

## **“The Whistle”: Creative Inspirations**

### **Discussion Guide**

Eudora Welty’s short story “The Whistle,” written and first published in *Prairie Schooner* magazine in 1938, is a glimpse into life in rural Mississippi during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The story may be found in Welty’s *Collected Stories, A Curtain of Green*, and the Library of America volume of *Welty: Stories, Essays, and Memoir*. “The Whistle,” an excellent introduction to Welty for youth and adults, forms the basis of this resource package exploring the concept of creative imagination. The materials that are included here are helpful resources for teachers, book clubs, and readers in general.

The act of creation is different for every artist. Eudora Welty’s short stories are often based on a scene or an event that she then transforms into a story. Welty scholar Suzanne Marrs says that “Welty thoroughly reshaped the living world so that it might more effectively convey the values or emotions or sensations that had made it memorable to her.” (*One Writer’s Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*)

Singer and songwriter Claire Holley is a Jackson, Mississippi, native now living in California who has been inspired by Eudora Welty. Her song “Pleasant Dreams” was written after she read “The Whistle.” In this song, she presents her interpretation of Welty’s story — what the whistle means to her — thereby taking the image from the story and transforming it into her own creation.

#### **Recommendations for using these resources:**

1. Read the Welty short story “The Whistle.”
2. Read the excerpt from Welty scholar Suzanne Marrs’s *One Writer’s Imagination* about the events that gave Welty the idea for the story and how Welty applied her creative vision to the events.
3. Listen to singer/songwriter Claire Holley’s song “Pleasant Dreams” and read a brief statement from her about the creation of the song. The song lyrics as recorded are also included for review.
4. Read the background essay about tenant farming in Mississippi.
5. View two of Welty’s photographs showing rural life in Mississippi in the 1930s.

6. Compare and contrast the creative processes of these two artists, explain how the central image of a whistle functions in both works, and explore how that image means something different to both artists.

**Objectives:**

1. Identify sources of inspiration for Welty's short story and Claire Holley's song.
2. Identify ways that the story and the song were transformed from the actual event that inspired them to the finished product.
3. Practice reading and analyzing text.
4. Practice using critical material to illuminate text.
5. Synthesize ideas from multiple sources.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. After reading "The Whistle," give a brief summary of the story. Who are Jason and Sara? What kind of life do they lead? What happens to them and what is their reaction?
2. After reading Marris's excerpt, explain what event inspired Welty to write this story. What did Welty add out of her own imagination? Can you guess why?
3. The central events in this story are the sounding of the whistle and the burning of the furniture. What does Marris suggest that these mean? Do you agree, or do you have a different interpretation?
4. After listening to "Pleasant Dreams," explain how it was inspired by Welty's story "The Whistle." What elements of the story are in the song? What is different?
5. In Holley's statement, she talks about her favorite part of "The Whistle." What is it? What does it mean to her?
6. What does the whistle mean in Holley's song? How is that different from what it means in Welty's story?

**Further Questions for Discussion and Writing:**

1. Welty is known for her use of description in her work. She said that she was a very visual writer but that she also liked to "listen for stories." Think about your five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste). How does Welty use description to

- call upon the senses? How many of them are used? Give specific images that correspond to the senses you have named.
2. Welty and Holley are two different kinds of artists. Welty was a photographer and a short story writer. Holley is a songwriter and musician. How might this impact the creation of their work? Can you select details or images in “The Whistle” and “Pleasant Dreams” to support your position?
  3. Based on your reading from all four sources, describe Welty’s creative process and Holley’s creative process. How do both artists take a literal event and transform it and for what purpose? What meaning are they trying to convey to their audience? Use specific examples and quotations from the texts provided.
  4. If you were to create an artistic response to Welty’s story, what would it be? How would you transform your piece to make it your own?