

# Themes within "the ponder heart" by eudora welty



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Flannery O'Connor once said: " Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one." In the brilliant novella *The Ponder Heart*, fellow great twentieth-century Southern writer Eudora Welty's central character of Uncle Daniel Ponder is undeniably a " freak" in the sense that he stands out within the society of his small Mississippi town. No one in the prestigious Ponder family knows quite what to do with him. Uncle Daniel is a lovable simpleton given to recklessly gifting the family possessions to friends and strangers alike. He has no understanding of how to behave within the simple, structured society of Clay, Mississippi, and as a result his actions disrupt the town's whole way of life, though everyone enjoys his pure-hearted company and innocent nature. This story is told in the form of a humorous front-porch monologue as narrated by Daniel's niece, Miss Edna Earle Ponder. Although younger than her uncle in years, Edna Earle is an intelligent and capable lady who acts as his guardian angel. Besides running the Beulah Hotel in town — which Uncle Daniel himself gifted to her — Edna Earle's deep, protective affection for her uncle keeps her busy fighting to protect his innocent spirit and to make him happy. She says of herself: " I'm the go-between, that's what I am, between my family and the world. I hardly ever get a word in for myself." For nearly two hundred pages, she regales her unknown listener — apparently a stranger to Clay and a guest at the Beulah Hotel — with Uncle Daniel's misadventures, along the way providing amusing insight into the people and society of her small Mississippi town. Because of her uncle, Edna Earle is unmarried. Her late grandfather raised her and considers her role to be caring for Uncle Daniel — who, as heir to the considerable Ponder estate, must be protected from himself and from society

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at large lest he do irreparable damage to the family name and fortune.

Besides Uncle Daniel, Edna Earle is the only remaining Ponder, and is therefore responsible not only for her uncle, but also for the Ponder honor and reputation at large — and indeed, for the good of the whole town, since her distinguished family is key to the Clay economy. Besides running the Beulah Hotel, the Ponders also own the bank and are the owners of land and a large fortune. Uncle Daniel becomes the heir of all of this after Grandpa Ponder's untimely death, but because of his habit of recklessly giving his belongings away, the whole town is in cahoots to keep him from knowing exactly how much he really owns. *The Ponder Heart* is about living within society — in particular, the changing society of the twentieth-century American South. The Ponders represent an old Civil War family of respectability, wealth, and social stature. Edna Earle and Uncle Daniel are the only remaining members of this proud line. Their antithesis is the Peacock family, a member of which Uncle Daniel haphazardly marries (his father keels over dead upon hearing the news). The Peacocks represent the overbred, undereducated backwoods families that are beginning to vitally change life in the South during this period. Edna Earle regards the Peacocks with thinly veiled disgust. In her estimation, they are the sort of people who reproduce indiscriminately, leave watermelon rinds on the courthouse lawn for others to clean up, take favors thanklessly, and senselessly spend what little money they come by on foolish purchases for which they have no use. They are, quite simply, what the Southern elite would call "white trash" — and their presence threatens the survival of the aristocratic Southern way of life. Edna Earle understands this, yet she loves Uncle Daniel so much that she will do anything to make him happy. What she feels duty-bound to

preserve — the remaining threads of her family prestige — her lovable idiot uncle methodically undermines with his madcap generosity, his failed marriage to Miss Teacake Magee, and finally, his second marriage to airheaded, seventeen-year-old Bonnie Dee Ponder, which ends in total disaster when Bonnie Dee is found dead and Uncle Daniel is accused of her murder. Eudora Welty's simple yarn is, at first glance, a random and disconnected comic monologue, a ridiculous story about ridiculous people and the situations in which they find themselves. There is a much deeper level to this story, however. Beneath the surface, it is a tragic look at the Old South in its dying days, at a time when everything is shifting and changing. The Peacocks are an example of the group effecting that change. Edna Earle and others like her view them as quiet encroachers on the Old South. Another changing dynamic that was developing during this time period was that of the relationship between white Southerners and African-Americans. Although slavery had long been abolished, and the Thirteenth Amendment had granted equal voting rights to blacks, the memory of the pre-Civil War South was still strong, and racism and prejudice were still driving forces within the culture. The Africans in this story, such as the maid Narciss and dimwitted Big John, are depicted as ignorant and foolish, unable to communicate, living on the fringes of society. Black people garnered little respect from most Southerners during this period, yet legally they had all the rights of white men. This tightrope is walked in *The Ponder Heart*, as Big John is called to testify in Uncle Daniel's trial. Whereas one hundred years earlier a black man's word on the witness stand would not have been highly esteemed, in the Clay County of Edna Earle's day, the slow words of Big John can incriminate her beloved uncle on murder charges. Surely this is a great

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transition, and it is a situation that Edna Earle, with her scathing description of the unintelligent witness and his words, clearly does not approve of. Amid all of this turmoil and change and class conflict, against the backdrop of Southern pretension and societal phoniness, the reader of *The Ponder Heart* meets Uncle Daniel. In all his guileless innocence, Daniel Ponder is a wealthy, upper-class Southern gentleman from an aristocratic family. He is, as he very well knows, “as rich as Croesus,” and beloved by the whole town. He has everything in his favor. And so Welty sets up the only situation in which such a privileged man would ever do the things that Uncle Daniel does: she gives him the mind of a little child. Uncle Daniel is not mad. He is only completely innocent. Whereas Edna Earle turns up her nose a little when it comes to the lowlife Peacocks and their spawn, Uncle Daniel marries Miss Bonnie Dee Peacock herself. No one in town has any respect for dirt-poor Big John, but Uncle Daniel loves his company and considers him a friend. In a materialistic society built on a class system — a society that values wealth and possessions and prestige above almost anything else — Uncle Daniel is not even let to know the true extent of his possessions because he will joyfully give them away to anyone he meets. During a time and in a place where one’s religious affiliation denoted his status in life (to be Presbyterian meant to be rich and entitled; to be a Baptist meant to be poor and uncultured), Uncle Daniel marries Miss Teacake Magee, the Professor Magee’s widow and star singer in the Baptist church choir. Social strata, wealth (or lack thereof), skin color, education, breeding — all of these things mean nothing to Uncle Daniel, although his niece is very well aware of the social conventions. As a result, this wealthy, typified gentleman of the South gets away with what no one else in such a position could have ever gotten away with, in literature or <https://assignbuster.com/themes-within-the-ponder-heart-by-eudora-welty/>

in life: he gives away everything he can possibly get people to take, he befriends those considered low by the rest of society, and he marries first a Baptist and then a lowlife backwoods teenager. His love for everyone and everything spills infectiously over the pages as Uncle Daniel, oblivious to those rules that form the very bedrock of every Southern town of the early twentieth century, continues to disobey them. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee gives us a glimpse of life in the prejudiced world of the Deep South, affording a look at its darker side through the perspective of a little girl named Scout Finch, the daughter of a small-town lawyer. Lee's masterpiece is beautiful because she tells of somber themes and heartbreaking issues through an unexpected medium: the eyes of a little child. In the same way, Welty tells her story from an angle. *The Ponder Heart* is, first and foremost, a piece of comic brilliance — a hilarious and unexpected narrative from beginning to end. It also touches upon the deep, conflicting issues facing the twentieth-century South, and it tells of these through the eyes of the skeptical Miss Edna Earle Ponder and the antics of her artless Uncle Daniel. *The Ponder Heart* is not an activist book; it is not a murder mystery or a play, either. It is simply what it appears to be from the moment you turn to the first page and read Miss Edna Earle's command to sit and listen: this is a story. It is a rambling yet masterfully crafted yarn about those dynamics that are slowly beginning to turn the lives of Edna Earle Ponder and her peers upside down. The South is changing, and Uncle Daniel is the one character in this story who survives those changes best. With his simple and unaffected love for everyone, his willingness to accept those around him just as they are, and his childlike generosity, Uncle Daniel represents everything that the prejudiced Old South — steeped in years of

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angst and frustration — is not. Edna Earle, self-sacrificing and doting, puts up with it all — even when Uncle Daniel arbitrarily gives away most of the family fortune in a single sitting, a fortune that Edna Earle well knows would have gone to her as next in line after Uncle Daniel. She lets him have his fun, however, and be happy. His greatest protector and ally, Edna Earle — like the Old South itself — strongly dislikes what she sees as the impropriety of Uncle Daniel's choices, yet she begrudgingly facilitates them. In this, the lavishly generous and loving Daniel and the self-sacrificial and practical Edna Earle both have something in common. They both have the Ponder heart.