

# Livvie by eudora welty essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Eudora Welty has made significant contributions to the cause of American literature. Born in 1909, she witnessed the causes and consequences of the Second World War, the Cold War and beyond. But her observations and insights into the collective American psyche during the twentieth century, especially that of the Southern states, would provide the material for her literary works. Although Welty explored all forms of literary art, she is best remembered for her short stories. Her short stories are invariably part of twentieth century anthologies released by major publishing houses. (Allen, 1999, p. 35)

The story in question, *Livvie*, has won both critical as well as popular acclaim. The story, in essence is the resurrection of the main character's life, from the realm of death. This is reflected in the outer atmosphere, where the season transits to spring. The story revolves around the nuptial life of Livvie, who is married to a much older man, Solomon. Although the married life provides some personal security and regularity, it lacks in passion. This makes her feel that she is entrapped in the relationship. One of the people whom she meets outside her domestic setting is Cash, the young farm worker, who offers Livvie an escape from the boredom of her marriage. But thereby, she takes the risk of abandoning the safety and security provided by the husband and entering an outside world where passion may be discovered at the cost of losing orderliness. While this sort of conflict had been well-explored and presented by many feminist writers of the last century, Eudora Welty's offering is not so much distinguished by the narrative method but by the story's thematic structure which is " far more

complex and subtly adjusted to the ambiguities of actual human experience” (Claxton, 2005, p. 78).

The story is also remarkable for the motifs it employs to depict the inner spiritual journey. As Welty has stated in interviews, she took inspiration from medieval texts such as the Book of Hours for the writing of the story. For example, the Book of Hours’ emphasis on seasonal changes is analogous to the cycles of human life that is pondered over in Livvie. There is also a similarity between the characterization of Livvie and the historical fictional character Persephone, in that both characters journey forth to the surface of the earth, and avert death through the renewal of spring. (Allen, 1999, p. 35)

In Livvie, Welty also subtly mocks the ‘respectable Christian’ image of Solomon, who is portrayed as an old man with rigid, immutable views about the revealed word of God and the roles of men and women. Livvie, in contrast, is tending toward the opposite view, as the metaphors employed by her illustrate. For example, as Livvie walks down the Trace, she finds a “graveyard without a church, with ribbon-grass growing about the foot of an angel”...and where “Scary thistles stood looking like the prophets in the Bible in Solomon’s house” (from Livvie, as quoted in Claxton, 2005, p. 79)

Eudora Welty, being an accomplished photographer, is renowned for her emphasis on the visual aspects of domestic and social settings. She brings this flavor to the short story Livvie as well. The systematic, orderly and routine life led by Solomon is visually reinforced by describing the geometries of the house and the yard. As Welty had often stated, the visual imagery she uses in the story is derived from her travels in the Jackson

country area. Moreover, the author's use of painting and photography in Livvie illustrates how her works of fiction directly derive from the real world visuals she encounters. For example,

“ In “ Livvie,” she uses light to symbolize the main character's freedom from her long imprisonment. Previously, Livvie was forbidden to go outside into the new spring fields and work in the sun with the tenants. Freed from these constraints by Solomon's illness, she meets Gash McCord, the “ transformed field hand” who embodies the color and light of spring in his “ leaf-green” coat and “ emerald green” hat “ blowing in the spring winds”” (Claxton, 2005, p. 79)

Eudora Welty is a writer who has transcended confinements of genre, and Livvie is a good example of this. In the story, we find traces of the feminist narrative, class consciousness, religious sentiments, allusions to slavery, etc. Hence, as with the rich detailing witnessed in her photographs, the story can be looked at through various prisms. And such complex thematic layering of the narrative structure adds rather than detracts from the aesthetic merits of the work. (Allen, 1999, p. 35) In other words, in Livvie, “ Welty writes one central narrative with several other narratives contained within the larger structure, a kind of palimpsest with narratives underneath and surrounding the main text. At times, these other narratives threaten the order of the main story with their complexity and ambiguity, but they also contribute to its color and richness.” (Claxton, 2005, p. 79)

The author brings the story to a novel conclusion. Solomon's death serves as a denouement to the plot. At this juncture, rather than portraying Livvie's

condition as one of deprived and bereaved, the author associates Livvie with a flowering peach tree. Instead of oppressing her, Solomon's death actually liberates Livvie at several levels. For example, Livvie is at last free to explore the outside world, unrestricted by any barriers of tradition. But the newly found freedom brings with it dangers and risks. On balance though, she is set free to discover the subtleties, conflicts and ambiguities of life, as opposed to the illusion of safety provided under Solomon's charge. Such an assessment makes the informed reader reminisce about another female writer from the South – Kate Chopin. Chopin's short stories such as *The Story of an Hour* and *The Storm* deal with inherent counter-tendencies in a domestic marital setting. The conclusion to the story *Livvie* is particularly striking in its re-exploration of the feminist theme first articulated by Chopin. But Welty and Chopin lived in different centuries and the socio-political experience of the two authors are quite different. Hence, although the theme is similar, its application and contexts are quite different. (Allen, 1999, p. 35)

#### Works Cited:

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