

ANALYSIS

“The Petrified Man” (1941)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“‘The Petrified Man’ offers a fine clinical study of vulgarity—vulgarity absolute, chemically pure, exposed mercilessly to its final subhuman depths. Dullness, bitterness, rancor, self-pity, baseness of all kinds, can be the most interesting material for a story provided these are not also the main elements in the mind of the author. There is nothing in the least vulgar or frustrated in Miss Welty’s mind. She has simply an eye and an ear sharp, shrewd, and true as a tuning fork. She has given to this little story all her wit and observation, her blistering humor and her just cruelty; for she has none of that slack tolerance or sentimental tenderness toward symptomatic evils that amounts to criminal collusion between author and character. Her use of this material raises the quite awfully sordid little tale to a level above its natural habitat, and its realism seems almost to have the quality of caricature, as complete realism so often does. Yet, as painters of the grotesque make only detailed reports of actual living types observed more keenly than the average eye is capable of observing, so Miss Welty’s little human monsters are not really caricatures at all, but individuals exactly and clearly presented: which is perhaps a case against realism, if we cared to go into it.”

Katherine Anne Porter
Introduction
A Curtain of Green
(Doubleday/Doran 1941) ix-xix

“‘Petrified Man,’ included in *A Curtain of Green* (1941), is typical of Miss Welty’s comedies of lower-middle-class town life. The story is seen obliquely, related by Leota, a beauty-shop attendant, to her customer Mrs. Fletcher. The plot chiefly concerns Mrs. Pike, an incredibly vulgar friend of Leota’s, who unmasks a side-show petrified man as a fugitive from justice who is wanted for raping ‘four women in California; all in the month of August.’ The real point of the story lies not in the plot but in the fascinatingly vulgar beauty-shop conversations, the preoccupation of the female characters with sex (‘He’s turning to stone. How’d you like to be married to a guy like that?’), and the general confused and earthy quality of Leota’s narrative.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 260

“The beautician named Leota who dominates ‘The Petrified Man’ is wonderfully vulgar, but she is also wonderful to listen to in the same way as are some of the shabbier characters in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. If the beauty parlor as the town headquarters for female gossip has cheapened and coarsened Leota’s mind and spirit, her moving into town has not yet quite sapped the vitality of her country-bred language. It surges on triumphantly, and Eudora Welty has reproduced Leota’s manner to a nicety.

In Leota’s mind, a certain professional knowingness lives happily alongside utter naivete. Does Leota really think that a reading of her other palm wouldn’t duplicate the reading of the first? Or does she credit herself with a split personality—two quite different minds to be read, one attached to her right hand, the other to her left? Yet maybe Leota is—in a certain crazy way—right after all. Though Lady Evangeline calls herself a mind reader, what she actually reads are palms. In any case, Leota, as a beautician, can spot a poor manicure right across the room. The ‘worst manicure [she] ever saw on a living person’ belongs to a woman who is constantly holding in her hand other people’s hands.”

Cleanth Brooks
“Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom”
Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks
(U Mississippi 1979)

“The vulgarity and self-centeredness of utterance, the coziness of tone dominate the entire story. Leota and Mrs. Fletcher speak mainly of other people; from their conversation emerges the tale of Mrs. Pike... Mrs. Pike’s ‘sharp eye’ uncovers in the petrified man of a circus sideshow a criminal wanted for raping four women in California; Leota’s enthusiasm for her and her small son markedly diminishes when Mrs. Pike collects five hundred dollars’ reward. But plot has relatively little to do with the story’s comedy. Plot functions to reveal character—which is to say, plot uncovers what voice leaves implicit.

Leota’s self-absorption, vulgarity, and superficiality play themselves out in her responses to shifting circumstances as she discusses Mrs. Fletcher’s pregnancy (and the absorbing question of how she herself found out about it) and her relationship with Mrs. Pike, whom she first admires for her skill at coping with social exigencies and then envies and dislikes for the same skill, expressing her rage finally by paddling Mrs. Pike’s little boy, who runs away yelling, ‘If you’re so smart, why ain’t you rich?’—a profoundly appropriate question.

Talking about other people, Leota reveals herself. Greedy and heartless, she cannot preserve her façade of amiability. She gets comeuppance in comically exact fashion: nothing could punish Leota more effectively than missing a chance at money. The story, despite its dazzling precision of detail, makes the beautician representative of her type. Magnified into significance by the exactness of her rendering, Leota in all her triviality plays a vital part in Welty’s drama of the South. In the culture Welty evokes, people talk constantly about one another, generating legends even of the present. Present and past often merge, for Welty as for Faulkner.”

Patricia Meyer Spacks
“Gossip and Community in Eudora Welty”
Gossip (Knopf 1985)

“These lessons from her childhood are evident in one of Welty’s most popular short stories, ‘Petrified Man.’ Essentially, the story is one long scene in a beauty shop. Through her own vivid descriptions and through the revealing, gossipy talk of the three characters, Welty not only produces an exact record of life at a point in time and space but also illustrates her theme: that women can dominate men to the point of turning men into freaks.”

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Volume 4
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1566

Michael Hollister (2014)