

“Opalisms” - Opal Whiteley’s Uncommon Use of Language

Where Does Her English as a Second Language Style Come From?

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I began editing and making research notes on the *Fairyland Around Us* in the Summer of 2017. I was soon struck by how much of the book appeared to be diary entries. Using an online text copy of the book from the Boston Library I began collecting passages in *Fairyland* that either had dates or read like a diary entry.

My original goal was to produce an edited version of the *Fairyland Around Us* with text notes. Interested readers can find it on the Internet. However, I believe these diary entries are important enough to be read by themselves in the form they were originally written - a diary. When read as a diary these entries give us new insights into Opal.

One thing I noticed was that the language of the diary entries was different from the style of the college age “fairy tales” Opal wrote for the book. Many of the diary entries read like they are much younger than late teenage writing. In these diary entries I found what I began to call “Opalisms”. The language of her later stories does not contain these interesting expressions.

What we’re calling an “Opalism” is any expression that either:

- 1) has the normal subject-verb-object order reversed - backwards
- 2) is a phrase not typical in ordinary English or,
- 3) she uses the same words twice in close proximity, in the same sentence she sometimes converts a verb into a noun and then uses both words
- 4) stream of consciousness writing - one sentence has more than 100 words!
- 5) unusual ways of expressing numbers, dates, time and distances

This file contains diary entries from her ninth and tenth year and upwards through high school. The first entries are from samples of her diary that she gave to publisher Ellery Sedgwick of the *Atlantic Monthly* and contain many “Opalisms”. The next section of diary entries are from her book *The Fairyland Around Us*. Some of these diary entries are from ages nine and ten. In one entry Opal says she is nine years old.

This document contains many of the Opalisms we have seen. For example, Opal frequently uses the terms “the mamma” or “the papa”, which are Germanic terms of endearment. These are just two of her “Opalisms”. There are over 30 in the *Fairyland*.

Opal has an unusual way of saying the “day before yesterday”. On page 78, she writes. “We waited and watched -- and as we waited saw Mother and Father Oriole come with insects and wild berries. All this was the day that was the day before yesterday.”

On Page 168 Opal feeds baby grouse and says “Very much they liked different berries, insects and grasshoppers.”

On June 12th, (page 66) she writes of a flower attracting moths, “To her blossoms at evening come the Sphinx Moth fairies.”

On October 12th (p. 168) she writes “A fondness for apples Maurine has, but her fondness for apples sometimes gets me into trouble.”

Opal Whiteley claimed her first language was not English, but French. Her written syntax has an English as a Second Language (ESL) style from early childhood through her diary entries in the *Fairyland Around Us* (1918). The background language may be French, German - or even a style Opal herself invented.

Whiteley also employs what is called the “little-professor” style of speaking and writing. This is very common with children who have autism. They can speak in detail about subjects which interest them. I believe Opal was on the autism spectrum. But while she often writes like a “little professor”, that is not the ESL “Opalisms” we are examining.

After the pages with Opalisms, (pages 2-19) there are three selections from her published six and seven year old diaries. They are included to show samples of her longer diary entries and her ESL style in the *Atlantic Monthly* diary.

“ABOUT 9 YEARS OLD” Opal Gave this to the Atlantic Monthly as a Sample

It is the time of goldenrod and the way is bordered with plumes of gold, bringing joy to the eyes of those who pass by. We children go unto them and catch the insects about them and upon them. We have this motto in our botany study: Know the flowers and know their insect visitors. So every day new things we learn, and sweet the joy we find in knowing the everyday things around us.

Commented [1]: Opalism - object-subject-verb

This has been quite a busy day. After part of the morning work was done the mamma and the children went a-visiting. I was left to mind the house, and told to stay and watch it all day. First I swept the floors and then I scrubbed them, then I started to clean the windows. I put Bon Ami all over those panes in the windows, then I made mottos -- helpful things that Virgil and Horace and Seneca said in days of long ago -- on the glass with my fingers. That gave the windows a proper look of inspiration, so I left the Bon Ami on -- just as a background for the mottos. I gave the stove a good shine-up. Then I decided the house didn't need any more tending; it could take care of itself; so I latched the doors and went and gathered up a lot of the camp children to go on an exploration trip.

Commented [2]: Opalism - the mamma .. "went a-visiting" - later she uses the phrase "the papa" - these may be Germanic terms of endearment.

Commented [3]: Opalism - the mamma went "a-visiting"

Commented [4]: Not really an Opalism but personification of the house

We walked along the flume and leaned over to pick leaves from the tops of the higher bushes. When we had gotten a goodly number of leaves, we played they were ships and sent them sailing down the flume with light cargoes laden. By-and-by we came to a very rocky place. A young fir tree was striving to grow up among all those rocks. It had a brave look. We children climbed down from the flume. We circled around that little tree and gave it our pledge of friendship. The children asked me to name it. I called it Theocritus because he said, "Who perseveres, succeeds at last." As we came away we noticed how cheery it looked and that it had a goodly number of pimples. Many young fir trees have pimples -- as many as some people have freckles. These pimples are sticky -- are bubbles of pitch with the skin stretched tight over them. They are very sticky and if one slides down a young fir tree that has pimples, one gets sticky all over.

Then we went on down to the lower end of the camp to get Lorelee. She was crying out by the chopping-block. Her mamma was just dead a few minutes before we got there -- she was dead of typhoid fever. The doctor looked angry looks. He said everybody in camp must boil all water used for drinking and cooking. Too -- he said -- it was a wonder half the camp was not dead with typhoid fever.

Commented [5]: Opalism - the doctor looked angry looks

We didn't linger to hear what else he had to say, because Jenny thought if we had the rope for Lorelee to jump it would help to keep her from crying. She is so fond of jumping rope. We went over by the mill to get John to get the rope for us, but John wasn't there to get the rope for us. He has gone to catch one of the hired girls at another camp, who is running away with the husband of the sad lady who lives in the mill town and gave all we children ginger cookies one day when we were coming home from feeding earthworms to the baby birds; and being as John wasn't there to get the rope for Lorelee to jump, I thought she would like to go for comfort to the Cathedral, so we all went.

From the Cathedral we went to the hospital, and there in the hospital today we were short of bandages, and after a short conference we amputated our apron strings, which made suitable bandages of assorted colors. When we arrived home near dark time our mammas, holding no conference, reached the unanimous decision that they would like to remove by surgical operation that part of our brains from which came the thought to amputate our apron strings. The switches left on the hazel bush by the window are few now.

Commented [6]: Opalism - "... near dark time ..."

Commented [7]: Note: the Opalism "near dark time".

Opal is spanked by her mother with a hazel switch. However, this paragraph is really describing what later came to be known as a "lobotomy". Strangely, Opal may have had a lobotomy in Napsbury Mental Hospital nearly forty years after writing this diary entry.

“ABOUT 10 YEARS OLD” - Opal Gave this to the Atlantic Monthly as a Sample

This day I went forth into the forest at the hour of sunrise. And within the forest I heard a sublime, bell-like voice -- it was one of his Cathedral singers. Upward and onward the song of the little singer carried my soul -- and nearer seemed the All-Wise Father as I stood there in his forest Cathedral listening. He who in his singing lifts up the thoughts of the children of men to higher realms is this fairy, Audubon's Hermit Thrush.

Commented [8]: Opalism - word order in sentence structure

I could not linger to listen long. I had to get a hurry on me and get myself back to the kitchen, to put the coffee on and mix the griddlecakes and bake them for the papa's breakfast, and in between times put up his lunch, for he has to be on his way to work before half-past six o'clock. While I was making the cakes the bird song I heard in the Cathedral sang on in my heart. It was a good start for the day.

Commented [9]: Opalism - using a verb as a noun "I had to get a hurry on me"

After the papa went to work, the children and the mamma got up for breakfast. The mamma, not being hungry, did eat only two griddlecakes, but the children (who most of the time have appetites like unto those of young birds not out of the nest) did eat nineteen griddlecakes, which it did take some little time to bake.

Then there were the chickens to feed and there was milk to deliver. We get five cents a quart for milk. When these tasks were done I learned on inspection that there was not quite enough wood split up for the day. When I was through splitting wood I sat down on the chopping-block to comb my hair for school.

I hurried away to school. On the way I saw twenty-one butterflies -- seven Swallowtails, nine Monarchs, three Checkersspots, a Painted Lady and Velvet Cloak. I spread my arms to sail along like all those butterflies, then I thought I had better hurry on to school. Pretty soon I found thirteen caterpillars and heard a Meadowlark sing three different songs, one after the other.

Then I stopped at the Redwing Blackbird nursery. While I was there Father Blackbird, he with red upon his wings, came with a plump caterpillar and pausing a moment popped it into the wide-open mouth of Christopher Columbus and then was off again for another morsel. And I was off again for school. A little farther on I found seven more caterpillars -- and in the pond by the great oak tree I found a goodly number of tadpoles. I took off my sun bonnet and took my dinner out of the tin pail and put it into the bonnet. Into the pail I put the tadpoles, then I hurried on to school. Last eventide I was so busy with the nursery and the hospital that I did not get a certain hole in my stocking darned

Commented [10]: Opalism - "off again" in one sentence and again in the next sentence

Commented [11]: "eventide" - Opalism - archaic word for evening time

(Later, in the same diary entry Opal writes about her school classes)

"History class was, then arithmetic, and then came spelling."

FAIRYLAND AROUND US DIARY ENTRIES

Original Book Fairyland Around Us PDF for Page References

<https://archive.org/stream/fairylandaro/mode/2up>

Over 30 Opalisms in Fairyland Around Us

166 March 15 Last year I found a Mother Saw-Whet Owl at home in an old Woodpecker's hole, one week later than this week. She was sitting upon six white eggs. Mice from the mouse-traps I brought her -- she liked them.

Commented [12]: Opalism classic - "one week later than this week" - about March 21st of previous year

P 168 Very much they liked different berries, insects and grasshoppers.

Commented [13]: Opalism "Very much they liked" - Example of normal word order being askew. Normally we would say "they liked different berries very much."

P 48 How we children joy to hear his song night or day.

Commented [14]: Opalism "How we children joy to hear ..." using "joy" as a verb

P 165 May 17th -- Found a Mother Kildeer at home in Grandfather's cornfield. She was near unto the corn plant. No home had she builded -- her eggs were on the ground.

Commented [15]: Opalism - "no home had she builded"

P 57 That I had been to Heron Town was made known by my torn apron before I had time to open my mouth and tell them about the wonderfulness of being up there with the baby Herons so far above the world.

Commented [16]: Opalism - "wonderfulness"

P 176 June 5th -- Among the Saxifraga fairies on the mountain side at the edge of the great forest I found the Parnassian Butterflies, they whose upper wing edges are transparent. When a small child as I wandered among these fairies on the mountain side I loved to think as I watched them that the Spirit of Winter and the Spirit of Spring to the Children of Men a thought of their friendship to bring, together had made, and had given to the world, this fair wonderful thing with the snow, and the ice, and faint colors of fair blossoms upon its wing -- just that its existence might ever and eternally in silence sing, year after year, of a friendship so dear between the Spirits of Winter and Spring.

Commented [17]: Opalism - Spirit of Winter & Spirit of Spring - almost 100 words in this sentence!

P 146 June 8th -- This morning I went into the fields before six o'clock, taking my breakfast with me. A happy hour I had among the Morning Glory fairies. And there were jewel dewdrops on the Spider Webs among the vines. Among Morning Glory's cousins are Moon Flower, Man of the Earth and Dodder (also called Strangleweed), who had fallen from grace and is much unlike our beautiful Morning Glory.

Commented [18]: Opalism - "A happy hour I had ..."

P 144 June 9th -- Gophers are busy out in the field; and the Mole fairies are being blamed for their work. Now the gopher -- it is true that he eateth of young roots of things we want to grow; but the Mole eateth of worms and insects.

Commented [19]: Opalism - use of archaic language - word "eateth" is in the same sentence twice

P 66 June 12th -- 'Tis the time of Bouncing Bet and she blooms along the way. Cousin of Campion, Cockle and Chickweed is she. To her blossoms at evening come the Sphinx Moth fairies.

Commented [20]: Opalism - "To her blossoms at evening come ..."

P 156 June 15th -- O, tongues of flame are speaking here and yonder where blooms the Indian Paint Brush, the Scarlet Painted Cup, cousin of Mullein, Monkey Flower and Fox Glove. And to it comes the Hummingbird. (We saw four about them today.)

Commented [21]: Opalism - unusual use of English - tongues of fire are speaking - "And to it comes the Hummingbird" is also an Opalism.

Also the ending sentence (We saw four about them today.)

IMPORTANT: YELLOW JACKET STORY ALSO IN CHILDHOOD DIARY

Commented [22]: the Yellow Jacket story is found almost word for word in the childhood diary - critics claim it proves she wrote she wrote it when she was older - but I think this is an authentic early diary entry here

P 92 July 5th -- Sometimes I share my bread and jam with the Yellowjackets who have a home on a bush by the road twenty trees and one distant from the garden. To-day I climbed upon the old rail fence close to their home with a piece and a half of bread and jam -- the half piece for them and the piece for myself -- But they all wanted to be served at once, so it became necessary to turn over all bread and jam on hand. I broke it into little pieces and they had a royal feast right there on the old fence rail. I wanted my bread and jam -- but then Yellow Jackets are such interesting fairies, being among the world's first paper-makers -- and baby Yellow Jackets are such chubby youngsters. Thinking on these things made it a joy to share one's bread and jam with these Wasp fairies.

Commented [23]: Opalism - "twenty trees and one distant from the garden"

“THE DAY BEFORE THE DAY THAT WAS YESTERDAY”

P 78 We saw him on a thistle -- for a moment he stopped at the thistle, then straight to the Cottonwood tree he flew. To the Cottonwood tree we softly hurried too. We peered about, in and out among the branches -- then we caught a glimpse of a hanging basket cradle. And keeping still we heard wee tiny voices -- voices of Baby Orioles calling for breakfast, dinner, and supper. We waited and watched -- and as we waited saw Mother and Father Oriole come with insects and wild berries. All this was the day that was the day before yesterday. To-day we children brought insects and berries to the four wee bits of Oriole humanity who have so recently come out of four grayish white eggs. Softly the cradle of Icterus bullockii swings in the wind.

Commented [24]: Opalism - "the day that was the day before yesterday"

Commented [25]: Opalism - "the four wee bits of Oriole humanity".

OPAL CALLS A WEASEL “EVIL” - the only reference to “evil” in Fairyland

P 187 July 15 To-day I saw a Weasel glide into a burrow, which used to belong to a Ground-squirrel. Now Weasel is one of the fairies I do not have a friendly feeling for in my heart. He is such a killer -- why, it seems that he always is killing some other folks -- just like a wicked giant in the old fairy-stories. Now Weasel is no giant. He is from thirteen to fifteen inches long -- which is no great length after all. His ways are ways of evilness -- surely he will reap as he has sown.

Commented [26]: Not an Opalism but the weasel is the only animal called "evil" in Fairyland.

P 93 July 17th -- Now time is weed time -- and we children find weeds very interesting. Today we found many Running Mallows with their small, pale blossoms. At four o'clock we held a reception for all relatives of the Weed Mallow. Those invited were Cousin Swamp Rose Mallow, who dwells on the bank of the stream;

Commented [27]: Opalism - "Now time is weed time"

P 98 August 10 Glory, glory! Praise God from whom all blessings flow! For five whole months I've been looking for Goldfinch home. In June when Bluebirds were raising their second family, and in July when Robins were making a third home, I sought and found not Goldfinches home.

Commented [28]: Opalism - "I sought and found not Goldfinches home."

Then I began to pray mornings as well as nights -- and if I didn't find the home today. I was going along the hillside among the Vine Maples when ahead of me I saw a dear cradle with a bit of olive brown on it. Mrs. Goldfinch was at home. When I came nearer I saw nearby a darling golden fairy wearing a black cap on his head, and black and white upon his wing. While keeping very quiet I heard him softly saying, "bay-bee, bay-bee." O, I am so happy.

Commented [29]: Opalism - two very similar words in the same sentence

P 101 August 15th -- 'Tis the time of Golden-rod, and the way is bordered with plumes of gold bringing joy to the eyes of those who pass by. We children go unto them and watch the insects about them and upon them. We have this motto in our Botany study, "Know the flowers -- and know their insect visitors." So every day new things we learn and sweet the joy we find in knowing the every-day things around us.

Commented [30]: Opalism - "The time of the Golden-rod" -

Also, this is the same paragraph as used in her 9 year old diary, so it's likely to be from when she was nine.

Commented [31]: Opalism - word order

P 101 August -- Willow-Herb whose other name is "Fireweed," and who also blooms in Asia and in Europe we now daily see. Where last year the forest fire burned over the hillside now the Great Willow-herb grows and hides a part of the ruin. It is truly a comforting fairy -- this cousin of Primrose and Starflower. Yesterday we learned this verse about it:

Commented [32]: Opalism - we now daily see ...

P 101 August 20th -- David and Jonathan, the two Mourning Doves, accompanied me along the road today. David perched upon my left shoulder, and Jonathan upon the right. Jonathan ate part of an acorn and David ate the rest. Then each did eat a millipede. And as we went on we saw thirty-one other Mourning Doves perched on the telephone wires. As evening came near we came again home.

Commented [33]: Opalism - time - using the word "came" twice in same sentence

P 162 Bumble-bees come and Bumble-bees go. Three times I have found a new Bumble-bee colony in an old nest of field mice. Long hours I have watched near these Bumble-bee homes -- and every minute was full of interest. In exploring to find out whys and wherefores of some things I have learned that a Bumble-bee worker stings.

Commented [34]: Opalism - word order

There are in the hospital this week nine Tadpoles who lost their tails last week. Some of my Water Beetles and larvae who are to be (that is, when they grow up), Dragon Flies and Caddis Flies nipped the tails off of some of my Tadpoles who are to be (when they grow up) Frogs. Now, these same tadpoles are in the hospital growing new tails.

Commented [35]: Opalism - time - unusual way of expressing time - word order

Today the Aster room is all abloom with fairy wings -- 'tis all a-brown with Pearl-Crescent Butterflies, for many of those mottled, grayish-white fairy cradles have given up their treasures. And, O, I am so happy, for I've watched over them so carefully since the time when from those small light greenish-yellow eggs, the tiny babies came, who some day were to be -- and that day having now come, are Pearl-Crescent Butterflies. They were such wiggling bits of humanity when first they came out of those eggs.

Commented [36]: Opalism - uses unusual phrase "bits of humanity" twice in FAU

P 109 September 5th -- Early this morning I was out seeking for Woolly Bear caterpillars -- those fuzzy black and orange ones who become, when they grow up, Isia Isabella Moths. I found the seven-hundred and fifty-first one that I have found this year. Early morning is an especially good time to look for them, by the road, while the dew is yet upon the grass. Last year I raised fourteen-hundred and thirty-nine Isia Isabella Moths from Woolly Bear Caterpillars like these. My, their appetites were enormous at times; and much bracken fern did they eat.

Commented [37]: Opalism - counting - she counts everything! Possible sign of autism

Commented [38]: Opalism - word order

P 110 September 18th -- Many and many are the Shepherd's Purses along the wayside now. These fairies with their dainty, heart-shaped seed pods, came over from Europe. Shepherd's Purses are cousins of Mustard, Radish, Spring Beauty, Wall Flower -- Alyssum and Candy-tuft.

Commented [39]: Opalism - "many and many ..."

I walked down the road a ways this afternoon and perched on the old rail fence. The reason I perched upon the fence was because I wanted to think, and while I was thinking I saw several Lizards. Now, a Lizard fairy is a very interesting creature -- from egghood up. And after one has raised some lizards from eggs one has a sort of brotherly feeling towards all Lizards. They so like fence corners, and so do I.

Commented [40]: EGGHOOD - Opalism & how she has "a brotherly feeling towards all lizards".

P 163 October -- In the night, last night, I heard them calling, "Kill-dee, kill-dee, kill-dee." Over and over again they told their name -- these cousins of Golden Plover, Snowy Plover and Mountain Plover.

Commented [41]: Opalism - same word - night - used twice

When Autumn time comes walking across the fields 'tis time to transplant Wild Flower fairies to our Wild Flower Gardens. To-day we have been transplanting Blue Iris, Blue-eyed Grass and Blue Sailors from the fields to our Garden of Joyous Blue. From the damp meadow we transplanted Helmet-flower and Forget-me-not.

Commented [42]: Opalism - Autumn comes walking across the fields - personification

P 196 October 12th -- A fondness for apples Maurine has, but her fondness for apples sometimes gets me into trouble. To-day she helped herself to five apples Mother had placed on the table for the Deacon to take home with him. They were beauties and she made a dainty meal of them -- for which I received a spanking.

Commented [43]: Opalism "A fondness for apples Maurine has, ..." - word order -also fondness used twice

P 163 October 27th -- Three quaint elves I met in the field today, and then three more -- and each one's name, it was the same, Leafhopper of Jassidae family. In August on Blue-grass in my Grass Garden there were tiny eggs, and I brought them home to the Nursery. Later from them came baby Leaf Hoppers who changed their clothes three times before they grew up. In June we held a "Leaf Hopper" convention -- and many and varied were the elves in attendance at this convention -- Leafhoppers of the Jassidae family.

Commented [44]: Opalism - word order

P 115 Dec. 24th — Today we decorated the Christmas tree for the birds — the little birds who glory in the snowstorm and mind not at all the rain. We began with the fir tree by the gate — then five along the road and three in the woods. With pieces of suet, and apple, and baked potatoes, we decorated their Christmas trees. Then we sat down on a log and waited — waited and watched to see who would come first to our Christmas tree — and he who came first was a glad Chick-a-dee.

Commented [45]: Opalism - "mind not at all the rain" - word order

END OF EXAMPLES OF "OPALISMS"