

Humor in Eudora Welty's Fiction

- **During her life, Eudora Welty was well-known to possess a sharp wit and an excellent sense of humor. As you read the following stories and novella, think about the types of humor they contain. Does humor emerge from characterization? Are humorous passages laugh-out-loud funny, ironic, or satiric? What is the tone of Welty's humor? Biting? Bemused? Both? In what ways are these stories a product of a particular time? Does that add to the humor or lessen it? Humor at times relies on single words or on homonyms with widely divergent meanings, at other times upon situations that can be perceived in two ways, occasionally upon metaphors that connect two unlike objects. Did the doubleness of humor, for Welty, tally with the doubleness of experience more generally?**

“Lily Daw and the Three Ladies”

- **Welty set a number of her early stories in a fictional town called Victory, Mississippi. “Lily Daw” is one of those stories, and in many ways it is as much a portrait of small-town Mississippi as it is of Lily and the three ladies. What significance do you attach to the town's name? Does that name tell us anything about the title characters?**

1. The “three ladies” are grouped together. Who are they and what are their individual motivations regarding Lily? How is Aimee Slocum different from the other two? Do the three ladies seem to be Mississippi versions of the three fates who play such a prominent role in Greek mythology?
2. What is “wrong” with Lily? What are some of the comic details that show that she is “feeble minded”?
3. “Tell, me, Lily—just yes or no—are you the same as you were?” What does Mrs. Carson mean by this question? What does Lily mean by her answer? What different types of sexual attitudes are present in Victory, Mississippi?
4. At the end of the story, the three ladies completely reverse positions on Lily's marriage. Can you explain their behavior? How does Lily feel at this point about getting married? Does the loss of her hope chest have any significance?
5. What does this story suggest about those who are doing “good deeds”? At the end, have the three ladies helped or hurt Lily Daw?

“Petrified Man”

- **In January 1937, Robert Penn Warren, editor of the Southern Review, rejected “Petrified Man” for publication, and Welty burned her only copy of**

the story in her kitchen wood stove. Over one year later in March of 1938, Warren changed his mind, but Welty ignored his request to see the story again. In September, Warren reiterated his desire to see the story, and Welty rewrote it from memory. It has become one of her most well-known works.

1. Describe the atmosphere of the beauty parlor. How does Leota treat her clients? How does it seem to be a torture chamber as well as a beauty parlor? What does Welty seem to be saying about concepts of beauty and about the American focus on beauty?
2. What is the relationship between Mrs. Fletcher and Leota? How does Mrs. Fletcher demonstrate that she is of a higher social class than Leota? What are Leota's behaviors that Mrs. Fletcher finds appalling? Does class-consciousness play an important role in the story?
3. Why is Mrs. Fletcher so upset that Leota knows that she is pregnant? What does she mean when she says, "If a certain party hadn't found it out and spread it around, it wouldn't be too late even now."
4. How do Leota, Mrs. Pike, and Mrs. Fletcher describe their husbands? Does marriage seem to be a battleground of sorts? Are the women concerned with issues of power?
5. What role does the freak show play in the story's plot and in its thematic structure? Mrs. Fletcher says, "I despise freaks." How does this statement reveal her feelings about her pregnancy?
6. What is Mrs. Pike's attitude toward Mr. Petrie? How do she and Leota respond to the realization that he is a rapist? What does their response tell us about them?
7. What is Billy Boy doing in the beauty shop? Is he part of the battle between the sexes that the female characters are so focused upon?

"Why I Live at the P.O."

• During her travels through rural Mississippi, Eudora Welty once saw an ironing board set up in a small-town post office. She then began to speculate about possible reasons for such an arrangement, and a story was the result.

1. Sister is the narrator of this story, and the telling of events comes from her perspective alone. How does this affect your reading of the story? Do you believe that everything happened the way that Sister says it does?
2. Stella Rondo and her daughter return to China Grove, Mississippi, and move in with Mama, Uncle Rondo, Papa-Daddy, and Sister. Who is missing from this family

group? What might be the reason? How do the family members relate to each other? What are the sources of tension between them?

3. What is the relationship between Sister and Stella Rondo? Is this a normal sibling rivalry? Does the small town environment intensify that rivalry? Why might the two sisters be so interested in Mr. Whitaker?
4. Who is Shirley T.? Why might she have received this name? Why is Mama willing to accept Stella-Rondo's assertion that Shirley T. is adopted, but Sister is not?
5. The pacing of the story is part of its humor. To fully appreciate this, listen to the recording of Welty herself reading the story. (The Essential Welty Audio CD is available in bookstores or through online sources such as Amazon.com. It is also available in many libraries.) Does this change your appreciation of the story?

The Ponder Heart

- **The Ponder Heart was published in 1954, and in many ways it deals with issues of class, race, and gender in a small southern town. It also deals with the decline of the small town and with characters' attempts to cope with that decline. Do you think Welty's use of comedy complements her investigation of these issues?**

1. Much of the humor of The Ponder Heart depends on the narrator, Edna Earle Ponder. Compare her to Sister from "Why I Live at the P.O." Is Edna Earle to be trusted? How could her view of events be prejudiced? How does she characterize herself for the reader?
2. Describe the characterization of the "Negroes" in The Ponder Heart. Does Edna Earle see these characters in stereotypical terms? Does she fail to recognize resourcefulness or the need to develop survival strategies in a white-dominated world?
3. "Uncle Daniel belongs in Clay, and by now he's smart enough to know it; and if he wasn't, I'd tell him." What is the relationship of the Ponders to the town? How does the idea of place and being displaced appear as a theme in the novella?
4. Describe Bonnie Dee, her family, and her family home. Is she similar to Fay in The Optimist's Daughter? Why does Uncle Daniel love her so dearly? What does Edna Earle think of her?
5. Discuss Edna Earle's statement, "There's something I think's better to have than love, and if you want me to, I'll tell you what it is—that's company." To whom is Edna Earle speaking? How would you describe Edna Earle's relationship with Mr.

Springer? Why does she value “company” over love? Do any other characters share that attitude?

6. How does Bonnie Dee die? Why does Welty take the figurative and make it literal?

7. What details of the trial are comic? How does the pacing of the novella change at this point? Why can't Uncle Daniel tell the court what he did? Were you surprised by the verdict?

8. Why does Uncle Daniel give away all his money? Is that really why the people of Clay avoid the Ponders at the end of the novella? What is your interpretation of what has taken place?