After the long noisy chatter of Losing Battles which is referred to as a "long raucous hymn to rural life," The Optimist's Daughter comes as a miracle of compression, a book small in scope but profound in implications. It is a subtle and contemplative study of the problem of love and isolation in the context of different relationships. It points out that despite the closest bonds of love, man is essentially an island and that he is never completely understood and deciphered by his closest kin. The novella has been acclaimed as Miss Welty's "Strongest, richest work" and has won her the Pulitzer prize for 1972.

The story of The Optimist's Daughter is stark and simple. Laurel McKelva Hand, a widow in her early forties, is summoned from Chicago, due to the illness of her father, Judge Clint McKelva. She comes to New Orleans where he is to be operated for a cataract. Here she clashes with her father's new and second wife, Wanda Fay, who is a few years her junior. The conflict between these middle-aged women comes to a temporary halt with the death of Judge McKelva. In the second part, the locale shifts to Mount Salus, the hometown of the McKelvas, where the body of the seventy-one-
year-old judge is brought for its burial. Here one gets a glimpse into the closely-knit community of Mount Salus which has gathered for the funeral ceremony. The third part deals with Laurel's journey into the past. The judge has been buried, Wanda Fay has gone to Texas, the friends have departed for their homes and Laurel, now alone, spends the night looking into the belongings of her parents. The seemingly insignificant things in the house take her back to her childhood. Then, out of her solitary ponderings in the large empty house, a fourth figure, that of Becky, Laurel's mother, emerges. Becky is made to rise up as a vivid presence out of her note-books, recipe-books and letters which she wrote to her husband from West Virginia and the letters she wrote to her daughter. In the fourth part, Fay is back from Texas. Laurel has come to terms with reality and has discovered the continuity of love in the human mind. She is now ready once more to face life — a true optimist's daughter.

Miss Welty has come a long way from the Delta Wedding, in which she painted an idealistic picture of a Southern family. The Fairchilds had been a closely-knit clan, smug and comfortable in their legend of happiness. They presented a houseful of uncles and aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins, rejoicing and partaking in the wedding celebration. The occasion symbolized love, harmony, growth, fulfilment. Losing Battles presented the desperate efforts of a family to hold together in the face of growing social and economic discord with the Renfros and
Beechans trying to protect their traditional values and family pride. They feared that the dark clouds of modernism were looming large on the horizon and would eventually devour the accepted family system. The occasion for their gathering was a family reunion to mark the ninetieth birthday of Granny Vaughn, who stood as a relic of the dying family system. In *The Optimist's Daughter* the family circle narrows down, and is limited to the study of one man, his second wife and a middle-aged widowed daughter. The occasion is the judge's eye operation, leading to his death. As the story ends, one finds the two women completely at odds with each other. Laurel leaves her ancestral home and goes back to Chicago. Fay stays on in her husband's house, alone, empty and unwanted. It is a picture of total disintegration of the family — a study in triangles.

However, Miss Welty considers the roots of familial love too strong to be severed so easily. Therefore, her Laurel, in order to gather herself to face the world, has to relive her childhood, which was richer, more secure, though pathosladen, in the house of her parents. To begin with, Laurel, who works as a dress designer in Chicago, comes flying all the way to New Orleans in order to be near her ailing father. She understands him more than Fay, his wife, does because both have shared a common past. Together, they have experienced the hope, despair, pleasure, pain and loss. She knows her
father's "delicacy in family feeling" as he lies quietly in the hospital bed, listening to Laurel's reading of Charles Dickens. Perhaps she does not even have to read aloud. Her silently turning the pages moves parallel with the judge's thoughts. Reading aloud has its bitter-sweet memories for both. To the old judge it serves as a reminder of the happy days when he and his first wife, Becky, sat in the library every night and read aloud to each other. To Laurel it means voices — the dear old voices of her parents when they were young, strong and healthy. She recalls hearing her parents reading to each other in the lateness of the night in the library, while she herself, a child then, dozed off to sleep in her bed upstairs. Years later, in the hospital room, Laurel is troubled by the change that has overtaken her father since she saw him last. She seems reluctant to acknowledge and accept what appears to be his uncharacteristic obedience: "The obedience of an old man — obedience. She felt ashamed to let him act out the part in front of her."

At Mount Salus, where the Judge is brought for his burial, Laurel learns from his father's friends that the people there blame her for her father's messing up his life and marrying Wanda Fay. Miss Tennyson Bullock, one of her mother's dearest friends tells her:

"Yes, daughters need to stay put, where they can keep a better eye on us old folk," and old Miss Peas says "Laurel is who should have saved him from that nonsense, his second marriage. Laurel should have stayed home after Becky died. He needed him somebody in that house, girl."
The censure is offered in a light-hearted vein, but it is made plain to Laurel that if she had come home after her husband's death and stayed with her father, he would not have fallen a prey to Wanda Fay.

Though Laurel cannot accept the charge that she was in any way responsible for what her father did, the question as to why he married Wanda Fay obviously troubles her. How could her father at seventy, marry a woman like her, thirty years his junior, who had absolutely nothing in common with him? Laurel is deeply puzzled by her father's strange step. All her childhood notions about her parents and their happy married life are disturbed. The question which had never arisen in her mind earlier, now begins to throb violently in her heart. "Did my father truly love my mother?" The answer comes when amidst the furniture, letters and other paraphernalia of the past, Laurel finds a small boat which her father had carved for her mother. As if a curtain is parted, Laurel finds herself looking squarely within, at the most intimate human relationships, that between her parents, and she tries to figure out her own place in it.

"Firelight and Warmth," that is what their memory gave her. But despite the warmth and love, Laurel feels that she was, in a sense, left out of it. She was the odd man out. She remembers the endless activities of her mother—horse-riding, cooking, playing mahjong, visiting her mother in West Virginia every year. Those were happy times. Becky
enjoyed being alive. But the joys faded out with her illness. Her eyesight gave way, making her completely blind. Laurel, by then widowed, watched her mother in bed for years — slowly growing more selfish and condemnatory. She tells Laurel, "You could have saved your mother's life, but you stood by and wouldn't intervene. I despair for you." 

Now, bereft alone, Laurel recognizes the meaning of that despair. She feels guilty at being unable to "save" either of her parents. She realizes how Becky felt when her own mother lay dying in West Virginia and Becky could do nothing to "save" her. The realization that none can save his parents, grips Laurel with deep emotion. Suddenly, almost compulsively, she is seized with an inner-need — to have her parents back, to ask them questions, to tell them all: "In her need Laurel would have been willing to wish her mother and father dragged back to any torment of living. She wanted them with her to share her grief." But it is too late. Those that take that path, never return. A flood of feeling descends on Laurel. She "... wept in grief for love and for the dead. She lay there with all that was adamant in her yielding to this night, yielding at last. The deepest spring in her heart had uncovered itself, and it began to flow again."

The dark night dawns into a silver morning of knowledge. Laurel learns that such a relationship, if full of pain, is nevertheless profoundly human and therefore infinitely valuable.
She has at last come to recognize and accept the relationship between her parents and her own place in it. She learns about the terrible failure of love to prevent pain and loss. Becky could not save her mother and Laurel could not save hers. All rights and duties come to an end when death knocks at the door. In the words of James Boatwright the story is about:

... the trauma we suffer in witnessing the death of parents, in burying them. In the order of nature; it occurs when most of us are middle-aged when we have learned, we think, what we are going to learn. ... When before have we grown up? With our first job, with marriage, with the first child? Maybe but they are not the same kind of events as this odd, painful liberation, which pulls the mind inward to a contemplation of our lives as we witness the end and make some final judgement on the lives of our parents, as we step free from them toward our own death.10

(Miss Welty has made a very subtle study of three marriage relationships — between Judge McKelva and his two wives, Becky and Fay, and between his daughter Laurel and Philip Hand. In this respect The Optimist's Daughter resembles the pattern of The Robber Bridegroom. But whereas The Robber Bridegroom was written in the mode of a fairytale so that one knew that all is going to end well, The Optimist's Daughter is a serious contemplative comment on the most vital relationships in an individual's life.)
Judge McKelva was in his early sixties when he lost his wife, Becky, with whom he had supposedly led a long and fruitful life. After Becky's death there was no necessity for him to marry again. But at seventy, he married Wanda Fay, thirty years his junior and totally incompatible. It bothers Laurel, his middle-aged widowed daughter, to think as to why he took this plunge. She wonders why a man acts the way he does at a certain turning point in his life. What happens to the memories of the times spent together after a satisfying marriage? What happens to marriage when two people love each other too much or not at all? To find an answer to these questions one must go deeper into the meaning of marriage as Eudora Welty conceives it.

Judge Clint McKelva's first wife Becky is a spirited girl from West Virginia. She is a strong, healthy, upright woman; fond of horse-riding, card-parties, reading and cooking. There is a lot of companionship between her and the judge. Each night they sit in the library and read aloud to each other, taking turns. Miss Becky is admired by her friends, cherished by her husband, adored by her daughter and spoilt by her mother. Secure and protected from all sides, she is confident and self-willed, dominating and demanding. Perhaps she demands too much of her loved ones. In her own special way she is hard on the judge at times. When her eye-sight starts failing, and the operations bring no improvement she
demands an explanation as to why her husband can't save her.
"Her cry" Miss Welty says, "was not complaint, it was an
anger at wanting to know and being denied knowledge. It was
love's deep anger." Laurel recalls the pain in her last
illness and her fierce reproaches to the judge. The Judge,
an optimist, believes that no harm would come to Becky because
he loved her. His love would be able to save her from the pain.
He presses her hand in consolation and says all would be well.
But as time goes by, things go from bad to worse. Hopelessly
she clings on to life and helplessly he watches her drift away.

During her last days, Becky is constantly reminded of
her home in West Virginia. She had always cherished "up home"
as a part of her inner world. Laurel remembers how she loved
telling stories about her happy childhood. She also remembers
their annual visits to West Virginia. Becky had even named
her daughter "Laurel" after the State flower. She was happier
"up home" than she ever was in Mount Salus. Now nearing her end,
Becky demands to be taken where she belongs. The Judge tells
her comfortingly, "I will take you to your mountains Becky."
But Becky knows the meaninglessness of the promise. She cries
out, "Lucifer! Liar! " In the end Becky loses all will to live.
She suddenly becomes silent, she lies quietly night and day,
waiting — waiting for the end to come. After a stroke has
crippled her further, she comes to believe that she has been
taken among strangers before whom even anger is meaningless. She
dies without speaking a word, keeping everything to herself, in "exile" and humiliation. Becky's marriage with the Judge is a complex fabric of love and separateness, compassion and abuse, and although Becky loves the Judge deeply and passionately, she dies unhappy, with her heart in the mountains.

Wanda Fay Chisom, the Judge's second wife, comes from what is called the "white trash" in the South. James Boatwright says, "She is not from the right sort of people, she is mean-spirited, totally self-absorbed. Price describes her as "hard, vulgar, self-absorbed"; and Cleanth Brooks calls her "a shallow little vulgarian". Fay worked in a small store from where she is picked up and married by Judge Clint McKelva and brought home to be introduced to his genteel circle at Mount Salus. The community of Mount Salus consists of a tightly-bound set of people with strong loyalties and commitments toward each other. An outsider is not easily accepted in this community. Fay has always been the outsider—an object of contempt and snide remarks. Her marriage to the Judge has been looked upon with scorn and skepticism. To Laurel it is a "desecration of a holy ground." Fay has violated the atmosphere of the a sanctuary where the perfect marriage of her parents had once existed.

The reader is introduced to Fay at the hospital in New Orleans. It is the time of Mardi Gras. New Orleans is buzzing with excitement and the old judge chooses to lie on his death-
bed, a thing unpardonable in the eyes of Fay. The two women attend on him alternately. At that time "Fay behaves like a pet, a baby doll, her idea of nursing consisting of the description of her new shoes and earrings." On the final night of the carnival Fay excitedly asks the judge to listen to her story. But the Judge is sinking toward his death. He makes no answer. At this her patience is exhausted. "Enough is enough," she cries shaking him violently. And the judge passes away under those deadly jolts. Reynold Price considers this placing of events just a coincidence. He says:

-Inevitably, a great deal of heavy holy weather will be made over Miss Welty’s choice of the Carnival season for this opening section and the eve of Ash Wednesday for the first climax. So far as I can see, she herself, almost makes nothing of it. The revelry is barely mentioned and then only as a ludicrously appropriate backdrop to death. Even less is made of the city itself. Almost no appeal to its famous atmosphere—it is simply a place where a man from the deep South finds the best doctors." Miss Welty, it seems has deliberately underplayed the sharp contrast between the outer activities of the world and the inner struggles of man, suggesting thereby, that despite the deaths and funerals, life must go on. The erratic nature of events cannot be explained. Secondly, she has implicitly depicted the spiritual discord between Fay and the Judge. Fay belongs to a different milieu. She is the child of fun and festivity, wedded to the spirit of Mardi Gras. It is significant that the action of the first chapter is set when
Mardi Gras is approaching loudly into the city of New Orleans. The old Judge is suspended between life and death while the carnival is at full swing outside. People are going delirious with hilarity and Fay is shaking the judge in exasperation. "It is my Birthday," she cries. She wants him to get up and pay a little attention to her, for a change. At forty, she is vibrating with life. Little things like carnivals and a pair of shiny ear-rings brighten up her spirits. But her enthusiasm is neither shared nor reciprocated by her old husband. A complete communication gap! It has been a wrong marriage — a marriage between Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday.

At Mount Salus, Fay's family, the Chisoms, whom she has claimed to be dead, arrive in a big bunch on a tractor. They are led by Fay's mother, followed by sisters, brothers and a hoard of kids. Their behaviour at the funeral evokes horror and disgust. It is entirely out of place for an occasion demanding restraint and serenity. When, at last, the funeral is over and the Chisoms leave for Texas taking Fay back with them for respite, Laurel is reminded of little Wendell Chisom, Fay's nephew. Now, the reason why her father at seventy, let a beginner walk into his life, becomes clear. Wendell "was like a young, undriven, unfalsifying, unindictive Fay. His face was transparent, he was beautiful." So Fay might have appeared to her father's slipping eyesight, young and childlike. This idea lends Laurel some temporary sanity, and helps her understand Fay and her father's love for her.
In the last chapter of the novel, Fay comes back from Texas. She has come to claim what rightfully belongs to her. Laurel, who has by now washed away her grief with tears in the night, wants to ask her just one question:

"What were you trying to scare father into—when you struck him" she asks.

"I was trying to scare him into living" Fay cries, "I wanted him to get up out of there and start paying a little attention to me, for a change."

"He was dying", says Laurel. "He was paying full attention to that." 22

To have disturbed a man when his entire being was focused on the process of dying can only be attributed to utter ignorance, unconcern and callousness. But Fay was unaware of her contribution toward her husband's death. Laurel resigns herself in exasperation.

However, one feels that critics have been too harsh on Wanda Fay. She has been compared to Salome, the wicked stepmother in The Robber Bridegroom and like her, proclaimed incapable of human feeling. A reader not acquainted with all of Miss Welty's work might be tempted to attribute her treatment of Wanda Fay to a contemptuous dislike of the southern poor-white. Nothing would be further removed from truth. Her very involvement with the Renfro-Beechams, the Peacocks, the Chisoms and the many poor people of her stories shows her tolerance, interest and sympathetic understanding of the class. No doubt, Miss Welty's description of Fay is somewhat horrible, yet, studied with an insight one realizes that even Fay has a point.
True, Fay comes from an uncouth, rustic stock. Her upbringing is poor, education meagre, mannerism uncultured, yet she emerges a strong individual. She is flippant but enterprising, having worked her way into marrying the rich widower, Judge McKelva. A true machiavillian, Fay is unscrupulous, dishonest and untruthful. She tells lies about her family without as much as a blink. She tells Laurel that her family is dead. But when her family, the Chisoms, actually appear for the funeral and Laurel confronts her with the lie, Fay readily confesses, adding the excuse that lying about the past is "what everybody else does." Indeed, the entire conversation of the assembled friends of the McKelva's corroborates this statement. They have been doing nothing but exaggerating, eliminating and colouring facts to suit their convenience. Fay is theatrical enough to put up a mock-show of uncontrolable grief after a night's sound sleep. She considers herself the star of the day and takes her own sweet time to come down while the whole community waits for her beside the judge's hearse. Fay knows fully the contempt of the community toward her, and returns the feeling with a greater force. Her roots are in Texas, with her own people, as Becky's were in West Virginia. She slaps the face of the Mount Salus community by returning home with her people as soon as the burial is over. Fay will have no nonsense from the Mount Salus community. She will come and go if and when she pleases. The very fact that no one can say a word to her face shows that she is one up over them.
Fay knows that her husband loved Becky, his first wife, intensely; that next to Becky came Laurel, his daughter, her own place being relegated to the last. She is considered merely a play-thing—a pretty doll. The Judge puts up with her tantrums and pouts with an air of amused tolerance. Therefore, she is driven to make her presence felt. Soon after her marriage she covers the old couple's bedroom with an outrageous peach-satin tapestry, and relegates Becky's belongings to an obscure sewing-room, and unthinkingly perhaps, mutilates the bread-board which Laurel's husband, Philip, made for his mother-in-law. "I am Mrs. McKelva now," she asserts jealously to all concerned. Her callousness, one feels, is only born out of some inner insecurity.

Fay, in her own place, is an isolated person. First, she is hopelessly outnumbered and outclassed by those whose circle she had hoped to enter through marriage. But more important, she is a newcomer and has no share in the past common to all others. She is the subject of gossip, object of criticism, a means to unite a group which excludes and isolates her.

Now it dawns upon Laurel that both times her father chose to marry, he suffered, once from the intensity of love which demanded more than he could give, and then from the total lack of love and concern. Whatever rivalry there was between her mother and Fay, it was not "between the living and the dead, between the old wife and the new, it was between too much love and too little."
Laurel's marriage with Philip Hand stands as a contrast between the two marriages of her father. Phil died in World War II after a very brief married life. With his death, Laurel too stopped living in the present. She tried to retain the sweetness of the memory by not letting a "beginner" walk into her life. At the end of her long vigil that stormy night she re-examines her own marriage with Phil and contrasts it with that of her parents. Their's was a relationship that was "burdensome, endless inconclusive, imperfect," while hers was that of ease, brevity, perfection. What would have happened had Phil lived? Would their marriage still have retained that perfection? Had it still been ideal? She realizes that in a vital relationship both joy and pain, love and hate are necessary. Love means growing together, fighting surrendering, adjusting, understanding. The experience which comes with friction, when the sharp edges are slowly blunted and two individuals accommodate to each other makes life rich and worthwhile. Laurel saw only one aspect of love - the sweet one. Her's was an incomplete relationship.

An actual incident comes in Laurel's dream that night. She and Phil were riding on a train, to be married in Mount Salus. At dawn they saw a beautiful scene from a high point. Far below them, the Ohio and Mississippi Waters were mingling together, and far above, "the long, ragged, pencil-faint line
of birds within the crystal of the zenith, flying in a V of their own, following the same course down. All they could see was sky, water, birds light and confluence. It was the whole morning world. The prospect of living her life with Phil and moving together filled her mind with exhilaration. She felt at that moment that they are "going to live for ever." But Phil is killed soon afterwards. After Phil's death Laurel makes herself a cocoon and retires into it. She seeks the past for consolation — she makes a retreat, from an alien and blind world represented by Fay on the one hand, the community of Mount Salus on the other, and derives her nourishment from the memories of the past. This aspect of Laurel's character is beautifully illustrated through another scene. On the train, once again, while bringing her father's body to Mount Salus, Laurel sees from the widow:

"Set deep in the swamp, where the black trees were welling with buds like red drops, was one low beech that had kept its last year's leaves, and it appeared to Laurel to travel along with their train, gliding at a magic speed through the cypresses they left behind. It was her own reflection in the window-pane — the beech tree was her head. How it was gone."

Laurel indeed is the beech tree clutching the dead leaves of her memory, refusing to let go.

Thus, both Laurel and Fay are isolated from the world they live in. Their isolation springs from their different spiritual affinities. Laurel belongs to the past, Fay to the future. Both are childless widows and have had an
incomplete married life. Laurel understands that the past is unalterable, but as a source of knowledge of love and separateness it is the key to acceptance and peace. When in the bread-board scene, Laurel loses her balance and finds herself holding the board over her head — a symbol of love but now serving as a weapon — Fay tells her that she doesn't know what they are fighting for. Her energy, her shrewdness, her spontaneity is directed toward the future and is identified with life. She is the Life-Force, the ultimate reality. She stands in the midst of the traditional value system, challenging the world to face life. Laurel learns from her the lesson of being true to life. She goes back to Chicago once again, a richer person with a wealth of memories, while Fay stays back, a figure totally incapable of love, in panicky flight from blood ties and yet going on with a vigour and zest, all her own.

(III)

With the opening of the second chapter of The Optimist's Daughter the reader finds himself amidst the upper brass of the Mount Salus community. The entire set of judge McKelva's cronies have assembled to say their final good-bye to their friend. Laurel's bridesmaids, now well into middle-age are present. Dot Daggot, the judge's secretary until he retired, tells Laurel: "I saw everybody I used to know." 29

There is a constant flow of talk in which the past is freely mingled with the present. One gets a peculiar sense
of continuity of time. Indeed, the past impinges so vividly on the present that even death ceases to be a tragedy. Cleanth Brooks sees the occasion as a celebration. He says: "A closely knit community is here gathered around the bier of one of the more prominent members, not so much to mourn him as to celebrate and with genuine affection — his achievements. The community means to do him honor."\(^{30}\)

One is struck by the atmosphere of festivity when Judge McKelva's body is brought to Mount Salus for its burial. It seems more like a wedding than like a funeral. Laurel is received at the railway station by her "bridesmaids". Friends await the party at the McKelva house with pies "three deep" in the pantry and drinks ready to be served. Major Bullock is already high. Fay's reaction to the situation is sharp and spontaneous, "I didn't know I was giving a reception."\(^{31}\) She says, as she stares into the room. Ladies sit in the parlour, talk about mahjong and the little pleasantries of the past. The country school has been given a holiday as a mark of respect to the late judge. The school-band plays a tune when the procession marches toward the cemetery, and gaily dressed children wave their coloured flags. After the burial Dot Daggot comes up to Laurel and says "I want to tell you Laurel, what a beautiful funeral it was."\(^{32}\)

After the funeral the ladies from the neighbourhood settle down in the McKelva's sitting room and remember the judge and
his first wife Becky. They talk about their happy married life, wonder at the Judge's misjudgement in choosing Fay as his second wife, pass cryptic remarks about Fay's family. Their malice toward Fay is projected without reservations. Yet, the one person who has reasons to hate her, does not participate in the coal-raking of Fay. Her contention is that Fay was her father's wife. She didn't storm the gates of Mount Salus, she was invited in. Laurel is further disturbed to see how little these friends know about her father. She resents their manipulation of her parents' past to fit their own argument. She wants to project them from this form of abuse. She is upset, for instance, when Major Bullock tells a story of her father facing down a mob of Ku-klux-Klammers to save an imprisoned man he had sentenced. Her father was not as theatrical as the story suggests; she suspects the Major is trying "to make father into something he wanted to be himself." Again, she flares up at the reminiscences of both her dead parents. "Since when have you started laughing at them?... Are they just figures from now on to make a good story?" She is upset at their endless prattling. "They are misrepresenting him falsifying, that's what mother would call it. He never would have stood for lies being told about him. Not any time, Not ever." But she tolerates them out of respect for her father. She tells Fay: "They're all father's friends Fey. They're exactly the ones he'd have counted on to be here in the house to meet us... and I count on them."
The other set of people come from a different class of the South. The Chisoms and the Dalzells—the poor whites, whom Miss Welty knows so well. There is a sprinkling of these people in many of her works. The Peacocks in The Ponder Heart, the bathers in 'A Memory', the couple in 'The Whistle' and the entire lot of Losing Battles. Miss Welty has a deep fascination with this class and she portrays them with understanding, gusto and good humour.

The Chisoms are a large family of uncouth rustics from Texas. Their responses to people and situations are spontaneous and often blunt. They look glaringly vulgar in the presence of the sophisticated Mount Salus crowd. Fay's mother makes direct and open comments about the funeral. Fay herself cries aloud on the Judge's bier lending a sense of melodrama to the tragic event. However, their mutual affection and strong family-feeling cannot be denied. Mrs. Chisom feels sorry for Laurel for not having anyone in the world to call her own. She says "So you ain't got father, mother, sister, husband, chick or child. Not a soul to call on that's you." She explains further: "Friends are here today and gone tomorrow not like your kin."

The Chisoms are a closely-knit family. Their children don't move out to make an independent living. The only exceptions have been Fay and a son Roscoe. Roscoe moved to Orange and killed himself there. When Mrs. Chisom wrote to his friends asking them what had been "fretting" her son, his
friends answered that Roscoe did not want his mother to know his troubles. Wanda Fay who earlier denied the existence of her family, decided to go back with them to Texas saying, "I'd just like to see somebody that can talk my language." Mrs. Chisom is proud of her family. She says: "Yes, me and my brood believe in clustering just as close as we can get.... Bubba pulled his trailer right up in my yard when he married, and Irma can string her clothes-line as far out as she pleases. Sis here, got married and didn't even try to move away. Diffy just smuggled in."39

Thus we see that the Chisom family comprises of Grandpa, Mrs. Chisom, her children and grandchildren — four generations living in complete harmony with each other.

Another family, the Dalzells are introduced in the New Orleans hospital. They are also a set of coarse people but a family of finer feeling and natural grace. They are both funny and touching in their approach toward Laurel and Fay. Old Mrs. Dalzell complains about the 'callousness' that prevails in the hospitals and says: "If they don't give your dad no water by next time round, tell you what, we'll go in there all together and pour it down him... If he's going to die, I don't want him to die wanting water."40 It is true that the sophistication and restraint are absent in these people but Fay is proud of what they are. She tells Mrs. Tennyson: "Well, at least my family is not hypocrites."40
The Optimist’s Daughter, at another level, is a study of two kinds of people, two versions of life, two contending forces, one represented by the genteel Mississipians and the other by the crude Texans. The romantic school of Southern critics associate the white trash with the ugly, the comical and the vulgar. According to them, these rootless, amoral human types are the ones to whom the future might belong. Cleanth-Brooks for example, likens the Chisos to the Snopes and Jason Compson of William Faulkner. “They all lack the pieties that bind one generation back to another, the loyalties and the imaginative sympathies which affirm that all men are one race and further, that the living and the dead are of one race too.” Therefore, Brooks claims that they are not fully human. Miss Welty, however, writes primarily about human beings as individuals, irrespective of what class they belong to. Her Chiso’s may be vulgar and coarse but they represent life; they make solid claims on vitality endurance and Life-Force, they may be common as the dirt, but “it takes dirt to make things grow,” says Howard Moss.

The Optimist’s Daughter can be considered as the epitome of Eudora Welty’s ideas about love, life, death and Time. Three levels of human relationships have been studied in this novel: that between parent and child, between husband and wife and between the individual and the community. At all levels, one notices the inadequacy of mutual understanding because one
always sees the other through his own lens, coloured by his own perspectives and values. The greater the expectation, the more the frustration. Thus, love and isolation go side by side.

Secondly, Miss Welty wants to say that man has no power over the forces of nature. His desires and dreams may suddenly be shattered by one bitter stroke of nature. Therefore, the best he can do is to keep the precious moments tightly tucked in the folds of his heart. The past indeed, is more clearly the subject of *The Optimist's Daughter* than any other work of Eudora Welty. *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Delta Wedding* were a nostalgic retreat into the romantic past, without any reference to the present; *The Pender Heart* and *Losing Battles* while explicitly gloating over the past, presented the future as a threat. *The Optimist's Daughter* holds a perfect balance between the two poles. Although its heroine seeks the past as a cure from her present isolation in an alien world, yet the direction of the novel is not inward but outward. Therefore, Laurel turns towards Chicago, a world of life and activity while carrying with her the past for sustenance. In the end what matters is life, not death.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Ibid., p. 31.

5. Ibid., pp. 136-37.

6. Ibid., p. 158.

7. Ibid., pp. 177-78.

8. Ibid., p. 150.


12. Ibid., p. 176.


17. Price, p. 63.

18. The Optimist's Daughter, p. 43.


20. The Optimist's Daughter, p. 52.

21. Ibid., p. 94.

22. Ibid., pp. 202-203.

23. Ibid., p. 119.

24. Ibid., p. 82.
28. Ibid., pp.56-57.
29. Ibid., p.111.
32. Ibid., p.111.
33. Ibid., p.98.
34. Ibid., pp.150-51.
35. Ibid., p.101.
36. Ibid., p.66.
37. Ibid., p.86.
38. Ibid., p.117.
39. Ibid., p.87.
40. Ibid., p.51.
41. Ibid., p.120.