

Imagery Narration in *The Optimist's Daughter*

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Abstract: *There are many natural imagery and social imagery in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Eudora Welty employs trifles to reveal the south social situation at that time to warn people not to immerse into the past. On the contrary, one has to live for today.*

Keywords: *The Optimist's Daughter; imagery; narration*

Eudora Welty is a known female writer, one of the south renaissance representatives. She has the fame as “20th century most outstanding American writer in local colorism” and “American Chekhov”. She has a strong passion for reading and photography. Her mainly writes short stories, such as *Death of a Travelling Salesman*, *A Worn Path*, *A Curtain of Green*, *The Golden Apples*, many researches have been done on them. On the top of that she also writes novels, for example, *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles*, *The Optimist's Daughter* and so on. Meanwhile, she is rewarded Presidential Medal of Freedom, and her works are in the prestigious Library of America series, which breaks the rule that only accept works of dead writers. In addition, she wins Pulitzer Prize, O. Henry Award, National Book Award, National Medal of Arts and so on. Therefore, it is necessary to do relevant researches on her and her works. *The Optimist's Daughter* is no exception. It is Eudora Welty who is good at connecting common things in our daily life with deep meaning. It is certainly that there are many imageries in her works. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, she mainly employs natural and social imagery, which teaches us a lesson that everyone in the world that cannot immerse themselves in the past. On the contrary, it is right for everyone to get out of the past and move forward.

The Optimist's Daughter was published in 1972, and won the Pulitzer Prize the next year. It mainly talks about Laurel comes back to New Orleans from Chicago, owing to her father's eye problem. Accordingly, she has to get along with her stepmother—Fay, whom she always avoid facing with. Although her father calls himself as optimist, he dies after a surgery. With the help of old friends and neighbors, Laurel successfully hold a funeral. After the funeral, Fay comes back to her mother's home, while Laurel stays at home to collect her parents' relics. In a sewing room, Laurel found many letters that her parents have written when they are apart after their wedding, books that they have read, mother's notebook for bread-making, which evokes the happy and beautiful memory in her mind together with her parents. Meanwhile, it is hard for neighbors to accept the fact that Judge marries Fay, which enhances Laurel's miss towards her mother—Becky. Laurel immerses herself in the past where she cannot get out of it and wants to turn the clock back. She even thinks she lives happily with her husband and parents. How beautiful and happy the days are. With a servant going away, a bird flies into Laurel's room, which breaks her fantasy. Getting the bird out of the room, together with the incoming of twelve o'clock, Laurel has to pack up her luggage and leave for airport. Unfortunately, Fay breaks into. Laurel has a quarrel with Fay on account of an old bread board which Laurel's husband makes for her mother. Laurel remembers her husband's ingenuity and wants to take away the bread board as a memory. While Fay says, “And then who'd eat it with you?” This sentence breaks Laurel's imagination and awakes Laurel when she is buried herself in the memory. It is time for Laurel to say goodbye to the past and make a suitable choice. Everything has come to an end. Father's funeral means that the last families pass away. At the same time, it also represents a new start. Laurel, the hope of the family, should live happily and cherish the life. She should live happier on behalf of the dead families to some extent. At last, Laurel gives up the bread board and goes to Mississippi.

Tzvetan Todorov published *Grammaire du récit* in 1969 where he invented a French word “narratologie”(narratology in English). And it combines “biology” and “sociology” and other subjects. Meanwhile, he interprets it as narratology. From the end of 18th century, western literary critics have regarded epic as the first to narrative literary. Chinese narration dates back Shangshu and Yang Yi compares imagery to mineral products in *Zhongguo Xushixu*. Imagery is not a simple composition of images. Instead, it is a sublimation, which one plus one is greater two. The combination of imagery is not casual, but in deep consideration. Writers often choose some imagery what are representative and can

unite the whole text. Yang Yi divides imagery into five parts: natural, social, folk, cultural and myth imagery. This paper will discuss the natural imagery and social imagery in *The Optimist's Daughter*.

1. Natural imagery

Becky in *The Optimist's Daughter* not only loves reading but also takes care of flowers. Things in nature are the best choice for poets and writers to repose emotion. Eudora Welty is no exception. With strong passion on photography and painting, Welty has a closer relationship to the nature than any other writers.

1.1. Plants

Many flowers can be regarded as a symbol of love. Although there are two lose marriages in *The Optimist's Daughter*, including Laurel's marriage and her parents', many flowers' presence on behalf of happy love between her parents. On the other hand, they also show Becky's image as a southern belle. Becky is so perfect ont only in Laurel's mind but in neighbor' thinking. Everyone who knows Becky speaks highly of her. Roses not only represent love but also work as the first choice for lovers to celebrate the festival. Roses have witness deep emotion between Laurel's parents. While roses' absence on behalf of the emotion between father and Fay is not true or deep. Daffodil means narcissism, while it in *The Optimist's Daughter* symbolizes that Laurel speaks highly of her mother. Mother is a so perfect character in her mind that no one can replace her. Winter jasmine is a beat wish that both herself and others can live happily and simultaneously it expresses a strong feeling of longing for. Her parents have caring and committed relationships in the past. After her mother's death, father marries Fay who indulge in a life of pleasure and comfort. Father is regretful, while there is nothing can do to change the situation but to leave. Thus, the winter jasmine expresses the deep mourning. Becky is a southern belle in *The Optimist's Daughter*, who is charming for Laurel and old Judge. Camellia planted by Becky is a symbol of true love between Laurel's parents, which also shows Becky's unique and personal charisma. Irises represent blessedness. In Laurel's memory, parents are an alliance made in heaven and they write letters whenever they are apart to maintain their relationship. What's more, Becky's belongings are accessible to father. If it is relevant to mother or mother's command, then father will do it in no time. Cornel stands for getting out of the evil and bringing into best wishes. Becky as a housewife hopes that can bring good luck to the whole family not only herself. Eudora Welty employ birds on behalf of death. Whenever there is a bird in the room, something bad or death will come. Judge calls himself as optimist, which influences Laurel deeply. Therefore, Laurel says that there won't be a bird after she goes into a big bedroom. Wild oleander implies the presence of Fay to some extent. Laurel is told that someone will come into their life. After mother is sick, she breaks up the harmonious relationship and finds that old Judge is a coward, which means there is a crack between them and their emotion is not perfect any more. Maples represent the changes of the things and a strong will. Though mother knows that there will be a crisis in their love, she chooses to hide and stand it and be strong until passes away. Mother wants to see the Big Mountain where Laurel's grandmother has lived in the last days of her life when she is lying in the bed. It seems like that it is there that her life can be extended and stretched. In daily life, no matter how far you go, if you have a low emotion, the first thing you think of is that go back to the original home. It is a magic place for each of us to cheer up again. Becky is the same. It seems that she has no place to tell but go home where she need not to face bitter in person anymore and her parents will provide shelter for her. On the other hand, even if Becky's parents have passed away, there is on one to listen to her sorrows. The nature will embrace her and comfort her. Nature is so wide that it can tolerate all emotions. Thus, everyone has a low spirit who goes close to the nature will be happy and tolerant again. Tulip is sent in the funeral, which represents best wishes that father have gotten a better sendoff and come to the heaven. As a saying goes: one good turn deserves another.

1.2. Animals

There are limited animals in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Sea gulls and eagles are symbol of perseverance, braveness and dauntlessness. Old Judge calls himself as optimist. Although he is older than seventy years old, he still has a strong will to see the beautiful world clearly, and he dares to face up with the operation and gladly accepts it. Doves, as messenger, represents love in the west while it is a symbol of harmonious relationship. Accordingly, it stands for beautiful, sweet and admirable love between Laurel's parents. A bird breaks into Laurel's room in a stormy night, which implies Laurel's situation at that time. She goes in a bedroom and sewing room where she has not come in for few years. The bird

flies on the rampage and however hard it tries; it cannot fly out of the room. It is the Laurel's situation when she searching for something in the room. She stays at room so long that she feels like that everything happened just yesterday. She can still remember it clearly and feels like her parents around. Bird's flying in the room stands for Laurel's condition where she immerses herself in the past and in the end she could not manage. She could not find a exit in the past as if a headless chicken. Birds fly into a room stands for something bad would happen, and it is in line with old Judge's death which seems reasonable to some extent.

In a word, Welty employs many natural imageries in *The Optimist's Daughter*, which is a bridge between daily life and deep meaning. Maybe Welty finds that the nature is tolerant. So she expresses her disappointment towards the southern situation in this way. On the one hand, she can relief her emotion. On the other hand, she can do nothing but bury in the bottom in her heart. In other words, she expresses her emotion in a tactful way.

2. Social imagery

Social imagery, just as its name implies, has limited or no relationship with natural imagery. Social imagery in *The Optimist's Daughter* mainly involves jobs, names, abstract time, color and so on.

2.1. Jobs

The Optimist's Daughter is home to three jobs related to Laurel, father, Fay and Courtland. Laurel is a professional designer of fabrics in Chicago. Designers are creative in general, which means they could design something special according to their own inspiration and thoughts. As a saying goes, "the outsider sees the most of the game". Laurel is good at design something with the help of her husband. But she fails as soon as she goes into her own room after she comes back her parents' home. She is not rational any longer. Instead, she is emotional. The southern belle takes Becky as an example, while Laurel searches for a job to Chicago, where is far away from her home. It means that female awareness is awaken in Laurel's mind and she has a long-term vision. It is her job that help her get out of the past to cherish the present life. Father Makelva is a known local judge who should deal with everything under justice, equity principle. He is rational, but he marries a forty years old woman—Fay after Becky's death. Fay is totally different from Becky. Becky takes good care of home and Makelva. Her home is always in perfect order and she is good at cooking. While Fay does nothing and she is too lazy to call the names of cooking utensil. Though old Judge is experiencing an operation, she still wants to go to the carnival. The fact is that Fay is much younger than old Judge's daughter—Laurel. Old Judge has dealt with others' quarrels for many years, but he does an obscure decision, which breaks his way. And it is not an old judge's choice and determination. Fay has a part-time job in an old Gulf Coast Hotel. For one thing, there are all kinds of people in hotel, so it is easy to understand that Fay likes wearing high-heeled shoes in green and wants to carnival which will attract customers' attention. For another, she does a part-time job rather than a full-time job, which implies that Fay pays more attention to old Judge's money, reputation, position, power rather than keep a long relationship with him. Therefore, it is reasonable that Fay lays hands on father and she says that if he does not snap out of it, she'd—. Fay is selfish to some extent, she only her birthday and pays no attention to her husband's illness. Courtland is a famous eye specialist, and Makelva have helped him before. The father's death shows an irony by Welty. Besides, father calls himself as an optimist, he passes away which is also an irony in *The Optimist's Daughter*. However famous you are, you cannot ensure that every operation you do will success. Thus, operation is risky. Makelva accepts the operation that shows he adequately prepares for it. So Laurel's father is an optimist. No matter how optimistic you are, there are be misery in your life. These jobs reflect southern situation at that time, which shows Welty's agreement on the awakening of female awareness and disagreement on the southern society.

2.2. Names

Laurel, a name of flower in West Virginia, Becky's old home, and it is also Becky's favorite flower. The name itself means that respect, victory and reputation, etc. Laurel is the only and beloved daughter of her parents, who represents hope and expectation. Although she finds an unsatisfied boyfriend to get married, she still the hottest baby and pride of her parents. Laurel takes her name from her parents and she represents expectations of parents. No matter how plain you are, you are always the best baby in your parents' eyes. Selim, the name of a horse in her family, is the younger son of eighth Suan II Bayezid in the Ottoman Empire. He conquers many countries and is called as the stern, the Magnificent and the

conqueror. A horse is given such a name that it is hoped to dash about in a battlefield and conquer lands as Selim and appreciate the motherland with great rivers and mountains. Welty also tell us that should be optimist and slow down to enjoy the beautiful scenery around ourselves even if we are in trouble. Only with a strong will, you will overcome all the difficulties in front of you. Everyone should be the daughter or son of the optimist.

2.3. Abstract time

Old Judge always pays attention to time. It seems like that time coincides with his life. Clock stops in *The Optimist's Daughter* means that father's life comes to an end. Later, a servant helps the clock to work its circle again. It implies that death means an end, while people alive still continue to live on. When Laurel immerses herself in the past, she cannot hear the ticking of the clock but gritting and hissing of the fire. What has happened is already in the past. It's no use staying at a certain moment. It's time to move on. The clock strikes for half-past twelve, which warn Laurel that she should drop her past and live for today to a better herself. Therefore, Laurel finally chooses to leave for Chicago. In other words, everyone in daily life cannot only think of herself, he should listen to other's advice. As a saying goes: three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang the mastermind. When you are in trouble, maybe other's advice can broad your horizon. Laurel tries to immerse herself in the happy past days while Fay cruelly tells the truth that awaken Laurel. Thus, Laurel makes a right decision.

2.4. Color

There are many colors in *The Optimist's Daughter*, including bright color: pink light, yellow, colored, Christmas poinsettias, red... All of these colors stand for beautiful life when they are rapture and happy both in the past and present. While dark and white represent respect for old Judge's death. Grayed books and yellowed letters are symbols of past. Although it seems like yesterday, it is still important to live for today based on the reality. There are both blessings and curses in our daily life. It seems that bright colors and dark colors. It is normal and common. Thus, it is our duty to accept the reality and try to bring in more bright colors in our own life to be optimist.

2.5. Other

2.5.1. With Chinese characteristics

There are two things with Chinese characteristics in *The Optimist's Daughter*: one is a set of Mah Jongh, the other is Chinese prints. These two things show Welty's attention to Chinese. On the other hand, it reflects that China is influential in the world. In other words, things with Chinese characteristics show that Welty's globalization awareness who break the gap between different nations.

2.5.2. Without Chinese characteristics

Laurel hears several band playing when her father is lying the bed waiting to a operation. God never change his mind because of someone in trouble. It has some similarities with *Break, Break, Break* written by Tennyson to some extent. Therefore, immersing yourself in the past has no effect on reality. The best way is to accept the reality and live for today. In addition, fire appears several times in the book. It is both a bless and a woe. For one thing, it helps provide warm to Laurel and Fay. For another, it is a symbol of destroy, which implies that there are few days for old Judge. At last, a bread board together with sewing machine arouses quarrel between Laurel and Fay which represents Laurel's attachment to the beautiful days in the past. It is the living people who cannot go out of the past, while the dead have gone. The things are left to awakens the living people's memory. Thus, the best way is to leave the old things away and live a new life to meet the dead's expectations. Otherwise, the dead cannot sleep serenely.

3. Literary effects of narrative imagery

There are many imageries in *The Optimist's Daughter* written by Eudora Welty, which play an important role to help author win the Pulitzer prize. First, as eye-catching point, imagery can embody the spirit. Imagery in this book contributes to Becky's hard work and expectations towards beautiful and happy life. It seems like a funeral, but it is a love story against the imagery. Most imagery represent the beautiful expectations and hope of the whole family, which proves Becky's greatness and attribution. Second, imagery can dredge the whole context. Imagery occurs in the four parts in *The Optimist's Daughter* which help this novel is an integrated mass. It seems that there are different imageries in

different parts, while they have some similarities to some extent. For example, they are all ties for the whole family. They are the hope not only the dead but also Laurel. Becky leaves them to accompany the living people, especially her daughter—Laurel. While they remind the living people of the past. On the other hand, they are warning Laurel that should move on to be better as her mother as a perfect woman in the society although no one helps her. Plants can survive. Laurel should cherish the opportunity to live a new, happy life. It seems like that Eudora Welty cuts it at will from her daily life rather than takes great pains to finishing it. At last, imagery can enhance the aesthetic implication and define as the stimulation to read. If we just read the plot, it is not surprise to find that it is easy and no different with other similar works. While with imagery, it seems that we have been personally on the scene. What's more, with bright and dark color, plots seem like a drama rather reading a book. It seems like that we have experienced the scene in person. Thus, the imagery enhances the cultural effect. Welty has had this awareness since last century that she employs trifles in daily life to teach great lessons to people at any time. It is Welty who employs trifles that different from the great philosophers who teach deep lessons difficult to understand. Therefore, she deserves the highest praise and most awards.

Narrative literature is a kind of literature in high cultural concentration, which not only lies in its structure, time and space, but also in imagery. Yangyi mentions narrative imagery in *Zhongguo Xushixue*. Narrative works with imagery is like the Earth has mineral resources which contains rich cultural codes. Imagery selected by Eudora Welty is closely connected to nature and our daily life, and it is easy to understand. Therefore, it can never be out of time. Even if *The Optimist's Daughter* has been finished last century, it also deserves analyzing. It is still teaching us many lessons and can serve as a model for many people. No matter time people live in, everyone should deal with problem that occur in their life and move on to embrace the future. The most important thing is that people not only appreciate Welty's skillful narration but also her deep thinking, such as feminism and the attitude towards death and families' leave. It is common for us to leave this world, but not every of us can be an optimist as judge. Then, enjoy now and leave no pity for the future. That is, everyone read it will benefit a lot and be lost in the admiration.

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