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ENGL 457C

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Haunting Memories and Healing Stories: Grief and Catharsis in Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

“‘Tis not Dying that hurts us so— / ‘Tis Living — hurts us more—”

-Emily Dickinson

Complicated familial relationships saturate southern literature. In particular, Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing Unburied Sing* grapple with the family's relationships to one another and their memories about the collective and individual past. Memory, then, becomes a central theme for the characters in both novels. As both narratives introduce protagonists struggling with the loss of loved ones, memory becomes one of the only things tethering them to their lost family members. The “impervious” (Welty 179) past, as Welty labels it, is inaccessible by nature: it denies true, authentic connection with those lost to the passage of time. Therefore, the act of remembering—a largely personal act—provides this connection and attempts to reconcile Welty's and Ward's protagonists to the lost past. But memory is often complicated by incomplete narratives, false perceptions, and tense familial relationships. These become the difficult factors that Welty's and Ward's characters must negotiate. The act of remembering, though, is not enough; it is the act of voicing and sharing those memories, storytelling, that provides real healing. Though trauma and grief complicate this process, both Welty's and Ward's protagonists face the past and their own memories through their interactions with haunting figures. And, as inadequate and complicated as those memories are,

the process of remembering and sharing provides healing, and storytelling becomes a true connection between the living and the dead.

For Welty, memories play a particularly important role; they allow characters to connect with one another and tell stories together. As Laurel, Welty's middle-aged protagonist, grapples with the overwhelming grief after losing her husband, Phil, and her parents, she faces the past directly and confronts her own memory, ultimately letting them go. Finding herself trapped in her late parents' bedroom, after fleeing from a terrorizing chimney swift, Laurel discovers all the letters "she [her mother] had received in her life" (Welty 135). Surrounded by these letters, literal artifacts of the past, Laurel begins to uncover years of lost memories. They "call her to the past, and she is finally forced to remember" (House 2). Laurel "wept for what happened to life" (155); the uncovered memories fill her with anguish as she repeats "If Phil could have lived... If Phil lived" (154). Laurel finds no peace in this reconciliation with the past. Instead, she is tormented, haunted by her husband. In fact, she feels guilty for surviving longer than her family: "But the guilt of outliving those you love is justly to be borne, she thought" (162). Guilt floods Laurel and the discomfort surrounding her memories frightens her: "The fantasies of dying could be no stranger than the fantasies of living. Surviving is perhaps the strangest fantasy of them all" (163). This guilt and fear prompt Laurel's first emotional release; "a flood of feeling descended on Laurel" (154). After repressing so many memories and so much grief, something in Laurel breaks and the "the deepest spring in her heart had uncovered itself, and it began to flow again" (154).

Finally, Laurel, in this painful reckoning, releases her memories of her parents and husband instead of "trapping them in the stagnation of a manufactured ideal," (Arnold 5). No longer does Laurel "defensively shape the past to fit into an idea of order" (Traber 11). She

finally admits that “Phil was lost” (154). This declaration liberates Laurel as she “relinquishes the past to memory” (Arnold 32) and accepts the permanency of death. But just as it can be comforting to know that memories “live for us,” (179) individuals can also manipulate memories, disrupting their memories and potentially misrepresenting the dead. Earlier in the novel, when family and friends are sharing stories about Laurel’s father, Laurel begs them to “*remember right*” (83). It is this preoccupation with “right” that points to the unreliability of memory. Haunted by the presence of the dead, the living must “remember right,” and construct stories that honor the dead. But after Laurel’s painful catharsis, she can release the “burdens we lay on the dying...the lastingness of memory” (146). She no longer uses the “memories as a means to protect herself” (Traber 12), but instead releases her grip on the memories and memory’s grip on her.

This moment of release prompts Laurel to finally voice her story. At the conclusion of the novel, Laurel confronts her mother-in-law, Fay, finally speaking her story and gaining agency, thus allowing her to finally move forward. While storytelling saturates much of *The Optimist’s Daughter*, it is important to note that Laurel is “often voiceless, without agency, shapeless” (House 2). As Laurel’s family and friends share memories of the late Judge McKelvaShe “sat on the back step and gazed at the ladies” (Welty 111) as an outsider in her own narrative. Ironically, Laurel, the protagonist, actually functions as a background character for the louder, more dynamic characters; she “is spoken to but does not speak” (House 2). Therefore, as Laurel is excluded (or perhaps excludes herself) from the main storytelling narrative, she must construct her own stories in a different way.

She accomplishes this by piecing together her own stories the night of her cathartic release. Laurel “sat on the floor and put together the fallen scrap of cloth... lining them up,

spacing them out, making them into patterns, families” (133). The memories that Laurel finds in her parents belongings augment the narratives of the past, Laurel’s own memories. The material objects are pieces of the past and they provide Laurel with access to it. Yet, just as she weeps for Phil, she desperately wishes for the dead to be alive: “she wanted them with her to share her grief as she had been the sharer of theirs” (150). Alone with these memories and overwhelming grief, Laurel has yet “been unable to interact with those around her, that is, to retell the stories... Her healing remains incomplete until she can tell her story, their stories” (House 4). Therefore, at last, this moment comes when she confronts Fay, finally voicing her story and releasing the past. After Fay insults the heavily symbolic family treasure, the breadboard, she asks Laurel: ““What do you see in that thing?”” (178). Powerfully, in a moment of reclamation and release, Laurel finally speaks back: ““The whole story, Fay. The whole solid past”” (178). This assertion elevates the breadboard above all else; it houses several crucial memories for Laurel, including those of her mother and husband. Yet, Laurel calmly tells Fay, “I think I can get along without that too” (179) and she leaves the breadboard behind. She knows now that “memory lived not in initial position but in the freed hands... and in the heart that can empty but fill again” (179). Laurel becomes a storyteller and “with the circulation of the story comes freedom as Laurel can then let everything go, including the symbol of the breadboard, the past” (House 4).

Having established Welty as an author interested in haunting figures of the past, Ward, a more contemporary writer, furthers the discourse of haunting figures by introducing several ghost characters that *could* speak for the past but instead refuse; with the inclusion of these characters, Ward too reveals the importance of memory and storytelling. Richie, the most vocal ghost character, narrates four out of the fifteen chapters of *Sing*. And while much of the novel centers around Jojo's growth as the adolescent protagonist, Richie’s eerie and often haunting

presence draws the reader closer to him, and they invest in his character. Ward herself claims Richie as a living part of the story: “I don’t want this character to be a memory. I want this character to be real, and to be in the present” (Ward “Evolution”). This distinction between memory and reality gives Ward ample opportunities to allow the dead to speak directly to the living. But, while “there are so many stories” Richie “could tell him [Jojo]” (Ward 137), Richie refuses, therefore preserving the past and relegating it to memory. And while sanctifying the tradition of storytelling, Richie also condemns it, pointing to one of the flaws of memory. Pop’s story, as he tells it to Jojo, is “a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is there, but the details have been erased” (137). Here, as Richie points out the incompleteness of Pop’s storytelling, he promises an alternative version, one where he could “patch those holes” (137). But he does not deliver. It is in this moment, then, that Ward offers the most valuable insight on memory. Richie, a ghost capable of relaying the past directly to Jojo, actually refuses to do so. Instead, Ward intentionally reserves the past for translated memories: storytelling. “The intergenerational transmission of stories,” no matter their holes, “serves the purpose of connecting Jojo with Mam and Pop as well as with more distant ancestors” (Swartzfager 6). When Pop finally finishes the story about Richie’s death, Jojo tells Richie that there “ain’t no more stories for you here,” (268) attempting to rid his family of Richie and finally let go of the past. Therefore, it is clear that Richie himself does not provide the characters with any solace—his memory is actually quite damning for Pop and Jojo. Instead, it is the act of remembering and storytelling that brings comfort.

And just as Ward comments directly on the power of storytelling, she joins Welty in suggesting voicing stories provides agency and the final cathartic release from traumatic pasts. Leonie, Jojo’s fairly absent and problematic mother, narrates the chapter of Mam’s, her mother,

death. And with this structural decision, Ward gives Leonie control over this narrative. It is Leonie who is actually responsible for Mam's release. Mam asks Leonie to recite the litany, the process that will finally release her to the afterlife: "Grande Bridgitte, Judge. This altar of stones is for you. Accept our offerings" (268). Through a "ragged sob" (268), Leonie releases her mother, and therefore lets go of the past. As painful as it is for Leonie, the act of voicing this narrative connects her to her mother and "intergenerational transmission of knowledge is used to cope" (Swartzfager 7) with grief. As the past and present join in this moment of release, "time floods the room in a storm surge" (269); Leonie finally understands what it means to "usher in her [Mam's] gods. To let her go" (270).

Another moment of release comes at the conclusion of the novel. Kayla, Jojo's innocent, "short three-year-old" (19) sister has the final voice in the novel. If Richie embodies the past, and Jojo the present, then Kayla represents the future with her "eyes shining, her mouth open in a smile so wide it looks like she could be screaming," (20). And when Ward gives her the final voice, she asks her readers to invest in the hope for the future. Notably though, she invests in the future in the same way as Welty: through agency and storytelling. The final scene features a crowded tree "full with ghosts... all the way up to the top... There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies" (282). But just as Welty contrasts the dooming image of the dilapidated breadboard with Laurel's self-proclamation, Ward gives Kayla command over the looming past: "She [Kayla] faces the tree, nose up to the air. Head tilted back to see. Her eyes Michael's, her nose Leonie's, the set of her shoulder Pop's, and the way she looks upward... all Mam" (284). While this scene highlights the ghosts' "displacement and alienation, it also signifies reunion and communion" (Khedhir 7). And it is Kayla who is responsible for this communion. She "takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together" (284), uniting the

past, present, and future through her voice. Kayla, the youngest character in the novel, having been “nurtured from birth on the type of emotional bonds formed through storytelling” (Swartzfager 18), has the “uncanny emotional intelligence” (18) to vocalize the complete story and finally send the ghosts “home.” Readers are then left with the image of “this little family who find strength and courage and succor in each other” (Ward “Evolution”). Together, they can let go of the past, carrying memories of their lost family members with them, instead of “pulling the weight of history behind” them (265).

Though Welty and Ward both suggest memory is inevitably incomplete, inaccurate, and often damning, they are careful to not discount its valuable, real connections to the past. While Laurel, Pop, and Jojo do not find comfort in their memories, they find healing in speaking them. When Laurel drives away, leaving Mount Salus for what may be the last time, watching “the many small and unknown hands” (180) waving goodbye, she still mourns her various losses. And when Kayla sings to the ghosts in the tree in the final pages of *Sing*, she does not magically wash away Pop’s grief and restore the memories of Richie. But, in both of these instances there *is* a semblance of hope. These characters come face to face with the past, and speak directly to it. And, in speaking, release the past from them and release themselves from the past. Finally, they see that the past is not something to cling to, but to let go of, as Laurel releases the treasured breadboard and as Kayla releases Richie. And with this release, memory no longer haunts or torments these characters, but comforts and liberates them. The living, as incomplete as they may feel, move forward carrying their stories and memories, not dragging them.

I pledge... Carleigh Rahn

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