Chapter IV
THE PRIVATE VERSUS THE COMMUNAL SELF

Welty presents the lives of women not only in a network of family relationships but also in their relations with the Southern community in which they live. Welty's own experience as a woman in a society which officially adored womanhood but disapproved of its liberal aspirations enabled her to place female consciousness at the centre of many of her novels to question the traditional complacencies of Southern domestic life, and to find out alternate possibilities for fulfilment.¹ As Bertram Wyatt-Brown points out in his book *Southern Honor*,

enforcement of gender and family conventions was community business, all ranks of men agreed that women, like other dependants upon male leadership and livelihood, should be subordinate, docile. As Dr. James Norcom of North Carolina put it, 'God in his inscrutable wisdom, has appointed a place and a duty for females, out of which they can neither accomplish their destiny nor secure their happiness!'²

In the traditional Southern world of patriarchy, this type of restriction of women's lives gained momentum. Since the Southern world provided only a dishonest basis for a girl's identity and her relations with men, Welty has to challenge the traditions of Southern womanhood as a woman writer and as a feminist of broadly humanist, if less extreme, persuasions.

In analyzing the lives of women in their relations to the wider human community, use has been made of the theories of the famous anthropologist
Victor Turner about doubleness in social action. Turner argues that people interrelate with one another in two modalities: “structure” and “liminality.” 

*Structure* is all that divides people hierarchically in a society. It is the operative mode in which the ordinary work of the mundane world gets done. It is sustainable and authentic insofar as it reflects the axiomatic first principles that sustain life, usually hidden from the mind by everyday, superficial social consciousness. *Communitas* is the state of recognizing shared humanity; it is a society’s people come together. When it does occur, it occurs in *liminality*, a state and time that occur when people set social structure temporarily aside. Turner says, “it is the analysis of culture into factors and their free recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is most characteristic of liminality.”

In a sense, all relations among people in social structure are wrong relations in that they divide people; communitas, as the mode of sharing both humanity and the construction of reality, is the source of both legitimacy and solace. Turner argues:

The basic and perennial human social problem is to discover what is the right relation between these modalities at a specific time and place. Since communitas has a strong effectual component, it appeals more directly to men; but since structure is the arena in which they pursue their material interests, communitas perhaps even more importantly than sex tends to get repressed into the unconscious . . . People can go crazy because of communitas repression.
The need for communitas puts pressure on those who have ostracized others to reverse that behaviour and join with the people whom they have shut out. Social division has to be balanced with communitas. Structure and liminality can operate simultaneously in the same situation or scene. In liminality people are close to the matrix life-stuff, to the place where destruction and creation meet. Turner points out that societies require scepticism from their members as well as adherence to the rules that seem to work to maintain life-giving relations among people. Turner’s analysis of social behaviour in its double modalities retrieves society’s unconscious.

Welty reflects on the Southern community’s disapproval of feminine intellectual development in her portrayal of the communities of Morgana in *The Golden Apples*, Clay in *The Ponder Heart*, Banner in *Losing Battles* and Mount Salus in *The Optimist’s Daughter*. The requirements of submissiveness and restraint for the Southern woman have traditionally discouraged the pursuit of artistic, professional, or political goals. The girl who insists on following her ambition has to pay inevitably the price of shame and guilt as an adult; she must lead her life with a complicated sense of herself as a woman who has overstepped the familiar boundaries of her gender. The Southern world which demanded beauty and charm for women disapproved of intellect. Ellen Moer’s description of the typical European and American emphasis on female beauty holds true in the South: “From infancy, indeed from the moment of birth, the looks of a girl are examined with ruthless scrutiny by all around her, especially by women, crucially by her own mother. ‘Is she pretty?’ is the second question put to new female life. . . .”5 The traditional Southern view insisted on keeping knowledge away from young women
rigorously and this resulted in making women feel that the community solidarity threatens to overwhelm their own individual lives. They have to develop strong defences to retain their self-respect in their battles against the cohesiveness of the community.

*The Golden Apples*, Welty's collection of stories centred on the theme of wandering, pictures the women in Morgana community who are subjected to social restrictions, possessiveness and sexual repression. The community imposes the concept that Morgana is the centre of the universe. In Morgana what counts in the history of the events is what people say rather than what people think of themselves. Talk among the townspeople establishes what the community's interpretation of events will be, a history which consists more of what they want to remember than of what really did happen. But the strict adherence to a public voice is their way of keeping hold of life even in the face of occurrences which seem to spite expected destiny. Moreover, it establishes a moral order, a precedence of right or wrong for ambiguous circumstances both present and future, an order which attempts to do away with life's distrustful surprises. Finally, it maintains working correspondences between people which keep them open to one another, and maintain relationships always definable. Life in Morgana is a pattern to be preserved at all costs, each man is expected to live up to his communally pre-destined end.

Against the tradition of spoken and unspoken law regarding public will, the separate characters struggle to drive down individual longings and inclinations in the face of their conflicting public roles. Those who have grown desperate in their lonely struggle to rise above the public pale and to defy consciously or unconsciously what the community will thrust upon them are
the characters who precipitate the crisis in each story in *The Golden Apples*. Katie Rainey's voice in the first story, which introduces us to each of those characters and their crisis, also by her own nature introduces us to that community force against which they struggle. Her house is at the entrance and exit of Morgana, which guards it well against both those who wander out and those who wander in. Ironically, we find that her own daughter, Virgie Rainey, who wanders out and wanders in again has to fight hard to reconcile with her own and others' expectations for her life. In Morgana she is perhaps the one with the greatest individual talent and therefore has the most to gain or lose in the game of life. Virgie Rainey's and Miss Eckhart's crisis is far more central to the story than the others, and certainly their crisis more clearly reflects the theme of the artist's problem of putting the truth about himself and life into perspective.

The question of talent arises in the context of the individual's struggle with community perception because *The Golden Apples* directly and openly considers the influence of art and the artist upon the community, and vice versa. This collection of stories provides the most fertile ground for ascertaining Welty's idea of the role of the artist in society. As in *Delta Wedding*, the forces of art which descend upon Morgana come in the form of music, specifically piano music, under the aegis of Miss Lotte Elizabeth Eckhart, teacher and militant proponent of *the* Beethoven.

Teachers in Welty's stories always dream of the bright future of their pupils, since they open the outside world to their students who otherwise would be ignorant of its possibilities as alternatives to the closed world of their community. Miss Eckhart assumes the role with vigour and determination,
like her counterparts Miss Julia in *Losing Battles* and Miss Adele in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Virgie Rainey is unquestionably Miss Eckhart's prodigy as long as the teacher can satisfy her appetite for the outward expression of passion she finds, even as a child, in Beethoven's music. There are very few in Morgana who have been deeply touched by art, and had it not been for Miss Eckhart, there would have been fewer.

Miss Eckhart's life has been governed by a discipline which is incomprehensible to her neighbours. The Morganans fail to realize that it is Miss Eckhart's peculiar discipline that has allowed her to attain the musical proficiency which is recognized only by her pupils. Only Cassie, Virgie, and Jinny Love Stark, as children, are privileged to hear her music. Marriage and motherhood would have exacted conformity to Morgana's mores, in which there is no place for artistic beauty. Miss Eckhart's life seems a waste because of the lost talent and potential which her playing reveals to the children. Miss Eckhart lives with the awareness that in Morgana creativity is stifled by prejudice: creativity is not the social norm; therefore in Morgana it cannot be honoured. The provincialism of the Morganans, their belief that Morgana is in fact the world, cannot be successfully challenged by the few artists who live among them. Since the townspeople believe and live in community solidarity, they cannot look out at all. Many women who believe that Morgana is world enough cannot tolerate the threat of Miss Eckhart's predictions about Virgie's success in the world. As an artist in Morgana, Miss Eckhart embodies rebellion and restriction, music's freedom and metronomic regularity, independence and conventionality.
Morgana community paradoxically demand homogeneity from those who hope to succeed at anything; Virgie and the other women of Morgana realise that Virgie's differences and her lack of status place her a "cut below" the rest of them socially, as well as economically. Unless she finds an alternative, economic necessity will keep her in Morgana, as it has kept Miss Eckhart there. Talent is a burden in Morgana; no one knows what to do with it. Everyone in town, including Virgie, when she is young, values talent far less than Miss Eckhart does.

But they had all known Virgie would never go, or study, or practice anywhere, never would even have her own piano, because it wouldn't be like her. They felt no less sure of that when they heard, every recital, every June, Virgie Rainey playing better and better something that was harder and harder, or watched this fill Miss Eckhart with stiff delight, curious anguish.

The Morganans set themselves up as arbiters of Virgie's fate without really knowing Virgie, who makes a point of maintaining distance from them: "they know, or think they do, exactly what would be "like her." There is no place for mystery in their lives. They cannot think of "differences" being rewarded: "Perhaps nobody wanted Virgie Rainey to be anything in Morgana any more than they had wanted Miss Eckhart to be . . ." (306). Virgie, the free-spirited, freedom loving, talented girl refuses to acknowledge the supremacy of the community, and the community in return, expresses its jealousy of Virgie's talent by associating her with Miss Eckhart, who is ostracized. Cassie Morrison is one of the pupils of Miss Eckhart and an insider, through whose memory and reflections we learn the history of these
social relationships. Cassie’s sympathetic observations contrast with her brother Loch’s factual narration of the bizarre events taking place in the house next door.

Cassie’s observations focus on the community’s views of Miss Eckhart and the scandals surrounding her: she is of German descent, single, middle-aged, living with her near senile mother, who come to Morgana to educate the Morganans, to act against their provincialism and to exploit their ignorance about music. There are several sexual scandals associated with Miss Eckhart to stigmatize her, though she is responsible for only one of them. In spite of the scandals, they tolerate her as she teaches their daughters the skill of playing the piano. The economic crisis, the aftermath of World War I, along with her suspected sympathy with the Germans results in the loss of her piano studio, her apartments, her pupils and in her moving into a run down, one-room apartment on the outskirts of the town; practically she is isolated.

Miss Eckhart is victimized socially; the very name by which she is known in Morgana declares her foreignness, her spinsterhood, and her social expulsion. Missie Spights puts the responsibility for the formality on Miss Eckhart herself:

If Miss Eckhart had allowed herself to be called by her first name, then she would have been like other ladies. Or if Miss Eckhart had belonged to a church that had even been heard of, and the ladies would have had something to invite her to belong to. . . . Or if she had been married to anybody at all, just the awfulest man—like Miss Snowdie MacLain, that everybody could feel sorry for. (308)
The Morganans are ready to accept a newcomer only on their terms, but the self-willed Miss Eckhart is reluctant to accommodate them. The status-conscious Morganans consider the transgression of their naming system unpardonable.

As per the unwritten rules of Morgana, as we learn in “June Recital,” women’s socializing should occur only through events centred around social gatherings, but Miss Eckhart is capable of arranging her social contacts without any such gatherings, but by herself, through her work. Her boldness and sense of independence, combined with her status of being unmarried enabled her to develop an intimate relationship with her female pupils, particularly her star student, Virgie Rainey but that resulted in scandals. As time passes, the love-hate relationship between Miss Eckhart and Virgie involves Virgie’s getting and using the power which her talent enables her to exert over her teacher, so that ultimately, Miss Eckhart poses no threat at all in her artistry.

Miss Eckhart compliments Virgie by saying “Virgie Rainey Danke Schön” and in mock tribute, the Morganans call Virgie by the new nickname whenever she acts unconventionally. But Miss Eckhart intends to teach Virgie to make the “unheard of” things heard, to utter women’s repressed voices, to express hidden identities and potential abilities. She says:

Virgie would be heard from in the world, playing that, . . . revealing to children with one ardent cry her lack of knowledge of the world. How could Virgie be heard from, in the world? And ‘the world’! Where did Miss Eckhart think she was now? Virgie Rainey, she repeated over and over, had a gift, and she must go away from Morgana. (303)
Virgie is totally committed to mastering the art of piano music, but she is not rewarded for her talents by the community. Instead of rewarding a girl's talent, they reward her social acceptability. Virgie continues to play piano after "graduating" from Miss Eckhart's school, quite contrary to the expectations of her teacher: "Virgie Rainey worked. Not at teaching. She played the piano for the picture show, both shows every night, and got six dollars a week, and was not popular anymore" (286).

Three years after Virgie's final recital, Miss Eckhart returns to the empty MacLain house, while Virgie is sporting with her sailor boy friend, upstairs. When Miss Eckhart sets her studio afire, two old men climb in a window to stop her. King MacLain suddenly arrives there and then disappears. Virgie and the sailor run out of the front door to escape, the polite ladies of the neighbourhood are leaving a card-party in time to see the whole thing. Virgie and her lover run out of the house. "Look at that!" one lady cries, "I see you, Virgie Rainey!" Virgie simply stalks down the sidewalk calmly clicking her high heels "as if nothing had happened in the past or behind her, as if she were free, whatever else she might be" (325). Virgie passes Miss Eckhart on the sidewalk, where two men are leading Miss Eckhart away to a lunatic asylum in Jackson, as if they were quite strangers.

The Virgie Rainey seen in "The Wanderers" is now past forty; at this age freed by her mother's death, through an initiation journey and insight into her past, she starts her liberation. In spite of Jinny Love Stark's advice to Virgie to marry immediately after her mother's death, all of the women in Morgana seem to use Virgie's mother's funeral as an occasion to be critical of her, like the women in The Optimist's Daughter who try to "console" Laurel.
after her father's death. Virgie's grief is regarded as no more sacred than anything else about her; in fact, it is intolerable and incredible to Morgana's women because of the distance that Virgie has maintained from them. After her mother's death, Virgie decides to leave Morgana and she shows no emotional attachment to her mother's things, unlike Miss Eckhart, and plans to auction them off.

Pitavy-Souques argues that the Morganans are tragic people who give in to their prejudice and thereby unjustly ostracize Miss Eckhart and in doing so they fail to encourage life. Turner's theory of structure, communitas and liminality helps us to analyze the relationship of Miss Eckhart and her prize pupil Virgie to the Morgana community; their relationship has a positive and negative aspect. In spite of all the grievances of the Morgana community against Miss Eckhart and their ignorance of her past history and the reason for her leaving Europe for the Southern village, and their conventional attitude to art, they send their daughters to her for piano lessons which is a means of living both for Miss Eckhart and for Miss Snowdie who rents the downstairs of her house. Morgana community seems to be willing to accept the newcomer as a proper lady on their terms, not hers. Just as her personal life violates the rules of good behaviour, her very name 'Miss Eckhart' violates Morgana's rules of speech and emphasizes her aristocratic "difference." Yet, they tolerate the display of her ego. In the June recitals they acknowledge their communitas with Miss Eckhart by shifting from structure. In the recital preparations, performance and celebration they balance their relationship with her by granting special and temporary authority to Miss Eckhart in May and June. They accede to her recital directives to satisfy the joint need for
communitas. With the parent’s participation, Miss Eckhart is transformed from an outsider to the position of an insider of the Morgana community every year, as she perpetuates hospitality. As a teacher, Miss Eckhart is expected to be a person of exemplary moral integrity, teaching her students the eminent art of piano playing; but in reality, her relations with her students are too unsupervised and too intense and her name is associated with unbridled passions. Moreover, she shows signs of insanity. Once she plays for her pupils during a storm: “Coming from Miss Eckhart, the music made all the pupils uneasy, almost alarmed; something had burst out, unwanted, exciting, from the wrong person’s life” (301). Patricia Yaeger regards this passage as a proof of Miss Eckhart’s capacity for passion; she argues that, “having given the daughters of Morgana’s community a forbidden vision of passion, the genderless ecstasy available to the woman artist, Miss Eckhart is ostracized and incarcerated—punished more severely for her iconoclasm than are the men of Morgana.” Welty herself admits that there is something mysterious in the character of Miss Eckhart:

But Miss Eckhart was a very mysterious character. Julia Mortimer was much more straightforward and dedicated and thinking of the people as somebody she wanted to help. Miss Eckhart was a very strange person . . . She herself was trapped, you know, with her terrible old mother. And then no telling what kind of strange Germanic background, which I didn’t know anything about and could only indicate. I mean we don’t know they had tantrums in that house, and flaming quarrels.
In the case of Virgie, there is communitas between her and Morganans in the sense that, the community has assigned a social job to the clever Virgie—controlling pernicious Miss Eckhart and she makes the job attractive by meeting their instructions with gay mockery.

On the other hand, communitas repression leads Miss Eckhart to the extent of getting insane and it pressures the Morganans. Everything that is repressed in her community life is channelled into her friendship and attachment with Virgie. Virgie both wins and resists Miss Eckhart’s attention, and often exploits the teacher’s devotion to her; she even torments Miss Eckhart. The annual recital in June is an occasion for the Morgana women to display their power, wealth, position, dress and the social skills acquired by their daughters. Social structure holds sway in the recitals and the ladies celebrate themselves. The communitas repression results in Miss Eckhart’s attempt to attack the whole social structure of Morgana by setting the Mac Lain house on fire. In her derangement this may be an attempt to kill herself or to kill Virgie and her boy friend on the next floor. Communitas deprivation has resulted in her directing her rage inwards and outwards. Undergoing the degenerate movements of an old ritual, June recital, the ruined memories of her hope for Virgie are re-enacted; but she is propelled this time by the destructive force of her madness, rather than by the interactive motives of her years as a teacher; Miss Eckhart decorates the room for a sacrificial burning. Morgana community’s refusal to show compassion for her who is imprisoned within the walls of the community, suffocated under their expectations, chained by their refusal to accommodate her, makes Miss Eckhart endure the wanderings of her psyche forever. Morgana community view Virgie Rainey as a wanderer, a fine pianist wasteful of her
talents, an irresponsible and reckless teenager indifferent to the community's assessment of her. A reliable daughter and the only hope of a mother, the prize pupil of a teacher, but an independent and unyielding member of the community—Virgie—is misunderstood and misrepresented by the community.

In the comic short novel, *The Ponder Heart*, a spinster niece Edna Earle Ponder narrates "the amorous career of her pathologically generous Uncle Daniel Ponder," who literally tickles his young second wife Bonnie Dee Peacock to death, quite accidentally, during a thunderstorm, in his attempt to remove her fears. The climax of this grotesque and horrifying comic event is the zany murder trial which ensues. Edna Earle Ponder, the proprietress of the Beulah Hotel in Clay, Mississippi, does all the talking in the novel, since she is a high priestess of the oral tradition. Just like the Banner women, she is neither interested in reading nor in writing, but only in incessant talking. In a community like theirs, the experience of reading amounts to a strange and potentially dangerous voyeurism. Edna Earle considers the ability to listen to and to appreciate a story the most important Southern characteristic. She comments:

The sight of a stranger was always meat and drink to him. The stranger don't have to open his mouth. Uncle Daniel is ready to do all the talking. That's understood. I used to dread he might get hold of one of these occasional travellers that wouldn't come in unless they had to—the kind that would break in on a story with a set of questions, and wind it up with a list of what Uncle Daniel's faults were: some Yankee.
Edna Earle speaks to her auditor, “... if you read, you’ll put your eyes out. Let’s just talk” (11). She compels a hearing since listening partakes of a Southern hospitality—one accepts what one is offered if it is the gift of a meal or a story. Like the etiquette of listening in the Southern community, loyalty reflects a person’s sense of duty. Edna Earle has multipersonal loyalty; she defends both Grandpa Ponder and Uncle Daniel when she says, “... I haven’t got time for conversation. I have to get out there and stand up for both of them” (40). She protects the family myth and her own identity as a Ponder. As we read in the Invisible Loyalties, “nations, religious groups, families, professional groups, etc. have their own myths and legends to which each member is expected to be loyal.” For Edna Earle, the community of Clay can be divided between those who are loyal to the Ponders and those who are not, since she regards the Ponders as the best family in Clay. The central and defining characteristic of the Ponders is their “social pride,” as pointed out by Neil D. Isaacs. Just as in Shellmound of Delta Wedding, family and place combine in Clay, nurturing as well as stifling their members. In Clay, “everybody knows where everybody is, if they really want to find them” (58). Robert B. Holland observes each character in The Ponder Heart as belonging to two families, one of blood and one of region. Grandpa Ponder, Uncle Daniel and Edna Earle belong to the Ponder family as well as to Clay.

“The Southern community as presented in The Ponder Heart can be defined as a thematic ‘isogloss’, or dialect boundary, by the gossip and anecdote “inherent to it,” observes Jennifer Lynn Randisi. Edna Earle sits, rocks and talks to her one captive listener since news travels by the medium of
tales, both simple and complex, in Clay. The narrative stands for the communal history of Uncle Daniel's relationship to Clay. The other characters, Miss Teacake Magee, Elsie Flemming, Dorris R. Gladney, Bonnie Dee Peacock, Johnnie Ree and Eva Sistrunk have their tales in the novel.

Edna Earle, guided by her thoughts, knowledge and experience constantly makes an attempt to order the life around her, but her uncle's urge is to follow the spontaneous prompting of his heart that perturb the stable world maintained by her. She is a troubled soul caught as a pressure point between her private desire for fulfilment and personal freedom, and her felt obligation to heed the community's nurture and authority by filling the role prescribed for her. Bonnie Dee Peacock, like Fay in The Optimist's Daughter, represents the non-domestic woman threatening the orderliness and continuity of the community with her erotic and careless femininity, lack of taste, and disregard for the institution of marriage. Edna Earle's never-to-be materialised hope of marriage with Mr. Springer, a travelling salesman makes her remain a spinster "impoverished, neglected, burdened probably for a good many years yet to come with the care of the ruined and nitwit, much-married uncle in whose interest she has sacrificed, no doubt permanently, her own hope for marriage." But, Edna Earle Ponder appears to be strengthened by the experience of being alone, since her daily experience illumines her psyche.

Welty gives due importance to Julia Mortimer's life-long effort to educate and civilize the rural community of Banner by fighting against their ignorance and small-mindedness, their superstitions and sloth in her novel Losing Battles. The Renfros are poor white farmers living in the Mississippi hill
country; Welty points out, “I needed that region, that kind of country family, because I wanted that chorus of voices, everybody talking and carrying on at once. I wanted to try something completely vocal and dramatized.” Miss Julia’s life and death stand in opposition to all that is symbolized by the Banner community. While she tries to unravel all mysteries, the Banner folk cling to mysteries and are interested in preserving and creating their identity in terms of the family and its group myths. The rational, objective identity, like that of Julia Mortimer, struggles with the instinctive group identity of the families. The intelligence, dedication, ambition, spirit of sacrifice and inflexibility of will, make Julia Mortimer a unique teacher. Her first words on the first day of school are: “Nothing in this world can measure up to the joy you’ll bring me if you allow me to teach you something.”

“In Banner, a community immune to learning, Miss Julia parallels Miss Eckhart in Morgana, a community stone-deaf except for Cassie and Virgie.” Even a successful career or a respectable occupation like that of teaching cannot remove the stigma of spinsterhood especially for women without a family to support them. The educated, self-supporting Miss Julia’s hopes are destroyed by her favourite student, Gloria Renfro’s efforts to seek an identity through marriage. Similarly, Miss Eckhart’s expectations for her prize pupil Virgie Rainey are devastated by Virgie’s insistence upon her own individuality.

James Silver pictures “the closed society” as “a hyper-orthodox social order in which the individual has no option except to be loyal to the will of the white majority.” He observes “the strongest preservative of the closed society” as “the closed mind.” Instead of planning for the future, the closed
society tries to look to the past, and to preserve the mythic view of life. On the one hand, there is the Banner community with its sustaining and unifying legacy of customs, rites, loyalties, and habits; its tendency to see the way things were as the way things are. On the other hand, there are the teachers, Julia and Gloria, outsiders in Banner who turn away from the past toward the future as the harbingers of change, possessing unlimited faith in education and aspiring to a better life.

Julia Mortimer’s career is an espousal of values different from those of the community, and she is judged aberrant by her female neighbours on account of the value she places on books, rather than on the home-made and home-grown things like the ferns, the quilts, pincushions, saucers and teacups. The reunions in Welty’s fiction confirm certain traditional female values. Whether the rituals honour life or death, they are family occasions, held for the most part in the home, surrounded by all of its treasures, and controlled by the women of the household. Though such things do not concern Julia Mortimer, they are of primary concern to women like Beulah Renfro, who value ceremony for its own sake and manage the perpetuation of family rituals.

As a young woman, Julia Mortimer boards with the neighbouring Comfort family, and she commits an unpardonable mistake by engaging in activities not traditionally accepted by women in the home. A woman spending time by fireside merely reading books appears quite unorthodox to women whose prime concerns are such time-honoured tasks as knitting, cooking, crocheting, and sewing. Aunt Nanny declares:
“Everybody had to have her. The Comforts, they had their crack at her too. Come the long winter evenings, they all had to crowd mighty close together in the room with the fire to both see and keep warm by. And she’d stand up and read to ’em! Made ’em mad as wet hens. They had to hush talking, else he called impolite,” said Aunt Nanny. “I used to be there and in the same boat with ’em because, you know, that’s who Mama gave me to.”

“Read to ’em? At home?” Aunt Birdie cried. “It was her idea, not theirs,” said Aunt Nanny. “Old Mis’ Comfort says nobody’d ever know what her and the children suffered, with that teacher cooped in with us all winter. Old lady’s dust now, but she one time heard Miss Julia out to the tag end of her piece in the reader, and then that old lady spit in the fire and told the teacher and her own daughter—who’d just had a baby without sign of wedding band—’Now be ashamed both of ye’.” (275)

Hardly tolerated in the school, reading aloud is totally undesirable in the home. In the eyes of the Banner women, reading at home and conceiving out of wedlock are merely equivalent sins, the latter can, however, be absolved by marriage.

In Welty’s fiction, books are never presented as gifts, though wedding or birthday gifts to a woman are prized. In Delta Wedding, Troy Flavin’s mother sends a quilt called Delectable Mountains, her invaluable possession, as a wedding gift to her daughter-in-law, Dabney. Religion and artistry combine to confirm the continuity of the quilting tradition among family
women, as the sources of the names of quilts are the Bible, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Granny Renfro in *Losing Battles* is proud of the quilt given to her on her birthday and she avouches with mixed feelings of pride and gladness that she will be buried under the quilt apparently of her own making and appropriately named as “Seek No Further.” She says, “I've got more than one quilt to my name that'll bear close inspection” (223).

Against the quilts and the teacups, Miss Julia sets her peach trees and the books which she buys with the proceeds from her garden. The Banner women are scornful and sarcastic of the results of her labour:

“Oh, books! The woman read more books than you could shake a stick at,” said Miss Beulah. “I don’t know what she thought was going to get her if she didn’t.” “She’d give out prizes for reading, at the end of school, but what would be the prizes? More books,” said Aunt Birdie. “I dreaded to win.” (240)

The women of the Banner community have always dreaded school, books and Miss Julia. Education and books are regarded as simply irrelevant to life. Julia Mortimer was “full of books” (240), which the community views as an oppressive force. “She drove what she could into us,” states Miss Beulah (236). The process of learning is pictured as punishment: “And for the rest of your punishment, you’re to come straight home from school today and tell me something you’re learned” (374). Aunt Birdie confesses that Banner school was pure poison while it lasted, but it didn’t leave her any scars due to her youth and because of the fact that everything at school was so “far-fetched” (294). Just as Morgana rejects the strange and alien teacher Miss Eckhart, Banner rejects Miss Julia Mortimer, the locally-born and bred teacher.
In the Banner community the accepted modes of female behaviour are sitting, talking and listening to others talk. Reading is a waste of time that could be spent talking. The domestic chores like cooking and sewing are done while talking. Nearly everyone in Welty’s communities is a compulsive talker; their idea of the function of communication is significantly not one of open sharing talk between one person and another. Welty’s communities as a whole are made up of people who talk mainly to defend their community conscience. It does not seem so strange that the catalysts of nearly all the novels are teachers: dedicated, sympathetic but determined women who show boundless patience toward the communities who are determined to educate and possess an enduring vision to sustain their patience. They bring the local to the universal to teach others to see and feel the true bounds of reality for themselves.

Miss Julia has been a long-time teacher at the Banner school and all who gather at the reunion and all other townsfolk of the Banner community have been her students. The nature of their vexation becomes evident in the mixed feelings of anger, guilt and nostalgia with which they speak of her. She is always guided by the desire to make her pupils confront the consequences of their humanity ultimately. She is a threat to the entire Banner community for what she is in, what she wants them to do, what she seeks to force them to learn about the world and themselves.\textsuperscript{25} The Banner women are not at all interested in reading or writing. Julia Mortimer reads and teaches, and she does not waste words. The reunion inevitably proceeds through talk and tales which link the past and present events and invariably confirm the old values. Like the reunion itself, such tales are perpetuated habitually, without a breath
of curiosity as to why. The working answer to any question about values is that it has always been done that way. Out of all the women in *Losing Battles*, only Julia Mortimer has the audacity and determination to ask why, and to persuade the Banner people to realize who they are, and what they are doing.

Julia Mortimer incurs the wrath of the Banner women since her domestic tasks like milking or gardening bear the ulterior motive of buying more books with the money she earns thereby. She plants trees just as she plants ideas in the minds of her pupils; she wants them to grow, to perpetuate. She cannot stand the thought of anything she values remaining unshared; her attempt to give away plants from her own garden meets with disgust. Gloria Short, who has assisted her teacher, Miss Julia, to mail little peach trees to the people throughout the community, tells at the reunion that Miss Julia “wanted to make everybody grow as satisfying an orchard as hers” (242). But they refuse to take anything at all from Miss Julia, whom they regard as their foe right up to her death.

As John Edward Hardy observes, the deep dedication to the cause of education, her long struggle against ignorance, against the lawless pieties of a debased religious faith and tribal customs have combined with implacable nature and a cruelly exploitative national economy to destroy Miss Julia’s career.26 She remains the champion of devoted single life, but the Banner community questions her very sincerity contemnuously, as expressed by Aunt Birdie in her characteristic remark that “she ought to have married somebody. . . . Then what she wanted wouldn’t mean a thing. She would be buried with him, and no questions asked” (296).
Julia Mortimer has vested in her protégée, Gloria Short, all hopes of continuing the educative ideals for which she stood throughout her life. But Gloria proves herself to be unworthy of the hopes and aspirations, the dedication and affection of her teacher. In effect, Gloria turns her back on a life of her own by marrying into the Renfro family. She gives up her career against the will of Miss Julia, who cannot share Gloria’s faith in her ability to keep her identity in marriage. Gloria proposes to remain a teacher in her mind and spirit, which for her is all that matters. The relationship between Julia Mortimer and Gloria is not so complicated as that between Miss Eckhart and Virgie. Gloria comes to no revelations about the relationship to Julia Mortimer, her teacher, to whom she owes her education and the still-cherished example of professional pride.

Under the pressure of their poverty, the Banner community neglects the material needs of Miss Julia, in a sense abandons her in her age and infirmity, to Lexie Renfro, who has been neglectful to Julia Mortimer and Julia dies. There is nothing ludicrous about Julia Mortimer. In the Bunting interview, Welty suggests that Julia Mortimer has not lost her battle at the time of her death:

Well, you can look at “losing” in two ways: the verb or the participle. Even though you are losing the battle, it doesn’t mean that you aren’t eternally fighting them and brave in yourself. And I wanted to show indomitability there. I don’t feel it’s a novel of despair at all. I feel it’s more a novel of admiration for the human being who can cope with any condition, even ignorance, and keep a courage, a joy of life, even, that’s unquenchable.27
The Banner community considers even her funeral a competition to the reunion. Disregarding the mournful nature of the gathering at Julia’s funeral, Beulah cries, “if you’d rather be celebrating at her house than mine, just turn around and go back over there, Homer” (339). When Homer Champion states that Julia’s house is full of “big shots” and that telegrams are arriving from high places, Auntie Fay answers, “all right for high style. But the way we’ve been told. Miss Julia herself is still going without a place to be buried” (338). When Homer replies that he has succeeded in getting her a plot in the Banner cemetery, Beulah Renfro is horrified: “In Banner cemetery? Homer Champion! You’re bringing her right smack in our midst?” cried Miss Beulah wildly. “She’s going to be buried with us?” (338). The presence of the distinguished mourners at her funeral makes Julia Mortimer superior to the Banner community. At her funeral ceremony, surrounded by her former pupils, and flocks of owls, Julia Mortimer attains a glorious Athena-like quality:

As the pall bearers reached where they were going, owls in a stream, one after the other, came up out of the old cedar tree. Owls lifted like a puff of smoke over the priest and the pall bearers and the coffin as it rocked once, suspended over the grave, lifted over the morning’s crowd, over monuments and trees, and away. Even the last old cedar was inhabited (429-30).

In contrast with the incessant chatter of the reunion, the language which surrounds Julia’s burial is elegiac.

Though Julia Mortimer never appears as a character in Losing Battles, she becomes the dominant figure. As Gloria puts it, Julia “didn’t want
anybody left in the dark, not about anything. She wanted everything brought out in the wide open, to see and be known” (432). In Welty’s fictional world, communities enable their members to hide from reality, not to spread out their minds and their hearts to other people, so they could be read like books either by others or by themselves. The gem of a teacher like Julia Mortimer cannot shrink from such knowledge as certain others, as she “had no use for a mystery” (316).

Turner’s explanations of communitas and liminality put the relationship between Julia Mortimer and the Banner community in a positive and negative light. Communitas is alive in the unconscious of societies. Both social legitimacy and personal comfort in relations with others depend on periodically renewed recognition of and participation in communitas. Wrong social relations bring pressure on the people who perpetrate them. Part of Turner’s argument about communitas is that it is both frequently repressed and crucially necessary. The Banner community perpetrate wrong social relations by picturing Miss Julia as their “cross to bear,” by regarding Julia’s efforts to teach them as a threat to their security and self-esteem, by showing entrenched resistance to change and by neglecting Julia in her old age and infirmity, and thereby the communitas repression pressures the Bannerites. Miss Julia is at fault too: she denies the complexity of the community whose lives she wants to alter; she tries to bring the higher synthesis of goodness and wisdom in the apparently changeless world of Banner at a stroke.

Julia Mortimer is a liminal figure, an “outsider,” in her struggle against the Banner community for enriching the life of the Bannerites and that of herself, without surrendering her personal priorities to those of the community.
Being an autonomous woman, she deviates from the accepted norms of the community, their value system, the potentially oppressive forces of their traditions and rituals, without losing her strength of mind and heroism. We learn much about Miss Julia from her deathbed letter to Judge Moody and from the memories and accounts of her former pupils, who at times praise her but more often portray her as a thorn in the flesh of the community, or as a tormentor. As Gloria assesses, “all she wanted was a teacher’s life... But it looked like past a certain point nobody was willing to let her have it” (294). Perhaps in retirement she is a little crazy as Lexie Renfro, her nurse, pictures. As Turner says, “people can go crazy because of communitas repression.” Communitas repression makes Miss Julia a little crazy. Her former student, Dr. Carruthers’ brief remark at the funeral expresses the neglectfulness that may crop up in any human community. “Neglect, neglect! Of course you can die of it! Cheeks were a skeleton’s! I call it starvation, pure and simple” (430). Despite her wish for a separate burial, in death, Julia Mortimer is no longer an outsider. Her grave adjoins the Renfro family’s plot in Banner cemetery.

As Marilyn Arnold observes, “the tragedy is that one human being who loved another is broken by the ingratitude of the beloved.” Gloria forgets her deep sense of obligation to Miss Julia who has nurtured as well as taught her and provided her for years with a role model. The only one who cherishes any dream about Gloria is Julia Mortimer, but in marrying Jack Renfro, Gloria shatters all those dreams with hardly a second thought. Gloria who marries into the Beechams, passionately longs not to be a Beecham; in her attempt to seek an identity through marriage, she chooses “feeling” over a
teaching career and over Miss Julia's opposition.\textsuperscript{30} When Julia is sick and old, she yearns for Gloria and her desperation for letters and communication from Gloria is met with contempt by the negligent nurse, Lexie Renfro. To Julia's inquiries about Gloria, Lexie answers, "oh, she's just forgotten you, Julia, like everybody has" (279). This ingratitude is too much for Julia with her indomitable will and heroism. Welty is positive about the limited possibility for women in the Southern community to establish female strength, thanks to her unusual confidence and acceptance of her individual self that she gained from the supportive maternal heritage.

*The Optimist's Daughter* is about the fate of an independent, committed artist Laurel Hand, who comes back to her hometown, the Mount Salus community, on the occasion of the illness and death of her elderly father, Judge McKelva. While Fay Chisom, Laurel's stepmother, is as frivolous and as heedless of her past and future as Bonnie Dee Peacock of *The Ponder Heart*, Laurel is as determined as Virgie Rainey in *The Golden Apples* to learn from her past, and as dedicated as the girl-artist in "A Memory," in her attempts to comprehend and assimilate the experience of others. These commitments and her insistence upon her own independence make Laurel Hand a liminal figure in the Mount Salus community of Mississippi.

Though Laurel Hand's readiness to re-examine her past distinguishes her from her stepmother Fay, to whom "the past isn't a thing," in a sense she is as isolated as Fay herself. Laurel McKelva, born and brought up in Mount Salus, marries outside the community. She has chosen a career which differentiates her from the other educated women, who most often choose teaching as their profession. Laurel who has chosen designing as her occupation lives her adult life away from her town, in Chicago. Her choices
isolate her from the Mount Salus women, especially her former bridesmaids who, despite their well-intentioned attempts to console her after her father’s death, criticize her quite freely. Though she belongs to the Mount Salus community, she returns there as an outsider; her stepmother and the others regard her as one who has abandoned her home in her efforts to practise a career in a faraway place.

When Laurel comes back to Mount Salus for her father’s funeral, the bridesmaids’ welcome at first seems overpowering. To her mind’s comfort, she is enfolded in the arms of Miss Tennyson Bullock, her mother’s best friend. But the omniscient narrator exposes their real self by saying that “most of them had practiced for smiles on their faces and they all called her ‘Laura McKelva’, just as they always called her.” Miss Tennyson who has in her voice “all the finality in the world” firmly rejects Laurel, despite her robust hug, when she utters, “yes, daughters need to stay put, where they can keep a better eye on us old folks” (61). Her mother’s friends reprimand her for the double betrayal of leaving her father and marrying a Northerner. While Miss Tennyson points an accusing finger at Laurel, Old Mrs. Pease is “mad” at Laurel “for not getting the house.” But she is frank enough to remind Laurel that her very presence in Mount Salus could have prevented her father from the foolish decision of choosing Fay Chisom as his second wife: “Laurel is who should have saved him from that nonsense. Laurel shouldn’t have married a naval officer in wartime. Laurel should have stayed home after Becky died. He needed him somebody in that house, girl,” said old Mrs. Pease (115).
Miss Tennyson feels that now Laurel is in a favourable position to make amends, since she has lost both her husband and her father, by staying on in Mount Salus to help the women manage Fay.

"Why not indeed?" said Miss Adele. "Laurel has no other life."

"Of course I must get back to work," said Laurel. "Back to work," Miss Tennyson pointed her finger at Laurel and told the others, "That girl's had more now than she can say grace over. And she's going back to that life of labor when she could just as early give it up. Clint's left her a grand hunk of money." (112)

These women typify the attitude of the Southern community to the profession of artists. To them, the artistic career is only a poor substitute for the comforts of family life and monetary benefit is the only possible motive behind work. Fay appears callous in her remark, "Oh, I wouldn't have run off and left anybody that needed me. Just to call myself an artist and make a lot of money" (28). Insensible women like Fay cannot understand the meaningful and noble aspect of an artistic vocation (like that of Laurel, Miss Eckhart and Virgie Rainey), other than its monetary side. If not for money, why should one become an artist? This kind of ludicrous logic prevails in Mount Salus. Miss Tennyson asks, "who's going to kill you if you don't draw those pictures? As I was saying to Tish, 'Tish, if Laurel would stay home and Adele would retire, we could have as tough a bridge foursome as we had when Becky was playing'" (113). Bridge game is more important, in their eyes, than Laurel's art or Adele's teaching profession.
Welty's artistic figures like Laurel Hand have to grapple with social forces in their everyday lives which nourish and frustrate their talents. The community is often blind to the artistic talents and vision that the women artists possess. The female artists in Welty's fiction are sophisticated enough to believe, like Simone de Beauvoir, that to prevent an inner life that has no useful purpose from sinking into nothingness, to assert herself against given conditions which she bears rebelliously, to create a world other than that in which she fails to attain her being, [a woman] must resort to self-expression.32

To the Mount Salus community, which cannot consider artistic career an effective means of self-expression, Laurel’s profession is meaningless and nonsensical. They bring threatening accusations against Laurel to lure her away from the commitment to her career. The women make use of Becky’s love for her garden as a weapon of their emotional blackmailing of Laurel: “Laurel, look yonder. You still might change your mind if you could see the roses bloom, see Becky’s climber come out,” said Miss Tennyson softly. “I can imagine it, in Chicago.” “But you can’t smell it,” Miss Tennyson argued (113-14). Like the Fairchild aunts and Renfro women, the Mount Salus women are under the impression that the past lives on in home-grown or home-made mementoes. They cannot imagine Laurel separating herself from the roses or any material reminder of her mother’s presence.

Old Mrs. Pease next door confronts Laurel with what she regards as the ultimate threat: “Once you leave after this, you’ll always come back as a
visitor. . . . Feel free, of course—but it was always my opinion that people
don’t really want visitors” (112). Her alienation from the Mount Salus
community lends her detachment. Laurel realizes that if she leaves Mount
Salus now, she will always be an outsider to the community. She will be
forgiven only if she stays where she belongs. It is not hard to imagine Laurel
stifling the cry Reynolds Price attributes to the “onlookers” in Welty’s fiction,
as Laurel is very much aware of her present position in Mount Salus:

Their cry . . . is not the all but universal ‘O, lost! Make me a
member,’ but something like this—‘I am here alone, they are there
together; I see them clearly. I do not know why and I am not
happy, but I do see and clearly. I may even understand—why I’m
here, they there. Do I need or want to join them?”

Laurel decides not to join, but to try to understand what makes her different
from others, and to accept herself as such.

Laurel notices that her father is a local legend, and is celebrated on the
day of his funeral by the Mount Salus community to which he largely remains
a mystery. To them, the details of his life are insignificant; what is important is
the power of his legend: “Laurel saw that there had not been room enough in
the church for everybody who had come. All around the walls people were
standing; they darkened the colored glass of the windows. Black Mount Salus
had come too, and the black had dressed themselves in black” (89). He is
honoured by a community for which his funeral is “in the most profound
sense a social occasion,” as Cleanth Brooks notes. Like Virgie Rainey at her
mother’s funeral, Laurel at her father’s funeral is at first enraged by what she
regards as "lies" about the dead man, their "misrepresenting" him, "falsifying" him (83). Laurel feels that what is happening is not real. Miss Adele, the teacher, philosophises that the ending of a man's life on earth is very real; people are trying to say for a man that his life is over. There is no other way than saying the untruth. Laurel is a seeker after truth and all she can claim is that she wants people to tell the truth. But, the community "is not searching for the truth, but for a truth that will cosily fit its corporate image of itself," says Michael Kreyling. Though Laurel is disturbed by the misrepresentation of her father by the community, "she is as guilty of misperceiving his personal life as is the community of mythologizing his public life." Laurel is not quite sure of what the truth is until she is able to evoke her mother's and father's presence through memory. She looks to the past to equip herself with the means of understanding.

Like Virgie, Laurel as an "onlooker" has a perspective which permits her to analyze both present and past relationships with others and to combine her new-found understanding with her own individual experience. During the course of the novel, her perception enables her to attain real spiritual insight. She accepts the loss of her parents and her husband and decides to return to her independent life leaving the Mount Salus community. Just like Virgie, Laurel has forged an independent, clearly feminine identity, but she is an exile, a solitary wanderer; there is no community to sustain her, no comrades to share her new world. "The paradox of the private versus the communal self" is revealed in the relationship of Laurel, the artist, with the Mount Salus community. The community nurtures and stifles her consciousness; she can achieve a full sense of her self only when she abandons the Mount Salus
community for the fulfilment of her artistic career. As Lowry Pei has noted, "the imposition of names, the observing gaze of community can become a ruthless imprisonment . . . the power to withhold one's life from others becomes highly paradoxical because it leads to the horror in love . . . the separateness." Only through art, can Laurel liberate herself from the observing gaze of her community.
Notes

1 Louise Westling, Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens 5.
2 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor 228.
4 Victor Turner, Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors 266.
5 Ellen Moers, Literary Women 108.
6 Peter Schmidt, The Heart of the Story 60.
10 Conversations with Eudora Welty 339-40.
11 Westling, Eudora Welty 20.
12 Eudora Welty, The Ponder Heart (New York: Harcourt, 1954) 17. All further references will be to this edition.
17 Jennifer Lynn Randisi, A Tissue of Lies 63-64.


20 *Conversations with Eudora Welty* 31.


27 Bunting, interview 720.

28 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* 266.


31 Eudora Welty, *The Optimist’s Daughter* (New York: Random, 1972) 51. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

32 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 663.

33 Reynolds Price, “The Onlooker, Smiling: An Early Reading of *The Optimist’s Daughter,*” *Eudora Welty* 77.


