

ANALYSIS

“Powerhouse” (1941)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“The wife of Powerhouse commit[s] suicide... Gypsy, the wife of Powerhouse, the jazz pianist, apparently cannot survive without the reflective presence of her husband.”

Carol Ann Johnston
Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1997) 31, 73

Powerhouse is modeled on the famous black musician Fats Waller. His name introduces the theme of power in the context of race relations in the South before the black Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, contrasting forms of power. As a black man, Powerhouse is subjugated by the social power of whites, whereas in ironic contrast, as a musician he has spiritual power over whites. The story transcends time and locale in dramatizing how people reconcile their racism with their idolization, their prejudice *against* with their prejudice *for*: They set him apart as not human like themselves. They see him as subhuman, primitive and reptilian, a freak of Nature—a “Nigger man...he looks more Asiatic, monkey, Jewish, Babylonian, Peruvian, fanatic, devil.” Seen as something remote from themselves, he is dehumanized and demonized—hence fascinating: “You know people on a stage—and people of a darker race—so likely to be marvelous, frightening,” like an exotic animal from Africa—and a “*devil*.”

The setting in Alligator, Mississippi emphasizes that human nature remains primitive. Yet the whites are also inhibited by convention. “This is a white dance.” But “nobody dances.” The story depicts uptight mainstream white culture before it got loosened up by the influence of black culture—in particular by jazz and rock and roll—becoming less puritan and more pastoral. When whites in the audience make requests of Powerhouse they laugh “as if to hide a weakness.” Elsewhere, of course, as in Europe, New York and Hollywood, black culture had been influencing music and dance since the 1920s. White writers such as Sherwood Anderson in *Dark Laughter* (1927) had established a literary tradition of romanticizing blacks as on the whole more spontaneous, creative, emotionally free, passionate, vital and natural than conventional white people. These whites in Alligator are so inhibited they see Powerhouse as a fanatic for being “in a trance” with “a look of hideous, powerful rapture on his face.” He has a spiritual power so far beyond their comprehension they see his movements as “obscene.” (Then along came Elvis Presley.) Powerhouse is transported like a “sibyl,” giving signals. Intuitive, he feels his way through the music, transcending this world. “Powerhouse is so monstrous he sends everybody into oblivion.”

Jazz gives the black musicians the power to improvise, a freedom they do not enjoy in white society. Pounding out the passionate inspirational song “Marie, the Dawn is Breaking” Powerhouse is joyful, leading them all “higher and higher.” The section of the band furthest away from him “is all studious, wearing glasses, every one—they don’t count.” They are like the inhibited whites. “Only those playing around Powerhouse are the real ones.” They have soul, like him. He has to keep encouraging his young bass fiddler Valentine to put all his heart into it. Valentine solos on the sweet love song “Honeysuckle Rose.” Powerhouse also loves his clarinet player Little Brother, who submerges himself in his music “with the whites of his eyes like fishes swimming.”

Powerhouse and his closest band members contrast in spirit with the whites who do not even dance “except a few straggling jitterbugs and two elderly couples. Everybody just stands around the band and watches Powerhouse.” They are captivated by his power, yet are ironically condescending—as if their own inhibition and lack of passionate dedication make them superior: “When somebody, no matter who, gives everything, it makes people feel ashamed for him.” The irony of this is that white readers are more likely to feel ashamed of the whites than of Powerhouse.

While he plays “Pagan Love Song”—only by request for it is “a sad song”—he is moved to reveal his personal sadness to Valentine: “I got a telegram my wife is dead.” Welty is vividly Impressionistic here: “His mouth gathers and forms a barbarous O.” The pagan name Gypsy suggests that his wife is a wanderer, like him but in a different sense as he travels around the country from one gig to the next with his “wandering fingers.” Scoot the skeptic in the band is “unpopular” for being so “disbelieving.” He suspects that Powerhouse may be masking something, using signals. Powerhouse says the telegram was signed by “Uranus Knockwood.” We sense that he is not sure what happened but he thinks he knows. He can feel it like he feels the music. Uranus is another planet far away and a pun on your anus. Some asshole may be playing around with his wife. Knock on wood.

Powerhouse wonders “What the hell was she up to?” They all laugh at the name Uranus Knockwood as inauthentic: “That ain’t Lenox Avenue”; “That ain’t Broadway.” The telegram was “signed nobody.” One band member notes that Uranus is a “star.” While Powerhouse is playing his music “higher and higher,” Gypsy the dancer may be “up to...a star.” Powerhouse has been so transported by his music that he is beyond space and time. He has to ask where he is and what time it is. Masking his emotions now, “with a hidden face,” he speculates a worst case scenario: “If she went and killed herself!”

Then he copes by making a joke, wearing a towel on his head. They laugh and call him a sheik, like the movie star Valentino, an attribution of romantic power ironic under the circumstances. Masking is a pervasive motif in black literature, as in the poem “We Wear the Mask” (1895) by Paul Dunbar. Masking, smiling when you do not mean it, is a major theme in *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison: “Play the game but don’t believe in it.” Trying to help Powerhouse feel better, Little Brother denies that Gypsy would kill herself, but that must mean she is up to something else.

The band takes a break and goes out in the rain to the World Café, with “Not Responsible” signs on the walls. There they follow their leader’s signals just as they do when performing on stage. Powerhouse is playful and flirts with the waitress: “Come here, living statue.” He teases. “She waits like a drop.” His black fans have followed their hero and watch him from the door while he speculates aloud that Gypsy jumped out a window because she was missing him so much. Valentine and Little Brother support him in his fantasy—“Sure, she misses you.” Powerhouse vents painful suspicions by fantasizing her remains in gory detail: “Brains and insides everywhere, Lord, Lord.”

Powerhouse identifies Uranus Knockwood as his nemesis, a personification of everything bad that happens to him behind his back. He imagines Knockwood as the one who finds Gypsy all broken up and “scattered around.” One of his band is moved by compassion to speak without a mask of toughness and callous humor: “Hush about her brains. Hush about her insides.” But Powerhouse persists about Gypsy’s “insides”—her feelings. Actually her insides spattered on the street are a metaphor of his own heart impacted by the telegram: “Ssssst! Plooey!” He masks the pain with hilarity: “Look here what I’m walking around in! They all burst into halloos of laughter.”

When Powerhouse fantasizes that Knockwood carried off his wife, it is a signal that this might be the real truth. One of his band follows his lead: “He take our wives when we gone!” All the traveling musicians with wives fear that: “He come in when we goes out!” The more specific they are in describing Knockwood in detail—“Middle-size man”; “Wears a hat”; “That’s him”—the more real his threat becomes. The blacks transcend fear, prejudice, loss and pain through humorous communal fantasy as well as through their music—jazz and the blues. Their transcendence feels sweet to all present: “Everybody in the room moans with pleasure.” A little boy shares his jelly roll.

Powerhouse the pop culture hero is compared to Sugar-Stick Thompson, the true life hero who dove to the bottom of a creek and pulled up 14 drowned white people—a sweet feat. The black who leads Sugar-Stick forward is “like a slave,” illustrating the charismatic social influence of the hero. To the public, an inarticulate “logy Negro” with bursting eyes has been transformed into an awesome exemplar of courage, strength, generosity, and will power. Powerhouse is comparable in that he pulls up countless white people from spiritual death with his music. Now he is sustaining himself emotionally with his fantasy. Once again he imagines aloud to his audience how Gypsy jumped to her death because she loved him so much, but Little Brother feels his pain: “Don’t, boss, don’t do it again.”

When the waitress says of his fantasy, "It must be the real truth," Powerhouse drops his mask: "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 I ain't saying it won't." The truth worse than Gypsy being dead is Gypsy not being dead. The worst case would be if she did not get "carried off" but simply wandered off like a Gypsy. Despite visualizing her insides splattered all over, Powerhouse does not know her feelings.

Returning to the white dance, Powerhouse and his band are "like old rained-on ghosts." Their spirits transcend the flesh. They joke about Uranus Knockwood until they "are afraid they will die laughing." The evidence that, supported by his band, Powerhouse is powering through his pain is his "look of hopeful desire" that brings a mist to his eyes. Scoot the skeptic suggests that Powerhouse call Gypsy on the phone "Just to see if she there at home." Powerhouse angrily declines. He needs to sustain his fantasy long enough to get through this performance, off and on stage. His imaginary telegram in reply to Knockwood counters with "Don't make any difference: I gotcha." He gets her in the sense of understanding that she is dead to him now and also in the sense of feigning indifference. His fantasy, their laughter and their music lift the band above it all "shaking the rain off and on them like birds."

The white audience of Alligator is condescending when Powerhouse returns from the intermission "no doubt full of beer, they said." They know nothing of his insides. They do not know what he is going through emotionally, masking his pain for their sakes. Through his art, Powerhouse "got it under his power." On request he plays "Somebody Loves Me" and does "twelve or fourteen choruses," increasing the irony and pathos of his wondering over and over and over whether anybody loves him. "Maybe it's you!" Maybe it's you, reader.

Michael Hollister (2013)