

ANALYSIS

“A Piece of News” (1941)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“At first glance this story may seem to be no story at all—merely a trivial incident, which is meaningless except as it may provoke out amusement: an all but illiterate girl happens, quite by accident, to come upon a newspaper story in which a girl with the same name as hers is shot by her husband. She goes off into a reverie in which she imagines that she has been shot by her own husband—imagines that she is really the girl of the newspaper story. This reverie is interrupted by the return of her husband, who reads the account, is for his own part momentarily shocked by the coincidence of names, but with an overriding common sense, throws the newspaper into the fire, and dismisses the incident.

Even the reader who tries to deal with the story sympathetically, who knows, for instance, the authority which the written word carries for many simple people, and who is willing to believe that the coincidence of names might really provoke in the simple girl the action ascribed to her in this story—even such a reader might feel that the story was finally pointless. That is, even if we feel that the motivation of the characters in the story is sound, we still may not be convinced that the story has a ‘meaning’ apart from its humorous commentary on the psychology of simple and primitive folk. The story does have a meaning, but the author has been careful to dramatize it for us in terms of the action. Perhaps the most fruitful approach to a discussion of the meaning will take into account the dramatic, though gradual, presentation of this meaning.

In the first place, the girl and her husband, Ruby and Clyde, are isolated from the world which we know. Clyde Fisher keeps a still. He is an outlaw, and is properly suspicious of strangers. He and his wife live in a world which reverses most of the conventions of the ordinary world: it is a world in which, for example, guns are common and newspapers uncommon—mention in the newspapers, least common of all. Ruby, as the story opens, has just made a visit to that outside world, to get the sack of coffee. She comes back with the chance-acquired newspaper. Now that she is back inside her own house, the storm builds up the sense of her isolation. The storm has soaked her, and thus accounts for her idling over the newspaper before the fire; with its lightning and thunder, the storm supplies a background for the excited imaginings that possess her. But Miss Welty’s use of the natural background is modest, probable, and subdued: the background remains background, yet contributes to the story.

The background helps to create the atmosphere of the story, by which or in the way they are treated. For instance, in Poe’s celebrated story, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’ we speak of the atmosphere of horror, as we many speak of the sunny, cheerful atmosphere of another story. Our general words for describing the atmosphere of a story are relatively few, and often metaphorical, as though we had to appeal to metaphor to make up for the poverty of the language available to us for this purpose. We say horrible, terrible, gay, sunny, cheerful, depressing, morbid, dank, dreamy, mysterious, cold, and so on, but we recognize how inadequate such terms are to describe and discriminate among the great variety and the subtle variations of atmosphere which we find in fiction. The good story is apt to carry with it a certain ‘feel’ which eludes our general descriptions but which we recognize as being essential and meaningful in the story. It is the atmosphere, we may say metaphorically, in which the story can breathe and live.

Though background, feeling, and atmosphere are important in varying degrees in all fiction (no story can exist in a vacuum) this element is more important in some stories than in others. In ‘A Piece of News,’ we realize that the world in which Ruby Fisher lives is, as we have said, immediately important for the story—much more immediately important, for instance, than the world in which Michael and Frances encounter their dilemma in ‘The Girls in Their Summer Dresses.’ Factually, as we have said, it is a world where the newspaper has some magical significance. It is an isolated world, isolated by Clyde’s outlawry, by ignorance, by poverty, by distance from the ordinary world. It is also a world in which Ruby moves in a dream divorced from ordinary reality, from ordinary moral standards, locked in her loneliness, humming

her little songs to herself, in the sordid adventures of her life breaking out, now and then, to the highway and the sordid adventures of the gin house, or into her dreamy musings, both the adventures of the gin house and those of the musings being somehow innocent, or merely childish—as even Clyde, who might slap her good and hard, but would never shoot her, instinctively recognizes. It is a world of dreaminess, of the mysterious confusions of dreams. How does the writer create this atmosphere for us?

The writer does, as a matter of fact, give us the words *dreamy*, *mystery*, *mysteriously*. A cruder writer might have insisted on such words, and have exhorted us, by their use, to notice and appreciate the effect being created. But here the words are casually absorbed into the body of the story. Ruby drags the newspaper ‘by one corner in a dreamy walk across the floor,’ and the dreaminess appears as natural to the specific act, the childish handling of the newspaper, the drifting aimlessness of the walk, and not as a direct comment on the atmosphere. It does, of course, do its work in helping to create the atmosphere, but primarily because it is an accurate description of the act, and not by definition of the atmosphere as such.

To take another example, later in the story, after Clyde has come home and Ruby is getting supper ready, we find the sentence: ‘There was some way she began to move her arms that was mysteriously sweet and yet abrupt and tentative, a delicate and vulnerable manner, as though her breasts gave her pain.’ A mysterious thing is indeed happening here: we may say that the daydream Ruby has had of herself as caught in a violent, dramatic, and pitifully sweet experience now overlaps back on real life and she feels the ordinary events and her old relation with Clyde touched by sweetness and romance. Because of the daydream, actuality has become mysteriously rich, full, and sweet. But here again we see that the writer has used the general word as tied to a specific moment; in the end it may also work toward a comment and an interpretation, but it does not come directly to us at that level.

We have seen that the words generally descriptive of the atmosphere are absorbed into the story itself. We could, in fact, dispense entirely with them, so strongly and subtly has the writer created her atmosphere. The girl’s talking to herself with the little rhythmic sing-song, her shaking her yellow wet hair crossly ‘like a cat reproaching itself for not knowing better’ than to get wet, her ‘playful pouting with which she amused herself when...alone,’ the ‘deepness’ of her mouth, the impersonal crashes and flashes of the storm and the rain ‘hung full of lightning and thunder,’ the cat-like stretching as she thinks of the gin house, her sweet, sensual self-pitying sleepiness as she thinks of being shot and dying and of Clyde weeping over her grave in the rain—all these things *are* the world, are the atmosphere, of the story. We don’t need to describe it, for it exists and does its work upon us by the vividness with which the writer has realized them. And so we begin to understand that that story itself, the events, the very plot, could not exist except in this world, in this atmosphere, for, as we shall see, the story is about an adventure in dream and the return to reality. That is the plot.

To return to the sequence of events in the story itself, we find that Ruby, who ‘must have been lonesome and slow all her life,’ is first surprised when she sees her name, surprised and even delighted as a child is delighted. But her next reaction is fright: ‘What eye in the world did she feel looking in on her?’ The isolation has been penetrated. She ‘pulled her dress down tightly’—as if her modesty were being violated. The reader soon guesses the common-sense explanation of the matter—the explanation which after a few moments occurs to the husband Clyde when he comes in: The newspaper is referring to another Ruby Fisher. But this is not the explanation which occurs in her bewilderment to the girl. The author, however, is not anxious to convince us of the strained and improbable psychology involved in the girl’s belief that the newspaper account is true. The girl knows really that it is not true. She even reasons out to herself the impossibility of the action suggests another motive which works against her making a realistic and common-sense dismissal of the newspaper story. It is exciting to imagine herself shot by Clyde—to imagine a Clyde who would shoot her. And after he had shot her, what would she be like, and what would he say, and do?

The coincidence of names has stirred her imagination. It allows her—indeed, has seemed to force upon her—a new focus of attention in terms of which both she and Clyde take on new perspectives to each other. By being seen in a new role, she becomes somehow a stranger to her husband. Even her own body becomes something strange and new to her: ‘There was some way she began to move her arms that was mysteriously

sweet and yet abrupt and tentative....' Throughout the reverie she thinks of herself in a nightgown ('She would have a nightgown to lie in...') like a bride.

This sense of illumination in which old and familiar things, by acquiring an altered focus, become mysterious and strange, is a recurrent theme in fiction as it is a basic fact in human existence. A shocking and surprising incident, an emotional crisis, may very well force on us such an alternation of focus. For a person who lives in a suburban world, say, where newspapers and electrical toastmakers are familiar, and guns and whisky stills unfamiliar, such an alteration would hardly be effected by the coincidence of names in a scrap of newspaper. But the fact of the experience is universal. In this story, it comes about in terms consonant with the characters depicted in the story and with their situation, and the accident which brings it about for them is a –to us, ironically—trivial incident.

Ruby's reverie is broken by Clyde's prodding her with the gun. His act is the impingement of common sense, the return to reality. But, ironically, the fact that Clyde stands there with the gun in his hand ties the reverie to the reality. For a moment, to the girl, it almost seems that the imagined situation will become real. We have seen how concretely—and delicately—the theme is developed. Equally noteworthy is the way the author has played down the ending of the story. The effect of the revelation on both Clyde and Ruby is given quietly, almost by suggestion."

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren
Understanding Fiction, 2nd edition
(1943; Appleton-Century-Crofts 1959) 128-32

"Ruby Fischer, a primitive, isolated and apparently unfaithful young backwoods wife, chances on a newspaper story in which a girl with the same name is shot in the leg by her husband. Though Ruby knows such an action on her husband Clyde's part to be quite improbably—even though he knows of her infidelities—she is immediately struck with the imaginative possibilities of such a situation, and is marvelously impressed and flattered. Images of herself dying beautifully in a brand new nightgown, with a remorseful Clyde hovering over her, play delightfully in her mind. The romantic view of herself extends to her whole body; and while preparing dinner after Clyde returns, she moves in a 'mysteriously sweet...delicate and vulnerable manner, as though her breasts gave her pain.' When she discloses to Clyde the secret of the newspaper story, there is a moment, before common sense triumphs, when the two of them face each other 'as though with a double shame and a double pleasure.' The deed might have been done: 'Rare and wavering, some possibility stood timidly like a stranger between them and made them hang their heads.' For an instant they have had a vision of each other in alien fantasy roles—an experience which is pleasing, exciting, and rather frightening."

Ruth M. Vande Kieft
"The Mysteries of Eudora Welty"
Eudora Welty
(Twayne 1962)

Michael Hollister (2014)