

Kate Lewis
West Davidson High School
Linwood, NC

Eudora Welty's Secret Sharer
NEH Workshop: July 20-25, 2008

Lesson Plan: *Why I Live at the P.O.*

This may be used as a performance piece for Theater Arts I or in an English class as part of a larger unit. I plan to use it in my beginning theatre arts class as one of the last performances pieces of the year, specifically for our English classes. I think they will be ready by then because we will have attempted improvisation, theatre games, monologues, scene study, and a poetry show. I also think that students will be familiar with some of the characters in this piece since we live in a rural farming community in North Carolina. The more we exaggerate the characterization, the more entertaining our short play will be for our students in the audience.

Part I: The following is from the NC Standard Course of Study:
(<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/>)

Theatre Arts I promotes learning the essential vocabulary and processes of theatre as well as reading, writing, and researching theatre literature, acting and technical theatre. Acting experience in this course, addressed in goal 2, includes exploring the concepts of self, body and voice work, improvisation, acting techniques, and reading and writing related to theatre study. In addition, students learn about and reflect on aspects of theatre through history and in different cultures, as well as the various forms of theatre and theatre-related media. Students have opportunities for practical application of knowledge in informal productions. This course develops creativity and spontaneity in those students wanting to explore theatre.

Strands: Perceiving, Thinking, Comprehending, Applying, Integrating, Communicating, Creating, Analyzing, Critiquing, Performing

COMPETENCY GOAL 1: The learner will write based on personal experience and heritage, imagination, literature, and history. (National Standard 1)

COMPETENCY GOAL 2: The learner will act by interacting in improvisations and assuming roles. (National Standard 2)

COMPETENCY GOAL 3: The learner will design and produce theatre by conceptualizing and realizing artistic interpretations for informal or formal productions. (National Standard 3)

COMPETENCY GOAL 4: The learner will direct through planning and presenting informal or formal productions. (National Standard 4)

Part II:

Stress with the students the importance of language and style in relation to Welty's short stories. Briefly discuss some of the stories students may have read in their English classes. Ask students to note the importance of not just *hearing* but really *listening* as

they listen to the author read her short story, “Why I Live at the P.O.” (This is available on CD, read by the author.)

Part III:

After listening to the CD, discuss the following with the class:

- What does the language of the story convey about the characters?
- What do you think the author wants us to hear? See? Feel? How do you know?
- What is the author’s possible theme/intent?
- Where does this story take place? How would you describe the setting?
- How would you describe the relationships between the family members? How is your own family like/unlike the family presented here?
- Who is the most dynamic character? Why do you think so?
- What is the significance of the characters’ names?
- If this were to be a television show or movie, list the actors you feel should play each part. Explain your decision.
- How does listening to Eudora Welty read this story affect your “vision” of the story?
- How can we stage this story for production and still remain true to the author’s intent?
- What technical difficulties do you think we might encounter as we attempt to script this piece?
- What type of music/song do you think should be playing as the lights dim before the first character steps out to speak to the audience? Why?

Part IV:

After discussion:

Give out large sheets of drawing paper to each student. Have them complete the following:

- On side one, draw your *vision* of the setting. Use as much detail as possible. You may divide it into specific scenes if you wish. (Note: This may also be done effectively while listening to the author read the story.)
- On the opposite side, draw a picture of each of the characters: Sister, Stella-Rondo, Mama, Papa-Daddy, Uncle Rondo, Shirley-T. Under each picture, list 2-3 words to describe each character. You may also use a brief quote from Welty.

Perhaps with this advance discussion of character and setting, students will find it easier to identify with the part he/she may play, not only making the connection to the characters’ motivation - but also the author’s intent.

Part V:

Begin a read-through of the following script, stopping occasionally to relate back to the questions in Part III as needed. After discussion, divide students into five groups, assign them certain pages to work with, and have them script the remainder of the story. This not only encourages a close reading of the text itself, but may also help students gain ownership of the piece and hopefully become excited about performing it for English classes. Each group can present their scripted scene and the class can work together to

edit it - if time permits. (The instructor may want to be the final editor). The teacher should still continue to stress the importance of *listening* to what Welty is saying in the story so the characters will remain true to her representation.

Suggested groupings for student scripting:

(based on the Library of America edition of *Stories, Essays, and Memoir*, 1998.

p. 61 "I asked you the instant...:"	to	p. 63 "I have nothing further to say."
p. 63 "But Mama just turned..."	to	p. 64 "Lie down my foot."
p. 65 "So he didn't do anything..	to	p. 66 " Ungrateful child! After all..."
p. 67 "Me either..."	to	p. 68 " Took her nine trips in her ..."
p. 68 "And that's the last I've ..."	to	the end of the story

Part VI: Script taken from "Why I Live at the P.O"
-Eudora Welty

Lights up on stage. Sister enters from Stage Right.

Sister: I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again. Mr. Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in China Grove, and Stella-Rondo broke us up. (*Stella-Rondo enters from Stage Left*)

Stella Rondo: Sister's one sided. Bigger on one side than the other.

Sister: (*with a menacing look to Stella Rondo*)
A deliberate, calculated falsehood.

Stella: I'm exactly twelve months to the day older than you so I should know.

Sister: (*to Stella-Rondo*) For that reason, you're spoiled. (*Back to audience*) Always had anything in the world she wanted and then she'd throw it away. Papa Daddy gave her this gorgeous Add a Pearl necklace when she was eight years old and she threw it away playing baseball when she was nine.

Stella-Rondo: Only two pearls....

Sister: So of course as soon as she got married an' moved away from home the first thing she did was separate from the photographer with the popeyes she said she trusted. Brought home this child of two.
(*Mama also enters "kitchen" from Stage Left*)

Stella: Mama said she like to made her drop dead for a second.

Mama: Here you had this marvelous blond child and never so much as wrote a word about it. I'm ashamed of you.

Sister: (to audience) But of course she wasn't.

Stella: Why, Mama, Shirley -T.'s adopted, I can prove it.

Mama: How?

Sister: Whoever Shirley T is, she is the spit image of Papa-Daddy if he'd cut off his beard, which of course he'd never do in this world.

Stella-Rondo: (angrily) Sister, you got a lot of nerve, always did have and I'll thank you to make no future reference to my adopted child whatsoever.

Sister: Very well. Very well, very well. Of course she looks like Mr. Whitaker's side too. A cross between Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy.

(Papa-Daddy enters, slowly crosses and sits at the kitchen table. The longer the cross, the better the effect.)

Stella-Rondo: Well, all I can say is she isn't.

Mama: She looks exactly like Shirley Temple to me.

Stella-Rondo: Papa-Daddy. *(No reply. He is trying to cut up the meat on plate.)*

Sister (in an aside to audience) Papa-Daddy's Mama's papa and about a million years old.

Stella-Rondo: Papa-Daddy! *(waits for a reply)* Papa-Daddy, Sister says she fails to understand why you don't cut off your beard."

Papa-Daddy: Have I heard correctly? You don't understand why I don't cut off my beard?

Sister: Papa-Daddy, of course I understand, I did not say any such of a thing, the idea!

Papa-Daddy: Hussy!

Sister: Papa-Daddy, you now I wouldn't any more want you to cut off your beard than the man in the moon. Stella-Rondo sat there and made that up while she was eating breast of chicken.

Papa-Daddy: So the postmistress, a job I got you, fails to understand why I don't cut off my beard. "Bird's nest" – is that what you call it?

Sister: Oh, Papa-Daddy, I didn't say any such of a thing, I never dreamed it was a bird's nest; I have always been grateful though this is the next to smallest P.O. in the state of Mississippi, and I do not enjoy being referred to as a *hussy* by my own grandfather.

Stella-Rondo: You did say it too. Anybody in the world could of heard you, that had ears.

(Stella Rondo smiles and exits)

Mama: *(looking at Sister)* Stop right there.

Papa-Daddy: This is the beard I started growing on the Coast when I was fifteen. I'm going out and lie in the hammock, and you can all sit here and remember my words: *(Yelling)* I'll never cut off my beard as long as I live, even one inch, and I don't appreciate it in you at all. *(He exits)*

(Uncle Rondo enters wearing one of Stella-rondo's flesh-colored kimonos)

Sister: Uncle Rondo! Where are you going?

Uncle Rondo: Sister, get out of my way, I'm poisoned.

Sister: If you're poisoned, stay away from Papa-Daddy. Keep out of the hammock. Papa-Daddy will beat you on the head if you come within forty miles of him. He thinks I said he ought to cut off his beard after he got me the P.O., and I've told him and told him and he acts like he just don't hear me. He must of gone stone deaf.

Uncle Rondo: He picked a fine day to do it then. *(He then floats out into the yard offstage and joins Papa-Daddy)*

Sister: *(to audience)* He's drunk another bottle of that prescription. Does it every single Fourth of July as sure as shooting. Then he falls over in the hammock and snores.

Noises from offstage:

Papa-Daddy yells and then is heard telling Uncle Rondo:

Sister didn't learn to read till she was eight years old and I don't see how in the world she ever gets the mail put up at the PO, much less read it all. On the other hand, Stella Rondo has a brilliant mind and was smart to get out of town.

Uncle Rondo: Please slow down the hammock. Please slow down. Please...Please...I'm dizzy as a witch.

Stella Rondo cries loudly offstage and re-enters in a rush.

Sister: What in the wide world's the matter? You mortally wounded?

Stella-Rondo: (*visibly upset*) No. I am not mortally wounded but I wish you would look out that window there and tell me what you see.

Sister: The front yard.

Stella-Rondo: Human beings?

Sister: Oh. Uncle Rondo trying to run Papa-Daddy out of the hammock.

Stella-Rondo: Don't you notice anything *different* about Uncle Rondo?

Sister: No. 'Cept he's got on some terrible looking flesh colored contraption I wouldn't be found dead in.

Stella-Rondo: You won't be found dead in it because it happens to be part of my "trousseau" and Mr. Whitaker took several photographs of me in it.

Sister: What do you expect me to do about it? Jump out the window?

Stella-Rondo: No. I simply declare that Uncle Rondo looks like a fool. It makes me sick to my stomach. What on earth could he mean by wearing part of my trousseau out in to the broad open daylight, knowing I only got home this morning after my separation and hung my negligee up on the bathroom door, just as nervous as I could be?

Sister: Well, he looks as good as he can. As good as anybody in *reason* could.