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Lecturer. Ahmed Khalid Hassoon

E-Mail: ahmadartstr@tu.edu.iq

Mobile: +964770793 9111

Department of English Language
College of Arts
Tikrit University
Salahuddin
Iraq

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The Portrayal of Alienation by Using Humor Tool in Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart* and *The Key*

ABSTRACT

The current paper tackles the theme of alienation by using humorous stylistic tool in the works of the southern American novelist Eudora Welty (1909-2001). It analyzes the alienated characters to find their identities in their world in Welty's works by adopting the Marxism theory. It attempts to explore the reasons and embodiments of the alienation of human nature to attain their self-redemptions in overcoming their adversity. Welty is distinguished with her skillful style; therefore, she goes to employ humor to facilitate the communication from the writer to the readers to convey the theme of alienation that characters encountered in their difficulties in life. She utilizes the humor in her works to disclose the aspects of flaw and failure of the characters in encountering their alienation. It attempts to reveal the humorous tools in two of Welty's works, *The Ponder Heart* and *The Key*.

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1. 1. Welty's Portrayal of the Theme of Alienation:

“An unfunny thing about humor is that you can’t think about it very long without becoming serious. ...the silly sides of our human struggle for survival and for perfection lie so close together”. Walt Disney

Eudora Welty is considered one of the outstanding Southern American novelists who attempts to explore the Southern world of Mississippi in her writings during the Depression period. Her works focus on the intricacies of human relations particularly those alienated individuals who encountered complicated circumstances. In this study, the theme of alienation is undertaken by adopting the Marxism theory to discover the characters’ loneliness, isolation, and alienation in Welty's fictional works. Marx classifies the alienation into three kinds: human beings are alienated from their work which draws a break between the individual and productive activity. They are alienated from their own products which draws a break between the individual and the material world. They are alienated from other human beings which draws species of alienation (Marx 452). For that reason, Marx gives deeper realistic description of alienation by relating the roots of alienation of human nature to the perspectives of realistic world. According to Marx, the appearance of capitalist economic structure reform in the human society refers to the private ownership, which consequently, it causes alienation of social and productive labor products manufactured by human experiences in creating a new world (Arthur 453). As a result, humans are led to be denied instead of affirming themselves as subjects of labor, therefore, they feel unfortunate instead of feeling happiness in the process of self-labor (ibid 166). Consequently, they are tortured instead of giving opportunity to take their turns to use their physical strength and intelligence.

During the depression period, Welty depicts the painful conflict and harsh life of the individuals who live in the southern American community in Mississippi. Those individuals severely experienced adversities and disasters brought by industrial civilization of capitalism and cruel war. In her fictions, Welty attempts to illustrate the plot development to unveil the individuals’ alienation which invites the reader to realize the diversity of human experiences. Moreover, she pursues to portray the human plight by revealing the curtain of the invisible shadow and veil which falls between people to each other’s presence. She depicts the people who passed by the tragic elements of life, such as: alienation, loneliness, hopelessness, and hesitation. Those individuals fail to recognize the feelings of freedom and liberation because of complexity of their world; and the various limitations of human nature (Jiang 36). They are defeated physically and spiritually under the force of alienation. In Welty's fictional works, they endeavor to cope the difficulties of the world, such as, the differences and inequalities between people, poverty, and racial discrimination. Therefore, the characters depicted with the pathos of the experiences of tragic spirits who

are alienated from their world to reach the goals to defeat their hesitations and fear. Welty examines the human beings by weaving the threads of those constant themes of isolation and alienation to make them aware of the world they live in (Jones 1998 178). As John Hardy remarks that Welty tackles the "themes of recognition, of the rarity and brevity of the moments of real awareness in which individuals awaken from the troubled dream of our existence (Gross & Hardy 223). She tends to present the contents of her fiction with complexity which comes from the creation of many demented, disturbed, isolated, and alienated characters. She tries to intensify our awareness of the world by showing an enigmatic tales and trapped obsessions in this world. All these give an opportunity to reveal that enigmatic complexity which is the basis of Welty's writing which is an act of insight and a refusal of the compromise (Lima 43). She invites the readers to live the complexity of the world and overcome the obsessions which distort their realistic sense and presented them as victims of the surrounding people. The text's enigmatic leads to several interpretations, as Welty indicates, "there is absolutely everything in great fiction but a clear answer" (Eye of the Story 148). The variety of portraying characters fosters the obscurity to permit the readers to see things for themselves with no need for any other explanation of the combination of different angles, contradictions, and dichotomies.

The psychotic isolation of those alienated characters appears to surpass the issues of race, and class, and pursued the readers to penetrate into the invisible truth which hides the incongruous reality. Welty refuses to present a variety of ideological, social, and political topics to affect upon readers, including many racial perceptions. She attempts to present the alienated characters with complications of the world they lived since she contemplates that her characters are individuals rather than to be symbols (McWhirter 116). Though she has opposed to such terms, "racism and injustice and cruelty, she presented the stories "to show the faults as they are, and to let the characters speak about themselves" (ibid 117). It is important to recognize that Welty sustains to portray the human life in all its details and duplicity, which it may interpret her ambivalent evaluation of gender and racial roles in the South community, "writing about human beings as human beings with all the things that make them up, including bigotry, misunderstanding, injustice, and also love and affection, and whatever else" (Dominy 88). Welty describes the human experience by preserving the order and ritual of society, giving identity of life, and supplying norms of personal relationships in the community. The price of separateness from the community is that sense of deprivation and loss that results of being separating from the roots and sustaining relationships that flourish in the society (Allen 19). She portrays those characters as they attempt in their pursuit to restore their identity to overcome their alienation.

The concept of alienation can be explored in another form of the loneliness when the isolated man feels alone even in surroundings and struggles against his plight. She depicts various forms and terms of alienations, such as the alienation of the world, the alienation caused by

physical obstruction, the alienation of childhood shock, and the alienation of the Negroes contempt and abuse in the southern societies. The alienated man feels his estrangement from himself, others, and God, as Karl Menninger indicates, the alienated individuals suffer from several problems: the feeling of neglect, ignorance, and a lack of appreciation, a sense of inferiority (Smith 67). The alienated people seek for many things, one of them is their identity since they feel annihilated in the real world. The modern man, as Joseph Gold remarks, is distinguished by the Consciousness and awareness of the detachment, the isolation and alienation from traditional human values"(Gold 81). Robert Warren indicates that Welty's fictions presents the characters as they are "cut off, alienated, isolated from the world" (Warren 248). She portrays the alienated characters of the American southern areas because they embody "the feeling of the hostility and isolation the alienation of the South the feelings of toward the culture of other surrounding regions" (Bohner 22). She handles the theme of alienation in a distinguished way and with a great deal. Welty has the capacity to illustrate the theme of alienation throughout the spirit of the southwest humor which match her willingness to expose the events in a narrative way.

1. 2. Humorous Style in Welty's Works:

Humor is an essential and pervasive element in Welty's fictional works throughout presenting juxtaposition between the alienation theme and the ridiculous situation to delineate the phenomenon of alienation in her community. In her writing, Welty treats with the theme of alienation in a humorous way. She identified the alienation with remarkable style by presenting the lengthy dialogues in a humorous and vernacular language. She makes use of humor to show awful lot of things through humor, both conscious and unconscious [humor], which can also take the Southern American form (Jones1963 332). Her uses of humor is not just to seek amusement, rather she portrays isolated and alienated characters with the feelings of sympathy and pity of the people around in the community in an elaborate way. She is deeply concerned with the essential nature of relationships and the interaction of the individual's quest for identity. Humor's technique emerges from her portraying the alienated characters in her works. She uses the humor as a mature tool of handling the problems of everyday life, which separate people away from their alienation and separation long enough to enable more objective insight into life (Gretlund 179). In other words, it she incorporates humor to soften the harsher reality her characters are encountered. Humor can be described as something so fundamental to our survival as species which can offer a distance from pain that is, in short, essential to existence (Hoyt 13-14). She attempts to fit the gap which exists between happiness and unhappiness by depicting characters' attempts to restore the identities. Then, it is inherent in a whole lot of living, as Walker Percy said, there is something in the modern consciousness, so that there is a communication from writer to reader which is greatly facilitated by humor (Jones 1963 332). She describes the function

of humor in her work as it is a way to attempt, risk something, a way to get around something to make it endurable, to live with it or to shrug it off. In a century of devastation and fragmentation, Welty presents humor as a good positive and healing force that nurtures the body and the soul. She reveals a world of nonsense, of nightmare, of nihilism, destroyed man in a comic vision of the world as a way out of chaos (Lima:42). She leads us to explore human nature, those who are inspiring fallible and laughable human beings, attesting the of life and enabling us to see that we are not very much different from one another. Welty makes use of the humorous moments in the characters' experiences to demonstrate the spirit of humor and jesting. Throughout the moments of laughter that confound the readers, the characters jest and giggle at times in the action where there is nothing overtly humorous. They resist the outsider's gaze on their community by enacting humor as protest (Lumumba 179). They present the humorous behavior as a protest against the marginalization in their society, especially the black people. Moreover, Welty's makes use of humor as a device of defense in the American Black societies. As Sarah Ford describes, humor "reverses the power structure for black characters, [the power which exists] as a device safe enough for disenfranchised blacks to employ against the white supremacy" (Ford 132). It shows that Welty embedded meaningful moments where black characters joke and laugh in forms of concerted defiance. Welty uses humor in moments of distress to gain control and protect themselves against alienation and in the black community.

In describing the harsh world, Welty expresses the theme of alienation throughout the presentation of the concepts of comedy and tragedy upon the characters' life. She draws a world of feelings where comedy and pathos become inseparable, as Alun R. Jones describes, Welty's works shows "how tragic feeling can be expressed in laughter, and laughter [which] is often the release of otherwise unbearable pathos" (John 1998 180). Welty's writings are basically carried the comic and humorous spirit which reveal a sense of harmony and reconciliation as part of tragic destiny of the alienated characters. It intrudes in the most tragic situations. Not comedy-I would say humor does" (Brans: 70). The relationship between humor and empathy appeared as one of Welty's themes, the real sense of humor" is "a human apprehension of others and it encompasses the outlook on life and the interplay of character, as Welty explains, humor "has nothing to do with gags, with jokes... it is much more profound: the sense of human relationships and human nature" (Michaels 161).

1. 3. Welty's *The Ponder Heart*:

The Ponder Heart is a story, which has published in 1953. It takes place in rural Clay County, Mississippi. It is about Daniel Ponder, who is a mildly retarded man, and he is the heir of his father's wealth. As Daniel generously gives up his family possessions, his father and his niece, Edna Earle Ponder, attempt to save their family fortune by having Daniel institutionalized to a psychiatric hospital. In a public trial, the prosecutor indicts Daniel on murder charges, accusing him killing his wife. He

convinces the judge that he is innocent, and then he gives up the remainder of his riches to all present at the trial, including the prosecutor.

Edna Earle Ponder narrates the story throughout a humorous prologue. There are two monologues: the first monologue deals with the events which led to the trial of Uncle Dantel. When the grandfather decides to find a wife for his son Dantel to solve his problems. Consequently, Dantel has married twice, the first time when he gets married Misa Teacake Magee, but it does not continue along; and the second time he finds Miaa Peacock, a younger white woman but, she dies in a mysterious storm. After his grandfather's death, Daniel has been a very wealthy man, but the prosecutor charged him for murdering his wife. The second monologue is devoted mostly to the trial. The humorous part of the monologue is when the jury members are sent out the courtroom, then they return immediately, with a not guilty verdict, because they don't want missing anything. Though the seriousness of the charge, all leave the courtroom, Daniel goes to the Beulah Hotel.

The Ponder Heart, as Pearl A. McHaney describes, “a wonderful tragicomedy of good intentions in a durably sinful world” (McHaney 92). Welty treats the theme of alienation throughout reflecting the suffering of the Negro characters in a compassionate way with keeping the humorous tone. She indicates that, the Negroes know nothing, “but you can try telling them and see what happens” (Heart 23). Furthermore, when the maid, Narciss, presents evidence in the trial, and she does not support the Ponders, Earle comments, “she just washed her hands of us. You can't count on them for a single minute” (ibid 10). In this story, it is important to recognize the way how Earle has alienated herself away from other people. She presents herself as the Guardian Angel of the family, she says, “it's always taken a lot out of me, being smart” (ibid 10). This presents an ironic contrast by defining Earle as she “never did get to be what you'd call a heavy thinker” (ibid 18). Her attitude helps to put her well as the (last of the Ponders), which is a thought makes her feeling comfortable. It is remarkable to notice that the alienation of the Ponder family can be construed as the kind of heart where no one else has; and therefore, no one else recognizes it easily. During the trial, people of the town seem to respect the family but that no one really appreciates the Ponders. There has to be somebody to stand between the family and the world, Edna Earle expresses her viewpoint:

We had all that company to crowd in at the Beulah dinner table ... everybody was kind enough to tell me how I did ... When somebody spoke to Uncle Daniel, I tried to answer for him too, if I could. I'm the go - between, that's what I am, between my family and the world. I hardly ever get a word in for myself (Heart 120).

When Uncle Daniel passes out all of his money at the trial, all knew the actual feelings of the people in the town:

Next, Mr. Bank Sistrunk stands up and roars out, “Dantel Ponder! Where did you get that money?”

Well, “says Miss Missionary Sistrunk the oldest one... the Ponders as I've always been told did not burn their cotton when Sherman came, and maybe this is their judgment,” Take that back, Miss Florette ... “’Twas the same Yankees you sold it to!” That was Mr. Sistrunk. Why, he was beside himself. But Uncle Daniel just then got to him and gave him a single hundred - dollar bill, and shuts him up. You know, I think people have lost the power to be ashamed of themselves (ibid 146-147).

Welty attempts to depict Uncle Daniel as an effective element of the total alienation of the Ponder family even though people have lost the power to be ashamed of themselves. Despite the humorous treatment, the tone of the story is still one of pathos. The people have been humiliated by Uncle Daniel's gifts: He has committed a bigger mistake because he has given away money: “the worst thing [in life when] you give away” (ibid 149). Consequently, the things that Daniel has interested in before, he is no longer enjoys it any more. He doesn't know what's become of everybody. Even the preacher tells that he has a catch in his back. If people feel a shamed of Uncle Daniel, he's going to feel that. Then, I'm here, and just the same as I always was, and I will be, but then, he never was afraid of losing me (Heart 120).

The Ponder Heart is based in its essential and thematic focus on the despair and alienation, but the perspectives of humor lies in the concealed meaning with a conscious effort. In her works, Welty shows a sympathetic insight in the human life from a humorous perspective. She attempts to show the importance of the individuals' striving to persuade them to find their personalities.

1. 4. Welty's *The Key*:

The Key is a short story, which has published in 1941 in Welty's collection of short stories, which entitles, “A Curtain of Green”. The story takes place in rural Clay County in Mississippi. It is about two middle - aged couple deaf mutes, the husband Albert, and his wife Ellie Morgan, who are waiting in a train station to go to Niagara Falls. In the waiting hall, a younger red - haired unnamed man who drops a key of a hotel room at Albert's feet. Albert tries to keep and convey the key to his beloved, Ellie, believing it represents a symbol of hope, love, and happiness. Eventually, the couple missed the train because they cannot communicate with the people around them, since no one can understand their sign language. Therefore, the young man intuitively feels the despair and frustration of Albert and Ellie because of their misunderstanding and isolation from the external world. The young man then dropped another key into Ellie's handbag, a key tagged “Star Hotel, Room 2” (Curtain 47), at least they would have a room for that night.

In this story, Welty explores the depths and limits of human communication by looking at the state of Mississippi through the eyes of both black and white inhabitants. *The Key* presents a realistic view of the

alienation behind the social relations between the characters in her works. It examines the nature of relationships of the poor people who live in the rural south environment of Mississippi as they are dramatically separated from the external world.

Throughout the consequences of these events, Welty attempts to reveal the theme of alienation in a humorous style. At first, When the young man throws the key to the floor, with a fierce metallic sound, all noticed that except Albert and Ellie because they are deaf. Later, Albert picks up the key, with wonder as if the key had fallen out from the sky. Albert is surprised by finding the key near his feet, but all people around them look ironically in this situation. Albert explains with sign language, "I found it. Now it belongs to me. It is something important. It means something. From now on we will get along better, have more understanding. Maybe when we reach Niagara Falls, we will even fall in love ..." (Curtain 57).

Welty presents the alienation of the couple, Albert and Ellie in another humorous situation. While the husband, Albert, feels that he is alienated because of his wife's control and demonstration upon his life. The wife, Ellie, seems to be the strong partner of the marriage because she is a mature woman who appears able to withstand the harsh life on her own rules. All can distinguish the control of Ellie in the marriage relationship and the unhappiness shaped by her dominance. On the other hand, Albert appeared homemade, though his wife had self-consciously knitted personality or contrived a husband when "she sat alone at night. He had a shock of very fine sunburned yellow hair. He was too shy for this world, you could see" (ibid 57-58). Albert is deaf and he feels isolated away from the world. The trip to Niagara Falls is Ellie's way of trying to get more options in deciding their relationship if there is any love in their marriage to Albert. If the trip does not succeed, they may lose their marriage.

Welty handles the themes of alienation in a humorous way to reflect the dilemma of the modern man to be alienated in the world he lives, and how it is difficult to know each other even though they live together. Man feels stranger in the world he lives. *The Key* presents another glance of Welty's tackling the theme of alienation humorously to reveal their physical infirmity. Those who stand by their ridicule, the deaf mutes, are outsiders because they cannot recognize the communication that passes between Ellie and Albert. One can notice that Ellie begins to reprimand Albert for keeping the key. In the waiting room, the people feel sympathy for the couple, in a shallow manner, then they are ignorant of the message that is passing between the deaf-mutes by sign language. Both feel disconnected and socially isolated from the world because both are deaf and it is difficult to understand sign language with others. The title of the story, the Key, is a good symbol for the couple, Albert and Ellie which gives several meanings, such as: opening up a new lease of life; promise of sustaining their love; and power for giving happiness. By finding the key in the train station, Albert finds it the chance to restore his beloved, Ellie, and keeps their marriage, because they feel the disharmony and isolation.

2. Conclusion:

Welty employs humor as a stylistic tool to delineate the theme of alienation in the southern society. In Welty's fictions, humor helps the alienated characters to separate their alienation and depression in an objective insight of life since they lack to the resistance tools of social power in their communities. The humor is not only capable of causing laughter; rather it helps to unveil truths about humanity, both spiritual and physical by exposing man's flaws and failure in facing the difficulties of life. Welty presents humor to reinforce those individuals in different ways, such as a positive element and safe defense and resistance for the alienated characters to escape from the chaos of life; a protest against their marginalization in their communities; and a device of defense of the blacks against the white supremacy, and a pursuit to find their identities against the strangers. Moreover, it helps to reduce the effects of trauma, despair, and alienation upon her characters. Though each work of Welty's fictions conveys a different shade of humor, they all commonly contain elements of redemption in attempting to overcoming their alienations. Both *the Ponder Heart* and *The Key* reflect Welty's treatment of alienation in a humorous way. *The Key* describes the alienation and isolation of the deaf mutes resulted from their physical infirmity while people stand by ridicule the Morgans because they cannot understand the communication. *The Ponder Heart* describes the alienation in a humorous manner by presenting an ironic contrast when Uncle Daniel treats the Negro characters in a humorous way in the southern society.

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