



A War of Strength: Femininity Against Masculinity in A Piece of News and Flowers for Marjorie

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Abstract:

By comparing Eudora Welty's short stories A Piece of News and Flowers for Marjorie, this essay attempts to discuss how femininity and masculinity are represented, as well as how femininity struggles against masculinity within families and society. In both stories, there are obvious conflicts between man and woman which lead to different tragic consequences. Welty is writing to show women's agony and inferiority within the family and men's absolute power of dominance on the one hand, she is also writing about men's struggle and resignation within the family and the society on the other hand. This comparative reading of the short stories from the feminist perspective offers us a better vision of Welty's theme: isolation and alienation split couples and beat down their fragile love.

Key words: A Piece of News, Flowers for Marjorie, masculinity; femininity; alienation.

1. Introduction

Eudora Welty's A Curtain of Green collects 17 impressive and diversified short stories of human plight and alienation. It is observed that the main themes of love and separateness are keenly represented in Welty's collection here. As Warren has commented, "all the stories in A Curtain of Green bear the impress of Miss Welty's individual talent, but there is a great variety among them in subject matter and method and, more particularly, mood. It is almost as if the author had gone at each story as a fresh start in the business of writing fiction, as if she had had to take a new angle each time out of a joy in the pure novelty of the perspective" (Bloom 71). Yet "behind the innocent delight of the craftsman, and of the admirer of the world, there was also a seriousness, a philosophical cast of mind, which gave coherence to the book, but on the surface, there was the variety, the succession of surprises" (Bloom 72). The present paper is making an attempt to rediscover the highlighted topics from a dialectically feminist perspective which researchers seldom pick up in reading A Curtain of Green.

By comparing Welty's short stories A Piece of News and Flowers for Marjorie from A Curtain of Green, this essay discusses how femininity and masculinity are textually represented and confronted within social and family frames. In both stories, there are obvious conflicts between man and woman. Welty is writing to show women's agony and inferiority within the family and men's absolute power of dominance on the one hand, she is also writing about men's struggle and resignation within the family and the society on the other hand. Isolation and alienation split couples and beat down their fragile love.

2. Gentleness, Rebellion and Femininity

In the two stories, both wives exhibit their femininity in similar yet different ways. In the first place, a sweeping tenderness is presented in both wives. In A Piece of News Welty is depicting the housewife Ruby as a gentle and mild woman like a cat. Descriptions frequently appear such as "she handled it tenderly" (12), "in a dreamy walk" (12), "only playful pouting with which she amused herself" (12), "Ruby was going through the preparations for the meal gently" (15), "she stood almost on tiptoe in her bare, warm feet" (15); her countenance of "flat blue eyes and her soft mouth" (15) also resembles so much to that of a meek cat. It is of intriguing significance to compare the housewife Ruby to a pet cat. Ruby's gentleness, tameness and timidity clearly show its way.

Ruby reminds us of the group of seemingly-happy American suburban housewives described in Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan is trying to enlist a popular magazine titles of the day to argue that "The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home" (107). Ruby is also caught in a similar travail here, that she is described as a pet cat, yielding to the social expectations of young wives as compliant, submissive and being pleasing to men. The society has had its presupposition for women, the limit of which is difficult to leap over. To take a further look at the problem, just as Friedan has argued that many educated American women become generally "Tom's wife" and "Mary's Mother" and lose their own identities, they've got a problem that has no name. "I feel empty somehow... incomplete" or "I feel as if I don't exist" (Freidan 80). Ruby is completely stuck in this similar predicament as a dull and lonely housewife. She is quite alone, idling around in the "sparsity" of the house, lost in all fancies and conjectures and cooking for her husband. Besides, infertility may also be a problem for the couple as the text gives no clue of a possible child, which may intensify her emptiness. In her very void, she turns to an extreme state of abnormality. Observe how Ruby behaves when she reads the news: "That's me," she said softly, with deference, very formally (13). Ruby's seriousness and piety reveal that she is eager and solemn to see her name appearing in the newspaper, even though the news says "she" is shot. It elicits the readers to comprehend what a lack of self-identity will lead to such an abnormality and how desperate she is aspiring for a kind of recognition and attention from others! It is believed to be the bitter abyss she experiences together with those suburban housewives.

In *Flowers for Marjorie*, the pregnant wife is also tender and soft. Every time Marjorie speaks she "whisper". Yet her husband Howard has an acute feeling of "the softness, the reproach" and he feels "pressed by tenderness". Gentleness here turns to a sharp dagger and peers through Howard with its piercing blade. Different from her husband, Marjorie cannot think of other things except the coming baby. She automatically leaves all the economic problems to her husband and is wholehearted immersed in her own joy with her rounding body.

Secondly, despite their tenderness, both wives present their awareness of rebellions in the two stories. In *A Piece of News*, driven by loneliness, Ruby is ridiculously stuck in her own hallucinations, seeking for an invisible rebellion. She imagines that she is dying so that she can escape from Clyde's violence, make him repent and in this way, win over a battle of self-esteem. As a gentle woman, Ruby has no other choice than to rebel in her feminine power. In *Flowers for Majorie*, the maternal love produces a strong force for Majorie to remain serene and powerful. She seems to be alienated from the pains and poverty of reality and grows detached with the coming baby.

Both female images are resonant to the Belle culture of the South America in which women are required to be obedient and submissive. And both pose a new challenge to the traditional southern ladies in an obscure, monstrous yet illuminating way. "To be a woman," says Kierkegaard in *Stages on the Road of Life*, "is something so strange, so confused, so complicated, that no one predicate comes near expressing it and that the multiple predicates that one would like to use are so contradictory that only a woman could put up with it"(qtd. in Beauvoir 163). Femininity is a tailing shadow of women; it is largely inborn and simultaneously greatly shaped and influenced by the family norms and social stipulations. In this part, we come to discern how women's femininity grows and plays its role; how women's traditional roles within the families have endowed them both dependence and potency, how women are making a struggle between her dependence and her power.

3. Violence, Struggle and Masculinity

The two husbands, in striking contrast with each other in terms of their characteristics, are showing their masculinity through violence and struggle. Clyde is coarse and violent, while Howard is emotional and sensitive. Yet both of them are the dominant gender in the household and use the means of violence. It is not difficult to understand their choice as Cornwell has argued "Many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance" (83). Clyde does not personally appear until the second half of the story and he appears as an invader. When he comes back home "He poked at Ruby with the butt of his gun" (15); when he is waiting for dinner, he holds "a knife and fork in his fists" (15); he tells her "Don't you talk back to me" (15) and calls her "living devil" (16). Clyde is overwhelmingly armed, not only physically and linguistically, but also mentally. The hallucination of Ruby also gives away the clue that Clyde might be beating and abusing Ruby a lot. Ruby tries to hide and escape but fails. The scattered evidence through the short story shows that Clyde is dominant and violent. Howard is comparatively a more complicated male character. His debut endorses him as a sensitive and suffering man; when confronting Marjorie, he seems to endure and be "pressed by tenderness". Yet his innate supremacy grows wide and he makes a fatal attempt to kill his wife. Violence eventually rules over and makes an overwhelming conquer. Yet Where is violence leading to? Is it an assumed victory or a doomed failure? In both stories violence leads to not a triumph, but a disastrous defeat. Violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection (Cornwell 84). In this sense, violence indicates cracks and flaws in gender relations and is clearly calling for remedy.

This dilemma also encourages us to look at the bigger picture of the society for a more rooted explanation. “As Chris Louttit has argued, the working-class masculinity is forged largely through the relationship between three defining aspects of the lives of working men: control over the body, authority in the home and independence in the workplace” (qtd. in Mallett 32). As industrialization changes the world, it also changes social criteria for men’s role in the family and the society, men become the breadwinners and are undertaking the financial responsibility. Work is an important means for men to win over respect and independence. Compared to Clyde, Howards seems to be more distressed in “authority in the home” and his inability to find a job deprives him of any independence in the society. It is the failure in these two aspects that crush down Howard hopelessly. There is also a different perspective. “Connections between masculinity and work are inflected by other social categories. For example, for many western societies work has traditionally been understood as an important moment in the passage from childhood to adulthood. Another example of this inflection is illustrated through the separation of the private sphere of family life from the public sphere, from values of dependence to independence. In short, to become a man is to become a worker” (Haywood, Mac and Ghail ed. 22) . If this is taken into consideration, Howard is failing to pass from his immaturity to adulthood. His affection for Marjorie and his feeling that she is like his home indicate his attachment to her as a child. If he cannot get a job, he cannot literally grow up, if he cannot grow up he remains eternally a young boy and son of Marjorie. In either Clyde’s choice of abusing his wife or Howard’s choice of killing his wife, they are trying to win their respect and independence by means of violence, which is in turn heavily restricted to the high social expectations.

On the other hand, masculinity is not related simply to being strong, powerful and violent. The power of struggle in both male characters also clearly stands out. After Clyde reads the newspaper, he experiences a momentary “helplessness” derived deeply from his guilt. The very opposition tells his inner struggle as another dominant power. In the case of Howard, this complexity and contradiction is even more obvious. Welty has devoted a large proportion of the text to describe Howard’s mind, full of struggle and conflicts.

“It was hard to remember, in this city of dark, nervous, loud-spoken women, that in Victory Mississippi, all girls were like Marjorie—and Marjorie was in turn like his home... Or was she? Marjorie often seemed remote now, or it might have been the excess of life in her rounding body that made her never notice any more the single and lonely life around her, the very pressing life around her” (99).

Howard is sentimental in such a way that he detects things easily and he tends to indulge himself in his own thoughts. Through this meditation it is believed that Howard is pressed and affectionately attached to Marjorie and he blames on the unborn child for the worsening situation. He intends to fight against it that he even has fancy that he has snatched Marjorie’s pansy which is emblematic of Marjorie’s pride and joy. He also makes compromise by holding the flower to Marjorie and dropping soberly onto the floor beside her. Yet again Marjorie’s gentle words and mild scolding attacks him ruthlessly and topples him down. As Annette Trefzer has argued “Welty’s working-class characters are pawns in a system of capitalist station that literally strips them of everything they have” (101).

Biddulph (1994) argues that the central problems of men’s lives, as he sees it—loneliness, compulsive competition and lifelong emotional timidity—are rooted in the adoption of impossible images of masculinity that men try, but fail, to live up to. (qtd. in Christ Baker, 303) This is also the woe Welty is trying to depict for men, on how they use their strength making desperate struggles to live up to that masculinity but fail.

4. Femininity Against Masculinity

The conflicts between man and wife are the climax of the two stories. It is in the climax that femininity and masculinity are opposed in such an obvious stance. In *A Piece of News*, the wife Ruby is foregrounded. She first appears very gentle, submissive and catlike. Her tenderness and bleakness is immersed throughout the story, in strong contrast with Clyde’s violence and roughness. The intensity of their confrontation reaches a zenith when Ruby shows Clyde the paper when “she took up his plate and gave him that look of joy” (16). Ruby is using these minor gestures and expressions to declare a war against Clyde’s oppression. “Well, I’d just like to see the place I shot you!” he cried explosively. He looked up, his face blank and bold (16). Clyde remains calm and reasonable and fights back out of his own instinct. “But she drew herself in, still holding the empty plate, faced him straightened and hard and they looked at each other” (16). Ruby shows remarkable courage and does not shrink back until at last “Slowly they both flushed, as though with a double shame and a double pleasure” (16).

Through this confrontation it is revealed that men can be weak and feeble and women can be tough and strong despite their external appearances. It is a clear fact that Clyde has never shot Ruby, yet for the very moment the couple are taking it as a reality. The double shame of remorse and double pleasure of triumph have strangely come into being as a false but real existence. Can females conquer male domination in such a clear-cut picture? Is Clyde making any compromise in this war?

“It’s a Tennessee paper. See ‘Tennessee’? That wasn’t none of you it wrote about.” He laughed, to show that he had been right all the time (16). This sudden twist in the ending answers it all. This revolt is only a temporary ironical snapshot; it is a farce and fancy. Ruby’s voice is silenced as the storm has rolled away.

In *Flowers for Marjorie* there is a similar thread of development. Howard is enormously attached to Marjorie and is never split with the thought of Marjorie. But when he comes back home and sees the yellow pansy he feels despairing. Unconsciously he has a fantasy that “He snatched the pansy from Marjorie’s coat and tore its petals off and scattered them on the floor and jumped on them” (99) as an inner impulse to give vent to his anger. He gains a temporary calmness when he buries his face against Marjorie but is soon obsessed with a “new desperation” as Marjorie talks. He bursts out a fierce quarrel with Marjorie about finding a job. Marjorie’s strong desire for the baby goes against Howard’s coolness and hatred; Howard’s long self-revelation rivals Marjorie’s short whispering articulation “Why, Howard, You don’t even hope you’ll find work anymore” (101); his outrage and despair are battling Marjorie’s softness and pride as he swings his purse and Marjorie sits undismayed; Howard fails to get a job and therefore loses most of the patriarchal dividend while Marjorie is feverishly aspiring for the coming baby as it is the hope of new life for her. These confrontations disclose a desperate alienation and disconnection between the couple, which is the root of their pains and sufferings. Their infertile love is finally shattered by the cruel reality.

“Have you had anything to eat?” (101) is the last stroke of insult for Howard. He rages up, losing control of himself and thrusting the knife under Marjorie’s breast. Does he win this war by silencing that soft voice? Howard wonders around in the street and finally comes back as if he becomes a little boy. It is a failed journey of Howard attempting to grow up from a boy to a real man.

All successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification (Abbott 53) Welty is creating piles of suspense and surprises in her short stories, therefore keeping her audiences in constant efforts to sort things out. It is until the closure of the story that Welty’s intentions are clearly revealed. On the diegetic level, both stories are telling the conflicts between men and women, between masculinity and femininity. It is a war of strength between men and women, both of who are declaring his/her own power to fight for their individuality and self-esteem. It is a war of overwhelming calamity and disaster; it is a war of no ending and of no bounding, it is a war that has no winner and all are destined losers. However, there’s another dimension to consider about. “A gender order where men dominate women cannot avoid constituting men as an interest group concerned with defense, and woman as an interest group concerned with change. This is a structural fact, independent of whether men as individuals love or hate women, or believe in equality or abjection, and independent of whether women are currently pursuing change” (Connell 84). Clyde and Howard are not born violent but are making a suppressive “defense” of their honor and respect as men; Ruby and Marjorie are not subdued but are making efforts to bring “change” to their situations. Their separate destinies have brought about their confrontations, solitude and isolation.

The poet John Edward Hardy comments that no other writer’s work can be so feminine on the one hand and drifting away from feminism on the other hand than Welty’s, which can be perceived better echoing to Welty’s instinctive and natural, rather than intentional and radical depiction of men and women’s situations. Welty studies always try to interpret Welty’s writings from feminist perspective for the stark truth of Welty being a woman writer. To trace Welty’s female awareness, we can never avoid her relation with Virginia Wolf. “All of these Welty scholars, however different in approach, understand the relationship between Welty and Woolf as an empowering one. (Shameem Black 153)”. Welty is believed to be instinctively influenced by Virginia Wolf, her intimacy to and interest of Welty on Woolf make it convenient and reasonable to follow Woolf’s female awareness. Akram SI. Habeeb delineated four feminine paradigms in his dissertation and found that Welty had used symbols and feminine images “in order to enact a feminine consciousness that defies the patriarchal traditions of society.” (V) He found that “Welty’s female heroines are defiant; they define themselves by challenging the masculine codes of the patriarchal society (218-219). *Golden Apples*, the love of the critics, claims its feminist attention in all occasions. Don James McLaughlin argues that “Welty thus offers us a model of the kind of feminism Grosz has advocated—action unconcerned with recognition. It is subversive work that is more preoccupied with practical transformation than with definition (545)”, which clearly points out the nature of Welty’s mythological allusions. Different voices parallel. Axel Nissen criticizes the limited and restricted research on Eudora Welty reliant on much of her own perception and traditional feminist perspective. He calls on the critics to unfold their researching view to a larger extend, such as new historicism, to find a “wilder” Welty. Laura Sloan Paterson also calls for more new gender theory as is practiced by Pierre Bourdieu, asserting “Jefferson Humphries responds to the general distrust of critical theory and outlines a theoretical agenda for a new post-Louis Rubin generation of Southern literature scholars, including viewing history and literature as mirror images and incorporating ‘European modes of thinking about literature, culture, and history’ ”(51). Domestic scholars have been stuck to research about gender problems in Welty’s works. Doc. Zhao Huihui paid close attention to the body expression and body images of females in Welty’s short stories and novels, expanding the southern panorama of Belle Culture and patriarchal representation, as well as their contradictions (133). Doc. Wang Lian, however, focused on King Maclain’s strategies for

hegemonic masculinity in Welty's representative work *The Golden Apples* in her doctor dissertation. On the one hand, although Welty might claim no political or feminist interest on her creation, her work appear instinctively with her idiocratic positions towards men and women. On the other hand, the feminist dimension is effective to interpret Eudora Welty's writings, but is never adequate to savour Welty's works.

Just as Beauvoir and Kimmel have argued, neither men nor women are born; they become. Men and women make themselves, actively constructing their masculinities and femininities within a social and historical context (Kimmel and Aronson ed. xxiii). The formulation of masculinity and femininity of the main characters in both stories can never be torn away from the social and historical influence. Therefore, their idiocrasies must be viewed from within families. Men and women share different responsibilities as Beauvoir has argued that "For both parties marriage is at the same time a burden and a benefit; but there is no symmetry in the situations of the two sexes" (417). "As the wage labor economy developed, men's occupational achievement outside the household took on stronger moral overtones and men came to be seen as fulfilling their family and civic duty not by teaching and interacting with their children as before, but by supporting the family financially. The ideal of separate gender spheres developed—work for him and home for her (Kimmel and Aronson ed. 270). In the two stories, the husband is the breadwinner of the household and is taking responsibility to rear the family. The wife stays at home and lives as a housewife. Clyde is claiming his power over Ruby by means of violence, Ruby is fighting back with her feminine power. As a man, Howard is trying to fulfill his duty to meet the social expectations and he fails. His wife Marjorie stifles Howard with her hopeful desire and is also the co-executer of this social crush. Masculinity may overwhelm femininity in terms of physical forms such as violence, yet the two are not opposed as the dichotomy of the same pole; men seem to dominate in the family with his masculinity yet also consequently become victims of the family norms and social constrains. In fact, man and woman, wife and husband, every one of them is the participator, conspirator and victim in this family war and social struggle.

Lastly I would like to quote from Bessie Chronaki's essay on her research of Eudora Welty's works: "Eudora Welty's concern, however, goes beyond fixities, and her subject becomes mankind in every place at all time. Something in the outside world, which is ever-changing, leads back to the permanent and more important matters of "love," "pity," "terror," and "feeling" – to the hidden reaches of the human heart, the mystery, the impalpable emotions without whose awareness a writer would not begin to write (36). Gentle or rebellious, violent or struggling, a glimpse into the two short stories reveals Welty's sensitive description of gender conflicts and her incisive observation of human alienation. Let it be more attention, let it be more love, let it be more reconcile and less of antagonism.

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