

Explaining the American South: with Special Reference to Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*

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The American South occupies a distinctive place in the history of the United States. Apart from its practice of slavery, the South has always had a kind of life and culture which is markedly particular of the region. Although slavery was abolished after the Civil war and the North and South were united into one America, the lifestyle of the South accompanied by its cultural values is seen to influence personality leading to certain character types.

The South has had its full share of illusions, fantasies, and pretensions, and it has continued to cling to some of them with an astonishing tenacity that defies explanation. It had faced many economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to all the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them.

The period of 1930s of the South is best characterized by one event: The Great Depression. The south had learned to accommodate itself to conditions that it swore it would never accept, and it had learned the taste left in the mouth by the swallowing of one's own words. The capitalist society began to affect the life style of the poor whites and the blacks. The labourers in the factories were given low wage and due to development in the industrial sector less and less numbers of

labourers were employed. This condition of the south created desperate individuals of the time, their isolation, alienation in their own society. It had learned to live for long decades in quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission. For the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America-though it is shared by nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia-the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction.

In this article, the characteristics of the people of the south will be shown through the characters in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*. How the different characters in the novel *The Optimist's Daughter* by Eudora Welty interrogate the different social conventions of their society and the God forsaken world of the individuals of the south-these all are being presented in this article. The article examines the different cultural values of different characters in the novel-the character of Laurel and her alienation, isolation from her friends and career, from her life in the present and also the worry and grief that kept Laurel away from her past. We can also see the mannerisms of Fay and the conditions which she had to face as an outsider in different places. Welty establishes a series of conflicts between tradition and modernity and shows the way the characters adjust themselves in different societies. The two women Laurel and Fay simultaneously iconizes isolation and how they are indifferent to their own societies and complicated by their precisely drawn, idiosyncratic natures. As Welty shows how the cultural isolation between old and new is both real and ambiguous, she also explores the emotional effects of that other divide, between the living and the dying -- which will always, eventually, be crossed.

In this article we will study the misfits, the desperate individuals in the south and the alienation that the individuals suffer in the society. Though the novel, *The Optimist's Daughter* by Eudora Welty do not manifest all the characteristics of the

Southern personality, the individuals appear to suffer from a sense of isolation and alienation brought on by their inability to fit in or adjust to their circumstances in society. In this article we can see different social conventions for which the characters of in the novel feel alienated along with the plight of the non-conformists. Welty presents two fortyish female characters- Laurel Hand, Judge McKelva's widowed daughter who lives in Chicago where she designs fabrics, and Fay Chisom McKelva, a former typist whom the Judge married eighteen months earlier. The novel shows the personal growth of Laurel Hand, Fay and the condition of Mississippi during the 1960s. It highlights the treatment offered to them in their own home town, Fay's indifference towards the society where Laurel lived, the Mount Salus and the bridesmaid's treatment of Fay. There are many different characters and each character in the novel show the behaviour and manners of the people leaving in the South.

Through Laurel Hand and Fay Chisom, Welty presents the desperate individuals, their possibility on the part of the members of closed society, the way they considers the very structure of their community- the white Mississippi community(the emergence of African American Mississippians as full members of the state). Fay, the outsider in the Mount Salus society, is seen as Welty's fighter in this novel. Her struggle on being herself amidst a suffocating community turns her to a desperate individual in the eyes of the people of Mount Salus. Fay always challenged the conventions followed by the people of this community. Her marriage to Judge McKelva itself signals the end of the old system, the giving of law and power, essentially equal rights, to those outside the closed circle, and the transposing of the outsider- like the black people in Mississippi- from the margin to the centre.

Fay is an individual in the novel who always wants to keep herself away from the connections of people around her, mostly in Mount Salus. The way she treats the Doctor who was diagnosing her husband Judge McKelva, shows her nature of

treatment of other characters in the novel. Fay was very much unsatisfied with her husband Judge McKelva, the way he kept his promise to her and kept her alienated from her love for the carnival.

The conflicts between the culture of Mount Salus and the modern culture embedded in Fay is clear. Fay questioned the presence of the bridesmaids in her house at Mount Salus. She could not accept the culture of the people living there and also their presence in her house. So she said, "I sure do know whose house this is". "But maybe it's something a few other people are going to have to learn." (OD, 58) She also said: "Well, at least my family's not hypocrites". "If they didn't want me, they'd tell me to my face." (OD, 62)

The bridesmaids accept Fay as Judge Mac's wife, but none of these old friends could understand Fay and she also did not comprehend their funeral traditions for her husband Judge McKelva. The bridesmaids were there to greet and comfort Laurel, not Fay the cultural outsider. They only discussed things that were not in the favour of Fay:

"What did she do with herself while he was here?" exclaimed Mrs. Bolt. "Nothing but sit-and-eat," said Miss Tennyson. "And keep straight on looking like a sparrow." "She had to eat. Had nothing else to do to occupy her hands," said Mrs. Pease, holding up a perfectly enormous afghan she was knitting as if by the porcelain light of the dogwood tree. "Oh, surely you know she was occupied enough with this great big house to care for." Miss Adele tilted up her face at it.

They had many other opinions about Fay and explained to Laurel that:

"Laurel, do you know that when he brought her here to your house, she had very little idea of how to separate an egg?" "And neither did he," said Miss Adele. "'Frying pan' was the one name she could give you of all the things your mother had in that kitchen, Laurel." said Miss Tennyson. (OD, 65)

They also did not like the way Fay arranged the funeral of her husband. They said:

“She interrupted herself before the others could do it for her.”

“She wanted nothing but the best for her husband’s funeral, only the most expensive casket, the most choice cemetery plot—” Choice! It looked right out on the Interstate! Those horrible trucks made so much whine, not a thing Dr. Bolt was saying could be heard. Even from our good seats,” said Miss Tennyson. [. . .] Singing over her words, the mockingbird poured out his voice without stopping. “I could have broken her neck”. (OD, 67)

Despite the quaint traditions of old Mount Salus, the modern world cannot be held at bay. Fay challenges ideas about class with her presence as Judge Mac’s wife in his first wife’s home. The bridesmaids did not like the behaviour of Fay and the way she acted. They also did not like the culture of the Chisoms.

Fay shows her dislike for the people of Mount Salus by refusing Judge McKelva’s association with old Mount Salus people and the traditions at his death and insists on his ties to her and the newer world bearing down on the town. The part of the cemetery where Judge McKelva was buried was a new part of the cemetery that Fay chose by herself and Laurel saw it as if it “was like being driven to the other side of the moon”. Fay declares, “How could the biggest fool think I was going to bury my husband with his old wife? He’s going in the new part”. Judge Mac is removed once and for all from old traditions and his former wife, who was loved by Mount Salus, and left in new territory.

The article highlights the effect of the Civil Rights movement in the South. And this is shown through the changes in the society and in the characters. After the Civil Rights movement, the southern population became a mobile one with the younger generation moving from place to place, no longer staying within shouting distance of their parents’ homes. The novel *The Optimist's Daughter* reflects the effect of the Civil

Rights movement that can be seen in the way the southerners are becoming mobile because they leave the region in search of rich experiences they feel the South cannot offer. Laurel, like many other young southerners of her time, must leave her small town of Mount Salus for her own fulfilment. The industrial city of Chicago offers this fabric designer opportunity she cannot find at home in Mount Salus. Laurel said to the bridesmaids of her mother in Mount Salus that she was going to Chicago again: "...I must get back to work".

In this novel, Welty writes a character freed from provincialism and one who refuses a sense of duty to live her life away from the south. But in order to live a full life away, Laurel must eventually make peace within the confines of her mother's house. Her escape into the larger world outside is complete only after she confronts the past and forces her personal history to release its hold on her and her future. As a fabric designer, she is an artist and a more cosmopolitan world awaits her.

Modernity forces the country man finally the South, to face change. The world outside the home has altered the way life is lived within doors. The outdoors of laurel's experience is a view that changes outside the windows of fast moving trains and a contained landscape of her mother's garden. Without close ties to nature, laurel's world is not as rooted to the landscape of the region as the world of the Fairchild women.

Since Mount Salus is a small town and the Mckelva family holds a prominent place in the social milieu of the town, therefore they are expected to adhere to certain rules and the same for Laurel. Mount salus is not the same town of laurel's youth. Chicago, Illinois signifies Laurel's desires for career and independence. Laurel, one of the main protagonist's of the novel thinks about her life in Chicago, even though she focuses her attention on her father's plight. All these suggest that consoling voices and productive endeavours await Laurel in Chicago, where she will again be able to push time forward. In a

passage, Welty ultimately excluded from "An Only child," Laurel thinks of a friend in Chicago as she tries to decide how she should have responded to Fay's final abuse of the judge, and she hears the friend's voice say that silence has been her only option. In the *New Yorker* Laurel recalls having been out with a friend when her father phoned to say he needed medical attention: "Her father, in the old home in Mount Salus, took pleasure in telephoning instead of writing, but this had been a late hour for him-she'd been saying goodnight to a friend after the theatre". And in all early drafts, Laurel phones a friend, not just her office, when she realizes she won't be returning for some time.

As Laurel looks after her father and as she brings his body home for burial, she is able to think of her work as a designer, of her passion for her profession. In the hospital, for instance, Laurel's mind wanders from her father. "As upon the stealthy opening of a door, the thought of her own work came into her mind-the design for a curtain for a new repertory theatre she'd spent recent time sketching on. She could see it as rows of small baroque figures in ones and twos, holding mandolins or swords or scarves or tambourines, bowing or dancing or duelling on their shadows in a long flowing line, black and white on a silver-gray background" and when she brings her father's body home to Mount Salus, she again thinks: "The train slowed all in a moment or two for the Mount Salus stop. Laurel got to her feet, swaying with the curve, and in doing so, she got a better idea for the color of her theatre." Laurel's work gives her life focus and meaning and she anticipates returning to it. Laurel "loved her hard work," Welty tells us. Laurel finds that "her true gratification was in finding how each new commission opened up a new and different experience in learning, with its own beginning, middle, and end." But Welty's references to Laurel's Chicago friends in order to suggest how thoroughly worry and then grief cut Laurel off from life. And though leaving Mount Salus and

returning to Chicago will allow her to look to the future, she may do without the jest for leaving she once possessed.

Welty's revisions ultimately emphasize Laurel's alienation from her friends and career, from her life in the present, but revisions also emphasize that worry and grief alienate Laurel from her past. In early of Part 1 and 2 of the story, Laurel is not thoroughly removed from the past. In the very early typescript titled "An Only Child," when Laurel decides to read *Nicholas Nickleby* to her father, she remembers her mother: "Perhaps what was in his mind gull flying beside the train that returns the judge's body to Mount Salus- "like a stopped clock on a wall" (OD,45). As she drifts off to sleep in her childhood room, Laurel does think of her young parents reading aloud to each other. But this memory is idealized. Laurel thinks not about the discord and despair that came to dominate her parent's marriage, she recalls only the harmony of their lives together. During the hours before her father's funeral Laurel objects to the way her Mount Salus neighbours distort the past latin stories about the judge that are not wholly accurate. But Laurel's own highly selective memory is also unreliable, its unreliability signalled by her difficulty in identifying the people who come to pay their last respects. It is only in the novel's closing pages that Laurel will find "it was no effort any longer to remember anybody." (OD, 163). In New Orleans, Laurel is unable to locate herself in relation to the past or her family. However, when she returns to the family home, Laurel is forced to accept the past, gather her strength to move forward and face the future. The loss of both her mother and husband has left Laurel uncertain of her place in the world even before she is faced with the death of her father, her last anchor to the past, her husband Phil and her identity. Laurel in her home at Mount Salus tries to make peace with the past of that house but the presence of Fay disturbs this connection of herself with her past. Fay's presence in this house has desacralized the

spaces once inhabited by Becky, and these changes are the ones noted painfully by Laurel.

The image of Chicago, the northern industrial centre is an important one for Laurel. It is her new home that she leaves to her father, where she began a career and a life with her husband, Philip Hand. The bridesmaids wished desperately that Laurel should stay back in Mount Salus. They couldn't understand the possibilities of Laurel's life up north as these women rarely left the small town and see it as holding the best the world has to offer. To them, the outside world is one of rapid social change and lost traditions. Though most of the bridesmaids have all "mostly all built houses in the 'new part' of Mount Salus," they still hold to some familiar traditions to keep the outside changes at bay. The bridesmaids informs Laurel that if she leaves their place then she has to "always come back as a visitor" and "people don't really want visitors".

There are many other characters in the novel that helps to understand Laurel and the conditions in which she was leaving. Mr. Dalzell and his enveloping family who invaded the hospital room in New Orleans never welcomed Laurel and so she always felt a kind of alienation in their company but Fay did not. Mr. Dalzell's presence and that of his family reinforces Laurel's isolation in this "nowhere" space. While Laurel is displaced among such people, Fay finds an immediate source of comfort in their presence. The Dalzells make sense to Fay whereas Laurel sees their behaviour as strange. Their storytelling and ease in the space they have created with food from home reassure Fay and, for a brief time, she is with "family." The socio-economic differences contrast starkly in this public building where people of all backgrounds are thrown together.

The Dalzell family replaces the emptiness by creating home space in the lobby which becomes Fay's place of respite while her husband lies dying in the hospital room she attempted to bring to life by tearing down the blinds to let in

the outside. This family shares stories in the middle of their supper and food. Fay enjoys their company whereas Laurel walks around their created perimeter and finally walks away into her thoughts and fears: "She walked on, giving them the wide berth of her desolation". As Laurel removes herself from associating with Fay and this strange family, this makes her alone in her world.

Laurel finds her identity in the welcoming arms of her old friends who have arrived ahead of her to put things in order for her arrival who were waiting for her in the house. She arrives home with her father's body. She is taken in immediately and does not take in the changes Fay made to her mother's home. But Laurel's homecoming is interrupted by Fay's arrival.

Fay and Laurel were indifferent to each other, didn't like the company of each other. Fay hated Laurel. She felt that she had the only right over her husband and was the only owner of the house in Mount Salus. Fay "had been married to Judge McKelva for only a year and a half" (OD1). Fay was very much displeased with Laurel when she came to visit her father Judge McKelva in New Orleans and began to look after his needs. So when the operation was done, Fay said to Laurel, "No point in you staying just because the doctor said so." (the doctor asked both of them to watch Judge McKelva). At this Laurel said, "Why I'm staying for my own sake." Laurel and Fay were hardly ever in the same place at the same time, except during the hours when they were asleep in their rooms at the Hibiscus. The aftermath of the death-Laurel and Fay's return to the family home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, for the funeral and the ordering of affairs- is the novel's core, as Laurel attempts to make sense not only of her fathers and his second wife but of her complicated mother and, ultimately, herself.

Laurel and Fay also always remained isolated from each other. They were always in a mood of confront with each other. Fay also had many dislikes about Laurel's mother Becky. Once

Fay and Laurel fought over a breadboard which Laurel's husband had prepared for Becky.

The complexities of her mother's love for her husband(discovered through letters and photograph albums) and the painfulness of her dying which could have led him to seek the animal vitality of his second wife Fay makes Laurel desperate. She even tries to accept Fay, but could not. Fay and Laurel were always at fight with each other.

They almost come to blows over a breadboard, Laurel's husband, Phillip, had made for her mother, and which Laurel finds in badly abused condition. As they argue over the board, all of Laurel's resentments of Fay come tumbling forth. "My mother...predicted you," Laurel says. "But your mother, she died a crazy!" Fay retorts. Laurel then lets loose with the strongest charge, that Fay killed her father, but Fay, a force as insistent as the weather, comes back, "I was trying to scare him into living!"-and even more viciously counter attacks, "I was being a wife to him! Have you clean forgotten by this time what being a wife is?" Laurel explains that it was Philip who had made the breadboard and that she wants to take it back to Chicago to try her mother's bread recipes on it. "And then who'd eat it with you?" Fay asks. Laurel starts to talk wistfully about how Philip used to love bread, but Fay interrupts most savagely, "your husband? What's he got to do with it? He's dead, isn't he?" Laurel, at the height of her vulnerability, suddenly sees how much more vulnerable Fay is, how she is no more than a child. They argue:

"What have you done to my mother's breadboard?" "Bread board?" Laurel rose and carried it to the middle of the room and set it on the table. She pointed. "Look. Look where the surface is splintered—look at those gouges. You might have gone at it with an icepick." "Is that a crime?" "All scored and grimy! Or you tried driving nails in it." "I didn't do anything but crack last year's walnuts on it. With the hammer." "And cigarette burns—" "Who wants an everlasting breadboard? It's the last thing on earth anybody needs!" "And there—along the

edge!" With a finger that was trembling now, Laurel drew along it. "Most likely a house as old as this has got a few enterprising rats in it," Fay said (OD, 112)

Thus, such was the relationship between Fay and Laurel. They each other to the utmost extent.

The article will also focus on the Mount Salus community in the novel. Whether it accept the new traditions? Do they accept outsiders?The Mount Salus closed society not only shuns outsiders, like Dr. Kunomoto and Fay, but also judges them by appearances and labels them derogatorily, as seen in the early description of Fay: "little square, idle hands...bony and blue-veined; as a child very possibly gone undernourished...round, country-blue eyes and a little feist jaw". Clearly, Fay is being labelled simply as "poor white trash." Laurel and Mount Salus inner circle relate with two families-the Dalzells, whose patriarch is in the hospital with the Judge, and the Chisoms, Fay's Texas family, who come to the Judge's funeral. In the hospital's waiting room, the Dalzell family appals Laurel. She treats them with total disdain, looks down her nose at them, and refuses to sit with them. Haughtily, Laurel fears that because of the Dalzells "the whole waiting room would dissolve itself in waiting-room laughter". Even though Mr. Dalzell is the Judge's roommate, Laurel never offers a kind word to him or his family.

Changes can be seen in Mount Salus-the Judge chooses an outsider as his new wife: Fay's brother runs a wrecking company: a new hotel is being built to replace the Hibiscus where the McKelvas usually stay; the outsider Fay will continue to live in the Judge's house. In this novel, Welty exposes the closed society, the non-expanding inner circle of a little Mississippi town-Mount Salus, a name which itself is based on an illusion, as Becky McKelva asks: "Where do they get the mount...there's no 'mount' here". In Part One, through the Judge and Laurel, who are staunch members of the Mount Salus closed society, Welty uncovers particular traits of the

community, traits she continues to emphasize in the next three parts. On the first page of the novel, Welty shows us that the community maintains a hierarchy, based not on merit but on the past, a hierarchy that is present even outside of the town itself-the same way that Laurel has maintained the Mount Salus mindset and mores, even in Chicago. The judge, his wife, and his daughter enter to meet the eye doctor-Nate Courtland, who is originally from Mount Salus. In this procession, Judge McKelva noticeably goes in first, then his daughter Laurel, and lastly his wife Fay-even though New Orleans was "out-of-town for all of them". During this initial conversation with the doctor, the mistrust of outsiders is illuminated. Courtland suggests consulting another eye specialist-ironically, an Asian-American named Dr. Kunomoto from Texas, Fay's home state. But the Judge immediately refuses: "I've got confidence in you". Even though his first wife died while under Courtland's care, the Judge still feels confident of the doctor's abilities, specifically because Courtland is a Mount Salus boy. The judge tells Fay, "I'm in good hands-I know his family". During the rest of the office visit, the three natives-the judge, Laurel, and Courtland-erect an invisible circle that excludes Fay. Treating her as a total outsider, they make references to a past to which they belong but Fay does not. Not until he is finished with the diagnosis does the doctor give his first 'direct look at Fay". After the Judge's death, this exclusion persists: Dr. Courtland, blatantly disregarding Fay, invites Laurel to his house because "there's nobody from home with you". In Part Two, Mr. Pitt, the long established Mount Salus undertaker, ignores the Judge's wife, Fay, and looks instead to Laurel for instructions.

Laurel is given an important position in the novel. Although Laurel has been away for twenty years, Fay is considered the outsider. Laurel still operates through the mindset of the closed society of Mount Salus and maintains the mores of that communal consensus. Like the insiders of the town, Laurel lives her life in an attempt to maintain the status

quo. Thus, in her mind, her six-month-long marriage, as well as her childhood, has been frozen in perfection; she still wears her wedding ring although she has been a widow for twenty years.

Fay challenges the system in Mount Salus and keeps herself isolated from the people there. She sees through the established niceties, refusing to adhere to prearranged guidelines amount what to wear, how to act, where to eat. Therefore, she and the Judge eat Sunday dinner at the hotel restaurant, and she flaunts her green stiletto-heeled shoes and earrings- which may be unusual but are certainly interesting. Fay is not blinded by untruths or false politeness, but challenges this falsity and is willing to speak out against it. When Laurel asks Fay why she earlier declared that her family was dead. Fay answers: "It's better than some lies I've heard around here!" A shocking answer to Laurel, just as her family's appearance at the funeral is a shock. The inbred community of Mount Salus may block her entrance into their circle, but Fay lives life fully-she loves, chances marriage with a man almost twice her age, accepts spontaneous adventure, and dares to be different. Instead of being blinded by the past, the status quo, and Mount Salus accepted and expected ways of thinking, Fay can see the truth in situations. Fay's observations on the Judge's illness turn out to be correct. Before the surgery, Fay cautions Dr. Courtland: "Before I even let you try, I think i ought to know how good he'll see. She warns the Judge and Laurel: "I know that you don't just jump into an operation" and "If Courtland's all that much, he better put in a better claim on how good this is going to turn out". Judge and his daughter do not observe this. Fay cautions that may be they should leave the Judge's eye to nature-realistically, if they had left it to nature, could the results of the illness have been any worse?

Laurel, towards the later part of the novel recognizes the ambiguity of the closed society of Mount Salus. Laurel realizes this, in Part 3, through a conversation that takes place among her mother's friends-a conversation to prove that the next

generation has failed to change, duplicated at Laurel's dinner with the bridesmaids, who married high school sweethearts and still live in Mount Salus and urge Laurel to do the same. Listening to these conversations, Laurel painfully realizes that the community is actually laughing at her family, that they have already made her parents' live-and Fay's-a funny story to be told and retold. Both generations of Mount Salus insiders essentially treat Laurel in the same way that they treat Fay. Refusing to recognize her individuality, they judge, label, and belittle Laurel. The ladies who call her McKelva, not Hand, never ask about Chicago or her career. Condescendingly, they ask:

“Who's going to kill you if you don't draw those pictures?” Mrs. Pease even threatens cruelly: “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”. But Adele Courtland's voice can be heard above these biting words-she subtly defends Laurel and Fay from the biting criticisms of the other women. Adele urges Laurel to see the reality of Fay: “She's never done anybody any harm...rather, she gave a lonely old man something to live for”. Laurel listens to all of them, without commenting, and then announces that she will walk home, even though “nobody ever walks in Mount Salus”. (OD, 165)

The novel is a story of Laurel Hand which corresponds to the situation in Mississippi during the 1960s. Welty shows that the Mount Salus community is insulated, stagnant, foolish and unaware of its own blindness to reality. By tolerating no differences, by rejecting outsiders with new ideas and ways of approaching life, this Mount Salus closed society remains ingrown and feed on itself, rejecting other nourishment. Like the closed society of Mississippi, the inner circle of Mount Salus has inbred a changelessness that has led to staleness and a slow deterioration which could have been averted by an acceptance of differences and a tolerance for outsiders. The habits of the insiders, like Tish's wink, are as etched in stone as

the people: for example, middle-aged women still see themselves as bridesmaids. By counter positioning Fay's standards to the community's, Welty shows an inner circle in desperate need of refreshing- the spark of which Fay can provide.

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