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The Outsiders and the Outside World: Exploring Identities through Nature in *Delta Wedding*

Much of Eudora Welty's novel *Delta Wedding* is centered on "things" – trinkets and heirlooms that the Fairchild family possesses as symbols of their collective wealth and family legacy. It is noteworthy that the material objects within the walls of Shellmound, the Fairchild family home, have great significance to the family at large, but little research exists on the ways in which the Fairchild "outsiders" – those who come from outside the family – turn outward, toward nature, to construct their identities instead of inward toward the abundance of material objects. While the Fairchild insiders in *Delta Wedding* experience their identities most strongly through the material objects within Shellmound, the Fairchild outsiders – Laura and Ellen – use sensory experiences in the natural world outside of Shellmound to explore and construct identities beyond the family unit. Laura and Ellen garner a sense of individuality and empowerment from their interactions with the natural, organic forms that occupy the plantation.

As a cousin connected to the family through a deceased parent, Laura McRaven occupies a position in the family that makes her vulnerable to exclusion. However, she possesses observational powers and a childlike imagination that allow her to create an identity for herself through interaction with the outside world, which will aid her as she navigates her sense of alienation from the rest of the Fairchilds over the course of the novel. Laura's insight into the world around her is evident even prior to her arrival at Shellmound, when she is being transported into the Delta aboard the Yellow Dog Train. As she takes in the scenery outside of the train window, Laura demonstrates striking

imaginative powers: “She sat leaning at the window, the light and the sooty air trying to make her close her eyes...Thoughts went out of her head and the landscape filled it. In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky” (Welty 3-4). Laura gives the world outside of the train the characteristics of an animate being, imagining the soot in the air “trying” to make her close her eyes and the Delta landscape actively filling her mind as thoughts empty out of it. Her imagination grows even more powerful as the train enters the Delta: “she watched the Delta. The land was perfectly flat and level, but it simmered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly. It seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it” (Welty 4). Laura’s state of “watching” the Delta gives her a sense of ownership over the changing landscape and a sense of purpose, while her observation that the landscape “seemed strummed” like an “instrument” further testifies to her ability to shape the natural world into something she can find joy and excitement in. Despite the unfamiliar aspects of the Delta, which she has not returned to in a long time, Laura uses her powers of imagination to mold this unfamiliarity so that it is advantageous for her.

The Delta that Laura experiences from her place on the Yellow Dog seems to depart from reality, taking on qualities that are almost surreal. Stephen Fuller, who argues for the appearance of surrealism throughout the visuals in *Delta Wedding*, sees Laura’s ride on the Yellow Dog as “introducing readers to the surreal perspective supplied by Laura” (123). He identifies Laura’s “childlike innocence” as a strategy Eudora Welty uses to distort time and space throughout the novel so that institutions such as “property, business, and religion lose any significance when confronted with the natural environment” (125). The argument that “property, business, and religion” – all of which

are institutions associated with the family unit and therefore institutions that are highly resonant with the Fairchilds – cease to retain their usual importance when Laura interacts with nature is certainly valid when it is considered in relation to later passages in the text. However, Fuller's assertion that Laura's experience on the Yellow Dog is one in which "The separation between observed and observer collapses to produce a disorienting hallucinogenic vision" disregards the thoughtfulness with which Laura considers herself in relation to the surrounding landscape and imbues it with animate values (124). To consider the Delta as "disorienting" and "hallucinogenic" from Laura's viewpoint is to imply that Laura is a passive recipient of the environment around her, rather than a character with the agency to actively shape the environment and make meaning from it.

In fact, any disorientation that Laura experiences emerges when she reunites with her cousins. When she spots them on the train platform, "Each mane of light hair waved like a banner, so that you could see Fairchilds everywhere" (Welty 5). Her step down from the train platform is met by chaos: "She was kissed and laughed at...then she was half-carried along like a drunken reveler at a festival, not quite recognizing who anyone was" (Welty 5). Laura's movement off the train represents a transition from her empowering connection to the rolling fields of the Delta to the disorientation and immobility that will plague her throughout the rest of the novel as she navigates her way through the family circle at Shellmound. Among her cousins, her sense of agency disappears and she becomes the recipient of their actions, being "kissed" and "carried" in a "drunken" state that signifies loss of control.

Beyond the disorientation that Laura experiences when she makes contact with her cousins, their car ride to Shellmound reveals that the insurmountable differences between Laura and her cousins will leave her entirely excluded from their group. When Orrin points out the road to the Marmion plantation to Laura through the window, Laura tells him, “Marmion’s my dolly” and Orrin responds, “It’s not, its where I was born” (Welty 6). Orrin’s reply effectively quashes Laura’s effort to associate the name “Marmion” with the doll that her mother gave her and therefore describe an aspect of her individual identity by talking about her home in Jackson. Orrin ties himself to the Marmion plantation and therefore to Shellmound, reminding Laura of her status as an outsider, while casually disregarding the fact that Laura has recently experienced her mother’s death and wants to communicate her mother’s lingering importance in her life through the doll. This interaction reveals two things: one, that the Fairchilds exist in a state of insulation, disregarding troublesome concepts such as death; and two, that Laura cannot obtain the same sense of validation through material objects like the doll that she can obtain through the natural world like that outside of the train window. Both of these implications may inform our reading of Laura as the novel continues.

The fact that Laura does not succeed at first in expressing her identity and emotions through her doll makes it difficult for her to fit into the Fairchild family, for the interior of Shellmound is packed with material objects that are important to both individual Fairchilds and the Fairchild family as a whole. Travis Rozier explains that many of the objects in the house are particularly important to the “Fairchild women,” who “act as caretakers for both the objects and the family history which provides the basis for constructing the family’s aristocratic identity” (289). He examines objects such

as the “nightlight” that Primrose and Tempe give to Dabney, which “embodies the melancholic sense of loss passed down in the family” as the culture of the Old South begins to deteriorate, and the “card table,” which “legitimizes their claim to the land by constructing a story of family origins involving conquering the wilderness and taming the land for farming” (289, 291). Evidently, objects such as these are important to the Fairchilds because they aid the family in preserving their ties to traditional Southern culture. Many of these objects have enormous meaning for individual Fairchilds as well; for example, when Primrose gives Dabney the night light, she recalls a personal childhood association with it, explaining that “it was company as early as I can remember – when Papa and Mama died” (Welty 44). The objects’ dual associations with family pride and individual memory permeate the novel, particularly in relation to Dabney’s wedding preparation. The Fairchild family relies upon objects such as the night light to aid them in passing down family stories through generations and to reinforce the notion that the Fairchilds are a collective unit with aristocratic status and idealized comfort.

At first, Laura tries to experience the various objects in the same way that the other Fairchilds do as part of her broader attempt to fit in with them. When she enters the Fairchild general store, Laura is infatuated with the abundance that it represents: “Any member of the Fairchild family in it its widest sense, who wanted to, could go into the store, walk behind the counter, and take anything on earth...Laura, who loved all boxes and bottles, all objects that could keep and hold things, went gazing her fill through the store, and touching where she would” (136). Laura’s perception of the store as a place where “any member of the Fairchild family in its widest sense” can access the endless bounty of goods appears to be an effort to unify herself with the Fairchild way of life,

which Allison Goeller describes as “material self-sufficiency” that makes the Fairchilds see themselves as “emotionally independent of the outside world” (61).

Ultimately, though, the objects that belong to the Fairchilds do not have the same significance for Laura. They lack any relevance to her identity, reinforcing her outsider status, and they alienate her. Through her behaviors of “gazing her fill through the store” and “touching where she could,” readers can infer that Laura generally relies upon tactile and other sensory processes to adjust to her surroundings and gain a sense of agency through them; these behaviors also appeared alongside her experience of the sooty air and the landscape outside of the Yellow Dog train on her trip to the Delta. In this instance, Laura encounters difficulty in building a sense of connection to the objects because they are not the same as natural forms. Fuller points out that the “series of passages exhaustively enumerating the store’s contents...illustrates wealth – but it more subtly suggests the sense of claustrophobia endured by the family. Money can liberate, but over-attachment can imprison and demean. The store’s apparently endless inventory of goods threatens to drown Laura” (128). This is a unique perspective that takes the store’s appeal of self-sufficiency and seclusion from the outside world, which Goeller posits as part of her analysis of the store, and describes it in the way that Laura actually experiences it: stifling and fake. Laura’s experience among the store aisles does not aid her in her effort to acquire the Fairchild lifestyle; instead, it illuminates just how confined her family is by the objects with which they surround themselves. Laura’s natural disposition toward imaginativeness and sensitivity, as well as her default status as an outsider, make her unfit to satisfy herself with the assortment of material objects that the Fairchilds own.

The sensory overload that Laura experiences in the Fairchild store, which embodies a spillover of the objects that crowd Shellmound, contrasts with her experiences of the natural world, which provide her with an opportunity to see herself as a unique individual who is part of a larger community. At one moment in the text, she escapes from the flurry of activity in Shellmound and heads outdoors:

She picked up a striped kitten that was stalking through the grass-blades, and held him to her, pressing against the tumult in her fingers and in his body. The willful little face was like a question close to hers, and the small stems of its breath came up and tickled her nose like flowers" (Welty 57).

As she observes the kitten's "willful little face" and the "breath" that "came up and tickled her nose like flowers," Laura demonstrates an ability to attribute powerful, animate qualities to something that does not decidedly possess a full range of human emotions, just as she did with the soot and the landscape on the Yellow Dog Train. She imagines that the kitten is questioning and recognizing her rather than merely sitting in her arms; therefore, she gives herself a role as a translator through which things that are wild and uncontained can become more "human." Laura obtains a sense of empowerment through the kitten that compensates for her relative powerlessness in Shellmound, where she is barred for participation in the wedding party and outcast among her cousins. She also uses the nature outside of Shellmound to see herself as a distinct, significant individual when she observes "the cardinals...flying hard at their reflections in the car" because she relates herself to them: "Laura could see herself in the car door too, holding the kitten whose foot stretched out. She stood looking at herself reflected there – as if she had gotten along so far like an adventurer in an invisible coat...Now she felt visible to everything" (56). Laura, too, observes herself in the car window and sees herself as one

of the various creatures occupying the world around her. Thus, she obtains a sense of power and of visibility that she does not have among her family at Shellmound.

Laura's perceived competency and agency while outdoors in this passage is connected to Kelly Sutzbach's argument that the presence of various "animate life forms" throughout *Delta Wedding* allows the Fairchilds to step outside of themselves and see their identities "as a component of a larger living body" (92). Her interpretation of this particular passage is that "Laura doesn't become 'visible' to herself and others until she becomes immersed in the non-human environment" and that "it is the keen awareness of the living presences around her...that gives Laura the ability to see herself as an embodied member of 'the flesh of the world,' no longer hidden by her status as an outsider" (94). While it is questionable whether other members of the family whom Sutzbach discusses, such as Dabney and Shelley, are truly able to step outside themselves and interact with the natural world as a means of strengthening their identities, Sutzbach's reading of Laura in this passage is spot on. The issue of "visibility" is critical to Laura throughout the novel as she prods at the invisible boundaries that separate her from the Fairchilds, and the aspects of the natural world that she picks up on through her powers of observation – whether the feel of the kitten or the sight of the cardinals – help her see herself as an individual in a broader community, even if she cannot do the same thing among her family.

Like Laura, Ellen Fairchild is an outsider from Virginia who occupies a position in the family that leaves her somewhat alienated; however, she is simultaneously in a matriarchal role, which provides her with great insight into the Fairchild circle even while she senses how different she is from them. Ellen's dual status as outsider and matriarch

emerges early in the novel, as she looks each of her children over while they scurry about in Shellmound: "How Ellen loved their wide and towering foreheads, their hairlines on the fresh silver skin...dipping to a perfect widow's peak in every child she had" (Welty 22). Ellen shows not only a detailed understanding of her children's appearance and mannerisms, but also a habit of looking at them as a collective. In this passage, they appear to her in a way that is similar to the way they appeared to Laura when she arrived on the Yellow Dog and noticed "each wave of light hair...waved like a banner" (Welty 5). Another aspect of Ellen's attitude toward the Fairchilds that links her to Laura is that her understanding of the Fairchilds' similarities makes her even more aware of the ways in which she is an outlier: "She had never had a child to take after her and would be as astonished as Battle now to see her own ways or looks dominant...All the mystery of looks moved her, for she was with child once more" (Welty 22). Like Laura, Ellen senses how different she is from the other Fairchilds, but she feels trapped in her maternal role. Ellen's observation that she has "never had a child to take after her" indicates a subconscious desire to gain ownership, or possession, over the child that she is now carrying. Much of the critical research that analyzes Ellen as a character in *Delta Wedding* focuses on the fact that she functions as the life-giving center of the Fairchild family despite her strong awareness of her separation from them, and this predicament imprisons her. In her article on the ways in which Shellmound's façade as a pastoral paradise is fraught with deeper family tensions, Goeller explains that a massive component of Shellmound's surface-level pastoralism is the fact that the children "seem to be infinitely produced...life, in short, spills over at Shellmound" (60). One of the primary forms of tension that threatens to break through the idyllic plantation facade is

Ellen's obligation to continue her role as a child bearer indefinitely, maintaining the fecundity of Shellmound that is vital to the family's illusion of aristocratic status. Goeller focuses mainly on the tensions that relate to the family's treatment of lower-class outsiders such as Robbie and Troy, but she fails to mention that one of the greatest tensions that threatens to mar the pastoralism of Shellmound lies within the matriarch herself. While Laura's discomfort at Shellmound stems from her inability to articulate the pain of losing her mother and the family's lack of willingness to help absorb her pain, Ellen's discomfort is tied to her entrapment within the family, which stifles her. Ultimately, she must remove herself from Shellmound to acquire agency, just as Laura does.

The outsider status that Ellen shares in common with Laura makes her sympathetic toward Laura, and her efforts to include Laura in family activities show that they both crave connections with their environments through sensory experiences. Seeing Laura lingering on the edge of the family circle, Ellen invites her to help with kitchen duties: "'Come help me make a cake before bedtime, Laura,' said Ellen; now she saw Laura with forgetful eyes fastened on her. She's a poor little old thing, she thought. When a man has to look after a girl...she will get long-legged and skinny'" (Welty 24). In this moment, Ellen demonstrates acknowledgement of Laura's family situation, which is something that Laura did not receive at all when she attempted to open up to Orinn. As she begins to make the cake, Ellen shifts seamlessly between monitoring her practice of mixing ingredients and lapsing into thoughts about her family: "Ellen was breaking and separating the fourteen eggs. 'Yes, I do want coconut,' she murmured. For Ellen's hope for Dabney...lay in George's happiness" (Welty 24). Readers experience Ellen's thought

process as rhythmical; her focus on baking activities transitions fluidly into deeper musings on the family, then back again, as though the practice of seeing and touching different components of the cake jogs her memory and enhances her intellect. Just as Laura sought to situate herself within the Fairchild store by touching various objects and situated herself within the outside world by picking up the kitten, Ellen is best able to situate herself within Shellmound through the sensory practices of seeing, touching, and tasting. While they are not outdoor life forms, the ingredients of the cake are raw materials that Ellen uses to gain a sense of autonomy and self-awareness even though she is still within the confines of her matriarchal role. Baking the cake provides Ellen with the opportunity to collect and explore her authentic thoughts about the family that she cannot voice amidst the chaos of her typical domestic duties. The cake might be considered part of the “bounty” of Shellmound that she is responsible for helping to produce, for the food on the plantation tends to be arranged in lavish buffet feasts that furthers the Fairchilds’ ideals of pastoral beauty and self-sufficiency (Goeller 60). However, The fact that readers receive insight into Ellen’s act of putting the cake together shows that she has the potential to dissociate herself from her familial obligations and achieve some agency when she is able to have sensory experiences. She and Laura both overcome their feelings of alienation through the acts of doing and creating, and it is easier to find opportunities for this in nature than within Shellmound.

The movement toward individuality and autonomy that commences with Ellen’s cake-baking accelerates when she moves outside, following a dream about her missing garnet brooch. Because it is a material object with the same fragility as Dabney’s night-light, it is tempting to lump it in with the other family heirlooms of the novel, but the

brooch is unique because it is erotically charged. When Ellen loses the brooch, it “signifies the loss of her sexuality, which has been appropriated in service of reproducing the clan” (Rozier 294). While the other Fairchild objects represent ideals of collective status and aristocracy, the brooch is personally significant to Ellen and embodies a form of freedom that contradicts her familial obligations. Ellen leaves her youngest child, Bluet, to her nap in order to pursue the brooch, which appeared to her in a “dream” where it “lay in the leaves under a giant cypress tree on the other side of the bayou” (Welty 66). In Ellen’s dream, the brooch transcends the limitations of the plantation and associates itself with nature - particularly the bayou, which is “a location characterized by sex and passion that Welty sets in opposition to the discipline of Shellmound” (Fuller 131). Ellen’s decision to leave behind her sleeping baby – the strongest symbol of her maternal obligations and lost sexual freedom – in order to retrieve the symbol of her sexuality from the depths of the woods reflects an impulse to turn toward the natural world in order to gain an identity that she, herself, is in control of.

Ellen’s experience of moving through the woods beyond Shellmound solidifies her acquisition of an identity that is separate from her role as a mother. As Ellen enters the woods, the “trumpet vines,” “passion flowers” and “cypress trunks” that “stood opened like doors of tents in Biblical engravings” prompt Goeller to consider the woods as a “pastoral landscape” (Welty 69, Goeller 67). However, “to characterize *Delta Wedding* primarily as southern pastoral is to focus on nature as symbol rather than Welty’s pervasive, tangible use of nature as a physical, animate force” (Sultzbach 90). Indeed, Ellen’s walk through the woods is packed with sensory experiences that make the nature around her appear far more as an animate force than as a symbol:

The shade was nice. Moss from the cypresses hung deep overhead now, and by the water vines like pediments and arches reached from one tree to the next. She walked abstractedly, gently moving her extended hand...from side to side, clearing the vines and mosquitos from her path" (Welty 69).

Ellen demonstrates an inclination toward actively engaging with her environment in the same way as Laura does, using her hand to feel her way along the path and interact with the nature around her. At the same time, the woods seem to envelop her with agency of their own; vines "reach" from tree to tree and moss "hangs" overhead. Like Laura, Ellen is empowered by nature as she explores it. Fuller sees the bayou woods as one of the novel's "satellite locales, located beyond the family home's purview, where the narrative counteracts the emphasis on family consensus with moments of feminine self-discovery" (129.) Ellen's "feminine self-discovery" requires the "magical wood" that is far removed from the "genteel decorum and high activity of Shellmound" (Fuller 136). Here, she can consider herself less as a housewife and more as a sexually and spiritually liberated individual.

If the woods represent a space in which Ellen can remove the shackles of her position at Shellmound and explore a new identity, the runaway girl she encounters in the woods embodies an "alter ego" who has all of the autonomous qualities she craves (Fuller 136). Ellen notes that the girl is a runaway headed to Memphis, which she refers to as "the old Delta synonym for pleasure, trouble, and shame," but in these woods, the girl takes on an alluring appearance that she would not ordinarily have in another environment: she is "more dryad than person" and is "untouchable outside the boundaries of family obligation and duty" (Welty 72, Fuller 136). Ellen's response to seeing the girl face-to-face reveals that she is not appalled by her, but awed by her: "None of her

daughters stood this still in front of her, they tore from her side...they never had a freshness like this, which the soiled cheek, the leafy hair, the wide-awake eyes made almost startling” (Welty 70-71). Through Ellen’s eyes, the girl’s earthy features are not evidence of her inherent dirtiness as a lower-class runaway, but evidence of her association with the wonder and mystique of the woods. This differentiates Ellen from the rest of her family, who care enormously about the upkeep of an upper-class appearance. Ellen’s realization that she considers the girl to be more beautiful than her own children is also striking; to her, the girl’s mysterious origins, stillness, and boldness are a welcome departure from the similarities in her children’s’ features and mannerisms. Once again, readers see the exhaustion that Ellen’s plantation duties have caused her and Ellen’s craving to have ownership of a new identity: “She felt sometimes like a mother to the whole world, all that was on her! Yet she had never felt a mother to a child this lovely” (Welty 70). For Ellen, the runaway girl embodies the woods in human form: she is liberated, with none but herself to look after. Ellen is most alive, alert, and self-aware in this moment, when she faces a symbol of feminine freedom that she knows she may never fully obtain. Like Laura, she finds solace in the natural world, but unlike Laura, the natural world cannot undo her sense of entrapment.

While both Laura and Ellen find individuality, autonomy, and empowerment in nature to compensate for their positions among the Fairchilds, they differ in terms of how they can incorporate their experiences back into their daily lives. For Laura, the profound moments of self-discovery that she experiences outside of Shellmound help her reach a point in which she can work through the emotions associated with her mother’s death on her own, without relying on validation or acceptance from the Fairchilds. While riding in

the car with her cousins after the wedding, Laura “brought Marmion, her stocking doll, up to her cheek. She held him there...and smelled his face which became, quite gently, fragrant of a certain day to her; his breath was the wind and rain of her street in Jackson” (Welty 230). Laura gives her doll the purpose she could not give him in the car ride with her cousins at the beginning of the book: he is now a symbol of happy memories from her past and a symbol of her community at home. This is a sensory memory that Laura generates for herself; she takes the validation that she gained from her experiences in nature and uses it to revive happy memories of her mother and her home that she has presumably suppressed amidst the chaos of Dabney’s wedding preparations and her urge to be accepted by her cousins. Just as she saw herself as part of a community in the natural world, she is now open to seeing herself as part of another community – the one she has left at home.

Laura’s newfound relationship with herself and with her life in Jackson presents itself most clearly at the end of the novel, when Laura and the rest of her family see shooting stars fall across the sky: “I saw where it fell,” said Laura, bragging and in reassurance. She turned again to them, both arms held out to the radiant light” (Welty 247). Laura is no longer attempting to identify herself with the Fairchilds; instead, “She accepts the ambiguity of ambient life with her whole body, her whole self. This offer of love takes precedence over her desire to be wrapped up with the Fairchild family” (Sultzbach 99). At this point in the novel, Laura has arguably received the validation she craved from the Fairchilds because she was allowed to participate in the wedding, but Laura’s time outdoors, interacting with the various animate forms and forces that comprise the natural world, has taught her that there is a much larger community in the

world than the Fairchild clan. Her desire to hold out her arms to the “radiant light” of the stars above shows that she has moved beyond them. Most importantly, she comes to the realization that she can return to Jackson and acquire other forms of belonging in the world at large.

Unlike Laura, Ellen is obligated to return to her duties at Shellmound, and she must suppress the new identity she explored in the bayou woods in order to keep the household running. Ellen’s reluctant return to her usual self is evident when she is in the Shellmound garden after Dabney’s wedding:

Her chrysanthemums looked silver and ragged, their few flowers tarnished and all their lower leaves hanging down black...She looked at the tall grass in her beds, as if it knew she could no longer bend over and reach it...Of all the things she would leave undone, she hated leaving the garden unattended (Welty 225-226).

Having achieved peak individuality in her bayou wanderings, Ellen now sees the plants occupying the outside space of the garden as an extension of herself. Her bulging stomach, which represents the constant cycle of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood that she is confined to, prevents her from nurturing and interacting with the garden plants as she usually does. However, this passage can also be interpreted as hopeful and uplifting in regard to Ellen’s future because the garden plants are part of their own cycle of life and death, growth and decay. Although they may wilt as Ellen pursues her other obligations, they will eventually spring back to life, as nature usually does. Therefore, the passage implies that Ellen will always have the world outside of Shellmound to escape to and explore when she needs to remind herself that she can possess an identity that is separate from motherhood.

Neither Laura nor Ellen is able to identify with the abundance of material objects within Shellmound in the same way that the other Fairchilds do. The appeal of studying their development as characters comes from their powerful sensory experiences in nature that occur periodically throughout *Delta Wedding*. Interacting with the natural world – influencing nature and allowing nature to influence them – provides Laura and Ellen with the opportunity to create new identities for themselves and break through the limitations that their positions in the family have imposed upon them. In order for Laura to process her mother's death and for Ellen to recover her liberated self, they must move beyond Shellmound and into the outside world.

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