

Autobiography in Eudora Welty's Fiction

Unlike many writers, Eudora Welty does not *typically* create plots and characters that mirror events and people in her life. She does, of course, draw upon experience to write her stories. Bits of dialogue, descriptions of places and people, brief encounters repeatedly enter her fiction. And in a few instances Welty writes quite directly and fully in an autobiographical fashion. The following questions deal with Welty's most autobiographical works: "A Memory," "The Winds," "No Place for You, My Love," and The Optimist's Daughter.

- **"A Memory." The Welty family often went swimming together at Livingston Lake in Jackson, Mississippi, and the Welty's likely saw a somewhat disreputable family like the one described here. Moreover, the narrator's youthful infatuation was Welty's own. But the narrator's class consciousness was not Welty's nor was her aversion to looking at life directly and realistically. Experience is transformed in the course of the story.**

Topics: the passage from childhood to adulthood--adolescence; the romantic disposition; the ideal vs. the actual; the power of imagination.

1. In the second paragraph the narrator says, "I was at an age when I formed a judgment upon every person and every event which came under my eye, although I was easily frightened." How old do you judge she is at the time the events of this memory occur? Why do you think she is so obsessed with *watching* everything and everyone around her? Why is she frightened?
2. The narrator tells us that she was "in love then for the first time: I had identified love at once. The truth is that never since has any passion I have felt remained so hopelessly unexpressed within me or appeared so grotesquely altered in the outward world." Describe the object of her love. How much of the relationship is visible in the outward world? How much of it is in her imagination? In what way is "the passion" she felt "grotesquely altered in the outward world"?
3. Why is she so disturbed by the boy's nosebleed? And why do you think she associates the swimmers she happened to see one summer morning with the boy she loves? What is her reaction to her discoveries of those "ugly bodies"?
4. Do you think it's possible to take greater joy from a dream of love than from a real relationship with another person? Is the dreamer *escaping* or *engaging* life when she/he "dreams of love"?
5. A storyteller draws upon the imagination and the direct encounter with life to make up a story. Would you say that storytelling and recalling a memory are similar? Do you think that we "make up" ourselves by the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, what we want, what we've done, why we do what we do?

- **“The Winds.” The Weltys experienced a tornado like the one described here, and the children and parents responded in the fashion described here. How does the story move beyond the literal?**

General Questions:

1. What role does memory play in the story? Does the nature of memory govern the story’s structure? Is the nature of memory an important theme in the story?
2. What role does social class play in the story? Do Josie and her mother differ in their views of class?
3. Is Josie representative of the artist in any sense? What do her responses to Old Bidly Felix, the female cornetist, and Cornella suggest about her? Does Josie seem to share Eudora Welty’s view that fiction involves imagining yourself into other lives?
4. What is the meaning of the story’s final scene? Why does the story end by focusing on Cornella? Who do you think wrote the note that Josie finds? Did Josie actually see Cornella out in the storm? Why does Welty incorporate ambiguity into this scene?
5. What does the story have to say about the nature of family?
6. What is the significance of setting in this story? Of the house and the street where it is located? Of the park? Of the Chautauqua?

Topics and textual questions:

Topics: see "A Memory"; comparison of themes in two stories.

1. Hearing the winds outside, Josie imagines, dreamlike, that "the big girls of the town were having a hayride." What does the opening sentence suggest about Josie's age and interests? What's the connection between her dream and the Old Natchez Trace and Lover's Lane? What is Welty suggesting by setting the story during an equinoctial storm?
2. Describe Cornella. Does she represent for Josie a "dream of love"? Is her role in this story more like that of the boy with nosebleed in "A Memory" or like that of the swimmers? Or both?
3. "Cornella" is an unusual name, and we know that Eudora Welty gave significant thought to the naming of her characters. What does this name signify?

4. Find a paragraph in the story in which Welty uses a listing of sensuous details to evoke the experience of childhood. Could you compose a similar list of some favorite images of your childhood? In an autobiographical essay titled "The Corner Store," Welty describes many related images from her childhood.
5. Midway in the story Josie experiences "a kind of shock" when her mother says to her, "You talk in your sleep too." Josie is embarrassed and hides her face in the pillow. Why is Josie so sensitive about this uncontrolled "exposure" in the hearing of her mother? What does the detail tell us of her developing maturity?
6. Welty develops many interesting allusions in this story to deepen our understanding of this maturing young woman. For example, consider the connection between the moon and developing female sexuality, between the fairytale character Rapunzel and Josie, between corn/Cornella and fertility. How do allusions contribute to a story's effect?
7. Describe the cornet player. What are the feelings her music arouses in Josie? Why are the feelings so comforting?
8. What does the fragment of letter that bears Cornella's name signify for Josie? What have we learned in this story about the excited fears and the eager anticipations of a girl's growing up?

- **“No Place for You, My Love”** After visiting New Orleans and joining Harvard professor Carvel Collins for a drive south of New Orleans to Venice, Louisiana, Eudora Welty transformed a story she had earlier set in a claustrophobic small town. Galatoire’s Restaurant, the landscape “south of South,” and the kiss shared by two travelers all came from Welty’s experience. So too does the story seem to deal with Welty’s long-term romantic involvement with John Robinson, whom she had known since her high school days. The essay “Writing and Analyzing a Story” (in The Eye of the Story) describes the genesis of “No Place for You, My Love.”

General Questions:

1. To what extent does this story deal with Eudora Welty’s experiences? To what extent does the story go beyond personal experience to deal with more wide-ranging issues?
2. How important is setting to this story? What about the story’s beginning in Galatoire’s Restaurant? What about the journey to Baba’s Place and back? Does the New Orleans setting stand in contrast to the world “south of South”? In what ways? Are issues of shelter and exposure involved here?

3. How would you describe the woman from Toledo and the man from Syracuse? To what extent do they conceal themselves from each other? To what extent do they manage to communicate? What is the nature of the relationship that springs up between them?

4. What is the import of the story's final scenes? Welty has described "No Place for You, My Love" as a ghost story of sorts. Is that because of the cry that rises up as the couple returns to New Orleans? What does this cry represent? Is there a man waiting in the hotel lobby when the woman from Toledo returns? Why does the man from Syracuse recall his student days in New York when "the shriek and horror and unholy smother of the subway had its original meaning for him as the lilt and expectation of love"?

Topics and textual questions:

Topics: Experiences of disappointment, of fear of exposure and embarrassment, of rejection, feelings of anxious boredom.

Yearnings for communication with a sympathetic, understanding "other"; dreams of love.

Aliveness to the physical world of the senses and the compensations and pleasures that that connection offers. Seize the day! Carpe diem! Moving beyond "imperviousness."

1. The woman of this story is not from the South. What distinctions are drawn early in the story between Northern/Midwestern/ Southern characteristics? What is your judgment of these generalizations?

2. What for you are the most memorable details that describe the drive south of New Orleans? How does Welty manage to make the reader feel the sensations of that place?

3. The woman keeps her "measuring coolness" when she sees an alligator on the boat, but, in contrast, the river and sun and uprooted trees are anything but measured and cool. What kind of opposition or conflict is Welty posing for us to consider?

4. What is the effect in this story of the emphasis on description-- and the scarcity of dialogue? How is the form of the story related to its theme?

5. In a key passage near the end of the story, we find an ironic statement of the couple's situation:

"Surely even those immune from the world, for the time being, need the touch of one another, or all is lost. Their arms encircling each other, their bodies circling the odorous, just-nailed-down floor, they were, at last, imperviousness in motion. They had found it, and had almost missed it: they had had to dance. They were what their separate hearts desired that day, for themselves and each other." Can you explain the irony (the opposition of ideas) that Welty is suggesting here? There is both

disappointment and comfort portrayed in this story, but the final lines return the man from Syracuse to memories of his youth, to a memory of the "expectation of love." Welty has been called "the necessary optimist"--how would you describe the "optimism" of this story?

- **The Optimist's Daughter** This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel draws upon the youthful experiences of Eudora Welty's mother and upon her mother's old age. Part 2, "Learning to See," of Welty's autobiography **One Writer's Beginnings** provides a good deal of the background for this novel.

1. Welty reports that her father was an "optimist," but that her mother was the more daring individual of the two. The critic Jay Tolson calls Welty a "necessary optimist," one who has a tough-minded view of experience, but who also has a "credible optimism." Does this biographical information shed any light on the novel? What does the term "optimist" mean in the novel? Does the novel ultimately have an "optimistic" vision or is the term ironic? What is Laurel's vision of experience as the novel ends?

2. In Part 2 of One Writer's Beginnings, Welty describes summer trips to West Virginia and discusses her mother's youthful years there. To what extent does this autobiographical information inform The Optimist's Daughter? To what extent has autobiography been altered to suit the needs of the novel?

3. Discuss the characterization of Fay, Judge McKelva's new wife? What values does she represent? Why might the Judge have married her? Do her differences from Becky point to a key reason? Why has she married the Judge? Is she merely a gold digger? How does Laurel respond to Fay? How do other characters in the novel respond to her? Why?

4. What is the cause of the Judge's death? Is Laurel right to hold Fay responsible? If so, why does she take so long to speak to Fay about the death?

5. The novel's opening section is set during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. How important is this setting? How do Laurel and Fay respond to Mardi Gras and to the revelers costumed as Death and the Medusa?

6. The bridesmaids from Laurel's wedding greet her at the Mt. Salus train station and still call themselves the bridesmaids. What does this title tell us about Mt. Salus and Laurel's friends? How does Laurel seem to be different from her old friends?

7. Has Laurel throughout most of the novel kept the past in a silver frame, a set piece which does not threaten her? Does her night alone in her parents' house bring her a

more complex vision of the past? Does she learn that the past is subject to our changing, evolving understanding of it?

8. Discuss Laurel's memories of her husband Philip, of their wedding journey, of the breadboard he made for her mother. What is the significance of the confluence of rivers, birds, lives that she and Philip see from the train bound to Mt. Salus? Why is the breadboard important to Laurel, and why does she leave Mt. Salus without it? How do these memories fit into the thematic structure of the novel?

9. The episode with the bird in the house receives a great deal of emphasis in the novel. The bird drives Laurel into the room where her mother's letters are stored; the bird remains in the house the next morning when Mr. Cheek arrives, and Missouri comments on the bird when Laurel finally manages to set it free outside. What seems to be the thematic import of this episode?

10. Chestina Welty was an ardent gardener and dearly loved her rose garden. The character Becky McKelva is like Chestina in this regard. And in the novel Laurel discusses a rose known as Becky's Climber. Does that rose seem symbolic in any ways?

11. Discuss Welty's portrait of Mt. Salus, Mississippi, of its class structure, its changes over time, and its racial dynamic. Who are the members of its white upper class? Of the white lower classes? What sort of relationship do they have with Missouri, the McKelva's African American maid? How has Mt. Salus changed from the time of Laurel's marriage to the time of her father's death?