Eudora Welty is an American short story writer, novelist, essayist, and memoirist. She is often designated as one of the most notable Southern regionalists. As a Southern writer of the new fiction Welty is, in a way, independent of literary fashion and stands at the head of the Southern Gothic stream of the new fiction in the forties. Her work is a summation of all that it represents and a major contribution to American literature of the twentieth century. The chapter begins with a note on Welty’s life and works and her place in Southern literature, followed by a discussion of the theme of past and memory in two of her novels, *The Robber Bridegroom* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*.

Welty made a very respectable contribution toward an *oeuvre*, publishing five volumes of fiction between 1941 and 1949. Furthermore, she has been the pioneer in the new fiction. The history of literature in the forties shows that she, above all writers of fiction, made the sharpest break with the prevailing modes in fiction and made it before any other writer. Chester E. Eisinger comments that for instance, “writers like Robert Penn Warren and Walter Van Tilberg Clark wrote as transitional figures at the beginning of their fictional careers, unable to free themselves in the forties of some attitudes they had from the thirties, attitudes which, to be sure, they would sharply modify or drop in time. Welty, however, broke clean, hardly seemed to be aware of the literary issues of the thirties, struck out on her original line, and initiated thereby a new school of fiction” (1965: 259).
Welty lived all of her life in Jackson, Mississippi, and nearly all of her fiction is set in the American South. In an essay entitled “Place in Fiction”, Welty contends that grounding works of fiction firmly in a particular location aids the achievement of universality; she claims “feelings are bound up in place” (1956: 9). Critics agree that her restriction of setting has aided Welty in writing fiction that is universal in its relevance and appeal since good literature is occupied chiefly with elementary passions and emotions – love and hate, joy and sorrow, fear and faith, which are an essential part of our human nature (Universality in Literature). Welty’s fiction is further broadened by her versatility; she writes of the historical South as well as the contemporary; of the Southern aristocracy and the common people in comic as well as serious tones. Her style at times is very straightforward, at other times so lyrical that it is almost impressionistic. To her credit Welty has five novels *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), *Delta Wedding* (1946), *The Ponder Heart* (1954), *Losing Battles* (1970) and *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1972), and short stories like *The Wide Net* (1943), *The Bride of Innisfallen* (1955) and *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941).

Comparisons of Welty with other writers in the Southern United States have been fairly frequent. In choice of subject, of course, she resembles all those who have written accurately about Mississippi. She also has demonstrable affinities with those modern authors who have written of other states in the Deep South. Being a Southern woman, she is also often compared with Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor. Like McCullers, she constantly probes the problem of identity or separateness which leads to isolation, while at the same time she forces upon her characters
recognition of the demands of love which can be fulfilled only through communication. In the opinion of Chester E. Eisinger “like McCullers, she shares with the Southern neo-conservatives but there is a difference. A defined social scheme, though present in her work, is not at the center of her concern as an artist. Welty is primarily concerned with the mystery of personality” (1965: 259).

But unlike most Southern writers of modern times, including William Faulkner, Welty stayed clear of the main topics of the time. She shows less interest in cataclysms that affect nations than in the private experience of living — the way a person greets a new day, or walks in a garden, or reacts to the face one meets on the street. In this large perspective, the social problems of her region are not important at all. Like Jane Austen, whom she admires, Welty has little interest in history or social themes, and concentrates on ordinary people of her country who go about the business of loving and hating and talking about their neighbors as if there was nothing more important in the world. But, according to Elmo Howell, “within this close range, she scrutinizes her subject and registers its vibrations with a tenderness of attention that places her closer to the heartbeat of her region than Faulkner himself” (1979: 775).

Again critics stress that if there is such a thing as a “Southern School of Writing”, Welty has remained independent of it. Welty’s master is always fiction itself, never Mississippi. She had, as she herself confessed, a visual imagination and a penchant for seeing things in their connectedness; and the simultaneous unraveling and compounding of the networks. She finds that life about her produces those complex pieces that more often than not seem to have grown like
crystals from simple sketches into the strange new entities that are her stories. As for structure, that has been present in Welty’s fiction from the beginning.

The world she creates in her fiction is unmistakably hers, and also irresistibly the world itself. One approaches Welty’s fiction with humility and imagination, which needs order to “survive.” In Welty’s fiction the reader must not expect or depend upon the infallible key, for meanings shift and “doubleness” abounds in all things. The hero, the writer, and the reader, each is expected to try to “come to terms” with a protean existence that flows and metamorphoses before the eye a thousand times between reach and touch.

Critics often note Welty’s capacity to delight the reader through her ability to capture the colorful patterns of Southern speech and through her imaginative evocations of Southern life. According to a set of lectures on “how she became a writer,” published as “One Writer’s Beginnings” (1984), Welty said that she had been a voracious reader and an avid listener since early childhood and her ear for dialect and her sense of the ridiculous had enabled her to create such memorable characters as Edna Earl Ponder, the garrulous hotel manager who narrates The Ponder Heart, and Sister, the young woman whose family does not understand her in the story, ‘Why I Live at the P.O.’ (1941).

The South works as a location for Welty’s stories and novels for several reasons. Southern speech is a rich resource for a writer like Welty who is attuned to colloquialism, dialect, and local color. Further, the South has a tradition of oral history and folklore; Welty has described these attributes of her home as “a treasure I helped myself to” (1985: 413).
An emphasis on family, as one of several essential defining features among Southerners, is consistently evident in the literature produced by authors whose origins lie in the American South. One of Welty’s favorite subjects is family life, the continuity of which is particularly strong in the South. Several of her novels focus on family and community ceremonies and rituals, such as weddings, reunions and funerals. Like her Southern colleagues, Welty repeatedly explored in her writing the nature of the family; its origins, structures, growth, influence, enmities, affections and complexities.

Welty has been warmly accepted by critics from the time of her discovery and promotion in the late 1930s by magazine editors John Road of Manuscript and Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren of The Southern Review. Welty’s literary career began formally in June of 1936 with the publication of ‘Death of a Traveling Salesman’ in a little magazine called Manuscript. Katherine Anne Porter, who praised Welty’s extraordinary range of mood, pace, tone, and variety of material, graced her first collection of stories, A Curtain of Green and Other Stories with an introduction. Maureen Howard, who wrote a review of The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty (1980), applauded the same quality after forty years: “her range is remarkable, her way of telling us that stories are as different as human faces, that beyond the common features of plot and narrative, there are discoveries to be made each time” (1980). A Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and numerous O.Henry Awards for her short stories, acknowledged Welty’s literary achievements. Her third novel The Ponder Heart (1954), was awarded the Howell’s Medal for Fiction by The American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her
appointment as Honorary Consultant of the Library of Congress and several honorary degrees show her greatness. During her writing life she held extended residences at a number of universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. (She was the first woman to enter Peterhouse College).

From the beginning Welty had displayed an extraordinary talent for the short story. Critics feel that while the short story was clearly her natural medium, it was also a medium in which she had achieved a too early and too effortless mastery, so that in that degree it had become her prison. Her very ease and security within it was such that she seemed to have little inclination to go beyond it, or to extend her imaginative range. They have observed that Welty has suddenly and mysteriously become surprising in her novels. She has radically altered the direction of her work, enlarged the range of her interest, and began to address herself vigorously to the use of varied kinds of experience which in the past she appears to have avoided.

In the South that Welty knows, story telling is a part of everyday life and its subjects arise from the life of the community. Story telling is not, however, mere imitation of life. Indeed, its major attraction might be the divergence of the story from everyday life. Oral or written, story telling appeals to and draws on the imagination of the people. Welty’s fiction combines a realist’s sensitivity to everyday life, a story teller’s imagination and pleasure in entertaining and a story lover’s familiarity with many traditions of oral and written narrative. Her prose style has frequently been described as puzzling, imprecise, dreamy, allusive and remote. The oral nature of Welty’s style is demonstrated by syntax as well as by
specific word choice. The mystery and novelty of Welty’s early stories need not be products of a modern, sophisticated, highly symbolic and allusive literary style; more likely they belong to the ancient art of story telling. In the words of Carol S. Manning, “her art consists of the mystery of allurement and the story teller’s enticement to the reader” (1985: 12).

There is a view that Welty belongs to no school and is attached to no tradition, a view Vande Kieft expressed many years ago. However, on one occasion Welty told Linda Kuehl that she feels close to Chekhov and that Virginia Woolf “opened the door for her” (1972: 75). Those two writers begin to define the tradition to which Welty belongs. Her work reflects the careful disorder of Chekhovian fiction and the accurate yet spontaneous rendering of detail that belonged to his slice of life technique. Welty clearly owes something to fellow Mississippian William Faulkner, and to the oral tradition of the South. She has a terrific ear, reproducing cadences of dialect and giving much insight into her characters by allowing her readers to hear them talk. Welty’s work also owes something to the grotesque as developed in the American South. Since Welty has not been grouped with writers critical of the South, her work has not been read much differently over the years. She has been criticized for not attacking the South; that has never been her interest or her aim.

Welty’s fiction has such major themes like the problem of balancing love and separateness (the community and one’s sense of self), the role and influence of family and the land (“place”), and the possibilities of art (story-telling) to inform
life. Welty is also very concerned with resonance of classical mythology, legend, and folk tale, and with the intersection of history and romance.

A private woman, Welty was reluctant to reveal details of her personal life, especially as critics and would-be biographers wanted to turn those incidents into Freudian justifications for her work. And there have been speculations about Welty’s sexuality and her lack of it, her insistence on uplifting socio-economic issues, her genteel Southern upbringing; there have been suspicions about her use of the fairy tale as a literary vehicle. There have been conferences that equate Welty’s writing with feminist upheaval, modernism, and anti-modernism, the political experience of the South, and even the symbolism and international implications of Welty’s use of Southern vegetation. Some scholars of Welty’s work have begun to challenge the established view of her as a modest and politically simple writer.

If a group of writers have produced a group of works within a certain span of time, these works should bear certain marks of similarity. The place is one of these; and with it is the special disposition to the past, to tradition, and to a special set of events in history. Welty in her novels represents place, especially Mississippi, its history and traditions.

Welty has distinguished between two styles in her writing, which she labels “inside stories.” The inside stories are introspective and the thoughts and emotions of her characters are clearly delineated. Modeled after the writings of Chekhov, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, Welty’s inside stories include the novels Delta Wedding (1946) and The Optimist’s Daughter (1972) and many other short
stories. A sense of mystery pervades many of her inside stories and their tone is quiet and reflective. Outside stories are those in which the reader has no access to the characters’ thoughts. Characterization is achieved through dialogue, storytelling and action. Like the works of Mark Twain and Ring Lardner, Welty’s outside stories, including *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), *The Ponder Heart* (1954), and *Losing Battles* (1970), are often humorous and light, although not without serious themes. While these categories are exclusive, they do reflect Welty’s deliberate exploration of different narrative techniques.

The technique that Welty employs to create a “Still Moment” in fiction is in the tradition of Flaubert, Bergson, Proust, Joyce and Faulkner; but the use to which Welty directs those techniques is individual. According to Welty, the inside kind of story is one where the outside world is given. She said, “I’ll always come back to [the inside kind of story] – for the interior world is endlessly new, mysterious, and alluring” (1955: 18). In Welty’s exploration of the inner world, clear distinctions between fact and fantasy dissolve; the impression that evolves is that of the dream, a moment out of time in which past, present and future are intermingled and freed from the logical sequence of rational perception. Welty’s use of fantasy is as varied as her use of mythic allusion. *The Robber Bridegroom* is her most ambitious attempt to sustain the timeless quality of the dream. Shortly before its publication she revealed that it was an amalgamation of historical fact, fantasy, and fairy tale.

In the practice of fiction, in the exercise of her imagination, Welty, as one would expect of a Southern regionalist, lives in close proximity to the past. Like
other Southern writers, her constant effort is to repossess the past. She wishes it to be meaningful for the contemporary experiences of her characters. She uses it to help them account for themselves and to help us account for them. It is the past of the South that interests her most, the past, perhaps, of the Natchez Trace country, but her treatment is not confined to history in any ordinary sense. One is more aware of the bright color of myth and legend in her treatment of the past than of the presence of drab fact. She is herself, in fact, as one of her critics has suggested, a legend maker; and when she gets beyond the confines of the South, she is quite willing to enter the realm of world myth. Her utilization of myth, another dimension of her preoccupation with the past, arises from a conviction that mythic patterns are deeply ingrained in the human consciousness and possess therefore a perennial relevance.

In the practice of fiction, further, Welty has worked out various techniques. Chester E. Eisinger says that “one method that accommodates her liking for reticence and indirection is the technique of simultaneity by which she seems to split time into parts, which she makes to co-exist. By virtue of this device she often gives us a report from more than one consciousness about the same event at the same time” (1965: 262). But it is seen, of course, from different points of view. As a consequence, Welty is able to introduce into her stories various versions of reality, the various and different versions entertained by different characters. Another practice that contributes to her subtlety is to see reality as public or private, one kind set against the other; reality taking on in these cases two faces. And finally Welty believes in what may be called the doctrine of moment. A photograph, she said, imprisons a moment in time and by so doing steals, in a
sense, its soul or spirit. Such theft is the purpose of nearly everything we do: “certainly in the arts, painting and writing we steal spirits and souls if we can” (quoted in Chester E. Eisinger 1965:262). What this doctrine demands of her is a search for the significant moment of realized human experience which, once found, yields up its rich meaning.

Here and there in Welty’s fiction one finds characters, created out of her own resources, which may stand as minor deities in the pantheon of her imagination. They take shapes as river gods or field gods, like the young man in ‘At the Landing’, The Wide Net and Other Stories or the overseer in Delta Wedding. They are kin to the creatures of ancient myth or kissing cousins to the men and women of legend and folk tale indigenous to the American frontier. They testify to the myth-making impulse in Welty. And they reinforce her attachment to the past.

The next two sections discuss two of Welty’s novels The Robber Bridegroom and The Optimist’s Daughter and her use of the elements of history, family, place, past and memory in detail.
THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM

Eudora Welty’s first novel, *The Robber Bridegroom,* is one of her richest and most complex in terms of the variety of themes it explores. The style is elemental, almost childlike, as she combines a number of fairy tales from the Grimm brothers with Southern folk humor and legend.

Welty gives all that Grimm gives and considerably more. Grimm tells how a young maiden was bestowed by her father unknowingly upon a murderous bandit and how she eventually succeeded in capturing that bandit by her courage and her wits. This is clearly the basic plot of the novel; but Welty has fattened it on the fruit of the Natchez Trace and allowed it to mature in the light of her own sophisticated reflection, and she does not expect to take much of it simply at face value. *The Robber Bridegroom* as a fairy tale set on the Natchez Trace, spins the story of a highwayman, Jamie Lockhart, who masquerades part-time as a gentleman. He kidnaps a planter’s daughter, and she falls in love with the thief, whom her father knows only as a gentleman.

Clement Musgrove, the planter, is the father of the girl Rosamond, born to his first wife Amalie. He is a man who lost his youth with the death of his first wife and now spins out his days perfunctorily with Salome, his second wife.

*Eudora Welty, The Robber Bridegroom.* New York: Doubleday, Doran. 1942. All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition.
a shrew who ill-treats the girl. Only in the presence of Rosamond, who preserves the image of her youthful mother, does he find happiness. He meets Jamie Lockhart at an inn and learns of his heroic qualities in an encounter the two have with Mike Fink; thereafter his dream is to find happiness for the young man who would make a fine heir in a union with the lovely Rosamond. Jamie at first abducts Rosamond and sends her away. However, she finds him in the forest where he is leading a bandit’s life with Mike Fink, Little Harp and the Harpe brothers. Thinking of first killing Rosamond, he is reformed by her devotion to him and marries her. He loves her in his own way, but he is with her in disguise only at night while during the day, he is a bandit.

In addition to the general shape of Grimm’s story, suggestions and reminiscences of a number of other tales are discoverable there, among them “The Little Goose Girl,” “Little Snow White,” “The Fisherman and His Wife”, “The Beauty and the Beast”, Charles Perrault’s “Cinderella”, and the Hellenic myth of Cupid and Psyche. Moreover, a great deal of American folklore and near-folklore gets worked into the narrative: the stories of Davy Crockett and Mike Fink and the atrocities of Big Harpe and Little Hart and tall tales about Indians, Frontiersmen and bandits of the Natchez Trace.

The tale has plenty of indigenous horrors taken from the history of the Trace — wild creatures and men of various states of savagery — but Welty cut her teeth on Grimm’s Fairy Tales, so it should come as no surprise that she injects some of Grimm’s gothic horror into the tale as well. Much of its charm lies in its fairy tale elements as Welty has domesticated them in early nineteenth-century
Natchez Trace country. In the novel Clement Musgrove is the weak father whose second wife, Salome, is the wicked stepmother to beautiful Rosamond. Salome forces Rosamond to appear to Jamie Lockhart as a kitchen slattern. Jamie is the gentleman highwayman who destroys his enemies, reforms himself, marries Rosamond, and lives happily ever after with her, in prosperity. Here are the elements of the Hansel and Gretel story and intimations of the Cinderella motif. The story also has elements of magic; the talking head of Big Harpe, the talismanic locket Rosamond wears, the ever-full milk pail she carries when Jamie kidnaps her on horseback.

The kind of implausibility traditional to folktale is inherent in both the dialogue and action of the novel. Two examples will serve to illustrate her use of the folktale as a narrative technique. In the first, Rosamond is captured, sentenced to death, and reprieved by a cake. “Kill her!” they cried. And they were going to kill her, but she said, “Have some cake” so each one of them took a piece of cake, and she said she had baked it herself. The robbers began to argue about what to do with her then, but Jamie, who was their leader and was called nothing but “the Chief,” said, “That business can wait till later. First we must count up our booty and divide it, for that is the order of affairs” (TRB, 81). What is striking in this dialogue is the absence of any relation between the robbers’ initial decision to kill Rosamond and their amendment to save her. It is reminiscent of the folktale precisely in this disjunction. The reader must rely totally on the narrative as presented without speculating on questions of motive or rationale. The second example further illustrates this method of narration when, late in the tale, Rosamond informs that all Jamie’s “wild ways had been shed like a skin, and he
could not be kinder to her than he was” (TRB, 183). It is a statement of fact. No reason for Jamie’s gentlemanlike behavior is given, nor is the reader encouraged to speculate on his motives.

The story is something like the one assumed by a canny maiden aunt, whose diction, asides, and silly puns are all devices of a naturally gifted teller of tales who knows how to make children giggle, shiver, and sit still. Children in the South are familiar with such performances, and it is to be assumed that children elsewhere know something like them. Almost any passage will illustrate:

Now Rosamond was a great liar, and nobody could believe a word she said. But it took all the starch out of the stepmother, you can be sure, to send Rosamond out on a dangerous errand, hoping some ill might befall her, and then to have her come safely back with a tale of something even worse than she had wished upon her. As for Rosamond, she did not mean to tell anything but the truth, but when she opened her mouth in answer to a question, the lies would simply fall out like diamonds and pearls. Her father had tried scolding her, and threatening to send her away to the Female Academy, and then marching her off without her supper, but none of it had done any good, and so he let her alone. Now and then he remarked that if a man could be found anywhere in the world who could make her tell the truth, he would turn her over to him. Salome, on the other hand, said she should be given a dose of Dr. Peachtree (TRB, 38-39).

The type of delight in this sort of thing undoubtedly is nostalgic, but that pleasure would pale here if it did not serve as a doorway to something else.

In the words of Gordon E. Slethaug, “the elements of myth, legend, and folktale, have superficially encountered the theme of doubleness that becomes most explicit in what can be regarded as the presence of the past” (1973: 87). The ritual quest for the damsel in distress, the protective environment of the feudal manor and corresponding danger of the surrounding lands, the concern with honor
and “name” — all these echoes are presented in the novel. With the introduction of character into place, doubleness becomes a source of conflict and anguish. In Clement’s dream, the conflict is defined in terms of the past and the present. “In the dream, whenever I lie down, then it is the past. When I climb to my feet, then it is the present. And I keep up a struggle not to fail” (TRB, 29). The dream functions as a metaphor for Clement’s philosophy of duality. As Charles C. Clark has noted, “Clement accepts the connection between good and evil and realizes the fact that can bring about “a higher happiness than would have been possible without the evil” (1973: 631). Clement’s speech on duality late in the tale echoes this dream of past and present through an attitude toward fate that is not unlike the medieval concept of the wheel of fortune.

For all things are double, and this should keep us from taking liberties with the outside world. And acting too quickly to finish things off. All things are divided in half – night and day, the soul and body, and sorrow and joy and youth and age, and sometimes I wonder if even my own wife has not been the one person all the time, and I loved her beauty so well at the beginning that it is only now that the ugliness has struck through to beat me like a madness (TRB, 126).

Amalie is replaced at the top of the wheel by Salome, just as good is inevitably replaced by evil. As Clement knows, Jamie’s transformation follows the same pattern: his robber ways are replaced by his kindness at the end of the tale, just as evil must be supplanted by good to complete the circle. Past and present become a continuum in Welty’s tale; they form a cycle symbolic of eternal return.

In addition, Welty works into this novel much of the legend and lore of that time and place, partly by bringing into her story Mike Fink and Little Harpe. The historical accuracy of her material can be checked by a reading of Robert M.
Coates’s *The Outlaw Years* published, in 1930. The strength and appetites and
dress of Mike Fink are much the same in the Coates book and in the novel, down
to the red turkey feather Mike wears in his cap. The same is true of details in the
lives of the Harpe brothers, including the wrapping of a human head in blue clay.
Both books tell of using berry juice and bearskins as methods of disguise, of
evading American law on the Mississippi, of ornamenting petticoats in New
Orleans with gold lace at the bottom.

The analogues to the fairy tales lend charm to the novel, and the accuracy
of historical detail constitutes an act of harmless piety. These two related aspects of
the story are self-contained. But Welty reaches beyond them towards a meaningful
interpretation of the American past, and this leads her to confusion. Clement
Musgrove, for instance, is made into an Adamic man who figures forth the
impregnability of innocence. No harm comes to him, although he constantly falls
into the hands of evil forces: Mike Fink, who would rob and murder him; the
Indians, who would torture and kill him; Jamie Lockhart, who would rob him; his
wife Salome, who would rob him of his daughter and trouble his mind with her
greed for land and things. Successful in staving off the assaults these people make
upon him, he is nevertheless the unwilling victim of the westering impulses that
have traditionally gripped Americans. He is not ambitious or a seeker after
anything; he explains: “yet it seemed as if I was caught up by what came over the
others, and they were the same. There was a great tug at the whole world, to go
down over the edge, and one and all we were changed into pioneers, and our hearts
and our own lonely wills may have had nothing to do with it” (TRB, 20-21).
This impulse, unconsciously felt, draws Clement as Adam into the West as Paradise. It is a search for continued earthly happiness that he pursues. He is unsuccessful. Paradise is corrupted by his greedy, proud wife and by the coming of other men. The spoiling of Paradise, even by those who seek it, is a paradox attendant upon the fall of man. It is a drama enacted in the history of the American conquest of the West, a history that reveals, on the symbolic level, the tragedy in the end of innocence. According to Chester E. Eisinger, “unfortunately, Welty does not reconcile the corruption of Paradise, with her happy ending. She does not give us a deeply human Clement, matured through suffering and reconciled to the human lot” (1965: 274). She begins to grope toward the archetypal meanings of her fairy tale, but she draws back from its total meaning. She accepts its happy ending without accepting or recognizing its great cost.

Welty imposes upon this slight novel the burden of another serious problem – the question of identity. This question is related to themes seen in the short stories, particularly the idea of doubleness and the paradox of love and separateness. The question of Jamie’s identity, which arises because he disguises himself and because he is both a gentleman and a robber, is pervasive throughout the novel. Little Harpe comments, when Jamie’s face is half-stained, that Jamie wears his two faces together. Rosamond is happy as Jamie’s beloved, except that she does not know who he is because she has never seen his face. When she washes off the berry juice, at the instigation of her step mother, Jamie leaves her. The urge for separateness in Jamie overcomes, for the moment, the power of love. The urge to banish the ambiguity about his identity impels Jamie to kill Little Harpe. The establishment of his identity and his separateness does not bring him
the heart’s ease he anticipated. Jamie yearns for Rosamond, who he thinks is dead. When she appears, as he is about to take ship for Zanzibar, they fall into each other’s arms. The fully realized consequences of this self-conscious separateness entangled with the power of love are the end of innocence as the plot turns tragic and dark, full of struggle.

Welty’s description of *The Robber Bridegroom* to the members of the Mississippi Historical Society outlined her purposes concerning the doubleness of that story. It was her firm intention, she said, to bind together “local history and the legend and the fairy tale into working equivalents,” and though it is not a “historical novel,” the figures born of fairy tale and legend incorporate the spirit of time and place. According to Trouard Dawn, “the line between history and fairy tale is not always clear, as *The Robber Bridegroom* along the way points out” (1989: 309). Welty’s description of *The Robber Bridegroom* to the members of the Mississippi Historical Society outlined her purposes concerning the doubleness of that story. It was her firm intention, she said, to bind together “local history and the legend and the fairy tale into working equivalents,” and though it is not a “historical novel,” the figures born of fairy tale and legend incorporate the spirit of time and place. Jamie Lockhart, with his two faces, is pulled between dream and reality, between “two” Rosamonds, between desire and duty. His night and day identities stay fluid until the transforming love of Rosamond settles his identity for him. His change from robber/woodsman to townsman/merchant is simultaneously the truth of fairy tale, the truth of growing up, and a truth about the sort of virtue needed for success in America.
It is Clement who sets free the most mysterious narrative truths about
doubleness in the novel. As the novel’s seer, Clement knows evil for what it is and
fears it; he-withholds judgment, however, hoping for the best but not expecting it.
He is not concerned with his own identity as Jamie and Rosamond are, but
wonders about “the identity of a man,” the time and place, what we are in the
universe (TRB, 141). As for himself, Clement knows he has been shaped by
chance and circumstance. Past and present have a sameness for him, and
experience has shown him that good and evil are not separate, nor ugliness and
beauty. The doubleness of all things, the inextricable blend of the pathos and the
absurdity of life, allows man to see and comprehend very little either of himself or
of the world. Neither Jamie Lockhart nor Mike Fink can effectively establish and
maintain a single identity; Clement Musgrove is confounded by events that occur,
apparently without his volition in his own life; Rosamond Musgrove is forced to
fantasize because the reality of her existence with her stepmother is intolerable; all
the characters are helpless before the forces of time and change. As the detached
narrator of these events, Welty suggests through the entanglements of the personal
lives of her characters the monumental task that confronts the twentieth century
mind that attempts to piece together and interpret the general history of a region.

Some of the reviews by Marianne Hauser, Lionel Trilling and Alfred Kazin
suggest that The Robber Bridegroom has from the outset left readers with two
basic impressions: the amusement of a fairy tale retold with irony and the
seriousness of an examination of the theme of disenchantment in the pursuit of a
Welty chose a real place for her “fairy tale”; this choice infuses the novel with
its undercurrent of irony and deliberate seriousness in which the Indians and Clement move. The real place Welty chose for the setting of *The Robber Bridegroom* is Rodney, Mississippi, which teems with this unseen life. Rodney began its history as a thriving town on the Mississippi River. Delta cotton went to market through this port, and Clement Musgrove’s crop goes to New Orleans through Rodney. He and his money return through the town to begin the story. Sometime after the War Between the States, however, the river changed course and left Rodney a ghost town. The doom which occurred in history hovers in the future of the Rodney of the novel, shading the hijinks with a sentence of death.

Since place plays a significant role in Southern literature and discussion of place includes its history, both time and place may conceivably play a role in identifying the literature. The place in which *The Robber Bridegroom* happens is both real and imaginary—the timeless land of fairy tale, and the changing world of historical and geographical event. Rodney is a ghost, symbolically cut adrift in time when the river went away and left it. Time and events make ghosts of the Indians and the town, and these are forces neither the Indians nor the conquering white pioneers can control or foresee. Although the tale takes place in the abeyance of time, by choosing Rodney and the Natchez Indians, Welty underscores our knowledge that, no matter what possibilities of wealth and empire the future may seem to offer, human time is finite; nothing man builds or accumulates is permanent against time.

The Indians enjoy an organic union with the place, appearing and dissolving in the surrounding forest, to the eyes of the pioneers, as if Indian nature
were not restricted to merely “human,” but partook of the animal and the vegetable as well. White men never spy the Indians first, but only after the Indians have chosen to be seen, when escape from a “reckoning” is impossible. Musgrove’s memory of his first captivity by the Indians expresses the pioneer astonishment at the Indian’s mysterious oneness with the surrounding wilderness: “They showed their pleasure and their lack of surprise well enough, when we climbed and crept up to them as they waited on all fours, disguised in their bearskins and looking as fat as they could look, out from the head of the bluff” (TRB, 21-22). The cunning art of disguise links the Indians intimately with their natural place. And the lack of it in the pioneers accentuates their estrangement from nature.

Clement remembers the Indians as both gay and cruel, like the Natchez. With “scorn” the Indians put to death Clement’s infant son and with “contempt” dismissed him into the wilderness with the body of his wife, Amalie. Once the Indians were sovereign, their realm was unfenced, unsurveyed, undivided. The onslaught of pioneers was but a trickle, and well within the Indians’ power to stop. In this first “reckoning” episode of the novel, the Indians can decree and pronounce. The time is still their own.

Jamie Lockhart, whose sole interest is the accumulation of capital, is the dashing hero of this new time — “Take first and ask afterward” is his motto. Rosamond, who appears to be a damsel, becomes Jamie’s wife and then the mistress of a mansion more lavish than the one her wicked stepmother coveted. And Salome herself is the perfect essence of exploitation and greed: “we must cut down more of the forest, and stretch away the fields until we grow twice as much
of everything. Twice as much indigo, twice as much cotton, twice as much tobacco. For the land is there for the taking, and I say, if it can be taken, take it” (TRB, 99). It is little wonder that the Indians of history and of fiction, faced with this plague of locusts, react with violence to defend themselves, but are overcome.

The second reckoning of the novel is the Indians’ twilight; they appear weary and decimated, faint shadows of their former, “blazing” selves. They have been exhausted in the struggle against the intruders; for them “sleep had come to be sweeter than revenge.” Salome insults the sun, the Indians’ divinity, and they hesitate to strike her dead. In former times she would have been executed on the spot. Clement sees, in the faces of the Indians, the inescapable human fate of extinction. They are, to him, just another group of human beings overtaken by change, as he himself will be overtaken. He is a planter about to give place to the merchant, Jamie. A stronger, more brutally efficient force is always wresting control of the present. The Indians, and, increasingly, Clement, are relics of the past.

Clement Musgrove is a character in a cast of caricatures. To borrow E.M. Forster’s terms, he is “round” while the others are “flat.” The pioneer cast includes the stereotypical hero, the damsel, and the wicked stepmother, but Clement is a person of considerable dimension and depth. He enters the novel with the naïve innocence of Don Quixote or Candide, but he grows to an encompassing vision through the development of his conscience, memory, and sympathy. Like the Indians, he is pushed aside by time and change. Like the Indians also, he is overtaken by history and must come to terms with it.
At first Clement is only aware of the pain of dislocation, not of its causes. His memory preserves the name of former comfort and peace: Amalie. Her name suggests a natural kinship which Clement has left behind. The temptation to “go home again” is as strong as the memory itself. Clement is moored to the past, like the town of Rodney and the Indians. But, unlike them both, he is tied to a long line of human history that casts him into the future. Welty had used the theme of doubleness in her novels in order to illustrate the double nature of memory. In *Robber Bridegroom* doubleness becomes a source of conflict between past and present as in the dreams of Clement. His memory about the past itself is double in nature. *In The Optimist’s Daughter* Laurel’s memory of her parents’ life and her marriage with Phil are in relation with the past. But her stepmother Fay changed her preserving memories of the past. As memory is fluid it can change from time to time but the past is static. So there is an ambiguous relation between past and memory.

This is an unusual and complicated situation for a character in a mere “simple” fairy tale. Time is not a real consideration for Mike Fink, for Jamie Lockhart, or for Rosamond. But Clement is part of the author’s concern with change. He is the only character in the novel capable of appreciating, perhaps not intellectually from the beginning, but surely intuitively, the expanse of time that will eventually erase all human enterprise. Everyone else is wrapped up in the here and now, unable or unwilling to appreciate the present as a single moment in a constant flow from the past toward the future.
For the pioneer, the past is left behind, that segment of history is put away. But Clement’s memory of the past is the keystone of his character. As he recalls the little group of white men and women huddled around a campfire just before the Indians effortlessly penetrated the circle and shattered the illusion of security, he is reminded that nothing he gathers around himself for familiarity and protection is as formidable, as impenetrable, as it seems. In time Clement learns that even his own “family circle” (Salome, Jamie, Rosamond) is vulnerable. They leave him alone, each one pursuing his or her own dreams of wealth and success. Clement lives in his heart, and the heart’s time is not history but myth — the pastoral. He has seen in the faces of the Indians pride and triumph brought down to impotence and weariness as their time runs out. And he accepts himself as an “end” and Jamie as a “beginning” in the constant process of time.

As Welty’s career unfolded, it became clear that *The Robber Bridegroom* was unique among all her works, a startling and winning departure for a writer whose fiction mostly is deeply rooted in the realities of 20th century small-town Southern life.
THE OPTIMIST’S DAUGHTER

*The Optimist's Daughter* is a compact and inward-looking little novel, a Pulitzer Prize winner (1973) that is slender of page yet big of heart. The optimist in question is 71-year-old Judge Clinton McKelva, who has come to a New Orleans hospital from Mount Salus, Mississippi, complaining of a “disturbance” in his vision. To his daughter, Laurel, it is as rare for him to admit “self-concern” as it is for him to be sick, and she immediately flies down from Chicago to be by his side. The subsequent operation on the judge’s eye goes well, but the recovery does not. He lies still with both eyes heavily bandaged, growing ever more passive until finally — with some help from the shockingly vulgar Fay, his wife of two years — he simply dies. Together Fay and Laurel travel to Mount Salus to bury him, and the novel begins the inward spiral that leads Laurel to the moment when “all she had found had found her,” when the “deepest spring in her heart had uncovered itself, and it began to flow again” (TOD, 154). This story of a young woman’s confrontation with death and her past is a poetic study of human relations.

In the rest of the novel — Fay’s low-rent relatives arrive for the funeral, a bird flies down the chimney and is trapped in the hall — and yet Welty manages to compress the richness of an entire life within its pages. This is a world, after all, in which a set of complex relationships can be conveyed by the phrase “I know his whole family” (TOD, 11) or by the criticism “When he brought her here to your


All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition.
house, she had very little idea of how to separate an egg” (TOD, 107). Fay is petulant, graceless, and childish, with neither the passion nor the imagination to love. Welty spends a lot of vindictive energy on Fay and her kin, who must be the most small-minded, mean-mouthed clan. There’s more than just class snobbery at work. As Welty sees it, they are a special historical tribe who revel in grieving because they have come to be good at it, and who seethe with resentment from the day they are born. They have come “out of all times of trouble, past or future — the great, interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them” (TOD, 84). Fay belongs to the future, as she makes clear; it’s Laurel who belongs to the past —Welty’s own chosen territory. In her fine memoir, One Writer’s Beginnings, Welty described the way art could shine a light back “as when your train makes a curve, showing that there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you’ve come” (1984:16). Here, in one of her most autobiographical works, the past joins seamlessly with the present in a masterful evocation of grief, memory, loss, and love.

The optimist’s daughter is Laurel Hand, who has been long absent from the South, comes from Chicago to New Orleans, where her father dies after surgery. With Fay, the stupid new young wife of her father, Laurel returns to her former Mississippi home and stays a few days after the funeral for reunions with old friends. In a night alone in the house f the past and comes to a better understanding of it and of herself and her parents.

With unsurpassed artistry Welty shows us Laurel’s struggle to come to terms with her father’s death and with the life of the small Mississippi town he was
so intimately involved with. In trying to deal with people who, like Fay, never even care to understand what has happened to them, Laurel realizes that she too has kept her distance from a shared past. Like so many today, Laurel has lived in a city where she survives by avoiding any real involvement with those around her. It is only the shock of her father’s death that leads her to new insights into the relationship between love, death and memory. Laurel is watching people whom she loves die and notices the similarity between her experience and her mother’s. Memories came to her of her mother, Becky (then a fifteen year old girl), in the midwinter, going with her father to a hospital in Baltimore and her father dying. This is what Becky records in her dairy about the doctor’s coming out to her and saying: “You’d better get in touch with whoever you know in Baltimore, little girl.” “But I don’t know anybody in Baltimore, sir.” “Not know anybody in Baltimore?” (TOD, 143). It actually happened to Welty’s mother and her grandfather.

The novel ends with Laurel reflecting on her family’s history and with one final, not entirely conclusive, fight with Fay. Its moral tells us that we cannot change the past, but we can hurt memories and that is what makes memories live. A little before, we find Laurel discovering her mother’s letters to her father still in his desk: “her father could not have borne to touch them; to Fay, they would have been only what somebody wrote - and anybody reduced to the need to write, Fay would think already beaten as a rival” (TOD, 135).

Like life, the novel is not clear-cut. Fay seems evil, unrealistically so, and we cannot tell if Laurel is really justified in hating her. Welty is usually feted and
criticised for liking all her characters; Fay is the one villain in the novel, a girl who rejects the past, and who is surrounded at the funeral by her family. It is a novel about the timelessness of family and love, but also about change, about a heroine who leaves the South behind to head to the industrial north to go to college and marry an architect, whose husband dies in the war, making her a modern independent woman yet still someone capable of connecting with the past. Although most of the book has the setting of the hospital and the funeral, parts of it are funny — rural women sitting around exchanging gossip, the remains of the old South, a memory of heroism and goodness and simplicity, but mainly people just living their lives, observed with clarity and clearness.

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, paradoxically, the murderer he seeks), and Oedipus himself (whose act of self-blinding serves as a judgment 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 toward blindness and/or insight is cyclic; it moves both backward and onward in time. That is, Oedipus moves forward to a fate assigned to him in the past. He begins his journey in disbelief and metaphorical blindness and completes it in a literal blindness born of insight. The journey of The Optimist’s Daughter is similarly constructed. Laurel’s journey back into her past and the past of her parents both leads her to an understanding of her father’s relationship with her 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” (TOD, 154).
Once she has arrived in the past Laurel is able to sleep, exhausted from the effort the night’s work has cost her, “like a passenger who had come on an emergency journey in a train” (TOD, 159). 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. “In that same moment, she felt, more sharply than she could hear them where she was, footsteps that tracked through the parlor, the library, the hall, the dining room, up the stairs and through the bedrooms, down the stairs, in the same path Laurel had taken, and at last came to the kitchen door and stopped”(TOD, 172).

There is an ambiguity in the memories of Laurel about the things that happened in the past and how they are at present for example

Laurel looked over their heads, to where the Chinese prints brought home by an earlier generation of missionary McKelvas hung in their changeless grouping around the mantel clock. And she saw that the clock had stopped; it had not been wound, she supposed, since the last time her father had done duty by it, and its hands pointed to some remote three o’clock, as motionless as the time in Chinese prints. She wanted to go to the clock and take the key from where her father kept it— on a small nail he’d hammered, a little crookedly, into the papered wall—and wind the clock and set it going at the right time (TOD, 73).

And also when Laurel sees her hometown again, the impression interacts with her memory of the past, just as her ability to cope with her present situation depends on her ability to come to terms with the past. Welty seems to say that our changing feelings about the past are valuable, and that we need to free ourselves very so often from the tyranny of the past by remembering that we cannot control it, only
recapture it through memory, which is, by definition, always unstable and inconclusive.

Ironically, Laurel learns a great deal about the past from Fay. In a sense, Fay is pastless because, as Laurel realizes, “Fay could have walked in early as well as late, she could have come at any time at all. She was coming” (TOD, 174). Like the two rivers Laurel remembers, Becky and Fay move toward the moment of confluence, each from a different direction. There is no past and future, because the existence of one presupposes the existence of the other: they must arrive together, “in some convulsion of the mind” (TOD, 174). For Laurel, self-renewal is accomplished through learning to see the past in a broader perspective — i.e., learning to accept the paradox that hero and victim are one and the same.

In The Optimist’s Daughter, the occasion of Judge McKelva’s illness and death provides the framework within which family myth operates. The “social occasion” here provides what Welty has elsewhere called “narrative sense” of a family: “a sense of what happened to them and probably why, because look what happened to her grandmother” interview to William F. Buckley (1973:499). Family myth is thus intergenerational. The McKelva family (Judge, Becky, and Laurel) is set against other families central to the novel through the experience of loss. Unlike her other novels, The Optimist’s Daughter is a portrait of the way in which three sets of estranged family members interact when brought together during the occasion of illness and death. For the McKelvas, estrangement consists of Laurel’s removal to Chicago, her mother’s death, and her father’s remarriage.
In a sense, the Judge’s illness is symptomatic of estrangement and his death allows for Laurel’s discovery of family myth.

Coming to terms with event entails coming to terms with memory. Judge McKelva explains the cause of his injury as a failure of memory: “Of course, my memory has slipped. Becky would say it served me right. Before blooming is the wrong time to prune a climber” (TOD, 5), and Laurel laments the community’s failure to correctly remember her father at his funeral. Her trip to Mount Salus teaches Laurel to recognize the unpredictability of memory and its power over time. “Memory returned like spring, Laurel thought. Memory had the character of spring. In some cases it was the old wood that did the blooming” (TOD, 115).

Laurel is initially concerned with preserving memory objectively in preserving her parents’ belongings, as she knew in her youth. Once she realizes that Fay has altered the past Laurel begins to erase it by erasing Fay (the drops of nail polish carelessly spilled by Fay on her father’s desk (TOD, 122), and by burning “her father’s letters to her mother, and Grandma’s letters and the saved little books and papers” (TOD, 169) belonging to her parents. Once the house has been stripped of event, “there was nothing she was leaving in the whole shining and quiet house now to show for her mother’s life and her mother’s happiness and suffering, and nothing to show for Fay’s harm” (TOD, 170), it has been emptied of memory. Ultimately, it is memory that redeems Laurel, “She had been ready to hurt Fay. She had wanted to hurt her, had known herself capable of doing it. But such is the strangeness of the mind, it had been the memory of the child Wendell, that had prevented her” (TOD, 178) and allows her to put the past to rest. “The past
is no more open to help or hurt than was father in his coffin. The past is like him, impervious, and can never be awakened. It is memory that is the somnambulist” (TOD, 179). Laurel can release the past, just as she can release her parents’ house, because memory keeps it safe for her.

With an understanding of the past, Laurel comes to accept the inevitability of “blundering.” Because her own marriage had been perfect in its brevity — “there had not happened a single blunder in their short life together” (TOD, 162) — Laurel is intolerant of the mob of people she hears at Mardi Grass, “the unmistakable sound of hundreds, of thousands, of people blundering” (TOD, 43). Her father’s pallbearers, “she heard them blundering” (TOD, 88), and Mr. Cheek, “Her mother had deplored his familiar ways and blundering hammer” (TOD, 164). Laurel’s acceptance of imperfection comes with her journey into the past. Her understanding does not condone the careless behavior she sees around her, but rather accepts it as the inescapable human error that comes of living.

Laurel’s resolution of the past is a product of listening to the silent voices of memory. In The Optimist’s Daughter, the ability of language to order chaos is a process contained in memory. Laurel’s acceptance of Fay in the final pages of the novel, for example, is stimulated by her memory of Wendell, son of Fay’s sister Sis; and the first night she spends in her room at Mount Salus is filled with the “velvety cloak of words” (TOD, 58) with which her parents unknowingly read her to sleep each night. The books in her father’s library similarly have their corresponding voices and the way in which Laurel knows that the funeral is being presided over by the predominance of a single voice: “one voice dominated the
rest: Miss Tennyson Bullock was taking charge”(TOD, 61). As Miss Tennyson’s voice indicates, language orders chaos in the present as well as in memory. Laurel’s journey is one that is composed of the voices of memory and is primarily visual rather than verbal.

Although the novel’s 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 realized through conflicting emotions in the mind of Laurel Hand, daughter of 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 one 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 parents’ love; she must reconsider the brief perfection of the love she and Philip Hand had shared; and she must recognize that it is not the dead but the living who, in their loneliness and uncertainty, are in danger. The futility of trying to protect anything precious from outside incursions is one of the painful lessons Laurel learns from her father’s dying. She grows increasingly disturbed as friends and townspeople invent a heroic past for Judge McKelva while he lies helpless in his coffin. Laurel was even less able to provide protection for her father while he lived. She could not save him from Becky’s scorn, and she was too far away in Chicago to save him from marrying Fay.
Welty represents Laurel’s struggle to evade and then finally to free the past by portraying it symbolically as a chimney swift trapped inside the family home the night before Laurel is to leave for Chicago. The past is caught in Laurel’s inflexible idea of it just as the bird is caught in the house. But the bird, like the past, becomes the pursuer, and Laurel becomes the pursued. In running frantically from the bird, Laurel flees into what was her parents’ bedroom and shuts the door against the bird. Its insistent drumming, however, drives her further into the recesses of the house, into the little sewing room off the bedroom. There she feels momentarily safe; having outrun the figurative past; but there she unexpectedly confronts the peril of the empirical past, her mother’s desk and its entire memorabilia.

The next morning the bird is caught and released, but not before “it had left the dust of itself all over everything, the way a moth does” (TOD, 165-66). The release of the bird confirms that Laurel must also release the past from the shackles of her unyielding view of it. Her night in the sewing room under the siege of mementos and remembrances predicts the saving change in her, but the final test comes when Fay returns unexpectedly early and finds Laurel in possession of one last relic from the past, the breadboard which Phil had lovingly made for Becky Mckelva. In Fay’s careless hands it had become gouged and filthy, and in her anger Laurel determines to take it with her to Chicago. She even seems poised at one point to strike Fay with it. When Fay scornfully asks, “What do you see in that thing?” Laurel replies, “The whole story, Fay. The whole solid past” (TOD, 178). In the moment of Fay’s reflexive bragging that she belongs to the future, that the past means nothing to her, Laurel is granted a culminating, redeeming revelation:
she acknowledges first that Fay is nothing to the past and can do nothing to the past; and then she wonderingly confesses, “And neither am I; and neither can I, she thought, although it has been everything and done everything to me, everything for me.” (TOD, 179). She realizes that she had been foolish in trying to protect her father, her mother, and the past. She had been wrong to resent the town’s charter, wrong to suppose that the keepsakes of the past contain it.

In that moment, Laurel relinquishes the past to memory, knowing at last that it is memory, not the past, that can “never be impervious,” that “can be hurt, time and time again—but in that may lie its final mercy.” The past is static invulnerable; but memory is fluid, dynamic, “vulnerable to the living moment,” and takes its life from the living (TOD, 179). According to Marilyn Arnold, “the dead are not saved by being shut off from the vicissitudes of memory; they are saved by being released into memory, freed by it and its capacity for pardon” (1982:32). In the process the living are also freed from awkward notions of what constitutes allegiance to the past. Thus, Laurel needs no breadboard, no house, and no stack of her father’s letters to her mother. She can exchange those lifeless tokens for the continuous promise of memory which, she realizes, “lives not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams” (TOD, 179).

Laurel’s revelation about the freeing effects of allowing memory its due has particular application to her interpretations of the human relationships she had protectively sealed up in the past. Before her apocalyptic night with the chimney swift, Laurel had locked her parents inside a rather idyllic notion of their
relationship. And she had done the same thing with her own marriage. Her recollections of her marriage to Phil, like her earlier recollections of her parents’ marriage, are expressed in images of unity. Laurel remembers that from the train carrying them South for their wedding, she and Phil had seen two great rivers come together, the Ohio and the Mississippi. This cherished vision of flawless union, whether applied to Becky and the Judge or Laurel and Phil, could not survive the honest probe of memory.

Subjecting the past to the “somnambulist” memory is a painful process, “It is memory that is the somnambulist. It will come back in its wounds from across the world, like Phil calling us by our names and demanding its rightful tears” (TOD, 179). Looking back through the wavy lens of memory during the night she spends in her mother’s sewing room, Laurel comes to understand that the interdependencies of love can produce an inner sense of alienation equal to its outward signs of unity. This happened with her mother and father; it might have happened with her and Phil had he lived.

The death of Laurel’s father in the wake of his eye surgery, and Laurel’s recollection of her perplexing inability to penetrate the wall of his dark suffering with comfort force to the surface thoughts of her mother’s dying. In searching the past with new understanding, Laurel also realizes that she has wronged Phil. By allowing him no voice of protest in her carefully orchestrated mental tableau of his unruffled glide into death, she had failed him just as surely as her father had failed her mother.
It is partly through imagery also that Welty describes Judge McKelva as a man who evaded the past because the past was too painful a reminder of his own mortality. He kept records of his public activities, for the results of those works are still in evidence and constitute a kind of immortality for him. His letters from Becky, however, were not saved because they could only testify to change and the passing of time. It was perhaps the Judge’s long helplessness against Becky’s absorption in her past “up home” that led him to take for a second wife a woman for whom the past meant nothing, a woman, in fact, who virtually erased her past by killing her family in a lie to Laurel.

The efforts of Judge McKelva to stay a step ahead of the past, to claim eternal title to the present, are represented by numerous references to time. In the hospital, forced to remain motionless to allow his repaired retina to heal, the Judge silently, motionlessly concentrates all his energies on the fact of time passing, as if through his solitary effort he can keep it and his pulse going. But after Fay has “laid hands on him” (TOD, 32) in an effort to jar him out of his dark study into life and action, he stops counting and let time go by him. It is as if this violent encounter with his present and future, embodied in Fay, opens his inner eye to reality. He makes a deliberate, if regretful, decision to die and slip into the shelter of the past. His continuing life now depends solely upon the function of memory among the living; and since Fay has no capacity for memory, he is at least safe from her in death.

One vital, but unusual, image is introduced through a parable, which serves as a capstone for the entire novel, the image of white strawberries. The dying...
Becky describes them in sermon-like reproach to the minister who had come to offer spiritual comfort, but who was so obviously her inferior in theological dexterity that he had nothing to give her. Marilyn Arnold comments that “in its capacity for at least dual interpretation, the strawberry tale brings together two basic thematic strands of the novel: the strand of the past and its relationship to memory, and the strand of human interdependence” (1982: 37).

Becky’s parable could be suggesting, on the one hand, that one’s personal past, like the strawberries, is inestimably precious. As such, it must not be exposed to the common view nor brought into the present. The one who would taste its nectar must find the fruit and partake of it where it dwells. To remove the past from its setting and subject it to the present is to destroy it. Becky could also be saying that human beings, like the wild white strawberries, are very delicate organisms. The very nature of human relationship that brings these delicate beings into intimate associations can also damage them irreparably. Becky had craved inviolate privacy, and throughout her married life she had escaped into her past “up home” in an effort to achieve it.

But ultimately, Becky was wrong; her blindness, like the Judge’s, was spiritual as well as physical. She thought that she could escape into the safety of solitude and the past indefinitely. The Judge’s blindness was that he thought he could escape from the past by warding it off through absorption in the present. In that sense he was using Fay as much as she was using him; she was his reprieve from old age and the past. Laurel’s blindness was that she thought that both the past and love could be sealed up into perfection, out of the reach of memory and
change. What Laurel learns – Becky and the Judge are past learning, and Fay is immune to it — is that people and the past and love are like Becky’s climbing rose. Though Becky had marveled at its ability to be “utterly strong” and “on its own roots,” blooming the next year if not this, Laurel knows that it is partly the pruning and the care that produce the blooming. Howard Moss remarks that “The Optimist’s Daughter is a miracle of compression, the kind of book, small in scope but profound in its implications, that rewards a lifetime of work. The best book Welty has ever written, it is a long goodbye in a very short space not only to the dead but to delusion and to sentiment as well” (1972:18).

The previous discussion of Welty’s two novels shows that “The Robber Bridegroom contains all of the virtues of a good fairy tale: mystery, magic, poetic description, and in general a sense of the inexplicable. What the tale lacks, surprisingly given the introspection of A Curtain of Green and Other Stories, is any psychological exploration of Jamie Lockhart and his need/desire to be both robber and gentleman, or of Rosamond’s relationships with her family, not to mention with the highwayman” (Carol Ann Johnston). Understanding Welty’s primary subject as relationships, attentive readers of A Curtain of Green and Other Stories found her circumscribing such issues in her second book odd.

In the opinion of Chester E. Eisinger, “the novel is backward-looking and myth-making, a relevant demonstration of the fascination the past holds for Welty. It is both an act of piety and an impulse of simple nostalgia that impels her to possess the past, and those motives are indeed crippling” (1965: 272). Clement Musgrove of The Robber Bridegroom, is a key character in Welty’s fiction.
Perhaps Welty spent thirty years of storytelling trying to unravel all that Clement meant when he said that “all things are double” (TOD, 126). Commenting on doubleness, Craig Turner says that “from 1942’s *The Robber Bridegroom* to 1972’s *The Optimist’s Daughter*, the currents of ‘doubleness’ have run as surely and deeply through Welty’s fiction as the Mississippi river and the Natchez Trace have run” (1989: 248). Different as they are, the two stories are doubles of one another as each explores a doubleness that exists within the self and the doubleness perceived outside the self. *The Robber Bridegroom*, written at the outset of Welty’s career, is a fairy tale about sitting out, growing up and changing, about Rosamond and Jamie’s love, their starting a new generation and making the circle turn. Like any good fairy tale, it suggests immortality and, despite bloodshed and violence, ends happily in a new beginning. Only the Indians and Clement are “sure of the future growing smaller always” (TOD, 21). The daughter of the optimist, however, in a story written thirty years later, faces her own future grown smaller, her own mortality and all the turns of life that fairy tales do not take. Clement’s mystical insight that all things are double finds experiential verification in the extremely physical, sensory mode and language of *The Optimist’s Daughter*.

The method of telling each story, *The Robber Bridegroom* and *The Optimist’s Daughter*, leads to differing discoveries about doubleness. *The Robber Bridegroom’s* hybridizing of fairy tale, captivity narrative, folklore and local history with Welty’s perspective on American history yield its own doublings: mistaken identities, transformations, misperceptions, deceptions and historical comment as the other side of burlesque. *The Robber Bridegroom* is a modern fairy tale, where irony and humor, outright nonsense, deep wisdom and surrealistic
extravaganzas become a poetic unity through the power of a pure, exquisite style. Overlappings of past with the frontier present of the story provide almost more doublings than a wary reader can handle – Harp brothers, Harpe brothers, Harpies, and so on. Welty has chosen an ancient theme to write a modern story and presents her characters on purpose as simply as if she described them for children, weaving her intellectual and poetic interpretations around them like multicolored ornaments. The novel’s inclusive ebullience is a rare contrast to the realistic method of *The Optimist’s Daughter*. Laurel McKelva Hand avoids allusiveness, avoids nearly all but what her eye takes in during the days of nursing her father, coping with his second wife, with her father’s death and funeral and with the truths which the eye of memory seeks.