

## ANALYSIS

### *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972)



Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“If the early work is classic, this might be medieval—in its fullness of vision, depth of field, range of ear. Jesus *and* goblins, Macbeth *and* the porter... Mystery dissolves before patient watching—the unbroken stare of Laurel McKelva Hand, the woman at the center. The story is told in the third person, but it is essentially seen and told by Laurel herself.... Laurel Hand has come on sudden notice (and intuition of crisis) from Chicago, where she works as a fabric designer, to a New Orleans clinic where her father Judge McKelva, age 71, is being examined for eye trouble. (The central metaphor begins at once—vision, the forms of blindness; the story is as troubled by eyes as *King Lear*; and our first exposure to Laurel’s sensibility suggests youth and quivering attentiveness.)...

Laurel’s father is accompanied by his new wife Fay; and at the diagnosis of detached retina, Fay’s colors unfurl—hard, self-absorbed, envious of Laurel and, in Laurel’s eyes, beneath the McKelvas’s and Laurel’s dead mother. The doctor advises immediate surgery, over Fay’s protests that nothing is wrong. The judge declares himself ‘an optimist,’ agrees to eye-repair; the surgery goes well, and Laurel and Fay take a room in New Orleans to spell one another at the Judge’s bedside—their important duty, to keep him still, absolutely motionless with both eyes bandages through days of recovery. Friction grows between the two women but with no real discharge. Fay shows herself a kind of pet, baby-doll—her idea of nursing consisting of descriptions of her new shoes or earrings, her petulance at missing Mardi Gras whose time approaches loudly through the city. Laurel watches quietly, reading Dickens to her father, oppressed by his age and docility....

Three weeks pass, the doctor claims encouragement, but the Judge’s deepening silence and submission begin to unnerve Fay and to baffle Laurel. (It is only now—nearly fifteen pages in—that we learn Laurel’s age. She is older than Fay and perhaps Fay is forty. We are, I think, surprised. We had felt her to be younger—I’d have said twenty-four and only now do I notice that she bears a married name; yet no husband has been mentioned and will not be till just before the midpoint of the story. There is no air of caprice or trick about these crucial withholdings, only quiet announcement—‘Now’s the time for this.’) Then on the last night of the Carnival, Laurel in her rooming house senses trouble and returns to the hospital by cab through packed, raucous streets. (Inevitably, a great deal of heavy holy weather 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 doctors.)

At the hospital, Laurel finds her fore-knowledge confirmed. Fay's patience has collapsed. She shakes the silent Judge, shouts 'Enough is enough'; and Laurel enters to watch her father die... While Laurel and Fay await the doctor's confirmation in the hospital lobby, they watch and listen to a Mississippi country family come to oversee their own father's death—the Dalzells, family of the Judge's deranged roommate. (Their sizable appearance is not, as might first seem, a chance for Miss Welty to ease tension and pass necessary clock-time with one of her miraculously observed country groups. Funny and touching as they are...the Dalzells make a serious contribution toward developing a major concern of the story. They are, for all their coarse jostling proximity, a family of finer feeling and natural grace than whatever is constituted by Fay and Laurel and they will soon return to mind, in sweet comparison with Fay's Texas kin who swarm for the funeral.) At final news of the Judge's death, Fay lunges again into hateful hysterics; but Laurel tightens—no tears, few words. Only in the ride through revelers toward the hotel does Laurel begin to see, with a new and steelier vision, meanings hung round people...

Part II opens with the train ride home to Mount Salus, Mississippi. (Laurel's view from the train of a single swamp beech-tree still keeping dead leaves begins to prepare us for her coming strangeness, her as yet unexpected accessibility to ghosts.) Mount Salus is a small lowland town and is now home only to the dead Judge—Fay will inherit Laurel's childhood home but is Texan forever; Laurel will return to Chicago soon. But two groups of her friends survive in the town—her dead parents' contemporaries and her own schoolmates—and they rally to her, ambivalent hurtful allies, as Fay's kin—the Chisoms—arrive for the funeral. Led by Fay's mother, they cram the Judge's house like a troupe of dwarfs from a Goya etching, scraping rawly together in a dense loveless, shamefully vital, hilarious parody of blood-love and loyalty—'Nothing like kin. Yes, me and my brood believes in clustering just as close as we can get.' It is they—Fay's mother—who at last extract from Laurel what we have not yet known, that Laurel is a widow—'Six weeks after she married him... The war. Body never recovered'....

So the Chisoms stand at once—or pullulate—in Laurel's sight, as a vision of the family and of love itself as a horror, hurtful, willfully vulnerable, parasitic. Yet one of them—Wendell, age seven, viewing the corpse—also provides her with a still point for temporary sanity, for 'understanding' Fay and her father's love for Fay... That emergency perception and the cushioning care of friends prop Laurel through Fay's last hysterical kiss of the corpse and on through the burial... And afterwards, at the house again, she numbly accepts more insults from Fay and waits out the slow departure of the Chisoms—taking Fay with them for a rest in Texas.

Part III is the longest of the four parts, both the story's journey through the underworld and the messenger of what the story learns there. It has four clear divisions. In the first, Laurel entertains four elderly ladies, friends of her parents, who raise a question so far unasked (among the signs of mastery in the story, one of the surest is the patience, the undefended gravity with which Miss Welty answers—or asks—all the reader's questions in her own time not his, and finally makes him admit her justice). The question is, why did Judge McKelva marry Fay?—'What happened in his judgment?' One of the ladies flatly states that Laurel's to blame; she should never have married but stayed home and tended her widowed father. Laurel makes no defense, barely speaks at all till the same lady weakens and begins 'forgiving' Fay...

This new ruthlessness (a specific defeat of her own attempt to forgive Fay through the child Wendell) calms in the following scene—Laurel alone in her father's library. Here, because of a photograph, she thinks for the only time in our presence of her own marriage—'Her marriage had been of magical ease, of *ease*—of brevity and conclusion, and all belonging to Chicago and not here.' But in the third scene—Laurel's contemporaries, her bridesmaids, at drinks—she bristles again, this time to defend her parents against affectionate joking—'Since when have you all thought my father and mother were just figures to make a good story?' Her friends retreat, claim 'We weren't laughing at them. They weren't funny.' (Laurel accepts the clarification; only at the end, if faced again with 'They weren't funn' might she offer correction, huge simplification.) The fourth scene is longest, strangest, the crisis—from which Laurel, the story, all Miss Welty's earlier onlookers and surely most readers emerge shaken, cleared, altered.

On her last night in Mount Salus before returning to Chicago and before Fay's return, Laurel comes home from dinner with friends to find a bird flying loose indoors, a chimney sweep. She is seized at once by an old fear of birds (we are not reminded till the following morning that bird in the house means bad luck ahead), and in panic shuts herself into her parents' bedroom—now Fay's—against its flight. Here alone and silent except for sounds of wind and rain, among her parents' relics, she endures her vision—of their life, hers, the world's. Her initial step is to calm herself, to examine the sources of her recent angers, her present terror... What she first defines as the 'facts' are these—that her helpless father had been assailed and killed by his own senseless, self-absorbed young wife and that she—his only child—was powerless to save him but can now at least protect his memory. Protect—and flush her own bitterness—by exacting justice from Fay, extracting from Fay an admission of her guilt.

Yet Laurel knows at once that Fay, challenged, would only be baffled, sealed in genuine blind innocence. Baked in advance then by invincible ignorance, is Laurel to be paralyzed in permanent bitterness? She can be, she thinks, released and consoled by at last telling someone—the facts, the names. But tell whom? Her own mother, long since dead. To tell her mother though—should that ever be possible—would be an abuse more terrible than Fay's. Laurel can only go on telling herself and thereby through her perpetual judging become a new culprit, another more knowing Fay. That is—and can go on being—'the horror.' At that moment, desperate with rage and forced silence, she makes the only physical movement open (the bird still has her trapped in the room). She retreats into an adjoining small room. It has been her own nursery, where she'd slept near her parents; then the sewing room; now a closet where Fay has hidden Laurel's mother's desk. Here, memory begins—a long monologue (yet always in third person) which bears Laurel back through her parents' lives, her life with them. (The structure and method of these fifteen pages at first seem loose, old-fashioned. No attempt is made through syntax or ellipsis to mimic the voice or speed of Laurel's mind, to convince us that we literally overheard her thoughts. Yet the process of memory proceeds with such ferocious emotional logic to an end so far beyond Laurel's imagined needs or desires—Laurel's and ours—that we are at last convinced, as shaken as she.)

The memories begin warmly—here are things they touched, relics of their love, a family desk, a small stone boat carved with her father's initials, his letters to her mother (which Laurel will not read, even now), a photograph of them in full unthreatened youth. In the flood of affection, Laurel begins to move from her old stance of onlooker to a conviction of having shared her parents' lives, been a corner of their love. She continues backward through memories of summers in the West Virginia mountains with her mother's family. (Both her parents' families were originally Virginian; and it would be possible—therefore someone will do it—to construct a kind of snob-machine with these genealogies: Virginians are finer than Mississippians are finer than Texans. The story says no such thing; only 'This is what happened'....

Miss Welty's own mother was from West Virginia, her father from Ohio.) Those summers, recalled, seem made of two strands—her mother's laughing immersion in family love and her own childish bafflement: tell me how much and why they love you, your mother and brothers. This early bafflement is focused for Laurel in her first sight of her grandmother's pigeons. Without claiming a mechanical connection which Miss Welty clearly does not intend, it is worth noting that this sight is the beginning (so far as we know) of Laurel's present personal distance, her stunned passivity in the face of the Chisoms feeding on one another.... It was a knowledge and revulsion which her mother had seemed to lack—until her long final illness at least. The terms of that illness are not fully explained—Laurel's mother went blind, lay in bed for years, growing slowly more reckless and condemnatory, more keensighted in her observation of husband and daughter as they hovered beside her helpless.

As the illness had extended through five years (just after Laurel's widowhood) and as Laurel now recalls it, her mother had at last endured the awful knowledge in its simple killing progression—that we feed on others till they fail us, through their understandable inability to spare us pain and death but, worse, through the exhaustion of loyalty, courage, memory. In the pit of her illness, Laurel's mother had said to the Judge standing by her—'Why did I marry a coward?'... That she had sunk silent toward her death, with only one last message to Laurel—'You could have saved your mother's life. But you stood by and wouldn't intervene. I despair for you.' In the teeth of such judgment, Laurel's father—the optimist—had married Fay; had chosen to submit again to need, and been killed for his weakness. What had been betrayed—what her mother like a drugged prophetess had seen and condemned before the event—was not his first love but

his first wife's knowledge, the dignity and achievement of her unanswerable vision. Fay's the answer to nothing. Then can love be?—Answer to what? Death and your own final lack of attention doom you to disloyalty. You're killed for your cowardice. With that news, the scene ends. Laurel sleeps.... Grief surely that love had not saved but harrowed her parents, a love she had not shared and now can never.

Part IV is a quick hard but by no means perfunctory coda. Laurel wakes in early light, having slept at her mother's desk. Now unafraid, she leaves her parents' room, sees the exhausted bird perched on a curtain. Mr. Deedy, the blundering handyman, calls her by to peddle spring chores. Laurel asks him in to catch the bird. He declares it bad luck and scares it around from room to room but only succeeds in making a nosey tour of the house. Then Missouri, the maid, arrives and she and Laurel gingerly arrange the bird's escape in the only passage of the story where the touch seems to me to press a little heavily, uneasily.... Laurel burns her mother's papers, saving only the snapshots and the carved stone boat. She calls herself a thief—the house and contents are Fay's now—but she justifies herself...

Her calm seems complete, her departure foregone and unprotested; but in a final look through kitchen cupboards, she finds her mother's breadboard—its worn polished surface inexplicably gouged, scored and grimy. Her numb peace vanishes, her rejection of revenge. She knows that, in some way, this is Fay's work. Fay's ultimate murder of Laurel's mother, the house itself, that she has 'conspired with silence' and must finally shout both 'Abuse!' and 'Love!' And indeed Fay arrives at this moment, her return from Texas timed for Laurel's departure (the bridesmaids by now are waiting at the curb to drive Laurel to Jackson). Laurel challenges Fay with the ruined breadboard... Laurel has judged at last, in rage, and in rage has discovered the order of experience, the mysterious justice of time and understanding, her mother's final accurate desperation...

So memory itself is no longer safe, no 'game for the bereaved.' The past is never safe because it is never *past*, not while a single mind remembers. Laurel requires revenge. She accuses Fay of desecrating the house, but in vain—as she'd known the night before, Fay does not understand and will not ever, least of all from Laurel (she had used the board for cracking nuts). Fay can only resort to calling Laurel 'crazy.' To hurtful revelation, an anecdote of Laurel's mother's last wildness—throwing a bedside bell at a visitor. Laurel raised the breadboard to threaten Fay. Fay has the courage of her ignorance, stands and scornfully reminds Laurel that her friends are waiting outside—'You're supposed to be leaving.' Then Fay goes on to claim she's intended reconciliation, had returned in time for that—'...we all need to make some allowance for the cranks...' Laurel abandons the weapon, one more piece of Fay's inheritance, and hurried to leave, escorted away by her own bridesmaids....

To summarize *The Optimist's Daughter* is to demonstrate how perfectly the meaning inheres in the form and radiates from it. Nothing is applied from outside or wrenched; the natural speed of the radiation—action into meaning—is never accelerated (with the possible exception of the trapped bird's escape)... The language (which in its stripped iron efficiency, its avoidance of simile and metaphor, bears almost no resemblance to the slow dissolving impressionism, relativism of the stories in *The Bride of Innisfallen*; that was a language for describing what things are *not*, for identifying mystery; this is a language for stating facts) and, second, the story's apparent lack of concern with Mississippi's major news at the time of the story—the civil rights revolution. Its apparent absence is as complete as that of the Napoleonic wars from Jane Austen. And for the same reason, surely—it is not what this story is about.

When Judge McKelva's old law partner says of him at the funeral, 'Fairest, most impartial, sweetest man in the whole Mississippi Bar,' no irony seems intended nor can honestly be extracted.... The stance of the onlooker—forced on him and/or chosen—is confirmed as the human stance which can hope for understanding, simple survival. The aims of participation are union, consolation, continuance—doomed. Laurel (who might well be the adult of the girl in 'A Memory' or even of Laura in *Delta Wedding*) might so easily have left us with a last word fierce as her mother's. She might have said, 'Show me a victor, and *actor* even'.... There is at the end...joy that a piece of credible life has been displayed to us fully and, in the act, fully explained (I take Laurel's understanding to be also the author's and ours; there can be no second meaning, no resort to attempts to discredit Laurel's vision).

And the perhaps most troubling and most appeasing, the sense that Laurel's final emotion is joy, that she is now an 'optimist' of a sort her father never knew (if not as she drives away from her home, then tomorrow, back at work)—that the onlooker's gifts, the crank's, have proved at last the strongest of human endowments (vision, distance, stamina—the courage of all three); that had there been any ear to listen, Laurel would almost surely have laughed, abandoning her weapon (as Milton's God laughs at the ignorance and ruin of Satan, only God has hearers—the Son and His angels). For Laurel has been both victim and judge—who goes beyond both into pure creation (only she has discovered the pattern of their lives—her parents', Fay's, the Chisoms', her friends', her own) and then comprehension, which is always comic. All patterns are comic—snow crystal or galaxy in Andromeda or family history—because the universe is patterned, therefore ordered and ruled, therefore incapable of ultimate tragedy (interim tragedy is comprised in the order but cannot be the end; and if it should be—universal pain—then that too is comic, by definition, to its only onlooker). God's vision is comic, Alpha and Omega.”

Reynolds Price

“The Onlooker, Smiling: An Early Reading of *The Optimist's Daughter*”  
*Shenandoah* 20 (Spring 1969)

“Wanda Fay, in *The Optimist's Daughter*...has been severely damaged. But perhaps she was flawed from the first. To have come out of a folk culture is no guarantee of virtue. Indeed, one of the fundamental religious tenets of the Southern folk culture is the doctrine of Original Sin: nobody is saved naturally; we have all fallen and come short. At all events, Wanda Fay is clearly a shallow little vulgarian.

She married the widower, Judge McKelva, a man of some distinction, much older than herself, a man who comes from a very different stratum of society. When the Judge dies, Wanda Fay creates a scene at the funeral. She leans over her husband's coffin and cries out, ‘Oh, Hon, get up, get out of there.’ In dying, the Judge has somehow betrayed her, and she screams, ‘Oh, Judge, how could you be so unfair to me?’ Someone tries to calm her and urges her just to bid him goodbye with a farewell kiss. Instead, she fights off the friends surrounding her and throws ‘herself forward across the coffin onto the pillow, driving her lips without aim against the face under hers,’ and is dragged ‘back into the library,’ screaming....

Judge McKelva's only child, his grown-up daughter Laurel, is appalled. Later on, after her young stepmother's departure, Laurel's friends feel free to comment on Wanda Fay's conduct, and they do so. But Miss Adele Courtland, the school teacher and sister of the physician who attended Judge McKelva, tries to be charitable.... But her interpretation is not acclaimed. Miss Tennyson finally remarks savagely, ‘I could have broken her neck.’

We shall miss the point, however, if we conclude that Miss Welty means to disparage the yeoman whites as a class or even the lowly poor white. Wanda Fay is really awful: ‘common poor white trash’ would scarcely seem too harsh a term to apply to her, and Wanda Fay's sister and mother are of the same stripe. But Miss Welty does not allow that even this family is wholly corrupted. Wanda Fay's grandfather, old Mr. Chisom, seems genuine enough, a decent old man, who had gone to considerable trouble to pay his respects. He arrives late for the funeral because he had had to make an all-night trip by bus. He has sat up most of the night shelling the prize pecans he is bringing to Laurel as a gift. He didn't mind the labor of shelling the pecans, he tells her; it was a way of keeping himself awake on the bus trip.

There is also little Wendell Chisom, attending the funeral in his cowboy suit. He sports a pair of holsters containing two toy pistols. Laurel, responding to the child's bewilderment and innocence, feels an impulse ‘to reach out for him, put her arms around him—to guard him. He was like a young, undriven, unfalsifying, unvindictive Fay’.”

Cleanth Brooks

“Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom”

*Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*  
(U Mississippi 1979)

“*The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) is almost a paradigm of...[the characteristic] Welty dialectic. Laurel McKelva, a designer in Chicago, returns to New Orleans, where her father is to undergo a routine eye operation. Even as the eye improves, however, Judge McKelva dies, from unforeseen complications. The

Judge's second wife, Fay, a woman of about forty (Laurel is forty-one), is silly, self-centered, without regard for the past or the finer points of the present. She lives self-indulgently, full of affectations, deceptive (about background, relatives), directionless.

Laurel has the Judge's body returned to the ancestral home, a small, self-enclosed town in Mississippi, Mount Salus. Laurel, herself a widow, having been married to an apparently fine man who went down on a ship during the war, is brought back to her beginnings, enabled to recover what she was and manifestly still is, under the big-city veneer. Welty's purpose, like Faulkner's in many respects, is the recovery of the Old South through memory and history. This comes about by way of one who has 'escaped,' who must return for some reason, and in that return confront herself and all those who did not escape. The drama is archetypal, closely associated with the expulsion from the Garden. Laurel McKelva—her name suggests her quest for Arcadia—must undergo some wrench or loss, or else become anonymous. The death of the Judge cannot be a wasted event, unconnected to the world in which she grew up. By way of memory, she relives private history: ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

Welty will not let the history of the South, her South, die. However provincial, even claustrophobic, it is immanent even in those who leave it. That rediscovery of the Old South through memory, that recapitulation of its history as a form of vital existence, is necessary for Welty so as to counterbalance directionless, dislocated urban life. Someone like Fay, who tries to straddle both worlds, has in fact left behind the small town without being able to deal emotionally and intellectually with life beyond. As such, she is ineffective, willful, infantile in her demands.

Laurel has successfully bridged the two worlds, but Welty does not accept the urban hold upon Laurel; she insists, rather, on Laurel's recognition of Mount Salus (the ancient Roman goddess of prosperity, also identified with the goddess Hygeia) as the connecting point, the door leading to well-being and stability. In Mount Salus, even Fay is treated decently, and the return of the Judge's body is celebrated as a true homecoming. Instead of weeping, there is a ritualization of the human spirit. Mount Salus is home, a Mount Olympus for the lesser gods.

Once the burial has taken place, Laurel spends a long weekend in the family home. The 'optimist's daughter' seeks the source of her father's spirit, communes with the spirit of her mother, Becky, with her own dead Phil, and searches for that optimism which circulated in the air of a modest house in Mount Salus. She rummages through desks and her father's books, discovers his letters to her mother, even her grandmother's letters. This is history, and her communion with the past is complete. With the aid of the old servant Missouri, she brings the house back to life, temporarily, by way of artifacts of the past. 'There was nothing she was leaving in the whole shining and quiet house now to show for her mother's life and her mother's happiness and suffering, and nothing to show for Fay's harm; her father's turning between them, holding onto them both, then letting them go, was without any sign.'

But the fragile balance of the house is not to be. For the showdown must come between Laurel and Fay, who distrust and despise each other. The issue is a breadboard, Becky's old breadboard (made by Laurel's husband), which she used for baking and kept immaculate. It is not scored, battered, streaked, the result of Fay's hammer blows and cigarette burns. It becomes the issue: how life is to be lived, how one uses objects, how balance is struck between human needs and the uses made of objects. Reverence is called for in certain areas; and desecration can be accomplished as much in the home as in the church.

Fay's life has simply not 'taught her how to feel.' Fay is part of the Snopes complex, people who struggle with life and foul their nests wherever they are. 'For Fay was Becky's own dread. What Becky had felt, and had been afraid of, might have existed right here in the house all the time, for her. Past and future might have changed places, in some convulsion of the mind, but that could do nothing to impugn the truth of the heart. Fay could have walked in early as well as late, she could have come at any time at all. She was coming.'

But even if Fay is Becky's fate, ten years after her death, then the breadboard, that fine piece of carpentry, made true, fitted, is Laurel's fate. For with the breadboard, she can hold together memory and history in some balance with her present life back in Chicago. It is 'the whole story...the whole solid past.'

Laurel half-heartedly starts to strike Fay with it, puts it down, and then recovers herself; the board is sacred, not a weapon. Since the past is frozen in time, 'and can never be awakened,' it is memory that is the somnambulist. It will come back in its wounds from across the world... It will never be impervious.' With that recognition of memory as joining material, Laurel can give up even the breadboard. '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.'

Actualization of memory, dreams, and personal history gives Laurel the strength to leave; she is not evading or escaping, but taking with her what is essential. Chicago will be different. She will continue to design her way into a successful career, but intermixed with that will be something more essential, that touch and memory of the breadboard. An object has been transformed from an artifact into human life. With Laurel's departure from Mount Salus, waved out by the good-byes of first graders, she has come full cycle. Her life in Chicago is not a rebirth, for her true rebirth occurred in her visit home. Death has energized her, given her optimism, and she can return to the modern world ready to confront it. Unlike Orpheus, who is destroyed by looking back, she has made the journey back as a form of discovery."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 71-73

"In 1969 Welty published, again in the *New Yorker*, a second short novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*, in many respects a subtle and more ambitious variation on the theme of *The Ponder Heart*. This time the forbearing guardian of the irresponsible elder is Laurel McKelva, lately returned from Chicago to comfort her father during what turns out to be his last illness. Like Daniel Ponder, Judge McKelva late in life has optimistically married beneath him to a much younger woman, this one an unwashed Texan named Wanda Fay. For the funeral (reminiscent of the one the Peacocks arranged for the unfortunate Bonnie Dee) Wanda Fay, much to the embarrassment of Laurel and the judge's older friends, brings in a host of relatives and then returns home with them for a family visit.

Laura remains briefly in the house preparing it for Wanda Fay's return. At first contemptuous of her vulgar mother-in-law, she recalls as she goes about the house that her own mother (like Eudora Welty's) had come to Mississippi from her native West Virginia to make a life in what was for her alien territory and then gone on to live out her days with divided and sometimes contradictory emotional attachments. In the end Laura returns to Chicago reduced in pride and more respectful of her father's charitable optimism. For this work Welty belatedly received a Pulitzer Prize in 1973."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 144

"Laurel Hand, the principal character in Welty's autobiographical novel *The Optimist's Daughter*, finds...a notebook as she goes through her mother's desk. Her response: to burn it. Welty describes this action quite simply: 'She [Laurel] burned Milton's Universe.' This is certainly one way to get rid of the myths casting women into weak or unflattering roles. The implication of Laurel's burning this notebook is usually read as her way of setting herself straight with her past and her personal history. (Peggy Whitman Prenshaw argues, for example, that 'Laurel confronts the inevitable dilemma manifest in her early lessons: she must maintain her ties to the past, and yet she must constantly struggle to free herself sufficiently to create a separate self'.... Laurel no longer lives in the South but in Chicago, and is a widower and has a career in fabric design. She is, in other words, far outside of her mother's southern world—'Milton's Universe'—which consisted of taking care of her husband and performing various domestic duties. Since the novel is autobiographical, written after the lengthy illness resulting in the death of Welty's mother, I think that we have to consider Laurel's burning the notebook that contained her mother's defining myth as deeply symbolic of Welty's laying to rest one of the defining myths of her mother's culture."

Carol Ann Johnston  
*Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1997) 109n.32

Michael Hollister (2015)