

## ANALYSIS

“Why I Live at the P.O.” (1941)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“The heroine of ‘Why I Live at the P.O.’ is a terrifying family poltergeist, when one reconsiders it. While reading, it is gorgeously funny.”

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

“‘Why I Live at the P.O.’ is a comedy of the Delta region foreshadowing the style of *The Ponder Heart*. Like the later short novel, it is a monologue related in a typical Welty-flavored Southern vernacular by its heroine, ‘Sister,’ who tells the story, is jealous of her sister Stella-Rondo, who has gone off to marry an itinerant photographer and now returns with a two-year-old girl, Shirley T., whom she declares is adopted. Sister, jealous, quarrels with her, and the whole family, including Uncle Rondo and the severe grandfather Papa-Daddy, takes Stella-Rondo’s side. Finally Sister hauls away her possessions and moves into the post office, which belongs to her in virtue of the fact that Papa-Daddy has had her made postmistress through his political influence. Although Katherine Anne Porter refers to this story as ‘a terrifying case of dementia praecox,’ this is to take Miss Welty’s comedy too seriously; the two sisters are no more feeble-minded than many other characters in Eudora Welty’s work, and their ‘regression into childhood’ is more whimsical than it is psychoneurotic.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 260-61

“To begin with, almost all of the stories deal with people who in one way or another, are cut off, alienated, isolated from the world. There is the girl in ‘Why I Live at the P.O.’—isolated from her family by her arrogance, meanness, and sense of persecution.”

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

“In ‘Why I Live at the P.O.’...Sister’s obsessive monologue reveals not only the comic interaction of her extended family, not merely her own deep-rooted feelings of alienation and lost opportunity, but also a sense of the mystery of human relationships. Like many southern writers, Welty is known for the creation of ‘grotesque’ characters. Her characters, including Sister, are often physically, mentally, or emotionally handicapped and are thus at odds with their community. Yet even as they show the pain that isolation inflicts, they also show a freedom that a small, tightly-knit community does not permit.”

David Minter  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1797

“Typical of the stories in *A Curtain of Green*, ‘Why I Live at the P.O.’ leaves the reader to her own devices to determine what is funny, what is serious, and often, what has happened. As narrator, Sister dwells with such intensity on petty slights—she has to cook for two more mouths than she planned, ‘stretch one chicken over seven people,’ as she puts it—that the reader soon understands the comic nature of her self-pity. Sister never does.

‘Why I Live at the P.O.’ is an explosion of highly comic events surrounding the return of Stella-Rondo to the family with ‘this child of two’ after she has run off with Mr. Whitaker, the traveling photographer.

Sister, a version of the older brother in the New Testament story of the prodigal son, has stayed at home cooking and cleaning for her truly wacky family: Mama, Papa-Daddy, and Uncle Rondo. Stella-Rondo returns, claiming that her child, Shirley T., is adopted (otherwise simple math would suggest that the child was conceived before her marriage to Mr. Whitaker).

Sister believes that Shirley T. is not adopted, even though this is the most convenient fiction for the family, who clearly want to save face: Sister insists that Shirley T. is the 'spit image of Papa-Daddy if he'd cut off his beard' and that 'she looks like Mr. Whitaker's side too.... She looks like a cross between Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy.' In this and in most other situations, Sister refuses to go along with the family fiction. Consequently, the entire family begins to turn on her. She has placed herself in a most difficult position as an outsider within the closed system of her family.

Sister's first-person narration should put the best possible spin on her actions. Instead we get glimpses through her eyes of her jealousy of Stella-Rondo, mixed in with heavy doses of self-pity. Her jealousy seems at least partially responsible for the family's repudiation. When Stella-Rondo arrives home, for instance, the first thing Sister tells us is that Stella-Rondo stole Mr. Whitaker from her, and stole him by telling him a lie.... Folktales have it that every woman has one breast that is slightly larger than the other—'bigger on one side'—and Sister's reaction to this accusation is very telling. She takes it personally, denying it vehemently, when she might just as well have said, 'Well, so is Stella-Rondo, and so is every woman.' But, as we see over and over in this story, Sister takes every comment and accusation as an intensely personal attack.

We don't know the truth about who really had dibs on Mr. Whitaker, what we learn from this monologue and others like it throughout the story is that Sister feels that she is at the bottom of the ladder in every way, and no matter what happens, Stella-Rondo will best her, because she is 'spoiled.' This is a case of older-younger sibling rivalry achieving its full comic potential. As with most instances of disagreement between sisters, however, this situation is not comic at all to the participants. Sister takes whatever favoritism there may actually be toward Stella-Rondo and magnifies it in her mind to such a degree that she makes the family, as well as herself, believe that she is the one who doesn't belong. She thinks that everyone conspires against her; when Uncle Rondo, drunk, leaps into a hammock with Papa-Daddy, 'Papa-Daddy woke up with such a horrible yell and right there without moving an inch he tried to turn Uncle Rondo against me.'

The story shows how an intensely close family can be not only suffocating but also impossible to escape. In the end, family ties are so powerful that Sister's moving to the P.O. merely intensifies her connection with and dependence on her family. They are the 'main' (and almost the only) family in China Grove, and they decide to boycott the post office. At the end of the story, we learn that Sister has been in residence at the P.O. for only five days; even though she already has 'everything cater-cornered, the way [she] like[s] it,' she leaves us with the sense of the insularity of her escape. She has found peace, but for how long?

While Sister's escape is successful in that she leaves home, it is clear that she has not left her sheltered life. As long as she is in China Grove, she is under complete control of her family. If this comic story represents the bright side of the sheltered life, then, it also has a dark underside. Though we can see that in some ways Sister's self-righteous attitude toward Stella-Rondo brings about the deluge of familial wrath—including the entire package of firecrackers exploding in her bedroom at 6:30A.M.—it is also clear that Sister has very little power. She exercises what little she has by taking small appliances, curios, and plants from the yard with her to the P.O. The postmistress job is an honorary, unpaid position, and even if she had a salary it isn't clear where Sister might be able to go. The tension between Sister's limited control over her life and her over-estimation of her power creates a comic situation in 'Why I Live at the P.O.'"

Carol Ann Johnston  
*Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1997) 17-19

Michael Hollister (2015)