

The Liturgical Year and Rebirth in Eudora Welty's The Optimist's Daughter

Lisa Dallape Matson

*"People live their own way, and to a certain extent
I almost believe they may die their own way, Laurel"* Miss Adele to Laurel (56).

According to Robert Brinkmeyer, Reynolds Price's essay "The Onlooker, Smiling: An Early Reading of The Optimist's Daughter" is the source of the view that literary critics who attributed significance to Mardi Gras and Christian symbolism in that work were mistaken.

(429). Price had written:

Inevitably a great deal of heavy holy water will be made over Miss Welty's choice of Carnival Season for this opening section and the eve of Ash Wednesday for the first climax. So far as I can see, she herself makes almost nothing of it—the revelry is barely mentioned and then only as a ludicrously inappropriate backdrop to death. Even less is made of the city itself, almost no appeal to its famous atmosphere—it is simply the place where a man from the deep South finds the best doctor (Price 122).

Brinkmeyer suggests that Price's hopes rather than his fears have come to pass. Perhaps because of Price's scholarly influence, most criticism of the novel "has generally focused on the problems of vision, time, and memory" that confront Laurel McKelva Hand and other characters "with little or no regard for the significance of Carnival or New Orleans to these problems" (427). But Brinkmeyer argues, contrary to Price, that the New Orleans of Mardi Gras embodies both Christian symbols and the enthusiasm for life found in Welty's work, which can be best understood as the freeing carnival spirit or the carnivalesque, as defined by Bakhtin (431).

Brinkmeyer is on firm ground, but could have pressed his case further. An examination of the original Price essay reveals that his commentary quoted above (which is Brinkmeyer's point of departure) is about Welty's 1969 story "The Optimist's Daughter," published in The New Yorker, rather than the expanded and reworked novel of the same name, which Welty published in 1972. Because the opening Mardi Gras scene appears in both the short story and the novel, Price's comments are relevant to both. But absent from the short story, though found in the novel, is the scene of Laurel's night vigil, which enhances the Christian symbolism in the novel. In 1972 or later, Price did append a postscript about the novel to his essay. Consistent with his earlier views, he now criticizes Welty for her reworking and the addition of Laurel's night vigil "in the room of her dead parents, among the debris of their love..." (136). Price then quotes in its entirety the scene of Phil Hand's appearance with his wild eyes, the reference to Lazarus, Phil calling Laurel's name three times, his voice like a roar calling, "I want it!" (136-137). Price is, at least in part, taking issue with the Christian symbolism when he writes, "Strong as that is, my initial reaction to it—and especially to the dream and morning reflections which it evokes from Laurel—was that it diluted the true harshness of Laurel's own widowhood... But after several readings, the additions seem to me clearly aimed at the keener definition of Laurel's belated discovery, growth and endurance" (137). Price then, grudgingly tips his intellectual hat to the concept that women, too, have a self beyond their relationship to a husband—that they have a personal journey tied to the life cycle. I would argue that Price's interpretation of Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday short-changes both the short story and the novel, and it particularly misunderstands Welty's crafting of the process of female renewal and the Christian ideas of suffering, death, rebirth and resurrection to a new life. I suggest that Brinkmeyer's well-argued ideas about the novel's Christian symbolism are part of an even larger use of symbolism in the

story—specifically, the use of the Christian liturgical year as it is tied to feminine rebirth myths. With “heavy holy water” in hand this essay examines these ideas.

The Optimist’s Daughter opens with precipitating events: an examination, the eye surgery, a three-week long recovery, and then the surprising death of Judge McKelva on a Tuesday—the last day of the Christian church’s season of Epiphany. This also happened to be the birthday of his selfish, young, second wife Fay. The last day of the season of Epiphany, always a Tuesday, is known as Mardi Gras, which literally means "Fat Tuesday" in French. This season, which celebrates the visit of the Wise Men bearing gifts for the infant Jesus, begins each year on January 6th, twelve days after Christmas, and ends on Mardi Gras. The forty-day, penitential season of Lent begins the next day, Ash Wednesday. Lent itself leads to Holy Week and the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus the Christ on Easter Sunday. The narrative, then, is actually set mostly during the Christian season of Lent, a time of soul searching and repentance, reflection and stock taking. Lent also commemorates Jesus’s testing in the wilderness which, according to the Synoptic Gospels, preceded his famous teaching and healing activities. Louise Westling observes that Welty often uses a “mythic substratum for symbolism” in her work (49). I suggest that she does so in this novel by using Christian church liturgical seasons—Epiphany, Lent and Easter—and compressing their symbolic meaning into four weeks (the three before the Judge’s death and the one following it) to frame the psychological experience of the Judge’s daughter Laurel, as she deals with immediate death of her father as well as the previous deaths of her loved ones (mother and husband) and reorients herself to life.

It is not until page forty-three of the novel, when the cab driver returns Laurel and Fay to their rooms in the Hibiscus, their hotel, that Welty actually explains that the Judge had died in Epiphany on Mardi Gras. In part I, section one, Fay and Laurel observe the parties going on in

New Orleans leading up to this last day of Epiphany. Fay tries to entice the Judge out of bed to watch the parade floats (25), while Laurel feels the “oppression of a carnival night, of crowds running wild in the streets” (31). Laurel’s instincts foreshadow that “something” is about to happen. On the night of his death, “they found that the Carnival was overflowing the Hibiscus, too” (45).

Welty makes interesting uses of the Mardi Gras symbolism in sections two, three and four: the name “Mardi Gras” itself comes from the tradition of slaughtering and feasting upon a fattened calf on the last day of Carnival. Fay is certainly portrayed by Mrs. Martello as abusing and killing the Judge by having “laid hands on him” (32). He, the wealthy respectable older husband, was killed for Fay’s own selfish needs—her inability to not be the center of attention. The day of Mardi Gras is also known as Shrove Tuesday (from “to shrive,” or hear confessions). Dr. Courtland, after not being able to save the Judge, offers a kind of confession to Laurel when he says of his father, “He helped me through medical school, kept me going when Daddy died. A sacrifice in those days” (41). Twice before his burial, Judge McKelva is portrayed as a sacrificial figure. The exterior carnival atmosphere is maintained inside the hospital by Mr. Dalzell’s family, who also give Fay an audience for her desolation at the thought of the Judge’s death—and for her spitting at Laurel (35). This begins Laurel’s road to psychological suffering. At the same time it also foretells her successful navigation to the end of the novel—it evokes the biblical story of a man born blind whom Jesus healed by using his saliva to make mud, which he spread on the man’s eyes to restore his sight (John 9:6). This is the first of several references Welty makes to Lenten scripture reading in the three year lectionary cycle. Also, by her action, Fay establishes herself and Laurel as what Weston calls “paired opposites.” Laurel is trapped in a “self-spun web of idealism” and Fay acts as the external force which forces her toward a

successful internal reassessment “to emancipate herself from the memory of the ideal (139, 155). By the end of the novel, Laurel’s sight is restored.

Parts II and III of the story are set by the calendar during the season of Lent— when as noted, Christians commemorate Jesus’s wilderness experience and engage in soul searching and repentance, reflection and stock taking. Welty, however, compresses many of these Lenten symbols into part II of the story. The Judge’s body travels home on Ash Wednesday, a day when The Book of Common Prayer reminds penitents to “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Laurel’s friends greet her and she reflects. They all suffer because of the Judge’s death especially Major Bullock. The section rides on the scene from Thursday’s viewing of the Judge’s dead body and his burial on Friday. Fay suffers at “suffering,” while the inauthentic tone of Fay’s “wilderness experience” of widowhood is a foil compared to Laurel’s more authentic struggles. Then Fay’s family, the Chisoms arrive. Shortly after, a character is introduced who plays the role of a “fool” or “outcast” and reinforces ideas from scripture. Miss Verna Longmeier, the seamstress tells about her memories of being welcomed to the McKelva house at Christmas (a season of expectation and rejoicing) and claims that she and the Judge danced together. Laurel reflects on Verna’s oddness and recalls, “to the criticism that her stitching was not straight, she replied, ‘Let him who is without sin cast the first stone,’” (72) quoting a statement attributed to Jesus addressing a “woman taken in adultery” (John 8:1-11). This interaction, along with the parable of The Prodigal Son, are exceptions to the principle that the Lenten scripture readings as detailed in The Book of Common Prayer refer to the life and work of Jesus. Lest the reference should be missed, Welty links Verna and the stone again later in the novel, when Laurel discovers the carved stone boat. Thus, Verna makes the first overt reference to forgiveness—the forgiveness so vital to Laurel’s wholeness. Laurel confronts Fay

about lying—when she had said that the Chisom family was dead. Fay is not repentant. Here again is the pairing of Laurel and Fay as opposites. Fay did not want to hear that the Judge was dead, but easily told Laurel that her entire family was dead. Laurel, on the other hand, has in fact lost her entire family including her husband. In part II, section three, Laurel “closed her eyes, in recognition” of what had made the Chisoms seem familiar when they arrive in Mount Salus. “They might have come out of that night [the Judge died] in the hospital waiting room...the great, interrelated family of those who never know the meaning of what has happened to them” (84). This realization makes Laurel determined to come to grips with the interrelatedness of her own family’s history. Throughout part II, Laurel is trying to take stock of Fay and deal with her. She is helped mostly by Fay’s young nephew, Wendell. His personality allows her to see Fay differently. “Laurel at the moment wanted to reach out for him [Wendell]...He was like a young, undriven, unfalsifying, unvindictive Fay” (76). Wendell keeps Laurel open to some redeeming quality in Fay. By doing this, she also helps herself to understanding.

Using the symbolism of Holy Week, Laurel tells Fay when she will be leaving Mount Salus and her former home. “I’m giving myself three days” (99). This evokes the three days in which Jesus went from death to resurrection. In his essay “Christ, A Symbol of the Self,” C. J. Jung writes that the “Christ archetype (as far as it is known) denotes completeness but is far from being perfect...This approximate state of wholeness comes from the transcendence of the real suspension between opposites” (69). I suggest that Welty employs the Christ archetype (Christ-image) in Laurel. Laurel is certainly suspended between the memories she has of her parents. She is also suspended between her thoughts about her mother and Fay. Finally, she has issues with Fay and her father. Specifically, I think Welty has Laurel resolve the memory of her parent’s conflict (in which her mother calls her father “Lucifer”) which took place directly before

Becky's death. She realizes that her mother understood her father would have guessed he would remarry. Moreover, as we learn at the end of the book, "Fay was Becky's dread" (174). This implies some loss of the past to a less appealing future. Finally, Laurel confronts Fay about "laying hands" on her father in the hospital.

Part III begins on Friday with Laurel and in the garden with her friends. As they talk about Fay, their real goal is to make Laurel laugh—and they do. Her friends also chide her about "taking up her life again, just where she left off" (113). Saturday she spends in the library, her father's former sanctuary which balances time spent in her mother's sewing room. She does not find anything here except an unexpected view through the window and realization that Miss Adele loved her father. On Sunday her friends say, "We are grieving with you" (127). The group of bridesmaids are really ladies-in-waiting for Laurel to love again. After walking home with the Major in the rain, Laurel senses a wild bird in the house. By introducing this element of nature—a bird—into the plot, Welty creates the energy for Laurel's renewal (136). In a second essay, Jung states, "Birds, as aerial beings, are well-known spirit symbols" (Individuation 334). It starts Laurel on the next part of her transformation begun on Ash Wednesday with Fay's spitting. A Leslie Harris, in her article, "The Mystic Vision in The Optimist's Daughter" suggests that Laurel is embarking on an experience similar to those experienced by Christian mystics like Julian of Norwich. She makes the case that "only after intense suffering" does Laurel see a vision of Phil—with Phil as a corporeal being "whose voice fills the house" (34, 37). I do not actual know enough about 14th and 15th century Christianity to judge Harris's argument. But I do agree with her assessment that Welty has used many symbols to create the environment and internal climate for Laurel to touch those things deepest in her soul and arrive at some kind of higher unity. Other secondary sources bear this out.

Several secondary sources affirm that the process of growth and individuation (the cycles of life), has applicability to The Optimist's Daughter. Ruth Weston points out, Welty's "most interesting characters are female heroes intent upon their own quest for selfhood" (11). Laurel McKelva Hand's journey is mythic and heroic. Franziska Gyax suggests the "book is about a daughter trying to come to terms with her dead parents"...and that "the novel is an example of a matrilineal narrative" (11). The ideas of memory, tradition and the mother-daughter narrative are, she asserts, the "buried plot" of the story (99). In addition to the Christian symbolism, Welty draws on the psychological aspects of the Greek myth of Proserpine and time as seasons. Louise Westling discusses how Welty used this myth in Delta Wedding. "It is easy to see why Welty was drawn to the story of Demeter" she remarks, "because she and her daughter Persephone are the figures who naturally come to mind when one thinks of images of female power and relationships in classical mythology" (98). She describes how this myth was discussed by Welty in correspondence as early as 1937 (44). Proserpine has, throughout her life, repeated opportunities, all cyclical, to move from darkness to light. As she does this she creates the idea that the feminine embodies endless renewal—renewal "not based on power struggles or on masculine sexual desires." Welty's vision "supports peace rather than war, cooperation rather than domination, and therefore comedy rather than tragedy" (44).

This myth is tapped to frame Laurel's night vigil. By remembering her grandmother and her mother's childhood, Laurel is placed in what Jung calls "the life-stream" (Jung, Kore 188).¹ Welty combines these ideas with some traditional Christian images from the liturgical year—especially the idea of death and resurrection, which of course reframes the Greek mythology. First, she is trapped in her parent's room—in the room where she was born. Next, she realizes that she wants Fay to tell her the truth about aiding in the death of her father. Laurel decides that

Fay has betrayed herself and she [Laurel] says: “I’m released” (131). This appear to echo Jesus’s last words on the cross, “It is finished” but Laurel has just begun to face the conjunction of opposites which will lead to her transcendence. Laurel travels from there into a small adjoining sewing which belonged to her mother. It is like an interior womb or wilderness. Here she finds her mother’s letters which: trace Becky’s own childhood and the death of Becky’s father; give details of Laurel’s childhood; and describe her mother’s story of suffering and death. That section ends with Laurel’s realization: “But Becky [her mother] had known herself” (144). Jung suggests that “every mother contains her daughter in herself, and...every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter” (188). That interpretation inherently reflects the idea of life-spans, embraced by Welty in this story with Laurel her mother and her grandmother. For Laurel this was a symbolic journey back to the womb so she could know herself. Notwithstanding this powerful feminine archetypal mythology, I would also assert that Laurel found a way to reconcile with her father in Becky’s sewing room. This is a reconciliation we do not see clearly until the end of the story.

When Laurel finds Becky’s letters she observes that, “In the back of the pigeonhole where these letters came from was some solid little object, and Laurel drew it out, her fingers remembering it before she held it under her eyes. It was a two-inch bit of slatey stone, given shape by many little strokes from a penknife... A boat. The initials C.C.M.McK. were cut running together in the base. Her father had made it himself” (135-136). She finds it exactly after she thinks of Miss Verna Longmeier’s hands sewing for her mother in that cold room — Verna who earlier in the novel was quoted as urging forgiveness. It is ironic that the “pigeon holes” yield such a treasure while the Laurel’s grandmother’s pigeons are fearful memories for her. The boat was made from a “river stone” picked up by her parents in West Virginia when

they were courting. Now it is more than just a talisman; it links Laurel to the confluence of her life and she finds that through its provenance and shape. Several secondary sources mention Welty's use of fairy tales, folk tales and local legends (Westling 44, Weston 11-14, Vande Kieft 9). This boat functions in the story as Jung proposes it often in many fairy tales, as "the necessary magical talisman, the unexpected and improbable power to succeed" which enters into the story through the "objective intervention" of an old man [archetype]—in this case from Laurel's dead father (Fairytales 220). Moreover, the boat is a symbol used by early Christians to refer to the church "bearing the faithful to salvation." The Latin word for ship, *navis*, became the name for a portion of the church building, the area occupied by the congregation—the nave (Shaw). This boat demonstrates Welty's use of bridges and the flow of water as a symbol for the passage of time. For example, on the night her father dies, Laurel sees through the window "the whole Mississippi River Bridge in lights" and describes the Judge's appearance "his whole pillowless head went dusky, as if he laid it under the surface of dark pouring water..." (33). One week later, in the light of the morning, she is reborn. Laurel's remembrance of leaving Cairo with Phil and crossing the water on a bridge at "the confluence of the waters, the Ohio and Mississippi" in that great morning of confluence, "they themselves were a part of the confluence" (159-160) reinforces this. Laurel, learning that life is real and transitory, has shed the ideals about her parents and husband. She is no longer living in suspended time. Once traveling across the water with Phil on a suspended bridge, she is now living in the present time—in "the life stream."

The fact that Laurel and Phil leave Cairo, Illinois, named for Cairo in Egypt, and cross the water strongly suggests the crossing of the Red Sea by the ancient people of Israel. In

Christian theology, the exodus is a precursor of rebirth, of salvation. “We thank you, Almighty God,” The Book of Common Prayer summarizes,

for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. (306)

For Christians, baptism with water identifies one with the death and the resurrection of Christ, the supreme event of Easter toward which the season of Lent points. By evoking Mardi Gras at the beginning of the novel, Welty establishes Laurel on the trajectory that brings her to her own Easter rebirth. The Christian holiday of Easter itself subsumed a pagan celebration dedicated to a goddess. This brings us back to the idea of wholeness exemplified by both the Demeter/Persephone myth and the Jungian Christ-archetype.

Finally, the stone boat may also reference the Philosopher's Stone which alchemists believed could change base metals into gold. The important idea here is the idea of transformation. This mythical stone was associated the Holy Grail, a mystical symbol of Christ, the reconciler of all things. Mystics believed that the finder of any of these objects would experience complete wholeness and see the world as it truly is (Halleaux 134-136). The hand made boat is her symbolic craft. When she attempts to give the boat to Miss Adele, she replies by calling her by her childhood name, “Polly. You must never give this up. You must know I can’t allow you—no indeed, you must cling to this” (170). Miss Adele, her mother’s best friend, knew its symbolism and the strength it brings to Laurel.

Laurel reconciles her issues with her mother; resolves the relationships of her father's two wives; and finally confronts her dead husband—Phil “Here waiting all the time, Lazarus” (154). Manning observes, “the reader comes to realize—and Laurel does too, to a large degree—that with Phil's death the marriage and Laurel's emotional life became suspended with time” (185). This is the final reconciliation that Laurel needs to make. The story of Lazarus, who had been dead four days, being raised from the dead is also in the Lenten cycle of readings. While it appears that Phil is being raised from the dead like Lazarus, Welty is actually using the story as a two-faced Janus. In the biblical tradition Jesus calls Lazarus to come out of his tomb and he duly emerges. While Laurel remembers Phil, it is actually Laurel, not Phil that is being called to live again. Mr. Cheek's comic visit early the next morning only confirms this. Mr. Cheek, like Verna, suggests the idea of forgiveness as in “turning the other cheek” And he is the carpenter who asks Laurel, “Why don't you go ‘head and marry another somebody?” (166). He and Miss Verna Longmeier could easily be characters in Shakespeare or in one of Jesus's parables.

Sunday night into Monday brought Laurel back to life. The story ends with a final symbol: the bread board. During her night journey, Laurel finds her mother's bread recipe and later fights with Fay for the breadboard. This is the final scene where they are paired as opposites. Fay's lack of reverence for the past and memory and mocking of laurel helps place her own values. On Monday morning, Laurel looks for her mother's bread board, made by her husband Phil by pieces of wood which was “Tongued and grooved—tight fit, every edge” (176) much like Laurel remembered her marriage. She finds it dirty, marred, cigarette burnt, and gnawed. She says to Fay, “All scored and grimy! Or you tried to drive nails in it” (172). Welty tells the reader,

And all Laurel had felt and known in the night, all she'd remembered, and as much as she could understand this morning—in the week at home, the month in her life—could not tell her now how to stand and face the person whose own life had no taught her how to feel. Laurel did not even know how to tell her good-bye. (173)

Finally Laurel confronts Fay about striking her Father. “Were you trying to scare father— when you struck him?” (175). Laurel tells Fay she wants the board to “Have my try at making bread. Only last night, by the grace of God, I had my mother’s recipe, written in her own hand, right before my eyes.” Then Laurel remembers Phil, not as the semi-dead Lazarus, but as “breaking” warm bread, right from the oven. Next Laurel raises the board over her as if hanging from it; while Fay fears Laurel will hit her, Laurel felt like the board was a raft in the water. She lowered it to the striking of the clock at noon. Laurel sees that the past is dead and “it is memory that is the somnambulist” (179). She tells Fay that the board represents the “whole solid past.” Laurel has come to understand what happened to her and her family. After more pointed dialogue with Fay, Laurel decides not to take the board: “Memory lived not in initial possession but in freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams” (179). Much as the crucifix represents an emptying and freeing of self to life, Laurel has learned that she can sustain herself and this knowledge is sacramental—it gives her the grace to see reality, and move on with her life.

Laurel journeys toward renewal through forgiveness: confronting Fay about using her father—perhaps even “abusing” him at his death, and letting go of her childhood house (which Fay inherits), Laurel is guided by her own devoted Presbyterian friends in Mount Salus, Mississippi. Moreover, Welty uses time—both past and present; mortality and eternity—to move

through the Christian seasons during the three days that Laurel has at home after her father's death and burial. Laurel has finally able to embrace the real meaning of these Christian seasons: she opens herself like a child; she is vulnerable to the many things she does not control; she revisits her past relationships; she makes the choice to recreate a more tightly integrated self. She is helped through this passage by friendship, children, nature and fools. At the end of the book Laurel summarizes, "Experience did, finally, get set into its right order, which is not always the order of other people's time" (174). Welty believes "right order" happens in its own time—that is, God's time. This is perhaps best summarized by the author of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." And yet it is so clear that Welty believes we make our own choices in life; she urges us to move toward light and life. Recalling Miss Adele's words, "people live their own way, and to a certain extent I almost believe they may die their own way, Laurel" (56) it is clear Welty uses the cycle of recreation and rebirth afforded by the liturgical seasons not overtly, but instead, as the under-pinning for Laurel's psychological and spiritual journey and ongoing rebirth.

texts. The optimist's daughter. by. Welty, Eudora, 1909-2001. Publication date. 1978. Topics. Women, Funeral rites and ceremonies, Fathers, Reminiscing, Reunions. Publisher. New York : Vintage Books. The Optimist's Daughter begins when Laurel flies from Chicago to New Orleans to be with her father as he recovers from an operation. The recovery doesn't go well, however, and when he passed away Laurel is left alone with Fay, his unpleasant second wife, in the community in which she grew up, full of people who worshipped her father. The story takes place over a short period of time, during which Laurel is forced to confront all her losses. She was as believably self-centered as it's possible to make a character, I think, and I admired Welty's ability to walk that fine line. My second thought is about loss/grief. It was very realistic to me that Laurel's father's death triggered renewed grief over her loss of her mother and husband. I think Welty said much else about grief in this novel, too. The Optimist's Daughter is the story of Laurel McKelva Hand, a young woman who has left the South and returns, years later, to New Orleans, where her father is dying. After his death, she and her silly young stepmother go back still farther, to the small Mississippi town where she grew up. Alone in the old house, Laurel finally comes to an understanding of the past, herself. The Optimist's Daughter is the story of Laurel McKelva Hand, a young woman who has left the South and returns, years later, to New Orleans, where her father is dying. The Optimist's Daughter: Eudora Welty's Celebration of Life and Memory. "But the guilt of outliving those you love is justly to be borne, she thought. Outliving is something we do to them.