

Through the Looking Glass: Eudora Welty's Photography and **The Ponder Heart**

By Mae Miller Claxton

Overview

Literature teachers often struggle to persuade students of the value of the written text in a world in which the word often seems secondary to the image. This assignment shows students that words and images often combine to convey meaning. Students from middle school through high school will examine Eudora Welty's photography and compare/contrast it to her novel **The Ponder Heart**. The lesson introduces students to the setting of the story—helping them to "see" time and place through Welty's images. Additionally, students will create their own photographs or sketches to accompany another Welty story, "Why I Live at the P.O." The assignment acts as an introduction to the series film, but moves beyond and through the literature as well with students using visual art to approach Welty's work in innovative ways.

Objectives

Students will:

- Comprehend the context of **The Ponder Heart** through Welty's photographs
- Analyze how illustrations and photographs interact with written text
- Create their own images to illustrate a well-known Welty short story
- Publish their works on a class Web page or in hard copy book form

Skills Attained

- Knowledge of photography and visual art, including illustration
- Knowledge of time and place (context or setting) for Welty's works
- Creative combination of student-generated images with Welty's words
- Use of the Web to obtain on-line texts and photos and publish student work

Lesson Outline

I. Anticipatory Set

Begin with a discussion of the role of images in our society. Bring in examples from print media and television commercials. How do visual and verbal texts combine to convey a message? Move to illustrations used in books. Discuss how these pictures affect our view of the meaning of the story. In particular, high school students should read selections from Welty's essays, "The House of Willa Cather" and "Place in Fiction." From her collection of nonfiction writings called **The Eye of the Story**, these works discuss the writer's views of fiction and artistic composition. As an art minor in college, Welty was especially aware of visual art as she created her fiction.

II. The Lesson

1. Show students examples of Welty's photographs in her collection entitled **Photographs** and an earlier work, **One Time, One Place**. Discuss what these images tell us about the time and place of **The Ponder Heart** and Mississippi small-town life in the 1930s and 1940s. Although Welty was an innovative and perceptive photographer, in interviews about her photography, she has consistently classified herself as an amateur. Teachers will find the introductory interview in

- Photographs** quite useful. They should not, however, feel obligated to have extensive knowledge about photographic techniques. They will find that students are quite comfortable evaluating images. A discussion of the photographs might include some of these questions:
- a. What does Welty focus her camera on in this photograph? What seems to interest her about this subject?
 - b. How is the subject placed in the frame of the photograph? Center, off-center, in the corner?
 - c. What are the surroundings of the subject? What does context tell us about the subject? What do we learn about small-town life in Mississippi? Many of the people in her photos are thin and seem poor. What does this say about the Great Depression and its effect on the people of Mississippi?
 - d. How does Welty use space in her photographs? Can the empty spaces communicate a message?
 - e. Many of Welty's images include advertisements. What message do these texts communicate?
 - f. Many Welty photos show relationships between people and the interaction of people with their environment. Discuss which photos fit into these categories.
 - g. Discuss Welty's use of black and white film. How would the pictures be different if they were in color?
 - h. Welty's camera did not have a light meter. How did she use light in her pictures?
2. Examine and discuss the illustrations for **The Ponder Heart**. Joe Krush created the drawings for the 1954 edition, and the 1982 Harcourt paperback edition recreates those drawings. Before the book was published, Welty sent many of her photographs to Krush to help him get ideas for his portrayal of the region and its people. Krush, in fact, recreated some of Welty's photographs in his drawings. Find these examples and compare Krush's drawings to Welty's photographs. Discuss how his drawings help us "see" the story just as Welty's photographs help us "see" Mississippi during this period.
3. Classroom Project
- a. Provide students with a disposable camera or allow them to use their own. Have them read "Why I Live at the P.O." and create their own "Welty" photographs as illustrations for this story. Discuss the emphasis on character and oral narration in "Why I Live at the P.O."
 - b. Next, students should access an on-line text of the story (http://art-in.com/art/or_weltypostoff.html). Have them cut and paste the text to accompany their illustrative photographs (students could also sketch illustrations if they wish). Students will re-create the Welty text, demonstrating how visual art can transform the written word. If resources permit, students could publish these assignments on a class Web page, allowing them to compare/contrast their visions of the stories with their classmates' projects. If published in book or pamphlet form, the projects should be displayed for general class perusal.
 - c. Students should complete the project with an evaluative essay summarizing what they learned from their work on written and visual texts. Essay requirements should be geared to the grade level of the students. Sample prompt: You have examined Eudora Welty's photography and Joe Krush's illustrations in the text of **The Ponder Heart**. In the first section of your essay, explain how these visual texts affect your understanding of the work. In the second part of the essay, discuss how your own illustrations have changed your perceptions of "Why I Live at the P.O."

Assessment

Students should be evaluated based on the creativity of their classroom projects. Specifically, teachers should assess how students have creatively combined their visual images with Welty's text. Instructors might wish to assign a grade based on a 100-point scale:

- 25 points on photos or illustrations (graded on composition, theme, detail, and overall creativity)
- 25 points on creative use of Welty's written text
- 30 points on quality of overall assignment
- 20 points on evaluative essay

Welty Resources

Welty's books of photography include **One Time, One Place** and **Photographs**.

The Ponder Heart with illustrations by Joe Krush was published by Harcourt in 1982.

To purchase **The Eye of the Story** online, go to <http://members.xoom.com/eudorawelty/conflu.htm>.

"Why I Live at the P.O." is in **The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty**. Access the story at: http://art-bin.com/art/or_weltypostoff.html.

Two Welty photographs are available at http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/welty_eudora/.

Additional Resources

Ansel Adams' Guide to Basic Techniques of Photography by John P. Schaefer, or another basic introduction to photographic techniques, might be useful.

For information about photography and writing in the classroom, **Doubletake** magazine's classroom companion website at <http://www.doubletakemagazine.org/> provides articles from the magazine and ideas for teachers.

Another helpful reference work is Welty's "artistic" autobiography, **One Writer's Beginnings**, a work that includes family photographs. A similar lesson plan might explore this work and allow students to create their own "memoirs" using photographs.

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