

Eudora Welty's Narrative Techniques in "The Optimist's Daughter"

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ABSTRACT

American short story writer, novelist, essayist and memoirist Welty is often designated as one of the notable southern regionalists, along with such writers as William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. Welty has distinguished between two styles in her writing, which she labels "inside stories" and "outside stories." The Inside stories are introspective and the thoughts and emotions of her characters are clearly delineated. They include the novels "Delta Wedding" and "The Optimist Daughter" and many other short stories. Outside stories are those in which the reader has no access to the characters' thoughts. Characterization is achieved through dialogue. Storytelling and action, outside stories including "The Robber Bridegroom", "The Ponder Heart" and "Losing Battles" are often humorous and light, although not without messages. While these categories are not exclusive, they do reflect Welty's deliberate exploration of different narrative techniques. The novel "The Optimist Daughter" is small in scope but profound in its implications, that rewards a lifetime of work. The story has all those qualities peculiar to the finest short novels; a theme that vibrates with overtones, suspense and classical inevitability.

Key words: *family, memory, narrative techniques ,past, southern regionalist*

American short story writer, novelist, essayist and memoirist Welty is often designated as one of the notable southern regionalists, along with such writers as William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. Her stories of family life in small towns in the Deep South are built around what Paul Marx has called "the complex network of judgments, misjudgments, and prejudgments," and sometimes take on the elusive qualities of dreams. However, critics stress that if there is such a thing as a "southern School of writing," Welty has remained independent of it. She has lived all of her life in Jackson, Mississippi and nearly all of her fiction is set in the American South. In an essay entitled "Place in Fiction" ^[1] Welty contends that grounding works of fiction firmly implanted in a particular location aids the achievement of universality.

Welty has distinguished between two styles in her writing, which she labels "inside stories" and "outside stories." The Inside stories are introspective and the thoughts and emotions of her characters are clearly delineated. They include the novels "Delta Wedding" and "The Optimist Daughter" and many other short stories. Outside stories are those in which the reader has no access to the characters' thoughts. Characterization is achieved through dialogue, storytelling and action. Outside stories including "The Robber Bridegroom," "The Ponder Heart" and "Losing Battles" are often humorous and light, although not without messages. While these categories are not exclusive, they

do reflect Welty's deliberate exploration of different narrative techniques. They make for an affinity to the tale, and they elevate the telling of the story to a position of first importance. Technique becomes an end in itself.

"The Optimist Daughter"^[2] story is woven around one family----mother, father and only daughter----and narrated through the eye and memory of the daughter. Laura McKelva Hand, is herself the battle-field and the conflicting sides---- the self with the McKelva family name, rooted to a place and its people; and the individual life outside the family and place of birth. The events and images of the novel are simple, homemade, yet charged with the possibility of a miraculous richness. They are the same kind of mundane, daily events out of which Virginia Woolf produces miracles. Though the novel is small in scope but profound in its implications, that rewards a lifetime of work. The story has all those qualities peculiar to the finest short novels; a theme that vibrates with overtones, suspense and classical inevitability.

What makes "The Optimist Daughter" such a remarkable achievement is that Welty's thematic concerns serve as formal, organizing principles in the structure of the novel. For example, the fact that Laurel's interior life is largely kept hidden from us throughout the first two-thirds of the novel is a direct reflection of the extreme privacy she maintains. Conversely, the gaudy public nature of Judge McKelva's funeral serves appropriately to define important aspects of his character and reveal its weaknesses. On a broader scale, Welty's structural technique of shifting between raw experience and memory, past and present, corresponds perfectly to the dynamic interaction between them she wishes to represent. In brief, as the novel progresses the formal structure itself resolves the very issues about experience raised by the novel----resolves them in the sense of providing a dramatic, intelligible pattern---- so that the reader experiences a kind of "double effect" which enhances the power of the novel immeasurably.

Throughout her fiction Welty has frequently presented the life struggle in terms of a dynamic, rhythmic battle between order and spontaneity, between the human need to pattern experience and the vital, erupting forces which, for better or worse, shatter the human design. In "The Optimist Daughter" Welty explores this theme by examining the mysterious relationship between memory and experience. Paradoxically, memory gives order and pattern of experience (though often an erroneous or idealized order), yet this order is constantly being disrupted by experience, a violation which in turn may nevertheless be life-giving. Memory too is life-giving insofar as it gives intelligible pattern and felt meaning to the raw shocks of experience. And the manner in which this relationship can be either static or dynamic is a crucial problem Welty explores in the novel. For, the relationship between memory and experience, examined through consciousness of her protagonist Laurel McKelva Hand, is intimately linked with several other familiar Welty concerns. They are the mystery of the private and the public self, the theme of the wanderers and the attachment of home, and that most pervasive of Weltian themes, the mystery of love and separateness, sustenance and violation which sees at the heart all human relationships.

The novel, however, is a wholly traditional novel. In this novel Welty enriches her theme through narrative strategies operating on at least two different levels; the single word or image and the wider mythic substructure. Through the juxtaposition of various parts of images (i.e., birds and hands, water and eyes) and through exploiting

the multiple meanings of single words (“watch”, “pupil”, “iris”, “cataract”), Welty foregrounds different dimensions of meaning to comment upon Laurel’s search for understanding it. In doing so she manages to recover some of the lost metaphorical dimensions of our everyday language. Welty’s use of image pulls the otherwise disparate phenomena from her family’s past that she selected for inclusion in her novel. As Reynolds Price puts it in “The Onlooker, Smiling: An Early Reading of The optimist’s Daughter” “all patterns are comic... because the universe is patterned, therefore ordered land ruled, therefore incapable of ultimate tragedy.”^[3]

The story of Laurel’s loss of her father and her struggle to come to terms with her memories of all the loved ones she has lost is on one level an extraordinarily personal meditation. In particular through the creation of Judge McKelva’s young second wife, Wanda Fay, she has transformed the outlines of Laurel’s story into a vivid interior drama. In the figure of the exasperating Fay, Laurel recognizes and confronts the forces of disruption and chaos that threaten the ordered perfection of her long-held memories, both of her parents’ relationship and of her own brief marriage with Philip Hand.

The novel’s overt action centers around the death of Judge McKelva following eye surgery in New Orleans and his funeral and burial at home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, its meanings are realized through conflicting motions in the mind of Laurel McKelva Hand, daughter of Judge Clinton McKelva and Becky McKelva. Welty’s several themes are death, human relationship, and the effects of memory on the past, but through the use of image, symbol, ritual, and parable she weaves them together into one thematic whole.

Laurel relinquishes the past to memory, knowing at last that it is memory, not the past, that can “never be impervious”, that can be hurt, time and time again---- but in that may lie its final mercy. The past is static, invulnerable; but memory is fluid, dynamic, “vulnerable to the living moment” (p.179) and takes its life from the living. One vital, but unusual, image is introduced through a parable that serves as a capstone for the entire book, the image of white strawberries. In its capacity for at least dual interpretation, the strawberry tales brings together two basic thematic strands of the novel; one is the strand of the past and its relationship to memory, and the other is the strand of human interdependence.

In the novel, the occasion of Judge McKelva’s illness and death provides the framework within which family myth operates. The “social occasion” here provides what Welty has elsewhere called the “narrative sense’ of a family: ”a sense of what happened to them and probably why, because look what happened to her grandmother.”^[4] Family (Judge, Becky, and Laurel) is set against other families central to the novel (Dazells and Chisoms) through the experience of loss. Unlike her other novels, “The Optimist Daughter” is a portrait of the way in which three sets of estranged family members interact when brought together during the occasion of illness and death. For the McKelvas estrangement consists of Laurel’s removal to Chicago, her mother’s death, and her father’s remarriage. In a sense, the judge’s illness is symptomatic of estrangement and his death allows for laurel’s discovery of family myth. Initially, Judge Courtland is physician. It is because Dr. Courtland is from Mount Salus, had treated Becky during her illness, and is close to the operation on his eye; “I’m in good hands, Fay,” McKelva told her, “I know his

whole family”(p.89). Ironically, however, precisely what Judge McKelva perceives as reasons to proceed with the operation hold Dr. Courtland against performing it. The comments of the two men provide a context of family (McKelva) within family (Mount Salus community) that is sustained throughout the novel. Within this context, family myth is twofold, encompassing not only Mount Sal’s perception of the McKelvas, but also Laurel’s perceptions of her father, her mother, and Fay.

Laurel is initially concerned with preserving memory objectively in preserving her parent’s belongings as she knew them in her youth. Once she realizes that Fay has shattered the past, laurel begins to erase it by erasing Fay (the drops of nail polish carelessly spilled by Fay on her father’s desk, (p.145), and by burning ‘her father’s letters to her mother, and Grandma’s letters and the saved little books and papers’ (p.196) belonging to her parents. Once the house has been stripped of event “there was nothing she was leaving in the whole shining and quiet house now to show for her mother’s life and her mother’s happiness and suffering, and nothing to show for Fay’s harm,” (pp.197-8), it has been emptied of memory. At the funeral, guests from the larger family “the country bar, the elders of the church, the hunting and Fishing Club cronies,”^[5] testify to Judge McKelva’s bravery, theatrical flair and sense of humor, even though Laurel insists to Miss Adele that they are “misrepresenting him----falsifying” (p.101).

Laurel’s resolution of the past is a product of listening to the silent voices of memory. In the novel, the ability of language to order chaos is a process contained in memory. Laurel’s acceptance of Fay in the end of the novel, for example, is stimulated by her memory of Wandell, and the first night she spends in her room at Mount Salus is filled with ‘velty cloak of words’ with which her parents unknowingly read her to sleep each night. The books in father’s library similarly have their corresponding voices, and the way in which Laurel knows that the funeral is being preside over is by the predominance of a single voice: “one voice dominated the rest: Miss Tennyson Bullock was taking charge”(p.76). As Miss Tennyson’s voice indicates, language orders chaos in the present as well as in memory.

To conclude that the novel is a reinforcement of the family and the family myth. There is a constant juxtaposition of past and present, experience and memory forms part of the structural technique. The themes of the mystery of love and separateness of the private and public selves find rich articulation in “The Optimist Daughter”. So from the study of the novel and criticism we come to know the greatness of Welty as an artist and master of technique. The usage of several narrative techniques proves Welty a good storyteller and a rich novelist who belongs to the twentieth century.

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