

# How Welty Doesn't Crusade

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By controlling her public persona and by firmly insisting both in interviews and in her essay, “Must a Novelist Crusade?”, that her fiction is apolitical, Eudora Welty made many critics feel what Warren French defended in 1983 and which I think is still true today: “I think that the reason why critics have scarcely known what to make of Eudora Welty’s work is that most of them, like the writers with whom they identify, can flourish only on denunciations of the very civilization that makes their trade possible” (*Thirteen Essays* 125).

It also seems to me that critics have had some difficulties to accept both the writer’s own point of view on what she herself wrote and on her own criticism. In 1955, in “Writing and Analyzing a Story” Welty wrote: “The story and its analysis are not mirror-opposites of each other. They are not reflections, either one. Criticism indeed is an art, as a story is, but only the story is to some degree a vision; there is no explanation outside fiction for what its writer is learning to do” (*Eye of the Story* 110). Furthermore, in 1980, she also wrote:

I have been told, both in approval and in accusation, that I seem to love all my characters. What I do in writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart and skin of a human being who is not myself. Whether this happens to be a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white, the primary challenge lies in making the jump itself. It is the act of a writer’s imagination that I set most high. (*Collected Stories* XI)

On the other hand, in 1972, the writer had told Linda Kuehl in an interview: “I just think of myself as writing about human beings and I happen to live in a region, as do we all, so I write about what I know —

it's the same case for any writer living anywhere. I also happen to love my particular region. If this shows, I don't mind" (*Conversations* 87).

It is clear that Eudora Welty wants to emphasize that neither her region alone nor the social or political problems of her "real" present life are the topics of her stories. And it is also evident that the writer faces her own stories as visions built not by particular political events or aims but, instead, by what she closely experienced and knew. However, just because this seemed to be a problem for critics of Welty's fiction, Warren French rightly underscored that many critics "have scarcely known what to make" of this writer's fiction since they think that the writers with whom they identify have to be politically involved; they have to crusade to flourish. And this is probably why more recent critics have done their best to involve Eudora Welty politically. Furthermore, current criticism focusing on the writer's fictional proximity to the Civil Rights movements or on race issues has been published. In addition conferences involving the theme of "Welty and Politics" in general, such as the one in Jackson in 1997, have been organized.

In 1998, Ann Waldron published an unauthorised biography of Welty where she wrote in the first chapter: "Nothing could illuminate the horror and stupidity of the segregated South more vividly than the fact that Richard Wright and Eudora Welty never met, although they were the same age, had similar interests, and lived in the same town for several years" (16).

In this biography Ann Waldron seems to suggest that Welty's resounding "no" to her own question "Must a Novelist Crusade?", denying that her fiction could be read as a starting point for a political debate, emerges just because she did not want to be involved in a crusade that was not hers. Yet, on the other hand, and now seeming to refuse her own attack on Welty, Ann Waldron also focuses on the living conditions and the poverty of black servants in *Delta Wedding*, contradicting Diana Trilling, who talked about this novel as a "narcissistic Southern fantasy" (578), and J. C. Ransom, who defined it as "one of the last novels in the tradition of the Old South" (507).

In fact, *Delta Wedding* is perhaps the fictional work where Welty most clearly manifests the strong emotion that connects her to the South. Here the reader perceives the knowledge that this region offered her from

her childhood onwards. And it was perhaps that emotion, the fact that *Delta Wedding* shows in many of its pages a true fictional lyricism, which motivated Trilling's above-quoted comment. But in my view, it is undoubtedly the inability of Trilling and of others to understand this text in all its depth that made them make this evaluation and thus describe the novel as a pure celebration of the land:

In the Delta the sunsets were reddest light. The sun went down lopsided and wide as a rose on a stem in the west, and the west was a milk-white edge, like the foam of the sea. The sky, the field, the little track, and the bayou, over and over — all that had been bright or dark was now one color. (*Delta Wedding* 4-5)

Indeed, most critics did not understand that some of the passages that we find in *Delta Wedding* are much more than a supposed celebration of the South. They did not perceive that those pages are definitely delicate moments of prose poetry.

In fact, critics have never understood that what Diana Trilling considered an “exacerbation of poeticism” at no time disturbed the necessary distance for Welty to make a serious and careful study of life and of the sense of family in general, and this, I stress, is made from an evident Southern feminine perspective. “I wanted to write a story that showed the solidity of this family and that went on on a small scale in a world of its own” (*Conversations* 50), Welty said to Charles Bunting about *Delta Wedding* in an interview in 1972. But she could have said the same about *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter* since, as Dean Flower rightly stated in 2007 in “Eudora Welty and Racism”, “[Welty's] long novel *Losing Battles* in 1970 and her short novel *The Optimist's Daughter* in 1972 went back to the same non-disruptive familiar themes that had generated *Delta Wedding*”. But neither in the past nor perhaps even today have critics been sensitive to the fact that poetic lyricism, together with deep reflections on ontological and epistemological problems, is one of the great qualities of Weltyan fiction. With a thematic multiplicity concerning predominantly female characters and voices, and an undeniable complexity of meanings on the one hand, and a vision of the Southern difference on the other, what Welty really writes about is life, human beings dominated by

their emotions and fantasies and their relationships. She writes about men and women (and above all women) as heirs of a Southern past or, then, as builders of a present that, in turn, conditions themselves and their history.

Furthermore, Eudora Welty is also the writer who in the tradition of the Southern Literary Renaissance reveals what Harold Bloom called the “anxiety of influence”. But if Welty is undoubtedly linked to the tradition of the Southern Literary Renaissance, which sees the South and its tradition as problematic, then, on the other hand, she seems to look for her originality and personalization by writing not exactly about a patriarchal South, as Faulkner did, but above all about Southern feminine characters and worlds. And these characters either reaffirm the tradition of the society to which they are linked or then question it, in an attempt to resist to what was built and attributed to them from generation to generation. This is a very peculiar “matriarchy” which in fact never existed and which only served masculine power and discourse:

The work of Eudora Welty provides us, finally, with a celebration of the traditional southern community not as a kind of pastoral fortress, a place of walls built to preserve cherished values and identities belonging to the past, but as a place of windows that must be opened on the wide and mysterious world of the future beyond. (7-8)

Although Lucinda Mackethan has written these words specifically about *Delta Wedding* in 1980, the truth is that they echo my own reading of Welty’s long fiction in general. In my opinion, the “reality” that the writer makes us understand concerns the place, the characters and the families that, although looking at their past, are not paralysed in it or by it. In fact, by rethinking and reinventing the past they open windows into the horizons of the future. And all this is done with an accumulation of meanings, worked with subtlety and harmonised with Welty’s choice of place, characters and time. As Elizabeth Evans said in 1981, and I accept it for the whole of Welty’s long fiction, Welty certainly deals with a study of life, of being and of the sense of family (See 97).

More recently, in 2005, Suzanne Marrs published a very interesting and stimulating biography of Welty where she states:

Widely considered a master of the short-story form, Welty wrote in many modes, creating the comic terror of a small-town beauty parlor, the 1807 'season of dreams' that arrived in Mississippi with Aaron Burr, the tortured interior monologue of a husband who imagines beating his wife's lover with a croquet mallet, and a ghost story of sorts in 'No Place for you, My Love'. Her novels — *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles*, *The Optimist's Daughter* — and her novellas — *The Robber Bridegroom* and *The Ponder Heart* — show a determination to experiment and to approach head-on issues of love and death, oppression and transcendence. (IX- X)

Here, Suzanne Marrs expresses how complex Welty's fiction is. But to affirm a complex and a polychromatic web of meanings in Welty's work does not necessarily imply to put aside the writer's own opinions on fiction, which, I think, very often happens today. This happens precisely to pursue a particular path in order to prove that Welty adopts (or should have adopted?) the point of view of political tracts concerning racism or race issues.

In a very clear evaluation of a possible relation between Welty's fiction and racism, Dean Flower stated: "What Welty did not expect, probably was the extent to which she would be asked to represent the South". And perhaps she did not. But this does not mean that Eudora Welty was not very much aware of segregation in the South. Her own words to William F. Buckley clarify any possible doubt: "I once did a story — I was writing a novel at the time, and when Medgar Evers was assassinated here — that night, it just pushed up to what I was doing. I thought to myself, 'I've lived here all my life. I know the kind of mind that did this'" (*Conversations* 100).

Welty's knowledge of the unfair racial situation in the South is undeniable. However, what more recent criticism wants to discuss seems to me not to be central to Welty's fiction. Indeed I do not think it involves concrete dynamics of politics addressing racism or racial issues.

"Where is the Voice Coming From?", published in 1963, has been seen as the story where Eudora Welty changed her attitude by breaking her silence on racial issues. However, it is important to understand that what she really did with this story was to go deeper towards the human self and

the human condition itself. Indeed, undoubtedly questioning racism in the South of her time and place, Welty went beyond it. As she herself explained, “Whoever the murderer [was, she knew] him: not his identity, but his coming about in [that] time and place” (*Stories* XI).

But I want to make it clear that my reading of “Where is the Voice Coming From?” does not imply that this story does not show how very close Welty was to that actual event on that night in June 1963. On the contrary, she was close and she was shocked, which unmistakably explains her emotional reaction in writing that particular story on the night of the murder. But as Welty says in *One Writer’s Beginnings*”, all that absorbed [her]” and she felt the necessity to enter “into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been more alien or repugnant to [her]” (43).

Converting reality into fiction and adopting the narrative voice of the killer, Welty finally makes the reader question how particular pressures, brought about by living in a particular place, can determine feelings, inner selves and their circumstances, making people behave well or badly without questioning themselves. And this involves all of us universally. Thus, in this story there is a complexity of emotions and feelings that constitute the murderer’s inner life and self and which he inevitably voices. And it is the questioning of this complexity that matters for Welty and not so much the events that took place that day in June in Jackson.

Analysing this story Jan Nordby Gretlund states:

The problems that preoccupy Welty in this story are and have been particular to the place she describes. They echo an era when ‘ancient rituals demarcated the separate spheres of racial life’, and they echo a time when individual black men ‘were made sacrifices to a sacred concept of white supremacy.’ But the problems of this community are finally universal in that the subject is our basic sense of right and wrong. (...) The situation speaks for itself without any crusading on the part of the author, and the story never becomes a tract of social protest. “Where is the Voice Coming From?” demonstrates how Welty, even in the thick of the racial upheavals of the 60s, managed to write fiction that is stone deaf to argument. (228)



At the very end of the story we are face to face with a perverse and pathetic man who is not aware of his perversion or pathos, simply because he is unable to understand his act as such:

Once, I run away from my home. And there was a ad for me, come to be printed in our county weekly. My mother paid for it. It was from her. It says: 'SON: You are not being hunted for anything but to find you'. That time I come on back home.

But people are dead now.

And it's so hot. Without it even being August yet.

Anyways, I seen him fall. I was evermore the one.

So I reach me down my old guitar off the nail in the wall. Cause I've got my guitar, what I've held on to from way back when, and I never dropped that, never lost or forgot it, never hocked it but to get it again, never give it away, and I set it in my chair, with nobody home but me, and I start to play, and sing a-Down. And sing a-down, down, down, down. Sing a-down, down, down, down. Down. (*Stories* 607)

From my perspective, what Welty emphasizes here is the inner nature of a human being in a specific time and place. And this is exactly what she means in "Place in Fiction" when she writes, "Place, then, has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it" (*Eye of Story* 122).

Welty's approach to feelings, to love and to death is tied to a strong sense of place, or rather, concretely to the region where she was born and in which she always lived. And to clarify my point I now quote from *One Writer's Beginnings*: "A writer cannot escape his material; that is, he cannot escape where and when he was born" (81). In her fiction, and above all in her long fiction, Welty shows that she herself doesn't escape either from where and when she was born or even from her experience as a woman in a very particular society which officially worshipped womanhood through time and through history.

In *The Robber Bridegroom*, *Delta Wedding*, *The Ponder Heart*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, Eudora Welty tells apparently simple stories about Southern events and identities, about Southern families and their own lives, as well as about Southern women,

who dominate a very well defined fictional Southern world. Being a muse of Southern Culture, reigning in a virtual matriarchy, the Southern woman of the “Old South” tacitly agreed to ignore the fact that the demands made on her, on her immaculate condition, were not shared by her companion. He frequently experienced the pleasure of miscegenation outside a kind of sanctuary nurtured by the rituals of that matriarchy which, in fact, wasn’t real. Thus, as “queen of her home” (and of the plantation) she took the “power” and the hypocrisy of that “matriarchy”, which paradoxically emerged from the subjection to an ideology which kept the man — the Master, the owner of the plantation, of the slaves and of his Ladies and “Belles” — at the top of the social pyramid. And so, the woman in the old South, grounded by fantasies that made her believe in a life she never had, contributed to the falseness and configuration of the Southern world. In fact, what women in the Old South defended and maintained from generation to generation was the honour of their place, of the Southern plantation and family and of their Master right up to the violation of that world represented by the Civil War. All this, in turn, intensified the role of this woman in the organization and management of her fantasized matriarchy. As Louise Westling underlines in *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor*, “The Southern world provided only a dishonest basis for a girl’s identity as she grew into a woman, and dishonest grounds for relations with men” (27).

My point is that Welty’s fiction, and in particular her long fiction, poses a question about the inner nature and self of the human condition. Furthermore, it also offers us flashes on and around the South. Thus, with *The Robber Bridegroom*, Welty starts a kind of macrotext, an “album” of “Southern Visions” where *Delta Wedding*, *The Ponder Heart*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist’s Daughter* also appear: an “album” through which we can also interpret and go deeper into our own lives. As Welty said about *The Robber Bridegroom* (and I take it for her long fiction in general):

The validity of [this] novel has to lie in the human motivations apparent alike in the history of a time and in the timeless fairy tale. In whatever form these emerge they speak out of

the same aspirations — to love, to conquer, to outwit and overcome the enemy, to reach the goal in view. And in the end, to find out what we all wish, to find out exactly who we are and who the other fellow is, and what we are doing here all together. (*Eye of Story* 311)

Considering Welty's long fiction as a whole, the reader understands the presence of women who are either enslaved by their fantasies, as in *The Robber Bridegroom*, or fight to put an end to them, as in *Delta Wedding*, *The Ponder Heart* and *Losing Battles*, or try out the fairy tale itself, as in *The Optimist's Daughter*. As Ben Byrne aptly stated, "Where the earlier novel is a magical story of starting out in life, *The Optimist's Daughter* is fairy tale tried out" (*Critical Essays* 253).

By telling us a real "Southern fairy tale", Welty's "album" revisits the history of the Southern frontier, as happens in *The Robber Bridegroom*. But questioning fantasies in Rosamond and exploring the desire to be both robber and gentleman in Jamie Lockhart, Welty reveals universal circumstances, which involve all of us: the way fantasies and dreams shape us all — women and/or men — as well as determine our inner selves and lives. In addition, this kind of album also celebrates and recovers, through different visions, a past grounded in myths. But it also offers visions in which the past is set against the reality of a present which, in turn, brings and imposes changes, as in *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter*; or simply, as in *The Ponder Heart*, it gives us a vision where the writer presents hilarious dialogues and descriptions emerging from the characters' or even from the narrator's mouth, making us wonder who in Edna Earle's family is sane.

But with her eyes on the future, Welty very often transforms an actual event or a particular circumstance into an imagined one. She is a Southern writer whose long fiction also gives place to a kind of implied textual meaning where the South and its identity glow, an implied meaning which clearly allows us to perceive the South. By problematizing the Southern past and present and making her region the starting point for a reflection on life and feelings, the writer goes far beyond the evocation of a place and a historical time. And thus once again I quote Welty's own words about *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*:

In the case of *Delta Wedding* I chose the twenties — when I was more the age of my little girl, which was why I thought best to have a child in it. But in writing about the Delta, I had to pick a year — and this was quite hard to — in which all the men could be home and uninvolved. It couldn't be a year when there was a flood in the Delta because those were the times before the flood control. It had to be a year that would leave my characters all free to have a family story. It meant looking in the almanac — in fact, I did — to find a year that was uneventful and that would allow me to concentrate on the people without any undue outside influences; I wanted to write a story that showed the solidity of this family and the life that went on on a small scale in a world of its own. (...) In the case of *Losing Battles* I wanted to get a year in which I could show people at the rock bottom of their whole lives, which meant the Depression. (...) I wanted a clear stage to bring on this family, to show them when they had really no props to their lives, had only themselves, plus an indomitable will to live even with losing battles (...). I wanted to take away everything and show them naked as human beings. So that fixed the time and place. (*Conversations* 49-50)

In this interview Welty analyses her compositional choices both for *Delta Wedding* and for *Losing Battles* and we understand that she chose time and place according to what she wanted to focus on, so that she could make serious and careful studies of life and of the sense of a family facing easy times or otherwise facing troubles and disasters.

In *Delta Wedding* we are face to face with Laura's inner development, which takes place in Shellmound — a huge plantation suspended in time, in the Southern Delta — where traditionally feminine and Southern values inform and dominate the Fairchild "matriarchy". But in *Losing Battles*, Welty offers us a different perspective. We meet a poor family, the Beecham/Renfros, preparing a large family reunion to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of the matriarch, Granny Vauhn. However, the two novels have something in common. Both *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles* underline and question private relationships, predominantly through women's stories and rites of domesticity, on the one hand and, on

the other, they raise the question of individual identity, here posed by Miss Julia Mortimer: "Is this Heaven, where you lie wide open to the mercies of others who think they know better than you do what's best — what's true and what isn't? Contradictors, interferers and prevaricators — are those angels?" (*Losing Battles* 299).

In *The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual*, Ann Romines expresses her point of view about the presence of women in *Delta Wedding* by stating the following: "Through all these women, *Delta Wedding* expresses the cost, as well as the beauties and the strengths, of domestic culture. Ellen, who is the mistress of Shellmound and thus deeply implicated in its house keeping comprehends this most fully" (230).

Indeed, if Ellen Fairchild embodies and symbolises the stability of the past plantation and the necessary fertility to maintain it, Granny Vauhn represents the same on her side but now within the centre of a poor family of agrarians dominated by women. However, this family does not seem able to win battles since its members do not understand that they also have to accept the education and the modern ways which Julia Mortimer represents.

In fact, the dominant theme in Welty's long fiction highlights a kind of learning process which is predominantly presented from (Southern) women's point of view. It is a learning process involving the discovery that the fantasies cherished by women and men and attached to particular places can make people retreat forever into the prison of their past and thus betray both memory and the present forever. But, in Welty's vision, this process never denies the importance of the past for the present. This is at the center of *The Optimist Daughter* and is illustrated by the basic difference between two women (Laurel and Fay) and their attitudes toward the past, as made explicit in the breadboard incident:

'I don't know what you're making such a big fuss over. What do you see in that thing?' asked Fay. 'The whole story, Fay. The whole solid past', said Laurel. 'Whose story? Whose past? Not mine', said Fay. 'The past isn't a thing to me. I belong to the future, didn't you know that?' (...) 'I know you aren't anything to the past', [Laurel] said. 'You can't do anything to it now'. And neither am I; and neither can I, she thought, although it has been everything and done everything to me,

everything for me. The past is no more open to help or hurt than was Father in his coffin. The past is like him, impervious, and can never be awakened. It is memory that is the somnambulist. (*The Optimist's Daughter* 206-207)

Laurel finally discovers that what Fay can't understand is the importance of memory to recover the past and its influence on the present. For Welty, as she herself pointed out in "Some Notes on Time in Fiction", "Remembering is so basic and vital a part of staying alive that it takes on the strength of an instinct of survival" (*Eye of Story* 171). And this is what Laura also learns through her experience in Shellmound:

When people were at Shellmound it was as if they had never been anywhere else (...). She tried to see her father coming home from the office, first his body hidden by leaves, then his face hidden behind his paper. If she could not think of that, she was doomed; and she was doomed, for the memory was only a flicker, gone now. (*Delta Wedding* 134)

With her long fiction Eudora Welty seems to have created a 'picture album' where she paints the Southern identity brushstroke by brushstroke. And in these polychromic visions she also portrays the end of its social imagery: the imagined fantasy of Southern superiority and aristocratic singularity which was defeated in the past, in 1865, and still goes on being defeated in the present by the announcement of other worlds and other histories. And this is what also happens to many of us and to the private and particular worlds in which we live. Indeed, and I quote Vande Kieft:

the best part of the meaning we perceive in Eudora Welty's or any other fiction, I think, is what spills over from the story into our lives, enabling us to make connections — not only of our private experience with those of fiction, but the connection between literature, art and music; of our bonding, both within and beyond the limits to time and place, with the whole human race. (*Critical Essays* 299)

But Welty is also the writer who makes us rethink a national Adamic myth, embodied by masculine heroes such as Huck Finn. If Twain's South is the one that emerges from the celebration of America and from the dream which the writer contemplates and celebrates with nostalgia, Welty's South

arises from the recovery and assimilation of the region's difference and from the confluence of its past and present. By announcing the South to the nation in this way, Welty finds her place in the U.S. literary canon.

From a feminine perspective and voice, Eudora Welty brings us visions associated to themes concerning a pastoral but also aggressive past (as in *The Robber Bridegroom*), fertility, women's role, domesticity and Southern womanhood and human relationships within the family (as in *Delta Wedding*, *The Ponder Heart*, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter*). The writer thus recreates and reorganizes the Southern history because, as Welty wrote in "Place in Fiction", "The moment the place in which the novel happens is accepted as true, through it will begin to glow, in a kind of recognizable glory, the feeling and thought that inhabited the author's head and animated the whole of his work". (*Eye of Story* 121) Undoubtedly, Welty makes use of the South, of what is there, whether right or wrong, fair or unfair, and of dominantly feminine Southern worlds to find answers to her existential doubts in order to take us up to the point where, by opening curtains, we question our own choices and decisions.

There is no better way of emphasizing my reading of how Welty doesn't crusade than by quoting Jan Nordby Gretlund's words: "[Welty's] view of mankind is not obscured by any crusading for a cause, nor has she become blinded by nostalgia and a longing for the past" (224).

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**ABSTRACT**

Eudora Welty firmly insists both in interviews and in her essay “Must the Novelist Crusade?” that her fiction is apolitical. As the writer states in *One Writer’s Beginnings*, her stories are visions built not by particular political events or aims but, instead, by what she closely experienced and knew. With a thematic multiplicity concerning predominantly female characters and voices, and an undeniable complexity of meanings on the one hand, and a vision of the Southern difference on the other, what Welty really writes about is life, about human beings dominated by their emotions, their fantasies and their relationships. She writes about men and women (and above all women) as heirs of a Southern past or builders of a present that, in turn, conditions themselves and their history. And although the short story “Where is the Voice Coming From?”, published in 1963, has been seen as the fictional text where Eudora Welty changed her attitude by breaking her silence on racial issues, it is important to understand that what she really did with it was to go deeper towards the human self and the human condition itself.

**KEYWORDS**

Welty; South; Literature and Politics; Race.

**RESUMO**

Tanto em entrevistas como no seu ensaio “Must the Novelist Crusade?”, Eudora Welty sulinha que a sua escrita é apolítica. Como a escritora declara em *One Writer’s Beginnings*, as suas histórias são visões baseadas não em eventos políticos mas, pelo contrário, naquilo que ela experienciava e conhecia de perto. Com uma multiplicidade temática sobretudo relacionada com personagens e vozes femininas, acrescida de uma inegável complexidade de sentidos, por um lado, e uma visão da diferença sulista, por outro, Welty escreve essencialmente sobre a vida, sobre seres humanos dominados pelas suas emoções, fantasias e relacionamentos. Escreve

sobre homens e mulheres (em particular mulheres) herdeiros do passado sulista e construtores de um presente que, por seu lado, os condiciona a si mesmos e à sua história. E embora o conto “Where is the Voice Coming From?”, publicado em 1963, tenha sido visto como o texto ficcional onde Eudora Welty mudou de atitude e quebrou o silêncio sobre as questões raciais, é importante perceber que ela apenas aprofundou a sua abordagem do ser humano e da própria condição humana.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Welty; Sul; Literatura e Política; Raça.

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