

Brian Kent's Reflection in Eudora Welty's "Moon Lake"

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In "Moon Lake," one of the linked stories in her collection *The Golden Apples*, Eudora Welty incorporates references to popular culture including: the game called mumblety-peg; a children's rhyme found in "readers" of the era; and perhaps most interestingly the (then) contemporary novel *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* by Harold Bell Wright. Welty's setting features a lakeside summer camp for girls in the rural south; Wright's features a river running through a rural landscape said to resemble the Ozarks. Both works of fiction depict acts of near-drowning. By definition mere reference to Wright's novel within Welty's text would be an intertextual act. Intertextual scholars have studied Welty's transformation of ancient Greek and Celtic mythology in the collection, and also, in the case of the story "Music from Spain," parallels to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. However, the reference to Wright's novel is made tangible when Welty physically places the novel in the hands of two separate characters whose interaction serves as commentary on the novel. But can this commentary be interpreted as metatextual; in other words is it intended as *critical* commentary?

THE REFLECTION OF BRIAN KENT IN MOON LAKE

Although product placement in television programs and movies is commonplace today, specific reference to other works of literature in works of literary fiction seem less common. In Welty, *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* is not only specifically named but also placed in the hands of two separate individuals

at the summer camp. Welty describes the book as well-read: "the covers curled up like side combs" (*Collected Stories* 351). Wright's novel is considered a work of popular, as opposed to literary, fiction. Why did Welty refer to the novel in her work? Three possibilities come to mind: Welty engages the reader in an act of play with the novel placed as a clue for the reader to interpret; Welty (somewhat subversively) offers her criticism of the novel; or the novel has no heightened significance but is merely one detail added by Welty to create a unique sense of time and place.

In taking up the question of the purpose Wright's novel serves, Leslie Gordon argues that the reference cannot be considered offhand: "Welty's references and allusions are never gratuitous, and this one allows a sufficiently curious reader to garner a few more thoughts about the novel than the simple play upon the differences between 'recreation'—a summer camping activity—and 're-creation,' a transformative experience" (118). Gordon points out: "The Re-Creation of Brian Kent was published in 1919, the year Welty turned ten years old, the same age as the campers in 'Moon Lake,' and traveled away from her Jackson home for the first time to attend a camp on a lake in the Mississippi Delta" (115). Is it possible Welty came across this very book at summer camp?

As for Brian Kent, the main character in Wright's novel, he is portrayed as a down-on-his-luck drunkard in need of salvation. His failed suicide attempt ends when the boat he steals, which he intended to use to drown himself in the middle of the river, runs aground on the riverbed of property owned by a retired

spinster school teacher named Auntie Sue. A disabled young woman named Judy who lives with Auntie Sue plucks the drunken Brian Kent from the river as he struggles to climb out of the boat. As Wright portrays the scene it is clear Judy saves Brian Kent from drowning. This action parallels the scene in “Moon Lake” in which the Boy Scout Loch Morrison retrieves the orphan Easter from the lake and performs resuscitation.

Could Welty's plot in “Moon Lake” have been influenced by Wright and specifically by *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*? Both works, after all, explore accidents of near drowning. Gordon points out Wright's novel was made into a movie in 1925: “This was the year Welty graduated from Central High School in Jackson, Mississippi, and possibly she saw the film, since her love of movies from early childhood on is acknowledged in her letters, memoir, fiction, and non-fiction” (116).

THE KING OF THE WOOD AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN WELTY

Scholarship on Welty's reference to *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* in “Moon Lake” is limited. In contrast, several scholars have undertaken the critical evaluation of Welty's use of ancient mythology as a framework for the short stories that make up the collection *The Golden Apples*. Rebecca Mark, in *Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples*, reveals a linkage between “Moon Lake” and James Frazer's telling of the myth of “The King of the Wood” in *The Golden Bough*.

At Moon Lake, Nina Carmichael, Jinny Love Stark, other girls from the town of Morgana, and a group of orphan girls, are all chaperoned by adults. Conspicuous, yet maintaining a distance in their midst, the teenage boy Loch Morrison, Boy Scout and Life Saver, assists the adults in maintaining order. He signals with his bugle the time for various events including rising, bathing, and sleeping. Because of this signal stature in the group and his tendency to haunt a certain tree by the lake, Mark interprets Loch as serving as the stand-in for the King of the Wood, with the king's sword swapped out for the scout's bugle (112).

From Frazer:

On the northern shore of the lake, right under the precipitous cliffs on which the modern village of Nemi is perched, stood the sacred grove and sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis, or Diana of the wood...In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead... (1)

Compare this to Welty's description of Loch Morrison at the beginning of "Moon Lake:"

From the beginning his martyred presence seriously affected them. They had a disquieting familiarity with it, hearing the spit of his despising that went into his bugle. At times they could barely recognize what he thought he was playing. Loch Morrison, Boy Scout and Life Saver, was under the ordeal of a week's camp on Moon Lake with girls. (Collected Stories 342)

And yet, even as Jinny Love Stark and Nina Carmichael are repulsed by Loch Morrison they are also intrigued:

In early evening, in moonlight sings, the Boy Scout and Life Saver kept far away. They would sing "When all the little ships come sailing home," and he would be roaming off; they could tell about where he was. He played taps for them, invisibly then, and so beautifully they wept together, whole tentfuls some nights. (Collected Stories 343)

This conflict is part of growing up: a time when bodies, minds, and preferences are developing. Because of their stature as adolescents it's difficult to take how Nina and Jinny Love handle *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* as an act of literary criticism.

POPULAR CULTURE, POSTMODERNISM, AND PLAY

As mentioned, the novel *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* appears twice in "Moon Lake." Physically described as well-read, it is first discovered in the hands of the young camper Nina by her somewhat bossy friend Jinny Love:

"Nina!" Jinny Love whispered across the tent, during siesta. "What do you think you're reading?"

Nina closed *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. Jinny Love was already coming across the almost-touching cots to Nina's, walking on her knees and bearing down over Gertrude, Etoile, and now Geneva. (Collected Stories 349)

The book is so quickly dropped by Nina (and, at least temporarily, by Welty's narrative) that the reader might be justified in ignoring its significance. Yet the subtle inflection in diction is unmistakable. Jinny Love doesn't simply ask "what are you reading," which would represent a more or less neutral question, but instead uses a confrontational, albeit playful, tone in practically saying rather than asking "what do you think you're reading" (emphasis added).

Gordon explains: "The Re-Creation of Brian Kent would not represent suitable material for ten-year-old girls" (116). And yet in her series of essays One Writer's Beginnings Welty relates her mother's permissiveness in this area:

I never knew anyone who'd grown up in Jackson without being afraid of Mrs. Calloway, our librarian...

My mother was not afraid of Mrs. Calloway. She wished me to have my own library card to check out books for myself. She took me in to introduce me and I saw I had met a witch. "Eudora is nine years old and she has my permission to read any book she wants from the shelves, children or adult," Mother said. "With the exception of *Elsie Dinsmore*," she added. Later she explained to me that she'd made this rule because Elsie the heroine, being made by her father to practice too long and hard at the piano, fainted and fell off the piano stool. "You're too impressionable, dear," she told me. "You'd read that and the very first thing you'd do, you'd fall off the piano stool." (One Writer's Beginnings 29)

Shortly after the novel *The Re-creation of Brian Kent* is dropped by Nina, it appears in the hands of camp chaperone Miss Moody:

"Let's us run away from basket weaving," Jinny Love said in Nina's ear, a little later in the week.

"Just as soon."

"Grand. They'll think we're drowned."

They went out the back end of the tent, barefooted: their feet were as tough as anybody's by this time. Down in the hammock, Miss Moody was reading *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* now. (Nobody knew whose book that was, it had been found here, the covers curled up like side combs. Perhaps anybody at Moon Lake who tried to read it felt cheated by the title, as applying to camp life, as Nina did, and laid it down for the next person.) (Collected Stories 351)

Jinny Love's mention of drowning not only foreshadows the near-tragic event in which Loch Morrison rescues the orphan named Easter who has fallen into Moon Lake but also proves ironic to the reader who knows the contents of *The Re-*

Creation of Brian Kent. Brian Kent tries to drown himself in a stolen boat but ends up passing out and running aground.

ARE WE THERE YET: OR WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT SUMMER CAMP

Welty's parenthetical text, discussed above, relates that the campers in "Moon Lake" feel cheated upon discovering *The Re-creation of Brian Kent* has nothing to do with play or the types of recreation normally found at summer camp. Welty's use of word-play in comparing the words "re-creation" and "recreation" reinforces the irony. But did Welty intend more than irony; did she intend to criticize *The Re-creation of Brian Kent*? A close examination of Wright's novel reveals its moralistic tone consistent with metanarrative or grand narrative; postmodernist theory distrusts metanarrative. Did Welty also distrust the moralistic tone in *The Re-creation of Brian Kent*?

Turning back to the consideration of whether Welty's parenthetical text represents literary criticism, the reader may want to consider the fact that the author only uses the parenthetical one other time in "Moon Lake":

Moon Lake came in like a flood below the ridge.... Out there Miss Moody would sometimes go in a boat; sometimes she had a date from town, "Rudy" Spights or "Rudy" Loomis, and then they could be seen drifting there after the moon was up, far out on the smooth bright surface. ("And she lets him hug her out there," Jinny Love had instructed them. "Like this." She had seized, of all people, Etoile, whose name rhymed with tinfoil. "Hands off," said Etoile.) (Collected Stories 359)

This passage represents a humorous moment when witnessed through the lens of adulthood. If we assume consistent use of the parenthetical as a literary

device, we may consider Welty's earlier parenthetical about *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* as having a similar intent. The fact that Welty does not address, or refer to, Wright's novel as a symbol in her critical writing supports the interpretation that Welty is engaging in a game with the close reader of her work.

While Gordon offers the observation, expressed earlier, that Welty's references and allusions are "never gratuitous" she leaves open multiple possibilities for the author's placement of the dog-eared novel *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* in "Moon Lake." Due to the lack of definitive treatment of the subject by Welty, the critic is left to use a "weight of the evidence" approach to reach a reasonable conclusion. Welty addresses the dilemma of the critic as follows:

Since analysis has to travel backwards, the path it goes is an ever-narrowing one, whose goal is the vanishing point, beyond which only "influences" lie. But the writer of the story, bound in the opposite direction, works into the open. The choices multiply... (On Writing 32)

One further observation from Welty may shine light on the perhaps unexpected appearance of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* in "Moon Lake". Speaking of the different ways in which a writer comes across her subject, Welty writes: "that person may come on it by seeming accident, like falling over a chair in a dark room" (On Writing 68).

Welty's metaphor accurately describes the way the reader of "Moon Lake" encounters *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. Given the lack of written

criticism on this subject, it would appear most readers stumble across the reference, pick themselves up, and move on. By the time Welty's "Moon Lake" was published, Wright's work no longer appeared on the best-seller list. Thus, the immediacy of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* as a reference to popular culture continues to diminish over time. Welty likely knew that would happen but may have hoped the curious reader would pick up the trail. The final piece of evidence that Welty's placement of the novel first in the hands of Nina Carmichael and then in the hands of Miss Moody was intended as an act of humorous intrigue is the parenthetical nature of her "critique" of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. It seems clear Welty was engaging the deep reader on another level, with humor and in a broader cultural context.

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