

THE ROLE OF THE ELDERLY IN EUDORA WELTY'S “A VISIT OF CHARITY”

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Abstract: *In the first half of the 20th century, charitable movements increased in American society through the help of various organizations. During this period, Eudora Welty wrote the short story “A Visit of Charity.” In this story, she explores important themes such as humanity, loneliness, and superficial compassion through the visit of a young scout girl to a nursing home. This analysis highlights the role of the elderly in society and how they are often undervalued.*

Keywords: *Aging, humanity, indifference, charity, symbolism, social criticism, younger generation, compassion, loneliness.*

American writer Eudora Welty was born on April 13, 1909, in Jackson, Mississippi. Many of her works are centered around the people and nature of her hometown. Through her short stories, she deeply explores themes such as the human psyche, social indifference, and the lack of compassion and love. Her first short story collection was titled *A Curtain of Green*. Furthermore, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Her short story *A Visit of Charity* was written in 1941 and included in the collection *A Curtain of Green* published that same year. The story attracted considerable interest due to its deep symbolism and relevant social themes. Welty's contribution to literature has been highly praised by her contemporaries. Noted writer Richard Ford described Welty as “one of the people who inspired me to become a writer,” calling her a creator who “understands small things deeply.” Prominent literary figure Robert Penn Warren referred to her as “one of the finest masters of the short story form,” praising her style as natural, delicate, and symbolically rich.¹ Katherine Anne Porter, in her introduction to *A Curtain of Green*, highlighted the tonal, emotional, and thematic variety in Welty's storytelling.

¹ Ford, R. (2018, October 8). Welty Lecture at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Eudora Welty Foundation. Retrieved from <https://eudorawelty.org/richard-ford-to-deliver-welty-lecture-at-folger-shakespeare-library-theatre-october-8/>

In *A Visit of Charity*, the author critically addresses the theme of elderly people in society. The elderly women Addie and her roommate are portrayed as lonely and forgotten individuals who live in a cold and indifferent environment. The retirement home they reside in is described as bleak and loveless, further emphasizing their emotional and social isolation. Welty bases these portrayals on real-life observations from her own upbringing in Mississippi, illustrating these issues through literary imagery.

The protagonist of the story is Marian, a young girl who is a member of the Campfire Girls organization. She visits the nursing home not out of compassion, but solely to earn points for personal gain. Welty sharply criticizes Marian's indifference and superficial attitude toward the elderly. Symbolic elements such as the apple and the cold atmosphere reflect Marian's self-interest and lack of empathy. Through these symbols, Welty exposes the artificiality of many charitable acts in society and the widespread neglect of the elderly. Marian's reluctance to engage with the residents and the fact that she earns extra points for bringing flowers make it clear that her visit is driven by reward rather than genuine concern.

In reality, many people engage in acts of charity donating large sums of money or goods not out of sincerity, but to gain social prestige or personal benefit. In such cases, their outward actions often do not align with their true intentions. Welty contrasts self-serving charity with genuine compassion and positions this contrast as a moral lesson, particularly for the younger generation.

The nursing home is outwardly peaceful, but this calmness masks a deep isolation, loneliness, and abandonment. Silence in the story does not simply represent quietness; it symbolizes the absence of meaningful communication and emotional connection. Each room and corner of the home seems suspended in time, where the elderly live in a monotonous, colorless existence. Welty uses silence not as a passive backdrop, but as a powerful symbol of social detachment and emotional void.²

This silence arises not because the elderly have nothing to say, but because there is no one willing to listen. Their voices no longer reach the ears of society. Their presence is barely noticed. This silence reflects not only the external stillness of the environment but also the internal emotional coldness between people. The hope in the elderly's eyes slowly fades, and deep sorrow rooted in neglect takes hold in their hearts. Welty's treatment of silence urges readers to break this silence, to reestablish dialogue, and to hear the voices of the elderly once more.³

The brief, awkward conversations between Marian and the elderly women reveal that the younger generation is not prepared to listen to the pain and stories of the old. Thus, silence in Welty's work is not merely a background noise but a stark representation of

² Porter, K. A. (1941). Introduction. In E. Welty, *A Curtain of Green*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

³ Warren, R. P. (1961). *The Legacy of the Civil War*. Random House.

broken intergenerational communication. Aging is portrayed not only as a biological process but also as a social, moral, and spiritual issue. Welty emphasizes the importance of supporting the elderly not only through institutional care but also through sincere human connection.

A key aspect of the story is society's gradual shift away from compassion toward cold, bureaucratic initiatives devoid of emotion. Marian represents a youth disconnected from the realities of aging unable or unwilling to understand or empathize with the old. This reflects a broader societal decline in empathy and emotional intelligence. The young increasingly distance themselves from the elderly, reluctant to hear their stories or pain. As a result, intergenerational disconnection deepens, threatening the preservation of cultural and historical heritage.

In Welty's view, old age is not merely physical weakness or loneliness it is also a source of wisdom, patience, and inner strength. However, society tends to treat the elderly as burdens rather than as valuable members. They are pushed aside, segregated from active social life, and left to fade in obscurity. This trend reflects a weakening of essential human values kindness, unity, and mutual respect.

Welty's message is that by listening to the elderly understanding their suffering and wisdom society reconnects with its spiritual roots. The elderly are living history, a treasure trove of forgotten values. Through their pain and stories, people can better understand their past and fill the moral void of the present. Thus, the idea Welty communicates through this story is not merely about aging it is a mirror reflecting the moral integrity of society itself. She calls on readers not just to think but to open their eyes to the elderly around them and to treat them with genuine care.⁴

Welty uses various literary devices to express the inner emotions and thoughts of the elderly women in the story. For example, Addie's words: "Who are you? You're a stranger a perfect stranger. ⁵Don't you know you're a stranger?" vividly express her sense of isolation and disconnection from the rest of society. This phrase carries deep symbolic meaning. To society, the elderly are often viewed as numbers, expenses, or charity cases not as full human beings with feelings.

The other elderly woman's sorrowful line: "She's not very happy... She's not very well," highlights Addie's suffering and the helplessness of those around her. Although the two elderly women are aware of each other's pain, they are powerless to offer real support. These poignant words encapsulate the widespread neglect and emotional deprivation faced by many elderly individuals.

⁴ Welty, E. (1941). A Visit of Charity. In A Curtain of Green (pp. 221–227). Harcourt, Brace and Company.

⁵ eNotes Editorial. (n.d.). A Visit of Charity - In-Depth Analysis. eNotes. Retrieved May 6, 2025, from <https://www.enotes.com/topics/visit-charity/in-depth>

Addie, a woman craving love and warmth, becomes a symbolic figure reminiscent of the biblical image where Jesus tells Peter, "Feed my sheep." Throughout the story, she is referred to as a "lamb" or "little lamb," symbolizing a vulnerable soul in need of care and compassion.⁶

The elderly in the story are portrayed as a marginalized group whose wisdom, experiences, and emotional depth are overlooked. They are often included in charity drives or holiday greetings, but rarely engaged in meaningful conversation. Through Marian, the author reveals how the younger generation often fails to see the elderly as full individuals with unique perspectives and needs. Instead, they treat them with indifference or use them for personal advantage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the elderly become victims of widespread emotional coldness and neglect. Their lives are increasingly marked by loneliness, forgetfulness, and lack of affection. As members of a previous generation, they could have served as the guardians of cultural memory and experience. Yet such values are fading.

This is not merely a personal tragedy but a sign of a broader moral crisis in society. Eudora Welty masterfully portrays human relationships, social inequalities, and the inner worlds of marginalized individuals. Her unique literary style captures the emotional depths of the human soul and reveals the invisible but critical issues of society. Through the sorrowful yet profound words of the two elderly women in *A Visit of Charity*, Welty compels readers to reflect on the growing emotional detachment and indifference toward the elderly in contemporary life. These women have endured many hardships and losses, yet their silent suffering serves as a powerful call for societal compassion.

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