

Narrative Techniques and Thematic Significance in Eudora Welty's "Powerhouse"

Yan Fang

School of Foreign Languages, Peking University, Beijing, China

Email: fangyan0531@pku.edu.cn

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Abstract

Eudora Welty is an American short-story writer and novelist whose work is mainly focused with great precision on the regional manners of people inhabiting a small Mississippi town. "Powerhouse" is one of the most debatable short stories, which appears in her first collection—*A Curtain of Green*. In this story, Welty subtly presents her criticism of racism and segregation by means of masterly narrative techniques: focalization and narration. In addition, she reveals the failure of human's mutual understanding.

Keywords

Eudora Welty, Powerhouse, Focalization, Narration, Perspective

1. Introduction

One of the most debatable of Eudora Welty's short stories is "Powerhouse," which appears in her first collection—*A Curtain of Green*. In this story, Powerhouse is a marvelous and fanatic African American jazzman. One night when they are on tour, Powerhouse improvises a tale about his wife Gypsy's committing suicide. During the intermission, Powerhouse and his bandsmen go into a shabby Negro bar to have a beer where the Negroes are extremely entertained by Powerhouse's improvisation. Later he goes back to the white dance to continue the performance. Through delicate and subtle narration, Welty expresses her understanding of the plight of African Americans in the segregated South. In addition, she reveals the failure of human's mutual understanding.

Eudora Welty claims to have written "Powerhouse" overnight after attending a concert and dance in Jackson where Fats Waller plays. Thomas Wright "Fats" Waller (May 21, 1904-December 15, 1943) is an American jazz pianist, organist, composer, singer, and comedic entertainer, whose innovations to the Harlem

stride style laid the groundwork for modern jazz piano. Welty intends to write a story about musical improvisation which is “a daring attempt” for an unqualified writer like her:

“I tried to write my idea of the life of the traveling artist and performer—not Fats Waller himself, but any artist—in the alien world, and tried to put it in the words and plot suggested by the music I’d been listening to” (Prenshaw, 1984: p. 85).

Some critics criticize Welty’s failure to address concerns of gender and race in her fiction while others see her as deeply engaged in the issues of her time period. In “Powerhouse,” Welty subtly presents her criticism of racism and segregation by means of masterly narrative techniques: focalization and narration.

2. Selective Omniscient Perspective of the White Audience

In this story, the focalization of the narrator is constantly changing with the progression of the plot. According to *Routledge, Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, as one mode of focalization, selective omniscience is third-person narration with one character as focalizer (Herman, 2005: p. 584). At the opening of the story, the narrator, a member of the white audience, is selected by Welty to give a full account of Powerhouse’s characteristic and performance. She describes the point of view as “floating around somewhere in the concert hall—it belongs to the ‘we’ of the audience” (Ford, 2014: p. 32), as is indicated in the story, “he looks down so benevolently upon all *our* faces and whispers the lyrics to *us*” (Welty, 1980: p. 132). At the very beginning, “we” convey the excitement about the concert: “Powerhouse is playing! He’s here on tour from the city--” (Welty, 1980: p. 131).

More importantly, the reader is invited to engage in the performance: “you can’t tell what he is,” “you know people on a stage—” (Welty, 1980: p. 131). As Rimmon-Kenan defines, the narratee is the agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: p. 92). From the beginning of the story, the narrator is addressing the narratee. The progression to second person intensifies the emotional taste of the story and narrows the distance between the narrator and the reader since the reader is inclined to take part in the action. Thus, the narrator presupposes “you know how he sounds—you’ve heard him on records” (Welty, 1980: p. 131). Narrative theorist Monika Fludernik illuminate, “whereas the typical story-telling mode allows the reader to sit back and enjoy a narrative of another’s tribulations, hence instituting a basic existential and differential gap between the story and its reception, second-person texts (even if only initially) breach this convention of distance, seemingly involving the real reader within the textual world” (Ford, 2014: p. 33).

This may be a pleasant engagement for the reader who pretends that he or she is at a jazz concert, but by and by it becomes obvious that as the “you” in the story, the reader is not only part of the white audience, but also is involved in the racist observation:

“There’s no one in the world like him. You can’t tell what he is. ‘Negro man’? —he looks more Asiatic, monkey, Jewish, Babylonian, Peruvian, fanatic, devil. He has pale gray eyes, heavy lids, maybe horny like a lizard’s, but big glowing eyes when they’re open. He has African feet of the greatest size, stomping, both together, on each side of the pedals. He’s not coal black—beverage colored—looks like a preacher when his mouth is shut, but then it opens—vast and obscene.

And his mouth is going every minute: like a monkey’s when it looks for something...

Is it possible that he could be this! When you have him there performing for you, that’s what you feel. You know people on a stage—and people of a darker race—so likely to be marvelous, frightening.” (Welty, 1980: p. 131)

From the narrator’s descriptions, the reader can sense a kind of racist judgment which is not too conspicuous but is real since the author depicts Powerhouse’s color in crystal detail. Thus, the white audience clearly sees Powerhouse as both a racial inferior and a savior. Notwithstanding the comparison to a lizard and a monkey, he also seems “marvelous”. He sends the white audience into “oblivion,” and they long to know the secret he holds. To the self-conscious, repressed, conventional white audience, Powerhouse seems to promise release. Therefore, the reader may draw a conclusion that Powerhouse is an accomplished Negro musician but with obscene and hideous appearances. As the narration, here is from the white audience whose perception and evaluation towards the black are not true, the narrator seems to be unreliable. Readers who do not find this a thinkable thought are then caught between what James Phelan calls the “observer” and “addressee” roles. Phelan explains that “the fuller the characterization of the ‘you’, the more aware actual readers will be of their differences from that ‘you’, and thus, the more fully they will move into the observer role” (Ford, quoted in (Phelan, 1994: p. 33)). The use of the second-person, however, can lead to enough ambiguity for the boundaries between roles to be blurred, so that it is not easy to say who “you” are.

Shortly after the publication of “Powerhouse,” Welty read it at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference that summer, but the audience’s reaction was uninterested. Perhaps the participants mistakenly identified Welty with the story’s white audience. Or perhaps they sensed that Welty was rejecting a stereotype cherished by white liberals. To some extent, the composing of “Powerhouse” is a way of rejecting the stereotype of the African Americans.

3. An Omniscient Viewpoint of the Events

After the opening sections of the story, the narration shifts beyond the white audience member narrator to an omniscient viewpoint of the events. The narrator vividly and specifically depicts the other band players—Valentine, Little Brother and Scoot. Late at night, the band begins to play the one waltz of the evening, a request, and during this sad song, Powerhouse suddenly declares to the other members of the band that he has received a telegram that reads that his wife,

Gypsy, has died. While playing, the other band members ask Powerhouse about her death, and Powerhouse begins to weave a story of receiving the telegram with such convincing detail, relating such pain and despair, that the reader becomes caught up in the imaginative reality of it and begins to wonder if, in fact, Powerhouse's wife has died.

The vivid improvisation of Gypsy's committing suicide shows Powerhouse's creative power of imagination. This is conceived very much in the spirit of the blues, for Welty seems to have a sympathetic and sensitive understanding of the important body of African Americans. Her imagination is highly relevant to the welling, primitive poetry encountered in the blues performance. Ralph Ellison defines the blues form as symbolic action.

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism (Appel, 1965: p. 221).

In "Powerhouse's Blues", Appel argues that "Powerhouse is a jazzman who conquers the agony of life through a blues-oriented toughness of spirit" and "Powerhouse' is a blues—an extended lament expressed in the short story form" (Appel, 1965: p. 221). In one interview, Welty talks about the intention of creating this short story: "Of course, what I was trying to do was to express something about the music in the story. I wanted to express what I thought of as improvisation, which I was watching them do, by making him improvise this crazy story, which I just made up as I went. Nothing like that, of course, happened" (Prenshaw, 1984: p. 328).

4. The Perspective of a Camera Eye

After playing for the white audience at the white dance, Powerhouse and his musicians take a break and wander into the black section of the town to get a drink. The point of view shifts from omniscience to a camera eye. The surroundings, the musicians, people nearby and the waitress are scanned by the author. Walking on the street, they are followed by "a hundred dark, ragged, silent, delighted Negroes" from "under the eaves of the hall" (Welty, 1980: p. 135). The setting contributes to the strength of the theme, for the fact that Powerhouse is a black musician playing in the segregated South, a place where black people cannot even come into the hall and dance to his music, gives added pain and despair to the already bleak circumstances of the human condition.

When Powerhouse walks into the ironically-named World Café, the place is dull and lifeless: "it is a waiting, silent, limp room" (Welty, 1980: p. 136). The nickelodeon is "burned-out-looking" and "a worn-out peacock feather hanging by a thread to an old, thin, pink, exposed light bulb" (Welty, 1980: p. 136). These details are described at full length by the narrator's careful observation. Powerhouse brings vitality to this dull room when he tells the story of receiving a telegram the night before informing him that his wife Gypsy had committed suicide, As Powerhouse improvises the details, he repeats the violent and disgusting

parts, narrating Gypsy's actual jump out of the window three times, vividly being portrayed. He depicts her brains and insides on the sidewalks four times. The second time Powerhouse uses this image, "brains and insides everywhere, Lord, Lord," we are told, "all that watching Negroes stir in their delight" (Welty 137). The third time he comments that, "her insides and brains all scattered around," the audience members signal their gratification, "a sigh fills the room" (Welty 138). Powerhouse creates the character of Uranus Knockwood to find Gypsy's body on the sidewalk. When Powerhouse imagines Knockwood walking round in her insides, "they all burst into halloos of laughter" (Welty, 1980: p. 138). Powerhouse describes Knockwood as the man who take their wives when they have gone. The response to this disturbing picture of the con man is "everybody in the room moans with pleasure" (Welty, 1980: p. 138). Powerhouse and the audience in the room are in turn focalized. As Powerhouse performs his story of Gypsy again, the reader has the chance to see him as a character other than the "fanatic, devil"; he is funny, clever and powerful. At this moment, the narrator's view becomes more closely aligned to the World Café audience. Early in the scene the narrator portrays the ridiculous figure of a "little boy in a straw sombrero which has been coated with aluminum paint all over," (Welty, 1980: p. 137) but later the narrator notes, "the little boy in the fine silver hat opens a paper and divides a jelly roll among his followers" (Welty, 1980: p. 138). In Ford's critical essay "'Serious Daring' in Eudora Welty's 'Powerhouse' and 'Where is the Voice Coming From?'" he articulates that "when we place the audience's reaction of stirring, sighing, bursting, and moaning, next to the highly suggestive name of 'Uranus Knockwood' and the plot of Knockwood entering Gypsy's insides and stealing wives, the pleasure the audience expresses is a kind of sexual release" (Ford, 2014: p. 28).

In creating the story of Gypsy, Powerhouse employs a blues strategy of making the evil thing present—whether it is death or loss or adultery—to diminish its power. Examining "Powerhouse" as an instance of the blues, Alfred Appel argues, "Gypsy symbolizes all the painful and brutal experience kept alive in Powerhouse's aching consciousness" (Welty, 1980: p. 227). He further claims that "Gypsy's 'suicide' is perhaps an enactment of Powerhouse's own death-wish, projected and released through the activated fantasy" (Welty, 1980: p. 228). Appel's interpretation of the character Gypsy is valid, we should pay more attention to Powerhouse's obsession with the story of Gypsy's suicide. Ford thinks that it is feminine object that bears the harm of the violence and the fictionally feminine Gypsy instead of a "real" masculine Powerhouse has the insides and brains on the sidewalk. He also believes that the audience is thus able to enjoy the way Powerhouse takes the classic narrative of male subject and female object and brings it to life with all its glory and sexual trappings (Ford, 2014: p. 29).

5. The Third-Person Limited Viewpoint of Powerhouse

With the progression of the plot, the omniscient viewpoint shifts to the third-person limited viewpoint, that is Powerhouse's point of view. The drum-

mer, Scoot, who certainly does not apprehend the improvisation, asks Powerhouse, “But ain’t you going back there to call up Gypsy long distance, the way you did last night in that other place? I seen a telephone... Just to see if she there at home?” Free indirect thought is employed here to present Powerhouse’s feelings: “that is one crazy drummer that’s going to get his neck broken someday” (Welty, 1980: p. 140). By following the shifting of the narrator’s point of view, the reader is pulled closer to Powerhouse, and towards the end of the story, the initial racist point of view is challenged.

From the very first sentence of the story, present tense is employed. Several investigators, such as Sutherland, Sandmann and Ruelle, have pursued the possibility of a connection to musical recitation, given that most genres in which tense switching occurs are known to have been recited or chanted, presumably with some musical accompaniment (Fleischman, 1990: p. 80). Since Powerhouse is jazz improviser, Welty uses present tense to depict the vivid artistic power of imagination.

In “Powerhouse,” a sense of alienation is experienced on several levels. Ford points out that the creation of the name Knockwood is intended to stand for all of the white jazzmen who have used Black jazz material for their own gain, coming after the Black jazz creators and following their musical trail (Ford, 2014: p. 29). At the end of the story, “a look of hopeful desire” appears on Powerhouse’s face, and then, “a vast, impersonal and yet furious grimace transfigures his wet face” (Welty, 1980: pp. 140-141). A genius of jazz as Powerhouse is, he could not be appreciated by the white audience, and he could not even be understood by his own ethnicity. Thus, Powerhouse is left as a “gypsy” who must travel to small towns and play for unappreciative audiences. Powerhouse travels so much in fact that he has forgotten where he is. As he demands his nickels back from the nickelodeon, he asks what the name of this place is. The answer sums up his problems: “white dance, week night, raining, Alligator, Mississippi, long ways from home” (Welty, 1980: p. 136). The story of Gypsy allows Powerhouse to find an image fitting the grief, so he can at least imaginatively gain power over it. When the waitress says, “it must be the real truth,” Powerhouse responds, “No, babe, it ain’t the truth... Truth is something worse. I ain’t said what, yet. It’s something hasn’t come to me, but ain’t saying it won’t” (Welty, 1980: p. 139). Powerhouse’s dreamy smiling has left much ambiguity for the readers.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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