
Umbrellas and Bottles

Teaching Welty's Mythology in the Hong Kong Classroom

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One of the best messages I get through the reading of *The Robber Bridegroom* is this: Love can override truths.

—**Nicola**

Critics have consistently given credit to Eudora Welty's writing for having voiced a particularly regional sensibility: that of the American South. Far too few, however, have acknowledged her work as a gift to the world or to readers from outside the United States. As my students and I learned while reading Welty in Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, her core literary values—the imagination at play, creative inspiration, and moral independence—can correlate to local predicaments facing readers in vastly different times and places. My experience teaching Eudora Welty in Hong Kong may also offer some indication of how “real world implications” impact the teaching of literature in classrooms well beyond the historical context of the American civil rights movement Welty wrote within, and as applicable to a variety of contexts and issues important to the present and future, ranging from transgender access to bathrooms to #BlackLivesMatter to the importance of sustaining the environment.

Another time, another place. The test of Welty's continued pertinacity, my students and I discovered, was not only her established value as a writer rooted exclusively in the American literary canon, but her timeliness and relevance beyond it. Welty's stories became suddenly applicable, in ways we had not anticipated, to issues and themes erupting in Hong Kong through the

autumn of 2014. We read Welty's works against the backdrop of massive student involvement in the Hong Kong "Umbrella Movement" as it was called in the popular press locally and around the world. Student groups were key stakeholders in the 2014 protests designed to push the Hong Kong government to adhere to the pledged timeline of Article 45 in the Basic Law (香港基本法第四十五條). Jointly ratified by the People's Republic and the ex-ruler of colonial Hong Kong, Great Britain, Article 45 has been subject to controversial interpretation on all sides. For many, although certainly not all, of my students, Article 45 guaranteed universal suffrage to Hong Kong citizens by 2017. The Hong Kong government's apparent refusal to meet this established timeline sparked citywide protests, including a coordinated call to boycott all university classes commencing September 26, 2014. A degree of uncertainty arose across the days that followed as to how, or if, my teaching colleagues and I should continue teaching. I chose to honor all sides of the debate by not canceling the class. Nor did I penalize those students who chose to support the protest. (I required them, instead, to complete and submit assignments remotely.)

By the end of September 2014, there was palpable tension among those students, many holding conflicting viewpoints, who had continued to attend class. I made an attempt to diffuse it by seeking to offer Welty's myth-making as a practical example of how a good writer enjoins dialogue across different worldviews. Our classroom community, I warned, was a microcosm of the wider Hong Kong society: if we fail to communicate respectfully within these walls, we must surely fail to do so outside them. And although I did not require it, such a pressing context obviously permitted that interested students could reframe Welty's works in close proximity to what was happening on the streets. How can and should foreign (Anglophone) literature continue to matter to Chinese students at such challenging times? What is the impact of a foreign literature, if any, apart from the immediacy of the context in which it is read?

For the great majority of my students—mostly Hong Kong women, coming from recently middle- or lower-middle income backgrounds—"worlding" Welty had initially involved something far simpler. At the start of term, Welty's myth-making had seemed to offer merely the somewhat vague critique of an abstract realism, loosely conceived by us as "things as they stand in the world." Upon conclusion of the protests and the abandonment of the student boycott on November 19, 2014, some nine weeks later, my students' interpretation of Welty's stories had come to mean something completely different, mindful of a reality that had become much harder and more truthful, potentially threatening, and all too suddenly "real." Given new life during a time of profound

existential crisis for Hong Kong society, Welty's stories had been completely transformed. In what follows, I focus briefly upon my students' "realization" of the mythical properties of everyday objects, which Welty stories demonstrate, as well as upon their search for consensus in the classroom, a search that builds community rather than divides it.

To the best of my knowledge, Eudora Welty has not been taught in Hong Kong before; if so, but sparingly, as a very small part of a survey course on American literary modernism or genre (i.e., the short story). Our seminar focused exclusively on five short stories, *The Robber Bridegroom*, and selected photographs taken during Welty's brief time at the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The course's primary semester-long teaching and learning activity (TLA) required students to build toward a "Hong Kong Mythology" created, storyboarded, and eventually filmed in groups. In addition to the storyboard, interim assessments contributing toward the final group video included a "Hong Kong Other" image-reading exercise (where students applied what I understand to be Welty's method as a photographer; i.e., using images to recover and interpret the gazes and perspectives of human subjects not widely understood or appreciated by the mainstream society); as well as a group-authored exegesis, reflecting upon which TLA outcomes had succeeded and which remained unachieved to date. The roll-out of these formative elements for the TLA, with interim assessments uploaded via our university's online student learning system and concluding with a final-project exhibition on the final day of class, provided the assessment framework. It was my job to provide the overall approach and enough substantive content so that my students could successfully address (and eventually meet) the course's stated learning outcomes.

Initially, I had offered a fairly straightforward and thematic approach to Welty's use of myth as adapted to her southern (American) context. What did her myth-making amount to in that context, and what literary purposes did it serve? Taking Welty's "Livvie" as our first example, my students and I observed how the story elevates everyday predicaments faced by African American Mississippians allusively, via references to classical (Greek) mythology and visual art. Rewriting the myth of Persephone to bracket the patriarchal power wielded by the characters Solomon and Cash, Welty empowers Livvie as an agent whose story is transformed from one of patriarchal containment to matriarchal sovereignty. Jamie Lockhart, in *The Robber Bridegroom*, was another popular example of how Welty's mythologizing transforms mere characterization into a catalyzing plot dynamic. Unlocking his heart's desires, Jamie's character transgresses existing boundaries in language and meaning, as well as what one "ought" or should do in any given situation.

Whether responding to Livvie's becoming or to Jamie's subversive narrative potential, my students' imaginations were activated, in the form of what Julia Eichelberger describes as "authorizing or celebrating their desires for more than is possible" in the world (Correspondence). By inviting my students to search for creative ways to apply Welty's myth-making to their own immediate context, the "Hong Kong Mythology" project also sought to transcend the limits of that context by transforming—localizing—a "foreign" literature as it was conventionally defined. (With an attempt to make Hong Kong's ethnic minorities more visible to my students, I had offered, for example, some basic statistics around life opportunities for African Americans in the rural South prior to 1960 and a "case study" of the career and activism of Medgar Evers.) Perhaps not surprisingly, my students began to look away from Welty's pages, searching for mythical potentials, invisible subjects, and analogies found in the Hong Kong world around them. They began to scout for the hidden immanence, as-yet-undiscovered, found in everyday objects. As they increasingly bought into the idea of unearthing the mythical potential hidden in everyday Hong Kong life, my students responded very positively to Welty's modeling of how an authentic locale—the commitment to local language, idiom, and place—is transformed by the energies of the universal meaning. Local contexts can also illustrate values anyone, anywhere, can understand and connect to. Using such a localized lens, instructors anywhere in the world can teach Welty's myths much as I did, by inviting their students to search for hidden potentials and analogies in their own immediate vicinity and as far from the constraints and "reality" of the American South as the imagination can allow.

After late September, it also appeared inevitable that the Umbrella Movement would intrude upon our dialogue and, at times, transform it. The TLA assessment sequence was already in process; some student groups, both present in class and in absentia, accordingly recalibrated their "Hong Kong Mythologies" data findings. Even as they occupied the protest sites, many of my students found ready material at hand as they prepared their storyboards. Formerly inert, everyday objects became illuminated by the collective mythological imagination. They began to realize the diverse signifying properties—symbolic, ideological, iconic—of such objects; and, seeking to apply Welty's method, my students began to observe how portable and humanizing mythical values can be across diverse contexts and languages. As in the epigram to this essay, the power of Welty's myths for many of my students lay in the displacement of hard truths in favor of the imagining of a happier future.

Inspired by E. M. Forster's short stories, Welty's mythical quietism held solid and magical realms equally sacred. Welty embeds the transcendent in

the everyday without poisoning the capacity of either, as we saw in some of Welty's photographs. We looked, for example, at "Sunday Morning," Welty's fetching image of an African American girl in her Sunday best, holding a broad umbrella against the sun (fig. 1). The photograph is famous for the play of oppositions that the black-and-white medium only accentuates—dark and light together enjoin aspects of vulnerability and protection that the umbrella gathers to itself.

The diverse uses of the umbrella as a mythically realized object became all too clear once the Umbrella Movement gathered force. Early on, student protestors had used the umbrella only functionally, shielding themselves from the blows of police batons and pepper spray. As the occupy zones took on a more permanent



Figure 1. Welty, *Sunday Morning*. Ca. 1935. Copyright © 1935 Eudora Welty, LLC.



Figure 2. Cat and umbrella. Artwork by shino. (<http://www.loftwork.com/portfolios/shino/archive/392523>).



Figure 4. Welty, *Bottle Trees*. Copyright © 1941 Eudora Welty, LLC.



Figure 5. The Water Bottle Umbrella. Photograph by Janet Lau.

Cash, the intended, must break the bottles on the tree before he can enter to incite Livvie's desire. My students reported that the Umbrella Movement had inspired a bottle tree, too, fashioned from the empty bottles of drinking water that had been used, on more turbulent nights, to wash pepper spray and tear gas from protesters' eyes (fig. 5).

As the protests intensified, however, our own discussion grew fractious as the world outside forced its way into our learning sanctuary. Sensibly, given the circumstances, my students began to debate the value of aesthetics versus politics. Always respectful, they began to call my own pedagogy to account, arguing that myths should depict not only foreign (English-language) literary practices but also validate claims defined by the Hong Kong context uniquely. In requesting the extension of a paper deadline, Nicola wrote: "It is very nice of Welty and Christie to voice out [on behalf of] the powerless, but [. . .] the powerless take the responsibility to fight for themselves as well" (fig. 6).

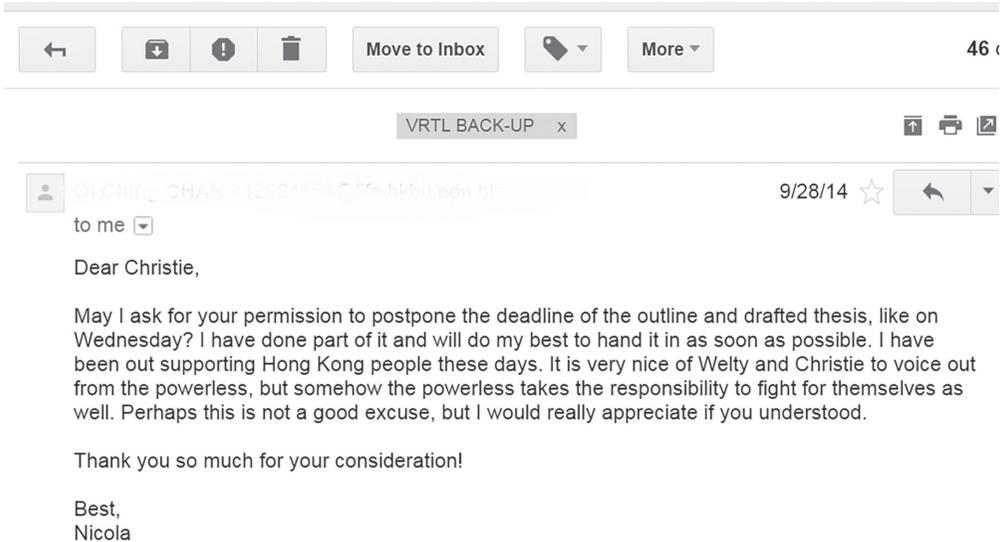


Figure 6. E-mail from Nicola.

Another student, Johnson, also informed me that he would be stepping away from class (fig. 7). In his letter to me and other professors, he made a thoughtful, if firm, critique of academic study in the context of "civil disobedience" and the "great stories and myths of a city."

As we progressed through the semester-long "Hong Kong Mythology" project, most students eventually came to understand the subtlety and real-world

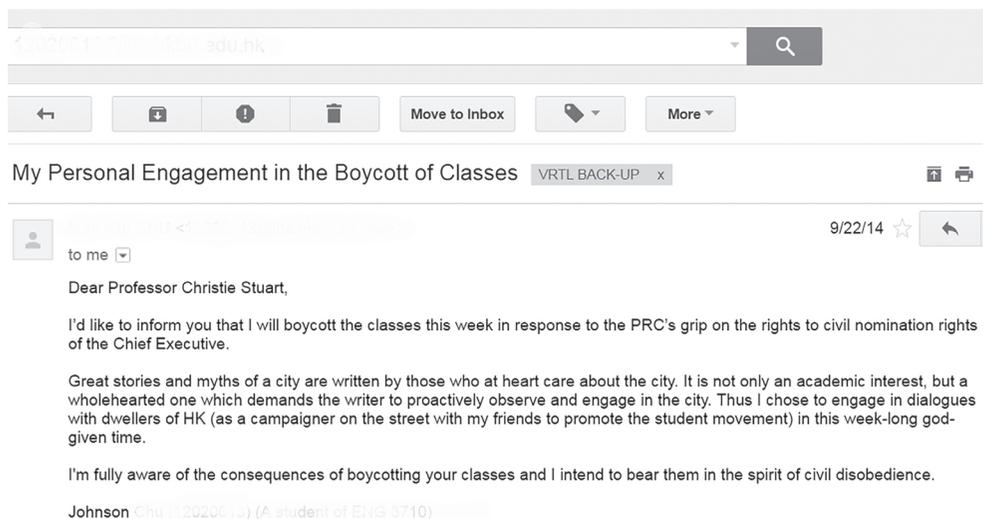


Figure 7. Letter from Johnson.

impact of Welty's myth-making, including its utility when making a present critique of reality, during what Johnson had aptly called Hong Kong's "god-given time." The photo-capture, storyboarding, and pre-filming elements of the TLA were satisfactorily completed by all student groups, more or less on time, and afforded sufficient scope linking Welty's own textual practice to the Hong Kong situation.

One group's storyboard comes instantly to mind. It begins in separation and ends aspirationally, with pro-establishment (blue ribbon) and pro-occupy (yellow ribbon) characters reaching consensus—the love of their home, a free and democratic Hong Kong—in a shared landscape of local recognition (fig. 8).

These concluding panels illustrate beautifully an outcome for teaching Eudora Welty in Hong Kong none of us could have predicted, and one, I suspect, which would have pleased the writer herself. As the semester drew to a close, my students began to internalize the power of myth to critique "things as they stand" in their society. Having observed how myth transforms everyday objects, they began, rightly, to regard *themselves* as mythical objects, each unique, world-forming, and alive to Hong Kong's unfolding story.

As the Umbrella Movement passed into history, my students struggled to accept that their protest would ultimately be defined by the lack of a political outcome. Still, for my part, I argued that it was precisely at such moments (for some, despairing) that the search for narrative outlets, distinct from



Figure 8. Blue-yellow ribbon harmony. Created by Anna, Karen, and Janet (Group 5).

history, becomes most crucial and prescient. Time and time again my students and I had repeated a phrase that Welty's stories had inspired in us: "if we can imagine it, is already real." What perhaps my students hadn't counted on—what had happened in the meantime during the protests and the process of completing their projects—was the collective benefit of what was occurring *inside* our classroom, as they committed to what might be called the process of consensus-based discovery. Students developed increasing respect for each other's positions despite, and probably because of, opposing views. The urgency of context had given collective focus to my Hong Kong

students' mythologies and provided a workable basis for understanding how myth-making can build understanding across cultural and linguistic divides. And, for all the brilliance of my students' final projects, I was even prouder of that unintended learning outcome they had achieved collectively in class: the eventual appreciation of democracy in action, including the embrace of dissent, as it inheres in respectful group dynamics.

My Hong Kong students rightly felt—and continue to feel—that they are on the frontline of a globalizing process that the People's Republic of China now controls. They, Hong Kong's future leaders, were uniquely situated, and exposed, when seeking to imagine sustaining mythologies for twenty-first-century Hong Kong. I again quote Nicola's words extracted it from an in-class assessment:

This was the time of our "Umbrella Movement," the first harmonious and loving protest that bound our people together and constructed new public and cultural spaces for Hong Kongers. It was the first protest in Hong Kong history in which the faith in humanity was, if not restored, then not reduced.

The wisdom of the comment lies in its appreciation of a contest for humanity bound by the double negative, a contest whose process is not yet entirely sustaining, not yet entirely destructive. Welty's myth-making created precarious space for my Hong Kong students to imagine their reality productively and otherwise. Across multiple data-types, and expanding conventional notions of the "literary," Welty's photographs, correspondence, and her emphasis upon compassion were particularly inspiring for my students who found (and redirected) imaginative resources in Welty's stories I couldn't possibly have expected. In Welty's words, "The transitory more and more becomes one with the beautiful" (*A Writer's Eye* 223). My students, too, were brave and beautiful in their transitory, god-given time. I dedicate this to them.

Works Cited

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