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"SOMETHING FOR THE GIRLS": DEMETER, PERSEPHONE, AND HECATE
IN EUDORA WELTY'S *DELTA WEDDING* AND *THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER*

By

AMY DAVIDSON GRUBB

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of Richmond
in Candidacy for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in English,
May 1996, directed by Dr. W.D. Taylor

Eudora Welty's novels of Southern women and ritual reveal her desire to convey a woman's world and to imbue it with a prelapsarian power of feminine self-knowledge. To create this world, Welty draws upon the mythological signifiers of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate. Utilizing natural imagery of food and flowers, Welty develops a fecund, spring-like landscape and explores the relationship between character, author, and myth. What begins in *Delta Wedding* as a search to reaffirm the existence of a world spirit concludes in *The Optimist's Daughter* as a triumphant rebirth of the feminine spirit. Laurel McKelva Hand, unlike her predecessor Laura McRaven, is no longer confined by a patriarchal system of self-definition; she is able to move freely between the boundaries of time and place and assume control of her own destiny.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W.D. Taylor', written over a horizontal line.

Dr. W.D. Taylor, Thesis Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lynn C. Dickerson', written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Lynn C. Dickerson

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"I've lived with mythology all my life. It is just as close to me as the landscape. It *naturally* occurs to me when I am writing fiction," Eudora Welty related in an interview (qtd. in Westling, "Demeter" 101). Welty's explanation of her fiction embodies three governing principles in her writing: mythology, landscape, and nature. Dense with imagery, both natural and man-made, Welty's writing shapes a world where the characters' lives are as interconnected as the textual images. Welty's fiction is "deceptively simple" (Young 368); beneath the surface of stories about Southern families rests a juxtaposition of life and death, past and present, unity and isolation. Diarmuid Russell, Welty's editor and friend, puzzled at this "obscure" nature of Welty's early writing and challenged Welty to shape her short stories into novel form. In creating her novels, Welty developed a "latent female psychology and inner experience that Russel shared but could not identify. . . something 'for the girls' [as Mary Lou Aswell of *Harper's* wrote] that male readers never detected" (Kreyling 69).

Welty's love of myth, fascination with opposing forces, and focus on the feminine recalls the classical story of Demeter and Persephone. Although this myth has attracted writers and classicists for centuries, it has only recently been implemented by scholars to illuminate the personal and

cultural code of the writers who use it (Hayes ix). Josephine Donovan's recent survey of Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow reveals how these nineteenth century authors adapt the Demeter/Persephone myth to their writing to "allegorize the transformation from a matricentric preindustrial culture--Demeter's realm--to a male-dominated, capitalist-industrialized ethos" (2). While Donovan's investigation indicates a reliance on the Demeter/Persephone myth in order to explain a growing female identification with male philosophies, Elizabeth Hayes' collection of essays, *Images of Persephone*, depicts a reliance on the myth by male and female authors of various genres and cultural backgrounds to evoke an "archetypal Mother" (2) and valorize a feminine philosophy of creativity, unconsciousness, and spirituality.

Eudora Welty, writing *Delta Wedding* during the World War II era and completing it in 1945, would have been bombarded by the violent, masculine images of war; however, her novel is superficially about a peaceful Southern family's plans for a young woman's wedding. In the early 1940s, Welty began reading works of American folk mythology which Russell encouraged her to pursue to broaden her regionalized stories (Kreyling 42). The women in the novel are not overtly rebellious towards or accepting of the masculine traditions. Indeed, there is an interdependence between the sexes which results in necessary, if not always complacent,

coexistence. Twenty-five years later, she would publish *The Optimist's Daughter*, another novel about Southern women and ritual. Here, Welty again reveals a fusion of seeming opposites through mythological significance. The natural imagery in both of Welty's stories, particularly the usage of food and flowers, creates a fecund, spring-like landscape and recalls the vegetation myth of Demeter and Persephone.

Sir James George Frazer recounts the details of the Demeter/Persephone story in *The Golden Bough*. While gathering flowers, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, goddess of fertility and crops, was raped by Pluto, the ruler of the underworld. Pluto took Persephone to Hades to become his queen. Demeter, distraught by the loss of her daughter, refused to let the crops grow. Because Demeter's withholding of fertility could have destroyed humankind, Zeus demanded that Pluto return Persephone. Since Persephone had eaten fruit of the underworld, a pomegranate seed, she was unable to be fully restored to her mother. Zeus's compromise--Persephone lived for two-thirds of the year with her mother and one-third of the year with Pluto in the underworld--resulted in the cycle of the crops and seasons. When Persephone is with her mother, the earth rejoices with the abundance of flowers and crops of the springtime. The harvesting of the crops and the desolation

of winter reflects Demeter's grief at Persephone's residence in Hades (456-457).

Although Frazer's version of the myth comes in part from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, this primary source for the Demeter/Persephone myth is somewhat different. Instead of approaching Zeus on her own, Demeter's grief is recognized by another deity: Hecate, goddess of the underworld. In the Homeric account, the "childish daughter of Perses, Hecate of the glistening veil" hears Demeter mourning Persephone's loss and aids her in her appeal to Zeus (Kraemer 337). A servant of Persephone in the underworld, Hecate is associated with night, witchcraft, and death. This torch-bearing goddess was also linked to Artemis and other nocturnal goddesses. As a handmaiden of Persephone and an assistant to Demeter, Hecate became the third member of the vegetation trinity, a mysterious figure of death who intervenes in the world of the living (Murray 70-71). Together, the figures become the "cycle of life" and death (Bell 157), as well as symbols of the three stages of a woman's life (Hayes 10).

Unlike other stories which allude to this myth of life, death, and rebirth, Welty's *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter* re-create the myth by reversing and overlapping the expected roles of mother and daughter and by adding the often overlooked persona in the vegetation trinity: Hecate.

In myth, these separate roles are later associated with a single identity of a vegetation goddess, symbolic of the birth, death, and rebirth of the crop (Sartiliot 137).

Delta Wedding's female characters undergo a Persephone-like abduction and experience a Demeter-like loss. Three of these characters, Ellen Fairchild, Robbie Fairchild, and little Laura McRaven also exhibit the mystery and danger associated with Hecate. Later, in *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty reveals this same blend of roles and offers each character a potential for self-definition through recognition of her interconnectedness to others. Laurel and her mother Becky shift between the Demeter/Persephone roles. Fay Chisolm McKelva, Laurel's stepmother, becomes a foil to any type of new life or continuation of life through her symbolic role of Hecate. Welty, aware of this mingling of identities, allows the protagonist, Laurel, to experience each separate role before she can be reconciled to the deaths of her parents and the natural cycle of life.

The characters in Welty's novels, *Delta Wedding* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, suggest the amalgamation of such a trinity. In *Delta Wedding*, the Fairchild men and women are so linked by their family identity that the reader is overwhelmed by the many characters and almost unable to differentiate between them. Three female characters, Laura McRaven, Ellen Fairchild, and Robbie Fairchild, are

outstanding because of their position in the Fairchild world as outsiders. Despite their sense of not belonging, these characters share experiences and beliefs which allow them to begin to forge their own community. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Becky, Laurel, and Fay are three distinct characters, unlike the plethora of personas in Welty's earlier novel. Although these women are distinct in their personality, Welty shows a clear link between them, revealing their similarities and their common potential as harbingers of life and death.

Welty skillfully uses specific Southern rituals to relate both sets of her characters to universal issues of life and death through the cyclical nature of the Demeter/Persephone myth. *Delta Wedding* focuses on the ritual most frequently associated with Southern women and their families: the wedding. Through marriage and the wedding ceremony itself, the Southern society defines a woman as life-giving (through pregnancy and support of her husband) or life-threatening (through barrenness and opposition to her husband). While Welty recognizes a woman's power, she is careful in this novel to contain it within the masculine-proscribed bounds of society (Sprengnether 121). Much like the physicality of early

goddess worship,¹ these women are defined biologically and their power rests in the physical creation of childbirth. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty uses the myth and the feminine society to reveal marriage as a force not only of life, but of death, of birth and rebirth, of fertility and self-abnegation. On the surface, this novel utilizes the ritual of the Southern funeral to connect three women to a larger, mythical community; however, Welty, through flashback and interweaving of characters, incorporates forces of life and death within family relationships, especially marriage. Instead of being defined by their family, as are the women in *Delta Wedding*, Laurel, Becky, and Fay attempt but fail to reshape the family and community around them. For Laurel, failure to change others results in a self-awareness which celebrates the cyclical nature of life and death. As Elizabeth Hayes explains, goddess worship through "a continuous positioning of opposite, but

¹ As early as 25,000 B.C., goddess worship focused upon fertility and ritual which involved the placement of a girl, pig, or goat into the earth as a sacrifice for a good harvest. By 2,000 B.C., goddess worship evolved into the cult of Gaia. Gaia's followers were displaced by the Dorians, and the power of the Mother goddess was relegated to lesser deities in the Pantheon, especially Demeter and Persephone. Still, those faithful to the goddess worshipped her in cults like the Eleusinian mysteries and continued to practice rituals of physical sacrifice (Hayes 6-8).

equal qualities. . . results in" psychic wholeness through a fusion of opposites (3).

Welty's novels use myth to bring universality to the specific trials of her Southern families. In these novels, the Demeter/Persephone myth reveals her fascination with the coexistence of the opposing forces of life and death. Also, her reliance on this myth alludes to an idealized feminine community, one which traditionally has been associated with the South (Sprengnether 121). The Vegetation Trinity of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate presupposes a feminized world where women, through their powers of biological and spiritual creation, control the destiny of humankind. In classical myth, however, the feminine world is shattered by the intrusion of Pluto and his abduction and rape of Persephone. Persephone's disappearance and the chaos which ensues from her rape symbolize the imbalance which resulted when the Pantheon of classical gods displaced Gaia and goddess worship (Hayes 2). The result of Persephone's abduction is a compromise worked out by Demeter, Hecate, and Zeus; however, the terms of the bargain reveal a shift towards patriarchy. Demeter barter her life-giving powers over the harvest in return for only a partial restoration of her natural role as mother. Zeus, by relegating Persephone to one world and another, assumes the same control over her that he once took with her mother, Demeter, when he raped

her and begot Persephone (Hayes 8-9). While the women are permitted to live in a peaceful, pre-classical world for two-thirds of the year, a shadow of patriarchy looms over them and beckons Persephone's return to the underworld.

In these novels, Welty recognizes the power of the feminine world, while acknowledging the presence of masculine authority. Although women are the main characters in the novels, they are driven by and linked to powerful men. The women of *Delta Wedding* are centered around the charismatic presence of George Fairchild. Welty makes specific references to George as a Zeus-figure. Not only are his "shoulders as bare. . . as a Greek god's" (166), but he possesses Zeus's dualistic attraction towards women. At times, George is a savior; he rescues Maureen from being run over by the Yellow Dog and smoothes the way for Dabney's wedding to Troy Flavin. Although all of the women look up to him as the ideal man, he is a distinct threat to women. He seduces the young girl in the bayou, who is later found dead. He tries to evict the Aunts from their home at the Grove in the final pages of the novel. His tender and threatening nature most clearly reveals itself in his attitude towards his wife, Robbie, who leaves him because he is assuming control of her identity and destiny. Viewing George and Robbie together, Ellen, the most mother-like of the women, understands the danger of involvement with

George: "They lay there. . .twined together--appealing, shining in the moonlight, and almost--somehow--threatening" (25). As a wife and mother, Ellen knows the danger of losing one's identity when new relationships and lives are created through marriage. George's loyalty to the Fairchilds and his role as patriarch of the family jeopardize Robbie's independent, stormy personality.

Although they recognize the sway that George Fairchild holds over them, his presence connects the women in the novel and allows them to glimpse their strength and their community. Ellen and Robbie fantasize about life outside the Fairchild circle and away from George, but both return to him and accept their role within the masculine-imposed bounds of their society. At the conclusion of the story, Ellen and Robbie are able to justify their decisions to embrace Fairchild philosophy by portraying George as a hero, as supreme Patriarch: "he was capable. . .of meeting a fate" (221); "George was left still the adored one" (241); "'It's his house,' said Ellen," justifying his announcement to take the Grove from Primrose and Jim Allen. Even little Laura, who has idolized her Uncle George since her arrival at Shellmound, rejects her birthright to Marmion and decides to live with the Fairchilds at Shellmound. Throughout the story, Marmion symbolizes awakening sexuality and feminine independence. Here, Laura learns that Aunt Studley's ever-

present sack is associated with female reproduction; finds Aunt Ellen's garnet pin, another symbol of the beauty of female sexuality; and runs from Rainy before undergoing her baptism in the Yazoo River (Leonard 112). Marmion is a woman's world, a place of sexuality, fertility, and mystery, yet young Laura chooses to reject her mature destiny for immediate acceptance into the childlike world of the Fairchild women. Although Uncle Battle reminds Laura that she cannot renounce her maturity by rejecting her inheritance of Marmion-- "'Marmion'll be yours, you know, when you want it'"--he stipulates her presence in the feminine world of Marmion within the proscribed bounds of marriage: "'You'll live there like your Aunt Ellen here, with all your chillen'" (237). Welty allows the reader to glimpse the potential of a feminine world, but does not fully recognize it through her characters in *Delta Wedding*.

Like the women in *Delta Wedding*, the three women in *The Optimist's Daughter* are connected by their relationship to a larger-than-life man: Clinton McKelva. Again, women are linked to a powerful man by both blood and marriage. Becky and Laurel, as mother and daughter, share Clinton. Although Laurel remembers the love between her parents, she only recalls her father in a generalized image of a hero: "he was young and could do everything" (133). Laurel's memories of Clinton recall the figure of George Fairchild. As

Clinton's wives, Becky and Fay also share Clinton. Although Becky died before Clinton married Fay, Laurel believes that Becky "predicted" Fay. Indeed, a snapshot of young Becky and Clinton does portend Clinton's future relationship with Wanda Fay Chisom: "he, slender as a wand. . .she with her hands full of wildflowers" (136). For Fay, Becky's memory is "a rival" (152). Finally, as the two living women who must oversee his surgery, recovery, and funeral, Laurel and Fay share Clinton.

Despite the many similarities between the plots and characters of the two novels, one obvious difference marks the maturation of the author. *Delta Wedding*, focusing on the socially accepted bonds between men and women, stops short of establishing a pre-classical female community. Much like Josephine Donovan's analysis of nineteenth century writers' use of the Vegetation myth to explain the resurgence of masculine ideology in America, this Welty novel seeks to analyze the relationships between men and women and to sketch a portrait of women on the border of an organized masculine society. Mary Louise Aswell of *Harper's* noted that *Delta Wedding* was an attempt to "discover a new, insightful point of view," a strange development of a particularly feminine and indirect form of communication (Kreyling 83). In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty recognizes the power of the feminine world which she alluded to in the

earlier novel and establishes it through the death of the masculine presence. Here, it is not a continuation of masculine domination through marriage and inheritance which Welty depicts, but the death of the father-figure and the beginning of a healthy, female-oriented community. Her final novel becomes an apocalyptic, post-classical vision of feminine society where no shadow of patriarchy threatens.

Welty's novels portray the feminine community through the use of the Demeter/Persephone myth and also through the interrelatedness of the women themselves. As a characteristic of the Vegetation Trinity, the similarities of the characters serve to heighten the sophistication of Welty's use of myth. As Frazer recounts, after the invasion of Pluto and the reunion between Persephone and her mother, the two goddesses become almost indistinguishable in Greek art (Donovan 3). The sameness of the women alludes to the single identity of the goddess Gaia in pre-classical religions; moreover, it suggests the commonality and uniqueness which defines womanhood. In both novels, Welty underscores the similarities between her characters. When Laura meets her cousins at Shellmound, she is reminded that "all the Fairchilds in the Delta looked alike" (14). Not only are they physically indistinguishable, but the Fairchilds possess a timelessness, again alluding to myth, that "Laura from her earliest memory had heard how they

'never seemed to change at all'" (15). The Fairchilds are so alike that many critics view the family or the Delta itself as the protagonist of the novel (Leonard 110). These critics, like viewers of Greek art, see little value in differentiating between characters, but recognize them symbolically.

Welty does not merge character in *The Optimist's Daughter* the way she does in *Delta Wedding*. Becky, Fay, and Laurel have distinct personalities, much like careful division between Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate prior to Persephone's abduction. Here, the characters are not interchangeable, nor can they be interpreted mainly for their contribution to the whole. Instead, Welty links these three characters and offers them insight to their potential for sameness. Like Ellen, Robbie, and Laurel, who are all connected by a loss of a child, a husband, and a mother, Becky, Fay, and Laurel have also experienced these losses. Becky's death forges a separation between mother and daughter; in addition, Laurel's husband, Philip Hand, has died. Also, the women of *The Optimist's Daughter* share the common loss of Clinton McKelva, a husband and father. Through this shared death, Welty allows the protagonist, Laurel, to envision herself in the roles of Becky and Fay. Laurel's memories of her parents threaten to engulf her in the past, her mother's world. Her isolation intimates Fay's

immersion in self. Only after Laurel glimpses her propensity for becoming like these other women can she learn to develop her own sense of self. Like little Laura McRaven who stands outside the circle of the Fairchild children, Laurel McKelva Hand remains an outsider to the Mt. Salus community. Her rejection of the safety-net of the established community permits her to balance the demands of the past and the present, the inside and the outside, and much like Welty, reconcile opposing forces.

In each novel, the primary female characters are linked because of their role as outsiders to the community. In *Delta Wedding*, Ellen and Robbie are not Fairchilds by blood, but merely by marriage. Laura, though kin to the Fairchilds of Shellmound, has lost her connection to them through the death of her mother. Interestingly, as much as these characters dislike the Fairchilds for isolating them, they long to become fully accepted. Ellen and Robbie indicate their willingness to participate in the perpetuation of the Fairchild myth through the announcement of their pregnancies towards the end of the novel. Robbie's return to George as a pregnant, repentant wife most strongly reveals her desire to forsake herself and join with the Fairchild clan. Laura McRaven offers her devotion and even her inheritance of Marmion to the Fairchilds so that they will permit her to stay with them at Shellmound. Reassured that she is

accepted as part of the family, Laura, in the final sentence of the novel, "turned again to them, both arms held out to the radiant night" (247). Neither the night nor the Fairchilds can return Laura's embrace; both are too large, too all-encompassing to permit such a personal interaction. Also, Welty's chooses to force Laura to face "the night" as a reminder of Persephone's fate. Laura has met the masculine world and her life will no longer be the same; like Persephone, she must resign herself to live part of her life in the darkness of Hades.

While the women in *Delta Wedding* are outsiders seeking to find a place in society, the women of *The Optimist's Daughter* are reconciled to their lonely lives. Becky and Laurel McKelva live in the Mt. Salus community while never fully becoming a part of it. Their tiny family served as their only true means of personal connection, a connection which death has severed. Fay Chisom McKelva possesses a large family, but isolates herself from them. A comical extension of the Fairchilds, the Chisom family descends upon the funeral, but Fay refuses to recognize their relationship to her: "'Get back! Who told them [the Chisoms] to come?'" (84). At the conclusion of this story, Laurel must make a decision much like the one Laura McRaven made: stay in the existing community or forge ahead to discover the future. Laurel does not reject the past, but she does choose to

leave it physically and carry it with her through her memory. She remains alone at the end of the story, but her self-reliance and reconciliation between the past and the future indicates a hope, a potential for rebirth and rejuvenation, that *Delta Wedding* lacks.

The distinct personalities of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate, especially those defined prior to patriarchal invasion, mark each of Welty's female characters in her novels. She utilizes these personas to clarify the three stages of a woman's life, but also to reveal her characters' relationship to the past, present, and future. Demeter, as a primeval goddess, represents a past of maternal, pre-natal bliss. Persephone, the maiden daughter whose abduction creates chaos in the natural world, symbolizes the "ineffable present" (Hayes 9). Hecate, goddess of the harvest, a harbinger of death and prophecy, signifies the unknown future. As separate entities, the goddesses have very limited powers over time; yet, together they create the cycle of womanhood and the natural cycle of life itself. Characters in Welty's novels who exhibit characteristics of a single persona of the trinity reveal their inability to cope with the passage of time and the development of the psyche. Indeed, Welty's own use of the various roles of the trinity reveals the author's personal development and artistic maturation.

Her first novel, *The Robber Bridegroom*, perpetuates fairy-tale stereotypes; *Delta Wedding* universalizes Southern myth while still narrowly classifying its characters. In *Delta Wedding*, the three primary characters, Ellen, Robbie, and Laura, are almost exact replicas of the goddess persona that they typify. Ellen, the mother of the eight Fairchild children, assumes the maternal role of Demeter. Not only does Ellen serve as a mother to her own children, but she worries about other young women, like Laura, Robbie, and the young girl in the bayou. Like Demeter, she is faced with the imminent loss of her daughter, Dabney. Ellen is associated with food, flowers, and fecundity; everything about her springs to life. While she is connected to reproduction, Ellen is disassociated from sexual pleasure. By the conclusion of the novel, she is "mostly mother" (189) and cannot understand the sexual attraction between George and Robbie. Like Demeter, Ellen constantly recalls the goodness of the past and seeks to reestablish it in her home. Although Ellen is not as obsessed with the past as are the Aunts who live in the unchanging Grove or Aunt Shannon who "would talk conversationally. . .[with] who all who died no telling how long ago" (13), she does perpetuate the Fairchild past through the sameness of her home, her staunch devotion to George and Battle, and her creation of

new Fairchilds. As a mother-figure, Ellen portends Becky McKelva's character in *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Robbie, on the other hand, possesses the wildness and the dangerousness of Hecate, goddess of the harvest and underworld. Like Hecate, she is an avowed outsider who wants nothing to do with the Fairchilds as a family: "'I didn't marry into them! I married George!'" (141). The Fairchilds recognize her self-imposed isolation and fear its consequences: "'You mean Troy's not as bad for us as Robbie,'" whispered Shelly intently" (206). Much like the bird which becomes trapped in the house only moments after Robbie's arrival to Shellmound, her struggle against the confining dictums of the Fairchilds threaten life itself: "A bird in the house is a sign of death. . .Robbie did not seem to know whether she had let the bird in or not; she did not know what she had done" (159-160). For the Fairchild family, Robbie Reid is the "Bad Fairy" (160), an interloper who can rob the family of their unity, and a woman whose egocentric character foreshadows that of Fay Chisom McKelva.

Ellen and Robbie typify the distinct characteristics of Demeter and Hecate; however, they do possess some overlapping traits which foreshadow Welty's blending of the personas in her later novel. Ellen's ability to interpret dreams is reminiscent of Hecate's powers of prophesy. Robbie, while embodying the wildness and dangerousness of

Hecate's persona, becomes Demeter-like in the final pages of the novel as the reader learns of her pregnancy. To a greater extent, the Persephone role becomes a common denominator for all of the women in the story. Ellen's dream of her missing garnet pin reveals her desire to return to her youthful past. She reenacts this dream when she visits the Bayou woods and finds herself in an "ancient place. . .there were trumpet vines and passion flowers" (69). Here, she meets a young girl and, recalling the sweetness of her virginity which she has lost like her garnet pin, warns the young woman about the dangers of men: "'I was looking for a little pin I lost. . .I was speaking about good and bad, maybe. I was speaking about men--men, our lives'" (70-71). Robbie, after marrying George, longs for her family and her independence. Like Persephone, she leaves her husband and returns to a sheltering woman. While at her sister Rebel's, Robbie dreams of George, "lost, without her, a Fairchild man, lost at Shellmound" (149). She returns to Shellmound, (for her, a house of the dead), to save her husband and thereby save herself.

Although *Delta Wedding* tells the story of Dabney Fairchild's marriage, it is little Laura McRaven who most accurately reveals the abducted maiden complex of Persephone. Like Persephone, Laura has lost her mother and arrives in a strange world. She is young and inexperienced,

holding promise for the future and memories of the past. From the earliest portraits of Laura, Welty depicts her as golden and life-giving. Much like Persephone, the maiden goddess of the new corn, Laura is associated with yellow. While on the Yellow Dog train, she views "yellow flowers" and "yellow butterflies," "her nose in the banana skin as in the cup of a lily" (3-4). Both Persephone and Laura bring light to their new surroundings. Interestingly, Welty does not choose to depict Shellmound as Hades for Laura's Persephone; instead, it is more like the static world of Elysium where individuals live in blissful forgetfulness. When Laura first meets the cousins, she is "half-carried along like a drunken reveler at a festival" (5); their reunion is a joyous, intoxicating experience. Anxious to shed her differentness, Laura takes part in the feasts, songs, and rituals that make up life at Shellmound. Like Persephone, Laura's participation in an unfamiliar world seduces her into remaining there. In an interesting shift, Welty allows Laura a choice which was not available for Persephone: whether or not to remain with the Fairchilds. Welty permits this choice to reveal the character's growing sense of self and also to highlight a woman's increasing power over her own destiny. While this choice modernizes Laura, her decision to remain in the patriarchal, unchanging world of the Fairchilds indicates a male-oriented society

similar to that of ancient myth. Welty, by permitting her female characters a strong voice and by focusing on women's traditions in the South, softens the society she depicts, but she cannot and does not alter the patriarchal core of the family itself.

The women in *Delta Wedding* are not fragmented enough to exist outside of the Fairchild circle. Unified by George Fairchild and their dedication to family, they perpetuate the code of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. They assume the role of either Demeter/mother, Persephone/daughter, or Hecate/prophetess. They are defined as either life-bringers or life-takers. In order to remain complete, they must share the company of other women who have assumed a complementary role. They cannot achieve spiritual wholeness of their own accord and, as a result, develop a network of female support. Together, the Fairchild women are powerful; yet, singly they are weak. Robbie recognizes their false sense of control: "All the Fairchild women indeed wore a mask. . .nothing was ever enough" (147). Because they are united by a man and a male-oriented system, the microcosm these women have created is weak at its very core.

In *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty fully recognizes the potential for the feminine self which she sketches in *Delta Wedding*. Here, her female characters are also a part of a

large network of women. Instead of relying upon one another as the women in *Delta Wedding* do, each of these women use the others' strengths and weakness to develop a mature, rounded self. Laurel McKelva Hand's success in achieving self-awareness stems from Welty's decision to separate her from the domination of men--both her husband and father have died--and Welty's blending of the various aspects of the Vegetation Trinity within Laurel, Becky, and Fay.

Becky and Laurel vacillate between the roles of Demeter and Persephone. As Nancy Chodorow examines the Demeter/Persephone relationship, she defines this sycophantic association as an "affirm[ation] of the continuing strength of the mother/daughter bond throughout a woman's life" (qtd. in Sprengnether 120). In the mythic relationship, the mother figure assumes the role of Demeter and the daughter becomes Persephone. The structure of the novel, however, places these women in both roles. Becky lost Laurel when she married Phil Hand and moves to Chicago. When Laurel returns to her mother, however, she is not associated with rebirth. Becky, dying, blinded, and bitter, focuses on death in her last moments with Laurel. She says, "'You could have saved your mother's life. But you stood by and wouldn't intervene. I despair for you'" (151). When Becky is taken from Laurel by death, Becky's experience becomes more like that of Persephone than Demeter.

Attacking Clinton for his false optimism, she screams, "'Lucifer! Liar!'" (150). Her final angry words resemble the echoing cries of the young goddess heard by Demeter and Hecate. As Becky slips into the underworld and sees Clinton's denial of her struggle as condemning her to her desperate fate, Clinton/Lucifer plays Pluto to Becky's Persephone. Because both of her parents are blinded, Laurel must care for them as a mother. This role reversal, daughter as a mother to her parents, reinforces Laurel as Demeter. Although Becky has been physically taken from her, the memories of her mother resurface throughout the novel, giving her the depth of a living character. Becky's rebirth in the mind of Laurel, her continual presence in her beloved flowers, and her memory in the Mt. Salus community of women, also echo Persephone's return.

Laurel compromises between the past, the present, and the future so that she can move on with her life. Like Demeter, her pain over losing a family member is so intense that Laurel's emotional desolation resembles the fruitless, barren earth after Persephone's descent into the underworld. As Demeter strikes a deal with Zeus to regain part of her happiness and a partial claim to her daughter, Laurel takes possession of the memories of her mother and wants to shape them into the present. When she burns her mother's letters, Laurel feels a desire to reach out for the smoldering

fragments, but recognizes that "all [she] would have wanted. . . would have been to make it [the reality of the past] over, give her a new one in its place" (169; Arnold 242). Since she finally sees the futility in reshaping the past, she can also experience the benefits of her memories: "As long as its [memory] is vulnerable to the living moment, it lives for us, and while it lives, and while we are able, we can give it up its due" (179). Like a flower, Laurel must emerge from the mother/earth to grow, yet also acknowledge the link between the two (Cixous 134).

Although Laurel and Becky are predominantly associated with the positive, nurturing aspects of the Vegetation Trinity linked to Demeter and Persephone, there is a dark side to both of their natures. Both Bev Byrne (248) and Barbara Carson (144) note the doubleness in Welty's fiction, the desire to explore the good and the evil in each character. There is an aura of separateness and mystery about Becky and Laurel which resembles Hecate more than Demeter and Persephone. Hecate, a night goddess, was linked to madness and prophecy. Unlike the fertile symbols of her counterparts, Hecate was often depicted at the center of a lonely crossroads (Murray 70-71). Becky, a native West Virginian, reveals her ties to this state, not to Mt. Salus. Not only does she name her only daughter after the state flower of her home state, but she derisively compares the

landscape of Mt. Salus with the mountains of home: "'Where to they get the mount? There's no 'mount' here'" (142; Young 381). The members of the Garden Club miss Becky's companionship, but they seem never to have included her completely. When describing her climbing rose, Becky remarks, "'[It] has every right to its own name, but nobody in Mt. Salus is interested in giving it to me'" (114). In a well-crafted merging of Demeter and Hecate, only Becky is able to make this long-neglected rose grow and bloom.

Likewise, Laurel, a Chicago designer, is no longer a true part of the Mt. Salus community (Young 381). The women of Mt. Salus deny her existence outside of their presence. When discussing Laurel's proposed return to the city, Miss Adele suggests that she stay in Mt. Salus because "'Laurel has no other life'" (112). The community also expresses its scorn at Laurel's marriage to an outsider: "'She didn't look at home to find Philip Hand'" (116). Although this isolation between Becky and Laurel and the Mt. Salus women could be interpreted simply as the symbolic distance between the divine and the mortal, the fear and contempt of the community towards the outside world is suggestive of a denial of Becky's and Laurel's suppressed natures. Interestingly, Laurel and Becky feel more alone in their home-town than Laura McRaven does among the Fairchilds of Shellmound. Welty creates this unexpected reversal to

indicate her awareness of isolation as a reflection of self, not geography, and her new focus upon the individual.

Not only do both women resemble Hecate at the lonely crossroads, but they also exhibit a wildness that evokes Hecate's maddening, chaotic rituals. As a little girl, Becky "'loved a good storm coming, we'd fly outdoors and run up and down to meet it. . .the wilder it blew the better we like it'" (144). Her love of storm as a small child parallels her behavior as she is gripped by blindness: "She loyally reproached her mother for yielding to the storms that began coming to her out of the darkness of vision" (145). For crude Mr. Cheek and Fay, Becky's storms of passion can only indicate insanity. As Fay sharply tells Laurel, "'Mr. Cheek put me wise. . .[Becky] was a crazy and you'll be a crazy too, if you don't watch out'" (174).

Becky also reflects Hecate's nature as a prophetess of the underworld. Although Becky's voice from the underworld frequently comes to Laurel through memory, much like that of a prophetess or like Fay/fey herself, Becky specifically foretold one event which occurs after her death--Clinton's relation with Fay. Laurel states, "'Fay, my mother knew you'd get into her house. . .she predicted you'" (173). Becky also speaks to the Presbyterian minister in the coded language of a mystic as she tells him about the wild, white strawberries that grow at home in West Virginia:

Deep in the woods, you'd miss them. You would find them by mistake, and you could line your hat with leaves and try to walk off with a hatful: that would be how little you knew about those berries. Once you've let them so much as touch each other, you've already done enough to finish 'em (149).

Helene Cixous links the plucking of the white flower/fruit to "fall[ing] under the law of the masculine," the interruption of "primitive feminine *jouissance*" (130; 125). For Becky to scold young Dr. Bolt's inexperience with women and nature through a parable immediately ties her to the vague prophecies of Hecate and brings to mind the unheeded and prophetic dreams of her predecessor, Ellen Fairchild. Also, by choosing to condemn a minister, Becky denies his knowledge of the Divine and establishes herself as a prophetess of natural divinity (Vande Kieft 180). Her wildness diminishes as she grows closer to death, and she rejects the love of her husband and daughter. As Becky wavers between life and death, "keeping everything to herself, in exile and humiliation" (151), she again resembles Hecate at the lonely crossroads.

Laurel reaches the closest connection to Fay/Hecate when she finally confronts Fay over her mother's breadboard, which Fay has ruined. After passively observing Fay's selfishness throughout the novel, Laurel is roused to action in the final pages. As Fay mocks her mother, her husband,

and herself, Laurel "took the breadboard in both hands and raised it up out of Fay's reach" (177). Fay, who can only relate to the physical world, views this action as a threatening one. Interestingly, Laurel also recognizes her desire to harm Fay: "She had wanted to hurt her, and had known herself capable of doing it" (178). The shared thoughts of the characters here indicate Laurel's potential to become like Fay and the inseparability of the trinity. Laurel does not choose to strike Fay, but relinquishes the breadboard. Laurel recognizes that a decision **not** to act is an action in itself. Also, by freeing herself of the physical tokens of her mother, Laurel gives herself to the present and the future: "Memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed" (179). Laurel has seen her other self, her potential for isolation and violence, in Fay and has turned from this reflection (Weston 84).

Not only does Welty rely upon the personas of the three goddesses to illuminate the characters in her novels and her attitudes towards the feminine spirit, but she utilizes traditionally feminine images and imbues them with mythological and universal significance. As goddesses of the harvest, Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate fulfill the potential of life and represent the cycle of life and death through the seasons of the crops. Because of their

association with crops and growth, food and flowers are particularly important to these goddesses. In each of these novels, Welty focuses upon food or flower imagery and links it to feminine power and community.

Alluding to an early Persephone/Demeter model, *Delta Wedding* recognizes the essential power of food. Food offers nourishment for the physical body, but also provides spiritual nourishment for those who participate in its preparation and in the communal consumption. It also addresses a mysterious dependence among living things: "[Welty's] symbolic language of food identifies physical nourishment with the landscape and feminine in a poetics of the body as part of a mutable, heterogeneous and cyclical ecology" (Westling, "Food" 29). Many of the important family interchanges occur while the family is eating: Dabney's announcement of her forthcoming marriage, Robbie's return, George's decision to take the Grove, Laura's choice to remain at Shellmound. In fact, the Fairchilds seem to be always eating; Robbie notes, "'they were all back there in oblivion, eating'" (153). This constant feasting is not coincidental. Welty pulls the reader into the Southern kitchen and forces him/her to become mindful of the preparation of the food. It is here that the women prepare life-giving substances for the well-being of those to whom they have already given life.

While the preparation of food is essential to life, the food most often prepared by the Delta women lacks substance and nutrition: cake. At three different points in the novel, Welty focuses upon the preparation and consumption of different cakes. She chooses the image of the cake to suggest the grain of the harvest of Persephone/Demeter, but also to imply the transience of the Fairchild women's perceived power and community. Ellen, as the Demeter/mother figure, is most often in the kitchen. Early in the novel, she prepares a coconut cake to welcome George and Robbie. Welty intersperses Ellen's thoughts with her careful description of recipe for the cake. Baking gives her the opportunity to reflect upon her love for George and her fears for the upcoming marriage of her daughter. Ellen pours her feelings into the cake along with the eggs, milk, and rosewater. When Ellen wonders, "Was the cake going to turn out all right? She was always nervous about her cakes" (27), the reader understands that Ellen is not worried about the cake itself, but about what it represents. The white coconut cake symbolizes the sweetness of Ellen's love for George and her motherly concern for her virgin daughter; yet, Ellen's care for those she loves can no more protect them from the outside world than the cake can ward off hunger.

A second cake prepared by another mythical figure shapes the middle section of the book. Parthenia, the Fairchild's black cook, is physically reminiscent of Hecate: "She was exactly as she had always looked, taller than a man, flat, and narrow, the color of midnight-blue ink" (128). Like Demeter, she is a nurse and a provider of food, but Parthenia's food is linked to superstition and black-magic. Without being told, she "knows" of the uproar at Shellmound over Robbie's abandonment of George and fixes a magic patticake/love potion which guarantees one's lost love to return: "'Dis little patticake. . .got a little white dove blood in it, dove heart, blood of a snake. . .'" (131). Here, Eudora Welty captures the sound of black, southern speech while creating an immediate link between the cake and the powers of the underworld, governed by Pluto/Dis. Although intended for George, Parthenia's patticake is sampled by Troy, then Robbie, and finally Pinchy. Troy seems to understand the cake's relationship to love and sexuality. He gives it to Robbie, saying, "'You're a married woman. Taste this'" (149). Each of the three who taste the patticake experience [re]union; Troy marries Dabney, Robbie comes back to George, and Pinchy "comes through." Both the white coconut cake and the black patticake suggest feminine power through food. Unlike the coconut cake, however, the patticake represents a dark,

unleashed feminine strength which is associated with sexuality.²

The Fairchild women attempt to create a cake which can encompass sexuality and fertility within the socially-proscribed bounds of marriage. Ellen orders a white cake for Dabney and Troy's wedding. In vivid contrast to Parthenia's patticake, this cake, "like the petals of a flower. . .was the tall white thing, shining before God in the light of day" (200). The Fairchild women praise the beauty of the cake, as much as they rave about the beauty of Dabney in her white dress. Both are pure, yet superficial; as Welty interjects, "Only God knew if it was digestible" (200). Inside this cake, there are tokens of fertility and barrenness: the ring and the thimble. When contrasted with the patticake, which contains dove's blood and snake's blood to manipulate goodness and evil, the bride's cake becomes hollow and delusive. Again, the Fairchild women have attempted to use ritual and community to give them autonomy; their rejection of the natural world jeopardizes their own stability. Much like the wedding cake, the Fairchild women are living a "real fantasy" which threatens to topple like the "leaning tower of Pisa" (200). Welty's use of the cake

²For a detailed analysis of the symbolism surrounding the coconut cake and the patticake, see Lousie Westling's article, "Food, Landscape, and the Feminine in *Delta Wedding*," *Southern Quarterly* 30:2-3 (1992): 29-40.

and other food imagery in the novel connote a realization of a woman's potential for creativity and nourishment, but falls short of recognizing the sexual force which the vegetation goddesses exude.

Welty does address fertility as sexuality in the novel, but only as a mysterious possession, like virginity, which can be lost. Indeed, these women seek to return to a prelapsarian, preclassical existence where all women are maidens and men cannot conquer them. Ellen's garnet pin and Aunt Studney's sack are the two most obvious symbols of feminine sexuality. Each of these physical manifestations of female sexuality is lost; Ellen loses her pin in the woods and Laura plans to steal the sack. "Like a rose" (177), the pin is discovered by Laura in the grass near Marmion, a house whose mystery and architecture allude to that of the female body (Leonard 112). Here in Marmion, Laura learns the secret of Aunt Studney's sack: "'that's where Mama gets all her babies'" (173). On the brink of sexual discovery, Laura accompanies Roy on a boatripe on the Yazoo River, a journey which she confesses she has never before taken. Roy, with a stereotypical masculine reaction to inexperience, throws Laura into the river. This baptism, like Persephone's journey to the underworld, symbolizes Laura's first steps into the masculine-feminine conflict of sexual power: "As though Aunt Studney's sack had opened

after all, like a whale's mouth, Laura opening her eyes head down saw its [the Yazoo's] insides all around her--dark water and fearful fishes" (178). The result of Laura's fall foretells the end of Welty's story and the Persephone myth. After kicking her, Roy pulls Laura from the river. Although apparently unhurt, Laura, like the maiden Persephone, loses her garnet pin, her innocence.

Having faced the sexual world, Laura/Persephone chooses a spring-like existence with the Fairchilds. She rejects her inheritance of Marmion, her personal underworld which will provide her with a balance of good and evil, knowledge and mystery, fertility and sexuality. This choice undermines the Demeter/Zeus compromise which ensures a cyclical balance in nature and a spiritual and sexual wholeness for Persephone. The final settings in the novel--Ellen's garden and the country picnic--allude to the preclassical, Elysian life which Welty promotes for her female characters. Unable to create a strong feminine community or to challenge the patriarchal code of their society, these women can only dream of returning to a life before the fall. Welty's use of flowers to symbolize new life and the night to represent the finitude in the final pages of *Delta Wedding* serve as precursors to the rebirth of a feminized world which she creates in *The Optimist's Daughter*. For Welty, as well as Diarmuid Russell, the

garden offers a "curious melting of the personality into nature," much like the dissolution of self into the larger, mythological world (Kreyling 79).

Drawing on the concluding garden scenes in *Delta Wedding*, Eudora Welty utilizes flower imagery in *The Optimist's Daughter* to associate her three main characters with the fertile land of Demeter and a growing, flourishing, feminine psyche. Laurel's wasteland of isolation sharply contrasts the blooming spring landscape. The profusion of flowers throughout the book immediately suggests the Persephone/Demeter myth. After the death of Judge Clinton McKelva, Laurel returns to Mt. Salus and is greeted by the Garden Club and her bridesmaids. The women "picked their flowers and they brought 'em"; "the whole house was filled with flowers" (53; 59). The image here of a society of women devoted to flowers, many still called "maids," evokes the images of May Day celebrations and priestesses of the spring. These women, in bringing their flowers to Laurel's house for a funeral ritual, again connote celebrants bringing gifts in homage to a goddess at her temple. Ruth Weston, focusing on the ritual itself and not the flowers/gifts, envisions the women as a classical "Chorus of mourners" (78). Feminine strength and unity become "the more subtle but related transformational power over nature" (Weston 85). This intimate Garden Club, much like a

religious sect, rallies around Laurel and tries to soothe her with a private language, the language of flowers.

Under careful examination, the flowers included in the book specifically allude to the Persephone/Demeter myth and the characters' primary role in the Vegetation Trinity. Of all the flowers given to Laurel by the Garden Club, the only variety specifically named are the Silver Bell daffodils. These daffodils are what Laurel first notices when she returns home: "long streamers of them reaching down the yard, hundreds of small, white trumpets" (51). Among the prunus, crab, jasmine, and narcissus in the house preceding the funeral, Miss Adele Courtland gives Laurel "a double-handful of daffodils, the nodding gray-white kind with the square cup" (59-60). As Adele explains, these Silver Bells were originally grown by Becky and then given to her. The daffodil, because it is a member of the narcissus family, is a symbol of the Persephone/Demeter myth. While Persephone picked a narcissus, grown by Demeter for the pleasure of Zeus, she was taken by Pluto. The color of the flower is also important. Persephone's narcissus was white, as are the Silver Bells, symbolic of virginity and a matriarchal society where women are pure and innocent (Sartiliot 130). Becky's Silver Bells become a very complex symbol. They are appropriate for a funeral because they are linked to loss. They also connect Becky and Laurel to the Persephone/Demeter

myth. Like Demeter, Becky has grown the narcissus. Laurel, as the recipient of the flowers, becomes Persephone holding the fateful flower and awaiting a journey into the underworld. Laurel does undergo this journey as she returns to the past through her memories of her dead mother.

Fay is also indirectly associated with the daffodil/narcissus. After the funeral, Laurel sees the Chisom children on the back of the truck "with their hands full. They had picked the Silver Bells" (88). Like her young relatives, Fay is senseless to the feelings of other people. This selfishness recalls the myth of Narcissus, a young man who was so infatuated with himself the gods changed him into a narcissus flower (Murray 155). Fay's self-involvement, even at her husband's death, is particularly striking. "'You picked my birthday to do it on!'" Fay shrieks when she learns of Clinton McKelva's death (41). Laurel, hearing the nurse's account of Fay's abuse of Clinton only minutes before his death, believes that Fay was instrumental in causing the death (130-132). The daffodil/narcissus, like Fay, represents egotism and death. Fay thereupon begins to assume her role as Hecate, goddess of the harvest, a harbinger of winter and death.³

³ Naoko Thornton offers an excellent analysis of Fay as another mythological symbol of death: Medusa. See "Medusa-Perseus Symbolism in The Optimist's Daughter." The Southern Quarterly 23 (1985): 64-76.

Although Fay resembles Hecate, a selfish, childish bringer of death and chaos, she also is associated with aspects of fertility which indicate her relationship to the vegetation trinity and reveal Welty's changing attitude towards a woman's sexual nature. While in New Orleans, Fay receives favors from the floats. She parades before Clinton wearing these gifts: green earrings and green stiletto heels. Green, the color most associated with spring and life, may seem incongruous when connected to Fay. Although she brings death (to Clinton), pain (to Laurel), and chaos (to Clinton's funeral), she associates herself with life. When Laurel asks Fay why she shook Clinton, Fay replies, "'I was going to make him live if I had to drag him. . .I was being a wife to him. . .Have you clean forgotten by this time what being a wife is?'" (175). The selfish pleasure Fay derives simply from living is reflected in her insistence to go to the Carnival and to rouse Clinton back to life. Her catty remark to Laurel about being a wife reinforces Fay's role as a sexual being. From the flashy red nailpolish to the redecorated peach satin bedroom, Fay asserts her sexuality and her femininity. She becomes "an inver[sion] of the cultural code of female/male sexual roles. She is the presence, the penetrating aggressor, the fullness of sexual expression" (Weston 84). Because sexuality is associated with fertility, Fay becomes an

integral part of the Vegetation Trinity. Welty's intricate use of allusion and symbolism reveals the doubling, Janus-like characteristic in even a very shallow woman like Fay.

Another recurring flower signifies the women's relation to the myth and to each other. Becky's climber, the rose she planted near their house, "opened its first translucent flowers of the true rose color" at the very beginning of spring (114). As a precursor to spring, the rose is generally associated with Persephone and also with love (de Vries 391). Also, the rose is reminiscent of Ellen Fairchild's rose-shaped garnet pin; both symbolize feminine sexuality and bind characters together. Because Clinton was pruning Becky's rose when he first noted that his eyesight was slipping, Fay blames the rose for causing his increasing blindness. Clinton's punctual care for the roses on the "time-honored day for pruning roses" suggests that the roses provide a resurgence of Becky's memory much like Persephone's return in the springtime (6). As if Fay is aware of the rose's significance of Becky's love and her recurring presence through the blooms, she has an intense hatred for the flower. Refusing to believe that Clinton has a slipped retina, Fay cries, "'Just for a scratch? Why didn't those old roses go on and die?'" (7). In their relationship to the rose, Becky and Fay become opposing forces: one nurtures living things, one destroys them.

The two, through their rivalry for Clinton, are linked in the mind of Laurel.

Laurel's relation to Becky's rose also reinforces the myth and helps her to reconcile the past and the present. After the funeral, the women of Mt. Salus remain with Laurel and recall their memories of Clinton and Becky. As the conversation floats around her, Laurel weeds an iris bed and is caught up in thoughts of her mother. Digging in the earth, tending the iris, (again a narcissus plant), and mourning the loss of Becky, Laurel becomes a Demeter figure. However, unlike Demeter, she does not disassociate herself from living plants when confronted with grief; nevertheless, she is isolated from living people. As Mrs. Chisom remarks to Laurel, "'Not a soul to call on, that's you.'" Although Laurel is "surrounded by her oldest friends" (69) throughout the novel, she remains a detached character because her thoughts remain in the past. It is Becky's rose that helps Laurel begin to see the futility of living in the past. When Miss Tennyson tries to tempt Laurel to stay in Mt. Salus, with the idea that she can see Becky's rose bloom, Laurel replies, "'I can imagine it.' 'But you can't smell it,' Miss Tennyson argued" (113-114). As Laurel focuses on the hundred year-old rose bush, she remembers her mother's optimism towards gardening: "If it didn't bloom this year, it would next" (114). Then, Laurel is able to make a

connection between the past and the present: "Memory returned like spring. . . [it] had the character of spring. In some cases, it was the old wood that did the blooming" (115). Laurel's ability to compromise the worlds of the living and the dead through memory resembles Demeter's compromise with Zeus for Persephone. Laurel will never fully regain her mother, but through memory, like spring, Becky/Persephone will return.

Eudora Welty's novels of Southern women and ritual reveal her desire to convey a woman's world and to imbue it with a prelapsarian power of feminine self-knowledge. To create this world, Welty draws upon the mythological signifiers of Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate. What begins in *Delta Wedding* as a search to reaffirm the existence of a world spirit which she saw denied with the onset of World War II (Kreyling 81), concludes in *The Optimist's Daughter* as a triumphant rebirth of the feminine spirit. Laurel, unlike her predecessor Laura McRaven, is no longer confined by a patriarchal system of self-definition; she is able to move freely between the boundaries of time and place and assume control of her own destiny. Writing about Virginia Woolf around the same time as she wrote *Delta Wedding*, Welty says, "the identification between characters examined and the writer examining seems fluid, electric, passing back and forth" (Kreyling 109). This apparent connection between

character, author, and reader also occurs in *Delta Wedding*, but achieves an ideal through the amalgamation of characters, myth, and imagery in her final novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*. Again writing about Woolf, Welty praises a "new" form of plot:

A journey of unspecified purposes, in a moving vehicle with panoramas flying and fading without, changing and merging features of person, landscapes, character, color, motion, in place and time, hope and despair [seeming] to seek at the very source the attraction and the repulsion in each moment of being. . . (Kreyling 110).

Welty writes so knowingly of Woolf's work because she herself implements this same plot-journey in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Through her use of the Vegetation Trinity, one writer's journey becomes the universal journey of womankind, a quest for self-knowledge and self-expression which Laurel McKelva Hand glimpses and attempts to grasp in the "twinkling of their hands, the many small and unknown hands, wishing her goodbye" (180). Like the author, the Laura/Laurel persona has reached the destination of self-awareness, but has not yet completed her journey.

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