

Stories of the Great Depression

Eudora Welty wrote her first stories in the midst of the Great Depression, and she set her 1970 novel Losing Battles in Depression-era Tishomingo County, Mississippi. The outer world in these works is both a vehicle of social commentary and an emblem of characters' inner lives. Did Welty's view of the Depression and her use of it change between the 1930s and 1970?

1. What sort of portrait of the Great Depression do “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” “Flowers for Marjorie” and “The Whistle” present? Do they tell us about the poverty, the substandard housing, the meager diet that individuals faced? Do they tell us about the psychological consequences of poverty?
2. “Death of a Traveling Salesman” was Welty’s first published story, and it prefigured the theme that Robert Penn Warren would find throughout her early fiction, the theme of “Love and Separateness.” How does Welty characterize R. J. Bowman? Does he seem to be an emblem of modern alienation and isolation? How has he isolated himself and why? How does he respond to the farm couple? Are his distorted impressions of the wife part of a larger distorted vision of experience? Does he both scorn the life the farm couple leads and long for the connection they have found? Why does he leave their home and leave money in payment for their freely-given hospitality? Is his heart condition both literal and metaphoric?
3. Is “Flowers for Marjorie” a story about time? Why does time seem stopped to Howard? Why is Marjorie so serene? The story is narrated in the third person with Howard as the story’s focal character. How important are Howard’s distorted perceptions to the story’s effect?
4. “The Whistle” depicts the battles against nature and against a tenant farming system that typified the lives of poor southerners. What does Welty see as the psychological consequences of these battles? Does the flickering fire early in the story seem to be an emblem of the imagination? Does the burning of the furniture allow Sara and Jason jointly to imagine that “what they had never said, and what could not be, had its life, too, after all”? Is that hopeful moment replaced by despair and separateness or will its effect endure in any way?

What does Losing Battles have to say about the Great Depression? To what extent are the Renfros and Beechams victims of their own traditionalism and willful ignorance? To what extent do they lead rich lives nevertheless? What values does Miss Julia Mortimer represent? Is her vision Welty’s own or does Welty see limitations in Miss Julia’s approach to experience? Does Losing Battles endorse or call into question Welty’s earlier depictions of the Great Depression?