

# ***The Optimist's Daughter: Readers' Guide***

**Developed by Lee Anne Bryan, Former Education and Outreach Specialist  
for the Eudora Welty House and Garden**

1. The novel begins with Judge McKelva, Fay, and Laurel in an examining room, with Dr. Courtland determining what is wrong with Judge McKelva's eye. Explain how this exchange sets up the characterization for all three main characters.
  - Laurel: cautious, traditional, understands what Dr. Courtland is telling her (what is behind what he is saying, with references to Laurel's mother, Becky)
  - Judge: low-key, says he is "slipping"; trying not to be concerned (optimist)
  - Fay: sets up her selfishness; she says, "I don't see why this had to happen to *me!*"
2. How does the confined setting of the hospital room during Judge McKelva's recovery continue developing the plot and the characters?
  - No movement; in terms of plot, the action is very focused. Laurel reads to her father, both the paper and novels, while Fay beats on his chest and screams at him.
  - Sets up the conflict between Laurel and Fay. Laurel is the dutiful daughter who is taking care of her father, while Fay is selfish and can only think of the impact on her life. She is angry because the judge dies on her birthday.
3. How does the exchange between Dr. Courtland, Fay, and Laurel after the judge's death reveal the social status of the characters?
  - Dr. Courtland is worried about Laurel because no one from "home" was with her; he offers for Laurel to stay with him but does not ask Fay.
  - Fay does not seem to have manners; blames Dr. Courtland for the judge's death and tells him "Thank you for nothing!" as she and Laurel drive away.
4. In Book Two, as Laurel and Fay arrive in Mt. Salus, how does the conflict between Laurel and Fay intensify?
  - Train met by Laurel's "bridesmaids" and Miss Adele Courtland—Laurel's closest friends and support system.
  - Fay has to ask why Miss Adele and the bridesmaids are there—she is an outsider to the town and does not understand the customs of grieving. This is partly because of social status, partially because she has not been assimilated into the town's daily life and operations.
  - Immediate fight over the funeral arrangements—Laurel automatically asks for the body to be taken to the house, but Fay jumps in and says, "I'm Mrs. McKelva now. If you're the undertaker, you do your business with me."
5. Who is Missouri? How does her presence add another layer to the social differences in the novel? What are the roles of other African-American characters?

- Missouri is the housekeeper who has worked for the McKelvas since Laurel's mother was alive. She is a comfort to Laurel and knows how to placate Fay but seems to be invisible to the other white members of Mt. Salus. At the funeral, the men in attendance joke about the "got-shot witness" (who is Missouri) right in front of her, without any care for her feelings.
  - The other African-American residents of the town are lumped together; at the church, Laurel notices that "Black Mt. Salus had come too, and the blacks had dressed themselves in black."
6. Two surprising things happen during the course of Judge McKelva's visitation. One, Fay's family appears after she has told Laurel that they are dead; two, Laurel becomes upset about the recollections people are making about her father. How are these things related?
- Laurel is struggling with the difference between memory and truth. She tells Miss Adelle, "I want what people say now to be the truth." Then she sees the books in her father's library and knows that she read the wrong book to him in the hospital because she remembered his favorite incorrectly. She realizes that memory and truth are not the same thing.
  - Fay wants to construct her own reality, without her past or her family. When Laurel confronts her about lying, Fay says, "It's better than some lies I've heard around here!" Both Fay and Laurel are shaping events the way they want them to be; Fay by ignoring the truth, and Laurel by filtering them through her memory.
7. What does Fay's family add to the novel? Describe their relationships compared to the ones Laurel shared with her parents.
- They explain some of Fay's behavior and show how she was raised; Fay's hysterical behavior at seeing the judge in the coffin was based on Mrs. Chisom's experience.
  - Comic relief; especially the child Wendell, who is dressed as a cowboy (complete with toy guns) and constantly asks questions.
  - Despite Fay's shock at seeing her family, whom she was not expecting, she goes to Texas with them because they are her people. They provide her support and comfort. Although Laurel, whose love for her family is expressed in a reserved manner, cannot understand Fay's outbursts, she does understand love for family. She is not surprised when Fay leaves with them.
8. After Fay is gone, Laurel spends the night in her mother's room. What is Laurel doing? What is she experiencing?
- Returning to her childhood home is causing Laurel to act like a child in that she is seeking reassurance. She is trying to confirm that her parents loved each other in the way that she remembers it. She is searching through her mother's desk and reading her parents' correspondence.
  - As she confirms her memory of her parents' relationship, Laurel must also grieve for her lost husband, Phil, who was killed in the war. She imagines that

the wind of the storm outside is Phil's voice, telling her "I wanted it," meaning he wanted the same kind of romantic love with Laurel that Laurel's parents shared.

9. That night, when Laurel falls asleep in the chair, she dreams of riding the train with Phil to Mt. Salus. What is the image that she dreams about? What does it mean?
  - Laurel dreams that she and Phil are on a train riding over a long bridge. Underneath them are two rivers coming together—the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers.
  - The joining of the rivers is like the joining of their lives; just as the two rivers join and turn into one, Laurel and Phil are joining their separate lives in marriage. It reminds her that "any life...was nothing but the continuity of its love."
  
10. A pivotal scene in the novel is the freeing of the chimney swift, the bird that was trapped in the house. What might this represent?
  - The trapped bird could be the grief that Laurel has been repressing. The entire time Laurel has been home she has been stoic; Fay has been hysterical, but in contrast, Laurel has not shed a tear.
  - That is why Laurel herself must free the bird; it is her tight hold on the past and her grief that she is letting go. Mr. Cheek and Missouri cannot free it for her, because it is her burden. She will complete this process by burning the letters and the papers that were in her mother's desk.
  
11. What happens in the final confrontation between Laurel and Fay over Becky's breadboard? What realization, or epiphany, does Laurel have?
  - Laurel is initially furious that Fay has destroyed the breadboard by cracking walnuts on it. Fay has taken something that Phillip made and that Becky loved and "desecrated" it—when Laurel says this to Fay, Fay does not know what the word means. Nothing in the house has meaning to Fay, because she rejects the importance of the past. She tells Laurel, "I belong to the future, didn't you know that?"
  - As soon as Fay mentions the future, Laurel realizes that she does not need the breadboard. She knows that memory does not reside in objects; memory lives in the mind, where it can always be called upon. Welty writes, "Memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams."
  
12. In the introduction to the Franklin Library edition, Welty writes that in *The Optimist's Daughter* she wanted to focus on "the progression of human relationships. Their tensions act as the directing force; and the plot of the novel tests the movement and pull, with and against, the power and strength of kinship." By the end of the novel, how many ways has she demonstrated this? Do you find this to be a compelling subject for a novel?

- The Dalzells (family in the New Orleans hospital)
  - Kinship of the town—closed social circles
  - Fay and her family
  - Becky's history with her family
- Laurel and her family—the most complicated. Her work in the novel is to reconcile her memories of her parents with the truth of their lives. Laurel has wondered how her father could marry Fay, who was so different from her mother Becky. She uses her parents' correspondence to confirm what she knew, that they had a deep love for one another. She must also grieve for the family she lost, her husband, Phillip Hand. By the end of the novel, Laurel knows that memory is what you carry with you that sustains your love.

13. Another theme in the novel is the process of grief and how people react to loss in different ways. What are the different characters' reactions? What do you find most true to your own experience?

- Fay—hysterical, screaming, putting on a show because she thinks it shows feeling. Does not seem to truly have grief over the judge's death. She is only concerned about how it affects her
- Laurel—reserved, wants her grief to be private—partly because this is appropriate to her social class, partly because she has not fully come to terms with it yet
- Major Bullock and the judge's male friends—by drinking too much, telling stories of their exploits
- The bridesmaids—by teasing Laurel, which upsets her—Tish has to say to her, "Aren't we grieving? We're grieving *with* you."