

PERSEPHONE IN EUDORA WELTY'S "LIVVIE"

by PEGGY W. PRENSHAW

Eudora Welty's "Livvie," the story of a young woman who is "carried away" from home and family by an aged husband to a remote house on the sunken Natchez Trace, calls to mind at once the myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades.¹ Although many critics have examined Welty's use of mythic material in this and other stories, no one has explored the elaborate and insistent pattern of details identifying Livvie and the characters surrounding her with the Persephone myth.² Perhaps what is most extraordinary about this story, and largely overlooked, is Welty's fusing of a realistic story set in the Mississippi countryside not only with the well-known episode involving Persephone, but with a motif of death and regeneration drawn from the related myths of Demeter and Dionysus, specifically, from the Eleusinian Mysteries.

A brief analysis of some of the main details of the story shows how explicitly Livvie is identified with Persephone. She is sixteen when she marries Solomon, "an only girl." The ambiguous words of the omniscient narrator suggest the youth and uniqueness associated with Persephone, often known as the Kore, Demeter's only daughter. Unlike Persephone, Livvie goes willingly with Solomon, but we are told "she had not thought she could not get back." Further, "where she came from, people said an old man did not want anybody in the world to ever find his wife, for fear they would steal her back from him" (p. 153).

In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Persephone remains hidden from her mother for nine days when at last the Sun reveals her whereabouts. Livvie has lived with Solomon for nine years, he growing older, she still young, when she is finally discovered. Her loneliness and barrenness are imaged in the stillness of the house and the dirt yard, which she herself keeps free of grass. But a potential fertility, submerged only temporarily, is as unmistakable as that of Persephone, whose recovery brought new life to earth. Livvie's single, treasured possession is the picture of a baby she had once tended, and near the steps of her house are rose bushes with "tiny blood-red roses" that come, like ovulation, every month.

1. "Livvie" in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943). Subsequent page references are to *Selected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York: Modern Library, 1954).

2. See especially Neil Isaacs, *Eudora Welty* (Austin: Steck-Vaughn, 1969), p. 4.

In many respects Solomon parallels Hades. He bears a kingly manner, and he imprisons his wife in an isolated house that the Natchez Trace, like the River Styx, separates from the world. Once, when Livvie ventures down the Trace, she feels as if she is wading a river; dead leaves reach as high as her knees. She climbs the high banks only to find a graveyard and trees enclosed in caterpillar nets that seem in the sun to burn like flames. Around the trees, which remind her of a torch-lit entrance to the Underworld, stretches a desolate scene accompanied by the sound of a mourning dove.

Solomon himself epitomizes death, ceasing to eat and sleeping day and night in a bed that is "like a throne." He seems to Livvie a "strict man"; he has a "strict mouth" and "strong eyes with second sight." Of course, Hades is typically portrayed as a grim and mournful character; H. J. Rose describes him as "severely just" and "inexorable in the carrying out of his, or Fate's, decrees."³ Furthermore, the name "Solomon," associated in the Old Testament with wisdom, calls to mind a similar feature of Hades, who was sometimes known as Eubuleus, meaning "Wise in Counsel." Another of Hades' names, Pluton or Plutos, designating "the Rich" or "Wealth," suggests another parallel to Solomon, who is a well-to-do owner of his own house and land. Finally, Solomon, like Hades, cuts a regal figure: he shines forth in a youthful picture that shows "a fan of hair . . . like a king's crown" (p. 160).

What emerges in the story as Solomon's most remarkable activity, however, is not his accumulation of wealth but his effort to keep spirits from entering his house through the magic of bottle trees, which he has carefully wrought during the nine-year marriage. The trees line the approach to the house—bare crepe myrtles that sprout no leaves but green and blue bottles. Also in the yard, near the red roses, are peach and pomegranate trees, the latter of course important in the vegetation myth associated with the Hades-Persephone story. Persephone, having eaten the pomegranate, is eternally infected with death. Although Demeter wins her reinstatement to the land of the living, she cannot abrogate the death penalty which strikes her daughter for part of each year.

The character who finds Livvie seems at first an unlikely Demeter figure. Miss Baby Marie arrives suddenly outside Livvie's door in a little car "steaming like a kettle." She is coarse, intrusive, and insistent on selling the cosmetics she brings. But further details of her appearance and behavior do indeed parallel a mythical being who rescues the maiden and returns her to home and life. For example, she is immune to limits of time and space. At first she appears as young, then old, to Livvie. She is "more than middle-sized" and wears a big hat, but she manages to enter the house through a door barely cracked open. An air of "triumph and

3. *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York: Dutton, 1959), p. 78.

secrecy" surrounds her. The lipstick she hands to Livvie is purple, a color specifically associated with Demeter. It "opens like magic," and its fragrance—"Chinaberry flowers," says Livvie—instantly transports the young woman home. She imagines her mother holding up an apron heavy with ripe figs and her father "holding a fish-pole over the pond, . . . the little clear fishes swimming up to the brim" (pp. 165-66). This image of fertility—fecund and phallic—anticipates the next stage that awaits the imprisoned Livvie, the stage that brings release from bondage and the promise of ever-renewing life.

Aside from her name several details suggest a Madonna figure in the characterization of Baby Marie. In Welty's comic but nonetheless deliberate description, the woman has a face that "draws the light" and otherwise reminds us of traditional portraits of Mary. As she leaves Livvie, "in the air and all around like a bright halo around the white lady's nodding head, it was a true spring day" (p. 168). The Biblical overtone seems less a confusion or doubling of myths than a subtle reinforcement of what is essentially the Persephone-Demeter story. Mary is invoked as simply another face of the goddess of earthly life. Baby Marie, who journeys to find Livvie, parallels the awesome mother, who holds sovereignty over nature's life and death. Baby Marie's reply, when Livvie tries to pay for the lipstick with eggs, "No, I have plenty of eggs—plenty," gives further evidence of an infinitude of life enclosed within this mother figure. When she leaves, she does not take Livvie with her, but she gives her a vision of home and, with the painted lips, a renewed, pulsing sense of life. After her visit, Solomon's hold on Livvie is surely broken.

A final characteristic of Baby Marie that invites attention is her witch-like aspect. The intense red and white coloring of her face, the tousled red hair and, especially, the wavering, flame-like image reflected in the mirror, all suggest an evil stepmother or witch, plotting the doom of an innocent maid. The relationship between the witch and the Demeter figure is, however, not at all incongruous or inconsistent. In his detailed study of Kore, Carl Kerényi shows that Hecate, the Mistress of Spirits, is an essential figure in the Demeter-Persephone cult. In some accounts of the myth Hecate, Demeter's ally, helps in the search for Persephone. In the archetype of the divine mother she is a second Demeter, a double, who retains a certain motherliness as a fertility goddess closely related to the moon. Frequently represented as bearing a torch, she appears as a light-bringer. Kerényi notes that in one version of the myth, it is Hecate rather than Demeter who is led to the Underworld in search of Persephone. He concludes in his study of the archetype that Hecate, Demeter, and Persephone are embodiments of a single mythological idea.⁴ Basic to the

4. "Kore" in C.G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (1949; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), pp. 109-113.

identification is the essence of each goddess: destruction, mourning, and rebirth, inseparable in any account of man's earthly experience.

In the popular myth the beneficent Demeter restores the earth's vegetation after she recovers Persephone. In Welty's story Baby Marie initiates only the beginning of Livvie's movement from barrenness to fertility. Her release from Solomon is accomplished finally in the union with Cash, a young field hand portrayed in the story as a Dionysian figure. Like the god of the vine, Cash appears suddenly on a spring day; his coat is "leaf-green"; and an "emerald green" feather adorns his plum-colored hat. Cash's manner suggests an animal, perhaps a bull or a goat, the familiar avatars of Dionysus;⁵ or a Pan-like satyr, part man, part goat. He "flings" his head, and in a miraculous gesture "wags" it against the sky. He stamps and plunges zigzag up the front steps. Entering Solomon's room, he makes "a noise like a hoof pawing the floor."

In his work on Dionysus, Walter Otto tells us that the god's arrival transforms the earth, shattering the well-ordered world in a "frenzied, all-engulfing torrent of life." With his coming, "everything that has been locked up is released. The alien and hostile unite in miraculous harmony. Age-old laws . . . suddenly [lose] their power, and even the dimensions of time and space are no longer valid."⁶ Ultimately, the presence of the god produces an irrepressible desire to dance.

This description mirrors Cash exactly. He dazzles Livvie with the prospect of passion and menace, walking as he does with a phallic "guinea pig in his pocket," and "kicking the flowers as if he could break through everything in the way and destroy anything in the world" (p. 170). He sails a stone into Solomon's bottle trees, releasing them, and immediately after the old man's death, he seizes Livvie, whirling her in a furious dance, until she, oblivious to time and death, drops the treasured silver watch that had been Solomon's final gift to her.

Further identifying Cash with Dionysus is a description of the field hands whom Livvie notices just as she feels the arrival of spring. Like a band of Dionysian celebrants anticipating the arrival of the god, they seem to be "going to some place on a journey" and to be awaiting a sign when "they would all start at once shouting, hollering, cajoling, calling and answering back, running, being leaped on and breaking away, flinging to earth with a shout and lying motionless in the trance of twelve o'clock" (p. 161).

Such mythic parallels persist throughout the story; I have noted only those most explicitly put forward in the text, least susceptible to the charge of a too-ingenious reading. Clearly Welty takes some liberties with the

5. See J.C. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), p. 390.

6. *Dionysus*, trans. Robert B. Palmer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 95.

myths, changing and fusing mythic characters and episodes in ways that intensify and universalize what is foremost, Livvie's vivid and realistic story. What I find most remarkable, however, is precisely the linking of the Persephone and Dionysus motifs. This association ties the story of Livvie's return to the two most important Greek cults celebrating fertility. In the great Eleusinian Mysteries the Greeks worshipped Demeter and Persephone, who assured the regeneration of earth and the human species. Dionysian cults, similarly, honored a god who died and was reborn and thus gave evidence that vine and man alike must take on a kind of death to be assured rebirth. In fact, in accounts of the Eleusinian Mysteries there occurs an essential third figure, Iakchos, who is frequently identified as Dionysus, or variously as a son of Demeter or Persephone (Zagreus), a husband of Demeter, or even the son of Dionysus.⁷ Kerényi writes of the divine triad that presided over the merry women's mysteries in December and over the Dionysian festival at Eleusis: "Its members are Demeter, Kore [Persephone], and Dionysus, who belong inseparably together."⁸ The basic theme in all the rituals associated with these gods is the eternal coming of life from death.

In Welty's story Solomon, like Hades, takes a young wife whose very name, Livvie, points to her role as ever-renewing life. She is rescued from sterility when her husband, the god of the dead, becomes the dying god, making way for the appearance of a new king of the woods, or, more emphatically, for his own reincarnation in the figure of the youthful Dionysus. Solomon's bottle trees, images of an enforced sterility, protect Solomon—like a sacred grove—as long as they remain intact. When Cash hurls the rock into the trees, Solomon's death is imminent.

The experience of dying, crucial in the archetype of regeneration, is thus furnished in the story by the aged man, a waning Dionysus. As a young man Solomon had produced abundant harvests, cultivated orchards, but in his last years he is a maker of bottle trees. According to an Orphic hymn Dionysus sleeps in the house of Persephone until he returns.⁹ It is not surprising to find that he who sleeps with Persephone is a god with two faces, Hades and Dionysus, who are identified by ancient and modern students of myth as one and the same.¹⁰ These are two essential forms of a god who vanishes and reappears, one who dies and is reborn.

Interpretations of the Welty story have generally viewed the Solomon-Cash opposition as an Apollonian-Dionysian conflict, in which the organic life principle takes precedence over individual accomplishment. Thus the story is read as a sort of tragi-comic reversal of the "Sailing to Byzantium"

7. Rose, pp. 95-96.

8. *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series 65, No. 4 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), p. 140.

9. Otto, p. 197.

10. See Otto, pp. 115-16; Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 40. Kerényi cites Heraclitus as one who reaches the same conclusion.

theme; here the young in one another's arms outlast the artistry of golden birds—or bottle trees. The interpretation is reasonable but does not account, I think, for the similarities between Solomon and Cash nor for the tone of celebration which infuses the story.

The original title of the story, "Livvie Is Back,"¹¹ seems a rather explicit reference to the Persephone myth of renewal. But Livvie is back precisely because one consort dies and another appears. Solomon's death, his loss to Cash, is not simply regrettable; it is necessary. Dionysus, inciting procreation and creativity, dies and thus assures a renewal of desire—sexual and artistic.

Many details suggest that Solomon's dying is very much like a birth. Livvie begins eating for two, consuming the meal that Solomon refuses. She is said to feel the "stir of spring," as "present in the house as a young man would be." The outside scene reflects a similar intertwining of death and life. The moon is in the last quarter as the distant field hands turn the sod, planting peas and beans. Inside, in his bed, Solomon looks like a "different and smaller man," like "someone kin to himself," with a face "like new . . . smooth and clear." It seems to Livvie that "the quiet she kept was for a sleeping baby, and that she had a baby and was its mother." Solomon embodies death, lying wrapped in a quilt "as if it were winter still." But he, like Phoenix, the old black woman of Welty's "A Worn Path," also incarnates life in death. Beneath his quilt, we are told, Solomon might have been "a bird, an Egyptian, . . . or a swaddled baby, about to smile and brush all away" (p. 174).

Throughout the story the Phoenix, or regeneration, principle is elaborated through parallels to the Greek version of the archetype. We see as a central element in the Persephone and Dionysus myths the figures of a dying god. The tragic elements of "Livvie" do not grow so much from the Apollonian-Dionysian conflict in society as from the inevitability of death for the separate self. The Greeks gave civilization a heightened consciousness of the individual, who, separated from organic life, living *in time*, fully perceived the abyss of his mortality. But in the Eleusianian Mysteries they maintained a complementary vision of the self recovered from isolation and death, returned to life through the promise of procreation and, more mystically, through faith in a god of the earth who vanished and reappeared.

Livvie, like Persephone, and Solomon and Cash, like Dionysus, contain an infinitude of lives and deaths. Cash, whom Solomon knew "all the time"—and who is appropriately named as a son, or double, of Plutos (Wealth)—appears miraculously at the bleak, tragic moment of death. Like a bridegroom or a returning god he walks with Livvie down the Trace, the "white irises shining like candles." The resurrection of Livvie and life is joyously

11. *Atlantic Monthly*, 170 (November 1942), 57-64.

celebrated at the conclusion in sexual images of flying birds and brilliant sunlight that fills the bottles. In the dying Solomon we see the assertion of the self that is a losing battle. "Life" wins out; ultimately, as in Faulkner's *Light in August*, a comedy serenely enfolds the tragic moment.

Livvie, a late version of the ancient Persephone, lives on like the re-appearing grain. Like the myth, Welty's story shows the struggle between life and self, or nature and art, to be less a battle than an old dependency. Finally, "Livvie" gives a classical vision of an enduring earthly harmony.

