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On the Verge of Change: Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*

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ON THE VERGE OF CHANGE: EUDORA WELTY'S *DELTA WEDDING*

by

MALLARY TAYLOR

(Under the Direction of Olivia Carr Edenfield)

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the effects of war on the southern plantation lifestyle depicted in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*. This thesis focuses on the female characters who adapt to the absence of the husbands during wartime. Wars are the catalyst for societal change in the novel, and the women must adapt to the new social changes that are encroaching upon the plantation. The chapters explore each individual reaction of female characters in the novel. The female characters in *Delta Wedding* represent varying ways of reacting to shifting social norms brought about by war.

INDEX WORDS: Eudora Welty, *Delta Wedding*, War, Women, Southern, Fairchilds, Family

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DEDICATION

This work is in memory of Annie Mildred McCarty, a true southern lady. I dedicate this work to the women who raised me: Mom, Mimi, Grandma and Aunt Jen. No matter where I am, I know that I can always go back home.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a Confederate monument in front of the capitol in Eudora Welty's hometown of Jackson, Mississippi, dedicated to the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters who sustained plantation life during the Civil War. Catherine Clinton claims that the effort put forth by these women was remarkable, especially considering they had no experience in managing plantations without men. Not only did they have to keep up with household responsibilities, but being the protector of the home became the matriarch's responsibility. Clinton also claims that since the British withdrew their trade agreement and goods during the Civil War, the women "were forced to manufacture their own cloth, and plantations had to become self-sufficient" (29). The amount of work that was put into preserving their lifestyle was admirable. The monument is a symbol of gratitude to the women who carried on at home during the war. The four inscriptions on the monument are individually dedicated to mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. These inscriptions serve as a fitting schema for addressing the women in Welty's *Delta Wedding* for they are the same roles explored in the novel.

Welty and the Wars

Welty experienced similar emotions to the women of the Civil War. She found herself sick with worry about her brothers and friends who were fighting overseas. Nevertheless, the widely recognized short-story writer began composing her second novel, *Delta Wedding*, wherein she created a small rural community in the Mississippi delta that was recovering from World War I. War is a central theme in Welty's novel since it causes pain by separating families. During World Wars I and II, women were forced to carry out their own duties to their families as well as responsibilities of the plantation that typically belonged to the men. At this point in

history, women in the South were adaptable to changes during wartime because of the absence of men during the Civil War. The Civil War was painful for women in the South because of the Confederacy's defeat, which meant that most of the men who went to fight never returned. However, just because southern women throughout history had to adapt to the effects of war does not mean that it was any easier to cope during World Wars I and II. Welty explores women in their domestic roles in *Delta Wedding* after two major wars have occurred: The Civil War and World War I. Women and men in the novel are recovering from World War I, and those same people will make up the generations that will live through another World War just two decades later. *Delta Wedding* brings all of the feminine anxieties about war to a head by exploring women's roles throughout World War II, World War I, and the Civil War.

When Welty's brothers and friends were called to fight in World War II, the pain of their separation was almost unbearable for her. Welty's two brothers and her lifelong friend John Robinson were active soldiers in the war. When she and her mother listened to news of the war on the radio, Welty was most anxious about John Robinson being on the front lines. Robinson was a classmate of Welty's at Jackson High School, and they had maintained a friendship ever since. In her biography of Welty, Suzanne Marrs¹ refers to their relationship as one-sided: Welty "was deeply in love with him and she may well have been in love as early as 1937" (55). The reason Welty and Robinson never got together in a relationship was because Robinson began a homosexual relationship when he returned from war. After he learned of Welty's affections, he told a good friend that "he loved Eudora too much" to marry her (208). Nevertheless, their correspondence during the war was very influential to *Delta Wedding*, so influential that Welty dedicated the work to Robinson. The dedication of this novel reveals Welty's own struggle with war.

To counter her anxiety, she visited Robinson's family. She often went to his delta plantation while he was overseas, and it was during these visits that she read the journals of his great-grandmother, Nancy McDougall Robinson. Nancy McDougall Robinson moved to the delta as a new bride. Her journals would go on to provide insight into "The Delta Cousins," which was the short story that eventually became *Delta Wedding*. Welty was able to keep busy with the journal, but the pain of being separated from Robinson and her brothers still persisted. In "The Wanderers," a short story she would publish in *The Golden Apples* in 1949, one of her characters best expressed the torment of the war by stating "all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying; ... hope and despair were the closest blood – unrecognizable one from the other sometimes, making moments double upon themselves, and in the doubling double again, amending but never taking back" (265). The worry expressed in this description mirrored what every military family was undoubtedly feeling at the time. Welty's emotions hovered along the border of hope and despair when she received word that Robinson had been moved to the front lines. Her anxieties sometimes blocked her ability to write, and it was only through memories and correspondence with John that she was able to remain strong until his safe return. Welty's struggle with war is reflected throughout the pages of *Delta Wedding*.

Nancy McDougall Robinson succeeded in helping Welty understand life on the Mississippi delta for a new bride, and she also inspired the creation of some of the characters in *Delta Wedding*. Marris states that Welty saw Robinson as a woman who wished "her world to be a good place" and "who sought 'present joy for people she loved.' Eudora sensed the sort of courage and serenity in his grandmother..." (128). Robinson's courage is also reflected in *Delta Wedding*. Welty stated in a letter to John Robinson that there "was a kind of greatness about her

that seemed to make everything else fall in place ...it was a stirring and beautiful kind of experience, that kept me reading without stopping ... and when I did fall asleep I seemed not to be forgetting her” (127). Welty was clearly moved by the strength and courage that Nancy McDougall Robinson evidenced in her journal, and these same traits surface in the characters in *Delta Wedding*. Robinson’s character is similar to Ellen’s, a strong mother –pregnant with her tenth child for the duration of the novel –who maintains emotional balance for her entire family. Marrs’s analysis of these letters asserts that the courage and strength of Nancy McDougall Robinson are also demonstrated by George and Dabney, who both choose to marry outside of their class. Nancy McDougall Robinson’s journal helped Welty comprehend how a drastic change in lifestyle can uproot a social structure, and the journal was an invaluable resource for Welty when writing *Delta Wedding*.

Welty’s Career

Eudora Welty was well known for her short stories. She won countless awards for her own publications, among them the Pulitzer Prize, the National Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of Arts, the Howell’s Medal for Fiction, and several awards for her collection of letters. She earned honorary degrees from Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, and Yale. Her circle of friends included literary legends Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, E.M. Forster, Elizabeth Bowen, Reynolds Price and William Maxwell. Welty’s writings were inspired by her literary friends, war, and travel, but rural life in Mississippi was her biggest muse for her cannon of works. In *Delta Wedding*, the community she created consisted of middle-class and lower-class characters whose everyday routines transformed into beautiful romanticized tales of southern culture. Welty’s progressive nature was mixed with a passion for reading, especially classical epics like *The Aeneid* and *The Odyssey* both of which influenced her decision to become a writer.

A critic of her work Joseph R. Millchap says that classical influences can be seen throughout her works. Greek goddesses like Demeter and Persephone are compared with characters like Ellen from *Delta Wedding* or the narrator from “Why I Live at the P.O.” (84). Welty used these classical references to elevate the importance of southern life in the realm of American literature, discovering what it truly means to be southern and what makes the southern region of the United States different from the rest of the world. Millchap also states that Welty’s short-story collections and novels follow the “traditions of the Southern Renaissance” while revealing the “subtle beauty and cultural complexity” of the South (76). Welty incorporates various parts of southern traditions, from hospitality to recipes, and her thorough explorations of each custom elevate the image of the South

Critical Reception

Welty’s writing, whether it was based on the Classics or Nancy McDougall’s journals, was pleasing to her peers. Robert Penn Warren and Katherine Ann Porter openly expressed their approval of Welty’s writings and could tell that she was going to be an important figure. The reception of *Delta Wedding* when it was first published was mostly positive. Hamilton Basso argued that the action of the plot was not like that of a typical novel, but he also stated that “although nothing happen[ed] in *Delta Wedding*, *everything happen[ed]*” [his emphasis] (59). Three contemporary reviewers, Elizabeth Bowen, James Gray, and Basso, claimed that the novel has universal qualities that strengthen the American canon. For example, Gray wrote that “Welty capture[ed] the poignant indecisiveness of the human struggles and the vague intensity of the human yearning with identification [for] another” (52). He also stated that Welty’s characters were “sharply individualized” and their actions were the focal point of her work (52). These were all qualities that made the novel universal. In another review, Louis Collins claimed that Welty’s

novel opened up a romantic form of writing that “delicately fuse[ed] in what seems an effortless manner, all the responsive, tender and searching strands that were sensed, but still hidden in her writing before” (67). Collins interpreted Welty’s novel as a seamless Romantic commentary on the South, which emphasized the human struggle through well-developed characters. In agreement with Collins, Charles Poore stated that because the novel had “all the excellencies of her short stories with all the advantages of a wider pattern,” it contributed to what was necessary for a southern literary revival (53). According to contemporary reviewers, Welty created a novel that is both regional and universal, but there were some reviewers who did not agree.

Reviewer Diana Trilling expressed that she was displeased with *Delta Wedding*. She claimed that Welty’s novel is not “universal,” meaning that Trilling thought it was too provincial. Trilling also stated that “Welty specifi[ed] snobbery, xenophobia, ‘mindlessness’ ... that ... [was] part of the price the South [paid] for its heritage of pride” (61). Sterling North agreed with Trilling’s qualms about the lack of global meaning, but he found the novel’s pace “unbearably slow, the writing precious, flowery and needlessly obscure and the technique amateurish.” He also stated that he found Welty’s writing “often astonishingly clumsy” (55). Helen L. Butler claimed that perhaps Welty should have a look at Aristotle’s theory of imitation to enhance the detail of her writing so that it was not so “woefully dull” in her next work (68-69). The negativity continued in the *Providence Journal*’s “Review of *Delta Wedding*,” which called the novel a “sad disappointment.” This statement was followed by the author’s declaration that he felt he had “eaten a barrel of molasses” (51). Obviously, some readers did not fall in love with the charming South that Welty portrays and were not enthralled by the “Fairchild grace” (61).

Similarly, Isaac Rosenfeld declared that instead of embracing southern tradition in the Mississippi Delta, Welty isolates the South making it seem out-dated. He reviews Carson

McCullers and Eudora Welty to show how each author has abandoned the true essence of folk culture that are typically composed from legend, history, and tradition. Rosenfeld admits that he did not get past the first one-hundred pages of Welty's novel because he found it "too dull" (57). He suggests that the dullness of the novel is not attributed to the structure, but the way in which "the events occur discretely, as they would to someone who, though situated within this society, did not have any ongoing, extended relationship with it" (58). He states that the way in which the plot unfolds is unclear because of the subtle form. He expresses that because of the subtlety in which certain events happen there is a gap between what is happening to the Fairchild family and what it happening in the South and in the rest of the country. Rosenfeld states that the lack of history in the Fairchild society establishes a barrier between the reader and the characters' emotions. This barrier seems to be clouded by the number of characters in the narrative and "the density of the atmosphere..." that did not "establish a true family connection" (58). To summarize, Rosenfeld interprets that Welty's novel seems irrelevant as a whole because the characters' emotions do not reflect the historical society around them, and the dullness of the novel can be attributed to the delicate way the events occur.

The Women in *Delta Wedding* and War

Contrary to Trilling's and Rosenfeld's notion that nothing happens in *Delta Wedding*, in the South, the setting of the novel, the society is on the verge of change after World War I has ended. The beginning of World War I was a pivotal point of change for the south. According to Allen Tate, "the South not only reentered the world with the first World War; it looked around and saw for the first time since 1830 that the Yankees were not to blame for everything" (592). The south realized there were other forces that threaten their culture. Tate claimed that the North was no longer an oppositional force to the South. Furthermore, Tate said that this difficult

“discovery” was what ultimately motivated writers to write about their region. He quoted Yeats’s epigram, “Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (592). The South was on the verge of identifying itself as a part of a globally powerful nation. Welty’s characters exist in a time where the majority of the South is beginning to be aware of emerging global powers outside the nation, but rural areas were the last parts to realize the change because they did not receive news as fast as urban areas. The tensions from the changing society are slowly creeping into the most rural parts of the nation, and these changes will force a subtle transformation on the life of the Fairchild plantation.

The tensions from the new emerging society brought about by the end of World War I are apparent. Although subtle, these societal changes were vital to the essence of life in the delta, and the bigger concern for Welty’s characters was to preserve southern customs that made up their daily routines. This is demonstrated through Aunt Tempe, who fights to preserve the delta plantation she knows from her childhood. Aunt Tempe Fairchild exclaims that in Shellmound, “there’s always so much –so much happening...!” (251). Tempe is referring to the daily activity at Shellmound and the preparations for Dabney’s wedding, but she is also referring to intruding changes that are pressing in on the delta from the outside world. Dabney’s wedding, a supposedly happy time for this family, represents this pressuring change because it mixes together two classes. Tempe’s attitude towards her home reflects the idea that the South was a unique entity that needed preserving from the rest of the world. Preston William Slosson asserted that the South, unlike any other part of the United States, “had felt a consciousness...wider than the state and narrower than the nation” (252). With all the changes that were happening in the nation at the time regarding industrialization and women’s right to vote, Slosson stated that “the South still differed collectively from other parts of the Union”

because Southerners wanted to preserve their unique history (252). For Slosson, the South was viewed two different ways by the nation: an idyllic southern fantasy or a poverty-stricken place, either hated or adored. According to David R. Goldfield, “Throughout our nation’s history, the South has functioned, for good or ill ...[as] an object of hate, love, and fantasy that rarely approached reality.” Goldfield’s statement that the South was a “national mirror” is reflected in *Delta Wedding* through the Fairchild plantation (7). If people’s conceptions of the South produced opposite views on a national level, then the image of the Fairchild plantation is a metaphor for the South. Robbie hates the plantation, while Ellen idealizes it. George and Dabney love the plantation, but they both promote a more modern image of the South because of their working class spouses who cross class barriers. It is through characters like George and Dabney that the South attempts to integrate into the modern nation, and move away from the plantation lifestyle. Goldfield confirms that even after World War II, “Americans knew and still know that the South is a different place” from the rest of the nation because of the history of war that belongs only to the southern region (14). The tension in the novel does not appear to stem from the political scene of America as a nation; instead, the tension in the novel emerges from a concern for the South as a region and the anxiety which the characters demonstrate about losing customs that are uniquely southern while attempting to emerge into the twentieth century.

Welty’s characters look back even further, to the Civil War, when their traditions were shattered after the Confederacy’s defeat by the Union. John Crowe Ransom points out that “the South was defeated by the Union on the battlefield with remarkable decisiveness, and the ... consequences have been dire: the southern tradition was physically impaired” (21). Ransom concludes that the aftermath of the Civil War was almost irreparable for southern culture. Southern cities such as Atlanta held artifacts of southern history that were burned to the ground.

Throughout history it has been a common pattern for a country to re-establish traditions after defeat in war. This re-establishing or renaissance rejuvenates old customs and restores a sense of pride in its citizens. Although the South is not a country, southern culture does not apply to all of the United States. Therefore, it is only logical for the South, as a region, to rejuvenate its customs lost in the Civil War. The challenge in the aftermath of the Civil War was to recover lost traditions by emphasizing customs that were purely southern.

Pride in the South rested within the heart of the southern family, but this iconic symbol had been separated because of the men who fought and died in the Civil War. The Confederate Army was made up of 750,000 soldiers, and out of that number 450,000 men died (Foote). More than half of those men did not return to their families from war. After these dramatic losses, the importance of the unity of the southern family was valued at a higher level due to the damages inflicted upon it by war. Southern literature studies the family in depth, presenting multiple familial units for observation. In *Delta Wedding*, Welty portrays a plantation family recovering from World War I who also still struggle with the many losses of family members due to the Civil War. Welty explores the Fairchild family during a crucial turning point in the southern region after World War I while also exploring the lingering damage from the Civil War. In *Delta Wedding*, the institution of the family is attempting to heal after two wars. The effects of the Civil War are still just as prevalent as the effects of World War I. Welty uses the characters in *Delta Wedding* to look back at the Civil War while situating them immediately after World War I. The southern family in the novel has been damaged by both of these wars, and many other families will be damaged by the war raging while Welty writes this novel. Welty's own family was separated because of World War II, and her pain was just as great as that which her characters experienced. While war may cause families to suffer, it also brings the transitions in

society. The pain and suffering from war and the angst of moving forward in society after the losses from war are the two subjects of *Delta Wedding*.

In a time when the nation as a whole was subject to the changes of modern twentieth-century society, the agrarian South depended on the family for stability. As noted by Scott, “more than other Americans, perhaps, Southerners had put their faith in the family as the central institution of society, faith that was slow to change” (213-214). Scott implies that the faith in the southern family was not something that was going to waver, which meant that old traditional southern families were adapting more slowly to new customs of the twentieth century. The resistance to adapting to a new custom stems from the damage that was inflicted upon the southern family by war. There is an example of this resistance in *Delta Wedding*. The Fairchild family seems to be isolated from the other townspeople, but it is because of the losses from the Civil War that they turn inward as a family to protect themselves. *Delta Wedding* works as an intricate study of the southern family as it struggles with the effects of war, and at the heart of the southern family is the southern woman. The southern woman remained behind during a war to preserve and protect her family. Women have both male and female responsibilities that must be maintained in order to protect their households. The women in *Delta Wedding* have preserved the structure of society during war, beginning with the Civil War.

The Four Types of Female Characters in *Delta Wedding*

The patterns in the novel that emerge after World War I can be broken down into four types: the traditional woman, the semi-traditional woman, the integrated woman, and the fleeing woman. Fully traditional women in the novel include Tempe, Shannon, Aunt Jim Allen and Aunt Primrose, who are the keepers of family traditions. These are the women who are the most impervious to change and also the women who are the most affected by the recent wars. These

women have also helped to establish the Fairchild matriarch and work to carry on their family customs. Although Dabney exhibits traditional qualities by choosing to live in Marmion after her wedding, her choice of partner outside of her class makes her semi-traditional. She has accepted her identity as a Fairchild woman and transitions from Fairchild daughter to Fairchild wife. She has chosen to marry the family's overseer, but she is not moving away from the family and will remain within the dynamic. Through her marriage, Dabney anticipates an untraditional flattening of class lines, meaning that she begins a new pattern for future generations that merges the higher class Fairchild family with her lower class husband. Ellen is an example of an integrated outsider. She is fully immersed in the Fairchild culture, even though she hails from Virginia. However, the fact that she was not born and bred in the Fairchild society means that she lacks the influence over the society. She does not have "ways," such as Tempe would have (160). Ellen is not resistant to the change that Dabney and George are bringing to the family because she is more concerned with her daughter's happiness than with class issues. What Ellen comes to know from Robbie's and George's marriage is that Dabney's marriage will be happy. Ellen is kind to Robbie and Troy, even though they are outsiders of the Fairchild family.

Finally, the last and most complex woman is the untraditional or fleeing woman. This woman is the one who has the opportunity to be a part of the Fairchild family, but longs to break away from the traditional path. Shelley and Laura both demonstrate strong desires to escape from the Fairchild dynamic. Even though both characters are never seen breaking away from their family, their future plans indicate that they will not remain on or return to the plantation for the rest of their lives. At the end of the novel, Ellen offers for Laura to live at Fairchilds, but Laura will return to her life in Jackson. Her rejection of Ellen's offer is written, but never spoken: "Laura felt that in the end she would go –go from all this, go back to her father. She would hold

that secret...” (313). Shelley is also on the verge of leaving the delta to go on a trip to Europe with Aunt Tempe. There she will be exposed to different types of cultures and lifestyles beyond anything that Fairchilds has to offer, but it is never stated whether or not she will permanently leave the delta. Robbie is another example of the fleeing woman. She grew up in the town of Fairchilds and has been aware her whole life of their unified nature. She feels like an outsider of the family because of the way that the Fairchild women treat her. She marries George and creates a household for herself and her husband in Memphis, but she cannot seem to escape her past identity as Robbie Reid. She wants to be Robbie Fairchild because as George’s wife she has the power to begin her own traditions in Memphis, but when she returns to the Fairchild plantation, she is instantly reminded, at least, that she will always be a Reid. She is empowered by the separateness that Memphis residency gives to her. Robbie uses Memphis to escape her past, but she will always feel like an outsider to the Fairchilds.

The traditional, semi-traditional, integrated, and untraditional women emphasize the transition that has and will continue to affect Fairchild society. Dabney and Robbie will begin new lives as twentieth-century women, while Laura and Shelley are on the verge of choosing paths that will inevitably break away from the traditional Fairchild lifestyle. The women like Aunt Shannon, Primrose, or Jim Allen, who do not adjust to the social changes, can be more concretely defined as traditional. Ellen is willing to accept the changes, while simultaneously cherishing the older traditions. These four patterns that emerge from the women in *Delta Wedding* enhance each woman’s reaction to pain and suffering from war and the societal transition into the twentieth century. Each woman must be defined as individual rather than collectively southern women to uncover the subtle transformation that is taking place in Welty’s novel.

CHAPTER 2
OUR DAUGHTERS

“Devoted daughters of the heroic women and noble men, they keep the mounds of loved ones sweet with flowers and perpetuated in marble and bronze the granite characters of a soldiery that won the admiration of the world and a womanhood whose ministrations were as tender as an angel’s benediction.” – Inscription from the Women of the Confederacy Monument

In *Delta Wedding* all of the women are daughters. The role of the daughter is a starting point for growth and maturity into womanhood. Laura has suffered a great loss with the recent death of her mother, Annie Laurie Fairchild. Shelley is the oldest daughter of Battle and Ellen. Shelley’s younger sister, Dabney, is preparing for her wedding to Troy Flavin, who is the overseer of her father’s plantation. Laura is nine, Shelley is eighteen and Dabney is seventeen, and each one represents a different stage of daughterhood that is important to the progress of their individual maturity. Each young woman is part of a generation that will break the traditional mold of her ancestors. Laura and Shelley will leave the plantation life to explore other options for their future, while Dabney will transform the role of the traditional plantation wife. Laura is on the brink of adolescence, while Shelley and Dabney are on the brink of adulthood. Whether in adolescence or adulthood, the stages of daughterhood in this text depict how young women develop and adapt to changes.

Laura McRaven has lost her mother at the age of nine. Only eight months after her mother’s death, she travels alone to visit her mother’s family. Laura is looking to be comforted after her mother’s death by being fully immersed into the Fairchild family. When she arrives at Shellmound, she desperately wants to be a part of Dabney’s wedding party, but cannot

participate because she is still in mourning. The mourning period prevents her from doing something that would make her happy. When Dabney realizes that Laura has arrived, she asks her to be in the wedding, but Laura's response is indicative of her current grieving state: "You be in my wedding! ...' 'I can't,' said Laura helplessly. 'My mother died.' 'Oh,' cried Dabney, as if Laura had slapped her, running away from her and back to her place at the table, hiding her face" (20). Dabney is shocked by Laura's response, and she hides her face because she is ashamed that she reminded Laura of her dead mother. The family is well aware of Laura's suffering, and the quick change of subject reveals that they do not want to emphasize Laura's sadness. Laura's helplessness and her terse answer to Dabney, "My mother died," indicate a depth of loss. There are several factors behind Laura's statement. Her journey to Fairchilds alone, her treatment by the adults as if they do not wish to intrude on her grief, and her very presence at the dinner table unengaged in conversation are the overwhelming realities that sit behind those three bare words. Kelly Sultzbach suggests that in order to fill that void she must become immersed in the Fairchild community. Laura's "desire to be a flower girl in Dabney's wedding and for someone to pity her motherlessness suggests a yearning to be part of a community" (93). Laura does end up becoming a flower girl in Dabney's wedding, but only because her cousin develops the chicken pox. Laura's fortuitous inclusion in Dabney's wedding begins to give her the feeling that she is a part of the Fairchild community.

Laura observes the Fairchilds in order to determine what it means to be one. Franziska Gygas states that Laura is an "onlooker" observing a new way of life, one different from her life in Jackson (19). Without her mother to guide her, Laura faces an identity crisis. At Shellmound, Laura "scarcely ever" thinks "of the house in Jackson, [or] of her father..." (175), and she is also attracted to the role of "an adventurer in an invisible coat" that she inhabits when she is there.

Laura becomes aware of what makes a Fairchild unique, and it relates to the concept that Dr. Murdoch labels as “mooning” (177). “Mooning” is the over-exaggerated passion for life that is the source of energy for the Fairchilds. Dr. Murdoch, the Fairchild community’s physician, believes that this concept is negative, but this is the fuel that the Fairchilds need. It is a hunger and an enthusiasm to live in the moment. An example of this phenomenon is when George saves Maureen from the Yellow Dog. George’s inner enthusiasm is awakened when he senses he and Maureen are in danger, and his energy source drives him in his determination to live. George’s passion for life is described by Dabney as “the very heart of the family” and that “the heart always was made of different stuff and had a different life from the rest” (42). Laura is overwhelmed by this same source of energy, although she does not know it, when she arrives at Shellmound. Laura struggles to keep up with her cousins when she reaches Shellmound. The boys are racing around the yard, while she stands in awe of their energy. She goes from the joggling board with Ranny and Little Battle to the front of the house, where she discovers India. She is trying to keep up when she throws up and waits pitifully, “like a little dog” on the front steps, for someone to help her (11). Her “dizziness” from the whirlwind of activities causes her to be sick (9). As an “adventurer” she learns about a different lifestyle than the one she has in Jackson with her father, and she desperately wants to become a part of her mother’s family, but she will have to learn how to harness this inner energy source that the Fairchilds demonstrate in order to become fully immersed into their culture.

Laura’s metaphoric baptism in the Yazoo River awakens her senses to the transience of the Fairchild life. In the Yazoo, Laura sees the “insides all around her...dark water and fearful fishes” (234). The “dark water” of the Yazoo represents the challenges that Laura must face in order to adapt to life at Fairchilds. She seeks to be accepted by the Fairchilds in order to fill the

void from her mother's death. Laura is not fully Fairchild, and her connection to her mother's family was severed when Annie Laurie died. Laura wants to move past her mother's death by immersing herself in the Fairchild culture, but the culture is changing as well because the family as a whole is learning to move forward without the ones they lost to war. The deaths of so many other Fairchilds from the Civil War and World War I have caused the plantation to turn inward focusing more on the native family members. Primrose states that Aunt Mashula never gave up hope of seeing her husband again, but "she was never the same" (57). The next generation suffered again with the death of Denis. His death was devastating because he and George were the source of the delta's passion for life. The other members of the family "never said but one thing about George and Denis, who were always thought of together –George and Denis were born sweet, and that they were not born sweet. Sweetness then could be the visible surface of all the darkness" (46). "Sweetness" seems to be the essence of life that makes the other family members love George and Denis the most, and at the same time their "sweetness" is what causes the family to be devastated when Denis dies. Since Laura was not raised on the plantation, she has to learn to mimic the actions of her family in order to be accepted as one of them. Since Laura is learning to adapt to a type of lifestyle that is always changing, it makes it that much harder for her to learn what it means to be a Fairchild. She does come to know that she will have to sacrifice her life in Jackson, in order to live at Shellmound. For Laura, joining the Fairchild family would mean giving up her life with her father, and it would also mean always struggling to identify herself in a culture that is constantly changing.

Before Laura is pushed into the river, she finds Ellen's garnet pin at Marmion and she places it in her pocket. The garnet pin is the only gift that Battle has given Ellen, and represents Ellen's youth. Ellen has been searching for the pin, but cannot find it. When Laura finds it she

knows that the pin is a “treasure” (233). She places her “forefinger to her small, bony chest” signifying that she knows the pin is something that is supposed to be kept and worn close to the heart. The pin falls out of her pocket in the river, and Laura’s heart aches “to her bones” when she realizes that it is gone. Marrs says, “the Delta’s Yazoo River bring Laura awareness of life’s most fundamental mysteries... of its transience” (86). The river, an unstoppable moving force that takes the pin away from Laura, makes her recognize the fleetingness of life. Once Laura believes that she has adapted to the Fairchild life, she faces another change that will force her to adapt again. Life on the plantation is constantly changing, and Laura must constantly adapt.

Laura is identified as a Fairchild by George when she returns the pipe she stole from him. She decides that the only way to impress George is to give him a present, but there is nothing to give him that will make him happy, except for something that he already has. Laura steals his pipe because she believes that its temporary absence will make George want it back. When Laura gives George his pipe, she ceremoniously brings the pipe “slowly from behind her sash...inching it out to him to make the giving longer” (274). She slowly reveals the gift to give George time to realize that she has stolen the pipe and is now giving it back to him. After George has his pipe he tells Laura “You’re growing up to be a real little Fairchild” (275). Adapting to the hectic plantation life, Laura finds a way to make George notice her out of all the other family members, and she has captured his attention in this moment. To any outsider, Laura’s act would seem selfish, but she is elated because it means that she has been noticed by George and that she is considered a Fairchild by him. Laura desires attention from her family, and George gives her what she wants: attention and identification as a Fairchild. However, through the river and the garnet pin Laura realizes the constant change that is happening in the delta has not affected who she is. She has now been identified as a Fairchild, but she always was a Fairchild because of her

mother. She had to make her own claim without her mother's influence to prove to herself that she was still connected to her family. Now that she has established who she is within the Fairchild family she has two options: to stay at Shellmound or to return to Jackson.

While Marrs's and Gyfax's statements support the hypothesis that Laura is fully initiated into the Fairchild way of life, they do not discuss what Laura does after her initiation. Ellen extends an invitation for Laura to live at Shellmound. Laura's reaction to the invitation is two-fold, but ultimately she "felt that in the end she would go –go from all this, go back to her father" (313). Laura's initiation is completed, but her desire to continue her life on the plantation is gone. In order to maintain a Fairchild state of mind, Laura would always have to adapt to the changing life of the Fairchild plantation and she would have to give up her life in Jackson with her father. Laura is not willing to sacrifice her father in order to become fully immersed into her mother's family because she realizes that she can still be a Fairchild and start a new life in Jackson. In the end, she will go back to her father in Jackson to begin a life separate from the Fairchild family plantation.

Like Laura, Shelley will also leave the delta. Shelley places herself at a distance by observing her family through a writer's eye. The process of writing in her journal forces her to dispassionately critique the goings-on around her. It is only in her journal entries that we see her true feelings towards her sister's marriage. Because Dabney is the younger sister and the first one to marry, it places Shelley in an awkward state where "things had not happened to her yet" (290). This means in part that Shelley has no immediate marital prospects in her life. Dabney marriage makes Shelley rethink about having a married life on the Fairchild plantation and she thinks that the plantation life was like "a door closing to her now" (290). There is evidence suggesting that Shelley will not stay among her family for her adult life. Prior to Dabney's wedding, India

informs her mother that Shelley is painting her name on her trunk for Europe, and Shelley “wants her name in *black*” (Welty’s emphasis 165). A color as bold and permanent as black on a piece of luggage suggests Shelley’s determination to flee Shellmound. She is stamping her signature on her trunk and hoping that it opens up other opportunities for her. Shelley wants a different life than the one Dabney is destined to lead. She critiques her sister’s emotions, and reduces Dabney’s passion for Troy to “a remote...unreal world” (290). Nevertheless, she struggles with living in the moment of transition between Shellmound and the rest of her life. Shelley writes, “There’s a long journey you’re going on, with Aunt Tempe, leading out...and you can’t see it now.... You see only the line of trees at Shellmound” (289). Even though Shelley is determined to leave, she wonders “if Shellmound were a little bigger...would [it] be the same as the world entirely...” (289). She fears the world will be the same as Shellmound. Shelley will leave to go to Europe with Tempe, and her experiences will prove to her that the world holds a vast number of opportunities that might influence her decision to live on the delta.

If Shelley’s determination to leave the delta is wavering, then her encounter with Dr. Murdoch in the cemetery should influence her to leave the plantation. Dr. Murdoch is going to make Shelley aware that there is no space for her to make a life on her family’s plantation. Elizabeth Kerr states that “India and Shelley take her to the cemetery to see her mother’s grave. Dr. Murdoch, meeting them there, predicts the future of the family and the need for more space in the cemetery” (136). While it is true that Dr. Murdoch gives a realistic perspective of the future of the family, some of the facts that Kerr suggests are unsupported by the text. In this scene, the three of them, Laura, India, and Shelley, have just come from Partheny’s house in Brunswick-ton (the black community). India has received a gift from Partheny for George. The gift is a “patticake” that contains blood from the heart of a dove; a love concoction made by

Partheny to motivate George to go in search of his estranged wife, Robbie. When Shelley offers to take Laura to go see her mother's grave at the cemetery, India hops out of the cart with the "patticake" claiming most abruptly that she does not want to go to the grave (171-173). India is not exposed to Dr. Murdoch's critique of the family. Still, Dr. Murdoch, being a realist and a scientific man, complains to Shelley and Laura out of frustration: "You're mooning. All of you stay up too late, dancing and what not, you all eat enough rich food to kill a regiment..." (177). He claims that Fairchild men and women would live longer if they stopped "mooning" as much as they do (177). "Mooning" is Dr. Murdoch's term for the Fairchild family's enthusiasm and source of energy. George displays this phenomenon through the Yellow Dog incident, and Dabney displays it in her relationship to Troy. Ellen protects it and demonstrates it through her immense love for all of her children, and even Shelley displays this same emotion for her siblings. This same type of passion for life is why Laura decides to leave Shellmound; however, Dr. Murdoch disapproves of what he sees as inappropriate behavior.

Dr. Murdoch continues to ridicule the family even though both girls are at a loss for words after being accused of loving their family too much or "mooning." According to Dr. Murdoch, mooning is what caused Annie Laurie's death. After making a small attempt at defending her family, Shelley politely introduces Laura to the doctor, who then tells both of them what he thinks about her Annie Laurie: "Jackson's a very unhealthy place, she talked herself into marrying a business man, moving to Jackson. Danced too much as a girl to start with, danced away every chance she had of dying an old lady" (177). Hearing Annie Laurie's name besmirched by Dr. Murdoch shocks Laura and shakes her ideal image of her mother. Shelley politely tells the doctor that they must leave because of all the company they have back at the house, but Dr. Murdoch continues to criticize the family. He picks out a grave for Battle, Ellen,

Dabney, and Shelley and even their unborn children: “He turned abruptly... ‘You’ll marry in a year and probably start a houseful like your mother. Got the bones, though. Tell your mother to call a halt. She’ll go here, and Battle here, that’s all right –pretty crowded, though. You and your outfit can go here below Dabney and hers” (177). Dr. Murdoch tells Shelley to tell her mother to “call a halt” or to stop producing babies that will live and die in Fairchilds (177). There is barely room in the cemetery for the eldest of the Fairchild children, much less the next generation. Dr. Murdoch has shown Shelley and Laura that if they remain in Fairchilds they will end up competing for a grave in an already-crowded cemetery. It is easy to understand their fear of staying on the plantation when Dr. Murdoch has shown them where they will likely end up if they marry and live in Fairchilds.

The interpretation of this scene with Dr. Murdoch comes down to determining Shelley’s and Laura’s future, which is never addressed in the novel. However, there is indirect evidence suggesting the path each young woman will take. Shelley does not want to have the same relationship as her sister. She writes in her journal about the relationship between Troy and Dabney, claiming that their love for one another is not based on anything meaningful: “When T. proposed to D. I think it was just because she was already so spoiled, he had to do something final to make her notice... That is not the way I want it done to me” (110). Shelley is skeptical of her sister’s marriage with Troy, yet she envies their relationship. When Troy and Dabney are speaking so affectionately to one another before Dabney leaves to go on her last dance before her wedding, Shelley overhears them. She sees “their tenderness ... as they clung together. She nearly cried with them” (114). Shelley’s emotions waver, but sometimes she can be more rational than emotional. Jennifer Randisi believes that Shelley is the only one of the Fairchilds that can see the bigger picture: “Shelley’s diary entry, for example, reflects not only an

understanding of her own history, but also an awareness of the larger history of the Fairchilds of which it forms a part” (50). Shelley knows exactly what her life will be like if she stays in Fairchilds, just as Laura knows that she will have to sacrifice her life in Jackson to live at Shellmound. After the wedding Shelley thinks her “desire’s fled, or danced seriously, to an open place ...an opening wood, with weather –with change, beauty” (290). Shelley seems to want to widen her options to seek “change” and “beauty” outside of Fairchilds (290). She anticipates the changes in her life that will come from her trip and hopes for something more than Dr. Murdoch has predicted for her. Her trip will undoubtedly widen her view of the world and give her a chance to explore options outside of Fairchilds, thus giving her more opportunities to seek that “open place” that she desires (290). Both Shelley and Laura will leave the Fairchild plantation because they have been exposed to an outsider perspective of their family. Dr. Murdoch’s outlook is harsh but realistic, and the two girls realize they must seek out other opportunities for themselves.

Unlike her sister and her cousin, Dabney is transitioning into the role of a caretaker that will remain on the plantation. She will be different from her ancestors because she is going to marry Troy, who, as the overseer of her father’s plantation, is beneath her in socioeconomic status. The family opposes the marriage from the beginning because they are afraid Troy cannot provide her with the comfortable life she is accustomed to at Shellmound. Battle and Ellen do not really know anything about Troy’s family, and the information given in the novel about his mother is minimal. Troy’s mother lives in impoverished hill country. He has no financial stability other than what he receives from the Fairchilds, yet Dabney is determined to marry him. Battle would rather that she marry Dickie Boy Featherstone, who has attended dances with Dabney and who is a member of the same class. In choosing to marry Troy, Dabney rejects a life

outside the delta. She is going to be living in Marmion, one of the oldest houses on the plantation that was abandoned by the family after the deaths of James and Laura Allen Fairchild. Dabney will reclaim the house as her own, and hopes to bring life back into Marmion by raising her future children there. Although Dabney does not realize it, her choice to marry Troy represents the leveling of barriers between classes.

Dabney is not leaving the delta, and she is setting up Marmion as her own domestic space for her untraditional marriage. Before her wedding, Dabney receives a night light from Aunt Primrose and Aunt Jim Allen that has comforted earlier Fairchild wives waiting for their husbands. She accidentally breaks the light, thus breaking the mold of Fairchild traditional marriages. It is not until the morning of the rehearsal dinner that Dabney “shed tears...belatedly” over the broken Fairchild night light (254). She cries because the tradition that the night light represents is broken and because “it seemed unavoidable ...as if she had felt it was part of her being married that this cherished little bit of other people’s lives should be shattered now” (255). Even without Dabney realizing it, this marriage is moving away from the traditional lifestyle the Fairchild women have worked hard to protect. Welty juxtaposes Dabney’s marriage to the traditional marriages that surround the story of the night light to show how Dabney’s marriage is different. Dabney’s determination to marry Troy out of love for him proves that accidentally breaks class barriers, and to show that she still craves approval from her family she remains on the delta. The only element that the family accepts about Dabney’s marriage is that fact that she is not “going out of the Delta” (38). Like many Fairchild women before her, Dabney will settle in Fairchilds with Troy and begin a similar lifestyle to those of her predecessors, but her marriage remains unconventional and allows her to transition into the twentieth century as a semi-traditional wife.

Unlike the other husbands and wives in the novel, Dabney's sexual relationship with her husband is explored because the height of the novel is on the night of her honeymoon. Dabney is drawn to Troy's physical attractiveness which can be seen in his unkempt, manly appearance and his body "sprung all over with red-gold hairs" (159). When Shelley ridicules Troy's excess of hair, Dabney just smiles while "biting her lip at that small torment" (159). This moment conveys Dabney's heightened sexual attraction to Troy. The sexual aspect of marriage in the previous generations of the family is not explored in the novel. Jim Allen and Primrose have never been married themselves, but they rely on stories to confirm their belief in the night light's physical comfort. As the history of the night light is told, Primrose recalls Aunt Mashula using it to comfort herself while waiting for her husband's return from the Civil War: "I remember her face. Only this little night light comforted her..." (57-58). Aunt Mashula's husband, George Fairchild, fought and died in the Civil War, along with his brothers, Battle and Gordon, and his brothers-in-law, Lucian Miles and Duncan Laws. All three women relied on other sources of comfort, like the night light, to carry on without their husbands and in-laws. The surviving women in the novel will never relinquish traditions that comforted them in their time of grief, and now that Dabney's generation is old enough to marry, Jim Allen and Primrose promote the older generation's customs and will pass down what they know about marriage from what they have been told.

In comparison, Dabney's relationship with Troy does not need anything that the night light can restore. Dabney's sexual connection to Troy is stronger than the comfort of the night light. When Dabney is saying goodbye to Troy before leaving to go to her last dance as an unmarried woman she "clung to him more ... and looked over her shoulder at the night as if it almost startled her –indeed the soft air seemed to ... be trembling with the fluctuation of starlight as with the pulsing of the compass on the river. ... 'I hear your heart,' she said right out, as if

imploringly and yet to comfort him” (114). The pulsing of the river and Troy’s own heart beat signifies the yearning sexual attraction that they have for one another. When Dabney accidentally breaks the night light, she is separating herself from her family’s traditional idea of marriage and becoming a part of a tradition of intense passion and a yearning for the physical fulfillment in her relationship with Troy. Dabney is criticized for abandoning tradition, but she continues with her marriage plans and shows acceptance of the transitioning world around her.

Laura, Shelley, and Dabney discover their strengths and weaknesses through their experiences at the Fairchild plantation. Daughterhood can be defined as a learning process, where each character discovers her true nature under different circumstances. Welty creates an atmosphere in *Delta Wedding* where each girl can mature individually. Shellmound protects and challenges the daughters to realize their true identities, but ultimately each woman will define herself in terms of the new twentieth-century woman. Dabney is the semi-traditional woman because she remains near the family although she will live in Marmion. Dabney’s marriage to Troy brings a new tradition to the delta that will be the norm of future generations. Shelley and Laura are examples of the fleeing woman because they choose to leave Fairchilds, even if it is not permanently. Shelley will go to Europe after the novel ends, as opposed to following in her sister’s footsteps, and Laura will return to Jackson to begin her adolescence. Shelley and Laura choose to explore societies outside of Fairchilds, while Dabney chooses to widen the perimeters of the Fairchilds tradition by ignoring the class barrier. The daughters are the strongest examples of the transitioning society that will allow for breaking away from the typical southern tradition.

CHAPTER 3

OUR WIVES

“They loved their land because it was their own, and scorned to seek another reason why, calamity was their touchstone; and in the ordeal of fire their fragility was tempered to the strength of steel. Angels of comfort, their courage and tenderness soothed all wounds of body and of spirit more than medicines. They girded their gentle hearts with fortitude, and suffering all things, hoping all things fed the failing fires of patriotism to the end. The memory and example of their devotion shall endure.” – Inscription from the Women of the Confederacy Monument

Nancy McDougall Robinson, a wife of the delta and the great-grandmother of Welty’s dear friend John Robinson, greatly influenced Welty’s creation of delta wives in *Delta Wedding*. Her influence is especially seen in the character of Ellen. Ellen demonstrates the traits a woman must possess to be Fairchild wife, and she attempts to pass down her traditions to Robbie. Ellen understands better than anyone else in the novel the essence of being a Fairchild. As a Fairchild wife, Ellen protects what Dr. Murdoch refers to as “mooning,” a quality unique to the Fairchild family in the novel (177). Robbie still struggles with the concept of “mooning,” which makes her marriage very different from Ellen’s. On the one hand, Robbie’s husband, George, is the sweetest man in the delta. He can do no wrong in the eyes of his family. On the other hand, Ellen’s husband, Battle, is a well-adjusted planter who is not under pressure, as George is, to exceed the family’s expectations. Their marriages represent two different generations, yet the similarity between Ellen and Robbie is that they both entered a higher class family by marriage. Ellen’s marriage to Battle is a plantation marriage because they live in Shellmound, while Robbie’s marriage to George is in Memphis away from the plantation. Robbie and Ellen

represent two different types of wives, and their individual characteristics, including age and lower class backgrounds, add to each type.

Plantation wives in the South were expected to maintain certain standards when it came to choosing a husband and raising families. The southern family was based on a patriarchal structure. Within the structure, women had two major roles as adults: belles and wives. Anne Firor Scott states that the explanation for patriarchy in the South had to do with “the ideal of the southern lady” (16). Wives within this patriarchal structure were responsible for household chores, their children and husbands, and the freed slaves that remained with their family. Scott positions women as burdened by the responsibilities of wifehood, but before they were wives they were belles: “the mythology assure[s] every young woman that she [is] a belle, endowed with magical powers to attract men and bend them to her will” (23). The belle is a state of mind women entered before marriage. The southern belle is also told that “God... created women to be wives and mothers” (23). The belle quickly transitions into a wife, thus losing her independence. The transition from belle to wife existed all over the South until women began to fight for their voting rights in the early twentieth century. Bellehood is something that is fading away for southern women, and Ellen and Robbie are examples of women that do not have the privilege of this idyllic time period.

Ellen and Robbie never have the luxury to participate in bellehood. Ellen’s bellehood and girlhood are stolen from her by her mother, and her internal struggle is depicted in the novel. As a married woman, Ellen’s life revolves around her family, and she is happy to take care of them. Ellen reflects on her life at Shellmound after Dabney’s wedding and states, “What would happen to everything if she were not here to watch it, she thought, not for the first time when a child was coming” (297-298). Ellen’s thoughts are anxious throughout the text about her responsibilities to

her family and what will happen when she is no longer able to perform the duties of the wife of Shellmound. She is anxious because she knows what it is like to be abandoned suddenly. When Ellen was nine years old, her mother ran away to England with a man. Ellen's Virginian identity is defined by her abandonment when she thinks back to her previous life. The only information we know of Ellen's life before her marriage to Battle implies that she never experienced a secure girlhood like her daughters. Ellen's life was tarnished by the abandonment of her mother and it made her realize "the complexities of the everyday, of the family, what caves were in the mountains, what blocked chambers, and what crystal rivers that had no yet seen light" (206). Ellen's previous life makes her thankful for the family that she has with Battle, but she still has fleeting thoughts that go back to her life in Virginia.

At her daughter's wedding reception, she is realizing that she has permanently lost her old "Mitchem Corners" identity permanently. She realizes this after she tells the story of the day that she was tested as a Fairchild wife. Ellen recalls that the day Shelley was born there was no one on the plantation except for her mother, who had come from Virginia to help her with her first child. The story begins with Ellen going into labor: "Mama came down from Virginia to stay with me. . . . Mama was up when I called her, it was before day, and sent and got Dr. Murdoch. The Fairchilds turned out to be late getting there, or couldn't come" (282-283). Again, Ellen is abandoned in her time of need, but because of her previous abandonment she has learned to be independent. The two people who are there with her are Dr. Murdoch and her mother, and they both become sick because they both breathe in too much ether from the machine next to Ellen. Ellen is left to deliver Shelley alone, but she is not resentful towards anyone because of their absence, nor is she placing blame on anyone for her abandonment. She considers delivering Shelley alone a test of true strength as a Fairchild wife, which can only gain her respect in the

eyes of the other Fairchild women. Ellen is sitting with several family members proudly telling them of her great accomplishment. At the end of the story, Ellen's audience "laughed till the tears stood in their eyes ... the long-vanquished pain, the absurd prostrations, [and] the birth that wouldn't wait..." (284-285). After her story, Ellen glances at Dr. Murdoch who glared back at her as if he "counted her bones" (285). Dr. Murdoch is made to look like a fool in Ellen's story, and Ellen is happy that her story of strength reflects a critic of her family in this way. She is not going to be defined by abandonment. Ellen relishes her moment of glory, and this story defines her as a Fairchild, not a native Virginian. Ellen is at peace when she is surrounded by her husband and her family, and she is proud of the sacrifices that she has to become a Fairchild mother and wife.

Similarly, Ellen's relationship with Battle comforts and consoles her. Ellen loves Battle and "hates" leaving him "untended" (298). Battle is a well-respected man on the plantation mainly because of his booming voice. He can command attention from his family when he desires to, but most of the time he does not take part in daily routines. Battle is her protector, and she manages to turn his Fairchild wildness into a domesticated husband. Ellen's fainting episode causes her husband to panic for her well-being, and after Ellen faints she rests "against Battle's long bulk" to recover. Their relationship is based on their genuine concern for each other. In subtle moments, like after their daughter's wedding when Ellen is recovering from preparing her house for many guests, she takes his hand to show that she still needs him (281). Ellen and Battle have a deep bond as husband and wife, but it is overshadowed by her other responsibilities to her children and to running Shellmound. Nevertheless, Ellen needs Battle to maintain stability in her hectic life at Shellmound, and even though her transition into a Fairchild wife has come with challenges, she is rewarded by the comfort given to her by her husband and children.

The difference between Robbie and Ellen lies within their separate generations. Robbie is about the same age as Dabney and Shelley. Robbie does not experience the girlhood that Dabney and Shelley are a part of, though. Robbie has been stripped of her girlhood for financial purposes. She courted George “over the counter” at the Fairchild’s store, but this is not an example of bellehood. Robbie relies on George to marry her to become financially sound (211). Robbie’s life before being a Fairchild wife was troublesome because of her father’s premature death and her sister’s bad reputation among the townspeople. Before her father’s death, Robbie’s family was respectable, but not as revered as the Fairchilds. Robbie’s father was a “Justice of the Peace,” which gave her family middle class status. However, after her father’s death, the family was left without any source of income. Her mother’s father, Old Man Swanson, was a well-known man in the town who worked at the compress, but who never had the reputation or financial status of a planter. Robbie was sent to work in Fairchild’s store to support herself and her family, while her sister ran around with the town’s “drunkard” (211). The school board denied Robbie the opportunity to teach because of her sister’s reputation. Because of her destitute beginnings, she was denied the privilege of a carefree childhood and was forced to take on a lot of responsibility at a very young age. This changed dramatically when she married George. Her previous life is why the Fairchilds look down upon Robbie, which is why she is so uncomfortable when she returns to Shellmound with George for the wedding.

Although Robbie does not love the plantation lifestyle in the way that Ellen does, she does mimic the same set up in Memphis. She redefines the plantation marriage by moving to Memphis with her husband. She has set up a home for only herself and her husband in Memphis on “the second floor of a nice, two-story flat...the living room faced the river with two windows...so they could lie there listening to the busy river life” (183). Since it is so far away

from Fairchilds, Memphis gives them freedom from their family. In this space “they would dance barefooted and drink champagne, and sometimes in the middle of the day they would meet by appointment in the New Peabody by the indoor fountain” (183). Robbie has created a space for her and George to explore their freedom away from George’s family. She seems resistant to the traditional life at Shellmound because she wants to return to her own space in Memphis. In Memphis, Robbie is allowed to be independent of the Fairchilds, and independence is something that is new to her. Robbie’s marriage is the new example of wifhood that emphasizes freedom between husband and wife away from the family. She establishes a new family unit in Memphis, which excludes the Fairchild influence.

Robbie does not admit to herself that she has become a Fairchild, but the text suggests that she is one. She is not as traditional as some of her in-laws, like Tempe, Primrose or Jim Allen, but she is a Fairchild wife. Ellen witnesses Robbie’s struggle with identity when she first arrives at Shellmound. In the scene when Robbie arrives, Dabney yells at her in front of the entire family at the dinner table for almost ruining the upcoming wedding. As Robbie enters Shellmound, she lets a bird into the house. All of the family disperse from the table to catch the bird, creating a chaotic environment. Robbie says to Ellen in front of Aunt Mac and Aunt Shannon over the empty dinner table, “It’s funny. Once I tried to be like the Fairchilds. I thought I knew how...But you all –you don’t ever turn into anybody. I think you are already the same as what you love” (217). As an outsider to the family, Robbie sees the self-absorbed nature that Dr. Murdoch discusses in the graveyard. Ellen is sympathetic to Robbie, and she tries to make her understand that the family protects themselves first before anyone else. She says to Robbie that there is a “fight in us, already, I believe –in people on this earth...It’s part of being alive” (214). Her own fight refers to is the fight to protect her family. Ellen believes that Robbie is resisting

her true nature as a Fairchild. Robbie continues to fight against the Fairchilds for George and for her identity, but she does not realize that while doing so, she is becoming the very thing she seeks to resist.

While Robbie is arguing with Ellen, she twists the ring on her finger that once belonged to Mashula Hines, who was the aunt of Battle, Tempe, and George (216). This ring symbolizes her connection to the Fairchild family through her marriage to George, but it is also a family heirloom being passed from generation to generation. Robbie owes her education, her job at the store, her life in Memphis, and her wealth to the Fairchild family. The community does not see her as a Reid anymore, and even though the family calls her Robbie Reid, they cannot deny that she is George's wife and likewise part of the family. Robbie may not resemble the traditional Fairchild wife, but she has attempted to mimic a similar luxurious lifestyle for George in Memphis. According to Randisi, Robbie believes "family implies both point of view and place..." (45). Robbie grew up with the Fairchild children, and all of her life she heard from others around her "Fairchild, Fairchild, Fairchild and working for Fairchilds and taking from Fairchilds ..." (195-196). In order to escape the pressure of accepting the family's traditions, she creates her own traditions that are based on the Fairchild family and she unknowingly embraces the old ones, like the ring.

The family has given Robbie more knowledge than a typical outsider because she grew up in Fairchilds. She is the same age as Dabney and Shelley, and it is implied that she played with them at the Grove on at least one occasion. That particular time she got wet playing in the river, and Jim Allen rushed her into the house "to get the river off her" (191). The river that represents the initiation of Laura into the Fairchild tradition is the same river that Jim Allen cleans off of Robbie. After she has been in the river, Robbie experiences an awakening to the

Fairchild tradition. In the Grove, after Jim Allen has brought her in, Robbie notices Mary Shannon Fairchild's portrait on the wall. Jim Allen explains the history behind the portrait, just as she would have to any of her young nieces. In fact, her other nieces comment on Mary Shannon's stance in the photograph. Dabney actually mimics the pose, "her arms folded across herself," because she is taking on Mary Shannon as a good role model (53). Dabney has been told the arrival story of Mary Shannon, and she is proud that her ancestor overcame the wilderness to build the plantation. Robbie's reaction, however, is different than Dabney's. Robbie thinks the woman looks "condemning," and she guesses that her look is for her husband (191). In this moment, Robbie comes face to face with the Fairchild matriarchy. As the river is being cleaned off of her by Jim Allen, Robbie decides that Mary Shannon's "condemning" look is for her. The portrait hangs on the wall above Robbie and looks down at her, in the same way that the matriarchy will always be looming over her. The same river that brought Laura an awareness of the transience of the family will later bring an understanding of the power of the Fairchild matriarchy to Robbie.

Robbie will create her own feminine power outside of the Fairchild plantation. She will always be able to claim that she is George Fairchild's wife, which is a role that George's family can never fulfill. Robbie's life in Memphis is sacred to her, and she wants to protect it in the same way that the Fairchild matriarch protects their plantation. Robbie wants to have a life similar to the Fairchilds, but she always wants to escape her identity as a Reid. Robbie desires "veracity –more than she could even quite fathom, as if she had been denied it" (195). She wants George to love and protect their home in Memphis and abandon his family for her. When Robbie comes to the Fairchilds' plantation she must resume her role as Robbie Reid and leave behind her identity as George's lover that she likes being. She loves all the luxurious things that she has

in the flat in Memphis like the “shiny mahogany and rich velvet” furniture, “soft pillows with gold tassels,” the lamps with “shades of mauve gorgette over rose China silk,” and the “mahogany clock” (181-182). Everything in the flat is “the finest in Memphis” and seems to overcompensate for Robbie’s insecurities as a Fairchild wife (182). Her marriage to George allows her the satisfaction of achieving her ambitions, but she does not want to sacrifice her independence to become submissive to the Fairchild matriarchy. After her marriage, her craving for George is as “hard and immediate... as the impact of George’s body” on top of her own (195). Her urge to have George all to herself has increased since her wedding day, and she seems to be fighting his family even harder now than before for his affection. Robbie is insecure when she returns to Shellmound, and she knows that the only way to escape her insecurities is by returning to Memphis. Her in-laws will never allow her to forget her identity as a Reid, and it seems that she will never be accepted as a Fairchild.

Entering into a family like the Fairchilds is challenging, but Robbie and Ellen have their own ways of overcoming the obstacles. Albert J. Devlin states that “in Ellen Fairchild, Robbie meets the world” of the Fairchilds, meaning that she is introduced to the Fairchild sentiment that Ellen has come to understand (101). Robbie does not understand this sentiment because she only sees the Fairchilds as a self-centered family. Devlin says Robbie would “annihilate the world” in order to have every ounce of George’s love all to herself, but Robbie does not understand that George is an intricate piece of the Fairchild family (101). George is a reminder to his family of valiant Denis, who died in World War I. He was the oldest brother to Tempe, Battle, Jim Allen, Primrose and George, and he went out into the world and never came back. The family is so protective over George because they do not want to lose him like they lost Denis. Robbie mistakes George’s immense love for his family as a rejection of their life in Memphis, but really

he and his family are still coping with his brother's death. Robbie still searches "in the depths of her soul" for a solution that will make George love her, and she cannot understand why there has not been some "unnerving change or beautiful transformation" in her marriage (189).

Ellen struggles with her identity are similar to Robbie's experiences with the matriarch. When Ellen says to Robbie that there is a "fight in us," she seems to be referring to her own personal transition into the family (214). When Ellen speaks these words, she is physically fighting to hold herself up, but loses the fight when she faints. Ellen is exhausted from protecting her family. She is on her tenth pregnancy, and her second daughter has just married, but she remains to feel "lucky –cherished and ...pretty" when she is with her family because she feels needed (293). Bearing children, cleaning the house, taking care of the men, and fighting off disrespectful comments from older matriarchs are all part of Ellen's daily struggle. Robbie will never understand why George's family is so dependent upon him, but she does have her own space in Memphis to cope with the family's rejection of her. Even though Ellen and Robbie are from separate generations, they both sacrifice their former identities to become higher class Fairchild wives.

CHAPTER 4

OUR SISTERS

“Their smiles inspired hope; their tender hands soothed the pangs of pain; their prayers encouraged faith in god; and when the dragon of war closed its fangs of poison and death, they like guardian angels, entwined their hands in their brother’s arms, encouraged them to overcome the losses of war and to conquer the evils in its wake, adopting as their motto: ‘Lest We Forget’”.

– Inscription from the Women of the Confederacy Monument

The two women in *Delta Wedding* who demonstrate the generational differences in the struggle to adapt to change are Tempe and India. Tempe’s disapproval of Dabney’s marriage shows that she, like Ellen, is another protector of Fairchilds. Tempe’s “unvarying word” against the marriage causes tension throughout Shellmound during the preparations for the wedding, but her cruelty stems from her desire to preserve her ideal image of her family against the changes coming to the South (30). Unlike Tempe, India represents the adolescent generation that will help build new traditions in the twentieth century. The changes in Fairchild society are demonstrated through the adolescent relationship between India and Laura. India and Laura have a ritualistic bond that resembles a sisterhood more than cousinhood. India is always teaching Laura about her life at Shellmound. Even though India is on the brink of adolescence, just as Laura is, she is able to teach Laura about life at Shellmound without pitying her. India and Laura provide a sense of balance to each other that counters the hard transition between childhood and adolescence. India has such a close bond with Laura because she has seen her two older sisters care for each other in a similar way. India idolizes Dabney and Shelley and supports who they have become, even if their decisions lead away from old Fairchild family values, as Dabney’s

does. While India welcomes the new traditions her sister introduces to Shellmound, Tempe strongly disapproves of them. India and Tempe represent two separate generations that want different things. India's generation will follow Dabney's and Shelley's example by breaking away from traditional customs, and Tempe's generation will cling to the past customs in order to preserve their ideal image of the South.

At the age of nine, India and Laura begin the transition into adolescence, but the major difference between the two is that Laura's mother is dead. The two girls still have childlike tendencies –like hand-holding and crying –but also they learn together what it means to grow older. Upon first encountering each other at Shellmound, India and Laura immediately pick up their rituals from Laura's previous visit. When Laura first sees India, she remembers that they both have the same white dress and gold locket. Laura notices that the dresses are still the same, except her dress does not have a blue ribbon around the waistline. She also notices that India has had her hair washed and “spun out down her back,” and she is saddened when she remembers that she has no mother to do that for her anymore (10). Her father folded the dress for her to come to Shellmound, and the thought of a man folding her pure white dress makes Laura cringe because her mother would have done that for her if she were alive. Laura cries out that her mother is dead, and India simply picks up right where the two girls left off from Laura's previous visit: “India ... said ‘Greenie!’ ... ‘We never did unjoin,’ said India. ... Laura ... stooped and put a pinch of grass in her shoe.’ You have to wash now,’ said India” (10-11). India calls Laura “Greenie,” which connotes something new and inexperienced. Instead of grieving for her friend, India encourages Laura to remember their rituals, and Laura accepts India's gestures by completing them. Unlike the adults, India does not pity Laura for her mother's death. The adults

isolate Laura because of her grief by not allowing her to be in Dabney's wedding. India does not alienate Laura, but instead embraces her as a sister.

India and Laura share a bond that seems to comfort Laura, but Laura is treated differently by the adult characters. The adults pity Laura, but at the same time they do not ask Laura directly about her mother. When Ellen asks Laura to help her bake a cake before they go to bed, Laura agrees and follows her into the kitchen. Ellen enlists the help of Roxie and gives Laura a task. Laura asks Ellen a question, but she never receives an answer from Ellen because Ellen is already deep in thought about George, Dabney, and the wedding that is quickly approaching (30-31). Ellen is not intentionally ignoring Laura, but her thoughts are expressed through three pages before she acknowledges Laura again. Another instance where Laura seems to be a lingering presence is her encounter with George in the library. Before Laura notices George, Welty plainly states, "Laura generally hesitated just a little in every doorway" (69). Her hesitation turns to fear, as she runs from George. He catches up with her and attempts to have a conversation with her, but it is not too long before the rest of the cousins call George away from her. George seems to run after her because he pities her, but does not follow through with his concern. The adults, like George and Ellen, attempt to comfort Laura, but they do not succeed in the way that India does.

India has a very independent nature. She tends to know all the secrets of Shellmound – like Robbie leaving George – even before any of the adults know. Her happiness does not rely on her family paying close attention to her, as Laura's does. After Ellen and Laura bake the cake, India is heard wishing from "an upper window:" "Star light, Star bright, / First star I've seen tonight, / I wish I may, I wish I might / Have the wish I wish tonight. (33) There is no particular warning or introduction that India is going to wish, but after her wish is heard there is silence throughout the house. In this moment, India is independent from her family, but it is because of

this separateness in fact that she can comfort Laura. India is not afraid of intruding on Laura's grief like the other family members seem to be. Bessie Chronaki comments on the intra-family workings of the Fairchilds and discusses how Welty describes them both as a whole and as individuals. She says Welty emphasizes "the need for and sanctity of love between individuals and the need for and sanctity of separateness between individuals, notwithstanding close relationships of blood and spirit" (38). This statement identifies the relationship between India and her family, but also between India and Laura. India's actions are determined by her nature and Laura's actions are determined by how family treats her. India is more independent than Laura, but India's independence never alters her love for Laura, meaning that India able to provide comfort for her grieving cousin.

India is independent from her family, yet she depends on them in some instances. She relies on her family to share her reactions to certain information she obtains throughout the novel, like the gossip of Robbie and George's relationship problems. Not only is she aware of the happenings on the plantation, but she uses the knowledge that she possesses to test the reactions of certain family members. For example, India decides to tell Tempe about the problems between Robbie and George. India is one of the first ones to realize that Robbie ran away from George. She tells Aunt Tempe, who then asks how she knew. India's response is "I'm nine ...*No-body* told me, but I *knew* way back this morning" [Welty's emphasis] (137). India tells Aunt Tempe about Robbie and George to see what type of reaction Aunt Tempe will have. Similarly, India gauges Shelley's reactions during her own highly dramatic version of the Yellow Dog story.

One of India's longest dialogues is the story of the Yellow Dog. She is asked to retell the story to Mr. Rondo, who is the Methodist preacher who will perform the marriage ceremony for Dabney and Troy. The story begins, "'It was late in the afternoon!' cried India, joining her

hands. She came close to Mr. Rondo and stood in front of him. ‘Just before the thunderstorm’” (75). India sets the ominous mood for Mr. Rondo, and then she explains how George saved Maureen from getting run over by the Yellow Dog, the Yazoo-Delta train. According to India, Robbie claims that George saves Maureen because he cares for his family more than his life with her in Memphis. India repeats the line that Robbie cried after the Yellow Dog stopped “George, Fairchild, you didn’t do this for me” (79). After India’s story it is evident that she pays close attention to the reactions of everyone around her; India notices Shelley’s tearful reaction to the Yellow Dog story and points it out to her audience. She points out Shelley’s behavior to Mr. Rondo by stating, “Look, Mr. Rondo: she’s the oldest” (79). India observes that Robbie is upset about George saving Maureen, and she knows that Shelley is upset by the story because she remembers the danger of the train. She does not mean to hurt Shelley when she retells the Yellow Dog story. She studies Shelley and Tempe to learn what types of reactions they will have to certain information that she holds, and this helps India to learn about how adults think. She is not concerned with the effects of war or death, but she is very aware of how her family functions on a daily basis. Her nonchalance toward war and death demonstrate the differences between the younger generation and the older generation in the novel.

The fact remains that India is just nine years old. While she does have the ability to test her family’s reactions, she is still a child who is transitioning into adolescence. India is present when Dabney receives and breaks the night light. India knows the family story behind the night light and realizes how important it is to Primrose and Jim Allen. India is enthralled by the history of the gift. When Primrose and Jim Allen decide that Dabney must have the light, India says to her sister, “Dabney, Dabney, they’re giving you the night light” (57). She is “pulling at her sister’s hand in a kind of anguish” (57). In this moment, India pulls at her sister in agonizing

excitement because she is proud of her sister for accepting a gift that has been in their family for many generations. As they ride back to Shellmound from the Grove, India thinks that the night light is “the most enchanting thing in the world” (63). Dabney does not even realize that her sister is affected in this way. Dabney accidentally breaks the light beyond repair when she rushes into Shellmound to meet Troy, but at the time she does not seem to even notice what she has done. India’s reaction to the broken glass is so powerful that she “flung herself against [George’s] knees and beat on his legs” (68). India is only just becoming aware of what it means to be a Fairchild, and all she knows about the night light is that it is a symbolic touchstone for her family that was destroyed by her sister. India is happy for Dabney’s marriage, but she cries for her sister because she believes that Dabney may have accidentally isolated herself from her family permanently. India does not want to stop loving Dabney because of the light breaking, but she is too young to understand Dabney’s transition from daughter to wife. Shelley and Dabney, likewise, demonstrate two different paths that India could take when she gets older. India loves her sisters equally and does not choose which path to take during the novel.

India does not condemn Dabney because she strays from a traditional marriage, but Tempe does. As the protector of the family, Tempe wants to preserve Shellmound so that it remains the same place that she grew up in. She reminisces about Denis, her brother who died in World War I, and it is evident that Denis was Tempe’s favorite brother. She names her own child, Mary Denis Summers, after him. At the family dinner before the day of the rehearsal, Tempe cannot think of anyone but Denis. She believes that his life was cut off before he could accomplish the things she thought he was capable of. She thinks Denis was “ahead of his time and it was Denis that was out of the pages of a book too. Denis could have planted the world, and made it grow...Denis could have been anything and done everything...” (152-153). Tempe’s

reflection on her brother's short life reveals that she longs for her protector. Even though Tempe's efforts to preserve the traditional delta can seem as somewhat cruel at points, she clearly attempts to maintain the delta out of love for her brother. Tempe disapproves of Dabney's marriage because it represents change that she is not able to adapt to without forgetting her older brother.

Tempe is a woman who abides by traditions set up by her parents' generation, but India is a member of the new generation that does not have to follow in her parents' footsteps. The difference in the two generations is that the younger generation is not emotionally restrained, and the older generations are hurt by the inflictions of war. The novel ends quietly at a family picnic to celebrate Dabney's return to the delta from her honeymoon with Troy. The scene is described as a pleasant "gregarious radiance," but the tranquility of the scene will soon be interrupted by World War II (316). It is impossible to predict what will happen to the women in the future, but if the pattern of separation continues, as in the previous wars, there will be a nostalgic longing for a simpler life. This simpler life is what Tempe yearns to protect from encroaching global forces. Welty's personal experience with World War II hint that there will be more pain and suffering for this iconic southern family. In the final scene of the novel, the family is comforted by their close bond of kinship before they are all separated. George and Robbie will return to Memphis; Tempe and Pinck will return to Iverness; Laura will return to Jackson; Shelley will go to Europe; Dabney will go to Marmion; and Battle and Ellen will resume their lives at Shellmound, while the next large-scale disaster begins to brew far from Fairchilds.

CHAPTER 5
OUR MOTHERS

“To the women of the Confederacy ‘Whose pious ministrations to our wounded soldiers soothed the last hours of those who died far from the objects of their tenderest love, whose domestic labors contributed much to supply the wants of our defenders in the field, whose zealous faith in our cause shone a guiding star undimmed by the darkest clouds of war, whose fortitude sustained them under all the privations to which they were subjected, whose floral tribute annually expresses their enduring love and reverence for our sacred dead; and whose patriotism will teach their children to emulate the deeds of our revolutionary sires.’” – Jefferson Davis from the Women of the Confederacy Monument

In *Delta Wedding*, the female characters have resumed pre-war routines because the men have returned home from war, but Welty still portrays a strong matriarchal structure. At the center of this structure is the role of a mother. Franziska Gygax states that “the female focalization not only pushes the men and their voices into the background, but it contributes to the establishment of a . . . matriarchal order ruling in the narrative realm” (41)². The matriarchal order focuses on the female presence that dominates the novel, and at the center of this presence is the role of a mother. Ellen is “the mother of the world” in *Delta Wedding* and demonstrates the most pure form of motherhood, but she is not the first mother of the delta. Aunt Mac and Aunt Shannon are not actual mothers, but surrogate mothers for Battle, Tempe, Rowena, Primrose, Jim Allen, George and Dennis. Raising their orphaned nieces and nephews healed their own grief for their lost husbands in the Civil War. Shannon and Mac are the oldest surviving Fairchild matriarchs, but the first matriarch of the delta was established by Mary Shannon Fairchild. She came to the wilderness of the delta to marry George Fairchild two generations before Ellen’s

arrival. Ellen, Shannon, and Mac help to carry on the matriarchal order that Mary Shannon established.

Shannon and Mac are most likely in their late seventies during the novel. Shannon's health is declining slowly. Several times in the novel, she is heard talking to dead people, like Denis; her brother George; or her husband, Lucian. Even with her health declining and her energy fading she still would take care of Battle's children if anything should happen to Ellen. It is common knowledge in the family that Shannon and Mac are "prepared to do it again, start with young Battle's children and bring them up" (87). Women have relied upon one another through multiple generations of the Fairchild family, and raising abandoned children is what gives Shannon and Mac the strength to move past their husbands' deaths. Laura Allen relied on Shannon and Mac to take care of her children after her death, and this is similar to Ellen taking in Maureen and wanting to take in Laura after their "dreadful trouble" with their own mothers (87). War means death and separation for the southern family, but in a time of need war brings out courage and strength in Shannon and Mac.

Ellen came to the delta in the same abrupt way as Mary Shannon. She had no preparation for married life and she remembers her arrival in the delta as daunting. When the family is being photographed at Dabney's wedding, Ellen remembers how she learned the definition of a delta mother. Ellen provides "tremendous meals [that] she had no talent for... and had to learn with burned hands to give the household orders about" (286). Ellen realizes her own sacrifices for the sake of her family, which is something that her mother would never have done for her. She is proud to carry on the traditions of motherhood that were established by Mary Shannon, and her individual relationships with her children reflect how much she cares for each of them.

Ellen's relationships with her daughters are precious to her, and she is most concerned with the two eldest, Shelley and Dabney. As the mother of the bride, Ellen has responsibilities to Dabney that require more of her time. Dabney's wedding has caused a stir among the family because of the low socioeconomic status of her future husband; however, Ellen is more concerned with her daughter's happiness than with her financial future. Ellen loves her daughter, but she believes that marrying Troy will make Dabney's life much more difficult than if she had chosen to marry someone with a bigger income. Ellen says early on in the novel that she loves Dabney "too much to see her prospect without its risk" (32). She is concerned about Dabney's future, but there is nothing she can do to stop her daughter's marriage. It is Ellen's concerned reaction to her daughter's marriage that defines her role as a mother. No mother wants to see her child unhappy, and Ellen does not want Dabney to suffer because of her choice. However, Ellen does not interfere with Dabney's decision.

Ellen is also concerned about her oldest daughter, Shelley. At the beginning of the novel, Dabney and Shelley lie together on the settee. Ellen notices the difference between her two daughters' lives. Ellen is the only one who acknowledges Shelley's unhappiness, but she does not state it. She looks at Shelley during the wedding ceremony and pities her. Ellen thinks that since Dabney's engagement Shelley demonstrates "a kind of ragamuffinism... as if she might not get through the wedding very well" (279). It is clear to Ellen that Shelley is different than Dabney, but Ellen cannot stop Dabney's marriage from affecting Shelley. Ellen calls attention to Shelley's internal suffering, and she realizes that Shelley's awkwardness is from Dabney marrying first. Ellen cannot help Shelley because that would mean she would have to stop Dabney's wedding. Ellen allows both of her daughters to be independent and choose their own paths, even though she knows the consequences of some of their choices.

Part of being a Fairchild matriarch is to reach out beyond immediate family to take care of others in need. Ellen pities Laura because her mother is dead, and she wants to adopt Laura as her own, just as she adopted Maureen, who was abandoned by her own parents Denis and Virgie Lee. Ellen brings Maureen to live at Shellmound out of sympathy perhaps, springing from her abandonment experiences with her own mother. Ellen contemplates inviting Laura to live at Shellmound after Dabney's wedding. She thinks to herself that "Billie McRaven was solid and devoted, but he had no imagination" (299). Ellen is not sure if Laura's father is qualified to raise a young girl without Annie Laurie. At the family picnic, she invites Laura to stay at Shellmound because she believes that is what is best for her. As a matriarch she has fulfilled her responsibility to Laura, but she does not anticipate that Laura will go back to her father³.

Along with all of the other responsibilities that Ellen has to the Fairchild matriarchy and to her other children, she is also bringing another baby into the world. The cruel reality of being pregnant comes with the risk of miscarriage. Ellen is aware of the risk because she has already lost a baby boy, but Shelley is the one who voices her fear for her mother. Battle and Shelley talk about the pregnancy on the night of the wedding. She cries to her father, "How could you keep getting Mama in this predicament?" (301). Shelley believes that there is no more room on the plantation for another child to be born, and she aches at the thought of loving another sibling. Dr. Murdoch has already explained to Shelley that there is a limited amount of space in the graveyard for her future children, and she is naturally concerned about overcrowding. By the end of the novel, the only reference to the baby is when India says to Laura that she will have a baby brother named Denis soon. Even though Ellen struggles through her tenth pregnancy because of all of the other pressure around her, she is excited about the new baby. Her excitement shows another way that she upholds and continues the Fairchild matriarchy.

The matriarch is a powerful force in *Delta Wedding* because of the women that stand firmly behind it. Ellen is a member of the matriarchy that dedicates her life to raising and protecting her children. She realizes the reality of both of her daughters' choices, and she also realizes that there is nothing she can do to change their courses. Dabney will live in Marmion, and Shelley must leave the plantation. Her tenth pregnancy has been a struggle for her because of the amount of pressure she is under from her other children, but she is still determined to provide for this child, as she has for her other children. Shelley realizes that it will be hard for her mother to love and protect another child, but this is part of the sacrifice that Ellen is willing to make. Mothers in *Delta Wedding* are not immortal, and, like Annie Laurie and Laura Allen, mothers can unintentionally abandon their children. This may seem like a darker side to motherhood, but it gave Shannon and Mac the opportunity to raise children. Shannon and Mac would never have had the opportunity to experience motherhood if Laura Allen were still alive, and this explains their determination to be good mothers to her children. Becoming mothers allowed them to move forward from their husbands' deaths. Ellen has heard the stories of Shannon and Mac and is inspired by their dedication to their family. Motherhood will always have light and dark aspects, but to the mothers in this novel the sacrifices they make for their children are worth it.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

The matriarchal society that dominates the delta emerges from suffering and loss caused by war, and the southern family is emphasized because it represents unity and love that binds women together in the absence of men. However, the iconic southern family is changing to adapt to the twentieth century. In *Delta Wedding*, when any part of the family dynamic changes each member responds by either rejecting or accepting the change. Scott states that the southern family was composed of members that “were parts of an intricate system; when any part of the system developed new patterns of behavior, all the parts had to respond in some fashion” (213-214). Dabney’s marriage to Troy is the new pattern of behavior in the delta. Her marriage represents two different classes coming together to move forward into a more modern South. Dabney creates a new pattern in the family that demands a response from the other women in the novel. The older generations reject the ideals behind her marriage because the ideals threaten the traditions of their childhood; but the younger generation of Fairchilds accepts Dabney’s new position as a twentieth-century wife and may follow her example in the future. The younger generation is on the verge of change, but the progression forward is not shown in the novel.

Wars are the catalyst for change in the delta. Change began with the generation that survived the Civil War. Shannon and Mac represent the Fairchild generation that become introverted because of the threatening outside world. Shannon and Mac were heavily affected by the deaths of their husbands and brothers, but healed through raising their nieces and nephews. Their fear of outsiders was passed down to Battle’s generation. After World War I, the fear increased for both generations because of the loss of Denis, the eldest brother and the source of energy for the entire family. Denis’s death affects the family the deepest because it is the most

recent loss to the family. The year 1923 is a year of reestablishing the southern family from the damaging effects of war. The next generation does not demonstrate the fear that the two previous generations have. Shelley and Laura will leave the plantation because there is no more room for them to hide out in Fairchilds. Dr. Murdoch makes this notion of overcrowding clear to them during the graveyard scene. The novel ends with the family watching falling stars in the sky, and Laura holds out her arms. The sky represents the outside world that threatens the Fairchild way of life, but Laura's ambiguous embrace symbolizes multiple levels. Laura is binding her family together, but at the same time she is accepting the fact that she will move on from the plantation life. Laura is embracing her identity as a Fairchild, and she realizes that she has overcome the loss of her mother through establishing her own connection with her mother's family. She can now move back to her life in Jackson, and move forward with her life.

NOTES

¹Suzanne Marrs biography of Welty was an invaluable resource, and the information is derived from her text.

² The chapter in Gygax's book entitled "*Delta Wedding: Point of View and Matriarchal Order*" goes into great detail about point of view, using the theorist Susan Sniader Lanser. He states that Lanser "tries to incorporate gender-based distinctions into her framework. She points out that most narrative theorists refer to the narrator and writer as 'he' and that they therefore subsume the woman writer is under the male. It is necessary to view the conventions of literary communications in relation to the cultural norms to which writers recur; thus, the sex role system and its concepts of male and female play an important role" (15). By Lanser's standards there is a direct link between perspective and social structures, and Gygax writes that this theory can be applied to *Delta Wedding's* narration to observe female characters. See more in Lanser's *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (1981).

³ In a similar manner to Ellen's treatment of Laura and Maureen, she wants to extend the matriarchy to include those outside of the Fairchild family, by trying to help the lost girl in the woods. Ellen's theme of the lost girl is a topic much larger than this will allow.

APPENDIX

Figure 1. Map of Fairchild plantation found on the inside cover of the 1946 publication of *Delta Wedding*. Welty, Eudora. *Delta Wedding: A Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946. Print.

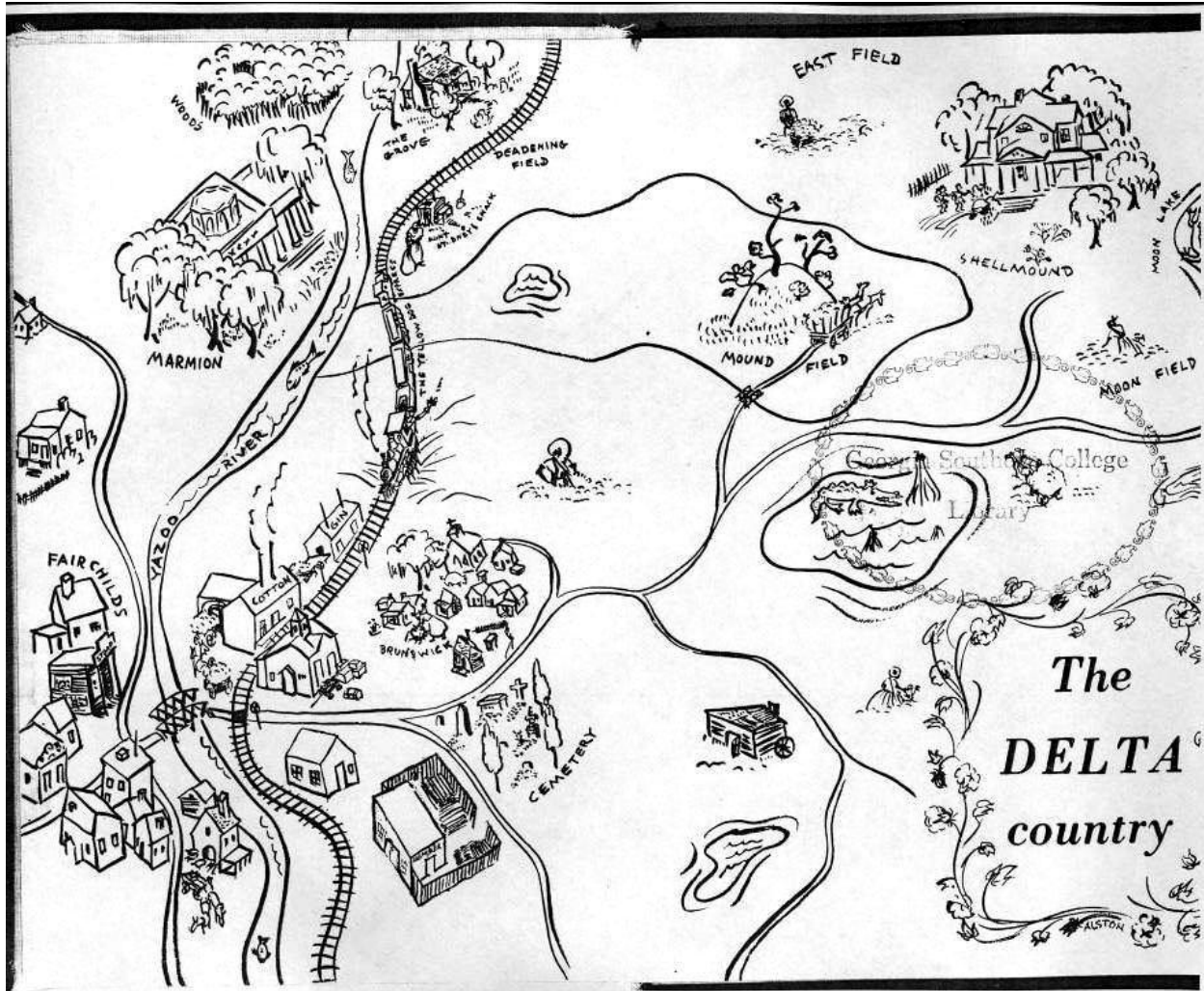


Figure 2. The Women of the Confederacy Monument



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