

Brian Kent's Reflection in Eudora Welty's "Moon Lake"

By Dave Seter (Dominican University of California)

In "Moon Lake," one of the linked stories in her collection *The Golden Apples*, Eudora Welty playfully imbeds the (then) contemporary novel *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* by Harold Bell Wright. This choice by Welty is clearly deliberate rather than offhand as the similarities between the two texts are too numerous to ignore. Welty's setting features a lakeside summer camp for girls in the rural south; Wright's features a river running through a rural landscape said to resemble the Ozarks. Both works of fiction depict acts of near-drowning. By definition mere reference to Wright's novel within Welty's text would be an intertextual act. However, the reference to Wright's novel in "Moon Lake" is not merely allusional. Welty makes the reference physically tangible when she places *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* in the hands of two separate characters in "Moon Lake." The manner in which Welty physically describes and the manner in which the characters in "Moon Lake" react to *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* suggest that Welty's placement of Wright's novel in "Moon Lake" serves as a playful critique of popular sentiment.

It's almost as if Welty uses *The Re-creation of Brian Kent* as a prop. And yet this is no generic prop of a dog-eared romance novel but rather the work of a novelist, Harold Bell Wright, who was quite popular in his day. Although product placement in television programs and movies is commonplace today, specific reference to other works of literature in works of literary fiction seems less

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common. In "Moon Lake" *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* appears as deliberately placed as a Coca-Cola.

In taking up the question of the purpose Wright's novel serves, Leslie Gordon argues that the reference cannot be considered offhand: "Welty's references and allusions are never gratuitous, and this one allows a sufficiently curious reader to garner a few more thoughts about the novel than the simple play upon the differences between 'recreation'—a summer camping activity—and 're-creation,' a transformative experience" (118). Gordon points out: "*The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* was published in 1919, the year Welty turned ten years old, the same age as the campers in 'Moon Lake,' and traveled away from her Jackson home for the first time to attend a camp on a lake in the Mississippi Delta" (115).

If Welty's reference to *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* in "Moon Lake," in the words of Gordon, isn't "gratuitous," then specifically what aspects of Wright's novel attracted Welty's attention? Brian Kent, the main character in Wright's novel, is portrayed as a down-on-his-luck drunkard in need of salvation. His failed suicide attempt ends when the boat he steals, which he intended to use to drown himself in the middle of the river, runs aground on the riverbed of property owned by a retired spinster school teacher named Auntie Sue. A disabled young woman named Judy who lives with Auntie Sue plucks the drunken Brian Kent from the river as he struggles to climb out of the boat. As Wright portrays the scene it is clear Judy saves Brian Kent from drowning. This action parallels the

scene in "Moon Lake" in which the Boy Scout Loch Morrison rescues the orphan Easter from the lake and performs resuscitation. Gordon further points out that Wright's novel was made into a movie in 1925: "This was the year Welty graduated from Central High School in Jackson, Mississippi, and possibly she saw the film, since her love of movies from early childhood on is acknowledged in her letters, memoir, fiction, and non-fiction" (116).

Clearly, "Moon Lake" was influenced by *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. Given this connection between the two literary works, what role does Wright's pulp novel play in Welty' highly literary story? Three possibilities come to mind: Welty engages the attentive reader in an act of play by placing *The Re-creation of Brian Kent* in the hands of two characters in such a provocative manner that the reader's curiosity is aroused; Welty's manner of describing the novel is intended to criticize pulp fiction generally and of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* specifically; or *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* has no heightened significance but is merely one detail added by Welty to create a unique sense of time and place.

The proposition that *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* has no added significance can be immediately dismissed. It's certainly true that Welty creates a unique sense of time and place by incorporating various references to popular culture in "Moon Lake," including a game called mumblety-peg in which the players throw a jack-knife dangerously close to their feet and a children's rhyme about a pear hanging from a tree found in "readers" of the

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era. But in contrast to these examples, Wright's novel appears not once but twice. Repetition in a work of fiction, especially given Welty's sense of craft, is significant.

Physically described as well-read, *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* is first discovered at Moon Lake in the hands of the young camper Nina by her somewhat bossy friend Jinny Love:

"Nina!" Jinny Love whispered across the tent, during siesta. "What do you think you're reading?"

Nina closed *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. Jinny Love was already coming across the almost-touching cots to Nina's, walking on her knees and bearing down over Gertrude, Etoile, and now Geneva. (*Collected Stories* 349)

The book is so quickly dropped by Nina (and, at least temporarily, by Welty's narrative) that the reader might be justified in ignoring its significance. Yet the subtle inflection in diction is unmistakable. Jinny Love doesn't simply ask "what are you reading," which would represent a more or less neutral question, but instead uses a confrontational, albeit playful, tone in practically saying rather than asking "what do you *think* you're reading" (emphasis added). As Gordon explains: "*The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* would not represent suitable material for ten-year-old girls" (116).

Shortly after *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* is dropped by Nina, it appears in the hands of camp chaperone Miss Moody:

"Let's us run away from basket weaving," Jinny Love said in Nina's ear, a little later in the week.

"Just as soon."

"Grand. They'll think we're drowned."

They went out the back end of the tent, barefooted: their feet were as tough as anybody's by this time. Down in the hammock, Miss Moody was reading *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* now. (Nobody knew whose book that was, it had been found here, the covers curled up like side combs. Perhaps anybody at Moon Lake who tried to read it felt cheated by the title, as applying to camp life, as Nina did, and laid it down for the next person.) (*Collected Stories* 351)

Jinny Love's mention of drowning not only foreshadows the near-tragic event in which Loch Morrison rescues the orphan named Easter who has fallen into Moon Lake but also proves ironic to the reader who knows the contents of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. Brian Kent tries to drown himself in a stolen boat but ends up passing out and running aground.

Welty's parenthetical text, above, relates that the campers in "Moon Lake," upon reading *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*, feel "cheated by the title, as applying to camp life." A close examination of Wright's novel reveals its moralistic tone consistent with patriarchal narrative or metanarrative. As a postmodern writer Welty challenges patriarchal myth structures, exploring feminist perspectives and appropriating popular culture, which depends largely on sentimental narrative. In "Moon Lake," Welty playfully critiques the moralistic tone and sentimental style of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*.

The key point suggesting this sense of play is Welty's use of parenthetical text, above, when referring to *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. The use of parenthetical text acts as an "aside" to the reader, more of a whisper or a

nudge than critical discourse. The reader may want to consider the fact that Welty uses the parenthetical only one other time in "Moon Lake":

Moon Lake came in like a flood below the ridge.... Out there Miss Moody would sometimes go in a boat; sometimes she had a date from town, "Rudy" Spights or "Rudy" Loomis, and then they could be seen drifting there after the moon was up, far out on the smooth bright surface. ("And she lets him hug her out there," Jinny Love had instructed them. "Like this." She had seized, of all people, Etoile, whose name rhymed with tinfoil. "Hands off," said Etoile.) (Collected Stories 359)

This passage represents a humorous moment when witnessed through the lens of adulthood. While *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* relies heavily upon sentimentality as a literary device, "Moon Lake" in contrast pokes fun at youthful susceptibility to such an emotional state.

When it comes to male-female relationships, Nina and Jinny Love seem to experience conflicting emotions in relation to the sole adolescent boy present at camp: Loch Morrison, the Boy Scout and life saver. Loch assists the adult chaperones in maintaining order, signaling with his bugle the time for various events including rising, bathing, and sleeping. The following is Welty's description of Loch at the beginning of "Moon Lake:"

From the beginning his martyred presence seriously affected them. They had a disquieting familiarity with it, hearing the spit of his despising that went into his bugle. At times they could barely recognize what he thought he was playing. Loch Morrison, Boy Scout and Life Saver, was under the ordeal of a week's camp on Moon Lake with girls. (Collected Stories 342)

And yet, even as Nina and Jinny Love are repulsed by Loch they are also intrigued:

In early evening, in moonlight sings, the Boy Scout and Life Saver kept far away. They would sing "When all the little ships come sailing home," and he would be roaming off; they could tell about where he was. He played taps for them, invisibly then, and so beautifully they wept together, whole tentfuls some nights. (*Collected Stories* 343)

This conflict is part of growing up: a time when bodies, minds, and preferences are developing. They're also susceptible to romance fantasies that Welty portrays here with ironic humor.

One further observation from Welty may shine light on the perhaps unexpected appearance of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* in "Moon Lake." Speaking of the different ways in which a writer comes across her subject, Welty writes "that person may come on it by seeming accident, like falling over a chair in a dark room" (*On Writing* 68). Welty's metaphor accurately describes the way the reader of "Moon Lake" encounters *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent*. Given the lack of written criticism on this subject, it would appear most readers stumble across the reference, pick themselves up, and move on. By the time Welty's "Moon Lake" was published, Wright's work no longer appeared on the best-seller list. Thus, the immediacy of *The Re-Creation of Brian Kent* as a reference to popular culture continues to diminish over time. Welty likely knew that would happen but may have hoped the curious reader would pick up the trail. The final piece of evidence that Welty's placement of the novel first in the hands of Nina Carmichael and then in the hands of Miss Moody was intended as an act of humorous intrigue is the parenthetical nature of her "critique" of *The Re-*

Creation of Brian Kent. It seems clear Welty was engaging the deep reader on another level, with humor and in a broader cultural context.

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