

The Mythical Journey from Innocence to Maturity in Eudora Welty's The Robber Bridegroom

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Published: 28/03/2023

Accepted:28/01/2023

Received: 01/10/2022

ABSTRACT:

The present article aims at tracing the psychological journey that culminates in the coming of age in Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom*. In doing so, it follows the protagonist Rosamond as she goes through ups and downs until she eventually develops from a naïve girl to a mature woman. What triggers this change in the first place and how the protagonist responds along the way are other major concerns that are targeted. Additionally, some parallels to the mythical story of Psyche and Cupid, which Welty herself admitted to have used, are laid bare so as to scrutinize the extent to which these symbolize the psychological development of the protagonist and render her experiences as truly suggestive and as such valid for all humans. This research aims at vindicating that by dint of myth and fairy tale, profound psychological truths can be subtly depicted in literary works.

Keywords: (Journey; Myth;; Psychological; Eudora Welty; The Robber Bridegroom)

1. Introduction :

In the bulk of her fictional narratives, the American writer Eudora Welty creates complex characters who endure different hardships to become who they eventually are. This process of becoming is remarkably noticeable for the character radically changes from one state of being to another. What is striking to the reader of the *Robber bridegroom*, in particular, is that the protagonist Rosamond is initially a silly woman leading a life of fake bliss and complacent with it never questioning anything. However, she becomes, by the end of the novella, someone else.

The journey to maturity is either enhanced or hindered by physical factors along the way. Yet, for the person who undertakes it, it remains mostly a psychological one. The transformation of the psyche from a stage of naivety, innocence and gullibility to a more complicated but elevated stage of maturity and knowledge is neither a straightforward nor a short and easy process. Given the fact that *The Robber Bridegroom* is an extended short story or a novella, ie, more textual space

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compared to the numerous short stories written by Welty, this allows a better exploration of the psyche in its ups and downs in the path or trajectory that has, since the dawn of humanity, always been full of thorns and obstacles. The question that is posed is: how does the protagonist endure all the hindrances and triumphantly gets over them in order to come of age. Furthermore, how does Welty employ myth and fairytale to address psychological truths? To answer the just mentioned questions, this research uses myth or archetypal criticism as an analytical method for furnishing illuminating readings to literary works.

2. Fantasy as a Means for Psychological Realities

From the vantage point of archetypal critics, Tim Gellispie expounds, a wide array of human experiences is conveyed by myths and stories of fantasy. Those experiences are discernible only at a more profound level that transcends traditional rational or intellectual methods. Accordingly, great literary works which are endlessly appealing are only those that depict this “magical realm”(1) “Some writers say they consciously incorporate mythic elements into their works, while others surely tap that deep vein of meaning unconsciously”. As far as Eudora Welty is concerned, she is known as a zealous admirer of mythological stories which she effervescently, to use her own words “devoured” in her youth and thus she well positioned herself to draw from this universal heritage in her creative literary works.

As it has been agreed in critical essays and reviews, *The Robber Bridegroom* is a fairy tale that features a fantasy world full of magical necklaces, talking beheaded heads etc. On the surface, it seems to be distant from articulating any truths or reality. Louis Westling, among others, argues that the fantastic world that prevails in the novella seems to belong to the collections of the Brothers Grimm (*Women Writers* 48). Yet, she adds that “Not until *The Wide Net* [the collection of short stories she wrote after], however, did Welty attempt a serious and sustained intermingling of myth and folktale motifs with subjects that are essentially realistic.”(73)

It is undeniable that this novel simultaneously articulates deep psychological realities about the characters that populate it even if they seem to belong to an unreal world. Neither does the use of this type of characters make the rendering of reality in any way less serious. This is the view that Christopher Vogler endorses when he points out: “Myths and most stories constructed on the mythical model have the ring of psychological truth. Such stories are accurate models of the workings of the human mind, true maps of the psyche. They are psychologically valid and emotionally realistic even when they portray fantastic, impossible or unreal events.” (*The Writer’s Journey: Mythic structure for Writers*, 4)It is the psychological truths about the characters that matter most in the case of *The Robber bridegroom* regardless of the imaginary or fantastic scopes they are endowed with. The fantasy world that permeates the novella can be interpreted as one aspect of the writers’ endeavor to, in Harold bloom words, “to squeeze meaning from the item which, in ordinary realistic fiction, would be passed over with a casual glance.”(80) In the novella under study,

moving beyond the text to uncover the psychological milestones that are shrouded in the mystery of fantasy is a worthwhile Endeavour..

2. In The Shades Of Gullibility

Despite the fact that the novella is entitled after a male character or a partly villain partly hero robber bridegroom who designs most of the acts and events, the heroic journey of the female character or the robbed bride Rosamond is more noticeable. In the very outset of the novella, Rosamond is not the first character the reader learns about but it is her father Clement Musgrove and two other characters: the first one is the would-be robber bridegroom Jamie Lockhart and it is him who saves the father from the second character Mike Fink after they all meet and spend the night in one room of an inn. As the narrative line of the novella proceeds, the reader learns, through the accounts of her father that Rosamond is the one who survived while her twin brother was murdered by the Indians.

In contrast to her stepmother Salome who is ugly and has nothing but ambition in her uglier heart, Rosamond is a fair looking and golden-haired girl. As we first glance them the former, in a witch-like manner, is stirring a brew in a pot whereas the latter is singing a sweet song and heedless of being locked in by the former. In fact, the role of the evil stepmother is not a mere mechanical device that Welty borrowed from fairy tales. Nor is the stepmother a mere foil that stands in contradistinction to the beautiful lady like a black background in a painting that pivots on the white thing placed within. While this can be held true to some extent, in the context of this story, what makes more sense is that by dint of the characterization of the wicked stepmother, Welty draws the attention to the stark difference that makes the beautiful lady stand apart in her psychological makeup while shedding more light on her because again it is her who psychologically develops and not the step mother who is a definitely a flat character. Nonetheless, being the same from beginning to end, it is the old wicked hag who triggers the psychological growth of the young lady (something that was the by-product of her evil deeds and not done intentionally because if she doubted for a second that her evil deeds would turn the opposite she would have never done them). Welty sums up the nature of both ladies: "If Rosamond was as beautiful as the day, Salome was as ugly as the night" (*The Robber Bridegroom* 33)

Good-natured as she is, Rosamond is still a child though her body is in its full blossom as that of a fully-grown woman. She is too innocent for she never suspects her stepmother's evil intentions every time she forces Rosamond out of the sheltered world of her father and thrust her into the dark corners of the deep forest.. Rosamond still acts like children, for her imagination weaves endless incredible stories whenever she is asked a question. For instance she would say to her father that:

A little old panther came out from behind a holly tree and rubbed up against my side. I took him in my arms, to see what he would do, and he gave me a little purr. Just then the mother panther let go from the tree above my head, and down she lit on her feet, stirring up the leaves like a whirlwind and growling from end

to end, like the gold organ in the Rodney church. She was ten feet long and she must have been nine feet high when her hair started rising, for she reached away over my head when I looked her up and clown. The first thing I knew she took me up in her teeth, but very easy, by the sash, and carried me all the way home through the woods before she set me down at the gate. (*The Robber Bridegroom*, 37-38)

For Rosamond, lies, which she didn't mean to tell, are the shortest cut to describing the reality of her experiences. Though she intended to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, only "the lies would simply fall out like diamonds"(38-39) . Rosamond cannot help but tell lies and this makes her childish. Although this childishness, for a grown up woman, is seemingly insurmountable, it is less negative and light-hearted for what prevails is her good –heartedness. As Welty describes the protagonist's character in her nonfictional work *The Eye of the Story* "Rosamond is a romantic girl, not a wicked one, and the lies she is given to telling are simply a Rodney girl's daydreams, not intended to do any harm: perfectly good pearls." (305) Sometimes her innocence leads her to act in the least expected ways and she just survives dangerous moments just because she is too innocent as the following passage humorously evinces:

"Kill her!" they[the robbers] cried.

And they were going to kill her, but she said,

"Have some cake."

So each one of them took a piece of cake, and she said she had baked it herself.

The robbers began to argue about what to do with her then,(81)

Rosamond is thus unprepared for the expeditions she regularly undertakes to the dangerous wilderness. It is predictable that due to her naivety and simple-mindedness, she would be vulnerable to the evil agents lurking within the corners of that still untamed wilderness. Equipped with nothing but her good nature and some food, she was an easy target to the first untoward male intervention as she has always been an easy target to her stepmother who was well aware of this and was looking forward to its happening to get rid of her. Understandably, the journey to darkness will not be without fateful upheavals for the gullible and innocent rose-like Rosamond. Nonetheless, Unprepared as she is, she is not indisposed and unqualified for the journey to come and the change to culminate. She does possess what Jean Shinoda Bolen calls "the potential for growth through Suffering"(*The Goddess in Every Woman* 17).

The first stumbling block was soon meant to happen. Once as Rosamond set out for the forest and as she was singing sweetly and never suspecting what was awaiting for her, the most notorious bandit of the woods Jamie Lockhart, after having heard her, immediately came to her and to his surprise the singing was no less sweet than the singer in the new silk dress. As he described her later, she was a piece of candy wandering all alone in the woods. The first thing he did was to rob her of her clothes. At this stage of childishness, and helpless as she was, she resorted to nothing but her diamond- like lies, but all in vain. She told him about her powerful seven brothers(in fact she has no brothers at all) who would come after him for retribution. However

thanks to her imagination, she knew something like this would happen and knew what to do in such a situation. She let loose her long golden locks which fell down nearly to the ground covering her body from the prying eyes of onlookers. She was like Rapunzel “The Princess in The tower” from the tales of Brothers’ Grimm using her magical hair or like a beautiful goddess but instead of protecting herself with wrath and revenge on the prying onlooker, she protected herself with her magical hair again.

The naïve Rosamond did not learn the lesson and for the second time she was vulnerable to the wild bandit who this time robbed her of what he left her the first time. Surprisingly, out of love, what she willingly did was to find the beast and live with him. Unexpectedly, the beast was so good to her and treated her well. Yet he never let her know who he is for his face was all the time stained with berries. In relatively modern terms, Rosamond’s story so far echoes the mythical Greek story of Cupid and psyche. In like manner, the latter lived contentedly with Cupid the god of love, but she was not able to see his face (*Greek Mythology*, 51). According to Bolen, the goddess is an internalized or latent pattern in the psyche of a woman. This pattern is “energized” or given full shape in different situations and stages in life(*The Goddess in woman*, 34). Understandably, the myth of psyche is not a mere mechanical device used to embellish the story. Psyche becomes a symbol that embodies the inner power that Rosamond has to resort to or to activate so as to become her “self” the independent woman.

As long as Rosamond was satisfied to live this life she was so happy and came back to her father bearing the news of this happiness. However ignoring the truth of her lover or her robber bridegroom, her happiness was fake and she was still the naïve lady who was complacent with appearances, and not intending to know the essence of reality. She was like a slave serving her husband and his group and leading a dull life. She was yet entrapped within the naivety that blinds her to truths regardless of the fact that she started to show signs of change.

3. At The Threshold Of Maturity

The moment of awakening or crossing to the next stage of maturity was meant to come but not from scratch. It came after the protagonist stepped out of her father’s protective world, ie, after she set out in her physical as well as psychological journey. Change also was meant to come because of the protagonist’s vulnerability and gullibility. Welty argues that “Instead of fairy immunity to change, there is the vulnerability of human imperfection caught up in human emotion, and so there is growth, there is crisis, there is fulfillment”(*The Eye of the Story*, 164-165). She adds that “it is the vulnerable who do get exposed to danger. It is the gullible who do get told the lies, or who believe their own;[...]it is the innocent who trustingly give their hands into the hands of the spoilers.”(*Ibid*, 257) . Though Rosamond’s imperfection is not really negative, in characterizing her as such Welty designs for her a good trajectory of psychological development. Referring in general to characters development, Vogler writes that “A character develops from condition A to condition

Z through a series of steps. Flaws are a starting point of imperfection incompleteness from which a character can grow”.(*Writer’ Journey*, 33)

Undertaking this journey, Rosamond struggled through different experiences. Most importantly, this awakening was triggered by the least expected person: the evil stepmother. The cruel step mother who, according to Estelle, “represents the dark, unexplored side of the heroine”(42) teaches the latter outstanding lessons . She adds that she is the catalyst for the heroine’s personal growth. “This antagonist must be faced, even accepted, for the heroine to grow into a balanced adult. Though cast as the princess’s deadliest foe, the witch-queen offers priceless knowledge of sensuality and lust that the virginal heroine must embrace”.(41-42) Indeed, in the *Robber Bridegroom*, though Salome was wicked enough, she is the only one who opened the daughter’s eyes to the truth of things and not the poor innocent father who thought that his daughter has finally met the man who taught her to tell truth. Out of wickedness, Salome addressed Rosamond as the “the poor ignorant girl” and expected that she does not even know the name of her husband. In few words she was kept “in the darkness”(19). This expressions sums up Rosamond’s blindness to truth and awarenesss for with invisibility comes uncertainty and confusion, two unnecessary ingredients for a healthy relationship..

Moreover, the stepmother divined, just as Psyche’s two sisters in mythology, that the cover of darkness or the guise may hide a hideous beast. “I fear, my dear, that you feel in your bosom a passion for a low and scandalous being, a beast who would like to let you wait on him and serve him, but will not do you the common courtesy of letting you see his face” (*The Robber Bridegroom*,123).The beast here becomes more suggestive, at a symbolic level, of the heroine’s other half: the dark unconscious, which she must know very well so as not to succumb to. To withstand the beast, she must first truly know the beast. As Estelle writes: “It is the people who do not know enough about their own shadow and their own dark side who are most likely to fall victim to evil influences”.(129) As far as Rosamond is concerned, the only hindrance to this true knowledge is the guise of the robber bridegroom or the beast and this guise is indelibly fixed in its place more by Rosamond’s ignorance and childishness than by the indelible stains of the strawberries. Aided by the wicked step mother, Rosamond is brought to the recognition that the guise must be removed so as to see the true face or identity of her robber husband. Once again Salome steps in and urges the step-daughter to use her magical recipe or brew of removing the berry stains, just as Psyche’s sisters urged her to light the candle on her lover’s face in mythology.

Using the recipe marks Rosamond’s first actual step towards change. She is no more the passive girl who silently obeys orders of others including her step mother, her robber husband and her father. She is unprecedentedly determined that to change her ‘self’ and her life she has to act. Putting an end to the mask can be rather interpreted as putting an end to naivety and childishness and an opening of the door for a better knowledge of the self and the dark side. This knowledge, piercing as it is, and eye-opening is also shocking for the transfer from a state of ignorance and darkness to a state of knowledge or enlightenment is not any easy process. Though

Rosamond is captivated by the beauty of the godlike face that she has come to see for the first time, she is entranced by the deception that her husband is indeed a beast in man, a double man, the bandit of the woods and the elegant society man Jamie Lockhart whom her father hosts. She is rather entranced by the knowledge of the dark or beastly side in her psyche, which was lying dormant so far and on which she has just to tapped on. What has to be noted is that with the newly acquired knowledge, the heroine feels a kind of self-sufficiency, that is she knew enough and does not want to know anything more. She said " I already know everything and can learn nothing new." (137)She also expresses her disappointment:

My husband was a robber and not a bridegroom/'she said. "He brought me his love under a mask, and kept all the truth hidden from me, and never called anything by its true name, even his name or mine, and what I would have given him he liked better to steal. And if I had no faith, he had little honor, to deprive a woman of giving her love freely." (*The Robber Bridegroom* 146)

This moment features the heroine's first psychological stirrings of transformation for with suffering, there starts development. This is not to say that the protagonist lived in a heavenly world of bliss and did not suffer before, she did but her sufferings were mostly physical as she was heedless of what she endured with the cruel step mother. Now, with the bitter taste of psychological struggle through her deception, the running away of the lover, and the feelings of being lonely , deserted and lost, Rosamond fainted . Fainting is a kind of psychological death that signals according to Estelle "the pathway to adulthood"(126) and the end of the previous role. Musing on the nature of the journey in general, Musgrove , Rosamond's father, speaks in philosophical terms: "A journey is forever lonely and parallel to death",(*The Robber Bridegroom*, 143). This fainting or psychological death evokes, in the case of Rosamond, the end of the role of the naïve child. In other words, it is the death of the old Rosamond and the birth of the new one. These are the same ideas James N. Frey articulates :

In the course of his or her initiation on the mythological journey, the ancient and the modern hero alike dies (symbolically) and is reborn to a new consciousness. The hero, through a series of tests and trials, death, and rebirth, is transformed. The mythological hero, modern or ancient, is on a journey that involves an outer and an inner struggle. [...] The inner struggle is to grow through self-discovery and achieve a transformation of character.(*The key How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using Myth*, 2-3)

The suffering of the hero is caused by a wound which can be physical, psychological, spiritual or social and propels in the hero the urgent need "to be healed, usually by love or righting a wrong."(*ibid* 56). As far as Rosamond is concerned, her psychological wounds ensued in her the need of having her lover back which is a kind of healing to her newly-wounded and tormented self. Until she was eventually united with her husband, her suffering continued as "she was sadly tattered and torn, and tired from sleeping in hollow trees and keeping awake."(*The Robber Bridegroom*, 168)Coming to terms with the truth of her husband is in a way a kind of acceptance of the other dark part of her 'self'. Finding the husband, who is the object

of her new endeavor, means having a wholeness, unity and balance in her 'self' which was until that moment fragmented due to the death of twin brother. The latter can be Psychologically regarded as the other half of her self.

4-Reaping The Fruits of Transformation

The heroine changes from one extreme to another, from one stage to another making the most remarkable leap in her psyche and thus in her life. Reaping the fruits of her interior journey she transforms from a silly and foolish girl to a mature woman. As Vogler argues: "in any good story, the hero grows and changes, making a journey from one way of being to the next; from despair to hope, weakness to strength, folly to wisdom, love to hate, and back again." (The Writer's Journey 7). Indeed, Rosamond makes her passage from the misery and dependence of her former life with her stepmother to the independence and hope of a happily shared life with her husband. She is no more the weak and vulnerable girl or the kept lover but rather a powerful mother and housewife. After losing her love and claiming it again she seems to be the winner of all. Furthermore what makes her journey the more fruitful is that she doubly reaps the fruits of her marriage and becomes the mother of beautiful twins.

Welty designs a perfect ending for her story as she continues to weave the fantastic thread that she started. By the end of the story, Rosamond is united with her father and the bliss of her new life seems indescribable in any other terms than the fairy tale: "A shutter opened, and a flower bloomed. The very atmosphere was nothing but aerial spice, the very walls were sugar cane, the very clouds hung as golden as bananas in the sky." (182) This bespeaks the ultimate change in her character and the true self fulfillment she reaches after having been secluded in her fake cocoon.

Indubitably, If the protagonist did not journey into the wilderness of the Natchez Trace and symbolically into the wilderness of her 'self', she would have remained forever a naïve person perfectly secluded from the outside world as well as sheltered from psychological development and growing up. She would have remained a child forever caring for the mysterious husband and complacent with fake appearances

5. Conclusion:

To conclude, as this novella captures the trajectory of the life of Rosamond, it touches on psychological truths that are valid for all humans: the growing up from one stage to another or the coming of age as well as the sacrifice that comes with it. Using some of the ingredients of the fairy tale as well as the Skelton of the myth of Cupid and psyche and fleshing them with the vivacity and complexity of human life, Welty succeeds in creating a story about a woman who thrives and develops at all expanses regardless of what she encounters. The use of such elements can never be considered as mere mechanical devices for embellishment.

Rosamond epitomizes the female heroine whose heroism derives from an inherent potential for growth. As for the stories of magic that she formerly wove, they became a part of a past stage. While echoing the universal mythical inner journey of the heroine, the story itself becomes mythical, for it is not relevant to one age, but has an “ageless quality”.(B. R. “Fairy Tale in Modern Manner.” *Kansas City Star*, November 14, 1942,. 24). The point that is adamantly evinced is that the depth of psychological truths this novella conveys far outweighs the aura of fantasy which envelops it and seems at first glance impenetrable. To look beyond the surface of the literary text, and dig deep within, by means of using archetypal and myth criticism, insightful readings can be offered by critics and the endeavor is worthwhile for the psychological treasures can be endlessly unearthed not by the stokes of a magical wand but by mythical and archetypal literary criticism .

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