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# 1. Introduction

“The more that I read and think about the work of the Southern writers, the more convinced I am that it is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of the relationship with the Southern community.”

– Louis D. Rubin (47)

The South of the United States as a region is unique in several aspects – in regards to its history, for instance, which continues to cast its shadow on the present, and in terms of its literary output. The body of writers the South has produced is unparalleled in the U.S. (Holman 1). Additionally, the South is “more distinctively a region than any other section of the United States” (87). For centuries the Southern states have brought forth great storytellers, many of them award-winning, without whom the canon of U.S. fiction cannot be imagined. Various male writers such as William Faulkner, Walker Percy, Mark Twain, and Erskine Caldwell might be among the first Southern authors who come to mind. Even though female authors were in fact an integral part of the Southern Renaissance, as well as in the periods before and after – including such notable authors as Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor – the canonization processes in the 1920s and onward “have created a literary map that privileges certain texts and themes and undervalues the contributions of minority and female writers” (Manning 2).

Nevertheless, in absolute numbers Southern women writers have been in the majority compared to their male counterparts since the Second World War (Bennett 987). With the socio-cultural changes brought on by the war, the situation of women writers improved gradually. Because of the rise in population and increasing urbanization, female authors were “no longer [...] isolated by rural living” and could rely on “[a] new unity and support system among women writers” (988). For a woman writer at the time, these developments meant that her voice was finally acknowledged in the public sphere: “Voice identifies, empowers, and legitimizes lives that have been seen traditionally – in both a literary and a social sense – as marginal” (990). The three Southern women writers and their works which are analyzed in this thesis exemplify the substantial contribution female authors have made to the South’s literary canon: *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956) by Elizabeth Spencer, *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1972) by Eudora Welty, and *Oral History* (1983) by Lee Smith.

The works selected present ensembles of characters constituting small-knit communities that shape their respective narratives. Community – in a socio-scientific sense – may be defined by several characteristics that are shared by its members, such as their place of residence, social class, religious beliefs or ethnic affiliation; shared activities, both professional as well as recreational; collective action in order to achieve political or communal goals; a shared identity that creates a feeling of belonging; an emotional component leading to a feeling of loyalty towards the community (Fulcher and Scott 496-97). In the Southern literary canon, community is generally viewed as a major theme. According to Louis Rubin, the importance of community stems from the emphasis on the sense of place in Southern fiction:

Now all novels are set in a place; as the saying goes, everybody's got to be somewhere. But what makes the oft-remarked Sense of Place in Southern fiction so important is the vividness, the ferocity even, with which it implies social and community attitudes. This is because the writer's own experience of a place has involved those attitudes so pervasively that for the writer to evoke the place is to confront the community's values. (33)

Rubin views community as a crucial aspect of Southern fiction which has a powerful influence on the individual writer's perspective: "Add the Southern community as catalyst to a writer's imagination, and in one way or another almost everything in the writer's fiction is affected, rearranged, changed" (35). Similarly, Ben Forkner argues that "the notion of a complete community underlies almost all modern Southern writing" (2). Aside from various historical and social aspects, what is truly unique to the South and integral to its literature is the Southern vernacular, because, according to Forkner, "language is a powerful force of community identity" (3), and the South's "rich oral tradition" (11-12) including music and storytelling affects Southern writers' perspectives and consequently the literature they produce. Barbara Ladd has assessed that community is not only a major theme in Southern literature as such, but also literary studies continue to mainly focus on "the social categories (family, community, place)" (1629) of Southern fiction.

Proceeding from the assumption that community is a central part of Southern culture and thus of the literature its authors have brought forth, this thesis analyzes the presentation of community in three novels by Elizabeth Spencer, Eudora Welty and Lee Smith. More precisely, this thesis focuses on the ways in which each community's dynamics function, how each community is characterized, how the characters presented fit into their respective community, and which common themes are shared by the novels selected.

In this thesis, each work will be analyzed in a separate chapter, beginning with a brief biography of the respective author as well as the setting of her novel and its meaning to the community presented. Furthermore, each chapter will present the respective novel's main characters and contextualize their role within the narrative. The main section of each chapter will consist of an analysis of the presentation of community in the novels selected, focusing on several main themes which represent and characterize the community. Finally, the conclusion will compare and evaluate the findings of the preceding chapters, and outline objectives of further research that might be undertaken in the future in order to expand on the hypotheses presented in this thesis.

## 2. Elizabeth Spencer: *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956)

At the center of Elizabeth Spencer's novel *The Voice at the Back Door* resides a community's difficult relationship with its troubled past and present. Spencer explores in her novel what Paul Binding calls "specific Southern issues or situations" (23). Thirty years before the time the novel is set, a racist massacre was carried out at the courthouse of the fictional town of Lacey, Mississippi, in which twelve African Americans were shot by a mob of white men. The incident is not only a tragic aspect of the town's history, and one that seems to be present constantly in the communal memory – it is an event that both unites and divides the community. As such, the novel is representative of Southern culture and history, and can be viewed as exemplary for the South's societal issues.

Told partly via a focalizer – Lacey-native and interim sheriff Duncan Harper – this story presents the complex relationship of a diverse community with its violent history. The novel's focus is on the community, as Terry Roberts has stated (4). While Spencer was concerned with community already in her earlier novels, it is most evident in her novel *The Voice at the Back Door*, in which an ensemble of four main characters displays "a fascinating self-consciousness. With this group of characters Spencer studies in depth the sort of painful definition of communal context that the characters in her more conventional southern novels undergo" (Roberts 4).

The novel's title refers to the sequence which initiates the plot. Beck Dozer, an African American citizen of Lacey, approaches Duncan Harper for help one night, and as Southern customs dictated in the 1950s, when the novel is set, he may enter the house only through the back door (Spencer 90). Beck approaches Duncan because he correctly assumes that Duncan is a supporter of equal rights for the black community, and will protect Beck from a potential lynching.

Born and raised in Lacey, Duncan chose to remain there despite the chance of pursuing a football career – a fact that is still viewed by the community as one of his most defining aspects, as is his former relationship to Marcia Mae Hunt, daughter of an influential Lacey family. Instead of leaving Lacey, Duncan stayed behind and eventually inherited his father's store, which illustrates precisely how committed he is to his hometown. However, when the civil rights discussion finally brings to light the community's differences, Duncan realizes that his home "is now no longer a space of stability, but of disturbing uncertainty, and this awareness guides Duncan as much as his simple desire to 'do what's right'" (Seltzer 72).

Elizabeth Spencer wrote the novel while living in Italy, and published it in 1956. According to an interview conducted by Elizabeth P. Broadwell and Ronald W. Hoag, Spencer views her relocation to Italy as a crucial influence, stating also that “the distancing helped [her] to sharpen the southern dialect in the book” (61). Spencer’s writing is specifically praised by Terry Roberts, who argues that the novel’s “intricate characterization, pared-down style, and suspenseful plot all suggest Spencer’s growing ability. Appearing as it did near the beginning of the civil rights movement, its topical treatment of southern race relations drew a large audience, and critics responded with universal approval” (35). In comparison to Spencer’s first two novels set in Mississippi, *Fire in the Morning* (1948) and *This Crooked Way* (1952), which according to Catherine Seltzer “demonstrate a strict adherence to traditional southern values and the Renaissance aesthetic,” *The Voice at the Back Door* displays more diversity (63).

This diversity is expressed in the characters who constitute the community, specifically where the civil rights issue is concerned. While some citizens, such as Duncan and his wife Tinker, firmly believe in the importance of equal rights for the black population of Lacey, others oppose the idea and even resort to violence in order to protect what they define as traditional Southern values. However, some characters are more conflicted in their opinion on the civil rights issue. Jimmy Tallant, an ambivalent character throughout, struggles to embrace the cause until Duncan Harper dies in a car accident protecting Beck Dozer towards the end of the novel (Spencer 342). Another ambivalent character, Kerney Woolbright – Duncan’s friend and a campaigner for the state senate – continues wavering between supporting and objecting equal rights. It appears that his opinion on the issue depends on whether it will help or hurt his public image, and therefore his candidacy (301).

## **2.1 Biography of Elizabeth Spencer**

Elizabeth Spencer was born on July 19, 1921, in Carrollton, Mississippi. After graduating from high school as the valedictorian of her class in 1938, Spencer attended Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi, for four years, where she was very active in the college’s literary society, and in her function as the society’s president also met Eudora Welty. After graduating from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, Spencer began teaching English in 1943 at Northwest Junior College in Senatobia, Mississippi, and at Ward-Belmont in Nashville, all

the while working on her writing on the side. Dissatisfied with her profession as a teacher, Spencer accepted a position with the *Nashville Tennessean* in 1945, and attended a short-story writing course at Watkins Institute in the evenings (Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* 1-9).

Briefly afterwards, Spencer left the *Tennessean* in order to focus on her writing full-time. In 1948, her first novel, *Fire In The Morning*, was published and received favorable reviews. Later that year Spencer accepted a teaching position with the University of Mississippi and began writing her second novel, *This Crooked Way*, which was published in 1952. One year later, Spencer resigned from teaching at the University of Mississippi and received a Guggenheim Fellowship which enabled her to leave for Italy. The distance from her family and the American South triggered her questioning Southern values and the life she had known (Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* 9-11). Spencer processed the resulting shift in perspective in her novel *The Voice at the Back Door*, as will be illustrated below. Although her changing view of the South was beneficial for the production of her novel, it did come with repercussions, as has been observed by G  rald Pr  her:

Spencer’s loyalty to her native region was questioned when she returned from Italy, and her fellow Southerners’ reaction to her novel somehow forced her out of the South [...]. She found herself in a predicament similar to the one Harper Duncan experiences in [*The Voice at the Back Door*] for, like him, she suddenly became an outcast. The situation is ironic since Spencer’s goal was to be true to her region, something she thought she could achieve by writing from a distance. (par. 4)

Elizabeth Spencer spent her first year in Italy – during which she also met William Faulkner – mainly in Rome while also traveling to Florence and other parts of the country. During her sojourn in Italy Spencer also met her later husband, John Rusher, whom she married in 1956. Her novel *The Voice at the Back Door* was published in the same year, marking “a kind of final leave-taking of Mississippi” (Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* 11). The couple moved to Montreal, Canada, in 1958 as a compromise because Rusher, originally from England, did not want to relocate to the United States, while Spencer refused to permanently reside in Europe. Nevertheless, Spencer visited her family and friends frequently in the American South throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This was also the period during which Spencer’s major work was produced and published – some with content inspired by her time spent in Europe – such as the novella *Knights and Dragons* (1965), the novels *No Place for an Angel* (1967) and *The Snare* (1972), and the story collections *Ship Island and Other Stories* (1968) and *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* (1981). Subsequently, Spencer returned to the Southern theme in her novel *The Salt Line* (1984). Elizabeth Spencer died in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on December 22, 2019 (McFadden par. 1)

## 2.2 Setting

The novel is set in the town of Lacey in Winfield county, a fictional region in Mississippi, with a close-knit community whose members know each other and their family histories well. To the ensemble of characters presented this small-town setting holds different – often quite contrasting – meanings, depending on their individual biography. One of Lacey’s most loyal and proud citizens is the novel’s protagonist Duncan Harper. Born and raised in Lacey, he used to be a successful college football player and was engaged to Marcia Mae Hunt, the elder daughter of the influential Hunt family (Spencer 11). When Marcia Mae suggested he elope with her out of the South he refused and instead assumed responsibility for his father’s store. Marcia Mae ended their engagement and left Lacey, while Duncan married and raised a family with fellow Lacey citizen Louise “Tinker” Taylor. Thus Duncan established an even closer connection to his hometown than had already been the case. The inheritance of his father’s grocery store, located in the center of town, further strengthened Duncan’s commitment to Lacey.

At the beginning of the novel, Duncan is on the brink of becoming sheriff, thus accepting even more responsibility for his hometown, which further illustrates how his entire biography reflects a strong loyalty to Lacey. The community almost idealizes him, specifically the memory of his college football career (9-10), unaware that Duncan actually hates football and “never wanted to play” (303). Furthermore, the community values the fact that Duncan operates his father’s store which is important to Lacey’s local supply, and thus upholds one of the town’s traditions. As Duncan himself mentions early in the narrative, “[t]here’s always been a Harper on the town square” (11), expressing either that the grocery store has been in the family for generations, or the Harpers traditionally are business owners, and therefore an important part of the town’s infrastructure.

Duncan’s former fiancée, Marcia Mae Hunt, has a diametrically opposed relationship with her hometown. Marcia Mae moved away from Lacey and is only visiting when the narrative begins (22). Ever since leaving Lacey, Marcia Mae has striven for freedom, and a close-knit community like Lacey’s in her opinion cannot co-exist with that concept. Contrary to Duncan, who occasionally finds himself defending Lacey and his close connection to it (11), Marcia Mae appears to refuse to find any positive aspect about living in a small town. She often expresses her opinion on the community’s closeness, which she views negatively. Recalling with Duncan the time before she left, she explains, “[w]e couldn’t stay in the South

and be free. In the South it's nothing but family, family. We couldn't breathe even, until we left" (194). Only in the middle of the narrative it is revealed that her aversion is closely related to, if not entirely rooted in her brother Everett's death. Although he died from bronchial pneumonia, Marcia Mae is convinced that his illness was a result of her family's and the community's rejection of him, due to his homosexuality (192). Therefore, Marcia Mae views Everett's death as proof of the faults she finds with close-knit Southern communities such as Lacey.

The setting of *The Voice at the Back Door* often carries meaning that is rooted in the past. A racist incident continues to haunt the community even thirty years after it occurred: the murder of twelve African Americans by a mob of white men. Three of the characters' ancestors played crucial roles in this tragic event: The father of Jimmy Tallant led the mob (71), Beck Dozer's father led the group of black men and was among the victims (88), and Judge Standsbury – Marcia Mae's grandfather – might have prevented the entire incident, had he arrived at the courthouse in due time (317). As a result of this personal involvement, the courthouse shooting is ever present in the communal memory.

## 2.3 Characters

Elizabeth Spencer's novel presents a large ensemble of characters who express their often diverging opinions on how the community ought to develop in the future. This comes at a time of critical societal development – at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement. In his analysis of Spencer's novel, Thomas F. Haddox has even referred to it as "one of the best-known white civil rights novels" (568).

Even though Elizabeth Spencer predominantly portrays the white residents of Lacey, a few African American characters are featured at critical points in the narrative, the most vocal character being Beck Dozer. He is deeply entangled with the history of Lacey, and specifically with the character of Jimmy Tallant. Their relation is unique within the community. Not only was Beck's father one of the black men who were shot by Jimmy's father at the courthouse (Spencer 71, 88); but both Beck and Jimmy fought in the Second World War and met each other during a bomb raid – a chance encounter that cemented their relationship. Jimmy was telling his fellow soldiers about his father's deed at the courthouse massacre when suddenly Beck came forward to confirm the story (73). The next time they



saw each other “was on the Lacey square and the war was over. But [Beck] remembered and [Jimmy] did too” (74).

Among the main characters in *The Voice at the Back Door* is an outsider, more specifically: a returnee. She is embodied by the character of Marcia Mae Hunt – elder daughter of James and Nan Hunt. Ten years after having left Lacey in an attempt to escape the confining qualities of the community and Southern culture as a whole, she visits her hometown, and rekindles her former relationship with Duncan Harper (121, 186). As Terry Roberts has commented, “Marcia Mae realizes more clearly than any other character in the novel how strictly the small southern town governs the actions of its citizens” (43). When Marcia and Duncan discuss their affair, Marcia Mae remarks that although she does not feel guilty about it she senses “that other people are trying to make [her] say [she is] wrong whether [she] think[s] so or not” (187) to which Duncan replies that “[i]t might be a little hard to convince anybody, sure enough, that the only thing between [them] was conversation” (187), angering Marcia Mae, yet she finally cannot but admit that “what he said was true” (187). The restrictive qualities of the community she had already felt to be true when she was younger, she now reconfirms in her role as an outsider. This shift in perspective was created by a decade of absence and the resulting emotional distance to her hometown and its close-knit community – quite similar to Elizabeth Spencer herself. Her temporary relocation to Italy (Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* 9-11) helped her gain perspective on her home country. According to Spencer, during her sojourn in Italy she “began to listen to these inner voices, to people saying things that [she] had accepted all [her] life without question; and suddenly [she] found [herself] questioning. [She] realized for the first time how outrageous these things were” (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 61-62).

In his essay “Telling About Southern Fluctuations” Gérald Préher suggests that similar to Spencer herself, Duncan becomes an outsider as well (par. 4). From the community’s point of view, Préher argues, Harper’s liberal thinking is reprehensible. Some among the community even go so far as to stage an incident that they hope will bring Duncan into disrepute (par. 10-12). Nevertheless, he cannot be dissuaded from defending his views; yet, only Duncan’s death in a car accident – after rescuing Beck Dozer from a violent mob on speaking day (Spencer 335-38, 343), an all-day event where the candidates for sheriff speak and canvass – seems to herald the dawn of a new day for Lacey and a more liberal approach to equal rights, beginning with the character of Jimmy Tallant, previously a rather ambivalent figure as regards the civil rights question. Finally, then, “Harper’s crusade has helped Tallant

see the worthiness of the fight since he eventually declares: ‘I favor equal rights’” (Préher par. 20).

### **2.3.1 Duncan Harper**

Although early in the novel Duncan Harper’s relationship to Lacey seems to be straightforward, as the story progresses it turns out to be more complex. This character is firmly rooted in his hometown. Born and raised in Lacey, he owns the local grocery store which he inherited from his father (Spencer 46). Many years earlier, when he was engaged to Marcia Mae, he had the opportunity to elope with her (362). However, Duncan’s loyalty to Lacey could not be challenged. In a conversation with sheriff Travis Brevard he explains how important the family’s ties to Lacey are to him: “The fact is I decided to stay in Lacey because I wanted to. My wife likes it here, and I like it. There’s always been a Harper on the town square” (11).

Duncan’s quintessential loyalty is finally rewarded, it appears, when he is appointed interim sheriff after Travis Brevard’s sudden death (13-14). For Lacey’s young generation this is an opportunity to herald a new age, and Duncan trusts that he can use his new authority to attract support among the community for equal rights. However, as Terry Roberts has commented, this also means that Duncan finally “is forced to act on his liberal beliefs. [...] Duncan is so threatening to Lacey because he, unlike [his friend] Kerney Woolbright, is an insider, literally the town’s ‘fair-haired boy,’ whose character and personality are shaped out of his Lacey background” (38). Duncan’s liberal ideas are seen as dangerous by the community, precisely because he is part of it, which is viewed as threatening. If he were to be elected sheriff after his interim function, he would be able to change the status quo – hitherto unchallenged by the community.

Even though Duncan’s position in the community generally grants him respect – not least because he belongs to a family that has a long history in the town – his liberal views are often viewed as problematic. Furthermore, his idealism and sense of justice occasionally cloud his judgement considering which measures are reasonable in this specific community. When Beck Dozer approaches Duncan one night for protection from a potential lynching mob, he calls on Duncan’s duty as interim sheriff and proclaims: “If a Negro never takes advantage of what legal rights are open to him, he can’t hope to enjoy those that ought to be

open and ain't. You are the law, Mister Harper, I have come to you" (Spencer 93). In his effort to do the right thing, Duncan remains oblivious to the fact that the imminent lynching is a ruse, designed to expose his liberal ideas and bring him into disrepute (Préher par. 10-12).

For the character of Duncan, loyalty is a recurring theme throughout the narrative. Besides his hometown Duncan also displays allegiance towards his wife Tinker Taylor. After his engagement with Marcia Mae ended, Duncan became romantically involved with Tinker, who had been interested in him for some time – a fact that is commented on by two characters. Kerney describes Tinker as "[t]he one that chased Duncan Harper till he finally married her" (Spencer 146-47); additionally, Duncan's mother had declared, when he was still a boy, that "that girl is just crazy about [him]. That child!" (205). Although generally a committed husband, Duncan's loyalty to Tinker is challenged when Marcia Mae visits Lacey and the two have a brief affair (146). Many years after terminating their engagement, this rekindling prompts him to finally ask her a question that had preyed on his mind: "Duncan turned abruptly to her from the window, demanding, 'Why did you leave me? *Why?*' There was finality in his voice, this time he would have to know" (189; emphasis in original). Thus, the rekindling of the relationship serves as a means of reconciliation for Duncan. When Marcia Mae, regardless, asks him again to elope with her, Duncan refuses one final time: "He faced it now, admitting that what they had had was over; that they had reached the end of what they had to tell" (202). Eventually, Duncan concludes that "[h]e wanted, positively now, to go home to his wife and children. Duncan Harper was a citizen of Lacey, that was it. Just answering a question about love could not alter this fact. Just saying 'Come away' could not change it. It was his strongest and final quality" (205). Thus, the definitive break with Marcia Mae proves Duncan's loyalty to Lacey and his wife Tinker once and for all.

### **2.3.2 Jimmy Tallant**

One of the most complex characters in *The Voice at the Back Door* is Jimmy Tallant, a bootlegger at the roadhouse of his father-in-law, Bud Grantham (Spencer 67). Terry Roberts has described Jimmy as "Spencer's first great achievement in characterization. Full of complexities, he is seemingly immoral yet deeply romantic, laconic while at the same time flippantly cynical, witty, tough, loyal, and, ultimately, self-destructive" (40).

Jimmy is married to Bud's daughter Bella – a relationship that is primarily based on commercial interest. Bud coerces Jimmy to marry his pregnant daughter, so that she does not give birth to an illegitimate child (Spencer 70-71). When he threatens to cut Jimmy out of business (45, 70), the latter agrees to the marriage. Despite these questionable circumstances, the new family ties open doors for Jimmy, who as Bud's son-in-law becomes "kin to half the county" (21).

Aside from his family by marriage, Jimmy Tallant is also closely connected to the town's history. Thirty years earlier it was his father leading the mob who murdered twelve black men at Lacey's courthouse. Therefore, Jimmy remains inextricably linked to the character of Beck Dozer, whose father was among the victims of the massacre. Although Jimmy does not condone his father's actions, he is bothered by the community's hypocrisy: "He had a scorn for the good families in Lacey because he figured his father had done their dirty work for them once, and then they had turned on him. The Tallants had had a most uncertain status since – or was it all settled and nobody had thought to tell him? Jimmy didn't know" (71). Even decades later, the incident is ever present in Jimmy's life, and he states that "[he] had grown up in the shadow of what his father had done" (165). These circumstances also complicate Jimmy's relationship with Duncan, whom he "scorns [...], not because he married [Tinker,] the woman Tallant loved, but because of Duncan's simplemindedness, his inability to recognize evil. For Tallant is profoundly aware of the human potential for evil as a result of his inherited guilt from the massacre" (Roberts 40). This awareness on Jimmy's part causes him to sabotage Duncan's candidacy. Jimmy is convinced that any candidate for public office who concerns himself with equal rights will be defeated in any election, and he therefore decides to scheme to have Duncan's political beliefs made public (Spencer 84). Thereupon, Jimmy is shot and wounded by an unidentified person, whom the community suspects to be Beck Dozer, who decides to disappear (170-71). This incident becomes another reason for conflict between Jimmy and Duncan: For weeks, Jimmy refuses to clarify that Beck was not his assailant, until he proposes to Duncan that he will at least clear Beck's name, even if he does not know his whereabouts (265). Doing so would suggest that Jimmy actively supports Duncan's run for office. However, Duncan refuses this olive branch and confronts Jimmy about his sudden change of heart: "You needn't think you can jump on the band wagon and good as say to everybody, Look what I did! [...] You've had your chance. You've got less sense of public good than any man I ever saw" (266). The rivalry between the two ends only when Duncan dies in a car crash on speaking day – a sudden incident that appears to leave Jimmy resigned and in shock:

He was apt to trail off into thinking now, and his thinking always went this way: Why me? It did not seem possible. If life was blind, how could it suddenly wish him well? Why had not he died in a field in the wood, shot by accident, with Tinker bending over him to help him, instead of Duncan, smashed out of life in a car wrecked by accident, with Marcia Mae covering the sight of him until they pulled her away, and bright blood clung in her hair? And Duncan, the poor bastard, at least was trying to do good; while he, Jimmy Tallant, had never been known to try to do anything good. (347)

Nevertheless, Jimmy presents himself unexpectedly outspoken about the equal rights issue after Duncan's death, when a few Lacey citizens approach him to suggest that he run for sheriff. Although he refuses, Jimmy proclaims with particular emphasis that he endorses equal rights (343-44), and one specific action adds credence to his statement. Jimmy offers to take Beck, who was injured in the car accident that killed Duncan, to see a doctor, and announces: "If anybody tries to stop him they've got to stop me first. I'd like to get it straight right now that whoever shot me it certainly wasn't Beck, and it's time everybody stopped making out that it was" (342). By finally clearing Beck's name, Jimmy aligns himself with the black community of Lacey and equal rights generally.

### **2.3.3 Kerney Woolbright**

One of the characters closest to Duncan is Kerney Woolbright – an outsider character who is not defined by his outsider status. Kerney has been accepted into the community for some time and serves as a poster child for Lacey. The 25-year-old Yale law graduate and aspiring politician is engaged to Cissy Hunt, the younger sister of Marcia Mae and member of the influential Hunt family (Spencer 21-23, 217). Although the narrative does not reveal where Kerney originally comes from, it is clear that he was not "born and raised in Winfield County" (133), or even "brought up in Lacey" (42). His close relation to the community, and the Hunts specifically, he owes to his friend Duncan, who reminds him of this fact when Kerney tries calling in a favor. According to Duncan, Kerney "wouldn't know a lot of people around here as well as [he does] if it hadn't been for [Duncan]" (133). Kerney has been able to establish a close bond to the community, who – despite the fact that he is not native to the region – calls him "Lacey's only gift to the Yale law school in twenty years" (21), thus displaying a sense of pride.

Undoubtedly, Kerney is ambitious, and a "born politician" (290). His connection to the Hunt household – he is involved with Cissy Hunt to whom he gets engaged over the

course of the narrative – proves to be an important aspect of his professional development. James Hunt, the patriarch of the family, functions as a mentor to Kerney, of whom he correctly assumes a political career to be his life goal (217). This opinion is shared by Tinker Harper, who at one point observes that “Kerney’s not interested in a solitary thing but politics” and has even identified the reason for Kerney’s desire to be close to the Hunts, ascertaining that it is “the best family in town for him to marry into. They aren’t in politics, but they have influence” (33). While Kerney is eager to announce his engagement to Cissy, he sacrifices other interpersonal relationships, if advantageous to his career. A pivotal moment occurs on speaking day when Duncan bids for the Lacey citizens’ votes in the upcoming election to become sheriff. Earlier, the two friends had agreed that Kerney should officially support Duncan’s candidacy (133). However, when it is Kerney’s turn to speak, rather than vouch for Duncan as planned, he publicly renounces his support:

I pledge you here, from this platform, that no matter what stand the federal government of the United States – the President, the U.S. Senate, or the Supreme Court – may take on [racial segregation], I, Kerney Woolbright, will defend our Southern viewpoint, our Southern traditions, and the will of our Southern people, as long as God gives me breath. [...] Duncan Harper will not receive my vote. (300-01)

Not only does Kerney disregard the agreement he made with Duncan; his words are also hypocritical because on an earlier occasion he demonstrated shame for the South. During a conversation with Marcia Mae, Kerney shares a secret with her: “‘That’s just the trouble,’ Kerney said, ‘with this whole part of the country. Do you know,’ he chose suddenly to confide, ‘a college friend of mine, practicing in New York now, passed through yesterday and called me. I said I didn’t have time to see him. What could I say to him? What can we ever say?’” (292).

On speaking day, however, Kerney ostensibly defends Southern values and traditions, even if that means jeopardizing his friendship with Duncan, claiming “[w]here [a public servant] must fulfill a public duty, he cannot hope always to please his friends” (300) and that “friendship [...] cannot and indeed should not make a demand higher than the demands of the public good” (301). When Kerney finally declares to “publicly dissociate [his] candidacy from the candidacy of Duncan Harper” (301), the breach of trust is accomplished. Kerney in fact acts on advice he received from Jason Hunt, who had advocated for Kerney not to support Duncan on speaking day in order to protect his own candidacy. Hunt appealed to Kerney: “Duncan Harper has no business in politics. He is not only inept, he may even be dangerous.

You instead have every business to be in politics. He has no right to ruin your career, as it will be ruined, Kerney, in this race, for good” (218).

The sequence on speaking day ends in the crowd erupting into a mob, enabled by Kerney’s speech, searching for Beck Dozer – whom they believe to have shot and injured Jimmy Tallant. Thus the sequence displays two facts about Kerney’s character: Firstly, he is willing to sacrifice his friendship with Duncan – to whom he owes his close link to the community and the Hunt family – for his career; secondly, Kerney gravely underestimates the importance of “Southern traditions” to the Lacey community and the drastic measures some are willing to take in order to protect them.

### **2.3.4 Beck Dozer**

The eponymous “voice at the back door” is embodied by the character of Beckwith “Beck” Dozer. This voice, as Peggy W. Prenshaw has argued, is also “the voice of conscience that unrelentingly hails the Southern segregationist tradition” (*Elizabeth Spencer* 62). Beck is part of the African American community of Lacey and works as a foreman at the local tie plant where he oversees two employees (Spencer 4, 232). Although Beck was only four years old when his father Robinson was murdered in the courthouse, “his earliest recollection of childhood” (88), his father is his lifelong role model: “Papa never made a mess of anything. That’s how come they don’t rest easy about him till this good day” (281). Robinson Dozer was gifted an education by the senator who had owned the Dozer family as slaves, and founded a school for black children (240-47). Consequently, Beck seeks a better life as well, yet unlike his father he does so in solitude and without much regard for his peers, as he explains to Duncan: “I don’t run in pack, Mister Harper. I’m not trying to help anybody but me” (137). Despite the brutal murder of his father, Beck does not fight for the equal rights cause, but rather for himself alone. In an interview with Peggy W. Prenshaw, Elizabeth Spencer has elaborated on the ambivalence of Beck Dozer’s character:

He was ambivalent because he was entering a new era of his own culture, passing from one static set of values and behaviors into another. His reaction is a sort of culture shock, which is why he vacillates in the way he talks and acts. Beck has moments of regressing and talking like an Uncle Tom; he has moments of sounding beyond himself. He also likes to play ironically on the guilt of whites, and there's even the suggestion of a death wish associated with Beck. I see Beck's whole character emerging in this novel; in fact, his is the theme of emergence. (*Conversations* 63)

Contrary to his statement, Beck does occasionally provide his peers with advice. He suggests, for instance, that his son W.B. should marry a white woman so that their children might “cross the color line” and be born with light skin (Spencer 277), thus advising him on how to advance in a world where marginalized ethnic groups still live separated from the majority culture. On another occasion Beck rebukes Lu, a black woman he meets in prison – where he is kept in custody as protection from the Grantham clan – for what he considers unfavorable behavior. When she cries out loudly in her cell, Beck reprimands her, arguing that her conduct will confirm white people’s prejudices of black people, and convince them that “they got [her] where they want [her] for another fifty, hundred, two hundred years” (112). A conversation between Duncan and Beck reveals his reasoning: “I prefer the status quo. You can climb the status quo like a step ladder with two feet on the floor, but trying to trail along behind a white man of good will is like following along behind somebody on a tightrope” (137). Beck reprimands Lu and advises his son in this way because he believes in the superiority of the status quo. In his mind, if black people conform to the status quo and behave in a docile manner, they become able to advance in society.

Despite his convictions, he remains ambivalent, which is further demonstrated by the odd jobs Beck is hired for by Jimmy Tallant – a character he is deeply entangled with. When Jimmy plans to expose Duncan’s liberal views, Beck, too, is part of the undertaking. Under a pseudonym, he writes a letter to a Chicago newspaper praising Duncan’s efforts to protect an innocent black man – Beck himself – from a potential lynching (135). In a conversation with Duncan, Beck explains that, regardless of the often substantial payment he receives for these sorts of jobs from Jimmy, they are inevitably “tied together” (136) because of their history – the murder of Beck’s father by Jimmy’s father. Because of this incident, Jimmy is Beck’s “main protection in this life” (136), and “[t]here isn’t anything one of [them] thinks that the other one hasn’t thought too” (139), thus suggesting a close personal bond, created by a fateful event.

### **2.3.5 Marcia Mae Hunt**

Marcia Mae Hunt is a specific kind of outsider character: a returnee visiting her former community. She returns to her hometown after having lived in California for ten years (Spencer 183). Soon after a chance encounter with her former fiancé Duncan she finally



reveals the entire story of her sudden departure. Marcia Mae's intention to clear the air with Duncan is the reason why she returned to Lacey in the first place (181). Despite the fact that she is the daughter of an influential family, which might have rooted her firmly in the town's community despite her absence, she is viewed as an outsider upon her return: "Her confident Hunt voice, with the smoky tint it had always held, framed now and again a Yankee crispness on a word, reminding them of her life's distance since ten years ago" (121). To Duncan's young son Cotton she seems like "an outside lady" who speaks "in a foreign way" (325).

However, in the Hunt house her old room has remained as it always was: "All her old things were around her – the cherry furniture, the quilt her grandmother had pieced, the radio she had got for graduation, the silver dresser set they had mailed to her when she got married" (41). This marriage, which according to the community came about because "[s]he had run off and married an Irishman who everyone in town insisted was a lumberjack because he was from Montana and wore a plaid shirt" (35), was never truly accepted by her fellow citizens. They still refuse to accept that she chose to marry an outsider instead of Duncan (39). The community insists that the marriage was irrelevant because "she doesn't even go by her married name" (41). In fact, it is not Marcia Mae who insists on still being called "Hunt," but rather it is the community who refuses to call her O'Donnell and thus accept her life outside of the South: "Nobody would ever call her by her married name. She was still Marcia Mae Hunt, the girl who was Duncan Harper's girl. An image had been violated; they were left with a sense of unease" (39). Calling her "Hunt" serves the community two purposes. Firstly, it is a reminder that she belongs to the influential Hunt family, and as such is seen as an integral part of the Lacey society regardless of her own feelings toward it; secondly, it negates the marriage to her deceased husband who was neither a citizen of Lacey, nor a Southerner.

Despite her long absence, Marcia Mae remains aware of the community's code of conduct, to which she adheres. The first time she meets Duncan again is in the town square, virtually "on stage," as Terry Roberts (43) puts it. Marcia Mae knows this reunion will be witnessed and commented on by the community, and this awareness affects her behavior: "She had parked her convertible, gathered up her bag and gloves and had one foot out of the door when she saw him, and knew she could not turn back. The square seemed empty, but she knew from old experience that it was not. In Lacey, someone was always watching, and by no means could she lack courage" (Spencer 35). Thus, the sequence demonstrates that even after her long absence Marcia Mae has retained knowledge of the community's code of conduct. Although she largely complies with it, Marcia Mae displays a critical awareness of these conventions, which occasionally affects the community's behavior towards her: "[P]ractically

everybody in Lacey felt constrained around her for one reason or another; she wouldn't accept invitations, tell her life story, or remember to speak to people" (289). By withholding information and refusing to participate in their rituals, Marcia Mae rebels against the community's rules.

Regardless of her opinion of the Lacey citizens, she and they do share a historical entanglement, which further complicates her relationship with them. Judge Standsbury, Marcia Mae's grandfather, served as judge in the town when the massacre at the courthouse occurred, yet was unable to prevent it (255). Despite the Hunt family's connection to the town's history, Marcia Mae seems to have forgotten that it happened at all:

'When was that?' she asked. 'Nineteen-nineteen,' said Kerney, 'or was it twenty? Somewhere along there.' 'Oh,' she laughed. 'I thought you meant last year.' 'You've heard about it,' said Duncan, 'all your life.' 'Yes, now that you mention it. I've heard it and forgotten it because I don't care. If I don't care nobody cares. I'm no different from anybody else. Nobody our age in town could say offhand who was there or why.'" (121-22)

Her obliviousness seems odd, considering her grandfather's involvement in the situation. However, her laughter may simply be an attempt to obscure the shame about her grandfather's inability to prevent the massacre.

Marcia Mae's role as a returnee character becomes apparent one final time as she prepares to leave Lacey towards the end of the narrative: "Marcia Mae knew she would soon be going away. She would take off the house and the town and the people there, like taking off her clothes, one thing at a time, before dressing new from the skin out – new place to live, new job, and somewhere, a new man" (318). She adopted the role of a Lacey citizen once again, as well as the role of daughter and lover of Duncan, for the time of her stay among the community. However, with her departure, she prepares to slip into a new identity that fits her life outside of the South.

## **2.4 Presentation of community in *The Voice at the Back Door***

In Elizabeth Spencer's novel *The Voice at the Back Door*, a small-town community struggles with the inevitable societal advancement towards equal rights for its African American citizens, after the sudden death of its sheriff. Spencer portrays the close-knit community via an ensemble of characters with interwoven relationships. According to Terry Roberts, *The Voice at the Back Door* is Spencer's "last novel-length portrait of small-town Mississippi

life,” and is “an exploration of her own feelings about race, specifically the segregated mentality of the Deep South” (35). Through her detailed presentation of the townsfolk, Spencer concurrently achieves “a dramatic focus on individual lives and a format for her characteristic attention to community dynamics” (Roberts 36). These dynamics are often attributable to the past, which remains present in the communal memory. In this community, as Catherine Seltzer has argued, the characters “seek to define themselves in relation to their shared histories” (53). The courthouse massacre is one of these shared histories, linking two characters inextricably to one another: Jimmy Tallant and Beck Dozer, whose fathers stood on opposing sides at the time. Both continue to struggle with their individual stance on civil rights, much like the community as a whole, yet despite their ambivalence Beck is under Jimmy’s protection from threats by the community (Spencer 136).

The deceased sheriff Travis Brevard, both conservative and hypocritical, acted as a reassurance for the more conservative minds among the community that change is all but imminent. Although Brevard had a reputation for being popular with black people, who supposedly “were crazy about him” (30) and invited him to weddings and funerals, it is common knowledge that Brevard was not above using physical violence against them. On one occasion he even let a black man “bleed to death on the floor of the jail” (30-31). In reality, the members of the black community were afraid of him, but – as Kerney states – “had to pretend they were [crazy about him]” (30). After Brevard’s death, with a liberal mind such as Duncan Harper acting as interim sheriff, the community’s development towards civil rights seems inevitable, but is being sabotaged by Jimmy Tallant, with the help of Beck Dozer (84), as well as by Kerney Woolbright on speaking day (300-01). Kerney’s speech reaffirms the more conservative members of the Lacey community in their views, leading to an eruption of the febrile atmosphere and the formation of a lynching mob. As Terry Roberts has stated,

[o]n many issues, the citizens of Lacey – particularly the white citizens – think and move as one. When an angry audience at a political rally turns into a mob, Marcia Mae Hunt realizes suddenly that the crowd is one dangerous entity. Yet this scene is no more than the actualization of a potential that has existed in Lacey since the opening pages of the novel. The individuals who live in Lacey share a deep well of common history, a communal consciousness that governs most of what they do and think. Ultimately, then, all relationships in Lacey, racial or otherwise, are shaped by public opinion. (36)

The final eruption of the tensions also illustrates the town’s awareness of public opinion. Thus, while many believe that equality for black people is not feasible for the community, they at first refrain from voicing their opinion outright. As the mob forms, Duncan protects

Beck by taking him along in his car and away from the mob, with his action ultimately resulting in a car accident and Duncan's death (Spencer 335, 343). This martyrdom on Duncan's part undoubtedly is a shock to the community, though "there is little indication that the characters' sense of guilt will drive them to institute real reform" (Seltzer 79).

### **2.4.1 Civil rights, racism and the black community**

With its focus on life in a fictional small town in Mississippi in the 1950s, the key aspects in Spencer's novel are the community dynamics in relation to racism and Civil rights. As analyzed by Terry Roberts, the novel "describes perhaps the last moment in American history when race could be considered as a local rather than regional or national issue" (35-36). For the citizens of Lacey the issue of equality is immediate, and increasingly perceived to be a threat, as becomes apparent during Kerney Woolbright's speech on speaking day. What the more conservative voices in Lacey seem to fear most is a decline of the "Southern way of life" (Spencer 300), which Kerney seeks to protect in his senatorial election campaign. He acts upon the advice of his future father-in-law, Jason Hunt, who warns him that "the last thing we need to discuss openly in this county now" (42) is the question of equal rights. Consequentially, Kerney's betrayal of his friend Duncan Harper is not necessarily an act of conviction, but rather a career move.

Although Kerney was not born and raised in Winfield County (133) and studied law outside of the South, at Yale (21, 289), the community has accepted him as one of their own. Specifically the crowd listening to him on speaking day welcomes his pledge that he "will defend [the] Southern viewpoint, [the] Southern traditions, and the will of [the] Southern people" (300). In his effort to gain votes and become a senator, Kerney calls upon the community's identity as Southerners and relates to them by emphasizing that he shares this very identity and the traditions. However, his speech leads to unforeseen consequences, which only confirms his naïveté and lack of knowledge of the people whose votes he seeks. After Duncan's death, Beck addresses the issue in a conversation with Kerney, demonstrating that he is aware of Kerney's indifference toward the equal rights issue: "You use the Negro question to fetch votes with, Mister Woolbright, but to me it's a matter of whether my hide is on my back or ornamenting the barn door" (363). Beck states clearly that what serves to Kerney as a political means to gain votes is actually a matter of life and death for Beck

himself.

On speaking day, Kerney's statement about the defense of the Southern viewpoint – which he continuously refers to as “our” viewpoint, thus strengthening his identification with the community – enables some of the listeners to come together and take the law into their own hands. After his speech, Kerney is met by people who “greeted him with relief – in the tangle of everything that had been talked about Duncan and Kerney and Jimmy Tallant and Beck, they were glad to get back to something they could understand without question, the way they understood a sermon on God so loved in the world” (306). Eventually, he is approached by “three countrymen with aging boy-faces” who invite him to join them and go “hunting” (306) for Beck Dozer, whom many in Lacey suspect to have shot and wounded Jimmy Tallant two weeks earlier (300-01). Instead of speaking up, Kerney merely explains that he is unable to partake because of a previous engagement. However, he does urge them to “talk to Tallant” (306). When Duncan's absence from the speaking grounds is noticed, the question arises whether he may have reached Beck first to protect him – at first merely an assumption which is then confirmed by a call “from out in the country” (325). Upon this news, more people join the mob, and begin to get into their cars. Caught in the middle of “the stampede” is Jason Hunt, who suddenly finds himself “hopelessly trapped in the rush. Several people had jumped into his car to ride with him” (327), and he involuntarily becomes part of the manhunt.

The fact that this mob forms so quickly illustrates how the tendency for violence and the racist sentiments have been lurking below the surface for some time. In a conversation with Kerney, Marcia Mae explains that Duncan “never realized how vicious people could be and that the crowd was in a terrible mood waiting for him” (361). Aggressions were already high among the crowd on speaking day, even before Kerney entered the stage, and then erupted when he officially withdrew his support of Duncan's campaign. The situation is only resolved when a tragic car accident occurs towards the end of the narrative. Duncan dies a martyr's death, saving Beck from the mob chasing them on the road (335-38, 343).

Beck Dozer is undoubtedly the most present and vocal of the black characters in *The Voice at the Back Door*, and among the first characters to be introduced in the narrative altogether. Gérald Préher has observed that already “[t]he opening scene reveals that black voices will run like a thread through the story. [...] [T]he first characters who are introduced and whose voices are reproduced in direct speech are blacks” (par. 7). Their portrayal throughout the novel is indicative of the status of the black community that is treated with varying degrees of anger, fear and indifference. The opening sequence displays two tie plant

workers and their foreman, Beck Dozer, who sings a song about laying off laborers, worrying the other two about being dismissed. The older worker “knew by now that another Negro is the hardest kind of boss to have” (Spencer 4-5). Beck scolds them: “You [...] ain’t got good sense. Did, you’d be in line for some other kind of job. [...] [I]t’s me that cuts the big orders down to the little folks. That’s you. You don’t do nothing but grunt and sweat. And how much money do you get? Not half as much as me” (5). His manner of speaking to his subordinates suggests that Beck is a rather strict foreman and thinks poorly of them, thus feeling superior. Rather than leading by example he stays true to his principle, which he also points out to Duncan: “I don’t run in pack, Mister Harper. I’m not trying to help anybody but me” (137).

Despite trying to adhere to the status quo (137) and attempting to blend in with the mostly white community, Beck occasionally displays confident, almost bold behavior towards the white citizens, specifically towards Duncan. The interactions between the two throughout the novel reveal that despite his overall liberal views, Duncan nevertheless tends to think along prejudiced lines. After Beck’s son W.B., who is employed by Duncan, abruptly leaves the store in fear when Travis Brevard dies there, Beck approaches Duncan in order to convince him not to dismiss W.B. Duncan assures him that W.B. need not worry about his employment, yet he notices that “some assertive quality in the Negro had irritated him” (16). Although the matter at hand is resolved, the conversation between Beck and Duncan continues because Beck follows him on his way through town. Beck reveals his ulterior motive for approaching Duncan in the first place by asking him: “One sheriff dying means another sheriff coming in. I expect that means you, don’t it?” (18). Beck’s bold inquiry is unusual for a black person in Lacey – probably anywhere in the South during the time the novel is set in. When Duncan “put[s] his hands into his pockets and [goes] back on his heels a bit,” it is apparent that he feels threatened by Beck’s behavior and prepares for a physical dispute. Instead, however, Duncan simply tells him “[t]hat kind of talk’s no good [...]. On your way, boy” (19). He reveals that he does not view Beck as equal, and further demeans him by calling him “boy.” Thus, despite the fact that Duncan is liberal and in favor of equal rights, on occasion he displays feelings of superiority and prejudices against black people. As Catherine Seltzer has observed, in this sequence “Duncan adopts the rhetoric of white authority, attempting both to silence Beck and to infantilize him” (74). The sense of white authority is also present in a conversation among Duncan, Tinker, Jimmy and Kerney, about the fact that Brevard’s black mistress cannot attend his funeral. Duncan supposes that “if she did go [...] and something did happen to her, [he] bet[s] his bottom dollar that somewhere along the line she would have dared it to happen” (Spencer 28). Duncan then explains in more

detail what he means, with a generalizing statement, that black people “try to aggravate. They try to work themselves into a position where you can’t do anything but get mad, cuss them out, fire them, knock them down” (29-30).

Although throughout the narrative white and black community members come into contact with one another occasionally, it is clear that the black citizens mostly live in seclusion. After the conversation between Beck and Duncan about W.B. Beck explains that he is the son of Robinson Dozer, who was murdered in the courthouse thirty years earlier. Beck’s statement appears to impact Duncan’s initial opinion of him, and “it seemed that the world listened, that a new way of speaking was about to form in an old place” (19). The fact that Duncan was not aware of Beck’s family history is surprising, specifically because he appears well-informed about the courthouse shooting. As the town’s grocer, Duncan is in frequent contact with members of the community, and he employs Beck’s son W.B., yet he is unaware of their family history. This suggests that Duncan and Beck generally do not encounter each other, thus illustrating how disconnected white and black people are in the community. Apparently, Lacey’s black citizens keep to themselves – a community within the community. This is explored in more detail in the narrative after Travis Brevard’s death, which is mourned by his black mistress, Ida Belle. As Jimmy Tallant explains at the beginning of the narrative, if Ida Belle attended Travis’ funeral, she would likely be banished from the town: “Tallant said, ‘I know. There’d come a knock at her door before midnight. We would never know who knocked. But it would happen.’ ‘What would happen?’ Tinker asked. ‘I don’t say they’d kill her. She’d just vanish, probably.’” (27-28). Therefore, Ida Belle is left to deal with her grief differently:

On a hill just at the outskirts of town, a Negro woman was sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of her house. She was dressed in her best silk dress, the dark one she wore to church. Her hands, resting in her comfortable lap, held a handkerchief and a folded fan. She was Ida Belle, for fifteen years Travis Brevard’s Negro woman. All around her front porch and the steps, other Negroes were gathered [...]. Ida Belle would not go to the funeral, though she would dress for it as she had dressed today and would sit on the porch in the rocker. The other Negroes, all dressed too, would bank against the porch and fill the yard. (14-15).

In her time of mourning, Ida Belle wears her best clothes, and is joined by the black community who is equally well-dressed for the occasion. Aside from the ritual of mourning, the sequence points out that the house is located “at the outskirts of town,” thus emphasizing that the black community – even the mistress of the sheriff – is relegated to Lacey’s periphery.

Besides Ida Belle another character demonstrates the treatment of black people by the community. Lucy Dozer, Beck's wife, is "a black washerwoman straight out of Richard Wright" (Haddox 571-72). Throughout the novel Lucy is submissive and fearful, unlike Beck who occasionally displays boldness and is outspoken. Lucy, however, has been subjected to negative experiences, particularly with white men. When she babysits Jimmy and Bella's baby son at the Granthams' house, deputy sheriff Willard Follansbee is present and questions her about Beck's whereabouts. When Bella leaves the house, Follansbee remains behind:

[S]he knew beyond a doubt what the white man was waiting there for. [...] She accepted what would happen. A Negro, lowered past a certain line of misfortune, no longer counts on cleverness: she did not think how she could divert him, contrive to upset the baby, win the other man's attention. Some savage instinct made her scrounge down low in the corner between the window and the bed. [...] The room was dark. When the door opened, and light entered, she turned her head low. If he didn't quit breathing so loud, he would wake up the baby. [...] When Lucy walked back through the woods, tears lay along her cheeks like scars. [...] She couldn't even tell Beck what the white man had done. He would feel it worse than she did. (Spencer 232-33).

Lucy expects abuse because she deduces from her past experiences with white men. After Bella leaves, she crouches in a corner, silently awaiting the abuse, which is prompted by what Elizabeth Spencer describes as a "savage instinct" (232). In the previous sequence, when Follansbee questions her about Beck, Lucy becomes "dull all over, animal, African, obedient to the forcing whip" (230). Throughout the novel the black characters are referred to in a similar way, as being animalistic and uncivilized. This manner of characterization has been noted by Jeff Abernathy, who has commented that by describing black characters in this way, "Spencer links her narrative to the very prejudices she had ostensibly set out to expose" (qtd. in Seltzer 80). Another notable example is the sequence of Beck spending a night in jail for protection from the Granthams. In the adjoining cell is Lu, a black woman who fears the approaching mob: "Lu began to wail, like something way off in the woods before dawn on a clear spring night" (Spencer 112). Although not described as definitively animal, Lu's lamentations are dehumanized, "something" rather than "someone."

#### **2.4.2 Past in the present**

With Duncan's candidacy for sheriff, a future is heralded that threatens the present conditions. The community appears to be torn between this potential future and the past which, although



not exclusively positive, symbolizes a more harmonious time for many. In the communal memory specific events and conditions are glorified and continue to be discussed. The community struggles with accepting the changes and, thus, the past remains alive in the present.

One such condition of the past is the relationship between Duncan and Marcia Mae. Although their engagement ended many years earlier, the couple's history is still present in the collective memory of the community. As a college football player and the daughter of one of Lacey's most prestigious families, Duncan and Marcia Mae constituted the town's poster couple: "[T]hey grew to be a fine-looking couple, fair, beautifully built, alert as a brace of hunting dogs, mettled as a young carriage span, and always going somewhere" (Spencer 39). Nevertheless, Duncan refused when Marcia Mae asked him to elope with her. Her desire to be free from her family as well as the close-knit community prompted her to move away on her own – even if that meant to end her engagement, an act which is described by Catherine Seltzer as "a 'violation' of the town's imagination" (65).

With this separation "[a]n image had been violated" (Spencer 39) within the communal mind. Decades later, Marcia Mae returns to Lacey and meets Duncan by chance in the town square. As Terry Roberts has analyzed, "[i]n Lacey even the most intimate relationships are all but public property. Love affairs, like that of the young Duncan Harper and Marcia Mae Hunt, are woven into Lacey's self-image so that an unforeseen marriage or a sudden breakup affects the lives of the townspeople" (36). The encounter of the pair naturally is observed by the community – a fact of which both Marcia Mae and Duncan are aware, and thus they "came together with a certain stateliness in the sun – without haste. [...] These were gestures they had known always" (Spencer 39). Their awareness results in almost ritualistic behavior "as if anyone could hear" speaking "a ritual language" (39), all the while under observation. Despite the fact that Duncan has been married for years, the community seems to feel vindicated by this reunion. The "sense of unease" (39) caused by the couple's earlier separation seems to be amended. With the spontaneous encounter in the town square "the image was restored: the few who saw it would be glad to describe it to the rest, then all would have it back again, the thought of the two fair heads" (39). Evidently, their relationship provided the community with a sense of consistency in the past, and does so still when they are reunited. However, in this case the past in the present is not merely a memento in the communal memory; it comes back to life quite literally when Duncan and Marcia Mae rekindle their relationship.

The meeting in the town square is mirrored later when Marcia Mae encounters Duncan's wife Tinker on speaking day (288-89). Similar to the earlier sequence, both women are aware of being on display among the Lacey crowd that has gathered on the speaking grounds. The fact that they meet after Marcia Mae's brief affair with Duncan adds to the piquancy of the situation, in the eyes of their audience: "Seen by so many they could not do other than greet each other, and stand talking for a while" (288). Because their respective relationship with Duncan is public knowledge in the community, Marcia Mae and Tinker feel obligated to conform to the societal expectations – ignoring each other might result in speculation among the community. However, simply acknowledging each other's presence is insufficient; a conversation is expected. Spencer's description of this sequence ends with a direct reference to the past in the present and its meaning to the community: "Looking aside together, they would have seen the past as one turns to see a person who already stands at the elbow. For in a small town, in a society whose supreme interest is people, the past exists physically – empty chairs expect the dead and not in vain" (289).

The novel's main character, Duncan, often serves as a manifestation of the past in the present in two ways: via the grocery store he inherited from his father and his former football career. Despite the fact that his last college football game took place decades ago, the image of Duncan as a successful player is still alive in the communal memory. It is first referenced at the beginning of the narrative, when Travis Brevard seeks out Duncan in order to appoint him as his successor as sheriff. The dying Brevard reminisces of the old days: "I used to go all the way up to the university on weekends to see you play. I went over to Baton Rouge too and down to New Orleans more than once. We would all go see you play. Then we would come home and read about it in the paper. They called you the fastest running back of the year. They named you 'Happy Harper'" (9). The community prided itself on being home to a successful football player and supported him by visiting his out-of-state games. This vivid memory even affects current events. According to Kerney, Duncan's former sports career will aid him in his effort to become sheriff, reasoning that "they'll vote for Duncan because he set the national all-time touchdown record for a single season" (21). Duncan himself, however, is conflicted about his past. In his conversation with Brevard he remarks that "[t]he newspapers made that up [...]. Nobody ever called [him 'Happy Harper']" (9). This demonstrates how the community has preserved the past and perpetuates an image of Duncan that he himself remembers differently. His statement even hints at a notion of embarrassment about the nickname he received. Later in the narrative Duncan surprisingly admits: "'I always hated football,' said Duncan. 'I never wanted to play. [...] I wasn't trying, I wasn't trying anything

at all. I never got to finish the work for my Scout badge because of [the] football team. I used to think I'd do it the next summer, but it was always the next summer" (303). This declaration contextualizes the embarrassment he feels towards his nickname. Duncan cannot pride himself in his past success because the decision to play football was not his own. He continues to reminisce: "'I only wanted to be a groceryman like Daddy,' Duncan told [Tinker]. 'I wanted to walk in the woods on Sunday with my family. I never imagined my name in all the papers, I never dreamed Travis Brevard would walk in my store and die'" (303). Regardless of his own plans for his life, the idea of "Happy Harper" is still alive in the communal memory as an instance of a past that allows the community to feel pride.

Aside from his football career, the store Duncan inherited from his father (46) serves as another manifestation of the past in the present. Because "[t]here's always been a Harper on the town square" (11), Duncan carries on tradition by operating his father's former business, and has even preserved the store the way he inherited it, how the community has known it. Marcia Mae's mother Nan at one point declares: "He's kept the store his father left him; he's stocked the things I'm used to buying; he hasn't 'renovated' and made his store front look like the inside of a bathroom" (46). Thus, Duncan's store provides a certain amount of stability in a world that begins to change ever more rapidly. However, towards the end of the narrative, Duncan's store too is affected by these changes. After the tumultuous situation at the speaking grounds Duncan flees the scene in his car and on the way to collect Beck Dozer, whom he seeks to protect from the mob, picks up his wife Tinker. As they drive by the store, "she was the first to see what had happened. The window of Harper's grocery was broken. There was a jagged hole like a star in the lower half; one point reached several feet upward into the painted letters" (305). The store which has been an institution in Lacey for many years, providing stability and local supply for the community, was vandalized. The damage done to the store is not only a rejection of Duncan's ideas, but also carries symbolic meaning. As a decades-old institution in Lacey, the grocery store brings the past into the present. It has been preserved by Duncan the way his father built it, as Nan Hunt remarks. Thus, the destruction of the window symbolizes the destruction of the innocence of the past – a past that is threatened by the societal changes that are about to commence. However the communal memory may have preserved the past, though, it is only ostensibly innocent, as it has of course been tainted by the courthouse massacre.

The atrocity that occurred at the courthouse is a manifestation of racist tendencies in the community, and continues to cast its shadow on the present. Although the shooting is an

integral part of the communal memory, Marcia Mae seems ignorant of it. Standing in front of the courthouse with Kerney and Duncan, the latter educates her:

“Upstairs there,” he scolded her, “twelve Negroes were shot down in cold blood.”  
“When was that?” she asked. “Nineteen-nineteen,” said Kerney, “or was it twenty? Somewhere along in there.” “Oh,” she laughed. “I thought you meant last year.”  
“You’ve heard about it,” said Duncan, “all your life.” “Yes, now that you mention it. I’ve heard it and forgotten it because I don’t care. If I don’t care nobody cares. I’m no different from anybody else. Nobody our age in town could say offhand who was there or why.” (121-22)

Her final statement is rendered untrue immediately: She is having a conversation about an event she tries to deny, with two people her age who are indeed aware of it. Even though Duncan and Kerney must have been small children when the massacre happened, they have learned about it. Since Marcia Mae’s own grandfather was judge at the time and even tried to intervene – but did not succeed as he was locked out of the courtroom the shooting happened in (317) – it is unlikely that her lack of knowledge is genuine. Her statement that such a transgression is likely to happen again in the present further emphasizes her contempt for the South and the community – from which she has attempted to distance herself for years, while simultaneously asserting that she is “no different from anybody else” (122). Marcia Mae also displays her contempt earlier in the narrative when explaining to Duncan her reasons for the break-up, claiming that she saw “the evil [...] in her family and in the whole South” (202). Despite her ostensible ignorance of the shooting, she discusses it again towards the end of the narrative. In a conversation with her grandmother, she inquires how her grandfather felt about the shooting:

“What did Grandfather Standsbury think of it?” “Think of it? He thought it was terrible, like everybody else.” “I mean didn’t he always feel guilty about it, as if he might have stopped it from happening if he had got up there in time?” “I was mighty glad he didn’t get up there till it was over. Those men were murderers, that Acey Tallant especially. Your grandfather couldn’t have done a thing with them. He always thought he could, but he couldn’t.” “Yet he always felt guilty, didn’t he? It haunted him till the day he died, didn’t it?” “I don’t know if it did or not. If he thought about it all the time, he never told me.” (317)

Even though earlier she had stated that she does not remember the incident because she does not care, and thus “nobody cares” (121), the very manner in which Marcia Mae formulates her questions suggests that she has meanwhile reassessed the shooting and its influence on the community. By posing these questions, Marcia Mae displays that she has reflected on the issue, as if she hoped her grandmother would confirm that Judge Standsbury took up position on a particular side of history, if only by regretting that he was unable to prevent the incident.

Despite her earlier denial she does come to realize that a past event is able to cast its shadow on the present.

### 3. Eudora Welty: *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972)

In *The Optimist's Daughter* Welty portrays the dynamics of a close-knit community in the fictional town of Mount Salus, Mississippi, largely by describing the town's joint preparations for the funeral of Judge McKelva. The entire story covers a period of only a few weeks, and apart from a few key sequences the plot develops slowly. This enables Welty to focus on the interaction between the characters and the mechanisms at work in the community – often through minute details which in toto present an intricate portrait of this small town. As Paul Binding has mentioned, it is this attention to detail which puts *The Optimist's Daughter* among those “masterworks [which] could be (and indeed are) enjoyed and respected by readers with no knowledge of or concern for the South” (22). Thomas D. Young has also praised Welty's “ear for the rhythms of southern speech and her understanding of the nuances of rural behavior [which] are seldom more convincingly portrayed than in this novel” (*Past* 88). The eponymous daughter is Laurel McKelva Hand, a widow in her mid-forties, who travels from her home in Chicago back to the South to support her father during a hospital stay, and she is the novel's focalizer. The people of Mount Salus are thus presented through her perspective – the perspective of a former member of this community, which struggles with accepting her life-choices. Simultaneously, Laurel finds it difficult to come to terms with the past she left behind in Mount Salus, but which seems to come back to life when she returns. Louis Rubin has argued that for Laurel this past means a “confrontation of roles”, a “conflict between personal fulfillment and the continuity of identity that a family situation can afford” (33). It is this very conflict that illustrates the community's character, beliefs, and world view in detail.

*The Optimist's Daughter* was originally written as a short story in 1969 and published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1972. Welty then adapted it into a novella and published it three years after the short story. In 1973, then, Welty received the Pulitzer Prize for *The Optimist's Daughter* (Capers 115). In his review of the first version, Reynolds Price calls the text “Welty's strongest, richest work” (225). While he goes on to criticize the author's “lack of concern with Mississippi's major news at the time of the story – the civil rights revolution” (237), Price concludes that, ultimately, this would not diminish the appeal of the story, as it is not primarily concerned with the South's civil rights era, but – as critics have stated – the main character Laurel's efforts to come to terms with the past (Carson 107, Wimsatt 134). Initial criticism of the novel largely focused on its supposedly autobiographical aspects and

the parallels between *The Optimist's Daughter* and Eudora Welty's life. These early critics were, however, basing their interpretations merely on their own assumptions, as Welty's memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* was published much later, in 1984 (Kreyling 209-10).

Welty depicts this community via a rather small ensemble of characters, who come together to mourn the deceased, well-loved judge of the town, Clint McKelva. What seems to be a close-knit community at first glance eventually reveals itself to be somewhat divided between an old Mount Salus and a new Mount Salus. The elderly ladies – members of the Garden Club and the Bridge Club, which Becky was also a part of – try their best to keep Mount Salus a traditional community (Wimsatt 135). However, Laurel's friends, people from the younger generation, hold on to the past as well by referring to themselves collectively as "the bridesmaids" (Welty 49) and thus are maintaining a strong connection with the past. Laurel's relocation to Chicago, or the fact that the wedding with Phil took place over a decade ago do not hinder the bridesmaids' nostalgia. When they call Laurel "Polly," a childhood nickname, they do so in an effort to "maneuver her back into the past" (Kreyling 221). Additionally, Laurel's choice to leave Mount Salus, and, consequently, her friends as well, seems incomprehensible to them (Kerr 140). Where the physical environment is concerned, however, the bridesmaids and their families are not focused on preserving the past, but on creating a present and future of their own: they built their homes in the new part of Mount Salus (Welty 123). Modernity also finds its way into the town also through the "new part" of the cemetery (90), which is located near the recently built highway (57). Old Mount Salus, then, is mainly represented by the elderly ladies who wish to rebuild the past as best they can by trying to persuade Laurel to move back to Mount Salus and replace her long-deceased mother in their Bridge Club.

Memory and the past are themes which are dealt with continuously in *The Optimist's Daughter*. Laurel's visit to Mount Salus is almost a journey to a different time. As Kreyling has suggested, "she steps [off the train] into a living present that for her is a living past" (221). The community in Mount Salus is reminiscent of the first Mrs. McKelva, Laurel's mother Becky, and the elderly ladies of the Bridge Club miss her particularly and take turns criticizing not only Laurel's but also Fay's life choices (107, 112-15). Laurel's final challenge, then, is to find a way of coming to terms with the disapproval of the community, as well as the inconsistency of her memories of the past.

### 3.1 Biography of Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty was born on April 13, 1909, in Jackson, Mississippi. Her father worked for a life insurance company in Jackson; her mother was a teacher, originating from West Virginia (Kreyling 1). Already from a young age Welty was surrounded by literature at home, being read to by her parents as well as becoming an avid reader herself. Michael Kreyling notes that young Eudora Welty read a wide range of genres, often “well beyond the ‘normal’ range for a girl her age” (1-2). She first gained experience as a writer for the high-school paper, and later wrote for the campus newspaper during her time as a student at Mississippi State College for Women from 1925-27. After graduating Welty ventured north to enroll in the University of Wisconsin which she attended for two years. Her time there was particularly formative, and was described by Welty herself as “an initiation into a mature literary life” (2).

From 1930-31, Welty lived in New York City, attending the Columbia University School of Business. Her father had suggested that besides her passion for literature and the arts “she should have a ‘day job’” (3), and disapproved of her plans to become a writer (Entzminger 128). However, aside from attending Columbia, Welty dedicated her free time to the art and culture New York City had to offer. After finishing her degree, Welty returned to her home state (Kreyling 3).

Back in Mississippi, Welty worked as a copywriter for a local radio station and various newspapers before joining the Works Progress Administration, “covering local gatherings and projects that had been facilitated by the WPA” (4). The photos she took in the process were exhibited in 1936 and 1937; decades later she also published two volumes of photographs: *One Time, One Place* in 1971, and *Eudora Welty Photographs* in 1989. Considering her photographic work, Michael Kreyling deems her “worthy of mention with Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke-White, and Dorothea Lange, three of the primary figures in American documentary photography” (5). Similar to the collaborations of writers and photographers who produced photo-documentary books combined with prose – such as *You Have Seen Their Faces* by Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by Walker Evans and James Agee, Welty attempted to follow suit, yet remained unsuccessful with her own publication *Black Saturday* (5).

In the mid- to late 1930s Welty published her first short stories, including “Death of a Traveling Salesman” and “Magic.” Her first volume of collected stories, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* followed in 1941 (6). It includes “Why I Live at the P.O.,” “Petrified Man”



and “A Worn Path,” which Ann Waldron has stated “are among the best Eudora ever wrote” (117). Only one year later Welty’s debut novel *The Robber Bridegroom* was published, whose reviews she awaited anxiously – critics were in fact “puzzled” (Waldron 140-41). That same year Welty won a Guggenheim Fellowship which due to the ongoing war she was unable to spend on traveling abroad, as is usually the case with this fellowship (135). However, a few years later she applied again, won the fellowship and booked passage to Europe to visit Italy, England and Ireland (197-211). In 1944, Welty again lived in New York for several months in order to focus on her writing, and was invited to join the *New York Times Book Review* as a copywriter (150). Her second novel, entitled *Delta Wedding*, followed in 1946 and was originally published in the *Atlantic* in four parts (162).

Over the course of her career, Welty published several other novels and short story collections, such as *The Golden Apples* (1949), *The Ponder Heart* (1954), *Losing Battles* (1970), and *One Time, One Place* (1971) among others (<http://eudorawelty.org>). Her oeuvre also includes a collection of three lectures on creative writing she held at Harvard in 1983, entitled *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1984) (Waldron 327-30). Despite the fact that Welty’s literary output was modest, her reputation rose nonetheless, including an early – inevitable – comparison of her own oeuvre to Faulkner’s work (Kreyling 6). On July 23, 2001, Eudora Welty died in her family home in Jackson, Mississippi (<http://eudorawelty.org>).

### 3.2 Setting

The largest part of Welty’s novel *The Optimist’s Daughter* is set in Mount Salus, a small fictional town in Mississippi. However, the narrative begins in New Orleans, Louisiana, when Laurel McKelva Hand joins her father, Judge McKelva, accompanied by his young wife Fay, in a hospital to support him during an ophthalmologic examination. Laurel flies in from her adopted hometown, Chicago, where she has lived for many years, initially with her husband until his untimely death. For all three of them – the Judge, Fay, and Laurel – New Orleans means something different. The Judge chose the hospital there to receive treatment mainly because he knows the physician in charge, Dr. Nate Courtland, well. Not only does the friendship between the Courtlands and the McKelvas, who are neighbors in Mount Salus, reach back several decades, but Judge McKelva even helped to finance Dr. Courtland’s medical studies after his father died (Welty 41). In the city of New Orleans, Dr. Courtland is

the only connection that both the Judge and his daughter Laurel have to their hometown. Nevertheless, Laurel feels foreign there, New Orleans is “nowhere” to her and might as well be “any city” (14). With nothing to do but wait for the Judge to recover from his eye surgery, Dr. Courtland is the only familiar face to provide comfort to Laurel. They are both from the same town, they both went to bigger cities to study and work there, and their families have been close for a long time. All of these aspects culminate in an intimate connection that Fay neither understands nor accepts. The trip to New Orleans, to her, is a trip the Judge had promised to take with her some day to see the Carnival, which coincidentally is underway while the Judge recovers from his surgery (12-13). Fay undermines Dr. Courtland’s authority and presents herself as the victim of his and the Judge’s supposedly empty promises. New Orleans as a setting, then, emphasizes both Fay’s and Laurel’s personalities and their struggles, with each other as well as with themselves, which are addressed throughout the novel and erupt in a final confrontation towards the end of the narrative.

Although Mount Salus might still hold a homely quality for Laurel, it becomes apparent that her stay in the town only repeats what had already started in New Orleans – she feels lost, foreign, and disconnected from a past that seems peculiarly alive. When Laurel and Fay arrive at the train station with the deceased Judge McKelva, they are met with empathy and prudence. The town’s undertaker comes to meet them, as do Laurel’s former bridesmaids (49). Although time almost seems to stand still in Mount Salus, as Laurel comes to experience during her brief visit, there are signs of an inevitable, gradual change towards modernity. The old spirit of the town remains alive in various ways. The elderly ladies of the Bridge Club have not overcome the death of their former member Becky McKelva, even after over a decade. Reluctant to accept that Laurel has turned her back on Mount Salus for good, they try to convince her to join their club and act as a replacement for her mother Becky (112-13). Laurel’s old friends, who functioned as the bridesmaids at her wedding, are still collectively referred to as “Laurel’s bridesmaids” (49). It appears as though the community tries to recreate a certain point in time when things were seemingly perfect – Becky was alive and well as a member of the Garden Club and the Bridge Club, Laurel had just gotten married in Mount Salus, and there may have been hopes that the newlyweds would settle down there. However, there are also physical changes in Mount Salus. The bridesmaids and their families live in a newly built part of the town (123). Similarly, the cemetery was enhanced and now has a new part, decorated with artificial flowers, where the Judge is buried. A newly built highway separates the old and the new part of the cemetery, and the noise from the highway can be heard everywhere (90-92). The nostalgia maintained by the bridesmaids and the Bridge

Club alike is interrupted by modernity which gradually finds its way into the community.

New Orleans and Mount Salus are connected to one another, and their meaning for the members of the McKelva family correspond. The Judge, who is firmly rooted in Mount Salus, also has an important connection to New Orleans, which Dr. Nate Courtland embodies – the brother of his long-time neighbor Adele Courtland, and former beneficiary of the Judge’s financial support. The physician is also the only familiar face that Laurel has in the city, but she feels like a stranger in New Orleans nonetheless. For Laurel, Dr. Courtland embodies the past. His “big country hands” (4) remind her of home, as does his “experienced face, so entirely guileless. The Mississippi country that lay behind him was all in it” (9). This alone cannot suffice, however. With both of her parents deceased, Laurel’s only remaining connection to Mount Salus are entirely things of the past – such as the house she grew up in, the bridesmaids, her mother’s former Bridge Club trying to lure her into their circle, and most importantly her memories of the community and her life among them. Naturally, Fay’s connection to both New Orleans and Mount Salus is the least firm of the three McKelvas. The original reason for visiting New Orleans was her hope of enjoying Mardi Gras with the Judge some day. Consequently, she cannot help but be disappointed when they finally do visit the city, but for a different purpose entirely. Quite similarly, she probably had hopes and specific expectations of life in Mount Salus as the Judge’s wife that do not correspond to reality at all. There seems to have been little effort on both sides – Fay’s and the community’s – to get to know each other and start on friendly terms. Fay is aware of her isolated status among the townsfolk, and is reminded of that in New Orleans.

### 3.3 Characters

*The Optimist’s Daughter* does not comprise as large an ensemble of characters as *Oral History* (cf. ch. 4), for instance, but rather it is only a few figures who represent the community. Welty’s dialogue, as the main instrument to convey their characteristics, paints a detailed picture of the community’s dynamics and rules. Mary Ann Wimsatt has noted that it is not the entirety of Mount Salus, but rather only “the genteel upper or upper middle class of Laurel’s and her parents’ upbringing” (135) who are depicted in the novel. Although Welty does include two working-class family clans – the Dalzells and the Chisoms – not from Mount Salus, the community is mostly represented by members of its higher class, thus limiting the

image of the town and its society that is created in the novel.

One aspect this novel shares with both Elizabeth Spencer's *The Voice at the Back Door* (cf. ch. 2) and Lee Smith's *Oral History* (cf. ch. 4) is the inclusion of an outsider character. Welty in fact presents three different kinds of outsiders in her narrative who are engaging with the community. Becky originally came to Mississippi from West Virginia, gradually assimilating but never completely belonging to the community. Her connection to her home state and her family was very close for the remainder of her life. She kept going back for lengthy annual visits, and did set herself apart from the Mount Salus community by singling West Virginians out as brave and resilient (Welty 144). Although Becky did spend the rest of her life in Mount Salus, thus becoming a sort of hybrid between outsider and local, she seems to have kept the town at a distance quite deliberately. Fay, then, is an outsider – much like Becky was when she first came to Mount Salus as a bride. Originally from Texas, and from a lower class (Brinkmeyer 436), Fay does not make an effort to belong to the community, and is rejected in turn. Immediately after the Judge's funeral she leaves to stay with her family in Texas for a while, where people "can talk [her] language" (Welty 97). The third outsider character, Laurel, is a returnee and thus an entirely different kind. Born and raised in Mount Salus, she left the South to study in Chicago, where she also met her late husband Phil (160-61), and has since never returned for more than a few days at a time. Consequently, Laurel became an outsider over the years, a returnee – a status which she is firmly reassured of by the community during her visit. Since her mother has been dead for years and the relationship with her stepmother Fay is practically nonexistent, her last remaining connection to the town dies with her father.

### **3.3.1 Laurel McKelva Hand**

Laurel McKelva is the focalizer of the novel. She is a "slender, quiet-faced woman in her mid-forties" (Welty 3), which makes her in fact a few years older than Fay (26). She left her hometown many years ago and resides in Chicago where she works as a designer of fabrics (16). There she also met her husband Phil, who passed away while serving in the Navy. The elderly ladies of Mount Salus in fact criticize Laurel for being a widow. They even try to convince her that it is her own fault because she "shouldn't have married a naval officer in wartime" (115). Returning to Mount Salus one and a half years after her most recent visit, on

the occasion of her father's wedding (11-12), Laurel feels like an outsider: Fay has taken over the beloved family home, and Laurel can see the traces of Fay's redecorating efforts all over the house (60).

Laurel's otherness is illustrated also by the clothes she wears, setting her apart from the fashion common in Mount Salus. Already in the opening chapter Laurel's otherness is highlighted by her unusual clothes, which are "of an interesting cut and texture" (3) and serve as a way to emphasize her creative and professional identity – a part of her which the community refuses to accept and instead chooses to ridicule (112-13). In fact, the sketchbook she uses to collect ideas for her fabric designs, which she always brings with her on trips (105), remains untouched in her suitcase (165). It would seem that Laurel's art and creativity are not appreciated in Mount Salus. In fact, Adele Courtland mentions at one point that "there's not enough Mount Salus has to *offer* a brilliant mind" (113; emphasis in original).

In her hometown Laurel serves a reduced function: she is, first and foremost, the eponymous daughter – not a designer, not even a widow, and hardly a person in her own right. For most of the narrative, Laurel fulfills her function and does what is expected of her: instead of spending what little free time she has during her visit sketching new fabric designs as she had apparently planned by bringing along her sketchbook, Laurel works in the garden, wearing "the dark-blue slacks and the blue cardigan [she had found] in her suitcase" (105) which, like her sketchbook, she brought with her routinely. Days later when she prepares to leave Mount Salus, she puts her Chicago identity back on: "[S]he bathed and dressed again in the Sibyl Connolly suit she'd flown down in. She was careful with her lipstick, and pinned her hair up for Chicago. She stepped back into her city heels, and started on a last circuit through the house" (170). Returning to the clothes she wore when she arrived in the South, Laurel prepares for her everyday life and her profession far away from Mount Salus, and, essentially, her past.

### **3.3.2 Fay Chisom McKelva**

Undoubtedly a central character in Welty's novel is the Judge's second wife, Fay. She is first described at the beginning of the narrative as being rather frail and bird-like. Fay is "small and pale" (Welty 3), and her laugh is "a single, high note, as derisive as a jay's" (5). She is "giving out perfume" (7) and seeks to attract people's attention whenever possible. Thus,

much of her public persona and her behavior seems to merely hide what is underneath, the person she really is – Wanda Fay Chisom from Madrid, Texas (67). While her often eccentric behavior seems irrational and egoistic at the outset of the narrative, more light is shed on her character when the family she had repudiated before – claiming that none of them are alive and that, consequently, she is all alone in the world – steps into the McKelva family home unexpectedly during the funeral reception (66-68). Certain characteristics are shared by all family members, and Fay’s need for attention and her affinity for drama is apparently inherited from her family, mostly her mother.

When Fay appears for the first time in the narrative, she is “forty, and so younger than Laurel” (26) and has already been married to the Judge for one and a half years (3) and seems to play no particularly important part in the community. This is most likely a result of both an inherent dislike for the community on Fay’s part, as well as the community’s rejection of this young and extravagant quasi-foreigner as the Judge’s new wife. Without a doubt, Fay is the “other” in this community – a stranger, a curious creature, who causes distress for all of Mount Salus, who had hoped for another Becky to reestablish, or revive the past. Barbara H. Carson describes Fay as “[h]aving never experienced death or otherness,” which she defines to be the reason why “Fay is incapable of experiencing life. In a non-differentiated state, there can be no life, since the significance of life develops only with awareness of the contrasting reality of death” (109). However, Fay has indeed experienced both death and otherness. Many years before the narrative is set, her brother Roscoe committed suicide, which Mrs. Chisom, Fay’s mother, elaborates on at length during the funeral reception (Welty 74-75). It is Fay who obviously refuses to connect her brother’s death with the funeral of her late husband, and to relive it, as her mother does, or to even commemorate him.

Otherness is a phenomenon Fay experiences presumably on a daily basis in Mount Salus. She is an “other” in the community, as she does not at all correspond to their image of a woman, especially a wife of somebody as reputable as Judge McKelva. Whether Fay herself dislikes her status as an outsider or not, she does go to some length to prove it to herself and the community that she is not one of them throughout the narrative (and, in fact, this is one of the very few characteristics she shares with Becky). At the beginning of the narrative, when Fay witnesses Dr. Courtland and Laurel having an apparent bond that she cannot comprehend/contest, she feels ignored and is singled out as an “other” (10). Fay’s presence as an outsider culminates when she designates her own otherness, claiming that she needs to leave for Texas after the funeral because people there “can talk [her] language” (97).

Fay is an impatient and self-centered character, who takes her husband’s critical

condition personally. Instead of helping him cope with the slow healing process, during which he must lie still, she insists on taking him out to Mardi Gras, which he had once promised her to attend together (12-13). Fay lacks empathy with his illness, perhaps also because the age difference catches up to them. However, her tendency to present herself as a victim reveals her egoistic character throughout the narrative. Repeatedly, Fay is described as behaving like a child: whether it is at the hospital where “[s]he had listened like a child” (16) to Dr. Courtland, or when she “hurled herself into the waiting room with voice rising, like a child looking for its mother” (32), or during the funeral reception when she arouses the pity of Major Bullock, causing Miss Tennyson to conclude that “[a] man can feel compunction for a child like Fay” (107). During Laurel’s final outburst towards Fay in the kitchen, close to resorting to violence, “it had been the memory of [Fay’s nephew,] the child Wendell[,] that had prevented her” (178). Ultimately, Fay’s often child-like behavior is only one manifestation of her difficult character. Fay lingers in the reader’s memory as a troubled person whose issues remain unresolved by the time the narrative comes to a close.

### **3.3.3 Judge McKelva**

The eponymous optimist of the novel, “a tall, heavy man of seventy-one” (Welty 3), is an authority figure and well-respected by all in Mount Salus. Clint McKelva is alive only during the first part of the novel; therefore, he is largely characterized through Laurel’s memories, and stories shared by the mourners during the reception. Overall, the Judge is described as being a father not only to Laurel but also, it seems, to the community. This is especially true of his doctor at the New Orleans hospital, Nate Courtland, brother of the McKelvas’ long-time neighbor Adele. Many years earlier, after the Courtlands’ father’s death, it was the financial support provided by the Judge which enabled Nate to finish his medical studies (41). Thus, the Judge’s choice to visit an out-of-state hospital is not coincidental, as is mentioned when he tells Dr. Courtland that “I hied myself away from home and comfort and tracked down here and put myself in your hands for one simple reason: I’ve got confidence in you. Now show me I’m still not too old to exercise good judgment” (10).

His decision to visit a surgeon he knows and trusts is not only an effort to reassure himself of his “good judgement,” but a sign of his growing doubts about his own health. It is this sort of apprehension which causes Laurel worry about her father she had not known

before, as “[h]is admission of self-concern was as new as anything wrong with his health, and Laurel had come flying” (7). Although his optimism seemed a helpful means when his wife Becky had to slowly give in to her illness, the Judge’s own rapidly declining health reveals that he is not truly an optimist. In an effort to ease her pain, he had promised Becky to take her to her native West Virginia one final time, yet it was met by her with accusations, calling him a “liar,” a “lucifer” (150). Ultimately, then, “[t]he Judge’s optimism has proved only a disguise of his terror before death, making him (as Becky cries out) a liar in denying death. At his own death, he seems almost destroyed by despair” (Montgomery 154).

While Laurel tries to take care of her father and assist him during the healing process, it becomes apparent that the Judge misses his wife Becky still, and would have preferred to be looked after by her. Laurel tries reading to him, like her mother used to do, but she notices that he barely listens, and that she does not read out loud as well as her mother did, which only increases her doubts about her qualities as a caretaker in time of need (Welty 23). The Judge’s increasing silence, then, is a sign of his resignation as he must realize that his supposed optimism does not make a difference in the end – he, like his first wife before him and his daughter after him, will die. Furthermore, the Judge is forced to acknowledge that he is accompanied by a young wife who seems to resent him for falling ill when she would rather go out to celebrate Mardi Gras, and a daughter who, despite her efforts, feels helpless and can thus provide neither diversion nor comfort. Ultimately, the Judge dies in a very similar way to Becky – ill, feeling betrayed, and, although surrounded by family, away from home.

### **3.3.4 Becky McKelva**

The Judge’s deceased wife Becky is an intriguing character who was in fact modeled after Welty’s own mother (Kreyling 1). Although she has been dead for over eleven years by the time the narrative begins, she is mentioned already in the first chapter of the novel and reappears in stories and memories throughout. Becky is first referred to in connection to the bird-frighteners she put in the fig tree in the McKelva yard (Welty 4). Even though at first glance the complete opposite of Fay, the former Mrs. McKelva and the young widow share a few important parallels. Both women came to Mount Salus as new brides from other areas – Becky from West Virginia, Fay from Texas – and thus had to work their way into the community (52). It would seem that Becky did a better job of becoming a part of the Mount



Salus society than did Fay, or at least made an effort. However, as Thomas D. Young suggests, “[Becky] was never a member of the Mount Salus community; home to her was the house atop a mountain in West Virginia” (“Social Form” 383). Indeed, some episodes suggest that despite having spent most of her life in Mount Salus Becky was reassured of her status as a stranger repeatedly. Even though Becky was a treasured member of the Garden Club, the community would refuse to tell her the name of the rose growing in the McKelva garden, which “has every right to its own name, but nobody in Mount Salus [was] interested in [telling her]” (Welty 116). While it seems that she was generally accepted, and much more so than Fay, the townsfolk did not let her in on every secret and seem to have kept her at a distance all her life. Laurel herself reveals, for instance, at one point in the narrative that her mother only felt truly careless and at home in her native West Virginia (141).

However, Becky too makes an effort to create or maintain a certain distance to the community. Her origins and her longing for “up home,” which she usually spoke of with “gravity” (136), seem to be an important part of her self-definition. Thus, Becky herself tends to emphasize her otherness, for instance through naming her daughter after the state flower of West Virginia, her home state. Until her illness began weakening her, Becky kept returning to her family in West Virginia for one month every year, bringing Laurel with her (122). Upon their return to Mount Salus many weeks after one sojourn to West Virginia, Laurel remembers, Becky belittled the town: “‘Where do they get the *mount*?’ her mother said scornfully. ‘There’s no ‘mount’ here.’” (142; emphasis in original). Furthermore, she liked to point to the fact that her fellow West Virginians are supposedly sturdier, especially where natural phenomena are concerned:

“Up home, we loved a good storm coming, we’d fly outdoors and run up and down to meet it,” [Becky] used to say. “We children would run as fast as we could go along the top of that mountain when the wind was blowing, holding our arms wide open. The wilder it blew the better we liked it.” During the very bursting of a tornado which carried away half of Mount Salus, she said, “*We* never were afraid of a little wind. Up home, we’d welcome a good storm.” (144; emphasis in original)

The fact that Becky appears in the novel only in the form of memories and shared stories, even a decade after her passing, makes her the personified past in the present. She seems to remain as important as ever for those who survived her. When the Judge wakes up in the hospital from the anesthesia, he even calls Fay by his deceased wife’s name (15). Similarly, the elderly ladies’ efforts to persuade Laurel to return permanently to Mount Salus illustrate how Becky is missed by the community. Miss Tennyson even blames her for leaving in the first place, claiming that “daughters need to stay put, where they can keep a better eye on [the]

old folks” (61). Laurel, then, seems to be the next best thing and an acceptable replacement for her mother.

### **3.4 Presentation of community in *The Optimist’s Daughter***

As Thomas D. Young has observed, in Welty’s work “the quality of life available to her characters is shaped by their belonging to a closely knit community, a group of families, friends and neighbors” (“Social Form” 367), which is also true of the characters in *The Optimist’s Daughter*. Laurel’s life choices, for instance, are curious, if not unacceptable to the Mount Salus community. It cannot fathom that leading a life outside of such a close community, remote from one’s family and roots, as Laurel does, can be considered fulfilling, or even desirable. Despite the issues most of Mount Salus undoubtedly has with Laurel’s career choice and relocation out of the South, they do stand by her after her father dies. Most of the funeral arrangements are already made when she arrives – a type of vigilance which is not appreciated by Fay, but is instead interpreted by her as an intrusion. Despite the joint efforts of the community to lighten the burden for Laurel, different expectations of the way the funeral should be handled are conflicting. Laurel’s request to close the casket and thus protect her father (Welty 62-63) conflicts with the neighbors’ wish to pay their respects to Judge McKelva. Especially Miss Tennyson advocates to keep the casket open: “[Y]our father’s a Mount Salus man. He’s a McKelva. A public figure. You can’t deprive the public, can you?” (63). Miss Tennyson even concurs with Fay when the undertaker, Mr. Pitts, adds that Fay wishes the casket remain open (63). Similarly, the skewed stories Major Bullock tells of the beloved Judge are met with lack of understanding on Laurel’s part. In an effort to lighten the mood he shares some memories which are in fact misrepresented. Nevertheless, Laurel’s friend Tish urges her not to “spoil it” for the Major (80), thus suggesting that the collective remembering is more significant to the community than the truthfulness of Major Bullock’s stories, or the potential pain they cause Laurel.

Functioning as the story’s focalizer, Laurel embarks on a journey from Chicago to her hometown, from her present and future to her past. According to Louis Rubin, for Laurel this past means a “confrontation of roles,” a “conflict between personal fulfillment and the continuity of identity that a family situation can afford” (33). While she struggles with her identity, or rather identities, Laurel’s clothes often mirror the clear distinction between the

roles she embodies in Chicago and in Mount Salus. During her brief stay in her hometown, Laurel is given a role that she had probably thought dead since she left Mississippi and began her own life in the North. In Mount Salus, she is not Laurel Hand, or Laurel McKelva Hand – she is simply Laurel McKelva, Clint’s and Becky’s daughter who, as the community views it, should not have turned her back on her hometown. Laurel’s clothes change, accordingly, from “the Sibyl Connolly suit she’d flown down in” and “her city heels” (Welty 170) to simple slacks and a cardigan she brought for gardening (105). The identity that is ascribed to her in Mount Salus contradicts her Chicago identity, and the community finds it difficult to accept that there is a version of Laurel, an entire life of her own, which the community cannot be a part of.

### **3.4.1 Past and present**

The past is an important aspect in *The Optimist’s Daughter*, and its significance to the community is illustrated throughout the narrative. Various characters view the past quite differently, and at the same time they must learn to accept that times, after all, are changing, even in Mount Salus. To those representing the old traditions of the community – such as the elderly ladies, and, somewhat surprisingly, even Laurel – the past is valuable, a treasure, and must be protected at all times. Adele Courtland, Mrs. Pease and Miss Tennyson lost their beloved Bridge Club member, Becky, over a decade before the narrative begins, yet they remain hopeful that a suitable replacement can be found in Laurel. The ladies emphasize the fact that Laurel – already “only” a returnee – will remain an outsider if she leaves Mount Salus again (Welty 112), instead of permanently relocating there, as the ladies are trying to persuade her to do. Mrs. Pease is quick to note: “Once you leave after this, you’ll always come back as a visitor [...]. Feel free, of course – but it was always my opinion that people don’t really want visitors” (112). To Laurel herself it seems only natural to return to her life in Chicago after the funeral – a decision that seems almost absurd to the ladies: “Miss Tennyson pointed her finger at Laurel and told the others, ‘That girl’s had more now than she can say grace over. And she’s going back to that life of labor when she could just as easily give it up. Clint’s left her a grand hunk of money.’” (112). Miss Tennyson further belittles Laurel’s career by asking her “Who’s going to kill you if you don’t draw those pictures?” (113), and old Mrs. Pease even goes so far as to blame Laurel for failing to save her father from Fay:

“Laurel is who should have saved him from that nonsense. Laurel shouldn’t have married a naval officer in wartime. Laurel should have stayed home after Becky died” (115). Rather than caring for her as a person, or trying to assist her in her grief, Becky’s friends urge Laurel to give up the life she has built for herself in Chicago, originally with her husband Phil, and help the elderly ladies recreate a past that is long gone.

As mentioned above, Becky is a specifically intriguing character where memory and the past are concerned, as she virtually embodies the living past – the past in the present – in this novel. Though deceased for over a decade, she appears to be as alive as ever in the minds of those she left behind. This is true of the elderly ladies especially. They miss Becky dearly, remembering the times they played Bridge together (113). Even the Judge, who has meanwhile remarried, asks for Becky instead of his new wife Fay when he awakes in the hospital from the anesthesia (15). Although Laurel keeps her father company during the healing process, she feels lost and useless: “Laurel moved about, as if to make sure that the room was all in order, but there was nothing to do; not yet. This was like a nowhere” (14). Remembering that her parents used to read to each other in the evenings, Laurel tries to pass the time reading to her father in the hospital, but “[o]f course, she was not able to read aloud with her mother’s speed and vivacity – that was probably what he missed” (23). With Fay’s lack of caring and Laurel’s helplessness, the Judge cannot help but miss his long-deceased wife Becky during his illness.

The second part of *The Optimist’s Daughter* is primarily concerned with the funeral preparations and the memorial service. Naturally, the main focus, then, lies on the past and the memories that are shared by the mourners about Judge McKelva. The funeral guests are “old Mount Salus personified” (92), and thus represent a time that has not yet entirely ended, but is on the brink of disappearing. As live chroniclers of Mount Salus, they share stories about the Judge, many of which are not necessarily truthful, as Laurel notices. When an inebriated Major Bullock, for instance, begins telling skewed tales about the Judge and a supposedly heroic civil rights act he performed against “White Caps” (79), Laurel takes it hard. Since she is dedicated to the past and memory in its correct form, Laurel does not appreciate the Major’s effort to lighten the mood with a heroic story of the deceased (79-80). It is Tish Bullock, the Major’s daughter and Laurel’s friend, who then urges her not to “spoil it” for the Major (80), and keep her silence about the questionable tales, even though they cause her harm in an already difficult situation. For Major Bullock the truth seems to be only secondary on this day. His ulterior motive appears to be the celebration of his beloved, deceased friend. This brief sequence is only one instance of the challenges Laurel experiences, where memories and the

past are concerned.

Clearly a strong defender of the past, Laurel finds it difficult to accept the fact that memories can mean something different to different people, and that not everybody shares exactly the same view of the past. Laurel, though, demands it be so, especially when it is the past of her parents – perhaps because she finds comfort in memory; it gives her “[f]irelight and warmth” (133). Upon hearing the Major’s stories about Judge McKelva, Laurel comments that her beloved father would not approve, having had “no patience for show,” let alone “any use for what he called theatrics” (80). Major Bullock, however, defends his version of the story, insisting that Laurel did not know her father as well as Mount Salus did because she chose to move away from the community (80). When Laurel joins the bridesmaids for dinner, after the funeral, she is again confronted with the fact that memories – no matter how important and vivid they are in Laurel’s own mind – may be different for other people. The friends share a story about Laurel’s parents, rejoicing in the happy memory and the funny aspects of it – much to Laurel’s chagrin. She concludes that the laughter of the bridesmaids means a lack of respect of Clint and Becky when she asks, “Since when have you started laughing at them?” (126). The bridesmaids, however, mean no harm. Laurel is sensitive, and so the laughter hurts her – yet, Tish Bullock is quick to correct this misunderstanding: “We weren’t laughing at them. [...] We’re grieving *with* you” (127; emphasis in original). This comment illustrates well how the bridesmaids view their role in regards to Laurel. Although they see her only occasionally now and the days when they were close are in the past, the group shows its support. Thomas D. Young concludes that “Laurel is no longer a member of the community of Mount Salus. [...] There seems to be no real closeness among the six women who served as Laurel’s bridesmaids. They seem to be trying to revive a closeness that once existed as they rally around Laurel in her time of sorrow, but there seems little day-by-day communication among them” (*Past* 108). Nevertheless, their laughter is no sign of impudence, but rather displays an honest attempt at lightening the mood and grieving with Laurel for the happy times when both of her parents were still alive.

However, it is not only Laurel who values the past to such an extent. Her deceased mother Becky had a similarly close connection to the past, which for her was also closely linked to the place where she grew up. Long after she relocated to Mount Salus to live with her husband, Becky kept various sorts of notebooks, preserved her entire correspondence with Clint, and materials she used when teaching school in West Virginia (Welty 152-53). Becky used to hold on to material items as a way of preserving her memories. Laurel feels the same way about the house she grew up in, which has become subject to Fay’s redecorating efforts.

The new Mrs. McKelva banished all of Becky's remaining possessions to the old sewing room, alongside the collected letters that Clint McKelva wrote to his first wife, and a book of photographs from the early days of their relationship (135-36). Looking for remaining artifacts in her father's desk, Laurel notices that unlike her mother the Judge did not save any of Becky's letters: "They weren't anywhere, because he hadn't kept them. He'd never kept them: Laurel knew it and should have known it to start with" (122). In this sense, then, the Judge is more like Fay than he is like Becky or Laurel, not holding on to the past by way of material things. All of Becky's remaining documents have been removed from the desk, so "there was nothing of her mother here for Fay to find, or for herself to retrieve. The only traces there were of anybody were the drops of nail varnish," left there by Fay (123).

Laurel honors the past like hardly any other character in the novel. Thus she struggles the hardest to leave her own past behind and come to terms with its finiteness. Only during the final pages of the novel is Laurel able to realize that memory is kept alive in one's own mind, not through material possessions. In a cathartic burning of Becky's remaining documents, the letters and notebooks she had kept for decades, Laurel frees herself from the burden of the past (169). A final confrontation with Fay in the kitchen, an argument over the emotional value of a breadboard made for Becky by Laurel's late husband, is Laurel's final step on her way to coming to terms with the past. The fact that Fay ruined the breadboard "crack[ing] last year's walnuts on it. With a hammer" (172) is a sign for Laurel that it is not material possessions which keep the memories of her loved ones alive: "The past is no more open to help or hurt than was Father in his coffin. The past is like him, impervious, and can never be awakened. It is memory that is the somnambulist" (179). Although she had tried to avoid meeting Fay before her departure, Laurel accepts it as a final confrontation which liberates her from the ghosts of the past that have been haunting her: "And the irony she saw herself, pursuing her own way through the house as single-mindedly as Fay had pursued hers through the ceremony of the day of the funeral. But of course they had had to come together – it was useless to suppose they wouldn't meet, here at the end of it" (177).

The breadboard, like the McKelva house, does not hold any sentimental value to Fay – first of all, of course, because her own memories are not attached to the breadboard, or to the house; second of all, because the past is of no importance to her, as she states: "The past isn't a thing to me. I belong to the future" (179). In the house, Fay sleeps in the master bedroom, which was not only Laurel's parents' room, but also the place where Laurel was born and where Becky died (58). Thus, Fay occupies space in the house that is filled with both comforting and painful memories dating back many decades. Seeing herself confronted with

the past in her new home, she is quick to make her presence felt. Fay exiled Becky's belongings to the sewing room, rearranged the furniture, and decorated the room with peach-colored satin (60) – similar to the “foolish pink” fabric she chose for the Judge's coffin (62). It appears as though the only legacy left of Becky are the flowers in the McKelva yard (59), and even those become subject to a destructive force eventually: “Two children sat on the roof of a truck to wave at Wendell [Chisom], with their hands full. They had picked the Silver Bells” (88).

As Fay tries to rid the McKelva house of traces of the past, she becomes an embodiment of the modernity that slowly finds its way into the Mount Salus community. Nevertheless, her focus on present and future, and her lack of respect for the past, are not merely instances of egocentric behavior – they are partly born out of necessity. As the second wife of the town's beloved Judge, she is undoubtedly confronted with the memory of Becky, who is missed dearly by the ladies of Mount Salus. An anecdote told by Tish late in the narrative reveals that Miss Tennyson had apparently planned to host a small welcome event for Fay upon her arrival in Mount Salus. The newcomer, however, merely commented, “Oh, please don't bother with a big wholesale reception. That kind of thing was for Becky” (126). Fay makes an effort to dissociate herself from her predecessor, thus trying to establish herself in the town as a person in her own right – not simply a replacement for the Judge's first wife. Symbolic of the new times, of a modernity the community would rather do without, Fay is constantly criticized by the ladies, and not accepted as the new Mrs. McKelva. Miss Tennyson, Mrs. Pease, Mrs. Bolt, and Adele Courtland still feel “at home in the McKelva backyard” (105), as they used to when Becky was still alive. While Laurel does some gardening, the ladies discuss Fay's lack of knowledge where cooking and housekeeping are concerned, and they express their hopes that – without a husband – she would not stay in Mount Salus much longer (105-06). They conclude that it is the Judge himself who is to blame for Fay, having exercised poor judgement in choosing his wife, and they wonder “[w]hat happened to his judgement” (107). Additionally, the ladies take it personally that he died, leaving – as Adele Courtland puts it – his “little minx, [...] on our hands in such utter disregard for our feelings” (115). Ironically, Adele Courtland's sentiment is very similar to Fay's own lamentation at the hospital, when she claims Dr. Courtland – Adele's son – overlooked her before the surgery: “They went in my husband's eye without consulting my feelings” (36).

Of the four ladies it is Miss Tennyson who assures Laurel of her discontent already before the funeral. Miss Tennyson feels inclined to let Laurel know that “daughters need to

stay put, where they can keep a better eye on [the] old folks” (61). Additionally, “an old lady’s voice” reaches her as she enters the parlor, commenting, “So this time it’s Clint’s turn to bring you home” (61). The anonymous voice implies that Laurel does not visit her hometown often enough, and simultaneously suggests that the last time Laurel came to Mount Salus was when her mother died. This, however, is an exaggeration, as the speaker should be well-aware of. In truth, Laurel’s last visit dates back one and a half years earlier, when she attended her father’s wedding (11-12). Later on, during the garden scene, the ladies then jointly voice their discontent with Laurel, while at the same time trying to persuade her to return to Mount Salus. If she were to move back the ladies “could have as tough a bridge foursome as [they] had when Becky was playing” (113). Laurel’s choice to live in Chicago is subject to specifically harsh criticism from Mrs. Pease: “Laurel is who should have saved him from that nonsense. Laurel shouldn’t have married a naval officer in wartime. Laurel should have stayed home after Becky died. He needed him somebody *in* that house” (115; emphasis in original). Because Laurel has not lived in Mount Salus for many years, she has gradually become an outsider in the eyes of the community, and apparently, the ladies believe that this may be the most convincing argument for Laurel to finally move back again. When Miss Adele claims that there is no reason why Laurel, who “has no other life” (112), should not stay in Mount Salus, she belittles Laurel’s job as a designer as well as her widowhood and childlessness. Miss Tennyson displays a similar lack of understanding of Laurel’s creative mind, asking her, “Who’s going to kill you if you don’t draw those pictures?” (113). After all, according to Miss Tennyson, the inheritance Laurel’s father left her would enable her to quit her job for good instead of “going back to that life of labor” (112), as Miss Tennyson points out.

Thomas D. Young comments on this sequence that in it “several divergent strains come together and all of them seem to indicate how certain forces once drew the residents of Mount Salus into a tightly knit community” (*Past* 107). With Becky long-gone, and the bridge party disrupted, the ladies seem to be united in their critique of both Fay and Laurel, who lead lives that are entirely different from those of the ladies and Becky. Having – or, at least wanting – a family and a life among this close-knit community is, according to the ladies, normal and expected behavior, especially for a young widow like Laurel. Although the ladies are eager to criticize both her and Fay, the two women who are essentially outsiders, in their immediate vicinity the ladies must accept the fact that modernity finds its way into Mount Salus slowly, for instance through the bridesmaids. They are all married and have families, and reside in the new part of the town, as opposed to their parents who “still lived within a few blocks of the McKelva house” (Welty 123). Even the Mount Salus cemetery now has a



new part, which Laurel is unaware of upon her arrival (90). At night she can hear the noise from a highway that had not been there before: “The quiet of the Mount Salus night was a little different now. She could hear traffic on some new highway, a sound like the buzzing of one angry fly against a windowpane, over and over” (57). The highway, like the new part of the cemetery – where Judge McKelva is being buried – is symbolic for modernity which has found its way into Mount Salus: “There were already a few dozen graves here, dotted uniformly with indestructible plastic Christmas poinsettas” (90-91). During the funeral, Laurel can even hear the noise and feel the vibrations on the ground from the cars rushing by in the distance (92). All graves look the same, and artificial plants adorn them. This is especially ironic, because a cemetery is by definition a place of mortality and finiteness, while the plastic poinsettas are put there to last. Symbolic of Fay, these are artifacts that a passionate gardener like Becky, who is buried in the old part of the cemetery, would not have accepted.

### **3.4.2 Family and relationships**

Already the title of the novel is closely connected to family and interpersonal relationships, and Welty presents different forms of these concepts throughout the narrative. While the eponymous daughter’s family dissolves completely with the death of her father, *The Optimist’s Daughter* also depicts families, or perhaps even clans, who are close both in emotional and spatial terms, such as the Chisoms, or who support one another in times of need, and even extend this helpfulness to outsiders – the Dalzells. These families, both from the South but outside of Mississippi, are contrasted with the Mount Salus community. There seem to be no clans in the town – the elderly ladies, for instance, are widowed – but either small families or married couples, and thus they form elective affinities with other people from Mount Salus. This is true of the aforementioned ladies, and the bridesmaids, but, they also rather spontaneously form these affinities as the occasion warrants, as is illustrated when the community jointly prepares for the funeral.

The eponymous daughter herself is the only character who in the end is completely without a family. Her mother died over a decade earlier, her father’s burial is central to the narrative, and she is an only child. Additionally, Laurel has been a widow for many years, and thus returns to Chicago at the end of her sojourn the only survivor of the already small McKelva family. Her difficult relationship with Fay renders another visit to Mount Salus

improbable. Over the years, since Laurel has been living in Chicago, she slowly transformed into an outsider, whose only actual connection to Mount Salus was her family. When her father passes away, she loses the only remaining reason for visiting. At the funeral, “[e]verybody remained seated while the family – the family was Laurel, Fay, and the Bullocks – walked back up the aisle first, behind the casket” (88-89), as is tradition. Interestingly, even the McKelvas’ maid Missouri, like the Bullocks, appears to have a special relationship with Laurel. They display their affection for one another openly, and each comforts the other when needed. After Laurel’s long absence from Mount Salus the two first meet again on the morning of the funeral. When Missouri expresses disbelief at the news that Judge McKelva has passed away, Laurel “[goes] to her and [takes] her in her arms” (59). Later, after the funeral ends, it is Missouri who offers consolation, and “Laurel, letting them go ahead, walked into the waiting arms of Missouri” (92). Notably, the novel’s flexible understanding of “family” does not exclude the McKelvas’ long-serving maid – the only black character in the novel – who offers comfort, and receives it as well. In *The Optimist’s Daughter*, family is, and must be a fluid and changeable concept, because Fay is reluctant to offer support.

While the troubled relationship between Laurel and Fay is not commented on very often, the few observations that are offered do present a detailed image. Laurel first met Fay when she married Judge McKelva, one and a half years before the story in the novel begins (26). Apparently, Laurel tried to befriend her, yet “Fay’s response to her kiss had been to say, ‘It wasn’t any use in you bothering to come so far.’ She’d smiled as though she meant her scolding to flatter” (26-27). The two women do not meet again until Laurel is summoned to New Orleans in order to accompany her father, and Fay, on a hospital visit. In quite the same fashion, Fay expresses her lack of understanding why Laurel would even stay at the hospital with them: “No point in you staying just because the doctor said so” (16). Nevertheless, Laurel remains in New Orleans and, with Fay, cares for her father in alternating shifts (17). Although both women are staying at the same hotel, they “were hardly ever in the same place at the same time, except during the hours when they were both asleep in their rooms at the Hibiscus” (18). Even though they occupy adjoining rooms, Laurel does not seek contact with Fay. Possibly fearing it might end in a confrontation, Laurel accepts the fact that her relationship with Fay resembles that of complete strangers. The narrative offers an explanation: “Where there was no intimacy, Laurel shrank from contact; she shrank from that thin board and from the vague apprehension that some night she might hear Fay cry or laugh like a stranger at something she herself would rather not know” (18). Her behavior in this situation is symptomatic of the way that Laurel’s family handles difficult situations. When

Judge McKelva lies in the hospital waiting for his eye to heal, “[h]e lay as was asked of him, without moving. He never asked about his eye. He never mentioned his eye” (18). It appears as though he would rather ignore the issue altogether than deal with a difficult situation, and “Laurel followed his lead” (18), as “both knew, and for the same reason, that bad days go better without any questions at all” (19). Father and daughter have spent years caring for Becky, yet they have not learned to properly address painful issues in order to eventually overcome them.

Nevertheless, remembering her very first encounter with Fay, Laurel attempts to establish a relationship with her. After all, both women worry about a loved one recovering from surgery and might bond over this painful experience. When Laurel visits Fay’s hotel room one night, her intentions are to learn more about Fay, to get to know her, and thus understand her better, but Fay has a different idea entirely. Laurel tries to create an intimate atmosphere by asking about Fay’s family. Fay reveals that she left Texas for Mississippi because she does not have a family anymore, but used to be very close to them (27). As Fay puts it, her entire family having passed away is the only reason why she relocated to Mississippi: “Oh, I wouldn’t have run off and left anybody that needed me. Just to call myself an artist and make a lot of money” (28). This harsh comment on Laurel’s choice to live in Chicago and pursuing a career effectively ends her attempts to bond with Fay: “Laurel did not try again, and Fay never at any time knocked at her door” (28). Pronouncing her entire family dead enables Fay to appear both strong and pitiable at the same time. On the one hand, she is making her way through life on her own, having even left Texas, while, on the other hand, Fay appears pitiable because she is all alone in the world, especially when her husband dies. Upon her and Laurel’s arrival at the house, on the eve of the funeral, many friends of Judge McKelva have assembled to offer their condolences and helping hands. Instead of appreciating the support, however, Fay seizes the opportunity to point, once again, to her being all alone: “‘Well it’s evermore unfair. I haven’t got anybody to count on but me, myself, and I.’ Fay’s eyes travelled to the one man in the gathering and she accused him. ‘I haven’t got one soul.’ She let out a cry, and streaked up the stairs” (54; emphasis in original). Although this statement illustrates her self-centeredness, Major Bullock sympathizes with her immediately: “Poor little woman, she’s the helpless kind” (54). On the next day, her story about not having a family turns out to be a lie, when the Chisoms collectively appear at the wake to mourn Judge McKelva. Immediately, Laurel feels as if she knows them already: “Fay had said they didn’t even exist, and yet it seemed to Laurel that she had seen them all before” (68). The Chisoms remind her of the family she had met at the hospital in New Orleans, the

Dalzells.

Both family clans presented in *The Optimist's Daughter* appear to be quite traditional, and the respective members of both clans maintain a close relationship to one another. Laurel is reluctant to accept the Dalzells' open and talkative nature, as opposed to Fay, who grew up in a very similar environment. Laurel and Fay meet the Dalzells at the hospital in New Orleans. They are there to offer support for their own father, Mr. Dalzell, who shares a room with Judge McKelva (20). He seems to be in an even more dire condition, being "blind, and nearly deaf" (20) and frequently confusing the Judge with his son Archie Lee (21, 23). Laurel does not even acknowledge the Dalzells, but instead chooses to deal with her worries for her father all alone. She notices that before he fell ill, her father "would have smiled" at the ramblings of old Mr. Dalzell, but now he "had no words to spare" (21). The illness makes Judge McKelva a more quiet character, and Laurel notes that "[h]is old curiosity would have prompted a dozen specific questions about [her life and her work]. [...] Her father left his questions unasked" (18-19). Although his demeanor seems positive to Mrs. Martello, the nurse, who calls the Judge "good as gold" (21), is unsettling for Laurel. Consequently, she might ignore the Dalzells because their father's presence makes the change in her own father apparent.

Fay, however, readily connects with the Dalzells. She herself originates from a large family with whom she is quite close, as is illustrated when they make their appearance at the funeral. She first encounters the Dalzells through Mr. Dalzell, who reminds her of her own grandpa, and so Fay is "not sorry to have him in here. He's company" (28). Later, after Fay tries to get the Judge to "snap out of it" because it is her birthday (32), and is removed from his room, she is comforted by Mrs. Dalzell. Wearing her bedroom slippers, "holding a half-eaten banana in her free hand" (34), Mrs. Dalzell immediately conveys that her family must be used to spending much time at hospitals. As Laurel tries to reach out to Fay once again, believing her father is about to die, Fay simply "spun around, darted out her head, and spat at her" (35). Upon this overreaction, Mrs. Dalzell tries to bring about peace between the two women: "Why don't you-all take a seat and save your strength? Just wait and let them come tell you about it. They will" (35). She appears to be a motherly figure, and shares her experience. Fay feels comfortable among the clan, who is not unlike her own family, and so she takes a seat "among five or six grown men and women who all had the old woman's likeness. Their coats were on the table in a heap together, and open shoeboxes and paper sacks stood about on the floor; they were a family in the middle of their supper" (35). The Dalzells apparently try to make the best of a bad situation, and they are prepared to spend long hours at

the hospital with Mr. Dalzell. Laurel, meanwhile, wanders about the hospital, choosing to spend the time alone rather than among “[t]he family [who] never let the conversation die” (36). They seem determined to pass the time and lighten the mood, because apparently they have spent quite some time at the hospital themselves. When Mrs. Dalzell prepares to go into her father’s room, she announces, “I declare, I’m getting to where I ain’t got much left to say to Dad myself” (37).

The Dalzells, living in Mississippi and proud to say that most of their family “claims Fox Hill” (36), inquire of Fay how she likes Mississippi – which they think “is the best state in the Union” (38) – to which she replies, “I guess I’m used to Texas” (37). Nonetheless, she apparently finds it important to establish a connection to the Dalzells by adding that she does have relatives in Mississippi (38). As their conversations continue, “as if their vying and trouble-swapping were the order of the day, or the order of the night, in the waiting room, they were all [...] unaware of the passing of the minutes” (38). Immediately before Dr. Courtland brings news of Judge McKelva’s death, a comical situation arises among the Dalzells. When Mrs. Dalzell exits her father’s room and complains that the nurses do not give him any water to drink, she states that next time the family would “go in there all together and pour it down him” (39). As the other children chime in, she continues: “‘No, if Dad’s going to die I ain’t going to let him die wanting water!’ she insisted, and the others began raggedly laughing. ‘We’ll pour it down him!’ cried the mother. ‘He ain’t going to stand a chance against us!’ The family laughed louder, as if there could be no helping it. Some of the other families joined in” (39-40). Their joking illustrates well how laughter, arising from a serious issue, is used by the Dalzells to ease their pain at least momentarily, and find amusement even in an emotionally tiring situation. Interestingly, this is the last time the family is mentioned at all, and immediately afterwards the mood becomes more serious again, when Dr. Courtland steps aside with Fay and Laurel to inform them of the Judge’s passing (40).

The Dalzells are easy for Fay to connect to for various reasons. Because she too originates from a large family, she can relate well to them. Furthermore, she mentions her connection to Mississippi, the Dalzells’ home state. Nevertheless, her need for attention is an important aspect in this situation as well. At the time she had still claimed not to have a family, which she also talks about with the Dalzells. However, Fay mentions that her grandfather, originating in Bigbee, Mississippi, “died in [her] arms” (38). During the funeral, of course, this is exposed as a lie, when her grandfather walks in after the Chisom family, and introduces himself to Laurel (77). Fay’s attention-seeking is also illustrated when she interrupts a story told by Mrs. Dalzell. At the mention of an acquaintance of the family who

was able to leave the hospital after two weeks, Fay exclaims, “Two weeks! Guess how long they’ve held us here!” (39) with no regard to the actual point of the story. Mrs. Dalzell, however, does not allow Fay to interrupt her. Instead, she ignores Fay’s outcry and continues telling her story. Overall, the Dalzells are shown to lend a shoulder to cry on, as they must be familiar with how Fay feels, spending her time by the side of her sick husband. They readily demonstrate their sympathies and try to lighten the mood with conversation. Fay accepts their offer, feeling a connection to the clan, yet she probably views them as a welcome audience as well. This type of behavior on her part can be witnessed again later on, during the funeral.

As mentioned above, Laurel is reminded of the Dalzells when she meets Fay’s family, the Chisoms, at her father’s funeral. Apparently, Judge McKelva wrote down their address, should the surgery be unsuccessful (84), and Major Bullock “summoned ‘em up without any trouble at all” (68). The Chisoms, the other family clan presented in the novel, attract everybody’s attention from the first time they are mentioned. Mrs. Pease notices them as they approach the house, wondering “Now what could *they* want” (66; emphasis in original). The entire community of mourners seems alarmed, and “[e]veryone turned, and those seated stood up, as two equally fat women and a man walked past Miss Adele into the parlor” (66). The Chisoms comment audibly on the house, wondering where Fay – or rather Wanda Fay, which is her actual name – might be, as they casually look into the coffin in passing (66-67). Only after they have talked about Laurel right in front of her, does Mrs. Chisom properly introduce her family to Laurel. Like the Dalzells, the Chisoms very much identify with their hometown, thus Mrs. Chisom is intent on mentioning that she herself is “from Madrid Texas. [...] And this is some of my other children – Sis, from Madrid, Texas, and Bubba, from Madrid, Texas” (67). Mrs. Chisom is quick to notice Laurel’s wedding ring, and upon Mrs. Pease’s revelation that Phil Hand died in the war, Mrs. Chisom concludes that Laurel “ain’t got father, mother, brother, sister, husband, chick nor child. Not a soul to call on” (69). Although the mayor comes to Laurel’s aide, mentioning that the funeral guests are “Laurel’s oldest friends,” Mrs. Chisom is quick to share her opinion on their value: “Friends are here today and gone tomorrow, [...]. Not like your kin” (69).

The Chisoms have in fact brought many of their kin to the funeral, who maintain a close relationship to one another. Mrs. Chisom is glad to elaborate: “Bubba pulled his trailer right up in my yard when he married and Irma can string her clothesline as far out as she pleases. Sis here got married and didn’t even try to move away. Duffy just snuggled in” (70). The family’s closeness is further emphasized by their behavior and some of their statements, which clearly echo Fay’s sentiments as well. When the mourners speak about Judge McKelva,

after the Chisoms have dominated conversation with stories about themselves, Mrs. Chisom chimes in:

“Too bad he ever elected to go to the hospital,” old Mrs. Chisom said. “If he knew what ain’t funny” “I tell you, what they let go on in hospitals don’t hardly bear repeating,” said Sis. “Irma says the maternity ward in Amarillo would curl your hair.” “Doctors don’t know what they’re doing. They just know how to charge,” said Bubba. “And you know who I wouldn’t trust for a blessed second behind my back? Nurses!” cried Mrs. Chisom. (72-73)

Apparently, only when her husband fell ill, and the doctors diagnosed that he would not recover, according to Mrs. Chisom, “[t]hey was guessing right, that time, the doctors was” (76). The Chisoms’ opinion of doctors and hospitals explains Fay’s distrust of Dr. Courtland and Mrs. Martello at the New Orleans hospital. Naturally, she would share the world view of her family. Much like she tried to draw attention to herself with that statement, the Chisoms are quick to do the same at the Judge’s funeral. Although Mount Salus’ physician, Dr. Woodson, tries to lead the conversation towards episodes of the Judge’s life, the Chisoms begin sharing tales from their own clan, and once again all eyes are on them. Mrs. Chisom talks about her son Roscoe’s suicide, emphasizing how glad she was that “he didn’t do nothing any more serious to harm his looks. He hated more than anything having remarks made against him. In his coffin he was pretty as a girl” (75). An appealing outward appearance seems to be of importance to Mrs. Chisom, who comments in a similar fashion on Judge McKelva, when she first sees him in his coffin: “Not a bit wasted. I’m proud for you, Wanda Fay” (71). After repeatedly drawing attention to themselves and dominating the conversation rather than honoring the memory of the deceased, another member of the Chisom clan unexpectedly enters the parlor.

Grandpa Chisom, residing not in the family’s trailers in Texas, but in Bigbee, Mississippi, brings calmness and dignity to the scene, and thus provides a sharp contrast to the rest of his family. Although his young grandson Wendell immediately runs up to him and hugs him, and Sis cries out when she sees him, old Mr. Chisom does not seem to acknowledge them. First, he addresses Laurel and presents her with a gift, “Bigbee pecans. I thought you might not harvest their like around here” (77). Only after “carefully dust[ing] his hands” (77), does he approach the coffin, commenting merely “I reckon he stood whatever it was long enough, [...]. I’m sorry he had to go while he’s so many miles short of home” (77). Mr. Chisom is a more solemn character than the other Chisoms, and his behavior is more appropriate. Thus, he differs significantly from the clan, and his presence – as well as the fact that he is from Mississippi, which the other Chisoms have left long ago to live in Texas –

creates a clear division between the characters from Texas, the Chisoms, and those from Mississippi, the community of Mount Salus. The latter are clearly devoted to honor the memory of Judge McKelva, while the Chisom clan seems dedicated to disrupting conversation with tales about themselves. This may be rooted in the fact that the family did not know Judge McKelva personally, yet still wishes to be part of the gathering of a community which has appeared almost completely to support the only child of the deceased. While the same is true of Mr. Chisom, his attitude is entirely different. Approaching the mourning daughter before anybody else illustrates his respect of tradition, as does the small gift he brings for her. When Wendell and Mrs. Chisom question him who the deceased Judge might remind him of – both having a clear idea of what they want to hear from him –, he hardly reacts (77). His appearance is brief but memorable, because of his solemn behavior. Mr. Chisom does not look for attention from the group of mourners, but rather pays his respects and quietly moves on.

In contrast to the Chisoms and the Dalzells, who are presented as clans, the people in Mount Salus lead quite different lives. The family clans appear to be very close-knit, like a community of their own, and are similar in a number of aspects. The family members live close to one another, even travel together, yet they also express solidarity through their emotional support of one another. In comparison, the Mount Salus folk are more reserved, and their community operates on a smaller scale. The small families of Mount Salus belong to “the genteel upper or upper middle class of Laurel’s and her parents’ upbringing” which also includes Miss Courtland, Miss Tennyson, and Mrs. Pease (Wimsatt 135). This upper class is not characterized by clans but rather by families with few children, such as the McKelvas and their only daughter Laurel. Mary Ann Wimsatt comments that “[t]ownspeople belonging to this class exhibit strong community solidarity, which has both a fortunate and an unfortunate side, and a corresponding distrust of outsiders – particularly of Fay, the Judge’s widow” (135). Interestingly, this distrust occasionally extends to Laurel as well. The fact that that she left Mount Salus many years ago and only returns on occasion is frowned upon by the community, who is unable to completely refrain from attempting to convince Laurel to move back to Mount Salus, although she has lived outside of the South for many years.



### 3.4.3 Death

A major part of *The Optimist's Daughter* is concerned with the arrangements for the funeral, and the ceremony itself. These sequences illustrate, in more detail than any other sequence described, how the Mount Salus community functions. However, the fact that the characters depicted belong to the upper class, as Mary Wimsatt has stated (135), limits the significance of their actions when compared to the entire Mount Salus population. This small community nevertheless appears to be very close, and expresses this closeness in their dedicated efforts to pay their respects to a valued member of their community, and to make things easier for Laurel, and – by extension – for Fay, who has little knowledge of or regard for the funeral traditions in Mount Salus.

The first instance of this community's spirit is a statement by Dr. Nate Courtland in the hospital in New Orleans, immediately after the Judge's death. He is aware that this is a difficult time for the only child and the widow, and he promises Laurel to call his sister Adele in Mount Salus to inform her of the Judge's passing (Welty 42). On the one hand, this spares Laurel and Fay the painful act of having to spread the news themselves. On the other hand, Dr. Courtland calling ahead enables the community to take matters into their own hands and begin with the funeral preparations until Fay and Laurel return. The two bring the deceased back to his hometown on the train, and upon their arrival at the station are met by a group of Mount Salus citizens. "All six of Laurel's bridesmaids, as they still called themselves," (49) come to pick up Laurel and Fay, as does Adele Courtland – notified by her brother in New Orleans. She approaches Laurel, calling her by a childhood nickname, "Polly," offering comfort and creating a homely atmosphere. Fay, however, meets the group with irritation, almost offense. To her question, "What are you here for?", Tish Bullock simply responds that they came to accompany them home (49). Among the people awaiting Laurel and Fay is also "a stranger in a business suit" (49), the undertaker, Mr. Pitts, who addresses Laurel about the funeral arrangements (50). She obviously does not remember him, yet Mr. Pitts had also handled her mother Becky's funeral. Immediately when "the first Mrs. McKelva" (50) is mentioned, Fay approaches Mr. Pitts, urging him to "do [his] business" with her instead (50). The harsh tone in which Fay meets the undertaker's quiet and dignified behavior prompts Tish to wink at Laurel: "It was a moment before she remembered: this was the bridesmaids' automatic signal in moments of acute joy or distress, to show solidarity" (50).

When the group arrives at the McKelva house, Laurel sees it is "streaming light from

every window, upstairs and down” (51), and the road is full of parked cars – apparently, there are quite a few visitors. Once Laurel enters the house, it becomes apparent how the Mount Salus community supports her during her time of grief: “Half a dozen – a dozen – old family friends had been waiting here in the house. They came out into the hall from the rooms on both sides as Laurel walked in. Most of them had practiced-for smiles on their faces, and they all called her ‘Laurel McKelva,’ just as they always called her” (51). Laurel notices that the group gathered at the house are, with the exception of Major Bullock, all women, and suspects that “out of some sense of delicacy” everybody left their husbands at home (52). The bridesmaids prepared a buffet, and while Laurel sits at the dinner table and is waited on by everybody, Miss Tennyson tries “to make her eat” (53). Judge McKelva’s friends look after Laurel and offer their support from the first moment that she is back in Mount Salus. Yet, their efforts are lost on Fay. She may not be familiar with these traditions, and refuses to appreciate them. Instead, when Fay enters the house, she immediately comments: “Well, I didn’t know I was giving a reception” (53). Rather than valuing the work that the group does, Fay decides to confront them, which prompts some of the group to explain, sounding almost as though they make excuses as to why they are there. Becky’s old Garden Club, for instance, insisted on showing their support already on the eve of the funeral, and comes to the house “for Laurel’s mother’s sake” (53), bringing flowers from their own gardens. When Laurel explains that the visitors are “exactly the ones he’d have counted on to be here in the house to meet us” (54), Fay simply concludes this is “unfair,” since she herself does not have “anybody to count on” (54).

The last visitor left in the house that evening is the McKelvas’ neighbor, Adele Courtland. Her close, long-standing relationship to the family and her authoritative nature are expressed through her actions in the episode immediately before she leaves the house. Miss Adele cleans up, washes the dishes, and puts everything back in its proper place, preparing the house for the funeral the following day (55-57). After Adele leaves, “by the kitchen door, as always and stepp[ing] home through the joining backyards” (57), Laurel notices that someone of the group had even turned on a light in her bedroom. Apparently, the group is dedicated to make this difficult time as easy on Laurel as they possibly can.

#### 4. Lee Smith: *Oral History* (1983)

Lee Smith's novel is remarkable not only in its narrative technique and detailed depiction of life in the Appalachian mountains, but, as Martha Billips has noted, among Smith's oeuvre it is "the work that marks this important and prolific contemporary writer's 'coming of age' as an artist. In both the scope of the story it tells and the experimental nature of its narrative technique, *Oral History* exceeds anything Smith had previously produced and anticipates the high caliber of her mature work" ("A Deleted Manuscript" 417). The novel consists of fourteen individual narratives eight first-person narrators and one third-person narrator, telling five different stories, three of which use focalizers. The ensemble of narrators presents a varied, although mostly unreliable, account of the lives of an extended family over three generations.

While both Spencer and Welty have allowed themselves to be inspired by their own lives for the novels analyzed in this thesis, Lee Smith has claimed in an interview that she had already "used up [her] life" (Hill, "Lee Smith" 33), and thus had nothing left to be included in her novel *Oral History*. Nevertheless, a few parallels remain, as will become apparent through the analysis in this chapter. Lee Smith's novel offers a wide variety of viewpoints from which to be analyzed, yet the aspect of community in the mountains is especially striking due to the contrasts provided by one specific type of character: the outsider. In *Oral History*, Lee Smith explores this type via two figures: Richard Burlage and Jennifer. Their position as outsiders singles them out, and potentially enables them to catch a unique glimpse of the dynamics of the mountaineer community. However long they each are exposed to the community, both Richard and Jennifer eventually fail at comprehending this micro-culture because their view is filtered through their prejudices.

What is significant about the community itself is the way in which specific characters are functioning in specific ways in the community. From unique storytellers, such as Granny Younger and Sally, to individuals preserving musical tradition, such as Little Luther, to the curious Reverend Aldous Rife, who knows what it means to be an outsider in this small mountain community – the entirety of the narratives and their being contrasted against each other accounts for a close documentation of events of everyday life in Appalachia over several generations, Smith "adapts the traditional southern story to a more human scale, one more closely tied to historical fact and cultural verisimilitude" (Parrish 575). A more negative interpretation comes from Fred Hobson, who argues that the conclusion of *Oral History* "is a

blending of cultures in the worst possible manner: the indigenous folk culture turns into a cheap imitation of itself for the sake of commercial mass culture” (30). Indeed, it appears as though the future for Hoot Owl Holler is bleak at best, and in fact worse than Richard Burlage could have imagined when he first philosophizes how the inevitable industrialization will alter the mountain region. However, Betina Entzminger offers a more positive outlook, stating that it is Sally who “has the final word on the Cantrell mystery” (168). Although the second part of the frame narrative comes even after Sally’s narration of the story ends, it is her detailed and continuously down-to-earth interpretation that lingers with the reader and provides for a cautiously optimistic conclusion.

#### **4.1 Biography of Lee Smith**

Lee Smith was born on November 1, 1944, in Grundy, Virginia, a “small town in the coal-mining region of southwest Virginia” (Broadwell 420). While her father’s ancestors were deeply rooted in the area, having lived there for many decades, her mother originated from the “aristocratic east coast of Virginia” (420) and had “pretensions” (Entzminger 154), according to Smith. The great geographical and cultural distance to the town of Grundy rendered Lee Smith’s mother a foreigner in the eyes of the mountaineers, a notion which is also represented in *Oral History*, through the character of Richard Burlage, who, like Smith’s mother, is a teacher. An interest in literature, both in reading and writing, was noticeable in Lee Smith already when she was still a child. After graduating from high school, Smith enrolled in Hollins College located in Roanoke, Virginia, where she attended courses on creative writing and first read Eudora Welty’s short stories, which inspired her to use her own experiences as inspiration for her literature. Joseph Bryant has described Lee Smith’s work as “a series of portraits for contemporary Appalachia somewhat analogous to those Eudora Welty produced for Mississippi” (204). At Hollins College Lee Smith was instructed as well as mentored by Louis Rubin, whom she credits as having had tremendous influence on her writing (Snodgrass 144). In her senior year, Smith won a fellowship awarded by the Book of the Month Club for her novel *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* which was published one year after her graduation in 1967 (Broadwell 421).

Subsequently, Smith and her husband, the poet James E. Seay, relocated frequently, depending on any changes of location Seay’s career required. Meanwhile, Smith worked for

newspapers and in schools; during a three year long maternity leave she raised the couple's two sons and her writing came to a temporary halt. After this hiatus, Smith wrote and published various novels, such as *Something in the Wind* (1971) and *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980) as well as a short story collection entitled *Cakewalk* (1981), which comprises stories Smith had written over the course of eleven years (Broadwell 421-22).

In 1981, Smith began teaching at North Carolina State University, during the time her first marriage ended. Two years later, Smith published *Oral History* – her first novel which did not originate as a short story. Again two years afterwards, *Family Linen* was published, with a dedication to Smith's second husband, Hal Crowther. The personal difficulties Smith lived through at the time inspired her seventh novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), which received much critical praise. In the same year Lee Smith also won the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature (Broadwell 422-23).

Smith's personal experiences – predominantly her divorce – inspired her second short story collection, *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* (1990). After receiving the PEN/Faulkner Award and a Lyndhurst Foundation Grant, Smith accepted a position with the Center for Documentary Studies in the South at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. The folk theme, already thoroughly ventilated in *Oral History* and *Family Linen*, was again employed in Smith's novel *The Devil's Dream*, published in 1992 (Broadwell 423). Subsequently, Smith published two more short story collections, entitled *News of the Spirit* (1997) and *Mrs. Darcy and the Blue-Eyed Stranger* (2010), as well as the novels *Saving Grace* (1995), *The Christmas Letters* (1996), *The Last Girls* (2003), *On Agate Hill* (2006), *Guests on Earth* (2013) and *Blue Marlin* (2020), which remains her most recent novel (<http://www.leesmith.com>).

## 4.2 Setting

Smith's novel *Oral History* is set in the Appalachian mountains, the author's own home turf. The fictional areas where the story's action takes place are Hoot Owl Holler, residence of the Cantrell clan, and the small towns of Tug and Black Rock, locations of the general store and schoolhouse. It is a rural, mountainous region, inhabited mostly by a poor white population and occasionally disturbed by the visiting outsider characters, Richard, and, later, Jennifer. The extended family of the Cantrells and their neighbors are located far up in the mountains

on farms, which are apparently their only source of income. Only Sally towards the end of the narrative mentions going to town for work, yet most characters are expected to stay and help out on the family farms. Thus, the community's children often quit school after attending only a few years, which is an issue also addressed in Richard Burlage's diary: "[...] most of them quit at about age eleven. The girls are put to work in house and field for a year or two until they marry, which they do at appallingly tender ages. The boys go to work on the farms or in the last few of the lumber camps [...], or they are sent down into the coal mines" (Smith 130).

One of the most significant alterations to the otherwise secluded mountain region reflects also what Fred Hobson has defined as a characterizing trait of Southern literature: the influence of popular culture on the "characters' perceptions of place, family, community, and even myth" (10). The context of Smith's works is usually modern popular or mass culture which is sharply contrasted with "an older, organic Appalachian folk culture" (23). Similarly, Linda Tate has observed that, despite Smith's focus on the life in and culture of the Appalachian mountains, the author uses as her "main topic the tension between the lively mountain culture of the past and the encroachments of modern, industrialized civilization" (77). This is also true of *Oral History*. Most of the novel is set during a time when the community and its culture are in fact still old and organic, as Hobson has described it. However, various forms of economic exploitation gradually alter the rural area until its entire mythical culture is monetized. After the turn of the century, the increasing industrialization and the Great Depression leave marks on nature and the inhabitants alike. Many decades later Ora Mae and Luther Wade's son Almarine – named after Ora Mae's step-father –, who "has never been one to stand in the way of progress" (Smith 3), turns his ancestors' home into a lucrative business by creating an amusement park around it. In order to achieve his goal, Almarine does not only exploit the mythic family history, he also deliberately employs the very stereotype for which he had in fact criticized Jennifer – the curse that supposedly haunts the old Cantrell cabin in the form of ghost sounds which Jennifer had hoped to find there.

In her biography of Lee Smith, Dorothy Hill mentions that the author had written *Oral History* with a specific, relevant theme in mind: the destruction of a formerly untouched region – including the decline of its original inhabitants –, expedited in order to respond to the demands of the American industries (*Lee Smith* 51). Smith laments the loss, not only of the nature of the Appalachian mountains, but also of the culture, the language, and the longstanding oral tradition of the mountain folk, all of which are integral parts of her fiction – presented in a detailed way in *Oral History* – and which are gradually replaced by and through the influence of popular culture. Nonetheless, before the economic demands can

move in to destroy the Cantrells' home, the community's rituals and traditions are thoroughly celebrated in Smith's descriptions. Returning to Hobson's statement about Southern literature, one may claim that Smith's novel is set in the aforementioned "older, organic Appalachian folk culture" which the contemporary popular culture intrudes on and, in the case of this novel, changes almost beyond recognition.

Conrad Ostwalt detects in Smith's fiction overall a replacement of the organic folk culture by religion (110). However, in *Oral History*, superstition and witchcraft do not disappear completely as time passes and modernization ensues – their history and mythic quality are exploited by Almarine who decides to convert the area into a capitalist project, and thus the formerly mythic past experiences a revival as a tourist attraction based on common stereotypes. Similar to Hobson and Hill, Ostwalt states that Lee Smith's fiction depicts a historical setting and its forced bow to the "intrusions of modernity" (105). With the rural folk culture at its center, the novel contrasts outside influences during two different time periods: in the frame narrative, set in the 1980s, as well as in Richard Burlage's diaries in 1923 and 1934. When Richard Burlage first arrives in the mountains, he captures assumptions about possible developments of the impending modernization in his diary:

I know, although they do not, that I am here at the end of something, that these days soon shall pass from the face of the earth and that these people and all their kind shall pass as well. Construction of roads throughout the remote areas of this county will soon commence – is slated, in fact, for spring. The men who keep their car and trucks now at Wall Johnson's store will drive them straight up to their own doors. These mountains will open up, and much will be gained perhaps, but from the viewpoint of this sojourner, much will be lost as well. (Smith 157)

By the time of his return eleven years later, the economic exploitation of the mountain region is in full swing, and Burlage is confronted with worse conditions than he had expected – extreme poverty, desperation, and a polluted environment. The bank and various stores in Black Rock have gone out of business (257-58), the holler is now known simply as the "Blackey coal camp" (262, 266), and log cabins have been replaced by "[t]iny ugly frame houses and makeshift shacks" (265). The creek is lined with trash, the mountains have been stripped of their woods (266). As Richard continues his drive through the holler in his new car, he attracts the attention of a coal miner. Impulsively, Richard claims he works for the W.P.A. in Charleston, which prompts the poor worker to demand an explanation for the area's devastating economic state (267-68). Desperate and angry, the coal miner eventually uses his rifle to shoot at Burlage's car (269).

The effects of the Great Depression are long gone by the time Jennifer visits her relatives in the mountains. Meanwhile, popular culture is firmly rooted in the region and the Cantrells themselves. Smith's description of the setting including various pop culture references provides a contrast both to the way the area used to be in the past, as well as to Jennifer's expectations of a rural, backwards family of mountaineers. Al's wife Debra, a former "Miss Tug Valley" styles her hair "like a movie star" and wears clothes with silver glitter on them (2). Her sons watch "Magnum" on TV, turning up the volume loud enough to drown out Luther's singing (12), and especially "Roscoe likes TV so much he could watch it all day, he even likes the game shows. That's why he's so smart" (3). Suzy, her little daughter, carries a Charlie's Angel doll (9). However, the influence of popular culture is not restricted to the Cantrell family. It is also apparent in Jennifer's expectations of what the old cabin is like. Jennifer assumes the atmosphere to be comparable to "the stereotyped versions of haunted houses one sees perhaps on late-night TV" (7). Similarly, the tape recorder she places in the cabin, in order to record ghostly sounds, reminds her of "a conscious anachronism in some kind of folklore film on ETV" (8). Jennifer's expectations are shaped by what popular culture has taught her about haunted houses, and it seems that she is deliberately looking for stereotypical signs of the cabin being haunted. Thus, Jennifer writes in her notebook about visiting the "picturesque old homeplace" whose door she opens with a "somewhat melodramatic creaking effect," yet, contrary to her anticipation, the "parlor inside was empty of theatrical cobwebs" (7). This sequence is interpreted by Hobson as Smith's critique of an "over-intellectualizing" of social science. What Jennifer sees on her brief sojourn is familiar to her in an abstract way, "a picture she has seen before (not precisely this picture but this *kind* of picture), one that is more real to her than what she is in fact now seeing" (25; emphasis in original). A similar statement can certainly be made about Richard's diary entries and his quasi-sociological descriptions of the mountaineers whom he encounters as though they are an entirely different species, as will be analyzed below. He makes his own observations 60 years before Jennifer visits the Cantrells. On the train to the mountains, Richard shares a compartment with, as he describes her, "a cumbersome old country woman" (Smith 113). When she offers him some of the food she brought with her, he is utterly surprised and feels "as if this whole encounter were taking place in a badly-made moving picture" (117). Upon his arrival in Claypool Hill, the last stop on his journey from Richmond, he exits the train and remarks that he finds himself in "a town resembling a stage set for a motion picture" (122). Like Jennifer, Richard does not seem open to the experience, but instead compares his impressions to familiar images provided by popular culture.



### 4.3 Characters

The numerous narratives in *Oral History* are presented by an ensemble of characters, whose individual stories and varied ways of storytelling in combination present a detailed story of Appalachian mountain life. The characters embody various roles among the community: some are deeply rooted in it and have specific functions, others are either mere visitors or have left the community to search for an independent life elsewhere. Some characters illustrate through their stories how the region changes and is gradually modernized, yet throughout the novel each narrator presents their own account of only a part of the entire story. Naturally, then, the issue of reliability arises, and truth may not be easy to define, especially where first-person narrators are concerned. As Nancy Parrish has stated, the novel “combines the rich oral heritage of storytelling in the South and the significance of geographical place with a postmodernist perception of truth as being mere subjectivity” (578). In a similar way, Fred Hobson concludes that as the individual narratives progress, “it becomes clear that Smith’s novel is really, in part, about the reliability of oral history itself” (27).

The narrators tell different truths depending on their personal agenda, which is illustrated, particularly through the characters of Granny Younger and Rose Hibbitts, who “emphasize certain facts in order to arrive at certain versions of the truth” (Hobson 28). Whereas the former is intent on presenting herself as an authority, a born narrator, and thus partly acts on vain motives, it is Rose’s story which sheds light on the mechanisms of narration. While other characters who mention Rose and her increasingly strange behavior in their own stories, it becomes obvious that Rose’s narrative may be less reliable than it seems at first. The diaries of Richard Burlage present two snapshots of Hoot Owl Holler at two different points in time – 1923 and 1934 – and thus highlight the drastic economic changes the remote region has undergone, while contrasting how differently the crisis has affected Richard himself. Furthermore, the first journal includes an interesting character who provides some perspective on Richard Burlage and his prejudices towards the mountain folk: Aldous Rife, a disillusioned minister and former outsider, who has lived in the community for over thirty years. Little Luther’s character is, both through his own narrative and the others, presented as an important part of the community. His function is strongly connected to his musicality, which is also a means of storytelling and celebrating tradition. Jennifer, as an outsider, serves no actual purpose to the community in the frame narrative. She lacks any substantial interest in tradition or her family, and instead seems to seek confirmation of her

stereotypes, which results in disappointment when her visit to Ora Mae and Little Luther, whom she wrongly assumes to be her grandparents, proceeds differently than expected. Finally, Sally – whom Hill places among the novel’s “[t]hree major narrators” (*Lee Smith* 53) alongside Granny Younger and Richard Burlage – tells her own, down-to-earth account of the mythic events in the holler, and her sober interpretation as opposed to the other narratives finally emphasizes the subjectivity of truth and the influence of the narrator’s own belief system on their descriptions.

#### 4.3.1 Granny Younger

The novel opens with the story of Almarine Cantrell and his infatuation with Red Emmy, seen as a witch by the community. It is told by Granny Younger, who is an important “preserver of oral culture [which] comes through both in her role as a healer and in her role as a chronicler of community history” (Tate 105). Granny Younger is careful to stylize herself as an authority in the community, emphasizing that she is a wise person: “I know what I know. I know moren most folks and that’s a fact, you can ask anybody” (Smith 17). She is in fact a treasured part of the community, a kind of mother-figure, so that “lots of others just calls her Granny” (204). Especially Almarine values her opinion highly, and sets out to find a wife when Granny Younger tells him to do so, which she finds only natural: “Because of course Almarine went right out and done it, what I said. Everybody does what I say” (29). Soon it becomes apparent that she holds a special position in the community, and thus has certain privileges: “Now you won’t catch me a-carrying no cookpots. But I have borned my share of these folks, and I am an old, old woman, and I aim to do as I please” (30).

Granny Younger is a unique kind of narrator, as she is well-aware of her audience and constructs her story accordingly (Buchanan 335). Granny Younger builds suspense in her story, frequently references important events before going into detail about them, so as to keep the audience on the edge of their seat, while stressing her own – indispensable – role in the events and her authority as a storyteller: “The way I tell a story is the way I want to, and iffен you mislike it, you don’t have to hear” (Smith 30). As the community’s healer she is also present at births or when somebody has fallen ill, performing mythical rituals, such as reciting Bible verses to stop bleeding (21). Conrad Ostwalt has described this as “the confusion of superstition with traditional Christianity” (108). Nevertheless, Granny Younger

is not almighty, and there are instances when her power as a healer is limited: “They called me, of course, and I done what I knowed, but nothing I knowed done any good” (Smith 21). Another interesting fact about Granny Younger’s character, and also about Rhoda Hibbitts who inherits the position as the community healer and gradually takes over (64), is how differently they are viewed in contrast to Red Emmy. Only she is defined to be a witch – due to her red hair, and her tendency to require only little sleep (38, 49). Supposedly, Red Emmy grew up “with ravens, in caves” (41) and “belonged to the devil” (38). Although these are only rumors, as is the curse as such, Red Emmy is seen as a witch, while both Granny Younger and Rhoda Hibbitts, who seem to actually be able to perform magic, are positive figures in the community – perhaps because they use their gift to help their peers.

In her own narrative, Granny Younger, undoubtedly an authoritative character, plays a significant part in creating an atmosphere of both myth and superstition, so as to document the way of life of the extended Cantrell clan. The story highlights her function in the community as the healer, yet simultaneously illustrates that Granny Younger can only prevent tragic events to a certain degree. When it comes to the curse, commonly attributed to Red Emmy, the healer is powerless and can merely watch its effects unfold.

#### **4.3.2 Richard Burlage**

A large part of *Oral History* is made up of a journal written in the winter of 1923/24 by a young teacher, Richard Burlage, who comes to Appalachia in order to educate the local children. Originally from a distinguished family residing in Richmond, Virginia, Richard leaves home temporarily in order to find meaning on what he somewhat dramatically views to be “essentially a pilgrimage, a simple geographical pilgrimage, yes, but also a pilgrimage back through time, a pilgrimage to a simpler era, back – dare I hope it to the very roots of consciousness and belief” (Smith 107). When Richard speaks of “a simpler era,” he likely expects a time without sorrow, a life that is happier and easier because it seems simpler. However, Richard not only views his sojourn in the mountains as a pilgrimage, but is quick to rank himself among “the august company I hereby join: all those pilgrims of yore who have sought, through their travels, a system of belief – who have, at the final destination, found also themselves. I seek no less” (107). This character is not modest and has ambitious goals, which, however, he does not achieve during either visit to the mountains because he keeps

“seeing the mountains through a pedantic filter” (Tate 101). Rather than give in to the actual experience, Richard’s credo is to be rational, a scholar at all times. Interestingly, his brother Victor, with whom he has a heated debate about his impending journey, pinpoints Richard’s main issue: “Your awareness of experiencing any emotion is likely to get in the way of the emotion itself, so that you think about feeling rather than feel” (Smith 110). Victor thus assesses why his brother’s stay in Appalachia is likely to fail.

Interestingly, both narratives told by Richard, in 1923/24 and 1934, are not oral, like the other first-person accounts in the novel. In this way, “Richard is a representative of Richmond and of literate culture [...]. Here is the showdown between Richmond and the mountains, between writing and the spoken word” (Hill, *Lee Smith* 55). The two modes of presentation of the narratives are not the only difference. Throughout his journals, Richard displays his “habit of writing extremely inflated prose” (Billips, “Wild and Various” 37) which immediately sets him off from the other narrators, and thus isolates him in the community. Although he, too, is a Southerner, he could not be any more different. Two worlds collide when he arrives at the Smith Hotel in Black Rock and realizes that the simpler life he set out to seek is not as romantic as he had imagined: “The bed is lumpy, with rumpled unprepossessing sheets. There is one bare hanging lightbulb. [...] Plumbing, one presumes, exists. I must go down the hall, however, and share the facilities with the other boarders of the Smith Hotel. Primitive!” (Smith 126). Despite the fact that he expected a journey to a “simpler era,” Richard is surprisingly oblivious to the reality of life in the Appalachian mountains, and seems to be unable to understand how poor whites live – or perhaps has even been unaware of their existence. The entire experience is a culture shock Richard has to recover from. Yet he sometimes displays a degree of self-reflective thinking, when he writes about himself that “[g]ood intentions so easily disappear, I find, when they come face to face with the exigencies of comfort” (129).

Viewing his sojourn as a pilgrimage, Richard seems to be an attentive observer. Soon he begins to take note of the mountaineers’ language, writing about how he “paced the trail, or ‘trace’ as they say” (141), “was mortified, afraid [Dory] would think I was ‘putting on airs,’ as they say here” (148), and adding “we’re having quite a ‘cold snap,’ as they say” (170). His attention to language and his attempts to use it are signs of his superficial assimilation. As time passes, Burlage remembers his actual purpose and finds himself fulfilled by the task to teach the pupils at his school. He is dedicated to enabling them to put their education to good use, although he is aware that in all likelihood their fate has already been decided for them: “Schoolchildren! the very term conjures up a vision of happy youth, and

although some of the children conform to this ideal, most of these ‘students’ emphatically do not, resembling, instead, wizened and already woebegone grownups who expect nothing more from life than the subsistence their parents have torn from these mountains” (129-30).

He is especially keen on motivating Jink Cantrell, Dory’s brother, whom he finds to be “a funny little fellow” (132), “a child of ten or so years, exceptionally bright and able. So bright, indeed, that I had sent a note home to his parents volunteering to tutor him and one or two others in Latin” (132). Some rare instances seem to keep Richard motivated to teach at the school, and he goes to some lengths for a few gifted students. When Jink is denied tutoring by his parents, Richard rewards him with a book for doing extra homework (162), and he rewards those students who come to school despite particularly nasty weather: “At lunchtime, I had planned a surprise for these few hardy souls who had braved such weather to come to school – Ovaltine!” (163); at Christmas, he shares with them gingerbread and oranges which his mother sent him (181). Richard also finds strategies to teach those whose interest in the subject is not easily sparked when he teaches two brothers how to write in complete sentences by using baseball terms (131). For most of them, however, he feels pity and shows empathy: “[...] among my boys and girls I can already pick out the few who will go on perhaps, and the many others who will stay. It breaks my heart!” (131).

Although there is potential for Richard Burlage to set aside his prejudices and get to know the mountain community on a profound level, his blossoming affair with Dory, beloved daughter of Almarine Cantrell, illustrates that he in fact lacks the ability to genuinely change. The relationship is characterized by Richard’s reversion to continually romanticizing the region, the community, and especially Dory, whom he calls his “mountain girl” (137). He admires her “fresh purity” (153) and “a profound simplicity, such a oneness with the natural things of the earth” (147) which he attributes to her, neglecting the fact that most of this knowledge is less connected to a romanticized “oneness” with nature, but rather is necessary in order to survive in the unforgiving environment. This is illustrated during a brief sequence when they are walking together and Dory picks up a woolly caterpillar from the ground, commenting that its woolliness points to the fact that a harsh winter is approaching (147). The relationship between Dory and Richard also causes tension between Richard and Almarine, which prompts an interesting hybrid character, Aldous Rife, to step in. Eventually, the affair ends when Richard leaves alone for Richmond – despite having quite impulsively promised Dory to take her with him.

A decade later, in 1934, Richard Burlage – meanwhile married and father of two children (261) – briefly revisits the mountain community. In only ten years since his departure

the once essentially virginal land has been industrialized and partly destroyed by strip mines and logging companies. Richard has taken up a new profession and visits the region as a photographer. His second journal is entitled “Richard Burlage – Discourses upon the Circumstances Concerning his Collection of Appalachian Photographs, c. 1934” (256). While he himself believes that he is a completely different person, telling himself that “here was a new man, a confident man, so different from the boy who had left here ten years back” (256), only little has really changed, least of all his attitudes. Thinking back on his first sojourn, he concludes that he “wished – foolish notion – to capture a bit of the past” (256). Although another journey to the past, to a “simpler era” is, according to Richard, not the exact purpose of his trip, it is essentially what he expects it to be. Despite the fact that ten years prior he predicted the changes the area would undergo once it would be thoroughly industrialized, and claims that he himself has changed profoundly in the past decade, he is disappointed that neither the holler, nor Black Rock are exactly the way he left them.

The Depression has rid the population of its already minimal possessions; a fact that Richard experiences first-hand when his new car attracts the anger of a poor worker who believes him to be a government official (268). As Richard drives away, chased by the worker’s gunshots, he decides to visit the old Cantrell home place, so as to perhaps catch a glimpse of Dory. Hidden from her view in the dark, Richard takes a photo of her and her twin daughters, who are actually his; a fact of which he remains unaware (270).

Both diaries of Richard Burlage, despite being written a decade apart, display his narrow-minded, stereotypical view of the mountaineer community. Even though he spends several months in their company, socializes, and makes an effort to help his students learn, Burlage seems immune to altering his prejudices according to the experiences he gains. His opinions, once formed, seem only rarely to change – and if so, usually due to intervention by Aldous Rife. Through the condescending prose throughout his journals, and especially through his affair with Dory, Richard Burlage conveys his true opinion of the mountain folk consistently, and in this way he is similar to the other outsider character in *Oral History*, Jennifer.

### 4.3.3 Aldous Rife

Although only a liminal character, Aldous Rife serves an important role, especially for Richard Burlage. Rife is a Methodist minister who originally came to the community as a circuit rider thirty years earlier, and has since lived among the mountaineers, whom he has come to know fairly well (Smith 137). Thus, the Reverend can be described as a hybrid character – uniting both the views and attitudes of an outsider with a profound insight into the community’s dynamics. As such, Aldous Rife forms a bond with Richard and finds himself advising the young teacher in how to engage with the mountaineers. When approached for guidance by Richard, Aldous is presented as a calm and reasonable character who provides perspective for Richard’s one-dimensional interpretations of the mountain folk. He is mostly featured in Burlage’s first diary, and again appears briefly in a third-person narrative entitled “At the Swan Hotel,” which reveals his affair with Justine Poole, the hotel owner.

In his primary role in *Oral History* he often assists Richard and sheds light on the mountain folk and their behavior, which Richard finds rather odd. After an unusual experience in Hoot Owl Holler – Ora Mae shrieks at Richard and runs away as he approaches the cabin (142) – Richard visits the Reverend in order to receive advice. Ora Mae’s shrieks, Aldous explains, are simply the accustomed way to signal that a foreigner is approaching on the premises, a particularly common practice among moonshiners (150). Aldous Rife informs Richard about the Cantrells’ history and the fact that Almarine and his sons produce corn liquor so as to provide for the family. When Richard quickly dismisses the patriarch as a “common criminal” (150), Aldous reminds him that the Cantrells are a large family that needs to be fed, and the hardships of life in the mountains further complicate the matter, emphasizing that “[n]o man engages in such a business unless he is a desperate man” (151). Rife’s explanations do not only demonstrate his own realistic view on the difficult life in Appalachia, but they also lead Richard to understanding that there is more to the Cantrells than meets the eye. Finally, Richard even acknowledges that “Prohibition, too, must have greatly increased the demand for the product” (151), and thus he gains a more complex picture of the family and the challenges they face.

Aldous Rife’s assimilation to the community is not only depicted through his knowledge and understanding, but also through the vernacular he uses: “And you seen the land up there, and the hardships, and the way they have to live. [...] You can just figger for yourself how much a man can earn by selling his corn at the mill” (150-51). Keen observer

that he is, Richard notes that “Aldous has been among these people so long that when he becomes agitated he reflects their manner of speech” (151). The Reverend’s way of speaking, then, subtly conveys the hybrid quality of his character which goes beyond being a source of information and insight for Richard. As Martha Billips has mentioned, “Aldous Rife understands the people around him in a way that Richard never will; he recognizes the conditions of their lives, and sees them as real and complex individuals, capable of violence and heartache, not merely as primitive or romantic others” (“Wild and Various” 41).

#### **4.3.4 Little Luther Wade**

Luther is a tragic figure in this novel, and similarly to Granny Younger fulfills an important role as an upholder of oral and musical tradition. His tragic aspect begins with his love of Dory, whom he also writes songs for, but who agrees to a relationship only after Richard leaves the holler and she realizes that she is pregnant. Luther is so infatuated with Dory that, in his brief narrative, he even describes how he goes after the train he assumes Richard takes back to Richmond, hinting at planning to kill him with his shotgun (Smith 196-97).

Musically talented and creative, he sings and plays the dulcimer, and comes up with original songs which are known and popular in the entire community. Furthermore, they often accompany chores that are performed together, such as hog killing (242). As his son by Ora Mae, Almarine, grows older, Luther turns to monetizing his talent and they perform together in public, wearing “Western shirts and string ties and cowboy hats exactly alike, [playing] at hoedowns and UMW meetings and political rallies” (309). Fred Hobson has stated that

Folk culture, the most indigenous, should be the most natural, the least self-conscious of the three [i.e. folk culture, mass culture, and high culture], but one realizes at the outset that in a world in which folklorists and oral historians come calling, even that is in danger of becoming acutely stylized and self conscious. Indeed, Little Luther already knows he is something of – as Jennifer calls him – a character. (26)

Little Luther perceiving himself as “a character” and showcasing his act is probably a result of his popularity among the community as a quasi-chronicler of their lives, as well as his touring around with Almarine to the point that they even achieve some popularity in the area. As Linda Tate concludes, “[i]n countless scenes, characters sing, clog, and play guitars, dulcimers and fiddles; the careful reader hears music on every page, music that is an integral part of the daily fabric of this community” (104), and Little Luther is usually a part of it.



### 4.3.5 Jennifer

The frame narrative, set in the late 1980s, focuses on college student Jennifer, who drives to see Ora Mae and Little Luther's family, whom she assumes to be her relatives. She hopes to interview them for an oral history project, yet her motives are clear from the beginning: Jennifer aims at impressing her professor who signals interest in her Appalachian relatives, even though initially "she was embarrassed because she was even so slightly related to people like that" (Smith 6). The artifacts of Appalachian life she looks out for are entirely shaped by her stereotypes: scary ghost stories, eerie sounds in the cabin, and her quaint, folksy relatives who must enjoy their lives because they still live like they did in simpler times (7-9, 11). What she finds, however, are alleged relatives who approach her in a reserved, almost hostile way. This partly is a result of Jennifer's attitude towards the complex family history and the community's natural distrust of strangers (Tate 101).

What Lee Smith unfolds in detail across many pages, chapters, and generations Jennifer seeks to quickly jot down in her notebook "[i]n her tortured student prose" (Donlon 27) in order to present it proudly to her professor. Of the remaining Cantrells it is Ora Mae who seems to have the least understanding for Jennifer's visit and "is not as friendly as someone might have supposed" (10). Furthermore, Ora Mae did her part in ending the curse once and for all by getting rid of Pricey Jane's golden earrings, and thus is far from pleased that somebody wants to dig up the complicated family history again, especially when this person displays ignorance of the mythic culture of the mountain folk.

Through the narrative strategy employed, Jennifer appears through the perspective of a third-person narrator for the most part of the frame story. Yet, because of the notes she takes while she sets up her tape recorder in the cabin, her motivation and self-image are presented directly through her writing, and thus "Jennifer's language alone convicts her. The word 'picturesque' implies detachment, seeing something from the point of view of another culture, having it conform to a particular image in her mind" (Hobson 25). In this sense, she is as much a visitor, a mere tourist, as Richard is, and displays the same kind of ignorance towards the community, thus "fail[ing] to construct appropriate strategies for reading this community" (Tate 100).

#### 4.3.6 Sally

The family of Ora Mae and Little Luther still lives up in the mountains, yet they are not the only remaining Cantrells. Sally, the daughter of Dory and Luther, has a family of her own with her second husband, Roy. Even when she still lived in the Cantrell cabin, she occasionally fled the holler in order to work in Black Rock (Smith 301). Much like Granny Younger, Sally is a gifted storyteller who displays awareness of the fact that “beginnings are never easy to discern, if they exist at all; stories cause pain and, more often, ambivalent feelings” (Tate 108). When Sally was a child, her mother Dory committed suicide (Smith 294), and before she met Roy, Sally was unhappily married to a man who “came from a family up in Ohio that didn’t believe in talking to women and he never said one word” (276) – tragedy, therefore, is not unknown to Sally. Nevertheless, she is not a sentimental person, and her attitude towards life is focused on living in the moment and making the best of any situation with her husband Roy: “Another way we are, Roy and me, is *down to earth*. I’ve always been like that basically and so has Roy, even before we took up with each other. Sometimes we play a little poker with Lois and Ozell Banks and sometimes we go to Myrtle Beach. We don’t want the moon” (276; emphasis in original). Sally’s narrative continuously illustrates that she lacks any illusions about romance and life but is content, and, although her family lives on the fringes of society, she does not seem to mind it (Entzminger 166-67). Sally is convinced that events from the past belong to the past, and are not to be worried about in the present (Smith 331).

Her attitude towards the mythic events that overshadow her family, even the tragic suicide of her mother, is not characterized by superstition, but instead displays a more realistic view: “my whole family is like that. People say they’re haunted and they are – every one of them all eat up with wanting something they haven’t got” (278). Sally attributes the family’s troubled past not to a mysterious curse of any sort, but to an inherent unhappiness or unrest on the part of the persons involved, which clearly distinguishes her from the rest of the Cantrells who remain “in sore conflict with the present” (Eckard 122).

## 4.4 Presentation of community in *Oral History*

In comparison to the other novels analyzed in this thesis, *Oral History* at first glance appears to present a rather loosely structured community, as Hobson has stated (31). This is on the one hand due to the individual narrators who each tell only a part of the story. On the other hand, there seems to be no intricate interaction with neighbors, which may result from the fact that the community is rather small and scattered over a vast region. However, at certain points in the narrative it becomes clear that the individual members of the community do need each other's help. At those times they come together to demonstrate support, be it at births, funerals, or preparing food for the approaching winter.

With the arrival of modern times, the narratives reflect a gradual dissolution of the community, which Hobson attributes to "its relative weakness" because of which "it falls so easily before popular culture" (31). At the end of the narrative no discernible community can be detected anymore, apart from the family of Almarine Cantrell and his parents. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that even a more close-knit community could have entirely prevented the devastating changes, as it is not merely popular culture that appears all of a sudden, as Hobson states – the Great Depression affects the mountaineers as much as do the logging companies who move in to take advantage of the land, and consequently robbing the area of its resources and the mountaineers of their livelihood.

### 4.4.1 Birth and death

When a child is born into this community, Granny Younger is an integral part of various medical procedures, and so she is also there for the birth of both children of Almarine Cantrell and Pricey Jane, Eli and Dory. Like various other events, as described below, childbirth is an opportunity for the community to come together and support each other:

Here's what they do – you ring your bell, and Almarine done it, and all the womenfolks and gals comes from all over, carrying food. There's no little girls can come, nor yet no singular women. They'll eat and they'll drink, and Almarine has got some corn liquor there ready, along with gingerbread Pricey Jane made herself when she figured her time was nigh, and directly they'll dust the baby with dust from between the chimley-rocks, for luck, and they'll take the ax outen under the bed where you put it to cut the pain. (Smith 66)

The rituals surrounding birth are primarily rituals of celebration that are shared with neighbors. However, there are specific rules as to who is allowed to attend – little girls and unmarried women are denied. Food is provided by the visitors and the new parents alike, and as the quote above illustrates, there is also room for superstition so as to bring luck to the family.

Many decades later, when Ora Mae gives birth to her son by Little Luther, Almarine, the times have changed, as Sally describes in her narrative: “[Little Luther] got up and got her bag and I helped him get her down the mountain to the car, which was not easy” (304). Healers have no place in childbirth anymore, the rituals have been replaced by modern medical procedures administered in a hospital, and the new parents drive there in a car.

Although the community congregates on Sundays for church service which is held by Brother Autry Lily (155), weddings and funerals are not performed by him. Instead, the mountaineers wait for the circuit rider to return who “does all the funerals and marrying which has built up over time, since last he came” (90). The community is not conservative where unmarried couples are concerned, and “[y]oung folks just gets them a roof and moves under it and when the circuit rider comes around he makes it legal by saying the words” (60). None of the narratives in the novel elaborate on wedding ceremonies, thus they appear to occur rather unceremoniously. The only exception is Almarine’s wedding to Pricey Jane, for whom he trades a mule to her extended family. This is witnessed by Miss Lucille Aston – like Richard she is originally from Richmond and entirely unfamiliar with the mountaineers’ mentality – who is morally outraged and initiates an impromptu wedding. The ceremony is performed by her brother, a former judge, now old and blind. Although the legality of the ceremony is questionable, Miss Aston is relieved (59-61).

Deaths and funerals in the community, like births, are accompanied by the attendance of the entire community. This is particularly illustrated in the third-person narrative entitled “At the Burying-Ground.” It describes the funerals of Pricey Jane and her son Eli, who died of “dew poison” (81). Granny Younger is present to perform various rituals – after Eli’s death, for instance, she puts two silver coins on his eyes (83). Because only a circuit rider can perform the actual service, funerals are divided up into two parts: first, the burial at the cemetery and later a funeral service (90), which may simultaneously serve as a memorial service for other relatives who had died earlier, and may be “preached” (95) even years later. By the time of Pricey Jane and Eli’s service, for instance, Almarine already has a son with his new partner Vashti Cantrell, his brother’s widow (103). Nevertheless, Almarine is dedicated to his deceased spouse’s memory, and so he manufactures “a little lattice burying-house

above her grave to keep out wolves, and [...] Joe Johnson who had the learning and the skill had carved her name PRICEY JANE CANTRELL on a slab of fine-grained oak he brung from home a-purpose and nailed it over the door” (90).

For the mountaineers, a burial is a time-consuming effort, as the cemetery is located on top of a mountain. Thus “[i]t [takes] them all morning to climb the mountain, with Almarine leading the way” (95), “the men go to form one group and the women another. The littlest children play back by the trees” (99). Apparently, in this community funerals are not solemn events, and it is not unusual for a rather casual atmosphere to develop: “You have to come to a funeral but you don’t have to listen too close, it ain’t expected, it ain’t like meeting. These folks have been dead a while” (100). Consequently, while ascending the mountain, the mourners talk, speculate about Red Emmy’s death, and “[s]ome of the men leave the group for a little drink or a hand of cards down in the woods; the women move back and forth tending to children” (99). This exuberance also extends to the circuit rider’s son who “goes off down the mountain a piece, pursuing a Ramey girl” (100). Overall, the funeral seems to be an opportunity for the community to socialize.

As time passes, the burials change as well, which is best illustrated through the death of Pearl – Jennifer’s mother and one of the twin daughters of Dory and Richard. Even though Pearl is buried on Hoot Owl Mountain, along with her ancestors, the influence of modern times is clearly visible. The mourners no longer walk up the mountain, but instead drive in their cars – even the preacher drives a truck to the cemetery. Furthermore, the community seems to have decreased over the years, as Sally describes: “It was Pappy and Ora Mae, Al and Debra – Maggie couldn’t be there, it cost too much to fly, and Billy wouldn’t get out of the rocker – and Roy and Davy and me. Lewis Ray, of course, couldn’t make it” (328). While the entire community attended Pricey Jane and Eli’s funeral service, they no longer make an effort when Pearl is buried. This is probably connected to the fact that Pearl’s generation is the first to turn their backs on the community and move out of the holler, which was unthinkable for their parents. As Sally describes it, “[a]ll of us grew up and left” (306). Tragically, Pearl is accompanied only by part of her family – neither her twin sister, nor her husband and her daughter Jennifer make the journey to Appalachia (327).

#### 4.4.2 Religion and myth

Religious practices in *Oral History* are largely overlooked by literary critics. Considering the small role they play in the characters' lives, and the fact that only Richard Burlage in his first journal actually comments on the community's church meetings, it is not surprising that religion is only a peripheral matter – in the novel as well as in its criticism. Nevertheless, religious rituals, and often their very absence, are a factor in the presentation of the rural community in *Oral History*, and it is especially in the interplay with the myth-making processes of the mountaineers that they become meaningful.

Conrad Ostwalt has commented on “Smith’s portrayal of these unusual practices from traditional Appalachian religions [which] highlights the differences between them and mainstream faiths” (100). Similarly, Richard Burlage compares the group of the Freewill Followers, whom he first encounters in the Appalachian mountains, to the Episcopal Church to which he belongs (Smith 155). Richard refuses to attend the church where Aldous Rife is active as a minister, “which does not thrive. And no wonder!” Richard comments, as “[h]e is a wild, white-haired old man, as stern as Jehovah himself” (137). Searching for a different congregation, Richard finds the Freewill Followers and describes their services as being “as if we travel back through time, back through the centuries” (156). In this community of mountaineers it is necessary for the entire family to work hard the entire week in order to survive. Thus, the meetings of the Freewill Followers are basically the only time they permit themselves to enjoy and be free of labor. Consequently, the attendees make some effort in order to take part in the meetings: “They come from their cabins here around Tug, from homeplaces all along Grassy Creek and Meeting House Branch and even farther, from the three mountains. They come on foot and on mules or horses, traveling these paths” (156-57). Every meeting then functions as a regular opportunity for interaction with one’s peers: “This coming to church is a happy thing – as witness the skipping children along the path, the timid smiles on the worn faces of these hard-working homebound women, the proud silence of the men. Meeting brings not only respite from work, but also affords one of the few opportunities available for socializing” (157).

The Freewill Followers’ ceremonies are lively and interactive. Singing hymns in a “high nasal mountain manner” (158) is as much a part of meeting as playing instruments. Nevertheless, the sermons are often concerned with grim topics which Richard comments on as being “usually no more than gibberish, concentrating upon the evils and rigors of hell,

pictured in great and gruesome detail” (158). For him, as an outsider character who is naturally met with skepticism at first, attending church service is an opportunity of gaining the community’s trust, and his observatory role highlights the function these meetings have for an outsider and for the community itself.

Richard’s presence at the service is an important part of building a foundation of trust, as it enables him to demonstrate his interest and actively partake in their social activities, but particularly because he sees the mountaineers at their most vulnerable. He is fascinated with the meetings, and describes them in detail. Burlage writes about the mountaineers being the “most expressionless of people, who pride themselves – even my schoolchildren – in showing neither hunger, nor pain, nor grief,” although they “certainly ‘let go’ in church” (159). The weekly service, then, becomes not only a means of socializing, but also provides for some temporary relief of the hardships of life in the mountains, and enables the outsider character to interact with his hosts.

After attending the service regularly for a while, Richard notices how the community appears to warm up to him. It seems that his presence is being tolerated: “the Justices greeted me warmly, or at any rate as warmly as I imagine they will ever greet anybody, and several of the schoolchildren came up to take my hand and giggle” (157-58). Richard assumes that this means that he is being accepted, although only to a certain extent, which, as he writes, “pains me deeply to admit” (176).

The mythic qualities of *Oral History* are mostly expressed through the characters of Granny Younger and Ora Mae, as well as through various rumors about the curse Red Emmy supposedly cast upon Almarine’s family. Over the course of the story it becomes clear that, similar to religion, myths exist as part of the mountain culture, yet they serve a different purpose. Ostwalt writes about *Oral History* that specifically the “family myth operates as all myths do, to provide sacred explanations” (107) for various phenomena occurring in this community.

It begins already in the first part of the frame narrative, as Jennifer sets up her tape recorder in the old Cantrell cabin, when Ora Mae is referred to as “feel[ing] a heaviness in her bosom which means that something bad is going to happen” (Smith 2). Supposedly, she can foresee the future, like Granny Younger who claims in her narrative that “[s]ometimes I know the future in my breast. Sometimes I see the future coming out like a picture show, acrost the trail ahead” (29). Ora Mae’s psychic quality first becomes apparent to Rhoda Hibbitts, who succeeds Granny Younger as the healer of the community: “I know what I know but I wish I didn’t, I’ve got the gift you don’t never want to have. Rhoda said it when I was not but nine or

ten, and she was right. I didn't want it then and I don't now" (245). Although Rhoda tries to persuade Ora Mae to put her "gift" to good use, she refuses to become a healer. Later in the narrative Ora Mae's psychic quality is mentioned again, and it sheds some light on the reasons for her constant unhappiness. Her affair with Parrot Blankenship potentially enables her to leave the holler and the Cantrells behind, yet apparently she foresees a negative outcome in her future: "I kept on crying because it was like I seen the mountains all around me open up there for a minute, and I seen Charleston, and me over there with him and all dressed up, I knowed I could go if I wanted. I knowed he would take me, he really would, but iffen I'd of gone over there with him I knowed he would leave me later, as sure as the world. I hate what-all I know" (253-54).

Ora Mae is convinced that the relationship would not work out, and therefore does not give in to Parrot's advances. Assuming that she cannot only foresee her own future but also that of other people puts the incident surrounding Richard's note to Dory – in which he asks her to accompany him to Richmond – in perspective. The fact that Ora Mae hides the note from Dory and deliberately approaches Richard to tell him that Dory will not leave with him (254-55), illustrates her desperate, yet vain efforts to change the course of events as she foresees them. Finally, in the second part of the frame narrative, Ora Mae "is talking out now from that place inside her where she knows things" (336) when Jennifer asks about the mysterious cabin. Myth also operates through the characters of Granny Younger and Rhoda Hibbitts, who are both healers. In order to stop bleeding, for instance, Bible verses are recited (21), and Rhoda recommends a specific treatment for warts: "You keep this on it a hour or so, and then when you get home, I'll tell you what you do. You take this off, and you let it bleed some, and you put the blood on a penny and lay the penny in the road, and when somebody picks it up, the wart will go away" (204).

However, one of the most important instances of myth in *Oral History* is the curse that is cast on the Cantrells by Almarine's former partner, Red Emmy. She herself is said to be cursed as well, and Granny Younger reports that Red Emmy "could never have a mortal man in all her days. She belonged to the devil is why. Her daddy had done pledged her years before" (38). The community refers to her as a witch and throughout the narrative speaks about her mystic behavior. Red Emmy is confident and not afraid of storms, as opposed to the other women in the community (47). Granny Younger explains that witches, like Red Emmy, "leave their bodies in the night, you know, and slip into somebody else's. They'll do it while you're asleep and they'll drive you all night long with nary a speck of rest. They can take on any form" (49). Finally, Almarine drives her out of the house and marries Pricey Jane who



gives birth to two children, one of whom dies alongside her one day from “dew poison” (81). Granny Younger claims that Almarine disappeared for a while after his wife’s and son’s deaths, and “[came] back all tore up covered in blood and said his dog had been kilt in a fight. And the dog never [came] back neither. But we knowed the truth of course, that he had gone to that witch and kilt her” (88) in order to end the curse which the community believes to have been cast upon Almarine and his family by Red Emmy.

The myth surrounding Red Emmy survives for a long time in the community. After Dory gives birth to the twins, a few decades after Almarine supposedly murdered Red Emmy, Ludie Davenport claims to hear Red Emmy laughing in the holler (204). Even Ludie’s grandson has a memory of the ghost of Almarine’s dog chasing his friend (206), and he mentions the story to Ludie when she tells the family about her experience in the holler. Myths such as these – the curse, Red Emmy’s story, the ghost dog – are repeated among the community as a way of explaining these phenomena, of producing knowledge. Towards the end of the novel, Almarine exploits these mysteries, consequently robbing them of the function they had for the community.

Dory’s affair with Richard and her resulting pregnancy further illustrate how stories and gossip travel beyond the holler. Although she marries Luther soon after Richard leaves, there seems to be little confusion about the true paternity of Dory’s twin girls. In her narrative, Sally tells her husband how she realized that Pearl and Maggie were in fact Richard’s daughters, not Luther’s. At this revelation, however, Roy is not at all surprised. Instead, he claims “that half the county knew that or at least suspected. He said he had heard it himself, he thought, and then forgot. Something about a schoolteacher – came and went” (326).

Overall, then, myths and gossip function as a part of the storytelling culture of the Appalachian community in the narrative. As Linda Tate has suggested, Lee Smith “argues the ability to share the old stories – whether by telling or by actively listening – is key to the community’s survival. [...] Smith concentrates more on creating spaces for the entire marginalized Appalachian community” (77-78). Thus, they use legends of the ghostly laughter, Red Emmy’s odd behavior, and, generally, the curse on the Cantrells as a way of explaining phenomena whose origins they cannot quite fathom, rather than viewing them as isolated tragic events in the long history of an extended family. In fact, only in the last first-person narrative it becomes apparent that Sally, through her down-to-earth attitude towards life is the only member of this family who does not attribute all the mythic events to an ancient curse. Instead, she displays a realistic attitude towards her complex family history,

and leaves the past to the past, which is “nothing to talk about now” (331). Furthermore, Sally’s narrative illustrates her effort to continue the storytelling tradition of her community.

#### **4.4.3 Rite and tradition**

As Hobson has claimed, the community of mountaineers in *Oral History* is not particularly tight-knit (31), and the individual families do appear to mainly function as separate entities and are rather left alone. Nonetheless, it may be vital for the community’s survival and thriving to work together at least at times. The annual hog killing, for instance, is an event – apart from births and funerals, as analyzed above – during which the mountain folk display their awareness of the importance of a sense of community (Smith 218-21). This is a particularly crucial rite because it secures enough meat for the families to last them during the harsh winter months. Additionally, for the young boys of the community, it functions as a quasi-initiation rite, an activity they need to partake in from a certain age. This is described in some detail in the narrative told by Jink Cantrell, Dory’s younger brother and student of Richard. During this annual rite, the importance of music for the community also becomes apparent, as Little Luther accompanies the hog killing in his own way (228-30). However, the presence of songs is not reduced to this particular episode. In fact, “the careful reader hears music on every page, music that is an integral part of the daily fabric of this community” (Tate 104), and Luther’s songs in particular repeatedly turn up as part of the storytelling tradition until the very end, in the frame narrative.

The annual hog killing is narrated by Jink Cantrell at the beginning of the third part of the novel. This is an activity to which the entire community seems to be summoned, as Jink describes how “[t]hen I could hear all of them, talking and laughing, and I could hear the horses neighing out and the mules, [...]. And more and more of them coming afoot that had parked down there where the hard-road quits” (Smith 220). Everybody has to fulfill specific tasks. While the men slaughter the hogs and cook the meat, the women bring food, brew coffee for everybody (220-21), and make sausages from the hog meat (231). The involvement of children of all ages serves two practical purposes. On the one hand, all children are looked after by the entire community and are not left on their own, while on the other hand they are included in the process from very early on. They learn how to prepare for the impending winter, and how the community must work together. While the younger children are not yet

obligated to participate, the older ones have to help in the kitchen (231). The narrator himself has grown old enough to be involved in the actual butchering of the hogs. Jink displays an awareness of how important it is for him to partake in this rite, and he has already acquired some important knowledge: “You don’t never want to kill a hog on the new of the moon, Mamaw says, or you wouldn’t make no lard. And if you kill on the new of the moon, the meat’ll blow you till you can’t hardly cook it. But if the moon is shrinking, the meat’ll shrink, and you won’t get but half of what you order. You got to kill on the first cold day in late November when the moon is right, and this was it” (218-19).

Nevertheless, he is reluctant to participate although his mother “said it was high time to stand up and be a man, she wasn’t keeping no lily-livered fancy pants around her house. She said I’d have to go this time, and I knowed it was high time too” (219). Learning how to kill hogs and preserve their meat for the winter months is an important process every boy has to go through on his way to manhood, but Jink seems to be too sensitive and he would rather play with the other children. His mother Vashti “made the first cut in the one [hog] they had strung up. She slid her eyes over at me first to see if I was watching, and when she saw I was, she cut him. I looked the other way real quick” (227). However, as the activity progresses, Jink finds it increasingly interesting, and he receives the community’s praise for his work, which elevates his self-esteem and he stops listening for the other children playing in the woods (227-28). Instead Jink enjoys the responsibility he is granted by the grown men of the community, and when he brings the hog meat to the family cabin where the women cook and prepare the meat, he realizes “how little [the other children] were and how a man don’t have time to play” (230-31).

By first assisting the men in this rite Jink finds his place among the adults in the community, which likely leads to his staying in the holler, instead of searching for a job elsewhere. Nevertheless, Richard Burlage, meanwhile back in Richmond, has a continuing influence on Jink, which can be seen in the way Jink narrates his story. Throughout the narrative he repeatedly corrects his own grammatical errors and even puts the knowledge he acquired in Richard’s classes to use for his life at home. When Jink and Dory bury the family’s homemade liquor in the yard, he explains that “it’s froze down in there solid now. Except for the liquor in the jugs, now that don’t – doesn’t – freeze. Alcohol doesn’t freeze, he said in school” (221). Jink ends his narration with an episode of him slaughtering a hog, which finally seems to establish him as a responsible member of the community. Although he fears that he will “disgrace [his entire family], and be sick or fall out on the ground” (240) he does a good job, and finally celebrates with the other men drinking the family liquor (241).

With the work finished, some stay around starting a bonfire and listening to Little Luther's music (242).

Similar to the oral storytelling of the characters, the songs of Little Luther are an integral part of this community and accompany various sequences described in the novel. Luther makes his first appearance in the frame narrative and is immediately connected to his musical talent when the narrator mentions that "[e]very now and then he strums a little bit on his dulcimer" (1). Only a few pages later, however, it already becomes clear that his music is no longer as important as it used to be, or that he still finds an audience for it: "Little Luther grabs up his dulcimer and starts in on the cabbage-head song which, sure enough, Jennifer has never heard, and after a while she is joining in on the chorus. Jennifer has a sweet, pure little voice with no feeling in it at all. Little Luther does 'Fox on the Run.' He's a real treasure. The boys turn up the TV louder so they can hear it" (12).

While Luther's grandchildren lack interest in this folklore tradition, Jennifer appreciates the music because it ties in with her expectations of her mountaineer relatives. This brief passage displays Luther's music as being a thing of the past, a relic which no longer belongs in the contemporary Appalachian culture, although it is precisely what Jennifer imagines that culture to be. When Almarine joins in his father's singing, "it is all so fine, it is just like Jennifer hoped it would be, until Ora Mae stands up all of a sudden and ruins it" (13).

## 5. Conclusion

By analyzing three novels by Southern women writers – Elizabeth Spencer’s *The Voice at the Back Door*, Eudora Welty’s *The Optimist’s Daughter*, and Lee Smith’s *Oral History* – this thesis has studied the structure, main aspects and dynamics of the communities depicted. Each community is defined by specific themes which are expressed through the respective narrative storyline.

At the center of *The Voice at the Back Door* by Elizabeth Spencer is a community that struggles with its violent, racist history as well as with calls for Civil Rights which seem to grow ever louder. Interestingly, not even the novel’s most vocal black voice, Beck Dozer, is exactly clear on where he stands in the discussion. While preferring the status quo because it provides a seemingly clear social hierarchy he believes to be able to control, his complex relationship with Jimmy Tallant, whose father shot his own father in a massacre thirty years earlier, often provides him with protection when others feel the need to protect the same status quo with violence. Thus, the two have a complex relationship not only with each other but also the community as such. The same is true of the main character, Duncan Harper, whose principal characteristic is the loyalty he feels to the community. This loyalty, however, is not exclusively positive. Some members of the community still view him as the college football star he used to be, and seemingly prefer to see him reunited with his high school sweetheart Marcia Mae Hunt. To this community, the past is a refuge in the troublesome present, and thus it is kept alive for comfort. Both Duncan and Marcia Mae, then, often function as manifestations of the past in the present.

In *The Optimist’s Daughter* by Eudora Welty, past and present collide as well, yet in different ways. Welty’s narrative does not include a painful history such as that of Spencer’s work, but instead shifts the theme of the past in the present onto a personal level. When at the beginning of the novel the town’s former judge – undoubtedly a key figure within the community – dies, the community finds itself reliving the pain of losing his first wife, Becky. Having relocated to Chicago over a decade earlier, the deceased’s daughter, Laurel, has long since become an outsider, a mere returnee who has come to town only to plan and attend the funeral. The community realizes that this is the final chance to reintegrate Laurel into the community or to lose her forever. In their efforts to keep her in town for good the members of the community, most of all of Becky’s former Bridge Club, often remain ignorant of the fact that Laurel struggles with her father’s death and the memory of the tragic suffering and death

of her mother, and in the process would prefer to alter some of the community's established traditions in favor of a more individual form of grief.

Finally, Lee Smith's novel *Oral History* displays a large community compared to the two former works selected. Nine narrators tell five different stories spanning across three generations of an extended family. Over the course of the narrative the complex story progresses, gaps in the individual narratives are closed by subsequent narrators, the secluded mountain area becomes increasingly industrialized, and with it the traditions of the community are monetized. The Great Depression hits the area, as Richard Burlage notices on a visit ten years after his first sojourn to the Appalachian mountains, destroying what he originally romanticized as idyllic and pristine. Some time later, popular culture is firmly rooted in the area, and the community has gradually dissolved. Although the community was strongly connected through various traditions, myths and a dependence in order to survive in the harsh environment, modernity has affected it crucially.

As analyzed in this thesis, community often defines itself in contrast to an "other," which in the case of the novels selected is an outsider character. This character either is from outside the community, a stranger; or has been part of the community but left it, and has thus become an outsider over time, a returnee. In *The Voice at the Back Door* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, the returnee characters, Marcia Mae Hunt and Laurel McKelva Hand, both used to be an integral part of the community they left – originating from influential families – and are reluctant to be reintegrated into. Even though they are often kept at bay by their former community, Marcia Mae and Laurel play key roles in the events of their respective narratives, and eventually through their mere presence identify key aspects about their community – such as the continuous presence of the past, traditionalism, and a reluctance to accept change. Similarly then, one may even identify Richard Burlage in *Oral History* as a kind of returnee. Arriving from Richmond, Virginia, Richard is originally identified by the community in Hoot Owl Holler as a stranger, a clear-cut outsider. However, even though his first diary reveals a number of prejudices about the mountain folk, he later displays the knowledge he has acquired about the community and the region as such, as is demonstrated by the changes he notes in his second diary, written upon his return to the mountains. This diary, then, illustrates Richard's appreciation of the community of Hoot Owl Holler, as he mourns the destructive changes it has been subjected to.

Even though the importance of community is generally noted in literary studies on Southern fiction, detailed analyses of the communities presented in specific works by Southern authors have been rarely undertaken. This thesis has attempted to shed light on the

intricate community dynamics carefully crafted by Elizabeth Spencer, Eudora Welty, and Lee Smith in their selected works. Amidst the socio-economic and political changes the United States have undergone since the 2000s, an analysis of more recent Southern literature would certainly be of interest. How relevant is the depiction of community in the recent literature? How do economic deteriorations such as deindustrialization affect the communities in Southern fiction? How is the ongoing protest of the Black Lives Matter movement and the increasing attention it has received reflected in Southern fiction? What influence does it have on the Southern sense of community in literature?

As the Southern states react to the recent protests and increasingly remove Confederate symbols such as statues and flags from public spaces, the issue of the past in the present is examined from a new perspective, which will likely find its expression in the South's literary oeuvre to come.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1 English Abstract

The Southern States in the U.S. as a distinct region have produced a unique body of writers over the past centuries. Even though women writers have been an integral part of Southern fiction since the Southern Renaissance, many have often been overlooked. However, since the mid-20th century, female authors have outnumbered their male colleagues, and have since contributed significantly to the South's literary output, which has also been publicly acknowledged. The three works selected for analysis in this thesis exemplify this contribution: *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956) by Elizabeth Spencer, *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) by Eudora Welty, and *Oral History* (1983) by Lee Smith.

One crucial aspect of Southern literature, which also influences the authors' perspectives, is the presence of a community, which is also the case for the three works selected. Proceeding from a sociological definition of the term "community," this thesis analyzes the ways in which communities are presented in the works by Spencer, Welty, and Smith. Each novel is analyzed separately in terms of the setting chosen by the author, and the main characters and their role within the respective narrative. Furthermore, this thesis thoroughly examines crucial aspects that define the community in each work selected – such as shared cultural practices, and the construction of an "other" – including the community's dynamics. Finally, the novels are compared to each other in regards to common themes and features.

(231 words)

**Keywords:** Southern fiction, Southern women writers, Elizabeth Spencer, Eudora Welty, Lee Smith, U.S. South, community, other

### 7.2 German Abstract

Die Südstaaten der USA haben in den vergangenen Jahrhunderten als individuelle Region eine beispiellose Menge an Autor\*innen hervorgebracht. Obwohl Autorinnen schon seit der Southern Renaissance ein integraler Bestandteil der Südstaatenliteratur waren, wurden viele

davon übergangen. Seit Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts sind Autorinnen ihren männlichen Kollegen jedoch zahlenmäßig überlegen und haben seither einen bedeutenden Beitrag zur Literatur des Südens geleistet, der auch öffentlich anerkannt wurde. Die drei Romane, die für diese Masterarbeit ausgewählt wurden, veranschaulichen diesen Beitrag: *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956) von Elizabeth Spencer, *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) von Eudora Welty, und *Oral History* (1983) von Lee Smith.

Ein wesentlicher Aspekt der Südstaatenliteratur, welcher auch die Perspektive von Autor\*innen beeinflusst, ist die Präsenz einer Gemeinschaft, einer Community, wie auch in den ausgewählten Romanen ersichtlich ist. Ausgehend von einer soziologischen Definition des Begriffes „Gemeinschaft“ analysiert diese Arbeit die Art und Weise in der Gemeinschaften in den Werken von Spencer, Welty und Smith präsentiert werden. Jeder Roman wird hinsichtlich des von der Autorin gewählten Handlungsortes, sowie der Hauptcharaktere und deren Rolle im jeweiligen Narrativ separat analysiert. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht außerdem die essentiellen Aspekte, welche die Gemeinschaft in jedem der gewählten Romane definieren – wie etwa gemeinschaftliche Kulturpraktiken und Prozess des *Othering* (die Distanzierung einer Gemeinschaft von einer anderen Person oder Gruppe) – sowie die Dynamik der Gemeinschaft. Zum Schluss werden die Romane hinsichtlich ihrer gemeinsamen Themen und Eigenschaften miteinander verglichen.

(229 Wörter)

**Schlagwörter:** Südstaatenliteratur, Autorinnen des amerikanischen Südens, Elizabeth Spencer, Eudora Welty, Lee Smith, Amerikanischer Süden, Community, Othering