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ABSURDISM AND DARK HUMOR IN WELTY'S *THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM*

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Perhaps because critics read Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* in the light of her other fiction, they have misread this story as an unsuccessful attempt at light comedy. Such readings emphasize the text's use of farce and romantic comedy, as well as its parody of fairy tales. But no one has recognized that, anomalous as it may be for Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom* is an absurdist dark comedy.

In the first scene, Welty establishes her absurdist technique by undercutting Jamie's status as the heroic rescuer of the maiden. Referred to by the narrator as "the second traveler," Jamie makes a preposterous entrance: "'Ho! Ho! Ho!' said the second traveler, punching himself in the forehead and kicking himself in the breeches."¹ The slapstick and burlesque of such events has blinded us to the absurdism behind them. The fantastic technique here goes beyond the fantastic characteristics of fairy tales. The irrational and fantastic representations in fairy tales can be read as attempts to represent reality despite their exaggeration of reality; but Welty's treatment is not an exaggeration of reality as much as it is a departure from it.

Welty further establishes her absurdist stance with situational irony. When Jamie's gang of robbers decides to kill Rosamond, she stops them by holding out the torte she has baked and saying "Have some cake" (p. 81). To contain this text's atypicality and destabilizing effect, critics have ignored this kind of absurd irony and turned this text back into the fairy tales that it uses as sources.

It is not just the characterization that is absurdist, but also the plot. As early as page thirty-seven the reader is so inured to miraculous, impossible events that when Rosamond says she played unharmed with a placid panther, the reader does not disbelieve the fair maiden until the narrator states that Rosamond, as usual, is lying. But two pages later, the narrator tells us that Rosamond, who has never tried to play the guitar before, picks one up and plays it immediately just from desire and will power. Welty thereby establishes not only Rosamond's unreliability, but the narrator's as well. In so doing, Welty asks the reader to enter the reality not of a fairy tale but of a put-on. Welty again uses the narrator to underscore the absurdity of the plot when Jamie thinks a dress is flying through the air and the narrator informs us that it is "only the old flying cow of Mobile flying by" (p. 57). Another preposterous plot development occurs when the narrator tells

us that Rosamond has lost the magic locket (which supposedly has protected her by, among other things, making the panther act like a big pussycat) yet has “never missed it” (p. 62). Moreover, Jamie turns up to protect Rosamond from the rapist after the rapist has already committed his crime. In addition, Jamie was the one who raped her, but he does not recognize her nor does she recognize him. Another absurd plot development occurs when the wicked step mother, Salome, refuses the Indians’ commands to shut up, yet she accepts their commands to dance until she dies.

Most critics have bracketed off the dark humor as somehow unfitting, a violation of the unity of the text. But the dark humor is part of the ironic stance toward the violence of fairy tales and myths. After Mike Fink thinks he has beaten Jamie and Clement to death, he says, “Nothing left of the two of them but the juice” (p. 17). And Clement says, in an oxymoron worthy of Evelyn Waugh, that the Indians who had captured him were “infinitely gay and cruel” (p. 21). In addition, the narrator says of Goat’s penchant for bestowing freedom on all beings, “he would let anything out of a trap, if he had to tear its leg off to do it” (p. 40). Moreover the ostensibly romantic hero, Jamie, says to his fellow bandit Little Harp, “I ought to break all of your bones where you need them most” (p. 111). Little Harp is literally out for Jamie’s head because there is a price on it, so Little Harp says, “Oh, the way to get ahead is to cut a head off!” (p. 145). But Jamie is prevented this inconvenience when the severed head of Little Harp’s brother turns up in town and is purported to be Jamie’s head.

Sexuality in *The Robber Bridegroom* is also depicted as darkly humorous. Sado-masochism is treated ironically when Clement says of his treatment by the Indians, “We had to be humiliated and tortured and enjoyed” (pp. 22-3). There are scenes of voyeurism as well. Goat conceals himself and watches while Jamie orders Rosamond to take off her clothes. And later Goat hides under their bed all night. In addition, Jamie’s gang of robbers watches as Little Harp drugs the Indian maiden, cuts off her finger, rapes her on the kitchen table, and finally kills her. That this dismemberment and rape occurs on the kitchen table also suggests both cannibalism and necrophilia. And there is another suggestion of sado-masochism and necrophilia when Salome is forced to dance to her death naked. There is even more when Mike Fink crawls in bed with what he thinks are two men he has just killed.

In addition Welty dwells on the homoerotic in the scene where Clement, Mike Fink and Jamie all sleep together in the same bed. Mike Fink says to Clement, “It’s been a long time since we slept together,” and Fink follows that up with two questions: “Have you the

same old smell you had before?” and “Are you just as lousy as ever?” (p. 6). And Fink says to Jamie, “It’s been a long time since our heads were side by side on the pillow” (p. 7). Fink also snatches Clement into his arms and forces Clement to waltz with him. Clement resists, not because he objects to being held by Mike Fink, but because Clement “did not like to dance” (p. 13). Later, when Jamie kidnaps the priest, he does so in the same way that he kidnapped Rosamond—by lifting him onto his horse and riding away. The priest’s robe is like a dress, so he rides side-saddle.

The critics have exhaustively explored the myths, fairy tales and legends that Welty draws from, but they largely ignore her parodic allusions to previous dabblers in dark humor. For example, the crow which keeps repeating the same foreboding message is an allusion to Poe’s “The Raven.” And the bedroom scene with the men sleeping together at the inn is a parody of Ishmael and Queequeg at the Spouter Inn. And while some critics have noted Welty’s debt to Twain in a general way, none have noted Welty’s allusion to the scene from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* in which Hank Morgan uses his knowledge of science to pretend to cause a solar eclipse. The scene of the technocrat saving himself from premodern people by pretending to cause a solar eclipse is now a cliché, and Welty parodies it by toying with us, arousing our expectations when Salome tells the Indians, “For I have seen your sun with a shadow eating it” (p. 161). Then Welty breaks our expectations when Salome fails to stop the sun.

The Robber Bridegroom, then, is atypical of Welty’s fiction. Her first novel, it was not entirely successful. Perhaps the disappointing reception was instrumental in Welty’s decision to turn to the more subtle techniques that have characterized her fiction ever since.

NOTES

¹Eudora Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942; New York, 1970), p. 7.