The Optimist's Daughter Study Guide

The Optimist's Daughter by Eudora Welty

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The first version of Eudora Welty's best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Optimist's Daughter,* appeared as a short story in 1969 in the *New Yorker.* Revised and published as a novel in 1972, it is considered by some to be her sparest novel. In fact, Welty herself thought of the novel as more akin to a short story than a true novel. The book's complexity arises not from its length but from the emotions of the characters.

The Optimist's Daughter is the story of Laurel, a widow who returns to Mississippi when her father is ill and witnesses his death and funeral. From there, she embarks on a deeply personal journey to explore her past and her family in order to make sense of her future.

Welty's novel contains a number of autobiographical elements. Some of the male characters are inspired by Welty's uncles, and the women of the town represent Welty's observations on life in the South. Welty has stated that much of Becky McKelva's background is drawn from her mother's life in West Virginia. In fact, the novel was written not long after her mother's death, a period in which Welty was recalling her mother's life and experiences. In this way, the character of Laurel represents Welty's own desire to inquire into her past and understand how it affects her present and future.

Author Biography

Eudora Alice Welty was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on April 13, 1909, to Chestina and Christian Welty. With her two younger brothers, she was reared in Jackson, although neither of her parents was from the Deep South. Her father came from Ohio, and her mother was from West Virginia. Both were teachers by trade until the family moved to Mississippi, where Christian entered the insurance business.

Welty remembers a very happy childhood in which she was surrounded by books and loved listening to her parents read to each other in the evenings. She also remembers how much she loved listening to the ladies in town trade stories, and her habit of noting their speech patterns and colloquialisms served her well when she began writing about the South.

After completing her public education in Jackson, Welty attended Mississippi State College for Women from 1925 to 1927, finishing a bachelor of arts degree in 1929 at the University of Wisconsin. At the encouragement of her father (who wanted her to have a reliable trade), she studied advertising at Columbia University from 1930 to 1931.

When her father died suddenly, Welty returned home to settle in Jackson. She worked various jobs with newspapers and a radio station before going to work for the Works Progress Administration, a government program established during the Depression that assigned people to work on public projects for much-needed income. Welty also took up photography, snapping pictures of all kinds of people (mostly African Americans) in her native Mississippi.

Her first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," appeared in 1936, after which Welty's stories were accepted by top publications such as *Atlantic* and *Southern Review.* During her early writing career, Welty's work was often narrowly defined as regionalist or feminist. Still, she was admired by other writers, and her first collection of short stories, *A Curtain of Green,* left critics eagerly anticipating Welty's future work. Over the next thirty years, Welty had over fifteen books published, including short fiction, novels, and nonfiction.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was renewed interest in her work, partially because of the rise in feminist criticism. Although Welty prefers to distance herself from the efforts of feminists, the renewed interest demonstrated to a new generation of readers that her writing was much more than an easily categorized body of work. Readers and critics continue to be drawn to her writing for her subtle, unique style, her handling of daily life, and her depictions of everyday heroism.

Welty's work has been recognized with prestigious awards such as a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1942; the O. Henry Award in 1942, 1943, and 1968; the National Institute of Arts and Letters literary grant in 1944 and Gold Medal for fiction in 1972; and a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for *The Optimist's Daughter.*

Welty died of pneumonia on July 23, 2001, in Jackson, Mississippi, at the age of 92.

Plot Summary

Part One

As *The Optimist's Daughter* opens, Laurel McKelva Hand leaves Chicago and goes to New Orleans, where her father, Judge McKelva, is seeing an eye specialist to find out why his sight is failing. Laurel meets her father's young, new wife, a selfish, disrespectful woman named Wanda Fay ("Fay"). The doctor tells Judge that he has a detached retina and that it must be operated on at once. After the operation, the eye seems to be recovering normally, but Judge's health is not bearing the rigors of surgery well. He is lethargic and his health declines. Laurel and Fay, along with another woman, watch Judge to assure that he does not move very much, which would jeopardize the recovery of his eye.

Laurel and Fay have adjoining rooms at a nearby hotel, but Laurel fails in her attempts to get to know Fay. Meanwhile, Judge is now sharing a hospital room with a man whose senility makes him speak and behave strangely. The man's loud, colorful family is always in the waiting room.

At one point, Fay decides to try to scare Judge back to vitality by shaking him, but he dies soon after this incident. Welty is never clear about whether or not Fay's action caused the death. The next day, Laurel and Fay board a train to Mount Salus, Mississippi, the McKelvas' hometown.

Part Two

Laurel and Fay arrive in Mount Salus, and Judge's coffin is taken off the train and loaded into a waiting hearse. Many of Laurel's old friends are waiting for her at the station. They go back to the house, where a few people are waiting. The next day, many neighbors and friends stop by the house to view Judge's body, to bring food for the family, and to socialize. Fay's family, the Chisoms, have been invited from Madrid, Texas, and their arrival creates quite a stir among the genteel southerners. The Chisoms are crude and loud and have no sense of decorum. When Fay finally emerges from her room, she screams and wails and throws herself on Judge's body before being dragged away. Next, the mourners go to the church for the funeral, where public turnout is impressive, and then they go to the cemetery for the burial.

When Laurel and Fay return home, there are a few lingering friends. Fay decides to return to Madrid with her family for a few days' visit and is happy to hear that Laurel will be gone in three days. Neither wants to run into the other, as they have found it impossible to get along.

Part Three

The next day, Laurel works in the garden while four elderly neighbor women sit and gossip about Fay. When Laurel goes inside, she walks through her father's library, taking in all the memories inspired by the books, furniture, and general clutter. Later, she meets some friends to reminisce about the days before Laurel moved to Chicago. When she gets back to the house, Laurel finds that a bird has gotten inside. As she tries to trap it in a single room, she allows herself to think about how much she blames Fay for her father's death, which makes her long to be with her deceased mother.

Laurel goes into the sewing room, which was once her nursery. She finds her mother's small desk, filled with papers, photographs, and letters. A flood of memories washes over her, including the details of her mother's background in West Virginia, their relationship, and her mother's steady decline and death. Her sorrow leads her to remember her husband, Phil, who died in World War II. She imagines that they would have enjoyed the kind of happy marriage her parents had, if only his life had not been cut short.

Part Four

The next morning, with the help of Missouri (an African-American woman who has worked as a cook for the McKelvas since Laurel's childhood), Laurel manages to get the trapped bird out of the house. She packs her suitcase in preparation for her ride to the airport. When she goes into the kitchen, more memories come to her, and she finds her mother's breadboard that Phil had made for her. At the same time, Fay returns home and is irate that Laurel is still there. They argue about the breadboard and then about the importance of the past, and Laurel comes close to striking Fay with the breadboard. She stops herself and decides not to take the breadboard with her because she has come to understand that freedom is more powerful than memories. The knowledge she has gained about herself over the last few days has liberated her from the pain, despair, and sense of obligation she once felt.

Laurel hears her ride honk for her outside, and she hugs Missouri on her way out the door. As she rides out of town on her way to the airport, she waves back at the many people who are waving to her.

Part 1, Chapter 1

Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Judge McKelva, his daughter, Laurel McKelva Hand, and his wife, Fay have been escorted into the office of Dr. Courtland. They had come to New Orleans from Mississippi to see the doctor because the judge had experienced some difficulties with his vision. The judge has known the doctor and his family for years; however, the doctor had never met Fay, who had been married to the judge for only a year and a half.

The judge explained how he noticed that something was wrong. He had been outside pruning the roses and was standing on the porch for a few minutes when he saw the fig tree giving off flashes. Since that time, he had noticed a little dimness but no more flashes. He called Laurel the night before and told her he was going to New Orleans to see the doctor and she flew in from Chicago on an overnight flight. His admission of self-concern was as startling as anything that could possibly be wrong with his health.

After his examination, the doctor proclaimed that the judge's retina had slipped and it needed to be repaired immediately. Fay had a difficult time comprehending what had happened and thought that an operation was a drastic step; couldn't they just let nature take its course. However, the judge wanted this doctor and no other. The doctor told him that there was no absolute guarantee with the surgery but the judge said that he was an optimist and they would proceed. So the surgery was scheduled for the next day and an ambulance was dispatched to pick them up and deliver the three of them to the hospital right away.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

Southern roots grow strong and the trust that Judge McKelva places in Dr. Courtland goes way back. We gather that he's not a man who is prone to pity or any attention drawn to himself. Moreover, he is not one who strays from home for just anything, so when he leaves town for a medical reason it must be something important. His daughter realizes this, but his new wife is more self-centered and doesn't understand why this had to happen to her. The judge's new wife is younger than his daughter which needn't be a problem, but there's a definite disconnect between Laurel and Fay and it's clearly more than an age difference. In addition, there's the single fact that Laurel has simply known the man longer and there's a tremendous advantage in that for her. On the other hand, it is a disadvantage for Fay, who will always be outside this circle of intimacy.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

As Fay and Laurel wait for the judge to return to his room after surgery, Fay piped up that this is some way for the judge to keep his promise. He had told her that he would bring her to New Orleans someday to see the carnival and now the carnival is going on and all she'll see of it is from a hospital room window. Laurel said nothing and checked her watch yet again.

Suddenly Dr. Courtland appeared and announced that everything had gone well and with luck, the judge would keep vision in that eye. He was clearly elated that the procedure had gone well. The judge was wheeled into his room on a tablelike bed. Both his eyes were bandaged and sandbags were packed around his head to keep him steady. In addition, they had wrapped linen across his body to bind him and keep him in place. Fay was upset that no one had told her he would look like that—you could hardly tell who it was under all that packing… it was big as a house.

When Judge McKelva started to come to, he called for Laurel and wanted to know how it went. Fay was outraged because he had forgotten her. The nurse cautioned all of them that he was not to be moved or even jiggled. The doctor came in and reaffirmed it: no moving, no turning, no tears. He took Laurel and Fay into the hall and explained that he would need to be watched 24 hours a day. After he left, Fay said the doctor's orders seemed a bit much and it wasn't really a matter of life and death, was it? Laurel left to make some necessary phone calls and Fay returned to her husband's bed and told him that it was a good thing that he couldn't see himself right now.

Laurel and Fay found rooms rented by the week at a hotel called The Hibiscus. It was a half hour streetcar ride from the hospital. The two women worked out a schedule where Laurel would stay with the judge from 7-3 every day and Fay would then take over from 3-11. They had hired a night nurse who would fill in the remaining hours. It seemed as if it would work, especially because the two women would rarely have to see each other.

Laurel would feed the judge his breakfast and read to him from the *Picayune.* When she could catch Dr. Courtland, he told her that the judge's eye was clearing some but it was not to be rushed. By this time, only his operated eye had to be covered, but he never asked about his eye or his progress. Laurel knew enough to follow his lead.

However, he didn't ask about her either. Normally he would have asked how her fabric design business in Chicago was functioning without her. He would have wanted to know what she was working on and what things were coming up. He used to love to read, too, so she brought in stacks of paperbacks and he listened but without much comment.

Laurel knew that part of his silence was due to the delicacy of family feelings. It had always been the three of them—the judge, his first wife, and Laurel. Now his daughter

had come here and been reduced to idleness and he didn't like creating that situation for her. She knew too that he was concentrating on time and so she set her inner chronology with his so that they could keep in step for the long walk ahead of them.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Laurel is the judge's steadying force, not his wife. She is the one who makes the phone calls, arranges for their accommodations and hires the night nurse. She is the one the judge asks for. It's really unclear why he has married Fay, she is such a superficial, self-centered woman and it doesn't seem like a man in his position would have abided her for any length of time alone, let alone married her. It's his daughter who is in tune with him and she knows his thoughts even when he's lying perfectly still, not saying a word about his current situation. There is an unspoken bond between them that Fay will never understand and it is bound to be challenged before long as the personal dynamics continue to unfold.

Part 1, Chapter 3

Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

Dr. Courtland said the judge's eye was clearing but they just needed to give it more time. Laurel didn't share the doctor's opinion. To her mind, her father was paying some unspoken price for his recovery. Day after day, he lay still, full of effort yet motionless. He looked more tired every day and swallowed his food obediently. She was almost embarrassed that she had to watch him in this state. Obedience and passivity were never traits that this man exhibited.

One day she found a copy of *Nicholas Nickleby,* feeling sure that it would revive his memory a little. She read and he watched her with his good eye but she wasn't sure he was listening to the words. The judge had long ago developed a capacity for patience but to Laurel it seemed as if he were lying in a dream of patience. He seldom spoke unless he was spoken to, and when he did, his reply was delayed almost as if he had to catch up. After awhile, he didn't even try to look at her with his good eye.

When her father had been there three weeks, Laurel asked Dr. Courtland about his prospects. The judge was doing fine; all his major systems were working and his eye was clearing. Dr. Courtland thought that there was some vision returning around the edges. He told her to wait just a little longer; everybody was different in how he healed.

Laurel hated to leave her father now in the afternoons so she stayed and read. The two of them arranged it so that she would read silently to herself, but he would know she was there by his bed.

One day Fay popped in almost scolding him because she was missing the carnival outside. It seemed so incredible to Laurel that her father could have married this woman. He had been almost seventy and why in the world did he let this stranger into their lives? Her mother had been dead ten years when he married Fay, who was a few years younger than Laurel.

When she had asked him about it at the time, he told her that it was the Southern Bar Association that had brought them together. Fay had been a typist at the Gulf Coast Hotel during one of the conventions. A month after the convention, he brought her to his home in Mississippi and they married in the courthouse.

She was forty but didn't look it except the line of her neck and the backs of her hands. She still had wispy blond hair as a child's and round country blue eyes and was bony with thin skin. Laurel figured she must have been malnourished as a child.

When Laurel flew down to their wedding, Fay told her that that hadn't been necessary and she meant it. Everything she said to Laurel from then on was the same tone; her flattery and disparagement sounded just alike.

One night she decided that maybe she and Fay should get to know each other a little better so she knocked on her door at The Hibiscus. Fay let her in and she sat on a hard chair in that little room. Fay confided that her family had come from Texas but they were all gone now. They had always been so close, never kept secrets and were so unselfish. Fay would have never run off and left anybody who needed her just to call herself an artist and make a lot of money. Laurel never tried again and Fay never once knocked on her door.

Now Fay was holding up a new high-heeled shoe she had bought. She wanted the judge to see it with his good eye. She wanted him to take her dancing. Thankfully, it was getting dark and Laurel could leave. Before she left the room, she told her father that Dr. Courtland said he could soon try his pinhole specs. The man who had been such an optimist all his life never responded. When she looked back, Fay was sitting with her face on the windowsill watching the carnival in the streets below.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Laurel seems to sense that her father is not recovering as quickly as he should. In fact, he seems to be passively slipping away. She's not sure what is to be done so she does what she always did. She reads to him and stays by his side, knowing that she represents the life when he was healthy, young and vital. Fay is passively aggressive towards Laurel and it's still not clear why she married the judge, or for that matter, why he married her. She is nothing like Laurel's mother. Laurel could have understood if he had tried to replace her somehow, but there was no explaining this complaining, whining woman who had entered his world on a lark and now seemed destined to be part of Laurel's, much to her chagrin.

Part 1, Chapter 4

Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Two nights later, Laurel had already undressed in her room at The Hibiscus, but somehow felt compelled to get dressed again to get back to the hospital. She was lucky to have found a cab at the foot of the hotel steps because it was the middle of Mardi Gras and the town and its streets were a snarled mess.

When she reached her father's room, she could hear Fay's tight little voice saying that enough was enough! She continued in her high-pitched squeal that this was her birthday! Then Laurel saw the night nurse run into her father's room and reappear dragging Fay with her. Fay broke free from the nurse, came running down the hallway, bumped into Laurel as if she weren't even there and passed into the waiting room like a frantic child looking for her mother.

The nurse told Laurel that Fay had laid hands on the judge. Apparently, she told him that if he didn't snap out of it, she'd---. According to the nurse, she had taken hold of him and was abusing him. After the nurse informed Laurel of what had happened, she turned and went back to the judge's room.

Laurel ran behind her and when she arrived, she saw her father with his right arm free of its cover looking soft and gathered like the sleeve on a woman's dress. To her this meant that he was no longer concentrating. She put her hand in his and pressed. He responded but not in the way she expected; her whole head seemed to go dusky as if he had put it under water and was holding it there.

Dr. Courtland rushed in, quickly examined her father and told her to leave and keep Fay out as well. He would find them when he had something to tell them. Just outside the door, Laurel heard the doctor tell a nurse that he believed the judge had just plain sneaked out on us.

Fay surrounded herself with others in the waiting room who were happy to hear her story while Laurel walked the hallway with her thoughts. Finally, she pulled Fay aside and told her that she thought the judge was dying. Fay jutted out her chin and spat at her. Fay returned to the center of the other waiting room group and settled in. Finally, Dr. Courtland came out to see them.

He drew them into the hallway and told them that he couldn't save him. He was gone and the irony was that his eye was healing. He simply collapsed. Fay screamed that the doctor had let her husband die on her birthday. He walked the two women to the elevator and as they rode down he told them that maybe they had asked too much of him, although he didn't have much longer to hold out.

Fay, of course, had been against the eye surgery from the very beginning and said that had they let nature take its course as she wanted, this would never have happened. Dr.

Courtland could only look at her and he had certainly seen his share of her kind over the years. In a private moment, he shared with Laurel that her father had helped him get through medical school; he had kept him going after his own father died. Then when the Depression hit, he helped him get his start. Laurel acknowledged him by saying that some things don't bear going into.

The doctor put the ladies into his waiting car to take them back to their hotel and said he would call his sister, Adele, and that they could take the judge home tomorrow. He said he wished he could have saved him and Fay simply yelled thanks for nothing.

The car wove through the back streets of New Orleans, trying as best it could to avoid the Mardi Gras crowds. Revelers were even spilling out of The Hibiscus when they arrived. Fay was still in disbelief that this had happened on her birthday, nobody ever told her this was going to happen! Laurel heard her puny little sobs from the next room that night.

They left New Orleans the next day with the judge's body on board the New Orleans-Chicago train he had always loved for its genteel qualities and service. Fay lay in her seat turned away from Laurel who watched the scenery change from cypresses to a featureless sky where one seagull hung with its wings fixed just like a clock that had stopped.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Finally Laurel's suspicions have come true… her father has died. The two of them had such an emotional connection that she knew his death was impending and rushed to see him one last time. His psychotically childlike wife was demanding from him up until the last moments of his life. It is still unfathomable why this man ever married her. She has no redeeming qualities and certainly no grace. What could have been the reason? We find out too why the judge had wanted to see Dr. Courtland and no one else. He had helped the younger man during a difficult time in his life and sent him on his way in his medical career; so it was not only skill that drew him to him, but also a kind of fatherly pride. The doctor confides this to Laurel and she tells him that it doesn't even need to be said; she knew her father and she knew the way he always did the right thing and did it with unfailing dignity. Fortunately, she had inherited the same noble qualities. How will she deal with the petulant Fay now?

Part 2, Chapter 1

Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary

When their train arrived at the station, the porter was waiting with his wagon to retrieve the judge's body. Also on hand were Laurel's six bridesmaids, as they still called themselves. In addition, Miss Adele Courtland, the doctor's sister, was at the front of the group. She embraced Laurel and called her by her childhood name, Polly. As she moved among their embraces, Tish Bullock told her that they had come to meet them and take them home. Fay didn't understand what this group was doing here.

Mr. Pitts, the undertaker, asked Laurel whether the judge would lie in repose at home or in their parlor. She told him that he should be at home of course. Fay interrupted by saying that she was Mrs. McKelva and these decisions were hers. Laurel heard a deep sound and realized that it was the door of the hearse slamming shut and she watched it pull away with her father. Fay stayed behind with the undertaker to make arrangements.

Laurel put herself in the hands of the bridesmaids and they drove her to her father's house. About a dozen or so family friends had been waiting there for her; all women with the exception of Major Bullock, Tish's father. All the other men had stayed home tonight. Miss Tennyson, who had been Laurel's mother's oldest friend, took her purse and gloves and smoothed her hair. She had known Laurel's mother when she first came to town as a young bride. She asked where Fay was and they told her that she was conducting business with Mr. Pitts and would be returned to them shortly.

The bridesmaids had set up a buffet and Major Bullock was tending to drinks on a tray. Soon Laurel found herself sitting at the head of the dining room table while everyone tried to wait on her. Suddenly they heard a piercing voice wondering what all these people were doing in her house. Fay was home.

They told her that she had pies three deep in the pantry; an icebox ready to pop; and a dining room table that might keep her from going to bed hungry. Her only reply was that she wasn't aware that she was giving a reception. Tish tried to explain to her that some of them were Laurel's bridesmaids and that some came out of respect for Laurel's mother. Fay didn't see how any of that was to her benefit. She didn't have anyone for her. With that, she streaked up the stairs and shut herself in her room.

Major Bullock came downstairs carrying a suit, a shoebox and a leather case; Fay was sending him down to Pitts' with the judge's things. Suddenly he burst into tears in the middle of all these women; he simply couldn't believe the judge was gone and Pitts had him now. His wife comforted him but told him to go on with his errand; he had insisted on being there that night. Tish called to her father that she would drive down with him.

That was a cue for the group to leave; tomorrow was going to be a long day.As Laurel was shutting up the house, she heard the sound of plates being carefully stacked in the

kitchen. It was Miss Adele. She had finished putting away the food and cleaning up the kitchen. Laurel told her that her father often said that Miss Adele couldn't help but be good. She told her that what had happened had nothing to do with her father's eye at all. He would have been able to see again. Miss Adele's brother, Dr. Courtland, had done everything right.

As she continued to put away the stacks of plates and platters, she told Laurel that she thought people live their own way and they die their own way. She had been Laurel's first-grade teacher and her voice still carried authority, so when she told Laurel to get some sleep, she immediately went to bed. As she tried to fall asleep, she remembered the sound her parents made as they read to each other in their bed at night. She could remember how the pitch and cadence had been her own personal lullaby. She thought about Fay sleeping in their bed tonight; the bed where she had been born and her mother had died. She waited to hear the mantel clock downstairs strike but it never did.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Analysis

Fay is a stranger in her own home the night they return from New Orleans. It seems to her that she has the ugly funeral business to attend to and no one has come to support her. The people in her house are there for Laurel and for the judge's dead first wife. People try to reach out to her, but she repels them because they are not her kind. They are so gracious and it must be comforting for Laurel to know that there is a pattern to grieving in the South where she grew up. These people came to be with her, they fed her and they will take care of her emotionally. She is very much loved in this circle and you almost feel some pity for the whining Fay because she wouldn't know what to do even if she were to make it inside one day. Laurel tries to sleep in her girlhood bed and she waits for the comfort of the striking of the mantel clock but it never comes. Life as she knew it is over.

Part 2, Chapter 2

Part 2, Chapter 2 Summary

At seven o'clock the next morning, Laurel went downstairs to see Missouri standing in her coat and hat right in the middle of the kitchen. She could not believe that the judge was dead. She washed her hands and put on a fresh apron just as she did when she had worked for Laurel's mother. She told Laurel that the judge always wanted Fay to have her breakfast in bed. That suited Laurel just fine; that way Missouri could have the job of waking her up.

Soon after, Miss Adele knocked on the back door holding a handful of daffodils. The house had been filled with funeral arrangements so they decided that her father's desk was the appropriate place for these. Missouri was unable to rouse Fay so the task fell to Laurel. She knocked and let herself into the room and came across a scene all covered in peach satin. It was nothing like it was when her mother and father had shared it.

Laurel told Fay that people would soon be calling and asking for her so she needed to get up. Fay said that she was the widow and people could just wait on her. By the time Laurel bathed and dressed, she could hear more commotion downstairs. Her father's casket had arrived. Mr. Pitts remembered the time of her dear mother's death and hoped that she would be pleased with his work on her father as well. Then he raised the lid.

There lay her father surrounded in the same peach satin which adorned the bedroom upstairs. The dark patches under his eyes were gone and his skin reflected the peach color so that his face had the cast of a seashell.

The casket lid had been raised only by half-section so that all people could see of him was waist up, propped on a pillow. Laurel told Mr. Pitts to close it several times but it was Fay's wish that it be open. Therefore, Laurel had no other choice but to stand at the head of the coffin and greet the visitors. So many visitors were there. Ministers, city officials, State Bar members, even his old secretary… all showed up to pay their last respects to this gentle man.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Analysis

Fay is about to play out her petulance on one of the best stages ever offered up to someone of her kind. She is the grieving widow. She begins the day by taking full advantage of the fact and not getting out of bed to prepare for the day. You can almost feel some pity for her though because there is no one to show up for her and console her. She is pathetic, no matter how irritating and self serving her actions. Laurel, on the other hand, makes no missteps in the respect shown to her father. She conducts herself nobly and is mortified when she finds out that the casket will be open. She knows that her father would not have wanted this because he adamantly refused the same at his

first wife's funeral. However, Laurel is required to move past this and bear witness to the life of this dignified man as best she can.

Part 2, Chapter 3

Part 2, Chapter 3 Summary

When the two fat women and the skinny man approach the house, no one knows who they are. They entered saying that the house looked like it would be big enough to be holding a big important funeral. When they asked to see Fay, it all fell into place. These were Fay's people. They had driven eight hours from Texas to see her in her hour of need. Laurel heard herself being introduced by one of these strangers to the other as the judge's daughter.

The people in the Texas crew were Mrs. Chisom, Fay's mother; Sis, her sister; Bubba, her brother; and some others who had chosen not to come into the house. Apparently, it had been Major Bullock who had contacted them to come. He had just forgotten to tell anyone else that he had done so. Mrs. Chisom wanted to know where Laurel's husband was and someone told her that he had been killed in the war. Mrs. Chisom proclaimed that Laurel had been cheated for sure, especially now that she didn't have anyone to come for her. The mayor stood up and declared that the whole town was here to support this girl; why, in fact, the government offices were closed, the courthouse lowered its flag and school was going to let out early. Now, that was support for this girl and her father.

Finally, Fay descended the stairs and into the parlor. She was practically gleaming in her black satin outfit. She set her eyes on the coffin and ran to it. She declared that the judge looked so good with all those sandbags taken away and that horrible bandage pulled off his eye. Then she heard her mother's voice and she was caught up short by the sight of her family in the midst of all these people. She wanted to know who told them to come. She then looked back into the casket demanding that the judge sit up and get out of there this instant. She continued her wailing wondering how the judge could have been so unfair to her. Major Bullock tried to pull her away but she fought and fought until they dragged her into the library where she could continue her hysterics out of view of the crowd of people in the parlor.

Laurel looked at her father for the last time. Tish Bullock came to her side and stood with her as the casket was closed. Miss Adele and Missouri joined her on the porch as she watched the casket leave the house and be loaded into the waiting hearse.

As they rode to the cemetery after the funeral, Laurel commented that she was glad that the camellia will be in bloom; the bush that the judge had planted on his wife's grave. That's when Fay replied that she was stupid if she thought he were going to be buried there; she was putting him in the new part of the cemetery. To Laurel, this was like the other side of the moon.

Mr. Pitts was waiting for them under the awning at the gravesite. As they were seated, Laurel saw that this part of the cemetery was at the edge of the new interstate. Sounds

of the highway rolled in during the service as the glare from windshields flashed lights into her face. Then it was over. Laurel left and walked into the waiting arms of Missouri.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Analysis

Fay has played out her part as grieving widow and put on a most dramatic performance over her husband's casket. She had said all along that there was no one there for her, but when she spotted her family in the group, she was more annoyed than relieved. She simply wanted to be the center of attention. Laurel is repulsed by all her theatrics and her decisions regarding her father. However, Fay is the widow and has the right to make the decisions. Fortunately, Laurel has the support of those who have known her and her parents all their lives. It is a comfort to her that there is some dignity in their revering the past and they will remember this man for his nobility while he lived, not for the tacky circumstances surrounding his death.

Part 2, Chapter 4

Part 2, Chapter 4 Summary

The post funeral meal was being set out in the dining room when Laurel and Fay returned to the house. The chairs had been moved back into place and one of the bridesmaids had rewound the mantel clock. The Chisoms remarked that Fay had enough stuff to last one woman forever. The neighbors talked about how Fay would be getting the house and Mrs. Chisom took the opportunity to say that all of their family could fit into a house that size. Fay could even open up a boarding house and she could cook.

Fay dismissed this idea but suddenly came up with one of her own: she wanted to ride back to Texas with them and spend a little time with her people. They decided they could squeeze her in and she went upstairs to pack a few things. Laurel was right behind her and told her that she planned to stay three days and then she would be gone. Fay told her to be as good as her word and she left with her rowdy family taking some Virginia ham with them.

The rest of the people finished tidying up the kitchen and dining room and one by one, they left as Laurel watched.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Analysis

Fay is going home to Texas for a little bit to be with her family, or so she says. She doesn't really want any part of the grieving process and wants to avoid Laurel too if at all possible. Nevertheless, she'll be back to claim her inheritance, that's for sure. One almost wishes there will be a twist in the reading of the will where Laurel will inherit the house so that the stately home won't be swathed in peach silk, or even worse, sold off to strangers. Laurel has three days at the house without Fay.

Part 3, Chapter 1

Part 3, Chapter 1 Summary

Laurel was tending to the garden at her father's house with the four elderly neighbors seated under the dogwood tree discussing the recent events. They surely wished Laurel were getting the house, as they never wanted to see that Fay person ever again. You wouldn't believe the state that house was in when the two of them had left for New Orleans that day… their bed wasn't even made! Fay could never cook either, so every Sunday that poor judge had to eat his meal at a restaurant, of all things. They only wish they could ask the judge one more question: what had happened to his judgment?

They also believed that Fay patterned herself after her own mother; after having seen the Chisom clan at the funeral. Nobody can really fault you for emulating your own mother, now can they? Laurel said only that she hoped she never saw her again.

The ladies were trying to convince Laurel to stay and not go back to Chicago. In fact, this Fay person wouldn't be an issue today if Laurel had still been at home to care for the judge. As much as she loved this place, her life was now in the city.

The women had no other recourse than to jump the conversation back to Fay. If they had only known the judge was looking for another wife, they surely could have helped him, and done a darn sight better job of it. They got no rise out of Laurel and they left one by one to attend to their Saturday chores.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Analysis

Now the funeral is over. Fay is gone temporarily and Laurel will be leaving in a couple days. The ladies who had known her mother are making one last ditch effort to convince her to stay and keep the McKelva touch in their little circle. Laurel's life here is over and she stands firm on her decision to return to Chicago even as her hands caress the dirt she's working in, the dirt that grew her childhood. She brushes off the past along with the dirt from her hands and watches the old women walk back into her memories.

Part 3, Chapter 2

Part 3, Chapter 2 Summary

All Laurel had to do now was face her father's library. It had always been a crowded room but even more so now with the addition of the things that had been in his office downtown. Her eyes moved over the portraits of her Confederate grandfather, the books that had never changed location in all these years, and all the maps and law books. She wondered where all his letters were. She knew that her mother had written him every day when they were apart even for only a day or so. She found texts to old speeches he had given when he had been mayor of the town and noted to herself that this town didn't deserve him any more than Fay did.

She moved to his desk and the drawers had already been relieved of their contents. Surely his attorney had retrieved the papers that had rested there. She did notice some red dots trailing across the top though and came to determine that they were nail polish. Evidently, Fay had spilled some of her red paint when she was sitting in there one day. Laurel never found the letters and determined that there was nothing of her mother for Fay to find. That's all she needed from that room.

Part 3, Chapter 2 Analysis

Laurel lingers over her father's things hoping to find something or see something that she had never seen before. Where was her mother in this room? Did she even exist for her father anymore? She did exist for him and certainly, he had moved or destroyed the letters between the two of them so that Fay couldn't ever find them. That part of his life was sacred, something Fay would never understand and he didn't want her to even have a glimpse of it. She wouldn't even have known what she was looking at. She could leave her garish marks on his life like the spots of red nail polish on his desk, but she would never have what lay at his core because he had put that out of sight to everyone.

Part 3, Chapter 3

Part 3, Chapter 3 Summary

Laurel was having dinner with the bridesmaids on that Sunday evening. They all lived in the new part of town and had children of their own in college yet on this night they were remembering the judge and his first wife. They were grieving with Laurel. They told stories and laughed until they cried and Laurel hoped that her parents hadn't been relegated just yet to two characters to star in stories about the past.

Then the evening was over. She would see the bridesmaids once more. All six of them would come for her tomorrow and drive her to the airport for her trip back to Chicago. Major Bullock offered to escort her home and went ahead of her into the house to turn on the lights then kissed her briefly and left.

As soon as she had closed the door, she knew that something was wrong. There was a bird in the house. It shot out of the dining room and went straight up the stairwell in front of her. Laurel ran through the house turning on all the lights, shutting the windows against the rain and closing all the doors to all the rooms upstairs so the bird would not fly into any of those. Just as she reached her parents' room, the bird flew toward the newly found light and she slammed the door against it. It couldn't get in now but had it already been in here flying around? All she knew was that she was trapped in this room, now Fay's, and it had been the first time she had been in there since the funeral.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Analysis

Laurel is saying one more goodbye, this time to her bridesmaids, in a ritual dinner designed to permit grieving and joy. She realizes how different she is from them now. They have all opted to stay in the little town where they grew up and her life is now in Chicago. It is good to know they will always be here, even though she has no one left to lose here, and really no one to come back for. Then to find the bird in her house is just too much. Maybe it's the spirit of something or someone which will not rest. There is something wrong about what has happened lately. Something needs her attention yet and it is beating its wings against the door of the room where she thinks she is safe. Could that door be her own heart?

Part 3, Chapter 4

Part 3, Chapter 4 Summary

Laurel was shut up in the bedroom but the storm outside continued to buffet the windows and shake the house. What was she in danger of here, she wondered. Then she reasoned over the events of late. Even if you have kept silent for the sake of the dead, you can't rest in your silence as the dead rest. She wanted to cry out to the world just as the nurse had that night in the hospital. There had been abuse here!

She didn't want punishment for Fay; she wanted her to acknowledge that she knew what she had done. She knew Fay would never admit to anything. Probably, making a scene was natural for Fay. She had brought scenes to the hospital and to this house. Maybe she didn't know what she had done and never would unless Laurel told her.

The bird kept beating against the door as Laurel continued her thoughts. She wanted to tell about this outrage to someone, but who? Then it occurred to her that the only person who would understand was her mother. Only her dead mother. She was in anguish that she had so much to tell and no one to tell it to and be consoled. The bird continued to flap against the door and Laurel backed up into the little room off the bedroom. It had been the sewing room and Laurel's nursery when she was an infant.

It was quieter in this room and Laurel sat down at her mother's desk which Fay had pushed in here. She opened the doors to reveal all the little pigeonholes in which rested the letters she had looked for yesterday. All the letters her mother had received from her father were there, and there were snapshots of her parents during their courtship, and mementoes of her mother's home "up there" in West Virginia.

Laurel remembered going "up there" during the summers of her childhood and she remembered how happy her mother had been in that old house on the top of a hill. She would explore and watch the birds and the clouds which were at her feet in this house in the sky.

Later she would recall stories that her mother told about her childhood. One in particular was very telling about the strength of her personality even as a young girl. Her father had been very ill and she and a neighbor traveled by raft in the icy river to get him to a hospital in Baltimore. It turned out that he died from a ruptured appendix and knew not a soul in Baltimore, but she knew herself. She always knew herself.

When her mother grew old and had to have eye surgery, she put on her makeup and perfume as if she were going to an evening party. Unfortunately, the judge didn't support his wife in the way she needed during her illness or in her life. He never seemed to have enough passion about the changes in her thinking or her health. He was delicate and loved her but didn't know how to sustain her. He had a horror of any private clash and if there seemed to be one brewing at home, he would just walk to his office and catch up

on some work. He would have given her anything and thought that that was enough and surely the answer to any of his wife's troubles. When he would return home, he would stand by her bed, she would wonder out loud why she had married a coward and she would hold his hand to help him bear the insult.

He would always tell her that everything was going to be all right and she would always respond that she had heard that before. That was when the judge became what he called an optimist. He loved his wife and whatever she did that she couldn't help was all right. It really wasn't all right, though. Her trouble was that very desperation. No one could help her but the one she desperately loved—and he refused to consider that she was desperate.

Ten years after her mother died, her father married Fay. He had been approaching seventy. He had suffered with both his wives. He died worn out from both of them. It was almost as if he had both of them in him right up to the very end.

Laurel was overcome with all the feelings that came flooding back at her and put her head down on the desk and cried for love and for the dead. If only her Phil had lived, her life would have been so different. She imagined she saw him now coming back and she wept for his life as he cried out to her that he wanted it all, he had wanted more of his unlived life.

Part 3, Chapter 4

Part 3, Chapter 4 Summary

Laurel is trapped in her parents' bedroom by a bird which is really her grief and anger over the loss she has suffered. She is angry at the indignity that surrounded her father's last days. The grief lets her find the desk in the sewing room where she can bond with the papers of her mother who is really the only one who could begin to understand her rage right now. She gets a perspective on her parents' marriage as well. She remembers that her father thought that loving somebody and giving them what they want should be enough. It wasn't enough for her mother, who had the passion and drive to survive a West Virginia childhood and move to Mississippi as a young bride. She had more than this house or this small town or even that mountaintop could contain. Laurel saw that now. She saw her father as having suffered. They both did the best they could and isn't that all you can ask of anybody? Laurel cries for her dead husband, taken from her much too early. She grieves for the love she has had with all these people and wonders if the memory of it will be enough to sustain her.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

Laurel had slept all night in the chair and the bird was still in the hallway, although he was now perched on the curtains and sitting very still. She went downstairs to fix some breakfast and heard knocking at the front door. It was Mr.Cheek, a handyman who came around each spring to do odd jobs. He tried to help rid the house of the bird but only ended up letting it into her parents' room. She dismissed him just as Missouri was coming in to work. Together they trapped the creature in two baskets and Laurel was able to let it free.

For the next hour, Laurel stood in the driveway burning all the letters and papers from the house. Then she went inside to prepare to leave. She pinned her hair up, dressed for Chicago and looked at the house one last time. There was nothing left to show the happiness and suffering of her mother's life. There was also nothing to show for Fay's harm. There was nothing to show for her father's holding onto them both, then letting them both go.

She was waiting for the bridesmaids and that's when she heard a sound from the back of the house. Missouri was hanging out laundry so it must have been something else. She opened a cupboard door and got the distinct smell of mouse. Something made her reach her hand inside and she pulled out her mother's breadboard. It was waiting for her to find it. She was aghast when she looked at it. The surface was splintered and gouged and there were even cigarette burns on it. That's when Fay walked in, in disbelief that Laurel was still there.

Laurel attacked her over abusing the breadboard. Her mother had baked the best bread in town. Fay couldn't have cared less. It was just an old board she cracked walnuts on. Laurel raged on. Her husband, Phil, had crafted that board for her mother and she had loved it. Laurel knew she could not fight with this woman. A person like Fay couldn't fight with a loving person, just as she couldn't be married to one. Fay had no powers of passion or imagination in herself and had no way to see it or reach it in the other person. Other people, inside their lives, might as well be invisible to her.

Laurel had been ready to really hurt Fay but she stopped herself. Fay could never understand what she was talking about and she could no longer hurt the past. The past is over and can never be awakened. It lives only when we need to call it up and at that moment, it lives for us and during that moment, we can give it its due.

Laurel laid the breadboard down, hugged Missouri goodbye and sped away in the car with the bridesmaids. The last thing she remembered were the little hands waving to her from the playground where Miss Adele's class was having recess.

Part 4 Analysis

By morning, the bird and Laurel's grief had calmed down. It was only looking for a place to escape and so were all the feelings that Laurel had repressed over the last few days. She had rediscovered the truths about her parents' marriage as she excavated the letters and papers. The child, as an adult, can see things in a totally different light and she loved them both and felt the pain they both must have felt too. The spirit of unfinished business called her back once again, this time to the cupboard to retrieve her mother's damaged breadboard. Bread is the very substance of life and comfort and Fay had tried to destroy this foundation of her perception of her mother. In the end, Laurel lets it go because she knows that the board really is a board. She sees her parents as the flawed individuals they were, but they loved each other and they loved her and that is how their story ends. Laurel still has more to live and to tell and she heads into the rest of her life, for she is, after all, the optimist's daughter.

Characters

Mrs. Bolt

The minister's wife, Mrs. Bolt is an elderly neighbor woman. She is one of the local ladies who gossips about Fay.

Major Rupert Bullock

Major Bullock is a friend of Judge McKelva. After Judge's death, Major attends the wake and the funeral, making a big show of telling grand stories about his deceased friend. There is an indication that Major may have a drinking problem, although nothing more than a suggestion is made. Major differs from most of the neighbors in that he is sympathetic toward Fay. He embodies southern manners in his attitude toward Fay and when he escorts Laurel safely home in the rain.

Tennyson Bullock

Major Bullock's wife, Tennyson, is a neighbor and close friend of the McKelva family. Despite her husband's commanding presence, she seems to be the dominant one in their marriage. She is typical of the women in her community in that she enjoys sitting with the ladies, gossiping, or playing bridge. Mrs. Bullock is known for her subtle sarcasm.

Tish Bullock

Tish is an old friend of Laurel's. She is the daughter of Major and Tennyson Bullock. Tish was one of Laurel's bridesmaids and their friendship is still warm despite the fact that Laurel now lives in Chicago. Tish married the captain of the high school football team but is now divorced.

Bubba Chisom

Fay's brother, Bubba arrives at the wake inappropriately dressed in a windbreaker, insensitively complaining about how long a drive they took to get there, and grumbling about how they will have to turn around and do the whole drive again.

Grandpa Chisom

Grandpa Chisom is the only member of his family who seems to have any manners. He demonstrates his thoughtfulness by bringing Laurel a candy box full of pecans he has

shelled for her. Unlike the rest of his family, he speaks kindly to her and tries to stay out of the way.

Mrs. Chisom

Mrs. Chisom is Fay's mother. She is insensitive and crude. Her only interest is in indulging her daughter, and she gives no thought to expressing any sympathy to anyone else in the house during the wake or the funeral. She is impressed with the money Fay now seems to have as Judge's widow. She suggests that the entire family should move into the house with Fay so she can turn it into a boarding house.

Sis Chisom

Fay's pregnant sister, Sis is no more refined or observant than her mother. She brings her young son to the funeral as a learning experience for him and proceeds to yell at him throughout the events of the day. She allows him to wear a cowboy outfit and say almost anything he pleases.

Adele Courtland

Dr. Courtland's sister, Adele is a nurturing woman who has known the McKelva family for many years and was Laurel's first-grade teacher. She is described as an elegant woman with an authoritative voice. She still wears her hair in the same bun that she wore back when Laurel was a child.

Dr. Nate Courtland

Dr. Courtland is the eye specialist Judge visits about his failing sight. Although Dr. Courtland practices in New Orleans, Judge makes the trip presumably because the two have been friends for so long. Their families know each other, and Judge even helped put his friend through medical school.

Mr. Dalzell

Mr. Dalzell shares a hospital room with Judge McKelva while he recovers from his eye surgery. Dalzell is senile, blind, mostly deaf, and speaks erratically. He is also from Mississippi and is convinced that Judge is his long-lost son, Archie Lee.

Fay

See *Wanda Fay (Chisom) McKelva*

Laurel McKelva Hand

Laurel is Judge McKelva's only child. Her mother named her after the state flower of West Virginia, her mother's home state. Laurel is in her mid-forties and is tall and slender with dark hair. She is a professional fabric designer in Chicago but flies to New Orleans, where her father is seeing a doctor. She then travels to Mississippi after her father's death, staying for the wake and the funeral. Laurel also spends a few days in her father's house (the house in which she was reared) in order to make peace with her past.

Among the many emotional challenges she faces is the acceptance of Fay, her father's new young wife, whom she blames for her father's death. Laurel and Fay fail to get along from the beginning, and it is heart-wrenching for Laurel to watch Fay take her mother's position in the house that is full of Laurel's childhood memories and cherished objects.

As a result of her personal struggles, Laurel begins evaluating her past and her parents' relationship, including her mother's death. Consequently, she also evaluates her own marriage and the untimely death of her husband, a naval officer named Philip Hand, in World War II. By the time she leaves to return to Chicago, she has made peace with her past and her present and is better equipped for her future.

Laurel is an intelligent and sensitive woman who wants her parents to be remembered as they really were, not as larger-than-life figures. She is perhaps not assertive enough in her dealings with Fay, although there is a sense that Laurel never plans to see her again, anyway. Laurel is welcomed in Mount Salus as a native, having grown up there, but, having been away for so long, she is now able to see the people as they really are. For example, she overhears several neighborhood ladies gossiping about Fay, but refuses to participate. Still, she refrains from passing judgment on anyone in town because she loves them as family friends and past classmates.

Judge Clinton McKelva

Judge McKelva is a retired judge in the small town of Mount Salus, Mississippi. When the book opens, he is seventy-one years old, and is described as tall and heavy. He is a lifelong resident of the town and holds a prominent place in it. At one point, he was the mayor. He is respected by the entire community, from his legal associates to the African Americans in the town.

Judge is described as patient and fair. He enjoyed a long and happy marriage to his first wife, Becky, although he did not handle her declining health well. When she needed strength, he was filled with uncertainty and thus reacted by not reacting at all. Often, he chose denial, reasoning that everything would be all right because he loved her. Eventually, she died. Years later, he married a woman completely different from his first wife. Welty never offers an explanation as to why Judge married Fay, although the neighborhood ladies gossip about it.

Wanda Fay (Chisom) McKelva

Wanda Fay Chisom McKelva ("Fay") is Judge McKelva's second wife. She is small, thin, and blonde with blue eyes. They met at a Southern Bar Association conference, where Fay was a part-time employee in the typing pool. A month later, Judge brought her to his hometown and married her. She is significantly younger than he is (and a little younger than Laurel), and her crude ways prevent her from fitting in with the Mount Salus community.

Fay is selfish, rude, ignorant, and self-indulgent. When her husband is being seen by the eye specialist, she insists that his problem is nothing that nature will not heal on its own. When her husband is recovering from surgery, her attitude is one of being inconvenienced. Thinking she can scare her husband back to vitality, she shakes him and yells at him, shortly after which he dies. During the wake, she bursts from her room in black satin to create a scene. She is never shown expressing any genuine pain or grief.

After the funeral, Fay decides to return to Texas for a visit with her family. She has no understanding of how important the house is to Laurel, nor does she have any interest in sympathizing with her. She seems to entertain her mother's idea of turning the home into a boarding house. This demonstrates how little she understands the community or her husband's standing in it.

Missouri

Missouri is the African-American cook who has worked for the McKelvas since Laurel was a child. She is a matter-of-fact woman who is deeply sympathetic to Laurel's grief. She seems somewhat resentful of Fay.

Mrs. Pease

Mrs. Pease is an elderly neighbor woman. She is one of the ladies who gossips about Fay.

Themes

Making Peace with the Past

In *The Optimist's Daughter* Laurel is forced to make peace with her past and her present in order to go on with her future. The event of her father's death is difficult for her because she enjoyed a loving relationship with him, and even more so because his recent marriage to Fay, a selfish, impatient woman, forces Laurel to accept circumstances beyond her control. Having lost her mother, her husband, and now her father□all of whom she loved dearly□Laurel finds herself alone in the world and faced with the reality of giving up her childhood home to a woman she despises.

Fay returns home with her family for a short visit after the funeral, and Laurel's flight back to Chicago is not for three days. This leaves her with a few days alone in the house. She uses this time to reflect on the past and its joys and trials. Laurel recalls her mother's love of her own home in West Virginia and the difficult period of her extended illness leading to her death. Along with her mother's virtues, she remembers her mother's flaws, just as she does with her father. In the process, she makes peace with the fact that her parents were wonderful people, but only human, and she decides to preserve their memories honestly. Realizing that the truly substantial gifts her parents gave her are not objects in the house that can be willed to someone else, she is able to leave for Chicago in peace.

Laurel confronts another painful chapter of her past as she revisits her memories of her marriage to Phil Hand, a naval officer killed in World War II. In her heart and mind, those years were blissful and full of promise; while she basks in the memories of their happiness, she must also feel the pain of everything left undone. The way she describes the image of Phil appearing to her suggests that she had kept his memory closed up tightly in a deep part of herself. Once she begins uncovering her past, however, she has no choice but to revisit this part of her past, too. In the end, she is able to finally make peace with the loss of her husband in her youth. By doing so, she leaves Mount Salus with a cleansed spirit, thus allowing her to bid farewell to the comfort of her hometown, because she is now comfortable within herself wherever she goes.

Family Relationships

Welty depicts a wide variety of family relationships over the course of the novel. She shows several marriages in flashback, some healthy and vibrant and others confusing. Laurel and Phil's marriage seems to have been a healthy one that would have lasted, just as Judge and Becky's marriage thrived until Becky's death. Having grown up watching such a healthy relationship, it is little wonder that Laurel would make a similarly good choice for herself. Judge's marriage to Fay confounds everyone who knew and loved him, but it makes perfect sense to Fay's family. This incongruity is

merely a matter of perspective; what Judge had to offer a woman was obvious to all, but what Fay had to offer a man was elusive to everybody except her family. Still, even one of the neighborhood gossips has to admit that if Judge was happy, it is nobody's place to judge.

Parent-child relationships are depicted through Laurel's childhood memories. She loved both of her parents and, as an only child, felt a deep sense of responsibility to them. Despite her mother's hurtful ranting after suffering a stroke, Laurel remained steadfast in her commitment to care for her. She excused her mother's behavior because she understood that it was not intentional, but also because her father's inability to deal with the situation left nobody else to be strong in such a difficult situation. When her father dies, Laurel objects when visitors to the house tell stories about him that, while well-meaning, are not true. She feels helpless to control the mayhem of the wake and the funeral, but remains committed to preserving an accurate memory of his life. She doesn't want stories told that make him larger than life or that attribute others' deeds to him. In the end, Laurel is only able to leave her hometown and her childhood home behind because she has examined honest memories of her parents and made peace with the decisions they made and the people they truly were.

Style

Contrast

Perhaps because *The Optimist's Daughter* is a short novel, Welty includes elements of contrast to create a sense of tension in the story. The plot is fairly straightforward, but its drama and depth come from the characters and the tense atmosphere that hangs over the events of the story until the end, when Laurel leaves for Chicago. That the tension lifts when it does signals to the reader that Laurel, the title character and center of the novel, has accomplished what she needed to accomplish on her unexpected trip home. It ensures the reader that resolution has been reached.

Welty's contrasts are both subtle and overt. Her description of the hospital hallway is an example of an overt contrast that hints at underlying tensions: "The whitened floor, the whitened walls and ceiling, were set with narrow bands of black receding into the distance." The title is a more subtle example, as the use of the word "optimist" is ironic. Judge McKelva called himself an optimist in jest, not because he was a pessimist but because he had little choice about circumstances like his detached retina: "He, who had been declared the optimist, had not once expressed hope. Now it was she [Laurel] who was offering it to him." Another example of contrast is when Laurel and Fay leave the hospital after Judge McKelva's death and find themselves in the midst of a Mardi Gras celebration. Welty sets the solemn passing of a genteel man amid one of the largest, most raucous festivals in the United States, thus creating tension and contrast.

Symbolism

Welty's use of symbolism is typical of short story writers. Symbolism is an efficient use of words because it allows the writer to convey multiple messages in a single passage, exchange, or image. For example, Judge McKelva's ailment that takes him to the hospital is an eye condition. This suggests that his ability to see clearly is compromised by his age. This may be one reason why he chose to marry Fay, as Laurel suggests in her observation of Wendell, Sis Chisom's young son: "He was like a young, undriven, unfalsifying, unvindictive Fay. So Fay might have appeared, just at the beginning, to her aging father, with his slipping eyesight." Laurel goes to close her father's casket so it can be taken to the cemetery for the funeral, but has difficulty with the weight of its lid. She is helped by Mr. Pitts, the undertaker, and her friend Tish, who "helped her to give up bearing the weight of that lid, to let it come down." Closing the lid to the casket is symbolic to Laurel, because it is her conscious choice to accept the end of her relationship with her father. It is literally the last time she will see him.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of symbolism is when Laurel returns to her father's house alone to find that a bird has found its way inside. As she rushes to close interior doors to isolate the bird, she hears it flying against windows and doors, trying to escape. At the same time, she allows herself to form the thoughts that express that she blames

Fay for her father's death. Her anger, resentment, and helplessness are struggling, along with the bird, to get out. As Laurel thinks about her case against Fay, Welty writes, "Why, it would stand up in court! Laurel thought, as she heard the bird beating against the door and felt the house itself shake in the rainy wind."

Omniscient Narrator

The narrator in *The Optimist's Daughter* is omniscient ("all-knowing"), meaning that the story is told from a third-person point-of-view. The narrator is not a character in the story, and is able to enter the thoughts of several different characters, but shows an obvious bias toward Laurel and other southern characters. The narrator is typical of an omniscient narrator in the telling of events, such as the wake at Judge McKelva's house, at which the narrator passes from room to room, describing the people and conversations along the way. The narrator also reveals the thoughts and feelings of several different characters, but never reveals those of Fay and her family. There are extended passages of Laurel's interior monologue, such as when she goes through her father's office, taking in the sight of every book, pile of papers, and piece of furniture. As Laurel delves deeper into her heart, so does the narrator, as when Laurel finds her mother's old letters, papers, and photographs. While it is most often Laurel's thoughts that are revealed, the narrator also sees inside the minds of other residents of Mount Salus. For example, when Laurel insists that Major Bullock's story about her father frightening away the "White Caps" (members of the Ku Klux Klan) is not true, the narrator tells the reader that the Major's feelings were hurt.

Historical Context

Life in the South

The small town of Mount Salus represents the gentility and social life of the traditional South. Because of its commitment to tradition and its older population, Mount Salus reflects many of the values and beliefs of the Old South. Despite changes and progress, the people adhere to the chivalric, hierarchical social organization of the South. Family is extremely important, and a person's character is often attributed to his or her bloodline. People treat one another with outward respect and kindness, are quick to help their neighbors, and respect the older residents and natives of the town.

Fay is the subject of mean-spirited gossip, not only because she is an outsider, but also because she is crude and dramatic. In one scene, the older ladies in the neighborhood marvel that she does not know how to separate an egg, can only identify the frying pan in the kitchen, and does not cook Sunday dinner. To these ladies, one of whom is knitting an afghan, domestic skills are a fundamental part of femininity. That Fay's lack of familiarity with the kitchen is the cause of talk all over town is evidence of the narrowly defined roles that traditional southern people expect.

Religion in the South is almost exclusively Protestant, although there are Catholics and Jews. While Baptists are most prominent, other denominations, such as United Methodist and Presbyterian, are also well-represented. Laurel's family, neighbors, and friends are all members of the Presbyterian Church, and they attribute many of Fay's unrefined ways to her being a Baptist.

Some historians believe that the endurance of southern manners and traditions is due to the hardships faced by the South in the past. Rather than tear it apart, they argue, the struggle to survive only made the culture stronger.

Southern Gothic Literature

Some of Welty's writing is associated with the southern gothic style, and there are elements of it in *The Optimist's Daughter.* This style features settings in the American South, fantastic incidents, and characters who are bizarre, grotesque, and outcast. Although the novels do not take place in drafty castles, mazes, and dark woods, the themes derived from such European gothic settings appear in southern gothic writing. These themes include isolation, confusion, and the search for meaning, all of which are reflected in the character of Laurel.

Other characters in *The Optimist's Daughter* represent the bizarre, including Mr. Dalzell, whose senility causes him to act and speak strangely. Judge McKelva's funeral also offers examples of the bizarre and morbid, as when Miss Tennyson argues with Laurel over the viewing of her father's body. The presence at the funeral of Dot, Judge's

secretary, is prompted not by grief but by the desire to take in the spectacle. Fay's erratic and disrespectful behavior is also grotesque.

Other writers associated with southern gothic writing include Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, and Truman Capote.

Critical Overview

Considered by many to be Welty's best novel, *The Optimist's Daughter* has garnered the admiration of readers and critics from the time of its publication to the present. In *U.S. News and World Report,* a critic declares that the publication of this novel secured Welty's position among the great American writers. Scholars find the novel so rich in material that many critical papers have been written about it, considering such ideas as Welty's use of landscape, her place among southern writers, and her portrayal of female characters, which many interpret as feminist in perspective.

Commentators are quick to praise Welty's stylistic choices in *The Optimist's Daughter.* Howard Moss of *New York Times Book Review* is impressed with Welty's skill in creating such a lush story in such a short novel. He describes it as "a miracle of compression, the kind of book, small in scope but profound in its implications, that rewards a lifetime of work." Detailing some of Welty's techniques, Welty scholar Ruth D. Weston writes in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "Welty's narrative virtuosity in *The Optimist's Daughter* provides continuing evidence of her modernist experimentation with the interior monologue and other narrative techniques, including character role reversals and split protagonists."

Welty's emphasis on the inner life as it relates to the outer world in this novel have led to comparisons with the acclaimed author Virginia Woolf. Moss notes that Welty's characteristic ability to write regional speech patterns is perfectly balanced with her attention to the truth about her characters. He explains, "Miss Welty is equally adept at redneck lingo, mountain twang and the evasions of middle-class speech, but it is in her inability to falsify feelings that gives the novel its particular sense of truth." Echoing this praise, the well-known literary critic Cleanth Brooks, in "Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom," finds that this novel is one of Welty's "finest instances of her handling of the speech of the Southern folk."

Critics are often taken with Welty's ability to create unique and colorful characters who are completely realistic. Moss comments:

there is a danger in *The Optimist's Daughter* of the
case being stacked, of Laurel being too much the gentlewoman,
and Fay too harshly the brash opportunist.
In truth, Fay is a horror but eludes being evil. . . .
Laurel is too nice but escapes being a prig.

Moss praises Welty's careful handling of these two opposing characters in such a way that neither is wholly good or wholly bad. Brooks expresses a similar sentiment when he comments,

Wanda Fay is really awful. . . and Wanda Fay's sister
and mother are of the same stripe. But Miss Welty
does not allow that even this family is wholly corrupted.

Wanda Fay's grandfather, old Mr. Chisom,
seems genuine enough, a decent old man.

A *Newsweek* review published at the time of the book's publication likens Welty's handling of her characters to that of Russian writer Anton Chekhov.

Many critics comment on the complex subject matter of the book. In *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online,* Ruth M. Vande Kieft observes:

Like no other work since a few of Eudora Welty's
early stories, *The Optimist's Daughter* comes
shrouded in what I have earlier called the dark or
"sorrowful" mysteries of life and death, finally impenetrable.
The weighting of terrible ambiguities and
contraries in the novel has left many readers moved
by its depth and beauty as by no other of Eudora
Welty's works, and yet strangely baffled and saddened,
as if the revelations heaped on Laurel, the understanding
won by this intelligent, sensitive, truthful,
and loving woman were not the final truth of the
novel.

Edward Weeks of *Atlantic Monthly* is particularly drawn to Welty's use of "contrast," as mentioned by Vande Kieft in the above passage. Weeks praises Welty's portrayal of the contrast between the sentimental emotion of the neighbors and the insensitive, rude remarks made by the Chisoms during the funeral scenes. He finds that this contrast provides "shocking comedy" in that the reader is both amused and sympathetic. Commenting on the overt tension between Laurel and Fay, Moss writes, "Two kinds of people, two versions of life, two contending forces in America collide in *The Optimist's Daughter.* Its small dramatic battle sends reverberations in every direction."

That the novel continues to be read and analyzed by critics and scholars of all kinds is a testament to its depth and texture and to its lasting thematic and stylistic strengths.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she discusses the importance of the concept of home to two women characters in Welty's novel. Bussey briefly relates autobiographical information about Welty to show how the author's own experience is reflected in Laurel's experience.

The saying "home is where the heart is" takes on special meaning in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter.* In this novel, the death of Judge McKelva prompts both his daughter, Laurel, and his widow, Fay, to connect with their respective homes. Home is a place that allows for restoration, because it is a comfort zone where people generally feel accepted, regardless of their moods, feelings, or decisions. It is a safe haven where Laurel and Fay can be truthful with themselves among people who know them well enough to know when to challenge them and when to leave them alone. In other words, home is the obvious destination in a time of crisis and change. For Laurel, home is the town of Mount Salus and the house where she grew up. For Fay, home is her hometown of Madrid, where her extended family likely meets the same needs for Fay as the house does for Laurel. In briefly reviewing the events of Eudora Welty's life at the time of writing this novel, it will also become clear that, for Welty, home is both Mississippi and the process of writing.

Laurel is a grown woman, living in Chicago, who returns to her hometown of Mount Salus, Mis- sissippi, when her father dies. While it may seem that Chicago is now her home, the reader soon becomes aware that the house in which she was reared is still very much her home. When Fay decides to stay with her family for a few days after the funeral, Laurel has the opportunity to spend some time alone in the house before Fay takes full possession of it. In this privacy and silence, Laurel begins the grieving process more earnestly than she has during the public funeral. Objects in the house, such as the mantel clock, books, letters, and her father's desk, bring back memories, each intimately attached to one or both of her parents. She is saddened because the clock has stopped, and she knows this is because nobody has wound it since her father last did so. A seemingly minor detail, this stopped clock signifies both her father's absence and the reality that her time with her family and in her home has come to an end. Her grief is projected onto household objects because they represent the life she once cherished. Similarly, the books remind her of her parents' habit of reading to each other, a precious memory that she both savors and grieves over. In one passage, Laurel blends her memories of the books with the overall feeling of family, which, she feels, infuses the house:

She ran her finger in a loving track across *Eric Brighteyes* and *Jane Eyre, The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Carry On, Jeeves.* Shoulder to shoulder, they had long since made their own family. For every book here she had heard their voices, father's and mother's.

Laurel also feels a connection to the house, and thus to her past, in domestic activities such as gardening. Her mother was an avid gardener, and her father tended the flowers after his wife's passing, so it is fitting that, as part of Laurel's process of connecting with her past, she should take up the task one last time. The activity of gardening helps her to feel comfortable and close to her parents, as she participates in the rhythm of the household as she remembers it. On another level, Laurel is tending her own inner garden and connecting with her own identity. Her mother loved flowers so much that she named her daughter after one, and now that the mother is dead, the daughter is caring for the mother's flowers.

In the house, Laurel finds herself so deeply in touch with her past that she can actually hear the voices of the people she has loved and lost. She hears her mother's voice when she is in the garden: "Laurel went on pulling weeds. Her mother's voice came back with each weed she reached for, and its name with it. 'Ironweed.' 'Just chickweed.' 'Here comes that miserable old vine!'" Later, in a moment of revisiting the pain she felt at losing her husband in World War II, Laurel hears his voice grieving for their lost future together. Welty writes, "'I wanted it!' Phil cried. His voice rose with the wind in the night and went around the house and around the house. It became a roar. 'I wanted it!'" Nowhere else in the world can Laurel experience such personal revelations and be given the opportunity to confront the pain in her past and make peace with it, because her bond with her home is so deep. Only at home is she able to bare her heart and hear what she needs to hear to heal herself. And yet, to truly make peace with her past and her present, she must internalize the significance of the house so she can take it with her wherever she goes. Incredibly, she is able to do so.

Fay is originally from Madrid, Texas, a small, low-income town. Although Welty never takes the reader to Madrid, the comments and personalities of the Chisom family offer some idea of what kind of place it is. It seems to lack all the charm and warmth of Mount Salus, yet for Fay it is home. In Mount Salus, Fay clearly feels out of her element and becomes extremely rude and insecure. The reader can only imagine whether or not she is the same when she is in the comfort zone of her hometown. Nevertheless, in her new community of Mount Salus, she is disrespectful, self-absorbed, and boisterous. She no more appreciates the home and possessions of her late husband than she does his friends and family. In fact, she never makes an effort to understand Laurel's grief or her need to be in the house for a few days. Fay's insistence on returning with her family for a visit after the funeral indicates that Madrid is the only place in which she feels secure. She is frantic to go back with them, insisting that she needs to be among people who "speak her language." In other words, Fay, like Laurel, needs to go where she feels understood either by others or by herself. In Mount Salus, Fay feels uprooted, and her insecurity takes many ugly forms, such as her propensity to disrespect Becky's memory and to deny her own family back in Madrid. Laurel muses, "Very likely, making a scene was, for Fay, like home. Fay had brought scenes to the hospital□and here, to the house. . . . " Laurel understands that Fay's horrible behavior is an outward sign of her need to feel at home. She tries too hard to appear to believe that Judge McKelva's home is truly her own, but she never convinces anyone, including herself.

At the time Welty wrote this story, she was grieving the loss of her mother. In fact, the book is dedicated to C. A. W. (Chestina Andrews Welty), which reveals that this work is closely connected to the author's own personal loss. The autobiographical elements in the novel are numerous, and are especially prominent in the parallels between Becky's background and that of Welty's mother. Other autobiographical features pay homage to Welty's happy childhood and the loving marriage her parents enjoyed. Through Laurel, Welty honors her mother and also works through some of the pain and the issues surrounding the death of a parent. Laurel's personal journey to make peace with her past in order to make sense of her future certainly mirrors Welty's own struggles. Welty differs from Laurel in that Laurel lives far from her hometown, while Welty lived in Mississippi, where she was born, until her death. For Laurel, however, the intensity of her journey comes from the house. In the absence of a house or other single vessel holding all of her childhood memories, Welty wrote this book. She in effect works through some of her grief in her writing, which is as meaningful to her as the house is to Laurel.

Welty comments on Laurel's love of her past: "Firelight and warmth□that was what her memory gave her." Laurel, Fay, and Welty are all working toward such warmth in a difficult time during the course of *The Optimist's Daughter.* In very trying times, charged with emotion and uncertainty, people often long to return to the comfort and security of their childhood homes. Fay and Laurel find the havens they need by going back to their homes, while Welty draws from her hometown and blends it with her most private pain. Laurel is ultimately able to take a piece of that firelight and warmth with her back to Chicago, because she has succeeded in making her heart and her home one.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *The Optimist's Daughter,* in *Novels for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Mortimer analyzes how Welty "enhances the implications of her images" in The Optimist's Daughter.

One of the striking characteristics of Eudora Welty's fiction□taken as a whole□is the remarkable diversity of styles she summons from story to story. Welty herself has said that when she begins a new story nothing she has written before is of much help to her, that each new story teaches her how to write itself. Yet when we turn to a novel such as *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) directly after reading *The Golden Apples* (1949) or *Losing Battles* (1970), for example, the shift in stylistic intensity is nevertheless surprising. The complex allusions and linguistic sensuousness of *The Golden Apples* and the garrulous charm of *Losing Battles* leave us quite unprepared for the spareness and apparent simplicity of the later text.

Two additional factors have contributed to critical readings of *The Optimist's Daughter* that are far different from those we find for works such as *The Golden Apples.* The numerous biographical correspondences between Welty's life and the details of her story and her explicit articulation of her theme at the novel's end□having to do with the fragility of memory and its role in understanding□ have led to explications of the novel that nearly always emphasize theme and content. And while the novel's critics have also to varying degrees considered one or more of its pervasive images, no one has yet addressed the nature of the coherence underlying their presence in the text. The narrative strategies that inform *The Optimist's Daughter* deserve, I believe, much closer scrutiny. Toward this end, I want to draw attention to at least three ways in which Welty enhances the implications of her images: through her exploitation of the ambiguity of etymological meanings, her syntactical juxtaposition or pairing of the images themselves, and her oblique references to various mythic substructures. By creating an explicit structure of relationships *between* images, Welty generates a particularly intricate network of meanings in which no single image stands alone, for each is modified by the simultaneous presence of others. Her strategies for insisting on the interdependence of her images as they affect one another's meanings enable Welty to express more fully the subtlety and complexity of her view of how understanding itself takes place and of how we□ostensible seekers of knowledge □manage so often to evade it.

The story of Laurel McKelva Hand's loss of her father and her struggle to come to terms with her memories of all the loved ones she has lost is on one level an extraordinarily personal meditation. When she wrote it, Welty herself had recently lost both her mother and her brother within a brief interval. Welty has gone well beyond this personal dimension, however, in framing Laurel's story. In particular through the creation of Judge McKelva's young second wife, Wanda Fay, she has transformed the outlines of Laurel's story into a vivid interior drama. In the figure of the exasperating Fay, Laurel recognizes and confronts the forces of disruption and chaos that threaten the ordered perfection of her long-held memories, both of her parents' relationship and of her own brief marriage with Philip Hand. Fay is the first of several characters in the novel who embody a crass

oblivion to the needs of anyone beyond themselves: they include the Dalzell family, whom Laurel encounters in the hospital the night her father dies; the audacious handyman, Mr. Cheek; and Fay's own relatives, the Chisoms, who (appropriately) run a wrecking concern back in Texas. It is through her efforts to account for the disturbing presence of Fay and to understand how her father could have chosen to marry such a person that Laurel is led to grapple with the limitations of memories she has long accepted as accurate. For Laurel, Fay becomes an emblem of the terrible disjunctions and violations, the things that don't fit and can never make sense, that enter one's life seemingly at random and destroy peace of mind. Laurel is much like her father, who calls himself an optimist and who has chosen in both of his marriages to avoid any deep acknowledgement of the existence of hurtfulness and pain. When her father refers to Laurel by her childhood name, "Polly", he reminds us of that excessive optimism we associate with a "Pollyanna's" view of the world, but the adult Laurel's epistemological task in the novel is to understand the distortions of her own former thinking, to recognize the failure of mere optimism to do justice to the complexity of experience.

In our reading of Welty's novel, we come to understand her purpose in part through the special cogency of her dominant imagery, that of vision and blindness. On the surface it appears that Welty is simply exploiting the traditional meanings of these images, using them as expressions of the broader symbolism of light and darkness□as emblems of human understanding. But as is true of her use of imagery throughout the novel, she evokes the full range of meanings implicit in each symbol, from the most positive to the most negative. Light connotes illumination, comprehension, and clarity, yet its excess leads to just the opposite. With Emily Dickinson, Welty believes "the Truth must dazzle gradually/Or every man be blind□." Thus, Welty gives an especially appropriate name to the vulgar family Laurel meets at the hospital, who incarnate the ugliness she needs to come to terms with; they are homonymously named the "Dalzells." Similarly, the darkness that normally signifies obscurity, ignorance, or an inability or unwillingness to understand can also imply a restfulness that makes introspection and later "vision" possible. The window *blind* in Judge McKelva's hospital room serves this function, darkening the room and protecting his eyes while they recover; twice it is torn down by disruptive figures in the novel, the blind patient (Mr. Dalzell) in the next bed and later (apparently) by Wanda Fay. On the first occasion, Laurel, the nurse, and the Judge's doctor put it back in place to protect his vulnerable eyes from the light. The second time there is no point in replacing it. The blind falls at the Judge's final crisis, as if signalling his death.

Welty's narrative methods often involve exploring many of the words signifying particular concepts, as she does to pursue the myriad linguistic connections between eyesight and insight. Words like "eye," "see," "watch," and "look" pervade Welty's novel, but so do terms that reflect limitations of vision brought about by factors both internal and external to the perceiving self. The ultimately blinding light mentioned above (conveyed in such terms as "glare," "blaze," "dazzle," and "brightness") is intimated throughout the novel by terms that express the intermittent, ambiguous light of objects themselves ("twinkling," "shimmering," "flickering," and "flashing"), suggesting the indeterminacy and tenuousness of the objects to which we look for understanding. Welty suggests, too, that perceivers allow their own preoccupations to interfere with seeing clearly

through her use of images of "mirrors" or "reflections" that cause them to see themselves instead□a kind of narcissistic blindness. And finally, she shows that vision fails when we look at the wrong object; a major example of this is her use of the word "slipping" which, evoking the idea of an eclipse or a veneer, suggests that an object is hidden by something in front of it that one sees instead. Recurrent references to curtains and screens enhance this motif. Judge McKelva has a "slipped retina," and his larger problem in the novel is that he has mistaken one wife (the young Fay) for his beloved late wife, Becky.

In one of her most fascinating narrative strategies, Welty creates linkages between the sustained motif of blindness and sight and other motifs by using key terms that serve as pivots between them. Thus, she enables the connotations of one set of images to enhance or modify those of a second group. This technique becomes evident as we turn to a second major image pattern in the novel, that of rushing water. With the word "cataract," Welty connects the eye disease leading potentially to blindness with the waterfall to suggest a particular obstacle to clarity of vision. In its destructive aspect, rushing water represents the overwhelming emotions or thoughts that can blind us to what is happening; in its more benign form, it signifies a cleansing of the eyes that frees us to see better, as in the tears that fill Laurel's eyes at the moment of her fullest understanding in the novel.

The Judge, his first wife Becky, and Laurel are all associated with the linkages between vision and rushing water. Before she died, Becky, who lay on her sickbed sightless after a number of eye operations for cataracts, had recaptured a sense of her longed-for childhood world of order and peace by reciting Southey's "The Cataract of Lodore," which in its very rhythms and momentum mimics the experience of rushing water. Years later, when Judge McKelva is recovering from his eye operation, he is told to rest his eyes in the dark and, above all, that there are to be no tears. Laurel sees him just before his death and fights back her own tears, to keep *him* from crying. The Judge dies just after Laurel finds Wanda Fay shaking him to demand that he get up out of bed and take her to the Mardi Gras. Since the novel makes explicit that his eye operation is not the cause of his death, we are urged narratively to recognize that he has "seen" too much□Fay's cruelty and his mistake in believing she is like his first, gentler wife, Becky□and that in his despair at seeing, he has just given up. Welty writes that at the moment just before his death, his "whole, pillowless head went dusky, as if he laid it under the surface of dark, pouring water and held it there." It remains for Laurel to come to terms with what they both have seen.

Images of water are especially significant in connection with Judge McKelva, because his basic emotional failure in the novel is shown to have been his refusal to acknowledge Becky's despair when, in her last days, she experienced a horrible fear that her optimist husband would not face. Welty tells us that in his belief that his love for her would make everything all right, he left her feeling that she was facing the worst crisis of her soul alone. Indeed, her sense of abandonment severely exacerbated her pain as she struggled with her fear of death. In view of his wife's suffering and his inability to acknowledge it, there is both irony and poignancy in the fact that formerly, as Mayor of the town, the Judge had been in charge of flood control for his community. In a

letter he wrote to his daughter Laurel shortly before he became engaged to Fay, the Judge's particular blindness that will eventuate in this second marriage is foreshadowed when he is still able to say, "There was never anything wrong with keeping up a little optimism over the Flood." Flood control, in these terms, is precisely what optimism is about. Thus, at the moment of Laurel's fullest epiphany, when she transcends the comfort of optimism, we are told: "A flood of feeling descended on [her]. She. . . put her head down on the open lid of the desk and wept in grief for love and for the dead. . . . Now all she had found had found her. The deepest spring in her heart had uncovered itself, and it began to flow again." The waters here, of course, have become emblems of life itself.

A third image pattern emphasized in the novel involves hands and their functions; how they create, give, manipulate, hold and withhold, touch, restrain, and express. Although there are numerous instances of this pervasive motif (prominent, for example, in the name and the talents of Laurel's lost husband Philip Hand), its *presence* is in some ways less interesting than how Welty incorporates it into her larger concern with the nature of knowledge. She links the hand imagery of this novel to the blindness motif we have looked at through the notion of hands that can see, through *braille.* Although the word itself is not used, this pivotal concept is recurrently enacted, as when Welty writes that the sensitive hands of Dr. Courtland, the eye specialist, "had always looked, to Laurel, as if their mere touch on the crystal of a watch would convey to their skin exactly what time it was", or when Laurel, in exploring her mother's writing desk, discovers the little stone boat carved by the Judge when he was courting Becky, "her fingers remembering it before she held it under her eyes." By repeatedly describing the motions of her characters' hands (both sensitive and insensitive ones), Welty pursues nearly every imaginable variation on the image to show us the strategies people use in experiencing and responding to new knowledge by accepting, modifying, denying, or using it. Ineptitude with one's hands is depicted as a type of blindness to the nuances of things, as when Laurel admits late in the novel that□unlike Philip Hand□she, her father, and her mother, Becky "were a family of comparatively helpless people." Moreover, with the word "blunder," used variously at least four times (in association with the Mardi Gras crowds, the men who carry Judge McKelva's coffin, the trapped bird, and the offensive Mr. Cheek), Welty merges hands and blindness once more: to blunder is to stumble or be clumsy as if one cannot see. Thus, Welty connects blundering (a word which at times she italicizes) with the chaotic and disturbing world of darkness and disorder that Laurel and her optimist father have struggled to deny. As for the remembered perfection of her marriage with Philip, Laurel believes "there had not happened a single blunder in their short life together."

A fourth□and for our purposes final□motif in Welty's novel involves her use of birds. They serve several imagistic functions at different points in the novel and ultimately point, even more directly than Welty's other images do, to her explicitly articulated thematic concern with memory. As we shall see, birds not only pull together the issues represented by the other images; they become at crucial moments images of memory itself.

A review of their more traditional uses in the novel helps us to understand the significance of Welty's later amplification of the image and its incorporation into her allusions to mythic stories. At times, for example, birds are used rather straightforwardly to represent nature commenting upon the actions of humans. A mockingbird sings throughout a conversation among four elderly women, Judge McKelva's contemporaries, when, after his funeral and in Laurel's presence, they discuss his two marriages; here birds serve as a kind of chorus to the Greek chorus constituted by the women themselves vis-à-vis Laurel, who is working quietly among the flowers. The flowers themselves reflect her struggle to see: they are irises. The mockingbird, meanwhile, "let fall a *cascade* of song" (emphasis mine).

At other times birds mirror what Laurel fears: the pigeons who feed out of one another's craws, and whose pecking as they ate out of her hands when she was a girl terrified her, seem to represent Laurel's avoidance of the complicating entanglements of human love in the nearly twenty years since Philip died in World War II. She experiences the apparently painful interdependence of these birds ("sticking their beaks down each other's throats, gagging each other") as an entrapment: "They convinced her that they could not escape each other and could not themselves be escaped from." The scene Welty creates is closely reminiscent of the one in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* in which Connie Chatterley's fear of life and sexuality is expressed in her timidity in handling baby chickens.

Birds also serve as images of Laurel's own aspiring soul. The chimney swift trapped in her house on her last night there echoes her panic and feelings of entrapment within anachronistic thoughts and feelings that no longer "fit." During the long, stormy night, she and the bird alike struggle toward "light." And in the morning, when she frees it, we feel that she is freeing herself as well. Birds also reflect the souls of Laurel and Philip Hand on a happier occasion. On their train trip to Mount Salus to be married, the young couple had seen a flock of birds "flying in a V of their own, following the same course" south that the lovers were taking, mirroring in fact the convergence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers beneath them all. This redoubled image of convergence had seemed a reflection to Laurel and Philip of the joy of their coming together.

Finally, as I have suggested, birds are used to suggest a more complex meaning within the novel. Welty enhances her consideration of how memory works and of "the danger of caging memory in" by using birds as images of memory itself. They are present on nearly every occasion when Laurel thinks about the past, at every one of her moments of revelation. When the funeral procession arrives at the cemetery, Welty writes that "as they proceeded there, black wings thudded in sudden unison, and a flock of birds flew up as they might from a ploughed field, still shaped like it, like an old map that still served new territory, and wrinkled away in the air." These birds, and the shape that they retain as they fly upwards, express Welty's vision of how memory continues to pattern our thoughts "like an old map" that may or may not fit new territory. Laurel's memories about her parents and husband, perfect and therefore necessarily distorted, constitute an old map that fails to account for Wanda Fay, fails to accept the reality of the difficult, painful moments in her parents' lives together, and fails as well to acknowledge the implications of Philip's loss of his own life. (In a later vision Laurel sees Philip looking "at

her out of eyes wild with the craving for his unlived life" as his voice rises to a "roar" of despair.) Laurel's growth in the novel involves learning to allow her memories to remain vulnerable to the changes in her own understanding. She must, to begin with, stop denying the fact of Fay's existence in her father's life and so come to terms with *his* needs and vulnerabilities. Welty is explicit about the lesson Laurel is to learn, and when she has finally learned it, Welty depicts her as, first, freeing the trapped bird and, then, withstanding waves of emotion in her final confrontation with Fay. In this penultimate scene in the novel, Laurel raises a breadboard Philip had made for her mother "above her head, but for a moment it seemed to be what supported her, a raft in the waters, to keep her from slipping down deep, where the others had gone before her."

It is impossible by merely citing examples to convey a sense of how intricately Welty structures her motifs in this novel. Blindness and sight, hands, birds, and rushing water□as well as a number of analogous motifs, such as fire, time, and bridges□ are linked in a variety of ways through individual words that cross etymological paths (as with "cataract" and "iris") and through their juxtaposition in various contexts (as in the mockingbird's "cascade of song"). Welty rarely fails to pursue the thematic suggestiveness of words' synonyms and homonyms. She seems vividly aware of the multiplicity of meanings inherent in single words, and her linguistic playfulness creates echoes throughout our reading as on various levels we grasp the movement among etymological realms. These explorations, in fact, account for a number of otherwise bewildering details in her stories. One decidedly lighthearted example involves her playing with the images associated with braille, a concept I have already mentioned as serving as a link between the motifs of blindness/sight and hands. Welty introduces us to a minor character in the novel, untypically, without her last name: the Judge's former secretary, who "to everyone in town. . . was known simply as Dot." Years ago, we are told, she had bought herself an expensive Mah- Jongg set. The palpable (raised) dots of braille are recalled in Dot's name itself; in the palpable (recessed) dots on the domino-like tiles, the small sticks, and the dice of the Mah-Jongg set (used as graphic signs in themselves or to count points); in expressions like "on the dot" that (like "the blink of an eye") recurrently appear in the text to signify time; and in the fact that Welty herself pauses as narrator of her text to call our attention to the word characterizing the sentimental feelings Dot had for the Judge and the Judge's excessive fondness for his young wife Fay (again, a sign of a type of blindness): "'[H]e doted on her,' " Miss Adele Courtland declares. "'Doted. You've hit on it. That's the word,' said Miss Tennyson." "Mah-Jongg" itself is Chinese for "house sparrow," a bird pictured on one of the tiles and a reminder of the bird who disrupts Laurel's home late in the novel, leaving spots everywhere it touches. Much of this may simply be playfulness, an expression of Welty's exuberant, even sensuous pleasure in the resonances of language. And while I think that we may err in placing very much interpretive importance on such passages, they are consistent with Welty's overall narrative strategies, which so often involve encouraging us, her readers, to let our imaginations roam among the network of meanings implied by her linked motifs.

The linkages I have suggested at the level of language take us repeatedly back to the surface message of her story, a message about how our understanding is jeopardized by our own habits of perception. Welty reinforces our sense of the ironies and

complexities of her subject at a deeper level, moreover, through allusions—some straightforward and others more oblique—to mythological stories that themselves have to do with evading and searching for truth. Unlike *The Golden Apples,* in which Welty overtly signals each mythic motif she offers as a way of understanding the patterns of meaning she intends, in this novel she has used— but left submerged—mythic substructures that add coherence and nuance to her depiction of the problematics of understanding. Early in the novel, for example, she mirrors the story of Daphne (whose name is Greek for "laurel"), who eluded Apollo's pursuit of her by being transformed into (or, in another version, replaced by) a laurel tree. Welty shows Laurel as confusing her own image in a window with that of a beech tree as she dozes on the train trip to Mount Salus. When we recognize this brief allusion, it becomes clear that Welty is adumbrating Laurel's problem; Daphne's avoidance of sexual encounter serves as a synecdoche for Laurel's avoidance not only of sexuality but of all entangling human relationships and suggests the nature of her failure to acknowledge fully the complexities of her memory of her parents and her husband.

Similarly, there are suggestions that the mountain in West Virginia where Laurel's grandmother lived is a type of magic mountain, perhaps one of the Venusberg mountains believed in medieval legend to be where the Goddess Venus held court, enticing travelers who then were reluctant to leave. A high priestess served the goddess under the name of Queen Sibyl (recall that Welty calls the river at the foot of the mountain "Queen's Shoals") and, because of her prophecies, the mountain came to be seen as a place of wisdom. The novel places such emphasis on the bliss that Becky experienced when she was there that the mountain seems to be the prototype of the lost paradise Becky thought of when she decided to keep her "diagrams of *Paradise Lost* and Milton's Universe", and so the mountain, like the figure of Daphne, also serves as an image of escape. Becky, remembering that longed-for sanctuary in West Virginia, had expressed scorn for the word "Mount" in Mount Salus' name; and now Becky's daughter, Laurel, in thinking of her experiences on that mountain, undergoes her fullest epiphany, after which she dons her "*Sibyl* Connolly" suit for the flight back to Chicago (emphasis mine). Among the objects sacred to the goddess Venus were the dove/pigeon (recalling Laurel's crucial childhood encounter with pigeons), bread (Becky's breadboard in the final scenes of the novel), and figs—all associated with Laurel's mother. Welty is drawing from the mythological tradition in which mountains represent the Great Mother, a place of nurturance and wisdom.

A more important mythological substructure for the novel, however, consists of the Oedipus/Teiresias story, especially as reflected in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex.* By alluding to the complex, ironic echoes of Oedipus' story, Welty is able to build upon Sophocles' intricate depiction of the relation between vision/blindness and memory. The paradoxical ways in which memory can both know and yet not know are central to Sophocles' themes, as they are to Welty's, for they explain how our own predilections and motives obscure our ability to see what would otherwise be evident. Oedipus in one sense knew that he had killed a man and married a woman, but his memory failed to grasp the connection with the prophecies about his fate. Laurel, similarly, "knows" of the complex hurtfulness that existed between her parents at the end of Becky's life, but she has needed or preferred to remember only their love and harmony. Judge McKelva, too, had

refused to see his dying wife's pain, preferring to trust in love to make things right. Laurel, the Judge, and Oedipus alike have all been optimists and have blinded themselves to some ugly realities. Fay, in fact, accuses Laurel (as she had the Judge) of "putting your eyes out, too" by reading too much, recalling Oedipus' deliberate blinding of himself. And finally, Laurel, like Oedipus, has failed to know who her parents are, so that her enlightenment at the end of her story, like his, constitutes the overcoming of an otherwise "fatal" flaw.

As is so often true with Welty's stories, she has followed through even to minor details with her mirroring of this mythic source. The incident in which the Judge as a boy cut his foot open and had to be carried home by his friend reminds us of Oedipus' name, which means "swollen foot." Young Clint, on that occasion, would necessarily have walked, as Oedipus does, with a limp. As a legacy of their childhood experience, both have scarred feet. Moreover, the riddle given to Oedipus by the Sphinx□about what being "has sometimes two feet, sometimes three, sometimes four, and is weakest when it has the most?"□itself acted out in Oedipus' story as, blind, he walks with a cane or leaning on others, is also mirrored by various characters in Welty's novel. Tom Farris, the town's "blind man," comes to Judge McKelva's funeral tapping his cane "from side to side in a lordly way"; and Sam, Becky's youngest brother, had attended her funeral some dozen years ago on two canes and was thus, in a sense, four-footed.

The cogency of many such details in Welty's novel consists in their reference to intertextual sources. Euripides' play *Ion,* for example, serves as one minor echo, reinforcing the more prominent Oedipal story. Welty names the place where the Judge and Fay ate Sunday dinner the "Iona Hotel." The Judge's old friends describe their going there as a "saddening exhibition" of the old man's blindness in choosing a wife who could not cook. *Ion* closely resembles *Oedipus Rex* in that both stories chronicle a protagonist's discovery of the true identities of his mother and father. Interestingly, the first scene of the play shows Ion, a servant in the temple of Phoebus Apollo at Delphi, sweeping out the temple with a broom and threatening to use a bow and arrow to shoot the birds who are defiling the temple. This scene mirrors Laurel and her housekeeper Missouri's pursuit (with a broom) of the chimney swift who has entered and left his sooty mark upon so many things in the McKelva home. The bird "shot out of the dining room and now went arrowing up the stairwell in front of her eyes." When the bird is gone and the curtains have all been pulled down and cleaned, the house resembles the temple of the sun god: "All the windows. . . let in the full volume of spring light. There was nothing she was leaving in the whole shining and quiet house. . ."

Just as significant as the associations with Oedipus are those with Teiresias, the blind old Theban prophet who became a seer by virtue of understanding "the tongue of birds." Just as Sophocles mirrored the ambiguities of blindness and understanding in Oedipus through the parallel blindness and "vision" of Teiresias, so Welty projects the paradox implicit in the figure of a blind seer onto several figures in her novel. A number of her characters, major and minor, are either blind or threatened by blindness; they include the Judge with his slipped retina; Becky, Laurel's mother, who was blind during the last few years of her life; the blind Mr. Dalzell in the Judge's hospital room; and "Mount Salus's blind man," Tom Farris. Moreover, we find scenes of precognition

attributed to all three of Welty's central characters. This happens first when, unbeckoned but sensing that something is very wrong, Laurel returns to her father's hospital room the night he dies and discovers Fay abusing him. The Judge foresaw the future twice; although he had only been going to have his eyes examined in New Orleans, he left complete instructions with a friend about how to get in touch with Fay's family should anything happen to him, and years earlier he had made his only trip to Chicago to see Philip during what was to be his "last leave" before dying in the Pacific in World War II. Becky too, Laurel concludes, had "predicted" Fay; part of her anger and sense of betrayal as she lay near death had been her recognition of that aspect of her husband's personality that would make such a choice as Fay possible. As a figure both male and female, who both sees and does not see, Teiresias, then, is embodied in Laurel, Becky, and the Judge alike. Just as Teiresias had been blinded as a result of his poor judgment□in one version of his myth because he had declared that women have more sexual pleasure than men□so too the Judge is blinded for failing to judge a woman rightly. Laurel, a judge's daughter, spends time in the novel introspectively holding a "trial" and marshalling "evidence" to help her reach a "verdict" about Fay; the courtroom language is explicit. Even the mystically potent number seven, associated in a variety of ways with Teiresias, is reflected in the Judge, who at 70 has blindly married the self-absorbed young Fay. Teiresias, moreover, is linked with the Judge in a more subtle way; Robert Graves tells us that he had a daughter named Daphne.

But most central to Welty's purposes is the fact that Teiresias is associated with being able to interpret or "read" the language of birds, a gift he received in compensation for having been blinded. We recall that the Judge's eye troubles began when he saw "flashes" from "bird-frighteners" on the family's fig tree, suggesting perhaps that in the implicit effort to keep birds away, the Judge was leaving himself vulnerable to "blinding" (because unanticipated) flashes of understanding. As I have emphasized, birds are persistently connected with Laurel's moments of understanding, as if the lessons of birds will free her spirit.

In *The Optimist's Daughter* Welty enriches her theme through narrative strategies operating on at least two different levels: the single word or image and the wider mythic substructure. Through the juxtaposition of various pairs of images (i.e., birds and hands, water and eyes) and through exploiting the multiple meanings of single words ("watch," "pupil," "iris," "cataract"), Welty foregrounds different dimensions of meaning to comment upon Laurel's search for understanding. In doing so she manages to recover some of the lost metaphorical dimensions of our everyday language. Through her evocation of mythic tales, moreover, she draws from the wider realms of significance reflected in the stories of such figures as Daphne, Oedipus, and Teiresias. The subtle nature of these linkages enables Welty's readers to experience her story at a variety of depths depending upon our awareness of these linguistic and literary/mythic associations. As happens when we lift a net by any one of its knots, all of the threads and other knots to which it is connected are pulled up along with it; similarly, no single image or pattern can be said to "explain" Welty's text. Since the phenomena I have discussed all have to do in some respect with the theme of understanding□our quest for it, our evasion of it□ Welty's strategy has the effect of leaving us with a strong sense of the difficulty and endlessness of the search. The core of Laurel's lesson has been that

old patterns of thought cannot do justice to new experience. It is important that Laurel not merely accept Fay or assimilate her into her world view since that would be to fail to recognize Fay's role as an emblem of the fact of disjuncture or chaos in our lives. If Laurel is to eschew the comforts of her old, patterned ways of seeing things, then she must come to tolerate ambiguity, complexity, and even horror in the world around her. Welty's narrative decisions reinforce this thematic message by refusing to offer clearcut and definitive readings of her story. Each time we glimpse the implications of one image, another modifies what we have seen.

Welty's use of image and myth pulls together the otherwise disparate phenomena from her family's past that she selected for inclusion in her novel. Moreover, the particular ways in which they give subtle structure to her novel are analogous to her concept of how memory itself works. She sees memory much as T. S. Eliot sees literary tradition. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argues that when a genuinely new piece of literary art is created, it causes the pre-existing body of literature to "be, if ever so slightly, altered" as "the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted." Eliot's "historical sense" is quite similar to Welty's idea of memory as something which needs to remain open to new perspectives, "vulnerable to the living moment." Welty is explicit in her novel in saying that the memory is *not* meant to freeze the past into something impervious to new experience. Instead, it repeatedly redefines the patterns of our lives as we reach a fuller understanding; the body of all we know alters slightly with each new addition as memory works its magic. What I want to suggest, then, is that Welty's deliberate evocation of the etymological histories of particular words, the conflation of meanings she creates by juxtaposing key words in various ways, and her use of mythic tales to revive our cultural memories of stories embodying these same concepts are meant to enact in her readers' memories the lessons *about* memory seen in Laurel's story. Just as Laurel is urged to allow her memory to glimpse correspondences and new implications, so we as readers are urged to recognize the connections implicit in Welty's intertextual and etymological allusions. We make "sense" of Welty's novel only to the degree that our cultural memories enable these connections to take place. *The Optimist's Daughter* persuades us of the truth of Welty's statement that memory is her greatest treasure: "during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives." In her memory as in her fiction, "the strands are all there: to the memory nothing is ever really lost."

Source: Gail L. Mortimer, "Image and Myth in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter,*" in *American Literature,* Vol. 62, No. 4, December 1990, pp. 617-33.

Adaptations

Random House has produced two audio-book adaptations of *The Optimist's Daughter,* an unabridged version in 1986 and an abridged version in 1999. Both versions are read by Welty herself.

Topics for Further Study

Consult psychology textbooks and journals on the subject of grief. From a psychological point of view, how would you evaluate Laurel's ways of handling her grief with reference to her mother, her husband, and her father? How would you evaluate Fay's manner of dealing with grief? Based on your knowledge of the characters' upbringings and backgrounds, why do you think these two women react so differently to the death of Judge McKelva?

Identify an object (such as a piece of jewelry or furniture, a photo, a letter, or a medal) that makes you feel connected to your past or to someone in your family who has passed away. Take that object and a notebook to a quiet place where you can reflect on your feelings. Write down your feelings about this object and the people or experiences with which you associate it. Write in a stream-of-consciousness style so that you will have an of interior monologue on paper. Later, review what you have written and compare it to Welty's description of how Laurel felt about certain objects in the house in which she was reared.

Different religions and cultures adopt different traditions and rituals for burying their dead. Learn more about the beliefs about death and the funeral practices in one religion, belief system, or culture which is different from your own (such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Muhammadan, African religions, traditional Native- American customs or beliefs, Catholicism, Protestantism, etc.). Compare it to your own. What significant differences are there? What similarities are evident?

With a partner, stage a debate in which one of you argues that Judge McKelva was right to marry Fay, and the other argues that his marriage to Fay was a mistake. Each of you should support your argument with reasons and examples; point out weaknesses in your opponent's argument; and respond to your opponent's criticisms of your position.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: After the death of a loved one, the family has the choice of having the body viewed at home or at the funeral parlor. It is not uncommon to have the viewing at home, in keeping with tradition.

Today: People still have the option of having the body of a loved one viewed at home on the day of the funeral, although most families choose to have the viewing at the funeral parlor. There is variation according to ethnicity and religion.

1970s: Racial tensions continue to discourage social interaction between African Americans and whites. While the law offers increased opportunities and rights to minorities, the culture is slow in catching up to this progress.

Today: Racial tensions are still a part of everyday life, particularly in very large and very small cities. Strides have been impressive, however, and social interaction between races is both common and accepted.

1970s: Traditional male and female roles are the norm. Women are primarily responsible for domestic duties, while men pursue careers to provide for their families. Opportunities exist for women, however, and the women's movement is bringing change.

Today: Women are free to choose careers or to commit themselves exclusively to caring for their families, if their economic situations permit it. Women are entering the workforce in increasing numbers, and are even making their way into top leadership roles. At the same time, there is little if any stigma in choosing to be a full-time wife and mother.

What Do I Read Next?

Eudora Welty (Modern Critical Views: Contemporary Americans) (1986), by noted literary scholars Harold Bloom and William Golding, provides biographical and critical overviews to aid the student of Welty's novels and short stories.

Fellow Mississippian William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) is the story of a poor southern family on a journey to bury their mother. While this book touches on some of the same issues as *The Optimist's Daughter* (such as death, grief, and family relationships), Faulkner's treatment of these themes is dramatically different from Welty's.

Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories* (1996) provides a comprehensive look at the short stories of another important female writer from the South. O'Connor, like Welty, also wrote novels but is more strongly associated with short fiction.

Welty's *Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (1982) includes all forty-one of her published short stories. Welty is recognized primarily for her short fiction, and this collection is an ideal introduction to her body of work.

Welty's autobiographical *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984) is a rare glimpse into the author's life experiences from her own perspective. Her writing style is the same blend of humor, acute observation, and sensitivity that readers enjoy in her fiction.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, *Eudora Welty: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide,* Chelsea House, 1999.

Bloom offers a thorough reference to Welty's short stories, for which she is best known. Ideally suited for the reader new to Welty's work, this book explains themes, techniques, and contexts in Welty's short fiction.

Champion, Laurie, ed., *The Critical Response to Eudora Welty's Fiction,* Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994.

This volume offers the collected criticism of Welty's writing from the 1940s to the present.

Price, Reynolds, ed., *Eudora Welty Photographs,* University Press of Mississippi, 1993.

Using Welty's early photographs, Price depicts Welty's personal view of the South. The book includes an introductory interview with Welty, conducted by Price, concerning her photographs.

Weston, Ruth D., *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty,* Louisiana State University Press, 1994.

Weston reviews Welty's work in terms of the gothic tradition to show how she uses gothic themes and narrative techniques within the southern literary framework.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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