

**A Comic Re-enactment of the Apollonian - Dionysian Conflict:
A Study of Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart***

R.Subbalakshmi

Eudora Welty's short novel *The Ponder Heart* was published by the *New Yorker* in December 1953 and a separate publication followed in 1954. According to Robert Liddell, "[A] novelist writing absolutely in the middle of his true range will be writing his best, like a singer singing in the best part of his register."¹ This is true of Welty's shortest novel (novella) *The Ponder Heart*, since it depended more heavily than the rest of Miss Welty's work on local colour for its effectiveness. The novel is a tour-de-force of sustained humour and is a mixture of subtle irony, broad comedy and observation of human foibles. Nowhere in Miss Welty does the comic spirit make a shamble of the assumptions of society as in *The Ponder Heart*.

Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart* has been read as a comic re-enactment of the Dionysian – Apollonian conflict. In this analysis, Uncle Daniel is seen as the admirable centre of the work, the Dionysian life-force, engaged in a struggle with his niece Edna Earle, the "funny and pathetic Apollonian advocate of order, reason, self-denial and society's values."² In this short novel we hear the voice of the narrator, unsophisticated, recognizable provincial and in exhaustible, relieved only by the "transcribed" conversation of others who come and go in her story of uncle Daniel Ponder and the heart that brought him much joy in life and near the end much sadness as well.

Welty's novel *The Ponder Heart* (1954) depicts a fun-and-games world. In this work, as narrated by Edna-Earle Ponder, a father has his son committed to the state mental hospital to teach him a lesson. A mistake takes place and the father is confined while the son gets released. The middle-aged son Daniel Ponder takes a very young wife, who insists that they should not live together.

Daniel Ponder, accidentally tickles his wife to death during a storm and at the ensuing trial for murder, the generous-hearted defendant unwittingly gives all his money away to the jury and the crowd and gets acquitted. In spite of all this, the only admitted suffering in the story is Uncle Daniel's: he frequently suffers from lack of company with whom he is to share his tales. The origin of his trouble is that he "was used to purely being rich, not having money," and the money he handed out so freely came between him and his beloved community.

The Ponder Heart is a Southern farce or a tall tale. The combination of the colloquial language, the exaggerated comic actions, the triumph of the naïf uncle Daniel over powerful and more intelligent forces in several incidents, and

the comic courtroom scene places the novella in the tall tale tradition. But Edna Earle does not mean to tell a tale, she is recalling uncle Daniel's history as faithfully as she is able to. The story is Edna Earle's reminiscence. Here for the first time Welty humorously reveals that the Southern reminiscence and the tall tale share some essential ingredients. With the romanticizing inherent in it and with the exaggerations and dramatic performance which a Southern narrator naturally brings to it, the reminiscence appears very much like a tall tale.

Though the novella appears to be humorous on the surface it has deeper meanings that run beneath the surface. It exposes various facets of human nature and the texture of the relationships that exists between different people. It also serves as a mirror of the Southern society and the attitude of its people. It depicts two different classes of society as well as two pictures of Southern womanhood. William Pedem points out that *The Ponder Heart* is a "distinguished, individualistic, memorable work of fiction."³ It is because of its comic high spirits and adroit use of Southern colloquial idiom, the novella won Eudora Welty the William Dean Howells medal of the American Academy for the most distinguished work of American fiction between 1950-1955.

Edna Earle, the narrator of the novel moves between two extremes- her uncle Daniel Ponder and Grandpa Sam Ponder. She is the mirror of Bonnie Dee, uncle Daniel's seventeen year old wife, on the side of positive synthesis. Throughout her narration Edna Earle coyly suppresses the acknowledgement of her age. While she is only slightly younger than uncle Daniel, who is in his fifties, she speaks of the poem she is saving to show her grandchildren and bristles when Deyancy calls her "ma'am." She does not stand outside time like Bonnie Dee and uncle Daniel, whose unetched countenances tell us life has scarcely touched them. It is because she lives truly "erring, feeling anger and frustration, knowing unfulfilled love, having to find substitutes for the romance, she craves-- her appearance shows it."⁴ Edna Earle has no everlasting springs like the ones she attributes to her uncle Daniel. The spring she does have is a very human one. Her reason has been dulled by Mr. Ovid Springer, the drug salesman, who has courted her all these years but she chooses to hang on to her dream that some day he will propose. In other words, she is her own spring of hope.

In Edna Earle we find the combination of her grandpa and Uncle Daniel's qualities. Grandpa's capacity for action and Uncle Daniel's for feeling combine in her. Balancing between her grandpa and Uncle, Edna Earle has created a life not of peace but vitality. She arrives at a reciprocal harmony between the superior intelligence that characterized grandpa and the unrestrained feelings of Uncle Daniel. The "thinking and feeling one, she is the real possessor of the pondering and ponderous heart of the title."⁵ Having been born "the smart one of the family," Edna Earle sees it her duty to keep the grounds of family distinctions clear. Hence she resorts to every available euphemism in

describing and accounting for Uncle Daniel's foolishness and always insists that it is a flaw of the "Ponder Heart," not of the mind that gets him in trouble. She knows that it is in the area of questions about relative intellectual capacity, about mental normality and abnormality that people who are themselves otherwise intelligent, like the hotel guest who wants to "read" rather than listen, are most likely to go wrong in judging of social distinctions. She simply distracts attention from the doubtful territory as much as she can. For all sorts of reasons, never mentioned directly is the possibility that uncle Daniel's troubles might stem from a source darker and deeper than either mind or heart.

Edna Earle is mentally strong and asks no one to cry with her, as her uncle does, and wastes little pity on herself. Her uncle and grandpa have been the enemies of romance in Edna Earle's life but she has managed to fulfill her duties while hanging on to the dream at least of love. Edna Earle is as much a Ponder as Uncle Daniel. Her father was the oldest child and Uncle Daniel, the youngest. In fact Edna Earle and Daniel were raised together by her grandparents. When she grew up, she had to take charge of the Beulah Hotel that the family owned. It is quite a job as the hotel consists of twelve bedrooms and she has to manage it alone with the help of a cook and some servants. Once beautiful and busy, now it has fallen on evil days, just as the town of Clay. Occasionally people may drop in rudely demanding a room or the menu for dinner much ahead of time. Edna brought up in the midst of old world virtues does not appreciate these new ways.

Clay- which was once a busy town, has now lost its prominence. It is only in the mind of the narrator, Edna Earle, that the town is vivid in all its particularity, variety and richness. Her love for Clay is deep and abiding, and the rendering of it contributes to the density of the texture of the novel. The novel has the formal pattern of a dramatic monologue spoken by Miss Edna Earle Ponder to a restless stranger in the Beulah Hotel in Clay. The events of the story are over, and it is only in the telling that Edna Earle tries to gain control over the issues of life. Besides being a narrator participant, Edna Earle has a story of her own --that of an ageing spinster with the responsibility of preserving the proud Ponder family and its tradition. She is proud of the Ponder family and the social position of the Ponders in the small town of Clay. She brags some and sounds foolish enough, but she has genuine pride in her family. Although her own life is full of frustrations, she stoically devotes herself to the happiness of the simple minded Uncle Daniel, not for reward, but that she will be able to live with herself.

While Edna Earle celebrates her family shamelessly in her cliché-ridden tale, it is clear that this is "not ordinary gossip ... but gossip providing the tale for its own sake, sad or humorous," as Robert Penn Warren suggested. Edna Earle is aloof and displays a condescending

attitude to the poor whites of Clay. But she is rather ineffective in her malicious statements, and her indiscreet and emotional monologue serves mainly to reveal aspects of her own mind and character. The reader is tempted to consider her relationship with Uncle Daniel, as "self-sacrificing and almost worshipping." She obviously feels responsible for Uncle Daniel.

Edna Earle does not undertake to protect Uncle Daniel simply as a vulnerable embodiment of the family honour. She protects him because she genuinely loves him, and does not want to see him hurt. Many readers observe a simple pathos in the situation of this fundamentally good and much abused, middle-aged lady at the end of the story--impoverished, neglected, burdened probably for a good many years yet to come with the care of the ruined and nitwit, much married uncle in whose interest she has sacrificed, no doubt permanently, her own hope of marriage. But we can sympathize with her as much admiringly as pityingly, because Edna Earle is "at least as much victor as victim."

One of the most convincing measures of the superiority of Edna Earle's heart is her capacity to suffer, not just for self, but for others too. For all his altruism, Uncle Daniel seems largely unconscious of the significance of his acts. Since he places no value on possessions, his gifts cost him nothing. But Edna Earle's willingness in letting Daniel give away all the money that one day she would have inherited must be seen as an act of loving courage. Her lying for Daniel at the trial is of the same mettle. Edna Earle says: "I never lied in my life before, that I know of, by either or saying or holding back, but I flatter myself that when the time came, I was equal to either one." (*The Ponder Heart*.143)

Edna Earle Ponder is the enlightened character in *The Ponder Heart*. Her insights are far-reaching. She realises that grandpa's expectation of "correcting" the childish uncle Daniel by consigning him to an asylum is itself "child-foolishness." She is the champion of a life fully and freely lived. One of the clearest marks of the functional superiority of Edna Earle lies in her role as story-teller. Daniel is also a teller of tales, but his problem as a creative spirit is his lack of self-control. Edna Earle is the real story teller, capable of feeling deeply, involved in her story, she can still step back enough to tell the tale that uncle Daniel cannot complete. Edna Earle is Eudora Welty's comic presentation of the whole human self. She feels thinks and acts. Her dynamic, shifting, experimental combination of these qualities is humanly superior to the rigid control of anyone of the extremes. Edna Earle's "terrible story" is that privately her heart is wrung with a thousand concerns for the orderly way of life she sees dropping into oblivion before her attentive eyes. She is a victim of the battle between self and society.

Edna Earle's occasional moralizing prepares the readers for a concluding demonstration of her own charity, as uncle Daniel makes his way down to greet the visitor. "I'd like to warn you again," she says, "he may try to give you something, may think he's got something to give. If he does, do me a favour. Make out like you accept it. Tell him thank you." Eudora Welty "is an artist, and she has permitted Edna Earle to be a kind of artist too".⁶

The next important character is uncle Daniel, the supposed hero of the novel, who is not in touch with reality. The story of *The Ponder Heart* brings out the different manifestations of Daniel Ponder's love for people and the consequences of this love. Since he has an affinity for people the sight of a stranger is "meat and drink to him" (PH p.17). The stranger need not have to open his mouth for Daniel is ready to do all the talking. It does not matter to him whether the person is a man, woman or child. For instance he enjoys going to the fair, "hand in hand with any soul, man, woman or child" (PH p.22). Daniel Ponder loves the people regardless of their colour and social standing. He loves the blacks and old Big John Beech is his good friend. Similarly he is affectionate towards simple farmers as well as with important personages like Judge Tip Clanahan.

Uncle Daniel is a "man greatly beloved," "an integrity of innocence", and like his Biblical namesake a blessed talker with "touched lips." In her tale of Uncle Daniel Ponder's career in the married state, Miss Welty indicates that the world will never be able to appreciate a simple and emotional human being who is also generous. Uncle Daniel stands as an illustration for the claim that all failings may become laughable, and sometimes even good qualities. Welty sees the incongruity between our ideals and reality, and where she could have shown despair, she chooses laughter. But in disagreement with the connotations of the original layout or first illustrations, her laughter is always informed by her compassionate vision. In the conventional manner of the Southern story teller Edna Earle tells us tall story after tall story about the triumph over the powerful forces of established order of her naive and innocent hero, "who was standing behind the door when brains were being handed out," and who is indeed the fool set apart, but--until he hands out cash--a man protected and cherished by the people in Clay. The origin of *The Ponder Heart* is often a discrepancy between the expected and the actual outcome of events in Uncle Daniel's life.

In Welty's tale and Edna's reminiscence, the so called hero Uncle Daniel Ponder seems a caricature of the Southern gentleman. He wears a "red bow tie every morning, and carries a large-size Stetson in his hand--always just swept it off to somebody. He dresses fit to kill, you know, in a snow white suit ... He has the nicest, politest manners ... If he ever did a thing to be sorry for, it's more than he intended" (PH p.11). Uncle Daniel has completely respectable origins, is so generous that he gives

something away everyday, be it money, a dog, or a hotel--and often gives the same thing away more than once, to different people, is so polite that he is exceedingly shy; and is so pure that he apparently never sleeps with his wife. His merits exaggerated to the extreme, the Southern gentleman appears a gentleman--child and buffoon.

Though Uncle Daniel's hat size is enormous, his intellect is pea-sized, but his heart is overworked. In both grandpa and uncle Daniel, the ponder heart of the title is in an unhealthy condition. Grandpa's weak from disuse, uncle Daniel's from overuse. The extremity of Daniel's good heartedness is indicated by his angelic nature of giving away everything he owns. Uncle Daniel's life was uneventful till he reached his forties and then his father managed to marry him off to a local widow named Tea Cake Magee. This marriage soon fell through and grandpa by now thoroughly tired of his son's habit of giving everything away, had him committed to the asylum in Jackson. The asylum proved to be no solution, for Daniel was neither mad nor neurotic, just innocent. He escaped, replacing his father in the asylum and married the poor Bonnie Dee Peacock. Grandpa's death soon after made Daniel rich, and much more free to distribute things to people around him. Just as an angel would be among us, he is incapacitated for life on this middle plane. He is too pure, too unself-conscious, too "young" that is too ungrown. He suffers too little and his heart of gold really, does not teach us much.

In his more or less adult life, Uncle Daniel twice marries beneath him, each time a step lower on the social scale. Miss Teacake Magee is merely a Baptist. The Peacocks are poor white trash on all counts. Daniel himself insists that he has been married three times, counting the Tom Thumb wedding at the church pageant in his childhood. We gather that his first bride, Birdie Bodkin, was of a family which at the time might have claimed near equality with the Ponders. But the Bodkins too "have gone down since" (PH p.34). But to Uncle Daniel the Tom Thumb Wedding of his childhood is as real as his marriages to Teacake Magee and Bonnie Dee. Strangely, Uncle Daniel, the man of feeling trivializes feeling. Though his emotional egalitarianism appears saintly on the surface, from the human point of view, it is evidence of a person doomed to miss not only love's intensity but any real experience of self or of other. To him, Bonnie Dee is not a person separate from himself. Since it requires a self to recognize the independent selfhood of others, the selfless person is actually the totally self-involved. Uncle Daniel has no sense of what Edna Earle suffers for him.

Since uncle Daniel has no independent sense of self, he can get a feeling of selfhood, only from others. "Uncle Daniel, of the golden heart, turns out not to be the origin of light here but merely a reflector of light from others."⁷ When he cannot make people happy by giving away his

love, or a brooder and incubator, or his stories--he ceases to exist. This accounts for his obsessive giveaway at the end of the novel. Unable to tell his story, Daniel Ponder suddenly goes berserk and starts throwing out handfuls of green bills and people forget all decorum and self-respect and grab at money bills, while dogs chew a few bills and babies get to eat some. There is pell-mell and confusion in the court room. The Judge, the lawyers and an old school teacher all call out to Daniel Ponder in their attempts to stop him but it is of no avail. The infuriated Judge points out that in all his jurisprudence he had never seen more disrespectful behaviour and greater commotion at a trial. He announces the verdict but it "almost [gets] lost in the rush" (PH p.150).

Uncle Daniel is happy and excited when he gives away things. For instance children jump in delight and in a frenzy of anticipation around Daniel Ponder who gives them the change he carries with him. Neither an unhappy marriage nor a sojourn in an asylum can dampen his spirits. Nor is he depressed when his wife turns him out of his house. Rather he is "happy" to be "in the Beulah Hotel where life goes on all sides" (PH p.66). Uncle Daniel has the capacity to "enjoy himself." He likes interesting things to happen so that he can talk about them. He is most delighted when Christmas comes, "then spring, then court, and everything in the world" (PH p.66) is going on and he has a "world more to see and talk about." When he receives the awaited message from Bonnie Dee he is exuberant. He is excited and out of breath as he happily tells Edna Earle how Bonnie Dee has sent word to him to come. Edna Earle recalls "you never saw a happier mortal in your life. He came hopping up those stairs lickety-split to tell me" (PH p.73).

The greatest disaster takes place when Daniel for once assumes the role of an adult. He overcomes his own fear in order to play "Creep mouse" hoping to make Bonnie Dee stop crying in her terror. For once, he is the adult, tickling the childish Bonnie Dee. But should death be the consequence of Daniel's single grown-up act? Whatever be the reason, uncle Daniel's response to his wife's distress misfires in the worst possible way. When Bonnie Dee dies, he retreats once more into his oblivious self, never again to take a chance at human risk and growth. The fact of Bonnie Dee's death seems lost on him at her funeral, where he turns to his old refrain that Bonnie Dee is "pretty as a doll."

Uncle Daniel is articulate and can relate hilarious as well as sad stories. But unable to step back from his story to achieve some sort of objectivity, he cannot complete his act of creation. Because of his confinement at the pole of feeling, he cannot truly, represent the artist. Though childish in nature, he rouses sympathy in the hearts of the readers. He is not overburdened with a lot of brains but what is there is "Ponder."

Bonnie Dee Peacock, the seventeen year old wife of Uncle Ponder serves as a kind of negative synthesis in the novel. She is not fully human and possesses none of Uncle Daniel's overflowing feelings for others. She only knows how to change and cut hair but otherwise she does not have enough sense "to get alarmed about." Even on the day of their wedding she listens to Daniel's request to get out of the car, only when he bribes her. While uncle Daniel gives away, Bonnie Dee accumulates things balancing all that Daniel Ponder has "given away."

Bonnie Dee like Daniel, does not know how to fight. Like him, she never grows, and hence never ages. At her death, she still looks seventeen, just as on the day of her wedding. While Uncle Daniel seems inhuman because he is angelically above us, Bonnie Dee strikes us as belonging to the realms below us. Though a collector of things, she herself is repeatedly described as "a little thing." If the human being is the only animal that smiles, Bonnie Dee does not make the cut off. When she dies laughing, Edna Earle realizes that her laughter was only a physiological response, not the result of human connectedness and communication that a smile represents. "I could have shaken her for it. She'd never laughed for uncle Daniel before in her life. And even if she had, that's not the same thing as smiling; you may think it is, but I don't". (*The Ponder Heart* 141)

To put it the other way, Bonnie Dee--shrinking from uncle Daniel's tickling as such as from the thunder--is unable to balance on two planes at once. She cannot see that love can come in the form of its apparent opposite, aggression. She is incapable of the double vision that Welty sees at the basis of a risking, erring, growing human life.

Narciss' narration in the court, of the events that preceded Bonnie Dee's death makes an appeal to all the senses. She recalls that she has heard it 'rainin,' 'lightin' and 'thunderin,' 'feets pacin' over de yard. And little dog barkin at Miss Edna Earle 'cause she didn't bring him a sack of bones' (PH pp.96-97). She vividly recalls the scene from the past:

Storm come closer and closer. Closer and closer,
twell a big ball of fire come sidlin 'down de air and
hit right yonder--' ... ugh. You couldn't call it pretty.
I feels it clackin' my teeth and twangin' my bones.
Nippin' my heels. Den I couldn't no mo' hear and
couldn't no mo' see, just smell dem smokes. Ugh.
Den far away comes first little sound. It comes
louder and louder twell it turn into little black dog
whinin'--and pull me out from under de bed'. She
pointed at the dog without looking and he wagged
his tail at her.

(*The Ponder Heart* p.102)

The Ponder Heart is concerned with such serious truths as the mysterious nature of the human personality but the most predominant and distinctive quality in the novel is its exuberance, delight and vitality. Robert Giroux, an editor at Harcourt Brace in 1954, wrote to Miss Welty his enthusiastic praise for Uncle Daniel, Edna Earle as well as for Bonnie Dee. Intrepid Elsie Fleming and Miss Teacake Magee: for him they were already immortal. V.S.Pritchett, in a review of the novella says: "Edna Earle's narrative is remarkable for its headlong garrulity and also for its preposterous silences and changes of subject at the crises of the tale. She is a respectable young scold with a long tradition in English sentimental comedy. If it was a shade tricky and art of Miss Welty to make her tell the tale, she has the advantage of being able to bring a whole town to life in her throw away lines and she has the scolds of Scott, Stevenson and Katherine Mansfield behind her in the world of feminine tongue rattling. Her breathless, backhanded, first person singular has been caught, word by awful word in all its affectionate self-importance by a writer with a wonderful ear. To conclude, "the Ponder Heart is one of Miss Welty's lighter works, but there is not a mistake in it."⁸

END- NOTES

1. Robert Liddell, *A Treatise on the Novel* (London: Cox and Wyman Ltd., 1958). P.46.
2. Michael Kreyling, *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*, p. 106.
3. William Pedem, *Saturday Review*, 37:14, Jan. 16, 1954.
4. *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* : Vo1.59 No.4, December 1987, Duke University Press, p.620. Henceforth *American Literature*
5. *American Literature*, p.621.
6. Cleanth Brooks, *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks* (Jackson University of Mississippi, 1979), p.16 .
7. *American Literature*, p.615.

8. V.S.Pritchett, *Bossy Edna Earle had a Word for Everything*, The New York Times Book Review 10, Jan. 1954, p.5.

WORKS CONSULTED

PRIMARY SOURCE

Welty, Eudora Alice, *The Ponder Heart*. New York, Harcourt Brace, 1954.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Evans, Elizabeth. *Eudora Welty*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1981.

Kreyling, Michael. *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*,
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.

Rubin, Louis D.Jr. *The History of Southern Literature*,
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985.

----- *The Literary South*, **New York:**
John Wiley and sons Inc., 1979.