

ANALYSIS

“A Curtain of Green” (1941)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“Mrs. Larkin shows the destruction of the individual life when it is lived through another; she has been so consumed into her husband’s identity that at his death, most of her dies with him. She is left very little of her self—literally she is without a voice—and left with the irrational guilt that is a woman’s heritage from Milton’s poem [*Paradise Lost*]; women are responsible for all the evil that happens to mankind.” [This Feminist does not recognize love or spiritual growth.]

Carol Ann Johnston

Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction

(Twayne 1997) 73

Mrs. Larkin is a widow living alone in Larkin’s Hill, named after her husband’s father. Her comfortable social position did not protect her from the big tree that fell over and crushed her husband just as he came arriving home from work. Watching the tree fall, Mrs. Larkin said “You can’t be hurt.” She felt so secure in life she believed that “her love for her husband was keeping him safe.” It proves to be a tree of knowledge and her paradise is lost, in allusion to Milton. The story is Realism in debunking her Romantic faith in Nature, “as if a curtain had been jerked quite unceremoniously away.” The accident is an extreme example of chance, a thematic motif in Naturalism, and the story dramatizes *transcendence* of deterministic forces in the tradition of Modernism.

The action is set entirely in her garden, an archetypal setting identified with the heart. “Since the accident in which her husband was killed, she had never once been seen anywhere else.” In shock and grief she has withdrawn into herself. “People said she never spoke.... Just to what end Mrs. Larkin worked so strenuously in her garden, her neighbors could not see.” The story reveals her motivation, her need to *do* something to cope with her grief and the “unaccountability” of Nature: “Was it not possible to compensate? to punish? to protest?” These are the impulses that drive her to working all the time from dawn to dark in her garden. Her frustration resembles that of the correspondent in “The Open Boat” (1898) by Stephen Crane: “When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples.”

The plants in her garden, like the feelings in her heart, are tangled and “more and more over-abundant and confusing.” To neighbors her garden is “sort of a jungle” in which she “lost herself.” Her ego has been crushed like her husband. She quits working only after dark and returns to her house “with a drooping submissive walk.” She is careless about her appearance, untidy and disheveled, often with her hair “streaming and tangled where she had neglected to comb it.” She has retreated from society, or the City (head), into her Garden (heart), which has turned into a Wilderness (soul).

“Only by ceaseless activity could she cope with the rich blackness of this soil.” Her grieving soul is extremely “fertile.” She is individuating into her masculine side, wearing an “old pair of men’s overalls rolled up at the sleeves and trousers,” probably her husband’s. “To a certain extent, she seemed not to seek for order, but to allow an overflowing, as if she consciously ventured forever a little further, a little deeper, into her life in the garden.” Alienated from the natural order by death, she “compensates” by “over-vigorous” planting and growing, immersing herself totally as she strives for *atonement* with Nature, her stained overalls “now almost of a color with the leaves.” The pantheistic implications here relate Welty to Thoreau, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck, as in “The Chrysanthemums” (1938). Mrs. Larkin is kneeling throughout the story, as the devout do when praying.

She takes shelter from the rain under a pear tree. The pear is a traditional symbol of fertility and this tree “in mid-April hung heavily almost to the ground in brilliant full leaf.” April is also the cruelest month in Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922), but whereas his land is waste, Mrs. Larkin’s garden is extremely fertile. Her garden makes it unnecessary for her to leave home on a quest like the knight for the Holy Grail in order to save her soul. “A Curtain of Green” is Welty’s feminine complement to the masculine quest myth of the Fisher King portrayed by Eliot.

Mrs. Larkin is “breaking ground” when she realizes that “The cries of the birds had hushed.” The pear tree where she takes shelter is the center of her soul, and now “The shadow of the pear tree in the center of the garden lay callous on the ground.” The shadow is a recurrent literary symbol identified by the psychologist Carl Jung with the dark repressed aspects of the self. Here the shadow is “callous” as she looks across the yard at the Negro boy she has employed: “‘Jamey!’ she called angrily.” Venting her anger over the injustice of her husband’s death, she becomes unjust herself.

“She felt all at once terrified, as though her loneliness had been pointed out by some outside force whose finger parted the hedge.” The hedge surrounding her garden is a curtain of green that induces an illusion of security, order and beauty, but conceals the whole truth about Nature, including her own: “She drew her hand for an instant to her breast. An obscure fluttering there frightened her” as if she might be having a heart attack, warning her that “The bird that flies within your heart could not divide [fly in] this cloudy air.” The metaphorical bird in her heart, her capacity for transcendence, is grounded by her angry mood and silent. She is “mesmerized” like her plants. Her sleeves fall back exposing the “whiteness of her arms, the shocking fact of their youth.” Her youth adds to the pathos of her situation. Having lost her husband, she may feel that now she has lost her ability to have a child.

Jamey evokes her own docility when the tree fell on her husband: “A look of docility in the Negro’s back as he knelt in the plants began to infuriate her.” As she approaches him “he looked like a child.” He is smiling, “lost in some impossible dream of his own”—naïve like her before the tree fell on her husband. His head “seemed witless”—just as she was—“so deadly its ridiculous dream.” She stands as she did before she knelt down to work, “as if a blindfold were being removed.” The blindfold is analogous to the curtain of green. With a “responding hopelessness almost approaching ferocity,” she raises the hoe above her head. Overcome by the natural but irrational impulse to “punish,” she is a conscious agent, unlike the tree that fell by chance on her innocent husband. If she had let the hoe fall on the innocent boy, the story would be pure Naturalism in the morbid gothic spirit of Ambrose Bierce.

However, when the rain begins to fall, Mrs. Larkin sighs and lowers the hoe to the ground. “It was so gentle.” The metaphor originated with Shakespeare: “The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.” (*The Merchant of Venice*) Mercy, her human superiority to Nature, has resisted the force of determinism, purging her vindictive anger: “The pear tree gave a soft rushing noise, like the wings of a bird alighting.” In the falling rain “tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body.” She “would not feel anything now except the rain falling.” Mrs. Larkin is contrasted to her neighbors and “the oblivious crash of the windows next door being shut when the rain started.” She faints into the flowers, a spiritual death—in rain that promises rebirth like a flowering plant in April. “Miss Lark! Miss Lark!” identifies her with the bird in the pear tree, affirming her transcendence.

Sunlight in the story reinforces the illusion of ordinary perception that all is well. Her husband was killed on a sunny day. It is also sunny when the shadow of her pear tree “lay callous on the ground.” Her shadow is her repressed anger and rage to punish—a monster behind her inner curtain of green. She raises the hoe above her head to chop the boy down. But then “Pale darkness turned for a moment through the sunlight” and raindrops start falling instead of the hoe.

After she faints, the black boy looks down in awe at her white face. He had sensed Mrs. Larkin standing behind him and did not turn around because “something had filled him with stillness.” That “something” beyond the awareness of Mrs. Larkin made it possible for her to complete her transformation and save herself, while also sparing Jamey from a terrifying experience. That something beyond expresses the faith of Welty. (Flannery O’Connor would call it the grace of God.) Opposites are united in that critical moment of stillness, as in the phrase “pale darkness.” A synthesis of opposites is a characteristic of transcendent

consciousness. “In the light from the rain, different from sunlight, everything appeared to gleam unreflecting from within itself.” This “inner light” is another characteristic of transcendence in literary and religious history.

The black boy is (1) literally the physical and social opposite of the white woman; (2) spiritually her equal as a “witless” childish dreamer; (3) her repressed shadow; (4) her scapegoat to punish; and—ironically--(5) her savior in a sacrificial role, hence Christ-evoking. In the end, before she can rise from the dead he will be gone like her innocent childlike self when she was still wearing a blindfold, before she saw behind the curtain of green. Now she can be resurrected, self-reliant and whole.

Michael Hollister (2013)