

Plant Writings in Eudora Welty's Early Works: A New Materialist Approach

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Abstract This paper, firstly scrutinizes the plant writings in Welty's early works, *A Worn Path* and *A Curtain of Green*, looks into the agency of plants as well as the intra-actions of human and the nonhuman through the New Materialist approach, and then further investigates the aesthetic value of Welty's writing and her environmental ethics. Welty, in *A Worn Path*, diminishes the distinctions between human and plants by emphasizing the agency of the latter, which is the manifestation of her de-anthropocentric view. Similar views are also found in *A Curtain of Green*. In addition, she presents how plants remain interactive with human beings affectively through their agency, thereby, as the depiction of the affective power of plants in healing the psychic trauma. Therefore, plant narratives, for one thing, add an ecological value to Welty's "place" writing, for another, demonstrate the aesthetic significance of her environmental ethics.

Keywords Eudora Welty; *A Worn Path*; *A Curtain of Green*; plant writings; New Materialist Approach

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Introduction

Just as Faulkner's biographers often mention Rowan Oak, where Faulkner used to live, in Oxford, Mississippi, Eudora Welty's biographers, too, talk a lot about Welty's former residence on Pinehurst Street in Jackson, Mississippi. In contrast to

the spectacular row of rowan oaks in front of Faulkner's house, Welty's is planted with a variety of flowers and plants. The house, with its Tudor Revival Style and the surrounding courtyard, is named "Eudora Welty's House& Garden," becoming one of the most famous tourist attractions in Jackson. Welty's Garden can be traced back to the year 1931, when Welty's mother, Mary Chestina, who was prostrate with grief after her husband's death, devoted herself to the garden, growing flowers, shrubs, fruits and vegetables. After returning home from New York, Welty often helped her mother with pruning and they also discussed gardening. Flowers and plants, serving as a bridge of emotions shared between mother and daughter, became an important material for Welty's writing during that period. "The garden and writing were linked at some profound level" (Marrs 6). After Welty sold her two short stories, *Powerhouse* and *A Worn Path* to *The Atlantic*, she received her paycheck and soon spent a great sum of her new gains "on flower seeds from Burpees" (Haltom and Brown 126). In her letters to friends in the 1940s, sometimes she described in great details the growth of plants, especially the moments when they started to bloom, and sometimes she complained about the bad weather that caused her plants to suffer. Her correspondence with friends was so focused on plants that reviewers regarded it as "The Gardening Talk" (Eichelberger xviii).

After years of nurturing by Welty and her mother, plants in the garden grew in abundance in the 1940s. At the same time, however, the Deep South, where Welty lived, was undergoing a lengthy restoration of ecology from vegetation destruction. After "a half-century of intensive exploitation and chronic wastefulness" since 1880s, forests in Mississippi area witnessed the most devastating destruction on record in the 1920s (Buell 2). In 1927, the worst Mississippi River flood ever in a century struck the area, inundated the delta, and made people realize the "the consequences of their actions" (Fickle 117-8). Welty, who worked for the Works Progress Administration since the 1930s, frequented many rural towns in Mississippi in order to provide the government with the records of the South's development during the Depression. Not only did she photograph the ecological changes in the South with her camera, but she also tried to write down what she had observed. Plant writings appear in many of the short stories in Welty's collection, *A Curtain of Green*, published in 1941. Writings of trees, flowers and thorns can be found everywhere in *A Worn Path*, in which Welty meticulously depicts the geographic landscapes along the way as an elderly African American woman named Phoenix Jackson ventures towards a nearby town to acquire medicine for her grandson. The short story *A Curtain of Green* focuses on Mrs. Larkin, a young widow who suffers from her husband's death and spends her entire time working in the garden,

which resembles the experience of Welty's mother. In *Flowers for Marjorie*, Welty, through the detailed writings of plants, subtly presents the grotesque plot of a pregnant wife being brutally murdered by her husband who is under great financial pressure. Besides, the thorny rose, a rather ironic image, is a metaphor for the harsh reality encountered by the poor in the South during Great Depression. What is the aesthetic value of various plant writings in Welty's early works published in the 1930s and 1940s? What kind of environmental ethics does Welty, a gardener and a lover of plants, convey through her plant narratives? This paper, based on these questions, intends to investigate the aesthetic value and cultural connotation of plant narratives in Welty's early works.

Since the 21st century, various discourses of "things" in many academic fields, including "Thing Theory," "Neovitalism," "Speculative Realism," and "Actant Network Theory," etc., have shaped "The Material Turn," a highly heterogeneous theoretic field. In recent ten years, "New Materialism," was more often used as an umbrella term to encompass "a range of new ways of understanding the relationship between humans and the object world that have emerged across a number of disciplines" (Epstein 185). As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann noted in their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism*, the first of the most basic assumptions of New Materialisms "is the chasm between the human and the nonhuman world in terms of agency" (Iovino and Oppermann 2). In the introduction to *New Materialisms*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost summarized the goal of new materialists as to "rediscover a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency" (Coole and Forest 9). The manifestation of agency, in Barad's words, is through "specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter." And it is through such practices that the differential boundaries between "humans" and "nonhumans," "culture" and "nature," the "social" and the "scientific" are constituted. In summary, "the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming" (Barad 135).

Following New Materialism, ecocriticism has seen a "plant turn" in recent years. Critical plant studies attempt to reverse the tendency among humans denoted as "Plant Blindness" which neither notices nor values plants in the environment (Balding and Williams 1192). Plant study scholars call for attention to "Botanical Being" (Ryan 6), and a kind of "vitality" in Bennet's sense that is intrinsic to plants and independent from human will (Bennet viii). In terms of Welty studies, although literary researchers have started to notice the connection between her gardening

experience and her writing, these studies tend to either adopt a macroscopic view or focus on analysis of identities, with little attention paid to the “agency” of plants. This paper, on close reading of *A Curtain of Green* and *A Worn Path* through the New Materialist approach, intends to explore the botanical “being” and “vitality,” as well as the “agency” of plants through which the affective intra-action between human and the nonhuman is achieved, and then further investigate the aesthetic value of plant narratives in Welty’s early works, and her environmental ethics.

A Worn Path: Diminished Distinction between Human and Plants

Published in 1941, *A Worn Path*, winning the O. Henry Award, is regarded by critics as one of Welty’s early masterpieces. The story is named after Natchez Trace, a worn path, along which the heroine, an elderly African American woman named Phoenix Jackson, undertakes an arduous journey twice a year to retrieve medicine for her sick grandson. Although Phoenix’s journey towards Natchez for medicine is the main plot line, two-thirds of the story focuses on vegetal environment along the rural path, presenting a bleak winter picture of the South suffering from an economic recession due to the impact of Great Depression. Environmental writing, though accounting for a significant part of the work, has, for many years, mainly been used to interpret the identity of characters or the cultural connotations of the story. Some critics have suggested that the environment of Phoenix’s journey, filled with hardship, shapes her into a persistent and optimistic spirit. As Vande Kieft concludes, Phoenix is, like Faulkner’s Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, “a completely and beautifully harmonious person (Vande Kieft 29). Others, considering Phoenix’s race and the deep-rooted racism in the South where the story is set, have interpreted the environmental obstacles as a symbol of racial oppression, with words like “chains” that imply constraint on freedom as supporting details (Moberly 115). This traditional interpretation of texts has been criticized in New Materialist studies of recent years. Influenced and inspired by various discourses of “The Material Turn,” literary researchers such as Bill Brown, Babette Barbel Tischleder, and Elaine Freedgood have raised awareness for “thingness” and “vitality” in material writings in literary works. From their perspective, “the protocols for reading the realist novel have long focused us on subjects and plots; they have implicitly enjoined us not to interpret many or most of its objects” (Freedgood 1). In traditional readings, the objects are indentured to the subject and a character’s possessions, even if they are mentioned with a certain degree of emphasis, “are meant to tell us something about that character and not about themselves or their own social lives” (Freedgood 12). As the new materialist approach implies, things are not only regarded as the springboard

of textual analysis but also endowed with the same subjectivity as humans. Plants, inanimate objects in the traditional sense, have “the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies,” which can “aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble and degrade” human beings (Bennet ix).

In *A Worn Path*, Welty focuses largely on the description of a wide variety of plants, including pines, thorny bushes, barbed-wire fence, old cotton, a field of dead corn, and the quiet bare fields, showing the biodiversity of the nonhuman world which Phoenix is in. These plants are brought to life with sounds and movements of their own. The cornstalk “whispered and shock” (Welty 279), the scarecrow was “dancing in the wind” (ibid), and some corn husks “blew down and whirled in streamers” (Welty 280), all with their unique “vitality” and “being.” The vitality of the nonhuman world can also be observed through the de-anthropocentric scene in the beginning of the story, where a “small” old woman, placed on a worn path without a soul in sight, “walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps” (Welty 275). Visual images such as “small” and “alone” miniaturize human figures in the picture and to some extent, dilute “human activities,” while at the same time, the physical environment made up of “pine” and “path” is highlighted in contrast, and the power of things is therefore emphasized. Some New Materialists maintain that to blur human beings in the picture can achieve “a radical reorientation of humans’ place in the world and the place and power of things, which are variously construed as part of us, inherently divided from us, or able to be manipulated by our artistic endeavors” (Russell 198).

In addition to the display and emphasis on the vitality of things, Welty abolishes the distinction between human beings and plants in many detailed writings, which altogether achieve an aesthetic effect in which “things behave like humans and humans like things” (Brown, *ST* 113). When portraying Phoenix, the only human being in the winter pinewoods, Welty zooms in, like focusing a camera, on her skin with “a pattern all its own,” comparing her wrinkles to plants as she writes “numerous branching wrinkles as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead” (276). Similarly, big dead trees are compared to “black men with one arm standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field” (Welty 278), in which the personification of plants makes the unhuman object assume “characteristics of human subjects” (Brown, *OT* 372), thus diminishing the distinction between the animate and inanimate beings. With the entanglement of human beings and plants, plants are elevated to the same position as humans, and become objective entities independent from humans.

Consequently, a new relation of human and the nonhuman emerges. Welty’s

Phoenix, alone in the nonhuman world, is no longer the dominator and conqueror of nature; instead, she truly connects with nature. With her thin, small cane, the old woman keeps tapping the frozen earth in front of her to see whether the road is passable in a natural way. Phoenix walks from side to side “with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock,” which suggests a synchronization of human and nature (Welty 275). Familiar with the law of nature, Phoenix also knows December is “not the season for bulls,” and neither will she encounter snakes that “curl up and sleep in the winter” (Welty 279). Throughout the story, Welty depicts an old woman who is sensitive to natural odor and sound and is able to smell wood smoke and river. Besides naming the plants along the path, old Phoenix communes friendly and pleads respectfully with them to keep dangers out of her way. As plants, in her eyes, are living, breathing things with their own laws of being, the bush which catches her dress is just “doing appointed work” (Welty 277). Through the intimate interaction between plants and old Phoenix who recognizes the botanical being and value, the distinction between human beings and plants further diminishes, and a harmonious picture in which human and the nonhuman are equals and companions of each other is foregrounded.

Phoenix, illiterate and untamed by modern industrial civilization, respects botanical being, which is opposed to the dominant environmental perspectives. In this sense, plant writings in *A Worn Path* form a narrative confrontation with the plant discourse in the South during the first half of the 20th century, and thus, imply Welty’s criticism of the anthropocentric view, and the objectification and subjugation of plants. Welty, in interviews, has repeatedly lamented the ecological destruction and disasters in the South in the 1920s. She claims that Mississippi is “really a pretty well-endowed state by nature,” but many of these natural resources had been misused; most of the forests in the state were cut over completely by the late 1920s, leaving a bleak and depleted landscape (Fickle xii). The old woman who respects botanical being and complies with the laws of nature is portrayed as positive and kind in Welty’s story, which undoubtedly embodies Welty’s underlying identity with Phoenix’s views on plants and nature. Readers, too, resonate with her attitude towards the physical world of nature through Phoenix’s limited omniscient point of view, and further comprehend Welty’s environmental view and ecological ethics embedded in *A Worn Path*.

A Curtain of Green: Affective Intra-actions between Human and Plants

A Curtain of Green, slightly predated *A Worn Path*, was first published in *The Southern Review* in 1938, and was hailed by critics as the “auspicious beginning” of

Welty's writing career (Peterman 91). Welty presents a story with a typical "trauma-healing" theme through her unique objective writing techniques. In this short story, Mrs. Larkin, a white widow traumatized by seeing her husband accidentally killed by a falling chinaberry tree, is haunted by the memory "tightened about her easily" when "a curtain had been jerked quite unceremoniously away from a little scene" (Welty 213). Suffering from the death of her husband, Mrs. Larkin spends all her days gardening in order to distract from the pain. However, she, as the ending suggests, ultimately finds solace in the act of gardening because when the day's work in the garden is over, "she would lie in bed, her arms tired at her sides and in motionless peace" (Welty 218). Mrs. Larkin, as many critics believe, is based on Welty's mother, who immersed herself in the loss of her husband and later accomplished her "trauma-healing" process through gardening. According to Suzanne Marrs, "Mrs. Larkin's isolation within her community, her grief, her venturing into the garden, and her discovery of some consolation there draw in oblique ways upon Chestina Welty's experience" (Marrs 7).

Among all Welty's works, *A Curtain of Green* is extremely abundant in plant writings. With plants as the title of the story and even the title of Welty's first short story collection, the significance of plant writings is self-evident. In current studies of this short story, some interpret plants as a symbol of "barrier" isolating Mrs. Larkin from the outside world, or as a containment of her traumatic memories (Chandrasekhar 428). Others regard Mrs. Larkin's garden-work as an example of what Hélène Cixous, a French feminist literary critic, calls *écriture féminine*, maintaining that it is through her gardening that "Mrs. Larkin is able to break through the state of melancholia that has plagued her for over a year" (Crews 21). In these studies, plants, treated as metaphors, are mostly attached to or possessed by the subject, with their own "being" and "agency" unheeded. In *A Curtain of Green*, plants, with destructive power, are responsible for Mrs. Larkin's trauma in the first place (since her husband is killed by a falling tree), but with affective power, they are also the reason for the healing of her psychic trauma in the end. To a certain extent, plant writings parallel the "trauma-healing" process of Mrs. Larkin in the story. Thus, to scrutinize the plant writings and to explore further how plants remain interactive with human beings affectively through their "agency" not only provide a new approach to the re-reading of its "trauma-healing" theme but also help to examine Welty's environmental ethics conveyed through her works.

Similar to *A Worn Path*, *A Curtain of Green* begins with depiction of the environment, placing human beings in a grand, formidable nonhuman world, as is reflected in details like the regular rain that "would come about two o'clock in the

morning,” “trees along the street,” “rows of flower gardens in the town,” and every leaf that “reflected the sun from a hardness like a mirror surface” (Welty 209). At the beginning of the story, Welty introduces the “agency” of the inanimate physical world independent from human will, and obliquely displays the interdependence and intra-action of all kinds of things when she portrays the reflection of sunlight by leaves. Human beings, however, are only a part of the environment, and they can do nothing but “sit in the windows of their houses, fanning and signing, waiting for the rain” (ibid). So far, Welty has set the tone, suggesting that everything in the universe has its own pattern and vitality. Then, the second paragraph turns to the characterization of Mrs. Larkin, who toils in the garden. Although Welty does not describe her heroine’s appearance in as many details as she does in *A Worn Path*, she conjures up a New Materialist picture with similar aesthetic connotations to the former through plentiful plant writings. Compared with Phoenix in *A Worn Path*, Mrs. Larkin is even more blurred in the picture. With her “clumsy, small” figure, she works “almost invisibly,” “submerged all day among the thick, irregular, sloping beds of plants” (Welty 210). While human subjectivity is hamstrung in the picture, the botanical vitality is emphasized as Welty describes the garden as “more and more over-abundant and confusing” (ibid). That the garden is “slanting” and “tangled” further epitomizes the wildness and disorder of botanical being. In addition, plants possess a certain kind of forcible, destructive power that can be exerted on human beings. “The intense light like a tweezers picked out her clumsy, small figure” and “separated it from the thick leaves” (Welty 209-10). It can be seen that at the beginning of the short story, plant narratives convey an inharmonious, contradictory tension between plants and human beings, thus previewing the emotional conflict between Mrs. Larkin and plants.

As the narrative proceeds, Mrs. Larkin’s response and resistance to the power of plants become obvious. Mrs. Larkin, in her “old pair of men’s overalls,” with “a sort of sturdiness” (ibid), works in the garden with a hoe, clearing patches of uncultivated ground and beating down weeds. Ecofeminist scholars have explored the connection between women and nature, as Noël Sturgeon explains, the focus of ecofeminist theorizing, as well as critiques of ecofeminism, “has been how to conceptualize the special connection between women and nature presumed by the designation ‘ecofeminism’” (Sturgeon 263). Seeing from this point of view, Mrs. Larkin, with her masculine dressing and expression, denied her association with nature. In fact, the hoe, an image of conquest, even reinforces her “masculinity.” Since her husband is killed by the natural power of plants, Mrs. Larkin’s working in the garden with a hoe can also be understood as a protest or revenge against nature.

Unlike old Phoenix who sees plants as her equals, Mrs. Larkin tries to impose human power on nature, but the garden she has been trying to transform still has "the appearance of a sort of jungle." Her struggles seem futile. As is implied by Welty in the description that her "overalls" are "almost of a color with the leaves" (212), Mrs. Larkin's confrontation with plants, instead of healing her psychic trauma, submerges her in the same power that kills her husband.

The story reaches its climax with a turn in Mrs. Larkin's emotions as she interacts with plants. The turn begins with "the first drop" that "touched her upraised arm" (Welty, 217). The rain, at the beginning of the story, is depicted as a regular, disturbing thing that comes at two o'clock in the afternoon every day, with the same destructive power as plants. But here, it miraculously "touches" Mrs. Larkin, marking a central point where trauma turns to healing. Mrs. Larkin's lowering and dropping of the hoe indicates that she begins to abandon her anthropocentric view, leading to a breakdown of the barrier between her and the plants. Then, Welty went on and wrote that "the green of the small zinnia shoots was very pure, almost burning. One by one, as the rain reached them, all the individual little plants shone out, and then the branching veins" (*ibid*), in which images like "small shoots" and "little plants" further hints at Mrs. Larkin's new birth after the healing of her trauma.

A shift from the objective point of view to limited omniscient point of view echoes this turning point. Readers' horizon is limited to Mrs. Larkin's emotional experience, and they can thus perceive the generation of emotions through the intra-actions between Mrs. Larkin and plants. From Mrs. Larkin's perspective, "in the light from the rain, different from sunlight, everything appeared to gleam unreflecting from within itself in its quiet arcade of identity" (*ibid*), which, positively and appreciatively, shows the vitality of the nonhuman world. Again, the power generated from "within" the plant "itself" is highlighted. Instead of the destructive power exerted on human beings in the beginning, plants, with their comforting "agency," now have a positive affective power. The emotional entanglement of the vegetal fragrance and Mrs. Larkin best illustrates their affective intra-actions. When "a wind of deep wet fragrance beat against her," "tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body," "as if it had swelled and broken over a daily levee" (Welty 218). In the end, Mrs. Larkin sinks down into "the flowers" and lies there in a state of complete relaxation, immersed in the realm of plants. The fragrance of plants, or the "physicochemical processes" contained in the fragrance, soothes down Mrs. Larkin's nerves, creating an intra-action between plants and human body (Coole and Forest 9). The powerful transcorporeal encounter also generates new emotions in Mrs. Larkin. Her attitudes towards plants shift from fear and confrontation

to acceptance and appreciation. In this sense, plants subdue and shape human emotions, as well as heal psychic trauma with their affective power.

In *A Curtain of Green*, Welty, through exquisite plant writings, presents the dual power of plants, including both the negative power independent from human will, and the affective power that comforts and heals human beings. Welty and her mother knew well enough the healing power of plants as they put it that “when we are weary from contact or perhaps conflict with the everyday world,” the peace and fragrance of the loved garden “are soothing to frayed nerves and its recurrent beauty whispers a message of comfort and hope when our hearts are lonely or sorrowful that ‘steals away our sadness ere we are aware’” (Haltom and Brown 139). To Welty, the coexistence of the dual power of plants is an objective being of nature, and the wisdom of getting along with plants requires human beings neither to try to stop changes in gardens nor to “impose one’s will over anything, especially a helpless bush” (Haltom and Brown 126).

Conclusion

A Worn Path and *A Curtain of Green* as Welty’s two early works, through the emphasis on botanical “being” and “agency,” both manifest her de-anthropocentric view, and demonstrate her environmental ethics that respects and values all things in the universe. What is different is that in *A Worn Path*, as the distinction between human beings and plants diminishes, Welty foregrounds a harmonious picture in which human and the nonhuman are equals and companions of each other, and implicitly criticizes the environmental view of her time which was characterized by the objectification and subjugation of plants. In *A Curtain of Green*, Welty is more dedicated to depicting how plants remain interactive with human beings affectively through their “agency,” and how they affect characters’ perception and their cognition of “place,” thus presenting the affective power of plants in shaping human emotions as well as healing psychic trauma. Plant narratives in Welty’s early works add an ecological value to her well-known “place” writing; furthermore, the plants in the “place,” with their unique aesthetic connotation and rich literary life, demonstrate the aesthetic significance of Welty’s environmental ethics.

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