

¹⁷ See Richard Gray, "A Narrative Room of One's Own: Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* and European Fairy Tale," in *Transatlantic Exchanges: The American South in Europe—Europe in the American South*, ed. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and Richard Gray (Vienna: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 246, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/33842229.pdf>.

meets Rosamond, who tells him that Jamie abandoned his old ways and became “a gentleman of the world in New Orleans, respected by all that knew him.”¹⁸ According to Welty herself, Salome should be similar to the wife in “The Fisherman and His Wife,”¹⁹ whose greediness knew no bound. In addition, the boasting nature of Mike Fink, who claimed that he could ““carry a dozen oxen on [his] back at one time”” (*RB*, 6), should remind us of “Jack the Giant Killer.”²⁰ As Michael Allen writes, Fink was a legendary flatboatman in the area between the 18th and 19th century, who became a legend.²¹ In the novel, he introduces himself in the same way, as the “champion of all the flatboat bullies on the Mississippi River” (*RB*, 6) and functions as a side character.

Welty incorporates elements from many other sources in her work. According to Ramirez, one such source is the myth of “Cupid and Psyche,” in which Psyche does not know the identity of her lover and is convinced by her envious sisters to try to find out. She uses a lamp to see his face in the night, but accidentally spills hot oil on him, which wakes him up and makes him leave her.²² Such curiosity is displayed also by Rosamond, who cannot bear not to know the identity of her robber bridegroom. She is overcome by curiosity and removes the berry juice from his face while he is asleep. This wakes him up and he cannot deal with such a breach of trust and leaves Rosamond.

Ramirez also notices a striking similarity between the novel and the Scottish romantic ballad “Tam Lin.” Both tell a story of a girl, who ventures into a forest, meets a young man, conceives his child and later has to search for him again. Reportedly, even small details such as wearing a green dress are shared by both texts.²³

In *The Robber Bridegroom*, Welty highlights her connection to the area by incorporating Mississippi legends and historical figures into the story. According to Charles C. Clark, “she refashions the history of the Natchez Trace, particularly the careers of the infamous Harpe brothers, whose name she chooses to spell Harp.”²⁴ In the novel, Welty uses the character of Little Harp as a counterpart to Jamie. Little Harp represents a truly evil robber, wanting to kill Rosamond and Jamie and become the leader of the robbers. Big Harp appears in the novel only

¹⁸ Eudora Welty, “The Robber Bridegroom.” In *Complete Novels*, ed. Richard Ford and Michael Kreyling (New York: Library of America, 1998), 88. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *RB*.

¹⁹ See Welty, “Fairy Tale Natchez Trace,” 304.

²⁰ See Welty, “Fairy Tale Natchez Trace,” 303.

²¹ See Michael Allen, “‘Sired by a Hurricane:’ Mike Fink, Western Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse,” *Arizona and the West* 27, no. 3 (1985): 238–39, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40169378>.

²² See Ramirez, “Gratitude,” 75.

²³ See Ramirez, “Gratitude,” 77–78.

²⁴ Charles C. Clark, “‘The Robber Bridegroom:’ Realism and Fantasy on the Natchez Trace,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1973): 626, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26474142>.

as a talking severed head, which Little Harp always carries with him. Welty herself draws our attention to another historical figure, the boatman Mike Fink.²⁵ In addition, as Ramirez notes, not only does Welty make use of the Mississippi folklore, but she also adds a distinctively American element – indigenous people.²⁶

The Role of Nature and Magic Phenomena

A widely known characteristic of fairy tales is the specific role played by nature. There are numerous fairy tales depicting, on the one hand, nature having its own will and helping the protagonist, and, on the other hand, animals even as main characters, speaking and living as people. What is more, in fairy tales the nature rarely harms the protagonist. This is the case also in *The Robber Bridegroom*, and can be seen, for example, when Rosamond encounters a panther and plays with its cub, or when she is sent to milk cows and even though she does not know how to do it, the cows do not kick her, but let her “lean her head against their soft foreheads [. . .] and they put out their warm tongues on her cheek” (RB, 31).

This is also connected with Max Lüthi’s claim: “In folktales the numinous excites no fear nor curiosity.”²⁷ This means that, for example, even if a fairy tale character could speak with animals, it would not be surprising in the slightest. Of course, Lüthi’s statement could also be applied to other magic phenomena. For example, Little Harp carries a little trunk, which he does not want anyone to open. Later, it is revealed that the trunk contains the head of his brother, Big Harp. The head is still alive and cries: “Let me out!” (RB, 46). Neither when he hears the voice coming from the trunk, nor when he opens it and sees the head, does Goat find this extraordinary or give this peculiarity a second thought.

Such things can be found not only in fairy tales but also in writings using the method of magic realism. According to *Longman Dictionary of Literary Terms*, magic realism can be defined as “a type of contemporary narrative in which the magical and the mundane are mixed in an overall context of realistic storytelling.”²⁸ In magic realism, the reality and fantasy intervene, and it is not possible to determine what is real and what is not because the reality of magic realism does not exclude magic. Therefore, in the realm of magic realism, numinous would excite no fear.

²⁵ See Welty, “Fairy Tale Natchez Trace,” 302.

²⁶ See Ramirez, “Gratitude,” 75.

²⁷ Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. John D. Niles (1982; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 7.

²⁸ X. J. Kennedy, Dana Giola, and Mark Bauerlein, “Magic Realism,” in *The Longman Dictionary of Literary Terms: Vocabulary for the Informed Reader*, ed. Joseph Terry and Bob Ginsberg (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 92.

Furthermore, as Lüthi writes, fairy tales “depict many an ailing princess but never name the type of malady [. . .]. Even when actual mutilations occur [. . .], we do not see blood flowing or a real wound developing.”²⁹ Explicit violence is understated, probably so as not to scare the younger audience. When Little Harp cuts off the little finger of the Indian girl in *The Robber Bridegroom*, there is no mention of blood streaming out of the wound, nor, when it falls into Rosamond’s lap, is her dress stained by it.

Symbolic Numbers and Magical Helpers

According to Vladimir Propp, one of the elements of a fairy tale is trebling,³⁰ the repetition of the number three. It plays its role when the number of objects or people is mentioned, but it can also relate to the repetition of actions or whole sequences in the story. Trebling is truly abundant in Welty’s novel. On his way home, Clement succeeds in finding accommodation in the third inn, there are three travelers accommodated in the same room, and Jamie kills Little Harp the third time they meet. Rosella Mamoli Zorzi notices that “the magic number seven also has a place in the text: Rosamond repeats the story about being robbed of her clothes seven times, the neighbor has seven children, and so forth.”³¹

In *The Robber Bridegroom*, we can also observe what Propp calls “magical helpers” or “magical agents.” They are living things or objects that help the protagonist to achieve their goal.³² Such magical helper could be the talking raven above the entrance to Jamie’ house. The raven can say:

“Turn back my Bonny, / Turn away home” (*RB*, 5).

The bird could be considered a magical helper, as it warns Rosamond against entering the robbers’ den. It is rather disputable what role the locket which Rosamond carries all the time plays. Rosamond might see it as a kind of a charm because she inherited it from her late mother. That is probably why it is later taken from her by her stepmother, to do her harm. On the other hand, its role is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, and it does not magically help Rosamond in any way.

²⁹ Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, 12.

³⁰ See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (1968; Austin: University of Texas, 2009), 74.

³¹ Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, “Eudora Welty’s ‘*The Robber Bridegroom*:’ A New Use of the Fairy Tale,” *Eudora Welty Review* 3 (2011): 27, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24742244>.

³² See Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 82.

Setting

Rudolf Roos states that traditional fairy tales “are detached from time and place.”³³ They are set in “fairy tale time” and “fairy tale place.”³⁴ Therefore, they usually lack specific reference to time and place in our world. Nevertheless, the mentions of concrete places are quite frequent in Welty’s *The Robber Bridegroom*: the Natchez Trace, New Orleans, or Rodney’s Landing, which used to be a busy port city until Mississippi changed its course, to name just a few. Also, if we know that the historical figures mentioned in the novel lived approximately in the 18th century, we can assume that the novel takes place at the same time. In one of her essays, Welty specifies that the story takes place just before 1798.³⁵ Zorzi claims that the setting is sometimes described in an abstract way, while sometimes it is concrete.³⁶ Such deviation from the abstractness of fairy tales can be seen right at the beginning of the second chapter, describing the place where one of the protagonists lives: “A way out in the woods from Rodney’s Landing, in a clearing in the live-oaks and the cedars and the magnolia trees, with the Mississippi River a mile to the back and the Old Natchez Trace a mile to the front, was the house Clement Musgrove had built” (*RB*, 17).

Jack Zipes notices one more interesting detail of the setting of traditional fairy tales. They usually present a feudal society and do not mention any modern machines or industrialization.³⁷ The 18th century was not very rich in technologies. The characters live in a countryside house surrounded by woods, not in a busy and overcrowded city; Clement is a planter and not a factory worker; the work is performed by slaves and not machines; and there are no mentions of any of the characters being educated or even attending school. Even though *The Robber Bridegroom* is a modern fairy tale, Welty chose to set it in a time more than a century and a half before it had been written.

The World of Characters

It is also important to explore the characters, or “*dramatis personae*,” as Propp calls them, and their functions and roles in the novel. We can see many archetypal characters: an evil stepmother, beautiful daughter, meek father, as well as villains. In addition, Welty also employs

³³ Rudolf Roos, “10 Characteristics of Fairy Tales (by a Professional Storyteller),” last modified December 11, 2022, <https://internationalstoryteller.com/characteristics-of-fairy-tales/>.

³⁴ Roos, “Characteristics of Fairy Tales.”

³⁵ See Welty, “Fairy Tale Natchez Trace,” 302.

³⁶ See Zorzi, “Eudora Welty,” 27.

³⁷ See Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 7–8.

a false villain, which, according to Scott Hamilton, is “a character who initially appears to be the villain [. . .] but is not truly evil.”³⁸

The evil stepmother in the story, who envies her stepdaughter and wants to get rid of her, is Salome. The meek father, who is not able to protect his beloved daughter from Salome’s schemes, is Clement. The beautiful daughter, the main protagonist of the story, is Rosamond. The false villain is Jamie; despite his being a robber, he is not trying to hurt the main protagonist. At the beginning, he seems to be the antagonist but turns out to be good in the end. The true villain in this story is Little Harp. It is Little Harp who kills the Indian girl and severs her finger, while Rosamond watches from her hideout. According to Ramirez, “Little Harp seems to be the personification of Jamie's worst potential, analogous to the villainous robber bridegroom in the original Grimm tale of that name.”³⁹ If Jamie really were the evil robber from the original tale, the novel would stray too far from the convention of fairy tales, where goodness always prevails over evil. Therefore, someone else had to take his position and be depicted as the antagonist in the novel. In addition, Salome, Goat, or the Indians can be considered as villains, too, because they are trying to hurt the main protagonist.

Now, I will analyze the tale, using the functions of Propp’s *dramatis personae*. Propp, in his *Morphology of the Folktale* defines functions as constant elements constituting a tale. Not all functions are present in every tale, but the ones that are present follow a given order.⁴⁰ Propp uses a set of letters and numbers to label each function. This analysis would be quite complex, as the novel, unlike a standard fairy tale, tells the story of numerous side characters and their own quests and encounters. Therefore, it comprises of multiple tales. It is not possible to take all the sidelines into consideration, as this would violate the simple order of a fairy tale. For this reason, I will focus only on the main fairy tale plotline, the story of Rosamond.

I. ONE OF THE MEMBERS OF A FAMILY ABSENTS HIMSELF FROM HOME.⁴¹

This can be perceived when Clement leaves house and leaves Rosamond alone with her mean stepmother.

³⁸ Scott Hamilton, “The Heroic Fairy Tale Villain: Application of Vladimir Propp’s Formalist Schema to the Creation of a Revisionist Cinematic Fairy Tale in which the Traditional Villain Is Transformed into an Anti-Hero” (Master’s thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2021), 33, accessed May 8, 2023, https://eprints.qut.edu.au/212364/14/Scott_Hamilton_Thesis.pdf.

³⁹ Ramirez, “Gratitude,” 79.

⁴⁰ See Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 21–2.

⁴¹ Points taken from Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, see 26–63.

VI. THE VILLAIN ATTEMPTS TO DECEIVE HIS VICTIM IN ORDER TO TAKE POSSESSION OF HIM OR OF HIS BELONGINGS.

Rosamond is sent to gather herbs by her stepmother. Salome does so without Clement's knowledge and with hope that something dangerous might await her there. What is more, she orders a boy named Goat to kill Rosamond.

VII. THE VICTIM SUBMITS TO DECEPTION AND THEREBY UNWITTINGLY HELPS HIS ENEMY.

Rosamond is carefree and sets off to gather the herbs.

VIII. THE VILLAIN CAUSES HARM OR INJURY TO A MEMBER OF A FAMILY.

Goat does not succeed, but a robber appears and robs Rosamond of her clothes.

Points I, VI, VII, VIII occur twice more. Rosamond is sent to milk the cows. However, this time she hopes to see the robber again and goes to the edge of the garden. The robber returns and Rosamond is "robbed [. . .] of that which he had left her the day before" (*RB*, 33). Then the stepmother makes Rosamond work hard in the kitchen so that when the visitor comes, she is dirty and does not look presentable. These repetitions in the story are also instances of trebling.

VIIIa. ONE MEMBER OF A FAMILY EITHER LACKS SOMETHING OR DESIRES TO HAVE SOMETHING.

Rosamond desires to meet the robber again.

XI. THE HERO LEAVES HOME.

She sets off to look for his dwelling.

XV. THE HERO IS TRANSFERRED, DELIVERED, OR LED TO THE WHEREABOUTS OF AN OBJECT OF SEARCH.

She finds the house.

XIX. THE INITIAL MISFORTUNE OR LACK IS LIQUIDATED.

Rosamond stays with the robbers and keeps the house for them. She is finally able to live with the robber, whom she loves.

II. AN INTERDICTION IS ADDRESSED TO THE HERO.

The robber does not want Rosamond to see his face.

III. THE INTERDICTION IS VIOLATED.

Rosamond cannot help her curiosity.

VI. THE VILLAIN ATTEMPTS TO DECEIVE HIS VICTIM IN ORDER TO TAKE POSSESSION OF HIM OR OF HIS BELONGINGS.

The stepmother convinces Rosamond to wash the robber's face while he is sleeping.

VII. THE VICTIM SUBMITS TO DECEPTION AND THEREBY UNWITTINGLY HELPS HIS ENEMY.

Rosamond washes his face.

VIII. THE VILLAIN CAUSES HARM OR INJURY TO A MEMBER OF A FAMILY.

The robber wakes up, feels betrayed, and leaves her.

XXI. THE HERO IS PURSUED.

Rosamond, Jamie, Clement, Salome, and Little Harp are captured by Indians.

XXII. RESCUE OF THE HERO FROM PURSUIT.

Goat frees Rosamond and Indians let Clement go too.

XXX. THE VILLAIN IS PUNISHED

Jamie fights with Little Harp and kills him. Salome offends the Sun and Indians make her dance until she can no more and dies.

XXXI. THE HERO IS MARRIED AND ASCENDS THE THRONE.

Jamie and Rosamond meet again and get married.

Deviations from a Typical Fairy Tale Scheme

The Robber Bridegroom is not a traditional fairy tale, rather, it represents a modern one. It was rewritten, expanded, and altered from a traditional fairy tale and partly deviates from its norms. Here are some of the deviations:

According to Lüthi, the characters in a traditional fairy tale “are figures without substance, without inner life.”⁴² This is not true in *The Robber Bridegroom*. We know that Rosamond tends to lie, but it is only a part of her storytelling heritage, which is obvious from this passage: “she did not mean to tell anything but the truth, but when she opened her mouth in answer to a question, the lies would simply fall out like diamonds and pearls” (*RB*, 20). She also likes to wear beautiful clothes and is a little vain; when her father bought her a new silk gown, “she was determined never again to wear any other” (*RB*, 22). Not only do we know about Rosamond’s likes and inclinations; we are also aware of her feelings and desires. After living in the robber’s house for some time, she longs to see her father again and she “‘beg[s] and beg[s]’” (*RB*, 56) until she is allowed to visit him. Rosamond even changes and develops towards the end of the story. She is not as foolish as she used to be, she seems to have become calmer. Clement himself thinks in amazement: “‘I should like to meet this strict bandit who has taught my daughter to be truthful’” (*RB*, 57). We also have some information about Rosamond’s past – she used to have a twin brother and she keeps a locket, which reminds her of her deceased mother, taking it everywhere with her.

Bruno Bettelheim claims: “The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent – not good and bad at the same time, as we are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child’s mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad, nothing in between. One brother is stupid, the other is clever.”⁴³ Children may need a story with a clearly defined polarity of characters, but Welty’s novel is not aimed at children. For this reason, Welty’s characters have both their bad and good sides. Rosamond is a liar but, on the other hand, very loving and kind to animals. Jamie robs people but he takes care of Rosamond and does not hurt her, even when she breaks his trust. Clement loves his daughter very much, but because of his meek character he never opposes his wife.

Another deviation from the expected order of fairy tales is the language one. Even though the whole work resembles fairy tales in great extent, the story does not start with the usual “Once upon a time.” Welty herself explained why she did not use it in her essay “Place in Fiction:” “There are only four words, of all the millions we’ve hatched, that a novel rules out: ‘Once upon a time.’”⁴⁴ Her reasoning is that this phrase cuts the connection between the work and its setting, while her work is strongly connected with the Natchez area.⁴⁵ Zorzi points

⁴² Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, 11.

⁴³ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976; New York: Vintage, 2010), 9.

⁴⁴ Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction,” in *On Writing* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 41.

⁴⁵ See Welty, “Place in Fiction,” 41.

out the use of tropes which cannot be found in fairy tales, for example: “the very clouds hung as golden as bananas in the sky” (*RB*, 87), which she claims to be very odd and not fairy tale language-like.⁴⁶ More similar examples can be found; for instance, “clouds the size of whales” (*RB*, 3).

What is more, the novel does not begin with a standard initial situation of traditional fairy tales. According to Propp, in the initial situation the hero with his family is introduced, or the hero and some information about him is given to the reader.⁴⁷ This can be found in *The Robber Bridegroom* only at the beginning of the second chapter, while the novel begins with Clement’s arrival from business and the reader is thrown right into action: “It was the close of day when a boat touched Rodney’s Landing on the Mississippi River and Clement Musgrove, an innocent planter, with a bag of gold and many presents, disembarked” (*RB*, 3).

Another deviation from the typical fairy tale scheme regards descriptions of sexual desire and attraction. Lüthi notes that even though folktales mention love and marriage, they do not dare going any further.⁴⁸ However, there are several implicit mentions of erotic acts in the novel. For instance, Rosamond spends the day alone in the house and does all the housework, but when Jamie returns in the evening, the author writes that “the night canceled out the day” (*RB*, 41), indirectly hinting at the fact that Rosamond and Jamie spent the night together; or in the sentence “[Jamie] robbed her of that which he had left her the day before” (*RB*, 33), which clearly refers to the loss of her virginity.

Conclusion

As we can see, Welty’s novel shares many features with fairy tales. Not only did she incorporate ideas and motifs from well-known tales, but she also added many general fairy tale elements, such as symbolic numbers, magical helpers, or a happy ending. Even the characters acted according to their functions as defined by Propp: if there was an interdiction, it was violated; if a member of the family left the house, the villain jumped at the opportunity; if the villain tried to deceive the hero, the hero fell for it. Nevertheless, Welty’s *The Robber Bridegroom* does not always follow the general rules of fairy tales. It is more explicit regarding the erotic acts, which would have been taboo in a traditional fairy tale. As a novel is considerably longer than most fairy tales, it gives its characters depth and portrays their feelings even if they are not essential

⁴⁶ See Zorzi, “Eudora Welty,” 30.

⁴⁷ See Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 25.

⁴⁸ See Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, 16.

for the story. Furthermore, the language choice reminds the readers that what they have just read was more than a fairy tale.

Mythical “Sir Rabbit”

Welty incorporated elements of fairy tales and myths into her writings very often. A good example is her short story “Sir Rabbit” (1949), first published in *Hudson Review*. It became a part of the collection *The Golden Apples*, with all the short stories revolving around the lives of the inhabitants of Morgana, an imaginary town in Mississippi. Literary scholars point out numerous similarities to myths and fairy tales in the whole collection.

“Sir Rabbit” is told from the point of view of Mattie Will. Firstly, she reminisces her possibly sexual encounter with the MacLain twins when she was fifteen years old. At first, she confuses them with their father, King MacLain, and calls out his name, but realizes her mistake when they step out from behind a tree. Later, as a married woman, she joins her husband, Junior Hollifield, and their helper, Blackstone, during a hunt. Suddenly, King appears in the woods, too. King MacLain is a legend in Morgana, coming and going whenever he pleases, rumored to have had numerous affairs with local women. He exchanges a few shots with Junior, who faints. When there is no husband stopping him, he seizes Mattie, rapes her, and leaves. Interestingly, Mattie does not feel violated, rather, she feels a sense of satisfaction, having become a part of his legend: “she was Mr. MacLain’s Doom, or Mr. MacLain’s Weakness, like the rest, and neither Mrs. Junior Holifield nor Mattie Will Sojourner; now she was something she had always heard of.”⁴⁹ She then finds King sleeping nearby and comes close to watch his face. The story ends with King waking up, telling Mattie to go away, and Mattie leaving, still not completely realizing what just happened.

The title itself, “Sir Rabbit,” is an important element in the story. It refers to King MacLain, as could be seen from the rhyme which runs through Mattie’s head when King wakes up:

*In the night time,
At the right time,
So I’ve understood,
'Tis the habit of Sir Rabbit*

⁴⁹ Eudora Welty, “Sir Rabbit,” in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (1980; New York: Barnes & Noble, 2001), 340. Italics in the original. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as SR.

To dance in the wood— (SR, 342)

The setting is the same, the wood. The rhyme talks about some habit, which could be interpreted as King's tendency to seduce or rape women. King is also rumored to have many offspring, which matches with the rabbit as a symbol of fertility. In addition, rabbits are frequent characters in kids' stories. James Shimkus gives an example of the stories of Brer Rabbit, which usually show the rabbit outwitting its opponent. These tales were told by African Americans and there were several attempts to collect and popularize them. They appear, for example, in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), where in the story "How the 'Gator Got Black," we can find a surprisingly similar rhyme,⁵⁰ which might be yet another example of Welty's rich knowledge of Southern folk narratives, including the African American ones:

"At night time, at de right time; Ah've always understood it's de habit of de rabbit to dance in de wood."⁵¹

Shimkus also adds that even King's appearance, such as his rabbit-like "square brown teeth" (SR, 340) and "starched white suit" (SR, 335) resembling white fur, reminds one of a rabbit.⁵²

Fairy Tale Elements

There is another sign of fairy tales present in "Sir Rabbit," namely supernatural elements. King possesses a magical ability to disappear. When Mattie watches him during his conversation with her husband, she often notes that he managed to disappear behind even the thinnest tree and his voice was sometimes coming from a more distant place, without her noticing how he managed to get that far. Even though King missed Junior and shot only through his hat, Junior faints, as if King cast some strange spell upon him. The short story explains that Junior was a hypochondriac and "he would always think he was shot through the heart if anybody's gun but his went off" (SR, 339), but that does not seem to be enough to explain why he stayed lying on the ground for that long, despite being aware of what King intended to do to his wife.

There is also trebling – Mattie had an intimate encounter with three MacLains, King and his two sons. The act of rape is never explicitly mentioned, no suffering or struggle against an offender is described, which could be attributed to Mattie not minding these incidents and rather desiring them. In addition, even the shooting is not described as a real danger where one fears

⁵⁰ See James [Hammond] Shimkus, "The Habit of Sir Rabbit: Harris, Hurston, and Welty," *Eudora Welty Review* 1 (2009): 107–8, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24742098>.

⁵¹ Zora Neale Hurston. "How the 'Gator Got Black," in *Mules and Men* (1935; New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 141.

⁵² See Shimkus, "Habit," 108.

for their life, as it would be in reality. Propp's functions can be applied on this short story, too. Mattie can be viewed as the hero and King as the villain, who makes use of the absence of the hero's protecting family and gets what he wants. Whether he harms the hero or not is arguable because Mattie does not display any signs of being hurt.

A Typical Fairy Tale Scheme

On the other hand, "Sir Rabbit" is not so close to fairy tale as *The Robber Bridegroom*. The short story violates the order of fairy tale by not being set in an abstract location, but in a particular town, albeit a fictional one; some real American towns and the Big Black River, a tributary of Mississippi, are also mentioned in the story. Furthermore, the depth of characters could be debated. "Sir Rabbit" does not work in isolation, it is a part of a short story sequence, with all the stories intertwining and functioning together to create a whole. We can observe the characters at different ages, learn about their nature, traits, and personalities, which would not be possible from "Sir Rabbit" alone.

Inspiration from Myths

It can be argued that while writing *The Golden Apples*, Welty was inspired by Greek, Irish, and Norse myths, as her characters, not only those present in "Sir Rabbit," but in *The Golden Apples* as a whole, as well as their actions carry a striking resemblance to their mythical counterparts.

For example, Thomas L. McHaney mentions a connection with William Butler Yeats's poem "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1897); he even connects King MacLain with Aengus himself.⁵³

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.
When I had laid it on the floor

⁵³ See Thomas L. McHaney, "Eudora Welty and the Multitudinous Golden Apples," *Mississippi Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1973): 591–2, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26474141>.

I went to blow the fire aflame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.⁵⁴

Aengus is a god from Irish mythology associated also with love, which agrees with King's reputation of a womanizer. In the poem, he is described as a wanderer, which is true for King, too, as he is rarely at home. McHaney adds that when the act of rape was described, Mattie was "brought down as suddenly to earth as if whacked by an unseen shillelagh" (SR, 340), which is yet another reference to Celtic folklore.⁵⁵ According to *Irish American Mom* webpage, shillelagh can be defined as a traditional Irish wooden walking stick, which could be also used as a weapon.⁵⁶ What is more, in the poem the trout changes into a beautiful girl who calls Aengus's name and disappears. Aengus is enchanted by her and desires to meet her again. If we consider the option that King, wandering as always, might have been in the woods at the time of the encounter between his sons and Mattie and heard Mattie say his name, there appears another correlation between the poem and the short story. He might have been enchanted by her appearance and her call, and might have longed to meet her once again and make her his in the Aengus's way.

⁵⁴ William Butler Yeats, "The Song of Wandering Aengus," in *The Love Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Kyle Cathie, 1990), 34.

⁵⁵ See McHaney, "Multitudinous," 606.

⁵⁶ See "What Is a Shillelagh?" *Irish American Mom*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.irishamericanmom.com/what-is-a-shillelagh/>.

Ruth M. Vande Kieft likens King to the Greek god Zeus,⁵⁷ who is known for his excessive interest in women. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, he had several wives but the number of women he seduced, usually by taking a form of something or somebody else, is even greater.⁵⁸ Vande Kieft views the rape of Mattie as a version of the myth of the rape of Leda by Zeus.⁵⁹ In this case, Zeus appeared to her in the form of a swan. Similarities include both Mattie and Leda already being married and, what is more, Shimkus suggests that the “little feathers” (SR, 342) mentioned in the short story symbolize the feathers of the swan.⁶⁰ Even the white suit, normally associated with rabbit fur, can, in fact, substitute for white feathers.

Shimkus points out two more possible mythical figures which could be the basis for King, this time from Norse mythology. Firstly, he mentions Odin, the main Norse god, the All-father. Similarly, King has many extra-marital children all over Morgana. Shimkus adds that Odin is said to use disguise, a hat, to wander among people, and King is also wearing a characteristic hat.⁶¹ Secondly, he argues that there is a great similarity between King and Loki, the Norse god of mischief, who enjoys tricking others and always changes sides, also able to shapeshift and having numerous offspring.⁶² On the one hand, King behaves like a villain, leaving his wife without any warning and seducing other women. On the other hand, he can also do good; in another short story from *The Golden Apples*, “The June Recital,” he promises Loch Morrison, who is also rumored to be his son, a talking bird as a present.

Not only do the characters in “Sir Rabbit” resemble a particular hero; they also become heroes of their own stories. King is known by everybody in Morgana, even though some of the inhabitants have never seen him. Everyone knows stories about him; he is a mysterious presence, tied with the town. Throughout the whole short story, Mattie is drawn to him, as if he were some kind of a higher being. Jennifer L. Randisi says that “fairy tale characters *become* heroic by action”⁶³ but “mythic characters are heroic by definition.”⁶⁴ King is a mythic character; he does not save the town, neither does he defeat a vicious villain. He is not even physically present in most of the stories, but the tales about him are always there. Even kids who have never seen

⁵⁷ See Ruth M. Vande Kieft, “The Search for the Golden Apples,” in *Eudora Welty*, ed. Sylvia E. Bowman (New York: Twayne, 1962), 113.

⁵⁸ See “Zeus,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 3, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zeus>.

⁵⁹ See Vande Kieft, *Eudora Welty*, 114.

⁶⁰ See James Hammond Shimkus, “Aspects of King MacLain in Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples*” (Master’s thesis, Georgia State University, 2006), 41, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.57709/1059468>.

⁶¹ See Shimkus, “Aspects,” 43.

⁶² See Shimkus, “Aspects,” 44.

⁶³ Jennifer L. Randisi, “Eudora Welty and the Fairy Tale,” *Southern Literary Journal* 23, no. 1 (1990): 32, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078002>. Italics in the original.

⁶⁴ Randisi, “Fairy Tale,” 32.

him talk excitedly about him. Mattie herself is very excited when she mistakes the twins for their father: “‘Oh-oh. I know you, Mr. King MacLain! [. . .] I know the way you do.’ When it came down to it, scared or not, she wanted to show him she’d heard all about King MacLain and his way” (SR, 333).

Conclusion

Welty drew her inspiration for *Golden Apples* from the stories of Brer Rabbit and myths from all around the world. When creating the character of King, she gave him some attributes of the Norse gods Odin and Loki, Greek Zeus or Irish Aengus. Interestingly, she did not make King mythical just by likening him to other, well known mythical entities; she made him the hero of his own myth, the myth of King MacLain of Morgana. The short story also employs some fairy tale traits, such as the symbolic number three, or magical elements. No details are mentioned concerning suffering or harm; such acts are only suggested or described briefly. One is also able to discover certain Propp’s functions of *dramatis personae* in the story.

Walking along a Worn Path

This part of my thesis focuses on the short story “A Worn Path” (1941), first published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, later becoming a part of the collection *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941). This short story also contains mythical allusions and fairy tale elements.

“A Worn Path” tells the story of an old African American woman, Phoenix Jackson, on her regular journey to the town of Natchez to obtain a soothing medicine for her grandson, who swallowed lye a few years earlier. On her way, she has to overcome a few obstacles: she meets people, some of whom are nice to her, and others not so much. Despite all this, she manages to reach the pharmacy where she, an old woman, suddenly forgets the purpose of her long journey. In a few moments, her memory returns, she gets the desired medicine and, in addition, two nickels. The story ends with Phoenix setting off on the long journey back, satisfied and full of hope.

Inspiration from Other Fairy Tales and Myths

We can find a parallel between “A Worn Path” and the fairy tale “Red Riding Hood.” However, in the fairy tale the roles are reversed; it is the grandchild who sets on a journey to care for the ill grandmother. Even the wolf from the fairy tale appears in the short story, in the form of a

“black dog with a lolling tongue.”⁶⁵ The dog attacks Phoenix who stays lying on the ground, unable to get up, until a young hunter finds her and helps her. In addition, the major sign of the main protagonist in the fairy tale, the red riding hood, appears in “A Worn Path” as a red rag tied on Phoenix’s head.

There is also a number of resemblances to Egyptian and Greek myths. Phoenix’s name alone is a direct reference to the mythical bird Phoenix, an immortal being regularly reborn from its ashes after a certain period of time. Dan Donlan points to the fact that Phoenix is very old, maybe even immortal, just like the mythical bird.⁶⁶ She calls herself “old woman” (WP, 146) and when she mistakes a scarecrow for a ghost she just remarks: “I too old” (WP, 145). Jim Owen interprets Phoenix’s journey as a visit to the underworld, with her way through a swamp symbolizing the crossing of the River Styx, which forms the boundary between our world and the underworld in Greek mythology, and the black dog symbolizing Cerberus, who guards the entrance to the underworld. Owen also notes that Phoenix is similar to Ulysses, the Greek mythological hero known for his cleverness, when she distracts the hunter in order to snatch a coin that fell out of his pocket.⁶⁷

The Role of Nature in the Protagonist’s Quest

As in numerous fairy tales, nature plays an important role also in “A Worn Path.” James Robert Saunders remarks that “elements of nature caress her [Phoenix] along the way.”⁶⁸ On the one hand, nature helps Phoenix but, on the other hand, it seems to hamper her progress sometimes. However, nature always finds its way to compensate for its occasional mischief. For instance, Phoenix falls into a ditch but is not injured at all thanks to “them old dead weeds” (WP, 146) softening her fall. Once, her clothes get tangled in a thorny bush, but she manages to untangle without tearing them. She even orders animals to keep out of her way: “Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons and wild animals! . . . Keep out from under these feet, little bobwhites . . . Keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don’t let none of those come running my direction. I got a long way” (WP, 143), and the animals seem to listen to her.

⁶⁵ Eudora Welty, “A Worn Path,” in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (1980; New York: Barnes & Noble, 2001), 145. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as WP.

⁶⁶ See Dan Donlan, “‘A Worn Path:’ Immortality of Stereotype,” *English Journal* 62, no. 4 (1973): 549, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2307/813111>.

⁶⁷ See Jim Owen, “Phoenix Jackson, William Wallace, and King MacLain: Welty’s Mythic Travelers,” *Southern Literary Journal* 34, no. 1 (2001): 31–2, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078315>.

⁶⁸ James Robert Saunders, “‘A Worn Path:’ The Eternal Quest of Welty’s Phoenix Jackson,” *Southern Literary Journal* 25, no. 1 (1992): 67, accessed March 17, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078057>.

Many fairy tales focus on a quest, portraying the main protagonist as a wanderer overcoming various difficulties on their way. Phoenix, too, is such a wanderer. Despite being an old frail woman, “moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock” (WP, 143), she manages to cross a creek, climb under a barbed-wire fence, and find her way through a labyrinth of dead corn. She does this all out of love to her grandson, who does not have anyone else to care for him, and despite all the difficulties she succeeds. There is another characteristic trait of fairy tales, a happy ending.

In a fairy tale, main protagonists can range from members of a royal family to ordinary people. In the latter case, the protagonist is often depicted as disadvantaged in some respect. They can be poor, orphaned, or even depicted as the youngest child looked down on by their siblings. Phoenix is a textbook example of such character. She is old, poor, and, what is more, black, which presented a significant disadvantage in the South between the world wars. The time when the short story is set can be guessed from Phoenix’s words: “I never did go to school. I was too old at the Surrender” (WP, 149). She refers to the surrender of the Southern Confederate States to the Northern United States in the Civil War in 1865, which meant the abolition of slavery in the South. Even though slavery was abolished, in the 1980s came the period of segregation, which ended in the 1950s.

Similarly to fairy tale protagonists, Phoenix’s character lacks depth and is not depicted in much detail. The information we have about Phoenix is scarce. Her clothes and figure are described but there is no mention of her facial features. We know that she has a grandson, but we have no information about any other family members. She is described as clever and loving but that is all that is revealed about her personality. The short story does not tell us anything about Phoenix’s youth, dreams, likes, or dislikes.

Idealization

“A Worn Path” offers an idealized depiction of the real world. Despite Phoenix’s inferior standing on the social ladder, everyone whom she encounters treats her with kindness. The hunter, who helps her when she falls into a ditch, advises her to return home because it is getting late. Phoenix asks a passer-by to tie her shoes, because she is unable to do so with a cane in her hand, and the passer-by ties them without hesitation. At the end of the story, an attendant at the pharmacy gives Phoenix a nickel because “it’s Christmas time” (WP, 149). Welty wrote a truly optimistic short story. As Saunders remarks, “During the time that Welty’s story was

created, such hope may well have been a rare commodity.”⁶⁹ The only moment which is not in accordance with the optimistic tone of the story is when the hunter points his gun at Phoenix. He does so without a clear reason, probably just as a joke, but it might also be a grim reminder of racial oppression of African Americans in the segregationist South. This moment makes the reader realize that Phoenix does not live in some ideal fairy tale world, but in the real South.

Conclusion

“A Worn Path” does not describe a typical experience of an African American. Welty approaches this topic in a unique, innovative way, and the result reminds us of a fairy tale. She uses references to fairy tales and myths, works with the typical motif of a quest, and gives a significant role to nature, too. The short story is brimming with optimism, leaving the readers with a feeling of satisfaction. It shows that a world without discrimination can exist and even seems very appealing. The short story shows yearning for an ideal world, and all the fairy tale elements in this short story contribute to it.

The Quest in “The Wide Net”

The last part of my thesis will focus on “The Wide Net” (1942), which was published for the first time in *Harper’s Bazaar* and later in the short story collection *The Wide Net and Other Stories*.

It tells the story of William Wallace Jamieson, whose wife, Hazel, is three months pregnant. Since the pregnancy, she seems to be in her own world and her eyes are glowing. William Wallace has had enough of it and goes drinking with the boys one night. When he returns in the morning, Hazel is nowhere to be found. There is a note in the kitchen saying that she went to the river to drown herself. William Wallace calls his friends to help him drag the river in search for Hazel’s body. They form a large group and use a wide net with heavy weights used for fishing. While dragging the river, they encounter a few alligators, a large snake, a weird man and catch a lot of fish but there is not a single trace of Hazel. William Wallace returns home and finds Hazel there as if nothing happened. She reveals that she never intended to drown herself and was hiding in the house the whole time.

⁶⁹ Saunders, “A Worn Path,” 72.

Inspiration

Welty drew inspiration for this story from various sources. The main protagonist is named after one of Scottish greatest national heroes, William Wallace, who is known for fighting in the First Scottish War of Independence. Owen sees a resemblance between gathering of William Wallace's friends and Scottish clans.⁷⁰ The character of William Wallace's friend Virgil reminds us of the Roman poet who guides Dante in *Inferno*. Virgil in the short story has a similar function; he is level-headed and accompanies William Wallace during this hard time. He even calms him down when needed: "On the way home Virgil kept saying, 'Calm down, calm down, William Wallace.'" ⁷¹

Owen points out that "The Wide Net" was also inspired by Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus." He states that Hazel "reversed the transformation of Yeats's glimmering girl/silver trout by jumping into the Pearl River."⁷² Hazel, being a "golden-haired girl" (WN, 175) with "her eyes glowing" (WN, 169) is a perfect manifestation of the glimmering girl from the poem. In addition, Hazel resembles the glimmering girl also in being elusive. It can be seen in her tendency to "run around the table" (WN, 169) whenever her husband touched her or her decision to hide and disappear to punish him. On the other hand, William Wallace is similar to Aengus, and has to set off on a journey to find the one he desires.

Fairy Tale Elements

Owen describes the setting as "fairy-tale like."⁷³ "'Only today,' he said, 'today, in October sun, it's all gold—sky and tree and water. Everything just before it changes looks to be made of gold'" (WN, 176). In addition, the river is called Pearl River, as if it was not water, but a stream of pearls flowing in its course.

Some events happening in the story border on extraordinary. Hazel claims that when William Wallace was reading her letter, she was so close to him that he could reach her with his hand. Did he oversee her or is it possible that she was invisible? In addition, the weather actively interferes with his search:

But at the next flare a big tree on the hill seemed to turn into fire before their eyes, every branch, twig, and leaf, and a purple cloud hung over it. [. . .] The

⁷⁰ See Owen, "William Wallace," 30.

⁷¹ Eudora Welty, "The Wide Net," in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (1980; New York: Barnes & Noble, 2001), 186. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as WN.

⁷² Owen, "William Wallace," 35.

⁷³ Owen, "William Wallace," 37.

great tree, split and on fire, fell roaring to earth. Just at its moment of falling, a tree like it on the opposite bank split wide open and fell in two parts. [. . .] The water in the river had turned purple and was filled with sudden currents and whirlpools (WN, 183).

As if the elements were trying to tell him to stop searching the river and look for his wife at home. “When he got to his own house, William Wallace saw to his surprise that it had not rained at all. But there, curved over the roof, was something he had never seen before as long as he could remember, a rainbow at night” (WN, 187). The nature is personified, and both the violent storm and the rainbow are means by which it directs William Wallace’s search.

An interesting moment is the appearance of “The King of the Snakes” (WN, 181): “In the center of three light-gold rings across the water was lifted first an old hoary head (‘It has whiskers!’ a voice cried) and then in an undulation loop after loop and hump after hump of a long dark body, until there were a dozen rings of ripples, one behind the other, stretching all across the river, like a necklace” (WN, 181). The King of the Snakes emerges, looks William Wallace in the eyes and “William Wallace stare[s] back at the King of the Snakes with all his might” (WN, 181). The snake might be a variation of Greek mythical Medusa able to turn a person who looks her in the eye into stone. Ioli Kalavrezou notes that Medusa’s head is also an “apotropaic symbol.”⁷⁴ If we consider that the violent storm started after the appearance of The King of the Snakes, this might have protected the men from drowning, being struck by lightning, or crushed by a falling tree.

Even though William Wallace is similar to Phoenix Jackson from “A Worn Path,” as he also sets off on a journey to obtain something, unlike Phoenix he never gets into any real danger. At one point, the group of men encounters alligators, “three big alligators and four middle sized ones” (WN, 178). It is not a dangerous situation; the men just climb out of the water and let them pass. Later, a strange, unknown man appears at the riverbank and watches them. Virgil goes to confront him, strikes the stranger and the stranger leaves. It is never explained what the man wanted and there are no consequences of this action, contrary to what one would expect.

⁷⁴ Ioli Kalavrezou, “The Cup of San Marco and the ‘Classical’ in Byzantium,” in *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World*, ed. Eva R. Hoffman (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 279. This essay was originally published in *Studien zur mittelalterlichen Kunst 800–1250: Festschrift für Florentine Miitherrich zum 70. Geburtstag* in 1985.

Conclusion

In conclusion, “The Wide Net” tells the story of yet another “mythic traveler,”⁷⁵ as Owen calls them. William Wallace sets off on a quest, succeeds, and lives with his wife happily ever after. Welty makes use of Greek and Irish myths and fairy tale elements. The setting reminds one of a fairy tale kingdom brimming with gold and pearls, the alligators do not attack anyone, and the natural elements are personified and communicate with the main character. Owen says that this resemblance to fairy tale “assures readers that the body of Hazel will not be found tangled in any wide net.”⁷⁶

Conclusion

The aim of my thesis was to search for and examine elements characteristic for fairy tales in Eudora Welty’s short fiction, namely the novel *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) and her three stories from collections *A Curtain of Green* (1941), *The Wide Net* (1943), and *Golden Apples* (1949). It also aimed to uncover the role which these elements play in the narratives as a whole.

As can be seen from the works I analyzed, Eudora Welty often wrote about instances from ordinary life with extraordinary twists. This characteristic of Welty’s writing perfectly fits Jones’s definition of fairy tale: “*fairy tales depict magical or marvelous events or phenomena as valid part of human experience.*”⁷⁷

A feature shared by all of the works examined was intertextuality. Welty made use of multitudinous Greek, Norse, or Irish myths, various European fairy tales, and Mississippi folklore. She also referred to African American traditional stories collected by Zora Neale Hurston, and Yeats’s “The Song of Wandering Aengus.”

An important role is played by nature, which is often personified and functions rather as a character interacting with protagonists throughout a story; sometimes only subtly, as in “The Wide Net,” where it shows William Wallace a rainbow as a sign, other times more directly as, for instance, in “A Worn Path,” pulling on Phoenix’s skirt or helping her cross a creek.

In some of these works, one could observe the use of symbolic numbers, the presence of magical helpers or archetypal fairy tale characters, such as cruel stepmother and hardworking stepdaughter.

⁷⁵ Owen, “William Wallace,” 29.

⁷⁶ Owen, “William Wallace,” 37.

⁷⁷ Jones, *The Fairy Tale*, 9. Italics in the original.

However, the stories do not completely adhere to the order of fairy tales. All the works have a strong connection with real physical setting. Real towns, rivers, and other places are often mentioned. Furthermore, the language used sometimes does not correspond to what one would expect from a fairy tale. For example, no phrases such as “once upon a time” or “and they lived happily ever after” are used; and instead we can find examples of regional Southern talk.

The reason for the use of fairy tale elements is arguable. In “The Wide Net” they might give the reader reassurance that everything will end well. In “A Worn Path,” they can emphasize the discrepancy between reality and the ideal world described in the short story. In “Sir Rabbit,” they contribute to the legend of King MacLain, which is one of the central themes in the whole collection, and enable the reader to feel as if they too were able to spot him while wandering in the woods. Only *The Robber Bridegroom* is a reworked specific fairy tale, and fairy tale features help it retain its fairy tale essence.

To conclude, Welty’s works are brimming with mythological allusions and elements typical for fairy tales. Welty makes use of these elements well and they help prove her points and contribute to the high quality of her writing, making it also accessible and pleasurable for readers.

Abstrakt

Táto bakalárska práca sa zameriava na prvky typické pre rozprávky a ich účel v krátkej beletrii Eudory Welty, konkrétne v románe *The Robber Bridegroom* a v poviedkach “A Worn Path” zo zbierky poviedok *A Curtain of Green*, “The Wide Net” zo zbierky *The Wide Net* a “Sir Rabbit” zo zbierky *Golden Apples*. Bakalárska práca čerpá informácie od známych folkloristov ako Stith Thompson, Antti Aarne, Hans-Jörg Uther, Max Lüthi a Jack Zipes.

Abstract

This bachelor thesis focuses on the elements typical for a fairy tale and the purpose of their presence in Eudora Welty’s short fiction, namely the novel *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) and her short stories “A Worn Path” from the collection *A Curtain of Green* (1941), “The Wide Net” from the collection *The Wide Net* (1943), and “Sir Rabbit” from the collection *Golden Apples* (1949). The works of famous folklorists, such as Stith Thompson, Antti Aarne, Hans-Jörg Uther, Max Lüthi, and Jack Zipes will serve as the source of information for this thesis.

Annotation

Number of pages: 37

Number of characters: 61 291

Number of sources: 43

Key words: Eudora Welty, fairy tales, myths, *The Robber Bridegroom*, “Sir Rabbit,” “A Worn Path,” “The Wide Net”

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