

## **From *One Writer's Imagination***

**By Suzanne Marrs**

Welty's story "The Whistle" is based on actual events. A friend of Welty's lived in Utica, Mississippi, a truck farming center near Jackson, and Welty occasionally visited her there. In the thirties, during an overnight stay, Welty heard a piercing whistle warn local tenant farmers of a coming freeze. The uncle of Welty's friend, in fact, was the man who owned the tenants' land and who sounded the whistle. Though she had heard the whistle from the comfort of a fine house, the next morning Welty encountered visible signs of a poverty and a desperation she had never imagined: the fields were covered with clothes and bedclothes, anything the tenants could muster to protect their fragile crops. At her own home Welty had often gone out into the night to cover the camellias she so loved to grow, but never had her actions been crucial to her family's very existence. The distinction between her sheltered life and the lives of Mississippi's tenant farmers left an indelible impression upon her, and it soon inspired the plot of a story.<sup>1</sup>

Plot, Welty has written, "forms a kind of metaphor. . . . But a living metaphor. From the simplest to the most awesomely complicated, a plot is a device organic to human struggle designed for the searching out of human truth."<sup>2</sup> Certainly plot in "The Whistle" forms a kind of metaphor. The warning whistle wakes Jason and Sara Morton in the middle of a long, cold night. It commands them to rise and go into the moonlit fields. It requires that they use the pallets on which they sleep and the quilts they need for warmth to cover their tomato plants; it requires that even the clothes from their backs be removed and placed on the plants. The whistle represents an arbitrary and alien force, and Jason and Sara feel helpless and vulnerable in response to it.

That arbitrary and alien force, as W.U. McDonald has argued, is in large part a sharecropping system. The whistle "is known everywhere as Mr. Perkins' whistle."<sup>3</sup> And Mr. Perkins is the man who owns what was once the tenants' land and reaps the profits from it. He need not come into the fields himself; he merely blows the summoning whistle. His power as landowner seems absolute, and Jason and Sara's labors have left them without the energy to

engage in protests like those waged by the Mississippi farmers who had joined organizations such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

Moreover, Jason and Sara's despair is intensified because it is not Mr. Perkins alone who controls their lives. They are also victims of the natural world, and the whistle suggests the power that world holds over them. The natural world itself can be exceedingly arbitrary. Sara recognizes this fact as she recalls the history of their farming endeavors: "Now, according to the Almanac, it was spring. . . . But year after year it was always the same. The plants would be set out in their frames, transplanted always too soon, and there was a freeze. . . . When was the last time they had grown tall and full, that the cold had held off and there was a crop?" The cold that threatens Sara and Jason is "like a white pressing hand"; it is as uncaring as the "hard, quick hand" Mr. Perkins extends at harvest time. The cold sinks into Jason and Sara "like the teeth of a trap."<sup>4</sup> Both the economic system of the thirties and the power of the natural world hold them prisoner. Jason and Sara Morton have little control over their own lives and have no way to contest that fact.

The whistle Welty actually heard, the man who sounded it, the farmers who responded to it thus all appear in "The Whistle," but Welty presents a selective account of her experience in Utica, Mississippi. She writes not about herself or her friend or her friend's fine house. She includes only those details that emphasize the injustice of a sharecropping system and the hard terms that nature inevitably imposes upon farmers. These concepts shine through what might have been only realistic description and exemplify the process Welty discusses in her essay "Words into Fiction." In that essay she first describes the pitch blackness of a cave, and she then writes that "without the act of human understanding — and it is a double act through which we make sense to each other — experience is the worst kind of emptiness; it is obliteration, black or prismatic, as meaningless as was indeed that loveless cave. Before there is meaning, there has to occur some personal act of vision. And it is this that is continuously projected as the novelist writes, and again as we, each to ourselves, read."<sup>5</sup>

Welty's selective vision, however, does more than illuminate an actual experience. Her ability to pierce the darkness of experience is matched by her ability to create actions that complement and complete the meaning she had seen in that experience. Perhaps the most

striking event in “The Whistle” is one entirely of Welty's making, one she added when revising the periodical version of the story for book publication. When Jason and Sara return to their cabin, having left quilts and clothes in the fields, Jason rekindles their fire. And when they burn the last of their wood supply, he breaks up their wooden chair and their kitchen table and burns them. Alfred Appel suggests that the fire is an emblem of hope, but this creation of Welty's imagination is also an emblem of memory and of imagination itself.<sup>6</sup> The fire, the Mortons' one means of combating the cold, their one means of exerting control over their lives, suggests that they may not be totally helpless victims, that their barren past may in part be redeemed:

*And all of a sudden Jason was on his feet again. Of all things, he was bringing the split-bottomed chair over to the hearth. He knocked it to pieces. . . . It burned well and brightly. Sara never said a word. She did not move. . . .*

*Then the kitchen table. To think that a solid, steady four-legged table like that, that had stood thirty years in one place, should be consumed in such a little while! Sara stared almost greedily at the waving flames.*

*Then when that was over, Jason and Sara sat in darkness where their bed had been, and it was colder than ever. The fire the kitchen table had made seemed wonderful to them — as if what they had never said, and what could not be, had its life, too, after all.<sup>7</sup>*

The fire suggests that “what could not be” can exist at least in the imagination.

Just as the fire in the story is associated with imaginative vision, it is also linked to memory. Earlier in the evening, lying in the cold house, Sara remembers the summer harvest time much as Welty herself actually remembered it:

*There in her mind, dusty little Dexter became a theater for almost legendary festivity, a place of pleasure. On every road leading in, smiling farmers were bringing in wagonloads of the most beautiful tomatoes. The packing sheds at Dexter Station were all decorated — no it was simply that the May sun was shining. . . . The music box was playing in the café across the way, and the*

*crippled man that walked like a duck was back taking poses for a dime of the young people with their heads together. With shouts of triumph the men were getting drunk, and now and then a pistol went off somewhere. In the shade the children celebrated in tomato fights. A strong, heady, sweet smell hung over everything. Such excitement!*<sup>8</sup>

But Sara cannot sustain these happy summer memories. They come to her “only in brief snatches, like the flare-up of the little fire.”<sup>9</sup> And ultimately the sound of the whistle outlasts the roaring blaze of the furniture. Imagination, memory, hope — the fire quite naturally suggests these three, for the fire frees Jason and Sara from the trap of the present moment and of the cold, but that freedom is fleeting. In creating the episode of the fire, Welty thus matched the flames of her imagination to a cold and very real Utica, Mississippi, night — her inner vision is matched to the living world as its secret sharer — and Welty's story is far more compelling as a result.

Finally, in “The Whistle” Welty finds a shared act of imagination to be crucial to communication and relationship. Sara and Jason have long been married, have long shared a one-room house, and have long failed to communicate: “Every night they lay trembling with cold, but no more communicative in their misery than a pair of window shutters beaten by a storm. Sometimes many days, weeks went by without words. They were not really old — they were only fifty; still, their lives were filled with tiredness, with a great lack of necessity to speak, with poverty which may have bound them like a disaster too great for any discussion but left them still separate and undesirous of sympathy. Perhaps, years ago, the long habit of silence may have been started in anger or passion. Who could tell now?”<sup>10</sup> The terms of their existence have destroyed any emotion that might have bound them together. But, as we have already seen, when Jason makes the fire, they know a moment of communication: “The fire the kitchen table had made seemed wonderful to them — as if what they had never said, and what could not be, had its life, too, after all.”<sup>11</sup> Their common past, their desperate present do not bind Jason and Sara together, but the fire helps them jointly to imagine the relationship they have missed, a relationship that momentarily seems to live, but that will not endure.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Eudora Welty, interview with Marrs, 19 September 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Eudora Welty, "Some Notes on Time in Fiction," *The Eye of the Story* (New York: Random House, 1978), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Eudora Welty, "The Whistle," in *A Curtain of Green* (New York: Doubleday, 1941), 111.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 109, 111, 110, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Eudora Welty, "Words into Fiction," in *The Eye of the Story*, 136-37.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Appel, *A Season of Dreams* (Baton Rouge: L. S. U. Press, 1965), 11.

<sup>7</sup> "The Whistle," 114.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.