

‘The waiting arms of Missouri’:
human connections and sheltered
lives in Eudora Welty’s *The
Optimist’s Daughter*

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When one reads Eudora Welty’s work, one has the impression to be taken into a comprehensive and large human embrace. Human flesh and human nature are always present, and the reader is invited to see and contemplate the whole world, to take it into his own mind and arms, as Welty herself has done when working with the Works Progress Administration, travelling all over Mississippi, and embracing its varied, complex and colorful life. From reading her texts, one gets a firm conviction: the world is to be held dearly. I wish to contribute to the idea that Welty’s art is a large and sheltered embrace, a place from which the reader may safely ponder at human flightiness and inconstancy. Thereby, and in spite of the safety of the place from which the world is observed, the result of the contemplation is not stable or definite. Eudora Welty lived in a place and in a time that secured no definite answers or visions, and her understanding of human lives includes the inevitable oscillation between light and shadow, and between comedy and tragedy. Implicit is the idea that though Welty knew the settings of her fictional world, that knowledge only aggravated her sense of responsibility towards the physical reality and the human other. Her main fictional arena is always human emotions, and therefore her characters are never fixed to a place but are always on the verge of taking flight towards the free territory of the unexpected; some of them fly into the realm of artistic imagination.

These considerations are a prelude to my main focal point: Missouri, the black servant in the McKelva’s household in *The Optimistic Daughter* (1972, OD), and her dual symbolic role. On one hand, she helps Laurel to discover her own identity as an artist; on the other hand, Missouri’s presence in the novel is a subtle indicator of the race relations in the South. Therefore and parallel to the many views this novel illustrates — Welty’s

preoccupation with the past, the clash between social classes, and the survival of the community (Gretlund, *Eudora Welty* 514) — my interest is to understand the way Missouri's role emphasizes the uneasiness of human relations in the American South, a place where prejudice against blacks prevailed throughout the 20th century, since slavery and imprisonment framed the black community's social and individual lives. In order to understand Welty's vision, I relied on her comments about Willa Cather's work, grounded on the relevance of symbol and suggestion: "the relationships, development of acts and their effects, and any number of oblique, felt connections, which are as important and as indispensable as the factual ones in composing the plot, form a structure of revelation" (Welty, *Eye of the Story* 48). Missouri's presence in the novel is characterized mostly by discretion and silence, thus I felt it necessary to look for something that, though not specifically named upon the page,¹ would be relevant to the understanding of race relations in *The Optimist's Daughter*, and to the final revelation of Laura McKelva.

Though racial issues are apparently almost nonexistent in the novel, I kept in mind Toni Morrison's thesis that in America "matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse" (Morrison 9). Although Morrison considers that Welty writes about black people in "the way they should be written about" (qt McHaney np)², in discussing *The Optimist's Daughter* one may call upon Morrison's questions: "how does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine an Africanist

¹ Cf Willa Cather's statement: "whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there — that, one might say — is created" (837). Similarly in "Must the Novelist Crusade?", Welty states: "What distinguishes it [the novel] from journalism is that inherent in the novel is the possibility of a shared act of the imagination between its writer and its reader" (Welty, *Eye of the Story* 147). Further ahead Welty writes: "The novelist works neither to correct nor to condone, not at all to comfort, but to make what's told alive. He assumes at the start an enlightenment in his reader equal to his own, for they are hopefully on the point of taking off together from that base into the rather different world of the imagination" (Welty, *Eye of the Story* 152).

² According to Pearl McHaney, "in a 1977 interview, Toni Morrison named Eudora Welty as a fearless writer, explaining that Welty writes 'about black people in a way that few white men have ever been able to write. It's not patronizing, not romanticizing — it's the way they should be written about'" (qt McHaney np).

other? What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter?" (Morrison 16). Simultaneously, as a scholar who has been working on Ecocriticism and nature writing, I am also interested in the way the American South has been an invisible landscape. In contrast to the images portraying a landscape of rural bliss, simplicity and felicity, representing plantation life in the Old South, there existed varied landscapes in the region that remained invisible; strongly ideological, those images of bliss were intended to illustrate the superiority of the Southern social system.³ The absence of African Americans from the depictions of harmonious southern landscapes shows the general invisibility of their lives.

However, to relate African Americans and nature may prove to be an interesting approach to American culture and literature, for though nature may represent danger to blacks,⁴ to associate this community to the natural world and to agriculture emphasizes a context which gave them roots and direction. In "Slavery and African American Environmentalism", Mart Stewart suggests that most of slaves' working hours were spent in labor on the land, but this labor gave them knowledge of the land that was intimate and precise, and in turn had material, social, and political usefulness (Stewart 11). Before the mass migrations to Northern cities in the early 1900s, more than 90% of blacks were a people of the earth, and to grow

³ As noted by Susanne Dietzel, the absence of blacks from the U.S. visual and popular culture reinforces the idea that landscapes and representations of landscape are never 'natural' or realistic descriptions of the look of the land. They are always signifiers of culture, shaped by prevailing discourses of aesthetics, economics, politics and science, as well as by the natural environment itself. Therefore Dietzel suggests that blacks were intentionally absent from the visual images of the South because only one fraction of the landscape — that of the plantation or the garden, the site of Southern white hegemony — was to be represented in order to reinforce the image of the South as a region of a prelapsarian garden and a plantation space for white America (Dietzel 40-1).

⁴ Many fugitive slaves sought their freedom in the wilderness, but that territory represented primarily a struggle for survival. Melvin Dixon expands on this theme, confirming that slaves looked for alternative landscapes, places outside the plantation where birds and roaming animals provided them with geographical and naturalistic referenced for freedom (17).

food and flowers was a way of fighting dehumanization; to see things growing from the earth confers hope and to watch plants rising from the land with no special tending reawakens the sense of wonder and reverence for life.

The perspective presented above aims at highlighting Missouri's context in *The Optimist's Daughter*, namely the symbolic relation between Missouri and the bird she helps to set free, for in it I find a vision proclaiming how the closeness to the nonhuman world may perform a life-affirming and spiritually healing role. Missouri has behind her a long tradition of the intense relationship between African Americans and the nonhuman world, for if in the wilderness they did not find the salvation of the world, it was nonetheless 'a site of healing, a highway to kinship, a place where salvation could be gained, either through worship in the holler, through the strengthening of kin connections or through stealing oneself away permanently' (Stewart 19). Therefore my aim is to underline that Missouri's role is relevant and linked to the idea of freedom and healing. To read Missouri's interior landscape, one glimpses into an undiminished human being, someone whose role in the narrative has at its core the cleaning of the house for the play of human emotions, an act clearly intertwined with a clear vision of the Mckelva's world. Missouri's fine intuition corresponds and highlights the motif of eyes and good vision present in the novel, and her hands add an additional interest to the pervasive symbol of the hands throughout the plot, clearly reinforcing the main strain in the novel: the intense and difficult birth of an artist.

The artist is Laurel Mckelva, a fabric designer in Chicago who comes to New Orleans due to her father's eyes surgery. He dies and she goes to Mount Salus, Mississippi, for his funeral. She was widowed twenty years earlier, her husband killed during World War II, but very little is known about her life in Chicago. The setting of the story is both her parent's house in Mount Salus and her own interior dwelling. As Ann Romines states, "Laurel seems to have been living on emotional hold; now she must confront her past, must identify and claim its value" (Romines 258).

When at the beginning of Part II Laurel arrives in Mout Salus with her father's coffin, many are the arms waiting to embrace and comfort her; to take her home. A warming homecoming, for Laura was encircled by old friends, happy to see her again though regretting the circumstances under

which she made her return. These embraces are a contrast to the deep solitude Laura felt in the first chapter, either in empty rooms, lonely streets, and hospital wards, as if she were a character in one of Edward Hopper's painting. In Part I, which takes place in New Orleans, the meeting between Laurel, her father and Fay, his father's new wife, was very constrained from an emotional point of view. Though Laurel came flying from Chicago when she knew about her father's eyes operation, the encounter between father and daughter is rather cold. Laurel does not approve of his marriage to Fay who she thinks to be frivolous and superficial. Instead of warm embraces, one sees hands touching arms and shoulders, evincing either human indifference or anticipating bad news. In contrast, the second part of the novel narrates Laurel's arrival at her hometown Mount Salus where neighbors and friends all showed affection and concern for Laurel and kept embracing her, strengthening the idea conveyed by all that in Mount Salus she would have a sheltered and protected life.⁵

Laurel arrives at night and therefore no maid is present; only Adele Courtland, an old friend, and neighbor, is in the house to help her. Missouri appears the next morning in the middle of the kitchen as expected, 'inevitably' as the first word of that section signals. The inevitability of her presence in the house tells the story of a family counting on black work in everyday tasks, but the expectation signals human affection as well; from the first moment, she is there, ready to give and take comfort. In this first encounter, it is Laurel who takes Missouri in her arms; there is no great emotion, just a plain embrace and the strong certainty of Missouri's presence, just like in the past when Laurel's mother lived in the house. After the first embrace, Laurel and Missouri had to confront the embarrassment of Fay's presence among them. Missouri's statement about Judge McKelva's motive for marrying Fay — 'He mightily enjoyed having him somebody to spoil' (OD 59) — might have helped Laurel to face her father's decision to marry Fay Chisom, but she is still too close to the general view that Judge McKelva married under his position, dishonoring her mother's memory. However, and as Jan Gretlund points out, Missouri

⁵ Inevitably, one thinks of the last paragraph in *One Writer's Beginnings*: "I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well" (114).

was right; Laurel fails to know her father, and does not understand that in his new wife he was seeking life, vitality and youthfulness.

Further ahead the novel will be structured dramatically with people coming and going, paying their respects to Judge McKelva (OD 62). The dialogue alternates between comedy and tragedy, as in one of Chekov's plays in which the trivial talk of everyday life resonates intense feelings and the deep mystery in common human lives. In the meantime, Missouri stays "back there" (OD 102) in the kitchen, which points towards Morrison's opinion that most Southern fiction black characters are relegated to a merely decorative place (Morrison 15, 16). Accordingly, Missouri's apron may be seen as a disguise to the person she is, so the reader only knows her through the tasks she performs; her own desires or views are nonexistent. She is there to reinforce the idea that things are as they should be, as they were in the past.

But if, on the one hand Missouri represents a connection to Laurel's past, yet, on the other, she is to perform a meaningful role in the changes which are to occur in Laurel's life. I wonder, however, why she is the only character with cemetery clay sticking to her heels (OD 93), a detail that from my point of view reiterates the heaviness of her own life, and also the racial prejudices which adhere to the blacks' lives. In this sense, her silent presence resonates with the symbolism of her name. Missouri, the name of a tributary river to the Mississippi, also known as the muddy river, may carry in it the weight of Southern history. A mixture of prejudice and tragedy, and therefore a symbol of the black lives in the South, the Missouri, like the Mississippi Langston Hughes refers to, is a river in which "sorrow, pity, pain,/ tears and blood/ mix like rain" (43).

If Missouri holds back during the moments in which the well-bred people of Mount Salus and the disquieting Chisom family come to the house, at the cemetery, after everyone is gone, she embraces Laurel and her grief (OD 93). Once more silent and speechless, the two women embrace each other, performing a gesture of communion and communication; they understand each other even if they do not use many words.

The reader may question Missouri's life, but apparently the stage is ready only to foreground her lady master's voice. However and as previously referred, in spite of her silent presence she is there to help Laurel find her own voice. In the fourth and last part of the novel Missouri's presence

becomes associated to the chimney swift and her role becomes aggrandized. The swifts here reinforce a pattern of escape and return and also the seasonal pattern of the plot: in spring swifts return and nature bears again, illustrating Ruth Kieft statement about Welty's art being also a celebration of the natural world, an artistic territory where human crises and tragedies, the beautiful and the outrageous acts are counterpointed by the larger, steadying rhythms of nature (6). Implicit in the model presented by nature is the message that humans should be prepared to change and aspire to rebirth. In addition, birds are closely related to Laurel's birth as an artist and to an independent individual who manages to integrate all experiences and from them to construct a freer life. When Laurel sees a chimney swift in her father's house, she avoids it, keeping the bird trapped in the house, hence realizing what it is to be similarly trapped: the bird is frightened and cannot find its way out. As Jan Gretlund states, what Laurel realizes is that she has been a slave to the past, unable to see it perfectly and therefore to bear meaning to her present life (*Welty's Aesthetics* 202). Setting the bird free symbolizes Laurel's ability to reach enlightenment and leave behind the terrestrial heaviness; it means that she has set her version of the past "the whole solid past" (OD 178) free. Leaving the house and the breadboard to Fay, Laurel realizes that she has got vital tools in order to fight for a life of her own: she has got the power "of passion and imagination" (OD 178). She acknowledges the artist in her.

Calling once more on the imagery of birds, the domestic and social pigeons Laurel relates to her family and to the ties between them has to be replaced by novel and more individualistic birds; sometimes it is not enough "to eat out of each other's craws, swallowing down all over again what had been swallowed before" (OD 140). A migratory bird, the chimney swift, as opposed to the pigeon, better symbolizes the new life Laurel has to embrace. Indeed, the swift represents not only the urge to leave, but also the ability to repair its old house when spring comes again. Therefore, when memories return like spring, (OD 115), Laurel will be able to select those that will enrich her life: her father's optimism, her mother's creativity, and Philips's sensitive hands.

On one of the days she stays at her father's house, in a period of internal discoveries, Laurel works in the garden, near her mother's roses. While working on the land she looks upward to see and to listen to the

birds around, mockingbirds and cardinals. Not only is the attentive look towards the sky a premonition of her own creative flight and original song, a kind of paradigm for the artistic career, but it also metaphorically represents her imperative choice between the sweet music of the cardinals (OD 117) or the imitating sounds of the mocking bird, signaling a denial of the power of creativity and artistry. The imagery of birds, as Gaston Bachelard points out, is connected to images of mobility and ascension, contrasting to images that reinforce stability and definite forms (19). By relating themselves to the imagery of birds, and therefore to the possibility of movement, Laurel and Missouri share the dynamic energy required to ascend to the world of imagination and consequently to aggrandize their own spiritual realm. In this sense, both women have to free themselves from fixed stereotyped roles and traditions and to reinvent their own positions in society, for only by rebellion will they reach a voice of their own.

In fact, as I have been arguing, Laurel's maturity as an artist with a voice of her own runs parallel to the presence of birds throughout the novel; Laurel rejects a petrified past, one represented by the seagull she sees at the end of the first part, with wings fixed, like a stopped clock on a wall (OD 45), and adorns herself with the characteristics of vitality and capacity for change that other birds embody. But, as previously highlighted, Laurel's accomplishment is not separated from Missouri's affirmative and energetic role. Both women are active in setting the bird free, and if it is Laurel who releases it, a "tilting crescent being drawn back into the sky", it is Missouri who states: "all birds got to fly" (OD 168). Being an accomplice of Laurel, Missouri's sees no other way: "It's you and me" (OD 167); she helps to liberate the bird and she helps Laurel to see her way out as well. Imagining the two women contemplating the image of the bird ascending into the sky, one sees in its pattern of flight the same openness and disclosure that Welty believes to be the purpose of any plot defined by some human truth (Welty, *Eye of the Story* 48). The liberation of the bird anticipates Laurel's recognition that the past is "memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but full again, in the patterns restored by dreams" (OD 179).

Welty could hardly ignore the racial tension in the South, and her own photographs of the lives of black and white sharecroppers struggling with the effects of the Great Depression were an indication of that

awareness, but like other Southern writers Welty decides not to enter into black consciousness. Clearly, it was not Welty's intention to work on Missouri's interior life because there was too much in the black southern souls that she might not know; instead she gives us glimpses, inviting further consideration, further seeing and hearing. Gretlund comments that Welty's aesthetics always involves a consideration of the people who lived or live in a given place (Gretlund, *Welty's Aesthetics* 190) and thus Welty could not erase the fact that, by the time she was writing, the South was a place of racial riots. On the other hand, and as Welty herself states, there is no political crusade in her novels, for: "The real crusader doesn't need to crusade; he writes about human beings (...) he tries to see a human being whole with all his wrong-headedness and all his right-headedness" (Gretlund, *Welty's Aesthetics* 253). This perspective gives credit to what Peggy Prenshaw sees as Welty's moral position concerning the race issues: she supports a respectful listening to the position of the other and a willingness to empathetically engage in it (Prenshaw 299).⁶ This perspective is at the basis of Welty's words on Missouri: "In the (...) wrenching experiences that Laurel is going through by herself, Missouri's instincts are perfect. She is always sensitive to what is going on" (Gretlund, *Welty's Aesthetics* 251-252).

Subtly Missouri reinforces Laurel's progress role in the novel, helping her to liberate herself from her mother's worldview. Laurel was born in a region and in a family that saw the South as a world of matriarchs and Becky McKelva, her late mother, seems to still rule over the house and other people's lives. And though she lived with passion, reaching the realm of art through her gardening and her sewing, something that obviously her daughter inherits and expands, Laurel needs to reinvent a life of her own. Laurel's trajectory may be compared with the way black women in the South were using their own mothers' domestic knowledge to liberate them

⁶ In Welty's own words: "Most of the things I write about can be translated into personal relationships. My stories, I think, reflect the racial relationships — guilt is just one aspect of that...I write about all people. I think my characters are about half and half black and white" (Prenshaw 299). This observation also shows that "Welty possesses a sharply aware political consciousness but that she manifests it obliquely in her work" ("Political Thought" np).

from a past of imprisonment and to reach for an artistic future. In the autobiographical essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (written in 1974, just two years after the publication of Welty's novel) Alice Walker signals the immense potentialities of the far-reaching world of creative black women, for their work in quilt-making or in gardening is seen as the work of anonymous artists who left their mark in the only materials they could afford, and in the only medium their position in society allowed them to use (Walker 239). Thus, Missouri's silence omits what the future will certainly bring, since she herself is a character inserted in a rich tradition in which women were storytellers, preservers of food, and exemplary gardeners who, like Walker's mother, transformed the rocky soil into flourishing gardens.

Welty did not crusade in her texts but she invests Missouri with dignity, the right intuition to understand Laurel, and a predisposition to love and to embrace. Thereby, and concerning race issues, Welty gives her own answer: one needs a way to remember and another to reach for freedom, confirming Richard Gray's statement that it has never really been possible to talk about the South in the singular (Gray xv), for there are many different Souths, all of them recreated through language and imagination. And that's what Welty has done; she has given the reader different perspectives on how life is defined in the South, though she never attempts a definite answer. What about the impenetrable silence involving Missouri's own life? Does she have a family? A garden? Will she miss Laurel? The reader will never know, though the silent presence of Missouri speaks for itself. In the study of Prenshaw already cited, she uses Tzvetan Todorov's ideas on political writing to highlight her view concerning Welty's fiction: "By means of his writing, he is already engaged, since his works help humanity to find meaning in existence, and no struggle is greater than the struggle for meaning. All true works of art create values, and in so doing they are political (Prenshaw 8).

Let's consider the moment when Laurel and Philip see the confluence of Ohio waters with those of the Mississippi: in that moment "all they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world" (OD 160) As Laurel comes to recognize, there is little besides the assumption that humanity is a part of this world, and that each person's life direction is a contribution to the wholeness of it. Human

lives are like a river or “a line of birds flying in a V of their own”, moving to the same flow and to the same purpose, trying to find a meaning for their voyage, for their direction. As in her and Philip’s case, “they themselves were a part of the confluence” (OD 160). But for Laurel the most important fact is that these two rivers have a common pas, just like her and Philip’s lives, “from far back, generations, must have had common memories” (OD 161). The fact that these are the rivers that figure in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, accrues their symbolic meaning. The Mississippi was the river which challenged Huck with moral options, for he had to choose between his affection for Jim and the social rules which obliged him to deliver his black friend to the authorities. Ohio was the river they wanted to reach, but which they never did. Huck had to choose and so had America. In my opinion, the Missouri river contributes to reinforce the moral strength that a culture, and an individual, has to acquire in order to pursue the truth. In *The Optimist’s Daughter*, the black character Missouri mirrors this dilemma, inviting the reader to confront his/her own vision and to question which direction to take, which margin to reach for. Unlike Huck and Jim, Laurel manages to go North, liberating herself from the past imprisoning clutch; like them, she is on the way to learning what possibilities there are for forgiveness, compassion and love, escaping from a place which can be a libel against the individual artistic sensibility.⁷ Laurel, like Huck, leaves Mount Salus searching for the Territory; Missouri, like Jim, stays, free and ennobled by understanding that it is necessary to reach out into Territories vacant of prejudice and confinement.

In Laurel’s intuition that human experience is shaped by confluence and that, like in a river, all tributary water courses are vital to the main

⁷ Other aspects could be referred concerning the relationships between Twain’s and Welty’s world, namely the relevance of oral culture for the two authors. To this aspect, I would like to add Shelly Fisher Fishkin’s pervasive question: Was Huck black? The answer to this question is related to the subliminal way the African American voices speak throughout the novel, or as Fishkin puts it: “The influence that African American speech patterns had on Southern speech in general and the ways in which a black child helped inspire the distinctive voice of Huck Finn make it plausible to explore the possible African-American roots of a style that we have come to view as quintessentially American” (Fishkin 49).

individual and community, one may read the confluence of multiracial and multicultural aspects of U.S. society and culture. Commenting on the “wonderful word *confluence*”, Welty says it testifies to one of the chief patterns of human experience — each of us moving, changing, with respect to others -; and she further adds that the greatest confluence of all is the individual human memory (Welty, *One Writer's Beginning* 113). Human memory, like a river, and like the pattern of birds flying “in a V of their own” is a living thing, joining the fragments of the individual world, making them converge in the flow of all human lives.

Going back to Welty's essay on Willa Cather, it is worth quoting the following passage: “We see human thought and feeling best and clearest by seeing it through something solid that our hands have made” (Welty, *Eye of the Story* 58). In *The Optimist's Daughter*, the realm of order is achieved by characters who work with their hands, as Laurel's married surname (Hand) underlines, pointing towards her and Philips's profession as designers; manual labor is also connected with Becky, who sews and gardens. Missouri's hands contribute both to the achievement of order in the Mckelva's domestic world, and, in a symbolic way, they secure Laurel an healing internal balance. Thus, the waiting arms of Missouri contribute to Laurel's discovery of the power of her own hands as instruments for the making of art. Missouri helps Laurel to find out that though her past is precious, now she has to move towards the future, embracing life dearly, and to fly away to territories of daring freedom. The last embrace between Laurel and Missouri denounces urgency: “Laurel pressed her [Missouri] quickly to her, sped down the steps to the car where the bridesmaids were waiting” (OD 180). Laurel is in a hurry, Missouri lets her go.

Implicitly Welty is saying that a person, a region, a country should not stagnate within the past; instead of imprisoning, the memory of the past should reshape and recreate a more fluid future. Instead of the color line division, an imaginary line like the one which separated the slave states of the South and the free states of the North, and that coincidentally acquired public visibility under the conflict related to the Missouri Compromise in the 1820, Welty proposes the thread of artistry. Through art, borders, lines, rivers and states are crossed again and again endless times, enabling all human beings to see and embrace a more unbounded life. Welty's important crossing, like the many she made with her optimist father when travelling

to Ohio, as she describes in *One Writer's Beginnings*, was accomplished through language, a shelter from where she saw the main operations of the world: rivers seeking for confluence, birds seeking for a destination, individuals searching for relationship and human connection.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reads *The Optimist's Daughter* based on the symbolic, silent, and scarce presence of Missouri, the black housekeeper of the Mckelva's house. On the one hand, her presence in the novel is rare and subsidiary; on the other hand, her presence signals Laurel's sheltered life and her need for human connections, showing, as Peggy Prenshaw suggests, that Welty truly believes in "the human connection between freely operating individuals who engage issues that directly affect their lives". Attuned to the political and social codes of the racial South, the embraces between Laurel and Missouri are silent, but they are also a reinforcement of what Prenshaw designates as the "respectful listening to the position of the other".

Besides, this paper underlines the connection between Missouri and the birds, an association which corroborates Welty's predisposition to listen to the voice of Nature. In the novel, the birds' journeys intensify and anticipate the imminent flight Laurel is to take into another life, that of imagination and artistic independence. Their presence may also indicate Welty's intuition of a collective and racially-based desire for flight and freedom.

KEYWORDS

Eudora Welty; *The Optimist's Daughter*; Missouri; Racial South; Nature; Imagination.

RESUMO

Este artigo sugere uma leitura de *The Optimist's Daughter*, de Eudora Welty, a partir da presença simbólica, silenciosa, e parca de Missouri, a empregada negra

que trabalha na casa dos Mckelva. Por um lado, a sua presença no romance é escassa e subsidiária, por outro lado, é um símbolo da vida protegida de Laurel e da sua necessidade de relações humanas. Para mais, como sugere Peggy Prenshaw, o modo como Welty lida com a questão racial demonstra que esta acredita na “conexão humana entre indivíduos que operam livremente e se envolvem em questões que afetam diretamente suas vidas”. Ou seja, as posições políticas mais relevantes são do foro individual e íntimo. Em sintonia com os códigos raciais, políticos e sociais do Sul, os abraços entre Laurel e Missouri, embora escassos e silenciosos, são também um reforço do que Prenshaw designa como a “escuta respeitosa da posição do outro”.

Esta reflexão sublinha igualmente a ligação entre Missouri e a presença de aves no romance, uma associação que reforça a predisposição de Welty para ouvir a voz da natureza. No romance, o movimento ascensional das aves intensifica e antecipa o iminente voo de Laurel para uma outra vida — da imaginação e da independência artística. A presença das aves poderá igualmente sugerir a compreensão de Welty relativamente à busca de afirmação e de liberdade de um colectivo racial.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Eudora Welty; *The Optimist's Daughter*; Missouri; Sul e Raça; Natureza; Imaginação.
