Why I Live at the P.O. Study Guide

Why I Live at the P.O. by Eudora Welty

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Introduction

Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." was inspired by a lady ironing in the back room of a small rural post office who Welty glimpsed while working as publicity photographer in the mid-1930s. Wetly had just started to write, and the story, which appeared in *Atlantic* magazine in 1941, was among the first she published. It was also included in her first collection of short stories, *A Curtain of Green*, which appeared that same year. Though Welty writes in many different styles and moods, "Why I Live at the P.O." is representative of her masterful evocation of vital, idiosyncratic southern speech. Both dark and hilarious, "Why I Live at the P.O." is one of Welty's most beloved stories and one of her own favorites. Throughout her long career she has frequently chosen it when invited to read from her work.

"Why I Live at the P.O." takes the form of a dramatic monologue. Sister, the first-person narrator, tells her side of the family spat that has led her to leave the family home where she had lived into adulthood and move into the local post office. She appeals to the reader to take her side as she indignantly recounts her younger sister's unjust maneuvers in turning the rest of the family against her, but her self-pity and exaggeration render her position unintentionally humorous. Though the story is comic, its underlying themes are complex, concerning the tensions between family affiliation and independence, the relative nature of truth, and the insularity and uniqueness of life in a small southern community.

Author Biography

Welty was born on April 13, 1909, in Jackson, Mississippi. Her father, an insurance executive, and her mother, a teacher, offered a stable and loving family for Welty and her two younger brothers. Her parents encouraged Welty intellectually and artistically, but were also very protective. In her autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings* she lovingly memorializes the "sensory education" in listening and observation offered by her parents and names their way of life as an important influence on her art.

Welty attended public high school in Jackson. She began college at Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus and transferred to the University of Wisconsin to finish her bachelor's degree. Welty majored in English Literature in college, but never formally studied writing or moved in literary circles. She is considered a self-taught writer, preferring the education provided by reading voraciously and listening carefully to the natural storytellers around her. In 1930, planning to equip herself to make money, Welty went on to study advertising at Columbia University's School of Business in New York City. Her graduation at the height of the Depression in 1931 and her father's death that same year led her to return to Jackson and move back into the family home. In Jackson, Welty took jobs at several newspapers and a radio station before accepting a job as a photographer with the Works Progress Administration (WPA). From 1933 to 1936 she traveled throughout Mississippi taking publicity photographs of WPA projects in the state, observing and listening to her fellow Missippians.

In 1936 Welty's first short story appeared in a small magazine called *Manuscript.* Over the next several years she published six more stories, including "Why I Live at the P.O.," culminating in her first collection, *A Curtain of Green,* in 1941. The collection was well received, and from this point forward Welty committed herself to writing full time. She has continued to publish novels, short stories, and nonfiction ever since and has received most of the major American writing awards and honors, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pulitzer Prize, an O. Henry Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the Modern Language Association Commonwealth Award.

Though she has taken temporary teaching appointments in other states, Welty has remained a resident of Jackson, Mississippi. She enjoys socializing, reading, and gardening, and has described her life as sheltered and uneventful. Never married, Welty continues to live in the home in Jackson where she grew up.

Plot Summary

The events of "Why I Live at the P.O." are set in motion when Stella-Rondo, the narrator's sister, returns to the family home in China Grove, Mississippi. The narrator, known as Sister, claims that up to this point she has gotten along well with her mother, uncle and grandfather. Sister has a competitive and contentious relationship with Stella-Rondo, and her return sets off a chain of petty family arguments that serve to explain why Sister has moved out and now lives at the local post office.

It is the Fourth of July. Stella Rondo has left her husband, Mr. Whitaker, a man Sister had once dated, and brings home a daughter, a two-year-old child named Shirley T. The family did not know of Shirley T.'s existence and her age suggests that she was conceived before the marriage took place. Stella-Rondo explains that Shirley T. is adopted, which everyone accepts except for Sister. Sister claims that the child looks like Papa-Daddy, their maternal grandfather, with his beard cut off. At lunch that day Stella-Ronda tells Papa-Daddy that Sister thinks he should cut off his beard. This is something he would never do, so Papa-Daddy gets angry with Sister and implies that she is ungrateful to him for using his influence in the community to get her a job at the post office. The sisters squabble about what Sister had really said and their mother takes Stella-Rondo's side. The conversation ends when Shirley T. throws up.

After dinner Papa-Daddy goes out to his hammock to sleep and Uncle Rondo—Sister and Stella- Rondo's uncle—who is drunk, appears in the hall wearing a kimono that had been a gift to Stella- Rondo from Mr. Whitaker. He goes downstairs to talk to Papa-Daddy who, according to Sister, tries to turn Uncle Rondo against her, but he is too drunk to listen. Stella-Rondo notices Uncle Rondo in her kimono and is upset. Still angry, Sister responds by insulting the kimono. Stella-Rondo snipes back at her, implying that Sister is jealous. Stella-Rondo adds that Uncle Rondo looks like a fool wearing the kimono and Sister defends him, telling Stella-Rondo that she is not in a position to criticize since she has just returned home separated and with a child no one knew about. Stella-Rondo is angry with sister for referring to Shirley T, which she had asked her not to.

Sister then goes to the kitchen to make greentomato pickle and has a conversation with Mama about Stella-Rondo's situation. Sister says that if she were in Stella-Rondo's position, Mama would not have been as accepting, and reiterates her belief that Shirley T. is not adopted. Mama denies her favoritism and says that Sister is wrong not to believe Stella-Rondo's word. Sister refers to a cousin who "went to her grave denying the facts of life" with whom Mama has feuded and Mama slaps her in response. Then it occurs to Sister that Shirley T. has not said a word, so she tells Mama that she thinks the child has a mental disability and cannot talk. Mama calls to Stella-Rondo and asks if Shirley T. can talk. Stella-Rondo is offended by Sister's theory and makes Shirley T. sing and dance. Mama is tells Sister to apologize and, when she refuses, walks away furious.

At this point, everyone in the household has been "turned against" Sister except for Uncle Rondo, whom Sister considers an ally in the family. But at supper Stella-Rondo wins Uncle Rondo's favor by serving him and, when Sister asks him if it's wise to eat ketchup while wearing the kimono, Stella Rondo tells him that earlier Sister had sneered at him for wearing it. He tears off the kimono in anger and does not listen when Sister tells him she thinks he looked all right. Being drunk, he does not do anything to retaliate that night, but the next morning he sets of a string of firecrackers in Sister's bedroom. Sister decides that since Stella-Rondo has now turned the whole family against her, she will leave home and move into the post office.

Sister goes about the house collecting items that she feels are rightfully hers. Her mother argues with her about some of the items, calling her ungrateful, and says she'll never come to the post office again. Stella-Rondo concurs, and Sister once again refers to Stella-Rondo's failure to explain the existence of her child. Mama tells Sister to sit down and play cards with them, but Sister says that it is too late to stop her from leaving, and if they want to see her they'll need to come to the post office. Papa- Daddy says he will never come, and Uncle Rondo adds that she should stop reading his postcards. Sister points out that Stella-Rondo will have no way to get in touch with Mr. Whitaker if they refuse to use the mail and goes on to speculate that it is Mr. Whitaker who has left Stella-Rondo, causing her to leave the room in tears. Sister again refuses to Mama's command to apologize and marches off with her possessions.

The story ends with Sister explaining that she has been living at the post office for five days and has not seen anyone in her family during that time. She has set up house and claims to like it there, despite the fact that there is little mail because her family is boycotting the post office and some of the people of the town have taken their side in the dispute. Sister proclaims, "I want the world to know I'm happy," and asserts that if Stella-Rondo decided to explain what happened with Mr. Whitaker, she would "simply put my fingers in both ears and refuse to listen."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The narrator, simply known as "sister," begins the story telling of how she had a fine relationship with her family: Mama, Papa-Daddy (her maternal grandfather) and Uncle Rondo. That is, until her younger sister returned home anyway. Stella-Rondo had recently separated from her husband – a man who, Sister points out, used to go with her until Stella-Rondo "stole" him. Stella-Rondo is the baby of the family by exactly twelve months and Sister says that is why she is so spoiled.

Sister is upset that Stella-Rondo always gets everything she wants and she just throws it away. This explains why, soon after getting married to Mr. Whitaker, she separates from him and comes home with a two-year old child, Shirley-T. Mama "pretends" to be upset with Stella-Rondo for not telling her about the baby, but Stella-Rondo claims that the baby is adopted. All Sister can think about is how extravagant Stella-Rondo's hat is and how she is going to stretch the lunch to feed two more people when Stella-Rondo arrives home unexpectedly on the Fourth of July. Sister also comments that although Stella-Rondo claims that Shirley-T is adopted, she looks just like what Papa-Daddy would look like if he shaved his beard. Stella-Rondo commands Sister not to make any more comments about her "adopted" daughter.

Sister then notices that Stella-Rondo turns Papa-Daddy against her first thing at the table. She tells Papa-Daddy that Sister said she does not understand why he does not cut off his "long-long" beard. Papa-Daddy gets angry, lays down his silverware and confronts Sister. He lays on the guilt trip about how he got her the job as postmaster at the post office and how she does not understand him. Sister tries to defend herself by explaining that Stella-Rondo made up the whole story as she sat there eating her lunch. Stella-Rondo insists Sister said it and Mama scolds Sister for the argument they are having as if Sister started it. Sister puts up her napkin and leaves the table. Mama asks Papa-Daddy to call her back, but all Papa-Daddy can say is "this is the beard [he] started growing when [he] was fifteen." He announces that he is going to go lie in the hammock and that he will never cut off *any* of his beard. He passes by Sister in the hall and walks straight outside.

Soon, Uncle Rondo appears in the hall wearing Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimono. Sister jokingly comments to him that she does not recognize him. He brushes past her and announces that he is poisoned. Uncle Rondo has drunk a bottle of expensive prescription medicine. He does this every July Fourth and then collapses in the hammock to snore the day away, which is exactly where he is headed. Sister warns him not to bother Papa-Daddy in the hammock and explains what happened. He continues on his way out to the hammock.

When Uncle Rondo reaches the hammock, Papa-Daddy tries to "turn him against Sister"

as well. He complains about Sister's supposed poor reading skills and wonders how she can even do her job at the P.O. He also compliments Stella-Rondo for getting out of town. They continue like this – Papa-Daddy swinging in the hammock and Uncle Rondo pleading with him to stop because he is getting dizzy.

As this is happening, Sister hears Stella-Rondo raise the window and loudly sigh. Of course, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo do not hear her through their own commotion. Sister runs to Stella-Rondo's room to see what is wrong. Stella-Rondo asks Sister to look outside and tell her what she sees. Sister says she sees Uncle Rondo trying to get Papa-Daddy out of the hammock. Stella-Rondo asks what is strange about Uncle Rondo and Sister describes him wearing a "terrible-looking flesh-colored contraption." Stella-Rondo is beside herself wondering why Uncle Rondo would wear part of her wardrobe when she has just hung it up in on the bathroom door. She also says that Uncle Rondo looks like a fool and the sight of him in it makes her sick to her stomach. Sister sticks up for Uncle Rondo and says he looks as good as he could. She then scolds Stella-Rondo for criticizing when she has just come home with a two-year old child and recently separated. Stella-Rondo reminds Sister that she is not to discuss the baby anymore.

Sister leaves the room and heads to the kitchen. Mama has given the servants the day off and no one else will do any work. She makes green tomato pickles. Mama comes in, looks at what sister has made and tells her it is not a good choice for Uncle Rondo in his condition or for Shirley-T. Sister comments that she is glad it was not she that came home with a child – she does not even want to begin to think about how the family would have received her. Sister and Mama then have a disagreement about whether Shirley-T is really adopted. Then, Sister wonders aloud if Shirley-T can talk because they had not heard her say a word. Mama yells upstairs, asks Stella-Rondo and tells her that Sister says Shirley-T cannot talk. Stella-Rondo says she can and Shirley-T begins singing and tap dancing. Mama then turns to Sister and insists she apologize to her sister and niece.

At this point, Stella-Rondo has Papa-Daddy, Mama and Shirley-T on her side. That only leaves Uncle Rondo still on Sister's side. This does not worry Sister too much yet because in the past he has been on her side as well. He even once, when Stella-Rondo broke a chain letter, took away from her a radio he had given her. He then gave the radio to Sister.

At dinner, however, Stella-Rondo begins her work. She asks Uncle Rondo to eat something. He says he will only eat cold biscuits and ketchup. Sister questions if he should really be eating ketchup while wearing the kimono. Stella-Rondo takes her chance and tells Uncle Rondo that Sister spent all afternoon looking out the window sneering at him. Stella-Rondo also says that Sister said he looked like a fool. His temper flares and he yells at sister for her disrespect. Sister knows that something bad is coming from Uncle Rondo because that is how he does things. Nothing happens until the next morning when he throws a whole string of firecrackers into Sister's room. They all explode. Sister, who has always been highly sensitive to noise, can take it no more. She makes it obvious that she is gathering all her belongings throughout the house.

Uncle Rondo offers her his army cot because they do not really think she is going anywhere – they do not think she has anywhere to go. She surprises them when she announces that she is going to live at the post office.

As she gathers everything that is hers or that she has helped pay the majority for, she tells Mama she can visit the things at the P.O. if she misses them. Mama says she will never visit the P.O. again. Stella-Rondo agrees. Papa-Daddy says he will never visit the post office again for fear that Sister will reach through the window and cut off his beard. They all claim they will never write another letter again. Sister asks Stella-Rondo how she will get Mr. Whitaker to come back after her if she does not write him a letter. She also admits that she thinks Mr. Whitaker actually left Stella-Rondo instead of the other way around. Sister leaves and moves all of her belongings to the P.O.

By the end of the story, the mail has slowed down because it is a small town and no one in Sister's family writes letters anymore, but she has set up a nice home in the P.O. She also soon knows which of the townspeople are on her side. She decides that if Stella-Rondo ever comes to her to tell her the truth about her and Mr. Whitaker, she will not listen.

Analysis

"Why I Live at the P.O." is the ultimate story of sibling rivalry. The two main characters, Sister and Stella-Rondo, are sisters who vie for the family's attention, love and support. Sister, who is also the narrator, is cynical and pessimistic about life with her younger sister. You get the sense that she has spent her life in the shadow of Stella-Rondo even from the simple fact that everyone refers to her simply as "Sister" instead of giving her a name. This shows a lack of attention, love and respect bestowed upon her by the other members of the family. Based on Sister's actions throughout the story, you can guess that in the short term she simply wants her family to choose her side in the bitter rivalry between her and Stella-Rondo. The fact that Sister never really takes a stand against her younger sister tells the readers two things: she has spent almost her whole life in Stella-Rondo's shadow and she probably, in the long term, just wants everyone to get along (even her and Stella-Rondo). By the end of the story, however, Sister has changed. When she decides to move out, she has realized that her family will never change and will *always* take Stella-Rondo's side over hers so Sister just leaves.

Stella-Rondo depicts the exact opposite of Sister in almost every sense. The only thing they really have in common is the desire to gain the support of the family even if it is on a short-term basis. Stella-Rondo is dramatic, manipulative and will do anything to gain loving attention from her family. She does not even act as if she cares about the long-term effects this may have on her family – if she did, she would not be so horrible to her older sister. Stella-Rondo does not show any evidence that she genuinely loves her family; just that she is using them to get attention.

The plot of the story revolves around the dramatic irony of "good sister" versus "bad sister." The readers see that deep down Sister is loving and caring for her family in the

sense that she makes dinner, jokes around with Uncle Rondo (and even warns him not to get involved with an angry Papa-Daddy), and defends Uncle Rondo when Stella-Rondo says he looks foolish. On the other hand, we see that Stella-Rondo thrives on manipulating the family to love her more than Sister. She twists the truth about what Sister says about Papa-Daddy's beard and outright lies about Sister calling Uncle Rondo foolish-looking. . The family sees the sisters in a complete different light, however, which causes hardship for Sister. The readers get the sense that her entire life has been like this. The other big issue with Stella-Rondo is the issue of whether Shirley-T is really adopted. If she had not been adopted, her age implies that Stella-Rondo had sex before marriage. Since Stella-Rondo wants to keep up her "perfect" image in the family's eyes, she lies about her daughter's origins

The point-of-view of the story adds another interesting twist. The readers hear the entire story from one of the member of the sibling rivalry – Sister. We know that she is cynical and pessimistic based on her tone, so that also gives us, the readers, caution that maybe, just maybe, she is not as reliable of a source as she would like us to think. For example, is it really that obvious that Shirley-T looks so much like Papa-Daddy that it is impossible for her to have been adopted, or is Sister just looking for ways to bring down her sister? While reading the story, many readers will immediately feel sorry for Sister because of all her "hardship" but we must realize that the story is from her eyes only and if she really is cynical, she could also be stretching the truth to make herself look better than her sister and finally get the attention, compassion and respect of someone.

Characters

Mama

Sister and Stella-Rondo's mother, Mama, is asked to mediate between her two daughters but, according to Sister, always ends up taking Stella- Rondo's side. In particular, she chooses not to question Stella-Rondo when she says that Shirley T. is adopted. This bothers Sister, who sees it as evidence of her mother's favoritism toward Stella- Rondo and a willful denial of unpleasant or diffi- cult facts.

Papa-Daddy

Papa-Daddy is Sister and Stella-Rondo's maternal grandfather and the patriarch of the household. By the standards of the rural community where he lives, he a rich man and he has gotten Sister her job as local postmistress, using sway that he aggrandizes as "my influence with the government." Papa-Daddy becomes the first family member who Stella-Rondo succeeds in turning against Sister when he accepts Stella-Rondo's story that Sister thinks he should cut off his very long beard, which is to him a profound insult.

Shirley T.

Shirley T., Stella-Rondo's blond-haired twoyear- old daughter, is the major source of contention between Stella-Rondo and Sister. Shirley T., named for child star Shirley Temple, is too old to have been conceived during Stella-Rondo's marriage to Mr. Whitaker. Stella-Rondo maintains that she is adopted and the rest of the family goes along with this explanation, but Sister thinks she looks like a cross between Papa-Daddy and Mr. Whitaker, and keeps asserting that that the child is Stella-Rondo's. This carries the implication that Shirley T. was conceived out of wedlock, a fact that is particularly crucial to Sister, since she was dating Mr. Whitaker before Stella-Rondo won him "unfairly."

Sister

Sister, the narrator and protagonist of the story, is a young woman who lives with her family and works as a postmistress in a small Southern town. She nicknamed for her relation to her younger sister, Stella-Rondo, and defines herself through competition and comparison with her. She claims that Stella-Rondo has always been spoiled and even seems to blame her for having the same birthday, suggesting that Stella-Rondo's very existence takes something away from her. The competition and resentment that clearly has existed since childhood was exacerbated when, according to Sister, Stella- Rondo stole the affection of Mr. Whitaker, a traveling photographer who Sister had been dating, and married him herself. As the story opens, Stella- Rondo has separated from Mr. Whitaker and returned home with a two-year-old daughter she claims is adopted. Sister

is convinced that the child is Stella-Rondo's and, by implication, that she got pregnant out of wedlock—a fact that the rest of the family has no interest in acknowledging. It is due the denial of this fact and the way that Stella- Rondo's additional lies turn the family against her that Sister leaves home and moves to the post office. Sister may be correct in her assessment of Stella- Rondo's situation, but her own exaggerated sense of self-pity and persecution render her less than creditable.

Stella-Rondo

Stella-Rondo is Sister's younger sister and the object of her resentment. She returns unannounced to her family home with a two-year-old daughter because her marriage has not worked out. She says nothing about what has gone wrong in her marriage and claims that her daughter, Shirley T., is adopted. The rest of the family is satisfied with this, but Sister feels that Stella-Rondo owes her an explanation and takes her deceptions as a personal affront. Stella- Rondo knows that Sister is jealous of her for winning Mr. Whitaker and for leaving China Grove and she uses this to get back at her for confronting her about Shirley T's parentage. She tells lies that alienate the rest of the family from Sister and displaces her in the family home. According to Sister, Stella-Rondo "always had anything in the world she's wanted and then she'd throw it away." But by the end of the story Sister has theorized that it was her husband, Mr. Whitaker, who had ended the marriage.

Uncle Rondo

Uncle Rondo is Mama's only brother and the sisters' uncle. He is the pharmacist in China Grove and is drunk for most of the story on what Sister coyly calls a "bottle of that prescription." He is the last member of the family to turn against Sister and she remembers his allegiance to her in the past. But when Stella-Rondo tells him that Sister said he did not look good in her kimono, he is enraged at her, though it was in fact Stella-Rondo who had earlier made this claim. He gets revenge on Sister by lighting firecrackers in her room, which precipitates Sister leaving home.

Joe Whitaker

See Mr. Whitaker

Mr. Whitaker

Mr. Whitaker is a traveling photographer and, according to Sister, "the only man ever dropped down in China Grove." He never appears in the story, but is significant as the central source of tension between the two sisters. Sister had dated Mr. Whitaker first, but Stella-Rondo broke them up and married him herself. Sister says that Stella-Rondo won him unfairly by telling the lie that she is bigger on one side than the other. This interpretation seems inadequate and the existence of Shirley T. suggests that his

decision might have had more to do with the fact that Stella-Rondo had premarital sex with him and became pregnant.

Themes

Individual and Family Identity

Welty's use of names suggests the degree to which the members of the family in "Why I Live at the P.O." define themselves in relation to one another. Mama and Papa-Daddy are given no proper names. Stella-Rondo is named after her uncle, and Sister has only a nickname, one that suggests that her entire identity is tied up in her relationship with Stella-Rondo. On the one hand, Sister is completely alienated from her family and their way of dealing with the "facts of life," but, on the other, her entire way of understanding herself and her world is based on her position in the family. When Sister decides she must save her pride and move away from the home after Stella-Rondo has turned everyone against her, she has no recourse but to go to the post office where her grandfather has gotten her a job and where her family provides most of the business. "There are always people who will quit buying stamps just to get on the right side of Papa- Daddy," she explains with feigned indifference at the story's close. Her self-exile at the post office has accomplished nothing but to draw the rest of the community—most of whom are relatives anyway— into "taking sides" in the family feud. Thus her bid for freedom and individuation from her family merely serves to underscore Sister's entrenchment in their insular world.

Truth and Falsehood

In "Why I Live at the P.O." the question of what is true and what is a lie divides Sister's family. Sister firmly believes that she knows the truth about Stella-Rondo's treachery in stealing Mr. Whitaker and her deception regarding Shirley T.'s parentage. Furthermore, she takes Stella-Rondo's sketchy version as a personal attack on her. While Sister "draws her own conclusions" about Stella-Rondo's recent history, the rest of the family is more than willing to go along with her face-saving fiction about Shirley T's adoption. Mama says she "prefers to take her children's word for anything when it's humanly possible," a position that Sister insinuates is "denying the facts of life." Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo believe Stella-Rondo's reports of Sister's insults toward them, which Sister's narration presents as bald-faced lies.

While Sister sees herself as the champion of truth, the extreme self-centeredness and self-pity of her narration creates the impression that her own version of reality is just as skewed and self- protective as that of Stella-Rondo. Sister feels aggrieved because those around her refuse to see the truth about Stella-Rondo's short marriage, but there is much that she herself cannot see. Sister is portrayed as a character who cannot see outside of herself and is thus incapable of insight into the ambiguities of human relations and the complexities and gradations of truth that result.

Communication

The hilarity of "Why I Live at the P.O." results, in part, from the havoc Stella-Rondo's return wreaks on her family's ability to communicate. Sister feels that she deserves an explanation of what happened in Stella-Rondo's marriage to Mr. Whitaker and an admission that Shirley T. was conceived out of wedlock, but Stella-Rondo's return to family life depends upon the other family members' cheerful denial of the obvious. Stella-Rondo seeks to simply cut off communication about the touchy subjects. "Sister, I don't need to tell you that you got a lot of nerve and always have and I'll thank you to make no future reference to my adopted child whatsoever." But when Sister goes on to do just that again and again, Stella-Rondo responds by bending the accusations Sister has made against her into comments that create tension between Sister and the rest of the family. The denials and further accusations create a farcical effect. For example, after Sister says that Shirley T. looks just like Papa-Daddy with his beard cut off, Stella-Rondo tells Papa-Daddy that Sister thinks he should shave, something she knows will seriously offend him. Sister denies this account, but Papa-Daddy not only believes it, but extrapolates further falsehoods. "I says, 'Papa-Daddy, you know I wouldn't anymore want you to cut off your beard than the man in the moon. It was the furthest thing from my mind! Stella-Rondo sat there and made that up while she was eating breast of chicken.' But he says, 'So the postmistress fails to understand why I don't cut off my beard. Which job I got you through my influence with the government. Bird's nest-is that what you call it?'" The dispute is never resolved.

Through the setting of the post office Welty offers further development of the theme of communication and its failure. The post office is the family's source of contact with the outside world. After Sister leaves home, the feud continues with the family's refusal to send or receive mail. Their inability to communicate with each other is a result of their insularity and also leads to their further isolation. The family is cut off from communicating beyond their immediate environs by post. And Sister, who serves as a hub of communication in her capacity as postmistress, becomes even more cloistered than she had been at home.

Style

Setting

Sister narrates the story of her estrangement from her family from her new 'home' at the China Grove post office, the second smallest post office in the state of Mississippi and the point of connection between the provincial community and a distant outside world. The events that make up the main part of the plot all take place in the family home where Sister has lived all her life with her mother, uncle, and grandfather. Her sister, Stella-Rondo, has gotten away from the insular world China Grove by marrying and going to Illinois. But Sister's only point of reference and only source of identity come from her wacky, strong-willed relatives and the small rural community where their ways are taken for granted. The family is prominent in the town and relatively wealthy. They have black servants to whom they unselfconsciously refer as "niggers," a practice that was not uncommon in the 1930s and 1940s. However, the story does not reflect the racial tensions that were taking place in the South, nor does it reflect broader social and cultural changes connected to rapid urbanization, modernization, the Depression, and the onset of World War II. Instead, the tensions between family members over beards and kimonos take on gigantic proportions within the insular setting of the family home.

Point of View

In a story that is so deeply preoccupied with "taking sides," the issue of point of view is paramount. Stella-Rondo and Sister's different versions of the truth and the responses that each version elicits from the family generate the plot of "Why I Live at the P.O." Though Sister narrates the story in the first person and thus has every opportunity to make a persuasive case for herself, Welty leads readers to question her accuracy. Welty lets Sister's voice and her perspective dominate the story, giving her plenty of rope with which to hang herself. In places, Sister's version of events simply seems implausible□as in her explanation of why she and Mr. Whitaker broke up. In others, her sense of victimization is so out of proportion as to seem comic□as when she complains of the terrible plight of having to "stretch two chickens over five people" instead of four. Despite her claims of championing the truth, Sister is rendered an unreliable narrator. She seeks to convince her audience that she is unambiguously in the right in her dispute with her family and that she has made a successful break from them by moving to the post office, but her account creates the opposite impression.

The Southern Idiom

Idiom is the specialized vocabulary, grammar, and word order of a language or regional dialect. Welty is famous for her skill in catching the rhythms and inflections of spoken language□particularly, the unique idiom of the American South. As reading the plot summary will reveal, the events of "Why I Live at the P.O." lose both their humor and

their poignancy without the vital tone created by Sister's emphatic voice and colloquial language. Welty's use of the speech patterns and figures of speech endemic to rural Mississippi gives "Why I Live at the P.O." its most striking stylistic feature. Sister's first-person exposition, as well as the quoted speech, is replete with sentence fragments, exclamation points, and emphases that capture the sound of talk. Papa-Daddy "l-a-y-s down his knife and fork!" Stella-Rondo "raises the window and says 'Oh!' You would've thought she was mortally wounded." Colorful colloquialisms like "dizzy as a witch," "kiss my foot," and "Miss Priss" root "Why I Live at the P.O." in a local way of talking that reflects the particularity and insularity of life in China Grove. The family is bound to the place and their mode of expression reflects this. The emphasis and diction also indicate Sister's hyperbolic sensibility. She perceives small gestures as major events and takes everything personally, which is reflected in the language that she uses to describe them. "She's always had anything in the world she wanted and then she'd throw it away. Papa-Daddy gave her this gorgeous Add-a-Pearl necklace when she was eight years old and she threw it away playing baseball when she was nine, with only two pearls."

Historical Context

Modern America and the Provincial South

Over first few decades of the twentieth century, the lifestyles of citizens across the United States became more homogeneous, and a sense of a uni- fied national identity and culture began to solidify. This was the result of a complicated combination of factors, including urbanization, increased centralization of the government, the growing international economic and military power of the United States, and the rise of mass culture mediums such as film and radio. In significant ways, however, the South was set apart from this trend. More than any other region, the South retained a separate culture from the rest of the country. In the Civil War the South had lost the right to secede from the Union, but this defeat served in some ways to strengthen regional identity. In particular, in contrast to the mainstream American ethos of progress and change, the South remained rooted in history and in sometimes romanticized visions of the agrarian past. This was reflected in the conservatism and traditionalism of the region in comparison to the rest of the country. One of the most important aspects of southern identity was the small town and rural lifestyle, with closeknit family and community at its center.

Welty attended graduate school in New York City. A few years later she returned home and took a job that required her to travel throughout rural Mississippi. Thus, shortly before she wrote "Why I Live at the P.O.," Welty observed two extreme examples of American culture. New York was the center of everything new in art, style, custom, and business. It was fast—paced and dynamic but also alienating and isolating. Upon returning to Mississippi and spending time in its most isolated rural communities, Welty was able to see more clearly the uniqueness of the traditional southern society, with its emphasis on family and community. "Why I Live at the P.O." reflects the insularity of smalltown southern life. Sister is largely oblivious to the world outside of her family and community. However, some of her tension with Stella-Rondo is based on Stella-Rondo's wider experiences in the North and her greater sophistication. The presence of popular culture and name-brand consumer items in the family home also suggests the influence of modern national culture on traditional southern society.

Women in the South

The conservatism of southern culture was re- flected in the status of women and gender relations. While during the "roaring twenties" premarital sex had become much more widely accepted among sophisticated urbanites, in the 1930s and 40s it still remained strictly taboo in the rural South. This explains the family's complicity in the face of Stella-Rondo's unconvincing account of Shirley T.'s origins. In small communities women typically lived at home until marriage and their choices for mates were few. Sister's description of Mr. Whitaker as "the only man ever dropped down in China Grove" reflects the narrow field of romantic options. Middle-class social standards determined

that an acceptable choice was not only a man of the right age and class, but preferably a local resident as well. Marriage to someone outside of the community was frowned upon and women seldom had the opportunity to meet men provided by leaving home for school or work. Unmarried women, known by the derogatory term of spinster, had to depend on their families to support them.

Southern women were more likely than other American women to work outside of the home, attributable to a higher rate of poverty in the South than any other region. However, most of these women worked in traditionally female roles such as domestic help, nurses, and teachers. The percentage of women working in traditionally male professions was lower than the national average. Sister's position at the tiny post office is largely honorary and would not have given her either the status or the financial power to make a greater bid for independence from her family.

Critical Overview

When it appeared in 1941, Welty's first book, *A Curtain of Green,* was met with mostly good reviews. However, reviewers who made up the northern literary establishment tended to find Welty's characters abnormal, a quality they chauvinistically associated with the South. "Like many Southern writers, she has a strong taste for melodrama and is preoccupied with the demented, the deformed, the queer, the highly spiced," reads a *Time* review. A mixed review in Books includes a similar comment: "As a whole, *A Curtain of Green* shows too great a preoccupation with the abnormal and grotesque. Some day some one might explore this tendency of Southern writers." However, the collection also won some very positive reviews. Interestingly, those critics who liked the book tended to focus on an opposite characteristic—Welty's beautiful and subtle portrayal of the normal. For example, the *New York Times's* Miriam Hauser states that "few contemporary books have ever impressed me quite as deeply as this book . . .To explain just why . . .appears as difficult as to define why an ordinary face, encountered by chance on the street, might suddenly reveal miraculous beauty, through a smile perhaps, or an unexpected expression of beauty." The reviewer for the *New Yorker* also points out Welty's extraordinary rendering of the ordinary. "Miss Welty's stories are deceptively simple. They are concerned with ordinary people, but what happens to them and the manner of the telling are far from ordinary." In her introduction to the collection Katherine Anne Porter seems to ascribe to the former view when she describes Sister of "Why I Live at the P.O." as "a terrifying case of dementia praecox," the Latin term for schizophrenia. But she also states that "there are almost perfect stories" in the collection and praises Welty's "blistering humor and her just cruelty."

Though Welty went on to become a beloved and respected writer, contradictory perceptions of her work have persisted. She is sometimes grouped with writers of the "Southern grotesque" school who portray the dark underbelly of the gracious Southern lifestyle. And sometimes she is characterized as a "Southern regionalist," a warm and funny writer who affectionately portrays the foibles of her own tribe. In *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Carol Anne Johnston suggests that both views undervalue Welty's artistry. Johnston claims that only way to account for such a discrepancy in interpretations is to recognize that Welty's genius lies in the merging and balancing of opposites. In her opinion, the first critic to do this was novelist Robert Penn Warren. His influential 1944 essay "Love and Separateness in Eudora Welty" explores the tension between intimacy and independence running through her first two collections of short stories. Focusing on the paradoxes of Welty's theme, he shows how, again and again, her characters love deeply and then are isolated.

Critical responses to Welty's fiction are almost always preoccupied, in one way or another, with its Southernness. But in her own critical writing Welty has made it clear that, while she is inspired by her cultural surroundings, she also sees herself as part of a broad, international literary tradition. In her book of literary criticism, *The Eye of the Story*, she discusses authors ranging from Chekov to Austen, drawing parallels between their aesthetics and her own. Welty's reputation has been overshadowed by that of her contemporary and fellow Mississippian, William Faulkner, one of the great American

modernists. Though Faulkner also roots his writing deeply in his native state, his work has not been reduced as "regionalism." A number of scholars have compared the two writers' treatments of Southern themes. Some conclude that Welty has been labeled quaint because of her focus on female characters and "feminine" themes of love and family, while Faulkner's more "masculine" themes of history and legacy are seen as universal.

In general, Welty's most interested and insightful commentators have been other writers, and she has not been studied extensively by scholars. However, this is beginning to change. In recent years, literary critics have begun to apply a range of contemporary theories to her works. Regardless of scholarly trends, Welty's fiction has won her a loyal following and "Why I Live at the P.O." remains a perennial favorite among students and readers.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses the implications of the first-person narrator's unbalanced perspective in "Why I Live at the P.O."

"Why I Live at the P.O." takes the form of a dramatic monologue, with Sister's emphatic firstperson account of her sister's return home and her own eventual self-exile at the post office given in a direct appeal to the reader. Sister argues her position on the family argument forcefully, presenting overwhelming evidence of Stella-Rondo's craftiness and her own terrible persecution. Furthermore, she presents her case with the fierce conviction that she is in the right, and with no indication that the matter is anything but of the gravest order. By giving Sister's voice complete free reign, Welty would seem to give Sister every possible advantage in winning the reader to her side. There is no place in the story where Mama, Papa-Daddy, Uncle Rondo, or especially Stella-Rondo get to present the facts of the feud from their perspectives. The only information available is that provided by Sister. However, this does not mean that the reader is likely to be convinced by Sister's version of events. I would hazard to guess that most readers respond to Sister's list of grievances with some skepticism and that very few indeed fail to see the humor in the situation that she herself takes so seriously. "I was trying to write about the way people who live away off from nowhere have to amuse themselves by dramatizing every situation that comes along by exaggerating it," Welty explains in a *Conversations with Eudora Welty.* In this essay I will look at Welty's use of Sister's own dominating voice to reveal the weaknesses in her understanding of the family fight and family dynamics, focusing on Welty's playful references to physical and ethical disproportion.

Sister doesn't ask readers for sympathy so much as she asserts her right to it. The story is one long, self-righteous justification of why Sister left home and moved to the post office, a situation that benefits her not at all except in her right to claim the moral high ground. According to Sister, the entire community is now divided into "sides"—those who see the justice of Sister's position and those who "will quit buying stamps just to get on the right side of Papa-Daddy." The irony of Sister's vehement appeal to the reader to take her side relates to her inability to see it as just that—a self-interested and subjective perspective. Sister speaks as if people who want to stay on the "right side" of Papa- Daddy are self-serving and biased, while those who agree with her are simply correct. In Sister's view, there is only one way to see the truth—her own way. But true justice is predicated on balance and perspective— the ability to measure and evaluate evidence from more than one side, as represented in the icon of the scales of justice. Sister employs illogical logic, evoking the abstract principles of fairness in a manner that shamelessly and transparently skews the scales of justice in favor of her own point of view.

The central issue in the conflict between Sister and Stella-Rondo is the affection of Mr. Whitaker. In the opening paragraph of the story, Sister asserts her initial claim to Mr. Whitaker and offers a somewhat perplexing explanation of how Stella- Rondo broke

them up. "Told him I was one-sided. Bigger on one side than the other, which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same." Throughout the story, Sister represents Stella-Rondo as amazingly successful at turning those closest to Sister against her by telling bald-faced lies about her. But, in this first example of Stella-Rondo's deceit that Sister cites, the reader is in no position to judge the facts of the matter. In *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction* critic Carol Ann Johnston explains that Stella-Rondo's accusation that Sister is "one-sided" and "bigger on one side than the other," refers to the folk wisdom that every woman has one breast that is slightly larger than the other. "Sister's reaction to this accusation is very telling," Johnston writes, "She takes it personally, denying it vehemently, when she might just as well have said, 'Well, so is Stella-Rondo and so is every woman.' But, as we see over and over in the story, Sister takes every comment and accusation as an intensely personal attack." While Stella-Rondo's accusation may or may not be true in regard to the issue of the symmetry of Sister's breasts, by introducing the sisters' conflict with this description, Welty makes reference to the flagrant bias that circumscribes Sister's perspective and renders her "one-sided" as a narrator. To build on Johnston's point, Sister's might just as well have admitted that everyone is "one-sided" in their view of personal events that involve them. If she had, her perspective on events would be much more convincing and much less funny. In the points of view as well as breasts, no one is perfectly balanced. In her attempt to convince her audience of Stella-Rondo's misdeed, Sister reveals herself as incapable of comprehending— let alone admitting—that she is not fair and objective in her overblown account of the family argument.

Sister holds Stella-Rondo responsible for taking what she sees as rightfully hers, starting with being born on her first birthday. As Sister goes on to characterize Stella-Rondo as someone who "always had anything in the world she wanted and then she'd throw it away," readers can affirm that Sister is unable to see any situation related to Stella-Rondo in an even-handed way. Sister recounts Stella-Rondo's profligacy with a "gorgeous Add-a-Pearl necklace," clearly categorizing this item, coveted from childhood, along with Mr. Whitaker. Sister is so self-centered that she presents the fact that Stella-Rondo once lost a necklace as if it were a personal affront to her, deliberate and calculated. Among the things that Stella-Rondo takes from Sister is the good opinion of the other family members. Sister understands the family as being composed of two "sides"—hers and Stella-Rondo's—that are perpetually uneven. The favor of loved ones —like the charm bracelet that Stella-Rondo tries to steal, and the radio that Sister triumphantly receives from Uncle Rondo after he takes it back from Stella- Rondo—volleys from to one sister or the other, but can never be shared by them both.

Sister's tension with the rest of the family is triggered by her indignation at Stella-Rondo's deception regarding Shirley T. Again, she reacts as if the principle of honesty was at stake, rather than the very personal questions regarding two sisters' relationships with the same man. As if the competition between the two sisters was not enough to render family dynamics topsy-turvy, the arbiters of the sisters' struggle are themselves portrayed as out of kilter in both their capacity for judgement and their physical appearance. Papa-Daddy is self-centered and self-important, a quality that is embodied in the excessively long beard to which he is excessively attached. Mama is an unreliable judge for the opposite reason; she seems to lack her own perspective, and

is thus too easily won over by Stella-Rondo's. When Sister appeals to her to face up to the "facts of life" about Shirley T.'s parentage, she adopts Stella- Rondo's attitude of blithe denial, saying "I prefer to take my children's word for anything when it's humanly possible." Mama "weighs two hundred pounds and has real tiny feet," a physical description that is also suggestive of being precariously off-balance. And Uncle Rondo, running around the house drunk in a negligee, is "a good case of a one-track mind." He is the last family member to be "turned against" Sister, but only because he has been too dizzy to follow the argument.

Sister is so focused on Stella-Rondo's persecution of her and her family's "unfair" taking of sides that she does not bother to address the question that remains as to why Mr. Whitaker would leave Sister based merely on the unevenness of her breasts. She sees herself as a champion of truth and uses abstract justification for why Stella-Rondo ought to reveal to the family just what happened between her and Mr. Whitaker, but she doesn't admit that Stella-Rondo's accusation comments in an obscure way on her sexuality, an intensely personal issue that is at the repressed center of their conflict. Sister was the first one to meet the travelling photographer and she dated him before he became involved with Stella- Rondo and chose her instead. It is easy enough to see why Sister would resent Stella-Rondo for this reason, and to wonder about what defect on her own part led to his choice. Instead of admitting her vulnerability or hurt feelings, Sister positions herself as the victim of injustice. With the childish view that good and bad life events ought to be doled out equally, she cries "no fair!" As the elder sister, convention dictates that she ought to be considered first for marriage. But, as the existence of Shirley T. proves, Stella-Rondo and Mr. Whitaker's courtship did not follow rules of propriety and convention. Part of Sister's frustration with Stella-Rondo is that she works within a different value system, refusing to acknowledge the rules of fair competition by which Sister wishes to play, and using a range of tactics to reframe, deny, and invert Sister's claims of truth.

In the powerful voice that makes "Why I Live at the P.O." such a stylistic tour de force, Sister describes as "lies" statements that may have gradations of meaning, double meanings, or subtexts, and misses out on a good deal of the truth herself in the process. Sister's voice and perspective crowd out everything else. It is as if she must keep talking because if she doesn't, somebody else will. And in Sister's world, this is a grave matter, because saying things seems to have the power to make them so. "If Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and *attempt* to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker—that is, to offer that truth in defense of which Sister has given up everything—" I'd simply put my fingers in both ears and refuse to listen," reads the story's last line. Sister narrates the story from this posture, with her ears blocked to other perspectives. But at the end of her diatribe against Stella-Ronda's lies, Sister concludes with lie of her own.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, "The One-Sided Narrator in *'Why I Live at the P.O.'" for Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Pingatore traces the publication history of Why I Live at the P.O., through Welty's inspirations and influences, to offer an interpretive critical analysis.

Critical Essay #3

The *Atlantic Monthly* published this story in April 1941 on pages 443-50. "Why I Live at the P.O." was the second story of Welty's to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly;* it followed the February appearance of "A Worn Path" and preceded the publication of "Powerhouse" in June 1941. According to Kreyling (1991), the acceptance of these three stories by the *Atlantic Monthly* signaled the clear arrival of Welty on the national literary scene. This advance in Welty's literary stature also fulfilled a major aspiration for her literary agent, Diarmuid Russell, who predicted such national acclaim would insure for Welty the publication of a book, and so it did. The story was included in Welty's first collection of short stories, *A Curtain of Green*, published in November of 1941 by Doubleday, Doran. The first British edition of *A Curtain of Green* appeared in July 1943, published by the Bodley Head.

Although it was to become one of Welty's most popular stories, "Why I Live at the P.O." suffered an inauspicious beginning. Its history of rejection began in October 1938, when Whit Burnett, editor of *Story*, offered consoling words to buffer his rejection of yet another of Welty's early submissions. She had submitted "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden" and "Petrified Man" earlier in the year, but Burnett could not secure editorial consensus about any of the three, and so rejected each of them in turn. Nonetheless, he encouraged Welty, noting in a letter housed at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History that "Why I Live at the P.O." "'is the closest yet'" (Marrs 1988).

Kreyling reports that Welty sent "Why I Live at the P.O." to Russell in the summer of 1940, after its rejection by both *Southern Review and Harper's Magazine.* Polk (1994), however, points out that the manuscript submitted to *Southern Review* in April 1939 was titled "Sister" and that Welty denied in a 1989 interview that this story was a earlier working of "Why I Live at the P.O." Upon receipt of the manuscript, the Russell & Volkening agency submitted the story to some six magazines, including the *New Yorker,Collier's, Harper's Bazaar, Good Housekeeping, Mademoiselle, and Harper's*, before its acceptance at the *Atlantic Monthly*.Referring to a 1941 letter from Welty to Russell, Kreyling remarks that the sale of "Why I Live at the P.O." to the *Atlantic Monthly* probably "saved it altogether" as it seems Welty was considering giving up on it. A copy of the *Atlantic Monthly* in which the story appears is housed at the MDAH, complete with Welty's signature on its cover (Marrs 1988).

The MDAH also holds an undated typescript copy of this story, which Marrs notes differs considerably from the published versions and from the other two typescripts held at the MDAH. These changes are not elaborated on by Marrs, nor are they addressed by McDonald (1983) or Lewis (1988), who examine the changes in the story only between its appearance in the *Atlantic Monthly* and in *A Curtain* of Green a few months later. Both report only slight variations, most of which are limited to alterations in punctuation. Lewis identifies three variants that either expand the discussion of Papa- Daddy's beard and Uncle Rondo's dizziness, for instance, or provoke speculation, such as the change from "Negroes" in the *Atlantic* version to "niggers" in *A Curtain of Green.* The undated

typescript also contains a note to John Robinson, Welty's friend and fellow writer, directing him: "'My new theme read it & throw it away'" (qtd. in Marrs).

This favorite of Welty's stories was often selected for inclusion in reissuings of her work. "Why I Live at the P.O." was included in the Modern Library's 1954 *Selected Stories of Eudora Welty,* the 1965 selection of *Thirteen Stories* by Ruth M. Vande Kieft, and its reissuing as *Moon Lake and Other Stories* by the Franklin Library in 1980, the same year that Harcourt Brace published *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty,* in which the story also appears. The story was also reprinted in *The House of Fiction,* edited by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate and published by Scribner's in 1950, as well as in *Readings for a Liberal Education*, edited by Louis G. Locke and colleagues and published in 1957 by Rinehart. The story has appeared in numerous literary anthologies as well. For example, Mordecai Richler's edition of *The Best of Modern Humor,* published by Knopf in 1958; *A Collection of Classic Southern Humor: Fiction and Occasional Fact, By Some of the South's Best Storytellers,* edited by George William Koon and published in 1984 by Peachtree; *Look Who's Talking: An Anthology of Voices in the Modern American Short Story,* edited by Bruce Weber and published by Washington Square Press in 1986; and *The Norton Book of American Short Stories,* edited by Peter S. Prescott and published by Norton in 1988.

Welty recorded her reading of the story for Caedmon Records in 1952, a recording that was reissued as an audiocassette in 1986. At least two dramatic adaptations of the story have been undertaken: one by Gloria Baxter, which was produced at Memphis State University in 1981, and another in 1979 by the University of Illinois, which Marrs notes was combined with the granting of an honorary degree to Welty. Welty discusses that production in an interview with Joanna Maclay in 1980 (Prenshaw 1984). She notes her worry about how the story would translate to the stage and voices concerns that she felt about actually seeing, on stage, characters whom Welty had not "seen" herself, given that the original story comes only from Sister's representation of the rest of her family. Welty concurs with the interviewer that the production avoided the pitfalls she had feared.

Critical Essay #4

As with all of the stories that Welty composed before the beginning of her thirty-year association with Diarmuid Russell, little, if anything, is known about the circumstances of the composition of the story. However, by the time she submitted "Why I Live at the P.O." for publication, she had published some ten or eleven stories in small literary magazines, including the *Southern Review,* and had begun to establish a network of literary relationships with such influential people as Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, Ford Madox Ford, and Katherine Anne Porter. Welty was beginning to make her way onto the national literary scene, and, despite early rejections, continued to write for the joy of writing.

The most direct source for "Why I Live at the P.O." was mentioned by Welty in an interview with two of her own students, Royals and Little, in 1978; the comment has been much repeated by Welty scholars and critics, despite Welty's own disclaimers as to the significance of this event in the germination of the story. The incident noted by Welty entails her catching sight from a train window of a woman ironing in the back of a post office. But when asked about the incident, Welty retorts that the sight of the woman in the post office is "a good example" of something "that's a fact but nothing like the truth" (Prenshaw). "The sight of the lady ironing was the striking of the match that set it off, but I wouldn't have written a story just about seeing somebody with an ironing board in the post office." Stories, according to Welty, "have long fuses that run a long way back," so that while a particular incident might ignite the spark, it does not provide the fuel for the story's insight.

Literary influence is not an issue much addressed in relation to this story, except in the most general of terms. Appel (1965), for instance, likens the quality of Welty's humor in "Why I Live at the P.O." to that of Mark Twain and Ring Lardner. Calling it "one of the finest pieces of American humor," Appel extols the virtues of the story, among which he includes the fact that its comic antics are tempered by a "sympathy that is generous yet unsentimental." Most commentators simply note its adept use of figures commonplace in local color stories, a tradition in Southern literature. An example is Skaggs's (1972) brief consideration of Sister as an essentially harmless eccentric whose provincial ways of thinking and speaking permit the reader to feel a sense of superiority. Du Priest (1982) detects allusions to Homer's *Iliad* in "Why I Live at the P.O." in terms of both its subject matter and its structure: "The pattern is this: a history of war, a world at war, nations at war, a town divided, a family at battle, two sisters who've never gotten along, and finally one person not at peace with herself."

Critical Essay #5

Both Drake (1960) and Buswell (1961) draw parallels between Sister as a first-person female narrator and Edna Earle, her counterpart in Welty's novella *The Ponder Heart*.Both females are loquacious, opinionated, assertive, and compelling narrators. Both Drake and Buswell identify the two women as representative of the "old maid" figure, who nonetheless commands, by her very presence, a certain authority and recognition in the community. Sister, like Edna Earle, assumes a traditionally male responsibility by securing work outside the home, yet remains within the conventions of the feminine by what Drake labels "a vocation of service." While both chafe at the restrictions of that vocation from time to time, neither protagonist is ever entirely free to sever those family ties completely, as Sister seems to begin to discover at the end of her amusing narrative.

Romines (1989) cites "Circe" as the story most similar to "Why I Live at the P.O." She does so based on her assessment of both stories as exemplars of "how not to tell a story." In Romines's view, both Circe and her narrative counterpart, Sister, exempt themselves from the communal nature of storytelling that Welty depicts as essential in some of her other fiction, such as in her novel *Losing Battles*.Both of these female narrators appropriate their stories from the control of others, Odysseus and Stella-Rondo respectively, who, in each narrator's view, misconstrue the tale to the detriment of the narrator. Sister, like Circe, sets out to make right the misrepresentation of facts that serve to malign each woman in ways she finds intolerable.

These narrative preemptive strikes constitute acts of courage and authority, according to Romines. "Sister refuses to subside as a helpless violated victim. Instead, she recasts herself as a hero. The source of this renewal is her essential self-possession." However, the autonomy Sister claims for herself as mistress of her own fate is juxtaposed against the isolation to which she has subjected herself in order to assert her hard-won independence. Ultimately, Romines observes, Sister, like Circe, is a failed narrator because each female, in her striving to resist another's definition of the self, has severed the very ties to community that are intrinsic to the act of storytelling.

Finally, a number of critics link "Why I Live at the P.O." to "Petrified Man" as stories that demonstrate Welty's consummate skill in capturing the Southern idiom, particularly in female speech (Vande Kieft ([1962] 1987); Appel 1965; Skaggs 1972; Howard 1973; and Schmidt 1991). Towers cites "Why I Live at the P.O." as a prime example of Welty's "mastery of the demotic speech of the region" and nominates the story as "a small classic of the genre" (1980).

Critical Essay #6

Much of the surprisingly limited scholarly attention accorded this most popular of Welty's stories focuses on certain questions readers repeatedly ask. "Is Sister insane?" ranks as an inquiry that surfaced early and has remained a lively source of discussion. Katherine Anne Porter, in her noted introduction to the 1941 edition of *A Curtain of Green*, initiated the debate by nonchalantly remarking that "the heroine of 'Why I Live at the P.O.' is a terrifying case of dementia praecox." While some commentators, such as Drake (1960) and Herrscher (1965), directly challenge Porter's assessment of Sister's sanity, others, like Ruth Vande Kieft, build their interpretations around the assumption that Sister acts "with the insane logic of the paranoid" (1962). It is not until 1982 that Vande Kieft retracts this early assumption, when she labels the diagnosis of "paranoic schizophrenia" as "the Ur-blooper of Welty criticism."

Presumably, it is Welty's own response to the question of Sister's sanity that helped to stem, if not stop, the growth of this issue as a dominant feature in the discussions of this story. In a 1965 interview with *Comment* magazine, Welty directly addressed the ineptness of Porter's diagnosis. "It never occurred to me while I was writing the story (and it still doesn't) that I was writing about someone in serious mental trouble" (qtd. in Prenshaw 1984). Instead, Welty suggests, Sister's predicament consists primarily of isolation and the need "to amuse" herself by "dramatizing every situation that comes along by exaggerating it—'telling it'." Welty's emphasis on the salient aspect that performance plays in this phenomenon is taken up by some critics, such as Eisenger (1979), who calls the story nothing less than "an ingenious accomplishment" of a "fiction absorbed with its own language."

Welty's own comments seem to confirm observations such as Eisenger's. Welty told Bill Ferris in a 1977 interview that "Why I Live at the P.O." "was an exercise in using the spoken word to tell a story." Again she mentions the geographical isolation of Southerners as a motivation that "encourages our sense of exaggeration and the comic" as well as expresses the true concern that such people feel for each other. Welty also calls the process by which the artist converts ordinary speech into artistic prose "a transformation, a magician act," thus calling attention to the aspect of performance involved in this story, an activity shared by Welty and her narrator.

Drake's 1960 designation of "Why I Live at the P.O." as a "cater-cornered epic" corresponds to Welty's description of her intention to depict what she heard and saw around her in the South. He proclaims that Sister's predisposition to exaggerate fits perfectly into the form of the "mock-epic because it is the absurd that has been exalted to the sublime." Unlike Vande Kieft and Appel, who find the story representative of one of Welty's darker comedies, Drake and Herrscher view the story as a triumph of both sanity and aesthetics. Herrscher, in fact, makes the argument that not only is Sister *not* insane, but she emerges as the only sane person in "a childish, neurotic, and bizarre family." He maintains that, far from being paranoid or schizophrenic, or merely vulgar, Sister represents unerring good sense and admirable mastery over the reality in which she finds herself. He attributes her "competence" to her status as a firstborn child who

has had to take on an early responsibility for the blundering family; she chooses to abdicate that serious undertaking only when she finds her "own sanity and stability" in some jeopardy.

May (1978) also challenges the reductive view of Sister as merely paranoid and proposes an alternative approach to the reading of the story, one that incorporates the reader's response to the story as a salient feature of the story's interpretation. The key, for May, lies in the dynamics of Sister's relationship to her family, and in particular, to Stella-Rondo. In this, May joins several critics (such as Vande Kieft 1962, 1987; Drake 1960, 1970; Tarbox 1972; Pickett 1973; Romines 1989; and Schmidt 1991) who find the sibling rivalry an important consideration in "Why I Live at the P.O."

Employing the phenomenological theories of R. D. Laing, May points out that Sister's narrative involves a splitting of her psyche into the subjective realm of desire and fear, which she claims for herself, and the objective depiction of those desires or fears, which Sister attributes to Stella-Rondo, who, according to May, acts "out Sister's subjective feelings." As examples of the "divided self" the story reveals, May offers the sisterly disputes over who said what about Papa-Daddy's beard or what Uncle Rondo looked like in his niece's kimono. Schmidt (1991) takes up a similar line of thought and describes this internal conflict in terms of Sister's "own self-revulsion," noting that while she clearly expresses a strong desire for autonomy and authority, Sister nonetheless has "internalized" her family's negative characterizations of her as the selfish and uncaring female. Thus Sister is inclined to judge herself deserving of the selfimposed isolation of living at the post office rather than being in her rightful place as the favored child of her family.

Tarbox (1972) mentions Sister as representative of the "loser" characters in Welty's fiction who are finally unsuccessful in their quest for maternal love. Tarbox views Sister's sensitivity to noise as a counterpart to her compulsion to talk; each represents an aspect of her sadomasochistic nature, which in turn reveals her untenable position as the sibling displaced in the family's affections. Drake, on the other hand, suggests that it is Stella- Rondo's "lack of penitence" that disturbs and finally alienates Sister from her prodigal sibling.

Welty's use of the war metaphor in "Why I Live at the P.O." interests Du Priest. While Schmidt comments on the "war of words" (1991) that constitutes Sister's narrative, and Romines notes that words are used as "a highly elaborated weapon" in the family arsenal (1989), Du Priest extends the discussion of war as a metaphor for the entire story, an idea alluded to previously by Drake, who identifies the dynamics of Southern family life as militaristic in nature: "Many Southerners, especially those from big families, are perfectly familiar with the guerrilla warfare which exists within that secular Communion of Saints which is the family" (1960). Du Priest embellishes Drake's comment by taking note of the July 4 date, which DuPriest claims celebrates a military conquest, and the use of images connected to ideas of the East versus the West such as the references to the kimono and the town's name, China Grove. Welty's purpose, according to Du Priest, is to examine "the etiology of war" and to locate it in the family

(1982). Pride is the culprit, in this critic's view, the factor that contributes to familial disputes and that is transposed to the global arena ultimately.

The remaining commentary on this story revolves around an analysis of its formalistic features: the nature of its comedy and the ways in which Welty achieves her hilarious effects. Vande Kieft (1962) leads off the discussion by identifying this story as representative of comedies of rigidity; her identification is based on Henri Bergson's categories of the sources of laughter. The repetitive nature of human thought and action provokes a comic response to the perversity of the situations, as is the case in Sister's narrative. Vande Kieft determines that the story succeeds due to Welty's expert depiction of Sister's "inexorable logic," including its exposure of her metaphysical alienation, as well as to Welty's superb command of the "Southern idiom." Calling Sister's monologue "elliptical and baroque," Vande Kieft sets the tone and tenor for subsequent discussions of the rhetorical features of this masterful achievement. Appel (1965) echoes Vande Kieft's analysis but adds that the story also serves as "a farcical treatment of the often obsessive Southern concern with 'kin'."

Schmidt extends Vande Kieft's designation of the story as exemplary of the comedies of rigidity to suggest that such stories are representative of the early Welty canon and that they offer a strong contrast to the later "comedies of rebirth." He finds "Why I Live at the P.O." indicative of the earlier group of stories but inclusive of features such as Sister's assertiveness that anticipate the latter category. He observes that "a majority of her [Welty's] early comic stories . . . satirize rigidities in behavior, especially in women, whereas later collections . . . shift the comic balance to include a much greater role for the satirization of men . . . and a corresponding rise in interest of comedies of rebirth—stories featuring motifs of escape and transformation."

Pickett (1973) and Howard (1973) both provide brief analyses of the rhetorical choices Welty makes in this story to achieve her comic effects. Howard cites Welty's use of the "hyperbolic cliche" and slang as crucial to the success of the story and Welty's unfavorable depiction of white lower-class women. Pickett identifies "irony, word manipulation, oblique details, fallacies in logic, and characterization" as the stylistic techniques that Welty employs in "Why I Live at the P.O.". Although Sister's ironic self-exposure as a petty and jealous sibling comprises a pivotal device to convey the humor in the story, Pickett also describes how word manipulation, such as Sister's description of her sister's kimono as a "terrible flesh-colored contraption," adds to the humorous exposure of Sister's own self-deceptions, as does her use of oblique detail, such as the inclusion of brand names. Through the skillful employment of such rhetorical devices, Pickett argues, Welty manipulates the colloquial style of the story so that it serves a thematic purpose by suggesting which values are enduring, for example, the sanctity of family life, and which are not.

Wages (1973) provides a brief commentary on the relationship between the use of the family name Rondo and the structure of the story, a feature that others make note of as well (Schmidt and May, for instance). He reminds readers that the rondo is a form of musical composition that restates the dominant theme recursively, interspersing minor themes between the major ones. "The circular motion of a static situation accounts for

part of the humor of the story," in Wages's view, as does the ironic deployment of "familial sobriquets."

Graves (1977) raises an issue that is not considered by other critics: that of the identity of Shirley- T's father. Graves attempts to make a case for naming Uncle Rondo for the position. She points out that the child calls him "Papa," and that Sister believes the child "was the spit-image of Papa- Daddy if he'd cut off his beard," which, Graves argues, would make Papa-Daddy like his son, Uncle Rondo; if Uncle Rondo had fathered Stella-Rondo's child, it would, in Graves's view, account for the long rift between Stella-Rondo and her uncle, during which time she refuses to be called by his name. The implication in Graves's argument is that such incestuous occurrences are not unheard of in the time and place of Welty's story.

There is much to be said even yet about this very well-known and much admired story of Eudora Welty's. As with a number of her early works, the deceptively simple surface permits, or even invites, fairly straightforward observations of the kind encouraged by early reactions to the story and even by Welty herself. But another line of interpretation, of a somewhat more complex nature, might also be investigated. Critical theories that enable a more sophisticated assessment of the linguistic elements in the story and align those elements to theme and structure would be welcome. The narrative as an act of performance seems a particularly promising area inadequately investigated thus far. Another avenue of exploration entails a deeper and perhaps more audacious examination of the relationship between the author and her work. For instance, a number of the features that Schmidt points out as characteristic of Sister also apply in a "cater-cornered" fashion to Welty herself. From her literary autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings,* we learn that the author, like her protagonist, was the favored child until the birth of her two younger brothers; like Sister, Welty assumed the traditionally male responsibility of contributing to the family finances after her father's death; thus she achieved a position of recognized authority in the outside world as well as within the family as is the case with Sister. Surely, as a young woman fresh out of graduate school and longing to become a writer, the young Welty must have entertained fleeting thoughts about striking out on her own, just as Sister did. Indeed, we know that from time to time Welty did extricate herself from her family situation long enough to spend extended periods of times in such places as San Francisco and Europe. Further exploration of the ways in which Welty envisioned these independent gestures and the possible ramifications of these may be induced, however, from a closer analysis of those early stories about independent, if conflicted, females. As Schmidt cautions, any resemblances need to be explored tentatively and carefully, not so much as clues to Welty's personal life but as clues to the process by which the author transforms those ordinary life experiences into art.

Source: Diana R. Pingatore, "*A Curtain of Green and Other Stories:* 'Why I Live at the P.O.,'" in *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Eudora Welty,* G. K. Hall & Co., 1996, pp. 69-79.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay, May advocates a close, analytical reading of Why I Live at the P.O. *to extract a more insightful understanding of the complex comical and psychological dynamics that are involved in the story's composition.*

Often in literary studies a well-known artist will turn critic briefly and make an offhand comment about the work of a fellow writer that becomes solidified into dogma and thus creates a critical or interpretative dead end. Such seems to be the case with the one-liner that Katherine Anne Porter tossed off over thirty years ago about Eudora Welty's popular little family comedy, "Why I Live at the P.O." Porter's classifying of the story as a "terrifying case of dementia praecox" seems so "right" that no one has ever bothered to examine or challenge her judgment. If the story is a case study, albeit an hilarious one, of paranoia in action, then little is left for the critic to do except nod his head with a knowing smile.

However, this alone does not account for the lack of discussion of one of the most anthologized stories of a writer whose other stories are discussed widely. Another reason for critical silence on the work is that it is comic. No interpretation can fully account for what makes it so funny, and no one wants the thankless task of explaining a joke. One could point out, as Ruth M. Vande Kieft has, that the narrator of the story nicely illustrates Bergson's notion that mechanical rigidity in human beings is laughable. There is certainly nothing flexible about Sister's persecution obsession. One could suggest, as Sean O'Faolain has, that the story, like most good humor, is a very mixed affair and thus hides a groan somewhere behind the joke. Again, it seems clear that if we laugh because the characters of the story seem so obsessed with trivia, we also despair to think that people *can* be so obsessed with trivia. After making these general comments, critics have found little else to say about the humor of the story except to admire Welty's ability to capture a particular humorous verbal idiom. Everyone agrees that the story is a *tour de force.*

An additional problem that faces Welty critics who would interpret "Why I Live at the P.O." is the fact that its tone and technique seem radically different from Welty's usual fictional milieu. Best known and most discussed for stories that take place in a "Season of Dreams" where reality is transformed into fantasy and fable, and, as R. P. Warren has noted in a famous essay, the logic of things is not the logic of ordinary daylight life, Welty, in this, one of her most widely-read stories, creates a season that is not one of dream at all; the reality of things seems to remain stubbornly, almost militantly, real. Warren has suggested that the dream-like effect of the typical Welty story seems to result from her ability to squeeze meaning from the most trivial details. However, here in a story that depends on the triviality of things, there is no dream-like effect; the trivial details are comically allowed to remain trivial. They are never transformed into hierophanic entities the way they are in such typical Welty fables as "First Love," "Livvie," "Death of a Traveling Salesman," or "A Worn Path." No one has dared to try to show how Sister's green-tomato pickle or Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimono are transformed from the profane into the sacred.

For these reasons the story seems almost impervious to critical analysis. Aside from Robert Drake's interesting but inconclusive analysis of the story as a "cater-cornered epic" several years ago in *The Mississippi Quarterly,* the only comments that have been made about the form of the story are the suggestions made by several readers that it is a monologue similar to Ring Lardner's "Haircut," for Sister reveals more about her moral status than she intends to or is aware of. Drake never makes clear just what the nature of the "cater-cornered epic" genre is. He suggests that it involves the exalting of the everyday and the familiar to the level of the heroic and epic; yet the result is not mockheroic, but rather something harder to define than that. Somehow, the cater-cornered nature of the story is related to a multiple point of view in which sister seems inwardly aware of the absurdity of her position in the P.O., but must justify her position anyway. Because Drake does not make the connection between Sister's psyche and the story's structure clear, I am left unsure about how the work is epical, cater-cornered, butt-ended, parallel-parked, or otherwise geometrically arranged.

I have reviewed these desultory comments about Welty's little story at such length because they illustrate certain basic interpretative problems about the work. The problem of calling Sister a schizophrenic is the resulting temptation to leave the issue there and thus ignore both the structural implications the phenomenon has for the story and the phenomenological implications it has for the characters. The problem of making such general comments about the story's monologue genre, its insane logic, its geometrical design, or its trivia-saturated detail is that all these remarks seem to be critical dead ends. None lead to a unified interpretation of the story or an appreciation of the complexity of its human content and artistic structure. R. P. Warren says that Welty's typical fictional character is, in one way or another, isolated from the world. Around this character, Warren further suggests, Eudora Welty creates either the drama of the isolated person's attempt to escape into the real world, or the drama of the discovery, either by the isolated character or by the reader, of the nature of the particular predicament. Of these two types, "Why I Live at the P.O." seems clearly to belong to the latter. Moreover, it seems equally clear that since Sister is less interested in discovering than justifying her situation, the drama of the story resides in the reader's gradual discovery of just exactly why Sister does live at the P.O. Consequently, although the story, by its very nature, seems to resist interpretation, by its very nature also it requires interpretation. The drama of the story exists as the drama of the reader's analysis of sister's basic situation as she herself describes it.

To make this discovery, I suggest the reader play the role of phenomenologist rather than psychoanalyst. To say that Sister's motives, actions, and intentions are other than those she proclaims is to indulge in the obvious and get nowhere. To attempt to analyze Sister's phenomenological situation in relation to her family, particularly her relation to her sister, Stella-Rondo, is to participate in the drama of discovery that Welty's story demands. R. D. Laing rather than Freud seems to be the best guide here. If Sister is indeed a schizophrenic, whatever that means, her predicament should not be analyzed *in vacuo,* but within the family nexus itself. I don't pretend that the method developed by R. D. Laing and Aaron Esterson in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* for analyzing families of schizophrenics can be adopted whole cloth to apply to the situation of "Why I Live at the P.O." After all, we do only have Sister's word on evening that happens, and,

as everyone agrees, she is not to be trusted. Moreover, we are dealing here with the static, closed form of the art work, not the open, dynamic situation of existential reality. Yet, to use Laing's Sartrean terminology, we cannot make "intelligible" what the basic situation of the story is until we very carefully retrace the steps from what is going on (the "process") to who is doing what (the "praxis"). If the action of the story, or Sister's recounting of it, is "cater-cornered," circular, "onesided," or "cut on the bias," then we must determine the existential source of both Sister's logic and the story's geometry.

A close look at the events of Sister's momentous Fourth of July indicates that she is an example of what Laing has termed the "unembodied self." She does nothing directly, but rather observes and criticizes what the body experiences and does. More specifically, in this story, Sister is one who does things subjectively rather than objectively. Welty dramatizes Sister's divided self by splitting her quite nearly into a subjective side, Sister herself, and an objective side, Stella-Rondo, who is "exactly twelve months to the day younger." Stella- Rondo acts out everything that Sister subjectively thinks or feels. In this sense Sister is right when she insists throughout the story that she does nothing, that everything is Stella-Rondo's fault. Yet the reader is also right in suspecting that everything that happens is Sister's doing. It is Sister who first dates Mr. Whitaker, but it is Stella-Rondo who marries him and moves away from the family; both are desires which Sister harbors but cannot act out. Stella-Rondo did not break up Sister and Mr. Whitaker by telling him that she was "one-sided," or as Sister says, "bigger on one side than the other." Rather, Stella-Rondo's action dramatizes that the one side which is sister is the subjective side that cannot act.

According to Sister, Stella-Rondo turns the other members against her one by one. However, what Stella-Rondo really does throughout the story is act out Sister's subjective feelings. First, Sister says that Shirley-T is the "spit-image of Papa- Daddy if he'd cut off his beard." A bit later at the table, Stella-Rondo turns Papa-Daddy against Sister by telling him, "Sister says she fails to understand why you don't cut off your beard." Although Sister's defense—"I did not say any such of a thing, the idea!"—is literally true; that is, she did not say these exact words, it is obvious that "the idea" was indeed hers. Next, when Uncle Rondo appears in Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimono, Sister says he looks like a "half-wit" in it. Later, Stella-Rondo echoes Sister by saying that Uncle Rondo "looks like a fool." At supper, Stella-Rondo thus articulates Sister's feelings when she tells Uncle Rondo that Sister said he looked like a fool in the pink kimono. Again, although Sister did not use these exact words, she thought what Stella-Rondo voices. When Sister asks the imaginary listener, "Do you remember who it was really said that?" the listener should remember all too well.

Sister communicates everything in this oblique, cater-cornered way; she does not express her feelings directly, but rather diagonally through Stella- Rondo. Consequently, she can cause a great many events to occur, yet disclaim responsibility for any of them. She can sit in the post office, proclaiming, "I didn't do anything," and thereby believe that she preserves her freedom, her individuality, her blamelessness, and her inviolate self. R. D. Laing's description of the schizoid individual indicates the nature and result of Sister's self justification: she tries to preserve the self by withdrawing into a central citadel and writing off everything else except the self. The tragic paradox of this

situation, says Laing, is that the more the schizoid person tries thusly to defend the self, the more he or she destroys it. The real danger stems not from the "enemies" outside, but rather from the destructive defensive maneuvers inside.

Once we see that Stella-Rondo is the objective side of Sister's subjective self, the inevitability of Sister's being driven out of the house precisely because she urges the exile of Stella-Rondo becomes clear. If Stella-Rondo is a female version of the prodigal son returned, then like the good and faithful son who stayed home, Sister resents the fact that Stella-Rondo has failed in the prodigality of the venture that Sister's subjective side has sent her out on. M. H. Abrams, in his study, *Natural Supernaturalism,* has reminded us that the prodigal son story is a figure for life as a circular rather than a linear journey. The leaving of home is a fall from unity into self-dividedness; the return is the circularity of the return to union. It is precisely this union of subjectivity and objectivity that Sister does not want.

Sister now desires to remain safe at home where she can manipulate the family from her position as dutiful daughter. However, given her subjective/objective split, the very existence of this desire means that Stella-Rondo will become the favorite while Sister becomes the exile. The psychological mechanism here is similar to that which Edgar Allan Poe describes as the "perverse"—that "radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment" often overlooked by moralists and psychologists alike.

Thus, in a very complex way the story illustrates the schizoid self-deception of the unembodied self. Moreover, it also dramatizes the results of a complete failure of communication when people not only refuse to listen to each other, but refuse to listen to themselves as well. The basic irony of the story is that although Sister spends the whole tale explaining why she lives at the P.O., she really does not know why. Although she talks, talks, talks, no one listens to what she says, not even herself. In fact, no one listens to anyone else in the story; the motif is constant throughout. When Sister denies that she said Papa-Daddy should shave off his beard, Stella-Rondo says, "Anybody in the world could have heard you, that had ears." And the more Sister protests, the less Papa-Daddy listens; "he acts like he just don't hear me," says Sister. "Papa- Daddy must of gone stone deaf." When Sister warns Uncle Rondo not to go near Papa-Daddy, he ignores her and goes on "zigzagging right on out to the hammock" anyway.

Sister, of course, is the character most guilty of not listening in the story, even though she is always accusing others of this. She tells Mama that if it had been her that had run away to Illinois and returned, Mama would not have been so overjoyed to see her. When Mama insists that she would have, Sister says, "she couldn't convince me though she talked till she was blue in the face." The last words of the story further emphasize Sister's refusal to listen, and sum up her situation: "And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and *attempt* to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen." The fact is, Sister has been telling the whole story with her fingers figuratively in both ears. She will not listen to Stella- Rondo because she will not listen to herself. Consequently, she will go to her grave denying the facts of life, as she claims Stella-Rondo will do. Our response to Sister as we read the story might best be expressed in the Southern

colloquialism, "I just wish you could hear yourself talk." It is precisely the point of the story that Sister cannot.

A speech to a listener that the speaker cannot actually hear, a speech in which the speaker reveals herself unawares, is, of course, the kind of utterance that we often attribute to the dramatic monologue form. However, Welty's story poses an important difference. The monologue speakers in Robert Browning's poems, for example, have dramatized listeners to whom they speak, with definite strategies in mind. Andrea del Sarto, Fra Lippo Lippi, the infamous Duke, all either have certain aims in speaking as they do to their listeners, or else they speak as a way to discover just what their situation is. A closer analogue to "Why I Live at the P.O." is Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." The poem is not a soliloquy in the sense that it is a set speech, a delivery of feelings or ideas previously arrived at by the speaker, but rather a soliloquy in the sense that it is spoken to no one. The particular ironic nature of the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" which makes it closer to "Why I Live at the P.O." than the work with which it is usually compared, Ring Lardner's "Haircut," is that the speaker in Browning's poem is "guilty" precisely of those sins which he attributes to Brother Lawrence. Consequently, he damns himself even as he believes he is damning Brother Lawrence. No one hears him, not even himself, but he is damned nevertheless. Similarly, Sister alienates herself from the family in the very act of trying to alienate Stella-Rondo.

However, the literary character that Sister resembles even more is Dostoevsky's Underground Man. As it is for Dostoevsky's nameless antihero, Sister's logic is not so much insane as it is the rational pushed to such an extreme that it becomes irrational and perverse. Sister's story, an apologia, but not an apology, is an argument that becomes nonsense. The whole story that Sister tells (not the story Welty creates) is nonsense, not because of the triviality of objects and concerns that the argument seems to be about, but rather because the subjective is completely cut off from objective reality. If the story is about schizophrenia, this is the nature of the pathology. Although, as is typical of her, Sister accuses the members of her family of "cutting off your nose to spite your face," this is exactly what she does to herself. By pulling herself into her underground P.O., by casting off everything except her own subjectivity, Sister, like Dostoevsky's underground man, becomes involved in a constant verbal defense of the autonomy of the self that only serves to further destroy the self, to eat it up with its own subjectivity.

At the end of the story when Sister's "revolution" against the family on the Fourth of July has divided up the whole town into two camps that correspond to her own divided self, she believes she has established a separate peace. "Peace, that's what I like. . . . I want the world to know I'm happy." But as long as everything in Sister's life is "cater-cornered," which is indeed the way she likes things, she will never have peace. Like the Ancient Mariner, she will grab every Wedding Guest who enters the P.O. and once again tell her oblique and slanted story, therefore never uniting her ghost-like subjective self with the objective world of others. The real drama of the story is the reader's discovery of the logical and phenomenological circle in which Sister is trapped.

Source: Charles E. May, "Why Sister Lives at the P.O.," in *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty's Fiction,* edited by Laurie Champion, Greenwood Press, 1994, pp. 43-49.

Critical Essay #8

In the following essay, Axel Nissen discusses the effects of "perspectival principle" in Welty's story.

In her introduction to the first edition of *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941), Katherine Anne Porter describes the heroine of "Why I Live at the P.O." as "a terrifying case of dementia praecox," effectively labeling her as a mental basket case. Though Ruth Vande Kieft has described Porter's comment as "the Ur-blooper" of Welty criticism ("Question"), the idea has stuck and poor Sister has been on the psychiatrist's couch ever since. In his monograph published in 1965, Alfred Appel, Jr. more or less accepts Porter's diagnosis and writes: "As the narrator continues her straightforward account, the reader becomes aware of penetrating inconsistencies." Marie-Antoinette Manz-Kunz also follows Porter's lead when she states that the "story is a sheer clinical study of the distortions of reality caused by mental disorder." Charles E. May, in an essay entitled "Why Sister Lives at the P.O.," analyzes the patient in the light of a much more sophisticated psychological theory than his predecessors, but his conclusion is much the same: "in a very complex way the story illustrates the schizoid self-deception of the unembodied self." A final judgment from Nell Ann Pickett will suffice to show that Sister has had a lot of "bad publicity" down through the years. Pickett writes: "Sister's step-by-step explanation of each incident leading up to her move to the post office convinces us not that her family has mistreated her but rather that Sister is deceiving herself."

What all these critics are doing is applying the *perspectival principle* to the story, which is a reader strategy for dealing with perceived inconsistencies, tensions and incongruities in a text. In the words of Tamar Yacobi, the perspectival principle "brings divergent as well as otherwise unrelated elements into pattern by attributing them, in whole or in part, to the peculiarities and circumstances of the observer through whom the world is taken to be refracted." Because Sister's world is a topsy-turvy one, critics conclude that there must be something wrong with her way of seeing it. They are implying that Sister is an *unreliable narrator*: "as everyone agrees, she is not to be trusted" (May).

If this assessment correctly reflects the author's intention, it would mean that the story is structured in such a way that the reader sooner or later will realize the narrator cannot be taken at her word and feel there is a secret communication between the reader and the implied author, behind Sister's back. If Sister is an unreliable narrator it means we should be able to apply certain criteria to her, qua narrator. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has outlined three main sources of unreliability as "the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme." To determine whether Sister is in fact an unreliable narrator we must consider these factors and answer the following questions: Do the facts and the outcome of the story contradict the narrator's view and, in effect, prove her wrong? Does her personal involvement prevent Sister from giving us a reliable account and is this shown by the way the characters' views consistently clash? Does Sister have a problematic value-scheme and does her language contain internal contradictions and double-edged images?

To take the facts first. Even among Sister's detractors there is an unstated assumption that Sister does not tell outright lies; there is no evidence that she actively distorts the facts nor biases her narrative of the events leading to her leaving home, so as to give us a false impression of the participants and actions. As we have seen, Appel describes it as a "straightforward account." Ergo: we can believe that people said what they really said and did what they really did. Without this basis in fact, in actual words and actions, the interpretation of the story would be an entirely equivocal activity and lost in endless speculations about what really happened.

From the story we can thus "read out" the following fictional facts and make the following inferences:

(1) Sister never tries to conceal the real reason for her resentment towards Stella-Rondo. Her dislike and jealousy of her sister is never just implied, it is stated outright from the beginning. Sister has a frank dislike of her younger sibling, who "always had anything in the world she wanted and then she'd throw it away."(2) Sister makes herself useful while the rest of the family lounges about. There is evidence that Sister might quite possibly be the family dredge, something her status as an unmarried daughter still living at home also indicates (Drake; Herrscher).(3) Sister has not in fact said any of the things Stella- Rondo quotes her as saying. She has not said that Papa-Daddy should cut off his beard, nor that Uncle Rondo looks ridiculous in Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimono. The alienation of Sister is thus based on the active involvement of Stella-Rondo in outright lying.(4) Sister is in fact treated unpleasantly by all the members of her family. Papa-Daddy calls her a "hussy," Mama takes Stella-Rondo's side against her, criticizes her cooking and assaults her physically. Uncle Rondo upsets her with firecrackers, Shirley-T. sticks her tongue out at her, not to mention Stella- Rondo's machinations. We notice that Sister is not included in the family games. Despite her ill-treatment, she shows remarkable patience and forbearance. She never complains about the physical and verbal abuse she is subjected to, and only objects to the scheming Stella-Rondo is involved in because it is what most insults Sister's sense of justice. She emerges as something of a stoic in the midst of egoists.(5) The members of Sister's family are all unbalanced to the extent that they are hypersensitive to certain stimuli. These we can observe from their reactions to Stella-Rondo's well-placed insinuations. Papa-Daddy rants on about his beard at the slightest suggestion that he should cut it off. Uncle Rondo is very touchy on the subject of his looks and throws what can only be described as a temper-tantrum at the suggestion (again from Stella-Rondo) that the pink kimono might not be the most becoming thing he might wear. Mama actually strikes Sister just for mentioning a member of the family, Cousin Annie Flo, who "went to her grave denying the facts of life." Not least of all, there is Stella-Rondo who shows much the same tendency as Annie Flo, resolutely denying the fact that Shirley-T. is her biological daughter and finally having a fit of hysterics. Sister might quite easily be seen as the most sane one of the bunch; she has a steady job, is responsible for the household diet and is the only one who seems, quite reasonably, to want a rational explanation for the appearance of Shirley-T. Sister also expresses gratitude towards Uncle Rondo, with whom she appears to have had a special rapport, and does not raise an eyebrow at his eccentricities.

Critics have been quick to condemn Sister's way of speaking as evidence of her vulgarity and distance from the implied author's norms. Zelma Turner Howard writes: "Sister's speech pattern lacks rhythm, cadence, aphorisms, and all the positive qualities of a natural idiom." Does Sister's language give her away and is it the verbal wasteland Howard suggests? If her speech is meant to lead us towards a negative appraisal of her character, we would expect it to be contrasted in important ways with speech patterns of the other characters (as is the case in the scene in the doctor's office in "A Worn Path"). Yet Sister's speech patterns do not differ markedly from those of the rest of her family.

When it comes to her style, be it a "natural idiom" or not, Sister has a remarkable store of vivid expressions, hyperboles and proverbs at her disposal, and in fact makes a very good storyteller. Just because her speech is not "poetic" in its imagery and rhythm is not reason enough to take it as evidence that she is a negatively judged character. Appel has noted that Sister has a fine ability to sum up her fellow human beings in a few short phrases, as this description shows: "You ought to see Mama, she weighs two hundred pounds and has real tiny feet." Sister is very much the equal of the others at verbal jousting and has a vein of irony, which clearly reveals her intelligence.

The implied author gives us one final and telling clue as to Sister's real situation in the household. This is what the members of her family call her. We never know her proper name, but to the rest of the family she is simply "Sister," indicating very clearly how she is defined as secondary to Stella- Rondo and of inferior status.

Based on this evidence it is possible to come to a completely different conclusion regarding Sister's mental state than have the great majority of critics. Despite her idiosyncracies, Sister is a character to be believed and what she is offering us is not a grossly distorted presentation of reality due to mental illness, but rather evidence of an entirely sane though unhappy state.

It is relatively easy to poke fun at critics for, in a manner of speaking, taking the story and its narrator too seriously (or maybe it is a case of them not taking her seriously enough?). It is more difficult to explain why so many have read "Why I Live at the P.O." as a textbook example of unreliable narration. It is possible that the publication of Wayne Booth's book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in the early sixties, which discussed the question of reliability extensively after a long period of silence (Yacobi), also produced an oversensitivity to signs of unreliability, and then especially in stories of this frankly subjective type.

In "Why I Live at the P.O." the point of view is dominated by Sister, the protagonist-narrator. The important difference between this narrative and traditional first-person narration (e.g. Welty's "A Memory") is that Sister's story is transmitted orally. Welty sets up a fictional storytelling situation, with Sister's narration in the form of one long continuous speech. The story is completely imitative of an oral narrative.

Keeping the story's unusual narrative structure in mind, I believe Sister's perceived unreliability is mainly the result of a disjunction between the style and content of her monologue. The style of narration is highly realistic, while the characters and events

teeter on the edge of the blatantly absurd. To analyze this contrast we need to account for the means by which Welty creates the illusion of living speech in print, because it is this that creates a disjunction with the bizarre content of her story.

The verisimilitude of the story's narrative structure is hard to describe objectively unless we compare Sister's monologue to some model of real oral narratives. The noted American sociolinguist William Labov has provided us with such a model. He has described the constituent features of the fully developed *natural narrative* as follows (in roughly chronological order): abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda. The *abstract* is a short summary (usually one or two sentences) of the story that narrators generally provide before recounting the story proper and which is meant to encapsulate the point of the story. The *orientation* serves to "identify in some way the time, place, persons, and their activity or situation" (Pratt) and usually occurs immediately before narrative proper begins.*Complicating action and resolution* are the core of the narrative. The former begins with the first narrative clause in the speech act, the latter usually ends with the last narrative clause. By *evaluation* Labov is referring to "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'etre,* why it was told and what the narrator was getting at." The *coda's* general function is to "close off the sequence of complicating actions and indicate that none of the events that followed were important to the narrative."

The deep structure of "Why I Live at the P.O." follows this model to a remarkable degree. Abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution and coda are all in place and in the right order. The first line of the story is the abstract: "I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again." Here Sister tells us in a nutshell what the story is going to be about, and also gives us a clue as to what motivates the telling of it. The orientation to the listener follows directly, with the presentation of the antagonist Stella-Rondo and the events leading up to the beginning of the narrative situation. The complicating action and the narrative proper begins with the line "Mama said she like to made her drop dead for a second" and continues on through a number of scenes, where the resolution begins with the line, "And I'll tell you it didn't take me any longer than a minute to make up my mind what to do." The coda is separated from the rest of the story by a blank line and quite properly closes off the story by bringing us back to the storytelling situation and the present.

The realism of the story's deep structure is also seen in its surface structure, as Welty recreates the idiolect of a small-town, upper middle-class spin ster. Welty has Sister use a wide range of expressions and figures, such as *colloquialisms and slang* (e.g. "as sure as shooting," "piecing on the ham," "no more manners than the man in the moon," a conniption fit" and "kiss my foot"); *cliches* ("thank her lucky stars," "I shudder to think," "till she was blue in the face"); *euphemisms* ([Shirley-T.] "lost the Milky Way") and *understatement* and *hyperbole* ("I made no bones about letting the family catch on to what I was up to," "before you could say 'Jack Robinson,'" "tickled her nearly to death"). Both part of Sister's verbal rhetoric and the monologue's verisimilar effect is her use of the *historic present* particularly in the speech tags. The use of italics to indicate emphasis and simple connectives rather than complex adverbs as transitions (mostly

"so," but also "but" and "then") also contribute to making "Why I Live at the P.O." a uniquely convincing representation of an oral narrative.

This is an unbelievable story with a believable discourse, bizarre content in a highly realistic form. Thus the perceived contradictions in the story are not caused by willful deception nor by a warped mind, but rather by a willingness to feel things strongly and to see the dramatic in everyday con- flicts, which every member of the family shares. This is not a sinister story in the manner of Ring Lardner ("Haircut" [1926]) or Ambrose Bierce ("Oil of Dog" [1909-12]). Rather, the effect of "Why I Live at the P.O." is highly comic.

In the beginning of his essay, May discusses why there have been so few critical analyses of this story (relative to its popularity and acclaim) and concludes that it is at least partly due to the difficulty of explaining its highly comic effect: "No interpretation can fully account for what makes it so funny, and no one wants the thankless task of explaining a joke." He mentions Vande Kieft's attempt at an explanation, which includes a reference to Bergson's theory that anything that suggests rigidity in a human being is laughable and thus ascribes the humorous effect to Sister's (perceived) *idee fixe (Eudora Welty).* Appel relies on another theoretician of the comic and writes that the story's "grim humor" is due to its being told gravely, as a humorous story should be, according to Twain's "How to Tell a Story."

There is nothing particularly grim about the humor in "Why I Live at the P.O." and its comic effect needs to be tied to the story's burlesque character. Sister's narrative is an unwitting, *high burlesque* of daily life in her family, where a quite trivial chain of events is narrated as if it were the second coming. Robert Drake touches on the same idea when he writes: "The whole point of Miss Welty's delicious . . . story is its exalting of the everyday and familiar to the level of the heroic and epic." When I choose to call the story high burlesque it is because, in the manner characteristic of this literary mode, Sister's rhetoric is used to raise the everyday to the plane of high drama and seriousness in a way analogous to the classic example, Pope's "Rape of the Lock," though with one important exception: Sister's style is not formal or pompous but rather exalts through her direct involvement, her acting it out before us in a highly convincing way. The coda clearly solidifies the total comic impression: "And that's the last I've laid eyes on any of my family or my family laid eyes on me for five solid days and nights." The short time that has actually passed since the events took place puts the whole "drama" of Sister's exodus in an even more comic perspective, and makes us wonder how long it will be before she is back home again in the bosom of her eccentric family.

In seeking a more unified and complex understanding of "Why I Live at the P.O.," in all its facets—comic and tragic, melodramatic and farcical— we have focused on the relation of the story to the person telling it and asked what motivates Sister's long speech, what it tells us about her and why Welty has chosen this particular point of view. As we have seen, the answers to these questions may be quite different from the critic's regular analysis. They look at the story clinically, as a psychological study in some form of mental illness, or consider that its chief aim is not to narrate, but rather to indict and indirectly, hold up to ridicule. This line of interpretation makes unreliability the

entire rationale of the story, and thus fails to look beyond this perceived technique to the actual fictional situation. To these readers, the medium ultimately seems more important than the message and they run the risk of fitting Edna Earl Ponder's description of the worst kind of listener (as so often, the heroine of *The Ponder Heart* is here talking about her uncle, Daniel): "I used to dread he might get hold of one of these occasional travelers that wouldn't come in unless they had to—the kind that would break in on a story with a set of questions, and wind it up with a list of what Uncle Daniel's faults were. . . ." Attaching psychological labels to the narrator, or to the other characters for that matter, prevents us from enjoying the humor of the story in its full breadth. The only dignosis we are able or need to pose is that Sister is a lonely woman. As the story so vividly shows, living in a family is no guarantee against loneliness and Sister's monologue is fundamentally a symptom of her lonesome state. The form of the story is, as often in Welty's fiction, the surest indicator of the basic motif.

Source: Axel Nissen, "Occasional Travelers in China Grove: Welty's 'Why I Live at the P.O.' Reconsidered," in *The Southern Quarterly,* Vol. 32, No. 1, Fall, 1993, pp. 72-79.

Critical Essay #9

In the following essay, Peter Schmidt employs character analyses for detailed insight into Welty's story.

One way to think of the Rondo family in "Why I Live at the P.O." is as an exceptionally noisy family of paper cutouts. Certainly the characters are as delightfully two-dimensional, and as farcically posed, as the cutouts described in *"Women!!"* but the story is also a comedy about fashion, gender differences, and power.

"Why I Live at the P.O." is set in China Grove, Mississippi, and features Sister as the narrator, Stella-Rondo (her younger sister), Papa-Daddy (Sister's grandfather), Mama (Sister's mother), Uncle Rondo, Stella-Rondo's two-year-old daughter Shirley- T., and (briefly) a dying woman named Old Jep Patterson. In the beginning of Sister's monologue, most readers tend to share Sister's view of the absurdity of her family members. Sister's main tactic is to show how false their language is. Stella- Rondo, Shirley-T., Mama, Papa-Daddy, and Uncle Rondo all speak an inflated language filled with euphemisms and the brand names of fashionable commercial products. When Stella-Rondo displays the clothes she has brought home, for example, she shows her sister something she has never seen before□a kimono that "happens to be part of my trousseau, and Mr. Whitaker took several dozen photographs of me in it." By replacing her sister's ignorance with exotic and fashionable words such as "kimono" and "trousseau," Stella-Rondo reminds Sister that although she may be older and have a job at the P.O., it is her younger sister Stella- Rondo who married the man they both dated and who escaped to live in the wide world. Thus she plays the sophisticated, well-traveled belle, full of polite condescension and a histrionic sense of martyrdom. In retelling her versions of these events, however, it is Sister and not Stella-Rondo who has the last word: the kimono becomes "a terriblelooking flesh-colored contraption I wouldn't be found dead in." Sister uses a similar tactic when relaying Papa-Daddy's speech to us. "This is the beard I started growing on the Coast when I was fifteen years old," Papa-Daddy boasts, but Sister deflates this boast with the comment, "he would have gone on till nightfall if Shirley-T. hadn't lost the Milky Way she ate in Cairo." All these examples are insults made after the fact, private acts of revenge taken during the retelling of the events to make up for her not being able to have her say earlier. Many of the most delightfully vulgar commercial references in the story, such as Shirley-T.'s Milky Way and the Add-a-Pearl necklace, furthermore, were not in Welty's early draft of the story; neither was fancy vocabulary like "disport" and "trousseau" (originally, merely "eat" and "underwear"). In revising, Welty carefully highlighted the story's comic contrasts of diction.

In Sister's war of words with her family, she continually seeks to draw our attention to the fact that their versions of the events are supposedly much less reasonable. Instead of admitting that her marriage to Mr. Whitaker has failed and that she has had to return to her family home with her two-yearold child, for instance, Stella-Rondo steadfastly maintains that the girl is adopted. Stella-Rondo's "proof" consists of nothing more than repeating her assertions more and more loudly□something that seems to work

especially well in the Rondo family. Our sympathy for the narrator increases even further when Stella-Rondo lies about what her sister said about her grandfather's beard to turn her grandfather against her: "'Papa-Daddy,' she says. . . . 'Papa-Daddy, Sister says she fails to understand why you don't cut off your beard.'" The narrator's anger at her sister's airs becomes understandable after a few such scenes, and we begin to relish the ways in which Sister gives others their comeuppance, both in her original retorts and again, even more successfully, in her later storytelling. The victories she gains through storytelling are especially sweet because at last she seems to have an audience who sides with her, not with her sister. As she says triumphantly to her imagined listeners at one point, when she relates how her sister accuses her of calling Uncle Rondo a fool in his kimono: "Do you remember who it was really said that?." Welty's witty last name for this family denotes a musical form that has a refrain occurring at least three times between contrasting couplets. In the Rondo family, however, repetition and contrast produces only discord and disorder.

As "Why I Live at the P.O." progresses, the reader cannot but begin to notice that the narrator has many of the same family traits that she so despises in others. This is especially true of the way she talks and the way in which she deals with inconsistencies in her account of the events. Sister's vanity infects her language as thoroughly as that of the other characters infects theirs. At the beginning of the story we may not notice it as readily because Sister has so carefully placed the other characters and their foolish actions at the center of our attention. But as her story approaches the tale of her climactic break with her family, her own pretensions become more prominent. When she describes her Uncle Rondo's throwing firecrackers into her room at 6:30 A.M., for instance, her language is as comically inflated as anything that Stella-Rondo or Papa-Daddy has ever said.

[A]t 6:30 A.M. the next morning, he threw a whole five-cent package of some unsold one-inch firecrackers from the store as hard as he could into my bedroom and they every one went off. Not one bad one in the string. Anybody else, there'd be one that wouldn't go off.Well, I'm just terribly susceptible to noise of any kind, the doctor has always told me I was the most sensitive person he had ever seen in his whole life, and I was simply prostrated. I couldn't eat! People tell me they heard it as far as the cemetery, and old Aunt Jep Patterson, that had been holding her own so good, thought it was Judgment Day and she was going to meet her whole family. It's usually so quiet here.

As this superbly comic passage develops, Sister's language becomes less controlled and ironic. Self-praise and self-martyrdom converge, and by the end she imagines that the entire town heard the indignities perpetrated against her, and the perfectly timed concluding phrase, "It's usually so quiet here," adds a new twist to the humor. The sentence is comic because its speaker does not realize that we have to take it as an absurdity; we have heard nothing but noise since the story began. This comment also has a sinister edge to it, for the longing for separation and silence that it reveals foreshadows the dark edge to the ending of the story, when "quiet" at great cost is finally achieved.

Once we begin to doubt the narrator's reliability, evidence to increase our doubt begins cropping up everywhere when the story is reread. The tale's wonderful opening paragraph is a case in point. "I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again. Mr. Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in China Grove, taking 'Pose Yourself' photos, and Stella-Rondo broke us up. Told him I was one-sided. Bigger on one side than the other, which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same. Stella-Rondo is exactly twelve months to the day younger than I am and for that reason she's spoiled."

As this passage reveals, the causes for Sister's anger lie much deeper than any resentment she has for specific things that Stella-Rondo has done to her, such as taking Mr. Whitaker from her and marrying him. The paragraph begins and ends with references to Stella-Rondo's being the younger sister whose birth caused her parents to spoil her and slight her older sister. In returning home with her child, Stella-Rondo clearly disrupts the privileged status of the parent's favorite child that Sister has managed to regain during her sister's absence. Because the two sisters share the same birthday, moreover, their rivalry is all the more galling to the older one; Stella-Rondo seems to have come on the scene exactly a year after Sister's birth to usurp her identity along with her birthday. Welty enforces this point by having Stella-Rondo's name mentioned repeatedly throughout the story, whereas the narrator, when she is addressed at all, is called merely "Sister," as if she has no identity except in (subordinate) relation to her favored younger sibling.

The status that Sister briefly had in the family with Stella-Rondo gone was much more various than the role of only child. Because of her job as the postmistress at the post office of China Grove, she is also able to hold the honored (and traditionally male) status as the family's principal breadwinner. (The fact that Papa-Daddy is rich and Uncle Rondo a pharmacist is, to Sister's mind, irrelevant; of the immediate family, she is the only member with a salaried position of authority in the outside world.) Indeed, Sister may even be said *to have become the family's father:* no husband for Mama is mentioned in the story, a telling omission; there is only Uncle Rondo and Papa-Daddy, Mama's father. With Stella- Rondo gone, Sister thus seems (at least in her own imagination) to gain the two most prominent positions of authority possible within a family— that of the head male breadwinner and that of the favorite child. Upon Stella-Rondo's return, however, she is immediately relegated to the role of female servant. Welty emphasizes the trauma of this demotion early in the story by having Sister indignantly portray herself "over the hot stove, trying to stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child into the bargain, without one moment's notice." As the story continues, the baby Shirley-T. takes over the role of the favored child, Stella-Rondo and Mama play the only available authoritative female roles, and both Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo reassert their place as male authority figures.

Originally, Welty's story used the name Adam rather than Rondo, implying that issues of gender, priority, and power are indeed central to Welty's conception of the root cause of the family's feuding. By fleeing to the P.O., Sister tries to gain a new family and new authority. The citizens of China Grove who must use the P.O. every day will see her,

listen to her story of her family's cruelty, and commiserate. Raiding her home of all the possessions that will make her feel at home in the back room of the P.O.—including a cot, an oscillating fan, a charm bracelet, a fern, a ukelele, a sewing machine motor, a thermometer, a calendar, and many jars of preserves, fruits, and vegetables— Sister reconstructs an orderly and quiet Eden-like world in the back of the P.O., a public rebuke to her family. Welty's revisions to the list of possessions Sister carries away with her well shows her genius as a writer of comedy: by changing "sewing-machine" to "sewing-machine motor," for example, she makes Sister's actions even more comically futile, and by changing "bottle-opener" to "the Hawaiian ukelele" she stresses Sister's need to feel in touch with a world of broader horizons she feels has been unfairly denied her. Sister's paradise regained at the P.O. becomes an Eden as it might be imagined in a Woolworth's advertisement.

In the last three paragraphs of the story Sister's picture of self-reliance darkens considerably, though, as the language Sister uses becomes less pastoral and the social dimensions of her domain suddenly shrink. For in cutting herself off from her family, she is more or less cutting herself off from any larger "world." Despite vague references to other "people" and "folks" in China Grove, the only other resident of China Grove who is named in the story, significantly, is the dying old Aunt Jep Patterson, her family's last surviving member.

Of course, there's not much mail. My family are naturally the main people in China Grove, and if they prefer to vanish from the face of the earth, for all the mail they get or the mail they write, why, I'm not going to open my mouth. Some of the folks here in town are taking up for me and some turned against me. I know which is which. There are always people who will quit buying stamps just to get on the right side of Papa-Daddy.But here I am, and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy.And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and *attempt* to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen.

The "world" and the authority that Sister will have at her P.O. thus seem largely self-created, a poor substitute for the position she had in her family before Stella-Rondo's return.

The most sinister aspect of the story's last paragraphs is not the sudden shrinking of Sister's world but the gruesome combination of a need to speak and a determination to be silent. Sister's flight and silence, like so many other elements in the story, are reminiscent of a child's temper tantrum caused by jealousy towards a sibling who seems to be favored by her parents. In a fit of pique Sister resolves never to speak to her family again, but like a child sulking in her bedroom she comically cannot but help break her resolve sooner or later—her family surrounds her. Sister's story is wholly constructed of desperate refutations and retellings of Stella-Rondo's stories, but the only audience that we are shown Sister convincing is one that she herself has imagined.

Thus we may revise one of the summarizing sentences at the end of "Why I Live at the P.O." to say "I want *myself* to know I'm happy." Despite the many legitimate reasons

Sister has for feeling that she has been unfairly treated by her family, her story proves she knows that her own vanity, jealousy, and insecurity are at least partly to blame for her having to live in a post office's back room. The secret target of Sister's refutations is not only Stella- Rondo but herself, and her narrative at its deepest level is tragicomically inspired by her own guilt as well as Stella-Rondo's. Like Stella-Rondo's hilarious description of her as being "bigger on one side than on the other," Sister's narrative is both monomaniacal and lopsided. What she intends to assert as the story develops becomes increasingly unbalanced with the weight of other secrets that she does not know are there: as Welty said of her in *One Writer's Beginnings,* "how much more gets told besides!" These other secrets include her desire to be the authority figure in her family and to play the traditional role of the fashionable, worldly wife, but her secrets also include her own self-revulsion—her lingering belief that her family's view of her as a monster may be right. She has internalized all of her family's words against her and seems condemned to try forever to talk them down. The slapstick comedy that makes much of the story so hilarious changes somewhat near the end, as unsuspected pain and self-torment sound through the pratfalls, darkening the cartoon-bright narrative surface of the story like a bruise. . . .

Source: Peter Schmidt, "Rigidity and Rebirth: Eudora Welty and Women's Comedy," in *The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty's Short Fiction,* University Press of Mississippi, 1991, pp. 109-203.

Critical Essay #10

In the following essay, Ann Romines explores Eudora Welty's rare, yet "memorable" use of first person narration in "Why I Live at the P.O."

Eudora Welty's fiction overflows with gifted, loquacious storytellers; it resounds with their voices. So, for me at least, it is surprising to realize how few of the stories are actually told in the first person. Welty is much more likely to depict storytelling as a kinetic exchange, an unpredictable process of reply, response, and mutual invention. *Losing Battles,* with its "fray" of voices, is the epitome of this process.

In that novel, one of the Beechams' main strengths (however terrifying) is their capacity to draw everyone and everything into a communal, continual story which becomes their own, as when they invent a paternity for Gloria which makes her one of the family. Such storytelling is a constant interchange, a game which everyone can—and must—play. A great moment of *Losing Battles,* weighted with danger and possibility, occurs when Lady May Renfro, the baby whose genealogy has been "decided" by the previous day's round of storytelling, finds her own voice, and thus begins her own life as a storyteller. Opening her eyes, "She put her voice into the fray, and spoke to it the first sentence of her life: 'What you huntin', man?'" Her sentence is a question, which demands a response: a story.

But occasionally, Welty has created a character who spurns such a communal storytelling. In such cases, we readers are unforgettably bombarded with direct address. This occurs most memorably in two great, singular stories: "Why I Live at the P.O." and "Circe."

The narrator-protagonists of these stories, Sister and Circe, frame their tales as definitive assertions of their own commanding visions; they brook no interruptions and no replies. Both women tell stories because they have been confronted with a version of experience they refuse to accept. For both are pitted against rivals who insist on being protagonists. These rivals, Stella-Rondo and Odysseus, aggressively advance their own tales and their own heroism. Circe and Sister can combat them only be reinventing their worlds. And they do so by preempting the story's voice for their exclusive use. In each case, that voice belongs to a single woman, uncomfortable with the place she finds herself assigned in others' narratives. Circe, the nonhuman sorceress, and Sister, the incapacitated woman, deny humanity by refusing the communion of storytelling. But they also act to preserve them selves, by grappling with conventional female plots which would constrict them. Their failures as storytellers, and as heroines, are among Welty's most stunning successes.

Sister's very title, "Why I Live at the P.O., is an act of appropriation; it asserts that she is the center of attention and that the reason for her domicile is of pressing interest to us. But then in her first sentence we learn that she has seized the power of narration because someone else snatched the role of protagonist: her prodigal sister, Stella-Rondo, who makes a spectacular reappearance at the family home on Independence

Day—with a surprise two-year-old in tow. Against such peremptory claims for attention, Sister fights for control, by means of her narrative. Virtually the only information she imparts about her sister's absent husband, for example, is that she "went with" him first. The very scene of Stella- Rondo's return, dramatic as it must have been, is omitted. Instead, in Sister's first dramatized scene she places herself at the absolute center of the household, "over the hot stove," trying gamely to perform feats of domestic magic and to "stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child."

For Sister, her family is the world, and the optimal position for herself, as her tale begins, is the traditional domestic locus of power: feeding the family. Her family's importance is so self-evident to her that she does not think to tell us what their surname might be. Almost all Sister's relatives— Mama, Papa-Daddy, Uncle Rondo, and Sister herself— are referred to only by names which designate family relationships. The exception, of course, is Stella-Rondo. She is named for a star and a man (her mother's brother), and by stealing Mr. Whitaker from her sister, she managed to accomplish what Sister has not—to project herself outside the family house and the state of Mississippi. When Stella- Rondo acquired a daughter, she determinedly named her in the language of a larger world, outside the self-referential family vocabulary. Her child is Shirley- T., for Shirley Temple.

Newly equipped with daughter, Stella-Rondo is formidable competition for her sibling. According to Sister, she can lie effectively at the drop of a hat, discrediting Sister in the most humiliating ways. She arrives back home equipped with the paraphernalia of sexual experience, notably a seductive trousseau and a child. But Stella-Rondo denies that she is the child's biological parent. To admit that she bore Shirley-T. would be to acknowledge that she was subject to the uncertainties and indignities of conception and pregnancy, and that admission might also subject her (and her child) to the stigma of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. She prefers to present herself as an adoptive parent, who exercised the powers of choice. If she is lying about Shirley- T.'s parentage, as seems likely, Stella-Rondo denies her own involvement in one of the most common female stories. By asserting that Shirley-T. is adopted, Stella-Rondo places herself in a position of clear-cut power which biological motherhood cannot afford: without the encumbrances of sexual passion and pregnancy, she chose her time and her child, as surely as she chose Shirley-T.'s defi- ant name.

When Stella-Rondo eloped with Mr. Whitaker, it must have seemed to Sister, and to all of China Grove, Mississippi, that she was this family's shooting star, its wanderer, its questing protagonist. But now she appears a fixed star, instead□returned to her place in the family constellation. Presumably, Mama once made the same return with her two daughters. For Mama too lives in her parental house, and there is no mention of the man who fathered Stella-Rondo and Sister. Stella-Rondo's return brings on a set of reversals, repetitions, and complications so disturbing for Sister that she must grapple for retrospective control of the situation by means of her plotted monologue.

Sister comprehends that plot is power; it is for her, as in Peter Brooks's definition, "the logic and dynamic of narrative, and narrative itself is a form of understanding and explanation." Thinking back over the events of the last few days, Sister gropes for an

explanatory arrangement of those events, a plot which will reinforce her version of the self she wishes she were. She once had a secure place and was "getting along fine," as she asserts in her first sentence. She was well entrenched as postmistress and as dutifully domestic daughter. But when Stella- Rondo came back, Sister found herself a defending protagonist, locked in combat with her antagonist.

The plot-battle which ensues is conducted almost entirely through language. Sister's monologue itself is a highly elaborated weapon. According to her, Stella-Rondo puts up an unfair fight, for her weapons are lies. She tells her uncle and grandfather that Sister made mocking or critical remarks about them. But by Sister's account, it was Stella-Rondo herself who said the words she attributes to Sister— for example, Stella-Rondo actually said that Uncle Rondo "looked like a fool" as he swayed across the lawn in a peach silk kimono. Sister is especially infuriated by this treachery; she admonishes her audience, to make sure we don't miss Stella-Rondo's duplicity, asking, "Do you remember who it was really said that?"

In Sister's story, she presents herself as the speaker of a solicitous language, that of the loving housekeeper who makes heroic domestic efforts to take care of everything and everyone, sweetly warning her drunk uncle against dripping ketchup on her sister's silk lingerie. By her inspired lies, Stella- Rondo robs Sister of her own (hypocritical) caretaking language—and thus of the secure position she thought she had. Stella-Rondo's lies are the instrument by which she reshapes Sister's story. And the lies also isolate Sister, as a single woman, by destroying her alliances with male power. Just as she once stole Mr. Whitaker, by lying to him that Sister "was one-sided," she now steals the allegiance of Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo.

Under the pressure of Stella-Rondo's attack, Sister tries to win points with a display of domestic faculty. But her efforts are souring by the minute, turning as tart as the green-tomato pickles she stirs up on the Fourth of July—"Somebody had to do it," she claims. A less essential food than green tomato pickle can scarcely be imagined, and Sister's effort to consolidate her powers at the stove cuts no ice with Mama, who "trots in. Lifts up the lid and says, 'H'm! not very good for your Uncle Rondo in his precarious condition, I must say. Or poor little adopted Shirley-T. Shame on you!'"

Sister's response is "That made me tired." And well she might be. It is Independence Day, but she is at the stove, expected to suit her cooking to whatever kinfolk might turn up, in whatever condition. She ends her account of her kitchen efforts with an admission of defeat—no longer claiming authority but, instead, asking for pity: "I stood there helpless over the hot stove." She has become that most threadbare of domestic clichés —a mocked, overburdened, hearth-bound Cinderella, ripe for a godmother.

Sister makes one major effort to fight Stella- Rondo by her own methods. She attempts to discredit her sister's trump card—Shirley-T. Realizing the child has not spoken since her arrival, she deliciously imagines "something perfectly horrible" and asks, "'Can that child talk?'" The most fitting debility Sister can imagine for her new niece is to rob her of the defending, denying, shaping powers of speech. But Shirley-T. wins the engagement by yelling in a deafening "Yankee voice," "'OE'm Pop-OE the Sailor-r-r Ma-a-n!' and then

somebody jumps up and down in the upstairs hall. In another second the house would of fallen down."

Shirley-T. has asserted her otherness from Sister and her invulnerability in every possible way: she is adopted, and not blood kin; she has all her faculties; she is a Yankee, not a Mississippian, and she is strong enough to bring the house down—or so it seems to Sister. And the child identifies not with a woman, but with a strong man, Popeye the Sailor, another figure from the mass culture which gave Shirley-T. her name. It is a complete rout for Sister—and from a two-year-old!

The last straw comes when Sister loses her last ally, Uncle Rondo, to Stella-Rondo's "lies." Angrily, Uncle Rondo throws a lit string of firecrackers into Sister's bedroom. Stella-Rondo's lies have already destroyed Sister's credibility with her family; the language by which she maintained her sense of her own dignity and power under their roof is no longer effective there. The firecrackers are not only phallic—aggressively male—and antidomestic; they are also pure, explosive, inhuman sound, absolutely outside Sister's control. And she prides herself on her sensitivity to noise.

Sister's response to the firecrackers is the turning point in her plot. This is the moment when she sees herself as most helpless; she says, "there I was with the whole entire house . . . turned against me." She describes herself in terms which emphasize her youthful *female* vulnerability: she is a "young girl" along in her bedroom, traumatized by an explosive invasion. But Sister refuses to subside as a helplessly violated victim. Instead, she recasts herself as a hero. The source of this renewal is her essential selfpossession: "If I have anything at all I have pride."

Sister's story is fueled by that pride. Her family is no longer a haven or a receptive audience. So she changes her locale—she moves into "the next-tosmallest P.O. in Mississippi," where (thanks to Papa-Daddy) she holds the position of postmistress. By deciding to move and then by incorporating that decision into a story, Sister rescues herself; she becomes her own fairy godmother.

Once she has decided to move, Sister describes herself in newly decisive language. She "marches" through the house, "snatching" her possessions. Stella-Rondo is now routed, reduced to tears at the thought that a family boycott of the P.O. will cut her off from her husband. Mama exclaims helplessly, "'Oh, I declare . . . to think that a family of mine should quarrel on the Fourth of July, or the day after, over Stella-Rondo leaving old Mr. Whitaker and having the sweetest little adopted child! It looks like we'd all be glad!'" Mama extols the sentimental ideal of the family. She believes in holidays and games (her solution to family discord is "'Why don't you all just sit down and play Casino?'"). If villains exist, they are outside the family, as is "old Mr. Whitaker." Although she may assume the postures of power under her father's roof, shaking her finger at Sister over the stove, she is incapacitated for movement and action in a larger world, for she "trots" about with only tiny feet to support her 200 pounds. Mama's daughters have little choice but to conclude that staying home could mean for them what it did for her—triviality and ineffectuality.

Gathering up her movable possessions, Sister says to Mama with new independence, "'You 'tend to your house, and I'll 'tend to mine.'" The new force of her language contrasts with Mama's. She says, leaving, *'"He left her* —you mark my words. . . . That's Mr. Whitaker. After all, I knew him first. I said from the beginning he'd up and leave her. I foretold every single thing that's happened.'" Thus Sister pronounces herself a spiteful oracle and demonstrates that she has exchanged places with her sister. Now Stella-Rondo is the displaced victim; now Sister is the adventuring protagonist, setting out to occupy a new world.

In her new world, the P.O., Sister has a title which is not familial, as an agent of the U.S. Mail. As postmistress she should, ideally, facilitate China Grove's exchange with the distant outside world. Thus she is also allied with the U.S. male, for in this story the world of distances is associated with men. For example, Uncle Rondo "was in France," and it was he who financed Sister's one major journey, to Mammoth Cave. When a woman travels, it is with the aid or provocation of a man. When Mama, impressed by Sister's new oracular authority, questions her about where Mr. Whitaker has gone, Sister replies, "'probably to the North Pole, if he knows what's good for him.'"

Sister's own short journey to the P.O. has led, she claims, to a happy ending: "Oh, I like it here. It's ideal. . . . I want the world to know I'm happy." But the ideal world she asserts she has created in her five days of domestic life at the P.O. is as far from the hectic bustle of her roomy home as the North Pole—and as chilly. The last thing Sister collected from her home was the kitchen clock. She has appropriated and brought with her domestic time, as an immigrant woman might carry household rituals into a new country. But Sister has simply created a miniaturized version of the family house, crammed with the hideous appurtenances of domesticity, arranged to her own perverse taste, "everything catercornered, the way I like it."

Whatever the faults of Sister's family house, it was at least a model of domestic process. Nothing was stale or static there; everything was in a constant state of change and renewal. Allegiances shifted, and shifted again; a wanderer reentered as prodigal. Sister's ideal world at the P.O. is created by rearranging an especially motley selection of domestic props. But her arrangement is fixed. And thus process is thwarted.

The process of the U.S. Mail is thwarted too, for Sister's family, by her account "the main people of China Grove," refuse to patronize the P.O.; and many townspeople, taking sides in the dispute, have "quit buying stamps just to get on the right side of Papa-Daddy." Sister and the P.O. are a bottleneck; the exchange of communication, of storytelling, and of domestic life at its best, has become impossible. Sister has "won"—by the last page, she has shaped and narrated her own self-centered tale, and she has denied Stella-Rondo's rival version. Sister concludes triumphantly, with a declaration of independence: "And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and *attempt* to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen."

Obviously, Sister has found no real independence. Instead, she has denied some of her own deepest impulses. One of those impulses is her sense of the centrality of family to

human life, to which her language often attests. (She refers to Judgment Day itself as an occasion for meeting one's "whole family".) Another of Sister's deepest impulses is to hear. Insatiably curious, she habitually eavesdrops around her family home. But now she boasts of stopping her ears against her sister's voice, shutting out the one story she most wants to hear. Finally, Sister has incapacitated herself as storyteller. For her true subject was the conjunction of her sister's life and her own, the pattern of rivalry, speech and silencing, setting forth and return which they mutually wove. Just as Stella-Rondo earlier destroyed the authority of Sister's voice, Sister now refuses Stella-Rondo a hearing. And she is her own victim: fingers in ears, she is rendered deaf.

Sister's story is a triumph of rearrangement. But in that very triumph, she has ignored what Eudora Welty calls "a storyteller's truth: the thing to wait on, to reach there in time for, is the moment in which people reveal themselves. You have to be ready, in yourself; you have to know the moment when you see it" *(Eye).* The story Eudora Welty wrote is very different from the one Sister tells, for it captures/invents Sister in her very moment of selfrevelation, which is the telling of this story. But recognizing revelation is beyond Sister's powers. She is not "ready, in herself" for that discovery. . . .

Source: Ann Romines, "How Not to Tell a Story: Eudora Welty's First-Person Tales," in *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller,* Kent State University Press, 1989, pp. 94-104.

Adaptations

Eudora Welty reads "Why I Live at the P.O." on a 1998 Caedmon audio cassette entitled "Eudora Welty Reads."

Topics for Further Study

Several early reviewers complain that Welty's stories all concern people who are "abnormal." Katherine Anne Porter goes so far as to describe Sister as "a terrifying case of dementia praecox," or schizophrenia. Welty has responded that the characters are regular people who are accustomed to speaking in an exaggerated way. Do you think that Sister is mentally ill? To what degree are the family conflicts Welty portrays abnormal?

Robert Penn Warren describes the central theme running through Welty's writing as the conflict between love and separateness. This is a conflict that clearly applies to Sister. In your opinion, what does Sister need more—her family's love or independence from them?

A sibling rivalry between Sister and Stella-Rondo shapes the conflict in the story. Read some psychological theories about the sources of sibling rivalry or use your own experiences with the phenomenon. How does the concept of sibling rivalry to help you understand the dynamics between the sisters and the rest of the family members?

Welty is famous for capturing the patterns and expressions of Southern speech. Read a favorite passage from "Why I Live at the P.O." aloud. What particular words, phrases, or word patterns make the sound of Welty's writing distinctive? How does this distinctive Southern voice affect your enjoyment of the story and your understanding of the characters?

Welty has stated that a definite sense of place in a work of fiction enhances the universality of its themes. Describe the sense of China Grove, Mississippi that Welty creates in "Why I Live at the P.O." Does this, in your opinion, add or detract from the story's universality?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The number of U.S. post offices is down from its peak of almost 77,000 at the turn of the century, but free collection and delivery are not available in all areas and many people must go to their local post offices to send and receive mail.

1990s: The vast majority of Americans receive their mail at home, delivered daily by mail carriers. For various reasons, a small fraction continue pick up their own mail at post office boxes and windows.

1930s: In the late 1930s the United States begins to recover from the economic devastation of the Great Depression, but President Roosevelt estimates that one-third of the nation lives in poverty. For the most part, the other two-thirds have not experienced dramatic change in fortune. In particular, small town life remains largely undisturbed by economic crisis.

1990s: The national economy is robust. The rural population is at its lowest level in national history, while technology has allowed agricultural production to grow to its highest level. Mass culture, information technology, and transportation have eroded the distinct culture of small town America.

1930s: For the first time in decades, there is a reverse in the rural-urban migration pattern, with slightly more people leaving cities and returning to their towns of origin than vice versa.

1990s: Fewer and fewer people live in rural communities and small towns, but a trend of "neo-traditionalism" or "new urbanism" attempts to recreate the intimacy of a small town community in a urban or suburban settings. Strategies include centralized businesses, common public places, and pedestrian scale. For example, a "neo-traditional" community would have a local post office within walking distance for most residents.

1930s: The popularity of radio surges. The same schedule of music, drama, and news shows is available to a national audience, contributing to a more unified and homogeneous American culture than ever before.

1990s: Radio is still a significant medium for music, with national franchises running the majority of local stations. The dominance of television has led to the end of radio dramas and has severely curtailed the importance of radio news.

What Do I Read Next?

The Wide Net and Other Stories (1943), her highly acclaimed second collection of short stories, portrays a series of southern characters in Welty's inimitable voice.

One Writer's Beginnings (1984), a brief autobiography by Welty, focuses on her relationship to literature and the influences that shaped her vision as an artist.

The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (1965) represents the finest work by another southerner and modern master of the short story form.

The Collected Stories of William Faulkner (1999) includes 42 short stories by the most famous modernist from Mississippi.

Everything that Rises Must Converge (1965) presents the final collection of short stories by Flannery O'Connor, whose portraits of the underside of southern life are extreme and grotesque.

Member of the Wedding (1946), a short novel by Carson McCullers, is the story of a Georgia 12- year-old's search for a sense of family belonging.

Shiloh and Other Stories (1982), a collection of short stories by Bobbie Anne Mason, reflects the tensions of family life and relationships in the contemporary South.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Eudora Welty,* New York: Chelsea House, 1986.

A collection of critical essays on Welty's fiction by the most well known Welty scholars of the past several decades.

Johnston, Carol Ann. *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction,* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.

A clear and comprehensive introduction to Welty's writing, this volume includes an analytical essay, excerpts from Welty's own writings on fiction, and selected reviews and articles reflecting how Welty's writing has been interpreted from the 1940s through the present.

Waldron, Ann. *Eudora: A Writer's Life,* New York: Doubleday, 1998.

This first biography of Welty to be written offers a great deal of factual information about the life and achievements of the very private writer.

Welty, Eudora. *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews,* New York: Random House, 1979.

This highly readable collection of Welty's non-fiction writing offers her perspectives on other authors of her generation, earlier authors who influenced her, and the craft of fiction.

Wolfe, Margaret Ripley. *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women,* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995.

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Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman, ed. *Conversations with Eudora Welty,* Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984.

Review of *A Curtain of Green*, in Books, November 16, 1941, p. 10.

Review of *A Curtain of Green,* in *New Yorker,* Vol. 17,November 15, 1941.

Review of *A Curtain of Green,* in *Time*, November 24,1941, p. 110.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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