CHAPTER-IV

*THE OPTIMIST’S DAUGHTER:*
Towards Portraying the New Woman
Flannery O'Connor once commented on the difference between her way of writing and Eudora Welty's. She said "I am not one of the subtle sensitive writers like Eudora Welty. I see only what is outside and what sticks out a mile, such things as the sun that nobody has to uncover or be bright to see." It is precisely those respective qualities identified by O'Connor that render her own meanings so starkly difficult and Eudora Welty's so elusive. It may not have occurred to O'Connor that things sticking out a mile can be harder to see than things hidden behind doors, but she was aware of something in Welty's approach to life and fiction that allows her to slip through our fingers. This characteristic of Welty's work is especially apparent in the final section of *The Optimistic Daughter*, published some sixteen years after O'Connor's remarks. The book is about the struggle of a widow in her middle forties to make sense out of the past, to understand her mother's and then her father's dying vow, to comprehend why her father took for a second wife a crass, low bred woman younger than his daughter, and to interpret her own brief marriage which ended suddenly by war and death.
Although the novel’s overt action centres round the death of Judge McKelva following eye surgery in New Orleans (Orleans), and his funeral and burial at home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, its meanings are realized through conflicting motions in the mind of Laurel, McKelva Hand, daughter of Judge Clinton McKelva and Becky McKelva. Welty’s several themes are death, human relationships, and the effects of memory on the past, but through the use of image, symbol, ritual, and parable she weaves them together into one thematic whole. Death, Welty says, plunges the dead into the past by snapping the present shut. What becomes important then is what living memory does with the past. Laurel must now ponder over the nature of her parents’ love. She must reconsider the brief perfection of the love she and Philip Hand had shared and she must recognize that it is not the dead but the living who, in their loneliness and uncertainty, are in danger.

Imagery and symbol are especially important in conveying the elusive character of Welty’s idea. The book’s most pervasive system of symbolic imagery centres round birds, with the first reference coming in the very beginning of the book when the Judge associates his initial awareness of vision problems with the flashing of bright tin reflectors in his fig tree. The reflectors are remnants of Becky’s
efforts to protect the fruit from the appetites of birds. They are ineffectual, of course, as evidenced later when an irreverent band of cardinals is seen zooming playfully at their own reflections in the shiny round tins. The futility of trying to protect anything precious from outside incursions is one of the painful lessons Laurel learns from her father's death. She grows increasingly disturbed as friends and town people invent a heroic past for Judge McKelva while he lies helpless in his coffin. Foiled in her wish to close the coffin lid against the eyes of the town people, Laurel feels that her father has "reached at this moment the danger point of his life". For it seems almost "as though he were in the process of being put on trial here instead of being viewed in his casket"(p.100-101) and she were being forced to testify in his behalf. Laurel can provide no more protection to her father against this joyous, irresponsible myth-making than the reflectors can provide to the fig tree. Miss Adele Courtlands' comment about the undaunted cardinals, and by implication, about the neighbours' gossip on a day following the funeral, could well apply to the story-telling ritual acted out in the presence of the corpse: "Oh, it's a game, isn't it? Nothing but a game!" (p.138)

Some critics describe the language of The Optimistic Daughter as having a "stripped iron efficiency" and bearing almost no
resemblance to the slow dissolving impressionism, relativism” of some earlier stories of Eudora Welty. Reynolds Price calls it, in fact, ‘a language for stating facts.”3 I think that although scattered segments of the first part of the novel have something of the quality Price mentions, most of it is far from “efficient” or factual. The later and the very long revelatory section during which Laurel calls up the past is highly celebral and poetic. The changes Welty made in the later version of the story may partly account for our differing perceptions. In a postscript to his essay, for example, Price notes that in the later version Laurel “has acquired memories and reflections” about her relationship with Phil that were not in The New Yorker story.

In this novel, the focus is on the modern daughter Laurel McKelva, who ventures out beyond the sheltered domestic restrictions of traditional womanhood. It is a story about what went on in a young widow’s (Laurel) mind in response to grief, loss and agony; her adjustment to face it and her acceptance of love and affection in tangled family relationships. She acknowledges her common humanity and achieves individuality and confirmation of her true superiority to Fay, her step-mother. At last she emerges as an enlightened person with an insight and understanding of life itself.
This novel is divided into four sections by the author herself. The first section deals with Judge’s eye operation, his depression, Fay’s rude and violent behaviour which results in Judge’s death. The second section deals with the funeral ceremony; the gathering of the mourners; Fay’s eccentric behaviour before the coffin and her departure with her relatives to Texas for a change. The third section begins with Laurel reliving her memories of her parents and her helplessness in failing to save her father. The fourth section encompasses Laurel’s departure to pick up new threads in her life after an estrangement with Fay.

The story begins with an examination of the 71-year old Judge McKelva’s eyes by his family doctor, Dr. Courtland, in a New Orleans hospital. Laurel McKelva Hand, the only daughter of Judge McKelva, comes from Chicago to stay with him at the time of the operation after hearing this news. Fay, the second wife of Judge McKelva, does not take the problem of her husband seriously. Despite her protest, the doctor performs the operation. Laurel takes every care of her father in his convalescent period, but Fay’s irresistible ire and violence result in her husband’s death. For Laurel, the reflective journey beings in New Orleans during the Carnival, a time of transition before lent. It is transition time for Laurel too. In the illness and death of her father,
she reaches a deeper understanding of her family, resolving in her mind the death of her mother and the entry of Fay into the family. For Laurel, New Orleans serves as little more than a backdrop for her father's death. She has an important moment of confluence as she rides the New Orleans – Chicago train with the body of her father to Mt. Salus, the home town of Judge Laurel's. The mourning ceremony gathers momentum with the assembling of the mourners. Fay's Kin, the Chisoms arrive for the funeral. The clash between Laurel and Fay's relatives intensifies the grotesqueness of the situation. Chisoms interfere, dominate, and pollute the whole funeral ceremony. It is performed with all official rites, because the Judge is a public figure. After this, Laurel is ill-treated and insulted by Fay and Chisoms. The usual, comforting patterns are missing and Laurel is forced to face the artificial behaviour of the people around her. Soon after the funeral, Fay leaves for Texas along with Chisoms for a change.

After the funeral ceremony, the neighbours of Laurel question her as to how, the old Judge came to marry such a young woman Fay. For Laurel too Fay is the woman who has come into their family to upset her pattern of life. Laurel spends most of the time in memories of the past where she recalls her brief but happy married life with Phil Hand in Chicago. She had to return to Chicago, a journey she has to
complete in order to resurrect. Although she mourns the recent death of her father, her focus is on the death and life of her mother. Before her return to Chicago she comes home from dinner with her friends and finds a bird which is supposed to be an ominous sign in her home. Fear seizes her. She feels guilty of her helplessness to save her father from death. He was killed by her senseless, self-absorbed stepmother. She decides to protect her parents’ memories. They creep into her heart and she gets moved by a family disk, a small stone boat carved with her father’s initials, his letters to her mother, photographs etc., which are concrete evidences of her parents’ love. She continues her backward journey through memories of summer in the mountains of West Virginia with her mother’s family and goes to sleep and satisfies herself by sharing their memories which have become part and parcel of her life. Laurel thinks that “Memory had the character of spring. In some cases, it was the old wood that did the blooming” (p.115). When Laurel decides to return to Chicago she wakes in early light, leaves her parents room, and burns her mother’s papers because she does not want them to be misused by Fay. She gets enraged by the misuse of her mother’s breadboard which is a gift of Phil to her mother by Fay. She accuses Fay of destroying the home but in vain. Laurel abandons the weapon of revenge and leaves the place to pick
up new strands in her life. She is escorted by her bridesmaids with unknown hands wishing her goodbye.

In the beginning of the novel, Laurel and Fay are seen as virtual strangers in a strange land in New Orleans. Kinship with Judge McKelva is the only common thing they share. Fay, though one year younger than Laurel, is her step-mother. Perhaps this may be one of the reasons for the clash between them. They are like two different poles which never meet. "Fay is childish and inhuman." Fay is a ruthless person who does not have concern for husband’s health. She refers to "Natures the great healer," but not to the doctor who comes to help him. She is more worried about herself and does not pay any attention to others’ problems. Judge McKelva’s eye problem has been symbolized. When Dr.Courtland is hesitant in performing the operation, he encourages him by says “Well, I am an optimist” which reflects his self-confidence and positive thinking perhaps nourished by social status and his profession. This positive vision paradoxically leads to the Judge’s eternal sleep. Welty’s presentation of the relationship between daughter and father is very striking. Though Laurel is in her forty plus he calls her by her childhood name “Eh, Polly?” Fay’s entry in their life doesn’t affect their relationship. Fay’s attitude and her use of acerbic vocabulary towards him really haunts
him. This may be one of the reasons for him for being calm after the operation and perhaps he might have taken a decision to quit this world instead of being humiliated by Fay. Laurel took every care of him but in vain. He, who had been the declared optimist, had not once expressed hope. Now it was she who was offering it to him. And it might be false hope (p.29). The eye problem of Judge symbolically represents that he lacks clear vision and chooses Fay who can’t be his good better half.

Welty is adept in portraying troubled relationships in this novel. Fay attacks her helpless husband with demands that precipitate his death. When he was lying on bed after surgery, she scorns at him for not keeping up the promise to show her the carnival at New Orleans. She sarcastically says “what a way to keep his promise” (p.12). She doesn’t have the least feeling of her husband’s death because he chooses her birthday to die. Fay screamed “you picked my birthday to do it on! (p.40). When the doctor said that he collapsed, Fay is cast in the role of a villain. Though she is an outsider and intruder in the McKelva’s family, she feels like an insider. Her patience gets collapsed by the slow recovery of Judge McKelva and she shouts “Enough is Enough.” Fay is Welty’s most-thoroughly vulgar character. Fay will destroy everything truly valuable in the
home’ says Ruth Vande Kieft. She attacks Dr. Courtland and says “I bet when the bill comes in he won’t charge so polite” (p.11). Despite serious trials to save Judge from the death the doctor fails to bring him to life. Fay screamed at him, “Thank you for nothing” (p.43). This shows her primitive instinctive behaviour.

The estrangement between Laurel and Fay over Breadboard is the climax which is vividly presented by Welty. This conflict brings transformation in Laurel. The Breadboard is a gift given by Phil to Laurel’s mother Becky. Fay, the younger woman whom Laurel’s father takes as a bride soon after his wife Becky’s death, moves into Laurel’s parents’ home but she is indifferent towards both their possessions and the values they stood for. If Laurel’s parents seem to represent individuality, memory, internationalized self-discipline and unstinting love – in short, for Laurel all that is best about the south, the whole solid past Fay seems to embody merely the “future.” Individual and society are defined purely by desire for material things and without any trace of conscience or moral responsibility shaped by a sense of connectedness to family, place, time and memory. Past is nothing for Fay, whereas it is a whole in case of Laurel. Fay says “The past isn’t a thing to me. I belong to the future, didn’t you know that.” (p.179).
The Chisoms who are Fay’s kin insult Laurel in the funeral ceremony. Before all the mourners, Mrs. Chisom humiliated Laurel of her loneliness and says “so, you ain’t got father, mother, brother, sister, husband, chick, nor child. Not a soul to call on, that’s you” (p.69). Fay is considered to be Welty’s best villainous character. After the demise of the Judge, Fay’s mother plans to stay in the spacious house of McKelva but the cunning Fay plans to go to Texas with her mother for three days. She doesn’t care even for her mother when her individuality gets disturbed. Chisoms represent new southern mechanization and consumerism, whereas McKelvas represent tradition. On the whose Fay is a Machiavellian character who is more concerned and absorbed in the self. In spite of these vices, Welty presented Fay as a loving daughter of Mr. Chisom.

Laurel McKelva Hand is the novel’s protagonist. With all her virtues, she wins everybody’s heart. She is the best portrayed character as a loving daughter throughout the novel. After hearing about her father’s eye problem, she reaches Orleans to stay with him for the operation. When Welty was questioned whether Laurel represents the decay of moral certainty in the south, she responds, “No, that never occurred to me. I won’t be using her as a figure head. I wasn’t writing anything about the south. She is a person, a human
being." This shows the author's breadth of vision rather than her regionalistic view of the south. Welty explored the situations of modern daughters who seek independent lives different from the trend set by their mothers. According to Louis Westling, she dexterously depicts "the troubled relationships" between mother and father which is essential for the main character's knowledge of herself. The same troubled relationship is seen between Fay and Judge McKelva, Fay and Laurel, Laurel and Becky, etc. Laurel remembers her childhood days in her parents' room "she could hardly fall asleep; she closed her eyes – night time sound of the two beloved reading voices came rising in turn up the stairs every night to reach her" (p.57). She treated her father very affectionately after surgery. She tried to fill the void of her mother, Becky. She read Dickens’ books to her father who was on bed. She stayed with him at night to take care of him. Despite Fay's indifference towards her, she was all affectionate. This reveals her kind heart even towards persons enemical. She respects Fay even though Fay doesn't deserve it.

Her brief marital life with Phil Hand, a communication officer abroad, a mine sweeper in the navy is a pathetic one. Welty says that the character of Phil is derived partly from her brothers and partly from the memories of friends lost in World War II. "Phil is only a cry
of despair that reverberates in Laurel’s mind with an excruciating anguish not found elsewhere in Welty’s fiction.”

Laurel’s union with him is compared to the union of Ohio and the Mississippi. Laurel remembers her sweet association with Phil “when they were climbing the long approach to a bridge after leaving Cairo, rising slowly higher until they rode above the tops of bare trees, she looked down and saw the pale light widening and the river bottoms the low, early sun. There were two rivers. Here was where they came together. This was the confluence of water of the Ohio and Mississippi” (p.159). In the final version of the novel Welty deleted some of the romantic scenes depicting their meeting, courtship, and marriage.

Phil only appears in Laurel’s dreams as shadow and a ghostly sound. “Only Phil’s memory emerges as the sustaining power of the novel’s final pages.” Fear and pathos seizes one on reading the situation in which Phil died left bodiless and graveless. “Phil could still tell her of her life. For her life, any life, she had to believe, was nothing but continuity of its love” (p.160). Asked about the word “confluence” Welty says it is the apt word to describe the Laurel – Phil relationship.
Laurel’s relationship with her mother Becky is perceived only in the past: “For Laurel Becky’s climber represents her mother’s personal strength and sturdy mountain roots.” Becky exists only in Laurel’s memories throughout the novel. She was Judge’s first wife. Becky dies of betrayal of her husband. “She had died without speaking a word, keeping everything to herself, in exile and humiliation” (p.151). The last remark which she made to Laurel has the implications of betrayal. Becky says to Laurel, “you could have saved your mother’s life. But you stood by and wouldn’t intervene. I despair for you” (p.151). For Laurel, Becky’s climber represent her past. Like the Judge at the beginning of the novel “Laurel is caught between the climbing rose and the fig tree, between Becky and Fay.” More emphasis was given to the memory of Laurel’s mother than her father because it was Becky who had influenced both Laurel and her father. Though both Laurel and Judge loved Becky, still they couldn’t understand her despair. “Her cry was not complaint: it was love’s deep anger” (p.148). At last Laurel realizes she and her father both have imposed their patterns on her mother, neglecting, ignoring her wishes. Laurel understands her mother better only after the death of her father. She finally hears Becky’s voice speaking to her.
Though both Fay and Laurel did the same thing in defying their parents yet they are different. Fay accuses Laurel of being a cheat and selfish because Laurel has left her father after her mother’s death, married Phil in Chicago and lived there. Fay too did the same thing leaving her mother to make a new life for herself in New Orleans. But Orleans has reverence towards her parents and their belongings, which Fay lacks. For her future is most important. The past doesn’t mean anything to her. It is a burden to her. Laurel never disrespected her parents, she always stood for their values. In the words of Ruth Vande Kieft, Laurel “is a person of dominant and solid middle-class, quasi-artistic consciousness.”

Of all the scenes, the breadboard scene is astonishingly striking. Before leaving for Chicago, Laurel enters the kitchen and observes the scratches on breadboard. It was made by her husband Phil who had given it to his mother-in-law as a token of affection. Laurel gets enraged at the misuse of the breadboard and accuses thus: “Fay you desecrated this house” (p.173). For Laurel it is concrete evidence of her husband’s affection towards her mother but for Fay it is just a kind of thing. When Laurel questions about her mother’s breadboard, Fay says “who wants an everlasting breadboard? It’s the last thing on earth anybody needs!” (p.172) For Laurel it is “The
whole story, The whole solid past” (p.178) because it belongs to the memories of her husband and her mother. This scene brings tremendous transformation and she emerges as an enlightened person with an insight into and an understanding of life in its full form.

Laurel is an amalgamation of the new woman and the ideal woman endowed with virtues like love, warmth, self-reliance, courage, understanding and quest for identity. She belongs to modern society; and she has shattered the shackles of patriarchal dominance. Though she has nobody to call her own, she has a resplendent past as her eternal companion. In her isolation Laurel is very much a woman of our century.14

The Laurel – Fay pair reveal conflicting human impulses. Welty fabricated the whole story with clashes between Laurel and the callous unbred Fay. She successfully demolishes the normal monstrous stereotype presentation of female characters. Laurel and Fay are realistic contemporary characters “as well as avatars of beauty and the beast.”15 Fay represents the morbid side whereas Laurel the brighter side of womanhood.

Fay / Laurel constitutes what is essentially a type of protagonist.”16 Relationships remain paradoxical in this novel.
Healthy relationships don’t exist between Fay and Laurel, Fay and Judge, Chisoms and Laurel, Becky and Judge etc. The author explores the mysterious relationship between memory and experience. Laurel is far from being an entirely ‘reliable’ central intelligence.

Welty’s presentation of symbolism in this novel is very remarkable. The striking of the clock has many connotations. It’s stop symbolizes the death of Judge. When Fay leaves the home of Judge to Texas it strikes odd hours which tells about the forthcoming hostility. The carnival in the streets of New Orleans represents grotesque happenings in the family of McKelva. The eye problem of Judger symbolizes lack of clear vision on the part of Judge. Price compares the lack of vision of Judge with King Lear’s blindness. The bird in the house foretells the evil happenings later. The beautiful description of the confluence of Ohio and Mississippi rivers represents the union of Phil and Laurel McKelva.

Critics say that The Optimist’s Daughter is an autobiographical novel because of the coincidence of the author’s personal life events with the events in the novel. Welty said The Optimist’s Daughter was very close to her personally. “It meant a lot to me in a way that some of others hadn’t”.

The books in this novel
are the books in the author's personal library. The character Phil is
drawn partly from her brothers and friends. The local West Virginia is
the native place of the author's grandmother. She says, "I did draw on
some of the childhood and early married experiences of my
mother."19 But all incidents don't express the author's personal
impressions. In the novel Laurel's parents die nearly of blindness but
the author's father in real life died of lukaemia. *The Optimist's
Daughter* is regarded by many readers and the author herself as
Welty's best work. It seems to be different from her earlier fiction.20

Welty's philosophy of life is revealed through the character of
Laurel. Laurel is tested by many trials and tribulations. She was
insulted by Fay and Chisoms. Being a widow she was ill-treated.
Laurel resembles contemporary women who face many problems as
widows in the society. The suffering of Laurel in her father's home is
very pathetic. That is why Howell says that *The Optimist's Daughter*
is one of Miss Welty's saddest stories because their lives are in some
basic way unfulfilled although before the world they acquiesce and
carry on."21
References


10. Ibid., p.76.


12. Ibid., p.56.


16. Ibid., p.139.


