In which we traveled into the Mississippi Delta with teacher and author Dixon Bynum. The mood in our two vehicles was excited as we traveled south and west from Oxford. Nothing looked different out the window until we crossed the Tallahatchee River.

The bluffs of the river widened and spread out before us, creating a fifteen mile-wide basin, flat and straight. Lines of cotton stretched out in every direction. The fields of cotton looked tired and almost dead. Overhead, thousands of geese passed, traveling south. Dixon explained that this is a major migration skyway.

We drove for close to three hours. We didn't see much we'd call civilization—was this finally the real rural South? We passed through small towns with boarded-up windows and faded paint.

We arrived at a small state park parking lot. We got out of the vehicles and brought the Frisbee, just in case. It was really too windy to throw, with nothing to break the wind. We walked a simple trail onto the sandy bottom of the Mississippi River. This section was dry during this part of the year, but it was easy to imagine water rushing past us across the barren landscape. We walked a half-mile and spent a few minutes taking in America's most mythic river. Then, we turned with reluctance and headed back from the water, in search of a suitable site for the bonfire we intended to build.

The wind-dried logs caught fire easily and quickly. We spent the next hour listening to Dixon read an essay about coming back to the Delta after years of living away. The stark landscape we had driven through began to have a face and personality. We had reached the western most point of our journey.
What a Garden It Was
by Dixon Bynum

But have I now seen Death? Is this the way I must return to native dust?
—Paradise Lost

My truck tops another of the North Mississippi hills, I tell myself that I'm simply going home to do some fishing, write if I get the chance, and watch the birds, migrating through the valley this month. I've driven through the flatland, from the hill country across the foothills of the Ozarks, many times since I left, but now, for the first time in years I've got a place all to myself. My friend Rushing, long gone from the valley, has loaned me his cabin by the river for a few days. And besides, it's the beginning of spring, time to shake off winter and get outdoors.

My truck is loaded with gear, really just a couple of poles, bedroll, cooler, a little food, but snug in the backseat and the bed. It's a promising Friday—an early spring lightness in the sky, blue backed by pale yellow or sometimes silver. A few cirrus clouds, feather thin to the west, gather, streaking and exuding light. Off in the distance a red-tailed hawk launches from the bare treeline, angles its wings in the wind, and crosses the highway.

It's a good feeling, driving in the spring weather, the windows down, a crisp breeze ballooning my flannel shirt, but I can't quit thinking about winter. The last few months (especially the dark slitting days of January and February) I've been reading about my birthplace and pouring over my state topographical atlases, revisiting mentally the towns, creeks, and when I can remember them, the people I haven't seen for a while.

Whether all this late night dreaming in my study this past winter prepared me or not in thirty minutes or so, I'll be confronted again with my homeland—largest floodplain on the continent, the Lower Mississippi Valley. Represented topographically, it's a wide and winding blankness covering large parts of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, with a few slips out of four other states. The map's near uniform whiteness signifies two undeniable characteristics: near level elevation and the absence of trees. One big field curving into the body of the continent. Yet the river is there, a muscular spine of green and blue, twisting through the emptiness. Past midnight in my study, eyes blurry with reading, the valley looked a little like a snake that had swallowed something and just turned its head to leave.

More precisely, though, the valley is an embayment, first scoured by the Mississippi River between the higher elevations of the coastal plain during the Pleistocene. When the valley was created, one glacier after another expanded and then contracted over the landmass of upper North America, an icy breathing from the pole. Pregnant with meltwaters and their load of sediment, the river drowned each valley floor in a flood of soil. Swelling and shrinking with the ice sheets, oscillating across its creation, the river twisted like a god in a fit of making.

But other forces were at work, altering all that the river had shaped. The continents rose, sea levels fell, and because of this, every valley created between the glaciations was fated. Destroyed and born again, the ghosts of old valleys hover in the sky above the flatland.

Since the end of the last glaciation, things have been comparatively calm. The boreal spruce and pine which had pushed ahead of the glaciers withdrew, and the bottomland hardwoods settled in: gum, cypress, and oak mainly, thick with canebrakes, mazes of swamps, innumerable brown lakes and slow rivers, a forest land rich in soil and snakes. Occasionally, a gloriously blue and brief prairie would open itself to the sky. Every few years, the river crawled out of its banks to replenish its garden, pruning or planting, or drowning all in alluvial soil—rebuiding the lowland again. Already, when you stand on the plain today, you have climbed atop a hundred valleys.

Over all this, the river and the walled low world it created, is the Mississippi Flyway, one of the major waterfowl migration routes in the Americas. Older than our valley perhaps, it braids over five thousand miles of avian highway, fanning out eventually into South America, stretching even to the Arctic. Over the river's bottomland, it becomes a
loose funnel of migration patterns with countless branches and elevations. Winter
mornings in the valley, you can wake up to a far-flung visitor, gracefully wading in the
merest spot of water, a migrant comfortable as a resident. On early spring days like today,
it's easy to look up and lose thought over hawks or herons or small bright songbirds, a
patch of wing-color glinting in the sun, making landless flights over the Gulf of Mexico.
Marking the coast and entering the valley must be a sort of deliriance. Descending
into the bottomland, resting and feeding in the riverflats, the islands, the oxbows,
dabbling in fresh water once again, they return.

I'm on Highway 32 and only a few miles from the Yazoo Bluffs, the eastern rim of the
bowl that contains the floodplain. Mantled with loess soil, silky and yellow, these low hills
hardly deserve the name escarpment. Yet something happens here; some quiet drama
always unfolds when the final hill is crested. Ahead: the valley, stretching out to the
Mississippi and beyond, narrowing north back toward the river, unrolling southward to the
Gulf. Maybe it's that small change in elevation—only a hundred feet or so from the
highest bluff—which produces such a strange bodily sensation those first moments, those
seem surreal first miles down in the flatland. It happens the same way from almost any direction
you approach. The only feeling that compares with it is being submerged in water. You are
enveloped. Immersed. Some thick indefinable presence washes over you, and yet there
is a calm, hanging stillness of it. Whatever it is, you know it was there before you, unseen
as atmosphere, and you sink under it, accepted, like an insect losing surface tension,
dropping beneath the skin of a tranquil lake. The horizon spreads itself. Things move
slowly. Prostrate, the fields extend, running out to a windbreak and the next open and
endless field, which reflects in its way the long blue stream of sky. A vulture soars, or
maybe two, ritually encircling the dead. It is no different today.

Springtime awakens the valley. Some of the fields are already turned; others still lie
undisturbed for the season. I scan the rows for the thin green shoots of this year's crops
breaking through the ground. Peering at the bare fields, the silent earth, is itself a strange
sensation: you know that soon the earth and air
will warm and the ground will be full.
The crops will roar and ripen.

Today, the creeks are brimming with fresh rain, a brown whirl with white foam, cans,
and a few boards. The woodlots and windbreaks are just returning to leaf, covered in a
haze several shades of green. In the odd corners of fields, the remnants of the valley
forest, those low unyielding swampy places, quietly struggle into season again. I think
I see the vermilion bloom of the red maple and the new cypress leaves, like pale lime
fern fronds, despite the distance.

There are broken branches in the crowns of most oaks, hickories, gums—evidence
of an ice storm that came sweeping across the valley six or seven years ago. Usual
occurrences during late winters and early springs here, they usually strike the same areas
only once in twenty or thirty years. Most recently, what started as a typical winter
rainstorm ended with four inches of ice encasing the landscape overnight. The cracking
limbs echoed like artillery; power lines snapped from the weight. The land was locked
down, some places without power for three or four weeks. But enough time has passed,
and some of the most twisted and broken trees are healing now, hiding their scars with
another spring. Today, it seems as if the promise of renewal is everywhere.

Then this thought, one which has grazed me all winter: Who would want to come
here? Much less return.

This is, after all, the Delta. It is for most an infamous place, known mainly through
headlines or news stories. Illiteracy, poverty, sub-standard public health and education—
we lead the nation perennially in these categories. Our staple crops you could say. The
boon of our rich fields. I may have missed the worst of my region's sins, too young to
remember or born too late to know, but the shadows fade slowly. When I meet people
and say I am from the Delta, I can only guess at what materializes in their minds. Even in
my own head, the conjured images of this land's history are frightening: the rain of
DDT over row houses; a sewage canal at the edge of town used for drinking water; the
chain gangs of Angola or Parchman Penitentiary; the heatless winter room of the
sharecropper's shack; the strained and grisly smile of the field worker. The lynching.

Yet things were bad from the beginning here, it seems, the Delta's reputation accruing
from a long history of hazards. Even though some of the first promotional tracts
presented the Delta as an Eden, other reporters were more honest. They saw Death
nearby. When the first settlers entered the valley, they were greeted by yellow jack, swamp
fever, constant floods, or just the threat of one. They saw houses broken loose from their
foundations, floating south toward the Gulf; poisonous snakes with heads the size of a
farmer's fist; panthers materialize from the swamp. Occasionally an alligator, when least
expected. And always, incessantly, the mosquito.

There was a time when I did not know these facts, that there were things to fear out
in the fields. Even after I left, as many have, I was unsure of the reason or force which
drove me from there. Now, almost fifteen years later, I still don't know. The motive
wasn't simply college, and in many ways the choice wasn't individual. At eighteen, we
all had been urged to leave at one time, by family and friends who couldn't or those who
were leaving too. Young with an education, we would be stupid not to, we were told. W
e were the lucky ones. Upon leaving, most of my class hoped we would never be back
at least not to live. The Delta, we agreed, was a good place to be from.

I was in such a hurry when I left that I forgot to solidify such reasons, to question
myself, and it seems now that I'm even forgetting the land from which I came, needing
books and maps to refresh my memory.

All of my friends are gone now. Some escaped to the gothams of the East, some to
the new metropolitan cities of the South. When they returned to Mississippi for a visit,
they appeared as if from the future. More often though, the mountains of the West lured
them away. The phone calls or letters from Colorado, Montana, Utah came sporadically.
At first, my friends went to the Rockies or farther wanted news of home, but later
conversations would always veer from that dangerous ground. The magnificence of
nature out West would dominate our talks then: the sheer inhuman mountains clean
of everything that was the valley.

My family left as well, slowly scattering out of the flatland. My father retreated to
Mississippi Delta | 149

Cornbread & Sushi.
the hills, my sister to Memphis, now a modern city with its suburbs gleaming into the countryside. Innumerable cousins, aunts, and uncles have absented. Only Newton Franklin, my father’s older brother, remains, and he is eighty-two this year. He still works the family land, a couple of hundred acres in the Arkansas bottomland, and every morning his boot tracks in dew spell out a constant refusal to depart. There are many other men and women like him in the Delta; it is a county of old people clutching the place in which they have spent their lives, their sons and daughters and grandchildren vanished from them. They sit on porches and watch their world decline around them, no heirs to lifetimes of knowledge on the land.

In the past few years I have come back only for funerals, sad reunions in dowdy church basements. For many of us they are the only reason to return. The most recent was just a year ago. Sipping punch in a cinder-blocked rec room, we perched awkwardly in cold gray folding chairs. While I scanned the crowd of old faces and the few younger ones here for the afternoon, my father whispered to me, in a tone somber yet wry, that people leave the Delta any way they can.

College for me was not the escape I’d anticipated, however. It took a few years but soon I discovered that my childhood had quietly passed in a place with many different names. The South’s South. The Most Southern Place on Earth. The Cotton Kingdom. America’s Ethiopia. The Nations’ #1 Economic Problem. The Valley of Death. I was overwhelmed by how much had been written about the Delta. It seems that every professor has a theory, every politician an initiative, every economist a plan. People damn it outright and others search desperately for what will save it. Researchers visit. So many official reports and commissions and symposia. A flood of words to control or commodify one small place in the world. I have become wary of these, like so many flags pinned to a map, or more accurately, like the banners of the conquistadors, flapping a little in the middle of a wilderness.

I would like to leave these theories behind for a while; there are many ideas I’d like to forget. I wish I could turn my back and enter the valley, wild with canebrakes and cypress and brown, fecund rivers. I wish I could hear the scream of a panther, the howl of a red wolf, the distant trundling of a bear in cypress and brown, fecund rivers. I could be any place, for I like to think I am in some way one of those, but the land itself. Or rather what we have made of it. Fear is not the precise word, not exact at all, yet I’m sure of a proper replacement. Maybe my long absence has changed everything; the memories of my twenty years here don’t come back easily. Maybe what I feel means I’m no longer a native. I do know this place is different now, and I am different. At least
I'll have time this weekend not to know the answers but to ask the questions.

Rushing's house isn't far away. I stayed there years ago. It sits on long steel legs because it's inside the levee, on that strip of land still given to the Mississippi River. No one has lived there for three years since Rushing moved away to Colorado. He can't unload it, no interested buyers. The water works, he said on the phone, but there's no furniture on either floor. Dead insects in the sink and bathtub are a sure thing and possibly a cottonmouth curled up in the bottom floor. A broom works best, he told me, but I'll probably just stay upstairs.

The last turn—onto the road which will take me to the other side of the levee. A straight road, as most of the roads in the Delta are, pocked with potholes filled with rainwater. A few shotgun shacks on the right, porches or sides askew, tilt toward the earth with groundrot. Trailers too, quietly rusting. A field full of used tires.

I stop the truck at the top of the levee. Last light. A loose group of blackbirds cascades in the sky, finally settling in a leafless tree. They scatter and converge again, heading toward the river. Above them, in the deep, fading colors of the sunset, formations of geese wedge their way through the coming night, assured by a force that I cannot know. I'll sleep tonight like them, once more in the valley, huddling close to the river.

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Most of the homes we've passed on our drive through the Delta look abandoned. What happened to the people living in those homes?

DB: It's a typical sharecropper's shack. Most of them are abandoned now. Small farmers found success in the Delta eighty years ago. Many farmers left in the great migration north in the 1920's and 1930's. Many more left with the increase of mechanized farming in the 1950's. Nowadays, tractors are driverless. They are controlled by GPS down each individual row. Small farming is not extinct in the South, but it is on the way out. The towns are dead now too. Stores simply can't stay open with so little business.

Why else have so many people left?

DB: There is practically no economic opportunity. Each town may have one doctor and one lawyer. There is no room to move up in that world. The Delta region has higher rates of every bad category you can imagine, from heart disease and baby death to illiteracy and tobacco consumption. There are a lot of implicit connections between these problems and the water quality, and some studies have shown direct relations to some types of cancer.

Why did you leave?

DB: I, like everyone I knew, was encouraged to leave as soon as I could from a young age. Parents here aren't naive about the possibility for opportunity in the Delta. Everyone I knew told me to leave.

Why do you keep coming back?

DB: The Delta is still my land. There is something powerful here, which I discover a little more of every time I come back. The land has no will of its own, yet bows to the will of no other.

Would you want to raise your kids in the Mississippi Delta?

DB: I definitely want my children to experience the Delta. I can't, however, in good conscience subject my son to some of the problems inherent with growing up in the Delta. I know that living near Oxford, MS, he will be statistically safer, healthier, and better educated. Maybe we will come back someday, but for now we are away from the Delta, for him.
Return to the Garden: Southern Landscape in the Literature of Eudora Welty
by Ivy Farr and Laura Vaughn

The botanical world has often been used subtly in literature to compose a setting with which the reader can associate himself or herself. Without some knowledge of native flowers, plants, trees, and grasses, the reader may find it very difficult to completely grasp the author's intentions. An author must work diligently to subtly reveal the features of his imagined landscape to the reader without overwhelming him with laborious amounts of scientific information. One of the masters of such subtlety is Eudora Welty. A gardener herself, Welty combines the cultivars that grew in her own garden with the natural landscapes and distinctive flora of the South to create a setting that would make any native Southerner feel at home. She uses her vast knowledge of the plants of the South to reveal their importance in the culture in which they are found, as well as to create precise images by comparing particular plants with seemingly unrelated objects.

To fully understand Eudora Welty’s use of the botanical in her works, one must first understand her personal relationship with plants. Her mother, Chestina Welty, first planted a garden at their home in 1925. Eudora tended the garden for many years while her mother lived and continued it even after her mother died in the 1960s. Daylilies, camellias, and roses—a few of Eudora’s favorites—filled the garden with sweet fragrances and beautiful blossoms, and Welty captured many of them with her camera. An avid photographer as well, many of her photographs aided in the recent restoration of her garden for all to see.

Eudora Welty’s house in Jackson, MS

Welty’s interest in gardening is revealed in her literature as well, for she incorporates the South’s native flowers and plants into almost all of her works. This task is by no means an effortless one. It is very difficult to be familiar with the thousands of species that may exist in one square acre of land. It would be impossible for the reader to fully grasp the entire landscape in which a writer may place his or her character. However, with some knowledge of the most common plants in an area, the reader can obtain a much fuller, richer understanding of the setting the author is trying to produce.

To make matters worse, the common names that exist in one part of the country may be completely obsolete or non-existent even in nearby regions. For example, in the mountains of North Carolina a species that locals call “ivy” is known only sixty miles away in the Piedmont of South Carolina as mountain laurel (Kalmia latifolia). If either name is used in the other setting, its meaning may be completely lost. This presents a very real problem for authors attempting to develop outdoor settings.

One means of eliminating the confusion over common names and regional differences would be to refer only to the scientific nomenclature of the plant, but excessive scientific jargon runs the risk of appearing ostentatious—a snobbish show of scientific information that the reader will neither be familiar with, nor want to know. Willa Cather once criticized a botany classmate for “call[ing] everything by its longest and most Latin name” and for being “a scholarly bore able to browbeat” [his listeners], argue them down, Latin them into a corner, and botany them into a shapeless mass.” Such a technical lashing is unnecessary and would mean instant failure to a budding author.

Welty avoids using scientific nomenclature in her works, with only a few exceptions, choosing instead to combine the worlds of classical botany and new ecology. Swift and Swift referred to classical botany as being for “identification, naming, and cataloguing” and that the sole use of classical botany in literature would produce works that “resemble field guides” instead of literary masterpieces. The “new ecology,” according to the Swifts, is “predictive in intention” and creates “complex interactions of individuals, communities, and environments.” Botanical nomenclature, familiar only to a limited audience, severely impairs the quality of such interactions. The regional name of a plant reflects the culture of its people. For example, any one of the thirty or more plants of South Carolina that contain “rattlesnake” in their common names were once used as treatments for rattlesnake bites—a particular nuisance to settlers, backwoodsmen and others in the rural South. Though few, if any, of these plants actually reversed the effects of a rattlesnake bite, the two did have an observable, though spurious, correlation: rattlesnake bites are rarely fatal, so each of the herbal remedies seemed to be successful. The uses of “rattlesnake plants” are revealed in their common names, though that name may not be used in other parts of the country.

As the Old South becomes the New, connections to the land are being lost. Younger generations are experiencing a lack of knowledge of native and cultivated plants, making it difficult to relate to the literature of their own region. Also, as time goes on, common names change. Welty recognizes both the danger and the value of referring to common plants in her works. She chooses only the most familiar and distinguishing plants for her
settings, usually in the rural South—plants that she assumes her readers will recognize and picture without needing a wealth of botanical knowledge to do so. It is essential for a reader to be familiar with these plants if he or she is to understand the environment in which Welty places her characters.

The author employs her extensive knowledge of flora in several different ways. Of these, the most fundamental is the referencing of plants in order to establish setting or background. Mentioning a specific plant name recalls a very concrete image permitting an immediate and definitive establishment of “place,” without cluttering the narrative with frivolous adjectives. In a mere five lines of The Robber Bridegroom, Welty manages to refer to a significant proportion of Southern species that would immediately orient a savvy lector:

How beautiful it was in the wild woods! Black willow, green willow, cypress, pecan, catalpa, magnolia, persimmon, peach, dogwood, wild plum, wild cherry, pomegranate, palmetto, mimosa, and tulip trees were growing on every side, golden green in the deep last days of the Summer.

For the slightly less erudite, blank upon reading this passage, a pass-over a few of these species might be helpful in evoking an image. A cypress tree (Taxodium) generally grows in swaminy areas; has sloughing, scaly bark; and is supported by a wide buttress at the base sometimes referred to as a “cypress knee.” In Delta Wedding, Welty describes these giants as standing “like towers with doors at their roots.” A persimmon (Diospyros) can be a large shrub or undersized tree with small, ovate leaves splotted with dark spots. Its yellowish-orange fruit is consumable. In the past, its wood was used in manufacturing golf clubs. The wild plum (Prunus) is a weedy shrub with white flowers, and small, red to yellow fruits which are used in pies, jams, sauces and preserves. The tree was also once used by Native Americans to treat skin abrasions.

In addition to planting species into the backdrop, Welty converts them into props. The modest reference to the “specially fine goldenrod” that Dr. Doolittle picked or, Lily, who “put a zinnia in her mouth and held it still,” highlights the supporting role of plants in the transactions that permeate the everyday life of Welty’s characters. Goldenrod (Solidago) is a small, erect, herbaceous plant easily spotted in fields and along roadsides by its narrow, lanceolate leaves and tops of small, yellow blooms. Zinnia (Zinnia) is a flowering, bushy plant originally from Mexico. Its bright, many-petaled blooms that vary in color are common in Southern gardens. According to Welty, blowing on the stem of a Zinnia produces a sound “exactly like a jaybird.”

Welty’s plants take on an even more central role when described in their various and infinite practical applications. From construction material to hair rinses, humans depend on the many plants of the natural world. In The Robber Bridegroom, Welty describes “a little house made of cedar logs all neatly put together...looking and smelling like something good to eat.” The latter portion of this citation would delight those who have smelled the warm, minty spice of a cedar, but puzzle those who have not. The evergreen cedar (Juniperus) has small, linear, prickly leaves, and bears cones and small, light blue berries. Its durable wood contains oil that resists insects and fungi making it ideal for chests, shingles, fence posts and more.

In addition to shelter, humans depend on food for sustenance. Welty ties food back to its source—not the local grocery store, but the land. A Welty character may drink blackberry wine, eat “the grapes from the muscadine vine in the radiant noon,” or “pull up the next persimmon tree by the roots” to satisfy his desire for its fruits. Blackberry wine is made from the fruits of a “blackberry bush” (Rubus sp.). This plant sticks in the mind of any Southerner unlucky enough to be caught in its thorny brambles or victim to its resident chigger population. Its vines boast white blooms, compound leaves in threes or fives, and, in the late summer, dark juicy fruits which cause any aficionado to easily forget the scratches and bites suffered for one taste. The less perilous muscadine vine (Vitis rotundifolia), is thorn-less but also good for getting tangled in. It bears a delicious, dark fruit; and its round leaves are consumed in Mediterranean traditions.

Welty’s descriptive precision is most clearly evident when she uses plants in similes and metaphors. As Welty describes with increasing specificity, her familiarity with plant characteristics becomes all-the-more imperative. For example, what would it mean to stumble over “in the ditch, like a little puff of milkweed”? Milkweed (Asclepias) stands about two to five feet tall, contains milky juice, with pink to dull purple flowers in ball-like clusters. It is speculated that these tiny flowers, at first upright, fill with rain water causing the cluster to bend or tumble over; which would explain the baffling simile. In another instance, Welty describes a vitrola standing “like a big morning glory.” It turns out that the angled, funnel-like appendage from which the music of a vitrola comes is almost identical in form to the petals of the very unique morning glory (Ipomoea) which opens in the morning to allow pollination and dies in the afternoon. The seeds have laxative properties and the plant itself can be used as a hallucinogen.

Above all, Welty’s most intricate, subtle, and occasionally perplexing use of plants is in characterization. Deciphering these clauses requires a careful reading and deeper investigation in order to build a knowledge of the plants in their social context. In Delta Wedding, Welty introduces the main character’s great-grandmother Mary Shannon by describing her portrait that hangs over the mantle: “There was a white Christmas rose from the new doorstep in her severely dressed hair.” What does the rose say about the personality of Mary Shannon? What does it say about the painter’s attitude towards Mary? Judging by her “severely dressed hair,” it could be that Mary is a very upright, aristocratic type with lots of money who only decorates her hair with the very best and most expensive. However, a white Christmas rose is not a rose at all but a more humble member of the Helloborus family. It is called a Christmas rose because it resembles a rose and grows deep into the winter, making it adept for use in Christmas arrangements and decorations. It is not a twelve-dollar floral shop splurge. Additionally, Welty says that the rose was from the “new doorstep” implying that Mary does not come from old money. In fact, the artist (Mary’s husband) had just completed building their new house himself.

What does Welty want to communicate about Mary Shannon? She goes on to relate...
that, in the portrait, Mary had been painted with “circles under her eyes” because that was the year of the yellow fever, and Mary had spent many hours nursing friends and neighbors to health. Her husband, the painter, also gave her a “defiant pose” to match her “severely dressed hair” which alludes to the bolder side of her spirit. The rose contrasts or offsets the strong side of Mary’s personality. The painter of the portrait was Mary’s husband who loved her very much and wanted her to be remembered as being strong and defiant, but also as a woman who loved and saw many die in her arms.

In chapter two of The Ponder Heart, Welty, in another subtle characterization, briefly introduces the Peacock family as the “kind of people [who] keep the mirror outside on the front porch, and go out and pick railroad lilies to bring inside the house.” For those non-native to the deep South, this description probably does not reveal much about “the kind of people” the Peacocks are. Based on their name, the “Peacocks,” and the comment about the mirror on the front porch, perhaps they are beautiful but vain. But bringing railroad lilies inside? Fortunately, three chapters later, at the funeral of one of the Peacocks, Welty thoroughly fills in the holes. The Peacock’s yard has “not a snap of grass,” just “a tire with verbena growing inside it.” They have a “tin roof that you could just imagine the chinaberrries falling on—ping!” The mother of the deceased “wore tennis shoes to her daughter’s funeral” and the decor consisted of “ferns hauled out of creek bottoms.” In this context, it becomes clear that the previously made comment about the railroad lilies serve to demote or belittle the Peacocks, who perhaps believe themselves royalty. Though, to the unscrupulous reader, bringing railroad lilies inside the house may sound like a very romantic gesture, Welty meant to imply that it is the social equivalent of putting weeds in a vase.

Welty is not the only author to utilize plants in the development of setting; however, her life as a gardener and her precision in description make her narratives an exceptional portal into the world of Southern flora. The intention of this paper was to provide a pass over of these fundamental plants and the ways in which they are used, thereby allowing the reader to understand the full potency of Eudora Welty’s works. Hopefully, by tasting the subtleties of the author’s ingenuity, the reader will be inspired to investigate the many other natural nuances present in Welty’s works and in other great works of literature.
associate with up-and-coming Southern towns and moved into the rural Delta of Mississippi. As I watched the landscape blur past my side windows, pangs of something familiar shot through my entire body and for a moment, I was fairly certain I was going to be sick.

It wasn’t long before I realized the source of my discomfort. Mississippi wasn’t actually Mississippi at all to me now. It looked like North Carolina, like eastern North Carolina, at this same time of year. I thought about all that had happened since I’d last been there in winter, and I began to realize that some images don’t leave you easily, no matter how much time passes you by. The pangs in my stomach started to fade, and, for the first time on the whole road trip, I found myself feeling at home in a place so far from my actual home. One of my fellow students remarked from the back of the car how ugly it was, how depressed he was getting as he looked out the windows, and before I could catch myself, I told him that I thought it was beautiful. And I did, I still do, looking back now and remembering. That desolate and gloomy landscape was Southern in its beauty.

When I think of the South as a concept, I cannot help but think of the landscape. It’s there in every piece I write, in every memory I have. I always start a story with, “So we were all sitting in the back of the truck down by the riverbanks/rocking on Momma’s front porch/standing in the middle of the pasture,” etc, etc. While I believe that rural Northerners and Midwesterners and maybe even rural West Coast folk (if there is such a thing) might start their stories that same way too, the landscape isn’t a character in their stories the way it is in mine or any other Southerner for that matter. You hear the land in the way we say our words, in our choice of food, in the way we laugh.

The fields were long and flat and the faraway trees were like charcoal lines against the horizon; dark and intimidating reminders of a place hundreds of miles away. The clapboard farmhouses surrounded by the only roadside trees in the landscape were dark as well. It was the middle of the day and I somehow just knew that the residents were off working somewhere tilling or planting or scouting. If I closed my eyes for a few moments and reopened them I could almost imagine myself back in eastern North Carolina. This is what ties us together, I couldn’t help but think, this is what makes us Southern, what makes me Southern. Looking back and remembering the cold and empty landscape, I am reminded of the warmth I took away from finding something of home in faraway Mississippi. This warmth I carried with me, as I walked along the edge of the mighty river, remembering home almost too vividly and letting the wind beat my face to numbness.

By the time I stood on the dirty banks of Mark Twain’s Mississippi, thinking about home and missing my high school years, I couldn’t help but feel a fading ache in my stomach from the shooting pangs I’d thought was carsickness. A landscape five hundred miles away from home made me physically hurt with memories, I thought incredulously, and then I realized it. This entire trip, I’d been trying to figure out why I, as an individual, love the South like I do. I wanted to know what makes it different from all the other places I’ve lived, California, Rome, Colorado. Suddenly I knew. It was the land. It was this view, these fields, and houses, and the people I couldn’t even see with their tractors and their dogs, and their children in school from community colleges to Ivy Leagues. Their sons born to drive tractors and drink beer to calm the nerves the weather puts in their bones. The daughters raised to be ladies and who turn out to be a hundred other things instead. But every time you look in their eyes in the aisle at Wal-Mart or in the fanciest restaurant Oxford has to offer, you see the same thing; the land. Southerners have something in their blood that takes them back to the land every time. We stood there, fourteen separate Southerners shivering and quiet, looking at the grand ole river full of awe and respect for the land that quietly surrounded us. We could not escape it and that brought us together in a way we would ever be able to deny, no matter where our futures would take us.