



# MEMORY, DEATH AND CLOSURE IN EDUORA WELTY'S THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

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## Abstract

Memory in literature is the written form of that which has come before. Memories come from the historical past but are also formed by social, political, and religious events in the lives of literary characters. Memory has always been a favourite theme for many excellent writers in their writings. There are multiple novels which move around the memories of the protagonist and other characters. Eudora Welty's work "*The Optimist's Daughter*", builds up its plot around the major themes like self-realization, grief, inner strength, memory, death etc.

Eudora Welty was an American short story writer and novelist who wrote about the American South. Her novel *The Optimist's Daughter* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973. Welty received numerous awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Order of the South, an American Book Award and National Medal for Literature. She was a six-time winner of the O. Henry Award for Short Stories. She was the first living author to have her works published by the Library of America. Much of her writing focused on realistic human relationships — conflict, community, interaction, and influence. As a Southern writer, a sense of place was an important theme running through her work.

**Key words:** Memoirs, Conflict, Motif, Climax, Funeral and Emotional

## Concept/Explanation

Eudora Welty launched her working life during the Great Depression, taking various jobs, but what gave her most satisfaction was photography. Her first writing breakthrough was with a short story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," published in a literary magazine in 1936. After that, she found it easier to sell stories. In *A Curtain of Green*, Welty included seventeen stories that move from the comic to the tragic, from realistic portraits to surrealistic ones, and that display a wry wit, the keen observation of detail, and a sure rendering of dialect. Here

she at times translated into fiction memories of people and places she had earlier photographed, and the volume's three stories focusing upon African American characters exemplify the empathy that was present in her photos. Toni Morrison has observed that Eudora Welty wrote "about black people in a way that few white men have ever been able to write. It's not patronizing, not romanticizing — it's the way they should be written about."

What stands out in her novels, stories, and memoirs is her ability to capture a sense of place and to portray her characters in a realistic yet compassionate manner. Throughout her writing life, she was respected for her command of the writing craft. Place is vitally important to Welty. She believed that place is what makes fiction seem real, because with place come customs, feelings, and associations. Place answers the questions, "What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?" Place is a prompt to memory; thus the human mind is what makes place significant. This is the job of the storyteller. "A Worn Path" is one short story that proves how place shapes how a story is perceived.

She grew up in a close-knit, contented family in Jackson, Mississippi. Her parents instilled a love of education, curiosity, and reading to her and to her brothers, with whom she was close. A private person, not a lot is known about her personal life. Though she traveled widely, she always returned to Jackson, Mississippi, and spent her later years living in the home that had belonged to her family.

Memory is a common motif for southern literature. Eudora Welty's novel *The Optimist's Daughter* is no exception to this generalization as it strongly entails both aspects of memory – remembrance and forgetfulness. The stark dichotomy of memory can be looked at as both a blessing and a burden. Characters throughout this novel and so many other pieces of southern literature struggle with the past which they wish to keep, but cannot fully, and a past from which they want to escape, but cannot fully. Memory, in its purest form, can best be described as a creature's mental capability to accumulate, hold on to, and retrieve information.

Although the novel's over action centers around the death of Judge McKelva following eye surgery in New Orleans, and his funeral and burial at home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, its meaning are realized through conflicting notions in the mind of Laurel McKelva Hand, daughter of Judge Clinton McKelva and Becky McKelva. Welty's several themes are death, human relationship, and the effects of memory on the past, but through the use of image, symbol, ritual, and parable she weaves them together into thematic whole. Death, Welty says, plunges the dead into the past by snapping the present shut, and what becomes important then is what living memory does with the past. Laurel must now ponder the nature of her parent's love; she must reconsider the brief perfection of the love she and Philip Hand, her husband (who died in the World War II) had shared; and she must recognize that it is not the dead but the living who, in their loneliness and uncertainty are in danger.

When Fay decides to stay with her family for few days after the funeral, Laurel has the opportunity to spend time alone in the house before Fay takes full possession of it. In her privacy and silence, Laurel begins to grieve more seriously than she did while in public at the funeral. There are objects in the house, such as the clock, books, letters, and her father's desk, that bring memories that are intimately attached to one or both of her parents. She becomes sad because the clock has stopped, and she knows this for a fact because nobody has wound it since her father last fixed it.

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 household activities such as gardening. Her mother was an avid gardener, and her father tended to 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 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 flower. In the house, Laurel finds herself so deeply touched 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.'"

Later, in a moment of remembering the pain she felt when she lost her husband in World War II, Laurel hears his voice grieving for their lost future together.

There is no place besides her own home that Laurel can experience such personal revelations and be given the opportunity to confront her pain from the past and make peace with it. The bond that she has with her home is so deep that she can overcome many obstacles and emotional problems in time. Only at home is she truly able to bare her heart and hear what she needs to hear to heal herself. However, to ultimately make peace with her past and her present, she must become "one" with the significance of the house so she can take it with her whenever she goes. Incredibly, Laurel is able to do so.

Fay is originally from Madrid, Texas, which is a small, low-income town. Although Welty never takes the reader to Madrid, the remarks and personalities of the Fay's family offer some idea as to what kind of place it is. It seems to lack all charm and warmth of Laurel's hometown of Mount Salus, yet for Fay it is nonetheless her 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 acts the same way when she is in the comfort of her own hometown, or if she acts the same way.

Nevertheless, in Fay's new community of Mount Salus, she is disrespectful, self-absorbed, and rowdy. Fay does not appreciate the home and the possessions of her late husband than she does his family and friends. In fact, she never makes an effort to understand Laurel's grief or her need to be in the house for few days. Fay's insistence on returning with her family for a visit after the funeral could possibly reveal that Madrid is the only place in which Fay feels secure.

Fay is anxious to go back with them, insisting that she needs to be among people who "speak her language." In other words, Fay, much like Laurel, needs to go where she feels understood either by others or by herself. In Mount Salus, Fay feels displaced, and her insecurity takes on many ugly forms, such as her tendency to disrespect Becky's memory and to deny her own family back in Madrid. Laurel imagines, "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 behaviour is an apparent sign of her need to feel at home. Fay tries too hard to appear as though she believes that Judge Mckelva's home is truly her own, but she never convinces anyone, including herself. At the time Eudora Welty wrote this story, she was grieving the loss of her mother. In fact, the reader can see that the book is dedicated to C.A.W., which reveals that this work is clearly connected to 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 elements pay respect to Welty's happy childhood the loving marriage her parents enjoyed. Through Laurel, Welty honors her mother and also works through some of pain and the issues surrounding the death of a loving parent.

Laurel's personal journey to make peace with her past in order to make sense of her future certainly mirror the author's own struggles.

Welty differs from Laurel in the sense that Laurel lives far from her hometown, while Welty lived in Mississippi, where she was born, until her death. For Laurel, however, the climax of her journey comes from the house. In the absence of a house that holds all of her childhood memories, Welty wrote this book. Welty 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 comfort in a difficult time during the course of *The Optimist's daughter*. In very difficult times, confronted 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. Laurel is ultimately able to take a piece of that firelight and warmth with her back to Chicago, because she has finally succeeded in making her heart and her home one.

The McKelva house represented all of Laurel's fears. She had to face all of her deepest horrors when she finally said good-bye to her father. In the house she discovered several items that contained emotional memories for her and she was forced to face them all. The house is a symbol of all of Laurel's conflicts that she faced before and after her father's death.

## Conclusion

The most fascinating thing about the book is how Welty weaves so many busy characters around Laurel, who seems to be a solid rock in a swirling atmosphere, giving little away of her own personality and emotions. Laurel, the stoic, puts aside her emotions until it is convenient and useful for her to confront them - that is, after her father's death and subsequent services. She mirrors her father's actions at the end of his life: she is steady, calm, unmoving even. She lets show very little of her true feelings.

Fay, Laurel's foil, throws herself into grieving, ensuring that all around her know how forlorn and depressed she is at the death of her new husband. Laurel seems content to allow Fay anything she pleases, handing over her childhood home and all the furniture and items contained inside it without any fight – or any desire to fight. Fay, on the other hand, thrives on drama. She tries to goad Laurel into taking action against her, but is surprised and frustrated when she meets no resistance.

Welty's story explores Laurel's inaction, which leads to her emotional growth. Even at the climax, as Laurel becomes angry at how scarred her mother's old breadboard is from Fay's misuse and raises it to strike Fay, she ultimately decides that her action, even the breadboard itself, is meaningless. That this woman who has infiltrated her life is unimportant, just like their house, her mother's saved letters the myriad tragedies their family has experienced. What she recognizes as important is the human ability to heal, and that only unburdened of the past can we heal completely. "Memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams".

Thus in the end Laurel attains complete solace from the passing of her loved ones and keeping the memories in her heart moves ahead with a lot more strength and courage, ultimately achieving absolute closure.

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