

ANALYSIS

“The Wanderers” (1949)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“Miss Katie Rainey, ‘the old lady that watches the turn of the road’ until her death, figures in ‘The Wanderers’ (1949) as one who not only sees but hears. The voices she hears come from her imagination. They tell contemporary truth, yet belong to the past; they speak of human recurrence.... Fate Rainey is Miss Katie’s dead husband; Mr. Mabry is courting her daughter. Her own experience and her daughter’s merge as she listens to the voices of her community, voices of fantasy.... The community and its voices interpenetrate all experience. Miss Katie expresses truth to herself in the guise of imagined gossip. The constant impingement on the individual of the community’s voices and judgments becomes Virgie’s preoccupation when left alone by her mother’s death. The account of rituals and ceremonies surrounding the death, of people coming to the house of mourning and of what they say, occupies much of the story.

Then Virgie, finally alone, drives to a neighboring village, looks at the cemetery, sits in the rain. Her meditations recall other people’s insistent opinions. She remembers a man buried in the cemetery who ‘lived in another part of the world,’ leaving for a time, keeping his own secrets, yet never avoiding persistent assessment by those of his home place. Virgie avoids an encounter with Mr. Mabry, walking in the rain, who fails to see her because she wishes not to be seen.... She thinks about the extreme difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of being all to oneself.... With a black woman holding a hen, Virgie sits under a tree in the rain....

Both alone and together at the story’s end, Virgie and the black woman ‘hear’ natural creatures—not so natural either, in the rural South: animals of legend, rather, imaginable out of literary tradition—in much the same way that Virgie’s mother has earlier ‘heard’ voices of the community. Isolation, separation are temporary constructions at best. In fictive isolation, the woman conjures up the alternative community of an imagined animal creation. Those surrounding Virgie in her everyday life are busybodies, compulsive interferers with and talkers about others; they will not leave her alone. Yet to live alone would be, after all, a horror. The gossip that plagues Virgie, the town’s compulsive interest in the affairs of others, also affirms necessary connection: an arrangement of things superior to any imaginable alternative. Even the vision of running animals in their beauty and freedom gains intensity of being shared, if only silently.”

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