DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 088 109 CS 500 596

AUTHOR Rienstra, Phillis
TITLE "Losing Battles": The Tests of Endurance.
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Doctoral Honors Seminar in Interpretation "The Phenomenon of Performance" (1st, Northwestern University, School of Speech, May 9-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50
DESCRIPTORS American Literature; *Characterization (Literature); Content Analysis; Critical Reading; *Fiction; *Interpretive Reading; *Literary Analysis; *Novels; Oral Communication; Prose; Twentieth Century Literature

ABSTRACT

The works of Eudora Welty challenge the abilities of the oral reader who wishes to interpret them properly. Her novel, "Losing Battles," requires careful attention to the narrative point of view as a guide to its various dimensions of meaning. The narrative shifts through the consciousnesses of various characters of four generations in a rural Mississippi community. The narrator is not a character in the novel; he stands outside the story, and yet he must convey a sense of participation and also establish time and place with summaries and descriptions. The novel's structure is somewhat elusive in the character study seems to be the controlling factor, but the concept of time also plays an important role in its development. The novel is historical and records detailed events, human sensibilities, emotions, and conflicts, and thus requires that the interpretative reader have extensive background information. The reader who interprets this novel must use his imagination to convey a feeling of its humorous and poignant testimony to human endurance. (RN)

SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

THE PHENOMENON OF PERFORMANCE

Papers presented at the first

DOCTORAL HONORS SEMINAR

IN

INTERPRETATION

The School of Speech
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

May 9-11, 1973

Table of Contents

Losing Battles: The Tests of Endurance

by

Phillis Rienstra
University of Texas at Austin

Acclaimed as a "masterpiece of American fiction" by Van Allen Bradley who says that he has not "often or lightly used that term,"[1] Losing Battles requires little else to recommend it to the student of literature. Too often, however, such accolades suggest effortless accessibility to the work, obscuring the shared responsibility of writer and reader in shaping a shared experience. The literary "masterpiece" can realize its full potential only through the readers who give to it the care and attention any intimate relationship demands. As early as 1952 Granville Hicks warned, "Miss Welty's short stories are not for inattentive readers; the best of them yield their meaning only to an effort of the imagination."[2] His statement is both encouragement and warning for the oral interpreter of literature; a careful consideration of Welty's method does, indeed, involve an "effort of the imagination." A part of this effort is an understanding of her craft in fiction, techniques that are, of course, primary concerns for those interested in actualizing a literary text through performance.

Perhaps inattention, impatience, the contemporary mania for effortless "entertainment," or any number of other rationales account for the initial disparaging remarks of Losing Battles' reviewers and the paucity of critical commentaries. To The Ponder Heart may go some of the responsibility for creating numb good will toward Welty narrators and encourag-

ing inattention to point of view with this novel that preceded Losing Battles. The Ponder Heart is narrated through the subjective consciousness of Edna Earle Ponder, a gregarious, self-conscious, endearing, confidential character whose witty verbosity supplies all the answers. That novel's entertaining hilarity contains the Welty economy and precision of style and sense of place without taxing the imagination. But Edna Earle Ponder is not a typical Welty narrator. In A Curtain of Green, her first collection of short stories, only "A Memory" and "Why I Live at the P. O." are related by a narrator-agent. In her second short story collection, The Wide Net, none of the narrators are active participants in the stories. The highly dramatized (almost "self-conscious")[3] third-person narrator reflectors of "The Petrified Man" and "The Wide Net" paint such precise, vivid protraits of their central characters that we are inclined, however, to call them narrator-agents. Losing Battles, in the tradition of earlier Welty works, recalls Granville Hicks' description of her novella The Robber Bridegroom as "a technical triumph . . . the constant, subtle shifting of the point of view to render the most that can be rendered."[4] Losing Battles' narrator penetrates the consciousness of four rural Mississippi generations to render the consciousness of a region and the pulse of humanity.[5] The interpreter's customary rewards--illumination of and coalescence with the text's experience--are not forthcoming in Losing Battles without careful attention to point of view as a major guide in experience through performance. This paper examines point of view in Losing Battles as a key to the novel's various dimensions of meaning.

Eudora Welty achieves through her mastery of narrative technique in Losing Battles an avowed wish to "part a curtain, that invisible shadow

that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight."[6] Her storyteller waits for, and reaches in time, the moment when the characters reveal themselves, revelations that are never self-conscious. The long-anticipated Losing Battles returns us to a narrator who shifts constantly and subtly through the consciousness of a multitude of characters to a sometimes bemused, sometimes sympathetic, always patient observer. These constantly shifting angles of vision clarify theme and character, enlarging the reader's perceptions of Banner and the human plight. Like the characters, the narrator is never a stranger. When he interrupts the family reunion with summary or description he does so as a native Northeast Mississippian, creating the sense of time and place in the idiom indigenous to Banner:

> Now there was family everywhere, front gallery and back, tracking in and out of the company room, filling the bedrooms and kitchen, breasting the passage. The passageway itself was creaking; sometimes it swayed under the step and sometimes it seemed to tremble of itself, as the suspension bridge over the river at Banner had the reputation of doing. With chairs, beds, windowsills, steps, boxes, kegs, and buckets all taken up and little room left on the floor, they overflowed into the yard, and the men squatted down in the shade. Over in the pasture a baseball game had started up. The girls had the swing.7

Neither a character nor an objective observer/witness, he stands outside the story; yet he conveys the sense of participating in it. He sparks our imagination and directs us to meaning.

The narrator is as inextricably bound to the specific heritage of Banner as are the characters. He is sensitive to and privileged about the characters and their locale, never intrusive but hovering naturally among them insistently. "All at once Lady May Renfro, aged fourteen months," any one of the family might have remarked,

> came bolting out into their midst naked, her voice one steady holler, her little new-calloused feet pounding up through it like a drum-beat. She had sat up right out of her sleep and rolled off the bed and come. Her locomotion, the newest-learned and by no means the gentlest, shook the mirror on the wall and made its frame knock against the house front like more company coming. (p. 46)

Except on those infrequent occasions when he chooses the re-establish time and place through lyrical description and summary, the narrator hands the novel over to the characters, showing the story through their dialogue and achieving a sense of immediacy by projecting states of minds. This narrative technique of showing rather than telling the family history is the tour de force of Welty's craftsmanship in a novel that exceeds 400 pages.

Only in viewing the characters as an inseparable part of their environment and as they appear in relief against it, can we identify their battles. The characteristic Welty themes of personality struggles and the problem of grappling with the forces that unite or seperate people are clarified as the characters, sometimes impotently, struggle to co-exist. While she offers a glimpse of a particular society, her works are never social documents, but like One Time, One Place, more genuine, more personal--something akin to a family album. Welty's characters know their world and move about freely in it. Reminiscent of her earlier works, in Losing Battles, too, they are

> . . . great talkers, great visitors-about; they are at their most typical when present at weddings, card parties, music recitals, receptions, funerals, those occasions when people come together and share each other's company. They all live in communities where everything is known, realized, accepted, talked about. At the same time they are individuals, with their private identities held secret from the world.8

Jack Renfro's homecoming and Granny Vaughn's ninetieth birthday provide

the occasion for the family reunion and the social setting that locates and contains identities in Losing Battles. The novel's structure as an organic whole, like Welty's style, is elusive. Character, at first, seems to operate as a synthesizing principle, as the story is a study of personalities. The concept of time, however, and the role it plays as a perpetrator of change in the development of human consciousness, unobtrusively informs the novel's structure. The narrator's patience in recognizing and ordering time as a controlling factor in the process of revealing personalities reinforces the concept's function. While most of the characters reveal various dimensions, none of them undergoes a serious reversal.

Likewise, the protagonist does not experience a completed change in thought, no real movement from ignorance to knowledge. What finally emerges as an identifiable change is the situation of Jack and Gloria Renfro. It begins when Jack Renfro, the novel's hero, returns from the state penitentiary. His incarceration represents the first "lost" battle, a comic struggle between the forces of "might" (Jack) and mightier" (Curly Stovall). This struggle also necessitates Jack's "starting over"--a phrase that resounds throughout the novel. Curly, the community storeowner and winner of the first battle, symbolizes the forces that threaten the traditional, contained world of Banner and the Renfro family's dignity. Though Curly is a native Bannerite, his keen sense of personal well-being provokes him to "move" when he feels the necessity. When his profession as the local "capitalist" ceases to be profitable he turns to the more secure, lucrative art of "politiking." Jack, on returning to Banner, begins his mythic journey to re-establish his rightful place as the oldest Renfro boy and family breadwinner, to regain the respect of

the community and to acknowledge the responsibility of head of his own recently enlarged family. The task of "proving himself" requires an introduction to a changed Banner. In spite of his constant refusal to admit the changes, his wife Gloria persistently demands of him, "Do you still think you're going to pick up living right where you left off?" His response is shortsighted, "Did something put the idea in your precious little head I can't?" Indicative of the subtle changes during Jack's absence is the new method of selecting the school bus driver. In Jack's "time" the privilege belonged to the most popular student. Now the honor goes to the best speller. Curly, Jack's persistent adversary, is a less gentle reminder of the community's changed attitude toward Jack:

> 'Nobody in Banner or nowere else ever so much as threatened to be sorry for me!' said Jack. . . .
>
> 'That's the way it used to be, but it ain't that way no longer!' Curly hollered. 'It's time you had your eyes opened, Jack--you come home to be pitied!' (p. 151)

Jack, prodded by the family and threats to the Renfro family honor, determines to vindicate the family name. On discovering that he has befriended Judge Moody, who sentenced him to prison, Aunt Birdie speaks for the group, "That's right, Jack. He made a monkey out of you. Now you can make a monkey out of him. . .that's all the reunion is asking of you." The mission of defending the family dignity proclaimed, Jack, Gloria, and Lady May set out to return the Judge to the ditch where Jack rescued him earlier that morning. He reverses this decision, though insisting that the Judge saved the life of his wife and baby by swerving to miss them as they lay obstructing the car's passage. Judge and Mrs. Moody "took the only way left open and charged up Banner Top. . . ." Jack's sense of honor and good will and his impulsive nature prompt him to attempt

singlehandedly the car's retrieval from Banner Top. In spite of numerous complications, the task is finally accomplished. The hurdles that Jack faces in re-establishing his group identity serve as a framework for the larger and sometimes deeper individual battles the family and community wage against fate, tradition, the legal system, and the laws of human nature.

The forces that unite the members of the family to each other, to their community, and to their time and place also threaten to separate them. While the action involves "taking out" the Vaughn family history, the effect of their discoveries on those present constitutes the novel's levels of meaning. Gloria, who feels superior to the Renfros, is mortified as the family, in the process of divining their own history, thinks they have discovered that Jack and Gloria are first cousins. As if their insistence on proving her a Beecham were not humilitating enough, they complete her degradation by "initiating" her into the family. The primitive, ritualistic rite, the most psychologically violent scene in the novel, gives the reader a sense of the magnitude of primordial dementia and of Gloria's "battle" to rise above them.

Welty must supply extensive family background to sustain reader interest, involvement and credibility in the central action, Jack Renfro's homecoming from the "pen" and his re-assertion of a place in the family and community. To meet the challenge of providing sufficient historical summary while retaining a sense of present action the author defies one canon of the art of narrative by disregarding any need for a "so-called" proper balance of scene, summary, and description. The book is almost wholly scenic. The subject matter, however, is history (a record of human sensibilities, events, emotions, conflicts), requiring background

information that many novelists dispose of in brief sentences or paragraphs--normally treated as summary. This history is important, though. It affects the mystery of individual and community personality and the cohesion or alienation of the "historians." Welty's history, as full of names, events, and their consequences as the most compact history text, succeeds where the bulk of those textbooks fail. The storyteller revitalizes the inseparable relationship of the human organism to a cultural, temporal, evolutionary consciousness. Personalities shape, and are only incidentally shaped by, particular events. Losing Battles is a history of human sensibilities presented as "summary in scene" or summary that appears as scene. Welty's narrator shows, through the pre-eminence of scene rather than summary, a group of people embodying and reflecting, but gradually transcending their changing historical/regional heritage. This accomplishment is due principally to Gloria's rejection of family and community and the family's rejection of her as a self-created and sustained individual. The Renfro/Vaughn preoccupation with Gloria's indefinite, mysterious "roots" and their own self-defined and loudly acclaimed genealogy identifies a major source of both tension and comedy. The reader, perpetually aware of the confusion emanating from these family ruminations, is simultaneously amused by their confidence in resolving the mysteries in the family history. The tension is reconciled intermittently with Gloria's "victories" in achieved dignity and the family's sporadic triumphs through strength in numbers.

The scenic quality of Losing Battles is also largely responsible for exact character delimitation and possibly the solution of what might have been a worrisome technical "problem" suggested by Phyllis Bentley's

warning that ". . . employing a great number of scenes" might waste the reader's time and attention and throw the story out of proportion.[9] Among Losing Battles' "cast of thousands" no character exists without a specific function, and every role is held in check by an initially established depth of characterization. Third, fourth, and fifth generation members of the reunion (except Lady May and Vaughn Renfro) reinforce in sheer number the novel's festive atmosphere and time in motion. Of Jack's uncles, only Nathan and Sam Dale Beecham (deceased) figure significantly in the book's developing psychological complications. Nathan, introduced early as a wandering bachelor, is the spiritually and physically diseased reminder of the family "sin".

> . . . there's not but one bad thing either you or I or anybody else can do. And I already done it. That's kill a man. I killed Mr. Dearman with a stone to his head, and let 'em hang a sawmill nigger for it. (p. 344)

In the brief account of that story the depth of his self-imposed moral abuse and remorse is clear, but the motivation for the crime is suggested, though never fully explained.

The literal presence of Sam Dale in Granny's mind and the presence of his spirit in Miss Beulah's is a catalyst for rediscovering Sam Dale's link to Gloria and Gloria's determination to reject their innuendoes and transcend their heritage. Miss Beulah is `arse, self-righteous, proud, indulgent of her family, and motivated by an overriding sense of family loyality. She intuits "discoveries" that are potential dangers to family unity and, when necessary to protect her family, redirects the course of their history.

While Jack is the novel's hero around whom the physical level of action centers, the "Good Samaritan" and the innocent pragmatist ("believing and blind" by Gloria's account), he functions as a foil for

Gloria's passionate, determined nature. Refusing to succumb to Jack's gentle persuasion to change her mind about his family, her declaration is: "Not for all the tea in China . . . and don't ever try to change me."

Jack's "battles" are practical and immediate and usually result from an impulsive family loyalty. Gloria's battles, in contrast, are long-range, intensive, unwavering efforts for self-realization. Her attitudes are shaped by the rearing of Miss Julia Mortimer, but tempered by the absence of family ties. Her forced self-sufficiency and educational superiority to the others dictates her losing battle-cry for isolation and her conviction that "We'll . . . raise all our children to be both good and smart." Jack's goodness is redemptive, but his needs are practical and conditioned. The "surest thing he knows" is that they "got to eat" and that some day they will have "a string of other little chaps to come along . . . ."

Miss Julia Mortimer taught the Beechams and their spouses (the uncles and aunts) "all they know" and, like Saint George with his Dragon, she battled ignorance, "left, right, front, center, and sideways." Paradoxically, she taught them all they knew of "mental arithmetic," sewing, and carpentry and in that respect kept a close race with the adversary. Like Granny's birthday, Miss Julia's death provides the occasion for self-revelations and historical speculations. Confessions of their indebtedness to the schoolteacher are clothed in general insensitivity and ingratitude to the woman who directed her energies to conquering their ignorance. In one character Miss Julia's vision may yet be realized. The proof of her continuing battle and the indication that she is "ahead of the race" emerges in twelve-year-old Vaughn, Jack's

neglected younger brother.

Welty's sensitive, imagistic style and simple adroitness at character delineation are apparent in young Vaughn whose presence in the novel is occasional and unnoticed until the right moment, near the end of the epic. Earlier hints of Vaughn's oneness with nature, his awareness of the universe's presence in him, is crystaline clear when he retreats to the haven of his beloved school-bus:

> Biting mosquitoes were everywhere: he plucked them from his breast like thorns. But he kept one hand on the steering wheel. The bus, as long as he held the wheel, held him all around, and at the same time he could feel that bus on its own wheels rolling on his tongue, like a word of his own ready to be spoken, then swallowed back into his throat, going down, inside and inside. And at the forming--more stars fell, like a breaking chain. Before he left the bus here, ready and secret till morning, he made sure of the book he had been sitting on, the new geography that he'd traded out of Curly Stovall. He dragged it to his cheek, where he could smell its print, sharper, blacker, dearer than the smell of new shoes. (p. 365).

Losing Battles is a humorous but poignant testimony of human endurance realized most fully through the narrator's systematic, sympathetic treatment of Gloria Renfro whose fortitude parallels her vision, "I've been trying to save him [Jack] since the day I saw him first . . . . You can't make me give up!" Eudora Welty's Battles, like most of her short stories, "yields [its] meaning" only to the most strenous "effort of the imagination"--perhaps the reader's test of endurance that, if mastered, ensures a pleasurable victory.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Van Allen Bradley, Review of Losing Battles, Chicago Daily News, April 12, 1970.

[2]Granville Hicks, "Eudora Welty," College English, 14, No. 2 (November 1952), p. 73.

[3]Wayne C. Booth defines the "self-conscious" narrator as "narrators aware of themselves as writers." He further implies that a self-conscious narrator thinks, speaks, or "reflects" a "literary work." See "Distance and Point-of-View: An Essay in Classification," Essays in Criticism, 11 (January 1961), pp. 60-79. I am not using the term in this technical sense, but suggesting that Welty's "reflector" narrators often convey a sense of self-awareness through frequent direct addresses to the reader.

[4]Hicks, p. 73.

[5]Louis D. Rubin, Jr. in Writers of The Modern South: The Faraway Country (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 139, sees in Welty's Delta Wedding a similar treatment of narration through the consciousness of various persons but "particularly of Laura McRaven."

[6]Eudora Welty, One Time, One Place (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 8.

[7]Losing Battles (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 17-18. Subsequent references in the text are to this hardcover edition.

[8]Rubin, p. 135.

[9]Phyllis Bentley, Some Observations on The Art of Narrative (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), p. 88.