

## ANALYSIS

“The Demonstrators” (1968)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“In ‘The Demonstrators’—the O. Henry Prize story of 1968—the lonely consciousness of an ordinary, good man is seen in a context of greater, more violent loneliness, the terrible general failure of mankind. The demonstrators themselves, the civil rights agitators, do not appear in the story and need not appear; their intrusion into the supposedly placid racist society of this small Southern town is only symbolic. They too are not to be trusted, idealistic as they sound. Another set of demonstrators—demonstrating our human powerlessness as we disintegrate into violence—are the Negroes of the town, a choral and anonymous group with a victim at their theatrical center, one of themselves and yet a curious distance from them, in her death agony.

The story begins with the semi-colloquial ‘Near eleven o’clock’ and concerns itself at first with the forceful, colorful personality of an aged woman, Miss Marcia Pope. Subject to seizures as she is, crotchety and wise in the stereotyped manner of such old dying ladies, she is nevertheless the only person in town ‘quite able to take care of herself,’ as the doctor thinks at the conclusion of the story; a great deal has happened between the first and last paragraphs. The doctor’s mission is to save a young Negro woman, who has been stabbed by her lover with an ice pick; his attempt is hopeless, the woman is bleeding internally, too much time has been wasted. And so she dies.

The doctor goes home and we learn that he himself is living a kind of death, since his wife has left him; his wife left him because their thirteen-year-old daughter, an idiot, had died...everything is linked to everything else, one person to another, one failure to another, earlier, equally irremediable failure. The doctor is ‘so increasingly tired, so sick and even bored with the bitterness, intractability that divided everybody and everything.’ The tragedy of life is our permanence of self, of Ego: but this is also our hope, in Miss Welty’s phrase our ‘assault of hope,’ throwing us back into life.

The next morning he reads of the deaths of the Negro lovers, who managed to kill each other. The homespun newspaper article concludes, ‘No cause was cited for the fracas.’ The doctor had not failed to save the Negro woman and the man because there was never the possibility of their being saved. There was never the possibility of his daughter growing up. Of the strange failure of his marriage nothing much is said, yet it too seems irreparable. But, as he looks into the garden, he distinguishes between those flowers which are ‘done for’ and those which are still ‘bright as toys.’ And two birds pick in the devastation of leaves, apparently permanent residents of the garden, ‘probing and feeding.’

‘The Demonstrators’ resists analysis. It is a small masterpiece of subtlety, of gentleness—a real gentleness of tone, a reluctance to exaggerate or even to highlight drama, as if sensing such gestures alien to life. We are left with an unforgettable sense of the permanence and the impermanence of life, and especially of the confused web of human relationships that constitute most of our lives. The mother of the dying Negro girl warns her, ‘I ain’t going to raise him,’ speaking of the girl’s baby. Of course she is going to raise him. There is no question about it. But the warning itself, spoken in that room of unfocussed horror, is horrible; the grotesque has been assimilated deftly into the ordinary, the natural. It is an outstanding characteristic of Miss Welty’s genius that she can write a story that seems to me, in a way, about ‘nothing’—Flaubert’s ideal, a masterpiece of style—and make it mean very nearly everything.”

Joyce Carol Oates  
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