The Power of Silence in Delta Wedding

Kelly D. Cannon
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol8/iss1/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
THE POWER OF SILENCE IN DELTA WEDDING

Kelly D. Cannon

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Eudora Welty has said of the South, “I think the Southerner is a talker by nature.”1 “All [Southerners],” she says, “have to talk about each other, and what they’ve seen during the day, and what happened to so and so.”2 Welty’s observation of this Southern characteristic apparently assisted in the crafting of her novel Delta Wedding, a work deeply involved in the “quintessentially Southern” oral tradition.3

The novel’s setting, Shellmound, symbolizes the spoken word; it is the home of what Ellen calls a “clamourous” family (p. 68). After her silent, meditative trainride, Laura is assaulted by the noises of Shellmound. The constant motion of the joggling board, going up and down with the pressure of even one body, let alone three, sets in mental motion for Laura the memory of Shellmound as a place of voices, mixed with a variety of other noises. The noise always continues long after the children are put to bed. Peals of laughter, Uncle Battle reciting poetry, Aunt Mac (supposedly deaf) calling out Bible verses, visiting planters “arguing” with Battle and George—these are the sounds of Shellmound. “Their was a house where, in some room at least, the human voice was never still” (p. 194). Shellmound will be heard, Ellen thinks, because Shellmound is importunate with myriad desires.

The characters best equipped to deal with the everyday demands of Shellmound are those who are most verbal. Battle throws his commands around the house without hesitation. At dinner he might shout, “Breast, gizzard, and wing! Pass it boy.” He even feels comfortable talking about the abstract and eternal, as long as they are rooted in the context of Shellmound: “he could also mention death and people’s absence in an ordinary way.” Aunt Tempe as well sports the Fairchild knack for words; her declarative manner makes gospel truth of mere gossip. Dabney wonders at Tempe’s powers of transformation, knowing “beyond question” the truth of the matter when “Aunt Tempe came and stated it like a fact of the weather” (pp. 12, 116).

Aunt Tempe’s bits of gossip represent the Fairchilds’ love of storytelling, which surfaces at times of pleasure or crisis, to entertain, to heal, and sometimes to harm. One recurring story is the Yellow Dog incident; it waits to be told. At one telling, Welty implies that the story has been told so many times that India knows precisely what response she can expect if she tells the story: “I can tell it good—make everybody cry,” she says (p. 61). Of course not all the family respond
**SILENCE IN DELTA WEDDING**

alike, but Shelley, as if on cue, turns white and begins to cry at one point of the tale.

If the stories of Aunt Tempe or India serve a particular end—to “make everybody cry,” etc.—then the oral tradition will often distort what “really” happened. Welty said in one interview, “Tales get taller as they go along.” In the Fairchild family, someone might recall the past with the question, “Why did such and such happen?” Then someone answers, with the “facts,” carefully woven into a narrative, shaped by the teller to follow handily the all-important phrase which lends credence to the fictional, “Here’s the way it was—” (p. 119). Welty reveals the Fairchild penchant for fictionalizing events in the thoughts of Ellen Fairchild, who wishes in some corner of her mind that the Yellow Dog incident might have proved fatal, creating a legend “heroic, or tragic” rather than what it is, a merely “romantic and absurd” story (p. 188).

Indeed the ones who have died, Denis and others, are pinned to the storytelling whims of the living. Denis, for the old aunts at least, is no longer Denis, but a god without limits—the best in law, gambling, horseriding—who “was cut off before his time.” For many members of the Fairchild clan, Denis, in the best oral tradition, has been shaped such that he “could have planted the world, and made it grow” (p. 116).

Words also distort the world of the living. Dabney is disturbed by the “nice things” people say about Troy (p. 31). Words are not inherently bad, but Dabney recognizes the power of words to distort the subject so much as to make him invisible; the person her family describes is not Troy at all, but a wished-for fiancé that replaces the real thing.

Ellen, too, ponders the mask the Fairchilds have dressed themselves with, accomplished through the repetition of a single word—“happiness.” Ellen hears Battle repeatedly ask Dabney on the day of her marriage, “Are you happy?” as if by some incantation the family’s happiness might be realized. The theme of happiness, Ellen thinks, dominates Fairchild speech, rendering happiness their “legend.” Over and over again the family implies, through their stories and small talk, that “the Fairchilds are the happiest of people” (p. 222).

The power that words have to distort, and thereby enshrine or otherwise imprison people, circumvents its power to reveal things as they are. Shelley laments, “Nobody had ever told her anything—not anything very true or very bad in life” (p. 122). Where do the keys to the universe, or at least the keys to the Fairchild universe, lie? As significant as the oral tradition may be in *Delta Wedding*, much of the power in the world of Shellmound lies in the “tradition” of silence.
Overlooked corners of silence in the novel resonate with meaning, producing in effect a sound. It seems that many of the voices in the novel, loudly proclaiming themselves, have their silent counterparts that direct the reader's attention to the margins, nooks, and crannies where the secrets of Shellmound are kept. What Virginia Woolf said of her novel *The Voyage Out* might appropriately describe a significant portion of *Delta Wedding*: "I want to write a novel about Silence, [about] the things people don't say."^5^ Shellmound has its silent places. The family library frequently lies vacant: "no one ever went" there at certain times of the day (p. 54). Laura loves the library, approaching it with the utmost reverence. To her this silent place speaks a language all its own, evoking the spirit of the past and the voices of the dead, a place where the "dead Fairchilds...live again."^6^ The library contains an old dictionary, survivor of a flood long ago and thus a symbol of the past. Inside the dictionary is the name of Great-Great-Uncle Battle, silently calling Laura back several generations. On the wall hang pictures of the dead—Denis, Great-Grandfather George Fairchild, Aunt Ellen’s mother, and others. The silence of the library invites the dead, and the dead invite the silence, making the room really a shrine of the past, becoming a reference collection for the present to measure time with.

Notwithstanding this haven of silence, there are places much quieter than Shellmound. The Grove symbolizes silence, with its doors that shut so softly, and the very quiet ring of the phone, like the ringing of a "tiny silver bell." The silence of the Grove evokes a sense of delicacy; people and things here are fragile. Dabney can't help but compare the Grove to the constant noise of Shellmound, where "even when at moments people fell silent," there was still the rushing sound of the fan penetrating every corner (p. 40). The silence dominates the Grove because it stands as a shrine for the dead. Here, on the open veranda where people "never walked anymore," Denis had read poetry by himself (p. 37). In a sense Denis controls the lives of the aunts who live here now. His silence speaks to them as no other voices can, decorating their memory with what now seem superhuman attributes.

Marmion is another silent shrine of the dead. Dabney thinks how Marmion has been uninhabited by the family since the death of Marmion's builder, Grandfather James Fairchild, in 1890. The silence here speaks much louder than words, a perpetual reminder to the living of a past nobler than the present. The aunts became the verbal vehicles of Marmion's message, with the words "honor, honor, honor" sounding repeatedly in the ears of the eight children they adopted.
While silence may appear in the human sphere, it thrives in the world of nature. Nature is a simile for silence, when, at the wedding, a silence falls on the party "like the [silence] after a flock of fall birds has gone over." Indeed, some of the most silent moments in the novel are set in nature, far from the human voices of Shellmound. The reaches of nature, up to the very walkway in front of Shellmound, evoke a sense of silence, particularly when contrasted with the human noise inside. Outside in nature "there was a quieting and vanishing of sound." The words "quieting" and "vanishing" instill nature with a power to diminish and even eliminate sound, as if nature prefers silence, and has the power to beat the voices of life into submission (pp. 155, 7).

The silences of nature are significant, and Welty emphasizes the significance of silences in nature by attributing to them certain sounds—characters "hear" the silence of nature. Laura, on her train ride to Fairchild, hears nature, though in reality it produces no sound at all. She looks at the Delta through the train window and thinks how it seems "strummed in the shimmering sunlight, as though it were an instrument" (p. 4).

Nature's silent sound is loud enough to awaken Dabney—"the silver night woke her." Welty emphasizes that it couldn't be literal sound, for the night that awakens her is "breathless and serene." Dabney again confronts the sounds of silent nature when she visits the whirlpool at Marmion. Staring at the water, she "listened to the silence and then heard it stir, churn, churning in the early morning" (pp. 89, 123).

One major significance of nature's silence is death. "The 'great confines' of Shellmound are bordered by that which the family least recognizes: mortality." Like the silent library in Shellmound, or the silent edifices of Marmion and the Grove, the silent woods are a shrine for the dead, in this case some ancient Indian tribe. When Ellen passes through the forest, she is struck by its stillness. The woods have drawn her from the security of the present into the unfamiliar as she anxiously listens for human voices which might call her back to Shellmound—"Even inside this narrow but dense wood she found herself listening for sounds of the fields" (the songs of the cotton pickers and the hoofbeats of the overseer's horse) and the sounds of the house (Dabney calling her for help) [p. 69]. Instead of familiarity, the woods produce a strange little girl who, interestingly enough, can be identified as white by Ellen only when the little girl speaks. This human voice brings Ellen back into the known world, while nature's silence confuses Ellen with its unspoken powers.
Kelly D. Cannon

Shelley is disoriented as well by the silence of nature when she goes to the Grove by way of the bayou. In her mind, Shellmound is clearly associated with human voices—"laughing and crying went rushing through the halls"—while the bayou is silent, like a lagoon. Much like Ellen's experience of some element of strangeness, the silence for Shelley is not meaningless, but rich in significance, presenting to Shelley's senses "a foreign world" (p. 194).

Welty imbues water with a more intense silence than the silence of the land, instilling in the water's silence an even more powerful expression of death. Laura thinks, "The water was quieter than the land anywhere." Welty symbolizes this by presenting an image of a road of earth to Shellmound, while a road of water leads to silent Marmion. "[Marmion] was all quiet, and unlived in surely; the dark water was going in front of it, not a road" (p. 172).

The silence of water as a symbol of death haunts Shelley when she visits the bayou. Musing on the silence of the water there, she thinks of another relatively silent place, the Grove, which borders on the Yazoo River. She remembers the words told to her by Laura who had heard from her fourth-grade teacher that "Yazoo means River of Death." With this phrase, Welty associates water with death, but circles back to the theme of silence in the thoughts which follow. To Shelley, the "River of Death...meant not the ultimate flow of doom, but the more personal vision of the moment's chatter ceasing." For her, the river silences the activity of the human community, and provides temporary and immediate refreshment, where "tenderness and love, sadness and pleasure" are "let alone to stretch in the shade" (p. 194). The river, then, carries a message of temporary silence and rest on one level, while on another it speaks of the permanent silence of death.

Meanwhile, Dabney confronts the whirlpool, which speaks to her of the dead who had fallen in, black and white alike who had dared get too close to the edge. She is overcome with the beginnings of vertigo, as if at any moment she might throw herself into the pool and drown. In the silence of the dead there lies a power over life. Places of silence, unlike places filled with the voices of life, bring the living into contact, sometimes treacherously close contact, with lives which have passed before, and with their own death.

The silence in nature vibrates with another meaning as well: it symbolizes the silence of the universe, a demonstration of Ruth Vande Kieft's observation that Welty "seems to be saying that there is no final meaning to life beyond the human meanings." The Fairchilds importunately ask questions of universal significance, but the answers, if they exist, remain unspoken. Even Battle effectively throws his
SILENCE IN DELTA WEDDING

hands in the air on one occasion, as if to say, “Look at me! What can I do? Such a thing it all is” (p. 12)! Meditative characters suffer even more in their silence. Laura, precocious in her meditations, finds the world silent to her questions. She wonders about the needs of herself and others—“Need pulled you out of bed in the morning, showed you the day with everything crowded into it, then sang you to sleep at night as your mother did, need sent you dreams. Need did all this—when would it explain?” Laura is consoled by the thought that one day she will receive direct, verbal answers. For now answers would be “put off, put off, put off” with silence (p. 76).

When she was young like Laura, Ellen too had known the significance of silence. Her mother’s running away to England, and then suddenly returning, went unexplained, and her mother’s passion remained a mystery to her, “like an act of God.” The cliche “an act of God” resonates with new meaning in this context. Always careful in her choice of words and phrases, Welty calls attention to this phrase in the words which follow. In her adult life, Ellen is confronted with similar silences, and the answers have not come. True, her family members have not spoken, like the old women of Mitchem Corner who had remained silent in the face of Ellen’s mother’s effrontery, but the complexities Ellen thinks of seem ultimately to be beyond the human sphere. She thinks: “How deep were the complexities of the everyday, of the family, what caves were in the mountains, what blocked chambers, and what crystal rivers that had not yet seen the light” (p. 157). There is a sense in the book of questions which will go unanswered indefinitely.

Robbie experiences similar anxiety when she says to Ellen, “Once I tried to be like the Fairchilda. I thought I knew how.” Ellen meets this statement with silence. While this could be just another obstinate human silence, there is the implication of a more persistent quietude. Robbie says, “Don’t any other people in the world feel like me? I wish I knew” (p. 165). Her wish for solidarity in some precise expression may never come.

The silent world of the deaf Aunt Mac provides a humorous counterpart to any silence of weightier significance. People give her answers, but she doesn’t hear them because she can’t. At one point Robbie raises her voice in consideration “of the deaf,” but “Aunt Mac did not hear Robbie’s answer, or suppose there could be one.” She talks on, comfortably oblivious of the world around her. She responds to those annoyed by her deafness with, “Talk louder. Nobody’s going to make me wear that hot ear-phone” (pp. 161, 164). Her eternally silent existence is rendered comic by her self-satisfied air.
Kelly D. Cannon

As characters seek meaning in the universe, so they seek some personal meaning in the mundane realm of Shellmound. Many times the spoken word fails to achieve significance for the speaker. A telling moment is Ellen’s meditation on Laura, who has become, by her familiar manner, just another face and thereby insignificant. Ellen thinks how Aunt Shannon had never shed a tear for Laura, the “motherless child.” Yet Denis, the now silent and once meditative young man, who had often retreated to the quiet balcony to read poetry, had Aunt Shannon “[tearing] herself to pieces” with sorrow for him. The element which determines significance seems to be in part the degree of silence associated with a certain character. Laura and others at Shellmound become nameless faces in “the general view,” belonging “to the multitudinous heavens” because they “all were constantly speaking,” or rather “twinkling,” often with that imploring quality Ellen calls “clamorous” (p. 63). In speaking, they become anonymous.

The power of a well-placed silence is something to be wished for amidst the frequent insignificance of words. One of the most silent characters is Maureen. Her communication with words is limited by a speech impediment; in fact her verbal communication is marred by too many words—“she had never talked plain; every word was two words to her and had an ‘I’ in it.” So Maureen performs best in silence, provoking fear in Laura. After Maureen tumbles a pile of logs over Laura, with no verbal explanation but the words “choo choo,” Laura contemplates that what Maureen meant by her marred speech and more frequent “speechless gaze” was “harm” (pp. 10, 74). Rendered incomprehensible by her failure to enact the verbal exercises required by the Fairchilds, Maureen achieves a certain power with her unspoken malice.

Yet other characters who can speak with clarity choose silence over words to make themselves significant. Theirs is the silence of secrecy. This manipulative silence empowers the user at the expense of other community members; “silence becomes...the invincible adversary.” Manipulative silences surface with Dabney’s marriage plans. The conversant Battle makes it verbally clear to Dabney that he doesn’t approve of her marriage to Troy. For example, he’s happy to say to Dabney that Maureen certainly won’t comb her tangled hair just for Dabney’s wedding (p. 62). These verbal outbursts have little power. “The caprices of his restraining power over his daughters filled her with delight now that she had declared what she could do” (p. 33). Her verbal declaration undermines her father’s.

Her mother is silent on the subject, however, and this silence assumes great significance for Dabney. Mother and daughter, retreating
into "shells of mutual contemplation," cannot verbally communicate, and Ellen's silence "somehow defeat[s]" Dabney (p. 33). That her mother "had never spoken the first word against her sudden decision to marry" does not guarantee approval; in fact it might imply misgivings too complex to verbally define. Ellen, by withholding valuable information, tacitly asserts a degree of power over her daughter.

Another instance of silence as a means to power—though in this case it ultimately fails—is the family's secrecy about George's separation from Robbie. In a scene complicated with undercurrents of meaning, George arrives without Robbie, and the adult family members who are present—Ellen, Battle, Shelley, and George—quickly determine the people from whom they will withhold this information. They will not tell India or the other little girls, who are young and might not understand. They will not tell Dabney—she is getting married, and needs no additional disturbances. They will not tell Tempe because she might respond irrationally, particularly after hearing of Dabney's "marrying the way she is, and after Mary Denis married a Northern man and moved so far off" (p. 52). And the elderly aunts, Primrose and Jim Allen, who depend so much on a placid present which does not disturb the past—they must never know. Indeed the family's superficial motive is protection of others, but these silent individuals are wise in their knowledge, sensing in their secrecy a way to preserve the surface placidity of Shellmound. For example, Battle is free to badger George into searching for Robbie so George can "wring her neck," before the rest of Shellmound feels the effects of the separation.

As young as she is, Laura is well aware of the power of silence. Laura thinks when she sees Maureen dancing that "she [Laura] could never be able to hate anybody that hurt her in secret and in confidence." This sentence may be read on two levels, both levels suggesting the power of silence to do harm. First, Laura recognizes that for her to hate others, she must do so in silence. Second, that there are people—namely Maureen—who have "hurt her in secret and in confidence." She would like to be secretly spiteful, as Maureen is. At this point, Laura observes that Shellmound houses an infinite number of secrets. The silences of Shellmound, far from being impotent, assume tangible proportions for Laura, becoming so thick that "she could not get by" (p. 102).

Laura does finally employ secrecy to her ends to achieve power over Ellen. "Laura wanted so badly to be taken to [the Fairchilds'] hearts" Ellen "saw" that she, Laura, is not a part of Shellmound (p. 77). Yet in the last pages of the novel, Aunt Ellen becomes Laura's Aunt Ellen: "Laura lifted on her knees and took her Aunt Ellen around
Kelly D. Cannon

the neck.” Just then, she thinks about what Ellen does and does not know. What Ellen does not know is that Laura knows where her rosy pin is—deep in the river bottom. The pin, in the silent river, will remain Laura’s secret. “Should she tell her, and suffer? Yes. No” (p. 247). By secrecy she achieves power because she possesses information Ellen wants, at the same time eluding punishment for her actions.

Dabney also employs silence as a means to power. Her marriage to Troy is not really her marriage as long as family members pry. What is known is shared. Significantly, Dabney withholds information at the end of the novel concerning the whereabouts of the honeymoon. “Instead of going to the Peabody in Memphis they had gone to the St. Charles in New Orleans.” This is Dabney’s and Troy’s secret, and theirs alone, to be cherished. It is their “success” (p. 145).

The significance of silence is further enhanced in Delta Wedding by Welty’s favoring relatively silent characters over verbose characters. The meditative characters are the silent voices that compose the novel, revealing the thoughts inhabiting their apparent silences. Sympathetic characters like George and Ellen are both associated with silence. The “favored center of consciousness in the novel,”10 Ellen is relatively quiet. She enters rooms in Shellmound with a “meditative” air, not rushing immediately into words as other family members might: “She walked into the roomful of family without immediately telling them anything.” Her silence is described in positive terms, associating her with restfulness, reflection, and beauty (p. 20).

Ellen and George communicate best in silence: “Caught in their momentum, [George] looked at Ellen perfectly still, as if from a train window.” George’s quiet manner is later imaged in his standing “in the midst of the room’s commotion...by the mantel as if at rest” (pp. 125, 186).

Though these quiet characters may be on the fringes of this community in several ways, they stand ultimately at the center of emotional power in the novel, and in this sense their silences are equated with power. Their meditative character lies exposed to a full range of experience which characters who do not watch, feel, and listen, but are instead talking, may miss altogether. Battle and Tempe are relatively unsympathetic characters largely because they are not sensitive to the silent undercurrents of Shellmound. It is in silence that personal revelation often occurs; in Delta Wedding, significant thoughts and feelings seldom break into words.”11 When Ellen is at Battle’s side toward the end of the novel, “comfortable and silent,” she thinks, “One moment was enough for you to know the greatest things” (p. 244).
Though the sound of voices rings through Shellmound, the undercurrent of silence speaks importantly as well. Characters of a quiet demeanor function as the emotional centers of the book. Other characters attempt on occasion to achieve significance by the use of well-placed silences. Finally, the quietude of nature echoes with the sound of mortality to those who will listen, and symbolizes as well a more profound silence.

To look beyond the spoken word is a key to this fictional world. Surface meaning can only be what it is—superficial. Meditating on George, Laura thinks how, to be a true receptacle of experience, one must appreciate phenomena through all the senses, exceeding the traditional modes of apprehension (p. 34). An ear for silence might well be included.

NOTES


7Griffin, p. 102.


10Vande Kieft, Eudora Welty, p. 94.