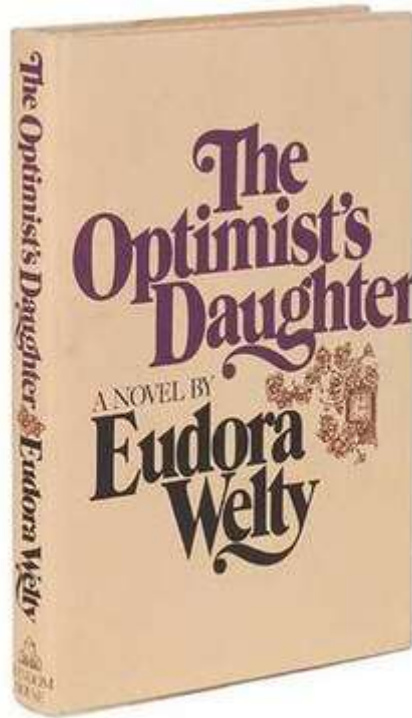


The Trope of Salvation in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*

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Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Optimist%27s_Daughter

Abstract

The *Optimist's Daughter* is a novel which Welty completed while working on *Losing Battles*. This novel extends and deepens the level examination of death through its focus on the changes experienced by the main character, Laurel Hard. This might be medieval in its fullness of vision, depth of field range of car. The protagonist of *The Optimist's Daughter* is a young girl grown to maturity, and in the end her frame of vision can take if not only things but the infinitely extended shadows of things, she often concerns herself profoundly with vision itself." *The optimist's Daughter* may well be the most personal of Eudora Welty's works, but she has kept her eye precisely on the subject. There is not slightest hint of self-glorification. By being reticent about her feeling she allows the reader's mind to respond fully to the subject.

Keywords: Eudora Welty, *Optimist's Daughter*, love, hate, salvation, tragic, cosmic manipulation, death, memory

A Lyrical Masterpiece

The *Optimist's Daughter* is a lyrical masterpiece. Like the ancient lyric poet story teller Eudora Welty has woven a multi-layered fabric of words - words concerned with the simplest, but most important words that we know - life death love and memory. In doing so she has enriched our language and given us in *The Optimist's Daughter* one of the true glories of modern literature.

Judge Mckelva

In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Judge Mckelva has come to New Orleans from his home in Mount Saius Mississippi. He has come to consult a well-known eye specialist originally a neighbour whom he had be-friended and helped through medical school to have his eyes examined. It is early March, the time of Mardi Gras. Judge Mckelva is accompanied by his silly second wife, Fay, whom he had meet when she was a member of the typist's pool at a Bar convention. His daughter Laurel Mckelva Hand, a widow in her middle forties is slightly older than Fay. Laurel, whose husband had been killed by Kamikaze pilots in World War II, has come from Chicago, where she makes her living as a designer of fabrics. Judge Mckelva trouble is diagnosed immediately as a detached retina, and he is operated at once. The two want to watch over him during the succeeding days in the dark hospital room. Just as his eye is about to heal, the Judge suddenly dies. His death brought on by Fay, who in exasperation shakes him and tries to get him up. The two women accompany the body back to Mount Saius, where it is laid in the family library to be viewed by the townspeople, and by members of Fay's family, who have driven over from Texas. Judge Mckelva is buried not in the old section of the town cemetery next to his first wife, but in the new section near the interstate in a plot chosen for Fay. While Fay departs with her family for a few days, Laurel, alone in the house, struggles to come to terms with the deaths of her parents and of her husband.

Opens in Modern Hospital

The narrative opens in the unnatural and antiseptic world of the modern hospital.

A nurse held the door open for them Judge Mckelva going first, then his daughter Laurel, then his wife Fay, they walked into the windowless room where the doctor would make his examination. (2)

In the above passage, Judge, Laurel and Fay Mckelva follow one another into a darkened landscape that is where they remain through most of the narrative what vision is possible within this landscape is sporadic and arresting; objects are seen as with "the excruciatingly small, brilliant eye of the instrument" (13) with which Dr. Courtland examines Judge Mckelva's sight.

Conflicting Emotions

Although the novels overt 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 meanings are realised through conflicting emotions in the mind of Laurel Mckelva Hand, daughter of Judge Mckelva and Becky Mckelva, Welty's several themes are death, human relationship, and the effect of memory on the past, but through the image, symbol, ritual and parable she weaves them together into one thematic whole.

Oedipus and *The Optimist's Daughter* - Juxtaposition of Blindness and Insight

The journey of *The Optimist's Daughter* is constructed in the same manner of Oedipus, The juxtaposition of blindness and insight echoes the Oedipal myth. In the myth, Tiresias, the blind prophet summoned by Oedipus to tell him his fate {that Oedipus is the murderer he seeks), and Oedipus himself (who act of self-blinding serves as a judgement on his lack of insight as well as an index of the level of self-knowledge he has attained) are both made wise in their blindness. The

journey towards blindness and/or insight, moves both backward and forward in time, That is, Oedipus moves forward to a fate assigned to him in the past. He begins his journey in disbelief and completes. It in a literal blindness born of insight, Laurels journey into her 'past* and the 'past' of her parents both leads her to an understanding of her father's relationship with his mother and to the resurrection of her dead husband Phil.

Now by her own hands, the past had been raised up and he looked at her, Phil himself here waiting all the time, Lazarus (181)

Laurel's Mother

Laurel's discovery of her mother's breadboard is a more precise example, for the moment of recovery. The moment when her searching hands locate the breadboard Phil had made for her mother dovetails past and future in the form of Judge Mckelva's wife Fay. "The cyclic journey that reaches both back and forward is symbolic of what Mircea Eliode would call 'meaningful repetition.' For Judge Mckelva as for Clement Musgrove in *The Robber Bridegroom* the journey forward is the mirror image of the journey back.

Judge Mckelva, like Clement Musgrove, has married twice, once "happily" (this marriage has produced a daughter) and once "unhappily" (Clement second wife Salome is the ideal "wicked" stepmother of the fairy tale) "while Judge Mckelva's Wanda Fay carries the fairy tale tradition in her name Wand a dead stick, Fay a spirit from underground".

Two Wives

Judge Mckelva like Clement is the center that holds antithetical poles (his two wives) in equilibrium. His position is demonstrated at the funeral, by attendants who "slowly moved in place as if they made up the rim of a wheel that slowly turned itself around the hub of the coffin and would bring them around again" (79). The primary objection of Laurel to Fay's marriage with her father is significant for Fay has invaded the family circle and thus disturbed the "zone of absolute reality;" you desecrated this house" (200). Early in the narrative identified as a designer she has been trained to look for patterns the hovel is Laurel's attempt to see a pattern in apparent chaos Laurel's completion of the journey, her ability to see a pattern, insures the novels comic resolution. For, as Reynolds price puts it in "The Onlooker, smiling, an Early reading of *The Optimist's Daughter*, all patterns are comic ... because the universe is patterned therefore ordered and ruled therefore incapable of ultimate tragedy."

Journey toward Knowledge

The journey of *The Optimist Daughter* leads a journey towards knowledge. Laurel, like Oedipus must come in terms with parental ghosts to complete her journey. Throughout the novel, Laurel's mother Becky recurs to counterpoint the judge's wife Fay.

Becky's ghost is evoked most completely, by the secretary 'made of the cherry trees on the Mckelva place a long time ago" (159). The secretary housing 26 compartments in which "her mother had stored thing according to their time and place" (160) is hot only the fountain through which Becky is brought into the present but got the vehicle that takes Laurel into the past.

Regional and Classical Myths

In *The Optimist's Daughter* the labyrinth partakes of regional as well as classical myth. Blindness keeps Becky away from her West Virginia mountains long after fire has destroyed her reason to go because "up home" is a symbolic location ... a place blindness and illness have kept her room.

Instead of returning home, Becky dies believing that "she had been taken some where was neither home nor up home that she was left among strangers, she had died without speaking a word keeping everything to herself in exile and humiliation" (179). Laurel's marriage like her mother's youth has been sealed within region. For both Becky and his daughter region lends significance to event.

Symbolic Geography

Sections of Mississippi, Texas and Virginia are as symbolic as Becky's West Virginia mountains, form regional indexes of character. In his "The Onlooker Smiling, An Early Reading of *The Optimist's Daughter*," Reynolds Price explains the significance of location in terms of class "Virginians are finer than Mississippians are finer than Texans." Judge Mckelva who "like his father has attended the University of Virginia" (p.162) is one of the social and political leaders of the Mount Salus community. His appropriate mate is Becky, for even though she is from West Virginia her parents both Virginians and her father is a lawyer. The next highest level of regional significance, the level exactly below the Virginians in terms of status is the Mount Salus community itself. It is on this level that Dr. Oourtlund himself, a native of Mississippi addresses Laurel in New Orleans the night of her father's death ... "Laurel, there's nobody from home with you, would you care to put up with us for the rest of night?" (53).

After her father's death, Laurel's family, her "people" are the members of the community in which she was raised. It is because her Mount Salus friend are communal "kin" that Laurel is reprimanded by her mother's friends for the double betrayal of leaving her father and marrying a Northerner:

Laurel is who should have saved him from that nonsense Laurel shouldn't have married a naval officer in war time Laurel should have stayed home after Beckey died, (136)

It is. because Laurel is a Mississippian that she is discouraged from returning to Chicago.

Once you leave after this, you'll always come back as a visitor". Mrs Pease warned Laure! 'Feel free, of course ... but it was always my opinion that people don't really want visitors' (133)

Among other regions Mrs Pease and the chorus of Becky's friends want Laurel to "stay put" ho she can protect the judge's house from Wanda Fay Mckelva. Though she is lowest in the novels social hierarchy, Fay is proud of her region and refuses to be mistaken for a Mississippian.

"I'm not from Mississippi, I'm from Texas," she let out a long cry, (18)

Described by Guy Devenport as one of the "repacious weak witted pathologically selfish daughters of the dispossessed" Fay is reduced to and explained away by her origins."

Fay's pride in her origins is a comment on her character, a way of indexing her by region.

Fay

The myth surrounding Judge Mckelva's marriage to Becky is exposed to Laurel in the reality of her marriage to Fay, Fay is the mirror image of Becky. Throughout the novel, Fay's preoccupation is Fay herself. In this self-centred envelope Fay is a malicious version of Delta Wedding's Robbie Reid and Losing Battle's Gloria short. Like them Fay denies history.

Fay obliterates memory to sustain a myth of homelessness and pastlessness rather than holding the memory of home after it has been destroyed as does Becky Fay's spontaneously is mirrored by Becky's patience. Although Fay and Becky are intrinsically opposite, they are not rivals as Laurel comes to realise late in the novel.

It's not between the living and the dead, between the old wife and the new, it's between too much love and too little. There is no rivalry as bitter, Laurel had seen its work."
(178)

Therefore, Fay completes Becky by providing her counterpart. The rivalry between them exists within Judge Mckelva himself. With this understanding Laurel can accept the possibility of Fay's existence within her family.

As in Welty's other novels the circle is here symbolic of family unity and cohesion. Invited by Major Bullock, the Chisoms complete the family portrait begun in the hospital by the Dalzells. To Laurel, Dalzells and Chisoms both belong to the "great interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them." (103)

The Process of Mapping

As in *Losing Battles* the cohesive family here maintains and perpetuates itself through what R.D. Laing defines as a process of "mapping." As in Welty's other novels most notably *The Ponder Heart* and *Losing Battles* behavioural standards are here supplied by narrative point of view. According to Laurel Fay's flaw, and the flaw of the Chisoms as a family is falling to perceive significance. After a lengthy discussion the chorus of Becky, she decides that Fay's behaviour is neither better nor worse than that of her family. Throughout the discussion Laurel comments neither on Fay's behaviour nor on that of the communal family during Judge Mckelva's funeral. Her silence is important in accentuating Laurel's separateness and refusal not only to Judge Fay but also to judge her mother's friend. The narrative point of view is made Laurel's but only by implication.

The very difference of *The Optimist's Daughter* from Welty's other novels is its silence, the fact that Laurel finally does not 'tell it even though she knows that 'to be released is to tell, unburden it.' (157).

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