

ANALYSIS

“A Memory” (1941)

Eudora Welty

(1925-2001)

“Perhaps in ‘A Memory,’ one of the best stories, there might be something of early personal history in the story of the child on the beach, estranged from the world of adult knowledge by her state of childhood, who hoped to learn the secrets of life by looking at everything, squaring her hands before her eyes to bring the observed thing into a frame—the gesture of one born to select, to arrange, to bring apparently disparate elements into harmony within deliberately fixed boundaries.”

Katherine Anne Porter
Introduction
A Curtain of Green
(Doubleday 1941)

“‘A Memory’ presents the moment of the discovery of the two poles—the dream and the world; the idea and nature; innocence and experience; individuality and the anonymous, devouring life-flux; meaning and force; love and knowledge.”

Robert Penn Warren
The Robert Penn Warren Reader
(1944; Random House 1987)

“‘A Memory’ . . . might be recognized as more or less autobiographical even if Katherine Anne Porter (in her sympathetic introduction to *A Curtain of Green*) had not suggested it first, because here in seminal form are some of the central mysteries which have occupied Eudora Welty as a mature writer. It is the *nature* of the child lying on the beach which suggests what is to come, her preoccupation and her discoveries. An incipient artist, the child has a passion for form, order, control, and a burning need to identify, categorize, and make judgments on whatever comes within her vision. She does this by making small frames with her fingers, which is her way of imposing or projecting order on a reality which she has already guessed but not admitted to be a terrifying chaos. She is convinced that reality is hidden and that to discover it requires perpetual vigilance, a patient and tireless scrutiny of the elusive gesture which will communicate a secret that may never be completely revealed.

Paralleled with this ‘intensity’ is another equal intensity: that of her love for a small blond boy, a schoolmate about whom she knows nothing, to whom she has expressed nothing, but whom she holds fiercely within the protective focus of her love—a protection of him and of herself and her expectations which is enforced by the dreary regularity of school routine. But one day the boy suddenly has a nosebleed, a shock ‘unforeseen, but at the same time dreaded,’ and ‘recognized.’ It is the moment when she receives her first clear revelation of morality, when she perceives the chaos that threatens all her carefully ordered universe, and the vulnerability of her loved one; she recognizes the sudden violence, the horror of reality, against which she is helpless. This event makes her even more fiercely anxious about the boy, for she ‘felt a mystery deeper than danger which hung about him.’

This event is also a foreboding of the experience the girl has on the beach when a family-group of vulgar bathers comes crashing into the world of her dream. Here is wildness, chaos, abandonment of every description, a total loss of dignity, privateness, and identity. There is destruction of form in the way the bathers protrude from their costumes, in the ‘leglike confusion’ of their sprawled postures, in their pudgy, flabby figures; there is terrifying violence in their abuse of each other, their pinches and kicks and ‘idiotic sounds,’ their hurdling leaps, the ‘thud and the fat impact of all their ugly bodies upon one another.’ There is a hint of a final threat to human existence itself when the man begins to pile sand on the woman’s legs, which ‘lay prone one on the other like shadowed bulwarks, uneven and deserted,’ until there is a ‘teasing threat of oblivion.’ The girl finally feels ‘a peak of horror’ when the woman turns out her bathing suit ‘so

that the lumps of mashed and folded sand came emptying out...as though her breasts themselves had turned to sand, as though they were of no importance at all and she did not care.' The girl has a premonition that without form—the kind she has been imposing on reality by her device of framing things like a picture—there is for human beings no dignity nor identity, that beyond the chaos of matter lies oblivion, total meaninglessness. This is the vision of reality which must be squared to the dream; and so the girl must now watch the boy, still vulnerable, 'solitary and unprotected,' with the hour on the beach accompanying her recovered dream and added to her love."

This is one of the sorrowful or 'brutal' mysteries which Miss Welty presents in her stories. The 'joyful' mystery is, of course, the careful, tender, ravishing love, the exquisite joy, and the dream. Chaotic reality does not displace the dream; though reality proves to be as terrifying as the child might have guessed, the dream cannot be totally destroyed."

Ruth M. Vande Kieft
"The Mysteries of Eudora Welty"
Eudora Welty (Twayne 1962)

"'A Memory' is most daring as an instance of Welty's exploration—it belongs to those remarkable stories in *A Curtain of Green* that are metaphors, stories whose form is the dramatization of their meaning. 'A Memory' is about representation and the process of seeing and writing.... What is shown here is not reality as it is experienced directly in everyday life, but a *conventional representation of a public park*, a descriptive discourse acknowledged by a group at a given time. At the same time, *this description is extremely hostile*, as the words 'steel,' 'glaring,' and 'thunderclouds' imply. Third, *this picture is framed*, and framed by the Bible, so to speak.

This first picture, which the young girl sees in her innocence, will be soon shattered. In other words, Eudora Welty rejects it, and she does so for reasons that seem to me very much postmodernist. First, we are confronted with a general suspicion of the myth of reality, i.e., 'the consensual discourse describing the official representation of the world in a given cultural community at a given time.' Then the picture raises the problem of frames and framing. This the young girl learned when she began taking painting lessons as part of the conventional way of dealing with representation. A frame is a way of delimiting her subject, of imposing restraint and cutting out all that might crop up unexpectedly. In this context, especially with reference to the thunderclouds in the Bible, the frame represents the law, the repressive law of Jehovah....

Framing and the need to see the world familiarly combine and represent the efforts of the self to master the world. The young girl feels such control because she can produce at will the memory of a brief encounter with a young boy, her first love.... The second picture presented in 'A Memory' is one of violence and distortion as the child sees 'a group of loud, squirming, ill-assorted people who seemed thrown together only by the most confused accident, and who seemed driven by foolish intent to insult each other, all of which they enjoyed with a hilarity which astonished my heart.' The pleasantly controlled circle of the first picture becomes 'wobbly ellipses' as the little boys chase each other. The trim white pavilion is replaced by the shapeless mound of sand built around the ugly woman. This is a painful initiation into the contingency of life as it is: in order to be true, the artist must be able to see all the violence and rage and ugliness that is part of life. But it is more than that, for in the culminating point of 'A Memory,' the little girl has a true vision of death."

Daniele Pitavy-Souques
"Eudora Welty"
Mississippi Quarterly 39.4
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"'A Memory' serves not only as a touchstone in the collection [*A Curtain of Green*], crystallizing Welty's fictional method for all of its stories, but also presents some of the philosophical difficulties in Welty's framing technique, especially when framing implies control of one individual over another. 'A Memory' begins with the narrator's reminiscence of her coming of age. The narrator recalls sitting on the beach as a young girl, awash in memories of the school year and her first crush, on a boy whom she has never met but whose wrist she has most certainly brushed against. While she sits on the beach recalling this

narrative, she frames the action around her (the frolicking of a family of 'common' people) within a rectangle of her fingers, as she is learning to do in her painting class.

Thus Welty opens this story with one of the primary visual techniques, the frame of vision. This act of framing gives us a quick view of the scene and indicates that the narrative method will be visually directed, as it is in other stories...rather than progressing in a straight line. We know to expect, then, a method of organization more scenic and poetic than linear and plotted.... The narrator presents two distinct, though somehow related, 'stories' here 'only as simultaneous.' The nature of these two juxtaposed stories offers further clarity of method. What starts off as a 'very long story' in this passage ends up as 'the dream I could make blossom at will.' This shift from story to instantaneous dream is significant.

The story of her tryst with her beloved is not long, not even a story at all in the conventional sense, but an encounter lasting a split second, a brush-by on the staircase. We learn here...that the narrator has a special definition of story, and it may be more like a blink of an eye that becomes 'dilated, timeless' than like an extended and connected series of events. The event story that the narrator juxtaposes with her remembered dream story is not conventional either. Rather, this 'sight of the bathers' is 'like a needle going in and out among [her] thoughts.' The narrator tells us that 'though some intensity' she 'had come almost into a dual life, as observer and dreamer,' and this is an accurate and telling description of what this longer passage describes: she dreams and observes at once, and the result is an interlocking series of observations with the lyrical, visual logic of a dream.

While 'A Memory' at first seems to be about the coming of age of love, a reading through the story with this expectation may be strangely unfulfilling. The narrator as a young girl doesn't have any contact with the object of her love besides the light touch on the stair. And the voice of the adult relating this childhood memory does not tell the story we might expect—that when she gets older, she does have a lover, but never the same intensity of feeling that she had for her first love. Since the narrator does not fulfill the reader's desire for information or closure in this matter of love, we must reconsider the story to find out what subject the narrator does address....the story's subject becomes the coming of age of Welty's particular artistic vision and method. Unlike any of the other visually directed stories in *A Curtain of Green*, 'A Memory' does not use the visual method to show development of insight in a central character, in fact, the narrator of the story is striking in her lack of movement or insight, just as she is remarkably unwilling to relate more information about her lover."

Carol Ann Johnston
Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1997) 47-49

Michael Hollister (2014)