

Southernness in The Optimist's Daughter from the Perspective of New Materialism

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ABSTRACT

The Optimist's Daughter, as Eudora Welty's final novel, has long been regarded as a work notable for its warmth and character portrayal, yet lacking in serious themes. However, by examining the various objects within the novel and the relationship between objects and characters, it becomes evident that Welty embeds a significant Southern theme in this work: an exploration of Southernness. This thesis applies new materialism theory to investigate how insiders, outsiders, and the seer respond differently to Southern society in varying circumstances, ultimately conveying through the perspective of the seer, Laurel, that an open and inclusive attitude represents the true essence of the New South.

KEYWORDS

The optimist's daughter; Objects; New materialism; Southernness

1 Introduction

Eudora Welty was born in April 1909 in Jackson County, Mississippi. Influenced by her parents' deep love for literature, she spent the majority of her life in Jackson County, and her literary works predominantly reflect the local life and culture, leading most readers and critics to categorize her as a regional writer. However, Welty's nuanced and domestic narrative style has been subject to criticism, with some dismissing her as a dreamer, accused of neglecting the brutal realities of racial tensions and class struggles in the South. Feminist critic Louise Westling contended that Welty's fictional world is "largely removed from poverty and violence," and that her novels exhibit a "profound lack of awareness regarding the violent enforcement of white male power" ^[1].

In fact, in her 1972 novel *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty's narrative goes beyond the surface-level depiction of Laurel's relationship with her deceased parents, subtly engaging with her perceptions of the South. Through the setting of Mount Salus, Welty employs the portrayal of objects to illuminate deeper thematic concerns. As Michael Kreyling asserts, "The events and imagery in *The Optimist's Daughter* are simple and homemade, yet they embody a miraculous depth of significance... Virginia Woolf similarly utilized the ordinary and mundane to evoke the extraordinary" ^[2]. In the novel, objects serve multiple symbolic roles: they are tools for the townspeople to uphold the traditional values and legacy of the Old South, instruments for characters like Fay to disrupt the established social order, and guides for Laurel, whom Welty positions as the New South's representative, in her quest to break free from the past and forge a new path forward. This analysis, from the perspective of new materialism, will explore how the traditional Southern identity in Welty's work is gradually dismantled through the role of objects, while simultaneously constructing a new Southern memory and identity.

Since the latter half of the 20th century, the humanities and social sciences in the West have witnessed the emergence of a theoretical trend known as the material turn. Scholars within literary studies have begun to critically reassess the longstanding interpretative practice of critics who have traditionally marginalized the role of material objects, favoring instead a focus on themes and narrative structures ^[3]. This reassessment seeks to foreground the active role of objects in the construction of meaning, as well as their deeper, often overlooked significance in literary texts. The academic discourse broadly refers to this intellectual movement, which reconfigures the relationship between humans and the material world, as "New Materialism" ^[4]. New Materialism endeavors to disrupt the traditional anthropocentric and contends that objects and humans share an equivalent ontological status. Foundational concepts such as "The Social Life of Things," "The Material Unconscious," and "material agency" have significantly contributed to the ascendancy of New Materialism in the 21st century.

Within literary analysis, the New Materialist focus on objects offers a novel approach to constructing the multidimensional discursive meanings embedded in texts. By probing the significance of material objects, this perspective provides critical insights into the formation of character identities and the articulation of thematic concerns in literature. The study of "things" within a text reveals that by consolidating these materially overdetermined yet symbolically underarticulated traces, scholars can uncover the cultural structures and political logics that define specific historical periods ^[5].

2 Feasts and food: objects as tools of differentiation and maintenance of the old south

In *To See Things in Their Time: The Act of Focus in Eudora Welty's Fiction*, Lucinda H. MacKethan categorizes characters in Eudora Welty's novels according to focus, delineating four distinct types: the objects, the outsiders, the insiders, and

the seers or onlookers^[6]. This analytical framework is equally applicable to *The Optimist's Daughter*. In the novel, Judge McKelva functions as the object, the focal point of observation; local figures such as Mr. Pitts and Miss Adele are classified as insiders, embodying the old Southern ethos. They adhere to traditional Southern values and nostalgically yearn for a return to an era of prosperity, rigid social hierarchy, and genteel manners. Yet their efforts to uphold these values are ultimately futile. Conversely, Wanda Fay assumes the role of the outsider, being described as "against the whole community"^[6]. Her entry into the town through marriage, combined with her behaviors that starkly diverge from Southern ideals of femininity, results in her exclusion from the social milieu. Laurel McKelva, the judge's daughter, represents a genuine Southern identity, having been raised in the town but subsequently relocating to Chicago. Through Laurel, the novel articulates the tension between the decaying Southern cultural traditions and the emergent new cultural influences, as well as the intersection of historical and contemporary experiences. This study will investigate how objects illustrate varying attitudes towards Southern identity by analyzing their roles and impacts on insiders, outsiders, and seers. The analysis will focus on how these categories illuminate the differing perceptions of Southern identity and the interplay between tradition and modernity within the text.

Sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Fussell have posited that objects possess the power to delineate social class distinctions, focusing on how objects facilitate the execution of significant ideological functions. In his scholarship, Ian Woodward addresses the "meaning-constructing function" of objects, which "have the ability to signify things – or establish social meanings – on behalf of people, or do 'social work', though this culturally communicative capacity should not be automatically assumed"^[7].

In *The Optimist's Daughter*, objects are instrumental in constructing Southern identity for the long-term residents of the town, serving as mechanisms for preserving their dignity and maintaining their social decorum. The notion of "Southernness" extends beyond a mere geographical area—defined as the region spanning from the Mason-Dixon Line in the north to the Gulf of Mexico in the south, and from Texas in the west to the Atlantic Ocean in the east—to encompass a complex social, political, and historical-cultural construct. As Wang Gang observes in *A Poetic Interpretation of the Classics of Southern American Literature*, "from the perspective of social consciousness, 'nostalgia,' a 'profound sense of history,' and a 'retrospective' socio-historical worldview are critical components of 'Southernness' "^[8]. Shaped by historical forces and the legacy of traditional Southern plantation culture, Southerners believe more firmly than any other Americans that the most beautiful aspects of life are not those currently in existence, but those that should exist, or are believed to have existed in the past.

This analysis underscores the active role of objects in *The Optimist's Daughter* in not only embodying but also perpetuating the values and ideologies of Southern identity. Objects function as pivotal elements in the cultural and ideological framework that sustains the historical and social fabric of Southern society, revealing the enduring influence of the past on the collective consciousness of the Southern insiders. Based on the novel's timeline, the story is likely set in the 1950s to 1960s, a period during which the South had clearly moved beyond the shame and consequences of slavery and the Civil War. Instead, the focus had shifted to how Southern society would navigate the challenges posed by a rapidly changing modern world. In this context, food and feasts serve as vital carriers and transmitters of traditional Southern identity, reflecting the arrogance and pride of the insiders who belong to the upper society of Southern society. These cultural practices embody the persistence of old values and social hierarchies, revealing the insiders' efforts to maintain their distinct identity in the face of societal transformation.

In *The Optimist's Daughter*, the narrative is predominantly structured around the funeral of Judge McKelva and the communal feast in his funeral. The food served during the event functions as a mechanism for the residents of Mount Salus to reinforce their internal cohesion, while simultaneously invoking and romanticizing the bygone glory of the Old South. Due to the distinctive geographic and settlement patterns in the Southern United States, Southern funerals have served sacred and social functions. This contrasts with the early, austere funeral practices of Northern Puritans, as Southern public funerals often included gun salutes, communal drinking, and the "sitting-up" ceremony. These gatherings provided an opportunity for people from various locales to converge, foster social bonds, and express collective mourning. During these gatherings, people are used to eating traditional Southern food, which can be viewed as an important tie among local people.

Judge McKelva's funeral, as the pivotal event of the novel, encapsulates the ways in which the insiders of Mount Salus uphold exclusionary practices against outsiders while maintaining allegiance to Southern traditions and cultural values. Within this context, the food served at the funeral unconsciously operates as a symbolic object that demarcates social boundaries. In social structures, class distinctions are not merely manifested through physical appearances but are often articulated through the use of material objects. Bourdieu's theoretical framework posits that "distinction" is "the result of a complex sociocultural construction, particularly measured through factors such as educational attainment, aesthetic preferences, cultural capital, and social needs"^[9].

Upon Laurel and her stepmother Fay's return to Mount Salus with Judge McKelva's body, Laurel's six bridesmaids had already meticulously arranged the funeral proceedings, deliberately excluding any input from Judge McKelva's current wife, Fay. These insiders had prepared a meal in advance of the funeral, and Miss Tennyson repeatedly reminded Laurel, "You've got pies three deep in the pantry, and an icebox ready to pop," And a dining room table that might keep

you from going to bed hungry" ^[10].

In this instance, food becomes a means for the community's insiders to provide Laurel with comfort and solidarity, reinforcing their internal cohesion and collective identity amidst her grief. In addition, attitudes towards food and the methods of food preparation serve as markers distinguishing insiders from outsiders in the community. Only a qualified Southern lady and mother can prepare food in a manner that meets the community's standards, so foodways and food matters a lot in a community. This is vividly illustrated in *The Optimist's Daughter* when the wife of the Presbyterian minister attends Judge McKelva's funeral and emphasizes, "I'd been waiting to see who it was I was saving my Virginia ham for" ^[10]. Laurel's mother, Becky, had taught the minister's wife the proper way to handle a ham and was renowned for baking the best bread in Mount Salus. Becky epitomizes the ideal Southern lady—graceful, skilled in the kitchen, and active in the local garden club. The ability to create delicious and refined food is a standard by which women in Mount Salus are judged for their ability to integrate into the community. Insiders like Becky and Miss Tennyson are proficient in the kitchen, and their culinary skills underscore their status as competent homemakers with refined tastes. In stark contrast, food represents an insurmountable challenge for the outsider, Fay. Not only is she unable to cook well, but she also lacks any appreciation for the quality of food, which alarms the insiders. Miss Tennyson expresses shock when discussing this: "Laurel, do you know that when he brought her here to your house, she had very little idea of how to separate an egg" ^[10]. She further remarks, "Trying pan' was the one name she could give you of all the things your mother had in that kitchen, Laurel" ^[10]. What further alienates the townspeople is the fact that Judge McKelva and Fay, without domestic help on Sundays, would eat in a grimy restaurant with dirty glass windows and no tablecloths—an unthinkable scenario for the dignity-conscious locals.

The feast, therefore, becomes a space where the upper-class white society of Mount Salus strengthens its bonds, with a keen attention to food serving as a semiotic marker of Southern upper-class identity. Fay's inability to meet these culinary and social standards illustrates the Mount Salus community's refusal to accept her as one of their own. These objects and practices act as barriers preventing Fay's further integration into local society, symbolizing the community's efforts to preserve the traditional Southern identity against encroachment by outsiders.

In a word, the feast serves as a way for reinforcing the bonds among the upper-class white community of Mount Salus, where the meticulous attention to food functions as a symbolic code of self-representation for the Southern upper class. Fay's failure to meet these culinary and social standards starkly illustrates the community's rejection of her as someone unfit to be integrated into their social fabric. These objects—such as food and the rituals surrounding its preparation and consumption—become instruments of social demarcation, effectively preventing Fay from further encroaching upon the local society. Objects underscore the traditional Southern town's concerted efforts to preserve its historical Southern identity and value against the intrusion of outsiders.

3 Clothes: object as a challenge to mount salus

Faulkner argues that the South represents the only region in America that truly maintains a sense of locality, with a strong bond between people and their environment, is distinguished by a shared worldview, collective lifestyle, and common values ^[11]. In Southern traditional ideology, a woman must embody "restraint and chastity" to uphold male dominance in the perennial gender struggle ^[12]. Southern men regarded women's restraint and submission as virtues, believing that they should not express their emotions with fervor, but instead serve as pure and beautiful ornaments. However, Fay, as an outsider, subverts these entrenched norms of Mount Salus, a prototypical Southern town. The role of material objects in her case underscores their disruptive potential, manifesting as a challenge to the Southern conception of femininity. Fay's use of material objects to infiltrate the previously tranquil society of Mount Salus facilitates her social ascent through marriage but simultaneously aims to dismantle the sacred and dignified status of the Southern upper class represented by Judge McKelva.

The material turn in literary analysis is exemplified by a focus on the minutiae of material culture. Fay, hailing from an impoverished background in Texas, starkly contrasts with the local fashion and home decor. Roland Barthes argues that "clothing can be interpreted as a sign, with one dimension being its style, fabric, and color, while the other pertains to the occasion, profession, status" ^[13]. This duality highlights how clothing functions not only as a material object but also as a social symbol, reflecting and reinforcing cultural norms and hierarchies.

Fay's clothing choices underscore her identity as both an outsider and a lower-class Southerner. When Laurel visits her father in the hospital, it is only the second time she sees Fay, who is dressed "in her dress with the gold buttons" ^[10]. Noticing Judge McKelva's growing neglect of her, Fay brings her green high-heeled shoes before him and tells Laurel, who tries to intervene, "But just let me try slipping out a minute in 'em, would he ever let me hear about it!" ^[10]. During the funeral, Laurel discovers that the bed previously used by her parents, now occupied by Fay, is covered with had been quilted from top to bottom in peach satin, while She glistened in black satin ^[10]. Clothing in this context functions as a symbol reflecting character traits. Fay's shiny attire symbolizes her flamboyance and contrasts with the modesty typically associated with Southern belles. In Western culture, peach satin and green color often symbolize passion, whereas Southern tradition favors white color to signify purity. Fay, coming from an unrefined, impoverished background, perceives the Southern upper class as hypocritical after her own class ascent through marriage. Her clothing choices

reveal her refusal to suppress personal emotions and her boldness, marking her as a disruptive figure to local sensibilities and challenging traditional Southern femininity.

However, while Fay can be seen as a disruptor of traditional Southern norms, she fails to contribute to a new Southern future. Laurel critiques "Fay was without any powers of passion or imagination in herself and had no way to see it or reach it in the other person" ^[10]. Fay's detachment from Southern society and indifference to her family and community prevent her from integrating into any social sphere, thus failing to represent a transformative vision for the New South.

4 Memory: object as a contrast of new meaning

In *A Sense of Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*, Brown emphasizes how objects influence subjects, shaping their identities ^[5]. Laurel, Judge McKell's daughter, represents a link between the Old and New South, embodying the role of the seer. The seer is crucial in focusing, "making judgments, shaping opinions, adding a dimension of objective distance or subjective depth" ^[6]. Laurel's development is influenced by the interplay between material objects and personal insights. According to new materialism, both human and non-human entities are objects, with blurred boundaries between subject and object, living and non-living ^[14]. Memory, as an intangible object, significantly impacts meaning construction and is central to Laurel's transformation, aiding her emergence from past shadows and initiating a new phase of life.

Milan Kundera remarks, "Forgetting is a major personal issue, akin to the loss of self or death. What terrifies us about death is not the loss of the future but the loss of the past. Forgetting is an innate form of death" ^[15]. In the years between the deaths of her husband and mother and her father's passing, Laurel becomes a figure of forgetfulness. After losing her loved ones and becoming an outsider in her hometown, she is trapped in past grief until her return to hometown for her father's funeral provides a new opportunity. In her mother's old sewing room, Laurel uncovers items from her past, prompting a reflection on her experiences and losses. Welty explains, "If they have memories, then memories teach them about the present. Otherwise, they do not understand everything they have experienced" ^[16]. Memory enables Laurel to confront her life anew. When Fay tries to provoke her, Laurel reconciles with her past, understanding that "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" ^[10]. She leaves Mount Salus for Chicago, starting afresh with the love of her departed relatives and Southern memories.

5 Conclusion

In *The Optimist's Daughter*, different objects reflect Eudora Welty's new insights into Southernness. Traditional Southern foods and feast symbolize the Southern upper class also the insider's status, helping them distinguish themselves from the "unrefined" lower class. Fay's clothing, represents her role as an outsider disrupting the town's traditional class stability and rejecting integration into local society. Memory, as an intangible object, links the past and present, allowing the seer Laurel to gain insight into the true meaning of life—embodying the new Southern identity that the author advocates. In Welty's work, objects serve as constructive forces, revealing that the old Southern order can no longer be sustained. However, the forward-looking attitude of characters like Fay, who entirely discard the past, does not offer a viable future for the South. Instead, the true representation of the South emerges through characters like Laurel, who integrate both past and present and embark on a renewed journey with the aid of memory.

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