

The optimist's daughter



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The old saying "The home is where the heart is" takes on a special meaning in Eudora Welty's, *The Optimist's Daughter*. In this short novel, the death of Judge McKelva prompts Laurel and Fay, who are his daughter and wife, to connect with their own homes. A home is a place where one can restore themselves because it gives one a sense of comfort. Home is where people generally feel accepted, regardless of their moods, feelings, or decisions. It is a safe haven where both Laurel and Fay can be truthful with themselves and one another. In other words, home is the obvious place to go when in a time of crisis and change.

For Laurel, the town of Mount Salus is her home. For Fay, home is in the town of Madrid, where her extended family likely meets the same needs for Fay as the house does for Laurel. When reviewing the events of Eudora Welty's life at the time of writing this novel, it will also become clear that, for Welty, home is both Mississippi and her writing. Laurel is a grown woman, living in Chicago, who returns to her hometown of Mount Salus, Mississippi, when her father dies. While it may seem that Chicago is now her permanent home, the reader soon realizes that the house in which she was raised is still very much indeed her home.

When Fay decides to stay with her family for a few days after the funeral, Laurel has the opportunity to spend some time alone in the house before Fay takes full possession of it. In her privacy and silence, Laurel begins to grieve more seriously than she did while in public at the funeral. There are objects in the house, such as the clock, books, letters, and her father's desk, that bring back memories that are intimately attached to one or both of her parents. She becomes sad because the clock has stopped, and she knows

this for a fact because nobody has wound it since her father last fixed it (Welty 73).

Although it may seem like a minor detail, this stopped clock signifies both her father's absence and the reality that her time with her family and in her home has come to an end. Her grief is projected onto household objects because they represent the life she once cherished. Similarly, the books remind her of her parents' habit of reading to each other, a precious memory that she both savors and grieves over. In one passage, Laurel blends her memories of the books with the overall feeling of family, which, she feels, infuses the house. She ran her finger in a loving track across *Eric Brighteyes* and *Jane Eyre*, *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Carry On, Jeeves*. Shoulder to shoulder, they had long since made their own family.

For every book here she had heard their voices, father's and mother's" (Welty 118). Laurel also feels a connection to the house, and thus to her past, in household activities such as gardening. Her mother was an avid gardener (Welty 53), and her father tended to the flowers after his wife's passing, so it is fitting that, as part of Laurel's process of connecting with her past, she should take up the task one last time.

The activity of gardening helps her to feel comfortable and close to her parents, as she participates in the rhythm of the household as she remembers it. On another level, Laurel is tending her own "inner garden" in the sense that she is connecting with her own identity. Her mother loved flowers so much that she named her daughter after one, and now that the mother is dead, the daughter is caring for the mother's flowers (Welty 27). In

the house, Laurel finds herself so deeply in touch with her past that she can actually hear the voices of the people she has loved and lost.

She hears her mother's voice when she is in the garden, " Laurel went on pulling weeds. Her mother's voice came back with each weed she reached for, and its name with it. 'Ironweed. ' 'Just chickweed. ' 'Here comes that miserable old vine! '" (Welty 107). Later, in a moment of remembering the pain she felt when she lost her husband in World War II, Laurel hears his voice grieving for their lost future together. Welty writes, " 'I wanted it! ' Phil cried. His voice rose with the wind in the night and went around the house and around the house. It became a roar. 'I wanted it! '" (155).

There is no other place besides her own home that Laurel can experience such personal revelations and be given the opportunity to confront her pain from the past and make peace with it. The bond that she has with her home is so deep that she can overcome many obstacles and emotional problems in time. Only at home is she truly able to bare her heart and hear what she needs to hear to heal herself. However, to ultimately make peace with her past and her present, she must become " one" with the significance of the house so she can take it with her wherever she goes. Incredibly, Laurel is able to do so.

Fay is originally from Madrid, Texas, which is a small, low-income town. Although Welty never takes the reader to Madrid, the remarks and personalities of the Chisom family offer some idea as to what kind of place it is. It seems to lack all the charm and warmth of Laurel's hometown of Mount Salus, yet for Fay it is nonetheless her home. In Mount Salus, Fay clearly

feels out of her element and becomes extremely rude and insecure. The reader can only imagine whether or not she acts the same way when she is in the comfort of her own hometown, or if she acts the same way.

Nevertheless, in Fay's new community of Mount Salus, she is disrespectful, self-absorbed, and rowdy (Welty 64, 85). Fay does not appreciate the home and the possessions of her late husband than she does his friends and family. In fact, she never makes an effort to understand Laurel's grief or her need to be in the house for a few days. Fay's insistence on returning with her family for a visit after the funeral could possibly reveal that Madrid is the only place in which Fay feels secure.

Fay is anxious to go back with them, insisting that she needs to be among people who "speak her language." In other words, Fay, much like Laurel, needs to go where she feels understood either by others or by herself. In Mount Salus, Fay feels displaced, and her insecurity takes on many ugly forms, such as her tendency to disrespect Becky's memory and to deny her own family back in Madrid (Welty 152). Laurel imagines, "Very likely, making a scene was, for Fay, like home. Fay had brought scenes to the hospital-and here, to the house" (Welty 131).

Laurel understands that Fay's horrible behavior is an apparent sign of her need to feel at home. Fay tries too hard to appear as though she believes that Judge McKelva's home is truly her own, but she never convinces anyone, including herself. At the time Eudora Welty wrote this story, she was grieving the loss of her mother. In fact, the reader can see that the book is dedicated

to C. A. W. (Chestina Andrews Welty), which reveals that this work is closely connected to the author's own personal loss (Marrs 228).

The autobiographical elements in the novel are numerous, and are especially prominent in the parallels between Becky's background and that of Welty's mother (Marrs 229). Other elements pay respect to Welty's happy childhood and the loving marriage her parents enjoyed. Through Laurel, Welty honors her mother and also works through some of the pain and the issues surrounding the death of a loving parent. Laurel's personal journey to make peace with her past in order to make sense of her future certainly mirrors the author's own struggles.

Welty differs from Laurel in the sense that Laurel lives far from her hometown, while Welty lived in Mississippi, where she was born, until her death (Marrs 232). For Laurel, however, the climax of her journey comes from the house. In the absence of a house that holds all of her childhood memories, Welty wrote this book. Welty works through some of her grief in her writing, which is as meaningful to her as the house is to Laurel. Welty comments on Laurel's love of her past, "Firelight and warmth-that was what her memory gave her" (Westling 159).

Laurel, Fay, and Welty are all working toward such comfort in a difficult time during the course of *The Optimist's Daughter*. In very difficult times, confronted with emotion and uncertainty, people often long to return to the comfort and security of their childhood homes. Fay and Laurel find the havens they need by going back to their homes. Laurel is ultimately able to

take a piece of that firelight and warmth with her back to Chicago, because she has finally succeeded in making her heart and her home one.