

Review

Isolation in Eudora Welty's "A Curtain of Green"

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Eudora Welty was a product of the South America's rich oral tradition. She was a brilliant and gifted story teller. Her most celebrated medium was the short story, and her main subject was the family, though she personally never married. The present paper presents Welty's association with her native state in South America, which reflected in her all writings – a brief summary of the short story "A Curtain of Green" - concept of 'isolation' in "A Curtain of Green"- Welty's points of view in projecting the concept 'isolation' in the short story. Mrs. Larkin is seen living in isolation since the death of her husband. She spent most of the day in her garden to get rid of the memories of the sudden and tragic death of her husband. Her human relations, love and affection with her husband are pointed out. The role of Jamey, a black coloured boy in Mrs. Larkin's isolated life is discussed.

Key words: Eudora Welty, short stories, a curtain of green, isolation, point of view, human relations.

INTRODUCTION

Eudora Alice Welty was born on 13th April, 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, South America (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudora_Welty.html). She was a renowned American woman novelist, short story writer, literary critic, essayist and photographer. Welty was a voracious reader from her childhood days and a continuous learner. She was greatly influenced by her parents and rural communities across her native town, Jackson. Her favorite setting was generally the South, in particular Mississippi, where she spent the majority of her life. Many of her stories are based on bits of dialogue overheard in her everyday life. Welty was greatly inspired by her first hand exposure to everyday life in the Depression- stricken era of South. Eudora Welty was a Southern writer whom some specialists of the literature of the South consider second only to her fellow Mississippian, William Faulkner, as a writer of fiction. Faulkner's and Welty's works focus more on human relations. Her main subjects were intricacies of human relations, particularly as revealed in her characters' interactions in intimate social encounters. Welty created characters that are often lonely and complex, full of longing but strangely

fulfilled.

Eudora Welty's short story, "A Curtain of Green" is about a young widow who has completely isolated herself after her husband's death (1998). The main character in this story, Mrs. Larkin, uses her garden as a shield to hide her emotions. It is also a physical barrier that keeps her from having to see or connect with the outside world. By using the word "curtain" in the title, Welty suggests that something in this story will be hidden, shielded, or shut-out. In addition to the title, she uses a variety of methods throughout the story to give the reader clue on Mrs. Larkin's isolation.

Place is one of the most distinctive factors in the development of Eudora Welty's writing and in her own evaluation of fiction in general (Johnson, 1997). Welty considers setting to be a powerful tool for a writer of fiction. She sees setting as a way to provide roots for her characters and a realistic basis for her stories (Vande Kieft, 1987). Welty selected the densely grown garden and white house as a right place to represent the words in the title 'curtain of Green' and Mrs. Larkin's isolation in her house, where she lives alone enjoying her work in

the garden.

Summary of "A curtain of Green"

Eudora Welty's short story, "A Curtain of Green" is about Mrs. Larkin, a young widow who has not come to terms with the sudden and tragic death of her husband. She found refuge from the world outside by spending her entire time in her garden. Only Jamey, a young black boy used to be allowed to enter to help her in the garden.

This short story is a part of the collection of stories of *A Curtain of Green* which was the first collection of short stories written by Eudora Welty. In these stories Welty looks at the state of Mississippi through the eyes of its common people, both black and white (Welty, 1979). In this collection of stories, Welty who is a native and resident of Mississippi chose a method which was more open to detached observation. She proceeds with the utmost simplicity and observes with delicate brevity. She does not try to transform to interpret but opens the doors and describes the setting almost inch by inch (Turner, 1989).

Mrs. Larkin's garden was a large, densely grown plot running down-hill behind the small white house where she lived alone now, since the death of her husband. The intense light like a tweezers picked out her clumsy, small figure in its old pair of men's overalls rolled up at the sleeves and trousers, separated it from the thick leaves, and made it look strange and yellow as she worked with a hoe-over –vigorous, disreputable and heedless. Within its border of hedge, high like a wall, and visible only from the upstairs windows of the neighbors, this slanting, tangled garden, more and more over-abundant and confusing, must have become so familiar to Mrs. Larkin that quite possibly by now she was unable to conceive of any other place.

The extreme fertility of her garden formed a preoccupation and a challenge to Mrs. Larkin. Only by ceaseless activity of cutting, separating, thinning and tying back in the clumps of flowers and bushes and vines could she prevent them from overextending their boundaries. Mrs. Larkin worked strenuously and planted every kind of flower that she could find. It was impossible to enjoy looking at her place. To the neighbours gazing from their upstairs windows it had the appearance of a sort of jungle (Welty, 2002).

After the death of Mr. Larkin, the neighbours called upon the widow but since it was not appreciated, the visits reduced and then stopped. The neighbours seemed to have forgotten Mrs. Larkin. One morning whistling could be heard in the Larkin's garden and the neighbours recognized Jamey's tune. They had seen him kneeling in the flowers at Mrs. Larkin's side. He was only the colored boy who worked in the neighborhood during the day. Even Jamey would tolerate Mrs. Larkin only occasionally. Throughout the afternoon Mrs. Larkin

worked continuously and silently. Images from the past flashed before her, "She would see promptly, as if a curtain had been jerked quite unceremoniously away from a little scene, the front porch of the white house, the shady street in front and the blue automobile in which her husband approached driving from work. It was the summer day.....". She recalled that there had been no warning when the enormous tree suddenly fell and struck the car crushing her husband to death. Mr. Larkin went behind Jamey and raised the hoe above her head. In that moment the rain came and touched her upraised arm, sighing lower the hoe to the ground. "In the light from the rain, different from sunlight, everything appeared to gleam unreflecting from within itself in its quiet arcade of burning. One by one, as the rain reached them".

Mrs. Larkins sank in to the flowers, streaked with rain. "Jamey ran jumping and crouching about her drawing in his breath alternately at the flowers breaking under his feet and at the shapeless passive figure on the ground. Then he became quiet, and stood back at a little distance and looked in awe at the unknowing face, white and filled him with stillness when he felt her standing there behind him looking down at him, and he would not have turned around at that moment for anything in the world."

He bent down and in a horrified, piteous, beseeching voice he began to call her name until she stirred and then he jumped nimbly to his feet and ran out of the garden (Welty, 2002).

ISOLATION IN "A CURTAIN OF GREEN"

"A Curtain of Green" highlights the isolation of a young widow. Mrs. Larkin segregated herself from the rest of the world in her garden which was a large, densely grown plot running down-hill behind the small white house where she lived alone since the death of her husband. She uses her garden as a shield to hide her emotions. It is also a physical barrier that keeps her from having to connect with the outside world. Welty's usage of the word "curtain" suggests that something in this story will be concealed, protected or kept out. Besides this, Welty uses a variety of methods to provide the reader with hints about Mrs. Larkin's isolation.

POINT OF VIEW

One method Welty uses to highlight Mrs. Larkin's isolation is beginning this story from an objective point of view and then changing to a subjective one. She thus makes it clear that Mrs. Larkin is isolated from the rest of the community. Her isolation is established by descriptions from the neighbors as well as from Mrs. Larkin's own thoughts.

In the beginning, Welty describes the garden objectively, as perceived by the neighbors. It is described as having a "border of hedge, high like a wall, and visible

only from the upstairs windows of the neighbors". Welty then tells us that Mrs. Larkin "had never once been seen anywhere else since her husband's accident". Welty then describes the garden, with its dense, irregular growth, and she tells us how Mrs. Larkin works all day long in it, only stopping when darkness comes and how the neighbours view Mrs. Larkin's labors as hasty and without any order or regularity. The garden has a disorderly appearance of some sort of jungle that she encouraged rather than an orderly place over which she had control. This suggests that Mrs. Larkin is probably seeking consolation in her garden or using it as a way of escaping socializing with her neighbors and others (Carson, 1992). By working in it continuously she can escape facing her fears and emotions concerning her husband's death.

Welty follows this objective narrative by telling the story from Mrs. Larkin's subjective point of view. She uses Mrs. Larkin to confirm what the neighbors have already implied. Mrs. Larkin is trapped by the memory of her husband's accidental death. She relives it repeatedly in her mind. Her gardening is an effort to control her emotions and keep them locked up inside her which will prevent her from having to face her own guilt for not having been able to prevent the accident. She works herself to exhaustion during the day so at night she can "lie in bed, her arms tired at her sides and in a motionless peace". Mrs. Larkin is truly trapped in despair and isolation. She believes she is responsible in some way for her husband's death, and is she trapped by the memory of the accident itself.

Welty uses a more subtle technique to give further evidence that Mrs. Larkin is isolated by not giving her an identity of her own. There is no mention of her first name. Her only identity is that she is the wife of Mr. Larkin.

"*A Curtain of Green*" can be read as the story of a person - Mrs. Larkin, who finds the meaning of her life. Mrs. Larkin begins her day by coming out of her home and venturing into her wild, untamed garden. This can be compared to a baby's emerging from its mother's womb to venture out into the big, confusing world. In the story, Mrs. Larkin "would wander about for a little while at first, uncertainly" almost like a child who is not certain about the world and begins to stumble around, searching for where she belongs in it. At the end of the day, Mrs. Larkin would "with a drooping, submissive walk" (Welty, 1998) go back into the house, much like a child who does not want to go back inside after a day of play.

In the story, Mrs. Larkin has a relationship with Jamey, a young black boy whom she "would tolerate only now and then". Certainly Jamey is the last person who would be expected to share Mrs. Larkin's world. At the end of the story, just as at the end of someone's life, "Mrs. Larkin sank in one motion down into the flowers and lay there fainting and streaked with rain" (Welty, 1998). Mrs. Larkin becomes part of the earth just as people turn to dust when they die. Perhaps, Mrs. Larkin does move

beyond her anguish and finds a type of resolution in the end, when she realizes that life goes on even after senseless tragedies occur. Most humans have strength to get through their tragedies and experience peace. The story of Mrs. Larkin's search can be read as anyone's search for meaning. Michael Kreyling (1980) agrees, stating that in several of the Eudora Welty's stories, "a main character . . . is universalized, and a point about the nature of individual human existence is made."

CONCLUSION

Welty's 'A Curtain of Green' characterizes the art of *faminocentric*. She created a feminine setting and concentrated on the experience of woman. A critic, Robert Penn Warren, states regarding Welty's collection of stories, "almost all of the stories deal with people who, in one way or another, are cut off, alienated and isolated from the world". Some readers of "A Curtain of Green" may come to the conclusion that Mrs. Larkin and her garden represent society as a whole. They may state that the story represents racial segregation and the seclusion that many whites chose to live in because they feared blacks and the changes that would come with desegregation.

A Curtain of Green seems to be a simple story of a widow who attempts to find meaning in life after witnessing her husband's accidental death. Most critical works concerning the piece enforce this idea by discussing the work in terms of this individual woman. However, a careful reading makes it clear that the story should not be read on an individual level. Rather, it reveals a more universal picture of humanity's search for meaning during the journey of life. Welty possesses an understanding of the region, built through experience that flourishes in her writing. Welty views place as a vehicle through which she can provide roots for her characters like the densely grown garden and white house which represent 'curtain' to the outer world and isolation in the story. After reading the Mrs. Larkin's story, one can understand the importance of human relations in life, how to escape form isolation in life and meaning of life.

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